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Confinement and Mobility: Transnational
Ties and Religious Networking among
Baptist Karen at the Thailand-Burma Border

Max Planck Institute for the Study of
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften



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Abstract

As the refugee crisis unfolds, tens of thousands Karen refugees roam in the jungle, make their way to the refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border or self-settle in the border town or in the countryside. In this paper, I explore the nexus of the Karen becoming stateless and empowered in Christian networks. I engage with Castells' social theory of network society to show the reliance of refugees on support networks. I argue that Christians are able to counter their confinement to the refugee camp by claiming spaces in the borderland. Far from being passive recipients of humanitarian aid, Karen refugees emerge as senior evangelists who use cross-border church networks to proselytize in the borderland. I show that the Karen use these dense support networks for reconstruction in the Thai borderland and for re-entering the war-zone in eastern Burma as part of a collective project and spiritual passage. I argue that the development of an indigenous Karen Christian tradition is intertwined and developed in tandem with the nationalist project of a Karen state. The Karen "struggle" is thus interpreted in religious language of Christian prophecy. This discourse is also reinforced by the identification of Western humanitarian aid agencies with the fate of the Karen.

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Introduction

As the Burmese military has gained the upper hand in a devastating civil war in Karen, Mon, Kajah/Karenni and Shan states from the 1980s onwards, it has afflicted brutal human rights violations on the civil population, who had no choice but to leave the villages and run to the Thai border (Grundy-Warr/ Wong 2002; Grundy-Warr/ Lang 2002). In the resulting refugee crisis, hundreds of thousands of Karens now roam around in the jungle, make their way to the refugee camps inside Burma and Thailand on the border, or have to self-settle in border-towns or remote villages in Thailand. Beyond community and network, the refugees in Thailand become an integral part of a collective project of the Baptist church and the nationalist movement of the Christians who use their missionary efforts and the political narrative of suffering to claim spaces and special rights in the Thai borderland and to mobilize international solidarity and advocacy networks for their purpose. While the available literature focuses on the everyday life of the refugee camps, little is known about the lives of refugees in the Thai borderland outside the camps or about the re-entry of refugees into Burma after the reconstruction of lives in the Thai borderland. Religious identities have been largely ignored. The religious aspiration of the Christian Karen leadership is also highly politicized as the proselytizing of Christianity is intimately linked to the project of a Karen nation and to the Karen army (Karen National Union and Karen National Liberation Army) which recruits among refugees. My argument is that the Christian Karen succeed in stretching the border by claiming spaces in the borderland in Thailand and Burma and by mobilizing international support. The stretching of the border by establishing dense organizations is an effort to resist the rapid shrinking of Karen spaces in Karen state and the pressure of containing people in refugee camps and of limiting their lives to eating and sleeping. Facing massive persecution and violence, the Christian Karen carve out spaces for themselves. Facing relocation and loss of basic citizenship rights, the Christian Karen provide humanitarian assistance and increase the life-chances and mobility of the refugees. The article thus promises to explore the connection of missionization, nationalism and refugees, a topic which has rarely been of anthropological concern.

Hence, in this article, I explore the nexus of being and becoming stateless and empowered in Christian missionary movements. I show that far from being passive victims, Christian Karen refugees become very important agents of proselytizing, who use their cultural capital to reach out to their relatives, friends and to the imagined community of Christians. I will show that by doing so, the Christian Karen refugees

are able to distribute opportunity by connecting close and far-away spaces to each other.¹ The Karen church not only provides a large selection of services, welfare and relief, but, in addition, enables Christians to re-enter the humanitarian space as soldier-medics-missionaries in a war-zone largely inaccessible for international humanitarian NGOs. I argue that the Christian church indeed exercises a form of governance in the refugee camps and in the Thai borderland by controlling the administration of the camp and the humanitarian aid, taking over state functions. Fuelled by global alliances with American Christian churches, South Korean Pentecostals and international advocacy networks, this project of evangelization and reconstruction is in the hands of the educated Christian Karen leadership. This leadership asserts the formation of an indigenous Christian Karen Christianity. Karen Baptist indigenous Christianity is thus based on a strong and closely-knit network. However, most of the people who have become refugees are confined to the conflict zone or roam the jungle or the streets of Maesot. In this article, I aim to illustrate the opportunities of mobility that the Christian Baptist network opens up for its members and the organization of education and health services on both sides of the border.

