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**WEAVING ETHNIC IDENTITY:
DISCOVERING THE THREADS OF MULTILINGUAL DIVERSITY IN THE FABRIC OF
GROUP IDENTITY AMONG KAREN COMMUNITIES OF DENVER, COLORADO**

by

Charity J. Seidler
Bachelor of Arts, Colorado Christian University, 2009

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota
August
2022

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This thesis, submitted by Charity J. Seidler in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Chris Nelson, Dean
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Degree Master of Arts

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Charity J. Seidler
August 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
LIST OF TABLES	ix
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	x
ABSTRACT	xiii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
1.1 Brief History of Civil Conflict in Myanmar since 1948	2
1.2 Population, Religion, and Language Situation of the Karen	3
1.3 Emigration of the Karen from Myanmar	7
Chapter 2 Methodology	12
2.1 Data Collection	12
2.2 Narrators	17
2.3 Data Analysis Approach	18
Chapter 3 Narrative Stories	19
3.1 Maria Mu: Multilingual Altruist and Open-hearted Servant of the Karen Community	19
3.2 Mulue Karr: Championing Education to Encourage Better Opportunities for the Karen People	26
3.3 Mi See: Industrious Woman of Intelligence, Meekness, and Genuine Joyfulness	34
3.4 Lah Say Wah: A Champion of Diligence Through Education, Using Multilingualism as a Way to Serve Others	40
3.5 Nau Naw Lynn: Resiliently Joyful, Driven Overcomer	51
3.6 Elvina Htoo: A Heroic Voice for Immigrants and Refugees Through Compassion and Advocacy	58
Chapter 4 Analysis	69
4.1 Domains of Language Use	70

4.1.1	Social domains of use	72
4.1.2	Functional domains of use	73
4.2	Language Use Patterns Among Generations: Language Shift	75
4.2.1	Narrators' observations of Karen and English language use patterns generationally	76
4.2.2	Narrators' personal language use patterns generationally	77
4.2.3	Language shift through receptive bilingualism	78
4.2.4	Unmarked code-switching	78
4.3	The Utility Principle for Language Use	79
4.3.1	Children voice the difficulty of learning Karen	82
4.3.2	Children are growing up in a monolingual society with English as the primary language	83
4.3.3	Lexical choice for a Karen speaker in an English-speaking society	83
4.4	Accommodation to Differing Identities	84
4.4.1	Juggling Karen and American identities	85
4.4.2	Marked code-switching: Marker of multiple identities to pursue privacy	86
4.4.3	Importance of maintaining Karen identity while integrating with American culture	87
4.4.4	Identity of a shared personal history of migrating	88
4.4.5	Generational youth identity	88
4.4.6	Identity as a speaker of Burmese	89
4.5	Karen Church Efforts for Preservation of the Karen Language	90
4.5.1	The narrators' personal connections to Karen language and culture through church	91
4.5.2	Elvina's perception of the church's influence	92
4.5.3	The church's involvement encouraging Karen language use by the younger generation	92

Chapter 5 Further Research And Conclusion	94
5.1 Further Research	94
5.1.1 Comparative studies	94
5.1.2 Bridging the gap for refugee youth accommodating for multiple identities	95
5.2 Summary: Language Shift, Identity, and Maintenance of Karen in Colorado	97
Appendix S'gaw, Sheraw, and Shaw terminology	100
REFERENCES	102

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Map of Myanmar	4
2. East Central Myanmar language map	6
3. Northern Thailand language map.....	7

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Colorado Burmese refugee admissions.....	10
2. Age breakdown for Colorado Burmese refugee admissions.....	10
3. Narrators' language repertoires.....	18
4a. Narrators' domains of language use.....	71
4b. Domains of use legend.....	72

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ABSTRACT

How do Karen immigrants use language within Colorado communities? My thesis answers this question through narrative case studies of six S’gaw Karen women. Many Karen refugees, who flee the decades-long conflict within their homeland in Myanmar (Burma), find themselves navigating life first in Thailand, and eventually in the United States as foreign-language speakers. These refugees encounter numerous linguistic and cultural barriers in their new U.S. homeland, where it is difficult to function in many domains if they do not have the opportunity to learn much English upon arrival.

The six case studies are based on recorded sociolinguistic qualitative open interviews. I apply two principles from Labov (1981) in my methodology, to learn about both the personal experiences and language patterns of the Karen in their communities. I provide an emic perspective through presenting direct quotations from the women.

The main languages discussed in the narratives are S’gaw Karen, Pwo Karen, English, and Burmese; the narrators maintain language use of Karen in the home and church settings, though their language is shifting to English in the work and school settings. They report that young refugees are showing shift away from the primary native Karen language of their parents. Coulmas’ (2013) utility principle and Karan’s (2011) Perceived Benefit Model provide some reasons for language shift. Children find the Karen language difficult and opt to use English instead in many cases, since they say it is easier. However, identifying as Karen ethnically for solidarity purposes is also indicated. Karen is one of the multiple identities the Karen have that accompanies language shift. Other identities for some Karen include American, immigrant, youth, and being a Burmese speaker. At times, these identities are evident through marked and unmarked code-switching. Finally, the narrators indicate that the Karen church is one of the primary institutions for preservation of Karen culture and identity.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Seventy years is only thirty years short of a century; seventy years is an entire lifetime for some people. This means that some individuals among the ethnic peoples of Myanmar (Burma)¹ have lived their entire life in an active war zone in their homeland; a significant number of others have fled as refugees because of the conflict and have ended up in the United States. In this thesis, I present the stories of six S'gaw Karen women who live or have lived in Denver, Colorado. This study is significant because the voices of women, especially from minority groups, are seldom heard. The six stories of these women focus on their use of language in their new homeland. On the basis of these stories, I establish five claims. First, the Karen language is being used by the narrators in most situations, especially in the home and church, although many use English as the secondary language in the fields of work and education. Second, there is a definite intergenerational language shift for the children in the narrators' families, where most understand Karen but use English as their main language. Third, the utility principle explains some of the language shift in the Karen community. According to the utility principle, language choice is influenced by that which is easiest with the most benefits (Coulmas 2013). Fourth, language shift is accompanied by a shift toward multiple identities. And fifth, the Karen church is one of the main institutions supporting the maintenance and use of Karen language and culture in Denver, Colorado.

¹ The government changed the name of the country from “Burma” to “Myanmar” in 1989; some nations still refer to the country as “Burma” (Selth & Gallagher 2018). In this thesis, I use the term “Myanmar,” though in the stories of the Karen women, I use the name of the country that the narrators use; this maintains the authenticity of their word choice.

The remainder of this chapter includes a brief history of conflict in Myanmar; an overview of Myanmar's major ethnic groups; and the population, religious background, language situation, and emigration of the S'gaw Karen. In chapter 2, I present the research methodology for this study. In chapter 3, I share the stories of the six S'gaw Karen women I interviewed. I support my five claims in chapter 4. Finally, in chapter 5, I present the implications of my study for further research and summarize my findings.

1.1 Brief History of Civil Conflict in Myanmar since 1948

Some refugees have experienced warfare situations face-to-face within their home communities in Myanmar. Others have spent a lifetime hearing news reports of ongoing warfare among their people and family members in Myanmar; they may hear these news reports of happenings in Myanmar when they are in a neighboring country, a completely new continent, or a mixture of these, during tumultuous transitions. To live through a whole lifetime while watching your people go through a civil war, whether up close or from afar, is hard to comprehend for those who have lived the majority of their day-to-day lives without a constant, looming fear of attacks. Many of the S'gaw Karen, one of the people groups from Myanmar who live as refugees in Thailand, the United States, and other parts of the world, are among those who have experienced the disorder resulting from warfare in their communities. Some are able to flee the war zones, and they eventually find themselves as refugees navigating the multilingual city environments of the United States or other places, in a country whose citizens consider them to be foreign language speakers.

As context to the refugees' current situation, I provide a brief background of the history surrounding the conflict in their homeland. British colonial rule in Myanmar lasted from 1885 until 1948 (Aung-Thwin et. al 2022). Myanmar became a republic in 1948, accompanied by the after-effects of the turmoil in the economy from World War II (Aung-Thwin et. al 2022). Multiple transitions in the Burmese government occurred over the next several decades. The country switched between civilian rule (1948-1962), military rule (1962-2011), civilian rule (2011-2021), and military rule (2021-present) (Aung-Thwin et. al 2022). While the type of rule changed over the years, conflicts within the country remained

fairly constant, regardless of whether the country was under civilian rule or military rule (Aung-Thwin et. al 2022). Many of the Karen and other people groups from Myanmar have found themselves living through these conflicts for decades.

1.2 Population, Religion, and Language Situation of the Karen

The Karen, Chin, Shan, Kachin, Mon, Rakhine, Karenni, and Bamar are among the major people groups in Myanmar; each of these contains a diversity of subgroups (Seekins 2017). While the term *Burmese* is commonly used to refer to either a member of the Bamar ethnic group or to anyone from Myanmar, I use *Bamar* to refer to the ethnic group; I use *Burmese* to refer to anyone from Myanmar (Walton 2008). The total Karen population in Myanmar was 1.37 million, according to the 1931 census (Lintner 2003). Comparatively, the Karen people made up approximately 6.2 percent (around 2.12 million) of Myanmar's total population, according to the 1983 official census; they are considered the third largest group within Myanmar (Seekins 2017). However, Seekins (2017) notes that only an estimate of the Karen people is possible since the 1983 census, due to both the Karens' widely-dispersed population and the blurred boundaries with similar ethnic groups. In light of the fact that the total population of Karen in Myanmar was about 1.37 million in the 1931 census, studies of Karen speakers over eighty years later indicate an increase in population (Lintner 2003). The S'gaw Karen language is used by approximately 2,050,000 in Myanmar, with an additional 200,000 in other countries, based on statistics gathered in 2017 and 2013 (Eberhard et al. 2022). However, it seems this statistic may not include countries beyond Thailand, since Ager (2022b) indicates that Thailand has about 200,000 speakers of S'gaw Karen. Delang (2003) estimates that around 400,000 Karen live in the northern areas of Thailand, while Seekins (2017) estimates that approximately 200,000 Karen live in Thailand.

The term *Karen* has affiliations with the term *Carianner*, used by a captain of the East India Company in the 1700s (Renard 2003). *Carianner*, in turn, has its origins in the Mon term *kariang*; *kariang* is pronounced "kayin" in Burmese, while the English term *Karen* retains the "r" from the Early Burmese version (Renard 2003). Karen State, also known as Kayin State, is located on the eastern border of the country of Myanmar, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Map of Myanmar ²

The Karen language group has a diverse variety of sub-group divisions within it. Some of the variations of the Karen language group include Paku (also known as Monnepwa) Karen and Mobwa (also

² Used by permission: Aotearoa, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons.

known as Monpwa) Karen (Eberhard et al. 2022). Additionally, though anthropologists have included Karenni and Pa-O within the Karen sub-group, the Karenni and Pa-O identify themselves as ethnically separate from the Karen (Seekins 2017). While there are a number of divisions within Karen, two of the *main* subgroups of the Karen are S’gaw Karen and Pwo Karen (Seekins 2017). S’gaw Karen is the largest of the ethnic sub-groups within the Karen language group (Lintner 2003). The narrators in my thesis all have a S’gaw Karen heritage, and they mainly refer to the S’gaw Karen and Pwo Karen languages in the interviews.

While 90 percent of the population in Myanmar hold to Theravada Buddhism, this is not the case for many Karen, Chin, and Kachin (Aung-Thwin et. al 2022). For example, Seekins (2017) states that about 25 percent of the total Karen population is estimated to be Christians, comprised of Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and other denominations. The S’gaw Karen I worked with have a Christian background. The S’gaw Karen sub-group is estimated to be 55 percent Christian (Joshua Project 2022). Hayami (2018) discusses the history of missionaries to Myanmar in the 1800s, including the work of Adoniram Judson; however, Hayami argues that the significant growth of Protestant Christians among the Karen was due to the fervor of native Karen who evangelized their own people. Occasionally, the foreign missionaries needed to leave certain areas of the country for periods of time. Hayami (2018) discusses that it was the consistent sharing of the gospel of Christ by the native Karen and by the early Karen converts Ko Thabyu and Saw Quala which influenced the growth of Christianity during the foreign missionaries’ absence.

S’gaw Karen is classified as one of the Southern Karennic Tibeto-Burman languages in the Sino-Tibetan language family (Eberhard et al. 2022). While Burmese is the national language, S’gaw Karen is one of the languages of wider communication in Myanmar (Eberhard et al. 2022). Figure 2 shows the location of Karen communities in East Central Myanmar. S’gaw Karen, represented by number 76, is present in seven areas in Figure 2.

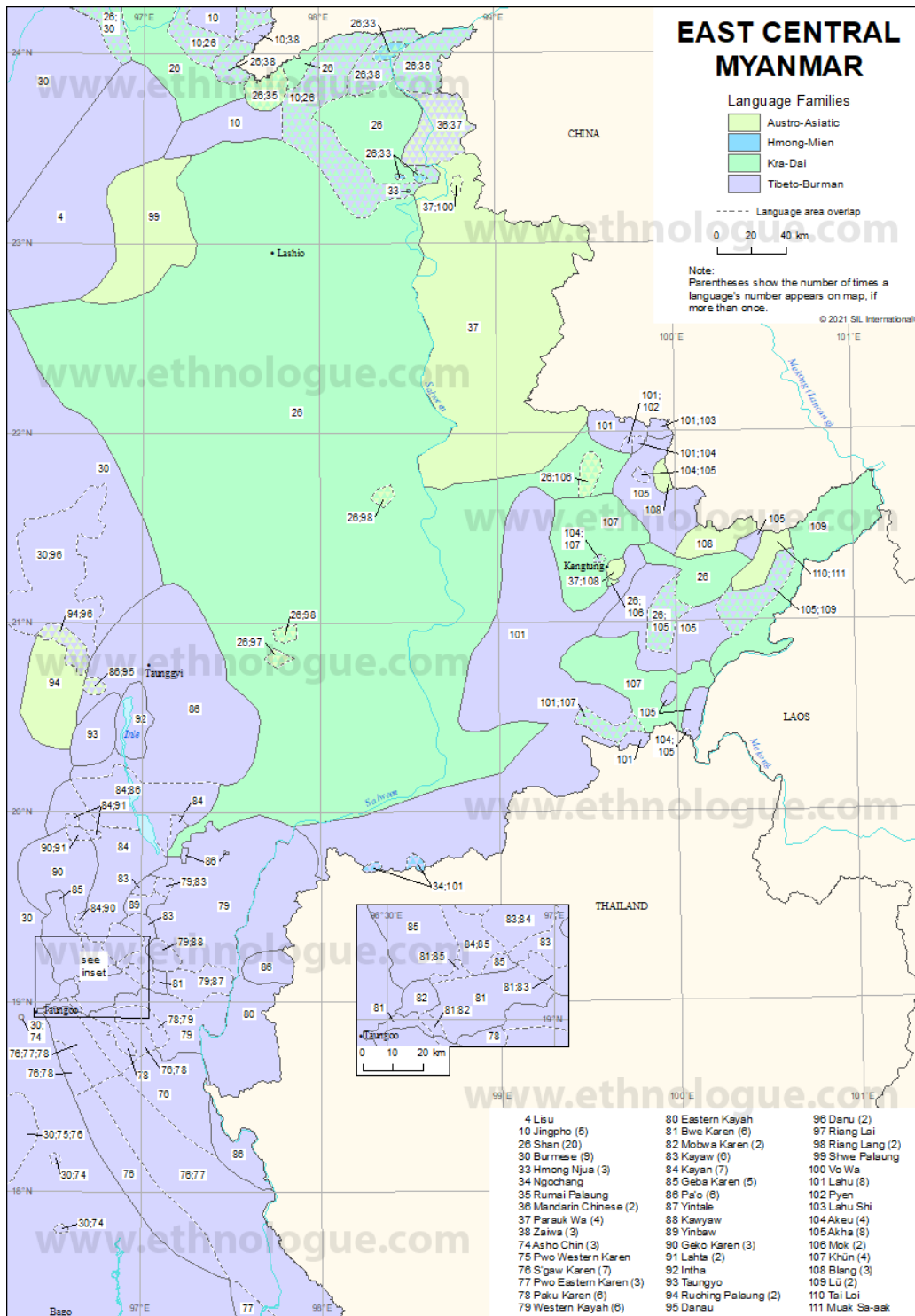


Figure 2. East Central Myanmar language map³

³ Source: <https://www.ethnologue.com>

The Karen people also have a significant presence in Thailand. Figure 3 shows that S'gaw Karen communities, identified as number 12, are present in four areas in western and northwestern Thailand, along with communities of other Tibeto-Burman languages.

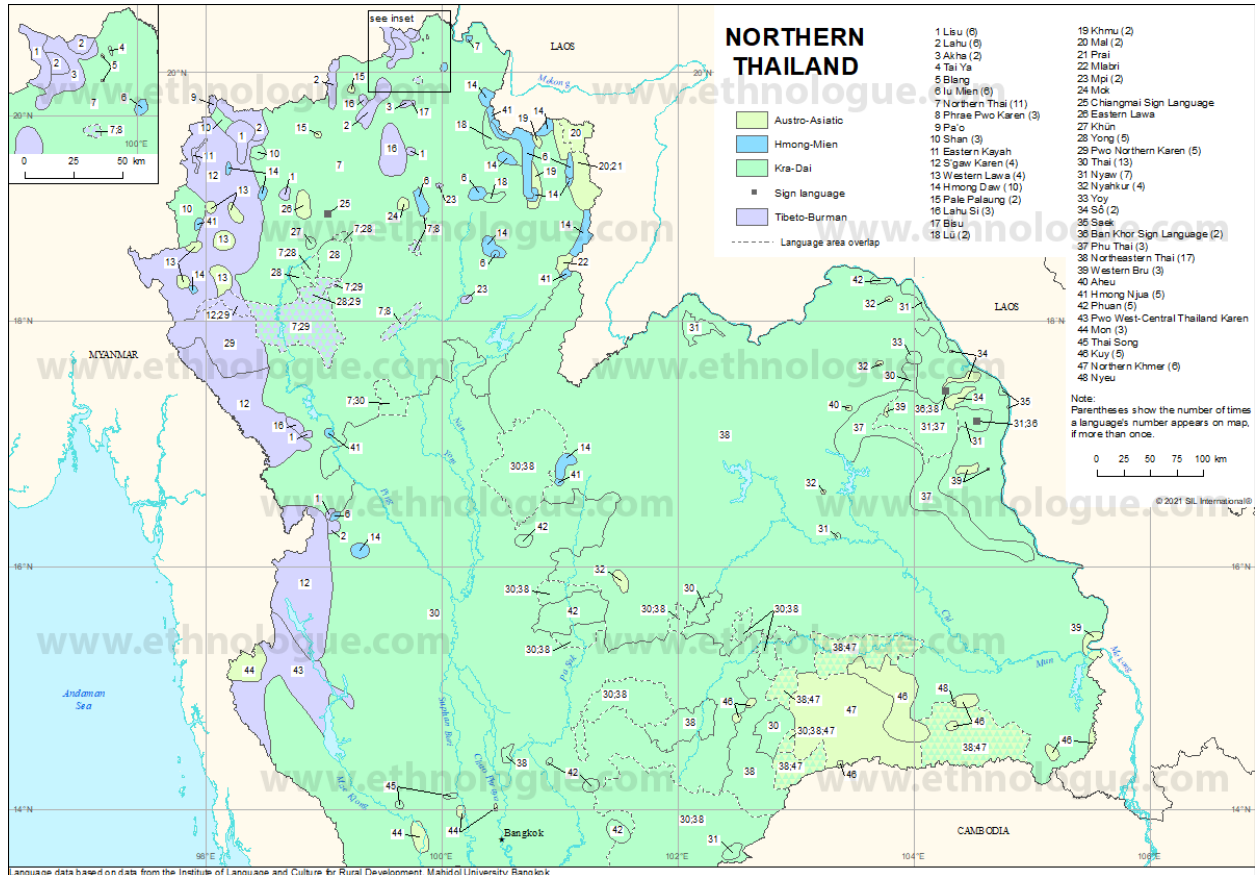


Figure 3. Northern Thailand language map⁴

1.3 Emigration of the Karen from Myanmar

Amidst warfare and unrest within Myanmar over the last several decades, many Karen, Chin, Kachin, and other ethnic peoples fled and continue to flee Myanmar. Many refugees from Myanmar flee first to Thailand, where they face an additional challenge beyond fleeing from their homeland; Burmese refugees on the border are not always recognized as having official refugee status, which limits the aid

⁴ Source: <https://www.ethnologue.com>

and support that they receive (Green et. al 2008). The International Organization for Migration (2022) notes that most of the refugees in Thailand are from Myanmar. The flight of the refugees into Thailand meant that they left not only their homes and way of livelihood, but they also often left family members still living in Myanmar.

The Thailand branch of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR Thailand MCO 2022) estimates that 84 percent of the 91,331 refugees in Thailand are of Karen ethnicity, distributed among the following nine refugee camps in western Thailand: Ban Mai Nai Soi, Ban Mae Surin, Mae La Oon, Mae Ra Ma Luang, Mae La, Umpiem, Nu Po, Ban Don Yang, and Tham Hin. After tumultuous events within Myanmar in February of 2021, it is estimated that there are new displacements of 440,000 people in Myanmar, including significantly-impacted Kayin and Kayah regions (United Nations 2022). The conditions in the refugee camps are difficult, including sicknesses resulting from contaminated drinking water from streams and lack of electricity or phone service in some of the isolated camps; the movement of those within the camp is restricted, under risk of possible arrest, which makes employment and education opportunities severely limited (Handicap International n.d.).

It is a complex process to move to another country from the refugee camps in Thailand. Not everyone has the opportunity to leave the refugee camp. When refugees from the Thailand refugee camps do transition to another country, many are resettled in the United States; they have been accepted in a number of other countries as well, including but not limited to Canada, Japan, Czech Republic, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, and the United Kingdom (International Organization for Migration 2022). However, for many, the thought of leaving the refugee camp is often accompanied by fearful uncertainties of the unknown, such as where they will be placed and whether leaving the camp will entail possible separation from family members remaining in the camp (Harkins 2012).

