Ethical Dilemmas and Identifications of Faith-Based Humanitarian Organizations in the Karen Refugee Crisis

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This paper examines faith-based humanitarian organizations and their multiple alliances with Karen Baptist missionary networks in the context of the Karen refugee crisis. Far from being only passive recipients of humanitarian assistance, I argue that Karen people become important agents of proselytizing, using their cultural capital to reach out to the imagined community of would-be Christians. Doing so, Karen are able to expand opportunities and to link their own self and livelihood to the mission of the Christian movement. Stabilized and supported by international humanitarian aid, the Karen National Union (KNU) resistance movement exercises a form of governance in the refugee camps by controlling their internal organization in contestation with the Thai state authorities. This biased engagement places humanitarian organizations and the Baptist church in opposition to the Burmese government and thus leaves faith-based humanitarian organizations with the ethical dilemma of whether to abandon impartiality. The article makes use of Castells’ social network concept to illustrate the importance of material and non-material resources that make access to indigenous refugee networks and international humanitarian aid organizations viable for survival and reproduction in a hostile environment.

Keywords: Karen, Baptist church, faith-based humanitarian organizations, Protestant missionary networks, refugee camps, Thai–Burma border

Introduction

Humanitarian organizations in the Thai–Burma borderland in Northwestern Thailand have the challenging task of providing essential supplies to over 150,000 displaced people across refugee camps on the Thai border and IDP camps in Burma. The camp population is increasingly diverse, but the Karen people from Burma constitute the large majority of refugees living in the camps. In addition to secular humanitarian organizations, faith-based
Christian organizations in the camps not only distribute food aid but also carry out a wide variety of educational projects that help the refugees and IDPs to become more self-sufficient. Beginning as a small network of missionary churches, the Thailand Burma Border Council has become a huge humanitarian umbrella for a wide array of secular, governmental and private non-governmental organizations (see TBBC 2010).

While humanitarian organizations in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot provide assistance to the widest spectrum of displaced people possible, supplying aid to the invisible and undocumented populations in towns, remote villages and especially in the conflict zone in Karen State in eastern Burma is nearly impossible. This gap is filled by religious networks, including Christian church networks, Buddhist monastery networks and Islamic revivalist grassroots movements that provide shelter and protection to displaced people. Many of these humanitarian organizations, including Christian organizations, do not proselytize, although Christian organizations such as Partners understand their assistance as a spiritual task and make no secret of their religious devotion. In addition to humanitarian aid, and educational projects, Partners organizes mass prayers for peace in Burma. Pastors in the Karen Refugee Committee, although concentrated on humanitarian assistance, are guided by their faith and interpret their activities from a religious perspective.

A sophisticated ethno-national Karen humanitarian relief network has resulted from the urgent need to provide food, medical aid emergency kits and educational schoolbooks to the IDPs displaced within Burma. Hundreds of volunteers and nurses organize in ‘backpack’ relief teams and literally walk into Burma as part of a collective humanitarian project under the protection of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The “Backpack Health Workers” and nurses are part of civil society organizations. In some organizations, as in the Free Burma Rangers, humanitarian and spiritual matters combine. Many of the Karen organizations operating in the Thai–Burma borderland are part of the Karen National Union (KNU) and thus support the resistance and insurgency against the Burmese military regime. Secular and faith-based organizations that provide humanitarian aid to the refugee camps consciously or unconsciously thus support and keep alive a political and military project and help to legitimize and justify the evangelical imagination of a Karen homeland.

In this paper, I concentrate on faith-based humanitarian organizations and their alliances with Karen Baptist networks to explore the nexus of being stateless and mobilized by Christian missionary movements. Far from being passive victims, Christian Karen refugees become very important agents of proselytizing, who use their integration in Christian Baptist networks to reach out to their relatives, friends and to the ‘imagined community’ of would-be Christians. By doing so, Christian Karen are able to expand opportunities and to tie their own self to the mission of the Christian movement. The Karen Kawthoolei Baptist Church in Thailand provides a large selection of service, welfare and ritual performances on which displaced people rely.
In addition, born-again Christians are able to re-enter the humanitarian space in a warzone that is largely inaccessible for international humanitarian NGOs. The KNU exercises a form of governance in the refugee camps by controlling the internal administration of the camp in negotiation with Thai state authorities. Fuelled by global alliances with American Christian churches (see Wuthnow 2009), South Korean Pentecostals and international advocacy networks, this project of evangelization and reconstruction is in the hands of the educated Christian Karen leadership. The Karen and their Christian partner organizations have woven the images of the atrocities perpetrated by the Burmese military into a powerful narrative about social suffering and Christian liberation. In the propaganda material that is shown in videos, magazines, and on websites, the suffering of the Karen people provides the platform for the heroic efforts of Karen Christian relief teams that provide humanitarian aid to the wounded.

