

# Sacred networks and struggles among the Karen Baptists across the Thailand-Burma border

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## THEORIZING MOVING BORDERS

In November 2010, Karen pastors, Karen Baptist intellectuals from Thailand and Burma and Karen refugee leaders came together in a Bible School in Chiang Mai in order to read the bible in a special way, “through Karen eyes”. Over two days, this illustrious circle would read from the bible to make sense of their “fate”, to find a reason to the suffering of the Karen population and to find biblical analogies to it. These leaders find terms to interpret their situation in religious language. Although debating in the post-era of the Karen nation, the national narrative of a unified Karen *ethnie* and nation remains stronger than ever. I argue that the Karen example

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provide a case where a nation is constructed, imagined and contested in the context of displacement and political exile in the margin of two nations. While the physical space of a Karen homeland *Kawthoolei* has been gradually lost, the spiritual idea of a “homeland” is still alive. In fact, nationalism and national identity is reproduced in the mission schools of the refugee camps and the “migration schools” for Karen migrant children. The thesis that I like to argue is that Christian spirituality, militarism and nationalism go hand in hand and together fuel the ideology of reconstruction in the Thai borderland. Refugees not only travel or cross a political boundary, but also a religious boundary. The key-speakers at the bible study meeting, Reverend Robert Htway and Reverend Simon Saw, are not only KNU-pastors and refugee leaders, but also staunch nationalists. I argue that the literate, élite, and intellectual circles of the Baptist Karen become realigned and reordered in political exile. The holy bible and the missionary Sgaw Karen script provide the basis for Christian interpretation of the national narrative and the transformation of the physical space of Karen land into a transcendent notion of Karen land. This perspective on a Christian nation conceals the internal diversity of the Karen in Burma, where religious affiliations vary from village to village. While the Christian Sgaw are mostly better off and better educated than the Pwo and Bre, Christians make up no more than one third of Karen population while the majority of the Karen are ancestral Buddhist. Gravers rightly states that Christianity is not seen as a non-Karen tradition, but from the Karen point of view, as a new ritual practice or a new worship, not a change in tradition or custom. “Christianity and Buddhism have been converted into genuine Karen traditions, replacing former rituals and prayers” (Gravers 2007b: 232). The literate nationalist circles emerging in the 19th century described skillfully by Womack (2005) have realigned and are extended to political exile, resettled Karen Diaspora in the West and to the Internet. Reading the Bible through Karen eyes also means reading the past anew and planning for the future.

In this article, I discuss the role of Baptist networks in the politics of reconstruction in a contested borderland in the context of forced migration. I am interested how displaced Karen, crossing the border, in the competition between Buddhism and Christianity, depend on and are politically mobilized by religious networks as refugees. I argue that the religious and national narrative as it develops cannot be separated from the context of civil war that has plagued the Karen since the escalation of the armed insurgency. It is the thesis of this chapter that the emergence of a militarized KNU in the context of the insurgency has consolidated a particular ethno-political national narrative associated with distinctive territorial claims. The KNU argue that the Burmese regime is waging genocide against them and that the Karen have to defend themselves and protect the Karen population. In the following, I am interested how missionary and evangelical networks respond to the humanitarian crisis. Not only have met the refugees when they are in their weakest and vulnerable position, they also mobilize the refugees for their missions inside conflict zone across the border and for proselytizing on the Thai border.<sup>1</sup>

In Burma, some ethnic minorities (Shan, Mon, Karenni, Kachin, Chin) in the borderlands have developed their own nationalities and ethnic militia (see Gravers 2007b). The Burmese state on the other hand has established a *régime* of differential citizenship in which some people are granted with citizenship rights while others are

denied these. The Burmese army has also waged a protracted and brutal war against the ethnic nationalities' armies at the frontiers (South 2008). In the war zone of eastern Burma, Burmese citizenship has probably lost its practical value, as social welfare and educational infrastructure collapse. The border has moved as the control of the territory and the border itself has shifted between Thailand, Burma and the Karen, a people that inhabits the land in Thailand and Burma or both. While the KNU used to function as a convenient buffer-zone in-between Thailand and Burma, and as the KNU has become a conservative anti-communist force under the leadership of Bo Mya, the KNU has become a burden in the diplomatic re-approachment between Thailand and Burma.

As Ananda Rajah (1990) notes, Burma is a state in name but not in fact, as relatively autonomous insurgent groups in the borderlands subvert the sovereignty of the state. The quasi state of *Kawthoolei* and its headquarters in Mannerplaw challenged the territoriality of the state and could thus not been tolerated. While Mannerplaw and other military garrisons were taken by the Tatmadaw, the idea of a Karen state persists among the KNU, refugee leaders and Karen exiles.

Rajah pointed out that the Karen rebel movement which seeks to represent 2,4 million Karen and Kayah is highly unusual in that it is a largely Christian movement in a Buddhist environment and very accessible (Rajah 1990). Visitors like me who work with the Karen are welcome, as the Karen hope that foreigners will publicize their "cause". This has led to a lack of detachment on the part of travelers, activists and scholars who have identified with the goals of the Karen.<sup>2</sup> The documentation of compelling human rights violations committed by the Burmese army on the non-combatant civil population by human rights organizations in the 1990s led to the rise of the aid industry along the Thai border and to identification of aid organizations with the plight of Karen refugees. On the other hand, critical studies on the everyday life of the refugees, the Karen insurgency movement and the political administration of the refugee camps are still rare.<sup>3</sup> Religion has not been part of the picture, although religion provides a privileged lens to study the identity processes of refugees. In this article, I show that religion and religious networks critically relate to mobility on the Thai-Burmese frontier. Most of all, missionary networks and humanitarian activism are characterized by movement. Missionaries cross the border against all odds: While *Kawthoolei* was widely accessible, para-troopers of the Free Burma Rangers today risk their lives by entering the conflict zone. Movement across the border can thus be interpreted as a religious commitment. In this article, I am interested in the physical and symbolic representation of people and spaces. The interconnections of missionization, humanitarian crisis and forced migration also allow a fresh angle on the movement in the borderland. Where humanitarian organizations cannot enter the conflict-zone in eastern Burma, Baptist networks fill the gap.

