The Dynamics of Karen National Union Political and Military Development: Reflecting the Shifting Landscape

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PETER JAMES BJORKLUND

School of Arts, Histories and Cultures
The University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester

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Appendices

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AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
BERG	Burma
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DAB	Democratic Alliance of Burma
DKBA	Democratic Kayin/Karen Buddhist Army
ENC	Ethnic Nationalities Council
FBR	Free Burma Rangers
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KNU	Karen National Union
KNU [OSH]	Karen National Union [Office of Supreme Headquarters]
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNUP	Karenni National United Party
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KRC	Karen Refugee Committee
KSNG	Karen Student Network Group
KTWG	Karen Teacher Working Group
KWAT	Kachin Women's Association of Thailand
KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
KYO	Karen Youth Organisation
NCUB	National Council of the Union of Burma
NDF	National Democratic Front
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation

NLD	National League for Democracy
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SSA [S]	Shan State Army [South]
SOE	Special Operations Executive
SWAN	Shan Women's Action Group
TBBC	Thailand Burma Border Consortium
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
WLB	Women's League of Burma

Abstract

This thesis investigates the themes and society of displaced Karen identity on the border between Burma and Thailand. The impact of the authoritarian military rule in Burma cannot be underestimated. The government exercises tremendous power to shape the social and economic environment. They determine whether a civil-society is prosperous and functions in an appropriate manner. Governments are also responsible for societal support and protection of all its populace. The population of Burma is essentially isolated from the global society through regime censorship and restrictions. The inter-linking spiral of humanitarian emergencies and continued to escalate, these include refugee, internally displaced people, the spread of preventable diseases and the illicit narcotic production.

Recently, the Western governments had solidified their position towards the military junta resulting in a stalemate of diplomatic interaction, with ultimately the people of Burma being the victims of such actions. Current realities in the global sphere present the powerful Western Nations an opportunity for a change in perspective. US policy recommendations include a greater dialogue with the junta and the outcome of the election is seen as crucial to fostering better relation. It is imperative that long-essential reforms are undertaken if Burma if is to achieve lasting peace.

The international community must develop coherent and focused policies towards Burma and make conflict resolution a priority. Humanitarian aid and displaced refugee support will play a vital role, and in the 21st Century regional dimensions must be addressed. The

challenges of nation-state building must be made in conjunction with political, humanitarian, and economic issues.

Declaration

I declare that no portion of this work referred to in the dissertation has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institution of learning.

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Acknowledgments

This thesis arose from disquiet over the years on a conflict that has spanned over sixty years; it has affected family, friends and relatives. I would like to thank Dr. Ana Carden-Coyne for her guidance, encouragement and patience to keep in focus and put my thoughts coherently together. I would also thank my wife Wendy who has supported and enthusiastically motivated me in pursuit of highlighting the Karen refugee situation. They have enabled me to read and research this project in a manner appropriate for the subject.

I am also indebted to my father-in-law Bruce Mortimer David Humphrey-Taylor, born of Anglo-Karen parents in Toungoo, Burma in 1928. He was, over the years, the person who offered valuable information and advice, on numerous occasions we engaged in lengthy discourses regarding the Karen. Over the last thirty years I have visited Burma and Thailand on frequent occasions, and on a visit to Kawthoolei in 1988, with Bruce and my son Kristen, who was twelve, we were accorded with generous hospitality and lasting generosity.
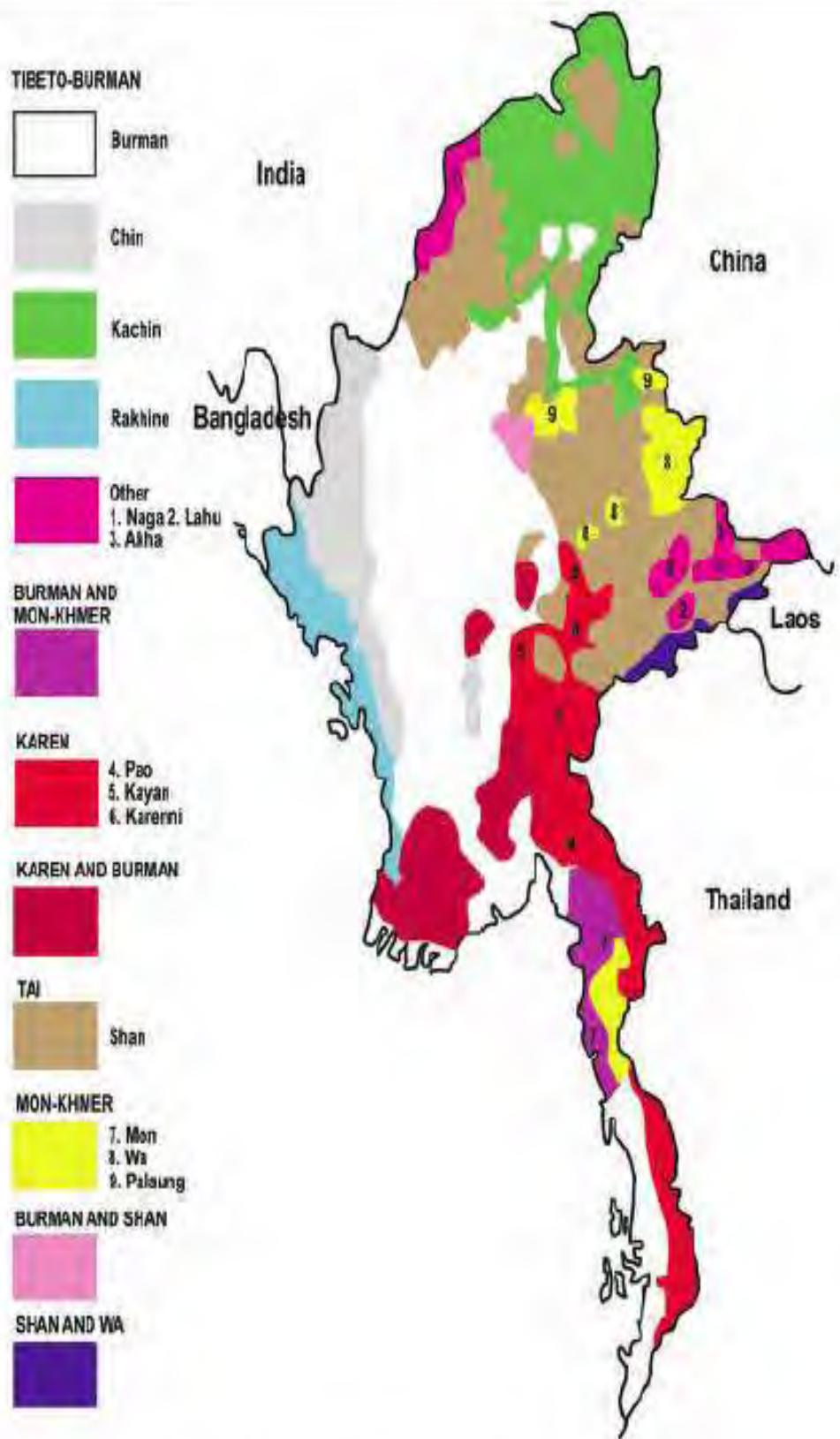
My special thanks go to all the Karen people who over the years have been welcoming and have become my extended family. I would also like to give thanks to President Saw Tamla Baw for his valued comments and dialogue also Naw Zipporah Sein for all her hard work and information the last two years. I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable

assistance over the years of the British Library and the School of Oriental and African Studies in London where most of the secondary research was performed.

In conclusion I would like to dedicate this paper to Mary Ohn for her perceptive insights, Padoh Mahn Shar and Padoh Saw Ba Thein who all sadly have passed away but their warmth and humanity are still with us.

Map 1
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Major Ethnic Groups of Burma

TIBETO-BURMAN

- Burman
- Chin
- Kachin
- Rakhine
- Other
  1. Naga 2. Lahu
  3. Akha

BURMAN AND MON-KHMER

KAREN
4. Pao
5. Kayan
6. Karenni

KAREN AND BURMAN

TAI
- Shan

MON-KHMER
7. Mon
8. Wa
9. Palaung

BURMAN AND SHAN

SHAN AND WA

Based on: Martin Smith: Burma - Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity

Introduction

Geography

Burma/Myanmar is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia and with a population of approximately 55 million is one of the least densely populated and the most ethnically diverse countries in the region. Burma is also a diverse country in terms of culture, language and ethnic composition.[1] There are no reliable census figures to indicate a clear account of the true extent of this diversity in linguistic groups and 'National Races', official government records and categorisations fail to indicate the complexity that prevents a simplistic rendering of what ethnic culture or ethnicity might mean in Burma today.[2]

Today Burma is officially known as the Union of Myanmar and was adopted in 1989 when the ruling military body, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) launched and defined its basis for the nationalism and 'Burmanisation', the decision was to Burmanise states, cities, towns and street names across the country. The stated objectives were to divest the country of vestiges of colonialism, the change also intended to express a new sense of national unity around which all ethnic interest groups should rally in the aftermath of the violent suppression of the pro-democracy uprisings of 1988. The name 'Burma', the military regime argued, was not only synonymous with colonial inheritance it also reflected the worst aspects of colonial rule in that it implied the distinctiveness of the

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[1] The term Burma will be used throughout this thesis apart from contexts where a specific pertinence to a post-1989 situation needs to be emphasised, in which case the term Myanmar or Myanmar/Burma will be used. The term 'Burmese' is a political term that includes all inhabitants of the country. Burman or Bamar is an ethnic term to identify the dominant ethnic group in Burma now Myanmar.

[2] Mikael Gravers, 'Ethnicity against State – the State against Ethnic Diversity', in Mikael Gravers (ed.), *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (Copenhagen, 2007), pp. 4-5.

ethnic Burman polity and its exclusivity from others. The contention was that the name 'Myanmar' reflected a more expansive-looking, modern nationalist entity that was respectful towards non-Burman/Bamar peoples within its borders and did not seek to be divisive. Indeed the name 'Myanmar' was a Burman/Bamar term, that the place and street names were now 'Burmanised' rather than the local ethnic minority language, convinced the many non-Burman people that such a dusting off of the past reflected nothing more than a further act of cultural aggrandisement by the predominant Burman-Burmese centre of its 'Others Within'.[3]

Burma constitutes 135 'National Races', the map on page 10 refers to the ethnic distribution of the eight 'big races' of ethnic categories – the Burman, the Mon, the Shan, the Karen, the Kayah or Karenni, the Kachin, the Chin and the Rakhine or Arakanese. These were also employed as markers during the British colonial rule to identify each group. Ultimately these kinds of categorisations, derived from historically incomplete research such as the flawed findings of the British colonial Census and Linguistic Survey of India tell us nothing other than this is a multifaceted area of research to be involved in.

Background and Objectives

The complexity of Burma's ethnic political conundrum poses the writer a particularly challenging subject when looking for clarity in the bewildering array of armed groups, political parties against the backdrop of decades of civil war, insurgency, poverty, drugs and the Burmese military state-building with its attendant human right violations. The aim and intention of this research is to inject greater clarity into the complexity and detail of the

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[3] Thongchai Winichakul, '"The Quest for "Siwilai": A Geographical Discourse of Civilised Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Siam'*, The Journal of Asian Studies,* Vol. 59, No. 3. (August, 2000), pp. 528-529. Winichakul argues that the Siamese elite emulated the colonial construction of 'others', but unlike the colonial otherness included their own subjects, hence the others within.

debates over ethnic politics and the role of the Karen National Union. The role of Karen women in civil society and organisations in the ethnic areas both within Burma and in Thailand is explored. Its aim is to also investigate the factors that inhibit and contribute to the development and self-determination of the Karen community. Evidence over the last few decades has shown that substantial proportions of Karen have been displaced and segregated within Burma causing large scale refugee migration to the Thai border areas. Research for this thesis was conducted both within Burma and in the Karen refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border. Primary sources that are utilised are author interviews with senior party members of the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), displaced Karen, local newspapers and KNU documents held at the archives in Mae Sot, Thailand.