Humanitarian NGOs are thus in an ethical dilemma. They are supposed to allocate relief welfare without discriminating according to belief, gender or ethnicity and should stay politically neutral. Studying the case of the Christian Baptist Karen in the Thai borderland, however, I argue that secular humanitarian and faith-based organizations have been drawn into the nationalist project of the Christian Baptist Karen, and have tended to privilege Christian Baptist Karen against other ethnic groups, including the Buddhist Shan, Buddhist Burmese or Indian Muslims. I argue that faith-based humanitarian organizations present in the refugee camps on the Thai–Burma border understand their support as a spiritual engagement in which humanitarian aid and proselytizing are intertwined. Furthermore, this political alliance is a continuation of the earlier alliance that American Baptist missionaries were able to develop with Karen converts and the contribution of American Baptist missionaries in developing Karen Christian identity. This biased engagement puts faith-based humanitarian organizations in opposition to the Burmese Junta and might hinder the way to end a dirty war that has been and continues to be devastating to the civil Karen population (Smith 1999, 2007).

**Theoretical Considerations**

Religion is not a central feature of the map of refugee studies, often being seen as a mere adjunct to the key markers of ethnicity and gender. I believe that religion provides a privileged window to shed light on the identification processes of refugees in transnational and political communities (Smith-Hefner 1994). Religion provides meaning that people need to recover from a painful past. In a situation in which people escaping from (civil) war have lost any sense of security, religion can provide relief and shelter. Religion thus provides both material and non-material resources, helping out with basic needs, providing psycho-therapeutic support and emotional backing (Pearson 2009). Secondly, but not less importantly, religion can be tapped
to raise emotion for a religious community in which religion provides the anchor for a nationalist identity (Keyes 1979). In the case of Christianity, religion has raised the national aspirations of the ethnic minorities in Burma and has fuelled a violent conflict between Christian Karen and other groups on the one hand, and Buddhist Karen and Buddhist Burmese on the other (Gravers 2007). These reasons make religion and the incorporation of people in religious networks important for anthropology and refugee studies.

Indeed, by studying the ways in which refugees are embedded in religious networks, we can understand a crucial aspect of transnational spaces and global networks. Humanitarian assistance to forced migrants in refugee camps has become a persistent, durable phenomenon of our time (Agier 2002, 2008). My research on the transnational religious lives of the Karen Christians adds to and complements important research on the economic and political practices of transnational refugees. Brees’ work in particular presents valuable research about the remittance strategies of refugees and the practical difficulties they face (2008, 2010), while Dudley’s (2007, 2010) work on the exiled Karenni in the Thai–Burma borderland focuses on the transformation of Karenni refugees into modern educated subjects, ethnic identification and the rise of a Karenni nationalism (especially Dudley 2007: 77–106). The Karenni (red Karen) identity is born in the refugee camps and, similar to Karen identity, conceals internal diversity, contradictions, tensions and plurality in favour of a united, Christian dominated Karenni-ness. This article can thus be read in convergence with Dudley’s important work.

Theoretically, I make use of Castells’ social network approach. Castells argues that the world is reconstituting itself around a series of networks strung around the globe based on advanced communication technologies (Castells 1996; cf. Stalder 2006). Networks are social ties that allocate and control resources. Inside networks, new possibilities are constantly created. Networks are not simply amalgams of nodes and ties, but are always organized around projects, goals and values. The network does not represent the environment, but brings forth its own world. Each network thus constitutes its own social world, and it is the bundle of material and immaterial resources and flexible, yet coordinated, communication which makes action possible. In this paper I argue that religious networks very much spread through the network logic. In the Thai–Burma borderland, the Karen Baptist Convention is a network that is organized around the political project of spreading Karen nationalism and Protestant Christianity, based on a set of material (donations by American and South Korean churches) and immaterial religious resources, and bound together through the use of advanced electronic communication on a local and a global scale. The network also acts as a gatekeeper: inside it, opportunities are created while survival outside of the network becomes increasingly difficult. Indeed, for many people, survival becomes a daily struggle collecting garbage, working in factories, or as wage labour under the minimum wage, while Christian networks provide shelter, food and security in a hostile environment.
Methodological Considerations

