

SPACES OF SOLIDARITY

KAREN IDENTITY IN THE THAI-BURMA BORDERLANDS

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Rachel Sharples

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning

Design and Social Context

RMIT University

June 2012

Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged, and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Rachel Sharples

June 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While it can seem like a largely solitary endeavour, this thesis exists because of many. Through their encouragement, interest, friendship and rigorous questioning, ‘the many’ have helped bring this thesis into being. This is an opportunity to acknowledge and thank them.

To the friends in the borderlands who have suffered my curiosity and my forays into your lives. While you all have my heartfelt appreciation and respect, I’d like to thank in particular Mort, Kweh Say, Theblay, Padi, Htoo Moo, Hten Dah, Daw Nay Htoo, Gay Hu, Cha Mu and Tham La. To all my colleagues at Burma Issues who really started me on this journey. You taught me many things, but in particular that there are other ways to understand and resolve the conflict in Burma through the voices of grassroots communities. I’d particularly like to thank Pi Lek for feeding my intellectual curiosity and my coffee habit, and Ajarn Pornpimon, an inspiring and original thinker on all things Burma and Thailand.

There are many Karen people who over the years have shared their stories with me. These stories are important and powerful reminders of life in conflict zones, and I hope that I have treated them with the respect they deserve. I also hope that the need to tell these types of stories will soon end, and that peace and stability will give the people of Burma the ‘home’ and life they so desire. And that new, empowering stories can then be told.

There are many people at RMIT who have helped me through this intellectual journey. My supervisors Damian Grenfell and Paul James, both of whom in their own ways have challenged and encouraged my intellectual endeavours. Damian’s patience, guidance and comfy op-shop chair were irreplaceable, and helped see this through to completion. I’d also like to thank Kelley Johnson for her early contributions in helping to form this thesis. Victoria Stead, Anna Trembath, Mayra Walsh and Anne McNevin for the many conversations about my research and feedback across various stages of the process.

I’d also like to thank the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Thailand who provided much needed funds for my fieldwork stints, in 2005 and again in 2008.

To my friends and family, who have never failed to enquire ‘how it’s going’ and have offered encouragement and consolation at the appropriate times.

And finally, to Emma. For her compassion, patience and belief.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iii
Map of Burma	vi
Map of the Thai-Burma border	vii
Abstract	1
Chapter 1: Introduction	3
Overview: the Karen in a borderlands space.....	6
Aims of the thesis	13
<i>Background to the study</i>	14
Thesis structure	18
Chapter 2: Methodology	22
Towards a methodology of ‘sites of intersecting social relations’	25
Participant Group	29
Location of the fieldwork	31
Methods	33
Chapter 3: ‘Fences and Neighbours’: <i>establishing a conceptual framework for the Thai-Burma borderlands</i>	42
The borderlands: re-imagining political space	44
Mapping borders: the body politic	48
Closed borders: the nation-state and nationalistic sentiment	51
Border crossing: global mobility, population and cultural movement	56
Chapter 4: From ‘Buffer Zone’ to Friendship Bridge: <i>the contemporary context of the Thai-Burma borderlands</i>	68
Refuge	70
Political intensification of the border	73
<i>Re-emergence of the Burmese state</i>	75
<i>Growing inter-state relations</i>	78
<i>Deteriorating security in the borderlands</i>	82
Humanitarian aid	86
Chapter 5: By the Shade of a Tree: <i>patterns of activism</i>	92
Institutional governance in the borderlands	94

<i>Consolidating place: controlling movement</i>	96
<i>Institutionalised labelling: controlling resources</i>	102
Controlled-contested: the political self	110
Chapter 6: This Story is Not For Myself: <i>networks of solidarity</i>	117
International networks	118
New technologies	123
Politically conscious, politically reflective	130
Activism: projecting a political message	138
Chapter 7: ‘Symbolic Anchors of Community’: <i>processes of cultural recovery</i>	145
Memory: the public projection of ‘remembered places’	147
Re-establishing cultural practices: processes of cultural reification	157
Imagining ‘home’	164
Chapter 8: To be Karen is to be Persecuted: <i>identity formation in the borderlands</i>	172
Modes of social practice and the performative dimension of identity	173
Karen identity through a narrative of persecution and displacement	176
Narrative of a homogenous Karen: a pan-Karen nationalist identity	182
<i>The Karen, a missionary-colonial construct?</i>	183
<i>The KNU and establishing a nationalist pan-Karen identity</i>	187
‘Karen-ness’ reinforced by external agents	190
Chapter 9: Conclusions	195
Spatial tension	196
Modes of social practice	197
Identity	199
The future of the borderlands	201
Appendix	206
List of acronyms	207
A note on use of names	209
Bibliography	211





ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the Thai-Burma borderlands becomes the setting for modes of social practice that critically inform the projection of a Karen identity. It uses the concept of 'borderlands' as a social construct to explore notions of space, activism and identity, particularly through an examination of the relationship between the nature of the borderlands space and the narratives of displaced Karen who reside within it.

This thesis examines how a group of Karen, displaced from Burma and now residing on the Thai side of the national boundary, conceive of and relate to the space they occupy. It shows that at the centre of this relationship between space and people is an interchange that occurs across a broader space that is informed by the national border that separates Burma and Thailand, a space that this thesis has treated as a 'borderlands'. This interchange is defined by the nature of sociality that occurs in conjunction with a territorial domain, and is broadly mapped through the operations of the nation-state and the practices of displaced Karen, two key agents of the borderlands space.

Drawing ethnographic field work into conceptual considerations of place and space, this thesis found that in the borderlands, the practices of displaced Karen take on a fluid and contested form, framed by processes of constructing, adapting, rejecting and reifying elements of a Karen cultural and political identity in order to construct a Karen narrative of persecution, and ultimately establish a Karen political self. This often sits in tension with the operations of the Thai and Burmese nation-states, which attempt to create a space that is more homogenised; defined and treated as representing the nation-state's political authority over a delineated territorial domain and its inhabitants.

This thesis shows that this tension provides a space in which displaced Karen protest, construct and redefine the parameters of their political life. This is done through key modes of social practice – patterns of activism that establish a Karen political voice, networks of solidarity that enable, broaden and strengthen the reach of a Karen political voice, and processes of cultural recovery that consolidate the idea of a Karen nation and a Karen cultural identity. These practices ultimately inform the construction and projection of a Karen identity that is specific to the borderlands space.

This research is important because it argues for a new way of looking at the borderlands as a political space, a spatial reimagining that moves beyond the specificity of the territorial domain to emphasise the social construction of space and the spatial aspects of identity. In doing so, this thesis offers a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the borderlands space, the actions of displaced Karen and the construction of identity.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*The lives of the porters are unlucky, no chance to survive
We have to carry unfair heavy loads
We have wounds on our shoulders and heads
We have to climb mountains and are beaten like cattle
We have to suffer from this powerlessness
They tortured us cruelly
All these problems are caused by the military government
Escaping to survive
Their power depends on their arms
They killed many porters
Many porters have sacrificed
We, the escaped porters, have hearts filled with hatred...
They beat and injured over one hundred of us porters
Don't cry porters
Together we will carry our loads until we reach the frontline
Along the way we saw many dead porters
Who died from landmines when they tried to escape
When we think of them we feel pain in our hearts
Porters run to escape and the soldiers try to shoot them
When we escape we feel grief for the porters who cannot escape
When we think of this we want to fight back to the military government...
Together we will struggle from now on!
Poem written by Kyi Le, a porter*

In November 2003 twenty-two prison porters arrived at the Thai-Burma border. Their most immediate journey had begun in various Burmese prisons where they had been incarcerated for offences ranging from receiving stolen goods to buying illegal lottery tickets, murder, and deserting the Burmese Army. These twenty-two porters ended up in Burma's eastern border area of Karen State where they were used as human labour to carry heavy loads of machinery, ammunition and food for the Burmese military. The porters told stories of being used as landmine sweepers (walking in front of Burmese military personnel to activate landmines), of beatings when they became too tired to walk, and of experiencing the malignancy of war. Many porters who attempted escape were killed, while a few made it back to their villages or to the Thai-Burma border. Those who made it to the border were afforded temporary security. A number of these porters then did something that was only made possible by their current location: tell their stories to a wider international audience. They wrote a poem about their experience and spoke it to camera. The porters were entrusting their story be told and their message heard, but with little idea where it might end up or how it might be used.

An act such as this highlights some of the key themes that frame this thesis. In a straightforward sense the thesis examines the significance of what is being said and where it's being said, and the relationship between them. While fairly standard questions, an in-depth analysis shows the answers are of course much more complex. At one level, what is being said is a personal experience of persecution. At another level, it shows a conscious reflection on the effects of armed conflict, and in its delivery an awareness of the place in which it is voiced: the poem is spoken and projected from the safety of the Thai side of the Thai-Burma border, an action that could not have taken place inside Burma. In its public projection, the porter's story became part of a larger narrative of political injustice that is produced in relation to Burma. In the poem the porter's talk of their persecution in terms of killings, beatings, and being forced to carry heavy loads. They do so in critical terms; "Escaping to survive, their power depends on their arms". The porters know who is responsible for their persecution and that the perpetrator's power lies in the threat of their guns. The poem also frames the porter's experiences in a way that promotes solidarity with others who share similar stories, ending with a cry to action: "Together we will struggle from now on". This is a story of persecution that is shared by many, and in its telling it becomes part of the larger body of activist material that I argue helps shape the identity of displaced Karen in the borderlands.

The location of this voicing of persecution is a key preoccupation of this thesis. Burma is one of Southeast Asia's frontiers. Its southern border faces the Bay of Bengal, but on all other sides its borders are landlocked, shared with Bangladesh, India, China and Thailand. From the time of a military coup in 1962 until the early 1990s, these borders kept Burma politically and economically isolated, a position largely achieved through the socialist path pursued by the military dictatorship and the enforcement of a policy of national unity that denied democratic reform and isolated the population from the rest of the world (Callahan, 2004; Fink, 2009; M. Smith, 1999; Taylor, 1987). With more than 52 million people and over 130 ethnic nationalities, successive military governments have largely attempted to contain and control the population through authoritarian rule, and with little tolerance for political plurality or ethnic diversity (Silverstein, 1997; Steinberg, 2001; Taylor, 1982). The ramifications of these policies are particularly evident in Burma's border areas where ethnic populations are concentrated and armed ethnic groups opposing the military dictatorship are typically based. Particularly since the 1970s, these policies have seen large numbers of people displaced within Burma and many hundreds of thousands forced to flee across borders and into neighbouring countries (BERG, 1998; HRW, 2005).¹

¹ Also see any number of reports produced by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), Amnesty International or Human Rights Documentation Unit (HRDU), to name a few of the organisations that have documented these abuses and the process of flight over the years.

One consequence of this is that the Thai-Burma border has become a place of refuge and reprieve for those fleeing persecution in Burma. The porters mentioned above not only found a safe and relatively familiar place at the Thai-Burma border, they were also afforded an open informal hospitality and access to resources not found inside Burma. There is some historical continuity to this as despite state regulation people have moved back and forward across this modern international border for over a century. But in constructing and projecting their poem from the Thai-Burma border, the porters are distinguishing the place from which they choose to tell their story; the location of this act of cultural resistance is no random coincidence. So what gives the border this perceived status of refuge? How does this largely invisible line on the ground come to represent differing states of security? Why did these porters tell their story here, on the Thai side of the Thai-Burma border? And more broadly, what impact does the telling of such stories have, particularly in terms of identity, agency, cultural reaffirmation and solidarity.

The central argument of this thesis addresses these preoccupations. I argue that the Thai-Burma borderlands becomes the setting for modes of social practice that critically inform the projection of a Karen identity. In order to make this argument, it is necessary to make three subsidiary arguments within the thesis. Together, these three subsidiary arguments examine the relationship between the nature of the borderlands space and the practices and narratives of displaced Karen who reside there. This ultimately leads towards the position of this thesis that Karen identity is formed in and through the dynamic of this relationship.

The first subsidiary argument this thesis makes is that the Thai-Burma borderlands is a distinct space characterised by a tension between a modern territorial domain, which is characterised by the modern demarcation of the Thai-Burma border and the consolidation of state control over it, and the intersection of a particular form of social relations, characterised by a fluidity of movement (of information, resources, ideas, culture, identity) that intensifies the possibilities available to displaced Karen, particularly in terms of political agency and mobilisation.

The second subsidiary argument is that these social relations take on the form of an interchange that occurs across the national border. This interchange is defined by the nature of sociality (flows of people, ideas and resources as well as connections to family, culture and identity) in conjunction with a territorial domain (the Thai-Burma border). It is framed by three modes of social practice that can be characterised as patterns of activism, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery.

The third subsidiary argument is that Karen identity in the borderlands is formed through a complex process of identity-making that conveys a sense of being rooted in the past, constituting

both real and imagined cultural identifiers and mythologies, and shaped by the present, specifically influenced by the experience of persecution and the consequences of displacement. These arguments, and how they relate to each other and the larger thesis argument, are elaborated upon later in this chapter where I discuss the thesis structure.

OVERVIEW: THE KAREN IN A BORDERLANDS SPACE

This thesis comprises a study of a group of Karen, an ethnic group from Burma, as well as an investigation of the social and geographic space they inhabit, a borderlands. As integral components of this thesis, both the Karen and the notion of a borderlands space require introduction and clarification.

In this section of the thesis I firstly place the Karen in an historical context, before bringing the focus back to the political and cultural characteristics of the displaced Karen in the borderlands who are the focus of this thesis. Like most ethnicities the Karen harbour complexities in their origins and in identification. Having some understanding of these historical complexities helps develop a key point I make later in the thesis around the formation of Karen identity in the borderlands, that it is projected through three key modes of social practice –patterns of activism, networks of solidarity, and processes of cultural recovery. These are manifest in two ways that are significant to the thesis, through a narrative of shared persecution and displacement, and as a pan-Karen identity based on a narrative of a unified, homogenous Karen. To understand this claim around Karen identity I must first put the Karen into historical context.

Secondly, this section of the chapter goes on to define the nature of the borderlands space that displaced Karen inhabit, arguing it has both cultural and geo-political qualities, but that it is in understanding the borderlands as a spatial entity that we can best map the interchange of social relations that occur across the borderlands domain and which frame a Karen identity.

The Karen

While the origins of the Karen are contentious, the claim most commonly accepted by early colonial administrators and missionaries was that the Karen originally came from current day China (Cross, 1854; Hla, 1939; Marshall, 1922).² What is more evident is that after a period of migration the Karen settled in areas that cover present-day Burma and Thailand. In Thailand the Karen are predominantly found in the hills of the country's northwest, as well as around major northern

² There is much literary discussion around the origins of the Karen. See Harry Ignatius Marshall's 'The Karen of Burma' (1922) and Jonathon Falla's 'True Love and Bartholomew' (1991) for extensive accounts of these debates.

cities like Mae Sot, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son. Many Karen also live along the Thai-Burma border, a result of either earlier migration or forced displacement caused by conflict inside Burma. Within the territorial confines of Burma, Karen people are predominantly found on Burma's eastern side, in Tenasserim Region and Karen State,³ but also in the Irrawaddy Delta to the west of Rangoon.⁴ Karen in these areas are predominantly engaged in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and livestock, and for many in the mountainous areas, subsistence farming. Many Karen are also found in urban areas like Rangoon and Pegu where they largely participate in the urban economy and lifestyle.

Such a description may carry the sense that there is a homogenous Karen identity, even one that stretches across national boundaries, but there is little evidence to suggest a syncretic nationalist Karen identity integrates the Karen in Burma and the Karen in Thailand. It is an important distinction to make, not only in terms of putting parameters around the displaced Karen I study in this thesis but also in its ability to illustrate a Karen identity partially formed around nationalist ties to territory rather than a shared ethnicity for all Karen. Differences in culture, religion and language which have formed over time may account for this, but one would also suggest that the mechanisms of the respective nation-state's and the notion of the international boundary that now divides them also plays a significant role (Rajah, 1990). These are important distinctions that are explored over the course of this thesis, however it is important from the beginning to note that the displaced Karen I talk of in this thesis do not include Thai-Karen. This is because despite largely conducting their political struggle from Thai territory, the Karen political movement in the Thai-Burma borderlands has made no real attempt to incorporate Thai-Karen into their struggle (Rajah, 1990).

This first step of clarification is however not enough, as the idea of 'the Karen' of Burma needs further analysis before we begin to understand the group of displaced Karen discussed in this thesis. Karen inside Burma are thought to number between 5 to 7 million (BERG, 1998). Yet putting

³ Across this thesis I use the names of towns, cities and states that are used by the participants in this thesis. These mostly constitute the names prescribed prior to a 1989 decision by the Burmese military to change the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar and the names of many of its key cities. There is obviously both a logistical and ideological basis to this. My main reason for doing so is because these are the names used by the participants in this research and out of respect to these participants and in order to provide consistency across the thesis I have decided to retain the names they use. However, in the first instance, and where relevant I have put the names used by the Burmese government in brackets.

⁴ Burma is made up of 21 administrative divisions. This includes seven states – Chin, Shan, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Arakan (Rakhine), Mon and Karenni (Kayah); seven divisions or regions – Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady), Pegu (Bago), Magwe (Magway), Mandalay, Sagaing, Tenasserim (Taninthayari), Rangoon (Yangon); five self-administered zones – Danu, Kokang, Naga, Pa-O, Palaung, Wa; and the capital, Naypyidaw Union Territory. The states are named after the seven significant ethnic groups in Burma, but while a large portion of the ethnic population may live in the state that bears their ethnic name, they are by no means restricted to residing there. For example, large pockets of Karen people can be found in the Irrawaddy Delta, Mon State and Tenasserim Division, as well as Karen State.

an accurate figure on Karen population numbers often seems like a futile business. There is little official data available and over the years numbers have often been manipulated for political purposes (Cusano, 2001, p. 141; M. Smith, 1999, p. 30). For example, the 1931 Census, considered the last attempt to truly capture Burma's demography and particularly its ethnic population, numbered the Karen at 1.3 million. A 1971 census noted 3.2 million Karen, but in 1983 the Burmese Government put the Karen population at only 2.21 million (BERG, 1998, p. 7).

While an accurate population figure may be hard to derive, so is a comprehensive distinction of the Karen as a cultural grouping. Across this thesis I will argue that Karen identity in the borderlands is projected through modes of social practice that manifest as narrative of displacement and persecution and a narrative of a homogenous Karen identity. This allows a much more fluid and elaborate understanding of identity than the sole focus on a homogenous Karen identity would typically allow, and is far more representative of my understanding of what is occurring in the borderlands. There is much evidence to support the argument about the complex nature of positioning a Karen cultural identity and the cultural, economic, linguistic and religious differences between the various people who call themselves Karen (Cusano, 2001). There are generally considered to be two major subgroups within the Karen, Sgaw and Pwo. They each have their own dialect and loosely speaking an assigned religion: Pwo Karens tend to be Buddhist and Sgaw Karens Christian.⁵ Chris Cusano suggests a distinction could also be made between lowland and highland Karen (2001, p. 143), and there is some merit to this categorisation. Lowland Karen are typically involved in the mainstream economy through small businesses or employment in the civil services. As such they are more likely to interact with non-Karen members of the population, particularly in trade and schooling, and are more likely to take on elements of the Burmese culture and speak the Burmese language. They are also more likely to be exposed to Western and Burmese dress and culture. On the other hand, highland Karen are more isolated from the Burmese culture. They are commonly subsistence farmers living in Karen State's eastern mountainous terrain and generally maintain a strong sense of their Karen language and culture. Highland Karen can be economically isolated and experience low education rates (Cusano, 2001).

While the majority of Burma's Karen population is estimated to live in the Irrawaddy Delta (Thawngmung, 2008), the Karen are more commonly associated with Karen State. This is due, at least in part, to two reasons. Firstly, Karen State's eastern hills are remote and Karen communities living there have more easily retained the distinctive features of Karen culture. Secondly, and of particular relevance to this thesis, is that Karen State is closely linked with the Karen resistance

⁵ Around 60 to 70 percent of Karen consider themselves Buddhist, while the remainder consider themselves Christian (25 to 30 percent) and Animist (5 to 10 percent) (BERG, 1998).

movement, and claims over Karen territory are commonly found in the projection of a Karen identity from the borderlands.

Burma has a long history of ethnic unrest. The main ethnic groups are the Arakan, Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan. Each has its own language and culture. But even within these ethnic groups one finds a multitude of subgroups with differing dialects and traditions. It is generally claimed that there are over 100 'national races' in Burma. Finding an adequate system of governance that can accommodate the political needs of the various non-Burman ethnic minority groups has dominated Burmese politics since independence in 1948. Many of these ethnic minority groups were disillusioned with the political landscape post-independence and in turn developed their own political and armed movements (M. Smith, 1999). In the absence of appropriate representation in the independence constitution, they were prepared to develop resistance groups against the central government. The Karen National Union (KNU) formed in 1947 and quickly became a significant armed force against the central authorities, although it was certainly not the only one with the Kachin, Shan, Chin, Mon and Karenni all waging similar battles against the newly-independent government. At times the KNU controlled considerable territory; in 1949 they famously took control of Insein, an outer suburb of Rangoon while at other times they controlled a large swath of territory from Mandalay in the north to Thaton and Kawkaik in the southeast (M. Smith, 1999).

A political resolution to the ethnic minority issue caused considerable concern for both the post-independence democratic government and the subsequent military regime. When General Ne Win staged his coup in 1962 he justified the act by stating that "Federalism is impossible; it will destroy the Union", while a spokesman of the new regime went even further, stating that federalism was a luxury Burma could ill afford (M. Smith, 1999, p. 196). Ne Win saw the *Tatmadaw*⁶ as the sole protector of the country's unity and national integrity, and federalism (with its accommodation of ethnic representation) as a threat to this unity. It is a position synonymous with the military regime throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with giant billboards lining Mandalay's fortress stating: '*Tatmadaw*' and the people, cooperate and crush all those harming the Union'.

What Ne Win and his military government instigated was a concerted effort to eradicate the ethnic opposition forces, which over the years were increasingly pushed back into Burma's ethnic border areas. In 1974 the Burmese Army implemented a 'Four Cuts' campaign in Karen State⁷ which was

⁶*Tatmadaw* is the Burmese word for the Burmese Army.

⁷ Similar campaigns were conducted against other ethnic armies such as the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) in Kachin State and the Shan State Army (SSA) in Shan State. These 'scorched earth' campaigns were a strategy employed by the Burmese military as far back as the 1950s and continued well into the 2000s.

an attempt to cut off the insurgent group's access to food, funds, intelligence and recruits. But such a campaign was never going to simply target ethnic armed groups; civilian villagers bore the brunt of this campaign. The Burmese Army conducted a systematic campaign of terror where they attacked villages and burnt crops, tortured and killed those accused of harbouring Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA⁸) soldiers, stole food and animals, moved entire villages into relocation sites under military control, made impossible extortion demands, used villagers as porters and for forced labour, and raped and killed at will.⁹ The result was a mass movement of traumatised people, many eking out an existence as Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) within Karen State, and others fleeing to the Thai-Burma border where they sought refuge in Thai villages or post-1984, the refugee camps.

This is a perfunctory summary that serves a number of purposes: to give historical context to the conditions that preside in Karen State today, to give a demographic snapshot of the displaced Karen who participated in this research, and to give some understanding of the key elements from which a Karen identity in the borderlands has formed. The vast majority of Karen currently residing in the Thai-Burma borderlands, including most of those who participated in this research, would be considered highland Karen from the eastern hills region of Karen State, the area of land immediately adjacent to Thailand. They are typically both Pwo and Sgaw, although Christian Sgaw Karen tend to hold many of the leadership positions of the Karen political movement in the borderlands. Many have a strong connection to the KNU which has been a significant presence in the hills region of eastern Karen State and the main proponent of the projection of a nationalist Karen identity. Most displaced Karen in the borderlands share a common experience of persecution and displacement as a result of a civil war that has consumed Karen State for more than fifty years. This unresolved conflict continues to have considerable impact upon villagers in Karen State, and it is this group of traumatised individuals, having fled into Thailand and settled into refugee camps or local Thai communities, that make up the group of displaced Karen discussed in this thesis. While most tell a story similar to the circumstances listed in the paragraph above, it is their presence in the Thai-Burma borderlands that is the basis for the arguments made in this thesis. From the borderlands space, displaced Karen attempt to re-establish some form of community, cultural identity and political agency. They do this through acts that develop an alternative articulation of the socio-political space in which they reside, an articulation that often sits in tension with the dominant discourse of the space. This alternative space forms opportunities for displaced Karen to undertake social practices that critically inform the projection of a Karen identity. It is to the nature of this space that I now turn.

⁸ The KNLA is the military arm of the Karen National Union (KNU).

⁹ Martin Smith gives a comprehensive account of the impacts of the 'Four Cuts' policy (1999).

A borderlands space

The concept of borderlands is elaborated in more detail in Chapter Three but it is necessary to lay out some of the key components of the term here. The location of acts of cultural and political resistance such as the porter's poem occurs in a complex political space that highlights a key thematic concern of this thesis: the composition of the Thai-Burma borderlands space. In this thesis a 'borderlands' domain is a space defined as having two intersecting components: loosely bounded geographical places where people live and interact with both state and non-state institutions associated with the mechanisms of a nation-state boundary (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992), and a space where the social interactions across the boundary give meaning to the borderlands as a space of cultural significance (Donnan & Wilson, 1999).

This definition incorporates two important elements that shape my understanding of the borderlands. Firstly, I take a social constructionist perspective of the Thai-Burma borderlands, in that I argue that the borderlands is a manifestation of space that is produced in and through the social relationships that occur across the border (Massey, 2005; Soguk, 2007; Staeheli, 1994). This concept of a 'borderlands' allows me to map the interchange that occurs across a broader space that is informed by the Thai-Burma border, rather than seeing the border as purely delineating two distinct autonomous spaces. This interchange is defined by the nature of sociality in conjunction with a territorial domain. In the context of this thesis, the interchange is broadly mapped through the operations of the nation-state and the practices of displaced Karen, and manifests as a point of tension between attempts by the nation-state to create a homogenised space delineated by the border and the intersecting social relations of displaced Karen that tend to map more fluid activities across the border.

Secondly, this definition of borderlands allows me to retain the importance of the geographical place that plays an integral part in the shape these social relationships take. While I will speak of places throughout this thesis, such as Mae Sot, Mae La refugee camp, or the strip of 'no-man's land' that sits between the two nation-states, this is a process of orientating the reader in terms of geographic location that is treated by locals and others as distinct from other places. In this definition, the borderlands is distinct from the Thai-Burma *border*, which is used here to describe the national boundary, as marked on a map, that separates Burma and Thailand, and which is an outward manifestation of the political power and territorial sovereignty of the adjoining states (Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Newman & Paasi, 1998). The border is part of the borderlands and as a manifestation of state power, the Thai-Burma *border* should also be viewed as a spatial social construct (Newman & Paasi, 1998), though encompassing a more homogenised sense of space than applies to the borderlands.

Within this definitional framework, the term 'borderlands' is used as an analytical device to account for the social relationships that occur *across* the geographical boundary that is the Thai-Burma border and that can also account for the notion of the contested social interaction that occurs in the space. Most of the social interaction discussed in this thesis is observed from the Thai side of the border, but the content of these social interactions is also intrinsically linked to the relationships and activities that occur on the Burma side of the border. These cross-border interactions have ramifications at both a global and a local level, but their origins lie in the very real connections established between forces on either side of the Thai-Burma border. In other words, one needs to understand the actions of those on the Thai side of the border in relation to their inter-connection to what occurs on the Burma side of the border. This position draws on Baud and Van Schendel's argument that both sides of the border be treated as *one* unit of analysis (1997, p. 216). It also relates directly to the spatial arguments made in this thesis: that the borderlands exist at the nexus of tension between state and non-state actors; it has both geographical and conceptual qualities, both of which are often highly contested; and it is often a site of discursive contestation and struggle, and as a result is conducive to a process of formulating new identities.

It should be said that borderlands practices are just one set of practices out of many in that space, and do not constitute a monopoly over the space in question. In other words, they are not for everyone at all times. This thesis, at various points, could be argued to view the borderlands from an ethno-nationalist political perspective, a refugee perspective, a state perspective and an activist perspective. You can make an argument for the Thai-Burma borderlands space from these and many other subjective positions, some contradictory and at times both restraining and emancipating. It is this contested nature and the opportunity for multiple articulations of the space that guides my use of the plural 'borderlands' so as to carry the sense of diversity and plurality (including the many ways in which life is lived in the borderlands that exist beyond the themes investigated in this thesis).

It is also important to note that the Thai-Burma borderlands is not mentioned on any map. It is not a fixed place, although it has loosely collated geographical boundaries associated with close proximity to the international boundary between Thailand and Burma. By this definition I would not, for example, classify a Karen person living in Bangkok as living in the Thai-Burma borderlands, although they may be connected into the borderlands through the social and political networks that emanate from global flows of information and communications technology. It is also important to note that 'borderlands' is not a term commonly used by the Karen themselves. A Karen person is more likely to refer to the space they currently inhabit in more conventional terms relating to their physical location, such as they live in a refugee camp such as Mae La or in a

township such as Mae Sot. Others may refer to their spatial circumstances in more abstract terms such as that they live as a refugee.

While it may not enjoy currency in the everyday vernacular, this thesis demonstrates how as an analytical tool the concept of 'borderlands' helps illuminate some of the key claims of this research, namely the interconnection between space and identity formation. This use of the term allows me to talk about the complexities of space, contestation and identity formation in ways that a more homogenised notion of the space does not allow. Not least of which is its capacity to open up the discussion to one of flows across space. This makes the concept integral to this thesis, but also an important contribution to larger debates around sociality and spatiality.

AIMS OF THE THESIS

While the genesis of this research lay with the arrival of the twenty-two prison porters mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, its development into a thesis was an intellectual journey both challenging and invaluable. What one begins with is rarely what one ends up with, and that is certainly true of this thesis. The original premise was to explore practices of cultural expression as a form of resistance, to look at the act itself as a means of articulating opposition to the political forces responsible for persecution and displacement in Burma. And of course to look at these acts of cultural expression from a specific ethnic group from Burma, the Karen, and in a particular location, from the Thai side of the Thai-Burma border where many had been displaced to because of conflict inside Burma. The acts of cultural expression I initially explored were in their nature public, intended, political acts of resistance, or so I intended to argue. But the longer I stayed on the Thai-Burma border and the more I spoke with Karen about the motivations and meanings behind their actions, this premise seemed an inadequate account of what was occurring.

Instead, what became quickly apparent was that the act of cultural expression was an outcome of a larger political struggle that was being uniquely articulated from the borderlands. The act could only be understood in the context of the space from which it was being projected and the political influences that shaped its content. The collective weight of these acts of cultural expression also suggested they were being used as a way to explore the parameters of a cultural and political identity that was shaped both by the experience of displacement and persecution in Burma as well as emplacement in a new location in Thailand. In other words, the expressive act was a conduit to what appeared to be the creation of an alternative political space which I contend is made up of multiple, concentrated socio-political activities that challenge typical state-centric notions of the borderlands space. Its multiplicity heightens its contestability, and it is this idea of contestation

that develops my understanding of the Thai-Burma borderlands as a spatial form, and as a site for the construction and projection of a Karen identity.

Background to the study

On reaching this conclusion, I proposed a study that could draw together the place (the Thai-Burma border), the political act (narratives of cultural and political resistance), and the background of the struggle (conflict, displacement and persecution), through a framework of identity formation that occurs in and through a borderlands space. For the following reasons it seemed to be a study that was long overdue. Most existing studies of the Karen on the Thai-Burma border contain theoretical constraints that limit an understanding of the relationship between the Karen as politically active subjects and the borderlands as a spatial entity. This linkage is important, firstly because it more adequately captures the nature of displaced Karen activity in the borderlands, and secondly and in a much broader sense, because it sheds much needed insight on the borderlands as a social construct, shaped by the social relationships that occur there, and an important conduit for the projection of a Karen identity. In discussing some of the key existing literature below, it is this gap in the literature that I intend to fill.

There is a significant body of existing literature on the Karen, and while I describe some of the key texts here, a more comprehensive examination of the literature is evident across the entirety of the thesis. This thesis is preoccupied with a particular set of themes where the literature can be grouped into three broad categories. The first constitutes literature which focuses on the political and ethnic resistance movement, largely dominated by the practices and doctrine of the KNU and its previous incarnations (KNU, 1991; M. Smith, 1999; Thawngmung, 2008). There has also been some literature on the identity-making of a Karen nation, in particular literature that focuses on the ethno-nationalist political movement (Rajah, 2002), the role of religion in the formation of a Karen identity (Gravers, 2007; Horstmann, 2011) and the development of a pan-Karen identity (Cheesman, 2002; South, 2007).

A vast majority of the political and ethnic resistance movement literature tends to focus on intra-state relations that privilege a state-centric understanding of Burma and the Karen. While relevant, I want to push beyond the limitations I see in a state-centric discourse. Firstly, Karen in the borderlands are forcibly displaced from Burma and are stateless in Thailand. In many respects, state operations and the state discourse attempt to exclude displaced Karen from the political domain, and so an approach that can account for this marginalisation is required. Secondly, a state-centric approach privileges a state articulation of place and this fails to adequately account for differing articulations, particularly those of non-state actors such as displaced Karen.

The second category into which this body of literature falls is that which focuses on the large refugee population on the Thai-Burma border. This literature places particular emphasis on the implementation and impact of refugee policy along the Thai-Burma border (Banki & Lang, 2007; Bowles, 1998), as well as the documentation of human rights abuses inside Burma, which tends to follow a human rights discourse.¹⁰ While some of this writing explores the political agency of refugees (Dudley, 2010; Lang, 1999), the vast majority of the literature on refugees and human rights tends to leave aside the importance of a framework for understanding the Karen as politically active participants in their own day-to-day living, as well as the flexibility to account for what is essentially a complex and opaque set of categories into which Karen in the borderlands fall, particularly for those who do not consider themselves a refugee and who live outside of the refugee camps.

The last key area of literature is that which falls under historical ethnographic studies, particularly focusing on the documentation of Karen culture and ethnicity. These tend to be fairly orthodox accounts written by colonial administrators and missionaries (Marshall, 1922; J. G. Scott; Smeaton, 1920) or early Karen historians (Hla, 1939; Po, 2001). While I draw on ethnographic accounts at various junctures in this thesis, as well as engage in ethnographic methods, this study differs by seeking to lift the discussions of culture, identity and sociality into a broader socio-political framework that moves beyond a *sole* concentration on the immediacy of interaction.

Each of these areas has made important contributions to debates focusing on the Karen in the borderlands, and in a sense I draw on all three and also build upon them. But this thesis differs in a key conceptual way as it argues for the formation of a Karen identity within a conceptual framework of a 'borderlands' that emphasises the social construction of space and the spatial aspects of identity.

A number of academics make reference to the idea of a borderlands in the context of the Thai-Burma border, but there are a number of contributions this thesis can make to this existing literature. The first is to define the concept of a 'borderlands' space. To date, the term 'borderlands' is predominantly used in a geo-political sense; describing zones that straddle nation-state boundaries. Political geographer Carl Grundy-Warr talks of the borderlands from this perspective; he refers to shared cross-border activity (focusing on political, economic, and military activity) and firmly ties it to the idea of nation-states and "... territories flanking and straddling

¹⁰ As an example, there are many reports documenting human rights abuses put out by the Burma Ethnic Research Group (BERG), the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) and Amnesty International. There are also studies available on the implementation of refugee policy on the Thai-Burma border, particularly put out by the Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) and UNHCR. For further discussion on refugee policy in the borderlands also see the April 2008 edition of the *Forced Migration Review*.

international land boundaries" (1993, p. 45). Grundy-Warr acknowledges that borderlands are sites of "contact and interaction between neighbouring peoples" (1993, p. 55), but stops short of examining the social and cultural aspects of this particular notion of a borderlands. Anthropologist Ananda Rajah refers to "borders" and "frontiers" with obvious geo-political intent, arguing they are often areas of dispute and symbols of state power and control. He places this territorial dispute and struggle for power clearly on the Burmese side of the border and suggests that in the context of the Thai-Burma borderlands it would be truer to claim a "Thai border and a Burmese-Karen frontier region" (Rajah, 1990, p. 123), a strong statement on state control over territory.

These are important studies that begin to articulate the nature of constructs that occur across a borderlands space. My interest lies in a more specific take on this spatial configuration however, namely the impact of cross-border activities and their inter-related nature, moving the debate beyond a preoccupation with autonomous state spaces to one of an interchange that occurs across the national border. There remains in the literature a significant lack of examination of the political and cultural constructs that occur across the nation-state boundary and in relation to its nature as a changeable spatial entity. Two academics, Alexander Horstmann (2004) and Decha Tangseefa (2006), have started to move the debate in this direction, developing studies that look at the Thai-Burma borderlands as a microcosm of human society, and as a conceptual space. Both have called for a greater study of the border and its conceptual impact and suggest that borderlands are symbols and spaces of political and cultural change that can challenge the national narrative and hegemony of the state. Of particular interest to this thesis is Horstmann's contention that the borderlands is not only a symbol of cultural and social change, but also their agent (2004, p. 6). This is certainly a position that develops the argument of this thesis, that the borderlands critically inform the social practices and identity constructions of displaced Karen, the borderlands being both symbol and agent in these interactions. However, the tendency remains amongst most of the literature, to see the Thai-Burma borderlands as strictly geographical in form, as at the periphery of political and economic activity, or as a manifestation of inter- and even intra-state relations. What is missing from the literature is a more thorough investigation of the borderlands as a conceptual space that can span the geographical dimension.

The second gap in the literature is to relate the space to the construction of identity. There is an exceptional amount of quality literature that has explored Karen identity from historical, mythological, political and cultural perspectives and it is important to explain my own arguments within this larger context. Many of the early colonial-missionary texts explored Karen identity in the more conventional terms of ethnic identifiers, mythologies and origin myths (Cross, 1854; Marshall, 1922; Smeaton, 1920). A number of authors have explored Karen identity in the pre-

colonial-missionary period, in particular anthropologists who have drawn on Animist and Millenarian traditions (Stern, 1968) and placed these within the modern adaptation and construction of Karen identity (Hinton, 1983; Keyes, 1979). In modern times we have seen the idea of *a Karen nation* enter this discourse. Many academics have explored Karen identity as it is constructed through nationalist and ethno-nationalist frames, and as such have questioned the authenticity of *a Karen identity* (Hinton, 1983; Rajah, 2002). Some have argued that the missionary influence was instrumental in the construction of a Karen nationalist identity and that this forms the basis of the present-day nationalist discourse perpetuated by the KNU (Gravers, 2007; Horstmann, 2011; Rajah, 1990). Academics such as Mikael Gravers and Ashley South have taken a decidedly constructionist approach, exploring the idea of Karen identity through both modern and traditional components of a Karen ethnics, suggesting there is no legitimacy to distinctions between 'real' or 'invented' categories of identification but rather that they both constitute the active practice of identity (Gravers, 1998; South, 2007).

What this body of work shows is that Karen identity draws complex responses that highlight the intricate array of social, cultural and political adaptations and constructs under which it is constituted. This represents what I believe is the reality of a lived Karen identity, particularly as it is constructed and projected in the borderlands. As this thesis will show, Karen identity in the borderlands can only be understood by drawing on this range of historical and modern-day acquisitions. In this sense, the literature mentioned above makes an integral contribution to the arguments around Karen identity that this thesis makes. But as yet, there is limited discussion around the construction and projection of a Karen identity as it relates to the nature of the borderlands space. This is a particular construct of Karen identity that is framed by the geographical location, including associated mechanisms that facilitate the projection of Karen identity, as well as the experience of displacement and persecution that most Karen in the borderlands share. What this thesis proposes is that a nationalist Karen identity, constituting both historical and recently-acquired elements, is largely perpetuated in support of a narrative of common suffering, of persecution and displacement, and that this is the basis of the construction and projection of Karen identity in the borderlands, a position I elaborate upon in Chapter Eight.

From the literary context discussed here, this thesis proposes an approach that can account for the geo-political and the conceptual qualities of the space as they relate to the construction and projection of a Karen identity, making an argument that is framed through the concept of a 'borderlands', in part by engaging with material in an inter-disciplinary manner. Rather than employing a narrow geo-political definition of borders and borderlands as respectively representing an outward manifestation of state sovereignty and as grey areas of control, my

approach to borderlands draws benefit from a variety of disciplines, including social theory across international and cultural studies, nationalism and refugee studies, political geography, and anthropology. By blurring genre boundaries we can move beyond the limitations in the narrower disciplinary approaches to the Thai-Burma borderlands, and develop a more critical apparatus that demonstrates the complexity needed in understanding the space. An example of this genre crossing is to say that the Thai-Burma borderlands is a loosely bounded geographical place associated with a nation-state boundary, and a conceptual space whose boundaries are associated with subjectivity, mobility and self-identification. At times, the borderlands is a space in which alternatives to the state discourse are practiced, and creative cultural production created. At other times it could be viewed as a site of marginalisation and unequal power distribution. The key to understanding the Thai-Burma borderlands is not to restrict the view of it from a singular disciplinary perspective but rather to see the borderlands as a spatial entity that is the accumulation and product of these inter-relationships. This is what the concept of 'borderlands' can bring to this thesis and to studies of the Karen.

THESIS STRUCTURE

Given these first examinations of the terms and literature of this thesis, it is worth reiterating the main contentions of this thesis and the structure in which it is presented. This thesis argues that the Thai-Burma borderlands space becomes the setting for modes of social practice that critically inform the projection of a Karen identity. The thesis is thematically organised around three subsidiary arguments that support this main thesis argument.

Firstly, the Thai-Burma borderlands is a distinct space framed by a tension between a modern territorial domain, characterised by the modern demarcation of the Thai-Burma border and the consolidation of state control over it, and the intersection of a particular form of social relations, characterised by a fluidity of movement (of information, resources, ideas, culture, identity) that intensifies the possibilities available to displaced Karen, particularly in terms of political agency and mobilisation.

Secondly, these social relations take on the form of an interchange that occurs across the national border. This interchange is defined by the nature of sociality (flows of people, ideas and resources as well as connections to family, culture and identity) in conjunction with a territorial domain (the Thai-Burma border), and is framed by three modes of social practice which I lay out below. While modes of social practice constitute a larger theoretical domain than I cover in this thesis, the phrase is used here as a means of collectively describing key patterns of practice of displaced Karen in the borderlands space. As such they are examples of modes of practice relevant to this thesis

rather than definitive categories. These three modes of social practice are, (1) patterns of activism that strengthen Karen agency and challenge institutional forms of governance; (2) networks of solidarity, developed through international networking, new technologies and political consciousness; and (3) processes of cultural recovery, constituting a public projection of 'remembered places', cultural reification and imagining a vision of the future.

The third subsidiary argument is that Karen identity in the borderlands is formed through a complex process of identity-making that is shaped by the present, specifically influenced by the experience of persecution and the consequences of displacement and conveys a sense of being rooted in the past, constituting both real and imagined cultural identifiers and mythologies.

This thesis is therefore organised in the following way. Chapter One introduces the thesis and defines the theoretical parameters of the research. Chapter Two makes an argument for a methodology of 'sites of intersecting social relations' which captures the multiple trajectories along which social relationships form and transform the borderlands space. This methodological framework is then used to inform the research location, participant group and the methods used to gather the data for this thesis.

Chapters Three and Four develop the underpinning ideas of the borderlands space. Chapter Three develops the concept of the Thai-Burma borderlands in relation to larger historical and theoretical developments of borders and borderlands. It firstly argues for a new way of looking at the Thai-Burma borderlands as a political space, a spatial re-imagining that establishes the notion of 'borderlands' as a social construct characterised by contested social relations. This concept of a 'borderlands' allows me to map the interchange that occurs across a broader space that is informed by the Thai-Burma border, rather than seeing the border as purely delineating two distinct autonomous spaces. The chapter goes on to propose that this interchange must be understood in relation to three significant processes of social organisation and transformation that have spatial impact on the nature of the borderlands. These processes are the advent of mapping the body politic, the rise of the nation-state as a key form of political authority, and population and cultural movement across borders. This chapter provides important background information on the historical and theoretical development of the Thai-Burma borderlands space in terms of the modern demarcation of the Thai-Burma border.

Chapter Four develops the conceptual framework laid out in Chapter Three by applying it to the modern configuration of the Thai-Burma borderlands; to establish the contemporary context of the borderlands as it relates to an intensification of control by the nation-state. The increased penetration of both the Burmese and Thai nation-state's to consolidate control over the border

has intensified the political nature of the borderlands space. This is achieved through an uneven process of increased militarisation on the Burmese side of the border and increased regulation on the Thai side.

The political features discussed across Chapters Three and Four provide the basis for an understanding of the borderlands in terms of the operations of the nation-state which are defined by a political authority attached to the modern territorial domain. Chapters Five, Six and Seven are a pivotal point in the thesis. They build upon the argument developed over chapters three and four to argue that, in sharp distinction to this, displaced Karen create a borderlands space based on an interchange that occurs across the national border, which in this particular context, is framed by fluid and contested social relations. For the purposes of this thesis, I group these social relations into three dominant modes of social practice, patterns of activism (covered in Chapter Five), networks of solidarity (covered in Chapter Six) and processes of cultural recovery (covered in Chapter Seven). This tension between the operations of the nation-state and the social relations of displaced Karen constitutes the first subsidiary argument this thesis makes, that the borderlands is a distinct space characterised by a tension between a modern territorial domain and the intersection of a particular form of social relations.

Chapter Five argues that patterns of activism emerge from a tension between the operations of institutional governance and a more informal political power that develops through the contested social relations of displaced Karen, namely that displaced Karen contest these institutional forms of governance because they do not adequately capture the nature of their political self. Instead they pursue forms of activism and subvert institutional norms of political belonging, and in doing so develop an alternative political space that strengthens Karen agency and mobilisation.

Chapter Six argues that new networks of solidarity are formed through activism that is framed by shared experiences of displacement and persecution. Further to this, in the Thai-Burma borderlands these networks of solidarity are formed and strengthened where activist practices intersect with particular mechanisms of social power, in this thesis categorised as international networking, new technologies and political consciousness. These networks of solidarity also become a key conduit for the projection of a Karen political narrative based on shared experiences of persecution, thus becoming a major factor in the construction and projection of Karen identity in the borderlands.

Chapter Seven argues that the borderlands facilitates the recovery of a Karen cultural identity which becomes part of a projected Karen identity. This cultural identity is characterised by a selective recovery of cultural icons and origin myths that reinforce the idea of a Karen nation, and

are framed through a lens of shared experiences of displacement and persecution. This cultural recovery takes place through three key processes relative to the borderlands space: a public projection of 'remembered places', cultural reification and imagining a vision of the future.

Together, Chapters Five, Six and Seven develop my second subsidiary argument, namely that these three modes of social practice take on the form of an interchange that occurs across the national border, and which ultimately sit in tension with the operations of the nation-state.

Finally, Chapter Eight argues that these key modes of social practice inform the construction and projection of a Karen identity. This identity commonly manifests in two ways: firstly through a narrative of shared persecution and displacement, and secondly as a pan-Karen identity based on a narrative of a unified, homogenous Karen. While both forms play an integral role in the projection of Karen identity from the borderlands space, the shared experience of persecution and displacement more readily lends itself as a unifying force around which displaced Karen can identify and mobilise. This chapter develops my third subsidiary argument by establishing that Karen identity is formed through a complex process of identity-making that conveys a sense of being rooted in the past, constituting both real and imagined cultural identifiers and mythologies, and shaped by the present, specifically influenced by the experience of persecution and the consequences of displacement.

While I have begun this thesis with a strong emphasis on the act of a poem being read, it serves a metaphorical purpose for introducing the broader cultural and political narratives that are evident in the borderlands. The Thai-Burma borderlands is comprised of complex layers of socio-political relations that, with closer scrutiny, shed insight into why and how a displaced person from Burma residing in the borderlands can construct and project a poem about persecution. This piece of activism is particular to the borderlands space and encompasses many of the arguments I make in this thesis. The porters spoke this poem from the relative safety of the borderlands. We know about it because the porters were able to speak it, but also because a group of Karen activists were able to access it, translate it into English and further disseminate it through global networks. This process both utilised and was a beneficiary of new technologies and networks that enable larger connections around human rights material. In voicing their poem, the porters are contributing to a rich contextual canvas that serves to illustrate the complexities of a modern spatial identity; particularly one that is framed by the experience of displacement and the struggle to have the political self recognised. The fact that these acts, and the form they take, can only occur because of a range of factors that make up the space in which they are constructed and projected, illustrates the importance of understanding the nature of the borderlands space.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

*On the first of October we met with a girl from Australia
She wanted to know about our Karen culture and tradition
We sat together and discussed Karen hta
We recorded the hta on tape and video
We laughed
It is very difficult for me and Tham La
To explain our traditions and hta
Because you really want to know
I will try my best to explain to you
Hta¹¹ created by U Kyi during fieldwork with the author, October 2005*

In October 2005 I travelled by *song tiaew* through the early morning mist and was deposited in front of a bamboo gate flanked by a razor wire fence. Strangers emerged to meet me. We walked the ‘highway’¹² of the refugee camp, passing bamboo houses and shops, herds of goats, and groups of chatting villagers. We traversed hard-baked earth, running rivulets of water, bamboo bridges and forests of exposed tree roots. At the end of this uneven path, at the base of tall white cliffs, and in the shade of a canopy of trees, we reached our destination, a Karen friend’s wedding, a refugee camp wedding.

I mention this wedding because it represents how confusing and ambiguous the Thai-Burma borderlands can be for an outsider. The wedding was held in a refugee camp. Special arrangements ensured I could get in to the camp and attend the wedding. The groom was Sgaw Karen, the bride Pwo Karen, he is Christian and she is Buddhist. Traditional protocol suggests they should never have met, let alone marry. A KNU leader cum Christian pastor presided, and the ceremony included Animist and Buddhist traditions despite its Christian direction.

The speeches were in many ways familiar: respect the sanctity of marriage, work on the partnership, be prepared to compromise, do not go to bed angry. The bridesmaids wore the traditional *hse* (Karen dress) and *hko peu* (head scarf). A young Karen man dressed in jeans and with a rock star mop of hair brought out a guitar and amplifier and sang a Karen rock song so loudly the veins protruded in his neck.

¹¹ *Hta* is the Karen word for a form of oral poetry that is used for storytelling and to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next.

¹² Refugees in Mae La camp often refer to the main thoroughfare through the camp as the ‘highway’. It is the largest path through the camp and connects the various zones. It experiences heavy foot-traffic and could sustain a small vehicle. However, the word is used in some jest as it is also an uneven dirt path prone to bogs, running water and deep crevices.

The groom told me he drank 'five fingers' of whisky to calm himself. The bride's family paid 'bribe' money to be allowed to travel from a different refugee camp to attend the ceremony. Afterwards the wedding party ate the meat of three slaughtered pigs, as well as goat, ribs, and curries, all washed down with beer and whisky. It was 10am in the morning and when you looked around you could see people from different countries, religions and languages, laughing, talking and eating.

In married life the couple spend their time between a house in the camp where they raise their pigs, and a share house in Mae Sot where they document human rights abuses against Karen people back inside Burma. To contact them in the camp you ring a communal number, leave a message, and an hour to a few days later they call you back. In Mae Sot they have mobile phones and the internet. They communicate through discussion forums and online chats, talking with people from the other side of the world who they have never met.

This wedding is typical of the type of social relationships that I explore over the course of this thesis. Social settings such as this one represent a point of intersection, where at times complex and seemingly contradictory activities and messages develop the fabric of social relationships particular to the place in which they are occurring. In the example mentioned above these social relationships are numerous: inter-ethnic, familial, political, cultural, gendered, inter-religious, and communal, and enabled by technology, shared languages and historical ties. The wedding mirrors the complex contributions both individuals bring to the relationship, differing religious orientations, gender roles and ethnic traditions, but it is also influenced by the space in which it takes place, the restrictions of a refugee camp, the inclusion of western culture and technology, the ability to move around freely. My point of interest is not that these relationships occur, for they are replicated in some way across the world every day, but rather that at their point of intersection we get an analytical account of the space in which it is occurring. As a researcher, a key concern is how best to capture and present this dynamic in terms of an academic argument.

In this chapter I argue for a methodology that looks at my research area as 'sites of intersecting social relations'. This provides a methodological framework to explore the nature of social relations as they relate to the idea of an interchange across sites. It is an important analytical tool that connects the primary content of this thesis (the nature of social relations in a borderlands space) with the methodological framework used to gather the material for the research. In this respect it has both conceptual and practical components to it; but over the course of this chapter I explore 'sites of intersecting social relations' in terms of its relevance as a methodology.

The chapter is structured in the following way. I first examine the conceptual parameters of 'sites of intersecting relations' and apply this to the context of the Thai-Burma borderlands. I then go on

to lay out some of the key determinants in conducting the research. Firstly, I define the location of my fieldwork in and around Mae Sot on Thailand's western border. Mae Sot is used as a location that can represent a point of intersection of social relationships that comes to identify a community of displaced Karen in the Thai-Burma borderlands. Secondly, I define the community and my participant group who provide the key empirical data for the arguments made throughout this thesis. This group of people were chosen because they have a shared experience of conflict and displacement which serves to deliver a unique articulation of the Thai-Burma borderlands. Finally, I lay out the key methods used to gather evidence needed to write this thesis: informal interviews, participant observation, analysis of cultural expression and archival research and literary analysis.

By using methods such as informal interviews and observation, I was able to examine patterns of cultural and political behaviour, noting their relationship to what quickly emerged as a key focus – the nature of the space in which it was occurring. A key characteristic of this space is a set of social relations that form an interchange across the national border. In setting up a methodology that examines social relations across sites, I am also able to develop my main thesis argument that the Thai-Burma borderlands becomes the setting for modes of social practice that critically inform the projection of a Karen identity. This is done through an examination of the social relations that connect the borderlands space, the social practices that occur there, and the projection of identity that emerges from it.

A final note of clarification is required. In this chapter, 'borderlands' is discussed in terms of a methodology, but it is also important to note that in the next chapter the concept of 'borderlands' is developed in terms of a theoretical framework to understand a process of interchange that occurs across a broader space that is informed by the Thai-Burma border. This connection of the borderlands in terms of the methodological and theoretical is intended; it strongly aligns the dual preoccupations of a piece of research, an analytical argument and the methods by which it was obtained, and this brings continuity to the arguments made across this thesis.

Over the course of this chapter I talk about Mae Sot as a study site specific to a geographic location, but this is not an ethnographic study of a distinct community treated in isolation from the rest of the world. Mae Sot is the physical location from which the fieldwork was undertaken, but the arguments in this thesis draw across a much broader borderlands domain that must account for the social relationships that develop beyond specific geographic locations. From this position, the thesis argues for the notion of multiple sites that are interconnected by a set of social relationships (Massey, 2005; Gille, 2001). This moves beyond the traditional ethnographic practice of studying a self-contained community with an essential identity, to a community identified by the point of intersection of social relationships, relationships that occur from the local to the global level, and certainly across the borderlands domain. In this approach, social relationships can be influenced by their locality but are not solely defined by it. This is integral to my thesis argument because this methodological approach establishes a theoretical context to my formulation of a borderlands space, linking a geographically defined place to broader patterns of social relations that allow us to think in a different way about the connections between sociality, spatiality and identity.

There is some need to justify this methodological focus on social relationships and its connection to the larger thesis structure. To make an argument that the Thai-Burma borderlands constitutes both geographical locations and is a locus of intersecting social relationships has considerable academic support. In particular, I draw heavily on the work of Doreen Massey and Zsuzsa Gille. Massey's book 'For Space' poses three propositions in regards to spatial understanding: that space is the product of inter-relations, that space is a sphere of the possibility of multiplicity, and that space is always under construction (Massey, 2005, pp. 9-10). Similarly to Massey, sociologist Zsuzsa Gille in her essay on the relevance of ethnography in the time of globalisation argues for a concept of place that is a "locus of intersecting social relations" (2001, p. 327). Anthropologists such as Anna Tsing (1993) and Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) have argued for a spatial imagination that accounts for connections beyond the immediate locality. These authors contribute to a rich body of literature that argues for a conceptualisation of place and space as mutually constituted, and socially constructed. As such, their writing has helped form my own arguments around the nature of a Thai-Burma borderlands space.

¹³ While neither use the exact terminology of 'sites of intersecting social relations', this concept comes directly from the work of Doreen Massey and Zsuzsa Gille. Gille talks of the "locus of social relations" and "sites of lived social relations" (2001). Massey talks of "space as the product of interrelations: as constituted through interactions" (2005). In both cases the emphasis is on the much more fluid notion of the role social relations play in identifying, articulating and transforming sites. My use of 'sites of intersecting social relations' is an attempt to bring both their work together in a concept that makes sense to my research.

In order to provide a better illustration of this argument I borrow a technique used by Zsuzsa Gille in her 2001 essay mentioned above. Researching a proposed waste incinerator in Hungary, Gille argued that by studying the paths of social relationships among her sites over a period of time she was able to see profound transformations in the sites themselves, particularly in terms of their inter-dependence (Gille, 2001). She developed a thread that could explain the study of sites “along the social relationships that develop...” (Gille, 2001, p. 324), rather than the study of a particular site/s. This is a useful way of framing the practices and articulations in the Thai-Burma borderlands. Let me try and develop a similar thread to illustrate the social relationships that define the spatiality of the Thai-Burma borderlands.

