

Karen Refugees in Burma and Britain: History and Identity

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Table of Contents

List of maps and photographs	4
List of acronyms and abbreviations	5
Abstract	7
Declaration	8
Copyright statement	9
Acknowledgements	10
Introduction	12
Aims of thesis	17
Historical background	19
Literature review: framing the Karen refugee	23
Burma and the Karen historiography	29
Thesis structure	33
Chapter 1: Sources and methods	36
Introduction	36
Field research data collection and interview methods	42
Methods	45
Language	49
Interview participants in Thailand and Sheffield	51
Conclusion	57
Chapter 2: Karen history in Burma	58
The heterodoxy of ‘Karen identity’	60
Karen and the colonial encounter	69
Borderland spaces and peripheral conflict	76
Karen history through the eyes of refugees	79
Conclusion	87
Chapter 3: Contested spaces: The Karen in the Burma borderlands and Mae Sot	89
Introduction	90
State making in Burma on the eastern borderland	92
Organised state violence in Burma:	96
Forced displacement from Burma	96
Burma and the Thai borderlands	98
Mae Sot – the city	109
The Karen in Mae Sot	114
Conclusion	121

Chapter 4: ‘Like birds in a cage’ – The refugee camps	124
Rethinking the camp as ‘space’ and resistance	125
The camps in Thailand; location and history	128
KRC and KNU	132
Mae La – the refugee camp	136
Housing in Mae La	138
Perspectives from Mae La refugee camp	143
Women’s leadership positions in Mae La camp	148
Education in the camps	151
International and local organisations	159
Conclusion	162
Chapter 5: Resettlement in Sheffield: Gender and change in Karen communities	163
Sheffield Karen resettlement experience	166
Integration in Sheffield	173
The changing gender relationships in Sheffield Karen community	181
The Karen Women’s Organisation and other organisations in Sheffield	187
Karen Organisations and transnational communities	197
Transnationalism	200
Media and social platforms	202
Conclusion	207
Chapter 6: Expressions of Karen culture and identity through ceremonies	209
The rites of the Karen New Year festival (Thau Ni Sau)	212
Expressions of Karen culture and nationalism in ceremonies at Sheffield	216
Karen cultural signifiers used in ceremonies	217
The Don or ‘ton’ dance	223
The Karen wrist-tying ceremony	228
Martyr’s day ceremony	234
Conclusion	237
Conclusion	239
Bibliography	243

Word count 79,902

List of maps

Map 1: Burma states and Divisions. (KHRG, 2005).	11
Map 2: Location of refugee camps. (UNCHCR, 2021).	44
Map 3: Ethnic groups of Burma. (Smith, 1999).	65
Map 4: Map of military airstrikes in northern Karen State. (ICCA, 2021).	95
Map 5: Map of Mae Sot. (Human Rights Watch, 2019).	111

List of photographs

Photo 1 and 2: Karen fleeing Tatmadaw forces in Burma, (author, 1988).	13
Photo 3, 4 and 5: Karen fleeing Tatmadaw in Burma, (author, 1988).	14
Photo 6: Mary Ohn and Wendy – my wife (author, 1990).	54
Photo 7: Mary Ohn in uniform, (author, 1990).	54
Photo 8: Burma side of Moei Riverbank, (Karen News, 2014).	112
Photo 9: Mae La - Refugee camp, housing density, (TBC, 2018).	138
Photo 10: Mae La – Refugee camp, housing density, (author, 2013).	139
Photo 11: House being built, (author, 2013).	140
Photo 12: Street in Mae La, (author, 2013).	141
Photo 13: Two Story house, (author, 2013).	141
Photo 14 and 15: School rooms with juniors, (author 2002).	154
Photo 16: Senior students in class, (author, 2002).	154
Photo 17: Karen New Year celebrations at Mae La, (author, 2006).	158
Photo 18, 19 and 20: Traditional weaving. (author, 2011).	160
Photo 21: The Don Dance with plastic poles, (author, 2019).	225
Photo 22: The Don Dance: Senior section, women. (author, 2019).	226
Photo 23: The Don Dance: Junior section, boys and girls, (author 2019).	226
Photo 24: Raising the Karen flag. (KCA, 2108).	227
Photo 25: Karen flag and photos with an obelisk replica, (author, 2019).	236

List of acronyms and abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian countries
BCP	Burma Communist Party
BGF	Border Guard Force
BPHWT	Back Packer Health Worker Team
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CBO	Community Based Organisations
COELT	Cultural Orientation and English Language Training
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
DKBA	Democratic Kayin/Karen Buddhist Army
EKN	European Karen Network
ERF III	European Refugee Fund
FBR	Free Burma Rangers
GPP	Gateway Protection Programme
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IKO	International Karen Organisation
ILR	Indefinite Leave to Remain
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IOR	India Office Records
IRIN	Integrated Regional Information Networks
KBBS	Karen Baptist Bible School and College
KCA	Karen Community Association
KCC	Karen Central Committee
KCO	Karen Central Organisation
KCC	Karen Central Committee
KED	Karen Education Department

KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KKBC	Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Church
KNA	Karen National Association
KNU	Karen National Union
KNU CC	Karen National Union Central Committee
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KRC	Karen Refugee Committee
KRCEE	Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity
KSNG	Karen Student Support Network
KTWG	Karen Teachers Working Group
KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
KYO	Karen Youth Organisation
MOE	Thai Ministry of Education
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PRAD	Partners Relief and Development
RTG	Royal Thai Government
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SLORC	State Law and Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
Tatmadaw	The Military force of the Burmese government
TBBC	The Thailand Burma Border Consortium
TBC	The Border Consortium
UKBA	United Kingdom Border Agency
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between the displacement and resettlement of the Karen people of Burma and their reflections on their history and identity. It pays particular attention to those living in the refugee camps in Thailand and those resettled in Sheffield. It covers the years from 1988 to the present day. The thesis aims to contribute to the field of refugee history and advance emerging academic interest in the Karen by providing a clearer understanding of the impact of protracted displacement, resettlement and socio-cultural adaptation from the perspective of the Karen experience. It foregrounds the role played in Karen communities in different settings in reinterpreting Karen history. It examines how notions of Karen identity have been created and recreated in different settings by engaging with their stories on the Thai-Burma borderlands, the refugee camps, and Sheffield.

The research draws upon a series of extended oral interviews and participant observations conducted over the last thirty years with Karen people in two locations: the Mae La refugee camp in Thailand and Sheffield. Amongst the thousands of displaced Karen living in Mae La, common themes emerged: ideas of displacement and historical oppression, the significance of 'homeland' and 'nation', and the importance of faith, all of which were bound up with ideas of cultural change. The use of personal testimony will show how past events are transferred into the present as they continue to affect the resettlement community. The thesis also gives particular attention to women's new role in Karen leadership and organisation in the resettled community in Sheffield.

The thesis also explores how the resettlement process has influenced Karen ceremonial practices, which have taken on fluid and contested forms considering processes of cultural adaptation - the thesis will demonstrate how Karen reconstruct and reify both cultural and political aspects of their identity in Sheffield. Finally, the thesis attempts to make sense of how the Karen have recurrently constructed a narrative of persecution while establishing new forms of political and ethnic identity.

Declaration

I declare that no portion of this work referred to in the dissertation has been submitted to support an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institution of learning.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis arose from disquiet over the years on a conflict that has spanned over sixty years. I want to thank my supervisors, Professor Ana Carden-Coyne and Professor Peter Gatrell, for their guidance, a huge source of encouragement and patience to keep me in focus and put my thoughts coherently together. I would also like to thank my wife, Wendy, who has supported and enthusiastically motivated me in pursuit of highlighting the Karen refugee situation. They have enabled me to read and research this project in a manner appropriate for the subject.

I am also indebted to my father-in-law Bruce Mortimer David Humphrey-Taylor, born of Anglo-Karen parents in Toungoo, Burma, in 1928. He was, over the years, the person who offered valuable information and advice. On numerous occasions, we engaged in lengthy discourses regarding the Karen. Over the last thirty years, I have visited Burma and Thailand on frequent occasions, and on a visit to Kawthoolei in 1988, with Bruce and my son Kristen, who was eleven years old, we were accorded with generous hospitality and continuing generosity. It is from this visit that this journey began.

My special thanks go to all the Karen people of Sheffield who have welcomed me over the last fourteen years and have become my extended family. I would also like to thank the Karen people who still live in the Mae La refugee camp and all those I interviewed over the years and made me feel welcome in their homes.



Map 1: Burma States and Divisions. (KHRG, 2005).

Introduction

I remember one spring evening, in March 1988. It was almost sundown and, our small group of six people were emerging from the deep Burmese jungle on our return journey to Thailand on foot. We crossed a meandering river on a makeshift bamboo bridge to make our way towards a village where we were to stay the night. The whole of the surrounding area was filling with the dying embers of the day; the atmosphere conjured up restful feelings in our tired and aching bodies. After a whole day of strenuous walking up and down steep mountains, we were more than ready to eat and rest. On reaching the other side of the river, we suddenly encountered a large group of over a hundred people, mainly Karen, mostly families spread alongside the riverbank. I asked my guide and interpreter, Saw George, who were these people? He replied that they were Karen fleeing their homes in Burma, away from the military. They were making their way to the Thai border, where they would find shelter and safety. Most of them were preparing an evening meal of rice and some soup of chopped banana bark or dried leaves. Our party of six had been travelling for most of a week in the conflict zone. I knew that the night would become cold, and, on seeing the babies, the older men and women, my heart sank. Was there enough food to feed all of these people? Many of whom were suffering from malaria, dysentery, and other diseases. We shared all we had carried, the food and the medicines, with the fleeing Karen families.

I found myself walking and climbing the hills along with them all the following morning (some of the mountains in this area were more than four thousand feet high). I saw a scene that I will never forget that of a snaking and slow-moving line of about one hundred displaced people carrying all their worldly possessions with them.

These observations and actions are recorded in my travel journal, dated 1988. I was visiting Thailand with my son Kristen, eleven years old, and my father-in-law, Bruce, who was a Karen leader and who, later, becomes a key informant in this thesis. It was my third visit to Thailand as a tourist only with family connections. This journey had resulted from numerous engaging conversations with Bruce about his previous life in Burma. These talks captivated my curiosity in a country that, to me, seemed mysterious as I pieced together stories from Bruce with scant media reports on the escalating ethnic violence in Eastern Burma. The following photographs detail parts of the journey taken in 1988. They evoke the hardship of flight through jungle and

rivers, the few things carried, and the kindness was given to us, all of which started me on the journey of this study.



Photo 1: The displaced Karen in Burma, (author 1988).



Photo 2: Walking in the hills on the borderlands, (author 1988).



Photo 3: Karen fleeing Tatmadaw in Burma, (author 1988).



Photo 4: Author and Karen people walking up hills, (author 1988).

Photo 5: Walking across the river to Thailand, (author 1988).



This PhD is a study of Karen refugees and family and communities I came to know over my lifetime, journeying to and from the Thai borderlands and the camps, and the resettled communities in Sheffield. My father-in-law, Bruce, was born in Toungoo, Burma, in 1927. He was of Anglo-Karen parents and was searching for his long-lost niece, Hilda, and her last letter informed her uncle that she was heading for the border with other refugees. Bruce was making his first visit to Burma since he had left in the mid-1950s after the post-independence civil war and the fracturing of the Karen resistance. Hilda and her family were part of the 1987 Karen exodus from Eastern Burma after the Burmese military (Tatmadaw) offensives created thousands of refugees who fled to Thailand. The Burmese military had killed her family members in one of these offensives. Hilda was the sole survivor of her family. She became the first Karen refugee to resettle in the United Kingdom from the border refugee camps in 1998 at the age of 20 and now lives comfortably in Dumfries, Scotland, with her son.

This profoundly personal vignette forms and belongs to a broader history of Burma's ethnic conflict that I became increasingly aware of during my visit to Burma in 1988. An unknown people in my early years of visiting Thailand and Burma, the Karen have become an intimate and integral part of my life for the last 30 years.

At the year-end of 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) announced that 79.5 million people worldwide are forcibly displaced because of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations.¹ That was a global increase of 8.7 million people over the previous year, with over 1.1 million displaced from Myanmar/Burma. More than 100 million have been forcibly displaced in the last decade globally. Since the Second World War, it is the highest number, overtaking the twentieth century as the 'century of the refugee'.² As Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, states:

We are witnessing a changed reality in that forced displacement nowadays is not only vastly more widespread but is simply no

¹ UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*, (Copenhagen, 2020), pp. 2-7, <https://www.unhcr.org/5ee200e37.pdf>, [accessed June 2020].

² Elizabeth Colson, 'Forced migration and the anthropological response', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 1-18.

longer a short-term and temporary phenomenon.³

The media outlets across the Western world have numerous reports about displaced people and asylum seekers making dangerous journeys across lands and seas to reach developed nations, with vast refugee camps filled with forcibly displaced people. Globalisation is about the worldwide movement of technology, goods, and ideas and involves people's movement, often brought about through conflict and threats of violence.⁴ In these challenging times of global migration, the world finds itself, as Homi Bhabha argued, in a 'moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion'.⁵

This dissertation seeks to contribute to understanding Karen's case in the camps and the British diaspora, drawing upon my own position as both 'inside' and 'outside' the communities.

The contemporary field of refugee studies comprises many disciplines. Social science, anthropology, and international law are considered essential fields in refugee studies. However, this is not always the case. Gil Loescher pointed out that between the two world wars and afterwards, historians played an essential and central role in refugee policy research.⁶ Historians were predominantly involved in documenting and interpreting refugee policy in Europe and examining international organisations' role in Europe during these periods. In recent years, historians have made significant new contributions to refugee studies. Of particular significance are current efforts to contribute to refugee research across several disciplines by many history scholars.⁷

³ UNHCR, *Global Trends*, (2020), p. 6.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, (Minneapolis, 1996); Dawn Chatty, *Dispossession and Forced Migration in the Middle East*, (Cambridge, 2010), p. 28.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London, 1994), p. 31.

⁶ Gil Loescher, 'History and the current state of historical research in Refugee Studies', (February 2016, This paper was presented at the Workshops 'History and Memory in Refugee Research' of the DFG-Netzwerk Grundlagen der Flüchtlingsforschung.

⁷ Previously neglected research subjects and issues such Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, (Yale, 2007), with history of displacement during the partition of India in 1948; Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I*, (Indiana, 2005), studies of forced displacement in the Soviet Russia era and in *The Unsettling of Europe: The Great Migration, 1945 to the Present* (London, 2019), a study on recent refugee displacement in the middle east to Europe; Katy Long, *The Point of No Return: Refugees, Rights, and Repatriation*, (Oxford, 2013), and Marjoleine Zieck, 'Refugees

Historian Peter Gatrell suggests that to bridge the divide between social scientists' and historical research is to deploy the concept of 'refugeedom', identified as a matrix involving many aspects such as refugees' experiences, administrative practices, and social relations. He further submits that 'history is needed in order to understand and contextualise this matrix'.⁸ Thus, the thesis seeks to contribute to refugee studies by drawing on a similar matrix of history and social science enquiry.

Aims of the Thesis

This research is a case study that traces multiple strategies that the Karen people of Burma have deployed within the refugee camps in Thailand and the resettled Karen diaspora in Sheffield, United Kingdom.⁹ It examines how they have negotiated the challenges of government repression, displacement, insurgency and resettlement and how these trends have played out within the specificity of Karen history and experience.

The research objectives of this study are threefold.

The first is to draw on several Karen personal narratives in Thailand and Sheffield to establish how individual Karen refugees found the means to express

and the Right to Freedom of Movement: From Flight to Return', *Michigan Journal of International Law*, Vol. 39, No. 19, (2018), on the history of refugee repatriation and displacement during the partition of India in 1948.

⁸ Peter Gatrell, 'Refugees – What's wrong with History?', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (2016), pp. 170-189.

⁹ Throughout this thesis, the term 'Burma' is utilised. When the British annexed Burma in the 1800s, the name Union of Burma (or Burma for short) was adopted. In 1989, the official name of the country was changed to the Union of Myanmar by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which became the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997 to reflect the peace and prosperity the ruling military junta was promoting to the international community. While the government claimed the new name is ethnically neutral and would provide a greater sense of national unity, many political and ethnic opposition groups contested the name change, since it was made without consulting the people through a referendum. 'Burma' has been the term preferred by the many political and ethnic opposition groups, as they did not recognize the legitimacy of the ruling military government or its authority to rename the country. While the UN has accepted the name change, many countries including the USA and UK are continuing to use the titles Burma and Myanmar. The terms have also become an indicator of one's political position in the struggle for control over the country. Since this thesis focuses on the Karen ethnic group who identify more with the term Burma than Myanmar, the expression of 'Burma' will be used throughout.

themselves, and by extension, to contribute to the creation of what has become called collective memory.

The second aim is to clarify the impact of displacement on Karen identity, organisations, and networks within the Karen diaspora. In particular, this case study examines how Karen refugees define their sense of ‘being Karen’ with a lost ‘homeland’. Their resettlement in Sheffield has amplified the Karen notion of ‘homeland’ and how a reconfigured identity has emerged. The study also offers an opportunity to understand how the Karen diaspora expresses the conception of ‘homeland’ in the borderlands and Sheffield. The Karen notion of ‘homeland’ is based on the proclamation in 1949 of the Karen Free State of *Kaw Thoo Lei* can be translated as either ‘the land of the *thoo lei* plant’, translated from Karen as ‘flowerland’ or ‘the land that burned black’.¹⁰

The third aim is to explore how the community and individuals seek to empower themselves in resettlement through ceremonial and cultural activities. An essential element of this analysis involves considering gender dynamics will also be explored within the camp and resettled communities. Women especially have found the means to establish a more prominent role in community resettlement.

This thesis will reveal how individual Karen have expressed their displacement and refugee-ness experiences, despite the minimal opportunities to be heard, including being marginalised again by resettlement. The study will argue that the experience of displacement has strengthened the sense of nationalist identity amongst the majority of Karen refugees and has situated their claims of autonomy and self-determination firmly as core political demands for their eventual return to Burma.¹¹

¹⁰ Alexander Horstmann, ‘Sacred Networks and Struggles among the Karen Baptists across the Thailand-Burma Border’, *Moussons*, Vol. 17, (2011), pp. 85-86; Peter J. Bjorklund, *The Dynamics of KNU Political and Military Development: Reflecting the Shifting Landscape*, (2010), [Dynamics of KNU Political and Military Development-thesis-2010-red.pdf \(burmalibrary.org\)](http://burmalibrary.org/Dynamics_of_KNU_Political_and_Military_Development-thesis-2010-red.pdf), Burma Online Library, [accessed November 2020].

¹¹ Karen National Union (Information Department), *The Karen Struggle for Freedom*, (Mae Sot, 2000); Khin Hnin Htet, ‘Suu Kyi reignites push for ethnic autonomy’, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, (17 November 2010), <http://www.dvb.no/elections/suu-kyi-reignites-push-for-ethnic-autonomy/12920>; [accessed July 2019]; Soe Zeya Tun and Hannah Beech, ‘Burma’s Ethnic Minorities seek Equality and Greater Autonomy’, in *Landmark Elections Time*, *Time Magazine*, 7 November 2015, <http://time.com/4103734/burma-myanmar-shan-ethnic-groups-elections-nld-aung-san-suu-kyi/>, [accessed April 2020].

There is an absence of resettled Karen refugee narratives and the perspectives on their evolving identity and memories of the camp life left on the Thai-Burma borderlands in Britain. Indeed, the very nature of their displacement brings a sense of the temporary to the everyday experiences of survival. The lack of scholarly research reinforces their feeling of being invisible, and displacement reinforces their situation's invisibility and silence. Very few in-depth studies explore exilic Karen cultural and ethnic identity in the United Kingdom, although a memoir has been published.¹² However, there are relatively few studies of contemporary Karen refugee notion of territorial 'homeland' within the diaspora. While *Kaw Thoo Lei's* physical space has been gradually lost in the last three decades, the spiritual idea of 'homeland' is still alive. The quasi-state of *Kawthoolei* and its headquarters in Mannerplaw challenged the state's territoriality and could not be tolerated. When the Tatmadaw secured Mannerplaw and overcame other Karen military garrisons in the late 1990s, the idea of a Karen state persists among the KNU, refugee leaders and Karen exiles.¹³ This study emerges from a focus on individuals engaged in third-country resettlement in Sheffield, UK.

Historical background

The result of the relentless campaigns of violence by the Burmese military government forces responding to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) insurgency over the last three decades for the Karen living in Eastern Burma has been catastrophic. This research explores the experiences and memories of the displaced Karen located in numerous refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma borderlands and the resettled Karen refugees currently residing in the UK, specifically the refugees who created Karen communities in Sheffield, Bolton, and Bury between 2005 to the present. Most

¹² Zoya Phan, *Little Daughter: A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West*, (London, 2009); Geff Green and Eleanor Lockley, 'Communication practices of the Karen in Sheffield: Seeking to navigate their three zones of displacement', *Asian Journal of Communication*, (2012), Vol. 22, No. 6, pp. 566-583; Green and Lockley, 'From bullets to blogs: how the Karen of Sheffield had their new 'weapons' turned against them', at the *Intersectional Conflict and Dialogue in Transnational Migrant and Digital Diaspora Networks conference in 2013*; Burma Campaign UK, 'Introduction and Information about Burma', <http://burmacampaign.org.uk/about-burma/>, [accessed July 2019].

¹³ Horstmann, 'Sacred Networks and Struggles', *Moussons*, (2011), pp. 85-86; Giulia Garbagni and Matthew J. Walton, 'Imagining Kawthoolei: Strategies of petitioning for Karen statehood in Burma in the first half of the 20th century', *Nation and Nationalism*, Vol. 26, No. 3, (July 2020), pp. 759-774.

UK primary research was conducted in Sheffield with three visits to Bury and two visits to Bolton to attend weddings or funerals. The resettled community regard Sheffield as the focal point for all community interaction. The United Kingdom has a history of selectively accepting refugees for resettlement; it has recently developed integration programs to assist many refugees in creating new lives.¹⁴

The primary research approach concentrates on Karen community survival issues both in the refugee camps and in Britain, focusing mainly on the re-negotiation of their ethnic identity within these different locations. It will explore and present the voices of the Karen people in Britain between 2005 and 2019, whose stories about camp life and their struggle with resettlement and integration in Britain will be the foundation of this thesis.

It is estimated that over two million people of many ethnic groups are internally displaced in Eastern Burma, with a similar number living and working illegally in bordering countries.¹⁵ The majority of these people are Karen, with more than 250,000 having chosen relative safety, although with limited freedoms, of the nine displaced persons'/refugee camps on Thailand and Burma's borderlands. Over thirty years, this has created a 'warehousing' of the many displaced ethnic people who live in these refugee camps.¹⁶ The situation in Eastern Burma in the first decade of the twenty-first century worsened, and in the last few years, there have been signs of a gradual improvement in Karen State. However, as the Royal Thai Government (RTG) is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, the Karen refugees cannot join Thai society and are considered illegal aliens. Whilst being granted temporary protection in the refugee camps, they are not allowed or permitted to venture outside and cannot return to their homeland in Burma.

The current situation in June 2021 continues to be precarious, with ongoing civil and ethnic strife. The Burmese military has nullified the election of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy, in the 2020 elections after seizing control in February 2021. Hundreds of people have been killed, and ethnic

¹⁴ Patricia Hynes and Yin Mon Thu, 'To Sheffield with Love', *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 30, (April 2008), pp. 49-51; Matthew Whitecross, 'Moving to Mars: A Million Miles from Burma', Channel 4 Documentary, (More4, 2010).

¹⁵ Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: The States of Conflict*, (London, 2008), pp. 79-81.

¹⁶ Merrill Smith (ed.), 'Warehousing Refugees: A Denial of Rights, a Waste of Humanity', *World Refugee Survey*, Vol. 38, (2004), pp. 38-56.

groups have been involved in armed clashes with the Burmese military since February. The Tatmadaw has invaded several KNU held territories, which has led to clashes with all seven KNU brigades in Thaton, Taungoo, Dawei, Mutraw, Dooplaya and Hpa-an districts. In April, over 20,000 Karen people had been displaced by the conflict in Karen State, with the Thai government reporting that over 2,267 civilians had crossed into Thailand. The UN report that over 40,000 people have been displaced on the eastern border. However, recent communication with the Karen communities in Thailand and the UK indicates that there is a growing concern with the continuing displacement to Thailand and China, by the ongoing military offensives in Karen (Kayin) State, Kachin State, and the Northern Shan State of Burma in the last few months.¹⁷

As a result of the conflict in Burma in the last three decades, hundreds of thousands of people from different Karen areas and other minority ethnic groups have crossed the Salween and Moei River (which constitutes the natural border between Burma and Thailand), becoming refugees in Thailand. The establishment of large refugee camps within kilometres of the international dividing line has attracted numerous NGOs. They and the KNU/KNLA and affiliated Karen NGOs have established offices in the Thai town of Mae Sot. Since the late 1980s, the city of 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 is identified by the international press and some scholarly works as the geographical space called 'the Thai-Burma border'.

Many international NGOs, such as the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) (now TBC), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and under the aegis of the UNHCR, have located on the borderlands to assist in the displaced people of Burma. Most of the displaced are Karen refugees from Karen State. They

¹⁷ Myanmar Now, [Following deadly airstrikes, junta planes seen spying on KNU territory | Myanmar NOW \(myanmar-now.org\)](#), [accessed June 2021]; The Irrawaddy, 'Karen rebel leader warns Myanmar regime of more fighting', [Karen Rebel Leader Warns Myanmar Regime of More Fighting \(irrawaddy.com\)](#), [accessed June 2021]; Reuters, 'Thousands of Myanmar villagers poised to flee violence to Thailand, group says', [Thousands of Myanmar villagers poised to flee violence to Thailand, group says | Reuters](#), [accessed June 2021], personal communication with family and friend in Thailand, Burma and Sheffield in the last few months.

have set up governance infrastructures in all the camps with a water supply and sanitation, shelter building, support facilities for food distribution, schools, and training facilities, with health centres and places of religious worship for all religious denominations. This camp infrastructure has provided a degree of protection for many Karen refugees, a buffer zone or ‘space’ enabling them to adapt positively to their changing environment and new ‘homes’. However, this technique’s negative impact is the difficulties experienced by many refugees in the unfamiliar and often cramped camp surroundings. Forced migration and situational instability combined with family losses and social disruption have resulted in accounts of increased levels of alcohol and drug abuse, with reports of gender-based and sexual violence in some of these camps. However, local refugee camp administrators have disputed this.¹⁸ Both the Thai government and the Karen refugees have viewed the camps as temporary ‘homes’ and an ongoing issue requiring resolution. Thailand has been host to the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border for more than thirty-five years and has shown a commitment to protection. However, they have also often violated international standards, such as the principle of non-refoulement.¹⁹ In the early 2000s, the UNHCR searched for alternative durable solutions in resettlement to third countries.²⁰ To date, by January 2021, over 100,000 Karen refugees have been resettled in third countries globally. However, between 2015 and 2021, there have been numerous attempts with refugee repatriation to their previous homes in Karen State, Burma, and this strategy is becoming increasingly likely. This strategy by the Thai and Burmese state

¹⁸ Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), *Thailand: The Mechanics of Resettling Burmese Refugees*, (February 2008); IRIN, *Thailand: Addressing Sexual Violence in Mae La Refugee Camp*, (January 2009). Personal conversations with Karen Refugee Camp (KRC) Committee Secretary, Saw George in April 2011 and 2013 who indicated a small increase in social problems within Mae La camp population.

¹⁹ Sucheng Chang, *Survivors – Cambodian Refugees in the United States*, (Chicago, 2004), pp. 43-44. Under international human rights law, the principle of non-refoulement guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm.

²⁰ UNHCR, 2011 *Regional Operations Profile: Myanmar and Thailand*, [accessed 26 November 2011], <http://www.unhcr.org.uk/resources/monthly-updates/myanmar.html>. ; International Organisation of Migration (IOM), ‘IOM Resettles 90,000 Refugees from Thai camps’, 17 June 2011, [accessed January 2019], IOM, ‘International Dialogue on Migration, No. 12, (Geneva, 2010), <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/media/press-briefing/notes/pbnAS/cache/offence/lang/en?entryId> , [accessed January 2019].

authorities is causing great distress and concern amongst all the current camp population and the resettled Karen globally.²¹

Literature review: Framing the Karen refugee

Ethnicity has remained a contentious issue within sociologists, although Weber was initially the first to use the term 'ethnic group' in his studies. This study investigates how the Karen adapted to displacement and resettlement and how different strategies changed over time. To do so draws on Robert Young's ideas of 'hybridisation' in which he argues that racial theory was developed in historical and cultural terms with adaptation practices change over time. By exploring how Karen culture was reconfigured in the camps and Britain, the thesis also seeks to understand the 'hybridisation' of identity among the resettled Karen in Britain. Young helped me rethink and reframe the term hybridity, whilst the term usually is thought of as a cross between different species

Anthropologist Aihwa Ong exemplifies the issues and problems encountered by Cambodian refugees in California. Ong discusses how the 'refugee' goes through a complicated transformation process through many modern government technologies, including social workers, medicine, and other social institutions. Ong examines the specific features of globalised migration and acquired citizenship.²² This thesis will follow her example by reviewing supporting Karen social institutions such as church, community and refugee support groups that engage with the resettled community in Britain. The Karen can express 'old' and 'new' layers of identity; this is especially relevant to Sheffield's resettled Karen people. They did not have such freedoms to express their cultural identity in Karen State, Burma. Transnationalism means that they can be fluid, adaptable and ambiguous as they negotiate diasporic collective memories and belonging within new cultural surroundings in the UK.²³

²¹ Communication via Skype and email in 2018-19 with Mae La camp section leader Saw George.

²² Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*, (London, 2003).

²³ Robert Young, *Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, (London 1999), pp. 3-5; Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Secure Borders and Safe Haven: The Gendered Politics of Belonging Beyond Social Cohesion', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (2005), pp. 313-335.

Exploring the term ‘refugee’ concerning the Karen is complex and rooted in political choice and ethical judgment expressions.²⁴ Particularly striking are how these definitions have conditioned the relationship between the state and refugee actors. In standard wording, ‘refugees’ are all those that have involuntarily left their homelands because of war, famine or natural disaster.²⁵ However, the international law definition currently expresses a narrower definition embodied in the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention on refugee status.²⁶ This study will build on Zolberg’s premise that scholars cannot study refugees independently from historical, political, and economic world processes.²⁷

Zolberg was the first to introduce an integrated explanation of forced migration. Before the 1980s, scholars viewed refugee movements as unpredictable, often as a result of non-economic circumstances. However, Zolberg argued that while voluntary migration may have roots in economic factors, refugee movements were intrinsically linked to political forces. Furthermore, Zolberg presents refugees as people in need of aid primarily as victims of nation-state violence rather than inherent helplessness; his studies provide a lens to consider refugees’ requirements in this study. This study will also examine and understand the underlying causes of ethnic violence linked to refugee flows from Burma to neighbouring countries.²⁸

Anthropologist’s Malkki and Chatty called on social scientists, governments, and international agencies to address refugees not as ‘defenceless’ victims knowable through their needs. Instead, to identify these people’s ‘agency’ and capacity to bring about political and economic change and stability for themselves and the international

²⁴ Astride R. Zolberg, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World*, (Oxford, 1989), p. 4.

²⁵ Ann Vibeke Egli, *Mass Refugee Influx and the Limits of Public International Law*, (New York, 2002), p. 34. Zolberg, Suhrke, and Aguayo also consider the movement of people seeking refuge as a global phenomenon. They write that refugee movements “reflect a fundamental characteristic of the contemporary world, namely its transformation into an interconnected whole within which national societies have been profoundly internationalized”, p. 153.

²⁶ UNHCR, *The 1951 Refugee Convention*, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html>, [accessed June 2019]; Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking*, p. 9.

²⁷ Zolberg et al., *Escape from Violence*, p. 6.

²⁸ Zolberg et al., *Escape from Violence*, p. 7.

community.²⁹ Malkki goes further and argues that the homogenised and overarching image of refugees presented by typical portrayal as masses of helpless people has been utilised to obscure the refugees' actual socio-political circumstances. This depiction of refugees has been used to erase the specific, historical, and local politics of particular refugees and retracts to the more abstract status of non-people. The application and bestowing of the 'refugee' label are initially critical for their survival and protection during flight and exile. More importantly, Malkki urges anthropologists to consider the impact on displaced people by aid intervention. This thesis will draw on Malkki's insights to examine how Karen refugees sought to resist helplessness and contest the label 'refugee'.³⁰

Resettlement is one of the three durable solutions to refugeedom, alongside local integration and return. It usually involves the organised movement of UNHCR-selected refugees to a third destination country which is expected to be permanent. Long suggests that resettlement solves displacement by offering migration to a third country to a limited number of refugees.³¹ A great deal of the global discussion on resettlement focuses on refugee numbers, capacity, and the resettlement countries' perspective. The UK resettlement programmes, in respect of the Karen, will be explored later in chapter five. Roger Zetter identified refugee survival strategies such as security, shelter, and personal space that have affected resettled refugees in the UK.³² These strategies are particularly salient to my study. Within the resettlement process, housing is a key initial step that Karen experienced in re-establishing their new third-country life. This thesis intends to demonstrate that integration into Britain has been self-identified by Karen refugees as a crucial and essential aspect of the resettlement process. Joanne Van Selm concludes that research on resettlement mainly

²⁹ Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, (London, 1995), p. 35; Dawn Chatty, *Dispossession and Forced Migration in the Middle East*, (Cambridge, 2010).

³⁰ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, pp. 225-226; Malkki, 'Refugees and Exile: "From Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things', *Annual Review Anthropology*, Vol. 24, (1995), pp. 495-523; Malkki, 'Speechless emissaries: refugees, humanitarianism and decolonisation' in K. F. Olwig and K. Hastrup, *Sitting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological perspective*, (London 1997), pp. 223-254.

³¹ Katy Long, 'Rethinking "Durable" Solutions', in Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long and Nando Sigona, *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, (Oxford, 2014), pp. 475-487.

³² Roger Zetter and Martyn Pearl, *Managing to Survive - Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Access to Social Housing*, (Oxford, 1999).

covers government policies, UNHCR approaches and interests and elements of the integration of resettled refugees.³³ This study supplements the relatively little written about resettlement from the refugee perspective; how Karen decide to apply and accept resettlement; how they adapt to utterly different circumstances, particularly when moving from sometimes decades in camps to a busy northern England city; how they motivate their community and make the best of their new situation.

Gayatri Spivak's argues that through the 'intellectual', the two acts of representation re-inscribe the subaltern figure in its terms. For Spivak, any work that engages with the subaltern from a position of privilege involves a process of representation that will eventually cohere with the dominant narrative shaped by Western discourse. While her analysis suggests a tension in the post-colonial framing of the marginalised voice. Spivak indicates that the practice of 'speaking to', 'speaking for', and 'listening to' is the process of listening to that reveal the ideas of empowerment and emancipation. Rather than obscuring the mechanisms of silencing and power, this project centres them in what Spivak calls a 'discourse of presence'. The conversation becomes the space in which the marginalised can be heard.³⁴

In the understanding of the various forms of agency, that of the state, the NGOs, The UK authorities, and (certain) refugees, it is the ability to be political, contest, and demand participation in the processes that shape the lives of the refugees. Nevertheless, it does not always manifest itself in vocal demands. It can also be marked as a quiet refusal to negotiate or acquiesce to prejudicial governance. Soguk develops a conception of agency that can demand and effect change in governance sites. While this understanding is central to my conception of agency, caution must be observed.³⁵ The agency the refugees exercise is a way of challenging ideas of helplessness, and I will be drawing upon the narrative findings to establish who exercises this 'agency' and how.

³³ Joanne Van Selm, 'Refugee Resettlement' in Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long and Nando Sigona, *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, (Oxford, 2014), pp. 512-524.

³⁴ Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft*, (Minnesota, 1999).

³⁵ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, p. 30.

Alternative discourses in Southeast Asian studies by Altatas and Ho have emerged to expose ideas entrenched in the social sciences, partly due to colonialism and the continuing western centrism.³⁶ More often than not, the terms in which ‘meaning’ is generated are within this dominant Western discourse. In this case study of Karen experiences and history, there is a conscious effort to disrupt the dominant Western narrative and give the Karen space to speak, mainly through interviews with various community actors. However, it will be evident from interview data with leaders and elite members that there are different power relationships within the Karen refugee population. In emphasising the Karen voices and narratives, it is crucial to enable these marginalised people to be audible in this study.

Braziel and Mannur differentiate diaspora from transnationalism in that diaspora is a subset of transnational movements between nations.³⁷ It also evokes the transferring of people, information, ideas, goods, and capital across national borders. A typical motion that diaspora refers to are people dispersed across the globe. The more contentious issue is the notion of ‘homeland’; some scholars use the Jewish diaspora as an ‘ideal type’.³⁸ Clifford argues that too strong an emphasis on homeland would exclude Asian and African diasporas. These diasporas are less concerned about their roots and ‘homeland’ than about the routes taken with a recreated group identity in multiple locations developed through transnational cultural ties.³⁹

By investigating the Karen people in Sheffield, the thesis will consider how its northern British diaspora is becoming distinct in its cultural and ethnic hybridity. For instance, the thesis will explore a diverse set of cultural influences and how their hybrid and liminal identities are negotiated depending on where they live and with which part of society they are interacting. This thesis aims to add to the arguments advanced in Wahlbeck’s studies on Kurdish diasporas by similarly focusing on the

³⁶ Syed Farid Alatas, ‘Alternative Discourses in Southeast Asia’, *Sari*, Vol. 19, (2001), pp. 49-67; Tamara C. Ho, ‘Representing Burma: Narrative Displacement and Gender’, *Modern Language Association*, Vol. 126, No. 3, (May 2011), pp. 662-671.

³⁷ Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (eds.), *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, (Oxford, 2003).

³⁸ William Safran, ‘Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return’, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1991), p. 84.

³⁹ James Clifford, ‘Diasporas’, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (1994), p. 308; Lee Morgan, ‘A Diasporic Painter: Negotiating the Racialised Terrains of Britain and Australia’, *Critical Perspectives on Communication, Cultural and Policy Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (2010), pp. 71-84.

lived experiences of the Karen first displacement from Burma and eventually resettled in Sheffield.⁴⁰

The Karen can also be seen as ‘new’ refugee transnationals as they move from Burma to the Thai border camps to the UK. How they connect across these three geographies through economic, cultural and political links and practices will be explored in chapter 5. As transnational refugees, the Karen maintain regular contact with people back ‘home’ with the development of communication and the internet. The internet, this thesis seeks to demonstrate, serves as a key technology that fosters transnational communication and contact with ‘home’ in ways previous generations were not able to do. The thesis will examine how the new mobility of this later group of transnationals has brought about a change in the structure and identity of ‘transnational communities’ as suggested by Vertovec.⁴¹

This forms an important part of the thesis objectives, which is to study how the transnational Karen refugees maintain long-term contacts with family and friends with the ‘homeland’ regularly engaging in cross border activities. Basch, Schiller, and Blanc define transnationalism as ‘the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement’.⁴² My research on the Karen thus seeks to add to the transnational concept with a more encompassing sense of the relationship between technology, home and geography.⁴³

In the next section, I will review the literature on Burma and the Karen.

⁴⁰ Osten Wahlbeck, *Kurdish Diasporas: A Comparative Study of Kurdish Refugee Communities*, (Warwick, 1999), and Wahlbeck, ‘The Concept of Diaspora as an analytical tool in the Study of Refugee Communities’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, (2002), pp. 221-238.

⁴¹ Steven Vertovec, ‘Transnationalism and Identity’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4, (2001), pp. 573-582.

⁴² Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc, (eds.), *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (New York, 1994), p. 7.

⁴³ Inge Brees, ‘Refugees and transnationalism on the Thi-Burmese border’, *Global Networks*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2010), pp. 282-229.

Burma and Karen historiography

Scholarly literature on Burma is gaining momentum in the 21st century with the ‘opening’ up of dialogue with western businesses and governments in the last few years. However, Burma has not enjoyed a high profile in major academic scholarship work. Moreover, many linguistically problems are involved in studying Burma’s ethnic and political disputes, often causing inconsistencies. For example, the use of the country name of Burma rather than Myanmar becomes an emotive issue. In addition, the lack of accurate translation between the two languages is often challenging, and the room for interpretation is open to disagreement.⁴⁴ Studies on the Karen in Burma have been sparse compared to collections on different ethnic groups from other Southeast Asian countries. However, there are also key works emerging.

The classic colonial-era examination of Karen ethnicity has focused on social characteristics such as language, culture, and religion.⁴⁵ However, it is essential to note Cheesman’s observations that Karen identity can be challenging, and he identifies that the Karen people do not all share common traits, beliefs and geography.⁴⁶ Prominent among academics studying ethnicity in Burma have been Lieberman, Renard, and Silverstein.

Lieberman has challenged conventional understandings of historical pre-colonial Burman and Mon identities. Burma consisted of several semi-autonomous regions, which were defined by regional and dynastic conflicts, Lieberman refer to this power dynamic as ‘satellite centres’ that orbit the ‘galatic polity’. This notion complements my research on the KNU in the Thai-Burma borderlands, where satellite centres constitute regional leaders at the periphery who maintain their autonomy in the face of central power. Allegiances determined the movement of people between

⁴⁴ Robert H. Taylor, ‘Finding the Political in Myanmar, a.k.a. Burma’, *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2, (2008), pp. 219-237; Lowell Dittmer (ed), *Burma or Myanmar? The Struggle for National Identity*, (London, 2010).

⁴⁵ Donald Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, (London. 1887); Harry Ignatious Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study of Anthropology and Ethnology*, (Bangkok, 1997); Ellen Huntly Bullard Mason, *Civilising Mountain Men: Or Sketches of Mission Work Among the Karens*, (London, 1862); Alexander R. McMahon, *The Karens of the Golden Chersonese*, (London, 1876).

⁴⁶ Nick Cheesman, ‘Seeing ‘Karen’ in the Union of Myanmar’, *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (2002); Nick Cheesman, ‘State and Sangha in Burma’, *Comparative Education*, Vol. 39, No. 1, (2003), pp. 45-63.

geographical places to patrons rather than central government, which is illustrated later in the thesis with Karen allegiance or support to the KNU.⁴⁷

Burma's diverse groups of people have had different political and ethnic units since the pre-British era, and Renard considers its ethnic minority problems to be the 'most perplexing' in Southeast Asia. Even the term 'ethnic minorities' itself is controversial. Renard's interpretation holds that since each ethnic group maintained its own identity or was treated as a separate entity during the British colonial rule, the question of majority/minority is a contradiction. Another interpretation is based on population, with the Bamar ethnic group, the largest group, referred to as the majority and the others as ethnic minorities. Renard has proposed that the defining characteristic of Karen identity is the conviction that one is Karen.⁴⁸ This comment seems somewhat simplified and conceals the complexity of its point that the Karen ethnic identity is not of one homogenous group but diverse in language and customs. My studies will further research fluid Karen identity from diverse parts of Burma and translocate to Thai refugee camps. It will examine how their identity is again renegotiated with the resettlement of the Karen refugees to Sheffield.

Josef Silverstein was the first to identify the difficulties of governing Burma's diverse ethnic communities as 'one nation' as the central issue of Burma's troubled period. Silverstein's work reviews the developments and constitutional debates from 1947, citing that ethnic nationality leaders effectively traded their rights under the amended 1947 constitution for financial reasons. His work extends to an authoritative monograph on Burmese politics up to the late 1970s and a concise review of the first fifty years of independence to 1997.⁴⁹

The lack of knowledge and understanding of Karen communities within Burma is understandable, given that scholarly access for much of the last seventy years has been severely limited. The informed view from Thailand has predominantly filtered through NGOs, the KNU, the church-based networks, and other associated

⁴⁷ Victor Lieberman, 'Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, (1978).

⁴⁸ Ronald Renard, *Minorities in Burmese History*, (London, 1988); Ronald Renard, 'Studying Peoples often called Karen', in Claudio Delang (ed.), *Living at the Edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the Highlands of Northern Thailand*, (London, 2003), pp. 1-15.

⁴⁹ Josef Silverstein, *Minority Problems in Burma since 1962*, (Singapore, 1981); Josef Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity*, (New Brunswick, 1980).

international charities. A few scholars have explored Karen self-determination; however, notable among those contributing to the subject include Fong, Smith and Thawngmung.⁵⁰ Although Thawngmung's study focuses on the various types and stages of the conflict between the KNU and the successive Burmese governments, it suggests a further enquiry of the displaced Karen in Burma is required. Although a helpful device, Karen culture and identity can be challenging to establish, as Rajah, South, and Womack have written. I suggest that a 'hybridisation' of identity is emerging within Karen refugee culture is becoming bifurcated within its adoptive state of Thailand and again with the resettled Karen community in Sheffield, Britain.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the globally resettled Karen have in recent years seen an increase in academic studies. Worland's doctoral thesis investigated the identity of displaced Christian Karen in Sydney, Australia and Mae Sot refugee camp, Thailand. Although her research focused on Christian Karen, her studies did not explore other religions such as animist, Muslim or Buddhist; Worland acknowledges these concerns and brought attention to her background as a Christian and theologian. However, a discussion regarding the identity of displaced other religions would have broadened the research. One of the key findings of her study was that displaced Christian Karen displayed a dual identity – one that centred on familial and community association and another that expressed nationalist values. These findings support my research questions conducted within the Karen community in Sheffield. Worland's thesis offers excellent insights into the role of identity in the early years of resettlement in Australia.

Jessica Bird's PhD thesis, also based in Australia, research centred on settlement issues and the impact of community empowerment within the Karen community in Brisbane. Her thesis is well researched into the resettlement social policy issues that the Karen encountered in Brisbane. This thesis's essential

⁵⁰ Jack Fong, *Revolution as Development: The Karen Self-determination Struggle Against Ethnocracy (1949-2004)*, (Florida, 2008); Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The Karen Revolution in Burma: Diverse Voices, Uncertain Ends*, (Washington, 2008); Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (New Jersey, 1999).

⁵¹ Ananda Rajah, 'A 'nation of intent' in Burma: Karen ethno-nationalism, nationalism and narrations of nation', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 15, No. 4, (2002), pp. 517-537; Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma*, (Abingdon, 2008); William Womack, *Literate Networks and the Production of Sgaw and Pwo Karen Writing in Burma, c. 1830-1930*, (unpublished PhD SOAS, 2005); Rodolfo Stavenhagen, 'Ethnodevelopment: A neglected dimension in development thinking', in Raymond Anthonpe and Andras Krahl (eds.), *Development Studies: Critique and Renewal*, (Leiden, 1986).

contribution for Australian settlement policymakers is to provide a flexible and alternative way to understand the wholeness of settlement. Bird's conclusion diverges from the Sheffield research in that local support systems and organisations were more cohesive within the Karen community. The US study by Lopez is on the early years of resettlement study into the psychological trauma aspects of refugee resettlement. Her studies lead to supporting resilience in Karen communities and the nature of interventions that could promote well-being. Although a very concise thesis with some revealing insights, it would have benefitted from more detailed case studies of individual Karen within the resettled community in Albany, New York. Rachel Sharples research offers a detailed history of the development of the Thai-Burma borderland makes two inter-related claims, that the borderland 'space' is created by social interchanges and secondly that this 'space' form a specific form of Karen identity. In an organised PhD thesis, Sharples research argues succinctly for the agency of people living in these borderlands, and her work illustrates through Karen refugees that they actively construct a Karen identity informed by experiences of displacement. My research over the last two decades within these borderlands areas confirms and supports Sharples' scholarly contribution.⁵²

One of the key aims of this thesis is to examine Karen displacement from their 'homeland' of Karen State (known as Kawthoolei) and other areas of Burma. By drawing on thirty of Karen personal narratives I conducted over a 30-year period, I can track how their identity has become fluid with each movement. I approach the refugee stories as valued life accounts rather than privileged 'official' narratives. This research will advance our understanding of renegotiated Karen individuals and contribute to what has come to be called 'collective memory'. The other aim is to explore the impact of Karen displacement from Burma and resettlement to Sheffield in Britain and how the refugees define their sense of Karen-ness with a lost 'homeland'. I will also

⁵² From the United States, Dixelia Lopez, *Resilience in the Karen-refugee Population from Myanmar/Burma Resettled in the U.S.: An Exploratory Study*, (unpublished PhD, 2015); Australian studies by Shirley Worland, *Displaced and Mismatched or just Displaced: Christian Displaced Karen Identity after Sixty Years of War in Burma*, (Unpublished PhD, 2010); Jessica Bird, "Talking with Lips": *Settlement, Transnationalism and Identity of Karen people from Burma Living in Brisbane, Australia*, (Unpublished PhD, 2013); Canada, Nicola Friedrich, *Making Connections: Literacy Practices of Karen Refugee Families in the Home, Community and Family Literacy Program*, (unpublished PhD, 2016); on Thai-Burma borderland research Rachel Sharples, *Spaces of Solidarity: Karen Identity in the Thai-Burma Borderlands*, (unpublished PhD, RMIT, 2012).

examine how Karen organisations and networks within the diaspora in Sheffield are being reshaped through women assuming leadership positions.

Overarchingly, by encapsulating the Karen refugees' memories and experiences of the insurgent war, their displacement and their eventual resettlement in Sheffield, this thesis seeks to show how the refugee narrative can be asserted as decisive action shaping migration history. It examines the causes and processes of displacement of the Karen people in Burma and questions how the agency of being a refugee is controlled through borderlands practices and the borderland 'spaces' that exist in these geographic margins. This study forms part of an ongoing thirty-year personal conversation with the displaced and resettled Karen people from Burma to the borderlands space as a temporary home with a rearrangement of memories through the resettlement process. By exploring the impact of organised state violence, displacement and resettlement on the memories and identity of a small section of Karen people in the UK, a greater understanding of their cohesive ethnic and cultural identity can be understood. In a world that is becoming increasingly aware of global disparities and inequalities that affect diasporic peoples, this research sought to increase awareness of the Karen people to the national and international community and understand how the displaced communities have shaped Karen nationalism.

Thesis structure

This dissertation is structured into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an in-depth discussion of the different methods I drew upon to interrogate Karen experiences of displacement and resettlement, namely participant observation, informal and semi-informal interviews and historical methods such as cultural analysis. It also discusses the methodological challenges and ethical considerations of this research.

Chapter 2, entitled 'Karen history in Burma', explores the Thai-Burma borderlands as a distinct space framed by ethnic tensions and war in Burma and the consolidation of state control. It locates the development of Karen identity and ethnicity in the context of Burma's social and political history. The chapter will explore the Karen colonial encounter with the British and the consequences for the ethnic Karen with an overview of relationships with missionaries and imperial

agents. The latter half of the chapter introduces Karen history seen through refugee 'eyes' in order to contribute new knowledge to the field.

Chapter 3, entitled 'The borderlands and Mae Sot', develops the idea of the borderlands as a 'space' of temporality for the displaced Karen. The first part examines the nature of the peripheral insurgencies and conflicts in the 'borderlands' within Burma. It will explore Karen displacement from Burma and the conflict between the KNU and the nation-state. It will also examine the Karen resettlement in Thailand, particularly Mae Sot and will contribute to the argument that displaced Karen form a 'hybridised' identity on the borderlands.

Chapter 4, entitled 'Like birds in a cage' – the refugee camps', outlines research findings and data obtained from interviews and observational visits in the refugee camps of Mae La and Umphiem that I gathered over nineteen visits over thirty years. The chapter examines the narratives of displaced Karen people who recollect their journeys from their villages in Burma's hills to the refugee camps in Thailand. It explores the teaching of Karen history in Mae Sot and argues that the camps has fundamentally shaped Karen unity, ethnicity and identity due to the considerable role played by the Karen National Union (KNU) there.

Chapter 5, entitled 'Resettlement in Sheffield: gender and change in Karen communities', examines how resettlement to Sheffield became a dominant theme for many displaced Karen refugees. It explores the changing Karen gender relations that emerged with resettlement in Sheffield. It will analyse the Karen conception of home and its challenges in resettlement and how 'new' mediums of connections were developed with other global diasporic Karen communities and relatives in Burma and the Thai camps. It draws on a broad set of ethnographic material collated in one hundred and twenty-three fieldwork trips to Sheffield from May 2005 to August 2018.

Chapter 6, entitled 'Expressions of Karen culture and identity through ceremonies', explores the emerging forms of Karen identity expressed in a range of ceremonial practices that define Karen cultures, such as traditional Don dancing, which celebrates and reinforces community values during the Karen New Year. Secondly, the chapter explores the significance of the wrist-tying ceremony to the Karen in Sheffield. Finally, it examines how the Martyr's Day celebration of

Karen 'fallen heroes' impacts the communities of soldiers and ordinary Karen. The chapter contends that the maintenance of such practices helps the Karen to offset the alienation of displacement, resettle on their own terms, and link history and cultural memory to national self-identity.

Chapter 1: Sources and methods

*On the third of March, we met a man from Chester, England
He wanted to know about our Karen culture and traditions
We sat together and talked about Karen hta
We recorded the hta on video and tape recorder
We laughed
we eat, we drank
It is difficult to explain our traditions and hta
You really want to know
I will try very hard and explain to you ¹*

Hta created by Hilda Tham Tay during fieldwork with the author in Sheffield, March 2004.² (The concept of the hta will be explored later in this thesis)

Introduction

This chapter aims to explain the research sources and methods. At the outset, I decided that utilising ethnographic research methods and multi-sited case studies were the most appropriate for understanding the lives of displaced Karen. There were two main reasons for this decision. First, the study seeks to generate new insights from the ‘participants’ perspective in light of existing theory by gaining an ‘insiders perspective’ on Karen participants and movements to explain how social interdependencies have driven broader dynamics. Second, a multi-sited approach is conducive to studying displaced people in different locations, including conflict zones. The highly politicised nature of Burma’s conflict can marginalise less powerful actors’ experiences and views than the political elite. The same is true of Karen refugees who were resettled.

A topic such as the one presented in this thesis presents methodological challenges which, this chapter seeks to address by first explaining the ethnological approach of my research. The second segment will reflect on the challenges and interview participants during the field research regarding access and positionality. The study requires an interdisciplinary approach of anthropology, political science and history, which will explore the advantages and challenges. This approach will assist

¹ *Hta* poem created by Hilda Tham Tay during fieldwork with the author in Sheffield, March 2004.