Once a refugee is approved for admission into the United States, resettlement agencies evaluate the records of each case from the resettlement centers of the U.S. Department of State in other countries (U.S. Department of State n.d.). Refugees are assigned to a specific center; this center evaluates the best resettlement location in the United States in light of various factors, including employment, whether the

refugee has existing family in the United States, and the resources available in various United States communities (U.S. Department of State n.d.).

Between 2002 and 2011, 88,348 of the total 515,350 refugees that came to the United States were originally from Myanmar (Vang & Trieu 2014). According to the Colorado Refugee Services Program in the Colorado Department of Human Services (2020), 2,397 refugees with Myanmar as their country of origin arrived in Colorado between 2002 and 2011, including secondary migrants.⁵ Between 2018 and 2020, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Myanmar is the second highest country of nationality for refugee arrivals in the United States, with 3,525 in 2018, 4,928 in 2019, and 2,112 in 2020, comprising 35 percent, 43 percent, and 24.2 percent of the total refugee arrivals to the United States each year, respectively (Baugh 2022). Myanmar appears as the top country of origin of refugee arrivals between 2011 and 2020, at over 100,000 (Baugh 2022).

According to information I obtained through a data request made to the Colorado Refugee Services Program, the total number of individuals resettled in Colorado between October 1, 2010 and March 31, 2022 who have S'gaw Karen or Pwo Karen as their primary language is 305; 99 percent of that group has an address reported as being within the metro area of Denver, Colorado, at the time of enrollment into the Colorado Refugee Services Program. I have compiled Table 1 from information obtained from the data requested from the Colorado Refugee Services Program, where I have highlighted the "Karen" entries in bold.

⁵ Colorado Department of Human Services (2022) refers to secondary migrants as those refugees who had another state as their initial place of resettlement before their arrival in Colorado.

Table 1. Colorado Burmese refugee admissions

Language reported as primary by Burmese individuals resettled in Colorado between October 1, 2010 and March 31, 2022	Number of individuals
Rohingya	578
S’gaw and Pwo Karen	305
Karen	125
Chin	193
Kachin	103
Karenni	90
Kayah	78
Chin Mindat	46
Lai	31
Mara	29
Mon	24
Burmese	672
Other Minor Groups	1,453

The Colorado Refugee Services Program also provided an age breakdown of Burmese refugees in Colorado in response to my data request. This information is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Age breakdown for Colorado Burmese refugee admissions

Age range breakdown for the 305 individuals resettled in Colorado between October 1, 2010 and March 31, 2022 whose primary language was reported as S’gaw Karen or Pwo Karen	Number of individuals
<= 12 years old	100
13-18 years old	44
19-59 years old	151
60+ years old	10

Refugees’ challenges by no means cease upon arrival in the United States. Minimal knowledge of English serves as a challenge for many adult refugees, due to the barriers it creates in regards to jobs, education, and resources; youth are challenged with adjustments to the new culture (Vang & Trieu 2014). Vang & Trieu (2014) recognize the need for increased support for young refugees as they adapt to the American culture; they point out how conflict results between generations, due to the differing cross cultural acclimation experiences for differing age ranges. They also reference the “negotiation of

identities” involved when refugees resettle; they note how essential it is that the adult refugees receive a sufficient amount of English as a second language training upon their initial arrival to the United States (Vang & Trieu 2014: 11).

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The Karen people's inspiring stories of resilience often get lost, since they are busy adjusting to, navigating, and surviving in a completely foreign country and do not have the leisure to sit around and tell their stories. Typically, native-born Americans today have not needed to suddenly flee from their homeland to a foreign land and culture due to conflict. Rather, the refugee experience is foreign to most Americans. Majority English-speaking Americans ought to have the opportunity to hear the story of Karen refugees to assist in bridging the gap between the majority host culture group and minority group, so that immigrants feel less emphasis is placed on their status as a *minority*.

When refugees have the opportunity to share their stories, it assists in creating a framework for cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. Vang & Trieu (2014) share that many Americans are unfamiliar with the contexts and stories of refugees, and an increased knowledge about this group is essential for cultivating a framework for success for future generations. The study in this thesis is significant because it provides a means by which six Karen women can share their stories; it also provides an emic perspective into their experience as Karen refugees living or growing up within a foreign culture in the United States. In this chapter, I discuss sociolinguistic interviews as the basis of my approach, including topics and examples of questions in the interviews. I also provide both an introduction to the narrators and my approach to analyzing the data.

2.1 Data Collection

As my method for data collection, I have gathered six case studies of Karen women using open-ended sociolinguistic interviews. Each of the women interviewed either lives in Colorado or previously has lived in Colorado for several years. Participants were selected through contacts and friends of

contacts. I sought to include women with a variety of life experiences, including some who are unmarried without children and some who are married with children. Furthermore, the narrators have a variety of experiences in relation to their age at arrival in the United States. Each interview, aside from the consent process, did not exceed ninety minutes. One interview included the presence of an interpreter, who was the narrator's son. (The timing markers used in the direct quotes involving the interview where the interpreter is present start with the English interpretation, unless it is necessary to include my prompt or question.) One interview was conducted in February 2021, and the other five were conducted between January and April 2022.⁶

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews had to be conducted virtually. The February 2021 interview was conducted through a Facebook call; all other interviews were conducted using Zoom. The narrator who was interviewed in February 2021 was living in another state at the time of the interview but had lived for several years in Colorado as a teenager.

My methodology applies usage of the sociolinguistic open-ended qualitative interview technique, which has a variety of benefits. When applied correctly, the sociolinguistic interview has potential to reverse the power differential often subconsciously attributed to the interviewer, as the interviewer takes on the role of the learner (Labov 1981). In this way, the interviewer empowers the interviewee by facilitating a platform for the interviewee to guide the interview according to what information the interviewee chooses to share (Labov 1981). In consideration of the refugees' background, where they have encountered hardship due to power structures throughout their journeys, the open-ended interview is an appropriate interview method for facilitating an environment which gives the interviewees more control over what they would like to share. With the open-ended interview, therefore, the flow of conversational topics varies for each narrator. Additionally, avoiding directness is encouraged as a cultural consideration within the Karen community (Karen Organization of Minnesota 2017). The open-

⁶ All interviews were conducted with the approval of the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Dakota, project number IRB-202107-008.

ended interview method appears to be a better method culturally within the Karen community, in contrast to the directness of a questionnaire, where the same list of questions is asked of each participant.

My goal of studying Karen language use in Colorado by conducting sociolinguistic interviews with six Karen narrators aligns with two of the goals outlined by Labov (1981: 8): “to elicit narratives of personal experience, where community norms and styles of personal interaction are most plainly revealed...” and “to trace the patterns of communication among members of the neighborhood, and establish the position of the speaker in the communication network.” “Community” rather than “neighborhood” is a more fitting description in my research, since the narrators I interviewed do not necessarily live within the same neighborhood; however, they all participate within the broader Karen community in Colorado. While the interviewer initiates topics and questions in the interview as a tool to meet goals, those topics remain fluid, so that the conversation ultimately follows the narrator’s interests (Labov 1981). In doing so, the interviewer can utilize the technique of recognizing the narrator’s enthusiasm associated with certain topics and encourage the narrator to expound on those topics. Another advantage of sociolinguistic interviewing is that it both promotes natural conversation and an opportunity for the interviewee to voice what is considered important to herself and possibly also important to the broader Karen community (Schilling 2013). In the narratives that follow, several narrators discuss the younger generation’s use of the Karen and English languages, indicating that to be a potentially important topic within the Karen community.

As part of the interview process, I posed general questions related to personal history of life in Colorado; family background and language use; language use in various spheres; community demographics, events, and language use; generational differences; language attitudes; languages in writing form; and future goals of the narrator. Ballena (2021) notes that yes-no, leading, and multiple choice questions are among the most unproductive interview questions, with the exception of the presence of yes-no questions within legal or judicial contexts. Though questions prompting a yes or no answer could not be completely avoided, due in part to a need for clarification, I actively used open-ended “what” and “how” questions (Ballena 2021).

When the interviewer asks leading questions, it can subconsciously place an idea into the interviewee's mind of how the interviewee is expected to respond (Ballena 2021). This may compromise the legitimacy of the interviewee's response. I attempted as best as possible to avoid leading questions by constructing my questions objectively, which allows the interviewee's response to be as un-influenced as possible. The following are examples of the types of questions asked of the narrators, although the list is not exhaustive, and not all questions were asked of all the narrators:

- How do you like being multilingual?
- How do children like learning the language?
- What languages do you speak at church or at home?
- How old were you when you came to the United States?
- How do you feel when you are talking to somebody who is not a native Karen speaker, and you find out that they know your language?
- How does the younger generation interact at church?
- How was it for you when you first arrived?
- What language do you use if you go to the store?
- What language do you read or write in?
- What language do you prefer to use in Colorado?
- How was language use for you in school?
- What languages do the people that you work with speak?
- Can you think of any S'gaw Karen who are different in how they use English and Karen, compared to how you use English and Karen?
- How do the Karen people feel about using their language in Colorado?
- With your future goals and what you want to head toward, how do you view language as you head toward that?
- How much of the community that you have worked in is from different backgrounds ethnically?

Examples of statements used as prompts are as follows:

- Tell me about what languages you use in your everyday life.

- You mentioned your involvement in church; tell me a little more about what language your church has in the service or Bible studies.

Summaries of the interview responses have been transcribed for each interview, with the assistance of Wondershare Filmora software when identifying word-for-word quotations. As needed, I utilized the 0.5x and 0.25x speed feature in Filmora to slow the recording in order to understand portions of the recordings that were difficult to decipher. The summaries have been integrated into personal narrative stories, which I have analyzed by identifying dominant themes occurring amongst two or more narrators. In order to verify my understanding of the data and to avoid any misrepresentations I may have unintentionally portrayed, I contacted each narrator and provided them with the draft of their own story. I asked the narrators to read it and let me know after a few days if there was anything they wanted me to change or if there was anything I wrote incorrectly in the narratives. I did not hear back from two of the six narrators. Two of the narrators did not specify any changes to be made. One mentioned a minor addition, while I received feedback from the son (who served as translator during the interview) of a different narrator about a spelling adjustment. I completed both the addition and the spelling adjustment.

In the word-for-word quotations, I eliminated filler words “um” and “uh.” Removal of such fillers as “ums” has become quite commonplace among researchers providing verbatim quotations, as it supplements readability and minimizes distraction from the value and impact of the narrators’ point (Corden & Sainsbury 2006).

While I refer to the country name as Myanmar in this thesis, in order to preserve the authenticity of the interviewees’ word choice, I have used the country name that was used by the narrators within the narratives. Also, both *S’gaw* and *Sheraw / Shaw* Karen are referred to within the narrations, and they are the same language; the narrators vary regarding who uses the terms *Sheraw / Shaw* Karen instead of the term *S’gaw* Karen. While I reference *S’gaw* Karen as the default term in this thesis, within the narratives, I have used the term referenced by the narrator. Please see Appendix for more information on the distinction between *S’gaw*, *Sheraw*, and *Shaw*.

2.2 Narrators

In this section, I provide a brief introduction to the six Karen women who are the narrators. I have included both their first and last names in this section, though I will refer to them by their first names in the remainder of the thesis, since that represents the informality of the interview process.

Maria Mu is 24 years old, unmarried, and lives at home with her family. She arrived in the United States at age 16. She is very involved with her church in the Denver, Colorado metro area, and she operates a home care and day care business with her mother.

Mulue Karr arrived in the United States when she was 19 years old and has been living in the United States for approximately 15 years. She has a son, and her husband is Kachin. She works as a community organizer within the Karen and Karenni community in Colorado, and she owns a small business outside of her job. Mulue uses the plural words “we” and “our” in the interview, so I use these pronouns in her narrative.

Lah Sah Wah is a community health navigator in Denver, Colorado and is pursuing her master’s degree in social work. She is unmarried, but does not live in her parents’ home, though she visits often. She is the youngest of her siblings and has two older brothers. She had been in the United States for approximately 13 years at the time of the interview.

Mi See arrived in the United States at the age of 45 in 2010. When she first arrived, she attended school in the evenings after work in Denver, Colorado for six years. She has been working at a nursing home for over ten years. Her son was present as an interpreter during her interview.

Nau Naw Lynn was engaged to be married at the time of the February 2021 interview, so the individual I reference as her fiancé became her husband during this thesis project. Thus, her last name became “Lynn” after the interview. She was born in Myanmar and arrived in the United States when she was eleven years old. Her parents live in Colorado, and as of the interview, she was living in another state, working at a hospital. She did not have any children at the time of the interview.

Elvina Htoo pursued her master’s degree and works as an English language teacher and instructional coach at Placebridge Academy. She arrived in the United States in 2008, and she is the oldest of her two sisters; she married a man whose parents are Korean. She has a daughter and a son.

Table 3 identifies the narrators' language repertoires.

Table 3. Narrators' language repertoires

	Maria Mu	Mulue Karr	Lah Say Wah	Mi See	Nau Naw Lynn	Elvina Htoo
Languages Spoken	Shaw Karen, Burmese, English, Thai	S'gaw Karen, Pwo Karen, Burmese, English, Thai	S'gaw Karen, English, Thai, Burmese	Shaw Karen, English, Burmese	S'gaw Karen, English, some Burmese	Shaw Karen, Burmese, English, some Thai, some Korean, some Spanish, some Pashto

2.3 Data Analysis Approach

I use multiple theories to explore themes within the data. For example, I use the economic concept of utility as developed by Coulmas (2013) to partially explain the occurrence of language shift amongst the younger generation. I also use Karan's (2011) Perceived Benefit Model to explain Karen speakers' development of multiple identities.

When analyzing these narratives, it is important to be aware of the fact that I am an outsider. Lalljee (1987) notes that outside observers tend to interpret actions or choices in terms of a personal motivation of the actor, rather than a situational motivation; conversely, the speakers themselves typically attribute their own actions to a situational motivation, rather than a personal motivation. Lalljee (1987) points out that outside observers should recognize that they are not aware of the full context, and that the actor may have made different choices in a different situation that the observer did not observe; this indicates that the actor's actions were situational rather than personal. It is important to note that situational and personal motivations cannot always be easily distinguished, particularly from an etic perspective; thus, as I analyze the data, I support my claims from the speakers' own words, whenever possible.

CHAPTER 3

NARRATIVE STORIES

In this chapter, I present the individual narratives, based on the most relevant information from the interviews. This includes information related to language use and the topics listed in Section 2.1 of this thesis. Other information included from the interviews are key points that seemed important to the narrator and information the narrators shared about their community involvement, employment, education, church, and family.

3.1 Maria Mu: Multilingual Altruist and Open-hearted Servant of the Karen Community

Maria is 24 years old and lived in a refugee camp in Thailand for fifteen years. Having applied to multiple countries, she came with her family to the United States when she was 16. She has been living in Colorado for nine years together with her family (00:01:06). Maria still has family members in Burma; some of her mother's relatives are also in the United States, including her mother's brother, who was here for two years prior to Maria's arrival. While everything was going well as of the time of the interview, she briefly commented about the difficulty posed by the language and culture barrier upon their arrival to the U.S..

Maria has developed a close connection with her community. Maria mentioned that she is a Baptist Christian and is connected with her community through her involvement with church every Sunday. At the same time, she volunteers within the community. Once Maria learned to communicate in English, she was able to help community members who did not speak English. Her volunteer work in the community includes helping community members with navigating the city, interpreting mail, or interpreting their

children's notes from school. Her mother is also involved with helping the community; their home has served as an open haven for community members who need help (00:05:02).

Maria speaks the "Sheraw"⁷ Karen language, which she understands to be the largest dialect in the Karen community. While Maria does not speak Pwo Karen, she has receptive bilingualism⁸ with Paku Karen; she is able to understand it, due to her grandmother's Paku Karen background. Maria additionally speaks a little Thai (usually at a Thai restaurant). Though she is not fluent in Burmese, she is able to speak Burmese to Chin or Karenni people. In regards to what languages Maria uses in her daily life, she stated:

And when I come home, like, we all speak Karen. But when I talk to my siblings, we speak English. But when I talk to my mom, or yeah, my, my parents, my auntie, or my relatives, we just speak Kar-, Karen (00:12:01).

She usually talks in English to her cousins who are younger than her and who grew up in Colorado, because her cousins (and also her younger siblings) are more comfortable with and find it easier to speak English; Maria talks in Karen with her cousins who are her age or older. At the same time, however, she still feels that, "Majority of the time, we just speak Karen" (00:12:46).

Maria operates a home care and day care business with her mother, in which they work with seniors and children; they jointly own the business with other individuals (00:21:59, 00:13:10). The owner needed her mother's help as a member of the Karen community, so he asked her mother to be a partner in the business. Maria joined her mother working there when the business started to grow (00:21:59). While the majority of the clients are Nepalese, she and her mother manage the Karen and Karenni clients (00:13:41). She works very closely with her mother at her job; she and her mother usually talk together in

⁷ Sheraw is an alternate pronunciation to S'gaw. Please see Appendix for more information. I have included the form of the word used in conversation on this topic.

⁸ Receptive bilingualism is when an individual hears a language in one language but responds back in a different language.

Karen, but with co-workers, they talk in English. They talk to their clients in English or Karen. They also interpret between English and Karen if they have to call a government agency for their clients (00:11:12).

The Shaw⁹ Karen community gathers every Sunday and has celebrations and traditions every year, including the Karen New Year (00:25:38). In regards to the traditions and celebrations, Maria said, “But I don’t usually get involved with those. Yeah, not even like Karen New Year’s. I will go sometimes, but like, not very very into it, you know?” (00:26:08). Instead, Maria is more involved at church, and song practice is one of the ways she serves and helps. “By practicing songs, we also get a chance to gather all the Karen and just hang out together like that” (00:26:29).

Describing how she got connected with the church, Maria said, “Yeah, so, the Karen people are like, majority of the Shaw Karen are Christians, Baptist Christians, so, wherever we go, we just wanna be connected with church” (00:27:10). Maria continued:

We just like, we joined the church right after we lived here. It was, it was quick.

Everyone, it’s everyone thing. Like, when we lived in Thailand, my mom was so concerning about like, ‘If we go there, are we going to be connected to any church?’ or, ‘Do they have church?’ or stuff like that, right? My mom has like many concerns about her religion, but by the time we got here, it was like quick. Yeah, it was just quick to be a part of the church (00:27:38).

She perceives the community as a small community, where “everyone knows everyone” (00:28:24).

According to Maria, her church is approximately eighty people; everyone in her church is Karen, and Karen is the predominant language that is used at church during the service and in Bible studies. However, when Maria teaches the younger children between the ages of three and twelve in Sunday school, she mixes both the English and Karen languages (half and half), so that the children pay attention more. They otherwise seem to get bored easily and not understand as well, especially if she is talking in

⁹ Shaw is an alternate pronunciation of S’gaw. Please see Appendix for more information. I have included the form of the word used in conversation on this topic.

Karen and uses larger words. Maria noted that when she uses both Karen and English, it increases both their attention and understanding (00:15:50).

Maria mentioned that sometimes the Karen youth will go to college, but due to difficulties, they will leave college after a couple of years (00:19:22). When Maria attended the community college, she had some Karen classmates. They were able to coordinate classes together one time, but once she transferred to university, she never had Karen classmates. At the university, Maria studied for her bachelor's in psychology after switching from nursing; she mentioned that her classes with her classmates and the teachers helped her become more opened-minded. The only language used in school was English. Maria shared that the debates and discussions in school were quite difficult. She mentioned that she had classmates who wrote in formal academic style, and because it was difficult for her to understand, it lowered her self-esteem when she wrote or spoke (00:17:27).

Maria is the oldest among her four siblings, who are about two to three years apart in age. Her youngest sister is fifteen years old. Maria has mixed feelings about her position as the oldest. On one hand, she likes it and feels blessed that her parents and family members trust her with making big decisions. Such big decisions may include buying a house, making arrangements at the cemetery when her grandmother passed away, or paying bills. However, on the other hand, she views it as overwhelming at times. Maria said:

Sometimes like, when your parents go to the hospital, they want you to be there, to, to, understand like what is going on with them, and to, yeah, the diagnosis, and if they have the treatment, or stuff like that. They want *you* to help them choose (00:31:27).

While overwhelming sometimes, she commented that it also helps her to grow faster and gain experience in various areas.

While sharing that she has friends from diverse backgrounds, including Karen, American, and Mexican, Maria noted a few of the differences between the Karen and American cultures. Maria's Karen friends who are her age have two or three children of their own, and Maria invites them over so she can talk with her friends as they play with the children. Conversely, Maria's American friends do not have children yet. Though it is completely normal in Karen culture that Maria lives with her parents since she

is not yet married, Maria hesitates inviting her American friends over. She feels embarrassed to invite them, since they may view the fact that she lives with her parents differently than her Karen community does. “Yeah, sometimes it’s just hard to grow up in two different cultures. Which is, it’s good too, because I understand, you know, both perspective on different, how do I say that, different like, cultures maybe” (00:36:09).

Maria also shared about her identity amidst integrating within a different culture.

Back in high school like, I would have friends who came from like, China, or those bigger countries, Russia or-. And me, on the other hand, like, people ask me, ‘Where are you from?’ I’ll tell them, ‘Thailand.’ And they will say that, “Oh, is that, do you live clo-, close by the ocean, the beach?” You know, those paradise places? I’m like, ‘Wh -?’ I-, It’s just-, I don’t know, it’s just so hard. I wanna tell people I’m from there, but I, I wasn’t there. I’ve never been there, you know? Sometimes you just wanna be like, you know, the same level as them, I don’t know, i- when you’re a teenager-, like the same or something. Yeah, you wanna be cool, you wanna be, you know, belong to the group that you are in. I wa-, I used to be so shy of telling people that I grow up in refugee camp back then. Because sometimes, when you tell them ‘I’m from refugee camp,’ and they don’t know what that is. ‘What is that?’ And you have to explain, like, ‘My country has war’ and you know, ‘I’m a stateless.’ And you have to explain everything (00:57:03).

The struggle with living in two cultures carries over into the use of language. Maria noted that it is easier to speak in Karen, since she is more fluent in Karen. However, problems sometimes arise when she speaks Karen to Karen speakers who also know English:

To me, like, I, sometimes, I feel like I’m losing both languages. I’m, I’m losing like both vocabularies from both languages. Because sometimes, you will talk to the Karen people, the Karen person, right? But English, English words wants to come out too. You know what I mean? When you talk to, English speaker, your Karen language will

come out too. I don't know, sometimes, it's just hard to find the right word, for both languages (00:38:30).