In summer 2009 and winter 2010/2011, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted primarily on the Thai side of the Thai–Burma border in Mae Sot, Chiang Mai, Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Son provinces (see Figure 1). I had access to the Baptist Christian networks through the Karen principal of a Bible college in Chiang Mai and a Karen Catholic priest residing in Chiang Mai. I either travelled with them or they facilitated contacts, to the extent that I was concerned about the independent choice of my informants. While my informants were generally willing to share their experiences with me, some of these experiences were just too painful to remember or to share. Jackson has recounted a similar experience and argues that the politics of storytelling are as important as the stories themselves (Jackson 2006). Of course, I did not press, as I knew of the atrocities from numerous reports by Human Rights Watch and other international human rights organizations. I spent my time travelling between the refugee camps (especially Mae La and Mae Ra Ma Luang), the border towns (especially Mae Sot) and the countryside. Many displaced families who fled to Thailand had family members living in the refugee camps, in remote villages and in towns, in order to disperse opportunities. Many people despised life in the camps and preferred the hard life of a remote mountain village to the routines and structures of the refugee camps. While most of them did surprisingly well, people outside the camps were most vulnerable to arrest, while people in the camps feared incursions by the Burmese military and deportation. This vulnerability and the aspiration to think about a future characterize the Karen today.

Setting the Scene

The experience of the Karen civil population in the conflict zones of Karen state and along the border between Karen state and the rest of Burma has been harrowing (Tangseefa 2006, 2007, 2009; Falla 2006; Karen Human Rights Group 1998; on the political geography of fear, persecution and flight, see Grundy-Warr and Wong Siew Yin 2002). The refugee population arrived in Thailand in waves. The KNU built a string of villages on the Thai side of the border, on the east banks of the Salween and Moei Rivers, opposite the KNU Headquarters. In 1984, a small group of international Christian agencies established a consortium to supply relief items to the new small KNU refugee villages on the Thai border. The first small camps were established near Mae Sot. South makes the important observation that most Karen refugees initially fled with their community structures more-or-less intact (2008: 90). The KNU Refugee Committee—established to administer the refugees—emerged as the natural partner for the international NGOs that depended on the authority and charisma of the Karen leaders to do their humanitarian work. Religious and non-religious NGOs that joined the consortium provided humanitarian aid through Karen, Karenni and Mon
Figure 1
Refugee Camps and Location Names along the Thai–Burma Border

Map showing refugee camps and location names along the Thai–Burma border. The map includes several locations such as Mae Sai, Mae Sariang, Mae La Oon, and Sangklaburi. The map also indicates the population size in different ranges, with symbols for capital, city, temporary shelter, and border. The map is credited to Jarae Zum (SMRU, Maesod, 2006).
refugee committees which were humanitarian appendices of ethnic minority national insurgent armies.

As South writes, increased levels of international awareness were followed by rising aid budgets for refugees along the Thai border (ibid.). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s a humanitarian and human rights industry grew along the border and substantial amounts of money were channelled through the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC). While detailed human rights reports contributed to strengthen international awareness of compelling human rights violations, abuses by the KNU were infrequently identified and completely ignored. NGOs’ reliance on the ad hoc refugee committees was rarely matched with the participation or the voices of the refugees who depended on the mediation of the KNU for their well-being and who were mobilized as porters and had to pay taxes. For the refugees, the refugee camps constituted a safe haven, and refugees refrained from openly complaining about the politics of the KNU leadership. This bias of humanitarian aid organizations, their role of shoring up the authority and leadership of the KNU ethno-nationalist project and its educational reproduction in the camps, has been underlined by a variety of scholars (Dudley 2007; Raja 2002, South 2008: 89–96). Dudley (2007) argues that the presence of sympathetic foreigners in the camps tends to further justify and legitimate this ethno-nationalist project. The international humanitarian and human rights constituency thus provides a forum for the KNU to promulgate its national aspirations and recruit from the pool of refugees. In the process of negotiating access to needy populations, humanitarian actors thus help to consolidate the KNU’s control over the population by being the movement’s de facto welfare wing. As South (2008: 94) notes,

international NGOs have empowered camp administrations dominated by self-selecting Sgaw-speaking, Baptist elite, which the aid agencies accepted as the refugees’ natural and legitimate representatives.

Lang, interestingly, argues that the case of refugees from Burma contrasts markedly with the ‘large-scale, high-profile and politically manipulated’ humanitarian relief infrastructure developed for Indochinese refugees, which was more broadly related to the politics of the Cold War (2002: 86–92). Instead, she notes that the humanitarian relief effort on the Thai–Burmes border was a low-key, localized response that preserved the traditional lifestyles of the refugees who had fled from their homes in the contiguous border regions (Lang 2002: 91). This discreet approach, with little if any international or national publicity, allowed civilian inhabitants to have a living standard consistent with the general conditions existing in the border area, and was the only arrangement that the Thai government would permit. However, I would argue that Christian civil society and human rights organizations’ efforts to document the violations, in parallel with the broader democracy movement, contributed to the politicization of the Karen refugee crisis, with American
missionaries and writers propagating the Karen rebellion as a just struggle (see Rogers 2004 for a striking illustration).