One possible thread would be to follow the burgeoning relationship between the refugees and a number of border towns. This thread largely underpins my arguments around the nature of a borderlands space as discussed in Chapters Three and Four. As a geo-political location, the area I discuss in this thesis changed significantly following the influx of large numbers of Karen refugees into Thailand in the early 1980s. Over time, towns such as Mae Sot, Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Son, all located on Thailand’s western border, have become synonymous with the refugees. Mae Sot, due to its close proximity to Mae La refugee camp, has a symbiotic connection to the camp and this has manifested in a number of ways: movement between the two sites, divided living arrangements, an increased military presence, and community-based organisations working between the two sites on social issues, including health and education, to name a few. The refugee camps have also brought a large number of aid agencies, journalists, religious organisations, academics and students to the area, which predominantly base themselves in Mae Sot. This has introduced Western influences to Karen culture and identity. It has also broadened the nature and reach of the refugee situation and the larger Karen political struggle.

Working parallel to this is the path of political intervention, where events throughout the 1980s and 1990s changed the character and operations of the borderlands. As I discuss in Chapter Four, the borderlands was more heavily policed than before, migration and customs more heavily regulated, and the operations of the border posts dependent upon the political manoeuvrings of bureaucrats in the state capitals. At certain times in the past, Mae Sot has been a sleepy border post, and the borderlands an innocuous space of economic and familial exchange. But this is not an adequate representation of the borderlands today. The relationship between displaced Karen and the locality has transformed the space, the two becoming more conjoined in the constructions they create.

The key to understanding the dynamic of this relationship between displaced Karen and the borderlands space is to look at its inter-connectedness. These relationships have changed the

nature of Mae Sot and other towns along the Thai-Burma border at the same time as they changed the way displaced Karen responded to these locations. They also help develop the story of the borderlands space. They are not static events isolated from history and circumstance, but constantly evolving connections developed along pathways of social relationships that interconnect multiple sites over time. It is for this reason that we can comprehend the influence of Western rock music at the traditional Karen wedding mentioned at the start of this chapter. Or that the practices of Animism, Buddhism and Christianity might coexist in a wedding ceremony. Or even that such a public display of Karen ethnicity can occur without discriminatory retaliation. The many factors that contribute to the ambiguities of the wedding I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter are the same sets of connections and relationships that in their identification led me to develop the notion of the borderlands, that is a space made up of an interchange characterised by contested social relations.

To understand these influences and their impact on displaced Karen living in the borderlands, it is necessary to follow the various paths that connect these events and the relationships that bind them. As these paths are followed over a period of time, and through changing political and social circumstance, these social relationships and connections inevitably change. As these paths intersect with Mae Sot, or in fact any geographical location in the borderlands, they add new layers to what constitutes the borderlands space. What becomes of interest to this research is not the town, or the refugee, but the social relationships that develop between them, because it is this constant production that transforms the site.

In addition to this argument that the Thai-Burma borderlands constitutes sites of social relationships, I must also acknowledge that the study of these relationships requires a study of the practices, meanings and products of those who live and narrate them, in this case displaced Karen in the borderlands. In addition to the contribution of anthropology, ethnography and sociology already mentioned, this is where I have relied on elements of cultural studies and feminist studies to frame the collection and analysis of data (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). These fields are incredibly diverse and constitute larger theoretical discoveries than I do justice to here. However, there are key elements I have extracted for use throughout this thesis, and while briefly discussed here their contribution to the thesis appears in more detail in the coming chapters.

The influence of these two disciplines largely encompasses the source of narratives and the insights they provide, although it is certainly not limited to this, and in turn directs the methods chosen to collect the data for this thesis. There are three areas in particular where these two disciplines inform my methodology. The first area is where I draw on a key feminist understanding of different ways of knowing (Haraway, 1988; Lal, 1999), to account for the way displaced Karen

develop non-hegemonic stories of their displacement and identity that differ from the dominant or patriarchal perspective. In this sense knowledge does not follow binary trajectories but rather develops a reality based on plurality and social construction. This leads to the second area of influence, and particularly pertinent to this thesis is that this approach allows for the production of knowledge based on contesting dominant norms (Behrendt, 1993; hooks, 1984). This is evident in the narratives of displaced Karen where contested narratives, which occur at both the intra and inter-level, can produce different types of knowledge that have traditionally been unaccounted for, for example how Karen identify themselves or what it means to be a refugee. And thirdly, I have employed a method of content analysis which draws on feminist and cultural anthropological approaches to the study of text and cultural products as a legitimate and insightful source of knowledge (Geertz, 1976; Tsing, 1993). In particular, these studies helped me develop the idea of examining narratives and messages in relation to power structures, cultural practice, nationality and ethnicity. This is an important inclusion to the thesis as cultural and artistic products were integral to the narratives provided by displaced Karen who participated in this research and as such are an important analytical tool of Karen life in the borderlands.

Participant-researcher relationship

In addition to the social relationships that develop along paths between research sites, there is a further relationship that needs clarification in terms of developing the parameters of my methodology; this is the participant-researcher relationship. As a researcher I also occupy multiple locations – as academic, activist, observer, participant, outsider, and insider – and my methodology needs to account for a reflexive approach to the participant-researcher dynamic. As the interchange at the beginning of this chapter shows, I was not only researching elements of Karen culture and tradition, I was also at times incorporated into their cultural production, often moving with some fluidity between those roles.

From the outset, I chose research practices that were embedded in traditional ethnography, and I perceived myself as embodying many of the dualisms that are associated with this approach. I was an outsider observing the insider, I was taking an objective view on the subjective, I was the self attempting to articulate the other. But my reality soon challenged the legitimacy of these dualisms. My objective position seemed unreasonable; who can be truly free of subjective prejudices and assumptions? The idea of insider/outsider seemed to me to be a shifting dynamic, relying on time, location and circumstance to determine who occupies these positions at any given time, and certainly not embodying any notion of being fixed or predetermined, for me or for my participants. It also seemed to me that I was in danger of “fetishising the other” (Haraway, 1988). I turned to the work of Anna Tsing (1993) and Jayati Lal (1999) to argue that the very notion of ‘other’ works to

reinforce the position of the participants in this study as being outside the norm, a position that could only further marginalise my participants, while privileging myself as an “elite observer” representing Western academic ideals (Tsing, 1993, p. 22). This preoccupation with ‘other’ seemed to me to obscure the “nuances of a cross-cultural relationship” (Tsing, 1993, p. 22) that can develop between the participant and researcher.

While struggling with these dualisms of ethnographic research, my intent was not to discount classical ethnographic methods, for many of its conventional principles underpin the work undertaken as part of this thesis, but rather to find new interpretations that could account for the realities of my fieldwork. In developing a methodology of ‘sites of intersecting social relationships’, I have also found Lal’s work on “situated locations” (Lal, 1999) a useful tool. This is a methodology that attempts to break down the divisions between subject-object, self-other, researcher-participant, by recognising that most people “occupy multiple and fluid locations” (Lal, 1999, p. 79) that challenge the assumption of an ‘objective outsider’ or an ‘authentic insider’. In many of the examples I use throughout this chapter I occupy an unfamiliar location; I am an obvious outsider. But it was surprising to me to realise how many of my participants occupied that space with me (as an outsider in Thailand), or how our roles were often reversed (for example at a Thai military checkpoint), or in many cases variable depending on the circumstances (as I became more familiar with and in the space). The ambiguity and fluidity evident in these positions helped break down some of the more traditional assumptions and divisions around researcher-participant roles.

Those distinctions between insider-outsider, researcher-participant, known-unknown, occupy a far greyer area than the hyphen implies, and ultimately were not a productive discourse in which I could understand how knowledge was generated and presented in the Thai-Burma borderlands. My hope therefore, is that this thesis makes some small contribution to ‘new ways of seeing’ that can lead to a “transformation of systems of knowledge” (Haraway, 1988). This contribution is found not only in the way this study is carried out, but is also reinforced in the arguments I make across the coming chapters for an alternative understanding of the construction and presentation of spatial power as developed through a framework of a borderlands space.

PARTICIPANT GROUP

Given that a ‘borderlands’ is a complex spatial entity, made up of a fluid, highly plural body of social relations that stretch across the space, a challenge to the researcher is how to describe this domain and from what perspective. The borderlands comprises members of the student democracy movement, the ethnic nationality political movement, exiled parliamentarians, ethnic civilians fleeing conflict, armed combatants and ex-combatants, refugees, migrant workers, civil

society organisations, visitors, and those temporarily seeking health or education services. Even then, these categories are simplified expressions of a far more complex reality: people occupy different categories at the same time, move across categories, and in some cases move between being self-designated and being designated by others. Therefore, some clarification is needed on who the participants in this research are, and why, in terms of the arguments of this thesis, they have become the focus over others.

Over the course of the fieldwork I interviewed more than twenty displaced Karen living in the borderlands. This included a number of Karen leaders who articulated a broader socio-cultural picture of the Karen within a historical context as well as Karen working in organised political settings such as NGOs and civil society groups. But the vast majority of participants interviewed for this thesis were Karen people who shared a common experience of displacement and persecution, and an everyday engagement with the borderlands. The principle point of reference for my work was that the participants self-designated as Karen, although other forms of identification used included being artists and activists, refugees and migrant workers. These were people who lived in the borderlands out of necessity, and who had developed, over time, a unique articulation of its connection to their daily lives and to their political status. This group of people mostly derive from one of the most significant populations in and around Mae Sot: villagers who have fled the conflict inside Burma and sought refuge in Thailand.

Many of my participants had been housed in one of the nine Thai Government-recognised refugee camps, currently catering to over 140,000 refugees.¹⁴ But there are also estimates of around one million Externally Displaced People now in Thailand.¹⁵ This particular population of displaced Karen had at least one thing in common; they have all been displaced from Burma. For one participant in the research, displacement had occurred 27 years before; for another it was only 10 months prior to our meeting. While some could not remember the circumstances of their displacement, instead relying on the stories of older relatives, all had been forced to flee their homes due to Burmese military offenses, or intense and unwanted military attention and persecution. Most are, or had been, considered a refugee at some point in their lives, and many had spent some time in one of the various refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. Of the participants from Burma, all were

¹⁴ The figure supplied by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium, Bangkok, as of April 2012 is 140, 356. TBBC is responsible for providing food, shelter and non-food items to refugees in the camps along the Thai-Burma border. They compile monthly statistics of the camp populations.

¹⁵ An accurate figure for externally displaced persons is hard to determine given that this population can be quite transitory and due to their illegal status many prefer not to be accounted for. Credible figures come from TBBC who quoted 1.2 million illegal migrant workers registered in 2004. This would not include numbers of people who are living but not working in Thailand. The Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, presented by Special Rapporteur to Myanmar, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, to the 62nd Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, quoted an estimated 1 million EDP in Thailand.

Karen and all were Christian. All but two participants lived in Mae Sot illegally, meaning they had no nationality, no Thai ID, no formal access to health or education services, and were constantly threatened by the possibility of deportation or imprisonment if they were caught. Over half the participants had lived and been educated in the refugee camps; although all but one now lived primarily outside the refugee camps. Many of my participants also had links to the KNLA. Some were former members of the KNLA and others had siblings or parents who were members. Many expressed a political affiliation to the KNU, although their allegiances in a practical sense were much more complex, and included local community identification, pro-democracy identification, and affiliations with socio-political movements such as globalisation, anti-capitalism, and environmentalism. This thesis could have chosen to focus on the narrative articulated by the Karen leadership in the borderlands and its political movement, the KNU. Instead, this thesis seeks an approach that focuses on the informal, everyday acts of resistance rather than the activities of a political elite.

LOCATION OF THE FIELDWORK

The location of the fieldwork is integral to the shape and direction this thesis takes. It was chosen for the political, metaphorical and relational qualities it brings to discussions of borderlands as spatial entities. These qualities are drawn through the arguments made in this chapter. While the thesis explores the nature of social relations across the domain of the 'borderlands', my fieldwork explored these social relations in a particular site within that domain, in and around the Thai town of Mae Sot. This thesis makes no attempt to generalise Mae Sot as representing the borderlands, however as will become apparent over the course of this chapter, Mae Sot was chosen because it encapsulates the different political and cultural dynamics from which a broader understanding of a borderlands can be drawn.

The location of the fieldwork for this thesis is broadly associated with the section of the Thai-Burma border that is defined by the Moei River. The Moei is 327 kilometres long and runs from Mae Sot district in the south to Tha Song Yang district in the north. The Moei forms a natural contour and political barrier between the Burmese and Thai states and it is this section of the border that experiences some of the greatest flows of displaced Karen seeking refuge in Thailand.

Burma ends on the Moei's west bank, Thailand begins on its east bank. Four kilometres inland from the Moei is the Thai town of Mae Sot. It is geographically and administratively within the jurisdiction of the Thai Government; it is also, unofficially, a hub of Burma's political opposition movements and the international aid apparatus that administers the border's many refugee camps. Mae Sot is a centrepiece of this thesis. It is where most of my interviews took place and

where many of the participants in this thesis, after their initial crossing in to Thailand, have subsequently settled. It was chosen because of its strong association with displaced Karen communities but also because of its links to the Karen resistance movement and broader political opposition movements, as well as its perception as a frontier town with the geographical, metaphorical and spatial characteristics associated with a borderlands.

It can be difficult to place Mae Sot's national orientation and this contributes to its perception as a 'frontier town', a sense of being beyond state affiliation, and home to a diverse sociality. An everyday and tangible example of this is the diversity in dress. *Longyi's* (a wrap-around cloth worn by men) mingle with Burmese *thanaka* (a ground-bark paste often used as a cosmetic), western clothing and the Muslim *taqiyah* (cap). There is a mosque, a number of Christian churches and numerous Buddhist temples which are the focus point of religious, cultural and music festivals. The highway that skirts the town and runs down to the border is dotted with western pizza and pasta bars while the night market and the main streets teem with Thai and Burmese curries, noodles and rice dishes. Signs are in Burmese as well as Thai, and languages spoken in the street range from Burmese and Thai to English, French and a multitude of ethnic minority languages like Sgaw and Pwo Karen and Hmong.

The ever-expanding aid contingency that bases itself in Mae Sot is visible in the large four-wheel drives that negotiate its tiny chaotic streets. Aid and development agencies have brought considerable Western influences to the border, which are now evident in dress, language, food, technology and culture. The morning market is full of cheap merchandise brought across from Burma. It caters to Mae Sot's ever expanding Burmese population but also to Thai locals and foreigners. Mae Sot is a significant border crossing between Burma and Thailand, sustaining not only official trade between the two countries but also an extensive black-market trade in gems, drugs, teak, sex work and human trafficking. Understandably, this and the high presence of refugees, displaced persons and migrant workers, ensures a large contingency of Thai military personnel and police in and around Mae Sot. The police are dogged by a widely accepted perception of corruption and this is associated with varying levels of risk for displaced Karen in the borderlands.

Mae Sot (inclusive of the surrounding municipalities of Mae Sot, Mae Ku and Tha Sai Luad) has a population of about 46,650 people. When taking in outlying *tambons* (sub-districts) the number is closer to 118,000.¹⁶ Both numbers can fluctuate widely depending on the presence of journalists,

¹⁶Statistics taken from The Administrative Bureau of Tak Provincial Office and the Office of Tak Province's Community Development, accessed and translated by Prasert Rangkla, 18 October 2008, http://123.242.165.138/tak_poc/report/support_management1/1001_2.php?year1=2551&A=6306#

researchers, aid workers, missionaries, academics and migrant workers. This varied population includes Burmese, Thai, Karen, Hmong, Thai-Karen and Chinese, as well as a variety of nationalities from western countries. While a perfunctory summary, Mae Sot defies such easy descriptions. Its influences are many, its constituents diverse and its political alliances complex. In theory it has a clear administrative power, but in practice authority is dispersed through practices linked to local alliances and corruption.

These diverse and often contradictory elements of Mae Sot are indicative of the greater tensions between state bureaucracy and localised activity that has come to dominate the borderlands. Mae Sot is a central focus point for the Karen in Thailand, a key geographical centre for state operations on the Thai-Burma border, and has a capacity to attract and sustain both state and non-state activity. As a result Mae Sot epitomises the diverse social relationships necessary to examine the nature of a borderlands space as it relates to the social interactions of displaced Karen and their construction and projection of identity.

METHODS

Given the complex mix of agents and relations along the Thai-Burma border, negotiating a method of data collection was a key preoccupation of this research. The information gathered played an integral part in the thesis structure, but also, through analysis, to the larger theoretical frames of the thesis, including the key conceptual positioning of a borderlands space. In this section I lay out the techniques I used to gather this information. By using a combination of ethnographic methods and content analysis, I garnered considerable insight into the nature of social relationships in the borderlands, as well as finding ways to address some of the key concerns I had with undertaking fieldwork, such as disparities in researcher-participant power balances, subjective-objective interpretation, different ways of knowing and understanding, and translation to name a few.

A large part of my information gathering was conducted through traditional ethnographic practices of interviewing and participant observation, though this does not make it a piece of anthropological or even ethnographic research due to the multi-disciplinary approach to methodology that this thesis takes. The thesis equally draws on document analysis, both historical and contemporary forms, as well as the examination of cultural expression. I elaborate on these processes below.

Ethnographic techniques primarily helped me to understand the patterns of social relations and identity formation that occur in the Thai-Burma borderlands. They also complemented knowledge gained from other methods such as archival research and literary analysis. By analysing the

literature and archival information I was able to put the practices of displaced Karen into an historical context and tease out the complexities and the contradictions. In addition to the methods mentioned above, I also analysed cultural expression. This technique provided integral support material to my interviews and observations but also provided rare academic insights in their own right. The analysis of cultural expression is a much under-utilised area of study when it comes to the Karen and the Thai-Burma borderlands. Together, these methods helped me gain the material needed to provide a more complete understanding of how the borderlands informs particular tendencies that occur in the projection of a Karen identity.

An additional point around the analysis of cultural expression is needed. For the purposes of this thesis I have treated the poems and songs of participants on their own terms, as projections of identity. Another piece of research may have deconstructed this cultural expression, examining the works in terms of their hidden meanings or providing analytical insight into their purpose as pieces of cultural production. My interest however, is to focus on the projection of Karen identity as it relates to the social practices of displaced Karen in the borderlands space. I therefore take this cultural expression in a more literal sense, as what it is projected to mean.

Non-formal interviews

Early on in my fieldwork I was in Mae La refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border. Through an interpreter I asked an older Karen woman if she liked to weave. She replied “I don’t like it, but I don’t not like it”. The ambiguity and brevity of the answer points to a crucial point of communication in Karen culture. Communication is communal, non-direct and informal.¹⁷ It requires personal interaction, a familiar setting, an interest in the participant’s broader stories, and subtle probing. It is in this type of setting that productive discussions can occur. When a Karen friend joined the group of women and they began weaving together I learnt a lot more from their informal chatting. I learnt that the men often left the camp to find work, but that the women could not because of their family commitments. Weaving alleviated their boredom. It also provided them with an income for their children’s schooling, clothes and food. The problem with my question was

¹⁷ Violet Cho is a Karen journalist and refugee who is one of the only people I know to try and give some academic form to this type of Karen communication. She does this by articulating a research methodology based on the Sgaw Karen word, *Tapotaethakot*. According to Cho the closest English translation for *Tapotaethakot* would be ‘chatting’ but this does not entirely capture the nature of the word. Cho’s work is a useful step towards a better articulation of Karen communication patterns and associated methodologies. Cho sets out seven principles for *Tapotaethakot*, which I summarise here: 1. Respect participants and treat them according to the rules of kinship; 2. Meet informally and have conversations (including sharing food) rather than having formal interviews; 3. Be open, direct and upfront about the research and its purposes; 4. Be a community member, involved in and supporting community initiatives; 5. Recognise and value people’s experience and experiential knowledge; 6. Recognise and make use of oral tradition and storytelling as legitimate forms of knowledge; 7. Recruit research participants through personal and family relations, and through community leaders in an informal way (Cho, 2011).

that it was framed in terms that were not relevant to the women's lives. It was not a question of liking or not liking weaving, it was a matter of practicality and necessity in the day-to-day living in a refugee camp.

Over the period of 2005 to 2010, I conducted three field trips to the Thai-Burma border. The initial trip lasted five months; two return trips took place over two to three weeks. My knowledge of and connection to the Karen in the borderlands must also be taken in light of my ongoing professional engagement with the border area, reaching back to 2002 and sustained by repeated return trips to the border area every 12 to 18 months. Over the course of the fieldwork trips I conducted informal in-depth interviews with Karen refugees, displaced persons and leaders that ranged from one to two hours. Many included multiple return sittings which allowed me to follow up ideas and ultimately engage at a deeper level with the material. They were explicitly designed as a limited sample of quality interview material that helped shape the arguments made in this thesis. In addition to these interviews, I also spoke informally with many other community members throughout the course of my fieldwork and these interactions played an integral role in the development of my arguments. A key element of these interviews and observations was that they gave me an insight into how the borderlands was 'lived in', moving me out of the theoretical realm to provide real experiences and real situations. Direct quotes from these interviews can be found throughout the thesis, providing a rich context to my own observations and arguments. But these interviews can be found in more subtle ways across the thesis too. The larger thesis structure and arguments draw heavily on the subjective responses of the participants, and in particular helped form the thematic structure of Chapters Five through to Seven. As a key source of empirical data they also guided the direction of further enquiries through literature and other content analysis.

In many cases the circumstances of these interviews were not dissimilar to those of the Karen woman mentioned above. What I learnt very quickly was that all those intricately planned interview questions and techniques devised in my academic world in Australia were to change dramatically once I engaged with people in the Thai-Burma borderlands. What emerged instead was an interview style more in keeping with Fontana and Frey's idea of "negotiated accomplishments" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 63). In this instance the interview is shaped by the context and situation in which it takes place and the interviewer becomes an active participant through their interaction with the interviewee (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Rather than the semi-rigid question structure I had intended, a more flexible, informal discussion occurred. With this realisation, my position in the research began to change and I became a much more active participant in the narration of participant's stories.

These informal discussions often began with the participants' piece of cultural expression – a poem, artwork or song, and were mostly directed by the participant themselves. I gave facilitating probes where I thought more information was needed for my own understanding. My opinions and explanations became interspersed with those of the participant. Instead of a set interview, we often had a dialogue. If I had a point I thought important to get across I would find suitable examples. If the direction of my probes lacked comprehension I also used examples. If my probes were treated nonchalantly I noted the direction the discussion then took. For every question that lacked clarity or simplicity there was a new train of thought that emerged, meaning that no part of this dialogue felt wasted or irrelevant to the research. The result of this interaction between myself as the researcher, and the participant, was the creation of an environment where both of us were active participants in the narrative.

As with any cross cultural piece of research, language is a key factor. Whether communicating in our interviews, translating artistic expression, or negotiating cultural norms at events, my inability to speak proficient Sgaw and Pwo Karen, or Burmese, left me reliant on interpreters. All the participants in my interviews were native speakers of Sgaw¹⁸ Karen while a few had a speaking knowledge of Pwo Karen. The remaining participants were either Thai or Burmese with proficiency in English. Most participants in this research spoke adequate, even fluent levels of English due to their education in the refugee camps and their ongoing participation in activist and democracy circles where they advocated to an international audience. The majority of interviews included in this thesis were therefore conducted in the English language. Just three interviews were conducted in Sgaw Karen with an interpreter. Having worked extensively with Burmese and Karen organisations along the Thai-Burma border for the last eight years, I have a pool of interpreters I have used and they conducted the core of the translation work that occurred in this study.

Working across languages requires more than just direct translation. Speaking a non-native language often gives rise to inconsistencies in communicating and understanding. Participants often relied on pauses, mumbling and prolonged searches when they could not find the word they were looking for. For the clarity of the reader, I have removed these utterances from the transcribed interviews; otherwise the interviews remain as the participants spoke them.

¹⁸ The Karen language has three main dialects: Sgaw, Pwo and Bwe. Sgaw Karen is mostly associated with educated Christian Karen, while Pwo is common among Animist and Buddhist Karen. The Sgaw Karen script was created by an American Baptist missionary, Jonathan Wade, in the 1830s, primarily for the translation of the Bible. It is closely based on the Burmese script, as is the Pwo Karen script which was adapted from the Sgaw script some time after. It is often cited that the Karen had an ancient, now lost script (Falla, 1991, p. 220), possibly called *Leit-Hsan-Wait*, which due to the strange shape of the alphabet markings is often referred to as looking like chicken scratchings. Today, Sgaw Karen remains the most visible Karen language, mainly due to its connection to the missionaries and their domination over the production of written publications in the 1800s, and its adoption by the Karen revolution as the official language for their written publications.

Challenges also existed in translation. Initially, interpreters tended to summarise the participants' words and it required constant vigilance to ensure a full translation was given. The interpreters' words often became intermingled with the participants as they sought the best means by which to describe their stories. As an 'outsider' I had to become attuned to the nuances of Karen communication, to know when to push for a truer interpretation and to recognise whose words I was in fact hearing. But even so, much is lost in the act of translation let alone the nuances of cross-cultural communication. I found that the best response to this challenge was to work closely with the author of the work to establish the best possible translation of the meaning of their words. One further challenging point needs to be addressed. Many of the participants in this research actively encouraged me to 'clean up' their spoken English, not wanting to sound uneducated or unclear in what they were saying. Given my ongoing connection with my participants and my work in the Thai-Burma borderlands more generally, there is a real need to respect and try to accommodate these wishes. While I have not 'cleaned up' the interviews in this thesis, I believe they are clear accounts in and of themselves, this request has implications for any future research work and is worthy of further examination.

Participant observation

In addition to these informal interviews I produced extensive notes based on what I was *seeing* in the borderlands. Rather than being a seemingly objective documentation of culture, events, dress, activities or social structure, these notes served a participatory, analytical purpose. They became a useful tool for deepening my understanding of what I was observing. These notes included observations of cultural activities, insights into the interview and research process, daily documentation of living along the Thai-Burma border and post-interview analysis. I was as much a part of these notes as the Karen I was 'learning to know' were. For me, this observation element served two purposes. Firstly it was observation of my field of study, the ethnographic recording of the daily lives of the people I was working with. This element of observation was incredibly important in validating what I was being told by participants in our interviews and through their artistic expression. It also filled in the gaps that weren't covered in the interviews, giving me a more complete understanding of the space I was studying. At times in the thesis I refer to these notes directly, at other times they take a more complementary, less visible role in that they add another layer to my understanding of what was occurring in the borderlands.

Atkinson and Hammersley argue that "we cannot study the social world without being part of it", meaning participant observation is not a research technique but rather a way of being in the world of those you are studying (1998, p. 11). 'Being in the world' allowed me to interact with my participants in a non-formal setting. I attended the wedding of the Karen friend mentioned at the

beginning of this chapter, I socialised with participants around cooking and drinking, I attended a relative's wake and I visited participant's homes and met their friends and families. This type of interaction gave me the opportunity to see participant's lives outside of the formal research setting and it broadened my understanding of the complexities and multiplicities in their lives. 'Being in the world', as opposed to an external force observing the world, allows the researcher to be part of, and open to, the many forces and dialogues that constitute the fabric of that world.

The second element of observation was self-reflexive, observing my own role and technique in the research process. I was a vehicle for participants' expression, a recorder, a contributor, a learner but also a speaker. I was therefore a participant in the research, and as open to rigorous observation and analysis as any other participant. My extensive field notes were my opportunity to have a dialogue about my day-to-day activities; they were also an opportunity for debriefing. They were a means for me to observe what had happened during the day and critique my technique, looking for changes or improvements that could benefit the research process. An analysis of my first recorded interview taught me the sensitivity of the microphone that picked up the squawks of chickens and dogs in the background. Observations on the frustrations and challenges of failed meetings, access to participants and refugee camps, and the seemingly insurmountable cultural differences, are all present in this thesis because of their contribution to defining the parameters in which the research occurred. Post-analysis of each interview helped refine the interview process to cater to Karen communication patterns; the interviews became more informal and I became less direct in my questioning and more conversational in tone. These were not the observations of an objective researcher, but rather the observations of someone participating in the process. This was an important personal and professional realisation as well as a significant insight into the practice of culture and identity construction in the borderlands.

Cultural expression

Throughout this thesis there are references to stories of people and events, drawings, cartoons, songs and poems. These were initially unexpected contributions to the thesis, but they have since brought a crucial element to the thesis arguments. More than twenty pieces of artwork were contributed by participants and form the core of this artistic expression. They are included for a number of reasons. The artistic expression formed a complementary source to participant's personal narratives and became an alternative form of analysis to more conventional sourcing of information such as interviews, participant observation and reviewing existing literature.

I quickly realised that the production of artistic expression was a living contribution to an ongoing dialogue around political and cultural construction. A thought, feeling or experience embalmed in a

piece of artistic expression provides a powerful insight into the author's thematic construction in a given time and place and can tell us much about the political and cultural environment in which it was created. More than that, if artistic expression embodies shared cultural symbols (Geertz, 1976), then it can also be viewed as a product of collective experiences that contribute to cultural transformation. Geertz draws this connection between art and culture when he states:

The capacity, variable among peoples as it is among individuals, to perceive meaning in pictures (or poems, melodies, buildings, pots, dramas, statues) is, like all other fully human capacities, a product of collective experience which far transcends it, as is the far rarer capacity to put it there in the first place. It is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture that participation in the particular we call art, which is in fact but a sector of it, is possible (1976, p. 1488).

Anna Tsing states that the stories inherent in these types of production show “sites of discursive contestation” (1993, p. 8). In other words they are comments on the meaning and practices of social transformation, particularly as they relate to the construction of power. The pieces of artistic expression included in this thesis not only document Karen identity, culture and life, they also contribute to a shared experience of cultural and political construction specific to the Thai-Burma borderlands space.

As both Tsing and Geertz recognise, the inclusion of artistic expression provides a rich context to understandings of social and cultural formation. The inclusion of artistic expression in this thesis serves two purposes. Firstly, it visually represents an individual's construction of a theme at a given moment, building the individual into a collective narrative of the borderlands. Secondly, it provides an object with meaning because of the symbolic forms that are familiar to the collective who experience it. This meaning is subjected to collective experiences, creating symbols that are familiar to the communal fabric and therefore explicit to cultural construction. Through cultural symbols we can understand art and through art we can see a practicing culture. A piece of art is therefore a legitimate source of knowledge for understanding the political and cultural constructions that represent both individual and collective portrayals of culture.

Archival research/Literary analysis

In addition to these ethnographic methods I also conducted archival research and literary analysis. I used this method to put my research and my arguments into an historical context, to enrich them with the insight that had gone before me, and to challenge the assumptions made and the political positions argued.

While the impact of archival research and literary analysis can be felt across the entire thesis there are some points worth bringing to the fore. I researched newspaper archives to collate an historical account of significant cultural and political changes that occurred along the Thai-Burma border in the 1980s and 1990s, a time of particular relevance to this thesis due to the large influx of refugees and the corresponding state response. These provided much needed factual evidence for the argument that the Thai-Burma borderlands saw an intensification of political interest by both the Thai and Burmese states following these large refugee influxes. The use of these archives is particularly evident in Chapters Three and Four.

Texts pertinent to Burma's political and ethnic history have also provided important historical context to the themes discussed in this thesis. While too many to mention here, they are referenced in Chapter 1 as well as many other places throughout the thesis. The influence of these texts is particularly evident in Chapters Three, Four and Seven. I studied a number of missionary and historical texts for their early ethnographic accounts of Karen culture and identity (Hla, 1939; Marshall, 1922; Po, 2001). These texts are seminal accounts of Karen identity and are arguably the foundations of a nationalist Karen culture and identity as it is projected from the borderlands today. They provide important insights into the nature and motivation of a Karen cultural identity and their influence can be found at various junctures across the thesis, particularly in Chapters Seven and Eight.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that my study area be viewed as 'sites of intersecting social relations', and that this is the most appropriate methodological approach for understanding a concept of borderlands that is made up of geographic locations and intersecting social relationships, the benchmarks of my larger thesis arguments around the nature of the borderlands as a spatial entity. As sites of intersecting social relations, the emphasis is placed on documenting and understanding the complex sets of social interactions that occur between people and spatiality, and which inevitably provide a story of the social and political environment in which they take place.

As I argue that the borderlands is a social construct, the relationships and the paths along which these connections develop are important elements of the study material. Ethnographic methods of interviewing and participant observation were chosen because they could provide the perspective of the people tied up in living and articulating the space they inhabit, and the projection of identity that emanates from that particular space. Archival research and analysing cultural expression provided important supplementary material that enriched the findings that came from the interviews and observations. The emphasis in choosing ethnographic methods was to provide

“flesh and bone” to the issue at hand (Gille, 2001, p. 321); How do people live in the borderlands? How do relationships form? And what significance does this have to the narration of identity?

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework for how the research was conducted and the methods or techniques used to gather the study material. In the next chapter I continue to build this framework, but now focusing on developing a broad theoretical framework in which the Thai-Burma borderlands can be understood in the context of spatiality.

CHAPTER 3

'FENCES AND NEIGHBOURS'¹⁹

ESTABLISHING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE THAI-BURMA BORDERLANDS

*The Thai-Burma border is characterised by what I don't see
It's an endless, invisible line with barely a physical marking
Confronted by this invisible line, the decision not to cross relies on an implicit understanding
A socio-political contract between an individual and the state; a contract broken daily
This tenuous sense of power makes the border porous
Like a thinly stretched membrane, pockets of people push their way through
Crossing the border to sell goods, live illegally, visit family or flee internal conflict
This contentious position highlights the salience of borders in our contemporary world
What is the meaning of the border
For the individuals who peer across it daily
And the nation-states who claim control over it
Author's field notes, December 2008*

This chapter establishes the key conceptual framework of this thesis. It develops the concept of the Thai-Burma borderlands by looking at key literature that relates to larger historical and theoretical developments of borders and borderlands. Setting up this conceptual framework of the borderlands supports my main thesis argument by allowing me to talk about the borderlands space as it relates to modes of social practice and identity, which together form the central themes of this thesis.

The chapter first argues for a new way of looking at the Thai-Burma borderlands as a political space, a spatial re-imagining that establishes the borderlands as a social construct characterised by contested social relations. This concept of a 'borderlands' allows me to map the interchange that occurs across a broader space that is informed by the Thai-Burma border, rather than seeing the border as purely delineating two distinct autonomous spaces. In the context of this thesis, this interchange is broadly mapped through the operations of the nation-state and the practices of displaced Karen, both key agents in the borderlands space.

The chapter goes on to propose that this interchange must be understood in relation to three significant processes of social organisation and transformation that have spatial impact on the nature of the Thai-Burma borderlands. These three processes are the advent of mapping the body politic, the rise of the nation-state as a key form of political authority, and population and cultural movement across borders. I contend that these three processes develop the Thai-Burma border as a geo-political marker, as well as giving form to the type and nature of social relations that occur

¹⁹ 'Fences and neighbours' is a phrase used by David Newman and Anssi Paasi in their article, 'Fences and neighbours in the postmodern world: boundary narratives in political geography' (1998). It aptly captures notions of separation and connection for people who live side by side, particularly as they relate to topics that are the focus of this thesis, such as politics, geography, identity and the meaning of boundaries.

across the national border. In order to make these claims, I use key concepts in social science theory, such as processes of globalisation and state-making, to draw on broader trends that can account for the development of these processes as they relate to the key agents and themes of the Thai-Burma borderlands. These concepts are worthy of a thesis in their own right, however I use them here as a way to understand contemporary debates of borders and borderlands, and in particular as a way to theoretically navigate the very specific questions this thesis is preoccupied with in regards to the social practices of displaced Karen in the Thai-Burma borderlands. Namely, how global processes enable an exchange of information, ideas and resources, how 'practices of statecraft' impact mobility and notions of citizenship, and how social practices shape the construct of cultural and national identities.

This chapter is important to the main thesis argument because it develops the historical and theoretical contexts in which the borderlands space can be understood, and to which the modes of social practice and identity constructs of displaced Karen can be mapped. A more analytical presentation of these social practices and how they pertain to the nature of the borderlands space and a Karen identity is the central focus of Chapters Five, Six and Seven in this thesis.

This chapter is also important to the overall thesis structure, for it begins the process of defining the first subsidiary argument of this thesis. This is that the Thai-Burma borderlands is a distinct space framed by a tension between a modern territorial domain, characterised by the modern demarcation of the Thai-Burma border and the consolidation of state control over it, and the intersection of a particular form of social relations, characterised by a fluidity of movement (of information, resources, ideas, culture, identity) that intensifies the possibilities available to displaced Karen, particularly in terms of political agency and mobilisation. Drawing out the various components of this tension gives definition to the practices of Karen who have been displaced to the borderlands, but more broadly it provides insight into how displaced populations politically engage with the state in ambiguous cultural-political spaces – providing clearer definition to the political nature and possibilities of the borderlands space.

As such Chapters Three and Four set up the key features of the borderlands space by outlining the modern territorial domain and the increased penetration of the nation-state to apply a homogenised political authority to the borderlands space. Chapters Five, Six and Seven lay out key modes of social practice of displaced Karen which, in contrast to the modern territorial domain, bring a fluidity and contestability to the space. As the nature of this tension evolves over the coming chapters it will become evident that this tension underpins both Karen activism and the projection of a Karen identity.

THE BORDERLANDS: RE-IMAGINING POLITICAL SPACE

The concept of 'borderlands', like borders, is used in different ways across a range of academic discourses. It is used conceptually to elucidate the multidimensional aspects of social and cultural practice and identification (Alvarez, 1995; Rosaldo, 1993). It is used in a geo-political sense to describe the frontiers of nations and states (Grundy-Warr, 1993; Prescott, 1987). And it is used metaphorically as a way of looking at socio-spatial identities (Anzaldúa, 2007; Bhabha, 1990) such as sexuality, gender, ethnicity and class.

To date, most academic approaches to the Thai-Burma borderlands have conceived the national boundary in terms of it being a line that separates two mutually exclusive territories (Grundy-Warr, 1993; Rajah, 2002; Wijeyewardene, 2002). This is largely true even in the discourses put forward in the section on border crossing later in this chapter, where even in speaking of fluidity, mobility and the potential collapsing of borders, the boundary remains the focal point.

My intent here and across this thesis is to articulate a different way of conceiving the borderlands space, one that doesn't so neatly compartmentalise discontinuous spaces – as in those divided by a border – but rather can account for an interchange that occurs across the space. In this respect the concept of 'borderlands' is one that can map this interchange, rather than conforming to the notion of two separate borderlands attached to either side of the national border (Baud & Schendel, 1997). This concept of 'borderlands' is integral to this thesis because it acknowledges that cultural and political activity does not necessarily stop at the border, but rather that there is considerable status and meaning acquired in the cross-border engagement, while still allowing that this interaction can be informed by the national border.²⁰

If the concept of 'borderlands' allows me to map an interchange across the nation-state border, what then is the nature of this interchange? Broadly speaking, it is framed by the three significant processes of social organisation and transformation discussed in this chapter. These processes lay out the historical development of the borderlands but they also help define how everyday interactions across the borderlands space are carried out. While these processes of organisation have developed across a vast period of time, the social relationships inherent in them have established the borderlands space as we know it today; as a site of intense interaction that is informed by the national border and where multiple, contested articulations of the space occur. This position provides a more adequate representation of how social relations in the borderlands

²⁰ This idea around the dynamic relationship between the mapped border of the nation-state and relationships that occur across it, and at times in defiance of it, draws on the work of Sankaran Krishna (1996) who in her writing cautions against the over emphasis on cartographic or state sovereignty discourses which she sees as potentially abstracting the lives of the people who are impacted by and engage with the border on a daily basis.

relate to and contest both the material and abstract presence of the border. Below, I outline some of the key theory that informs my use of 'borderlands' and then apply this to the context of the Thai-Burma borderlands.

As already stated in Chapter 1, the concept of 'borderlands' is used to define a space that is produced in and through contested social relations that sit in conjunction with a loosely bounded geographical place. In this thesis the Thai-Burma borderlands is a spatial entity, with place a political-geographical dimension ascribed to that space. There are particular reasons for taking this approach. As a *space*, the borderlands is made up of more abstract notions around discourse and identity, but also characterised by the social relations that distinguish this particular space from others. *Space* is used to encompass the interactions and constructions that occur in a relationship of people and discourse and defined by a more abstract notion of multiple simultaneous stories (Massey, 2005). Such a definition gives rise to the notion of contested social constructions that produce potentially dissonant narratives of the space, a key component of the concept of 'borderlands' argued in this thesis.

My use of the term space in this thesis is largely based on definitional work conducted by Doreen Massey. In her book, 'For Space' (2005), Massey outlines her definition of space through three propositions which are relevant to the arguments I make around the Thai-Burma borderlands. Massey's first proposition is that space is understood as a product of inter-relations, constituted through interactions from the local through to the global. This understanding of space means that identity is constructed in relational terms rather than the notion of an unchanging identity. Thus a Karen identity, rather than being seen as authentic, essential, already constituted, is in fact co-constitutive or relational to the space in which it is constructed.

Massey's second proposition is that space is a sphere of multiplicity and therefore plurality. If we follow this argument then space exists because of the sphere of multiplicity, and multiplicity allows for the possibility of heterogeneity, or differences. It puts forward the possibility of a simultaneous coexistence of other stories and histories that transverse a space. This point is essential as it represents the nature of both the stories and the identity formations of displaced Karen in the borderlands, particularly as they sit in tension with more conventional articulations of the space.

Massey's final proposition is that space is always under construction. This means nothing is ever perfectly formed and in situ to everything else. The stories and arguments I relate in this thesis are one characteristic of the borderlands space. That space is open, changing, and always developing new relationships and linkages, constantly under construction and open to different interpretations and articulations.

In addition to these propositions around space, I also consider the borderlands to constitute elements more commonly associated with the understanding of place. This includes a geographical element, in that the borderlands contains places with established boundaries that are most readily represented in maps, treaties, administrative rules and legislation; the tools necessary to differentiate spatial order and distinguish one fixed geographical location from another (Prescott, 1987). In this context I talk of Mae Sot, the Thai-Burma border checkpoint or the market, as places in the borderlands. This sense of place is animated by the practices of human settlement that make the place 'meaningful, lived, and part of the everyday' (Massey, 2005). Michel de Certeau refers to this as the order in which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence (1988), or put more simply how our lives relate to our surrounds. Place often implies a stable configuration (de Certeau, 1988) and in the modern world a place is most commonly understood through the nation-state paradigm of boundaries that contain human settlement.

But like space, place is also a social construct (Massey, 2005; Newman & Paasi, 1998; Staeheli, 1994). A place must necessarily encompass the negotiations of humans, and this requires flexibility and adaptability. Places are subject to great historical shifts at both the local and global level, meaning places are able to be reconceptualised. Boundaries change, as does the natural environment²¹ – rivers dry up, rock formations collapse and agriculture practices can change the very nature of the landscape and therefore the characteristics of the place. The demographic of a population of a place also changes as do the political structures and decision-making apparatuses that administer and control the parameters of a place. What this means is that places are embedded with rich, complex layers that intersect and relate to the changing nature of the locale in which they operate, but which also cannot be separated from the contested space 'out there' that attempts to reformulate the narrative of the place. Put simply, even today's most hard won place may not be recognised as a place in the future.

Up until this point I have provided the definitional understanding of 'borderlands' used in this thesis, and introduced the relevance of the attributes of both space and place in relation to the borderlands. Let me now apply this conceptual framework to the context of the Thai-Burma borderlands. One subsidiary argument in this thesis is that the Thai-Burma borderlands is characterised by a tension between a modern territorial domain and the intersection of a particular form of social relations, a tension that underpins the social practices and identity constructions that form the main thesis argument. This tension derives from two differing articulations of the space. One articulation comes from, to borrow a phrase from political scientist

²¹ My argument for the role the natural environment plays is strongly influenced by Massey's observations around "the natural world that will not stay still" (Massey, 2005, pp. 130-137) as an example of place as a temporary constellation.

Nevzat Soguk, the 'practices of statecraft' (1999), or the operations of the nation-state that attempt to create a homogenised space delineated by a border that is a manifestation of political authority. This is dominated by a modern nationalist discourse that differentiates their space (the nation-state) from others that lay outside their border. The operations of the nation-state, particularly in reference to the borderlands, can be seen as an attempt to control the national space, but also who articulates that national space and how. This articulation of space associates territorial boundaries with a national identity, or in other words identities formed between people and the state. In a perfunctory manner, this represents the state's attempt to articulate the parameters of the borderlands space.

Another form of articulation comes from the narratives of displaced Karen who interpret the borderlands through a particular set of intersecting social relations that are mapped across the national border. These relations are framed by a fluidity of movement – of information, resources, ideas, culture and identity that intensifies the possibilities available to displaced Karen, particularly in terms of political agency and mobilisation.

In order to understand this tension, and its impact on the relationships and activities that occur in and through the borderlands space, we need to examine the nature of a borderlands from a different spatial perspective. This is a perspective that can account for the 'practices of statecraft', but also a more dynamic and fractured notion of the space that can account for the contested social relations that occur across the borderlands domain. These social relations are addressed in key modes of social practice discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, but as an example, they include engagement with other people and ideas through global flows of information and technology, displacement from but continued connection to a homeland (both physical and psychological), processes of reconstitution of Karen culture and identity, both acceptance and resistance to institutional governance, and political agency that develops through particular forms of Karen activism. The co-existence of many of these relations is characterised by the contestability of the space. These relations also often occur across national spaces. As a result, the borderlands is a space that can be understood as sitting both inside and outside of the state, both embracing and resisting systems of belonging, and as unquestionably shaped by its uneasy association with the geographical proximity of the Thai-Burma border.

The presence of these particular features and the form they take, are in part related to three significant processes of social organisation and transformation that have spatial impact on the nature of the borderlands space. These processes give both a historical and conceptual context to the development of the Thai-Burma borderlands. As such, understanding these processes and the contributions they make to spatial organisation and identity is integral to understanding the nature

of the borderlands space. In the following section I use historical and theoretical analysis to draw on broader trends that can account for the development of these three processes as they relate to the key agents and themes of the Thai-Burma borderlands. While these broader trends constitute the larger theoretical domains of nation and state-building and globalisation, they are examined over the remainder of this chapter because they provide a clear framework for the way displaced Karen live in and engage with the borderlands space.

MAPPING BORDERS: THE BODY POLITIC

This section examines the first significant process of social organisation and transformation that has spatial impact on the Thai-Burma borderlands, the mapping of the body politic. I argue that during the period of colonisation Burma moved from a political system based on relatively autonomous regions characterised by changeable local political allegiances, to the idea of a bounded territorial sovereignty with a central system of governance and characterised by a collective national identity. This shift is integral to the nature of the borderlands space because the advent of the map was instrumental in developing our current understanding of the body politic and developing the concept of a national identity based on allegiances to a bounded territory. This set up the dominant modern day framework for how displaced Karen in the borderlands would be identified.

In the late 1800s the leaders of Burma and Siam began to first conceive of boundaries as continuous lines on a map, “as demarcating an exclusive sovereignty wedged between other sovereignties” (Anderson, 1991, p. 172). Geographical Burma as we know it today is largely defined by the policies of its colonial administrator, Great Britain, although the modern-political Thai-Burma border emerged from diplomatic negotiations between the governments of Great Britain and Siam that occurred over a period of sixty years in the mid-late 1800s (Prescott, 1987; Winichakul, 1997). In the context of broader changes and subsequent negotiated border treaties, Burma as a bounded nation was formed.

In Burma’s instance, colonialism is largely responsible for replacing the customary polity with an entity based on the idea of a bounded nation. Prior to the advent of the modern-political map, pre-colonial Burma consisted of a number of semi-autonomous regions which were defined by “regional and dynastic conflicts” (Lieberman, 1978, p. 458). Lieberman refers to this power dynamic as “satellite centers” which orbit the “galatic polity” (1978, p. 461); where satellite centers constitute regional leaders at the periphery who maintain their autonomy in the face of a central power, usually the monarchy but otherwise a customary leader rather than the notion of a nation. Population movement between geographical places was determined by allegiances to patrons,

rather than a central government (Lieberman, 1978, p. 459) and power comprised of control of people rather than control of territory (Steinberg, 1987, p. 30).

Burma's pre-colonial period is noted for the failure of the central power (the monarchy) to control the regional commanders at the peripheries (Adas, 1981, p. 221). The further from the centre the more diminished state power became and this was further consolidated by the failure of "the administrative system to penetrate the village level" (Adas, 1981, p. 222). It can be argued that at the beginning of British rule little of these power dynamics changed, the colonial administration merely replaced the role previously played by the monarchy, although with greater emphasis on controlling all its political subjects under a central power. What colonial rule did instigate was a bureaucracy that eventually attempted to control the outer areas and in doing so create a more geographically structured mapping of Burma as a nation.²²

In this modern setting, the map changed the way territory was conceived and presented. It took a three-dimensional understanding of territory based in localised knowing and claimed a different spatial reality formed on the basis of two-dimensional graphics (Winichakul, 1997), comprised of symbolic shapes, colours and in most cases accompanying words. But more than that, border lines delineated a nation's political sovereignty, providing an outline in which the nation as an entity and in its entirety could be visualised. Mapping allowed a birds-eye-view of a nation's territory, and eventually placed the nation-state in a larger geographical context on the world map (Anderson, 1991). Traditional understandings of space, territory and nation were replaced by the map, which created what Winichakul refers to as the "scientific abstraction of reality" (1997, p. 130), in other words the map was meant to represent something that already existed.

To illustrate this broader concept, it is useful to look at Thongchai Winichakul's seminal study 'Siam Mapped' which reversed these traditional understandings of maps objectively representing something which already exists. He argued that the mapping of the "geo-body of a nation" is synonymous with the creation of nation-hood (Winichakul, 1997). He claimed that nations could be constructed to meet the demands of the map. In other words, the mapping of a nation's boundaries held more ambitious intentions than merely representing a geographical location; the map was intended to personify the nation itself.

In the history of the geo-body, this relationship was reversed. A map anticipated a spatial reality, not vice versa. In other words, a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what

²² The culmination of this on Burma's eastern flank was the exchanging of maps in 1894 between Great Britain and Siam (Thailand) which demarcated the area from what is now Karen State up to Shan State (Lang, 1999, p. 149).

it purported to represent. A map was not a transparent medium between human beings and space. It was an active mediator (1997, p. 130).

Underlying much of Winichakul's argument is the idea that a nation is created to give substance to the matter enclosed by its boundaries. If we take Winichakul's argument through to its conclusion then Siamese rulers mapped out a territory they called Siam. They then began the task of constructing a nation and identity which could inhabit that space. It is an important point of analysis, for if it is possible, as Winichakul suggests it is, that the map precedes the nation (1997, p. 130), then the relationship between the object (the map) and its intended purpose can, at the very least, be politically ambiguous. It is more likely to be a subjective construct of a particular kind of space projected as an objective delineation of existing space. This is not a unique argument but it is worth reiterating: the narrative of a nation-state and its associated national borders is as much a social construct of a particular space as that of the social relationships of displaced Karen that I argue for in later chapters.

The emphasis mapping placed on the relationship between a nation and its borders is associated with an analytical placement of the border as central to nation-state control. Borders became sites and symbols of power (Donnan & Wilson, 1999) which represented the spatial limits of state power and the manifestation of political control. In an extension of their geographical mapping of nations boundaries, political geographers began to treat the territorial line (border) as an objective fact, a manifestation of territoriality and sovereignty that is fixed to the form of the nation-state (Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Newman & Paasi, 1998). This view has run parallel with the global trend that prioritised a nation-state's political authority over a specified bounded space, and the inhabitants who lived within it. According to this discourse boundaries may separate individuals and communities at a local level by determining gender roles, economic distribution or unique cultural practices, but it is the international boundary that represents the symbol of a collective identity. In the same way that we would identify ourselves as Australian or Thai – a collective identity based on our nation-state, rather than as a feminist, Muslim or ethnic-Karen – self-identified groupings based on socio-political belonging. The emphasis of this approach to boundaries lies in its alignment to the notion of a self-contained national identity that supersedes other forms of identification, a point to which the next section turns. This position not only impacts the political nature of the borderlands space, it also develops the main thesis argument because it establishes the conditions in which the social practices of displaced Karen are constructed and contested, and from which an alternative to a self-contained national identity has been able to emerge.

CLOSED BORDERS: THE NATION-STATE AND NATIONALISTIC SENTIMENT

This section examines the second significant process of social organisation and transformation that has spatial impact on the borderlands, the role of the nation-state as integral to the development of a national identity. The creation of nation-state borders coincided with an associated political authority over the operations and relationships that occur within those borders. This resulted in the borders of the nation-state being closely aligned with a national identity that reinforced a system of belonging and excluding. This is significant for the main thesis argument on two levels. It introduces a key modern spatial unit, the national territorial domain, which is a central component of the concept of the Thai-Burma borderlands. And it establishes the dominant practice of political organisation and identity which in later chapters I argue sits in tension with key modes of social practice of displaced Karen. This section is structured by first looking at the nature of a nation-state's political authority and the ways in which power is enacted, and secondly looking at how identity and belonging is formed within these structures and what role nationalistic sentiment plays in this formation.

The terms nation, nation-state and nationalism are commonly used across this thesis. These terms constitute complex studies in and of themselves and have been subjected to intense scrutiny by scholars (Anthony Smith (1986, 1995), Benedict Anderson (1991), Ernest Gellner (1983), Eric Hobsbawm (1991), to name a few). My intent is not to debate their validity nor construe a new definition, but rather to use them in a very narrow application by focusing on their relationship to theories of borders and borderlands. With this in mind, the terms are used across this thesis in the following way.

Definitions of a *nation* attract a variety of sometimes contentious views (for example see Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1995). In this thesis I use a common definition of *nation* as the presence of a shared culture, typically embodying historical myths and symbols, language and popular identification (Smith, 1995). In addition a nation can also include economic unity and equal rights and duties for all members (Tønnesson & Antlöv, 1998), a pre-eminent political goal of attaining some sort of autonomy (Donnan & Wilson, 1999), and a mass public culture and a designated homeland²³ (Smith, 1995, pp. 56-57).

By contrast, the *nation-state* can be seen as an abstract administrative body characterised by legal structures such as a judiciary and political authority as implemented through some sort of

²³ Incidentally, another point of difference in Smith's definition is his linking of the modern nation to pre-existing ethnic ties or ethnies. His argument is that some ethnic ties have survived into the modern era and that these form the basis of some modern nations and nationalist movements (Smith, 1986). This is a clear distinction between Smith and many other authors writing in this area, and while an insight worthy of further debate, this thesis does not intend to draw this argument out.

governance. Most literature accepts that the nation-state consists of a number of the following aspects: citizenship, representative institutions, bounded territory, legal codes and a national culture or identity (Anderson, 1991; Smith, 1986; Tønnesson & Antlöv, 1998). It is important to differentiate between the nation and the nation-state, for while they are often used interchangeably, the differences place members of a nation and citizens of a nation-state in significantly different political circumstances.

A working definition of *nationalism* has evoked hotly contested sentiments among scholars. These have ranged from early work by Ernest Gellner that claimed nationalism invented “nations where they do not exist” (1964, p. 168) to Anthony Smith’s elaboration on nationalism as an ideological movement for “attaining and maintaining identity, unity and autonomy of a social group some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential nation” (A. D. Smith, 1999, p. 18). There are many other variants to these definitions, but it is the underlying sentiments of representation and legitimacy of the national that are of most interest to this thesis. While nationalist ideology is often a manifestation of this sentiment, for my own purposes, I take a broad approach to nationalism and see it as the sentiment that feeds an often primordial-like devotion and sacrifice to a particular nation and national identity.

One way of understanding the nation-state is as a system of organisation and governance based on geo-political principles, namely that the border constitutes a distinct line that separates sovereign states (Newman, 2001). This creates a world compartmentalised into discrete spatial partitions; a process that anthropologist Liisa Malkki says is to be “territorialized in the segmentary fashion of the multicoloured school atlas” (1992, p. 26). Discontinuous lines delimit one nation-state from the other and as happens when you view the coloured map of which Malkki speaks, the division at this superficial level is blatantly clear. Of course, beneath these lines exist the social and political processes which are the embodiment of the nation-state; manifestations of which come to mean much more than what can be represented by these visual lines. Much of the literature on the nation-state also considers that line a demarcation of political authority (Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Newman, 2001; Smith, 1986). This approach places its emphasis on the assumption of a self-contained nation-state whose political life consists of a contract between a nation-state’s population and authorities, a contract that regulates how a system of social organisation is to be carried out (Brown, 2001; Newman & Paasi, 1998). This approach is largely based on a position of sovereign-territoriality, meaning a nation’s geographic boundaries directly impact the political construction of the nation-state, including regulating political authority, and in turn come to be the most visible representation of that nation-state’s identity. The international borders then become a filter through which the structures and operations of the nation-state can be accepted and

understood, both by its citizens and the citizens of other nation-states, therefore making the border both symbolic and material (Newman & Paasi, 1998).

While the next section of this chapter talks more broadly about the notion of border crossing movements such as the mobility of people, culture, trade and technology, it is worth pointing out here how some of these counter-movements relate specifically to a nation-state's political authority over territory and a national identity. This begins to get at the tension that emerges when the social practices of displaced Karen contest the seeming homogeneity of the territorial domain.