Though Maria is strongly fluent in Karen, English is the language that she typically reads, writes, and texts in. However, she sometimes reads the books they have that are written in Karen. She said, "I don't like reading a lot, but I, I'm reading English, just because I was forced from school, or, you know? [Laugh]. But, [Laugh] yeah. Or anything that, pass, to pass the, the course or something like that" (00:39:49). At church, the language of the Bible is Karen.

From Maria's perspective, knowing multiple languages is a very helpful skill to have, since Karen interpreters are always needed. This makes it easy to find employment, and professionals contact Maria about job positions when they find out that she speaks both Karen and English; they call her immediately, despite not seeing her resume first.

I used to think that coming here as a, as a teenager is like a curse to me, because I don't speak a word, and I wish I could come here when I was like, little, you know? But, later on, I realize that, how living in the refugee camp, I was, in the refugee camp, we, we only speak Karen, so I was able to like, get all the Karen language there, and then after that, I came here. So, yes, I used to, when I first came here, I didn't speak English, so I used to think like, I should have come, come here a little bit early, so I can, you know, I don't feel embarrassed when I am a teenager (00:43:35).

Maria concludes this thought by stating how no one knows God's plans.

In regards to how the younger generation interacts in church, from what Maria has noticed, they communicate with each other in English, but they speak to their parents or the elderly in the church in Karen (00:47:27). According to Maria, "Yeah, I feel like, that, the church also helps children to understand, you know, just learn Karen..." (00:48:05). Maria asserted that it is nice how they can learn about God's words in Scripture "...in their own language..." (00:48:30).

Some of Maria's students state that they cannot learn the Karen language; they say how difficult it is to learn it. Maria shared that while their speaking is okay, reading and writing is very difficult for them. However, Maria excitedly noted:

But they're, they're *getting* there! The, the, the more time they spend learning the Karen language, the better they're getting. So, I feel like, they are just say that it is how hard, when they just started, but after a, awhile, they master the language very well (00:45:31).

Maria's mother is involved with starting a program for the Karen children who were either born here or who grew up here, she noted. The Karen people are collaborating on how they will teach the children to learn the language in the future. It has not been started publicly yet, but they have started a portion of the program in a home to teach the children Karen.

Maria sees the church as integral to maintaining community. She noted, "And the other thing I like about, like, going to church, is that you get to see people, your people, like every week, you know?" (00:48:38). She also said, "It's a good place to see your people, because when you go to work or school, you don't see your people; you are not surrounded by your people..." (00:48:53).

More generally, Maria noted that the Karen community did not come here by choice; the majority of the parents additionally did not have the chance to learn English (00:50:48). Because the majority of the parents do not know any English, the community always needs help with communication because of the language barrier; interpreters are needed who can understand the culture (00:50:48). Moreover, Shaw Karen interpreters are needed more than Pwo interpreters. While some organizations offer English classes, the assistance that those classes provide is limited in terms of the spheres in which the parents communicate. For example, the classes are helpful in their communication with teachers, but Maria does not see that they are significantly helpful in the realms of communication in legal situations or hospital settings. She clarified specifically, that the need is for a Shaw Karen interpreter as opposed to a Pwo interpreter, since Pwo Karen can understand Shaw Karen, but Shaw Karen cannot speak Pwo Karen.

In regards to whether the parents bring an interpreter to parent teacher conferences, Maria noted that sometimes an interpreter is available through the school. However, the parents are not accustomed to parent teacher conferences, since it is different than schools "back home;" because of this, the parents do not care about the conferences, and they do not prioritize time for the conferences (00:54:34). In addition, children do not want their parents to come to the school, since the children feel that their parents will not

understand, due to the language and culture barrier. Maria spoke from personal experience; she would share with her parents about parent teacher conferences but would discourage them from coming.

Regarding literacy in the Shaw Karen community, Maria thinks that reading is done mostly in Karen. Notes from school for the parents must be translated before being read to the Karen community. Maria noted that documents in the Karen language would be immensely helpful, since the parents do not understand how to read in English. Otherwise, someone must come to the Karen family's house to read and translate the letter. Maria recognizes the needs within the Karen community, and desires to help the community by making others aware of those needs.

Maria is a multilingual altruist and open-hearted servant of the Karen community. Her service is admirable as she abundantly pours her energies into helping the community. While Maria used to feel as though it was a curse to be born in a refugee camp, she noted that:

...the older I get, I realize that being born in refugee camp is not a curse. It's a blessing. Where we came from, it's not something bad. It's, everything happens when the time is right. Yeah. Every good things happen when the time is right (00:56:32).

Considering the hardships she encountered, Maria's hopeful perspective and her drive to use what she has learned to serve others is an inspiration. Her speech is filled with grace rather than bitterness despite her past hardships, evidencing her inner strength. Instead of dwelling upon the weight of the hardships she has encountered, she has risen above the hardships in ways that she can pour her energies into serving and helping Colorado's Karen community; this demonstrates the inspiring courage and selfless demeanor within her.

3.2 Mulue Karr: Championing Education to Encourage Better Opportunities for the Karen People

Mulue has lived in Colorado since 2007, when she came to the United States as a Karen refugee at 19 years of age (00:00:22, 00:17:39). She does not have any siblings in Colorado, but she has two sisters who are both in Thailand (00:22:33). Mulue also has two brothers who live in the United States. She is

married and has a son; Mulue met her husband in Thailand. While she came in 2007, he arrived in the United States five years prior to 2022, which would be approximately 2017 (00:07:32).

Mulue studied business in college, which she enjoyed, although her current job working in the community is not related to business (00:17:47). She does, however, hope that she can build her own business later on. Mulue has her esthetician license; she does home facials for friends, and she has a small business on the side, outside of her job (00:18:14).

Mulue shared about what it was like when she first arrived in the United States:

This was hard, I think, because that time it's like we are the pioneer groups of refugee came to Colorado in 2007. Not many people, many refugee in the Colorado...maybe less than ten family live in the Colorado in 2007. Yeah, the refugee group came here in 2007. It's hard because there is no, only a few organization, like, refugee resettlement center, those thing, and a lot of refugee coming each month, and they don't has enough resource...compared to right now. Now they has a lot of resource. At that time, you are already need to find a way to navigate that on your own, but right now there is resources everywhere, you can go everywhere to ask for help looking for something. It's not like when we first came in 2007 (00:08:12).

Mulue went on to say that there are several more non-profit organizations assisting refugees as of the time of the interview (2022) than there were in 2007, and that people have more of an understanding about refugees in 2022. In contrast to the fact that Mulue did not know anyone or have any relatives in Colorado when she came, the refugees who came later than her already had family here when they arrived (00:09:19).

Regarding her linguistic heritage, Mulue's mother's language background was Pwo Karen, while her father's is S'gaw Karen; Mulue speaks both Pwo Karen and S'gaw Karen (00:21:33). As a child, Mulue learned the two Karen languages first, then Burmese, Thai, and English. Mulue thinks that she was perhaps around ten years old when she learned Burmese (00:24:07). She says regarding Thai, "It is much harder because we don't use it" (00:25:09). Frequently: "...I can still understand all the Thais. I cannot read like before. You know, I cannot speak fluent like before" (00:25:09). While Mulue mostly speaks in

Karen, she speaks Burmese to her husband, and she speaks Burmese, Karen, and English to her son. Mulue considers it good to be multilingual, because she is able to speak to people from more than one ethnic group. She explained:

I can relate to the people, like, if I s- to someone who speak Pwo Karen, if I speak the same language, they feel more connect to me. Yeah, also, with the Burmese or with the S'gaw, S'gaw Karen, if you speak the language, you can feel the connection. People feel more comfortable with you when you speak their language, I think (00:26:20).

Although she is multilingual, Mulue reads in English, since she only had the opportunity to go to school through fourth grade when she was younger (00:20:43). In comparison, Mulue had the opportunity to learn English in Colorado, so she is able to read better in English. She concluded by saying, “But I can spe-, I can read, not fluent, like English is more easier for me, [Pause], or Karen” (00:21:19).

Mulue’s knowledge of English was acquired with dedication and hard work. When she came to the United States, she spoke “zero English” (00:16:00). She worked during the day time and went to an ESL (English as a Second Language) class at night. Then, she took the GED and went to college, so her ability to use English slowly got better. Mulue said:

It’s not very easy because even now, we speak, at home, we speak our own language. Our English is not good enough. We should be better able to speak better. Because at, every day at home we speak our language, we work with the cl-, family, we speak our own language. Every day, speak Karen, Burmese, Karen, Burmese. [Laugh] (00:16:40).

An interesting mix of languages is used in Mulue’s home. While Mulue’s son mostly responds in English when he is spoken to, Burmese is the language that Mulue and her husband use to communicate with each other. Mulue speaks Karen, and her husband speaks Kachin, but they both understand Burmese (00:07:03). Mulue estimated that the degree to which she speaks English is, “...50/50, but at home only, we only speak our own language, and also, my son speak, he in English too, both English and Burmese and Karen” (00:17:12).

Mulue and her family use English with co-workers or other people outside of the home. However, if they know that someone in their community does not speak English and that it would be “weird” to use English to speak with them, they will only speak Karen (00:17:32). When Mulue goes to the store, she usually uses English, but if she meets Karen people at the store, she will speak with them in Karen; if she meets Burmese people at the store, she will speak with them in Burmese. If people at the store speak English, she will use English (00:23:25).

Most of Mulue’s friends who are her age (34) speak in Karen (00:48:06, 00:48:36). She notes that while some Karen use English with their children, many speak Karen:

I think some, like some people will be speak more Karen, and some people... if they have better education, they will speak with their kid more in English, because the kid speak English. But some family they are, only speak in Karen for their kid. Its depend, each family will different, but mostly, the family will try to speak with their kid in Karen. We would like to preserve our culture, our language, but it is hard, especially with the kid (00:46:41).

Mulue elaborated:

Mostly like my age or a little bit younger than my age, we will only speak mostly Karen. We don’t speak English. Unless we go out in the communit-, have to communicate outside people. If you are at home, meet with Karen people we only speak Karen, don’t speak English with each other (00:48:06).

Regarding employment, Mulue used to work in a mental health and medical clinic. Then two years ago, she learned of an opportunity at a non-profit organization to help parents as they interact with the education system; she wanted to experience what it is like to work in the education field, in a role which she saw filled a definite need (00:10:58). Since then, Mulue has been working as a community organizer at that non-profit organization for the last two years (00:00:38). Mulue enjoys her current job, because she has the opportunity to be involved with helping the Burmese, Karen, and Karenni community in Colorado (00:01:05). Her organization helps guide parents in how to support their children with school and

homework, and how to navigate the school system. Mulue noted her average workday in what she does helping the community:

And, and our, we don't speak language, the language is the barrier, so, we work with the family if they need any help related to their children school. We come with them at the school, help them navigate the school system, and also support them with other thing, like general knowledge, mental health, or financial education, law, anything we need in the community (00:01:55).

Mulue encourages families regarding the importance of taking advantage of educational opportunities in Colorado, which has a different educational system than the refugee camp (00:12:20). She has observed from her job that many students drop out of high school; then, they work in a meat factory or another factory, since they do not have a good education and cannot find another job (00:12:57). In regards to why they drop out, Mulue said:

There is many reason. Some reason is a bully at school, and the other, they are not-, because they are, it's not their own language, it's hard for them to, for them to master the, the language and the subject, and they dis-encourage. And they drop out in school. Also because the family, there not some stability, because the, with them, they having issue, paying for rent, paying for food, those thing, or so encouraging the children want to work and drop out from school, there is many reason (00:13:45).

Mulue recognizes the importance of education for getting a good job:

But we live here, we mean, even you don't, you will be easier to get a job here even you don't speak the English, w- compared to refugee camp, but...right now, maybe you are still young, you will be able to work, and that's hard work, right? But in the future, if you don't have education, if something happen, you are not able to get a, a job—like, well-paid job. You can find a job but not well-paid job... (00:15:09).

Mulue guides those with whom she works with in wisdom regarding the long-term benefits of pursuing education.

Karen and Burmese are the main languages that Mulue uses in this role; Burmese is the language she says she needs to use with other ethnic groups, such as Burmese, Chin, or Karenni, since they do not speak Karen (00:03:03). Mulue shared, “So, like all the community, like, we have Karen, the main language we use is Karen, Burmese, Karenni, and some Chin. But those, some family, they are able to speak Burmese, some family they don’t...” (00:03:52). Mulue does not speak with any of them in English. She explained:

Our family, they’re the people in our community, we know our community, we only speak in our language—Burmese or Karen, not English. But for the younger, younger generation, like second generation here, who speak English, so, we do speak in English. But for the, the parent who first came here, we don’t speak English. We speak Karen (00:04:28).

Karen children growing up in the U. S. have a different grasp of the Karen language than the older generation. Mulue shared how they struggle with the language:

Right now, we are struggling with the kid. Kids growing up here, they especially who, born here, they don’t speak their own language. That’s, now we are, the community leader, they are finding ways to teach the children Karen language by having Sunday school, or having a different time, like some people will have class on Saturday to teach the children Karen language (00:05:07).

Expanding on this, Mulue said:

It’s hard for children, because every day, they d-, hear English. They go to school, they speak English. They stay home, they watch TV, they, they use social media, they hear only in English. So they are not-, they say, Karen language is difficult. It’s not easy for them. And they don’t want to learn it. [Laugh]. They say it’s really hard. E-, Even my son he only speak in English, he does not speak Karen or Burmese or any other language. Even, we talk to him in Karen and Burmese and Kachin—he still only talk in English (00:05:47).

Regarding whether her son understands what she says in Karen, Mulue noted:

He kind of understand, but he does not respond to you in Karen, he only respond to you in English. And most of children, they are very similar to my son, like, they only speak English. Even some family, parents who don't speak English at all, but their children only speak English, they don't understand Karen (00:06:36).

Being surrounded by many English speakers affects what languages the younger generation communicate in.

The use of language, then, is definitely affected by age:

...people who a little bit older, like parents, they will feel comfortable using Karen, because they don't speak English. But for the kid, they will feel comfortable using English. They are not comfortable using Karen—they don't understand, they don't speak. Yeah, and then the kid under eighteen, kid under eighteen, they will be more, they prefer speak English. Even with the mom, their sibling, they only speak English. Even the parent will talk to them in Karen or Burmese or Chin or Kachin. The kid, they will talk in English (00:27:04).

While Mulue indicated that more resources are available at the time of the interview than previously, she noted that there are still not many resources for the children to learn Karen; these materials are only available through the church, where the children are taught Karen (00:27:51). She added, "One day, our goal is, we would like to be Karen language available at school" (00:28:11), where the children can learn it. She shared that the state of Minnesota already has such a program, and she suggested that this is because they have several leaders and educated people there:

Like they has a lot of leader, sh-, Karen leader, they have strong organization over there. So they are able to and a lot, and more educated, and like Karen leader, more educated people, more educated, second generation compared to here. In Colorado, we see very few people, what to say, like, finishing college or those thing. It still, not a lot yet in Colorado. I think that also, a pattern. The day we have more people, more educated, and we'll be able to do something different (00:29:37).

Mulue noted that Christians and Buddhists do not always celebrate the same festivals within the community. While Karen Christians celebrate Christmas, Karen Buddhists celebrate wrist-tying days and the water festival. The event where Karen Christians and Karen Buddhists participate as a common community is New Year's.¹⁰ She said they do not have many community events. Mulue is a Christian—she was baptized and came to know Jesus in the refugee camp (00:36:00). Mulue mainly goes to one of the Karen churches in Colorado. Though she does not understand the language at her husband's Kachin church, she also sometimes attends there (00:19:13). At Mulue's Karen church, the sermon and the music is always in Karen. She noted that the children's Sunday school, which they have every Sunday, is also in Karen (00:19:54). Regarding how she got involved in the Karen church in Colorado, Mulue explained that when they first came to the United States, they had a church, but some people came from a different camp with their own pastor. As more people came to Colorado, they came from different refugee camps, so they formed their own group as a church; the groups were sometimes formed around whether they knew someone else from the same camp who used to be a pastor. Those groups gathered at home and eventually rented a place to gather for worship (00:37:47).

After discussing the cultural events, I asked Mulue, "...what are, like, whether it's maybe music or art or, or anything you can think of that, that makes you feel close to your culture as a Karen speaker?" (00:40:52). Mulue responded that it is music, food, and clothing, and that if someone wears Karen clothing, "...you know those people is Karen. You feel safe" (00:41:40). Mulue noted that for her personally, whether it be in the United States, Burma, or Thailand, "If I see someone wearing Karen clothes, I know that person is Karen. You ca-, you can feel safe. You don't feel like, 'Ah danger!' or something. Like, you know your people is there" (00:42:42).

Mulue said that in the Karen community in Colorado as of 2022, there are probably less than fifty older people who are over the age of sixty (00:44:36). When I asked how often new Karen people come to

¹⁰ The narrators come from a Christian background and did not reference many instances of interaction with Karen Buddhists.

the Denver area, she responded that new refugees are not getting sent to Colorado as of the time of the interview (00:45:09). The Karen community is very small and very close—if something happens to one family in the community, the whole community will be aware of it (00:43:44).

Mulue said she feels that both Karen and English are important languages, after she mentioned that she has aspirations to incorporate both Karen and English into her business. She shared:

Because here, and we live here, we needs to be able to speak English as well, and our language, we still need to be able to speak our, our language as well. I think both is important. We don't know our language, it will be harder to communicate with our parents or our grandparents or someone here who does not speak the language. If you only speak the, our language, it's also hard to go outside and navigate thing. I think those, both languages is equally important (00:31:14).

Mulue's heart for reaching out to others is a blessing in the Karen community, where the members find themselves navigating usage of both Karen and English within the cross-cultural settings in Colorado. As illustrated through what she shared about her employment, Mulue has a wise perspective that she is able to provide; due to the importance of education, she encourages the younger generation to thrive by staying in school. Mulue is indeed an educational protagonist championing education to encourage better opportunities for the Karen people in Colorado.

In talking with Mulue, I noticed her calm, peaceful, and steadfast nature, and her story demonstrates her inspiring drive for applying that wisdom in order to help others within the Karen community. She is a woman who has taken hold of wisdom in order to help equip others for success amidst living cross-culturally in the United States. Her own success in her employment, despite the challenges she has faced, is an indication of the outworking of that wisdom.

3.3 Mi See: Industrious Woman of Intelligence, Meekness, and Genuine Joyfulness

At the start of the interview, Mi's interpreter noted, "First of all, you know, she would like to thank God that she's, you know, able to live in the U.S., and as a Karen speaker, you know, it's definitely hard sometimes..." (00:01:15). Mi came to the United States when she was forty-five years old (00:18:02).

She knew a small amount of English before they arrived in September of 2010 (00:18:19, 00:28:14).

When she first arrived in the United States, she attended school after work for six years (00:14:52). When I asked how she feels about using English now, the interpreter said, “She say she pretty much understand all of that right now. [Mi talks]...She say she understand what the other party has to say...” but she is still learning to develop a response in English (00:18:57).

Mi has worked at a nursing home for over ten years, since she came to the United States (00:03:26).

The interpreter noted:

...she said she has improved a lot of her English, just because she’s surrounded herself with a lot of like, non-Karen speakers. So that really helped her grow, you know, to, you know, to be more confident herself speaking...to be more confident with, you know, other languages speakers, you know, as a Karen (00:01:37).

She works with people who are mostly non-Karen speakers, including those who are Spanish, Ethiopian, Ghanaian, Congolese, Filipino, Indonesian, Malaysian, and others who speak Thai. Though Mi works with quite a few Southeast Asians, most of them are not Karen. Mi mostly speaks English with the internationals that she works with. As I saw her joyful smile, I mentioned how I imagine that it lights up the lives of so many people where she works. Mi responded that since I mentioned it (which seemed to indicate that she would not have said it otherwise), many residents really like her and her “genuine smile” as she works with them (00:04:26).

In regards to her family background, Mi’s parents were both Karen. (The interpreter expanded with further information in response, specifically that Burma was actually peaceful for all Karen before the time of World War II). I asked which variation of Karen; after interpreting with Mi, he answered “Shaw” Karen when he replied in English (00:06:22). He relayed that she said Shaw Karen was the main ethnicity back then.

Mi spends somewhat minimal time speaking in Karen throughout the day, since she does not spend a lot of time with many Karen people. She spends quite a bit of time diligently working. Her interpreter said:

She spends her days mostly working, like 85 percent of the time at work, 25 percent [sic] of the time at home. The only time she will speak Karen if she at home. Mostly, she will just speak English with, you know, her friends in nursing home. But yeah, no, that's pretty much. The only time she will speak Karen i- when she's home, so pretty little (00:07:10).

The interpreter directly answered regarding the language that he speaks when he talks with his mother, "We s-, we do speak a lot of, yeah, a hundred percent of the time, Karen" (00:07:37). Mi also speaks English at stores, and she speaks very little Karen at the Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) church she attends, since the interpreter mentioned that they are all American there (00:08:05). The interpreter noted:

You know, I would say she speak Burmese every once in awhile. So, she will speak Burmese with her friends, her, one of her closest friends every once in awhile. [Mi talks briefly in her language.] And also she listen to a lot of news back home, and all those news were, are reported in Burmese, so, yeah. So like, little, little bit of English, little, lot of English, lot, little bit of Burmese, and ver-, a little bit of Karen... (00:08:27).

While Mi speaks mostly English, she does still speak Burmese and Karen at times.

Regarding whether Mi has a preference which language she uses, she likes to use English, but she has a close connection with Karen and wants to speak Karen, whatever the situation. Her son interpreted:

She said she would love to very much improve her English so she *does* love to use English, but she said becau-, as a Karen, she will always want to speak Karen regardless of the situation just because it's Karen, so. But yeah, she said she prefer like, preferably, she say she would just like to use Karen –English I mean—just to improve her English, since she lives in the U.S., right? (00:09:24).

The interpreter directly interjected that his mother will frequently use social media to talk with her friends in different states using Karen, specifying that she will do this when she is at home, rather than at work (00:09:55). Regarding Mi's social media use, the interpreter said, "Yeah, I mean she will speak in Karen, but the letter, the text letter, it's done mostly in English words, just because it's, I don't think there's app

for, you know, converting English to Karen when texting...” (00:22:46). Mi relayed that there may be apps, but she does not know how to use them. I further clarified regarding the comment on texting, “Like she uses, like you use Karen words, but it’s the English letters, and not the Karen letters?” (00:23:10). The interpreter directly responded that is not quite what she meant, and he explained:

She will type in English, like, she will say like she, the, the, the meaning will be, like, the text, everything will be done in English. Like, you know, ‘Where you going?’ She’ll be like, ‘Where you going?’ But when she speak, verbal, verbally-wise, will be in Karen, right? But text will be in English (00:23:20).

