

Re-shaping Karenni-ness in exile: education, nationalism and being in the wider world^{1,2}

Sandra Dudley

Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester

shd3@le.ac.uk

I really want to improve my English because I want to tell the world about our independent Karenni Historical. I want to fight the SLORC or SPDC by non-violence. Today I'm a student. I can't hold a gun. I can't fight with violence. We can't defeat the SPDC because we are ethnic group. So we need a lot of educated people in our country. I want my nation [to] return to our motherland ... my nation's gotten big problem and faces hell ... My village was burned and my nation was kill[ed] ... Burma military keep ethnic cleansing in Burma. They keep nepotisms in their organization so that become soon mutiny in troops. I so much glad with East Timor. Because East Timor get independence from Indonesia. Teacher, I want to become a good or a great leader ... I will study more and more during the school. I'm the hope of the future for Karenni people.

Extract from a letter, in English, from Eh Ka Lu Taw³
(Karenni refugee camp high school student) to the author,
18 October 1999.

In his letter, Saw Eh Ka Lu Taw neatly expresses some of the issues central to the ongoing re-formulation, in refugee camps in Thailand, of what it is to be 'Karenni'. He is convinced of the importance of learning English, rationalised as it is in terms of being able to spread information about the Karenni to a wider world. He has accepted the inevitability of the *Tatmadaw*'s military superiority, and believes that all he and his people can use effectively is education. He is clear about the belief in the political independence of Karenni (Kayah) State as taught in camp schools, and about his desire to return to an independent homeland. His use of the phrase 'ethnic cleansing' demonstrates familiarity with some of the potentially impactful language of international politics and human rights. His familiarity and association with recent events in East Timor indicate the extent of his international awareness. And in his aspiration to be a 'good or a great' leader of his people and his acknowledgement of the importance of the next generation, he demonstrates a combination of ambition and sense of duty common amongst refugee Karenni school students, especially young men.

Introduction

¹ Thanks to the Carnegie Foundation and Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford, for support in the writing and presentation of a much earlier version of this chapter at the 1st Collaborative International Conference of the Burma Studies Group (BSG), 'Burma-Myanma(r) Research and its Future Implications for Scholars and Policymakers', University of Gothenburg, Sweden, September 2002. Parts of this chapter have appeared in different forms in Dudley 2000, Dudley forthcoming (a) and Dudley forthcoming (b).

² The chapter is based on ongoing communication with Karenni refugees in Thailand, and, primarily, on my field research in Karenni refugee camps from 1996 to 1997, and again 1998. I am grateful to the grant-making bodies who made this field research possible: Jesus College, Oxford; the Emslie Horniman and RAI/Sutasoma funds of the Royal Anthropological Institute; the Peter Lienhardt Memorial Fund, University of Oxford; the Cha Fund, University of Oxford; the Board of Graduate Studies, University of Oxford; and the Evans Fund, University of Cambridge. My greatest debt of gratitude, however, is owed to the many Karenni friends who shared their lives with me.

³ Since I last saw him Saw Eh Ka Lu Taw has changed his name. He was previously known by a Karen religious name, but his new epithet expresses his nationalist aspirations. In his letter, he explained it thus: '*Eh* is love, *Ka Lu* is nation, and *Taw* is truth or faith.'

This chapter focuses on the over 22,000-strong⁴ Karenni refugee community in Thailand, examining some of the ways in which Karenni refugees conceive of and interact with the world beyond the camps, and how they perceive their place in the wider world and construct and re-construct Karenni identity in exile. The chapter does not explore Kayah or Karenni ethnogenesis (c.f. Chit Laing, this volume), pre-exile historical constructions of identity, the role of religion in pre- or post-exile imaginations of Karenni-ness, or wider issues in the theoretical modelling of ethnicity. With specific reference to the Karenni, these matters are discussed elsewhere by myself (Dudley 1999, 2000, 2002, forthcoming a and b) and by F K L Chit Laing (Lehman 1967a and b, 1979).

Karenni refugees are highly diverse in various ways. Ethno-linguistically, most Karenni belong to the wider Karen family. Nonetheless, they are politically and historically distinct from, albeit often intimately involved with, the much more numerous Karen groups further south. Under the wide 'Karenni' umbrella, are grouped perhaps a dozen self-distinguishing but related groups, principal among whom are the Kayah, Kayaw, Paku Karen and various Kayan sub-groups. The boundaries of these groups are ambiguous and fluid. Furthermore, the population of Karenni State, Burma's smallest ethnic state, is disparate not only in ethnicity and language but also in socio-economic and educational background, religion, awareness of the world beyond, political aspirations, and, in the refugee camps, in the experience of displacement itself and in future expectations. Experiences at the hands of the Burmese army or others inside Karenni State and subsequent displacement have brought together people who all originate in Karenni State, but who are in many other ways disparate. That is, diversity is a characteristic of the population inside Karenni State and has been concentrated still further by the distillation process of displacement and subsequent coming together in the relatively confined spaces of the refugee camps. Yet despite this, all the refugees refer to themselves as 'Karenni' although, as I have elaborated elsewhere 'Karenni' is itself an ambiguous and fluid label, its meaning dependent upon whom one talks to, variously defined in terms of ethnicity, territoriality, and history (Dudley 2000, Dudley forthcoming [b]).

Amidst their displacement and the concomitant diversity of their own community and in their engagements with both, then, Karenni refugees in Thailand are active in continually defining and re-defining what it means to be Karenni, a process that involves highly self-conscious appropriations and rejections of elements of tradition, ideas of history and future aspirations. In particular, they are mostly engaged in an ongoing nationalist agenda dominated by a largely Christian,⁵ political elite known as the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), a self-styled 'government-in-exile' that continues to fight a guerrilla war against the Burmese military regime. The KNPP has the official objective of independence for Karenni State or, more accurately, international recognition of what they see as Karenni State's *existing* independence compromised by illegal invasion by an alien aggressor (Burma). This official position on independence has in the past led the KNPP to refuse to participate in talks with other Burma opposition groups on federalism and a pluralistic, democratic constitution for a future federal Burma that would include Karenni State: why, the KNPP have argued, should they participate in such dialogue if they are not, as they insist they are not, really a part of the country of Burma at all? More recently, however,

⁴ Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2004. <http://www.csw.org>

⁵ I do not have space to discuss religion and identity in the camps here, suffice to say that Christianity has become a central component in this view of positive ways to be Karenni in the world. Spreading the Christian faith amongst the Karenni refugee population is seen not only as a Christian duty, but also as a way of spreading a wider message about the hegemony and benefits of things generally thought of as 'modern' and 'moral' and associated by the Karenni with Christianity. In particular, these include ideas about education and female propriety. See, for example, Dudley 1997, 2000, and forthcoming (b).

under the current KNPP Prime Minister Hte Buphe,⁶ the approach has been considerably more pragmatic, so that although the KNPP's official position on independence remains the same, in practice the leadership is prepared, for example, to endorse the draft federal constitution drawn up by opposition groups for a future, democratic Burma that would incorporate the Karenni. Most importantly for present purposes, however, this nationalist, KNPP group dominates the processes whereby what it means to be 'Karenni' and 'modern' is deliberately reformulated in exile.