The borders of the nation-state, and its associated operations, are of course not as rigid as the map makes them out to be. Borders are often blurred by cross-border movements like migration and tourism, and membership of a particular nation-state can be ambiguous, particularly in the ways the nation-state can accommodate non-citizens such as international students, spousal visas or refugees and asylum seekers, where some rules of membership apply but others do not. To accommodate these deviations leaders of the nation-state adapt the membership rules, disaggregating levels of entitlement and protection for those who reside within its borders. The nation-state response to such cases recognises that in its operation a totalising approach to borders as associated with national identity and political authority can be problematic, and in its operation require alternative methods of control. It is worth noting that in these circumstances while pragmatic adjustments may occur, the assumption of political authority continues to lie in the hands of the nation-state.

Challenges to nation-state authority can produce a sense of disruption or contradiction, and I argue this is a key component of the Thai-Burma borderlands space. In contemporary Burma, the territorial boundary has been treated as a manifestation of political authority. The boundary represents the parameters of power and as such embodies a system of power relations. However, in practice this political authority is often distributed unevenly, particularly at the peripheries of the nation-state which are the point of interest for this thesis. In Burma, the state's power has typically lain at its centre; the further from the centre the weaker that power has tended to be. One ramification of this has been a state tendency to heavily militarise border areas in an attempt to contain and control dissidents and the disaffected who naturally reside or are drawn to these areas. This process has tended to "produce and invent" a population at the margins of the nation-state (Horstmann, 2004, p. 3), which is often isolated from political power (Conversi, 1999). This assertion can certainly be made of the Karen discussed in this thesis, but also for many other ethnic groups that occupy Burma's border areas and struggle to have their political demands met, such as the Naga, Karenni, Shan and Rohingya. It is a reasonable affirmation that Burma's

territorial edges are inhabited by those disenfranchised by the centre's power; those that have been pushed there by their failure to conform to centrist demands for belonging to a national identity, or those who inhabit the periphery as a strategy to evade state control, described by James C Scott as those that seek to "evade both state capture and state formation" (2009, p. 9).

Given that the Karen I talk of in this thesis inhabit these political and metaphorical margins, I propose to look at the borderlands not from the centre, but from the margins itself.²⁴ I contend that by viewing the space from the margins, it is possible to examine the borderlands as a site of empowerment, not just marginalisation. In moving beyond the notion of the 'view from the centre', this approach offers insight into not only how those inhabiting the margins interact with the state, but how they construct relationships and identities that test nation-state boundaries and disrupt this form of political control. Thongchai Winichakul has attempted to advance this view by calling on the writing of a history at the interstices, "the history of the locations and moments between being and not being a nation, becoming and not becoming a nation" (2003). In such a statement Thongchai acknowledges the existence of *histories* that can contribute to our understanding of how national identities and nation-formation occurs. Over the course of this thesis I will argue that the Thai-Burma borderlands is a location where such a dynamic operates, where subjects at Burma's peripheries construct identity/ies that are contingent upon but also mindful of the uneven power relationships between themselves and the nation-state.

How identity and belonging is formed within the structures of the nation-state and what role nationalist sentiment plays in this, is another key focus of this section of the chapter. For at least the last century, the role of the nation-state has been integral to discourses around how identity is formed and practiced. In its very simplest form, the nation-state approach to borders uses the construction of a boundary as a means to determine who belongs – in a crude sense, *us* and *them* (Conversi, 1999; Newman & Paasi, 1998; Soguk, 1996). Those inside the boundary – *us* – are entitled to certain rights and protections based on membership to a particular national identity. Those outside the boundary – *them* – are not. The key question is how the criteria for membership of the group is determined. *Us* and *them* categories are a means of maintaining differences. Key elements of the nation-state – citizenship, national security, codified rights – are both a means of protecting and enhancing the chosen population as well as rebuffing those who are different or do not belong. The creation of a nation and a national identity relies heavily on producing a system of

²⁴ By 'view from the margins' I mean to look at the margins as sites of political and cultural production in their own right, and as such as a worthy centrepiece for research. My motivation for establishing this conceptualisation is that a view from the margins offers new forms of knowledge, in that it takes the debate away from the urban centre where it has traditionally been focused. My conceptualisation of a view from the margins draws heavily on the work of Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson (1999), Anna Tsing (1993), James C Scott (2009) and Thongchai Winichakul (2003).

social classification which is universally understood and distinguishes members. In turn the claim of statehood is legitimised (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) because it is accepted and recognised. By nature the border of the nation-state is therefore a means of exclusion and inclusion, or in other words a check-list for belonging.

Belonging is central to the concept of a nation-state and is often equated with nationalistic sentiment; the feeling of belonging to and identification with a national identity or history (A. D. Smith, 1999, p. 30). In this instance, the boundaries of the nation-state also act as a point of reference for codes of behaviour regarding national identity. For example, the state serves up strength, stability and unity which become more important and in some cases replace customary ties such as those associated with family or community (A. D. Smith, 1999). By accepting this privileging of national authority, citizens are expected to act accordingly, for example accepting that they will work, live and be governed by a national allegiance, rather than cultural ties or historical lineage. But this sense of national identity is a relatively modern construct (Gellner and Hobsbawm in A. D. Smith, 1999) and in the context of Burma it is in direct contrast to the traditional allegiances which characterised Burma's semi-autonomous authority structures of the past.

For most Karen, ethnic and community ties remain the dominant form of identification and the concept of a national Burmese identity, enabled by a strong Burmese state, continues to be a position pushed by an elite few in authority. But even so, these modern versus customary notions of identity formation are not so easily delineated. The Karen do not monopolise customary forms of identification any more than the nation-state embodies a strict hold over representations of national identity. In many cases these forms of identification overlap and both certainly incorporate some sense of fluidity and contestability in the way they are applied. In this respect I am not arguing that the Karen maintain their customary form of identity in the face of the Burmese state's attempts to establish a national one. The dynamic is far more nuanced than that. Rather, I am arguing we need to find a way of accommodating the reality already evident in the relationships on the ground – a duality, the possibility of a customary identity and a national identity co-existing in a state of complex tension. One does not secede to the other, but rather should be looked at as in a state of tension that is perpetuated by their ongoing interaction. This dynamic is not unique to the Thai-Burma borderlands, for it is replicated in the 'borders' of many nation-states around the world, it does however allow me to reiterate the importance of the space the Karen inhabit. In the borderlands the Karen negotiate a tension that frames a key subsidiary argument of this thesis, a tension perpetuated by the ongoing interaction of the operations of the

nation-state and associated codes of behaviour regarding national identity with the Karen's own social relationships which are dominated by cultural, historical and ethnic ties.

Up until this point I have proposed that in the context of Burma, the political authority of the nation-state has come to replace what had traditionally been semi-autonomous regional alliances. The attempt to establish a national boundary was prioritised over local affiliations and ethnicity as the primary point of identification. This was achieved through the establishment of political authority over the nation-state's bounded territory. Easily recognisable and understood parameters of belonging such as citizenship, a national narrative and a shared history were developed, and a corresponding nationalistic sentiment that supported a sense of inclusion and exclusion, or an identity of belonging was encouraged. Without negating the role of the nation-state in identity formation, it is clear that identities, including national identities are formed through complex processes of social, cultural and political interaction, some of which fall outside of the typical boundaries of the nation-state. Most notable, for the purposes of my thesis, is the increasingly relevant concept of border crossing, both in terms of population movements, as well as global flows of information, trade and cultural identity. Here, the mobility of populations and global trends challenge the association of a fixed border with identity formation. It is to this spatial configuration that I now turn.

BORDER CROSSING: GLOBAL MOBILITY, POPULATION AND CULTURAL MOVEMENT

This section examines the third significant process of social organisation and transformation that has spatial impact on the borderlands, global mobility and population and cultural movement across national borders. I argue that border crossing, shaped by global flows of technology, trade and information as well as population and cultural movement, constitute global processes that mark an interchange that occurs across nation-state borders. While the previous two processes of social organisations and transformation have established the influence and consolidation of the nation-state and its associated political authority, this section moves in a significantly different direction. It examines a process of organisation and transformation that brings a sense of fluidity to established borders and identities that stands in contrast to the nation-states attempts at consolidation and control over that space. This introduces a key conceptual underpinning of my larger thesis argument, that the borderlands constitutes an interchange across the national border which frames the social practices of displaced Karen and critically informs the projection of a Karen identity.

Throughout this section I draw on broader trends within global processes to show how they relate to displaced Karen in the borderlands. Most significantly, I show how these processes have

exposed the Karen to new ways of thinking, not only around their political struggle but also around conceptions of identity and social organisation. These processes have also provided the Karen with a range of mechanisms (international networking, advocacy, and new technologies) to both support and project their political claims to a wider audience and enable them to retain a connection to their culture and identity in the face of immense upheaval and displacement. I also contend that global processes have had a significant impact on the nature and projection of Karen identity, bringing a more fluid and accessible component to the identity. This larger process of global mobility and population and cultural movement is integral to the main thesis argument because in capturing the notion of an interchange that occurs across nation-state borders, it can better account for the nature of the social practices of displaced Karen as they relate to the borderlands space.

Large population movements have occurred for centuries; the more notable contemporaneous include the Chinese and Arab migrations in the 15th to the 19th Century's (Anderson, 1991) and the imperialist conquests of the 18th Century (Donnan & Wilson, 1999), of which Australia and the Americas are obvious examples. While the notion of movement across borders is clearly not exclusive to the modern era, there are particular features that distinguish the contemporary period that is relevant to this thesis. The most visible feature is the pockets of cultural and political groupings which are scattered across the global community, as opposed to living as a single group in a particular nation-state. Homi Bhabha calls this mass movement of people across international borders and outside the containment of a national culture, the "wandering peoples" (1990, p. 315). Some of the causes of this mass movement of peoples include major global conflicts of this century, in particular the Second World War, and increasing displacement caused by internal nation-state conflicts throughout the world. Other reasons for population movement include economic and social considerations that enable migration cached in the search for a better life and labour needs which facilitate the push and pull factors of migration for employment opportunities.

For many of the people who undertook these early journeys, a return to their place of birth was not a viable option. For those who fled because of civil unrest or persecution, returning was never an option, and for those who left in search of a better life, utopia would never be forsaken for a return to 'just getting by'. In many instances what occurred was a form of assimilation which saw many of these particular populations assume the traits of the new cultures they were entering. Benedict Anderson argues that it wasn't until the politicisation of the Americas that population movement acquired a nationalistic sentiment which allowed mobile populations to resist assimilation (Anderson, 1991, p. 189). With it came realisation, and slowly acceptance that you did not have to give up one identity for another. Such a position has tended to characterise migration

in the 20th Century, where there is either a hope of return to the 'homeland', or at least the knowledge that such an avenue is available.

One consequence of this difference is that migratory lives now frequently span countries and even continents, so that the border is not something to be crossed once and for all, but something to be crossed and re-crossed, in the imagination if not always in reality. As a result, lives are lived in more than one location, generating fragmentary and fugitive biographies that defy fixity in politically delineated space (Donnan & Wilson, 1999, p. 109).

What Donnan and Wilson identify is a key development in migration theory: that border crossing didn't need to consist of the finality that typically defined pre-19th Century population movement. Even if physical return proves improbable there are many ways to maintain a connection to the homeland which defy fixed spatial delineation. Donnan and Wilson develop this concept even further to explore living "in more than one location" by taking the specific example of undocumented migrant labour. They relay Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner's three-phase model of how individuals move from one group to another. The three phases are: separation – the erasure of one's existing status; transition – where status is neither or; and incorporation – successful transition to a new group. Donnan and Wilson suggest that for many undocumented migrants the final stage of 'incorporation' is never reached. Due to their illegal status they are trapped in the liminal phase of the second stage, perpetually in transition because they are never able to become legally incorporated into the new group (Donnan & Wilson, 1999, p. 110). Their interpretation of this model provides a useful understanding of movement between groups. It has some relevance to the circumstances of the Karen in the Thai-Burma borderlands in that many displaced Karen inhabit a trajectory that incorporates the first two phases of this model: erasure of the existence they had known in Burma and living in a current state of uncertainty that characterises the second 'transition' stage. I would add a further observation to Donnan and Wilson's model, the relevance of which will unfold as this thesis progresses. This is that the undocumented individual, in this case displaced Karen, can make a conscious decision not to move into the third stage. In fact, rather than being 'trapped' in the second stage, many Karen make a choice not to assimilate or become incorporated into Thai society. Instead they choose to remain distinct so they can continue to be politically active in their struggle to return to their homeland. For many Karen, remaining in this second stage of transition is more conducive to that return.

These more general statements around the nature of flows across national borders highlights several broader trends that assist in understanding the situation of displaced Karen in the Thai-Burma borderlands. In particular, how greater global mobility of information, peoples and technology has contributed to the re-imagined political space of the borderlands, and how it has

facilitated an interchange across the national border that has helped develop the capacity for Karen agency and mobilisation.

The flow of information, technology, money and culture across international boundaries is utilised by displaced Karen in ways that challenge the spatial constraints of the state. An example of this can be found in Burma's informal money lending system. Burma's diaspora is spread widely, some living thousands of kilometres from their former homeland. Many migrants send money back to Burma to support family and friends through a system called *hundi*. In the Sanskrit language this means 'to collect' but is generally understood to mean migrant remittances. The system operates through informal networks where the money given to a *hundi* broker in one country turns up in the hands of the recipient in Burma. It bypasses official banking and import regulations and ensures the money goes directly to the family member, not the Burmese military. Based on a study carried out in 2002-2003, Sean Turnell, an economics academic and Burma specialist, claims the *hundi* system makes up approximately five per cent of Burma's GDP (Turnell, Vicary, & Bradford, 2008). While admitting the numbers are 'rough', ²⁵ he estimated that in 2002-2003 more than US\$300 million, or ninety-four per cent of all remittances, were sent back to Burma via informal funds transfer schemes. ²⁶ The other six per cent were conducted through formal schemes such as banks. Of course a *hundi*-type remittance system has existed in Burma for centuries but its form in the modern era is particularly salient when taken in the context of border crossing mechanisms that challenge the primacy of state regulation. While the *hundi* system of money lending is unlikely to turn around Burma's financial problems, and indeed may pose a long-term challenge for any economic reform, it does have considerable impact through its ability to exist outside the restrictions of state regulation.

Another way border crossing is utilised can be found in the informal networks migrant communities use to stay connected to home. Modern technology such as communication and information flows as well as transport and labour migration have tended to dramatically reduce the disconnection associated with vast geographical distances. In many cases migration no longer

²⁵ There is very little documentation or data regarding informal money transfer schemes in Burma. Turnell's study is one of the first to detail the logistics and amounts associated with the *hundi* system in Burma and while it is preliminary in nature, it currently stands alone in terms of reference material. At the core of the study's analysis was a survey of around 1000 Burmese migrant workers and refugees residing in Thailand. Turnell calls the numbers 'rough' because he is estimating remittances from the general Burmese migrant population based on the findings of the survey of 1000 he conducted in 2002-2003. For further analysis of the study's methodology and findings see 'Migrant Worker Remittances and Burma: An economic analysis of survey results' by Sean Turnell, Alison Vicary and Wylie Bradford (Turnell, et al., 2008).

²⁶ The Informal Funds Transfer Schemes (IFTS) set out by Turnell et al, include the *hundi* system, family, carrier or merchant, or in person. According to Turnell's study, remittances were predominantly used for survival (96 per cent of those surveyed), followed by the purchase or development of farmland, establishing a business, meeting education expenses, repaying debt, hiring workers and buying consumer goods (Turnell, et al., 2008).

means intermittent contact, verbal or physical, with family that remain in the homeland, instead far more sustained levels of interaction are available to many. Modes of technological communication such as the telephone, email and the internet help reduce the subjective sense of distance and enable communication to occur across borders and between places (Clifford, 1994).

In the case of the Karen, and the exiled Burmese community more generally, this process of connection also moves beyond immediate familial ties; this is commonly seen in the way the greater Karen diaspora mobilise around websites, chat forums and global activist networks. For example, community groups who maintain contact with partners in their 'home' country are enabled and strengthened by the structures of their 'host' country. In Australia network groups such as the Burma Campaign Australia straddle both worlds; connecting the information flows between other activist groups around the world, the Australian political scene, and individuals inside Burma. The group would not function without the resources and infrastructure available within the 'host' country (Australia), or the information provided by its partners in the 'home' country (Burma).

In many senses this process of connection and networking represents a paradoxical shrinking of the world (S. D. Brunn & Leinbach, 1991; Janelle, 1991). Paradoxical because a subjective shrinking of geographical space is associated with an expansion in consciousness related to ideas, knowledge and accessibility to the greater world (Newman & Paasi, 1998). The world is simultaneously smaller and larger; smaller in terms of our ability to connect with people and places, and larger in terms of what we can know and access because of these connections. The result of such connections is the capacity to mobilise large or small groups of people across vast geographical distances around what are increasingly seen as global issues – the environment, human rights, poverty, the food crisis, nuclear disarmament and weapons proliferation, security and trade are just some of these global issues. This vastly more connected spatial condition that can be paradoxically both smaller and larger, reminds us that within global processes, distance and time constitute new meanings (S. D. Brunn & Leinbach, 1991; Rodgers, 2003). Traditional concepts of communities based on individuals in close spatial proximity who share religious, cultural and social values (Janelle, 1991) is replaced with transnational communities whose membership can be as geographically broad as it is narrowed by advances in communications technology.

These advances in communications technology enable the emergence of global networks, resulting in the capacity of dispersed communities to mobilise along cultural and political lines that are unbound by distance or nation-state borders. In such cases, a Karen person can sit illegally in Thailand and access information via the web they could not obtain if they were inside Burma. They can share this information with the Karen community dispersed throughout Europe, America or

Australia, and using alternative methods, they can even share this information with Karen still inside Burma. They can further compile information gained from this dispersed community and submit reports to a UN Committee in Geneva or a foreign government which could apply pressure to Burma's military government to cease its oppressive practices. In the end, this information will have traversed countless national borders and political systems, without facing nation-state border restrictions, in an attempt to resolve a localised predicament. It is possible that we are now encountering a system that challenges nation-state boundaries on a fundamental level; a system that is reconstituting our conceptual understanding of geographic distance and spatial control (Sassen, 2006b; Soguk & Whitehall, 1999).

While border crossing is an important concept to this thesis and to the borderlands space, it would be a mistake to view these networks and connections as unbounded by territory entirely. While there are certainly elements of the globalisation literature that advocate the demise of the nation-state, or a 'world without borders' (S. Brunn, Jones, & Purcell, 1994; Ohmae, 1995), others present a more nuanced argument that is in keeping with the sentiment I am trying to convey in this thesis. This includes an approach to territory that contemplates a reconfigured spatial order rather than a demise (Appadurai, 2005; Newman, 2001; Sassen, 2006b). Arjun Appadurai clearly elucidates this when he suggests that "people, machinery, money, images and ideas now follow increasingly nonisomorphic paths..." (2005, p. 37). To the point where global flows have created fundamental disjunctures that require new ways of reasoning and theorising. Nevzat Soguk ties the deterritorialising aspects of these global flows to the narrative of statism.

Deterritorialising mobility of peoples, ideas, and images plays against the laborious moves of statism to project an image of the world divided along territorially discontinuous (separated) sovereign spaces, each supposedly with homogenous cultures and impervious essences (Soguk, 1996, p. 285).

These positions suggest that forms of deterritorialisation are a condition of the modern world (Appadurai, 2005, p. 37). They are forces that must be contended with, but while they may challenge the spatial narrative of statism they do not necessarily suggest the demise of the state altogether. Instead, these arguments take the view of a transformation of the spatial reality, where elements of global processes force us to rethink the space in deeper, more nuanced terms. This is where the complexities of this debate are particularly relevant to displaced Karen. While the Karen challenge the homogeneity of territorialised sovereign spaces, they are not suggesting that a deterritorialised world sans the nation-state replace it. On the other hand, they do utilise the deterritorialising mobility of ideas, images, trade, money and machinery as a resource and as a means to construct an alternative representation of the space. The principal position of territory is

therefore neither a given nor an aberration, but rather constantly evaluated for political purpose, including adopting elements that can be seen as both resistant and accommodating of various practices of the territorial state. In an interview with the Guardian newspaper, social scientist Saskia Sassen suggests a way of approaching this dynamic, also framed in terms of a nation-state in transformation rather than decline.

I see, rather, a multiplication of what is beginning to happen today: the formation of partial, often very specialised, assemblages of bits and pieces of territory, of authority, of rights, that used to be lodged in national states. Some of these assemblages will be private, some public, some will continue to inhabit national spaces but be actually denationalised, others will be global (Sassen, 2006a).

Sassen expands on this point in other parts of her work, articulating a form of disaggregation of the unity of the nation-state, leading to elements of denationalisation, renationalisation and the formation of novel global entities, but with the nation-state remaining the normative reference point (Sassen, 2006b). This argument of Sassen's poses one way of accounting for the particular dynamic between global processes and territoriality that is occurring in the Thai-Burma borderlands. This dynamic consists of the coexistence of a nationalisation of Karen identity and a denationalisation of cultural systems and collective narratives; a deterritorialisation of information, ideas and images and a reterritorialisation of a Karen state inserted into the territorial exclusivity of the Burmese nation-state; and self-defined global formations such as environmental activism or non-state money lending systems.

Sassen's position points to the complexities and nuances of the relationships under discussion, and the risk of applying too casual an understanding to them. As a way of working through the somewhat 'messy' application of global processes in the Thai-Burma borderlands, I therefore propose that displaced Karen use various mechanisms of global processes (international networking, global and local solidarities, advocacy, information technologies) to support their claims for a political self and to retain their connection to culture and identity. This represents a deterritorialising of capital, information, ideas and images. At the same time it is a claim to territory (not deterritorialisation) that defines the nationalist Karen struggle, and the practices of territorial sovereignty that limit (not restrict) their movement across the international boundary and beyond the immediacy of the Thai-Burma border. Rather than the deterritorialisation of people, we are in fact seeing some instances of heightened prominence of territory and nationality and some instances of its decline. In this sense the nation-state and territorial authority remain key elements of the debate, not removed from it entirely. This dynamic represents a key component of the borderlands space and the larger thesis argument because it gets to the core of the

relationship between the nation-state, displaced Karen and the borderlands space. They are interconnected, sometimes in contestation and sometimes in conformity, but in either case they are in a state of dependency and tension.

As outlined above this brings me to the second point I want to make in this section, namely the impact this greater sense of global mobility has on Karen identity in the borderlands. Again, I want to draw attention to the somewhat uneasy relationship between territory and globalisation and the tensions and contradictions this brings to the complex identities that form. While the territorial boundary is often present in the practices of these global and mobile networks, it is not integral to their actual formation. Governments-in-exile are a striking example of assumed political authority with no territorial sovereignty. Such an environment allows for the construction of new homes and homelands that do not necessarily have a national territorial base. A sovereign territory of their own may be an aim, particularly for diaspora or exiled communities, but a homeland and a national identity can be formed and practiced without it. This absence of territory can motivate the mobile to invent a home “through memories of, and claims on, places that they can or will no longer corporeally inhabit” (Malkki, 1992, p. 24). Here Malkki is suggesting that the construction of home manifests itself in some sort of genealogical or metaphysical sense rather than the physical-ness of a discontinuous line. Benedict Anderson argues a similar sentiment by suggesting that through global processes a type of community can form with no shared territorial or physical presence needed at all.

It became conceivable to dwell on the Peruvian altiplano, on the pampas of Argentina, or by the harbours of ‘New England’, and yet feel connected to certain regions or communities, thousands of miles away, in England or the Iberian peninsula. One could be fully aware of sharing a language and a religious faith (to varying degrees), customs and traditions, without any great expectation of ever meeting one’s partners (Anderson, 1991, p. 188).

Such commentary by Malkki and Anderson suggest that identity can form without the physical presence of territory. Malkki in particular suggests that one can identify with people and practices in which you currently share no common territorial boundary, and maintain allegiances and identify with a homeland, while at the same time residing, but not necessarily assimilating, into a new country (Malkki, 1992). In essence, both Malkki and Anderson are suggesting that one can share in a community that has no great expectation of ever meeting face-to-face, yet which shares a common identity, culture and national narrative. In contrast to the early migration patterns mentioned at the beginning of this section, migrants and refugee communities, who are the main

proponents of contemporary population movements, are increasingly able to maintain the cultural ties they identify with despite entering new cultural zones (Malkki, 1992; Rosaldo, 1993).

This is particularly evident in the case of displaced Karen in the borderlands where we begin to see a familiar but slightly contradictory pattern emerging. Despite displacement to Thailand, the Karen maintain strong cultural ties to their Karen identity, and in many instances even a heightened connection to it; an internalisation of identity if you like (as I explore in Chapters Seven and Eight). At the same time this identity is undergoing transformations related to outward looking or external forces, partly because of exposure to ideas and influences associated with access to global networks and partly because of the shared experience of trauma and displacement which has framed the experiences of Karen in the borderlands (as I explore in Chapters Five and Six). Identity is therefore embedded in the idea of home (which is no longer physically inhabited but certainly part of a political imagining) as well as in the transformations occurring in the context of the borderlands. While these two things might seem to sit in tension with each other, for displaced Karen in the borderlands they are in fact co-existent. This is an important element of the borderlands space for it conveys a sense of the contested social relations that are present in how Karen construct and project their identity in the borderlands, a point I make more thoroughly in Chapter Eight.

Liisa Malkki conceptualises this phenomenon in a way that has relevance to the arguments made in this thesis. Malkki suggests border crossers are active agents in transforming the political and cultural systems they inhabit. Rather than the loss of identity and agency often associated with displacement, Malkki argues that territorial displacement effects a transformation in culture and identity consciousness (Malkki, 1995, p. 208), a view also adopted by Donnan & Wilson when they say:

Culture and identity, like class-consciousness and class relations, do not disappear among the people who make the crossing. They simply change: they change within their home communities because of the loss entailed in their going as well as within the new political and economic context in which they find themselves, and they change in the communities who are now host to the border crossers (1999).

The importance of Donnan and Wilson's position is that by arguing for a process of change or transformation, they acknowledge the interaction between the practices of the 'old' country with the influences of the 'new' community. This can be represented by the fact that while refugees in camps along the Thai-Burma border maintain a close geographic proximity to 'home' they are also subjected to legal and political regulation which limits assimilation into Thailand, if this were to be

considered. Both the 'old' and the 'new' play an important role in the transformation of the refugee experience.

For many displaced Karen in the Thai-Burma borderlands, identity is formed through a complex process of non-isomorphic projections that traverse fixed national boundaries. This is partially a result of their displacement outside of their national borders and partially a result of long-standing political disengagement with the politics of the nation-state. Global flows of information, trade and culture, characterised by their ability to transcend national boundaries are evident in the way the borderlands is constructed, but also in the way it operates. These global flows undoubtedly influence the way identity is formed and projected. The result is that identity formation in the borderlands defies "modernity's dominant spatial stories" (Soguk & Whitehall, 1999, p. 689) of a fixed, cohesive national identity. A national identity, by its very nature symbolic of those who belong and those who do not, will only ever tell the story of a proportion of the people who actually reside within the nation-state's boundaries, and it will almost always fail the needs of those who look at the borderlands from a different spatial perspective.

At this point it seems relevant to relate these three processes back to the chapter and larger thesis arguments. This chapter has drawn on a large body of social science theory in order to understand the nature of the Thai-Burma borderlands and the practices of displaced Karen who engage with the space. While these larger theoretical domains have been dealt with in a somewhat perfunctory manner in this chapter, their relevance is evident across the remaining chapters of this thesis, where they are drawn through discussions on the intensification of state control over the borderlands (Chapter 4), patterns of activism (Chapter 5), networks of solidarity (Chapter 6) and processes of cultural recovery (Chapter 7).

Returning to this chapter, this large body of social science theory helps frame the impact the three processes of social organisation and transformation have had on the nature of the Thai-Burma borderlands. Each of these processes has contributed to the development of the Thai-Burma border as a geo-political marker, and together they encompass the key cultural and political interactions that inform an interchange that occurs across the national border. As such they develop the main thesis argument by developing the historical and theoretical contexts in which the borderlands space can be understood, and by outlining the type and nature of the social relations that characterise that space. In particular, the advent of mapping introduced our current understanding of the body politic and developed the concept of a national identity based on allegiances to a bounded territory. It set up the modern day framework for how displaced Karen in the borderlands would be identified. The rise of the nation-state as a key form of political authority introduced a key modern spatial unit, the national territorial domain, and closely aligned a nation's

borders to the construction of a national identity. This established the nation-state as a form of political organisation and identity that sits in tension with the key modes of social practice of displaced Karen. The greater global mobility of people, culture, technology and ideas constitute a form of interchange that occurs across national borders. This has brought a sense of fluidity and multiplicity to established borders and identities that stands in contrast to the nation-state's attempts at consolidation and control over that space.

While the dominance of these three processes of organisation can be related to particular historical transitions, they should not be viewed as following a linear or chronological order. Rather, in the context of this thesis they co-exist as contested, intersecting elements that help characterise the nature of the borderlands space. Together, they provide definition and context to some of the borderlands key spatial elements; its preoccupation with territoriality and mobility, rigidity and fluidity, connections and disjunctures, dominant and alternative discourses, and overarching all this, contestability. Together, these three processes of social organisation and transformation give historical context to the development of the borderlands space, developing the notion of space that constitutes an interchange that occurs across the national border but that is also informed by the national border.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that a key conceptual framework in which the Thai-Burma borderlands can be understood is through a spatial re-imagining that maps an interchange, based on contested social relations, that occurs across the national border. This interchange must be understood within the historical context in which the borderlands has developed, specifically through three significant processes of social organisation and transformation that have spatial impact on the nature of the space. These include the advent of mapping the body politic, the rise of the nation-state as a key form of political authority, and population and cultural movement across borders. While each makes a contribution to the development of the border as a geo-political marker, together, they encompass the key cultural and political interactions that make up the type of interchange that occurs across the borderlands space, particularly as that interchange relates to the operations of the nation-state and the practices of displaced Karen.

This concept of the borderlands is important to the main thesis argument because it provides a theoretical and historical framework for the social construction of the borderlands space. This concept of 'borderlands' as it is applied across this thesis, is an attempt to better clarify the nature of the relationship between the nation-state and displaced Karen, and the political space both, in their differing ways, attempt to narrate. This forms a key conceptual understanding of the

borderlands and allows me to talk about the space as it relates to modes of social practice and identity, two key themes that are developed over the later parts of the thesis, and which form the central components of my main thesis argument.

Together, Chapters Three and Four develop the underpinning ideas of the borderlands space. This chapter has developed the concept of the Thai-Burma borderlands in relation to larger historical and theoretical developments of borders and borderlands. Chapter Four will develop this conceptual framework further by applying it to the modern configuration of the Thai-Burma borderlands; to establish the contemporary context of the borderlands as it relates to an intensification of control by the nation-state. This spatial configuration of the modern territorial domain has seen greater penetration into the borderlands by both the Thai and Burmese nation-states, and consequently an intensification of the political nature of the borderlands. This consolidates the border as an expression of the modern nation-state apparatus, representing a very different spatial treatment of the borderlands to that of displaced Karen.

CHAPTER 4

FROM 'BUFFER ZONE' TO FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE

THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF THE THAI-BURMA BORDERLANDS

*The River Moei is no more than 10 metres wide under the bridge.
You could wade it. Many people do. On one side is Myawaddy, the other side Mae Sot.
One side Burma, the other Thailand. Such difference is divided by only a small stretch of water.
Once you've crossed the water and before you reach the official Thai border,
There is a vast piece of land, no-man's land.
There was once talk of building a casino on it but for the most part it remains overgrown: dirt and high grass.
In this no-man's land is a group of people from Burma. They live under the bridge on bamboo-woven mats.
They have no roof covering save for the under carriage of the bridge, 25 metres above them.
They look as if they are ready to move, to run, at the slightest hint of a soldier. From either side.
Three bridge pillions separate them from a lone Burmese soldier
He sits under the bridge on a deck chair, his rifle propped by his side.
I wonder at the position these Burmese have placed themselves in.
They are closer to Thailand than they are to Burma.
They have wedged themselves against a pillion, blocking themselves from the soldiers view and his gun.
He must know they're there. They certainly know he is there.
They live in no-man's land. They have no country, no papers.
They live on the periphery; hope and a future in their sight yet so far from reach.
They could lean across and touch Thailand but they cannot go there freely.
To go back they must face the soldier's gun.
On their left is the checkpoint barring them from Thailand,
On their right a machine gun barring them from Burma.
Authors field notes, 2 October 2005*

The Thai-Burma border is over 2,400 kilometres long. It has, since demarcation of the modern border in 1868, been an internationally recognised, geographically mapped boundary.²⁷ Yet large tracts of this boundary remain indistinguishable to those on the ground; vast stretches of mountainous terrain and variegated waters blur the boundary of one country from the other. A history of relatively free movement and, at times the porous nature of the border, typify the characteristically pragmatic, non-institutionalised approach to this international boundary by many of the Karen, Burmese and Thai who engage with it on a day-to-day basis. This has begun to change in recent decades. A series of events beginning in the early 1980s has had a significant impact upon the ways in which those on the ground engage with the border. Over this period, operations undertaken by the two nation-state's abutting the border were increasingly restrictive, with efforts to control movement and trade as well as curtail political activism. The increased interest of both the Thai and Burmese states in how the border operated brought with it a

²⁷ While officially demarcated in 1868 it should be noted that the modern demarcation of the border is a result of agreements undertaken between the governments of Siam and Great Britain over a period of decades in the late 18th Century. As such, there has been no comprehensive, formal border demarcation between the governments of Burma and Thailand, leading some researchers to suggest that this has led to the continuing 'flashpoints' between the two countries over border demarcation, particularly in areas around the Three Pagodas Pass (M. Smith, 1999).

corresponding political weight which was instrumental in the form of politicisation that occurred along the border since the early 1980s.

This chapter further develops the theoretical framework laid out in the previous chapter by applying it to the modern configuration of the Thai-Burma borderlands. It examines the formation of the Thai-Burma border in relation to an intensification of control by the nation-state. It argues that the increased penetration of both the Burmese and Thai nation-state's to consolidate control over the border has intensified the political nature of the borderlands space. This can be characterised as an uneven process of increased militarisation on the Burmese side of the border and increased regulation on the Thai side. This penetration into the space is based on both self-serving motivations and, in this case, a response to the perceived political instability and threat to nation-state authority that comes from the arrival of vast numbers of refugees.

To make this argument, the chapter is structured in the following way. It first looks at the changing political nature of the borderlands through a number of significant events and policy shifts that provide contemporary context to the argument that the border is an expression of the nation-state's political authority and control. The first of these events was the arrival of significant numbers of Karen refugees to the border in 1984, seeking a place of refuge from Burma's internal conflict. This was the catalyst for a heightened political attention that came to be focused on the border. This influx of refugees was followed by a series of events that further intensified the political nature of the borderlands. These include the re-emergence of the Burmese state from 27 years of political and economic isolation, the growing bilateral relationship between the Thai and Burmese governments, and the deteriorating security situation in the borderlands. Finally, this chapter also examines how the humanitarian aid apparatus has become entrenched in the political structure of the borderlands, bringing a further complexity to the political dynamic that characterises the space.

Building upon the historical processes discussed in Chapter Three, in particular mapping the body politic and the rise of the nation-state as a key form of political authority, this chapter develops a key contemporary influence over the nature of the borderlands space, namely a consolidation in the operations of the nation-state which are defined by a political authority attached to the modern territorial domain. These operations of the state attempt to create a homogenised space that is delineated by the border. In the coming chapters I argue that these operations sit in tension with key modes of social practice of displaced Karen that tend to map an interchange that occurs across the nation-state border, and that this tension both defines the nature of the borderlands space and the activism that occurs there. Laying out the borderlands framework in this way allows

me to develop two key themes later in the thesis, namely how modes of social practice and identity relate to the borderlands space.

REFUGE

The arrival of significant numbers of refugees to the Thai-Burma border in the early 1980s significantly changed the political nature of the borderlands. This is shown by a shift in border politics, moving away from fairly localised systems of authority in dealing with earlier, sporadic refugee arrivals, towards a more formal refugee policy that became entrenched in the operations of the nation-state. This shift is mirrored in the initial Thai Government responses to the first refugee arrivals compared to the political position that has come to define the current institutional policy towards refugee populations. Although quickly and heavily politicised, the border began, at least in the context of contemporary Karen engagement with it, as a place of refuge.

In January 1984 the Thai-Burma border took on particular significance to Karen living in the mountainous regions on the Burmese side of the border. To cross this international border meant relief from Burmese military attacks on their villages. In the many interviews conducted as part of this research few spoke of crossing the international border in terms of national jurisdictions. Some participants had crossed the border more than twenty years before, others less than a year, but most told the same story: they were driven by fear, and the hope of safety and refuge. That these things resided across an international boundary in Thailand were consequently significant, but incidental to their flight. For many, the aim was not to seek asylum in a third country but rather to find relief from encroaching Burmese military attacks, short-term relief and then to return.

The arrival of displaced persons to the Thai border was not a sudden phenomenon. Evidence shows that smaller numbers of Karen had fled into Thailand following persecution prior to 1984, settling unofficially in Thai villages in the borderlands and often moving back and forth as fighting permitted.²⁸ At this time, the Karen were mostly accepted in to Thai communities with an informal hospitality and little disruption to their existing structures (Lang, 1999, p. 90), a process made easier by a history of trade relations, familial connections and similar economic conditions across the border regions. At that time the territory straddling the Thai-Burma border was politically

²⁸ In 1974 General Ne Win began his official 'Four Cuts Policy' (cutting off Karen soldiers from crucial links to food, finances, communication and recruits) in Karen State. This led to mass displacement of Karen villagers. In 1974 a group of 8,000 Karen crossed the Salween River to the Thai side of the border. Over the next four years some returned to the Burma side of the border, or back to their villages. It was a pattern repeated throughout Karen State's northern districts (see (BERG, 1998, p. 27). One participant in this research, Loo Ne, also talked of a group of refugees fleeing Nyuanglebin District in 1976 because of a Burmese military offensive and settling in a Karen village on the Thai side of the border (Loo Ne, Interview, 2007).

remote from Bangkok and the Thai Government showed limited interest in the movement of displaced populations that was occurring there.

However, the dry season offensives of 1983-84 were distinct in their intensity, requiring new more attentive responses from the Thai Government. The Burmese military attacks on areas of Pa'an District, adjacent to the Thai border, were an attempt to take control of territory dominated by the KNU and consolidate a permanent presence for the Burmese military along the Thai-Burma border. As a result of these attacks about 10,000 Karen fled across the border just north of Mae Sot in late January. The sheer size of refugee numbers looking for relief in Thai communities forced the Thai Government to respond. Thailand's Ministry of the Interior (MOI) initially asked the Coordinating Committee for Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT), an umbrella group already working with Indochina refugees on Thailand's northern border, to provide basic support to the Karen refugees. Reports at the time suggested the Thai Government wanted to avoid the international attention which would follow a call for assistance from the UNHCR. They were eager to deter any pull factor that would bring more refugees to the border, or set up system that would encourage those already along the border to stay. The Thai Government was also reluctant to get involved in another large-scale assistance program similar to the one they had encountered with the Indochinese refugees (BERG, 1998, p. 52; Dunford, 1993, p. 10). As a result initial support was provided by a small group of NGOs, called the Burmese Border Consortium (BBC)²⁹ which operated under CCSDPT.

Accounts of this time suggest that these newly arrived Karen refugees were quick to organise themselves in a pro-active and self-reliant manner (BBC, 2004; Lang, 1999). Many Karen were initially accommodated in local monasteries or rented houses in villages around Mae Sot. Most expressed the view that the fighting would be short-lived and they would soon be able to return home. In one instance, a Karen person I interviewed told me that Karen villager's negotiated with Thai authorities to secure a piece of land at Huay Kaloke, just north of Mae Sot, on which they could build temporary shelters. In an interview, he described his early days on the border.

When I first arrived to the border we stayed in the *wat* [temple] at Huay Kaloke. Then we moved to stay in the houses of Thai villagers, and later still we rented a house in Mae Sot. I think we stayed like this because most of us thought the fighting would end and we could return home. But then it dragged on and we needed a more permanent solution so we

²⁹ In 2004 BBC became a registered charity and changed its name to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC). The acronym BBC will be used when referring to the organisation pre-2004, on all other occasions it will be referred to as TBBC.

organised with the Thai people to provide some land for us at Huay Kaloke and that's when the refugee camp was set up (Saw Ba, interview, 9 December 2008).

By the time a small contingent of NGOs arrived on the border in March they were able to describe a "village-like" atmosphere, highly organised with rudimentary housing, schools and other structures, and an administration system already in place (Jack Dunford, personal communication, 18 December 2008). Interviewed for a BBC publication on twenty years of working along the border, Jack Dunford, a member of one of the first delegations to assess the border and later the director of TBBC recalls the logic behind their decision to support a coordinated approach to aid provision in the camps.

We had found something on the border that was quite different to other refugee situations we had seen, in which whole societies had been torn apart. Although the Karen had already been struggling for a long time, their communities had remained intact, and their own social and governing structures were still in place. It made sense to support and recognise the Karen Refugee Committee ... (BBC, 2004).

The Karen Refugee Committee administered the various camps while BBC initially committed to supporting fifty per cent of their rice needs (Jack Dunford, personal communication, 18 December 2008). At this stage Karen continued to plant rice crops back over the border in Burma to feed their families, while others worked for local Thai farmers to gain an income and supplement the food support they received from the BBC. The system required little intervention and minimal support in the beginning and the Karen were left to largely manage it themselves. Over the next four years the BBC continued to consolidate a refugee support system that had a coordinated approach based on self-reliance, a system generally perceived to be a successful one (BERG, 1998).

The system allowed the Karen to replicate communal and administrative structures not dissimilar to those they had practiced back home in Burma. This represents a relatively unique refugee situation for it extended the boundaries of Karen communities into Thailand by providing some continuity to home and cultural practice. It gave the Karen an opportunity to continue to practice their culture rather than lose it through assimilation into Thailand or becoming aid dependent on foreign NGOs. These issues of course became more complex as the conflict drew on but at the beginning at least it seemed easier for the Karen to continue aspects of their previous lives, particularly in terms of agrarian-based employment and cultural practices.

While this may seem like a situation that reinforced a level of political autonomy, this position should be viewed with some caution. The Karen experienced the trauma and disruption commensurate to any situation where forced displacement occurs. They were vulnerable to Thai

policy and dependent to some degree upon NGO assistance. However the small amount of political autonomy allowed them through the administration of the camps was enough to maintain, and for many enhance their commitment to a political resolution and return to their homeland.

By 1988 it became increasingly apparent that the conflict in Burma was not dissipating. The Burmese military continued their drive to occupy KNU territory, destroying Karen villages as they went. More and more refugees fled across the border into Thailand. By 1988 there were almost 20,000 refugees housed in the camps along the border (BERG, 1998, p. 52). In these early years the Thai authorities allowed the Karen to establish camps wherever they entered Thailand, so that in 1993 for example there were 31 refugee camps along the border housing people from the Karen, Karenni and Mon ethnic groups (Dunford, 1993). The border camps became a refuge from daily harassment, extortion, death and destruction. But the sheer size of the problem, seemingly without end, suggested that low profile assistance to refugees and their informal administration systems would not be able to continue in its present form.

While the initial arrival of refugees in 1984 was greeted with muted hospitality and a humanitarian response, the unravelling magnitude of the problem suggested the system would necessarily have to change. Burma's refugees were beginning to become an uncomfortable political uncertainty for the Thai Government and they were keen for the refugee problem to disappear. NGOs providing assistance to the camps saw the need for their services increasing rather than declining. Camp sizes and locations had multiplied, so to the number of humanitarian organisations providing services to the camps, putting pressure on capabilities to maintain the self-governing structures of the camps. The temporary place of refuge was starting to take on more fixed notion of permanency, at least for the indeterminable future. Underpinning all this was the continued flow of Karen villager's across the border and into the refugee camps in Thailand. There was also by the late 1980s, indications that the Thai Government would pursue a different political approach with their neighbour, as evidenced by a series of events which consolidated the penetration of both the Burmese and Thai nation-state's control over the border. It is to these events that the chapter now turns.

POLITICAL INTENSIFICATION OF THE BORDER

This chapter began with the premise that the early-1980s saw an intensification of political change in the Thai-Burma borderlands. While my focus is on events occurring since the early-1980s, it should be noted that the Thai-Burma borderlands has a fairly sustained, if mixed history of political activity over many decades, particularly in the period after independence. The 1960s and 1970s in particular saw the development of fairly formal political alliances in opposition to General Ne Win's

central military government.³⁰ Over the decades post-independence, the remote ethnic areas of the country attracted many other political and revolutionary parties willing to oppose the central military government, all with varying degrees of effectiveness and longevity.³¹ These alliances, and many of the groups that formed them, had their bases in the border areas adjacent to the Thai-Burma border, and for many, Thailand provided material and financial support for their ongoing activities (M. Smith, 1999).

There were however, certain elements missing from these earlier periods that distinguish the post-1980 events I talk about in this chapter. Most significant is the Thai Government's lack of a formal refugee approach pre-1984 and Burma's political and economic isolation under Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) – a position that was largely sustained until 1988. As will be discussed over this chapter, the emergence of these and other events post-1984, gave the contemporary period which is the focus of this chapter, its own unique political qualities in the history of the borderlands.

While the Thai-Burma border has been demarcated for some time, the early-1980s saw heightened political attention given to securing it for nation-state operations. This changing political dynamic saw the entrenchment of state policies on both sides of the border; in Burma manifesting in heavy militarisation aimed at controlling the border areas, and in Thailand through a tightened regulatory framework. While they differ in approach, both worked to exclude displaced Karen from the formal political structures on both sides of the border.

In this section I argue that the increased penetration of the state to consolidate control over the operations of the border can be attributed to a number of shifts in the political landscape: the emergence of the Burmese state from 27 years of political and economic isolation; growing bilateral relations between Thailand and Burma; deteriorating security along the border, including the depreciation of KNU military power, replaced by a far more powerful *Tatmadaw*; and a larger humanitarian aid apparatus aimed at servicing refugee needs. Each of these points will be considered in turn, but together they establish how the changing political nature of the borderlands space has intensified the conditions conducive to a tension between the operations of

³⁰Some examples of these political alliances include: a number of ethnic nationality groups allying themselves with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) to form the National Democratic United Front (NDUF) (between 1959-1975) and in 1970 the National United Liberation Front (NULF) was formed between former Prime Minister U Nu's insurgent Parliamentary Democracy Party and the ethnic nationality groups of the KNU, the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and the Chin Democracy Party (CDP). These ethnic nationality groups broke away from the NULF in 1976 and formed the National Democratic Front (NDF), an alliance that is still in existence today.

³¹ For an extensive discussion of these ethnic political alliances and revolutionary parties see Martin Smith's 'Burma: insurgency and the politics of ethnicity' (1999).

the state and key modes of social practice of displaced Karen. Ultimately, this tension helps develop the conditions for the projection of a Karen identity in the borderlands.

Re-emergence of the Burmese state

As Burma's ethnic conflict drew on and more and more refugees arrived on the Thai-Burma border, the political nature of the borderlands began to change. The borderlands became more than just a place of refuge. It was increasingly a site of political struggle, defined by events both inside Burma and along the border that saw an increased penetration of the state into the borderlands space. The first significant events that instigated this change occurred in 1988 and 1989. Although they originated far from the border, taking place in Burma's capital and larger towns, these events were to have a significant impact upon the practices that occurred in the borderlands.

Up until 1988 Burma had conducted an isolationist approach, both politically and economically, under Ne Win's 'Burmese Way to Socialism'. Ne Win's BSPP was in power in Burma for 27 years, a time characterised by the country's mostly sealed, enigmatic status which was often perceived as decaying and romantic yet prone to bouts of brutality and suppression. This period of isolation and political mismanagement took the country from one of South East Asia's wealthiest to its poorest. As a result and in protest against soaring prices and goods shortages, much of 1988 was dogged by protests in the capital and other provincial towns, culminating in what is now known as the '88 uprising' on the 8 August 1988. The government response was draconian and brutal. The death toll on August 8 alone is commonly estimated at between 2,000 to 3,000 (Fink, 2009, p. 56; Lintner, 1994, p. 344; M. Smith, 1999, p. 4) and across the entire year more than 10,000 (M. Smith, 1999, p. 16).³² Videos and images of these events were smuggled out of the country, many survivors fled to the Thai-Burma border where they told their stories to the media. For the first time in more than thirty years the international community caught a glimpse of what was happening inside this isolated country.

Under this cloud of civil protest, Ne Win surprised many in July 1988 by resigning and calling for a multi-party political system and elections to be held. The initial response from the BSPP was to reject Ne Win's proposal. But after more than a year of political unrest elections did eventually take place in May 1990. The result was spectacularly under-estimated by the military with more than 80 per cent of the vote going to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party. Despite the outcome of the vote, it immediately became apparent that the Burmese

³² Figures of the death toll for the uprising in 1988 are contentious and variable. The figures I use here are widely cited by authors with extensive research reputations for their work on Burma. But as far as I know an accurate figure have never been able to be verified. The Burmese military government states the death toll was less than 100; this is widely considered a gross underestimation.

generals were not about to relinquish power. In the midst of this instability the military made another surprising move, hastily establishing a new era of 'open door' economic policy. This strategy attracted the attention of Burma's neighbours, particularly Thailand, who was quick to take advantage of this new position. The Thai army commander-in-chief at the time, General Chavalit, visited Burma where he purchased 20 logging concessions from the Burmese generals, 16 of which were in insurgent-held areas on the Burmese side of the Thai-Burma border (Lang, 1999). Thailand itself had banned logging in May 1989 after years of indiscriminate destruction of forests had depleted their own resources. It was the beginning of a new era for the Burmese generals who were attracted to the potential of a capitalist economy. Coupled with Thai Prime Minister, Chatichai Choonhavan's foreign policy directive for "politics [to] take second place to economics", ³³ it seemed an 'open door' economy was instrumental to Burma's re-emergence on the global stage.

The logging concessions negotiated by General Chavalit and the Burmese generals were the beginning of a series of economic agreements that were to have a significant impact upon Burma's border areas. The Burmese Army moved into areas traditionally under the control of the KNU under the pretext of preparing for and protecting the logging agreements made with Thailand. ³⁴ Other global companies and governments also entered into economic development agreements with the Burmese military. Most notable was the Unocal-TOTAL deal to extract gas from the Andaman Sea, including the development of a pipeline which runs for 700 kilometres from Nat E Tong in Thailand to Daminseik on the Tenasserim coast in Burma, and which attracted international condemnation for its displacement of thousands of Karen villager's and the use of forced labour in its construction. ³⁵ Almost in defiance of the reports of human rights abuses attached to these economic projects, international investment in Burma rose exponentially. It was a largely untapped market with little regulation. The benefits for the Burmese military were significant: the agreements gave them credibility and legitimacy in the international arena, it also

³³ Chatichai made the comment in an address to the Foreign Correspondents Club in Bangkok on 22 December 1988, as reported by Marc Innes-Brown and Mark J. Valencia (1993).

³⁴ 'Burmese pound Karen bases to clear log routes' (1989, May 8). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

³⁵ Reports at the time detailed the pipeline's construction, including the use of forced labour, human rights abuses and the destruction of local villages and livelihoods. These reports were highly attentive to the stories of villager's who were directly impacted by the pipelines construction. See: (Earthrights International, 1996) and (Earthrights International, 2000). In 2004 Unocal finally settled with 14 villagers who had taken them to court based on a case that Unocal should be held accountable for the human rights violations that occurred during the construction of the gas pipeline. The settlement was undisclosed but in a joint statement Unocal and Earthrights International (who represented the plaintiffs) stated it would "compensate plaintiffs and provide funds enabling plaintiffs and their representatives to develop programs to improve living conditions, health care and education and protect the rights of people from the pipeline region." See Girion, L. (2004, December 14). 'Unocal to settle rights claims'. *LA Times*, p.A1.

provided much needed financial resources which were funnelled into the military, generally considered the second largest Army in Southeast Asia (Selth, 2010), rather than developing the services and needs of the country (Burma is now listed as one of the United Nation's Least Developed Countries).

The economic development of the border area continued throughout the 1990s, decimating the KNU's economic control and significantly depleting their control over territory. For decades the KNU had controlled the border trade by controlling the territory and resources that sat adjacent to the border. In 1983 the KNU estimated income of 500 million kyat [A\$69m] through their border trade posts (M. Smith, 1999, p. 283). While rice and cattle was traded across the border into Thailand, radios, watches and other manufactured goods went back across the border into Burma, all with a flat five per cent tax on them that went straight into KNU coffers (Bryant, 1997; M. Smith, 1999, p. 283). Further income came from timber mills and tin mines, jointly run with Thai businessmen. Up until the mid-1990s the KNU was able to fund a large proportion of their armed insurgency from these profits. However, a combination of the logging concessions handed to Thailand in 1989 and the KNU's continued deforestation for their own revenue purposes soon depleted much of this valuable resource. The KNU's revenue was further decimated in 1998 when the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge was opened between Myawaddy in Burma and Mae Sot in Thailand, effectively moving trade between the two countries to this official checkpoint while at the same time weakening the unofficial trading posts under the operation of the KNU.

After almost three decades of economic and political isolation Burma emerged to embrace the financial benefits of economic engagement, quickly making agreements with international companies to develop gas, oil and teak reserves. In a tactical manoeuvre the Burmese military had asserted their right to negotiate economic investment within their sovereign borders with two potential advantages to them. Firstly, they strategically positioned themselves to gain financially from foreign investment, and secondly they were able to move in and significantly deplete the ethnic insurgencies that had traditionally controlled the border areas rich with natural resources. This also led to the Burmese military's growing interest and presence in the border area adjacent to Thailand. The Burmese military gained further international standing as they began to develop a political relationship with their neighbour, Thailand. This growing inter-state relationship was to have a significant impact upon Thailand's long-standing but capricious relationship with the Karen, largely weakening the status of the Karen and re-orientating the political dynamic in the borderlands.

Growing inter-state relations

The realities around the longevity of the conflict and the continued presence of refugees in Thailand became a significant pressure on Thai Government responses. The early informal hospitality soon lost its lustre. This was due to a number of changes in Thai-Burmese relations, namely the increasing pressure Karen refugees were placing on Thailand's own under-resourced services, the changing economic alliances from local to government level, and perhaps most significantly, the growing bilateral cooperation between the Burmese and Thai governments. The development of this diplomatic relationship, while often volatile, had a significant impact on the intensification of the political nature of the borderlands because it increasingly prioritised state engagement over what had previously been more autonomous local allegiances. This allowed the state to consolidate control over the operations of the border and at the same time attempt to weaken the more localised relationships developed with ethnic groups like the Karen.

In many ways, as Burma negotiated its tumultuous independence years, characterised by ethnic unrest and political instability, Thailand developed a relationship with the immediately adjacent ethnic border areas that was an extension of the historical distrust and animosity between Thailand and Burma.³⁶ Thailand pursued a policy that was an uneasy balance between practical, local level support of the ethnic groups with whom they shared a border and a more tentative, at least post-1988, official relationship with the Burmese generals. This ambiguous position led anthropologist Gehan Wijeyewardene to observe: "Until very recently one could say that though the Thai have not satisfied any of the parties concerned, they had not unduly offended them either" (Wijeyewardene, 2002).

However there are a number of aspects of contemporary border politics which contributed to a clear shift in Thai border policy, particularly in terms of Thailand's treatment of Burma's ethnic groups along its border. By the late-1980s Thailand was clearly re-ordering border politics to favour stronger relations with the Burmese generals, a position that was obviously detrimental to its traditional relations with localised minority ethnic groups. One indication was the mounting pressure placed on Thailand to curb the activities of minority ethnic insurgent groups and political activists basing themselves in the borderlands. As a result of the constructive engagement policy Thailand was pursuing with the Burmese generals the pressure was immense. Burma has consistently declared Thailand should not allow its territory to be used by ethnic insurgencies as a

³⁶ Elements of this historical distrust are touched on in this chapter and in Chapter Three. Some contemporary examples of this distrust include the buffer zone policy and periodic closure of border checkpoints between the two countries, the most recent of which was the closure of the Mae Sot-Myawaddy Friendship Bridge between July 2010 and December 2011. Historical examples include a litany of invasions by both sides, for example the Burmese conquest of Ayuttayah in 1767.

springboard to attack its neighbours.³⁷ Thailand has at least paid lip service to these demands by making declarations around the prioritisation of their friendship with Burma.

These calls were largely a result of the influx of 15,000 Burmese students to the borderlands, most having fled Burma's major cities after the '88' uprising. Many of these students found protection in the camps of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), consequently forming their own organisation, the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), and later basing political-organisations-in-exile in Mae Sot and other towns in the borderlands. While the Karen resistance movement remained a predominant force in the borderlands, post-1990 saw even further political expansion as the newly-elected and subsequently harassed members of parliament, particularly from the NLD, also fled to the borderlands and established alternative political movements and resistance groups. As well, united ethnic nationalities groups based themselves there and special interest groups around law, trade, political prisoners and the environment were established, some replicating their organisations from inside Burma, others starting from scratch. Most significant of this time was that the democratic goals of the students and exiled parliamentarians came into direct contact with the political claims of the ethnic groups.

In effect, over a period of less than a decade, the borderlands saw the arrival of repeated waves of political agents. The students, exiled parliamentarians, ethnic insurgents and refugees may all have differing experiences and goals, but in the borderlands they found the necessary space to articulate an alternative political voice and find an audience for their messages. Their presence contributed to a political re-shaping of the borderlands. The space became an intensified political environment, and this provided opportunities for displaced Karen to develop their own activism and strengthen their own political voice and identity. The actions of these political groups brought greater international attention to the political and humanitarian crisis along the border, as well as providing skills to strengthen the political engagement of those involved in the struggle.

