

## **Uneasy Pairs: Revitalizations of Karen Ethno-Nationalism and Civil Society across the Thai-Burmese Border**

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### **Abstract**

Building on Wimmer (2012) and other critical scholarship on ethnic nationalism, I explore the reproduction and increase what I like to call here a humanitarian or refugee nationalism of the Karen in the context of a humanitarian civil society in the borderland of Thailand and Myanmar. While this ethno-nationalism is of course tied to the parochial and local image of Karen cultural identity firmly rooted in the rural and mountain landscape of Southeastern Burma, I argue that Karen ethno-nationalism is very cosmopolitan in that the revitalization of this idea of an imagined homeland for the Karen (Kawthoolei= land of the free, without evil) is fabricated and socially embedded in the wider globalized networks of organizations in Southeastern Burma, in the refugee camps, the many Karen civil society organizations on the Thai border, and not least in the growing diaspora resettled to the many countries in the West.

### **Keywords**

Karen, Burma (Myanmar), nationalism, displacement, exile, diaspora, ethnicity, civil society

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The Karen are an ethnic minority living in Thailand and Burma/Myanmar, constituting about 4 million people in Burma (Kwanchewan 2003, Hayami 2004). Its nationalist organization and movement rally round the notion of an autonomous Karen nation called *Kawthoolei*, an “imagined community” in the sense of Ben Anderson (1983), which exists in the aspiration of the Karen and is performed as such in public ritual. After decades of civil war in Southeastern Burma, Karen villages in the conflict zone were left devastatingly poor, lacking even the most basic resources. The education and health sector in this area were mostly never really developed and physical violence and constant taxing and looting of the villages resulted in severe food crises and large-scale displacement and migration. This displacement and migration led to a re-location of the nationalist movement to the nine refugee camps along the Thai border with Burma. A new partnership with Western, mostly Christian humanitarian organizations enabled an amazing effort to provide emergency health and educational services to devastated communities in Burma and displaced households in the camps (Horstmann 2011, Horstmann *fc.*).

The hardships faced by the Karen in Southeastern Burma at the hands of the Burmese army generated a strong swell of sympathy and social support from various international networks and church congregations. This follows a pattern of over 200 years of intensive contact between the Karen people in Southeastern Burma and American Baptist missionaries. As a consequence, even though only a small segment of the mostly Sgaw-Karen language speakers are actually Christians, they formed the core of the early nationalist movement and the Karen are known in America and in the global West as Christians, where else the majority is in fact Karen Buddhist. Karen Baptist and other Christian-Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventists, charismatic, evangelical and Pentecostal-congregations have over time built impressive trans-national church networks and receive modest financial support. For example, when the famous bible school in Maela refugee camp was burned to the ground in a fire in 2011, the reconstruction lasted only a few months as financial support readily flowed in from around the globe.

Even when the social fabric of Karen society in Southeastern Burma was torn up by war, I argue that Karen ethno-nationalism survived and was even greatly strengthened by the growth of humanitarian aid and services and transnational Karen diaspora networks, especially, but not only, in the refugee camps (Horstmann *fc.*). Karen ethno-nationalism is widespread and has also strongly influenced the young civil society in Southeastern Burma. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to critically reflect on the continuous reproduction of the ideology of a Karen race and its performance in the Karen ritual calendar, especially in Karen New Year celebrations in Southeastern Burma, in Maesot, in the camps, and in the Karen

diasporic groups in the West. As Gravers insightfully points out, the historical development of ethno-nationalism in association to Karen Buddhist visions of millenarian utopian orders of a just and reciprocal society and, in a Christian and ultimately Western modern version was fostered in the close alliance between the Karens and American missionaries (Gravers 2007a, 2007b). Dudley comes closest to the approach presented in this paper in her fine study of Karenni education and of the reproduction of nationalist ideas as a central element in camp education. As McConnachie, in her fine study on governing refugees posits, the Karen were able to reverse the power relations reigning in Southeastern Burma and construct a cultural hegemony in the refugee camps (McConnachie 2014). Thus, in the following, I explore the continuous vitality of Karen ethno-nationalism in the face of military defeat and the reconstruction of the idea of a Karen nation in exile. The Karen National Union (KNU), the largest Karen political organization and armed group, was forced to reconcile its position and, since 1976, has opted for advocating for a semi-autonomous Karen state in a federal system in the Union of Burma. But who speaks for Karen nationalism and who is included in this? For example, what is the meaning of Karen ethnic ideology for various cultural minority groups within the Karen groups? What is the meaning of Karen nationalism in the context of stark poverty among the majority of the Karen? And what is the ontology of everyday nationalism as experienced by ordinary Karen? Karen nationalism is built on a bundle of identity markers, legends and myths about the origin of the Karen, Karen clothes, Karen rural identities, Karen arts and beliefs, but also the mobilization of political identity statements in the nationalist movement and masculine Karen military culture (Dudley 2010, Fink 2001, introducing San C. Po). Where Karen ethno-nationalism may well be based on traditional ideas of a just order elsewhere (Gravers *fc.*), my question is whether this nationalism can be mobilized to persuade people to sacrifice their lives for the abstract and constructed idea of a Karen race by joining fighting, or seeing fighting as the only solution. Another question closely related concerns the way that nationalism engenders processes of inclusion and exclusion.