In the early 1990s, when the deteriorating military situation forced large numbers of refugees into camps, it became increasingly clear that the settlement of Burmese refugees would not be a temporary affair. Nonetheless, the Thai government refused to accept the situation and continues to this date to reject the political entitlements of the refugees and the protracted nature of the refugee settlements. No efforts have been undertaken to facilitate the integration of refugee families who have lived for decades alongside the local Karen population.

In the ‘quasi-state’ of the destroyed KNU military headquarter of Mannerplaw in Karen state, Burma, the Baptist Sgaw-speaking elite fostered the image of a united Karen nation and geared the educational system towards a rising ethno-national consciousness (Raja 2002). Although only 15–20 per cent of Karen in Burma are Christian, the Christian Karen occupy a hegemonic position in the refugee camps in which the Buddhist Karen community plays only a subaltern role. The Buddhist Pwo and Animist Sgaw are generally poorer and have had less education than the Christian Sgaw (Gravers 2007: 229). The Buddhist Pwo Karen follow their own Buddhist traditions, and Buddhist Pwo migrants in the Thai borderland rely on Buddhist monastery networks or support from the Buddhist Sangha. However, many of the Buddhist and Animist villagers who had to flee from warfare in Karen State had nothing to do with the conflict, but have nowhere to turn to after arriving in Thailand.

By talking about Karen identity as homogenous, Christian Karen conceal internal diversity and cleavages. It has primarily been Christian missionaries and Sgaw Karen intellectuals who have constructed Karen identity as opposed to Buddhist Burmese identity. Baptist missionaries have played a key part in constructing Karen literacy and national identity. Christian Karen looked down on the Buddhists, whom they, in tandem with the missionaries, regarded as worshipping idols, and also considered the Animists to be uncivilized. Western missionaries and Christian Karen were drawn into the violent suppression of the Burmese anti-colonial rebellion in the 1880s that also included Buddhist monks and Buddhist Karen. Burmese forces in turn alienated the Karen by massacring Christians during the Second World War. In 1946, the hope of a Karen Christian nation, Kawthoolei (flowering country), remained a dream and the Karen were disappointed by the absence of support from their Western ‘white brothers’. Gravers notes that the concept of a Karen state was an entity with ‘huge inner contradictions’ as many Buddhists and Animists did not want to share a space dominated by Christians. Instead, further confrontation was the start of a devastating civil war in 1949 that brought suffering to all Karen—Buddhist, Christian or Animist—with no neutral position available to the latter (Gravers 2007: 247).
Thus, the Christian national narrative is one that juxtaposes Karen pure Baptist Christian identity in stark opposition to the Buddhist Burmese. The staunchly patriotic and anti-communist president of the Karen National Union, Bo Mya, a Seventh Day Adventist convert, suppressed the leftist wing of the Karen independence movement, and attracted assistance to the KNU from the Thai government and the CIA. In 1994, a conflict between the dominant Christian leadership in the KNU and Buddhist soldiers and monks culminated in the formation of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which became a tool of the Burmese army and survives on looting, drug trade and the collection of illegal taxes (Gravers 2007: 248). Although support for the DKBA has dwindled, the conflict illustrates the rivalry between Christian and Buddhist factions in the KNLA. Gravers reports that the symbolic space of Kawthoolei competed with the Buddhist imagination of the Golden Land:

Kawthoolei remained a symbolic ethnic space with deep opposite lines of identification in terms of class, education, custom, religion—in fact all the criteria often listed in the memoranda as general elements for a Karen identity (Gravers 2007: 245–246).

A prophetic Buddhist movement, led by the monk U Thuzana, formed zones of peace around their monasteries, sanctuaries and sacred spaces, with Buddhist pagodas in the centre, where thousands of poor Buddhist Karen would look for refuge and free food (Gravers 2007: 248).

Christian Karen refugees continue earlier efforts to Christianize the Karen in Thailand from Burma, including through the concerted campaigns of Karen evangelists in the Thai hinterland. Karen from Burma are widely known and respected for their expertise in Bible studies, and Karen border villages in Thailand regularly ask for Christian pastors for their churches. Solidarity is extended to Christian refugees by Christian families in the mountain hamlets. The arriving Christian families contribute to the Christianization of the hinterland and establish Christian villages, marginalizing Theravada Buddhism in this remote area. Family members in different spaces form a densely-knit network of utopian Christian communities in intensive communication with each other. Solidarity is extended to every single community in the most remote corners as well as to new arrivals to the camps and the many illegal settlements across the border. Christian missionary networks take care of the refugee camps, for which they provide a huge spiritual umbrella, and connect the Karen refugees to the networks of the Karen churches in Thailand as well as to the transnational Christian organizations that provide humanitarian aid and that keep the Christian Karen’s project of reconstruction alive. The Karen Baptist Convention is well established and has created its own organizations in Thailand. Its privileged position in the camps and its firm presence in the hills provide the foundations on which the Christian Karen base their identity.
The missionary encounter is thus decisive for the identification of Karen identity, Karenness and the idea of a Karen nation. The political alliance is consolidated in political exile, and the special treatment of Christians raises resentments on the side of the Buddhist refugees. The competition between Buddhism and Christianity is rooted in Burmese history. Humanitarian organizations should be careful not to enhance this competition.