Exile itself is also a key component in reformulations of identity. The spatial and other constraints of living in the camps of necessity mean that life in displacement is in many ways very different from life before it; subsistence farming, for example, the main occupation of the majority of Karenni refugees prior to exile, is impossible. Political awareness and activity too are different in displacement, as is the extent to which refugees feel themselves part of wider, (post)modern global networks. Nonetheless, far from being passive victims of circumstance, Karenni refugees are active in making the best of their situation both conceptually and practically. What is more, they work hard to preserve some sense of continuity with 'home'; in turn, this idea of 'home' and of continuity with it is important in what it means to be Karenni in the first place. Rather than *losing* collective identity because of violent upheaval and migration, then, for many it is in the refugee camps that a collective sense of Karenni-ness is *born* (c.f. Malkki 1995). Refugee camps provide theatres within which the complexity and lack of clarity in what 'Karenni' means are made explicit but are also, to an extent, resolved.

The pan-Karenni identity formulated by dominant groups is continually challenged, however, by real diversity in tradition, history, religion, levels of education, etc. There are also occasional resentments and rivalries between groups. Indeed, there are many tensions and conflicts in the processes of defining a pan-Karenni identity, stemming from the challenges of diversity and from imbalances of power and political consciousness across the population. This is particularly so as some of the different Karenni groups in the not-so-distant past were little more than neighbours or distant relatives; i.e. there is some degree of shared history, and often shared language and/or other cultural traits, but the idea of all the groups being members of one community is relatively recent (c.f. Anderson 1991). Some groups are more effective than others in advancing their highly politicised models of a shared future and of what it means to be Karenni. These dominant groups come from the longer-staying refugee community, and mainly comprise relatively well-educated, Christian, politically-conscious individuals who are in the highest levels of the social and political hierarchy. Yet other groups rather than being simply subsumed into an emerging pan-Karenni national identity sometimes find it is their socio-cultural 'traditions' – e.g. the annual *ka-thow-bòw* ritual so important to recently arrived non-Christian refugees – that are appropriated by otherwise more dominant groups, perhaps transformed, and incorporated as central, defining elements of what it means to be Karenni (Dudley 2000 and forthcoming [a]).

The Karenni identity being discussed here is like all identities a relational artefact: I am only who I am because of how I and others define me *in relation to* others. (c.f. De Vos 1995). And in the Karenni case particularly, it is essentially an 'ethnic identity' or 'ethnicity' (here treated as synonymous).⁷ Diasporas such as Karenni refugees, and those to whom they relate 'back home', by definition consist of groups sharing a sense of identity primarily thought of in ethnic terms. Sharing an ethnic identity means belonging to a group with a common name, myth of common ancestry,

⁶ Hte Buphe's most recent occupation of the KNPP premier office began when he succeeded Aung Than Lay in the party elections of December 1996.

⁷ On ethnicity and the relative importance of an ethnic group's boundaries rather than content, see Barth 1969, Barth 2000 & Cohen 2000, but c.f. Glazer & Moynihan 1975. For overviews of anthropological perspectives on ethnicity, see Banks 1996, Jenkins 1996.

memories of a common past, several elements of a common culture (religion, customs, language), a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity (Smith 1986), all of which may be real or, often more likely, imagined (c.f. Chit Laing, this volume). In fact, for Karenni refugees much of the pan-Karenni identity may indeed be imagined. Important for groups such as the Karenni is the degree to which political aspiration such as nationalism combines with migration, forced displacement or other means of increasing and altering one's engagement with the wider world (such as use of media) to strengthen and/or modify senses of ethnic or other identity and political and economic agenda. Furthermore, as the influence of global cultural forces increases, there is an associated, increasing awareness of the international political importance of *having* an 'identity' in the first place (c.f. Handler & Linnekin 1984). The articulation and re-formation of 'identity', be it defined in ethnic, religious or other terms, thus becomes a very self-conscious and deliberate endeavour indeed.⁸

More generally, it is now well accepted that the genealogy of ethnicity, like that of the nation, is traceable to the imaginings of colonial state and associated anthropological, historical and other constructions.⁹ Nationalism and ethnicity are seen as products of the modern world (Anderson 1991, Gellner 1994), although ethnicity tends not to be prioritised as an important part of the development of nationalism (Smith [1986, 1994] being a notable exception), at least not until the influence of colonial constructions of ethnicity took hold in most parts of the world. Indeed, it is now a commonplace to refer to the totalising, controlling and categorising needs of the imperial system as leading to the self-consciousness and politicisation of ethnicity and, inevitably, ethnonationalist conflicts and collective violence (e.g. Tambiah 1989 & 1996; see also Horowitz 1985). Nonetheless, however recent may be self-conscious constructions of ethnicity (and 'nation'), and whatever the part played by colonial and post-colonial history and politics, it is a fact that *now* ethnicity *matters* to many groups. That the Karenni, for example, now call themselves 'Karenni' and define it in certain ways, matters in itself (Dudley 2000). The 'truth', if it exists, in what 'Karenni' actually means, matters far less to this analysis and is far less of an interesting question to me, than the way in which the KNPP and their supporters seek to manipulate such claims not only in their relationships with potential members who share their ethnicity or religious identity, but also in their response to wider global cultural influences.

Karenni refugees are part of a large population of around half a million refugees and asylum seekers from Burma residing in neighbouring countries, including over 335,000 Karen, Karenni and Shan in Thailand.¹⁰ Ethnic minority parties and organisations consider that it is the non-Burmans who 'have always paid the highest price for the political volatility in [Burma] at large' (Smith 2001: 23), as evidenced by internal displacement¹¹ and outpouring of refugees on a massive scale particularly (but not solely) after 1988. Nonetheless, internationally, ethnic minority situations have received less coverage and sympathy than has the general pro-democracy cause. Many ethnic group members attribute this relative international neglect to their geographical marginality, their longer history of struggle, and, above all, their relative lack of education that has made it harder for them

⁸ C.f. Barnes (1995: 1) on the self-conscious assumption of the identity 'indigenous people' because of its 'currency in contemporary international legal and institutional activities'. See also Dudley forthcoming (a) on increasingly self-conscious uses of internationally familiar human rights language, such as 'genocide'.

⁹ In Africa, for example, Malkki notes that 'there is a chilling traffic back and forth between the essentialist constructions of historians, anthropologists, and colonial administrators, and those of Hutu and Tutsi ethnic nationalists' (Malkki 1995: 14)

¹⁰ *US Committee for Refugees Country Report: Burma*, 2002, <http://www.refs.org/world/countryrpt/east-pacific/burma.htm>.

¹¹ In Kayah (Karenni) State alone, in October 2004 there were estimated to be up to 88,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs).

to convey their predicament to an international audience. But whatever its origins, it is a neglect that is felt sorely and contributes significantly to Karenni and other ongoing constructions of identity.