As many of the ethnic minorities have become partly Christianized, the identity marker of religion becomes a key in the conflict as the Baptist and Catholic churches operate in a nation-state environment where Buddhism is not a state religion, but the predominant religion and where popular Karen Buddhist movements vie with Karen Christian networks over hegemony in the villages. In present Myanmar, the issue of religion is much politicized as Christianity is regarded with suspicion by the Burmese state authorities. In Thailand, by contrast, the Christian church of Thailand

is fully recognized by the Thai government and benefits from religious freedom. This political tolerance has motivated the presence of multiple Christian missionary agencies in Northern Thailand, from where they operate in the politically much more sensitive environments of the neighboring countries. Baptist and Seven Day Adventist networks are not the only missionary network in humanitarian aid and relief welfare, the Catholic Church is very well established through the presence of priests. In addition, Pentecostal churches and evangelical networks, from the US, South Korea and Taiwan now have established a presence in Northern Thailand as well and have begun to work with the poorest segments of the population, hill tribe minorities, drug addicts, and with refugees. They have used the same community churches as the Baptist and have attracted young people to their worship services and summer camps.<sup>4</sup> Historically speaking, American Baptist missionaries played a central role in the development of Karen national imagination (Keyes 1979). Catholic missionaries and catholic relief welfare organizations by contrast are not tied to KNU and the insurgency in the way that Baptist pastors were and are.<sup>5</sup>

The competition of Christianity and Buddhism reflects in the territorial claims in the borderland. The largely Christian Karen rebel movement used to control large tracts of territory in Eastern Burma, operating from bases in Northwestern Thailand. This situation has changed dramatically in the 1990s when the deterioration of the military situation and the large inflow of refugees, Karen civil population and Burmese students required a change in strategy. The control on the refugees by the Thai government has heightened and refugees are not allowed to leave the refugee camp.

In the documentation of the Karen, there is a bias on Christianity, although the Christians –falling themselves in several denominations– are in the minority. In access to humanitarian assistance and resettlement to third countries, notably the US, Christians are privileged against non-Christians. Clearly, the genocide of the Karen population in eastern Burma was instrumentalized to further the interests of the Karen rebel movement. Yet, it is the armed rebellion that leads to the retribution by the Tatmadaw on the civil population that endures incredible suffering. Obviously, the competition of Christianity and Buddhism has become a key issue. The largely Christian KNU is not only in fight with the Burmese army, but also with the Buddhist Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) that has allied with the Tatmadaw. The retreat of the KNU from its bases in eastern Burma resulted in the DKBA's control of the border. The ongoing factionalism within the Karen rebel movement and the withdrawal and growing dependence on Thailand of the KNU has resulted in further fragmentation of the territory. Not only among the Karen, but in the complex constellation of a largely Christian rebel movement in a Buddhist state in which international NGO's and a sophisticated network of religious and nonreligious organizations and groups provide the social welfare wing of the insurgency movement (Horstmann 2011).

While the Baptist church in Burma is not directly associated with the Karen National Union, the leadership of the KNU is Christian and many pastors preach directly for the KNU. In the words of their leaders, the Baptist church provides the spiritual umbrella for the ethnic insurgency movement. Moreover, in the refugee camps, the Karen refugee committee is made up of KNU-pastors and the refugee camp is administered by the KNU and by the Thai army. When the refugee camps were established in 1984, the Karen refugee committee emerged as a natural partner for the evangelical

missionary networks that were directly involved in providing emergency welfare and assistance to the Karen people crossing the border. Moreover, the first refugee camps emerged from the villages of the KNU families. While the population of the camp has become more diverse, the Karen make up the large majority and churches and the Bible school are central institutions of cultural life in the camp.

While many ecumenical Christian and nonreligious international NGO's have since joined the consortium, religious networks play a very important role in assisting the displaced people by providing them with food, clothes and shelter. The KNU has thus established a network in which the KNLA is associated with many civil associations and NGO's. But while national identities –Burmese/Thai– do not fit the context in the borderland, where people are neither Burmese nor Thai, the Karen stick to the idea of a Karen homeland and a Karen nation. We have a case here not so much of evasion, but of the construction of Karen intellectual circles and publics and the imagination of Karen state spaces. These Karen intellectual circles and publics focus on senior church leaders, represented by the theological seminaries of Maela Bible College, the Karen Refugee Committee and the Myanmar Institute of Theology in Insein, Yangon, Burma.

The idea of a Karen nation governed by the KNU is now reproduced in and extended to the Diaspora. Old Karen war veterans go into the church with traditional cloth and full national and KNU regalia. Before the fall of the garrison of Mannerplaw in 1995, the Karen National Union controlled vast territorial tracts in Eastern Burma and thus constituted a quasi-state and buffer-state. The gate read “Welcome to *Kawthoolei*” and the KNU comprised its own army, its own schools and hospitals and its own townships, bureaucracy and flag (Rajah). The KNU raised substantial resources by taxing the Karen population, taxing the illicit border market and by exploiting the teak forests.

After the military defeat of the KNLA, and the resettlement of Christian Karen families to the USA, Australia and Europe, the religious reconstruction of a Karen imagined community gained in importance. The KNU, individual families and churches gained new incomes through the remittances of the new Diaspora. Religious interpretation of the bible was used to justify a war that is perceived to be “just”. Metaphors of refugees being “saved on Noah’s ark”, “God’s mysterious plan” and the promise of the “promised land” and “eternal life” were extensively used by Christian leaders to encourage themselves. The heroic behavior of the KNU was underlined by delivering emergency health services and prayer worshipping to the internally displaced in the war zone. In a sense, the imagination of a Christian nation is mentally transported to the refugee camp. Evangelical Christianity can thus be seen as a replacement to the dwindling homeland in South-Eastern Burma.