² *Hta* is a Karen word for a form of oral poetry that is used in story telling or history. The Karen have used it for generations to pass knowledge down the generations and it is used extensively by both the young and older Karen. See pp. 79, and 80-87, 131-132, 216, below.

as a reflection on my data and help the reader assess the presented study's overall integrity. My research aims to interpret social phenomena by drawing upon a range of theories. I adopt a qualitative research interpretation of 'everyday life'. The study employs interpretive practices to deeply explore ordinary moments by recording insider (emic) understandings and presenting them as outsider (etic) interpretations.³ The research methods I used among the displaced Karen of the Thai-Burma border in Sheffield reflect what some anthropologists refer to as 'deep hanging out', which involves long-term connections, sharing lived experiences, and intimately knowing community dynamics.⁴ Over thirty years of visiting family and talking to two communities, and through my family connections with my Karen wife and father-in-law and amongst relatives, I developed strong relationships with many of the people I spoke with and observed and interviewed. This study gave me a profound understanding of their social and community lifeworlds, including their perspectives and analyses of their situations.

The research for this thesis utilises data collection methods to compare and contrast different versions of evidence and mitigate some of the ethnographic approach's weaknesses. In understanding the refugee's experience, I examined writings produced in diaspora and refugee studies as outlined in the introduction. By drawing on cultural anthropology, oral history, and participant observation, this study explores the social dynamics of Karen refugees in different locations. The study tracks the subject across two locations, both spatially and temporally, by importing methods from cultural studies combined with history, anthropology, sociology, and political science.

The research presented here analyses oral data collected and collated through 'participant observation' of meetings, community gatherings and ceremonies, and by interviews of Karen refugees in the camp and village settings from 1988 to 2013. I also analysed 145 interviews varying from 5 minutes to over 3 hours, with over 75 Karen.

³ The terms emic and etic were coined in 1954 by linguist Kenneth Pike, who argued that the tools developed for describing linguistic behaviour could be adapted to the description of any human social behaviour.

⁴ Renato Rosaldo, "Anthropology and 'the Field'." Conference held at Stanford University and UC Santa Cruz, (18-19 February 1994); James Clifford, 'Anthropology and/as Travel', *Etnofoor*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (1996), pp. 5-15; and reflected upon in an essay by Clifford Geertz, 'Deep Hanging Out', *The New York Review of Books*, 45, No. 16, (1998), pp. 69-72.

This material sought to understand how those most directly affected understood the experience and emotional dimension of being forced from Karen areas in Burma and embarking on resettlement in Sheffield.

A combination of data collection methods from notetaking, video and cassette recording, and digital audio recording was utilised in this study. A comparative study in form, the project is designed to compare the historical memory and identity of displaced Karen and the resettled community in Sheffield. Personal accounts of refugee experiences have been an element of research in refugee studies for several years. Researchers such as Allen and Powles find that the 'narrative' method offers a meaningful way of engaging with forced migration experiences.⁵

Though I drew on anthropological methods described above, the research was not 'an ethnographic study' of Karen identity or insurgency in Burma. Instead, it seeks to use the interviews with senior members of the Karen community and non-elites in both the Thai-Burma borderland and Burma to examine different questions of homeland and identity shifting experiences. Talking with Karen refugees resettled in Britain enabled an examination of the complex relationships held with their homeland and the wider Burmese nation. The thesis will explore how the Karen homeland in Burma came to represent all the good things lost, the property, the land, social networks, and the past. At the same time, the interviews will also enable discussion of war and violence and the experience of displacement and exile. The interviews will draw out specific ways in which Karen yearn to go home, yet they know they cannot return, and this discussion will put in context the untenable politics of repatriation.

The conversations, formal interviews and my observations, conducted over thirty years of travelling back and forth to the Thai camps and Sheffield, will contribute to current studies of refugees and camps by considering what is particular to the Karen refugee experiences in Britain, such as the impact of the long-term resettlement on Karen. Though there are studies in the United States and Australia, my thesis will contribute to the literature on Karen resettlement in Britain.

⁵ Diana Allan, 'Mythologizing al-Nakba: Narratives, collective identity and cultural practice among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon', in *Oral History*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (2005), pp. 47-56; Julia Powles, 'Life history and personal narrative: Theoretical and methodological issues relevant to research and evaluation in refugee contexts', *New issues in Refugee Research: Working paper No. 106*, (2004), p. 4.

For instance, the thesis will consider how fifteen years of being established in Sheffield, many Karen are happy, yet at the same time, there are degrees of resentment as it is not their chosen home. My research data allows consideration of resettlement reactions and emotions and aspects of personal life that close contact and trust can help explain. By carefully listening to their stories and paying attention to how they describe their experiences and moving between homeland and the diaspora, this research seeks to understand the relational dynamics of forced migration and its ongoing aftermath. Personally, as the research was both in and out of the Karen community, I was moved and challenged by the stories offered by close friends and family as well as strangers in this study which form the basis of my analysis of Karen identity and what it means to the communities in the Burmese borderlands and the UK.

This thesis draws on mixed methods, including what the anthropologist team the Comaroff's describe as refer research to 'enlarge a specific experience to the dimensions of a more general one' and therefore counter stereotypical and universalising descriptions, including the definition of 'refugee'.⁶ Although I did not write an ethnography, I did draw on some methods to explore the Karen culture and use 'thick' descriptions of the themes and patterns within Karen communities while taking both an insider and outsider perspective.⁷

Comparative research in these two research sites enabled me to investigate patterns of difference and similarity across seemingly disparate contexts within the refugee migration system. The story of Karen displacement and forced migration cannot be assumed to be identical to other refugees. The 'narrative' forms allow for contradiction and complexities among these collective Karen experiences that are re-structured over time. Acknowledging this dynamism and complexity means taking the research in different directions and thereby generating new insights. One key intention of this study has been to create new knowledge and understandings from Karen participants' perspectives and help advance new interpretations of displacement and resettlement. I developed a multi-layered understanding that enabled me to interpret the functions, meanings, and consequences of Karen identity human actions and how these are implicated in local and broader contexts. Because I do not speak Karen fluently, I was

⁶ John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography, and the Historical Imagination*, (Colorado, 1992), p. 7.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York, 1973), p. 12.

reliant on observations, community knowledge I gained over many years. I was nevertheless immersed in fieldwork with significant contact time with participants in their own culture and language. Burgess suggests that ethnography research accepts that the social world is not objective, seeking insight into participants' experiences and meanings in their social environments. However, Wood argues that information can become part of the conflict economy and can frequently be politicised, manipulated, and suppressed, leading some participants to seek a strategy of silence to avoid risk.⁸

Therefore, most of the information presented in this study stems from informal interviews and participant observation conducted in English. Whilst my research is not 'pure' ethnography of Karen identity, as I have followed some of the principles that anthropologist Rosalind Shaw describes as:

Combination of participant observation and informal ethnographic interviews by which anthropologists and others seek to understand particular processes, events, ideas and practices in an informant's own terms rather than ours. This entails building up relationships rather than making a single visit and spending time in ordinary conversation and interaction, preferably before introducing the more direct form of an interview.⁹

However, I also drew on the practices of history and oral historians, such as Alessandro Portelli, who argues that the content of oral sources depends mainly on what the interviewer places into it in terms of dialogue, questions, and personal relationships. An oral history interview transcript or an audio recording thus needs to look at as not merely a source in itself but also what made this source possible at a particular time and space.¹⁰ This calls for exploring and studying the traces beneath the transcript and voices that remain unheard in the recorder. Recent work by oral historians has widely

⁸ Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in conflict Zones', *Qual Sociol: Political Ethnography I*, Vol. 29, (2006), pp. 373-386; Robert Burgess, *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*, (London, 1984), p. 6. Johnathan Goodhand, 'Research in conflict zones: ethics and accountability', *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 8, (2000), pp. 12-18.

⁹ Rosalind Shaw, 'Memory Frictions: Localising the truth and reconciliation commission in Sierra Leone', *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (2007), pp. 183-207.

¹⁰ Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, *The Oral History Reader*, (Third edition, London, 2016), pp. 48-58.

discussed the power dynamics within interview situations and the varied forms of negotiations in the presence of translators.¹¹ There are emotional consequences for both interviewer and interviewee and the translator for whom the listening process is involved. While the existing literature on oral history discusses how the translator's presence influences the interview, there is a silence on the kinds of dilemmas the interviewer's presence poses for the translator.¹² However, interviews are ultimately personal interactions between human beings and rarely conform to a methodological ideal. Each interview situation and location is a text in itself that requires different modes of access. During some field interviews I conducted in Burma and on the borderland, there were limitations with gaining access to the areas as they were in conflict zones and caution and safety had to be considered. This approach was helped by Mazurana and Gale also provide an excellent overview of how researchers can help ensure their security in active conflict zones. Many authors argue that ethnographic methods are necessary for research in conflict environments.¹³

Multi-sited research is not studying the elites and institutions but acknowledging the subaltern's role in the spaces and temporality beyond the immediate locale, which I sought to do in Burma and Sheffield. Marcus suggests that a multi-sited approach is an 'exercise in mapping terrain'; its primary aim is not a holistic representation or an ethnographic 'portrayal of the world system'. Appadurai has a different approach to traditional anthropological thinking proposing to go beyond the locale to transnational and imaginary spaces. He discusses the power of the social imaginary as a new site for ethnographic research, introducing the role of landscapes in the transportation of cultural flows. In this study, I find Appadurai's approach to multi-site ethnographic research invaluable. It provides a foundation and framework for exploring resettlement and transnational connections in the Sheffield Karen community.¹⁴

¹¹ Amongst the most recent work, see Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (eds.), *Oral History Off The Record: Towards an Ethnography of Practice*, (New York, 2013).

¹² Nadia Jones-Gailani, 'Third parties in "third spaces": Reflecting on the role of the translator in oral history interviews with Iraqi diasporic women', in Sheftel and Zembrzycki, *Oral History*, pp. 169-183.

¹³ Dyan Mazurana, Karen Jacobsen, and Lacey Andrew Gale (eds.), *Research Methods in Conflict Settings*, (Cambridge, 2013), p. 5.

¹⁴ G. E. Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (1995), pp. 95-117; Arjun

Field research data collection and interview methods

I first visited Thailand as a tourist and Burma to visit my wife's family in 1984. Unfortunately, tourist visas to Burma in the 1980s could only be given for a visit of one week. A subsequent visit to Burma was made in 1986, and further exploration of the Karen people in northern Thailand reinforced my inquisitiveness about these mysterious people. This study examines ethnographic and oral material collated during fieldwork in Thailand between 1988 and 2011 and in Sheffield between 2005 and 2020. The approach begins with a conscious privilege of having close familial and personal ties with the Karen. My father-in-law, Bruce, was born in Burma and was of Anglo-Karen descent, and he had fought with the British Army in the Second World War during the Japanese occupation of Burma. After independence, Bruce stayed in Burma to help with the Karen calls for a separate state. He became involved in the post-independence conflict between 1948 and 1956, arriving in Britain in 1957. Bruce remained in contact with friends and relatives in Burma throughout his time in Britain and became the KNU representative in Britain until he died in 1999. Through Bruce and my wife, Wendy, who took up the mantle of KNU UK representative by Bo Mya's invitation after Bruce's passing, these close connections with the Karen people have been forged.

Because of Burma's conflict, hundreds of thousands of people from different Karen areas and other minority ethnic groups have crossed the Moei River (which constitutes the natural border between Burma and Thailand) and became refugees in Thailand. The establishment of large refugee camps within kilometres of the international dividing line has attracted numerous NGOs. They and the KNU/KNLA and affiliated Karen NGOs have established offices in the Thai town of Mae Sot. Since the late 1980s, the town of 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 some scholarly works as a conceptual space most often called 'the Thai-Burma border'.

The initial research proposal was to study Karen's displacement to Thailand, but it became multi-sited and transnational with Karen refugees' resettlement in

Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', *Theory Culture Society*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (1990), pp. 295-310.

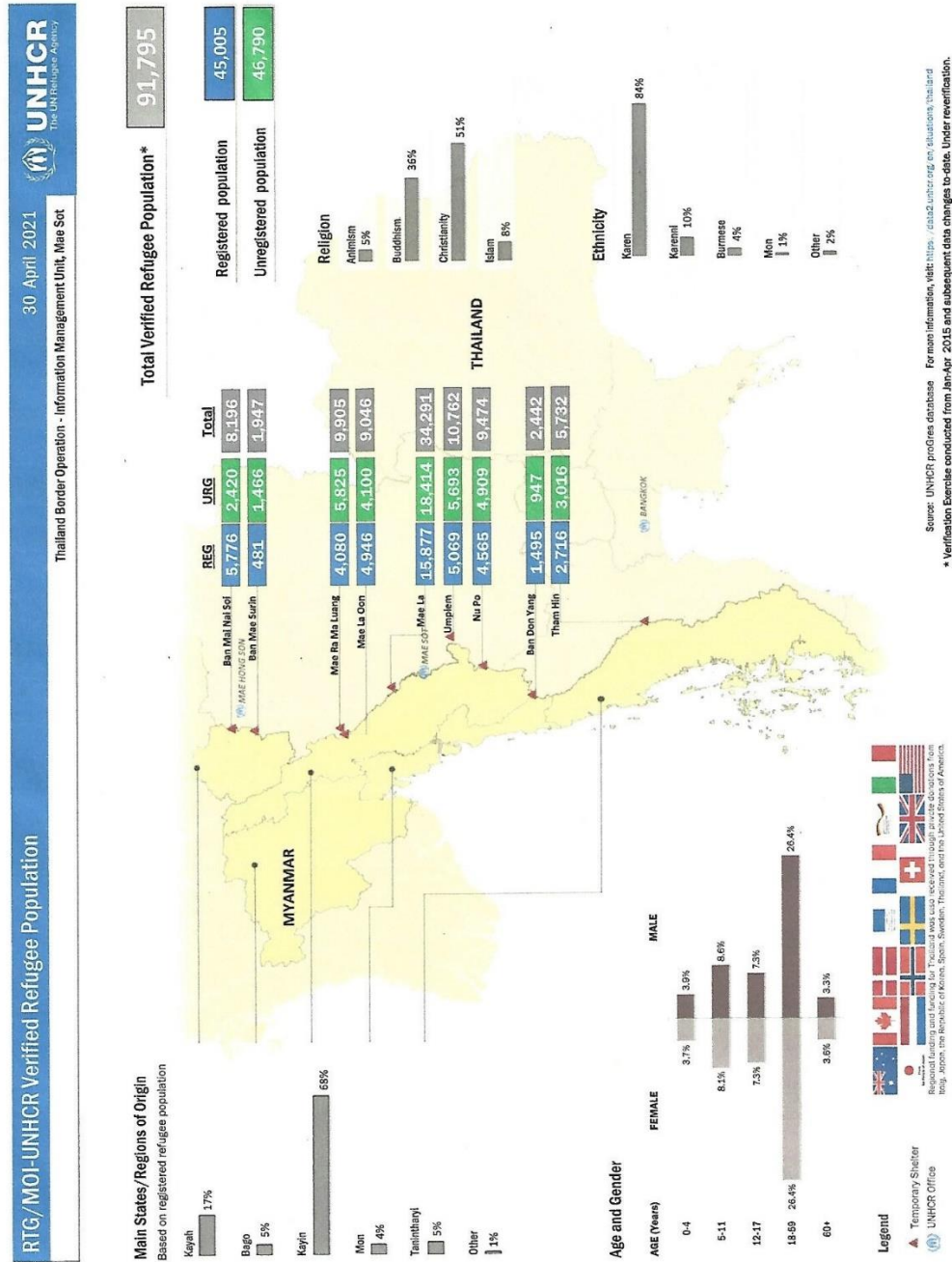
Sheffield, UK, in 2005. My fieldwork in Thailand and Burma involved research visits of between one month and three months, typically on a biannual basis. On numerous occasions, These biannual trips usually involved visiting several camps, and in total, I visited five refugee camps and usually stayed between two and five days in Mae La camp with a prolonged two-week visit to Umphien Mai in 1999. Map 2 (page 44) identifies the current nine Karen and one Shan refugee camps located on the Thai-Burma border with a total population of 91,795 in April 2021.¹⁵

I also undertook several unofficial cross-border visits to Burma to visit villages supplying the population with medicines and much-needed school materials. On the Burma borderland side, there are five IDP camps. In the early 1990s of displacement from Burma, there were almost thirty camps of varying sizes. By 2002, the camps had been consolidated to ten to protect them from the Burmese Army's military attacks and streamline NGO humanitarian efforts.

In the initial years of the research process, in 1988 and 1990, I had identified some people who would enable me to carry out the field research role and built relationships with them. I was assisted in this process by relationships formed with members and staff of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) and the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Church (KKBC). Both these organisations are located in the refugee camps of Mae La and Umphiem Mai. The Karen National Union leadership also relocated to Mae Sot in 1995 after the fall of Manerplaw to the Tatmadaw. I was aware that I asked the Karen people to grant me access to their environment, observe them, and ask them many questions in my research.

¹⁵ UNHCR, 'Thailand-Myanmar Border Refugee Population Overview – April 2021', [Document - Thailand-Myanmar Border Refugee Population Overview - April 2021 \(unhcr.org\)](#), [accessed June 2021].

Location of Refugee Camps on the Thai-Burma Border - April 2021



Map 2: RTG/MOI-UNHCR (April 2021)

Methods

This study utilised several commonly used sampling strategies involving participants already known to the researcher who made themselves available for interviews. It also involved opportunistic sampling methods in which data is collected in the form of impromptu interviews or observations. Snowball sampling was another strategy, which is often used in refugee studies. This method requires participants to ‘volunteer’ or propose other potential participants who are then invited to participate in the interviews.

Over the last thirty years, the primary methods employed were open-ended, structured, and semi-structured interviews during fieldwork. These methods were combined with participant observations at various sites; it was designed to increase the flexibility of my interaction with the participants. This type of model allows the participants to feel freer to interpret my questions and guide the interview in directions that they sense are particularly relevant to them. Such an approach can be more valuable in accessing the knowledge that may be imprinted on the participants but not easily accessible to the researcher except with great care. This technique grants such a degree of control to participants. Each ‘category’ of participants - camp and resettled refugees, policymakers, NGOs, and support staff - are approached in Thailand with slightly different questions but guided by a common framework.

There are specific problems with the reliability or validity of some of the interviews, including interview dynamics, unintentional errors, expansion of the truth, and various cultural and social constraints. However, these issues can be mitigated by using internal triangulation by obtaining the same information in different ways, probing, and validating evidence from other sources. While there was no conscious reason for my non-elite participants to misrepresent past events purposely, I still required interpreting the information carefully. Testimonies can be unconsciously distorted, particularly past events that are distressful by what Wood calls ‘the social process of memory formation’. Personal experiences affect what memories are retained and forgotten as well as muted and accentuated.¹⁶

¹⁶ Elizabeth Woods, ‘Ethnographic Research in the Shadow of Civil War’, in E. Schatz, *Political ethnography*: (2009), pp. 119–142.

The interview settings in situations of ethnic and political violence additionally shape the narrative. Information collected in a semi-secret environment of insurgent groups and displaced Karen cannot verify the data independently and discern ‘facts’ from rumour and gossip of leadership opponents and dissent with the KNU. This does not mean that the interviews and narratives presented to me were false or misleading. On the contrary, the rumours in themselves provided valuable sources of information for my research about KNU authority and internal contestation. The rumours reveal what they disclose about the communities view of those in power and the dynamics affecting the daily lives of the Karen.¹⁷

Reflection on the production of knowledge through interviews I sought to mitigate distortions and misrepresentations. In constructing narratives, triangulation of the interview data was essential in this study to correct false information. One of the main issues for triangulating data within clandestine ethnic groups is that there is scant independent information available to triangulate. My approach was to verify information with aid workers, NGO’s, local journalists and members of both Thai and Karen civil society outside of the KNU social networks. Writings of academic and non-academic researchers were invaluable, some of whom I contacted and discussed findings. To mitigate bias and realise a wholesome perspective on the internal politics of the KNU, I triangulated information amongst differently geographically situated members. Networks with Karen in Chiang Mai differed with discussions and issues with individuals in southern Karen State or Mae Sot. The research aim in Thailand was to capture the relationships, mobility, and the changing positions of the individuals who move through the border spaces.

Rather than locating Karen ruling elites or leading representatives to achieve an ‘authentic’ voice, the mixed societal approach in the sites allows the research to start from the grassroots level and look up. Individual narratives from the elites are calibrated at the everyday level. These reveal individual memories and experiences that are interconnected and intersecting within the Karen communities. No single narrative or story is heard or seen as ‘authentic’ or a revelatory experience. This study

¹⁷ Mazurana, Jacobsen and Gale, *Research Methods*, p. 13.

follows Clifford and Appadurai and tracks connections, relationships, and experiences across spatial and temporal boundaries.¹⁸

I examined previous ethnographic studies of Karen society, academic studies, and colonial records of the conflict in Burma, which mentioned both politicised Karen in the formation of the KNU and traditional structures of Karen villages' society in Burma.¹⁹ I also asked many young and older Karen people about their own life experiences in a Karen village in Burma in numerous interviews. By comparing written evidence and oral testimony, I was able to identify the particular characteristics that were distinct to the KNU and how its construction of Karen history and ethnicity was constructed.

Between 1996 and 2003, interviews were recorded on a tape cassette player, videotaped, written down, and recently digitally recorded on a Marantz Professional PMD620 portable audio recorder. The interviews or video files, when conducted in English, were transcribed that evening. If the recordings and interviews were conducted in Karen or Burmese, they would be recorded and translated back in Thailand/Burma by trusted Karen, and for triangulation and translational checking in the UK by sisters, Moo Pet and Tee Pay, this will be examined later in this chapter.²⁰

As the study progressed, additional purposive sampling strategies were employed to follow up ideas and emergent themes. These assisted in adding depth to emerging themes. For example, respected or knowledgeable Karen were identified as experts or having detailed knowledge concerning specific topics. In addition, opportunities in sampling enabled access to single case participants who would identify issues, such as Karen with mental issues or women who had suffered some form of abuse or distress.

Participant observation can be described as the primary method of data collection for ethnographers. It involves recording and watching people's behaviours, expressions, clothing, and interaction with others in particular settings or locations. The key benefits of participant observation are that it can clarify what transpires in a

¹⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, (Harvard, 1988).

¹⁹ Mason, (1865); McMahan, (1876); and Marshall, (1922), Scott, (1922), Furnival, (1948), Keyes, (1979), Rajah, (2002, 2008) and South, (2007).

²⁰ These are pseudonyms.

social or group context rather than what informers say. In addition, it can enable valuable accounts of complex situations to be gathered.

In the last eighteen years, I have interviewed both in video and audio formats, with fifteen key informants representing political, women's and youth organisations of the KNU, KRC, KWO, KED, and the KHRG. The border town of Mae Sot became the focal point of transit to the locations in Thailand and Burma; during this time, we often stayed in local hotels or with Karen friends. Accompanying my wife to meetings with KNU and camp leaders gave me unparalleled access to conduct interviews often informally to them.

Throughout the fieldwork in both Thailand and Sheffield, as particular issues were presented for analysis during the semi-structured interviews or focus group gatherings, discussions were carried out between all to explore the dynamics of these issues or problems. Morgan suggests that the focus group approach can be a helpful method to give voice to groups whose voice is not often heard in research because of difficulties in cross-language data collection.²¹ Focus groups were used on two occasions in Sheffield and were partially successful. Esposito recognises that focus groups in particular circumstances are an excellent way of identifying under-researched populations.²² For example, my aim in the two focus groups was to gain perspectives of resettlement from the displaced Karen in Sheffield. They were not simply a discussion between people but are focused interviews exploring the interactions between the participants. The advantage of utilising this method was that a considerable amount of data was generated, with many participants stimulating each other's recollections of certain events.

In addition, this informal format was often used after lengthy formal community association meetings as most of the participants were relaxed and enjoying a coffee break. However, the disadvantages of this method are that research results cannot be generalised, the individual expression can be suppressed, and a minority may dominate the session. Ivana Acocella cites that the main disadvantage of the focus group approach that emerges is that shared information prevails over information that

²¹ David Morgan, 'Focus Groups', *Annual Review Sociology*, No. 22, (1996), pp 129-152.

²² Noreen Esposito, 'From Meaning to Meaning: The Influence of Translation Techniques on Non-English Focus Group Research', *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (2001), pp. 568-579.

is not agreed upon by all participants.²³ Thus, focus groups present potential attributes as well as intrinsic limitations. Their use as a data collection exercise in Sheffield illustrated these limitations. Although a simple technique to utilise the spontaneous nature of the Karen community meetings meant a process of detailed preparation could not be prepared.

Nevertheless, defined criteria for participants must have certain elements. In the Thailand case study, they are to be ethnic Karen who were displaced from their birth-country of Burma, or in the UK case study, to be resettled Karen from the refugee camps within the last fifteen years. Inclusivity of both genders and being aged eighteen to seventy is essential in reflecting Karen culture and life experiences. Both genders have ascribed roles in Karen communities that impact identity and societal roles within those communities.

To capture the continuity between these sites, the interview process, I maintained a consistent approach and engagement with participants at each site by situating the contexts and narratives within events and real places. The interviews, both formal and informal, are valuable tools in evaluating the nature and the process of historical memory, how people perceive their past, the interconnectivity with experience and social context, and the interpretation of their present worldview. It is also a valuable tool in illustrating the different ways in which Karen refugees envision their homeland and in re-shaping their reconfigured ethnic identities in resettlement at Sheffield.

Language

As Sgaw Karen is the *lingua franca* of the Karen, living in Burma, Thailand, and Sheffield, the two sisters, Moo Pet and Tee Pay became my trusted translators, working with them for over 18 years.²⁴ While many Christian Karen leaders speak and understand English, most Karen in Burma or the refugee camps in Thailand are not fluent in English to a greater or lesser degree. The last few years have seen most of the resettled Karen in Sheffield better understand spoken English. However, the Karen

²³ Ivana Acocella, 'The focus groups in social research: advantages and disadvantages', *Qual Quant*, No. 46, (2012), pp. 1125-1136.

²⁴ Moo Pet and Tee Pay and their mother, Naw Bleh were initially displaced from Burma in 1988 and became refugees in Mae La and Umphiem camps. They then relocated to Mae Sot and lived in the town for a number of years before being resettled in Sheffield in 2005.

youth are all very proficient in English, and Karen children of primary school age have become a concern for their parents as they assimilate into British society. These very young children are sometimes reluctant to learn or speak Karen.

Given that the study's focus was a detailed exploration of participants' customs and identity, I needed to interview the participants in the language that the participants were most comfortable using. As the research progressed during the 2000s, many Karen youth in Sheffield became more confident in English and became the preferred communication method. In contrast, some of the older cohorts in Sheffield still have difficulties speaking English and often ask the young Karen to translate as they talk in mixed Karen and English.

Key concepts from the social group have to be accurately translated. Many Karen words and phrases do not have a precise equivalence in the English language. Equally, the English language has untranslatable concepts into Karen worldview and vocabularies (examples are refugee camp and resettlement). Although I have close familial links to the Karen people, the researcher's position enacts into the translation of ethnographic material in a cultural context. Within this study, my lifeworld and worldview, in addition to my participants' lifeworld and worldview, must be acknowledged. The language should not reflect a Western or ethnocentric bias. In one viewpoint, culture is a part of everyday *praxis*; it is enacted in everyday activities and actions. Ethnographic writing or writing on culture turns everyday praxis into an abstract text; it is the ethnographer's role to maintain a strong sense of the lived experience while writing on culture.²⁵

The research raises several theoretical and practical questions of Karen language interpretation in camp settings. As most of the interviewee cohort were within a specific age range, not many older men and women were represented in the Sheffield research findings. Some of the older cohorts of men opted for the young men to translate and speak on their behalf, as they were uncomfortable communicating and expressing their memories of individual events. Some women have a reasonable command of English, but a few required interpreters with their interpretations of experiences. Whilst I acknowledge that there are limitations to this approach, having

²⁵ James Clifford, & George E. Marcus, (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (California, 1986), pp. 198-159.

a limited understanding of the Karen language impacted some of the respondents and participation in specific interviews required translators.

Translation does add a layer of complexity to the interview process, but the impromptu interviews were translated immediately rather than transcribed later. The few transcribed camp interviews were firstly transcribed from the spoken Sgaw Karen to written Karen and then translated into English. There is potential for misinterpretation. The written Karen was then presented to a second transcriber to check to ensure that the translator correctly conveyed the correct information and meaning.²⁶

Interview participants in Thailand and Sheffield

I now describe my research participants and key informants. However, it should be noted that most of my participants' names have been replaced with carefully chosen pseudonyms that are uncommon in the Karen community for reasons of confidentiality. I also use the term *participant* rather than the more popular term *informant*, with a specific purpose. It gives the participant a role and function in the research extending beyond a one-way process of information giving. The participant is, therefore, intentionally an active part of the research project. My focus is the local, national, and transnational connections between the Karen people. Throughout this study, I describe how participants and organisations are interlinked through community, social kinship, and political relationships.

Nevertheless, defined criteria for participants must have certain elements. In the Thailand case study, they are to be ethnic Karen who were displaced from their birth-country of Burma, or in the UK case study, to be resettled Karen from the refugee camps within the last fifteen years. Inclusivity of both genders and being aged eighteen to seventy is essential in reflecting Karen culture and life experiences. Both genders have ascribed roles in Karen communities that impact identity and societal roles within those communities.

To capture the continuity between these sites, the interview process, I maintained a consistent approach and engagement with participants at each site by situating the contexts and narratives within events and real places. The interviews, both

²⁶ Karen words used in this thesis have been rendered into English as reliably as possible.

formal and informal, are valuable tools in evaluating the nature and the process of historical memory, how people perceive their past, the interconnectivity with experience and social context, and the interpretation of their present worldview. It is also a valuable tool in illustrating the different ways in which Karen refugees envision their homeland and in re-shaping their reconfigured ethnic identities in resettlement at Sheffield.

In the initial years of the research process, in 1988 and 1990, I had identified some people who would enable me to carry out the field research role and built relationships with them. In the early years of the research process, the interviews and contacts of Karen camp residents were agreed with the KRC Chairperson, Major Mary Ohn and Saw Ba Thein, the then president of the KNU. From the outset, it was essential to establish rapport and gain trust with the people who would facilitate entry into their communities.

Bruce, my father-in-law, was involved in the civil war between 1949 and 1956 when the Burmese military captured and released him with the conditionality that he would not return to Burma. The visit in 1988 cemented his relationships with senior KNU leaders, among them General Bo Mya, who enabled and endorsed my access to these elite Karen leaders. Bruce returned to Burma on many occasions over the following decade till his death in 1999 to help the refugees in the camps and advocate for the Karen cause.

I conducted interviews with over twenty KNU leaders between 1991 and 2013. These consisted of informal gatherings at their homes or formal occasions where most KNU Central Committee members were present. Informal interviews with committee members and four KNU Presidents and Chairman were also conducted between 1988 and 2013.²⁷ As my wife was the KNU UK representative, we travelled to Thailand every two years, usually during March and April, to attend meetings with the KNU leadership to update her advocacy work in Britain and Europe. Presenting myself as her assistant and historian (I was in my first year of an MA in Military Studies), I attended most of these meetings as an observer but was counselled on many occasions on particular political subjects and was able to freely wander around the enclosed

²⁷ Past and recent KNU Presidents and Chairman, General Bo Mya, (1976-2000), Saw Ba Thein, (2000-2008), Saw Tamla Baw, (2008-2012) and General Mutu Say Poe, (2012-21).

compounds and have conversations with lower-ranked KNU actors. These informal day-to-day encounters most significantly changed the elite-centrism of my then field perspective. On several occasions, I was asked to assist and edit the formulation of reports and documents into English. Many hours were spent at their living quarters and workplaces, where conversations unfolded over food and drinks. Involvement did not disturb the research environment, and daily notetaking, the transcription of interviews and reflections on observations were conducted from an academic viewpoint in the evenings in the hotel room in Mae Sot.

Within these interviews with senior KNU leaders, I followed Scott and Pachirat advice that in order to establish a ‘plausible account’, self-critical reflexivity is pivotal. The researcher's positionality creates power dynamics and relations, shaping what is seen (question of access) and how it is seen (the production of ethnographic knowledge).²⁸ For example, it can be challenging to determine whether actions and goals are for personal or political profit because political goals may be a ‘smoke screen’ for unsanctioned or personal viewpoints. While my background as a white British male connected through familial ties was welcomed, my interest and sympathies with the Karen struggle in Burma enabled me to foster reciprocal relationships with KNU leaders. Interest in their struggle during the Second World War for my MA research in the early 2000s reinforced friendships and relationships. The KNU leadership relocated to Mae Sot in 1995 after the fall of Manerplaw to the Burmese Military.

When meetings my wife attended in the refugee camps were prolonged, I wandered unhindered within the camp, often attending schools, orphanages, giving talks to children, or attending church services. These trips to the camp involved daily and overnight visits to the camps and other Karen organisations, schools, churches, and villages in Burma and Thailand. The Karen people I stayed within Thailand often had social, kinship, and religious connections with Sheffield’s resettled community. I conducted multi-sited research in several sites during fieldwork in Thailand and

²⁸ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance*, (New Haven, 1979), p. 47; Timothy Pachirat, ‘The Political in Political Ethnography: Dispatches from the Kill Floor’, in Edward Schatz, *Political ethnography: What immersion contributes to the study of power*, (Chicago, 2009), p. 147.

explored the Karen participants cyberworlds and imaginary spaces. These will be explored later in chapter 5.

I was assisted in this process by relationships formed with members and staff of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) and the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Church (KKBC). Both these organisations are located in the refugee camps of Mae La and Umphiem Mai. I was aware that I asked the Karen people to grant me access to their environment, observe them, and ask them many questions in my research.

Through family connections (my father-in-law, Bruce), I was invited to stay at Umphiem and Mae La refugee camp with 63-year-old Major Mary Ohn, the then KRC chairperson, in 1997 (see photos this page). Mary chronicled her life and explained how the Karen people struggled for self-determination and survival under the military junta. She explained the plight of Karen people who lost their land, their way of life, and many who have lost their lives. Major Mary became a charismatic and iconic leader in many Karen organisations that males then dominated. She paved the way for Karen women to hold both influence and positions of authority in Karen organisations.



Photo 6: above Mary Ohn and Wendy-my wife, (author, 1990).

Photo 7: left Mary Ohn in uniform (author, 1990).

Over the next decade, I conducted over twenty informal interviews and video recordings with Mary Ohn. She was always a focal point of information and access to visiting the camps. Sadly, Mary died in 2006 in Mae La camp at the age of 73.

Through Mary Ohn and Bruce, I was introduced to Reverend Matthew, Principal of the Karen Baptist Bible School and College (KBBSC), in Mae La. Reverend Matthew is a respected leader of the Christian Karen community on both sides of the Thai-Burma border. His historical and contemporary knowledge of the Karen struggle for freedom is comprehensive. His people's commitment was recognised in 2000 when he became the second recipient of the Baptist World Alliance Human Rights Award for his work in the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. He was always one of the first to be visited by elders and community leaders as a mark of respect. Initial contact with the camp leaders and people who lived there was cautious. However, as the visits increased whilst staying either in camp or Mae Sot during my stays, I established good relationships with specific individuals who became to trust and became firm friends. Frequent communication by post, email and telephone over the following years enabled me to forge strong links with the camp and Mae Sot Karen communities.

Key informants were close relatives Hilda, Moo Pet, and Tee Pay, who became the prime translators and key informants, Chairperson Htoo Ku of the Karen Community Association (KCA). Moo Pet, Tee Pay, and Htoo Kee translated in Burma and Thailand. In addition, par Thu Lar and Win Lee were employed in supporting roles as interpreters and guides throughout Sheffield's resettlement site research.²⁹

Other Karen key participants in the refugee camps were Htoo Lay, a teacher at Mae La and her family of four, now resettled in Sheffield. Htoo Lay's family lived in Mae La camp for over fifteen years, and we became to be regarded as close friends, which was further cemented with their resettlement in Sheffield. Htoo Lay is the mother of three children, and at the start of fieldwork in 2002, the eldest was fourteen, and the youngest was ten. Her husband, Par Doh, had worked as a farmer in Burma.³⁰ She was born in Hpapun Township, Karen State, and moved with her family to Phop

²⁹ Whilst there are some three hundred and fifty Karen people living in Sheffield, some forty percent of participants were interviewed either informally or formally during fourteen years.

³⁰ Interviews in Mae La camp in April 2003 and at respondents' home in Sheffield July 2009.

Phra, on the Thai-Burma border, near Mae Sot in 1987. As a teacher in the camp, she met her husband, a camp food helper, at one of the distribution centres. All her children were born in the camp. The children were taught English at the refugee camp school, and all the family can speak Sgaw Karen, Thai and English.³¹ Htoo Lay can also speak Burmese. The family lived in Mae La for seventeen years before resettlement in Sheffield in 2005. At Mae La camp Htoo Lay became a respected headteacher at one of the larger schools with six hundred pupils. She organised the curriculum, lessons, and the school's general smooth running with support from the KRC and KNU Education Department. Her children, Dwe Gaw, is now a qualified nurse, Par Too is training to become a mechanic, and Esther is still in school. Htoo Lay now lives in Sheffield and holds a master's degree in sociology. She is now a leading member of several organisations. She was Chairperson of KCA Sheffield and is Secretary of the International Karen Organisation (IKO) with global connections to the Karen diaspora. She is one of the key informants in this study.

Another key participant in Thailand and Sheffield was Naw Thu, a military nurse and two daughters Moo Pet and Tee Pay.³² Naw Thu was a military nurse during the Karen resistance to Burmese military incursions in the 1980s. She was born in Papun, Karen State and lost all her family to military operations in 1985 and soon after joined the KNLA as a nurse, although she had no battlefield medical training. She had six months of training and was stationed in a rudimentary hospital close to the frontline. Whilst serving, she met her first husband, and Moo Pet was born in 1989. With a six-month tour of duty, she was frequently on her own, always moving closer to the Thai border by the Burmese military. However, a landmine killed her husband before Tee Pay being born. With no husband, she fled with her young children to Thailand. I first met Naw Thu in Umphiem Refugee camp with Mary Ohn in 1998 and stayed with them for four days. Naw Thu and her daughters were moved to Mae La camp in 2000 but soon settled illegally in Mae Sot city until their resettlement to the UK in 2005. All three speak Sgaw Karen, Thai and English and all are now British citizens. Naw Thu and her daughters are close family friends, and I also consider them the three primary key informants. The two sisters recently graduated with degrees from Sheffield University. Since 2005 when the Karen were resettled in Sheffield, my visits

³¹ Sgaw Karen is the most popularly used Karen dialect in the camps and Sheffield.

³² Interviews at Mae La and Umphiem camps between March 1998 and April 2003.

have been monthly, sometimes more frequent, but I always visit or stay with them. These two families have now been resettled in Sheffield but still keep in contact with the camp refugee communities in Thailand and relatives and friends in Burma.

During the fieldwork in Thailand and Sheffield between 1988 and 2019, I took numerous photographs of cultural and social situations I participated in and observed. The photographs used in this thesis always sought permission from the people and caused minor disturbance to the setting. The fieldwork photographs in this study are used to supplement the ethnography. They do not direct the research analysis but visually represent a particular moment or location.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed my use of multi-methods in two sites to research Karen identity and displacement from Burma to Thailand and the resettled communities in Sheffield. It argued that this approach was the most appropriate methodology to use because of the highly politicised situation in Thailand and Burma. The chapter explained that I sought various perspectives and subgroupings in my fieldwork to enable a wide range of voices.

I could not access the other Karen population living in Burma due to security issues; most of my participant observation took place in Karen State in Burma and the safe space of Sheffield. The exceptions to this were the small number of meetings or commemorative occasions in KNU-controlled territory, which I attended. However, several interviews took place with participants located in IDP sites in KNU controlled areas in Burma.

Chapter 2: Karen History in Burma

To gauge the present-day attitude and social status of a nation, knowledge of past history is essential. The past not only make the present more easily comprehensible, but also enables one to conjecture what the future may hold in store. Just as the physician takes into consideration the family history and previous illnesses of the patient in forming his diagnosis, so must the student of history have some knowledge of past events to guide his opinion. (San C. Po).¹ (My emphasis)

This quote is by a prominent Karen leader San C. Po, author of '*Burma and the Karens (1928)*', who led the call to create an autonomous Karen state in 1928. His statement points to how the Karen refugees framed their displacement experiences concerning 'national' history. Po's work stressed the importance that the community may have lost its home, but it must nevertheless learn Karen history and that this history was intrinsic to Karen identity and pride. This chapter examines the history of the Karen in Burma and their interpretation of this history.

In order to provide the necessary context for this investigation of Karen uses of their own history for self-determination, this chapter begins with a discussion of the Karen people's encounter with British state-creating practices and the profound repercussions that these practices entailed. The second part examines the importance of their history to the present-day Karen refugees, with an overview of the Karen relationships with missionaries, imperial agents, and the Karen pursuit of nationhood.

The sources for this history are quite limited. Before the 1800s, Karen communities lived in a pre-literate society. In contrast to other ethnic groups such as the Mon or Shan, the Karen historically held no power or great wealth and seemed to have lived on the periphery of other kingdoms rather than holding centres of power in their own right. This helps to explain why few written historical records survive. Instead, the Karen used their oral histories to describe a nomadic past of displacement and persecution. As we shall see, this oral history forms an essential component of refugees' contemporary accounts of Karen history.²

¹ San C. Po, *Burma and the Karens*, (London, 1928), p. 1.

² Michael and Maiitri Aung Thwin, *History of Myanmar since Ancient Times: Traditional and Transformations*, (London, 2012), pp. 48-49.

In the pre-colonial era (before 1822), the Karen (and other non-Burman) ethnic groups had substantial autonomy, existing within a tribute system of relationships through patronage and taxation. This style of rural village or township governance was typical throughout Southeast Asia. James Scott has argued that the Karen and other ethnic groups in the mountainous ‘hill’ regions made a conscious effort to reject the central state favouring autonomous self-governance. Scott’s interpretation of the Karen borderland strategies can be interpreted as basic survival strategies rather than strategic adaptation or ‘distinctive positioning’.³ Although Scott’s analysis is based on the pre-Burman kingdom era, Karen village-level autonomy survives to the present day in remote areas of Southeast Burma.⁴ Whether the Karen actively rejected the central power or their isolation was a territorial accident, it is apparent that they were very successful in maintaining autonomous governance beyond other ethnic groups such as the Shan and Kachin. Kirsten McConnachie states that in remote areas of Southeast Burma, this village-level local autonomy survives to the present day.⁵ Recent reports by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) suggest that village-level governance continues to be closely connected to the success of resistance and coping strategies of displaced people in the Karen State. Before British colonisation, Karen villages and towns had a flexible and adaptable way of identifying with each other. Customary law and practice played a fundamental role in Karen society. The Karen village elders were the guardians of orally transmitted laws implemented in the hills and Burma’s plains.⁶ Although the Karen had no form of written laws, in 1800, Michael Symes, sent as an envoy of the Governor of India, wrote of the Karen:

They have, of late years, been oppressed by the Birman landholders,
of which number have fled into the mountains of Arracan. They have

³ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, (London, 2009), p. 8.

⁴ Kirsten McConnachie, *Governing Refugees: Justice, Order and Legal Pluralism*, (Abingdon, 2014), p. 25; KHRG, ‘Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarised Karen State’, (2008), p. 33, <https://www.khrg.org/>, [accessed October 2020].

⁵ McConnachie, *Governing Refugees*, p. 19.

⁶ John F. Cady, *A Modern History of Burma*, (London, 1958), pp. 832-837; Michael Symes, *An Account of the Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava in the Year 1795, Volume II*, (London, 1800), pp. 109, 207; A.R. McMahon, *The Karens of the Golden Chersonese*, (London, 1876), pp. 81-90.

traditional maxims of jurisprudence for their internal government but are without any written laws: oral custom . . . constitutes the law.⁷

This quote is relevant to this chapter because it mentions the oppression of the Karen by the Burman kings and their oral traditions that is critically important in maintaining village communities. During the early nineteenth century, this political and social marginalisation from the Burman monarchy encouraged solidarity between these often-fragmented villages.

A key element to understanding Karen identity is the connection of the distant past through oral traditions and the relationship to the value of education. To the Karen, the implication is clear, they had valuable knowledge, lost it and suffered as a result. Hence this chapter also examines the relationship between the displaced Karen narratives and their cultural reinforcement in the Thai borderland. It seeks to understand how Karen identity is formed through a complex identity-making process that conveys a sense of being rooted in the past through real experiences of persecution and displacement, but also through cultural signifiers and mythologies. This chapter seeks to demonstrate how the reconstitution and regeneration of Karen identity practices have been evolving as displaced Karen are resettled in Thailand, adapting and ‘hybridising’ their sense of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’.

The heterodoxy of ‘Karen identity’?

To understand how displaced Karen in Britain perceives their identity, I engaged in an informal conversation with Sara, a female Karen now an activist living in London. I asked what it means to be a Karen, she replied:

I was born in the remote jungles of Burma near the Irrawaddy, my parents were born animists, and we lived in bamboo huts in a small village. Most Karen people are farmers living peacefully in villages. Our village is mixed Buddhist, Christian, and animist, which is typical of Karen villages. My parents used to take me to the water festival in April, which is a Buddhist one. But we also listened to Christian preachers, but at home, we practised animist traditions. When I was

⁷ Michael Symes, *An Account of an Embassy, Volume 1*, (London, 1827), p. 243.

fourteen, the Burmese Army attacked the village and burnt our house. We had to run away, and we spend two years in the jungles of Kawthoolei hiding with other groups. We stayed in Mannerplaw, but it was taken by the junta. We had to flee again, and we crossed the border to Thailand, and then we arrived at the refugee camp in 1995 - I think.⁸

Sara's conversation illustrated the complexities of Karen identity, where she has merged and inter-twined her religious beliefs, which is a common thread with the present Karen people. She identifies her family as farmers, which is a collective ascription within the displaced Karen communities now residing in the camps and resettled in third countries. Many other Karen people interviewed throughout this study replicated her recollection of the Burmese army's actions. Ethnic and religious affiliation in rural villages is often flexible, and their identities result from tense ethnic relationships and reflect two histories. One chronicled history connected to oppression and remembered through oral histories and poems-songs called *hta's*, the other chronicled liberation and constructed through religious and colonial texts.⁹

What of more formal, institutional accounts of Karen history and identity? In Furnival's phrase, Burma is a 'plural society', one of ethnic diversity that made it difficult in his view to building a cohesive nation from disparate and fragmented nationalities.¹⁰ In Burma, eight main ethnic 'nationalities are recognised with many more ethnic sub-groups.¹¹ In the last population census conducted by the British in 1931, the Karen constituted the second largest ethnic minority group in Burma. In twenty-first-century Burma, it is estimated that between five and seven million people lay claim to Karen identity. To understand Karen identity and history, one must be

⁸ Interview with Sara in Sheffield during Karen New Year celebration in January 2007.

⁹ Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, (London, 2006), pp. 81, 88; Ananda Rajah, *Remaining Karen: A Study of Cultural Reproduction and the Maintenance of Identity*, (PhD, 1986, Canberra,).

¹⁰ J. S. Furnival, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy*, (Cambridge, 1939), p. 446.

¹¹ The term "Burman" or "Bamar" is used in this study to refer to the ethnic majority of the country. They make up 68 per cent of the population, while 'Burmese' is used as an adjective to refer to the language and the various peoples of the country.

aware of the two inter-twining issues: having a non-written culture and those the early oral and written histories are inextricably linked.¹²

The issue of Karen identity today is to participate in a discourse about history, ethnopolitics, religion, and nationalism. At one level, the Karen constitute a distinct entity in one of the world's most geographically diverse areas. However, although the ethnic label 'Karen' might suggest a distinct category, it is more accurate to consider the Karen as an umbrella term for over 16-subgroups of 'Karennic' speaking peoples who are politically, territorially, culturally, and religiously diverse.¹³ Map 3 (page 65) illustrates where the Karen in Burma are located. The Karen are mainly engaged in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and subsistence farming in mountainous hills. The Karen are also found in Pegu (Bago) and Rangoon (Yangon) urban areas, where they engage in urban lifestyles and economies. The Karen can be broadly divided into two major groups, the Sgaw and the Pwo, with the Bwe, Pa-O, Karenni, and others in the sub-divisions. Although Karen ethnic identity is sometimes labelled as an artificial construction, there are substantial differences between these diverse Karen sub-groups, not affiliation or self-ascription.¹⁴

There is no homogeneous Karen identity that permeates national boundaries. There is little evidence to suggest that a syncretic nationalist Karen identity integrates the Burma-Karen and the Thai-Karen. These differences are an essential distinction to make, not only in placing parameters around the displaced and resettled Karen I study in this thesis but also to illustrate a Karen identity that is partially formed around nationalist ties to the KNU and geographical territory in Burma. The KNU actively promote Karen unity which actions of Burma's military have helped. Differentiations in Karen religion, culture, and language, which have shaped over time, may account for this. However, I suggest that Burma's nation-state's mechanism that divides them has played a significant role. It is essential to note that the displaced Karen in this thesis omits Thai-Karen. Despite the Burmese Karen's political struggle being

¹² The first census was in 1891 in the British colonial period. The Census of India (1931) was the last to independently record the diversity of Burma's population.

¹³ The linguistic survey of Burma in 1910 indicated that Sgwa and Pwo were the largest groups, this identification appeared in the 1921 and 1931 censuses.

¹⁴ South suggests that this is based on speculative missionary ethnography and politically expedient colonial classification, Ashley South, 'Karen Nationalist Communities: The "Problem" of Diversity', *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, Vol. 29, No 1, (2007), p. 56.

conducted from Thai territory, there has been no attempt to include them in this study.¹⁵

From an analytical perspective, the term 'Karen' is a self-identifying classification. It must also be positioned within colonialism, Christian missionaries, and relationships with other political groups. In attempting to understand this identity marker, one must be aware of the origin(s) of the word 'Karen'. The marker of *Karen* is of Burman origin and was not used by the people themselves until the late nineteenth century. Schrock suggests that the term '*Kayin*' had origins in Burmese discriminatory word meaning a 'slave-barbarian'; Cheesman argues that Karen is an Anglicisation of the Burmese word '*Kayin*', but the etymology is unclear. Another suggestion of this derogatory word stems from the Mon language or is a corruption of the word '*Kanyan*', translated as a vanished tribe's name. Today's Karen want to ensure that they do not become a 'vanished tribe' of Burma.¹⁶

The lack of vocabulary in the Karennic languages to capture a sense of Karen unity or cohesiveness makes an all-inclusive pan-Karen identity problematic. The Karen could not inscriptively record or document their histories in their language before the arrival of American missionaries in the 1800s. However, the Sgaw term *dawkelu*, which translates as 'entire race', encapsulates their self-identification. There are many variations in the literature on the label 'Kayin', including Karaian, Kariannes, Karyens, Kayen, Carian, Carryaners, Carrianers, Cariana, and various names of the eighteenth-century label of Gwe.¹⁷

Various sub-groups claim to be of Karen ethnicity, further complicate Karen categorisations. It is estimated that eighty to eighty-five per cent of Karen are either Sgaw or Pwo. The Sgaw or S'gaw (*S'ghawa*) Karen call themselves *Pga-gan Yaw*, *Pgaz Cgauz*, *Paganyaw* and *Pakayo* (also known as White Karen). Most of the Sgaw Karen speak the same language, although with significant regional variations.¹⁸ In

¹⁵ Rajah, *Remaining Karen*.

¹⁶ J. L. Schrock, *Minority Groups in Thailand*, (United States Department of the Army, USA, 1970), p. 795; Cheesman, 'Seeing "Karen" in the Union of Burma', pp. 202-203.

¹⁷ John Lewis *The Burmanization of the Karen people in Burma: a Study in Racial Adaptability*, (unpublished PhD, 1924); Nigel J. Brailey, 'A Re-Investigation of the Gwe of Eighteenth Century Burma', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (1970), pp. 33-47.

¹⁸ D. C. Gilmore, *A Grammar of The Sgaw Karen*, (Rangoon, 1898); C. H. Duffin, *Manual of the Pwo-Karen Dialect*, (Rangoon, 1913).

Burma, Sgaw Karen is the official language in Karen State and the refugee camps in Thailand. The highland Sgaw-speaking Karens tend to be heterodox Buddhists who also profess strong animist beliefs. Although current data for Burma is unavailable, it is estimated that twenty-five to thirty per cent of Sgaw Karen are Christian, mainly Baptist. In the refugee camps located in Thailand, Sgaw Karen is used as the common language and taught in most schools. Sgaw Karen live in both mountain and lowland areas.¹⁹

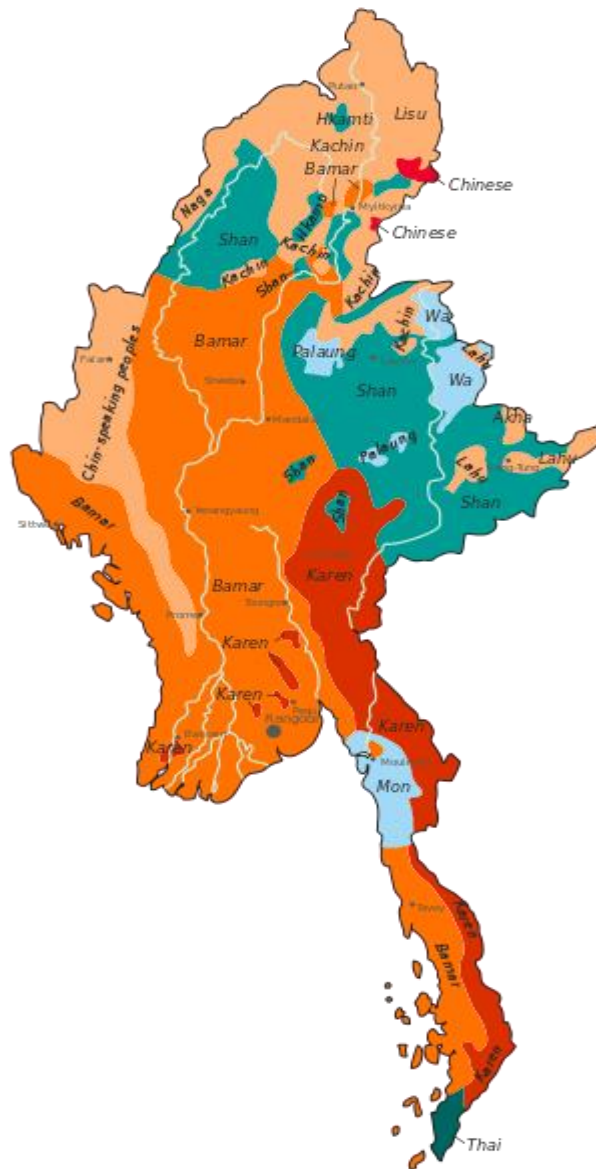
The second-largest are the Pwo Karen, are usually referred to as *Pgho*, *P'wo*, *Pa-O*, *Ploe*, or *Plong* (also known as Black Karen or Taungthu). In Burma, Pwo Karen traditionally only live in lowland areas. The Karen people write their language using a Roman script developed by missionaries. Sgaw and Pwo languages do not differ significantly in word or structure but do differ in pronunciation.