The plan of this article is as follows. First, I provide background information on Christianity with a focus on the Karen in Thailand and Burma to show the development of a distinctive Christian identity in this community. 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 examine the re-organization of Karen lives in the spaces of the Thailand/ Burma borderland, providing ethnographic data on the survival and reproduction of individual refugees in the camps 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, but as Christians also claim spaces by introducing spiritual and political guidance. Unlike former Vietnamese refugees who converted to Christianity in refugee camps, the Christian Karen are old Christians who have a tradition of proselytizing among their own ethnic group and other ethnic minorities.²

1 In summer 2009, I carried out first preliminary fieldwork in Maesot, the Maela camp and in Huay Nam Nak, a border village in-between Thai and Burma border spaces. A second round of fieldwork in the Salween region in Mae Sariang followed from December 2009-January 2010.

2 I agree with Malkki (2002) that refugees are a mobile, highly unstable phenomenon and should not be studied as an essentialist category or anthropological “tribe”, but in relation to the social and political processes in which the refugees become positioned and embed-



Figure 1: Baptism at Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp (photo by Alexander Horstmann)

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 spiritual Karen communities that construct their own religious landscapes in Thailand and Burma. I argue that through studying the lives of the refugees embedded in the 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. While I am also interested in a comparative perspective with Buddhist monastery networks and Islamic da'wa missionary networks, the starting point and focus of this paper is the organization of Christians in Christian networks.

ded. The term “refugee” will be used here for humanist and definitive reasons, although the displaced people discussed here are not recognized as “refugees” as Thailand has not signed the Geneva Convention of Human Rights.

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. 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 was born in the refugee camps and, similar to Karen identity, conceals internal diversity, contradictions, tensions and plurality in favour of a united, Christian-dominated Karinni-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.

I argue that Christian networks provide a very important frame in which the transnational practices of Christians take place. As I will show, these practices encompass not only religious practices, but social, economic and political practices as well. The focus on Christian networks enables me to show that individual refugees who have nothing but left their bare lives cease to be "refugees" and as authorized Christians become powerful agents in the political project of a transnational community.

This decision invites a short reflection on the rise of networks in our time. 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. They 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 that 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 organized around the political project of spreading Karen nationalism and Protestant Christianity that is based on a set of material (alms, donations, American and South Korean churches) and immaterial religious resources and 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 argues that 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 labour under the minimum wage, while Christian networks provide shelter, food and security in a hostile environment.³ The concept of a transnational social formation gives a more coherent frame for explaining the dynamics of durable transnational exchanges. Vertovec provides a more concise overview of transnational social formations (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, NGOs, 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 the 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. This community is bound to a common destiny or fate and the ties are bound through Christian spirituality. These spiritual ties oblige pastors in the Thai borderland to assist Karen displaced people in Karen state even if these people expose themselves to great danger. By defying this danger, Christians show their loyalty to the community. The circulation of powerful images of suffering and the emotions associated with them is bringing about this loyalty.

3 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.

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 Salemink calls the “cosmopolitization” of the refugees (Salemink 2009). Cosmopolitization here means a greater awareness of the world, and participation in the public sphere, but does not necessarily translate into de-ethnicization. The principal of a Karen Bible school in northwestern Thailand, for example, who had graduated from *Kawthoolei* High school and Bible College in Maela camp, opened a virtual platform for Karen people, called “Karen Family”, promoting Karen culture and the Karen language. I am interested in exploring the imagination of a marginal, transitional society in-between the sovereignties of nation-states as “promised land”. While the state puts severe constraints on the movement of the refugees 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. The mobility of the Christian Karen extends to several nodal points in different spaces in the borderland that are closely connected through Christian organizations.

