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The Don Dance:

An Expression of Karen Nationalism

BY HEATHER MacLACHLAN

How do Karen people define themselves as Karen? This question has particular import for one community in New York State—the Karen of Utica. The two hundred members of this group affirm their distinctiveness in part by celebrating a day that is special to Karen people worldwide. Since their arrival in Utica in 1999, every January they dance the *don* dance, a dance created and practiced only by Karen people. This article will discuss the performance of the don dance in another context: in a refugee camp in Southeast Asia, the dance functions to create and reinforce a particular ideal of Karen nationhood.

In January 2002, I was invited to spend a week in the Mae Khong Kha refugee camp, located in Thailand approximately three days walk from the Burmese border, to help with the camp schools. At the time, I was working as an elementary school music teacher on the Canadian prairie; the contrast between my urban first world home and the Mae Khong Kha camp was enormous. Prior to arriving, I had only bare-bones knowledge about Karen people. I was aware that the Karen are a Southeast Asian group of some millions living in Thailand and in the Karen State of Burma, also known as Myanmar. The Karen National Union has been fighting for independence from Burma for over fifty years. The civil war has created tremendous difficulties within Karen State, and as a result, thousands of Karen have fled over the western border to refugee camps located in Thailand.

The Mae Khong Kha camp housed some fifteen thousand residents, almost all of whom are ethnically Karen. The residents live in twelve sections, or small villages, which are located along a mountain gorge. There is a large flat area, about the size of a football field, which has been cleared of trees, in Section Four. The residents have erected a stage, which is often used as a performance platform, at one end of this area. My interest in music drew me there repeatedly; it was in this area that I was able to observe rehearsals and performances of the *don* (pronounced "don") dance. As I was able to see this dance performed and then talk to participants, I developed a profound respect for the Karen's determination to maintain their sense of cultural and ethnic distinctiveness.

I first began to understand this determination when I learned that the camp keeps Burmese time. The camp is located in Thailand proper, and thus in the Thai time zone, but the camp leaders have determined that the camp will operate according to the time zone of Karen State, thirty minutes earlier than Thai time. Furthermore, the Karen celebrate their new year on January 16, rather than on the Thai new year of April 13, called *Songkan,* or during the Burmese water festival that is held around the same time. In Mae Khong Kha camp, the new year celebration takes place in the Section Four public area, and the highlight of the ceremony is the performance of the don dance. The don dance is actually a series of dances performed by groups of dancers and accompanied by traditional Karen instruments. In Mae Khong Kha, a man named Mee Htoo—the leader of the don dance, who is called the *don koh*—told me that he has managed to teach only four dances so far (2002).

Don (which means "to be in agreement") dancing originated with the Pwo Karen, who developed it as a way to reinforce community values. The don koh would compose a song criticizing the misdeeds of a community member, and all of the don dancers would sing the song while dancing, thereby publicly condemning the person's actions and affirming the group's moral standards. During the second half of the twentieth century, the pace of the don dance reportedly sped up and its function changed: under the military dictatorship that took control of Burma in 1962, don dances were set to songs extolling the glories of Burmese socialism (Zin 2000). When Stern and Stern observed performances of the don dance in a Karen village in Western Thailand in the late 1960s, they found that the don dance was "a musical expression of village or regional pride" (1971, 202). Their description of the don dance, published in the journal *Ethnomusicology,* is very similar to the performance I videotaped in 2002. Stern and Stern also observed a dance of fifteen minutes' duration, in which two lines of dancers moved energetically, dancing in unison and then mirroring each other. The dancers sang a series of songs while they danced; Stern and Stern characterize their singing as "lusty" (1971, 203). As a choral conductor, I was interested to hear their use of chest tone, and I appreciated the fact that the singing was well-projected!

I would like to propose, however, that the don dance has changed in some significant ways, its form reflecting its new function in

The youth troupe of don dancers at Mae Khong Kha camp, rehearsing the don dance around the flag of Kaw-thoo-lei. Photo: Heather MacLachlan

the context of the refugee camp. It seems clear that the performances I observed were musical expressions not of Burmese unity, nor of Karen village or regional pride, but of national pride—that is, of Karen nationalism. Benedict Anderson explains in his book of the same name that nations are "imagined communities" (1983). This phrase echoes poignantly in light of the recent history of the Karen people: their nation is, in fact, solely an imagined community. The Karen call their hoped-for nation *Kaw-thoo-lei*. Significant numbers of Karen people desire to see the territory currently called Karen State become an autonomous nation. The repression they have suffered at the hands of the *Tatmandaw* (Burmese army) has allowed them to imagine their community more fully. The conflict has given rise to much movement of people: out of their small villages and into relocation camps in Burma, then into refugee camps in Thailand, and now to Western countries. As Anderson points out, when a person journeys to a foreign place only to discover someone who speaks the same language, a "consciousness of connectedness . . . emerges" (1983, 56). This sense of connectedness is evident among the Karen in Mae Khong Kha, who have been torn away from their kin and are now creating a new community. The performance of the don dance is one way in which they are creating their community, a community that is no longer limited to a village or a region, but is now conceived of as a nation—a nation, however, without land, or more specifically, without land on which they can live together safely.

