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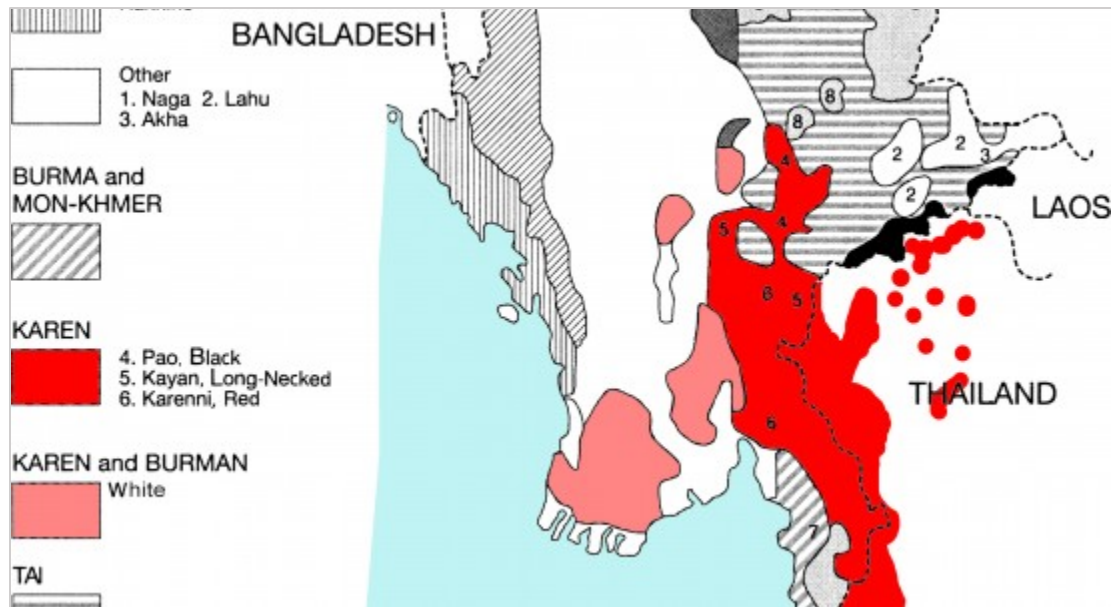


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Karen Identity on the Thai-Burma Border

Review of *Spaces of Solidarity: Karen Identity in the Thai-Burma Borderlands*, by Rachel Sharples

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In 1949, civil war broke out in the newly independent country then known as Burma, and now known as Myanmar. The war, which continues to this day, pits the central government (made up mostly of Burmans) against dozens of ethnic minority insurgent groups. One of the largest and most militarily successful of these ethnic insurgent groups is the Karen National Liberation Army, which contests the state army in southeastern Burma/Myanmar in areas of Karen State abutting the border with Thailand. The conflict has created tremendous hardship for civilians in the area, who speak mutually unintelligible Karennic languages and who variously adhere to animism, Buddhism and Christianity. As a result, hundreds of thousands of people from these different Karen groups have crossed the Moei River (which constitutes the natural border between Burma and Thailand) and become refugees in Thailand. The establishment of large refugee camps within kilometers of the international dividing line has attracted numerous non-governmental organizations, who along with the KNLA and affiliated Karen NGOs have

established offices in the Thai town of Mae Sot. Since the late 1980s, Mae Sot, the nearby refugee camps, the military checkpoints on various access roads, and the no-man's-land on either side of the Moei River have been identified in the international press and in some scholarly works as a conceptual space most often called "the Thai-Burma border." Rachel Sharples' dissertation offers a detailed history of the development of this area (pp. 70-86), which she calls "the borderlands." Most importantly, Sharples makes two related claims about the borderlands: first, that the borderlands space is created by the social interchanges which occur there, and second, that the space in turn gives rise to particular types of social interchanges which form the basis for a specific form of Karen identity.

In this tightly organized dissertation, Sharples builds toward the argument evoked in the title, that is, that a particular form of Karen identity is projected from the borderlands. She arrives at this conclusion, elucidated in Chapter 8, by first outlining her understanding of the borderlands as "a social construct characterized by contested social relations" (p. 42). In Chapter 3, Sharples refutes the received understanding of this region as one neatly divided into two sovereign national territories. Rather, she points out that the region is "always under construction" (p. 45), because it is constituted by a multiplicity of ever-shifting human interactions and relationships. People, technology, and ideas are always on the move through the borderlands, and together they create a fluid, open notion of the space in the minds of borderlands residents. Here, Sharples is following Doreen Massey's definition of space outlined in *For Space* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005). Importantly, though, she points out that the borderlands also include more conventional elements of space, such as geographic sites which are represented on maps – and therefore have tangible impacts on the everyday lives of those who live in the borderlands. For example, the imaginary border line dividing Thailand and Burma does demarcate areas in which Karen refugees are treated differently by state governments. Refugees have usually been protected from military encroachment on the Thai side, and therefore, the east bank of the Moei river has often – but not always – represented a place of refuge in the minds of Karen people (pp. 83–86).

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, Sharples describes three modes of social practice which are prevalent in the borderlands: patterns of activism, networks of solidarity, and processes of cultural recovery. In Chapter 5, she argues that Karen people in the borderlands sometimes label themselves as "human rights workers," and other times as "refugees," strategically choosing the

role that allows them the largest degree of political autonomy (p. 110). They engage in sophisticated negotiations with Thai state governance, “walking a fine line between accommodation of state policy and resistance to it” (p. 96). In addition, borderlands Karen demonstrate a number of other patterns of behavior, variously labeled by Sharples as challenges to state control, resistance or activism: they construct refugee camps to resemble Burmese villages, constructing a space of “normalcy” rather than exception; they move (illegally) in and out of the camps to earn money; they speak and sing of their hope to go back to Burma; and they participate in “informal political activity,” such as contributing to women’s produce-selling collectives (p. 115). In this chapter, Sharples refers repeatedly to Lisa Malkki’s body of work on refugees.