One way in which some outsiders have attempted to make up for this general neglect of the ethnic groups has been by working extensively with and focusing on the displaced groups based on and around the borders. This is especially so in Thailand, where groups in exile and their ethnic relatives inside Burma but near the Thai border, have received an especially high level of contact, support and attention from Western governments, agencies, and individual activists, journalists and scholars. As Smith (2001) has pointed out, this is problematic from the perspective of some ethnic leaders inside Burma: for them, focusing on border politics means not seeing the ways in which internal ethnic minority struggles have changed and moved on. On the other hand, one way in which analysis of the experiences of those living in exile can enhance wider understanding is by exploring the effects of increased contact with the outside world. Such increased contact comes via interaction with NGO staff and other visiting foreigners, through access, albeit still limited, to computer-mediated communication and opportunities outside the camps, and through the greater availability in Thailand of globally distributed material objects, images and ideas. Foreigners, and foreign objects and images can play a significant part in people's constructions of their own identities and their ideas of the world and of their place in it. Moreover, there is often created a sphere of transnational discourse that rests on the international acceptance of the apparent authority of refugees and exiles.¹²

To return to Eh Ka Lu Taw's letter at the beginning of this chapter, the issues with which he deals, together with the extent to which his beliefs and aspirations have been engendered and nurtured in displacement, particularly in camp schools, run through the remainder of this chapter. The first section deals with the education system in the camps and its relationship to nationalist ideas of the future. The second addresses ways in which Karenni refugees contextualise themselves and their experience both in a wider world and against the backdrop of KNPP political aspirations. Together, both sections explore how Karenni refugees perceive their situation within wider temporal and spatial contexts *beyond* the confines of present life in the camps. 'Beyond' is itself a relative concept operable on a number of different levels; 'traditional' Kayah refugees from very remote areas of Karenni State who have been arriving in Karenni refugee Camp 2 since forced village relocations in the Shadaw area in 1997, for example, have a very different experience and idea of the world beyond Karenni State and Camp 2 than do members of the KNPP elite. Furthermore, any one person or group does not always adhere to the same view of a particular 'beyond'. Members of the KNPP elite, for example, sometimes see the outside world primarily as a potential source of assistance and, ultimately, legitimation; at other times, they see it as something that has failed to fulfil its obligations; and at yet others, as something which may in various ways threaten Karenni security and communal values. What matters to the discussion in hand, is the extent to which certain beyonds and/or Karenni perceptions of them, impact upon and have agency in the ways in which the Karenni construct and reconstruct their sense of who they are.

Looking to the future: being educated, being 'a modern Karenni'

Education has taken on enormous importance in Karenni refugee life. Refugees see education as the one thing they can usefully pursue – albeit within the constraints imposed by displacement – both to make the present more bearable and to prepare for possible futures, individual and communal. It is at once something to occupy otherwise idle hands, something that will be of practical use in the

¹² C.f. Tibet (e.g. see Korom 1997).

future, and a powerful tool to mould minds and work towards political ends. It serves existing aspirations, reinforces them, and sets up others. Indeed, the importance placed by refugees on education as part of a process of change far exceeds that placed on the military struggle, in both aspirational and everyday terms.

Positive Karenni attitudes towards education are common not only to those involved in running the formal education system and to those senior in KNPP and camp hierarchies, but also to other members of the refugee population. Whatever their own educational background, during my field research almost everyone I spoke to emphasised the importance of children and young people availing themselves of the educational opportunities in the camps. Karenni leaders and teachers in particular, however, articulate specific reasons for the importance of formal education. As parents rather than as leaders and teachers, they recognise that to attain as good an education as possible improves future prospects for individuals. Accomplishments considered especially useful include good spoken and written English and, to a lesser extent, information technology (IT) skills. Whether or not refugees are able to return to Karenni State in positive circumstances in the imaginable future, an increasing array of internship opportunities with foreign NGOs (see below) means that there are some possibilities for gainful employment outside the camps as well as in them, and in order to be successful in obtaining one of these placements students need to demonstrate English and other skills. Hence, parents and teachers encourage students to work towards this sort of goal in part at least for themselves. Of far greater importance, however, is the emphasis on education being of value because of the need to work in the future for one's people, whether in exile or back inside Karenni State. Speaking English and being able effectively to use information and communication technologies, is perceived as crucial to propagating the KNPP nationalist message to a wider world beyond the camps. Language, IT and the overall education agenda all ameliorate the present (not least by providing a focus to one's time) and simultaneously are geared towards the future – both coping with it and having the potential to change it – and towards improving communication with the non-Karenni world.

The value of formal education is enthusiastically promulgated by parts of the Karenni leadership and by senior schoolteachers (the boundary between the two groups in fact being blurred). Nonetheless, because of the wide variety in the adult refugee population's experience of formal education prior to coming to the camps, ranging from a postgraduate university education to no schooling whatsoever, people's reasons for valuing education, the sorts of ambitions they have for their children, and the degree of actual commitment, vary widely. New refugees with no or very little school education of their own, for example, while all delighted to have an opportunity to send their children to school could neither explain *why* they considered education important nor articulate any post-school ambitions for their children. Furthermore, their attitudes to schooling were not strict and they were unlikely to force a child to go to school if he or she did not want to (Dudley 1997: 15). Members of the political elite with relatively extensive educational backgrounds of their own, on the other hand, can posit numerous advantages of education both for individuals and for the community as a whole.

The message that education is for the good of all is continually repeated to students by their teachers, in normal classes and in addresses to the whole school given at morning assembly or on some special occasion by the headmaster or, occasionally, the KNPP Education Minister or his Deputy. The message inculcates a strong sense of duty in school students. Obligation to 'try hard' is felt keenly, as is a duty to use what one learns 'for the Karenni people'. The sense of duty is not, however, abstract and reified: it is personalised and strengthened with the emphasis on the need for today's good students to be tomorrow's leaders. Karenni leaders also convince their students that it

is only in education that the Karenni have a chance of 'defeating' the Burmese military. This student's comments in 1997 are typical:

We couldn't compare to [the Burmese] with arms. So we must try hard and make up our Education.

At first, I wanted to fight but our leaders didn't want [it] because we couldn't believe we could win against them in the field. All of the students ... are going to be many leaders for the future...

...So I want to learn ... English is the most important and is used all over the world.

Extract from an essay by James (10th standard), January 1997.

Things had come a long way since a few years previously when the children of the Deputy Education Minister, already quite proficient in English on first arriving in Camp 5, were teased for 'eating English shit'.

By targeting all young people within the refugee community (the KNPP require that all children attend school up to the age of 18), the education system is set up for success in its aims not only of providing a forum for teaching and learning, but also of being a focus for the reproduction of a particular set of social values (c.f. Bourdieu & Passeron 1977) and, especially, for the promulgation of nationalist ideology. Education provides refugee young people (and teachers) with something to do, but it also secures them as a target constituency for the KNPP-dominated ideology of Karenni identity and nationalism justified along certain historical lines:

The few authoritative persons who have read the several documents relating to the Karenni people, their past history and their political status, agreed that the Karenni people have been politically wronged by the British Government when it allowed Karenni to be ceded to the independent Burma. It is the British Government which refused to admit the injustice fraudulently committed by the Labour Government which passed the Burma Independent Bill knowing the 1947 constitution was criminally fabricated ...

(Karenni Government, nd)

The tone is similar in a number of KNPP documents, for example:

Karenni is a tiny small independent state. It is situated between Burma and Thailand on the longitude 97.10 to 97.50 east and from north Latitude 18.50 to 19.55. It has an area of 4582 square miles with a population of 300,000 approx. Throughout the history of Karenni we have never been subordinated to Burma kings or other neighbouring sovereign states. In August 1948 Burma invaded Karenni then we, the Karenni people fought back to defend our sovereign and independence. The national liberation war against the successive regimes of Burma and now Myanmar counts 48 years and it continues to this day. Over the many years many of us were tortured and killed. Many of our villages were burnt down from year to year and villagers fled to live in thick jungles.

