

Walking-on-borderland: Karen Strategies and Tactics of Survival at the Thailand-Burma Border¹

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Abstract

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork with the Karen at both sides of the Thailand-Burma border. I analyse in this paper the different strategies and tactics of survival in the lives of displaced Karen people. Through my methodology of walking with/to the Karen State in an active participation in their conversation and discussion both in a formal interview and in informal interviews, I have discovered strategies of survival through a struggle at the myth and imagination level and at the level of realities. My analysis reveals the Karen's experience of a culture of death and their efforts to establish a culture of life despite the adversities of everyday life. In this way, my paper is an anthropological contribution to the current peace-building process in Burma³

Keywords: Karen, walking, strategies and tactics, culture of life.

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² Winai Boonlue is a native Karen and a Jesuit priest, a religious order in the Catholic Church. His methodology of walking with the people whom he study is a called a contemplation in action which is a method of reflection about one experiences that leads to the transforation of the observer and the people whom being observed to be a co-transformer of the social settings.

³ 'Burma' and 'Myanmar' are used interchangeably in this paper, as are the corresponding place names and boundaries for states, regions and townships. No endorsement is intended by either name.

Introduction

My mother made pillow from a long bamboo. All of us will use the same piece of bamboo. Whenever the danger come, my mother would lift the bamboo and our heads will fall on the ground and we would grasp whatever in a hand and run to the forest..... When I was a child I must fear Burmese army so much because they came to Karen state for many places and they massacre Karen people and raid people who had the beautiful places with treasures. They really torment Karen people and really want to occupy Karen state, they attacked Karen people for many ways to until now. And also Burma is not a free country. Karen people didn't have freedom so we try to reach our goal, as we will have a freedom. All people in the earth need more freedom everything for themselves. If they have a freedom you will happy in their lives. So we need a freedom in my country as in the future, we want to occupy for ourselves.⁴

Most of the Karen people living in Karen State, Burma, expressed similar experiences to the one in the excerpt above. Indeed, children and young people growing up in Karen State are being socialized to fear the Burmese people. They always have been prepared to run. They have been told that there are soldiers nearby in front of them, and that they have to protect themselves. Thus in the depth of their conscience, they have internalized a general sense of danger where there is neither a sense of security nor space for peaceful trust. One can argue that those who have been born in the Karen State of Burma have been displaced from the moment they were born.

The paper is divided into four parts: First I describe the research context and research methods. Second, I introduce the conceptual framework. The third and the fourth part of the paper discuss the empirical findings of my fieldwork: I introduce Karen tactics of creating a sense of belonging in a continuous situation of displacement and then I discuss everyday practices of negotiating their identities once they entered a temporary shelter at the Thailand-Burma border. A conclusion summarizes the arguments of this paper.

Research context and methods

Karen State is one of the 14 states of Burma (Myanmar). It is also called Kayin State or Kawthoolei, which literally means "a land without blemish" (Rogers, 2004). Karen State is located in the south of Burma and covers an area of 30,383 square kilometres with hills, mountains and

⁴ Interview with Mary, 5 December 2008

fields. It shares borders with Mandalay Division, Mon State, Bago Division and with Thailand. The capital city of Karen State is Hpa-an.

According to the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, the estimated total population of Karen State is 1,572,657 persons (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014). This population comprises a range of Karen groups such as Sgaw, Pwo and Pao. Of these, the majority are Buddhists (67-80%), followed by Christians (15-30%) and small minorities of animists, Hindus and Muslims (UCAN, 2015).

The Karen belong to the people who inhabit the area called Zomia (Scott 2010), located in the highlands that stretch across mainland Southeast Asia. According to Scott, the inhabitants of Zomia are essentially migratory people who have been wandering along these spaces without being constrained by any artificial lines. While remaining to some degree out of state control, for their livelihood provision, the inhabitants of Zomia enter into relationships with political and economic authorities.

Most displaced Karen persons left their homeland because of the pressure they felt from the military junta. Although the Royal Thai Government (RTG) is not a signatory State to the Geneva Convention of Refugees, the RTG offers forced migrants from Burma temporary shelter in nine camps set up alongside the Thailand-Burma border. In December 2014, most of the 110,607 refugees in camps at the Thailand-Burma border were ethnic Karen (The Border Consortium, 2014). These people receive education and humanitarian assistance from a range of international humanitarian organizations as well as community based organizations. In addition, an estimated number of 400,000 internally displaced persons are living across rural areas of South East Burma. These people, too, occasionally cross the border to Thailand in search for education and training (The Border Consortium, 2013).

This paper is based on long-term multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with the Karen people from Burma. Since 2008, I have been conducting qualitative interviews and participant observations in rural and urban areas of Karen State in Burma as well as at various places in and around Karen refugee camps in Thailand. I have been walking in Karen country as well as in refugee camps or internally displaced camps at both sides of the border. Usually, I cross the border with my contact persons between Mae La Oocamp and Mae La camp to visit small scattered villages, temporary and seasonal schools, emergency clinics, shelters, small sawmills for teak and communities of religious groups, such as Catholic and Baptist churches as well as the Big Jar movement in the northern part of the Karen state on the Burmese side. There hasn't been any substantial fighting for a period of time and it is easy to cross the river with a small boat and to start walking. Thus, walking turned into a general fieldwork tactic.