Burma has long been dominated by two inter linking conflicts: the struggle for a democratically accountable government and the struggles for self-determination of the non-Burman ethnic communities. According to Burma Campaign Group and others, it is a nation in crisis, it faces endemic poverty severe economic problems and serious social welfare challenges in conjunction with health problems, all within the context of significant international isolation particularly amongst western nations.[4] Burma/Myanmar has suffered continuous armed ethnic conflict since independence in 1948. A series of ceasefires since the late 1980s has significantly reduced the levels of violence across Burma, but the legacies of the hostilities run deep, and the achievement of sustainable peace and security for the populace remains a major challenge in the twenty-first century.

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[4] The Open Society Institute and Soros Foundation Network: *Burma Project Southeast Asia Institute*: see website http://www2.soros.org/burma/CRISIS/index.html .See also www.burmacampaign.org.uk . The Burma Campaign Group also cites the ongoing and widespread systematic abuses by the military in Burma.

The gradual British occupation of Burma during the nineteenth century enabled the colonial authorities to separate Burma into 'Ministerial Burma' and the 'Frontier Areas' (the mountains surrounding the plains). With the expansion of Christian missions, many Karens converted to Christianity and ties between the Karen ethnic minority and British colonial rulers were reinforced. Although during Burman rule, all minority ethnic groups had been persecuted, the Karen were particularly victimized by them in marked contrast to other ethnic groups.

The majority of Karen people considered the British as liberators with many Karen joining the British army in the nineteenth century to serve as guides and soldiers during the First and Second Anglo-Burman Wars. Dorothy Woodman cites that in retaliation for the support given to the British in 1852, Karen villages within a fifty-mile radius of Rangoon were destroyed. During the colonial period the British administration granted privileges and senior administrative positions to the minority Frontier Areas people. Karen levies were used to suppress various Burman disturbances in the mid-1920s and the Saya San rebellion between 1930 and 1932. The British separation of minorities fostered exclusiveness, and created the mechanism for ethnic fragmentation. The Burman social order was not a mutual concurrence of its regions, rather it was one which was dictated and maintained by superior force. The seeds of destruction and resentment between the Burman and the ethnic minorities existed several centuries prior to British colonialism.

The Second World War widened the traditional gap between the Burman nationalists and the Karens, the British especially found the idea of a multi-party Burma particularly difficult to convince the ethnic groups to join the Union of Burma which the nationalist Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) were proposing. The Karen, Kachin, Shan and Chin ethnic groups had considerably aided the British during the war and the Karen in

particular had harboured many British Special Operations Executive (SOE) officers during the Japanese occupation to assist in sabotage and the recruitment of levies to undertake missions behind enemy lines. The Karens were particularly reluctant to see British and Burman plans for an independent Burma in which they would be subsidiary partners in a national government. The Karen sent a Goodwill Mission to Britain and presented a memorial to the House of Commons in 1946, present were prominent Karen leaders they proposed a new state called *Kaw Thoo Lay* (now Kawthoolei) and for it not to be part of the territory envisioned for an independent Burma.[5]

The British were the catalyst that negated the existing value system of Burma. The historical pattern of the Burman-Karen violent interaction already existed and was embedded in each psyche. The British merely encouraged the minorities to breech their subservient role through bestowing protection in social and governmental institutions. The Burmans lost their national control of Burma and with the ascendant Karen occupying senior positions of power, inevitably tensions and conflict was the only outcome. The demise of British Power combined with Japanese expansionist ideals served to divide the Burman and Karen interests even further.

The intention of the review is to locate the literature on Burma and the Karen and limitations of the research with interlinking concepts of conflict theory, identity and ethnicity.

The first chapter of this dissertation will provide an overview of the history of KNU political and military landscape of conflict in Burma. It will provide some of the principle

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[5] *Kaw Thoo Lei* can be translated as either "the land of the *thoo lei* plant" i.e. 'flowerland' or "the land that burned black" i.e. the slash and burn farming method or by warfare.

issues that have divided Burma and Karen and will explore the rise of authoritarianism under the military regimes. It will also briefly examine the causes, dynamics and theory of ongoing conflict that have structured over half-century of insurgency between the predominant Burman and Karen ethnic minority. Also identified are the dynamics of state counter-insurgency measures which affected the political structure of the KNU organisation. Its intention is to inject greater clarity into the complexity and detail of the debates over ethnic politics and the role of the re-configured KNU.

In the second chapter, the concept that is explored is the 'shifting' Karen identity and ethnicity with the translocation to the borderlands. It offers a brief exploration of the notion of Karen self-determination which has sometimes served and reflected both the military-state and Karen strategies. It offers an examination of the roles played by the displaced Karen civil-communities and their support networks in shaping our understanding of the ongoing conflict and human-rights abuses in Burma. Analyses of the 'other' Karen population within and outside Burma's borders, focusing on the plight of the displaced peoples and the influence and impact roles local agencies have on their internal communities. At present there is a lack of understanding of these 'other' Karen, although some ethnographic work has been compiled by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG).[6]

The concepts that are explored and interlinked within this thesis are displaced Karen identity, and the political dynamics of authoritarianism with reference to the military government of Burma. Finally, conclusions are drawn alongside possible methods and

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[6] The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) is a small and independent group documenting the human rights situation of people in rural Burma by working directly with rural villagers who are suffering abuses such as forced labour, systematic destruction of villages and crops, forced relocation, extortion, looting, arbitrary detention, torture, sexual assault and summary executions.

ways to proceed to alleviate the continuation of the exclusion and displacement of the Karen communities.

Literature Review

This section examines the relevant literature and background to the development of the KNU and the Burmese military authority. The intention of the review is to locate the literature on Burma and scrutinize the ongoing ethnic conflict within it. It will support and develop a framework through which to examine the current political and military structures of the KNU both within Burma and on the Thai border. Indicators that limit the research project are explained. Current ethnic conflict theory is briefly considered to underpin and support the main thrust of the argument that the KNU organisation is in a different phase in its developmental evolution. It will examine interlinking concepts of identity and ethnicity that have impacted on the Karen National Union since inception in 1947. One of the contributions that this paper will address is to re-focus work from the recent descriptions of stagnation and stasis within the KNU and to examine its re-configuration on local level and recent non-elite political action.

Literature on Burma is relatively sparse compared to collections on other countries. Burma has not enjoyed a high profile in major academic scholarship works as constant to some other academic disciplines. The work is often based on knowledge of Burmese or one of Burma's main ethnic group languages, such as the Mon, Kachin, Shan, or Karen. Linguistic problems involved in studying Burma's political disputes probably obscure issues. Illustrative of the name taken for the country and majority population, the use of

Burma or Myanmar becomes an issue greater than its analytical value. The lack of accurate translation between the two languages is often very difficult and the room for interpretation is open to agreement.[7]

Relying significantly on English-Language primary and secondary sources limits the scope of the research in this thesis. The classic colonial-era examination of Karen ethnicity has tended to focus on social characteristics such as language, culture and religion.[8] Although Cheesman notes that Karen identity can be challenging, he identifies that the Karen do not all share common traits.[9] Prominent among academics studying ethnicity in Burma have been Lieberman, Renard and Silverstein. Leiberman has challenged conventional understandings of historical Burman and Mon identities. Josef Silverstein was the first to 'identify the difficulties of governing Burma's diverse ethnic communities as one nation' as the central issue of Burma's troubled period. Renard has proposed that the defining characteristic of Karen identity is the conviction that one is Karen. This seems rather simplified and conceals the complexity of its point and I suggest that further enquiry relative to the translocation of the displaced Karen to the border-areas requires further examination. [10]

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[7] Robert H. Taylor, 'Finding the Political in Myanmar, a.k.a. Burma', *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies*, Vol. 39 No. 2. (June 2008), pp. 219-237.
[8] Ethnographic treatise on the Karen by the missionary Rev. Harry Ignatious Marshal, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study of Anthropology and Ethnology* (White Lotus Press, Bangkok, 1997. originally published in1922).
[9] Nick Cheesman, 'Seeing 'Karen' in the Union of Myanmar', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 3, No. 2. (September 2002). Cheesman analyses modern Karen ethnicity and draws on British colonial-era authors and reviews contemporary Myanmar (Burma) government policy on modern ethnic identity.
[10] Victor Leiberman, 'Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth Century Burma', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3. (1978). Ronald Renard, *Minorities in Burmese History* (London, 1988); Josef Silverstein, *Minority Problems in Burma since 1962*, (Singapore, 1981); Josef Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity* (New Brunswick, 1980).

Lack of knowledge and understanding of Karen communities within Burma is understandable, given that scholarly access has been severely limited for much of the last half-century. It is the view from Thailand that has predominantly filtered through the KNU, the Karen churches and other associated networks and these are the aspects which will be explored later in this thesis. Karen self-determination has been explored by few scholars however notable among those that have contributed to the subject include Fong, Smith and Thawnghmung.[11] Although Thawnghmung's study focuses on the various types and stages of conflict that have occurred between the KNU and the successive Burmese governments it suggests further enquiry of the displaced Karen is required. Fong frames Karen self-determination as a developmental issue by employing Rodolfo Stavenhagen's ethno-development model. It is a sociological term which places *culture* at the centre of rural development planning. Although a useful device, Karen culture and identity can be difficult to establish as Rajah, South and Womack have written. I suggest that a 'hybridisation' of identity has take place and that Karen refugee culture is becoming bifurcated with its adoptive state. [12]

Outside the domain of Anglophone literature there are few scholarly articles published in Burmese or Karen with reference to Karen history and culture. Lists of Karennic writing can be found in Mahn Lin Myat Kyaw's books, added to which U Pon Myint's work on

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[11] Jack Fong, *Revolution as Development: The Karen Self-determination Struggle Against Ethnocracy (1949-2004)* (Florida, 2008); Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, *The Karen Revolution in Burma: Diverse Voices, Uncertain Ends* (Washington, 2008); Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (New Jersey, 1999).

[12] Ananda Rajah, 'A 'nation of intent' in Burma: Karen ethno-nationalism, nationalism and narrations of nation' *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 15, No. 4. (2002) pp. 517-537; Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma*, (Abingdon, 2008); William Womack, unpublished PhD Thesis, *Literate Networks and the Production of Sgaw and Pwo Karen Writing in Burma, c. 1830-1930* (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2005); Rodolfo Stavenhagen, 'Ethnodevelopment: A neglected dimension in development thinking' in Raymond Anthorpe and Andras Krahl (eds.), *Development Studies: Critique and Renewal* (Leiden, 1986).