According to Martin Stokes, dominant culture members in emerging states have often used music to help promote their definition of the new nation (1994, 10). Musical performances are particularly useful in nation building because they bring people together in groups: musicians, dancers, and audience members join each other for a single purpose. In Mae Khong Kha camp, the elected leadership—that is, the members of the Karen Women's Organization—organize the performance of the don dance, which brings the community together in some remarkable ways. Don dancers come from all over the camp, and so it seems, do audience members. Even rehearsals draw hundreds of observers.

The participants in the don dance must make a significant time commitment. In order to attend rehearsals, participants who live in Section Twelve have to hike for approximately two hours each way across mountainous terrain. Rehearsals are held once each week, beginning in November. The words, the melody, the instrumental parts, and the dance moves are all taught by rote, so learning this long dance takes much time. The don koh told me that he is not aware of any recording of the don dance, and thus cannot use video footage to teach it. Western notation of the song may exist in a Buddhist monastery in Karen State, but since none of the participants knows how to read notation, it would be of no use (Mee Htoo 2002).

Karen don dancers Dain Moo (left) and Naw Phaung Phaung (right) pose before the 2006 Karen new year celebration at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Utica, New York. Photo: Felicia McMahon

One of the participants, Saw Poo Eh, remarked that he and others were happy to dedicate their time to such a project: "Because we are Karen, we want to celebrate our new year, and we don't want to leave our culture. So we try to continue playing Karen music" (2002).

Camp leaders clearly support Saw Poo Eh's sentiments and want to foster Karen togetherness through the *don* dance. The leaders of the Karen Women's Organization manifest their support by making a crucial financial commitment to the dancers. All of the participants wear the full traditional dress of the Karen nation while performing. This costume includes handwoven fabrics that are very time-consuming, and thus expensive, to produce. The camp leaders have allocated money to purchase this traditional clothing for each dancer and instrumentalist, so that the performers can be uniformly attired.

As I lived in the camp, I came to understand the context in which this decision was made. Mae Khong Kha camp is geographically isolated. Trucks cannot proceed past Section Three due to the limitations of the terrain, so any needed objects must be hiked in—brought in on foot by porters carrying heavy backpacks. Many camp residents have no electricity and limited access to running water. The terrain further limits their ability to cultivate crops and raise livestock, so money is spent on much-needed food provisions. In addition, the amount of money available to the camp as a whole is extremely small; the residents are allowed to reside on the land, but the government of Thailand does not help in any other significant way. Most of the refugees are not legally permitted to leave the camp to obtain employment. Funding is provided largely by nongovernmental organizations, which themselves often depend on donations. Learning these facts helped to clarify my understanding of the significance of the don dance uniform purchase. Clearly, camp leaders make the dance a high priority, funding it just as they fund basic necessities.

The youth of the community also play a significant role in the don dance. The don koh organized a troupe of very young dancers and taught them a shorter, less complex version of the don dance. He explained that he made this effort specifically so that people will continue to perform the don dance in years to come: "I want the Karen tradition to spread more and more and for the young generation to have a knowledge to share with the coming generation" (Me Htoo 2002.)

The don dance brings Karen people together, and it also helps them to construct a notion of a larger togetherness: a unified Karen nation. The Karen have historically been differentiated through tribal distinctions and language differences; the Sgaw and the Pwo Karen speak different dialects, both called "Karen" by the speakers, but which are clearly distinct and not easily understood by the speakers of the "other" Karen. In addition, the Karen of Mae Khong Kha

include various religious groups; most are Christian, but a significant number are Buddhist or animist.

The don dance as it is performed in the Mae Khong Kha camp effectively removes these barriers, at least for the time in which the participants are rehearsing or performing. The don koh, in an attempt to represent fairly all of the residents of the camp, has a policy for choosing the twenty-four men and women who will dance on January 16: he picks two or three dancers from each of the twelve sections of the camp. The performers include Christians and Buddhists; no one is excluded or included on the basis of their religious faith. This deliberate inclusiveness is significant. When Stern and Stern saw the dance forty years ago, it was always preceded by a religious ritual, a propitiation of Buddhist spirits (1971, 202.) The performances I observed did not begin this way. The fact that the don dance does not now begin with a ceremony invoking a particular god means it is not tied to one religion rather than another. Clearly, it is now intended to appeal to—and to represent—all of the faith groups within the Karen nation.