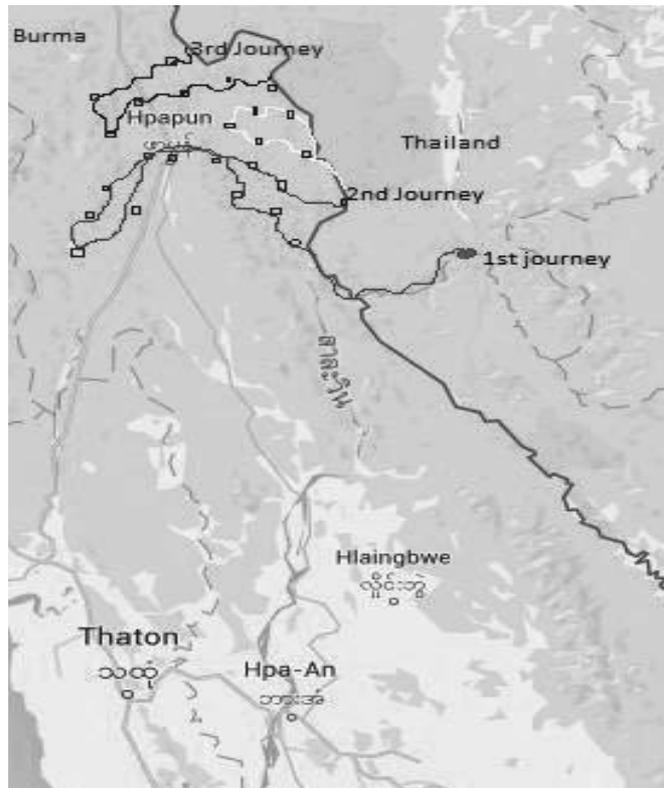


Figure 1 : Map of the villages and my journey to the border (Source: modified from Google Map).

Conceptual framework: Walking as a tactic

The walk into the network of meanings that can be discovered in the hearts of temporary shelter dwellers (refugees) begins at their foreign home called “the home of suffering people; the refugee camp”. My imagination of the place beyond the borders is a space for hiding and running away from danger . The representation of the world behind and beyond the artificial line of the national border is a representation of unknown spaces full of fear. Therefore, for a deeper understanding, the journey that I have walked through needs a special tool that allows it to maintain an ethnographic attitude of reflexivity. I identified the classical spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius de Loyola (1491-1556) and the contemporary social theory of Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) as most powerful tools for self-introspection during fieldwork. Saint Ignatius was a Spanish noble man who converted to religious life. In 1539 he founded the Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic religious order whose members are also known as Jesuits. Based on the

spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius, the Jesuits educated and formed some of the Catholic Church's greatest thinkers, including the French sociologist Michel de Certeau.

The Spiritual Exercises written by Saint Ignatius can be seen as a tool helping people towards inner awareness, helping them to know the inner movements of each person's heart. They include "the Examen" or examination of consciousness which allows a person to go through five stages of self-awareness and self-understanding. The five stages include:

- 1) Gaining awareness of the presence of the higher authority that governs your life to obtain the structural-total picture of the present reality.
- 2) Focusing on the inspirational experiences that you have encountered with realities to better understand the active reality that appears to you.
- 3) Looking at the negative forces that destroy reality.
- 4) Deep analysis of the negative effect that is imprinted upon your experience.
- 5) Looking for the space of hope in seeing the brighter sides of the reality⁵.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau dedicates a whole chapter to the ethnographic tactic of walking. His analysis of the walk in the city portrays the active roles of consumers who walk to make sense of the realities that surround them. Therefore, de Certeau understands walkers as producers of meaning, even when they act as consumers. Indeed, men and women are never merely passive consumers of a given meaning. For example, the streets function only as signs that guide – but never determine - their acts. In other words, people do not have to walk strictly according to signs; they have to make their own choices of meaningful acts. De Certeau's chapter starts out with lifting the reader to the summit of the World Trade Center which is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. De Certeau starts there, at an all-encompassing yet detached and distanced stance towards his object of investigation. From the top of the high-rise, the city is perceived in its totality (*ibid.*: 91-93). From there it can be studied, dissected and observed while being able to maintain a detached research attitude. This is an intellectual stance which is often also the dominant and even hegemonic world view. Importantly, de Certeau replaces totality with particularity, meta-narrative with micro-narrative, disengagement with engagement, viewing with walking. Like Heidegger and the phenomenologists, de Certeau starts from within – and not from outside or above - experience. Reading the city is walking in the city, and strangely enough, also writing it. For de Certeau insists that the reader of the story also takes part in its writing. Furthermore, the micro-narratives of walking in the city "compose the manifold story that has neither author nor spectator". Therefore, if meaning starts from within experience and not outside of it, it is always limited to this experience and cannot transcend it, as the philosophers of enlightenment had hoped.

According to de Certeau, "there is a rhetoric of walking." Meaning is revealed as it is created, it did not exist before. The city does not precede its actualization by people living in it. In

⁵ Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus.

a sense the city is Saussure's *Langue* while walking in it in a certain path is *Parole*. de Certeau's path starts with speaking, with saying something about the city through the medium of walking. The city seen from above is an illusion, a simulacrum. It starts when you take the first step in it.

In order to understand the process of making sense from the structural given text, de Certeau looks at the process of the consumers internalizing, interpreting and producing their own meaning from the given text in order to manifest the consumer's agency. The city walkers are never completely dominated by the planned structure, they use material objects and bring out their subjective meaning.

Michel de Certeau perceives the pedestrians' walking through different streets in the urban society. In his view, the pedestrians feel uncertain about the different representations of the products along the streets. But while walking in the city, the pedestrians will interpret and make use of ready-made products of other people as well as of their own meaning. The pedestrians walk along the window shops where the expensive products have been exhibited. It is the strategy of the producer in a consumer society that by walking by their products you are placing yourself in front of the values that they have produced. You feel proud when walking in front of expensive goods because you have somehow related to the price of the products.

But for the walk of the refugee back to their homeland, they have seen the mountains, rivers, the valleys, the plains and many other types of small shelters, houses, and fences. They feel and make use of meaning, of the history of different mountains, names, places that they have passed through. These are all sources of social memory. The imprint of the memory in the different spaces that they walk through is the revitalization of social memories about their shared histories.