About three-hundred thousand Karenni people are living in Karenni (Kayah) State in Burma. The Bwe Karen (Bway), a smaller sub-group, predominantly live in Toungoo District in northern Karen State, which is several weeks walk from the Thai border. The Bwe both live in mountain and lowland villages. Most anthropologists count the Karenni as a sub-group of the Karen.²⁰

The following map illustrated the geographical location of the Karen ethnic group on the eastern Burma border.

¹⁹ Pongrapunt Rattanaporn, *Phonetics of Sgaw Karen in Thailand: An Acoustic Description* (unpublished MA, Chiang Mai, 2012), pp. 10-12.

²⁰ Sandra Dudley, *Materialising Exile, Materialising Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experience among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*, (2010).



Map 3: Ethnic groups of Burma: red denotes Karen. (Smith, *Insurgency and Politics of Ethnicity*, 1999).

Marshall’s ethnography of the Karen people was influential in the ethnic description written in the early twentieth century in the way that colonial categories are used. He remarks that bloodshed and rivalry were common between Karen communities before their resettlement to the plains during the British economic push for increasing rice production. Furthermore, Marshall focuses on Sgaw and Pwo Karen, omitting the less distinct Bwe Karen group who occupy the eastern hills of central Burma. The predominant Sgaw and Pwo Karen communities had integrated with the agrarian expansion of colonial Burma's lowland economy. As Marshall described before the British came to Burma, ethnic diversity was approached with discrimination

and enslavement by the Burman and Mon ethnic groups. The British employed other methods. In order to establish authority, the British created states or divisions through which local governance would be operated. Marshall concludes that the attempt to harmonise all the minority groups by the British was unsuccessful.²¹

As a forest-dwelling and hill people subservient to the Burman ethnic majority, the Karen overturned their marginality in a century of colonial occupation (1824-1948) by rising to positions of political influence within the British administration. Their political and military alliance with the British crucially shaped Karen national identity along with their religious affiliation (the Christian minority). The features of the British colonial state that contributed most to defining Karen identity as separate from the Burmans are revealed in the priority recruitment of Karen into the army and the British granting indirect rule for the border regions. This question of British imperialism impact on Karen identity will be explored further on.²²

In Southeast Asia, religion and ethnicity link to generate distinctive identities, mainly where ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity triggers fierce competition between the dominant and minority ethnic group. Rajah argues that religion and ritual sustain what is regarded as a cultural ideology, which provides a cultural identity, from which a platform of ethnic identity may/can be constructed according to a set of circumstances.²³ Yang and Ebaugh's Christian and Buddhist Chinese studies in America show that religion becomes a vital identity marker of ethnic and cultural identity in newly resettled communities. Scholars have emphasised the religious factor in creating and maintaining ethnic groups.²⁴ Smith argues that ethnic grouping is determined by immigrant identification with specific religious traditions more than shared descent, language, and national feeling. Not only is the Christian church or Buddhist temple a symbolic centre of religion, but it is also the 'space' where symbolic culture, social and spiritual activities can be performed. This 'space' is demonstrated

²¹ Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, p. 27; Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941*, (Wisconsin, 1974), pp. 30-31.

²² Donald M. Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma*, (Vol. 59), (Oxford, 2006), pp. 17-19; Robert Taylor, *The State in Myammar*, (London, 2009), p. 80.

²³ Rajah, *Remaining Karen*, pp. xi-x.

²⁴ Martin E. Marty, 'Ethnicity: The skeleton of religion in America', *Church History*, No. 42, (1972); Helen Ebaugh and Janez Chafetz, *Religion and the new immigrants: Continuities and adaptations in immigrant congregations*. (California, 2000); George Pozzetta (ed.), *Ethnicity, ethnic identity, and language maintenance*. (New York, 1991).

in Karen communities within the refugee camps and the greater diaspora, operating as a re-enforcement of ethnic identity.²⁵

Historically Burma was an animist society. In present-day Burma, Theravada Buddhist is the predominant religion. There is no official state religion, but the military junta strongly exhibit support for Buddhism. In practice, Burmese people demonstrate fluid boundaries between religions. As my conversation with Sara illustrates, Buddhist, animist and Christian belief systems suffuse many Karen rural villages, and some families draw on each of them interchangeably. Some also follow a spiritual practice that is an amalgam of Buddhism and animist beliefs, such as ‘cult of the *nats*’ (spirit beings) worship. Eight per cent of the population are Christian, and the Islam faith is approximately four per cent of the population. Other religious traditions are also represented in Burma, such as Hindu, tattooing cults, animist and the Jewish faith. In practice, Burmese people enjoy fluid boundaries between religions, and most follow a spiritual practice that is an amalgam of Buddhism and animist beliefs such as *nat* (spirit beings) worship. Before the introduction of Buddhism, *nat* worship played a central and dominating role in Burma. The *nat* cult is legitimised by its encompassment within the Buddhist value system and has enabled local religious practices to be integrated into the Burmese way of life.²⁶

The original Karen who settled in Burma were animists and believed in the *nats* ancestral spirits and one creator; God pronounced *Y’wa*. *Nat* worship is still practised amongst the Karen people in Burma and Thailand, with traditional *nat* festivals being important social events. *Nat* spirit mediums have retained their roles as conduits between the human and spirit world. The belief in spirits, witches and ghosts is common, with these entities being easily offended, sometimes malevolent and would punish wrongdoers causing illness and sometimes death. Buddhist Karen people account for sixty-five per cent of the total Karen population in Burma,

²⁵ Fenggang Yang and Helen Ebaugh, ‘Religion and Ethnicity among New Immigrants: The Impact of Majority/Minority Status in Home and Host Countries’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 3, (2001), p. 369; Horstmann, ‘Sacred Networks and Struggles’, *Moussons*, p. 88.

²⁶ Benedicte Brac de la Perriere, ‘An Overview of the Field of Religion in Burmese Studies’, *Asian Ethnology*, Vol. 68, No. 2, (2009), pp. 185-210; Melford Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism: A Study in the Explanation and Reduction of Suffering*, (New Jersey, 1967); Juliane Schober, *Shamanism*, (California, 2004), has written on the Burmese cult of these ‘nat’ spirits.

Christians thirty per cent, with the rest being of animist or folklore. Christian Karen were prominent politically and socially in colonial Burma. However, the mainly Buddhist population remained largely ignored until the end of British rule and received scant scholarly attention apart from a few articles and books.²⁷

Thus, in the early nineteenth century, the all-encompassing idea of a collective Karen identity was a new phenomenon even to the Karen themselves.²⁸ The rise of a pan-Karen identity can be attributed to British and missionary encouragement of statehood amongst the Karen ethnic groups, combined with contesting ethnic relationships between the Burmans and the ‘Frontier’ peoples. Rajah suggests that before Christian missionaries arrived in Burma in the early nineteenth century, the Karen had no sense of national unity but instead shared an ethnic identity derived from what he termed ‘an ancestral consciousness’. Rajah further states that this shared Karen consciousness was misconstrued as a shared cultural construct such as dress, language, religion, and oral traditions.²⁹ Mikael Gravers also considers the construction of Karen nationalistic history in his study of pan-Karen identity. Gravers argues that the conversion to Christianity was an attempt to obtain access to greater knowledge with which their animist worldview traditionally associated mainly with spirits and taboos for many Karen.³⁰

With the arrival of missionaries in the 1830s theological and secular education flourished. Many Karen believed that regaining that ‘lost’ knowledge could reverse their oppression by other more powerful ethnic groups. The following section examines the Karen encounter with the British and the repercussions reverberating within Karen communities.

²⁷ Kazuto Ikeda, ‘Two Versions of Buddhist Karen History of the Late British Colonial Period in Burma: Kayin Chronicle (1929) and Kuyin Great Chronicle (1931)’, *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (2012), pp. 431-460; Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The “Other” Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms*, (London, 2012).

²⁸ Kwanchewan Buadaeng, ‘Ethnic Identities of the Karen Peoples in Burma and Thailand’, in James Peacock, Patricia Thornton, and Patrick Inman (eds.), *Identity Matters: Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict*, (New York, 2007), pp. 73-97.

²⁹ Rajah, ‘A “Nation of Intent” in Burma’, p. 520.

³⁰ Mikael Gravers, ‘Conversation and Identity: Religion and the Formation of the Karen Identity in Burma’, in Mikael Gravers (ed.), *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*, (Denmark, 2007), pp. 227-258.

Karen and the colonial encounter

The British colonial state nurtured the conditions for a Christian Karen structure to flourish in the early nineteenth century. Burman nationalists accused the British colonial administration of pursuing a 'divide and rule' policy with the Burman monarchy's dissolution and its patronage of the Buddhist sangha. Scholarships by several nineteenth-century scholars assert that Karen nationhood and identity formation was a colonial-missionary enterprise.³¹

In this Burman narrative, the Karen were viewed as performing colonial puppets' role, misled into separatism and aggression against their former masters, the Burmans. The augmentation by the publication of colonial and missionary books that praised Karen Christian faith and loyalty while denigrating the Burman people as unruly and idolatrous cemented the Karen ideals of identity and nationhood.³² The missionaries, colonisers, and educated Christian Karen, Kachin, and Mon jointly created a new order in Burmese society. From the vantage point of post-colonial nation-building, this had tragic and irreversible consequences.

Thus, at the beginning of the colonial period, the British inherited and mainly continued the practices of the Burmese monarchy that preceded them. The British colonial authorities favoured a reduction in conflicts with indigenous peoples employing territorial separation through segregation and partition from earliest times. British colonial policy's objective was rarely to create new 'English' men and women out of colonial subjects'. The British sense of racial superiority was typically too great for that to be even considered. If integration was not the desired outcome, then by logical conclusion, segregation was the alternative. These widely pursued policies in British colonies had long-lasting geographical consequences, especially in Burma.³³

³¹ Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, pp. 66-68; Mason, *Civilizing Mountain Men*, p. 361; J. R. Logan, 'On the Ethnographic Position of the Karens', *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, Vol. 2, (1858), pp. 364-390; Alonzo Bunker, *Soo Thah: a Tale of the Making of the Karen Nation*, (London, 1902), pp.14-16.

³² Charles H. Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma 1887-90*, (London, 1912); Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, p. 73.

³³ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, (Edinburgh, 1922). Lugard's account of indirect rule epitomises this colonial approach by expressing the fundamental principles of European imperialism in Africa. He articulated the basis for European imperial design and the colonial administrative system dynamics of indirect rule.

Comaroff and Comaroff suggest that to colonise was to appropriate the land, administer and classify its inhabitants, and seize the hearts and minds of its 'wild peoples, rousing them from a state of nature that rendered them indistinguishable from their rude surroundings'.³⁴ Pre-colonial Burmese geographies this not connect political authority with fixed territorial concepts of fixedness, fluidity and spheres of influence, which scholars have described as a *mandala*. It is only the awareness that the non-fixity in the political contours of pre-colonial East Asia makes sense. The Karen Chief Sgwa Saw Ku's surrender of the Salween area to the British after the first Anglo-Burman war constituted integration into the British Burma *mandala*.³⁵ It did not involve the moving of lines of boundaries in the Karen geographical space. This British imposition of a territorial limit within colonial cartographies and affirmed by military dominance meant Karen perspectives of their territories now had fixed lines. At the inception of British rule in Burma in 1885, Lower Burma was already part of British India, with Upper Burma added in 1886. The resulting union of Burma was administered as an autonomous province until 1937, when it became a separate British colony, gaining independence in 1948.³⁶

As a result, British colonial authorities and territorial separation adopted a 'divide and rule' strategy policy. One ethnic community was separated from another as indigene had earlier been separated from the immigrant. Allied to this, colonial administrations compiled reports and notably censuses in a classificatory manner. More elaborate classifications replaced the simple Christian-heathen or British-foreigner separation as colonial government administrators divided populations into discrete groups based on linguistics, religion, ethnicity, and skin colour.

The British brought a new conception of the nation-state, possibly the most important cultural innovation since the domestication of Buddhism, and it immensely improved technical means to implement that conception. The colonisers introduced closely defined, functional conceptions of bureaucratic authority, governed by

³⁴ Jean and John Comaroff, 'Through the Looking-glass: Colonial Encounters of the First Kind', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1988), p. 6.

³⁵ Michael Charney, 'Before and after the wheel: Pre-colonial and colonial states and transportation in mainland Southeast Asia and West Africa', *EuroDEAS Conference paper*, (2015), p. 11.

³⁶ George De Rhe-Philipe, *A narrative of the first Burmese War, 1824-26*, (London, 1905). The first war ended in 1826, the second was in 1853 and the third British-Burma war ended in 1885.

measured written codes. With these techniques combined with improved communications technologies and modern arms, the British were able to increase the scope and efficiency of central administration and establish control over imperial agent appointments, taxation, and welfare projects on the village level.³⁷

Between 1887 and 1937, British Burma was administered separately as a colonial province of British India. It was created with a strong central authority backed by its administrative, judicial and security apparatuses. The colonial British administrative system generally followed the duality of governance previously employed by the Burman kings. It was direct rule over the Burman, Mon and Arakanese plains peoples known as 'Burma Proper' with indirect rule over the numerous hill peoples and was known as the 'Frontier Areas'. The eastern borders with Siam (Thailand) were demarcated and, the northern and north-eastern frontiers with China generally settled.³⁸ The colonial encounter with the British did not create Burma as a sovereign state. Instead, British Burma was a mosaic of peoples and geographically constructed under the aegis of the Empire, and its indigenous ethnic groups assimilated initially within British colonial India.

With the advent of the British Empire and missionaries, British Burma was transformed. The colonial encounter changed Karen people's lives and collective-selfhood and awareness of distinct national identity. Although a Karen rebellion in which an animist leader, Meng-Loung, undertook to drive out the colonial British from Burma in 1858 to set up a Karen dynasty at Pegu, it was suppressed without severe consequences.³⁹ The early nineteenth-century Karen Christian converts considered themselves morally superior, sanctioned and legitimised through a divine will, while the Burman group increasingly associated Christian Karen with neo-colonial power. Most Karen people considered the British as liberators. In the mid-nineteenth century, many Karen joined the British Army to serve as guides and soldiers during the First and Second Anglo-Burman Wars. The British administration granted privileges and senior administrative positions to the minority 'Frontier Areas' people during the early colonial period. Between 1850 and 1886, religious identities created a source of

³⁷ Victor Lieberman, 'Reinterpreting Burmese History', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (1987), pp. 162-194.

³⁸ Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, pp. 17-20.

³⁹ Cady, *A Modern History of Burma*, p. 90.

tension and confrontation between Buddhists and Christians that persist to the modern day.

In the late 1880s, educated Karen were permitted into the Social and Services Club in Rangoon, suggesting that they were accepted in social status and Burmese colonial society. In 1881, Christian Karen leaders were aware of the existing tensions between the disparate Karen groups and the Karen National Association (KNA) was established to integrate non-Christian Karen into the nation-building design.⁴⁰ It was an attempt by the Christianized Karen to link the different Karen groups from diverse regional, lingual, religious, and social-economic backgrounds to unite all Karen groups into one broad-based organisation.⁴¹ The intent was to have a common platform for Christian and Buddhist Karen to combat oppression and hostility. Reverend Thanbyah, one of the KNA founders, illustrates the urgency of uniting the Karen and the need to empower the people:

This segregation of the Christian Karens split the Karen race into two sections, the heathen and the Christian. The former with no written language, uncared for by the state . . . there is a common platform, united by ties broader even than religion.⁴²

Karen levies were used to suppress various Burman disturbances in the mid-1920s and the Saya San rebellion between 1930 and 1932. The Karen were accepted as serving police officers. In the Colonial British Army, these elements of Karen integration within British colonial Burma have been acknowledged as contributing factors in the rise of Karen national identity.

During the First World War, young Karen joined the British Army in their thousands. According to Smith Dun, writing his memoirs in 1917, the Karen enlisted and formed regular infantry battalions, as were other Burmese ethnic groups. These Karen Battalions were sent to Egypt for garrison duties. Some Karen took part in the

⁴⁰ Thawngmung, *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar*, pp. 28-29.

⁴¹ As the concept of a pan-Karen identity is relatively new, so too is the term in Sgaw Karen of *Daw Ka Lu (k'lu)* best captures the intended essence of the meaning: *dawkelu*, meaning 'entire race'.

⁴² Reverend T. Thanbyah, *The Karens and Their Progress, A.D. 1855-1890*, (Rangoon, 1913), pp. 81-92. cited in J. Petry, *The Sword of the Spirit*, (1993).

Mesopotamia campaign, while a number served in France with the Labour Corps and motor transport units.⁴³ Several Karen became prominent called for unity and nationhood.

San. C. Po was a Sgaw Karen Christian sent by a missionary to study in the USA, where he completed a Doctorate in Medicine. He served as a district medical officer in Bassein, Kyaukse, and Myaungmya and was appointed to Burma's Legislative Council. In 1924, Po became a Knight Commander of the British Empire due to his recruiting Karen in the Great War of 1914-18.⁴⁴ San C. Po, the author of '*Burma and the Karens*', pioneered the call to create an autonomous Karen state. In his treatise, he mentions:

The Burmans have the whole country to themselves. Where have the Karens a place they can call their own?

Following on with a call for nationhood:

Why should we not try . . . if only as a political experiment . . . to give the Karens a chance of growing as a nation in their own way? Why should we not try and bring their wild growth under cultivation, grafting on the ancient roots as time and experience improve our perception and increase our skill? We have here a little people--probably under a million in all--who aspire to keep their own nationality intact. Why should we not allow them and encourage them to do so? The result may be of the highest interest in the future and cannot fail to be fraught with great benefit to the people themselves; it will strengthen British Rule and safeguard it in the times of trouble which may yet be in store for us in Burma.⁴⁵

⁴³ General Smith Dun, *Memoirs of a Four-foot Colonel*, (Ithica, 1980), p. 104.

⁴⁴ Po, *Burma and the Karens*, p. 12; Thawngmung, *The "Other Karen in Myanmar*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Po, *Burma and the Karens*, pp. 77-78.

The book is a manifestation of the Karen nationalist ideal and situates the history of the Karen within a context of ongoing Burman repression. From the beginning of his book, Po emphatically located the contemporary Karen within a historical context that left an indelible imprint. Po's rhetoric focused on forming a nation, utilising phrases like 'Karendom', home rule, and maintaining a 'nation's desire' for the Karen people. Po successfully lobbied the British to have five Karen seats reserved when the 1923 constitution established a plural representation for Ministerial Burma.⁴⁶ His contribution to Karen nationalist sentiment's construction is quite significant as a Karen, rather than a British colonialist or a missionary. During the 1920s, Karen leaders, including Po, used their political power to establish Karen recognition in Burma's parliamentary bills. They institutionalised the pan-Karen identity by passing a law to recognise Karen New Year in Burma's official State calendar.⁴⁷ In Sheffield, several Karen interviewees mentioned that his book was used as a history textbook in camps together with Aung Hla and Thanbyah's books on Karen history.⁴⁸

The employment of the coloniser's language of English and civilising discourse enabled the 'civilised' Karen to become a very vocal and a visible 'minority', yet with great political astuteness, and by default came to represent their whole nation to the outside world. Marshall commented on the 'progress' the Karen had achieved in just over a hundred years:

Very few races or tribes have made greater '*progress*' than the Karen . . . we can hardly realise that some of the refined, educated, well-dress and cultured people that we have known come from such unlikely ancestry. The 'wild cattle of the hills' have indeed turned out to be what they called themselves, *Pg K'Nyaw*, which actually means 'men'.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence*, (Oxford, 1959), p. 3.

⁴⁷ Cheesman, 'Seeing 'Karen' in the Union of Myanmar', p. 207.

⁴⁸ Informal interview in Sheffield in May 2015 with Naw Moo Rah and Saw Win Htoo.

⁴⁹ Harry Marshall, *The Karens of Burma, Burma Pamphlets No. 8*, (Burma Research Society, London, 1945), p. 35.

By the early twentieth century, the Sgaw and Pwo Karen groups had become more culturally homogeneous, with many responding to the colonial censuses in 1881 and 1901, referring in the census just as ‘Karen’ instead of their specific grouping.⁵⁰ It was principally true of the Christian Karen with whom Marshall was most familiar. Furthermore, Marshall broadly presents the Karen as a ‘group of Indo-Chinese tribes’. Finally, he sketches a shared origin for all Karen groups, concluding the book with what many have considered the most significant integrative institutions Karen units in the colonial British Army and the Christian churches. Marshall’s study appears incongruous with modern contemporary scholarship by framing his ethnography in the unity of primitive origins. Nevertheless, his observations on the perils of the awakening ‘national consciousness’ and the transformations in Karen self-identification in Burma’s census data foresee the post-Second World War discussions about the nature of Karen ethnicity and nationalism.⁵¹

The Second World War began with intense Burman-Karen animosity, often expressing itself in violence and marginalisation. During the war, the Karen aided the British with support of an insurgency in Burma. Karen elders often talk about Karen-British history. Saw Micah Rolly reminiscing in Mae La camp in 1999 mentions:

I remember Seagrim during the war. He was very tall and a good friend to the Karen. We were part of the levies that he trained. We were in Kyaukkyi for a while. He liked reading the bible to us. He loved the Karen.⁵²

The conversation with the then eighty-year-old Saw Micah demonstrates the intersecting identities of faith and political allegiances of the Karen soldiers with Major Hugh Seagrim, who was nicknamed ‘grandfather longlegs’. He remained behind enemy lines and led a Karen insurgency against the Japanese Army; he surrendered

⁵⁰ William Wilson Hunter, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India Provincial Series: Burma Vol. 1 and 2*, IOR: V/27/60;69;70.

⁵¹ Rajah, ‘A Nation of Intent’, and Ananda Rajah, ‘Transformations of Karen Myths of Origin and Relations of Power’, in Gehan Wijeyewardene and E. C. Chapman (eds.), *Patterns and Illusions: Thai History and Thought*, (Canberra, 1992), pp. 237-276; Womack, *Literate Networks*, p. 24.

⁵² Conversation with Saw Micah Rolly in Mae La camp in March 1999.

and was summarily executed. This story typifies the friendly relations that existed between the Karen and the British.⁵³

The change of the British government in 1945 brought about a different approach to the British dominions. After their continued demands for vast tracts of Burma and boycotting attempts for national unity within the confines of parliamentarianism, the Karen lost British political goodwill, most notably at the Panglong Conference in 1947. The lobbying of various ethnic claims in the 1940s, the withdrawal, and exclusion of colonial specialists, combined with the immense economic damage inflicted by the war, and ideological and factional rivalries among Burmese leaders all contributed to a severe deflation and dispersion of those sources of power that British rule had placed at the disposal of the state. Communist and Karen rebellions became manifestations of this trend, reducing the newly independent government in Rangoon's authority to a narrow geographical corridor. In 1948, Burma secured independence from the British.⁵⁴

The Karen were encouraged and supported in their efforts of unity and self-determination by outspoken colonial officers and administrators. The Karen earlier military alliance with the British colonisers had mutually beneficial effects. Given the contexts that have been surveyed above, it is not unsurprising that Karen leaders believed that they would receive special consideration, both under British rule and when independence for Burma materialised.

Borderland spaces and peripheral conflict

This section explores Burma's political, social, and geographic space in the Thai-Burma borderland where most Karen live. Its primary concern is to examine the historical complexities of the shared borderlands space between the Burmese nation-state, the Thai nation-state, and the ethnic Karen. Understanding the historical narratives supports a key point I make in this study around the formation of Karen identity. This section develops the theoretical and historical contexts in which

⁵³ Ian Morrison, *'Grandfather Longlegs' The life and Gallant death of Major H.P. Seagrim*, (London, 1947).

⁵⁴ Hugh Tinker, *Burma: The Struggle for Independence 1944-1948 (Vol. II)*, (London, 1984), pp. 404-405; Lieberman, *'Reinterpreting Burmese History'*, p. 190.

borderland 'space' is understood and supports the displaced Karen's modes of identity construction and cultural practices.

The causes of Burma's many peripheral conflicts are dynamic and complex and cannot be understood without reference to Burma's recent history. By 1962, twenty-four separate and different armed ethnic opposition groups conducted insurgent war in the borderlands.⁵⁵

In 2021, Burma's peripheral conflicts continued, alongside major infractions by the Burmese military in Karen State.⁵⁶ The perception of co-existence between the Burmese nation-state and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) armed ethnic opposition groups, and the KNU, increased with the cease-fire agreements in 2012.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, nation-states such as Burma continue to strive to consolidate power at the borderlands. The rise of the modern Burmese state has created borderland spaces where armed groups often exercise coercive power with an assured degree of legitimacy and, in some instances, create 'shadow states' imitating the central nation-state.⁵⁸

This section conceives the borderland as a spatial entity in which political, social, and cultural relations convene, and this has fundamentally affected the Karen identity change from subsistence farmers to displaced refugees. This displacement has changed Karen identity. The borderland is a distinct social 'space' framed by the tension between Burmese states' territorial domain and the consolidation of control. This study draws on Alvarez's concept of 'borderlands' as a geopolitical tool that

⁵⁵ Smith, *Burma*, p. 196.

⁵⁶ VOA (Voice of America) 1 May 2021, 'Myanmar's Karen State remains defiant amid military attacks', [Myanmar's Karen State Remains Defiant Amid Military Attacks | Voice of America - English \(voanews.com\)](https://www.voanews.com/news/myanmar-karen-state-remains-defiant-amid-military-attacks-20210501), [accessed June 2021].

⁵⁷ The DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army) was an armed rebel faction of Buddhist soldiers and officers in Burma that split from the predominantly Christian led KNLA in 1994. The DKBA was formed for a variety of reasons, a campaign of pagoda constructions in Karen State had been initiated, including the KNU/KNLA headquarters at Mannerplaw. The predominant Christian KNU leadership prohibited their continued construction claiming that they would attract government airstrikes and demolished many of them. The DKBA carried out dozens of attacks on Karen villages sympathetic to the KNU and refugee camps. The DKBA aligned themselves with the State Peace Development Council (SPDC) in 1997 after the collapse of the Karen military headquarters at Mannerplaw.

⁵⁸ Alfred McCoy, 'Lord of drug lords: One life as lesson for US drug policy', *Crime Law and Social Change*, (1998), pp. 301-331.

identifies state frontiers and illuminates the multi-dimensional aspects of cultural and social practices to grapple with the borderland spaces and the peripheral conflicts. In addition, I draw on Homi Bhabha's concept of 'third space' in which the boundaries of these subjectivities are negotiated, and hybridity emerges. This 'third space' in the Karen case can frame its geographical and cultural locations also encompasses socio-spatial identities such as sexuality, gender, class, and ethnicity. These case study sites allow the researcher to explore how individuals interact separately and collectively and shape institutional processes and relationships in their everyday lives.⁵⁹

In using Homi Bhabha's concept, I intend to articulate an alternative view of perceiving the borderlands as less a space that is compartmentalised, divide or demarcated on a map, but rather where social and cultural interchanges occur across that 'space'. They permeate and seep through, ignoring the artificial character of international borders and lines. I also follow Baud and Schendel insights into borderlands' politico-economic aspect that enables significant social and cultural change.⁶⁰

Although Barbara Morehouse suggests that conventional borderlands are essentially 'an area through which a boundary line runs', these 'spaces' are where a borderland cultural and social society straddles the international borderlines. James Scott's work on the Southeast Asian borderlands characterises an internal space, which may not straddle the border, but the population is resistant to the central state's attempt to control them.⁶¹ Meehan states that Burma does not fit the Western model of a sovereign state wielding a centralised monopoly of violence and legitimacy. Many ethnic groups, including the KNU, utilise violence in pursuit of recognition.⁶² Since its independence in 1948, its boundaries, political structures, and state-making approaches have been violently contested by a range of actors, by democracy

⁵⁹ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, and *The location of culture*; Alvarez, 'The Mexican-US Border', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, (1995), pp. 456.

⁶⁰ Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, 'Towards a Comparative History of Borderlands', *Journal of World History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (1997), pp. 211-242.

⁶¹ Barbara Morehouse, 'Theoretical Approaches to Border Spaces and Identities', in Vera Pavlakovich-Kochi, Doris Wastl-Walter and Barbara Morehouse (eds.), *Challenged Borderlands: Transcending Political and Cultural Boundaries*, (Aldershot, 2004), p. 29; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

⁶² Patrick Meehan, 'Drugs, insurgency and state-building in Burma: Why the drugs trade is central to Burma's changing political order', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, (2011), pp. 376-404.

movements and numerous armed ethnic-nationalist groups, among them the Karen, the Kachin, and the Shan ethnic groups. The campaign of organised violence against the Karen by the ruling Burmese military over the last seventy years has caused them to migrate from their villages and townships in Karen State to Thailand, leaving the majority in a 'state of liminality'. Alex Hinton and Victor Turner's views on liminality argue that the sovereign state atrocities create diasporic communities of people uprooted from their homeland occupying a 'liminal space'.⁶³ The weak state penetration of liminal spaces, such as the Karen State, is characterised by the mountainous and difficult-to-access geographical terrain. In Karen State, liminality is also shaped by Burma's military incursions and atrocities, which have uprooted people from their homeland and created the diaspora, where Karen occupy a 'liminal' space.

The geography of the borderlands is also pivotal in affecting liminality, established boundaries defined on maps by treaties with neighbouring countries such as Thailand and China and legislation that defines States within Burma. This borderland area is populated by many Karen settlements that make it meaningful and lived. Karen spaces such as Kawthoolei have been subject to immense historical shifts and change at the local and global levels. The population demography of a place also changes, as do political structures and administrative apparatuses that control the parameters of the place. The outcome is that these borderland places are rich, with complex layers that intersect and relate to the locale's changing nature but cannot be separated from the contested space that reformulate the narratives. This section has investigated how the Karen people have been subject to displacement by the Burmese military and how these borderland spaces have transformed Karen identity from farmers to refugees.

The next chapter will examine in depth how the Karen interpret and experience the borderlands and their spaces in intersecting social relationships across international borders through the narratives of displaced Karen.

Karen history through the eyes of refugees

Karen history is passed down orally from generation to generation, articulating their culture and traditions through the *hta* song-poems. The *hta* is a Karen form of

⁶³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, (New York, 1969), p. 26; Alexander Hinton. 'The Dark Side of Modernity', in Alexander Hinton (ed.), *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*, (Berkeley, 2002), pp. 1-42.

oral poetry used in storytelling or remembering their history. The Karen people have used it for many generations passing knowledge and is used by young and older Karen. These *hta*'s and recent forms of knowledge also inform contemporary Karen history, especially with the connection of oppression by the Burmese military and their orphan status resulting from their separation from their legendary father, Htaw Meh Pa. These *hta* song-poems will be explored in greater detail in chapter three. Here, however, the discussion focuses on the Karen approach to education seen through the prism of the *hta*. The beliefs and values the Karen attach to the *hta* infuse every aspect of their lives. A more in-depth insight into the identity of the displaced Karen today is connected with their identification of the past, connecting the value of education in Karen life. For example, in an article in a Karen state, school magazine Paw Kwee put this:

My teachers give me an education, and I know if I try to get an education, I will have more knowledge, and if I want my nation and freedom, I must try to get an education. ⁶⁴

Christian missionaries played a central role in constructing the concept of literary education amongst the Karen. The mythologised 'golden book' that was lost, which contained invaluable knowledge, identified many Karen myths with Old Testament stories. The emphasis on education dovetailed with the promises contained in the oral legends and the 'vision' of a better future, and the Karen highly values it. Education was a direct development from Christianity, and nationalism was borne out of the newly educated Karen elite.⁶⁵

By approaching Karen history through the lens of their oral stories and writing systems that have appeared since 1830, the literate networks provide another avenue to explore. Womack suggests that through the convergence of missionary ventures and Karen millennial movements, these literate networks promoted education as a tool for integrating Karen people into larger social groups.⁶⁶ Moreover, the actors who

⁶⁴ Paw Kwee, 'Thinking About My Heart Feeling Sad', *Thoo Lei Doh Sah Dru: Kaw Moo Rah High School Tenth Standard Magazine*, (1994), p. 9.

⁶⁵ Cheesman, 'Seeing 'Karen' in the Union of Myanmar', p. 210; Htoo Hla, *E 'Lō` Pa` Ywa`*, (The Karen Baptist Convention, 1955); Smith Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, pp. 6–7; Jonathan Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, pp. 226–31. D. C. Gilmore, 'Karen Folk-lore II: The Fall of Man', *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Vol. 2, (1912), pp. 36–42.

⁶⁶ Womack, *Literate Networks*, pp. 15-16.

promoted literacy - the missionaries, nationalists, monks and prophets, utilised the decisive symbolic significance of writing to advance their influence over Karen communities. The propagation of the Karen writing systems of Pwo and Sgaw in the nineteenth century also draws attention to the competitive interplay of these networks that redefined and incorporated Karen social groups during this period.

The Karen have handed down several versions of their ethnic history since they were published in the 1930s. These books are photocopied and widely circulated as underground editions inside and outside Burma among the Karen people. Two works narrate the Buddhist history of the Karen, and the other is a Christian version of Karen history, all of which were published in the last decade of the British colonial period: *Kayin Chronicle*, (1929) by U Pyinnya, *Kuyin Great Chronicle*, (1931) by U Saw these are significant as they constitute the first assertions of Buddhist Karen. The third is *A History of the Pgakanyaw [Karen]*, (1939) by Saw Aung Hla, a missionary educated inspector of schools for the colonial state. Saw Aung Hla calls his book simply 'a history book'.

In contrast, U Pyinnya and U Saw have 'chronicle' in the titles suggesting a historical account that memorialises the achievements of Burmese kings. The history book by Aung Hla has been abridged and reprinted into numerous versions in small leaflets and mimeographs. It is distributed at Karen New Year Festivals and other occasions. These 'chronicles' are significant because they were the first historical narratives and ethnic self-assertion made by Buddhist and Christian Karen. Little scholarly reference or analysis has been made of these Karen Buddhist publications, but my informants referred to them in Sheffield and the camp on numerous occasions.⁶⁷

Aung Hla wrote and compiled a history of the Karen people, which outlined the strictures of an all-encompassing Karen identity formed in the late nineteenth century. In the forward, he writes:

⁶⁷ Kwanchewan Buadaeng, 'Ethnic Identities of Karen Peoples', in James Peacock, Patricia Thornton and Patrick Inman, (eds.), *Identity Matters: Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict*, (Oxford, 2007), p. 93, note 4; Ikeda, 'Two Versions of Buddhist Karen History of the Late British Colonial Period in Burma', *Southeast Asian Studies*, (2012), p. 438.

I had therefore endeavoured to gather materials and, to the best of my ability, made a compilation of records of Burmese, Karen and English authors, not excluding the traditions and *hta* of Karen elders handed down by words of mouth so that we, of the present generation and our offspring in posterity will know and be fully enlightened about the concepts mentioned herein above.⁶⁸

The Buddhist chronicles ignore the Christian religion, whereas Aung Hla has a differing attitude towards his religion. Burman Buddhists might have deprived what he fears the most if the Sgwa Karen (Pgakanyaw) loss as a nation without putting up a fight, the Pgakanyaw of their unique language, script, culture, and religion. The other apparent purpose was to document the deferring versions of the historical oppression of Karen ancestors. The impact of this book on Karen nationalism was immense. It is still utilised by the Karen political organisations to develop a sense of Karen national identity and unity. On a visit to Mae La camp in 2011, I asked some of the teachers what type of textbooks they used in Karen history lessons in the camp. Most replied that Karen students use the Aung Hla text or the version supplied by the KNU. One informant replied:

Many of the children are born here in the camp. Too many of the children do not know their culture . . . they have not been in the village in Burma. It is very important we teach them about our culture through our Karen history books by the KNU and Aung Hla . . . we teach them what it is to be Karen . . . so that they can be proud and know about their homeland.⁶⁹

The teachers in many Mae La camp schools informed me on several visits that they considered it particularly important that Karen children know and understand their history. It is not surprising that the long history of war and multiple displacements have resulted in a high illiteracy rate in the camps. Moreover, many adults and children

⁶⁸ Saw Aung Hla (Translated by Pu Tamla Htoo), *The Karen History*, (Rangoon, 1932), p. 2.

⁶⁹ Conversation with teacher in No. 1 Middle School teacher, Mae La camp recorded in field notes in March 2011.

have not had the opportunity to access any formal education when living in Burma. After the lessons had finished, I asked an older woman why she was amongst the children. She replied:

Most of the Karen women I know have lived in the camp more than ten years. Before we came to Mae La, we have been running away from the Burmese army in the jungle, moving here and running there. Many women have not even had a chance to learn to read and write Karen. But now, in the camp, we learn about Karen history from teachers. I also learn to speak better English.⁷⁰

This conversation illustrates that many displaced women have not received much formal education in Karen State, Burma, and cannot read or write in either Karen or Burmese. Their pre-displacement education opportunities had been severely limited by the political and social situation and gender role practices and beliefs. Low literacy and education meant that many Karen women were unfamiliar with holding pens and unable to utilise dictionaries to assist with communication.

History textbooks are one mode in which conceptions of ethnicity and nationhood are conveyed, subjectivities are generated, and ideologies are reproduced. Trouillot suggests that history is not impartial, that historians often impose narratives on information that produce certain meta-narratives and silence others.⁷¹ History curricula are often inherently ideological and usually offer a nationalist narrative that legitimises the existing power structure (in the camps –the KNU). It often serves as an ‘identity’ resource through which Karen students construct ethnic self-understanding. Metro also suggests that extremist history curricula can increase inter-ethnic animosity and sometimes legitimise violence in conflict situations.⁷² This recognition has cultivated the hope that post-conflict curriculum revision may support peace.⁷³ Ethnic

⁷⁰ Key informant remarks in field notes by Mrs Htoo, March 2011.

⁷¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, 1995), p. 20.

⁷² Rosalie Metro and Nicolas Salem-Gervais, ‘A textbook case of nation-building: The evolution of history curricula in Myanmar’, *Journal of Burma Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (2012), pp. 27-78.

⁷³ Rosalie Metro, ‘Post conflict History curriculum revision as an “Intergroup Encounter” prompting interethnic reconciliation among Burmese migrants and refugees in Thailand’, *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 57, (2013), pp. 145-168.

categories are reproduced within the history textbook, including grammar, vocabulary, and meta-narrative. These narrative silences in the textbook offer the linguistic, religious, and sub-ethnic differences that could compromise the cohesion of 'Karenness', thus preserving the power of the KNU organisational elites.

School leaders in the camp and in-migrant schools in Thailand have been free to select their curriculum but choose to use the Aung Hla history textbook that the KNU provide. Most schools in the camps use history textbooks produced by the KNU. However, in the last few years, the Thai Ministry of Education (MOE) has collaborated with international NGO's such as ZOA and World Education to develop a standardised core curriculum in key subjects of Maths, English and Science as a method to address concerns that unregulated curricula may pose a risk to Thai national security.⁷⁴

The Karen shared stories of how they had understood their oppression from childhood can be illustrated by Saw Sanky's world view was demonstrated in his political awareness gained from his childhood experiences of oppression:

. . . ever since I was a young child, I knew that the KNU is the organisation that stands for the Karen people and always working for the Karen people. So, I decided that when I grow up, I will be involved in the KNU and working for the Karen people.⁷⁵

Participants in Sheffield also demonstrated this worldview in their response to why they attended a Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) seminar. In particular, two participants, Naw Suu Thaw and Saw Pan Hkoo stated they wanted to know more about their Karen history, the oppression of their people, and Burma's present situation so they could be of greater use to help their people.

Indeed, an examination of passages from the KNU textbook used in the camp schools illustrate that history teaching could potentially fuel inter-ethnic animosity:

⁷⁴ Thailand Ministry of Education, Office of the Education Council, *Educational provision for stateless and cross-national migrant children in Thailand*, (Bangkok, 2008); Nongyao Nawarat, 'Negotiating curricula for Burma migrant schooling in Thailand', *Social and Behavioural Sciences*, Vol. 143, (2014), pp. 872-878.

⁷⁵ Interview with Saw Sanky in Mae La refugee camp in April 1999.

We are, according to most historians, the first settlers in this new land. The Karens named this land Kaw-lah, meaning Green Land. We began to peacefully clear and till the land free from hindrances. Our labours were fruitful, and we were very happy with our lot. So, we changed the name to Kawthoolei, a land free from evil, famine, misery, and strife . . . here we lived characteristically simple, uneventful and peaceful lives until the advent of Burma . . . the Burmans came in they oppressed and enslaved the Karens.⁷⁶

Here, as in other KNU textbooks, the adjectives ‘peaceful’ and ‘simple’ are ‘co-located’ with Karen, while the verbs ‘oppress’ and ‘enslave’ are co-located with Burmans. In this way, the text establishes ‘logics of equivalence and difference’ in which Burmans and Karens are bounded, homogenous categories with clearly defined characteristics. This text suggests to Karen students an identity as innocent and oppressed victims, which legitimises the violent struggle against Burmans. This text is clearly ‘addressed’ to Karen students, but as many classrooms in the camps are of mixed ethnicity, it also relegates and labels Burman students as aggressors. For instance, the KNU textbook alleges that the Karens came to Burma before other nations did without acknowledging that many other ethnic groups also claim they arrived first.⁷⁷

A surprising response came from another Karen teacher, originally from Rangoon but now living in the camp. He was initially puzzled by the KNU textbook’s praise of the colonial British. The SPDC curriculum he had grown up with portrayed the British as oppressors whose divide and rule practices sowed dissension amongst the Burman population. The attending Karen assistant explained that many Karen people saw the British as protectors who developed education, health, and transport infrastructure. This clarification was a revelation to the Burman teacher.⁷⁸

The Karen education curriculum in Mae La Camp includes the promotion of Karen culture. Every Wednesday, children wear traditional Karen clothes to school –

⁷⁶ KNU-Karen Education Department, (KNU-KED), *The Karens and their Struggle for Freedom*, (Thailand, 2000), p. 5.

⁷⁷ Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual analysis for Social Research*, (London, 2003), pp. 36-37, 54, 215.

⁷⁸ Field notes from No 3, Middle School, Mae La camp in March 2011.

the girls wear their white 'chemowah' (a long white dress with flowing threads of varying colours), and the boys wear their 'chaka' (a V-neck striped shirt with tassels), and a cultural curriculum is taught including literature, music and Don dancing.

In their pursuit for a usable Karen past, both nationalists and missionaries appealed to the Karen oral traditions, particularly the poem-songs known as *hta*'s. This study draws attention to the tense ethnic relationships between the Karen groups and the missionary and colonial intrusions in constructing a Karen 'national' consciousness. It is not to over-accentuate the role of Christian missionary discourse in the building of Karen nationhood. Nevertheless, a relevant and vital distinction recent scholarship by Worland and Horstmann emphasises Christianity's influence on Karen identity formations.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the educated Christian Karen provided effective leadership, a voice in governance, and a ballast of the emerging Karen identity and nationhood. This does not imply that the impact of Christian conversions was insignificant. On the contrary, increasing Christian conversions in Karen village and township communities brought education and organisational benefits. However, this situation highlights a distortion of the Buddhist Karen during the nineteenth century. Christie suggests that it would have been likely that Buddhism would have become the dominant religion for most Karen and was gaining momentum amongst animist societies.⁸⁰ Christie's claim deviates from the thrust of my argument. It is essential to examine beyond Christianity's role and other dynamics that may have contributed to the present-day construction of Karen nationhood and identity. The impact of religion and the colonial encounter on Karen identity construction is profound in the awareness of identity and 'nationhood' consciousness.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Worland, *Displaced and Misplaced*; Horstmann, 'Sacred Networks'; Alexander Horstmann, 'Ethical Dilemmas and Identifications of Faith-Based Humanitarian organizations in the Karen Refugee Crisis', *Journal Of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, (2011), pp. 513-514.

⁸⁰ Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia*, p. 55.

⁸¹ Yoko Hayami, 'Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha: The Implications of Multiple Reinterpretations for a Minority Ethnic Group in Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, (1996), pp. 334-349; Clive Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonisation, Nationalism and Separatism (Volume 25)*, (London, 1996), p. 56.

I would argue that the KNU maintain an ideological stronghold within the camp refugees and resettled Karen communities. They are the dominant discourse producers submitting subject positions regarding Karen history education, 'Karen-ness', unity and supporting outlooks on Karen nationalism. In addition to drawing on historical claims of justifiable sovereignty, on extended narratives of 'suffering', the rhetoric of the KNU has reinforced ethnic and cultural identity, ensuring that displaced Karen communities become very cohesive. The KNU presented the Karen military struggle as a legitimate expression of Karen nationalism. The UNHCR resettlement process in the mid-2000s to resettle displaced Karen to third countries has softened the calls for military responses. The last decade has seen a seismic shift by the KNU to a 'peaceful dialogue' with the newly formed civilian government.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that Karen identity is attributed to British and missionary encouragement through the colonial encounter. I presented a brief history of the Karen in Burma with a complexity of religions, languages, and traditions among the Karen. Developments in the 1990s have badly affected their status, particularly the displacement of the majority Karen population within the Karen State. One result is a substantial decline in their numbers in Karen State.

Conflict on the borderlands has displaced Karen from Burma to Thailand, and in the refugee camps, the KNU dominated by Christian Sgaw Karen continue to be in leadership positions, and through this, they express Karen history's dominant discourse in the camps and Sheffield. However, this chapter has shown that Karen history textbooks have reinforced Karen unity and culture in the camps and has given illiterate Karen the opportunity for education.

There is an ongoing struggle between the KNU ethno-nationalist discourse and alternative Buddhist Karen relating to all Karen's 'authentic' representation, regardless of faith, language, or political ideologies. Thawngmung suggests that the Pwo Karen

are seldom heard outside of Burma. However, there have been tentative academic research on these ‘voiceless’ Karen living in Burma in recent years.⁸²

⁸² Thawngmung, *The “Other” Karen in Myanmar*, (2012); Indre Balcaite, ‘The Inaccessible Phlong (Pwo): Religious, Linguistic and Socio-Economic Hurdles for an Outsider’, *The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research*, Vol. 6, (2016), pp. 99-115.

Chapter 3: Contested spaces: The Karen in the Burma borderlands and Mae Sot

*the village I was born
far from metropolis
my village alluring
more than any place
with mountains and forests
and rivers and streams.
in the jungle growing up
I lived a barren life
although my life was poor
I had freedom
the beauty of Karen land
my ideal location.
without notice
suffering came quick to greet us:
soldiers
rapid
they burnt our house
an annihilated place.
rice barn to ashes
our food lost
inhabiting the forest deep
from my house of ashes
as the enemy searched for us
in the basket, father took me away
my village
I can never see again
the school where I fell in love
burnt down by a dictator
the school's books
into the ground
for knowledge
I went to the school in the jungle
made life in the jungle
moved from place to place, day through night*

'The land that the Karen lost', *Hta* poem by Tee Noe: (Karen resistance poetry, 2014), translated by Violet Cho (May 2014).¹

The *hta* poem above illustrates the persecution and oppression that many Karen refugees experienced in Burma. The Karen poet expresses his kinship with the land and the loss of village, land and possessions. This chapter will explore the themes in

¹ Violet Cho, 'Karen Resistance Poetry', *Transnational Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2014), pp. 1-4.

this poem of the loss of Karen lands to the Burmese military, their schooling and their eventual fleeing to Thailand.

Introduction

The chapter is structured in two parts. The first part examines the nature of the insurgencies and conflicts in Burma's 'borderlands'. It will examine how the Burmese nation-state and KNU armed group have been engaged in long-term conflicts to control these borderlands. The KNU forged alliances with peasant Karen communities in the borderlands, creating a '*de facto*' state of Kawthoolei in Burma. This section will also analyse state-sponsored violence, and Karen displacement from Burma to Thailand contested borderland spaces.

The second part of this chapter examines the social relations seen in the borderlands and the Thai town of Mae Sot. This chapter will contribute to the overarching argument that the displacement of Burma's Karen refugees to Thailand since 1988 has changed social and cultural practices that Karen now associate with 'hybridised' Karen identity.

Before and during the fieldwork, I equipped myself with several conceptual tools. These enabled me to grasp the interconnections between sovereign power and human life as manifested in state violence, refugees, and displacement and understand what was at stake in the flow of 'warehoused' people and these borderland areas in refugee camps on both sides of the Thai-Burma border.

We will see how the narratives of displaced Karen interpret the borderlands in intersecting social relationships across international borders. These relationships are framed through a dynamic fluidity of movement and intersections in many ways: resources, information, ideas, culture, and identity. This fluidity augments the possibilities available to the displaced Karen, particularly concerning mobilisation and political agency, allowing them to permeate and cross the border back to Burma with medical supplies and other forms of support.

I use this term periphery in two inter-related themes. The first is the location and the ethnic minority status of the people of the conflict zone, making them marginal within the geographic nation-state. The second theme is that the minority population and the conflict are often peripheral politically and demographically, portraying the central

state as minor or unacknowledged grievances. Moreover, numerous local leaders of ethnic minority groups of the peripheral populations do not influence national-level political and social structures. As a result, the Karen have endured long-term failure in political settlements and broader participation in constructing national identity within Burma.²

The term 'space' defines the Thai-Burma borderland as a spatial entity, and the location has a clearly defined political dimension ascribed to it. Doreen Massey's concepts of 'space' as the heterogeneity of local contexts construct identity in relational terms. This can be mapped onto the emerging 'new' Karen identity connected to the 'space' in which it is constructed. Her other main proposition is that 'space' is always under construction. It is continually changing, open and developing new linkages and relationships as new technologies allow the Karen to communicate with each other. These are always open to different articulations and interpretations.³

However, tension exists between the Thai and Burmese borderland spaces that impact Karen activities and relationships. Therefore, we need to examine the nature of the borderland from a discrete spatial perspective. This perspective can account for what Nevzat Soguk phrases, 'practices of statecraft'.⁴ It is also a fractured and dynamic view of 'space' that accounts for the contested social relationship across borderlands. The Burmese nation-state attempts to create a controlled space delineated by a border that becomes an expression of its political and military authority. Soguk expresses these 'practices of Statecraft' as the dominant state nationalist discourse differentiates their space/place from the 'others' that lie inside/outside their territorial domain.⁵ Nevertheless, despite the state's intentions, these borderland spaces are permeable and allow the Karen people to move between Thailand and Burma.

The conflict between the Burmese nation-state and the Karen connects state-making, state failure and state-sponsored violent conflict. Posen and Kaldor identify causative connections between state fragility and civil war since Burma's state

² Jonathon Di John and James Putzel, *Political Settlements: Issues paper*, (Discussion paper 2009).

³ John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping and the Geo-Coded World*, (London, 2004); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, (Minneapolis, 1994) and *For Space*, (London, 2005).

⁴ Soguk, *States and Strangers*, pp. 29-30.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 31-32.

political instability generates a fragmentation of authority and competing ethnic groups when facing a 'security dilemma' and usually take pre-emptive action to secure their territory.⁶

The Burmese nation-state attempts to control and articulate the geographic space, particularly their approach to governance of peripheral or borderland spaces. This articulation of state borderland control and its articulation is examined in the next section.

State making in Burma on the eastern borderlands.

To understand the Burmese state's micro-dynamics making on the periphery, we need to examine state-making and borderlands studies briefly. The use of the term 'state-making' associated with Charles Tilly's thesis is a contentious issue in its applicability beyond Europe. However, in this study, I use the term state-making broadly. It is within the context of Burma's military government and its state formation and consolidation activities along the Thai-Burma borderlands.⁷ This study adopts Tilly's use of the term 'state-making' to mean both the Burmese state's formation and consolidation activities. Burma's centralisation has seen the often-violent redistribution of local power resources away from ethnic minorities.

To some extent, this affirms Tilly's analysis of 'war-making and state-making as organised crime', in which both non-state and state actors seek to consolidate their hold on power and belong to the same multiplicity of organised extraction and coercion. The only distinction he views between them is the degree of legitimacy. Tilly also implies that the development of capitalism and the formation of citizen

⁶ Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World*, (Princeton, 1988); Barry Posen, 'The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict', in Barry Posen (ed.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, (Princeton, 1993); Mary Kaldor, *Human Security: reflections on globalisation and intervention*, (Cambridge, 2007); Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, 'Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 52, (2), (2008), pp. 436-455.

⁷ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990-1992*, (Oxford, 1992), Charles Tilly, 'War Making and State Making as Organised Crime', in Peter Evans and Theda Skocopol, (eds.), *Bringing the State Back In*, (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 169-180.

governments came as derivatives of the state-making processes. These have always been challenges to the nation-state from within and outside.⁸

Tilly's theories of the highly coercive state-making methods and the complex roles that the armed non-state actors help explain Burma's state formation insofar as how the Karen and other armed ethnic groups have used Burma's tenuous and sometimes fragile hold on these peripheral geographical spaces. However, the Karen can also be seen as part of the long and brutal politics of sovereignty and state making on these borderland spaces. The Karen have exercised a sixty-five-year long insurgent war with the Burmese nation-state in their demands for autonomy, which has caused the mass displacement of Karen to Thailand as refugees.

Burma's situation also confirms Andrew Tan's argument that armed ethnic/religious opposition groups challenge post-colonial Southeast Asian states on the borderlands or periphery. The outcome has resulted in civil wars; they have often lasted longer in Asia than anywhere else, displaying remarkably similar dynamics. These insurgent civil wars are usually conducted on the periphery or borderlands of the state, populated by ethnic or religious minorities who face a majority ethnic dominated nation-state.⁹ Tan also suggests that although the resistance can be political and ideologically motivated, they may also be organised on religious affiliation grounds.¹⁰ These ruthless methods of the Burmese state can be seen concerning the Karen, specifically in its dealings with the Karen National Union.

