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ALEXANDER HORSTMANN

Creating Non-State Spaces: Interfaces of Humanitarianism and Self-Government of Karen-Refugee Migrants in Thai Burmese Border Spaces

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Abstract

This paper examines the interfaces of local community based humanitarian organizations with displaced Karen people in Thai-Burmese border spaces and their claims for cultural rights. It argues that Karen people have to organize themselves in a context where they do not have access to social welfare of the state and in which the state is hostile and oppressive to them. Applying Merry's thesis on the localization and vernacularization of international rights frameworks in the local context, the paper explores the context of power in which different humanitarian actors intervention in the local conflict zone.

The author finds that Karen displaced people have differentiated access to humanitarian assistance and that powerful organizations like the Karen National Union are able to benefit while essentializing Karen culture and suppressing internal difference among the Karen to position itself towards the international donor community, thereby becoming "liked" or "preferred" refugees. The paper then also looks at secular and faith-based local humanitarian groups and finds that these groups are deeply embedded in local society and thus able to help effectively. Karen displaced people thus create non-state spaces in border spaces by establishing partnerships with local humanitarian organizations that act as brokers and mediators of international organizations and donors.

Authors

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold. On the one hand, I am interested in the self-organization and emplacement strategies of Karen refugee-migrants in Thai-Burmese border spaces. On the other hand, the paper looks at different humanitarian actors, mobilizing and engaging Karen refugee migrants. This project builds on previous works of protection and violence avoidance of displaced Burmese Karen people and their social support networks. It can be seen as a first attempt to study humanitarianism and self-government in the borderland in a context where the people are squeezed between the sovereignties of two mainly repressive nation-states (see Horstmann and Wadley 2006). This albeit critical perspective on a public space for Karen refugees, humanitarianism from below or self-government can be fruitfully compared and juxtaposed with the recent work of James C. Scott in which he follows up an old interest in power, domination an d the arts of resisting the repressive state (Scott 1990, 2009).

The rights discourse being a universalizing, utopian, liberal, individualistic and ultimately Western invention (Goodale 2009), not much of the human rights conventions are of practical relevance to Karen villagers in violent conflict in Eastern Burma where rights are accessed or implemented only with great risk. That does not mean that universal human rights standards are irrelevant for displaced Burmese Karen. Especially the recent opening of the Burmese political system and the subsequent ceasefire in Karen state, although partial and fragile, gives hope to Burmese that they might finally enjoy greater freedom and express their opinions more freely. But the specific situation of displaced Karen villagers requires a sensitive approach to human rights that is centered on the particular needs, choices and aspirations rather than abstract notions of the protection of freedom of choice.

Second, there is a tension between international legal frameworks and traditional norms and values and organization of displaced people in orders outside of the Western sphere of liberal governance and Western discourse. Much more relevant are international UN and EU conventions on the protection of minority rights and group identity. While efforts in this direction have been applauded by indigenous people, international conventions have also been appropriated by nationalist movements who have essentialized minority cultures and suppressed internal differences by claiming to represent minorities.

Displaced people from Karen state in Burma offer a compelling case as Karen villagers rarely enjoy citizenship or even land rights and use customary law. The Burmese state is primarily perceived as hostile and oppressive, threatening the human

security of Karen villagers. Only displaced Karen who register officially with the UNHCR enjoy limited rights and access to humanitarian aid, while people internally displaced in Karen state are deprived of any protection by international humanitarian organizations. Still, Karen displaced people have regular interactions with faith-based organizations and Karen local missionaries, relief and social welfare organizations, more political advocacy and human rights activist organizations and with armed factions. The Karen National Union and its armed wing, the KNLA, present itself as champion of human rights defender, but also expose Karen villagers to the very violence they reveal by their sheer presence and insurgency.

The paper offers a glimpse on the contestation of the Human Rights discourse among different Karen groups and their interfaces in Southeastern Burma and in Northwestern Thailand. It is based on a research project on sacred spaces of Karen refugees, jointly done with Decha Tangseefa and Kwanchewan Buadaeng and funded by the Thailand Research Fund. Fieldwork was carried out primarily in the province of Tak and the town of Maesot and Maela refugee camp and lately in the province of Hpa-an in Eastern Burma. Multi-sited fieldwork was done to follow the trajectories and cross-border social formations and networks of displaced Karen people between the refugee camps and their home communities in Burma. Theoretically, the project on border interaction of community, the state, territory and identity refers to Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality" (Dean 2010, Foucault 1979).[1] But interested in empowerment and practices of emplacement, I like to partly turn Foucault on its head and also extend Agamben's theory of "bare lives" to study practices of self-government of Karen refugees (Agamben 1998).[2] Karen displaced people, besides escaping to the hills and the forest in my understanding have a clear concept of their rights claims corresponding closely to their survival struggles and find partnerships with local and international organizations in the humanitarian field to construct their own corridors and ways of passage in the Thai-Burmese borderland.[3]

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1 See Dean (2010) for a clear exhibition of Foucault's idea of the art of governmentality, mentalities and techniques of rule. The idea of care developed in relation to pastoral power and later to the technologies of the self is still caught in the discipline of subjects and cannot be confused with humanitarian values.

2 Agamben is interested to explore the question of people without value in the spaces of exception. However, I like Agamben to look into the idea of altruistic humanitarian assistance as a counterpoint to the logics of the state. On the development of morality and humanitarian assistance, see for example the work of Didier Fassin (2011).

3 I share this interest on governmentality in Thai-Burmese Border Spaces with Sang-Kook Lee (2008). As Lee points out, governance at the border town of Mae Sot, Tak province, Northwestern Thailand, is related to the control of profitable because cheap migrant

Keen to examine the translation of international legal frameworks into local contexts, anthropologists of rights highlight how international human rights norms have been "vernacularized," and imbued with local meaning (Cowan et al. 2001; Cowan 2006; Goodale 2009; Merry 2006b; Wilson and Mitchell 2003). In an influential essay, Merry argues that academics, transnational human rights NGO's, social movement activists and community leaders gain competency in both the international human rights framework and the local struggles and are able to "translate" and implement international norms into local legal frameworks (Merry 2006a, 39-40). According to Merry, vernacularization of rights is the defense of rights by local grassroots movements, local justice groups and social movements rather than strategies that focus on the legal implementation of rights.