A sense of belonging

The strategy and tactics of survival in the struggle against an oppressive situation cannot be seen only in the physical or social level. One has to also look back into the original reason of such social suffering. For the Karen, the cause of social suffering in the form of fear takes root at the myth, the ritual level. In this section, I will first discuss the tactics that the Karen people have used to create a sense of belonging at the level of myths and legends. Second, I analyse how membership to an institutionalized religion creates a sense of belonging. My fieldwork suggests that becoming a soldier is another tactic that fosters feelings of belonging among the displaced Karen people. I suggest that the condition of displacement itself can create a sense of belonging.

1. Myths and legends

A sense of belonging is the deep human yearning for a social position in the invented hierarchy of the world. Indeed, the modern world has classified human society in terms of a civilized world and a primitive world. In this imaginary, the Karen have been excluded and marginalized from the modern developed world. According to one of their legends, the Karen people have been the lost eldest son of creation and used to be a great nation. It is because of their responsibility to find food for their younger brothers, that they lost the chance of being developed like other nations:

Before the mu qa left the world, she called all children of the world to come to her in order to give them a final gift: wisdom, contained in a golden book. The oldest son should get the best wisdom to take care of his younger brothers. Karen was the oldest son in the cosmos brotherhood. Therefore, he had the duty of getting food for his younger brothers; because he was busy getting food he had no time to see mu qa for the final gift. He asked his youngest brother, the Kaw La to take it for him. Kaw La took the golden book. But instead of returning it to the Karen, he went away with it. Therefore, all the wisdom of developing a country is in the hands of the Karen's youngest brother Kaw La. Because of this, nowadays the youngest brother comes to give the Karen education, shelter, and food. Some of them even take the Karen to their home.⁶

The relationship between international humanitarian aid agencies and the Karen refugee population is often explained with reference to this legend. Accordingly, the Karen believe they have a right to expect that the youngest brother is able to take care of them. This is particularly applied to the British people, because of past experiences: during the Second World War the Karen supported the British as allies against the Japanese. After the war, the British Government was concerned about the political future of the Karen. It disapproved of the idea of a separate Karen state and also rejected a complete domination by the Burmese majority. Thus, the British Government supported a united and federated Burma (Morrison, 1947).

The refugee camp may be the answer to the story of the lost book of the Karen people. Indeed, some Karen have justified the move to the refugee camp as a right they have lost since the British left Burma. To this day, the Karen from Burma imagine having an autonomous state with the help for the former British colonial power. This is why, because of their former loyalty to the British, the ordinary Karen from Burma felt they have rights to receive aid from the international community (Po, 2001).

The relationship between Thai authorities and the displaced Karen people from Burma is also explained with reference to the Karen legend of Mu Yea Hpai. In an interview, the elders in the refugee camp narrated the following version of the legend:

⁶ The interview with a camp leader, 2 November 2013.

“Mu Yea Hpai was a beautiful woman in the Karen land. She lost herself to the “Yo do”, a foreign kingdom, but her bloodshed in the foreign land obliged our old enemy. “Yo do” welcome us to their land, to be our friends. They paid back the debt that they have taken our treasure and killed her. Her blood became the obligation that the Thai people, the descendants of the “Yo do” have a place to use as the refugee camp. There is no other place in the world that welcomes us like the Thai people. This is because our past history.”⁷

Buddhists believe that the Karen’s stay on Thai soil is due to the merits of the sacrifice of Mu Yea Hpai, the legendary Karen woman in the northern parts of Karen land. Therefore, the Thai authorities will always have the duty of taking care of the descendants of Mu Yea Hpai.

In 2013, a group of Karen people who had migrated to the United States of America came to search for the tomb of Mu Yea Hpai. They believed that there was a real person who had been forcefully taken by a Thai king and had a royal tomb. Therefore, the people in Karen State have a sense of belonging to some legendary kingdom. The Karen refugees have a sense of security and trust the Thai more than the Burmese.

In summary, the legend of being the eldest son of the universal brotherhood continues to give meaning to the identity of the Karen people. Thus, according to Karen morality, older children have to suffer for the younger ones. In addition, the legend of Mu Yea Hpai justifies the Karen’s stay on Thai soil. The transpose of actual suffering into the world of ideal suffering has maintained a sense of meaningful being. The refugee camp is a dis-place and yet home for the Karen refugees and also justified by the legend. It is the legendary duty of the Thai people to welcome the Karen refugees. The Thai unconsciously repaid the debt of their previous life; it was the right from the previous world.

2. Belonging to a religion

Human life has always been actualized through the performance of rituals. Rituals are therefore the expression of human agency. In Karen State, religious expression is the only act of gathering that has been accepted by the Burmese government. The Burmese authority has classified religious celebration as a non-political expression. Therefore, ritual performances are not suspected by any of the many Burmese security forces. In this section, I discuss religious affiliation as a tactic to create a sense of belonging for Christians on the one hand and to exclude others who are not initiated to the Christian ritual, namely the Burmese people.

For the Karen, religion is a blended cultural practice. It combines elements of religion and culture. Moreover, it is like a spiritual and social sanctuary as well as a political space of inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, many Karen communities converted from animism to different religious practices, such as the Catholic Christian Church.

⁷ Interview with elders in the refugee camp, 25 December 2009

In Karen country, the Catholic Church registers its members when they get baptized. Several months after the birth of a baby, it is the parents' obligation to come for baptism in the Church. Many villagers in Mutraw have never seen a Catholic priest, but they will come to the Papun Catholic Church for baptism. In addition, twice a year the Catholic Church organizes a great liturgy for Catholics who live in the villages to celebrate Christmas and Easter season. The names of the babies as new members of the Church are registered in the parish book and sent to the national Catholic Church in the diocese offices. The whole northern Karen state is under the diocese of Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State.