Regarding what languages she reads or writes in, her son interpreted that Mi mostly reads in Burmese, though she does read some Karen. He mentioned, “She said she use a lot of like Burmese because, just because not many uses Karen” (00:24:08). Regarding how the people in the community feel about using their language, the interpreter said:

My mom, she said like, you know, yeah, surprisingly, like, older people they are very comfortable with Karen. You know, they communicate, they travel with Karen, just, you know. When they travel, they travel with their kids, so they will use their kids to, you know, translate, but, most, yeah. They’re, they, they’re very comfortable, like, they’re happy with using just Karen... (00:24:52).

When I asked how they feel about the younger generation’s use of Karen or English, like how much they use Karen, after interpretation, her son said:

Yeah, so like those young-, youngsters, yeah. I mean when they, when they go to school, they will use mostly English, right? They, they, I mean that’s only thing they have to use, but when they go home, they, they have to pick up Karen, just because their parents speak Karen (00:25:36).

In regards to whether Mi mostly uses S’gaw Karen, Burmese, or English with other speakers that are Karen, Mi directly responded, “S’gaw” Karen. The interpreter mentioned, “Shaw” Karen, while also noting that she does not speak Pwo Karen, and that she speaks only Shaw Karen (00:10:16).

Mi has three children and five sisters (00:10:50). Most of her sisters are living in Canada amongst a large community of Karen people, and "...a lot of them will use lot of Karen since her, they're, since where they live is a big Karen community. So a lot of times, they will just go out and use a lot of Karen" (00:11:49). In regards to other aspects of Mi's family background, the interpreter relayed that her grandmother and grandfather worshipped trees as part of their religion, since Christianity had not been introduced yet (00:11:58). In regards to how Mi became a Seventh-Day Adventist Christian, the interpreter said that first she was just a Christian without the Seventh-Day Adventist denomination, and then a pastor from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church contacted her to ask if she would like to teach in their school. She was 23 years old when she started teaching; she became Seventh-Day Adventist after teaching at the school. Burmese is one of the subjects Mi taught in Karen State, though she never taught Burmese after she came to the United States. Her son added that she did not want to say it, but he knows that she also taught math, and he said that not many people teach math in Burma (00:12:26). This indicates perhaps how Mi seemed to have a modest and humble demeanor even through her intelligence, skills, and knowledge.

Before Mi came to the United States, she had to fill out a form indicating her religion; she marked "SDA," so her case worker got her connected with a Seventh-Day Adventist church in Colorado (00:16:12). Regarding whether there are any Karen or Burmese speakers at the church, Mi's son interpreted, "Yes, there were, there were a few, but no Burmese" (00:16:44). It seems noteworthy that he used the word, "were," since earlier in the interview, he had noted that those at the church are all American; this indicates that perhaps there used to be a few Karen speakers at the church, but that there are not anymore. In his next statement after he mentioned that there are no Burmese, he names a specific person's name and asked if I knew that person. I said I was not sure; Mi responded in her language, and the interpreter said in English that they were one of the families that they had first met, but that the family moved. When I asked if any of the singing, Bible reading, Bible studies, or the sermon at her church is in Karen, the interpreter responded after interpretation that all of them were English. In regards to how Mi feels about that, the interpreter said, "So, she say like, you know, it was, you know, like, it was good. It

was mostly great, because she, she met many, many great people, so that's, she felt comfortable" (00:17:38).

In regards to whether Mi has interaction with the younger Karen generation, she does have some friends that she communicates with about two or three times per week, though they are not especially young (00:19:48). (They mostly talk on the phone due to busy schedules.) She does have nieces and nephews who are under 18 years old, but they are mostly in Canada and the state of Texas, rather than in Colorado. I asked what language Mi speaks in to those Karen that are under 18 years old, and the interpreter responded:

She say yeah, like, when she speaks to like those young, those younger kids, it's mostly in Karen. Cause yeah, when she goes to Texas- [Mi talks]. Yeah, she says when she sees Karen, she will speak in Karen. And even her nephew, when, when we go to Texas, like, she will speak in Karen also. I mean they will, those, those, [Mi talks] those, those people will speak in English, but my mom response will always be in Karen (00:21:15).

To confirm my understanding, I asked if the children will speak in English, but if they understand when she speaks back in Karen; the interpreter answered affirmatively. Mi's son went on to interpret, "Yeah, they were born here, but, you know, my mom responds in, in Karen, they understand just fine" (00:21:51). The interpreter added, "I mean all, almost all of like Karen kids speak Karen, just because their parents do not speak English at all so they have to, I mean they have to speak Karen or understand Karen, right. It's a requirement. [Interpreter briefly laughs]." (00:21:57). Mi added through the interpreter that the children will speak Karen.

Near the conclusion of the interview, the interpreter asked if I had heard of the term "Jubilee" (00:29:13). Mi values the Jubilee in light of how it has been twenty-five years since the Karen have been fleeing. She shared that a lot of the Karen people will go back to Karen State in Burma in December of 2022 for the Jubilee.

Meekness has been defined as "...strength under control" (MacArthur 2006: 23). Mi has a genuine, kind, and meek nature. In the interview, I noticed not just her genuine joy, but an intelligence that is

hidden beneath her meek and unassuming demeanor. Despite the hardships due to linguistic and cultural differences that can accompany an individual's life when moving to the United States as a refugee, Mi maintains a positive attitude and a hopeful demeanor filled with joy. Her story illustrates the industrious woman and hard worker she is, with a meekness that she maintains amidst her intelligence. Her genuine kindness and hopeful perspective is truly an inspiration.

3.4 Lah Say Wah: A Champion of Diligence Through Education, Using Multilingualism as a Way to Serve Others

Lah Say was sixteen (almost seventeen) years old when she came to the United States, though her documentation listed her as being a year older at seventeen, almost eighteen (00:39:07). She was born in Thailand, and she has lived in Colorado since 2009 (00:44:42, 00:00:35). Lah Say volunteers within the community, and she also has been working for a hospital as a community health navigator for over five years (00:00:35). She is in a Master's degree program in social work, where she is focused on the macro side of research policy (00:59:14). Lah Say is the youngest of three in her family; she has two older brothers (00:01:30). Regarding what she shares in the interview, Lah Say has the sense that her perspective about life likely differs from others who are her age or younger (01:16:17).

The refugee camp where Lah Say grew up had firm restrictions in place, such that people could be arrested if they left the refugee camp; because of this, some were never able to leave, nor see the outside of the camp. For Lah Say, she had the opportunity when she was a child to visit nearby towns a few times; since she was close to a Bible college when she lived at the refugee camp, occasionally, students would be taken on a missions trip outside the camp (00:07:15). She had the opportunity to return to the refugee camp in which she grew up when she participated in an internship in Chiang Mai, Thailand in the summer of 2016 (00:06:56). She explained that it was "...like, my real live in-, experience in Thailand un- from the outside" (00:08:46). Lah Say had a new perspective on the camp through seeing it from the outside instead of from the inside.

In light of her experience going back to Thailand in 2016, I asked Lah Say if it changed her perspective about anything in the United States when she came back from Thailand (00:08:53). She replied:

I would say, ‘Yes.’ Here is stressful. [Laugh]. I was, I don’t know maybe it’s just, maybe it’s my work, but I don’t know. I feel like, I just remember, it was the summer after I graduated, so I, I just remember I was in the office. We were in the office in Thailand, and we actually have time to go to the market, to pick up vegetables and whatnot, to come back and cook our lunch and eat, and then continue to work. Like here, that would never happen. You like, barely have thirty minutes (00:09:08).

In contrast, Lah Say said that the American culture is more rushed and on a timeline than the culture in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Lah Say also shared about what it was like when she arrived in the United States for the first time. The program for refugee resettlement has a “lottery” process in regards to where refugees get placed; however, refugees can request a place of relocation if they have a family member in a certain area already (00:03:48). Lah Say’s family requested to be resettled in Colorado, because that is where her oldest brother was living in 2009. Subsequently, they were placed in Colorado. What Lah Say likes most about living in Colorado is nature and the mountains; in comparison, she could not see herself living in a state like Nebraska. Additionally, she noted, in reference to Colorado, “It is also my home. Like my connections, all of it, is here” (00:05:33). Lah Say’s family did not initially realize how cold it is in Colorado. She remembers that when she went to school in March, after they arrived in the month of February, she wore flip flops to high school. Her toes were purple by the time school ended. “So my first winter in, in Colorado [Laugh]—goin’ full force, embracing it!” exclaimed Lah Say (00:06:23).

In regards to the size of the Karen community, Lah Say perceives it to be somewhat small in relation to other states (00:01:30). Lah Say said, “So, right now when I say community, I’m just thinking about neighborhood” (00:01:55). Lah Say said there are three churches in the Denver metro area, and she estimated that between 600 - 1,000 people attend those churches; there is a larger Karen community in Greeley, Colorado, and fewer than 100 in the Karen community in Delta, Colorado. Lah Say estimated

that the Karen population in Colorado is 3,000 or 4,000. She believes Minnesota to have the largest Karen population and Nebraska to have the second largest Karen population.

Lah Say expressed the gratefulness she feels for individuals named “P Sue,” “Pu Jack,” and to CBRTN (Colorado Burma Roundtable Network), who helped her to get signed up for school in the United States after she arrived and before she turned eighteen years of age (00:39:07). Lah Say commented that in public high school in Colorado, if one does not get into school before turning 18 years of age, one cannot stay in school. Being able to sign up for school helped Lah Say get connected with a summer internship program called Health Science Pathway during her first summer in Colorado (00:40:32). When she arrived in the United States, Lah Say knew some English, but it was at the summer internship program where she was able to gain more English (00:31:44). At the summer internship program, she lived in a dorm; in her opinion, “...through that, you know like just, being immersed in the language without no one else that speak your language, so that was what pushes me to be able to grab the language faster, I feel like” (00:32:55). Lah Say contrasted this with other peers who were surrounded by many Karen speakers where they went to school: They did not learn the language quite as fast. When she attended her school that year, Hinkley High School, there was only one other Karen speaker. That speaker left the summer when she did the internship, so she was the only Karen speaker there during that summer. Through the Health Science Pathway program during that first summer, she was involved in an internship at one of the hospitals in Denver. During her second summer in Colorado, she interned in a lab; she was then hired after she had handled the procedures quite well (00:40:32).

At the time of the interview, Lah Say has been working as a community health worker for slightly over five years, though her title changed to “community health navigator” after the third year (00:11:34). Her position involves case management and social work, which entails being a reference person for the community (00:12:03). For three and a half years, she worked at a local office within the community until the onset of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which is when her work moved into the hospital (00:16:14).

While at the local office in the community, Lah Say was working on a grant which was focused on assisting pregnant and post-partum women with mental health; she had housing at the office in which she

worked. While the scope of the grant was to help pregnant and post-partum women with mental health, she and her co-worker came across a range of other issues and needs in the community, including domestic violence situations or difficulties with paying rent (00:12:48). The population demographic that Lah Say serves includes immigrants and refugees from throughout the world, resulting in an array of language barriers (00:13:27, 00:15:10). There were some psychologists at the clinic for the community, but members of the community did not want to talk to the psychologists during the first year (00:15:43). Lah Say commented that she was just "...seeing the importance of like having someone from your own community or your background or at least someone that look like you-ish, and then, so a famil-, a lot of family will open up about other stuff" (00:16:01). In Lah Say's experience, community members do not necessarily have the same concept of appointments, and sometimes, her clients will not show up for appointments at all. If they show up, they sometimes tell her that they forgot a document and need to go back home; this might mean that they will walk all the way home and then return later. Lah Say told a story where one of the mothers from Africa came with her child, who was about three or four months old. The mother forgot one of the documents that she needed for the appointment, and Lah Say recounted:

...she doesn't speak English. And she was holding the baby and she give it to one of the staff, and she's like, she show her hand like, like, 'I will be back.' And then she was *gone* for like almost thirty, forty-five minutes... (00:24:33).

The staff was trying to figure out what was happening. "She trust the staff enough that like she went back home to pick up her paper to come back, so she can finish her appointment [Laugh]...but with language barrier and whatnot, we couldn't really understand...she just left, you know?" (00:24:49). The busy pace of Lah Say's schedule working in the hospital setting is quite different, where each patient has appointments within limited time slots; Lah Say misses working in the community, which necessitated needing to be flexible in order to meet community members where they are at (00:16:20, 00:25:25).

Lah Say works with people from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds, including speakers of Arabic, Oromo, and a large amount of people from Burma who speak Burmese, Karen, Chin, and Lisu. The community office that she worked at was in the midst of an area of Colorado where refugees live during their first few months in the United States (00:26:48). With respect to the subgroups of Karen who

Lah Say works with, the number of S’gaw¹¹ Karen greatly exceeds the number of Pwo Karen. Lah Say did not learn Pwo Karen as a child when she was growing up in Thailand, since most of her textbooks were in S’gaw Karen. She requires the use of interpretation services to speak with a Pwo Karen individual who does not speak S’gaw Karen; however, if a Pwo Karen person does not know S’gaw Karen but does know some English, Lah Say uses English. Lah Say shared that many Pwo Karen can speak S’gaw Karen, “But us, S’gaw Karen, we can’t really speak Pwo Karen and can’t understand them” (00:28:39).

In addition to S’gaw Karen and English, Lah Say also speaks Thai and Burmese (00:29:38). She elaborated regarding her language learning and knowledge:

I only, well, I learned Thai, I think, out of, you know, as I was a kid. I learned other languages out of revenge, I think. But I am thankful, like in 2017 when I got this job, I was able to utilize it; Burmese as well. I don’t speak-. My parents were Karen from the city, so they speak Burmese fluently. I don’t. I only learn it in school. Never use it, never see the need, but I just, I just learn it. But, since I started working, I have used it so often that now, my Burmese is more, I can converse easily (00:29:51).

Lah Say speaks with very few native Burmese speakers in the course of her work.¹² She mainly speaks in Burmese to other ethnic groups from Burma, such as Lisu, Arkhai, Mon, or Arkhai-Mon, who do not speak Karen or English. She will sometimes use Burmese with those who speak Pwo Karen (01:05:42). Lah Say noted:

I have a really strong accents when I speak Burmese. You can tell that I am the ethnic people. But it is kind of cool in the sense that like, another person who speak Burmese with me that are not Burmese, they, they know, like, we both know each other; ‘Okay, your, you are not native Burmese speaker, but you know, that’s how we’re gonna communicate.’ And you know, that make it easier... When I was a kid, I learned

¹¹ “Shaw” is the term I used in my question to Lah Say, and she responded with “S’gaw.”

¹² I use the term Bamars (Burmans) to refer to those who are native Burmese earlier in this thesis.

Burmese, in the sense that like one day, you know, when my dad used to say, ‘You will have to fight with education,’ right? So my goal is like, one day I’m gonna speak up and say-. So I learn it, like in a way that like, I’ll want to fight back. That’s my way of learning. But I didn’t really use it until now, like here in Colorado (01:06:56).

Lah Say speaks S’gaw Karen both at church and at home: “Our church, we speak S’gaw Karen, and then you know, like some people who have been visitor, they do speak, they use some Burmese as well” (00:34:29). Lah Say continued:

But we only speak Karen at my home or at least, like, my parents’ house now. But with my niece and nephew now, it’s-, they understand, but like sometimes, really frustrating when I say something in Karen and they don’t get it right away, I was like, ‘Okay, in English’ [Laugh] (00:34:39).

She went on to say, “So yes, we, we do both, I mean like now, the-. With my niece and nephew, we do both English and Karen, but if they’re not home or like, we, yeah, we speak Karen, only” (00:35:00).

Apropos of the younger generation’s use of language, Lah Say elaborated:

But you know, the kids, like, when they are in school now, like English—it’s more their first language. And like you know, [Indecipherable], trying to, I think my mom’s like, we’re trying to teach them some Karen. But like, all, both of them can understand really well and, s-, but when they speak, it’s slower. You know, I imagine like, when I speak, when I first came, even now I still have accents. So now, when they speak Karen, they have accents, speaking Karen (00:35:29).

With regard to Lah Say’s language use with other members of her family, Lah Say speaks Karen, not English, with her brothers (00:36:06). Her father speaks Burmese, S’gaw Karen, and Pwo Karen; though Lah Say’s parents can speak in basic English, she goes home once a week to help them with reading letters. Lah Say outlined the nature of the struggle they faced:

I think for my parents’ generation—not just my parents—it’s really hard to learn English. And also, you know, like when we first came, in order to qualify for public

benefit, you need to go to the ESL classes. But then you also need to pay your bills, so when you start working, you can't take the English class... (00:38:03).

Regarding the younger generation, Lah Say reflected about seeing all of the children when she visited her church. Lah Say said, "Sometimes bridging the culture between our parents, also U.S. culture, and then also not having the support or feeling like you don't have that mentorsh-, mentorship. You know, that-. It's a challenge" (00:42:54). Mentorship is important when facing this challenge. Lah Say is grateful that she was able to find a mentor through her summer program in 2009; that person has continued as her mentor. She related:

...juggling between the two cultural is hard I think, especially for younger ones. Like I, I can, like I'm already older. I was sixteen, you know, like I already, you know like, in a sense that I'm, I already in, I know my own culture. But also I was like trying to, willing to be embraced in the new culture as well... (00:43:49).

Regarding how many of the Karen who are Lay Say's age in the Denver area were born in Burma, Lah Say said that most people her age did not know Burma, since they were born in the refugee camp. She can only think of two of her friends who were born in Burma, went to a refugee camp, and then came to the United States (00:44:19). With respect to whether there are any S'gaw Karen speakers who are her age that were born in the United States, she stated that there are not (00:46:05). She explained:

S'gaw Karen, who was refugee, came here as a refugee, no. That would, that would be a no, in the sense that like we only start coming here, what, in twenty-, two thousand? Less than twenty years ago. So there are no, like, so you have to be twenty and younger, that who would be from a refugee family who were born here...at least in Colorado state for sure... (00:46:27).

Due to her proficiency in Karen, Lah Say is able to distinguish when a translation has been completed by a proficient Karen speaker. For example, younger individuals who are certified Karen translators will mix English words in with Karen in translation (00:48:38). Or, if someone is a Karen interpreter, Lah Say is often able to ascertain if that interpreter has been in Colorado since he or she was young:

...In Karen, like, you address people differently based on their age and whatnot, so it's like you can tell if someone, if a, if, if an interpreter is been here when they're younger or something, or when, a young interpreter-. The, their Karen is not as proper, compared to someone who is my age or a little bit older...So it's like not that they speak it wrong, but it was like, a lot of time, the word choice or whatnot, it's not, it's not the same (00:50:05).

Colorado does not have the same offerings as other states in the U.S., which offer a language class in Karen at the school, Lah Say pointed out (00:50:41). "We used to, our church used to lead a few summer camp, like Karen language camp. I haven't done that in a long time, and it's a, it's a lot of work," she shared (00:51:36). Lah Say and her friend were very involved in starting the Karen language camp, in which they had about seventy children and teenagers between the ages of seven to eighteen (00:54:50, 00:58:03). They organized games and debates, with the one rule that once the timer started, only the Karen language could be used (00:54:50). She elaborated:

Some of the kids, it's really hard, but it's fun in the sense that like they're trying, you know, to speak in Karen, and yeah. And like, we did it in the sense that not forcing them. You know what I mean? Like, I mean, when you are at home, like I feel like some parents like, you know, either forcing them, or just the language is like losing it in sense that some parents feel like, 'Oh, I don't speak English, so my kids need to learn English.' But then, we're at a point where some kids speak English only, and now, they can't even translate for their parents, because they can't speak the language (00:56:10).

While Lah Say has not been able to be involved in the summer camp more recently, she believes that the camp was quite successful. The Karen community is very small, and this type of language camp event is organized in Colorado by either a church or a temple, in contrast to other states, which have adequate staff to be able to run a program for hundreds of children (00:58:33). In the past, language learning has been done in a home; a few summers ago, some of the older Karen in the community had some of the children over to their home to teach them the Karen language (00:55:28).

When children cannot translate for their parents, the families have interpretation services that they can access if they are at certain locations, such as a hospital. Lah Say believes that the children can still understand Karen, but when they speak, “The first thing that come out is English instead of Karen, and they, they can’t translate that word into Karen. So yeah, it happen like that. And we have seen that a lot” (00:57:25).

Some of the Sunday school classes at the church have sometimes incorporated teaching Karen, though not every week, according to Lah Say (00:51:47). Lah Say noted, “I do know that now, like, a few of, even in our, some of our Sunday school classes, they are trying to teach in Karen for some. You know, like, maybe not every week...” (00:51:47). Lah Say provided more specifics:

So now that we have a older teacher, Karen tea-, sorry, Sunday school teacher, they do speak Karen only. But then, you know, the kids will be talking like-, she will speak it in Karen, and I see the kids answer in English, like that. Yeah. So [Laugh], so it’s both Karen and English (00:53:40).

Some families teach their children S’gaw Karen written script (00:50:41), but some children under 11 years old cannot recognize or read Karen (00:52:02). Some others who are teenagers can read it, but they can only write it in English, according to the sounds (00:52:30).

The Karen language’s lexical components are different from those of English. For Lah Say, language is an integral component as she works within the mental health and social field (01:16:43). She described the Karen language as being “very simple,” so the terms in the healthcare field are difficult to translate and convey (01:17:04). Lah Say said:

...if I write on my journal, and there’s some things that happen in life, I, I can express myself more in English versus Karen. Because sometimes, I feel like there’s more weight to our language as well, even though it’s a simple language... (01:17:41).

She indicated that she thinks this is also true for others her age, specifically for those who have grown up in both cultures. In her personal opinion, in some ways, she finds English as the more helpful language to use. She noted:

So I mean, learning English, and also be-. It also allow me to express myself better as well, versus our culture, like, our language too. Like, sometime it, there's a, the downside to it is, like, not that we don't have word, but our word are so heavily-weighted, you know. Like somehow, like immoral or ethic way, that I feel like sometime I cannot use that word... (01:18:42).