In order to begin a critical and reflexive work on Karen ethno-nationalism I find inspiration in the path breaking work that has been done on nationalism and ethno-nationalism. Wimmer, for example, has skillfully analyzed the mobilization of cultural resources in nationalist indigenous movements (Wimmer 1997). And the increasing commodification of ethnicity in the articulation of modern discourses on indigenous rights has been discussed in critical scholarship such as that of Comaroff. Moreover, in a classic comparative study of what he calls hierarchical and egalitarian nationalism, Bruce Kapferer has shown the resilience of legends and myths in the making of nationalist ideology (Kapferer 2012). Wimmer

has also argued that the essentialist perspective of ethnic group identity and ethnic boundaries has been underestimated by approaches that focus on a constructionist perspective of identity (Wimmer 2012). Building on Wimmer and other critical scholarship, I explore the reproduction and increase what I like to call here a humanitarian nationalism of the Karen in the context of a humanitarian civil society in the borderland of Thailand and Myanmar. While this ethno-nationalism is of course tied to the parochial and local image of Karen cultural identity firmly rooted in the countryside and mountains of Southeastern Burma, I argue that this Karen ethno-nationalism and national identity is very cosmopolitan in that the revitalization of this idea is fabricated and socially embedded in the wider globalized networks of organizations in Southeastern Burma, in the refugee camps, the many Karen civil society organizations on the Thai border, and not least in the growing diaspora in the many countries in the West. My thesis is that today's Karen ethno-nationalism is not only associated with the nationalist movement and to the different Karen armed groups, but is a dynamic social phenomenon that takes its strength from close networked civil society groups in Burma, Thailand and in the world. It is a way that the Karen educated middle class rather than ordinary Karen villagers present themselves to the world and define their identity within it.

Resentments are already starting to grow in the refugee camps among the non-Karen populations in the camps in Thailand as animists are becoming exposed to dominant Karen nationalist ideology and (soft) Christian proselytizing. The KNU is one of the major players in the loose alliance of ethnic minority armies, despite being greatly weakened by major splits and withdrawals from military leaders who set up their own militia or, in the case of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), to develop a counter-army consisting of Buddhists in opposition to the predominantly Christian leadership of the KNU. Even within the KNU, there are strong disagreements and tensions as to how to proceed with the fragile peace process. Some leaders strongly support the peace process, while others prepare for further fighting and all the suffering that would entail for the civil population. Nevertheless, the KNU continues to represent the strongest force in the cease-fire negotiations. For the KNU the fact that they are allowed to govern in their "liberated areas" within the Karen state and their inclusion in the peace process is taken as evidence of the great success of their decade long armed struggle.

## THE FRAME

While conducting fieldwork in Eastern Burma and in the refugee camps on the Thai border, I was struck by the overwhelming influence of Karen ethno-nationalism on the civil society of the Karen.<sup>1</sup> Whether it was the head teachers in the migration school or the head teacher of the boarding school in Maela camp, or the young new Karen leaders, NGOs, in unison they urged the Karen to stand together, boosted T-shirts with KNU slogans (*We never surrender*) and the national hero of the Karen nationalist movement Saw Ba U Gyi, the flying of the Karen flag, training in Karen drilling skills, and more general beliefs in the purity of the Karen race. Moreover, the KNU also regularly hoist the Karen flag and hold ritual days, such as the national day and the martyr day to commemorate national heroes. While the Karen nationalist movement has been closely associated with the influence of American Baptist missionaries (Keyes 1979), Karen ethno-nationalism is just as widespread among Buddhists as it is among Christians. The DKBA holds Buddhist as well as nationalist rituals and the KNU and DKBA actively compete to represent the Karen nation. DKBA's patron, monk U Thuzana who was identified as a Maitreya, a figure who has descended from heaven to liberate the Karen from suffering and to bring prosperity to the Buddhist kingdom, is a stern nationalist. During my last ethnographic project on bottom-up/grassroots humanitarianism, young people working for Karen NGOs looked to the KNU for leadership and often directed my attention towards the "Karen unity" meetings in which the KNU leadership took a lead with the aim of overcoming strife and competition between the various political factions. Moreover, during the Karen New Year festivities I found that female and feminist community leaders stood side by side with the main male and expressively macho Karen militia leaders. During the Karen New Year festivals the performance of the Karen *Don* dance has become the emblem of Karen nationalism. The same dance is performed by dance troupes from every region in Karen state, each troupe representing a different color of the Karen flag. The performers train no less than six months in advance to perfect the movements. The meaning of the *Don* dance as a central symbol of village cohesion and fertility has slowly shifted to a symbol of the imagined Karen nation. During the Karen New Year celebrations in Shwekoko the flags of the Karen militia, the Karen

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1 The paper incorporates recent observations from my project funded by the Thailand Research Fund entitled *Humanitarianism from Below* community-based organizations of the Karen and the role of the international community. Fieldwork for the project was conducted in conjunction with the project group "Streams of Knowledge along the Thai-Burmese Border Zones: Multiple Dimensions of People, Capital and Culture," coordinated by Decha Tangseefa (Thammasat University, Bangkok). All data collected are my own and based on observations gained from ethnographic fieldwork. I would like to thank Decha Tangseefa and Su-Ann Oh for their warm and friendly support and for inspiring this article.