Missionary agencies claim spaces in the borderland by establishing mental maps: the bible school, the migration schools, orphanages, hospitals, and the village churches. In a time in which the movement of the Karen refugees in the limited spaces of the borderland is restrained, Christian missionaries make every effort to convert refugees. The Christian Karen and Christian partner organizations have woven the imaginary of the atrocities perpetrated by the Burmese military into a very 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 who provide humanitarian aid to the wounded.

Themes that I would like to highlight in this context are the metaphors of war and liberation. Christians are at war with the Burmese military, which is portrayed as the devil. In this political discourse, Karen soldiers are the “angels” who provide relief to the displaced people. “They march with the Lord.” Karen nationalism mirrors the chauvinistic ultra-nationalism of the Burmese junta. This propaganda is used to mobilize international solidarity and donations. The Free Burma Rangers, a paramilitary group that provides medical teams to help internally displaced people, makes extensive use of this psychological warfare. The Free Burma Rangers are also Christian missionaries who reach people in the most remote corners of the

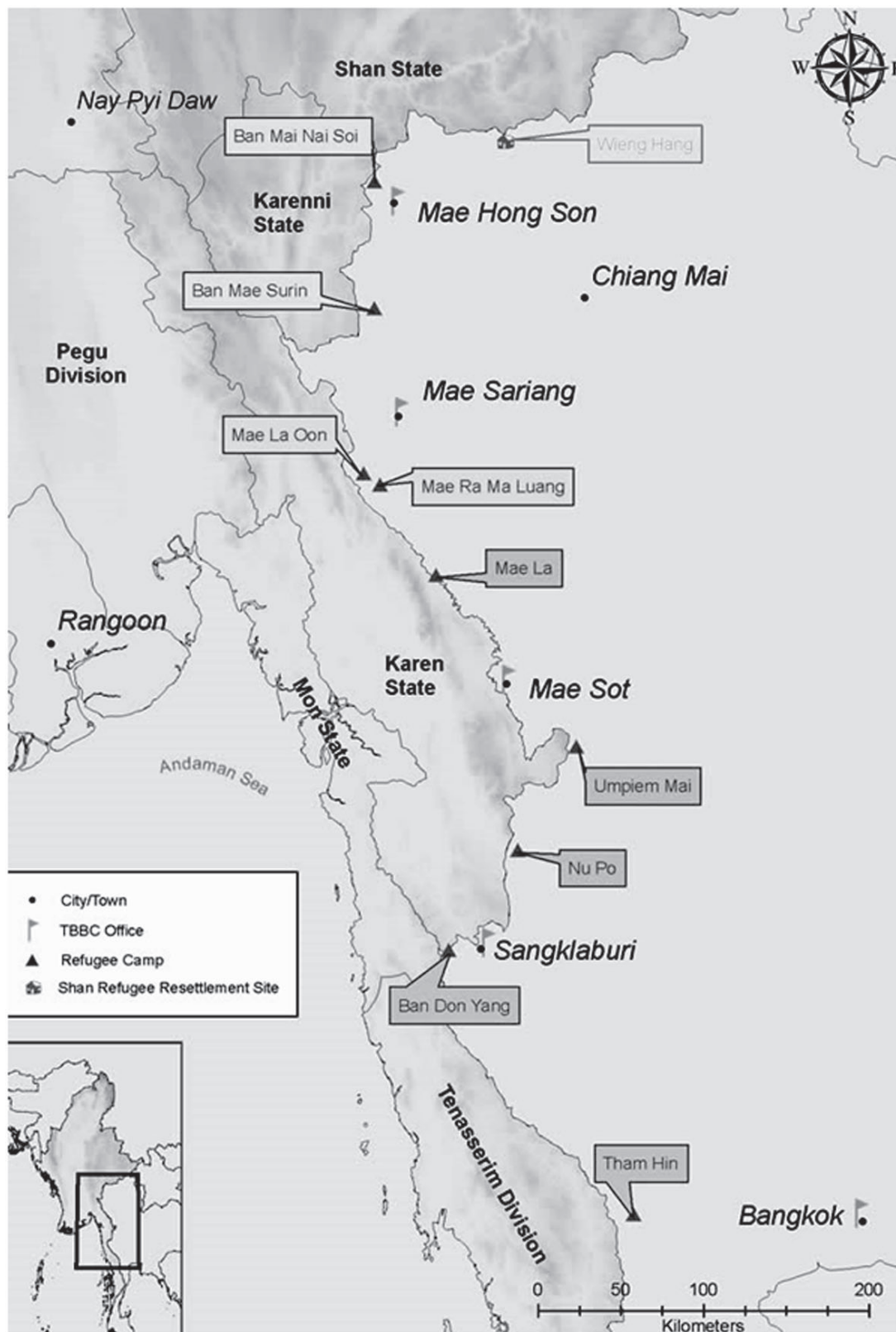
Karen state and assist them while spreading the gospel. Using the website to advertise the efforts of the relief workers, the Free Burma Rangers and other transnational Christian organizations transform the image of the multi-religious Karen state into a Christian land that is occupied and terrorized by the atheist Burmese military.