However, Thailand was under increasing pressure from the Burmese military to curb the activities of these groups. Calls to stop the ethnic insurgents entering Thailand have led at various junctures to Thailand undertaking repatriations, imprisonment and intimidation of Karen, Burmese and other

³⁷Burmese Prime Minister U Sein Win told the nonaligned summit in 1976 that neighbouring countries should "faithfully undertake not to provide one's territory as a spring board of attack on its neighbours both covert and overt" (Moscotti, 1978).

ethnic groups residing on the Thai side of the border.³⁸ Under pressure from the Burmese Government, the Thai Government essentially affirmed its sovereign authority over the Karen by restricting their presence in Thailand. However, despite this policy shift Thailand often displays a lingering nostalgia for their relationship with the Karen and at various times has employed a flexible application of the policy on the ground. Their treatment of the Karen is rarely consistent. At times it suits the Thai authorities to allow the Karen to move freely and act as a buffer to the ongoing distrust between Thailand and the Burma, or to negotiate development opportunities. At other times it suits them to treat the Karen as pariahs and to enforce restrictive conditions upon their presence in Thailand. These are indications of the complexity of Thai-Burma borderlands actors and their relationships; loyalties can be transient, relationships continue to evolve, political allegiances are often based on best interests, and the border operates through a diverse mix of economic, political and military input. It is these types of scenarios that indicate the tensions that can arise when the operations of the nation-state that apply a more hardened and homogenised spatiality to the borderlands, intersect with the social relations of a range of agents that pursue a more fluid and contested engagement with the borderlands space.

Another indication of a changing border politics was Thailand's removal of the 'buffer zone' policy. Under this policy Thailand had maintained a relationship with the Karen as they provided cross-border intelligence on Burmese politics and defended the Thai border against Burmese military attacks and communist crossovers. This was particularly evident at the height of communist insurgencies in the 1970s and 1980s when Western government's opposed the expansion of communism into some developing countries. From the mid-1970s the KNU strategically positioned themselves as an anti-communist group.³⁹ The Karen were also a convenient black market trading partner in arms, teak and other natural resources which dominate the border area, offering Thailand one of the only ways to access these natural resources during Burma's period of economic isolation.

³⁸For example, in 1997 the Thai Army's 9th Division was accused of preventing refugees from entering Thailand and in other cases pushing them back into Burma, claiming there was no fighting. After a number of such refolements and accusations of harsh treatment in the refugee camps, concerned embassies set up a roving border team to report on conditions for Karen along the border (BERG, 1998). A further example occurred in 2002 with reports of the forcible repatriation of 31 Burmese (comprising student activists and exiled members of the NLD) via the checkpoint at Sangklaburi, see 'Officials send back activists held at border'. (2002, August 23). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

³⁹ This was a significant shift in KNU policy. For most of the 1960s and 1970s there had been increasing tension between two of the KNUs most prominent leaders, Mahn Ba Zan who followed a socialist policy based on Marxist objectives and Bo Mya who pursued a capitalist nationalist agenda. In the end Mahn Ba Zan was placed on a banning order by the Thai Army for his "left wing sympathies", seriously restricting his movement in Thailand and eventually forcing him to resign as KNU President. Bo Mya became the new KNU President and was quick to reinforce the KNUs position as a guard to prevent links between communist movements in Burma and Thailand (M. Smith, 1999).

There is some debate about when this buffer policy first emerged. Burma analyst Bertil Lintner traces it back to a relatively inconsequential event in 1953 when a Burmese military aircraft bombed a Thai village, mistaking it for a KMT base (Lintner, 1992). As a result tacit negotiations between senior Thai officials saw the beginning of this unofficial 'buffer' agreement as a means to protect themselves against their unwieldy Burmese neighbour. By the 1990s the policy had largely run its course, mostly because communist insurgencies were no longer deemed a threat to Thailand and the ethnic insurgencies had lost much of their military power making them less effective as a buffer and therefore protector of Thai soil. Finally, in a 2002 radio address, the Thai Prime Minister at the time, Thaksin Shinawatra became the first Thai leader to acknowledge such a policy had existed when he officially announced that Thailand would stop fostering the buffer zone made up of ethnic groups along the border.⁴⁰ He quickly denied making the statement and was accused of damaging the already fragile relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, it was a clear indication that Thailand was turning its support from the ethnic insurgent groups along the border so as it could foster a stronger relationship with Burma's central governing power.

The growing bilateral relationship between the Burmese and Thai governments is one of the most significant elements in the border's changing political dynamic. Despite the often temperamental state of this relationship, the informal, long-standing relationships between the Thai authorities and ethnic minority groups were seriously weakened by this change in policy. This posed a challenge for ethnic minorities living in Thailand. It saw greater restrictions placed on political groups and local NGOs who suddenly found their presence in Thailand was more ambiguous and less welcoming. This had ramifications on the ability of these groups to conduct their activities. It also meant the Thai Government was more likely to make economic agreements with the Burmese generals rather than the ethnic minority groups, reducing income generation opportunities and therefore much needed funding, and depleting the power of the insurgencies.

A border by its very nature is a site of political power (Donnan & Wilson, 1999), but these events of the late-1980s saw renewed political interest from the nation-state's that shared its border. This penetration into the border, by both the Thai and Burmese state's, offers some insight into how much the political dynamics of the border could and would change as a result of this burgeoning bilateral relationship. The border was increasingly being used as a political tool by both governments, complicating its position as a place of refuge for displaced Karen.

⁴⁰See 'Buffer state policy against Burma to end' (2002, June 9). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database; also (Kawhtoo, September 2005).

It is from these events and circumstances that we begin to see the extent of nation-state penetration into the borderlands and the establishment of a key contemporary framework for the borderlands space. A greater presence and interest by both nation-state's over the operations of the borderlands, brought a corresponding coercive regulation which was to impact the social practices of displaced Karen and the way they engaged with the space, a point discussed further in the next chapter. But also importantly for the main thesis argument, these events help to develop the conditions from which the social practices and identity constructs of displaced Karen begin to emerge. As a key agent of the borderlands space, the operations of the nation-state form a key influence over the nature of those social relations.

Deteriorating security in the borderlands

There are a number of factors specifically related to the borderlands which also affect its political status; of particular significance to this thesis is the issue of security. The deteriorating security situation, particularly inside Burma, has changed the political nature of the borderlands through an increased militarisation on the Burma side of the border and increased regulation of the Thai side of the border.

In 1989 Burma's military spokesman, Colonel Aung Thein, in response to questions about negotiating with the ethnic insurgent forces inside Burma was quoted as saying, "We shall continue to fight them until they are eliminated".⁴¹ The ensuing decade shows the seriousness of this threat. From the mid-1990s onwards the Burmese military presence in Burma's ethnic border areas was highly visible and increasingly dominant. In a matter of five years, the Burmese military had become a real and dangerous presence in the border region, particularly to Karen villagers and displaced persons.

Such a change in status suggests the extent of political manoeuvring that was occurring at the time, but it also characterises a new phenomena in the borderlands. Prior to the offensives of the mid-1980s, Burma's conflict, with few exceptions,⁴² was mostly contained within its international boundaries. The increasing presence of the Burmese military in the previously KNU-dominated border areas was a sign of changing military power. The way it often spilled over the border into Thailand also meant that Thailand became increasingly, though reluctantly, embroiled in Burma's

⁴¹'Rangoon rejects offer for peace talks with rebels'. (1989, May 26). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

⁴² A number of declarations by Burmese generals in the seventies allude to the prevention of insurgents launching subversive attacks from neighbouring countries, including guidelines from MOI aimed at preventing "refugees from using Thai territory to stage hostile or subversive acts against their home countries and to maintain good relations between Thailand and neighbouring countries" (Moscotti, 1978, p. 87). Yet rarely did this fighting spill across the border to the same levels seen in the late eighties and early nineties.

ethnic conflicts, at times proving disadvantageous to Thailand's constructive engagement policy with the Burmese generals. For example, in May 2002 Burma closed its entire border with Thailand after military skirmishes between Burma's minority ethnic groups and Burmese soldiers spilled over into Thailand. Burma accused Thailand of supporting the Shan State Army, an armed ethnic group from Burma, who were fighting against the Burmese military. Burma called on Thailand to take a clear stance on their relationship with Burma's ethnic minority armed groups. The border remained closed for five months. The fallout included a serious breakdown in bilateral relations, millions of baht lost in trade and tourism, detention of soldiers and villagers who strayed across the border on both sides and the resurgence of decade old disputes over land. When the border finally reopened the Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai commented: "The Burmese government now understood Thailand's policy of non-interference in its neighbours' domestic affairs and bilateral relations were back to normal".⁴³

The Burmese Army's biggest military achievement however was the taking of the KNU Headquarters, Manerplaw, in 1995. This was an enormous physical and psychological blow to the Karen resistance movement. With the exception of small pockets of soldiers undertaking guerrilla tactics, the KNU was largely forced across the border into Thailand, losing large swathes of territory and any ability they may have had to protect Karen villagers. The extent of Burmese military power at this time meant that they were reportedly able to cross into Thailand and launch offensives against Karen military camps in 1989⁴⁴ and against the refugee camps between 1995 and 1998, burning down both Huay Kaloke and Don Pa Kiang camps.⁴⁵ Some reports suggested the attacks from Thai territory were with the aid of Thai authorities.⁴⁶ At the very least the Thai National Security Council chief, Gen Boonsak Kamheangridirong, accepted Thai authorities had been "inactive" and that "(security) should have been stronger, particularly in our intelligence gathering".⁴⁷

One Karen person interviewed for this thesis lived through the burning down of Huay Kaloke refugee camp and spoke of the despair he felt at the time when he realised that even in Thailand, their place of refuge they were not safe from the Burmese military. He spoke of how the Thai

⁴³'Surakiart is confident of reopening'. (2002, August 26). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

⁴⁴'Burmese pound Karen bases to clear log routes' (1989, May 8). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

⁴⁵ See: 'Two killed as Karens hit refugee camp'. (1998, March 12). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database, and 'Renegades exchanged for villagers – Locals say officials gave in too easily'. (1998, March 17). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

⁴⁶See: "UNHCR slams Burma over raid on refugee camp". (1998, March 13). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database, and 'Internationalization of Burma's ethnic conflict' (Lintner, 1991).

⁴⁷'NSC admits security lapse led to refugee camp attack'. (1998, March 21). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

military, tasked with protecting them, had failed to stop the attack (Nyi Nyi, interview, 19 October 2005). For many Karen who cross the border into Thailand there is an expectation of the security that is denied them inside Burma. But the security that has eluded them in Burma will often elude them in Thailand as well, though it has taken on a different, and on occasion perhaps more dangerous form. For in Thailand Karen refugees are denied the ability to choose and control forms of protection. Inside Burma they employ various resistance strategies to ensure their security, such as hiding food and household items for retrieval after Burmese military attacks, employing evasive techniques to get out of dangerous military demands such as portering and finding creative alternatives to resist human rights abuses by the military.⁴⁸ In Thailand they are completely reliant on others to provide their security, having been denied rights and choices in how they live and protect themselves.

At the same time, the very circumstances that were creating the refugee exodus not only continued, but were reaching ever greater proportions. Waves of refugees arriving in Thailand were almost always related to Burmese military offensives on the other side of the border. There was an influx of 10,000 refugees in 1995 after Burmese military offensives led to the capturing of the KNU Headquarters Manerplaw and the fall of another major base Kawmoorah. Most settled in the Mae La Oon and Mae Ra Ma Luang camps. In 1997 thousands of refugees arrived from the Mergui-Tavoy area. They were fleeing a combination of Burmese military offensives and large-scale international development projects such as the Yadana Gas Pipeline. A new 'temporary site' was established to house the refugees, called Tham Hin refugee camp, which after 15 years is only now being slowly dismantled by resettling the refugees in third countries. More recent is the arrival of more than 3,000 refugees as a result of military attacks upon the IDP camp, Ler Per Her⁴⁹ and surrounding villages.⁵⁰ Those arriving in the camps tell a range of devastating stories: from being forced to porter for Burmese military battalions, to increasing militarisation, crop and land destruction or confiscation, extrajudicial killings and torture, food shortages and starvation, and

⁴⁸Villagers inside Burma's conflict zones have employed various strategies, often evasive and almost always defensive, both for daily survival and as a form of resistance. These 'everyday forms of resistance' are significant indicators of agency, a proactive, creative and sometimes revolutionary way to subvert military and political power. It acknowledges the strategies of vulnerable populations to be active rather than passive in their marginalisation. For more on this concept of everyday resistance and agency see 'Weapons of the Weak' (J. C. Scott, 1985), 'Village Agency' (KHRG, 2008) and 'Burma: Displaced Karens. Like Water on the *Khu* Leaf' (Cusano, 2001).

⁴⁹Ler Per Her was an IDP camp situated on the Burmese bank of the Salween River. Many families and individuals at Ler Per Her had already been displaced from villages further inside Karen State. Refused entry to Thailand they had simply re-established themselves on the Burmese side of the banks of the Salween. In June 2009 a combination attack by the Burmese military and the DKBA forced most of Ler Per Her's inhabitants across the river into Thai communities at Mae U Su and Noh Bo, causing one of the largest refugee influxes of the last few years.

⁵⁰Refugee influxes as a result of Burmese military attacks on Ler Per Her were reported extensively. For example, see (Jagan, 2009) and (Yeni, 2009).

the culture of rape among military personnel. The Burmese Army's militarisation of its border areas directly contributes to refugee influxes and causes significant concerns for neighbouring Thailand who bear the brunt of this movement.

These security concerns aren't confined to the Burma side of the border. Reports of deaths of Burmese migrant workers were increasingly evident in Thai media in the 1990s and 2000s. These included 14 Karen found drowned in the Moei River in 2002,⁵¹ and 54 migrant workers found suffocated in an enclosed container truck that was transporting them to resort locations in Thailand's south.⁵² In both instances the deaths were reported as the deliberate actions of Thai employers or people smugglers. A number of reports from refugee camps include accusations of rape by Thai soldiers and security personnel. In many instances these rapes go unreported or are never investigated.⁵³ In 2002 two Thai school children were killed when gunmen opened fire on a school bus in Ratchaburi province. Some reports suggested the shooting was a result of a business dispute between the bus driver and the gunmen, others that it was the work of the KNLA or the Burmese Government.⁵⁴ In 2007 and 2008 even the KNU leadership was shown not to be safe in Thailand. KNU Secretary General Pado Mahn Shah was killed in his home in Mae Sot in February 2008, reportedly a revenge attack by members of the Karen Peace Council (KPC), an armed group who broke from the KNU in 2007. KPC lost one of its own leaders, Saw Ler Mu from a bomb placed under the hut he was sleeping in, reportedly the work of the KNU.⁵⁵ Rumours abounded after Mahn Shah's death of other targeted attacks on KNU leaders which caused many to go into hiding.⁵⁶ These attacks, while not a complete list, highlight the many concerns Karen and Burmese in the borderlands have for their security in Thailand.

It was the end of the 1990s that the chaos in Burma had its most significant impact upon security in Thailand and Burma-Thai relations. In October 1999 Burmese students stormed the Burmese embassy in Bangkok and took 40 hostages. In a perhaps surprising move the Thai Government gave the students a helicopter ride to the border in exchange for the release of the hostages. The Burmese Government was highly critical of how the Thai Government handled the situation, and this almost certainly had some impact on their response to the next hostage drama. In January

⁵¹'Karens found dead in river' (2002, February 9). *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=2204.

⁵²'Suffocation of 54 Burmese workers – No surprise'. (2008, April 11). *Inter Press Service*. Retrieved September 26, 2009, from <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=41955>.

⁵³ For example, see ("Raped by soldier, no investigation", 2002) and (Paung, 2006).

⁵⁴'Bus attack leaves many questions unanswered' (2002, June 5). *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=2332.

⁵⁵'Myanmar gains in leader's death'. (2008, February 16). *Online Asia Times*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.atimes.com/Southeast_Asia/JB16Ae03.html.

⁵⁶'KNU: More leaders targeted for assassination' (2008, February 16). *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=10428.

2000, members of the God's Army, a rebel group who broke from the KNU and perhaps best known for its child leaders, twin brothers Johnny Htoo and Luther, seized a hospital in Ratchaburi Province. This time the Thai Government was not so accommodating, the siege ended with nine of the dissidents killed.⁵⁷

The deteriorating security situation on both sides of the border highlights the complex nature of Burma's internal conflict and the limited control both nation-states have exhibited in resolving the conflict. The events mentioned in this section, and many others similar to them, show that the change in the political dynamics of the borderlands had done little to improve the safety of displaced Karen. In fact the greater level of political interest in the borderlands and its operations has brought many restrictions that reinforce the vulnerability of displaced Karen. Heavy militarisation on the Burma side of the border means displaced Karen continue to be subjected to Burmese Army attacks, death, arbitrary arrest, rape and torture. Greater regulation on the Thai side of the border means displaced Karen are increasingly prone to exploitation and, due to their illegal status, excluded from the services and entitlements that may help protect them. The actions of the nation-state on both sides of the border have only perpetuated this state of existence. Further contributing to this state is the heavy militarisation in Burma's border areas combined with the increasing bilateral relationship between Burma and Thailand (manifesting in greater restrictions on the Thai side of the border). Together, these policies seem to have increased the security concerns of displaced Karen living on both sides of the border. While this lack of security continues to manifest in refugee flows, cross-border skirmishes and exploitation, it seems political stability for all players in the borderlands will remain elusive. It is this state of ambiguity that reinforces many of the political characteristics of the borderlands that have emerged since the early-1980s, and define the nature of this nation-state political layer in the borderlands.

HUMANITARIAN AID

As the number of refugees along the border increased the refugee apparatus grew in its complexity, bringing a new humanitarian political dynamic to the border as well. This type of politicisation is entrenched through both an ideological framework of humanitarian assistance and a practical implementation of aid policies and activities. Over the last twenty years the humanitarian aid program has become entrenched in the political landscape of the borderlands. It provides a vital service, administering the needs and entitlements of highly vulnerable populations,

⁵⁷'Profile: God's Army'. (2000, January 24). *BBC News*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/616772.stm>.

but through its policies and activities it has also changed the long-term political dynamic of the borderlands by bringing a more regulated, policy-driven approach to the space.

Humanitarian aid in some form has existed along the Thai-Burma border since the arrival of the first official refugees in 1984. In these first years it was quite low key so that in 1988 only three NGOs were officially working along the border providing relief assistance to the Karen. These NGOs were the BBC, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR). In 1991 an agreement with Thailand's Ministry of the Interior (MOI) allowed these NGOs to increase their reach to also include two other persecuted ethnic groups who were arriving on the border, the Mon and Karenni. Eventually, other NGOs began working in an informal capacity until a further agreement with MOI was reached in 1994 which formalised their working arrangements and established a greater number of NGOs working along the border. This agreement also increased the aid mandate, allowing NGOs to provide food, clothing and medicine as well as education and sanitation.⁵⁸

Under the CCSDPT umbrella group there are currently seventeen NGOs working on the border on issues as diverse as education, healthcare, family planning, landmines, drug and alcohol recovery and child support. This does not include a myriad of other independent NGOs working across migrant, refugee, environmental and human rights documentation issues, to name but a few of the policy areas in which they are involved. As many of these NGOs work in an informal capacity (they are not registered with the Thai Government) there is limited consistent coordination or regulation of their work.

The 1991 and 1994 agreements had profound effects on the refugee population. On the one hand it increased the services available to refugees in the camps, particularly around education opportunities and healthcare services. But coupled with the deteriorating security situation mentioned above, it also introduced a more restrictive and regulated camp environment. The informal camp environments and the easy hospitality that first greeted the refugees of 1984 were gradually replaced with fenced enclosures and highly regulated conditions which, despite attempts by some NGOs to reduce aid dependency and maintain community management, weakened the

⁵⁸ NGOs sought formal permission from MOI to increase their assistance to all ethnic groups along the border after receiving requests from the Karenni Refugee Committee (in 1989) and the Mon National Relief Committee (in 1990) to assist refugees from their respective groups who were also arriving at the border. On 31 May 1991 MOI gave written approval for the provision of assistance to all ethnic groups under the same conditions they had been administering support to the Karen refugees. This was limited to food, clothing and medicine. By 1994 there was an increasing number of NGOs working along the border with tacit MOI approval but no formal mandate. An agreement with MOI in May 1994 allowed formal recognition and approval of the services and programs these NGOs were conducting. As part of this agreement MOI allowed an extension of current NGO service provision to include education and sanitation. (Jack Dunford, Personal communication, 18 December 2008); also see (TBBC, 2008).

autonomy and agency of the Karen who lived there. One participant in the research described the changes he saw in the refugee camps during this period.

In 1989 I left Huay Kaloke refugee camp and went to Manerplaw. When I came back in 1995 I noticed that many things in the camps had changed. The camp was fenced and Thai military police guarded the camps. Movement in and out of the camp had become seriously restricted. These conditions became even worse after Huay Kaloke was burnt down in 1997. I suppose there were more Thai police to protect us but as more Karen fled to the refugee camps I think the Thai authorities wanted greater control over the camps, they wanted to deter other Karen from entering Thailand (Saw Ba, interview, 9 December 2008).

Thai authorities introduced tighter controls in the camps; camp passes were enforced which restricted NGO and refugee movement in and out of the camps, and NGOs were now required to submit formal project proposals to MOI for approval as well as provide quarterly program reports to district authorities (Jack Dunford, personal communication, 18 Dec 2008). The increased number of NGOs brought with them an accompanying humanitarian apparatus. Staff, both local and international, an increased injection of capital, financial and material, international exposure to the plight of the Karen and Burma generally, and a bureaucracy which increased regulated service provision and introduced new political terminology to describe the border's humanitarian situation. This terminology has been both enabling and limiting in its application, a point I discuss in some detail in the next chapter.

The Thai-Burma borderlands humanitarian status is somewhat unusual for an international refugee situation. This is mostly due to the combination of Thai government and NGO roles in providing humanitarian assistance, rather than through UN bodies such as the UNHCR. In terms of minimising the effects of displacement and maintaining the autonomy of refugee populations this relative uniqueness has provided strengths to the program. CCSDPT for example have consistently called for the promotion of sustainable livelihood initiatives and income generation opportunities. They have long suggested moving humanitarian assistance from an approach based on relief to one based on development (CCSDPT & UNHCR, 2011). CCSDPT and UNHCR have put together a number of joint plans and strategies over the period 2005-2011⁵⁹ which would allow refugees increased self-reliance, including skills training and higher education opportunities, participation in

⁵⁹ Comprehensive plans were made in 2005 and 2006 and presented to the Thai Government and donors. These plans were updated in 2007 with the production of the 'UNHCR/CCSDPT Comprehensive Plan 2007/08' (CCSDPT & UNHCR, 2007). In 2009 UNHCR and CCSDPT put together a five year strategic plan and revised the plan in 2011 to produce the 'Strategic Framework For Durable Solutions' (2011). These plans are designed to provide a dialogue with the Thai Government around how to best implement a solutions-based, development approach to the protracted refugee situation along the border.

income generation projects and employment opportunities. These plans have been designed as a dialogue with the Thai Government, whose support will be a necessary component for the plans feasibility. But while the response from the Thai Government has been encouraging and small-scale projects have been introduced, particularly around developing livelihoods, there seems to be no substantive practical application of the larger strategic plan.

In the early years of refugee arrivals at the border, the lack of formal structure and regulation around receiving refugees certainly helped the Karen. Had UNHCR been involved in the refugee response from its earliest inception it is doubtful they would have been able to achieve this community management of the camps. However, given rising concerns around protection, particularly from the mid-1990s onwards, there is some value in the argument that UNHCR involvement might have ensured greater and earlier protection of refugee populations. UNHCR has both the capacity and mandate to protect vulnerable populations, where NGOs could not. Regardless, this absence of UNHCR involvement in those early years is certainly one of the more unusual aspects of the border's status for refugee asylum. UNHCR were absent from any meaningful participation in the day-to-day administration of the refugees along the Thai-Burma border for the first 14 years,⁶⁰ even now their involvement is mostly tasked with monitoring security and service provision, and administering the resettlement program. This absence is in part due to political manoeuvring by the Thai Government. UNHCR's core mandate to provide protection and assistance to refugee populations is reliant upon requests by both the host and/or sending country for UNHCR involvement, something both Burma and Thailand had been reluctant, particularly at the beginning, to provide.

Despite the best attempts of some NGO providers, refugees and displaced Karen continue to hold a mostly passive-recipient position in the humanitarian assistance apparatus. The way humanitarian aid is administered – governed by centralised ideologies and largely reliant on the directive of Thai Government policy – leaves little room for aid providers to explore long-term enabling and empowering programs. Aid providers are forced to negotiate an uneasy path between assuaging Thai Government concerns and fulfilling their own mandate to provide protection and support to refugees in the camps, and for some a moral obligation to support those outside the camps. Aid agencies have been in the borderlands for more than two decades and are

⁶⁰ While I state that UNHCR has not had a meaningful involvement in the day-to-day administration of the camps, that is not to say that UNHCR has not had a long-term presence along the border. While UNHCR has had an office in Bangkok since 1977, they took no formal role in the operations of the Thai-Burma border refugee situation until 1998. At this time, negotiations with the Thai Government allowed UNHCR a limited role in observing and monitoring refugee rights and protection, although the actual carrying out of these tasks continued to lie with the Thai Government and NGOs. UNHCR took on a more substantial role in 1999 when they tentatively established a resettlement program, although the administration of this program didn't take full effect until 2004.

adept at negotiating these government level requirements; however there has been only little success during that period to generate more autonomous and participatory programs that would provide displaced Karen with skills and employment opportunities outside the camps and empower their political voice to take control of their displacement experiences. The humanitarian aid apparatus may be entrenched in the political fabric of the borderlands but I argue over the coming chapter that in being so it has contributed to an apolitical passive-recipient picture of displaced Karen in the borderlands. Challenging this state of apolitical passivity underlies Karen practices of agency and activism, an argument that is developed in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this chapter I have examined the modern formation of the Thai-Burma borderlands in relation to an intensification of control by the nation-state. Taken together, the series of events discussed in this chapter represent what I argue has been the increased penetration of the Thai and Burmese state's into the operations of the borderlands, marking some of the most significant shifts in the borderlands political make-up. This state penetration has brought intensified attention, regulation and militarisation to the space. This includes a growing assertion by both Burma and Thailand of their state authority, and the move to use the border as an expression of political power through operations aimed to contain and control it. This is evidenced by Burma's emergence from political and economic isolation, the state's increased interest in investment and trade, and the growing bilateral cooperation between the Burmese and Thai governments. There has also been an intensified militarisation on Burma's side of the border in an attempt to gain control over ethnic insurgent areas, and this has led to increased levels of displacement, refugee influx and deteriorating security in the borderlands. All these elements contribute to a political intensification of the borderlands, where the state has both pursued self-serving operations and responded to the perceived threat to their political authority. This paints a picture of the borderlands that conforms to many of the nation-state principles and practices set out in the previous chapter.

In developing the historical and theoretical framework for the Thai-Burma borderlands in Chapter Three, and now applying this framework to the contemporary context of the Thai-Burma border, Chapters Three and Four develop the main thesis argument by establishing the underpinning ideas of the borderlands space. In establishing the nature of this space, I am then able to discuss its relationship to the modes of social practice and identity constructs of displaced Karen which are developed over the latter part of the thesis. This relationship is framed by a tension that occurs where the operations of the nation-state as discussed over the last two chapters, interact with key

modes of social practice of displaced Karen, practices which are examined in detail over Chapters Five, Six and Seven.

At this point in the argument however, it is necessary to reiterate the importance of the role of the state, because it is not only a fundamental component of the borderlands space I articulate across this thesis, but the activities of displaced Karen are intrinsically tied to these state operations. Over the coming chapters I juxtapose these state operations with key modes of social practice of displaced Karen. Through these practices, the Karen develop a more informal political power based on contested social relations, and this informal power sits in tension with the aspirations of state administration and governance.

BY THE SHADE OF A TREE

PATTERNS OF ACTIVISM

*Why do we Karen people have to suffer from our grandparents through to now.
I am not satisfied with this. We want to have our dignity.
If people ask us the population of the Karen we can tell them
but if people ask about our education we can only say 'we have none'.
Looking back I would say my life is like this.
I would go and stand in the shade of a tree near my home that I left in Burma.
This tree, the insects had eaten the inside of it out and worms gorged themselves on the leaves.
If I stay under this tree then the shit of the worms would drop on me
and eventually the branches will fall off and hit me.
So I have to leave the shade of this tree.
If I go back I want to stand in the shade of a tree
that provides coolness and it should be a tree that we plant ourselves.*
Moo, interview, 15 September 2005

Maw Bweh began 'visiting' Thailand in the 1960s. He now resides there permanently and instead, has become a frequent 'visitor' back to Burma. He can describe in great detail his experience of stepping back onto Karen territory in Burma. He uses words like happy and comfortable, and describes the easy hospitality of his people and the feeling of not having to be afraid of the Thai police. While there is certainly a measure of romanticism in the picture he paints, what is less evident in his story is the presence of the national boundary he has often crossed. Maw Bweh doesn't talk of checkpoints or passports, negotiating different languages and signs, or different customs, currencies or food. For Maw Bweh, the border represents a point where he either feels at home in his homeland or feels uncomfortable in a foreign land. He is identifying a difference that exists in his heart, rather than a difference determined by state regulations. This is his interpretation of the national border, and it indicates a very different view on what most would consider an established, institutionalised spatial identity.

This chapter argues that patterns of activism emerge from a tension between forms of institutional governance and a more informal political power that develops through the contested social relations of displaced Karen. The chapter is structured to first examine forms of governance in the borderlands through two broad authorities: the state (predominantly the Thai Government) and the humanitarian aid apparatus. These bodies exercise political authority over the Thai-Burma borderlands through two key operational elements of coercive regulation. Firstly, operations of governance establish a series of controls over space and movement that aim to contain and control refugee and displaced populations. Secondly, a system of administrative categorisation that works

to identify and regulate displaced populations is primarily used as a way to control the movement and rights of displaced Karen in the borderlands.

The second half of this chapter examines the patterns of activism that emerge when displaced Karen contest these particular forms of institutional governance because they do not adequately capture the nature of their political self. This contestation is evident in the way displaced Karen move illegally across the national boundary and the way they choose to live outside administrative containment lines. By employing a broad definition of activism based on the notion of a political being rather than an act of protest, I contend that through these patterns of activism, the Karen develop a political self that aims to advance their political claims and subvert institutional norms of political belonging by negotiating their own place in the political domain. In doing this the Karen develop an alternative political space that strengthens Karen political agency and challenges forms of governance in the borderlands. In structuring the chapter in this way, it allows me to first examine operations of coercive regulation over displaced persons lives in the borderlands and then map this against how it is lived by those displaced persons themselves.

This chapter is at a pivotal point in the thesis for it moves away from state operations in the Thai-Burma borderlands to examine displaced Karen responses to forms of governance and regulation. It does this by building upon the argument developed over the last two chapters, that the nation-state attempts to contain and control the borderlands space in terms of a political authority attached to the modern territorial border, to develop an argument that the Karen, in sharp distinction to this, create a borderlands space based on an interchange across the national border, which in this particular context, is framed by social relations associated with fluidity and contestability. While the activities inherent in this interchange occur largely on the Thai side of the border, as I show over the coming chapters, practices of activism, solidarity and identity are intrinsically linked to the relationships and activities that occur on the Burma side of the border. This constitutes a key conceptual framing of my use of the term 'borderlands'. In other words, to understand the actions of those on the Thai side of the border one must see them as inter-connection to what occurs on the Burma side of the border.

This interchange across the national border is framed by three key modes of social practice that are integral to the main thesis argument, in that they are evidence of a set of social relations that can be mapped across the borderlands domain and which critically inform the construction and projection of a Karen identity particular to the borderlands space. These modes of social practice can be characterised as patterns of activism (covered in this chapter), networks of solidarity (covered in Chapter Six) and processes of cultural recovery (covered in Chapter Seven).

While this chapter is largely preoccupied with patterns of activism as a mode of social practice, it also begins to develop a parallel thread around another key theme of this thesis, a Karen identity specific to the borderlands space. While Chapters Three and Four developed the notion of a national identity attached to a modern territorial domain, this chapter moves the debate beyond a singular preoccupation with territory as an understanding of spatial identity to explore how human activity can make space meaningful and foster complex spatial identities. While this point is developed over the remaining chapters, this thread culminates in Chapter 8 where I argue these modes of social practice develop a performative dimension of Karen identity that is formed through a complex process of identity-making that conveys a sense of being rooted in the past as well as being shaped by the present circumstances of persecution and displacement.

INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE IN THE BORDERLANDS

Displaced Karen experience a precarious existence in Thailand, and this is largely due to the system of institutional governance under which they must operate. Most displaced Karen living in Thailand are effectively stateless; having no citizen's rights in Thailand and unable to return to Burma. As a result their options for legal status and access to essential services are limited. They face threats of deportation back to Burma and are often vulnerable to crime and discrimination. They are considered a burden on Thai state resources and a strain on the diplomatic relationship between the Burmese and Thai governments. In this section of the chapter I argue that this 'undesirables' (Agier, 2011) status is linked to a form of governance that has come to dominate the borderlands space. This system attempts to contain and control displaced Karen in a type of "territorial quarantine" (Agier, 2011, p. 24), where they are both highly stigmatised and largely ignored (or at least that is the intent).

To talk of governance is to talk of a vast and highly contested field of academic study. While acknowledging these inherent complexities, for the purposes of this thesis I take a broad view of governance as the exercise of political authority, with a particular emphasis on its relationship to structures of control (Agier, 2011; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, & Tsianos, 2008; Wilson & Donnan, 1998). This broad position allows me to integrate a range of agents of power into the discussion – governments, institutions, humanitarian organisations, leaders, civil society, individuals and the grassroots. While I talk of particular institutions such as the Ministry of Interior (MOI) or UNHCR, my intent is to keep the discussion of institutional governance at a broader level of government and humanitarian operations rather than focusing on the work of a particular organisation. This allows me to focus on the exercise of political authority over displaced Karen regardless of its

source, and draw in the operations of particular institutions as they are relevant to the points I make.

In this chapter I focus on two key ways in which this exercise of political authority occurs in the Thai-Burma borderlands. The first is the use of the fixed national territorial boundary as an expression of political authority and control (Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Newman, 2001; Smith, 1986), a point generally accepted or observed by the majority of people within the national borders who are considered members of this political community (Gellner, 1983, p. 7). From this perspective control over space and movement within that territory becomes the right of the governing authority, and is implemented by established institutions that ensure its surveillance and enforcement. This is often described as the manifestation of a state's right to determine who can enter and stay in their country, and under what conditions. This type of governance is commonly representative of the nation-state, who pursues policies that reinforce their territorial and political authority.

The second way in which political authority is expressed is through a process of administrative categorisation. This is where authority is exerted through a series of labels used to determine a person's position and associated treatment, as well as providing clear identification to assist bureaucratic classification and resource allocation (Wood, 1985, p. 9; Zetter, 1991, p. 44). This is most visible in the humanitarian aid apparatus, though not singularly attributable to it, which works within a system focused on managing the numbers of displaced persons; identifying them (through administrative categorisation) for resource allocation purposes, and so that displaced persons can ultimately be either expelled or resettled. This is framed by a process of justification of status (proving you are refugee – persecuted, a victim) rather than recognising a person's rights as a citizen or political being. In both cases, the dominant practice is now one of control, deeply embedded in the system of governance, rather than the more traditional notion associated with refugees, that of protection or humanitarian goodwill.

But there is also a counterpoint to this system of governance, a type of challenge that emerges when the Karen engage with the limitations it places on them. This manifests as a resistance to a process that inadequately captures the Karen political self and is strongly aligned to the spatial attributes of the borderlands. For example, a system of governance that reinforces 'not belonging' gives displaced Karen the opportunity to examine and articulate their own identity and what their political and social needs are. A system of governance that seeks to control necessarily creates the conditions for contestation and resistance. Where citizenship is not a given, one is not constrained by the obligations that go with it. This link between the activities of the political self and the attributes of the space suggests an experience of both marginalisation *and* agency. But this should

not be viewed as an either-or dynamic. In the borderlands, there is the possibility to both use and resist the structures designed to govern the displaced population.

Through her research on the Meratus in Indonesia, anthropologist Anna Tsing suggests a useful way of understanding this dynamic which can be applied to the situation of the Karen: that one can be “simultaneously inside and outside the state”.

Marginals stand outside the state by tying themselves to it; they constitute the state locally by fleeing from it. As culturally “different” subjects they can never be citizens; as culturally different “subjects”, they can never escape citizenship (Tsing, 1993, p. 26).

It is a point that has particular resonance with the sometimes contradictory behaviours of displaced Karen in the borderlands. In the nexus of controlled-contested space tensions (in the case of the Thai-Burma borderlands a contradiction between the modern territorial domain and the social relations of displaced Karen), the Karen often question the system of governance while at the same time tying themselves to its structures. For example, a displaced Karen person in Thailand may not be recognised as a Thai citizen or benefit from citizenship in Burma, yet their struggle is to gain such recognition for their own grouping, not to disrupt and replace the system completely. What may seem like a paradoxical dilemma should not be mistaken for sanctioning these governance structures nor be seen as confusion around Karen roles and motivations. Many displaced Karen walk a fine line between accommodation of state policy and resistance to it, and this is partially how they negotiate their own place in the political domain. As I will show across the coming chapters, it is in the creative resistances, only possible when there is some accommodation to begin with, that Karen in the borderlands can produce some of their greatest scenes of agency. This process of accommodation *and* resistance is perhaps most evident in the way some displaced Karen question the limitations placed on them by the refugee label because it suppresses their political agency, but also embrace the term for the benefits it brings them in terms of food, shelter and other services. It is this tension that characterises many of the activities of displaced Karen in the borderlands, and underpins a key point of this chapter, namely that the borderlands constitutes an alternative political space where Karen agency is strengthened through patterns of activism that challenge the structures and operations of the prevailing system of governance.

Consolidating place: controlling movement

This section argues that the operations of institutional governance establish a series of controls over space and movement that aim to contain and control refugee and displaced populations. Many displaced Karen counter this institutionalised power by living in ways that contest

institutionalised control of the space. They do this by moving illegally across nation-state boundaries and living outside administrative containment lines. In analysing these challenges to forms of institutional power there are hints of a more creative use of the space than traditional nation-state ideologies allow.

The most obvious form of governance in the borderlands is the exercise of authority by the nation-state. This authority constitutes typical nation-state operations of power for control over space and movement. Devices used to exert this control are familiar to state logic: checkpoints, detention centres, prisons, local bureaucracies, border control and other features typical of the modern socio-political landscape (Malkki, 2002). For displaced Karen, the operations of the nation-state have largely excluded them from being politically active subjects of Burma, and to a lesser extent Thailand. This exclusion is managed through state devices that exert the nation-state's right, and power, to control and contain its territory, and that territory's inhabitants. This controlled space is a well-established principle of territorial sovereignty (Malkki, 1992; Tangseefa, 2006).

An obvious example of this controlled space is the Thai Government's attempts to contain displaced Karen in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, essentially applying fixed territorial principles to their containment. Here we have delineated spaces aimed at segregating displaced Karen from the rest of the population, both physically and psychologically. This is evident in a number of ways. The camps are fenced and patrolled by the Thai military and other paramilitary groups⁶¹ used by MOI for security in the camps. Movement of people and goods in to and out of the camp is regulated by a combination, sometimes contradictory, of Thai Government policy and the disposition of local authorities. The institutionalised bureaucracy attempts to register the camp populations for identification purposes for resource allocation and determining entitlements. The locations of the camps are often remote and difficult to access. Camps such as Mae La Oon and Mae Surin,⁶² both close to the Thai-Burma border and prone to road closures, can be inaccessible during the rainy season. The nature of the camps, being both geographically and psychologically isolating, create immense distances between the camps and other human

⁶¹ The most common paramilitary group is the *Or Sor*, or in Thai the *Kong Asa Raksa Dindaen*, translated as Volunteer Defence Forces, who have a reputation for violence and corruption. These volunteer forces are mostly found along the Thai-Burma border and in Thailand's southern regions, both areas with volatile security concerns. Along the Thai-Burma border their main purpose is to manage the flow of refugees. This includes being used as a security force for the various refugee camps, manning camp checkpoints and monitoring refugee flows across the border. For more discussion of the Or Sor and other militia units see 'Militia Redux' by Desmond Ball and David Scott Mathieson (2007).

⁶² Mae La Oon is located in Mae Sariang province and sits about 2km from the Thai-Burma border. During the rainy season the road suffers from erosion and 4WDs and chains are required. In 2002 the camp experienced a flash flood which killed 26 refugees from the camp population. Mae Surin is located in Mae Hong Son province and sits about 3km from the border. The road to the camp is also prone to flooding from local rivers which tends to isolate the camp for long periods.

populations. The result is that displaced Karen find themselves isolated in camps which reinforce their exclusion from the Thai nation-state, including benefiting from the state's protection, as was the case with the burning down of the Huay Kaloke and Don Pa Kiang camps.

The Thai nation-state conducts other operations that tend to exclude or isolate displaced Karen. These policies remove displaced Karen – those living in Thai communities rather than in the refugee camps – from what is common and normalised for the rest of the population. Thai identification cards, which are used to categorise and regulate citizenship and therefore nation-state membership, act as a form of exclusion for displaced Karen who are denied access to the card. Without this recognised identification, displaced Karen are also excluded from state health and education services as well as secure employment opportunities. Thai military checkpoints regulate the movement of people into and out of the border area. A point commonly made by those I interviewed during fieldwork was that failure to meet the criteria for free movement (Thai identification card or foreign passport) meant you were either put into detention or subject to fines. Similarly, it was felt that many of these operations act to instil and regulate fear. Fear, be it for survival or of the authorities, can occupy much of the daily thoughts and activities of displaced Karen. As such, fear can provide a form of authority as it underpins a largely self-regulating system of control. Many of the displaced Karen I interviewed indicated that at various times they self-regulated their movements within Mae Sot out of fear of being picked up by Thai police checks. For some this self-regulation meant they rarely left their house or at least their immediate community.

Yet displaced Karen undertake many activities that challenge the restrictions placed on them by this system of governance, and it is here that we see the strongest evidence of Karen activism and political agency. One such example is the way refugee's reference the camp attributes with terms similar to an urban town. In Mae La refugee camp, many residents refer to the main thoroughfare through the middle of the camp as "the highway", a familiar term in a typical urban environment. Churches and schools are built in an attempt to restore some form of normalcy to social and religious life. Administrative structures divide the camp into localised sections with accompanying leaders and mini-bureaucracies, similar to the village structures left behind in Burma. Some refugees set up small shops to sell fish sauce, rice and other commodities to the camp residents. Mobile phones, motorbikes and the internet have slowly filtered in, connecting Mae La to the outside world and introducing elements of a modern socio-political landscape. Such scenes are familiar in many of the refugee camps along the border and show that while the nation-state manages the refugee camps as spaces of exception – characterised by mechanisms that segregate, exclude and control – residents create and interact with the space in ways that are strikingly

familiar to normal village life. But more than this, residents are challenging typical understandings of what camps should look like and how a refugee should act; in doing so they disrupt the accepted realities so often associated with institutional categories.

These conditions can of course be deceptive. Using an intellectual exchange between Michel Agier, Liisa Malkki and Zygmunt Bauman that discusses the notion of refugee camps as comparable to urban cities (2002), I want to both deepen and complicate my argument by stating that while Mae La may seem to have attributes similar to any other town, in reality such an urban space is largely beyond the camp resident's reach. Thai security personnel are known to conduct raids and confiscate people's motorbikes. The remoteness of some of the camps means that while mobile phones are present in the camps, coverage is often restricted. Many refugees illegally leave the camps, but many more are confined within its perimeter. An urban centre also brings with it an expectation of service provision by the state – public transport, roads or sanitation – and more broadly citizenship (Holston & Appadurai, 1996), but these are not evident in the refugee camps. The lack of services reinforce that Mae La is a refugee camp; people are not free to leave and this is a fundamental difference that isolates the refugee camps from the rest of Thailand's urban centres. To borrow a phrase from Liisa Malkki, this does not make the camps "social voids", in fact what we are seeing is a group of people who live in "complex systems of relationship" (2002, p. 359). These relationships position the Karen as political, social, cultural and economic actors (which frame their agency) as well as institutionally perceived refugees (victims, apolitical). The Karen live this tension, and rather than being victims of these constraints, the Karen immerse themselves in it, utilising the ambiguities to create their own place in the political domain.

So how do these complex relationships manifest? How do some of these challenges to state control over space occur? And where can we see evidence of this Karen activism and creative resistance? I have indicated that many refugees in the Thai-Burma borderlands challenge the restrictions upon their movement in and out of the camps, choosing to move across the institutionalised boundaries meant to contain and control them. The reasons they do this fulfil complex needs associated with practical survival and the need to pursue political activities. For example, the camp environment inhibits practical concerns around providing money, food and other material for friends and family. Aid organisations provide basic food supplies to the camps, but additional food and income generation projects fall outside the scope of humanitarian aid and refugees are forced to look elsewhere to have these needs met. As a result, men and particularly youth, move outside the camps to find jobs and provide an income. There are other reasons for leaving the camps. The camp environment is spatially isolated and densely populated. These cramped and dispiriting conditions impact the physical and emotional capacities of displaced

Karen to fight immobility and despair. This is a common concern for those who remain inside the camps:

Now I live in Tham Hin [refugee camp] and I have no happiness because I live in another country and I cannot speak their language. My life is like an animal. I can only eat when people feed me, I stay here, I sleep here, I go to the toilet here, it is like we are a herd of cattle ... If we go outside looking for vegetables we are afraid of the police. We don't have space to grow our own vegetables or bury our own bodies (Moo, interview, 15 September 2005).

Moo identifies a lack of control over the most intrinsic of human needs – that of living and dying. More than humiliating, this is a deeply dehumanising place to be. It goes beyond a denial of basic civil and political rights to include the most fundamental – the sanctity and respect for human life. Moo also highlights a practical concern. The camp is a place of idleness and powerlessness. She is a victim of rigid policy that restricts her ability to grow vegetables and make decisions over food and housing. Typical daily activities and decision-making are removed from her control. A consequence is a permeating idleness that threatens the social and cultural fabric of camp populations – the most visible of which are drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and gang-related incidents among youth.

While Moo's story is a common one, there are also many refugees who challenge these types of restrictions and in doing so redefine how the space is controlled. One refugee explained to me that she weaves clothes and sells them to foreign organisations as a way of getting around camp restrictions on movement and to provide an income for her family. The task counters her idleness and depletes feelings of uselessness and despair. The income ensures her children can receive an education. Of course, in this instance confinement to the camp continues, and there is some legitimacy to the argument that she is vulnerable to dependency upon foreign organisations for income. While long-term income generation projects remain elusive in the camps these arguments will continue to be of concern. However, the ability of this particular woman to provide an income for her family has a considerable short-term impact upon their day-to-day lives. She is able to make decisions over her daily tasks and where the money is spent, giving her some control over the space in which she is forced to live.

Other displaced Karen in the borderlands refuse to be confined to the refugee camps for socio-political reasons. The camp restrictions limit their capacity to undertake their political and activist activities. Instead they negotiate a complex connection with the camps which allows them to move between the camps and outside communities. The fluidity of this movement involves many

factors which displaced Karen must negotiate. Thai-Burma government relations, and particularly high-level government visits often determine the level of scrutiny at checkpoints and restrictions on movement throughout the border area. This often results in lockdowns in Mae Sot or the refugee camps. Many Karen who leave the camps develop relationships with the *Or Sor* or camp authorities to better facilitate movement in and out of the camps. Maintaining this freedom of movement is integral to their activities. Underpinning this connection is the premise that access to the refugee camps is an essential element of Karen activism; it is complete confinement to the camps that many activists try to avoid.

There is also a more subtle challenge to the notion that the borderlands is a definitive modern territorial domain where authorities can control space and movement. This occurs in the way many displaced Karen treat their situation as temporary by retaining hope of return to their homeland. Common statements I heard during my work along the border between 2005 and 2010 were, 'We are only here until things get better in Burma', or 'One day I will return to my home'. Even Karen who had been along the border for more than 20 years expressed this sentiment. One Karen man I interviewed talked about Thailand as "a temporary place". He has lived in Thailand for over twenty years, spending time both in the refugee camps and in local Thai communities, but he did not see himself as a 'refugee' or as 'Thai'. He saw himself as a Karen person living in a temporary place until he could return to his home inside Burma (U Kyi, 2007). A further example of this can be found in the song 'Story of an IDP', where another Karen participant I spoke with in 2005 talks of his wish to return to the land that encapsulates family, home and spiritual connection, an excerpt of which is below.

Oh, I miss the place where I was born
I long for the songs my mum sang to me
And her love drags me to recall the place I once lived
Wishing to be back there before the end of my days

'Story of an IDP', written by Loo Ne

The sense of how long this might take is referred to in the last line, suggesting the struggle may be long but that the current predicament is a temporary one and that return to the homeland is the ultimate objective. The sense of time in this song is peripheral to the idea of connection to land and to culture as being the fulfilment of Karen identity. It is this attitude which maintains the Karen sense of temporariness in Thailand and is a sentiment also echoed by Moo:

Other countries will be nice for a while but later we will get thirsty. When I think about this I am not satisfied. Why were we created to be humans? But I'm not disappointed, I've had five children, I have my own people. Even though it takes so long one day my hopes

will be fulfilled. If not fulfilled in my lifetime, then at least in my children's (Moo, interview, 15 September 2005).

Moo uses a metaphor which equates her experience of displacement with the lack of an essential human requirement: speaking metaphorically she says that without liquid you are thirsty, without a homeland you are empty. This connection to the idea of home is explored in more depth in Chapter Seven; however it is sufficient at this point to say that this connection to the idea of home, which is somewhere else, remains integral to the Karen sense of identity and wellbeing in the borderlands. And that the current placement, in a space that is not home, will continue to be perceived as a temporary one, and as integral to the story of the borderlands.

These references to temporality, like those of the political and social injustices also mentioned, suggest actions that situate the borderlands space in a broader historical, political and cultural context. These stories transform the stable configuration of the modern territorial border into one animated by the practices and stories that characterise the borderlands space. The operations of the nation-state towards displaced Karen in the borderlands work to de-historicise their experiences and their voices by extracting their political and cultural context, and in turn universalising the displaced Karen experience. This tension between the nation-state's attempts to regulate and control the borderlands space, and displaced Karen contestations over that same space are a significant factor in the construction of an alternative political space from which a Karen identity is constructed and projected.

Institutionalised labelling: controlling resources

Working in a symbiotic relationship with this control over movement is a 'legal cocktail' (Holston & Appadurai, 1996) of labels that reinforce a system of governance that further isolates displaced Karen. This system of administrative categorisation works to identify and regulate the displaced population and is primarily used as a way to control the movement and rights of displaced Karen in the borderlands. This control is established through a number of means: privileging certain categories of people, excluding categories where necessary, and complicating membership and associated rights. In response, displaced Karen both challenge and utilise this labelling for their own political purposes. This engagement in political angling represents a key form of Karen activism and political agency.

In many ways labelling can provide a taxonomic listing of society, creating a logical and recognisable means to describe and allocate the complexities in our social structures (Wood, 1985, p. 7). In the 'messy' political space of the Thai-Burma borderlands, labels fulfil a need for clear identification pathways that can assist bureaucratic classification and resource allocation in

relation to the large number of displaced persons from Burma. Labelling can be beneficial, for example a UNHCR registered refugee in one of the camps along the Thai-Burma border has access to the resettlement program, and once resettled in a third country should gain benefits equal to the citizens of that country. In this instance, being the recipient of the refugee label enables access to services, citizenship, education and a life far removed from the statelessness of the camps. Without labels it would be difficult to define the parameters in which such a complex process could be carried out. Undoubtedly, there are important and positive outcomes that emerge from a system of labelling, but in the interviews I conducted with displaced Karen between 2005 and 2010, people spoke about institutionalised labelling from a very different perspective. Common themes that emerged included the use of labelling as a means of control and restriction, disempowering associations related to many of the labels, and the unbalanced power relations involved in label identification and resource allocation. It became clear that responses to institutionalised labelling were a key element of the activism exhibited by displaced Karen in the borderlands, and it is an area worthy of further analysis.

A number of externally-imposed labels are applied to displaced Karen, and these have a significant impact on their lives. In most cases these labels are created in response to a change in the political nature of the borderlands and to manage institutional responses to Karen displacement, as discussed in the previous chapter. The most obvious of these labels are the range used by the Thai Government to identify and categorise the different groupings of Burmese in Thailand. One participant spoke of how he saw this identification process working.

They use refugee registration just to find out who is in the refugee camps. In the same way they try to register migrant workers – these people are workers, they are not fleeing war. They are just trying to find out who is who: this is a refugee, this is the KNU, this is the migrant worker, and this is a stateless person. So if anything happens in Thailand, they know who is responsible for it. Really they are trying to separate all the groups so they can identify them (Loo Ne, interview, 24 July 2007).

For Loo Ne, labels are a way of identifying for political purposes. This inventory – refugee, migrant worker, KNU member – comes with prescriptive methods of treatment. In the case of the refugee camps the ‘refugee’ label is a means of identifying the recipients of humanitarian aid such as food, education and healthcare. The label ‘migrant worker’ identifies Burmese working in Thailand, and while this label should ensure access to state-sanctioned working conditions: basic wage, access to healthcare, and safe working conditions, it often works to the opposite effect. The Thai Government has yet to introduce a comprehensive and successful registration system of Burmese migrant workers and as such migrant workers mostly remain outside the protection of the law,

and therefore vulnerable to exploitative practices and abuse which at various times has led to deaths.⁶³ A Karen person working with a local NGO might be labelled 'dissident' or a 'political activist' and as such can be vulnerable to Thai police crackdowns.

Other problems relating to label terminology exist. The Thai Government does not refer to displaced Karen in the refugee camps as 'refugees'. This is partially because Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and therefore under no legal obligation to recognise or treat the Karen as refugees. It would also lead to overt acknowledgement of Burma's political unrest and its impact upon the region, a position Thailand is reluctant to take. Instead, the Thai Government labels those in the refugee camps 'displaced persons'. It is a deliberate and politically motivated use of terminology. Prior to 1997, Thai Government terminology for Karen in refugee camps along the border was *bukkhonplad tin*, the Thai phrase for 'Displaced Persons'. After 1997 this term acquired further limiting elements when Karen in the camps along the border were categorised as *bukkhonphi nee jakkarnsurop*, meaning 'Displaced Persons Fleeing Fighting'⁶⁴ and the camps became 'temporary shelters'.⁶⁵ The refining of this term was an attempt to restrict the number of displaced Karen entering the camps in Thailand. It also provided a set of rules related to incarceration in the camps, for example no movement outside the camps and the provision of basic food and shelter being contingent on the assistance of international aid agencies.

The Thai Government has also at various times unofficially registered, and therefore labelled, KNU members. This type of member card entitles you to a set of allowances: for example the ability to reside in Thailand, some protection from Thai police and safer movement throughout the border area. It is also generally accepted that the borderlands houses 'political dissidents', those who are working within exiled political organisations or NGOs. This is an important category to differentiate because depending upon Thai-Burma government relations this particular grouping is often the target of Thai Government crackdowns. Alternatively it is often used by the Burmese Government as an example of Thailand's antagonism towards them by allowing the political

⁶³ For further evidence see the Amnesty International report (Amnesty International, 2005) or 'Migrant Registration Process Hits Snag' (2004, July 1). *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved December 12, 2011, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=3602.

⁶⁴ Technically, this terminology would exclude IDPs, or those who had hidden in the jungle for prolonged periods of time; those who had fled due to economic reasons, such as destruction of their paddy fields and theft of their crops and animals by Burmese military personnel; and those who feared for their life because of affiliation to an ethnic armed group such as the KNLA.

⁶⁵ For example, in a presentation at the 2011 World Refugee Day seminar in Bangkok, Kasem Tawepanyasakul from the Thai Government National Security Council consistently referred to the refugee camps as 'temporary shelters' and the people in the shelters as 'people fleeing fighting' (2011 *World Refugee Day Public Seminar Report: Situations of Forced Migration, Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Thailand's Role and ASEAN Mechanisms*, 2011). Also see (Ruttanasatian, 2004, p. 18) for further discussion around how these terms have been used for political purposes.

dissidents to reside safely in Thailand and undertake their political activities against the Burmese Government.

In addition to identifying, labels are also used as a means for allocating resources. In the Thai-Burma borderlands labels are used most visibly in resource allocations associated with the humanitarian aid industry attached to the various refugee camps. The international community, including international governments and humanitarian aid organisations, refer to those in the camps as 'refugees'. UNHCR, prior to a formal and comprehensive camp registration process which began in 2004⁶⁶, referred to this same group of people as *prima facie* refugees, refugees who on the face of it appeared to be refugees, but who had not been assessed on any evidence-based criteria.⁶⁷

After 2004, with the official registration process underway, Karen in the camps could become UNHCR-recognised refugees. The nuances in this type of terminology had a profound impact upon the way Karen in the camps were acknowledged and treated. As a *prima facie* refugee there is the implication that claims of persecution are not yet legitimate or proven. Such a categorisation also restricts entitlements to refugee protection and resettlement in third countries. Both legitimacy and protection are, arguably, still prominent concerns of Karen refugees in the camps, despite losing the *prima facie* label.