Peace Council and Border Guard Forces, were flown while those of the DKBA and KNU were notably absent.

Although the Karen national project as it was first conceived may have limited future prospects, the idea of a sovereign homeland remains at the core of the different Karen militia's territorial aspirations as they negotiate with the military government in Myanmar. My main thesis is that the humanitarian economy in the Karen case has been decisive for the emergence of a pioneer civil society, consisting of organic, indigenous intellectuals, such as students, teachers, artists, writers, monks, pastors, and local politicians. Many of these local intellectuals who were forced into exile in the early 1980's, have later received extremely lucrative and highly sought after jobs in NGOs, human rights groups, self-employed colleges and universities, and camp schools. The KNU has been forced to re-organize itself in the Thai borderland and has been incredibly creative and industrious in doing so, establishing many different grassroots organizations, which I look to look into here. While the violent fissure of the KNU and DKBA had disastrous consequences on the KNU and heavy reprisals on the civil population (including camp attacks by the DKBA), Karen nationalism can equally be found among Christian pastors in the camps and along the KNLA-controlled border areas, as among charismatic Buddhist monks in Hpa-an town and Karen state.

This explains the existence of religious nationalism among Buddhist militias that revitalize traditional cycles of Karen millenarian and anti-colonial movements among the leadership of the Karen National Union which, until recently, was in the hands of a Seventh Day Adventist, who governed the KNU with an iron fist, not hesitating to execute members who were identified as betrayers of the national cause. Therefore, a minor aim of this article is to explore the ambiguous relationship between civil society and vibrant Karen ethno-nationalism and how this may hamper the peace process in the sense that Karen society and the nation of *Kawthoolei* is persistently imagined by the nationalist movement as exclusively Karen, leaving little space for peaceful coexistence of the Karen with the Burmese majority.

In a recent article on human rights in Southeastern Burma I argued that the KNU holds a monopoly on the human rights discourse (Horstmann 2012). The KNU discovered the discourse on indigenous minorities at a time when there were serious doubts among anthropologists about the essentialist definition of ethnic identities. I further contended that the KNU exercises a form of symbolic violence by underplaying internal differences within the Karen. While the Karen are estimated to comprise anything between 4-6 million people in Southeastern Burma this number includes groups such as the Karenni, the Pa-o, who are vastly different for those who traditionally identify as "Karen." Even among those who

do identify as ‘Karen,’ there are considerable differences in language, modes of livelihood, and cosmologies between, for example, Sgaw and Pwo Karen. I contend that Karen cultural identity was in the refugee camps and within the frame of the emergent humanitarian sector having hardly existed in Southeastern Burma in this homogenous form before.

What I describe here is how the highly commendable humanitarian work and the outstanding efforts to help Karen to reconstruct their fragmented lives also served to build the foundation for the Karen ethno-nationalist project. The emplacement of the Karen individual within this organized humanitarian framework shaped Karen social and cultural selves and produced new personalities who are ready to risk their lives for the sake of an imagined Karen collectivity.

## **KAREN CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE THAI BORDERLAND**

Karen civil society got off to very rocky start in Southeast Burma. The brutal civil war devastated the social fabric of Karen society leaving many schools and sometimes whole villages burned to the ground, forcing many villagers into the forest, into exile in the Internally displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Burma or the refugee camps in Thailand, or to Thai Karen communities on the Thai border. Certainly, the sheer physical violence of the military regime in Myanmar did not allow for the operation of open political opposition, which would be suicidal in the face of military repression. But it is possible to argue that the civil society in southeast Burma was also squeezed by the KNU who purged left wing elements within the nationalist movement and put intensive pressure on the civil population in KNLA-controlled provinces. While the assaults by the Myanmar military were far graver, peasants were also threatened by KNLA-commanders and the KNU continued, and continues to exercise pressure on peasants in the military bases. The KNU was reconstructed and bolstered by a partnership with the newly emerging humanitarian sector. Western missionary networks and Christian humanitarian organizations regularly identified the KNU as the aggrieved party and such were considered as the “good guys.” This eventually led European humanitarian organizations to form the very productive Thailand Burma Border Consortium, which efficiently organized humanitarian assistance to the desperate Karen and increased transparency of aid distribution to private households (TBBC 2010).