Karen Buddhist literature can be viewed as representative of the major writing on Karen culture and customs. Whilst language and literate ability combined with political association can play a limiting role upon the Western historian the cleavages they emphasize are defined by the network of literate production and distribution.[13]

Drawing upon a multitude of studies Horowitz' work provides a penetrating and authoritative critique of theories of ethnic conflict.[14] Although cogent the discussions draw on a wealth of country case-studies. Although it has limitations in its deep-mining of Burma's ethnic conflict, it does however provide a foundation in which to build on. On the theory of ethnic conflict, Caselli and Coleman create a model of greed-motivated conflict to explain the prevalence of ethnic tension. Individuals organize into groups that compete over a country's wealth. Conflict escalates when losers find it difficult to switch alliances and capture the spoils of war, as is the case when groups organize according to racial or ethnic identities.[15] By comparison Wolff's work makes faint reference to the Karen National Union in his study; although it has proved useful in its analysis of ethnic conflict it requires further detail to support his theory. [16]

Post-independence political and historical studies of Burma are marked by several sociological characteristics. Due to the lack of access to many forms of information and published material, students of Burma adapted and borrowed data and theories from other disciplines to supplement their traditional understanding. Burma studies after 1988

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[13] Mahn Lin Myat Kyaw, *A Compendium of Knowledge on Karen Customs* (Rangoon, 1980); U Pon Myint, *Essential Karen Customs* (Rangoon, 1970).
[14] Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (London, 2000 second edition).
[15] Francesco Casselli and Wilbur John Coleman II, 'On the Theory of Ethnic Conflict' *Working Paper*, (Harvard University. 2002).
[16] Stefan Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict* (Oxford, 2006).

increased with the advent of a new military government with more open economic policy and the rise of an indigenous opposition.

Important contributions have also been made to Burma political studies by observers outside the formal confines of academia. Journalists and freelance authors like Martin Smith, Bertil Lintner and recently Ashley South have not only provided valuable information and understanding about Burma's political situation and the KNU, particularly since the elections of 1988. They have also written these works based on extensive field work and direct personal experience.[17] Against this background this thesis will contribute to the debate on the dynamics surrounding Karen ethnic involvement in political processes that have shifted significantly since the inception of the KNU in 1948.

Smith's recent book on insurgency and ethnicity in Burma describes the multiplicity of insurgent groups, driven underground since 1949 by the exclusionary politics. It is invaluable in gaining an understanding of the complexities and difficulties the ethnic minorities have confronted in having to reach an acceptable solution to the ongoing conflict. Smith's work illustrates what Eisenstadt calls the 'breakdowns of modernization' where there is continuous internal warfare and conflict between different groups within Burmese society.[18] This thesis draws on Smith work to re-orientate the Karen geographical and political cleavage and present it in new light employing updated KNU historiography and testimonies. Furthermore, Smith focuses on conflict and ethnic identity collating available evidence which lends itself to no definitive conclusion, leaving

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[17] Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (1999); Bertil Linter, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948*, (Chiang Mai, 1999); Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma* (London, 2008).

[18] S. N. Eisenstadt, 'Breakdowns of Modernization' *Economic Development and Cultural Change* Vol. XII, No. 4. (July 1964), pp. 245-367. He said of Burma in the 1960s that it reverted to behaving in a 'pre-colonial regal' manner.

important issues open. His aim appears to have been to produce a narrative and reference rather than an academic study. However, Lintner goes a step further incorporating studies of the communist insurgency. He alone stresses the symbiotic relationship between the drugs trade and the Burmese military.

Mary Callahan supports Robert Taylor's analysis that challenged the prevailing explanations of Burmese culture, exeptionalism and historical rupture.[19] Taylor's detailed analytical approach of intra-army developments and the impact of warfare on state formation argues that the institution that had the greatest impact on postcolonial Burma was the military machine. The body of total work in the field of security studies within Burma remains diminutive, and as trans-national issues have become more significant, the definition of security has expanded giving greater attention in Burma to include human security problems. One of the few Burmese academics to venture in this sphere is Maung Aung Myoe his work studies the rationales and strategy behind the force and its modernization programme and it examines the military capabilities of the Tatmadaw in the twenty first century.[20] Andrew Selth has number of works that examine Burma's place in the contemporary strategic environment. Selth provides detailed and meticulous exploration of the Tatmadaw presenting highly detailed chapters, a contestable omission which this thesis will address is the wide spread human rights abuses by the military perpetrated during counter-insurgency campaigns against the Karen people.[21]

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[19] Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Cornell University, 2003), pp. 7-8. Callahan's book is primarily a historical narrative but its moorings are deeper, Callahan seeks to explain why the military have been so durable since 1962.

[20] Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* (Singapore, 2009).

[21] Andrew Selth, *Burma's Armed Forces: Power without Glory* (Connecticut, 2002), and Selth, *Transforming the Tatmadaw: The Burmese Armed Forces Since 1988*, (Canberra, 1996). He has written a substantial number of papers and monographs on Burma's

Callahan has contributed significantly to the understanding and debate about the early days of the Tatmadaw –the armed forces in Burma focusing on their role in state building. Recent contributions by Hlaing, Thawnghmung, Myoe and Peterson have each examined different aspects of Burma's broad range of political and ethnic self-determination issues.[22]

Chapter 1:

Kawthoolei Dreams and Nightmares: KNU Pathways to the Present

Karen ethno-nationalism and insurgency

Ethno-nationalism is the identity of an individual to their ethnic or national group. Ethnic identities are often seen as extended kinship identities giving a sense of a wider 'family' which contributes to a sense of belonging. It could be argued that grouping the Karen as an ethnic group contributed to a divisive Burmese community. Establishing an articulated Karen identity and a sense of commitment amongst all the different religious sub-groups is an ongoing challenge to Karen leaders and organisations going back to 1880.[23] Since its inception in 1948 the KNU has faced internal diversity problems, and the KNU elite have continuously tried to promote a unified image and a singular pan-Karen identity. The

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military. See http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs07/Selth-Burmapubs3.pdf for a comprehensive list.

[22] Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 'Burma: Civil society skirting regime rules' in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Civil society and political change in Asia: Expanding and contracting democratic space* (Stanford, 2004), pp. 389-418; Muang Aung Myoe, *Military Doctrine and strategy in Myanmar: A historical perspective* (Canberra, 1999); Morten B. Pederson, *Promoting human rights in Burma: A critique of western sanctions policy* (Lanham, 2007).

[23] In 1881, during the British colonial era, the Karen National Association was established to promote Karen identity. The Karen leader Sir San C Po made the first call for an independent Karen state in 1928.

construction of Karen ethnic identity is explored in the next chapter but it should be borne in mind that the themes are interlinked and should be viewed as an organic multi-dimension premise. The Karen nationalist aspirations and history are as much a consequence of intra-ethnic conflict as conflict between the Karen and the military government. At the zenith of its power in 1990s, the KNU was arguably the most influential and powerful political-military organisations opposing the military government in Burma.

By the mid 1990s the KNU and opposition alliance headquarters at Mannerplaw was an alternative axis of power to the Rangoon government. The Karen rebel state of Kawthoolei became the focus of international attention following the Tatmadaw's brutal suppression of the emerging democracy movement in 1988.[24] Mannerplaw on the Thai-Burmese became the host for virtually all the Burmese opposition and its fall to the renamed government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), Tatmadaw army and the breakaway Democratic Kayin/Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) in January 1995 symbolised the end of significant Karen military presence on Burma's soil.[25] By late 2008, however the Karen military operation had been substantially stunted and a change in KNU policy has focused the world's attention to the upsurge in refugees to Thailand. To understand this dramatic and seismic shift, an examination of the Karen, the KNU and counter-insurgency role of the Tatmadaw is required.

The post-war period saw the disintegration of the British empires through Africa and Asia in the face of nationalist movements, which had drawn heavily on the ideal of self-

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[24] *Kaw Thoo Lei* can be translated as either "the land of the *thoo lei* plant" i.e. 'flowerland' or "the land that burned black" i.e. the slash and burn farming method or by warfare.
[25] The Karen Free State was proclaimed by the first KNU President, Saw Baw U Gyi in June 1949, *Mannerplaw* means 'Field of Victory' in Karen.

determination. Burma is a leading example of a colonial authority choosing to ignore minority ethnic considerations prior to independence. A notorious legacy of colonisers was the tendency to ignore ethnic, linguistic, or other 'national' considerations.[26] Burma is a perfect example of such a situation where a political eruption was left by the colonial administration upon independence. It is within the development of consciousness in post-colonial conditions that new and pro-active Karen organisations emerged.

The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) was formed on the back of the KNU in 1949 as the military wing of its political organisation. Ethnic polarisation between the Burman and Karen communities significantly increased after independence in 1948 when on Christmas Eve, Tatmadaw soldiers massacred Christian Karen in a church at Mergui. Within months increased killings of Karen civilians near Rangoon and in the Delta region took place. This escalated into a fully fledged civil-war and by early 1949 the Karen were outside Rangoon at Insein where they fought for 112 days and were forced to withdraw to Papun. Nevertheless, they still controlled substantial amounts of territory throughout Karen state and Tenasserim division near the border with Thailand.[27] In the ensuing decade the KNU insurgency assumed a leftist tendency under the Karen National United Party (KNUP), forging an alliance with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in 1952.

The Karen rebellion gained momentum and a logic of its own in the 1960s and 70s, for many supporters and observers the self-determination model of KNU nation-building seemed to be the only expression of Karen nationalism in Burma. Following the military coup in 1962 the KNUP/KNU and other insurgent groups received a multitude of new

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[26] Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda' in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire* (London, 1997), pp. 3-4.
[27] Author interview with Mika Rolly, Mae Sot, Thailand. March 2004; Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 262.

recruits from the government controlled areas of Burma. The disastrous economic agenda of Ne Win's 'Burmese way to socialism' provided the insurgents with new sources of finance, as Burma's economy collapsed with urban markets becoming dependant on smuggled goods brought through the Karen held territory of Kawthoolei bordering Thailand. The KNU were heavily dependant on teak-extraction activities to finance their struggle against the Burmese military junta. This permitted the KNU to prosper and build up a well-equipped army and increase their soldier numbers.[28]

Recent field research and evidence that I am exploring indicate that not only was the economic and social structure of Kawthoolei based on Teak extraction from the jungle, it was an integral part of the assertion of Karen sovereignty. Forest use and its ongoing management has been an integral and important part of the Karen rural life. Karen trained, captured and owned many elephants and their reputation as *mahouts* prompted the colonial British to use them extensively. The Karen are traditionally rural dwellers, and their forest use varied from site to site depending on ecological and social conditions. Even today, my research indicates that where shifting cultivation is practised, the forest is still burned to provide fertiliser for crops and the forest allowed to re-grow until favourable conditions were right again. The forest provides the Karen with fruit, fuel, building material, and medicinal products. It is not surprising that that the well developed links with the jungle form an integral part of Karen attempts to establish a Karen state. Its application was associated with livelihood, security and their identity.[29] The jungle became crucial to Karen military efforts, as the retreat to the remoter border areas from the Tatmadaw

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[28] Ray Bryant, 'Kawtholei and Teak: Karen Forest Management on the Thai-Burmese Border' *Watershed* Vol. 3, No.1. (Autumn 1997), p. 19.
[29] Kaw Htoo Lei, *KNU Forest Department Policy Document*, (April 2009).

increased the KNLA have strategically used the jungle and improvised materials to out-manoeuvre the opposing superior force.[30]

In 1975 following the dissolution of the leftist pro-communist KNUP, two Karen military factions reunited under the banner of the KNU to become known as the KNLA. It was led by the charismatic leader, General Saw Bo Mya, a Pwo Karen field commander, staunch Seventh Day Adventist Christian and strong anti-communist who became a key asset in Thai and US strategic manoeuvring in the region. The long-established KNU commander who was active from the early days in the Karen insurgency was born in the Papun Hills, and had served with the British towards the end of the Second World War. Bo Mya ruled the KNU, as President from the 1970s through to the 1990s, suppressing any criticism or dissent as the defence of the highly lucrative trade routes to Burma became more significant to Karen economics.[31] His authoritarian and personalised rule was admired and despised by many of the 'ordinary' Karen both within Burma and in the border refugee camps. Although he ensured that economic opportunity was concentrated in a minority of elite Karen rather than controlled by the *de facto* Karen state. Bo Mya was instrumental in executing the 'gentleman's agreement' ceasefire with the SPDC in 2003; although he acted without the authority of the KNU leadership they endorsed his dramatic actions. Evidence also suggests that this was move was endorsed by Karen communities in Kawkareik Township, Burma. [32]

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[30] In a KNLA Field Manual (1985), the use of 'home-made' landmines and other improvised explosive devices are mentioned. Respondents wish to remain anonymous and limit the document's publication.