Unlike many other forgotten ethnic groups, the Karen Christians have succeeded in getting substantial public awareness and solidarity in the West and external funding keeps their project alive. I conclude by showing that the different spaces and segments of the Karen struggle – churches, NGOs, the KNU, and the Diasporas – are linked in one complex that organizes the Karen Christian community and governance from the leadership down to the grassroots level.

Setting the Scene

The experience of the Karen civil population in the Karen-Burma frontier has been harrowing (Decha 2006, 2007, 2009; Falla 2006; Karen Human Rights Group 1998). The Burmese military has been waging a war against the Karen secessionist movement since 1949. In order to cut the Karen army off from the Karen civil population, the Burmese military has established garrisons from where it is looting, burning houses, killing people, raping women, and 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 to the Burmese and to provide soldiers as well as pay a war tax to the rival Democratic Karen Buddhist Association and Karen National Union (Callahan 2005; Grundy-Warr/ Wong 2002; Smith 1999, 2007).⁴ Thousands of people are forced to leave the villages as a result, and find themselves in the jungle, on the mountains, roaming around without food and medical care, and struggle to make their way to the Thai-Burmese border. Hundreds of thousands of people are

4 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.



www.tbbc.org - Location of nine refugee camps along the Thailand border with Burma (with permission of TBBC- Thailand Burma Border Consortium)

internally displaced people who inhabit the Burma-Karen frontier region without much hope of returning to their homes. Many Karen crossing the border hide in the Karen villages on the other side of the border. Crossing the border to Thailand, they self-settle in border villages or in border towns illegally or find refuge in the camps at the Thailand/Burma border, where they are considered Burmese national displaced people fleeing from civil war.⁵

Although the Christians make up only 15-20 % of the Karen in Burma, the Christian Karen exercise a dominant position in the refugee camps in which the Buddhist Karen community plays only a subaltern role. This hegemonic position in the camps reflects the dominant position of the Christian Karen and the internal segregation of the Karen in Burma. The Buddhist Pwo and Animist Sgaw are poorer and have had less education than the Christian Sgaw (Gravers 2007: 229). The Buddhist Pwo 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 did not have anything to do with the conflict, but have nowhere to turn to after arriving in Thailand. These people are excluded from the transnational social formation and the transnational religious community. Survival outside the camps or religious networks is difficult.

By talking about Karen identity as homogenous, the Christians conceal internal diversity and cleavages. It was the Christian missionaries and Sgaw Karen intellectuals who have constructed Karen identity as an entity deeply opposed to Buddhist Burman identity. Baptist missionaries played a key part in constructing Karen literacy and national identity. In making the Christian Karen a crucial ally of the colonial conquest of Burma, they were responsible for deep hostilities between the Christian and the Buddhist Karen. The Christian Karen looked down on the Buddhists, whom they, in tandem with the missionaries, regarded as worshipping idols, and the Animists, who were regarded as uncivilized. The Western missionaries and the Christian Karen were drawn into the violent suppression of the Burmese anti-colonial rebellion that included Buddhist monks and Buddhist Karen. Burmese forces, on the other hand, responded by massacring Christian Karen in World War II. The hope of a Karen Christian nation *Kawthoolei* (flowering country) did not come about and the Karen were disappointed about the missing assistance from the Western white brother. Gravers (2007) notes that the imagination of a Karen state was an entity

5 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.