An increasing number of economic and political scholars identify civil wars and other forms of organised violent conflicts to be conceptualised as an ongoing and dynamic process.¹¹ These processes, over time, generate various incentives or constraints to continue the conflict. Cramer, Kalyvas and others suggest numerous impediments to

⁸ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States*, Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change*, (Princeton, 1994).

⁹ Lawrence Cline, 'Insurgency in amber: ethnic opposition groups in Myanmar', *Small Wars & Insurgency*, Vol. 20, Nos. 3-4, (2009), pp. 574-591.

¹⁰ Andrew T. H. Tan (ed.), *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia*, (London, 2009), pp. 3-9; James D. Fearon, 'Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3, (2004), pp. 275-301.

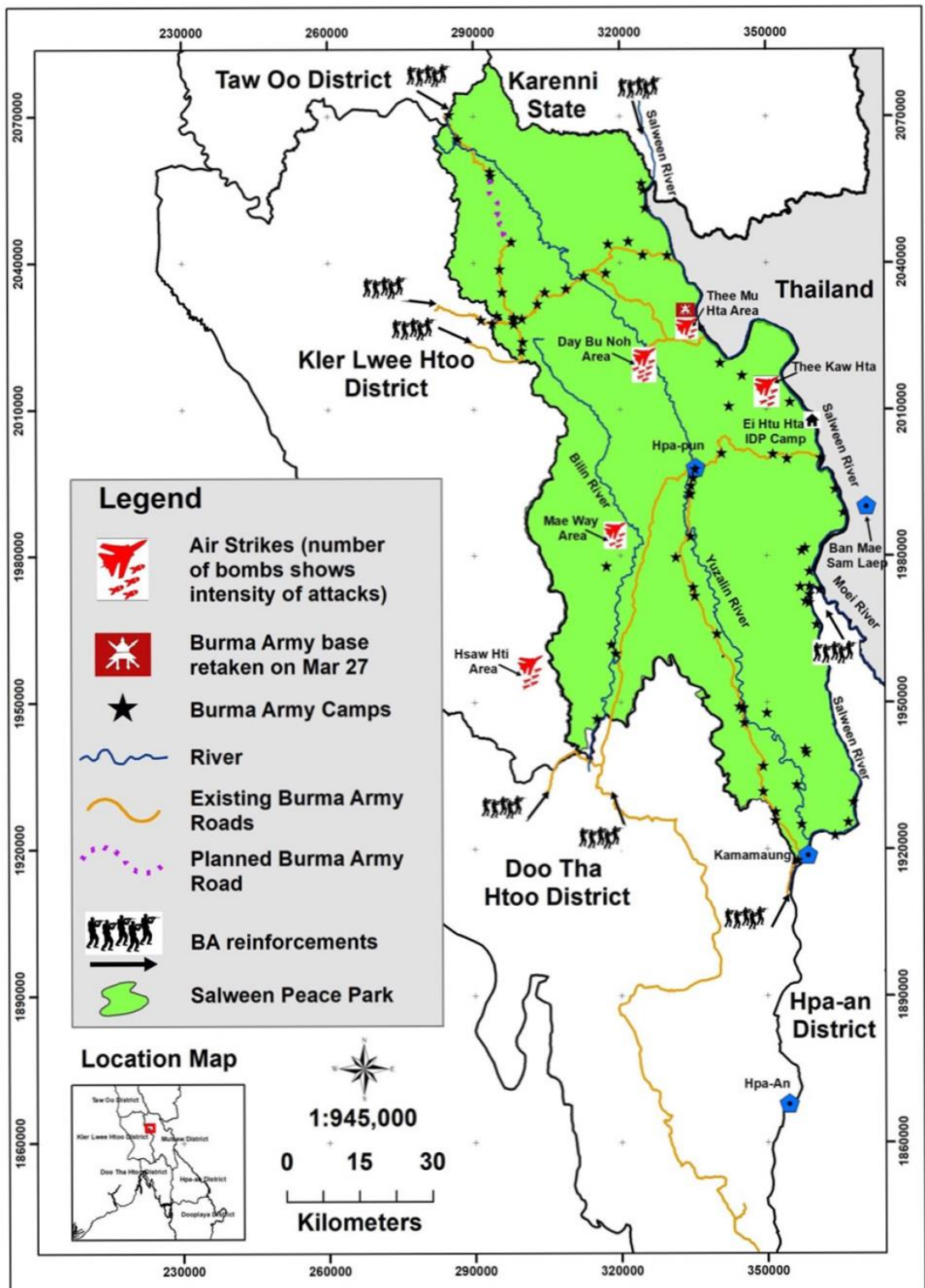
¹¹ Mark Gersovitz and Norma Kriger, 'What is Civil War? A Critical Review of its Definition and (Econometric) Consequences', *The World Bank Research Observer*, Vol. 28, No. 2, (2013), pp. 159-190; Edward Newman, 'The "New Wars" Debate: A Historical Perspective is Needed', *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 35, No. 2, (2004), pp. 173-189.

end civil wars of internal disorder when norms such as national identity or commitment to the rule of law are not shared by contending actors or when rebels fight for a transnational cause, simple the seizure of state power.¹² For example, the KNU has conducted an insurgent war with the Burmese state for over sixty-five years. The dynamics and objectives of both parties during the conflict's outcome have changed over this period.

In 2012, a ceasefire agreement had been implemented after eighteen months of negotiation, and in early 2020 the conflict situation in Karen State has been relatively stable, with only minor incursions and violence reported by CBO's and NGO's. However, on 1 February 2021, the Burma/Myanmar military declared that the 2020 election was 'null and void' and staged a coup d'état, sparking nationwide civil society demonstrations. The military responded with brutal force and repressive tactics. Between March and May 2021, the military began a series of deadly airstrikes on Karen villages in the Mutraw (Hpapun) District, Karen State, killing over 30 villagers, injuring many more and forcing several thousand to flee and attempt to cross the border into Thailand. Some 20,000 Karen villagers have been internally displaced seeking refuge in the forests of Salween Peace Park. Map 4 (page 95) indicates southeast Burma's current contested areas with all the insurgent groups.¹³

¹² Christopher Cramer, 'Does Inequality Cause Conflict?', *Journal of International Development*, Vol. 15, (2003), pp. 397-412; Dylan Balch-Lindsey, Andrew Enterline and Kyle Joyce, 'Third-Party Intervention and the Civil War Process', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 45, No. 3, (2008), pp. 345-363; Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, (Cambridge, 2006).

¹³ ICCA Consortium, 'Alert: military junta bombs Salween Peace Park in Indigenous Karen territory after coup d'état in Burma/Myanmar', (25 April 2021), [Alert: Military junta bombs Salween Peace Park in Indigenous Karen territory after coup d'état in Burma/Myanmar | Alert | ICCA Consortium](#), [accessed June 2021].



Map 4: Map of military airstrikes in northern Karen State: 27-28 March 2021. (ICCA, 2021).

Organised state violence in Burma: from the centre to the periphery

This section will explore the concept of what Mary Kaldor refers to as ‘new wars’ in her work of organised state violence. Kaldor also identifies and traces relationships between the military state, the non-state and local authorities and identifies prevailing patterns.¹⁴ Organised state violence in Burma has affected the Karen since independence in 1948. Firstly, definitions and a typology of organised state violence will be examined. Secondly, the causes of organised violence are explored, followed by a brief review of research on these actions' impact. Finally, it will conclude with an overview of organised violence in Burma by state and non-state armed actors.

State violence's typology may comprise an armed challenge to the sovereign and legitimate state authority by secessionist and civil war actors, even leading to genocidal acts by state and non-state actors.¹⁵ As explored earlier, Tilly investigated the positive connections between war-making and state formation. However, Giddens saw the appeasement of societies by nation-states leading to an ‘extrusion of violence’ from its domestic sphere into the international.¹⁶

The nature of state violence in Burma operates to suppress and eliminate dissenting voices by employing strategies where the culture of terror and displacement are used. The continued use of organised state violence and intimidation in Burma on the Karen people has displaced hundreds of thousands internally and to Thailand. In recent years, the Burmese military has responded to the Karen prolonged civil war with harsh counter-insurgency policies, which have deeply permeated civilian life and increased the cross-border exodus.

Forced displacement from Burma.

This part will examine the displacement of Karen from conflict areas in the eastern Burma borderlands. As argued previously, there is a convincing relationship between organised Burmese state violence and Karen civilians' displacement. However, the dynamics of this relatively new arena of scholarship are complex and

¹⁴ Mary Kaldor, ‘In defence of new wars’, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (2013), pp. 1-13.

¹⁵ The ICD (Institute of Cultural Democracy) Program for Human Rights and Global Peace http://www.ipahp.org/index.php?en_acts-of-genocide, [accessed September 2020].

¹⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence*, (Cambridge, 1995).

multi-faceted. This part will explore these displacement dynamics by the Burma Army in Karen State and exist in three forms.

There are four distinct but overlapping spaces of sovereignty in the Karen borderland areas, where political authority is exercised. The identifiable Burmese government-controlled ‘white zones’, the pockets of ‘black zones’ controlled by the KNU, the ‘brown zones’ which are areas with a multiplicity of intersecting forms of authority and lastly, the exilic ‘zones’ in Thailand, which include Thai towns, and the refugee camps which will be explored in the next chapter. The Burmese military designated the ‘black zones’ as free-fire zones, where ethnic Karen communities were forcibly relocated and, the army was instructed to shoot on-site anyone who contravened these instructions or remained soldier or civilian armed or unarmed.¹⁷

Callahan asserts that the Burmese military-controlled ‘white zones’ in Karen State has become notorious for extorting materials, money, and forced labour from the Karen population.¹⁸ In Karen State, considerable land is confiscated from the Burma Army villagers to make economic and political projects. These include enlargement of Townships (to accommodate the displaced people), military business ventures, rubber plantations, gold and wolfram mining, gas pipelines and hydroelectric dams.¹⁹

Furthermore, forced local labour has been systematically used in macroeconomic development projects such as roads and private-military controlled enterprises such as rubber plantations. Thus, it can be argued that the Burmese regime’s attempts at re-organising society and land rights for industrial or commercial production have institutionalised the dominance of armed coercion, executed in the same manner under British colonial rule. It follows a similar pattern of intimidating changes to patrimonial politics and capitalism found in many other countries.²⁰

¹⁷ Anne Decobert, *The Politics of Aid to Burma: A Humanitarian Struggle on the Thai-Burmese Border*, (London, 2015), p. 55; Heather Rae, ‘Internal Displacement in eastern Burma’, *Forced Migration Review*, No. 28, (2007), pp. 45-47.

¹⁸ Mary Callahan, *Political Authority in Burma’s Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, Occupation and Coexistence*, (Washington, 2007), p. 47; TBBC, *Protracted Displacement and Chronic Poverty in Eastern Burma/ Myanmar*, (Bangkok, Thailand. November 2010), pp. 2-3.

¹⁹ Townships are the third-level administrative divisions of Burma/Myanmar.

²⁰ KHRG (Karen Human Rights Group), *Civilians as Targets*, (Report, 30 April 2006); TNI (Transnational Institute), *Access Denied Land Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Burma*, Burma Policy Briefing, No. 11, (BCN [Burma Centrum Nederland], Prasert, 2013), pp. 1-16.

From the mid-1970s and up to 2012, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) implemented the Four Cuts (*Hpyat lay hpyat*) policy, a programme modelled on the ‘new village’ tactics the British Army developed during the Malayan Emergency, albeit ignoring the battle for ‘hearts and minds’. It sought to effectively sever the supplies of food, funds, contact and information in areas where they were perceived to be sympathetic to the Karen insurgents or resistant to the military regime.

This policy's strategies included torture, detention, and summary execution of villagers accused of supporting or contacting the Karen insurgents. Areas were identified as either insurgent-controlled, contested or government-controlled; entire districts were subjected to systematic extortion, crop destruction, and village food stocks' plundering. In addition, the villagers were ‘recruited’ as forced labour in land clearance and road construction or used as ‘human mine-sweepers’.

Burma and Thai Borderlands

Since independence, conflict over Burma's land rights and its natural resources has been central to the political economy. The extensive militarisation by armed ethnic groups, combined with similar land confiscation patterns in the transition to a military-capitalism economy, has become a significant issue in these partially securitised borderland areas. In Karen State, over 90 per cent of villagers are dependent on farming for their livelihoods. Moreover, farming is a way of life entwined with hill villagers' traditional animist beliefs with many land-related rituals such as the wrist-tying ceremony (this will be explored in detail in chapter six). The Karen are dependent on swiddening, wet-rice cultivation and a cash economy for their subsistence needs. Swidden farming is the predominant form of agriculture production within Karen village communities in Burma and pre-dates wet-rice cultivation. It has ensured the persistence of religious and ritual life that seems organised around the swiddens cycle.²¹

My two visits to Mae K'neh in Myawaddy Township and Ta Per Phar in Papun Township, Karen State in 2009, 2011 and 2013 support the assessments made by the TBBC into protracted displacement in 2010-15 on the eastern borderlands. However, Karen villagers' most critical and fundamental challenges have been in the alterations

²¹ Swidden agriculture, refers to a technique of rotational farming that the Karen have utilised in centuries, in which land is cleared for cultivation.

in land control. The following interviews illustrate the severe vulnerabilities of villagers in Karen State; this is a by-product of militarisation and a critical factor in displacement and impoverishment. In an interview with me, a female Karen villager reflected on her experience of displacement in Karen state, she said:

the Burmese army came to my village, destroyed our homes and crops, and they left landmines all over, so we could not go back. I dare not return . . . I have lost my family's land to the military . . . My family now have no home, and unless I can find food before my stocks run out, I will go to the refugee camp where I will be safe. ²²

The loss of land to the military and the effects of agrarian deterioration and the destruction of natural resources were common themes in Karen reports. This loss signifies the importance of land in Karen conceptualisations of cultural identity. Its importance lies in the spiritual role, which is at the centre of many traditional Karen cultural ceremonies and the agrarian role. The land provides employment and food for many of the Karen communities. The land is a central theme in the struggle for Karen imaginings of nationhood. It represents both an ideological conceptualisation of Karen culture and identity and a physical location being fought. Several Karen interviewees in Thailand and Sheffield talked about specific areas of land farmed by their families that they would return to if they could.²³

In these instances, the notion of land ownership falls within the parameters of nation-state interpretation of land tenure and the control of territory. For many Karen, the land represented 'home', a place representing peace and justice worth fighting. In these instances, the land conceptualises identity and meaning for many Karen villagers, epitomising the struggle for nationhood and an end-goal. It is important to note that the land is a crucial aspect of identification in the Karen imaginings of home. The Karen villagers see the pollution of their land by installing land mines and other forms of denial such as barbed wire and water contamination as 'land grabs' by the

²² Interview with anonymous Karen woman from Papun village Karen State, Burma in March 2009.

²³ Interview with anonymous Karen in Mae La camp March 2013, and with KNU member in Sheffield during Karen New Year January 2018.

military. Local farmers in the Toungoo district were forced to abandon their plantations. In a conversation with a Karen villager in 2019, he uttered his feelings:

Whenever I go to my plantation, I see a sign erected by the Tatmadaw that says, 'Military Land, do not trespass!'. This makes me feel heartbroken. I live in fear that the Tatmadaw will confiscate my land. All our work on the land will be for nothing. Our lives and families will be shattered because we depend on our plantation for our livelihood. We are only Karen farmers.²⁴

In another interview with a man conducted in March 2009, from a different village in Karen State, similar experiences were expressed:

After fighting broke out between SPDC and KNLA near our village in Kawkareik, the SPDC troops order all to move, or they would burn everything. They put many mines in the fields to stop us from planting crops. So, we all scatter to other villages and to the forests. Some try to return to their villages, but they were forced to leave again.²⁵

The testimony of the Karen villager in 2009 illustrates the extensive use of landmines by the Burmese military and the KNU, which has been active for more than twenty-five years in the borderland areas. The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) monitoring arm, *Landmine Monitor*, documented anti-personnel mine contamination in ten of the country's 14 States and Divisions, mostly in Karen and Karenni States.²⁶ In 2008, the Myanmar Ministry of Home Affairs mission inspected sites proposed for border area development and prospective village sites for returning refugees. It concluded that the areas were saturated with landmines, and extensive

²⁴ KHRG, 'Land confiscation by Armed actors in Southeast Myanmar', (May 2019).

²⁵ Interview with anonymous Karen man from Kawkareik Township village, Karen State Burma in April 2009 in Mae La camp and with villagers in 2013. [Both interviews recorded in Karen, translated and transcribed in Mae Sot in 2009 and triangulated by second translation and transcription in Sheffield during 2013].

²⁶ The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), *Landmine Monitor*, 'Mine Ban Policy', (2019), http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2019/myanmar_burma/mine-ban-policy.aspx, [accessed November 2019].

clearance would be required before any development. As a result, the de-mining plans were quietly shelved in 2008.²⁷

Numerous reports from 2001 to 2019 indicate the scale of the landmine contamination in southeastern Burma.²⁸ The Burmese military units in Bago Division, the Dawna mountain range, areas near Myawaddy and Dooplaya District of Karen State have extensively laid landmines. In an interview with landmine survivors in Mae La Camp in 2011, it was revealed that nearly half of the KNLA mine casualties were self-inflicted, whilst lifting, laying, or stepping on their own or their comrade's mines. Other casualties are often Karen farmers clearing their land for agricultural purposes. Survivors of mine incidents also reported some indicators of minefield dangers, such as parts of mines and wired and dead bodies.²⁹

In another interview conducted in 2013 with a female village chief Naw Kwy Tha, she said:

I have known about the farms that we don't dare to go across. We don't dare to go along the riverbank or across the farms. Also, we don't dare to go to collect vegetables in the forest because people planted *ta su htee hkaw htee* [in Karen literally: 'hit hands hit legs', meaning landmines]. We still don't dare to go, and we only stay in our garden. We just cut the mango tree branches. ... We just want this problem to be kept in peace . . . I mean taking out those landmines for us so we can work on our farms. We want to request that.³⁰

This interview with the female chief displays the challenges and responses of Karen communities in landmine-contaminated areas in Karen State. Villagers reported that the Burmese Army laid mines close to areas of civilian or farming activities and

²⁷ Yeshua Moser-Puangsuwan, 'Anti-personnel landmines in Myanmar (Burma): a cause of displacement and an obstacle to return', *International Campaign to Ban Landmines*, (December 2008), <https://odihpn.org/magazine/anti-personnel-landmines-in-myanmar-a-cause-of-displacement-and-an-obstacle-to-return/>, [accessed July 2020].

²⁸ Andrew Selth, 'Landmines in Burma: Forgotten Weapons in a Forgotten War', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, (2001), pp. 19-50.

²⁹ Interviews with four ex-KNLA soldiers and three civilians in Mae La camp in April 2011 and with three villagers in 2013 [all wish to remain anonymous].

³⁰ KHRG, Interview with Naw Kwy Tha, village head, Thaw Waw Plaw village, Noh Kay village tract, Pa'an District, 9 April 2011 and March 2013.

are routinely used by the army to dissuade Karen people from returning to their villages after forced eviction after counter-insurgency campaigns. Although the village chief assumed that I had access to the KNU senior leadership in her final interview remark, it was explained that I was researching a study in shifting gender roles. Some Karen villagers in Pa'an District moved three times after each previous settlement was burned and subsequently mined. In those areas of mine contamination, villagers could identify six different mine types but were unaware of the dangerous areas even though the entire village regularly visited mined areas for farming and foraging. One of the most common issues by women related to landmine contamination was the negative impacts on their livelihoods, either due to family members and livestock being injured or killed or restrictions on access and movement. In one case reported by KHRG in Lu Thaw, Hpapun District, in June 2013, a woman was left widowed after her husband was killed by a landmine while working on his land. In addition to family members being injured or killed by landmines, many Karen women faced livelihood problems after their livestock stood on landmines. Women in Karen State employ several agency responses to the threat and effects of landmines. These have included submitting complaint letters to the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC), negotiating directly with armed actors who use landmines and sending landmine incident reports to the Karen National Union (KNU).³¹

Villagers are not passive victims of this indiscriminate weapon; they often employ various strategies to avoid landmine-contaminated areas. These strategies are not always practical or sufficient in negating fatalities or serious injury. The local perspective on landmines is not always uniform. Depending on the actors employing landmines (the KNU) and the dynamics of abuse, the villagers sometimes view mines as a potential source of protection.

Despite the ceasefire between the Burmese government and the KNU in 2012, the ethnic civil society and the KNU have expressed the view that de-mining activities in contaminated areas at present are not desirable. KNU officials indicated that the Burmese army sets up outposts and sees troop movements through the areas they (the KNU) control. The KNU Township administrators maintain that until the Burmese

³¹ KHRG, '*Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles*', (Mae Sot, 2016), p. 4-6.

troop withdraw, the landmines provide some level of security and safety for villages under their administration and that local people are aware of the minefield locations.³²

During 2010, the SPDC attempted to pressure ethnic ceasefire groups within Karen State to transform into the Border Guard Force (BGF), and this strategy increased insecurity in relatively stable areas. Although the main ceasefire parties resisted pressure to join the BGF, calling for a review and political dialogue, the Burmese Army extorted villagers and forced conscription to form ethnic militia units.³³

With the subsequent loss of Karen territory, the Burmese army spread further into lowland areas close to the Thai border. In Karen State, tradition and a male-dominated social order ensured that men were village heads or chiefs. However, this order is crumbling, giving rise to a new phenomenon of more villages in these areas appointing women village chiefs. This trend adds an essential dimension to the way Karen women are viewed, and Blooming Night Zan revealed in an interview in March 2011 and April 2013 that:

Due to the conflict, people only think of women as victims. But now, we are seeing that they also have been taking on very challenging leadership roles. These roles require much courage for they are dealing with the Burmese army . . . Karen villagers are themselves surprised by the emergence of women as leaders in their midst.³⁴

Therefore, the evidence suggests that the Karen women are stepping into the vacuum formed as more Karen men fled their villages, avoiding taking on traditional leadership roles out of fear of persecution by the Burmese army or joining the armed Karen resistance. Other testimonies reveal that being village heads or leaders has brought mixed fortunes for these Karen women, some of whom have been local leaders since the 1980s. For example, one Karen woman chief said:

³² Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), *Land Rights and Mine Action in Myanmar*, (2014), p. 25.

³³ BNI (Burma News International), 'Myanmar Peace Monitor, Border Guard Force Scheme', <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/background/border-guard-force>, [accessed 12 July 2020].

³⁴ Interview with Karen Womens Organisation (KWO) Chairperson, Blooming Night Zan at Chiang Mai in March 2011 and April 2013.

My family and some other villagers did not want me to be the leader. I choose to do it because I am thinking about the future of our Karen community. I became village chief in 1985, and I served for over twenty years. The villagers like me because I fight for them.³⁵

However, being the chief of a village community also invites abuse and persecution from the Burmese military. These take on the form of extortion, with forced labour to carry arms, torture and portering. These views are confirmed in a KWO report, which chronicles this gender shift in Karen State and highlights women's fate in a conflict zone with over 3,500 villages destroyed in the last fifteen years. One of the Karen women chief interviewed in the report revealed that:

When I was village chief and forced to porter, they raped me . . . and then they started to beat and torture me. They beat me on the chest, then they tied me up and beat me with a bamboo stick until the stick broke. I was then put in a dark room and left for two days.³⁶

Despite some appalling abuses that these women suffer, they do not suffer in silence, as has been for the men when threatened by the Burmese military. On the contrary, their display of anger through shouting and berating the officers, often shaming them in front of their soldiers, has had a tempering effect in recent years.³⁷ Many women are adopting the headman's or village chief's role usually reserved by men in the last ten years, illustrating the changing nature of Karen women's identity within Burma. It is also being replicated in the refugee camps in Thailand and Karen community organisations in resettlement. These gender role reversals support my argument that Karen identity is being modified and re-negotiated.

³⁵ Interview with Kwy Tha, village head, Thaw Waw Plaw village, Noh Kay village tract, Pa'an District, 9 April 2011 and March 2013).

³⁶ KWO, *Walking Amongst Sharp Knives*, (Mae Sot, 2010), pp. 19-20, Marwaan Macan-Maker, 'Politics-Burma: Conflict Pushes Karen Women to be Village Chiefs', *Inter Press Service*, (2010), [POLITICS-BURMA: Conflict Pushes Karen Women to be Village Chiefs — Global Issues](#), [accessed 10 November 2020].

³⁷ KWO, *Kill Me Instead of Them: A report on the Resilience of Karen women chiefs*, (March 2020), p. 12.

In 2006 a KHRG report detailed the abuse and agency of Karen women in southeastern Burma in a militarised context during the conflict period.³⁸ In light of such abuse, external media representations of Karen women have illustrated stereotypes of women in armed conflict areas, which depict nothing but their helplessness and vulnerability. However, the findings of this report demonstrate that such representations can be both inaccurate and harmful. These media representations miss the many ways Karen women actively respond to abuse and resist militarisation, undermining local women's attempts to determine how they and their communities develop. Such portrayals promote external perceptions and intervention that neglect local concerns and the strategies these women employ to claim their rights. Whilst they are constrained by military abuse, Karen women have also been actively working to lessen the harmful effects of militarisation and maintain their dignity regardless of systematic oppression. The women's responses go well beyond the 'coping strategies' by including deliberate non-compliance, evasion and other aspects of resistance used to retain control over their own lives.

Karen men have been targeted for heavy forced labour such as portering and torture on false accusations as KNU 'insurgents' for purposes of extortion. Many men leave their villages when the Burmese military forces are conducting frequent patrols to escape such abuses. This exodus leaves the Karen women to protect the children, the elderly and the household belongings and confront the soldiers entering their villages. Karen women then face an even greater risk of being taken for forced labour in place of men or charged that their missing husbands and sons are KNU 'insurgents' and then being tortured and detained as a means of pressuring their missing men to 'surrender'.

While gender roles have shaped the type of military abuse and its effects on Karen villagers, the fluidity of such roles means that individual women can play an active part in redefining them. Women in Karen society have reacted to abuse in ways that have challenged traditional gender roles. As previously indicated, Karen women have increasingly taken on the position of the village head, in which they serve as mediators between the military and village community. In this role, they have successfully

³⁸ KHRG, *Dignity in the shadow of oppression: The abuse and agency of Karen women under militarisation*, (Mae Sot, 2006), pp. 4-6.

utilised traditional norms of respect for Karen women to negotiate reduced military demands on their village communities.

As military restrictions and extortion have severely hindered the provision of education and medical care at the village level, Karen women have increasingly taken on roles as medics, teachers, and midwives, both as means to support their families and as a service to their communities. The Karen women have broadened the family's subsistence base by adding cash crops grown in hidden jungle clearings or getting involved in small-scale inter-village trading. They have also developed novel forms of inter-community mutual support. For example, Covert 'jungle markets' allow Karen women living in hiding and those in military-controlled communities to exchange goods and thereby evade military restrictions on trade. In their roles as caregivers within the family, Karen women fleeing attacks on their homes have had the principal responsibility to manage the family's flight and relocation into nearby forests. They have coordinated the quick packing and evacuation of the family's belongings, food and children. They have constructed temporary shelters, organised education for the children in displaced communities, foraged for food and worked as midwives and teachers in these situations.³⁹

Karen women's political participation during the insurgent conflict in Burma remained low despite the KNU experiment with Marxist ideologies, a factor that many scholars have identified as a good indicator of a commitment to gender inclusivity and female participation in the conflict.⁴⁰ Thus, the Karen conflict is an ideal case study for studying women's political participation during wartime with the varied role that women's groups have played in the KNU. Following Kampwirth's work on the guerrilla movements in Chiapas, Central America, she argues that establishing women's organisations is one of the primary ways ethnic insurgent groups mobilise women to their cause and build ties with other social groups to pressure the government to reform. Beckwith also suggests that women's organisations are central

³⁹ A KHRG report in 2016 supports many of these observations and interview taken between 2011 and 2013. The report, *Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women's testimonies from southeast Myanmar*, post-dates my studies in Burma and Thailand.

⁴⁰ Cindy D. Ness (ed.), *Female terrorism and militancy: agency, utility, and organization*, (New York, 2008); R.M. Wood and J.K. Thomas, 'Women on the frontline: rebel group ideology and women's participation in violent rebellion', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (2017), pp. 31-46.

to political engagement because women often share a common political exclusion experience as a class. Thus, when women venture into the political arena, they will seek to petition collectively, commonly through participation in women's groups.⁴¹

Many Karen women have explored new forms of political agency and exposed the regime's atrocities, such as sexual violence as a weapon by the Burmese state against ethnic minority groups. There is also evidence of sexual violence being deliberately used as a policy by the Burmese military to discourage women from asserting themselves in villages' leadership positions. The organised use of sexual violence against women by Burmese military forces has impacted women's ability to travel and work independently, contributing to a 'culture of fear' in which women fear for their safety at all times. Many of the women village leaders interviewed by the KWO in 2010 reported that their family members and women villagers had been raped by Burmese army officers, sometimes as punishment for non-compliance with orders. In many cases documented and reported in 2004 by the KWO, women subjected to sexual violence were accused of supporting or having relatives belonging to the KNU/KNLA.⁴²

Conflict drives women into political arenas and leadership positions by removing the power structures that often exclude them. Unfortunately, the insurgent conflict in Burma created new institutional barriers that can hinder and benefit women's ability to take advantage of the power vacuum. As economic prospects for villagers have collapsed under severe military restrictions on movement, some Karen women (particularly unmarried Karen women) have chosen to migrate outside of their communities to Thai towns searching for employment to support their immediate families. Through their employment of diverse response strategies, Karen women have

⁴¹ Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the legacy of revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas*, (Athens, 2004). Karen Beckwith, 'Beyond compare? Women's movements in comparative perspective', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 37, No. 4, (2000), pp. 431-468.

⁴² KWO, *Shattering Silences: Karen Women speak out about the Burmese Military Regime's use of Rape as a Strategy of War in Karen State*, (Mae Sot, 2004); KWO, *Walking Amongst Sharp Knives*, (Mae Sot, 2010), Nicholas Henry, 'Chapter 8: A Place on the platform: the participation of women in Karen community organizations', in International IDEA, *Journeys from Exclusion to Inclusion: Marginalized women's successes in overcoming political exclusion*, (Stockholm, 2013), pp. 266-293.

proven themselves adaptable and highly competent in confronting life's challenges under military abuse and countering military efforts to control and abuse them.

However, my findings suggest that such representations can be both inaccurate and harmful. They miss the many ways Karen women actively respond to abuse, resist militarisation, and undermine local women's attempts to determine how they and their communities develop. Such portrayals foster external perceptions and intervention that neglect local concerns and the strategies these women employ to claim their rights.

The relationship between the KNU, the displaced Karen, and Burma's economic trade expansion has transformed Mae Sot and the borderland areas. It is the principal trade gateway between Thailand and Burma.⁴³ A symbiotic relationship exists between the Thai authorities and the Karen. In 2013, at the KNU office in Mae Sot, I asked one of the KNU ministers about the cross-border and river trade. I asked him whether taxes on specific items were imposed on them, he replied that the riverbank merchants do not pay taxes; it was *withi chiwit* (Thai for a way of life).

It was a traditional thing being allowed to trade and import/export merchandise to and from Burma.⁴⁴ Their activity as *withi chiwit* problematises the conventional view of state law violators and illegal traders. Instead, they cross the border freely without much intervention from the Thai state, subverting state control. In my forays into Burma, I have crossed the Moei River on many occasions without the need for passport control to visit Karen people and relatives. Smuggling is a 'normality' and 'legitimate' economic activity that benefits both the town and the refugees. In some sense, I argue that these porous borders exist because they do not seek to overthrow the state because their existence depends on it. This section has revealed that the border has been a trade hub for the Burmese state, the unauthorised Karen smugglers, and the border town of Mae Sot. They co-exist in an intimate and symbiotic relationship.

The conflict in Karen State, Burma, has displaced hundreds of thousands of Karen to refugee camps in Thailand. It has enabled the border to become porous and flexible for Karen people in Thailand and Burma to cross. It is commonplace for Karen

⁴³ Denis Grey, 'From Backwater to Boomtown- Thailand's Mae Sot', *Asian Review*, February 2015), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/From-backwater-to-boomtown-Thailand-s-Mae-Sot>, [accessed July 2020].

⁴⁴ Anonymous interviewee, at the KNU offices in Mae Sot, 11-14 April 2013.

to live in the camp and illegally cross back into Karen State in Burma or settle as undocumented migrants in border towns such as Mae Sot. The following section will explore the Karen that decide to live in the town of Mae Sot and the links they have with other Karen.

Mae Sot – the Thai city

This section will examine the flourishing relationship between refugees from Burma and the Thai border town of Mae Sot. It will explore the physical space and how the Karen have adapted and reworked by their presence. My study will consider interviews with displaced Karen in Mae Sot and how they have adapted to Thai restrictions.

The Thai border areas changed significantly following the large influx of Karen refugees into Thailand in the early 1980s. Border towns such as Mae Sariang, Mae Hong Son and Mae Sot, all located on the western border of Thailand, have become synonymous with the growing Karen refugee migrations. I will investigate Mae Sot as it is the largest and busiest cross-border focal point in western Thailand. Mae Sot is four kilometres from the Moei River, which constitutes the geographical border with the ‘Friendship Bridge’ linking with the Burmese border town of Myawaddi and is the official border checkpoint. The long and narrow Moei River makes the border point very porous; the photograph (page 112) indicates the porosity and the unchecked nature by border guards on the Burmese side of the international border. Nevertheless, by various means, people can easily cross the river, the most popular being by boat, costing 40 Baht (£1.00) for a round trip. Officially, there are twelve border checkpoints along the river, but there are approximately thirty channels to cross the border unofficially.⁴⁵

Many different ethnic groups have lived and settled in this frontier town for over a hundred years, and it continues to be a manifestation of multi-faceted locales where both official and extensive black-market economic transactions are thriving. As a border town, Mae Sot has been a site for conflict and accommodation of refugees, on the one hand, and a site for Thai and Karen cultural translations and negotiations. On

⁴⁵ Karen News, ‘Thailand’s Military coup a headache for migrant workers’, 3 June 2014, <http://karennews.org/2014/06/thailands-military-coup-a-headache-for-migrant-workers/>. [accessed October 2020], Pobuk Supatsak, ‘Negotiating a Border Regime for Rights of Refugees on the Thailand-Myanmar Border’, Article presented at 13th Asia Pacific Sociological Association Conference, Phnom Penh, (September 2016), pp. 1-6.

the other hand, it has harboured Burmese traders and civilians fleeing from the KNU and Tatmadaw conflict in the last two decades.

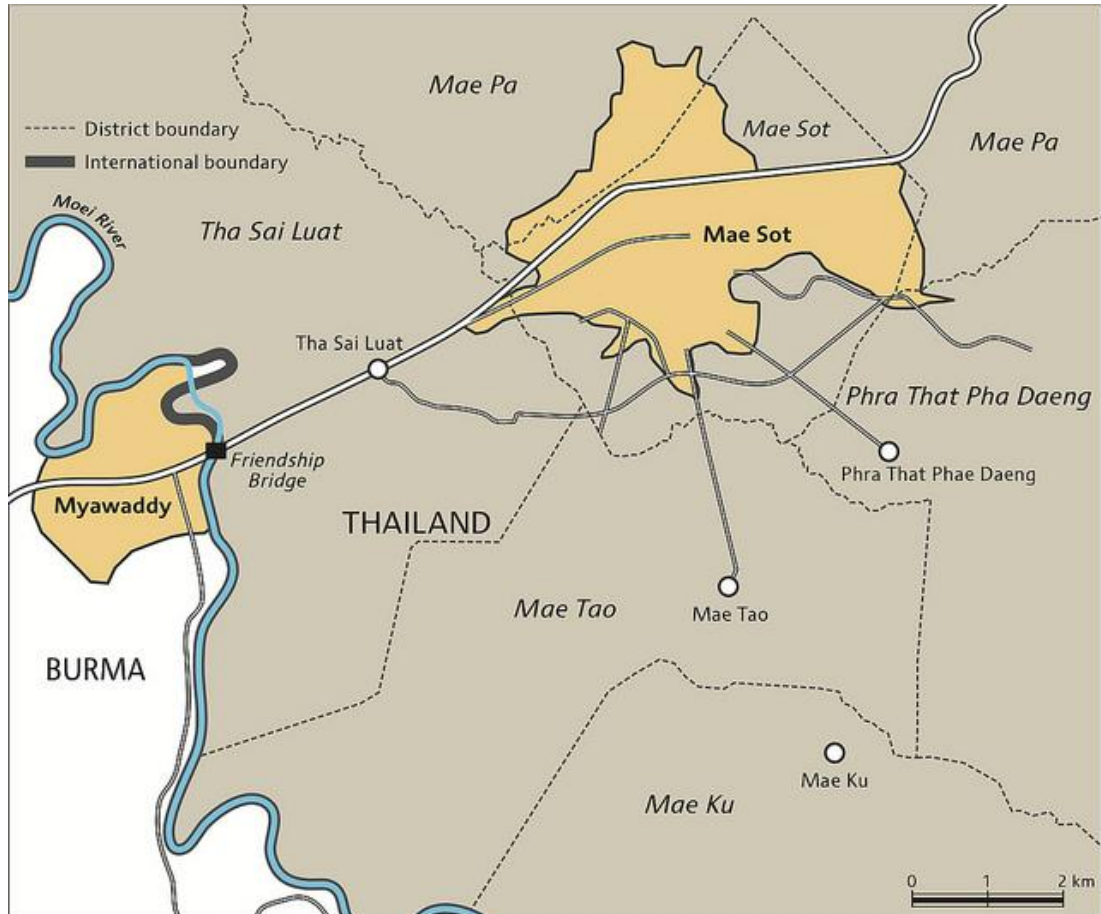
In 1937, Mae Sot was a local administration constituting 27 villages and was administered by a village headman, and its population was 12,000. In 2010, it was established as a city municipality and had many state agencies such as the military, immigration, and border police to monitor and check migration flow between Burma and Thailand. An essential tool in determining who and what enters Thailand is identifying papers such as passports, ID cards, and Burmese day border passes at the border and checkpoints around Mae Sot. The checking of these documents and police patrolling, with subsequent arrest and deportation, maintains Thai national security. This border regime has established these identification practices to regulate the flow of people, both legal and illegal, into Thailand. In this context, the document holder can access certain welfare rights and some protection, although some restrictions are attached to each type of document. According to the Thailand Immigration Act, individuals are deported to their country of origin without official documents.⁴⁶

Map 5 (page 111) indicates Mae Sot's central position in the cross-border trade, both legal and illicit, with Burma. When compared with other Thai border towns, the illegal trade through Mae Sot was immense. In the late 1980s, the Burmese military government introduced an 'open door' policy and subsequently developed the Burmese border town of Myawaddy as a point of bilateral trade with Thailand to officiate trading patterns supplanting the black markets alongside the border. However, this Burmese development was not successful, cautious in protecting some of its industries combined with the introduction of sanctions by many Western countries in 2003 on human rights violations, resulting in a substantial reduction in consumer goods imported and exported from Burma.⁴⁷ However, following signs of liberalisation and democratic election in 2016, the US sanctions were formally eased and improved economic links. As a result, Burma's border trade with Thailand

⁴⁶ The Irrawaddy, 'Hundreds of Myanmar workers arrested by Thai police in Mahachai', 19 October 2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/hundreds-myanmar-workers-arrested-thai-police-mahachai.html>, [accessed October 2020].

⁴⁷ Toshiro Kudo, 'Border Industry in Myanmar: Turning the Periphery into the centre of Growth', IDE Discussion Paper No. 122, *Institute of Developing Economies*, (2007), p. 2.

increased, and it is now its sixth-largest trading partner in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).⁴⁸



Map 5: Map of Mae Sot (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

The international and local humanitarian agencies, civil society organisations, medical centres, schools, and cross-border businesses provide some rights to the Burmese refugees and migrant workers. Although unofficial, these agencies issue identification documents to the refugees, although they allow the holders the right to mobility in Mae Sot as the Thai authorities recognise them as ‘proof of status’. Karen refugees have employed these ‘unofficial’ identification documents provided by non-state agencies to ‘stretch’ their rights and access to work, health, welfare facilities and

⁴⁸ Yaw Zar Ling, ‘An Analysis of the Effect of Border Trade Value on Myanmar Economic Growth’, Paper T738, *Asia-Pacific Conference on Global Business*, (Bangkok, 2017), pp. 1-39.

education in Mae Sot. The following will examine how they use these documents to access these rights, which they could not in the camps.



Photo 8: The Burma side of Moei Riverbank, (Karen News, 2014).

In Mae Sot, the many migrant schools for the Karen refugees and workers play an essential role in acquiring accredited degrees and acceptable certificates in education for further education or employment. Therefore, the Thai government encourages all children and adults, regardless of status, to access primary education and acknowledges migrant schools as learning centres (MLCs). These centres are overseen by the Migrant Education Coordination Committee under the Ministry of Education.⁴⁹

Mae Sot has an interdependent relationship with Mae La refugee camp, the largest on the borderland. This geographical and symbiotic bond expresses itself in many ways with continuous movement between the two sites and divided family living arrangements. Many CBOs work between the two sites on health and education amongst the many challenging issues of refugees. The camps have also attracted an increased Thai military presence, media journalists, numerous aid agencies, religious

⁴⁹ As of May 2021, there are 64 migrant learning centres (MLCs) accommodating over 14,000 refugees and migrants in Mae Sot.

organisations, and academics, primarily base themselves in Mae Sot. Sharples supports the suggestion that this borderland area has introduced significant Western influences on the displaced Karen identity and culture. Interviews with Karen youth, particularly in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, Thailand, reveal that these Western influences have broadened the reach and nature of the refugee situation and the larger Karen political struggle regularly interact through social media forums and the internet with Karen refugees both in Mae La camp and friends located in Mae Sot. The KNU, through web-based forums, regularly update information about the current situation on the borderlands. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been adopted as vehicles for exchanging ideas and political challenges to the established medium of authority. Displaced Karen living in Mae Sot are in continual contact with their relatives and friends in the diaspora and Burma. Mae Sot has arguably become a digital transit point as an intersection of ideas and interchange of politics.⁵⁰

The transnational and translational inter-twined to form a hybrid culture, the displaced Karen acquire this by conforming with local Thai culture and customs. Because of this intertwining, Mae Sot typifies the diverse social relationships between the displaced Karen in these borderland spaces. The use of global media technologies in the internet cafes of Mae Sot reconfigures the Karen culture into a new form of cultural signification for the displaced. The social interactions of displaced Karen in the diaspora and their identity construction will support our understanding of displacement from conflict areas.⁵¹

The pattern of collaboration between the actors in the borderland spaces brings about different types of interaction beyond conventional understanding. There are formal and regulated ways of relationships and informal patterns of interaction, and these can be revealed by the 'informal' political relationship between the Thai authorities and the KNU and the interaction of Karen refugees/town dwellers.

⁵⁰ Participant interviews and observational research with numerous Karen residents in Mae La and borderland areas in Mae Sot and surrounding districts, during 2009, 2011 and 2013 visits. Sharples, *Spaces of Solidarity*, pp. 26-27.

⁵¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Cultures*, p. 247; for a journalistic view of Mae Sot, see Phil Thomson, *Restless Souls*, (Bangkok, 2006).

The Karen in Mae Sot

Refugees can integrate and participate in Thai society through official channels and documents issued by the nation-state. However, obtaining such documents for non-citizens is very problematic. A national Thai ID card can take up to a year and require supporting documentation (a passport) and large fee upfront. Refugees leverage kinship and ethnicity to acquire such a document, but it does not allow the holder to complete Thai citizenship. They can join Thai society with partial citizenship status, but it negates any other rights to resettle or repatriation back to Burma. In a conversation with a Karen refugee who said:

no one will recognise you if you do not have a valid ID card or Thai citizenship. . . Even the document I have from the organisation is not really a national identification card. The card shows that I belong to the country but not a full citizen.⁵²

Local integration can also be viewed as negotiation by the refugees to obtain their rights and privileges. In this case, the document affirms local integration in the country of asylum as a solution to staying in the camps, where he could not enjoy rights and privileges to drive around Mae Sot on Karen organisation business legally. In another statement by another Karen refugee in Mae Sot about negotiating citizenship rights, he mentioned:

Though I have the 10-year ID card (for Unregistered Persons), I don't have the Thai ID card. This is all they give refugees in the camps, having it is better than nothing . . . it is a partial status but legal you see . . . I can get some freedoms and civil rights, and I feel safe when I have the document. I can be employed and earn a living in Mae Sot but don't live anywhere nice.⁵³

⁵² Interview with Saw Tha Dar La at Poonnagunn Hotel in March and April 2013.

⁵³ Conversation with Naw Jury in coffee shop in Mae Sot April 2013.

This interview illustrates how refugees whose Burmese citizenship was deprived due to the conflict in Karen State and how they adapt their situation to local jurisdictional requirements. Both refugees can access certain rights such as health care, employment, and education and, in this case, upgrades them from non-status to partial citizenship. The restrictions on employment within the camps along the border instigate the refugees to seek employment opportunities outside the camps to support themselves or their families. All refugees understand the importance of documents such as passports, work permits and migrant worker ID cards to find employment in the Mae Sot district. However, camp registration and enforced confinement by the authorities reduce the chances of obtaining these documents. Ethnic and personal networks are used to get them the documents. In another conversation:

If I stayed in Mae La camp, I would have had no future. I decided to give up my refugee status and seek a job outside in Mae Sot. When I try to get my money, it all went to the policemen . . . It is very tough if we do not have the correct papers here . . . then I ask my employer to help me get a work permit and maybe a passport to work legally in town. I do not need to hide now and feel better as I can feed my family.⁵⁴

These case studies illustrate the extensive use of unofficial documents issued by ethnic organisations to extend the refugees right to work within specific parameters. By issuing their organisation identity cards to refugee staff, they effectively leverage their ethnicity to get employment with health centres and migrant schools in the city. A refugee working at Mae Tao clinic serving Burmese refugees and migrants told her story:

I know my medical centre card is not an official Thailand, but I use it when I need to travel from the camp to the doctor Cynthia's clinic . . . the local police accept it. But the card does not allow me to work for my people from Burma. But it ensures my safety. I wasn't to be a nurse in Karen State . . . I want to work for my Karen people, but my education certificate from the camp are not recognised in

⁵⁴ Interview with Saw Tae So Way at KNU office in Mae Sot in March 2011.

Thailand or Burma . . . I don't have a citizenship document . . . I also can't apply for university without citizenship papers. I need to have an acceptable degree and education from the migrant school where I get more knowledge and gain an official degree to apply for a university in Bangkok.⁵⁵

The displaced Karen that have settled in Mae Sot congregate and live in enclosed residential compounds around the Mae Pa area, where many households get together within a particular area. These compounds can be seen all over the Mae Pa district, and some are in the downtown area. These enclosed compounds' size varies, from small ones, with up to ten households to larger ones with up to forty households. Some compounds are exposed so blatantly that one can readily recognise them, while some compounds are camouflaged, and it becomes exceedingly difficult to locate or discern the entrance. These are most conspicuous around the places of the Thai Government offices, UNHCR or other NGO buildings. Numerous Karen leaders or organisations that I have visited over the years live within their own residential houses. However, this only applies to those Karen leaders who are involved in political activities. For example, displaced Karen are often employed as drivers transporting KNU Central Committee (CC) members or visiting dignitaries to Mae Sot locations. My early years of visiting KNU leaders often involved evasive strategies to avoid Thai authorities or perceived threats from the Burmese military.

On one occasion, while having a formal dinner meeting with most KNU CC members, we changed vehicles three times and made a circuitous route to a rural restaurant with armed guards. In other circumstances, Karen refugees of both genders in NGO organisations get together in some regions of Mae Sot. For example, several

⁵⁵ Interview with anonymous volunteer nurse at Dr. Cynthia Muang clinic in Mae Sot. The Mae Tao Clinic relies on international governments, private and corporate donors to maintain its health programs. The clinic also collaborates with sympathetic Thai and Karen communities to establish an emergency referral service for sick and injured asylum seekers who have no access to health care. Dr Cynthia trains other clinicians and health workers in rudimentary health care to curb malaria and diseases in the border region. <https://maetaoclinic.org/wp-content/uploads/Annual-Report-2020.pdf>, [accessed June 2021].

Karen groups such as the KYO and the Karen Education Department (KED) of the KNU are based in the Mae Pa district (see Map 5, page 111).

Some particular compounds constitute people who have migrated from the same State/districts in Burma. However, other Karen who may have migrated from Burma for economic reasons live in integrated settlements in Mae Sot with other Burmese regardless of ethnicity. These residential compounds nurture social ties among people in the compounds; they can retain the village-like lifestyles even in unstable and insufficient conditions. In one interview with anonymous participants at one of these compounds, strong opinions were generated on the perceived 'lifestyles' of the KNU Central Committee members. One participant commented in 2011 that:

Why should we live like dogs and cattle in our small houses? They (*the KNU*) live like kings and plenty to eat all the time. They have cars and trucks. My family live in the camp.⁵⁶

This statement indicated some disenchantment with the KNU and an undercurrent of tension with the compound community. I sympathised with the participant and relayed his concerns to senior KNU organisation members. This situation illustrates the increasing alienation of the KNU grassroots for having borne the brunt of a decades-long civil war. The overwhelming majority of the lower ranking KNU insurgents viewed the internal strife and the current leadership with deep suspicion. The severe military defeats the KNU experienced after the fall of Mannerplaw sent large contingents of the KNU to Thailand. Many of these insurgents found refuge in the growing refugee camps on the border together with thousands of displaced Karen civilians. The lower insurgent ranks blended in with other refugees in the camps and Thai border towns. The organisation's top leaders settled down in relative safety and comfort in the Thai urban centres, particularly Mae Sot. Today many KNU members are aware that many of their leaders favour a luxurious lifestyle over the hardships of an armed struggle in the jungles of Burma.

⁵⁶ Interview with Saw A, (anonymous and others) at a Karen compound in Mae Sot, March 2011.

Condemning their own leadership seemed emblematic of a growing disappointment with the KNU leadership that pervaded in 2011 and 2020 has become a broader disillusionment with the ceasefire that held sway among the rank-and-file of the Karen military. A junior Karen leader suggested that the ceasefire was a conciliatory move to generate wealth for the elites.⁵⁷ A particular concern for lower-ranking insurgents is the perception that some of their leaders have amassed great personal fortunes, which have been invested in Thai companies and properties during the rapid border expansion in the 1990s.⁵⁸

Key figures in this internal opposition, former General Secretary Naw Zipporah Sein, David Thakerbaw and General Baw Kyaw Heh have publicly repeated the concerns of the grassroots KNU disenchantment with the incumbent leadership. The leadership is perceived to be increasingly detached from the concerns of local and camp Karen communities. In a public interview in 2014 and 2017, these former KNU leaders criticised the lack of political dialogue and the detrimental social and environmental effects of increased resource extraction, land confiscation and infrastructure in Karen State.⁵⁹ A recent email communication supported this position in early 2021 with some of the named respondents.

Local KNU administrators at the local level are given a small stipend and are usually deeply embedded within the local communities. This embedding has constructed a tightly knit social network where the social identities of non-insurgent and insurgent members commonly overlap. It has also established a well-working social contract between the KNU and local communities, evidenced by many low echelon Karen.

A local Mae Sot KNU administrator explained the workings of this:

We used to make a living as farmers back in Burma, but I was also a KNU army member and came back to the village to help with the harvest; we fight and protect our people. We don't have paper money as we cannot spend it in Burma . . . the KNU pay the farmers who are in the army in food. It is a way of taxes, we give the government

⁵⁷ Interview with Saw Bwat at Karen compound in Mae Sot on April 2011.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Insurgency*, p. 395.

⁵⁹ *Karen News*, May 2013, January 2014, July 2017, November 2018.

food, and they pay the front-line soldiers with this food. This way, we help the KNU, and we protect each other.⁶⁰

Community interdependence has allowed the Karen to have some semblance of a financial safety net crucial to their livelihood. As more Karen live in small communities, there is always an underlying fear that the Thai authorities will evict them from these compounds. The reorientation of Karen society means that celebrations like the Karen New Year are unlikely to be celebrated in Mae Sot, as Naw Pha mentions in conversation:

We cannot have Karen New Year celebration here (in the compound) . . . we all have to keep quiet and got to Mae La or Umpium to celebrate we usually go at Christmas and stay there till it happens . . . In Mae Sot we have to be very careful, we don't wear our traditional clothes, as it lets everyone know that we are Karen.⁶¹

Karen who live in Mae Sot are uneasy about wearing traditional clothing as it draws unnecessary attention to themselves. The loss of celebrating New Year profoundly impacts the Karen as it celebrates and emphasises their identity. Instead, the Karen have adapted to the western model of wearing jeans and other Western imitated clothing styles worn by young Thai's. It camouflages their identity and allows them to blend in with the local populace. In addition to the legal status of the Karen refugees, the ability to speak Thai and the amount of time lived in Mae Sot imply to some extent that the individual's integration into Thai society can ameliorate abusive encounters. In many ways, the act of speaking Thai can serve as a protection mechanism for refugees. For example, during an interview with a Karen woman in a Mae Sot sub-district who had recently experienced harassment by a gang of Thai youths, she felt unwilling to call the police:

I do not know how to do it. . . I cannot speak Thai, and I am afraid that the problem will get bigger by doing this.⁶²

⁶⁰ Interview with Saw Say Wah Htoo in tea shop, in Mae Sot in March/April 2011.

⁶¹ Interview with Saw Tae So Way at KNU office in Mae Sot in March 2011.

⁶² Conversation with anonymous Karen woman who was in Mae Sot, and had no papers or documents.