As Cowan points out, ironically, minority groups and their nationalist organizations become more conscious in appropriating culture as a resource, in a time when anthropologists express doubt if something like essentialized culture does exist, or if the concept is useful (see Cowan 2003, 2006). In a situation of the development of a nationalist movement striving for self-determination in particular, culture becomes the legitimating resource of national aspirations. Cultural rights can also conflict with human rights, especially when human rights are perceived by the Burmese government as a weapon of the West to intervene into its political affairs.

A perspective on culture and rights among Karen displaced people is fraught by methodological problems. I argue that we cannot assume that humanitarian organizations or human rights activists are able to support Karen villagers to claim their rights. Instead, I propose in this chapter to study the political arena of rights, in which different actors claim to represent people's suffering. Questions asked include: How are images of Karen suffering mediated through international human rights frameworks? Can local rights organizations contribute to a more participative management of cultural resources?

Theorizing moving borders

In November 2010, Karen pastors, Karen Baptist intellectuals from Thailand and Burma and Karen refugee leaders came together in a Bible School in Chiang Mai in

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labor. Lee points out that the special context of Maesot requires flexibility and produces contradiction in governance (Lee 2008).

order to read the bible in a special way, "through Karen eyes". Over two days, this illustrious circle would read from the bible to make sense of their "fate", to find a reason to the suffering of the Karen population and to find biblical analogies to it. These leaders find terms to interpret their situation in religious language. Although debating in the post-era of a Karen nation, the national narrative of a unified Karen *ethnie* and nation remains stronger than ever. I argue that the Karen example provides a case where a nation is constructed, imagined and contested in the context of displacement and political exile in the margin of two nations. While the physical space of a Karen homeland *Kawthoolei* has been gradually lost, the spiritual idea of a "homeland" is still alive. In fact, nationalism and national identity is reproduced in the schools of the refugee camps and the "migration schools" for Karen migrant children. Christian spirituality, militarism and nationalism go hand in hand and together fuel the ideology of reconstruction in the Thai borderland.

In Burma, some ethnic minorities (Shan, Mon, Karenni, Kachin and Chin) in the borderlands have developed their own nationalities and ethnic militia (see Gravers 2007). The Burmese state on the other hand has established a *regime* of differential citizenship in which some people are granted with citizenship rights while others are denied these. The Burmese army has also waged a protracted and brutal war against the ethnic nationalities' armies at the frontiers (South 2008). In the war zone of eastern Burma, Burmese citizenship has probably lost its practical value, as social welfare and educational infrastructure collapsed. The border has moved as the control of the territory and the border itself has shifted between Thailand, Burma and the Karen, a people that inhabits the land in Thailand and Burma or both.

As Ananda Rajah (1990) notes, Burma is a state in name but not in fact, as relatively autonomous insurgent groups in the borderlands subvert the sovereignty of the state. The quasi state of *Kawthoolei* and its headquarters in Mannerplaw challenged he territoriality of the state and could not been tolerated. While Mannerplaw and other military garrisons were taken by the Tatmadaw, the idea of a Karen state persists among the KNU, refugee leaders and Karen exiles. Rajah pointed out that the Karen rebel movement which seeks to represent 2,4 million Karen and Kayah is highly unusual in that it is a largely Christian movement in a Buddhist environment and very accessible (Rajah 1990). On the other hand, critical studies on the everyday life of the refugees, the Karen insurgency movement and the political administration of the refugee camps are still rare. Religion has not been part of the picture, although religion provides a privileged lens to study the identity processes of refugees. I show that religion and religious networks critically relate to mobility on the Thai-Burmese

frontier. Most of all, missionary networks and humanitarian activism are characterized by movement. Missionaries cross the border against all odds: While *Kawthoolei* was widely accessible, para-troopers of the Free Burma Rangers today risk their lives by entering the conflict zone. Movement across the border can thus be interpreted as a religious commitment.

An exploration of interconnections of missionization, humanitarian crisis and forced migration also opens up a fresh angle on the movement in the borderland. In present Myanmar, the issue of religion is much politicized as Christianity is regarded with suspicion by the Burmese state authorities. In Thailand, by contrast, the Christian church of Thailand is fully recognized by the Thai government and benefits from religious freedom. This political tolerance has motivated the presence of multiple Christian missionary agencies in Northern Thailand, from where they operate in the politically much more sensitive environments of the neighboring countries. Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist networks are not the only missionary network in humanitarian aid and relief welfare, the Catholic Church is very well established. In addition, Pentecostal churches and evangelical networks, from the US, South Korea and Taiwan now have established a presence in Northern Thailand as well and have begun to work with the poorest segments of the population, hill tribe minorities, drug addicts, and not least with refugees.

After the military defeat of the KNU/KNLA, and the resettlement of 76.000 Christian Karen families to the USA, Australia and Europe, the religious reconstruction of a Karen imagined community gained in importance. The KNU, individual families and churches gained new incomes through the remittances of the new Diaspora. Religious interpretation of the bible was used to justify a war that is perceived to be "just". Metaphors of refugees being "saved on Noah's ark", "God's mysterious plan" and the promise of the "promised land" and "eternal life" were extensively used by Christian leaders to encourage themselves. The heroic behavior of the KNU was underlined by delivering emergency health services and prayer worshipping to the internally displaced in the war zone. In a sense, the imagination of a Christian nation is mentally transported to the refugee camp. Evangelical Christianity can thus be seen as a replacement to the dwindling homeland in South-Eastern Burma. Facing massive persecution and violence, and given their loss of citizenship, the Karen are only marginal to Thai modernity. In this situation, humanitarian aid organizations emerge as a crucial ally for the KNU reorganizing in the camps. The article thus promises to explore the making of "ethno-fiction" by the Karen themselves and by international humanitarian organizations (Keyes 2008). I argue that far from being

passive victims, evangelical Karen become important agents of proselytizing, who use their cultural capital to reach out to their relatives, friends and to the community of Christians. The Karen church not only provides a large selection of services, welfare and relief. In addition, Christians are able to re-enter the humanitarian space as soldier-medics-missionaries in a war-zone largely inaccessible for international humanitarian NGO's.