To be registered in the Church is not only to have a sense of spiritual belonging, but also the protection under the umbrella of a religious institution. This protection, in turn, grants a certain level of freedom of travel. It is because the Burmese government, and especially the local army authority, respects the religious ceremony. They had never attacked the Karen people during a religious ceremony. However, now we must face the fact that on Christmas night of 1948 the Burmese army attacked the Karen people in order to stop the Karen revolution in the area of Pa-tieng. It is considered very cruel to kill people during the celebration of their beliefs. People take the opportunity of religious ceremony as a prime time to meet each other and it is generally believed that religious celebration is a sacred time during which everyone has to be honest with each other.

I came to celebrate Christmas at Papun, during the time of the Burmese attack. They did not stop us when we told them that we were going to celebrate a religious feast. The Burmese also have fear of God. It could also be because they fear the priests who speak their language and therefore they did not harm us. You know the religious priests are highly respected by the Burmese army.⁸

The Karen's making use of sacred time to manifest social agency can be related to many of the religious cultural traditions in Asia. During a strictly religious ceremony, outsiders are forbidden to participate in the ceremony. It is an internal communication; it is only for the members of the family or the community to have the rights to participate in such ceremony. Therefore, those initiated in the religion can ask outsiders to keep away from strictly religious practice. The Catholic Church has also made use of exclusive ceremony in order to protect themselves from unknown intruders such as the Burmese soldiers. In the Catholic traditional celebration of the Mass, there are many rituals and only baptized Catholics are allowed to receive Holy Communion. Indeed, anyone unfamiliar with these rites is easily recognized by the congregation. Therefore, security guards of the parish easily spot Burmese spies who try to disguise themselves to participate during the Mass. Thus, performing a particular ritual of the celebration of the Mass can become a tactic of self-protection.

⁸ Interview with Palakor on 5 December 2011

My father was saved by a Catholic priest. He was guaranteed by the priest as a member of the Catholic Church, so he was released and move to the priest house.⁹

Living in a religious community is another tactic of protection. Many Karen people who are not able to protect themselves from the local army move to a Church compound and work for the Church. The Burmese authorities trust the Church and respect the word of religious leaders. Therefore, converting to institutional religion has become a tactic for some Karen people. The Catholic Church in Burma has the reputation of being loyal to the government and the Burmese army does not normally harm those who belong to the Church.

The Protestant churches take a different stand to protect their members. Most of the leaders of the Karen National Union are Protestants. The Protestant churches in Burma, especially in the Karen area, do not have a hierarchical structure. Each Church has their own leader and protects their own members. They are supported by the Karen National Union. Usually, the members of the Protestant churches do not baptize infants, only adults. In addition, they have a strict rule that anyone who marries a protestant has to be re-baptized as member of the church. Therefore, being protestant means having a privileged role in the society. The Protestant churches in Burma set up a loose structure of church relations in form of a convention. For example, the Baptist convention organizes every two years a big mobile celebration to enable people to move around the country.

When I visited Papun, people organized the convention at the Baptist Church in the north of the city. The Burmese leaders allowed this kind of convention because the Baptist leaders in Papun had informed the Burmese army chief of the event. Therefore, they could travel all over Burma without being interrogated at Burmese army checkpoints. They had to put up a religious sign on their vehicles so that they would be easily recognized.

The Karen Baptist Convention at Papun has brought together Karen people from all over Burma and abroad. Those Karen who have migrated to another country come back to their homeland via Thailand. Even though, they are citizens of other countries like Canada or America, they do not want to ask for Burmese visas. Instead, they prefer to come to Chiang Mai and travel back through the forest like refugees.

During the 2012 Karen Baptist Convention in Papun, the Baptist religious leader invited Buddhist monks and a Catholic priest to the opening ceremony in order to have a new image of being open to different beliefs among the Karen people. This is because in the past most Protestant pastors believed that the true Christianity is the Protestant church and that the other churches are not an authentic form of Christianity. However, at the 2012 convention in Papun, the Protestant Karen leader was able to invite Karen of different beliefs.

⁹ Interview with Has Mutraw on 5 November 2011

The convention created a strong sense of belonging and hope among the participants. The message and preaching during the ceremony were words from the Bible that gave encouragement of being people of God and to love one's neighbour. Since there is no official institution of authority and identity of the membership, each religious group has to develop their identity through religious belief. Thus, religious practice becomes a means of protection.

Charismatic Karen religious leaders develop diverse forms of religion. For example, the community of the "Big Jar" (*Mong Chalee*, "Big Jar" in Burmese) is a religious sect that combines some elements of Christianity with elements of cosmology, such as the legend of the "big jar" to reinforce a sense of community by stressing the value of respect and obedience towards elders:

A person who is not obedient to their parents and leaders, are worse than a blind person. This is happening to most of young people. Some young people don't know their life. They are pampering as they want to do and they want to do every things. They don't enjoy a good life. Some young people are naughty. Some young people became nasty and they kill people. They make problems to each other and they don't see a good way, they only see the bad ways. At time I saw many people became blind and deaf people but exactly they are not blind. Because they don't see the good way and they enjoy bad ways so they are like blind and deaf people.¹⁰

During the flood all over the world, the Karen boat has to cross the ocean of violence. On the boat there were old and young. The young people were able to sail the boat because they have more strength and energy. The older people were weak and only guiding the way. After a few months of sailing across the ocean, the young people do not find any value of having the old people on boat. They started to kill the older one by one. One of the young people loves his grandfather so much and hides him inside the big jar. After another several months of journey, the young people do not have enough experience so they lost their way. They started to lament that if we still had an elderly man, he could guide us through the way. The young boy who hides the grandfather asks his friend to promise not killing the elderly again. They promise and were able to have the elderly as their guide to safety place. Therefore, the younger has to obey and listen the elder people.¹¹

The Karen community of "big jar" is a sect that combines elements of Protestant Christianity. For them, obedience to the elderly is a tactic to avoid the Burmese army. They justify their behaviour with reference to the principle of seniority and in this way, the Burmese army does not threaten them.