The gender composition of the dance troupe represents another significant departure from the don dance observed by Stern and Stern in the 1960s. At that time, don dances were performed by troupes of young girls; boys were included only if bodies were required to fill out the rows (Stern and Stern 1971, 203.) However, I observed an equal number of men and women performing the dance in Mae Khong Kha camp; one complete row of women was balanced by another complete row of men. The leadership of the dance also indicates that movement toward gender equality is occurring as the dance evolves. Stern and Stern noted that the don dance troupes that they observed were always taught by pairs of men (1971, 201.) In Mae Khong Kha, the don koh has taught the sung melodies to a sixteen-year-old woman named Paw G'mwee. She functioned as his assistant; she participated in the rehearsals at the side of the don koh, and when I asked him to sing the main melody for me during an interview, he requested that she sing with him. The leadership of the Mae Khong Kha don dance, then, was split equally between the two genders.

Karen don dance group performs at the 2006 Karen new year celebration at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Utica, New York. Photo: Felicia McMahon

These changes in the don dance performance signal a way in which the notion of the Karen nation is being constructed. The most visible participants in a significant cultural event are now adults, adults who represent the spectrum of religions and genders equally. Kaw-thoo-lei, in its turn, is imagined to be a community where ideals of human rights and equality are upheld—a community radically different from Burma today. That country is controlled by a military junta that jails democracy advocates. It is an officially Buddhist country; Christians and Muslims are often targeted by the regime. Treaties made with ethnic minority groups, guaranteeing them the right to secede in the

1950s, have been broken, and tension between various groups runs high. As Christopher Small has observed, "The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in these relationships that the meaning of the act lies" (1998, 13). In one place where the don dance is happening—in the Mae Khong Kha camp—the relationships being established are, to a large degree, egalitarian and inclusive. Herein lies part of the meaning of the dance.

Perhaps the most visible signal that the don dance as it is performed in Mae Khong Kha camp is an expression of nationalism is the fact that the dance is performed around a flagpole bearing the flag of the Karen nation. The flag at the Mae Khong Kha camp is somewhat worn, but it was raised with great care even for the rehearsals of the dance. This again represents a departure from the tradition that Stern and Stern observed: they saw troupes performing the don dance as entertainment and for friendly contests between villages. The present-day inclusion of the flag confirms that the don dance has evolved into a way for the Karen to express their national culture and identity.

While the flag is an obvious visual symbol, the text of the main song that the don dancers sing is yet another expression of Karen national unity. This translation of the words was given to me by my translator, Ha Nee Htoo:

> The Karen people, they are two groups of Karens; we call Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen. So Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen, we group together, and we try to make, to manage this dance, and for this we need our sovereign in peacefuldom. And we are trying to celebrate our new year, and we don't mind we are Sgaw Karen, you are Pwo Karen. We are Karen, we are together.

As I mentioned earlier, the don dance is actually performed to a series of songs. I obtained the translation of only two of them, and it is entirely possible that the texts of other melodies have very different meanings. Stern and Stern heard courting songs used as don dance songs. In contrast, the musical centerpiece of the 2002 New Year's Day performance was a song that references national unity.

The Karen National Union has been fighting the Tatmandaw—the Burmese national army—since Burma gained its independence from Britain in 1948. I visited many houses in Mae Khong Kha camp, and in most of them a poster featuring the face of the commanders of the KNU was displayed. The caption on the poster read, "We will determine our own political destiny." This don dance song expressed the same desire: the text of the song focuses on the need for sovereignty and "peacefuldom." It evoked the idea of a unified and independent nation—a kingdom, perhaps—where peace reigns. Most importantly, affirmation of the unity of the two groups of Karen is the main message of the song.

All of the performers who spoke with me told me that they were participating in the don dance as a way of maintaining their cultural heritage. Mee Htoo, the don koh, described the time and energy he puts into organizing the don dance each year as a "sacrifice," but he believed it was a sacrifice with a noble purpose. "I don't want to lose our culture. I want to keep and maintain our culture. That's why I try to sacrifice myself without complaining," he said (2002). The don dance is not only a way to preserve Karen tradition, but also a way in which the Karen signal their ethnic and cultural distinctiveness. This difference is of paramount importance because it justifies the Karen claim that they are not Burmese—that they are in fact ethnically distinct from Burmans. As Fredrik Barth has made clear, conceptions of ethnicity depend on maintaining boundaries between groups. In fact, "the ethnic *boundary* defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses" (Barth 1969, 15.)