Key Concepts in Cultural Rights

Following international conventions of minority rights and endangered minority cultures, Karen rights organizations have claimed that their culture is systematically suppressed in Burma, that the military operations of the Tatmadaw in Burma's longest conflict threaten the livelihood, and that the "cultural survival" of the Karen is at stake. However, in eastern Burma today, villagers throughout Karen state celebrate and revitalize Karen culture in all its forms despite the lack of resources and the devastating military campaigns by the military government. In some of the most contested districts, for example, the population has the highest ratio of traditional weaving, even when some of the villages have been burned down several times. It seems that the villagers use cultural skills and weaving solidarity to survive and keep sane in a context of deep violence. Still, the relevance of rights to the everyday life is not self-explaining and the issue of rights operates on several levels, local, national and global, and the local, highly contextualized interpretation competes with the decontextualized, general declarations on minority rights.

Regarding the travel of human rights, and its meaning, I found Steve Lubkemann's findings on migration and mobility of civilian population in warfare inspirating (cf. Lubkemann 2008). Working on protracted warfare in West Africa, Lubkemann argues that it is not helpful to study violence independently from the life-projects of the people (ibid.). In a state in which the war has become "normality," it is necessary to study the life strategies in the "cultural chaos" of war. People do not stop organizing their reproduction, pursuing the education of their children, or marriage. Lubkemann found that in a context of uncertainty, mistrust and threat to livelihood, migration and mobility is among the most important strategies to avoid harassment (ibid.). While migration and flight are often seen as a last option for refugees, the organization of refugees in transnational networks and the mobility within these networks function to the advantage of the refugees.

While images of human rights violations are visible in numerous media human rights reports and while VCDs are available from human rights NGOs, we know relatively little about the different actors who work with Karen villagers on human rights or claim to represent them. Human rights issues are most often presented and mediated in reports and in the web in negative forms of abuses, not in positive form of capacity building. The most important literature pertaining to human rights is certainly the meticulous documentation of local human rights violations by human rights advocacy groups. Reports are written in the light of expectations of Western donors who are urged to take action on the "victims'" behalf (e.g. Wilson 1997). Reports often are biased, offer one-dimensional narratives of "oppressors" and "victims," tend to neglect cultural realities, different positions, and introduce people as egalitarian and passive victims. Reports on the plight of Karen refugees by the KNU, Free Burma Rangers and by some Christian humanitarian organizations and even some scholarship follow this biased format by identifying the "good" and the "bad". By contrast, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) and "Burma Issues" are local Karen NGOs distinctively give villagers a voice by befriending with villagers and training villagers to do research on rights and rights violations (see Heppner 2006).[4]

Reports have to meet the expectations of donors. Unfortunately, reports on the situation of Karen refugees tend to be heavily biased on human rights violations and stereotypical presentations of the civil war and do typically not discuss the way that community leaders organize themselves, their cultural life, social relations and life choices. The claims-making process can hence only be understood by taking into account home-grown activists, indigenous and expatriate rights activists, consultants, transnational communities, humanitarian aid organizations, and (unseen) cyberspace communities, new forms of governance as entailed in the structures of the European Union or United Nations. Home-grown activists like Karen Human Rights groups become products of transnational networks, maneuvering between multiple audiences and potential patrons. As Cowan observes, minority claims are not only a dialogical relationship between the state and the minority, but increasingly, rights claims "are asserted and answered in full view of a global audience and in anticipation of its response" (Cowan 2003, 141). While the rights discussion has widely discussed the tension between universal claims of international rights declara-

4 See http://www.khrg.org/about.html for a presentation of KHRG. Find many well-researched reports on human rights abuses and villagers' resistance strategies. See http://www.burmaissues.org/ for a presentation of Burma Issues and Peace Way Foundation.

tions and cultural relativism (see Cowan et al. 2001; Cowan 2006), new approaches aim to overcome this binary distinction and approach the shape of rights through an analysis of power, globalization and transnationalism (Goodale 2009; Wilson and Mitchell 2003).

For the case of Karen refugees, Burma Issues and KHRG can be seen as frontline human rights activists. Working from the Thai border, these NGOs train Karen local volunteers to assist Karen villagers inside the eastern Burma conflict zone. While rights organizations working from the Thai border are mostly politicized, and see their work as part of the resistance to the oppressively perceived Burmese government, Christian humanitarian and missionary organizations and Buddhist monasteries are legally registered operate low-key inside Burma and concentrate on apolitical humanitarian issues, such as health and education.

Christian humanitarian missionary networks and social services were by far the best locally embedded organizations, benefitting from long-established mission schools and hospitals. At the time of writing, Catholic, Anglican, and Adventist churches were all sending young volunteer teachers and health workers graduating at the vocational colleges of the churches to the villages in the conflict border zone in Eastern Burma. The different churches formed an ecumenical network, operating and specializing in different areas of the conflict zone, but a variety of churches in the Thai borderland, including American, Thai, and South Korean charismatic and Pentecostal churches also compete for the souls of the displaced. The missionaries become good friends with the villagers and receive some food as reward of their sacrifice. Eventually, the teachers will invite the villagers in the chapel, and many young people will begin to visit the chapel in addition to the monastery. After socializing in school, church and taking bible studies, some teenagers are ready for conversion. The missionaries are interested in culture as folklore but reject the animist values underlying many cultural ceremonies.

In many ways, the suffering villagers become the pawn of different insurgent armies and factions, they become the sine qua non for the existence and financial support of human rights organizations, and they are the recipients of humanitarian assistance and resettlement by international organizations that operate worldwide and that have their offices in downtown Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Mae Sot.