The Border Consortium not only provided crucial rations of rice, charcoal and clothes, but also worked together closely with many humanitarian organizations to provide training, education, health services, and produced highly reliable

and well-researched reports on the human rights situation, poverty and displacement in Burma. The Border Consortium provides crucial support to local Karen organizations, which it has funded and supported from the very beginning, and thus, contributed greatly to a hugely active and dynamic civil society on the Thai border.<sup>2</sup>

The Karen had a high level of organization in their social support networks and alternative security networks. The traditional security networks were established to protect the waterways against being poisoned and to patrol the villages with volunteer guards. When the first refugee camps began emerging, the Karen established internal committees to share the administration, and especially, the crucial distribution of aid rations to the vast number of refugee families who sought shelter there. The KNU benefitted from the resources that were channeled to the Karen, military aid, and from human rights campaigns led by the democratic opposition and student movement, that were represented in the United Nations, who were allied with the KNU. From a practical perspective, the emerging humanitarian sector could only operate under the protection of active KNLA troops.

In a sense, the KNU has set out a course of suffering for the Karen in taking up arms, but also used this suffering as a tool to garner support and funding for its nationalist cause. In Maela, for example, I was able to buy a pirated copy of the film “*Blood Karen*” in which the horror of the civil Karen population was depicted by portraying a Burmese commander who shoots a young Karen girl in cold blood. This black and white, what best can be described as propaganda, film is routinely repeated in other Western representations of the Karen conflict such as film clips of the Free Burma Rangers and in populist scholarship where the Burmese army is portrayed as “evil” (Rogers 2004), constantly reproducing crude stereotypes and valorizing Karen nationalism. But the KNU also realized that, apart from the military arm, the organization needed civil partners to attract funding and resources from Western donors, and thus in the early 1980’s, numerous NGOs and CBOs were founded. While many of these organizations in their early stages stemmed directly from, or were closely associated with the KNU, most soon developed their own agendas, quite independent and sometimes in conflict with KNU positions and strategies. Together, these NGOs and CBOs soon formed

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2 The Border Consortium—former Thailand Burma Border Consortium—consists of voluntary humanitarian organizations that oversee and manage humanitarian assistance and rations to the camp and support Karen voluntary groups working with the Karen on all aspects of livelihood in the camps. See the excellent report of the Consortium’s experiences and moving engagement in TBBC (2010). I would like to thank the board of The Border Consortium for answering to all of my questions relating to their wonderful work. The excellent reports and surveys on conflict, displacement and poverty are available for download on TBBC’s website <http://theborderconsortium.org/>.

a very impressive local and transnational activism, what I called a refugee public. Curiously, there is little critical scholarship on this important public sphere, with human rights reports from activist groups concentrating solely on human rights violations.

One such organization is the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), which emerged from an alliance of American and local human rights activists. The KHRG regularly issues excellent and precise documentation of human rights abuses and is exceptional in that they increasingly also cover human rights abuses committed by different Karen militias. Another private, non-profit organization that works on human rights is called Burma Issues, it focuses on training and empowering Karen villagers. Some of the activists active in both organizations were former KNLA soldiers or have relatives fighting for the KNLA. One of the central Karen NGO/CBOs is the Karen Woman Organization (KWO), which is an extremely sophisticated, strong and well-funded private non-profit organization that consists of many thousands of women. Originally associated with the KNU, the KWO has developed their own goals and is powerful enough to counter male KNU positions in the public sphere. The KWO defends women in refugee camps and IDPs, with a strong focus on childcare and violence against women, including violence perpetrated by Karen men.

Indeed there is a multiplicity of civil society groups active on the Thai/Myanmar Border today. The Karen Teachers Working Group (KTWG), for instance, organizes mobile schools for IDPs in the conflict zone, while World Education Thailand produced the schoolbooks and written the curricula. The KTWG is also active in the camps and many activists are former student activists who are close to the Karen refugee committees. Another such group, the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) has established hundreds of small mobile teams that provide emergency health care in minority areas. Originally concentrating their efforts on the Karen state, the Back Packers are now active in nearly all ethnic minority areas of Myanmar. These organizations have been closely related to the KNU and as many KNU members and former soldiers found new jobs within these newly founded CBOs and NGOs. In a sense, Christians with strong affiliations with the KNU form an overwhelming majority of the staff of the different organizations, leaving little room for the multitude of ethnic minority organizations from other groups that are increasingly organizing in Maesot as CBOs and are securing a piece of the humanitarian cake. The manifold of Karen NGOs and CBOs has created a robust social network with deep transnational connections and are usually well funded, although sponsorship for the relatively independent small organizations, such as Burma Issues, are dwindling in the context of political system in Myanmar garnering steadily more legitimacy in the international community

which has led to the subsequent relocation of operations of many international humanitarian organizations across the border into Myanmar. The intertwining of humanitarian assistance, ethnicity, and nationalism can be seen clearest in the repressive, but partly protective spaces of the refugee camps in Thailand, the space I now turn to.

## **HUMANITARIAN GOVERNMENT AND CIVILITY IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS**

The refugee camp in Thailand, is not simply a depressed “non-space” where traumatized people are degraded to do little more than wait, dependent on rations and subjugated under the military administration, but is also a public space of “quasi-urban sociability” (Agier 2002), a space of possibility and hope in which residents make huge efforts to “occupy” the camps and make them more human. The potential, heterogeneity, and heterotopia of identity resources are constitutive to social interaction and to people’s “urban” aspirations. Indeed, even when marginalized and destitute, people tend to gather all their resources in order to reconstruct their lives and to shape the environment around them. While the “polis” is made up by community centers, community organizations and churches, the “urban” habitat is also characterized by the emergence of informal markets, shops in which foodstuff, clothes, cellphones, and pirated CDs and VCDs are sold for profit.