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 great suffering to all Karen – Buddhist, Christian or Animist – to whom no neutral position was available (Gravers, 247). Thus, the Christian national narrative is one that juxtaposes a Karen pure Baptist Christian identity in stark opposition to the Buddhist Burmans. The staunchly patriotic and anti-communist president of the KNU, Bo Mya, suppressed the leftist wing of the Karen independence movement, and thereby attracted assistance for the KNU from the Thai government and the CIA. A conflict between the Christian-dominated KNU and Buddhist soldiers and monks culminated in the formation of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, which became a tool of the Burmese Tatmadaw and today survives on looting, from the drug trade and illegal taxes. Although support for the DKBA is dwindling, the conflict illustrates the rivalry between Christian and Buddhist factions in the KNLA. After the fall of Mannerplaw in 1995, parts of the Christian KNU surrendered to the Burmese army, further weakening the dwindling resistance. Gravers reports that the symbolic space of *Kawthoolei* competed with the Buddhist imagination of the Golden Land. 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 several thousands of poor Buddhist Karen came seeking refuge and free food (Gravers, 248).

Today, Christian Karen refugees continue earlier efforts of Christianizing the Karen in Thailand from Burma that included concerted campaigns by 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 and 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 keep the Christian Karen project of reconstruction alive. The Karen Baptist convention

is well established and has founded its own organizations in Thailand. Its privileged position in the camps and its firm presence in the hills provide the basis on which the Christian Karen base their identity.

The Christian Karen in the Thailand-Burma borderland

It is as Christians that members of these networks provide solidarity and regard it as a God's command. Religious attributes can even strengthen the boundaries to the ethnic other, e.g. the boundaries of the Christian Karen to the Burman Buddhists. However, Karen traditions and local cosmologies are eradicated in evangelical Protestantism, and reduced to Karen folklore. 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.

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 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 have stormed the camps, shelling them, burning houses and looking for KNLA soldiers. Karen nationalism and Christianity are thus intimately intertwined, reinforcing each other. As Reverend Dr. Simon Saw, principal of Maela Bible College puts it: "God's plan is a mystery." As he puts it, the Karen have had to endure endless suffering, but in the refugee camps, "we can re-organize our people." In addition, Reverend Simon notes that missionization in the refugee camps is a big success for Christ: 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. To demonstrate the diaspora's reach, 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 is looking forward to the dissolution of the camps after resettlement of the last refugee. Helas, new fighting and harsh poverty in Burma recently 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 (cf. 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 NGOs that are operated by Christians. This becomes particularly evident in the refugee camps where the Christian missionary networks dominate religious life. The Christian Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) recruit soldiers and supporters from the camps. The Christian pastor is the head of the border committee that is responsible for the distribution of humanitarian aid. In the New Year, a mass Baptization ceremony is carried out in which pastors from Bible schools, churches, refugee camps and American Baptist missionaries are invited.

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 are nevertheless emotionally attached. Two million refugees in Thailand and hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Karen state need to organize their survival and reproduction in a hostile environment. The educated Christians in Thailand assume a leadership role as pastors, headmasters, professionals and activists. They re-organize in the different spaces in the Thai borderland in constant tension and negotiation with the Thai state. In the limited space with which they are provided and with the support of transnational churches and Christian organizations, Karen refugees create a transnational imagined community in which the church is the nucleus. The Karen educational and national project lies in the heart of the reproduction of Christians in the Thai borderland. 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

Maela Camp



Figure 2: Makeshift Housing in Mae Ra Mu Luang Refugee Camp

Maela camp is the biggest of the camps at the Thai-Burmese border. “Mae La” means cotton field. Maela is well known as a study center; thousands of students come from Karen state to study there. Built in 1984, it has always been very crowded. There were 46,855 people in the shelter in 2009, with a density of 105 persons per acre. The camp 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 from staying overnight. The camp is guarded by ca. 100 border patrol police forces and fenced with barbed wire. It 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 camps. 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 villages. Most shelter residents have no income or land to farm, and they have therefore become dependent on aid. The families receive calculated rations of rice, charcoal, oil and drin-

king water. Early shelter residents had small plots for gardening but this is no longer possible.

