

# **In Pursuit of Morality**

Moral Agency and Everyday Ethics of Plong  
Karen Buddhists in Southeastern Myanmar

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Doctor of Philosophy

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# STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own original work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized initial 'J' followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Buddhist Plong Karen people in Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, Myanmar pursue morality in what is a time of momentous social, political and cultural change. As one of the rare ethnographic studies to be conducted among Plong Karen people in Myanmar in recent decades, my research problematises existing literature and assumptions about ‘the Karen’. Informed by eighteen months of participant observation in Hpa-an, I examine the multiple ways that Plong Karen Buddhists broker, cultivate, enact, traverse and bound morality. Through an analysis of local social relations and the merit-power nexus, I show that brokering morality is enmeshed in both the complexities of the Buddhist “moral universe” (Walton 2016) and other Karen ethical frameworks that define and make personhood. I examine the Buddhist concept of *thila* (P. *sīla*), moral discipline, and how the everyday cultivation of moral “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1997), engenders a form of moral agency and power for elderly Plong Karen men and women of the Hpu Takit sect. Taking the formation of gendered subjectivities during the transitional youth period as a process of “moral becoming” (Mattingly 2014), I demonstrate the ways young women employ moral agency as they test and experiment with multiple modes of everyday ethics and selfhood. The experiential tensions between the traditional habitus of morality as filial obligation and utopian aspirations for the future are then examined through the prism of youth education programmes which encourage learning as a means of individual self-actualisation. Finally, I consider how the moral ideals of Buddhist Plong Karen have contingently converged in recent years with Buddhist chauvinist ideology which excludes non-Buddhists and especially Muslims from popular notions of belonging.

The thesis contributes to literature on how minority people in Myanmar see themselves beyond the ethno-nationalist narratives and movements that have defined them for decades (Sadan 2013; Thawngmung 2012). It also advances the anthropological study of morality by arguing that ethics are best understood not according to any neutral external measure or set of binary ethical positions, but as a set of frequently contradictory and ambiguous ideals which individuals seek to cultivate and enact in

the course of everyday life. Rather than searching for morality in moments of ‘moral breakdown’ or conflict, I argue that moral agency is a highly interactive process that is differentiated across people’s lifetime according to one’s circumstances, age and gender. Critiquing the notion that moral coherence is necessary for ethical selfhood, the thesis shows that contradiction and ambivalence is inherent to the pursuit of morality among Plong Karen people. While moral ideals may encapsulate diverse values, meanings and expectations, their individualised and ongoing pursuit can form the basis of a symbolically powerful collective identity.

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This thesis bears the imprint of a multitude of interlocutors, friends and colleagues whose generous support I want to acknowledge. My first and greatest debt is to the numerous Plong Karen people in Hpa-an who took me into their lives and generously shared their time and lives with me. The tolerance, generosity and care people extended to me during my stay in Hpa-an was truly humbling and there is no words to express my thanks to those without whose openness I never could have written this thesis. The owners of the guesthouse I stayed in deserve a special word of thanks for their generosity and hospitality, becoming my second family throughout my time in Hpa-an. Our long conversations, many meals, cups of teas and even the enforcement of curfews was a constant reminder of your love, care and support. I owe a particular debt to the teachers and students of a local educational institution who adopted me into their lives and enthusiastically provided me with insights, delicious dinners and invaluable help with practicalities throughout my fieldwork. Three university students deserve a special word of thanks. Their assistance with interpretation at various points helped to make the Plong Karen world of rituals, Buddhism and culture more accessible to me. Our time together also enlivened my fieldwork with jokes, gossip and karaoke, guiding and powering my research. This thesis is dedicated to you and I hope one day we will be writing something together as co-authors. *Cher koh pa du!*

People from across the globe have offered intellectual companionship, friendship and advice throughout my doctoral studies that made this thesis possible. I feel an immense sense of gratitude and indebtedness towards my supervisor, Philip Taylor, who continually pushed me to consider the multiple complexities of my field research. He read my work carefully and patiently challenged me to think more deeply and critically about Plong Karen people's lives. Much of the writing in this thesis and the ideas encapsulated in it were inspired by our long conversations and his guidance. His intellectual rigour and philosophical erudition gave me room for movement but also nourished my intellectual journey. I will miss our time working together immensely

and hope that I can one day provide the same intellectual guidance to others like he has done for me and many others in the anthropology student community at ANU.

I am also incredibly grateful to my other supervisory panel members Nicholas Farrelly and Jane Ferguson for being so supportive throughout my PhD journey, especially in the final months. From the very first meeting when I proposed conducting my research in Hpa-an, Nich was an enthusiastic advocate for me and my research and played a key role in seeing me through to the end. Having his full support in the period before submission was incredibly reassuring and I will always be grateful for his help. Jane's generous feedback throughout the writing up phase was also crucial, particularly as I came close to submission. Her breadth of knowledge on Myanmar, Buddhism and attention to detail helped me to think through and sharpen key aspects of my thesis.

At the Australian National University, I have been lucky to find a home in the Department of Anthropology, in the School of Culture, History and Language. During my PhD our school and the importance of our discipline was attacked through a torturous review process. And yet, the anthropology community at ANU sustained me and my writing throughout the PhD and particularly in the write up period. I am especially grateful to the cohort of anthropology students at ANU in both my own department and the School of Archaeology and Anthropology whose friendship, collegiality and intellectual engagement was one of the highlights of my doctoral studies. Our Friday writing group was immensely helpful as I wrote up my dissertation and oriented the direction, ethnographic detail and analytical rigour of many parts of my thesis. I would like to especially mention Helen Abbot, Simon Theobald, Jo Thurman, Poonnatree Jiviriyaboonya, Julia Brown, Gita Nasution, Jodie-Lee Trembeth, Ian Pollock, Xeem Noor Mohd Noor, Muhammad Kavesh and Fay Styman. Their generous and thoughtful critique opened me up to so many different cultural worlds and I have become a more knowledgeable and empathetic person for it. My conversations with Simon in particular helped to sharpen my analysis considerably on the vexing topic of morality, ethics and subjectivity and the critical advice he gave me throughout the writing up journey has made me a better scholar. I also want to thank students from the Coral Bell School including Jacqueline Manager, Chit Win, Timothea Horn, David Oakeshott and Shaun Gessler for sharing in the PhD journey.

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# ACRONYMS

**BGF** – Border Guard Force, battalions operating in southeast Myanmar under the command of the Myanmar Tatmadaw, formed from members of the DKBA and the KPF in 2010.

**BSPP** – Burmese Socialist Programme Party, in power 1974-1988.

**CSO** – Civil Society Organisation.

**DKBA** – Democratic Karen Buddhist Army.

**KHRG** – Karen Human Rights Group.

**KNA** – Karen National Association, the precursor to the KNU.

**KNDO** – Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO).

**KNLA** – Karen National Liberation Army, the armed wing of KNU.

**KNU** – Karen National Union, the main political wing of the Karen ethno-national movement.

**KPF** – Karen Peace Force.

**NGO** – Non-Government Organisation.

**NLD** – National League for Democracy, the political party led by Aung San Suu Kyi which is currently serving as the governing party of Myanmar (in power 2015-).

**SLORC** – State Law and Order Restoration Council, the political wing of the military junta in power 1988-1997.

**SPDC** – State Peace and Development Council, the political wing of the military junta in power 1997-2010.

**USDP** – Union Solidarity and Development Party, the main opposition party in Myanmar (previously in power 2011-2015).

## HONORIFICS

**Saw** – Karen personal prefix used for men

**Nan** – Plong Karen personal prefix used for women

**Hpi** – Karen personal prefix used for grandmothers

**Hpu** – Karen personal prefix used for grandfathers

**Sayadaw** – Burmese language prefix used when referring to senior Buddhist abbots

# LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

The three languages transliterated in this thesis are Eastern Plong Karen (hereafter ‘Plong’), Burmese and Pāli. The transliterations I use in the text are given in parentheses, preceded by an indication of the language – K. for Plong Karen, B. for Burmese and P. for Pāli. I follow the academic convention and use italics and lower case in the case of common nouns, and use upper case without italics for terms representing proper nouns. The Plong Karen language does not have a standard writing system nor a common form of transliteration.<sup>1</sup> I followed scholarly convention in the transliteration of some terms and have otherwise endeavoured to use as simple an approach to transliteration as possible to reflect the phrasing of my interlocutors. For Burmese transliterations, I have followed John Okell’s *Guide to Romanization*. I have used Pāli terms where they have become common in scholarly discourse and where its Plong Karen or Burmese equivalent does not significantly differ from the accepted Pāli meaning.

In using locally relevant terms in this thesis it is important to note the fluidity and complexity of language in this region of Myanmar. Language is best understood as lived, social and deeply fluid and the eastern Plong Karen lexicon is representative of this. Some Plong Karen terms differ across areas. For example, even simple terms such as cow and goat differ between villages close to Hpa-an and those in neighbouring Hlaing Bwe. There are also many terms which Plong Karen use which are adopted from Burmese, Mon, Pāli and, to a small degree, Thai and Sanskrit.

Hpa-an is a highly dynamic linguistic space and people often switch rapidly between Burmese, eastern Plong and sometimes S’gaw Karen. Reflecting the linguistic diversity of the social landscape, throughout the thesis I use a combination of Burmese and eastern Plong Karen terms, privileging the latter when they are of central

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<sup>1</sup> For a lengthy discussion on the different Plong Karen writing systems see Stern (1968a) and Womack (2005).

important to understanding vernacular notions of moral evaluation and social life. All non-English terms used in the thesis were discussed at length with a range of interlocutors to minimise potential interpretive error or ambiguity. In conjunction with the dynamic multilingual environment that is Hpa-an, Plong Karen people hold a number of different names, including one in Karen, one in Burmese and countless childhood nicknames. In this thesis, I use both Plong and Burmese names to reflect the fluidity of the naming landscape, but use Plong honorifics to help indicate people's ethnicity, age and status. 'Nan' and 'Saw' are the female and male honorifics that are used for Plong Karen names. 'Hpi' and 'Hpu' are used for grandmother and grandfather respectively. I have chosen to use pseudonyms throughout this thesis for my informants, except when referring to prominent monks, armed leaders or politicians. In considering the ethics of this research and the sensitive nature of discussions related to morality, this decision has been made to protect the identities of the people I spent time with in Hpa-an.

Finally, I want to consider the enduring contention over the nomenclature of the country known as Burma/Myanmar. In June 1989 the ruling military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), renamed Burma, 'Myanmar' for the international community, and replaced existing names for the country's divisions, townships, cities, citizens and ethnic groups to conform more closely with Burmese spellings instead of those inherited from the British colonial regime (see R. H. Taylor 2008b). For example, Rangoon became Yangon and ethnic groups such as the Karen were renamed 'Kayin'. Reflecting the vocabulary used by my friends and interlocutors in Hpa-an, throughout this thesis I use 'Myanmar' to refer to the country in the present era and 'Burma' in the time prior to 1989. My preference is to use locally relevant terms whenever possible in discussion of important Karen place names or people, such as Mount Khwaegabaung, instead of Mount Zwegabin. Whilst Plong people are commonly referred to as 'Pwo' in studies of the Karen, I prefer to use the term 'Plong' as people refer to themselves and their language in this way. I also use 'Karen' rather than 'Kayin' (in the Burmese language) to reflect common terminology in English-language scholarship on the Karen and in those published by Karen civil society networks. However, I have chosen to use Burmese names for towns, including my



primary field site Hpa-an, in Plong Karen ‘Tah Ohn’, so as not to confuse readers familiar with the country.



Figure 1: Map of contemporary political divisions of Myanmar. Source: ANU CartoGIS.

# INTRODUCTION

It was a hot and humid summer morning at the end of the 2016 new year Thingyan festivities. I sat chatting with my friend, Nan Soe<sup>2</sup> and some older Plong (Pwo) Karen grandmothers in a small village outside of Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, in Myanmar. Thingyan is the most prominent holiday in Myanmar's calendar and is celebrated in mid-April during the month of *Tagu*, the first month of the Myanmar Lunar year. We had arrived in the village around 7:30am, as Nan Soe wanted to pay her respects to her grandmother with gifts of cream durian biscuits and by washing her feet with the *Eugenia thabyay* plant. Afterwards we sat and chatted while the rest of the villagers busily prepared for a celebration in honour of their charismatic, spiritual leader, Hpu Takit, who was due to preach a sermon at midday. A group of elderly men and women were gathered together in one corner of the village under some trees preparing a meal to give out to Thingyan festival-goers. Women squatted on the ground peeling garlic and onion and pounding chilli, while most of the men stood over a large iron cooking pot of spicy pumpkin curry, chatting together while they chewed betel nut, already perspiring in the early morning heat of the day.

On the day I was visiting they were preparing food to give to people visiting the nearby waterfall for Thingyan, encouraging them to donate for blessings and good fortune for the coming year. Down at the waterfall, where the villagers had set up chairs and tables, one of the elders from the community called out over a megaphone inviting the hordes of young men and women splashing in the pools of the waterfall to come and eat. In the background, on the other side of the pool, a Buddhist monk from the nearby monastery could also be heard soliciting donations from festival goers. Both religious

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I employ pseudonyms for all individual villages and for respondents' names in order to protect their identities.

men competed for people's attention against the din of modern dance music blaring out from speakers rigged up to the back of several trucks.

Nan Soe and I bobbed our heads along to the music, singing along to the most popular song of the New Year festivities, PSY's 'Gentleman', blasting out of a loud speaker. We talked together, quietly reminiscing about the fun we had during the last few days, which we had spent driving around Hpa-an on motorbikes, stopping to dance with our friends at makeshift stages under a constant spray of water streaming from hoses, buckets, water pistols, cups and other receptacles. We giggled to ourselves at the sheer irony of the contrast, as we now sat, seemingly a world away from the pandemonium, chatting sedately with Nan Soe's grandmother and some of the other elders of Hpu Takit's religious movement, waiting for him to give his much expected sermon.

Dressed in heavy, hand-woven traditional Karen garb as was required by the celebration, Nan Soe told me she felt hot and sticky. We both wondered aloud how we were going to stay awake during the long and esoteric discourse that we knew Hpu Takit was about to commence. Nan Soe cheerfully urged me to try and keep my mind peaceful and clear even if I felt bored as the sermon would be good for my soul. I asked Nan Soe's grandmother, Hpi Da Boo, what she thought of the modern Thingyan festivities and particularly the loud music which was making it difficult for us to hear each other. She shook her head, muttering that she had a headache from all the noise. She continued:

Everything is changing. These days, girls dress like boys and think they can go anywhere and do anything. Even you, an *Ingaleik maung* (K. English woman),<sup>3</sup> wears Karen dress and our own young people don't. Nan Soe is a good girl, coming here to pay me her respects for the New Year in her Karen dress. But all of my friends here, their granddaughters have forgotten how to be faithful to their identity.

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<sup>3</sup> This term is used to refer to women of all nationalities with Anglo-European heritage.

Nan Soe smiled at me and rolled her eyes, bopping her head in motion to the songs blaring from the speakers nearby.

Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Hpa-an and its surrounding towns and villages, this thesis examines how Plong Karen Buddhists in southeastern Myanmar understand and ultimately pursue morality in the contemporary period. After decades of ethno-national conflict, military rule and economic stagnation, Plong Karen in southeastern Myanmar are living amid rapid and momentous social, political and cultural change. Since the introduction of political reforms in Myanmar in March 2011 which marked a transition from direct military rule, Myanmar has seen dramatic and substantial reforms in recent years.<sup>4</sup> In Myanmar's southeast, these national-level changes began to be felt most resoundingly following the signing of a preliminary ceasefire agreement between the Myanmar government and the Karen National Union in January 2012. That agreement brought a pause to more than sixty years of conflict, opening up parts of southeastern Myanmar to trade, tourism and investment (K. Joliffe 2016a; KHRG 2014; South and Joliffe 2015; UNDP 2014).<sup>5</sup> The everyday perspectives and experiences of Karen people in Myanmar, however, have attracted only modest attention from researchers to date. As a result, it remains to be seen how

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<sup>4</sup> Since March 2011 reforms in Myanmar have been wide-ranging, including the release of hundreds of prominent political prisoners, the easing of censorship and, importantly, the adoption of a market-based exchange rate (Brooten 2016; Holliday 2013; ICG 2012; Pederson 2014). The thoroughly entrenched system of military rule also saw the transition to civilian administration through the reintroduction of formal democratic processes, cemented by the 2015 national elections in which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party won a majority in both the upper and lower houses of parliament. However, the military *Tatmadaw* retains significant power over the country's governance, including allocating itself 25 percent of seats in parliament and control over three key ministries – the General Administration Department, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population. For more details on these political arrangements see Farrelly and Chit Win (2016), Jones (2014b) and MacDonald (2013).

<sup>5</sup> A longer discussion of the Karen ethno-national movement and its offshoots is provided in Chapter One. While Hpa-an district has been relatively peaceful since 1995 as a result of a ceasefire negotiated with the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a group which split off from the KNU, the ceasefire agreed with the KNU in January 2012 made a significant difference to people's freedom of movement and the growth of trade networks across the border. This was reinforced when the KNU and other Karen armed groups signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in October 2015. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan, however, are ongoing and the KNU have repeatedly expressed their concerns about the lack of progress in moving from a ceasefire towards genuine political dialogue. Conflict has broken out in Karen State on several occasions in the last six years. At the time of writing in September 2018 the ceasefire is particularly fragile after the incursion of Tatmadaw troops in April and August into KNU territory in northern Karen State, forcing some 2400 people to flee.

this critical juncture in Myanmar's history is being understood and experienced by Karen people themselves.

In this thesis I offer an insight into the changing worlds of Buddhist Plong Karen in Myanmar and their complex understandings of moral agency and everyday ethics. My thesis recounts the lives, ambitions and everyday challenges of the Buddhist Plong Karen with whom I engage. I focus especially on how they reconstruct their own understandings of morality within a world of competing and sometimes contradictory values, ethics and responsibilities. Building off recent literature on the anthropology of morality and ethics (eg. Laidlaw 2002, 2014; Lambek 2015, 2010c; Robbins 2004, 2007, 2013), I argue that Plong Karen understandings of morality are deeply agentic, embodied and performed. As demonstrated by the proliferation of charismatic Karen religious leaders such as Hpu Takit described above, the increasingly ambiguous and fragmented socio-moral worlds Plong Karen now find themselves within lends itself the formation and reinvention of moral subjectivities, cultural identities and imaginings of the self, of Karen community and of Myanmar society more broadly.

Arriving in Hpa-an at the height of Myanmar's political changes in March 2015, I sought to cast a wide analytic net during my fieldwork in order to capture the diverse understandings and practices of morality and everyday ethics engaged in by Plong Karen. I set out to examine how the expectations and visions of a transition to democracy corresponded with the reality and everyday lives of Karen people. How did young people, in particular, constitute themselves in relation to these changes? Was this period considered a time of rupture, or did life simply continue as normal? How was Karen identity being reimagined, renegotiated and transformed?

The longer I spent with Plong Karen in Hpa-an as they navigated everyday life the more my research came to revolve around questions of ethics and morality, including conflicting notions of what it means to be 'good'. This was not simply an intellectual pursuit of my own making. Rather, it was an endeavour fundamentally driven by my Buddhist Plong Karen friends and informants for whom basic moral orientations and frameworks are becoming ever more fragmented and uncertain in the changing social landscape of Hpa-an.

Contemporary Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, presents a unique setting to consider the contestation over morality engaged in by ordinary Karen people in the contemporary era. For decades people in urban areas of Myanmar, as well as many scholars working on the country, have viewed and depicted Hpa-an either as a sleepy backwater, dangerous conflict zone and even a “ghost-town” (Cockett 2015: 137).<sup>6</sup> Hpa-an has been at the forefront both of the KNU’s long-running ethno-national resistance movement and, since the signing of a ceasefire agreement with KNU-splinter group the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) in 1994, at the heart of the Myanmar government’s nation-state-making project in southeast Myanmar. The dramatic political and economic reforms in Myanmar, as well as the ongoing peace negotiations between the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) and the KNU, have brought significant changes to Hpa-an since 2011. Indeed, by the time I commenced my doctoral fieldwork in 2015 Hpa-an was a dynamic socio-cultural setting with a lively trade sector, a booming tourist economy and a vibrant civil society. Hpa-an is also the centre of state-level government administration and law-making for the entirety of Karen State. It was thus the ideal context in which to examine the lives and moral projects of Myanmar’s Plong Karen, a mostly lowland, Buddhist-majority group that have received minimal scholarly attention thus far despite comprising the vast majority of Myanmar’s ethnic Karen (see Thawngmung 2012).

Karen State is home to approximately 1.5 million people. Almost a third of these live in the trade, educational and investment hub of Hpa-an District, approximately 260km west of Yangon and 160km east of Mae Sot, the major town on the other side of the Thai border. The upgrading of the ‘Asia Highway’ to Thailand and constant repaving of roads since Myanmar’s liberalisation has cut travel time to the border town of Myawaddy in half, further cementing Hpa-an’s place as an economic corridor for trade and commodity exchange.<sup>7</sup> The electrical grid now covers the whole city, many of the

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<sup>6</sup> This region of Myanmar has been described in the literature primarily as a conflict zone (Delang 2000; Rogers 2004; M. Smith 1999, 2003, 2007; South 2008, 2011; Thawngmung 2008, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> The ‘Asia Highway’ is part of the famed East-West Economic Corridor backed by the Asian Development Bank and set to link Vietnam starting in Da Nang with Laos and Thailand all the way through Karen State to Yangon and further afield. Despite having some positive impacts for traders,

roads are newly paved and mobile phone service can be reached in most quarters and nearby villages. The ability to make money locally is a further sign of change, with a proliferation of restaurants, clothing stores, phone shops, hotels and other businesses opening up to cater to Hpa-an's burgeoning consumer class.

And yet despite this mood of transformation, Hpa-an and its surrounds are defined by their deep connection to the rural landscape. Wedged between dramatic limestone cliffs, emerald mountains and the Thanlwin (Salween) river, Hpa-an is located in a vast lowland plain and serves as a bustling market hub for the hundreds of surrounding rural villages which sprawl out of the urban space along the busy thoroughfare which leads to Thailand. Outside the main roads and central areas of the city many urban quarters resemble dense rural villages. Houses are often erected next to fields while chickens, ducks and goats flutter through the urban landscape. According to the 2014 census, over eighty percent of people in Hpa-an township are classified as living in a rural area (Ministry for Immigration and Population 2015).<sup>8</sup> Many of the families that live in villages surrounding Hpa-an are engaged in wet-rice cultivation and seasons and the weather are an important part of daily conversation. From June through to October during the wet season, the surrounding paddy fields give Hpa-an's landscape a sparkling green emerald hue and the otherwise tranquil Thanlwin river overflows at the banks. From November through to March the dry season takes hold and people prepare for what they hope will be a good and prosperous harvest. In this sense, it is important not to get too caught up in what appears to be a rapid social and political changes, as life for many Plong Karen in Hpa-an remains deeply enmeshed in the land and wet rice paddy cultivation.

Over the course of my time in Hpa-an, I came to understand that on the lowland plains of the Thanlwin river, morality is one of the master organising concepts of Buddhist Plong Karen lives. It is central to understanding how the contemporary era in

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this project has been steeped in controversy since its inception, with the large scale dispossession of land from Karen people along the route (KHRG 2015a, b).

<sup>8</sup> According to the 2014 census Hpa-An township's urban population is 75,883, which is 18% of the total township population of 421,575 (Ministry for Immigration and Population 2015).



Myanmar is lived and experienced differentially by Plong Karen Buddhists in particular. In the current era, Plong Karen Buddhists are profoundly concerned with morality as a meta-narrative that structures world views about collective and individual subjectivities. Morality is implicated in how people live, in what they wear, where they work, their understandings of personhood as well as religious and ethnic identity. Deeply embedded in the everyday realm and its myriad ambiguities, morality is simultaneously tied to the past, present and future through what one knows, how one sees the world and in dreams and aspirations for the future.



Figure 2: Map of Hpa-an Township, Karen State. Source: ANU CartoGIS.

For many Plong Karen of Hpa-an district understandings of morality are deeply influenced by Theravāda Buddhist religious frameworks and modes of power. According to the 2014 national census of the 1.5 million people living in Karen State

84.5% are Buddhist (Ministry of Labour 2016: 3).<sup>9</sup> In and around the plains of Hpa-an township, the strength of lay Buddhist worship can be seen in the many golden pagodas, monasteries and shrines that dot the surrounding landscape.<sup>10</sup> Paying homage to the Buddha to receive blessings for the day ahead through the *awgatha* prayer is one of the first things Plong Karen Buddhists will do in the morning, paying homage to the Three Gems – the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *sangha*. Most villages and towns in Hpa-an district have at least one monastery, which are the primary institutions for the dissemination of Buddhist literature as well as the transmission of moral frameworks and value orientations. Indeed, in Hpa-an, as in Myanmar more broadly, a Buddhist religious cosmological imaginary heavily frames local culture and subject formation, colouring most aspects of quotidian social life (Brac de la Perrière 1989; Mendelson 1960, 1975; Nash 1965; Schober 2011; Spiro 1970). However, although it is convenient to invoke a single totalising morality such as is outlined in the Theravāda Buddhist canon, there is no single collective morality which can comprehensively characterise Plong Karen society. As other anthropologists of Theravāda populations have observed (eg. Eberhardt 2006; Hayashi 2003; H. High 2017; Tannenbaum 1995), among the Plong Karen, Buddhist ethical frameworks must be viewed as part of a broader social cosmology through which people live and move through the world.

Inspired by the work of other anthropologists who study morality and ethics (eg. Keane 2015; Laidlaw 2002, 2014; Lambek 2015, 2010c; Robbins 2004, 2007), in this thesis I examine the multiple understandings of morality among Buddhist Plong Karen people and how these provide meaning and purpose in their lives. Since the 1980s, anthropological scholarship has inquired after questions of power, inequality and how economic and political forces shape people's lives – what anthropologist Joel Robbins (2013: 448) aptly terms the “suffering subject”: anthropology that emphasises “the subject living in pain, in poverty or under conditions of violence or oppression.” Much of the existing research on Myanmar's Karen people has fallen into this line of inquiry,

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<sup>9</sup> While the national census cannot be relied on for a completely accurate estimate of the number of Buddhist Karen people, especially without the release of data on ethnicity, this proportion is broadly reflective of the many hundreds of Karen people encountered throughout the authors' fieldwork.

<sup>10</sup> Beside countless Buddhist monasteries and pagodas, there are also Hindu temples, Christian churches and mosques.

examining the proliferation of forms of violence by the state against its citizens and their suffering as a collective ethnic nationality group (eg. Delang 2000; Harriden 2002; Horstmann 2011b; Rajah 2002; Rangkla 2014; Rogers 2004; Sharples 2017; M. Smith 2003; South 2007; Thawngmung 2012; Worland and Darlington 2010).<sup>11</sup> These depictions have been reinforced by the fact that the history of civil conflict, state surveillance and physical danger has made it virtually impossible for scholars to conduct the in-depth ethnographic research necessary to gain long-term access to the social worlds of the Karen in southeastern Myanmar. Influenced by the recent ‘ethical turn’ in anthropology (Keane 2015; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2015), this dissertation thus seeks to look “beyond the suffering subject”, as Robbins (2013) posits, focusing instead on the ‘anthropology of the good’ and the everyday projects of how Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an navigate and experiment with how to live a ‘moral’ life in a moment of social and political flux.

In his introductory essay to a collection of personal essays on *The Ethical Condition*, Michael Lambek observes that insofar as people act with an ethical framework, “fundamentally human beings live in worlds in which it is impossible not to evaluate action with respect to the good” (2015: xvii). Drawing from Aristotelian concepts of moral practice, Lambek argues that ethics should fundamentally be located in “in the thick of immediate circumstances, in historicity, and in the constraints and opportunities of life” (2000: 318). My friend Nan Soe who featured in the opening vignette was always keen to spend time with me throughout my sixteen months of fieldwork in and around Hpa-an. She had an extraordinary talent for creating and maintaining relationships with people from a myriad of social, ethnic and demographic backgrounds, including in her home village around one hour motorbike ride beyond the urban centre of Hpa-an. She was enthusiastic to introduce me to this world and her contacts and the friendship that grew between us offered me windows into many complex and morally ambiguous facets of Karen social and cultural life. It was in the context of getting to know Nan Soe, her extended kin, relatives and the

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<sup>11</sup> One notable exception to this is William Womack’s (2005) detailed study of Karen literature networks in Hpa-an. Through a close analysis of different forms of writing, their institutions, literary networks and the socio-political processes at play over time, Womack demonstrates the diversity of Karen imaginaries within southeastern Karen state.

multiple socio-moral worlds she engaged in that I began to grasp the immense creativity, experimentation and agency involved in Buddhist Plong Karen people's everyday enactment and pursuit of morality in contemporary Hpa-an.

Part of the significance of my work lies in its methodology, and its return to ethnographic and socially grounded approaches to the subject of Plong Karen identity in Myanmar, the "imponderabilia of everyday life" (Malinowski 1922: 18). In contemporary Hpa-an, Plong Karen identities and understandings of morality and what it means to be a 'good' man or woman are in a process of contestation. As described in the initial anecdote, youth sit at the centre of many of these moral debates. On the one hand, the identity of many Plong Karen youth is intertwined with strong rural social norms, customs and a celebration of 'traditional' notions of Karen identity. On the other hand, they are increasingly drawn into urban, transnational and mediatised global spheres where value aspirations that emphasize individuality and personal transformation are simultaneously tinged with an aura of possibility and danger.

Through a focus on morality, I thus seek to challenge a reductionist view of Karen personhood and moral subjectivity. Critiquing reductionist understandings of 'the Karen' as a collective people who cohere with a singular moral framework, I instead take the everyday lives of my Plong Karen informants as the starting point for anthropological examination. The framing of Karen people in relation to ethnic armed conflict in southeastern Myanmar is understandable given the central role civil war has played in the lives of many in this corner of the country. However, solely focusing on dynamics of collective resistance and suffering obscure many other important aspects of people's lives and identities. Before turning to a conceptual discussion of how my work also contributes to the anthropology of morality and ethics, it is important to first examine the literature that has come to define understandings of 'the Karen'.

## **Setting the Scholarly Scene: Who are the Karen?**

The ethnonym ‘Karen’ is a collective term for approximately twenty ethno-linguistic sub-groups from the Tibeto-Burman language family that inhabit a large area stretching from Myanmar’s Ayeyarwady river delta to the plains of Thailand’s Chao Phraya.<sup>12</sup> The largest of these sub-groups are the S’gaw (or Pgaganyaw), Plong (Pwo) and Bwe (Bghai or Bghwe), terms which Karen people use to refer to themselves and directly translate as ‘human being’. At present, there is an estimated population of three to seven million Karen people, of which the majority live in lowland areas of Myanmar around the Thanlwin, Sittaung and Tanintharyi rivers in southeastern Myanmar, in the Ayeyarwady Delta and in the commercial capital of Yangon.<sup>13</sup> In Thailand, Karen people mostly live in the forested hills and mountain valleys that stretch just south of Bangkok, through to the northern provinces of Tak, Mae Hong Son, Lamphun, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai (Hamilton 1976: 2).

Whereas this thesis concentrates on the Plong Karen of Hpa-an district in largely lowland regions of southeast Myanmar, much of the existing anthropological literature on the Karen is based on research conducted in in the northern highlands of Thailand. Led by the pioneering work of Charles Keyes (1969, 1977b, 1979) and Peter Kunstadter (1967, 1969, 1979), early anthropological research in the 1960s-1970s in Thailand largely characterised the Karen as a virtuous, honest and simple people, exclusively set in highland, forested areas where they practiced shifting cultivation. Research by other social scientists including Peter Hinton (1969, 1975, 1984), David Marlow (1969, 1979), Shigeru Iijima (1965) and James Hamilton (1963, 1976) contributed to a lengthy Durkheimian canon of anthropological knowledge on upland Karen village life, indigenous rituals and the importance of key moral frameworks in the functioning of social and community life. Based on a structural-functionalist approach, these studies focused on the socio-economic and cultural institutions that defined the Karen as a hardworking, virtuous and honest people, in contrast to their central Thai counterparts.

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<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested that the term ‘Karen’ stems not from any Karennic language group, but rather from the derogatory ‘kayin’ (Burmese/Mon) and ‘kariang’ (Thai), synonymous with ‘wild’ or ‘slave’ (Renard 2003) or ‘forest dweller’ (U Pyinnya 1929; U Saw 1931: 99).

<sup>13</sup> The ethnic data from Myanmar’s 2014 national census is yet to be released.

Anthropological scholarship on Karen language systems (Stern 1979), cultural characteristics, subsistence strategies, distinct myths, rituals and folklore (P. Hinton 1975) have often been defined in terms of the boundaries and differentiations they created between Karen and non-Karen groups (see also Kunstadter 1969, 1979; Rajah 2008). In particular, many scholars have emphasised the unique ‘moral ethic’ of the Karen (P. Hinton 1969; Iijima 1965; Marlowe 1969; Rajah 2008). According to much of the ethnographic literature from Thailand, Karen people are traditionally animist and practice an ecologically well-balanced form of shifting agriculture, which cannot be separated from their cosmological beliefs and rituals around the importance of maintaining one’s morality. However, it is apparent from both early anthropological, colonial and missionary treatise on the Karen that a significant degree of fission, fusion, expansion and contraction of different groupings made the Karen a highly heterogeneous ethnic group, made up of substantially divergent social, cultural, and religious affiliations (Lehman 1971; Lieberman 1978; G. Scott 1922; J. G. Scott 1932). Indeed, while Karen people often speak of a common moral framework which situates them as a collective people, it is experienced, embodied and expressed in multiple ways.

Although many Karen people recognise a kind of kinship with one another, the name, historical origin, language and the degree of ethnic homogeneity of different sub-groups is heavily disputed in both contemporary and more classical anthropological accounts (P. Hinton 1983; Keyes 1979; Lehman 1967, 1979; Walker 2001). Considering the numerous linguistic, sociocultural, religious, and political differences between these various sub-groups, in 1983 Peter Hinton, famously challenged early anthropological models of Karen ethnic classification and boundary making as “grossly exaggerated” (1983: 159), when he asked “Do the Karen Really Exist?”<sup>14</sup> Andrew Walker (2001) also later criticised the research that grew out of anthropologists working in Thailand and what he saw as “essentialised” and moralistic depictions of “the Karen” as benign and submissive forest protectors that had come to

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<sup>14</sup> For a linguistic reading of these dynamics see Luce (1959) and R. Jones (1961).

the fore in the rise of the global environmental movement.<sup>15</sup> Problematizing the perpetuation of what he termed the “Karen consensus” in anthropological scholarship, Walker called for a deeper and more radical understanding of Karen livelihoods outside the hills, within which they were figuratively trapped.

Dissatisfied with the mechanistic implications of structural functionalism, many contemporary anthropologists have enlisted interpretive frameworks to highlight internal debate, contestation, and broader global processes to expose other Karen modes of being in the world outside the ethno-ecological paradigm. Yoko Hayami’s (2004) monograph, for example, emphasises the extraordinary fluidity and variability of ethnic identity, demonstrating how Karen collective identity has been formulated in relation to various outside influences such as the process of state nation building in Thailand. Hayami’s research of Christian practices among Karen villagers in northern Thailand, for example, sought to transcend the ‘ethnic identity hypothesis’ that assumes an antagonism between highlander and lowlander peoples. She argues that the conversion of people to Christianity and new world religious cults should be understood not simply as boundary-making but also as reflecting a desire to “pursue material and other forms of wellbeing” (2004: 289). Hayami (2004: 290) notes:

By assuming a new set of practices that are based on a very different relationship to power, the Karen align themselves with a different mode of socio-economic life and a redefined community and social network.

Christianity, according to Hayami, offered Karen people access to a more modern and globalised gaze and understandings of time, work, ethics, medicine and education, allowing them to be simultaneously ‘modern’ and ‘Karen’.

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note here the conflicting views of scholars towards Hinton and Walker’s work. In February 2015, the prominent Thai anthropologist Chayan Vaddhanaphuti noted in a public seminar at Chiang Mai University that while there is some value to these arguments, they ignore the realities of Karen communities who live in Thailand and the important work of anthropologists in supporting their rights. According to Chayan, the work of academics has been significant in helping Thai-Karen peoples gain access to land title and the right to live in national parks through what Spivak (1990) terms ‘strategic essentialism’. For more on this debate see Claudio Delang’s (2003) edited collection.

Despite the growing influence of interpretive frameworks in understandings the lives of Thailand's Karen, a different kind of 'Karen consensus' continues to dominate much of the scholarship on Karen peoples of Myanmar. The protracted nature of the ethno-nationalist conflict between the Karen National Union and the Myanmar government, in particular, has generated strong Karen political exile identities in Thailand (Cheesman 2002; Gravers 2007; Harriden 2002; Thawngmung 2012). Indeed, in this century, the Karen as an ethnic category has taken on a life of its own, shaped by the political thought and behaviour of secessionist struggles across the world. Despite the 2012 bilateral ceasefire between the KNU and the Myanmar government, the sixty-year Karen ethno-national war continues to define identities, agendas as well as scholarly research. Much has been written by others before me on the post-independence history of conflict between the Myanmar government and the Karen National Union (M. Smith 1999, 2003; South 2011; Thawngmung 2008, 2012). However, in any research of the Karen it is essential to note the influence and impact both of global classifications of ethnicity and nationalism and the ways in which the Karen ethno-nationalist movement has sought to define what it means to 'be Karen' in Myanmar.

## **Karen Ethno-Nationalism and the Struggle for *Kawthoolei***

For almost seven decades Karen State has played host to one of the world's most enduring civil conflicts. Soon after Burma achieved independence from the British in 1948, one of the main Karen political organisations, the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing commenced a struggle against the state for the independent homeland of *Kawthoolei*<sup>16</sup> (M. Smith 1999, 2003; South 2011; Thawngmung 2008, 2012). Under brutal military and counterinsurgency campaigns the civilian population

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<sup>16</sup> *Kawthoolei* is the name for the Karen territory that the KNU has been fighting for since the late 1940s. It encompasses present day Karen state, parts of Mon State, Tanintharyi Region, Eastern Bago Division and detached enclaves around Patheingyi in the Delta. The precise etymology of *Kawthoolei* is debatable, but it can be directly translated in S'gaw Karen as 'the land of the *thoo lei* plant' (South 2007: 73). Anthropologist Mikael Gravers (2007: 245) notes that some Karen leaders give the term a symbolic rendering as "the old land," and that in earlier writings, it referred not to a specific geographical space, but rather a "symbolic space."



of Karen State was subjected to decades of instability and egregious human rights violations, which resulted in mass displacement and large flows of refugees to Thailand and further afield (Delang 2000; Lang 2002; Tangseefa 2006, 2007).<sup>17</sup> The widespread application of the Burmese military's 'Four Cuts' (*B. Pya Ley Pya*) counter-insurgency strategy aimed at cutting rebel groups off from access to food, funds, intelligence and recruitment played out in particularly damaging ways for civilians especially for communities in resource rich regions or on strategically important trade routes (Lang 2002; M. Smith 1999).<sup>18</sup> Following the military coup of 1962, Karen culture and languages were further marginalised by state officials of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), who attempted to impose a unifying national identity derived from the majority Buddhist Bamar community (M. Smith 1999).

The proximity of Karen State to Thailand has meant that it has become the first destination for many Karen peoples in their flight from civil conflict.<sup>19</sup> It has also served as the centre for the production of Karen ethno-nationalist ideology, education and policy among the Karen militarised elite. Since the government recognition of refugee camps in Thailand in the 1980s members of the primarily Christian S'gaw speaking KNU have held a hegemonic position over the majority of organisational, financial and educational institutions, popularly known as the 'K-Family', which seek to represent and administer the refugee population (Brees 2009; Horstmann 2011c, 2014; South 2008, 2011).<sup>20</sup> With the support of transnational faith-based INGOs, these

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<sup>17</sup> The Tatmadaw has been accused of numerous crimes against humanity, including ethnic cleansing, forced labour, abduction, torture, rape, religious and cultural persecution and even genocide. Evidence of this abuse is documented in countless reports and scholarship on the Karen (eg. Amnesty International 1999; Delang 2000; KHRG 2001, 2008a, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2017; KPSN 2018; KWO 2010; Rogers 2004; Tangseefa 2006, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the 'Four Cuts' policy and its application throughout Myanmar's borderland regions see Maung Aung Myoe (2009: 26), Smith (1999: 258-62), Selth (2002: 91-2) and South (2008: 86-7).

<sup>19</sup> In the absence of economic opportunities in southeastern Myanmar, there are also many Karen people who have migrated to Thailand in the hope of attaining a better income. The cross-border movement of Karen people should be understood as representative of a complex mixed flow which cannot be easily categorised into voluntary and involuntary, refugee, forced and economic migration (see also Rangkla 2012).

<sup>20</sup> These include the Karen Refugee Council, the Karen Youth Organization, the Karen Women's Organization, the Karen Human Rights Group, the Karen Organisation for Relief and Development, and many more.

networks have been formative in the production of Karen ethno-national identity, dominating the provision and structures of healthcare, education, media and socio-cultural activity of camp life (Horstmann 2014: 56; Sharples 2017). As a result of the strength of these networks, the conflict between the KNU and the Myanmar government has come to define much of the existing scholarly knowledge of southeast Myanmar and of Karen people more broadly.

The pan-Karen vision of solidarity espoused by KNU leaders has worked to the exclusion of other ethnocultural, politico-ideological, and religious narratives (see also Cheesman 2002; Gravers 2007; South 2007; Thawngmung 2012). Central to the Karen ‘ethnic consensus’ is the distinctiveness of Karen identity vis a vis the Burman, Buddhist and militarised state.<sup>21</sup> Ethno-religious Christian values have also been an integral part of the KNU’s conflict with the central government in Myanmar, viewed not only as a source of cultural identity but also as a badge of resistance to the overwhelming claims of Burmese state-sponsored Theravāda Buddhism and ‘Buddhification’ of Karen regions (Horstmann 2011a, 2014; Rajah 2002, 2008).<sup>22</sup> According to much of the existing scholarship, Karen life stories and world views

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<sup>21</sup> The notion of an essential ‘Karen’ identity defined in opposition to Burman culture was a trope that featured in early correspondence between the Karen delegation and British authorities in the year prior to independence. In a 1946 resolution, the KNA appealed to the British government for their desire for an independent state from the Burmese. In it they wrote: “The Karens are unanimous in their desire to be separated from the Burmans. [...] Our ambition and aspiration are to be a Member of this great Commonwealth of Nations. We do not deem ourselves inferior to the Burmans in any sphere of life and can never stand any measure to merge us with them. We are distinct from them in every way – dress, language, culture custom and especially in moral character. Can a people who respect truth and honesty give up his virtue and suffer himself to be merged with another who is of a lower moral standard” (cited in Tinker 1983: 740). These criteria were systematised by Karen leader Saw Po Chit (1946), who summarised them in a booklet distributed in London and claimed that: “[Karen and Burman] are in fact different and distinct genuses and it is a dream that Karen and Burman can ever evolve a common nationality.” These distinctions were then defined according to a list of clear differences including religion, custom, literature, history and myths, as well as mental and moral qualities that defined ‘the Karen’ as passive and virtuous and ‘the Burman’ as aggressive.

<sup>22</sup> Fundamental to Karen ethnic identity on the Thailand-Myanmar border the presence of Christian Baptist and Seventh-Day Adventist belief systems which form an opposition to the ethno-religious persecution of the Buddhist Burmese state. While many Karen people in fact follow the Theravāda Buddhist tradition and animist beliefs in Myanmar, Christianity was introduced to the Karen by early nineteenth century American Baptist missionaries and today plays a prominent role in their modern political ideology and ‘mythological charter’ (in Malinowski’s sense) of the Karen ethno-national movement (Gravers 2007; Rajah 2002). This political-religious division has been enhanced since the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) defected from the KNU in December 1994 with the support of the Myanmar state army. The repercussions of this defection and the resultant crisis in the KNU/KNLA are still felt to this day.

speak of suffering and repeatedly fleeing the Tatmadaw, the Burmese military – of attacks on civilian communities, of men, women, and children recruited for forced labour, and of a life of fear and uncertainty (Fink 2001; Lang 2002; Rogers 2004). Much of the ethno-nationalist discourse on the Thai-Myanmar border is also ingrained in millenarian yearnings for a ‘lost’ homeland and self-identification as an “oppressed, uneducated and virtuous” people (Cheesman 2002: 204).

The long-running ethno-nationalist conflict has produced a strong normative narrative of the moral Karen versus the immoral Burmese military state. This resonates with much of the anthropological literature from Thailand on the Karen, emphasising their inherently simple, honest and hospitable nature (eg. Saw Aung Hla 1929; Saw Moo Troo 1981). Saw Moo Troo (1981), for example, lists eight attributes of Karen people: the knowledge that there is God; high moral and ethical standards; honesty; simple, quiet and peaceful living; hospitality; language; national costume; and an aptitude for music. He also emphasises the importance of hospitality as a uniquely Karen attribute noting, “For the Karen hospitality is not merely obligatory out of courtesy. It is the duty of the host to provide shelter, protection, facilities, comforts and privileges wherever practicable” (Saw Moo Troo 1981: 6). As Nick Cheesman (2002) and others note, these core ethics have become a key narrative of Karen identity and the legitimacy of the ethno-nationalist movement. The countless stories of human rights abuses conducted in Karen areas of Myanmar have also played a powerful role on the border in asserting the legitimacy and moral authority of the KNU and the struggle for *Kawthoolei*, both among Karen people, but also foreign journalists, development practitioners, human rights activists and academic scholars.

Academics are not immune to such discourse but are heavily embedded in the Karen ethno-national liberation movement, documenting human rights abuses and the plight of displaced Karen people in Thailand’s refugee camps (Cusano 2001; Fink 2001, 2008; Lang 2002; Tangseefa 2006, 2010). The long-term ethno-national civil conflict, has meant that long-term anthropological research in Karen areas of Myanmar has

been extremely difficult to access for international researchers.<sup>23</sup> As a result, scholarship on the Karen has become highly reductive, overrepresented by the work of activists, political scientists and policy-oriented scholars who have helped to reproduce the above constructions.<sup>24</sup> An emphasis on the life stories of refugees and the Karen freedom fighters has also failed to adequately encompass the view of the ‘other’ Karen, as Ardeth Maung Thawngmung (2012) calls them, those who have spent their lives living under Myanmar’s military regime. These narratives not only transmit particular historical truths, they also determine what peoples come into view as characteristic of a place and time, drowning out other voices and the importance of understanding local, cultural and historical particulars.

In this thesis I explore the diverse and multiple lives of some of these ‘other Karen’ (Thawngmung 2012), by turning our attention to the lives of Buddhist Plong Karen in and around Hpa-an, Karen State. The thesis offers a grounded, ethnographic understanding of what it means to pursue morality as a Plong Karen Buddhist in ‘everyday life’ (de Certeau 1988). Constraints on long-term research in southeastern Myanmar made in-depth ethnographic studies of vernacular understandings of Buddhism impossible until recent years. Rather, much of the scholarship on Karen Buddhism focuses on its millenarian aspects, lending itself to narratives which reinforce a depiction of ‘the Karen’ as oppositional, conflictual and largely Christian, a characterised that does not necessarily represent the broader population nor everyday lay Buddhist practice among many Karen people (eg. Gravers 2001, 2012b; P. Hinton 1979; Stern 1968b). As anthropologist Mikael Gravers (1999, 2001, 2012b, 2015b, 2018) has demonstrated in his scholarship, the Buddhist Karen have long been associated with what he describes as “projects aimed at realizing a new moral order” (2015b: 45). My research in Hpa-an adds to a long tradition of anthropological literature in Southeast Asia which examines Buddhist social practice and morality

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<sup>23</sup> It is well known that scholars, human rights activists and NGOs have long had access to KNU-controlled areas of Myanmar through the border with Thailand. However, this access has always been conditional on the permission of the KNU or their affiliated networks.

<sup>24</sup> While scholarship of this kind has importantly increased international awareness of the various ethnic conflicts in Myanmar and the human rights violations suffered by the Karen, the explicitly political positions of these groups has bestowed a certain legitimacy to the KNU and their insurgency, and may even, as Ashley South (2011: 33) suggests, have helped to prolong the conflict.

through the lens of everyday social relations (eg Bowie 1998; Eberhardt 2006; Hayashi 2003; H. High 2017; Keyes 1990; Tannenbaum 1995). Through an account of the more everyday, mundane understanding of morality made visible from the lens of ethnographic fieldwork, my thesis unpacks the complex logics of everyday ethics enacted and navigated by Buddhist Plong Karen of Hpa-an district. It is within the textures of everyday life – at the level of the personal rather than more abstract collectives – that I seek to understand the practice and substance of the pursuit of morality.

## **On the Anthropology of Ethics and Morality**

In recent years, the field of morality and ethics have become the focus of an explicit research agenda within anthropological theory (Fassin 2014, 2015; Faubion 2001, 2011; Keane 2015; Laidlaw 2002, 2014; Lambek 2010c; Robbins 2004; Zigon 2007, 2008).<sup>25</sup> A new ethnographic canon has called renewed attention to how people evaluate the good, make moral decisions, and inhabit ethical subjectivities. I draw on this body of work throughout this thesis to examine the changing moral terrain of Plong Karen lives and explore the implications for anthropological accounts of individual and collective ethical practice.

There are two distinct bodies of thought that have significantly influenced anthropological research on morality and ethics. The first approach derives from Durkheim and the notion of morality as a pre-given set of “rules of conduct” which regulate society (Durkheim 1974 [1906]: 35). Both Malinowski’s (1926) work on crime and custom among the Trobriand Islanders and Meyer Fortes’ (1959, 1987) research on understandings and varieties of moral luck within the world of the Tallensi and Ashanti in Ghana adopt a structural-functional approach to the study of morality. For Ruth Benedict (1946: 195) morality “is a convenient term for socially approved

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<sup>25</sup> In the last two decades the study of ethics and morality has become the focus of anthropologists including Veena Das (2012), James Faubion (2001, 2011), James Laidlaw (2002, 2014), Michael Lambek (2015, 2010c), Saba Mahmood (2005), Cheryl Mattingly (2012, 2014), Joel Robbins (2004, 2007, 2013), Helle Rydström (2003) and Jared Zigon (2007, 2008). For an overview of this work see Fassin (2014, 2015), Keane (2015) and Heintz (2009).

habits.” Later interpretive works by anthropologists like Clifford Geertz also retained an emphasis on categorical definitions of morality. He argued that the “socially established structures of meaning” – what he termed ‘culture’ – was equivalent to a person’s “ethos” defined as “the tone, character, and actuality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood (1973: 12, 89). In these famed anthropological works, the respectful adherence to a set of social obligations or ‘moral facts’ arise from society and inspire the respect of all (Durkheim 1974 [1906]).<sup>26</sup> As already noted, scholarship of this kind has typically dominated studies of the Karen. However, if we conceive of Karen morality as a set of principles and rules that must be learned, we may neglect the exercise of freedom and agency that is essential to crafting a morally and ethically meaningful life – especially during periods of social change.

Anthropological scholars in recent decades have critiqued the conflation of morality and ‘the social’, emphasising instead the importance of understanding how ethical frameworks allow for a degree of “freedom” and deliberation in people’s everyday moral reasoning (Laidlaw 2002, 2014; Lambek 2015; Robbins 2007, 2013). Much of this scholarship draws from Michel Foucault (1987, 1997) who in his later work argued that the ethical must always be distinguished from mere obedience or transgression: “Every morality, in the broad sense, comprises the two elements... codes of behaviour and forms of subjectivation” (1987: 29). In this sense, Foucault posits that while social codes and systems of power define the broad boundaries of morally acceptable behaviour, from the perspective of the individual, ethics is often a highly subjective, agentive and interactive process. As James Laidlaw argues (2002: 315), in considering ethics as something that is lived and practiced rather than simply imposed from on high anthropologists must “take seriously... the possibilities of human freedom.”

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<sup>26</sup> As Durkheimian models of anthropology have suggested before, morality is deeply embedded in the ethical norms, standards and values held up in various societies and cultures that regulate behaviour. Indeed, in our attempt to understand the everyday lives and conceptual worlds of different peoples and cultural worlds across the globe, some anthropologists argue that morality and ethics has always been a focus of some of the richest anthropological accounts of people’s lives (eg. Fassin 2013).

Using Aristotelian foundations of ‘virtue ethics’, the language of ethics rather than morality has come to dominate subsections of these discussions (Faubion 2001, 2011; Laidlaw 2002, 2014; Lambek 2015, 2010c). Drawing from philosopher Bernard Williams (1985), James Laidlaw (2014) criticises anthropological scholarship for conflating the two. He distinguishes between *ethics*, which he argues answers the question “how shall I live?,” and *morality* defined as systems of rules and obligations, usually conceived in quasi-juridical terms.<sup>27</sup> Despite differences in anthropologists’ use of these terms, in this thesis I treat them as synonymous and use them interchangeably, though concur they have different connotations. In the context of Hpa-an, where Buddhist doctrine plays an important feature in Plong Karen everyday lives, separating the domain of morality from the practice of ethics is empirically problematic. Indeed, drawing a distinction between everyday ethics and abstract moral imperatives is tenuous given that many people evoke such moral principles in their everyday, embodied practices of being in the world.

Among the Plong Karen of Hpa-an, Buddhist frameworks of morality, right and wrong are key features of the socio-moral landscape. Identifying as Buddhist is embedded in what Matthew Walton (2016) calls the Buddhist “moral universe”, governed by a set of moral laws and notions of truth laid out by the *dhamma*, the laws and teachings of the Buddha.<sup>28</sup> According to my Plong Karen Buddhists interlocutors, the *dhamma* is taken to be the source of moral order in the world. Following its teachings thus offers a path by which people can escape *samsāra*, the continuous cycle of rebirth and suffering. Part of this is upheld by a strong cosmological belief in karma (K. *khoung*) — that the individual self is constituted by an accumulation of merit and good deeds as a result of this and previous lives.<sup>29</sup> Making merit is thus an important feature of morality among Plong Karen and these ideas create a strong framework for what it

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<sup>27</sup> Webb Keane (2015) similarly writes at length about the historical usage of these terms in anthropology and philosophy in the introduction to his book, *Ethical Life*.

<sup>28</sup> Drawing from Peter Jackson (2002), Walton notes the “the interpretive plasticity” of Burmese Buddhist concepts and that as scholars we need to be careful when studying any of these traditions that we are not presenting them as unified ideas.

<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed exploration of the centrality of karmic theory in Buddhism see Spiro (1970), Tambiah (1970) and Keyes & Daniel (1983).

means to be a good or ethical person. Consequently, evil or immoral actions generate demerit and have real material consequences for this and subsequent lives.

Buddhism is also evident in a range of Plong Karen social practices and the cultivation of the self as a moral being, including in how one dresses and speaks, ideas around social and community work and particular rituals which define the life course and its transitions. For men, it is expected that they will spend at least two periods of time in their life in a monastery as a novice monk, once when they are a child (between the ages of 7-10) and again when they are coming of age (between the ages of 20-23). Women are expected to develop a sustained adherence to the five Buddhist precepts (P. *pañca-sīlāni*), injunctions against killing, thieving, lying, intoxication and improper sexual behaviour, over the course of their lives and to play an active role in local Buddhist festivals and merit making rituals. However, while Buddhist cosmologies and discourses of morality inflect people's conceptualisations of ordinary ethics, other local cultural idioms are often just as salient in the practice of everyday life.

Reflecting other research on Theravāda Buddhist communities throughout Southeast Asia, the metaphysics of lived Plong Karen Buddhist practice does not neatly map onto classic Buddhist texts or philosophy (see for eg. Davis 1984; Eberhardt 2006; Hayashi 2003; Kitiarsa 2005; Tannenbaum 1995). Beyond the Buddhist concept of *thila*, moral discipline, in the Karen language there is no explicit term that precisely translates as 'morality'. Rather, a series of moral tales and discourses which serve to clarify esteemed and derided human qualities provide a basis upon which many people evaluate moral conduct. For many Plong Karen morality and goodness is often embedded in gendered embodiments of behaviour and dress which stem from Karen social and cultural codes. For others, moral conduct is embedded in daily economic activities, especially how one chooses to balance earning money *vis a vis* one's subjectivity as a Karen person and community member. Even among people engaged in extraordinary practices of worldly renunciation, everyday understandings of morality are often defined in relation to Karen understandings of the life course and the duties embedded in marriage and parenting.



As I use it here, morality refers to the connections between social norms, customs and codes of being ‘good’, and the capacity of individuals to deliberate and make their own choices as to how to behave and respond to various situations and ethical quandaries. Central to this definition is moving beyond a distinction between the ideal and the lived reality, and instead focusing on the social space left open for individuals to reason and negotiate one’s own moral model and rationalise to oneself what it means to be ‘good’ according to an interpretation of collective moral expectations. This understanding of social hierarchy and cultural practice offers scope for individuals to exercise agency, to disrupt or challenge moral codes and even to engage in activities that may be considered as transgressive. In this sense, my theoretical approach builds on the structural moral models rooted in the Durkheimian tradition, but also importantly emphasises morality as something that is *pursued* with a highly agentive conception of the self.

It is important to consider the notion of agency in relation to Theravāda Buddhist frameworks of morality, through which the majority of my informants identify themselves. According to Plong Karen Buddhists and the logic in built in the notion of karma, the conception of ‘freedom’ and agency is a radical one. However, calling to mind Talal Asad's (1993) distinction between abstract religious discourse and the everyday, lived moral experience, in this thesis I lay bear the reflexive and agentive accounts that people use on a daily basis to position both their own and others practices and lifestyle choices as embedded in moral agency. This draws from the work of anthropologist Nancy Eberhardt who, informed by her research among the Shan in northern Thailand, critiques anthropologists’ use of the term ‘agency’ as akin to ‘free-will’ (2014: 411). She instead conceives of agency as “the (socially, culturally, historically) constrained capacity to act that characterizes the human condition” through which people justify themselves and their actions on moral or ethical grounds. As Eberhardt rightly notes, even with a view of one’s fate as pre-ordained “any specification of ‘the moral’ will always be an abstraction from a messier reality” (2014: 410). I am also influenced by the work of De Certeau (1988) who writes that agency is practiced in the art of living as one’s self within environments not of one’s making.