The Christian Karen in the Thai–Burma borderland

Solidarity is provided on the basis of shared Christianty, and regarded as God’s command. In a context of mobility, dislocation, uprooting, and economic anxieties, conservative religious movements provide social security, social organization, merit-making, prayer, shelter, and not least, social recognition. The literature describes the space of the borderland as a transitional space in which displaced people are stripped of any citizenship rights and hence are vulnerable to exploitation and human rights violations (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004). The refugee camp in particular is seen as a panoptical space in which the refugee is detained and incarcerated and condemned to senseless routine (Tangseefa 2007: 247). However, I argue that Karen Baptist networks present a different perspective on the borderland. In the spaces in which they exercise control in everyday life, they are able to establish a cultural hegemony and to instil cultural values in parents and children. These spaces extend from the chapel and Bible school in the camps to Sunday service in a Baptist church in the border village, to the orphanage in Mae Sot, and to the office of the Karen Baptist Convention in Chiang Mai.5

Educated Christians are at the forefront of the secessionist Karen movement and Christianity provides the ideological underpinning of Karen nationalism. At the same time, the camps provide a site for the mobilization of young soldiers for the Karen ‘revolution’. This is why the camps are perceived as providing dangerous sanctuaries: on various occasions, the Burmese military and DKBA soldiers have stormed and shelled the camps, burning houses and looking for KNLA soldiers. Karen nationalism and Christianity are thus intimately intertwined, reinforcing each other. Karen were enthusiastic supporters of American missionaries and spread the gospel widely among other ethnic minorities in Burma, like the Chins and the Kachins, 90 per cent of whom are now Christians. Salemink also argues that ethnic minorities, through Protestant conversion, become members of a more cosmopolitan, urbanized and de-ethnicized moral community (2009: 53). As many of the villages in the free-fire zone have been forcibly relocated, burned or totally destroyed, the Karen Christian refugees cannot return to their homeland to which they remain emotionally attached. Hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Karen state and in the Thai borderland need to organize their survival and reproduction in a hostile environment.
Christian Spaces in the Thai–Burma borderland

Saved on Noah’s Ark: Reconstruction in the Refugee Camps

Mae La camp is the biggest of the camps located on the Thai–Burmese border. Mae La is well known as a study centre, and thousands of students come from Karen State to study there. Built in 1984, it has always been very crowded. The camp is guarded by approximately 100 border patrol police and is fenced with barbed wire. UNHCR, the International Labor Organization and the European Union have offices in the camps. The people live in simple bamboo houses. They use cheap wood, bamboo, earth and plastic sheets to build houses, just as they would in their own villages. Most residents have no income or land to farm, and they have therefore become dependent on aid.

The camps are administered by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), which was initially called the Consortium of Christian Agencies and comprised the Karen Baptist Convention, Church of Christ, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Mennonites. Later, governments and humanitarian NGOs joined the large-scale provision of humanitarian assistance. The Karen Refugee Committee not only coordinates relief assistance, but also organizes education in the schools and kindergartens, the infrastructure of the camp, protection, the political organization and public relations. Christians make up the leadership of the camp and school. The Baptist church and Bible school constitute the centre of camp life, with pastors overseeing daily church services in the Bible school. In addition, the church organizes Bible study circles and large choirs. A dense network of pastors, evangelists, Bible schools, and political activists thus operates under the roof of the Karen Baptist Convention. Other churches involved in the camp are the Roman Catholic Church, the South Korean Pentecostals and the Seventh Day Adventists.

Reverend Dr Simon Saw, principal of Kawthoolei Mae La Bible College, recounts that the church began very modestly, as houses were primitive and people did not have access to electricity and water. However, the Karen leadership persisted and transformed the camps into a livable place with pathways, trees and beautiful gardens. Korean Pentecostal Presbyterian missionaries bought lamps and computer hardware and installed light and internet. In a sense, the lost Kawthoolei Karen state in Burma is reconstructed symbolically in the refugee camps. Dr Simon used biblical language to interpret the Karen’s experience. According to his interpretation, the Karen have been ‘saved on Noah’s Ark’ and the experience of the refugee camps has been a great success for Jesus Christ. In this sense, Dr Simon believes that reconstruction in the refugee camps is a ‘blessing in disguise’ and that the emergence of a global Karen diaspora is part of ‘God’s mysterious plan’.