In addition to suggesting a mistrust of Thai authorities, this participant, who is in Thailand without any documents or registration, highlights language as a barrier to finding protection from intimidation and threats.⁶³

In Mae Sot, various Burmese cultural elements can be experienced; almost every cultural product can be found. The concentration of a settled and displaced Karen population in the town has also brought Karen and Burmese cultural identifiers. These cultural elements can be witnessed in many Burmese eateries, with the wearing of the traditional *longyi*, enjoying Burmese/Karen movies and songs allow them to live as if they were back home in Burma. The majority of young Karen spend most of their pastimes within peer groups, making them feel relatively comfortable being a Karen as other Karen have similar values. The collective consumption of cultural material plays a crucial role in building social relationships with other Karen Mae Sot town dwellers.

On many of my research visits to Mae Sot, I have witnessed the rise of Burmese teashops around the city. I counted more than twenty of these teashops to explore the Moei Market and some near the Mae Tao Clinic. Approximately ten teashops are concentrated in the Phajaroen market area, three of which are located near the UNHCR offices, where a garment factory and worker dormitories are found. Several of them are situated around the central Mosque. The size of most of these teashops is relatively tiny, accommodating just several tables and chairs. Some teashops have shallow wooden tables and tiny stools typical of Burma, whereas other teashops are equipped with plastic or metal standing tables and chairs. The presence of these Burmese tea shops brought socio-cultural elements into the town, where displaced Karen and Burmese workers can watch Burmese television programmes Karen would often visit and ‘chat’, drinking tea and chewing betel nut, leaving so many ‘red spots’ on the roads and pavement, a habit much frowned upon by the Thai people.⁶⁴

⁶³ J. Gerald and R. Dorothy, ‘Developing a Profiling Methodology for Displaced People in Urban Areas’, *Feinstein International Centre*, (Medford, 2011), p. 38.

⁶⁴ Emma Larkin, *Secret Histories: Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop*, (London, 2004), p. 15.

Importantly, by 2006, Mae Sot's combined urban population constituted more than one-third of the total urban population of the whole Tak Province. This population growth does not include the large volume of registered/unregistered illegal migrant workers from Burma and the displaced persons in the two main refugee camps. Cross-border trade was highly organised and structured by the KNU during the 1980s and the DKBA in 1994.⁶⁵ The KNU effectively structured the area's economy during this period by actively organising the cross-border trade of Mae Sot that excluded the Burmese military government who cannot exercise control over their geographical territory.

This section has investigated the relationship of Mae Sot to the displaced Karen who live there. In particular, the town's societal formation reflects the changing conditions brought about by the continuous flow of Karen people. This chapter provides evidence of the Karen and the social community of Mae Sot. The section has demonstrated that Mae Sot is becoming an extended territory of Burma, which the Karen can easily reach from the refugee camp or even from Burma. The investigations and interviews support the argument that Karen social networks are often constructed among kin groups and through these networks, where communal bonds are established.

Conclusion

This chapter investigated the complexities of the shared but contested spaces in the eastern borderlands of Burma.

I argued that the marginalised Karen, who were excluded from power, turned to the support of the displaced people in the Karen State. The KNU's conflict with the Burmese state can best be understood as a strategic alliance between the Karen elites and peasants from eastern Burma's highlands and lowland areas. The chapter argued that following independence in the initial stages of the conflict, the KNU was dominant and built up a de-facto state of Kawthoolei in liberated areas by governance facilities, deploying the symbolism of statehood. As Mampilly argues, ethno-nationalist groups

⁶⁵ See footnote 57 in chapter 2 about the DKBA.

are more likely to establish governance systems within their areas of control.⁶⁶ This chapter suggests that the central Burmese state was weak and had limited territorial control over the peripheral geographical spaces. Although there were often competing and alternative political authorities such as the DKBA, the KNU consolidated their power by combining autonomous villages into its structures by forming a ‘hybrid’ order by merging customary village leaders into its governance structures.

The KNU achieved a high degree of political authority on Burma’s eastern borderlands despite the immense diversity. Under the leadership of General Bo Mya, the KNU established wealth and power within the borderlands. I also argued that centre-peripheral conflicts in Burma are long-lasting and violent. In the state-making process, the Burmese nation-state employed numerous strategic and ruthless methods to consolidate and expand their geographic footprint in the early 1990s in Karen State, where the KNU was dominant. The conflict increased as the Burmese state breached the borderlands and forcibly established its control over resources and land. This action dramatically increased the numbers of displaced Karen people as villages were destroyed and refugees fled to Thailand.

This chapter has also argued that ‘new’ forms of political authority emerged on the borderlands. In the partially securitised areas, multiple armed groups with intersecting forms of sovereignty have amplified insecurity levels amongst the Karen population. Burma’s state monopoly on coercive means in a defined territory was in some cases diminished, and its limit on access to remittances meant it had to use and negotiate with local and regional armed actors, thereby reducing the threat or instigation of violence in the borderlands. I argued that while the Burma Army has effectively strengthened its direct control or has co-opted its coercive power to other armed groups in the ‘white’ and ‘brown zones’, the result is that there is neither peace nor war. With these strategies and manoeuvres by the Burmese state, the displaced population in Karen State increased exponentially, and a mass refugee exodus to Thailand ensued.

The next chapter explores the Thai-Burma border refugee camp at Mae La Thailand. It will reveal the complexity of connections for the displaced Karen people.

⁶⁶ Mampilly, *Stationary Bandits*, p. 216.

I also use it to demonstrate the multi-sited nature of the diaspora and its connection to the 'homeland' and the camps through ties of kinship, religion, morality, and social involvement.

Chapter 4: 'Like birds in a cage' - The refugee camps

Karen refugees in the camps are like birds in a cage, they get regular food but are not allowed to fly away . . . When the owner comes and opens the cage door, most of the birds in the cage do not know how to fly anymore . . . They have not had the opportunity to learn or even practice how to fly around because they have been caged for such a long time.

Anonymous Karen participant in a workshop at Mae La camp, 2005.

This chapter examines the displacement of the Karen people and the refugee camps' establishment on Thailand's western borderland in the late 1980s. The first section surveys theoretical aspects of space and the refugee camps' location on the borderland. It also examines Karen identity reinforcement in the refugee camps and the influence the KNU has on the camp population. It also considers camp governance's informal and formal nature under the aegis of Thai and NGO organisations. The chapter discusses the composition of the Mae La refugee camp and the Karen refugee population with an emphasis on testimonies from the residents.

The chapter argues that multiple study sites are interwoven and interconnected by a defined set of social relationships with common cultural expressions. The main argument this thesis suggests is that Karen identity is reformed with each stage of displacement. This chapter asks whether and to what extent the refugee camps enable the displaced Karen from diverse locations within Burma to develop reformed communities' networks in the refugee camps. Several themes emerged from the research in the camps. The main themes that emerged are culture, education, oppression, nationalism, and displacement. These themes are conceptually central in several ways. First, they are all present in the data collected cross-sectionally within this study, and they are integral to the present-day Karen self-conceptualisation of their identity. Second, they can be considered a development over Karen identity over time as new experiences and events were integrated into the collective Karen identity. Finally, I explore these reformed community networks that enable the Karen to express their identity and culture.

This chapter will also explore women's leadership positions within camp organisations and examine the role of education within Mae La camp's confines.

Finally, it will assess the extent to which the Karen people reinforce their culture and identity within the camp environment's confines and how they ensure cultural production.

Rethinking the camp as 'space' and resistance

I suggest that the camps express a 'space' that is produced through Karen societal relationships. The Karen cultural mobility traverses these geographically defined 'spaces', and the displaced Karen are recasting their culture as a place of belonging as they construct 'new' local identities. These 'new' identities link the geographically defined spaces and Karen culture. This chapter explores different approaches to the connections between identity, refugee-ness, and camp societies.¹

The origin of the refugee camp as a modern institution is inherently connected to colonial history. Scholars in camp studies associate the emergence of the camp as a formation to the continuities between the colonial regimes and those established by totalitarian states in the twentieth century.² In the last two decades, there has been an intensification in studies of camps; these studies have witnessed the emergence and the strengthening of a field identified as 'camp studies'.

Giorgio Agamben's conceptualisations crucially influenced this body of work on the camp as the 'the nomos' of our time. Agamben's focus on the refugee as a manifestation of 'bare life' has opened up 'camp studies' to reflect on the displacement and management of refugees on the part of national authorities. For Agamben, the camp has become a technology of power that divides lives worth living and protection from the people deserving exclusion and abandonment, a site where individuals may be translated into biopolitical bodies and where power is exercised via sovereign exceptions.³ The refugee, for Agamben, is the most exposed figure of our time since its very presence reveals the untenable link between citizenship and territory, an order incapable of imagining any other form of belonging and a legitimate 'right to a place'. Some of the key Agambenian concepts have thus been applied to many displacement

¹ Karen Fog Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup, *Siting Culture: The shifting anthropological object*, (London, 1996), p. 228.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York, 1968).

³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford, 1998).

situations, encampments or forms of abandonment: from refugee camps to detention centres and managing Romani populations in the European context.⁴

The consolidation of camp studies in the late 2000s can also be seen as a broader response to Agamben's grand statements about the importance of incorporating the 'nomos of the camp' in our understanding of sovereign power in the modern state. Although these studies have been concerned with the multi-layered inner-workings of refugee camps, this can be described as 'post-Agambenian camp studies' since this body of literature shows signs of continuity with earlier work on camps. Moreover, it is characterised by an explicit critique of the Agambenian reading of the camp, claiming that a different approach is needed to appreciate present-day refugee camp spatiality and complexity.

While designed as 'spaces' where refugees can receive humanitarian assistance and relief, they often turn into spaces of control, surveillance and sometimes violence. As biopolitical 'spaces', they are often managed by humanitarian organisations, which capture and further expose the very bare lives of subjects included in relief programs designed at making them survive. Revealing their intimate link with sovereign power, these organisations may contribute to the stripping of the very life they are supposed to protect and become what Agier has labelled the 'left hand of the Empire': while the right-hand strikes and produces bare life, the humanitarian left hand heals, cures and 'makes lives'. For Agier, 'there is no care without control', and the biopolitical role of these camps is keeping the refugees distanced from the rest of society. Moreover, Agier argues that instruments of power and confinement that enclose and manage such humanity are excessive, but they also reveal the permanent crisis of the nation-state. Agier suggests that refugees are perceived and treated as 'undesirables' whose life is captured and managed through the political technology of the camp.⁵

Edkins initially illustrated how the Agambenian concepts of 'exception', 'the camp' and 'bare life' were useful analytical tools to study the current spatial management of displaced populations and understand the condition of refugees,

⁴ Nando Sigona, 'Campzenship: reimagining the camp as a social and political space', *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1, (2015), pp. 1-15.

⁵ *Ibid.*

asylum seekers and irregular migrants.⁶ McConnachie indicates that refugee camps are established as temporary sites for the containment, care and control of the displaced, often turned into permanent spaces of exception extra-territorial sites governed by juridical and administrative orders. Refugee camps often become tools of control and containment of a mass of individuals that governments believe cannot be treated otherwise.⁷ As we shall see, these camps on the Thai-Burma border are set up as humanitarian responses to population displacement due to disasters or war-related events.

Nevertheless, refugee camps, migrant camps, Roma camps and even detention camps are increasingly recognised also as fields of possibility for political action and as spaces where inmates and residents may use the exceptionality of the conditions and specific social fabric to reconstitute and reshape their identities and possibly claim their rights.⁸ Camps are studied as highly politicised spaces, where empirical work has shown many cases in which they have turned into sites of resistance, commemoration and new political struggles. The extensive literature on Palestinian camps has come to represent symbolic ‘spaces’ whose very existence and presence reminds the international community of the ‘right of return’ and a form of resistance to the state of Israel. Remaining in the camp is thus perceived by many of the refugees as a commitment to the Palestinian cause. Camps are ‘spaces’ where political and collective interpretations of injustice and rights are presented in many ways.⁹

I examined the camps with a nuanced approach that considers them to be sites of incarceration but also spaces of cultural expression and social identity formation.

⁶ Jennifer Edkins, ‘Sovereign power, zones of indistinctions, and the camp’, *Alternatives*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (2000), pp. 3-23.

⁷ Kirsten McConnachie, ‘Camps of containment: A genealogy of the refugee camp’, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, Vol. 7, No. 3, (2016), p. 399.

⁸ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*; D. Woroniecka-Krzyzanowska, ‘the right to the camp: Spacial politics of protracted encampment in the West Bank’, *Political Geography*, Vol. 61, (2017), pp. 160-169; Sigona, ‘Campzanship’, *Citizenship Studies*. p. 12; Fatima Abreek-Zubiedat and Alona Nitzan-Shiftan, “‘De-Camping’ through Development: The Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Gaza Strip under the Israeli Occupation”, in: Irit Katz, Diana Martin and Claudio Minca (eds.), *Camps Revisited: Multifaceted Spatialities of a Modern Political Technology*, (London, 2018), pp. 137-158.

⁹ Diana Martin, Claudio Minka and Irit Katz, ‘Rethinking the camp: On spatial technologies of power and resistance’, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 44, No. 4, (2020), pp. 743-768.

The camps may represent precarious life to their occupants, and later in the chapter, I will offer sketches of life for these long term residents.

The camps in Thailand: location and history

The section begins with a description of my methods and then provides details about the participants. The ethnographic material was obtained during eleven fieldwork trips undertaken between 1996 and 2013. I have made thirteen visits to Mae La refugee camp over this period ranging from a few days to staying two weeks in the camps. Initially, in the mid-1980s, there were thirty small open refugee camps spread out over hundreds of kilometres along with the border areas, a circumstance that offered many advantages for the Karen refugees. There are presently nine temporary camps on the Thai-Burma borderlands, and over the last ten years, I have visited five of them. Seven of these are ‘managed’ by a Karen Refugee Committee (KRC). These camps are Mae Ra Ma Lung, Mae La Oon, Mae La, Umphiem Mai, Nu Po, Ban Don Yang, and Tham Hin, whilst a Karenni Refugee Committee manages the other two camps, Ban Mai Nai Soi and Ban Mai Surin.¹⁰

In all the refugee camps, under the guidance of the UNHCR and with the assistance of international NGOs, the displaced Karen have set up the infrastructure of camp governance, primary and secondary education, sanitation, and water supply, including training facilities for the various skills required, with religious and health centres. For many of the displaced Karen, this infrastructure has provided a protective buffer enabling them to adapt positively to their altered environment.

The Thai Ministry of Interior (MOI) is responsible for the administration of all the refugee camps. A Thai Ranger Unit is stationed near the camps to monitor security and Territory Defence Volunteers (TDVs, known as *Or Sors*) and is employed and trained by the MOI to provide internal camp security.¹¹

¹⁰ Burma Link, *Displaced in Thailand: Refugee Camps*, (2017), <https://www.burmalink.org/background/thailand-burma-border/displaced-in-thailand/refugee-camps/> [accessed June 2021]; UNHCR, *Refugee camp profile*, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/71564>, [accessed November 2020], pp. 1-2.

¹¹ The Border Consortium (TBC), ‘Mae La: where we work’, <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/where-we-work/camps-in-thailand/mae-la/>, [accessed 3 November 2020]; UNHCR, ‘Thailand: Mae La Temporary Shelter Profile (30 June 2019)’, Reliefweb, (2019), [Thailand: Mae La Temporary Shelter Profile \(30 June 2019\) - Thailand | ReliefWeb](https://reliefweb.int/report-thailand/thailand-mae-la-temporary-shelter-profile-30-june-2019), [accessed November 2020].

The camps have a village-like atmosphere. Communal buildings, such as hospitals and schools, are located in the camp's central sections in the larger camps. Most children need to walk for no more than ten minutes to attend school. The water supply is generally adequate and accessible, with streams, water tanks or wells to utilise. There is some space for camp residents to plant small vegetable gardens or even rear animals next to their bamboo homes. However, these activities depend on the soil's quality, although there are bans on refugee crop planting by the Thai authorities in some camps to avoid soil degradation. The refugee camps have elected committees with a camp and section leaders, who are responsible for all aspects of camp administration, these include aid distribution (significantly food aid), the registration of the population in new camps with the recording of births and deaths, as well as the primary education for children in camp schools.

The Karen camp residents have no economic security, and the adaptation to camp resettlement can be attributed to their self-governance and sufficiency in Karen villages and townships within Burma. To illustrate how efficient and effective the Karen are in camp management, I draw on my interview with Mary Ohn in April 1999. She discussed running all the camps as Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) chairperson. Mary Ohn added that general maintenance of sanitation issues, resolving disputes, transport and referral of medical emergencies, and routine camp security were also part of KRC community responsibilities. Emphasising that:

these small camps were run very well by the Karen; they also fix and mend all the houses and schools . . . You see, my base was in Wan Kha camp, but the Burmese came and shelled it. They burned half the shelters and burned everything . . . we stayed in Huay Kaloke camp, and I was elected as Karen Refugee Committee chairperson in January 1999 . . . so here I am, in Ohn Pyan (Umpien Mai) Chairperson for one year and eight months and have to go here and there. Go with UNHCR, go to the BBC, and go with other NGOs. I go to many camps, here and there, and I solve the problems, you see.¹²

¹² Interview with KRC Chairperson, Major Mary Ohn, in April 1999 at Umpiem Mai and May 2002 at Mae La refugee Camps.

Mary Ohn was a charismatic freedom fighter for the Karen and, as a young woman in Burma, was a quartermaster and recruiter for the 13th Karen Battalion in the Delta region of the Irrawaddy for about six years. During the 1970s, she carried out insurgent activities for the KNU ‘behind enemy lines’ as she puts it, but retaliation on innocent villagers by the SPDC ensured that any return to her activities would result in punitive measures, and she crossed over to Thailand in 1984 at the age of 51.

Mary Ohn moved from Umphien to Mae La to assist with the influx of refugees. She highlighted the harsh circumstances of the early refugees in Thailand to many NGO organisations. In an interview in 2002 with Mary after her move from Umphien to Mae La, she explained the plight of the displaced Karen inside Burma, having little food and hiding in the jungle. Mary was one of the initial Karen to be displaced, and she used her many linguistic skills to significantly affect the Thai and international organisations, frequently being employed as an interpreter. The Karen refugee camp population increased in Mae La from 3,341 in 1999 to 40,000 in 2002. She mentions their plight in another conversation in Mae La:

The displaced persons, they cannot come to Thailand. They want to be refugees because they have got no food, nothing to eat. In the forest, they have to eat only bamboo shoots and roots and leaves and all. Even the Burmese tried to teach the Karen that when you open the Karen’s belly, you see only leaves.¹³

The Karen spirit’s resilience is embodied in many of Mary’s *hta* songs and highlights the tension between the refugees’ harsh living circumstances and the liveliness of their spirit. Here is one of the last *hta* songs she wrote in 2002. The *hta* is a political song that one of her grandfathers’ wrote, and Mary translated for a cousin and others who could not understand the nature of the Karen plight:

Kawthoolei, our harmonious land
Discovered by our forefathers’ clan
How many years land, the Burmans grabbed from our hands
Subjugated and oppress us since then.
Nowadays, the Karens will never, never be your slave

¹³ Interview with Mary Ohn in Mae La May 2002.

Till the time of grace
Banners raised with might and mirth
Till the time of victory
Today the Karens will never, never give way
Fight without delay.
Stormy or fair weather,
Survive or die,
The land we crave for equal rights
Survive or die
The land we crave for equal rights.¹⁴

Mary explained to the then displaced Karen from Burma in 2002 that the plight of Karen people had a previous history of oppression by the Burman people. These Karen were from the Irrawaddy delta region and were unaware of previous ethnic strife or that the Karen had occupied Kawthoolei (Karen State) until 1999.

A common theme flowing through the displaced Karen's imaginings in the refugee camps is the notion of returning to their 'homeland' of Kawthoolei. It can be found in the comments made by Naw Bwa Bwa, who said that 'we hope to live one day in our own land in Kawthoolei'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it also often permeates much deeper in the songs and *Hta* poems of displaced Karen. For example, a participant interviewed in Mae La camp in 2006 later sent me a poem she had written about her life. She called it 'I Dream of Home'. The poem begins with a dream of what her 'home' should be. She then juxtaposes this with three segments representing different periods in her life: an internally displaced person, refugee, and resettled in Sheffield. She finishes with a plea for them all to be treated as human beings and finally repeats her dream of home, only now she talks of 'our home'.¹⁶ Another presentation of a *hta* poem to me was by a village elder, Saw Micah Rolly (in his eighties, who had fought

¹⁴ Conversation with Mary Ohn about *hta* poems and songs in Mae La, May 2002. This is also entered in a book by Thanakha Team, *Burma – More Women's Voices*, (Bangkok, 2000), p. 24.

¹⁵ Nant Bwa Bwa Phan, *Crimes Against the Karen Must End*, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), (Sept. 2, 2011), <http://www.dvb.no/analysis/crimes-against-the-karen-must-end/17411>, [accessed September 2019].

¹⁶ Naw Hsa Mary Oo at her home in Mae La refugee camp in April 2006.

with the British during the Second World War). He reflected on his villagers' thoughts through his *hta* of the destruction by the Burmese military during the late 1990s:

Women, our water is being destroyed,
our land is being destroyed.
The birds are too sad to sing,
and the chickens are too depressed to crow.
Look down into the farmland below you,
see the women cry as they go to work.¹⁷

The *hta* is a widespread medium for expressing emotions and feelings; it is meaningful in itself as it is a 'traditional' literary practice linking *hta* readers and writers to an imagined past.¹⁸ It also allows for the individual and subjective expression of feelings and cultural identity, arguably facilitated by the fact that it is a familiar form compared to other writing genres, such as news reports or essays. *Hta* is the original Sgaw Karen literary form and is an essential and crucial part of their culture.¹⁹

KRC and KNU

Initially, dominant factions within the KNU hierarchy controlled the KRC, but as the refugee numbers expanded, the presence of international NGO's and the UNHCR forced the committees to become more responsive. The refugee camps provided political and military mobilisation opportunities for the KNU, who maintained its oath of duty of caring for and protecting its people. The KNU began to cooperate with an increasingly growing web of churches and non-religious humanitarian organisations to provide food, shelter, and education to over 100,000 refugees that resided in the camps.²⁰ These 'uneasy pairs', as Horstman calls it, of ethnic armed groups and humanitarian organisations, led to many accusations that the refugee camps, like those in Congo in the 1990s, had become militarised, making them the likely 'new staging

¹⁷ Saw Micah Rolly in Mae La camp April 2006.

¹⁸ Violet Cho, 'Karen Resistance Poetry: translated and introduced by Violet Cho', *Flinders Open Access Research*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, (2014), pp. 1-3.

¹⁹ Theodore Thanybah and James Vinton, *Karen Folk-Lore Tales* (Rangoon, 1924); Roland Mischung, 'When is it better to sing than speak: the use of traditional verses (*hta*) in tense social situations', in Claudio O. Delang, (ed.), *Living on the Edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the highlands of northern Thailand*, (Abingdon, 2003), pp. 130-150.

²⁰ Tomas Cole, ' "Power-Hurt": The Pains and Kindness among disabled Karen refugees in Thailand', *Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 85, No. 2, (2020), pp. 224-240.

posts' of the civil war in Burma.²¹ However, the Thai authorities considered the KNU a political organisation and prohibited it from working inside all the camps. However, the normative perception within the Karen refugees is that the KRC is under the control of the KNU. The KRC are the overall representatives for all the refugees living in camps, and they also oversee activities of all the other camps through their camp committees, coordinating assistance provided by NGOs and liaising with UNHCR and Thai security personnel.²²

The central coordinating body over all of the camps is the KRC. As the chairperson for the KRC from 1988 to 2004, Major May Ohn was instrumental in showing and guiding me through the intricate network of Karen committee layers and their relationship with the NGO's that enable the relatively smooth functioning of the camps. The KRC has rules and regulations governing the selection processes of the camps' administrative committees. However, some of these take more general guidelines, allowing for varying understandings in their implementation. As a result, the selection procedures for camp leaders are often different from camp to camp. The main KRC selections occur every three years and of the fifteen members selected, eight respected and experienced Karen are appointed, the other seven are chosen from representatives of the other camps.²³

Refugees can use water and forest products, maintain their traditional foraging, cultivation and building skills without relying entirely on NGO assistance. Families are partly self-sufficient, with most children attending school, and the communities can live according to their traditions. This unrestricted aspect of administration allows the Karen communities to maintain their cultural traditions and social structure. There is considerable assistance from NGO's such as The Thai-Burma Consortium (TBBC) for food aid and material, ZOA-Refugee Care (The Netherlands), which provide school and educational support and services. The Thai Ministry of Interior (MOI)

²¹ Alexander Horstmann, 'Uneasy Pairs: Revitalizations of Karen ethno-Nationalism and civil Society across the Thai-Burmese Border', *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (2015), pp. 33-52; Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, (Cornell, 2002); Kirsten McConnachie, 'Rethinking the 'Refugee Warrior': The Karen National Union and Refugee Protection on the Thai-Burma Border', *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Volume 4, No. 1, (March 2012), pp. 30-56.

²² Interview with KRC Chairperson, Mary Ohn, March 2002 and April 2004, KRC Vice-Chairperson Saw George in March 2013.

²³ Online Burma Library web site for KRC monthly report, <http://www.burmalibrary.org/show.php?cat=1831>, [accessed July 2019].

coordinate all the NGO's through the Coordinating Committee for Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT).²⁴

The continued influx of Karen refugees with the escalating violence along the border in the mid-1990s led to the recognition by the RTG that the refugee issue was becoming progressively challenging. The voluntary return of the displaced Karen people could no longer be envisioned. Moreover, in refusing the displaced Karen people UN refugee status and offering minimal Thai citizenship pathways, the Thai government inscribed them as 'outside' of legal citizenship. As a result of RTG's policy of refugees, the Karen were unable to seek legal protection or gain lawful employment in Thailand.

However, since 1995, there was a transition from the small, open style camps with high refugee self-sufficiency levels to larger enclosed camps. This change has produced greater aid dependency due to the increased security demands and ongoing security and protection problems. In addition, the aid dependency situation afforded the KNU more significant opportunities to influence the camp populace, educational needs and reinforcing Karen nationalism. In 1996, DKBA soldiers attacked some of the smaller refugee camps in Thailand in cross-border attacks in the area and the Thai authorities began to consolidate the numerous refugee camps to improve security.²⁵ The RTG carried out a camp consolidation policy and combined approximately thirty smaller Karen refugee camps into fewer but larger camps, arguing that larger camps were more easily secured and defended than the many small camps.²⁶

The RTG also deployed Thai military personnel in the camps and subsequently stationed them on egress/entry points. High fences were also erected around the larger Karen refugee camps, with strict controls placed on people's movement outside the camps. Since the mid-1990s, the camps have been completely closed to outsiders, only authorised aid or NGO personnel are allowed in, refugees are not allowed to go out of the camps and access to the camps is strictly limited. Refugees who leave the refugee camps for work or education or other reasons lose their status as UNHCR persons of

²⁴ The TBC budget for 2018-19 was 510 Million THB (Baht), (£12 Million).

<https://www.theborderconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/TBCAnnualReport2019-for-website.pdf>, [accessed November 2020].

²⁵ See footnote 57 in chapter 2 about the DKBA.

²⁶ McConnachie, *Governing Refugees*, pp. 33-34.

concern. If they are arrested during a crackdown on illegal migrant workers, they face deportation like all irregular migrant workers. To clarify the plight of the refugees who imagined they were ‘locked in’ the camp. When interviewed in Sheffield in 2011, Par Too Klo and Par Ta Dow said that they were arrested whilst collecting firewood on Mae Sot town's outskirts. They were ‘released’ after paying a substantial ‘fine’ by the Thai security personnel at the roadside. This practice is common, and most Karen living in border towns often do not venture from their local compounds for months on end.²⁷

Since 2005, UNHCR has focused its resources on registering, screening, and resettling the refugees encamped in the camps along the Thai-Burma border. A significant portion of the registered camp population has been referred for resettlement consideration. Many have been accepted and have departed from Thailand. UNHCR is aware of the potential environmental impact of displaced people. Local competition for natural resources such as fuelwood, building materials, fresh water and wild foods is of immediate concern. UNHCR also reports that temporary shelters like those on the Thai-Burma border have impacted natural resources such as soil degradation and water, the ecosystem, and competition for resources between local and displaced people.²⁸

With the influx of displaced Karen refugees flooding into Thailand, camps were established and have been in existence for nearly thirty years. As of early 2021, an estimated 149,000 internally displaced people were spread over 36 townships in Burma's southeast population.²⁹ However, TBC has assessed that IDP numbers remain unchanged in the current period. By early 2020, The Border Consortium (TBC),

²⁷ Edith Bowles, ‘From village to camp: refugee camp life in transition on the Thailand-Burma Border’, *Forced Migration Review*, (1998), pp. 11-14; Interview with Par Too Klo and Par Ta Dow on March 2011, and other displaced and resettled Karen in Sheffield between 2006 to 2016.

²⁸ Suwattana Thadaniti and Supang Chantavanich, (eds.), *The Impact of Displaced People's Temporary Shelters on their Surrounding Environment*, (Bangkok, 2014), p. 8; UNHCR, ‘Refugees and the Environment’, <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/environment/3b039f3c4/refugees-environment.html> [accessed June 2021].

²⁹ UNHCR Myanmar Emergency Update, 01 June 2021, [Myanmar emergency update 1 June 2021.pdf \(unhcr.org\)](#), [accessed June 2021].

formerly the TBBC, reported that over 100,000 refugees still reside in refugee camps on both sides of the Thai-Burma border.³⁰

Mae La – the refugee camp

Mae La is the largest of all the refugee camps and is located in the Thanon Thongchai mountain range (700-800 meters above sea level) and 63 km north of Mae Sot in the Sang Yang District of Tak Province. The refugee camp is situated on the Huay Si Mo Kue River banks on a narrow valley floor. It is 8 kilometres from the Burmese border and has surface acres of 454 acres. It is divided into three main zones, which are further divided into sections.

In 1984, Mae La had an initial population of 1,100 people following the fall of a KNU base near the Thai border. In April 1995, Mae La was designated by Thai authorities as to the main consolidation camp and increased in size from 6,969 to 13,195 due to the closure of five smaller camps to the north – Mae Ta Waw, Mae Salit, Mae Plu So, Kler Kho and Ka Mawlay Kho Huay Heng. In March 1997, people were relocated to Mae La following the closure of Huai Bone and in February 1998, from Shoklo camp.

The majority of the Karen refugees in Mae La are either Sgaw and Pwo, with the Sgaw far outnumbering the Pwo, the Karen language and culture also dominate Mae La refugee camp, with Sgaw being the primary language of communication. Mae La is also known as '*Beh Klaw*' or 'cotton fields' in the Karen language. The name referred to the agricultural activities when the Karen negotiated refugees' permission to cross into Thailand in 1984.

Mae La has a varied range of educational opportunities and is considered a centre of study for refugees, so the current population includes a few thousand students who come to study in the camp (some from other camps, but many other students also come from Karen State in Burma). The students are registered only as temporary residents to the Thai authorities.³¹ After the fall of the KNU headquarters in Mannerplaw in 1996, the camp population increased to over 50,000.

³⁰ TBC, *Programme Report: January to June 2015*, (Bangkok, Thailand. 2015), pp. 2-3.

³¹ Mae La Refugee Camp, '*Home*', (July 2017). Mae La Refugee Camp, <https://maelarefugee.blogspot.com/2016/03/history.html>, [accessed June 2021]

The current population is over 37,000 people in November 2020 (this peaked in 2007 at 57,397) with 6,700 households.³² The following photographs (pages 138-9) show the housing density on the hillside in Mae La. The Dawna mountain range to the west of the camp is the international border between Burma and Thailand and forms a natural barrier. The camp is located in a Tha Song National Park comprising of thick, dry, evergreen forest. The camp can be reached by vehicle with good all-year-round access. Mae La camp experiences three seasons, summer from March to April, temperatures typically reach 33 degrees Celsius, Monsoon lasts between May and October with heavy rainfall, and winter season is from November to February when temperatures can fall to 13 degrees Celsius.

More than eight-four per cent of the population are Karen, while around ten per cent are ethnic Mon whilst about five per cent are Bamar from Bago Region in Burma. The adult population has an equal gender population and is approximately fifty-six per cent of the total, and the remaining population are children.³³ The camp has four Buddhist temples, four Mosques, twenty-three Christian churches that include fifteen Protestant or Baptist, six Seventh Day Adventist, and two Anglican churches reflecting the camp's religious diversity.

In 2009, the camp was connected to the primary electricity grid. Electrical power is transmitted from the Thai Provincial Electricity Authority to specific places in the camp. These are the camp administration offices, hospital and two medical centres, and some schools. A few households now have daily but intermittent access to electricity. Generally, camp residents rely on candles, portable car batteries and kerosene lamps as sources of power. Since 2009 mobile phone coverage has been available to the camp, this has also facilitated privately-run internet services in the community and schools. The primary source of water supply is the Pha Roo creek, pumped up and stored in large water tanks strategically placed on the camp's elevated areas. The water is supplied in the morning and evening and also obtained from approximately 60 water wells.³⁴

³² TBC, *2019 Annual Report*, (Mae Sot, August 2020).

³³ TBC, *Where we Work*, (Mae Sot, July 2018).

³⁴ Navid Rahimi, *Modelling and Mapping of Mae La Refugee Camp Water Supply*, (unpublished Master's thesis, Virginia, 2008), pp. 15-16.

Housing in Mae La

The Karen refugees in the camps predominantly live-in thatched bamboo huts since the camps are considered ‘temporary shelters’ by Thailand. TBBC supplies most of the materials needed for house construction and yearly maintenance. Bamboo is used for floors, walls, stilts, and ceiling joists, with Tong Tueng leaves being used as a roofing material. The photographs (pages 140-1) illustrate the type of buildings in Mae La camp. Permanent building materials such as concrete and stone are prohibited as construction materials, although schools and churches have been allowed to use this material in Mae La camp in recent years.



Photo 9. Mae La - Refugee camp, housing density, (TBC, 2018).



Photo 10: Mae La -Refugee camp, housing density, (author, 2013).

The support in food, shelter material and welfare is given by The Border Consortium (previously TBBC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and others that provide medical and health facilities. It has been and is in Thailand's interest to confine the refugee situation to remote and often invisible border areas where there are severe restrictions and logistical difficulties for the refugee population. This encampment policy further allows for trouble-free control and containment of refugees, and it also alleviates Thailand from the fiscal responsibility for meeting the Karen refugees needs by shifting it to the NGO/international donor community. The RTG prohibits refugees from engaging in any economic activities, though some refugees sometimes work illegally as daily labourers on nearby Thai farms or forest plantations. Traditionally, the Karen are subsistence farmers, and most of the displaced refugees have come from such communities. The transfer of traditional Karen farming skills and knowledge in some camps where some available arable space is used for agriculture or animal husbandry.



Photo 11: House being built, (author 2013).

The refugees in Mae La grow various crops to supplement their meagre diets. The use of yards around some bamboo houses for growing vegetables such as corn, mustard leaves, onions, squash, aubergines, and various legumes is widespread. Livestock such as poultry and pigs are also tended to, but these are not common to all households. The refugees also gather edible forest vegetables, such as bamboo shoots, wild beans and leaves when in season. Other ‘legal’ economic activities include weaving, selling the forest vegetables, leaf thatch, charcoal or running small shops within the camp.³⁵

The restrictions enforced by the RTG have affected refugee livelihoods and self-sufficiency in the camps. Unable to go out of the camps to forage in the nearby forest area or earn steady cash income and living in the camps that are geographically unsuitable or too overcrowded for large-scale gardens or maintaining livestock, many of the refugees have become increasingly dependent on NGO assistance. RTG has restricted NGO assistance to food, educational assistance, medicines, clothing, and essential items. NGOs have had to provide building materials such as bamboo and timber, cooking fuel and other food, such as yellow beans and cooking oil, in addition to the regular rations of rice, salt, fish paste, mosquito nets and blankets, sleeping mats and cooking pots. Space is considered meagre and inadequate there are regular queues for water in the dry season.

³⁵ Bowles, ‘From village to camp’, *Forced Migration Review*, (1998), pp. 11-12; Inge Brees, ‘Refugee Business: Strategies of Work on the Thai-Burma Border’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, No. 21, (2008), pp. 380-397.



Photo 12: [above] – Street in Mae La, (author, 2013).

Photo 13: [below] - Two-story house, (author, 2013).



Rumours of impending conflict cause tensions among the Karen. The Karen refugees stop repairing their homes or tending crops when they learn they have to move. Children's education is disrupted, leading to higher drop-out and failure rates.³⁶ The administrative autonomy, self-sufficiency and Karen village atmosphere integral to life in the early years' camps were diminished. In her study of camp life transition, In Early fieldwork conducted in 1998 by Edith Bowles suggested that an entire generation

³⁶ BNI Multimedia Group, 'Residents scared, rumors abound in wake of impending conflict', (July 2009), <https://www.bnionline.net/en/independent>, [accessed June 2021].

of Karen have been born and raised in the refugee camps and have no knowledge of life beyond the campsites.³⁷

However, losses of family members, situational instability, loss of personal control, and the uprooting and forced migration from Burma have been linked to increased drug and alcohol abuse levels and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) within the many camps along the border. This situation in the camps has led to increased domestic violence and is an ongoing problem within most Karen communities. A Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Committee (SGBV) organisation was established in 2003 with support from the UNHCR. A recent case study in 2016 by Human Rights Center on sexual violence in Mae La reports on the continued abuse of women with key informants identifying a particularly urgent need for a safe shelter for Muslim women in Mae La camp.³⁸

In addition, key informants within Umpiem Mai and Mae La camps said it was challenging for Muslim women to stay at the KWO safe house because of their different dietary practices and other cultural traditions. A provider from Muslim Women's Association (MWA) explained the situation:

We are not the same religion, and so food is always a problem. Some of the Muslim women are pretty conservative. At KWO, we can't eat there. So, they don't want to go and stay there. In other camps where there are no MWA safe houses, so a lot of Muslim women are abused. I always ask what abused Muslim women do in those places. Some come to the safe houses, but it is very difficult for them because they can't eat the same food.³⁹

KWO has two safe houses in Mae La and reported that some Muslim survivors who stayed had left before their cases were resolved because the shelter program was

³⁷ Bowles, 'From village to camp', *Forced Migration Review*, (1998), p. 16.

³⁸ Conversation with Htoo Lay in Mae La camp in 2002; Caroline Lambert and Sharon Pickering, 'Domestic violence on the Thai-Burma border: International Human Rights implications', *Forced Migration Review*, Vol. 17, (2003), pp. 41-42; KHRC, *Safe Haven: Sheltering Displaced Persons from sexual and Gender-Based Violence Case Study: Thailand* (Mae Sot, 2013), pp. 1-145; IRIN, *Thailand: Addressing Sexual Violence in Mae La Refugee Camp* (Mae Sot, 2009); KWO, *Salt in the Wound: Justice Outcomes and SGBV Cases in the Karen Refugee Camps 2011-13*, (Mae Sot, 2015).

³⁹ Communication with MWA volunteer in Mae La camp in 2020.

incompatible with aspects of Muslim life. As a result, resettlement is more often used as a protection strategy, offered as an option when a survivor of SGBV or otherwise feels unsafe in the camp. As one Mae La community worker mentioned:

If someone feels totally unsafe and want to leave, resettlement is the only solution, and they themselves want to go to a third country.⁴⁰

Perspectives from Mae La refugee camp

I have visited and conducted eighteen field trips to the Thai-Burma borderland area over twenty-three years (from 1988 to 2013). I have made thirteen visits to the Mae La refugee camp between 1996 and 2013, ranging from a few days to two weeks. I held informal and formal talks with in-depth interviews with Karen refugees, camp leaders and KNU leaders, NGO workers, and teacher volunteers in Mae La camp. A visitor is better off greeting a stranger with ‘*O su o clay?*’ (How are you? in Karen), rather than ‘*Nei kaon la?*’ (How are you? in Burmese). Traditional red Karen *lungi*, or sarong, are favoured by most residents, as are t-shirts worn by young men, printed with Saw Ba U Gyi, the first president of the KNU. These t-shirts are freely handed out by KNU and KRC committee members, thus reinforcing the Karen ‘freedom fighter’ image of heroic warriors to the Karen youth of both genders. It is prohibited and punished in Burma.

The chapter draws on over forty testimonies of Karen people ranging from ages 17 to over 80. However, Mae La testimonies’ research was conducted over thirty years in Thailand, with some held in Sheffield. Additional testimonies were gathered about Mae La through other resettled Karen from Norway, Sweden, Germany, and Canada who visited Sheffield for Karen New Year in 2015 and 2017. Their contribution to the research was through visits to Karen family and friends in the UK. This chapter focuses particular attention on fifteen individuals’ testimonies but will look particularly closely at one particular interview with Naw Thu. What was striking was the similarity in their reflections on experiences during my fieldwork in the camps in Thailand.

In the main Mae La study, my rationale for conducting key informant interviews was to develop, deepen and clarify the understanding of political, cultural, and historical information that was particularly important to the displaced Karen.

⁴⁰ Interview with Mae La CBO volunteer in 2011.

While many of these interviews are recorded in English, a few had to be translated and transcribed. In the early years, translation was completed by either Saw George or Bruce, my father-in-law. Between 1999 and 2013, Saw David Thakerbaw translated from Karen or Burmese to English with triangulation done by Moo Pet and Tee Pay.

In some instances, the camp leaders' relationships were forged very quickly, supported with a written recommendation from General Bo Mya and other prominent KNU leaders. Relationships with the camp residents came at a slower pace. Initial suspicion and uncertainty of my questions and conversation soon became amicable after Moo Pet and Tee pay often accompanied me on walks through the camp zones. The following is a detailed excerpt from an interview with Naw Thu, a Karen mother with her two daughters living in Sheffield and having known Naw Thu since 1998 when we met in Umphiem camp. It is about her displacement in Burma and the journey to becoming a refugee in Thailand's refugee camps. As argued, histories of displacement and seeking refuge are inseparable from many Sheffield Karen resettlement experiences, and Naw Thu's story acts as an example of these everyday journeys. Naw Thu's story also allows analysis of the resettlement experience and the ways that many Sheffield-Karens came to be displaced, resettled, and living in the UK.

The interview took place in Sheffield in August 2005 after Karen Martyr's Day celebrations at her home. Naw Thu's story reveals that the displaced people in Burma endure hardship and trauma, and even when seeking refuge in Thailand, they still do not feel safe.

Tell me where you came from?

My village was in the Papun in Karen state. When I was ten, because my father was working in the Karen Army, we could not stay in our small village, so our family had to walk to a different place, near the border. It took about two days, the SPDC came to our village and killed all my family, my mother, father and brothers and sisters.

How old were you when you came to the Thai border?

I was seventeen and became a nurse with the KNLA army. It was sometimes near the frontline, but I met my husband in the hospital when he was wounded. We got married and lived close to the Thai border . . . But you see, between these years, there was much fighting, and my husband [Tha Law Lo] passed away in August 1991. He was on frontline duty on patrol when he was killed by a SLORC landmine. I worked as a nurse there for two years. I have two daughters, one born after my husband died. Since 1991 many villages and many people flee the fighting, the village is burnt down, and everybody goes to Thailand, across the river. We all arrive at a Wang Kha camp in 1986 . . . I was 27 years then with two little babies. During that time, the ceasefire comes, and we think that we can go home to Karen State, but after a few years, the SPDC start the war again, and many, many refugees come to Thailand. It was worse than before, and KNU HQ was taken by the Burmese army. In 1998 they burned Wang Kha and Maw Ker camps, where I have many friends. The Burmese troops came into our refugee camp, and we had to run away again.

So, tell me why the Thai soldiers did not stop them?

The Thai soldiers don't want to be killed by the Burma army, and they are not enemies. I remember in 1999, during the night they came again . . . they kill a young pregnant woman. The Thai soldiers again start fighting with the Burmese, and we are stuck in the middle of the war. All of the camp got burnt down again.

Where did you go to live?

We go to another camp high in the mountains, where the UNHCR recognise refugee and register everyone. It takes over two hours by bus, and we stay at Umphiem Mai refugee camp. It is also very cold there sometimes. Have you visited Umphiem?

Yes, I have. I stayed with Mary Ohn

Oh, I know Major Mary she is a very good person. She looks after all the Karen in Camps. When were you there?

In May 1999, I think,

Ah, when you stay in camp it is very hot, yes, but in December and January it is very cold it rains all the time big winds they blow everything down even our bamboo houses. Next to Umphiem, there are Hmong villages, and they don't understand why we move there. We build many houses on the steep slope and because not many trees there we can plant many vegetables. But after three years, I move to Mae Sot with my daughters and live with other Karen in a small compound. To go back to Burma is not a good idea. My home now has Burmese military Tatmadaw soldiers, and they force some people to carry guns and mortars and bombs for them. And another thing, the Burma army and Karen they plant many mines along the border, it is how my husband got killed many, many mines. And they don't know where they are, even the people who plant them in the ground—many people with one leg. So many peoples, especially Karen, think of moving to a new country. To go is better for my children, a better life maybe. You know, living in Thailand, before in camp, in Umphiem, even Mae La, the Thai you know, do not want education for Karen children. They don't allow high school level, only primary level. But when TBBC and ZOA come to camps, they start talking of high schools and even post-high school.⁴¹

What is pertinent about Naw Thu's testimony is that the displaced Karen were still not guaranteed safety in seeking refuge in Thailand. The displaced Karen found themselves still being attacked by the Burmese military and subservient to the Thai authorities. After seven years of temporary living in many camps, the second observation is that the hope of a return 'home' slipped away. The hope of returning home to Burma was replaced with the notion of resettlement in other countries. The

⁴¹ Interview with Naw Thu at her home in Sheffield in August 2005.

hope of UNHCR resettlement meant the beginning of a new life, especially with access to better education opportunities. Naw Thu's story reveals the length of time that displacement and refugee experiences can experience. Her contribution exemplifies the Karen and KNU discourse narrative of suffering and flight from a military dictatorship. Naw Thu's narrative adds further evidence of the extensive human rights abuses that the Karen have suffered over the last three decades in Burma. The loss of Naw Thu's husband to landmines is reflected with the many injured amputee Karen that live in Mae La is explored in an earlier chapter.⁴²

Naw Thu's experienced great distress in displacement and living in a refugee camp by the Karen is continuing to become a part of the everyday social context of the resettlement experience. The past experiences and the many traumas the Karen have endured in displacement were mixed with Sheffield's resettlement experiences. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that it is an ongoing physical and mental healing process.

Naw Thu's story illustrates that throughout the 1990s, the Burmese military conducted and followed a pattern of dry-season offensives and wet/monsoon season retreats on Burma's eastern borderlands. Under attack, the Karen population echoed this movement, crossing into Thailand and returning to their homes when the army departed. In 1984 the Burmese Army troops did not retreat when the rainy season arrived. Instead, they set up permanent army bases and entrenched themselves. As a result of the KNU losing territory, thousands of displaced Karen migrated to Kawthoolei to seek the KNU's protection. The Karen villagers did not return to their homes. Over the next decade, the hope of returning to their villages ebbed away, with the KNU losing extensive territory to growing Burmese military incursions and the increasing displacement of Karen from Burma.

Instead, they were 'trapped' on the Thai side of the border. This led to the initial creation of the first 'temporary shelters' to provide transitory asylum for the people fleeing conflict and oppression in Karen State.

⁴² KHRG, <http://khr.org/about-us.> [accessed April 2021].

Women's leadership positions in Mae La camp

The Karen conflict in Burma is an example of an ethno-nationalist movement where neither the establishment of a women's organisation nor ideology increased the political participation of Karen women. I suggest that the conflict dynamics in Burma changed as the KNU lost more territory in Karen State. The insurgent war created windows of political opportunity for Karen women to participate in community governance within the refugee camps and KNU civilian governance. These opportunities permitted the KWO to take advantage of its increased autonomy from the KNU to develop its political relationships and economic relationships with other CBOs operating in Burma and international women's organisations operating in the refugee camps along the borderlands.⁴³ The parallel structure of the KWO allowed women to participate in their communities and indirectly in the KNU. By 2006, at least 160 CBOs were working along the Thai border, and their growth is prominent because, through the KWO, most Karen women have been able to participate in policymaking and politics achieving positions of influence in Karen politics. Women's leadership and participation in the Karen community are closely linked to the KWO and other Karen organisations' relationships. In recent years the KWO has asserted itself as an autonomous political organisation to the male-led KNU.

Most Karen women activists flee from the authoritarian Burmese military regime and move to the border areas. Many women arrive in the border areas and the camps particularly to pursue their political campaigning. Although, in the early years of camp life, women's refugee organisations and movements represented in Burma, the camp Thai security forces initially treated the Karen women as lacking a legitimate political identity. Women have been at the vanguard of the pro-democracy movement in Burma, despite its protracted nature. Apart from Hedstrom and Israelsen studies, there has been a scarcity of studies on how the conflict affects Karen women, particularly their political participation.⁴⁴

⁴³ Shelli Israelsen, 'Women in charge: The effect of rebel governance and women's organisations on Karen women's political participation', *Civil Wars*, Vol. 20, No. 3, (2018), pp. 379-407.

⁴⁴ Jenny Hedstrom, 'We did not realize about the Gender issues. So, we thought it was a good idea', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (2016), pp. 61-79; Israelsen, 'Women in Charge', (2018), pp. 379-407.

My research in Mae La between 2007 and 2013 indicates that women are becoming increasingly prominent as leaders and as activist-refugees supplanting males' once-dominant role in organisational hierarchies. Although refugee women have been campaigning as activists and creating networks of women-only political and social organisations from their initial arrival in the border camps, their embracing leadership positions are constrained by external patriarchal structures of the KNU. Although Skidmore has recently explored the leadership roles and women's status in Burma and O'Kane implies that women are principal agents in creating an alternative sphere for resistance, few scholars have examined women's role in the refugee camps and supporting organisations.⁴⁵ In an interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, the KWO Executive Secretary, in 2007, she indicated that many more refugee women are undertaking political roles and leadership activities. Mentioning the roles that KWO women previously undertook in Karen villages in Burma, she told me:

. . .but at the local level, like in the villages in Burma, especially in some KWO areas, women are still very active, working for the community and helping social work in the villages. During that time in the 1960s and 70s, it was mostly women working at the local level on local issues.⁴⁶

Karen women are particularly vulnerable to multiple forms of psychological and physical violence in Burma and border areas. Henry argues that the KWO's role in organising women in Karen communities is part of the KNU's customary governance process.⁴⁷

The changes in labour division within the refugee camps led to Karen women having more direct contact with the working environment than previously experienced in Burma's villages and townships. Many female participants in Sheffield talked about the fact that men often turned to drink in the camps, which constituted its problems for

⁴⁵ Monique Skidmore and Patricia Lawrence, *Women and the Contested State: Religion, Violence and Agency in South and Southeast Asia*, (Notre Dame, 2007), pp. 165-171; Mary O'Kane, 'Blood, Sweat, and Tears', *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, Issue 15, (2007).

⁴⁶ Interview with Naw Zipporah Sein at Mae Sot in 2007.

⁴⁷ Interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, (KNU General Secretary) in 2007, 2009 at Mae Sot and 2013 in Chiang Mai; Nicholas Henry, *Journeys from exclusion to inclusion: marginalised women's successes in overcoming political exclusion*, (Stockholm, 2013), pp. 266-293.

many women. In an informal interview in August 2007, Eh Tee Htoo, the KWO General Secretary in Mae La camp, recalled the issues and problems their menfolk experienced in Umpiem Mai before her resettlement:

. . . some men don't want to face problems in camp. Because when the problem is really hard, they don't want to face the truth. They are just having alcohol see. Why? They drink to forget everything about life at home in Kawthoolei (Karen State). Also, women you see try and get more money into the house, for the children and education, the women make weaving and sewing and knitting with looms which KWO teach in camp. (see photo page 143) Another thing the women like that . . . the men you see do not like weaving and knitting they like to cut trees and build and farm but in camp cannot do. Women get small monies more than men, and the men have nothing to do. It disappears in camp. They are trying and make bamboo basket and hats but not very good . . . yes ha-ha (laughter). Women become more powerful in camps take many leaderships.⁴⁸

A study of alcohol consumption in Mae La was conducted in 2009 and supported Eh Tee Htoo's issues some two years earlier. Scant research has been conducted on alcohol abuse amongst displaced refugee populations, but the Karen women in Mae La perceive alcohol abuse by Karen men as contributing to the rise in women gaining more leadership positions. Preliminary data by Ezard *et al.* suggest that in some war-torn settings (Colombia) and long-term displaced populations in Kenya, Liberia, Uganda, and Thailand, it is linked to various individual and community harms.⁴⁹ Mae La camp Chairman, Saw Honest told the Irrawaddy in 2016 that there were 54 reported suicide attempts, in which the majority died. He said:

⁴⁸ Informal interview and discussion with Eh Tee Htoo in August 2007 after Martyr's Day Ceremony.

⁴⁹ Nadine Ezard, Supan Thiptharakun, François Nosten, Tim Rhodes and Rose McGready, 'Risky alcohol use among reproductive-age men, not women, in Mae La refugee camp, Thailand, 2009', *Conflict and Health*, Vol. 6, No. 7 (2010), pp. 1-9.

It is alarming, so we tried to find out what was behind it.⁵⁰

Camp authorities mentioned that the most commonly abused substance was alcohol, with drugs also increasing in prevalence, even though both substances being banned in all refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. This type of behaviour in the camps has led to increased domestic violence and became an ongoing problem in Karen camp communities.

Education in the camps

This section will explore the educational initiatives and how the displaced Karen are supplanting and reinforcing their nationhood and self-identity agendas. In general, refugees in all camps have limited educational opportunities. The RTG provides the Karen refugees only ‘temporary shelter’ status and makes public schooling inaccessible to refugee students. The RTG has maintained a *de facto* policy of no access to Thai public schooling and a *laissez-faire* approach to refugees setting up their schools. Educational exclusion in a protracted refugee context, such as that along the Thai-Burmese border, occurs at multiple levels. As a group, the Karen refugees living in Thailand became a marginalised community and were excluded from Thailand's educational and other opportunities.

At the core of inclusive, non-discriminatory education frameworks is the right to education, as enshrined in 1949, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In addition, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) affirmed all children's rights, regardless of the children's status, to have free primary education and access to secondary and higher education.⁵¹ The RTG decides on the implementation of educational services for the refugees while the Ministry of Interior (MOI), the National Security Council (NSC), and the Ministry of Education (MOE) decide Thai policies on education provision.⁵²

⁵⁰ Irrawaddy, ‘Suicide attempts in Refugee camp linked to drug and alcohol abuse’, (8 March 2017), [Suicide Attempts in Refugee Camp Linked to Drug and Alcohol Abuse - Thailand | ReliefWeb](#), [accessed June 2021].