[31] Saw Bo Mya, *Memoirs on my true past experiences that I wish to disclose* (KNU, Kaw Thoo Lei. 2002), pp. 127-131; Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict* (Abingdon, 2008), pp. 39-40.

[32] *The Nation* (Daily Newspaper, Bangkok) and *The New Light Of Myanmar* (government controlled newspaper, Rangoon) October, 2004. Photograph and article in these newspapers showing an assembly of over 1,000 Karen people supporting the end of the

Conceptualizing the dynamics of conflict and insurgency in Burma

The exploration of conflict theory is important for understanding the nature of political conflict itself within Burma. This segment will approach the issue of Karen participation in Burma's insurgent war. I suggest that by placing the KNU rebellion/insurgency as a catalyst, the outcome for the KNU was a more decisive and determined political party that was supported by a military organisation. The conceptualisation of civil war and insurgency as contests over sovereignty in a specified territory can be problematic especially in relation to Burma. What is considered civil war and is coded as a single ongoing war since 1948 by many analysts and scholars including Fearon and Laitin, others have adopted the 'conflict' or 'insurgency' as an analytical unit to codify the ongoing violence. Although it could be suggested within limitations that contested 'space' means the right to monopolise violence in a specified or defined territory or 'space'.[33]

Conflict engenders interaction at a more intense level than that of competition, conflict occurs when competing groups' goals, needs, objectives or values clash and violence is a resultant action. Theories of conflict have added an important dimension to our understanding of conflict. They place complex situations into workable models that stand up to empirical analysis. Early political theorists such as Sun Tsu-Tung, Machiavelli and Von Clausewitz chose power as a particular component of group conflict and violent interaction. Modern conflict theory was inspired by Karl Marx where he proposes that conflict exists in many forms of power. It can be constituted in many ways, that of military, economic, political and cultural. The power base of the Burmese regime is built

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armed conflict. Numerous are seen carrying makeshift banners calling for an 'end to the bloody war' and proclaiming 'we want peace'.

[33] James D. Fearon and David Laitin, 'Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War', *American Political Science Review* 97 (February, 2003), pp. 75-90; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 289-90, 412.

entirely upon the Tatmadaw. Foucault agues that the modern form of deployment of state power consists of making its citizens believe that the exercise of such power is permanent.[34]

Field research that I recently conducted suggests that the unanimous perception within Burma is that informers are everywhere and the state 'sees' everything, it is certainly an accomplishment of the panoptic model of state power. But more than this it is the belief by ordinary people that it is the omnipresence and hence the omnipotence of the regime that pervades through society.[35] In the surreal landscapes of urban Burma, power becomes spatialized through the body – not just by regulating bodies in space during periods of urban warfare – but also the treatments of real people as things without rights otherwise accorded to human beings, as Foucault has written,

> in modernity political power increasingly becomes a matter of regimenting the circulation of bodies in time and space in a matter analogous to things

The most common assumption is that conflict stems from group competition and the pursuit of power and resources. In the Karen case study, ethnic tensions and exemption from control of territory were the driving factors of the ethnic conflict.[36]

Clausewitz is typically interpreted as saying that it is the violence of the means which distinguishes war from politics, in his own words

> We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means[37]

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[34] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1979), p. 201.
[35] Author field visit to Burma/Myanmar 2001 and 2004.
[36] Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, p. 5.
[37] Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832, translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton, 1993. revised edition), p. 99.

The distinction between war and violence can be distinguished as a reference to a public-private dichotomy. When violence is used towards some public or political goal it is war, when it is 'rioting' or 'civil disobedience' then it could be seen as an expression of an underlying political grievance, even when the participants do not share similar motivations. War is an interaction of organised protagonists to violence in interstate conflict. However it could be argued that James Scott's ground breaking research has demonstrated the frequency of everyday forms of resistance and that in the absence of violence, conflict can be ever present.[38]

However, to conceptualize the dynamics of the insurgency in Burma we need to define its parameters. Insurgency can be defined as an 'organized rebellion aimed at overthrowing a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict'.[39] Conflicts where rebel organisations control territory within the contested state in which they are conducting violence can be construed as an insurgent war. However, in supporting Theda Skocpol's premise, Saleheyan's estimates that 55 per cent of insurgent wars are carried out by rebel organisations that operate from cross-border territorial bases. Certainly, in Burma's case several ethnic organisations including the Karen operate from external bases whether they are in China or Thailand.[40] Consequently, in recent times the KNU Executive Committee call their resistance areas 'revolutionary areas' and most Karen and KNU members reject the term 'insurgent' and 'rebel' as being pejorative. It implies that

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[38] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale, 1985), and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (Yale, 1990).
[39] Definition extracted from Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, (Oxford, 2008).
[40] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolution: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge, 1979); Idean Salehyan, 'Transnational Rebels: Neighboring States as Sanctuary for Rebel Groups' *World Politics,* 59. (January 2007), pp. 217-42.

their struggles are unlawful, which in turn is problematic for a dictatorship nation-state to claim the lawfulness of their displacement of Karen people.[41]

Charles King's *Benefits of War Theory* provides a compelling argument and response as to why Burma's insurgent war has been durable, protracted and coalesced into an intractable internal conflict. King's theory offers a rational choice answer as to why this insurgent war has continued despite large loss of lives and resources by all protagonists. *The Benefits of War Theory* theorises that wars continue because many of the key actors benefit politically and financially from the ongoing aggression. In Burma's case, to support its expanding military machine, the government spends over fifty percent of its annual budget on its military arsenal despite there being no external enemies or threats. Most of Burma's ethnic minority resistance groups have individually and cooperatively engaged in state-building exercises that have produced governing institutions and constitutions. Those that benefit include the leaders of all sides, state-neighbours, diaspora and the Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs).[42]

Drawing upon Donald Horowitz' ethnic conflict theory in the developing world provides a key component and motive for the Karen insurgency in Burma, that of cultural pluralism. The colonial imposed limitation of cross-cultural contacts exacerbated the tension between the majority Burman and Karen as well as other ethnic minorities. Another theorist of ethnic conflict who has contributed significantly to our understanding is Walker Connor. Whilst he suggests that observers often attribute ethno-national conflict to other, less salient elements such things as religion and economic deprivation may be important

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[41] Correspondence with KNU General Secretary Padoh Mahn Shar 2004, and subsequent supporting evidence from KNU President Saw Tamla Baw, December 2009.
[42] Charles King, 'The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States', *World Politics,* 53. (July 2001), pp. 524-552.

contributing factors to ethnic conflict, I suggest that it is the opposition of national

identities which define the conflict within Burma's ethnic minorities.[43]

State counter-insurgency measures and their impact on the KNU

The Tatmadaw, now has the second-largest military force in Southeast Asia (after

Vietnam) cited widely with an estimated 400,000 soldiers which has more than doubled

since 1988. Selth challenges this figure in his paper but few observers would counter his

revised figures.[44] The Tatmadaw continues to wage its counterinsurgency campaigns in

the eastern areas along the Burma-Thailand border where the KNLA/KNU remains active.

The Tatmadaw's counterinsurgency strategy, the *Pya Ley Pya* or the 'Four Cuts' strategy

(officially endorsed in 1968 and still in operation today) is designed to suppress internal

insurgency by cutting the insurgents off from their support systems, these include, funding,

food supplies, intelligence and recruits that are inherently linked to the Karen local civilian

population.[45]

The regime and the Tatmadaw equate the security of the nation-state in ideological terms

as '*national security*' this brand of state nationalism is based on the so-called proclamation

of 'Our Three Main National Causes'.[46] Underscoring these objectives the regime has

declared its intolerance of any opposition to this security ideology and uses symbolism and

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[43] Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, p, 135, refers to J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice* (London, 1948); Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, 1994).

[44] Andrew Selth 'Known Knowns and Known Unknowns: Measuring Myanmar's Military Capabilities' *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 31, No. 2. (2009), pp. 282-83.

[45] The *'Four Cuts'* strategy has been amply covered by numerous scholars amongst them Aung Myoe, 1999; Selth, 2002; Smith, 1991, 1994, 2002; KHRG, 1999; Amnesty International, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1997, 2002; Lang, 2002; and Mary Callahan, 2007.

[46] Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo, 1999), p. 67; Tin Maung Maung Than, 'Preoccupation with Regime Survival, National Unity, and Stability' in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.), *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideational Influences* (Stanford, 1998), pp. 390-416.

spectacles of power to reinforce its hegemony. Spectacles witnessed in Burma consist of military parades on Armed Forces Day and are re-enacted narratives of state power with enforced participation and witnessing that both naturalise and mythify state hegemony and dominance through combining the spectacle with political ideology. Strong Burmese cultural symbols such as the 'Chinthe' and 'Hintha' have become part of state power-supports what the Comaroffs have described as an 'emblematic struggle central to the process of producing hegemony'[47] Through the treatment of Burmese and Buddhist symbols the military regime and its organs of domination manipulate and politicise Burmese social conventions and relations, the junta thus impresses on the populace with the dominant ideology of military rule.

Evidence gathered supports the view that forced participation, which involves more than involuntary labour and mass rallies, is employed by the government in Burma. It includes compulsory attendance at all spectacles created by the regime. There seems to be several reasons why the Burmese 'go with the flow' of domination the pressure on collaboration is apparent at all levels of civil-society. It is part of a theme of respect, appeasement and reciprocity involving the functionality of kinship obligations. If the spectacle includes a 'national race' then it involves participation in 'ethnic dancing' or the demonstration of other ethnic skills that become commodities exchanged with the regime. Burmese people are thus regimented, mobilised and circulated as mobile signs of state hegemony through the various sites of military domination. This serves the dual function of promoting the

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[47] Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 25-31. The 'Chinthe' is a mythical winged lion of Buddhist legend famously coopted by the British Chindits in the Second Wold War. The 'Hinthe' is also a mythic beast, being a pheonix and appropriated by the Tatmadaw to situate its relevance.

myth of absolute state power and establishing control of urban and countryside 'space' by controlling the individuals through the re-configured landscapes of domination.[48]

The SPDC began a very effective policy of negotiating ceasefire offers with individual ethnic insurgent groups after the military coup in September 1988.[49] This created an opportunity to end ethnic conflicts that had endured since 1948 and has resulted in seventeen ethnic groups accepting the deal. In some of the remaining contested border areas, the Tatmadaw is conducting its counterinsurgency campaigns, including the relocation of hundreds of thousands of Karen villagers into areas under its control.[50] To date, the only major ethnic groups that are continuing armed struggle that have significant military strength are the KNU, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Shan State Army South (SSA[South]). Although these groups have formed a new alliance their aims in the last decade have largely been of a defensive nature.[51] The continuation of a few relatively low-level conflicts, mainly concentrated in Karen and Shan State could be seen in one sense, as being beneficial to the SPDC, providing justification for the continued expansion of the defence budget.

There is a constant level of factionalisation among the ethnic insurgent groups and the Tatmadaw encourage and support this manoeuvre as part of their counter-insurgency strategy. In some cases ethnic factions supporting negotiation separate from the main

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[48] Author field trip to Burma 2001 and 2004.