The sense of belonging to religious rituals from both traditional religious institutions and the invented religious obedience to the elderly has become a social sanctuary for the Karen

¹⁰ Interview with Ma Twa, December 2013

¹¹ Group discussion with representatives of the "Big Jar movement" in Hpa-an, 2014.

people. Religious practices have become an internal mechanism to control members as well as a tool for exclusion of non-members. Becoming a member of a religious institution, therefore, becomes a means of channelling the weight of suffering into different dimensions of being.

3. Becoming a soldier

There are very few choices for children regarding their future life. When we ask children about their future, one of the most common answers is to be a soldier in the Karen National Union Army. This is because in Karen State children have never seen other powerful male role models except for soldiers. Therefore, becoming a soldier is an aspiration of some of the Karen children. Of course, their choice is constrained and limited by social structures. In this section, I discuss the role of the soldier as a strategy to create a sense of belonging.

Within the Karen National Union, it is customary for every family to send a boy to serve the country as a soldier. If there are two boys in the family, it is obligatory to send one son. Although many families do not want their sons to become soldiers, they agree to send their son to the army because it is a sign of pride for the family and also guarantees them the support of the wider Karen community.

If you become a soldier, your children, your wife will be supported by the KNU. They will give rice and pay for the education of your children. You are somebody in front of the KNU leaders.¹²

The governing science of the Karen community is the science of war. It is the science that they have developed throughout their six decades of fighting. The new generation has internationalized the science of war as the only possible way of being a meaningful member of society. Therefore, in order to live a meaningful life in the Karen state, the change from war and violence to a normal way of peaceful living has opened up a new possibility of experiencing the life around us.

My son does not like to study. He finished only grade 7 and does not continue. He went back to the Karen State and volunteered to be soldier. His boss likes him a lot. It is because he rides motorcycle, he rolls the boat and can carry staffs for the Karen army. He did not go through the normal training because his commander thought that living in Thailand, the refugee camp has trained the boy to be reliable person. Even though, he does not received any salary, he enjoys being soldier.¹³

Thus, being a soldier in the Karen state is not an ordinary occupation compared to work in other places around the world. Rather, Karen soldiers are volunteers who resist the political

¹² Interview with Hpa Saw on 2 October 2011

¹³ Interview with Naw Kea Pa, on 6 January 2012

domination and social oppression of the Burmese soldiers. Therefore, since 1948, being in resistance has become a form of identity for the Karen people. At the time of fieldwork, not many young men in the fighting zone were keen to serve the Karen Army, but young people in other parts of Burma volunteered to come to the Karen State for military training. These trainings, too, create among the young generations a sense of belonging to the same political group.

4. Displacement as a sense of belonging

As outlined above, there are traditional and institutional perspectives of belonging. In this section I argue that for the Karen refugees throughout the last six decades displacement, too, has turned into a form of belonging.

The feeling of not being oneself is not only due to the physical forces that impact people to move out of their homeland. It is also the internal struggle of individuals to search for another-self. It is the search for a better condition of life. The following is a narrative account of the life of a boy who continued moving around, not because of persecution, but because he was not satisfied with the conditions of his life:

My name is Maung Tway and I was born in 15 March 1990 and was born in Wah Mu village in Karen state. My father passed away, when I was 3 years old. So I felt my mother had to try everything to raise us up. I felt about my mother had to face many problems to take care four children. Because that time we all were very young and didn't think anything to help our mother at home. So my mother had to manage and lead everything for the works inside and outside by herself alone. One oldest brother and two older sisters were married. Oldest brother named Ler Paw, first elder sister named Ah Htoo, second elder sister named Chit Poe. I was a youngest son in family. I passed grade 10 in my village. Before I started to study grade 10, I sold the lottery to pay for my school fees. Most of the villagers in my village tried to get the money by selling lottery. At first I sold lottery, I had to face so many problems that how can I tell and connect the people to buy my lottery to get money from them. And also I felt very shy, because it's my first experience to sell the lottery. But latter on I knew the people more and more, and I didn't feel shy any more about selling lottery. When I was selling the lottery I heard the others. Parents taught their children to emulate their lives like me to find the money by themselves. No need to spend money from my mother. When I heard the word about me from others, I felt very happy to be proud of myself. In 2008, I intended to study grade 11 in town of Burma, but I had many problems for my studying again. So I couldn't go to study in town of Burma. But I heard my nephew's mother told my mother about me to go to school in the camp.

Before I left, I prepared trip document from village leader named Paw Nay Tha Moe. When I left my village, I had 4 friends who were students and 4 adults joined with me to see their children off to the camp. During my trip to the camp, I passed many villages. The first village I passed was Pog Ken Ta village, second village was They Pee Seh, and the third

village was Kweethema. And I had to cross a river named BillinChaw. And then I got to Mencho village. I started to climb up the mountains, and then I arrived village named Wahkata. Later I arrived at Bawthota village, the time was already to take a bath. So I stopped to take a rest in Bawthota village, and we got up early to cook and we could start our trip early. When I climbed up the mountain, I saw my mother was very tired and I helped her carry the bag. During walking on the way or climbing up mountains my mother, and my friends' parents told the words "they forced themselves to climb up the mountains by loving of their children". When we reposed on the top of mountains, I saw my mother smoking. And I spoke to her "you looked very tired, but you could smoke every time during reposing" and she replied to me, if she couldn't smoke I should know she had a way only to die. So I couldn't tell her and I thought smoking was energy for mother. One tallest mountain named Butho Mountain. I hated this mountain, because it was very sad for me, my mother and others climb up many other mountains that I didn't remember the names between Bawthota and KohNikoh village. Before I arrived at Konikoh, I slept one night at a small place of stream. We started to cook for our dinner; we collected many different vegetables for our dinner.