The camp is governed by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium. The TBBC was initially called the Consortium of Christian agencies and comprised the Karen Baptist Convention, the Church of Christ, the Seven Day Adventists and the Menonites. 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 NGOs joined the large-scale provision of humanitarian assistance. The Karen Baptist Convention not only chairs the organization of relief assistance, but also organizes education in the schools and kindergartens, the infrastructure of the camps, protection, the political organization and public relations. The KBC is the spiritual umbrella of the refugee camps and for the Karen resistance. The consortium is not discriminatory in relation to the distribution of humanitarian aid. In addition, freedom of religion and worship is granted to all religious communities in the camp. The Christian leadership of the KNU still dominates the Karen refugee committee, and the educational sector in the refugee camps.

The Baptist church and Bible school constitute the centre of camp life, church services and religious life. Pastors provide daily church services in the Bible school. In addition, the church organizes Bible study circles and large choruses. Every year 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 Pentecostals and the Seven Day Adventists.

Reverend Dr. Simon Saw, principal of the Maela Bible College, 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 did not have the right to it. But 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 connections. They thus succeeded in transforming 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 *Kawthoolei* 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 the ritual life of the camps. Pastor Robert, who is the head of the Karen Refugee Committee, facilitates the entry of the Christian NGOs that provide humanitarian aid and social training. Pastor Robert also presided over the yearly Baptist mass ritual in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp where more than 400 people and youth were baptized in 2010. At the event, American, Korean and Japanese missionaries joined Karen pastors and missionaries by baptizing the converts in the river. Karen members from Christian NGO's in Northern Thailand visited the refugee camp on that day to participate in the Baptist ritual. The church service is regularly held on the main public place in the camp to reach a wide audience. The influence of the church in the refugee camps is all-encompassing. The church provides spiritual guidance for everyday life, education and national "struggle" of the Karen. Karen pastors and evangelists play a key role in the Christianization of the Thai borderland. Many Karen refugees who visit Christian kindergarten and schools want to become Christian because of exposure to Christian discourse, prayer, singing and mission. Conversion to Christianity provides relief to the memory of atrocities, membership in a lively community, social security and connections to modernity. As Dudley suggests, foreigners who come to the camps provide access to the outside world, sources of help, and the promise of a better world (Dudley 2007: 94).

The first-generation Karen youth participate in a long-distance B.A. program 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, churches and as teachers in the migrant schools. Dudley (2007) has rightly emphasized the reinforcement of Karenni ethnicity and national identity in the refugee camps. 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 to support the "struggle." The positions in foreign NGOs in particular are highly desired, but require a solid education and some level of English. Many Karen focus on education, which 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 and the teaching of the Holy Scriptures is given high priority. The emotional aspect of Christianity in providing hope should not be underestimated. While the mobility in the camp is

highly restricted, the relationship of people to God is intensified. This intensification of religious feeling in the camps is expressed by pastors in the camp. The religious feeling of committing oneself to God penetrates all spaces in which the refugees live and learn. Humanitarian aid and humanitarian projects have a strong ideological underpinning.

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 camps. Some refugees, especially young men are recruited by the KNLA and some refugees join the KNLA of their own choice. On Sundays, the Christian Karen visit the service at the chapel by the camps. The Bible school at Maela camp is located close to the chapel and offers a service every day. Here, the connection of Christianity and Karen nationalism becomes even clearer. I had a long conversation with Reverend Simon, the principal of the Maela Bible College. Reverend Simon obtained a doctoral degree from the Asian Graduate Baptist College in the Philippines. Before teaching at the Maela Bible College, he was a professor of theology at the Burma Institute of Theology in Yangon. The ministry in the camp depends on outside support. Due to generous funding from American and Korean churches, the Maela Bible College expanded to an officially recognized college in which students come from far places outside the camps to learn about the Bible. Reverend Simon talks about God's mysterious plan to liberate the Karen from the suffering and to return them their promised land. He compares the Karen to the saved ones on Noa's ark. The Maela Bible College thus becomes a key project in the missionary world plans of American and South Korean churches.⁶ In the Maela camp, Christian, Buddhist and Muslim communities have established their own places of worship. Religious missionary movements, Protestant evangelists, Pentecostal movements, Buddhist charismatic movements, and the Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jama'at have all established a presence in Mae La camp. Mae La Camp is thus imagined as God's plan to establish "heaven on earth." While institutional development was difficult in numerous camps, the durability and concentration in Mae La camp enabled the élite to pursue their political project.