We need to distinguish local and international humanitarian organizations and NGO's working with displaced people in Northwestern Thailand. First, there are the groups organized by the displaced people themselves. Many of these NGO's (Karen Women Organization, Karen Student Network Group, Karen Youth Organization,

Karen Migrant Education Network, etc.) are closely associated with the KNU. Other relief and humanitarian aid organizations include faith-based organizations like ZOA, Partners, ADRA, Free Burma Rangers and Jesuit Refugee Services. International Humanitarian Organizations include International Rescue Committee, International Red Cross, and many others. Activities of these organizations are comprehensive and include primary health care, mother-child programs, teacher training, women's rights, children's rights, community development, and many more.

Some local relief organizations and Christian missionary and humanitarian agencies such as the Free Burma Rangers conflate missionary and humanitarian goals and operate beyond the legal framework; crossing the border illegally in coordination with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) troops to intervene on behalf of Karen villagers whose houses are burned and destroyed by the Burmese army.

Photo 1: Prayer for Burma, Hpa-an district (courtesy Free Burma Rangers homepage)

Northwestern Thailand, containing some 150,000 refugees (including camps for internally displaced people inside Burma), administered by the Refugee Committees and the Thai Ministry of Interior, are served by numerous humanitarian organizations (organized by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC)) visiting displaced

people in the camps on a regular basis.[5] In sum, the KNU, international NGO's, and humanitarian organizations operate in different legal frameworks, with different sovereignties, all claiming to represent the rights of displaced Karen villagers.

Rights to Karen Culture

Karen culture and the rights to language, traditions, customs, and performance has become an issue of increasing importance in the context of civil conflict in Eastern Burma, the experience of exile for many Karen community leaders and the presence of international humanitarian organizations in the refugee camps.

Encouraged by the Kayin Student Organization, for example, young people from 16 years onwards come together in Hpa-an for twelve days every year in April (summer) to train in Don dance, Karen literacy, poetry, and drawing for a great competition in the Thai-Burmese border zone close to northwestern Thailand. The meaning of the Don dance has changed significantly: Starting from an expression of social cohesion in village life, the Don Dance performance has become a central symbol of Karen national identity (MacLachlan 2006). It is celebrated for Karen New Year in eastern Burma, in northwestern Thailand (including in the refugee camps), and especially among the resettled new Karen diaspora in the United States, Australia, Canada, Norway, and England as a symbol of Karen unity and nation. Like self-determination movements elsewhere (Herzfeld 1997), the KNU, has developed an essentialized version of Karen culture in an effort to equalize Karen people and territory and make distinctive territorial claims for independence (Rajah 1990). The definition of Karen culture is problematic for a few reasons. Karen nationalism has been largely shaped by American Christian missionaries who laid the basis for the emergence of a nationalist movement guided by educated Christian Sgaw Karen elite (Gravers 2007; Hayami 2004; Keyes 1979). From the beginning, the emergence of Karen literacy was highly contested and Buddhist movements were developing their own Karen script in interaction and as a response to the Christian missionaries, while indigenous cultural movements such as the Leke or Talaku had developed a language and script on their own (see Womack 2005). Moreover, the four to seven

5 Figures of camp populations are regularly provided by TBBC. Only half of camp population is registered with UNHCR.

Figure 1: Map of Burma (Myanmar) with Karen state, courtesy of KHRG homepage.

million Karen in Burma are living not only in the hills and plains of Kayin and neighboring Mon and Kayah states, but also in Yangon, Insein, and in the Irrawady Delta.

The KNU invention of a uniform culture thus simplifies a great diversity of cultural and religious groups and great difference of status, class, language; ecological system, social stratification, and education (see Gravers 2007). While the KNU was guided by Western-educated, Christian Sgaw Karen intellectuals, the majority of the Karen are Buddhist, following the Mon-Burmese and their own Karen tradition, while also respecting ancestral traditions and spirit cults. Within this tradition, there are perhaps a hundred different local movements that are affiliated to different millenarian Buddhist traditions, syncretic traditions and animist movements (see Hayami 2004; Kwanchewan 2003). Thus, while the KNU is able to garner international support and donations from the local and international audience for the Karen cause, it also suppresses the marginal voices of indigenous Karen communities that do not correspond to the nationalist script of the KNU. The KNU has especially become involved in a symbolic competition over the occupation of symbolic expression and ownership of symbolic and cultural discourse with U Thuzana and has suppressed Karen communities it has perceived as challenging their authority and leadership, such as the religious leader of the Taleku community (Gravers 2007; Kwanchewan 2008). Furthermore, the KNU is not a homogenous organization and the nationalist movement and its army is challenged by generational conflicts, by strong gender positions in the Karen Women Organization and strong reform by the Karen Student network.

The KNU rights agenda turns out to be a hegemonic script that does not accommodate the aspirations and needs of many Buddhists and Animists. Karen Buddhists have, moreover, developed an alternative nationalism beyond the KNU version, in which the veneration of charismatic Buddhists monks and the revitalization of traditional culture and non-Western values play a crucial role.

Instead of reproducing a narrative of the KNU about the persecution of the Karen in Burma, my work and that of other scholars has explored the everyday life struggles of Karen refugees and in their strategies to make ends meet, establish durable transnational spaces between home communities and the Karen diaspora in Thailand and in changing identities during trajectories to the refugee camps, to the Thai border and to resettled communities in the West.

I have argued that the KNU has appropriated the ownership of the international human rights discourse to attract humanitarian aid (Horstmann 2011b). The growing aid industry developing at the Thai border, especially in Maesot, has provided

something like a social welfare wing to the KNU (South 2008). On the other hand, the presence of international aid organizations also has provided jobs for a new salaried middle class of Burmese activists. However, some NGOs, some identifying with the KNU, trained and advised the villagers to collect and research data on human rights violations. The KHRG, for example, challenges international legal frameworks and promotes more grassroots approaches. Thus, one could argue that the KHRG aims to play exactly the role that Merry (2006a) has advocated. Adopting a political agenda of rights, KHRG claims to introduce the villagers to international social norms and help them in their strategies to claim rights. Much of the international human rights framework is irrelevant in the local context where the focus is on survival strategies rather than implementation of legal rights.