Chapter 6 explains how new networks of solidarity are forged in the borderlands. These networks are created by three practices. First, Karen people in the borderlands access international networks, interacting with media personnel from around the world, writing reports which they submit to United Nations agencies, and presenting their stories to high-profile visitors like Angelina Jolie. Second, they use the internet to gather and exchange information (such as evidence of human rights violations), and as an educational resource (by providing teaching texts in Karen languages). Third, borderland activists build awareness of socio-political realities and thereby develop a political consciousness among Karen people. Specifically, they evoke the suffering of Karen individuals and groups in songs, theatrical productions, stories, and cartoons; in these works, they emphasize that this suffering has specific causes which can and should be addressed – rather than accepted as the machinations of fate (p. 135).

In Chapter 7, we read that Karen in the borderlands engage in three processes of cultural recovery. First, artists publicly project “remembered places,” that is, they sing, draw, and recount romanticized portrayals of Kawthoolei (the longed-for Karen homeland in Burma which many refugees, born in the camps, have never seen). They retell origin myths, especially that of Taw Meh Pah, the legendary father of the Karen people, and create drawings of traditional Karen clothing and musical instruments, allowing displaced Karen to conceptualize “home” and “the Karen nation.” Second, activists engage in “cultural reification” by selecting everyday cultural identifiers and explicitly teaching them to young people (p. 157). Karen youth are systematically trained in traditional music and dances, animist ceremonies, and Karen spoken language and script. Third, Karen people from all walks of life articulate a future Karen “home,” which is an

imagined place marked by peace, justice, equality, and freedom. As Sharples points out, the songs, poems, and statements which evoke this future home are determinedly naïve, not acknowledging the complexities which would accompany a real return to Burma, such as unexploded land mines and deforestation (p. 169).

In Chapter 8, Sharples reveals the relevance of the patterns of activism, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery so prevalent in the borderlands: these modes of social practice all function to build a borderlands Karen identity. This identity depends on two interwoven narratives. First, a narrative of displacement and persecution: this narrative emphasizes that the suffering engendered by displacement is integral to being Karen. Refugees reference their own experiences of being forced out of their ancestral villages by the Burmese army, their ancestors' experiences of persecution at the hands of the Burmese, and even the experience of Taw Meh Pah, who established the Karen as a people by leading his family across the Gobi Desert. Second, a narrative of a unified and homogeneous Karen nation: if "to be Karen is to be persecuted," then Karen people who speak different languages, who practice different religions, and come from different areas inside Burma are all included in this expansive notion of Karen identity. Sharples points out that international media portrayals which focus on human rights abuses suffered by "the Karen people" inadvertently reinforce this idea of a single, unified Karen identity. Ultimately, she concludes that "the purpose of such narratives is to give meaning to the current predicament, but also to offer restoration; that through their struggle the Karen will one day be a free nation" (p. 187).

This dissertation makes a significant scholarly contribution because it argues for, and clearly demonstrates, the agency of people living in the Thai-Burma borderlands. This is a population that has been the subject of much international concern, and deservedly so. Most of the Karen refugees living there became refugees when their families and communities were subjected to horrific violence inside Burma. As a result, it is easy for sympathetic outsiders to focus on the injustice and trauma suffered by Karen people, and then to view the people themselves simply as (or primarily as) helpless victims needing rescue. Sharples' work, though, shows that Karen refugees in the borderlands actively construct a Karen identity informed by their experiences of displacement and political negotiations in the borderlands. This identity, based on stories of suffering, actually has "empowering qualities" (p. 180), because it mobilizes people to fight against oppression of all kinds, and ultimately motivates the social practices of the borderlands

outlined at length by Sharples. Ultimately, in this account the Thai-Burma borderlands emerge as “a site of empowerment, not just marginalization” (p. 54).

Secondly, this dissertation’s theorization of the concept of borderlands deserves further exploration by scholars of Burma/Myanmar and of Southeast Asia. Sharples argues persuasively for treating the Thai-Burma borderlands as a unit of analysis in its own right. Borderlands, as she explains, are places divided by a national border, marked by an intensification of state control, insurgent resistance, and INGO activity on one or both sides, and constituted by social interchanges which regularly cross the border. In the twenty-first century, Burma/Myanmar is ringed by a number of borderlands: most famously the Thai-Burma border, but also the Kachin State-Yunnan Province border area in the northeast, the Arakan State-Chittagong Division border area in the west, and the Chin State-Mizoram State border area in the northwest. Further scholarly analysis of each of these regions is needed. Finally, a comparative look at all of these regions, illuminating their similarities and differences, could reveal interesting aspects of the modern nation-state of Burma/Myanmar, and much about the people who live – indeed, who construct lives of meaning and significance – in its many borderlands.

Primary Sources

Observations derived from participant observation fieldwork conducted in 2005 and 2008
Interviews with twelve Karen residents of the borderlands; artwork (including songs texts, poems, drawings and cartoons) produced by Karen residents of the borderlands

Dissertation Information

RMIT University. 2012. 222 pp. Primary Advisors: Damian Grenfell and Paul James.