As I will argue in this thesis, for Plong Karen Buddhists morality is a way of being, everyday choices through which one cultivates the self as a moral subject in relation to different and sometimes contradictory notions of what is and isn't 'good'.

Drawing from Eberhardt and the work of other scholars of mainland Southeast Asia (eg. Bowie 1998; Davis 1984; Tannenbaum 1995), I explore moral agency among the Plong Karen by paying attention to the dialectic between conversation and social interaction. Among the Buddhist Plong Karen in Hpa-an, to have moral agency is not simply the pursuit of individual moral selves, but is also deeply embedded in how others in society see you and relate to you, as well as how you interact with spirits, ghosts and the environment. Furthermore, in drawing from Foucault's (1997) notion of subjectivation, I demonstrate that moral agency should not be understood as equally accessible to all actors across space and time. Rather, moral agency is best conceived as individuated and differentiated, accessible to people in different ways across their lifetime.

Building on this definition, I use the term moral agency in this thesis to refer to the ways that people consciously pursue morality, a daily navigation of different and sometimes competing socially constructed and determined socio-moral value spheres. Drawing from recent work within anthropology, I take as my starting point the view that humans are inherently "evaluative" and that plural ethical modalities inform how people pursue and enact morally meaningful lives (see Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2015). In particular, I draw out the way sometimes conflicting moral frameworks provide collective meaning and help to orient everyday life for different people in distinctive ways (c.f de Certeau 1988). Rather, than seeing morality as a "moment" or a discrete category of human experience (Zigon 2007, 2008), my approach examines moral agency as something that unfolds over time through the everyday and as something that varies according to one's circumstances, age and gender. In exploring the multiple, contested and conflicting practices of morality among Plong Karen Buddhists, I therefore critique the influence of MacIntyre's (1981) model of virtue ethics that has become dominant within recent anthropological literature on morality and ethics (eg. Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; Mattingly 2014; Robbins 2004, 2013).

According to MacIntyre (1981), an ethical life can only be coherent if social practices, self-narratives and institutions are integrated and consistent. Drawing on this Talal Asad (1993) argues that the practice and performance of ethics is based on an authoritative epistemic and moral framework or “discursive tradition” which instructs practitioners on the “correct forms” of the good life. Following Asad, Mahmood’s (2005) important work on Islamic piety in Egypt demonstrates that such discursive traditions shape a unique interpretation of practical reason itself, so much so that “the individual is contingently made possible by the discursive logic of the ethical traditions she enacts” (2005: 32). While Buddhism, like Islam, “consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice” (Asad 2009: 14), crafting an ethical life among the Plong Karen relies on engaging with multiple and sometimes conflicting moral discourses and authorities which do not always point people in the same direction. Indeed, morality, as Laidlaw (2014) argues, requires deliberation and judgement. Taking Laidlaw’s argument further, I argue that the productive tension between multiple and potentially contradictory moral frameworks is a fundamental part of both of how people know and understand everyday ethics and how moral practices come to cohere within everyday social life. This is also why I don’t find it productive to separate ethics and morality. One need not think of these in such a dualistic manner – morality as rules, obligations or tradition and ethics as an arena for deliberation. Indeed, one informs the other.

In doing so, I draw attention to the unique, biographically particular ways in which individuals construct, debate and pursue morality. In focusing on moral agency through the lens of everyday ethics, I am not interested in making assertions about what is right or wrong, but rather, asking how Karen people navigate the question, “What is the good I *want* to pursue?” in a world of contradictory moral values. Indeed, this thesis shares many of the questions and concerns raised by scholars recently in the debate on ‘contradictions’ (Berliner 2017; H. High 2017; Kuan 2015). Despite the power of outside environmental, structural factors in dictating what it is to be ‘good’, there is, as Teresa Kuan (2015: 23) relates, “always rooms for human initiative, room

for management and manipulation.” The ethical, in this sense, should always be located in the realm of everyday life, shaped by the exigencies of social interaction.

## **Methodological Framework**

This dissertation draws from extensive ethnographic research with Plong Karen in Hpa-an township, Karen State and its surrounds between 2015 and 2018. Throughout this period I engaged in more than eighteen months of participant observation and “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998) with young Plong Karen men and women, their families and communities focusing particularly on their diverse understandings, practices and projects of moral obligation and cultivation. The methodological approach of the thesis reflects the recognition made by leading anthropologists of morality that ethical practice and evaluations of the ‘good’ must be examined “in the thick of immediate circumstances, in historicity, and in the constraints and opportunities of life” (Lambek 2000: 318). Indeed, moral frameworks are often intensely experienced and negotiated in routine everyday encounters which cumulatively serve to shape individual and communal notions of moral ideals and collective identity.

Ethnography is especially useful for examining the generation and enactment of moral subjectivity as it relies upon an ontological outlook that accommodates diverse and evolving notions of the human condition. By paying attention to the mundane and “ordinary” (Das 2012; Lambek 2010c) it becomes possible to re-examine from new vantages points the ethical frameworks, psychological outlooks and structural influences that constitute morality as practiced in the everyday. Focusing on the individual as they navigate their diverse social commitments and ideals can be especially generative for, as Webb Keane (2015: 26) explains, “social interactions are the natural home of justifications, excuses, accusations, reasons, praise, blame, and all the other ways in which ethics comes to be made explicit.” Examining individuals as they navigate their diverse familial and communal obligations also provides an ideal lens through which to expose the ambivalence, contradiction and ambiguity that often lies at the heart of moral life (Berliner 2017; Kuan 2015; Schielke 2015).

In order to examine the complex interactions and quandaries of everyday ethics and moral agency, my project relied on many thousands of hours spent visiting, eating, cooking and generally ‘hanging out’ with Plong Karen in Hpa-an. Many of my networks grew out of relationships with Plong Karen university students and their affiliated kinship and educational networks that stretched across Karen State through to Myawaddy on the Thailand-Myanmar border. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I offered to teach three days a week at a recently founded non-state English language program. My relationship with the two teachers there quickly flourished and they came to play a fundamental role in opening up my world to the lives of Karen people from a diverse range of social strata around Hpa-an. As teachers are highly respected in Karen culture and are expected to make regular visits to the homes of their students, accepting invitations to visit the urban wards and rural villages of my pupils also provided me access to new networks of people and their families. Staying ‘in place’, and assuming the obligations associated with a teacher, thus allowed me to cement relationships with Karen people while grounding their sense of me as part of their community.

Throughout my time in Hpa-an, this included accepting every invitation that I received to attend local Buddhist festivals and rituals, birthday parties, wedding and funerals, as well as spending as much time as possible in people’s households, trying to get to grips with family structures, social responsibilities and moral values emblematic in everyday routine. Taking part in ordinary social interactions among Plong Karen friends and family also allowed me to observe the way in which everyday cares and concerns are often framed in highly moral terms. I paid particular attention to categories my interlocutors used to describe and explain social worlds and the way certain languages are used or perhaps, usefully deployed, in different contexts. In my sustained curiosity and questions about Karen culture and everyday ethics, moral judgements about my own life also became a central part of my field experience.

During my fieldwork in Hpa-an I frequently wondered how my own position as a young, Anglo-Saxon woman from Australia influenced my research. Indeed, my height, skin colour and blue eyes immediately positioned me as an outsider in most social contexts, a point that was constantly reinforced when I was in rural areas and

could hear the constant call of '*Ingalaik maung*' – English woman. For some young Plong Karen men and women, spending time with a foreigner was a status enhancer, and for others it provided an opportunity to speak openly about their questions related to morality and their own 'coming of age' – themes which recur in the chapters that follow. Indeed, while I'm sure I missed many nuances an 'insider' would see, I found that my outsider status helped me gain an insight into people's private moral dilemmas and their navigation of certain cultural customs, traditions and beliefs.

In and outside of Hpa-an many people, regardless of their age, generously welcomed me into their lives and were open to my research questions and activities. It no doubt helped that a key notion of Karen morality is embedded in the importance of hospitality to guests. This was always emphasised to me as a uniquely Karen ethic, and was particularly prominent in rural areas surrounding Hpa-an. As an '*Ingalaik maung*' and almost always seen as a guest, I experienced such hospitality in full flavour from the beginning of my fieldwork. While some people were slightly cautious of my presence and my curiosity about their lives, many Plong people – especially elderly grandparents of my pupils – situated me in a historical lineage of foreigners who had maintained an interest in Karen society since the nineteenth century and were keen to ensure that I understood their various ethical practices and moral projects.

For many Plong Karen, the research I conducted also made sense to them as part of wider attempts to 'preserve' Karen identity and culture. For them, an anthropologist was someone interested in traditions, culture and customs, including the intricacies of rituals, dress and dance. This often saw me placed in the company of elders who my younger interlocutors insisted could tell me the most 'authentic' stories of the origins of Plong Karen identity, history and ritual sociality. Especially in esoteric Karen religious movements (see Chapter 3), I found myself often being prompted to spread the news to the world about the greatness of their leaders and the importance of preserving Karen customs and 'traditions'. Others saw my presence and enthusiastic inquiry into Karen life and morality as a natural expression of Karen legends which

depict ‘the *Ingalaik*’ (K. English) as the inquisitive younger brother of the Karen.<sup>30</sup> As one Karen Grandmother Hpi Ha Mya explained to me:

When Hpu Chai, the Karen lord of the guardian spirits, created people we were all brothers and sisters. Karen people were created first and we were the oldest brother, and the *Ingalaik* were created last and so you are the youngest brother. So, you have a duty and an obligation to help us.

Indeed, many Plong elders I spent time with implored me to write their histories and life stories to enact my enduring obligation to them and their families as their younger sibling.

Outside the deep relationships I formed with various Plong Karen men and women, I also engaged informally with a wide array of people in Hpa-an, including shop keepers, hoteliers, government officials, civil society leaders, monks, politicians and prominent businessmen.<sup>31</sup> I conducted numerous interviews with political and social leaders from across the spectrum, including the Chief Minister of Karen State, Nan Khin Htwe Myint, appointed in 2016 by Aung San Suu Kyi following the November 2015 election of the National League for Democracy (NLD). I also spent time with the managers of Hpa-an’s Free Funeral Association, a civil society group with close links with the NLD, as well as local members of the Buddhist nationalist association, Ma Ba Tha, which flourished in Hpa-an throughout my fieldwork. For me it was also essential to take time attending sermons in monasteries and talking with monks and lay ascetics about Buddhism and its relationship with understandings of everyday ethics. Interactions with both my close interlocutors and these other key informants largely took place either in their homes as well as in restaurants, tea shops, the

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<sup>30</sup> The oral story of the seven brothers, the Karen being the eldest and the *Ingalaik* being the youngest, has recurred in various ethnographies of Karen people across Thailand and Myanmar (Hayami 2004; E. Hinton 1999; P. Hinton 1975; Marshall 1922; Rajah 2008; Stern 1968b, 1979)

<sup>31</sup> I formally interviewed some of my older Karen interlocutors, but soon learnt that day-to-day conversations provided a more rigorous sense of morality, ethics and goodness and a level of comfort that more formalised conversations did not provide.

marketplace, monasteries, church grounds, festivals and, especially on long trips to and from far-flung villages, on the back of motorbikes. Though the networks of my students often took me from Hpa-an into towns further afield like Kawgareik and Hlaingbwe, the bulk of my time was spent within 40 minute motorbike from my lodgings in the urban core of Hpa-an.

Unlike the 'field' as mythologised in the Malinowskian tradition, the relevant laws in Myanmar did not allow me to live on a permanent basis in the same dwelling as my interlocutors.<sup>32</sup> Consequentially I lived in a family-run guesthouse in the bustling downtown market of Hpa-an throughout much of the eighteen months I spent in Karen State.<sup>33</sup> This arrangement afforded me private space to reflect and write-up fieldwork throughout my research. However, it also allowed me to develop close bonds with, and gain an insight into, the structures and internal dynamics of the relatively affluent local family which owned and managed the guesthouse. Though I sat within their family hierarchy as an outsider and ultimately had the freedom to make my own choices, my long-term presence meant they developed a strong sense of responsibility for my wellbeing. As a result, they often sought to regulate me according to their social and moral values – chastising me when I got home too late and regularly suggesting guidelines for appropriate behaviour as a young woman in Hpa-an.

Throughout my fieldwork I used a combination of conversational Burmese, eastern Plong Karen and English, and often a mixture of all three. Hpa-an is a dynamic multilingual space where Burmese has been the primary language of school instruction for many years. As a result, many young people I spent time with used a combination of Burmese and Plong Karen, often interspersed with English terms they had picked up in language classes. I chose to follow suit, changing the lingua franca I used depending on the people I was speaking to and their own preferred language for conversation at the time. Language learning is an iterative and ongoing process, made

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<sup>32</sup> Whilst these laws were more flexible laws in urban spaces like Yangon, in the post-conflict landscape of Hpa-an, in 2015-16 authorities still strictly precluded foreigners from residing in the same residence as Myanmar nationals outside of officially-registered guesthouses.

<sup>33</sup> Upon returning for a shorter stint of follow-up fieldwork in mid-2018, however, I was able to stay for two months in the urban home of one of my close interlocutors.



even more complicated in multi-lingual settings. Even though my linguistic abilities improved over time, I am certain that I missed many nuances in everyday conversation. Since many of my networks flowed out of the English language centre in which I taught there was often someone who could help me with the many questions I had about translation. As a result of the strong connections I made with the English learning centre in which I worked, I developed a close relationship with three Plong Karen-speaking students who sometimes assisted me in Hpa-an and provided translation help during formal interviews with authorities such as monks, ritual elders, armed leaders or government staff.

The writing of my thesis was also aided by the changing information environment of Myanmar and the fact that many of my Plong Karen friends gained access to social media and Facebook in particular. This allowed me to continue my relationships with people as well as keep relatively up to date with their lives even during lengthy physical absences from Hpa-an. I also made four impromptu trips to Hpa-an during the ‘writing up’ phase, including to attend a wedding of two of my closest interlocutors. These visits assisted my conceptual framing, allowing me to cross-check arguments I was making with my Plong Karen friends and interlocutors. In examining the pursuit of morality, this interactive approach was also important to ensure the ethical representation of the many hundreds of people who contributed to my research.

## **Chapter Outline**

In the chapters that follow I demonstrate the multiple ways that Plong Karen broker, cultivate, enact, traverse, defend and ultimately *pursue* moral lives. In attempting to understand what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘moral’ life in and around Hpa-an, it is important to locate the historical dimensions of power and authority and examine how these shape and constrain people’s lives in the current context. In order to understand the context that frames the pursuit of morality in contemporary Hpa-an, Chapter One provides an historical overview and outlines the way powerful moral agents have played a critical role in influencing Plong Karen and their ideals of ethical practice and moral life. Combining historical and ethnographic research, I provide the context for understanding the lives of Plong Karen Buddhists from Hpa-an, bringing to the

fore a history that has been relatively neglected in studies of the Karen. In doing so, I locate Plong Karen understandings of morality in relation to charismatic and competing moral authorities who have positioned the project of Buddhist revivalism as central to collective Karen identity and moral community.

In Chapter Two I examine moral agency and everyday ethics in relation to the power nexus of the Buddhist economy of merit making. Building on some of the dynamics that emerge in Chapter One, in this chapter I explore the conflicting logics embedded in Plong Karen understandings of morality and everyday ethics. Through the lens of one powerful lay figure, I examine the accumulation of what is widely perceived as ‘unclean wealth’ in contrast to the Plong Karen ethic of keeping ‘faithful’, *thout kyar*. In exploring these themes, I reveal the complex moral regimes of value embedded in Plong Karen understandings of morality. Through a comparison of pernicious forms of exchange relations and how these become interwoven in the everyday ‘gift’ economy of keeping *thout kyar*, I demonstrate that for Plong Karen Buddhists, multiple and sometimes conflicting understandings of morality are a fundamental condition of everyday life and ultimately how people explain what it means to be a morally coterminous being.

In Chapter Three, I focus on the Buddhist concept of *thila* (P. *sīla*), moral discipline, and the cultivation of ‘extraordinary’ ethics among the elderly men and women of an esoteric Buddhist religious movement. In exploring the lives of elderly men and women in this community and their view of everyday ethics *vis a vis* their leader Hpu Takit, I argue that Plong Karen understand the pursuit of morality in highly agentive ways. I demonstrate how the cultivation of moral “technologies of the self” for elderly people from the Hpu Takit sect engenders a form of moral agency and power amidst a time of rapid social and political change (Foucault 1997). This draws upon the work of Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005) who shows that even among the most religiously pious members of society, the relationship between morality and religion is not simply one of obedience, but of practical judgement and deliberation (see also Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2006).

Through a rich ethnographic account of the experiential tensions of being a young Plong Karen Buddhist woman, in Chapter Four I further examine the agentic processes embedded in enacting morality. In particular, I puzzle over the gendered understandings of the Plong Karen ‘coming of age’ process. Taking the formation of gendered subjectivities during the transitional youth period as a process of “moral becoming” (Mattingly 2014), I demonstrate the ways young women employ moral agency as they test and experiment with multiple modes of everyday ethics and selfhood. This chapter reveals the multiple ways in which young Plong Karen Buddhists enact and understand morality in ways which sometimes border on transgression. Through the lens of the Buddhist New Year *Thingyan* festivities, I argue that while outsiders may perceive inconsistencies and incompatibilities within the various moral codes that young people embody, they themselves experience little contradiction moving within and between them.

In Chapter Five, I examine how young people traverse new value orientations in the contemporary era alongside the traditional habitus of morality as embedded in filial obligations. By following the lives of several young people, I demonstrate how the propagation of a hopeful outlook by emergent educational institutions influences young people’s eudaimonic imagination and visions of what it means to live a ‘good’ or ‘moral’ life (see Annas 2011; Hursthouse 1999; MacIntyre 1981).<sup>34</sup> In analysing the moral values of young Karen people in connection to the promises of technological, personal and social transformation, I demonstrate how the broadening of hope in Hpa-an through new educational sites, influences young people’s subjectivities. Further to this, I extend my discussion on moral agency and ‘coming of age’, and the tensions between the traditional habitus of morality as embedded in filial obligations and the utopian ideas of youth education as a means for individual self-actualisation. In examining the inherent contradictions in young people’s understandings of human flourishing, I show the deeply fraught and contested nature of eudaimonic wellbeing as it is lived and enacted.

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<sup>34</sup> Eudaimonia is a concept used by philosophers who argue that wellbeing is not so much a state of being, but rather a process of fulfilling one’s virtuous potentials.

In Chapter Six, I consider how the moral ideals of Buddhist Plong Karen have contingently converged in recent years with Buddhist chauvinist ideology which excludes non-Buddhists and especially Muslims from popular notions of belonging. I focus on the social and political changes in Myanmar and how they have resulted in two contradictory social movements among the Karen in Hpa-an that are deeply moralised. On the one hand, I note the resurgence of Karen nationalist identity which has sought to unite Karen Christian and Buddhist communities as a way to secure peace and development. On the other hand, there has been a growth in Buddhist nationalism, which has positioned Muslims as well as non-Buddhists more broadly as ‘Other’. These hierarchies generate and entrench new dynamics of exclusion within the Karen community writ-large, threatening the overall peace process and Karen attempts at ‘unification’ while problematically including Buddhist Karen within the larger state-endorsed project of Buddhist moral community. A partial form of “cultural citizenship” (Rosaldo 2003) begins to emerge from the project of Buddhist nationalism which complicates, though certainly does not erase, the cleavage of ethnicity that has underpinned the Karen ethno-nationalist struggle for decades.

In the Conclusion, I enlist material and arguments presented in earlier chapters to conceptualise moral agency and everyday ethics amongst Plong Karen Buddhists. The thesis contributes to literature on how minority people in Myanmar see themselves beyond the ethno-nationalist narratives and movements that have defined them for decades (Sadan 2013; Thawngmung 2012). It also advances the anthropological study of morality by arguing that ethics are best understood not according to any neutral external measure or set of binary ethical positions, but as a set of frequently contradictory and ambiguous ideals which individuals seek to cultivate and enact in the course of everyday life. Rather than searching for morality in moments of ‘moral breakdown’ or conflict, I argue that moral agency is a highly interactive process that is differentiated across people’s lifetime according to one’s circumstances, age and gender. Critiquing the notion that moral coherence is necessary for ethical selfhood, the thesis shows that contradiction and ambivalence is inherent to the pursuit of morality among Plong Karen people. While moral ideals may encapsulate diverse values, meanings and expectations, their individualised and ongoing pursuit can form the basis of a symbolically powerful collective identity.



# CHAPTER ONE

## Competing Moral Agents: A Political History of Hpa-an

Hpa-an is neither upland nor lowland, but somewhere in between. Known for its karst limestone mountainscape, the most famous landmark in the region is Mount Khwaegabaung (B: *Zwegabin*) which pierces the green emerald landscape that surrounds the Thanlwin river like a towering beauty. Mount Khwaegabaung is one of the most sacred sites in all of Karen State and deeply symbolic within the Buddhist Plong Karen imaginary. The uniquely shaped mountain is considered by many as the spiritual home of Karen people, and is referenced in stories told by Karen people from Hpa-an through the eastern hills of Myanmar to Chao Phraya in Thailand (Hayami 2004; E. Hinton 1999). It is home to Karen spirits, elders, hermits and the remnants of a past Karen kingdom. The bones of Hpu Htaw Meh Pa, a powerful Karen leader who is thought to have brought the Karen south along the Thanlwin to southeastern Myanmar, are believed to be interred in the mountain. Mount Khwaegabaung has also been at the heart of Buddhist missionisation projects among the Karen from the time of the Mon kingdoms right through to the contemporary era. The golden pagoda within the Upper Yetagun Monastery compound at the pinnacle of the mountain is also thought to contain one of the hairs of Buddha Gotama.

Making the arduous and steep climb to the apex is believed by many Myanmar Buddhists – Karen and otherwise – to bring prosperity and health. At 2734 feet, the climb to the top of Mount Khwaegabaung is tough for even the most athletic people. During the annual Khwaegabaung festival in the lunar month of *Tabaung* during March every year, thousands of Karen people make their way to the top of the mountain to make an offering at the pagoda during the four days prior to the full moon. During *Tabaung* people all over Myanmar gather at prominent pagodas during the full

moon to show veneration to the Buddha and his teachings. In Hpa-an the ritual hike up Mount Khwaegabaung is said to provide special protection against harmful beings and other dangers. For paddy farmers who live beneath the powerful domain, it is also common to bring a basket of rice from the harvest as an offering to the spirits of the mountain.

When I joined the climb with a group of friends during *Tabaung* in March 2016, we found ourselves weaving between monks, Karen elders in traditional garb and groups of young men and women in skin tight jeans taking selfies on their way up the mountain. There was a carnivalesque atmosphere and lots of excited chatter between people, who carried with them various offerings and donations to make at the top of the mountain and to Karen animist spirits or *nats* along the way. Taking our shoes off as we reached the Upper Yetagun Monastery, hundreds of people gathered around the large golden pagoda at the top, kneeling down to light candles and make offerings of flowers and incense as a tribute to the Lord Buddha. I sat down nearby to take it all in and soon found myself chatting to a middle-aged Plong Karen woman, Nan Mae New Soe who lived in a village nearby. She told me that she climbed to the top of the mountain for the annual Khwaegabaung pagoda festival every year. She explained that a long time ago when the Buddha Gotama came through this area he made a ball of rice so that everyone who came to visit the pagoda on top of Mount Khwaegabaung would never be hungry. She added, “As long as the sound of the monastery bell can be heard loudly throughout this land, there will be peace and prosperity.”

Like elsewhere in Theravāda Buddhist Southeast Asia, peace and prosperity among Plong Karen Buddhists is seen to rely on a cosmological balance between the heavenly bodies, local spirits of the land and water as well as the coherence of people’s individual moral practice according to Buddhist ethics (Davis 1984; Keyes 1987; Spiro 1970; Tambiah 1970). For many Plong Karen in Hpa-an, the resurrection of a Buddhist polity is key to their imagining of peace. This is in line with a socially engaged understanding of Buddhism and the view that the flourishing of the Buddhist *sasāna*, the dissemination of the teachings of the Buddha, ameliorates social, economic and political hardships. Overlooking the sparkling emerald landscape towards the Dawna Mountain range with the sounds of tinkling bells and Karen

prayers humming in the background, the intense power struggles and conflict that plagued this region for decades can begin to feel distant and almost unbelievable. And yet, as I draw out in this chapter, contestation over geographic space from powerful and often conflicting moral agents has been a defining feature of Plong Karen lives since their settlement in the southeast of Myanmar.



Figure 3: The view of Hpa-an's rice fields from Mount Khwaegabaung. Photo by author.

In this chapter I trace the oral narratives of Hpa-an's Plong Karen Buddhists and the importance of Buddhist understandings of power and legitimacy in the place of everyday people's lives. In doing so I situate the scope of individual Plong Karen moral agency "in active interaction" within what Sherry Ortner (2016: 65) calls the "larger contexts" of power and social inequality. I start by locating Hpa-an's Plong Karen historically between the competing political military campaigns of the Mon, Burman and Thai Buddhist kingdoms, examining the importance of Buddhist notions of moral authority and legitimacy. I then examine the impact of British colonial rule and the influence of Christian missionaries on Karen communities and their subsequent relationship with the independent Burmese state. The chapter then explores the conflicting moral claims to power made by both the Burmese socialist government and the Karen National Union from the 1960s through to the late 1980s. I then discuss how the change in military leadership in 1988 impacted Plong Karen communities in Hpa-an district. In particular, I focus on how the emergence of the



Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and the rise of two powerful monastic authorities during this time shaped both the political economy of the region as well as Plong Karen conceptualisations of moral agency and everyday ethics. However, the chapter concludes that while these larger forces and structural dynamics play pivotal roles in influencing the nature of social, economic and political life, sizable scope remains for everyday Plong Karen to exercise moral agency and craft ethical lives of their own making.

## **The Buddhist Karen of Mount Khwaegabaung**

From pre-colonial times to the present era, borderland areas of Myanmar have been conceptualised as a complex political and social landscape, where as Edmund Leach aptly explained more than fifty years ago, “cultures interpenetrate in a dynamic manner” (Leach 1960: 50). Contacts with outside cultures and social fluidity have long been features of Hpa-an’s landscape, contributing to a cultural mosaic of linguistic, cultural and ecologically contiguous peoples. Described as *plong hti*, ‘water Karen’, or *plong chai long hti*, ‘Karen who work on water land’, the cultural identity of Plong Karen of contemporary Hpa-an district draw many symbolic resources from the geography of the lowland river plain and flood water paddy.<sup>35</sup> Connected through trade, migration, and early forms of Buddhism, this region has always been a major site for cultural exchange and pilgrimage.

Over the last two centuries, contacts with other populations and kingdoms, such as the Mon, Bamar and Thai have been common in the Thanlwin valley, as has trade and inter-marriage with other ethnic and religious groups. Hpa-an is also grounded in millennium-old trade networks, the flows of peoples, goods and capital. Prior to colonial rule it served as a major crossroad between the kingdoms of Pegu, Lanna and Siam, along the trading route between Yunnan, Chiang Mai and Moulmein

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<sup>35</sup> This contrasts with scholarly representations of Karen people as an ethnic minority people who rely on terraced paddy planting and swidden cultivation on steep hillsides (eg. P. Hinton 1969; Kunstadter 1967, 1979; Marlowe 1969).

(Mawlamyine), which was the nearest trading seaport.<sup>36</sup> It was through Hpa-an that Chinese caravan traders would take their raw silk, brass, chestnut and opium to trade with gasoline, candles, matches and salt to Moulmein on the coast. It was also in Hpa-an and the valley of the Thanlwin river that Karen people came and settled as a lowland rice-growing people.

Although there are no clear historical accounts of how Karen people came to inhabit the southeast of Myanmar,<sup>37</sup> oral stories (K. *hta kho*) from Buddhist Plong Karen elders who live beneath Mount Khwaegabaung speak of them fleeing multiple rulers from a far away and distant land.<sup>38</sup> During my fieldwork, Plong Karen elders I spoke to often recounted to me the legend of Hpu Htaw Meh Pa, Grandfather Boar Tusk.<sup>39</sup> I was told that Hpu Htaw Meh Pa led the Karen south through Yunnan in southern China, down the Thanlwin (Salween) river to the plains of Hpa-an. While the S'gaw Karen 'father' group got caught up along the way hunting in the mountains, the Plong people, as the 'mother' group of the Karen, dutifully followed their grandfather south along the Thanlwin river to Hpa-an. The poetic oral stories of Plong Karen grandmothers speak of countless adversities, including treacherous weather, steep mountain climbs and multiple barbarous clans, bandits and wild beasts. Reaching the life-giving and fertile plains of Hpa-an, according to many local elders I spoke to, Hpu Htaw Meh Pa is said to have sought refuge under Mount Khwaegabaung. His people

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<sup>36</sup> There is evidence to suggest that in the late ninth century the northern Mon kingdom of Haripunjaya, centered nearby Chiang Mai at modern-day Lumphun in Thailand, developed a major trade route to modern day Mawlamyine (South 2003: 58).

<sup>37</sup> Historian Ronald D. Renard (1980, 2000) makes similar observations of the Karen in Thailand (see also Keyes 1979: 41-3). Much of our knowledge of the Karen people prior to the nineteenth century is fragmented because they lacked written sources of their own. Under British rule there was a rapid increase in writings on the Karen by colonial officers and missionaries as well as Karen people themselves under the auspices of the Karen National Association (KNA). During this period Karen monks also began to develop Karen literature (see Stern 1968a; Womack 2005)

<sup>38</sup> *Hta kho* is a form of oral poetry passed down between generations. Often sung in a call and response fashion at celebrations or ritual events, many of these poems discuss ancestral wisdom, ritual knowledge, histories, marriage rules and moral codes of the Karen. For a longer discussion on these important forms of oral history for Karen people see Cho (2011, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> A similar story is recounted by the American missionary and ethnologist Harry Ignatius Marshall (1922: ch 2) of 'Htaw Meh Pa' in his chapter on 'the origins of the Karen'.

subsequently settled there sometime during the reign of the Buddhist Mon Thaton kingdom between 300BC and 1057CE.<sup>40</sup>

Successive Mon Buddhist kingdoms were major epicentres of religious and administrative power for people in lower Burma until the mid-eighteenth century (see Guillon 1999; Phayre 1883; South 2003).<sup>41</sup> The royal, ritual and administrative centre of Thaton is located only 52km west of Hpa-an and Mon monks and princes are widely recognised as having introduced the Buddha's teachings to the Karen people of contemporary Hpa-an. The lowland plains of Mount Khwaegabaung, west of the Dawna mountain range, are interspersed with the archaeological remains of the great Mon Buddhist kingdom found in limestone caves and ancient pagodas which dot the surrounding landscape.<sup>42</sup>

A Buddhist cosmology played a central role in entrenching the Mon Kingdom over the Plong Karen in the neighbouring plains and valleys. Early written references to the Karen are few, leaving people to suggest that they lived on the fringes of lowland kingdoms in small, localised groups. Authority was largely shared with surrounding populations through a mandala-like tributary system where any given space could owe allegiance to one or several centres of power. While many scholars depict the Karen as hill tribes “on the peripheries of the feuding, loosely-defined precolonial *mandala*” (South 2003: 63),<sup>43</sup> Buddhist Plong Karen oral stories from Mount Khwaegabaung instead speak of the importance of Mon rulers, monks and ascetics in bringing Buddhism to the Karen.

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<sup>40</sup> Some Plong Karen elders suggested that Hpu Htaw Meh Pa fought the Mon kings and hid in the caves of Mount Khwaegabaung once defeated, whilst others gave a less conflictual account.

<sup>41</sup> Even though the Mon kingdom was conquered by the Burmese King Anawrahta (1044-1077) in 1057, they retained sovereignty over Lower Burma until the mid-eighteenth century. The nineteenth century *Glass Palace Chronicle* recounts how the capital of King Manuha, the Mon ruler of Thaton, was overrun in 1057 by his northern rival, King Anawrahta of Pagan. It was told to me by local monks that the Thaton King Manuha refused to give King Anawrahta a copy of the Theravāda Pāli canon (*P. Tipitaka*), which is why he waged war on the southern Mon kingdom (see also Fytche 1878: 170). Some Mon historians debate whether Thaton was ever conquered by the Burmese, suggesting rather that it is the subject of Burmese ‘myth making’. Emmanuel Guillon, for example, argues that the very existence of Anawrahta is open to doubt and that the Mon may have in fact invaded upper Burma (see Guillon 1999: 111-113).

<sup>42</sup> Kawgun cave, for example, has terracotta Buddhist tablets which date back to the seventh century.

<sup>43</sup> Exceptions to this include Ikeda (2012), Gravers (2001) and Womack (2005).

In his seminal work on Theravāda Buddhist civilisations of South and Southeast Asia, Stanley Tambiah (1976) refers to the rule of Buddhist kingdoms as a ‘galactic polity’, highlighting the importance of a symbiotic relationship between the *sangha*, Kings and laymen for the perpetuation of the *sasāna*, the dissemination of the teachings of the Buddha (see also Gombrich 2006; F. E. Reynolds 1972). Tambiah (1976) argues that harmony in the universe depends on the welfare and prosperity of both the *sangha* and the laity under a rightful King, *dhammarāja*, that governs according to Buddhist ethical virtues. Within the Theravāda Buddhist cosmology, a rightful leader or king *dhammarāja* acts as a ritual patron of the *sangha* and the protector and propagator of the *sasāna*, ensuring social harmony and the overall health and wealth of the kingdom. This is informed by the mythic dimensions of the Buddhist Mauryan Emperor Aśoka (270-232 BCE) who is said to have strengthened and propagated the *dhamma* and the *sangha* by living and governing according to the Universal Law of the Buddha (see also Strong 1983).<sup>44</sup> As anthropologist Craig Reynolds (1979: 99) points out, this understanding of authority also posits an “interdependent nexus linking royal virtue with agricultural and economic prosperity.” In accordance with these principles, political power, livelihood and fertility are deeply intertwined.

The Eastern Plong Karen Buddhist tradition is closely tied to the influence of the Mon kingdom (see also Gravers 2001, 2012b; Womack 2005). Legend recounts that the pagoda atop Mount Khwaekabaung was established after a Mon Thaton prince meditated there as a hermit and returned to build the famed hair-relic pagoda where he interred one of the seven hairs given by the Buddha Gotama (see also Womack 2005: 136). Many local spirits which Plong Karen feed and nourish for protection are also often believed to be powerful Mon hermits, monks, princes and kings. Religious monuments built by the Mon kings, such as the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon and the Shwemawdaw Pagoda in Bago, are also mentioned in Plong Buddhist Karen prayers. People also recall the importance of having a *dhammarāja*, a just and righteous

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<sup>44</sup> The Aśokan model has been emulated in many Buddhist Theravādin polities (Gombrich 2006; Tambiah 1976). For a detailed analysis of how these notions influence contemporary political thought in Myanmar see Houtman (1999), Schober (2011) and Walton (2016).

Buddhist ruler, to ensure peace and prosperity (see also Gravers 2001: 7). However, the presence of a *dhammarāja* does not mean that power is fixed and located in a single individual ruler.

Even though the Karen Buddhist tradition is closely associated with the Mon kingdom, there are also strong links to the Burmese Buddhist orthodoxy centred in central Myanmar. After the fall of the Mon kingdom in the eighteenth century, the powerful Konbaung Burmese dynasty (1752-1885) used the Buddhist tributary-like galactic polity of the Mon, placing themselves at its centre. In many Plong Karen oral tales from the bottom of Mount Khwaegabaung elders speak about pre-colonial history as a time of perennial warfare, which resulted in people being taken as slaves and prisoners of war. Whilst Burmese rule is often described by historians as a more aggressive and assertive form of political domination because of their military campaigns in Southeast Asia (Guillon 1999; Lieberman 1978: 472-74; Phayre 1883),<sup>45</sup> the Konbaung dynasty is instead highlighted by Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an district as strengthening their faith. According to local historical accounts, it was only with the permission of the Burmese Kings that Karen people were allowed to be ordained as monks, resulting in a rapid increase in Buddhist missionisation (see also Stern 1968a; U Pyinnya 1929; Womack 2005).<sup>46</sup> There are also many pagodas and

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<sup>45</sup> The Karen are recorded as having been involved in the Mon rebellions against the Burmese Kingdom in the sixteenth century and later against the Burmese King Alaungpaya in 1757 (Gravers 2001: 7). Loyal to Mon kingdom, when the Mon lost their power many Karen felt betrayed. Thus when the Burmese kings sought to collect tax and enforce military quotas in Karen villagers, they sometimes met resistance from lowlanders who refused to be integrated under the new kingdom. The period of pacification under King Alaungpaya (1752-1760) is said to have resulted in a mass exodus of thousands of Mon and Karen people to neighbouring Siam (Thailand), gaining permission from the Buddhist Siamese king to settle in the mountains of the northeast (see Furnivall 1956: 59-60; Gravers 2012b: 348; Lieberman 1978; Renard 1980). For a more complete description of the Mon rebellions against Konbaung rule see Phayre (1883: 131-170), Guillon (1999) and South (2003).

<sup>46</sup> Hpu Ta Meik is thought to have been the first Plong Karen person to have been ordained as a monk, gaining permission to study the Pāli scriptures in the royal capital of Amapura. He established a highly influential and powerful monastery west of Hpa-an on the Gyaing river and spent much of his life travelling around Karen state as a Buddhist missionary preaching the Pāli doctrine and converting many animist Karen to Buddhism. The Karen historian U Pyinnya (1929) who wrote one of the earliest written histories in Burmese of Buddhist Karen people attributes the spread of Buddhism around the plains of Hpa-an to Hpu Ta Meik. According to William Womack's research on Karen literacy in Myanmar there are no documents that confirm the details of the life of Hpu Ta Meik, and as a result it is unclear as to whether he lived during the reign of King Bowdawpaya or King Mindon (2005: 130-135).

monasteries in Hpa-an district which date back to this period and important oral stories about the spread of Buddhism among the Karen are attributed to this time.

One of the most important oral stories told by Plong Karen about Burmese kings is related to the practice of Duwei, a Karen marriage ritual popular with Buddhists who live nearby to Mount Khwaegabaung. According to local legends, before Hpu Duwei came to Hpa-an, villagers living under Mount Khwaegabaung engaged in animal sacrifice and alcoholic offerings to a powerful spirit that lived in a bodhi tree nearby present day Tao-pon village. Hpu Duwei is said to have studied in Amapura under King Bowdawpaya (1782-1819), and then returned to Mount Khwaegabaung to urge locals against the practice of animal sacrifice and spirit worship.<sup>47</sup> It is said that he spent one week meditating on Mount Khwaegabaung attaining great mystical powers after which he returned and engaged in a battle with the spirit, who is said to have lost all his power when Hpu Duwae knocked off his conical hat and fled to the spirit island, Nat Kyun. Cutting down the bodhi tree, the Karen villagers then built a pagoda over the same place, symbolizing the conquering of Buddhist practice over spirit worship.<sup>48</sup> Hpu Duwei encouraged the practice of vegetarianism and the worshipping of Buddha as an alternate of protection for Plong Karen against evil spirits and misfortune. Instead of alcohol and animal sacrifices, he also urged Karen people to make ritual offerings of coconut, bananas, rice and candles at the time of their marriage, a practice which continues to this day (see also Hayami 2011).

Over the next hundred years, Buddhism is said to have flourished in Hpa-an district amongst the Plong Karen of the Thanlwin valley. As William Womack (2005) demonstrates in his detailed study of Plong Karen literature systems, Mount Khwaegabaung also became to locus of Plong Karen Buddhist nationalism during this time. Influential Karen monks translated Mon, Burmese and Pāli Buddhist literature

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<sup>47</sup> There are various iterations of this story. It is disputed as to whether he was a monk, a novice or a hermit. However, the historical accuracy of this story is less an issue here than the way local people think about this event as historical.

<sup>48</sup> Yoko Hayami (2011) suggests that the integration of local Karen cultural customs and Buddhism should be understood as part of a broader process of 'Burmanisation'. However, I see the strength of the Duwae ritual among the Karen as a two-way process whereby both customs and religion inform each other.

into the eastern Karen language, playing a strong and powerful role in the propagation of Buddhism in this area. Today many of the original palm leaf manuscripts written at that time endure and are guarded as articles of value in special monastery cabinets, wrapped carefully in white cotton cloth. In addition, Womack demonstrates that these monks used their power and authority “to articulate, both directly and symbolically, a communal Karen identity by appealing to pre-existing notions about literacy” (Womack 2005: 148). However, the expansion of British colonialism and capitalism in the nineteenth century created a renewed crisis of political and moral authority that radically altered everyday people’s lives throughout the plains of Hpa-an and Burma more broadly.

### ***British Colonial Rule***

Plong Karen society changed dramatically between 1826 and 1885, when British rule was gradually imposed in lower Burma. Adopting policies that sought to transform colonial ‘subjects’ into ‘citizens’ of the nation, lowland Burma was remade by the bureaucratic, capitalist nation-state the British imposed. Under colonial rule, the country was divided into the central lowlands of ‘Burma Proper’ and the highland ‘Frontier Areas’, adopting different approaches to political and economic governance (see Figure 4). In upland ‘Frontier Areas’ of Burma, largely inhabited by ethnic minority populations like the Karen, the British imposed a form of indirect rule, governing via local potentates who were able to retain influence if they paid taxes to the British crown (Lehman 1967; R. H. Taylor 2009; Tinker 1957). However, in lowland rice producing areas many of its subjects experienced a radical reconceptualization of authority and power as the British sought to overturn the traditional subsistence tributary system, and impose taxation and British rule of law (Adas 2011 [1974]; R. H. Taylor 2009; Turner 2014).



Figure 4: Political divisions of Burma under British rule. Source: ANU CartoGIS.



Following the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1824-26, the southern part of what is now Karen State was incorporated into British India as part of Lower Burma.<sup>49</sup> Administered directly as a part of Ministerial Burma (see Figure 4), the rice growing region of Hpa-an became an extension of lowland Thaton district, in southern Tenasserim division.<sup>50</sup> Rice production played a major factor in the colonization of many areas of Lower Burma, and the integration of people into long-term relationships of debt and political patronage to the colonial government (Adas 2011 [1974]; Cheng 1968: 27). Even though the British concentrated their efforts around the fertile plains of the Irrawaddy south of Rangoon (Yangon), paddy farmers in Hpa-an district also prospered as part of the ‘rice frontier’ of Lower Burma (Adas 2011 [1974]; Cheng 1968: 27).<sup>51</sup> These policies saw lowland Karen people integrated into governance structures administering land and people down to the village level (Keyes 1993; Swearer 1995; Turner 2014).

Like other lowland areas of Myanmar during the colonial era, there was widespread resistance among some Buddhist Karen lowland populations to colonial rule and Christian missionisation efforts.<sup>52</sup> Some of the early anti-colonial resistance movements officially documented by British colonial writers were led by Karen ‘prophets’ who sought to drive out the English and establish a new Buddhist moral

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<sup>49</sup> The territory of contemporary Karen State was not a single administrative unit during the British colonial period, when it formed part of what was then Tenasserim Division in 1826. Areas north of the Thanlwin River were later annexed after the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852. Hpa-an remained apart of Thaton District until 1954 when Karen State was formed.

<sup>50</sup> After the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826), the British made the port-city of Moulmein (Mawlamyine) their administrative and economic capital, through which many of their exports moved from Burma.

<sup>51</sup> Historian Michael Adas’s (2011 [1974]) in-depth historical research on this period captures the strength of the British Empire’s new economic policies. He describes how in the fertile plains of Lower Burma the British encouraged ‘pioneer agriculturalists’ to clear and cultivate land, allowing for the massive expansion of land title throughout the early twentieth century (see also Brown 2013: 37). Adas (2011 [1974]: 31) notes that by the 1870s lower Burma had become the major source of rice for Europe with “over half a million tons of rice shipped annually from the ports of Burma.”

<sup>52</sup> The occupation of Burma is depicted by many Burmese historians in particular as not merely a territorial and political annexation, but also an attempt to destroy their culture, religion and society (see Michael Aung-Thwin 1985b; Ni Ni Myint 1983; Thant Myint U 2001). Under colonial rule, Burma saw widespread popular discontent among lowland Buddhist populations which proliferated at the turn of the twentieth century, as everyday people, student activists and monks sought to protect their culture and religion (Turner 2014).

order (Gravers 1999; Stern 1968b: 103-115).<sup>53</sup> These rebellions were eventually suppressed at great human cost and their charismatic Buddhist leaders executed. Under the colonial government Karen people east of Moulmein in contemporary Hpa-an district were designated as the derogatory ‘Talaing (Mon) Karen’ as a result of the influence of Buddhism and their proximity to the Mon kingdom (A. Judson 1832; E. Judson 1883; Smeaton 1887). This was also documented in the lower Thanlwin basin in the areas surrounding Hpa-an where Baptist missionaries are recorded as having encountered severe opposition from local Plong Karen monks (see Gravers 2001; Ikeda 2012; Womack 2005).<sup>54</sup>

Records found in letters and journal entries of Baptist missionaries during the colonial era detail their frustrations and local peoples’ “strange aversion” to Christian teachings (A. Judson 1832: 355).<sup>55</sup> For example, after opening a school at the base of Mount Khwaegabaung in 1837 the resident Baptist missionary, Eleanor Macomer, reported open hostility to her work, noting:

Buddhism has so long prevailed and become so deeply rooted that they are about as much attached to it as the Burmans and Peguans themselves, and what is more those people and the Tong-thews are found everywhere among them, and are ever zealous for their own system, so that we seldom go out a day but we meet with many of them and often cannot avoid their arguments, every one of which listened to with applause by surrounding Karens (cited in Womack 2005: 140).

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<sup>53</sup> For a detailed analysis of how Buddhism provided a powerful idiom of opposition to British rule for lay men and women in other parts of colonial Burma see Turner (2014).

<sup>54</sup> Two Karen Buddhist prophets also led fierce resistance movements against the British in the eastern Papun hills and south of Yangon in Patheingyi, the capital of present day Ayeyarwady Region, between 1856-1860 (Gravers 2001: 12).

<sup>55</sup> The Baptist missionary Judson for example notes the influence of a Buddhist Karen “prophet” named “Areemaday” (Arimetteya) in his tour of the Thanlwin river north of Moulmein (cited in Shwe Wa Maung 1963: 97-98). The Baptist missionary Francis Mason similarly writes about a powerful prophet, who he contends was “without any settled principles, unless a heterogeneous mixture of old Karen traditions and Boodhism [sic.]” (F. Mason 1843: 144-48). As noted in a report to the British Commissioner in 1856-57, “[I]t is a trait in the national character of the Karen to have religious prophets rising up among them” (Government of India 1856-57: vol. 25).

This sentiment is also reflected in the manuscripts and diaries of Plong Karen monks from Hpa-an, who saw the propagation of Buddhism as under threat from the encroaching influence of Christian missionaries in the area (U Pon Myin 1979: 105-106; U Pyinnya 1929; Womack 2005).

Despite this history of resistance to colonial rule and Christian missionisation related in the oral histories of Plong Karen elders, the Karen are often regarded as close allies of the British. Unlike lowland areas of Burma, Karen authorities in upland Frontier areas of Burma maintained considerable power to manage social and political affairs according to custom (M. Smith 2007: 9).<sup>56</sup> These relationships were also aided by an emergent commercial class in upland areas, who benefited from the extraction of teak, gems and precious metals by the British in areas under their dominion (R. H. Taylor 2009). The proximity of British officers to the Karen in upland areas was also cemented by the large-scale conversion of upland Karen animist communities to Christianity by Baptist and Catholic missionaries. In their detailed ethnological depictions of the Karen, British officers thus tended to ignore the majority Buddhist Plong Karen population of lowland Hpa-an district, focusing instead on those who converted to Christianity and were more closely aligned with British political authority (see also Ikeda 2012).<sup>57</sup>

Karen support and ‘loyalty’ to the British is well documented (Bunker 1902; Marshall 1922; F. Mason 1843, 1866; Saw Aung Hla 1929; Smeaton 1887). Much of the scholarship on the Karen emphasises the close relationship they had during the colonial era and British perception of the Karen as noble, incorruptible hill tribesmen (Marshall 1922; F. Mason 1843, 1865; Saw Aung Hla 1929; Smeaton 1887). In particular, the recently-converted Christian hill Karen peoples are known for the key role they played in securing the British administration of lowland Burma (Cady 1958).

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<sup>56</sup> The colonial administration’s tradition of favouring ethnic minorities over the majority Burman population, including recruiting many into the police and military, played a strong role in engendering a strong division between ethnic minority groups and the Burman majority.

<sup>57</sup> It has been suggested that the number of Karen people in Myanmar was severely underestimated during the colonial era, due to the simple fact that many living on the plains spoke Burmese or Mon and practiced Buddhism – administrative lines cutting through communities based on arbitrary conceptions of identity (M. Smith 1999: 30, 51-2, 75, 83-4).

Upland Karen were, for example, enlisted to employ scorched earth policies against lowland Buddhist villagers, including the capture and beheading of the famed martyr, Saya San during the anti-British rebellion in 1930-32 (Adas 2011 [1974]; Michael Aung-Thwin 1985b; Turner 2014).<sup>58</sup> Animosities between upland minorities, including the Karen, and lowland populations intensified during the Second World War, when mostly Christian Karen soldiers fought alongside the British, while the Burmese Independence Army led by General Aung San, initially supported the Japanese occupation as part of their bid to seek independence from the British Empire.<sup>59</sup> As a result of their close alignment with the colonial government and their integration into the British army, at the turn of independence the Karen as an entire ethnic group were accused by Burmese independence activists of being “tools of the imperialists” (Callahan 2004: 124).

On their own side, the British divide and rule policy helped to foster amongst Karen elites a deep sense of nationalism that differentiated them from the Bamar lowland majority. These fractures were deepened when prior to Myanmar’s independence members from the Christian-elite network, the Karen National Association (KNA), appealed to British authorities for an independent state of their own, using their status as a ‘loyal’ minority to support their claims (see Morrison 1947; Saw Po Chit 1946).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Saya San led an anti-colonial peasant uprising in Tharawaddy opposing the tax system imposed by the British. For more on this movement see Maitrii Aung-Thwin (2008) and Turner (2014).

<sup>59</sup> Led by the famed independence leader General Aung San the Burma Independence Army (BIA) collaborated with the Japanese imperial forces in the invasion of Burma against the British in 1942. As a result of the close alliance of Karen with the British, the Burma Independence Army massacred thousands of Christian Karen near Hpapun and in Myaung Mya in the Delta (see also Gravers 1999: 47-8; Guyot 1978: 227). However, the relationship between the BIA and the Japanese became increasingly strained and they switched sides, after receiving formal support for independence from the British (see R. Taylor 2009: 237-38). For a more detailed historical account of the Burma Independence Army and this period see Callahan (2004), R. Taylor (2009) and Maung Maung (1989).

<sup>60</sup> Calls for the creation of a separate Karen State date back to the early twentieth century after the establishment of the Karen National Association. In 1928, the Karen leader Sir San C. Po, called for the formation of a Karen State covering much of southeast Myanmar, initially as a colonial territory under British patronage, but administered by Karen leaders. The appeals of Sir San C. Po to the British for an independent state were also based on a strong sense of a unique pan-Karen identity. However, these were primarily built on Christian Pagan (S’gaw) elite projections of Karen national identity. As Charles Keyes (1979) demonstrates, the development of a Karen literature and education system initiated by Protestant missionaries during the colonial era played a critical role in the development of Karen nationalism. Ashley South (2007) similarly suggests that the emergence of a self-conscious ethnic identity among the Pagan (S’gaw) Karen Christian elite over the twentieth century, was deeply strengthened by their close alliance with the British colonial state and Baptist missionaries (see also Cady 1958; Lehman 1979; Rajah 1990; Thawngmung 2008, 2012).

Building off British typologies of race and identity, the KNA's appeals for an independent state were embedded in deeply moralising constructions of the Karen as virtuous, honest, simple, hardworking and 'loyal' to the British *vis a vis* Burmese Buddhist lowlanders. Whilst this was primarily a Christian led elite project, the KNA claimed to represent all Karen people using nineteenth-century European paradigms of biology and race, with the category of 'Karen' constituting a fixed and mutually exclusive group (see Lieberman 1978: 456).<sup>61</sup> However, their appeals to the British were disregarded and southeastern Myanmar collapsed into almost seventy years of civil war and sectarian and ethnic violence, witnessing the rise of a powerful and brutal military state (M. Smith 1999, 2003; South 2011).

## **Competing Visions of Power and Authority in Independent Myanmar**

As already described in my introduction, much of our knowledge of Myanmar's Karen is embedded in the historical narratives of the Karen National Union and their secessionist struggle against the Myanmar state for the independent homeland *Kawthoolei* (see M. Smith 1999, 2003; South 2011; Thawngmung 2008, 2012). The conflict between the KNU and the Burmese military Tatmadaw played a significant role in defining Plong Karen people's relationship with the newly independent state. In the early days of Burma's independence, other Karen organisations advocated for accommodation with the Burmese state and expressed a willingness to compromise on key issues of autonomy under a parliamentary democracy (see Thawngmung 2008: 6).<sup>62</sup> This included the prominent Plong Karen politician Dr Saw Hla Tun, born

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<sup>61</sup> British understandings of the Karen were often based on homogenising, exclusive conceptualisations of ethnic identity (Keyes 1977a, 2003). Under British rule, political power and rights to representation were delineated along ethnic lines using nineteenth-century European paradigms of biology and race, with the category of 'Karen' constituting a fixed and mutually exclusive group (Lieberman 1978: 456). Colonial practices saw ethnic differences territorialised in mapping exercises which physically bounded ethnic groups and places on a map (Grundy-Warr and Dean 2003; Sadan 2007). Difference became naturalised and primordial in tribal classification schemas, reduced to simplified models of incompatible ethnic difference enhanced by a system of 'divide and rule', separating Bamar majority areas in central Burma which were directly ruled, from ethnic minority areas in the frontier regions which remained relatively autonomous under traditional rulers (Gravers 1996: 239; Lehman 1967: 105).

<sup>62</sup> While the KNU had broad support across Karen-populated territories, at the turn of independence there were multiple Karen organisations which were competing for power. The leaders of the Karen

in Hpa-an, who became the first Chief Minister of Karen State upon its creation in 1954.<sup>63</sup> Buddhist lowland Karen people in southeastern Burma were also known to have allied themselves with new independent Burmese government. However, the legitimacy of these efforts were increasingly challenged as the southeast of Burma degraded under military rule and conflict with the Karen National Union (Gravers 1996, 1999; Rajah 1990, 2002; M. Smith 1999, 2003; South 2007, 2008).

The Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) were formed in 1947 with the aim of advancing the Karen national cause.<sup>64</sup> Its leaders drew heavily on the ideals of nationalist movements around the world which had gained momentum in the wake of World War II. Taking a nationalist outlook which built off European ideologies of race, the KNU sought to unite ‘the Karen’ across linguistic, geographic and religious lines. Even though the nationalist movement was initially concentrated around the Irrawaddy Delta and Yangon, by the time the Burmese military took over government in 1962, the conflict between the Burmese military Tatmadaw and the KNLA was pushed eastwards, encompassing much of present day Karen State, eastern Bago and southern Tanintharyi Region (M. Smith 1999, 2003; South 2011).<sup>65</sup> The competing claims for loyalty from the KNU and the Burmese military state came to define life for many Karen people in Burma’s

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Youth Organisation (KYO), for example, disagreed with many of the principles espoused by the KNU and did not join the armed resistance movement (Thawngmung 2008: 6). In 1947, when the KNU boycotted elections to the constituent assembly, KYO candidates ran unopposed in all 18 Karen constituencies.

<sup>63</sup> The current Chief Minister of Karen State, Nan Khin Htwe Myint, is the daughter of Dr Saw Hla Tun. In November 2015 she and her two younger brothers were elected to parliament as part of the National League for Democracy (NLD). For more information on the current Chief Minister see Chambers (2016).

<sup>64</sup> The KNU armed wing, the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO), was reorganised into the present-day Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soon after independence (see Callahan 2003). Though the KNU was formed with the primary aim of forming an independent Karen State, in 1976 the organisation adopted a more pragmatic approach, demanding a federal constitution based on the present states and divisions which would guarantee democratic rights, cultural autonomy and equal representation to minority populations including the Karen. Detailed histories of the origins of the Karen National Union and the 70-year-long conflict are provided by Smith (1999, 2003), South (2011) and Thawngmung (2008).

<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, at the turn of Independence, the Burmese army was headed by a Karen officer, General Saw Kya Doe. Some of its units were also entirely comprised of Karen soldiers as a legacy from colonial rule. However, many of these Karen soldiers defected to the KNU in the early months of independence. In March 1948 Ne Win replaced General Saw Kya Doe as the army’s head and reorganised the army’s units so they were mixed. For a detailed discussion of this see Thawngmung (2008), Tinker (1957) and Callahan (2004).

southeast over the next fifty years in what many scholars have described as a landscape of “horror and despair” (Horstmann 2015: 2; see also Lang 2002; Rogers 2004; Tangseefa 2006).

In Hpa-an, the administrative seat of the newly established Karen State, Plong Karen people became caught in the middle of a vicious military campaign targeting the KNU who were classed as enemies of the state. During my fieldwork, people described to me the first forty years of independence as a period of running and hiding. Whenever I sat down to eat with Plong Karen in villages outside Hpa-an they would often tell me to eat slowly. “Now we don’t have to run or hide. So, you should eat slowly,” they would explain. Plong Karen elders from Hpa-an district explained that after the British left Burma, people in rural areas were constantly harassed by both the Burmese Tatmadaw as well as the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) for taxes, food and conscriptions. The widespread application of the Myanmar military’s ‘Four Cuts’ (*B. Pya Ley Pya*) counter-insurgency operation played out in particularly damaging ways for Karen civilians in rural areas where they were often suspected of colluding with the KNU/KNLA. Lowland Plong Karen farmers from Hpa-an district described countless human rights abuses enacted against them during this time, meted out to those who were thought to support the KNU. This included the widespread use of forced labour, as well as extrajudicial killings, destruction of property, torture, rape and religious and cultural persecution (see also Fink 2001; KHRG 2017; Lang 2002; Rogers 2004; M. Smith 1999, 2003). Others also explained that they had their paddy harvests arbitrarily seized or destroyed by the Myanmar military in aggressive campaigns against rural Karen villagers.