Through blood, tears and sweat, we, the Karenni people had survived after having suffered an unaccountable hundreds of violations of human rights at the hands of the racist Burmese regimes. However, we continued our steady and sturdy support to our resistance. Since the racist regimes could not subdue us they tried to relocate us to confined locations, where they could be able to set up a rigid control on us. In 1976, 61 villages in No. 2 District area were force relocated to Mawchi town. We refused and our villages were destroyed and burnt down. We had to build hide-outs and lived in jungle to continue our support to the resistance.

(Karenni Government, 1996)

Both the texts extracted from above were written largely for an external readership, and intended for distribution to outsiders: either those who turn up and express interest, or international bodies and others whom the KNPP wish to lobby. There is also, however, a repetition of this historico-political message and tone in a history textbook produced in both Burmese and Karenni by the KNPP for use in Karenni refugee camp schools (KRNRC 1974/1997).¹³ All of these sorts of publications, despite their different intended readerships, have as their focus a description of the KNPP view of Karenni history and its relationship to the KNPP characterisation of a politico-military struggle for independence, and the more or less explicit need for KNPP interpretations of history to be accepted by a wider, international public. The KNPP-run education system in the camps is actively and continually involved in the politicised propagation and reinforcement of this set of ideas, with the specific aims of inculcating tomorrow's adults and leaders with certain beliefs about who the Karenni are, why they are in the situation they are in, and what they should be doing about it. A Ma, 10th standard student, explained:

I was born in Loikaw [capital of Kayah State] [but before I came here] I didn't know I'm Karenni ... I never heard about the Karenni. I know it as the Kayah. I never learned the history of the Kayah [but] I have some knowledge of Burmese history ... Only when we arrived here we have learned about the history of the Karenni and are proud of being a Karenni.

(essay, January 1997)

The formal education system is, then, central to the reinforcement and propagation of ultimate creation and continuation of the KNPP's interpretation of history and a KNPP-determined sense of pan-Karenni nationalism and purpose (c.f. Anderson 1991, Gellner 1983). Beyond the KNPP history textbook, methods include singing of the national song in school assembly every morning, the central part played by school students in national days and festivals, the teaching of a particular interpretation of history using KNPP-produced text books (e.g. KRNRC 1974/1997), the teaching of Karenni (Kayah) language, and frequent reference to the Karenni struggle/history/future aspirations by the headmaster and others in addresses to the school and in classes. On national days, for example, all but one of which mark the anniversaries of particular events in the post-1948 period,¹⁴ schools close, and there is a formal parade and opening ceremony in which the school students are the most active, central group. It is school students who make up those on parade, and for whom and by whom most of the day's activities are put on. On Army Day, for example, after an opening ceremony involving senior members of the KNPP and speeches – made to an audience consisting mainly of school children – about the history and importance of the Karenni Army, there is an atmosphere of fun and mischief-making focused on competitive games such as tug-of-war, *chinlon*,¹⁵ badminton and, especially, volleyball. Certainly, Army Day and other annual commemorative occasions are not solely targeted at school students, but this group does comprise the main constituency from which the main participants in the day's activities are drawn and the bulk of the audience for speeches from KNPP leaders. It is KNPP and camp leaders, and schoolteachers, who largely organise the events. In so doing, they ensure that young people,

¹³ This textbook is also given to outsiders and includes the KNPP address and telephone number for those requiring more information.

¹⁴ These days include Resistance Day (9 August; commemorates the day in 1948 on which, according to the KNPP Karenni State was invaded by the Burmese), Martyrs' Day (18 September), and Army Day (17 August; commemorates the day in 1948 that the Karenni National Resistance Army [KNRA] was formed). One other annual commemoration, National Day, is held on 21 June, to mark the anniversary of the Anglo-Burmese signing of the 1875 agreement recognising the independence of (Eastern) Karenni.

¹⁵ *Chinlon* is a Southeast Asian game of skill played with an open-structured rattan ball, the aim being to keep the ball in the air by kicking it. The Karenni generally refer to it by its Burmese name, although one or two use the Thai name, *takraw*.

especially school students, hear the message to be given out on that day. And, by definition, on commemorative days this message always directly concerns some aspect of Karenni history, interpreted from a KNPP perspective and intimately tied to KNPP aspirations concerning an independent Karenni State.

Commemorative days like other central aspects of the formal education system, thus serve as effective fora in which KNPP interpretations of history and nationalism can be promulgated and, thereby, further disseminated and reinforced. That is not to say, however, that every detail of the KNPP message will be immediately taken in and remembered by everyone. On Army Day in 1996, for example, many of those to whom I spoke after the opening ceremony, did not know the precise reason for celebrating on 17 August, despite it having been explained to them earlier in the day. But they did still understand that the day was about celebrating the Karenni Army, and showing support for its part in the ongoing Karenni struggle for independence. And from a KNPP perspective, this is enough: it does not matter that many people do not know or understand the details of the historical rationale that lies behind the KNPP's nationalist aspirations. It is sufficient that the refugee constituency – especially its younger members – is regularly reminded of what and how central its political objectives are. Of course, the official organisation of these events, especially those such as Army Day that are a great deal of fun, also reinforces the KNPP's standing and authority within the refugee community at the same time as strengthening bonds of commonality and solidarity between students, soldiers, and other young people.

Ambition and opportunity

Both ambition and opportunity refer to potentialities that have not yet necessarily acquired concrete reality, but they are distinct: ambition is a vision, an internal thing with reality only inside the minds of those holding it; opportunity, on the other hand, here the existence or potential existence of possible work, is an external thing that has reality or potential reality outside of mental life. It is in the interface between these two things that the relationships between Karenni attitudes to education and Karenni perspectives of the outside world and their place within it become apparent.

Before reaching the upper end of the school, students tend to have developed but unfocused ambitions. A combination of their own personal experience and the ongoing reinforcement by school authorities and others of the message of duty and obligation, ensures they have a strong sense that they must not only try their hardest in the present, but that they must also aspire to 'help' or 'work for' the Karenni people in the future. Precisely what this might entail is vague, however, encapsulated in such typically general statements as 'so the Karenni Government has opened schools ... where people can learn. And then their people will be useful for the future ... we must try to succeed for the future' (extract from a joint essay by five ninth standard students, February 1997). This conviction in the need 'to succeed for the future', if it is further focused at all, usually concerns only on a minimal set of possible future occupations including soldier, teacher, and medic. In other words, personal ambitions are largely restricted to the sorts of jobs for which students have existing role models all around them; that is, there is a clear relationship between subjective expectation and objective probability (c.f. Bourdieu 1977). These ambitions are not only imaginable, but are also directly related to Karenni perceptions of the current political, military and humanitarian situation and what might be done to ameliorate it.