On the other hand, a recent visit of the author to Hpa-an (Kayin State) showed the emergence of local civil society alliances that are able to articulate important rights issues in the public sphere, especially relating to Karen education, including language, culture and dance. While the advocacy networks are important to reach international attention, humanitarian aid and human rights work is heavily concentrated on the refugee camps, with little help reaching the villagers inside Southeastern Burma. However, the nature of the internal organization of many NGO's has facilitated cross-border contacts and has informed villagers' perspective on rights inside Burma tremendously.

Rural Life in Times of Violent Conflict and Human Rights Abuses

In eastern Burma in the Kayin and Kayah states, a civil war was ravaging society in the hills (Smith 2007). The KNU was waging an insurgency (calling it revolution) against the central government. As in other local conflicts, the civil population had to bear most of the casualties. In few places, atrocities and human rights violations could make up with the Burmese army "four cuts," burning whole villages, depopulating areas, and with relocation, torture and killing forced on the Karen civil population (see Decha 2006). As the war was winding itself over time, the attention of the media was moving to other places and only occasionally returns to the fate of the Karen. However, the Karen have received much sympathy and solidarity in the West and especially among church congregations that have donated lavishly to the "persecuted" Christian church. Thus, the Christianized Karen acquired the status of preferred and trustful refugees in the West.

The leadership of the KNU is largely Christian, and the organization boosts Christian church networks in the United States, Canada, Australia, and in Scandinavia. In fact, the representation of the KNU as Christian negates the internal diversity of the Karen, the majority of who are actually Buddhist. American churches also get involved in the conflict and give donations to faith-based humanitarian organizations and action groups. The mantra of persecuted Christians symbolically frames the conflict in terms of spiritual warfare in which churches are burned and pagodas are planted. It also simplifies an increasingly fragmented insurgency in which family have their members fighting either for the KNLA or the DKBA, not least for opportunistic reasons. Moreover, most of the foot soldiers of the KNLA are Buddhist who feel attracted to the nationalist movement, but alienated by its Christian leadership. This overly defensive perspective has shaped the view of many Christian aid organizations in the Thai borderland and has shaped the agenda endangered Karen culture. Endless propaganda in the form of gruesome images and often termed in a theocratic language has reinforced the notion of the evil, killing innocent villagers.

This perspective has not only given a biased picture of rights, importantly, it has also tied the discussion on human rights and cultural survival to the KNU and KNLA, so that Karen and KNU culture become almost synonymous. This domination and representation of the political economy of rights has made research into the complexity of the rights issues independent from the KNU nationalism difficult or impossible. The KNU has almost kidnapped the human rights discourse and has used it as a rhetorical weapon. More recently, the KNU has given more attention to human rights issues and has disciplined its own commanders for false-playing as the KNU has to consider its international reputation and especially as Diaspora support from resettled Karen communities is increasingly significant for its financial situation.

Criticizing a perspective that favors a view of villagers as helpless victims, Kevin Malseed from KHRG focuses on the strategies of villagers in Eastern Burma to claim and realize cultural rights (Malseed 2008). Malseed rightly points out that human rights reports and academic analysis limit themselves to the repression, "without exploring the many ways that villagers respond and resist" (2008, 12). A study of rights claims includes the strategies and responses of people to prevent violence and to claim rights to subsistence and freedom of choice of lifestyle. While Malseed criticizes the lack of studies on villager's agency, he fails to see divergent responses to the low-intensity conflict, seeing rural villagers in Karen state as an egalitarian people. Yet, the poor are paradoxically condemned to stay, while commanders, educated elites, KNU leaders and activists associated with the KNU are able to migrate

and sometimes to improve their status. A discussion on rights should thus include, I argue, a discussion of differential options and aspirations available to people.

War as Normality and Strategies of Resistance

Before beginning the analysis, some theoretical reflections are in order. The technical term "internally displaced people," or "IDPs," obscures the internal diversity and individual agency of diverse people, and blinds us to look at differentiation of status and position. Even the term refugee has been repeatedly criticized as giving a view of an essentialized, anonymous crowd rather than a portrait of individual life-histories and differentiated trajectories (Malkki 1995). An ethnographic approach is therefore extremely useful to give people a face and a voice. It is also a perspective that focuses on the access versus exclusion of people from resources and how different networks function as social support structures. The war and the violence is seen as a "normality," in which different armies and militia impose themselves on the Karen peasants, and where the association of people with one of the factions is a strategy of empowerment and pursuing material interests.

The Burmese army is not least marauding and plundering in Karen villages, but so does the DKBA and sometimes, the KNLA. The people become pressured and taxed by different factions and parties that are involved in a fierce struggle over sovereignty and control of land and people, constantly trying to control and confine the movement of people who are a resource to them. The Burmese army campaigns to relocate people into state spaces should be seen in this light. Forced mobility and migration has become a pattern of responding to the threat of the different armies.

The most common strategy of villagers is to use the KNLA and their military expertise as resource to anticipate the arrival of Burmese troops. Since the most contested districts are free fire zones, and since villagers know that they will be kidnapped, enslaved or abused, they disappear to the forests. Non-compliance and evasion are among the most popular strategies used, besides fighting the Tatmadaw. Villagers establish hidden rice caches in the forest. The troops aim to make life unlivable, sniping villagers, burning rice barns, mortaring villages and planting landmines. Eventually, the determination of the Tatmadaw to prevent the villagers from returning may cause a food crisis, driving villagers to the refugee camps in Thailand. The refugee camp has become a center of proselytization: Many refugees who arrive in the refu-

gee camp are exposed to Protestantism in a Christian environment and eventually convert to Christianity. People develop different strategies to claim their rights by navigating between different hegemonic relations.