The crucial architecture of the polis in the camp relies on the construction of public space. Humanitarian organizations were able to base their assistance on the very high degree of organization present in the Karen Community based organizations and NGOs. The different actors address the camps from completely different angles. The Thai government sees the camp as a space for the establishing of power, confinement and control over refugees. The humanitarian sector, on the other hand, regularly sees the camp as a place of destitute refugees and victims that depend on aid. The refugees, by contrast, often aim to make the camp a space of their own to compete with the Thai government. The Karen National Union, for example, runs a parallel system of humanitarian government and administration, which remains very vulnerable to changing Thai politics. This is such that a pastor from the Karen Refugee Committee has called the camp as a “blessing in disguise” as it allows them to preach the bible to the Karen and reconstruct a “home” in exile. Even after the announced closure of the camps, the refugee organizations constructed a permanent public space, which is transportable in the Thailand-Burma border, and hence, counters the emphasis of the Thai government on the

transitory nature of the camps. For many refugees the camps in fact offer *mobility* in the form of resettlement and livelihood strategies between the camps, enclaves in Mae Sot's urban center, in the hilly Thai countryside in Northwestern Thailand and access to resettlement programs to a third country in the West.

While the refugee camp population benefits from the service and assistance of INGOs, refugees are not allowed to work and thus depend on remittances, illegal work, or relatives to subsist. This focus is important as it turns the attention away from the conception of refugees as a passive, anonymous crowd, to people who actively strive to shape their destiny and future in the camp. Moreover, community leaders in the camps keep multiple connections to centers outside of the camp for their survival and reproduction. We are now witness to the last incarnation of the refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border: humanitarian organizations are gradually withdrawing from the highly accessible and highly regulated camps to move directly to Burma. Only roughly half in the camps of the residents (mostly older, established) are registered with the UNHCR, and are thus, entitled to their international rights as a refugee, such that this category is not granted to displaced people residing in the hilly countryside of Northwestern Thailand who are inscribed in Thai law as simply illegal migrants, many of them without papers or identification (Tangseefa 2007).

An understanding of the camp management requires a short excursion through the history of the camps in western Thailand. There is a long history of Burmese Karen resettling to this area, yet permanent refugee settlement did not exist until 1984. Refugee camps were transformed into large agglomerations we see today only after many smaller and more temporary camps in the border-zone were shelled and raided by the Burmese army and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) troops in the early 90s. The assistance of Christian faith-based groups and Christian missionary networks was instrumental in the first phase of the establishment of these City-Camps. Christian groups had collected experiences with refugee camps on the Thai-Lao and Thai-Cambodian border in the 70s/80s so were well equipped to help when the humanitarian crisis emerged in hills and forests of Southeastern Burma after the large scale escalations in the conflict in the 80s and 90s.

Settlement into the camps is anything but spontaneous and is in fact regulated by the camp authorities. The governance and social control of the camps is two-tiered with the administration formally entirely controlled by the Thai Ministry of Interior, the camps being de-facto a state-controlled space. Refugee camps are called "temporary shelters" by the Royal Thai government (RTG) to underline their temporary status and refugees were forbidden from leaving the camp without governmental permission. However, while the formal administration of the

refugee camp lies with the Royal Thai Government, the practical day-to-day administration is left to the Karen.

After the Christian missionary networks moved to the Thai-Burmese border in the early 80's to help a huge wave of displaced people unable to return to Burma, the Karen Refugee Council (KRC) was the natural and obvious partner for the emerging Christian aid consortium to access the refugee population in Thailand and Burma at that time. The Karen Refugee Councils have been established by the KNU, but the KRC did not usurp the broader role of the KNU. Only a small proportion of the displaced population made it to the camps, and huge parts of the civil population remained internally displaced in the hills forest of Burma. A place in the camp became a privilege that could only be attained by those who had ties to camp residents and those who were able to find an entrance point to the camp. Over time the Christian consortium transformed into the secular Thai Burma Border Consortium, which administers a substantial budget to help with food, charcoal and other rations to 140,452 refugees in the camps, in the countryside and through another INGO, on the Burma side. Each camp has a refugee committee divided into sections or zones. In the early stages of the camps positions on the committees were members of KNU friendly groups such as the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Pastors, Karen community leaders and elders.

McConnachie (2014) argues that this military and political structure of the camps has enabled community participation in humanitarian assistance. The KRC has preferred to handle penal cases internally, involving the Thai administration as little as possible. Moreover, the KNU has expelled families from the refugee camps if they found them a security threat to the governance of the camps. However, in time, the Karen Refugee Committee has become more civilian and elders have been appointed to complement existing representatives. The Thailand Burma Border Consortium has also begun to reflect more critically its own identification with the KNU and has placed more emphasis on the accountability of the humanitarian aid they provide.

The urban or "polis" in the camp is constituted by the presence of international organizations such as the UNHCR, the EU, international humanitarian organizations and community based organizations, organized by the educated spectrum of Karen refugees.