In the context of discussing how Thai, Karen, or Burmese have some words that English does not have, Lah Say added, "Language is also tied to culture, and U.S. culture is more individualistic, I would say in a sense, you know, like, close to individualist versus collective culture" (01:19:48). For example, it is culturally normal and expected within the Karen community for women who are unmarried to live with their parents as an adult. Lah Say noted that even her brothers continue to live with either their in-laws or Lah Say's family (01:20:20). In the American culture, on the other hand, those who turn 18 years of age will often move out from their parents' home. "The western will look at the Asian culture, or at least to the Karen, and it's like, 'Oh, why, why you still live with your parents?' Versus our parents want us to be livin' with us-, with them, you know?" (01:20:51).

With respect to how the Karen people feel about using their language, Lah Say said she cannot speak for other people but shared from her personal experience. "When I was in high school, going to college, like, I got an award and my parents came, and then like, we were speaking in Karen, and I was like, you know, I, I tried to whisper..." (01:03:22). Though it was in the context of her receiving an award, Lah Say mentioned that she was ashamed of her language in the sense that she wanted to keep others from knowing that she speaks a different language. Her sixteen-year-old nephew, who currently lives in another state, had been shy about having his grandmother use their language when his grandmother picked him up from school as a five-year-old child. Now, however, he has started re-learning Karen on his own initiative. He can understand Karen but does not speak much in Karen yet. Lah Say shared:

As a little kid, you know, like, I feel like there's also a sense of like trying to immerse in this language too, this culture, and you feel like you have to hide who you are. I think that's happened a lot with other kids...Even as someone who came new to the country, it just feel like, I feel like, I need to, I need to be able to only speak English,

and like get into this culture or this country, you know, like, to be, to feel like, accept, to feel accepted (01:04:31).

For her ultimate goal, Lah Say would like to travel back to Thailand or to Karen State in Burma to serve, where she will utilize her knowledge of various languages. She added:

But in the meantime, here-, I think language is, language is also like our identity, you know? And then, being in the role that I'm in, or even if I'm going to a different field, like I will always have accents, or you know like, or, I will never look, you know, Westerner, right? So it's like, people already make assumption that I s-, 'You speak another language because of your look as well.' But, so I, I personally feel like, for me, I, I wanted to be able to preserve that, not just to my family, but to my community as well. Like I, I don't know how much history you know about Burma. You know like, back in the day, there was, you know, other speech that been said that, 'Oh, one day if you want to see a Karen people, you will see in the museum, because they will kill out all the Karen people.' So it was like, for me, it was like even if I'm going far, or if I'm in a field that I don't...use my language, but I still want to be able to preserve that, like, or help support in some way. Because one of my friends in Nebraska is like writing, and making, you know like, alphabet books, like a textbook for little kids, you know? And I want to be able to preserve that, I think, like help in some way. Yeah. And so far, me and my work, kind of related, like, I have been helping, and always use the language... (01:09:26).

Lah Say is insightful and intelligent, with a fun and energetic demeanor. Her diligence has led to an abundance of amazing experiences, which she may have missed out on, had she not shown persistence to take hold of the educational and employment opportunities before her and pursue them with determination. Instead of being focused on her own gain through her successes, her story illustrates her desire to help her people while seeking to preserve her language through serving in both the United States and Thailand.

3.5 Nau Naw Lynn: Resiliently Joyful, Driven Overcomer

As of the time of the interview, Nau Naw's job was with COVID-19 patients in a hospital (00:59:47). She was born in Burma, but her family fled to Thailand in 1997. She lived in the refugee camp in Thailand for approximately ten years. While S'gaw Karen is her native language, she also studied Burmese and British English at the refugee camp (00:01:22).

In 2006, when Nau Naw was almost twelve years old, the opportunity arose for her and her family to come to the United States. She recalls how even as an eleven-year-old, she was able to discern the concern written on her parents' faces about relocating to a completely foreign country. "I remember my parents prayed really hard...about the culture's differences and the language barrier that we will have to face," she recounted (00:02:13). "It was pretty tough," Nau Naw said, "but we're...trusting God" (00:03:22). She recalled her perception during the first evening that they arrived in America as, "Everything was humongous!" (00:03:36). Nau Naw also relayed, "It was culture shock, we didn't understand the language. I mean, you'd hear, people were talking, people were staring, because we were wearing *shorts* in the middle of *November!*" (00:04:03). Nau Naw was mostly home during her first year in America, and she could understand others to a degree, but she was not able to speak much English (00:04:33).

At school, Nau Naw's teacher would give her a piece of paper with English words on it, and Nau Naw would get a callous on her finger from practicing handwriting by copying it into her notebook (00:05:34). Nau Naw's experiences in middle school within the first few years after she arrived in the United States reflect how she did not flee from the challenges; rather, she sought to overcome them through her diligent work ethic by staying focused, even when her classmates were not. Other internationals who did not speak much English from Congo and Mexico also attended her school. Nau Naw shared in light of that:

...we pretty much just stay within our own group, like me and my brother and my other friends. We're all together, just, you know, in our own language, Karen, and other kids would speak their own native tongue. So a lot of time, like, we don't get to

practice in, unless the teacher talk to us...I try to speak to the teacher, it's kind of like you, know-. It's, it's, it wasn't easy (00:06:34).

Nau Naw indicated that all the rules in the English language were difficult to learn, and she felt badly that her teacher needed to stay after work in order to help with Nau Naw's questions. Nau Naw remembers one of her middle school teachers, Miss Allison, who taught English, was very nice. Nau Naw reflected, "...she was not easy teacher, and I think that's one thing I like about her" (00:09:31).

Before she came to the United States, the school setting Nau Naw experienced in Thailand had its own set of challenges. In Thailand, Nau Naw would sometimes get spanked by the teacher if she did not recite a memorized paragraph correctly to the class (00:07:07). Nau Naw noticed quite a difference between the behaviors of students in the U.S. with those where she grew up (01:04:11). Remembering a seventh-grade teacher she had after she arrived in the United States when she was thirteen years old, Naw Naw recalled, "Nobody was listening to her. I was like thinking in the back of my head, I'm like, 'Man, if these kids were like, where I grew up, they would be a *dead meat!*'" (01:04:11). She had compassion for the teacher, and she mentioned, "Even though I didn't understand everything she said, I knew nobody was listening. And, I was the only one who was paying attention, mostly because I don't understand the language well enough...so I actually had to pay extra attention" (01:04:59).

Nau Naw took English as a Second Language (ESL) courses at her middle school when she first arrived (00:09:42, 00:14:50). English is still difficult sometimes, Nau Naw shared, and if she finds out she said something wrong in English, she asks her friends what the correct way of saying it is (00:10:29). Nau Naw noted:

Actually a lot of people tell me that for a non-native English speaker, I speak really fast, [Laugh], you know, and I speak pretty well. Some thought that I was actually born here. I was like well, 'No, [Laugh], I was not born here,' you know (00:11:12).

In her opinion, since the brain is still developing in eleven-year-olds, which is the age she was when she came to the U.S., she did not acquire a "full" accent (00:11:12).

Another challenging dynamic associated with language use that Nau Naw encountered in the U.S. is the miscommunication that can occur through slang language and abbreviations in texting (00:12:53).

She shared, jokingly, how she communicated a request to a non-native Karen speaker that words be typed out during texting rather than abbreviated. Despite being able to conclude that “u” stands for “you,” she noted that it is not helping her brain to sift through the abbreviations in texting. As an example, she said while laughing, “ ‘On my way’ is, you know, ‘*On -my-way.*’ It’s not just ‘O,’ ‘M,’ ‘Y’ ”(00:13:31). Writing and speaking English are very different for Nau Naw; while she passed her speaking class quite easily, she did not get through her writing classes with quite the same ease.

I asked if they have used much Burmese since she came to the United States, and Nau Naw shared, “When we first came, my mom pray for someone who could understand us” (00:45:13). In answer to that prayer, their case worker was Burmese, and Nau Naw’s parents also know Burmese; they used Burmese for the first six months that they were here, but they do not use it much anymore. But Nau Naw said in relation to those who speak Burmese:

Now that I’m looking at it, there’s, there’s, there’s Karen people. One thing, the difference is, they’re, they came from Burma, so their comfort language is Burmese and not a Karen. So a lot of time, and also like people around there were also other tribals. So yeah, the, lot of Zomi Chin and other Chins and a lot of them actually lived, like a Pwo and a S’gaw Karen married together, or, you know, Chin person marrying Karen, or a Burmese person, so like their main language that they use in their church is Burmese (00:45:49).

Nau Naw does not really speak Burmese, though she wishes she paid more attention to learning it back in Thailand. That way, she could speak in Burmese to her Chin friend; she usually speaks with that friend in English (00:46:29). She reflected on her reasoning, “I didn’t want to learn Burmese because I flee from it, you know. I flee who people with that language. Why would I want to learn the language, you know?” (00:48:09).

Nau Naw’s parents started working as soon as they arrived in the United States, so they did not have the opportunity to become involved with ESL classes; she shared how her mother got a job at a hotel in housekeeping, while her father got a job as a janitor (00:16:15). For others in the older generation, they sometimes made plans for learning English at a person’s house or at a specific location (00:15:52).

Despite not having the opportunity to take ESL classes, Nau Naw's parents have an understanding of the English language. Nau Naw indicated:

If you're gonna wanna keep something a secret, like, don't, don't, don't even try to like say it in English; like, you know, even though you think my parents don't understand, but they will understand you. So like, if you don't want them to hear it, might as well don't say it. Because if you say it, if they hear it, then they know. Even though they probably can't tell you that, they can hear you (00:17:25).

Nau Naw believes that they understand more than they speak, but she was surprised one time when she heard her father, whom she describes as quiet in general, talking with one of his friends who is Russian. This was about three or four years after Nau Naw and her family had been in the United States (00:19:21, 00:17:59). Her father's Russian friend also knew English as his second language. Nau Naw shared:

I was very amazed, like he, he [Indecipherable] to call it the broken English, but I call it awesome perfect English. [Laugh]. I was like, '*Whoa, s'cuse me? My dad could speak English?*' I was like, '*No way!*' But, man, he had full-on conversation in English with his Russian friend. I'm like, [Gasp] jaw-dropped. I was like, '*That's the first time!*' Cause everywhere I go, I'm pretty much the translator (00:18:04).

Before she moved out of state and lived away from her parents' home, Nau Naw spoke Karen at home. "We speak that, because our parents speak Karen, since they don't speak English" (00:21:40). Nau Naw's sister, who was five years old when she came to the United States, was able to learn English and the pronunciation of English words somewhat easily in elementary school. Nau Naw shared, "...her accent like, literally is more a regular American kid's accent"; Nau Naw shared that sometimes her own Asian accent will come out if she is angry or nervous (00:22:48). In her interactions with her sister, Nau Naw said, "So when I'm with her, now a day, like, somehow it's just, more comfortable speaking English to her. Yes, I will still speak Karen to my parents" (00:23:10). At the time of the interview, Nau Naw had been living away from her parents for a few years. She is around many English speakers at the place she moved to. She mentioned:

So when I call home, I, I slipped out English sentences ins-, instead of Karen sentence, and my dad be like, he'll be like, 'I am *not* Americans,' or like 'I'm not English speaker' like, 'Don't speak to me like that,' you know, 'Speak to me in Karen. I'm Karen. I'm Karen person' (00:24:17).

Nau Naw's fiancé's first language is English, though he had been working on learning Karen (00:29:44). She shared:

He want to learn so that way, when he go to my house-. Cause he went to my house and he feel a little bit, he blend in pretty good, but the only thing...sometimes, like, my, my parent don't speak English. Like my other siblings, when we in the room, like, we try to speak English for him, but my parent, you know, don't. And sometimes it's easy for Asian people to get embarrassed, so they don't say it or speak it at all... (00:43:44).

Nau Naw shared additionally about language use within her family. The only people that her brother's children address in Karen terms are their grandmother and grandfather (00:23:26). Nau Naw's brother's children speak English to her parents at home as well, "...cause all they watch is, is like, English," (00:24:25). Nau Naw tries to teach her brother's children Karen when she goes back home; they do not have much opportunity to learn it otherwise. She related, "But when I'm not home visiting, there is no hope, cause the mom's working, the dad is working," and the children are entertained by things on the television, the iPad, and the iPhone that are only in English (00:25:11). Nau Naw told the story of a call from her brother:

...he's like, 'Have you heard your nephew speaking Karen?' I'm like, 'No.' I was like, 'Why? What's wrong with him, with his grammar?' you know. He's like, 'He sounds like a foreigner trying to speak Karen, and he's *Karen!* He's full-on blood Karen, but he sounds like a *foreigner!*' I'm like, 'Oh, okay!' I'm like, 'What do you want me to do?'" (00:25:52).

Nau Naw's strategy is: "You know if you force it, you reinforce it. Every time he speak English, you reinforce by speaking Karen, so that will make him speak Karen too," in contrast to taking the "easy way out" by speaking English (00:26:21, 00:26:38). Nau Naw explained:

Like one time I ask him to pick up something and he was just staring at me. I'm like, so if I will look at him, I pointed at what I want him to pick up, and I said it, and he pick it up and put it. Like, it just, it takes maybe two or three time for them to guess, grasp what you are saying, you know. Instead of saying once in English, I just say it maybe once or twice or maybe three times sometimes. Just, I'm literally looking at him, I'm like, you know, so that way they know what I'm actually saying, and they're like processing in their heads, you know (00:26:49).

Nau Naw said that her first nephew of the second generation did not talk for a while, and she thought it was because he was confused amidst the languages he heard; however, his younger brother and younger sister had no confusion or hesitation with choosing to use English (00:27:33). Nau Naw accepts that their choice of English is okay, "...cause that will be the main language they probably use, you know, in their daily lives now" (00:28:32). According to Nau Naw:

English, you know, is their comfort language, pretty much...I'm not saying just their generation too. My generation as well, so every time meet up with *my* friends, I notice, we only speak English, unless we want to say something we don't want people to hear. Then we'll bring up the Karen. But you know, I, it's kinda make me sad, but to sometime realizing that we actually have full-on conversations in English, you know. Ki-, Kinda sad, you know. Mhmm. Like, I'm like twenty-six now, so is my other three friends. So when we meet up, I, sometime I catch myself, I catch us speaking English more than we speak the native tongue (00:28:49).

One of Nau Naw's nieces, the youngest one as of the time of the interview, understands Karen more than her other cousins do; her niece's Pwo Karen mother speaks both Pwo and S'gaw Karen to her (00:33:55). Nau Naw elaborated on why she thinks it is that this niece understands more Karen: While the cousins of this niece live in the same house, this niece that knows Pwo Karen spends a lot of time with

her mother, who teaches her Karen. Also, when this niece goes to her mother's family's house, they also speak Pwo Karen instead of English there. In contrast, Nau Naw's other brother's children speak in English at home. Even though both of her brother's children live in the same house, the cousins do not often interact through playing together (00:34:45).

Regarding Nau Naw's experience at church in Colorado, she shared that at first when they arrived in the United States, they attended an American church. After the first or second month, the Karen people formed their own church, which is in Karen. Nau Naw said:

The only downside to that is the newer generation don't understand what is being preached, and when it come to like, you know, going to church or talking about spiritual life, we always says, God's first, right? You know, and the culture second (00:52:28).

The preaching and singing are in Karen at the church (00:54:47). When the younger generation does not understand what is spoken, it is more difficult for them to stay connected to the church. Nau Naw tied their connection to church with their connection to their culture. Nau Naw said:

It's heartbroken. You don't want to lose, you don't want to lose the language, but also you're not planting the seed in them at the same time. So like you're losing both of them like, you're los-, like, you're losing what you call it, the traditional way of doing things. But also, you're losing God and the mission. And you know, like, I don't know how you say it, like, you're not connecting with God. They're also not connecting to their culture at the same time (00:53:57).

While she certainly does not want the Karen language to be lost, Nau Naw simultaneously has a heart that the younger Karen generation understand God's Word in a way that language is not a barrier.

At the same time, Nau Naw's heart that the younger generation know the Karen language could not be more evident. Nau Naw is thinking about homeschooling her children after she gets married and has children (00:37:49). With respect to whether she wants to teach them both languages, she said, "For sure, I am very proud Karen person," as she pointed to some pictures that she had on the wall behind her. The pictures portrayed letters in the Karen alphabet which she had painted (00:38:05). Regarding her children,

Nau Naw said ebulliently, "...I'm gonna teach them *Karen!* I was like, I wanna teach them something besides English, you know, so one of these days, they go to Burma, go back to Thailand" (01:08:08). Nau Naw continued:

...it'll be really cool if people see them speak something other, in Karen, since they won't look like people who will speak Karen because [Laugh] they will be a mix...since he's [her fiancé] Black Americans and I'm Asian, so mix. But yeah, nobody will expect him to speak anything besides English (01:08:22).

She reflected how she has joked with her fiancé, quipping that he can learn Karen with the children; when he replied that he is not a child, she teased him back that he has to start with baby steps when learning (01:09:51).

Nau Naw radiates with a joyful enthusiasm and vivaciousness in conversation. Her patient persistence in school and cheerful demeanor amidst the hardships she has encountered evidences a courageous approach in facing life before her. She shows a focused determination to learn through her educational experiences in the U.S., even amidst the linguistic challenges she encountered. She carries this drive into her passion that the younger generations of Karen learn the Karen language. She is an inspirational example of one who, even amidst numerous challenges and difficulties, maintains a contagious joyfulness. She holds to her trust in God as her anchor. In light of her experiences, Nau Naw expressed, "It's just amazing journey, you know? One culture to another, one language to another, so yeah. As I grew older, I was hoping it's get easier, but *no!* It get harder! ...So, mm, oh well. God's still good!" (00:14:18).

3.6 Elvina Htoo: A Heroic Voice for Immigrants and Refugees Through Compassion and Advocacy

When Elvina came to Colorado in 2008, she was eighteen years old, so she had been in the United States for almost fourteen years at the time of the 2022 interview. She came to the United States through a refugee agency from the refugee camp in Thailand. Elvina has a diverse linguistic repertoire, since she speaks Karen as her first language, Burmese as her second language, a little Thai, and English as her

fourth language. After marrying a man whose family background is Korean, she acquired the ability to communicate some in Korean; she lived with her Korean parents-in-law for about eight years in her late teens and her twenties. English is the language that she uses most of the time at home. As a teacher, she also has been learning the Spanish and Pashto languages in order to communicate with her students at her job. When she first arrived, Elvina spoke a little English, and she learned more English as she lived in the United States.

S’gaw¹³ Karen is the variety of Karen that Elvina speaks. When she was younger, she used to have the ability to communicate with Pwo and S’gaw, but she confirmed that S’gaw is what she speaks.

“It has been a great journey with God,” Elvina noted, when sharing about her career path in the United States (00:49:08). As an English language teacher and instructional coach at Placebridge Academy, Elvina works in a bustling multilingual, multicultural environment. She started working as a paraprofessional at Placebridge in 2008, not very long after she first arrived in the United States. She shared how she prayed to God that she did not know what He wanted her to do and she did not really know English, but she prayed that she would get a job as a teacher assistant. She then applied for a teacher assistant position, and the principal of the school called her to set up a time for her to start. During the March 2022 interview, she expressed her gratefulness how she has been provided for. She voiced her desire to honor God through her life. “God always placed, like, the correct people on my path that will literally, like, provide opportunities for me to go everywhere I want to go” (00:49:25).

It was during the time that she was a teacher assistant that she had gone to a camp where she heard a speaker from The Calling, a non-profit organization. What Elvina heard from the speaker challenged her to consider what she would like to do with her life. As a teacher assistant, Elvina had observed the disconnect and cultural misunderstanding between the teacher and students in the classroom in which she worked. She decided she wanted to become a teacher to help others learn about communities of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

¹³ The terminology of S’gaw or Shaw Karen as used by Elvina is discussed in the Appendix.

Elvina eventually became an instructional leader at Placebridge Academy, where she now serves as an English language teacher and an instructional coach. At her job at Placebridge, since she currently has two Burmese students and two Karen students, she mentioned how "...it's really amazing that I get to communicate with them in their languages" (00:03:05). Her students have a wide range of first languages, including Spanish, Nepalese, Burmese, Karen, Pashto, Arabic, Dari, and Tigrinya. In order to communicate with her students, Elvina has taken it upon herself to learn Spanish and Pashto. She did not know Spanish before she came to Colorado; through her work, she observed that there is a significant population of Spanish speakers at Denver Public Schools. Elvina believes that Spanish speakers make up about forty-five percent of the students in the Denver Public School system. She will use some English with her Spanish students, but since some of them speak minimal English, she frequently needs to communicate with them in Spanish. Elvina's Pashto students noticed that she speaks Spanish; they asked her why she does not speak their language, so she has started learning Pashto. She created note cards for herself that she uses as reminders of phrases that she can speak to her Pashto students. She hopes to learn and memorize more Pashto words. Elvina said:

I feel like, in order for me to tell them that I truly care about them, cause my work cannot, you know, express all of my gratefulness to work them. I'm like so honored to work with them every single day, and I just wanna tell them that. But I feel like learning their culture, wh-, especially their language, totally, like, allow me to connect in a deeper level with them, and they see that I truly care about them (00:05:27).

When she was growing up, Elvina wanted to travel and work in an orphanage as a missionary; however, she noted that she does mission work now at the job where God placed her, since her school has students from about forty different countries (00:46:45). "It's more powerful when you're doing your actions and people will see...God's work through you. It's really amazing" (00:52:05). Outside the school setting, Elvina mentioned that sometimes she greets her friends from other cultural backgrounds, such as Nepali and Arabic, in their languages, in order to "truly connect" with them (00:08:58).

When asked, "...How do you feel when you're talking to somebody who's not a native Karen speaker, and you find out that they know Karen?" (00:06:15), she responded:

You know, it's truly amazing. Truly amazing. So, I have these friends from school. He used to live in Thailand for five years, so, I feel like he's my brother, you know, because at work, at first it was only me who would speak my language, and then now my sister works there too, so it was so amazing. But then when he, he came along, I was like so grateful that I got to speak Thai, a little bit of Thai with him. And also, he knew the culture. And he doesn't just know Thai; he lived with the Karen people in Thailand, so it was so, like, I connected with him right away, and it makes me like, 'He's my brother!' (00:06:24).

Elvina went on to explain that this friend whom she is referencing is American.