[49] The ceasefire accords are explored in depth by Zaw Oo and Win Min, 'Assessing Burma's Ceasefire Accords' *Policy Studies,* 39. (Southeast Asia), (Washington, 2007).

[50] Ongoing Summary Reports by the KNU (Information Department) updated on monthly basis through e-mails and correspondence.

[51] Correspondence with KNU President Saw Tamlabaw, November, 2009, and author interview with Padoh Mahn Shar, March 2004.

group and in other cases brake-away to continue the insurgency.[52]   Increasingly the Tatmadaw have utilised break-away factions as allies in their counter-insurgency operations, this is exemplified in the Karen case when Kawthoolei was over-run and led to the fall of Mannerplaw in January 1995. This in turn led to the fall of all the major remaining KNU base areas along the Thai border in a second major offensive in 1997/8. Sporadic fighting continues to erupt between the KNU and Tatmadaw/DKBA troops. At this juncture, focus on KNU organisational structure is of relevance and will underpin the themes for the next chapter.

KNU organisation structure

The four main aims of the KNU as outlined by the 1956 KNU Congress and which remain accurate to the present day are, first the establishment of a Karen State with the right to self-determination, the setting up of 'National States' for all other ethnicities and the creation of a Federal Union with all the states having equal rights. The fourth objective is the pursuance of 'national democracy'.[53] The Maoist origins of the 'national democracy' concept have been marginalized with time and the expression is utilized today in the context of the ethnic insurgency as a means to describe a federal parliamentary system similar to the one in Switzerland. Indeed, recent evidence from KNU committee members on political aspirations in this context is amplified in the need for a national consensus.[54]

The political goals of the KNU have undergone three phases of development corresponding to the three Burmese/Myanmar military regimes. At the beginning of the

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[52] Lawrence E. Cline, 'Insurgency in amber: ethnic opposition groups in Myanmar' *Small Wars & Insurgency* Vol. 20, Nos. 3-4. (September-December 2009), p. 579.

[53] Aims, Policy and Programme of the KNU, http://www.karen.org/knu/knu.htm (accessed 30 March 2010); Smith, *Burma: Insurgence and the Politics of Ethnicity*, pp. 185, 286.

[54] Saw Kwee Htoo, Naw May Oo, Saw Htoo Htoo Lay and Saw Mutu Say Poe, 'From Political Aspiration to National Consensus: The Need for a National Consultative Conference in Karen Context' KNU (Information Department*)*, (November, 2009).

parliamentary era of the AFPFL (1948–1962), the KNU demanded the right to secession and the inclusion in the Kawthoolei state of mixed Burman-Karen territories in the Irrawaddy Delta. In the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) era of General Ne Win (1962–1988), the objective of the KNU transferred from territorial demands to preventing and diluting the 'Burmanisation' of the ethnic minorities. During this period, at a meeting held at the KNU headquarters in Mannerplaw, and the National Democratic Front (NDF) was established as an alliance of ethnic minorities which sought a Federal Union of Burma. A KNU representative asserted in 1987 at the Fifth Session of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations that the NDF and the KNU sought 'autonomy not separation'.[55]

After the pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988, the KNU stronghold of Mannerplaw on the border with Thailand became the main refuge for students and pro-democracy activists fleeing from the SLORC. Subsequently the KNU joined the democracy goal of creating and supporting exile organizations and subsequently set up the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB). The DAB represented the nucleus for the alliance with the National League for Democracy, a grouping which, in the 1990s, became the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB).[56] By becoming, in 2001, a member of the Ethnic Nationalities Solidarity and Cooperation Committee (today Ethnic Nationalities Council), the KNU agreed to the concept of a federal Union of Burma. Interviews in relation to the Burmese saffron robe protests in September 2007 indicated that the KNU expressed its willingness to cooperate with the demonstrators politically as well as opposing the regime in armed conflict. In an interview with Padoh Mahn Shar, the then General Secretary of the KNU (same status as Prime Minister), identified as a shortcoming the lack of unity of the ethnic

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[55] Karen National Union, 'Working Group on Indigenous Populations: Statement of the Karen National Union' *KNU Bulletin No. 13*, (December 1987), p. 6.
[56] Background history of National Council of the Union of Burma available at http://www.ncub.org/AboutNCUB.htm (accessed 30 March 2010). Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt* (Chiang Mai, 1999), p. 495.

groups in their fight against the Burmese military government. He went on to suggest that all ethnic representatives have to be involved in drawing up the State Federal Constitution and that all states are equal.[57]

The KNU is a political organisation that has been established since Burma became independent and aims to serve the interests of the Karen people engaged in their struggle of self-determination and governance. Its predecessor was the Karen Nation Association (KNA) first formed and created in 1881 and initially led by Christian Karen but was open to all Karen from all religious denominations regardless of faiths or beliefs. Indeed, religious freedom and its expression is a principal and central aspect of Karen identity and culture as constructed by the KNU.[58] Furthermore, according to David Tharckabaw, the present KNU General Secretary, the organisation is inherently democratic and at its core retains its village based electoral foundations.

The decision-making structure of the organization at present is that of a one-party nation-state, this is covered periodically by a party congress. Between congresses the party is led by its two other administrative organs, the Central Committee and the Executive Committee. The KNU is governed on a daily basis by the executive committee which has eleven members and meet on a weekly basis. All departments report directly to the General Secretary including the Defense Department (see appendix I for a formal structure of the

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[57] Author e-mail and correspondence with President Padoh Saw Ba Thein Sein and interview Padoh Mahn Shar, November 2002; 'Ethnics Join Protests,' *The Irrawaddy*, 24 September 2007; 'Lack of Unity Kept Ethnic Groups Out of the Showdown,' *The Irrawaddy*, 11 October 2007; 'KNU Call on Ethnic Ceasefire Groups to Support Uprising' *The Irrawaddy*, 28 September 2007, http://www.irrawaddy.org/archives.php.
[58] Lintner, *Burma in Revolt* (1999), p. 27.

KNU). Based on the British administration model the KNLA are subject to the command of the KNU Executive Office.[59]

KNU congresses (usually lasting three weeks) are held every four years where each District nominates six representatives. All KNU representatives are eligible to attend congresses, nominate candidates and vote in election for the post of President and Vice-President. There are over 70,000 KNU members and 1,000 KNU officials are democratically elected and to manage the military and social infrastructure of Kawthoolei at present. The congress is 'selected' to represent the seven administration districts making up the state of Kawthoolei and each is headed by a District Chairman. Kawthoolei's seven districts which were established in the late 1960s are, Thaton, Toungoo, Nyaunglebin, Mergui-Tavoy, Duplaya, Pa-an, and Papun. Each individual District comprises of several townships and their intrinsic villages and each District has a KNLA Brigade attached to it. The District administrative structure comprises of a district governor, a committee of administration officials and military officers. Smith does support the notion that the regional KNLA commanders liaise closely with the District administrative bodies. However, recent evidence collated on the border suggests that this close relationship is now diminishing and closer connections with rural Karen communities are being fostered by the KNU administrative divisions.[60]

Groups of ten to twenty villages are grouped into a 'village tract' and each village elects a committee with a village head, which in turn elect 'village tract' committees. These also

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[59] David Tharckabaw & Roland Watson, 'The Karen People of Burma and the Karen National Union' KNU (Information Department), (November 2003), Accessed, 1 April 2010 http://dictatorwatch.org/.html; Fong, *Revolution as Development* (2008), pp.236-7.
[60] *KNU Statement on Review of Karen Revolutionary Resistance National Politics* (KNU Office of Supreme Headquarters [OSH], (Kawthoolei, 31 January 2009); *KNU Statement on DKBA Situation* (KNU OSH, Kawthoolei, 8 June 2009).

comprise of chair-persons, vice chair, and secretaries.[61] Current evidence and primary field research indicate that in the last decade, that increasingly women have become village-heads that traditionally was a male-dominated social order that guaranteed men the role of village chief. This trend adds another dimension to the way women of the Karen community have been viewed. In a recent interview Blooming Night Zan, joint secretary of Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) said,

> "more Karen women are taking on leadership roles in villages, but this
> is not recognised…The responsibility that they are taking on need to be
> appreciated. But Karen villagers are surprised by the emergence of women
> as leaders".[62]

This gender shift in the contested areas is a result of the vacuum that was being formed as more Karen men fled their villages either to join the KNU resistance or avoid the enforced SPDC demands of forced portering and labour. Recent testimonies also reveal that women village leaders have mixed fortunes, a recent KWO report has revealed the extent of the systematic abuse these women village heads have experienced by the Tatmadaw and their allies. Based on interviews of 95 Karen women from 2005 to 2009 it indicates that the women are particularly targeted by the Tatmadaw. According to the report, women village chiefs experienced or witnessed gender based violence, crucifixion, torture, and slave labour are being used as state instruments of intimidation.[63]

Nevertheless, women have been voted onto the KNU Executive Committee reinforcing their leadership roles but despite the abuse they suffer it has engendered similar

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[61] Saw David Taw, 'Choosing to Engage: Strategic Considerations for the Karen National Union' *Accord*, Issue 16, Conciliation Resources (2004); Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, p. 392. Human Rights Watch, 'They Came and destroyed our Village Again: The Plight of Internally Displaced Persons in Karen State' Vol. 17, No. 4. (June 2005), p. 21. Accessed 1 April 2010 http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2005/06/09/they-came-and-destroyed-our-village-again-0.html
[62] Author interview with Joint secretary Blooming Night Zan of the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO), June 2007 at Mae Sot Thailand.
[63] Karen Women's Organisation, *Walking Amongst Sharp Knives* (Mae Sariang, February 2010).

movements in the Shan and Kachin women's communities.[64] With the KWO having a membership of over 49,000, similar support networks and organisations have emerged and are flourishing with the Shan Women's Action Group (SWAN) and the Kachin Women's Association of Thailand (KWAT) also having substantial membership numbers.[65]

According to a KNU representative, the Central Committee and the Executive Committee are responsible for leading the KNU in the period between congresses. Until 1995, the KNU formed a Kawthoolei government with the post of Prime Minister being occupied by the KNU General Secretary. The Kawthoolei state is divided into seven administrative districts, which in turn have townships and villages. Each district is headed by a KNU District Chairman, while a KNLA Brigade Commander leads the military brigade corresponding to the district area. A 2005 Human Rights Watch report points out that these structural divisions are valid in those areas where the KNU still exercises some influence.[66]

Despite the reduction in troop strength of approximately 20,000 in 1980s, the KNU's armed wing, the KNLA can reportedly muster some 5,000+ armed troops in present times. Although The KNU leadership called for ethnic unity among opposition elements it experienced a significant split in December 1994. A group of Buddhist Karen troops, complaining of religious and promotional discrimination within the KNLA by the Karen Christian Leaders separated from the KNU. However, South does contend that some grievances were justified with the KNU who where providing more opportunities and

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[64] Communication with KNU Executive Council 2006, Naw Zipporah Sein now General Secretary has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Price in 2006 and was Winner of the 2007 Perdita Huston Human Rights Award she was a the former General Secretary of Karen Women's Organisation and refugee camp teacher.
[65] SWAN information accessed on 11 April 2010. http://www.shanwomen.org/main.html; Kachin Women Association Thailand (KWAT), http://www.kachinwomen.org/ .
[66] Interview with KNU-UK Representative March 2010, respondent wishes to remain anonymous.

support services to Christian Karen families than to Muslims or Buddhists.[67] The breakaway Buddhist troops formed the DKBA which subsequently allied themselves with the SPDC and where involved in operations to capture Mannerplaw and Kawmoora in 1995. Until the fall of Kawthoolei in 1995, the KNU formed a complex and workable government in the de facto state and still enforces a civil population support network.