Facing massive persecution and violence, and given their loss of citizenship, the Karen are only marginal to Thai modernity. In this situation, the humanitarian aid organizations emerge as a crucial ally for the KNU reorganizing in the camps. The article thus promises to explore the making of “ethno-fiction” by the Karen themselves and by international humanitarian organizations (Keyes 2008). I argue that far from being passive victims, evangelical Karen become important agents of proselytizing, who use their cultural capital to reach out to their relatives, friends and to the community of Christians.<sup>6</sup> The Karen church not only provides a large selection of services,

welfare and relief; In addition, Christians are able to re-enter the humanitarian space as soldier-medics-missionaries in a war-zone largely inaccessible for international humanitarian NGO's. Fueled by global alliances with American Christian churches, South Korean Pentecostals and international advocacy networks, this project of evangelization and reconstruction is still in the hands of the educated Christian leadership. I also do not intend to replace essentialized ethnic identities with new labels, but look how identities are constructed in religious and nationalist movements and contested in "economies of power" that constitute the "field".

By forging the ethno-fiction of a united Karen nation, the KNU conceals vast internal differences within the Karen population. I argue that the invention of a united Karen leadership is a very recent one and that this leadership was imposed on an extremely diverse population. First, while the Baptists constitute a very eloquent minority within the Karen population, the Buddhists are in the majority. In Karen state, the ethnic and religious composition can vary from village to village. In the KNU, the leadership is mostly made up of Christians, while the foot-soldiers are for the great majority Buddhists. The frustration of being locked up in the lower level of the KNU's hierarchy was effectively used by the Buddhist monk U Thuzana who instrumentalized the status gap by mobilizing these grievances to found his own break-away army, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). Religious developments in Karen state were always very dynamic and conversion to Christianity was never a straightforward, uniform movement, but was characterized by ups and downs and may have encapsulated some villages and regions but not others. Many Karen villages remain animist and follow autochthonous Karen traditions, while indigenous millenarian Buddhist movements developed in parts of Karen state. In some areas, there was intensive religious competition and that dynamic remains until today. In a landmark study, Womack shows that this competition of social networks and intellectual circles centred on the development and appropriation of the Karen script and on the contested imaginations of a Karen ethnicity (Womack 2005). By examining Christian, Buddhist and syncretic literary groups in the 19th and 20th century in different regions of Eastern Burma, Womack shows that the missionary Karen Sgaw script was only one among 11 different scripts, albeit the most influential one. Competing scripts were reproduced in the churches, monasteries and among syncretic groups such as the Leke and Telekhon, mixing Buddhist, Christian and autochthonous elements.

The nationalist Christian leadership of the KNU is, according to Martin Smith, only a recent phenomenon (Smith 2007). However, this does not make the link between Christianity and the insurgency less important. Religion provides a very interesting lens to look at the contestation of Karen representation and territorial spaces in the borderland. But Womack's work makes the perspective of Karen nationalism more diverse and cautions us to not making the mistake of producing a unitary perspective where there is none. South points out that many syncretic Karen in Burma do neither identify with the KNU nor with the DKBA but are drawn into a vicious cycle of violence. Womack is certainly right to state that the nationalist narrative is filtered to foreign researchers by the KNU, the Karen refugee committee and Karen NGO's. Nevertheless, I think it is very significant to research the way that the national narrative is reproduced in the Thai borderland and in the publicity on the humanitarian

crisis. This article is about the connection of religion and nationalism in this politics of representation.

While this diversity remains in Burma, in this article I argue that the Baptist Christian network has the strongest lobby in the refugee camp and that the domination of the administration of the camps is reflected in the Christian teaching in the camp schools. Of course, Christianity is not a unified entity either. From the beginning, American Baptist missionaries proselytized along Catholic missionaries and the Christian landscape of today is characterized by the co-existence of Baptist and Catholic community churches. In addition, other denominations compete with the dominant Baptist stream, the Seven Day Adventist church being second place.

I argue that the privileged position of the evangelic Baptist church and its close association to the KNU in the refugee camp results in a campaign to missionize refugees, and that this is what happens. Refugees, Buddhist and animist, who are socialized in the migrant schools and in the humanitarian networks are exposed to and convert to Christianity. The reasons for conversion are complex, but that the main reason is that individual refugees want to be part of the collective body of the Karen characterized by faith and nationalism. Christianity symbolizes modernity and cosmopolitanism. Not least, conversion to Christianity grants access to social welfare and better access to humanitarian aid and social mobility. Inside Karen state, the DKBA also offers a future perspective and the KNU and DKBA now aggressively compete over the symbols of nationalism. In both guerilla armies, religious affiliation have become key symbol and the DKBA is involved in building pagodas and temples while the Baptist network is eager to plant churches.

First, I provide a background to Christianity with a focus on the Karens in Thailand and Burma to show the development of a distinctive Christian identity. I show that Christian identity is intimately associated with Karen nationalism and the project of a Karen state. The Christians in the camps and in the borderland have established global connections with American churches and South Korean Pentecostal churches. Second, I will write about the reorganization of Karen lives in the spaces of the Thailand/ Burma borderland, providing ethnographic data on the survival and reproduction of individual refugees in the camp and in the countryside organized in the collective transnational community of the Karen Baptist church. I argue that the Karen are not just recipients of humanitarian aid. Unlike former Vietnamese refugees who converted to Christianity, the Christian Karen are old Christians who have a tradition of proselytizing among their own ethnic group and other ethnic minorities.

## TRANSNATIONAL TIES AND RELIGIOUS NETWORKING

Christian missionary networks are not the only religious networks in town. The cultural hegemony of the Karen in the Thai borderland in Northwestern Thailand excludes the subaltern Buddhist, Islamic and autochthonous Karen communities that construct their own religious landscapes in Thailand and in Burma.

My research on the transnational religious lives of the Christians adds to and complements important research on the economic and political practices of transnational refugees. Brees' article in particular provides very valuable research about the remittance strategies of refugees and the practical difficulties they face (Brees

2010). Another important contribution comes from Sandra Dudley whose work on the exiled Karenni in the Thailand/Burma borderland focuses on the transformation of Karenni refugees into modern educated subjects, Karenni identification and the rise of a Karenni nationalism (Dudley 2007: 77-106). The Karenni (red Karen) identity is born in the refugee camp and similar to Karen identity, conceals internal diversity, contradictions, tensions and plurality in favor of a united, Christian dominated Karenni-ness. In a recent full monograph on the Karenni refugees in Thailand, Dudley uses a material culture lens to analyze the formations of pre- and post-exile Karenni identity (Dudley 2010). This article can thus be read in convergence with Dudley's important work.