A committee of Christian pastors and evangelists look after the church service, social welfare, and the ritual life of the camps. Pastor Robert
Htwe, a charismatic and engaged Christian pastor who is the chairman of the Karen Refugee Committee, presides over the Thailand Burma Border Consortium and facilitates the entry of the Christian NGOs that provide humanitarian aid and social training. Pastor Robert also presided over the annual Baptist ritual in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp in 2010, when more than 500 adults and youth were baptized in the presence of KNU families, pastors, and Karen NGOs as well as American Baptist missionaries.

Many—although not all—of the humanitarian NGOs in the refugee camps are non-evangelical Christian organizations, concentrating on the provision of basic needs, such as food, shelter, health, and education. They are Christian Aid UK, Church World Service USA, Caritas Switzerland, ZOA Netherlands and Trocaire Ireland. Christian churches and organizations began to request government funds from 15 countries and the European Union and this income currently accounts for more than 90 per cent of their funds. They rely heavily on the mediation of the Karen Refugee Committee and the Karen National Union (TBBC 2005). Almost all activity is overseen by the Karen Refugee Committee that also communicates each project to the refugee target group. Buddhist, Muslim and Animist refugees, who have their own monastic networks and places of worship, have no such organization but depend on the same Christian agencies. A dense network thus operates under the roof of the Karen Baptist Convention. Other churches involved in the camp are the Roman Catholic Church, South Korean Presbyterian, and smaller churches, such as the Seventh Day Adventists and the United Church of God.

The influence of the church in the refugee camps is all-encompassing. The church provides spiritual guidance in everyday life, education and the national ‘struggle’ of the Karen. Karen pastors and evangelists thus play a key role in the Christianization of the Thai borderland. Many Karen refugees who visit Christian kindergartens and schools want to become Christian due to their exposure to Christian discourse, prayer, singing and mission. Conversion to Christianity can provide relief from and a constructive interpretation of painful memories, in addition to ensuring membership of a lively community, access to social security and diverse connections to the modern world (van der Veer 1996). The first generation of Karen refugee youth participates in a long-distance undergraduate programme at the Kawthoolei Management and Leadership School. The school is a Christian school for Karen youth, but also accepts Buddhist Karen. Graduates from the school become community leaders who work in the Karen NGOs and churches, and as teachers in the migrant schools. Many students focus on education, since this seems to be the main resource left in the refugee camps, as formal employment is not allowed, and only limited informal opportunities are available.

Many refugees tap Christianity as a spiritual resource in order to come to terms with a painful past and to gain hope for the future. The emotional quality of the church can thus not be overestimated. Many Karen, including
the leadership, draw on the Bible to interpret and negotiate their situation. Through finding support in the Bible, and keeping their faith alive, people explain that they are able to overcome their suffering and to see a sense and vision for their lives. In a meeting in Chiang Mai called ‘Reading the Bible through Karen eyes,’ for example, rich analogies from the Bible were cited to make sense of the Karen’s fate. This is illustrated by a poem by Dr Simon Saw:

I am not ashamed to be a refugee, for I know my Lord, my Master, my Saviour was a refugee long, long before me.
I am not afraid to be a refugee, for though I am displaced, I am not misplaced.
I will never feel lonely, for God gives me many friends around the world.
I will never feel helpless, for God gives me many hands for help.
I will never stop doing good things in spite of all the difficulties and hardships, for I know that this is the real purpose of life God has entrusted to each one of us.
I will never feel regret being a refugee, for though life is full of limitations, restrictions and tragedies, it is enriched with meanings and values.
I will never feel hopeless, for my Saviour promised me an eternal home.
I am glad to be a refugee, for I am always reminded that my eternal home is in heaven and not on this earth.
But I know that for the time being, Satan is trying to enslave me, for though I live in my Father’s, my brothers’ and sisters’ world, I am not free to travel.
However, I am strongly convinced that a day will come—and it will be soon—when I will be able to travel freely to visit my brothers and sisters around the world and say ‘thank you’ for what they have done. I will then see the beauty of my Father’s world. Amen.

God’s Mysterious Plan? Self-Settlement of Refugees in the Countryside

Refugees who self-settle in the countryside find that they are welcomed by their Christian hosts, who provide shelter and food for them. However, resources are limited, and as many Karen villagers are struggling economically and have just enough rice to eat, refugees are perceived to be a burden. Refugees try to build their own houses with cheap materials and work as wage-labourers for the Thai Karen farmers, who are mostly landowners. Here, I want to present the examples of two villages. The first is the village of Huay Nam Nak which is located on the Thai-Burmese border in Tak province and is accessible via a small lane. Huay Nam Nak has a Buddhist temple, a Baptist church, and a Catholic church.