Labels such as these humanitarian ones serve a political purpose: most commonly for those creating or allocating the label, not those who are the recipients of the label. In his article 'Labelling in Development Policy', Refugee Studies scholar Geoff Wood writes that labelling is the:

Allocation, distribution, redistribution, the management of access on the one hand, and the generation of resources through organising production, investment and fiscal activity on the other all require processes of authoritative classification and designation(1985, p. 9).

Wood argues that labelling is an authoritative way to manage resources and organise production. A look at the refugee camps along the border sees this type of labelling in action. Refugees are allocated resources such as food, shelter and clothing. Access to these resources is organised

⁶⁶ UNHCR began camp registration in 1999 but only limited data was collected at this time. A more formal and comprehensive registration process began in 2004.

⁶⁷ It is estimated that prior to 2004, 96 percent (Huguet & Punpuing, 2005) of Burma's refugee exodus to Thailand fell into this category of 'prima facie refugees'. There are three conditions that define 'prima facie' refugees. The first is that the 'prima facie' refugee is confined to one of the nine officially recognised refugee camps along the border. The second is that up until the comprehensive UNHCR registration process which began in 2004, 'prima facie' refugees were excluded from obtaining UNHCR refugee status and therefore third country resettlement. And the third condition is that 'prima facie' refugees were under the administrative authority of the Thai Government.

through investment and funding from foreign governments and organisations. In this sense, labelling provides Karen in the refugee camps with essential needs or materials.

But humanitarian labelling is neither neutral nor apolitical (Agier, 2011; Zetter, 1991). In managing resources and organising production, labels serve the political needs of those allocating the label, meaning it is difficult to extract the political motivation behind labelling from its implementation. This causes an unequal power balance between those allocating the label and those who are the recipients of it. The label not only identifies a person, for political or resource distribution purposes, but it also determines treatment and entitlements, giving legitimacy to certain resource allocations, making them seem objective and neutral in their designation, but at the same time denying legitimacy to other entitlements which may seem problematic, divisive or conflictive if they were implemented.

There is an important distinction to make here. Where the allocation of humanitarian labels is politically-motivated, there is also the potential to de-politicise the stories of the recipients of the label. This works through a process of prioritising the humanitarian aspects of the case, rather than the political aspects, creating what Liisa Malkki describes as a “humanitarian case” (Malkki, 1997). In this scenario, displaced Karen become victims of violence, reliant on others for food, education and health services, silenced subjects, and therefore a ‘humanitarian case’. In such an instance, the execution of power inherent in the label allocation reduces the political potential of displaced Karen stories. Karen claims of political grievances of ethnic persecution, human rights violations, religious and cultural intolerances, lose their political potency in such a scenario.

Further complicating this position is an expectation of behaviour that is associated with the label. Liisa Malkki calls this the “performative dimension” (Malkki, 1997, p. 231) of refugee status where the tendency is to identify what a ‘real’ refugee looks like and how a ‘real’ refugee acts. This performative dimension is evident in the borderlands in a number of ways. Over months of field work in 2005 many of the participants in this research made references to first time visitors to Mae La refugee camp who would comment on its village-like atmosphere, or compare the camp’s liveability to the surrounding Thai villages. Many of the people I interviewed told stories of visitors who commented that people with motorbikes and mobile phones could not possibly be considered a refugee, and that people who leave the camps should not continue to receive the support of the aid agencies. The implication in such comments is that a ‘real’ refugee must look and live a certain way, and that refugees should only receive institutional support if they appear to be helpless and immobile. Another way in which this performative dimension appears is how refugees themselves often use the label. During field work in December 2008 many Karen I spoke with talked about the refugee influx that had occurred over the preceding months, reportedly as a

result of the heightened resettlement process. Karen who had been in the camps for many years began to refer to these new arrivals as the 'new' refugees, and themselves as the 'real' refugees. One person I interviewed told me the 'new' arrivals were coming for economic reasons and the hope of being resettled in countries like the US or Australia. She talked about them as not having suffered genuine persecution at the hands of the Burmese military, and that they were taking the places of the genuine or 'real' refugees who had no choice but to be in the camps (Naw Paw, interview, 9 December 2008). In examples like this one, the Karen themselves used the label to differentiate who should have access to entitlements, and who could claim legitimate persecution.

The use of the refugee label in both these situations suggests a model of how a refugee should look and behave. When refugee behaviour no longer constitutes the conditions prescribed by the label, needs and entitlements change. While not explicitly stated, behaviours which reflect action taken outside of the principal label – behaviour that is not passive or helpless – constitutes other less sympathetic labels: an insurgent, a trouble-maker, a political activist. By extracting the political aspect, those applying the label remove a very important outlet for grief and justice. It is this failure, on the part of both the humanitarian aid apparatus and more broadly the modern nation-state, which has forced displaced Karen to look elsewhere for a space in which their political aspirations can be met.

Similar to Karen responses to restrictions over their movements, displaced Karen in the borderlands challenge the limitations inherent in the allocation of these labels. This represents an attempt to move outside of administrative containment lines where displaced Karen can negotiate their own place in the political domain. One Karen person I interviewed talked about this in terms of the ambiguous nature of entitlements that go with the refugee label. He spoke of refugee entitlements under the UN Refugee Convention such as education equal to that of national citizens, the right to engage in wage-earning employment, the right to housing equal to other foreign nationals, and the right to choose your place of residence and to move freely. (UNHCR, 1951) These entitlements, while talked about, continue to sit outside of current policy implementation for refugees on the Thai-Burma border. This is reflected in the way one participant spoke of his refugee status.

I don't really call myself a refugee because if I'm a refugee then I am entitled to rights as a refugee. If this was the case then I would accept it but people who register under UNHCR or with the Thai authorities they are not really refugees. According to the declaration a refugee has the right to work, the right to study or have an education. If you're born in Thailand after 1990 and you've lived here for more than seven years then you should be

able to apply for citizenship. We don't have any of these rights (Loo Ne, interview, 24 July 2007).

To Loo Ne, the label refugee is in a sense meaningless because it has not brought with it the associated entitlements. This makes it difficult for him to accept the refugee label or see a benefit to himself in acquiring it. Of course there is also an argument that many of these entitlements are lacking for Thai citizens as well. For example poverty, access to education, and sexual or religious practices exclude many Thai citizens from benefiting as members of the state. However in either case, where the nation-state has failed to fulfil its commitments to its people, they inevitably force those same people to look for redress elsewhere. For many displaced Karen this dynamic drives their activism and informs their political self.

For many displaced Karen the refugee label also carries with it connotations that do not adequately address the realities and aspirations of their lives. According to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is defined as someone who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 1951).

While the wording of this definition provides a conceptual understanding of the Karen as refugees, what it doesn't account for is the disparities inherent in its implementation and practice. This definition is clinical and clear about who constitutes a refugee, in practice the refugee label often comes with limiting interpretations, evidence of which can be found in the Thai-Burma borderlands. While certainly not characteristic of all displaced Karen's position on being a refugee, the Karen I spoke with during my field work between 2005 and 2010 spoke of the label carrying implications of helplessness, passive victimisation and reliance on external support, all terms they considered disempowering and unrepresentative of their active struggles. One Karen person interviewed called himself a "human rights defender" (Loo Ne, interview, 24 July 2007), while another called himself a "community worker" and the Karen more generally as "political asylum seekers" (U Kyi, interview, 21 July 2007).

When I asked another participant, Saw Ba to describe himself he said he was "an illegal person" because although he is registered in the camp as a refugee he lives outside the camps and works

for an NGO. Saw Ba does not deny being a refugee but it's not a defining identity. Instead he chooses to be defined by the work he pursues to find a resolution to Burma's conflict.

Sometimes I think that technically I am a refugee because I flee from my country because of the war, or the political situation. I cannot stay there so I come to Thailand, so that makes me a refugee. But I also find ways that I can do something. It is a big problem what has happened in Burma and I can find a way to solve this problem. So what I can do is to find a way to do something. It is a big problem but I can try and do the little thing and distribute what I have (Saw Ba, interview, 21 July 2007).

Saw Ba, like many others who participated in my research spoke of their work in terms representative of their active struggle. For Loo Ne this meant challenging the notion of being a victim, "...to show that even living under oppression we are not victims, we are not victims. We are struggling to survive, we are survivors and we struggle and we are moving (Loo Ne, interview, 22 September 2005).

Use of the phrase "are moving" implies activity which defies the immobilisation and helplessness associated with the refugee label. For many displaced Karen in the borderlands it is their participation in a struggle for political survival and recognition which defines their lives in the borderlands, not their incarceration as refugees. In such instances disempowering concepts associated with how the label of refugee is implemented – such as victim or aid-dependent – fail to account for individual identities and capacities which constantly defy the limitations of the label.

My argument is not whether the label *should* be used but rather that there is a need for greater analysis of which label is allocated and by whom, and what implications this has for displaced or refugee populations. As I have mentioned previously in this chapter, Karen have at various times used the label 'refugee' or 'migrant worker' for their own identification purposes. But there are often disparities in how these labels are used and distinctions between the various labels or groups can be ambiguous. For example, in the borderlands a refugee may often refer to herself as an IDP, and a political dissident may live at various points in a refugee camp. In addition to the disparities caused in the naming process, movement between the categories is also common. One can simultaneously be a refugee and a political activist, or a displaced person and a migrant worker. These are the realities and complexities of how displaced Karen live in the borderlands. Yet these diverse groupings with their complex motivations and needs have been tagged with what Geoff Wood calls a 'principal label' (1985, p. 11): a refugee. This effectively forces the IDP, the displaced person, the activist and the artist, with all their associated experiences and stories,

into one stereotyped group, with its singular understanding of identity. Problems of political identification arise when this externally-imposed principal label (refugee) takes precedence over other forms of identification, particularly self-designated ones. It can become another way of silencing non-institutionalised forms of identification.

Rather than accepting an identity based on this idea of an undifferentiated static mass, I have shown that many displaced Karen choose to refer to themselves in more dynamic terms: 'human rights defender', 'activist' and 'community worker'. This type of terminology suggests action based on an injustice: I am a human rights defender because my human rights have been taken from me. In these types of responses the Karen create what Wood calls a "shift in power to deploy time [personal experience] as an ingredient of identity" (Wood, 1985, p. 13). This shift is examined in more detail in the next section, but for the moment it suffices to say that by bringing personal experience into the narrative of political identity, displaced Karen are responding to a system of governance that too often has the effect of containing and silencing their political agency.

Up until this point I have shown how operations of institutional governance act as a form of coercive regulation of displaced Karen in the borderlands. I have also shown that displaced Karen contest these institutional forms of governance because they do not adequately capture the nature of their political self. This political self is articulated in the way displaced Karen challenge certain forms of institutional labelling in order to develop an alternative political narrative of their persecution, or how they defy restrictions on their movement in order to pursue socio-political activities. In this next section I move into defining this political self in terms of patterns of activism that have emerged out of a tension between institutional governance and a more informal political power that develops out of the contested social relations of displaced Karen. These patterns of activism form a key mode of social practice in the borderlands, and they are integral to the main thesis argument because they link the activities of displaced Karen to the borderlands space in which they operate. In other words, patterns of activism are able to emerge because of the nature of the borderlands space, at the same time they develop the notion of a Karen political self, and ultimately help define a Karen identity specific to the space.

CONTROLLED-CONTESTED: THE POLITICAL SELF

A tension between institutional governance and informal political power that develops through contested social relations has come to represent the contemporary context of the Thai-Burma borderlands. On one side state sovereignty and its administrative apparatus are increasingly deployed to control areas historically unfavourable to state authority, and on the other are those who live or transit the borderlands and practice a more informal, fluid and contested engagement

with the administration of the border area. The result is a layer of political activity that sits across, but also conjunctively with these operations of governance. This layer of political activity does not sit separately to the operations of the state, they are in fact unequivocally connected, but rather it develops in tension to the operations of institutional governance, particularly as implemented by the state and the humanitarian apparatus.

In this section I contend that patterns of activism emerge from this tension where institutional forms of governance have failed to adequately capture the nature of a Karen political self. By political self I mean the ways in which the Karen pursue forms of activism that aim to advance their political claims and subvert institutional norms of political belonging by negotiating their own place in the political domain – a form of activism that is based on the notion of a political being rather than an act of protest. As will be shown over the remainder of this chapter, this form of activism is evident in Karen claims for political autonomy, their advocacy around human rights abuses and their agitation for political and social change. Through these forms of activism, the Karen develop an alternative political space that strengthens Karen political agency and challenges forms of governance in the borderlands. It is within this conceptual dynamic that the Karen are able to articulate their political self and produce some of their greatest scenes of agency.

I propose to explore these patterns of activism through a conceptual framework used by refugee studies scholars, Geoff Wood and Roger Zetter; this is the idea of re-linking the case to the story (Wood, 1985; Zetter, 1991). Across this chapter I have suggested that labels can depersonalise individual narratives and place them into a singular frame that forces thousands of individual stories of political struggle into a category that makes their situation the ‘same’ as thousands of ‘other’ refugees in the world. In other words they become a ‘refugee’ case, a member of a largely anonymous category of peoples. Roger Zetter and Geoff Wood, both of whom have worked extensively in the field of refugee studies, put forward a framework that sheds some insight on this phenomenon. Wood talks of this in terms of the ‘case’ and the ‘story’ (Wood, 1985, p. 13). Roger Zetter expands on this further to suggest that labelling is a process of stereotyping that essentially de-links the story from the case, creating a “stereotyped identity with a categorical prescription of assumed needs” (Zetter, 1991, p. 44). I contend that this stereotyped identity (label) that Zetter talks about, works to ignore the political activism in which displaced Karen are engaged: the experiences of, and resolutions to prolonged injustices. By extracting the historical and political context from the Karen situation, the label strips bare the identity of those who have experienced displacement, and questions their authority to give credible accounts and evidence of the political and institutional conditions they have experienced (Malkki, 1997).

Seeing Karen displacement as a 'case' without associated stories and political failings can lessen the impact of substantiated claims by displaced Karen of political neglect and persecution by the Burmese state. These include failed economic policy, inadequate ethnic identification and representation, social fragmentation, institutional denial of basic education and health rights, nationalist and racist policy, and challenges to state sovereignty – all social and political factors that contribute to Karen displacement to begin with.⁶⁸ In effect, a case-based approach dehistoricises Karen experiences of displacement, removing the outcome from its causes.

Becoming a refugee is one possible outcome of displacement, and perhaps its most visible form. However, as social anthropologist Liisa Malkki points out, any forced movement resulting from displacement is “only one aspect of much larger constellations of socio-political and cultural processes and practices” (Malkki, 1995, p. 496). Displaced Karen who arrive at the border are the product of pre-existing political and cultural tension. Their displacement has deep roots in historical processes that have discriminated against ethnic plurality and marginalised democratic principles. The current manifestation of such policies has resulted in the destruction of villages and crops, extrajudicial killings, rape and torture, extortion, and forced labour. Instead of addressing the political problems that cause displacement, as well as the corresponding political claims of those experiencing the displacement, current institutional responses – such as labelling, establishing refugee camps, and the status afforded displaced Karen – tend to focus on the Karen as a humanitarian case. In this type of scenario, the refugee label is used to project an image focused on the need for humanitarian assistance rather than enabling the Karen to be proactive members of society. This type of institutional response has deeply dehumanising connotations (Malkki, 1995, p. 518), because it strips the Karen of their story (history, agency, experience) and forces them to become simply a “victim”. In 2007 I interviewed a Karen man who explained to me some of the political reasons behind the flow of people into Thailand’s refugee camps.

One thing is that the income likelihood of the people inside Burma means they come to Thailand. Let’s say this is the economical reason. People want to come to Thailand to work, for their livelihood, to get money. The second thing is that along the border there is conflict, there is fighting. People who stay inside Burma have to pay many things, like taxes, which means they suffer (Saw Ba, interview, 21 July 2007).

⁶⁸ I have attempted here to identify and summarise key claims made against the Burmese military. This should not be seen as a definitive or comprehensive list. As an example of where some of these larger claims are made, see reports and commentary put out by Amnesty International, the Karen Human Rights Group, Human Rights Watch, the National league for Democracy and various ethnic political parties such as the KNU, NMSP and KIO.

Further in to our interview he told me that many Karen people don't want to come to the refugee camps. They would prefer to stay with their homes and land. Only when this is no longer possible, because of military operations, do they resort to the refugee camps. It is only when we listen to the stories of refugees that we are given a context to the refugee 'case'. People don't choose to flee to Thailand; they leave because of larger systematic socio-political problems. And rather than simply fleeing fighting, these stories provide a far more complex barometer of the problem. Some people flee because their crops and their livelihood has been destroyed by a military battalion, others flee because they can no longer afford to pay the corrupt taxes demanded of them, still others because they face starvation, their primary provider has been killed or they have a family member in the armed insurgency. These stories alone cover a wide range of political, economic and social reasons indicative of state failure to provide protection and a livelihood. This is an important framework in which the presence of displaced Karen and refugees in the Thai-Burma borderlands must be understood.

In the story above, and the many others recounted throughout this thesis, we are exposed to a range of insights into the political circumstances behind the experiences of displaced Karen. In Moo's story quoted at the beginning of this chapter she talks about the history of the Karen conflict, "Why do we Karen people have to suffer from our grandparents through to now". Her story also tells of a political will: a grassroots resolution to the conflict, and to return, "If I go back I want to stand in the shade of a tree that provides coolness and it should be a tree that we plant ourselves". Another participant, in talking about his refugee status, recognises the civil and political rights that are denied him, and the political motivations he perceives are behind this. And finally in 'Story of an IDP', Loo Ne talks about missing the land of his birth and "wishing to be back there before the end of my days". For these Karen, the circumstances that forced them to leave must be resolved if they are to fulfil their dream of one day returning to Burma.

This sense of discrimination and unresolved political injustice isn't confined to Burma's political and territorial structures. The silencing of the political self inside Burma is also transferred to the borderlands and reinforced by the structures of institutional governance that treat the Karen as a 'case' and apolitical. One Karen man I interviewed in 2007 described it like this:

Sometimes we make a joke that we are like a pig in the garden or something like that. People come and feed you, you only eat and sleep and when you go outside the garden people beat you. There is no freedom. It's not like you are human ... you don't have any future, any choice (Saw Ba, interview, 21 July 2007).

Moo shared a similar sentiment: “My life is like an animal. I can eat only when people feed me, I stay here, I sleep here, go to the toilet here, it is like we are a herd of cattle” (Moo, personal communication, 15 September 2005). Coincidentally, though perhaps not surprisingly, both participants associate their treatment with that of animals. The implication in both these comments is that their life constitutes the simple fact of living associated with survival rather than a life of thinking, acting and doing – a ‘political self’.

Another participant interviewed talked specifically of the dangers of the resettlement program which he considered to be an institutional humanitarian resolution rather than a political one.

They look at us and just see us as Human Beings; they don’t see us as a Nation. That is why the resettlement program was born ... I feel like the ‘Resettlement Program’ is taking away the power of our people ... I would like to encourage the countries also to help find the solution and help end the civil war in Burma. Let us work together to remove the military dictator and bring back democracy in Burma.⁶⁹

To this participant, recognition simply as a Human Being is the equivalent of a life without history, context or agency. In contrast, to be viewed as a Nation incorporates the idea of a political life – of rights, entitlements and political representation – and in turn recognises the presence of and possible resolutions to political injustices. Given that the resettlement program has targeted skilled and educated Karen, decimating a key resource of the Karen political movement, this participant makes a legitimate point: any help provided by the international community needs to be more than humanitarian alone, it needs to address the political, social and cultural causes of the current situation and their impediments to achieving justice in Burma.

Each of these stories provide context to the presence of displaced Karen in the borderlands, developing complexities to the circumstances that move the Karen beyond being seen simply as a refugee ‘case’. These stories are accounts of individual and collective experiences of abuse and discrimination; they provide historical continuity to Karen claims of prolonged political neglect, persecution and displacement. They are integral to understanding the deeper questions around cause and effect. But as a refugee ‘case’, the answers to some very basic questions are lost, so to resolutions to the circumstances that led to the displacement, and would benefit those who have experienced it. Why are the Karen in the borderlands? How have they come to be there? What grievances do they carry with them? How can their predicament be resolved? Karen stories can

⁶⁹ Comment made under the ‘Hsaw Pa Kaw’ entry of ‘the crooked line’ blog, <http://thecrookedline.wordpress.com/2007/02/04/8/> [accessed 21 November 2009]

provide some of these answers; at the very least they provide a complex reality, bringing context to a space that has been monopolised by the uniformity of institutional responses.

The stories of displaced Karen mentioned in this chapter show the Karen narrative has its roots embedded in historical practices of cultural differentiation, discrimination, displacement and exclusion. One cannot understand the current predicament of the Karen without understanding these historical and political factors that have brought it about. The danger of the modern institutionalised approach to Karen in the borderlands is its propensity to treat the Karen as ahistorical, as generalised victims stripped of personal narratives and therefore denying the political self. It is this condition that has forced displaced Karen in the borderlands to look elsewhere for a space in which they can have their political needs met. I argue that a significant part of this alternative political space is the attempts of displaced Karen to privilege the political voice; and in turn re-link the story/ies to the case.

Part of re-linking the story to the case is the ability to see that Karen as 'refugees', 'displaced persons' or 'illegal migrants'; victims, opportunists or both. But also to see them as politically and socially engaged activists, or a community with history, identity, rights and grievances able to be heard. Even more so, we need to see the Karen as being able to live both ends of the spectrum simultaneously. The Karen are refugees at the same time as are activists, they are displaced persons that continue to maintain strong cultural and historical ties to land and identity, they are victims at the same time as they are socially and politically engaged members of society.

In attempting to accommodate this dialectic, the Karen use the borderlands as an alternative political space. In many instances, informal political activity specific to the borderlands is established to oppose persecution and political exclusion. Some examples include artists and musicians who create works that document their culture or are critical of Burmese military persecution; environmental activists who campaign against state dam proposals; mobile health teams who treat internally displaced people, soldiers, and victims of militarisation; women's organisations who organise collectives to sell their produce; and community theatre activists who stage shows about drug use, family planning or community development techniques. These more informal types of political activity can occur because they sit predominantly outside of the state-centric discourse. They are conducted by people who continue to go unrecognised as qualified political subjects (Tangseefa, 2006) by either Thailand or Burma. Their tenuous residence in Thailand means they are not beholden to the political restrictions they would otherwise face in Burma. Their state-less position in Thailand gives them some flexibility in creating alternative political opportunities for Burma. These types of political activity may lack formal political

organisation, yet they fill the gaps left by the political inadequacies of the current system of institutional governance; they make a statement for informal, participatory politics.

CONCLUSION

Institutional failure to adequately address long-term socio-political issues, typified by ongoing displacement and persecution, has led to the creation of an alternative political space where the Karen themselves protest, construct and redefine the parameters of their political life. In doing so they challenge and in some cases renegotiate the administrative frameworks that govern their political existence in the borderlands.

This alternative borderlands space is a highly political one and is enacted through the practices of the every-day. Displaced Karen take on the role of advocate for the political persecution they and others continue to experience. They document state abuse and search for lasting solutions. They become the keepers of cultural knowledge and act as conduits between their homeland and the international community. The 'victim' is also the 'political self' capable and able to speak authoritatively on the political elements that impact life in the borderlands. In doing so displaced Karen have created a space that is partially defined by political agency and evidenced through patterns of activism, and which gives meaning to the political and social aspirations of displaced Karen.

This chapter is important to the main thesis argument because these patterns of activism are one of the key modes of social practice in the borderlands space and as such critically inform the projection of a Karen identity. This is evident in the way patterns of activism develop the notion of a Karen political self, and ultimately a collective political identity. This is critical to how a Karen identity in the borderlands manifests but also to understanding how this identity is connected to the space and the social practices that feed it. The next two chapters continue to develop the nature of the borderlands space by concentrating on two other modes of social practice that are relevant to the space, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery. In the next chapter I will argue that the borderlands has given rise to new networks of solidarity which are largely formed through activism and framed by shared experiences of displacement and persecution. These networks of solidarity act as vehicles for the expression of a Karen identity. It is to these practices of solidarity and the political messages they contain that the next chapter turns.

CHAPTER 6

THIS STORY IS NOT FOR MYSELF

NETWORKS OF SOLIDARITY

*I said to my mom not to worry about my future, because I know what is my future
My future is not property and not living in good conditions
My future is to be against any injustice and oppression
To live in harmony with our world environment and build up a peaceful society
(Saw Ba, personal communication, 25 June 2008)*

For many Karen who arrive at the Thai-Burma border, there is a shared experience of persecution and displacement. The journey to the border is often one of trauma, physical hardship and repeated attempts to evade the operations of heavy militarisation in Burma. In such instances the Thai side of the border is seen as a place of safety and refuge. But far from being the journey's destination, for many the border becomes a sort of extension of the journey, a space in which these common experiences and stories can be told and re-told, nurtured, refined and noted – and at times also concealed or embellished. These stories, in a sort of cyclic motion, are projected outwards to a global community as well as returning in a much changed form to the territory in which they were born, Karen State in Burma. The opportunity for this process to occur is significantly reliant upon a key component of the borderlands space, an interchange that occurs the national border: particularly non-institutionalised physical movement across the border, global flows of information, and the transfer of skills and knowledge. These processes allow stories to be built in such a way they develop networks of solidarity, gathering momentum and support as they are further disseminated in both local and global settings.

This chapter argues that new networks of solidarity are formed through patterns of activism that are framed by shared experiences of displacement and persecution. These networks of solidarity are formed and strengthened where activist practices intersect with particular mechanisms of social power, in this thesis categorised as international networking, new technologies and political consciousness. In addition, these networks of solidarity also become a key conduit for the projection of a Karen political narrative based on shared experiences of persecution and displacement, a key component of the Karen identity I argue for in Chapter Eight.

While networks of solidarity can manifest through a range of socio-political processes, in this thesis solidarities are defined as they relate to or form through activist practices. I focus on activist practices because these constitute a dominant form of political activity in the borderlands and are now deeply embedded in the nature of this space. With this in mind, the chapter is structured

around the grouping of these solidarities in to three key practices that are framed by an overarching political narrative of Karen persecution and displacement.

The first practice is access to international networks and mechanisms that have helped displaced Karen create greater awareness around claims of persecution as well as enhancing the capacity of Karen to develop and present a political voice. The second practice is the use of new technologies. Similarly to engagement with international networks, new technologies provide an opportunity to create greater global awareness of Karen persecution, but in addition, new technologies also act as a platform for the projection of a Karen political narrative of persecution. New technologies have also created opportunities for greater connections between Karen groups with shared interests and activities in the borderlands. The third practice is where specific activities of the Karen are designed to develop a level of political consciousness and critical thinking that helps strengthen the ability of displaced Karen to convey a strong political message around the ongoing persecution of Karen inside Burma. This political consciousness fulfils a larger need to develop the capacity of local Karen communities both inside Burma and along the border.

These three practices are framed by an over overarching political narrative of displacement and persecution which begins to develop the parameters of a Karen identity that is projected from the borderlands space. Combined with the inward projection of a Karen identity characterised by a selective recovery of cultural icons and origin myths, which is the focus of the next chapter, over the coming chapter I argue that these political and cultural narratives are critical components of a Karen identity that is specific to the borderlands space.

This chapter sets up the second key mode of social practice in the borderlands, networks of solidarity. It is integral to the main thesis argument because networks of solidarity are evidence of a political interchange, framed by activism that occurs across the national border. This interchange is defined by the nature of sociality (the flow of people, ideas and resources as well as connections to family, identity and culture) in conjunction with a territorial domain. These networks of solidarity not only constitute a key component of the nature of the borderlands space, they give form and meaning to the practices of displaced Karen as they relate to that space and in particular to the construction and projection of a Karen identity.

INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS

The opportunities for political agency significantly increase for displaced Karen once they reach the Thai side of the border. The barriers that stifle political agency on the Burmese side of the border – isolation, poverty, militarisation, political homogeneity to name but a few – while still present in

Thailand carry less urgency and political significance for displaced Karen. A key contemporary element of the borderlands as a political space is the capacity to utilise international audiences and mechanisms in ways not available to Karen in the conflict zones inside Burma, particularly as a platform for advocacy to the international community. With this, I contend that the borderlands space provides displaced Karen with the opportunity to tap into global networks that can increase awareness of Karen claims of persecution, and importantly, help develop solidarities around these claims. This interaction with a global community enhances the political capacity of displaced Karen by providing greater opportunities to develop and present a Karen political voice.

This exposure to a global community comes from a diverse range of sources and relationships specific to the space. These include the increasing tourist trade along the border and a mostly sympathetic media willing to focus on instances of Karen persecution, as well as the presence of international aid agencies that have provided greater exposure to international mechanisms and ideas. But perhaps the most prominent form of global engagement for displaced Karen comes through a more sophisticated access to UN mechanisms, sympathetic governments, and funding sources, as well as information flows and political platforms. Inherent in this access is a heightened form of advocacy; by this I mean the active support of an idea or argument, mostly, though not always, conducted in the public domain. In the borderlands this most commonly takes the form of a call for political action against continuing Burmese Army attacks on ethnic areas, or a plea to take more immediate steps such as providing humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict. Advocacy at the international level has been further enhanced by the capacity of emerging technologies to connect the borderlands with the greater global community, an issue discussed later in this chapter.

For many Karen, their former lives were spent in the jungles of Karen State or the confines of the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Their emplacement in the borderlands offers very different political opportunities, particularly in terms of the political agency and activism discussed in the previous chapter. Karen activists and community organisations have increasingly engaged with international bodies in ways that have developed the capacity of displaced Karen to present their experiences and link them to political injustices, as well as bringing international attention to the ongoing persecution and displacement of Karen within Karen State. Further to this, these political injustices act as platforms around which the Karen can come together and form networks of solidarity.

Some of these methods of engagement include submitting written reports to regulatory bodies and submissions to commissions such as the UN Committee against Torture and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, as well as the United Nations Human Rights Commission. As traditional

forms of human rights documentation they cater to a mostly international audience in need of objective factual information. In other instances activists have travelled overseas in their capacity as a victim of state violence, placing them in direct contact with the exiled community, foreign governments and media outlets. For example, Zoya Phan, a Karen activist and daughter of slain KNU leader Pado Mahn Sha, met the British Prime Minister at the time, Gordon Brown and was also asked to address the British Conservative Party Conference in 2006 and 2007. On both occasions she was able to convey her experiences of persecution and displacement and highlight the plight of Karen people in Burma.⁷⁰ In September 2006 Hseng NOUNG, a Shan activist, was invited to talk at a special roundtable discussion convened to coincide with the opening of 61st General Assembly session of the United Nations.⁷¹ She spoke of the Burmese Army's use of rape against women, particularly in Burma's ethnic areas.

In other instances various government delegations and prominent individuals have visited the refugee camps and held audiences with displaced Karen, hearing firsthand accounts of their experiences. Some examples include a 2008 visit by the US First Lady Laura Bush, who spent time at Mae La Refugee Camp as well as conducting discussions with Burmese health and education groups in Mae Sot.⁷² In 2007 the Nobel Women's Initiative led a group of high profile women to the Thai-Burma border where they visited clinics and refugee camps as well as meeting with government officials and women's groups.⁷³ Other high profile people such as Angelina Jolie in her capacity as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR have visited the camps along the border on a number of occasions, meeting and talking with refugees. The results of such visits can be elusive in their direct outcomes for displaced Karen in the borderlands; they do however attract international attention to the unfolding crisis along the border and provide some opportunity for Karen voices to explain their experiences and articulate their socio-political needs.

⁷⁰ At the 2007 Conservative Party Conference Zoya Phan pleaded for international action to help the people of Burma. She recounted the ongoing killing in Karen state as well as the use of violence against monks during the Saffron Revolution. Zoya Phan's speech can be viewed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WW4fd8pUblM>.

⁷¹ For coverage of this UN General Assembly session see a posting by Washington File United Nations Correspondent, Judy Aita: <http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2006/September/20060920144706eafas0.84219.html> [Accessed 23 September 2009].

⁷² Laura Bush's trip was covered by numerous media outlets, for example see: 'Laura Bush visits Burmese groups in Mae Sot' (2008, August 8). *Democratic Voice of Burma*. Retrieved March 28, 2012, from <http://www.dvb.no/uncategorized/laura-bush-visits-burmese-groups-in-mae-sot/1307>.

⁷³ The Nobel Women's Initiative delegation, including Nobel Laureates Jody Williams and Wangari Maathai, visited Burma and Darfur in July 2008 on a fact-finding mission to investigate the status of women. At the conclusion of the trip a major report was released, 'Women for Peace' (*Women for Peace: Nobel Women's Initiative Delegation to Thai-Burma border, South Sudan, Chad-Darfur Area*, 2008) which called on the world's superpowers to create the "conditions for long-lasting peace and democracy" in Burma and the Sudan.

Displaced Karen in the borderlands also use global networks to connect with other ethnic groups facing persecution in Burma, as well as persecuted peoples from countries in Asia, the Pacific and other conflict areas. For example, there has been some attempt to unite the different ethnic groups around a common political goal. The most prominent example of this is the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) formed in 2001. The Council's stated aim was to create unity and cooperation between the various ethnic groups and act as a united force for tripartite dialogue between the SPDC, NLD and ethnic minority groups. It does however face the formidable task of bringing together ethnically-divided and diverse interests behind a common cause. There are also opportunities to create networks of solidarity at more informal levels. One such example is a study tour organised by a local NGO, Burma Issues⁷⁴ in 2002 between the recipients of state violence in West Papua and members of the Karen, Karenni and Shan communities along the Thai-Burma border. The meeting allowed these groups to share their respective struggles, but also provided the opportunity to explore their common difficulties and possible solutions. Developed further, these types of regional networking can strengthen a sense of mutual sharing and responsibility, developing a pool of resources and forming solidarities around resolving conflicts in the region.

It can be difficult to see the immediate benefits of engaging with the international community. It doesn't often bring swift change or relief, and the outcomes can be ambiguous and difficult to measure. I mention these examples however to show the benefits of international engagement on a broader platform with a number of inter-connected levels. It places the Karen conflict in a global framework where they can draw on the considerable resources of the international community. This in turn gives displaced Karen the opportunity to articulate their experiences in supported, politically recognised environments such as a forum like the United Nations. It also provides a platform from which displaced Karen can project a political narrative of persecution and political will. And finally it exposes displaced Karen to diverse interests and ideas which in turn help to shape Karen understandings of their own conflict within the global context.

There is another way this international engagement impacts the lives of displaced Karen. While instrumental in maintaining global interest in what is essentially a prolonged civil war, international engagement has also created a space of transversal trajectories which connects Karen political agency with ideas and resources. As a result there are many more grassroots-driven activities that have come out of the borderlands over the last decade. One prominent example is the 'License to Rape' report released by the Shan Women's Action Network and the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SWAN & SHRF, 2002). The release of this report prompted statements from the US Congress and US State Department, as well a call by the UN General Assembly for the Government

⁷⁴ This author was working for Burma Issues at this time and was involved in the organisation of this study tour.

of Myanmar to cooperate with a UN investigation into charges of rape carried out by members of the armed forces.⁷⁵ These responses were instrumental in forcing the SPDC to conduct an investigation into the report's claims. Unsurprisingly, the SPDC investigation found the report's claims were "false and fabricated".⁷⁶ The 'License to Rape' report instigated a number of other reports on the widespread use of rape by the Burmese Army, including 'Shattering Silences' (KWO, 2004) which documented the rape of Karen women and 'Catwalk to the Barracks' (HRFM, 2005) which documented instances of rape against Mon women. All these reports relied on information documented and collated by local researchers on the ground, and were strengthened by the ability of these researchers to speak to the report's findings in international forums. These reports were further strengthened by their ability to present a picture of the widespread use of rape as a weapon of war against ethnic women, and to link this to international forums already working on this issue. These and other similar instances highlight the increasing reach and capacity of the borderlands community to effectively utilise the resources of the international community.

Engagement with the international community has meant many displaced Karen in the borderlands have learnt a number of skills which will serve them in an increasingly globalised world; including the capacity to negotiate complex global structures and the skills to communicate in both a cross-cultural and multi-lingual environment. Participation in formal structures as politically-engaged members of the Karen community – for example references to Karen reports documenting the displacement of Karen in Burma's eastern states have consistently appeared in UN statements and recommendations since at least the mid-1990s – has also strengthened the legitimacy of Karen activists claims to present their own political agency. Engagement with international networks has provided the Karen with an outlet for their activism, increased global awareness of the Karen situation, and developed the capacity of displaced Karen to present their own political voice. A considerable impact upon the effectiveness of global engagement is the many advances in communications technologies. These new technologies have not only strengthened Karen connections to the world away from the borderlands, but also developed the capacity of grassroots Karen to define what these connections and messages should be.

⁷⁵ Expressions of concern regarding rape and other forms of sexual violence consistently appear in the Resolutions of the UN General Assembly. In 2003, following the release of the 'License to Rape' report, the 58th session of the UN General Assembly specifically called on the Government of Myanmar "To immediately facilitate and cooperate fully with the proposed investigation by the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Myanmar into charges of rape and other abuse of civilians carried out by members of the armed forces in Shan and other states, including unhindered access to the region, and to guarantee the safety of those cooperating with and covered by the investigation". The resolution can be accessed here: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N03/509/34/PDF/N0350934.pdf?OpenElement> [Accessed 7 November 2011].

⁷⁶ For an example of the SPDCs response to the 'License to Rape' report, view the official government briefing here: <http://missions.itu.int/~myanmar/02nlm/n020824.htm#3> .

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

In addition to being a catalyst for greater and more effective interaction with the international networks mentioned in the previous section, new technologies have also developed the capacity of displaced Karen to produce their own messages and project them to a larger audience. This section contends that the use of new technologies, particularly in terms of developing networks of solidarity, has been most effective on two levels: Firstly, technologies such as blogs and websites have been utilised by grassroots communities to increase global awareness of the Karen situation inside Burma and in the borderlands. In addition, they act as a platform for the projection of a Karen political narrative of persecution. Secondly, new technologies have created opportunities for greater connections between Karen groups with shared interests and activities in the borderlands. This is particularly evident on an organisational level aimed at English-speaking audiences, although less effective in its ability to reach Karen-language audiences (a point discussed later in this section).

It is important to note that this section is not a comment on the technology per se, nor its impact on users; this would require a very different methodological approach. Rather, my interest is in how these technologies are being used and for what purpose, and this necessitates a focus on content rather than a technical analysis of the technology. It should also be noted that my research on new technologies was largely conducted between the years 2005 and 2008. The actual technologies and the way they are used by displaced Karen have developed significantly since then. However, the material in this section remains particularly relevant in terms of identifying and understanding how new technologies have helped shape Karen political activity and more broadly the projection of a Karen identity. To date, what little that has been written about the impact and use of technologies has tended to focus on diasporic communities (Cho, 2011). This however, does not contend with the very particular circumstances of displaced Karen in the borderlands, particularly an ongoing close physical connection to the homeland and inter-connectedness to Karen still inside Burma which is evident for example in processes of cultural exchange and the collection of stories of human rights abuses. While the technology has, and will continue to change, the larger arguments made here remain relevant. Namely that new technologies, whatever form they take, constitute a key platform from which a Karen political narrative of persecution is projected, and that new technologies create opportunities for greater inward connection between the Karen in the borderlands as well as outward connection to a global audience. The material I use here is worthy of examination in this respect.

Through observations over a number of fieldwork stints between 2005 and 2008, it became apparent that new technologies were initially embraced by displaced Karen because they provided

a readily accessible outlet for the documentation of Karen persecution, and as such were an effective medium for their activism. The Karen I talked to recognised that these technologies could potentially capture larger audiences and garner more effective responses to the conflict inside Burma. The focus was on what the technology could convey, not necessarily its technical capabilities, although this obviously influenced its projection. It also gave many Karen who were concerned about the conflict inside Burma a purpose, some contribution they could make to in support of a political resolution to the conflict. The line between personal and professional use of new technologies is a blurry one in a messy political space like the Thai-Burma borderlands, but my sense from the many interviews and observations I undertook at that time was that the use of new technologies served a political purpose; they were used to collate and disseminate information around ongoing claims of persecution, with the purpose of it reaching someone who could do something about it, or at least that was the intent.

The most significant of these new technologies in terms of their impact on activities in the borderlands has been the internet. Over the last ten years the internet has taken a central role in mobilising and projecting alternative political, social and cultural messages from the borderlands. It has allowed Karen activists to reach more diverse audiences with their messages. While use of the internet was evident in the borderlands from the mid-1990s, it is difficult to find statistics for internet use in particular regional areas of Thailand. Anecdotal evidence at the time of my field research in 2005 suggested the internet was largely used by exiled organisations, NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in the larger towns of Mae Sot, Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Son. At that time, personal internet use was fairly sporadic, although this has changed significantly over the last five years as personal wifi devices have become more prevalent along the border. However, the focus in this section is on organisational use because in the context of the Thai-Burma borderlands at the time of this research, this is where most activist practices were largely located.

The way in which the internet was used by these organisations was fairly typical, falling into two broad categories. The first was as an information gathering and exchange portal, although with a few subtle variations. Some websites in this category offer additional participatory options such as blogs, message boards or chat forums, while others were primarily aimed at the provision of political, cultural or social information about the Karen. For example, organisations such as the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), Burma Issues (BI) or the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) collected information from inside Burma and the borderlands, create reports based on this information and then place them on their websites for further dissemination or exchange. Others, such as Burmanet and BI Weekly distributed news of ongoing human rights violations through

listserves and email bulletins. These are often picked up by mainstream media and projected back into Burma through media outlets like Voice of America (VOA), BBC and Radio Free Asia. Websites such as KarenPeople.org provided political and cultural information about the Karen with an additional function of allowing the user to participate in an online message board. Blogs such as 'KarenRefugee' and the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People's 'Inside News' also allowed users to interact through a comments function (although these were fairly under-utilised at the time), while at the same time providing important cultural and political information about being a refugee or displaced person in the borderlands. Websites such as the Karen History and Cultural Preservation Society and the Burma Library act more traditionally as a library of data regarding the history, culture and political situation of the Karen.

The second category is where the internet is used as a resource tool. In most cases NGOs and CBOs fall into this category. These organisations provide information for sharing and exchange but they also provide important resource material. An example would be the Karen Teacher Working Group whose website provides education texts, and Karen dictionaries and fonts, and the Mae Tao Clinic which provides important information about health services, training and education. In many of these cases the internet acts as a largely supplementary function to existing activities. For example, the main function of the Mae Tao clinic is to provide health services to refugees, migrant workers and others from Burma who cross into Thailand. This core function is supplemented by a website which allows the clinic to disperse knowledge of its services to a larger audience. In another example, human rights documentation has been occurring in the borderlands for many decades. The internet has not necessarily changed that function of documentation, but rather the form it takes: providing a faster more effective and accessible means of disseminating it. In this sense, the purpose of activists in the borderlands remains the same; the internet simply becomes an additional tool, albeit a significant one, through which their activism can be disseminated.

There are other important factors to consider when laying out internet use in the borderlands. Any presentation of information has both a producer and a recipient. While information provided on the internet may seem to have clear distinctions between the two, it is not always the case. Most raw data in the borderlands is collected in the Karen language, and with a few exceptions this is then translated into English and put on the web for an international audience. The Karen produce it, an international audience receives it. But in many cases foreign researchers, volunteers and writers produce English-language reports and other documentation based on the raw data. This is then disseminated to an international audience as well as a local English-speaking Karen audience. The Karen and foreigners are both producers and receivers. A smaller amount, although increasingly growing, is the production of information in Karen and Burmese intended for a Karen

audience. *KweKaLu*, a Karen-language newspaper in the borderlands is an example of this. Information is collected by Karen staff and placed online in the Karen language. Much of the art and music produced in the borderlands fits this type as well, with a plethora of Karen-language music albums appearing in the borderlands over the last five years. Through this process of shared information creation and dissemination, networks of solidarity between the Karen and an international audience are able to form. There are however, still significant obstacles when it comes to internet use and the integration of a more diverse Karen audience.

The internet has undoubtedly increased the global reach of the Karen struggle. It has also had considerable impact upon local organisations' ability to connect with global audiences. However, an area still under development is its use to support local networking, particularly in terms of providing for a Karen language audience. The two biggest obstacles remain language and accessibility. For many years the use of Karen language on websites was limited by technical and visual constraints around the Karen font. While this has been resolved in more recent years, a large amount of internet content is still English-orientated; this is a challenge to internet accessibility and user inter-connections globally.

From a sample of 19 Karen websites studied in 2007, only one, *KweKaLu*, had substantial amounts of Karen language on their site. Four others, the Karen Human Right Group, Burma Issues, the Karen Teachers Working Group and Drum Publications, provided various resources in Karen language, while the rest of the site was in English. Even where Karen language is used it is mostly Sgaw Karen, and this excludes audiences who speak Pwo, Bwe and many other Karen dialects. Language is still one of the biggest obstacles to wide-spread internet accessibility, but *KweKaLu* with its emphasis on Karen language is a strong example of the internet's potential in this area.

While language and accessibility pose some difficulties when it comes to the internet developing more meaningful connections at the local level, there are at least two areas where new technologies have had a profound effect: firstly the way they have been used to develop solidarities between organisations in the borderlands and secondly in the way that new technologies can give priority to personal narratives. Both points are elaborated on below.

An example of the internet developing solidarities between organisations in the borderlands can be found in the work of a coalition of five Karen organisations called the Karen River Watch (KRW). KRW is made up of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG), the Karen Office for Relief and Development (KORD), the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) and the Federation of Trade Unions - Kawthoolei (FTUK). By using various forms of technology the coalition has been able to communicate, mobilise and advocate in more

collaborative and efficient ways. A good example is a campaign the coalition began in 2003 against the Thai and Burmese government's decision to dam sections of the Salween River. The campaign worked at both a grassroots and global level to raise awareness of the environmental impacts, as well as the associated political, social and economic impacts, of such a large-scale development project. The campaign employed a number of new technologies to achieve their aims. To date, the project has produced a written report, a DVD, a tape of music and a website. They instigated an e-petition to the Prime Minister of Thailand and took part in a Global Day of Action in 19 cities across the world. Production of the tape of music provides an interesting approach to cross-border sharing which makes use of both new technology and international networks. A group from KRW along with other associated individuals set up a temporary recording studio in an internally displaced persons (IDP) area on the banks of the Salween River. They recorded six songs over five days. When villagers weren't busy they came down and watched. Many of the songs on the tape are based on Karen *hta* which is a form of oral poetry traditionally used to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next.

Originally we thought it would be too difficult to record this on the banks of the Salween. It is an IDP area and it is difficult to know when the Burmese military might appear ... The use of poem, song and performance art is of real practical use to the villagers ... music can make everything concise. They can keep the tape to remind them of the dam issue and it will remain in their memories (So Pla, interview, 29 September 2005).

Once the tape was finished the group sent copies back to the village where they had recorded the music. It has also been distributed along the border and through international networks, including being able to be downloaded from the KRW website. By using the web, video and music, in Karen and English languages, the group has reached an audience, both locally and internationally, Karen and foreign, in ways that would never have been possible before the advent of these new technologies. The connections and solidarity built around this one particular issue is indicative of the way new technologies can bring politically and socially engaged individuals together around shared values and interests, while at the same time restoring the value of the voices and the messages they provide.

Projects such as these begin to show the inward projection of a Karen political narrative, a point I explore further in the next chapter but of interest to my argument here. In this instance, KRW was able to construct a political message – firstly regarding the viability of the dam and its impact upon local communities, and secondly regarding a wider message of Karen persecution – that is specifically designed to reach and influence a Karen audience. The project brings an inward projection of solidarity that is characterised by its place as part of the larger act of persecution

enacted upon the Karen by the Burmese military. In this sense villagers affected by the dam are not alone in terms of the ongoing threats of displacement and violence enacted by the Burmese military. They are in fact part of a larger Karen community who have suffered similar experiences, making them part of a larger narrative that can articulate a collective response. This inward projection will be discussed further in the next chapter but at this point it is worth noting that new technologies can enable access to a wider Karen audience (including the inward projection of a Karen political narrative) which facilitates the dissemination of a shared Karen narrative of displacement and persecution. This narrative manifests in the projection of a Karen identity in the borderlands (the key argument of Chapter Eight), and is critically informed by the borderlands space in which it is constructed and projected.

The second point discussed in this section is that new technologies can prioritise personal narratives, which in turn are used to establish a collective political narrative. This process provides legitimacy and power to Karen political voices by allowing Karen to own their message as well as fulfilling a need in the outside community for greater 'proof' of atrocities they have only heard about second hand. In 2007 in Mae La Refugee camp a group of Karen students started a blog called KarenRefugee.⁷⁷ It began by providing first-hand accounts of life in the camp as well as the aspirations of youth living as refugees. Due to the impact of the resettlement program, the blog went on to include entries from Karen refugees resettled in Australia, and others who are undertaking work in local Karen communities outside the camps. The blog had the potential to utilise both a diverse user-base and a wide international audience, connecting those in the isolated confines of the camp with the greater online global community. The conversational nature of blogs allows Karen refugees to tell their stories, but also learn from communities they would not normally have access to.

The personal narrative is imperative to this type of technology. One participant, Loo Ne, emphasised this point when talking about his song, 'Story of an IDP'. "It's like I'm reading my own biography since I was a child" (Loo Ne, personal communication, 22 September 2005). For Loo Ne the song fulfils an intensely personal need to let other people know his feelings and experiences as an IDP. But this is not the only purpose of writing the song. A group of Karen activists have created a video clip for the song and released it to a wider audience on YouTube.⁷⁸ In this instance technology and greater opportunities for dissemination allows this personal narrative to become an advocacy tool as well. In our interview Loo Ne expanded upon this when he said:

⁷⁷ The KarenRefugee blog was at its most active in 2007 and 2008. It has remained largely static since 2009, most likely due to the impact of the resettlement program. The blog can be viewed at: <http://karenrefugee.livejournal.com/>.

⁷⁸ The video clip of 'Story of an IDP' can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0a97qOnrRU>.

Writing this song was not really for myself because it is a story I already know. It's like I'm using different tools to tell the story of the IDP, actually not only the IDP but people here [in Thailand] as well. It can cover all people, not only those from the civil war zone. Especially it can be useful for human rights activists who can do lobbying and campaigning with it (Loo Ne, interview, 22 September 2005).

What is also evident in the way Loo Ne speaks of his song is his belief that 'Story of an IDP' represents a larger collective of people with similar stories. This is not his story but many people's story. He tells it as a way of reflecting the experiences of other IDP, or other Karen in the conflict zones or displaced into Thailand. In 'Story of an IDP' we see a subjective experience of displacement turned in to a collective identity with a political message projected through an activist framework. The song is a good example of moving beyond the realm of a personal narrative into a shared experience of displacement and in turn a potential point of mobilisation and identification for a collective community of Karen.

In the early to mid-nineties the border area experienced an influx in trainings around video and its potential as an advocacy tool. Western organisations spent time training and funding local activists to take videos into the conflict zone and record first hand experiences. It followed an international trend where the public wanted 'to see for themselves' what was happening in areas they had only previously read about.

I think, nowadays, there are changes in many places, including information and media. More and more people are aware of getting the real voice, the real story from those who suffer, not through NGOs or reports. They themselves want to see, want to hear. First of all they try and get these people to go somewhere and tell their story by their own. That's what they try. From the point of view of the voice of the people, one thing is like the empowerment. They don't feel that they are victims; they don't feel that they are suffering alone. It will give them awareness to go out and learn they are not the only ones who are suffering. In other countries there are also people who are suffering like them. And also there are people who support them, a sort of movement. They are not standing alone, so it is very important to bring their voice to empower them (Loo Ne, interview, 19 September 2005).

New technology and access to broader networks has allowed the Karen to present their own voices to a global community, effectively moving the debate beyond the state narrative that has typically excluded a Karen political voice. As pointed out by Loo Ne in the comments above, this has produced a space that allows for personal narratives and at the same time reinforces a sense of

empowerment for those whose voices have a history of being neglected. Perhaps one of the most authoritative voices on narrative and empowerment is Julian Rappaport who has worked extensively in the fields of community psychology and social policy. Rappaport calls neglected voices “an ignored or devalued resource”, and as a resource therefore subject to uneven distribution. Re-establishing the value of these stories therefore requires “people participate[ing] in the discovery, creation, and enhancement of their own community narratives and personal stories” (Rappaport, 1995, p. 52). This is, as stated in the previous chapter, an example of Geoff Wood’s claim to put the story back into the case (Wood, 1985), but with an emphasis on the value of these stories which are too often neglected. To some extent what new technologies have done is address this imbalance, allowing long-neglected or devalued voices to develop a space in which their political voice is supported. A video, a web page or a blog are all methods of information exchange that can function freely and largely outside of the formal political structures. As a result it is a space where alternative political voices can be expressed and supported, and it is this capability that ensures new technologies are an integral factor in creating spaces of solidarity for displaced Karen, and in turn help develop an alternative space where those political needs can be met.

Advances in new communications technologies and the increased capacity of displaced Karen to utilise these technologies has significantly improved the reach of Karen political voices, and undoubtedly increased the reach of advocacy around Karen persecution and displacement. At the same time, these technologies enable greater connections between individuals and groups in the borderlands with shared interests and activities. Evidence of the potential of these technologies can be seen in the way organisations have worked together on projects such as those undertaken by KRW. While new technologies have expanded the reach of Karen political messages, the focus of this next section is on how the development of political consciousness is used to strengthen the capacity of local communities and in the process contribute to new networks of solidarity.

POLITICALLY CONSCIOUS, POLITICALLY REFLECTIVE

A state of political consciousness is in many respects an outcome of the first two practices already mentioned; it also represents the way the Karen typically utilise new forms of knowledge and skills to develop the capacity of their communities. While not explicitly stated, many Karen approach this as a way to expand the potential power and influence of Karen political agency. In this section I contend that the Karen attempt to develop political consciousness in their communities in order to strengthen the ability to convey a strong political message around the ongoing persecution of Karen inside Burma. This fulfils a larger need to develop the skills and knowledge of local Karen communities both inside Burma and along the border.

While I touch briefly on aspects of more formal technical skills transference such as practical trainings and education, this section focuses on the broader theme of political consciousness and reflection. There is an important reason for this. A key theme that emerged from many of the displaced Karen who participated in this research was the twin desire to both share the knowledge and opportunities they themselves had gained and to build a critically aware population capable of strengthening the Karen political movement and ultimately resolving the conflict inside Burma. This motivation has deep historical roots, and is framed by a desire to present the Karen as an educated and civilised nation with its own history and literature, thus putting them on a culturally and politically equal footing to others, and highlighting the unjust nature of their persecution (Cheesman, 2002, pp. 209-214). This position is encapsulated in the words of Po Lin Tay, an early Karen historian.

If at some time our texts are lost, what will become of our race's experiences in past generations? There would be nothing to serve as evidence of Karen history, whether records, newspapers or written news, so we would not be able to exactly re-identify our origins and would become a generation of people without a country (quoted in Cheesman (2002, p. 213).

It is a sentiment echoed by a Karen participant in this research, U Kyi, who clearly saw the importance of learning and 'knowing' Karen history and culture.

Personally, for me I think it is really, really important because without knowing your own history you cannot do anything for your people ... You know that to organise people you have to know history and culture, this is what I believe. Because if you would like to give the young generation, let's say this is not the right word but like ideology or nationalism then you need to base it on history. If you cannot give them firm information then they will not believe. That is why history is important (U Kyi, interview, 8 November 2005).

This participant's account indicates a perceived link between a critically aware population and the progress of the idea of a Karen nation. In other words, to work for the cause, to educate others, is seen as the duty of all Karen, in order to ensure the survival of the Karen peoples, their history, their culture, and their land. This is certainly true of the displaced Karen who participated in this research who expressed a clear duty towards developing a politically conscious population as a way of protecting and developing Karen identity and culture.

There are a number of key examples from my research that best illustrate how this process of political consciousness helps to form networks of solidarity at the local level. Imparting learnt knowledge underlies most of these types of activities. One participant, Saw Ba, is a Karen artist-

activist with a particular interest in drawing cartoons. He has natural creative ability but has also benefited from informal training in community organisation and NGO-facilitated arts programs in the borderlands. A number of his cartoons have been published in *KweKaLu*, a Karen language newspaper distributed along the border and inside Burma. In our interview, Saw Ba said the main purpose behind his cartoons is for them to be used as an educational tool, a means for imparting knowledge. He talked about a particular cartoon he drew where he contemplates a common refrain expressed by Karen in Burma's more remote and illiterate conflict zones (see Figure 1). He believes that prolonged suffering and isolation has caused many displaced Karen to search for explanations in the metaphysical world (Saw Ba, interview, 30 September 2005). This will often take the form of an 'acceptance of fate' or 'God's will' and this then frames how Karen perceive the injustices enacted upon them and rationalise their current predicament.⁷⁹



Figure 1– 'Fate', cartoon by Saw Ba

In the cartoon the mother accepts that the circumstances of her life are caused by fate. Saw Ba told me that the mother represents many displaced Karen who believe that life and its repercussions are beyond their control, demobilising any action that might serve to change these

⁷⁹ Comments on 'fate' and 'God's will' are found in the interviews of many displaced people in the conflict zones. For examples see video footage produced by Burma Issues www.burmissues.org and the Karen Human Rights Group www.khrg.org

conditions, and in effect entrenching their own immobility. In his work on cultural pedagogy Paulo Freire has attempted to account for this cultural conditioning that allows people to inadvertently participate in their own subjugation. His term “culture of silence” is a useful way of understanding the sometimes paralysing effect of living under sustained periods of oppression. Under the culture of silence life is a space in which you live only; where blame and responsibility lay outside the realm of your reality, and where alienation from those in power has caused the masses to be complicit in their muteness (Freire, 1972, p. 30). It is these kinds of belief that Saw Ba believes are damaging to Karen agency and which he is determined to address through his cartoons. He uses knowledge and skills enabled by his presence in the borderlands to create and then disseminate alternative messages like the one in his cartoon above. His knowledge, and subsequently his message can be found in the comments of the villager’s in the last panel when they state that the conditions suffered by the woman and her son are the creation of fellow human beings, not an ethereal ‘other’ from a different realm. By viewing this in the context of action-cause, displaced Karen can change the nature of those conditions rather than be complicit in their silence. Saw Ba has developed this knowledge or political awareness through a combination of self-analysis and exposure to other ideas. It is knowledge he thinks is important to share and he achieves this through his art.