While Malseed argues that avoidance tactics is the major strategy of resistance, I think that reorganization in the refugee camps, social organization in political and religious networks, and alliance with international human rights and humanitarian networks and transnational church networks and the re-organization of these networks in Eastern Burma in the form of relief, human rights and missionary movements and the close association of these efforts with the KNU are among the most important strategies of resistance, although these strategies and the close association of relief and aid projects to the political organization of the KNU is not explicitly articulated and taken for granted. In my understanding, this political organization and reconstruction leads to the appropriation of the human rights discourse by a (mostly Christian) elite and to the differential access of people to entitlements, such as access to citizenship rights, mobility and resources, including money, food, clothes, medicaments and schoolbooks. It is not migration that hurts the most disadvantaged groups, but rather involuntary immobility. The majority of Buddhist and animist Karen in eastern Burma may not identify with the KNU project. People may use the refugee camp not as last exit from a miserable life, but as a sanctuary for temporary shelter. Families may leave young children in the camp where they benefit from free education delivered not least by the KNU and by Christian missionary networks while they prefer to stay in the hills. Religious cosmologies are very important to the social life of the Karen and its inclusion into analysis gives voice to the people. Religion is part of what Dudley calls *sensescapes*, they form the core of the material religious culture and influence aspirations and mobility (Dudley 2010). Different groups of Karen are attracted to numerous religious movements, cults and to religious utopian projects propagating to restore moral order and justice. These spiritual projects seem extremely important to me for the local perception of rights, but difficult to understand for outsiders and probably marginalized by the KNU.

Contestations of Karen culture

Taking into account the ethnic and religious diversity of the Karen, the definition what is Karen culture is not obvious. Moreover, international rights frames tend to

favor individualism and freedom of speech etc., while the Karen notion of culture includes a system of beliefs that center on the cosmological values of the community and on the relationship of humankind with the environment and the cosmos (Hayami 2004). Karen culture is largely synonymous with the imagination of a just and moral order, but while this focus on customary law is encompassing, the different local religions have established different belief systems governing everyday life and social relations in the community. The different communities are now building alliances with different actors, including the KNU, charismatic Buddhist monks, American Christian missionaries, international human rights organizations, UNESCO officials, and local Karen human rights organizations. Communities that become affected by the ongoing fighting disintegrate and reintegrate, and are divided across distances and across the Thai-Burma border. In the contestation of competing descriptions of Karen cultural traditions, religion plays a central role as a social need, a base of social solidarity and political aspiration.

Photo 2: Together for a better Future? Religious and Community leaders in Karen state (Courtesy of the Seventh-Day Missionary Society)

Karen culture has also been reinvented in the nationalist movement. Karen culture or more precisely selective parts becomes an important asset in the nationalist claims of the KNU nationalist movement. With the ongoing Christianization of the KNU leadership, the nationalist struggle is increasingly regarded as a spiritual struggle and the Baptist church is teaching Christian culture and Christian lives. Karen nationalism becomes deeply entangled with and legitimated by Christianity. The religious legitimization and marker of the nationalist movement makes it even more difficult for Buddhists and Animists to identify with the Christian imagined homeland. The breakaway Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, under the spiritual leadership of U Thuzana, has established a competing Buddhist nationalism in a Buddhist zone in which Buddhist law is implemented, vegetarianism encouraged, asceticism practiced and roads and electricity as signs of development and modernity installed. Following public ritual of the KNU, the DKBA raises its own national flag and chant a Buddhist national anthem (Gravers 2007).

Conversion to Christianity is regarded as a break with animist traditions. New Christians are encouraged to discontinue their sacrificial beliefs and instead join the "kingdom of God." Karen culture is reduced to folklore, to the colors of the flag and the national anthem. While traditional instruments and musical elements may be integrated and transformed into evangelical church music, the animist ideas associated with traditional narratives, epics and song are rejected. Thus, traditional musicians in the refugee camp in the Thai borderland are only partly supported by the KNU refugee committee while the spiritual dimension of music is seen as heretic. I argued that the refugee camps managed by indigenous refugee committees which are chaired by KNU pastors have emerged as centers of proselytization (Horstmann 2011a). Fifty-nine Christian churches of different denominations (Protestant, Catholic) in Mae La refugee camp dominate the cultural environment in the refugee camps and the public spaces in the refugee camps are regularly used by the Kawthoolei Baptist church for rituals in public space. The Karen Baptist leadership in the camps organizes concerted campaigns to Christianize new Animist arrivals in order to mobilize, discipline and integrate them into the administrative and cultural management of the camps. Buddhist and Animist displaced people are exposed national narratives and Christian bible studies and almost all children visiting Christian boarding schools and orphanages become Christian.

Both the internal security practiced by KNU representatives and the propagation of Karen nationalism have no legal basis other than the legal niche established by the KNU in the camps. While the Thai government has full authority on surveillance,

it fully respects the freedom of the Baptist church. Other churches operating in the camps include the Catholic Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist church, charismatic churches (Assembly of God) and Pentecostal churches. While the KBBC is closely tied to the KNU and to the Karen "cause," other churches have independent religious agendas and distinguish themselves from the Baptists. While many faith-based organizations operate through the Baptist church, the Catholic and Seventh-Day Adventist churches have their own humanitarian faith-based organizations and run their own schools. International human rights conventions are more easily appropriated by the Christian KNU elite than by any other group. As I describe below, the KNU has relied heavily on international legal human rights frameworks to lobby Western governments, while the Buddhists refer to their own cosmological frameworks and have not accessed international human rights frameworks. Rights are here rather discussed as obligations to the Buddhist community and as obligation to merit making, and have hardly given any attention to global Human Rights conventions. Imitating the KNU, the DKBA has also relied on international human rights.

Theravada tradition in Kayin State however developed differently from and partly in opposition to Burman traditions. Karen Buddhism, following Mon Burmese tradition, has strong millenarian traditions and tends to focus around particular charismatic monks who are regarded as saints who liberate the Karen from suffering. Karen Buddhists in Eastern Burma long for the fifth Buddha and venerate particular charismatic monks or particular relics that become centers of local pilgrimage (see Gravers 2001). In Thailand, many Buddhists do not stay in the refugee camps that they identify with the Christian leadership of the KNU, but work as wage-laborers in the Thai countryside in Mae Sot valley, keeping in close touch with home communities in Burma. They make themselves at home by bringing powerful relics from different places in Burma to the new community, look for a faithful Karen monk, and establish a monastery. But as the new monastery is outside of the Thai association of Buddhist monks, the *sangha*, the Karen leader has to use Buddhist contacts to influential Buddhist leaders in Thailand to get permission and support for the monastery. Yet, the Karen migrants definitely prefer a Karen Burmese-speaking monk to a Thai monk from the centralized Thai tradition. They like to listen to the sermons in Burmese or Karen language and follow the Mon Burmese practice and Karen indigenous traditions and customs all not known by Thai monks. Like Christians who prefer to follow services of Burmese pastors in the refugee camp, Buddhists also move with their village community almost intact.