As students grow older and more educated, their ambitions are consolidated and refined. The subject of ambition does not necessarily change, but the way in which individuals see their role becomes more aspiring. Most students still hope for posts within education, healthcare and/or 'the struggle'. Now, however, rather than simply wanting to be a teacher, they may want to be a 'very

good teacher' or a 'headmistress' (essay by Ni Ma [10th standard], January 1997), or a 'very good doctor ... to take care of the wounded soldiers during the war ... like Florence Nightingale' (A Ma [10th standard], January 1997). And rather than simply wanting to be a soldier, ambition to be seriously involved 'in the struggle' is defined in terms of wanting to be a politician, a great leader, or a senior military officer – 'a manager of soldiers' (Klaw Reh [9th standard], February 1997), or even 'a good dictator' (James [10th standard], January 1997). This consolidation and refinement of ambition is due to increased encouragement and reiteration of the need for today's students to be tomorrow's leaders by teachers and other members of the Karenni elite. But there are discrepancies between individual students, perhaps unsurprisingly related to gender.¹⁶ While they aspire to help their people, female students are far less likely to articulate ambitions unprompted. They are also most likely to restrict ambitions to education or healthcare, whereas male students often visualise themselves playing an important part in future politics. Nonetheless, female students may still see themselves being able to help publicise the Karenni situation to the wider world – it is just that they do not think of or describe this sort of activity in terms of politics, whereas male students, who also may perceive their future role as being in communicating with members of the international community in some way, immediately describe it in terms of political life.

By the time students reach the top of the school, they are aware of the existence of various opportunities. Realistically, for most students these opportunities are restricted to employment within the Karenni refugee community, as teachers, medics/medic assistants or clerical and political assistants within one of the Karenni Government Ministries. Involvement in the military for students who have reached 10th standard or above, is likely to comprise clerical, political and intelligence assistance to senior officers, although students who drop out of school at a much lower level are more likely to become soldiers; in either case, involvement in this sphere is largely restricted to males. But beyond these Karenni jobs, there is also the possibility of getting an internship, furthering one's education or at least attending some training with an outside organisation. Such opportunities include fixed-term internships with NGOs in Thailand (in a few cases with the possibility of an ongoing job afterwards) and training periods outside the camps with NGOs in Thailand. A very few individuals are able to take up study and training opportunities abroad. Since 1997, when the first Karenni interns began work at the local International Rescue Committee office in Mae Hong Son, the availability of these sorts of opportunities has mushroomed. Nonetheless, they are highly competitive, and often open to all groups along the border (i.e. the Mon and Karen as well as the Karenni). They are eagerly sought after – from a communal perspective they present an opportunity to widen not only skills but also knowledge and experience of the wider world beyond the camps; and from a personal perspective for young individuals they constitute a chance to get out of the camps and away from the relatively restrictive and boring life there. The possibility of acquiring office skills, management skills, familiarity with information technology, increased proficiency in English, greater political sophistication and knowledge of the machinations of the international community, and using this experience to the benefit of the Karenni, is highly valued by all.

Outsiders' involvement in Karenni education

For most refugees, the outside world is most immediately experienced in interactions with visitors to the camps. A disproportionate number of these outsiders come in connection with education, and they have a significant influence on Karenni attitudes to formal education. Visitors include

¹⁶ Education itself is also affected by gender. While all adults, for example, said education was equally important for girls and boys, in practice it is more likely that in any one family girls will receive less schooling than boys. It is also more likely that older siblings, especially if they are girls, will receive less education than their younger brothers and sisters as they are required to help in the house. (Dudley 1997; CCSIPT 1995).

miscellaneous foreigners who stay for periods ranging from a few weeks to a year or more to teach English or, occasionally, some other subject such as music, art or politics. Also included are NGOs such as JRS, who conduct occasional trainings inside the camps. Those who stay more than a few weeks usually make the most impact of all outsiders. In general, the increased level of interaction with outsiders implied not only by increasing numbers of internship and other training opportunities, but also by the involvement of outsiders in the camps' education system, has numerous impacts upon the Karenni community. One is the potential of some internships and similar opportunities to exacerbate existing inter-camp or other rivalries. The selection of individuals to take part in the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) original internship programme in the late 1990s, for example, became enmeshed in and in turn exaggerated existing bones of contention between the Camp3/Nai Soi nexus and Camp 5. The candidates preferred by IRC did not exactly correlate with those preferred by the two Karenni leaders also involved in the selection process. Both leaders resided in Nai Soi, and their preference for candidates from this nexus rather than from Camp 5, together with an initial insistence that all successful individuals should be able to speak Kayah, was evident in their final choice.¹⁷ Eventually, the creation of an additional internship place by IRC allowed a satisfactory outcome whereby both IRC and the Karenni leaders were happy that their chosen candidates had been successful. Nonetheless, before this point was reached it looked as if the Karenni leaders would get their way; among Camp 5 students, this led to considerable resentment.

Another significant impact of the involvement of outsiders has been the beginning of a change in Karenni attitudes towards opportunities for women. A number of NGOs now make it either an explicit condition of offering an internship that they are able to select a woman candidate, or at least indicate a preference for doing so. From the NGOs' perspectives, emphasising opportunities for women goes some way towards raising the profile and role of women in refugee communities. In turn, this trend has not gone unnoticed by the Karenni leadership. Their reaction has been characteristically pragmatic: they have recognised that currently there are more opportunities available to young women than to young men, and that taking up such opportunities still means that some young Karenni people have the possibility of furthering their education. Beyond this, however, to recognise the internships being taken up by young women as potentially useful for the Karenni has also entailed having to acknowledge that these young women should subsequently play a significant role in Karenni communal and/or political life on their return to the refugee camps. In turn, because it is still assumed that marriage will mean the woman's departure from her job, male Karenni leaders and teachers have also begun to recognise the need actively to encourage young women not to get married too early.¹⁸ Such shifts in attitude on the part of a few leaders are thus far still small, and women are still regarded as secondary to men in the political sphere. Nonetheless, the shift is there, albeit more because of pragmatism in maximising the use of available opportunities rather than because of a clear ideology of equality.

How far foreign teachers reinforce certain received ideas of Karenni-ness is inevitably less than the effect of Karenni teachers. Nonetheless, it is significant. Within a short time of being the camps foreigners learn Karenni versions of the current humanitarian and political situation, making no out-loud critique of what they are told and then in turn reinforcing it. In my own teaching, for example, I often asked students to write essays about their individual backgrounds, their views of the Karenni situation, and about hopes and fears. While I did not stand in front of the class and presume to tell them about Karenni history, in getting them to write down a combination of personal experience and the historical rationale and political aspirations they had already been

¹⁷ Kerry Demusz, personal communication, 1996.

¹⁸ Saw Doh Say, personal communication, 1999.

taught I was reinforcing a particular perspective on the past and future. I was encouraging its confirmation in writing, and in my subsequent expressions of shock and sympathy to individuals when I read of their own experiences, I further contributed to strengthening a certain way of *interpreting* that experience. I am not suggesting that what my Karenni students wrote and said was untrue, rather that in my encouragement and reaction, like other foreign visitors I indirectly strengthened the received relationship between individual suffering and a particular historical and political explanation. I did not ask my students to write in their essays about Karenni history and politics, but invariably they did so, at once demonstrating the effectiveness with which it had been taught to them and, in the very act of writing it down for me, reinforcing its strength and validity not only in their minds but as something in need of further dissemination, for which purpose they should develop their abilities in English. Hence, in the process of inadvertently reinforcing a certain set of ideas about Karenni-ness, I and other foreign teachers also reinforced a certain approach to the reason for education and – especially – learning English in the first place. As representatives of the outside world encouraging interaction with us about ideas of what it means to be a Karenni refugee, we crystallised our students' ideas of the nature and desirability of similar interactions with the rest of the non-Karenni world.