These ruthless counter-insurgency attacks targeting Karen civilians drew significant support for what in many ways might have previously been considered an elite ethno-nationalist project of S’gaw Karen Christians. Indeed, over the resultant decades many Buddhist Plong Karen from Hpa-an district took up arms against the Burmese Tatmadaw and what they saw as the illegitimate rule of the military state (see also Rangkla 2012: 38-41). The perceived illegitimacy of the Burmese government according to local Plong Karen Buddhists I spoke to in Hpa-an, was also demonstrated by the rapid deterioration of the national economy after the 1962 military coup which

launched the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’. Under Ne Win (1962-1988) the Revolutionary Council implemented the ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’, pursuing autarkic state policies which nationalised all sectors of the economy including public utilities, foreign trade and the commercial, agricultural and industrial sectors (Steinberg 2006; R. H. Taylor 1987). Part of these reforms were instituted as a way to liberate the country from the dominance of foreign business, but they had pernicious side-effects on all sectors of society (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2003). Despite seeking to transform Myanmar into a “prosperous and modern socialist society” (Mya Than 1987: 55), the country’s economy deteriorated rapidly and saw high inflation, economic stagnation and unprecedented levels of unemployment (L. Jones 2014a: 148; Steinberg 1981).

Income scarcity and food insecurity were central themes of many Plong Karen family narratives about the socialist era (1962-1988). Many of the elders I spoke to during fieldwork shared accounts of relentless poverty, of sparsely stocked stores, under-resourced hospitals and having to travel long distances to find work and basic supplies. For the many rice farmers of Hpa-an district, the imposition of a paddy quota system heavily impacted households in particular. Where under colonial rule the Hpa-an river plain prospered as a result of rice exports, Ne Win’s economic nationalisation policies obligated rice farmers to sell a significant quota of their paddy harvest to the local government at a below market rate (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2003).<sup>66</sup> Known in Burmese as *Tar Wun Kya Sapar*, ‘dutiful paddy’, if farmers were unable to meet these quotas their land could be confiscated and people arrested. Everyone I spoke to about this period, emphasised how much of a burden this tax was on households and how they often had to buy rice from others to meet the demands of the military government and avoid being arrested. Many farmers sold their land during this time and moved to Hpa-an or other areas to avoid the taxes as well as the constant calls from nearby military bases to serve as porters.<sup>67</sup> To try and cope with these demands Plong Karen families also

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<sup>66</sup> The problem brought about by the decline in rice production during was exacerbated by the slump in the international rice market in the 1960s.

<sup>67</sup> As a result of the successive counter-insurgency campaigns against the KNU during the 1970-80s many Karen people sought the safety of urban Hpa-an in what was a very tumultuous period (South and Joliffe 2015: 215). The military government also began a policy of forced relocations to urban



turned to ‘underground’ sources of livelihood, including the black-market economy largely brokered in the region by the KNU.

To help finance their armed struggle against the Tatmadaw and their growing administrative apparatus, the KNU moved into a range of commercial operations, including brokerage of the lucrative black-market trade running into central Burma (Bryant 1996; Rangkla 2012: 46-49; M. Smith 1999: 283-85). During the 1970s and 1980s, the President of the KNU, General Bo Mya, took advantage of the scarcity created by Ne Win’s dysfunctional command and control economy by constructing a powerful economic fiefdom smuggling goods through the borders to meet voracious demand for consumer goods in what was known in Burmese as the *hmaung kho* sector (M. Smith 1999: 283-85; South 2008: 39-40). The *hmaung kho* market was a vital source of income for many Plong Karen families around Hpa-an, and many older men recounted trekking over the Dawna mountain range, *Naung Kalar*, with bags up to 80kg full of common household goods on their backs (see also Balçaitė 2018; Rangkla 2012). “At that time, we couldn’t afford to fulfil our paddy quota anymore, so we would go in groups over *Naung Kalar*,” one Plong Karen uncle who lived outside of Hpa-an explained. During this period the capacity and strength of the KNU as a governing authority greatly expanded throughout the southeast.

For more than fifty years the KNU operated as a de-facto government across many parts of southeastern Myanmar, using their alliance with Thai military authorities to broker the *hmaung kho* economy into central Burma. Aided by their control of the cattle trade, agricultural products, gemstones, gold and teak (from KNU-controlled forests), the KNU developed mobile health, education and justice systems to reinforce and legitimise their rule in areas they controlled (see Brenner 2017; Décobert 2016; Gravers 1996; Oh 2013; Rajah 2002). While the *hmaung kho* sector provided the KNU a powerful economic base, the thriving black market which ran through Karen State to the Thailand border financially crippled the centralized Burma Socialist Programme

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centers in Karen state to isolate support for the KNU. Hundreds of thousands of others fled to refugee camps in Thailand or IDP camps in KNU territory, or into hiding in remote areas.

Party.<sup>68</sup> Extensive networks developed from the border to Hpa-an, and then further inside the country to supply Yangon and other major cities.<sup>69</sup> However, the strength of the black market and the KNU in supporting local livelihoods was significantly diminished in the 1980s after a series of heavy military offensives in KNU controlled regions. In 1987 the *hmaung kho* sector also took a hit when, for the second time in two years, the centralised government demonetised almost eighty percent of all currency with no loop-hole for transfer into new denominations. As a result, thousands of people connected to the black market economy lost their savings and only source of income overnight (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2003: 53-54).

In 1988 ongoing civil wars, a collapsing economy and a government perceived as increasingly out of touch and predatory sparked a popular uprising. Hundreds of thousands of students, monks and civil society leaders took to the streets across the country in protests against the government (Lintner 1990; Silverstein 1990). Demanding an end to BSPP rule, the protests were brutally suppressed by the military, leaving thousands dead and forcing many from the democratic movement underground (Ferrara 2003: 303).<sup>70</sup> After protests continued, a new faction of the military took control of the country and abruptly ended the “Burmese Way to Socialism” by introducing new economic policies aimed at supporting private enterprise (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2003; Steinberg 2001).<sup>71</sup> During the following years many of the communities surrounding Hpa-an, who had otherwise been relatively isolated from the state (outside their interaction with the Tatmadaw), were gradually integrated into the new State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) project of modernisation over the territory it now decreed to be named the ‘Union of Myanmar’

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<sup>68</sup> As much as US\$3 million or 40 percent of Burma’s General National Product changed hands on the black market in 1983 controlled by the KNU (M. Smith 2007: 98).

<sup>69</sup> It is estimated that by the end of the 1970s, more than 90% of the population across Myanmar relied on the black-market economy for about 75-80% of their basic needs (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2003: 24).

<sup>70</sup> Many democratic leaders fled to the border in Thailand after 1988 and aligned themselves with the KNU.

<sup>71</sup> As part of a plan to regain public support in 1990 the SLORC government held the first multi-party election in over 30 years. Although the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, won over 80% of the seats in Parliament, the SLORC refused to cede ruling power. Furthermore, most of the elected parliamentarians were arrested and imprisoned while Aung San Suu Kyi, herself, was placed under house arrest for much of the next twenty years. For a more detailed discussion of the 1988 uprising see Lintner (1990).

(see Callahan 2004; R. H. Taylor 2009).<sup>72</sup> While the military junta sought to use market-based mechanisms to turn the country's economy around, it simultaneously instituted a powerful and repressive form of military rule in ethnic states which sought to eliminate the strength of ethnic armed organisations like the KNU. At the same time other moral agents and charismatic religious authorities began engaging in their own projects of Karen moral subjectivity and nationhood. These policy changes had significant outcomes on Plong Karen everyday lives, the impacts of which can still be felt today.

## **The SLORC/ SPDC Years**

In the years following 1988, significant structural changes took place in Hpa-an district under the new SLORC military government. Prior to 1988, much of Karen State had been neglected and inaccessible to the centralised state, caught up in the conflict between the KNU and the Tatmadaw.<sup>73</sup> Guided by the three 'national causes' which were communicated widely through state controlled media — 'non-disintegration of the Union; non-disintegration of national solidarity; and perpetuation of national sovereignty' — the new SLORC regime set out to "restore peace and stability, law and order" in Myanmar, focusing their efforts on the frontier borderland regions where natural resources and the black market economy were concentrated (Secretary 1 Khin Nyunt cited in Y. Cohen 1999: 2). Aimed at eliminating the strength of ethno-nationalist insurgencies across the country, this saw the reassertion of military dominance in Hpa-an district through the massive expansion and strengthening of the armed forces and a new security apparatus which sought to penetrate everyday life (Callahan 2004; Lambrecht 2004; Maung Aung Myoe 1999).

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<sup>72</sup> The official name of the country was changed from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, along with many place names, in a move which was protested by democracy activists in the subsequent decades. For more on this debate see Houtman (1997) and R. Taylor (2008b)

<sup>73</sup> Under the BSPP government (1962-1988) much of Karen state was considered a 'black' or 'brown' area. Populations in black areas were considered to be under the control of the KNU and were targeted as combatants. Brown areas experienced mixed authority and control between the military and the KNU, and populations experienced harassment from both sides. During the 1990s communities in mixed administered zones became subject to much deeper state control and overlapping territorial claims by KNU and its splinter factions including the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army.



Figure 5: A military signboard stating Myanmar’s ‘Three Main National Causes’ in central Hpa-an. Photo by author.<sup>74</sup>

The dissolution of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in 1988 prompted a substantial shift in the political economy of state-society relations, its social structure, government administration, economy, educational system and religious organisation (Callahan 2000, 2004; Fujita et al. 2009; G. McCarthy 2018a; Steinberg 2001). In the early 1990s the SLORC military government began implementing an ambitious programme of modernisation and urbanisation in an attempt to bring about economic reforms in Hpa-an and other areas of Karen State. In 1991 the Work Committee for the Development of Border Areas and National Races was formed, and over the next two decades there was an explicit and active attempt to modernise the politically and economically contested periphery of the state and extend the central government’s control in order to ensure the “non-disintegration of the Union” (see Callahan 2004; Lambrecht 2004; Sadan 2016). This coincided with a strengthening of the state’s bureaucratic administration and coercive controls. In 1993 the military regime also established the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) in order to implement systematic and direct links between the government and civilians, setting up a structure which helped to control and monitor everyday life. Focusing their

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<sup>74</sup> This signboard was removed in 2017.

energy on infrastructural needs, the new government also set about constructing roads, bridges and schools to help develop and pacify insurgent areas.

Over the next decade Myanmar saw the transition from the tightly regulated, state-led economic development of the BSPP to state-mediated capitalism, including increased openness to foreign investment and the privatisation of state owned enterprises (SOEs) and properties (Ford et al. 2016: 16; Fujita et al. 2009).<sup>75</sup> The SLORC/SPDC government encourage private sector development through the issuing of licences, permits, leases and contracts to trusted contacts and business-people (Fujita et al. 2009; Mya Maung 1998).<sup>76</sup> As a result of the state's new economic policies, during the 1990s regional military commanders accrued significant power and authority over trade and commerce in the borderlands (Callahan 2000, 2004). Wealth and business investment quickly became concentrated in the hands of a few well-connected 'big men' (*B. lu gyi*) with close links to the military under a system known in existing scholarship as 'crony capitalism' (Ford et al. 2016: 16; Fujita et al. 2009; L. Jones 2014b; Mya Maung 1998). This highly decentralized system allowed regional military commanders to maintain a degree of oversight, mediation and influence over assets and businesses perceived as potentially profitable and to expand their own economic base substantially by setting up lucrative military corporate ventures, including agricultural plantations, banks and holding companies (Callahan 2007: 28; Ford et al. 2016). In the wake of new laws which encouraged investment in exportable cash-crops such as rubber and oil palm (Woods 2015: 8), this period also saw massive land confiscations from military leaders, forcing many Plong Karen to instead seek income generating opportunities by migrating to Thailand and further afield for work.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Two key laws - the Foreign Investment Law (November 1988) and the State-owned Economic Enterprises Law (March 1989) - were passed during this period, enabling private foreign capital after 25 years and allowing authorized private enterprises to be engaged in all but 12 stipulated industries (S. McCarthy 2000).

<sup>76</sup> In 1997, the SLORC was reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

<sup>77</sup> Post-1988 patterns of Plong Karen migration will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.

The strength of the new SLORC government was also aided by a massive shift in foreign relations with neighbouring Thailand (L. Jones 2014b: 792; Meehan 2011).<sup>78</sup> As a result of lucrative business concessions offered by the SLORC regime, the Thai Prime Minister General Chatichai Choonhavan declared a new policy of active engagement to transform “battlefields into marketplaces” (Battersby 1998: 479; see also Lambrecht 2004).<sup>79</sup> The SLORC regime used the bulk of these profits to finance military acquisitions and to secure control over major arterials and trade routes through Karen State.<sup>80</sup> In addition, this new income helped to facilitate the doubling of the Myanmar army, from around 200,000 personnel in 1988 to close to 400,000 in the mid-1990s (Selth 2002: 253). Alongside the additional income from military enterprises, the junta used the currency from foreign investments to finance military acquisitions from China and Russia, increasing the power of its armed forces against ethnic insurgents (Callahan 2004; Selth 2002: 253). This also included a military intelligence apparatus that penetrated deeply into ethnic areas of Myanmar, to suppress and co-opt those who contested its power and authority (Maung Aung Myoe 2009; Tin Maung Maung Than 2005).

After the widespread pro-democracy protests of 1988, the SLORC government set about attempting to re-establish themselves as rightful rulers of Myanmar. Portraying their leadership through a dynastical link to Myanmar’s great Buddhist Kings, King Anawrahta, Bayinnaung, and Alaungphaya, the new government used an authoritarian ideology infused with Buddhist principles to help legitimise their power. In the post-1988 era the new SLORC/SPDC military regime resurrected the ancient notion of a *dhammarāja*, a just and righteous ruler, as a source of legitimation to enhance and help consolidate their political power (Houtman 1999; Jordt 2003a, 2007; Schober 1997, 2005, 2011). Using the ‘ritual theatre’ of the state to restore the pre-colonial

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<sup>78</sup> Significantly, foreign investment increased from USD 58m in 1990–91 to USD 800m by 1996–97 (L. Jones 2016: 99).

<sup>79</sup> After the change in government in Myanmar in 1988, the Thai Prime Minister General Chatichai Choonhavan met with Myanmar’s Senior General Saw Maung to negotiate the share of timber concessions along the border between the two countries for Thai companies. This coincided with new environmental laws passed in Thailand in January 1989 limiting domestic logging, thereby increasing their demand for more formalized routes of passage into neighbouring countries like Myanmar.

<sup>80</sup> Thai loggers also built roads through Karen state facilitating military penetration (see Battersby 1998: 486-87).

monarchical Buddhism, Juliane Schober argues that the large-scale Buddhist merit making rituals of military junta during the 1990s and 2000s were used to project an image of themselves as a rightful Buddhist monarch or *dhammarāja* (see Schober 1995, 1997, 2011).<sup>81</sup> The state's public and performative rituals around the Buddha's physical remains (*P. rūpakāya*) and the refurbishing of national icons like the Shwedagon Pagoda and the ancient site of Bagan were, as Schober (1997, 2001) describes, elaborate and extravagant affairs designed to legitimise military rule among the primarily Buddhist population.

In her work on Buddhism and the construction of power in Myanmar, Ingrid Jordt (2007) similarly describes how the military generals co-opted Buddhist discourse and symbolism to legitimise their rule (Jordt 2007: 105). Under the more open economic system, Jordt shows that the new class of wealthy crony entrepreneurs to whom the state gave business licenses were also enlisted to add to the public's conception of the SLORC as a *dhammarāja*, generating an established hierarchy of merit making related to power, wealth and status (Jordt 2003b; Schober 1997, 2011). Under the *dhammarāja's* polity, subjects would pay tribute to the court through Buddhist rituals that affirmed their social positions within the court.<sup>82</sup> In accordance with this philosophy, technocratic, business and ethnic elites worked together with the military government to help finance religious construction, restoration and other merit-making rituals, endorsing the state's modernisation agenda (Jordt 2003b; Schober 1997: 238; 2011).<sup>83</sup> They also sponsored religiously motivated social welfare programs including funeral services, homes for the elderly, health clinics, blood collection banks and other services through a hegemonic discourse of Buddhist ethics that lent moral legitimacy to profit-oriented activities (see also G. McCarthy 2018a). In Hpa-an district, the strength of this system was further entrenched by the emergence of the Democratic

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<sup>81</sup> This was deeply embedded in the state's vision of a 'modern' nation, linking the contemporary SLORC/SPDC rulers to a lineage of past kings and the Buddhist cosmological system of 'just rule' (Schober 1997: 225).

<sup>82</sup> This is related to the teachings of the *Abhidhamma*, and the notion that to give freely is a necessary condition for the arising of a higher consciousness and protection against greed and hate.

<sup>83</sup> The increased centralisation of Hpa-an and its surrounding districts went hand in hand with the Myanmar government's institutionalisation of the monastic establishment through the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Ahpwe (council) (see Tin Maung Maung Than 1988).<sup>83</sup>

Karen Buddhist Army and two charismatic monks who sought to recreate Karen State as a Buddhist polity.

### ***The Emergence of the DKBA and the Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw***

Although the Tatmadaw secured control of vast areas of southeastern Myanmar from the Karen National Union under their four cuts strategy enacted by Ne Win, the power of the new SLORC military regime in Karen State was significantly enhanced after the emergence of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) in December 1994. The political and economic changes described above significantly strengthened the junta's power against ethnic armed organisations in borderland regions, forcing many of them to concede to tentative ceasefire arrangements with the Tatmadaw (Callahan 2004; M. Smith 1999, 2007). The KNU faced a double-blow after the emergence of the armed rebellion of Buddhist Karen soldiers who split from the KNU and signed a ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw (Gravers 1999: 91-95; South 2008: 58).<sup>84</sup> With the help of the DKBA, the Tatmadaw launched a brutal offensive against the KNU, seizing control of key arteries and importantly the KNU headquarters in Mannerplaw on the Thailand border in January 1995.<sup>85</sup>

The ceasefire between the DKBA and the Tatmadaw was one of a wave of similar agreements the Myanmar government negotiated with other ethnic armed organisations in the early 1990s (see M. Smith 1999: 421-41; Zaw Oo and Win Min 2007). The military allowed the DKBA a large degree of autonomy in many parts of Karen State, including the right to carry arms and pursue economic trade and development. Significantly, this included control over key arteries through Karen State and the right to tax goods through borderland checkpoints (Callahan 2007: 24; L. Jones 2016: 100-101). As with many of Myanmar's emergent crony capitalists, the

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<sup>84</sup> Internal divisions within the KNU also spawned two additional non-state armed groups, the Karen Peace Force (KPF) in 1997 (Brigade 6), and the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC) in 2007 (Brigade 7), which emerged when members of KNU Brigades 6 and 7 respectively defected and signed ceasefires with the Myanmar military Tatmadaw. Those who established ceasefires with the Myanmar army, received lucrative economic deals such as mining licenses and rubber plantations.

<sup>85</sup> U Thuzana is rumoured to have collaborated with the Tatmadaw's southeastern Commander to obtain weapons and supplies for 4000 soldiers in his monastery in Myaing Gyi Ngu (see KHRG 1996). These reports have not been independently verified.



ceasefire between the Tatmadaw and the DKBA resulted in lucrative business concessions for DKBA commanders, securing both state and armed group elites access to highly profitable systems of resource extraction in a system described elsewhere in Myanmar as “ceasefire capitalism” (Woods 2011).

“Ceasefire capitalism” is a term coined by political geographer Kevin Woods (2011) to describe the economic concessions given to ethnic armed leaders in the 1990s as a result of the ceasefires they negotiated with the military government.<sup>86</sup> The cooperation of ethnic armed groups with the Myanmar military through joint ventures resulted in lucrative deals in extractive industries including logging, mining and agribusiness, that primarily enriched themselves and their relatives (L. Jones 2016: 102; MacLean 2008; Meehan 2011: 398). Similar dynamics also emerged in Karen State where business contracts obtained by DKBA military personnel, fostered the formalisation of Karen State’s thriving Thailand border black market into the hands of a well-connected few. Like in other ceasefire areas, little of the wealth extracted from DKBA commanders trickled down to local Karen communities. However, the majority of DKBA personnel had to find their own sources of income among local populations, relying on extortion, taxation, gambling and the increasingly profitable sale of methamphetamines (South 2008, 2011).

Labelled by Ashley South as “conflict entrepreneurs” (2011: 19), the DKBA’s soldiers gained a reputation as predatory and profit seeking (HRW 2016; KHRG 1997, 2002; Lang 2002; South 2008, 2011).<sup>87</sup> Over the 1990s and 2000s, the DKBA became infamous for exploitative practices used against Karen civilians in these territories and

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<sup>86</sup> During the 1990’s, economic incentives were given to ethnic armed organisations who signed ceasefire agreements so as to gain control of the borderlands and their rich natural resources. As has been described by Woods (2011) and others, these dynamics contributed directly to the collapse of the 17-year-long ceasefire between the KIO and the *Tatmadaw* in 2011 (Sadan 2016; Woods 2016). A recent edited volume by Mandy Sadan (2016) provides a detailed insight into the impacts of ceasefire agreements in Kachin state. One conclusion we can draw is that the ceasefires enacted across many parts of the country in the 1990s, effectively enabling the strengthening of the Tatmadaw’s position over frontier areas of the country, tying ethnic armed elite to the state through lucrative joint ventures. These ceasefires did very little to address people’s grievances related to human rights abuses nor demands for greater political autonomy.

<sup>87</sup> The reputation of the DKBA among Karen scholars such as Ashley South, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung and Martin Smith is also related to their proximity to the KNU, of whom viewed the defection of the DKBA as a betrayal of the Karen nationalist cause.

a viscous sectarian campaign against Christian and Muslim communities in the name of protecting and propagating Buddhism (KHRG 1996, 1997, 2001; South 2008: 58).<sup>88</sup> Despite this reputation, there was widespread support for the DKBA among many Plong Karen Buddhist civilians I encountered in Hpa-an district, with many seeing the group and its leaders as having brought a semblance of peace and order following decades of conflict with the Tatmadaw. In order to finance weapons and ammunition as well as administrative overheads the DKBA built powerful and competing centres of power which social researcher Ashley South conceptualises as having “mandala-like qualities” (South 2011: 34). Central to their contingent legitimacy was the alliance they formed with the Buddhist abbot U Thuzana, also known as the Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw,<sup>89</sup> who sought to ‘rejuvenate’ the Buddhist Karen polity around Hpa-an.<sup>90</sup>

U Thuzana is renowned in scholarship on the Karen for having facilitated the split of Buddhist Karen soldiers from the KNU in 1994 (Gravers 2001, 2012b, 2018; M. Smith 1999; South 2011). Arriving in the KNU’s stronghold of Mannerplaw in 1989, U Thuzana proclaimed the importance of building a Karen Buddhist polity in order to see peace. His charismatic leadership appealed to many disgruntled Buddhist Plong Karen civilians and soldiers who, by the early 1990s, were tired of engaging in the endless conflict led by the KNU – especially those that felt alienated by the ethno-nationalist narratives of largely Christian S’gaw Karen elites. The tensions between these two factions came to a head in mid 1994 when U Thuzana enlisted the support of Buddhist Plong Karen soldiers to build a ‘peace pagoda’ a few kilometres north of Mannerplaw. However, the peace pagoda project was stopped by KNLA commanders who believed the Tatmadaw would use the site as a target. A few months later, a group

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<sup>88</sup> Karen Buddhist-Christian relations will be further explored in Chapter 6.

<sup>89</sup> Sayadaw’ is a Burmese honorific used to refer to a monk, who is usually the head of a monastery. Plong Karen in Hpa-an use the term interchangeably with their own term ‘Thaungkha’ to refer to senior monks like U Thuzana.

<sup>90</sup> U Thuzana has also attracted widespread support from Karen people in Thailand and substantial donations from wealthy Thai businessmen. Although he is still active in Karen State he is very unwell and spends much of his time now at a meditation center south of Bangkok established by one of his Thai patrons, the owner of Saha Farm Company.

of disaffected Buddhist Karen soldiers deserted their front-line positions and established the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA).<sup>91</sup>

At the centre of U Thuzana's project of Buddhist revivalism is Myaing Gyi Ngu and his 11-tier Ganda Kuti temple. As a self-declared *thathana myei*, Buddhist religious land, Myaing Gyi Ngu is a Buddhist landscape in every sense. The distinctly white pagodas of U Thuzana dot the landscape and Theravāda Buddhist flags flutter in the breeze on bamboo poles which line the roadside. Reflecting his efforts to create a Karen Buddhist polity, U Thuzana has led a mission to inscribe a unique Karen language translation of the Theravāda Pāli Canon,<sup>92</sup> the *Tipitaka*, on stone tablets in a project which mimics the iconic collection on stone in Mandalay, in northern Myanmar.<sup>93</sup> However, evidence of U Thuzana's religious works can be seen throughout Hpa-an district, even in some of the most remote villages and mountain tops.

My Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an emphasised U Thuzana's kind and loving nature, citing as example the peace he had helped to broker around Hpa-an in the early 1990s. For many Plong Karen in rural areas of Hpa-an, the ceasefire between the DKBA and the government significantly reduced the harassment they received from

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<sup>91</sup> From a cursory analysis, the division between the KNU and DKBA took place along religious and linguistic lines and the "genuine grievances" of Buddhist Plong Karen soldiers against their Sgaw Karen superiors (Gravers 1999: 91-97; South 2008: 58; Thawngmung 2008: 30). The KNU was governed by an executive committee that was dominated by S'gaw Karen Christians, many of whom came from the Irrawaddy Delta, whereas, the rank and file soldiers were largely made up of Buddhist, Plong soldiers from the southeast of Myanmar (see Gravers 2007: 252; South 2008: 57-59).

<sup>92</sup> U Thuzana has developed a distinct Karen script which he claims is the 'original' Karen language, which is painted on signboards and on pagodas throughout Myaing Gyi Ngu. Like other religious leaders before him promoting various Karen writing systems (see Womack 2005), U Thuzana has rejected the more common Karen writing scripts as invented and through his vast and powerful networks is attempting to spread this new script throughout Karen communities in Myanmar. U Thuzana claims that he was inspired by a dream where he was made known the true ancient Karen language, and that his literature originates in Southwest China and predates the separation of Plong and Sgaw languages. Given his political history, however, it is unlikely that his attempt at producing a universal Karen orthography will be able to overcome the geographic, religious and linguistic differences in Karen communities across Myanmar.

<sup>93</sup> There are reports that Karen internally displaced persons (IDPs) from clashes in September 2016 in nearby Mae Tha Waw are being forced to provide labour for these projects in exchange for shelter and rice from U Thuzana (see Kyaw Lin Htoon 2018). However, in discussions with people in the wider Myaing Gyi Ngu district, many people suggest they are willing to offer their time and labour to the venerable monk as a way of gaining merit.

the Tatmadaw and ended the regular calls made on male family members for portering services. For many Plong Karen in Hpa-an district, U Thuzana and the religious compound he created with DKBA support in Myaing Gyi Ngu, north of Hpa-an, also came to represent an alternative and powerful moral authority to that imposed by both the Myanmar military state and largely Christian-led ethno-nationalist KNU.

U Thuzana built up a cult following of Karen Buddhists around the Myaing Gyi Ngu monastery during the 1990s (see also Gravers 1999, 2012a, 2018). One Plong Karen aunty who moved to Myaing Gyi Ngu in 1997, Naw Ku Wah, explained to me that the conflict between the KNU and the Tatmadaw and its resultant political economy, resulted in what she described as poor moral standards among Karen people. Naw Ku Wah told me U Thuzana appealed to Karen Buddhists like herself because of his explicit emphasis on resurrecting a Buddhist moral order. Followers of U Thuzana who moved to Myaing Gyi Ngu made an oath committing themselves to vegetarianism as well as five rules outlined at his central monastery: no violence, no politics, no preaching of other religions, no gossip and to practice *thila*, moral discipline (see also Gravers 2015). According to this logic, Naw Ku Wah suggested that U Thuzana helped Karen people to improve their everyday ethics and thus secure durable peace.

U Thuzana's reputation among the Plong Karen builds off a strong tradition of charismatic leadership which dates back to the nineteenth century (Gravers 2001, 2012b; P. Hinton 1979; Stern 1968b). Among his supporters, U Thuzana is highly regarded for his adherence to the 227 *vinaya* rules of conduct for monks as part of the Shwegyin Niyaka sect,<sup>94</sup> praised as a Buddhist 'saint' who will bring peace and prosperity to the Karen (Rozenberg 2010). Among Buddhist Plong Karen U Thuzana is widely respected and believed to possess supernatural powers as a result of his commitment to meditation and the promotion of morality. Indeed, in many Buddhist Plong Karen homes I visited in and around Hpa-an, laminated photographs of U Thuzana were often pinned to the wall beside the household Buddhist shrine. Many

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<sup>94</sup> The Shwegyin sect dates back to the rule of the Burmese King Mindon who in the nineteenth century sought to reform and discipline the *sangha*. They are known for their strict discipline and adherence to the 227 monastic rules.

Plong Karen Buddhists believe he has supernatural powers (P. *iddhi*) and make regular pilgrimages to Myaing Gyi Ngu to seek his blessings for material prosperity, healing and to carry out purification rites. Stories about his magical powers are widespread and his pictures are widely used as a form of protection.

Over the last three decades U Thuzana has devoted himself to the building and repair of Buddhist religious monuments as part of his mission to restore Karen State as a Buddhist land, encouraging his thousands of Karen followers to donate free labour and money as ‘acts of merit’. When I met U Thuzana he boasted of having built more than 2500 pagodas in the last thirty years, and that continued construction was key to strengthening the Karen Buddhist polity necessary for lasting peace and prosperity in Karen State. The construction efforts have helped build his reputation among Buddhist Plong Karen as a ‘*talakhoung*’, a man of great karma who, as an expression of his compassion for lay Karen people, initiates the construction of religious monuments so that they can make merit and build a Karen Buddhist polity.<sup>95</sup> However, it is impossible to understand the power and appeal of U Thuzana without discussing another highly charismatic monk U Winaya, the Thamanya Sayadaw, who erected an equally prominent though less militarised project of Buddhist moral revivalism outside Hpa-an between the 1980s and 1990s.

### ***The Thamanya Sayadaw***

Much of U Thuzana’s emphasis on Buddhist ethics was built on the work of one of his teachers, U Vinaya, the Thamanya Sayadaw who between the 1980s and 1990s established a Buddhist, vegetarian monastic centre at the base of Mount Thamanya – about 35 km east of Hpa-an. The Thamanya Sayadaw died in 2003, but Mount Thamanya is still considered to emanate his sacred power, as well as that of the Buddha and other holy deities into the surrounding landscape. Between 1990 and 2003 U Vinaya’s core base of supporters grew to more than twenty thousand Pa-o and Karen people seeking protection under his monastic and supernatural powers (Rozenberg 2010; Tosa 2009). He encouraged strict moral behaviour within Thamanya and was

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<sup>95</sup> ‘*Tala*’ is thought to stem from a Mon word used for monk (see Gravers 2001: 17).

said to have supernatural powers like the powers of prophecy, mind reading and the ability to ward off evil spirits as a result of *samādhi* meditation, mastering concentration (Gravers 2015b; Rozenberg 2011; Tosa 2009).<sup>96</sup>

The Thamanya Sayadaw was a highly charismatic figure, exemplifying what anthropologist Guillaume Rozenberg (2010) refers to as a “Burmese saint”. Combining a strict ascetic practice and meditation in the tradition of the forest monk Khruba Wong in northern Thailand (see P. Cohen 2017), the Thamanya Sayadaw is considered by many to have possessed the powers of a *yahànda* (P. *arahant*) — a Buddhist saint who has attained enlightenment according to rigorous ascetic practices and intensive meditation (Rozenberg 2010). In the tradition of the *yahànda* there are many unusual stories and incidents narrated and circulated by his followers throughout Karen State, which enhance his status. In narratives of his coming to meditate on Thamanya mountain, it is said that he communicated with local spirits and supernatural beings, including one who came in the form of a female doe and protected him from wild animals and bandits. Most prominently, many people in Thamanya spoke of the time when the then powerful intelligence chief General Khin Nyunt visited Thamanya in the early 1990s and was disarmed as a result of the great monk’s supernatural powers.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, the fact that his body was stolen shortly after his cremation has enhanced his mythical status (Rozenberg 2011).<sup>98</sup> However, U Vinaya is most fondly remembered and revered locally for his ‘loving kindness’ (P. *metta*) with locals speaking about him with the affection of a close grandfather. One of the people I met in Thamanya, Khon Win Khaing, became a novice monk under the great abbot, and remembered his patience: “He was softly spoken and never harsh to any of

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<sup>96</sup> Strongly associated with revolutionary and anti-colonial discourse, *samādhi* meditation has been practiced by notable figures throughout Burmese history including Saya San, the leader of the 1930 ‘peasant’ revolt against the colonial government and Thakhin Kudaw Hmaing, one of the grandfathers of Burmese nationalism and post-war Buddhist socialism (see Houtman 1990).

<sup>97</sup> This story was told to me on several occasions by various followers of the Thamanya Sayadaw. For a more detailed account see Rozenberg (2010: 141).

<sup>98</sup> The venerable monk was embalmed after his death, but his corpse was later stolen under mysterious circumstances from the monastery. For more details see Tosa (2009) and Rozenberg (2010).

us as students. He was full of *metta* (P. loving kindness).<sup>99</sup> Under the Sayadaw we lived in peace and there was no anger, jealousy or hatred.”<sup>100</sup>

Anthropologist Mikael Gravers (2012a, 2015b) argues that for lay Karen people the communities of Thamanya and Myaing Gyi Ngu became spaces of stability and moral wellbeing in an otherwise chaotic and violent socio-political environment. In the midst of the long-running civil conflict, for local people Thamanya was a space of political refuge for local civilians, against forced portering, illegitimate taxation (B. *akauk kun*) and other human rights abuses on the part of the *Tatmadaw* and Karen ethnic armed groups.<sup>101</sup> Like in Myaing Gyi Ngu, settlers and pilgrims who came to live in Thamanya in the 1990s were expected to observe the five precepts, avoiding the consumption of meat, drugs, alcoholic drinks and the use of weapons. Devout followers also observed additional precepts on holy days during the full and new moons, soliciting donations from residents in their particular wards. In addition, members of the Thamanya community were expected to provide voluntary labour for the Sayadaw’s various development projects including building roads and the iconic bridge across the Thanlwin River outside of Hpa-an on the highway to Yangon.

Similar to some of the religious movements in Thailand popular in the 1980s,<sup>102</sup> there is a sense in academic scholarship that U Vinaya’s popularity across Myanmar reflected a growing disenchantment with the military regime undermining the power and authority of the state in his formation of a deeply religious moral community (Gravers 2001, 2012b; Houtman 1999; Rozenberg 2010; Tosa 2009). Part of U Vinaya’s cult status also lay in his independence from the SLORC/SPDC government’s extensive Buddhist patronage networks and his rejection of invitations and title-awarding ceremonies from the State Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Council (Ma Ha Na). Famously he also refused to accept the gift of a luxury vehicle from General Khin

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<sup>99</sup> The Thamanya Sayadaw is said to have devoted his assiduous concentration meditative practice to ‘loving kindness’ (P. *metta*), one of the four realms of a sublime state of mind.

<sup>100</sup> See similar observations from local people about the Thamanya Sayadaw in Rozenberg (2010: 140).

<sup>101</sup> The Karen and Pa-O were the primary group of settlers, but many Burmese, Mon and Shan followers also came to visit during the 1990s.

<sup>102</sup> For example, the religious movements of Thammakaai and Santi Asok (Heikkila-Horn 1996; Satha-Anand 1990).

Nyunt. It is widely believed that the Myanmar state authorities feared his increasing influence as a challenge to state power and regime stability especially after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi visited in 1995,<sup>103</sup> pictures of which can be found in households throughout Thamanya and across Hpa-an district (see Figure 6). His project of Buddhist moral revivalism thus served to critique the state's projection of itself as a bastion of Theravāda Buddhism and as a *dhammarāja*.<sup>104</sup>



Figure 6: Photograph of U Vinaya and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Source: Author.

Unlike U Thuzana whose Buddhist moral revitalisation project was closely associated with the armed DKBA movement, the Thamanya Sayadaw's fame and influence grew primarily because of his socially-engaged vision of Buddhist moral practice. U Vinaya used his popularity to promote the importance of *parahita*, charity or social work, as a form of lay Buddhist social ethics and merit-making.<sup>105</sup> *Parahita* is a Pāli term used to refer to social work which is conducted for the good or welfare of others or in

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<sup>103</sup> This visit occurred shortly after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's release from her first term of house arrest in 1995.

<sup>104</sup> Paradoxically, many Tatmadaw officials turned to the Thamanya Sayadaw to gain power and protection.

<sup>105</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the place and history of *parahita* within Myanmar see Walton (2016: 150-161) and G. McCarthy (2018b).



support of the *sasāna*, the dissemination of the teachings of the Buddha. Through his large donation network, U Vinaya was well-known for his active pursuit of both *lokuttara* (B. *lawkouttara*), supramundane activities, such as pagoda building; as well as *lokiya* (B. *lawki*), this-worldly activities, such as building schools, community halls, roads and other infrastructure projects as part of a broader social practice to encourage socially-engaged Buddhism (see Tosa 2009; Rozenberg 2010). During the 1990s, devotees came from all across Myanmar to listen to his sermons and pay their respects to the great monk, from which he collected large donations and funds to construct roads, bridges, schools and other community projects which brought about much change and development to Thamanya and Hpa-an district more broadly. In public sermons he would emphasise the importance of works of *parahita*, social work or compassionate action, as a form of merit. These sermons and his work throughout Hpa-an district, helped to transform Plong Karen lay donation practices and their understanding of social work for the benefit for others as an important form of everyday moral practice.

The legacy of the Thamanya Sayadaw today is most evident in the large number of pilgrims who continue to travel to Hpa-an from other areas of Myanmar to visit the many powerful Buddhist sites and archaeological remains of the Mon kingdom. However, his impact on Buddhism and ethical practice in Karen State is considerable. Since the death of the Thamanya Sayadaw, the powerful Zwegabin Sayadaw of Mount Khwaegabaung, U Kawidaza has configured a new pilgrimage route which continues to reinforce the spiritual power (B. *dago*) of this area of Myanmar.<sup>106</sup> U Kawidaza has promoted Kawgun cave, for example, whose terracotta tablets date back to the seventh century, as home to a Buddhist statue which he claims has the power to remove the debts (B: *akywe kyi paya*) of those who pay homage. U Kawidaza has also drawn from the Thamanya Sayadaw's legacy, using his donation networks to construct roads and schools and providing access to electricity to villages directly beneath Mount Khwaegabaung and more recently a cable car project. Like the Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw, he also has a strong reputation for helping to 'build Buddhism' (B. *thathana*

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<sup>106</sup> I have chosen to refer to U Kawidaza as the 'Zwegabin' Sayadaw rather than 'Khwaegabaung', since he is Burmese and commonly referred to in that way.

*pyu*) claiming much of the land around Mount Khwaegabaung as *thathana myei*, land for the propagation of the Buddhist religion.

Gravers (2015b) argues that the Buddhist revivalist projects of powerful monks like U Thuzana and U Vinaya have become an important source of identity for their Karen followers, akin to ethnic and national identities. He (2015b: 50) notes that as a result of their work “a moral order and spiritual politics are preconditions for a righteous rule and establishing a moral community.” Based on a Buddhist cosmological imaginary of moral leadership and moral order, the resurrection of a Buddhist polity is also key to how local Plong Karen define themselves and their understandings of morality. These projects of Buddhist moral revivalism led by U Vinaya and U Thuzana in the 1990s and continued by other monks in the present era remain deeply influential in the popular domain and local Karen people’s understandings of everyday ethics. Among many Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an, understandings of moral ideals, Karen collective identity and everyday ethical practice are intimately tied to the legacies of these projects of Buddhist revival.

## **Conclusion**

The power dynamics and various moral agents I have described in this chapter provide the historical and conceptual foundation for the remainder of this thesis. Contemporary enactments of moral agency around Hpa-an are deeply shaped by the historical legacies of various competing moral, political and religious authorities. The legacies of military rule, ethno-national conflict and projects of Buddhist moral revivalism, continue to influence and structure everyday life in Hpa-an. In southeastern Myanmar, the struggle over political power, legitimacy and moral authority forces people to negotiate different loyalties, allegiances and identities between competing norms and regulations.

Some of these power dynamics have become even more muddled with the introduction of reforms under President Thein Sein (2010-2015) and the signing of a ceasefire with the Karen National Union (KNU). Despite the liberalisation process, in the contemporary era sovereignty in Karen State remains splintered among various armed

splinter groups and the Myanmar Tatmadaw in what Su-Ann Oh (2013: 1) conceptualises as a “mosaic of territorial control.” Different areas of the state are controlled by separate and relatively autonomous armed groups, which have highly fragmented and unpredictable approaches to local rule, justice, economic development and relationships with their civilian populations, adding to the complexity of Karen State’s political geography (Gravers 2015c, 2016; K. Joliffe 2016a; Rangkla 2014). In Hpa-an, some of the most powerful authorities are former DKBA commanders who were formally integrated into the command structure of the Tatmadaw as a ‘Border Guard Force’ in 2010.<sup>107</sup> Major General Chit Thu, for example, the former commander of DKBA’s Brigade 999, is a household name across Karen State as a result of the wealth he has assumed over the last two decades. Even though his military base, casino and American-style villa is located on the border with Thailand near Myawaddy in Shwe Kokko, his black shiny SUV is well-known to Hpa-an district residents, where he was granted numerous lucrative business licenses as well as land for rubber plantations in the wake of the 1994 ceasefire with the DKBA.<sup>108</sup> However, his power cannot be explained without understanding his proximity to influential monastic leaders and the role he plays in helping to ‘build Buddhism’ (*B. thathanapyu*) throughout areas he controls.

The power of monks in Hpa-an district is crucial to understanding Plong Karen everyday ethics and the way powerful moral agents like Major General Chit Thu are framed by local people. The influence of these and other religious figures is evident in the endless pagoda construction throughout Hpa-an district, which marks the varied

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<sup>107</sup> The majority of DKBA forces were disbanded and incorporated into Tatmadaw-aligned Border Guard Force (BGF) units in August 2010 - created after the adoption of the 2008 Constitution to assimilate ethnic armed groups into the national army. Whilst the majority of DKBA soldiers became BGF units, a small faction re-aligned themselves with the KNU in 2010, refusing to become a Border Guard Force for the Tatmadaw. They later signed a preliminary ceasefire agreement with the Thein Sein government in 2011 and in 2015 signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. In 2012 they renamed themselves the ‘Democratic Karen Benevolent Army’, emphasizing themselves as a secular organization for all Karen people. They are mostly concentrated in areas close to the Thailand border in the Dawna mountain range.

<sup>108</sup> In recent years, Major General Chit Thu has also been involved in the development of controversial coal and cement mines in Hpa-an district. See for example <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/locals-face-threats-about-rock-mining-kayin.html>; <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/bgf-plans-large-city-expansion-project-karen-state.html>; <https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/adb-puts-brakes-on-kayin-state-quarry> (accessed 23 February 2018).

sources and competition over people and geographical space. Monks like U Thuzana and U Vinaya have played a central role in legitimising lay power structures in dynamics that will be described further in the next chapter. Alongside the work of charismatic monks, contestation over geographic space and power can also be evinced in the religious dynamism in and around Hpa-an, and the constant negotiation between state sanctioned Buddhist practices and local prophetic movements. However, whilst morality is deeply implicated in Buddhist understandings of power and authority, Plong Karen lived understandings of everyday ethics is much more complex and multifaceted.

These political flows and movements are central to understanding Hpa-an, Plong Karen Buddhists and their differentiated understandings of morality and ethics in dynamics that will be explored further in the next chapter. Based on a Buddhist cosmological imaginary of moral leadership and authority, morality is fundamental to political power and rule among Buddhist Plong Karen. However, Buddhism and its ethical frameworks should not be seen as all-encompassing in defining Plong Karen people and how they live and move through the world. As I explore in Chapter Two, Plong Karen Buddhists seek to position themselves as good or ethical humans in ways that are not always consistent. For some people the importance of everyday ethics and Buddhist morality is key to this. For others, however, the project of Buddhist moral revivalism is just one in a set of multiple frameworks that they know and understand as what it means to live and embody an ethical life. As I demonstrate, people's understandings of everyday ethics and how they attempt to pursue morality are often embedded in contradictory moral frameworks which cannot always be perfectly reconciled.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Brokering Morality: Everyday Buddhist Ethics and Obligation**

En route to visit the village of one of my students outside Hpa-an, we stopped briefly to take a break at a roadside teashop to buy some water. There I ran into a local woman I'd met earlier who had just returned from the Taungalay monastery after helping to prepare food for the monks final meal for the day. After a few minutes of humorous pleasantries, our discussion quickly strayed onto the topic of Buddhist charitable giving, especially the role of lay people propagating *sasāna*, the Buddha's dispensation, around Hpa-an. Given my interest in projects of Buddhist revivalism around Hpa-an, the woman urged me to go and see the newly refurbished Yeh Myo Oo Pagoda, a monastery nearby which she claimed would one day be the largest in the whole world.

On the way out to my friend's village we took a slight diversion from our destination to travel out to the site not far from the teashop. Despite the hype we found barely a soul in the vicinity of the construction area. The small Yeh Myo Oo pagoda poked out of the ground on a small hill and was surrounded by a large, dusty construction site where an excavator stood silent. Finding my way down to a simple wooden monastery complex not far from the site I sat and spoke to the resident abbot who was helping to facilitate the project on behalf of the Taungalay Sayadaw, a prominent monk in this area. The abbot reiterated what the woman had earlier told me, explaining that the powerful Taungalay Sayadaw had been raising money for the project for many years from local Karen Buddhist villagers. Powerful patrons dedicated to 'building Buddhism' (B. *thathana pyu*) in Karen State had also made substantial contributions, he explained.

While we sat chatting a group of these lay donors, officers from the local Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), came to pay their respects to the abbot and make a donation. They wore army uniforms and their commander had a noticeable thick gold chain hanging around his neck with a large Buddhist amulet. After a short discussion on the progression of the project they handed the abbot's assistant a thick wad of US hundred dollar bills and promptly jumped into a large, gleaming black Prado four-wheel drive which took off in a thick cloud of dust. As we watched the soldiers disappear into the distance, I asked the abbot if they came very often. Repeating the cosmological understanding of peace and conflict discussed in Chapter One, he explained that the BGF commander was one of the most significant *daga*, close benefactors, of the Taungalay Sayadaw and he was here because it was his wish to see peace in Karen state:

You see, it's only through building this monastery that we will be able to reduce the suffering of Karen people. Come back in five years' time. You will see. Through the generous acts of *dāna* from the Sayadaw's benefactors we will have peace and prosperity in Karen State.

As described in Chapter One, for many Plong Karen in Hpa-an Buddhism is central to how concepts of peace, stability and order are understood and enacted. This cosmological imaginary coheres with the view that the strength of Buddhism within a polity determines the extent of social, economic and political hardship (see Nash 1965; Obeyesekere et al. 1972; Spiro 1970; Tambiah 1976). In line with this belief, making donations to monks and to projects of Buddhist revival are widely seen as highly meritorious acts that contribute to attaining *parami*, moral virtue, and ultimately nirvana.<sup>109</sup> Participation in donation rituals affirm one's place as both a person and member of the Buddhist social and moral community. However, power and authority

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<sup>109</sup> *Parami* (P. *pāramī*) is a Burmese word used commonly among Plong Karen Buddhists to refer to one's virtue or aptitude towards reaching enlightenment. Matthew Walton (2016: 50) notes, "Burmese use the word *parami* in an everyday sense to refer to talent or ability, but it carries a specifically Buddhist meaning of 'acquired virtue.' The ten principle virtues are charity, morality, renunciation, knowledge, effort, honesty, forbearance, loving-kindness, equanimity, and resolution... While one's present circumstances are always to some degree the result of past actions, development of *parami* is explicitly connected to one's circumstances with regard to progress towards nibbana."

are deeply embedded in what Juliane Schober refers to as the “merit-power nexus” and an established hierarchy of merit making related to one’s wealth and status in society (see Schober 1989, 2011).<sup>110</sup> In Hpa-an, some of the most powerful benefactors of Buddhism are also implicated in a post-conflict economy of illicit wealth making which sometimes places them in an oppositional relationship with local people and how they see and relate to each other on an everyday basis. It is the tensions between these understandings of morality which is the subject of this chapter.

This chapter follows in four sections. In section one I examine the life of a local powerful Karen Buddhist benefactor, Saw Eh Klein and how he and his family broker morality within their community in complex and contradictory ways. Calling to mind Arthur Kleinman’s (1998) distinction between abstract ‘ethical discourse’ and lived ‘moral experience’, in section two I pay particular attention to the reflexive of his community members, whereby his everyday economic practices and lifestyle choices are framed in relation to the precepts and frameworks of Buddhism. While meritorious acts of *dāna*, giving generously, are articulated in very clear ways by Plong Karen society as an exemplary form of Buddhist ethical practice, in section three I demonstrate that lived understandings of morality emerge not from abstract moral laws but from the messy ambiguity of quotidian social obligation. In doing so, I examine the tensions between being a wealthy village patron with deleterious debt relationships in conjunction to the Karen ethic of keeping *thout kyar* – an ethical framework which relates the interdependency of Karen people as a moral people embedded in the subsistence economy of lowland rice production.

Far from being neutral accounts, social relations within Karen communities carry highly charged and divergent moral evaluations of people and the way they choose to live their lives. In describing some of the ways Saw Eh Klein is positioned within his community, I reveal how understandings of morality are interwoven in elaborate and

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<sup>110</sup> Much of the research on Buddhist merit-making also highlights its role in legitimating power structures and modes of authority (Michael Aung-Thwin 1985a; Houtman 1990, 1999; Schober 1989, 1997, 2011; Spiro 1966, 1970).

sometimes contradictory value norms and debt relations. I argue that while these may appear to conflict with and contradict each other in powerful ways, these paradoxes are at the heart of social life and the very constitution of morality.

## **Brokering Morality according to the Buddhist ‘Moral Universe’**

Buddhism is a central feature of the sonic tapestry of everyday life in Hpa-an. Buddhist sermons are often the first thing you hear when you wake up in the morning, broadcast from monasteries, radios, televisions and more recently smartphones in people’s homes, businesses, restaurants and paddy fields. The morning chaos of Hpa-an’s marketplace is frequently punctuated by the sounds of lay ascetics in white robes, beating a large gong, in a call for donations to the local *sangha*. Booming from a megaphone, they remind passers-by of the importance of giving generously through *dāna*, a practice said to generate merit (K. *boung*) for this and future lives. Acts of *dāna*, they emphasise, contribute to the reproduction and flourishing of the Buddhist *sasāna*, the dissemination of the teachings of the Buddha. Buddhist charitable giving is thus a defining element of Plong Karen Buddhists understandings of what it means to pursue morality.

The importance of *dāna* is embedded in the teachings of the *Abhidhamma*, advanced Buddhist philosophy, which teaches the importance of the ‘Middle Way’ – that monks and laity alike should avoid the extremes of self-mortification and self-gratification through acts of *dāna* (Braun 2013). Articulated through the stories of exemplary figures such as Prince Vessantara and Anāthapindika,<sup>111</sup> it is widely believed that to give freely through *dāna* is a necessary condition for the arising of a higher consciousness leading to purification and nirvana, thereby ending the cycles of rebirth and suffering (see Jordt 2007: 102).<sup>112</sup> Making merit through acts of *dāna* is a key

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<sup>111</sup> This also includes Aśoka, the third century Indian emperor whose rule is understood as paradigmatic for Buddhist kingship; Anāthapindika, a wealthy merchant during the Buddha’s time; and Visākhā, a devoted housewife of the Buddha’s time.

<sup>112</sup> The *Abhidhamma* is one of the three groupings of the Tipitaka, the Theravāda Pāli canon. The *Abhidhamma* concerns the causality that governs the path to enlightenment.



aspect of Plong Karen social life, evident in the daily offerings made to the lines of saffron-robed monks that can be seen collecting alms throughout the city and surrounding villages every morning. In Myanmar, *dāna* is generally concerned with gifts to the Buddhist *sangha*, but it can refer to a wide range of good deeds which includes charity to the poor, giving food and hospitality (see Kumada 2004; Nash 1965: 116). For many people, however, the perpetuation of the *sasāna*, the Buddhist religion, through religious donations is of the highest importance.

When I first arrived in Hpa-an, I was struck by the constant donation drives of powerful abbots throughout the area and their various projects aimed at ‘building religion’ in Karen State (B. *thathana pyu*). Given the scholarship I had read on the conflict that had engulfed much of Karen State for so many years, I was equally surprised by the large sums of wealth donated to monasteries by local people as part of the thriving Buddhist merit economy. During my time living in Hpa-an, there seemed to be a new pagoda or monastery project in the district every few weeks, most of which were facilitated by charismatic monks and their associated powerful *daga*. Known in Plong Karen as *saboung kachar* (B. *ahlu shin*), these individuals are often praised widely for their immense generosity to the *sangha* and carry highly moralised depictions as a result of their ‘good’ works in the community.

Numerous scholars have remarked on the convergence of merit making rituals and social strata among Burmese people in Myanmar (Jordt 2007; Mendelson 1960, 1975; Nash 1965; Schober 1989, 2011; Spiro 1966, 1970). Following on from Spiro’s argument that “merit is power”, Juliane Schober (1989) contends that the monastic donation economy in Myanmar helps to entrench a hierarchy of social control between main lay donors and other community members who may not be as wealthy. As Schober (1989: 198) notes, “merit begets social power and status, which, in turn, beget more merit.” The complex logics which undergird the merit-power nexus among the Plong Karen was most visibly demonstrated to me after spending time with one powerful ex-military man and his family, Saw Eh Klein.

Saw Eh Klein grew up in a small Plong Karen village near Myaing Gyi Ngu on the Thanlwin River in a black area controlled by the Karen National Union. As a child

born in the 1970s, he was exposed to conflict from a young age as a result of the application of the Tatmadaw's 'Four Cuts' counter-insurgency operations. After his uncle was killed by the state military, it did not take much to persuade him to join the KNU, and he found himself serving as a soldier at a young age. After years fighting against the Tatmadaw in the dense jungles of the Dawna Mountain range, during which tensions between Christians and Buddhists in the KNU intensified, Saw Eh Klein was drawn into the 1994 Buddhist-led revolt against the KNU leadership.<sup>113</sup> Led by the highly charismatic U Thuzana, the Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw, Saw Eh Klein and other Buddhist KNU soldiers joined their Buddhist commanders to form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA).

As described in Chapter One, under the SLORC/SPDC government (1988-2010) the armed leaders of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) gained access to highly profitable systems of resource extraction as a result of the ceasefire negotiations with the Myanmar military government.<sup>114</sup> However, the majority of DKBA personnel received little support from their superiors and thus had to find their own sources of income among local populations, relying on extortion, taxation, gambling and the increasingly profitable sale of methamphetamines (South 2008, 2011). Labelled by Ashley South as "conflict entrepreneurs" (2011: 19), these hardened military men gained a reputation in some areas of Karen State as predatory and profit seeking (HRW 2016; KHRG 1997, 2002; Lang 2002; South 2008, 2011). However, the limitations on in-depth ethnographic research means little is known about how these figures are understood within their local communities and especially the powerful role they play as benefactors and religious patrons.

I met Saw Eh Klein through his daughter, Nan Eh Hti Paw, when she was 17 and in her first year at the state university in Hpa-an. Like many other young people I spent time with in Hpa-an, she explained to me that her family had faced many difficulties

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<sup>113</sup> In this chapter I have deliberately chosen not to include specific information regarding Saw Eh Klein's rank, status or battalion so as to ensure his anonymity.

<sup>114</sup> Natural resource exploitation has always played an important role in Myanmar's many ethnic conflicts, where timber, minerals and ores have helped to finance long-running ethnic insurgencies (L. Jones 2014b; Sadan 2016; Woods 2011).

when she was a child. She had vivid memories of going to the market with her mother as a three year old to sell cooked chicken eggs, fruits and other snacks. “Many days we didn’t come home with enough money to buy meat or vegetables, so we just ate rice and fish paste,” she told me. She recalled other families looking down on them for their poverty. However, in the mid-2000s, after her father moved back from the border where he was a soldier with the DKBA she told me that life began to get “easier”:

After that time, nobody pitied us anymore. My father was a DKBA soldier and after he returned from the border everyone respected us. After he came home I never had to go to the market to sell snacks again.

Unlike most of the students I met who drove a motorbike or caught a lift with someone else into Hpa-an, Nan Eh Hti Paw drove to university every day in her own car. Compared to some of the other students who often came to class dressed casually in loose cotton pants and a t-shirt, Nan Eh Hti Paw was always dressed immaculately in a matching ‘one set’ skirt and shirt, freshly ironed and tailored to her figure. Most of the young Karen women I met in Hpa-an only had a few matching sets of clothes which they saved for special occasions. Yet Nan Eh Hti Paw always seemed to be wearing something new with a corresponding pair of velvet slippers, studded with brightly coloured diamantes. She also went to the hairdressers regularly to have her hair coloured and was always across the latest diet fads and beauty products coming to Hpa-an from Bangkok, including herbal teas for weight loss and skin lotions for a whiter complexion. Nan Eh Hti Paw’s house was also grand compared to most other homes I spent time in during my time in Hpa-an, including air conditioning in the central bedrooms of the house – a luxury most other families I knew could not afford.

Saw Eh Klein was widely known for his immense wealth in Hpa-an, positioned locally as a boss or ‘wealthy man’ (K. *thae hti*).<sup>115</sup> In Saw Eh Klein’s community, the average household income was between 100,000-150,000 *kyat* (\$US80-120) per month and

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<sup>115</sup> *Thae hti* is likely a Plong Karen adaption of the Burmese term, *tha htae*, which is also used to refer to a ‘wealthy boss’.

was largely drawn from the bi-monthly remittances sent home by family members working in Thailand. In contrast a number of people connected to Saw Eh Klein and his wife claimed the family handled around 20 million *kyat* every week (\$US15,000), 400 times more than the average monthly income in the area.<sup>116</sup> Even though he was retired from active duty, Saw Eh Klein's status as a DKBA veteran was reinforced by the 1.5m length vinyl photograph of him in his fatigues that greeted me and other visitors at the entrance to his house, to the left of the household Buddhist shrine. His military service with the DKBA was thus a defining feature of how local people situated him within his community – as both a soldier of the Karen, but also importantly a protector and defender of Buddhism.