Cartoons have been used in a similar way by the artist Pe Li in his *Hsaw Pa Kaw* series. Published in *KweKaLu* since 1997 the cartoons often convey educative messages around politics and being a refugee. In a particular cartoon published in October 2005, Pe Li addresses the concerns he has with the resettlement program.



Woman: Do I look like them?

Pa Kaw: You dress like them, I worry you will forget us.

Woman: Well I have prepared rice seeds, betel nut seeds, sticky rice seeds and my knife to cut the rice with. I thought of taking the rice pounder but friends said it would be too heavy to take to the third country.

Pa Kaw: Will you have land to cultivate in this third country then?

Woman: Sure. Friends have told us there is lots of land.

Pa Kaw: hmmm ... maybe

Figure 2 – Hsaw Pa Kaw cartoon by Pe Li, KweKaLu, October 2005

At the end of 2005, concern within the refugee camps about resettlement to third countries was particularly heated and dominated by misinformation. Many thought they would be leaving to be resettled the next day, not understanding that the process might take months if not years. Pe Li's cartoons at this time showed concern that little was being done to address the cultural realities of resettlement. From simple things such as differences in the styles of dressing, to more potentially debilitating differences such as making a living and understanding what day-to-day life would be like in countries such as Australia or America. As more and more people complained of the lack of information being handed out to those in the camps, Pe Li's message through his *Hsaw Pa Kaw* cartoon became increasingly important in reaching the people most affected by the resettlement process, those in the camps. It was a reminder to the people that resettlement was not necessarily the golden land promised, and that it was not without its own difficulties and struggles. For many, resettlement is a resolution to the appalling and protracted living arrangements of the refugee camps along the border. However it can also be the beginning of a whole new set of challenges for displaced Karen to face, and it is this knowledge that is conveyed in Pe Li's cartoons.

The objective of both these cartoonists work is to convey knowledge and ideas. In their work they critically analyse the realities that impact the everyday lives of displaced Karen in the borderlands and inside Burma. As an easily accessible and understood medium, cartoons have the potential to reach a large and dispersed audience. In his 'fate' cartoon, Saw Ba talks of this in terms of

developing a culture of political reflection through art, and he believes the medium of cartoons is currently underutilised in terms of its capacity to develop a forum for a Karen political culture. In our interview he expressed it like this:

From my experience I don't see the Karen draw so much compared to the Burmese and other cultures. I mean in terms of making a living from your art and having your work published. Karen people draw but they don't pass on their work to others, it's mostly just for themselves. I would like us to have our own drawing culture that is widespread, that shows our own ideas, opinions, culture and identity (Saw Ba, interview, 30 September 2005).

In a sense he is articulating the element of 'silence' currently pervading this artistic medium and its associated messages. The implication is that Karen people must be responsible for articulating their "ideas, opinions, culture and identity" (Saw Ba, interview, 30 September 2005) if a political culture is to be sustained. To achieve this requires a critical consciousness of social-political-cultural realities. Returning to the work of Paulo Freire for a moment, this critical consciousness is a process of 'conscientization'. Freire defines this as:

Conscientization refers to the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality (1972, p. 52).

In Figure 1, the cartoon's message is a call for this type of consciousness. It encourages an awareness of the political realities which cause suffering. It asks people to discard their beliefs in fate and God's will and embrace a deepening awareness of reality based on the actions of individuals, not on what Saw Ba depicts as a demobilising spiritual realm.

A further example of this conscientization can be found in the way another participant Po Hsan articulates his motivation for teaching art to school students. Po Hsan is an artist in Mae Sot who has spent many years teaching art to migrant children. He expressed strong views about the role art can play in education.

Education is important. It's not only about transferring technical skill but also sharing with them the many social and political issues they will confront. Children need to see strong positive ways forward and I believe art can provide this (Po Hsan, interview, 11 October 2005).

Further on in our interview Po Hsan expanded upon what he sees as the key aspects of educating through art: firstly it provides skills for critical thinking, secondly it builds a relationship between

the artist and nature, and thirdly it provides a means to articulate emotion. In this way, his art classes convey the technical skill needed to create art while at the same time supporting the conscientization of critical young minds so that they can transform the political realities that oppress them.

There are many other examples of projects that develop political consciousness in the borderlands, some of which provide more practical, immediate benefits through their use of international advocacy tools. For example, many displaced Karen in the borderlands use their newly acquired skills to educate and train those unable to access the same systems from which they benefited. In 2005 I interviewed members of the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) about their community theatre program, 'Theatre for the Oppressed'. This program aims to educate refugee and IDP populations on political, cultural and social issues, and in a format that is accessible to both literate and illiterate audiences. One of their Drama Representatives told me that many of the communities they work with cannot read or write. If they have access to radios it is rarely in their ethnic language. He believes community theatre has a number of benefits: it is more accessible, more easily understood, delivered in the audiences own language, and made familiar and relevant to their everyday lives. Given that most of their audiences have had limited education opportunities and spend the majority of their adult life in demanding physical activity, he also says that it is very important to the group that they incorporate capacity building into their programs (KSNG, interview, 26 October 2005).

KSNG also conducts community theatre in the refugee camps, transferring their knowledge about social issues such as domestic violence and alcohol and drug use, as well as educating the camp population on the resettlement program and social, political and economic issues at both the local and global level. For example, in 2004 KSNG took part in a joint project that aimed to educate villagers about the Salween Dam campaign. They conducted evening drama performances that drew up to a hundred villagers, five times the number that took part in the daily formal training activities. Later, they conducted this same performance in the refugee camps. The same KSNG Drama Representative explained the reasoning behind this:

Many of the refugees in the camps did not know about this campaign or the threat to the Salween River until they had seen our performance. Drama is the facilitator between those inside and those outside. We were able to provide a link across the chasm that often exists between those inside Burma and those living along the border ... they told us they understood the issues about the dam a lot more and that they would undertake activities to support those who were objecting to the dam (KSNG, interview, 26 October 2005).

Imparting knowledge and skills in ways that develop and strengthen local capacities is integral to the work of displaced Karen in the borderlands. For many displaced Karen education and skills are an important part of developing local communities – both in the borderlands and inside Burma – as well as improving the effectiveness of a political Karen voice. Whether it be educating for greater political consciousness or developing technical skill, displaced Karen in the borderlands become equipped with knowledge and skills they feel it is their duty to share. In doing so they are helping to strengthen the ability of displaced Karen to convey a strong political message around the ongoing persecution of Karen inside Burma, as well as more generally developing the capacity of local Karen communities.

Together, these three practices – a new political capacity (developed through political consciousness) combined with a more effective vehicle (new technologies) and access to a broader audience (through international networks) – are evidence of the social relations that develop an interchange that occurs across the national border. This interchange is evident in shared projects with local-global reach such as the KRW dam campaign, Karen engagement with global human rights networks, partnerships that form around the production and consumption of music and art, and political messaging that challenges the state narrative, to name just a few of the examples that have been explored across this chapter so far. What this interchange does, in terms of the main thesis argument, is establish a set of practices that due to their sociality across the national border, sit in tension to the modern territorial domain. This tension is a characteristic of the borderlands space, but it also gives form to the social practices and identity constructs of displaced Karen as they relate to that space.

In addition to these activities, networks of solidarity in the borderlands can also be seen at a more abstract level in that they form around shared experiences of displacement and persecution, something that in many senses is less physical and tangible but which sits at the core of all this activity. In some respects this incorporates membership to a collective group that has experienced persecution due to the heavy militarisation occurring on the Burma side of the Thai-Burma border. Solidarity, in terms of talking about a community based on shared feelings and a corresponding set of interests and responsibilities, forms from this base point of shared persecution and develops through to a shared political narrative around which the community can mobilise. This next section looks at the form this political narrative takes and argues that new networks of solidarity are framed by a political narrative based on shared experiences of persecution and displacement. This narrative develops a key component of Karen identity, particularly in terms of how it is critically informed by the political and activist practices of displaced Karen in the borderlands space.

ACTIVISM: PROJECTING A POLITICAL MESSAGE

Up until this point the chapter has focused on the ways in which international networking, new technologies and political consciousness all strengthen Karen capacities to form networks of solidarity from which they can advocate for political change in Burma. This section now turns to an element that sits at the core of these activities. I argue that new networks of solidarity are framed by a political narrative based on shared experiences of displacement and persecution. This argument is integral to the main thesis argument because this political narrative, along with a narrative based on cultural recovery (discussed in the next chapter) are key components of Karen social practices, but more than this they ultimately form the basis of a projected Karen identity that emanates from the borderlands.

This section examines a number of activities which form the basis of this argument around a political narrative based on shared persecution. These activities are drawn from data collected over periods of fieldwork between 2005 and 2010. Of particular interest to this research are the political messages inherent in activism – particularly from the perspective of those who fall outside formal political organisations – and also how cultural expression is used as a method to convey these messages. My interest in cultural expression as a vehicle for advocacy comes from my experience of the borderlands during numerous research trips during the aforementioned period, including fieldwork for this thesis as well as my work, pre-thesis, for a local NGO. These experiences indicated a common use of cultural expression as an activist tool that could document experiences and make calls for action. For example, songs about displacement and the armed struggle are common, as are drawings of Karen culture and Burmese Army attacks on villages. In addition, the practice of these types of expression allows for a more non-formal involvement in the politics of the borderlands and by extension to inside Burma.

Some of the most interesting examples of advocacy framing the practice of cultural expression can be found in the way that inanimate forms of human rights documentation are increasingly being used in more dynamic forms of advocacy at the grassroots level, framed by artistic mediums, and in particular new technologies. These artist-activists combine factual information with a more appealing dissemination format, suggesting a broadening awareness of their audience. A common technique was to infuse art with the voices or stories of displaced Karen. U Kyi, a research participant, spoke about talking to Karen inside Burma and then using their words in his songs. In this way he says he is paying respect to the voices of those otherwise silenced while at the same time exposing the human rights violations they suffer. An interesting element of this technique is U Kyi's ability to move stories and voices across international boundaries in ways that physical movement cannot. For example, while the owner of a story of persecution can be physically

confined to Burmese territory, the story is not; it transverses a global setting, using communications technologies to connect with international networks, and with others who share similar stories, to form a larger collective narrative of persecution and displacement. As a result, a critical mass of solidarity develops around this collective narrative, forming an identity that is based on shared experiences of displacement and persecution.

Many Karen artists in the borderlands draw strength from their 'people' inside Burma to direct this activism, often returning to Karen State to document cultural practices. As U Kyi states: "I love to go inside and see my people and my land. When I see them I gain strength from them and grow more committed to the struggle" (Interview, 10 October 2005). However, such experiences can also create further trauma in the telling. Anthropologist Marita Eastmond, who collected the narratives of Chilean refugees in the late eighties, found that for many of the refugees "it was a struggle between the moral imperative not to forget and the extreme pain of remembering" (2007, p. 259). It is a sentiment echoed by U Kyi who told me: "It's difficult to write songs because you have to remember your experience" (Interview, 17 October 2005).

This epic but nuanced struggle between 'not forgetting *and* remembering' is exactly what U Kyi did when he wrote his song 'Do Not Forget'. He uses strong language to describe the experiences of many Karen inside Burma, producing a narrative that is both a documentation of human rights abuses and a denunciation of political violence. An excerpt of the song is written below:

Old or young, they show them no respect, all are treated brutally
They split our skin in torture and put salt in our wounds
They disembowel us and hold it tauntingly in our faces
They cut off our fingers and hang us feet up
Our children are choked, pounded and whipped 'til necks hang loose

Our virgin women have been raped to death and left to rot
Creating our hatred
Small children thrown to the skies and impaled upon enemy spears
These are not tall tales but reality

'Do Not Forget', by U Kyi

The lyrics of this particular song act as documentation of real-life events and atrocities, acting as an historical record of a particular period of time and place that might otherwise be lost. In describing the writing of 'Do Not Forget', U Kyi said while he himself had never seen a child impaled upon enemy spears, he believes the events he describes in this song are commiserate with events described in many human rights reports that document such atrocities. There is no need for him to

construct 'tall tales' of abuse, he says, because these events are the reality experienced by many Karen living in conflict zones. These two stanzas of the song also project a collective experience of persecution, it is *our* children choked and pounded and *our* women beaten and raped, and this becomes a Karen narrative around which a displaced community can mobilise and identify.

This need to document events is also found in the work of another artist interviewed. He talked about living through a Burmese Army attack on Huay Kalok refugee camp in 1997, and how he dealt with this through his drawing.

For me drawing can tell a story. Like when the camp burnt down I used my drawings to document the burning. It means I can keep it as a record. But also I drew this and UNHCR took it and made an exhibition with it. So when the people saw the exhibition it reminded them that the camp had been burnt down ... Even though we take refuge in Thailand our life is still not safe, we are still faced with burning and persecution (Nyi Nyi, interview, 19 October 2005).

Nyi Nyi also talks of an outward projection of persecution. He needs to let other people know about the camp's destruction, remind them of the atrocity that was committed by the DKBA and Burmese Army troops. Disseminating this message on a global scale was facilitated by an international organisation, UNHCR. Nyi Nyi, like many others discussed in this chapter, conveys an outward projection of a Karen narrative characterised by shared experiences of displacement, violence and trauma. These experiences and their articulation build upon each other to produce a political narrative that helps define the identity of displaced Karen in the borderlands.

A common theme throughout the many pieces of cultural expression viewed by this author between 2005 and 2010 is this idea of injustice. Shared experiences of persecution are a common thread framing the content and political messages of stories produced in the borderlands. It is also a significant factor in motivating activists in the borderlands to advocate on behalf of those exposed to the continuing realities of persecution. One participant in this study, Po Hsan, spoke of his art as having political purpose, but also his motivation to document lived experiences for the purpose of informing others. His comments suggest a preoccupation with recording actual events so as they are not lost, but also in presenting a political statement around the continued persecution.

When I first saw the IDP children inside I felt so painful I wanted to draw their faces. I wanted people to know the realities of the Burmese military's operations and I really feel that I have the opportunity to share this through my art (Po Hsan, interview, 11 October 2005).

Loo Ne shares a similar sentiment when he highlights the plight of IDPs in his song 'Story of an IDP'.

Security and shelter are vanishing
Health, food and education I lack of
I can't think for tomorrow
Because I don't know how to survive today

The military regime destroyed my lands and home
I wonder who even knows our suffering

I miss the place where I was born
Where my mother rocked me in the cradle
Peace, love and unity were there
Natural resources abundant
And a picture of 'home' was in my eyes

Now the worlds' greed destroyed this unity and peace
Oh, I miss the place where I was born
I long for the songs my mum sang to me
And her love drags me to recall the place I once lived
Wishing to be back there before the end of my days

The children are naked
The mothers are sobbing
The fathers disheartened
And all because of war

And I want to go home when the light shows my way

I can't think of tomorrow
Because I don't know how to survive today
My farm and home has been destroyed by the military regime
I wonder who even knows our suffering

Dark clouds are growing darker
And the military troops approach our home
We are moving from place to place and suffering daily

Oh I want to be free
Oh where has all the education gone

I want to learn

I want to rest like the birds at night

But I have to worry for tomorrow

And that worry brings screams while I sleep

'Story of an IDP, by Loo Ne

'Story of an IDP' conveys Loo Ne's personal story but it also places his experience in a broader global context. He talks of *our* suffering and *our* home and the destruction caused by the *world's* greed. When he speaks about his song he sees it as his own story but also the story of a greater collective narrative. It is a lived and shared experience which gathers meaning and power in the telling.

I just wrote this song because I want to show the life of the IDP through the song. It's like I'm reading my own biography since I was a child but I also see other children who are still facing these same problems that I faced as a child. In my opinion to tell this type of story is the first step. It shows only the problem, trouble and worries of the IDP and all those who live in the civil war zone. My idea is to write another song after this one, because this one only shows the oppression and the next one is about the power in you. Because this one tells the true story but in the eyes of the radio listener you are a victim under this oppression and people see you as powerless but in the reality people are doing many different things and they survive, they are still there, without having any weapons to protect themselves. No education, food scarcity, no healthcare, but they stay there. Their energy and their power is still going strong (Loo Ne, interview, 22 September 2005).

In both songs, 'Story of an IDP' and 'Do Not Forget', the authors convey a message of solidarity around the shared experiences of displacement and persecution. While 'Do Not Forget' is biting with hatred and bitterness, 'Story of an IDP' conveys a deep sorrowful energy. It is a romanticised memory of 'home' and a previous way of life. Yet underlying both these songs is a focused attempt to use cultural expression to both educate and advocate, to bring people together around a shared purpose and to convey a shared political message. As Loo Ne explains in the interview above, the story is his story but it is also the story of many children still experiencing persecution and displacement inside Burma. He suggests a collective exposure to atrocities but also a collective response not to succumb to its disempowering qualities.

These pieces of cultural expression (voices) from the borderlands tell many stories about the lives and political motivations of displaced Karen. They offer insight into individual and collective narratives with a recurring theme of shared experiences of persecution and displacement. The very

presence of these voices also tells us something of the uniqueness of the borderlands, in that the borderlands enables these voices greater access to global networks and advances in communications technologies, and an increased exchange of skills and knowledge that is framed by political consciousness. This is integral to the main thesis argument because it constitutes one of the key modes of social practice that I argue for across this thesis, the development of networks of solidarity. One result of these social practices is an emerging Karen political voice, empowered by new networks of solidarity to build a sense of a politics of belonging and a shared political narrative that informs the projection of a Karen identity.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that where activism around persecution has intersected with particular mechanisms of social power – international networking, new technologies and political consciousness – new networks of solidarity have been able to form that enable, broaden and strengthen the capacity of a Karen political voice which is specific to the borderlands space. These networks of solidarity also become an important conduit for the projection of a political narrative based on shared experiences of displacement and persecution, and a sense of belonging to a common community.

The presence and importance of these practices over the last decade or so has changed the way in which a Karen political voice is projected outward to an external audience, developing a form of activism that is more powerful, but also driven by a more informal political power. This informal political power develops because of a more fluid, heterogeneous and contested approach to the borderlands space that is characterised by practices of activism (Chapter Five), networks of solidarity (this chapter) and processes cultural recovery (to be discussed in the next chapter). These form the dominant modes of social practice of displaced Karen in the borderlands. In addition, this thesis argues that these practices sit in tension with the operations of the nation-state which has tended to treat the borderlands space with a more homogenous political authority that is framed by the narrative of a modern territorial domain. The nature of this tension is an integral characteristic of the space, and as such critically informs many of the activities that occur there.

This chapter is important to my main thesis argument because it develops the political narrative that forms part of a projected Karen identity. In other words, through the networks of solidarity discussed in this chapter, displaced Karen are able to construct a political narrative of shared persecution around which they can mobilise. This narrative forms a key part of a Karen identity projected from the borderlands. What is yet to be fully ascertained is the impact of this political

narrative in terms of its *inward* projection to a collective Karen audience and its influence over a collective Karen identity, and it is to this that the next chapter turns. I contend that a further layer to the construction of Karen identity in the borderlands incorporates social practices that inform an inward projection of identity that is characterised by a cultural narrative based on the selective recovery of cultural icons and origin myths which emphasise a Karen nation. As a threatened culture, this inward projection includes protective mechanisms which show a heightened sense of home and cultural identity which are significant to the formation of a Karen identity in the borderlands.

CHAPTER 7

'SYMBOLIC ANCHORS OF COMMUNITY'⁸⁰

PROCESSES OF CULTURAL RECOVERY

*I was born in a refugee camp in a foreign land
I was told that a small bamboo house is my home
A life confined by barbed wire is not my home
A living fed by others is not my home
A life without dignity is not my home
Freedom and equality is what I want
To uphold my beautiful home
'I Dream of Home' by Saw Ba*

Nyi Nyi and I sit in a room in Mae Sot, Thailand. We are four kilometres from the Thai-Burma border. We watch a television screen which is showing video footage of Karen villagers in Nyaungglebin District of Karen State. Nyi Nyi watches as some of the men assemble a *klo'*, the traditional Karen drum. They bless it with rice whisky and call on the spirits to protect them. With a number of deep vibrations they begin a traditional Karen *hta*. Nyi Nyi expresses surprise at seeing the *klo'* played. He has heard about the *klo'* he says, but he has never seen one nor heard one played before. "I know the story of it from learning about it at school and from the old people but I've never seen it for myself", he says. And then more quietly, "I feel proud to hear my people still playing this traditional instrument" (Author's field notes, 19 October 2005).

Nyi Nyi is distanced from his homeland by both the fixed geographical certainty of the nation-state border and the uncertainty created by his displacement to Thailand. An outcome of this displacement is that he is forced to develop new ways of connecting to and representing both his homeland and his cultural identity. This chapter argues that the borderlands facilitates the recovery of a Karen cultural identity which in turn becomes part of a projected Karen identity. This cultural identity is characterised by a selective recovery of cultural icons and origin myths which reinforce the idea of a Karen nation, and that is framed by the shared experiences of displacement and persecution.

This cultural recovery most commonly occurs through three significant processes which are made possible by the nature of the borderlands space, and these form the framework of this chapter. The first process is the public projection of "remembered places" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 11) which act as a 'symbolic anchor' from which a homeland and collective cultural identity can be

⁸⁰ This phrase comes from Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's article 'Beyond Culture' where they state that "Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people" (1992, p. 11). In this chapter I use the phrase 'symbolic anchors of community' as a way of understanding the role of memory in the narratives of displaced Karen, but also more broadly as a metaphor for any imaginative reconstruction that leads to collective representations.

constructed and projected. I contend that displaced Karen in the borderlands use this public projection of memory to provide a linear continuity to a Karen cultural identity that is currently under threat from disruption and upheaval. These 'remembered places' act as a beacon around which the Karen can mobilise and in turn strengthen and project a version of the identity under threat.

The second process is where cultural practices are re-established on the Thai side of the border through a process of cultural reification. The nature of these cultural practices changes in line with experiences of forced displacement and exposure to elements of cultural exchange and adaptation conditioned by the borderlands. As a result cultural practices are reified in a learnt environment rather than through the everyday (as would presumably be the case for those still inside Burma). In addition, a fear of loss of ethnic identity and the resulting need to preserve and protect the associated culture has seen selected cultural identifiers lifted out of the everyday and used to reinforce the notion of a Karen nation around which displaced Karen can mobilise.

The third process is where displaced Karen pursue a form of cultural recovery by imagining a vision of the future. These imaginings prioritise a connection, both physically and metaphorically, to a Karen homeland. Due to the circumstances of displacement, this vision of the future occurs at a largely abstract level that gives credence to a shared Karen narrative, and ultimately a Karen identity.

Together, these three processes constitute the main form of cultural recovery that occurs in the borderlands space. Over-arching all three processes is the reification of a Karen culture, made up of reclaimed cultural icons and origin myths that are framed by the experience of displacement and persecution. This process of cultural recovery is specific to the borderlands space, namely because it is enabled by key features of the space: a population with shared experiences of persecution and displacement that has led to heightened attention paid to cultural identifiers; access to resources that have helped shape and disseminate a cultural narrative that forms the basis of a Karen identity; a certain level of security that allows the practice and projection of ethnic culture to occur without fear of retribution; and a close geographical proximity that allows the flow of cultural activities across the Thai-Burma border. For these reasons, the processes of cultural recovery that are occurring in the borderlands are distinct from a Karen cultural identity that could be found inside Burma or among the greater Karen diaspora for example.

This chapter sets up the third key mode of social practice in the borderlands: processes of cultural recovery. It is integral to the main thesis argument because it ties a cultural narrative that is framed by the notion of a Karen nation to the construction and projection of a Karen identity. This

narrative takes the form of a cultural interchange that occurs across the national border, further supporting my claim that the borderlands becomes the setting for modes of social practice that are in part, framed by a flow of people, ideas and resources as well as connections to family, culture and identity. This manifestation of a Karen nation is discussed more fully in the next chapter where I argue that it forms one of two narratives that have come to represent Karen identity in the borderlands, but for the moment it is important to note that this cultural narrative is projected through the activism of displaced Karen and in turn forms a key component of a Karen identity in the borderlands.

Together, the themes of the last three chapters constitute the key modes of social practice in the borderlands – practices of activism, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery. These practices are evidence of a set of relations that can be mapped across the borderlands domain, intersecting at times with the processes that are so integral to this thesis: the operations of the state, agency and activism, global processes and political contestation. These practices are enmeshed in the spatiality of the borderlands; they are both enabled by the borderlands space and characteristic of it. As social constructs, they also, importantly for this thesis, set the conditions from which a Karen identity in the borderlands is constructed and projected. Articulating the nature of this identity is the focus of the next chapter.

MEMORY: THE PUBLIC PROJECTION OF ‘REMEMBERED PLACES’

In refugee and diaspora literature, remembered places are often constructed with the idea of what Gupta and Ferguson call “symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people” (1992, p. 11). In this sense, the constructions served by memory act as a beacon around which the chaos and destruction of displacement is replaced by familiar elements of cultural identity or community. This section proposes a greater analysis of this ‘symbolic anchor’. I contend that displaced Karen in the borderlands use a public projection of memory to provide a linear continuity to a Karen cultural identity that is currently under threat from disruption and upheaval. This requires an expanded vision of Gupta and Ferguson’s concept of ‘remembered places’ for it necessarily takes into account the range of elements that constitute that place – culture, ethnic symbolism, tradition, identity, myths, and history to name a few. In this expanded vision, the process of ‘remembering place’ takes individual experiences and projects them as collective memories, which in turn act as a beacon around which the Karen can mobilise, and then project a version of the identity under threat.

During field work in 2005 I had the opportunity to focus on the artwork produced by many of the displaced Karen I was interviewing. These mostly constituted subjective representations of Karen

culture and identity. These artworks made an important contribution to my own observations and arguments around how a Karen cultural identity is constructed, practiced and projected. One possible way of handling these artworks is to see them as important subjective constructs of a Karen cultural identity and ultimately a Karen nation. As such they can be viewed, and subsequently analysed, as a powerful response to Burmese military persecution and the threat of cultural obsolescence.

A common theme running through these pieces of art is the tendency to idealise the past by depicting the Karen homeland through a romanticised lens, a position that was in direct contrast to the current reality of conflict and militarisation in Karen State. An example of this can be found in the song 'I love you my Kawthoolei'⁸¹, written by U Kyi, a participant in this research. The song comes from a trip he made to Karen State in 2002 where he found himself on top of a mountain with a view of his Karen State (Kawthoolei) which, for a brief moment, seemed to defy all knowledge of the death and destruction that existed below the tree line (U Kyi, personal communication, 17 October 2005).

I love you my kawthoolei

The green pastures
The mountains, the rivers and the streams
In the valleys the birds are singing
And the flowers bloom in vibrant colours
Beauty and wealth are in you
And bring me perfect bliss

When the sun sets
And I look upon my Karen land
There is only happiness
I have to stay away from you
While others take you over
And your beauty becomes fields of death
My blood and my sweat I sacrifice for you
I give you my life
And stay true to you my Kawthoolei

I will fight for my return my Kawthoolei
As many lives have been sacrificed for you

⁸¹ Kawthoolei is used here to reference Karen State. For a more comprehensive analysis of the origin and use of this term, see my comments on page 183.

We have exchanged our blood and sweat for your return
There will come a day my Kawthoolei
When we will meet again to enjoy our life

The land of *Taw Meh Pah*
We will not give to others
We will struggle for the return
Of our Kawthoolei
'I love you my kawthoolei' by U Kyi

In this song U Kyi invokes a romanticised depiction of the landscape. He freezes this depiction in a time where birds sing in the valley, flowers bloom in vibrant colours, and there is a sense of bliss that invades him as he looks over a place that is obviously dear to him. Yet he immediately juxtaposes this with imagery that acknowledges the destruction of this beauty: fields of death, and the blood and sweat sacrificed as others take it over. The loss associated with the romanticised beauty of the place is heightened by the brutality in which it is being destroyed. U Kyi acknowledges the immediacy of this moment – its temporal, aspirational nature – it is a time and an image that no longer exists outside of his song. But perhaps most interesting is the way he correlates this moment with the motivation for what he does and writes. The systematic destruction of his Karen homeland defines the struggle projected from the Thai-Burma borderlands. The romanticised beauty of what is being destroyed only intensifies the urgency of that struggle.

Naw Mu, another participant interviewed in 2005 had recently arrived at the Thai-Burma border. She showed a similar tendency in her writing. In our interview she described her village by saying there is “no village like my village” and that it always “comforts me and brings me pleasure [to think of it]” (Naw Mu, interview, 27 September 2005). Her experiences inside Karen State and her journey to the border compelled her to write a poem, her first ever, about her village back inside Burma.

My Beautiful Village

My beautiful village that I love the most
Is the village that I was born
You look very lovely by the evergreen mountain
The stream is flowing down
Carrying with it a beautiful sound
Beside my village there is a night flower
It spreads a fragrant smell

The village that I grew up in

Is such a beautiful village
Even though I am far away from you
I remember you always
Not only in my time
But from my forefathers time
With all my sincerity
I hope you will always be permanent

'My Beautiful Village' by Naw Mu

Naw Mu also uses idyllic and unique language to depict her homeland. She shows that the memory of her home stays with her and informs her current thinking. She mentions the presence of historical and cultural connections to her village, acknowledging that what she talks of in her poem is something bigger than just her: "Not only in my time, But from my forefathers time". She employs a particular use of time, linking hers and her ancestor's time to arrive at an understanding of what constitutes home, in this instance her village. While not explicitly stated the implication is that her village's historical continuity is under threat, a poignant reminder of this is in the last line of the poem: "I hope you will always be permanent".

U Kyi also creates a temporal frame around his message in 'I love you my Kawthoolei'. He begins in the past, a land untarnished in its beauty, then moves to the present where that same land is ravaged by conflict, and then back to the past as he invokes the historical myth of *Taw Meh Pah*, and the Karen's claim over the land. While the romanticised depiction of home is frozen in a time where things were seen to be peaceful and beautiful, the conceptual idea of home moves between times. In 'I love you my Kawthoolei' home is something that transverses time and the songs movement through time works to both solidify Karen claims over Kawthoolei and de-legitimise the actions of those who only exist in the present, 'those trying to take it over'. In both these pieces of art home is a more abstract presence in a larger historical order, moving it beyond the idea of home as a material object alone.

Such heightened levels of loss and chaos incur a yearning for things that are stable and familiar, an attempt to re-link the historical continuity that has been ruptured in the displacement. When interviewed about the song 'I Love you my Kawthoolei', U Kyi said he remembers his home where he could play football, travel freely, and hunt and fish. He can no longer do these things, yet he yearns for that time when he could (U Kyi, interview, 17 October 2005). In a subsequent interview he said:

I compare the situation in the past and now. In the past our land is full of natural resources and animals. Traditionally Karen people go hunting, but now you cannot do this anymore because of landmines, fighting, soldiers, the situation of our country is poorer, poorer, poorer. So some day we wish to see our land as before (U Kyi, interview, 8 November 2005).

U Kyi attempts to draw a line between his memory of home in the past, through its present destruction and to the day he can see his home as it was before. War and conflict have disrupted the continuity of this trajectory, destabilising his perception of the world he knows. Memory and the utilisation of memory in general, is a way to dispel the sense of disruption caused by the displacement. Instead he holds on to a picture of home that is familiar, that gives purpose and meaning to his memory, but that also attributes responsibility for its current destruction. In this sense, the remembered place is a powerful tool for protecting and preserving what is under threat of being lost.

While both the song and the poem offer individual interpretations of lived experience, they also present a number of commonalities that suggest the existence of a collective narrative that is characterised by a sense of violence, loss and displacement. Both artworks use the device of romanticised depiction while at the same time juxtaposing it with the brutal realities of loss and displacement. Both are constructs of current realities intermingled with references to historical events and past suffering. Both employ time as a device to represent the meaning of home and the significance of its destruction. Both artworks address a greater external audience as well as providing a sense of collective identity as a nation. U Kyi does this by evoking the homeland of the Karen nationalist struggle, Kawthoolei – the spiritual home of all Karen people, and Naw Mu does this by drawing an historical line to the time of her forefathers, illustrating a sense of ownership and community attached to the land she speaks of. Both artworks are also aimed at a more localised Karen audience familiar with their experiences (Eastmond, 2007, p. 258). This is evident in that both songs were originally written in Sgaw Karen. The content of the songs also suggests they were written for an audience with a particular empathy or understanding of its message. The loss of land and its association with home is a feeling familiar to many displaced Karen, and references to cultural myths and ancestral continuity suggest familiarity with a common historical narrative.

By singling out these cultural symbolisms of land and myth, and consequently using them to represent a common Karen understanding of home, both these pieces of art reinforce the idea of a collective narrative of Karen displacement and ultimately a Karen nation and identity. Taken at a big-picture level there is much that can be ascertained from this presentation of a collective

experience and its articulation into a collective narrative. Anthropologist James Clifford, talking specifically about diaspora communities, elaborates on how he sees this process working.

...diaspora cultures work to maintain community, selectively preserving and recovering traditions, “customizing” and “versioning” them in novel, hybrid, and often antagonistic situations (1994, p. 317).

Leaving to one side the issue of diaspora communities, what interests me in Clifford’s point is the idea of a *live* and discursive construction of community, based on the selective recovery and presentation of cultural traditions. There is evidence to suggest that displaced Karen in the borderlands construct a Karen history through the selective recovery of historical cultural myths and traditions that emphasise a unique ethnic identity. Many Karen activists infuse their cultural expression with references to such myths, employing mythical figures and symbols supposedly unique to Karen culture and asserting these as key ethnic identifiers. These ethnic identifiers differentiate the Karen from the dominant culture, in this case the culture claimed by the Burmese military. These ethnic identifiers, woven into the telling of mythohistories, may include references to unique language, kinship and religious practices, elements which are often used as indicators of a national ethnic culture, although they are certainly not the only ones (Eriksen, 1993).

Social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen sees ethnic symbolisms as “crucial for the maintenance of ethnic identity through periods of change” (Eriksen, 1993, p. 68). Not only does it reassure the threatened culture of an “ethnic belongingness” but it also provides for a continuity and authenticity of history and culture which may have been undermined by the upheaval caused by their displacement (Eriksen, 1993). The key to Eriksen’s observation is the assumption of a pre-existing ethnic homogeneity, something to revert back to. However, it would be too simple to suggest the Karen had or have a pre-existing ethnic homogeneity. Existing studies (Cheesman, 2002; Rajah, 2002; South, 2007; Thawngmung, 2008) question the assumption of a pan-Karen identity based on a shared material culture, suggesting instead that purports to a nationalist identity are in defiance of the differences in cultural, religious and lingual identification. One way of working through this discrepancy is to look at how displaced Karen recover certain elements of ethnic symbolism to portray a national ethnic culture, moving the debate away from the authenticity of a pre-existing homogeneity and towards the construction of cultural identity. This cultural recovery works to sustain a collective memory and contributes to the development or construction of the notion of a Karen nation. At the same time that Karen nation is being used for political mobilisation. To mobilise requires shared interests, and for displaced Karen in the borderlands these shared interests include cultural constructs around people, myths and places which are used to establish what I argue is perceived as a collective Karen identity.

There are a number of examples in the cultural expression of displaced Karen in the borderlands that can support such a claim. In the song 'I love you my Kawthoolei', U Kyi talks of Karen state as the land of *Taw Meh Pah*, often considered one of the Karen's greatest mythical heroes. *Taw Meh Pah's* story can vary depending on who tells it but essentially the myth's power lies in the belief that *Taw Meh Pah* is the Karen's ancestral father, and the presumption that all Karen share this common descent.⁸² The oft-repeated story sees *Taw Meh Pah* leading his people from the 'River of Flowing Sand' (generally believed to be the Gobi desert) to Burma where they settled. This myth provides the Karen with a story of origin, and at the same time an ancestral line that connects Karen today with Karen of the past. Many Karen have used this myth to claim that this ancestry places them as the original inhabitants of Burma (Hla, 1939), although most historians attribute this position to the Mon (Falla, 1991, p. 13). However, the myth serves the purpose of distinguishing the Karen as a distinct race to the Burmans and provides what Mikael Gravers calls "the genealogical foundation of a common Karen national identity despite religious and cultural differences" (Gravers, 1998, p. 253).

Of course mythohistories like *Taw Meh Pah* must be looked at as a cultural construct, rather than a factual certainty. Much has been written that disputes the validity of the events and locations that make up the myth (Rajah, 2002); suggesting there is little historical evidence to support it. Mythohistories do however serve an important purpose. In the face of what may seem like the debilitating reality of persecution, the re-creation of mythohistories acts as an anchor for displaced communities as they reformulate their history and traditions; reinforcing a common ancestral rooting and cultural identity. It shows a consciousness of Karen heritage, history and ethnic identifiers being part of a larger historical order. In many respects it can be seen as evidence of 'being in the world', an important concept for cultures who feel under threat. It also provides legitimisation, and therefore significance in the practice of culture and identity. This continuity with a past, epitomised by the placement of ethnic identity as present in a vast historic order, provides a sense of stability and order to what is otherwise a time of great upheaval for a Karen cultural identity.

The retelling of foundational myths is one way in which threatened cultures can retain this historical continuity. A myth that appears across the different Karen religions and ethnicities is that of the Golden Book, although each may tell a slightly different version. Interestingly, it has

⁸² A shortened version of the myth is that due to an expanding family, or in some versions persecution, *Taw Meh Pah* led his family away from their home in Tibet in search of richer lands. Upon reaching Karen State *Taw Meh Pah* left his family and went on ahead to find the path. His track was obscured and the Karen remained in the area waiting for his return. To read further versions of the *Taw Meh Pah* myth see Jonathan Falla's 'Truth Love and Bartholomew' (1991), Mikael Gravers' 'The Karen Making of a Nation' (1998) and Ananda Rajah's 'A 'nation of intent' in Burma: Karen ethno-nationalism, nationalism and narrations of nation' (2002).

sustained cultural relevance over a substantial historical period.⁸³ The version related here was told by a Sgaw Karen person and is based on a book by Thara Htoo Hla E. The simplest version of this story is that God (*Y'wa*) bestowed gifts upon three brothers, the Karen, the Burman and the white brother. The Karen brother receives the Golden Book, the book of wisdom, but he leaves it in his field one day and the white brother takes it. The white brother uses the Golden Book to bring wisdom to the western world and the Karen are left languishing as they await the return of their Golden Book.⁸⁴ The Karen often interpret this story in different ways. Some use it to explain why the Karen have suffered throughout history as a result of their failure to protect the Golden Book from the white brother, and that they would continue to suffer until the white brother returned with the book. In his article 'Ariya and the Golden Book', Theodore Stern talks about interpretations of the myth which view the return of the white brother as the dawn of a new era of Karen nation-hood; where centuries of subjugation to Burmese and Mon kings would be replaced by a Karen king and the elevation of the Karen race (Stern, 1968, p. 304). In this sense the myth contains beliefs that Karen suffering is part of a larger divine order which one day will be eradicated by the return of *Y'wa* and the Golden Book. It also evokes strong political aspirations for a Karen nation, where the downtrodden will rise up and rule their own land.

This myth is then interpreted through a number of events across Karen history. When American Baptist missionaries entered Karen State in the 1800s, bringing with them their bibles, it seemed feasible that this could be the White Brother returning with the Golden Book. The inference is that the missionaries were successful in converting many of the Karen to Christianity because the Karen believed the bible was their long lost book of wisdom (Falla, 1991; Gravers, 2007; Hinton, 1983). There are other more contemporary versions. One is that leaders of the Karen resistance evoke the myth to justify the moral obligation of the White Brother to provide weapons to their armed movement (Stern, 1968, p. 313). Another interpretation of the story was told to me by one of the Karen people I interviewed for this research, and involves the refugee camps. In this depiction western NGOs (the White Brother) look after the Karen in the refugee camps because they are indebted to the Karen for stealing their Golden Book in the first place (Saw Ba, personal communication, 10 October 2005). Rather than being viewed as victims, this version allows the Karen to see their current predicament as the repayment of a debt. Of course these recountings of the myth are highly questionable, not least because the written documentation of these stories

⁸³ Theodore Stern's 'Ariya and the Golden Book' (1968) provides a pivotal account of the different interpretations that constitute the history to this myth.

⁸⁴ This particular version comes from 'The Golden Book' by Thara Htoo Hla E, published by the Karen Baptist Convention in 1955. Other versions range from a dog stealing the book, to the book being burnt in the paddy fields. The outcome is generally the same however. The Karen lose their wisdom through their own foolishness. Other versions and interpretations of the Golden Book story and the conversions of the Baptist missionaries can be found in 'True Love and Bartholomew' by Jonathan Falla (1991).

relies on the translations of the Baptist missionaries who were likely entrenching their own agendas in interpreting the stories (Falla, 1991, p. 231).

The origins of such myths are undoubtedly important, particularly if we are to understand the purpose behind their construction. But of most interest to this thesis is the way these myths are interpreted and used in the context of a borderlands setting, and what part this plays in the construction of a political Karen identity. By remodelling mythohistories to suit the contemporary setting, the Karen are taking historical-mythical accounts and ensuring a continuity of culture and identity across considerable historical platforms; from the first arrival of the Karen in Burma to the contemporary setting in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. In doing so the Karen are attempting to establish the idea of a Karen nation around which they can form a common point of identification, and which in turn is used as a point of mobilisation for the threatened Karen culture.

Another common representation of a Karen ethnic culture can be found in the drawings of many displaced Karen in the borderlands. Here, ethnic identifiers such as dress, music, employment and religious practices are reinforced through their presentation in visual mediums. Nyi Nyi, a Karen artist I interviewed spoke of why he felt compelled to draw the Karen culture. His drawings can be seen in figures 1 and 2 below.

I always draw pictures of our culture, like our traditional instruments. That way I can explain this is Karen, this is what our culture looks like. We are one of the big ethnic groups in Burma, we have a great culture and our culture can be recognised as a group of people (Nyi Nyi, interview, 19 October 2005).



Figure 3 - Artist: Nyi Nyi



Figure 4 – Artist: Nyi Nyi

Another artist I interviewed expressed a similar sentiment.

I would draw my culture; sometimes I would draw our New Year's celebrations, sometimes our traditional dance, the *dohne*. I wanted to describe our ethnic culture, how we dance, what we wear, things like that. Culture is important for ethnic groups (Po Hsan, interview, 11 October 2005).

Both these artists speak of their ethnic Karen culture as something that needs to be preserved and recognised. The *hse* (Karen dress) and the *ta'na* (Karen harp) in the drawings above are elements of Karen culture that can identify a person's Karen identity. Drawing them reminds people of who they are and what makes them distinct. For displaced Karen in the borderlands it serves an additional purpose: projecting remembered objects and places to document what is under threat of being lost. What both artists are speaking of typically falls into Eriksen's observation of "ethnic belongingness" in periods of change, the need to show a continuity of ethnic distinction that can be traced throughout history. 'Remembered places' are of course created through retrospection, with a tendency towards selective, subjective recovery, and this can make their legitimacy questionable. These elements will always make what is told open to historical dispute, in itself a legitimate concern, but rather than debating the historical accuracy of these 'remembered places', this thesis is more concerned with how a remembered culture is articulated and used in the formation of a Karen identity in the borderlands. Under these circumstances I argue that the public projection of a shared remembered culture develops a cultural narrative that sits at the core of a projected Karen identity in the borderlands.

To date, I have argued that displaced Karen in the Thai-Burma borderlands use a public projection of 'remembered places' to establish a collective cultural narrative that attempts to stabilise and legitimise a Karen cultural identity. In the borderlands we can see this working in two ways. Firstly, the public projection of memory is used to selectively recover a Karen history, origin myths and cultural icons that give meaning to a collective Karen identity. This can be seen in the way displaced Karen display ethnic identifiers that reinforce a distinctive Karen identity, such as the *Taw Meh Pah* myth and referencing key cultural elements such as the *da thee bli* (Karen string dance) or *ta'na* (Karen harp). It can also be found in the way a Karen history is told that establishes ethnic continuity across vast historical platforms such as the use of the Golden Book myth. Secondly, the public projection of memory utilises the contemporary setting, in that it is used to establish a collective narrative around shared experiences of displacement and persecution. In this case, what is remembered often 'romanticises' what has been lost as well as reinforcing claims of cultural subjugation. In both cases, the public projection of memory becomes a 'symbolic anchor' around which displaced Karen in the borderlands conceptualise 'home' and mobilise as an ethnic

community. The public projection of a remembered cultural history is used to construct events, narratives and myths that give meaning to that world which defines a collective Karen identity.

This process of projected memory, in effect constitutes an imagined connection to a place that is no longer inhabited, including embodying the cultural identifiers attached to that place. Because it is no longer inhabited, displaced Karen retain that connection through a pattern of reification, where cultural practices are re-established in a learnt environment, in a space that is not considered 'home'. In this next section I look at how this process of reification works.

RE-ESTABLISHING CULTURAL PRACTICES: PROCESSES OF CULTURAL REIFICATION

Re-establishing cultural practices in times of displacement and disruption is often defined by complex, inter-locked factors which re-orientate conceptualisations of home. In this section I contend that cultural practices are re-established on the Thai side of the border through a process of cultural reification, and that these cultural practices change in line with experiences of forced displacement and exposure to elements of cultural exchange and adaptation conditioned by the borderlands. This process of cultural reification is integral to my main chapter argument because it illustrates a key component in the recovery of a Karen identity: a heightened preoccupation with cultural identifiers which are lifted out and learnt in terms of establishing a collective Karen identity.

There are two key distinctions that frame the nature of this cultural reification in the borderlands. The first is that cultural practices in the borderlands are largely reified in a learnt environment rather than being seen as part of the everyday. This is further complicated as traditional roles of cultural practice, preservation and custodianship become ambiguous in the displacement. As I will show, this is evident in the perception of roles between those who remain inside Burma and those who reside on the Thai side of the border. The second distinction is that a fear of loss of ethnic identity, and the resulting need to preserve and protect that culture, has seen selective cultural identifiers lifted out of the everyday and used to reinforce the notion of a Karen nation around which displaced Karen can mobilise. Unpacking all these elements is necessary to understand what role cultural practices play in times of displacement, and how they have helped to develop a collective Karen narrative.

Many Karen in the borderlands have not seen their 'home' for up to twenty years. Many children under the age of 15 are likely to be born in Thailand or the refugee camps. Many of the older Karen I spoke with during the period 2005 to 2007 expressed their concern over the loss of culture and identity, especially regarding Karen youth. Their comments indicated a fear of losing important

practices that identify or establish the uniqueness of the Karen as a distinct ethnic group. Such a concern can be seen in a story relayed to me by a Karen person I interviewed in the borderlands in 2005. He told me he asked his six year old sister if she would one day like to help the Karen people. She had replied to him by asking 'Who are the Karen?' He told me his sister was born and brought up in the refugee camp and had little knowledge of the Karen struggle (Zaw Kyi, interview, 26 October 2005). It is possible she was still too young to fully grasp the history and significance of being Karen. But for this Karen man the story was used to express his concern about how the Karen culture was at risk of being lost. It is a concern that comes across in many of the interviews I conducted in the borderlands between 2005 and 2010.

Long term incarceration in the refugee camps, and therefore removal from typical community patterns, has motivated Karen authorities in the borderlands to provide alternative opportunities for learning Karen culture. A typical example is that cultural practices are now studied in a learnt environment, most commonly the schools in the refugee camps. This creates a reification of cultural practice where the intent is to ensure that culture is preserved and the practice of it not lost. This is evident in the way Karen history and language form part of the school curriculum in the refugee camps. Another example can be found in Mae La Refugee Camp where in 2005 a group called *Le Geh* were teaching what is considered by some to be the traditional Karen script (*Le Saw Wei*). *Le Geh* also taught traditional animist religious practices and traditional Karen music, including learning the Karen harp (*ta'na*). Refugee camp committees have also facilitated the practice of traditional Karen dances and ceremonies such as the *dohne* (traditional Karen dance) and *da thee bli* (string dance). The greater Karen community in the borderlands also continue to practice Karen New Years and Karen Revolution Day celebrations. Other traditional ceremonies have also been adapted to the new context. One Karen participant told me that the traditional Karen wrist-tying ceremony has now become an annual celebration in the camps. Traditionally the ceremony occurs in August each year, at the end of the rice-planting season when families would return home and celebrate being together again. In the absence of this traditional setting, many Karen along the border have forged a new version of the ceremony. He told me that because most people can't go back to Burma and be with their families they join together with the camp family instead, facilitating a new sense of Karen community and family (Nyi Nyi, personal communication, 4 October 2005).

For those in the borderlands, seeing cultural practices in traditional settings becomes an anomaly, and this is where the Karen still living inside Burma play an important role in maintaining cultural practices. Nyi Nyi's story at the beginning of this chapter is an example of where institutionalised learning of cultural practices occurs. Nyi Nyi has learnt about the *klo'* (drum) but he has never seen

it outside of a picture and he has never heard it played. In the video footage Nyi Nyi not only sees the *klo'* played but also experiences the traditional ceremony required before such a revered instrument can be used. He is seeing it played in a traditional setting but he is viewing it through a detached lens, or the schism of the border. He can see it, but he cannot participate in it. He can know it, but he cannot practice it. It may be that Nyi Nyi believes he is missing important cultural learning unless he can participate in these traditional practices.

For many displaced Karen in the borderlands, Karen people who remain inside Burma often take on the role of cultural custodians. There are inter-related complexities evident in this statement and these are addressed shortly, however there is first some benefit in looking at where this role as custodian might occur. During field work in 2005 I was told of a group of Monypwa (an ethnic subgroup of the Karen) numbering about 3,000 who managed to continue to practice their traditional cultural ceremonies. This includes *orcheebwa*, an annual animist food festival, and spirit ceremonies practiced with traditional musical instruments such as the *klo'*, *moe* (gong) and *paw ku* (xylophone). I was told by Nyi Nyi that the Monypwa were extremely protective of their culture and practiced it very strictly (Nyi Nyi, personal communication, 15 October 2005). This includes participating in spirit ceremonies for protection and prosperity, and ex-communication if you marry outside the group. I watched video footage of an interview with the Monypwa elders. They were asked what they saw as the threats to their traditional practices. They replied that Burmese troops were a threat. When asked how they could resist the Burmese troops they answered they couldn't. They could only flee and return once the troops had left. They told the interviewer they had already been relocated a number of times but they always returned because they needed their chicken, pigs and land to fulfil their traditional practices.⁸⁵

Despite Burmese military threats and great disruption in their lives, these Monypwa continued to return to their land to practice their cultural traditions, arguably a form of resistance in itself, even

⁸⁵ Video footage courtesy of Burma Issues, translated by Nyi Nyi, [Mae Sot], 15 October 2005

if the Monypwa do not articulate it as such.⁸⁶ Karen I spoke with in the borderlands viewed the Monypwa as custodians of Karen cultural practices; in ways they themselves were unable to fill because of their displacement to the borderlands. But the Monypwa face significant threats to their continued role as cultural custodians and this implies a more complicated reality to the roles of those inside and outside Karen state. One such perceived threat is the increased penetration of western culture into traditional Karen communities. One Karen person interviewed said that trading, even in the more remote areas, has meant that many Karen villagers have been exposed to western clothing, food, soft drink and even pornography CDs. For many villagers this is their first significant contact with a world outside their village. Even the Monypwa community mentioned above has had its numbers reduced by conversions to Christianity and relocations to Burmese Army bases which disrupts traditional practices. The Burmese Army's policy of ethnic unification also means many points of ethnic distinction are assimilated or eradicated, for example important ethnic distinguishers like language and history cannot be taught in Burma's government run schools.

What these examples show is that in the case of Burma, being in an environment of perceived traditional cultural practice is not always conducive to their continued practice or retention. And herein lies the somewhat paradoxical dichotomy of Karen cultural practice and custodianship. For while Karen people inside Burma may be perceived as the keepers of cultural practices, it is Karen in the borderlands who have largely taken responsibility for documenting and preserving those cultural practices. This illustrates an important division embodied by the border. Inside Burma cultural practices are conducted in traditional settings but at great personal cost to those participating in them: to the point where security often overshadows the importance of what they are achieving. In contrast, in the borderlands culture is reconstructed and practiced in a new setting, a setting the Karen mostly tolerate but do not necessarily embrace, and that is deemed a temporary substitute for how life should be lived and culture practiced. But interestingly, it is also a setting where greater personal security means traditional cultural practices can be learnt and

⁸⁶ When the Karen interviewer pointed out that the villager's return to their homes and their continued practice of cultural traditions is a form of resistance against the Burmese military, one of the old villager's repeated that they were helpless to do anything against the Burmese military. While the Karen interviewer saw this as an act of resistance, it was not necessarily seen or articulated as such by those involved in the act. This incident does however reinforce a point made by James C Scott when he outlines "the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does "between revolts" to defend its interests as best it can"(J. C. Scott, 1985, p. 29). My argument that Monypwa actions be seen as a form of resistance confers with Scott's sense of *false compliance*: the Monypwa appear to relocate to Burmese military bases, only to return time and time again in defiance of these orders.

practiced in relative safety, and where education opportunities have taught many Karen of the importance of preservation to threatened cultures and the skills needed to achieve that preservation. Po Khai, a participant in this research, writes music with this idea of preservation in mind.

I try to use the Karen words. I want to remember. Because some of our Karen friends, like me, when we speak we copy some Burmese words and some English words. When I visited my nephew I saw some children and other groups of people who grew up in the SPDC area. They don't know about the suffering from the past. I would like to ask this of the next generation to come. Do we forget our suffering that we suffered in the past and the fact that our enemy is trying to lose our culture in the world (Po Khai, interview, 11 October 2005).

A common story I have heard from different Karen people in the borderlands is how the Burmese military attempts to destroy their culture. In our interview, Po Khai said that the SPDC claim, "In the future if you want to see Karen culture you will have to go to the museum" (Po Khai, interview, 11 October 2005). For Po Khai, and many other Karen artists in the borderlands, this concern feeds its way into their art. They are practicing and preserving what they know and what they have experienced for future generations. Aspects of the borderlands enable this preservation to take place. Access to technology means that websites now document Karen dress, music, dance, literature and story-telling. Musicians and artists incorporate Karen language and Karen stories into their artwork. Education curriculums in the camps teach Karen history and culture. Not only has education and technology provided a means of preserving Karen culture, it has done so for contemporary times, turning it into transferable and easily digestible formats – for example over the internet or in an album of music. At the core of these activities are attempts to ensure the Karen ethnicity is a living culture, not something that can only be found in a museum, and that Karen culture is something to be preserved, not lost.

The borderlands space brings a further complexity to this dynamic of cultural reification. While the borderlands space in many ways facilitates cultural preservation and reification it also provides opportunities for cultural change and adaptation that pose a challenge to Karen attempts to preserve and practice their culture. While adaptation and change are now considered accepted norms of cultural identification and practice (Appadurai, 2005; Geertz, 1976), this does not discount the fear and resistance that often comes with that change. An example of this can be found in the resettlement program which began in earnest in the borderlands in 2004. It has arguably created the largest upheaval in the practice of a Karen cultural identity since the initial large-scale refugee exoduses of the early-1980s. The resettlement program was a point of great

discussion among people I interviewed in 2005. At that time the program was still in its infancy and a lot of uncertainty surrounded its implementation, let alone the possible impact upon a Karen cultural identity. Many Karen interviewed at the time, expressed concerns around the negative impact of resettlement on the Karen culture. Comments ranged from concerns about cross-cultural marriages in third countries to fears the Karen culture would be lost through domination by a much more powerful western culture. The theme emanating from most people's comments was that the resettlement program had a feeling of permanency, of immediate and unavoidable change with long-term ramifications. Many expressed the belief that by staying in the borderlands they had the best possible chance of lessening the disruption, and of retaining their Karen identity and connection to their homeland. Saw Ba expressed some of these concerns:

At the moment many Karen who have left to the third country stay in Karen communities and they celebrate Karen New Year and Karen traditional wrist tying, so I think they maintain their identity. This generation is fine, but maybe in the future, I don't know, if we are strong, if we have people to organise us, but I don't know. Because you stay in the capitalist country. It's difficult right. You have to care about work and money. But here you don't care about work so much, you care about your community. In the third country you forget about your family, you have to go and look for a job. Another thing I heard is that the relationship between children and their parents is very bad there. When they talk to their parents there is no respect. It's different, there's something changing, just in one generation (Saw Ba, interview, 21 July 2007).