As to smaller Karen groups, the Leke and the Talaku are the most prominent syncretic religious movements (Kwanchewan 2007, 2008). The Leke and Talaku movements are among a great diversity of religious and cosmological groups among the Karen. These groups also show the cultural and religious flexibility of the Karen, but also the determination to cling to the values of the community. Dudley (2010) reports of the vastly diverse Karenni Animist groups who have a difficult standing in the Christian environment of the Karenni refugee camp. Animist groups may actually become more aware and conscious about their local religion in the refugee camps where they feel discriminated by the dominant Christian tradition. They may respond by either keeping up their tradition by reproducing their rituals in the camps or by converting to Christianity and Karen nationalism.

Interfaces with Cultural Rights Organizations

While the problem of the incongruence of non-Western ideas and Western definitions of human rights persists, the Karen have nonetheless realized that they can tailor international norms to their advantage. This is particularly true for the KNU that has tailored itself into a democratic force that fights for human rights and cultural rights. The new outfit of the KNU is even more important as the association was regarded as staunchly nationalist, anti-communist, Christian, authoritarian and corrupt. The KNU is now extending its political networks into the New Diaspora, making heavy use of international human rights conventions for their propaganda in Western countries. It is organizing political networks in Europe and mobilizes the Karen youth against the Burmese military dictators who – in their words – commit "genocide." The KNU extorts the communities to contribute to the KNU. Lobbying with governments, the KNU hopes to go into a human rights offensive. I have argued that the KNU and the KKBC was a natural partner for the Christian missionary networks who needed the KNU pastors to get access to the refugee population and to provide aid efficiently. As the Christian relief organizations were unable to help in eastern Burma, they established the refugee camps in 1984 which became the basis of humanitarian assistance. A low-key humanitarian assistance developed into a high-key aid industry with new humanitarian actors showing up in the humanitarian field. Most of the humanitarian organizations settled in the border town in Mae Sot and concentrated on camp populations.

Aid was much more difficult to provide to unregistered migrants in the countryside and to internally displaced people. The KNU was able to control people and distribution of humanitarian assistance in the refugee camps and to channel humanitarian assistance into the insurgency. Many organizations identified with the KNU which they saw as a good, democratic organization. Second, the KNU opened a second humanitarian front by launching a number of initiatives to provide relief in Eastern Burma, crossing the border illegally under the protection of KNLA units. Many Karen families from Burma have members in the KNU, in different international NGOs working on relief projects in Mae Sot or Chiang Mai, in the Baptist church or in faith-based humanitarian organizations, like Partners. Partners is an American Christian organization that provides relief projects, helps migration schools and partners with Free Burma Rangers, a relief organization founded by an Evangelist missionary with close contact to the US army. The Free Burma Rangers have a base in Chiang Mai province where they train nurses to cross the border into the conflict zones to do three things:

To provide emergency health care for the wounded, to document human rights violations and to provide Christian worship service and Christian missionary work.[6] Educated Christian Karen from Burma have formed a sort of salaried middle class in Northern Thailand, benefitting from the humanitarian belt of KNU, NGOs and faith-based organizations. Humanitarian organizations are organized into a consortium, the former Christian Consortium. Later, the Christian was dropped. The Consortium works very professionally to provide emergency aid to as many people as possible. But surely, they could not control all the distribution of rice, portions were sold on the black market or given to the KNLA. The relief efforts include Mae Tao clinic run by Dr. Cynthia Maung that provides free health care to the refugees from Burma and the backpack health worker teams who are based in Burma to distribute medicine, while the Karen Teacher Working Group provide schoolbooks. These operations implemented by the KNU, NGOs and humanitarian organizations politicize emergency relief by actively promoting their activities in the international media and acquiring private donations. Doing video documentations on health and human rights abuses, local humanitarian NGO's contribute to public relations on human rights violations and have organized a whole system of illegal secondary relief welfare (see Horstmann 2010).

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6 For a presentation about the Free Burma Rangers, see http://www.freeburmarangers.org/. The Free Burma Rangers were founded by retired US Army envoy and Protestant missionary Allen Eubank.

The Karen Human Rights Group

Organizations like Burma Issues and Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) tackle human rights issues more explicitly and they also interface with the KNU and Humanitarianism across the Thailand-Burma border. The KHRG is a mediator of rights par excellence. Organizing workshops with villagers and training villagers for research on human rights abuses, the group understands itself as a mouthpiece for Karen villagers.

KHRG argues that the humanitarian crisis of displaced Karen is not so much a consequence of binary conflict between the KNLA and the Burmese army, but a consequence of the brutal goal of the Burmese army to impose sovereignty on people and replace local sovereignty with military law by relocating villagers and ordering them to forced labor, taxes in money and kind. The villagers, coming from different cultures, religions, ecological systems, locals, etc., respond by constantly frustrating the orders by escaping to the nearby forests, relying on hidden barns and places of worship, relying on traditional internal security systems, ignoring orders and applying other avoidance strategies. Malseed believes that the Karen villagers apply survival strategies of state avoidance to prevent total assaults on the social fabric. He criticizes the view that humanitarian aid can be neutral, since humanitarian actors should support the villagers to defend themselves against assaults of the state. They explain that the villagers are creative actors who apply the "weapons of the weak" to counter the warfare of the state to crush them. The KHRG is critical of the international legal rights framework and likes to challenge its assumptions. They call for a contextualized action rights works that help villagers to discuss and claim rights. Health and education should be organized by grassroots actors rather than channeled through government organizations. Organizations like KHRG have made negative experiences with international organizations like UNHCR and work closely with community leaders to empower them and to encourage them to discuss rights issues. The KHRG criticizes the humanitarian language of calling displaced people IDPs who are regarded as victims and mere recipients of aid management. Referring to Scott's work "the art of not being governed", KHRG argues that for Karen villagers, "displacement is a fluid and ongoing process that is less spatial than sociocultural, and which often occurs as a survival strategy in their struggle to resist control by the state and retain local sovereignty over their identities, land and livelihoods" (Heppner 2006, 24). This contrasts with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) defining internally displaced people as people who were forced