I noted two distinct ways in which the don dance draws a boundary around the Karen, making them different from their neighbors. Although the hand gestures used in the don dance are reminiscent of hand gestures used in Burmese classical dance, the don dance could never be confused with a Burmese dance because, as Stern and Stern point out, "it is far more vigorous and free" (1971, 201). Karen dancers also use their legs in a much more active way than do classical Burmese dancers. The movement of the body in the don dance is enough to distinguish its dancers from dancers in the Burmese tradition. A musical instrument called a *g'weh,* used to accompany the dance, constitutes a second boundary marker. The g'weh is shaped like the horn of a water buffalo, although the instrument I saw was made of wood. The player of the g'weh, Saw Mee Htoo, created variations in pitch by changing the amount of air pressure he used to blow into the instrument and by pressing the smaller end of the g'weh with his thumb. The instrument was especially important in the instrumental ensemble because it was included in the musical accompaniment with complete freedom; that is, it played absolutely *ad libitum*, unlike any of the other instruments in the ensemble, which all had some specific pattern or signal to play at one point or another.

Adelaida Reyes argues that "ethnic identity calls for cultural markers to signal membership. . . . Identity is defined by the boundary created as a consequence of groups' differentiating themselves from one another on grounds that group members claim are cultural" (2001, 515). The g'weh is included in the don dance for precisely this reason—as a cultural marker. Saw Mee Htoo, the player of the g'weh, explained it to me this way:

> This music [instrument] does not have any special music or special beats. Whenever we have a festival or celebration, we use this as [a] sign of our Karen people. And also in Karen State, when they go to the farm to collect the rice before the daybreak, they use this music to let the other people know. This is the music [instrument] of our Karen people, *the mark of our Karen people.* (2002, my emphasis)

Karens thus mark their identity through both differentiation and inclusion, by visual and sonic means. The dance movements say,

Moi yo moi yo moi yo lay lay lay lay lay lay lay lay moi yo lay lay lay lay lay lay moi yo

moi yo moi yo moi yo lay reh lon paw neh — mung ya tan poo jaw la paw ———

e anoi Kaw leh aw —— plo k'm la ay aung ja pu mae khong kha mae kwai jaw

plo la mung kwa aw lon ton paw mung yu tan poo jaw mung yu tan mung naw me

si law —— lay lay lay moi yo oh ——— sy law sy law eh sy law

mung yu tan poo jaw reh sy law yoo law i tee rah day maung oo ———

ton bah leu blon —— plo nay tan than mee — nee — ay bon per ma on rah

lon hey! plo nay tan than ron per ma on rah lon lay lay lay lay moi yo ong thai

tan yaow plo su hree la pung ton mung kwa non —— pe ton tan yaow tha ge la ong thai ton yaow

tha ge la plo tha bon hry bya lay lay ay hay oh poo weh per hoo hoo hon hon

nay ton than ay pa maung lon le nay le blon ti kon ka yah —— mung yu ton poo —— jaw

on hrah te — bah la on hrah lon plo nay ton than lay lay lay lay moi yo

The melody and words of the main song of the Mae Khong Kha don dance. Transliteration by So La.

"We are different from the Burmese," while the sound of the g'weh says, "We who recognize this sound recognize our togetherness as Karen."

My experience at Mae Khong Kha camp, observing and discussing the don dance with camp residents, led me to a greater understanding of Karen people and of the hoped-for Karen nation. Karen refugees are not simply powerless victims; rather, they are a people who, despite having been oppressed and displaced, actively construct their own group identity. By organizing, rehearsing, and dancing the don dance, they express their social solidarity, political aspirations, and cultural uniqueness. They affirm their own identity as a nation—a nation that is unified, distinct from its neighbors, and capable of simultaneously preserving and adapting its own traditions.

Note: *Karen words used in this article have been rendered in English as consistently as possible. The Karen alphabet does not use Roman letters, so the writing of Karen words in English proved difficult for my informants. I have depended on two culture members, Ha Nee Htoo and So La, for the spelling of Karen words in this article. I asked individuals to supply the spelling of their own names. Here the lack of a widely recognized, standard way of writing Karen phonetics in English proved obvious: several informants argued with one man about how he should spell his name!*

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First New York Folklore Society Community Scholar Field School

PHOTOS BY VALERIE WALAWENDER

The New York Folklore Society held its first Community Scholar Field School residency at the Kanatsiohareke Mohawk Community Bed and Breakfast in Fonda, New York, on July 21–3. The distance-learning course was cosponsored by Empire State College. For information and more photographs, visit our web site at www.nyfolklore.org.

Residency student Jude Valentine and Empire State College instructor Alice Lai attend a session on video techniques taught by professional videographer Barry Dornfeld.

Archivist Andy Kolovos making a point. José Gomez Davidson is to the left.