Castells argues that the world is reconstituting itself around a series of networks strung around the globe based on advanced communication technologies (Castells 1996, Stalder 2006). Castells argues that the network is the signature of new society. Networks are driven by modern communication technologies and reorganize geographical space by creating a new material foundation of time-sharing. Networks are social ties that allocate and control resources. Networks are not simply amalgams of nodes and ties, but are always organized around projects, goals and values. Each network constitutes its own social world, and it is the bundle of material and immaterial resources and flexible, yet, coordinated communication, which makes action possible. Clearly, I want to argue that religious networks very much spread through the network logic. In the Thailand/Burma borderland, the Karen Baptist Convention is a network that is organized around the political project of spreading Karen nationalism and Protestant Christianity that is based on a set of material and immaterial, religious resources and that is bound together by use of advanced electronic communication on a local and a global scale. The question of inclusion and exclusion is one of the most fundamental in network society. Castells writes, the network also acts as a gatekeeper. Inside networks, opportunities are created while outside the network survival is increasingly difficult (Castells 2000: 187, Stalder 2006: 195). Indeed, for many people, survival becomes a daily struggle collecting garbage, working in factories, or as wage labor under the minimum wage, while Christian networks provide shelter, food and security in a hostile environment.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of a transnational social formation gives a more coherent frame for explaining the dynamics of durable transnational exchanges. A concise overview of transnational social formations is provided by Vertovec (1999, 2009). In arguing that the Christian Karen community provides a case-study for the transnationalization of the social world, I follow Vertovec's definition of transnational social formations and his proposition for empirical research on transnationalism. The Christian community is a transnational social formation with a special type of consciousness and national identity of an exiled but chosen people that extends to the Thailand borderland and to the Karen Diaspora in the West.

The project of the Karen community is kept alive through remittances from transnational humanitarian organizations and church networks and from the growing Diaspora. Transnationalism is an arena for transnational advocacy networks, NGO's, sophisticated Internet-homepages and ethno-political formations in the Diaspora. The transnational social formation has a durable spatial location in Karen state, refugee camps, in the countryside of the Thai borderland, in the migration schools, in Mae



Sot border town, and in the Karen communities in the US, Scandinavia and Australia. The consciousness of a Christian Karen identity in a durable transnational space makes the exiled Karen Diaspora a transnational social formation par excellence. This transnational formation takes up the social figuration of an ethnic and religious community.

The refugee camp, the orphanages and migrant schools are important spaces of proselytization. The organization of the refugees in missionary networks often, but not always, collides with the interests of the national order and contributes to what Saleemink calls the “cosmopolitization” of the refugees. Cosmopolitization here means a greater awareness of the world, and participation in the public sphere, but does not necessarily translate in de-ethnicization. While the state puts severe constraints on the movement of the refugees in the borderland by confining them to the borderland, Christian missionaries present themselves as saviors as they provide crucial access to humanitarian aid, social services, transnational networks and global ideologies that are closely associated with modernity and education. Unlike many other forgotten ethnic minority groups, the Karen have succeeded in getting substantial public awareness and solidarity in the West.

## SETTING THE SCENE

The experience of the Karen civil population in the conflict zone is characterized by compelling human rights violations (Tangseefa 2006, 2007, 2009; Falla 2006; Karen Human Rights Group 1998). As the Burmese military has been waging a war against the Karen secessionist movement, it aims to cut the Karen army from the Karen civil population. The Burmese military has established garrisons from where it is looting, burning houses, killing people, raping women, using people as porters, mine-sweepers and human shields. The Burmese military has established free-fire zones along the border from which the people are forcibly relocated to strategic hamlets. Karen people are forced to pay taxes and forced labor to competing armies (Callahan 2005; Grundy-Warr & Wong 2002; Smith 1999, 2007).<sup>8</sup> Thousands of people are forced to leave the villages as a result, find themselves in the jungle, on the mountains, roaming around without food and medical care, and struggle their way to the Thai-Burmese border. Hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced people who inhabit the Burma-Karen frontier region without much hope to return to their home. Many Karen crossing the border hide in the Karen villages across the border. Crossing the border to Thailand, they self-settle in border village or in border towns illegally or find refuge in the camps at the Thailand/Burma border, being considered Burmese national displaced people fleeing from civil war.<sup>9</sup>

Christian Karen refugees continue earlier efforts of Christianizing the Karen in Thailand from Burma that included 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 regularly ask for Christian pastors for their churches in Burma. Solidarity is extended by Christian families in the hamlets of the mountains to Christian refugees. 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 the new arrivals in the new camps as well as in 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 Baptist's reconstruction project alive. Its privileged position in the camp and its firm presence in the hills provide the basis on which the Karen base their identity.

## KAREN AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE THAILAND-BURMA BORDERLAND

Educated Christians are at the forefront of the secessionist Karen movement. Christianity provides the ideological underpinning of Karen nationalism. At the same time, the camp provides a site for mobilization of young soldiers for the "revolution" of the Karen. This is why the camps provide dangerous sanctuaries: In various instances, Burmese military and DKBA soldiers were storming the camps, shelling the camps and burning houses and looking for KNLA-soldiers. Karen nationalism and Christianity are thus intimately intertwined, reinforcing each other. As Reverend Dr. Simon Saw, principle of *Kawthoolei* Maela Bible College puts it: "God's plan is a mystery." But in the refugee camp, "we can reorganize our people." In addition, Reverend Simon notes that missionization in the refugee camp has been a big success for mission: Thousands of people have received the gospel. Moreover, the Karen Baptist convention has expanded all over the world as Karen refugees have been resettled in all countries that accept them. He shows me a poster with the numerical concentration of Karen communities in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Scandinavia, Netherlands. Reverend Simon notes that the leadership was looking forward to the dissolution of the camp after resettlement of the last refugee. Helas, new fighting and harsh poverty in Burma swept new waves of refugees into Thailand and into the camps.