Huay Nam Nak village lies on the shallow Moei River which separates Burma and Thailand, just south of Mae Sot, and Karen live on both sides of the border. During the dry season following the fall of the KNU’s headquarters and capital—Mannerplaw—in 1995, many Karen fled from poverty and violence, and crossed the shallow river. After days in the jungle, they found refuge in the villages. Villagers provided shelter even when kinship relations

Figure 3
Catholic Church in Mae Sariang
did not exist, and even though food was scarce. Many people work in the household, without an income, in exchange for shelter and food. These people are invisible at first sight as they live hidden in small huts in the fields. Some people, like Ray, marry local women, and build their own houses. Some survive by working the land owned by villagers.

There are many interesting connections between Burmese nationals living in Huay Nam Nak and other spaces associated with the Karen Christians. For instance, the assistant to the pastor in the Protestant village chapel is a Burmese national who cannot converse in Thai and thus teaches the Bible in the Karen language. He is a graduate of the Bible school in Mae La camp. Every Sunday, the church offers services in a warm atmosphere, where all can pray, study the Bible and sing hymns together. Because of the closure of the Catholic Church, that they actively used for worship, prayer, singing and studying is held in the private space of the house. A missionary from the Karen Baptist Convention in Chiang Mai also moved to Huay Nam Nak. The Baptist educational foundation based in Chiang Mai provides educational scholarships for the children of poor Karen parents. A Catholic missionary also resides in the village.

Ray, a young man from a remote village in Karen state, made his way through the jungle to the Thai border and eventually reached Mae La camp to study there. Whilst in Karen state, Ray had heard of the educational opportunities available in the refugee camp through word of mouth propaganda. Whilst training as a nurse in the humanitarian relief programme at the Mae Tao clinic led by Dr Cynthia Maung, Ray converted to Christianity. Tilling some land owned by his wife’s family in Huay Nam Nak, he also employs other refugees, and regularly joins the missions of the Free Burma Rangers as a medical nurse. He has left his wife and children in Mae La refugee camp, as his children are entitled to free education and food in the camp. Huay Nam Nak also houses a few KNU families with whom Ray has regular contact. Ray has received humanitarian aid both in Burma and in Mae La refugee camp, and has committed himself to humanitarian relief work since arriving in Thailand. He is a good example of a Karen refugee villager who has been socialized in the humanitarian and missionary network and who converted as a result of this meaningful encounter. His commitment is manifested in his training as a nurse as well as his work with the Free Burma Rangers: he risks his life to accompany them on their missions as they re-enter Burma after working as part of the humanitarian relief system on the Thai border.

Although many refugees do not have papers, Burmese nationals are not generally harassed as long as they stay in the village. Children under the age of 14 who attend school and learn the Thai language can apply for Thai citizenship. However, citizenship is not granted easily, and the church networks therefore support children by accompanying them during their meetings with the Thai authorities. In the case of parents, the Baptist church networks also help them obtain their papers, although it is expensive to
bribe the officials. Through the educational foundation, the church and the missionaries, the Karen Christians of Huay Nam Nak are embedded in Catholic and Protestant Baptist networks.

While Huay Nam Nak is easily accessible via the road from Mae Sot, a ‘children’s day for stateless children’ was held in the remote village of Ban Hin, in the province of Mae Sariang. Here, Karen families displaced from Burma join the few families which have settled in an area that has officially been designated a national park. The village is inaccessible by road and can only be reached via a small river on a four-wheel-drive truck. The journey is exhausting and time-consuming. Before, precious teak wood was logged and driven out of the area, but little teak is now left. The families settling here grow rice on the hills, without having land ownership, but it is hardly enough. Thus, the TBBC brings free rice by lorry through the rivers to the refugees. In a predominantly Buddhist environment, Ban Hin is a mixed Baptist and Catholic community. Most of the settlers arrived from Burma ten years ago. They were forced to leave their property behind and in effect had no resources upon arrival. Legally, they have become stateless people.

The second example is therefore that of Mae Sariang, where Roger lives with his extended family in a modest house in the mountains. When I first met him at the celebrations for the stateless children’s day, Roger spoke to me in fluent English. He was born in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp, before the headman of Ban Hin village in Mae Sariang invited his family to move to Ban Hin. The village headman visited the camps to sell

Figure 4
Stateless Children Day in Mae Sariang
some cattle and to buy some rice. Although the family was not supposed to leave the camp to live on Thai territory, this is exactly what they did. This shows that refugees are much more mobile between the home village, the refugee camp and the Thai countryside than they are officially supposed to be.