⁵¹ UNCHR, *CRC*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>, [accessed July 2020].

⁵² Su-Ann Oh, ‘Refugee children: the future begins in the present’, *Around the Globe*, Vol. 6, (2010), p. 6.

From 1985, the Karen refugees were proactive in setting up their schools and the accompanying structures to administer them. This organised school set-up resulted from the Karen refugees' conviction in the importance of education and the RTG's schooling restrictions on them in the refugee camps. As a result, all the teachers, principals, caretakers, teacher trainers, school and camp committee members are from the refugee community. As a result, there is an immense level of community ownership over the education system and administration.⁵³

One of the remarkable educational features in the refugee camps is the organisation of schools and learning facilities. In most of the camps, the highest available level of education is post-ten, although some higher education is available in the Christian Bible schools. For many Karen, learning and education are synonymous with leadership and Karen nationalist ideals. This is shown in the Karen Education Department (KED) pamphlet.⁵⁴ In their mission statement of 2015, they said:

To build up a true and lasting peace and justice by producing graduates who are critical and creative thinkers, leaders, good citizens and proud of their ethnicity.

In 2009, the KED formally turned over the administration to the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE). The KRCEE has jurisdiction and administers the education system and policy with assistance from ZOA, INGOs and CBOs. The bulk of finance for primary and secondary schools is by ZOA Care Thailand, and the organisation also funds for building material, staff salaries, teacher training and teaching materials. This value was transported through the curriculum to the refugee in the camps. As part of a five-year transition scheme, the academic year 2018-2019 was the final year of financial support for a refugee camp school overseen by KRCEE.⁵⁵

The Karen in Burma suffered extreme exclusionary practices. In addition to physical threats, human rights violations, and other hostilities, the Karen are not permitted to manage their schools. Furthermore, the Karen are not allowed to teach in

⁵³ Su-Ann Oh and Marc Van Der Stouwe, 'Education, Diversity and Inclusion in Burmese refugee Camps in Thailand', *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 52, No. 4, (2008), p. 591.

⁵⁴ The KED the ministry of education for the KNU.

⁵⁵ Personal interviews with P'doh Say Lay Say, Head of Education and Cultural Department, KNU, in April 2011 and March 2013.

their language (either Sgwa or Pwo) or to challenge official versions of Burmese history.⁵⁶

In the Mae La camp, there are approximately twenty thousand children attending school. The current pupil population includes 1,039 boarding house students who have come to study in the camp, mainly from Burma. In total, as of July 2019, there were one boarding housing students in the camps.⁵⁷ There are seventy schools in the Karen refugee border camps with eighty head-teachers and 1,600 teachers. They support and foster the learning of over 34,000 students. In 2020 there were twenty-two nursery schools, sixteen primary schools to Year 4, three middle schools (Grades 5-6), eight high schools (Grades 7-10) and eleven post-ten study programmes. Many other students also stay with their relatives in the camps. Many young students are what happens after they finish a post-ten school, the highest level of education available in most of the camps. Here are only a handful of schools on the Thailand-Burma border where these young students can apply for further education. Hundreds of talented and aspiring Karen students have no means to further themselves in education unless sponsored by Christian Bible schools.⁵⁸

Due to its size and its accessible location, and according to the TBBC's overview of Mae La:

(It) is considered as a centre of studies for refugees, so the current population includes several thousand students who come to study in the camp (some from other camps but mostly from Burma).⁵⁹

Of the many schools that I visited, one of the largest is No. 1 Middle School, which also includes a primary school. It is located near Htee Ger Nee Church. Thirty-one teachers teach nearly seven hundred children in classes that operated simultaneously in this space with curtains used as dividing walls and blackboards lean against each other back-to-back. There is a cacophony of voices during lesson breaks as the children relax and interact with each other. Many Karen parents' that I interviewed shared their

⁵⁶ KHRG, 'Road Construction, Attacks on Displaced Communities and the impact on Education in Northern Papun District', *Field Reports*, (2007), p. 3.

⁵⁷ TBC, *Annual Report 2018*, (Bangkok, 2018), p. 24.

⁵⁸ Reverend Dr Matthew and with Jack Dunford of the TBBC in March 2009 and April 2011.

⁵⁹ TBC, *Annual Report 2017*, (Bangkok, 2017).

opinions are that the education provided in camp-based schools is higher than those in the rural Thai or Burmese villages surrounding these camps.



Photo 14 and 15: School rooms with juniors, (author 2002).



Photo 16: Senior students in a class, (author 2002).

All the students, both boys and girls, I observed in most bible schools, displayed a tremendous nationalistic pride. It was evident in their knowledge of the struggle for a free Kawthoolei (Karen State). The students showed great respect for past and present leaders and a veneration for the Karen flag. When they sang the Karen National Anthem in the morning before the lessons began, it was sung loudly and

with passion. Most of the students in the church middle school were Christian and what I observed in these students is that their sense of nationalistic pride and faith were intertwined and interdependent. I observed that in non-Christian schools, the Karen national anthem was also sung, although with less enthusiasm than in the Bible schools. Nevertheless, this suggested that the imprinting of a Karen national consciousness and ethnic cohesiveness is an essential educational factor. My last visit to Mae La was in 2013, and though the violent struggle that has been going on for more than sixty years had abated, a fragile ceasefire was in operation in Karen State, although it was viewed with great suspicion by Karen camp people.

The students did not talk of 'if' Kawthoolei becoming free; only 'when' and then they could return to their 'homeland'. As mentioned in chapter 2, each Wednesday, the students wear traditional clothes to the school, as evidenced in the photographs (page 154), and a Karen cultural curriculum is taught, including music, literature, and dancing.

A Karen teacher remarked in a conversation after class that:

There are too many Karen children in Mae La that don't know their culture because they have been born here. They do not know what village life is and the guidance of the forest spirits . . . It is important that we teach them what it is to be Karen with our clothes and music . . . and very importantly our history . . . they need to be proud of being Karen and know about their land of Kawthoolei.⁶⁰

While a few of these children have experienced oppression, the teaching and reinforcement of Karen culture through education is an important way of mitigating these experiences' effects. It also promotes their identity as a Karen as a distinct ethnic nationality within Burma.

Interviews with various displaced Karen in Mae La supported this viewpoint; in her in-depth study of Christian schooling in refugee camps in Thailand, Worland also supports this opinion. The language medium to Grade ten is Sgaw Karen, but teaching in other subjects offered is in English, Burmese and Thai. The spoken

⁶⁰ Conversation with Teacher in Middle School No. 1, at Mae La camp in March 2011.

language of instruction in mainstream schools in most of the Karen camps is Sgaw Karen. Using Sgaw Karen for teaching excludes all non-Sgaw Karen speaking students; it often erodes school attendance for non-Sgaw Karen speakers. The use of the Sgaw Karen language is particularly marginalising for Burmese-speaking Muslim refugees. To counteract this development, the Muslim communities in Mae La have designated specific schools as Muslim. They are not Koranic schools. Instead, the students are taught in the Burmese language.⁶¹ The KED regard the learning of contemporary nationalistic history curricula in the Karen language as essential in maintaining Karen identity and culture.⁶²

Another challenge to the language of instruction is that many textbooks are donated by American, Australian, and British NGOs written in English. These English-language textbooks are a legacy of the emergency approach to delivering education in the early days of refugee camp establishment and NGO intervention. Although they are still used in some schools, these English-language resources are not seen as exclusionary because the educated Christian Sgaw Karen community places exceptionally high value on being proficient in English.⁶³

Photographs 14 and 15 (page 154) show the construction of the rooms in the school. The buildings are all constructed of bamboo as permanent structures are prohibited, tables, and benches are made of bamboo fixed into the ground. The classrooms are formed and divided by bamboo partitions which are wholly ineffective in keeping out the noise from another adjacent 'classroom'. Thus, schools are crowded, noisy and hot. As in the rest of the camps, there is no electricity in the schools. Moreover, limited resources mean no tables or chairs for the teachers in the classroom and no science laboratories. Thus, the infrastructure of school compounds and buildings is not adequately equipped to cater to students' physical and learning needs with special education needs.

There is a degree of politicisation in all the Karen refugee camps, as evidenced by the organised KNU national events such as Karen New Year, Martyrs' Day, and Karen

⁶¹ Oh and Stouwe, 'Education, Diversity and Inclusion', *Comparative Education Review*, p. 607.

⁶² Worland, *Displaced and Misplaced or just Displaced*, p. 134. Interviews with anonymous displaced Karen in Mae La, March and April 2011-13.

⁶³ Oh and Stouwe, 'Education, Diversity and Inclusion', *Comparative Education Review*, p. 610.

Revolution Day. The photograph (page 158) shows the New Year celebration in 2006. Camp committees have also encouraged traditional dances and ceremonies such as the Don (traditional Karen dance) and bamboo dances of Karen New Year and the wrist-tying ceremonies. These ceremonies and occasions are explored in greater detail in chapter six.⁶⁴

As mentioned in chapter two on Karen history, the schools in Mae La use various history curricula resources, but the leading history textbook is Saw Aung Hla, 'The Karen History' first published in 1932. Metro asserts that history textbooks are one medium in which nationhood and ethnicity concepts are reproduced, conveyed, and subjectivities are generated.⁶⁵ The lens of writing or offering history is never value-free; historians often produce through masses of information specific meta-narratives and silence others. Frequently, formal schooling reproduces social hierarchies and curricula that are inherently ideological. History curricula can present a nationalistic narrative that legitimises the existing political power structure and serves as wellbeing through which students construct self-identity.⁶⁶

A familiar narrative in Karen history textbooks is the construction of Karen identity built around Burman's shared suffering and British neglect. This narrative silences the sub-ethnic Karen groups, the different religions, and linguistic differences that threaten the cohesion of Karen, thus preserving Karen political elites' power. It can also provoke inter-ethnic animosity and aggression, and often it can lead to legitimising violence between ethnic groups. The textbooks used by the Burmese SPDC Ministry of Education devalued ethnic minorities and valorised the domination of the Burmans. However, curricula written by many ethno-nationalist groups were predisposed to demonise Burmans and rationalise violence against them.

Educators on all sides of Burma's ethnic divide acknowledge that contested history curricula can worsen the conflict and agree that reconciliatory approaches should be followed. Unfortunately, inter-ethnic collaboration has not yet yielded materials appropriate for the ethnically mixed classrooms typical in the refugee camps and the

⁶⁴ These ceremonies and occasions are explored in greater detail in chapter six.

⁶⁵ Rosalie Metro, 'Developing history curricula to support multi-ethnic civil society among Burmese refugees and migrants', *New Issues in Refugee Research*, (UNHCR, Research Paper No. 139, 2006), pp. 1-30.

⁶⁶ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: aims, methods, and new directions in the study of modern history*, (London, 1984).

migrant schools in Mae Sot. These approaches are critical because in the aftermath of the recent ethnic conflict, revising history curricula that fuelled the hatred and legitimised the violence is crucial toward reconciliation and stability. Unfortunately, conducting such revisions is extremely difficult and often only partially successful. These revisions can be attributed to the disputes among stakeholders and controversies over perceived historical truths, and many projects fail to produce viable curricula that delegitimise conflict.



Photo 17: Karen New Year celebrations at Mae La, (author, 2006).

Moreover, Burmese and Karen elites on all sides of the ethnic divide on both sides of the borders, whose power and livelihoods were bound up in the continuation of the conflict, stand to lose if students question the different versions of history textbooks offer them. Current Burmese leaders of the newly elected government and the ethno-nationalist armed struggle groups (most have declared cessation in violence) must recognise that inter-ethnic conflict is no longer viable. Suppose the younger generation begins to question the ideologies that fuel conflict and justify the current distribution of resources. In that case, these leaders may not retain their power during the transition to a not organised society around ethnic and political divisions. Thus, these powerful

elites would not be expected to support a history curriculum that challenges the hierarchies and social organisation on which their power rests.

International and local organisations

The Karen refugees have sustained their previous organisations and socio-cultural activities; moreover, new organisations and institutions were established and maintained inside and outside the camp environment. A plethora of international NGO and Karen CBOs operate within Mae La Camp – TBC (formerly the TBBC), Shoklo Malaria Research Unit (SMRU), ZOA, Aide Médicale Internationale (AMI), Curriculum Project, World Education, Handicap International, and also several Karen based organisations among them, the Karen Teachers' Working Group (KTWG), the Refugee Camp Committee (KRC), Karen Women Organisation (KWO), Karen Education Department (KED) to name just a few.⁶⁷

The NGOs often employ displaced Karen in Mae La camp (mostly women employed as teachers or nurses in Burma), the schools, medical centres, orphanages, or administrators. Small salaries range from 500 baht (approximately £9) per month for a nursery schoolteacher to 3000 baht (approximately £50) per month for medical staff in the hospital and as a senior KRC staff member. Whilst the KYO represents most of the Karen youth in the camp, the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) support them as a working group in Mae La.

In Mae La, traditional weaving by Karen women has taken on a different course. The KWO has set up training and teaching women on how to traditional weaving and embroidery. KWO supplies the raw materials, and Karen women use weaving looms to manufacture the material shown in the following photographs (page 160). These items can then be sold in nearby towns and cities. The KWO's project is run in four refugee camps with Mae La, the primary location, and the income generation establishes new livelihoods for the refugee women. The photographs show the women in the workshops.

⁶⁷ Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch (HRW), Watchlist, and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). National advocacy organizations include The Border Consortium (TBC), Back Pack Health Workers' Group (BPHWT), Free Burma Rangers (FBR), Partners Relief and Development (PRAD), Women's League of Burma (WLB), Burma Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC).



Photo 18 and 19: Woman weaving traditional cloth, (author 2011).



Photo 20: Traditional weaving, (author 2011).

In the 1990s, Sandra Dudley conducted an anthropological study in a Karen refugee camp in northwest Thailand.⁶⁸ The requested research by a relief agency was to establish the causes of conflict among the Karen women. Sandra Dudley's conclusions drew attention to traditional Karen dress's importance as an important cultural signifier, identity, a life cycle marker, and pride. Their violent displacement meant that much of their traditional clothing was left behind in Burma. In addition, the lack of resources to weave or buy traditional dresses meant wearing non-traditional clothing often of a western nature. As a result, the women had to wear and take on new and often unwanted representations of identity. Although Dudley's research was not primarily on Karen women, her study highlights the significance of clothing as markers of identity for Karen people.

⁶⁸ Dudley, *Materialising Exile*.

Kawamura defines a collectivist culture as ‘Individuals are seen as embedded within their group identity, and the notion of a separate, autonomous self is de-emphasised’.⁶⁹ Integral in the beliefs and values of Karen collectivist culture that define their identity is filial piety constructs in family, place, and language. Throughout the interviews, all the participants in this study confirmed these constructs’ centrality concerning their identity. However, when I asked several of the Mae La participants to explain what it meant for them to be Karen, the typical answer was :

pwa k’nyaw may pwa k’nyaw may pwa k’nyaw,

Translated as Karen is Karen is Karen.⁷⁰

Being Karen was enough; no explanation was required. When I investigated further, two separate respondents replied, and each referred to the varying construction of culture and the meaning each had for them:

... because the Karen people is the nation that the people who love each other, they helping each other, be honest and helping others and love to live peacefully.⁷¹

In this way, being Karen can be seen as part of each participant’s self-identity and critical to their sense of self-worth. Filial piety is a process of maintaining the family group’s wellbeing in Karen societies, and it encompasses obedience and respect for parents, the honouring of ancestors and practical support to other family members. Filial piety is evident in Karen culture. In interviews conducted with resettled Karen in Sheffield, it was evident in their commitment to the financial and practical support of those family members and friends remaining in the camps. Of note, these studies were participants’ descriptions of extended family living and challenges to maintaining filial piety.

The Karen values regarding family mean that all extended family members, including those related by marriage, are at all times welcome to stay in one’s home.

⁶⁹ K. Y. Kawamura, ‘Body Image among Asian Americans’, in Thomas Cash, (ed.). *Encyclopaedia of Body Image and Human Appearance*, (2012), pp. 95-102.

⁷⁰ Interview with Saw Has Mu Htoo in Mae La on April 2002.

⁷¹ Interview with Saw Eh Wah Kler in Mae La on April 2002.

These values will be explored in chapter six. Although all participants were committed to the value of filial piety, some participants mentioned the challenges to fulfil their family obligations. Many aspects of participants stories reflected a sense of sacrifice. Karen culture's collectivist nature was evident in how filial piety in the family was perceived by resettling Karen concerning practical support of family. The family was perceived to be more than just their own family, and it also included the '*bwadawer*', the wider Karen community.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed Mae La refugee camp's daily lives on the Thai-Burma border through the individual's lens of displacement. The version of displaced Karen identity in the refugee camps suggests that all characteristics of their life journey need to be considered to gain a more informed understanding of who they are. The combination of their traumatic experiences and their experience of living in a refugee camp forms a broader context of their history, culture, and idea of Karen nationalism. It shapes who they are individually and collectively. When I reflect on my participants' recollections and my overall observations in Mae La Camp, I gained an insight into how the inhabitants of Mae La perceive their identity. The Karen living in Mae La Camp maintain and observe their identity as '*Pwa K'nyaw*' – Karen from Kawthoolei. The KNU attempts to forge a sense of community amongst all the displaced Karen in Mae La Camp. For many displaced Karen in the Thai-Burma borderlands, it suggests that identity is formed through complex processes that traverse fixed national boundaries. The version of displaced Karen indicated that negotiated like in the camp includes engaging with various actors (including NGOs) who have their own agenda, one aspect of which is to instil a sense of Karenness amongst the camp population. The combination of Karen acquaintance traumatic experiences and their exilic experience within the broader context of their history, culture, and nationalism form who they are individually and collectively.

Chapter 5: Resettlement in Sheffield: gender and change in Karen communities

'A tree has branches, A bamboo has branches'. (Karen Proverb)

95IAo;yS>ql.vXuvk><Azdo.ql.vXcD.'k.I (Karen Proverb)

English Translation: People have a variety of cultures, religions, lives, but we are all human and should not be discriminated against.

This chapter draws upon fifteen years of fieldwork with the Karen community in Sheffield. It examines how the resettled Karen refugees in Sheffield have reinforced their cultural perspectives of Karen-ness and nationalism in forming renewed connections with the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) and the UK based Karen Community Association (KCA). It explores the changing gender relations that emerged in Burma's displacement and Sheffield's Karen resettlement site from 2005. It analyses the Karen conception and challenges of Sheffield's new home in resettlement and how they have negotiated innovative mediums of connections with other global diasporic Karen communities, with family and friends in Burma and the borderlands.

This chapter argues that resettlement in this particular place and region of northern England has transformed Karen perceptions of belonging and identity. It is particularly evident in the changing role of women as community leaders. The focus on Sheffield will examine the relationship between the predominantly male-dominated KNU and the KWO. These Karen relationships and identity have been reinforced and strained in resettlement, sometimes distancing Karen's community at 'home' in Burma.

The chapter draws on an extensive set of ethnographic material collated in 133 fieldwork trips to Sheffield that I undertook from May 2005 to August 2019. The research involved 58 informal interviews with Karen men and women during or after community meetings in Sheffield, where I was present. It also involved 35 individual interviews with female community leaders over this period. I have been part of many community and family events, gatherings, and meetings, and the research involved

participant observation methods. I took extensive notes and photographs of our interactions and observations. Additional visits were made to the two minor Karen resettlement communities in Bury and Bolton between 2010 and 2014 to attend two weddings, funerals, and other familial occasions. These two satellite sites consist of a small but growing Karen resettled population. The minor Karen population at Bolton and Bury jointly amount to around 30 families with strong familial ties to Sheffield. No detailed studies or interviews apart from observational studies were conducted at these minor sites. The majority of the Bury and Bolton Karen visit Sheffield more often than a reciprocal visit from Sheffield Karen. Although small individual groups of friends or relatives frequently visit Bury and Bolton. The city of Sheffield is viewed as the Karen UK community's epicentre where most political and community meeting transpires. There is also a small number of ex-patriate Karen in London; these were either economic or study-related Karen students who have decided to stay in Britain.

The chapter is organised into three main sections addressing Karen resettlement. The introduction establishes why so many Karen decided to resettle in third countries. Secondly, the chapter focuses on the emergence of dominant gender relations within Sheffield's resettled community through female Karen organisations, the KWO and KCA associations. My research identifies an important shift in the role of women as they gained more powerful community leadership positions in Sheffield, which is particularly distinctive to the UK resettled groups. I will argue that the resettlement site of Sheffield and interaction with local women in northern England and support groups actively shaped Karen women's worldview. Finally, the chapter explores how Karen reconnect with their global communities through social media and other forums. This chapter will shed light on how a new generation of young Karen women has continued to shift the power balance from Sheffield's men. The overarching analysis argues that the resettled Karen in Sheffield has reinforced their cultural identity. Women have become instrumental in making the community more cohesive than other resettlement sites in Europe.

As I have demonstrated in chapter three, experiences of exile and displacement from Burma were integrated into Karen identity as part of community, ethnicity,

religion and belonging.¹ This chapter examines and forms a crucial backdrop to the inquiry line in this chapter, as the resettled Karen of Sheffield have consolidated their identity and ethnicity through cohesive intergenerational social structures. It seeks to demonstrate that the resettled refugees in Sheffield have reinforced their central perspectives of Karen-ness and nationalism by forming a UK-wide community association and renewed connections with women's organisations. We will see how notions of ethnicity and nationalism are intertwined and constitute a dominant discourse in Sheffield and the global diaspora's resettlement site. These two elements of refugee-ness and nationalism rigorously structure the Karen people's worldview by representing particular subject positions related to the question of 'what and how I am Karen'.

For instance, within the Karen communities, conflicts have emerged due to the complex interactions between national and international organisations representing particular Karen communities. In Sheffield, the KNU occupies a dominant position in circulating and reproducing Karen nationalism.² The KNU predominates in Sheffield, but its nationalist worldview circulates alongside alternative views of what it is to be Karen. There is also an ongoing struggle between the ethno-nationalistic discourse of the KNU and those of alternative Karen discourses relating to aspects of faith, language, and politics. The KNU predominates in Sheffield, but its nationalist worldview circulates alongside alternative views of what it is to be Karen.

Nevertheless, in Sheffield, there is an increasing disparate shift in the relationship with the KNU back in Thailand relating to representation within the KNU Congress and voting rights.

¹ Liisa H. Malkki, 'National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees', *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (1992), pp. 22-44; Decha Tangseefa, *Imperceptible naked-lives and Atrocities: Forcibly displaced peoples and the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces*, (Unpublished PhD, Hawaii, 2003).

² The KNU in the UK has two representatives who function as liaison with community organisations. The KNU-UK representatives attend all the important occasions and annual celebrations reading New Year messages from KNU central committee and situational updates of Karen State in Burma.

Sheffield Karen resettlement experience

Since 2005, over one hundred thousand displaced Karen have resettled in third countries, including Britain, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan.³ Refugee resettlement is one of the three durable solutions promoted by the UNHCR. It entails the organised migration of recognised refugees from their country of first asylum (in this case, Thailand) to a third country for permanent settlement.⁴ In spring and summer 2005, the first group of fifty Karen refugees from Burma arrived in the UK under the Gateway Protection Programme (GPP). Approximately 350 Karen refugees have been resettled to the North of England, most in Sheffield. My research into Sheffield Karen resettlement is a step forward in resettlement discourses. It is adding another chapter to the small but growing literature regarding British Karen in resettlement. It is crucial to understand how resettling Karen communities make sense of the resettlement process.

While most Karen refugees would prefer to return to their homes in Kawthoolei or Karen State, the option of a safe return to Burma is unlikely at present in 2021. Those refugees who applied for resettlement in third countries or decided to apply gave the following main motivations: freedom, safety, self-sufficiency, dignity and educational opportunity for their children. Most Karen refugees referred to resettlement as an opportunity to ‘start their life’ and to ‘rely on themselves’.⁵ However, the single-core motive to resettlement among the Karen refugees was the opportunity to obtain a college or tertiary education for their children. Many described the lack of opportunity for improved education after post-10 school education within the camps as ‘the end’. Furthermore, for the Karen education is strongly associated with democracy and progress, a western educational system is considered superior. The Karen education system in Burma and the refugee camps is underdeveloped

³ International Organisation for Migration (IOM). ‘*Resettlement Milestone reached as 100,000 Refugee leaves Thai camps*’, (2017).

⁴ The other are: a) repatriation to the refugees’ country of origin; b) local integration in the country of first asylum.

⁵ It was a common theme when conducting interviews and conversations with Karen people of Sheffield at New Year celebrations and other occasions.

compared to international standards, and education is viewed as a future investment for the Sheffield Karen community.⁶

Registration as a refugee by the UNHCR does not automatically qualify people for resettlement. UNHCR guidelines specify that refugees cannot choose the country of resettlement. Information is usually provided about all possible countries, regardless of whether a specific country will offer resettlement. Most Karen apply to resettle in Europe or Australia and apply to the USA primarily because of its relative ease for the application process. According to seven participants interviewed in Sheffield, certain countries had a challenging health screening process.⁷ Despite a strong desire to resettle in their chosen country, many Karen choose resettlement in an alternative location.

Alexander Betts suggests that refugee resettlement aims and objectives are poorly specified, and the outcomes are inadequately measured. For resettlement to be more effective, it needs a much more robust evidence base and improved coordination at the international level.⁸ To date, research on resettlement has focused mainly on three broad areas, descriptive accounts of the evolution of resettlement policy, secondly work on the social integration of resettled refugees and lastly, the cultural dimensions of the resettlement experience. Betts also suggests that the existing body of work has left critical gaps in important areas. Methodologically, there has been limited quantitative or comparative research that can inform practice. Thematically, there are also gaps.⁹ The politics have rarely been scrutinised, how the ‘resettlement industry’ operates, and the power relations and interests that sustain existing global, national, and local practices. Most of the existing scholarly work is country-specific, focusing on understanding how the refugees’ experience the complete resettlement process. The findings by Betts support my field research in Sheffield, where many resettled refugees questioned the motives of the UNHCR and the fragmented

⁶ Adrienne Nenow, Xinwei Zhang and Melanie Salzarulo, ‘Education in Burmese Refugee Camps in Thailand’, *Current Issues in Refugee Education*, (2015); Oh and Stouwe, ‘Education, Diversity, and Inclusion’, pp. 589-617.

⁷ Pieter Bevelander, Miriam Hagstrom and Sofia Ronnqvist, *Resettled and Included? The employment integration of resettled refugees in Sweden*, (Malmo University, 2009), pp. 260-270.

⁸ Alexander Betts, ‘Resettlement: where’s the evidence, what’s the strategy?’ *Forced Migration Review*, 54, (2017), pp. 73-75.

⁹ Ibid.

geographical outcome of applications. An example of this geographical separation came from Saw Isaac Myint's conversation, confused about why his mother and siblings had been relocated to Sheffield. His father was resettled in Australia. It just so happened that his father was visiting relatives in Burma during the family's resettlement application process. His absence delayed his application. As his father did not want to stay in the camp alone, he re-applied and is now in Australia and would have to wait some years before gaining residency and visiting his family in Britain. Saw Say gave another example; whilst he was living in Mae Sot, he was denied resettlement as the application process was closed, and now his wife and children live in Sweden.¹⁰

Explanations of the high proportion of informed and educated refugees resettling in Sheffield indicated they are more confident and seem less intimidated by the outside world. Numerous conversations with Karen in Sheffield since their resettlement in 2005 indicated greater access to information on third countries and frequent contact with external support staff in organisations and agencies supported in their application.¹¹ Furthermore, some resettlement countries emphasise the importance of the integrational potential in candidate selection for resettlement and accept the educated Karen in more significant numbers.

In March 2004, the UK initiated the Gateway Protection Programme (GPP), facilitating refugee resettlement to Great Britain. The GPP is co-funded by the British Home Office and the European Refugee Fund (ERF III) and is operated by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) in cooperation with other organisations.¹² Initially, the UK limited resettlement quota placed 500 people, but it increased to 750 per year in 2016.¹³ Like other resettlement nations, the UK Border Agency (UKBA) conducts interviews and security and health screenings before offering individual places to refugees. GPP

¹⁰ Conversation with Saw Isaac Myint in Sheffield at Karen New Year 2009 and Saw Say Say in Mae Sot in March 2011.

¹¹ Informal conversations with Karen community leaders Htoo Kuu, Moo Rah San, Rosie Trang and Wat Choo in Sheffield between 2005 and 2017 at meetings, home gatherings and ceremonies.

¹² The main organisations are UNHCR, IOM, Refugee Action.

¹³ Refugee Council, *Gateway Protection Programme: Good Practice Guide* (London, UK 2004); D. Platts-Fowler and D. Robinson, *An Evaluation of the Gateway Protection Programme: A report commissioned by the Home Office*, (Sheffield: Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, 2011), pp. 4-6; G. J. Wright et al, *ICAR Navigation guide to key issues: Resettlement Programmes and the UK*, (London, 2004), pp. 13-15.

aims to help groups from refugee camps integrate into UK society by providing a coordinated support package in the resettlement areas.¹⁴ Sheffield was the first UK city to welcome refugees through the GPP, with Liberians arriving in late 2004. The initial arrival of fifty Karen refugees from Mae La and Umphiem camps in May 2005 was subsequently followed by another three hundred between 2006 and 2007 from these two refugee camps and others located on the Thai-Burma border.

Once the assessments are completed and approved, the UK NGO's offer Cultural Orientation and English Language Training (COELT). These courses give the refugees essential information regarding employment, health, financial assistance, and education in the UK. Additionally, local service providers and the general public in the UK's resettlement areas are expected to be informed about refugees' arrival. On arrival, resettled refugees receive Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), which allows them to stay in the UK indefinitely. The ILR status means that resettled refugees enjoy the same rights to live, work and study in the UK as any other citizen, including the right to claim benefits and welfare payments. Moreover, the ILR allows persons to apply for citizenship after five years of permanent residence in the UK, many Karen in Sheffield and the North West have taken.

As refugee resettlement from Thailand scatters the Karen people worldwide, the Karen family unit, the community, and the group undertake a process of fragmentation and transformation. Some Karen CBOs in Thailand have expressed significant fears concerning resettlement.¹⁵ Resettlement issues diverted attention away from other important community issues in the camps. The remaining camp populations expressed fears about losing what they understood as Karen culture when they were placed for resettlement. When asked about preserving Karen culture in Sheffield, Naw Htoo said:

¹⁴ GPP can be divided into four separate phases: a) Set up and pre-arrival; b) First main period of support: focus on statutory services and basic support needs; c) Second main period of support: focus on longer-term needs; d) Exit strategy: programme wind-down.

¹⁵ Chie Noyori-Corbett and David P. Moxley, 'Resettlement Issues among Myanmar Refugee Women in the Early Stage of a Community-Based Developmental Research Project', *Journal of Community Practice*, Vol. 25, Issue 3-4, (2017), pp. 464-487.

. . . we have opportunities and no discrimination, we can wear our Karen dress, speak and study our language, even as a small community we can teach our culture and traditions.¹⁶

In interviews of recently resettled Karen at Sheffield in 2007/8, some expressed the loss of the Karen culture regained in resettlement. Women in Sheffield provide a significant way of ameliorating that loss, often reforming the social bonds within the community group. However, for most Karen deprived of cultural rights for several decades, resettlement represented an opportunity to reaffirm and perform their culture. When several Sheffield Karen men and women were asked about cultural preservation in the resettled country, they answered in the following manner:

When we moved to Sheffield, we were very happy my family was in a good, strong house not made of bamboo, but it rains a lot like the monsoon rains, and it's very cold . . . we have plenty of rice and food from the Asian shops, there are many in Sheffield, we are not hungry anymore.¹⁷

The previous comment by both men and women suggests that access to food is an essential indicator of Karen material culture and their relationship with food. Rice is a particular staple part of Karen everyday life regarding diet and identity when visiting family and friends in Sheffield. It was always customary to be given a meal or a snack, which could become problematic if we visited many people whilst staying in Sheffield. It is conceptualised as a home-making activity and how they make meanings of their new places of residence relative to a former life in Burma and the camps. This study builds on the everyday lives of the Karen in Sheffield. In another comment by a young woman in her twenties:

we can wear traditional clothes anytime, nobody worry about us we see many African peoples with coloured clothes, they are very pretty.¹⁸

¹⁶ Conversation with Naw Htoo in Sheffield in January 2006.

¹⁷ Focus group at Hillsborough Church in May 2017, attended by over 35 community members, excluding children.

¹⁸ Interview with Naw Daisy Eh Khin at Karen New Year Celebration 2019 in Sheffield.

This perspective illustrates how the Karen observe and interact with other ethnic communities in Sheffield, such as the Caribbean and Irish communities. Many established ethnic communities have made Sheffield their home, establishing strong communities in the process. Like most of its older communities, Sheffield's newer arrivals have come seeking refuge from political instability and wars in their home countries. In 2004, Sheffield became the first city in the UK to house and resettle Karen refugees and was designated City Of Sanctuary.¹⁹ Since then, many refugees from numerous countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Somalis, Iraq and Burma, have been dispersed among its existing communities.²⁰ There are over twenty ethnic communities represented in a Migration Matters festival during refugee week annually since 2015. Several diverse events spanning theatre, dance, film, fashion, food and music are featured. The Karen community interacts with the wider ethnic community in Sheffield and invite speakers to church meetings and Karen New Year celebrations. As one female Karen community member in her late thirties commented in 2017:

We like to invite other communities to our church gatherings and meeting to discuss our problems. Sometimes they join us for church services and have food afterwards . . . in 2016, we had a choir sing at New Year celebrations.²¹

My research suggests the Karen interact with other ethnic groups by the Karen in Sheffield with invites to church services and Karen New Year. Most of the relationships with local people are through church organisations and their members. Sheffield's local Baptist church network supports the Karen in many ways through English proficiency work and meetings regarding housing and settlement issues. Most Karen view Sheffield's title of 'City of Sanctuary' in a very positive way. Adapting

¹⁹ 'City of Sanctuary' movement began in October 2005 in Sheffield. In September 2007, with Sheffield City council's support and over 70 local community organisations, Sheffield became the first UK's 'City of Sanctuary'. The movement enjoys close partnerships with all major refugee organisations and are committed to working with all to build a united voice to advocate for people seeking sanctuary in the UK.

²⁰ Runnymede: 'Intelligence for a Multi-ethnic Britain', *Sheffield Migration Stories*, (2012), p. 3, 21; Runnymede: 'Creative Commons', *Sheffield Migration Stories: Making Histories*, (2012), pp. 2-24.

²¹ Conversation with KCA committee member Naw Moo Rah San during Martyr's Day meeting in August 2016.

to life in Sheffield has been challenging for some older Karen, especially in the initial years. At a Karen community meeting in Sheffield in 2018, which over fifty Karen attended, I conducted a quick ‘straw poll’ after the meeting, and over eighty per cent of the Karen said that they now considered Sheffield as a ‘very good’ place to live and have reconfigured it as their ‘home’.²²

Interviews and informal conversations with community leaders Naw Too Rah San (forty-year-old female), Naw Rosie Muang (mid-thirty-year-old female) and Naw Wat Choo Tee (late-forty-year-old female) and community members Saw Robert Htoo (mid-twenty-year-old male), Naw Wah Wah Nee (mid-thirty-year-old female) and Saw Thomas Muang (twenty-year-old male) in Sheffield during Karen New Year celebrations of 2007 and 2008 expressed a common view that resettlement in Sheffield was challenging. Reasons given were the lack of employment opportunities, language issues for the older cohort and certain forms of racism they had not been encountered before in Thailand. It also allowed the Karen more freedom to express their culture and identity. In 2007, the inaugural Karen New Year celebration was attended by most of the UK Karen community. Reflecting on these notions of cultural expression during the Karen New Year, some ten years later, a prominent KCA leader Htoo Kuu expressed in August 2017 that the continuing interaction with the local Sheffield community by UK-KNU representative Wendy Humphrey-Taylor had significantly facilitated their integration in the early years of settlement in Sheffield.

As Saw Robert Htoo and Naw Wah Wah Nee stated:

We have equal opportunities, no discrimination, we are not prohibited, we are not banned to study their own language . . . they do not wear your dress, they allow you to do . . . the situation is a little bit different from Burma, so at least some people will keep some culture and traditions.²³

This cautious statement about life in Britain being ‘a little bit different’ indicated that the early years of resettlement were not the end closing phase of the migration process.

²² KCA meeting at Hillsborough Baptist Church June 2018.

²³ Interview and informal conversations with Karen Saw Robert Htoo and Naw Wah Wah Nee during in 2008 and later during 2017 Karen New Year celebrations.

My studies on the Karen in Sheffield suggest that many had few illusions about how hard life would be after resettlement. Some Karen in Sheffield had an idealised expectation of life after resettlement, contributing to distress when their experience does not match their hopes. Expressing their cultural heritage on the first Karen New Year celebrations in 2007 at Sheffield gave most of my interviewees' cautious optimism about their future.

With the number of Karen resettling in Sheffield increasing to three hundred and fifty in 2007, the Karen challenges in Sheffield were many. However, as this chapter contends, one of the significant outcomes of their social dislocation was that it enabled Karen women to take an unprecedented role in leadership by forming community associations and supporting families and individuals in many different aspects, such as assisting with local government, the police, and social workers. The following section explores this important aspect of changing gender dynamics in Sheffield. It considers how women effectively recuperated broken bonds and social losses and created new ways of belonging.

Integration in Sheffield

Most of the resettled Karen residing in Sheffield are members of the KCA. The KCA-UK was founded in 2006 by the Karen community in Sheffield and have three branches in the UK, in Bolton, Bury and London. The KCA represents the Karen community in the UK and assists the Karen community with problems they face in the UK. It also raises awareness about the refugee situation in Burma and Thailand, raising money to help internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees. It also campaigns for action by the international community. KCA UK also aims to promote unity among Karen and at the same time preserve and promote their language, culture and literature in the UK.²⁴

Some Karen adults meet daily, their children play together, and most of the community meet at Hillsborough Trinity Methodist Church or community hall once a week. It is important to note that all Karen religious denominations gather at the meeting place, including non-Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim Karen. Although the community is spread out around Sheffield, they will often meet in other churches or halls available

²⁴ Karen Community Association UK, 'History and Blogspot', [Karen Community Association UK: 2007](#), [accessed July 2021].

to them from local Baptist or other community halls. Church networks play an essential and integral part of the societal fabric in Sheffield. The Karen community replicates the Karen refugee community's organisational structure on Thai-Burma border refugee camps. These usually include the establishment of 'elder' Karen community members often to deal with complex social welfare, integrational and cultural issues.

The Karen that have experienced these issues are usually Karen displaced from Burma in the early 2000s, a few years before resettlement in Sheffield. An unpublished study by a resettled Karen highlighted the challenges for integration by some vulnerable members (male and female) of the Karen community, such as mental health combined with the post-traumatic stress of having lived in conflict zones. These vulnerabilities mean that the Karen tend to seek support from community leaders, who are predominantly women.²⁵

The older cohort's primary and most frequent issue was language, the interaction of speaking English in situations of authority such as the local council, housing associations, or medical advice. The principal source of hope and achievement was the educational opportunities afforded to the younger generation. Acting out these goals has had modest success, with some young Karen gaining degrees in various subjects. Other points raised at an early stage of their resettlement were mobility and transportation, food, health, and British cultural practices. The subject of racism caused most Karen consternation. However, there was also recognition of the intergenerational conflict and the need to focus on positive integration of Karen youth, with the cultural past's role in shaping their future in resettlement. There follows an informal interview and conversation conducted during 2012 at one of these meeting halls. I asked a KCA member, Naw Lew Say San, who is in her mid-forties, how she was settling in England and what problems she had encountered. She responded with a lengthy conversation:

Could you please tell me how do you find life in the UK?

²⁵ Htoo Ku Hsar Say, 'An Insider study of the Karen Community: Reflection from the Field', (unpublished Master's Thesis, Sheffield, 2014).

We arrived in the UK in November 2007 with our youngest daughter and settled in Sheffield, where the Refugee Council helped us with complicated paperwork and introduced us to Karen friends who came before us—travelling by bus troubles me a lot. I don't speak or read English. If I am lost, then how do I find my way back. I always need someone to walk with me. I am so nervous to walk by myself. I do not recognise places, and that worries me so much. Back home, I usually walk my children and hold their hands when they were young, now the opposite, my daughter has to walk me around. She learns things very quickly.²⁶

This conversation with Naw Lew describes how nervous she was in using public transport in Sheffield. The fear of being lost or stranded somewhere unknown in Sheffield was compounded by being unable to communicate in English. Transport contributes to the complexities of resettlement and dealing with complicated paperwork. The conversation also indicates a change in parent-child dynamics where the child has taken on greater responsibility. There is an acceptance of intergenerational conflict and the need to focus on the younger Karen's positive integration in shaping the future.²⁷ I asked another question on resettlement problems she was having, she continued:

Could you please share with me what are the problems and how you resolved them?

There are many things, lots of letters in this country you do not see people coming to your house instead of that they send lots of papers. My husband has to take those letters to his friend's house and get help from them. The last two years, we had received some support from the housing association staff, but now that has stopped.

[long pause]

²⁶ Informal interview and conversation with Naw Lew Say San at her home in Sheffield in April 2012.

²⁷ Anina Chabert Ramon and Monica Turrini. 'Grandparents and Grandsons: poetics of an intergenerational learning experience', *eLearning Papers N° 8*, (2008), p. 6-7.

Do you know the place where we live is very dangerous, for three years already we have had problems with our neighbours? I do not like it here, but I don't have anywhere to go. These young people don't sleep, they stay up very late, and many times they have thrown rubbish to our garden, they set fire to our dustbin and burnt the papers, they threw dead rats, tomatoes, and eggs to our windows. Sometimes they called the police to come to our house, the police came and asked us about the call, but we did not know who rang them, my husband and I were so very frightened seeing policemen coming to our house. We thought they would arrest us or questions us.

So, what did you do with them?

Last year, we got the English lady who came to help us with our community members. They reported all the incidents to the police. The police in the area did come from time to time, but those young people are not afraid of the police, they would disappear for a moment and then come back in front of our house, and they smoke a lot too. Last year in winter, we had guests, and my husband went out to buy some vegetables in the evening. He did not think that those young people would attack him, he was about to enter the shop, and two men came behind him and punched him from the back and on his head. He came home running and did not bring anything, and he told us to turn all the light off, shut all the windows and lock the doors well.²⁸

This conversation requires a more in-depth analysis of racism and fear among the older Karen community. Naw Ley's experiences of being subject to racist intimidation and violence were common issues with three families housed in a particular district of Sheffield. She was aware of racism and social housing problems, but rather than complaining. She showed a sense of 'gratefulness' for being resettled in the UK. It was also acknowledged that dealing with the

²⁸ Informal interview and conversation with Naw Lew Say San at her home in Sheffield in April 2012.

police profoundly impacted the family, increasing their sense of fear and vulnerability rather than making them feel more secure. In Burma and Thailand, the police are figures of authority to be feared. The Karen community usually deals with the authorities through the help from KCA leaders, so young women play an essential role with the police as they are more articulate and perceived as less threatening by the predominantly white British police. The conversation turned to relocate within Sheffield:

If you have the opportunity to move out of this area, would you like to do that?

I don't know, my friend told me that if we move to another place, we may see them again, she said that these young people live everywhere. If I move out from this area, I will have a lot more problems with those papers and lots of phone calls to inform those who responsible for the property. I will have to look for other people to help me, and that is not always easy.

Naw Ley's statement reflects her understanding of whether integration within the local community in certain districts of Sheffield and the family is particularly challenging. She recognises that Karen people have different cultural traits but found that maintaining relationships with Karen people in the community was essential. The main barrier to confidence in resettlement or in seeking help from outside the Karen community was given as the lack of English language skills:

You sound like you have many problems, so how do you find living in Britain.

Yes, because you can speak English, so it's good for you, but for me, I don't find any happiness living here. I know for sure - we have plenty of food and no more Burmese soldiers who will harm or kill us. But I miss my daughter and granddaughter so much. I thought that they would be able to join us, but it was not easy. My daughter had tried

many times applying for the UK but was not successful. My sister and brother are still living as internally displaced people in Burma. I want to send them some money to them, but none of us has got a paid job. My husband has volunteered at a charity shop for four years, but I don't think we will get any paid jobs because we do not speak English.²⁹

After many years of being resettled, the lack of English finds this middle-aged couple still suffering from social and economic exclusion from mainstream British society. The conversation then turned to family members in the refugee camps in Thailand. Karen families have robust kinship ties. The past experiences of living in the camps are mixed with the present resettlement experience, revealing that living in Sheffield is an ongoing healing process embedded with personal histories of suffering. Naw Lew's husband has approached the resettlement through another strategy; in volunteering at a charity shop, he replaces the work he conducted in the refugee camp. Given their age, I wondered what steps were available to rectify the language barrier in their resettlement, security and happiness. The last portion of the conversation turned to the issue of language again:

Do you go to any English conversation classes or clubs?

Yes, I do; I go twice a week. I now understand my teacher speaking but not other people. It's a little bit easier to listen, but when I speak, no one understands me. I am very nervous of speaking English to other people because they don't understand me. My teacher understands me after being in her class for three years. I try to learn new words, but I forget them very quickly. My daughter helps us a lot, but my husband and I still find it very difficult to learn a new language when we are old.³⁰

²⁹ Informal interview and conversation with Naw Lew Say San at her home in Sheffield in April 2012.

³⁰ Ibid.

The general response to language issues in Sheffield is that older Karen people have significant difficulties learning English while many of the younger Karen adapt at a faster rate. The older generation pins their hopes on the younger Karen generation in leadership roles. There is an awareness amongst some older Karen that there is a growing divide between cultural identity and the Karen language. The evidence gathered in Sheffield suggested that this viewpoint is very much in a minority of the elder Karen. The research indicates that the Karen community in Sheffield is cohesive, and the organisation mobility of the KCA leaders is highly organised and supported by the Karen youth.

Sheffield Karen households typically have three generations residing in them. In some households, the family can number up to a dozen members. This household composition is not unusual to the Karen in Burma or the camps, but what makes it singular is the struggle in these unusually large households of communicating and relating to one another. Some Karen elders felt isolated from their family in the initial resettlement period and felt 'disappointed and depressed'.³¹ Some Karen elders could not connect with their grandchildren or children, as their children's social networks expanded to intermingle with local children, especially in the early years. Disconnection from their child's social worlds impacts parents' participation in school and communication with their teachers. Social impacts of resettlement on the Karen elderly, such as those described above, are standard features of newly arrived groups with refugee backgrounds. Since the initial resettlement in 2005 of the Karen in Sheffield, there has been a changing expression of identity. Presently, Karen youth are more likely to have stronger and strengthened links with Karen communities locally and globally. This illustrates the dependence of the older Karen cohort in Sheffield, especially in communication or official correspondence with the local government authorities. The Sheffield Karen youth assume more responsibility and leadership roles than similar studies in global Karen resettlement. This study of the Karen in Sheffield adds to the UK's knowledge in migration and resettlement studies.

Research by Allen and Ponzio suggests that aged people with refugee backgrounds in Britain are particularly at risk of isolation, mental ill-health, and

³¹ Interview with four Karen elders after community meeting at Mount Tabor Methodist Church in Sheffield in May 2016.

family conflict. It is markedly common in newly arrived communities as they negotiate with other more immediate resettlement challenges and establish themselves as a community. The authors argue that once these communities become established, they have more opportunities to advocate and support the elderly in their group and employ strategies to deal with isolation and generational conflict. This chapter supports the research that Allen and Ponzio have advanced by studying the Karen community in Sheffield. The Karen resettled community in Sheffield have settled into an organised and unified society with hardly any community members relocating to other cities such as Leeds or Manchester, which are close.³²

Other issues and problems that have emerged in resettlement in Sheffield have been cross-cultural communication and acculturation. Traditional Karen cultural practices in Burma and the refugee camps necessitate that the family live together as a family unit in one room where they live, eat, relax, and importantly sleep together on bamboo rush-matting. A Karen family visited a local hospital concerning a medical complaint experienced by a child. The child was taken into care through a combined lack of understanding of Child Protection Legislation and a proficient English translator. The situation could not be resolved through a Karen community leader's intervention. According to the Child Protection Law, only family members can and are directly involved with the authorities, not community leaders. This Karen refugee family not only lost their home but their social standing within the Burmese community. This family had also thought that if a professional interpreter were employed in the first place by the authorities, then their case would not have escalated and become so severe that they could lose their children into care. After eighteen months, the case was resolved, and the Karen family relocated to another town close to Sheffield.³³

This section argued that the challenges the Karen community in Sheffield experienced in their resettlement are both matters of language, racism, elderly vulnerabilities, economic exclusion and confidence. Ordinary everyday tasks such as public transport or talking to authorities can become sources of isolation and

³² Judith Allen and Orna Bosenfeld, 'Local Political Strategies for Housing Refugees in Bradford and Sheffield', in Giovanna Zincone and Irene Ponzio (eds.), *How European Cities Craft Immigrant Integration. Something to Learn*, (Italianieuropei, 2013), pp. 137-165.

³³ An informal and confidential conversation with a female KCA leader in Sheffield during Martyr's Day Celebrations in August 2014.

integration barriers. The term integration can be problematic as western European societies see themselves under threat from immigrants they regard as ‘not yet present in society’ or appear ‘unadjusted to society’, including the poor, the young, and the elderly. Moreover, Willem Schinkel argues that the concept of integration identifies ‘what does not belong’.³⁴ The evidence suggests that community-based organisations such as the KCA can help address some of these problems and issues more straightforward to navigate. Overcoming these obstacles substantiates the notion that resettlement is more complicated than moving through a checklist of tasks.

The changing gender relationships in the Sheffield Karen community

The rise in women’s roles in leadership positions in community-based organisations (CBOs) is crucial for the Sheffield Karen community. The previous chapter saw this relative to the camp communities and its developing impact on gender relations. In Sheffield, the observed changes to gender relations include the change in the division of traditional Karen labour, the improved access to education, particularly by young women to tertiary level and the strengthening of connections with women’s organisations back in Thailand. In Sheffield, the rise in women’s leadership roles steered the men to a reduced workload to perform than they had previously. New types of knowledge are offered in resettlement and the camps, leading to new views on female activism and leadership.

In Karen society, traditionally, the husband was the head of the household. In most Karen communities, the wife’s responsibilities were associated with taking care of the family and household maintenance. While farming, the procuring of food and money was predominantly the husband’s responsibility. Consequently, the husband was outdoors more, whereas the wife was more housebound, cooking and looking after their children. This relationship was not considered a hierarchical arrangement by either gender but was viewed as a more convenient and complementary labour division. As one Karen female commented during a conversation in Sheffield in April 2011:

The men can do the things that they can do, and the women can do the things that they can do. In Sheffield, the women are doing more for

³⁴ Willem Schinkel, *Imagined societies: a critique of immigrant integration in western Europe*, (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 1-6.

the community than the men, but the men are not happy that more of the women are leaders in KCA.³⁵

The young female Karen's viewpoint suggests that there is still a perceived gender hierarchy even in Sheffield. However, this has been eroded with women taking on more responsible roles within the Sheffield Karen communities between 2006 and 2018.

However, in Sheffield, the gender relationship and hierarchy have shifted favouring women, mainly as more interaction with the local authority with family and financial matters or issues are presented. These interactions are mainly dealt with by women from the KCA, formed soon after arrival in April 2006. The Karen community in Sheffield are spread out across the city and often meet on weekends at church or community centres. Although men contribute to the community through support functions and technical aspects of ceremonies, it is only in the last three to four years that some men have taken up positions of authority in Karen community organisations. The primary objective of the KCA organisation is:

The Karen Community Association represents the Karen Community in the UK. It assists the community with problems they face coming to live in the UK, raises awareness about the situation in Burma, raises money to help refugees and internally displaced [and] to promote Karen unity in the UK, with its other aims being to preserve culture, literature and language, represent Karen affairs, and build a secure foundation to support the efforts of Karen.³⁶

This statement issued in June 2017 reflects the influence of female leadership in the community by promoting unity and cohesiveness within the Karen communities. From 2006 to 2016, most branch community leaders have been women, with Htoo Ku Hsar Say being chairperson and a board member of the European Karen Network (EKN),

³⁵ Interview with KWO member Naw Hsar Seng at Sheffield in April 2011.

³⁶ KCA-UK web page, [Karen Community Association UK - New-year Events | AllEvents.inhttp](#); [accessed June 2020], and KCA-UK Facebook page, [karencommunityassociation.blogspot.co.uk/](#), [accessed December 2020].

though, from 2016, there was a representation of two men on these committees. In 2017, two Karen male members were voted onto a board committee, and as existing Karen women initiated new international networks, more KCA-UK women board members enrolled in these newly formed global organisations. The KCA-UK organisation has enabled the women from Sheffield to network through the global Karen diaspora in the USA, Europe and Australia to form international organisations.