Orphanages, schools and churches can be conceptualized not only as shelters, but also as disciplinary institutions. Mediating the suffering of the Karen as a spokesperson, this nationalist network maintains cross-border humanitarianism, while the KNLA exercised pressure on Karen villagers by demanding their loyalty, levying them for taxes and young men to serve as soldiers, and not least by exercising control over the population in the camps and in the KNU-controlled areas

of Karen state in Burma.

Non-KNU aligned Karen villagers, squeezed between different conflicting parties and their demand for taxes and labor often responded in strategies of avoidance, asserting their non-KNU, non-Christian identities, and/or settling outside the camp altogether. Settling in the countryside allowed Buddhist Pwo Karen to avoid the camp regime set up by the Christian and nationalist administration in the camps. These villagers often made a living by working for Thai Karen patrons as tenant farmers or farm laborers living in hiding, and thus, are not entitled or cannot access humanitarian assistance or the advocacy work of community based organizations (Prasert 2012).

Under these conditions the situation on the Thailand-Burma border has bifurcated: The camps have become a basis for the reconstruction of a nationalist movement and project, and for the emergence of corridors for transnational social formations and re-entering of the conflict zone in Burma with a humanitarian and military task. KNU and Christian-controlled education was the basis for the emergence of a distinct Karen identity. The reconstruction of the educational sector in the camps is one of the astonishing achievements of indigenous camp administration and protestant churches. High schools operating in Mae La were known widely as schools of excellence with a high quality of teaching, staffed with professional teachers, foreign volunteers, and community and church leaders. The educational system in the camps was in the hands of the KRC with little or no interference from the Thai administration. As such, while the educational system almost collapsed on the Burmese border and many schools were closed, the humanitarian situation and the support of many organizations, especially faith-based, and the bounded, quasi laboratory like character of the camp, allowed for the blossoming of the Karen education sector that was used for the modern production and transformation of illiterate refugees into “modern” educated subjects (cf. Dudley 2007). Education is the springboard to one of the lucrative positions in a humanitarian NGO.

This distinct refugee identity was backed by international humanitarian organizations that identified with the Karen and all too regularly grasped the conflict in Manichean terms of good against evil. Massive human rights violations by the Burmese military against civil populations, campaigns to depopulate whole areas, forced labor and relocations, massive displacement and wide spread state terror reinforced a global imagination of persecuted Christians in a world of hell. For some selected faith-based organizations and associated church networks, the Karen symbolized the prototype of persecuted ethnic minority Christians. Hence, faith-based relief and missionary organizations were able to raise substantial church donations in the US and elsewhere for the “Karen cause.”

Dudley (2007) describes the mental transformation of young men to conscious warriors during socialization in the camp schools and think tanks. Learning English with anthropologist Sandra Dudley, young refugees often expressed their desire to fight for, contribute to, and serve the Karen nation. These young women and men were transformed from Buddhists, Animists or other syncretic local religions and unawareness of ethnic or national attributes to a distinct ethnic, religious and nationalist identity.

In the camps, only some key public buildings (social, health and community centers) benefitted from electricity, while private households depended on public facilities, generators and candlelight. KRC members, camp speakers, Community organizations, zone representatives and other community, social and health workers contributed greatly to the wellbeing of the camp households by way of strategic planning and brokered the services and projects of numerous international NGOs. The RTG did not allow the UNHCR to operate in the refugee camps until the late 90s, as this would imply an acknowledgement of the fact that the refugees may be residing in Thai territory for good.

Above all, there were offices of the international organizations, the UNHCR and the EU. International NGOs present in the camps included *act for peace*, NCCA (Australia), *Caritas* (Switzerland), *Christian Aid* (UK and Ireland), *Church World Service* (USA), *Dan Church Aid* (Denmark), *Diakonia* (Sweden), *ICCO* (Netherlands), *International Rescue Committee* (USA), *Norwegian Church Aid* (Norway), and *ZOA Refugee Care* (Netherlands). Other organizations providing services included *Save the Children* (UK), faith-based *Partners*, *Red Cross*, *ADRA* and *World Vision*. In a sense, Maela was “over-served” with aid projects, with numerous international NGOs using the camp space to deliver their aid packages. Almost every aid project, health, educational or livelihood was coordinated and implemented closely with the Karen Refugee Committee and the Karen internal administration.

The seven “Karen” and two “Karenni” refugee camps are located in remote places on the Thailand-Burmese border. The intention the RTG had with this was to keep refugees away from being drawn into Thailand, and to make the sites less accessible. In the wet season, roads are difficult and four-wheel trucks are needed to make the way to some camps. This, however, has not hindered people in leaving the camps whenever they need to by way of drawing on their extensive social support networks. From around 2005, access to the camps was highly restricted. Even before, the RTG declared that the camps were full and therefore closed for new arrivals.