Unlike other more silent minorities, the Christian Karen constitute a very articulate English-speaking minority that historically differentiated itself from the Burmese Buddhists and overcomes its marginality by drawing on the infrastructure of local and transnational Protestant churches, transnational religious networks and a pool of transnational financial support (Salemink 2009: 53). Many scholars suggested that evangelical Protestantism is an attractive religious option for many marginal ethnic groups. For the Karen refugees from Burma, this is not entirely convincing. A substantial proportion of the Karen in Burma stick to their local spirit beliefs. But the Baptist minority assumes a hegemonic position in the Thai-Burma borderland, because of the organizational, financial and communicative strength of protestant churches and the many Karen Nongovernmental Organizations that are operated by Christians. This becomes particularly evident in the refugee camps where the Christian missionary networks dominate religious life. The Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) recruit soldiers and supporters from the camps.

As many of the villages in the free-fire-zone have been forcibly relocated, burned or totally destroyed, the Karen refugees cannot return to their home villages to which they are emotionally attached. Two million refugees in Thailand and hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Karen state need to organize their survival and repro-

duction in a hostile environment. Education is used to instill Karen national values in the children and youth. Education holds the future alive. Without education, the refugees are degraded to a life of “animals” that are restricted to eating and sleeping. Education is also hold alive in the embattled Karen state in Burma. Activists in Mae Sariang coordinate the preparation of schoolbooks that are distributed by volunteers who cross the border by foot to distribute them among displaced people in mobile “displaced” schools.

## SPACES OF THE KAREN CHRISTIANS IN THE THAILAND-BURMA BORDERLAND

### Saved on Noah’s Ark: Mae Hla Camp

Maela (Mae Hla) camp is the biggest of the camps at the Thai-Burmese border. Maela is well known as a study center, thousands of students come from Karen state to study there. Built in 1984, it has swelled up with the closure of many smaller camps along the border. There were 46,855 people in the shelter, with a density of 105 persons per acre. It is located ca. 65 km from Maesot on the Moi River. Very hot in summer, Maela is very cold in winter and very muddy after rains. Visitors are allowed to enter from 06.00 to 18.00 only and are prohibited to stay overnight. The camp is guarded by ca. 100 border patrol police forces and fenced with barbed wire. The camp was shelled in 1997 and many compounds were burned by DKBA-forces. The UNHCR, the International Labor Organization and the European Union keep offices in the camp. The people live in simple bamboo houses. They use cheap wood, bamboo, earth and plastic sheets to build houses as they would build them in their village. Most shelter residents had no income or land to farm, and they have therefore become dependent on aid. The families receive calculated rations of rice, charcoal, oil and drinking water. Early shelter residents had small plots for gardening.

The supply of food and basic items is organized by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium. The TBBC was initially called the Consortium of Christian agencies and comprised the Karen Baptist Convention, Church of Christ, the Seven Day Adventists and the Mennonites. These organizations provided the first assistance to the border and established the infrastructure for the first camps in 1984. What was provisional became a durable phenomenon. Later, governments and humanitarian NGO’s joined the large-scale provision of humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian aid organizations depend on the indigenous Karen Refugee Committee that is under the patronage of the KNU. The Karen refugee committee allocates the organization of relief welfare, organizes education in the schools and kindergartens, and administers the infrastructure of the camp, protection of refugee families, the political organization and public relations. The KBC is the spiritual umbrella of the refugee camps and for the Karen resistance. While the consortium should not be discriminatory for the distribution of rations, Christians represent most of the KNU refugee families.

The church and Bible school constitute the spiritual center of camp life, church services and religious life. Pastors provide daily church service in the bible school. In addition, the church organizes bible study circles and large choruses. For the pastors, the faith stands of course in the center of everyday life. In a poem entitled “I am not

ashamed to be a refugee” that he composed, Dr Simon Saw from *Kawthoolei* Bible school compares the refugee camp to Noah’s ark. After New Year, a mass Baptist ritual is held in Mae Ra Ma Luang. A dense network of pastors, evangelists, bible schools, and political activists thus operate under the roof of the Karen Baptist convention. Other churches involved in the camp are the Roman Catholic Church, the South Korean Presbyterian and the Seven Day Adventists.

Reverend Dr Simon Saw recounts that the church began very modest as houses were primitive and people did not have access to electricity and water. Moreover, when they installed electricity, the military told them that they have not the right to it. But the Karen leadership persisted and transformed the camp into a livable place with pathways, trees and beautiful gardening. Korean Pentecostal Presbyterian missionaries bought lamps and computer hardware and installed light and internet connection. They thus succeeded to transform a form of desolate and regressive place into a livable, friendly space in which communication is maintained through the many offices both inside and outside the camp. In a sense, the lost Karen state in Burma is reconstructed symbolically in the refugee camps.

A committee of Christian pastors and evangelists look after the church service, social welfare, and ritual life in the camps. Pastor Robert, head of the Karen Refugee Committee facilitates the entry of the religious and nonreligious NGO’s that provide humanitarian aid and social training. The church service is regularly held on the main open-air public place in the camp to reach a wide audience. The church provides spiritual guidance to the everyday life, education and national “struggle” of the Karen. Many Karen refugees who visit Christian kindergarten and schools want to become Christian because of exposure to Christian discourse, prayer, singing and mission. The gospel songs by the large camp choruses are particularly important. The choruses, existing not only in refugee camps but in churches, bible and mission schools, train regularly and perform in competitions. The texts in the gospel songs are meant to encourage the refugee families and to unite them in the national narrative. Conversion to Christianity provides relief to the memory of atrocities, membership in a lively community, social security and connections to modernity. The educated Christian leadership in the administration of the Refugee camp targets the animist arrivals in the camp for Christianization. While the first waves of refugees left whole village communities largely intact, later arrivals came from the interior of Southeastern Burma and were more scattered and religiously diverse.

As Dudley suggests, foreigners who come to the camp provide access to the outside world, sources of help, and the promise of a better world (2007: 94). Dudley (*ibid.*) has rightly emphasized the reinforcement of Karenni ethnicity and national identity in the refugee camp. Confined to the limitations of the camp, pupils are taught effectively about a nationalist agenda developed by the Christian-dominated Karenni National Progressive Party (KNNP). Education therefore ultimately serves the national struggle of the Karenni against the Burmese Junta. Karenni graduates aim to work in foreign and Karen NGOs, in the health-sector or support the army. Many Karen focus on education, as education seems to be the only resource left in the refugee camp as work is not allowed.