The last decade has witnessed the KNU lose a considerable amount of territorial land to the SPDC, the fall of Mannerplaw was not only the result of conflict between the military government and the KNU but also of the continuing failure of the KNU to represent all the Karen diverse ethnic groups. As the KNU were pushed further back by the Burmese military Karen and other ethnic minorities fled to Thailand. By 2009 the Thailand Burma Border Consortium Report reported that over 140,000 refugees now reside in seven main camps on the Thai/Burma border.[68]

The KNU organised a series of seminar and discussion groups in 2000, 2002 and 2006 in which the leaders discussed the ongoing political situation and the continuous question of evolving and shifting Karen identity and unity. With the refugee re-settlement of over 46,388 mainly ethnic Karen and Karenni to third countries since 2005 from the camps.[69] Although, the Burmese junta report that KNU is struggling to convince the Karen ethnic 'family' that their construction of identity is the predominant one. Indication suggests that the pan-Karen identity is being eagerly fostered in this growing global diaspora among

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[67] Ashley South, 'Karen Nationalist Communities: The "Problem" of Diversity' *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 29, No. 1. (2007), pp. 55-76.
[68] Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), Programme Report: July to December 2009, (Bangkok, Thailand. 2010), pp. 2-3; Rajah, 'A "nation of intent" in Burma', (2002) p. 520.
[69] TBBC Report (2009), p. 9. Resettlement figures quoted are extracted from International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and slightly higher than UNHCR numbers.

refugee and exile communities, especially in the United Kingdom, USA and Australia.[70] It is in the next chapter that this notion is explored and the support networks that are employed by the refugees and re-settled Karen people combined with the KNU's leadership vision of engagement.

The themes investigated in this chapter indicate that there has been a lack of knowledge and understanding in the KNU organisational structure. With the recent re-configuration and displacement of the Karen communities onto border refugee camps there has been a willingness to adopt innovative techniques to re-engage with its communities

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[70] Karen Community Association-UK. Currently there are over 500 Karen people living in the United Kingdom with most of them located around Sheffield.

Chapter 2:

Karen Contested Domains: Uncertain Future and Diverse Voices

Karen political engagements and new horizons

This chapter will examine the 'shifting' construction of Karen identity and ethnicity with a brief examination of how self-determination ideologies and theories have served the KNU. It will also examine and investigate how in recent years Karen civil society has been modified and coded by re-settled communities. It will also consider the roles played by the re-settled/exiled KNU political communities and investigate the support networks utilised in shaping their understanding of the ongoing conflict in Burma. A brief analysis of the 'other' Karen population is evaluated both within and outside Burma focusing on the plight of the displaced peoples and the impact local agencies have on their communities through the work of support actors. The interweaving of these themes can elucidate and define the ongoing changes in Karen society and the strategic challenges facing the KNU leaders now firmly entrenched on the Thai/Burma border or re-settled in third countries. Even though many Karens have been displaced from their 'homeland' and many lives lost, their identity as a people has not been simply lost they have been instead reconfigured. Many of these displaced Karen have been struggling to survive and be perceived as a 'nation' again and the reconfiguration of the 'border-space' as their territory is ever-evolving, their culture and identities are imperceptibly changing.

The Shifting Construction of Karen Identity and Ethnicity

According to Renard and Keyes, the history of the Karen is very obscure; the ancestors of the Karennic-speaking peoples seem to have settled after the Mons in Burma but some centuries prior to the Burmans.[71] Indeed as Smith and Keyes note that until the annexation of Burma in the nineteenth century, the Karens were predominantly forest or hill dwelling people without a written literature. The Karen and other hill tribes lived on the peripheries of lowland people where the centre of power lay. They were often viewed as inferior, used as porters, and seen as providers of forest product and as such most of the hill people were marginalised. Nineteenth century Karen society was highly localised with very little political structure beyond inter-village alliances, however Keyes states that the penetration of new outside influences resulted in the transformation of many Karennic sub-groups into an ethnic grouping under the rubric of 'Karen'.[72]

The term 'Karen' encompasses approximately 20 subgroups of Karennic speaking peoples who are geographically, culturally and religiously diverse. They are the second largest minority group in Burma and the Burma Ethnic Research Group (BERG) estimates that there are between five and seven million Karen of whom 25 percent are Christian, the rest being Buddhists or animists.[73]   Although, Karen ethnic identity has been labelled

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[71] Ronald Renard, 'The Delineation of the Kayah States Frontiers with Thailand: 1809-1894' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 1*8, No. 1. (March, 1987), pp. 81-82; Charles F. Keyes, *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: the Karen on the Thai frontier with Burma* (Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 41-43.
[72] Smith, Burma: *Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (1999) p. 11; Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland South East Asia* (Hawaii, 1995), p. 19.
[73] Burma Ethnic Research Group, *Forgotten Victims of a Hidden War: Internally Displaced Karen in Burma* (Chiang Mai, 1998), p. 34. The Karen (in Burman *kayin lu*

sometimes as an artificial construction, there are substantial differences between the diverse 'Karen' sub-groups.[74] Karen society is extremely plural, with considerable differences in religion, language, culture, economic status and political ideology. Evidence indicates that it is very imprecise how the vast majority of Karen people who are poor rice farmers construct their identity, adopt ethnonym and nationalist ideas. Indeed, recent fieldwork research indicates that the majority of people subscribe to a distinct Karen identity. The sixty year struggle for the state of Kawthoolei is demonstration to the lasting appeal of a Karen national ideal.[75]

The Karen have two dominant groups and can be divided into three dominant linguistic dialects. There are the S'ghaws who are predominantly animist and Christian, they are mainly found in the Irrawady delta and also occupy the hill regions of the Pegu Yomas and its peripheral areas. The Pwo or Talaing Karen are concentrated near the coast around Bassein, Thaton and Moulmein, a subdivision of the Pwo's, and the Pa-O or Toungthu people are located in the Southern Shan States around Taunggyi, Loiklaw and Toungoo. These two groups account for over 85 percent of Karens. There are also the Kayah, Kayan and other sub-groups, who have been classified since the nineteenth century as Karenni (Red Karen in Burmese) who inhabit the southern spurs of the Shan plateau east of Loiklaw. Under the colonial regime, many Pwo Karen migrated from the Pegu Yoma hills in the east to the Irrawady delta which was being opened for rice cultivation by the British

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myo), self-titled *Ka Nyaw Po* or *Kayan*, and also known in Thailand as the *Kariang* or *Yang*.
[74] Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (London, 2006), pp. 81, 88.
[75] Keyes, *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, p. 11; Ananda Rajah*, Remaining Karen: A Study of Cultural Reproduction and the Maintenance of Identity* (PhD Thesis 1986, published Canberra, 2008), p. 3-5; Ashley South, *Civil Society in Burma: The Development of Democracy amidst Conflict* (Washington, 2008), p. 26.

in the late nineteenth century.[76] Many of these lowland Karen became assimilated and adopted Buddhism as well as Burmese customs and social habits. The Baptist missionary Andoniram Judson arrived in Burma in 1813 and began to convert large numbers of Karens to Christianity. Over the following century, the growing identification of Karen elites with Christianity reinforced their identification with the British. Indeed, Keyes suggests that Christianity created Karen identity and the ethnonym 'Karen' has become linked in the ethno-politics of Burma and primarily with the Christian-led Karen ethno-nationalist movements.[77]

Although Christians account for a small proportion of the Karen peoples, members of this group have historically assumed leading roles in society and have sometimes led privileged lives. This is primarily due to the level of education received and interaction with foreign missionaries. Gravers analyses the processes of this religious conversion among the Karen which caused fractures and divisions between families and within villages with Karen missionaries. Whereas Gravers examines the nature of the Karen cultural cores and its associated myths, symbols and values, Smith primarily concentrates on the historical basis of these cultural cores hoping to defend the ethnic origin against 'modernist' deconstruction. Although evidence from the re-configured and displaced Karen indicate and suggest that their cultural cores are now becoming 'hybridised'. [78]

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[76] A.R. McMahon, *The Karens of the Golden Chersonese* (London, 1876), pp. 32-33; Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941* (London, 1974), pp. 55-56; Shelby Tucker, *Burma: The Curse of Independence* (London, 2001), p. 13. The Karenni were ruled by *myosas* (a Burmese title meaning 'town-eater', and conferred with tax collecting powers); an agreement was made in 1875 between the British Government and the state of Western Karenni conferring a *sanad* (formal acceptance of an independent and separate statelet).
[77] Charles F Keyes, 'Afterword: the politics of 'Karen-ness' in Thailand', in Claudio O Delang (ed.), *Living on the Edge of Thai Society: the Karen in the highlands of northern Thailand* (London, 2003), pp. 211-213.
[78] Gravers, *Exploring Ethnic Diversity*, pp.12-13; Benedict Rogers, *A Land without Evil* (London, 2004), p. 51.

Benedict Anderson refers to the term 'imagined communities' into which the Karen might be given as a fabricated national identity. The views that Anderson shares with Gellner, Connor, and Rajah are that nationalism, nations and nation-states are a modern phenomenon, that they are tools of elites and the expression of identity.[79] Although Rajah debates that fully formed nationalism does not emerge from nothing that they have to emerge from ethno-nationalism onto the larger form of a 'nation'. This emergence of Karen ethno-nationalism in Burma can also be located in O'Leary's classification of the theories of nationalism, which also supports and underpins Anderson's reference of 'imagined communities'.[80] In supporting Anderson's idea that the nation-state is a modular one when ethno-nationalism becomes coupled with the idea of the nation-state, then it can be argued that fully-fledged nationalism could be said to exist. I suggest that it is within this construct of new modes of consciousness in post-colonial conditions that Karen movements towards self-determination, separatism and local autonomy emerged. Although Karen identity and ethnie may be perceived as an 'invented' or an 'imagined' community as Anderson argues, the KNU is creating ethno-history by imposing its own 'anthropological' model as an authentic one.

Self-Determination

The gradual British occupation of Burma during the nineteenth century enabled the colonial authorities to separate the Burman dominated plains into 'Ministerial Burma' from

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[79] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991); Walker Connor *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, 1994); Rajah, 'A "nation of intent" in Burma, (2002), pp. 517-518.
[80] Brendan O'Leary, 'Ernest Gellner's diagnoses of nationalism: a critical review, or, what is living and what is dead in Ernest Gellner's philosophy of nationalism?' in John A. Hall (ed.), *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 76-77; Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1983), p. 157.

'the Hills'- the 'Frontier Areas'. Lintner suggests that the 'Frontier' people developed a movement that was considerably different in approach to the mainstream Burman politics. With British rule, came the expansion of Christian missions and the ties between the Karen minority and the colonial power became reinforced, with many converting to Christianity. Although during Burman rule, most ethnic minority groups had been persecuted, the Karen were particularly victimized by them in marked contrast to other ethnic people. But, unlike the Mons who waged a continual struggle, and the Shan, who instigated a war in 1752 against their Burman oppressors, Marshall suggests that the Karen reacted to maltreatment, not with violence but withdrawal.[81]

The Burman social-order was not a mutual consensus of its regions, rather it was one of which was dictated and maintained by superior force. The majority of the Karen modern community still conceive the British as liberators.[82] Many Karen joined the British army in the nineteenth century to serve as guides and soldiers during the First and Second Anglo-Burman Wars. There are numerous references to the active recruitment of Karen levies into the colonial army and constabulary. Dorothy Woodman cites that in retaliation for the support given to the British in 1852, Karen villages within a fifty-mile radius of Rangoon were destroyed by Burmans.[83] During the colonial period the British administration granted privileges to the Frontier Areas people. Karen levies were also used to suppress various Burman disturbances in the mid-1920s and the Saya San rebellion between 1930 and 1932. However, evidence shows that the British separation of minorities fostered exclusiveness and created the mechanism for eventual ethnic fragmentation. The

[81] Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karen Peoples of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (London, 1922), p. 306.
[82] Thuleibo, *The Karen Revolution in Burma* (Mae Sariang, Thailand. 2004), pp. 3-5; Mae La Refugee Elders, *The Relationship between Karen and British Government and Historical Journey of Karen-Burman Racial Conflict* (Mae Sot, nd.), pp. 2-15; KNU (Information Department) *The Karen Struggle for Freedom* (Mae Sot, 2000), pp. 3-6.
[83] Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London, 1962), pp. 161-163.