## KAREN PATRIOTISM IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS

Karen Refugees use a number of strategies to make the camp more human. They construct houses along traditional village architectonic forms, construct meeting places and beautiful gardens, places of worship and keep their communities intact by giving the name of the community or the church to the respective Zone. These efforts point to a central feature of the Karen situation, which distinguishes it from other camp situations around the world: From the beginning of the camps, the Karen situation was characterized by a highly encompassing level of community organization and discipline.

Resettlement programs, which started in 2005 and reached their peak from 2007 to 2011, lead to a huge enthusiasm and optimism about a better future in the West, although rural, uneducated villagers often had little idea what their life in the US would look like. Not all settlers were successful in the US and some ended up falling so deeply in debt in the new home that they returned to the camp again penniless. Families that successfully integrated into Western society mostly send important remittances to their home communities in the camps, which act as a life support for many refugee households who depended heavily on these. No less than 76,000 Burmese (mainly Karen) refugees had been resettled to the West in 2012, mainly to the US (around 80%) and the rest settled in either Australia, Canada, Norway, Denmark, Finland, or the UK.

In this process, the Karen have acquired a reputation of being “preferred” refugees in many of the countries they have resettled to. In the US, Christian refugee service organizations are largely responsible for taking care of the new arrivals. Christians of the *Kawthoolei* Karen Baptist Convention were, for example, able to mobilize international church networks to place children in educational institutions. Some of the Karen leaders have, however, decided to remain in the camps, sending their children abroad for a better future. People in high positions in the refugee administration were able to place their relatives high on top of the resettlement lists. This was not so much a corrupt practice, but emerged naturally from the camp structures.

The sense of the time of the camps coming to close has unleashed dynamics in the camps and heightened competition among a diverse refugee population. The refugee camps seem to be disintegrating, while the gap between the families is quickly widening. High remittances together with black money and aid resources has created urban markets in the camps such that nearly everything is now traded and shops, coffee corners and stalls are opening everywhere. Resettlement has increased pressure on the camp population tremendously as unfettered rumors have raised hopes among many (especially paperless) Burmese citizens that they

may have the possibility to also become a UNHCR registered refugee. Repatriation is not a prospective that many of people in the refugee camp are looking forward to, and the paradigmatic shift from UN and INGO discourses on resettlement to those on repatriation is too abrupt for many to digest. Political change in Burma may increase aspirations for the KNU leadership, however for refugees who suffered human rights abuses at the hands of military groups in Burma resettlement provokes many deep-seated anxieties.

Religion in the camps was from the beginning predominantly Christianity and has been deeply implicated in local governance. The first Karen Christian communities arrived on the Thai border almost intact and the community's pastor acted as their natural leader. Therefore, the original population in the camps was largely Christian, while the majority of the Karen in Eastern Burma are Buddhist, Animist or practice a syncretic mix of both religions. However, more recent arrivals in the camps have been Buddhist and Animists who have had to adjust to the relative hegemony of Christianity in the camps. Dudley describes the arrival of Animist villagers 1996-1997 from hill dwelling villages due to ethnic cleansing and forced relocation in Eastern Burma who had little contact with modern civilization, had often never seen a foreigner and were neither in touch with Christian nationalists nor identified with Pan-Karenni nationalism. The traditional Kayah villagers clashed with the educated Karenni in the schools and health clinics, who regarded the traditional villagers uncivilized and un-integrated (cf. Dudley 1999).

Maela refugee camp has some 56 churches where many of the churches and the bible school are Baptist. The name of the Karen Baptist Convention on the Thai border, the *Kawthoolei* Karen Baptist Convention, clearly demonstrates the proximity of the Baptist church to the Karen nationalist movement. While the church has its own theological agenda, many of the KNU leaders are Christian. Other churches, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, the Catholics or Anglicans do not identify with the nationalist movement to the same extent as the Baptists. The Mae La refugee camp and other camps have also become centers of proselytizing Christianity to Buddhist Karen. Conversion is not only a spiritual trajectory, and Animists are also integrated into the collective political project by way of conversion to construct an imaginative Karen homeland. Converts are invited to assist the highly politicized community based relief and human rights organizations where new members are needed. In this way, new converts and newborn Christians become part of the Karen modernity project and part of the imagined national community. A young friend in my host family in Mae Sariang, for instance, volunteered for an Australian Pentecostal church for which he taught impoverished children on the Burmese border, while another friend who converted in the camp went on missions with the humanitarian groups the Free Burma Rangers

inside Eastern Burma. The Free Burma Rangers is a Christian humanitarian organization that works with Karen volunteers, providing both emergency relief and worship service to displaced and wounded Karen villagers.

While the first wave of refugees was mostly Christian Karen, the last wave has been more disorganized and consists mostly of Buddhist and Animist Karen. In this manner, the population in the refugee camp has become more diverse and many new places of worship emerged for Buddhists and Animists as well as for Karen local religions. Many of the Christianized Karen in Eastern Burma became successful missionaries and far more Karen were converted by local missionaries who used local narratives and were more at ease with local cultural beliefs. All Karen churches, thus, believe in their obligation to spread the “good news” of the gospel and to organize evangelist teams in Eastern Burma. Local volunteer teachers regularly stay with war-torn civil populations in the Burmese borderland. After some time of teaching, they build a small chapel, conduct worship, and invite the children to the chapel and to Christian prayer. In the refugee camps, the Karen Baptist convention drew on the organizational structures they formed in Eastern Burma to successfully establish a local missionary network, connecting pastoral work in the camp with evangelizing missions on the Thai border. They have benefited greatly from religious freedom in Thailand, whereas missionary activity in Eastern Burma has to be done low-key and is closely tied to the provision of social services. On the Thai border, Karen pastors, bible students, or churches visit Christian villages or Buddhist villages with Christian minorities. Christians from Burmese migrant villages go to the most remote villages on the Thai border to introduce locals to Jesus.