Christianity is obviously a crucial element of the educational project. The teaching of the Holy Scriptures is given high priority. The emotional aspect of Christianity

in providing hope should not be underestimated. According to my informants, the relationship of people to God in the context of displacement is intensified. This intensification of religious feeling in the camp is also expressed by pastors in the camp. The feeling of committing oneself to God penetrates all spaces in which the refugees live and learn.

Many families have registered for preparation to settle in a third country, but have only a vague idea about life in the United States or in Europe. With memory of a horrible past and illusions of a better life, many are ill-prepared for a second life in the US. The Christian KNLA targets young men in the refugee camp. Some refugees, especially young men are recruited by the KNLA and some refugees join the KNLA by their own choice. On Sundays, the Christian Karen visit the service at the chapel of the camp. Near to the chapel, the bible school at Maela camp is located. Here, the connection of Christianity and Karen nationalism becomes even clearer.

Reverend Simon obtained a doctoral degree from the Asian Graduate Baptist College in the Philippines. Before teaching at *Kawthoolei* Maela bible school, he has been a professor of theology at the Myanmar Institute of Theology in Yangon. The ministry in the camp does depend on outside support. Due to generous funding from American, Hongkongese, Taiwanese and Korean churches, *Kawthoolei* Maela Bible College expanded to an officially recognized college in which students come from far places outside the camp to learn about the bible. Reverend Simon is talking about "God's mysterious plan" to liberate the Karen from the suffering and to return them their "promised land". Maela Bible College thus becomes a key project in the missionary world plans of American and South Korean churches.<sup>10</sup>

Mae La Camp is thus imagined by the pastors as God's plan to establish "heaven on earth." The symbolic presence and display of the heightened religious emotion was impressively illustrated by the Baptism in Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp. In one showdown, more than five hundred people were baptized in the shallow river by Karen, American, Korean and Japanese missionaries. The baptism was presided by KNU-pastor Robert Htway, as charismatic church leader and administrator. After a long and emotional speech and sermon given to the crowd of supporters who joined on this day from outside the camp, the baptism went underway, with fifteen people being baptized at a time. The importance of the event was enhanced by the visit of American missionaries and church representatives who work with resettled Karen asylum seekers in the US. Although one of the reasons the baptism was held for practical reasons, as the Thai authorities do not allow regular baptisms in the refugee camps, the baptism was filmed on video and the CD was widely distributed to friends and supporters. This mass baptism illustrated the word of Simon Saw who called the flight to the refugee camp a "blessing in disguise".

### God's mysterious plan: In the countryside

The Christians in the villages extend their solidarity to the refugees and provide shelter and food to them. However, this solidarity is limited. As many Karen villagers struggle with the capitalist economy and have just enough rice to eat, the refugees are a burden. The refugees then try to build their own poor houses with cheap materials and work as wage-laborers for the Thai Karen farmers, who are mostly landowners. Here, I want to give the examples of two villages. The village of Huay Nam Nak is located

on the Thai-Burmese border at the Moi river in Tak province and is accessible *via* a small lane. Huay Nam Nak has a Buddhist temple, a protestant Baptist church, and a Catholic church. Huay Nam Nak is a large village. Huay Nam Nak lies on the Moei River, the river is very shallow, and Karen live on both sides of the border. After the fall of KNU-Mannerplaw in 1995, and during the dry-season, many Karen fled from poverty and violence, and cross the shallow river. After days in the jungle, they find refuge in the villages, dozens sleeping in cramped rooms. People in the village provide shelter, although they many do not have kinship relations or food to spare. After some time, these families try to return or construct their own huts. Plenty of people thus stay on in the houses, especially young people, who lost their parents or relatives. They work as helping hands in the house, without income, but for shelter and food. These people are invisible on the first sight as they live hidden in small huts in the fields. Some people, like Ray, marry with local women, and build their own houses. Some people survive by working the land of local people or raise chicken. There are some interesting connections of Burmese nationals living in Huay Nam Nak to other spaces of the Karen Christians. The assistant to the pastor in the protestant village chapel is a Burma national who cannot converse in Thai and thus teaches Bible in Karen language. He is graduated from bible school in Maela camp. On every Sunday, the church offers services for parents, for women, for youth. In a warm atmosphere, they pray, study the bible and sing hymns together. Because of the closure of the Catholic Church, prayer, singing and studying is hold in the private space of the house. A missionary from Karen Baptist Convention in Chiang Mai also moved to Huay Nam Nak. The Foundation provides educational scholarships for Karen children of poor parents. A Catholic missionary also stays in the village. Ray, a young man, comes from a remote village in Karen state. Ray made his way through the jungle to the Thai border and Meala camp to study. Back in Karen state, Ray has heard about the educational opportunities in the refugee camp through mouth-to-mouth propaganda. While doing training as a nurse in Mae Tao clinic, Ray converted to Christianity and joined the Free Burma Rangers. Tilling some land of his wife's family in Huay Nam Nak, he also employs some refugees, and joins the Free Burma Rangers regularly. He employs a friend who prefers to stay in the village and is making a living by raising livestock. This man is a friend of a colonel of the Karen National Union who comes to visit in the village. He left his wife and children in Mae Ra refugee camp, as his children are entitled to free education and food in the camp.

While many people are without papers, Burmese nationals are normally not harassed as long as they stay in the village. Children who visit school and learn Thai language can obtain Thai citizenship. For the parents, the missionaries help them to get papers, but a lot of money is necessary to bribe the officials. Through the educational foundation, the church and the missionaries, the Karen Christians of Huay Nam Nak is embedded in Catholic and Protestant Baptist networks. While Huay Nam Nak is easily accessible to the road from Mae Sot, the children's day for stateless children is hold in the remote village of Ban Hin between Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Son. Ban Hin is located a hundred miles from Mae Sariang. Karen displaced families from Burma join the few families settling in an area that has been officially marked as a national park. The village is inaccessible by road and has to be reached via the small river by four wheel truck. The journey is exhausting and time-consuming. Before,

precious teak wood was logged and driven out of the area, but little teak is left in the area. The families settling here grow rice on the hills, without having land ownership, but it is hardly enough. Thus, the Thailand Burma border Consortium brings free rice on lorry through the rivers to the refugees. In a predominantly Buddhist environment, Ban Hin is a mixed Christian Baptist and Catholic community. Most of the settlers arrived here ten years ago from Burma. They had to leave their property behind and had basically no resources. They have become stateless people. Take the example of Roger. Roger lives with his extended family in a modest house in Ban Hin. When I first met him in Ban Hin, where I joined the stateless children's day, he spoke in fluent English to me. Roger was born in a Mae Ra Mu refugee camp, before the village headman invited his family to join Ban Hin. The village headman visited the camp to sell 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.