On a more short term basis than teaching for a year or more in the camp schools, foreign teachers are also often involved in training programmes such as teacher training by outside organisations. Karenni attendees take training sessions seriously. They are seen as opportunities to make Karenni education more effective. Karenni participants also see them as emancipatory by comparison to the situation inside Karenni State/Burma. Firstly, it is allegedly very difficult for members of the Karenni and other non-Burman ethnic groups inside Burma to gain access to adequate teacher training (and other further education). Secondly, whether one has access to it or not there is a general refugee perception that the level of training received in the camps is far superior to anything inside Burma. Whether or not this is true is irrelevant. Teachers and students alike feel education is better in the camps. Furthermore, positive attitudes towards trainings reflect general Karenni conceptions in which they see themselves as 'simple' and uneducated by comparison to the outside world, representatives of the latter therefore being perceived as able to teach the Karenni many useful things.

Overall, education is something Karenni refugees consider they can be positive about. It is not just something that whiles away the time and prepares the young better to face the future; it is also something that in itself is worth being glad about. In part, this entails attitudes towards the outside world, and it is to these that the chapter now turns.

Looking and being 'beyond' the camps

NGOs and other foreigners are for most refugees the only points of contact with a wider, outside world. Furthermore, they are generally seen and interacted with inside the camps – that is, they stand for an outside world that for most refugees is otherwise unknown. Visiting NGO staff and occasionally NGO donors, foreign teachers, and other outsiders such as journalists and religious groups, are for most refugees transient beings who come and go between the refugee camp and another, unfamiliar realm. Meanwhile, most refugees themselves stay put, unable to move freely. For them, particularly recent arrivals such as those in Camp 2, the outside world *is* foreigners who come to the camp and are perceived simultaneously as actual or potential sources of help and as fleeting symbols of another, richer, stranger world. It does not take long for the comings and goings of such foreigners to be taken for granted, and while many refugees expressed anxieties about not wanting to have to accept help at all, dependency is a concern on all sides (Dudley 1997). Furthermore, in the course of their assistance NGOs unwittingly and perhaps unavoidably reinforce

the sense of displacement and all it entails. Many organisations, for example, are unwilling to provide funding to assist internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Karenni State, on the grounds that such assistance could not be accurately evaluated.¹⁹ This reinforces the distinction between ‘home’ or ‘inside’, on the one hand, and refugee camps on the other. It also reinforces Karenni refugee perceptions of themselves as beholden and subordinate to donors. To be told that one may not have funds for projects inside Karenni State because the money’s destination and use cannot be confirmed by the NGO, while understandable in terms of NGO accounting from a refugee perspective makes one feel mistrusted.²⁰

For a minority within the refugee population, relationships with NGOs and other foreigners extend beyond seeing outsiders in the camps and perhaps being involved in their assistance programmes. Primarily, this minority comprises camp and KNPP leaders with whom IRC and others regularly meet, and young people who may be selected as NGO interns or employees or for study in Thailand or beyond. In the case of leaders, their interactions with foreigners still mostly take place within the bounded spaces of the camps, although some need sometimes to travel out of the camp to Mae Hong Son or occasionally elsewhere for meetings. It is, however, amongst young people selected to move outside the camps to fill positions as NGO interns, trainees, employees or university students, that relationships with outside organisations and individuals, indeed, with the outside world as a whole, reach their fullest development and impact.

Since 1997, when the first Karenni interns began work at the International Rescue Committee (IRC)’s local Mae Hong Son office, the availability of these sorts of opportunities has mushroomed. Nonetheless, they are highly competitive, and often open to all groups along the border (i.e. the Mon and Karen as well as the Karenni). They are eagerly sought after – from a communal perspective they present an opportunity to widen not only skills but also knowledge and experience of the wider world beyond the camps; and from a personal perspective for young individuals they constitute a chance to get away from relatively restrictive and boring camp life. The possibility of acquiring expertise and of subsequently using it ‘to help the Karenni people’, is highly valued. Particularly appreciated acquisitions are office skills, management skills, familiarity with information technology, increased proficiency in English, greater political sophistication and knowledge of the machinations of the international community, and general experience of the outside world so that the Karenni may benefit from and become increasingly involved in it.

Older members of the Karenni elite are now enthusiastic about these sorts of opportunities for young people. This kind of enthusiasm for younger people gaining experience and knowledge away from their communities, especially abroad, has not always been shared by all members of the Karenni leadership, however. It was claimed to me that even by the end of 1996 some Karenni leaders thought it unnecessary, extravagant or generally undesirable to send anyone abroad at all – and this despite the fact that some of them had enough personal wealth to make it possible for one or two young people.²¹ For other Karenni elite, however, this reluctance was incomprehensible, because in their view without getting young people out to learn as much as possible, ‘who is there here now who is able to run a country?’²² Nonetheless, some Karenni leaders feared that if young people went abroad to learn, they would not come back again, though others pointed out that if the camp education system was successful enough in instilling in young people a political consciousness and sense of duty, then most if not all would return to their people. More recently,

¹⁹ Christina Fink, personal communication, 2000.

²⁰ C.F. Daniel & Knudsen 1995.

²¹ Teddy Buri, personal communication, 1999.

²² *Ibid.*

however, like wider attitudes to education (Dudley 2000), attitudes to the value of gaining experience away from the displaced Karenni community, have become more positive. And as the number of such opportunities increases, and as young people gradually return to the refugee population from partaking of them, so general awareness and imagination of the international community and of ways to communicate with it, also increases.

Global views and global exposure

Interaction with tourists, whether in the 'Long-neck' villages or in passing in Mae Hong Son market, is but one way in which Karenni refugees come into contact with representatives of a wider, international community outside the camps. Indeed, tourists are of relatively minor importance in comparison to such other vehicles of the global as video, radio, printed media, and NGOs. Interactions with, and Karenni imagination of, the international community bring a varied sense of the global into Karenni ideology.

On a political level, it seems clear that the Karenni, or at least the KNPP leadership, have little sense of much of the outside world's opinion of their hard line on Karenni State independence. The KNPP emphasises the distinctness of its own political standpoint on this, and at the same time feels aggrieved at the apparently poor understanding and support of it by the outside world. The KNPP leaders on the whole do not perceive that differing foreign views of them on the one hand and, say, pro-democracy Burmese student groups on the other, may have something to do with the difference in political standpoints. So, while the Karenni are right to feel aggrieved that human rights abuses in their and other ethnic areas tend to be reported less than those affecting the mainly Burman population of central Burma, they may not be wholly correct to assume it is simply lack of awareness that is responsible for the relatively low level of international sympathy they receive. Indeed, this sympathy seems low in comparison to other ethnic groups such as the Karen, as well as in comparison to pro-democracy groups such as the National League for Democracy (NLD). This is partly a function of relative size (the KNPP is small in relation to the Karen National Union [KNU]), but it may also be a result of the KNPP's stance on independence, a political objective that to many outsiders seems worthy of little support.