Saw Eh Klein's control over key elements of the local social, moral and financial economy, derived from his former status as a DKBA soldier, entrenched him and his family in a complex web of debt relations with people in his neighbourhood. Not only was he involved in the trade of methamphetamines locally, but he was also the main lottery dealer in his local town, in control of the popular two-digit (B. *hnit lone*) and three-digit (B. *thone lone*) schemes.<sup>117</sup> His income was said to increase during the dry season when '*ar wer deh*' festival celebrations commenced and armed commanders encouraged gambling and drug use as a way to raise income.<sup>118</sup> In villages and towns outside of Hpa-an *ar wer deh* festivals can go on for months at a time, and men, in particular, gamble heavily, with sums of money equalling a month's wages often changing hands swiftly.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> This figure is based on conversations with multiple households in the area and people that worked with him.

<sup>117</sup> Addiction to the two-digit (B. *hnit lone*) and three-digit (B. *thone lone*) lotteries is endemic in Hpa-an, as it is across Myanmar. The *hnit lone* draw is taken two times per day (12:30pm and 4:30pm) and the results are based on the closing indexes of the Thai stock exchange. *Thone lone* is based on the last three digits of the bimonthly Thai state lottery. For more info on the Thai lottery and its popularity in Myanmar see Rozenberg (2005) and Thawngmung (2011).

<sup>118</sup> *Ar Wer day* celebrations mark special occasions such as the building of a new pagoda and are marked with traditional Karen *done* dances and theatre performances.

<sup>119</sup> These celebrations are largely controlled by former DKBA commanders. They are an important means of reaffirming relationships and building rapport among community members, but they are widely perceived as taxing on local families – especially from the perspective of wives and children.

Saw Eh Klein was also one of the most powerful money lenders in his community. In Hpa-an, many peoples' lives are beset by unending cycles of debt and a constant struggle to make a living. The majority of families I met in Hpa-an faced high levels of indebtedness and many were constantly looking for new sources of income through various luck economies such as that of *hnit lone*. This permanent demand for cash left many families from his community connected to him through a deleterious relationship, either through debt, an addiction to gambling or the purchase of drugs. Saw Eh Klein controlled the integrated economy of gambling and debt in his neighbourhood, a role that cultivated complicated perceptions among local residents. As one middle aged Karen woman from a house nearby to his home explained to me, "If you spend time with Saw Eh Klein and his wife it is like quicksand. You will sink deeper and lose everything."

Saw Eh Klein was also connected to many of his neighbours through a patron-client like relationship typical of the 'strongman' tradition in Southeast Asia (Keyes 1990; Nishizaki 2011; J. C. Scott 1972, 1976; Thawngmung 2004). Most people referred to him as a wealthy boss, *thae hti* a term used to address those with immense wealth and often in positions of power. *Thae hti* are largely perceived in a negative way and one would never self-identify as a *thae hti*, but it is often used to refer to those who act as village patrons. Research among other Theravāda Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia demonstrates that economic relations between elites and non-elites is often structured by relational norms related to the importance of generosity, redistribution and other forms of appropriate behaviour within a local social context (Bowie 1998; Keyes 1990; Kirsch 1973, 1977; Nash 1965; F. E. Reynolds 1989). Despite the socially pernicious activities which he brokered and engaged, dynamics of moral obligation were central to Saw Eh Klein's perception among local people.

Many residents in Saw Eh Klein's community had a story about he had helped support them in one situation or another. Like other forms of exchange relations within the village, the deleterious debt relationship Saw Eh Klein had with local friends and neighbours came with a high degree of social responsibility. Saw Eh Klein played a notable role in his community, sponsoring Karen festivals such as the wrist tying

ceremony,<sup>120</sup> as well as the local Karen traditional dance troupe. He was also widely known for giving sizable donations when people faced difficulties of various kinds. For example, one woman explained to me how grateful she was when her husband died to have his support to help pay for funeral costs. Another woman told me that he had helped support her husband's medical costs when he had a motorcycle accident. Another family told me that Saw Eh Klein and his wife had donated substantial sums for building roads and other amenities in various parts of their community. However, whenever his name came up in conversations with local people, he was most commonly praised for his large acts of *dāna*, generosity, in the name of propagating Buddhism.

Most people I met spoke of Saw Eh Klein with deep respect, referencing the immense and lavish donations to various monks and monasteries for which he had become renowned. In Hpa-an, Saw Eh Klein and his wife were the major patrons, *daga* of several powerful abbots. His family's everyday acts of *dāna* was visible in their daily feeding of monks on the morning alms run, but most evident in the large sums of money they donated at Buddhist festivals and in the upkeep of local religious monuments.<sup>121</sup> At most major Buddhist celebrations I went to nearby to Hpa-an they were often invited as a distinguished guest of the relevant abbot – brought up on a raised platform in front of others to receive a special blessing. Special occasions in their household were also marked by offering a donation to a powerful monk or by inviting a group of monks to their home for a meal, publicised and shared widely through word of mouth and on Facebook. One Karen aunty extolled to me: “Saw Eh Klein does so many good and meritorious things. He has a lot of benevolence (B. *sedāna shi deh*).” Despite his central role in a socially detrimental economy of addiction and debt, the status of Saw Eh Klein and his family was also reinforced by their proximity to Buddhist moral authorities. This offers an insight into the

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<sup>120</sup> The Karen wrist tying ceremony occurs annually during the lunar month of *Wagaung*, around August. Its meaning and significance will be discussed in Chapter Six.

<sup>121</sup> In Hpa-an the names of donors and the amounts of money they give are displayed on lists in every monastery and often announced over loud speakers.

importance of the ‘merit-power’ nexus in the post-conflict context of southeast Myanmar.

## **The ‘Merit-Power’ Nexus: Power, Charisma and Parami**

The connection between Saw Eh Klein and powerful monks was most visibly demonstrated one evening when they invited me to attend a sermon of U Thuzana, the Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw in a small town outside of Hpa-an. As described in Chapter One, since the early 1990s U Thuzana has been one of the most charismatic monastic authorities in Karen State and he is highly regarded in Hpa-an District in particular. As the ailing monk spends much of his time on dialysis in a Thai hospital in Bangkok, his visits to Myaing Gyi Ngu had become quite rare by the time of my fieldwork.<sup>122</sup> As a result, Saw Eh Klein and his wife were eager to introduce me to him when he visited the area in early 2016. Having heard so much about U Thuzana and his relationship with Saw Eh Klein by this stage, I was equally keen to see what the relationship between the two powerful moral authorities was like.

To show my respect whilst meeting U Thuzana, Saw Eh Klein’s daughter asked that I wear a brown coloured skirt and white shirt, commonly associated with female lay Buddhist ascetic practice in Myanmar. I arrived on my motorbike to their house dressed as requested and they asked that I come inside to pin up my hair, dishevelled from the motorbike helmet, and also to apply *thanaka* on my cheeks, a yellow paste made from ground tree bark. Saw Eh Klein’s daughter explained to me that I was very fortunate to meet with U Thuzana: “You have to have *parami*, moral virtue, to be able to meet with a powerful monk like U Thuzana and have the opportunity to offer him religious gifts (K. *boung*; B: *ahlu*). This is a very rare chance.” *Parami* (P. *pāramī*) is a Burmese word used commonly among Plong Karen Buddhists to refer to one’s virtue or aptitude towards reaching enlightenment. Matthew Walton (2016: 50) notes:

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<sup>122</sup> U Thuzana spends most of his time living in Bangkok, for specialised medical care, but was making a special visit to this region of Karen state in the lead up to the Buddhist New Year.

Burmese use the word *parami* in an everyday sense to refer to talent or ability, but it carries a specifically Buddhist meaning of ‘acquired virtue.’ The ten principle virtues are charity, morality, renunciation, knowledge, effort, honesty, forbearance, loving-kindness, equanimity, and resolution... While one’s present circumstances are always to some degree the result of past actions, development of *parami* is explicitly connected to one’s circumstances with regard to progress towards nibbana.

It is used in similar ways among Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an. Indeed, according to Saw Eh Klein’s daughter, the chance to meet U Thuzana and offer him a donation implied significant progress towards attaining *parami*.

On our way to meet with U Thuzana the sun was setting behind us, illuminating in a warm orange glow the steps up to the central monastic hall where he lay in front of a large crowd of Karen devotees. The air was still and warm and Saw Eh Klein, who had gone ahead of us to welcome the monk, knelt beside U Thuzana fanning his body with a maroon coloured velvet fan as he lay on his back propped up by a pillow, breathing heavily in and out of a plastic tube through his nose which was connected to an oxygen tank. Alongside him, Saw Eh Klein took turns with a group of four other Karen men to massage his arms and legs. A Thai monk in an orange robe also stood to the left of U Thuzana. Every now and again he would interrupt the line of devout followers who were offering the Sayadaw donations to provide him a ritual healing – moving his hands over his body whilst whispering Pāli mantras. With the constant shuffling of people to the front to pay their respects to him, the men massaging his legs and orange robed Thai monk nearby it was hard not feel captivated by his presence. As each person presented themselves to him, alongside small to large wads of cash, he placed his hand on their head and repeated in Pāli “Have a peaceful life, have a successful life and may the bad things stay away from you – *sadu sadu sadu*.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Monks will say in Pāli ‘*sadu*’ three times as a way of venerating the goodness of lay donors. This is also quite popular among lay people, who say ‘*thadu*’ three times to exclaim when other have performed meritorious deeds.



Nan Eh Hti Paw, her mother and I knelt in front of U Thuzana keeping our heads bowed low, our legs carefully folded behind us and our hands together in prayer formation, while others from the town and surrounding villages came in to pay their respects shuffling forward one by one on their knees to offer a donation. Bedecked in beautifully woven Karen clothes and a thick gold chain with an amulet that hung around her neck, Nan Eh Hti Paw's mother stood out among the other religious goers who wore the simple colours of brown and white. She and Nan Eh Hti Paw were warmly greeted by U Thuzana, who after handing over a thick wad of 10,000 *kyat* notes (c. US\$8 each) praised them for their good works and benevolent mind. He chatted with them about their lives, joking with Saw Eh Klein about people's addiction to the two digit lottery, *hnit lone*, of whom Saw Eh Klein was the major broker in the community.

Afterwards, we moved down to a large audience hall where a large group of Plong Karen men, women and children had gathered to hear his sermon. Unable to walk due to his ailing health, U Thuzana was picked up and carried downstairs by Saw Eh Klein and his other aides between the many rows of men, women and children waiting to hear him speak. While the other aides left to sit down, Saw Eh Klein remained beside him, like a personal bodyguard – reinforcing both his proximity to the venerable monk as his role as the primary *daga*, close benefactor, in the community but also his former status as a DKBA soldier. U Thuzana took his place on a large teak wooden armchair at the front of the room on a raised platform overlooking the hall. He looked small and fragile in the large wooden throne-like chair, but his voice was strong and commanding in the wide hall.

U Thuzana gave the audience a lengthy sermon, urging the people there not to lead easy and corrupt lives but to keep *thila*, moral discipline, and to give generously through acts of *dāna*. He talked about the importance of being vegetarian and how meritorious works can help each and every individual end suffering in this and next lives. Changing his tone slightly towards the end of the sermon, he again joked about the practice of *hnit lone* gambling and its ubiquity among Plong Karen in the surrounding area.

It is good that so many Karen people play *hnit lone*! Now that I am old, I must strengthen my mission to make Karen State a Buddhist land by building as many pagodas as possible.

Everybody laughed at the connect the abbot made between his mortality, the strengthening of Buddhism and their daily habit of two-digit gambling. Gesturing toward Saw Eh Klein who stood next to him, he noted, “You can all make merit if you help to ‘make religion’ (B. *thathana pyu*).” And with that he proceeded to give the audience hall a clue for the numbers for the next day’s lottery.<sup>124</sup> Finishing his sermon with a vocal recitation seen to infuse the devotees with power (B. *theidki tin*), U Thuzana was picked up by Saw Eh Klein and several of his other close aides and taken to a glistening, sea-green Maserati car waiting at the entrance to the hall and returned to his monastery in Myaing Gyi Ngu to spend the night.

After U Thuzana gave the lottery numbers, everyone in the room picked up their phones quickly, carefully writing down what he had said, and starting to decipher what it might mean. Nan Eh Hti Paw turned to me and whispered excitedly that the monk had generously given them the winning number, “we just need to know how to read his message” she explained. According to the logic of the lottery practices, the possibility of a monk accurately predicting a winning lottery number depends on his spiritual accomplishment. “Because U Thuzana meditates a lot, he is able to see the correct numbers in his dreams,” she explained. In turn, the gifts made to a powerful monk are thought to bring great merit to the donor. However, several interpretations of the lottery numbers were possible and one’s ability to decipher the complex codes from a monk depends on knowledge of enumerations bound in Buddhist terminology, numerology and letters.<sup>125</sup> According to Nan Eh Hti Paw’s mother, deciphering the coded numbers correctly also depended on your fate or karma (K. *khoun*), the sum

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<sup>124</sup> U Thuzana has gained a strong reputation around Hpa-an district for predicting the last three winning numbers of the Thai lottery. Through his predictions he has secured a clientele of generous donors who have financed his many religious buildings projects partly due to their winnings.

<sup>125</sup> See Rozenberg’s (2005) account of these practises for a more in-depth discussion of the complex deciphering methods related to the lottery.

of all good and bad actions committed in past and present lives. In addition, she noted “If you are lucky then you will see the numbers clearly.”

As the main *daga* (B. close benefactor) of U Thuzana in this community, Saw Eh Klein’s moral authority that night was reinforced by his physical proximity to the great monk at the time. Known for making very large donations through the *hnit lone* economy which he controlled, his role in ‘building Buddhism’ (B. *thathana pyu*), was also confirmed to other lay members of the community assembled in the monastic hall. However, the logics of the Buddhist karmic theory do not imply an innate ethical self for those who make large donations. Rather, as was explained to me in multiple conversations with both lay and monastic authorities, according to the logic of karma, one’s moral subjectivity is based on the sum of all deeds performed in both this and previous lives (see Keyes and Daniel 1983; Spiro 1970; Tambiah 1970).

In Myanmar this is helpfully demonstrated by the figure of *Pu htu zin* (P. *puthujjana*) who is seen to be representative of human nature at its base – caught up in a world of ignorance, desire and illusion (Walton 2016: 72-6). According to Theravāda Buddhist thought, the individual is thought to be exposed to daily tensions between Buddhist truths and surrendering to their own desires. Among Buddhists in Myanmar humans are all thought to behave like *Pu htu zin* in one form or another until they reach enlightenment. *Pu htu zin* is neither good nor evil, but rather a reflection of what is thought to be a fundamental part of human existence. Fundamental to being a Buddhist then is the importance of self-control over one’s desires – the cultivation of the self as a moral agent through everyday acts which mitigate those desires (see also Tannenbaum 1995; Walton 2016: 41).

Nan Eh Hti Paw explained that there are a number of actions that can help improve one’s spiritual fate. For example, she noted that those who prostrated to the Buddha in the early morning at the same time that monks wake up to pray will receive blessings and have an auspicious day. Nan Eh Hti Paw explained that if you want a peaceful and successful life you must pay homage to the Buddha often and be devoted to the Buddha’s teachings.

It is very difficult to avoid bad things. There are many things we should not do according to the *dhamma*. So you should try to overcome this through good action, speech and thought every day. For example, if we always do *dāna*, Buddhist charitable giving, then we can try to balance it out. If we are Buddhist then we should always do *dāna*. By giving generously with ‘clean and pure’ intentions, *saydana*, we can cultivate a mental state characterised by a lessening attachment to material objects and gain merit.”<sup>126</sup>

She told me that acts of *dāna* are also considered an expression of one’s ‘loving kindness’ (P. *metta*) and compassion and religious donations are viewed as especially efficacious for the acquisition of merit. Saw Eh Klein, further reiterated this to me. “We should always do *dāna*. If we do not we can build pride and greed and demerit (B. *akutho*; P. *akusala*).” In addition, Nan Eh Hti Paw emphasised the importance of other everyday acts essential to the cultivation of morality, including the reciting the *awgatha* prayer every morning. Burmese scholar Pe Maung Tin (1964) refers to *awgatha* as the ‘Buddhist Common prayer’, a ritual which many Buddhists in Myanmar conduct as part of their daily routine after paying homage to the Three Gems – the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *sangha*. Nan Eh Htee Paw explained that reciting the *awgatha* prayer demonstrated one’s devotion to the Buddha and the *dhamma*: “If we say this prayer we can show our commitment to the Buddha and to proper moral conduct.” Matthew Walton (2012: 38) recounts similar dynamics among interlocutors in Yangon, who saw reciting the *awgatha* as “express[ing] the wish that her devotion may deliver her from a long list of hindrances and states of suffering and that she may attain enlightenment quickly.”<sup>127</sup> During my time with Nan Eh Hti Paw and her

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<sup>126</sup> For Myanmar Buddhists *saydāna* (P: *cetanā*) refers to the pure intention of the donor in wanting to give to others freely. If the donor does not have *saydāna* then it is thought that you do not acquire merit from the act of giving. These conditions derive from the belief that all mental and physical phenomena are impermanent and that we must not develop an undue attachment to material wealth, sensory cravings and possessions. Thus, the more that is accumulated and then given away freely, the more a person can cultivate a mentality of detachment from worldly possessions and ties. See Kumada (2004) for a more comprehensive examination of the concept and practice of *dāna* under SLORC/SPDC rule.

<sup>127</sup> As Walton (2012: 38) recounts, the *awgatha* lists a number practices that one should avoid and the potential consequences of such actions, and also extends the scope of moral conduct to include “appropriate thought and words” in addition to actions.

parents, everyday ritual practices such as reciting the *awgatha* sometimes felt like a cleansing of the soul —designed to protect them from the immorality inherent in the many illicit economic practices in which they were engaged. Despite the temporal and spatial proximity of what may be deemed ‘moral’ practices and ‘immoral’ activities, the perception of their morality by fellow Plong Karen Buddhists was far more ambiguous however, than such black or white binaries allow.

In considering Plong Karen understandings of morality in relation to the merit-power nexus, it is important to keep in mind the capacity for intense moral critique. Despite Saw Eh Klein’s generous donations to the *sangha*, there was a great deal of moral scepticism directed towards his business-activities and lifestyle. While Saw Eh Klein was highly regarded for his immense generosity to the *sangha*, his moral and social status was often questioned through the lens of his many actions which positioned his daily economic practices as incommensurate with broader Plong Karen moral ideals. Indeed, in understanding everyday ethics among the Karen, it is important not to exaggerate the significance of Buddhist ethical frameworks related to merit-making in how people understand and pursue morality. To view Saw Eh Klein’s moral status within the community purely through the merit-power nexus ignores the way people use different frameworks of “moral reasoning” (Sykes 2012) to situate those around them. Furthermore, as I demonstrate in the next section, Plong Karen morality is not simply the pursuit of individual ethical selves *vis a vis* the logics of the Buddhist “moral universe” (Walton 2016). The performance of morality is not only about being a good Buddhist, but also embedded in other ethical frameworks which delineate a particular understanding of Karen personhood and subjectivity. These ambiguities were evident in many interactions and stories which critiqued the ‘Karen-ness’ of Saw Eh Klein and his family and his accumulation of “unclean” wealth.

## **Morality without Faith? Keeping *Thout Kyar* as a Karen Ideal**

One day in the late summer of 2016 I was speaking to a Karen Grandmother, Hpi Ha Mya, on a bamboo mat under her wooden house. As we whiled away the hours plating cotton threads she would give to her friends who made Karen clothing, I began to feel

a little faint. Hpi Ha Mya immediately offered me water and a mat on which to rest and began to enquire about my health. I told her that I thought I might still be getting used to the heat of Hpa-an as I'd been sleeping badly recently and had a few strange dreams. She moved closer to me and quietly warned that I needed to be careful spending time with Saw Eh Klein and his daughter. Through a full mouth of deep red juice from the betel nut she had been chewing she remarked, "If you make "dirty money" (B. *ma than shin te paik san*) bad things can happen to you and your family." In line with this, if I ate from bad money then bad things could also happen to me. "*Ma than shin te paik san*, unclean money – it is not Plong Karen culture." Hpi Ha Mya explained to me that the accumulation of unclean money was not Plong Karen culture. Rather, engaging in morally questionable activities such as money lending and profiting from the addiction of others was an economic practice brought by outsiders – namely Burmese – and embedded in values that were not consonant with Karen social customs and beliefs. "That's why you have a headache and are having strange dreams" she told me matter-of-factly. She shook her head, getting up slowly to move to the corner where she spat out the thick red betel juice. Wiping her mouth, she reminded me how Saw Eh Klein's mother-in-law had severe back problems and was constantly in pain.: "You see, even though his mother-in law is a good Karen woman and eats vegetarian, even she cannot avoid the unclean money."

I felt surprised by Hpi Ha Mya's reflections at the time, as most people I had spent time with from his neighbourhood seemed to regard Saw Eh Klein, constantly praising his various works in the local community. From Hpi Ha Mya's perspective, however, Saw Eh Klein's business practices were not in line with Plong Karen cultural ethics which were deeply embedded in subsistence agricultural production. Referring to the traditional practice of paddy cultivation core to much of the local Plong Karen cosmology, Grandmother Hpi Ha Mya, explained to me that keeping faithful, *thout kyar*, and reciprocity defined was it was to be Plong. In the past, Hpi Ha Mya recounted, each household was considered an independent productive unit that produced and consumed its own rice. However, there was also a lot of inter-household cooperation in labour exchange during the planting and harvest seasons. "We believe that only the rice we get from the sweat of our own brow by working together with

*thout kyar* tastes delicious. When we plant and cut the fields together we have to have *thout kyar*” she explained.

The moral identity of Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an draw many symbolic resources from the geography of the lowland river plain and flood water paddy production. While the idyllic representation of a past time embedded in paddy production and subsistence living is far removed from the reality of most people’s lives in contemporary Hpa-an, moral frameworks embedded in subsistence production still hold value and are often spoken about in conversations with Plong Karen elders and young people alike. In contrast to the ethics embedded in paddy production Grandmother Hpi Ha Mya told me: “Nowadays many people are very greedy (K. *ser ner gah*) and their mindset is dirty (K. *thar gyi gya*).” For Grandmother Hpi Ha Mya people’s moral dirtiness or disloyalty derived from the fact that their economic practices were not consistent with the Plong Karen moral logic of keeping *thout kyar*. Indeed, she told me, “Many Karen have lost *thout kyar*.”

In helping to explain *thout kyar*, Grandmother Hpi Ha Mya related a story to me of Hpi Bu Yaw. Hpi Bu Yaw is regarded among both Plong and S’gaw Karen communities as the guardian spirit of rice. Those that still believe in her power make a ritual sacrifice in her honour every year to ensure the prosperity of the harvest. It was told to me that during a great famine, Hpi Bu Yaw was helped by two poor orphan children when she was begging beside the road during a famine. Rather than turn away from her like the other villagers did, the two orphan children cooked her their last rice, bathed and cared for her as best they could, “because they had *thout kyar*.” Unbeknown to the children at the time, Hpi Bu Yaw was a powerful Karen deity who used her powers to fill their orphans’ storehouse with rice and opened the heavens to create good weather for their fields. “If we keep faithful, *thout kyar*, to one another like these children did for Grandmother Hpi Bu Yaw,” Hpi Ha Mya explained to me, “then we will never have any problems.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> There are various iterations of this story in literature written on the Karen (eg. Gilmore 1911; Hayami 2004; Kunstadter 1967; Marshall 1922, 1945; Smeaton 1887).

Singing an oral poem (K. *hta kho*), she related that all Karen people knew that they must love and look after one another through keeping *thout kyar*: “We do not fight and do not cause problems for one another. Because, we are *plong* (Plong). We help each other with *thout kyar*. Because we are *plong*.” Grandmother Hpi Ha Mya’s explanation of faithfulness and solidarity thus referenced larger Karen moral notions of the importance of keeping harmonious relations. Existing above and beyond the cosmological imaginary of Plong Karen Buddhism was thus, for Grandmother Hpi and many others, a larger Karen moral ideal of reciprocity and obligation.

*Thout kyar* is an adjective directly translated in English as ‘faithful’. As used by Plong Karen, however, it is much more encompassing term enlisted to refer to a particular Karen ethic which people describe as fundamental to living as a morally coterminous life. Grandmother Hpi Ha Mya argued that to be faithful, *thout kyar*, is core to Plong Karen understandings of morality and ways of being. *Thout kyar* was often described as the most essential moral trait for Karen personhood and seen by both young and old people alike as the key to people’s understandings of each other as good or ethically coterminous beings. To be faithful, in this understanding, is to live simply and honestly, without pride and greed and to value harmonious relations, over and above individual gain. It is also used to refer to Karen people’s ethics of care, hospitality and kindness to others, to be ‘faithful’ to oneself and one’s community as an ethical being. Rather than living as an autonomous individual, to be *thout kyar* is to live as a relational being embedded in the concerns of the family and community – what anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1988) terms a ‘dividual’, someone who is a composite of the larger social whole. Other moral qualities important to Plong Karen Buddhists include the importance of humility, keeping harmonious relationships, generosity to others, hospitality to strangers and the importance of care and respect for elders. Yet *thout kyar* was a common and central element of everyday conversations I had with Plong Karen, especially when reflecting on the power and authority of wealthy individuals like Saw Eh Klein.

A university student in Saw Eh Klein’s village further elaborated on Hpi Ha Mya’s understanding of faithfulness. Like Grandmother Hpi Ha Mya, he explained to me that among Karen people money earned from hard, physical labour in the rice fields



cultivates a disposition towards faithfulness. Hpa-an sits in a lowland river valley, a place of abundant rice fields and rivers teeming with fish. For a long time, agriculture was the mainstay of Plong Karen family sustenance and income. Unlike ‘unclean money’, he explained that the traditional way of life for Plong Karen revolved around economic practices and social exchange relations tied to rice production. These practices are inherently communal and thus reproduce the ethic of *thout kyar*. He explained that Plong Karen believe that working on the land lends itself to being faithful both to yourself as a moral being and to others around you. In this sense, the production of rice is seen as both an honest form of human labour, as well as nourishment which sustains the community. According to this framework, he explained, people respected Saw Eh Klein for his immense generosity to various powerful monks and believed he had good merit, but their perception of him in relation to Karen moral ideals were more complex. He noted, “We always hear from our elders that if you make unclean money, then you can have a lot of problems (B. *doukkha bae deh*). It is like that for Saw Eh Klein.”

The notion that money earned from illicit or socially deleterious practices and businesses is in some ways dangerous and inauspicious is not unique to the Karen. Numerous ethnographies document the various ways in which the conditions in which money is earned shapes its moral evaluation and subsequent circulation (Gamburd 2004; Graeber 1996, 2001; M. M. High 2013; Parry and Bloch 1989). Mette High’s examination of the gold mining industry in Mongolia vividly describes the emerging regimes of value and power connected to what is seen by many as “polluted money” (M. M. High 2013: 676). She argues that what unsettles local Mongolian people about wealth accumulated *vis a vis* the extractive economy is the “symbolic connotations that can affect the kinds of exchange relations” in which it takes part (M. M. High 2013: 676). Similarly, for many in the Karen community that I spoke to, unclean work stands in contradistinction to Plong Karen conceptualisations of everyday ethics and, in particular, the importance of keeping ‘faithful’ *thout kyar* – not simply to yourself, but also to your community.

In considering these understandings of moral action, one might suggest, alongside Christopher Gregory (1980, 1982) that the gift economy of the village is the opposite

of commodity exchange and that these two systems work in logically opposite ways.<sup>129</sup> Gregory argues that in contrast to commodity-debts where the lender seeks to maximise profits, the gift-debt is one in which the giver seeks to establish long-term relations of trust and overwhelm the recipient with generosity (see also Godelier 1986 [1982]). Money that is earned from unclean practices, including gambling, selling illicit substances and debt collection, is instead thought to produce bad effects, which contravene the broader Karen moral ideal of keeping *thout kyar*.

Yet, such analytical distinctions between different kinds of exchange relations cannot be made when the two are so intricately implicated in each other's constitution and reproduction. Indeed, Plong Karen do not understand social relations in such black and white terms. Just like Jane Guyer (2012: 492) has pointed out in her research on obligation and debt responsibility in west Africa, the separation between gift and debt relations is inherently ambiguous, since the "play of time in the human life span... lies squarely at the centre of a terrain where gift and debt meet, a terrain that is traversed ambiguously by 'obligation' and its reciprocal 'responsibility', along with 'promise' and 'credit'." Debt instead should be understood as an open-ended temporality among many Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an, which plays on people's ethic of generosity and faithfulness to each other, *thout kyar*, such that everyone is embedded in multiple circuits of gift and debt relations. One is not simply indebted to powerful men like Saw Eh Klein, but other family, friends and neighbours such that "everything intermingles" within these debt relations to generate complex and multifaceted social bonds (Mauss 1970: 3).

Despite his immense wealth and deleterious relations of debt with people throughout his community, Saw Eh Klein and his family were deeply embedded in the social and community life of their village. Although the community they lived in is quite a large and busy trading town, Plong Karen I spoke to in urban areas often referred to smaller areas as their 'village' (K. *da woun*). These were not based on formal government

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<sup>129</sup> Gregory argues that gifts belong to, and reproduce, "the social conditions of the reproduction of *people*" within a kinship based social order while commodities are "the social conditions of the reproduction of *things*" in a class-based division of labour (1980: 641, original emphasis).

divisions, but rather on deep and enduring social ties of interdependency and ‘gift’ exchange (Mauss 1970).<sup>130</sup> Much of life in Saw Eh Klein’s village was spent in proximity to one’s neighbours, eating together, laughing together, telling stories and jokes. People from their community explained to me that kin relations between families run deep within household clusters, where children grow up with often more than ten sets of grandparents who each admonish them and guide them as their own. In a system of gift giving that underpins social life and village solidarity, families often share excess produce with each other on a daily basis. One does not need to call ahead when visiting or feel any sense of self-consciousness when asking for favours.

When I visited Saw Eh Klein’s house, people from the community were often visiting. These guests were constantly plied with drinks and snacks and always asked to join for a meal. Saw Eh Klein’s family also hosted various festivals or celebrations at their house, to which they invited many members of the local community – including many of their regular, and often highly indebted, customers. Walking down the pot-holed road between houses with Saw Eh Klein’s daughter, it was hard not to stop and talk with friends or neighbours and leave without invitations for tea, meals or a bagful of freshly picked fruit from household trees. During Karen ritual festivals or Buddhist ceremonies, people from each of the households came together to cook and prepare food. Deep social bonds were also generated as people pounded chillies, garlic and onions, preparing food for local festivals and Buddhist celebrations. They attended the same monasteries and meditated together. At the more quotidian experience of everyday life, they also came together at multiple times during the day to share time, sit, eat and talk together.

One uncle from Saw Eh Klein’s street told me that he liked to spend time with Saw Eh Klein because he was funny and always shared his betel nut. “Even though he is rich, he is not proud,” he explained. Saw Eh Klein was always dressed casually in a t-shirt and Karen *lungyi* and spent many of his days by the river fishing with other men

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<sup>130</sup> This is based on an endless sequence of dyadic exchanges which are in the long term balanced rather than based on a certainty of immediate reciprocation.

from the community. His wife was also well-liked in the community, for her warmth, good nature and for her various social works she was involved in locally. Young men and women referred to them respectfully as aunt and uncle in Karen, *gha u* and *moung kyaw*, and their two children were popular among their peers. When I asked if they were good people, many people also spoke about their morality in reference to a shared ethos of community and the importance of *thout kyar*. “Even though they have a lot of money, they always look after people from our village,” one aunty explained. “Because they are Plong, they have *thout kyar*.”

Examining the moral economy of ‘unclean’ wealth through the lens of *thout kyar* helps to expose the contradictory system of values and relationships which underpin everyday Plong Karen social organisation in the changing post-conflict landscape of southeast Myanmar. On the one hand, people’s lives are embedded in long-term exchange relations based on reciprocal relations that generate socially binding long-term relations of trust, sentiment and mutuality between people and define the ideals and ethical parameters of moral personhood. On the other hand, ‘unclean’ monetary practices are a manifestation of a short-term cycle of exchange infused with immorality, impersonality, zero-sum relations and ultimately a lack of reciprocity. As the case of Saw Eh Klein demonstrates, these exchange relationships cannot be empirically examined as separate systems which sit in contradiction to each other. Rather, they are two inter-connected sides of the same Plong Karen socio-moral universe which simultaneously produces and mitigates risk and precarity while enlisting culturally valued moral ideals.

Holly High’s work on the contradictory orientations of Laos people’s relationship with the state and how this plays out in social life is useful here. While the state portrays itself and is understood to be a caring and nurturing provider of goods and services to escape poverty, it is also experienced as extractive, corrupt and non-reciprocal. Indeed, like High observes in southern Laos, contradictions are at the heart of Plong Karen rural sociality and the way they know and understand what it means to pursue morality. To see powerful Karen figures like Saw Eh Klein through the narrow dichotomy of an extractive relationship overlooks the way he is embedded in the mutual coproduction of community life. The accumulation of ‘unclean wealth’ among

Karen Buddhists does not necessarily imply an innate immoral self. Rather, as the rest of this thesis demonstrates, the distinction between a moral and immoral self is much messier in reality and is intimately tied to self and external judgements of how daily practice coheres with broader moral ideals.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored how considerable scope emerges for negotiation between the concerns of moral and social capital among Plong Karen in Hpa-an. The accumulation of illicit forms of wealth through gambling or selling drugs gives rise to a distinct form of monetary wealth, a wealth that has elaborate symbolic connotations that can affect the kinds of exchange relations in which it takes place. This moral logic both constrains and enables agency for different people at different levels. On the one hand, the social logic of Buddhist merit making can be used to condone the exploitative practices of powerful lay men. On the other hand, the social ethic of *thout kyar* and the importance of keeping ‘faithful’ to your community complicates the picture of the ‘merit-power’ nexus.

The questions I have raised in this chapter are indicative of the kinds of ethical debates taking place in Plong Karen households and communities in Hpa-an. The immense wealth of powerful men like Saw Eh Klein was a constant topic of conversation and debate in Hpa-an. Despite the avowed respect many of these powerful figures assume because of their generosity and proximity to powerful monks, there is a distinct sense of ambivalence towards these powerful men because of their connection with ‘unclean’ regimes of wealth. This is not simply because of the coercive power embedded in their authority, but because of the way extractive debt relations are figured within Plong Karen social ethics and the everyday importance of maintaining *thout kyar*.

As I came to understand, the logics of Plong Karen Buddhist frameworks of morality require an intentional and agentive commitment to the practice and performance of everyday ethics. This can be enacted through highly ostentatious displays of generosity to the *sangha*, but it is also fundamentally located in the ethics of everyday

social relations – of keeping one’s *thout kyar*, faithfulness, to both the community and the self. Indeed, the negative comments I heard directed towards the accumulation of so-called “unclean money” was often quickly contrasted with the high praise of Saw Eh Klein as a powerful *daga*, religious benefactor. This was also further complicated by his relationship with the community and the way he was embedded in both positive and deleterious ‘gift’ relations. Morality for the Karen, like understandings of *thout kyar*, is a verb, an action word – something that is to enacted and performed in multiple and everyday ways. While one’s morality is always connected to one’s past actions *vis a vis* the logics of karma, it is also explicitly grounded in Plong Karen social ethics and how one lives, moves and inhabits the world.

The discourse of ‘unclean money’ and *thout kyar* also raises questions central to the anthropological study of morality and ethics and the importance of recognising the contradictions in people’s everyday ethical frameworks. In the next chapter I examine how rapid changes to Plong Karen society brought about by national-level political reform and successive ceasefire are leading people to reinterpret and disrupt the moral ideals that have formed the basis of Karen society in a smaller and slower world. Focusing on a Karen Buddhist esoteric religious movement nearby to Hpa-an I explore how a moment of perceived moral crisis has encouraged extraordinary ethical performances that satisfy the expectations and ideals of both Buddhist and Karen conceptions of morality. I show that amongst this tight-knit religious community, whilst their understandings of morality may appear coherent, it is not always the case.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Cultivating Morality: Hpu Takit's Karen and the Power of Moral Discipline

About fifty kilometres southwest of Hpa-an, in a remote area towards the small city of Kawgareik, an enormous gateway marks the entrance to what is titled, 'Plong Nationality Village' (K. *Plong seuh pu dawun*). Driving down the small dirt road off the main Asia Highway towards the village, one encounters a row of bamboo and thatch houses with palm leaf rooves, each with a bamboo flagpole out the front tied with a Karen flag and woven shirt, signalling the entrance to a sacred Karen domain. On the top of the surrounding hills, a large statue of a Karen *nat* spirit also signals the entrance to what is an enchanted moral sphere led by the and self-proclaimed Karen King and lord, Hpu Takit, and his community of lay Karen worshippers.



Figure 7: The entrance to Hpu Takit's village. Photo by author.

As visitors drive towards the village, time seems to slow down as they come upon people ambling slowly towards the central religious complex of the charismatic leader. At first glimpse, it appears to resemble an old, wooden, monastery compound. However, stepping inside this structure it doesn't take long to notice that many of the regular markers of monastic buildings, such as images depicting scenes from the pantheon of Buddha Gotama's 547 lives prior to his awakening (the *Jataka*), are absent from the walls. Images and statues of the Buddha are also missing, as are the bodies of monks, young and old, in their saffron coloured robes. Instead, a group of older Karen men, dressed in handwoven Karen *longyis* and shirts sit reciting mantras in front a small alter dedicated to their spiritual leader and King Hpu Takit, clicking through a string of 108 wooden beads hanging around their necks.

This community of people form part of a distinctively ascetic Buddhist Plong Karen movement, based on the utopian moral vision espoused by its leader, Hpu Takit. In Hpu Takit's village, life is guided by the 'The Middle Way', the means of breaking out of the cycle of change, suffering and false attachment to ego as taught by the Buddha, with a particular emphasis on the practice of *thila* (P. *sīla*), moral discipline, as well as the everyday active restoration of a distinctly Plong Karen cultural sphere. Just as Paul Cohen describes of the Yuan 'holy man' tradition in Thailand (T. *ton bun*), this can be perceived as a philosophy of moral regeneration and "Buddhist revivalism" which "proclaims the supremacy of Buddhist morality" over other ethical codes (P. Cohen 2001: 227). In addition, there is a strong emphasis on the need to revitalise Karen traditions, language, rituals and customs which they actively celebrate and claim to protect from the changing, globalising outside world.

The Karen have a long tradition of following charismatic religious leaders which dates back to before the colonial period (Gravers 2001, 2012b; Hayami 2000; P. Hinton 1979; Keyes 1977b; Stern 1968b).<sup>131</sup> As described in Chapter One, early colonial and missionary accounts vividly document the power of visionary monks in the Thanlwin (Salween) valley and their claims to unite the Karen based on the myth of the coming

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<sup>131</sup> The most well-known of these are the Leke and Telekhon religious movements (see P. Hinton 1979; Keyes 1977b; Stern 1968b; Womack 2005).



Buddha, *Arimetteyya* (Gravers 2001; Marshall 1922; F. Mason 1843). It is believed that prior to the arrival of the fifth and final Buddha, *Arimetteyya*, the world will see a period of intense social, economic and political disorder or an apocalyptic transformation. After the arrival of *Arimetteyya* all virtuous beings who are exposed to the *dhamma*, the Buddha's teachings, and practice *thila* (P. *sīla*), moral discipline, will instantaneously become enlightened and attain nirvana in a new utopian and harmonious order.<sup>132</sup>

Rather than interpreting Hpu Takit's project as simply a millenarian expression of deeply ingrained Karen resistance to the state as earlier scholarship tends to suggest (eg. Hayami 2000; Hayami 2011; P. Hinton 1979; Keyes 1977b; Stern 1968b), I draw from Cohen (2001) and view the work of Hpu Takit and his followers as a project of Karen moral "revivalism." Like other esoteric congregations, a fundamental part of living a moral life coterminous with the teachings of Hpu Takit is the practice of *thila* (P. *sīla*), moral discipline. A common interpretation of *thila* is a commitment to follow the five Buddhist precepts (P. *pañca-sīlāni*), injunctions against taking life of other beings, thieving, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication. However, *thila* is explained by Plong Karen Buddhists as an extraordinary form of ethical practice and much more widely understood as a source of power.

In this chapter I use Hpu Takit and his community of devotees as a prism through which to examine the relationship between moral agency, Karen collective ideals and identity discussed in the Introduction. Building off the literature which examines similar charismatic movements in Myanmar as a core feature of Theravāda Buddhist practice (Brac de la Perrière et al. 2014; Foxeus 2011, 2016c; Gravers 2001; Mendelson 1961; Pranke 2014; Stern 1968b), I explore the way Plong Karen morality is understood and embodied in everyday life in its most extraordinary forms.<sup>133</sup> Central

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<sup>132</sup> The worship of *Arimetteyya* has been prevalent in Myanmar for centuries. According to Burmese historian Pe Maung Tin (1936: 59) there are inscriptions on a pagoda in Bagan which refer to the future Buddha. For more recent work on how other esoteric Buddhist communities prepare for *Arimetteyya* in Myanmar see Foxeus (2011, 2012, 2016b) and Pranke (2011).

<sup>133</sup> There is a long history of charismatic "holy men" who have led similar Buddhist revivalist movements in southern Laos and northeast Thailand as well (P. Cohen 2001; Keyes 1977b; Ladwig 2014).

to Hpu Takit's project of moral revivalism is the rejuvenation and preservation of Karen culture and traditions in what his followers see as a society decaying – both as a result of the influence of ethnic Bamar over Karen people and as a consequence of the increasing space that modern technology and ideas have to play in everyday social life. Rather than focusing on the way this movement creates a space to respond to the social and political disorder of post-colonial modernity and nation-state building as other have done before me (Foxeus 2012, 2016c; Mendelson 1961; Pranke 2011; Stern 1968b), I demonstrate the deeply agentive ways that Hpu Takit's Plong Karen followers understand their lives and their extraordinary everyday ethical practice. By catering to the anxieties that prevail among elderly Karen men and women about the physical, moral and cultural degeneration of Karen State and its people, I argue that following Hpu Takit provide his followers with the means to consider their own sense of self, power and moral agency in the realisation of a distinctly Plong Karen moral universe.

This chapter proceeds in four sections. Section one situates Hpu Takit as a charismatic religious figure and how he is perceived by his congregation. Section two examines the congregation's beliefs and how the cultivation of morality according to Hpu Takit's teachings is understood as a way to transform the contemporary world. In section three I argue that for Hpu Takit's followers, the everyday performance and cultivation of moral "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1997), simultaneously constitutes a form of moral self-making and agency amidst a time of rapid social and political change. In making this argument I draw on the work of Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005), and demonstrate that even amongst the most religiously pious members of Plong Karen society, the relationship between morality and religion is not simply one of obedience, but of practical judgement and agential deliberation (see also Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2006). In the final section, I show how the everyday embodiment of extraordinary ethics for Hpu Takit's Karen members should not be understood on its own, but as part of the wider Plong Karen understanding of what it means to pursue morality across the life course. Critiquing the notion of a coherent ethical notion of being in the world, I argue that contradiction and ambivalence is an inherent part of pursuing morality.

## Hpu Takit: The Embodiment of a Charismatic Moral Authority

Religious communities with extraordinary charismatic leaders have been a hallmark of life across Myanmar for decades. Building on a tradition that pre-dates colonial rule, in recent decades leaders like Hpu Takit have attracted the support of devotees from across social classes, from farmers, market traders, government officials and military officers, concerned about the need to promote and defend the Buddha's dispensation in a period of moral degeneration (Foxeus 2011, 2016b; Kawanami 2009; Mendelson 1961; Pranke 2011).<sup>134</sup> The belief in the coming Buddha, *Arimetteyya*, is related to the Buddhist cosmological narrative of the impermanence of the Buddha's doctrine and the gradual degeneration of the religious substance of society towards a dark age (B. *kāli yuga khit*). According to Buddhist Theravāda belief, the *sāsana* is in decline the further time moves away from the time of the Buddha Gotama, resulting in an increase in material greed, moral disintegration and the proliferation of violence among worldly beings (Nattier 1991: 122). Unlike mainstream Theravāda Buddhists who consider that *Arimetteyya* will arrive at some undefined point in time millions of years after the current Buddhist era (Foxeus 2016a), esoteric Buddhist movements often believe that his arrival is imminent, and subsequently spend their lives preparing for his return. While these movements have often been regarded with disfavour and suspicion by political elites in Myanmar in recent decades (Foxeus 2016b; Rozenberg 2010), the exceptional personal qualities of such charismatic leaders cohere with what Hiroko Kawanami (2009: 213) describes as many ordinary people's "constant search for an awe-inspiring mystical power that transcends ordinary human existence."

Hpu Takit was born in Hlaingkaba village at the base of Mount Khwaegabaung and began attracting followers in the early 1990s. According to devotees, as a boy he was

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<sup>134</sup> During the colonial era, prophecies surrounding the coming of the next Buddha were popular all over Myanmar and other parts of Southeast Asia amongst both urbanites and rural people alike (Ferguson and Mendelson 1981; Foxeus 2011, 2012; Ladwig 2014; Mendelson 1961). The 2500th-year anniversary of the Buddha's *parinibbāna* in 1956, in particular, saw the rise of many charismatic monks and so called 'millenarian' communities in the belief that the world had entered a new 'age of enlightenment' (Foxeus 2011: 58-75). Their focus the coming Buddha, *Arimetteyya*, played an important role in the chiliastic connotations that many of these movements have assumed in western scholarship, with their prophecies of a coming Buddha and the end of the world.

possessed by a *nat* spirit during the November fire festival (B. *mibonpwe*) which marks the full moon of *tazaungmon*.<sup>135</sup> His ability to communicate with spirits marked him out as different from other school children and he eventually dropped out of school to study as a novice in various monasteries throughout Karen State. Studying under senior monks including the venerable Thamanya and Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaws he learnt *samādhi* (P. concentration) meditation, a practice considered especially efficacious for developing the supernatural powers and mental strength required to exercise control over spirits (see Mendelson 1963: 786-807; Pranke 2011: 471). However, after he grew his hair long in what he claimed was the traditional Karen fashion, he was eventually expelled from the *sangha* for violating the rules of the monastic order. Following the advice of his mentors he then went and spent 3 years, 3 months and 3 days<sup>136</sup> living as a hermit meditating in a cave on Mount Khwaegabaung in what is believed to have been the place of the last Karen King, Hpu Htaw Meh Pa, Grandfather Boar Tusk.<sup>137</sup> Afterwards he returned to his natal village identifying as ‘Hpu Takit’, a name which his followers say was given to him by a powerful Karen deity that possessed him. There he established a small community of lay Karen Buddhist worshippers, urging people to practice Buddhist ethics and revitalise the practices of traditional Plong Karen culture. As described in Chapter One, Mount Khwaegabaung is considered by many people as the sacred and cultural heartland of the Plong Karen and for Hpu Takit’s followers he is its lord and King, Hpu Chai.

Like other esoteric masters in Myanmar, Hpu Takit is regarded by his congregation as a Buddhist holy man and a ‘champion’ of Buddhism (Brac de la Perrière et al. 2014;

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<sup>135</sup> Spirit mediums are common in Myanmar as across Southeast Asia more broadly. See for example the work of Brac de la Perrière (2012a), Jackson (1999), Keyes (1987), Kitiarsa (2005) and Tambiah (1970, 1984).

<sup>136</sup> The combination of the three threes adds up to nine, which is regarded as a potent number in Buddhist texts, symbolizing the nine key virtues of the Buddha.

<sup>137</sup> The legend of Hpu Htaw Meh Pa is part of both Plong and Pgaganyaw (S’gaw) Karen ancient folklore. His name is mentioned in Karen oral stories throughout Myanmar and Thailand. Yoko Hayami (2000: 94) also notes the legend of ‘Taw Me Pa’ in her writing on Karen in northern Thailand, as a figure who “will return to bring them happiness and richness.” Gravers (1999: 47) similarly names ‘Toh Meh Pah’ as a cultural hero of the Karen who “would return to lead them to their promised land.”

Foxeus 2016b; Pranke 2011; Rozenberg 2010).<sup>138</sup> Hpu Takit's knowledge of Buddhism and Karen traditions, history and culture is viewed by his followers as extraordinary and reaffirms their view of him as their King and Lord, Hpu Chai. Much of his influence rests on his knowledge of the *dhamma* and his charismatic qualities which are seen and spoken of as extraordinary.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, for his followers he is seen and talked about as a moral exemplar in his observance of the *sāsana* and the ten moral perfections of a righteous king (P. *dhammarāja*) — almsgiving, morality, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-discipline, control of anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-opposition to the people's will.

In many ways, Hpu Takit lives like a monk (K. *thaungkha cho ma*), observing most of the 227 monastic rules of Buddhism including celibacy and the prohibition of any contact with money, teaching the importance of non-attachment and non-violence, and encouraging his supporters to follow his example in fasting and other daily ascetic practices. Hpu Takit also spends long periods practicing concentration meditation and during the four months of *Waso*, Buddhist lent, refuses solid food, surviving instead on water and the extracts of rice which his supporters prepare for him. In person Hpu Takit is warm, affectionate and highly charismatic and widely known for his ability to mobilise followers. His peregrinations through Karen areas to spread the word of the Buddha are related by his followers as evidence of his *bodhisattva*-like qualities. The care he takes in looking after his congregation as well as his compassionate nature is a recurring feature of discussions with his followers, who often refer to him as full of “loving kindness” (P. *metta*).

Both Karen ideals and Buddhist moral discipline were central to how one grandmother, Hpi Paw Htoo, narrated her decision to follow Hpu Takit:

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<sup>138</sup> Bho Bo Aung and Bho Min Khaung are the most famous esoteric masters in Myanmar. For a more detailed explanation of their work see Foxeus (2011, 2012) and Patton (2014).

<sup>139</sup> Hpu Takit is also revered for his secular academic achievements, having recently graduated with a Bachelor of Law from the University of Taungoo. Images of him in his graduation gown can be seen in the households of his followers.

When Hpu Chai was a boy he lived a very simple life. His parents were very poor – for example they could not even afford to buy a candle to study for his classes at night. When he was in middle school, they took him to the fire festival and the spirit of Hpu Takit entered into his body. After 3 years, 3 months and 3 days meditating, he began to act very strangely and many people thought he had lost his mind. He told people that he was a Karen guardian spirit and he would protect Karen culture and traditions. He also told people to be vegetarian and to practice *thila*, moral discipline. At that time, I went to see him, and I could see that he was a very powerful and moral leader, our *Plong Hpu Chai*. He knew a lot of ancient stories about the Karen people and had many special powers. I made a promise, *tha dae ton*, that I will keep *thila* and Karen culture for the rest of my life under his protection.

As Hpu Takit integrates Karen culture and ritual practices into his ethical imaginary, Hpu Takit is viewed by his followers not just as the coming Buddha, but as the coming *Karen* Buddha. Seeing themselves as morally superior to ordinary Buddhist followers of the state-endorsed *sangha*, Hpu Takit's members firmly believe that the fifth and final coming Buddha will be Karen. As another grandmother, Hpi Mu Htoo, told me: "Hpu Takit is our God, '*Plong Hpu Chai*'. We have already had an Indian, Mon, Burmese and Thai Buddha. Now it is time for the Plong."<sup>140</sup>

Within Karen Buddhist cosmology, the coming Buddha, *Arimetteyya*, is deeply linked to the rise of a 'righteous king' (P. *dharmarāja*) and the revival of a Buddhist social and moral order (see also Gravers 2001, 2012b). For Plong Karen people, this is also related to their belief in a pantheon of *nat* spirits and the importance of Hpu Chai, lord of the guardian spirits.<sup>141</sup> The term Hpu Chai predates the introduction of Buddhism

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<sup>140</sup> This is similar to a Karen verse recorded by the missionary Ellen B. Mason (1862: 85) which notes: "The Talaing [Mon] Kings had their season; The Burmese Kings has their season; The Siamese Kings has their season; And the foreign Kings will have their season; But the Karen King will yet appear. When he arrives there will be only one king; And there will be neither rich nor poor. Everything will be happy; And even lions and leopards will lose their savageness."

<sup>141</sup> Amongst the Karen, the word *nat* refers to a wide range of entities, including Buddhist deities and tutelary spirits. Like in much of Myanmar, many Buddhist Karen people believe that each locality,

to the Karen and is commonly used by Karen Buddhist religious movements to refer to a higher being or God, the coming Buddha and sometimes powerful and charismatic monks.<sup>142</sup> The term is also used in prophecies predicting the arrival of a Karen king, Hpu Chaqwah. It is told that the coming Hpu Chaqwah of Mount Khwaegabaung, nearby to Hpa-an, will reunite the Karen people and bring peace and prosperity to the region.

## **The Revitalisation of a Plong ‘Moral Universe’ through Extraordinary Ethics**

In southeastern Myanmar Hpu Takit has gathered a large following of Plong Karen people both in his village and across Karen State. According to Hpu Takit and senior members of his community, over four thousand people follow him actively while a core community of approximately 200 households reside in his village (see also Hayami 2011: 1094). Central to the appeal of Hpu Takit’s moral vision is a response to the social transformations brought about by economic change to Karen State in the last three decades as a result of the SLORC/SPDC government and the 1994 ceasefire with the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). In the context of increasing out-migration to Thailand and growing encroachment of Myanmar state institutions into ceasefire areas of Karen State during the 1990s members of Hpu Takit’s congregation were drawn to Hpu Takit and his vision of Plong Karen moral revivalism.<sup>143</sup> In enacting a moral vision of Karen society, Hpu Takit’s older Karen devotees seek to revitalise what they imagine was a stable, predictable and ethically coherent past

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village, house, mountain, river, tree, rice plant and so on, is host to a *nat* or guardian spirit, and that they can both act to protect and harm those within their domain (Brac de la Perrière 2009; Nash 1963, 1965; Spiro 1967). The most prominent *nats* in Myanmar are the Thirty-Seven Lords, which were established as tutelary spirits by King Anawrahta, the famed 11th century ruler of the kingdom of Bagan and upheld by successive royal dynasties (Brac de la Perrière 1989; Maung Htin Aung 1962; Temple 1906). However, in Hpa-an and its surrounding villages when Karen people refer to *nats*, they are not talking about the official thirty-seven *nats*, but other local Karen spirits and ancestors.

<sup>142</sup> In my conversations with people ‘Hpu Chai’ is characterised as a supreme being, creator of the world and of mankind. In the Pgaganyaw (S’gaw) language ‘Chai’ is commonly referred to as ‘Ywa’. W.C.B. Purser & Saya Tung Aung (1920) translate the Plong word for Buddha, ‘Chai’, as God. It is thought that the word ‘Chai’ is derived from the Mon term ‘caik’, which means ‘sacred being’ or ‘Buddha’ (see Gravers 2001: 27).

<sup>143</sup> While sitting outside the orthodoxy of Theravāda Buddhism, Hpu Takit’s movement also echoes the Buddhist moral revivalist movements of the Thamanya Sayadaw and the Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw.

weakened by modern structures of secular governance and the influence of globalisation. The contemporary era, in contrast, is thought to be increasingly driven by immoral forces, conditioned by hate, greed and delusion – in opposition to what the Buddha taught.<sup>144</sup>

Part of what motivates Hpu Takit and the daily ethical work of his devotees is not only the spiritual and moral progress of Karen people *vis a vis* the propagation of the Buddhist *sāsana*, but also the fortification of what they see as a Karen moral universe against the corrupting influences of the outside world. Many of the elders I spent time with in Hpu Takit's community viewed the contemporary time as corroding people's capacity to live a moral life and would often reminisce with nostalgic reverence for an idealised rural Buddhist moral past. They frequently referred to the village, donated to Hpu Takit in 1998 by military authorities to establish a monastic base for his increasing following, as a space of exceptional morality compared with the outside, modern world. Residents with whom I spent time often referred to the community as possessing considerable power, contrasting it to urban spaces such as Hpa-an or Mae Sot on the Thailand-Myanmar border which they saw as degrading and corrupting the customs, traditions and moral virtues of inhabitants.

For many of Hpu Takit's members the moral practices of Buddhism has become corrupted in the contemporary era. From their perspective, this is instantiated by the increasing number of monks they see travelling on motorbike and by car, in the mobile phones they carry and the 'gifts' they receive from armed commanders and other people they view as corrupt or immoral. This is also evident in the power and purchase donations to the *sangha* have come to hold over and above the everyday practice of *thila* (P. *sīla*), moral discipline. Indeed, many of Hpu Takit's followers see the moral practices of mainstream Buddhists as an adulterated expression of what the Buddha taught.

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<sup>144</sup> Despite their avowed antagonism towards modernity, it is important to note that the movement is far more hybrid in character than its practitioners acknowledge. For example, Hpu Takit has a Bachelors degree in law from the University of Taungoo.



Hpu Takit's members criticise what they view as the distance between everyday lay Buddhist practices of morality and the beliefs and precepts as taught by monastic authorities. I frequently heard the *vipassanā* meditation movement that proliferated during the 1990s criticised by Hpu Takit's devotees as insufficiently communal and overly private.<sup>145</sup> In contrast to *vipassana* meditation, usually conducted in groups under the guidance of a monk, outward bodily acts, practices and rituals such as counting beads were considered by Hpu Takit's devotees to be superior expressions of moral practice and the ultimate means of obtaining enlightenment. As discussed in Chapter Two, some of the most powerful patrons of Buddhism in Hpa-an and its surrounding districts are also involved in selling drugs, gambling, land grabs and armed conflict.<sup>146</sup> One grandfather, Hpu Hta Lu, related his concerns to me one day, expressing his deep frustration with contemporary society:

In the past time people were not very greedy (K. *ser ner gah*) and only made enough to feed their families and their parents. Everybody had enough to eat and lived peacefully. But now we see so many wealthy people while others who have nothing. There is also conflict everywhere. Nobody follows the rules of the *dhamma*. Most people do not follow vegetarianism and only do *dāna* for their own benefit. Ordinary people used to keep *thila*, moral discipline. Yet, now most people only care about themselves and making money.