As Roger wanted badly to go to school, he joined the bible school in Tah Song Yang. He was to become a pastor in the community church. Roger had no means to pay for the school fees. Thus, he stayed on in the holidays to work for his fees. Now, Roger is an assistant pastor in Tah Song Yang, commuting between Ban Hin and Tah Song Yang in Tak province. Every time he is commuting, 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 go on a lorry for the four-hour ride to Mae Sariang. A young man, Roger is not yet married. Besides, he is interested in soccer and mission. In his leisure time, he walks to remote villages to spread the word of God. This ethnographic vignette shows that the people in Ban Hin, although vulnerable, have settled in remote villages, living Christian lives and immersed in Christian networks. Roger has been socialized in an American bible school and is now a pastor. Without any personal savings, Roger's life is in the hands of Christian networks. But Roger is not just the recipient of humanitarian assistance and Christian education, but is also a keen evangelist who eagerly participates in the missionization of this remote corner of Northwestern Thailand. He is part of a whole community of Christian refugees who participates in the missionization of the Karen in Thailand.

In January 2010, a Thai-Buddhist NGO for children welfare in conjunction with Catholic and Protestant church networks organized on the occasion of the national children day a special event for stateless children in Ban Hin. The NGO wants to publicize the situation of stateless children who cannot go to College and to facilitate the granting of citizenship rights to stateless families. Recent migrants such as Roger's family do not have a chance to receive a Thai Identity-card. However, Roger and his family participated in the preparation of a cultural performance of Karen villagers for the audiences that made their way to the far-away village. In addition to the Thai-Buddhist NGO for children welfare, the Catholic NGO for refugee welfare also participated in the event, distributing children books and educational materials for free. For one day, the village on the fringes of a national park was in the limelight. While most of the villagers participated willingly in the campaign, some villagers did not want to catch too much attention from the Thai authorities. Although the head of Mae Sariang district also participated in the event, the relationship of the villagers and the state was conflictual regarding the rights to use forest and resources. In Ban Hin, the mountain rice harvested in Ban Hin was not sufficient to supply the villagers,

who had to buy additional rice on the market. Ban Hin has a large amount of migrant families from Burma who confront statelessness and stark poverty. They join peasants in the remote hills who are also poor. While some inter-marriage between the village and migrant population takes place, the migrant families are not fully integrated, disadvantaged regarding access to land and forest resources, are not entitled to government welfare and often have to work as wage-labor for Thai-Karen villagers. The festival that celebrated harmony in the community did not conceal these differences, but did not much to highlight these. The granting of citizenship rights to poor Thai-Karen rather accentuated the gap to the fresh migrants. For Roger, the future was with Christian networks. After I returned to the field, Roger hold a job with an independent Australian Pentecostal church that worked in villages both sides of the Moei border river to provide education to poor and orphan children and to spread the gospel. Roger thus earned his first income that he was able to send to his family.

### THE RE-ENTRY OF CHRISTIAN REFUGEES INTO BURMA

Christian Refugees in Northwestern Thailand thus establish strategies to make a living, to assist friends and relatives in Thailand and Burma and decrease their vulnerability in Thailand, depending on faith-based organizations. Family-splitting strategies are among the strategies to spread opportunities and incomes. It is very important to realize that all the different spaces in which the refugees make a living are closely intertwined and that the church provides an institutional umbrella for activities of the Diaspora in Thailand. For many Christian refugees, it is not enough to care for the own survival, but the educated Karen activists use their institutional resources in Thailand to re-enter Burmese territory and to actively support displaced people in Karen state. Diaspora groups, Karen Human rights organizations and middle-class activists collect a mass of information on human rights violations and supply international organizations and NGO's in Europe and in the US. These international groups channel resources to the activists on the ground coordinating education and health services to displaced people. One prominent example is the Karen Teacher Working Group, which comprises 10,000 volunteers from the communities who had to walk three weeks in the jungle to transport school materials and medicine to 1000 schools in war-torn Burma. The Karen Baptist Convention also uses institutional resources to assist the refugees at the border and displaced people in Burmese territory. Thus, pastors and evangelists who have an intimate knowledge of the area re-enter Burma by foot to distribute the Bible, spread the word, and to assist church services. Another prominent example is the Free Burma Rangers. The Free Burma Rangers (FBR) was founded by a retired US envoy who wanted to help the Karen for humanitarian and religious reasons to provide emergency relief to displaced people in war zones. FBR is a non-armed humanitarian group that prepares volunteers to walk into war zones protected by the KNLA or ethnic armies. The volunteers undergo intensive health care training and are able to help immediately people who suffer from illness, starvation and violence. Video-cameras and voice-recorders are used to document human rights abuses. In the US, FBR runs a campaign to collect donations and Christmas presents for displaced people in Burma. The FBR is a missionary agent that makes no secret that it operates based on the Bible, but emergency work has been extended to non-



Christian populations. In the war zones, the FBR organizes a “Good Life Club” in which the volunteers entertain the children and try to encourage them. The FBR also prays together with the displaced people and provide church service for them. The FBR uses Christian rhetoric in cyberspace to mobilize solidarity networks in the US. International prayer requests and prayer sessions are organized for Burma. The images that the FBR disseminates in cyberspace provide material for a powerful narrative of the Christian community on the suffering of the Karen and play a central role in mobilizing advocacy networks and donations for the work of Karen groups. The Free Burma Rangers show that Christians are prepared to expose volunteers to great danger and succeed to dramatize the human rights violations on sophisticated homepages.