But concerns about a disappearing culture, particularly in the face of western assimilation, have been evident in the borderlands for some time. Many Karen I interviewed between 2005 and 2010 expressed concerns over inter-racial marriages, which are dissuaded despite their increasing visibility. Others spoke of social problems such as domestic violence and drug and alcohol use which they associated with western influences. These concerns underlay their resistance to the resettlement program and are also present as social commentary in some of the cultural expression I witnessed in the borderlands. This social commentary can be seen in the Saw Pa Kaw cartoon already discussed in Chapter Six of this thesis, where Saw Pa Kaw comments to his friend who is about to leave for resettlement: "You look like them, I worry you will forget us" (see Figure 2 in Chapter Six). By embracing western dress and moving far from her cultural origins Saw Pa Kaw is implying his friend will forget her people, her culture and her identity, to be replaced instead with a myriad of western influences.

These intersecting relationships around cultural preservation and cultural change bring heightened attention to the necessity to define what *Karen* is and means. This has resulted in a layering of

cultural practice in the borderlands, where culture continues to be 'lived', but in a form that tends towards a nationalist construct. This is the result of a significant shift in the way culture is learnt and ultimately practiced. Rather than being seen as part of the everyday (as it would for those inside Burma), cultural symbols are lifted out of the everyday and given defining categorisations around national identity. This can be seen in the way the traditional woven *hse* (two narrow strips of woven cloth sewn together to form a loose fitting garment) is considered Karen national dress. The *klo'* (drum) and *kweh* (a horn usually made from an elephant's tusk or a buffalo's horn) are sacred instruments associated with intense patriotism and romanticisation; an affirmation of their revered status is that they are symbols on the Karen national flag. A Karen history of martyrs and revolutionary heroes, including the leadership and ultimate ambush of the KNU's founder Saw Ba U Kyi, is taught in the schools in the refugee camps. A portrait of Saw Ba U Kyi, and other leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi and Bo Mya, will often line the walls of Karen houses in the borderlands. These national symbols are reified through the formal learnt environment, attributed meaning and purpose in ways that lift cultural practice in the borderlands out of the realm of the everyday and into a constructed nationalist paradigm. While this process remains a largely subjective construct of a Karen nation (a point elaborated on further in the next chapter), it does hold real ramifications for displaced Karen, who not only believe a Karen nation exists, but that it's also something worth struggling for.

The continued practice of a cultural identity is a key concern for the displaced Karen I interviewed as part of this research. Many saw their identity and culture under threat from the militarisation that led to their displacement as well as cultural domination from external factors such as western influences in the borderlands. The initial displacement often disrupts familiar cultural patterns, but even when cultural practices are re-established, the nature of displacement forces these practices into new more complex forms. In this section I have argued that this occurs in instances of cultural exchange and adaptation as well as in the changing relationship between Karen inside Burma and Karen in the borderlands. Traditional cultural roles change, so too does the cultural content, which in the Thai-Burma borderlands shows evidence of becoming more political in intent. This is both a response to the threat of political domination by the Burmans and to reinforce political messages particular to the circumstances of displaced Karen in the borderlands. In addition to the changing nature of cultural practice, displaced Karen in the borderlands also re-establish these practices as a vehicle from which they can conceptualise home and what has been lost.

IMAGINING 'HOME'

In addition to the public projection of memory and a process of cultural reification, displaced Karen also pursue a form of cultural recovery by imagining a vision of the future that prioritises a connection, both physically and metaphorically, to a Karen homeland. This process uses the memory of place and culture to construct a vision of the future. Due to the circumstances of displacement, this vision of the future also occurs at a largely abstract level that gives credence to a shared Karen narrative, and ultimately a Karen identity. These imaginings are crucial to my main chapter argument because they embody the process of 'making' place and culture through the recovery of a Karen cultural identity, as well as acting as a conduit for the projection of that identity.

Displaced Karen approach this imagining through a framework of retrospection of the past as well as critical awareness of the current realities they face. This duality frames what I believe is a search for meaning; the Karen are looking to understand their own experiences by placing them in a broader social and political context. From this perspective, the way displaced Karen imagine their future is contingent upon their experiences in the past. For example, these imaginings often project a world free of the constraints of suffering and persecution, while at the same time are a construct based on displaced Karen experiences of the loss associated with that persecution. Anthropologist James Clifford calls this the living of "loss and hope as a defining tension" (1994, p. 312). In other words, the nature of displacement forces many Karen in the borderlands into a daily confrontation with loss while at the same time hope – of return or a resolution to their predicament – often defines the constructs evident in their imagined vision of the future. For Karen in the borderlands the process of imagining incorporates the presentation of possibility and a vision of the future, but also an awareness of the subjugation and persecution which has led to their current circumstances. Displaced Karen build upon these past experiences in an attempt to create an alternate vision for the future.

In 2005 a Karen woman from Tham Hin refugee camp narrated her story using imagery that illustrates a powerful vision of her future that fuses the past with the present.

Looking back I would say my life is like this. I would go and stand in the shade of a tree near my home that I left in Burma. This tree, the insects had eaten the inside of it out and worms gorged themselves on the leaves. If I stay under this tree then the shit of the worms would drop on me and eventually the branches will fall off and hit me. So I have to leave the shade of this tree. If I go back I want to stand in the shade of a tree that provides

coolness and it should be a tree that we plant ourselves (Moo, personal communication, 15 September 2005).

The metaphors she uses here help us understand the threads of her life that motivate these imaginings. Central to the picture Moo paints is the vulnerability of what is typically portrayed as a sign of strength and growth, the tree, rooted in the ground from which its life source comes. She highlights its susceptibility to rot when infested with parasites, the insects being representative of the Burmese military's slow destruction of the Burmese land and its people. Her use of the word 'gorge' to describe the parasites' feeding frenzy suggests that the extravagant 'fattening' of the military is at the expense of its people and natural resources. While her use of the words 'shade' and 'coolness' to describe her imagined future sit in stark contrast to more heated metaphors which could be used to describe the death and destruction which has shaped her experiences inside Burma. In this metaphor, where heat burns, shade soothes.

The narrative has a visually powerful retrospection of the past; her life has been the slow rotting and final destruction of her home. She realises this is not a condition she can remain in and survive. This retrospection allows her to construct a vision of the future; in that vision her home is strong, protective and cool, and it is a home that she makes herself. The memory of her past experience is significant in the construction of her future vision, and this is a fairly typical theme running through much of the cultural expression witnessed during my field work in the borderlands. Even when participants in this research called for a focus on the future rather than the past, their imaginings were rarely free of the remembered past. Another participant, Naw Hser, spoke about a song she had written in 2002, called 'Making the World a Better One'.

There was this world conflict and the conflict in Burma and I wanted to think about how we could live together peacefully. I don't want our young people to just have hatred and revenge. You know if someone kills my parents and then I kill theirs, the hatred will never end. I don't mean we should forget about our history but that we should find a positive way forward (Naw Hser, interview, 7 November 2005).

The song was written in response to a time of great upheaval. September 11 was fresh in her mind and Burma had reached its tenth year since the results of the democratic election had been denied. The song was written as a response to Burma's internal conflict, but also to greater global upheaval – it is very much a product of past events. But for this Karen woman there is also concern regarding the disempowering aspects of hatred and revenge associated with past injustices. As a result her final comment is one of peace and pursuing a way forward, a mixture of practical action and imagined possibilities.

A common theme running through the imaginings of displaced Karen in the borderlands is the idea of returning to their home. It can be found in the comments of Nyi Nyi who said that, “We hope to live one day in our own land” (Nyi Nyi, personal communication, 6 November 2005), but it also often permeates to a much deeper level in the songs and poems of displaced Karen. A participant interviewed in 2005 later sent me a poem he had written about his life. He called it ‘I Dream of Home’. The poem begins with a dream of what his home should be. He then juxtaposes this with three segments which represent different periods in his life: internally displaced person, refugee, and migrant worker. He finishes with a plea for them all to be treated as human beings and finally he repeats his dream of home, only now he talks of *our home*.

‘I Dream of Home’

I Dream of Home
I want to go Home
I have dreamed of it for so long
Home will be filled with love
freedom and equality
Home will provide me with protection, security and love
At my home I won't worry about hunger
and my crying and suffering will fade away
I will see the smile of the bright sun
and the sun's rays will bring me peace
Everybody will be happy
At my home
We will celebrate Peace with true justice

Internally Displaced Person

I was born in the jungle
People say that I am homeless
But I have hope to have a home
Where I won't flee like wild animals
My meal is not Klee Ti
When the killings, rape and destruction of my paddy field
I couldn't see with my eyes
When apprehension and tragedy
Fear and tears were gone
This is my home

Refugee

I was born in refugee camp-a foreign land
I was told that a small bamboo house is my home
A life confined by barbed wire is not my home
A living fed by others is not my home
A life without dignity is not my home
Freedom and equality what I want
To uphold my beautiful home

Migrant Worker

I wasn't born in my parents' homeland
I am told that my home is everywhere
But I am not recognized as a legal person with legal document
Always afraid of Thai police and moving my cloth-tent
I want to return to my native land
My home is not here where exploitation and corruption occur
Not where deception and human trafficking happen
There is neither slave nor master at my home, but everything is equal

We are a human being

We are the three people from different places, but have one dream
We are the three people with different lives, but have one suffering
We, the three people who don't want
Hate, oppression, domination, discrimination, segregation
Envy, corruption, killing, war, rape and torture

We need a HOME

Our home will be filled with love
freedom and equality
Our home will provide us with protection, security and love
We will see the smile of the bright sun
and the sun's rays will bring me peace
Everybody will be happy
At our home
We will celebrate Peace with true justice

We want to go home...

We want to go home ...

We want to go home ...

This poem has multiple layers to it, many of which have already been discussed in this thesis. It paints a romanticised picture of home – a place of bright sun, celebration and love. It juxtaposes the brutality of the past with hope for the future – suffering, killing and hunger replaced by happiness, peace and justice. In another sense it is a call to action – to work to bring equality, peace and justice back to a land that has been denied these things for so long. It places the situation of the Karen into a global context – the internally displaced person, the refugee and the migrant worker are all human beings and part of a larger global community. And finally it is a plea to return, to be rid of the hate, oppression, war and torture and to be back in the place that is Saw Ba’s home.

But one of the most interesting techniques used in this poem can be found in the three segments that represent stages in Saw Ba’s life. In these stanzas he makes a very strong statement about what home means. As an internally displaced person he is told he is “homeless”, as a refugee that his home is a “bamboo house”, and as a migrant worker that his home is “everywhere” but not in his homeland. Yet he lists all the reasons why these are not his home and rejects their claims upon him. Instead he offers his own vision of home, one that is full of love, has freedom and equality, and where people are protected and secure. Rather than accept the interpretations of home imposed on him by others, he imagines his own home, and it’s a mixture of what he remembers it to be (free of hunger and suffering), what he has learnt from his time in the borderlands (that it should incorporate peace and justice), and ultimately what he imagines it will be (a place of freedom and equality). This kind of imagining connects Saw Ba to his home; it also allows him to articulate his own vision of home rather than someone else’s. He is retrospective of past events, he finds meaning in them to better articulate his current circumstances, but he also uses that critical understanding to construct his vision of home in the future. Used in this way, the imaginings of displaced Karen in the borderlands can find the positive ways forward that Naw Hser talked about in her earlier comments.

While I have argued that the imaginings of many displaced Karen in the borderlands are linked to past events, there are instances where imaginings reconstruct an imagined return that is not based on past memories. Naw Hser spoke of this when describing her song writing:

Writing as a person who had lived most of their life along the border my songs are often about returning to my homeland. Not about going back to what we had, because many of us don’t remember Burma anymore or were born in the refugee camps, but imagining what we will return to in the future (Naw Hser, interview, 23 October 2005).

For many Karen wanting to return home, the image is one of an imagined future, not necessarily what they remember their home to be like in the past. The reality for many Karen in the borderlands is that home is a distant memory at best, but more likely a learnt one. What therefore awaits a population whose claim to the land is one riddled with uncertainty? U Kyi has also given considerable thought to this concern.

Actually I talk with many families from the camp and they want to go back to their home. But as for their children they want to go back but they don't know exactly where their land is. Maybe they will learn about their land from the school, but it is difficult. So now they face the problem where when they came here they were only one person, they married and had children and now there are many more people. It is difficult for them to compare to before and what they will go back to. I think this is also one of the problems. But I think that if we have peace in our land, maybe, no not maybe, I think we have many, many spare places for our people (U Kyi, interview, 8 November 2005).

U Kyi's last comment highlights a serious concern for any vision of the future. Underlying the desire to return is a need to establish how that might occur and what it might result in. There are many factors that might hinder this process, and again, a predominant consideration in U Kyi's comment is time. The longer Karen stay in the borderlands the more difficult it is to remember, or imagine, what their home might be, and the more complicated the social unit becomes as more and more people become integral to the process of what that imagined return might be. In this instance time is problematic; its ramifications are felt in current realities and in turn can blemish future action. While not reading too much into U Kyi's hesitation over the word 'maybe', it is indicative of the uncertainty that characterises life in the borderlands. It is an uncertainty steeped in the unknown future, the illegal status most Karen obtain in the borderlands and the unsustainable existence of being a refugee, IDP or illegal migrant. This uncertainty often finds its way into the cultural expression of those involved in this study and is an important indication of the complexities involved in any imagining of the future.

The word 'maybe' also implies an understanding of the tensions which can occur when places imagined at a distance must become lived spaces (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). While imagining which occurs at a distance provides useful insights into theoretical considerations of imagined communities (used to mean something broader than Benedict Anderson's interpretation) and spatial understandings, it does add a level of complexity to any practical implementation of that vision. At a distance, many of the pieces of cultural expression discussed in this thesis imagine a Karen homeland of beauty and wealth. But any future return will need to account for, among other things, the loss of land to the military or subsequent inhabitants, as well as the effects of

militarisation such as landmines, agrarian deterioration and the destruction of natural resources. These are complex practical concerns not often dealt with in the imagining.

These references to land are one the most common themes found in Karen imaginings of the future, and indicate the importance of land in Karen conceptualisations of cultural identity. Its importance lies in its spiritual role – land is at the centre of many traditional cultural ceremonies, as well as its agrarian role – it provides essential food and employment for many communities and individuals. But land is also central to the struggle for nation-hood. It represents both a physical location that is being fought over, and an ideological conceptualisation of Karen culture and identity. This means land is talked about in terms that frame a key subsidiary argument of this thesis; it is both a fixed geographical place (territory), and a space which is attributed cultural meaning and identity. Some of those I interviewed talked about a specific piece of land to which they would return to or of the effects of militarisation and the struggle to control pieces of land. The notion of land in these instances falls into typical state understandings of ownership and control over territory. For others, land was home, and represented the peace and justice they were fighting for. In these instances land conceptualises meaning and identification, it epitomises the struggle and represents the end goal. The role of a homeland in the Karen struggle for ethnic identification will be discussed further in the next chapter, but it is important to note here that in Karen imaginings of home, land is a crucial point of identification.

In a way these imaginings are a conversation with the past and the future which happens to take place in the present. Examples used above show that for displaced Karen in the borderlands retrospective views of the past form a vision for their future. Michael Fischer in *Ethnicity and the Arts of Memory* calls this the modern version of the Pythagorean arts of memory: “retrospection to gain a vision for the future” (1986, p. 198). This retrospection is a search for meaning, to understand the totality of experiences in the broader social and political context. Its vision for the future is in turn both a critique of domination and a celebration of possibility, and it is here that Karen imaginings of the future can provide powerful antidotes to the despair and destruction often inherent in current realities.

CONCLUSION

As displaced Karen in the borderlands negotiate the difficult terms dictated by their displacement and consequent emplacement in the borderlands, attitudes to home and cultural identity change. This chapter has argued that the nature of the borderlands facilitates the recovery of a Karen cultural identity, largely conducted through the processes of remembering place, cultural reification and imagining a future ‘home’. In turn, this cultural recovery develops a Karen cultural

narrative, made up of reclaimed cultural icons and origin myths that reinforce the idea of a Karen nation, and which are framed by the experience of persecution and displacement. This cultural narrative becomes a significant part of a Karen identity that is projected from the borderlands space in that it provides a sense of a cultural heritage around which displaced Karen can identify and mobilise.

What is increasingly apparent is that this Karen identity projected from the borderlands is a complex construct made up a number of elements discussed over the last four chapters. Taken together, these chapters have developed the main thesis argument by mapping the social practices of displaced Karen across the borderlands space, and tying these practices to a performative dimension of Karen identity. Notably, this has included the notion that the borderlands space gives rise to key modes of social practice that can account for the activities of displaced Karen as they negotiate their experience of displacement and persecution. In addition to developing our understanding of these modes of social practice, the last four chapters have also helped uncover the influences on the construction and projection of a Karen identity. These include a process of cultural recovery that reinforce a shared Karen cultural narrative based on the notion of a Karen nation and a pan-Karen identity and shared experiences of displacement that underpin a political identity-narrative of displacement and persecution.

In addition, the projection of this identity is enabled by access to international networks and new technologies, a close geographical proximity and connection to a Karen 'homeland', and political agency, developed in response to the institutionalised status accorded displaced Karen in the borderlands. These elements highlight the range of social, political and cultural factors that impact the construction and projection of a Karen identity in the borderlands. But they don't, as yet, articulate what that identity is. This therefore is the premise of the next and final chapter, where I build upon these influences to develop an argument for the projection of a Karen identity that is critically-informed by the borderlands space and conveyed through the key modes of social practice that occur there.

CHAPTER 8

TO BE KAREN IS TO BE PERSECUTED

IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE BORDERLANDS

*The revolution struggle should not be monopolised by one person or particular group.
It should be a leading struggle, inclusive of everyone who is oppressed ...
It is important to consolidate and mobilise the people, to reinforce them to a national struggle.
There are many ways for organising and mobilising our people ...
To encourage them to change the oppressive system which they are facing
(extract from an article written by Saw Eh Doh Doh Moo, KweKaLu newspaper, 19 January 2009)*

This chapter argues that key modes of social practice discussed throughout this thesis – patterns of activism, networks of solidarity, and processes of cultural recovery – inform the construction and projection of a Karen identity in the borderlands. Over the last three chapters I have begun to develop the political and cultural parameters of this identity, so that I can now argue that Karen identity in the borderlands commonly manifests in two ways: firstly through a narrative of shared persecution and displacement, and secondly as a pan-Karen identity based on a narrative of a unified, homogenous Karen. While both forms play an integral role in the projection of Karen identity from the borderlands space, I contend that the shared experience of persecution and displacement more readily lends itself as a unifying force around which displaced Karen can identify and mobilise. The notion of Karen-ness and a Karen nation is more commonly used for the purpose of consolidating Karen claims to persecution and displacement as well as larger claims around governance, political representation and human rights. In this sense it is the shared experience of displacement and persecution that helps to reinforce the idea of a Karen nation.

To make this argument, the chapter moves through the following steps. It first examines the relationship between the key modes of social practice developed over the last three chapters and the construction and projection of a Karen identity in the borderlands. The chapter then goes on to examine the nature of this identity through two key manifestations. Firstly, that a Karen identity forms through a narrative of shared persecution and displacement that is developed through activist practices, and that this narrative acts as a primary reference point around which displaced Karen in the borderlands are able to identify and mobilise. Secondly, the chapter explores the idea of a unified, homogenous Karen identity by examining key colonial and missionary texts which arguably construct, or at the very least provide the first written articulation of the notion of *the* Karen. The content of these early texts carry through to present day discourses where they are used to further develop and embed the notion of a pan-Karen identity. This is particularly evident in the way a pan-Karen identity is reinforced through the KNU's nationalist agenda as well as through media, activist and diaspora discourses in the borderlands. Both these manifestations rely

on attributes of the borderlands space for their form and projection, and as such the borderlands becomes a critical component in the nature of Karen identity in the borderlands.

This chapter develops the third subsidiary argument of this thesis: that Karen identity in the borderlands is formed through a complex process of identity-making that is shaped by the present, specifically influenced by the experience of persecution and the consequences of displacement, and conveys a sense of being rooted in the past, constituting both real and imagined cultural identifiers and mythologies. I contend that this is often a fluid process, the Karen constructing, adapting and reifying the social and cultural aspects of their political identity in order to establish a Karen claim to a political self, a point from which they can protest the persecution and discrimination waged against them.

This chapter also brings together the key components of the main thesis argument by mapping key modes of social practice and Karen identity against the borderlands space. This is important to the main thesis argument because it shows that a Karen identity in the borderlands is a product of particular modes of social practice that are specific to the borderlands space from which it is projected. In other words, the particular form of Karen identity discussed in this thesis is both shaped by and reconfirms the nature of the borderlands space. This chapter is structured to provide conclusions to the arguments developed over the last five chapters, and while it ties the various elements of this thesis together, a formal conclusion to my main thesis argument will be reiterated in the next and final chapter.

MODES OF SOCIAL PRACTICE AND THE PERFORMATIVE DIMENSION OF IDENTITY

Patterns of activism, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery form the key modes of social practice displayed by displaced Karen in the borderlands. These modes of social practice help develop a performative dimension of Karen identity which manifests in two ways: as a narrative of persecution and displacement and as a narrative of a unified, homogenous Karen. The nature of these modes of social practice have been developed over the last three chapters, but I now bring them together in order to examine how they inform Karen identity in the borderlands space.

The modes of social practice discussed over Chapters Five, Six and Seven set up the conditions for the expression of a Karen identity that is specific to the borderlands space. This is done in a number of ways. One way is by opening up the political landscape, a process that is tied to the first mode of social practice in the borderlands – patterns of activism that contest the predominant political structures (as discussed in Chapter Five). In contrast to the operations of the state, which

have largely seen a contraction of political space in order to establish a state-centric demand for primacy over identity, this opening up of the space has seen an array of socio-political agents emerge. One outcome of this has been the rise of a more informal political power in the borderlands that develops through contested social relations.

The most significant and visible contribution these agents and their informal political power have made is to open up the socio-political space to include broader messages and more participatory forms of political engagement. Women's organisations, environmental groups, healthcare teams, human rights documenters and artists have all helped to shape a broader political message that contests state attempts at a hegemonic political message. Compared to inside Burma, there is greater opportunity in the borderlands for forms of political agency like this to occur. As the socio-political space in the borderlands opens to these broader interests, so does their increased influence over the nature of agency and ultimately identity that can be found in the borderlands. These agents are able to shape the projection of a Karen identity in ways unseen before, through opportunities for self-descriptions of Karen identity, particularly in terms of political agency, and through greater freedoms to articulate the complexities of that identity.

In addition to the changing political landscape, we also see more integrative measures of contemporary systems of connection emerge, specifically around international networking, new technologies and political consciousness (as discussed in Chapter Six). This is the second significant mode of social practice that informs Karen identity in the borderlands. Being in the borderlands has given Karen the opportunity to connect with people and ideas in ways not available to them inside Burma. This means an act of defiance or the destruction of a village can very quickly be connected to larger advocacy networks where they are documented and used to further highlight the plight of displaced Karen. Through a blog post, an uploaded video or a human rights report, displaced Karen can push stories of displacement and persecution to an external audience. It also means that a Karen person in the borderlands is more easily connected to larger communities (the Karen diaspora, international sympathisers and governments) than they have ever possibly been in their lives. Displaced Karen have access to a wide range of resources and agents that can both support their work against ongoing persecution and help shape the political message the Karen want to project.

These types of connections are fundamental to the borderlands space and the activism that occurs there. Many of these connections have already been discussed in this thesis, particularly in terms of their capacity to form new networks of solidarity, but they are worth reiterating here because they establish a key component of the projection of a Karen identity, solidarity around a political narrative of shared persecution. In addition, these networks of solidarity act as a vehicle for the

outward expression of a Karen identity that is central to forms of activism occurring in the borderlands space.

Finally, the changing political landscape and these new systems of connection do not intend to undermine the crucial role the idea of nation and culture play in the formation of a Karen identity in the borderlands (as discussed in Chapter Seven). A 'Karen' nation and culture is evident in a process of cultural recovery that is characterised by the selective recovery of cultural icons and origin myths that reinforce the idea of being 'Karen'. This recovery forms through a cultural exchange that occurs across the national border, in particular learnt history and cultural traditions, the practice of music and arts, and the shared stories of a 'remembered home'. These practices in turn develop a cultural narrative that feeds into the projection of a Karen identity that conveys a sense of being rooted in the past, and based on the current circumstances of persecution and displacement. This process of identity making is the third significant mode of social practice that informs a Karen identity in the borderlands. A Karen nation and culture are integral components of a Karen identity in the borderlands, but their place in the larger formation of identity takes on far more subtle forms than is usually argued. As the experience of persecution and displacement connects with new technologies and global networks, this thesis has shown that a political narrative of persecution and a cultural narrative of a Karen nation are developed and projected through activist practices. This projection of a Karen nation is closely aligned to a recovery of cultural identity that has procured ethno-nationalist elements to serve the purpose of reinforcing larger claims around governance, political representation, persecution and human rights. This is the more nuanced form in which a Karen cultural and political identity forms and is projected.

What we find in the borderlands then is a Karen identity that is framed through a shared experience of displacement and persecution, and an intensification of 'being Karen' (reifying cultural identity, a Karen nation and a unified Karen identity), both of which are enabled by a combination of practices of activism, networks of solidarity, and processes of culture recovery, and framed by the nature of the political and geographical space in which it occurs, the borderlands. It is these modes of social practice that critically inform the nature of Karen identity in the borderlands. They do this by developing a space in which Karen identity can be practiced and projected, including providing opportunities for political agency and mobilisation, but also by providing a space in which that identity can be examined, including reifying, shaping and re-shaping the political, social and cultural messages that are integral to that identity. Taken together, these modes of social practice help displaced Karen shape and project a form of identity that is specific to their circumstances of displacement and the space they currently inhabit; bringing a unique form of adaptability and reification to the construction and projection of a Karen identity in

the borderlands. It is only when these practices are taken together and examined in conjunction with the borderlands space in which they operate, that a more accurate description and understanding of Karen identity can occur.

If, as I argue, these modes of social practice frame the practice of Karen identity in the borderlands, then what form/s does this identity take? Over the remainder of this chapter I contend that this identity tends to manifest in two distinct *and* inter-connected forms: firstly as a narrative of persecution and displacement around which displaced Karen identify and mobilise, and secondly as a narrative of a unified, homogenous Karen with a shared cultural heritage. It is to these manifestations, and their relationship to Karen identity that the chapter now turns.

KAREN IDENTITY THROUGH A NARRATIVE OF PERSECUTION AND DISPLACEMENT

A key element of Karen identity in the borderlands is that it forms through a narrative of shared persecution and displacement, and this narrative acts as a primary reference point around which displaced Karen in the borderlands identify and mobilise. This form of Karen identity partially develops through the key modes of social practice that have framed many of the arguments across this thesis, namely patterns of activism, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery. While this section focuses on a manifestation of Karen identity, it is clearly linked to these modes of social practice in their capacity to enable, broaden and shape the projected identity.

A number of writers have made reference to themes of persecution, displacement and alienation in relation to Karen identity, and drawn links to representations of these themes in traditional Karen mythology and contemporary narratives (Cheesman, 2002; Cusano, 2001). My argument builds on these observations but also differs in two aspects. Firstly, I emphasise the place this narrative of persecution and displacement has on the formation and projection of Karen identity because it constitutes a key component of how the Karen make sense of their lives in the borderlands. And secondly, I draw a close link between the nature of the borderlands space and how this narrative is formed and projected. In other words, this point of Karen identification is formed by and through the space in which it occurs, and applies a spatial specificity to identity formation in the borderlands that has to date received limited academic attention. This position is based on a claim substantiated over the remainder of this chapter: that a predilection to shared experiences of persecution and displacement has intensified to the point where they now constitute a primary component of Karen identity in the borderlands, particularly in terms of a point of reference for political mobilisation.

In discussing Karen identity with various participants in the borderlands it became obvious that the process of identification was complexly understood. Some Karen identified as a refugee or displaced person, others as an activist, human rights defender or community organiser. Some identified themselves as Buddhist, others as Christian or Animist. And for others still it involved hyphenates, Thai-Karen, or half Sgaw-half Pwo. These identities are not self-contained, nor do they act independently of each other. For many Karen it is common to embody two or more seemingly contradictory forms of identity. One Karen Christian friend, previously a soldier in the KNLA, showed me a tattoo he had on his arm which constitutes a grid of three squares by three. Each square has a Burmese letter in it which he calls “the nine most powerful letters in the Burmese alphabet”. The tattoo is supposed to protect him from Burmese bullets as it had been infused with the protection of the spirits. He saw no contradiction between his Christian beliefs and his Animist tattoo, or indeed his Karen identity and using the Burmese language. It was perfectly legitimate to embody elements of both.

However, the majority of displaced Karen I spoke with over the course of conducting research for this thesis and in my previous work with communities along the Thai-Burma border, identify themselves as Karen. It is clearly a subjective relationship, but it also encompasses a sense of Karen identity based on cultural heritage that links the Karen across a vast historical order. Pushed further there are other common trends. To be a Karen is to be persecuted, to have experienced significant displacement and family death, to be living in a foreign land, or to be uneducated. These constitute a collective sense of displacement and persecution that underpins Karen identity in the borderlands, perhaps more so than specific cultural traits.

In a way this collective trauma manages to unite the Karen in a way that a unified, homogenous Karen identity, based on shared cultural traits, is unable to. It does this in the sense that the act of persecution does not discriminate against ethnic sub-group, religion or language; nor does it require justification of common ancestry, culture or ethno-nationalist narrative. Almost every Karen person in the borderlands has some experience of persecution at the hands of the Burmese military. My point is that rather than focusing on traditional forms of identification that focus on ethnic and cultural identifiers as supposed truths, a problematic approach because it is difficult to prove, Karen identity in the borderlands should be approached from a position of self-description. This position exposes a strong relationship to the shared experience of displacement and persecution which then becomes enmeshed in the political narrative of the Karen people, and ultimately contributes to the form and projection of a Karen identity in the borderlands.

This narrative of persecution is underpinned by a process in which persecution, oppression and alienation become part of what being Karen is. Individual experiences of persecution form part of a

larger narrative of oppression that both unites and mobilises the Karen. One way in which displaced Karen make sense of these experiences is through an historical narrative that the Karen have been the subject of oppression in Burma for a long period of time (Cheesman, 2002, p. 208). This historical narrative is evident in the way oppression is recited through early myths such as the Golden Book (suffering as result of the loss of the book of wisdom) and later, colonial accounts of ongoing oppression by the Burmans (Hla, 1939; Po, 2001), and more contemporary human rights reports that document persecution by the Burmese military. Throughout these narratives of persecution the perpetrator may change (the Mongols, the Mon, the Burmans, the Burmese military, the 'Generals' etc.), but the suffering of oppression remains consistent, eventually developing into a form of a national narrative where to be Karen is to be persecuted.

This position as a recipient of persecution is also reinforced through the stories of many of the participants in this research. Reference to persecution, oppression and alienation are common themes, so is reference to a larger historical process that links this persecution to what being Karen is. One participant, Moo, gives an indication of how this process manifests.

I am Karen. I was born in the mountains and my parents were farmers. When I was young my parents told me they were suffering from before I was born ... Why do we Karen people have to suffer from our grandparents through to now. I am not satisfied with this" (Moo, personal communication, 15 September 2005).

Another research participant, Po Khai, expresses similar sentiments in a song he wrote, 'The Burden of our People'.

Have we forgotten our suffering from the past
Our history shows our enemies eliminate us
Our grandparents tried to find us shelter
In a place where we could not be found
Free of death

We try to find a place of freedom
A sheltered place where the wild animals hide but still we are not free
Our grandparents struggled for the next generation to be free
Struggling for many years but still we are not free

We have faced the Revolution for more than 50 years
Some gave their eyes, their limbs, their lives
Some saw death in their fight for freedom

But we continue to fight for our country and people, we will not surrender
This is our commitment, our inspiration

The yoke of the Revolution has been carried by our grandparents
And now the new generation must carry it forward to our destiny

'The Burden of our People' by Po Khai

In a subsequent interview Po Khai elaborated on this reference to the yoke of the revolution: "This is the yoke that our legend carry until they die, the new generation has to take that yoke from the old generation and carry it to their destiny" (Po Khai, interview, 11 October 2005). Both Po Khai and Moo show a keen awareness of the longevity of Karen suffering, suggesting that it goes back beyond the immediate circumstances. Po Khai articulates a typical nationalist take on the struggle by attaching a sense of responsibility and obligation to the suffering. He indicates that the "yoke of the revolution" must continue on with the next generation or at least until the conflict, and by extension the persecution of the Karen is resolved.

These two examples are not isolated occurrences; there are many other references similar to these in the stories of those who participated in this research. In his song 'Do Not Forget', U Kyi talks of a history of oppression that can be "re-opened from 1949", the time of independence from Britain. He talks of "our virgin women have been raped and left to rot", an oppressor that feels no pity for "man, women or child", "children impaled upon enemy spears" and disembowelment held "tauntingly in our faces". Another participant, Loo Ne explained: "You try to do something because your grandfather, your grandmother, your father are struggling and fighting for a long, long time, and you always hear the story of suffering, suffering, suffering" (Loo Ne, interview, 19 September 2005). Another participant explained why at one point in his life he thought about joining the armed resistance movement.

My father was killed, my uncles were killed, my cousin was killed, my friends were killed
and my people were killed by war, torture, abuse and rape. Without sacrificing your blood,
you aren't free from slavery and I learnt that from the elders. Fighting meant for me to
protect my family, my village, my people (Saw Ba, personal communication, 9 January
2009).

While persecution is a central component in these examples, they also serve to highlight a number of other themes that are linked to persecution and the nature of Karen identity in the borderlands. Persecution is often framed by references to family and community, and these entail complex representations. Many Karen I spoke with as part of this research had experienced the death, torture or maiming of loved ones. Some explained that a motivation for fleeing was to protect their

children or to provide them with safer, more progressive prospects in life. Then there were those who cited family and community as a reason for their impassioned willingness to sacrifice for the struggle. This sacrifice is tied up in the nature of the persecution suffered but also embedded in the political narrative of the nationalist struggle perpetuated by the KNU. These may be quite individual and subjective accounts of persecution, but they are integral to the larger representation of Karen identity because they provide context to the shared experiences of displacement and persecution around which Karen identity in the borderlands forms.

Persecution is also often framed by the loss of land, and subsequently the production of an imagined homeland and culture. The most obvious manifestation of this deeply felt relationship to 'the land' can be found in the way the KNU use the notion of a Karen homeland to motivate their political struggle; a struggle that aims to reunite the Karen with their *Kaw La* or homeland. But it is also tied to the close spiritual and agricultural connections that Karen have to the land. Land is their sustenance, their work, and at the heart of their spirituality. There is also a metaphysical aspect that is played out through the sense of 'temporariness' that is assigned to the refugee camps and the presence of displaced Karen in Thailand. While often incorporating many unwanted connotations, to be a refugee has some value to displaced Karen because it indicates temporary exile, not permanent displacement and acculturation 'somewhere else'. In this sense many Karen take pride in their status as a displaced person because it harbours the hope that they will one day return to their rightful home.

These examples serve to illustrate that the narrative of persecution is both part of being a Karen person (a condition shared by all who have been displaced to the borderlands, but also through the historical narrative of oppression, *all* Karen more broadly) and a condition to be fought against (underpinning Karen activism as well as the nationalist struggle). In the process both become part of how the Karen identify and mobilise themselves. The sheer weight and pervasiveness of these collective traumas ensures they are the focus of Karen expression in the borderlands, and this in turn places them as a dominant framing of Karen identity. Far from being seen as a purely negative state of affairs, this narrative of persecution has empowering qualities, particularly in the way it helps to mobilise Karen around this shared oppression. This is not to suggest that this mobilisation has a purely altruistic agenda aimed at eradicating oppression. Part of that mobilisation has seen Karen oppression weaved into a nationalist-militarist narrative, as evidenced by Po Khai's comments that Karen suffering is intrinsically linked to the yoke of the Karen revolution. The KNU has also used this narrative of persecution and oppression to reinforce its ethno-nationalist agenda that the Karen constitute a distinct cultural and political grouping pitted against a military oppressor.

However, Karen persecution, and its use as a motivating force for mobilisation, resonates more broadly than a singularly nationalist agenda. This narrative of persecution lends itself as a unifying force around which displaced Karen can identify and mobilise with much broader implications for individual agency, community organisation, civil society and heterogeneous political organisation. A more diverse range of agendas are also evident such as human rights, ethnic and religious diversity, political representation and plurality, as well as that of ethno-nationalist politics. This is where my argument around the relationship between modes of social practice, identity and mobilisation is particularly evident. The modes of social practice discussed over the last three chapters are the dominant patterns of practice of displaced Karen in the borderlands; they are underpinned by a shared experience of displacement and persecution and act as a vehicle for the projection of a narrative of persecution around which the Karen can mobilise. In other words, these modes of social practice have enabled and broadened the possibilities for Karen identity in the borderlands.

So how does this relationship between experience, projected narrative, and ultimately identity formation work? Let me first give some practical examples of how I see this relationship working. A mother in the refugee camp, who wants more for her children than a life of persecution, utilises the services of international agencies and the humanitarian apparatus to resettle her family in a third country. A Karen activist uses her experience of persecution to advocate for other Karen, tapping in to global networks and utilising new technologies to get her message out. A refugee, after coming in to contact with a western environmental group, establishes a grassroots environmental network that develops projects and raises awareness about damage to the environment, realising that persecution and environmental destruction in Burma often go hand in hand. A Karen refugee, displaced from Burma's urban area and having never known her Karen culture or language, begins to reify that culture by learning Karen ceremonial practices, language and mythologies in the refugee camp.

What these examples illustrate is a relationship between the experience of persecution and displacement, modes of social practice through which this shared experience is framed and articulated, and mobilisation that will bring some sort of change – perhaps a resolution to the conflict or merely extracting the Karen from their current circumstances (through say the resettlement program). It is the act of persecution and displacement from which so much oscillates outwards. The various narratives shared by participants across this thesis, and many others besides, establish the shared experience of persecution and displacement as a point of reference around which they and others identify and mobilise. In doing so they are mapping their identity against a spatial and political backdrop that defines what *being* a Karen in the borderlands is,

namely someone who identifies with the experience of persecution, with being Karen, even if such cultural identifiers remain elusive and subjective, and whose identity is likely to be defined by their practices as an activist, an agent, and a voice for themselves and for others who have shared their experiences. That this narrative of persecution, this performance of Karen identity exists is a testament to the space in which it occurs. It is an identity that has been formed and projected based on a set of social relations that occur across the national border, namely an interchange of people, ideas and resources as well as connections to home, culture and identity, which sit in conjunction with a territorial domain. This relationship between space, practice and identity supports my main thesis claim that the borderlands space becomes the setting for modes of social practice that critically inform the projection of a Karen identity, an identity that I have argued here largely manifests through a narrative of persecution and displacement.

NARRATIVE OF A HOMOGENOUS KAREN: A PAN-KAREN NATIONALIST IDENTITY

While I have argued that Karen identity in the borderlands is formed through a narrative of persecution and displacement, there is another manifestation of Karen identity that needs to be considered. One way of looking at Karen identity, and the one that garners considerable academic attention, is through the narrative of a unified, homogenous Karen. As already shown in this thesis there is little evidence to support the idea of the homogenous Karen. The Karen share no common language, religion, political ideology or territory (Cheesman, 2002; Cusano, 2001; South, 2007). Throughout history the Karen have tended to live as semi-autonomous communities with local allegiances rather than the idea of being part of a 'one' unified Karen community (Lieberman, 1978). Yet over time a pan-Karen identity has formed to the point where it is the projected symbol of the nationalist Karen struggle now centred in the Thai-Burma borderlands, and undoubtedly acts in some ways as a unifying force to other Karen.

This section examines the idea of the homogenous Karen through key colonial and missionary texts which arguably construct, or at the very least provide the first written articulation of the notion of a pan-Karen identity, and which have been carried through to present day discourses around Karen identity. These early written accounts are typically attributed to the modern documentation of a Karen culture by Baptist missionaries and colonial administrators in the early to mid-1800s. The content of these early texts carry through to present day discourses where they are used to further develop and embed the notion of a pan-Karen identity. This is particularly evident in the way a pan-Karen identity is reinforced through the KNU's nationalist agenda, but also through media, activist and diaspora discourses in the borderlands which tend to convey the image of a 'Karen people' and a 'Karen struggle'. But instead of taking this pan-Karen identity as a given, I contend

that this notion of Karen-ness and a Karen nation is commonly utilised for the purpose of consolidating Karen claims to persecution and displacement, and ultimately to seek a resolution to this persecution. In this respect, it is the shared experience of displacement and persecution that has helped to reinforce the idea of a Karen nation and to mobilise the Karen to struggle against their continued persecution.

While the arguments in this chapter develop beyond a singular notion of the pan-Karen as a useful way of understanding Karen identity in the borderlands, there is a significant subjective relationship to the idea of being 'Karen' that is found in the projection of Karen identity from the borderlands. As a key component of self-descriptions of Karen identity, this evolution is worth noting, and is the focus of the remainder of this chapter. So how has a pan-identity formed from what seems to be a pluralistic peoples? And what does this tell us about the nature of the space in which it is has developed?

The Karen, a missionary-colonial construct?

Adoniram Judson, an American Baptist missionary, arrived in Burma in the early 1800s. He was tasked with bringing Christianity to the largely Buddhist population. By many accounts his early years among the central, mostly Burman population failed to illicit many conversions (Rajah, 2002, p. 523), and this appears to have led him into Burma's more remote hill tribe areas where he was reportedly more successful in converting the 'heathen' Animist and Buddhist Karen to Christianity.⁸⁷ During this period Judson, subsequent missionaries, and colonial administrators, conducted the first modern documentation of Karen history and culture. At the time, the Karen being a largely oral culture, this occurred predominantly through the documentation of Karen poetic *hta*⁸⁸ and oral storytelling. Jonathan Wade, a missionary in the 1830s, is credited with

⁸⁷ There is some debate around exactly how many Karen were converted to Christianity and just how successful the Baptists missionaries were in this task. Falla suggests that "no more than one quarter of the Karen have ever been converted" (Falla, 1991, p. 18) while Martin Smith suggests that today "perhaps only one sixth of all Karens are Christian..." (M. Smith, 1999, p. 44). In a pamphlet called 'There is no God and no soul' put out by an Italian Buddhist Monk, U Lokanatha, he congratulates the "7000 Karens of Toungoo who have thrown away their bible", evidence at least of a large number who resisted conversion (Lokanatha, date unknown). Due to their early influence over a written Karen language the missionary story remains the dominant narrative of this period, but these accounts must be treated carefully. Mikael Gravers in particular highlights the complex nature of the role various religions have had in the generation of Karen knowledge and identity (Gravers, 2007). Still, the role Christianity now plays in the modern Karen identity is significant and has received considerable interpretation from academics such as Mikael Gravers (2007), Alexander Horstmann (2011), and Ashley South (2007).

⁸⁸ Stories about the origins of *hta* are closely linked with the story of Karen persecution. One participant described it in this way. At one time the Karen had their own language and culture but then the Burmans arrived and began to oppress the Karen. The Burmans cut off the Karen's hands and tongues to stop them speaking and teaching their ethnic language. After some contemplation the Karen decided to come up with a language that the Burmans couldn't understand, while at the same time the Karen could teach their children about Karen culture and history.

developing a Karen script (based largely on the Burmese script) by which these stories and *htas* were used to establish a larger cultural identity and history of the Karen.⁸⁹ Wade's script was undoubtedly a powerful tool in the construction and validation of a modern pan-Karen identity.

There are a number of early colonial-missionary texts that have been used to reinforce the idea of a pan-Karen identity. Karen historian Aung Hla's comprehensive account of Karen culture and migration 'A Karen History' (Hla, 1939) draws on Karen *hta* to establish key ethnic identifiers such as a common history and culture. Aung Hla recites one *hta* meant to clarify the existence of a Karen country and a common ancestor, *Taw Meh Pah*, who led his people to the promised land of *Kaw Lah*⁹⁰:

Within our great main country,
Who had the noble sovereignty?
Our land that's genuinely Karen land,
By whose rule did it stand?

Within our real motherland,
Taw Meh Pah, great chief of our clan,
Our land that's genuinely an ancient homeland
Was ruled by *Taw Meh Pah*, the immortal man.

Our forefathers of ancient times,
Exhorted us to seek and to find,
That pleasant place we named *Kaw Lah* (Green Land)
Wither host thou excelled most lands by far?

The pleasant country of the Karens,

⁸⁹ It should be noted that historians and anthropologists place Wade's script as only one in a range of Karen scripts that are thought to have emerged during the nineteenth and early twentieth century's. Wade's script benefited from early adoption by missionaries, but also its adoption by the Karen political elite, particularly the KNU, which have helped embed this script as the primary written language of the Karen. For further discussion of the origins of Karen written language see William Womack's PhD dissertation, 'Literate Networks and the Production of Sgaw and Pwo Karen Writing in Burma, c.1830-1930' (2005).

⁹⁰ *Kaw Lah* can be translated from Karen to mean 'Green Land' and is loosely associated with the land of the Karen or what is currently known as Karen state. *Meh Ywa*, also known as *Htee Hset Meh Ywa* is translated to mean 'Land of the Flowing Sand'. Many interpretations (see Hla, 1939, pp. 37-38 for example) take *Htee Hset Meh Ywa* to mean somewhere in or around the Gobi Desert. Regardless of its geographical location, *Htee Hset Meh Ywa* is usually taken to mean the land of *Taw Meh Pah* and by extension the original land of the Karen before their migration south. One research participant explained it in this way: "*Taw Meh Pah* and *Htee Hset Meh Ywa* is a bit complicated. I think no one knows exactly. This place does not really exist in the world. It is more like *Htee Hset Meh Ywa* is Heaven and *Taw Meh Pah* is God" (Loo Ne, personal communication, 18 November 2011). Loo Ne's comment shows the clear biblical influence which is often associated with these early Karen myths.

Where *Taw Meh Pah* ruled over the clans,
The pleasant Karen land *Kaw Lah*
Was *Taw Meh Pah's* land called *Meh Ywa*.
(Hla, 1939, p. 37)

In a KNU publication dated 1981, Saw Moo Troo takes this foundation myth even further, stating:

In answer to the question, 'Who is a Karen?' one of the answers should be (1) one who can claim his ancestry to Toh Meh Pah and (2) one who possesses, maintains and cultivates the legacies bequeathed to him by the said forebear and his predecessors. The writer maintains that anyone who treasures and upholds these inheritances is a Karen though he may not have a drop of blood from this tribe (Cited in Falla, 1991, p. 11).

There are obvious religious overtones in many of these early myths, and there are discrepancies and claims to legitimacy that caution against privileging a literal meaning. But there are other ways of looking at the continued recital of these types of myths, particularly in terms of metaphorical meanings. The story of *Taw Meh Pah* highlights a recurrent theme in the telling of Karen culture and identity, that the Karen harbour a long history of persecution and flight. This can be found not only in the early documentation work of the missionaries and colonial administrators, but also in the literature of the KNU and more importantly for the arguments made in this thesis, the narratives of the displaced Karen who participated in this thesis. Time and again, flight and persecution frame the way displaced Karen in the borderlands identify themselves; this is particularly relevant to the arguments laid out in the previous section of this chapter.

A number of these early missionary accounts also make mention of the colonial-missionary role in building a Karen nation. Perhaps one of the first comes from Donald Smeaton's book 'The Loyal Karens of Burma' where he quotes from the letters of the missionary Dr Vinton who gives an account of a battle in which the Karen played a prominent part.

So far from being daunted, I never saw the Karen so anxious for a fight. *This is just welding the Karens into a nation, not an aggregation of clans.* The heathen Karens to a man are brigading themselves under the Christians. This whole thing is doing good for the Karen. This will put virility into our Christianity (Smeaton, 1920, pp. 15-16, italics are mine).

In another account, the prominent Karen Dr San C Po, writing in 1928 talks of a Karen nation in emphatic, almost prophetic terms. His book is predominantly a nationalist proclamation of Karen distinction and independence and he very clearly projects a nationalist claim to territory and a Karen nation:

“Karen Country,” how inspiring it sounds! What thoughts, what manly feeling, what wonderful visions of the future the words conjure forth in the mind of the Karen (Po, 2001, p. 81).

While much of this early work makes mention of the various Karen clans, there is a tendency to convey a sense of a collective Karen people and there is little insight into how these clans might be brought together to be a ‘Karen nation’. Likewise, there are detailed descriptions of seemingly objective ethnic identifiers such as language, dress, customs, and religion. But there are obvious problems that arise from attempts to claim a collective identity based on ‘authentic’ and objective ethnic identifiers. The fact that the Karen are not homogenous suggests objective ethnic determinants are less useful in trying to understand Karen identity than perhaps subjective ones are. A shared language, political ideology, religion, and territory are some of the common traits of a nation and are seen as critical components for binding people together under a common national identity (Smith, 1995). In terms of the Karen, there is no obvious commonality across these traits from which a pan-Karen identity could naturally establish. So how has a pan-Karen identity been able to form if not around these objective determinants?

In his essay ‘Seeing ‘Karen’ in the Union of Myanmar’, Nick Cheesman goes some way towards addressing this concern when he proposes an examination of self-descriptions to understand how an ethnic identity is defined (2002). Cheesman suggests there are three recurring themes that exist in these early writings and remain in evidence today. These are “narratives of oppression, lack of education and virtue” (Cheesman, 2002). Such assertions can be found in many of the historical texts and mythologies. In San C Po’s ‘Burma and the Karens’ (Po, 2001) he calls the Karen “shy and backward, and often lacking in the spirit of competition ...”. Prominent missionary Harry Ignatius Marshall mentions the Karen as shy, cautious and prone to being preyed upon by others (Marshall, 1922). The oft-recounted Golden Book Myth (recited in detail in Chapter Seven) is heavily prescribed to the idea of Karen education; having lost the book of wisdom the Karen must rely on the return of the younger ‘white’ brother for their education.

Cheesman’s classifications of self-description are also evident in references to Karen identity today. In discussions with a number of participants I was told that Karen people are oppressed through their ignorance and belief in traditional notions of fate and karma. I have heard Karen people say they are uneducated and that their persecution is part of God’s Will. Others tell me that the Karen are simple but loyal.⁹¹ But to suggest this is the extent of how these self-descriptions work underestimates the dynamics of their intent and perception, and this is something Cheesman points out at the end of his essay.

⁹¹ Author’s field notes, 28 September 2005, Mae Sot

Among these strands of discourse, many aspects of Karen identity that appear to stress subordination and inferiority in fact have antithetical implications that may be attributed both to traditional mythology and refinements made by the elite. Historical persecution signifies future liberation; a lack of education conceals both former glories and future renaissance; high morality ensures that Karen autonomy remains a political imperative (2002, p. 219).

This begins to get to the complexities of Karen identity in the borderlands. These narratives work on a number of levels. Myths and stories are used to perpetuate a common ancestry and ethnic culture. They are used to validate contemporary circumstances; for example, the Karen are uneducated because the white brother stole their book of wisdom. They serve a political purpose in that they support a message of persecution based on ethnicity. As Cheesman states above, in these accounts the Karen may be portrayed as victims – uneducated and persecuted – but this also forms the basis of their future liberation, a validation that the struggle will produce the desired outcome: because this is what the ancient myths have already prescribed. The purpose of such narratives is to give meaning to the current predicament, but also to offer restoration; that through their struggle the Karen will one day be a free nation.

The KNU and establishing a nationalist pan-Karen identity

The work of the early missionaries was extremely influential over the construction of the foundations of the Karen as a people, suggesting the notion of a Karen nation and a pan-Karen identity were occurring from at least the nineteenth century. But a pan-Karen identity and a Karen nation has also developed through the adaptations and interpretations the Karen have brought to this documentation of their culture and history.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is how the KNU has utilised this pan-Karen discourse to establish a nationalist Karen identity. Many of these early writings have carried over into the nation-building ideology perpetuated by the militarised struggle of the KNU. The KNU has employed these historical accounts to reinforce their claim to represent a unified, homogenous Karen people.

The KNU has undergone a number of ideological shifts throughout its 60 year insurgency,⁹² but for the purpose of the arguments I make in this chapter I focus on the period after Bo Mya's rise to the

⁹² For example from the turn of the twentieth century through to pre-World War Two, the Karen movement was dominated by nationalistic fervour and the struggle to gain political representation in the colonial administration. The sixties and seventies were dominated by a socialist era under the presidency of Mahn Ba Zan, while the Bo Mya era (1976 until his death in 2006) was dominated by a more right-wing conservative Christian agenda, described by Martin Smith as Bo Mya's "bulldog brand of nationalism" (1999, p. 391).

Presidency as it is this era that most significantly defines the nature of Karen identity in the borderlands today. A combination of circumstance and political will has seen the dominance of this KNU version of Karen identity. It typically takes an ethno-nationalist form, for example, a distinct Karen culture, a claim to territory and political autonomy, and persecution based on ethnicity. Since the mid-seventies, the KNU has been dominated by a conservative, Christian, Sgaw speaking elite pushing a nationalist-militarist agenda. This has seen the early translation work of colonial administrators and Baptists missionaries incorporated into the nationalist agenda projected by the KNU. An example can be found in a treatise put out by the KNU in 1991, 'The Karens and their Struggle for Freedom':

The Karens are much more than a national minority. We are a nation with a population of 7 million, having all essential qualities of a nation. We have our own history, our own culture, our own land of settlement and our own economic system of life. By nature the Karen are simple, quiet, unassuming and peace loving people, who uphold the high moral qualities of honesty, purity, brotherly love, co-operative living and loyalty, and are devout in their religious beliefs (KNU, 1991, p. 5).

Under the KNU, a Karen state, Kawthoolei⁹³ (there are many translations of this, including the 'Green Land' mentioned in the earlier *hta*) was established in the eastern part of Burma and is commonly portrayed in both historical and contemporary narratives as the Karen's promised land. Kawthoolei has featured prominently as a symbol of the Karen nation and demand for an autonomous state within the federal union of Burma. In another section of the KNU's 1991 treatise it is stated:

We desire Kawthoolei to be a Karen State with the right to self-determination. We are therefore endeavouring to form a genuine Federal Union comprised of all the states of the nationalities of Burma, including a Burman state, on the basis of Liberty, Equality, Self-determination and Social Progress ... We desire the extent of Kawthoolei to be the areas

⁹³ A precise translation of Kawthoolei is uncertain. It is often translated as "flowerland", "green land", "land of lilies", or "country burnt black". The word seems to have first come in to use after the Second World War and appears to be used in reference to a state for the Karen. Martin Smith states that the 1947 Constitution made provision for a special region (not a state) to be known as Kawthoolei that would include the Salween district and adjoining areas (M. Smith, 1999, p. 82). The idea of Kawthoolei as representing Karen state came later, in a peace treaty in 1964; this also included the consideration of Karen areas in the Tenasserim and the Irrawaddy Delta becoming part of Kawthoolei (M. Smith, 1999, p. 217). Mikael Gravers also suggests it was first used in publications in 1947 but he clearly states that it does not refer to a specific geographical area but rather is symbolic and not necessarily inter-connected (Gravers, 2007, p. 245), which would account for the many Karen who live in the Irrawaddy Delta and other areas of Burma. In any case, Kawthoolei is generally considered a nationalist construct for a designated space that could represent the interests of the Karen. Martin Smith (1999) and Jonathan Falla (1991) provide some of the most extensive commentary around the origins and translations of this term.

where the Karens are in majority ... All the people in Kawthoolei should be given democratic rights, political, economical, social and cultural (KNU, 1991, p. 15).

There is a distinct preoccupation in the KNU literature on dispelling any doubt that the Karen are a unified nation. In many respects, in presenting these historical cultural 'truths' as evidence of a 'unified Karen identity', the KNU has fallen into a classic predicament of modern society, forcing plurality into unity and therefore alienating many people who consider themselves Karen but under different terms (South, 2007).

But for some Karen the primacy of the KNU vision is not a given. This is particularly evident in the youth and the Karen diaspora now in third countries. Many view this as a failure by the KNU to adapt to the changing political and social circumstances. One participant talked about the need for a 'new revolution' that would build up a younger generation of leaders and bring much needed change and rejuvenation to a KNU position that he views as "old and stale".⁹⁴ A statement put together by four progressive members of the KNU executive in 2005, shows some of the concerns they have:

Since the inception of the Karen resistance movement in 1949, Burma's internal political dimensions, as well as regional and international situations, have changed significantly. At the advent of economic globalization and the digital world, the Karen's struggle for self-determination and ethnic equality cannot be fought purely in the realm of politics ... Having fought relentlessly for more than half a century, we as a movement need, as any healthy movement does, to critically review our strategies and approaches ... The most challenging task ahead for the Karens is to generate a new generation of leadership that is capable of looking beyond the same voices that recycle the old mantras or prescribe the same solutions, which can grasp the complex dynamics of ethnicity, and stay attuned to the regional political situation of this increasingly interconnected world. The Karens need a leadership that is not only committed to the Karen's collective vision of self-determination within a genuine union of Burma, but that is also skilful and inventive in policy making, intellectually and strategically flexible, and capable of adapting to and taking advantage of, new development in Burma, the region and the world (IEDS blog, 2005).

The wording of this statement is chosen carefully. There is respectful acknowledgement of what the KNU has tried to achieve on behalf of their long suffering constituents, and there is certainly no outright condemnation of the KNU. However, the message is clear. The KNU must develop an inclusive, consultative agenda, genuinely representative of all Karen regardless of the natural

⁹⁴ Author's field notes, 17 December 2008

fracture lines along religion, language and ideology, and capable of addressing the challenges of an interconnected world. Such an achievement is difficult in any political society, but it suggests a rethinking is needed in terms of a genuinely representative national ethos. And there are significant obstacles. Although Bo Mya died in 2008, the current Karen leadership seems to remain deeply embedded in his philosophy for the KNU and militantly devoted to the party's founding principles set out in 1949.⁹⁵ Under these circumstances, talk of change will remain a long-term challenge.