6 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.

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 land-owners. 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 is a large village and has a Buddhist temple, a protestant Baptist church, and a Catholic church. It lies on the Moei River, which 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 crossed the shallow river. After days in the jungle, they found refuge in the villages, dozens sleeping in cramped rooms. People in the village provide shelter, although many did not have kinship relations or food to spare. After some time, these families tried to return or construct their own huts. Plenty of people thus stayed on in the houses, especially young people who had lost their parents or relatives. They now work as helping hands in the house, without income, but 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 people survive by working the land of local people or raising chickens. 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 about the Bible in the Karen language. He graduated from Bible school in the Maela camp. 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 held 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.

In addition, a Catholic missionary also lives 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 the Meala camp to study. Back in Karen state, Ray heard about the educational opportunities in the refugee camp through mouth-to-mouth propaganda. While training as a nurse in the 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.



Figure 3: Performance of Karen migrant youth on Stateless Children Day (photo by Alexander Horstmann)

While many people are without papers, Burmese nationals are not harassed as long as they stay in the villages. Children who visit the school and learn the 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 are embedded in Catholic and Protestant Baptist networks. While Huay Nam Nak is easily accessible from the road from Maesot, the children's day for stateless children is held 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 joined 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 the insurgency, precious teak wood was logged and driven out of the area, but little teak is left nowadays. 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 Lorries through the rivers to the refugees. In a pre-dominantly 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 camps 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 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 go on a lorry for the four-hour ride to Mae Sariang. 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 also a keen evangelist who eagerly participates in the missionization of 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. The example of Ray in Huay Nam Nak shows that many Karen who are not Christian, convert on their journey to Thailand by becoming embedded in Christian networks.

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 to 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 one's 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 and supply international organizations and NGOs 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 on foot to distribute the Bible, spread the word, and to assist with church services.

Another prominent example is the Free Burma Rangers. The Free Burma Rangers (FBR) was founded by a retired US army general 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 paramilitary team that prepares volunteers in paramilitary sessions to walk into war zones protected by the KNU 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 provides church services 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 in dramatizing the human rights violations on sophisticated homepages.

Conclusionary Remarks

In a similar fashion to the Montagnard-Dega from the Vietnamese Central Highlands, the missionaries transformed the Karen from “primitive” to self-consciously modern subjects. In the nightmarish experience of the civil war in the Karen-Burma spaces, Christian missionary networks are the driving forces in the reproduction of Karen national identity in the Thai-Burmese borderland. 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 on spreading the gospel in Thailand, Burma and in the world. These efforts directly follow earlier efforts of Christianization in Burma in which the Karen emerged as motivated evangelists who brought the word to other ethnic minorities. The cognitive model and map of *Kawthoolei* has been imposed on the Karen and ignores their internal diversity. In the refugee camps, it is the image of the common enemy and the narrative of suffering that has united the Karen in the refugee camps. As more and more Karen resettle in the West, a global and cosmopolitan Karen diaspora emerges. However, most of the Karen are squeezed in the cramped refugee camps and in the Thai borderland, where they develop nostalgic notions of home, tradition and culture. The humanitarian campaign, the advocacy networks, international partner organizations, the Free Burma Rangers and sophisticated homepages are directed by the educated Christian Karen leadership. 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 for Burma. Far from being passive recipients of

humanitarian aid, the refugees make a career in the Christian church and emphasize their aspirations by actively participating in evangelical efforts. These efforts are now bundled in networks of the Karen Baptist Convention in Burma, Thailand and the Karen global Baptist fellowship.

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