On arrival in Sheffield, English-speaking Karen women from London acted as interpreters and translators to assist in ongoing resettlement services, including employment assistance, English tutoring, and health support. A recent study by Jolliffe on Karen learning adaptation in the UK offers new insight into their engagement with education in Sheffield. Jolliffe presents two concepts central to understanding the study's aim – education as a gift and social discord. Concerning the first concept of education as a gift, my research into diaspora Karen communities, spanning twelve years, concurs with Jolliffe's findings of Karen's high value on education. Jolliffe presents the second concept of social discord through a historical lens and locations in her study. Jolliffe suggests that on the individual level, discord is presented when the value of education sometimes conflict with the reality of the economic hardships faced by Karen parents. However, the Karen view that education and learning as inter-generational progress. Sheffield Karen and the global diaspora present a possible threat to the socio-cultural values attached to the concept of the 'gift of education' as the Karen children of this and second-generation seek instead to discover their place living between two cultures.³⁷

Nant Bwa Bwa Phan and her sister Zoya Phan arrived in the UK in 2001 before Karen's mass resettlement in 2005-06. Both have studied at British universities and provided educational support for Karen children at mainstream primary and secondary Sheffield schools early on in Karen resettlement. Bwa Bwa and other female community leaders have organised summer camps for new arrivals to ensure that they were establishing themselves within the schooling environment. Typically, Bwa Bwa attended classes with Karen children and translated what the teacher was saying. In this way, the children were enabled to participate in mathematics, games and other

³⁷ Pia Jolliffe, *Learning, Migration and intergenerational Relations: The Karen and the Gift of Education*, (Oxford, 2016), pp. 146-147.

school activities. The support given by the Phan sisters who had lived in the UK for five years before Karen resettlement in Sheffield has also been instrumental in their integration and acculturation.³⁸ The Phan sisters were daughters of a prominent KNU leader, Padoh Man Sha Lah Phan and were accorded great respect and position within the Karen community.³⁹

Sheffield's northern England city exposed the resettled Karen women to local church organisations and other refugee associations dominated by Yorkshire women. In Sheffield, however, many Karen women were re-exposed to notions of gender equality and women's rights for the first time, which permitted them to envisage taking on more significant political and societal roles within their communities and diasporic Karen democratic movements. This shift in gender dynamics is further illustrated by the emergence of communication technologies that allowed international Karen women's forums to share everyday experiences and collectively organise to push for social and political rights more effectively.⁴⁰

Although scholars have noted both structural and symbolic subordination of women in Southeast Asia, Chie Ikeya's work focuses on the colonial period to illustrate how the Burmese men and women adapted to foreign ideas as their complex engagements with social reform, media and consumerism rearticulated the boundaries of belonging in terms of racial and ethnic terms. Ikeya also suggests that Burmese women transformed what was expected of them in their wife and mother roles. She also emphasises the colonial legacy of xenophobia in Burma by the Burma majority. The military junta has denounced Aung San Suu Kyi as a Burmese woman who should

³⁸ Informal interview with Bwa Bwa Phan during Karen New Year at Sheffield in January 2011, 2012 and 2016

³⁹ Padoh Mahn Sha Lah Phan was born in Rangoon in 1943. He graduated from Rangoon University in 1966 with a degree in history. He joined the KNU in 1963. In 1964 he became a member of the KNU Central Committee and was elected Joint General Secretary in 1995. He was credited by many observers with being a shrewd political tactician and a leader capable of unifying the country's ethnic political groups; he was murdered at his exiled home, in the Thai border town of Mae Sot, on Valentine's Day 2008 by militia gunmen aligned to the Burma Army. His death had a tremendous and shocking impact on the refugee communities in Mae Sot, the refugee camps and in Sheffield.

⁴⁰ Jessica Harriden, *The Authority of Influence: Women and Power in Burmese History*, (Copenhagen, 2012).

be treated as an outcast because she married a foreigner, Michael Aris, a British academic.⁴¹

In contrast to these studies, gender role differences in Sheffield have shifted sometimes substantially within Karen organisations where women have gained new leadership roles in forming committees, arranging venues for meetings and ceremonial occasions. Resettlement has re-worked traditional expectations of gender perceptions with the Karen community favouring female candidates, often young females in their thirties are exploring different nodes of influence on the sense of community belonging through home-making practices. In Karen society, young females in Burma are discouraged from adopting or taking leadership roles. With their resettlement in Britain, these young Karen women are typically adopting typical roles within British society. The older Karen women cohort view these new roles by the young females as progress and inroads into a previously male stronghold. My observations and conversations with the older men within the Karen community suggest a silent acceptance of women's advancement into leadership positions. Young Karen women were bolstered concerning political leadership when Teresa May became the British Prime Minister in 2016. My working theory in taking up leadership positions in the Sheffield Karen community is that women had a higher educational level than most men. Most spoke English and could communicate effectively with local Sheffield organisations. All the women members of the KCA-UK organisation had previously held leadership posts in several CBOs in Burma and Thailand. The younger Karen women are usually more proficient in English and communicate with people in authority significantly more than men.⁴²

My research evidence in Sheffield demonstrates that there is a significant shift in gender relationships. In discussing the case of culture change among refugees, Camino and Krulfeld argued that 'in the face of altered access to resource allocations and new differential employment opportunities, changes in gender roles and statuses, and ultimately, often, in gender models themselves are fostered in refugee communities'. Through their actions, Karen women in the expanding public discourse

⁴¹ Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*, (Honolulu, 2011), p. 167.

⁴² Unni Wikan, *Managing Turbulent Hearts: A Balinese Formula for Living*, (Chicago, 1990), p. 67; Theresa W. Devasahayam (ed.), *Gender Trends in Southeast Asia: Women Now, Women in the Future*, (Singapore, 2009).

with local Sheffield organisations actively promote their culture through church organisations and media communications. For many Karen women, their gendered responsibilities are often education and childcare. In particular, Karen women with lower literacy and education often accessed Karen women of higher education and English language skills who could navigate and access the national health care service (NHS). There was a general perception amongst the Karen community that more Karen women are educated than males in Sheffield. As one Karen male explains:

Well it because she's more educated than the husband. And she knows how to get around and talk with other Karen women . . . in the Karen community, the women are learning more than the men. The men are accepting this. They are in contact with NHS and others.

The underpinning of this acceptance amongst the Karen men is that women, through their organisations and support groups, have greater community support between each other. Later in this chapter, evidence will be offered in separate but linked interviews with an elderly Karen man and a young Karen woman at a Sheffield New Year ceremony, which underpins this observation.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the apparent complementary organisation of the gendered division of labour might well entail dominance structures. In the refugee camp(s), male power's dominant structures were maintained but sometimes supplanted by women employed by CBOs and could speak English. Once resettled in the UK, women could step forward and upwards by volunteering for prominent community organisation positions. More women took on active roles with organisations and associations in Sheffield, often as community liaisons, significantly improving their English language skills. Traditionally, Karen women are/were not expected to occupy leading or prominent positions but to stay passive and be centred on the home. This slow but incremental change in the traditional roles has afforded the Karen resettlement in Sheffield a step-change in gender power dynamics.

The Karen Women's Organization and other organisations in Sheffield

This section highlights the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) importance as an influential organisation. It was formed in 1949 and provided support for Karen women both inside and outside of Burma. However, the organisation was dormant until it was re-established in 1985, at the proposal of the KNU, and under the leadership of Naw Lah Po, the wife of then KNU Chairman, General Saw Bo Mya. The KWO became a recognised entity in the Karen community and produced a structure that enabled female power to influence the broader community power bases by promoting community decision-making and political processes.⁴³

Since its re-emergence in 1985, the KWO expanded its focus from purely social welfare to encourage an awareness of Women's Rights and to promote women's participation in the community decision making and political processes. The organisation's principle was to support women's participation in the political work of the KNU at different levels. However, the role of the KWO has altered over time, supporting the KNU and engaging in social work to be an independent political organisation in its own right. The KWO in Sheffield plays a vital role in producing gender and ethnicity discourse, an alternative to the one proffered by the male-dominated KNU.⁴⁴ Although this resistance was ultimately rooted within male KNU discourse, it does not represent a rebellion against it. Resettled Karen women in Sheffield have overcome barriers to their involvement in community decision-making through collective action to develop the KWO as an independent organisation that gives women activists a foundation for engaging with male leaders as equals.

The KWO has an influential position in the border villages in Burma, the camps and the wider Karen diasporic communities. In the camps, they organise a broad range of activities for women, from education and training, via income generation to the documentation of abuses towards women. The KWO hold a notion of empowerment and equality not as 'women and men doing the same things', but becoming more valued, and women can sustain themselves through 'female activities'. In other words,

⁴³ The KWO was formed in 1949 <https://karenwomen.org/about/>, [accessed July 2019].

⁴⁴ Sarah Fuller and Eileen Pittaway, 'Karen Voices on Resettlement', *Forced Migration Review*, 30, (2008), pp. 45-46.

they aimed to raise the value of female modes of action to the level of male modes of action. The fundamental notion of gender difference is not viewed as a contested arena.

The KWO's political role has been reinforced since the organisation joined others representing women from various ethnic groups in Burma to form the Women's League of Burma (WLB) in 1999. Since the mid-2000s, the KWO has taken on an increasingly engaged role internationally with resettled Karen communities. It enabled the organisation to raise funds from INGOs to support local work in Karen communities in Burma.⁴⁵

Fundamentally, the KWO enables new gendered subject positions to emerge, thus representing an intersection or node of resistance towards the masculinised notions of power prominent in the KNU discourse and power struggles. The KWO frequently acts as a counter to the often male-dominated and political KNU, focusing more on women's social issues and equality with men. The success of the KWO in promoting women's participation in everyday Karen governance was in the election of former KWO leader Naw Zipporah Sein to the position of Secretary-General of the KNU in 2008.⁴⁶

In her forties, a former KWO activist, now resettled in Sheffield, advocated gender equality in an interview and stressed the importance of urging young Karen women to become future leaders. However, in a post-meeting conversation held in Hillsborough Trinity Methodist church in Sheffield in August 2014, the female participant mentioned these differences:

Ah yes, in the camps, the women are getting equal rights with the men. However, as you know, because you have been to many of the refugee camps, yes? Women are maybe weaker than men but do more than men. Men cannot be soldiers in the camp. Women can be part of NGO's or other camp organisations, and there are many parts that to do, and women do these parts. They do not cut trees or move heavy things in the camp. But now, in Sheffield, we are not afraid, and many become leaders. Look at Zoya Phan and Bwa Bwa; also, most of the

⁴⁵ Henry, 'A place on the platform', pp. 268-269.

⁴⁶ Interview with Naw Zipporah Sein in March 2009, 2011 at her home and KNU offices at Mae Sot.

KCA-UK leaders are all women. It is very important for women to be leaders and go back to Thailand and show the camp refugees how strong they can be.⁴⁷

Thus, even though this informant in Sheffield is reasoning that reciprocity in female and male roles potentially occupied unbalanced power relations, she nevertheless saw a clear divide between female and male modes of action. Kruffield maintains this line of reasoning in her study of Laotian refugees in the United States. Nurturing and caring for the family was traditionally the power base of Lao women, thereby implying gender reciprocity.⁴⁸

In an interview after the Karen New Year celebrations in 2012, traditionally, Karen women were supposed to be ‘shy’. However, the Karen word for which they gave the English translation for ‘shy’ was – ‘*meshah*’, which also translated as ‘to want to cry’. Being shy entailed being quiet, polite, stay in the background or maybe even hiding, not solving issues or engaging in conversations, avoiding attention, and even wary of strangers.⁴⁹ One of my elderly male informants Saw Lah Kei Doh [75+ old who had been a KNLA sergeant during the civil war], explained how Karen women could not be leaders regarding their shyness and their physical weakness:

Were they good speeches by the women leaders of KCA? [Karen Community Association]

Ah yes, but back in Burma, women do not have leader positions, only mens in villages and townships. Speeches very good, but now many women in charge maybe not good. I think. But now we are in Sheffield, and KCA are very . . . um . . . helpful and organise New Year celebrations.

⁴⁷ Post meeting conversation with a former KWO leader in Sheffield during August 2014.

⁴⁸ Ruth M. Kruffield, ‘Buddhism, Maintenance and Change: Reinterpreting Gender in a Lao Refugee Community’, in Linda Camino and Ruth Kruffield (eds.), *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning: Refugee Identity, Gender, and Cultural Change*, (Basel, 1994), p. 102.

⁴⁹ Reverend Jonathon Wade, *Thesaurus of Karen Knowledge (1847), Vocabulary of the Sgaw Karen Language*, (Rangoon, 1896), Interviews with Nan Chuang Mu and Paul Keenan in Mae Sot, Thailand in April/May 2011, observational notes in Sheffield in 2012/2013; Paul Kennan, *Saw Ba U Gyi: Voice of the Revolution*, (Mae Sot, 2008).

Do you think women are equal to men?

Maybe, now we have many womans in leader roles. In camps and now in Sheffield. But womens are not as strong as men cannot do same thing as climbing and cutting trees to build homes, they also give up easy and are how you say *meshah* um . . . don't know the word in English maybe you ask the young boy to translate. In Karen, culture women are weaker than men. Womens cannot be leaders because they have not been soldiers. Do you think they are equal?

Yes, I think they are strong in other different ways from men but equal, but you have to be a soldier to be a leader?

Yes.⁵⁰

This conversation underlines how the older generation of Karen men continues to be committed to a view of leadership attached to militarised masculinity at the time of conflict in the 1980s. Although the young Karen men in Sheffield do not replicate this, most have only experienced the conflict through reading about it or lived in camps for most of their lives. This veteran saw female physical weakness [typified in not being a soldier] as an impediment to female leadership roles. It also reveals the prominent position given to KNLA soldiers as suitable and rightful leaders in Karen society. This leadership ideal has been explored in previous chapters and is continuously reproduced within Karen society. Interestingly, in a later conversation with a young female at the same venue about Saw Lah Kei Doh's statement, what became apparent was the resentment was not that Karen women lacked physical strength but the presumption that Karen women could not be leaders within Karen society. Esther Loh Wah, 24, responds to this ideal:

So, Esther, I talked with an elderly former soldier earlier about gender equality, how men and women are equal, and he mentions that maybe

⁵⁰ Conversation with Saw Lah Kei Doh on Karen New Year at Forge Valley Community School, Sheffield in January 2017.

women are not as equal to men that they cannot climb trees, build houses, or become soldiers not be Karen leaders.

But Karen women can build houses, mum, me and Laytoo had to build in camp by ourselves with bamboo and leaves, and also I can climb and cut trees. (laughter)

Do you think that many men and boys think that Karen women cannot be leaders?

We can be very good leaders, look at Zipporah Sein, now vice-chairperson of KNU and our own KCA, all committee member leaders are women.

What about the opinion of Karen men and boys? Do you think they agree that you [women] can be leaders?

Maybe young Karen boys get used to us [women] being leaders now so it will be better and equal for men and women in Sheffield. I don't know about back home. Maybe it takes time for soldiers and men to get used to women being leaders. We have the right to become leaders.

So, it is up to the girls then?

Yes, very much up to us to decide, become strong for our people.⁵¹

The young woman felt that Karen women should take responsibility for becoming leaders. This belief was confirmed in many other conversations with young and older women held on that day and subsequent Karen New Year festivities. Other participants of both genders and mixed ages emphasised the complementarity or equality of having differing 'male' and 'female' qualities as a qualification for female leadership roles.

⁵¹ Interview with Esther Loh Wah, on Karen New Year at Forge Valley Community School, Sheffield in January 2017.

Most females emphasised the suggestion that difference gave men advantages in specific roles, although all rejected the argument of male characteristics being a superior ‘leadership quality’.

One of the aims of the KWO is to increase the value of female capacities within themselves and enhance their position in gender relations. The KWO representatives reinforced the notion of shyness or ‘meshah’ previously mentioned as a hindrance for emerging female leadership candidates. Although encouraging the young girls not to be ‘shy’ is not seen as contesting female Karen-ness, women may be seen to be shy and demonstrate their strength. Fostering power through their activities seemed to be the KWO approach. They provided new gendered subject positions for Karen women through their activities but retained their sense of Karen-ness. To the KWO, shyness could be ‘lost’ without having the effect of rendering the young girls less Karen.

Nevertheless, young female KWO members I spoke with in Sheffield insisted that it was not ‘against Karen culture’ for women to be leaders. However, within the refugee camp(s) community, they knew there was a considerable obstruction to women becoming leaders.⁵² The contradiction of this statement is that the men see the women in the camps as homemakers and childminders, but when transposed to Sheffield, the men feel emasculated and weakened, being unable to perform what they were seen as masculine tasks or leadership roles.

This stance was reinforced in a KWO statement on International Women’s Day in March 2017 when demanding more KNU leadership positions. The statement also demanded that the Karen community leaders:

To encourage and actively promote women in leadership positions and . . . to see more women genuinely participating in Peace Talks in Burma.⁵³

⁵² Interview with KWO member Naw Hilda Tay Naing, in Sheffield on May 2016 during a church meeting.

⁵³ KWO, ‘*Be Bold For Change*’ statement on International Women’s Day in March 2017; Karen News, ‘Karen Women demand more positions in KNU leadership and more Involvement in Peace Process’, [Karen Women Demand More Positions in KNU Leadership and More Involvement in the Peace Process - Karen News](#), [accessed December 2020].

The statement alluded that many Karen women leaders have been left out of history books, despite their sacrifices, contribution, and achievements. In referring to the women who took the place of men as the KWO in a statement said:

. . . Women village chiefs who stood bravely in place of men in times of conflict. They are the teachers and health workers, the students and workers, the leaders, and members of organisations. Karen women have made and continue to make essential contributions to the processes of change.⁵⁴

The KWO also points out that Karen women's work is often unnoticed and not praised; they are often kept out of decision-making and kept away from the tables of power.⁵⁵ The previous statement was a call to the KNU 16th Congress held between March and April 2017 to be more inclusive with women members. The KNU has a 55-member Central Committee with five people in the senior positions of power. The recent 16th Congress selected 60 nominees from 217 delegates, of which only a tiny proportion were women (five). The incumbent Vice-Chairperson, Zipporah Sein, was deposed, and all eleven members of the Central Executive Committee are now male.⁵⁶

There were differing ideas and opinions regarding what qualifies a Karen as a leader within the Sheffield cohort, whether the person is 'strong' and showed 'masculine' attributes or the ability to be dominant regardless of gender. The differences between these two strands of thinking lie in the perception of whether one mode of action is stronger than the other. The earlier quotes illustrate what is perceived as being physically 'strong' and having the military experience that reflects a greater ability to lead rather than the 'shy' feminised notion. The 'feminine' capabilities of adapting and creating 'new' modes of action within the Sheffield resettled communities in leadership roles reflect many women's gender equality. However, both positions imply a precise definition of the difference between masculine and feminine characteristics and capabilities. A recent study by Paustian-Underdahl, Walker and

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Interview with an observer and delegation (who requested anonymity) in May 2017, who attended the 16th KNU Congress between March and April 2017 at Pa-an, Karen State.

Woehr indicates no perceived difference in leadership effectiveness between genders. This gender difference is born out in Sheffield most Karen communities who see no difference with the leadership qualities of either gender.⁵⁷

Many women had previously interacted with the KWO by attending workshops, leadership training courses and income generation projects in the camps. Female participants interviewed in Sheffield related that they ‘realised that they did not have to be dependent on men’.⁵⁸ The research suggests that through the KWO, Karen women and young girls in Sheffield gained new possibilities and were exposed to new knowledge types. As a result of the intense ideological position of the KWO, many women experienced new gendered subject positions that became available. However, my general impression was that there was a significant gap between stated views by KWO activists and the lived realities for people in Sheffield who were less engaged in politics or organisational life. Nevertheless, with the resettlement in third countries, the KWO members have re-established their networks and positions of power within the UK and diasporic global Karen communities.

When formal leading positions of authority were advertised within Karen communities in Karen State, more men volunteered than women. This perception corresponds with the notion of women’s responsibilities being tied to the functions of running a household. It became apparent in some interviews during the early period of resettlement in Sheffield that some of the older cohorts of women were initially reluctant to assume positions of authority, even though they had previously held them within the camp(s). With encouragement from Karen females who had lived in London for many years, the number of young women adopting positions of authority increased within Sheffield's community.⁵⁹

Further exploration through informal interviews and conversations with the Karen women and men in Sheffield, it became apparent that the women believed that

⁵⁷ Samantha C. Paustian-Underdahl, Lisa Slattery Walker and David J. Woehr, ‘Gender and Perceptions of Leadership Effectiveness: A Meta-Analysis of Contextual Moderators’, *Journal Of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 99, No. 6, (2014), pp. 1129-1145.

⁵⁸ Informal conversations with Naw Jury and Naw Tha Hso, at Mae La camp 2007 and 2011 and in Sheffield from 2005 and 2017.

⁵⁹ Informal interview and conversations with Zoya Phan and other London based Karen between 2006 and 2017 at London and Sheffield.

many men ultimately felt threatened by women's leadership roles within the communities. Interviews conducted at Sheffield early in the resettlement period with middle-aged Karen males, the view they expressed was a general concern for women's safety when they wanted to prevent women from participating in any political processes.⁶⁰ In the last ten years, the men have assumed less visible forms of power; during Karen New Year celebrations between 2011 and 2019, the programme of speeches and introductions where women speakers lead. The recent New Year Celebrations on 6 January 2018 saw just two male speakers in a programme of 15 parts. Most of the presentations' technical aspects, including lighting, audio amplification, visual recording, and flag-raising, were directed and conducted by Karen men or youths. Over the last thirteen years of my research observation and participation, it appears that some of the young men have overcome their reluctance to contribute to the running of the community organisations.⁶¹

A recent conversation in 2019 with a European Karen leader indicated that the KCA-UK was unique, with women dominating its committee leadership positions. Sweden was the only other comparable community association that had several women in leadership roles.⁶² The Sheffield and diasporic Karen communities agreed that men no longer denied women access to leadership positions.⁶³ The KWO has had to connect the two notions of Karen femininity as thoroughly as possible to maintain and realise an influential position in both the resettled and camp refugee communities. Overt revolt against the dominant and masculine ideal within Karen society and the tenet of *ah nah dey* would not have given them the extensive support that the KWO enjoy in the contemporary period.⁶⁴ The concept of *ah nah dey* is defined by Christina Fink as 'a feeling of obligation to others that makes one act in a restrained way' or 'a desire not to impose on others'. There is a strong sense of social cohesiveness and respect for

⁶⁰ Interview with Saw Myint Cho, meeting at his home in Sheffield in July 2006.

⁶¹ I have attended all the Karen New Year celebrations from 2006 to 2019, conducting many informal interviews during and after the ceremony.

⁶² Interview with Naw Htoo Ku Hsar Say, European Karen Network Committee (EKN) member, at Sheffield in January 2017 and 2018. Karen communities from four European countries including Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom came together for the first time to form a new European Karen Network after a two-day conference held on 11-12 July 2009 in Sweden.

⁶³ Conversations at Karen Youth Congress meeting in Sheffield, on 12 August 2016, where Swedish and Norwegian Karen Youth had been invited to attend. Among the many participants were Thomas Laing, Lal Wai Htoo and Naw Hpo Moo.

⁶⁴ Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma Under Military Rule*, (London, 2001), p. 120.

authorities deeply ingrained, and the norm is to avoid disagreements and not stir up negative emotions. However, Parker's reflections, supported by Skidmore and Lawrence, hold that agency should not be confused with resistance, neither is it always the same activity.⁶⁵ Moreover, the fact that issues relating to female leadership were discussed at all by the Karen communities suggests a shift in what questions were and what are possible today.

In this section, my research reveals that the KWO is a powerful and influential organisation. Although on closer investigation, it is apparent that KWO operates within the parameters articulated by the male discourse of the KNU. By presenting issues, social transition resulting from resettlement leads to many changes that significantly affected gender relationships. I also suggested that gender relations in the Karen community context were defined by 'difference' and comprised an unequal power relationship. KWO's primary aim was to increase the value of what was seen as female modes of action and agency, enabling young girls to take up leadership roles in the community without abandoning their Karen-ness. However, it is not a universal assumption that the emancipatory power of increased access to previously men's domains in a Southeast Asian society.

The case study also indicates how changes relating to Karen life as a refugee may also contribute to a shift in gender power relations in resettlement. The changes in the defined areas of a gendered division of labour and increased access to education with exposure to 'new' types of knowledge served to bring new elements into the Karen communities' gendered identity negotiation. In the previous chapter, evidence suggested that some aspects of certain leadership positions had veered in favour of women in the refugee camp(s). Building on this, my research in the Sheffield resettled community finds that young women's predominance as leaders in the number of organisations has dramatically increased. I account for this difference in age and gender power due to increased awareness of feminist issues and greater exposure to external societal influences in Britain. Although not pivotal in their encounter with Yorkshire women, many Karen women in Sheffield have been influenced and inspired.

⁶⁵ Lyn Parker (ed.), *The Agency of Women in Asia*, (Singapore, 2005), pp.11-12; Skidmore and Lawrence, *Women and the Contested State*, pp. 2-3.

Karen organisations and transnational communities

From information gathered through participant interviews and personal observations in the early years of resettlement from 2005 to 2006, it became apparent that Sheffield Karen actively pursued links to their homeland and the diaspora communities through digital social network platforms. These were being initiated by the Karen resettling in Sheffield. In discussing a similar case with Kurdish refugees resettled in London, Wahlbeck describes how such links create a sense of belonging and duty between their society of origin and the country of resettlement.⁶⁶ Indeed the KNU actively encourages, through various communication mediums, the formation of Karen communities on arrival in the host country, identifying key contact people to act as KNU representatives within the host country.⁶⁷ One of the representatives' critical functions is to update the resettled community on the current situation in Karen State and the borderlands through electronic newsletters and statements/messages to community gatherings. Following Hall's view of collective identity, my research indicated that the resettled Karen in Sheffield are still re-forming their identity within their new evolving environments through interactions with the local community. The Karen youth also maintain close and numerous connections to their cultural origins in Burma through social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and other digital platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp.⁶⁸

The establishment of a KYO in Sheffield to set up youth activities has engendered the Karen youth with a renewed dynamism. Furthermore, the young Karen in Sheffield have initiated various educational and cultural activities. The predominant intention is to remind their generation of their cultural background and heritage through the support of language education, religious services, numerous KYO exchange programmes with other European Karen communities and cultural events. Every summer for a week, the Karen language is taught to the children and the young

⁶⁶ Wahlbeck, *Kurdish Diasporas*, and Wahlbeck, 'The Concept of Diaspora', pp. 221-238; Eva Ostergaard-Nielsen, *International Migration and Sending Countries: Perceptions, Policies and Transnational Relations* (New York, 2003) p. 3.

⁶⁷ The KNU utilise telephones, mobiles, email, YouTube, webpages and digital platforms to connect with the resettled communities. The KNU Representative in the UK is located in northern England and regularly interacts with the KNU leadership in Burma and Thailand.

⁶⁸ Robert Bruce Hall, *National Collective Identity: Social Constructs and International Systems*, (New York, 1999).

people of Sheffield. Thin Taw, one of the male KYO leaders living in Sheffield, described community interaction as follows:

We meet nearly every day; we all know each other, some from Mae La and from other camps, but all now good friends. We have maybe 35-40 youth in KYO now, from Bury as well, oh and Bolton, but not very often they come, on weekends. We all learn English and practise with each other . . . We practise dancing and play music, and last year Karen youth from Norway come oh and some from Sweden. Every year after Christmas, we have Karen New Year. It is very good, and we show our Karen culture.⁶⁹

The resettlement procedure for these former refugees is felt in diverse ways according to gender, age, and experiences. Enthusiastic Karen leaders view resettlement as a ‘preparation period’ and an investment for future generations. However, they stress a need for better communication and involving the Sheffield Karen diaspora in the nationalist cause. Nevertheless, the KYO play a crucial role in culture and heritage preservation. These promote and encourage Karen unity beyond borders, organising Karen communities in host countries, networking, and active cultural preservation. These activities are encouraged at information and discussion workshops and meetings on resettlement; they encourage communication through their offices in Thailand, provide information and collect contact data on Karen who resettle in third countries. One female KYO member explained:

We encourage resettled people to keep the Karen culture, and also we teach about our Karen culture, our language and our way. Also, we educate our little children to speak Karen. We also teach the community to keep in touch to stay united and in contact.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Interview with Thin Taw, a music graduate, in March 2010 and January 2018 in Sheffield at a meeting in Hillsborough church.

⁷⁰ Conversation in Sheffield with teenage female KYO member, (who wishes anonymity) in 2012.

In a conversation with Thaw Wah, now 22, in 2013, recalled the journey with his parents in Sheffield, he recalled his feelings to me:

Sitting on the bus, I felt I had freedom, and I thought I can do whatever and anything I want. I don't have to stay in the camp anymore . . .⁷¹

He goes further with his experience of resettlement in Sheffield:

I had no problems with prejudice. Sheffield is nice. But I did have difficulty with the accent. I had to learn that wa'er means water. I have many English friends and go to college now. I am happy.⁷²

The resettlement proved to be much harder for Thaw parents, Htoo Ley and Titu Paw, Htoo is a former civil engineer and teacher and proficient English speaker. He had a reasonable idea of what to expect in resettlement. However, he was disappointed that he is not employed in his profession as the UK does not recognise the qualifications he achieved. His wife, Titu Paw, has not used her skills as a piano teacher in Sheffield as she has difficulty communicating her musical knowledge in English. Thaw has decided to move from the family home to elsewhere in Sheffield with friends he made in university. His parents were hurt and baffled by this decision which would never have been made in Burma. Thaw comments:

Yes, my parents were very shocked when I told them, but in the UK, most teenagers leave home at 18 or 19. But now I am at uni. Studying hard, and they are proud of me.⁷³

In 2016, Thaw graduated from Hallam University with a degree in musicology, and he has travelled to the US to teach Karen music with resettled American-Karen. The family's experience illustrates that refugees are not always victims and that the older generation struggles to adapt and look on as the benefits of moving to a wealthy county go to their children, whose adaptive capacities tend to be more rapid.

⁷¹ Conversation with Thaw Wah at a meeting in Mount Tabor Baptist Church Hall, Sheffield in 2013.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Transnationalism

In contrast to the experiences and cohesiveness of the Karen community in Sheffield, a recent study on the Swedish Karen resettlement experience by Kanska has highlighted the limitations and deficiencies of the communication network between Swedish Karen communities.⁷⁴ The Karen population's dispersal in Sweden across a large geographic area means that the community groups cannot come together frequently, apart from Karen New Year celebrations.⁷⁵ Thus, the lack of time and economic resources makes frequent contact between the Swedish Karen urban and rural-based community groups impracticable. Although some community members use social media to communicate with each other, the financial considerations in Sweden have an adverse effect on the Karen Swedish community.⁷⁶ Moreover, similar difficulties in other diasporic Karen communities lead to a lack of efficient and systematic networking and communication between Karen communities residing in third countries. For instance, compared to the UK situation, where the Karen have active lobbyist groups with ties to parliament, the Karen in Sweden lack the language ability, knowledge of the Swedish political system and contacts with government representatives or lobbyists. As EKN community leader Htoo Ku in Sheffield pointed out in the spring of 2016:

There are so many Karen organisations in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In Europe, we have set up the EKN [European Karen Network]. Furthermore, I have been to the Czech, Norway, and Sweden, also the Netherlands. We now set up the IKO [International Karen Organisation] with Karen from America, Australia and back home in Burma and Thailand.⁷⁷

The reality is that many educated and skilled Karen refugees are resettling and may contribute to a reproduction of Karen identity discourse in third countries. As highly

⁷⁴ Kanska, *Resettlement of Karen refugees*, p. 92.

⁷⁵ Gustav Liden and Jon Nyhlen, 'Explaining Swedish Refugee Policy', *Journal of International Migration & Integration*, (2013), pp. 1-20.

⁷⁶ Brigitte Suter and Karin Magnusson (eds.), *Resettled and Connected? Social Networks in the Integration Process of Resettled Refugees*, (Malmö, 2015), pp. 75-77.

⁷⁷ Conversation with Htoo Ku, EKN community leader at her home in Sheffield in March 2016 and October 2018.

educated, they are often critical actors in creating 'new' transnational identities.⁷⁸ The connection to the Karen State and the discourse of displacement exile and the dream of repatriation are crucial in shaping Karen transnational identity. However, as Vertovec suggests, transnationalism brings about a deep-rooted change of cultural and identity patterns and structures, affecting the coming post-migration generations' identities and awaking dual identity.⁷⁹ The majority of Sheffield Karen interviewed believe that the Karen culture will survive and be preserved. However, it will ultimately inter-twine with host cultures creating British-Karen, American-Karen, Australian-Karen, Canadian-Karen and Swedish-Karen.⁸⁰

Some of the older Karen are faced with the changing dynamics of Karen culture and integrational relations. In some regards, and particular language, the older Karen generation are disadvantaged, whilst the younger generations have more significant economic and educational opportunities to integrate with the wider British community – becoming British-Karen. Conversely, some younger Karen exclude themselves from the general Karen community as they participate more frequently with Britain's cultural and social worlds. By participating in these new social and cultural worlds, these young Karen are viewed as dis-advantaging themselves, primarily through exclusion from Karen, who conform more readily to more traditional Karen behaviours and practices. This intergenerational complexity is further evidence in Sheffield of the younger Karen's frictions and misunderstanding representing resettlement's social nature.

Regarding economic and financial contribution to Karen living in Burma or Thailand, there is increasing evidence that small individual and collective remittances are occasionally sent to extended family in Burma and friends inside the camps. Research by Koser suggests that remittances in conflict-torn areas are invested in daily subsistence, housing and health and is often a resource for building up social capital.⁸¹ However, the remittances are usually small and are often not received by the recipients inside the camps. Furthermore, small donations by the church to the camps are

⁷⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 161.

⁷⁹ Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, (2009), pp. 7-8.

⁸⁰ Kanska, *Resettlement of Karen refugees*, p. 94.

⁸¹ Khalid Koser and Nicholas van Hear, 'Asylum Migration and Implications for Countries of Origin', United Nations University, *World Institute for Development Economic Research*, Helsinki, Discussion Paper No. 2003/20, (2003), p. 4.

frequent, and some educational supplies as pens, pencils, paper copybooks, rulers and instruments that Karen communities in third countries have contributed to schools in the camps. There may be many reasons for this, as the camps are not officially recognised, resettled Karen are unaware or unsure of the post-box schemes and will often send remittance with Sheffield Karen visiting relatives in Mae Sot or Mae La camp. Following a three-day conference in Australia in 2017, attended by fifty-five representatives from seventeen countries, including the KNU former vice-chair Zipporah Sein organised by the International Karen Organisation (IKO), a call for a significant fundraising effort to help support Karen refugees and internally displaced people.⁸²

There are some examples of Karen communities in third countries organised by home district affiliation. For example, the Karen community in San Francisco maintains remarkably close ties with the Thaton district in the Karen state, including delivering economic and humanitarian help to the district. There are small indications of entrepreneurship within the Sheffield Karen community with the importation of cultural goods such as Karen clothes and crafts for sale during Karen New Year celebrations, leading to micro-investment and income generation for Karen cloths weavers remaining in the camps.

Media and social platforms

With resettlement to third countries, ‘new’ transnational modes of communication were devised and required, and it is this new arena that the next section will explore. This next section of the chapter examines the development of resettled Karen in Sheffield within social media and historical contexts. It will illustrate the plurality of Karen-ness that has contributed to the diversity of global Karen ethnic media. The Sheffield case study groups include Burmese Karen and Karen born in the Thai refugee camps. In the last ten years, research and observational studies in Sheffield indicate that the more the group develops a sense of being Karen through media outlets, the more identity becomes firmly constructed. The consequence of this is the assumption of an ‘imagined Karen community’.⁸³ This, however, is contingent

⁸² E-mail correspondence with IKO Executive Committee member Naw Htoo Ku Hsar Say October 2017.

⁸³ I refer to Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* as a foundation for the diasporic imagined Karen communities.

on the availability of media technologies and knowledge. Moreover, the examination reveals that Karen identity and Karen media interact considerably; Karen media as a social actor has shaped - and has been shaped by - Karen-ness simultaneously.

The political situation in Burma interrupted the Karen media advancement for about three decades. Karen works of literature such as history textbooks and others are still used in Sheffield at summer schools and distributed within Karen State and most refugee camps. However, the continuous circulation of news and current issues by ethnic minorities is a powerful instrument in gathering and mobilising societies. As noted by Anderson, apart from consuming the same news stories, mass media such as newspapers and pamphlets afford individuals 'the feeling and create this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') newspaper-as-fiction'.⁸⁴ That sentiment creates and maintains their imagined community by linking them with each other through replicating the activity.

Additionally, without Karen media, Burmese government media was more efficiently used to manipulate Karen people. A resettled Karen journalist living in Sheffield said that while living and studying in Rangoon, Burma, she had never been aware of Karen media output. Although, she noticed that the Burmese radio mainly focused on military songs or news about the (military) government activities.⁸⁵

In another study on media, Kuroiwa and Verkuyten revealed that individual Karen youth growing up in Burma negatively perceived the displaced Karen and KNU from media. These illustrate that the interruption and limitations of Karen media arose from the Burmanisation policy in Burma but is now flourishing and expanding through new communication mediums.⁸⁶

A recent study by Cho on the Burmese diaspora in New Zealand in 2011 found that the research participants, mostly Karen, have followed media from the Thai-Burmese border. She argues that the news is:

⁸⁴ Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London, 1991), p. 35.

⁸⁵ Personal communication with Rose Ham Kei in January 2007, she is now living in Sheffield.

⁸⁶ Yoko Kuroiwa and Maykel Verkuyten, 'Narratives and the Constitution of a Common Identity', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 15, No. 4, (2008), pp. 391-412.

read in a highly personal manner where they connect with home and think about family and friends who may be suffering in the locations written about.⁸⁷

Sheffield does not have a distinctively Karen professional media organisation, although pamphlets and mobile communications are very useful. Either media enthusiasts or Karen university undergraduates produce creative works based on their interests or volunteers participating in media projects or community media. Inevitably, the Karen ethnic media from the Thai-Burmese border performs a connective function for the Karen in Sheffield. Its ability to connect overseas Karen to their home communities is unquestionable. They have provided various stories of Karen in Burma and Thailand, both factual and in fictional forms, within traditional and the new multi-media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. It has allowed Karen activists to reach a more diverse audience at Sheffield and internationally with targeted messages.

There is a complexity of connections between the Karen people, the multi-sited nature of resettlement in Sheffield, the homeland and the diaspora are presented through ties of morality, obligation, kinship, and social participation. Horstmann and Flemming researched Karen virtual communities on the Thai-Burma border. They concluded that many young Karen participates in global social networks, virtual digital communities with financial transactions or remittances to the homeland from the UK's resettled Karen.⁸⁸ Observations and interviews in Sheffield from 2007 to date highlight that the most popular connection method was Facebook. This platform acts as a social network with Karen from the diaspora who re-connect and socialise within the globally scattered community. Though used mainly by the younger Karen, the older generation seems to use and adopt the same 'tool' to communicate back home. Naw Lay Mi Htoo commented at her wedding in 2017 that:

⁸⁷ Violet Cho, 'Searching for home: explorations in new media and the Burmese diaspora in New Zealand', *Pacific Journalism Review*, 17, No. 1, (2011), pp. 194-209.

⁸⁸ Horstmann, 'Sacred Networks', Alexander Horstmann, 'Stretching the Border: Confinement, Mobility and the Refugee Public among Karen Refugees in Thailand and Burma', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (2014), pp. 47-61; Jennifer Flemming, 'Making online connections', *Forced Migration Review*, 38, (2011), p. 34.

. . . we thrive on the Facebook connections it makes, and many today from the US, Norway, Europe and Australia have come here through Facebook invites.⁸⁹

Further conversations with wedding guests revealed that most Karen use a social network platform to interact with other global Karen and within online circles, suggesting that ‘friend requests’ from Karen people unknown to them was expected. With the relaxing of sanctions against the military regime in Burma and introducing new technologies in the country, connectivity with lost family members is growing. In another recent post on the KCA’s Facebook page in December 2016 by Garroe Wah in the US highlights this interconnectivity,

Hello, my name is Garroe Wah from Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. I am wondering if KCAUK would allow us to use your flyer for our upcoming Karen New Year? Your flyer is very impressive. Is it ok with KCA-UK. Could you please send me the flyer in the doc. To my email at garroewah@xxxxxxx.com so that I can edit it. Thank you—
[9 December 2016 at 12:19].⁹⁰

This posting on the local KCA-Sheffield Facebook page indicates the transnational links to other global Karen networks, and the interchange within these digital networks enables some members of the Karen community to interact with ‘home’ and the global diaspora.⁹¹

Facebook is just one means of reconnecting the dispersed Karen communities. For example, Moo Wah Ley, a KCA committee member, uses another online tool, Skype, and email, although she does feel that contact with family is sometimes challenging.⁹² She stated:

Now I work in a hospital, so no time to telephone or email my sister and when I contact her [my sister], others ask me to pass news down

⁸⁹ Conversation with Naw Lay Mi Htoo at her wedding in Sheffield, August 2017.

⁹⁰ Karen Community Association, *Facebook homepage: October 2017*, <https://www.facebook.com/Karencommunityassociationuk/>, [accessed, November 2019],

⁹¹ KCA, *Facebook*, [accessed, December 2020],

⁹² Conversation with Moo Wah Ley at Martyr’s Day celebration August 2016 and 2017.

to relatives . . .so sometimes many messages on Skype but very easy to use.⁹³

Although these digital connections and communications are making life in Sheffield for the resettled refugees, a recent incident highlights the consequences of encounters with new technologies. Many Sheffield Karen were exposed to ‘flaming’ or ‘hacking’ attacks while involved in a community project run by the University of Sheffield. The project ran from September 2009 to April 2010 to develop social media technology and traditional journalistic approaches and methods. This project began as a stated desire by particular female members of the resettled Karen community to report the Burmese military regime's political oppression and human rights abuses. However, in a conversation with one of the Karen community leaders in May 2010, she stated that an online campaign of hate and derogatory remarks were made towards the activists and community.⁹⁴

Green and Lockley describe this cyber intrusion as an ‘inverse reach’ by the resettled refugees oppressors back in Burma through telephone surveillance of calls made from Sheffield to Burma.⁹⁵ The students' video was uploaded to YouTube very early on in the sessions through unprotected web servers. Near the end of the project, a substantial amount of content and material had been created and entered on the community blog site, and participants started having offensive online material. Hacked accounts posted derogatory content and sexual images, threatening emails with specific names and personal information and mobile text threats were received, which rippled anxiety throughout the community. This cyber-attack on the Karen community was profound as it was causally related to their collective and individual painful experiences. The community envisioned it as the Burmese regime’s attempt at long-distance intimidation using new technologies. It connected with previous Karen experiences with the Burmese military government and became a manifestation of the

⁹³ Conversation with Moo Wah Ley a KCA, member at her home in Sheffield in March 2017.

⁹⁴ Confidential conversation with KCA community leader in 2010 and with project leader Geff Green of Sheffield Hallam University. ‘Flaming’ is a hostile and insulting interaction between persons over the internet, often involving the use of profanity. It can also be the swapping of insults back and forth or with many people teaming up on a single victim.

⁹⁵ Geff Green and Eleanor Lockley, ‘Surveillance without borders: the case of Karen refugees in Sheffield’ in the Fifth Biannual Surveillance and Society Conference: “*Watch this space: Surveillance futures*”, Sheffield University, (2-4 April 2012. Unpublished).

Burmese regime's long reach. Because authoritarianism relies on psychological fear and physical oppression, which leads to fear, this event illustrates that repression does not have to be physical.

The incident raised tensions within the Karen community as suspicions were directed at the non-Karen Burmese in Sheffield. However, a detailed discussion about cyber-security with the Karen community leaders by the project leaders and others ameliorated the situation. It was suggested that their desire to create a counter-power through new media technologies and their freedom in a western environment presented an ongoing threat to the Burmese regime, leading to these directed and individualised cyber-attacks. Additionally, as the attacks were directed at women, it mirrors the inability to protect women and children from the Burmese military's actions.

Conclusion

The role and potential of all the Karen diasporic communities should not be overestimated. However, some limitations and restrictions imposed on the Karen in exile and KNU political authority's reach. This chapter has outlined some of the existing boundaries and their implication on the Karen diaspora's capacity as political, social, and economic actors in their society of origin. To what extent the Karen in Sheffield can influence and be involved in the Karen political decisions will depend on the host country domestic resources and position in the global system. The UK's situation will significantly impact the potential to help, as economic, social, and political factors will affect their capability. Most Karen refugees are still learning English and receive governmental support. Those who gained employment often work as unskilled low waged labour.

The study also highlighted that many of the adult Karen in Sheffield find it challenging to find employment. The older Karen generation often finds it exceedingly difficult to learn the English language. Employment prospects in and around Sheffield are often low paid, often part-time work, as is the case in other resettlement courtiars such as the US and Canada. The research also suggested limitations with integration in resettlement, cross-communication difficulties, lack of knowledge in support systems, and general lack of economic and social capital contribute to misunderstandings. Although KCA-UK might appear as a potentially influential political organisation, it cannot act on a transnational political level. Although the

Sheffield community has limited economic resources, there are indications that the community has consolidated its organisational skills, which involve cultural and community activities consolidated in the last ten years.

This chapter's research implies that the Karen collective identity is not being eroded but reshaped into a new resettlement context taking on a transnational form. Karen identity is based on the discourse of displacement and vulnerability. However, it is linked to the notion of the motherland of 'Kawthoolei'. This discourse is articulated and moved from local to global and plays a crucial role in reproducing Karen identity in resettlement. This does not in itself represent an obstacle to performing Karen culture for communities that have been deprived of cultural rights for decades. Cultural preservation and maintenance of Karen unity have become the individual responsibility of those who resettle.

The next chapter will explore Karen identity reproduced through public rituals, ceremonies and informal social relations.

Chapter 6: Expressions of Karen culture and identity through ceremonies

When all Karen men and women dance, they have unity. Dancing is like a story. Some of the dances here are about how we are all brothers and sisters. We eat on the same plate. Five to six family members will sit and eat five or six portions from the same plate. This is representative of unity . . . I always encourage our people to study so they can have community . . . We try to unite everyone because, whether Christian or Buddhist, we are still Karen. We focus on unity here in Sheffield. We will always be one heart.¹

Chapter five revealed the challenges of Karen resettlement in Sheffield. This chapter will explore and discuss the Karen's re-formed cultural expressions in Sheffield whilst retaining their core identity. The main transnational Karen ceremonies, the Karen New Year, the wrist-tying, and Martyr's Day, are examined to take the Karen resettlement experience beyond everyday life's functionality into the symbolic worlds. The Karen in the refugee camps participate in the many Karen National Days celebrated and commemorated each year. These special days include Karen New Year celebrated in December or January, Karen National Association Day commemorating the establishment of a united 'dawkelu' on 11 February 1881, Karen National Union Day commemorating the establishment of the Karen independent government on 5 February 1948, Karen Revolution Day marking the beginning of the Revolution on 31 January 1.

These occasions highlight the tensions and diversity that sometimes arise during negotiations of cultural expressions within the Sheffield community. Most Karen communities also celebrate these events and view them as traditional Karen cultural celebrations, but some participants envisage them as purely political or religious orientated ceremonies that they are likely to attend. This study will explore the challenges and tensions within the UK community surrounding the cultural, political, or religious roots of these celebrations, which can sometimes impact the Karen social cohesiveness in the UK as a whole.

¹ Conversation with Reverend, Saw Mathew Zan Than at St. Tabor Methodist Church, Sheffield in 2008.

Colson has proposed that displacement provides a lens through which a community's collective memory is reworked in exile. She suggests that 'the memory of the shared experience of uprooting helps create new forms of identity'. The uprooting and resettlement into these 'new' communities, such as the Karen in Sheffield, involve processes such as identity management, manipulation of myth and labelling.² Collective Karen memories of an idealised 'homeland' and a shared traumatic experience in displacement from Burma provide them with a broad frame of reference regarding subsequent experiences. Ballinger's Balkan studies on state border transformation can be used as the template for the displaced Karen perspective, suggesting that powerful moral narratives can enable subsequent generations to 'experience' the displacement first-hand. Scholarly work by Catalani has explored the linkages between refugee artists and memories of displacement.³ Research in Sheffield on enacting culturally important ceremonies in Burma has taken much greater significance and importance in resettlement in Sheffield.

The Karen New Year is viewed by a small minority of community members as a platform for the KNU to present its political agenda to the Sheffield diaspora. Although the programme lasts four hours, it offers an excellent opportunity to celebrate 'being Karen' and invite local guests and dignitaries. Martyr's or Memorial Day is held on the 12 August, and it is in memory of the fallen 'heroes' and comrades in the insurgent war, the first of whom was the inaugural KNU President, Saw Ba U Gyi assassinated in 1950 together with other Karen leaders at a small village near Moulmein.⁴ Since 2007 the SPDC and the civil government have allowed the KNU to hold celebrations on Karen Revolution Day and Martyr's Day in Burma.⁵ Considerable debate centres on the Wrist-tying ceremony as to cultural, tradition or religious practice. Despite these notions, the ceremony in Sheffield has sometimes been combined with the Martyr's Day ceremony. The participation in the wrist-tying ceremony has caused tensions in faith and culture since most of the Sheffield Karen community is Christian. Research evidence suggests that these events or ceremonies

² Colson, 'Forced Migration', pp. 1-18.

³ Pamela Ballinger, *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*, (Princeton, 2003), p. 193. Anna Catalani, 'Refugee artists and memories of displacement: a visual semiotics analysis', *Visual Communication*, Vol. 20, No. 2, (2019), pp. 1-25.

⁴ Martyr's Day is held on 12 August every year.

⁵ Paul Core, 'Burma/Myanmar: Challenges of a Ceasefire Accord in Karen State', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (2009), pp. 95-105.

are constrained by their historical links to culture, politics, and religious themes, despite their capacity to provide a collective identity and the capacity to rebuild the Karen community. In turn, these ceremonies' historical meanings are re-spun to form new webs of significance for the resettled Karen in the diaspora.

In this chapter, the central themes encompassed within these ceremonies are explored and discussed separately, understanding that themes are interdependent and intertwined. Throughout this chapter, Baumann and Gingrich's analytical framework understand how the resettled Karen refugees negotiate their new surroundings. This relatively new research field draws upon literature in anthropology, and it will clarify how we can understand resettlement and how diasporic people construct their identities. Baumann and Gingrich's classification method for comparing identities and alterities across societies will be the foundation to explain how the resettled Karen articulate and have adapted and adopted a particular identity and nationhood during the Karen New Year, the Wrist-tying, and Martyr's/Memorial Day ceremonies.⁶

Recent studies by Gravers and South suggest that Karen culture has remained intact and continued to give meaning to who they are, and this is supported in some of the interviews undertaken at Sheffield.⁷ Culture does not in isolation refer to observed behaviours but rather in the values and beliefs that generate those sets of behaviours. These essential elements of cultural expressions of values and beliefs are the foundations that maintain the identity of those within. An added understanding by Kramsch underpins the membership in a discourse community that shares common values, beliefs, history, and social space. Karen culture traditionally is family-oriented, and their culture is collectivist in values and beliefs, rather than on individualism and challenging opinions. These attributes are what is inherent and ultimately defines their Karen identity.⁸

⁶ Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (eds.), *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach* (Oxford, 2004).

⁷ Mikael Gravers, 'Conversation and Identity: Religion and the Formation of the Karen Identity in Burma', in Mikael Gravers (ed.), *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*, (Denmark, 2007); Ashley South, 'Karen Nationalist Communities: The 'Problem 'of Diversity'', *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, Vol. 29, No 1, (2007), pp. 55-76.

⁸ Claire Kramsch, *Language and Culture*, (Oxford, 1998), p. 10.

However, studies on American, Canadian and Australian resettled Karen communities suggest that pan-Karen identity is discursively constructed within the diasporic Karen communities in the Karen New Year, although there are no in-depth studies on the resettled Karen community in Sheffield.⁹ In the last eight years up to 2020, the Karen New Year celebration location has been at Forge Valley Community School in Sheffield, where Karen from all over the UK come and celebrates. Given that the majority of the community and political leaders of the Sheffield Karen identify themselves as Christian. At this event, speeches by both Buddhist and Animist community members are also made.

Traditionally the New Year celebration is conducted in early January with the Martyr's or Memorial Day on 12 August and the Wrist-tying at the time of the full moon in August. However, the Sheffield Karen have adapted and sometimes merged these two latter ceremonies demonstrating that respect for each other's faith, values, and unity in their struggle in a re-formed cultural reproduction and re-imagining of identity.

The first part will introduce and examine the January Karen New Year Festival in Sheffield every year. Although in Burma, it may be celebrated earlier in December.

The rites of the New Year festival celebration (*Thau Ni Sau*)

There are many significant features in the rites of the Karen New Year or 'rising of the New Year' (*thau ni sau*) as it is called in Karen, conducted in Sheffield. The study will examine some of these aspects of identity expression and consider the most important cultural ceremonies within the Karen community calendar. The origin of these New Year rites can be traced back and be regarded in some way as a 'harvest celebration' but are rooted in marking the passage from one agricultural cycle to the next. The cyclic nature of agricultural seasons in Burma is described in the metaphorical sense of the 'rising' and 'falling' transition between the old and new seasons (Wet rice harvesting from November to January and the swiddens planting in April to May). This transition denotes the rites of the New Year celebrations, which are usually held over two consecutive days in agrarian communities of Burma, but, in

⁹ Authors who have studied the Karen New Year in the diaspora are Worland, *Displaced and Misplaced*, (2010); Bird, "*Talking with Lips*", (2013); Lopez, *Resilience in the Karen-refugee*; (2015).

the resettled communities, it is held on a day in the month of Pyathoe (on the Roman calendar month of either December or January).

The first official Karen New Year was inaugurated in January 1938 (Karen Year, 2677), when Karen national leaders' demands to the British colonial administration were finally recognised in Burma and declared an official annual holiday. Although the month of Pyathoe (Sgaw Karen call it *Th'lay* and for Pwo Karen *Htike Kauk Po*) is deemed the preeminent month for the festival, it symbolises the end of the rice harvest where according to tradition, there must be a celebration for the consumption of the new crop. Typically, this is also the time of celebration when the constructions and completions of new houses begin. Additionally, as the first of Pyathoe is not a distinctively religious festival, it is acceptable to all Karen people regardless of faith, intimately related to kinship's ideology and strengthening social and cultural cohesion. Nevertheless, Karen New Year is commemorated throughout Burma, although marred by restrictions and violence, in Karen villages in Thailand, refugee camps, and resettled refugee communities worldwide.¹⁰

The expression of 'Karen-ness' in its cultural identity and signifiers assumes many forms throughout all festivals, emphasising traditional attire, music, dancing, visual symbols such as flags and the frog drum combined with the communal eating of food. This articulation of a pan-Karen identity is encouraged by most diasporic communities across the globe; through these ceremonies, Baumann and Gingrich's theoretical formulation identifies as a 'grammar of encompassment' is not universally shared by all the Christian and Buddhist Karen people of Sheffield.¹¹

These ceremonies are an annual event intended to unite Karen of all religious faiths and contribute to the Karen language, customs, and traditions to its youth. Most of the KCA in Sheffield are Christian (the encompassers) and often preside at Sheffield's ceremonies. However, it was observed and recorded at Sheffield that the Christian Karen struggle with and sometimes reject this 'identifier' searching for community cohesion.