Elvina's linguistic interactions with her son are complicated. Although her son's first language is English, she expressed her desire that he be bilingual. She would like to still teach him to speak Karen and noted, "...I should have made him bilingual, but I feel like it's not too late, so hopefully one day..." (00:09:41). It was difficult for her to decide what languages he should learn first, and whether she should teach him Karen, Thai, or Burmese. The reason she decided to speak in English at home with him was because of her concern that he would not be able to communicate with other students in school if she did not prioritize English first (00:10:01). This is understandable, since she thought it would help him be most successful in school. At the same time, she has already started planning ways to teach him Karen. One idea is to write books for him in Karen about topics that interest him. Since the Karen community only has a few children's books, Elvina wants to write her own for her son. Another idea is to create a scrapbook with sentences in Karen, describing the photos of trips that she has taken with him; the scrapbook will be a memory for him when he gets older. Additionally, although he understands Korean, he responds in English. Elvina occasionally speaks in Korean to her son, particularly when she wants to get his attention.

Elvina's siblings speak English with her son. Her father, who speaks minimal English, communicates with him through hand gestures and a mixture of broken Karen and broken English. Though not fully communicating with Elvina's father in Karen, her son is able to speak in basic Karen

phrases to her father. Elvina's mother speaks English to Elvina's son, while including Karen words in conversation to expand his vocabulary.

Regarding her daughter, who is older than her son, Elvina shared she can speak Karen "a hundred percent" (00:23:28); she can also read in Karen. But her daughter communicates with Elvina only in English. Elvina has encouraged her to speak Karen more, but her daughter's vocabulary is limited—she speaks more at a "first-grade level" in Karen (00:23:54). However, Elvina believes that she will be able to be fluent eventually. Elvina said, "But yeah. She keeps learning, and she keeps going to church, I feel like she'll be able to be fluent one day" (00:24:04).

Elvina also has two sisters who are younger than her. Since both sisters came here when they were youth, Elvina thought that they would both lean more toward English in conversation. However, while she mainly speaks in English to the youngest sister, she speaks Karen to her other sister. However, Elvina noted with a laugh that when talking with her youngest sister, with whom she usually communicates in English, "Only when we want to say something secretly, then we'll say it in Karen" (00:13:37). She went on to note that when she works with her youngest sister in the professional work setting, they speak in English because "...we're just so familiar at a work setting, and we literally like have a meeting all the time as a sister, as profession, and all that, professionals" (00:15:17). But outside the work setting, they start conversations in English; even when they begin the conversation in Karen, it always ends up in English. She noted that they will typically discuss serious topics in English, since English has a broader vocabulary with more synonyms; Elvina described Karen as being a "closed language" (00:16:15).

Elvina is enthusiastic about the Karen language and the importance of preserving it. When she commented that she *gets* to speak Karen when she goes to the Karen church (00:17:37), I asked what language she prefers to speak. She replied that she loves to speak Karen but does not get to speak it often. She related how she began speaking in Karen when her sisters recently visited. She indicated some slight disappointment when her youngest sister responded in English. Elvina reaffirmed that she wants to teach her son Karen so that they can have the opportunity to communicate in Karen. Elvina added:

...and I don't want our language to get lost either. Because Karen people, because of the persecution, because of what happened in Burma/Myanmar, therefore, you know,

our language is so important, because all our families are all over the world, resettling in Norway, Sweden, Australia, here, England. And the only common language we have is Karen... (00:19:18)

Although some of Elvina's cousins in Europe do know English and can connect using it, Elvina said that for her son "...to be able to feel fully Karen, just have that language, I just wanna make sure that our language is not going to get lost, you know?" (00:20:05). Even if Karen families can fully communicate in English, knowledge of Karen is important to maintaining identity. Elvina noted later on in the interview:

...for my son to understand the struggle of Karen, I feel like he needs to know the language, so, he can actually truly understand the struggles of the Karen people, and how we have come so far by the grace of God to now... (00:29:44).

When asked how the Karen language can be cultivated in the United States, Elvina noted that her parent's generation is very proud of their culture, and she enthusiastically outlined how they have already started language programs through the churches in states throughout the United States (00:21:16). She said:

So they already started like—my mom's a part of this too—like, all Karen people in the United States, from every states through churches, they have started a language program where they teach kids of my son generations, and they created books. And they have the whole organization going, and they start kicking off Karen language... (00:21:47).

Their goal is that the next generation will have materials to learn from, so that they will be able to still speak Karen in the United States. Elvina shared, "...they also want to incorporate that as, another language in school and stuff, so I don't know which school or what, but it's started from the churches" (00:22:52). She also mentioned, "Yeah, all the churches' Sunday school are like in Karen language, right? To teach all the kids to speak Karen" (00:23:05).

In regards to how the younger generation, those under 18 years of age, feels about learning Karen, Elvina responded:

...all of the kids now a day, they do know their language. However, they, I feel like they want to respond in English all the time. Like even they understand them, they just respond in English *all the time*, and that's one thing that we have to-, I think they haven't seen the value yet, maybe? But one day –ll, they'll know. We, we hope that they, they'll get where we are. Like, 'Oh, we wanna be bilingual, you know, make sure that we speak in our own language, and, stay in touch with our roots.' Right now, they don't see the value of it yet, just because the friends and everybody that they're, associate with every single day speak English, so they don't see the use of it..."

(00:24:12).

Because she has seen a disconnect between the parents and their children in both Karen families and in other immigrant families, Elvina really encourages her students to "stay with their language" (00:25:05). Oftentimes, because the children cannot participate in a deep conversation with their parents due to the children's limited vocabulary in their parents' main language, and the parents do not fully understand English, "...there's a disconnect over there, misunderstanding, culture clash. All of that happen in not only in our community, also in Hispanic communities, also in every one that I work with" (00:25:39). This sometimes creates a strain on the students' relationships with their parents. Elvina has observed that students seem embarrassed when their parents attend meetings when the parents have accents or do not speak English well (00:26:17). Elvina impresses on her students that if the parents have a limited grasp of English, it does not mean that they are not smart; Elvina works hard to cultivate a thriving relationship between immigrant students and their parents (00:25:39).

In regards to how the Karen culture is tied to language within the community, Elvina shared the following:

For me, I will say personally, it's church. Because, when we go to church, the pastor will preach in Karen, you know, and we'll sing in Karen, we'll read Karen Bible, and we'll have Karen Sunday school. Mm, but for people who are not Christian, I will say Karen New Year's, weddings, and wrist-tying days, you know. Those events, that's

happen, then you'll see like, a lot of Karen people wearing Karen clothes. Then, you know, like, 'Oops! I gotta speak Karen'... (00:27:32).

At these events, she has observed the children speaking only English, the older generation speaking only in Karen, and the young adults speaking a mix of Karen and English.

Burmese is spoken by only some of the Karen in Colorado. Elvina noted that less than half of them know Burmese. The Karen who grew up here do not speak Burmese; in contrast, those who lived in the refugee camp spoke it there, since it was both required in the curriculum there, and it was also the language used for communication with the Rohingya and other people groups at the refugee camp (00:30:04).

In regards to her experience with languages in a study setting, Elvina did not have fellow Karen classmates at the university during her undergraduate degree or master's degree. Thirteen and a half years prior to the 2022 interview, while she was still learning English, she used to think in Karen and write down her thoughts in Karen and then translate that into English. By 2022, she is able to switch to English automatically if she wants to speak to someone in English, and she is able to think in Karen when she wants to verbalize a statement in Karen (00:36:12). Elvina noted, "I can switch code really quick..." (00:36:41). Elvina shared that she used to not talk as much; her hesitancy was accompanied by a concern that she might not use the correct word if she spoke. Also, she used to miss the opportunity to talk due to the time required to translate the response between English and Karen in her head.

With her fluency in English came Elvina's increased motivation to serve as a voice in the community for others, since she understands the struggle that immigrants and students have, including the challenge they have of mentally translating language in their minds. She incorporates the wisdom she has gained from her experiences into her advocacy for the English language learners she works with. Through advocating for the community and for immigrants, she desires to be a voice to vocalize their opinions. She wants to let others know that they exist amidst the trauma that they have been through; through her advocacy, Elvina hopes that others will understand their perspective better. Elvina mentioned how her father is someone who is one of the wisest men that she knows—he is blessed with wisdom that truly

comes from God. However, because he cannot communicate in English, those who only know English do not know how smart he is.

Raising awareness about the Karen people is important to Elvina. In light of her advocacy, when I noted that she has a lot of insight to offer, Elvina responded, “Yeah, just to, educate, I will say, you know? Because nobody know Karen exists unless you’re like really deep-diving in or encounter them...Not a lot of people encounter Karen people” (00:41:13). However, Elvina often used to veer away from sharing about herself; this is because explaining her situation is complicated:

Even just like, people telling ‘Who are you?’ is like the biggest work for me. Like, it takes about thirty minutes to share, you kn-, to tell them who I am, where I’m from. I was like, someone was like, ‘Who are, where you from?’ ‘Thailand. But I’m not, I’m not Thai. I’m Karen. Oh, this is what Karen people are, and this is what happened, which is blah, blah, blah. This is why I grew up in refugee camp.’ You know, it takes a long time to explain where I’m from (01:02:06).

Religion is how Elvina connects to her language, through her relationship with God. Elvina noted:

Like I said, for me, I connected to language through religion, through our relationship with God, right? And when I worship God, I feel like I can speak to Him a little bit different when I’m in s-, I used to speak in Karen a little bit more, but now more in English (00:54:21).

When I asked what language she prays in or reads the Bible in, she proceeded to share how she came to know God. She grew up in the Karen church back in the refugee camp, but she did not initially have a relationship with Jesus. Through a Bible study with her uncle and his wife, Elvina discovered how to have a relationship with Jesus. She expressed how grateful she is to her uncle for leading her to Jesus and for teaching her about God’s grace and steadfast love. Her uncle, who lived in the refugee camp as of the time of the interview, is from Burma and speaks Japanese and Burmese but not Karen. Because she came to know God through the Burmese language, Elvina would read the Burmese Bible and pray in Burmese when she was at the refugee camp. At that time, even though she had previously loved watching movies, she chose going to Bible study with her aunt and uncle over watching movies. She said:

I was so inspired and empowered. All I wanted to do is to sha-, all I wanted to do was to share the gospel, like I, everybody that I see, I'm like, I-I wanted to share the gospel, in Burmese, not even in Karen (00:57:31).

At the time of the interview, she prays and reads her Bible in both Karen and English; she chooses which one to use according to the situation. While she mostly uses English, when she has a Bible study with her parents, she uses the Karen language. She noted that she has the Bible in Karen, Burmese, and English on her phone.

Elvina attends three different churches—Korean, Karen, and American churches. She does not always understand at the Korean church but noted that when she goes there, she still feels that “..the Lord touches my heart” (00:17:25). This contrasts with her experiences at the Karen church:

But yeah, when I go to my parents' church, which is the Karen church, I get to speak Karen. It's so funny, because I can switch so fast, you know, from English to Karen. It's just so cool, like I can just switch anytime. The funniest thing is, sometime, if I speak Karen a lot when I go to church, then I'll come home and I wanna say something, and it came out in Karen, and I was like, 'Oops!' You know, I have to translate it back into English. I've done that, multiple, multiple times (00:17:33).

As evidenced through her story, Elvina has a compassionate care and concern for others who have encountered significant adversity. Her compassion stems from her own experiences of overcoming hardship amidst her journey to the United States from the refugee camp in Thailand. In addition to her cheerful demeanor, she is diligent, intelligent, and multi-lingually gifted. While she is incredibly grateful for the opportunity to come to the United States, she constantly remembers with concern those who are still in the refugee camp. Though she could not remember the author, she mentioned a quotation about advocating for others that resonates with her: “If not all of us are free, then we're not free at all” (01:00:39). This quote appears to serve as one of the driving ideas behind her heart for advocacy. When Elvina now encounters what she calls first-world problems, she challenges herself, remembering, “God has brought you, like, this far. You think that He's going to abandon you now? Like, who are you without Him?” (01:01:20). Her advocacy is rooted in her reliance on God: “I feel so small without Him, but with

Him I feel like I'm the biggest, I can do anything..." (00:50:54). Her driven spirit is instrumental in her role of advocacy for refugees who speak other languages. She shared, "I'm really grateful that I found my voice through, this whole journey, so I can advocate for, immigrants and refugees, I feel like" (00:51:23).

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Given the richness of the narrators' stories, in this chapter, I explore common themes and patterns from the narratives. First, I give an overview of how the Karen and English languages are being used in various domains in Section 4.1. My aim is to illustrate those domains in which the Karen language is being maintained and the domains in which the members of the community switch to English. I claim that the Karen language is being maintained in the home and church settings with the partial exception of the younger generation, while shift is occurring in the work and school domains. Then, in Section 4.2, I examine language shift in more detail.

The next two sections deal with explanations for the observed language shift (Section 4.3) and language use patterns (Section 4.4). In Section 4.3, I apply the utility principle (Coulmas 2013) and aspects of the Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift (Karan 2011) to the observed shift. Then, in Section 4.4, I show that patterns of language use can be explained by examining the multiple identities which are being concurrently managed and juggled in varying degrees by members of the Colorado Karen community.

Finally, I note factors contributing to the vitality of Karen language maintenance in Section 4.5. I claim that Karen identity is closely tied to a religious identity within the Karen community, and that the church is a key orchestrator in pursuing preservation of the Karen language amongst the younger generation of Karen.

4.1 Domains of Language Use

In order to better understand the contexts of language shift, it is important to establish patterns of language use. Karan (2011: 139) notes, “When the motivations to use a new or different language variety in a particular speech environment or domain outweigh the motivations to use the variety normally used in that domain, language shift happens.” Coulmas (2013) identifies two social domains which are important for language shift: 1) the family, whereby language is transmitted between generations at the micro-level, and 2) the social realm of the group settlement at the macro-level. According to Coulmas (2013), the community territory at the macro level influences language use among the family at the micro level. In my data, the predominance of English in the work and school domains is influencing language shift for all generations, while Karen is being largely maintained in the familial and church settings for the older generation.

However, additional variation is occurring among the younger generation. While the evidence indicates that Karen is mostly being maintained in the home and church settings for the older generation, the younger generation is undergoing a language shift to English through receptive bilingualism within those settings. Chambers (2003) notes that once young adults acquire a sociolect,¹⁴ it typically remains solidified during their lives as long as there are normative conditions. With youth who are refugees, the varying levels of tumult within their lives would most certainly not be considered normative. To be uprooted from one’s home and transition to a completely foreign culture contributes to a variety of factors affecting not only the sociolect in one’s own language but also their language use within a multilingual setting. Karen is still spoken in familial settings for all narrators, with English often included when the younger generation is present. Karen is the predominant language in the church domain for four of the six narrators: Maria, Mulue, Lah Say, and Nau Naw. Of the remaining two narrators, it is the dominant

¹⁴ Chambers (2003: 170) defines a sociolect as: “...a dialect that includes features characteristic of the people with whom one wishes to show solidarity, either densely or loosely.”

language in one of the three churches that Elvina attends, while Mi attends a predominantly English-speaking church.

Language is not a static entity, and often, the boundaries of its usage are not definitive; rather, it tends to be kaleidoscopic. Nevertheless, as best as possible, Tables 4a and 4b reflect a snapshot of the fluid multi-dimensional phenomenon of Karen language use as reflected in the narrators’ experiences. Table 4a shows, for each speaker, the domains in which each language was reported to be used. Table 4b is a legend indicating what each letter used in Table 4a means.

In Table 4a, an upper case letter signifies that the language is used by the narrator, the narrator’s peers, or someone older; a lower case letter signifies that the narrator specifically references an example of the language spoken with the younger generation within that environment. If the narrator does not specify whether the communication was with an older or younger generation, a capital letter is used.

Table 4a. Narrators’ domains of language use

		Languages							
		Karen	English	Burmese	Kachin	Thai	Spanish	Pashto	Korean
Narrators	Maria	CcHW	chEw			S			
	Mulue	CchWFS	hEeSW	HhWS	hC				
	Mi [†]	ChF	ChWFES	F					
	Lah Say ^{††}	CcgHhW	hWE	CW					
	Nau Naw	CcHhF	HhEF						
	Elvina ^{†††}	CGgHhw	CghWwE	w		F	w	w	CHh

[†] Mi has a lower case letter of “h” under the “Karen” column, because she speaks to her young adult son (younger generation) in Karen at home and did not specify if any other adults live at home.

^{††} Lah Say only had one other Karen “kid” (00:33:33) present at her high school. She did not mention if she spoke in Karen with that speaker there, so I have not included the “e” letter for her under the “Karen” column. Lah Say did not reference “E” in this domain for Karen, so “E” has not been included either.

^{†††} I have included the “g” designation for Elvina under the Karen and English columns, since the lower case letter “g” includes young adults and children. In this domain, she mentions that young adults use both Karen and English, while children use only English.

Table 4b. Domains of use legend

Functional Domains of Use	Social Domains of Use
C or c = Church	F or f = Friends
W or w = Work	H or h = Home or Family
E or e = Education or Internship	G or g = Cultural Event or Language Camp Gathering
S or s = Store	

Not all narrators shared details about every language in each domain, given the open interview format, so I have only included those instances mentioned. If a letter is not listed, it means that the narrator did not reference language choice in that domain. If the narrator referenced using a language but the domain was unclear, I have not added a letter for that section in Table 4a. Narrators' references to written materials are not reflected in Table 4a.

The "G" or "g" designation is used for a cultural event or language camp gathering in Table 4a. Lah Say mentions Karen at the language camp for the children and teenagers. Elvina discusses how Karen is spoken by the older generation and the young adults at cultural events and weddings; she also mentions how English is spoken by the children and the young adults at those events.

The narratives did not reveal sufficient detail to indicate domain use within formal or informal settings. For example, when Mulue refers to speaking Karen, English, or Burmese to people at the store (00:23:25), it could have been in either an informal social or formal functional capacity. (This is indicated as "S" for "Store" under the Karen, English, and Burmese columns for Mulue in Table 4a). "Store" has been categorized as a functional domain in the table.

4.1.1 *Social domains of use*

I first briefly summarize the narrators' experiences in the social domains of home and work.

In the home and familial setting, Maria speaks both Karen and English. Burmese, English, Karen, and Kachin are the languages spoken in Mulue's home. Mulue speaks Burmese to her husband, and she speaks Burmese, English, Karen, and Kachin to her son. Mi speaks Karen at home and with her son, and

she speaks to her nephew in Texas in Karen. Lah Say speaks Karen with her parents and brothers, and she speaks English and Karen with her niece and nephew. Nau Naw speaks both English and Karen at home; she speaks Karen to her parents and English to her sister. Nau Naw shares that she sometimes accidentally includes English sentences in during her conversations with her father. Nau Naw tries to speak in Karen to her brother's children; while her brother's children speak English at home, their cousin who lives in the same home speaks more Karen. Elvina speaks English, Karen, and Korean to her son in varying degrees. She speaks Karen to her parents, while she speaks Karen and English with her sisters; her daughter speaks to her in English. These occurrences indicate that the presence of speaking Karen in familial settings is present with all narrators.

The narrators did not provide much information regarding language usage with friends. In relation to the social domain amongst friends, Mi speaks English with her friends at the nursing home and Burmese with some of her friends. She uses Karen with her friends in different states through social media. Elvina shares that since her American friend from school knows Thai, she speaks with him in Thai.

4.1.2 Functional domains of use

In this section, I focus on language use within the four functional domains: church, education, stores, and work environments.¹⁵

The experience of the narrators at church indicates that Karen is generally maintained by the Karen people within this functional domain. Exceptions to this are when the narrator does not attend a Karen church (that is, Mi and sometimes Elvina), or when the children respond with receptive bilingualism. Maria mentions that Karen is the dominant language used at her church, with English and Karen used in the children's Sunday schools. She also notes that the younger generation interacts in English at church.

¹⁵ As I mentioned in 4.1, Mulue's interaction in the stores may be categorized as either functional or social; it seems more affiliated with a functional domain, so it is included in this section.

Mulue notes that Karen is used in Sunday school with the children. Mulue goes to her husband's Kachin church sometimes, but when she attends Karen church, the sermon and music are always in Karen. While Mi goes to a non-Karen church and uses mostly English, the data indicates that she has used Karen minimally at her church (00:08:05). Karen is spoken at Lah Say's church, and Sunday school for the children is in English and Karen. Nau Naw notes that the language of the Karen church she attended in Colorado is Karen. Elvina goes to Karen, Korean and English-speaking churches, but when she attends the Karen church, the preaching and singing and Sunday school are in Karen.

In the educational domain, Maria shares that only English was used during her time in school. She had Karen classmates one time at the community college, but never had Karen classmates at the university. Mulue notes that her English got better as she went to college. She also mentions how the children speak English at school. Mi notes that when the children go to school, they mostly use English. Lah Say participated in an internship where she learned English faster through immersion in an English-speaking setting. Lah Say also points out that English is the children's first language when they are in school now, and that Colorado does not offer a Karen language class in school. Nau Naw mentions that she speaks Karen with her friends and her brother at school, and she discusses challenges of her English class.

The narrators did not provide much information about language use in stores. Maria speaks Thai at the Thai restaurant. Mulue uses English, Karen, and Burmese at the store, depending on the language of the speaker. Mi notes that she speaks English at stores.

English is the dominant language used by four of the five narrators who discuss their work environment, with the exception of times when Karen and Burmese speakers might be present. English and Burmese seem to be the main languages used in the work setting for the narrators, though Karen is also used in some cases. It should be noted that five of the six narrators work in multilingual settings where multiple languages are used. Maria shares that she talks with her mother at work in Karen, and she talks with her co-workers in English. Maria uses Karen and English with her clients. Maria also mentions that knowing both Karen and English increases her job opportunities. Mulue uses English with co-workers and speaks in Karen and Burmese to the people she assists at her job. She also shares that

families may be able to get a job in Colorado without speaking English, but these are not well-paid jobs. Mi says that she speaks English with her coworkers at the nursing home. Lah Say uses English and Karen at her job; she also uses Burmese with members of other ethnic groups. Elvina's role as a teacher places her in an environment with students from around the world; she uses English, although she speaks to her Burmese and Karen students in their languages. Elvina has been learning Pashto and Spanish to use with her students who speak those languages.

The most common patterns within the functional domains are as follows: Karen is mainly used in the church domain, while English is mainly used in the education and work domains. However, Maria also uses Karen and Burmese in the work setting. Not much information was provided about the store setting.