to leave their homes as a result of armed conflict. UNHCR, as an international body of governments, has to repatriate and reintegrate refugees and IDPs by addressing all responsibility for protection and assistance to foreign agencies and the state. Following the argument by Malkki (1995), KHRG challenges the technocratic language and questions the policy of international organizations that weakens the agency of Karen villagers which they ignore and override per definition. The technocratic understanding is blind to "villagers' multiple identities and capacities and homogenizes their diverse experiences of displacement" (Heppner ibid. 2006, 24). Mobility in this sense should not be seen as weakness, but as main strategy to mitigate and avoid extortion, threat and abuse in state-controlled spaces. Through careful research with local villagers, KHRG found that villagers mitigate assaults on their subsistence by establishing non-state spaces, in which they rely and reproduce community networks, mutual support networks, education and religion. KHRG argues that the danger is that humanitarian assistance misunderstands the real battle between the state and the villagers, ignores villager's strategies to upkeep traditionally non-state spaces and forces them into state spaces making them effectively state-controlled and aid-dependent.

This is the case in the refugee camps where refugees are state-controlled (by Thai government), aid-dependent (on international humanitarian assistance) and controlled by the KNU through the Karen refugee committee and camp administration. Seeing the camps as shelter, the KHRG does not give much attention to them. Yet, the refugee camps have become an integral part of refugee life and of the emergent transnational formations across the border. The KHRG makes the point that many families send their sons to the KNLA, and that the villagers need the protection of the KNLA. But the KHRG also note that the Tatmadaw rarely engages the KNLA in battle and concentrates instead on burning Karen villagers' barns. Unfortunately, the KHRG ignores the role of the KNU in the violence, the conscription of boys into the KNLA, the taxes required by the KNLA, and the intimidation and human rights abuses of non-state forces. The KNLA controls the population in the camps and restricts their movement in and outside the camps. The camp committee and the Kawthoolei church exercise considerable influence on the reproduction of Karen culture in the camps. The reproduction of Karen national culture even includes sanctions for pupils in the migration schools for non-obedience to nationalist-Christian rule. The right to culture in the camps is strongly associated with the nationalist agenda of the KNU. Minority groups in the refugee camps cannot afford to confront the KNU leadership, but carve out spaces for themselves.

The Buddhists establish networks with Karen monasteries in Burma and in northwestern Thailand and involve them in Buddhist rituals. Refugees from different religious communities in the camps reproduce their own rituals by inviting religious leaders and community elders from their home communities to the camps. Animist groups, while being invited to convert to Christianity by KNU evangelists, also return to their home communities in the conflict zone to perform traditional spirit worship, particularly harvest rituals to please the gods. The KHRG, while being very sensitive to aspects of political organization of the villagers, seems to give less attention to cultural and religious organizations of the migrants and migrants' organizations, although they constitute a substantial part of community and mutual support networks. A focus on self-organization of villagers in political, cultural and religious organizations, I argue, provides us with a better understandings how people constantly engage in their life projects, enrich their lives in difficult circumstances, find relief and intensify joy, emplace themselves in exile, build new lives, find meaning, confidence and hope. A focus on cultural engagement will provide us with a better understanding of the values and dreams of the villagers and with a less abstract picture of their rights.

Conclusion

Culture is not an innocent, neutral resource that can be easily approached by an international legal rights framework with a universal claim and ethos. Players operating in the rights domain include international humanitarian organizations, relief organizations of different interest, various Christian missionary networks, the Karen nationalist movement (especially the KNU) and local non-government rights organizations. In the conflict unfolding in Eastern Burma and Northwestern Thailand, different notions of culture are associated with powerful actors and truth claims. Constructed Karen culture has become invented and essentialized, minoritized, and packaged to appeal to the educated elite and to Western donors. For the KNU it was important to produce a uniform notion of Karen culture to support its struggle for a legitimate aspiration to a Karen homeland. But because of the strong Christian, and evangelist component of the Karen imagined community, the majority of Buddhists and Animists did not identify with the Karen imagined national community. Karen Christian missionary movements and some Christian faith-based organizations even

speak of a spiritual war between Christian martyrs and atheists/ evil. Christian missionary networks use the documentation of human right violations as propaganda to raise awareness in US church congregations and collect donations for medical relief welfare, ideological warfare and missionary work. Christian missionary networks and faith-based relief organizations use the word "genocide" for severe human rights abuses among the civil populations, but avoid a careful analysis of the conflict dynamics that would deceive a simplified binary description. Local rights organizations are more interested in the political economy of rights and strategies of survival and resistance. However, local human rights organizations as we have seen are also very critical of international human rights agendas, the goal of repatriation, and especially the principle of respecting state sovereignty and working through state organizations and institutions. Local community based organizations champion the local strategies of villagers to establish local sovereignty and local autonomy in non-state spaces. The close association of the local human rights organizations to the KNU, KNLA, and other NGOs and Western humanitarian organizations puts them into a similar worldview. Is culture and rights a Western discourse that imposes itself on the local context in the global South? Local human rights organizations successfully train villagers in the documentation of human rights abuses of detention, intimidation, torture, forced labor, illegitimate taxes. Different rights organizations and relief organizations work with local volunteers, and volunteer and community workers, teachers and pastors from different Christian churches and denominations established a presence in the Karen communities. Local human rights organizations, relief organizations, NGOs and indigenous missionary societies are able to mediate rights to health, education, culture and a better life to Karen villagers who actively establish relations and alliances with them to improve their livelihood and to resist a repressive state. A stakeholder meeting is needed that brings community leaders, community elders together with NGOs, humanitarian practitioners, academics, intellectuals, and clerical leaders and rights activists in order to find out the positions existing on culture and to design strategies to protect culture, to stimulate a discussion on cultural rights and to establish a public space in which culture can be critically discussed and cultural values preserved.

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