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<sup>145</sup> Their daily religious practice itself can be read as a critique of what they viewed as the anti-ritualistic, rationalist and individualised 'New Laity' *vipassanā* meditation movement (see Jordt 2007). *Vipassanā* meditation has been a popular practice all over Myanmar since the postcolonial period, mobilised in part by a modern religious reform movement which sought to distinguish between "authentic" Buddhism (B. *ta keh bouddha batha*) and traditional or inherited Buddhism (B. *mi you hpala bouddha batha*) (Brohm 1957; Houtman 1990). Unlike esoteric forms of Buddhism, the *vipassanā* conception of religiosity presupposes a distinction between privatised interiority that is the proper locus of belief and a public exteriority that is an expression of this belief (Houtman 1999). Located in opposition to the fickle world of religious rituals and other traditional practices of belief which are *this-worldly*, its practitioners thus seek "to purify their minds in order to attain at least the lower levels of enlightenment along the path to nirvana and Buddhist sainthood" (Foxeus 2016b: 416; see also Jordt 2007).

<sup>146</sup> As related by Juliane Schober (2011), an emphasis on the accumulation of merit through *dāna*, specifically donations to the *sangha*, was deliberately cultivated under the SLORC/SPDC governments in a way that undermined local forms of Buddhism. These reforms were invariably met with resistance from Buddhist esoteric sects across Myanmar like Hpu Takit's, often described pejoratively as traditionalist or backward (see Foxeus 2011, 2016a).

Hpu Hta Lu sense of society's moral decay reflected a broader scepticism, and in some cases outright hostility, among Hpu Takit's followers towards the capacity of the Myanmar state and the *sangha* more broadly to propagate the *sāsana*. These criticisms were often expressed in response to the intense scrutiny Hpu Takit himself received from Buddhists across Myanmar. Many monks and Buddhist laity I encountered both in Hpa-an and elsewhere in Myanmar regarded Hpu Takit with disdain, suspicion and in some cases outright hostility. Some viewed his claims to be the future Buddha as heretical to mainstream Theravāda Buddhist beliefs, while others saw his followers as naïve and illiterate fools. Aware of these criticisms of Hpu Takit's vision of moral revival, many of his followers argued that Buddhism was threatened by the national *sangha* and its role in embracing and enabling materialism and greed. As another devotee explained:

In the past, most monks used to follow 227 precepts, now they struggle to follow just ten. Very few are vegetarian, they handle money and own phones and many other possessions. Nowadays our religion is changing. In the past monks used to live simply in a village hut, but now nobody thinks like this. Many people only think about how big and beautiful the monastery building is. Here we only think about *thila*.

Central to the sense of moral decline is what many of Hpu Takit's followers see as the gradual degeneration of Karen traditions and cultural values. Hpu Takit's followers constantly highlighted to me what they saw as a growing sense of dislocation from basic Karen moral orientations. The growing impact of markets in most spheres of society, including the dominance of consumerist logics among youth in particular, was seen to subvert fundamental ethical frameworks they believed were unique to the Karen, including the importance of the moral ideal of faithfulness or *thout kyar*. Their retrospective yearning for the past was often evoked in relation to lost Karen values and behaviour. As Grandmother, Hpi Paw Htoo explained:

This place is changing now so fast, so we have to worry about the loss of Plong culture. If Plong people disappear we will have no culture and no religion. We have so many oral poems from our ancestors which we must not forget. Our elders loved poetry. They are so precious, the

greatest achievement of our people. But many people are forgetting. Just like they are forgetting our culture and heritage. For example, a long time ago when we cut the umbilical cord of our children we put it under the stairs at the entrance to our house. Nowadays Plong people just go to the hospital and the nurse throws it away, because they don't understand its importance. This is our ancestors' place, so we have to put it there. If we put it there we will know our family and ancient grandparents, our village and our place. If we throw it away, we will not know about that and we will lose our culture and heritage.

Cultivating the self through everyday practices of *thila* as well as the keeping of Karen customs are considered to be mutually germane to the reproduction of Plong Karen morality. Adherents see their embodied practices as representing the 'real' or 'authentic' Karen Buddhism, in contradistinction to what they view as a passive, materialistic and generally corrupted form of Buddhist practice that has proliferated locally over time. Unlike the majority of Myanmar Buddhists who see strictly keeping *thila* as an aspirational and extraordinary form of ethical practice, Hpu Takit's members judge it to be the defining feature of both of ethical life and of Karen moral community.

The revivalist ideals of Hpu Takit's devotees are also deeply wedded to the role of Karen ethnic identity in his broader moral vision. The keeping of daily moral practices and disciplines is intricately interwoven with the enactment of Karen collective moral ideals. Within Hpu Takit's village, all congregants have taken initiation rites where they swear an oath to Hpu Takit to keep a promise to him, drinking consecrated water over which he has whispered ritual mantras to protect them. As a part of this oath members commit to a unique cosmological imaginary which amalgamates Buddhist codes of ethics and a traditionalist understanding of what it means to be a 'good' Karen person. Dedicated as they are to enacting a highly symbolic moral register, lay members constantly scrutinise both their own moral standing and others in everyday conversation and discuss how they can work towards improving themselves and their

moral trajectory.<sup>147</sup> Special focus is placed on purification through non-violence (*P. ahimsa*). Alongside daily prayer, periodic fasting and strict ideas about how one should carry oneself, act, think and behave, vegetarianism is an integral component of how Hpu Takit's devotees distinguish themselves from other Karen and Buddhist people. While abstaining from meat and animal products is a common practice among Buddhists, his followers see keeping vegetarianism as fundamental to their transformation of the contemporary world as a Karen Buddhist polity.

Alongside vegetarianism, the body is seen as a metaphor for social identity and clothing choices, in particular, enunciate a distinct moral ethos of the Hpu Takit community. Similar to other esoteric Karen religious movements,<sup>148</sup> at the core of Hpu Takit's community is their active celebration of a Karen "national identity" (A. D. Smith 1991) through language, clothing as well as customs around marriage and kinship. Of particular significance is the type of clothes they wear, deemed as the 'traditional' Karen pattern and style of dress. Visually they look quite different from other Karen people. For unmarried girls, a long white undyed tunic is worn with bright tassels, while married women wear a distinctly traditional Karen patterned skirt and blouse. Their skirt must also be unstitched and made on a handloom. Married men also wear an unstitched Karen *longyi* and a white Karen tunic that extends down to the knees. Underwear and trousers are prohibited amongst both sexes. Married women have to wear their hair pulled back in a low bun while men grow theirs long and tie it up in a topknot, as they are thought to have worn in the pre-colonial era (see Figures 8 & 9 below). During sermons and other special occasions, they also wear headscarves with a unique dragon pattern to symbolise their connection to other powerful beings.

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<sup>147</sup> Unlike some of the other scholarship on esoteric congregations (eg. Foxeus 2016c), the people I spent time with rarely spoke to me about the cosmic battle between good and evil. Rather, they focused on daily ethical practice.

<sup>148</sup> See for example the work of Stern (1968b) and P. Hinton (1979).



Figure 8 and 9: The typical dress style of Hpu Takit's congregants. Photos by author.

Members explained that wearing Karen traditional dress was an outward manifestation of both *being* and *becoming* a good Karen person (c.f Sadan 2013) and an important symbolic gesture towards Karen understandings of moral being. The cultivation of a moral self is also evident in people's material possessions – or lack thereof. Hpu Takit's members live in houses built in the traditional Karen style above the ground from bamboo and thatch with palm fronds as rooves and engage only in 'traditional' agricultural practices of the Plong Karen including paddy rice cultivation and vegetable growing. Part of their celebration of Karen culture also includes the revitalisation of ritual events related to the Karen rice goddess, Hpi Bu Yaw, the Duwei marriage rite and the wrist tying ceremony. Thus, in committing themselves to Hpu Takit and his work to defend both the Buddha's dispensation and the Karen way of life, devotees see themselves as helping to resurrect a uniquely Plong Karen Buddhist moral polity and transforming the world as a whole. It is believed that by maintaining these strict and embodied understandings of everyday ethics, they can help contribute to the realisation of a Plong Karen "moral universe" under Hpu Takit – their King and lord, Hpu Chai. As I describe in the next section, the everyday embodiment of extraordinary ethics also engenders a form of moral agency and power.

## In the Presence of a Moral Authority: Cultivating Moral Agency

One of the most notable aspects of the Hpu Takit sect is the recurring emphasis placed on *doing* morality and cultivating *thila* through everyday embodied practices.<sup>149</sup> One grandmother told me that Hpu Takit's name itself means quite literally in Plong Karen, 'grandfather morality,' and he is regarded as a moral exemplar whose words and deeds are understood not so much as commandments, but as ways of inhabiting the world, bodily and ethically. The ability of Hpu Takit to seek enlightenment depends partly on the moral conditions of those that surround him and their capacity to maintain an ethical life. Indeed, creating a distinct moral universe has become the primary individual and collective project of every member of Hpu Takit's congregation who see the active cultivation of an ethical self as a way to regenerate southeastern Myanmar as a place of *shu mao lassai*, serenity and peace.

Men and women in Hpu Takit's congregation are vigilantly aware of their everyday acts of morality and constantly relay the importance of keeping *thila*, commonly understood as the five moral precepts: injunctions against killing, thieving, lying, intoxication and improper sexual behaviour. The practice of maintaining *thila* forms a moral framework to which people subscribe to and aspire to live by in their everyday lives as part of what they explained to me as the Eight-Fold Noble Path (P. *ariyo atthanggiko maggo*). According to this view the Eight-Fold Noble Path should serve as the basis for correct moral conduct. This includes 'wisdom' (P. *paññā*) – right understanding and right intention; morality (P. *sīla*) – right speech, right action and right livelihood; and mental development (P. *bhāvanā*), right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.<sup>150</sup> Hpu Takit describes the Eightfold Path as a means to enlightenment, like a raft for crossing a river. Once one has reached the opposite shore,

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<sup>149</sup> This resonates with *weikza lam* associations in Myanmar and other Karen chiliastic movements before him (see Brac de la Perrière et al. 2014).

<sup>150</sup> Jordt (2007: 101) notes that *paññā*, *sīla* and *bhāvanā* "constitute a threefold hierarchical and progressive purification process marking the road toward individual enlightenment and a moral and ordered society." These three elements are a common subject in monastic sermons in Hpa-an and elsewhere in Myanmar (see also Walton 2016).

through the cultivation of moral discipline, one no longer needs the raft and can leave it behind.

However, *thila* is more than just living according to the five Buddhist precepts, but as Tannenbaum (1995) explains, should also be understood as a form of power. Analysing the lives of a Buddhist Shan community in northern Thailand, Tannenbaum argues that actively cultivating the self through the embodied practice of keeping *thila* creates a field of power and control over the dangerous forces of the natural world. In analysing the lives of elderly temple sleepers, Tannenbaum explains that in their ability to cultivate morality through the practice of restraint – i.e. keeping the five precepts – they are able to build a field of power that keep these outside forces at bay. This understanding of power, she notes, doesn't simply come from the physical practice of restraint, but is a natural force, that is viewed as morally neutral and unevenly distributed.

Plong Karen Buddhists believe that individuals are born with previous life stories and karmic inheritances that shapes who they are as they move through the hierarchically-ordered levels of birth in *samsāra*, the cycle of death and rebirth. Following the collective teachings of the *dhamma* offers a path through which people can overcome *samsāra*. While the fortunes of individuals are thought of as unpredictable embedded in the logic of karma, there is a deep sense among Hpu Takit's members that one can affect the life course through the correct application of moral "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1997).<sup>151</sup>

Foucault's (1997) theory of subjectivation argues that "technologies of the self" permit individuals to perform operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, in order to transform themselves. Central to Hpu Takit's followers, is the use of moral "technologies of the self" as a means of creating and refining the self. It is important to discuss here the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā*, which is commonly translated as "no self". As Matthew Walton (2016: 41) notes, "Because everything is

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<sup>151</sup> This occurs within a cyclical time and their gaze is always turned towards the remote future.

impermanent, existing only from moment to moment and arising and passing away instantaneously, there can be no permanent, lasting essence of anything. Therefore, according to the Buddha's teachings, there is nowhere to situate a self that is permanent, even within our own minds and bodies." Within Shan Buddhist Theravāda thought, Nicola Tannenbaum (2005) argues that the notion of *anattā*, 'no self', can be more accurately understood as 'no control', in relation to the multiple forms of power that surround Shan people in the everyday world. Walton similarly suggests that Burmese understandings of *anattā* as "no control", *a-so ma ya bu*, is also seen in the views, sermons and writings of various monks in Myanmar, "since the concept of the soul remains abstract" (2016: 41). In this sense, to maintain control over the self and one's physical and mental phenomena, is one of the most effective forms of control.

According to the Plong Karen view of the world, the world is an unstable and dangerous place. Outside the human realm there are powerful spirits, spirits of the dead, spirits of the land and a range of malevolent and benevolent spirits. If one cultivates relationship with them they protect and take care of their followers. One of the ways that people deal with the outside powerful force of the universe is to create bounded protected spaces and fields of power. As described in Chapter Two, one way of building power vis a vis these outside powerful forces is through the accumulation of merit through acts of *dāna*.<sup>152</sup> Distinct from monastic Buddhist fields of merit which emphasise donations and generosity through acts of *dāna* to the *sangha*, Hpu Takit's supporters instead emphasise everyday lay moral practice as generative of power.<sup>153</sup> In this sense, power comes from the practice of self-control and restraint.

For Hpu Takit's Karen, their view of the world is deeply embedded in Buddhist understandings of karma and fate alongside the power of *nats* and other powerful

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<sup>152</sup> This emphasis on lay practice appears to have begun with the development of Buddhist lay associations during the colonial period (Turner 2014). According to Alicia Turner (2014), Buddhist lay practice represented a new version of the traditional *sāsana* reform that had previously targeted the monastic community. Foxeus (2016b) argues that the simultaneous rise of esoteric congregations in the colonial era were another variant of the Buddhist lay associations that Turner describes.

<sup>153</sup> While there are some similarities, these contrast with what Theodore Stern (1968b: 314) calls the "fully-fledged chiasm" of the Telekhon Karen and his descriptions of their cataclysmic and militant manifestations of Buddhist practice.



beings, who effect change in this life in a fluid and dialectical relationship. Taking Tannenbaum's argument that keeping the precepts creates a field of power over the physical and mental phenomenon of the world can help us to more accurately understand the importance of keeping *thila* for Hpu Takit's Karen. Like Tannenbaum (1995) describes of Shan precept keepers in northern Thailand, the cultivation of an ethical self through daily, ritualised and embodied performances of morality acts as a means of accruing power and exercising moral agency. Among Hpu Takit's Karen, this is most clearly embodied in the white strings they tie around their wrists and ankles, as a protective barrier. Hpu Takit's village is also thought to be a protective space, partly made through the people that live there, their keeping of the precepts and their daily routine of chanting the Buddha's powerful words. Hpu Takit's himself is also considered what Spiro (1970: 280) refers to as a "field of merit" and of power.

Similar to other Southeast Asian cultural constructions and performances of power in the Geertzian "theatre state" (Errington 2012), Hpu Takit enacts his authority through a theatrical array of performative gestures, costumes, symbols and ritual practices. Hpu Takit is distinct from previous Karen esoteric leaders in that he does not wear simple white, cotton cloth in the style of a hermit or forest monk. Rather, he dresses in twelve beautifully designed hand-woven Karen robes which visually demonstrate his symbolic and moral power and reflect some of his reincarnations in previous lives including as the last Karen King, Hpu Htaw Meh Pa. From the perspective of his lay followers, these robes are befitting of their view of him as Hpu Chai, lord of the guardian spirits, creator of the world and of mankind. His representation as Hpu Chai and *Arimetteyya* is visually inscribed on laminated cards disbursed and kept closely by his followers (see figures below). In the first image he is depicted as the Buddha, seated beneath Nāga Mucalinda, a snake-like spirit who protected the Buddha after his enlightenment.<sup>154</sup> In the second image, he is depicted as the Karen King and Lord, Hpu Chai, floating on top of Hpa-an's *Kan Thar Yar* lake with Mount Khwaegabaung in the background, the symbolic heartland of Plong Karen Buddhists.

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<sup>154</sup> The depiction of the Buddha shielded by Nāga Mucalinda whilst meditating is a common motif in Buddhist iconography.



Figure 10 and 11: Images of Hpu Takit which his members carry. Source: Author.

One of the main visual demonstrations of his symbolic and moral power can also be seen in the centre of his village in the *nat tamou*, where Hpu Takit brings together Karen *nats* and guardian spirits he collects throughout the land.<sup>155</sup> Hpu Takit explained that as a result of the knowledge and powers he has acquired over time he has been visited by many *nats*, including the spirit of Hpu Ta Maik, the first Karen person to be ordained as a monk. According to the Theravāda scriptures, there are powerful deities, *thewadaa*, who pay homage to the Buddha and receive instruction from him, whereas other *nat* spirits are controlled and exercised by the lower domain of this-worldly beings (see Tambiah 1970: 43, 202, 341). Unlike some *nats* whose functional domain is limited to the lower world, the power of these higher Buddhist deities extends to larger society, the weather, environment and the karmic cycle. *Thewadaa* rank fifth on a seven-tiered scale and can protect and propagate Buddhism by possessing human mediums.<sup>156</sup> Hpu Takit claims to embody the spirit of twelve formerly powerful Karen lords and monks, including Hpu Ta Maik and the last Karen King Hpu Htaw Meh Pa,

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<sup>155</sup> Unlike some Karen chiliastic movements before him, and the *weizka lam* associations where leaders encourage their devotees to renounce any devotion to *nats* (Brac de la Perrière 2015: 398), part of what is unique to Hpu Takit is his connection and power over the spirit world.

<sup>156</sup> This is thought to occur 2500 years after the Buddha's death, interpreted in Buddhist mythology as a time of moral decline.

making him Hpu Chai, lord of the guardian spirits. Like other spirit mediums Hpu Takit sees it as his sacred duty to save the world.

Within Hpu Takit's village, the *nat tamou* occupies the focal point of much ritual and social activity. Every full moon night Hpu Takit circumambulates the *nat tamou* nine times on a golden chariot pulled by two elk after which he addresses the villages with a sermon and prayers to bless their village and Karen people. Alms in the form of young coconut, bananas, rice, leaves, candles and flower offerings are also given to each of the spirits on these nights. One goal of this ritual is to establish a relationship with powerful, potentially dangerous spirits and transform them into protectors and tutelary spirits of the Karen people and their land. Some of these spirits are malevolent or thought to perpetrate evil, but many are described as guardians of the Karen moral order. Members also circumambulate the *tamou* several times a day counting their 108 prayer beads in a form of concentration meditation to help build a protective field of merit around the spirits – which they told me also helps to ‘cool’ the power of the *nats*. Buddhism is central here, as it is through observance of everyday ethics according to *thila* that Hpu Takit is able to transform the malevolent spirits in subservient symbols of his power.<sup>157</sup> These rituals are also thought to contribute to the moral regeneration of the world as a whole and to work towards the spiritual achievement of all beings.

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<sup>157</sup> This also holds for the popular Burmese ‘Cult of the 37 Lords’ described in the lengthy canon of scholarship by Benedict Brac de la Perrière (1989, 2007, 2009, 2012b). This is how Buddhist countries incorporate spirit cults – they create hierarchies. The spirits who are “tamed” by the power of the Buddha and turned into his servants.



Figure 12: One of Hpu Takit's elders circumambulates the *nat tamou*. Photo by author.

The everyday, embodied performance of morality through these rituals and the daily practice of keeping *thila*, moral discipline, is understood by Hpu Takit and his members as fundamental to living an ethical life. These everyday rituals should not be seen as discrete performances, acts of commission or simply conformity to a specific – and perhaps extraordinary – set of ethical rules. Rather, the everyday embodiment of extraordinary ethics through such ritual practices is very much embedded in personal agency and moral reasoning. As Rappaport (1999) would have it, moral judgement is sanctified, guaranteed and directed by ritual.

In his endeavour to promote moral regeneration in Karen State, Hpu Takit's sermons (K. *tohtor*) are also viewed as especially compelling by his devotees as they consciously draw on the Plong tradition of storytelling.<sup>158</sup> These can last between one-three hours, and he frequently intersperses Pāli language with local Karen vernacular stories, prayer and rituals.<sup>159</sup> Listening to Hpu Takit's *tohtor* is considered a method by which his followers can gain merit and cultivate wisdom and virtuous behaviour.

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<sup>158</sup> Hpu Takit's sermons are called *tohtor*, *toh* meaning tradition and *tor* meaning story, infused with moralistic advice and cosmological knowledge of the Karen people and their oral history.

<sup>159</sup> It is interesting to compare these sermons to Patrice Ladwig's (2016) case study on the emotional power of the Vessantara-Jataka recitation by Laos monks.

Beyond the cognitive task of learning the rules and ethics of Buddhist practice, listeners also understand themselves to be building an embodied ethical disposition which strengthens their coherence with moral ideals. The relationship between moral practice and Karen moral ideals was evident when I listened to one of Hpu Takit's *tohtor* in 2016.

### ***Hpu Takit's Tohtor***

On the last day of the Buddhist new year celebrations in 2016 I arrived early in the morning at Hpu Takit's natal village near Hpa-an. During Thingyan Hpu Takit and many of his members descend on his birth village around 20 minutes outside Hpa-an to help renew his connection to Mount Kwaegabaung and missionise in the town and surrounding villages to help build their congregation. During this time Hpu Takit's members who reside nearby to Hpa-an township also gather together in the central monastic complex in his birth village to listen to his *tohtor*.

The ritual practices of Hpu Takit's sermons are highly valued by all congregation members, especially those who live outside of his central village and have less regular contact with him. Attending his *tohtor* is thus significant for devotees seeking to cultivate a moral self and gather together as a community, exchange news and information and renew their connection with their lord, Hpu Chai. The annual ceremony, which attracts many members from outside his immediate community, also builds a strong sense of belonging and connection to a shared moral universe. In addition, the embodied nature of the sermon creates a "subjunctive universe" through which the various members of Hpu Takit's congregation can reconcile the disparate aspects of their everyday lives through set actions (Seligman et al. 2008: 20-21).

After eating some food and making an offering to my friend's grandmother, we sat down in the central ceremonial hall of the village. The open hall was full of elderly men and women, dressed in an array of beautifully coloured traditional Karen clothing. While people waited for Hpu Takit to come, some congregated around betel nut bowls chatting to each other about various things whilst others slept. The front table underneath the central throne at the front of the hall was covered in offerings of bananas, coconut and candles in woven cane baskets. Bags of soy balls, bottled water,

lychee juice, oil, isotonic drinks, and betel leaves and nuts were also placed on the table as offerings.

As the elders sat waiting for Hpu Takit to arrive, the temperature grew hotter. It was mid-April and despite the open hall, there was no breeze and the mass of bodies pressed together made the room warm and stuffy. In the crowded room people fidgeted and began to stretch their legs out to have a nap. My friend and I lay down on a bamboo mat, fanning ourselves and trying not to fall asleep in the humid morning air. One grandmother slept with a cheroot in her mouth, whilst another had thick red betel juice dribbling down her chin as she simultaneously tried to nap while keeping her eyes on her one-year old granddaughter who was playing close by. Over a megaphone about 100m down from the village I could hear one of the elders of the community cajoling young Karen Thingyan festival goers swimming in the nearby waterfall to come and join Hpu Takit for the *tohtor*: “Don't be shy. Even if you don't wear Karen clothes you are welcome to join.”

After more than two hours of waiting through the morning heat, one of the grandfathers announced that Hpu Takit was coming. An excited murmuring of voices buzzed through the hall. The old man asked everyone to sit in neat and orderly lines, because it was “more beautiful and respectful” to their leader. He then came around collecting donations from everyone in a silver alms bowl to add to the growing pile of food and other gifts at the front. As each person made their donation, they touched the money to their heads and those surrounding them before placing it in the bowl. The grandfather then carried around a glass of water with *thabyay* leaves inside, which we dipped our fingers in and placed on our heads. The elderly woman sitting next to me explained with a warm smile that our mind must be clean and pure like the water when we donate and meet with Hpu Takit.

As 3pm approached Hpu Takit still hadn't arrived, and the elders at the front of the room told us he would be joining us soon, that he was having a bath. As we waited the Karen grandfather at the front of the room continued to direct people into lines over the megaphone, singling out those who were not sitting in the correct formations or whose feet were not neatly placed under their bottoms in a sign of deference. He also

directed some to retie their white scarves with the distinct dragon pattern around their head so that they “looked beautiful for Hpu Chai”.

Hpu Takit finally descended the stairs from his monastery around 4:30pm, wearing beautiful, handmade golden robes. He was followed by a musical dance troupe which clashed a brass gong and a Karen two-headed drum. A group of elders in the community beside the entrance got up to dance to welcome him as he entered the hall and stepped up to the throne-like seat prepared for him at the top of the hall. Everyone bowed their heads low as he sat down with their eyes closed and their hands clasped above their heads in prayer formation, after which he began reciting Pāli sutras which his members repeated after him.

The congregation sat attentively for three hours as Hpu Takit worked his way through a series of Pāli recitations and Karen prayers. In a mechanical way, the assembled men and women followed his voice in a call and response fashion knowing exactly what to say and when to say it. The room hummed with their voices and his words of advice about appropriate ethics, values and morality. Hpu Takit spoke about the need to work hard every day to keep moral discipline so that ‘serenity and peace’, *shu mao lassai*, could come to the Karen. He talked about the decaying state of Karen society, and how in his travels around Hpa-an he could see fewer people wearing Karen clothes and more young people addicted to drugs and alcohol. He told them that the land was full of *chedehba* (P. *akusala*), immoral actions, and that all of these things were indicative of the decline of the world.<sup>160</sup> He explained: “We must all work hard to keep *thila* so that we see *shu mao lassai*, serenity and peace.”

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<sup>160</sup> *Chedehba* is the Plong Karen term for *akusala* in Pāli (B. *akutho*), actions defined in opposition to *kusala* actions which are thought of as moral. Many Karen people in Hpa-an have adopted the Burmese term *akutho*. *Akusala* actions include killing living beings, false speech, frivolous chatter, etc and are rooted in greed (*lobho/rāgo*), hate (*doso*) and delusion (*moho*).





Figure 13: Hpu Takit and his members at a sermon. Photo by author.

During the lengthy sermon, my body began to ache and my feet got pins and needles from sitting steady for so long. As the early evening set in, however, a cool breeze helped to cool the hall down. Yet the congregation did not seem to notice the change in temperature as most remained fixated on his words. Time seemed to stop for everyone that surrounded me, but my mind continued to wander. I asked one of the grandmothers afterwards, Hpi Da Boo if she also felt uncomfortable during the sermon as I knew she often suffered from back pain. She responded that Hpu Takit's voice was so sweet and cooling to her body and mind that she only felt peace and calm, *yeh tha shu mao*. She told me that she wished I could understand more fully what he said so that I could also feel *yeh tha shu mao*.

Hpi Da Boo's words reminded me of the scenes recounted in Paul Stoller's (1984) ethnography of 'learning to hear' and recognise the force of words in the context of Niger. According to the Songhay of Niger "the sounds of praise-names, magical words, and sacred musical instruments create an auditory presence that can transform a person morally, political and magically" (Stoller 1984: 559). For Hpu Takit's members a key aspect of his sermon that day was the embodied and sensorial elements that allow devotees to connect spiritually with Hpu Takit and his godly words. Echoing Csordas's (1993) discussion of religious practices that involve cultivation of certain "somatic modes of attention", Hpu Takit's sermon was also "culturally elaborated



ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (1993: 135).

In listening to Hpu Takit's *tohtor* his members are able to cultivate peace and calm, *yeh tha shu mao*, both in their inner selves, physical bodies and in the wider world. Indeed, the performativity of Hpu Takit's sermons not only facilitates the spiritual and moral progression of the congregation but also encourages them to consider their own sense of self and moral agency in the reproduction of a distinctly Karen moral universe. In Hpu Takit's emphasis on the need for cultivating an alternate moral universe based on the embodied practice of *doing* morality, his followers equally see themselves as contributing to the creation of a distinctly Plong Karen moral universe. These performances of morality are integral to how Hpu Takit's members see themselves, but they should not be thought of as unconscious or unreflective. Instead, they are deeply agentic.

In order to clarify what I mean by the term agency here, I draw on the work of post-structural theorists and their reconceptualisation of power as a set of relations that do not simply dominate the subject, but also, importantly form the conditions of its possibility (Butler 1997; Mahmood 2005). Following from Judith Butler (1997) and Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005), this comes back to Foucault's (1997) notion of "subjectivation", and the idea that even though one's subjectivity is often "proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group" (Foucault 1997: 291), this does not preclude the ability for deliberative thinking and active freedom. In this sense agency should be understood "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination" but, as Saba Mahmood (2001: 210) suggests, "as a capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable."

Moral agency is inherent to everyday life and the practice of *thila*, moral discipline. However, this does not preclude the presence of ambivalence, contradiction or uncertainty. While studies like Mahmood's have yielded important insights into our notions of agency and freedom (see also Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2006), an emphasis on coherent religious subjectivities enacted through practices of self-cultivation obscures the presence of other moral frameworks in people's lives. As I demonstrate

in this next section, even among those who practice extraordinary ethics, there is still doubt and serious contradictions in the way they see and understand what it means to live an ethical life as a Plong Karen person throughout the life course.

## **Ambivalence Amidst the Extraordinary**

Contemporary social theorists may take it as axiomatic that cultures are not fixed and bounded entities, but this highly moralised understanding of what it means to be Karen is central to the lives of Hpu Takit's congregants. It is also central to their sense of belonging, meaning and subjectivity in a time of significant social and cultural change. In this way religion permeates all aspects of daily life and virtuous selves are actively made and cultivated as a part of their understanding of everyday ethics. By their own account, they are willing to be disciplined and to work hard at meeting the rigorous moral standards that they set partly because they see the 'extraordinary' as fundamental to the substrate of life and particularly old age. Morality is an embodied quality, which requires everyday deliberation, intention and agency. However, even among Hpu Takit's followers, there is still room for debate, agency and consideration in their seemingly extraordinary understandings of their ethical ideals. Taking such an argument also compels us to look at the dynamics of how this project of moral reform is understood in relation to Karen moral ideals and society more widely.

Grandmother Hpi Da Boo is in her mid-seventies and walks with a deep hunch, close to the ground. She has long straight greying hair which she ties back into a tight bun at the back of her neck with a plastic comb. Her face is aged with deep lines, indicative of the many years she spent working in rice fields before joining Hpu Takit's congregation. She is always dressed in traditional Karen clothing, with wooden rosary beads around her neck and white strings tied around her wrists, which she told me, serves as a protective field. For Hpi Da Boo and others I spoke to, the body serves as a canvas for exhibiting her moral identity. She explained that wearing Karen traditional dress was an outward manifestation of being a good Karen person and an important symbolic gesture towards the enactment of Karen understandings of moral being.

Due to her ailing health, Hpi Da Boo lived in her daughter's compound near to Hpa-an, in a separate small house made from wood and thatch outside of Hpu Takit's community. The wall of her house where the Buddhist shrine sits is covered in laminated photographs. Some depict her family at Buddhist festivals, graduation ceremonies and birthdays, but the majority are of Hpu Takit from various stages of his life. Unlike the walls of her home, the floor is sparse, with only a few rolled up bamboo mats. Whenever I visited she offered me soft drinks and sweet snacks, passing on gifts from her grandchildren that came through to see her on their way to Thailand and receive blessings. The snacks, she explained, were not good for her, but I could eat them as an *Ingalaik maung* (K. English woman).

Whenever I was with Hpi Da Boo, time seemed to slow down. Life would seem less rushed and more peaceful in her small house. I often would lose sense of time there as well, sometimes spending four or five hours without even realising. We would spend our time together talking about Hpu Takit, the importance of *thila* and how she thought life had changed for the Plong Karen in Hpa-an district. And yet in many ways when I observed Hpi Da Boo I was always struck by how busy she really was.

Alongside her daily routine of counting beads and extended fasting, she was often in demand from various people in the community. Whenever major Karen festivals were held she was invited to sing songs and conduct traditional ritual ceremonies. She was also often asked to give blessings to young people in the neighbourhood travelling to work in Thailand, so that their soul might not be lost. Hpi Da Boo would also visit friends and relatives of other community members who were unwell or dying, and chant sutras at funerals and mourning services so as to help people's souls move to the next world. This was even more important in the case of sudden or accidental deaths which claimed the lives of the young. Much as Tannenbaum (1995) describes of Shan precept keepers in northern Thailand, Hpi Da Boo and others in Hpu Takit's congregation are considered by their broader community to be powerful beings with a unique ability to impart blessings and provide protection (see also Eberhardt 2006, 2017).

Community elders like Hpi Da Boo are regarded as the embodiment of Plong Karen cultural wisdom and knowledge. The ability to keep *thila* is considered difficult and those who do so are regarded with a mixture of awe and fear. I asked Hpi Da Boo if it was difficult to keep *thila* and she explained to me that it takes a lot of concentration and a daily commitment to discipline the self and the mind. Hpi Da Boo's daughter neither practices vegetarianism nor followed Hpu Takit and I couldn't help but ask her one day if she was worried for her next life. "I don't worry about anything" Hpi Da Boo told me. "I am too old to worry. I only think about *thila*." I pushed her on this point asking whether she thought it was possible for everyone to follow Hpu Takit and keep *thila* given the demands of daily life. She told me, "We should always try to follow Hpu Takit and keep *thila*, but it is very difficult for most people. If you have a family, you have to work to support them. If you are a young person, you have to get an education. Also, many people have to live in Thailand these days, so there is no time for *thila*. If you are old like me, it is easier to follow *thila*. I don't have to worry about anything. I only think about *thila*."

Part of Hpi Da Boo's response above about her daughter's life choices is embedded in the Buddhist conceptualisation that desire and emotional attachment have dangerous qualities which can result in physical or mental illnesses. As she told me, having control over one's emotions and engaging in daily merit making practices to cultivate discipline and a state of calm over the mind is a core part of being a member of Hpu Takit's congregation. As Hpi Da Boo emphasised on another occasion, "We need to clear the mind of all fears and worries. If we think about these kinds of things too much it can be bad for our health." However, part of this ambivalence towards her daughter was also embedded in beliefs around Plong Karen understandings of the life course.

As a relational marker of difference and positionality, Hpi Da Boo explained to me that old age and the concomitant withdrawal from economic activity is crucial to the diachronic structuring of Karen lives and her practice of morality. This is also part of a kind of historically specific cultural understanding of a kind of social contract between family members of the kinds of social bonds that ought to structure relations between Karen individuals and groups and the way that people move through life and

time. In line with this view, old age is conceived as a site for continued and demanding moral development and it is not unusual for elderly people to spend the latter part of their lives dedicated to accruing merit and other ritual actions aimed at affecting the quality of their rebirth.

According to standard Theravāda Buddhist practice, this is a popularly recognised stage of life across Southeast Asia, marked by increased involvement in the monastery, a more sustained adherence to keeping the five Buddhist precepts, and the taking on of various ascetic practices such as meditation in a spiritual quest to accumulate *parami*, moral ‘aptitude’ required in order to attain enlightenment (Eberhardt 2006, 2017; Jordt 2006, 2007; Tannenbaum 1995). For Plong Karen Buddhists these beliefs are not just about reaching nirvana, but rather they are fundamental to how one functions in society towards the end of the life course. In line with this view, Hpi Da Boo explained that moral practices take different expression across three life phases. When you are young you focus on your education and learning; when you are middle aged you focus on working, accumulating wealth and supporting your family; and finally when you are old you focus on *thila*, living a moral life according to the *dhamma*. Indeed, for Hpi Da Boo and many of the others in Hpu Takit’s congregation morality is not seen as something innate or available to everyone at all stages of the life course but is something that one works towards through an everyday and active emphasis on moral discipline that varies across space and time.

Hpi Da Boo’s story highlights how even among those with the most extraordinary vision of Plong Karen Buddhist morality, they accept that it is very difficult to balance with different stages of the life course. Indeed, despite their disdain for modern life and what they see as an increasingly degenerating social world, Hpu Takit and his members understanding of morality in fact allows for a significant degree of situationality. Equally the strict practice of *thila* is difficult to reconcile with the complex and dialogical understanding of Plong Karen subjectivity, which differs across time, age and space. While Hpu Takit’s members express an active willingness towards self-discipline regarding one’s desires and actions, the realities of Karen life undermine the coherence of their project of Plong Karen Buddhist revivalism. Morality is instead most concretely understood as taking place in competition and

conflict with other elements of life in a way that is inherently unstable. Even for Hpi Da Boo and others within the congregation, the cultivation of a moral self is often characterised by everyday discipline and practice, which in itself is inherently unstable, fragile and ultimately, incomplete. For Hpu Takit's vision of Karen ethical order the normative ideal of Buddhist moral perfection is often unrealisable and is not harmonious with the ambivalent character of the human experience. Instead, an ethical self is only made through active self-cultivation through membership within Plong Karen society and enactment of related, although sometimes conflicting, moral ideals.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have provided an exploration of the ethical practices and affective attachments that undergird Hpu Takit's project of Karen moral revivalism. I have shown here how Hpu Takit and his followers subscribe to a cosmological world order which amalgamates strict Buddhist codes of everyday ethics with a unique moral imaginary linked to Karen ethnic identity. I have described how in assisting in the reconstruction and preservation of a Karen past through the embodied promotion of a Plong Karen Buddhist moral universe, Hpu Takit's members develop moral agency and power in a world they feel is radically changing.

For this congregation of Plong Karen elders, Hpu Takit fulfils the dual moral role of a Buddhist leader and Karen King, connecting them to a wider cosmological scheme which sits in contradistinction to the commercialisation and materialism that increasingly defines Plong Karen people's lives. This hybrid religious-ethnic socio-moral sphere that has been built by Hpu Takit and his congregation is symptomatic of the social concerns of a community coming to terms with a past that, for many social actors, does not make sense any more, and a future which is anything but certain. Thus, by establishing a closed community of worship largely withdrawn from the outside world, the synchronised tempo of social and religious life in Hpu Takit's village assures the reproduction of Buddhism and Karen traditions as a stable reference point in what is a rapidly changing world.

However, as the case of Hpi Da Boo demonstrates, in examining morality amongst the Karen we must see Hpu Takit and his followers' understandings of everyday ethics within the larger context of a mutable and diverse social landscape. This in turn compels examination of different forms of subjectivity and the performance of ethical self-formation at other periods of the life course. Indeed, understandings of morality according to Hpu Takit and his congregation should not be seen as representative of the wider lived practice of everyday ethics among the Plong Karen in Hpa-an district. While some of the elders who follow Hpu Takit play a fundamental role as moral exemplars within the Karen community and broad conceptualisations of what it affectively means to live a moral life, coterminous with the teachings of the *dhamma*, their lives are understood as specific, in time and place, rather than representative of broadly Plong Karen sociality. Even among those who hold such strict understandings of moral discipline and metaphysical order can still recognise the disjuncture between the extraordinary nature of their moral practice and the possibility of enacting such moral ideals in daily life across the life course.

Part of putting this chapter at the beginning of my thesis is to locate the way Buddhist understandings of *thila*, moral discipline, informs ethical life more broadly in Hpa-an. That is to say, whether or not Plong Karen aspire to live by Buddhist ethical codes in the extraordinary sense – and in fact many people don't – it deeply informs their understanding of morality and the good even in its ordinary, everyday forms. While basic value orientations and moral frameworks of Plong Karen culture remain rooted in the importance of Buddhist ethical frameworks and the importance of community, individualism and new aspirational horizons which site beyond the village have radically changed contemporary Plong Karen society.

As I examine in the next chapter through the lens of my younger informants, what is considered 'good' and moral is actively evolving as people of different age, gender and status experiment with, critique and navigate various and often competing moral ideals. Furthermore, in understanding morality, it is important to give attention to the multifaceted context of everyday life and contingencies of people's everyday relations and interactions. Unlike Hpu Takit Karen members, young people see their lives and the enactment of a moral self in very different ways. As I argue, Plong Karen morality

is best understood not according to any neutral external measure or set of binary ethical positions, but through emerging and contradictory moral ideals which individuals resolve through everyday practices of ethical self-making.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Enacting Morality: Coming of Age on Shifting Moral Ground**

In Hpa-an, many elders deplore the social changes to Plong Karen society instead preferring nostalgic reverence for an idealised rural moral past. Grandmother Hpi Muh Eh would often reference with disdain the increased incidents of immoral behaviour and her perception of moral decline in Karen urban areas. She often focused on young people and their apparent lack of respect for traditions. In particular, she focused on the negative consequences for Plong Karen women as seen as a direct result of the influence of more open social morays coming across the border from Thailand through migration channels.

After decades of civil conflict, economic decline and political instability, the push factors that lead people to work in Thailand are complicated and intersect with a number of structural phenomena. During the 1990s and 2000s, Karen families experienced increased economic insecurity, massive violence and marginalisation under the SLORC/SPDC government (1988-2010) pushing many people to seek employment across the border. The opening up of Myanmar's state-controlled market system to private enterprise and foreign capital in the 1990s (see Campbell 2018; Fujita et al. 2009), in particular, negatively impacted many families' household incomes leaving little income for everyday household expenses.<sup>161</sup> This coincided with a sharp increase in demand for cheap migrant labour in Thailand to fulfil the roles that a growing educated, middle class Thai population increasingly shunned as 'dirty,

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<sup>161</sup> This built off the dense layer of clandestine black-market trading networks described in Chapter One that were developed under the socialist period (1962-1988).

dangerous and difficult'<sup>162</sup> and a massive boom in Thailand's manufacturing, fishing and seafood processing sectors.<sup>163</sup>

What is known locally in Hpa-an as 'the age of Thailand', out migration across the border has reshaped parent-child relations, gender roles and responsibilities significantly over the last three decades in Hpa-an district. Cultural contestations over the meanings of kinship, ethnicity, gender and everyday ethics have intensified, shifting the ways in which people see themselves and live day to day. Grandmother Hpi Muh Eh always wanted to discuss her concerns about young Karen women being exposed to the dangerous and immoral influences of Thailand's migrant culture. Hpi Muh Eh worried about Karen women's virginity and the growth in divorce rates for Karen married couples as a result of young women migrating from their natal villages. She exclaimed to me one day:

For Plong Karen, the most important thing is to be faithful (K. *thout kyar*) and to be honest (K. *tor loun*). Now that young women travel to Thailand they don't know how to be faithful and honest.

Hpi Muh Eh explained to me that in the past Plong women would spend most of their lives in the one place, ensuring the social reproduction of Plong Karen morality. Karen living arrangements are primarily uxorilocal, meaning that women traditionally stay within their own village after marriage. As women's souls are prone to wandering and thought to be vulnerable to both maleficent spirits and other powers outside the community,<sup>164</sup> Hpi Muh Eh explained to me that by staying within their own

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<sup>162</sup> During the 1980s Thai workers in industrial and agricultural sectors began shifting to higher-income, skilled employment in the city, creating a demand for cheap labour. This was enhanced between 1986 and 1996 when the minimum wage for Thai citizens grew significantly, and low-wage jobs in fisheries, food processing, factories and agriculture were increasingly shunned by the growing population of educated civilians. The demand for migrant labour expanded dramatically in 1988 when the Thai Prime Minister General Chatichai Choonavan declared a policy of 'constructive engagement' with Myanmar in a bid to "turn the battlefield into a market place" (cited in Rajah 1990: 107). After the fall of Mannerplaw, the KNU stronghold, in 1995, the ceasefire between the DKBA and the Burmese government also meant that travel became much easier through borderland areas.

<sup>163</sup> For a detailed discussion of the history and precarity of migrant labour in Thailand see the work of Stephen Campbell (2018), Eberle and Holliday (2011), and Pearson and Kusakabe (2012).

<sup>164</sup> The exception is post-menopausal women and widows.

communities young women's morality was protected. She related a story to me about what happened to disobedient Karen daughters who travelled outside their home communities:

A long time ago a young woman disobeyed her mother by entering into the jungle alone. Her mother had forbidden her to go into the jungle, because she was worried she would be harmed by a powerful spirit or wild animal. While she was walking through the forest, a powerful spirit met her and turned her into a little bird.

Hpi Muh Eh explained that you can still hear this bird calling out in distress for her mother every day at sunset. "That's what happens if you don't listen to your elders and go wandering outside your village. You can easily lose your soul." And yet despite these moral anxieties, the notion that women continue to reside in their villages, both before and after marriage, contrasts with the reality of contemporary Plong Karen social life.

On the motorbike ride home from Hpi Muh Eh's house I asked her granddaughter, Nan Soe, what she thought of her Grandmother's views towards young women and travel. Nan Soe responded ambiguously:

You know, it is very difficult. For Karen people it is very important to respect our elders. We should always listen to their advice. If they say do this, we should do it. But sometimes, if we listen too much, we can lose our chance. If we stay in our villages our whole lives like in the past time, how can we ever improve ourselves and our knowledge.

She laughed and told me that maybe she had also lost her soul and become a little bird. "But at least I am free to fly."

I met Nan Soe when she was living in Hpa-an as a university student, about forty minutes from her home village. For young people from rural areas of Karen State, Hpa-an serves as a commercial and aspirational capital for the state, drawing many for

both educational and employment opportunities. Living in Hpa-an and attending university Nan Soe told me that she felt “free” – liberated from her family and free to pursue her own ambitions. Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing social and political environment, according to Nan Soe living in the city also allowed her a space in which to question more traditional forms of female Plong Karen Buddhist morality.

Throughout the time I spent with Nan Soe I was confronted by the moral dilemmas that she faced as a young Karen woman and how she accommodated various interpretations of what it meant to be ‘good’ or ‘moral’ in Karen society in her everyday life. In spending time with Nan Soe and other young women like her, I came to see that moving fluidly through and between what appear as contradictory moral spheres does not necessarily provoke a moral “crisis” or “breakdown” (Zigon 2007), or indeed a transformation from one moral state into another. Rather, these conflicting moral spheres should be seen as an everyday part of life which people navigate and traverse as they attempt to live lives coherent with broader ethical ideals.

Shaped by the perception for new opportunities and desires which sit outside the agricultural realm, in this chapter I demonstrate how Plong Karen young women enact morality in highly differentiated ways across different moral spheres. This follows from the work of James Laidlaw (2002, 2014) who, in invoking the German philosopher Nietzsche and his characterisation of the natural state of the human condition as antithetical to the pursuit of the moral, argues that in understanding ethics we should privilege people’s capacity for freedom, reflexivity and judgement (see also Lambek 2010b, 2015; Robbins 2007, 2013). Focusing on the life of Nan Soe and the “betwixt and between” status of small town rural youth, I explore the way she makes moral judgements about the boundaries of what is and is not ‘good’, between often conflicting moral spheres. Rather than relying on a single notion of being moral in the world, I demonstrate that the enactment of multiple moral registers matters for Plong Karen, and they do not always point them in the same direction.

In the first section of this chapter, I lay out the how conceptualisations of everyday ethics among Plong Karen are deeply embedded in the life course and gendered understandings of goodness, which seek to mould and discipline young women as

ethical agents through a process of “moral becoming” (Mattingly 2014). I then go on to explore the influence of other moral exemplars in Nan Soe’s life as a result of her living in Hpa-an city, and how these also add to her own understandings of goodness and subjectivity as a young woman. Following on from Webb Keane’s (2015) insightful discussion of ethical life, I highlight the way that embodied forms of female morality should be distinguished from something that is determinative. As such, I consider gender as a kind of “ethical affordance” – “the opportunities that any experiences might offer as people evaluate themselves, other persons, and their circumstances” (Keane 2015: 31). In using this framework, I argue that gender norms and ideas are not necessarily determinative to an individual’s capacity to enter into an “ethical life” as the capacity for agency affords space for moral reasoning and practice. I demonstrate this point in the final section, by following Nan Soe through the morally perilous Thingyan festivities, drawing out the deliberate and agentic ways that she navigates her own moral subjectivity as a young woman as a process of experimentation and fun. The chapter demonstrates that enacting morality for young women ‘coming of age’ should be conceptualised as a set of reflexive and contradictory practices which produces the self as a moral agent.

## **Coming of Age as a Process of ‘Moral Becoming’**

In Plong Karen communities, social opinion acts as a deeply formative force in the lives of young people. The spatial arrangements of Plong Karen villages contributes to the importance of learning moral lessons early in life. Most houses in Hpa-an’s surrounding villages are made from wood with corrugated tin roofs.<sup>165</sup> Inside the houses, an entire family may sleep in one room under one mosquito net, which may also double as a lounge room where people gather together during the day and roll their bamboo mats out to sleep at night. In most houses, the kitchen will jut out of the back of the house in an open fashion to allow ease of access to the household and prevent the smoke from the cooking fire from coming inside the house. The lack of privacy within homes is replicated within Karen neighbourhoods, where houses are

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<sup>165</sup> As a result of remittances from migrants who have left Plong Karen communities, double-story cement houses are now common throughout Hpa-an district, even in the most remote villages.

close together and loud conversations in one household inevitably trickle into the next. Fences between households are rare, with boundaries marked by trees and other shrubs. In Plong Karen villages everyone watches each other, especially for signs of success or failure, little remains private. How much a family earns, how many children attend school and how well they are dressed and cared for and the relationship status of young people is a matter of constant village discussion. Rumours and false information can circulate quickly. In this context, the lives of young women are a constant source of intrigue and gossip.

Morality is a fundamentally gendered notion and for young Plong Karen women, appropriate behaviour is subject to critical scrutiny. Plong Karen culture is matriarchal and the domestication of women as moral bearers for the household and community more broadly is essential to their understanding of subjectivity and personhood. Outside the Buddhist concept of *thila*, there is no explicit term that can be translated as morality in the eastern Plong Karen language. Rather, there are a series of moral tales and discourses which recur throughout everyday life which provide an evaluation of conduct in relation to esteemed and derided human qualities. To be good is grounded in long-practiced cultural and religious traditions which emphasise the importance of both the family unit, but also the community more broadly. These conceptualisations are also highly gendered and intimately related to the life course.

A Plong Karen life is broadly categorised into three significant stages – childhood, marriage and old age. The Plong are regarded as the ‘mother’ group of the Karen people and the S’gaw as the ‘father’. As the mother group, Plong Karen regard themselves as the guardians of Karen traditions, morality and culture. Marriage is considered an important part of the life cycle and to grow old and remain childless is considered a great misfortune. Once married, a woman’s place is thought to be tied to the household and the moral preservation of the family unit. As part of their duty to the household, it is women’s responsibility to feed and nurture various spirits. For young women, then, the cultivation of a moral self in preparation for marriage starts early in their childhood and throughout their adolescence as they prepare to become a wife and care-taker of the home. The period of youth for Plong Karen women can be seen as an interstitial period of the human being *in process* – as subjectivities in the

making – only with careful development of moral “technologies of the self” can they, over time, enact morality (Foucault 1997).

According to this framework, morality is a quality that is learnt and cultivated iteratively and progressively. This conception of morality is embedded in the process of socialisation and the Karen belief that childhood is a time of wildness during which young people have less control over their emotions and desires (see also Hayami 2004). This view is evident in Karen people’s understandings of the soul, which are thought to leave the body more frequently in children and in young women of a fertile age.<sup>166</sup> After being born, an offering is often presented to the house spirit and a string tied around the child’s wrist to keep its soul from being enticed away from other mischievous *nat* spirits. The souls of children also need to be called and secured to the body more frequently, a belief symbolised in the annual wrist tying ceremony which is performed by elders in the community – who in contrast to children – represent moral exemplars.<sup>167</sup>

Women’s morality was a key point of conversation in Nan Soe’s home village. Alongside holding strict ideas around observing vegetarianism and the five Buddhist moral precepts, many people in Nan Soe’s village wore traditional hand-woven Karen dress and actively promoted Karen cultural customs as members of the Leke Karen Buddhist esoteric religious movement.<sup>168</sup> Like Hpu Takit’s Karen, Leke Karen people see themselves as the guardians of Karen cultural and literary customs, as well as traditional forms of Karen virtue and morality. As the granddaughter of a religious

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<sup>166</sup> This includes during dreams or when the soul leaves the body in an accident.

<sup>167</sup> The practice of wrist tying, long-considered by Karen Christian Baptists as an animist tradition to be avoided, has been embraced by KNU elites as a means of ritualistically cultivating unity across Buddhist and Christian Karen communities (see Rangkla 2014). These themes will be explored in Chapter Six.

<sup>168</sup> The Leke religious sect combines both Buddhist teachings and Karen traditions. The primary space of differentiation that separates them from more mainstream Buddhists is that they do not worship or give donations to monks or visit monasteries. Instead they have their own spaces of worship, which more closely resemble the style of a Christian church building: a rectangular wooden or cement building with a central post surmounted by a *hti*, the umbrella-like finial of a Burmese stupa. They primarily come together on Saturdays to celebrate their religion, where they dress in Karen clothes and eat vegetarian and read the Holy *Toah*.

elder, Nan Soe was brought up with strict understandings around what it means to embody morality, including ideas around the importance of female virtue as core to the power and protection of the household. Nan Soe explained to me that according to the view of elders in her village, Plong Karen women should spend their lives building an embodied disposition considered germane to the cultivation of morality. This is said to relate to the functioning and success of the family unit and the cosmological balance of the household.

Many taboos among Plong Karen are described with reference to offending the spirits, which can endanger the household and village as a whole. To offend the spirits might cause the rice crops to fail, the pigs and buffalo to die and for family members to become unwell. Women's inadequate observances made to the spirits, sexual misdemeanours or other immoral practices, can result in dire consequences for the household. Such misdemeanours can also result in a curse on the land and the failure of the rice harvest. As Nan Soe's grandmother explained to me, those women who do not conduct themselves with propriety are likely to condemn their family to ruin and disaster.

Nan Soe prided herself on being a good daughter and often spoke to me about the importance of morality for Plong Karen. She explained that Karen customs dictate that young women remain a virgin until marriage and premarital sex is said to result in those persons being hit with ill health and other misfortunes later in life. Adultery is also considered one of the most immoral acts a Plong Karen woman can make, damning her future children and their marriages, prosperity and success.<sup>169</sup> Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of harmonious relationships, over and above self-empowerment or ambition. For Nan Soe, however, one of the most important ways of demonstrating one's morality was through the body, how she lived and moved through the world.

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<sup>169</sup> Adultery committed by men is considered equally immoral. For a long time laws in KNU territory had very harsh repercussions for acts of adultery including jail time.



In rural areas of Hpa-an, morality and goodness is often embedded in a conceptualisation of the body as an outward manifestation of the interiority, including through appropriate embodiments and codes of female behaviour. As described by Nancy Eberhardt (2006) in her study of child-adult interaction among Shan communities in northern Thailand, the “body hexis” of Plong Karen children is learnt through everyday life and linguistic interactions (c.f Bourdieu 1977). Nan Soe told me that young women’s clothing choices, for example, are thought to be reflective of one’s morality. She explained that this also included the way you walked, how you spoke and how you interacted with others around you.

In the space of her home village Nan Soe encountered various kinds of social control and had to carefully balance her verbal and bodily behaviour in order to keep within well-established ideas about domesticated female ‘morality’. This included sitting with her legs folded underneath her with her feet pointed away from her elders, speaking more softly and respectfully and making sure not to laugh too loudly. She was also careful to respect and gratefully receive the advice of elders within this community, particularly in relation to notions of goodness, virtue and female morality. This was evidenced linguistically where she would note with respect the higher status of elders through her language and actions as part of carefully constructed codes of respect and etiquette that standardise behaviour between generations. The use of Plong Karen terms, in particular, when used with elders, allows the speaker to demonstrate both respect by establishing the appropriate hierarchy, but also intimacy by acknowledging their connection to a shared Karen community, family and past. This respect is expressed in special sociolinguistic terms of address ‘Hpi’ and ‘Hpu’, which although largely referring to ‘grandmother’ or ‘grandfather’ are also used to refer a person of great knowledge, and therefore also to senior abbots or other religious figures.

The valorisation of respect and deference to elders are also evident in Plong Karen oral songs and stories, which frequently emphasise the importance of filial piety, and the consequences for those who do not heed the moral lessons of honouring one’s elders (see also Andersen 1980; Hayami 2004; P. Joliffe and Worland 2018). According to Nan Soe, Plong Karen oral poems also highlight an epitomised notion

of female morality, *maung pa kan*. The term *maung pa kan* is broad, encapsulating a host of desirable feminine attributes, sentiments and virtues, ‘maung’ meaning woman and ‘pa kan’ the qualities which Karen women should seek to assume as moral bearers of the household. For young Karen women, the wildness of childhood is contrasted against the embodied expectations of an idealised Karen notion of feminine virtues such as shyness, modesty and humility. Nan Soe explained to me that to be *maung pa kan* is to be obedient to your elders, self-sacrificing, gentle and submissive. More broadly, she told me “if you are *maung pa kan* you grow your hair long, you wear traditional Karen clothes, you are good at housework, you don’t get out at night, you shouldn’t colour your hair or wear makeup, you sit politely, you walk and speak gently and sweetly.”

I asked Nan Soe if she was *maung pa kan*, and she responded, “not really... You know. I’m a modern Karen girl”, giggling to herself as she said so. She continued:

These days it is very hard to be *maung pa kan*. In some ways it is mixed with the ancient ideas of being moral, like my grandmother. Some parts are good, but other parts are not so good. For example, if we are *maung pa kan* we cannot go out at night. But if we cannot go out at night sometimes we lose our chance to improve ourselves and our knowledge. If we consider our future, we can lose our way if we are *maung pa kan*.

Indeed, while I saw a clear measure of respect and love for traditional Karen customs, I also noticed ambiguity around what Nan Soe would often refer to as the “ancient” beliefs of her elders. As described in the opening to this chapter, Nan Soe would often critique and debate the lessons of her elders. “That’s what ancient people believe,” she would tell me. “Young Karen people aren’t like that anymore.” From the lens of Nan Soe, the pursuit of morality should not simply be understood through the norms, values and customs that are passed down to her through her elders. Instead, Plong Karen morality is best conceived as a ground-up process whereby individuals cultivate themselves as ethical beings according to a mixture of different and sometimes conflicting moral frameworks they actively engage with. Here I draw on Webb Keane

(2015) who argues that gender should be understood as a kind of “ethical affordance” and that we can most clearly understand people’s notions of morality through the way they evaluate themselves in relation to such norms. These should not be understood as determinative.