Burman social order was shattered, furnished a rise to pluralism and through British rule traumatised Burman civil-society.

For a country like Burma, where State rulers and ethnic insurgent groups have a history of complex relationships, self-determination is one of the central issues in Burma's past and present day. As a principle, self-determination for 'national' ethno-linguistic-cultural groups emerged as a natural corollary of developing nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[84] A notorious legacy of colonisers was the tendency to ignore ethnic, linguistic, or other 'national' considerations. Burma is a perfect example of such a situation where a political eruption was left by the colonial power. [85]

The Second World War widened the traditional gap between the Burman nationalists and the various ethnic groups. The British especially found the idea of a proposed multi-party Union of Burma particularly problematical when it came time to convince the ethnic groups.[86] Mary Callahan argues that the Karens were particularly reluctant to see British and Burman plans for an independent Burma in which they would be subsidiary partners in a national government. In August 1945, Karen leaders Saw Ba U Gyi and Sydney Loo-Nee arranged a meeting with Governor Dorman-Smith and they proposed a new state which included both the delta and hill Karen be implemented, and not to be part of the territory envisioned for an independent Burma.[87]

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[84] Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (London, 1992), pp. 138-9.

[85] Hurst Hannum, *Autonomy, Sovereignty and Self-determination: The accommodation of conflicting rights* (Philadelphia, 1994), pp.27-28.

[86] Hugh Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle for Independence 1944-1948 Vol. I, From Military Occupation to Civil Government 1 January 1944 to 31 August 1946* (London, 1983), pp. 655-659, IOR: M/4/3023, M/4/3024.

[87] Saw Ba U Gyi was a prominent Karen who was educated in Britain, he was a barrister-at-law, and a veteran of Force 136 (part of the Special Operation Executive which operated behind Japanese lines during the war) and Sydney Loo-Nee, also a Karen leader was a barrister and member of the House of Representatives from 1937 (Speaker, 1941).

The issue of self-determination by the Karen ethnic minority was a product of the changing dynamics of British-Karen relations, the catalyst that polarised the relationship between the Karen and Burman majority. A comprehensive analysis of self-determination is beyond the scope of this research but an evaluation of the concept and its development within the Karen is explored. Self-determination is a powerful and emotive concept, it can be threatening and also inspiring, frequently cited but rarely defined. As a principle it achieves almost universal support which is however infrequently translated into encouragement from the international community for the fragmentation of recognised States and is a very imprecise relationship between Statehood and self-determination. For a country like Burma there are numerous factors that impinge on both the state military rulers and the minority ethnic groups where a complex symbiotic relationship exists. To understand the implications of self-determination a number of its prominent factors of the ethnic and the pro-democracy struggle have to be examined that of external and internal dynamics.[88]

Karen civil society, the KNU and their support networks

The fragmentation and decline over the last few years in KNU military conflict has seen a burgeoning rise in the expansion and deepening of contacts between Karen elites and the broader Karen civil society, even traversing conflict front-lines within Burma. There are a myriad of definitions of civil society in the post-modern world and it is often defined in a number of different traditions. Essentially a civil society is composed of the totality of civic, social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society as opposed to the force-backed structures of a state (regardless of that state's political system).

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[88] Fredric Kirgis Jr., 'The Degrees of Self-Determination in the United Nations era' *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 88, No. 2. (April 1994), pp. 304-310.

The notion of post-modern civil society is derived from US and European political thought which makes it problematic in its application to non-Western States. However, following Alagappa, the concept is a useful tool for analysing state-society relations both within Burma and the societal relations between the displaced actors involved. Alagappa further elucidates that Burma shows features of neo-Gramscian models of civil society although there are some neo-Tocquevillean aspects indicated.[89]

Departing from Marx's negative theory, Gramsci's perspective did not envisage civil society as contiguous with the socio-economic base of the state. Rather, he located civil society in the political superstructure.[90] He underlined the crucial role of civil society as the contributor of the cultural and ideological capital required for the survival of the hegemony of capitalism. Rather than posing it as a problem, as in earlier Marxist conceptions, Gramsci viewed civil society as the site for problem-solving in which competing forces and interest groups seek to establish positions, in a protracted struggle for power. However, whilst some civil society actors aim to influence, subvert or overturn government policy, actors such as the KNU in this study are primarily concerned with establishing areas of relative autonomy. According to Alagappa, an authoritarian state like Burma does not have total exclusivity over the establishment of civil society parameters and in politically unfavourable circumstances activists such as the KNU create both formal and informal organisations.[91]

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[89] Muthiah Alagappa, 'The Non State Public Sphere in Asia: Dynamic Growth Institutionalization Lag' in Alagappa, *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia*, (2004), pp. 468-9; South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma*, (2008), pp. 173-174.
[90] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers, 1971); Anne Shawstack Sassoon, *Approaches to Gramsci* (London, 1982), pp. 94-96.
[91] Alagappa, 'The Non State Public Sphere in Asia', (2004), p. 409.

The last decade has witnessed the KNU lose a considerable amount of territorial land to the SPDC. The fall of Mannerplaw was not only the result of conflict between the military government and the KNU but also of the continuing failure of the KNU to represent the many diverse Karen groups.[92] As the KNU were pushed further back in eastern Burma by the Tatmadaw army, the Karen communities and other ethnic groups fled to Thailand. By late 2009, the Thailand-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) reported that over 140,000 refugees now reside in refugee camps on the Thai/Burma border (see appendix II for detailed analysis).[93]

With the influx of displaced Karen refugees flooding into Thailand, camps were established and have been in existence for nearly thirty years. As of February 2010 there are seven main camps with a total population of 141,125 (see appendix II). Turning to this border 'space' the Karen established the support networks that are ostensibly outside the conflict zones. It is the largest and busiest cross-border focal point in western Thailand, located in Tak Province, Mae Sot is directly opposite and across the Moei River where there is the Burmese border town of Myawadi. A multitude of different ethnic groups have lived and settled in this frontier town for over a hundred years and it continues to be a manifestation of multi-faceted locales where both official and extensive black market economic transactions have been thriving. Mae Sot as a border town has been a site for conflict and accommodation of refugees, on the one hand and a site for cultural translations and negotiations and the other. It has equally harboured Burmese traders and civilians fleeing from the KNU and Tatmadaw conflict in the 1980s. Perhaps it was because of such 'specific histories of cultural displacement' that have been parts of this town dweller's

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[92] Paul Core, 'Burma/Myanmar: Challenges of a Ceasefire accord in Karen State', *Journal of Southeast Asian* Affairs, Vol. 28, No. 3. (2009), pp. 96-97.
[93] Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), *Programme Report: July to December 2009*, (Bangkok, Thailand. 2010), pp. 2-3.

memories and genealogies that have rendered it accommodating to these 'others'. The transnational and translational inter-twine and form a hybrid culture which the Karen diaspora acquired by assimilating with Thai culture and identity.[94]

For the KNU, the fragile ceasefire agreement in 2003 with the military government presented the Karen ethno-nationalist movement symbolic weight in Burmese politics. Although details of the arrangement are still being developed, the Karen leaders in exile and within Burma can engage politically with the regime from within 'the legal fold' whilst addressing the requirements of Karen society.[95]   Indeed, there has been a considerable rise in community based organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) and support actors for most of the displaced Karen ethnic communities. Prominent organisations in these areas are the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO), welfare, educational -the Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG), environmental and human rights organisations such as the KHRG and the Women's League of Burma (WLB).[96]

Initially the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) was controlled by the dominant factions within the KNU hierarchy but as the refugee numbers expanded the presence of international NGO's and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) forced the committees to become more responsive. The Thai authorities considered the KNU a political organisation and prohibited it to work inside the camps however; the

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[94] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Cultures* (New York, 1994), p. 247; For a discursive model and journalistic view of Mae Sot, see Phil Thomson, *Restless Souls* (Bangkok, 2006).

[95] *Asian Tribune* 2003-12-26, Accessed 12 April 2010 http://www.asiantribune.com/; Correspondence with Padoh Mahn Shar December 2003. The ceasefire accord was an 'oral gentlemen's' agreement, it has currently interrupted the violence between the SPDC and the KNU/KNLA. *KNU (Information Department)*. C. Guinard, 'KNU Cease Fire Talks; Negotiating a Return to the "Legal Fold" ', *Burma Issues Newsletter* Vol. 14, No.3. (Bangkok, 2004). pp.1-3.

[96] Karen organisations loosed affiliated to the KNU. KYO and KWTG, author correspondence and interviews June 2007.

normative perception within the Karen refugees is that the KRC is under the control of the KNU. Although the KRC are overall representatives for the refugees living in camps on the border and they also oversee activities of all the other camps through their camp committees, coordinating assistance provided by NGOs and liaising with UNHCR and Thai security personnel.[97]

As the main coordinating bodies of the camps, Camp Refugee Committees have rules and regulations governing the selection processes of the camps' administrative committees. However some of these take the form of more general guidelines, allowing for varying interpretations in their implementation. As a result, the selection procedures often differ from camp to camp. The main KRC selections occur every three years and of the fifteen members selected, eight respected and experienced Karen are appointed, the other seven are chosen from representatives of the other camps.[98]

The adaptation of the Karen refugees in the camps has been astonishing in the last twenty years, the largest camp is Mae La located some 63 km north of Mae Sot in Thailand and is by far the largest with a current population of 49,605 (as of February 2010), of whom approximately 9,000 are Muslim. Support in food, shelter material and welfare is given by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium along with Medecines Sans Frontiers who provide medical and health facilities.[99] With reference to the socio-cultural activities, the Karen refugees sustained their previous organisations and cultural activities, moreover new organisations and institutions were established and are still maintained. Whilst the KYO

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[97] Interview with KRC Chairperson Mary Ohn, March 2004. The KRC is based in Mae Sot with branch offices in Mae Sariang, Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi.
[98] See Online Burma Library web site for KRC monthly reports for the last 27 years and is an ongoing procedure, http://www.burmalibrary.org/show.php?cat=1831 .
[99] Author interview with TBBC Executive Director, Jack Dunford and Sally Thompson Deputy Executive Director, Bangkok, June 2007.

represents Karen youth, the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) was recently established as a working group in the camps. As mentioned previously, evidence indicates that women are not only becoming increasingly prominent as leaders but also as activist refugees supplanting the once dominant role of males in organisational hierarchies.