From an outside, practical perspective, then, the KNPP seems unable to recognise what it is that ensures their continued international marginality. But from the inside, ideological perspective of the KNPP, the greater the marginality the greater must be the insistence on the objective of independence: it is a point of principle that is hard to compromise. For the KNPP it has also become a definitive characteristic of who the Karenni are, and a principal element in the explanation of their suffering. It is through such mutual misunderstanding that the Karenni have frequently been left out of NGO and other border initiatives. Negative Karenni responses to certain projects, made on the grounds of independence, often result in the Karenni not being included in subsequent projects. An example is the responses of some KNPP leaders to the efforts made in 1997 by the Burma Lawyers' Council (BLC) to provide training sessions to all groups along the border, facilitating understanding of a draft written constitution for a future democratic Burma. The BLC simultaneously tried to involve their target groups in discussions about the composition of this draft constitution. For some KNPP leaders, however, this process was irrelevant to the Karenni: if Karenni State should not and will not be a part of Burma, then how can it be included in the latter's constitution? They did not, however, prevent the training taking place, and those Karenni who actually took part – mostly young, reasonably well-educated people drawn from all the camps – were positive in their response. Indeed, the grassroots reaction from involved youth was that the process was a useful one in which the Karenni should most certainly be involved. Unfortunately from a Karenni perspective, however, the apparent negativity of some KNPP leaders towards such

projects does not always encourage outsiders who might be planning further efforts (neither, as I discuss elsewhere [Dudley 2000] does it always make for agreement between generations of Karenni refugees). It seems, for example, for precisely this reason that the Karenni were not as significantly involved as other groups in the 1999 onwards National Reconciliation Program.²³ Furthermore, apparently negative responses from KNPP leaders sometimes give the impression to outsiders that the Karenni are not very concerned with the wider world. But this could not be further from the truth. International legitimisation of and support for Karenni political objectives are important to the KNPP, as is the dissemination of information about the humanitarian situation inside Karenni State.

More abstractly but perhaps most significantly, for younger people especially the wider world is both a source of knowledge, and itself something about which they wish to know more. The acquisition of knowledge from and about the wider world not only allows it to be better understood, but also alters Karenni perceptions of their own place within it. Tantalising glimpses of parts of this wider world are had in the camps, not only through the visits of foreigners but also through radio, video, and printed media. Short-wave transistor radios are highly valued items, and those who do not possess them (the majority) often visit the houses of those who do to listen to news broadcasts. Inevitably, news about Burma and the border is of particular concern, but there is also a general awareness of and interest in international current affairs. There were numerous occasions on which I was asked, unprompted, my opinions on current situations in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and the Middle East. Discussions often extended beyond immediate 'news' – educated, young people, for example, wished to explain their admiration for such figures as Yasser Arafat, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro.²⁴ Furthermore, interest in persons and events elsewhere in the world goes beyond politics: sport, in particular the English football league, is of major interest to well-informed young men, who are often able to discuss not only teams but also individual players. Any fashion magazines or other Western images, together with British or American popular music, are eagerly consumed by the young whenever possible. For a few individuals who have previously lived in urban areas in Burma with access to cinemas, Hollywood films and the Oscars are also of major interest. For most, however, films are familiar only through the showing of videos in the camps. These showings, usually out of doors in the evening, in Camp 5 at least are usually organised by KNPP leaders using their own equipment. The TV screen is invariably of normal size, yet despite this, and despite the fact that most watching the video cannot understand the dialogue, scores of people crowd together to watch. Sometimes the films are Thai or Chinese, but more often they are American, ranging from violent war movies such as *Full Metal Jacket*, through blockbusters like *Jurassic Park*, to quirkier films such as *Babe* or *The Gods Must be Crazy*. Occasionally too, smaller student groups are shown educational videos, or taped British TV programmes (including, on one memorable and surreal evening for me, an *Inspector Morse* episode based in my old workplace, the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford).

It is all these sorts of sources of information pertaining to a modern world beyond that contribute to a continually growing curiosity in and knowledge of both the international community and its machinations, and of cultural diversity around the globe. This is 'consumption' in its wider sense of being conscious of 'living through objects and images not of one's own creation' (Miller 1995: 1; see also Appadurai 1986, Bourdieu 1984). As more knowledge, images and sounds are consumed, so more are desired, and so grows the realisation of being a *part* of a wider community. Becoming refugees and coming to the camps has hastened and intensified this process for all, but perhaps

²³ Christina Fink, personal communication, February 2000.

²⁴ C.f. Eriksen on the effects of 'globalisation of culture and relativisation of boundaries', on which he cites as an example Mauritians talking about Chernobyl (1993: 148-9). Karenni conversations in 1998 about the death of Princess Diana provide similar examples.

particularly for young people – their interactions with foreigners, video and printed media are often greater than amongst other members of the refugee population. Furthermore, the increasing availability of internships or other opportunities outside the camps means greater numbers of educated young Karenni people are gaining experience of the wider world through physical interaction with a part of it, and, once out there, through email contact with other parts of it. Such experience is by its nature partial, so that ideas of the outside world are part knowledge and part imagination; by extension, so too are conceptions of Karenni-ness in relation to the wider world and of the place of the Karenni within it. As experience of the wider world increases, so do its impacts on constructions of Karenni-ness.

Ideas about the wider world are important too for ways in which Karenni refugees conceive of their current situation *as refugees in camps*. That is, the camps themselves are seen not alone but in relation to the world beyond. Particular glimpses of the wider world heighten awareness of disjunctures between local poverty and social realities on the one hand and global materialism and possibilities on the other. In direct comparison of life inside and beyond the camps, however, the commonest idiom is that of ‘the jungle’. On one level, this entails emphasising the paucity of opportunities for educational advancement, political expression and material acquisition, and other palpable disadvantages of jungle living. Relative isolation, ignorance, hardship and boredom are all variously pointed to as problematic results of camp-based exile, and ‘the jungle’ becomes shorthand for all of them. The feelings of young people in particular about being confined to such a life at times reach desperation, although such strong emotions are often couched in irony and humour. Paul, for example, while talking to me of his depression at being stuck in the jungle and his desperate hope not to have spend the rest of his life in such a socially, politically, intellectually and materially restrictive environment, added that he supposed it was not all that bad as at least there was lots of fresh air. Most importantly, expressions of unhappiness at the current situation are invariably counteracted by statements about having to put up with it out of duty to one’s country and people; that is, living in the jungle is a price that must be paid for being a positive part of the Karenni struggle. And here, of course, there is a circularity: refugee-ness is a price that must be paid for being a Karenni nationalist, yet simultaneously Karenni nationalism as it is manifested in the camps can be perceived by an outsider as an elaborate way of ameliorating the experience of displacement.

Negativity about jungle living is mostly expressed by young and/or relatively well educated people, and by the minority who lived formerly in urban areas. ‘The jungle’ is used by such people as shorthand for a situation in which intellectual, political and sophisticated cultural activity are almost impossible. For many other members of the refugee population, however, the jungle is in some ways not that different from the area whence they came. It may be topographically a little different, but it is similar insofar as it is a rural surrounding from which may be gathered a variety of food and other useful items such as leaves for thatching, natural dyestuffs, etc. However, for these refugees one important difference remains: here, nearby areas of jungle may not be cleared for cultivation and thus in this context ‘jungle’ is indeed symbolic of restriction.