4.2 Language Use Patterns Among Generations: Language Shift

Karan (2011) notes that the direction of language shift within a community is often evident through the patterns of the younger generation. On the basis of language use patterns presented in Section 4.1, in this section, I go into greater detail regarding how language use patterns are changing between generations.

Language shift from Karen toward English among the younger generation is evidenced through the narrators' observations (Section 4.2.1), personal experiences (Section 4.2.2), reports of receptive bilingualism of the children (4.2.3), and unmarked code-switching (Section 4.2.4). The narrators' observations and experiences regarding generational language usage and the phenomenon of receptive bilingualism and unmarked code-switching indicate that English is becoming the dominant language for the younger generation of Karen, while Karen is becoming their secondary language.

According to data provided by the Colorado Refugee Services Program within the Colorado Office of Economic Security regarding age of arrival for the 305 S'gaw Karen and Pwo Karen refugees who arrived in Colorado between October 1, 2010 and March 31, 2022, 151 fall between the ages of 19-51, while 100 are 12 years old and younger. Lah Say notes that there are no Karen speakers her age (approximately 29 years old) who were born in the United States, since refugees only started coming to the United States 20 years ago (00:46:27).

4.2.1 *Narrators' observations of Karen and English language use patterns generationally*

A common theme that the narrators mention relates to language usage when the different generations speak with each other. Mulue notes that the children are not comfortable using Karen, and that children under 18 years of age prefer to speak English, while the parents are more comfortable using Karen (00:27:04). Mulue says that most Karen who are her age (34 years old or slightly younger) do not speak in English unless going outside the Karen community; if they are at home or meeting with Karen people, they speak Karen and not English (00:48:06). She says that others might speak more English to their children if they have better education, but families generally try to only speak Karen to their children (00:46:41). Mulue mentions, "But for the younger, younger generation, like second generation here, who speak English, so, we do speak in English. But for the parent who first came here, we don't speak English, we speak Karen" (00:04:28). Mulue says, "Kids growing up here, they especially who, born here, they don't speak their own language" (00:05:07). Maria indicates that in her Karen church, the younger generation communicates with each other in English but speaks in Karen with the older generation (00:47:27). Nau Naw notes that her brother's children's Karen grandmother and grandfather are the only people that they speak to in Karen (00:23:26). Elvina shares that at Karen events, she has observed that the children speak only in English, the older generation only speaks in Karen, and that people Elvina's age speak a mix of Karen and English (00:28:05).

The narrators also share observations about the accents present within the younger generation's speech. Nau Naw notes that her sister has an American accent (00:22:48). Lah Say shares that English is more her niece and nephew's first language and that they have accents speaking in Karen (00:35:29). Nau Naw relates her brother's perception of her nephew trying to speak Karen: " 'He sounds like a foreigner trying to speak Karen, and he's *Karen!* He's full-on blood Karen, but he sounds like a *foreigner!*' " (00:25:52). In talking about her nephews and niece, Nau Naw says that English is their comfort language (00:28:49).

The data does indicate an exception to this pattern, which I hypothesize is due to the speaker's personal situation. Nau Naw tells about one niece who understands Karen more than her cousins, but Nau

Naw believes it is because this niece does not spend a lot of time with her cousins who speak English in the same home. Nau Naw observes that this niece spends a lot of time with her mother, who speaks both Pwo and S'gaw Karen; this niece also visits her mother's family's home, where Pwo Karen is spoken instead of English (00:33:55). Since they interact with this niece in Karen, it influences her usage of the language. If this niece continues to interact mostly in Karen in the home settings, it is plausible that she may grow up with both English and Karen as dual primary languages.

4.2.2 Narrators' personal language use patterns generationally

The narratives additionally reveal a variety of instances from their own experiences where they choose English as the language of communication with the younger generation, while they choose Karen as the language of communication with the older generation. Maria speaks in English to her younger cousins who grew up in Colorado and to her younger siblings (the youngest of whom is 15 years old); she speaks in Karen to her parents and her aunt (00:12:01). Lah Say shares that she speaks only in Karen at home with her parents, and she also speaks in Karen with her two older brothers, but she speaks in both English and Karen with her niece and nephew (00:34:39). Before Nau Naw moved out of her parents' home, she would speak Karen with them, since they do not speak English (00:21:40). While Nau Naw still speaks Karen to her parents, she feels more comfortable using English to speak with her younger sister, who came to the United States at age 5 and is five years Nau Naw's junior (00:23:10). Nau Naw mentions what appears to be unmarked (unperceived)¹⁶ language choice when she notes that she catches herself and her three friends her age speaking English more than they speak Karen (00:28:49). Elvina's siblings speak in English to her son; Elvina's mother also speaks in English to Elvina's son while incorporating some Karen words to try to boost his vocabulary (00:13:49). Elvina illustrates the generational language barrier when she notes that her son speaks in basic Karen phrases to Elvina's

¹⁶ I discuss this term further in Section 4.2.4.

father, since her son knows he does not speak English; her son and Elvina's father communicate through hand gestures and a mixture of broken Karen and broken English (00:12:23, 00:13:49).

4.2.3 Language shift through receptive bilingualism

In cases where Karen rather than English is chosen as the language used when speaking to the younger generation, the younger generation frequently uses English for their responses, thus demonstrating language shift through receptive bilingualism. Receptive bilingualism shows language shift occurring because rather than responding in the same language, the speaker shifts to a different language in reply. Mulue notes that she speaks to her son in Karen, Burmese, or Kachin, and he only responds in English and does not speak in Karen or Burmese (00:06:13). Mulue mentions that other children are similar to her son, in that they only speak in English (00:06:36). In settings where the parents may need translations into Karen, Lah Say believes that the children still understand Karen, but "...the first thing that come out is English instead of Karen, and they, they can't translate that word into Karen. So yeah, it happen like that. And we have seen that a lot" (00:57:25). Lah Say mentions that the Sunday school teacher at the church speaks in Karen, but the children answer in English (00:53:40). Elvina notes that her daughter, who is under 18, communicates with Elvina in English, though her daughter can speak Karen (00:23:16). When Mi speaks in Karen to those who are born here, they can still understand her; when Mi speaks to those under 18 years of age in Karen, they respond in English (00:21:15).

4.2.4 Unmarked code-switching

I have drawn ideas regarding the concepts of "marked" and "unmarked" language choice in my analysis from Carol Myers Scotton's markedness model; Myers Scotton's model defines unmarked choice as that which is unremarkable and is considered the normative choice within a specific environment, while marked choice occurs when the speaker tries to show a shift in relationship to the other speaker (Swann et. al 2004). I differ slightly from these definitions, in that I use "marked" and "unmarked" to describe consciously-perceived (intentional) and unperceived (subliminal) code-switching, respectively. While unmarked code-switching illustrates language shift occurring within a multilingual environment, marked code-switching evidences both the utility principle and the narrator's decision to

associate with multiple ethnic identities. (I discuss marked code-switching further in Section 4.4.2). In this section (Section 4.2.4), I demonstrate how unmarked code-switching is among the patterns transpiring which demonstrate language shift.

Unmarked code-switching occurs when speakers include words from other languages in their speech without intending to switch to those words. This indicates that one language is starting to become more dominant than another language. Maria, Nau Naw, Elvina, and Lah Say mention instances which demonstrate unmarked code-switching, indicating generational language shift from Karen to English. These instances of unmarked code-switching involve English words slipping out during speaking without the narrator's conscious intention of using English. For example, Maria shares:

To me, like, I, sometimes, I feel like I'm losing both languages. I'm, I'm losing like both vocabularies from both languages. Because sometimes, you will talk to the Karen people, the Karen person, right? But English, English words wants to come out too. You know what I mean? When you talk to, English speaker, your Karen language will come out too. I don't know, sometimes, it's just hard to find the right word for both languages (00:38:30).

Nau Naw illustrates a similar experience when she notes, "So when I call home, I, I slipped out English sentences ins-, instead of Karen sentence..." (00:24:17). Additionally, Lah Say shares that she can tell if a Karen translator has been in the United States since they were younger, because they mix English words in with their Karen translation (00:48:38).

4.3 The Utility Principle for Language Use

Having established the direction of language shift, I now explore reasons to explain this shift. In this section, I examine the utility principle as one possible reason. "Language shift is always in the direction of the language of greater utility," notes Coulmas (2013: 182), tying language in with the economic principle of utility. Coulmas (2013: 182) notes that "If people act rationally...they will, as a general principle, minimize their expenditure of time and effort to achieve their ends and, therefore, choose the instrument optimally suited for a certain job, that is, the instrument with the highest utility-value."

Coulmas (1997) also notes that people tend to choose the language that has the most benefits for the least effort.

Coulmas' (1997) position shares similarities with that of Grin (1996), but Grin integrates economics more comprehensively into his theory of language use as a whole. Grin¹⁷ (1994) notes not only that economics is sometimes directly tied to language in a financial sense (for example, being multilingual may allow one to earn more income), but he also uses terms and principles of economics as a lens through which to understand language use, maintenance, and preservation. Such terms include considering language as an investment, language as consumption, or the cost-benefit analysis of language use (Grin 1994). The costs and benefits for language use mentioned by Grin (1996) align with Coulmas' (2013) utility principle. According to Grin (1996: 4), economics is an important framework for considering interactions of various multilingual groups; he mentions the "...benefits and costs of various arrangements for intergroup communication." Economists evaluate costs of goods weighed against the benefits and value of those goods. For the motivation of some multilingual speakers, they consider the benefits and ease of communicating in a certain language with a certain group in one context to outweigh the benefits and ease of using another language in that context. The benefits of using one language also outweighs the cost of using that same language in that context. Individuals choose language based on both language attitudes and what they perceive to be the typical societal language choice, Grin (1994: 37) notes, but he takes this further to say "...attitudes can be expressed through an objective or utility function, while norms can easily be interpreted as constraints." While Grin (1996) believes that economics, combined with other disciplines, can provide insight into language, he acknowledges the limits of economics on human behavior analysis. Human behavior is connected to motivations, and language choice is rooted in motivations. Goals of human behavior as shown through language use are not strictly limited to functional practicality, ease, and strictly financial benefits; goals of human behavior

¹⁷ For summary information on earlier scholars who have looked at language from the perspective of economics, see "The Economics of Language: Match or Mismatch?" by Grin (1994).

through language use are additionally influenced by language attitudes and the desire for inclusion within a particular group. Therefore, language is also used as “utility” to be included within a particular group, though language use and identities with particular groups is discussed in Section 4.3.

The economic utility principle shares similarities with Karan’s (2011) Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift, in which he proposes that people make language choices based on that which will benefit them. However, while Karan (2011) mentions economic motivations, he includes additional separate categories of communicative; social-identity (including solidarity-related); language power and prestige; nationalistic and political; and religious motivations as well. Whereas Grin (1994) emphasizes language use through economics, Karan (2011) separates economic-related motivations into one of many other categories of motivations. To tie the two together, we might consider two thoughts: The economic concept of utility in language choice is seen when the speaker chooses language based on that which is easiest for the least effort. Concurrently, individuals also pursue language choice for the utility of communicative and solidarity reasons, because they consider the benefits to be worth the efforts in those respects, even if the efforts for language usage are not particularly “easy.” Therefore, when used for communication and solidarity reasons, the benefits still outweigh the costs of using the language.

In their study of Japanese individuals living in London, Miyake & Iwasaki (2021) note that the children who had Japanese mothers were brought up British. This was because a child with a Japanese mother was not granted a Japanese passport prior to 1985, and therefore, those Japanese families did not see a purpose in the children learning Japanese. This shows how the decision *not* to learn the heritage Japanese language was made based less on solidarity or communicative reasons than on utility-value. Of course, not all contexts are the same as this Japanese-British context, and various factors relating to the host culture and heritage culture influence the degree of motivation for learning the heritage language.

My data indicates that communicative, solidarity-related, and utility-related motivations are not mutually exclusive; in other words, both motivations can occur at the same time. In fact, my data shows that individuals pursue both utility-related motivations for the English language while pursuing communicative and solidarity-related motivations for both English and Karen.

While my data does certainly illustrate solidarity-related and communicative motivation for language choice as mentioned by Karan (2011), this chapter will focus on the utility-related motivations as outlined by Coulmas (2013). As discussed in Section 4.1, the home and church settings are the predominant areas that children still hear the Karen language. The data indicates that the younger generation's language choices are based, in part, on speaking the language where the ease and end-goal of choosing English takes precedence over their choice of Karen in certain environments. This is demonstrated through the expressions of the difficulty children have of learning the Karen language in Section 4.3.1, the benefits of knowing English within the United States' largely monolingual society in Section 4.3.2, and switching languages for ease of conveying the correct lexical choice in Section 4.3.3.

4.3.1 Children voice the difficulty of learning Karen

The utility principle can be observed first through the challenge that Karen children encounter when learning Karen. Mulue indicates that the children find it difficult to learn Karen: "...they say, Karen language is difficult. It's not easy for them. And they don't want to learn it. [Laugh]. They say it's really hard" (00:05:47). Maria mentions how her students cannot learn the language because of how hard it is; this is especially true for reading and writing (00:44:55). The difficulty the younger generation has in understanding Karen is also shown in the experiences Nau Naw provides. When speaking to her nephew in Karen: "...it takes maybe two or three time for them to guess, grasp what you are saying, you know. Instead of saying once in English, I just say it maybe once or twice or maybe three times sometimes. Just, I'm literally looking at him...and they're like processing in their heads..." (00:26:49).

While the younger generation chooses English because it is easier than Karen, the utility principle is also demonstrated when Mi discusses the older generation's choice of Karen. Mi mentions that the older generation feels more comfortable using Karen while having the children translate as needed when they travel (00:24:52). Lah Say shares that the parents want the children to learn English, in order to assist the parents with translation (00:56:10). Many of the parents are working and do not have the time required to learn English. The benefit of having children who are able to translate for them in English is that it makes

it feasible for them to operate in Karen. That is, there is utility for the parents of their children knowing English well.

4.3.2 Children are growing up in a monolingual society with English as the primary language

The utility principle also explains the shift to English in light of the fact that English is the dominant language in the United States, the country in which the children grow up and operate in. Nau Naw notes that English is the main language that her nieces and nephews use (00:28:32). Elvina chose English as the first language to teach her son because she wanted him to be able to communicate with other students in school (00:10:01). While sharing how her son talks in English, Mulue mentions: “It’s hard for children because every day, they d-, hear English. They go to school, they speak English. They stay home, they watch TV, they, they use social media, they hear only in English” (00:05:47). English has taken a unique place amongst the languages of the world, since its widespread usefulness has surfaced in every continent in the world in various different cultures and domains (Coulmas 1997). Coulmas (2013 :184) notes:

Its multiple uses have made it a most powerful and versatile instrument which increases its utility in a snowball-fashion by the day as people of different social and cultural backgrounds around the globe see in it a means of social advance and its acquisition as a profitable investment.

English as a dominant language in the world is present within Colorado, in the context which the Karen children operate. Because English is the dominant “key” to accessing various opportunities in society in Colorado, Karen children find it the easiest language to choose.

4.3.3 Lexical choice for a Karen speaker in an English-speaking society

For individuals within multilingual societies, one of the methods by which they function within those societies is through utilizing their languages as tools from a “toolbox” as those languages are needed within that society. The act of choosing English when living in a largely English-based monolingual society demonstrates the utility principle of language choice. Individuals also demonstrate the utility principle when finding the correct lexical choice within that English-speaking society. Languages have

lexical items whose meaning is tied to the cultural context. Thus, in the overlap of cultures, one language does not always have unique words to describe specific happenings within the other culture. Karen speakers living in the United States are faced with this scenario when looking for the correct lexical choice while navigating between the English and Karen languages.

For example, Lah Say shares that terms from the healthcare field are difficult to translate (01:16:43). She noted, "...our culture, like, our language too. Like, sometime it, there's a, the downside to it is, like, not that we don't have word, but our word are so heavily-weighted..." such that she feels like she cannot use the word (01:18:42). She believes this is the case for others who are her age as well. Lah Say shares that she is able to better express herself in English than in Karen in her journal at times (01:17:41). Lah Say suggests that the shortage of terms in one language compared to another may be related to how the United States culture is more individualistic instead of collectivist (01:19:48).

Elvina also illustrates the challenge of lexical choice. Even if she begins a conversation with her sister in Karen, it will end up in English (00:13:29). Elvina associates English as the language in which she can pick the best word to use to discuss serious topics with her youngest sister; she refers to Karen as a closed language (00:16:15).

Similarly, Maria mentions an instance which demonstrates how marked code-switching indicates generational language shift: When she teaches students between the ages of three and twelve at her Karen church, she mixes both English and Karen so that they will pay more attention (00:15:50).

4.4 Accommodation to Differing Identities

While utility is a factor influencing language shift for the Karen in Colorado, given the complexity of language shift situations—it is certainly not the only factor. Grin (1996) recognizes the limitations of the economic model and emphasizes that human behavior cannot fully be explained through it. The accommodation of differing identities is another factor that cannot be ignored, due to how these identities are influencing both language maintenance and shift. Languages and identity are tied closely together. Coulmas (1997) points out that the value of languages cannot just be relegated to that of utility, since they have personal value to mother-tongue speakers. For mother-tongue speakers, language is not solely a

functional tool for communication; it is often strongly tied to kinship and ethnic group membership (Fishman 1989). Even in multilingual contexts where various factors may influence language shift, the heritage associated with a language maintains a gravitational pull influencing language behaviors (Fishman 1989). While language is often tied to one's ethnic identity by biological family line, one can concurrently speak a language affiliated with other identities as well.

Lewis (2019: 48) notes that it is the differences between ethnic groups "...which most often motivate strategic patterns of identity negotiation." This is a helpful framework for introducing the concept of an individual accommodating for multiple identities through language. Those in migratory settings are faced with preserving their own ethnic identity with a particular historical background, amidst the context of interaction amongst others who have their own identity shaped by their own experiences and backgrounds (Lewis 2019). Individuals may have varying identities, which are compartmentalized and used according to whom they are interacting with (Lewis 2019). For the Karen community in Denver, it seems that individuals have multiple identities, which are compartmentalized in relation to their interaction with various groups. Coupland (2014: 293) notes, "Identity is indeed a matter of social indexicality, but identities are constructed and inferred in the subtle dynamics of acts of speaking." Individuals have various identities indexed or "filed" in their minds, which influence the choice of languages used in day-to-day life. In this section, I discuss Karen and American identities in Sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.3 and marked code-switching as an indicator of multiple identities in Section 4.4.2. I also discuss the immigrant identity in Section 4.4.4, the youth identity in Section 4.4.5, and the Burmese speaker identity in Section 4.4.6.

4.4.1 Juggling Karen and American identities

For the younger Karen generation, the pull toward adjustment to and acceptance in the new American culture can threaten cultivation of the Karen identity, and therefore, cultivation also of the Karen language, contributing to language shift. Lah Say mentions this challenge when she says, "...juggling between the two cultural is hard I think, especially for younger ones. Like...I know my own culture. But also I was like trying to, willing to be embraced in the new culture as well" (00:43:49). While many students would feel commended by receiving an award in high school, the celebration for the

accomplishment was dimmed for Lah Say because she did not want others to hear her speaking a different language (Karen) with her parents (01:03:22). Lah Say shares, “Even as, someone who came new to the country, it just feel like, I feel like, I need to, I need to be able to only speak English, and like get into this culture or this country, you know, like, to be, to feel like, accept, to feel accepted” (01:04:31).

Another important consideration in the tug between both cultures is that cultural norms that are present within American culture can differ significantly from cultural norms within Karen culture. Lah Say points out how the U.S. culture is individualistic compared to collectivist (01:19:48). She mentions how it is completely normal for unmarried women to live with their parents until they are married in Karen culture, whereas in American culture, unmarried women will often move away from home and live elsewhere after they become eighteen years old (01:20:20). Maria shares similar sentiments, that she readily invites her Karen friends who have children of their own over to her house, but she hesitates inviting her American friends because they may see it differently; she shares, “Sometimes it’s just hard to grow up in two different cultures. Which is, it’s good too, because I understand, you know, both perspective on different, how do I say that, different like, cultures maybe” (00:36:09).

4.4.2 Marked code-switching: Marker of multiple identities to pursue privacy

One of the conclusions of Altehenger-Smith (1987) from her study on language choice in Singapore is that choice is associated with the speaker’s decision to associate with a particular identity. The association of code-switching in languages with multiple identity negotiation is an idea that Myers Scotton (1983) proposed. As I mentioned in Section 4.2.4, I refer to “marked” as consciously-perceived (intentional) code-switching.

I claim that within my data, marked code-switching is one example of accommodating for multiple identities in order to ensure the privacy of information from other groups the speaker identifies with. Fought (2011) points out how code-switching illustrates a speaker’s ability to catalog more than one ethnic identity in that speaker’s own mind. Marked code-switching is illustrated through both Nau Naw’s and Elvina’s stories. Through consciously switching their choice of language, they wish to separate themselves and their topic of conversation from nearby non-Karen speakers. Elvina notes that she usually

communicates with her youngest sister in English but adds, “Only when we want to say something secretly, then we’ll say it in Karen” (00:13:37). Nau Naw notes similarly that “...every time meet up with *my* friends, I notice, we only speak English, unless we want to say something we don’t want people to hear. Then we’ll bring up the Karen” (00:28:49). Muthusamy et al. (2020) notes that privacy is one of the motivations for code-switching, which appears to be demonstrated by these examples from Nau Naw and Elvina.

Nau Naw also indicates that using marked code-switching to keep information secret from her parents would be unsuccessful. She notes:

If you’re gonna wanna keep something a secret, like, don’t, don’t, don’t even try to like say it in English; like, you know, even though you think my parents don’t understand, but they will understand you. So like, if you don’t want them to hear it, might as well don’t say it. Because if you say it, if they hear it, then they know. Even though they probably can’t tell you that, they can hear you (00:17:25).

Thus, marked code-switching may be attempted, but not always successful, as the listeners may understand more than the speaker initially thinks they do.