## CONCLUSIONARY REMARKS

In describing the agency of Karen refugee leaders in the Thai-Burmese borderland, I use my concept of borderlands as active spaces that spoke of interconnections as much as they did of geopolitical «boundedness». Rather than seeing borders as fixed zones, it was more productive to see the border as constantly built up and contested through the actions of local agents (Horstmann & Wadley 2006). In the nightmarish experience of the civil war, the Christian landscape at the Thai-Burmese border uses education as a crucial resource to socialize Karen refugees in a Buddhist environment. While the Karen state of *Kawthoolei* becomes an illusion as the Karen National Liberation Army loses ever more territory, the Karen missionaries concentrate instead of spreading the gospel in Thailand, Burma and in the world. These efforts are directly following earlier efforts of Christianization in Burma in which the Karen emerged as keen evangelists who brought the word to other ethnic minorities, like the Kachin. The cognitive model and map of *Kawthoolei* has been imposed on the Karen and ignored their internal diversity. In the refugee camp, it is the image of the common “enemy” and the narrative of suffering that has been exhausted by the Karen. In a hostile environment, and harassed by the state, unable to return home in Burma, the Baptist church provides a key location for mobilizing the resources for a better life, solidarity with other refugees and a vision. Far from being passive recipients of humanitarian aid, refugees make careers in the church and emphasize their aspirations by actively participating in evangelical efforts. While the future of *Kawthoolei* looks bleak, Christian Baptist missionaries see new opportunities for the spread of the faith. Religious networks have established a presence and remain active on both sides of the border and organize many of the people who become internally displaced, migrants and refugees. In that sense, the border has indeed moved much closer to the sanctuaries in Thailand and has made return to Burma ever more difficult.

## Notes

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1. The best introduction to Burmese Refugees in Thailand remains Lang (2002).
2. A typical example of a partisan approach is Rogers (2004), who, writing from a “Christian” perspective, calls the Burmese army “evil”.
3. The monograph by Falla provides insight to the Karen rebel movement without using any theoretical approach (Falla 2006).

4. The author relies on his own fieldwork notes. See Hayami (2004) for a very consistent account of Christianization in Thailand.
5. On the role of American Baptist Christian missionaries in forging an unitary Karen identity, see Gravers (2007b).
6. In summer 2009, I carried out a first preliminary fieldwork in Maesot, Maela camp and Huay Nam Nak, a border village in-between Thai and Burma border spaces. A second fieldwork in the Salween region in Mae Sariang followed in December 2009-January 2010. A third fieldwork followed in winter 2010-2011.
7. While I find Castells' concepts especially helpful to conceptualize networks, the definition of network stays frustratingly vague. Writing from a post-Marxist agenda, Castells was interested in the modern capitalist networks and about social movements. Religion was not his primary concern.
8. See the (biased) report of the Karen Human Rights Group (1998): Wholesale Destruction for a report on human rights violations. See the works of Decha Tangseefa (2006, 2007, 2009) for a participant analysis of the forcibly displaced Karen. Decha Tangseefa teaches constantly in Maela Camp. He is the director of a project to establish an international college for migrants and refugees in Maesot at the Thai-Burmese border.
9. I am very grateful to Decha Tangseefa, who extended his friendship to me and integrated me into his teaching at the Karen College in Maela Camp.
10. For a good overview of the global financial flows of American churches, see Robert Wuthnow, 2009, *Boundless Faith. The Global Outreach of American Churches*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

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**Abstract:** In this article, I provide a case study of a moving border between Thailand and Burma. Emphasizing the agency of people who become refugees, the article is concerned to point out the important role of religious networks in providing humanitarian assistance, shelter and mobility to stateless Karen refugees. I argue that Christian and Buddhist literate networks- realigned in political exile, develop competing visions of a Karen “home-land.” Arguing that membership in the network is crucial for survival, the article follows the social organization and religious practices in Baptist networks. I examine how the Baptist church network in close partnership with the Karen National Union is able or not able to mobilize refugees for proselytization. Karen refugee leaders and KNU-pastors find analogies in the bible to find an explanation to the suffering of the Karen civil population in the war. The article is interested in the nexus and overlap of humanitarian ideology, Christianity and nationalism in the transitional space between Thailand and Burma. Providing case-studies of individual refugees, the article gives ethnographic sketches from the refugee camp, the countryside and humanitarian assistance to the internally displaced.

### *Réseaux sacrés et conflits parmi les Baptistes karen de part et d'autre de la frontière birmano-thaïlandaise*

**Résumé:** Cet article est une étude de cas d'une frontière mouvante entre la Thaïlande et la Birmanie. Insistant sur l'agency (action) de personnes devenues des réfugiés, l'article souligne le rôle important des réseaux religieux qui apportent une assistance humanitaire, des abris et de la mobilité à des réfugiés karen dépourvus d'État. Je soutiens que les réseaux intellectuels chrétiens et bouddhistes, recomposés dans l'exil, développent des visions concurrentes d'une « mère-patrie » karen. Soutenant que la participation au réseau est cruciale pour la survie, l'article développe plus particulièrement l'organisation sociale et les pratiques religieuses en vigueur dans les réseaux baptistes. J'examine comment le réseau de l'église baptiste, en partenariat étroit avec l'Union Nationale Karen (UNK) est capable – ou pas – de mobiliser les réfugiés pour du prosélytisme. Les dirigeants réfugiés karen et les pasteurs de l'UNK trouvent dans la bible des analogies pour donner une explication aux souffrances de la population civile karen dans la guerre. L'article s'intéresse aux connexions et aux imbrications de l'idéologie humanitaire, du christianisme et du nationalisme dans l'espace de transition entre la Thaïlande et la Birmanie. Révélant des études de cas de réfugiés particuliers, l'article donne des éléments ethnographiques du camp de réfugiés, des campagnes et de l'aide humanitaire aux déplacés de l'intérieur.

**Keywords:** religious networks – Baptism – Buddhism – nationalism – Karen – humanitarian crisis – humanitarian aid – refugee – refugee camp – confinement – mobility – borders.

**Mots-clés :** réseaux religieux – baptisme – bouddhisme – nationalisme – Karen, crise humanitaire – aide humanitaire – réfugiés – camp de réfugiés – détention – mobilité – frontières.