During we were sleeping at night, we got wet with big raining and one adult woman face problem with her eye. Because on small piece of tree fell down on her eye. She told us, she could not sleep the whole night. But in the early morning we got up and cooked for our breakfast. After finishing our breakfast, we started our travelling again until we got to Konikoh village on the Salween river side. And I started to travel on sailing boat. The first boat I paid 40 baht for me and my mother. When I got down at the river side, my mother and I must go to take a paper as trip document. My mother paid 50 baht for paper.

After getting paper, the sailor sent us to cross the river and I paid 40 baht again. The next period of times we had to walk along the trekking track in the forest, because we had to avoid the police's gate. When we were walking on the trekking tract, we were very afraid to speak aloud. Without speaking while we were walking in the forest, and we arrived in the Mae La Oo camp. It's very dark; I went to sleep at my relative house. He lived in Mae La Oo camp. He worked for Karen Education Department (KED); his name was Pu Toh, he had 5 children.

In the early morning of the following day, his wife cooked for our breakfast, and we ate breakfast together happily. After our breakfast we thanked his family, and we started to go to Mae Ra Moe camp. When we arrived at Mae Thaug Yin riverside, we didn't have a boat to cross the river. Because of bad flood, so we had to climb up the rock cliff highly. The pathway that leads on the rock cliff was very dangerous. We felt very nervous to look down in the river. As we reached to the top, we had to walk down directly, because no flat land to walk. When we walked down, we directly arrived in Mae Ra Moe camp.

When I arrived at the Me Ra Moe camp, I had to find my cousin house, and I got to my cousin's house. When we have found his house, we were full of happiness and greeting to each other. My mother stayed with me at my relative's house for 3 weeks and return to the Karen State. When she left Mae Ra Moe camp, I felt very sad, because I missed her and wanted to go back with her. Before she left, she asked me "did you want to go back with me to the village?", and I replied to her "no", but actually in my heart, I want to go back. After my mother left the camp, I was very sad because everything in the camp was new for me. I didn't know any friend in the camp. At first, I thought how could I go to school, who I could speak with. It was 13 April 2008, I got to Mae Ra Moe camp, I remember very well. In 2008, I began to study grade 1 in the camp. During the first few months, I couldn't follow the class especially English class. I was very weak in English subject, and I saw some of my classmates who were better than me, they could speak English quite well. It motivated me a lot to learn English. It is very attractive to be able to speak English, and I tried to study hard. Later on, I could do better in English subject. I studied 7 subjects such as English, Science, History, Geography, Mathematic, Burmese and Karen language. When I lived in the camp, I had to face with some problems. I didn't have money to buy candle to read the book because there is no electricity in the camp. I needed to buy candles for my studying at night. So I worked for a family to wash their clothes and they bought candles for me. I did washing and cooking every day for them. I did that until I passed grade 12.

In 2010, I studied at Mea Ra Moe Junior College (MRMJC). When I joined my study at MRMJC, I came to stay with my foreigner teachers who were from the Naga land. I prepared the foods for them every day. When I stayed with them, I tried to make a conversation to them every day. I felt that my English was improved more than I stayed with my cousin's family. In 2011, I continued study at the second years at MRMJC school, I stayed with Thai teachers. I did everything for him; they helped me for my study. I stayed with him for 1 year and I graduated in 2012. After I graduated, I went back to my village in 2012. I taught students in my village for 4 months. I taught English, I taught grade 5 to grade 8.

Before I started to teach at school, I sold the lottery for 3 months. When I got money from my salary and from selling lottery, I saved for my studying. When I came back to Mae Ra Moe camp, my friend told me about the school in Chiang Mai. When I heard about school in Chiang Mai, I decided to come to study in Chiang Mai.¹⁴

The life story of this young man is a constant search for a better opportunity. It illustrates and represents the life story of many other young people in the Karen state. The interview evidences that MaungTway came to the refugee camp, not because his life was endangered by the Burmese army, but because of the human desire for a better condition in life. Sadly, his life

¹⁴ Interview with MaungTway on 4 July 2013

never settled because of his constant struggle to fulfil his dream and imagination. This striving for an imagined self has encouraged him to search for a better life even in the unknown space of temporary shelters at the Thailand-Burma border.

In sum, the Karen people have been using different levels of belonging to the social world: at the level of myth and legend, in religion, in being a soldier and even in being displaced. The myths and legends that the Karen people have constructed become their "imagined spaces" to which they belong; but in real life, these myths and legends have the power of transforming themselves from the imaginary to giving the Karen a space and place which they can feel that they belong to. Through strategies of belonging linked to global religious institutions such as Christianity and Buddhism, the Karen people have gained a spiritual self that is not bound to spirit worship in their traditional beliefs. Being a soldier also gives a space of belonging to the nationalist movement. They gain self-esteem as persons who have contributed to the self-determined human race. Lastly, displacement and a place indicates human mobility in different social fields.

The legal boundary and the transgression

Having analysed Karen strategies of creating a sense of belonging, I now move to a discussion of everyday practices that help the displaced people negotiate their identities once they have entered the space of temporary shelters at the Thailand-Burma border.

Living in a refugee camp has various dimensions of being restricted and of being open to new possibilities. The Karen have crossed the struggle of the border restriction and established their existence in the refugee camp; they gain new tactics in their struggle for a daily living. Of course, there are advantages and disadvantages of such identity construction. Since the border area is a place of temporary relations, and a place without any permanent principles and solid foundations for guidance in life, the border dwellers have to learn new tactics to help them in their life. I argue that these ambiguous situations have turned into an opportunity for them to have a deeper and fuller sense of life.