For all refugees, then, living in the jungle symbolises a degree of restriction, be it constructed primarily in intellectual, political, agricultural or other terms. The response to such restriction is often rather passive. In part, this is unsurprising – there is little refugees can constructively do about not being able to farm properly, for example. But for some passivity also becomes a more generalised way of talking about things, even an affectation. When, for example, I asked Saw Eh Gay if the Karenni tried to make contact with outside groups (e.g. religious organisations), he replied ‘Oh no. They contact us, because we don’t know how to. We are quite content and when things are needed God sends them – like he sent you.’ Yet in reality various Karenni individuals

and organisations *do* make and maintain contacts with a number of outside groups. Indeed, by 1999 the Karenni were successfully using email actively to seek replacement English teachers. Admittedly such organised efforts, and knowing where to start in making them, are relatively new. Admittedly too, Saw Eh Gay's apparent Christian fatalism is more marked than most. Nonetheless, it is also slightly disingenuous. Many Karenni portray themselves as poor, ignorant jungle-dwellers, yet do not always behave or really see themselves as such in practice. Indeed, the simplicity and ignorance so often claimed by the Karenni and so often rationalised as being due to having to live in the jungle, is sometimes a useful tool in the effort to win outside sympathy and assistance. Living in camps in the jungle is problematic, but is also part of a wider way in which a separateness from the outside, the non-Karenni, is asserted (c.f. Malkki 1995) and used, both in reinforcing what it means to be Karenni and in relating to what is non-Karenni.

Concluding remarks

Engaging positively with the future through education and outside contacts, is envisaging that future as the hoped-for end-point of 'the struggle' with which many Karenni refugees have been actively engaged for a long time. Eventual return home, at its most positive, is dreamt of as return to a place free of Burmese oppression, a future manifestation of an idealised past not personally experienced by any of the refugees in the camps; in other words, the object of the myth of return is itself a myth. As time passes, it appears to more and more refugees to be less and less of a real possibility. Nonetheless, it is a part of the KNPP's political agenda and aspirations, presenting refugees with a possible future, a politically constructed, hypothetical alternative to staying in the camps indefinitely or returning to a Karenni State still under a Burmese fist. Furthermore, the dissemination of KNPP ideals to 'outsiders' and the training and encouragement of young people to participate in this dissemination helps to keep alive in Karenni minds the possibility of fulfilling the nationalist dream.

The fact that there *is* a dream, and that part of trying to make it come true is to disseminate it amongst both the Karenni and the international communities, not only reinforces political ideology in a positive feedback cycle, but also helps make displacement itself more bearable. It does this indirectly by providing something for people to work towards and focus on, and directly by conflating the dissemination of ideology with the need for material assistance. Many of those outsiders with whom the Karenni interact comprise relief agencies and individuals wishing to help on humanitarian grounds: in the process of assisting, they are made aware of KNPP-driven Karenni views on why Karenni refugees are in the position they are in, and where ideally they would like to be. Conversely, other outsiders initially become interested in the Karenni because of their history and political agenda, and subsequently become drawn into a process of assistance. Outsiders themselves, by their very involvement perpetuate further the dream of return to a free Karenni State. NGOs, for example, frame capacity development programmes in terms of developing skills for refugees to use when they eventually return home, in the NGO's view perhaps including preparation for a worst-case scenario such as forced repatriation but from refugees' perspectives often simply reinforcing the hope, nay belief, in the successful outcome of current nationalist agenda.

As time spent in the camps increases, inevitably so too does the level of refugee exposure to and conviction in political aspirations of an independent Karenni State. Putting it another way, as others have joined the original, politicised, pro-KNPP core of the refugee population, they have provided a means to widen the KNPP constituency. In general, the spreading of nationalist ideology and ideas of common pan-Karenni bonds is part of a wider dynamic system in which the refugee community is fertile ground for the propagation of ideas. But the same community is also a pool from which

are drawn both people to serve the system and the reason for the system to exist. The dissemination of nationalist ideology is a self-sustaining, self-serving, dynamic process. The inculcation of a sense of belonging and duty, or identity and purpose, amongst the refugee population, and especially amongst young people, particularly through education, is an important part of this process. Education and nationalism are both intimate parts not only of shaping and reinforcing what it means to be Karenni, but also of coping with being a refugee.

Worldwide, education, outside contacts and transnational solidarities,²⁵ media and new media, and forced migration itself are all pathways of multidirectional cultural influence between the local, regional and global. Members of refugee populations such as the Karenni, may perceive themselves as liminal, marginal to a globally hegemonic system of nation-states (Dudley 2000), and this self-image may help to initiate and maintain nationalist movements such as the KNPP: that is, nationalist movements often comprise people who rather than challenging the order of nation-states to which they perceive themselves as not properly belonging, seek to join or reproduce it. At the same time, forced migrations like that of the Karenni bring together in the relatively narrow confines of refugee camps, etc., ethnically and otherwise heterogeneous populations, the diversity of which for most first generation migrants has little or no precedent in pre-migration life. Exile often provides a context for the strengthening and transformation of collective identity, as is clearly happening for the Karenni refugee population. Simultaneously, identity is also continually modified by the increasing engagements with a wider world that exile often brings. Fascination with Western media and personal images amongst young Karenni, for example, draws them into a wider world from which their present liminality as refugees seems to separate them, making more porous the boundary around them, and yet at the same time accentuates the demarcation between refugee and non-refugee, poor and rich.

In sum, displacement and dynamics of ethnicity and nationalism are interwoven with each other and with knowledge of and attitudes towards the wider world in order continually to re-shape what Karenni-ness is. As ‘symbolic universes merge ... people become more similar in terms of practices and representations ... [and they become] more liable than before to reflect upon and objectify their way of life as *a culture* or *a tradition* ... [thus becoming] *a people* with an abstract sense of community and a presumed shared history’ (Eriksen 1993: 85, emphases original; c.f. Chit Laing this volume). Presumed or not, imagined or not, the Karenni of the refugee camps in Thailand are indeed focused upon becoming ‘a people’.

²⁵ Transnational solidarities in the form of NGOs and more informal networks provide valuable support and advocacy for many groups. In particular, ‘a much sought after strategy for transnational political networks’ is the co-opting of NGOs ‘since such organizations facilitate contact with levels of policy making which are otherwise difficult to gain access to for a diaspora organization’ (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001: 16). Østergaard-Nielsen gives the examples of Andean indigenous and Kurdish political organizations, and although not discussed in this chapter it is a strategy common to many other groups as well, including the Karenni (Dudley 2000), who appeal to and depend upon the lobbying of the United Nations and other international organisations by organisations such as the Unrepresented People’s Organization (UNPO). But transnational social movements and international organisations do not just function as conduits, supports and targets for lobbying. They also ‘provide a normative frame of reference for those [groups] advocating democratization and human rights agendas’ (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001: 16) and, one might add, a normative frame of opposition for those groups advocating rather different agendas. In the case of pro-human rights/pro-democracy groups such as the Burmese pro-democracy movement, for example, they increasingly take on the language and values of international human rights rhetoric in order both to explain their cause to a wider international audience and thereby to attempt to garner additional international support of various kinds (Dudley forthcoming [a]).

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