Refugee women have been campaigning as activists and creating networks of women-only social and political organisations from their initial arrival in the border camps. Although Skidmore has recently explored the appropriation of power and women's status in Burma and Jordt implies that women are important agents in creating an alternative sphere for resistance, few scholars are examining the role of women in the refugee camps and in supporting organisations.[100] Recent field interviews indicate that refugee women that undertake political roles are particularly targeted and are vulnerable to multiple forms of psychological and physical violence in Burma and to a certain extent on the border areas.[101] Most women activists flee from the authoritarian Burmese military regime and move to the border areas, many arrive particularly to pursue their political campaigning. In the early years of these women's refugee organisations and movements they were predominantly treated by the Thai state security forces and humanitarian workers as lacking legitimate political identity. Women have been at the forefront of the pro-democracy movement in Burma, the leading example being the leader of the opposition Aung San Suu Kyi (the NLD). The Karen women have explored new forms of political

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[100] Monique Skidmore and Patricia Lawrence, *Women and the Contested State: Religion, Violence and Agency in South and Southeast Asia* (Notre Dame, USA. 2007), pp. 165-171. One scholar that has written a paper is Mary O'Kane, 'Blood, Sweat, and Tears', *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, Issue 15, May 2007.
[101] Author interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, KNU General Secretary 2007 and 2009.

agency and exposed the atrocities of the regime such as the use of rape as a weapon by the state against ethnic minority groups.[102]

The 'other' Karen communities and 'political' leaders inside Burma have been relatively active within the controlled government areas throughout the period of military rule. One of the roles that the displaced Karens are conducting is humanitarian relief through the Free Burma Rangers organisation (FBR). The FBR is a multi-ethnic humanitarian service movement and is a pro-active, pro-democracy humanitarian group who work predominantly throughout Burma but concentrate primarily on the heavily forested border region, delivering emergency medical assistance to sick and injured internally displaced people (IDP's). FBR is one of a number of grass roots organisations which include the Mae Tao Clinic and the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) which have emerged in response to the growing health needs of Burma's ethnic communities. FBR are not supported by either the Thai or Burmese authorities and most of their activities inside Burma are of a clandestine nature. FBR trains teams of men and women in frontline medical treatment and reconnaissance techniques. Since its inception in 1997, the FBR has trained over 110 multi-ethnic relief teams and there are 27 full time teams active in the Karen and Karenni areas of Burma. These teams are primarily composed of displaced Karen and they have conducted over 250 humanitarian missions of one to two months into the Karen contested zones of Eastern Burma. On an average FBR humanitarian mission nearly 2,000 patients are treated. The teams have treated over 360,000 patients and helped over 750,000 people. In addition to delivering humanitarian relief, a secondary role of the teams is to obtain evidence of SPDC military violence and human rights abuse. This information is then published in the form of online reports and/or released to larger

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[102] The Karen Women's Organisation, *Shattering Silences: Karen Women speak out about the Burmese Military Regime's use of Rape as a Strategy of War in Karen State* (Mae Sot, 2004).

international human rights groups, inter-governmental organisations such as the UN, and news agencies.[103]

Thailand's attitude towards these 'others' from Burma has been decidedly uneasy, the Thai government stated in 2002 that the plethora of refugee camps under its jurisdiction along the Thai-Burmese border should gradually be closed. Nevertheless, the history of the Thai nation-state's relations with refugees taking flight across its state borders away from violence/wars dates back to the 1970s. The kingdom officially began to ensure protection of forcibly displaced peoples from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam in 1974 and from Burma in 1984. However, these forcibly displaced people have not been recognised as refugees according to international law, and Thailand has not acceded to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol.

The Global Aspect of Karen Identity

The displaced peoples' spatial histories within and along the translocalities have been accompanied by the invasion of the communication and media technologies. Translocalities in this instance is defined as the locus in which the refugee border networks merge and are established in connection with 'other' places.[104] Combined with capital inflow, the territorial ambition of these global technologies have inscribed itself on the established community and the incoming displaced Karen. Since 1988, Thailand's policy of focusing on economy has been of turning 'war zones' into trade zones. In a series of multi-million Baht development projects on the border, it has become a zone of electronic

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[103] Author interviews with FBR members March 2004 and 2009. See also http://www.freeburmarangers.org. The FBR also conduct missions in Pa'O, Arakan, Kachin, Chin and Lahu areas, the total number of teams throughout Burma is 47.

[104] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minnesota, 1996), pp. 42-43. Appadurai suggests that it is the imagined reality of 'trans-local workers', that is, persons who live in liminal states i.e. Those who remain in a state between two other states may said to become permanently liminal.

mediation which has been exploited by the members of the ethnic nationalities struggle against the military junta in Burma.[105] As the refugee population exponentially rose, so did International support and relief agencies with the communications infrastructure modernising in response to this growth. Karen organisations exploited the emergence of cyberspace and technological supports setting up their own websites to disseminate to the global audience the issues, causes and struggles of its people in the zones of conflict, not all of these necessarily armed.

The exponential rise in refugees and the exodus through third country adoption it has forced the KNU to adapt and this has enabled them to form new strategies. They have forged links with western organisations in several sectors to relay their message.[106] The emergence of the Internet has not only provided new opportunities for a range of actors to publicise a variety of abuses by Burma's repressive regime, but also for these enabled actors to form a new interconnected 'space'. The role of the internet in Burma's 'Saffron Revolution' in 2008 witnessed its unprecedented use in knowledge sharing and trans-border communication flow.[107] Activist's can document, publish and blog acts that are committed by the Burmese authoritarian state.[108] These interconnected sites form a permanent record of actions which can easily be retrieved and accessed by an international bystander audience.

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[105] KNU (Information Department) (1999), there has been economic growth in logging, natural gas, damming project and highway construction. Directorate of Operations, Royal Thai Army, (1997)

[106] KNU website re-launched 2010 http://karennationalunion.net/ . They have also formed new social networking sites such as Facebook and twitter to further engage with a global audience.

[107] Mridul Chawdhury, 'The Role of the Internet in Burma's Saffron Revolution' *Internet & Democracy Case Study Series* (Harvard, September, 2008), p. 4.

[108] David B. Conklin, *'Blogging Burma: The Internet and the Recent Uprising'*, (Working Paper, Chicago. 2008).

It is notable that the Karen diaspora from various areas plays an important and influential role in supporting the KNU cause. There is now a global web of networks which the KNU are now exploiting and the characteristics of personal media technologies allow the individual to disseminate information and visual images on a global scale.[109] Moreover, when individual users increasingly construct media messages, social discourses multiply and mass media actors no longer have exclusivity over the story. The KNU and the Karen global community are now responding to a far wider audience, and as such oppressive acts have never been so visible.

The themes explored in this chapter illustrate that there has been a 'shift' in displaced Karen identity and ethnie with an amplification of hybridity on the Karen refugee border community. Evidence suggests that self-determination issues have also been modified and extended to be inclusive and broader in their parameters. Evidence presented shows the recent re-configuration and displacement of the KNU and Karen civil-society has seen a dramatic increase in women occupying positions of power. It also suggests a KNU willingness to adopt innovative techniques to re-engage with international communities.

Conclusion

The Karen historically have had an acute relationship with the Burman ethnic group. During the British colonial period, the Karen identified themselves as an ethnic group and started a nationalist movement. The relationship between the Karen and Burman ethnic groups widened and deteriorated during the Second World War and this relationship has

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[109] Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, *Open Networks Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, 2003), p. 97. The Open Society have also supplied some Karen Organisations with laptop and internet connections, it also sponsors the Burma Project to make strategic use of the web in attracting support and mobilising campaigns.

not recovered with the inception of military rule in 1962. After Burma gained independence there were serious cleavages between the newly formed government military forces and the Karen community which resulted in a civil war. After the civil war the KNU controlled large areas of eastern Burma and established a *de facto* nation state with an effective administrative apparatus at its disposal. However a resurgent Burmese military machine effected a containment policy and gradually the state of Kawthoolei was constricted and territory lost.

Since the 1980s a large number of Karen and other ethnic groups have become refugees seeking asylum or escaping abuse by the Tatmadaw. There are a number of causes that contribute to this, the Karen relationship with the Burmese government, its authoritarian policies and the internal divisions amongst the Karen themselves. The Karen organisations were constructed in the Karen State and are still in existence today. The intention of this thesis is to introduce clarity into the ongoing dynamic KNU relationships through interviews and recently released primary sources. Research over the last decade has neglected to focus on the emerging women's organisations although there is a modest amount of scholarly research being conducted. The research conducted in this thesis indicates that it is an undeveloped field and requires more insightful and greater in-depth studies.

The Karen National Union is an established organisation and as suggested in the thesis, is in a modernising stage. With the recent passing away of the senior members of the KNU in the last few years, there is a perception that the hard-line element in political policy is softening. Certainly evidence presented in this thesis indicates a greater flexibility in mediation and constructive engagement with other exiled political groups. Anecdotal

evidence also seems to suggest a slight downturn in Tatmadaw abuse in Kawthoolei and the border areas although collation of such events is ongoing.

The cost of this conflict on all the ethnic groups in humanitarian terms is incalculable on the resident Karen and other ethnic communities. There is limited research on these 'other' Karen within Burma due to external scholarly limitations and this thesis has added some evidence. This is also an area of research that requires development.

Karen cultural activities has in some ways thrived and sustained itself, to the extent of being exported to third countries as more refugees are adopted and taken in. However, the border Karen are gradually being influenced by Thai culture and exposed to ever present Western expressions and becoming 'hybridised'. As the Karen interact with global society their own civil-society becomes fused. It is noteworthy that Christians are relatively more active than other Karen denominations and this is possibly because of the assistance and interaction with international Christian organisations.

As I write this conclusion I have a memory that endures. It was one day in May 2004, whilst sitting at lunch at his home with Padoh Ba Thein Sien, the Karen National Union President, he said at one point in our conversation:

"We are a family without a home, a nation without a land"

It was then that I realised that from the President down to the front-line soldiers still on Burmese soil and the women weaving away on their looms whom I had interviewed and chatted to, that the memories of their homes and places in Kawthoolei – their natural homeland have always been vivid. Yet, in all the years that I have visited the Karens in Kawthoolei and ever more recently in Thailand or the refugee camps they have been away from 'home' for many years. Their temporal 'home' will always be with them and as for a

'home' in the future, their dreams and aspirations for a Karen State under the Federal Union of Burma that is democratic remains although it has been relentlessly resisted by successive Burmese military regimes. Still, the Karen have persistently struggled to achieve that aim, the gaol of self-determination and to control their lives against seemingly impossible odds. Many of the strategies for survival and political momentum cannot be revealed in this study as it is still a fractured and fragile cease-fire. The International arena awaits the election outcomes of 2010 in Burma to create further responses.

Appendix I

The seven District in Karen and Burmese/Bamar names in Kaw Thoo Lei State.

Karen	*Burmese*	*KNLA Brigade*
Thaton	Doothatoo	Brigade 1

Taungoo	Taw-Oo	Brigade 2
Nyaunglabin	Klerweetu	Brigade 3
Mergui-Tavoy	Blee-Taweh	Brigade 4
Papun	Papu	Brigade 5
Kawkareik	Dooplaya	Brigade 6
Pa-an	Pa-an	Brigade 7

Each brigade now comprises of approximately 800-1,000 soldiers although in recent years in some districts this has fallen dramatically.

The Karen National Union Executive Committee.
This committee has eleven members.

- President
- Vice-President and Defense Minister, Defense Department
- General Secretary (equivalent to Prime Minister)
- Joint General Secretary 1, Organizing Department
- Joint General Secretary 2, Information Department
- KNLA Chief of Staff and General Officer Command
- Vice Chief of Staff, Forestry and Mining Departments
- Foreign Affairs Department Head
- Transport and Communications Department Head
- Relief and Rehabilitation Department Head
- Alliance Affairs Department Head

Karen National Union Fourteen Departments are as follows:

- Agriculture
- Alliance Affairs
- Defence
- Education
- Finance and Revenue
- Foreign Affairs
- Forestry
- Health
- Information
- Interior
- Justice
- Mining
- Organizing
- Relief and Rehabilitation
- Transport and Communications

Formerly there were also departments for Fisheries and Animal Husbandry.
Appendix II

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