Nan Soe’s understanding of the Plong Karen marriage ritual of *Duweï* helps to unpack this argument further. Directly below Mount Khwaekabaung is the Don Ying Pagoda, home to Hpu Duwei, where Plong Karen come to make a pre-marriage ritual offering, promising not to get divorced and to carry out the proper duties of a husband and wife (see also Hayami 2011). Combining Karen animistic and Buddhist religious rituals, many Plong Karen of Hpa-an district, both young and old, believe this ritual is vital to the strength of one’s marriage and the future prosperity of the household. According to many of the Plong Karen elders I spoke to who lived close by, if you don’t make an offering to Hpu Duwei your marriage will be cursed, and disaster is likely to strike your household. As one grandmother explained:

If your marriage is blessed by Hpu Duwei, your husband or wife will always be faithful (K. *thout kyar*). This is the most important thing for Karen people. So, if you want to avoid trouble in your life, you should make a promise to Hpu Duwei.

The three main elements of the Hpu Duwei promise consists of making a life together in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, to show respect to other families and to maintain the correct behaviour of a husband and wife. The most notable characteristic of this ritual is the importance of keeping *thout kyar* to one’s partner during marriage. According to Plong Karen elders I spoke to, it is believed the performance of this ritual connects the husband and wife as lifelong partners across time and space – in both this, previous and next lives. The preservation of the Duwei marriage rite according to many elders of the community I spoke to is central to Karen personhood and said to distinguish Karen from non-Karen people in the area. The continuation of this ritual is also associated with the social and moral order of the community where maintaining marriages is considered vital. As with other Karen ritual practices recorded elsewhere (eg. Hayami 2004, 2012; Rajah 1984), there is a

strong emphasis on the role of the bride, who bears a moral responsibility to both maintain the connection to Hpu Duwei through yearly offerings as well as to transmit the custom to the next generation.

I asked Nan Soe what she thought about Hpu Duwei and the beliefs around the popular marriage ritual. Nan Soe explained to me that becoming a wife and mother is thought of as a part of one's destiny. "To make an offering to Hpu Duwei is also important to Plong people from this area, because it is our culture. But sometimes, our culture can get in the way of our future," she explained. I asked what she meant, and Nan Soe explained to me that her elders' emphasis on the importance of marriage and children sometimes obscured other goals, such as education:

Our grandmothers tell us that the most important thing for women is to get married and have children. In my village, so many Karen girls get married at a very young age. But, in my opinion, marriage is not good for young women. Once you get married you can't keep getting an education and you have to start working and can forget all your dreams and goals. When you make the promise to Hpu Duwei, you have to promise to be a good wife – like *maung pa kan*. You should only care about the house duties and having children. So it is not always good to promote our traditions and culture. Sometimes it can get in the way of our own future.

"Also," she told me, "to be *maung pa kan* you shouldn't dance. And you know that I love to dance!" Indeed, among her peers in Hpa-an, Nan Soe was well known for her penchant for Korean dancing, spending many afternoons during the week with a group of friends learning new moves to their favourite songs. Unlike in her village where Nan Soe was taught to behave and model the behaviour of an ideal moral *maung pa kan*, with her friends in Hpa-an, she was rambunctious, confident and always performing.

For Nan Soe, her performance of morality in urban Hpa-an was embedded in her desire to emulate a 'modern' Karen self. For many of the young Plong Karen men and women

I spent time with, modernity is positioned as alluring because of the promise of something better – often ill-defined, but more technologically advanced. Tharaphi Than’s discussion of the Burmese term ‘modern’ is relevant here (2014: 113-114). She suggests that the Burmese understanding of ‘modernity’, *kaun mi*, refers to an external era of time, and thus to be in line with or up to date with the outside world. She notes that to be modern then is to “emulate the modern external world” and “discard the local and traditional” (2014: 114). This notion of modernity echoes the critiques of Karen youth by elders who, like Nan Soe’s grandmother, see young people’s attempts to attain adulthood through imported ideologies and consumerism as a betrayal of Karen identity and culture, conjuring up an alarming future in which older more traditional values no longer matter. Part of the critique of elders is embedded in the view of young people’s presumed propensity to adopt foreign practices and ethical frameworks, simultaneous to the discarding of Karen culture and values as obsolete, redundant or ‘traditional’. And yet, as other anthropological research on modernity shows (Besnier 2011; Foster 2008; Gaonkar 2001), the actual navigation of tradition and modernity from the lens of young people is much subtler and nuanced than such conceptual frameworks allow.

## **Navigating Conflicting Moral Selves**

Modernity is produced and shaped by actors in conjunction with localised life projects, generating their own possibilities and constraints (Besnier 2011; Foster 2008; Gaonkar 2001). Anthropologists have taken two analytical approaches to understand the agentive and creative aspects of modernity (Keane 2003). As Webb Keane (2003) identifies, one approach examines modernity through “disjuncture and differences”, highlighting the mobility of people, ideas and resources (Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). The other approach focuses instead on the intimate lived experience available through the ethnographic encounter (Abu-Lughod 1991b), privileging the micropolitics of “performing modernity” (Schein 1999). Drawing from critiques of these frameworks advanced by Keane (2003) and Besnier (2011), here I want to emphasise the variability within which young Plong Karen people experience and enact modernity and in turn morality.

In her sheer enthusiasm for social interaction, creativity, initiative and risk-taking, Nan Soe sometimes liked to position herself in opposition to her elders as educated, stylish and worldly, but most of all as forward thinking and 'modern'. By opening herself up to new networks made available in the city, relatively free from parental control, the emergence of new moral social-scapes and opportunities allowed Nan Soe to creatively adapt to an increasingly global and outward looking worldview. This was partly because she lived in Hpa-an with her two English teachers. For Nan Soe, many of her elders' views on appropriate female behaviour contradicted some of her teachers' understandings about how best to live and move through the world as a young Karen person 'coming of age'. Learning how her teachers navigated their own 'coming of age' therefore enlarged her own perception of what was possible and acceptable with a Plong Karen moral worldview.

In anthropological literature the 'coming of age' process refers to a time in people's lives that is distinguished by age or generation, often in a state of transition or 'flux' between childhood and adulthood (Lloyd 2005; Roberts 2009). Following Margaret Mead in her famous book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), Erik Erikson (1968) defined the youth period as a "moratorium", an intermediary period in which young people were free to experiment with different social roles. Beginning with adolescence, this has been described as a "rite of passage" (van Gennep 1960) and a time of "social transition" (Bucholtz 2002), when individuals shift from a position of relative powerlessness characterised by childhood to the responsibilities and autonomy of adulthood. As already described, for young Plong Karen women the 'coming of age' period, entails significant moral ambiguities and contradictions and is often perceived as a 'liminal' zone, between childhood and becoming a wife and mother – a process of "moral becoming" (Mattingly 2014).

It is important to recognise that Nan Soe's ability to navigate, negotiate and test the boundaries of virtuosity was partly embedded in her 'coming of age', in her being a young woman, not yet married. For others I met, who were slightly older and closer to marriage, the sense of freedom and ability to negotiate gender norms was more limited. Nan Soe's teacher, Nan Mu Htoo, often felt burdened by the contradictory, and sometimes conflicting, moral spheres within her life. As will be discussed in more

detail in Chapter Five, having spent time working as a domestic maid in Thailand, Nan Mu Htoo graduated from university with first class honours and established a highly successful English school in Hpa-an, which Nan Soe attended. However, Nan Mu Htoo constantly struggled with her two selves – the modern, educated, independent, forward thinking young woman and the model teacher come wife-to-be, who was of child-bearing age.

In returning home to Hpa-an, Nan Mu Htoo constantly distanced herself from the figure of the migrant. Although Bangkok is admired as a modern metropolis, many Plong Karen see it as a space for loss of values, customs and promiscuity. Much like in other parts of Southeast Asia, young Karen women's sexuality is considered a dangerous and immoral force that needs to be tamed and controlled within the village context (see also Kirsch 1982; Muecke 1984; Vogler 2013). Those who move to cities or internationally are thus often thought to have become contaminated by other cultural values or moral codes.

Research in other areas of Southeast Asia demonstrates how migration can be a catalyst as well as a context for conflicts between different regimes of value (Hayami 2004; Mills 1999; Muecke 1984). The perception of Thailand as a space where one becomes sexually promiscuous and of bad moral character was made clear to me after spending time with another young woman, Nan Than Than, whose mother had worked in Thailand her whole life. Among the Plong Karen, it is believed that children derive an important element of their moral essence from their mothers. Nan Than Than explained to me that she had been discriminated against as a child because her parents were divorced, and many people thought that, like her mother, she must be of low moral character. She told me that her mother was “just like a boy”, strong and independent with “hot blood.” She told me she liked to drink alcohol and smoke. She was also addicted to gambling so the amount of money she would send back to their family would vary wildly from month to month. Whenever Nan Than Than had an argument with her grandmother, she would say things like, “You are just like your mother!”, “Your blood is too hot!” and “You do not care for me like a good girl.” The perception that moving to Thailand strips women of their virtue and very ‘Karen-ness’

thus recurs in ways that shapes the values of young women in their home communities as they ‘come of age’ and how they are in turn perceived by the wider community.

Nan Soe’s teacher, Nan Mu Htoo was extremely conscientious about her own performance of a Karen moral self once returning to Hpa-an. As she explained it to me, “so that people didn’t think I became a bad girl while in Thailand.” She told me that when she lived in Thailand, she had felt confident, proud of her independence and in control of her life. Returning home, on the other hand, came with new rules, social expectations and changes in her own subjectivity. Since she had previously left school early to work as a housemaid in Bangkok, she felt particularly compelled to prove herself as a moral exemplar in the community with her new role as a teacher. Returning home to Hpa-an as a teacher in her late twenties thus came with many ambivalent characteristics, which necessitated conscious deliberation about how to perform in the world.

Being a female teacher in Myanmar for women requires embodying a number of characteristics and ways of dressing and behaving ‘appropriately’ (Tharaphi Than 2014). A teachers moral standing and purity is constantly monitored by the community, forcing them to undergo intense daily moral labour to conform to expectations. Given the emphasis commonly placed on qualities of feminine docility and virtuousness among teachers, migrant women are often defined in contradistinction to these expectations as strong, dangerous and morally contagious.<sup>170</sup>

When I first arrived in Hpa-an, Nan Mu Htoo rarely wore a matching *thamein* and *ingei* (B. skirt, blouse), often preferring to wear loose fitting t-shirts and cotton pants. They were more comfortable to wear for teaching, she told me. However, she constantly raised concerns with me about the views of her students’ parents:

You see, Justine, if you are a teacher in Myanmar you have to look and behave like one. It doesn’t matter if you can teach or not. The most

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<sup>170</sup> Part of this is a result of the high rates of gender-based violence female migrants face as well as sex trafficking.



important thing is that you are dress like a teacher and behave appropriately as a woman.

Nan Mu Htoo's explanation of the role of attire in visually performing the role of a teacher followed a number of negative interactions she had with parents who had not taken her or her school seriously "Anyway," she told, "I don't care what they think. Our students have the best English in Hpa-an so that's all that should matter." However, over the next 18 months she increasingly came to change her clothing habits in an attempt to project an image of female morality and domesticity. In my first year in Hpa-an she also joined a group of her students for the country-wide New Year Thingyan water festival revelries. Yet, in the second year she told me she would stay at home. "It is not good for me to go around with the students," she explained to me. "The parents will say bad things about me."

For Nan Mu Htoo, part of the tension she faced was related to her own 'coming of age' and proximity to marriage and motherhood. Nan Mu Htoo was engaged to be married when I met her and constantly spoke about her fears of how marriage might restrict her freedom and independence. Nan Mu Htoo hoped to study for a Masters' degree abroad and feared that marriage and her subsequent responsibilities might curtail this option. Australia, North America and the United Kingdom were her preferred destinations, places she had not travelled to before and where she could use her English skills but to which she had not travelled to before. Soon after she got married, her partner wanted to start having children. Yet, Nan Mu Htoo told him emphatically that they would wait until she had completed her Masters' degree. For Nan Mu Htoo, pursuing some of her own personal goals and ambitions, particularly related to her education, was more important than the traditional roles associated with becoming a good wife and mother. Indeed, despite being close to thirty and having multiple people in her life tell her it was time to have children, she carefully asserted herself and crafted a path that allowed her to advance herself intellectually and vocationally. "Some people tell me that I am not a good wife if I pursue my own education above my own family," she explained to me. "But I have my own dreams too."

These evolving conceptions of femininity, morality and ‘Karen-ness’ influenced the self-conceptions of her pupils. Living in Hpa-an with Nan Mu Htoo beyond the direct gaze of kin and community as she navigated her return from Thailand instilled in Nan Soe an enhanced sense of moral agency over her life too. Learning through Nan Mu Htoo’s life experiences enlarged Nan Soe’s own perception of what was possible and acceptable with a Karen moral worldview. Just like her grandmother, Nan Soe saw Nan Mu Htoo as a moral exemplar and over the time I got to know her, would often project views and notions of goodness and value, as related to education levels, modern lifestyles and her own personal goals and aspirations.

One muggy afternoon in the middle of August, Nan Soe and I lay down on the wooden floor of her house in Hpa-an on bamboo mats, chatting as we waited for a monsoon storm to pass over: “I am really interested in politics. I want to learn more about this subject,” she told me. We had spent the morning talking to a local member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and were reflecting on our conversation. “Sometimes I want to be a politician,” she exclaimed. “Why not?” I responded, “You’d be great! Myanmar needs more female leaders!” She laughed. “Of course, but my family wants me to be a nurse. There is no nurse in my family and in my village, so if I can be a nurse I can look after them. My parents already sacrificed a lot for me, so I must work hard to become a nurse.” However, simply because Nan Soe expressed her desire for life choices that are consonant with cultural directives, does not mean that there was no room for debate, evaluation, negotiation or manoeuvre.

Around the same time we were having this conversation, one of Nan Soe’s relatives had offered to find her a position at a local monastic medical clinic in Hpa-an as a nurse. As a result of her poor school grades and an inflexible higher education system, Nan Soe was unlikely to find a way into the formal government nursing degree program. However, by working for several years in the clinic, she would be able to gain invaluable experience equivalent to that of any tertiary education and might be able to set up her own clinic in her village as expressed above. Nan Soe had seemed excited by the prospect at first, but later changed her mind after talking with her peers and her teachers. A few weeks later, I asked whether she was going to take up her

relatives' offer and drop out of her university studies to pursue nursing. She responded somewhat guiltily:

I changed my mind. After speaking with my friends and teachers I decided to continue my Bachelor degree and my English studies. If I join the monastery as a nurse, I will never be able to practice my English and lose my chance to improve myself and realise my goals.

“What are your goals?” I asked her. She looked at me and burst into laughter, “To become a nurse of course.”

For Nan Soe, as for many young Karen people in Hpa-an, a Buddhist religious cosmological imaginary heavily framed her notions of subject formation, seeing acts of obedience, love, respect, and care for one's parents and elders as central to her personal moral foundation. Gendered understandings of morality, and the importance of giving back to family and community as a dutiful daughter, were also core to Nan Soe's ethical reasoning. Indeed, many of Nan Soe's conceptions of everyday ethics intersect with ideas of care, duty and community driven far more by ideals of reciprocity than self-interest. Part of this is embedded in the importance of honouring one's elders as a key component of Plong Karen culture (see also Andersen 1980; P. Joliffe and Worland 2018). Whilst deference to older generations certainly structured Nan Soe's understanding of how to live and enact morality as a young woman coming of age, she also had her own sense of how to pursue morality.

It was through multiple conversations with Nan Soe over my fieldwork, that I began to understand how young Plong Karen women simultaneously navigate strict genealogically inherited gendered subjectivities through highly creative moral agency, deliberation and experimentation. Cheryl Mattingly's (2014) concept of “moral becoming” usefully captures the way that Nan Soe pursues morality through a practical and sometimes deliberate engagement to herself, her family and her community. Considering the role of parents raising children with significant chronic illnesses and disabilities, Mattingly argues that they are called upon every day to try and ascertain what is best for their children amidst competing demands and changing

life circumstances. Even though Nan Soe is called upon to enact a moral self which is in line with preestablished norms and values she has inherited, she is also able to discern and see moral horizons of her own. Indeed, seeing the conflicting demands confronted during the ‘coming of age’ process as providing crisis or conflict ignores the way young people see and experience this period themselves in ways that re-formulate moral ideals and conceptions of collective identity. For many Plong Karen youth the enhanced sense of independence experienced through the ‘coming of age’ process – between the moral demands of childhood and marriage – can be exciting, fun and experimental. The generative nature of potential conflict between ethical frameworks was most visibly demonstrated during the Myanmar New Year Thingyan festivities.

## **Transgressing Morality? Playing with Moral Selves during Thingyan**

Thingyan is the most popular holiday in Myanmar and is celebrated in mid-April every year during the month of Tagu, the first month of the Buddhist Lunar calendar. The weather in April is usually very warm and humid and the months before seem to build in intensity. Most of the rice crops have been harvested by Thingyan, and the landscape across the country looks weathered and tired. Equally people seem to move slower during this time and many can be seen sleeping in their workplaces during the hottest part of the day. Even dogs, cats and other animals seem to move more slowly, seeking out shady spots in which to rest during the daylight hours. However, when the well-known song “Tu Poe Tu Poe” about the Thingyan water festival by the late iconic Burmese actor Zaw One is heard drifting along the breeze and the sweet smelling golden *padauk* flower blooms wafts into your path,<sup>171</sup> people young and old excitedly start counting down the days for Thingyan to arrive.

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<sup>171</sup> The *padauk* flower only blooms for couple of weeks every year during Thingyan. During the festival *padauk* flowers can be seen covering public places, Thingyan stages, in cars, temples and monasteries. People young and old wear the golden flowers in their hair and around their necks. According to local people the *padauk* flower symbolises youth, love and success. These flowers are given as a gift from young men to women as a demonstration of their love, but also as gifts between friends to show hospitality and goodwill.

Considered the greatest of Myanmar's full moon festivals, for almost one week the entire country comes to a standstill during Thingyan. Highway bus companies, restaurants, government ministries and the majority of businesses allowing themselves a well-deserved break. Dating back more than 900 years, the ritual celebrations of Thingyan are rooted in Hindu laws and myths. The term itself means 'transit' and it is said that during this time the sun enters the constellation Aswini in sign Aries from Pisces and the celestial deity Indra, *Thagyamin*, descends to the earth writing the names of good people into a golden book to bring them wealth and prosperity for the coming year. In the days prior people collect nine types of leaves and flowers to make a Thingyan pot to welcome *Thagyamin*. Indeed, Thingyan is a deeply auspicious time and astrologers across the country spend their days watching for signs of *Thagyamin* during this period to help make predictions for the coming year.

For many Plong Karen Buddhists Thingyan is a time of reverence, merit-making and dedication to the Buddhist scriptures, heralding the beginning of an auspicious new year. During Thingyan some people take things very slowly, spending their days focusing on mindfulness of breathing and cultivating a sense of impermanence through *vipassana* meditation (Braun 2013; Jordt 2007). Meditation camps are very popular during Thingyan as a form of acquiring merit by cleansing the impurities of the past year, and many of my young Karen friends had also spent time in them volunteering as cooks and cleaners as another form of showing their devotion to the Buddha. During Thingyan, some people also ordain as monks and nuns for a short period of time (usually 7-9 days) in either a local monastery, a meditation retreat or at the monastery of their birthplace. People also focus on making *dāna*, through donations and other acts of service to the *sangha*, while others engage in more social acts of kindness, making various kinds of Thingyan traditional foods to share with their neighbours in what is called a *satudithar*. It is also a time to wash away the sins of the past year, to rest and enjoy yourself.

During Thingyan, friends and community members famously come together to sprinkle scented water on each other from a silver bowl using sprigs of the *thabyay*

leaf,<sup>172</sup> a green tropical tree thought to hold healing properties. This practice is widely believed to wash away the past year's sins in preparation for good health, wealth and happiness. In Hpa-an, you can also find people in traditional Karen dress, lining the paths to significant caves and other religious landmarks to sprinkle water on your shoulder from the *thabyay* leaf. However, the majority of young men and women can be found riding around on motorbikes and in the back of pick-up trucks, tractors and rickshaws throwing water on each other at street parties, big and small.



Figure 14: Thingyan festivities in Hpa-an (April 2016). Photo by author.

The New Year festivals across Southeast Asia are understood as a traditionally sanctioned time for ritualised performances that protest, mock or flaunt traditional social hierarchies (Davis 1984). In northern Thailand, Richard Davis argues that the festival opens a liminal space for young people to express themselves, a stage where acts and expressions that normally are frowned upon and suppressed can be acted out in a contained time and space. In Hpa-an, vehicles of every kind converge around Kanthayar lake and the Thanlwin river where people dance around makeshift stages and spray water from large water hoses at anyone who passes by. Behind them large four-foot speakers, built up on top of each other like bricks, blast out the most popular

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<sup>172</sup> The *thabyay* leaf also holds important symbolic value to interact with supernatural elements and is used during the new year celebrations to ward off ghosts and malevolent spirits.

sounds and beats of the year from Myanmar and across the globe. Thingyan is a time when young people feel a greater degree of freedom, and consequently alcohol and drugs are very common (see also Menager 2017: 221-52). In front of each of the podiums it is like a dance party with young bodies, slowing down the numerous cars and other vehicles on the road as they dance to the music. The Karen are well known for their generosity during Thingyan and many of the stages also have tents with tables and chairs set up beside them for *satudithar*, where festival goers are called to sit down for Thingyan rice (B. *Thingyan htamin*). At places people also hand out drinks and snacks like *mont lone yeibaw*, warm glutinous rice balls with sweet jaggery sugar-cane inside, served with a sprinkling of grated coconut, which people greedily grab at. Around Hpa-an it is also popular to hand out toddy palm juice, which once fermented can be quite alcoholic.

During Thingyan in Hpa-an, people move not only between different water stages, but also to different Buddhist religious holy sites to pay their respects to the Buddha. Each day focuses on a different religious site, beginning with Lonya cave and ending with Sadan cave, where people come to seek blessings or make a donation for the coming year. The site of young men and women in their K-Pop inspired clothing kowtowing at Buddhist religious sites is incongruent. Indeed, despite the fun and frivolity there are certain duties one must perform during Thingyan such as feeding your loved ones in the cemetery, releasing fish or paying respect to your parents by washing their feet.

Before coming to Hpa-an, Nan Soe had spent every Thingyan meditating in her local monastery. Lay meditation during Thingyan is very popular and seen as an avenue of spiritual renewal, endorsing temporary withdrawal from the materialistic world and what many see as a disintegrating value system (Jordt 2007). Nan Soe told me that meditating was good for the mind, but that she felt very bored and restless when she engaged in such activities. Nan Soe explained that Karen people looked down upon girls who participated in the other kind of Thingyan activities – “they say a lot of bad words about them. Like they are ‘bad’ girls (B. *bwe sho*), that they are ‘sexy’”. Part of this is based on the increasing use of methamphetamines in Hpa-an and the prevalence of drugs during Thingyan throughout the country. These conceptions are also reflected in the news and from government officials who urge young women to be aware of the

dangers of wearing indecent clothes, drinking alcohol, unprotected sex and drugs. In 2016 Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) government reinforced these perceptions by introducing a temporary ban on selling contraception to try and prevent young people engaging in sexual activities. Despite the scaremongering, Thingyan for many young people is simply a time to rest from study, work or other home obligations and enjoy themselves.

During the four days of the 2016 new year's festivities Nan Soe and I spent every morning getting ready together with another friend, Nan La Moo, making sure our outfits were cool and in style, and our makeup perfect. Like Nan Soe, twenty-two year old Nan La Moo was confident, outspoken and had the energy and smarts of a young person ready to take on the world. She had finished studying English at Hpa-an University and when I met her she was working part time at one of the recently opened mobile phone shops in downtown Hpa-an. A confident and eloquent speaker, she told me that her sales job and learning English was just a stepping stone to something larger. "I want to be a flight attendant," she told me. "I want to get out of Hpa-an and see the world."

Nan La Moo's 24-year-old boyfriend Saw Sun Ni also joined us that day. He wore jeans hanging on his hips, showing off his Adidas underwear. The sides of his hair were buzzed, and he had gelled the middle section into a stylish do. As Nan Soe, Nan La Moo and I perfected our faces and hair, he and some of their other friends prepared their motorbikes, filling them up with petrol and taking their mirrors and baskets off – "it's more stylish" he told me. After getting ready, the other girls and I jumped on the back of a motorbike driven by one of the boys in our group, one leg on either side of the motorbike, and cruised along the main road between Hpa-an's villages, stopping along the way at various makeshift wooden stages, to dance with people under a constant shower of water streaming from hoses, buckets, water pistols, cups and other receptacles. As we passed trucks and rickshaws along the way, people threw cups of water out of large plastic drums on our bodies. We passed a group of small novice monks throwing water outside a monastery and a military garrison with soldiers drunkenly singing along to traditional Thingyan songs on a makeshift stage.



Along the route we stopped at platforms known as pandals which double as both a dance stage and a launch pad for the hosing. On our motorbikes we would wait in line behind other festival goers to take our turn to be doused in water, the beats of the music becoming more deafening as we drew closer to the speakers. There was not a *longyi* or *thamein* (B. skirt and blouse) in sight on the young revellers who cruised around in black skinny leg ripped jeans, matching group t-shirts, sun glasses, denim jackets and flat bill caps. Unlike us, many of the groups were wearing matching black t-shirts which they had prepared in advance of the festival, with names like ‘Vampire Team’, ‘Team K’, ‘Dynamite’ and ‘Demons’ branded on them in red, white and blue, the colours of the Karen flag. Some of them had bearers who rode out in front carrying vinyl banners bearing their group name as they drove around at high speed in packs of twenty to thirty people.

After stopping at a *satudithar* to eat ‘Thingyan rice’ we decided to visit nearby Sadan cave as it is considered auspicious to visit there and make a donation during Thingyan. The traffic along the dirt roads there was bumper to bumper – made worse by the occasional stage of water set up by villagers to soak passers-by. Despite being a religious space, there was a festival-like atmosphere nearby the cave and traders gathered selling everything from fried Indian snacks, to plastic machine guns, helium balloons, hats and sun glasses. Various trucks were also allowed in through the crowds to hand out packaged rice and dried fish – a traditional Thingyan speciality. Others were handing out free bottles of water as a form of making merit for the year ahead. The Karen Border Guard Force (BGF) (former DKBA) was also there, managing parking and security in exchange for ‘donations’ from the assembled crowds. They stood out among the crowds of festival goers in their army uniforms and serious faces, AK-47's resting on their backs. However, no one was phased by their presence.

After making a donation at Sadan cave, we got back on our motorbikes stopping at a shop in a nearby town to have another dance. The boys in our group soon scattered to go and buy cans of beer. There was a group of girls dancing there very provocatively in short shorts and white ripped singlets, and Nan Soe explained she recognised one of them from her village: “She can dress and dance like a sexy girl because she lives in Thailand... Before she went to Thailand she would never dress like that.”

Bottles of the Thai wine cooler, Spy, and cans of Thai Singha beer were passed around and there were already some young men sprawled out on the ground passed out. A man drove by on a motorbike wearing a short red dress and a bra with a wig on, beeping his horn incessantly through the mass crowd of people. Young men and women smeared the thick yellow wet paste of *thanaka* across our cheeks, with cheeky glints in the eye as they called out 'Happy Thingyan'. A whole can of shaving cream was sprayed in my face, alongside another hand with *thanaka* which stung my eyes and filled my mouth with grit. Screams rung out in front of me from the other girls as a bucket of icy cold water was thrown on us, but they were drowned out by the sounds of the music which blared out from the large speakers close by. Many of the people dancing there were drunk and high on drugs and Nan Soe told me we should "go and take a rest" at her cousin's house who lived close by.

We arrived at Nan Soe's cousin's house and were warmly welcomed with towels to dry ourselves off, as well as soft drinks and snacks. Her cousin was the same age as Nan Soe and she told me that she preferred not to go out during Thingyan, spending the extended holiday at her local monastery meditating with her mother. Nan Soe's cousin explained that it was "not good" for young Karen women to be out during Thingyan celebrating as we were, as many people often got the wrong impression – "they think you are a bad girl if you go out." Glancing at Nan Soe, she added:

Also, there are many risks if you go out. For example, you can have a heart attack if the cold water hits you too many times. Many girls also get raped. There are many Burmese boys here who will take advantage of Karen girls. Others drink too much and can die in motorcycle accidents. You must watch yourself when you are a young woman, because you can easily lose your way. There is a lot of negative influences from Thailand and other foreign countries which promote 'bad' habits.

As an aside when Nan Soe left the room she noted to me:

You know, Nan Soe is so young and naïve. She doesn't understand the boys' real intentions. I know that she will go on the motorbike with them. It is not good, you know, to go around like this with boys. These days young women think they can do anything they want, but it is not good to disrespect your parents and go out like this. You will have a lot of problems in your future life.

Despite her cousin's advice, Nan Soe and I took ourselves back to meet our friends to have one last dance. As the sun went down, the young men and women around me drank more, their bodies increasingly coming closer together, swaying rhythmically with the music, arms in the air, eyes slightly glazed. Alcohol was passed around, and the heavy smell of beer and whisky tinged the air as people's faces draw closer together. Water flowed out of a hose nearby, faces luminescent in the moonlight, ghostly looking with the heavy eye liner and mascara running down their faces. I looked over at Nan Soe dancing and she smiled at me. Pointing my hand in the direction of my motorbike, I gestured towards home and whether she thought we should leave. Yelling over the deep thumps of the electro music beats she responded: "This is our last night to be young and free, so let's not lose our chance!"

The next day was New Year's Day (B. *hnit san ta yet nei*) and we got up early to go and visit Nan Soe's grandmother and pay her our respects as is customary. On New Years Day, the tone of the holiday period changes dramatically to a day of humility and charity. Buddhists across the country celebrate the first day of the New Year by gathering with their parents and elders and flocking to their local pagodas to make merit, lighting candles and incense and buying fresh flowers to place in front of the lying Buddha. It is also popular to give donations and gathering around bodies of water to release captive fish into lakes and rivers. It is regarded widely as a time to pay obeisance to elders with a traditional offering of water in a terracotta pot and other gifts to parents and grandparents in particular. Young people also perform a hair washing ceremony with their elders, reminiscent of Burmese kings during the Ava period who are said to have travelled to Mawlamyine to wash their hair from the sacred spring of Gaun Say Kyun (B. Shampoo Island), as an omen of good luck and

prosperity.<sup>173</sup> In the early evening before the sun goes down, groups of middle aged and elderly women sit down with monks at road intersections to recite sutras to warn off any evil spirits from their neighbourhood, giving blessings for the new year.

On our way out of Hpa-an to go and visit Nan Soe's grandmother, most of the water stages outside the front of houses and shops were being taken down, and we passed many other young men and women with their families on their way to religious sites in Hpa-an to make merit and blessings for the new year. Tightfitting jeans, short skirts and dresses had been replaced with more respectful and traditional Karen garb and faces were clean of makeup. The friends we had been dancing with the night before had also gotten up before sunrise to help their families cook and prepare packages of food to hand out to people along the road, with bottles of water and traditional Karen home-made snacks wrapped in large teak leaves from nearby forests. Back in her matching Karen skirt and blouse on her way to pay respects to her grandmother Nan Soe was again the epitome of goodness. She crossed her legs politely to one side whilst sitting behind me on the back of my motorbike, a box of sweet cakes in her hand that she had bought earlier in the week, ready to greet her grandmother like a good Plong Karen young woman.

Later in the day I spoke to Nan Soe about what appeared to be the contradictory moral worlds embedded in Thingyan, and indeed, in Nan Soe herself. I wondered out loud to her whether Thingyan offered a possibility to ventilate and act out in relation to the many pressures and demands young people faced. Recalling to mind how Richard Davis (1984) refers to the Buddhist New Year festival in northern Thailand as a "rite of reversal", did Thingyan offer a commodious space for releasing steam and enacting subversive moral identities – albeit temporarily? Nan Soe explained to me that for her Thingyan was both fun and exciting – a "time to be free and dance and let go of all of our problems" – but also a time of deep moral contemplation of the self and one's

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<sup>173</sup> It is believed that the island was created by the Nat King, Sakka, who cast a ruby from the sky which turned into an island to shelter the Lord Buddha from a storm during his previous life as a duck. It is also believed that the island is visited by many spirits who come to meditate there.

duties to parents and other elders. “It is a time to enjoy yourself, but we should never forget to show respect to our elders and our religion,” she explained. This was especially the case for people who spent their days meditating or ordaining as a nun. But, even for her, she told me:

Of course, we should have fun and enjoy ourselves. This is the youth time. But we should not lose ourselves and who we are. If we do, we can lose everything.

While Nan Soe’s participation in the Thingyan festival can be read as a counter-reaction to the stifling imposition of tradition, she did not necessarily view it that way. Nan Soe was unlike young people described in much of youth studies literature who actively seek to disrupt the system of moral hierarchies as part of the ‘coming of age’ process (de Boeck and Honwana 2005; Lindegaard 2009; Woodman and Bennett 2015). She sought to navigate her world in ways in which she could be both a good or moral young woman motivated by responsibility towards her family, her ethnicity and cultural customs regarding women’s morality. Yet she also sought to craft herself as a modern and educated young woman, who liked to dance, laugh and whose lifestyle reflected that of inhabitants in cosmopolitan spaces far beyond the small-town site of Hpa-an itself.

While outsiders may perceive inconsistencies and incompatibilities between these worlds, young people like Nan Soe may not experience any contradiction moving within and between them. In a life where religious, cultural and other morals compete with each other in young people’s lives, Nan Soe’s agential navigation of potentially conflicting frameworks reflects the work of Samuli Schielke (2009, 2015) who highlights the ambivalent and often contradictory values of Egyptian youths. Like young Egyptian Muslims, for Nan Soe Karen moral codes and norms related to Buddhist morality remain important and fundamental to her sense of self and identity. However, various Karen spheres of morality within one’s life cannot be neatly separated, but instead blend and overlap with one another in the course of daily life. Rather than positioning young people who live between their rural and urban worlds as morally alienated as a result of confronting ethical “pressure points” (Schielke

2015), we should understand them as reflexive moral agents who are actively and creatively shaping the world around them in ways that simultaneously cohere with and re-imagine collective moral ideals.

## **Conclusion**

Through this chapter I have sought to illuminate how young people's moral agency in Hpa-an is constructed in relation with various kinds of moral exemplars and how the young generation takes a more active part in their own transition to adulthood amidst conflicting desires and expectations. By focusing on the life story of Nan Soe, I have given an insight into the complex and often contradictory nature of everyday ethics during the 'coming of age' process, especially in its more subjective dimensions. At the core of this analysis is an examination of changing norms around female morality, and how new social, cultural and educational spaces are challenging traditional structures and ideas of being in the world. However, rather than challenging worldviews per se or resulting in a kind of "moral crisis" (Zigon 2007) or "pressure points" (Schielke 2015), I argue that a holistic understanding of morality and its pursuit emerges by examining how youth move between different ethical worlds as agential and reflexive moral agents.

This chapter has examined how gendered notions of Plong Karen morality and everyday ethics shape the experience of 'coming of age' in contemporary Hpa-an. Culture, ethnic identity, language, gender, modes of life and orientations to the world all mould people's understandings and performances of morality. Yet these influences are not entirely determinative. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the various moral spheres within which Karen youth in Hpa-an enact morality also offer the resources for experimentation, play and agency. The life of Nan Soe, in particular, highlights the ways that Karen youth employ moral agency and creativity in their discourses related to everyday ethics. By focusing on Nan Soe through the lens of Thingyan, I have given an insight into the experimental nature of everyday ethics, especially in its more subjective dimensions. For Nan Soe, Thingyan, like Hpa-an city, serves as an arena in which the contradictions between conflicting visions of moral selfhood may be engaged and negotiated, ideally promising reconciliation and

transcendence but also inviting experiences of internal conflict and contradiction, as a part of the process inherent to coming of age. Part of this is about privileging new ways of being and behaving in the world that are both creative and experimental. But it is also about maintaining a view of the self as a social being embedded within community, culture and family. Morality in this sense has just as much to do with normative moral cultural codes within Plong Karen society, as well as how people transgress, experiment with and negotiate their own understandings of what it means to live and embody everyday ethics.

Rather than challenging worldviews per se, this case helps to demonstrate how young Karen people are able to navigate their morally plural lives while also maintaining cultural and ethical continuity. While contradictions can emerge between exterior and material performances, they themselves do not necessarily experience any conflict moving within and between them. To live a moral life then is not a top down imposition of norms, values and practices, rather a ground-up reworking of the frameworks of morality in ways that make sense to young people both socially and for their own senses of themselves as ethical beings. And yet, as I have also described, the process of crafting lives that both augment and cohere with moral ideals at the time can often involve pervasive self-doubt, insecurity and moral ambivalence. The next chapter explores these themes further by examining how new educational spaces which have proliferated in recent years impact the life-course and outlooks of young Plong Karen people in ways that conflict with and augment filial notions of Karen personhood and moral subjectivity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Traversing Morality: Reimagining Lives, Hopes and Filial Obligations

One afternoon in June I was on a mini bus to Hpa-an from Myawaddy on the Thailand-Myanmar border. I closed my eyes, trying to sleep, feeling slightly nauseated as we drove through the winding roads of the Dawna mountain range, *Naung Kalar*. The scenery from Myawaddy to Hpa-an through *Naung Kalar* is made up of dense jungle and the heavy rain outside shrouds the horizon in a heavy mist. Apart from the odd army hut with a few poor soldiers left to hold their leaking bamboo forts in the rain, there was little human habitation. The small bus was filled with a bulky mixture of goods from Thailand, including large boxes of dried snacks and canned drinks which sat under our feet. The pungent smell of betel nut wafted through the bus as people spat into little plastic bags that were given to them by the driver. Sitting next to me, a young-looking couple chatted away in Plong Karen about their return home to Hpa-an and my ears pricked up. Saw Tin Oo and his wife Nan Nilar Aye explained to me that they were on their way back to their home village near Hpa-an, to visit their 18 month old daughter.

Like many others their age, Saw Tin Oo and Nan Nilar Aye finished studying after middle school<sup>174</sup> and found work in Bangkok, Thailand, where they stayed for the next ten years working in households and restaurants. Showing me a collection of photos of their baby on their phones, I asked if they had considered keeping their daughter with them in Bangkok whilst working. They explained that it's common for Plong Karen migrants working in Thailand to leave their children with their parents back

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<sup>174</sup> In Myanmar, state education is broken up into primary school, middle school and high school.



home. Noting the difficulties of maintaining the long working hours of a migrant with a child, they also explained:

It is better for our daughter to grow up in her own country, where she is a citizen, she can go to school and be with her own people – and where we will also return. Besides, there are more opportunities now in Myanmar and we want to make sure she doesn't become a migrant like us.

Saw Tin Oo and Nan Nilar Aye are just two of an estimated 3-5 million migrant workers from Myanmar who make the commute from the border eastwards, in a well-trodden circuit to Thailand's major cities (Balčaitė 2015; Campbell 2018; Pearson and Kusakabe 2012; Rangla 2012).<sup>175</sup> When I first arrived in Hpa-an and told people that I was interested in studying youth, they told me I had come to the wrong place. If I wanted to meet Karen youth, I'd be better off spending time researching in Bangkok. Many Karen people spoke to me about their home villages in Hpa-an district as places bereft of young people – full of aging grandparents and the small children they look after while their sons and daughters work in Bangkok. Many of these grandparents have already spent time working in Bangkok, and the expectation for a long time has been that when these small babies inevitably drop out or fail their high school matriculation exams they will also take over from their own parents in the factories, farms and fisheries of Thailand.

Over the last three decades, remittances from migrants have emerged as a critical insurance mechanism for many Plong Karen families in Hpa-an district, the material effects of which can be seen across the landscape. For a long time, social disintegration, unemployment, impoverishment and conflict have all been features of Karen State, but when I first arrived in Hpa-an I was struck by the large houses I saw everywhere and the constant construction. A new house is the first major investment a Karen family will make with savings made from migration journeys, and many

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<sup>175</sup> It is difficult to estimate the actual number of Burmese migrants working in Thailand, due to the complex social, legal and historical factors related to migration.

houses in both urban and rural areas are made out of bricks and concrete – instead of the wooden and bamboo houses of former times – adorned with grandiose steel gates, reflective windows and satellite dishes. Where vehicles were once a rare household commodity of only the wealthy, cars, trucks and motorbikes are now also common. Indeed, as a result of the large-scale movement of Karen people over the border in the last three decades, many families have experienced a transition from a subsistence lifestyle to a more middle-income status.

Beginning with the stories of an older generation of Plong Karen men and women who spent their young lives as migrants in Thailand, in this chapter I explore how this new wealth has manifested itself in the changing hopes and aspirations of young Plong Karen men and women. The growth in family incomes as a result of migration over subsequent years has had significant implications for Karen families, creating different opportunities, challenges and aspirations. Where there is much less pressure on family household incomes, young people are much more likely to stay in school and finish their high-school certificate and even move into university education rather than to Thailand for employment opportunities. These have become particularly pronounced over the last five years as a result of political changes in Myanmar, and the accompanying economic and social changes.

In tracing the changing lives of multiple young Plong Karen men and women through this chapter, I demonstrate that it is through everyday moral agency that Plong Karen youth strive to transform their lives and actualise a eudaimonic vision of the self. This draws on the work of philosophers who argue that wellbeing is not so much a state of being, but a process of fulfilling one's virtuous potential (Annas 1993, 2011; Hursthouse 1999; MacIntyre 1981). In particular, I focus on the role that new private education learning centres have played in creating new hopes and aspirations among young people, and how these come into contact with the dilemmas posed by traditional rural notions of filial obligation, reciprocity and sacrifice as a form of virtue and human flourishing. In attending to the tangled web of intergenerational, institutional and affective practices which shape young people's lives within these new learning sites, I demonstrate the conflicted logics embedded within young people's understanding of the self and morality as it is lived and experienced.

## **Migration and its Legacies**

The notion that people move for their survival is not new to the Plong Karen of the Thanlwin valley. One of the first things that was explained to me about Plong Karen people, in contrast to their S'gaw Karen brothers, was their ability to adapt and live with other cultural groups. One of my closest friends in Hpa-an, Nan Mu Htoo, explained that unlike S'gaw people who resided in remote mountainous areas, Plong are adaptable, business-minded, intelligent and like to travel. Similarly, stories, songs and tales of Plong Karen history speak to the importance of movement and migration in response to political and social change over time. Contacts with outside cultures and social fluidity, have long been features of the Plong Karen social landscape, contributing to a creative cultural mosaic of linguistic, cultural and ecologically contiguous peoples. However, the intensified migration processes of the last three decades have deeply affected social life in rural communities of Karen State.

For hundreds of years, agriculture was the mainstay of family sustenance in Karen households. While more than sixty percent of Karen State's income comes from agriculture and the majority of people still live in rural areas, the impact of high rates of migration is visible across the social and material landscape. Decades of civil conflict, economic crisis and the state's failure to invest in education means that Thailand has offered one of the only economic lifelines for many families, and connections across the frontier are deeply embedded in the social fabric of most Karen families (see also Balčaitė 2015). During this time, agricultural production, the mainstay of the household economy, has shrunk significantly and rural livelihoods have become multifunctional and multi-sited. Across Hpa-an District, it is common to see people engaging in wet-rice cultivation. However, plots are small, and only few households cultivate enough land to subsist on for everyday living costs.

Only 160km east of Hpa-an, the Mae Sot valley in Thailand became a natural migration hub for the many Plong Karen seeking new economic opportunities outside the Myanmar state in the 1990s. Where there were no immigration checkpoints and little regulation of movement across the border during the 1990s and 2000s, Karen people were commonly employed as labourers in the town's booming manufacturing sectors (Arnold 2005; Balčaitė 2018; Campbell 2018). In addition to new policies from

the Thai government encouraging migration, in 1993 three provinces along the Karen State border were designated as special investment promotion zones, with tax and duty privileges offered to Thai investors who subsequently rushed to the region. As a result of these policy changes, many of the middle aged and older women I met in Hpa-an and the surrounding villages had spent time in garment factories or worked as domestic servants in Mae Sot and further afield in Thailand. Many of the men I met had similarly made the overnight bus to Mae Sot and further afield to seek employment on construction sites, rubber plantations, food processing centres and in fisheries.

Plong Karen families in Hpa-an district often have at least one member living abroad working in Thailand or elsewhere and the constant back-and-forth movement of people, goods, ideas, news, and symbols colours nearly every aspect of the economy, society and culture. In Hpa-an district, Thai restaurants can be found almost everywhere you go, with *pad krapauq*, stir fried mince and basil leaves, and *som tam*, spicy papaya salad, an addition to most restaurant menus. Thailand is also visible in the fashion sense of young local youths and the TV soap dramas that people watch on their screens at night. It can also be seen in the close following and participation in Thai lottery schemes *hnit lone* and *thone lone*, and in the popularity of various Thai pyramid schemes facilitated by working relatives. Coke cans in Hpa-an, alongside many other sugary drinks are made in Thailand, as are locals' motorbikes, snacks and cooking implements. Singha and Tiger beer is readily available and when spending time talking to monks you often are offered Thai energy drinks such as Red Bull. Even in small, seemingly remote villages many people in Hpa-an district can speak rudimentary, market-place Thai and images of the late Thai King Bhumiphol can be found in people's houses.

In Hti Lo village outside of Hpa-an, at the base of Mount Khwaegabaung, the impact of migration was obvious. Late in the afternoon one day in early November I sat with a group of student friends eating papaya salad at a small Thai restaurant-cum community shop. The owner of the restaurant was in her late forties and she had returned home to Hti Lo village two years previously to take care of her ailing mother. After more than twenty years working in a Thai kitchen in a marketplace in Bangkok, she opened up the small eatery after returning to Hti Lo village, which she told me

was increasingly popular. However, it still wasn't enough to pay off her family's debts and her own daughter, who had just finished high school had recently taken her place in Bangkok. An older Karen man, Hpu Eh Hto, stopped by to pick up some toothpaste, snacks and an energy drink and a small three year old toddled along behind him. As the lone foreigner in the small shop he inquired after my presence. After chatting for a few minutes, I asked about the small child's parents, and he explained to me that Hti Lo village only had old people, like himself and little ones like her. "You won't find any young people here" he laughed. "They are all over the mountain, in Thailand."

Hpu Eh Hto invited me to his house for tea and introduced me to his wife, Hpi Mhu, a strong looking older woman with a deep hunch who was sitting on the ground holding a large bamboo plate sifting rice from rice husks to give to their chickens as feed. Hpi Mhu told me that they cared for their six grandchildren, and that one of her daughters had only recently returned back to Bangkok, leaving a six month old baby for them to look after. The oldest of the grandchildren came over holding the small baby, inspecting what we were doing. She wore a grubby and torn green t-shirt and denim shorts and asked if she could have money to buy snacks from the nearby shop. Spitting out the juice from the betel nut she had been chewing into the dirt, Hpi Mhu told the young girl off, taking the small baby from her and wiping his snotty nose with the back of her hand.

I asked Hpi Mhu what it was like to be a young person when she was a teenager. Did she also have so many difficulties? Hpi Mhu told me that she never had the chance to be a young person. She had been pulled out of primary school in grade two to help her parents in the rice fields and at the age of fifteen she had left for Thailand because there was no food to eat except chicken feed. Alongside thousands of other Karen people, she had travelled south to the coastal province of Samut Sakhon to wash, peel, debone and behead bucket after bucket of assorted aquatic creatures in what she described to me as back breaking work. Later, she had gone to work as a housekeeper in Bangkok looking after wealthy Thai people's children, missing years with her own. She laughed and told me that when she had returned from Thailand five years earlier she thought she could rest, but that she was still busy every day, now just washing, feeding and disciplining her own grandchildren instead. Saying to me "even though I

am so old and should be spending my days making merit and resting at the monastery, I am still working every day.”

While stories like these are common across Hpa-an and migration is still a typical route for many young people, in the last five years Karen State has seen significant changes. For many people, the political and social changes since President Thein Sein came to power in 2011 have augmented aspirational mobilities that sit beyond the lens of migrant labour in Thailand. While the legacies of military rule (1962-2010) remain a constant feature of everyday people’s lives, the opening up of Karen State in the last five years has seen a fundamental shift for young men and women, both in the way they see themselves as well as their values, aspirations and visions of the self and future.

## **Hpa-an’s Changing Social Landscape**

Despite the widespread perception that all Karen young people live in Thailand, Hpa-an town gives off a different impression. Where rural parts of Karen State seem near empty of youth, walking around Hpa-an, it doesn’t take long to notice the many young men and women cavorting in public spaces, outside the direct gaze of their parents and community. Stroll through one of Hpa-an’s green spaces at the weekend, and more often than not you’ll meet a gaggle of well-coiffed young men or women, photographing each other with their smart phones. Various districts of the town are now dominated by boarding houses who cater to this growing population of young men and women in need of a place to stay.

Young people migrate to Hpa-an for a wide variety of reasons, including the increasing employment opportunities there. Since 2012, the opening up of Karen State has encouraged the return of a creative class of migrants from Thailand, who in turn are repositioning Hpa-an as a cosmopolitan trade hub – or as one man told me a “mini Bangkok without the high rises and pollution.” One Karen auntie I met returned from Bangkok to use her skills to establish a t-shirt printing business, which she ran out of her brand new, two-storey concrete house. A group of young men and women I met joined together to start a sushi shop, while one couple opened an airy, tranquil outdoor organic coffee house set with freshly made juices and salads. As Myanmar has opened

up to the world, the urban landscape of Hpa-an itself has also changed with banks, smartphone shops and hotels now a common feature of the urban landscape. Seven sets of traffic lights were installed across Hpa-an during 2015-2017, a new state Parliament and a large 3D cinema. A giant flat screen television now beams advertisements at traffic intersections reminding locals of the possibilities of wealth creation.

Complete with four high schools, three universities, a teacher's college and a wide variety of vocational centers, Hpa-an acts as a centre which lures young rural people because of their desire for upward social mobility. Indeed, an oft-cited motivation for migration to Hpa-an among young people is education. In Hpa-an, schools are better equipped and hold greater prestige than those in rural areas.<sup>176</sup> In addition, university education and technical vocation training is only available in Hpa-an town. In Hpa-an one of the major changes for young people in the last five years has been the re-emergence of private education learning centres targeting youth.<sup>177</sup> Alongside private high schools, which focus on preparing final-year students for the matriculation exam, there are an increasing number of not-for-profit English learning centres which have been established to cater to the large and growing youth population living in Hpa-an and their demand and desire for an education that improves their chances for a “brighter future” and “better life” (see Figure 15).<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> For those that live in more isolated areas where high school education is not available, parents often choose to send their children to go and live with an aunt or relative in state capital where they don't have to worry about the dangers and costs associated with transport. In the contemporary period prospects for education reform seem limited. Weaknesses in Myanmar's education system are well documented. In Karen State, attendance rates remain low, dropout rates are high and up until recently very few people attended high school. In many cases, families are also unable to cover school expenses such as uniforms, textbooks and other learning materials. The Myanmar government's Ministry of Education's *National Strategic Plan* (2016) sets out an ambitious five-year timeline to improve “the knowledge, skills, and competencies” of all of its students. However, without an increase in state expenditure on education this is unlikely to change.

<sup>177</sup> In 1962 Ne Win nationalised all private educational centres and schools. In 2012-13, there were just over 50 private schools in Myanmar, but in 2016-17 this number grew to 585 private schools nationwide (Ei Shwe Phyu 2017).

<sup>178</sup> There are also Japanese classes provided at a number of private language schools which cater to the growth in Japanese NGOs and investment in southeastern Myanmar.



Figure 15: Advertising for an English learning centre in Hpa-an.<sup>179</sup> Source: Sunshine Learning Centre.

Mixing social development with entrepreneurship, alongside teaching English, these schools provide opportunities for young people to be trained in an array of areas, including computer skills, résumé writing, professional development, leadership training and management. These build off a symbolic and historical association between learning English and achieving economic security and social recognition.<sup>180</sup> Education and English learning, in particular, figure strongly in imaginings of transitions to modernity in contemporary Myanmar. For young Karen people who have migrated to urban centres for educational purposes, their engagement with these new sites is thought to equip them with the skills necessary to participate in the modern world. Emphasising the ability to realise one’s human potential through altering the self, learning English is figured as a tangible gateway to a future of eudaimonic wellbeing.

Eudaimonia is a concept used by philosophers who argue that wellbeing is not so much a state of being, but a process of fulfilling one’s virtuous potential (Annas 1993, 2011; Hursthouse 1999; MacIntyre 1981). This stems from Aristotle’s (2009) understanding of the highest human good involving virtue and the realisation of one’s potential:

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<sup>179</sup> The text in Burmese reads ‘English language school’.

<sup>180</sup> This stems back to the colonial era, where English became the medium of higher education in Myanmar as well as employment in the colonial bureaucracy.



Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and every choice is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim” (Aristotle 2009: 1094a, 1-3).<sup>181</sup>

This includes individual characteristics linked to virtue, wisdom and flourishing. For Aristotle, this importantly includes desire, deliberation and rational choice based on that deliberation which are teleological in their very nature (see MacIntyre 1981: 150-162). As MacIntyre (1981: 215-16) observes, eudaimonia is fundamentally grounded in practice-based virtues which are future oriented – “towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present.” In Hpa-an, these new English educational sites have become important actors in young Plong Karen lives, restructuring social imaginaries through teleos narratives of an imagined future and ‘good life’. This is not simply because they focus on English and broader skills development, but they explicitly seek the cultivation of a new way of seeing and inhabiting the world as a young Karen person. These are not unique to Hpa-an, but socially and historically grounded in neoliberal ideologies of education as a conceptual and practical resource for imagining new possible horizons. As I demonstrate below, they are motivational, aspirational and most of all geared towards potentialities, possibilities and perceptions of a future eudaimonic self.

### ***Shining Light***

When I arrived in Hpa-an in March 2015, it did not take long for me to meet two teachers who ran Shining Light,<sup>182</sup> a community-based English learning centre, and some of their affiliated students and alumni. One morning I was sitting idly at the newly opened ‘Verandah Youth Community Café’ enjoying a freshly made espresso coffee, the only place in town where that was available at the time. Nan Mu Htoo, one of their teachers, approached me to volunteer in their school. Like many of the people

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<sup>181</sup> For a detailed exposition on Aristotle and virtue ethics see MacIntyre (1981).

<sup>182</sup> The name of this educational organisation is a pseudonym.

I met in Hpa-an, Nan Mu Htoo was warm and friendly and immediately made me feel a little less lost as a budding anthropologist trying to find my way into the field, and I soon found myself quickly enmeshed in what she and her partner called the “Shining Light family”.

The Shining Light family is part of an extended network of English educational institutions which were able to open in Hpa-an as a result of the changing political environment in Myanmar. Inspired by their own experiences of attending English immersive programs in Thailand prior to getting scholarships for further education, Nan Mu Htoo and her partner had returned home to Karen State with dreams of building a program of their own which could help “lift up the Karen youth.” Focused primarily on teaching English, social sciences, civic education, community development and leadership skills, they targeted high school students who had finished and passed their final-year matriculation exams. Charging 30,000 *kyat* per month for day students, and 15,000 *kyat* per month for evening class students, after opening up in 2014 it did not take long for them to start accumulating a sustainable income for themselves and to further build their reputation within the town and the wider Hpa-an district.<sup>183</sup>

Nan Mu Htoo explained to me that their decision to open the school was deeply embedded in their experience of having worked as migrants in Thailand prior to their university studies. In contrast to the opportunities now available in the changing socio-political climate of Myanmar, life for them in Thailand held a lot of ambivalent characteristics. One afternoon I was sitting in a car driving with Nan Mu Htoo and the Hilary Duff song, ‘Sweet 16’ came on the radio.

Sweet Sixteen

Gonna spread my wings

Sweet Sixteen

It’s my chance to shine

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<sup>183</sup> As a result of their growing reputation and increasing student numbers, these fees increased progressively over time.

Sweet Sixteen

Discovering

Sweet Sixteen

So much more to life

Sweet Sixteen

“My life was not very sweet when I was 16,” Nan Mu Htoo commented to me. “I never had the sweet experience.”

Nan Mu Htoo recalled how she was only fifteen when she travelled to Thailand to find work as a domestic maid. Her parents had prioritised her schooling allowing her to finish middle school, but she decided that she would be better off finding work across the mountains in Thailand rather than staying at home. With no jobs available locally to earn enough money for the household, Nan Mu Htoo did not see the point in finishing her schooling. Nan Mu Htoo’s sister had left to work in Bangkok a few years earlier and she sent remittances back home, but her parents needed more financial support to assist with the rising costs of the family’s accumulating debt. She explained that she was tired of the debt collectors who came to their house every week demanding money and bringing shame to the family. In contrast, the idea of working in Thailand gave Nan Mu Htoo a sense of excitement and empowerment in her ability to contribute to the household economic unit.

Nan Mu Htoo explained to me, however, that her strong sense of purpose soon diminished after her arrival in Bangkok and the beginning of her life as a house maid. She told me that even though she was never treated badly by her employers, she often felt vulnerable and exploited. She also became frustrated by her restricted lifestyle and the lack of progression in skills training. As she saw it, the lack of legal citizenship and associated rights for migrant workers – alongside risks related to arbitrary arrest, abuse and extortion by both state authorities and local Thai people – discouraged social mobility and reinforced a perspective of the Karen as simple and uneducated.

When I met Nan Mu Htoo she had just graduated from university in Thailand and had opened up Shining Light with her fiancé. She had been lucky to become a part of a

network in Bangkok of like-minded Karen people and was able to teach herself English, eventually finding her way through various programs into getting a scholarship and studying a Bachelor's degree at a university in Thailand. Nan Mu Htoo explained to me that building Shining Light in Hpa-an was not only about teaching English, but fundamentally concerned with reorienting young Karen peoples' value systems, knowledge and conceptualisation of the 'good' life away from becoming a migrant in Thailand. Nan Mu Htoo explicitly wanted to change Karen youth perceptions of Thailand and expand their imaginative horizons of the future. She explained to me:

Just like when I was young, a lot of Plong people in rural areas do not have an inspiration for their future – they only see Bangkok. But we try to change their perceptions. We share our knowledge with young people and open their minds to education and the endless possibilities of the future.