While this may seem highly critical of the KNU's position one must also take into account that the KNU sees itself as in a struggle for the survival of the Karen people. They have pursued a path not uncommon to the leaders of many other persecuted and oppressed populations of the world. They have developed a narrative for their struggle, giving a national identity to a people and their culture to distinguish their plight and to support their claims of political and cultural persecution. In the case of the KNU this is at times a claim to represent *all* Karen against the Burmese oppressor and the right to an autonomous Karen State within a Federalist Union of Burma. The premise being that the competing struggles of numerous fractured groups is less effective than a united Karen struggle guided by a nationalist agenda.

'Karen-ness' reinforced by external agents

The projection of a pan-Karen identity is not just the prerogative of the Karen; it is also taken up and projected by others. A range of external agents, in particular the international media, activists and the Karen diaspora, all reinforce the idea of Karen-ness in the way they present the Karen struggle and conduct their own activities.

A largely sympathetic international media reporting from the Thai-Burma border have typically portrayed the Karen as a nationalist struggle, persecuted because of their ethnicity and locked in a struggle against a brutal authoritarian dictatorship. Coverage in mainstream media tends to fall into two areas. There is the nostalgic, almost romantic vision of the Karen as the underdog, portrayed as patriotic guerrilla soldiers fighting for their homeland in defiance of the vastly better resourced oppressor, the Burmese military. The second type of coverage is the plight of civilian Karen villager's, who are the victims of human rights abuses and displacement at the hands of the armed forces. In either case, reporting tends to reinforce a 'Karen-ness' by generalising the conflict as a Karen conflict, with little account of its diversity and complexity, or the other ethnic groups

⁹⁵ These founding principles are laid out in Saw Ba U Kyi's 'four basic principles': 1. For us surrender is out of the question, 2. The recognition of the Karen State must be complete, 3. We shall retain our arms, 4. We shall decide our own political destiny. In justifying the need for change in the KNU one participant told me that "If Saw Ba U Kyi was alive today I'm sure he would have amended his four basic principles by now" (Author's field notes, 16 December 2008).

also engaged in similar struggles. This reporting also tends to focus on ethno-nationalist features to define the Karen struggle such as reporting ethnic genocide, or the right to a Karen 'homeland'.

These ethno-nationalist features are also presented through various forms of activism. This is most commonly framed through actions that raise awareness and call for action against the ongoing ethnic persecution of the Karen. Advocacy highlighting Karen displacement, killing, torture, rape and land confiscation, tends to present these abuses as suffered by *a* people, the Karen. Again, we see a generalisation of the conflict, a simplification of the issue in order to gain international awareness, understanding and action. But what we also see is an intensification of Karen ethnicity and a Karen nation that puts a spotlight on the abhorrent and illegal nature of the persecution and justifies action taken to address, and ultimately eradicate this persecution. Many in the wider Karen diaspora, for example those resettled in third countries, take this one step further and develop an almost militaristic affiliation to their Karen ethnicity. Distance and the need to maintain a sense of self and community, tends to heighten their attachment to the Karen identity and culture, for many this can manifest in more hardline rhetoric around who the Karen are and what their struggle is all about. But there are also other considerations. The Karen struggle is adapted to garner the understanding of a largely ignorant (in terms of the complexities of the Karen situation) western audience with competing demands being made on their attention. Burma, the Karen people, the conflict, all tend to be simplified into terms this western audience can understand. The diaspora community must also focus on preserving the Karen culture in the face of twin threats – the Burmese military and other, particularly western, cultural assimilation. For the exiled Karen, Karen-ness is a means for survival, and often, once removed from the immediate vicinity of their homeland, one of the few tools available to them to account for their experience of displacement and continue their support of the Karen struggle.

In their own ways these external agents reinforce the idea of Karen-ness by presenting the conflict in terms that simplify and corral diverse groupings and concerns into a 'unified' struggle against a military oppressor. The practices of these external agents serve to highlight that a pan-Karen identity, whatever its origins may be, is now reinforced by agents that may have no real connection to the Karen or the larger discourse around what constitutes Karen culture and identity. It is telling that most people view this conflict as a Karen struggle, not a Pwo, religious, or gender struggle for example, all positions that could make equally legitimate claims to oppression. These external agents may have different motivations for embracing a pan-Karen identity but the outcome is the same, reinforcement of a homogenous, unified Karen people.

There are an increasing number of texts that claim a pan-Karen identity is an artificial construct (Hinton, 1983; Rajah, 1990). Hinton spends much of his essay 'Do the Karen Really Exist?' pointing

out the misleading aspects of conventional classifications of an ethnic Karen identity. In answering his question 'What is a Karen?' Hinton concludes that difficulties arise "due to the fact that I was assuming cultural distinctiveness where there was none..." (1983, p. 165). He even goes as far as to say that these conventional classifications "have helped make real the very facts which they inaccurately describe" (1983, p. 166). In his essay 'Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Nation-State', Ananda Rajah notes:

It is not difficult to see now that Karen identity, as it is made out to be by the KNU is an *invention*, rather different from the way that Karen in village communities identify themselves, and that the Karen nation-state is, to use Anderson's term (1983, p.15), an "imagined political community... imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign". (1990, p. 121)

While both Rajah and Hinton put forward positions that can certainly be argued, these texts should be treated with caution in that they appear to assume authenticity lies with seemingly objective historical evidence, and that the more subjective 'constructions' of the colonial-missionary era, or indeed we could add the KNU or modern citizenship accounts of identity, are the less authentic cousin of cultural objectivity. Indeed, I argue that these 'constructions' actually provide a more holistic account of the complex nature of how identity is formed and practiced. In reality, the line between subjective and objective indicators is a blurred one, but this should not detract from the legitimacy of the identity. When I asked a Karen friend born in the hills around Thailand's northern city of Chiang Mai how he identified himself he told me "Thai-Karen", subscribing to the idea of embodying multiple identities. Thai because that was his citizenship, and Karen because that was his culture, his heart.⁹⁶ In this context he has a sense of Karen-ness but not necessarily a predilection for a Karen state. Another Karen participant recited in earnest detail the origin myth of *Taw Meh Pah*. He began the story with the classic children's fairytale beginning, 'Once upon a time', and when I asked if he believed this story he laughed nervously and said no not really. While the actual details of this myth may be 'fantastical' or 'invented' to some, the sentiment is absolutely taken seriously, and that is that the Karen have a history and a culture that gives them power and legitimacy. In both these instances seemingly objective ethnic identifiers such as culture and language mix with subjective interpretations of historical narratives and modern notions of citizenship and belonging.

The point is that whatever the origins and influences of a pan-Karen identity, it is now developed and reinforced through a number of processes that lend their own subtle variants to the discourse. But while these variants may distinguish them to some level, all reinforce a Karen-ness by

⁹⁶ Author's field notes, 8 December 2008, Mae Sot

privileging a pan-Karen narrative, the idea that there is one Karen struggle and one Karen people and that there are fundamental and historical ethnic identifiers around which this narrative has formed. And there is some legitimacy to elements of this claim. For the fact remains that among the Karen I have encountered throughout the course of this thesis and in my previous work with Karen communities along the Thai-Burma border, the majority consider themselves 'Karen' and attest to a distinct Karen identity. Whether this is a result of nationalist or missionary-led indoctrination of a pan-Karen identity seems almost irrelevant. If you subscribe to the idea of identity as a social construct, as I do in this thesis, then the way identity is practiced and interpreted becomes a more important indication of identity than where or how it originated. This is not to ignore the importance of how a pan-Karen identity has formed but rather proposes that the focus is moved to how a Karen identity is interpreted, particularly by those who are exposed to these various elements in the borderlands.

My intent in this chapter has not been to dismiss the importance of a Karen nation or a nationalist sentiment in the formation of Karen identity in the borderlands. I am not suggesting that a Karen nation cannot, or does not exist. It is undeniably present in the contemporary configuration of the borderlands. But rather, my intent is to emphasise that through modes of social practice a narrative of persecution and displacement becomes a key reference point around which displaced Karen in the borderlands mobilise, and in addition becomes the dominant framing of a Karen identity. I argue that in the projection of a Karen identity from the borderlands, the notion of Karen-ness and a Karen nation is commonly used for the purpose of consolidating Karen claims to persecution and displacement. In this sense it is the shared experience of displacement and persecution that has helped to reinforce the idea of a Karen nation and mobilise the Karen to struggle against their continued displacement. This shared experience of persecution becomes a point of reference to which all these, and many others in the borderlands, are able to identify and unite.

A Karen nation is certainly feasible, but its ultimate goal of representing *all* Karen will remain elusive while it is conditional on the idea of pan-Karen identity with a unified, nationalistic agenda. Perhaps it is time to see Karen identity in the borderlands in terms of its relationship to the space in which it is constructed and projected: a space that harbours a range of diverse Karen peoples who commonly identify with a shared experience of persecution and displacement and who procure the idea of a Karen nation to serve the purpose of reinforcing larger claims around governance, human rights and the political self. This is both the potential and uniqueness of a Karen identity as it is developed and projected from the borderlands space. It acts in asymbiotic

relationship to the space – shaped by modes of social practice, the geographical location, and the interchange that occurs within and across the nation-state border.

CONCLUSION

This chapter highlights the complex nature of Karen identity in the borderlands. The description of Karen identity offered in this thesis is conclusive, but not definitive. There are many other parallel and interconnected trajectories that could equally be argued to represent a Karen identity and this shows the complex nature of how a Karen identity in the borderlands is formed and practiced. This thesis does however, highlight a key conceptual framework in which Karen identity can be understood: the formation and projection of identity within the construct of a borderlands space.

This chapter argues that key modes of social practice critically inform the construction and projection of a Karen identity. This identity manifests in two key ways: as a narrative of shared persecution and displacement and as a narrative of a unified, homogenous Karen that reinforces the notion of a Karen nation. The lack of a pan-Karen identity that truly unites and represents *all* Karen people, means the shared experience of persecution and displacement has become a more effective way for displaced Karen in the borderlands to identify and mobilise. This narrative has been woven into the contemporary accounts of displacement due to conflict as well as through historical origin myths and texts, and serves to provide a locus from which the Karen can make sense of their plight, but also provide a common narrative around which they can identify and mobilise.

This version of Karen identity is specific to the space in which it is conceived and projected, and this is largely due to the three modes of social practice that critically inform the construction and projection of Karen identity. These processes do not follow a linear path. Patterns of activism, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery are informed by the borderlands space. In other words, their existence is only made possible by the space in which they operate. But they also make up a key component of what constitutes the borderlands space I talk of in this thesis. In this respect, Karen identity therefore makes and is made by the borderlands space in which it operates.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has examined how a group of Karen, displaced from Burma and now residing on the Thai side of the national boundary, conceive of and relate to the borderlands space they occupy. At the centre of this relationship between space and people is an interchange that occurs across a broader space that is informed by the national border that separates Burma and Thailand, a space that this thesis has treated as a 'borderlands'. This interchange is defined by the nature of sociality that occurs in conjunction with a territorial domain, and is broadly mapped through the operations of the nation-state and the practices of displaced Karen, two key agents of the borderlands space.

This thesis has found that in the borderlands space, the practices of displaced Karen take on a fluid and contested form, framed by processes of constructing, adapting, rejecting and reifying elements of a Karen cultural and political identity in order to construct a Karen narrative of persecution, and ultimately establish a Karen political self. This often sits in tension with the operations of the Thai and Burmese nation-states, which attempt to create a space that is more homogenised; defined and treated as representing the nation-state's political authority over a delineated territorial domain and its inhabitants.

This tension provides a space in which displaced Karen protest, construct and redefine the parameters of their political life. This is done through key modes of social practice – patterns of activism that establish a Karen political voice, networks of solidarity that enable, broaden and strengthen the reach of a Karen political voice, and processes of cultural recovery that consolidate the idea of a Karen nation and a Karen cultural identity. These practices have ultimately informed the construction and projection of a Karen identity that is specific to the borderlands space.

In this context, the main thesis argument is that the Thai-Burma borderlands becomes the setting for modes of social practice that critically inform the projection of a Karen identity. There are three subsidiary arguments that support this main thesis argument. The first subsidiary argument defines the *space* in which practices and constructions occur, the Thai-Burma borderlands. The second subsidiary argument analyses the nature of the patterns of activity as they relate to that space, what this thesis argues are the *modes of social practice*; practices of activism, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery, as practiced by displaced Karen. The third subsidiary argument explores the type of *identity* that forms where the attributes of the space and the modes of social practice intersect. These three subsidiary arguments do not act independently of each other, in fact they intersect at various points and it is from these junctures that this thesis draws much of its data and ultimately its findings. The remainder of this chapter provides a summary of

these findings, before finishing with some speculation on how the recent political changes in Burma may impact the nature of the borderlands space.

SPATIAL TENSION

The first subsidiary argument that frames this thesis is that the Thai-Burma borderlands is a distinct space characterised by a tension between a modern territorial domain, characterised by the modern demarcation of the Thai-Burma border and the consolidation of nation-state control over it, and the intersection of a particular form of social relations, characterised by a fluidity of movement (of information, resources, ideas, culture, identity) that intensifies the possibilities available to displaced Karen, particularly in terms of political agency and mobilisation.

This argument spans the breadth of the thesis. Chapters Three and Four lay out the nature of the territorial domain, arguing that the operations of the nation-state attempt to create a homogenised space that is delineated by the international border between Burma and Thailand. These operations include many features typical of nation-state operations: checkpoints, citizenship, border controls, local bureaucracies and policing. They also include operations that are more specific to the circumstances of the Thai-Burma borderlands: an uneven process of increased militarisation on the Burmese side of the border in order to control ethnic opposition groups and territory and increased regulation on the Thai side of the border in response to security concerns and refugee influxes. This has resulted in an attempt to contain refugees in designated camps along the border and to monitor and regulate other displaced persons that live outside the camps.

These factors represent an increased interest and penetration of both the Burmese and Thai nation-state's to consolidate control over the border, intensifying the border as a form of political authority. While the nation-state may attempt to enforce the concept of the modern territorial domain, this thesis does not suggest that the operations of the nation-state are able to achieve this with any form of totality, in fact it has shown the often complex and contentious practices that a hardened, homogenised approach to the border must eventually accommodate. In this sense, the operations of the nation-state, almost by necessity, must at some point accept that the modern territorial domain also exhibits a sense of fluidity that is needed in order to accommodate what might be seen as aberrations to this attempt to contain and control: activities encompassing illegal trade and informal population movement across national borders, as well as policies that cater for non-citizens such as refugees, international students and spousal visas.

In contrast to these more delineated characteristics of the modern territorial domain, are the particular form of social relations laid out in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. These social relations are

framed by an interchange that occurs across the national border and which intensifies the possibilities available to displaced Karen in the borderlands. Ultimately, this constitutes a more fluid and contentious approach to the territorial domain, and in the context of this thesis it manifests as resistance to a process (institutionalised governance) that inadequately captures the nature of the Karen political self. In this thesis, examination of the social relations of displaced Karen has shown they encompass some of the following characteristics that are relevant to this cross-border interchange: ongoing physical and psychological connection to the Karen still inside Burma, use of global networks and communications technologies to engage and connect with a range of political agents globally, and developing flows of information that feed both cultural and political needs. There are of course many others that have been mentioned throughout this thesis.

These conflicting uses of the space both sit in tension and intensify each other, a situation that reflects that neither agent, the nation-state or displaced Karen, have absolute control over the space, and that both are attempting to articulate their own narrative of the space. My argument across this thesis has been that this tension informs the nature of the borderlands space, but also that it frames the activities of those who reside there or have a political interest in the operations of the space.

MODES OF SOCIAL PRACTICE

This idea of a Thai-Burma borderlands space that informs and is informed by the social relations that occur within it, leads to the second subsidiary argument this thesis makes, that these social relations take on the form of an interchange that occurs across the national border, and this interchange is framed by three key modes of social practice. While these modes of social practice constitute a larger theoretical domain than is covered in this thesis, I have used this phrase as a means of collectively describing key patterns of practice exhibited by displaced Karen in the borderlands space. As such they are examples of modes of practice relevant to this thesis rather than definitive categories. These three modes of social practice are patterns of activism that strengthen Karen agency and challenge institutional forms of governance; networks of solidarity, developed through international networking, new technologies and political consciousness; and processes of cultural recovery, constituting a public projection of 'remembered places', cultural reification and imagining a vision of the future. Chapters Five, Six and Seven of the thesis lay out the parameters of these modes of social practice.

Chapter Five showed that patterns of activism emerge from a tension between the operations of institutional governance and a more informal political power that develops through the contested social relations of displaced Karen. These operations of institutional governance aim to contain and

control displaced Karen; this includes control over space and movement through institutions tasked with surveillance and enforcement, as well as through administrative categorisation aimed at identifying and regulating displaced populations. Displaced Karen contest these institutional forms of governance because they do not adequately capture the nature of their political self. This contestation occurs in a number of ways, by deliberately moving across designated boundaries and by living outside the containment lines determined by administrative categories, for example making the choice to live outside of the refugee camps or rejecting the refugee label when it doesn't suit their political purposes. These acts of contestation have helped displaced Karen develop a political self by pursuing forms of activism that advance their political claims (for example resolving the ongoing persecution by the Burmese military) as well as subverting institutional norms of political belonging by negotiating their own place in the political domain (for example articulating a political self that can encompass both agency and marginalisation). These actions strengthen Karen political agency and mobilisation in the borderlands.

Chapter Six showed that the Karen utilise forms of activism and political agency to develop networks of solidarity that are framed by the shared experience of displacement and persecution. These solidarities are strengthened where activist practices intersect with particular mechanisms of social power. These mechanisms of social power are grouped into three categories. The first category involves international networking. Displaced Karen utilise global networks in ways that create awareness of Karen persecution and enhance the political capacity of Karen to develop and present a Karen political voice. The second category involves new technologies. Communications technologies such as blogs, websites and multimedia have enabled the Karen to produce their own messages and project them to a larger audience, both internationally and within Karen communities in the borderlands. In addition these technologies have formed a useful platform from which the Karen can project a political narrative of displacement and persecution which forms the basis of a Karen identity in the borderlands. The third category involves political consciousness. Displaced Karen develop greater political consciousness among the Karen communities inside Burma and in the borderlands in order to convey a strong political message around the ongoing persecution of Karen inside Burma. These advances in communications technologies, and the increased capacity of displaced Karen to utilise them, has improved the capacity of Karen political voices, increased the reach of advocacy around Karen persecution and displacement, and enabled greater connections between individuals and groups in the borderlands and globally.

Chapter Seven showed that the mechanisms utilised for activism and solidarity have also been integral to the recovery of a cultural identity. This cultural identity is characterised by a selective

recovery of cultural icons and origin myths which reinforce the idea of a Karen nation and is then used to enhance claims of persecution and a political voice. This thesis showed that the Karen use processes of 'remembered place', cultural reification and imagining, all forms of cultural recovery, to construct a cultural narrative framed by the notion of a Karen nation that becomes part of a projected Karen identity.

Together, these key modes of social practice are evidence of a set of social relations that can be mapped across the borderlands domain. At times, these intersect with other processes that are integral to this thesis, such as the operations of the nation-state, political agency, global processes and political contestation. These practices and intersecting relationships constitute a key component of the borderlands space, they both make and are made by the borderlands space, but they also enable the construction and projection of the particular form of Karen identity that I argue exists in the borderlands, an identity based on a shared narrative of persecution and displacement.

IDENTITY

The third subsidiary argument this thesis makes is that Karen identity in the borderlands is formed through a complex process of identity-making that is shaped by the present, specifically influenced by the experience of persecution and the consequences of displacement, and conveys a sense of being rooted in the past, constituting both real and imagined cultural identifiers and mythologies. The thesis has argued that this is often a fluid process, the Karen constructing, adapting and reifying the social and cultural aspects of their political identity in order to establish a Karen claim to a political self, a point from which they can protest the persecution and discrimination waged against them.

With this in mind, the thesis has argued that Karen identity in the borderlands commonly manifests in two ways. Firstly, as a narrative of shared persecution and displacement that acts as a primary reference point around which displaced Karen in the borderlands are able to identify and mobilise. And secondly, as a pan-Karen identity based on a narrative of a unified, homogenous Karen. The thesis has shown that this particular type of Karen identity is informed by the key modes of social practices mentioned above. In other words, patterns of activism, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery frame the construction and projection a Karen identity. This thesis has shown that these modes of social practice give form to the identity by incorporating present day influences such as the experience of persecution and displacement or the influence of western trends, with cultural identifiers that convey a sense of being rooted in the past, such as the adaptation and dissemination of Karen origin myths and cultural icons. These modes of social

practice also enable the projection of a Karen identity across a larger global order by providing a platform and tools for its dissemination. This is evident in the utilisation of global networks and the use of technologies with far-reaching impact and exposure to international governments, media outlets and the greater Karen diaspora. Because these modes of social practice are critically informed by the space in which they operate, this identity takes on a form that is specific to the borderlands. It is not, for example, a form of Karen identity that is replicated inside Burma, or in the Karen diaspora around the world.

That this identity also includes notions of a pan-Karen identity is also reflective of the borderlands space. While the notion of a pan-Karen identity has been shown to have historical roots in the colonial-missionary texts of the mid to late 1800s (Gravers, 2007; Rajah, 2002), this thesis has shown that it takes on a particular form in the borderlands, where it is used to reinforce the idea of a Karen nation and a Karen nationalist movement. This is largely as a result of its intersection with the nationalist armed resistance movement, particularly its adaption and consolidation to fit the nationalist story projected by the KNU, and the way it has been used by global agents such as the international media, the Karen diaspora and activists, who all reinforce the idea of a pan-Karen identity in the ways they present the Karen struggle in their own activities.

The intent in this thesis was not to look at Karen identity from a conventional perspective aimed at determining the legitimacy and efficacy of ethnic identifiers, although this is of course discussed particularly as it relates to historical and mythological constructs of 'the homogenised Karen'. Instead, this thesis has explored the performative dimension of Karen identity, in other words how it is practiced and interpreted by those Karen who have been displaced to the borderlands. From this position, the thesis has found that Karen identity in the borderlands is characterised by a sense of fluidity and complexity, integrating elements of an 'homogenised Karen' identity largely rooted in re-interpreted cultural traditions of the past, and a collective Karen experience of persecution which is impacted by events in the present day. The Karen treat these various elements with a sense of fluidity, adapting and reifying them as they become useful to a larger objective of protecting and preserving the idea of a Karen people who suffer under the Burmese military.

While on their own each of these subsidiary arguments make self-contained contributions to understandings of space, practice and identity, together they fulfil the larger prospect of understanding borderlands spaces, and in particular how that space relates to the activities of displaced Karen. By interconnecting spatial tension, modes of social practice and identity in this way, this thesis offers an analytical framework that can account for the practices and narratives of displaced Karen as they pursue a new type of political existence in the Thai-Burma borderlands. It is from this entry point that this thesis has argued that the Thai-Burma borderlands becomes the

setting for modes of social practice that critically inform the projection of a Karen identity. And that this dynamic has produced a particular form of political agency, framed through activism that has come to represent the activities and identity constructions of displaced Karen in the borderlands.

Why is this important? The Karen have suffered persecution and displacement over many decades. Rather than be seen as purely victims of these sets of circumstance, displaced Karen have utilised the mechanisms of the borderlands space to engage with their marginalisation, contesting and constructing the existing socio-political structures so as to ensure a more adequate addressing and representation of their political needs. They do this not only through the key modes of social practice discussed in this thesis, but also through the development and projection of a Karen identity that reflects their experience of persecution and displacement. As a result, displaced Karen are active participants in their own political narrative of both marginalisation and agency, and the borderlands space has both enabled and enriched the strength and reach of that narrative. This is very clearly an important dynamic that links the social practices of displaced Karen to the borderlands space in which they operate; and the Karen political self to a process of interchange that occurs across the nation-state border.

THE FUTURE OF THE BORDERLANDS

Recent changes in Burma, while still largely uncertain, will likely be felt in the Thai-Burma borderlands. This requires some speculation on the impact of these changes on the arguments made in this thesis and the nature of the borderlands more generally. Over the last year Burma has experienced, arguably, some of the most potentially significant political progress since independence in 1947. In 2010 elections were held for the first time since 1990, bringing in a nominally civilian government that retains strong military links. A new President was installed, Thein Sein,⁹⁷ previously a general in the most recent incarnation of the Burmese dictatorship that had ruled Burma for the previous 48 years. With the international community repeatedly calling on

⁹⁷ Thein Sein was a key figure in the Burmese military until he resigned in 2010 in order to contest the elections as a civilian. He became head of the USDA and contested the seat of Zabu Thiri Township in Naypyidaw which he reportedly won with 91 percent of the vote. He had previously gained the rank of Secretary-1 in the Burmese military (the second highest ranking position) and held the position of Prime Minister between 2007 and 2011. He is sometimes called a moderate and a reformer and has reportedly been instrumental in brokering talks with Aung San Suu Kyi and relaxing many of the oppressive military-instigated restrictions Burma has suffered under for nearly 50 years. But Thein Sein largely remains an enigma. He appears to have none of the reputation for human rights abuses and corruption that many of the other generals have acquired, but he has worked his way up through the ranks of one of the world's most oppressive and immoral military regimes, and that is not done without a level of ruthlessness and strategic drive. Time will tell whether he is a true reformer, a lackey for the military, or as I think is often the case when it comes to decisions by the Burmese military, an arbitrary, non-threatening choice that will allow the real orchestrators of Burma's human suffering to fade quietly and without retribution into the background.

the Burmese regime to undertake democratic reform, he spent most of 2011 undertaking diplomatic efforts aimed at appeasing the international community. This included releasing Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and more than two hundred political prisoners from Burmese jails, including well known activists and politicians who had been given large prison sentences. There has been expanded freedoms around media reporting and internet access. New legislation protecting freedom of assembly and forming trade unions is currently before the parliament, and political parties were allowed to register for the by-elections held in April 2012.

Thein Sein has used these steps to illustrate Burma's progress towards democratic reform and has urged the international community to lift a range of sanctions currently in place.⁹⁸ The foreign ministers of Australia and the United Kingdom and the Secretary of State of the United States were the first high ranking government officials from their respective countries to visit Burma in decades. After the release of a significant number of political prisoners in mid-January, the US Government announced that it would establish full diplomatic ties with Burma, including re-establishing its Ambassador in Rangoon.

While many have spoken of these changes as a new era for Burma, many others are treating these developments with caution, and rightly so, Burma has a long and painful history of not fulfilling its obligations when it comes to its own citizens but also in meeting the demands of an international community eager for reform. While encouraging, the concessions made so far have been relatively pain-free for the new government, and their resolve for democratic reform is still to be truly tested.

It is far too early to say whether these changes constitute a genuine show of political progress, or even if they are sustainable. Any democratic reform will be seriously hindered by restrictions embedded in the much-maligned 2008 Constitution. A convoluted and complicated piece of legislation, the Constitution was not only introduced on the back of a fraudulent referendum, it effectively gives the military veto power over any major constitutional changes, in effect cementing their control over the country only now under a supposedly democratic structure. Even as the new government speaks the language of reform and conciliation, the Burmese military continues to attack ethnic areas, most notably displacing more than 50,000 civilians in Kachin State⁹⁹ and an estimated 30,000 in northern Shan state¹⁰⁰. There is as yet little mention of any

⁹⁸ Australia has already relaxed sanctions as did the European Union after the April by-elections. The US has eased some sanctions to allow Burma to get financial help from international institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, and has indicated it will ease some of the other economic, trade and financial sanctions it has against Burma if the momentum for political reform continues.

⁹⁹ UNHCR estimates 50,000 have been displaced across government and KIO controlled areas since June 2011. Human Rights Watch has estimated the number to be closer to 75,000. See 'UNHCR delivers aid to

meaningful resolution to the ethnic conflict, and this is arguably one of the biggest obstacles confronting any future democratic government in Burma. Long-standing military oppression and political disaffection of the ethnic groups means resolving this issue is deeply rooted in the success of political reform in the country. Until there is a definitive cessation of fighting in the ethnic areas and a genuine integration of ethnic affairs and representation in the political process, it is difficult to see a positive or even moderately successful outcome for a democratic Burma.

The impact these changes will have on the borderlands is also largely uncertain. The Thai Government is already talking of repatriating refugees and many I spoke with along the border in January 2012 stated they would willing return but only if their safety was guaranteed. Large numbers of refugees, including many who participated in this research, have already been resettled to third countries, further depleting the social and political capacity of those working in the borderlands. In January 2012, the KNU met with Burmese officials in Pa'an to discuss a ceasefire agreement. Conflicting reports of this meeting show the uncertainty inherent in these talks and only time will tell whether this will be more successful than previous attempts to broker a ceasefire.¹⁰¹ Many NGOs working in the borderlands are already expressing concerns about securing ongoing funding, many believing that donors who were previously constrained by sanctions and international political pressure, will see these tentative political reforms as a reason to now support work inside Burma. This does not necessarily mean the dismantling of the NGO infrastructure in the borderlands; if what we are seeing now is indeed genuine political reform and this continues to gather momentum, it will still take some time for results to trickle down. In the meantime savvy NGOs will work out ways to extend their work inside while at the same time maintaining the integrity of a struggle that has looked to provide human security and genuine democratic reform. For many NGOs who already attempt cross-border work, a calmer, more

thousands in Myanmar's remote Kachin state' (2012, March 26). *UNHCR News Service*. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from <http://www.unhcr.org/4f7061566.html>.

¹⁰⁰ See 'Over 30,000 displaced by Burma Army attacks face humanitarian crisis in northern Shan State' (August 10, 2011). Press release by the Shan Women's Action Network and the Shan Human Rights Foundation. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from http://www.shanwomen.org/images/stories/pressrelease/10_8_11_preseles_eng.pdf.

¹⁰¹ Initial reports stated a ceasefire agreement had been signed, although further clarifying statements followed. The Burmese media reported that a five-point agreement had been signed that was to be implemented as a preliminary task, and that an 11-point agreement would continue to be discussed at the higher political level. The KNU served to confuse this supposed agreement with various members releasing differing 'clarifying' statements about what the state of the agreement actually was. KNU General-Secretary Zipporah Sein reportedly stated that no ceasefire had been agreed upon, rather that an agreement to hold further ceasefire talks had been signed. KNU Vice-President David Tharkabaw, called the initial meeting "... a very minor and very small initial step ..." and that the government's motive was to make ceasefire agreements with ethnic armies so that they could develop the resource-rich border areas (See 'David Tharkabaw, KNU: 'Treacherous offer' (2012, February 10). *Democratic Voice of Burma*. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from <http://www.dvb.no/interview/david-tharkabaw-knu-treacherous-offer/20179>.

peaceful borderlands region will likely benefit their activities in ways that heavy militarisation has hindered in the past.

But there are still significant obstacles to overcome before any genuine plan for repatriation can occur. There are over 140,000 refugees in the camps along the Thai-Burma border,¹⁰² and this situation requires answers to some significant questions. What and where will refugees and displaced person return to? What are the logistics of even moving such a large number of people? Will it be safe? The Burmese military continue to attack ethnic areas but there are also safety concerns associated with the effects of militarisation such as undetonated landmines. While Thailand may be eager to rid itself of the burden of the refugee problem, these are issues that cannot be resolved overnight. They indicate a prolonged winding up of border operations, if this were to happen at all, and continued cross-border familial and social ties that will not easily be disconnected.

The nature of the borderlands will likely change. But then this is exactly the argument this thesis makes. Borderlands, made up of intersecting social relationships, by their very nature changeable, contestable and fluid, are always in a state of perpetual construction. Even the notion of a hardened, homogenous territorial domain is subject to the variable decisions and operations of the nation-state and other border agents, changes that occur depending on political will, diplomatic relations, global processes and practicalities, among other things. This thesis provides a snapshot of the Thai-Burma borderlands not only during a period of time (2005 to 2010) but also from a particular social and political perspective. It shows how the confluence of a range of factors (political, social, cultural, historical) have created a distinct space in which displaced Karen can contest the structures of governance, articulate their political self, and construct an identity based on a narrative of persecution and displacement. That this picture of the borderlands might not exist in this exact form in the future is not a judgement on the arguments made in this thesis, but rather represents the realities and constructs of a borderlands space, and indeed reinforces a key point that this thesis makes: that the borderlands as a spatial entity will always make and be made by the agents and relationships that constitute the space.

This changing nature of the borderlands and its impact on the claims made in this thesis is best posited at an analytical level. On the one hand, the dynamic of the social practices and relationships discussed across this thesis will likely continue. Displaced Karen and other border agents will continue to contest the state structures and institutionalised governance attached to the national border, and engage in the social practices and relationships that give meaning and a practical ethos to the space. In doing so, these agents will continue to provide definition and

¹⁰² Latest figure provided by TBBC is a verified caseload of 140,356 (as of April 2012).

substance to the ever evolving borderlands space. On the other hand, the content of these activities is likely to alter as new realities and priorities emerge. For example, the form of identity projected may be susceptible to further adaptations, particularly as diaspora and hybrid identities gain more traction as a result of resettlement and migration. New technologies will continue to develop and change the way displaced Karen engage with global audiences and their own identity and narratives. And while the conflict and persecution that has caused many Karen to flee into Thailand may ease, other causes of mobility are likely to replace it such as economic migration or displacement due to large-scale development projects. This will require different types of research, new approaches and new forms of knowledge. However, the value of the work conducted in this thesis lies in its contribution to understandings of borderlands spaces, presenting knowledge that can help us better understand how people live in borderlands space, how they engage with the state structures that attempt to govern these spaces and how they develop notions of identity and political agency through their own social practices.

What the Thai-Burma borderlands will look like in 2012 and onwards is yet to be determined, that will depend on the ongoing nature of political reform inside Burma, and how Thailand and other international governments and donors respond to the current activities servicing the needs of refugees and displaced persons in the borderlands. It will also, of course, depend on the nature of the social and political activity that actively and reactively responds to the space and to the changing political structures. But to argue that the borderlands is a social construct, defined by a set of fluid, contested social relations that sit in conjunction with the Thai-Burma border, and that in turn critically inform the projection of a Karen identity, is a much more certain proposition.

APPENDIX

1. List of Acronyms
2. A note on use of names

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ABSDF	All Burma Students Democratic Front
BBC	Burmese Border Consortium
BERG	Burma Ethnic Research Group
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CCSDPT	Coordinating Committee for Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand
CDP	Chin Democracy Party
COERR	Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
FTUK	Federal Trade Union of Kawthoolei
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
KESAN	Karen Environmental and Social Action Network
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KMT	Kuomintang
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KORD	Karen Office of Relief and Development
KPC	Karen Peace Council
KSNG	Karen Student Network Group

KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
KYO	Karen Youth Organisation
MOI	Ministry of Interior (Thailand)
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NDF	National Democratic Front
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUDF	National Democratic United Front
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NULF	National United Liberation Front
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA	Shan State Army
TBBC	Thailand Burma Border Consortium
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

A NOTE ON USE OF NAMES

The names of the Karen participants in this thesis are pseudonyms. This decision was based on the need to ensure the safety and privacy of many of the people who gave their time and their stories to this research. Some participants were happy to be referred to by their real name, expressing pride and duty in owning their stories and with no fear of the ramifications in doing so. Others, due to safety concerns preferred not to use their real names. I have deliberated over this for some time and I feel there is no easy solution. In the end I decided that with respect for the wishes of the various participants and in order to maintain consistency across the thesis I would use pseudonyms for all the Karen participants in this research. This should not detract from the very real desire many have to identify themselves and their experiences and to tell these stories in their own words.

There are many Karen and Burmese words that appear in this thesis. Many towns, districts and states have both Karen and Burmese names. In this thesis I have used the names used by the participants themselves. These mostly constitute the names prescribed prior to a 1989 decision by the Burmese military to change the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar and the names of many of its key cities. For example most participants refer to Karen State rather than Kayin State (the reference used by the Burmese government). My main reason for using these pre-1989 names is because these are the names used by the participants in this research. However, in the first instance, and where relevant I have put the names used by the Burmese government in brackets.

Many Karen words have slightly different spellings, for example Sgaw, S'gaw or S'Gkaw. These can vary depending on the author. As a result, my spelling of Karen words may differ from the spelling used by other authors. When quoting directly from other literature and authors I have retained their spelling of the words, in all other instances I have retained the spelling used by the participants themselves. As there is no universally accepted convention around Karen spelling this seems the most authenticate approach to take.

A last point of clarification is needed around the use of Burma or Myanmar. This debate is often highly politicised and evokes passionate positions. The name 'Union of Myanmar' was introduced by the SLORC in 1989 to replace the 'Union of Burma'. At this time the SLORC also changed the name of many of Burma's states and key cities and towns. Many believed these name changes lacked the consultation of the Burmese people and were imposed by an illegitimate governing authority. A boycott of the term 'Myanmar' has since become part of the opposition movement's

protest against the ongoing human rights abuses against the Burmese people and political illegitimacy of the military regime. Depending on the outcome of recent political changes in Burma, the opposition's position on this may change. However, in the context of this thesis, and out of respect of the wishes of the participants in this research, I have retained the use of Burma in reference to the country, Burmese when referring to citizens of the country, and Burmans in reference to the ethnic group.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books, journal articles, reports

- 2011 World Refugee Day Public Seminar Report: Situations of Forced Migration, Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Thailand's Role and ASEAN Mechanisms (2011). Bangkok: Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, Chulalongkorn University.
- Adas, M. (1981). From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 23(2), 217-247.
- Agier, M. (2011). *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government* (D. Fernbach, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Agier, M., Bauman, Z., & Malkki, L. (2002). Field for Thought. *Ethnography*, 3(3), 343-349.
- Alvarez, R. R. (1995). The Mexican-US Border: The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 447-470.
- Amnesty International (2005). *Thailand, The Plight of Burmese Migrant Workers*.
- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Appadurai, A. (2005). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Atkinson, P., & Hammersley, M. (1998). Ethnography and Participant Observation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. California: Sage Publications.
- Ball, D., & Mathieson, D. S. (2007). *Militia Redux. Or Sor and the Revival of Paramilitarism in Thailand*. Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press.
- Banki, S., & Lang, H. (2007). *Planning for the Future: The Impact of Resettlement on the Remaining Camp Population*. Bangkok: CCSDPT.
- Baud, M., & Schendel, W. V. (1997). Towards a Comparative History of Borderlands. *Journal of World History*, 8(2), 211-242.
- BBC (2004). *Between Worlds: Twenty Years on the Border*. Bangkok: Kampai Imaging Co, Ltd.
- Behrendt, L. (1993). Aboriginal Women and the White Lies of the Feminist Movement. *The Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 1, 27-44.

- BERG (1998). *Forgotten victims of a hidden war: Internally displaced Karen in Burma*. Chiang Mai.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1990). *Nation and Narration*. New York: Routledge.
- Bowles, E. (1998). From village to camp: refugee camp life in transition on the Thailand-Burma Border. *Forced Migration Review*, 2, 11-14.
- Brown, C. (2001). Borders and Identity in International Political Theory. In M. Albert, D. Jacobson & Y. Lapid (Eds.), *Identities, Borders, Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Brunn, S., Jones, J. A., & Purcell, D. (1994). Ethnic Communities in the Evolving 'Electronic' State: Cyberplaces in Cyberspace. In W. A. Gallusser (Ed.), *Political Boundaries and Coexistence: Proceedings of the IGU-Symposium, Basle/Switzerland, 24-27 May 1994*. Berne: Peter Lang.
- Brunn, S. D., & Leinbach, T. R. (1991). *Collapsing Space & Time: geographic aspects of communication & information*. London: HarperCollins Academic.
- Bryant, R. (1997). Kawthoolei and Teak: Karen Forest Management on the Thai-Burmese Border. *Watershed*, 3(1).
- Callahan, M. P. (2004). *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- CCSDPT & UNHCR (2007). *CCSDPT/UNHCR Comprehensive Plan 2007/8*. Bangkok.
- CCSDPT & UNHCR (2011). *Strategic Framework for Durable Solutions*. Bangkok.
- Cheesman, N. (2002). Seeing 'Karen' in the Union of Myanmar. *Asian Ethnicity*, 3(2), 199-220.
- Cho, V. (2011). Searching for home: Explorations in new media and the Burmese diaspora in New Zealand. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 17(1), 194-209.
- Clifford, J. (1994). Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology*, 9(3), 302-338.
- Conversi, D. (1999). Nationalism, Boundaries, and Violence. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 28(3), 553-584.
- Cross, E. B. (1854). On The Karens. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 4, 289-316.
- Cusano, C. (2001). 'Burma: Displaced Karens. Like Water on the Khu Leaf'. In M. Vincent & B. R. Sorensen (Eds.), *Caught Between Borders: Response Strategies of the Internally Displaced*. London: Pluto Press.
- de Certeau, M. (1988). *The Practice of Everyday Life* (S. Randall, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Donnan, H., & Wilson, T. M. (1999). *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*. Oxford: Berg.
- Dudley, S. (2010). *Materialising Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experience Among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*: Berghahn Books.
- Dunford, J. (1993). *The Thai-Burmese Border: the need for humanitarian assistance*. Paper presented at the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA) Burma Seminar.
- Earthrights International (1996). *Total Denial: A Report on the Yadana Pipeline Project in Burma*.
- Earthrights International (2000). *Total Denial Continues: Earth rights abuses along the Yadana and Yetagun Pipelines in Burma*.
- Eastmond, M. (2007). Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(2), 248-264.
- Eriksen, T. H. (1993). *Ethnicity and Nationalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Falla, J. (1991). *True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fink, C. (2009). *Living Silence: Burma under military rule* (2nd ed.). London: Zed Books.
- Fischer, M. M. J. (1986). Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory. In J. Clifford & G. E. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview: from structured questions to negotiated text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2 ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Cultural Action for Freedom*. Middlessex, England: Penguin Education.
- Geertz, C. (1976). Art as a Cultural System. *MLN*, 91(6), 1473-1499.
- Gellner, E. (1964). *Thought and Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and Nationalism*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Gille, Z. (2001). Critical Ethnography in the Time of Globalization: Toward a New Concept of Site. *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies*, 1(3), 319-334.
- Gravers, M. (1998). The Karen Making of a Nation. In S. Tonnesson (Ed.), *Asian Forms of the Nation*. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Gravers, M. (2007). *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (Vol. 39). Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

- Grundy-Warr, C. (1993). Coexistent Borderlands and Intra-state Conflicts in Mainland Southeast Asia. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 14(1), 42-57.
- Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J. (1992). Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), 6-23.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- Hinton, P. (1983). Do the Karen Really Exist? In J. McKinnon & W. Bhruksasri (Eds.), *Highlanders of Thailand*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Hla, S. A. (1939). *The Karen History* (P. T. Htoo, Trans.). Mae Sot: Kawe Ka Baung National Books Store.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1991). *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: programme, myth, reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holston, J., & Appadurai, A. (1996). Cities and Citizenship. *Public Culture*, 8, 187-204.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory from margin to center*. Boston: South End Press.
- Horstmann, A. (2004). *Incorporation and Resistance: Borderlands, Transnational Communities and Social Change in Southeast Asia*.
- Horstmann, A. (2011). Sacred networks and struggles among Karen Baptists across the Thailand Burma border. *Moussons*, 1(17), 85-104.
- HRFM (2005). *Catwalk to the Barracks*.
- HRW (2005). *They Came and Destroyed Our Village Again: The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons in Karen State*: Human Rights Watch.
- Huguet, J. W., & Punpuing, S. (2005). *International Migration in Thailand*. Bangkok: Report sponsored by IOM, ILO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCAP, WHO and the World Bank.
- Innes-Brown, M., & Valencia, M. (1993). Thailand's Resource Diplomacy in Indochina and Myanmar. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 14(4), 332-351.
- Janelle, D. G. (1991). Global interdependence and its consequences. In S. Brunn & T. Leinbach (Eds.), *Collapsing Space & Time: geographic aspects of communication & information*. London: HarperCollins Academic.
- Kawhtoo, B. J. (September 2005). The End of the "Buffer Zone": Thailand Security Policies Towards Burma's Armed Opposition Groups. *Burma Issues*, 15.
- Keyes, C. F. (1979). *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: the Karen on the Thai frontier with Burma*: Institute of the Studies of Human Issues.

- KHRG (2008). *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in militarized Karen State*. Mae Sot.
- KNU (1991). *The Karens and their Struggle For Freedom*. Thailand: Shade.
- Krishna, S. (1996). Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India. In M. J. Shapiro & H. R. Alker (Eds.), *Challenging Boundaries: global flows, territorial identities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- KWO (2004). *Shattering Silences*.
- Lal, J. (1999). Situating locations: The politics of self, identity and other in living and writing the text. In S. Hesse-Biber, C. Gilmartin & R. Lydenberg (Eds.), *Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lamont, M., & Molnár, V. (2002). The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 167-195.
- Lang, H. (1999). *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese refugees in Thailand*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, ANU, Canberra.
- Lieberman, V. B. (1978). Ethnic Politics in Eighteen-Century Burma. *Modern Asian Studies*, 12(3), 455-482.
- Lintner, B. (1991). The Internationalization of Burma's Ethnic Conflict. In K. M. de Silva & R. J. May (Eds.), *Internationalization of Ethnic Conflict*. London: Pinter Publishers.
- Lintner, B. (1992). Collective insecurity. *Far eastern Economic Review*, 155(48), 22.
- Lintner, B. (1994). *Burma in Revolt: Opium and insurgency since 1948*: Westview Press.
- Lokanatha, U. (date unknown). There is no god and no soul, *U Thwin & Daw Daw Thein*. Rangoon: Rice Millers, Shwe Dagon Pagoda Trustee.
- Malkki, L. (1992). National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialisation of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), 24-44.
- Malkki, L. (1995). Refugees and Exile: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 495-523.
- Malkki, L. (1997). Speechless emissaries: refugees, humanitarianism, and dehistoricization. In K. F. Olwig & K. Hastrup (Eds.), *Siting Culture: The shifting anthropological subject*. London: Routledge.
- Malkki, L. (2002). News from nowhere: Mass displacement and globalized 'problems of organization'. *Ethnography*, 3(3), 351-360.
- Marshall, R. H. I. (1922). *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology*: University of Columbus.

- Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Moscotti, A. D. (1978). Current Burmese and Southeast Asian Relations. *Southeast Asian Affairs* 1978, 83-94.
- Newman, D. (2001). Boundaries, Borders, and Barriers: Changing Geographic Perspectives on Territorial Lines. In M. Albert, D. Jacobson & Y. Lapid (Eds.), *Identities, Borders, Orders: Rethinking International Relations Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Newman, D., & Paasi, A. (1998). Fences and neighbours in the postmodern world: boundary narratives in political geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, 22(2), 186-207.
- Ohmae, K. (1995). *The End of the Nation-State: The Rise of Regional Economies*. New York: The Free Press.
- Papadopoulos, D., Stephenson, N., & Tsianos, V. (2008). *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the Twenty-first Century*. London: Pluto Press.
- Po, S. C. (2001). *Burma and the Karens*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- Prescott, J. R. V. (1987). *Political Frontiers and Boundaries*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Rajah, A. (1990). Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Nation-State: The Karen in Burma and Thailand. In G. Wijeyewardene (Ed.), *Ethnic groups across national boundaries in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Rajah, A. (2002). A 'nation of intent' in Burma: Karen ethno-nationalism, nationalism and narrations of nation. *The Pacific Review*, 15(4), 517-537.
- Rappaport, J. (1995). Empowerment Meets Narrative: Listening to Stories and Creating Settings. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 795-807.
- Reinharz, S., & Davidman, L. (1992). *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rodgers, J. (2003). *Spatializing international politics: analysing activism on the internet*. London: Routledge.
- Rosaldo, R. (1993). *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Ruttanasatian, N. (2004). *Traditional and Contemporary Conflict Transformation of the Karen People in Tham Hin Camp Thailand*. Unpublished Master Thesis, Mahidol University, Bangkok.
- Sassen, S. (2006a, 4 July). The ideas interview: Saskia Sassen. *The Guardian*,
- Sassen, S. (2006b). *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton: New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance*. Hew Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, J. C. (2009). *The Art of Not Being Governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scott, J. G. *Burma*. London: T.Fisher Unwin Ltd.
- Selth, A. (2010). Burma's armed forces: Does size matter? *East Asia Forum*, September 17,
- Silverstein, J. (1997). Fifty Years of Failure in Burma. In M. E. Bown & S. Ganguly (Eds.), *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Smeaton, D. M. (1920). *The Loyal Karens of Burma*. London: Trubner & Co.
- Smith, A. D. (1986). *The ethnic origins of nations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- Smith, A. D. (1995). *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Smith, A. D. (1999). *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, M. (1999). *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Zed Books: London.
- Soguk, N. (1996). Transnational/Transborder Bodies: Resistance, Accommodation, and Exile in Refugee and Migration Movements on the U.S.-Mexican Border. In M. J. Shapiro & H. R. Alker (Eds.), *Challenging Boundaries: global flows, territorial identities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Soguk, N. (1999). *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Soguk, N. (2007). Border's Capture: Insurrectional Politics, Border-Crossing Humans, and the New Political. In P. K. Rajaram & C. Grundy-Warr (Eds.), *Borderscapes: hidden geographies and politics at territory's edge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Soguk, N., & Whitehall, G. (1999). Wandering Grounds: Transversality, Identity, Territoriality, and Movement. *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 28(3), 675-698.
- South, A. (2007). Karen Nationalist Communities: The "Problem" of Diversity. *Cotemporary Southeast Asia*, 29(1), 55-76.
- Staeheli, L. (1994). Empowering political struggle: spaces and scales of resistance. *Political Geography*, 13(5), 387-391.
- Steinberg, D. I. (1987). *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

- Steinberg, D. I. (2001). *Burma, the state of Myanmar*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Stern, T. (1968). Ariya and the Golden Book: A Millenarian Buddhist Sect Among the Karen. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 27(2), 297-328.
- SWAN, & SHRF (2002). *License to Rape: The Burmese military regime's use of sexual violence in the ongoing war in Shan State*.
- Tangseefa, D. (2006). Taking Flight in Condemned Grounds: Forcibly Displaced Karens and the Thai-Burmese In-Between Spaces. *Alternatives*, 31, 405-429.
- Taylor, R. H. (1982). Perceptions of Ethnicity in the Politics of Burma. *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 10(1), 7-22.
- Taylor, R. H. (1987). *The State in Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- TBBC (2008). *Program Report January to June 2008 including 2009 preliminary budget*. Bangkok.
- Thawngmung, A. M. (2008). *The Karen Revolution in Burma: Diverse Voices, Uncertain Ends*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Tønnesson, S., & Antlöv, H. (1998). *Asian Forms of the Nation*. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Tsing, A. (1993). *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Turnell, S., Vicary, A., & Bradford, W. (2008). Migrant Worker Remittances and Burma: An Economic Analysis of Survey Results. In M. Skidmore & T. Wilson (Eds.), *Dictatorship, disorder and decline in Myanmar*. Canberra: ANU E Press.
- Wijeyewardene, G. (2002). The Frontiers of Thailand. In C. J. Reynolds (Ed.), *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand Today* (2nd ed.). Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Wilson, T. M., & Donnan, H. (1998). Nation, state and identity at international borders. In T. M. Wilson & H. Donnan (Eds.), *Border indentities: nation and state at international frontiers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Winichakul, T. (1997). *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Paperback ed.). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Winichakul, T. (2003). Writing at the Interstices: Southeast Asian Historians and Postnational Histories in Southeast Asia. In A. T. Ahmad & T. L. Ee (Eds.), *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Womack, W. (2005). *Literate Networks and the Production of Sgaw and Pwo Karen Writing in Burma, c.1830-1930*. University of London, London.

Women for Peace: Nobel Women's Initiative Delegation to Thai-Burma border, South Sudan, Chad-Darfur Area (2008). Ottawa: Nobel Women's Initiative.

Wood, G. (1985). The Politics of Development Policy Labelling. In G. Wood (Ed.), *Labelling in Development Policy*. London: Sage Publications.

Zetter, R. (1991). Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 4(1), 39-62.

Newspaper articles

'Buffer state policy against Burma to end' (2002, June 9). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

'Burmese pound Karen bases to clear log routes' (1989, May 8). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

'Bus attack leaves many questions unanswered' (2002, June 5). *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=2332.

'David Tharkabaw, KNU: 'Traacherous offer' (2012, February 10). *Democratic Voice of Burma*. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from <http://www.dvb.no/interview/david-tharkabaw-knu-treacherous-offer/20179>.

Girion, L. (2004, December 14). 'Unocal to settle rights claims'. *LA Times*, p.A1.

Jagan, L. (2009, June 18). 'Thousands of Karen Seek Safety in Thailand'. *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=16077.

'Karens found dead in river' (2002, February 9). *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=2204.

'KNU: More leaders targeted for assassination' (2008, February 16). *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=10428.

'Laura Bush visits Burmese groups in Mae Sot' (2008, August 8). *Democratic Voice of Burma*. Retrieved March 28, 2012, from <http://www.dvb.no/uncategorized/laura-bush-visits-burmese-groups-in-mae-sot/1307>.

'Migrant Registration Process Hits Snag' (2004, July 1). *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved December 12, 2011, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=3602.

'Myanmar gains in leader's death'. (2008, February 16). *Online Asia Times*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from <http://www.atimes.com/Southeast Asia/JB16Ae03.html>.

Myers, Steven Lee. (2011, December 1). 'Clinton Says U.S. Will Relax Some Restrictions'. *New York Times*. Retrieved February 17, 2012, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/02/world/asia/us-will-relax-curbs-on-aid-to-myanmar.html?pagewanted=all>

'NSC admits security lapse led to refugee camp attack'. (1998, March 21). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

'Officials send back activists held at border'. (2002, August 23). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

'Over 30,000 displaced by Burma Army attacks face humanitarian crisis in northern Shan State' (2011, August 10). Press release by the Shan Women's Action Network and the Shan Human Rights Foundation. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from http://www.shanwomen.org/images/stories/pressrelease/10_8_11_preseles_eng.pdf.

Paung, S. (2006, February 8). 'Rape claim at refugee camp'. *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=5460.

'Profile: God's Army'. (2000, January 24). *BBC News*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/616772.stm>.

'Rangoon rejects offer for peace talks with rebels'. (1989, May 26). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

'Renegades exchanged for villagers – Locals say officials gave in too easily'. (1998, March 17). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

'Suffocation of 54 Burmese workers – No surprise'. (2008, April 11). *Inter Press Service*. Retrieved September 26, 2009, from <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=41955>.

'Surakiart is confident of reopening'. (2002, August 26). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

'THAILAND: Raped by soldier, no investigation - widespread and vicious human rights violations in border area'. (2002, March 22). Asian Human Rights Commission. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from <http://www.ahrchk.net/>.

'Two killed as Karens hit refugee camp'. (1998, March 12). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

'UNHCR delivers aid to thousands in Myanmar's remote Kachin state' (2012, March 26). *UNHCR News Service*. Retrieved June 13, 2012, from <http://www.unhcr.org/4f7061566.html>.

"UNHCR slams Burma over raid on refugee camp". (1998, March 13). *Bangkok Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2009, from Factiva database.

Yeni. (2009, August 6). 'On the Run'. *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved August 6, 2009, from http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=16497.

Interviews and cultural expression

KSNG Representatives	26 October 2005, Mae Sot
Loo Ne	19 September 2005, Bangkok
.....	22 September 2005, Bangkok
.....	24 July 2007, Bangkok
Moo	15 September 2005, Kanchanaburi, interview translated by Ehna
Naw Hser	23 October 2005, Mae Sot
.....	7 November 2005, Mae Sot
Naw Mu	27 September 2005, Mae Sot
Naw Paw	9 December 2008, Mae Sot
Nyi Nyi	19 October 2005, Mae Sot
Po Hsan	11 October 2005, Mae Sot
Po Khai	11 October 2005, Mae Sot
Saw Ba	30 September 2005, Mae Sot
.....	21 July 2007, Mae Sot

.....	9 December 2008, Mae Sot
So Pla	29 September 2005
U Kyi	10 October 2005, Mae Sot
.....	17 October 2005, Mae La
.....	8 November 2005, Mae Sot
.....	21 July 2007, Mae Sot
Zaw Kyi	26 October 2005, Mae Sot

‘Story of an IDP’, song written by Loo Ne (2004), translated by Rumi (2005)

‘Do Not Forget’, song written by U Kyi(2004), translated by U Kyi (2005)

‘I Love You my Kawthoolei, song written by U Kyi (1999), translated by U Kyi (2005)

‘The Burden of Our People’, song written by Po Khai (2002-03), translated by Po Khai (2005)

‘My Beautiful Village’ poem written by Naw Mu (date unknown), translated by Hten Deh (2005)

‘I Dream of Home’, poem written by Saw Ba (2008)

Prison porter poem written by Kyi Le, a porter (2003), translated by Po Taw (2005)

Hta written about author’s research, created and spoken by U Kyi (2005)

Figure 1 – ‘Fate’ cartoon. Artist: Saw Ba (date unknown)

Figure 2 – Hsaw Pa Kaw cartoon. Artist: Pe Li, published in *KweKaLu*, October 2005

Figure 3–Drawing of Karen girl with wood. Artist: Nyi Nyi (date unknown)

Figure 4 – Drawing of Karen girl with *ta’na*. Artist: Nyi Nyi (date unknown)