¹⁰ Rajah, *Remaining Karen*, pp. 127-129; Mahn Thint Nuang, *History of the Karen New Year*, (Kawkareik District, Burma. 1976).

¹¹ Sheffield, Bury and Bolton, Karen community, 65% are Christian, 25-30% are Buddhist with the remainder being animist; Floya Anthias, 'Evaluating 'Diaspora': Beyond Ethnicity?', *Sociology*, Vol. 32, (1998), pp. 557-580.

The Christian-Buddhist divide was exacerbated by the fracture between the Karen KNU and the DKBA in 1996. Nevertheless, KNU leaders of both faiths have engaged in the last decade to bridge the animosity created by the armed conflict between the two Karen religions. KNU Christian leaders publicly emphasise the difference between the Karen and Burman peoples to coalesce the Karen in unity and ethnic division. As in Baumann's expressions, the KNU Christian leaders used binary constructions to define the Burmese military. Karen leaders use this 'grammar of encompassment' to argue for all Christian and Buddhist Karen's unity. A recent study suggests that the emphasis on pan-Karen solidarity in opposition to other ethnocultural political or religious movements is primarily because of its uncompromising rigidity and failure to represent and recognise Karen diversity.¹²

The labels of 'Sgaw Karen' and 'Pwo Karen', when primarily used by Karen people, tend to obscure the complexities created by intermarriage and bilingualisation. It becomes problematic when attempting to link Karen ethnic labels to language users. Karen people are aware and acknowledge this. Examples of this linguistic hybridity exist and are frequently encountered in Sheffield. In a recent conversation, Mu Shi explains that her parents are from each ethnic group and speak Sgaw and identify themselves as predominantly Sgaw but spoke both languages at home. This is unusual because Mu Shi's husband is a Pwo Karen ethnic group but defines their young English-born children as Karen. It will be interesting to see how the children themselves define their ethnicity when they are older. The small children are currently being taught English at a primary school in Sheffield and are taught written and conversational Sgaw Karen during summer school by their Karen elders and community members.

Another example of how Karen refugees in Sheffield position themselves and talk about Karen identity is Thomas, a prominent member of the KCA. Thomas and his father speak, read, and write Sgaw and Pwo Karen fluently, and his father taught at a junior school in Mae La camp. However, Thomas's mother, a refugee, is a Burman and only learnt to speak Sgaw after marrying his father in Mae La camp. On a subsequent conversation with Thomas, it was established that they are Christian and

¹² South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma*; Jessica Harriden, 'Making a Name for Themselves: Karen Identity and the Politicization of Ethnicity in Burma', *Journal of Burma Studies*, Vol. 7, (2002), pp. 84-145.

speak Sgaw at home and identify themselves as Karen, but they also speak Burmese on occasion when Burmese friends from London are visiting.

For most of the Karen people of Sheffield, the most significant aspect of their subsumed identity is not their respective native language but rather the coalescing factor of religion. Although there are Christians, Animists and Buddhists in Sheffield and speak either Sgaw and Pwo Karen, Christians spend most of their time with each other through church worship or using the church hall for group meetings and general conversation during the week. Although the Sheffield Buddhist Karen are in the minority, they sometimes attend church services or significant occasions such as Karen New Year, the wrist-tying ceremony and the Martyr's or Memorial Day ceremonies. Although not substantiated in conversations, the lack of unity could be a continuation of the patterns or animosities established on Burma and Thailand's borderlands with the fracturing of the KNU.¹³

Some Karen in Sheffield are convinced that the conflict along the border with Thailand impacts relationships in the diaspora. Many individuals within the community have mentioned in a conversation about the ongoing suffering and sporadic fighting. Nevertheless, the Sheffield KCA community leaders express a desire to be inclusive and religious divisions are recognised and tolerated. One Christian community leader acknowledged the reality of the situation and the need for a common pan-Karen identity to build and strengthen the whole community. For the Karen refugees in Sheffield, having a predominance of Christian Karen representing and serving as public and official leaders of both religious groups is an extension of the political situation at home in Burma or Thailand.

We can single out the Christian Karen as the dominant group in the broader Karen population of Sheffield. They articulate a pan-Karen identity that claims to encompass both Christian and Buddhist Karen. This articulation of pan-Karen identity is crystallised in their discourse about the Karen New Year, Memorial Day, and the wrist-tying ceremonies. Although Christians account for a small proportion of the entire Karen people, members of this group have historically assumed and held leading roles

¹³ Karen News, 'KNU, DKBA and KNU/KNLA Peace Council find strength in unity', <http://karennews.org/2012/03/knu-dkba-and-knuknla-peace-council-find-strength-in-unity.html/>, [accessed December 2020].

in their society. In Sheffield, this paradigm continues; it is more likely that the Christian Karen who speaks English are more likely to occupy leadership positions and be employed translators. In addition, the Christian Karen teenagers have embraced their ‘new’ resettled home that are very proficient in the English language that are attending higher or tertiary education in northern England.

Expressions of Karen culture and nationalism in ceremonies at Sheffield

Rajah affirms that a structural process must begin with cultural histories that develop into a defined ethnic consciousness before a nation-state emerges.¹⁴ Missionary scholars studied Karen oral histories and recorded the poems and songs called ‘*htas*’. These were recited over the generations. These ‘*hta*’ song-poems have long played an essential role in forming Karen’s national consciousness. According to Violet Cho, these narrative song-poems were used to spread news, share customs, remember historical events, and courtship. Cho continues, stating that:

Hta is intimately connected to systems of knowledge – if ideas are not transformed into *hta*, they have little value. Poets who can compose and use *hta* thus have a high status in Karen communities. As *hta* is an oral tradition, authorship is attributed to ancestors. The perception that *hta* is ancient – linking Karen to an imagined ethnohistory – makes *hta* important to cultural identity.¹⁵

Hta song-poems are being extensively used in the Karen diaspora and are present in online exilic media websites in Karen Sgaw language such as *Kwe Ka Lu* and *Karen Information Center*. The general themes of *hta* poetry include ideas of homeland and expressions of displacement. These *hta* expressions demonstrate how the Karen diaspora maintains solidarity with Karen State by expressing suffering and referencing a real and imagined homeland. It is particularly significant that the Karen nation-building exercise where literacy is used to develop a community commonality among

¹⁴ Rajah, ‘A ’nation of intent’ in Burma’, pp. 526.

¹⁵ Violet Cho, ‘Mother Died and Time Passed:’ Reading Diasporic Identity in Karen *Hta*,’ *Poetry International Rotterdam*, (2013), pp. 1-6.

diverse Karen groups. Such diverse Karen groups have long hosted competing cultural and social, sometimes explicit political ‘communities of interpretation’.¹⁶

The majority of the Karen from Sheffield are from villages or small townships in Karen State. Most Karen have a notion in customs and practices called ‘*a lw a la*’, including costume, kinship, ritual, marriage, language, and cultivation methods. Although these rituals referred to as ‘*a lw a la*’ are traditional practices involving two realms of animist spirit rituals, they have been incorporated into contemporary Karen ceremonies in the refugee camps in Thailand and the diaspora. These rituals define the individual’s membership in the Karen community and the domestic setting, and they are primarily devised to ensure, restore, and reinforce cultural order within Karen village communities. In the Karen state villages in Burma, the Christian Karen eschew these animist rites but practising Buddhist Karen continue to perform them through the wrist-tying and other lesser ceremonies. These Karen expressions of culture and identity are expressed through the wearing of the traditional costume, playing traditional music, the Don dancing, the communal consumption of food, combined with the displaying of the Karen and UK Flag. The following section will introduce these important cultural signifiers and explain their location in Karen culture.¹⁷

Karen cultural signifiers used in the ceremonies

For all ceremonies and festivals in Sheffield, the Karen always adopt and display the Karen flag. The wearing of the traditional costumes is universally adopted in all Karen children at the ceremonies at Sheffield. Likewise, nearly all the Karen and some western visitors wear traditional costumes. In 1928, KNA member Saw Tha Aye Gyi composed the national anthem comprising of three verses celebrating the love that the Karen people have for each other and the cultural values they embrace. The Karen flag was created in 1937, and the design was decided by open competition. The final version was a combination of the three finalists and represented the collective Karen identity and values promulgated by the KNA. The inaugural and unrestricted raising of the Karen flag was the first celebration of the Karen New Year in 1938 to coincide

¹⁶ U Chit Hlaing, ‘Anthropological communities of interpretation for Burma: An overview’, *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies*, Vol. 39, Issue 2, (2008), pp. 239-254.

¹⁷ Charles F. Keyes, ‘The Karen in Thai History and the History of the Karen in Thailand’, *Ethnic Adaptation*, pp. 25-61; Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, pp. 270, 277; Peter Hinton, ‘Do the Karen really exist?’, in John McKinnon and Wanat Bhurksasri, *Highlanders of Thailand*, (Oxford, 1983), pp. 155-156.

with Burma's state recognition of this as a public holiday. In sanctioning this event, the British colonial government effectively endorsed the prevailing Karen worldview of their history as recorded by Thanybah and Aung Hla, that the Karen were the original inhabitants of Burma.¹⁸

Both men and women wear the Karen traditional costume. For centuries Karen women have practised the weaving and dyeing of cotton. In Thailand and Burma, the cotton is cultivated and harvested, from which they spin their thread, utilising a variety of organic material to dye the threads. Women and young girls are taught the weaving skills from an early age (usually from seven years old), and a skilled adult can weave up to four feet of material per hour, and an expert will weave for up to six hours a day. However, in Karen female society, both in the camps and the villages in Burma and Thailand, weaving is not an individual's primary task; it is only one of the many that fall to the women. The looms require a high level of coordination, agility and manual dexterity using both hands and feet. Hundreds of individual threads (the warp) are stretched out horizontally side-by-side over the loom's length with approximately 50 threads per inch of cloth width; the widest material possible is one yard. Some simple looms are very flexible and are carried from village to village. A small number of the resettled women refugees in Sheffield have acquired these simple looms and continue to weave cloth, creating and making shirts, pants, skirts, and handbags. Each weaver is an artist who decides the pattern, colours, and width of her material. To get a consistent pattern, the weaver must continuously count the number of shuttle passages through the vertically spread threads so that she can stop and change thread colour at the appropriate place in the material.¹⁹

Traditional colours are used, these being white, black, red, and green. Research by Ratanakul in the late 1960s indicated that within the Karennic languages, there is a

¹⁸ Theodore Thanybah and J. Vinton, *Karen Folk-Lore Tales*, (Rangoon, 1924); Aung Hla, *The Karen History*, (1932); Cady, *A Modern History of Burma*; Renard, *Kariang*, pp. 41-42; John Petry, 'The Construction of Karen Nationalism: American Baptists in Burma', *Ethnic Studies Report*, XI, (I), (1993), pp. 64-92; Cheesman, 'Seeing 'Karen' in the Union of Burma', pp. 202-203.

¹⁹ Michael C. Howard, *Textiles of the Hill Tribes of Burma*, (Bangkok, 1999), pp. 72-84; Marjo Moeyes, *Natural Dyeing in Thailand*, (Bangkok, 1993); Robyn J. Maxwell and Matiebelle Gittinger, *Textiles of Southeast Asia: Tradition, Trade and Transformation*, (Oxford, 1990), pp. 58, 82, 114, 144; Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, pp. 109, 114; Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment, (WEAVE), Thailand, <http://www.weave-women.org/about-us/>, [accessed January 2021].

lack of a universal concept for ‘colour’ in a Western technical sense. Therefore, it is problematic to ask an abstract question such as ‘what is the colour of this object’ in the Karen language, instead an indirect request must be made. In his investigations of Sgaw Karen terms for colours, Ratanakul concluded that there were/are six ‘prime’ colours discerned by the Karen from the spectrum. However, he also considers four other categories: brightness and paleness being dominant in the Karennic languages. These colour definitions usually would clarify and validate the traditional Karen colours. However, my recent observations at many Karen ceremonies and festivals at Sheffield indicate that new colours have been introduced into the weaving processes with modern cotton.²⁰ In 2017, as part of the Karen New Year celebrations, a fashion parade was organised by some of the younger Karen women using these new and unconventional colours within the fabric. Several older Karen mentioned that it was inappropriate or disrespectful to the Karen culture to use these bright, unusual colours. It was seen as an example of young Karen ‘rebelliousness’ but illustrates the divergence in traditional costume by the Sheffield Karen youth who modify their identity in resettlement.

The other critical cultural signifiers in the Karen culture operate through music and the Don dance. Traditionally, Karen music learning has occurred in the informal settings in Burma and Thailand’s rural villages. The influx of Karen from Burma into the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border from 1984 began a new chapter in Karen traditional music and dance transmission. Significantly, the resettled Karen of Sheffield have initially addressed traditional Karen indigenous music and dance practices in its celebrations of New Year and other festivities. Encouragement has been forthcoming from the community association and the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) to keep the expressive repertoire intact so that current and future generations can elicit meaning and inspiration from these practices within the diaspora. Although a small number of resettled participants have been exposed to Karen traditional music either in Burma or the camps, it is only in the last seven years, since resettlement, that most youths have experienced these traditions.

²⁰ Suriya Ratanakul, ‘Sgaw Karen Color Categories’, *Journal of Siam Society*, Vol. 1 and 2, (1969), pp. 138-144.; Robert B. Jones, *Karen Linguistic Studies, Description, Comparison and Texts*, University of California, Vol. 25, (1961), pp. 1-2.

However, it is important to define certain key elements and concepts employed in this segment. Uchida and Catlin suggest that the traditional Karen indigenous music and dance employs an oral tradition that is deeply rooted in animist beliefs through the performance of music, poetic songs, ensemble instrumental pieces relating to a political and religious context that interrelate with marriage, love, death, daily activities, and ceremonies. Karen indigenous music's cultural transmission and maintenance are made through social action and learning techniques employing ethnic expertise to promote the shared values through their performances. The traditional Karen word for music is '*ta thi kli*' translated means 'to sing praise to the divine being', although the modern spoken words may be in the format '*ta day ta Oo ta thu wit ha ser*', which roughly translated means to 'play or pluck, to blow and sing'.²¹

In his study of the Karen, Marshall provides information on musical transmission and its teaching, while his limited study does include material about Karen traditional music instruments and performance contexts; it is a valuable source of background knowledge. It is essential to acknowledge that music has a primary role in Karen daily life, '*hta*' or poetic songs provide religious indicators and meanings. However, the plurality of Karen music and dance cultures within Burma, with each group having its unique traditional practices, means that there are impediments to understanding the subject. The Karen musical culture exists in both Thailand and Eastern Burma. A close examination by Stern and Stern of the three significant genres of the harp, mouth reed organ and the *ton* or *don* dance discovered that the *Pwo* Karen from Burma of western Thailand shared musical features that point to the origins of single dominant tradition and society. Their study reveals that the Karen music was influenced and enriched by the diverse musical practices of the region, including those of the Burmese, Mon, Laos, and Thai, people. Stern and Stern's theory is also maintained by Cooler, who demonstrates that musical cultures, traditions, particularly the bronze frog drum of the Karen, are shared by other ethnic people in southeast Asia.²²

²¹ Ruriko Uchida & Amy Catlin, 'Music of Upland Minorities in Burma, Laos and Thailand', in Terry E. Miller and Sean Williams (eds.), *The Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music Southeast Asia Volume 4*, (New York, 1998), pp. 199-202 and 303-317.

²² Theodore Stern and Theodore A. Stern, '“I Pluck My Harp”: Musical Acculturation among the Karen of Western Thailand', *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (1971), pp. 186-219; Richard M. Cooler, *The Karen Bronze Drums of Burma: Types, Iconography*,

The Karen community sees this cultural manufacture as an essential feature in preserving their cultural identity. They also recognise that their traditional music culture is declining amongst the Karen youth and is threatened due to the exposure to modern pop music due to resettlement.²³ Some global Karen communities have outright abandoned traditional music practices changing traditional instruments for using modern ones. Max Peter Baumann supports the proposition that practical preservation of traditional music through teaching courses, performance, and composition in the field collection of music is essential in maintaining endangered cultures.²⁴ Learning the traditional music practices requires an understanding of the cultural, social and religious contexts in which that culture exist. Thereby, the diaspora's younger generations are unable or find it extremely difficult to comprehend and relate to the traditional Karen cultural ecology and its cultural significance. The Karen community's prevailing attitude in Sheffield towards traditional music is very supportive in maintaining its traditional values. In a conversation with KCA leaders on music-making, it is viewed to meet the social, cultural, and emotional needs and challenges the resettled Karen encounter.²⁵ Their involvement is motivated by the opportunity to develop their musical heritage combined with promoting well-being and solving behavioural problems with Karen youngsters.

In recent years outside interest in Karen musical culture has been expressed, utilising the advantages of modern technology. Many interested non-Karen engage in preserving endangered musical cultures through unique field recording and presenting rare musical material on the internet. Examples of such initiatives are *Cultural*

Manufacture and Use, (New York, 1995), pp. 46-47; musical instruments identified by Karen students in Sheffield in January 2013, 2016, 2017 and 2018, also YouTube weblink, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUBpCEGcdr4, [accessed April 2018]. Traditional musical instruments played at these ceremonies would be the Karen bronze or frog drum (called a 'klo'), approximately 60 cm in diameter and between 40-60 cm in depth. The frog drum is accompanied by a six-stringed Karen harp ('tana') made from one piece of Pterocarpus Indicus (rosewood or 'klaw klay') wood, a mouth reed organ ('pi bhar'), a bamboo flute ('puan dwar'), a Karen long drum ('ta') very similar to the African goblet-shaped drum, a membranophone ('yu pu'), and a four-stringed instrument ('na dhi') that is played by 'plucking' the strings and a western mandolin which the Karen have adopted to folk-song playing.

²³ Conversation with undergraduate Karen music student Thu Mae Lai at Karen New Year celebrations in Sheffield, 5 January 2013, 2015 and January 2018.

²⁴ Max Peter Baumann (ed.), *Music in the dialogue of cultures: traditional music and cultural policy*, (Wilhelmshaven, 1991).

²⁵ Conversations with community leaders after Karen New year in 2015 and 2017 at Sheffield.

Cornerstones and *Guerrilla Ethnomusicologists*, whose prime aim is to maintain and inform the current generation of world music consumers of traditional Karen music and the plight of the people. The diversity of music videos uploaded to these sites allows global listeners to understand both the musical culture and the Karen people's political struggle. The field recordings feature instrumental performances and songs by Sein Tin Aye, a popular Karen cultural bearer living within the Mae La refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border. Websites emphasise the cultural importance of maintaining and preserving Karen heritage in the camps due to the ongoing uncertainties along the borders and within the diaspora.²⁶

Problems and issues emerging from Karen ethnic identity have a considerable impact on the diasporic Karen diaspora. With the increased realisation of the importance of maintaining their culture, Karen people in the diaspora tend to continually reinforce and consolidate this complex nature of ethnic identity within the community. The motive for transmission is now keenly influenced by a desire to maintain and preserve. While many *Pwo* Buddhist Karen and *Sgaw* Christian Karen refugees led separate lives within the refugee camps on the border, it appears that the 'Pwo' Karen culture bearers continue to maintain the 'Pwo' Karen cultural practices, including 'Pwo-specific' music and dance genres. This observation is justified by the rich and diverse genres of 'Pwo' Karen music and dance circulating in diasporic Karen communities, compared to a less promoted (and stagnant) 'Sgaw' Karen culture. Throughout Burma's turbulent history, the two groups' segregation is prominently reflected through Christian and Buddhist separation amongst the 'Sgaw' and 'Pwo' Karen. In Sheffield, this particular 'Pwo' cultural practice has been subsumed into the renegotiated Karen identity. The religious differences are muted through an understanding that with resettlement, their differences can be overlooked.

²⁶ Cultural Cornerstones, *The Karen Displaced on the Thai-Burma Border*, (2007), <http://www.culturalcornerstones.org/karen/> [accessed, June 2021]; Guerrilla Ethnomusicologists, *From Eastern Burma: The Music of Karen Refugees*, (2008), <http://guerillaethnomusicology.wordpress.com/2008/06/29/karenrefugees/>. [accessed June 2021],

The Don or 'ton' dance

The highlight of important ceremonies such as the Karen New Year, the Wrist-tying and Memorial Day occasions is the performance of the Don, don, or 'ton' series of dances. The Don is a series of dances performed by mixed and single-gender groups of dancers often accompanied by traditional Karen instruments described earlier. The Don dancing (the Karen meaning being 'to be in unison or agreement') originated with the Pwo Karen, who developed the dancing to reinforce community ethical values. Traditionally, two male leaders called the 'don koh' manage the Don dances' different variants and compose a song or poem that criticised a village community member's misdeed with all the performing dancers singing the song while dancing. This poem or song had the appearance of publicly condemning the individual's actions and re-affirming the community's and Karen moral standards. Although don dancing was an expression of democratic values, it has expressed Karen nationalism and moral consensus within the Karen communities in Burma, the refugee camps and third countries. In an article written for the *Irrawaddy*, Min Zin reports on 'hta' song-poems, and that 'dong' or 'dau' dancing reportedly sped up, and its function changed under the military dictatorship extolling the glories of Burmese socialism.²⁷

In their description of the 'ton' dance, Stern and Stern observed performances in a Karen village in Western Thailand in the mid-1960s; they discovered that the don dance is used as a musical expression of a village or regional pride.²⁸ They characterised the 'ton' dancing as 'bouncy' and 'vigorous' in which two lines of dancers moving are in unison and mirroring each other moves with the performance lasting some fifteen minutes. They also noted that a religious ritual preceded the don dance. Often they are appeasement of Buddhist spirits (*nats*). The gender configuration of the dance troupe that they observed were predominantly young girls, with boys only included if there were insufficient numbers. The don dance is an important opportunity for the Karen community to express their cohesiveness as a people; it is primarily the community's youth that plays a significant role in the don dance. The don dance in the

²⁷ Min Zin, 'Karen History: In their own words', *The Irrawaddy*, Vol. 8, No. 10, (2000), http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=2054, [accessed June 2021].

²⁸ Stern and Stern, "I Pluck My Harp", *Ethnomusicology*, (1971), pp. 202.

contemporary era is viewed as an expression of a unified Karen nation and helps them construct a larger whole.²⁹

The Don dances observed at all the Karen New Year ceremonies in Sheffield represent a significant alteration from the performances that Stern and Stern studied in the 1960s. Both Pwo and Sgaw Karen of various religious groups attend, although most are Christian. There are a significant amount of Buddhist or animist members attending the ceremony. The gender composition of the dance troupes has also radically altered from Stern and Stern's observations. In a conversation with one of the male dancers in Sheffield, Saw Am Lay Say commented on the dance formation,

The dance is performed by two lines, one male and the other female and should be accompanied by traditional Karen music instruments. The team in Sheffield had to research the clothing and the meaning of each dance as they are similar but individual in their dancing . . . we do not want to lose our culture and this way we can carry on and maintain our Karen culture.³⁰

I have observed the New Year celebration since 2007, and video recorded between 2011 and 2020 in Sheffield indicated there were three types of don dances of varying configurations with mixed children and youth dance troupes. Photographs 21-23 (page 225-6) show the costumes that the Karen community wear. The dance has evolved and been transmuted to third countries, and dance leadership is divided amongst both genders, indicating a movement toward gender equality. This change in the dance performances is also observed in the refugee camps; in recent research, MacLachlan supports the notion that the displaced Karen express their nationalism through their music and dances. These changes in don dance techniques signal modes in which the notion of the Karen 'nationhood' is being constructed both in the refugee camps and in resettled communities. Research in Sheffield would suggest that the don dance has changed significantly from Stern and Stern's observations, its new forms reflecting its new functionality in the resettled community context. The performances observed were not Karen village or regional pride but a Karen nation, as Anderson has

²⁹ Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*, (California, 1982), p. 4.

³⁰ Conversation with Saw Am Lay Sai in 2008 at Karen New Year Celebration in Sheffield

exemplified in his conception of nations as ‘imagined communities’. Indeed, the sixty-year struggle for the Karen ‘state’ of Kawthoolei is still a demonstration of the lasting appeal of a national ideal.³¹

The most notable changes to the previously observed performances by Stern and Stern are Christian and Buddhists’ inclusion. This deliberate inclusiveness is significant. Adults who embody the spectrum of genders and religions are equally represented. In addition, the statement that the don dance does not commence with a ceremony petitioning a particular deity means that it is not bound to one or any other religion.



Photo 21: The Don Dance with plastic poles, youth section, (author 2019).

³¹ Heather MacLachlan, ‘The Don Dance: An Expression of Karen Nationalism in Refugee Camps’, *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*, Vol. 32, (2006), pp. 26-34; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Rajah, *Remaining Karen*, p. 3-5; Ashley South, *Civil Society in Burma: The Development of Democracy amidst Conflict*, (Washington, 2008), p. 26.



Photo 22: The Don Dance – Senior section – women only, (author 2019).



Photo 23: The Don Dance - Junior section, boys and girls, (author 2019).

Research observations in Sheffield reveal that the don dance is now intended to appeal to all the different Karen groups' faith groups and has become an integral function of

Karen consciousness. Notably, the don dance has been included in these important annual ceremonies, where the inclusions of other Karen cultural signifiers or icons are equally important. Reyes argues that through music:

ethnic identity calls for cultural markers to signal membership . . .
identity is defined by the boundary created as a consequence of
groups.³²

The present-day inclusion of raising the Karen flag (page 227), the wearing of traditional costumes, combined with music and the don dance, are visible symbols of expression and statements of political intent within the context of performing ceremonies.



Photo 24: Raising the Karen flag, (KCA, 2018).

The following section will examine the wrist-tying ceremony as a significant window into the Karen community building's developing and complex dynamics for Sheffield's community. The resettled Karen are in the process of maintaining solidarity with Karen back home in Burma and the camps through the wrist-tying ceremony. By examining this crucial cultural practice of the Karen community building, I present it to bridge the global and local 'spaces'. Understanding this movement between these 'spaces' and utilising cultural practices as agents acknowledge transnational engagement and allow identities and communities to adapt to new social territories.³³

³² Adelaida Reyes, 'Identity, Diversity and Interaction', in Ellen Koskoff (ed.), *The Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music The United States and Canada, Volume 3*, (New York, 2001), pp. 504-518.

³³ Steven Vertovec, 'Transnationalism and Identity', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, (2010), pp. 573-582.

The Karen wrist-tying ceremony

Many Southeast Asian ethnic communities express the ritual of tying silk or string around a person's wrist to commemorate good luck, celebrate important events, or strengthen individual well-being at various life stages. This ceremony is predominantly practised in Northern Thai Isan and Lao culture and is appropriated by other Southeast Asian cultures. It is commonly known as *Baci* (*Basi*) or *su kwan* (meaning 'calling of the soul' or 'blessed threads') and is an animist spirit ritual prevalent in Laos even before the introduction of Buddhism.³⁴ In Sheffield and on the Thai-Burma border, several Karen practices appear to be substantially influenced by ethnonationalism and are adopted as a vehicle for strengthening solidarity for the displaced and resettled communities.³⁵ The Karen in Sheffield must, as similar refugee communities, confront a variety of challenges to overcome in their new environment. These challenges include finding new ways of fitting into a vastly different social landscape from Burmese villages and the Thai refugee camps. Research conducted by Rangkla along the Thai-Burma borderlands indicates that this August wrist-tying ceremony usually attracts large numbers of Karen.³⁶

Marshall describes the wrist-tying ceremony as one of the many practised by animist Karens as a 'propitiatory sacrifice' or offering to the k'la (defined as a life principle of humans). Extrapolating from Marshall's writing, the ceremony that was/is practised by animist Karen groups in Burma and Thailand from the early last century is still practised in modern times. Animist beliefs and practices have generally been assumed by 'Folk' Buddhism rather than Christianity that condemns it as idolatry. In contemporary Burma and Northern Thailand, animist and Buddhist Karen mainly celebrate the wrist-tying ceremony and has only recently been adopted by Christian

³⁴ Michael Kleinod, 'Enchanting Frontiers: A sacred forest and the symbolic-material complexities in Laos', *Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia (DORISEA) Working Paper Series, No. 5*. (2014), p. 3; Linda Camino and Ruth M. Krulfeld (eds.), *Reconstructing Lives, Recapturing Meaning: Refugee Identity, Gender and Culture Change*, (Basel, 1994).

³⁵ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, (Princeton, 1994).

³⁶ Prasert Rangkla, 'Karen ethno-nationalism and the wrist-tying ceremony along the Thai-Burmese border', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1, (2014), pp. 74-89; The Irrawaddy, 30 August 2014. More than 5,000 people attended the Karen annual wrist tying ceremony at Taw-ya-Kyaun Buddhist temple in Mae Sot it began at 07:00 in the morning. http://www2.irrawaddy.com/print_article.php?art_id=3867, [accessed June 2021],

Karen. However, the Karen people consistently claim that the wrist-tying ceremony is a unique Karen custom.³⁷

From accounts written in Karen and English languages, in the nineteenth century, the tradition of wrist-tying by participants renovated the ceremony in various ways and for various reasons. These sources suggest complex rules governing the act and often vary according to whoever is articulating them. The ceremony is articulated at many levels, town or village-wide event, household, and individual level, which is held according to the lunar calendar. In each case, the act's central theme is the enunciation of a prayer or blessing by an elder over another person, and he ties the string or silk around the wrist. This act is based upon the belief that one's soul or spirit may depart from one's body, and if this is the case, then one will be prone to illness, even death. Therefore, the presumption and reasoning of this act are to summon a wandering soul/spirit during prayer to ensure that it remains inside the host body by the act of tying either silk or string around the wrist.³⁸

I have attended five wrist-tying festivals at Sheffield, and the following is an abridged version of my field notes from 2007 to 2016. The festival is usually held a week or two after the August Martyr's Day celebration, and there is sometimes a lower attendance to this celebration. In 2016, the festival was held at the Middlewood Nature Nursery, and it began with speeches in Sgaw and Pwo Karen, with translation implants provided for non-speakers in English. The main aim was to elucidate the congregation with Karen history and culture. The opening ceremony involved community members and children carrying the Karen flag and parading down the stage centre. The Karen flag is raised to the signing of the Karen national anthem. (see page 227). On many long tables, there were several silver platters set out with food and water. The emphasis in all the speeches at Sheffield was that Karen people are not Burmese and are a distinct and unified ethnic group. In the early years of resettlement, many Sheffield Karen were instructed on the symbolism attached to food and the act of wrist-tying ceremony. Most

³⁷ Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*; Manning Nash, 'Burmese Buddhism in Everyday Life', pp. 103-114, in Robert O Tilman (ed.), *Man, State and Society in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, (New York, 1969).

³⁸ Guido Sprenger, 'From Kettledrums to Coins: Social transformation and the flow of valuables in Northern Laos', in Francois Robinne and Mandy Sadan, (eds.), *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia: Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma by E. R. Leach*, (Boston, 2007), pp. 161-186.

of the resettled Karen attended the wrist-tying act, and some of the nominated couples had been invited to participate in the ceremony formally. The ritual promoted significant interaction between the participants.

In his comprehensive study on Thai-Karen wrist-tying rituals, Rajah affirms that the ceremony calls for the reunification of the soul/spirit and the body, requiring physical contact between individuals, emphasising long-term relationships and loyalty.³⁹ Observers view it as an ideal imprint to promote unity within Karen groups of Animist, Buddhist and Christian faiths. Christian Karen leaders of the UK and Sheffield community have accepted this act of wrist-tying to promote greater unity between Christian and Buddhist Karen, and it has become a device to implant a greater pan-Karen identity.

Nevertheless, the wrist-tying ceremony is linked to animist practices and beliefs to justify that both Buddhist and Christian Karen should embrace the act. The discourse of 'encompassment' contends that, though distinct differences exist between these two religious groups, they are unjustified in the appropriate understanding of pan-Karen identity. This particular discourse of encompassment requires two discursive modes, the narration of origin stories about the wrist-tying ceremony that justify a universal understanding of what it is to be Karen and secondly delineating and illustrating a clear line between the concepts of 'religion' and 'culture'. Many of the Sheffield Karen community espoused the rationale that the act of wrist-tying is cultural rather than religious, particularly Joseph, who articulated the grammar of encompassment by saying that it is 'simply not religious our culture and not from any religion'.⁴⁰ Many Sheffield Christian Karen distinguish the ceremony as a cultural act rather than a religious unity, which is crucial to the grammar of encompassment, that is, to the notion that a ceremony is an event that unifies all Karen of all faiths.

The non-religious explanation of the wrist-tying ceremony by many Karen promotes an encompassing notion of Karen identity. The story's origin prefigures the recent separation of Christian and Buddhist Karen, but most importantly for the Christian Karen, it presents an opportunity to reconcile the observance to their faith

³⁹ Rajah, *Remaining Karen*, p. 226.

⁴⁰ Conversation with Joseph Ta Thu in August 2010 during the wrist-tying ceremony, at Mount Tabor Methodist Church, Sheffield.

with their commitment to a global pan-Karen identity. This flexibility of articulation is interesting in the diasporic communities and how it permeates into the daily discourse between the Christian and Buddhist Karen of Sheffield.

In Sheffield, Christian Karen who speaks English are likely to occupy leadership positions and be employed as translators. The Christian Karen teenagers have embraced their 'new' resettled home, becoming proficient in the English language and attending higher college or tertiary education in northern England. Having the Christian Karen serving as official or public figures of both Buddhist and Christian groups is a continuation of the accepted normality in the Karen society of Eastern Burma.

At the ceremonies attended in Sheffield, leaflets were distributed by Karen organisers to explain the symbolic meaning of the seven items used in the ceremonial act. The list included sticky rice, compressed rice balls, banana, sugar cane, branches of flowers, a glass of cold water and white cotton thread. These items are placed on a large bamboo or wooden tray, then struck by a wooden spoon before the prayer enactment. The leaflet explains each item's importance to the Karen people; the sticky rice represents solidarity and sharpness. The rice balls represent the uniting of Karen as a people. Bananas represent good disciple and loyalty. The flowers signify the ability to settle and grow anywhere. The sugar cane presents the quality of sound ethics and moral values. Water means to regain peace of mind and a cleansing of the body and mind. The white thread represents protection from misfortune and evil spirits. Other sources indicate different requirements and other items to be used, offering different rationales for their symbolic meaning. However, all these sources agree that the prayer incanted before the wrist-tying begins with the call '*heh gay, heh gay*' in Sgaw or '*reh tain, reh tain*' in Pwo, both meaning 'come back, come back'. Although the ceremony is practised differently throughout Karen areas, it is a new experience for the Sheffield Christian Karen.⁴¹

⁴¹ Drum Publications, <http://www.drumpublications.org/wrist.php>; [accessed June 2021] Yoko Hayami, 'Morality, Sexuality and Mobility: Changing Moral Discourse and Self' in Claudio O. Delang (ed.), *Living at the edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the highlands of northern Thailand* (New York, 2003) pp. 112-129; Zoya Phan, *Little Daughter: A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West* (London, 2009) pp. 38-39.

In Sheffield, the wrist-tying festival began with speeches in Sgaw and Pwo Karen, with translations given for non-Karen speakers in English. The main aim was to explain to the congregation Karen history and culture. In the early years of resettlement, the Karen of Sheffield's predominance was instructed on the symbolism attached to the food and the act of the wrist-tying ceremony. The wrist-tying act was attended by most of the resettled Karen and couples invited to participate in the ceremony. The ritual promoted significant interaction between the participants. The ceremony calls for the reunification of the soul/spirit and the body, requiring physical contact between individuals, emphasising long-term relationships and loyalty.⁴² Other Karen observers view it as an ideal imprint to promote unity within Karen groups of Buddhist and Christian faiths. Christian Karen leaders of the UK and Sheffield community have adopted this act of wrist-tying to promote greater unity between Christian and Buddhist Karen, and it has become a device to implant a greater pan-Karen identity.

Participation by some of the Sheffield Christian Karen was problematic; their requirement to be faithful to their Christian beliefs and participate in the wrist-tying ceremony based on an animist ritual was interpreted as idolatry. Although genuine support for a unified Karen community was observed, the response to the grammar of encompassment was either rejection, partial accommodation, or full acceptance.

In Sheffield Saw Hla Htoo exemplifies this attitude of rejection, believing that it is acceptable for Sgaw Christians to participate in Karen cultural customs such as singing and dancing but is quite adamant in rejecting the encompassing notion of the wrist-tying ceremony, stating that it has no Christian meaning. He mentions as follows:

Our ancient ancestors and great grandfathers and grandmothers lived in fear of the spirits before Christians and Buddhists were given to the Karen. Our grandparents and parents tied a white thread on the wrists of children after calling their spirits back. It means that the person and spirit stay together and are free from fear.⁴³

⁴² Rajah, *Remaining Karen*, p. 226.

⁴³ Discussion about the origins of the tradition with Saw Hla Htoo at Sheffield in August 2014 wrist-tying ceremony.

This attitude was supported mainly by the senior community members while the young members were enthusiastic about celebrating the ceremony. Nant Bwa Bwa Phan articulated the grammar of encompassment by indicating that the wrist-tying ceremony is ‘. . . Simply, Karen culture and not based on any particular beliefs’. She followed this conversation to explain that ‘the Karen Association simply promotes this ceremony to unite our Karen people’.⁴⁴ This rationale that the wrist-tying ceremony is a cultural rather than a religious notion is/was advanced by other community members. This ceremony has been reinforced annually, during August, by the KNU Office of the Supreme Headquarters in a ‘Letter of Felicitation’, that is distributed globally to ‘all the Karen people of different clans, living in various places, get together and express affection and unity, and promote customs, culture and literature.’⁴⁵ Most importantly, for those promoting an encompassing notion of Karen identity, it offers a non-religious and secular explanation for the symbolism of the wrist-tying ceremony. Therefore, the account is significant to many Sheffield Karen people of all religious faiths, especially the Christians who require reconciling their devotion to their faith with their commitment to a pan-Karen identity.

However, most Karen in Sheffield that were informally interviewed expressed one of two approaches to this notion of encompassment. One group claimed to come to some accommodation with this discourse, believing that the wrist-tying ceremony is not a non-sectarian event, not accepting the denial of the difference between Buddhists and Christians, which is intrinsic in the grammar of encompassment; they find other ways to participate in the ceremony. Hoping to be viewed as supporters of Karen culture and a pan-Karen identity while still faithful to their religious beliefs, Saw Robert Htoo exemplifies this stance, saying that he attends the ceremony but does not actively participate in every feature of the wrist-tying ceremony.⁴⁶ Similarly, some other Christians stand back when the actual wrist-tying ritual is performed, but all support the event and enjoy the fellowship, food and entertainment provided but do not tie the thread on the wrist. Other strategies employed by some of the Christian Karen was to arrive late to the planned wrist-tying ceremony, other more prominent

⁴⁴ Conversation with Nant Bwa Bwa Phan at wrist-tying ceremony in Sheffield August 2014.

⁴⁵ E-mail(s) dated August 2012 and subsequent years (to date June 2021) with KNU ministers P’doh Kwe Htoo Win at KNU-Supreme Headquarters in Mae Sot, Thailand in March and April 2013.

⁴⁶ Conversation with Saw Robert Htoo at wrist-tying ceremony, in Sheffield, August 2014.

community members in early years attended the event but declined the wrist-tying practice, in the following year participated with a higher degree of involvement giving opening speeches and welcoming the assembled guests. A particular aspect of extending the grammar of encompassment observed in Sheffield was the emphasis given by a prominent community leader to most white British guests that the ceremony dates back to ancient times. It encapsulated the way Karen people celebrate their culture and show respect for elders.

There is a begrudging acceptance of this ceremony and the grammar of encompassment for most Karen community elders. It is not limited to the younger Christian, who seemed more willing to participate in the wrist-tying ceremony. Throughout the ceremony, most of the younger generation have an overall acceptance and accommodation and the idea that it is a non-sectarian event by both Buddhists and Christians. Many Karen visualises the event as a time of fellowship to reinforce their cultural heritage. The event draws most Karen people from Sheffield, including Bolton and Bury, to participate and is viewed as an opportunity for a reunion. The majority of the Christian Karen indicate that they either accommodate or completely accept the 'grammar of encompassment'; however, I have observed that their claims are not transmitted by them all participating in the wrist-tying ceremony.

The evidence suggests that this shift in a new meaning of the wrist-tying celebration has, in effect, promoted a reconnection with ancient traditions and has enabled Karen unity within the resettled community. It demonstrates the flexibility in Karen cultural reproduction, and it also illustrates that the ceremony status within cultural, traditional, or even political discourse is now debatable.

Martyr's Day ceremony

This final section will examine the Martyr's Day ceremony celebrated annually on 12 August to commemorate the assassination of Karen leader Saw Ba U Gyi and fallen comrades, soldiers and civilians who have died in the struggle for national equality. This ceremony was held at Mount Tabor Methodist Church, Sheffield, in August 2016 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and was attended by around 70 people and children, all mainly Karen. The setting for the occasion was a large four-metre by two-metre green cloth-backdrop with the British Union flag to the left and the Karen flag on the right above the stage, with large Karen writing with no English translation. Immediately in front

of the stage, the focal point was a homemade white three-metre replica of a needle obelisk and a temporary flagpole to its left. On a table behind the obelisk were many photographs of fallen soldiers and deceased KNU leaders. The ceremony began with a silent salute to the British and Karen flags. Most Karen were dressed in formal Karen clothing, including all the children, although a small minority wore western-style clothing. Programs were given out which are designed around the Karen, and British flags encircling a map of the United Kingdom with the words:

When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrows, these
gave their today.⁴⁷

The ceremony began with introductory speeches, and a message from the KNU President General Mutu Say Poe's address on the 66th anniversary of Karen Martyr's Day was recited in Sgwa Karen (translation to the English version on a paper copy). The message echoed principles about political oppression, unity with the unique opportunities for all Karen based at home and abroad to have active programs and cooperate among themselves. Furthermore, the message by General Mutu was addressed to Karen 'Leaders and Comrade menfolk and womenfolk', it declared that all Karen must unite and advocate for Karen people's political aspirations.⁴⁸

The Karen flag's hoisting is accompanied by the Karen anthem and conducted by an elderly ex-soldier who had participated in the Karen-Burmese civil war. A KNU-UK representative speech followed a Karen children's choir's performing traditional songs. The KYO emphasised the importance of unity and the relevance of cultural integrity and identity in Sheffield. There followed a procession of the congregation placing flowers on the front of the obelisk and table of photographs of 'fallen Karen martyrs'. My previous observations and attendance of the Martyr's Day celebration in the camps and Sheffield had not included this aspect. It had been accepted from Karen attendance and observations of British Remembrance and Armistice Day commemorations of the fallen in the World Wars. Photograph 25 (page 236) shows the inclusion in the Sheffield celebration of the obelisk in the ceremony.

⁴⁷ Pamphlet given out on Martyr's Day ceremony at Mount Tabor Community Hall, Sheffield, in August 2017.

⁴⁸ Burma Link Organisation, 'Karen National Union President General Mutu Say Poe's Address on 66th Anniversary of Karen Martyr's Day speech', <https://www.burmalink.org/karen-national-union-president-gen-mutu-say-poes-address-66th-anniversary-karen-martyrs-day/>, [accessed June 2021].

It demonstrates the link that Karen perceives to be with the British since the nineteenth century, and when discussing the obelisk motif, the ex-soldier commented that the Karen had supported the British during the Second World War, and it was befitting to follow the UK in remembering its fallen soldiers.⁴⁹



Photo 25: Karen flag and photos with an obelisk replica, (author, 2019).

In 2014 civilians and leaders from KNU's Hpa-an District in Burma gathered to commemorate the Karen Martyrs' Day at the KNLA's 7th Brigade headquarters. Martyr's Day ceremony is well attended within Burma and the Thai refugee camps and has been approved by Burma/Myanmar's ruling government. The 2015 event at Judson Hall in Rangoon/Yangon was organised by Karen youth groups and included KNU representatives. However, the organisers indicated that many Karen did not attend as, under existing laws in Burma, the KNU is regarded as illegal and could be arrested under Article 17/1 of Burmese law. Among those attending was KNLA Chief-of-Staff General Saw Johnny.⁵⁰ The ceremony started with a military parade followed

⁴⁹ Informal conversation with Saw Taw Zan member of the KCA –UK at Mount Tabor, Sheffield in August 2016.

⁵⁰ Karen News, 'Despite its Legal status, Karen Martyrs Day well attended', (August 2014), [Despite its Legal Status, Karen Martyrs' Day Well Attended - Karen News](#), [accessed July 2021].

by speeches and songs to honour the martyrs. Speaking to *Karen News*, General Saw Johnny said that the struggle had yet to end:

The wills of all martyrs who had given their lives for the Karen struggle has not been accomplished or fulfilled yet. We, the Karen people, have the responsibility to carry on until we reach our ultimate goal.⁵¹

During the ceremony, General Saw Johnny inspected the Karen troops and members of the KNU who had lost their lives for the Karen resistance movement. The placing of wreaths on the martyrs' pillar, and the reading of speeches prepared by the KNU's Chairman, Saw Mutu Say, Poe, followed a military parade. KNLA Chief-of-Staff, General Saw Johnny, and Hpa-an district chairperson, Padoh Saw Aung Maung Aye, spoke at the commemoration. Then, the KWO and the KYO delivered their traditional messages for martyrs' day. The closing ceremony ended when the Karen people saluted the Karen national flag. KNU Chairperson, General Saw Mutu Say, Poe, gave thanks in his speech to the sacrifice of the loyal Karen leaders, comrades, and civilians who have paid with their lives in the fight and struggle for independence, for freedom and human rights, for self-determination and the survival with the dignity of the Karen nation. General Saw Mutu also paid tribute to the fallen for keeping the Karen struggle alive.⁵²

Conclusion

As all Karen in the diaspora, the Karen of Sheffield does not accept a bold statement as 'all Karen are one' without question, as Baumann and Gingrich suggest, it is to be assumed that to contest the grammar of encompassment should often be the case. The Christian Karen of Sheffield indeed revealed that 'encompassers' themselves evaluate the grammar of encompassment thoughtfully. Some embrace it, and some produce new correlations to justify denying the difference between each other that it demands. Others decide to accommodate it partially, and some reject it outright. Pan-Karen

⁵¹ Karen News, *Karen people honour Martyrs Day*, <http://karennews.org/2014/08/karen-people-honour-its-martys/>, [accessed July 2021].

⁵² Karen News, '*Karen People Honour Martyrs*', 18 August 2014, <http://karennews.org/2014/08/karen-people-honour-its-martys/>, [accessed July 2021].

identity is undoubtedly a contested notion permeating those who have gained the most from its broader acceptance.

The flow between the context of the 'homeland' of Burma and the 'new' home of Sheffield is particularly evident through the Karen paying respect for the British political and local social circle by inviting local politicians, service providers and other resettled refugees as guests of honour whilst singing the national British and Karen anthem at the end of each ceremony. These events also emphasise Karen history and politics by engaging and reifying national Karen identity. I argued that these contexts of belonging and yearning could coexist in resettlement. I also argued that these festive events provide a central space for emplacing the displaced refugee's environment.

These three ceremonial events magnify Karen cultural practice in Sheffield and are transnational as they flow between the homeland and the resettled refugees in Sheffield and the global diaspora. The production of memory in these ceremonies is not dependant on a single individual's memory of the past but rather a collective remembrance. It is a social understanding of events represented as memory and is constructed by sharing with other community members through 'sets' of images that have been transported down to them through the medium of memory, be they poetry, songs, storytelling, ritual, or ritual music. In almost every society, the researcher can identify a range of memory-sites of commemorative practices where remembrance anchors the past. They also furnish a series of locations where common knowledge of the past is sustained and conveyed by an annual circulation of inclusion and engagement with their history's imagined identities.

Conclusion

This thesis began by reflecting on a journey with my son and father-in-law in Burma in 1988. It has taken over thirty years to garner and develop the insights into the inter-related themes of organised state violence, displacement and memory as it affected the displaced Karen of Burma. The journey developed to include the resettled Karen community in Sheffield in 2005.

The thesis set out to explore the challenges the displaced Karen People of Burma faced in Thailand and Sheffield and how they have negotiated these challenges over the last thirty years. The aims of doing so were to address the following areas of inquiry: explore Karen personal narratives and examine how individual Karen refugees found a way to express themselves in Thailand and Sheffield; to understand the impact of displacement on Karen identity, organisations and networks within the diaspora and their notion of homeland: to explore the ways the Karen individuals and community seek to empower themselves through cultural activities, and how women have established more prominent roles in resettlement.

The thesis began with several observations of Karen history and their encounter with the British in Burma. I cited San C. Po's remark that the Karen reject Burma's central state and favour self-governance, and I suggested that Karen identity is not an umbrella term encompassing all Karen. The Karen are not a unified, homogenous ethnic identity. There is a great deal of diversity, and the KNU actively promotes and encourages the idea of unity, which has been helped along by the Burmese military's actions on the Thai-Burma borderlands.

The intensity of the military conflict depended on which 'space' you found yourself in and on what date. Equally, the severity of the violence conducted in Karen State was often determined by local conditions and power relations. As Karen oral history interviews suggest, refugee identity was a product not only of displacement, and it was also constructed in conditions of chaos, danger and uncertainty. Systems of categorisation which draw sharp distinctions between, on the one hand, 'political exiles' and the other 'refugees' fail to acknowledge that refugee identity was not something that was necessarily 'inherent' to someone or defined from within. It was also a reaction to the violent state policies of Burma.

Scholars such as Malkki recognise the voices of refugees' dominant discourses, such as the social, political and cultural impact that such discourses and resettlement have on people with refugee backgrounds. It is not surprising that legal frameworks helped construct a politicised and essentialised identity for refugees and of resettlement after the Second World War. A contribution Malkki makes to the critique of refugee categories is how visual representations of refugees can further embed framings of displaced persons as vulnerable.

Thus, it is not surprising that 'being a refugee' was often anathema to the Karen individual who lived through these events and how they disassociated themselves from particular labels they should be incorporated into our historical analyses. More basically, focusing on individual testimonies' details also demonstrates how different refugees' experiences could be.

To some extent, these personal testimonies allow us to complicate the symbolic meaning of the displaced Karen and, in a broader context, the image of the 'refugee who is the victim of the indiscriminate powers of conflict, the nation-state, ideology and institutions. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that many refugees identified themselves as belonging to a group or a mass united in their opposition to the Burmese military regime and that the flight of these people should not be divorced from the ethnic or political context.

By drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community', the thesis proposed that the Karen construction of nationhood had been shaped by its interaction with Christian missionaries and British colonialist ideals of the nineteenth century.¹ This novel Karen construction of their ethnic community imagined its communion as stretching back to pre-colonial and Burman conquest times to allay postcolonial anxieties over their national identity. This thesis revealed how the KNU leaders have long attempted to reify the Karen *ethnie* (an ethnic community and identity) to draw together Burma's diverse social and cultural communities into a Karen national consciousness.

In concentrating on individual narratives of displacement and resettlement, I hope this thesis has demonstrated that each Karen walking across the border had an

¹ Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London, 1991).

inner life, possessed a range of motivations and went on to renegotiate their displacement in many different ways. This research has sought to add to the displaced Karen people's knowledge base significantly affected by organised state violence, displacement, and resettlement. The individual and community experiences extrude narratives that strengthen and weaken refugee political and exilic memories by exploring these issues.

By engaging and drawing on oral testimony with Karen refugees in the camps, the thesis demonstrates how Karen identity is being reimagined and reinforced within the refugee camps and resettlement within Sheffield. Resettlement of refugees goes deeper than grasping the everyday life negotiations and into the realm of the symbolic. Resettlement involves compromises and renegotiations regarding Karen homeland politics, cultural integrity, and ethnic relations. The thesis also draws on many Karen narratives through their experiences of oppression and displacement from Burma to refugee camps in Burma revealed their journey, and refugees typically have had limited opportunities for being heard.

The re-framed the Karen people's resettlement with Sheffield's refugee backgrounds not stigmatised or idealistic. This thesis's collective recollections are shaped by both the realities of direct experience of displacement in Burma and the new frameworks formed in resettlement. However, it does not suggest that the adaption of an oral history method provides a way of understanding the process of memory and remembrances in exile in the context of authoritarianism and political turbulence.

Community events are valuable devices for the symbolic negotiations displaced people make in resettlement. In Karen's example, the Karen regarding their political, religious, or cultural and identity perceptions renegotiate participation and representation at community events. The thesis argues that it allows people to take stock of the events' capacity to support a particular ethnic-collective political identity through ceremonies celebrating their ethnic identity.

The oral testimony in my interviews over the many years revealed Karen resettlement's dynamics and complex processes in Sheffield. In this range of circumstances, Karen refugees had to negotiate their 'refugee-ness' and filter their experiences because they were displaced and the array of characteristics this was supposed to confer upon them.

This part of the thesis provided a scenario of how displaced Karen people experience resettlement through symbolic modes that explored the nature of inter-

connectedness, identity work, and transnational diasporic engagements. My contribution to knowledge rests in developing a new perspective on Karen resettlement in the UK – one that integrates dominant resettlement discourse with the ‘lived experiences that sit on the periphery’ of that prevailing discourse. I do not provide a universal resettlement model as it would contradict my argument that resettlement needs to move beyond essentialised modes of thinking. Instead, my research evidence supports those resettlement assumptions based on an ethnographic exploration of the life-worlds and identity of resettling Karen people are evolving and being reimaged. I neither resolve tensions nor the challenges raised during this research; these are continuing personal and collective frictions that may never be resolved during displacement and resettlement; they may be resolved – at least temporarily – but on Karen people’s terms, not mine.

The journey continues as my social relationships in Sheffield have grown more robust and committed to helping the Karen cause. Having a strong sense of social and humanitarian commitment to the Karen people is common for those who engage closely with them. It has been remarked by some people who connect intimately with the community that the Karen stay forever in one’s heart. I can relate to this – my journey – with the Karen does not end here. What happens in the second and third generations of Sheffield Karen regarding transnational engagement and identity work is slowly unfolding as the young children adopt Yorkshire accents get British citizenship, and maybe go back to Kawthoolei. Values of cultural integrity and familial obligations to the Karen back in Burma and the refugee camps will possibly wane. However, there is evidence that new experiences, new connections, and organisations in the Karen diaspora will take on different meanings and the resettled Karen will export their newfound freedoms in Sheffield to Kawthoolei.

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