The endless possibilities of a eudaimonic, utopic future was deeply rooted in Shining Light's educational philosophy and in their curriculum model.<sup>184</sup> Reorienting young peoples' value systems, knowledge and aspirations for the future, their teaching philosophies had a strong emphasis on knowledge produced through affect and fantasy. As noted in their motto, "Shining Light is the foundation for a brighter future." Despite the many challenges facing young people in the contemporary era as a result of legacies from military rule, Nan Mu Htoo and her partner felt able and morally entitled to imagine and offer their students visions of an alternative future. According to their view where the migrant's life often results in a kind of social paralysis at both the individual and community level, education – and especially English language

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<sup>184</sup> Grounded in the potentiality of a person's individual ability, education is widely seen across many parts of the world as a human right and development good. In the current period of political change in Myanmar, education is increasingly symbolized as the gateway to another, ill-defined, but more successful life. Educated in Oxford in the UK, the Myanmar State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi's emphasis on the importance of education for Myanmar's development also feeds into this narrative. The global aid and development industry similarly promotes infrastructure and delivery of scholarships for widespread participation in education as a pathway to a more globalised and developed economy and as a progressive agent of national modernity.

education – allowed the development of an alternative self. As they saw it, English education was a way to transform the Karen subject and actualise an agentive, eudaimonic Karen subjectivity.

As a result of a desire for new and imagined worlds, much of the school's curriculum and socio-moral philosophy revolved around exposing students to imagining a future that was not yet materially realised. Taught in opposition to the 'copy culture' favoured by Myanmar's state education system (Cheesman 2003; UNICEF 2016), this included an emphasis on Karen students as innovative, creative and critical thinkers. These lessons were also emphasised in the countless 'youth leadership' workshops the school held every couple of months and would also host in neighbouring villages and towns. While, many of their classes were set by the content of a British English learning textbook, including sections on grammar and comprehension, students were also regularly required to perform short drama pieces in English and speeches on leadership, education and their goals for the future. Alongside their daily classes, every couple of months the teachers would also organise a performance evening where students would gather together in groups to sing English pop hits and dance in groups that were often imitations of their Korean pop idols. They also liked to prepare dramas about the contemporary experience of youth, often emphasising the transformative potential of education and their dreams for a modern and sophisticated future self.

In addition to this, they also organised yearly trips to Thailand to expose a selection of students to the universities there and show them what life in Bangkok could be like outside the migrant experience. Indeed, the activities on these trips mostly consisted of middle-class leisure pursuits such as spending time in shopping malls, going to cinemas and theme-parks as well as eating international foods like KFC and Pizza Hut. While most of the students could not afford to attend these trips, they were able to experience it second hand through daily updates and photos on Facebook from their friends and teachers. As Nan Mu Htoo explained, she wanted the Shining Light students to see and experience a life beyond what they already knew – a life of mobility and movement across spaces and temporalities very different from those of previous Karen generations.

In this way, Nan Mu Htoo saw Shining Light as more than just an educational institution, but also a value-making space anchored in concrete practices to reorient student subjectivities and their aspirations towards a eudaimonic self. Indeed, for Nan Mu Htoo, Shining Light helped to guide their students understanding of the self through shifts in what Henrietta Moore (2011: 15) calls the ‘ethical imagination’: providing them with “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1997), as a means of creating and refining the self, engendering a form of moral agency and power for approaching both individual and collective social and moral transformation. For the young Plong Karen men and women that attended Shining Light, its teachers provided the conceptual and practical resources, shaping young people’s sense of their future selves and ethical trajectories. As I describe in this next section, through this form of subject making, the Shining Light students are encouraged to emerge as part of a world that is uncertain, indeterminate and risky, but made as creative, entrepreneurial and future-oriented agents of change.

### **Aspiring Subjects: Searching for a ‘Life of Curry’**

A crucial part of understanding the impact of Shining Light and other learning centres in Hpa-an is examining the way individual students come to imagine themselves within this new socio-moral sphere. For many young people, the move from high-school to university signals a time of increasing independence, particularly for those who move to Hpa-an, away from rural areas for further education. During this time, these schools provide a space for young people for new and more autonomous relationships outside of the natal community. Living outside their home environments, the negotiation of Hpa-an’s streets and educational spaces then becomes an important arena for learning and the construction of a more independent and individualised self. Similarly, the intensified forms of relationality as provided by these educational spheres open up emotional and cognitive vistas of possible eudaimonic futures, generating new hopes and social imaginaries of the future.

Anthropologist Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004, 2006), who, in analysing the lives of Suvavou Fijians fighting for the recognition of land rights, frames ‘hope’ epistemologically as a “method of knowledge production”. Building on Ernst Bloch’s

(1986) concept of the “not yet”, according to Miyazaki (2004: 5) hope lies in the “radical temporal reorientation of knowledge” towards a possible future.<sup>185</sup> Drawing on Miyazaki’s work, anthropologist Stef Jansen (2016) suggests that we should understand hope as affect or disposition through which people navigate their everyday lives. Taking a ‘future-orientation’ lens from Bloch, hope in this sense should be understood as a form of embodied openness to a future-orientated social project or what Ghassan Hage calls a “sense of possibility” (Hage 1997: 103). Like eudaimonic virtues, hope expresses evaluative processes that actively infuse people’s everyday selves and the ways in which they engage with the world. Indeed, hope is not simply a forward-looking stance, the Blochian “not-yet”, but also a value-making process anchored in concrete practices that reorient individual subjectivities and how they navigate the worlds they live in.

During my fieldwork in Hpa-an, I followed the lives of many young people who attended Shining Light, following their efforts to reorient their lives and hopes for the future. In particular, I spent a large amount of time with a group of eight 17-20 year-olds who had already graduated from Shining Light and were now attending Hpa-an University. As first year university students, when I first met them there was a great sense of anticipation for the future among this tight-knit network. Most of them were from small towns and villages outside Hpa-an and the city seemed to present them with countless opportunities for education and self-improvement. The neoliberal developmental narratives embedded in Shining Light’s educational philosophy constituted a major organisational framework shaping their temporal reasoning of the present and aspirations for the future. This was further heightened by the ongoing changes around them in Hpa-an related to the broader transition in Myanmar, made visible by the constant construction of new roads and shiny new buildings, availability of cheap mobile phones and overall sense of ‘change’ on the horizon.

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<sup>185</sup> Ernst Bloch (1986) describes how hope can evoke a range of images – of adventure, travel to foreign lands, hidden treasures and dreams of a life not yet achieved. He suggests that the future is imagined in reference to both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ pasts and to utopian dreams of what might be.

Much of the time I spent with these students was at their teacher's house where they converged every evening to play caneball, eat, study, gossip, sing karaoke and simply hang out. Since most students were living with relatives, in boarding houses or in monasteries, the teachers' house became like a second home where they felt like they could relax and enjoy themselves. One warm summer night around seven of us lay on bamboo mats in the main sitting room watching a movie on a large white projector screen they had hooked up on the wall. A few of the male students sat behind us, playing on their phones and gradually moved outside as they became bored with the film. On my way out of the house to return home, I noticed them sitting on their motorbikes chatting intensely. I asked, "What are you guys talking about so secretly? Your *chit thu* (B. girlfriends)?" "No" they replied, laughing at me. "We are talking about our future." One of them, Saw Eh Tsu continued. "We hope we can realise a successful future like our teachers. The 'Shining Light family' is our only chance." How this was understood and experienced however, in relation to the practicalities of Plong Karen social ethics, was much more complicated.

Most of the days I spent in Hpa-an I saw Saw Eh Tsu and we talked at length about his hopes and dreams for the future, for a 'new' kind of life as he told me. Saw Eh Tsu grew up in a large town in Karen State, approximately one hour north of Hpa-an. While this area had once been a 'black' area caught up in the conflict between the *Tatmadaw* and the KNU, by the time he was born in 1998 government forces had near full control of the town. He told me that while his parents always supported his education, they faced many problems because of their accumulating debt and lived for the everyday. "They only think of today and how much money they can make. They never think of the future or how we should think more critically about how we can make lives better for the future," he explained to me.

Saw Eh Tsu felt like his parents did not appreciate the value of education in the same way he did or his teachers in Hpa-an, as they had never had the opportunity for formal schooling beyond grade 3.<sup>186</sup> Growing up in the midst of conflict between the KNU

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<sup>186</sup> Decades of conflict and economic turmoil during the socialist era (1962-1988), including disastrous efforts at agricultural collectivisation meant that the majority of Karen people left school at the age of



and the Myanmar army he told me his father was “strong and brave. He is skilled in the old ways, but not like we need to be for the future.” Referring then to his mother he noted:

She is very kind and has a good heart like most Karen. But she does not know very much. She is very simple and honest. She does not think of the future or how we can improve ourselves and our situation.

Part of a new generation of young people growing up in Karen State with the ability to pursue education beyond primary or middle school, Saw Eh Tsu saw his life as much more open and less determined than that of his parents and elders. For Saw Eh Tsu, his education increasingly separated him from the world of his parents and elders and developed in him a modern subjectivity deeply embedded in individualistic aspirations. In contrast to the view of his parents, Saw Eh Tsu saw his teachers at Shining Light as inspiring and dedicated Karen leaders of social change. Learning English for him equally held promises of social and economic development and transformed his hopes for the future.

One afternoon I was sitting down with Saw Eh Tsu at a small road-side tea stall outside of Hpa-an eating lunch and he explained some of these tensions further to me. Saw Eh Tsu told me that while his parents thought education was important, they could not see the material benefit in him continuing his studies and often pressured him to migrate to Thailand to help support the family. But from his perspective, life was very different now and full of opportunities that they just could not see. As he explained:

Before being young in Karen State is like a life without curry (B. *hin*). Like just eating this rice with *nga pei* (B. fish paste). It is ok, but it is not very tasty. In this time many people have to go to Thailand. The

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ten or below. Under military rule, decades of under-investment and civil conflict resulted in the slow degradation of the state education system across the country, and for many families their children are the first to graduate from high school. This is also reflected in the 2014 national census results, where 69% of the Karen State population’s highest level of education is of a primary school level or below (grade 1-5). Ministry for (Ministry for Immigration and Population 2015).

young people think there will be a lot of good curry in Bangkok. But actually there is only rice and *nga pei* there for them too. Now we have a lot of opportunities, a lot of different *hin*.

A life without curry is a metaphor which refers to the life young people living in Karen State have experienced for many years, where decades of conflict and rampant poverty has prevented the process of eudaimonic social becoming. Saw Eh Tsu's narrative reveals the aspiration and anxiety that underlie his desire for a 'successful' life outside the confines of his parents' experiences and other kin. In Thailand, the situation of a Karen migrant is perceived by Saw Eh Tsu as the same – in a position where one is unable to improve oneself or one's life prospects beyond material gain. In contrast to the government schooling he had received as a child which he perceived as failing to prepare him for a successful life, Saw Eh Tsu saw Shining Light as opening up a promising future that led to jobs, income, health, wealth and social security. He strongly identified with the school and the manner in which it provided a stepping stone to a more hopeful, eudaimonic future. Indeed, for young people like Saw Eh Tsu, looking towards a future as envisioned by Shining Light moved him further away from the life course of his parents and the fate of what many young people born in Karen State still experience today.

Temporally speaking, young Plong Karen people like Saw Eh Tsu are influenced by eudaimonic "futures" that are not yet realised – those which Reinhart Koselleck (2004) theorises as offering utopian qualities. And indeed, the possibilities of a new utopian vision of the future always seemed within the lens of possibility. Soon after I arrived in Hpa-an one of Shining Light's students received a scholarship to a prestigious two-year pre-university college program teaching the IB diploma in Hong Kong. Shortly after that, four of their students were accepted into a one-year Community Leadership and Social Studies program based in Yangon. For Saw Eh Tsu, the proximity of this utopian imagining of the future was cemented when he and another student were accepted into a six-week leadership camp held in the US. Several other students also applied for and were accepted into a scholarship program to study English in a one-year intensive program in Yangon. However, as I describe in this

next section, the manner in which these opportunities of self-actualisation was experienced was deeply conflictual.

## **Situated Eudaimonia: The Limits of Moral Agency**

In framing my analysis within the changing socio-economic landscape of Hpa-an, in this chapter I have highlighted the role that new educational learning spaces like Shining Light play for young people in Hpa-an. Within Shining Light young people from outside Hpa-an build new lives and identities, form life-changing relationships, and develop a sense of belonging to Hpa-an by making it their home. Shining Light orients aspirations of hoping towards particular ends, critiquing the status quo that often renders young Karen people as uneducated migrants. This notion is epitomised in many of the student's desires to study abroad, becoming the means by which, their future potential selves are able to support their families as well as gain social worth. As a space which draws on the anticipatory hopes of its students, it galvanises young Hpa-an people's sense of possibility for emancipatory transformation and a more eudaimonic self. However, Shining Light's ideology of hope and the capacity to aspire ignores the wider structural conditions of life for young Plong Karen in Hpa-an and other social and cultural values which places a high value on filial piety.

MacIntyre's (1981) theory of virtue ethics implies a degree of coherence in eudaimonic conceptions of the self, virtue and conceptions of human flourishing. However, to focus on a singular and coherent narrative of selfhood, overlooks the variety of everyday cultural resources and moral authorities that people draw upon in their deliberations about how to pursue a virtuous self and indeed morality. For Plong Karen young men and women, the ability to pursue utopic visions of the 'good' life cannot be reduced to an exercise of agency or free will, or the choices of an autonomous moral agent, but is part of living within and a part of a family or community and directed towards ideals that encompass the collective 'good'. Indeed, the ethics of sacrifice that prevails in this Buddhist rural migratory society, means that the ideal of self-actualisation as embedded in new education networks is experienced as a flirtation with an ambiguous and elusive utopia and at worst often considered selfish and strange.

Many of the tensions that Saw Eh Tsu and other young Plong Karen spoke to me about come from living within a society where children learn from a very young age that filial respect and gratitude are considered the highest moral values. In the rural communities from which many Karen young people in Hpa-an come from, it is believed that children incur a debt of gratitude to their parents when they are born, a debt which is vital to understanding the moral basis of parent-child relationships. While many Karen families put a heavy premium on youth and their education, it is often seen as a social investment, a 'gift', and one that requires a kind of social exchange (see also P. Joliffe 2016b). Similar to Saw Eh Tsu, many of my discussions with other young people revolved around the conflicting desire of continuing their education and the moral obligation to contribute to the household economy. Within this framework, children are conceptualised as future earners and imagined as moving along a shared time-line. According to this time scale, parents want their children to complete their schooling, find employment, and then, adhering to Karen principles of reciprocity, support them financially when they retire. As a result, the material and aspirational hopes of the household economy, often rely on the shoulders of young people.

Plong Karen children in rural areas feel a strong obligation towards their families and see it as their moral responsibility to support their parents as part of their understanding of human flourishing and virtue. With few jobs available locally that would earn enough income to support a family and their increasing debts, migrating to Thailand has become many people's only chance to ensure the family's survival. Contemporary expressions of Plong Karen filial piety have thus come to mean that for the large majority of young Karen men and women, they are expected to take the well-travelled route to Thailand in order to support their families (see also Balčaitė 2015). While all children are born indebted to their parents, daughters in particular bear a material responsibility to provide for the family unit and failure to fulfil this duty is considered demeritorious or immoral.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> This is also highlighted in research on young rural women in Thailand (eg. Muecke 1984; Mulder 1978; Tantiwiranond and Pandey 1987; Wilson 2004).

Nan Sha Poo Wah was an incredibly bright and dedicated student at Shining Light. At the age of 17 she was precocious and one of the more confident young women I met during my time in Hpa-an. The first time I met her, she grabbed my hand and linked our arms together, introducing herself in English. She told me proudly that she was the first person to attend university in her village and that she knew that studying at Shining Light was going to be her ticket out of Myanmar for “a successful life”. “Maybe one day I will be like you and also study for my PhD,” she gushed.

For Nan Sha Poo Wah spending time within the social sphere of Shining Light spurred a prospective positioning of the self and a constructed vision of future scenarios where positive personhood could be gained and subjectivity anchored; that is, futures that afforded social being and moral worth. Furthermore, Nan Sha Poo Wah drew on the success of her teachers and other young people, who played a symbolic role in the reproduction of ideologies of ‘success’ and the ‘good life’ to inspire other students. From Nan Sha Poo Wah’s perspective, her Shining Light teachers’ life choices involved a sequence of shifts in agency, in self-stylisation and in the deployment of critical knowledge, adding up to their own personal transformation. Indeed, their own experiences of having embodied the transition from migrant to university student to educator played a symbolic role in the reproduction of ideologies of ‘hope’ to inspire other students. As Nan Sha Poo Wah explained, “the teachers at Shining Light, they raise me up a lot. Not only in my English skills, but how to believe in myself and how to see a bright future.” She told me emphatically that attending Shining Light was like she had been “transformed from being a small blind frog who only knows about the world in a little pond to a bird who can fly and see very far.” She continued:

Before I knew nothing. When I came to Shining Light I learned so many new things. They opened my eyes and my mind and changed my view on life, on myself, on everything.

As a young woman myself, Nan Sha Poo Wah often asked me for advice about her life, aspirations, education and overall anxieties about family, duty, obligation and gendered understandings of morality – but often commenting on the differences

between being Karen and *Ingalaik* (K. English). “It is very easy for you,” she would say. “In your culture, you can do anything – you don’t have to worry about what anyone thinks. You don’t have to worry for your next life. For us there are many things to think about. It is very difficult.” Indeed, Nan Sha Poo Wah’s self-confidence belied a much more complex reality. Even though she felt a moral imperative to become a different sort of person and re-envision her own life according to individualised cultural values embedded in her urban lifestyle, she often spoke to me of the importance of filial obligations. Her attempts to reconcile and balance these opposing imperatives often led to frustration and doubt. The more she succeeded with her education, the more modern she felt and estranged from Karen social ethics which promoted the importance of filial obligation over and above any conceptualisation of an individualised self.

For Nan Sha Poo Wah moving to Hpa-an to study English provided an “escape”, as she told me, from all the struggles embedded in her simple, village life. She explained to me that passing the matriculation exams was one of her greatest achievements, cementing a sense of self-belief that she was a ‘good’ person with a ‘good’ fate (B. *kan*). She told me, “To pass the matriculation exams you need to have wisdom (B. *nyan*), a good attitude (B. *wiriya*) and importantly fate (B. *kan*).” She never thought she had good destiny because of her family situation but attending university and learning English made her feel proud and confident in herself and her abilities. She continued: “Before, everyone used to look down on me in my village. But now that I am at university, everyone says that I am a good and educated person.” However, in many ways Nan Sha Poo Wah’s continued studies placed a continued burden on her family and she often wondered how she could better align her desires for the future with the needs of her family.

She called me very upset and distressed one evening from her village where she was staying for the weekend:

My parents didn’t send money again this month. My grandfather told me I should go to Bangkok so I can help support my parents and younger brother and sister – like a good daughter should. My family

has a lot of debt, so that's why he wants me to go there. You know, if my mother didn't play *hnit lone*, we wouldn't have this problem. I don't want to have to go to Thailand to work so my mother can keep this bad habit. If I go to Thailand I can only feed my family and the *hnit lone* broker in our village. How can this be good?

Nan Sha Poo Wah's conflict with her parents was a common refrain that I heard from a number of young people in Hpa-an and particularly among the Shining Light students whose dreams and goals of the future often contrasted sharply with the economic realities of the family unit. The topic of debt looms large in most Karen households, intimately present in everyday lives and community relations. As described in Chapter Two, many Plong Karen relationships are also embedded in systems of debt, such that "everything intermingles in it" (Mauss 1970: 3): filial obligations and debts to community members and money lenders. Because of this permanent demand for cash, remittances from migrants living and working abroad remain the mainstay of most Karen household's income in rural areas of Hpa-an district.

Nan Sha Poo Wah was born in a small rural Plong Karen Buddhist village approximately two hours north-east of Hpa-an. This area had been a site of conflict between the KNU and the Tatmadaw, but it had come under the control of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army during the late 1990s after the ceasefire deal. Before I arrived in her village, she had to get permission from the village head for me to come and visit, but he warmly welcomed me, explaining that it was an honour to have an international guest come and visit. The village was largely made up of wooden traditional styled raised Karen houses with tin rooves and many of Nan Sha Poo Wah's neighbours owned small shops which jutted out the front of their houses onto the laneway. The dusty, broken up road on the way to her house, had groups of children playing games on it, riding bicycles and moving between the houses to collect snacks in people's makeshift shops. Dogs roamed the street as did chickens and ducks, but people stared at me as an aberration to the messy social landscape.

Nan Sha Poo Wah told me that while many of the households in her village continued to grow rice and other vegetables for everyday subsistence, most families relied on remittances from family members who lived and worked in Thailand. Both of Nan Sha Poo Wah's parents worked in Bangkok, however there was little evidence of the money they sent home – spent instead on the many complex webs of debt that her parents continued to accumulate. Unlike some of the other houses I had seen around Hpa-an district where remittances from family members were clearly evident, Nan Sha Poo Wah's house looked small and fragile, made up of one large room where her family members slept and a small outdoor landing for the kitchen. The Buddhist altar in the centre of the room had a small plate with rice on it and a vase in front with wilted flowers as an offering to the Buddha. She told me that her mother was addicted to *hnit lone* and that her grandfather was an alcoholic.

When we arrived, her grandfather was lying underneath the house on a makeshift bamboo bed, fast asleep. The humid air was tinged with the smell of whisky and urine and Nan Sha Poo Wah told me it was probably best not to wake him up. We climbed up the ladder to her house where her heavily pregnant older sister was hovering over a pot of boiling water preparing food for us. She had gone into a neighbouring town the day prior to pick up Chinese sausages and meatballs especially for me. Proudly introducing me as her English teacher, Nan Sha Poo Wah told her sister that I was helping her to fulfil her dreams of becoming educated. Her sister smiled encouragingly, telling Nan Sha Poo Wah to go and introduce me to some of the other households while she was preparing our lunch.

While Nan Sha Poo Wah took me through the village, stopping in nearly every household to introduce me, we talked about her family's situation and the various difficulties she faced as a child.

I suffered a lot when I was younger. Sometimes our family budget was not enough for oil, onion and salt, so we had many problems. When I was in high school, I felt so bad because I wanted to pass my matriculation exam, but I also thought I should work in Thailand. My grandfather was very sick then and his medicines were very expensive.



Many of the other people in my village said bad things about me during that time. I thought I should leave school and go to Bangkok to help my parents, but the monk at my village encouraged me to finish. In the end I passed the matriculation and got accepted into university. So, I am sure that education must be my destiny.

Unlike her own sense of a utopic destiny, Nan Sha Poo Wah explained that her sister was forced to live at home in the village and look after their grandfather as he had had a stroke a few years earlier. She told me that her sister had been very lonely as most young people of a similar age worked in Thailand, but that she had recently met someone on Facebook from Bago in central Myanmar, and he come to live in their village after they got married. Nan Sha Poo Wah explained that her sister hoped that her new husband would help contribute to the household economy, but that he had faced a lot of problems finding work locally as he was Burmese and the other Karen villagers refused to hire him as a worker in their fields. She told me it was very difficult for her sister and she felt bad that she continued to take income from the family for her education – especially with a new baby on the way.

After I visited her village, a few months went by where I did not see Nan Sha Poo Wah. I had assumed that she was working as a volunteer English teacher over the summer, as many of Shining Light students had done in rural parts of Hpa-an district as a way to spread their knowledge in the surrounding community. However, when university classes resumed, and I still did not see Nan Sha Poo Wah, I asked the Shining Light teachers where she had gone, and they explained that she had taken the well-travelled route to work in Bangkok with her parents. She had enthusiastically signed up to teach English in rural villages over the summer for Shining Light as I thought, but she had pulled out at the last minute. They explained to me that her sister's husband had 'run away' and that her parents had insisted that she go to work in Bangkok.

I called Nan Sha Poo Wah that night to check in on her. She told me it was very difficult working in Bangkok and that she had no time for her study. She claimed satisfaction and pride, however, in supporting her parents and taking on the role of a

good and dutiful daughter. With a degree of uncertainty, she explained emphatically that she was only going to stay in Bangkok for a few months longer, aware that obtaining social recognition for her filial duty might come at a heavy personal cost. She was sure that she would return to Hpa-an and her studies soon. “Just like Martin Luther King,” she told me, “I have a dream.”

For Nan Sha Poo Wah and others like her, it was not always easy striking a balance between her desire to educate herself and her determination to keep faith with a traditional worldview that encourages one to honour one’s elders and live within the gendered limits set by one’s birthright. Thinkers like Frederic Jameson (2005) and Lauren Berlant (2011) remind us that the realities of everyday life often do not meet the hopes and aspirations of most people. In considering this particular moment in Myanmar’s history, it is important to keep in mind the ‘cruel’ potential of hope, as Berlant (2011) writes, whereby visions of possible lives are generated, distributed, negotiated and sustained differentially within various social configurations. The socio-economic realities facing most young Karen men and women in the contemporary period are often exceeded by the hopes and fears that are invested in them.

Nan Sha Poo Wah’s stunted trajectory of eudaimonic awakening helps to shed light on the moral dilemmas that young people face as they seek to pursue a commitment to a re-envisioned more hopeful and aspirational vision of the future. While hers and other student’s engagement with Shining Light allows for a heightened sense of agency and control over their life trajectories, they also create new moral vulnerabilities. Directing our attention to the fragility embedded within people’s efforts to transform themselves and the social and material spaces within which they live, what I want to stress here is that pursuing morality depends crucially on traversing circumstances that are often fraught, uncertain and can also lead to failure. Viewed through this lens, morality should not simply be seen as a set of ideals but as the outcome of everyday processes of Plong Karen identity making, whereby multiple values, meanings and expectations shape the dynamics of individual and collective subjectivity.

## Conclusion

Over the past five years, social, political, economic and cultural transformations have taken place in the lives of Karen people in Hpa-an. Despite the difficulties still facing many families today, aspirational horizons in Hpa-an district have broadened in often dramatic ways in recent years. Coupled with the reforms implemented since 2011, the post-1988 expansion in access to education and increased migration to Thailand and other parts of the world, have widened the circulation of money, goods, people and ideas. Visions of the ‘good’ life in Hpa-an are now increasingly wedded to patterns of consumption and public displays of wealth, new forms of employment including in the NGO sector, higher education, and the stylisation of global cosmopolitanism. Today, youth are increasingly reimagining themselves in relation to values once esteemed by older generations and associated with a particular understanding of the life course.

In the case of young Karen people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Hpa-an, the teachers at new educational sites like Shining Light use hope as a “tool” to cultivate new skills and capacities and ultimately reconfigure notions of success and pathways towards the future (Miyazaki 2006). Hope is motivational, aspirational, geared towards potentialities, possibilities and perceptions of a more eudaimonic future self as Miyazaki (2006) suggests. As seen through the life story of Saw Eh Tsu and Nan Sha Poo Wah, hope for young people attending Shining Light animates their engagement with new forms of knowledge, expanding the horizons of the life-world and orientations towards a more individually oriented vision of the self. However, dreams of a possible future often remain unmet and unrealistic for the majority of young people whose lives are still dictated by the vagaries of social life and filial obligations. Simply because one seeks to enact new aspirational horizons, does not mean the traditional demands embedded in parent-child and village relations are discarded or forgotten. Rather, they are central to both sets of concerns, animating how young people seek to traverse and maintain moral consistency with both relational norms as well as their own personal sense of individual moral striving.

The experience of young people in Hpa-an highlights the textured, conflicted and constrained reality of Plong Karen moral experience and moral subjectivity. As this

chapter has demonstrated, the individualistic desire for a future successful self is almost always pursued in deeply fraught and conflicted ways by young people in Hpa-an. In the new education spaces that promise a vision of a better future, young people come together to imagine, anticipate, enact and embody this promise, momentarily assuming a degree of control over their life trajectories. In the temporal dimension, young women like Nan Sha Poo Wah are aiming to shape themselves to an image of a global and individualistic personhood that is linked with modernity and the 'future'. At the same time, many of their social settings demand non-individualistic dispositions and hence the prospect of utopic social change is often put into doubt.

The distinction between hope that is realisable and one that is not is not simply a matter of the application of critical knowledge, as Miyazaki (2004) suggests. Rather, for most people, their ability to act on their newly found critical knowledge and hopes for the future largely depends on their embodied capacity to inhabit and navigate the social environment and seemingly competing socio-moral spheres that surround them. Moral agency is not a straightforward cumulative achievement which Plong Karen can aspire towards and pursue in variegated ways across the life-course, however. Furthermore, morality may also be expressed in highly bounded narratives of ethical subjectivity and notions of collective belonging which simultaneously work to the exclusion of society's most marginalised people. Focusing on the alliance between Karen moral ideals and state-endorsed nationalism, the next chapter explores how ethnic and state moral ideals have increasingly converged in recent years around an ideology of anti-Muslim Buddhist revivalism. This further demonstrates the way that multiple and contradictory moral frameworks influence and direct people and their understanding of what it means to pursue morality.

# CHAPTER SIX

## **Bounding Morality: Buddhist Nationalism and Plong Karen Identity**

In theorising morality and ethics among Plong Karen Buddhists living in Hpa-an, in this thesis I have emphasised the agency of people and the way that contradictory ethical frameworks can be mutually constitutive of the way they understand what it means to live and enact a moral life. While people draw and borrow from different local and global ideas, I have argued that malleable though cohesive moral ideals form a recurring feature of how Plong Karen people understand and enact ethical lives. The everyday pursuit of morality reflects a broader search for moral self-cultivation in what is a rapidly changing social landscape. In this chapter I examine how Myanmar's political and social changes are playing out amongst Hpa-an's Buddhist Plong Karen community in complex and uneven ways. I consider how bounded understandings of morality inform practical notions of belonging and citizenship for Plong Karen in Hpa-an, and how Muslims are positioned and excluded from these frameworks in ways which partly align with ideologies of the state.

The political climate of Myanmar deeply influences the way people pursue morality. In recent years the consequences of national-level social and political changes have heralded a blossoming of Karen civil society groups in Hpa-an calling for the unity of Christian and Buddhist Karen people. However, alongside this movement, calls for the protection of Myanmar as a Buddhist nation have found considerable appeal among many Plong Karen Buddhists. The purchase of these narratives in Myanmar partly lies in Buddhist cosmological narratives of the impermanence of the Buddha's teaching and the gradual moral degeneration of society towards a dark age. Historically, anxieties regarding the decline of Buddhism during periods of social

change have underpinned recurrent efforts to revive the culture and institutions of Buddhism (see for eg. Turner 2014). In recent years scholars have explained the resurgence of Buddhist nationalism as an attempt “to make sense of a changing world” (Foxeus 2016a: 230; see also Schober 2017). Indeed, as noted in previous chapters Myanmar has seen major social, economic and political changes in the last five years since the military’s tentative transition to partial civilian rule. As other scholars of Myanmar have noted, insecurities broader about by these shifts have raised fundamental questions regarding national belonging, identity and citizenship, including about the status of Buddhism within Myanmar (Cheesman 2017a; G. McCarthy 2018b; Schissler 2016; Schober 2017; Walton 2016; Walton and Hayward 2014). However, much of the scholarship examining anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar has analysed it through the lens of Bamar Buddhist nationalism. Very few have considered how the moral ideals of ethnic nationality groups such as the Karen have been enlisted to justify the social exclusion of Muslims in ways that reinforce and extend Buddhist nationalist movements that have received considerable state support in recent years.

In this chapter, I advance understanding of Buddhist nationalism and everyday moral practice by examining how Plong Karen moral ideals have converged with broader movements demanding the social and political exclusion of Muslims. In the first section, I explore how the changes in Karen State have seen a proliferation of Karen civil society networks seeking to celebrate and encourage a vision of Karen ethno-nationalism that unifies Christian and Buddhist Karen communities. This project of unification aims to overcome divisions bequeathed by the 1994 split between the KNU and the DKBA, which organisationally and symbolically fractured the Karen ethno-nationalist project (see Gravers 1996, 1999). However, in considering the recent upsurge in community activism around a Karen ideology of inter-religious reunification, I also examine how this movement converges with the bounded conceptualisations of moral community propagated by Buddhist nationalist in Karen state and across Myanmar. Drawing on the work of Veena Das (1998, 2007) and Renato Rosaldo (2003), I examine how the exclusionary ideology of Buddhist nationalism long-endorsed by the state produces contingent forms of belonging that complicate the positioning of Plong Karen Buddhists in opposition to the state.

Enlisting the framework of everyday ethics developed in earlier chapters, I argue that ethnic understandings of personhood and moral ideals increasingly reinforce the role of the Myanmar state as the protector of a broader Buddhist moral order which encapsulates Plong Karen people and works to the exclusion of Muslims.

## **Contemporary Hpa-an and the Project of Karen Reunification**

The signing of a preliminary ceasefire agreement between the Myanmar government and the Karen National Union (KNU) in 2012 which brought a pause to more than sixty years of conflict in Karen State unleashed extraordinary hope for a more peaceful future. The ceasefire brought about momentous social, political and economic changes, with many people benefiting from the cessation of hostilities (KHRG 2014; South and Joliffe 2015). Although significant challenges remain to securing a sustainable peace, the ceasefire has increased freedom of movement, decreased taxation, improved livelihoods, access to income opportunities, healthcare and education services and a significantly reduced incidence of human rights abuses (KHRG 2018; UNDP 2014).<sup>188</sup> The ceasefire with the KNU and the opening up of political space due to the broader reforms in Myanmar, has meant that local communities are able to formally organise themselves. This has seen a proliferation of community-based organisations, which were previously banned under the military government.

Many of the Karen civil society networks that have proliferated in Hpa-an have a deep relationship with the Karen ethno-nationalist movement, including the KNU's affiliated humanitarian and activist organisations (Brenner 2017; Décobert 2016; Horstmann 2011b, c). The bilateral preliminary ceasefire agreement signed in 2012 opened the way for the Karen National Union to open 'liaison' offices in Hpa-an and

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<sup>188</sup> Despite these positive developments, people in Karen State continue to suffer from poor access to health services, education, a lack of livelihood opportunities and insecurity over land rights (see Davis and Joliffe 2016).

other townships throughout Karen State. Outspoken Karen advocacy groups previously only based in Thailand, including the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) and the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), have also secured permanent bases in Hpa-an.

Beyond overtly political organisations, in recent years Hpa-an has also become a hub for Karen civil society groups working to promote Karen language, culture and history. For many years, Karen history and culture was not actively celebrated or promoted in Hpa-an. The owner of a popular Karen dress store in Hpa-an, Grace, explained to me that wearing Karen clothing in rural areas branded you an ‘enemy’ of the state during the many decades of conflict. He told me that under Myanmar’s more open political environment, Karen clothing had become very popular. When I arrived in Karen State in 2015, Karen clothing stores could be seen everywhere alongside the distinct red, blue and white colours of the Karen nation – on petrol stations, t-shirts and motorbikes. Similarly, the Karen flag, which is affiliated with the KNU and their separatist cause, was being flown out the front of restaurants, houses and often plastered on people’s car side mirrors in sticker form. I also regularly saw t-shirts branding the KNU’s slogans from their martyred independence leader, Saw Ba U Gyi, including his famed ‘four principles’, the cornerstone of the Karen revolution: 1. For us surrender is out of the question; 2. The recognition of Karen State must be complete; 3. We shall retain our arms; 4. We shall decide our own political destiny.<sup>189</sup> After being somewhat isolated for many decades from the strong border-based Karen ethno-nationalist movement, Hpa-an is now a heartland for the celebration of the Karen national history and culture. One aspect of Hpa-an civil society rejuvenation which has come to the fore of this movement is the strong focus on the importance of building ‘unity’ (K. *oh hu oh hau*) between Karen Buddhists and Christians.

The symbolic cultivation of Karen unity is best evinced in the embrace of the wrist tying ritual by the full spectrum of Karen society, including many Christian networks. Though most Plong Karen families perform the yearly ritual in their homes, the public

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<sup>189</sup> *Kawthoolei* was proclaimed as a free state by the first KNU President, Saw Baw U Gyi in June 1949.



observance of the wrist tying celebration has become an increasingly important feature of the ritual calendar for many Hpa-an residents. In the wake of the 2012 ceasefire prominent monasteries in Hpa-an have begun to hold special celebrations as a way of bringing community members together.<sup>190</sup> In August 2015 I arrived at the Taungalay monastery, about 15 minutes outside of Hpa-an, with a large group of Karen university students, who were all dressed according to the occasion – young men in striped Karen shirts and girls in long white Karen dresses. Nineteen-year-old Saw Ho Kyaw explained to me that his family had celebrated the wrist tying ceremony for as long as he could remember, remember, but mostly within the domestic sphere, and that it was first time he had attended such a public spectacle.

Thousands of people in colourful Karen dress flocked to the Taungalay monastery, gathering beside a hall where they were hosting the celebrations. In a large hall beside the monastery, long wooden low-lying tables were lined up on the floor in rows, with flat bamboo rice baskets filled with bananas, sugar cane, sticky rice, rice, water and flowers. A Plong elder explained the importance of the wrist tying ceremony for Karen people and the symbolism behind each of the objects:

During the rainy season month of *Wagaung* (in August), in the past Karen people faced many difficulties and troubles. In this month there is a lot of flooding and many evil spirits that wander the land. Also, we did not have a lot of rice and many people got sick. So we tie the white string around our wrists with a ritual blessing so that our soul stays close and protects us from any demons. The white string is also a point of identification, the mark of Karen people, and so it is important for us to keep our culture alive.

She explained the symbolic value and ritual importance of the various fruits and foods gathered on a tray in front of her. “If we do this ritual, we need all the different items”, she said.

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<sup>190</sup> The wrist tying ceremony can occur anytime in the lunar month of *Wagaung*, but most of the major ceremonies are held on the full moon day.

We believe that Karen need to be united like bananas in a bunch, to stick together sticky rice, to love each other like rice, to have a clear mind and heart like water and to have grace like a flower.

As the ritual leader explained, the blessing of Karen elders using these items calls the soul to protect the body from harm, to keep malevolent beings away and to ensure full and overflowing rice stores.

Gathered in the hall that day were hundreds of Plong Karen elders who sat on the floor dressed in traditional Karen garb on one side of the tables. On the other side young people in more modern contemporary Karen dress shuffled in on their knees to receive their ritual blessing from the moral exemplars (see Figure 16). It was raining outside at the time, and the hall was hot and steamy, heaving with the many bodies that came to receive blessings for the year. The sounds of the ritual prayers from the Karen elders hummed against the din of the monsoon rains outside, competing with the clanging of Karen horns, cymbals and a drum played by a group at the far end of the hall where a group performed the famed Karen *don* dance.



Figure 16: Elders and youth come together for the wrist tying ceremony in Hpa-an in August 2016.  
Photo by author.

The historic *don* dance promotes the unity of Karen people and the importance of maintaining community harmonious relations. *Don*, meaning ‘to be in agreement’, is represented by all of the dancers wearing matching handwoven Karen dress. Many groups dedicate hundreds of hours learning how to dance with what they describe as *hu hu hau hau* – ‘unity’ or ‘togetherness’. Each *don* dance begins with a *ya ta nya*, a welcome and introduction, by a woman who explains the *don* dance and provides a brief history of Karen people and whose sound must be sweet. Renowned as one of the most energy-intensive dances of all ethnic groups in Myanmar, the lyrics that accompany the *don* dance often emphasise the hard-working, honest nature of Karen people and the importance of village harmony (see also Stern and Stern 1971). In its contemporary form, these songs also offer an expression of pride about Karen culture and traditions and of Karen nationalism.<sup>191</sup>

The famed unity song of the Karen, ‘*Oh hu Oh hau*’ expresses similar sentiments to the *don* dance and was a feature of nearly every public celebration I attended in Hpa-an and was performed after the Karen *don* dance. Singing about community harmony, the unity song calls for the mother and father groups, Plong and S’gaw Karen, to come back together and unite as one people. It also has a strong religious overtone, encouraging Buddhists, Christians, Leke and Telekhon Karen – the four Karen religions – to come back together and unite as brothers:

<i>Hey! Plong po gyeh taing</i>	Hey! Plong people come back
<i>Hey! Shau po gyeh taing</i>	Hey! S’gaw people come back
<i>Gyeh taing oh go toh, eh hu hau</i>	Come back together and unite
<i>Ba thi yi wae ku ga ba bah hti kli ong</i>	We all should all love each other
<i>Kwai soe hton hee</i>	Do not abandon each other
<i>go gah bah hu hau</i>	We should all be united
<i>Ngeh ngoh eh</i>	We should not misinterpret each other <sup>192</sup>
<i>bah hta puh weh</i>	We are siblings

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<sup>191</sup> For a discussion of how the *don* dance features as an importance source of national pride amongst celebrations in Karen refugee communities see MacLachlan (2006) and Rangkla (2012).

<sup>192</sup> This can also be translated as ‘don’t get angry with each other’.

<i>Eh loh tha tho thar ler Plong loh</i>	We should love each other like we have one heart
<i>Dae ba thaung kha dae Plong ba ywa</i>	Buddhist and Christian
<i>Leke, Telekhon lor</i>	Leke and Telekhon
<i>Dae Plong muh tong dae shaw</i>	Eastern Plong and S'gaw
<i>Dae Plong muh naw</i>	Western Plong
<i>Mu ler nyi</i>	One day
<i>Byi ma toh tor</i>	In order to develop
<i>Ba bah tha moh, oh hu, oh hau</i>	We have to be united
<i>Oh hu haw, mweh bah tsui ngn</i>	United, for our ethnicity
<i>Ba eh pli pla tho tha ma geh kli ong</i>	If we are separated, our heart will not be connected
<i>Tseh eh tseh gwi kyaw tha dae ku nor</i>	Think with your brain and heart
<i>Tseh eh ma wun ner hsu tun thi le chon</i>	Love and work hard for your ethnicity
<i>Ner eh air doh tsu tsar ngon</i>	If you love your ethnicity
<i>Plong, Shaw Pwo, oh hu, oh hau</i>	Plong and S'gaw will be united
<i>Ler muh tong kaw mi yo baung</i>	The yellow sun will come up in the east

Viewed as an ethnographic text, the ‘*Oh hu Oh hau*’ song provides many insights into the sentiment underpinning the movement for Karen unification. The song evokes the image of a peaceful Karen nation, affirming the status and belonging of various linguistic and religious groups within the broader idealised ethnic collective. The spirit of the ‘*Oh hu Oh hau*’ song was evinced in 2015 by the Taungalay Sayadaw invitation to representatives from Hpa-an’s Christian churches, as well as the Leke and Telekhon community, to celebrate in the wrist tying ceremony in his monastery. One of the Baptist pastors who attended explained to me that many Christians are not familiar with the wrist-tying ceremony as missionaries in the past had disparaged and discouraged the practice as an ‘animist’ tradition. However, he explained that the wrist tying ceremony was “actually for all Karen people.”

It is important that all Karen, whether we are Christian, or Buddhist celebrate the wrist tying. It is about family and keeping Karen people tied together. It is our culture and heritage.

Talking to the Taungalay Sayadaw later in the year, he reiterated similar ideas, explaining how important it was for Karen people to unite: “For a long time, Christian and Buddhist Karen have been divided. But we are brothers and we need to come together if we are going to see peace here.” These sentiments recurred again during the ‘Sweet December’ celebrations in the lead up to Christmas in 2015. There are a number of churches that invite prominent Buddhist abbots to come and celebrate with them on Christmas day. The Muchali Baptist community at the base of Mount Khwaegabaung, in particular, has a reputation for bringing together Karen people of different religious communities. The 85-year old pastor there, Hpu Sunday Tun, spoke to me about the importance of unity for Karen people. Softly yet firmly he explained that as a Christian he believed in loving all people, regardless of their religion. Born on Christmas day, and with a unique vision promoting inter-religious harmony, Hpu Sunday Tun has become a strong advocate in Hpa-an’s community for promoting Karen unity. Every month he held a community meeting for Karen people from four faith communities – Christian, Buddhist, Leke and Telekhon – to come together and share experiences. He told me, “For a long time Karen people have been divided by their different religions,” he explained. “But really, we are the same. We are brothers and we need to come together and be *thout kyar*, faithful, to one another as in the past. If we do not, Karen people will never see peace.”

Hpu Sunday Tun explained to me that the inter-religious tensions between Karen communities in Hpa-an district were long-running, going back to the colonial period. Reiterating much of what I had been told by Buddhist Karen elders and monks, he explained that when Christian missionaries first came to Hpa-an, led by the famed Adoniram Judson, the primarily Buddhist community had felt threatened by their presence. However, he explained that the split between the Karen National Union and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army in the mid 1990s created a renewed sense of moral crisis among the Karen community which he hoped to overcome with his monthly gatherings. “During the 1990s Christian Karen came to be associated with the KNU and Buddhist Karen with the DKBA. Since that time, we have been very divided,” he explained.

Beneath the optimistic movement of inter-religious cooperation and dialogue that is ascendant in the contemporary moment, however, is a dark history of religious marginalisation in which Karen moral identity has increasingly been defined in opposition to Muslims. As described in Chapter One, what many scholars consider to be the “genuine grievances” of Buddhist Plong Karen soldiers spilled into a split within the KNU in which soldiers from religious and linguistic splits from the mostly Christian organisation to form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (Gravers 1999: 91-97; South 2008: 58; Thawngmung 2008: 30). The KNU was governed by an executive committee that was dominated by S’gaw Karen Christians, many of whom came from the Irrawaddy Delta and Yangon, whereas, the rank and file soldiers were largely made up of Buddhist, Plong soldiers from southeastern Myanmar (see Gravers 2007: 252; South 2008: 57-59). As already noted, the DKBA’s separation from the KNU was also aided by the influential role of U Thuzana, the Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw. Mikael Gravers (2015) argues that U Thuzana’s popularity was based on a distinctly Karen Buddhist cosmological imaginary of moral leadership and order which appealed to many Buddhist Plong Karen. However, his explicitly Buddhist mission also marginalised non-Buddhist sectors of society throughout DKBA controlled areas of Karen State.

Whilst U Thuzana’s Buddhist revitalisation campaign was concentrated in Myaing Gyi Ngu, other areas of Hpa-an district also promulgated a strong Buddhist nationalist ethos at the time. This coincided with attempts by the SLORC/SPDC regime to explicitly and actively missionise southeastern Myanmar in the 1990s. Working closely with the Council for the Development of Border Areas and National Races in ethnic states, the State Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Council (MaHaNa) helped to institutionalise a new repressive order, believing that conversion would help reorient the identification of ethnic minority peoples towards the state as a part of ‘national integration’ efforts (Schober 1997: 238).<sup>193</sup> In Karen State these changes saw

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<sup>193</sup> Subsequent to the establishment of the MaHaNa Council in 1980 Ne Win launched a Sangha reform, targeting several popular esoteric religious groups and their charismatic monks considered to be heterodox. This campaign targeted some well-known abbots such as the Mahasi Sayadaw and Thein Pyu Sayadaw and continued throughout the 1990s, particularly those with the possession of supernatural powers who were sanctioned and defrocked by government representatives in what

relatively autonomous Karen monks and their communities subsumed within a hierarchical framework under the Myanmar state, challenging traditional structures and the continuity of local Karen Buddhist practices, including the use of Plong Karen language sermons and the integration of local Karen rituals and *nats* into religious practice. This state project of Buddhist missionisation also affectively granted Buddhist abbots in Hpa-an district, the seat of government administrative power, limitless authority to engage in activities to help ‘build religion’ (B. *thathana pyu*). Aided by the coercive power of the DKBA, who effectively became a proxy militia force of Buddhist authorities, monks became a law unto their own in Hpa-an district.

People across all religious groups explained to me that during the late 1990s and 2000s the DKBA were extremely powerful in Hpa-an district and became a law unto their own. Unlike Buddhists Plong Karen for whom the DKBA brought some form of peace and stability to their lives, for Muslims and Christians in rural areas of Karen State, the time of the DKBA is imprinted in their memory as one of instability and violence. U Thuzana’s biographer, Myaing Nan Swe notes that in creating Myaing Gyi Ngu as a Buddhist ‘religious land’ (B. *thathana myei*), U Thuzana aimed to revitalise a ‘pure’ Karen race, language and religion (cited in Gravers 2018: 101). In his mission to resurrect a distinctly Karen Buddhist moral community, during the late 1990s DKBA soldiers inflicted brutal violence on non-Buddhist communities throughout areas they controlled (Gravers 2018; KHRG 2002). This included forced conversions to Buddhism, the destruction of non-Buddhist places of worship and multiple attacks on non-Buddhist communities (KHRG 2002: 28). In the early 2000s a number of significant land grabs took place by powerful Sayadaws in Hpa-an district and elsewhere for the purpose of ‘building religion’, including confiscations from Buddhist households. The Sayadaw of famed Kyauk Kalat pagoda which draws thousands of pilgrims every year to Hpa-an, for example, took over 90 acres of paddy land from villagers nearby in 2001, including taking a bulldozer to a newly built Seventh Day Adventist church. The Zwegabin Sayadaw is similarly well known in

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Rozenberg (2010: 123) describes as a “spectacular purification operation” (see also Houtman 1999). This also included a rationalised demythologisation of Buddhism, the bureaucratisation of Buddhist institutional structures and a renewed call for authenticity and purity in the state *sangha* and monastic practice (see Rozenberg 2010; Foxeus 2016).

Hpa-an district for land grabs from local Buddhist and Christian people for the purpose of ‘building religion’ (B. *thathana pyu*). This project of Buddhist moral revivalism inevitably generated considerable animosity among non-Buddhists, and Muslims in particular, who were positioned outside the protective sphere of national moral community.

While targeting all non-Buddhist communities, the mistreatment of Muslim communities during the SLORC/SPDC period (1988-2010) was especially pernicious. As one local Hpa-an Muslim, U Aung Kyaw told me, “This time was very bad. The DKBA did a lot of bad things to Muslim people. They killed many people.” U Kyaw Win had fled to Hpa-an with his family in 1997 after attacks on his village. He was from a small town called Kamamaung nearby to Myaing Gyi Ngu with a sizeable Muslim population and he strongly identified as Karen – partly because Karen was his first language, but also because many of his friends and community members also saw him as Karen. He told me that after the DKBA returned from the border mosques were burnt down, people indiscriminately killed and families driven out *en masse* of Myaing Gyi Ngu in U Thuzana’s bid to ‘cleanse’ Karen State of all Muslims (see also KHRG 2002). Buddhist settlers were subsequently brought in and given land taken from Muslims while pagodas were built on the former sites of mosques in an attempt to cultivate what U Thuzana labelled a ‘Buddhist land’.<sup>194</sup> Despite their dispossession and vicious treatment, Muslims in Karen State received little sympathy from the broader Karen community as they have often been viewed as outsiders to the Karen nation.

At the behest of powerful Buddhist abbots who sought to defend Buddhism, during the SLORC/SPDC period multiple villages in Hpa-an district instituted rules preventing the sale of land to Muslims and even registration through a family list.<sup>195</sup> Despite the handing of partial power to a democratically elected civilian government

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<sup>194</sup> In 2015-16 U Thuzana was also attracted media attention for building pagodas in Christian church compounds and beside mosques in a move which was largely condemned by the government and some of the wider community (KHRG 2017: Ch 8).

<sup>195</sup> The family list is an important bureaucratic document necessary to obtaining a national registration card and other official papers in Myanmar.



and popular calls to unify the Karen people, anti-Muslim sentiment has become even more pervasive in the contemporary era. Indeed, in the more open political environment, a more pernicious social project of Buddhist moral revivalism has come to the fore of contemporary understandings of Buddhist Plong Karen moral identity, subjectivity and belonging, which casts Muslims as definitively outside the Karen nation and moral community.

## **Buddhist Nationalism and the *Sangha* in Karen State**

Nationwide calls for the protection of Buddhism against perceived threats strongly resonate with many Plong Karen Buddhists in Karen State. Since the commencement of political liberalization in 2011 Buddhist nationalist networks have become a pervasive force in national and provincial political debates. In 2012 the Buddhist 969 movement flourished around Hpa-an, organising boycotts against Muslim-owned businesses as a response to the communal violence that erupted between Buddhist and Muslim communities in western Rakhine state.<sup>196</sup> This sentiment gained renewed intensity during my fieldwork in 2015-2016, building off the popularity of Ma Ba Tha, the Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion.<sup>197</sup>

Since its inception in 2013 Ma Ba Tha has been very popular among Plong Karen Buddhists championing a socially engaged model of the *sangha*, as a vehicle for strengthening Buddhism (Fuller 2018; Schober 2017; van Klinken and Su Mon Thazin Aung 2017). In the more open social and political environment, the strength of Ma Ba Tha has been enhanced by the relaxation of media laws and their ability to project their sermons via Facebook. In Myanmar Ma Ba Tha has become virtually synonymous with the activities of hard-line nationalist Buddhist monks who have led a public

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<sup>196</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the 969 movement see Nyi Nyi Kyaw (2016)

<sup>197</sup> Ma Ba Tha is an acronym for *Amyo Batha Sasāna Kakwaèsaungshaukye Apwè*—literally translated as the Organization for Protection of Race and Religion. Ma Ba Tha claims 10 million members in nearly 300 townships across Myanmar and their focus on the promotion of the dharma, Buddhist moral values and social action of *parahita* have been a core part of the movement. Ma Ba Tha was successful in lobbying the government in 2015 to approve a controversial set of four laws on race and religion that imposed restrictions on interfaith marriage, birth spacing, polygamy and conversion. For more on this see Walton et al (2015).

campaign which positions Muslims in Myanmar as a threat to state sovereignty and to the national faith of Buddhism (Cheesman 2017a; Foxeus 2016a; Schissler et al. 2017; Schober 2017; Walton and Hayward 2014).<sup>198</sup> The most prominent and outspoken abbot of the Ma Ba Tha movement in Hpa-an is the Zwegabin Sayadaw, U Kawidaza, who has helped to instil a paranoid Buddhist nationalism in much of Hpa-an which fears the extinction of Karen State's unique Buddhist culture and moral community. However, these views are widespread and voiced by many ordinary Plong Karen.

In May 2017 Myanmar's Sangha Mahā Nāyaka Council (Ma Ha Na), the state appointed organisation representing over 500,000 Buddhist monks, issued a controversial order against Ma Ba Tha to disband and remove its signboards across the country. The committee's order came in response to Ma Ba Tha's association with anti-Muslim activities and calls from the new NLD government that the Buddhist nationalist group was provoking instability.<sup>199</sup> Ma Ha Na also accused Ma Ba Tha of acting against basic *sangha* principles, rules and regulations. While most Ma Ba Tha chapters agreed to adhere to the directive, in Hpa-an the deadline passed on July 15 with local affiliate groups refusing to comply.<sup>200</sup>

At the central Thayettaw monastery on the main road through Hpa-an, an old discoloured Ma Ba Tha signboard was replaced with a shiny bright new version as a testament to the town's resistance to the state order (Hin Thar Nee 2017). Hundreds of Karen people gathered at the monastery to protest the decision in support of Ma Ba Tha (see Figure 17). A university friend of mine, Nan Poh Wah, who attended the gathering at the Thayettaw monastery explained to me that Ma Ba Tha was essential

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<sup>198</sup> Internationally, the most extreme examples of their speech have attracted media attention, including references to Muslims as "rabid dogs" and invasive species (see TIME, July 1, 2013).

<sup>199</sup> Since the NLD came to power in March 2016, Ma Ba Tha and some of their leading abbots have faced increasing restrictions on their activities. Ma Ba Tha was rebadged as the 'Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation' in 2017 after they were declared an 'unlawful monk association' by the State Sangha, though they are still commonly referred to as Ma Ba Tha among most people in Hpa-an. In addition to declaring Ma Ba Tha an 'unlawful association' the *sangha* has also enacted orders barring the prominent nationalist monk U Wirathu from giving sermons for a year because of his repeated hate speech against Muslims. In 2018, another monk U Parmaukkha was sentenced to 3 months jail for his part in organising an anti-Rohingya protest outside the US embassy in April 2016.

<sup>200</sup> Another order was made by Ma Ha Na in July 2018 to ban the nationalist group ordering it to take down its signboards across the country (see Aung Kyaw Min 2018). At the time of writing it is unclear as to whether the Hpa-an chapter will comply with this directive.

for the protection of Karen people and the Buddhist religion. Nan Poh Wah told me that Buddhism in Myanmar was under threat from Muslims committed to ridding the world of the *dhamma*. “Before Malaysia and Indonesia were Buddhist countries too,” she told me emphatically. “So, we have to work hard to protect our Karen people and religion.”



Figure 17: Karen men and women hold up signs outside the Thayettaw monastery in Hpa-an which reads ‘All people of Karen State are Ma Ba Tha’. Source: Anonymous.

In considering the popularity of Ma Ba Tha it is important to consider the powerful role Buddhist abbots play in shaping the moral ideals and everyday ethical practices of Plong Karen Buddhists. In Hpa-an, the *sangha* has often been a key institution of support for Buddhist Plong Karen families over time. The close ties between Plong Karen lay Buddhists and the *sangha* are reinforced on an everyday basis through donations, alms giving and other acts of *dāna*. Among Plong Karen Buddhists monasteries are one of the first places they turn to in times of both celebration and hardship. Monasteries have played an important social role in the protection of

civilians displaced by annual flooding and conflict.<sup>201</sup> As described in Chapter One, the Thamanya Sayadaw, for example, provided a space of political refuge for local civilians against forced portering, illegitimate taxation and other human rights abuses on the part of the Tatmadaw and Karen ethnic armed groups. In Hpa-an, monasteries have also played a crucial role in educating poor primary school-aged children.<sup>202</sup> They also run blood donation drives and provide maternal health care. Other abbots in Hpa-an district have similarly helped to provide electricity, medical clinics and other important social welfare services for local communities.

Most villages and towns in Hpa-an district have at least one monastery, which are the primary institutions for the dissemination of Buddhist literature as well as the transmission of moral frameworks and value orientations. At the local everyday level, many people will consult with their local abbot, in the naming of their child, for moral guidance in relation to personal difficulties they face and before they make major financial investments. Monks also play a role in the arbitration of justice and community disputes and are host to victims of floods and conflict. Karen monks are also highly vocal and outspoken actors about the importance of moral community and the need to reinvigorate the *sāsana* in order to achieve genuine peace and prosperity.

In Hpa-an, Buddhist monks have immense power and authority, and play a key role in guiding people's everyday ethical practices and broader moral ideals. Encouraging lay members to revitalise Buddhism through social works of *parahita* has become a defining feature of contemporary understandings of Karen moral community. *Parahita* is a Pāli term which describes an attitude of altruism, where a person or organisation works selflessly for the benefit of others (Ashin Sandar Thika 2014). Works of *parahita* are deeply shaped by the logics of the Buddhist “moral universe”

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<sup>201</sup> In August 2015 the heavy rains of the monsoon season wreaked havoc across Myanmar, claiming lives, submerging villages and creating a national crisis unseen since the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, in which more than 138,000 people died. Facing perhaps the worst flooding in a generation, and a response which the Myanmar government itself labelled as ‘weak’, local religious and welfare groups, students and artists took the lead in raising and redistributing hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of rice, noodles, water, clothes and medical supplies for communities in need.