1. My Thai father

The power relations in temporary shelters are intensified by the existence of relationships between those who have and those who do not have Thai citizenship. The Thai officers who are supposed to represent the Thai official representatives in protecting the sovereignty of the nation have incorporated the national sovereignty in their individual office. Yet, these civil servants who are meant to protect the border and the people dwelling there have many times misused citizenship to dominate and suppress non-citizens. Therefore, being a Thai

citizen is not only about citizenship and the right to national welfare. It can also function as a means of exploitation of refugees whose need for citizenship renders them vulnerable to abuse by authorities.

For example, in the temporary shelters many young Karen girls are victims of patriarchal power. Although there are strict rules for Thai officers to protect and control the population in the temporary shelters, the officers have extended their patriarchal power over the weak women in these settings.

HtiKe paw moo's mother was a young girl in Mae-Ra moo. She was pretty and the Thai official personnel liked her very much. She fell in love with the man and had HtiKe paw moo. Her father got already a wife in Mae Sariang and therefore her mother could not live with him. HtiKe paw moo's Thai aunt has to register the girl as her own child. HtiKepaw moo has Thai citizenship but she likes to stay with her mom in the camp and speaks Karen like her mother.¹⁵

Thus, through a so-called outlaw relationship HtiKe paw moo's mother was able to obtain Thai citizenship for her daughter. Now the "outlaw" daughter holds lawful citizenship that allows her to travel freely to cities all over Thailand. In addition, Hti paw moo and her mother have the right to refugee status which allows them to relocate in a third country. In this case, the use of vulnerability to access rights is considered morally acceptable. In any case, the weak family structures in the temporary shelter clearly need empowerment.

2. The broken family

Most of the Karen people who move to temporary shelters are women and children. The fragile and vulnerable images of these "arrivals" to the camps can be said to be a tactic of the marginalized people. Indeed, the Thai and international humanitarian aid agencies prefer to work with vulnerable age groups rather than the so-called normal population. The fragility and vulnerability of the people is sometimes romanticized as "naked being" (Tangseefa, 2003). In the past 15 years, the "camp arrivals" have tactfully used this romanticized idea:

I put my daughter in the orphanage in Mae Ra Moo. It is difficult to live together in the camps. The officials will not give us rice, if we live together. We have to be broken, separated so that we can survive.¹⁶

Thus, for borderland people, their vulnerabilities have turned into a tactic to negotiate their identity. In particular, the broken family is emphasized by the refugees as a result of on-

¹⁵ Interview with a social worker on 19 June 2008

¹⁶ Interview with NauKhuon 5 December 2011

going war between Karen and the Karen resistance group. The following excerpts illustrate how the vulnerability of the broken family turns into a successful tactic in gaining space for life:

My father is working in Dwei area. It is our Karen land also over there. We want to have some part of the sea as our land. Sea is important for our future county.¹⁷

The Karen had fought in the Dwei area since the beginning of the resistance, it is beyond the Mon state, down south to the sea. The area that the Karen wanted to unite the seacoast with the most east of Burma and the west of Thailand seems impossible to have a big area under the small troop. But the Karen leaders still believe that they have the possibility of gaining an independent control over this area also. Therefore, they have to send the soldier from the Salween district to the coast. As a result, many children lost their fathers in the fighting.

In the Christmas night, I am waiting for you my dear Papa.
The night is dark, the weather is cold yet the star is bright.
Dear Dad you have come back to me every time at the Christmas night.
Where have you been dear father at the Christmas night.¹⁸

The image of separation can be found in that person's story about the experience of Christmas night. It was the story of a young man who left his wife to fight on the frontier. His young daughter was waiting for him on Christmas night, but he disappeared and never returned home. This song was again sung by a little girl Day DayHpo on Christmas night 2011. Naw Dah Hpo, Day DayHpo's mother was a young girl in Mae La Moo refugee camp. She brought her daughter to the Christmas night celebration to sing a song for the people. I was very confused when everyone started to cry while she was singing. I interviewed her after the celebration to see what happened but she was not ready for the interview. I then went to interview her grandmother instead. The grandmother was not ready to talk to me either. It was the collective sadness that I did not understand. Therefore, I went to interview the social worker who works for the Catholic office and specializes in emergency relief, child care, and elderly care. Her story is very interesting.

She was only 17 years old. Four years ago, there was a young boy who was relocated in America came back to visit the refugee camp. They have fall in love and she got pregnant. The young boy who lived in America did not take any responsibility and got a new girl friend who was his fellow and relocated to third country. Thus Day DayHpo does not have her father. Her father did not die in the war field but died in the third country.¹⁹

¹⁷ Interview with Naw Mu Eah on 24 December 2012.

¹⁸ The song Day Dayhpo sang on Christmas night 2009.

¹⁹ Interview with a social worker of the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR)

Naw Dah Hpo had enrolled with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and waited for resettlement to a third country. She gave a very strong reason that she was a widow and her daughter was an orphan. In October 2012, she relocated to the United States of America. The vulnerability and brokenness of the social institution of the family opened an opportunity for her. Her broken, imperfect, and unstable family turned into an opportunity for a better life. The shamefulness of not being accepted even in the unacceptable space gave opportunity to new life. Thus, in order to create space in life where there is little room for manoeuvre, the individual needs to use full strength to change one's situation. In this way, the human capacities of survival manifest the positive culture of life.

3.The culture of life

As outlined above, war and displacement do not destroy the culture of life in the Karen State. The more human life has been dehumanized, the more humane effort sparks up to preserve life. For example, on 27 December 2009 a wedding between a young boy and a young girl took place in the refugee camp. The bride's name was NawHpaw La. Her father Bo Pew was a famous fighter in the Karen army. Although he is Karen, he cannot speak the Karen language. His wife passed away when his children were still very young. At that time, his eldest daughter was only 11 years old. The other three children were 9, 7 and 5 years old. Because their father was at the frontline, the four children had to develop strategies of taking care of each other at home. Their mutual help is a good example of how individuals can make humane efforts even within the context of the ongoing killings which surrounded them:

Yes, when we were young, and got sick my brother gave me bitter leaves as medicine. It was alright for us. Sometimes, when my brother was very sick and could not move, I thought he was praying. I did not know that he was unconscious. He later told me that he asked God not to let him die yet. He said "If I die, my little sisters do not know the right hand from their left. Please keep me alive." While he was sick, he told us what to do, to cook rice to light up the firewood. So we follow what he told us.