4.4.3 Importance of maintaining Karen identity while integrating with American culture

While the younger generation of the Karen have the beginning of a new American identity, it is important to the Karen adults in the community that they maintain the Karen identity and language. From Elvina’s perspective, knowledge of Karen is important to maintaining identity, as illustrated when she notes that her son can only fully understand the struggles the Karen people have endured and their history through understanding the Karen language (00:29:44). Elvina indicates that one’s language is a connection to their identity; she does not think the children have seen the value of knowing the Karen language yet, but she hopes that the children will see the value of speaking Karen and staying in touch with their roots (00:24:12). Lah Say states, “I think language is, language is also like our identity, you know?” (01:09:26). In the context of hearing someone claim that one day all of the Karen will be killed,

Lah Say emphasizes the importance of how much she wants to preserve her language and how she desires to support preservation of her language, even if she is working in a field where she does not use it (01:09:36).

4.4.4 Identity of a shared personal history of migrating

An added component present amidst the Karen and American identities is how the Karen who live in America navigate the identity of being an immigrant, including history preceding that immigration. Both Maria and Elvina relate the difficulty of describing to others where they are from, drawing upon the identity of migration. The concept of needing to live somewhere else as a refugee is so foreign to some of those who asked Maria where she is from, that they thought she may live near the luxurious beach areas of Thailand when she shared that she is from Thailand. She notes:

You wanna be cool, you wanna be, you know, belong to the group that you are in. I wa-, I used to be so shy of telling people that I grow up in refugee camp back then. Because sometimes, when you tell them ‘I’m from refugee camp,’ and they don’t know what that is. ‘What is that?’ And you have to explain like, ‘My country has war’ and you know, ‘I’m a stateless’ (00:57:03).

This indicates the clash between identifying with the new American culture while navigating one’s identity as an immigrant, whose people needed to flee their homeland. Elvina also shares about the difficulty and time it takes explaining to others where she is from, when she notes:

Even just like, people telling ‘Who are you?’ is like the biggest work for me...someone was like, ‘Who are, where you from?’ ‘Thailand. But I’m not, I’m not Thai. I’m Karen. Oh, this is what Karen people are, and this is what happened, which is blah, blah, blah. This is why I grew up in refugee camp.’ You know, it takes a long time to explain where I’m from (01:02:06).

4.4.5 Generational youth identity

For the youth, combining the Karen, English, and immigrant identities with bridging generational gaps sometimes creates a clash. Maria and Elvina both mention the embarrassment encountered by the

younger generation of Karen at school when their parents attend school conferences. Maria mentions the children's feeling of shyness when their parents come to conferences at school, since there might be a misunderstanding by the parents due to the language and culture barriers (00:54:51). In her role as a teacher, Elvina has observed "...there's a disconnect over there, misunderstanding, culture clash" (00:25:39) and that children get embarrassed at school meetings because their parents do not speak English well or have accents when speaking English (00:26:17). This is why Elvina encourages children to maintain their language, while reinforcing the fact of their parents' intelligence despite their parents not knowing English (00:25:05, 00:25:39).

Maria notes that parents did not come to the United States by choice; not only this, but they have an additional hardship of not being able to speak English after they arrive in the United States, since they did not know much English before they came (00:50:48). It is difficult for Karen parents to learn English after they arrive in the United States. The parents sometimes have to work immediately after they arrive in the United States instead of taking English classes, as Nau Naw (00:16:15) and Lah Say (00:38:03) both mention.

4.4.6 Identity as a speaker of Burmese

In addition to Karen, American, immigrant, and youth identities, some of the narrators indicate an additional identity as speakers of Burmese. When Karen speakers communicate with other people groups from Myanmar in the United States, they sometimes speak in Burmese with each other, rather than in English.

The motivation for using Burmese in the United States seems to be different from what it was in Thailand or Myanmar. In Myanmar and Thailand, Burmese was considered the language of opposition; within the United States, it is becoming the common language of shared origin. This indicates a shift from an aversion to the Burmese language to an association with the Burmese language, as it allows a shared identity with speakers of Burmese from other ethnic groups, especially other minority groups. In the United States, immigrants can talk with other people groups from Myanmar with whom they may share the same immigrant refugee identity.

Nau Naw indicates that she did not want to learn Burmese when she was in Thailand, because it was the language of those from whom they fled. However, now that she is in the United States, she wishes that she had paid more attention in Thailand and could talk in Burmese with her Chin friend in the United States (00:46:29. 00:48:09). Similarly, while Lah Say and Nau Naw did not previously want to use Burmese, it has taken on a different, unifying dimension in the United States. Lah Say's intention in learning Burmese as a child was to fight back with education, as her father encouraged her, but she had not used it much until she came to Colorado (01:07:25). Lah Say points out that she speaks in Burmese to other ethnic groups from Myanmar and rarely speaks to ethnically Burmese in Burmese:

I have a really strong accents when I speak Burmese. You can tell that I am the ethnic people. But it is kind of cool in the sense that like, another person who speak Burmese with me that are not Burmese, they, they know like we both know each other; 'Okay, your, you are not native Burmese speaker, but you know, that's how we're gonna communicate.' And you know, that make it easier... (01:06:56).

This indicates a possible shift where Burmese is identified as a common language of communication associated with the immigrant refugee identity of those fleeing conflict in Myanmar.

4.5 Karen Church Efforts for Preservation of the Karen Language

In this section, I examine the Karen church's role amidst Karen culture in Denver, Colorado. Karen churches were established early in the arrival of Karen immigrants to Colorado, according to Mulue (00:37:47). This points out the importance of the church in community life for the Karen. For the narrators, the Karen identity is closely integrated with religious identity. According to the narrators, efforts toward the preservation of the Karen language and Karen ethnic identity amongst the Colorado Karen communities is predominantly done through Karen churches in Denver. This is demonstrated in Section 4.5.1 through personal connections with the Karen language and culture through the church, in Section 4.5.2 through Elvina's perception of the Karen church's influence in bolstering Karen language and Karen identity, and in Section 4.5.3 through the church's involvement in incorporating Karen language camps and Karen language lessons for the children.

4.5.1 The narrators' personal connections to Karen language and culture through church

The narrators illustrate their personal connection with their language and culture through being involved in a Karen church. Maria notes that she can be very close to her community by going to church every Sunday (00:05:02). Maria adds, “And the other thing I like about, like, going to church, is that you get to see people, like your people, every week, you know?” (00:48:38). Maria also shares, “It’s a good place to see your people, because when you go to work or school, you don’t see your people; you are not surrounded by your people...” (00:48:53). Maria includes herself in the collective statement, “Yeah, so, the Karen people are like, majority of the Shaw Karen are Christians, Baptist Christians, so, wherever we go, we just wanna be connected with church” (00:27:10). Maria shares that she is more involved with church than with the few Karen celebrations that are held during the year (00:25:38). Given that Karen New Year’s and wrist tying days are held occasionally, and weddings may be sporadic, they do not provide the weekly group exposure to Karen culture that weekly church services and Bible studies do.

Elvina points out, “But yeah, when I go to my parents’ church, which is the Karen church, I get to speak Karen” (00:17:33). In reference to how the Karen culture is tied to language, Elvina says, “For me, I will say personally, it’s church. Because, when we go to church, the pastor will preach in Karen, you know, and we’ll sing in Karen, we’ll read Karen Bible, and we’ll have Karen Sunday school” (00:27:32). Elvina also notes: “Like I said, for me, I connected to language through religion, through our relationship with God, right?” (00:54:21).

Religious identity is reinforced by Karen culture, but it is possible that religious identity tied to experiences before immigration supersedes identity with a Karen church in America. Mulue shares how Karen groups in the United States formed churches based on the connections they had in the refugee camp (00:37:47); thus, it is not strange that Mi attends a non-Karen Seventh-Day Adventist church in the United States, since she had formed connections with a Seventh-Day Adventist church as her home church in Asia. For Mi, it is obvious that her connection to the religious denomination that she had in Asia was maintained once she arrived in the United States.

4.5.2 *Elvina's perception of the church's influence*

The church is influential in helping the younger generation to grasp the Karen language better, according to Elvina. She recognizes that the church has a role in strengthening individuals in the Karen language. Elvina references church as a means to learning the language better when she speaks of her daughter learning Karen: "But yeah. She keeps learning, and she keeps going to church, I feel like she'll be able to be fluent one day" (00:24:04).

4.5.3 *The church's involvement encouraging Karen language use by the younger generation*

According to the narrators, the church is the main entity in Colorado encouraging Karen language preservation among the younger generation through Sunday schools and language camps. Maria notes, "Yeah, I feel like, that, the church also helps children to understand, you know, just learn Karen..." (00:48:05). Mulue observes:

That's, now we are, the community leader, they are finding ways to teach the children Karen language by having Sunday school, or having a different time, like some people will have class on Saturday to teach the children Karen language (00:05:07).

Mulue also indicates that few resources are available for the children to learn Karen, and it is only in the church where children are taught Karen (00:27:51). Mulue contrasts this with other states that have a Karen language program at the schools (00:28:15). Lah Say also shares that a Karen language class is offered in public schools in another state, but not in Colorado (00:50:41). Lah Say outlines the church's approach:

We used to, our church used to lead a few summer camp, like Karen language camp. I haven't done that in a long time, and it's a, it's a lot of work. But I do know that now, like, a few of, even in our, some of our Sunday school classes, they are trying to teach in Karen for some (00:51:36).

Lah Say ties language programs to religion, noting that the summer language camps in Colorado are typically organized by either a church or temple; this differs from the programs in other states for larger

Karen communities (00:58:33).¹⁸ The data indicates a few instances of teaching the younger children Karen outside of the church setting, such as when Lah Say mentions that the older Karen would have children over to their home to teach Karen (00:55:28). It seems that older Karen having younger Karen over to teach them Karen perhaps is not common though, since she mentions that this was two summers prior to the time of the interview.

Elvina indicates that the Karen churches are involved in the school programs in other states: “So they already started like—my mom’s a part of this too—like, all Karen people in the United States, from every states through churches, they have started a language program...” (00:21:47), and Elvina reiterates, “...they also want to incorporate that as, another language in school and stuff, so I don’t know which school or what, but it’s started from the churches” (00:22:52). Elvina also discusses the Karen Sunday schools: “Yeah, all the churches’ Sunday school are like in Karen language, right? To teach all the kids to speak Karen” (00:23:05). Furthermore, since most of the members of the Karen community have a Christian background, the Karen church has predominant involvement in consistently promoting and upholding Karen culture within the Karen community.

In conclusion, language shift is occurring in certain domains for the Karen, with a significant pattern being the younger generation’s shift toward English. The utility principle (Coulmas 2013) combined with language choice for community and solidarity-related reasons (Karan 2011) to accommodate for different identities offers explanations for language choice and shift. Finally, one can see how the Karen church is the predominant institution involved with preservation of the Karen language in Colorado Karen communities.

¹⁸ Maria notes that the majority of Karen are Baptist Christians. None of the other narrators mentioned involvement from a temple in language programs, but churches were abundantly referenced in regards to cultivation of the Karen language.

CHAPTER 5

FURTHER RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

This thesis has provided information on the use of language within the Karen communities of Colorado. During the interviews with the narrators, I encountered topics which are beyond the scope of this study but which would be helpful to explore in further research. In this chapter, I present those topics in Section 5.1, as well as a summary of my research and findings regarding language shift, maintenance, and identity of the Karen in Colorado in Section 5.2.

5.1 Further Research

5.1.1 Comparative studies

My research has established that intergenerational language shift is occurring for the younger generation of Karen in Colorado. Language offerings within the U.S. school system in the languages of communities which have immigrated may have an impact on language use and maintenance within communities. When describing the Colorado Karen community, some of the Karen narrators compare their community with Karen communities in other states. Mulue mentions that Minnesota has a Karen program available at school; she said that this program is possible because Minnesota has more leaders and a more educated second generation compared to Colorado. In light of how the younger Karen generation is shifting toward English in Colorado, it would be interesting to investigate whether language shift is occurring for the younger generation within the same domains of language use in other states. Such a comparative study has potential to show what factors contribute to the vitality of Karen language use in the United States. For example, does one community show stronger Karen language vitality than another? If so, what factors contribute to stronger vitality? Other questions to explore include: Does the

Karen program available at school in Minnesota significantly impact the degree to which the young generation of Karen use the language in various domains? Did the older Karen generation have more opportunities to learn English upon arrival to the United States, and if so, how did that impact language use within the community? If researchers can identify which factors contribute to increased Karen language vitality in some communities, they may be able to provide suggestions for other communities to increase Karen language vitality.

Another potentially interesting area for further research is: How do other people groups from Myanmar use language within their communities in Colorado? For example, Chin, Kachin, and Rohingya¹⁹ peoples in the United States understand the shared experience of fleeing warfare in Myanmar, but they may function differently than the Karen in their community networks within Colorado. Do Chin, Kachin, and Rohingya communities show similar patterns regarding language use and identity shifts? The Rohingya people would be especially interesting to study, because they are among the larger populations from Myanmar in Colorado, according to Table 1. In addition, the Rohingya language comes from the Indo-Aryan language family, which differs from the Tibeto-Burman language family of S'gaw Karen (Ager 2022a & Ager 2022b). Does that affect their use of Burmese with other ethnic groups from Myanmar in Colorado? Also, the Rohingya come from a predominantly Muslim background (Seekins 2017). Since religion does have a significant influence on language maintenance for the Karen, it would be a good comparative study to examine the extent to which the religion of the Rohingya influences their language maintenance.

5.1.2 Bridging the gap for refugee youth accommodating for multiple identities

I have noted that an intergenerational language shift is occurring for the younger generation of Karen while a shift toward multiple identities is also occurring. It would be interesting to conduct research into how to best support Karen refugee youth as they adjust to life in their new homeland. Further research is

¹⁹ The Rohingya are originally from Myanmar's Rakhine State (Seekins 2017).

also needed regarding how to best support the Karen church in reaching Karen refugee youth in light of language shift.

My research has highlighted the cultural and generational gaps experienced by Karen youth in the U.S. between their Karen and American identities. In order to help them bridge those gaps, it is important to study what mentorship programs are in place for refugee youth throughout the United States. Lah Say emphasizes the importance of mentors for refugee youth while discussing the importance of her mentor in her own experience living between the U.S. culture and the Karen culture. It would be helpful to identify existing refugee mentorship programs and interview both community members and the youth involved in those programs to examine the effectiveness of those programs from the community's perspective. It is possible that media and technology have a positive impact on refugee youth's adjustment. Hoffman (2020) mentions a project called "Mapping Memories: Participatory Media, Place-Based Stories and Refugee Youth," in which refugee teenagers are taught to re-create their story of both life in their homeland and their life in the United States. These stories are re-created through photography, video, graphic design, and various means of media; they are used in community centers and schools (Hoffman 2020). Could these media projects be effective in raising awareness and recruiting mentors for youth? Understanding what is helpful in existing programs from the refugee perspective may be instrumental in determining whether it would be helpful for those programs to be started in other refugee communities.

I have discussed both intergenerational language shift among the younger generation of Karen and the role of the church in Karen language maintenance. I did not have the opportunity to explore the question: What would be helpful support for Karen church leadership as they strive to bridge the communicative gap for the younger generation at the Karen church? Since the Karen culture is such a key aspect of their identity, it is important for the younger generation to have opportunities for maintaining their culture through church. However, intergenerational language shift makes it difficult for them to understand the language of the Karen church services. Nau Naw explains how it is difficult for the younger generation to stay engaged at Karen church, because they cannot always understand it. Nau Naw notes that because of this, the younger generation sometimes does not connect with their culture while also not connecting with God through church. It would be an important study to interview Karen pastors

and Karen youth in the church to consider how the Karen church can effectively engage with the younger generation in the message of the service while maintaining Karen culture. For Karen youth who attend an English-speaking church instead of a Karen church, what are their reasons for doing so? For Karen pastors, what are the greatest challenges they experience in trying to engage the young generation at church? Answers to these questions could assist in determining options for bridging the cultural and generational gaps between the young and old generations at Karen churches.

5.2 Summary: Language Shift, Identity, and Maintenance of Karen in Colorado

While my thesis has uncovered intriguing questions and topics to be explored for further research, it has also contributed key information about language use and identity in Colorado's Karen community. The introduction of Karen speakers into Colorado communities resulted from over seven decades of conflict in Myanmar. Because of this conflict, refugees from Myanmar's various people groups, including many Karen, fled into Thailand and eventually emigrated to the United States. Colorado is one of the states of resettlement for Karen refugees in the U.S., and most who come to Colorado find their initial place of resettlement in the city of Denver.

Considering the numerous challenges—one of which is the language barrier—that refugee women face when relocating, they do not often have the opportunity to share their stories. Because of this, there is often a gap in outsiders' understanding and awareness of the experiences of Karen refugees. Through the presentation of the stories of six Karen women, this thesis has contributed toward filling in that gap. I hope that allowing these women's voices to be heard promotes awareness about the Karen, including how language use impacts Karen identity. The women interviewed—Maria Mu, Mulue Karr, Mi See, Lah Say Wah, Nau Naw Lynn, and Elvina Htoo—shared insights into not only their own lives but also revealed patterns of Karen language use.

Based on the information shared by the narrators, I have first established that the Karen language is largely being maintained by the older generation in the home and church settings, while there are shifts to English in the domains of school and work.

Secondly, language use for the younger generation is shifting from Karen to English in the home and church settings. This is evidenced through the narrators' observations and personal experiences, the children's responding to Karen with English, and unmarked code-switching.

Thirdly, I have demonstrated how the utility principle for language use (Coulmas 2013) accounts for some of the language shift. The younger generation often chooses English because it is easier for them in light of what they need to obtain while living in a largely monolingual society in the United States. Because it is sometimes difficult to find the correct word when living in the English-based society of the U.S., the narrators indicate that children sometimes choose English as the best way of expressing what they need to say.

Fourth, the shift in language is also accompanied by a shift in identities for some of the narrators. Since language is not solely a tool for ease of use but also has significant effects on ethnic identity, use of Karen helps to preserve that ethnic identity, as Karan (2011) points out. Karen, American, immigrant, youth, and Burmese speaker identities are among the ethnic identities present for some of the Karen in the United States. The Karen in the United States are living between two cultures, the Karen and the American culture, which effects their use of language. As speakers choose languages, they use marked code-switching to pursue privacy. They use language to separate from certain groups in order to associate with other groups. While there is a tug living between Karen and American cultures, the narrators emphasize the significance of Karen as part of their identity. Sometimes, the tug between Karen and American cultures creates an additional challenge for the youth, since there are significant differences between the older generation of Karen and the younger generation. Another identity which the Karen navigate is that of a history of migrating due to warfare. Some of the narrators voice how they do not have a shared identity with some in the United States who do not understand what it is like to flee their homeland due to warfare. In fact, those who have had to flee their homeland because of warfare find that they often have a shared identity with other speakers of Burmese. This identity is a distinctive shift from their pre-United States experience, since some of the narrators mention they did not want to learn or speak Burmese previously.

Finally, I have established that the Karen church in Colorado is one of the primary institutions for promoting Karen language and culture preservation. This is demonstrated through the narrators' personal involvement at church, Elvina's perception of the church's influence, and the church's involvement of facilitating and encouraging Karen language learning for the younger generation.

The Karen people have encountered a diversity of challenging experiences through their journey to the United States. From fleeing warfare in Myanmar, to the difficulties of the refugee camps, to resettlement to a completely different continent in the United States, and specifically the state of Colorado, their inspiring stories of courage too often go unnoticed. It is my hope that in addition to providing helpful information for refugee communities regarding language use, these stories of resilience will be documented for Karen and American generations to come.

APPENDIX

S'GAW, SHERAW, AND SHAW TERMINOLOGY

Some of the narrators provided insights on the use of “S’gaw” Karen versus “Shaw” or “Sheraw” Karen. Although a full explanation of the difference between these terms is beyond the scope of the present study, I present a summary of observations in this appendix.

When I asked Maria which type of Karen she speaks *without* using the word “S’gaw,” she replied that she speaks “Sheraw” Karen (00:08:03). (I heard Maria pronounce it as both “Sheraw” and “Shaw” during the interview, though most frequently, she pronounced it “Shaw”). Maria confirmed that S’gaw and Sheraw refer to the same variety of Karen; she says, “In my languag- language, in the Karen language, we call it ‘Shaw Karen’, but when you write it in English, it became ‘S’gaw Karen,’ something like that” (00:08:55). I usually referred to Karen as “Shaw” in my conversation with Maria, but once, I accidentally called it “S’gaw” Karen. When I commented to her that I said it incorrectly, she said that “S’gaw” is acceptable and commonly-used, but that “Karen, us Karen, we call it, we called it [Pause] ‘Shaw Karen,’” emphasizing “Shaw Karen” with a tone of certainty and confidence (00:18:48). Maria referred to it as “S’gaw” only twice during the interview. Both references occurred in contexts where “S’gaw” and “Sheraw / Shaw” were being contrasted.

When Elvina said she speaks “S’gaw” Karen, I asked her if it is the same as “Shaw” or “Sheraw.” She had been thinking out loud about how the term S’gaw came about when she replied:

Yeah, S’gaw is Sheraw. How did I, how did I tell you S’gaw? I should have tell you Sheraw because- Who come up with S’gaw, is that? I don’t remember who come up with S’gaw. Is that American? (00:34:35).

Then she noted:

I know there’s S’gaw and Pwo, I- Sheraw is like super, super Karen, like when you say ‘Sheraw,’ that’s mean you are like native Karen. Like [Laugh], I say S’gaw, it’s more like, Americanized. Like when you go to Thai restaurant, you, you have Thai owner versus Americanized-Thai, so when you say Sheraw, it’s like Thai. When you say S’gaw, it’s like Americanized, you know (00:34:53).

When I asked Mi if she uses “S’gaw” Karen, Burmese, or English with other speakers of Karen, she replied directly with “S’gaw Karen,” after which the interpreter interjected, “Shaw Karen” (00:10:16). Mi repeated “S’gaw,” followed by discussion between Mi and the interpreter, after which the interpreter said in English, “We call it ‘Shaw,’ yeah...”(00:10:42). The interpreter used “Shaw” throughout the interview. While they did not explain why it is called “Shaw,” their discussion indicates that the interpreter found it significant enough to adjust the interpretation to “Shaw” from “S’gaw,” and to specify that they call it “Shaw.” The interpreter never used “S’gaw” during Mi’s interview.

In the personal narratives in this thesis, my use of “S’gaw,” “Sheraw,” and “Shaw” reflects the usage of the narrator. It must be noted that not all narrators were asked to comment on the differences between the terms, so it is not possible to draw conclusions regarding those narrators’ sentiments or preferences regarding which term they used.

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