<sup>202</sup> Monastic schools have a long legacy in Myanmar, dating back to the 11th century.

(Walton 2016), placing emphasis on the importance of enacting the Buddhist virtues of ‘loving kindness’ (P. *metta*) and ‘compassion’ (P. *karunā*) for others (see also G. McCarthy 2018b). The cultivation of these values through everyday social acts is seen as an embodied form of merit-making par excellence and thus a means of human flourishing – for breaking out of the cycle of change, suffering and false attachment to ego. The logics of *parahita* have also increasingly reformulated the boundaries of Plong Karen understandings of moral community, citizenship and belonging.

While some monastic leaders have sought to bring Karen people together as a part of a renewed political project to unite the Karen, they have also created new divides around the logics of moral community. As Gerard McCarthy (2018b) relates from his research in central Myanmar, while the logic of *parahita* has instilled a firm sense of the importance of social work for the good of others amongst Buddhists, in Hpa-an it has also helped to entrench the exclusion of non-Buddhist communities from the boundaries of “moral citizenship.”

The deeply problematic dimensions of Buddhist revivalism became evident to me when I was speaking to a university friend of mine, Saw Hti Klein, one afternoon in Hpa-an. Saw Hti Klein was a part of a youth *parahita* organisation in Hpa-an called ‘Metta Shin’ – loving kindness. Referencing Buddhist frameworks of morality, he explained to me that “If you are Buddhist you like to do *parahita*, social work for others. If you are Muslim you like to kill.” Despite the promotion of ‘loving kindness’ to others, a powerful discourse that positions Muslims as ‘other’ in absolute moral terms has thus begun to shape how many people have come to define and enact moral community. In connecting themselves to Buddhist understanding of *parahita* as a form of moral citizenship, Plong Karen Buddhists find resonance and a sense of shared connectivity with Myanmar as a political and national project. This connection to the wider national polity of Myanmar has become even stronger in recent years as a result of nationwide calls for the defence of Buddhism and the nation vis a vis Muslims and the Rohingya in particular.

Buddhist cosmological understandings of citizenship as related to *parahita* permeate all kinds of every day ordinary giving within the field of Buddhist Karen social

relations. What it means to be ‘good’ according to a Buddhist “moral universe” strikes at the core of the way many Plong Karen Buddhists craft themselves as moral beings through everyday social relations and ethical practices. So what does it mean to sit outside the Buddhist Plong Karen “moral universe” (Walton 2016) entirely, especially in a space so ethnically and religiously diverse? How do Karen people see and relate to others given the “moral reasonings” they apply to their own lives (Sykes 2009). Are there possibilities for mutuality?

## **Plong Karen Buddhist Morality and its Other**

Fear of Muslims was a defining feature of everyday conversation with Buddhist Plong Karen during my fieldwork in Hpa-an throughout 2015-2016. Karen people do not speak of ‘Muslims’, but of *kalar*, *kaw la* or Bengalis, various terms which broadly referring to people of south Asian origin and those who follow Islam.<sup>203</sup> These terms imply an implicit outsider status and are mostly used in derogatory ways. On one of the first nights I spent in Hpa-an, I went down to the market to buy fruit. I noticed above the shop where a couple was sitting together cutting up pineapple was a prominent ‘969’ sticker, a emblem of the nationwide Buddhist nationalist movement that spread across Myanmar in 2012. I asked what the ‘969’ sticker meant, and the store owners told me bluntly, “We do not sell or buy from *kalar*!” “You should be careful walking around at night,” they added. “There are many *kalar* in Hpa-an now.”

A month later, I was sitting in a café run by a community youth organisation chatting with one of the young Plong Karen interns there. Saw Than Zaw was 19 and had just finished high school the year before, passing his matriculation exams and gaining entrance to Hpa-an University to study English. He had started working at the café in an effort to improve his English. I had already spent many hours getting to know Saw Than Zaw, but on that afternoon we were talking about his plans for the upcoming Thingyan celebrations, which were only a couple of weeks away. For the second year

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<sup>203</sup> *Kalar* is Burmese and *kaw la* is Plong Karen. ‘Bengalis’ is a term used to refer specifically to the Rohingya, and often to Muslims more broadly, to denote their alleged origins in Bangladesh and thus their ‘foreignness’.

in a row he told me that was going to spend the national New Year festival in a monastery meditating. “I always like to meditate during Thingyan, because it helps to clean my mind,” he explained. “It makes me feel very peaceful.”

Changing the conversation, he then turned to me and pointedly asked, “Do you like Muslims?” I felt very taken aback at the time and confused given the preceding conversation. I responded affirmatively, asking his own opinion, to which he responded emphatically: “No! I hate them. They are opposite from Buddhists and Christians. They like to kill.” He then brought out a 30-page magazine filled with articles on the rise of Islamic terrorism around the world, with full-page faux-propaganda posters saying ‘Kill all Myanmar Buddhists’ and various articles about how the Islamic State (IS) movement was infiltrating Myanmar. It was a very inflammatory collection of stories written in both English and Burmese, with many glossy photographs used to justify their stories. “See,” he told me, “Their religion is terrorism. They want to kill all Buddhists. We say, ‘don’t kill’; they say ‘kill – if you kill, you will be blessed.’” Crossing his hand across his neck in the action of slitting a throat, he explained:

You should be careful. If you spend time with Muslims, they will convert you and then every opportunity will be lost. You should know. This is the weakness of Karen people. We are too honest and trusting. We do not know what Muslims are doing to our country and our people.

Furthermore, he contended that because of the long-term conflict, Karen armed groups had been able to keep Muslim population numbers controlled. However, now that the Thailand-Myanmar border was opening up to trade and commerce, he believed emphatically that Muslims in Karen State were proliferating. He told me that just like many other places in the world, Karen State, and Myanmar more broadly, would soon lose its Buddhist religion. In addition, he explained that Muslim mosques and their members were also being funded to convert young Karen women:

It's been happening for a long time, but it's become more of a problem recently. They are known to prey on young Karen girls who are

uneducated. They always cause trouble wherever they go. For example, whenever you hear of a rape case it's always a Muslim. If you marry a Muslim, they will also definitely beat you. They do many bad things to their women. I also read in the news about how they rape children. Also, they can take many wives. This is their habit.

Concerns about the vulnerability of Karen Buddhist women *vis a vis* Muslim men evokes the concept of 'paranoid nationalism' that anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2003) uses to conceptualise how marginality is reproduced and exacerbated in relation to Muslim communities in Australia. For Karen Buddhists, Muslims are seen as both religious and ethnic other and therefore inherently immoral. In discussions with many young Karen men and women about future marriage partners and what makes a good husband or wife, my university friends were often vague, noting their disdain for traditions and the role of parents in denoting a 'suitable' match. However, they were always clear about one thing: "We can marry Pa-O or S'gaw Karen," Nan Soe explained to me, "but we should never marry Burmese and we can die if we marry a Muslim. If I was to marry a Burmese, my mother would scold me and disagree with me. If I was to marry a Muslim, the head of my village would kill me." Another student, Nan Eh Eh told me explicitly, "You know, my father told me that if I marry a Burmese to not invite him to the wedding. If I marry a Muslim he would prefer me to die. My cousin married a Muslim and she is not welcome in our village anymore." Indeed, narratives related to Muslims are often deeply related to concerns about the preservation of the Karen as a distinct moral community.

In many of my discussions with people the defence of Plong Karen *vis a vis* Muslims was cast in profoundly moral terms around the boundaries of social belonging and "cultural citizenship" (Rosaldo 1994, 2003). This speaks to the work of Veena Das (2007) and her exploration of Hindu-Sikh violence in India in the 1980s. In her research, Das marks an important shift in inter-communal perceptions when "fear of the other is transformed into the notion that the *other is fearsome*" and violence enters "the recesses of the ordinary" (2007: 134, 16). Much like the social production of hate enacted against Sikh communities by Hindus in India, the characterisation of Muslims as aggressors has created amongst the Karen "an imaginary world in which the whole



social order [is] seen as if it [is] about to collapse” (2007: 132). This violence makes up a continuum, she argues, which hinges on our ability to reduce others to nonpersons in ways which encourage everyday practices of violence and exclusion.

In Hpa-an, these narratives converge with strong anxieties regarding the preservation of a distinctly Buddhist Plong Karen moral community. During my fieldwork Plong Karen Buddhists would often spontaneously raise Muslims in discussion, describing them as violent, untrustworthy and tricky, often in contrast to Karen people who they saw as simple, honest and good. Reflecting narratives which circulated elsewhere in the country during this period (G. McCarthy and Menager 2017; Schissler et al. 2017), the high moral and ethical standards of the Karen were often placed in contradistinction to Muslim people – who, in contrast, were classified as dishonest, indolent, calculating, assertive, unscrupulous and violent. When I would go to the market in Hpa-an, my Plong Karen friends would warn me to stay away from Muslims, “Only buy from Plong people. The Muslims will try to trick you. Only the Plong traders will give you an honest price.” The virtue of humility, for example, was extolled to me at length by one grandmother who noted with contempt how tricky and mendacious Muslims are. These prejudices formed the basis for stories of folk devils Karen mothers would tell to children, threatening that if they don’t behave, the *kaw la* (Muslims) will come and find them and take them away.

Much of the rhetoric of people I spoke to was a reproduction of narratives told to them by prominent Buddhist abbots around Hpa-an such as the Zwegabin Sayadaw. On one evening while staying with my friend in a small trading town outside of Hpa-an I went out to see a sermon of the Zwegabin Sayadaw. After preaching about the importance of keeping Buddhist ethics he cautioned about the spread of Islam and the decline of Buddhism in the region. Noting to his supporters the rising number of ‘Bengalis’ in Karen State, he praised the town’s support for the enforcement of its rules against allowing Muslim-owned land or businesses.

According to one of the Karen grandmothers I spoke to, and many others from the town, the local abbot had made the decree many years earlier and the tradition still held. She explained to me that this was because their local abbot had once travelled to

India on a meditation retreat and had several bad interactions with Muslims there. She told me that throughout his travels in India, one Muslim household had refused to give him water to drink, while another refused to let him rest under their palm tree and a third had turned him away when he needed rice to eat. “So when he returned to our village he made a law that no *kaw la* can own land or businesses here,” she simply explained. “He instituted this rule for our protection. *Kaw la* are opposite to Plong – we are smooth, they are rough. We are cool. They are hot.”

A young friend of mine from the same village concurred. “*Kaw la* people are bad, most people are very afraid of them. That’s why they cannot live here.” She told me, “If you let one in, more and more will come, and before you know it the whole village will be taken over by them.” I asked if this was just a rumour and if she had ever had any interaction with Muslim people. She responded emphatically, “No, it is not a rumour, it is true! We see many examples of this kind of experience.” She explained to me that Muslims are tolerable on their own, but when they come together they are “dangerous”. Continuing, she explained, that rules around the sale of land to Muslims were therefore important for the preservation of Plong Karen culture and people. She told me:

*Kaw la* have been trying to take over Myanmar for many years now. If we don’t have these rules, we might become a Muslim country like Indonesia or Afghanistan. It is already happening in Rakhine state, so we really need to make sure that it doesn’t happen here in Karen State.

As Das (2007) relates in the context of Hindu-Sikh relations in India, these constructions of the Muslim as ‘Other’ lead to a distinctive definition of who belongs to the national territory, of who is ‘moral’ both nationally and religiously. As I demonstrate in the next section, these narratives feed off state propaganda which frames the Myanmar state and military as the lead defenders of Buddhist people and culture against external threats. From the perspective of ordinary Plong Karen people, the threat of Islam constructed and cultivated by predominantly Bamar state authorities paradoxically converges with their efforts to enact Karen moral ideals in everyday life.

## **Buddhist Nationalism and the State**

As across Myanmar, the popularity of Ma Ba Tha-aligned monks in Karen State cannot be explained without reference to the role of state institutions in Buddhist culture and local life (Houtman 1999; Turner 2014; Walton 2016). Since the colonial period, Buddhism has been situated by both civilian and military governments as the essence of the majority ‘Bamar’ national and cultural identity (Schober 2011; Turner 2014). As highlighted in the slogan of one of the first lay Buddhist nationalist organisations, the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA): “To be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist” (cited in Schober 2011: 66). Protection of race, religion, and nation has been emphasized by Burmese nationalists over time, as it was during the anti-colonial struggle and after independence in 1948 (Turner 2013). Buddhism also became a vehicle for reasserting national identity in the post-colonial period, led by Prime Minister U Nu who advocated to build 60,000 sand pagodas to get elected in the post-independence election (Brohm 1957). Buddhism was also used to legitimate the SLORC-SPDC regime (1988-2010), with its leaders portraying themselves as *dhammarāja*, just and righteous Buddhist rulers (Schober 1997, 2011). In the contemporary era, Buddhism is also deeply embedded in evolving conceptualisations of citizenship and the boundaries of political community in Myanmar (Cheesman 2017b; G. McCarthy 2018b; Walton 2016).

Despite being seen as an ethnic ‘Bamar’ organisation, the logics of Ma Ba Tha produces a kind of moral community for Karen Buddhists which is able to cross ethnic lines, bounding the logic of citizenship within which the state imagines it. While discussions around the protection of Karen Buddhists *vis a vis* Muslims has been promulgated through a powerful discourse led by charismatic monks, these narratives also build off decades of propaganda from the state military junta which emphasised their outsider status – in both religious and ethnic terms (see Cheesman 2017b; Kyaw Zeyar Win 2018). As other research demonstrates, the denigration of the Rohingya as a security threat has been systematically institutionalised over many decades of military rule in Myanmar (Brooten and Verbruggen 2017; Cheesman 2017b; Kyaw Zeyar Win 2018).

These fears have been amplified in recent years by the vast expansion of new communications technologies and the circulation of hate speech (Brooten and Verbruggen 2017; Stecklow 2018). New press freedoms in print and digital formation outside the remit of information censorship in Myanmar, have played a particularly critical role in enhancing anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the country (Brooten and Verbruggen 2017; G. McCarthy and Menager 2017; Schober 2017).<sup>204</sup> As I have seen it, individuals, monks and civil society organisations have become increasingly adept at using these new platforms to shape public opinion and mobilise support, especially through Facebook. Powerful and charismatic abbots, as well as government officials, have also used Facebook to spread falsehoods about an alleged increase in the Muslim population and rumours of a Muslim plan to reduce the Buddhist population. Through sophisticated campaigns to mobilise support they have often compared the alleged wealth of Muslims in Myanmar and their threat to women in particular (see G. McCarthy and Menager 2017). Such discourses draw heavily from global events and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and other parts of the world (Gravers 2015a).

Outside of the predominantly ethnic Bamar lowland areas, the protection of Myanmar as a Buddhist nation has become a rallying call for some Plong Karen Buddhists as well as how they see themselves as citizens of the Myanmar nation. Despite the history of civil war with multiple ethnic armed organisations, the notion of national unity has been a key feature of successive governments in Myanmar. Constituted by General Ne Win (1962-1988) and sustained under General Than Shwe (1990-2010), since independence the military has sought to project itself as the key institution protecting the country from disintegration (Steinberg 2006). This is perhaps best encapsulated by the ‘three national causes’ which were emblazoned on newspapers and billboards across Myanmar under military rule. Such an imagination of the national political

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<sup>204</sup> In 2012 social media played a particularly powerful role in fuelling communal violence against the minority Muslim population in Myanmar. The speeches of the national abbot U Wirathu, in particular, are thought to have directly sparked violence in Mandalay and Meiktila. More recently, Facebook has been accused by the UN of facilitating incitement to discrimination and violence in the violence conducted against the Rohingya in 2017 (Miles 2018; Stecklow 2018).

community includes Myanmar's ethnic groups as hermeneutically inscribed in the conception of *taingyintha*, national races or 'sons of the soil' (Cheesman 2017b; Thawngmung 2016). This is based on a list of 135 ethnic groups that the state sees as having settled in Myanmar prior to 1823, a year before the first Anglo-Burmese war in which the British conquered lower Burma.<sup>205</sup>

No single legal text fully captures the notion of *taingyintha*, but as Nick Cheesman (2017b: 470) argues, it has become the *sine qua non* of belonging in Myanmar, preceding and arguably superseding legal citizenship as defined by the 2008 constitution. As Cheesman (2017b: 470) relates, "To talk of the political community 'Myanmar' is to talk of *taingyintha*, and to talk to that community is above all to address its members not as citizens but as national races." In this way, even though the Myanmar state formally acknowledges ethnic pluralism within its constitution, the government admits it only within the limits the state establishes (see also Thawngmung 2016).<sup>206</sup> Not only are Muslims perceived negatively for the fact that they sit outside the Buddhist moral community, but they are often positioned as ethnically outside the nation in a narrative that draws directly from the military state and the legacies of colonialism (Cheesman 2017b). In the contemporary era this has resulted in increasingly violent demands to exclude the Rohingya and Muslims more broadly from the rights and opportunities of inclusion within Myanmar's political community.

The core message of the Buddhist nationalist project led by Ma Ba Tha, does not just concern Burmese Buddhists, but should be more accurately understood as a moral project of Buddhist revivalism which includes Myanmar's *taingyintha*. As anthropologist Maxime Boutry (2016: 101) explains in relation to ethnic Rakhine

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<sup>205</sup> This is based on an understanding of ethnicity that separates people into discrete groups based on arbitrary cultural and psychological traits. As a result of the significant number of people that migrated to Myanmar from India under the colonial administration, Muslim communities of South Asian descent lack legitimacy in the eyes of much of Myanmar's population.

<sup>206</sup> The Citizenship Law passed in 1982 made belonging to one of the national races the primary criterion for full citizenship. In the contemporary era, *taingyintha* has come to refer to a static and bounded notion of ethnic identity, bounded in 135 ethnic groups. The 1982 law restricts citizenship to Rohingya and other minorities not considered members of one of Myanmar's *taingyintha*.

people in western Myanmar: “the conception of an endangered Buddhism partly unifies Burman and Rakhine against Myanmar’s Muslims only because it is linked to a perceived threat against their respective territories.” Equally, the work of Ma Ba Tha in Karen State and concerns for the decline of Buddhism has become a unifying force among Plong Karen Buddhists and positioned them in line with state propaganda around citizenship. Furthermore, Ma Ba Tha and their networks have used the social production of hate speech against Muslims to give birth to discourses which endorse ethnic cleansing and indeed, genocide, of Muslim communities. Such narratives have become particularly vicious in the wake the 2017 Rohingya crisis, where the protection of Buddhism was a rallying cry for many Plong Karen people and groups seeking to enact and revive ‘ethnic’ moral ideal which tie them closely to the larger Myanmar state and military as self-declared protectors of the *sāsana*.

Myanmar’s military ‘clearance operations’ against the Rohingya Muslims community which killed an estimated 10,000 people<sup>207</sup> and brutally displaced more than 700,000 to neighbouring Bangladesh in 2017,<sup>208</sup> gained widespread grassroots support across Myanmar under the notion that Buddhism needs to be “protected” against external and internal “threats” posed by Muslim populations, and the Rohingya in particular. Amidst reports of extrajudicial killings, sexual violence and arson by Myanmar’s military, the United Nations has declared this to be a “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” (Cumming-Bruce 2017) executed by the Tatmadaw acted with “genocidal intent” (UNOHCHR 2018).<sup>209</sup> Despite their own history of persecution and multiple

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<sup>207</sup> Getting reliable estimates of how many people were killed is difficult. This estimate is according to conservative estimates by the medical charity Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) in December 2017. Rohingya refugees from the Arakan Rohingya Society for peace and human Rights have also systematically compiled their own list, suggesting See <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-14/rohingya-death-toll-in-the-thousands-says-msf/9260552> (accessed 9 February 2018).

<sup>208</sup> Notably, this is the largest movement of people in mainland Southeast Asia since the Indochinese crisis in the 1970s. For the most updated information on this crisis and the displacement of Rohingya people see <https://www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis> [accessed 18 December 2017].

<sup>209</sup> A report released in September 2018 by the United National Human Rights Council provides a detailed account of atrocities committed by the Myanmar military, including gang rape, imprisonment, torture, arson, and organised mass killings (UNOHCHR 2018). Significantly, the report recommends that the Commander in Chief of Myanmar’s armed forces, Min Aung Hlaing, along with five other senior military officials, be investigated for genocide at the International Criminal Court. The Myanmar government and military has continued to dismiss all allegations in addition to the ICC jurisdiction.

human rights abuses from the state, the Tatmadaw's campaign was disturbingly popular among Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an with whom I retained close contact via social media and through three months of additional fieldwork in 2018.

After the August 25 attacks of border guard posts in Rakhine state by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), images on Facebook flowed through my Karen networks showing machete-inflected head wounds, severed limbs and disfigured bodies, framed as those of Buddhists or Hindus who had allegedly been attacked by 'terrorist' Bengali Muslims. Many of my friends from Karen State posted in support of what they considered to be a mission to rid the country of illegal immigrants and terrorists. One school teacher, Nan Htoo Lae in particular, tagged me in a new post every day for two weeks straight to make sure I was not 'blinded' by information from the Western media. As she noted to me in a Facebook message:

If you have two ears, you need to listen to both sides to know why all this happened. The government is only protecting us from terrorism. Bengali extremists have systematically planned to destroy Rakhine state and the Buddhist people of Myanmar for a long time. Soon they will also come to Karen.

Another friend of mine and prominent Karen civil society leader in Hpa-an, Nan Bah Goh, expressed similar sentiments: "Did you ever visit Kawkaik or Hlaingbwe townships in Karen State?" she asked.

In those areas, there are sometimes more than three mosques in one village. Did you know? You better take time to explore more thoroughly about Bengalis in Karen State before you come to your own conclusions. Yes, you can mention that Muslims are a religious minority in Myanmar but not in the world. Use your brain to educate yourself properly.

Part of Nan Htoo Lae and Nan Bah Goh's views can be explained by the sheer level of misinformation about the Rohingya crisis, but also about Muslims more broadly in Myanmar. In the wake of the August 25 attacks while those outside Myanmar were

focused on the sheer scale of human rights abuses and the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in Bangladesh's refugee camps, the image of the crisis circulating among people in the country couldn't have been more different. In the wake of the 'clearance operations' enacted against Rohingya communities in northern Rakhine State in August 2017, hate speech and a deluge of misinformation spread like wildfire throughout the country (Kinseth 2018; Stecklow 2018).<sup>210</sup> This included rumours about the growth of an international jihadist movement in Myanmar that was going to attack major cities across the country including Hpa-an.

While it is important not to conflate views towards the Rohingya with Muslims more broadly in Myanmar, these events played a significant role in exacerbating anti-Muslim sentiment in Karen State in 2017. A few weeks after the August 2017 attacks against security outposts in Rakhine state, hundreds of Karen people gathered in support of the military's clearance operations at the Taungalay monastery. Much like the wrist tying ceremony in August 2015, people came dressed proudly in Karen garb. However, unlike the themes of inter-religious harmony which were on display in the wrist tying celebration, Karen people gathered together in support of the military's clearance operations in Rakhine and what they perceived as the protection of Myanmar and the Buddhist religion.

Reflecting both Karen political grievances and the increasingly ubiquitous popular depiction of Muslims as the 'fearsome other' (Das 2007), people gathered that day and in subsequent Ma Ba Tha gatherings endorsed wider Buddhist nationalist narratives about the decline of Buddhism in Myanmar and the threat of Islam to both the Karen and Myanmar nation. Despite the many decades of war which had placed the military in direct conflict with local Karen communities, signs at the protests read out "Good health to the army chief, who is defending the country's sovereignty, race and religion." On a stage in front of a crowd of hundreds of Karen people the firebrand chauvinist monk, U Wirathu, called for Karen people's support in defending

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<sup>210</sup> United Nations investigators have condemned Facebook as a vehicle for "acrimony, dissension and conflict" and for playing a "determining role" in prompting 'clearance operations' enacted against Rohingya communities in western Rakhine state Myanmar in 2017 (Miles 2018).



Buddhism against the looming Muslim threat: “They call themselves Rohingya, but these Bengali people burn their own houses and they flee to another country. What kind of people are these Muslims?”, he asked. “Do they eat rice through their backsides and excrete through their mouths? They are the opposite of everything in nature” (cited in Hookway 2017).

Many Plong Karen Buddhists understood the clearance operations enacted against Rohingya communities in Rakhine State in highly moralistic terms, with the Tatmadaw seen to be defending the Buddhist *sasāna* and the country more broadly. This depiction of the state army as a source of socio-moral protection contrasts with Karen ethno-nationalist narratives which have for decades positioned the Tatmadaw as a fundamentally exploitative, corrupt and destructive dominated by the ethnic Bamar majority. Like Mark Jurgensmeyer (2010: 268) relates from his research in southern Thailand, state-propagation of Buddhism may thus be providing the “basis for a national consensus” which draws previously marginalised people on the edge of the state into the national project of citizenship and political community. Aligning themselves with Ma Ba Tha, the pursuit of Buddhist morality by Plong Karen people helps to cultivate a form of “cultural citizenship” (Rosaldo 1994, 2003) in which Karen people are positioned *inside* the nation and political community of Myanmar. The partial and contingent cultural integration of Plong Karen people, still durably bounded by a deep scepticism of inter-marriage with Bamar and non-Karen more broadly, is thus coming at the cost of the increasingly violent physical and symbolic expulsion of Muslims from both Karen and Myanmar society at large.

## **Conclusion**

Existing literature on Karen people is heavily focused on the militant ethno-nationalist narrative of self-determination that has been mobilised in opposition to central Burmese authorities for decades. For many Karen people, including Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an, these discourses have shaped and lent meaning to the human rights abuses, persecution and marginalisation inflicted by the state. However, as this chapter has shown, Karen ethno-nationalist narratives are taking new expression in

ways that simultaneously unify some Karen and legitimise the exclusion of religious minorities from Karen and Myanmar society more broadly.

The mobilisation of Buddhist Plong Karen communities against Muslims, as with Islamophobia across Myanmar, is not immutable or all-encompassing (Schissler et al. 2017). While these build off a strong legacy of anti-Muslim violence that proliferated in the 1990s under the DKBA, the views of Plong Karen Buddhists towards Muslim communities that I have described here are closely aligned with the social and political visions of the Myanmar state and its military. Since independence, Myanmar's military (and civilian) leaders have attempted to shape social morality in the image of Buddhist political ideologies in order to legitimatise their rule (Schober 2011; Walton 2016). In their struggle for recognition and membership in Myanmar, religion, specifically Buddhism, has provided a basis for national belonging for Buddhist Plong Karen. In their everyday pursuit of morality, Muslims come to be positioned as outside the boundaries both of the project of Karen unification and the crafting of national citizenship.

The perceived threat of Muslims to Plong Karen Buddhists reflects a broader crisis in understandings of Karen morality and identity during a period of social rupture and political change. What identity means in the changing social and political landscape of Hpa-an remains unclear. As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, since the commencement of national-level reforms, new dynamics are emerging in Hpa-an that are redrawing the imagined boundaries of morality and subjectivity in Myanmar. After decades of ethno-nationalist conflict, Buddhist Plong Karen understandings of may in some instances map onto attempts by the Myanmar military and state to define themselves as the protectors of the Buddhist "moral universe" (Walton 2016) by working to symbolically and physical exclude Muslims from moral and political community. As the state attempts to consolidate its power in peripheral areas of Karen State in the wake of successive ceasefires, many Karen people find themselves embedded within the state project of national belonging *vis a vis* Buddhist citizenship and the exclusion of Muslims. These forms of socially engaged Buddhism express issues central to modern politics and public life, and the struggle for moral and political authority in a multi-ethnic state. And yet, these should not be seen as defining

of the Plong Karen moral experience. As I have shown throughout my thesis, there is no single or coherent ethical notion of being in the world. Furthermore, structural and powerful forces like the ones I have described here do not preclude the ability to enact individual moral agency in ways that oppose or contradict these norms. Buddhist nationalism in its contemporary form should be seen as part of an ongoing process of Plong Karen identity making, whereby multiple values, meanings and expectations shape the dynamics of individual and collective subjectivity. In the next chapter, I conclude my thesis by elaborating further on the shifting conceptions of moral subjectivity among Plong Karen Buddhists, and what this implies for understandings of the Karen, morality and Myanmar more broadly.

# CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have illuminated how Plong Karen broker, cultivate, enact, traverse and bound morality in ways that form the basis both for collective ethnic unity and minority exclusion. In the ethnographic context of Hpa-an, I have explored Plong Karen understandings of moral agency and everyday ethics and how these position and structure everyday life and people's worldviews. By exploring Plong Karen Buddhists differentiated understandings of what it means to pursue morality through the lens of everyday ethics, I contend that we must pay attention to the multiple, contested and contradictory ways in which people understand and seek to pursue morality. Furthermore, I argue that Plong Karen understandings of everyday ethics are deeply performative and embedded in a highly agentic understanding of the self as a moral agent.

I argue that the pursuit of morality cannot be examined in dichotomous terms, but can only be understood through the lens of everyday ethics which are always responding to changing personal, contextual and structural conditions. The pursuit of morality should be understood as an everyday social experience, as a vehicle which lends itself to dynamic interpretability. In focusing on the scope for individual ethical agency I embrace a Kantian view of human beings as complex individuals that are not wholly defined by categorisations and identifications such as ethnicity, class, gender and religion. This is not to suggest Plong Karen people are 'rootless' travellers who privilege universal liberal values above their family, ethnic group, religion or national affiliation. Rather, I examine how Plong Karen people reflexively enact moral lives which simultaneously cohere with, and reimagine, collective moral ideals.

In this conclusion I draw together the main arguments in this thesis and clarify the conceptual contributions I make to literature on morality, agency and Karen identity. As one of the first long-term ethnographic field studies to be conducted in Hpa-an, my thesis examines the ways that Plong Karen see themselves outside the politicised and victimised narratives of the ethno-nationalist movement. My starting point for the

thesis and for understanding the history of Hpa-an district was Mount Khwaegabaung, since this is where many Buddhist Plong Karen locate Hpa-an and situate themselves historically. As outlined in Chapter One, though the rootedness of Plong Karen moral ideals to the dramatic geography of southeast Myanmar recurred in the oral stories of many of my interlocutors, this history has largely been marginalised in existing studies of Karen people. Much of Chapter One thus seeks to position the lives and histories of Plong Karen Buddhists as told to me within the larger social, cultural and political context of southeast Myanmar. In tracing Plong Karen histories from the perspective of Hpa-an's Buddhist community, I have highlighted differentiated understandings of power and legitimacy and the influence of powerful moral agents beyond the Karen National Union and the organisational networks of the largely border-based and Christian led ethno-nationalist movement. In particular, I demonstrate the role played by powerful and charismatic monks who have played a critical role in Plong Karen everyday lives and their pursuit of morality.

Alongside emphasising the importance of Buddhist frameworks and its religious leaders as moral authorities, in Chapter Two I show how Plong Karen domains of morality are embedded in a complex array of norms, values, historical experiences and social institutions. I pay particular attention to how potential contradictions in moral frameworks are resolved and negotiated through everyday practices of ethical self-making. I argue that coming to grips with how people choose to live a moral or ethical life requires attention to the contingent and conflicting ways in which people pursue and enact ideals of the 'good'.

Chapter Two lays bare some of the careful deliberations of moral reasoning Plong Karen Buddhists apply in their pursuit of everyday ethics. Drawing from the work of Myanmar scholars on Buddhist religion including Juliane Schober and Matthew Walton, I examine how the 'merit-power nexus' has reinforced the central role of monks in the post-conflict commercial and moral economies of Hpa-an district. I demonstrate that the core of illicit enterprise in Karen State is a web of reciprocal exchange relationships and responsibilities, both to the *sangha* and to the community at large, that have been cultivated and assumed by emergent economic elites. However, in understanding everyday ethics among the Karen, I argue that we must

not exaggerate Buddhist doctrine as the sole framework through which people navigate daily life and legitimise socially pernicious economic practices. In considering Plong Karen understandings of morality in relation to the merit-power nexus, I demonstrate that broader collective moral ideals defined around Karen faithfulness and solidarity also provide a framework to critique the status and merit of prominent Karen patrons of Buddhism. The pursuit of morality for Plong Karen Buddhists thus cannot simply be viewed through the lens of Pāli frameworks of merit making, but must be situated within how others in society see you and relate to you.

The centrality of ethnic moral ideals is most clearly articulated through the Karen ethic of *thout kyar* and its importance to Plong Karen understandings of each other as morally coterminous beings. In many ways, Saw Eh Klein and his family are able to take advantage of the ambiguous socio-religious values of prestige, power and morality embedded within the merit-power nexus and their proximate relationship with power moral authorities like U Thuzana. However, Saw Eh Klein's relationship to other members of his community is more complex than the 'merit-power nexus' would predict. As Samuli Schielke demonstrates in relation to Egyptian Muslims, though "grand schemes" of morality embedded in religious doctrine are "relevant as models of living" (2015: 13) the realities of moral evaluation and practice are inevitably multifarious and often inconsistent when viewed through the lens of everyday life. As I argue throughout this thesis, multiple and sometimes conflicting understandings of morality may thus be a necessary condition for life, with the agential resolution of these competing sources of ethical ideals ultimately generating the evolving parameters of morality and collective identity.

In my exploration of moral agency among elderly Plong Karen men and women oh Hpu Takit's esoteric religious movement in Chapter Three I extend my analysis of moral agency and ethical ideals. Examining the exceptional religious community erected by Hpu Takit and the aspirations which underpins its appeal to Plong Karen people, I focus on the ways ordinary people develop power by engaging in extraordinary acts of Buddhist *thila* or moral discipline. Drawing on Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1997), I show that Hpu Takit's devotees see themselves as cultivating *shu mao lassai*, serenity and peace, not only in their inner

selves, but also in wider Karen society. Indeed, the performativity of Hpu Takit's sermons not only facilitates the spiritual and moral progression of the congregation *vis a vis* the propagation of the *shu mao lassai* ideal but also provides his followers with the means to understand their own moral discipline as reproducing a distinctly Karen moral universe. In Hpu Takit's emphasis on the need for cultivating a moral order based on the embodied practice of keeping *thila* and Karen culture, his followers come to see themselves as agentive beings whose efforts revitalise a Plong Karen Buddhist universe. However, the existence and propagation of extraordinary Karen moral ideals does not preclude ethical contradiction and ambivalence, even amongst those who seek to fulfil this vision.

These themes are highlighted further in Chapter Four, where I demonstrate that morality is shaped as much by strict socio-moral frameworks embedded in tradition, as it is by the changing mores and values of contemporary society. Focusing on how one young Plong Karen woman navigates the process of 'coming of age', I draw out the highly performative and creative aspects of ethical subject making which simultaneously coheres with and reimagines Karen moral ideals. Nan Soe's navigation of an ethical life as a young Plong Karen Buddhist woman resonates with ethnographies of young people around the world traversing social mores and traditions. However, rather than highlighting the 'coming of age' process as one of friction and "pressure points" (Schielke 2015), I argue that morality for young women is more usefully conceptualized as an active and agentive process of what Cheryl Mattingly (2014) refers to as "moral becoming". Here I build off Foucault's (1997) notion of subjectivation to demonstrate how individuals facing potentially contradictory moral orientations can produce and enact morality in ways they view as coherent with the expectations of and demands of social authorities. I thus contend that we should understand moral agency as individuated and differentiated, accessible to people in multiple and sometimes inconsistent and contradictory ways across their lifetime.

Continuing on the theme of friction, in Chapter Five I offer insight into how Plong Karen moral agency is actively constructed in relation to multiple moral exemplars and how the young generation takes a more active part in their own transition to

adulthood. In doing so, I highlight a fundamental shift occurring among young Plong Karen men and women, both in the way they see themselves, their ethnic identity as well as their hopes and future aspirations. By opening themselves up to new networks made available in urban spaces where they are relatively free from parental control to form new peer groups and pursue educational opportunities, young Karen people are able to creatively adapt themselves, their hopes and aspirations. Acknowledging the agentive negotiation of everyday ethics amidst debt, poverty and filial obligations, the future imaginings and aspirations of Karen youth exposes the potential for moral contradiction, coherence and failure. I show that while students within these educational spaces are motivated to experiment with new modes of individualised and aspirational moral being, they remain deeply embedded in kin networks and obligations which ensure that norms of filial piety towards parents and elders remain a central element of how they understand their own moral subjectivity.

As I show in Chapter Four and Five, Karen youth are attempting to cultivate a moral self with reference both to pre-established norms and values and to the modern models offered by new authorities who seek to reimagine contemporary Karen society. Though many students still feel strong obligations to fulfil customary obligations to their family and community, they are also increasingly exposed through these younger moral brokers to the virtue of education, assertiveness, confidence and boldness. Rather than simply being individuated and perfectly subjective, moral ideals thus arise and are reformulated as different groups, peers and community authorities interact, negotiate and reimagine the demands and values of collective identity. Though moral incoherence or inconsistency may be a feature of this intersubjective process, it does not necessarily spark a “moral crisis” (Zigon 2007) in which individuals abandon moral ideals and aspirations. Rather, the everydayness of ethical contradiction means that the moral ideals that form the basis of collective identity are constantly negotiated, as people respond to, enact and traverse the competing demands of quotidian social life.

In my final chapter I examine how the urge for coherence between everyday practice, moral ideals and a Buddhist social order can work to the exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities while providing scope to contingently integrate groups long in



opposition to the state into projects of national moral community. I explore how the recent changes in Myanmar have seen a proliferation of groups seeking to unify the Karen across religious divides, while others have simultaneously sought to bound Buddhist Karen people as moral citizens to the problematic and chauvinistic nation-building project of the Myanmar state and military. As demonstrated, the complex history of contested sovereignty in Karen State is being revised and challenged by the integration of Plong Karen Buddhists into national-level networks and projects aimed at protecting, propagating and violently ‘defending’ Buddhism from the perceived threat and proliferation of Islam. As I have shown, the extension of these efforts into Karen State have contingently integrated many Plong Karen Buddhists into the ‘cultural citizenship’ efforts of the Myanmar state (Rosaldo 2003). Though the formation of a Buddhist religious cleavage complicates the oppositional narratives of the Karen ethno-nationalist movement and problematically excludes Karen Muslims, the endurance of Karen ethnic ideals which reject inter-marriage with Bamar demonstrates the limits and fractures of the cultural citizenship produced by the state.

## **Thesis Argument and its Significance**

So what do the lives, projects and moral ideals of the Karen people I have examined in my thesis tell us about contemporary Myanmar, Buddhist Plong Karen people and anthropological studies of morality and ethics more broadly? First of all, they remind us that behind the long-running ethno-national conflict in Karen State, there are individuals who sit within these spaces, that have different lives, and unique worldviews that do not conform to a singular narrative of being in the world. Through long-term ethnographic research in Hpa-an, the capital of eastern Karen State, Myanmar, the study contributes to literature on Plong Karen experiences of self, community and nation in relation to the momentous social and political changes in Myanmar. Viewed from the quotidian lens of the texture of daily existence, research into the dynamic lives of Plong Karen Buddhists in Hpa-an helps to re-center debates and research in Karen studies away from the lens of KNU elites and refugee communities.

One of the primary aims of this thesis is to open up a space for the subaltern voices of Hpa-an's Buddhist Plong Karen – those who have historically been marginalized from scholarly and historical accounts of 'the Karen'. This research builds off a conversation within Karen studies about the paucity of research among the 'other' Karen as Thawnghmung (2012) calls them, the silent majority, those who have lived under military rule in government-controlled areas.<sup>211</sup> Knowledge about the social and cultural aspects of Buddhist Plong Karen people remains a significant void in scholarship. By concentrating on narratives of suffering, previous scholarship has tended to elide the nuanced realities of how Karen people readjust, revise and redefine the moral ideals that form the basis of ethnic identity and their own subjectivity.

The lives of my Plong Karen informants demonstrates how narratives and meanings of morality can vary over time, but also that individuals can simultaneously hold different and contending understandings of themselves and their own moral subjectivity. The Plong Karen men and women I examine are called upon to cultivate a moral self partly informed by pre-established norms and values they have inherited from the community they have grown up in, but also through their own active pursuit of morality. Following from Appadurai's view that we live in an age characterised by a "plurality of imagined worlds" (1996: 5) many Plong Karen in Hpa-an affirm and deconstruct norms of morality by both borrowing from global ideas and images as well as those deeply embedded in the conflicted experience of everyday ethics. This is not to suggest that people are disembedded from the particularities of time, place and culture, but rather that, a certain cosmopolitanism shapes the practices of localised individuals, their everyday interactions and popular cultural activities and practices. These are bound up in commitments to the 'self' as individual moral beings, but also as part of their identification as a member of a family, religious community and, indeed, the Karen ethnic group.

Second, my thesis also raises questions about knowledge production and provokes new understandings of the shifting locations of Karen identity across time and space

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<sup>211</sup> See also Cheesman (2002), Harriden (2002), Gravers (2007), South (2007) and Ikeda (2012).

in a way that crosscuts the axis of hills and plains. The exploration of ethnicity and identity may seem a redundant, if not overdone, anthropological project in Southeast Asia. It seems to me, however, that one of the key problems still facing scholarship on the Karen, as Andrew Walker (2001) identified over a decade ago, is the continued production of the notion of an “ethnic consensus”. In writing this thesis, I do not want to imply that Karen ethnicity is not real per se. But rather, as ethnographic and historical research in other areas of Southeast Asia demonstrates, “any account of human diversity in Southeast Asia that takes for granted contemporary ethnolinguistic classification serves, deliberately or not, to reinforce particular state regimes of truth” (Jonsson 2011: 109).

In scholarly literature, efforts to comprehend ethnic diversity in Southeast Asia have all too often focused on the contrasting tautologies of lowland and highland cultures (J. C. Scott 2009). While this has been challenged in recent years by many scholars working in Southeast Asia (H. High 2017; Jonsson 2010, 2014; Sadan 2013; P. Taylor 2008a), the distinction between the state and highland peoples, and stories of domination and resistance continues to dominate narratives of Myanmar’s ethnic nationality groups and the Karen in particular (Brenner 2017; Gravers 2015c, 2016; Horstmann 2011b; Oh 2013; Rangkla 2014; Sharples 2017; South 2011; Thawngmung 2012). As outlined in my introduction, the Karen have long been relegated to the hills of mainland Southeast Asia as a forest-dwelling people in resistance to both the Burman and Thai states. Evoking Tania Murray Li’s (2007) “resistance to resistance studies” it is important to recognise the seductive power of the state and the way that Karen people have over time actively sought out and domesticated the state (see also H. High 2017). Indeed, as I have demonstrated throughout each of my chapters, Karen State and its people should not be viewed as a peripheral borderland or conflict zone, but a social space where flows of different peoples, goods and ideas coexist with multiple authorities in a symbiotic and morally productive relationship.

Third, in examining practices of moral agency among Plong Karen Buddhists, my thesis offers new insights on the relationship between individual and collective moral identity in Myanmar as a whole. Describing a highly experimental and embodied

picture of morality, my aim has been to open the reader up to the multiple ways that people attempt to pursue everyday lives in Myanmar, according to a selection and mixture of several moral models they consciously engage with. Amidst competing values and the relational demands of family and kin, I have used the life stories of various Plong Karen Buddhists to capture the way that people pursue morality in their own biographically particular ways. Long-term ethnographic research in government-controlled regions of Myanmar has very difficult up until recent years. An exploration of “first person virtue ethics” through the lives of everyday ordinary people, allows as Cheryl Mattingly (2014: 84) observes, “a rich vocabulary for considering humans as ‘self-interpreting’ moral beings whose perceptions, interpretations, and actions help shape moral subjectivities in the singular as well as the collective.” My exploration of morality is not an attempt to create discreet character ‘types’ of what is ‘good’, ‘moral’ or their opposition amongst the Plong Karen or in Myanmar more broadly. Though the case studies I have presented cannot serve as ‘models’ of social life people in Myanmar, they demonstrate dynamics that are emblematic for the constitution of new and increasingly common forms of moral subjectivity in the context of a rapidly transforming country.

Throughout the thesis I stress the importance of understanding morality through the lens of the everyday and frame the ethical lives of my Plong Karen interlocutors as self-conscious and purposeful outcomes of moral orientation. I emphasise the agency of individuals as they address the multiple moral contingencies and ambiguities they experience as part of their everyday lives. Much like in other areas of Myanmar, many of the moral ideals which my interlocutors strove to enact and fulfil in their everyday lives were also embedded in a framework and imaginaries of collective moral ideals that are also in a process of redefinition and regeneration. Examining the inherent tensions and potential inconsistencies in Plong Karen moral understandings thus offers new perspectives on how morality is reproduced and remade during a period of rapid and ambiguous social and political change. Furthermore, by shifting the focus away from essentialised notions of ethnic identity to everyday navigation of collective moral ideals I challenge some of the deeply held beliefs and assumptions about what it means to live in and inhabit a ‘moral’ life as an ethnic minority person in Myanmar more broadly.

Fourth, moving beyond the importance of recognising people's ability to enact moral agency, the significance of this thesis lies in my emphasis on the everyday, quotidian lives of *Buddhist* Plong Karen in particular. In her analysis of *weikza* cults in Myanmar, Juliane Schober (2012: 303) invites scholars of Myanmar to pay closer attention to “the range of ethnic inflections and diverse interpretations in the Theravāda tradition.” By examining understandings of morality amongst Plong Karen Buddhists, in relation to their cultural beliefs, values and local history, this thesis helps to contest the prevailing orthodoxy in the study of Buddhism in Myanmar which has hitherto been largely situated from the viewpoint of lowland Bamar Buddhists. By drawing out the lived experiences of Plong Karen Buddhists I add to the complexities and contradictions Theravāda Buddhist practice in Myanmar. In this thesis I show how Buddhist moral subjectivities in Myanmar are informed by the deep and enduring structures related to the vagaries of military rule, but also by futurities which may assume utopian qualities that are markedly different from present conditions.

Rather than cohering to a singular and coherent conception of Karen Buddhist morality, I demonstrate that they live by multiple moral compasses that do not always point them in the same direction. In this vein, my work contributes to a growing body of anthropological literature that highlights the contradictions and ambiguity inherent to everyday sociality (Berliner 2017; H. High 2017; Kuan 2015). I have also been deeply influenced by the ongoing legacy of Foucault whose later work examined subjectivities as the product of complex, historically conditioned processes – made visible only through “the way in which the individual establishe[s] his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obligated to put it into practice” (Foucault 1997: 264). In drawing attention to contestation and friction between different moral regimes of value within Plong Karen lives, I argue that while outsiders may perceive inconsistencies and incompatibilities within the various ethico-moral world spheres people inhabit, they themselves may not experience any contradictions moving within and between them.

Finally, my research with Buddhist Plong Karen in Hpa-an adds to what Didier Fassin (2014) refers to as the “ethical turn” in anthropology (Keane 2015; Laidlaw 2002,

2014; Lambek 2015, 2010c; Robbins 2004, 2007). I examine the lives of Plong Karen in Hpa-an and how different moral values, meanings and expectations shape the dynamics of ethnic and personal identity and the relationships of people with their families, peers, community and the nation state at large. More specifically, I explore how the experiences of pursuing morality forms part of an ongoing process of identity making, where multiple values, meanings and expectations shape the dynamics of individual people's subjectivity. I have drawn especially drawn from the work of James Laidlaw (2002, 2014) who argues that in order to pursue the study of ethics, we must acknowledge and analyse the 'freedom' of the individual to choose his or her way of life in a given society. Emphasising the importance of personal experience in shaping individual values, in each of my chapters I explore how Plong Karen understandings and enactment of morality are shaped by the ideological and moral social worlds within which they live and manoeuvre. I argue that morality is best understood not according to any neutral external measure or set of binary ethical positions, but as something that is pursued by individuals as they navigate often contradictory frameworks in their everyday life – that is, in the active and agentic forming of the self as a moral agent.

I contribute to this literature by emphasising the contradictions inherent in people's moral orientations, rather than their internal coherence. In doing so, the thesis demonstrated the limits of the "moral breakdown" framework of understanding morality, in which moments of crisis force individuals to respond to an "ethical demand" (Zigon 2007). As Jarrod Zigon (2007: 11) argues, it is at these moments of rupture that people are often "forced to step-away from their unreflective everydayness and think-through, figure out, work on themselves and respond to certain ethical dilemmas, troubles or problems." In Joel Robbins' schema, actors move from 'moralities of reproduction' to 'moralities of freedom' when value-spheres come into conflict with one another or when hierarchies within a single value sphere become destabilized (Robbins 2007: 301). My analysis of Plong Karen moral agency and everyday ethics through the lens of Myanmar's social and political changes demonstrates the limits of conceptualising ethical or moral change as a necessary conscious or unidirectional process, as suggested by these scholars. In examining the connections between the 'moralities of reproduction' and 'freedom' amidst

Myanmar's tentative transition to democracy, I demonstrate that even in periods of massive social and political change and at junctures of the life course, the pursuit of morality often resolves itself less in moments of "moral breakdown" and more as part and parcel of reflexive moral agency in everyday life.

Indeed, my fieldwork in Hpa-an and its surrounding districts suggests that Plong Karen Buddhists have multiple moral ideals to which they strive to live up to. Unlike Zigon (2007) I do not see the tensions and contradictions between these frameworks and ideals as producing formal "moments" of "ethical dilemma" or "moral breakdown". Rather, I see these potential ethical incoherencies as an everyday part of life through which people traverse and make meaning. Veena Das (2012: 134) adopts a similar approach in her understanding of ordinary ethics, arguing that moments of apparently moral inconsistency are "like the threads woven into the weave of life." I contend that in contexts of rapid social change such as southeast Myanmar the pursuit of morality is not a linear or coherent process. Rather, Plong Karen navigate morality in fragmented, conflictual and sometimes contradictory ways while simultaneously retaining coherence with broad moral ideals that form the ethical substance of fluid and contingent ethnic and personal subjectivities.

## **Final Reflections**

In writing this thesis I have drawn inspiration from these debates, seeking for an anthropology which is self-aware of the ways we participate in and often influence ongoing changes to local practices. Central to writing this thesis for me therefore has been questions related to power and authority and an effort to flesh out the various ways my nationality, social position, gender and biography intimately shape the interpretive practices that constitute 'writing culture' and my social experiences and interactions in the field (Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986). There is an inherent tension in the anthropological pursuit between establishing trusting and meaningful relationships, while maintaining a critical distance with the scientific pursuit of 'objectivity'. With the above critiques of anthropology in mind, I have aspired to a kind of "objectivity-in-progress" combining inter-subjectivity and critical distance (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009: 19-20). My hope is that, as others before

me have observed (eg. Werbner 2008), the gaze of the stranger has enabled new insights, but importantly that my research has been formed through a kind of ‘dialogue’ – understanding people on their own terms and through their own internal debates (Fardon 1990). Indeed, this thesis is a collaborative effort of critical deliberation, in dialogue with my Plong Karen friends and informants, other academics and scholarship from a range of disciplines.

In conjunction with these ethical reflections, I also want to discuss here the social and political changes in Myanmar and what this means for Karen understanding of morality. In the context of such significant structural change, focusing on moral agency may appear to underplay the forces that living with the legacies of military rule and ethno-national conflict imposes on ordinary people. This thesis is constituted by the hopes, anxieties and frustrations that many ordinary Plong Karen experience in the context of profound social change. Life and opportunities in Hpa-an are still inflected and imbued with social strata deeply linked to the economic realities and moral institutions of the sanctions and conflict period in Karen State. Given the fragile nature of peace talks in Myanmar it remains ambiguous whether the ceasefire will hold in Karen State and, if it does, whether the future will resemble the aspirations of Karen people both young and old. Furthermore, in the absence of a tangible economic progress, the injustices of the past continue to loom large over life in southeast Myanmar. Similarly, it is unclear how this project of Buddhist nationalist revivalism is going to play out for Muslims in Karen State and political reform in Myanmar more broadly.

They are likely to continue to structure and constrain my interlocutors lives in significant ways into the future. The last five years have brought ideas of the ‘new’ consumerist Myanmar, together with a rapidly expanding universe of commodities and mass media images of urban Myanmar people moving around in fast and sleek which are parked in large homes cluttered with modern gadgets. In considering the pursuit of morality in the lives of the people that I have described in this thesis, the potential to enact the aspirations and ideals is determined by unequal access to resources as well as different histories of personal and community struggle. Underpinning the structural changes occurring in Myanmar, there remain deeply



entrenched structural inequalities which on many dimensions, especially for Muslim religious minorities, has worsened further in recent years. It is in this context that I can't help but be forced to wonder, what in the coming years, will the lives of my interlocutors and friends be like? Will many of the young Karen people I spent time with in Hpa-an be forced to make the well-trod journey to Bangkok and further afield to work as migrant labourers. Will their lives, like their parents before them, be racked by debt, conflict, violence and poverty?

In concluding, I do not intend to present the findings in my thesis as representative of particular people at a particular time. Rather, I hope that this thesis is the beginning of further conversations in studies of the Karen, and indeed Myanmar, which listens to more diverse voices and brings to the fore their multiple experiences and perspectives at a time of rupture and reform. In examining the perspectives of Plong Karen men and women in relation to this particular moment in history in Myanmar, my objective has most of all been to open up a space for critical thought, debate and inquiry. I hope that this research helps to redress the simplification of Plong Karen lives and allow us grapple with the connections and contradictions between power, ethnicity, religion, gender, class and sexuality in more heterogenous ways.

# GLOSSARY

**Ahlu** (B) meritorious or religious gifts

**Akusala** (P) immoral or unwholesome actions; opposite of *kusala*

**Akutho** (B) see *akulsala*

**Anattā** (P) the common English translation is “no self,” although another understanding is “no control”

**Awgatha** (B) a daily ritual in which Buddhists affirm their faith in the Buddha, *dhamma*, and *sangha*, and asking for protection from harm.

**Ba thaung kha** (K) Buddhist religion

**Ba ywa** (K) Christian religion

**Boung** (K) see *ahlu*

**Chai** (K) God or lord of the guardian spirits; can be used to refer to a higher being or God, the coming Buddha and sometimes powerful and charismatic monks

**Chedehba** (K) see *kusala*

**Dāna** (P) charity, generosity, donations, a Buddhist virtue

**Daga** (B) close and often powerful benefactor of a monk

**Da woun** (K) village

**Dhamma** (P) the Buddha’s teachings and laws

**Dhammarāja** (P) a righteous Buddhist ruler who rules according to the *dhamma* and its ten rules: almsgiving, morality, liberality, rectitude, gentleness, self-discipline, control of anger, non-violence, forbearance, and non-opposition to the people’s will

**Don** (K) a unique Karen traditional dance; the term *don* also means to ‘be in agreement’

**Hmaung kho** (B) refers to the black-market economy that thrived under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (1974-1988)

**Hnit lone** (B) two digit lottery scheme based on the closing indexes of the Thai stock exchange

**Hta kho** (K) oral stories

**Ingaleik maung** (K) woman of Anglo-European heritage

**Kan** (B) karma; used to refer to one's fate and the sum of all good and bad actions committed in past and present lives

**Karuna** (P) compassion, a Buddhist virtue

**Kawthoolei** the land of the *thoo lei* plant; S'gaw Karen term used to refer to the Karen land that the KNU has been fighting for since the late 1940s.

**Khong** (K) karma; that the individual self is constituted by an accumulation of merit and good deeds as a result of this and previous lives

**Kusala** (P) wholesome action; merit acquired through good acts

**Kutho** (B) see *kusala*

**Kyat** (B) Myanmar's currency

**Longyi** (B) a sheet of cloth widely worn by men in Myanmar

**Metta** (P) loving-kindness, one of the four realms of a sublime state of mind

**Oh hu oh hau** (K) unity

**Nat** (B) general category that refers to a local spirits, Buddhist deities and tutelary spirits

**Naung Kalar** (K) Dawna mountain range

**Parahita** (P) work for the good or welfare of others; a form of merit making.

**Parami** (B) in everyday usage refers to moral virtue or aptitude; one of the ten virtues that the Buddha perfected before enlightenment (charity, morality, renunciation, knowledge, effort, honesty, forbearance, loving-kindness, equanimity and resolution)

**Pyaw Ley Pyaw** (B) the Burmese military's 'Four Cuts' counter-insurgency strategy aimed at cutting rebel groups off from access to food, funds, intelligence and recruitment.

**Samsāra** (P) the continuous cycle of rebirth and suffering

**Samādhi** (P) concentration meditation

**Sangha** (P) the monastic order founded by the Buddha

**Sāsana** (P) the Buddha's dispensation and its entire community of practitioners

**Sayadaw** (B) Honorific for a Burmese monk; usually the head of a monastery

**Sedāna** (B) to have a benevolent or altruistic mind

**Ser ner gah** (K) greedy

***Shu mao lassai*** (K) serenity and peace; can be a state of mind, but is also used to refer to an idealised world

***Taingyintha*** (B) Myanmar's national races or 'sons of the soil'

***Talakhoung*** (K) a Buddhist abbot of great karma

***Tatmadaw*** (B) Myanmar's state military

***Thabyay*** (B) Eugenia leaf; commonly used in religious and social rituals

***Thae hti*** (K) wealthy man or boss

***Thamein*** (B) traditional skirt that women wear in Myanmar

***Thanaka*** (B) a yellow paste made from ground tree bark that is commonly applied on the face by men and women in Myanmar

***Thathana pyu*** (B) building or propagating the Buddhist dispensation

***Thathana myei*** (B) land of the Buddha's religion; is a formal classification in Myanmar's law

***Thila*** (B) moral discipline; commonly used to refer to the five Buddhist precepts: avoiding the consumption of meat, drugs, alcoholic drinks and the use of weapons

***Thaungkha*** (K) honorific for a Plong Karen monk; usually the head of a monastery

***Thone lone*** (B) three digit lottery scheme based on the last three digits of the bimonthly Thai state lottery

***Thout kyar*** (K) directly translated in English as 'faithful', but used much more broadly to refer to a particular Karen ethic which people describe as fundamental to living as a morally coterminous life

***Tipitaka*** (P) the Theravāda Pāli canon

***Tohtor*** (K) sermon or speech by a charismatic Karen authority or abbot

***Tor loun*** (K) to be honest

***Yahànda*** (B) a Buddhist saint who has attained enlightenment according to rigorous ascetic practices and intensive meditation

***Vinaya*** (P) the rules of monastic discipline

***Vipassanā*** (P) insight meditation

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