The day before the wedding, the teacher Th'ra Daniel recalled the childhood of NawHpaw La:

When I met you at your village you were very small. I saw you at rice pounding: you had to carry your brother in order to have more weight to lift up the hsefmoj (the swinging post holding the pestle). My tears were flowing but I could not say anything to you all.²⁰

²⁰ Interview with Th'ra Daniel on 27 December 2009

For NawHpaw La, her wedding day was the happiest and most meaningful moment of her life. All the neighbours, friends and cousins came to her house. On 27 December 2009, early in the morning, the children led the procession with flowers and music to the small bamboo church. In Christianity, Buddhism and animism, the commitment expressed through marriage is a permanent commitment for the whole life. This is succinctly expressed in the wedding vows:

I Saw Hpa Dah take you, NawHpaw La, to be a wife to have and to hold, on this day forward, for the better, for the worse, for the richer, for the poor, in sickness and in health, all the days of my life.

Thus, it was at this temporary building within the temporary shelter of a refugee camp that the permanent commitment of the bride and the groom was testified and celebrated. The temporariness of life did not prevent the transmission of the permanent value of life. Therefore, the whole community in the refugee camp celebrated the wedding in an extraordinary glorious way.

Although NawHpawLa's father could not speak proper Karen, he tried his best to speak in public to invite everyone to have a meal in his house:

Dear brothers and sisters, this is my first daughter's wedding, I am very happy today to have this happy time. As you know, I have been away from my family for a long time; I have never seen my children as happy as today. Therefore, please do not go away with empty stomachs. Please celebrate with them after the church service. Give thanks to God and to all everyone who gather here. With his grace, our ceremony is meaningful, full of happiness and joyful spirit. Many friends and relatives come to celebrate and you give joy to my family through the songs and your presence here. After the mass celebration, I feel so happy. After the Mass come to my place, the adult will have one place and the others will be in a different place and the children will be eating group by group for the celebration. Thank you.²¹

Thus the celebration started after the church service. Children carried flowers and decorated umbrellas to shadow the bride and the groom as if they were being given protection under the shadows of the umbrella. The "umbrella of glory", as it is called, was made from used notebook paper cut into stripes like petals of white roses. The use of temporary materials was to represent a certain permanent abstract understanding about life.

The celebration of small material thing as a very important thing struck me so much. I was surprised to see that the refugees had a big celebration for everything. They might not have

²¹ Interview with Bo Pew on 27 December 2009

so much food to give to the guests, but they are happy to see each other. It changes my understanding about life also.²²

The tactic of maintaining the value of life relates to a deeper level of strategies for the protection of life. Thus the example of the wedding manifests the conviction of people who are suffering yet respect the value of life deeply.

4. The partial truth

The everyday practices in the constant changing situation in Karen State affect peoples' capacity to see the whole picture of reality. The Burmese army employed the so-called "Four Cuts" (*Pya Ley Pya* in Burmese) policy to prevent men and women from obtaining a holistic view over life and society. As ordinary people the Karen lack equipment or means to know a wider world view. Accordingly, they have only a very limited horizon in their understanding of life. Therefore, when they were forced to leave their homeland and crossed the international border with Thailand, they were unable to express fully or clearly how the Burmese power had caused their flight to Thailand:

When I arrived in the camp, I was told not to tell the Thai officer the real reason why I had come to the refugee camp. Actually, I was sent by the priest in Pha Pun to take care of the Christians in the camp. I am a religious teacher. When the Thai officers question me, they told me to tell them that it was because of the war and because of fear that I was forced to escape from the Burmese army. I had to obey to what they told me. So, I could not tell them the real reason. For example, my leg was cut by a land mine, but it was not the Burmese land mine. It was a handmade Karen landmine. I was not injured in the war. It was only when I went to catch frogs in the evening that I got an accident. It is difficult for me to tell a lie, but I needed to, in order to get rice from the organization. Yet, my real reason for arriving is to take care of the spiritual life.²³

In this way, the telling of partial truth proved a lifesaving strategy for the Karen people at both sides of the border. The reason is that there are many powerful groups operating in the borderland. Each group functions according to different principles. Thus, the telling of partial truth has become a survival tactic in the war zone.

In sum, the outlaw daughter, the broken family, the culture of life and the partial truth become resources that these marginalized Karen people have made use of; they have turned their worst experiences and opportunities into something that has become powerful and useful for their lives. The rejected social phenomenon have become the corner stones of their social realities.

²² Interview with a social worker on 27 December 2009

²³ Interview with Th'ra Maw Say htoo on 28 December 2010

Conclusion

This paper discussed the tactics of survival used by the Karen people who live in the Karen State of Burma and in temporary shelters in Thailand. I argued that their tactics manifest the agency of human beings in situations of war and forced migration. Living in the dehumanized space of displacement, children lack common forms of socialization for forming human capacity to live together. Yet, my research stresses that human beings are resilient and do not surrender to the plight they face. They find chances to represent and sustain their human capacity. Therefore, religious identity is not a form of spiritual protection or opium for the modern world. Instead, my empirical analysis highlights that religion can be a tactic for inserting oneself into a possible space. The daily practice of explaining suffering through the Karen legends has the potential to create peace and a sense of victory in the human world. Even the experience of the broken family turns into a tactic for surviving the hardships in life. The partial truth confirms the imperfection of the human world, and turns suffering into capacity to search for the meaning of life according to the Psalmist: the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (Good News Bible, 1976: 730).

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