As Roger was determined to go to school, but had no savings, he joined the Bible School in Mae Sariang. He was eventually to become an assistant to the pastor in the community church. Roger had no means to pay for the school fees, and he therefore stayed throughout the holidays to work for his fees. Every time he commutes, he needs the approval of the provincial governor of Mae Hong Son. As he does not even possess a motorcycle, he has to pay a fee to travel on a lorry for the four-hour ride to Mae Sariang. A young man, Roger is not yet married, and his main interests are soccer and mission work. In his leisure time, he walks to remote villages to spread the word of God. This ethnographic vignette shows that the people in Mae Sariang, although vulnerable, have settled in remote villages, living Christian lives and immersed in Christian networks. Without any personal savings, Roger’s life is in the hands of Christian networks. However, Roger is not just the recipient of humanitarian assistance and Christian education, but is also a keen evangelist in this remote corner of Northern Thailand. He is part of a whole community of Christian refugees who participate in the missionization of the Karen in Thailand. When I last met Roger, he was working on a project run by an Australian Pentecostal missionary in border villages on the Burmese side of the Moei River, from whom he received his first modest income. Operating in an area that is now controlled by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, this Australian missionary comes from an independent Pentecostal church that used to work with Karen asylum seekers in Sydney. Roger helps by teaching poor orphanage children in a mobile school. After some years of teaching on and off the Moei River, the Australian pastor gives sermons and plays the guitar in an improvised home church. Having been raised in Baptist educational networks, Roger, like Ray, is committed to God and is willing to re-enter Burmese territory on spiritual and humanitarian missions, thereby combining humanitarian relief work and humanist evangelism.

Concluding Remarks

In a similar fashion to their work with the Montagnard-Dega from the Vietnamese Central Highlands, Christian missionaries transformed the Karen from ‘primitive’ to self-consciously ‘modern’ subjects. After the night-marish experience of the civil war in the Karen areas of Burma, Christian missionary networks have become driving forces in the reproduction of Karen national identity in the Thai–Burmese borderland. The ethno-nationalist movement mobilizes the refugees at their weakest and most vulnerable stage of life, and is supported through welfare resources provided by an
ever-expanding humanitarian aid industry. The refugee camps have been transformed over time from sporadic settlements in the 1980s to durable townships in the 1990s; although fragile, the camps not only provide safety, protection and basic social welfare, but also education, spiritual welfare, and political organization. As shown in this article, the growing aid industry along the Thai–Burma border has become a crucial ally of the KNU, although this alliance has been de-emphasized in international NGOs’ reports and public relations campaigns. These NGOs, Christian and non-Christian alike, continue to bolster the authority and leadership of the KNU. For the Karen Refugee Committee, the spiritual dimension of humanitarian assistance has become increasingly important and visible in parallel to the day-to-day struggle for survival. The mass baptism that I observed in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp in 2010 is such an example of high spirituality in the context of displacement.

The Christian landscape of the Thai–Burmese border uses education as a crucial resource to socialize Karen refugees in a predominantly Buddhist environment. While the Karen state of Kawthoolei increasingly becomes an illusion as the Karen National Liberation Army loses ever more territory, Karen missionaries concentrate instead on spreading the gospel in Thailand, Burma and across the world. These efforts directly build upon earlier efforts towards Christianization in Burma, in which the Karen emerged as keen evangelists who brought the word to other ethnic minorities. The cognitive model and map of Kawthoolei has been imposed on the Karen and has ignored their internal diversity. In the refugee camp, it is the image of the common enemy and the narrative of suffering that has united the Karen. As more and more Karen resettle in the West, a global and cosmopolitan Karen diaspora is emerging. However, most Karen are packed together in refugee camps across the Thai border, where they develop nostalgic notions of Karen home, tradition and culture. In this article, I have aimed to illustrate the centrality of Christian networks for the social security and social mobility of Karen refugees. In a hostile environment characterized by state harassment, and unable to return home to Burma, the Baptist church provides a key location to mobilize resources for a better life, solidarity with other refugees and a vision for Burma. Far from being passive recipients of humanitarian aid, refugees make a career in the Christian Church and emphasize their aspirations by actively participating in evangelical efforts. These efforts are now bundled in the networks of the Karen Baptist Convention in Burma, Thailand and the Karen global fellowship.

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2. The Free Burma Rangers is a humanitarian organization that re-enters Burma from Thailand to provide emergency health services, to document human rights abuses and to provide evangelical and psycho-therapeutic support to IDPs on the move in eastern Burma.

3. In this paper, ‘Burmese’ will be used to refer to the state of Burma and the ethnic Bamar people who form almost 70 per cent of the population. ‘Burmese nationals’ will be used to refer to people with Burmese citizenship but belonging to other ethnic groups.

4. South provides the figure of US $60 million channelled through Thailand-based organizations supporting displaced people in and from Burma (2008: 92).

5. Hayami (2004) has produced the most comprehensive study on local conversions of the Karen; also see the study by Hovemyr (1989), who is himself a missionary and provides a concise introduction to the Christianization of the Karen in Northern Thailand.