Religion in the refugee camps fuels a mergence that we may call religious nationalism. Every year, Baptists and different Christians residing in the Thai borderland meet in Chiang Mai to read the bible through Karen eyes. Reading the bible through Karen eyes also meant to interpret the past and to project the future. The success of this soft proselytizing in the camp became apparent to me after I attended a Baptist ceremony in the new year of 2010 in remote Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp, a difficult drive from Mae Sariang. The large-scale event brought the whole Karen community inside and outside the camp together, churches, refugees and NGOs and was presided by the KRC. More than 500 people, children and adults, were baptized on a single day. Friends and relatives living in Mae Sot or Chiang Mai joined the large audience on the small river flowing through the camp. Non-eother than the charismatic leader and chair of the KRC Robert Htwe resided the ceremony in traditional Karen clothes from a boat using a loudspeaker to address the big audience. Numerous church leaders, pastors, teachers and North American missionaries were invited to this auspicious ceremony and spectacular perfor-

mance. Baptisms included teenagers, born-again Christians who were baptized a second time and converts. The event occurred in a festive atmosphere that transformed a whole refugee camp into a church or Christian public space. The meaning of the ceremony however, transcended a mere religious practice. Religious leaders carefully planned this event as an ambition of evangelist practices in the camp. In realizing this event, church leaders talked about “God’s mysterious plan” where the suffering of the Karen was rendered sensible as it constituted a “blessing in disguise.”

## CONCLUSION

In the Karen case, as I have shown, Sgaw Karen leadership in the camps have developed an attitude that is at once parochial and cosmopolitan, since the KNU network is able to mobilize resources from international humanitarian aid organizations, human rights institutions, international church networks, Buddhist networks, and resettled refugee communities in the West. Thus, through mediating suffering Karen have faced many years of civil war, the Karen leadership in the camps has been able to reproduce a very strong national narrative of Karen national identity and to expose incoming refugees to this narrative. The cosmopolitanism is reinforced by the resettlement projects, diaspora formation, visits of former camp residents and resulting long-distance nationalism. This article, which can be read together with the excellent historical analysis of Gravers (2007b) on the development of Karen ethno-nationalism, Gravers’ essay on U Thuzana and Buddhist Karen nationalism and millenarian aspirations and movements (Gravers *fc.*), and Dudley’s participant observation’s report on Karenni nationalist education in the refugee camp (Dudley 2007) has explored the blurred boundaries and interfaces between civil society, social development and humanitarian cultures in the refugee camps, in the Thai borderland and diaspora and in Southeastern Burma. I have argued that the vitality of Karen nationalism was bolstered and developed in tandem with the humanitarian effort. That was because the “refugee warriors” (McConnachie 2012) were identified as efficient and invaluable partners by the Christian development circles and early missionary networks. Many if not most of the humanitarian grassroots humanitarian local civil society originated in the nationalist movement, but developed quickly independent agendas. This was because the KNU was not in a position to receive humanitarian aid. Moreover, despite the obvious limitations of camp conditions, the refugee camps has provided the basis for a revitalization of Karen nationalist education and everyday nationalism in the context of a human rights discourse. In this manner, refugee nation-

alism is a new type of nationalism that has evolved in tandem with exemplary humanitarian efforts of the Karen to navigate their lives. What has emerged, therefore is a sort of refugee nationalism of the suffering Karen, and this ethno-nationalism was reproduced in educational institutions as well as Buddhist monasteries and Christian bible schools and boosted by humanitarian aid. Even young people working in the young and emerging civil society in Hpa-an today are looking for leadership with the KNU and engage in Karen unity seminars and meetings where a Karen identity as a nation is upheld. Karen ethno-nationalism has thus survived in a defensive context, but has been revived in an essentialist form in exile as well as in the Diaspora. Karen ethno-nationalism and the notion of a utopian Karen homeland are very prevalent among Baptist pastors as well as among charismatic monks, such as U Thuzana. For this article, it is important that this spirit has fuelled civil society with powerful ethno-nationalist thinking. It is an open question if this ethno-nationalist drive goes hand in hand with a tolerant view towards the ethnic “other” or opens the door for narrow ethno-chauvinist solutions. Every day Karen nationalism is mobilized in a defensive context and used as a tool of solidarity in the face of development and state repression, but it is also mobilized by the Karen militia in a context of continuous militarization of large parts of South-eastern Burma. Thus, the ghost of Karen ethno-nationalism pairs uneasily with the grassroots and democratic efforts of the young civil society in the Karen state today.

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