

Transnational “Myanmar”-Karenni Societies in United States: Experiences of Karenni Refugee Resettlement

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Introduction

This paper examines the resettlement of refugees from Burma/Myanmar to the United States, by focusing on the refugee experience.⁽¹⁾ The ethnographic description of the resettlement process reveals how refugees, by establishing a transnational “Myanmar” community in the United States, manifested a nationalism that was hitherto believed to be impossible.

Building a nation-state in Burma/Myanmar has been a controversial issue since the nation’s independence from the British in 1948. Callahan argues that the process of state building in Burma has focused on warfare and violence by the state. After independence, the national army or Tatmadaw regarded citizens as potential enemies, and conducted various anti-insurgency campaigns.⁽²⁾ Her argument richly elucidates the state-building process in Burma/Myanmar. However, though the Nation and the State are inseparable, her arguments exclude the *nation*-building process.⁽³⁾ This paper explores one aspect of belonging to the nation of “Myanmar.”

While state building is one of the most important tasks for a country following ethnic conflict, it is often analyzed only within the context of resistance movements, such as “Burmanization” by the government or resistance movements against it. Hence, the

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possibilities for actual nation building have not yet been explored. The experiences of refugees outside the country offer a new and useful perspective for such a discussion. Refugees may no longer legally belong to their country of origin, yet their existence expresses the core essence of the nation they come from.

The case study dealt with in this paper focuses on Karenni refugees from the Kayah State, which is the smallest state in Burma. In the Kayah State, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) has been resisting the Burmese ruling military junta for more than 60 years, seeking either autonomy or independence from the state. The KNPP strategically have used the word “Karenni” as an umbrella term that includes all ethnic groups in Kayah State, in order to resist the Burma-centric state. The ex-chairman of the KNPP, namely Khu Hte Bu Pe, invented a “Karenni” script for the sake of the core spirit of his nation. Two refugee camps in Thailand were centers of KNPP politics in order to construct the “Karenni”, and “Karenni” has been an anti-state term, with its use being prohibited inside Burma by the junta. The category of “Karenni” or “Karenni” identity was constructed as a refugee concept in Thailand.⁽⁴⁾ This paper discusses the further transnational spread of “Karenni” through the resettlement of refugees to a third country, while also considering the meaning of Burma and Myanmar for those resettled refugees.

I . Refugees and Resettlement

1.1. Burmese Refugees in Thailand Resettled to third Countries

Burma is one of the most refugee-producing countries in the world. More than 140,000 people are residing in refugee camps in Thailand. There are ten camps on the Thai side and four on the Burmese side of the border. The first refugee camp was set up in 1984, and the refugee situation has been protracted since then. The Thai government has never given nationality to refugees.⁽⁵⁾ Increasing numbers of refugees over decades have been a major concern along the border area, and yet as the political situation of Burma did not improve, there was no outlook for voluntary repatriation.

The Thai government therefore introduced a refugee resettlement program in 2005 in order to “solve” this refugee problem. This program involved resettling refugees in third countries. According to the statistics of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), major countries for resettlement are: the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Japan. By the end of 2012, a total of 84,341 Burmese refugees had been resettled from Thailand, and the majority went to the United States. In 2012, the United States accepted 5,926 of the 6,668 Burmese refugees in Thailand, who were accepted for resettlement.

For refugees, resettlement to a third country is a final choice. By examining their camps, or their change of living environment, refugees made the necessary decisions. The major reason for refugees to choose resettlement was to improve their children’s future prospects, which constitutes a major concern in the camps. Some people are motivated by an expectant good income, others decide to use the chance of resettlement as a preparation

for future voluntary repatriation to their home village in Burma.

On the other hand, moving to a new social environment is stressful, especially for the elderly. Expectations about resettlement are different among family members. At the beginning of the process, some couples divorce, others rush to create new households in order to settle together in a new country. These choices reflect different household strategies for survival. For example, a son or daughter over eighteen years of age can apply alone and resettle first, and later bring in their parents from the camp after their new life has been stabilized.

1.2. Refugee Resettlement in the United States

Life in the United States

Resettled refugees receive various types of official assistance. In the beginning, a lump sum of 425 to 1,100 US dollars is paid to a refugee as temporary arrival assistance. The cash assistance differs from state to state. Food stamps, in the amount of 180 dollars per month are provided to each refugee, and they can be used to purchase food. Medical assistance is used for medical services. Refugee cash assistance of 250 dollars per month is provided for the first eight months after their arrival, and for low-income families, about 800 to 900 dollars is paid per household as temporary assistance to the needy. Based on this assistance, refugees are expected to be economically self-reliant within four to six months. Food stamps and other services decrease as income rises. A volunteer agency (VOLAG) funded by the government prepares housing and allocates caseworkers to refugees, and several umbrella organizations provide services to them.

Karenni refugees start their new life by taking the following steps. A caseworker comes to the airport to assist the refugees and take them to their new place of residence, and the caseworker arranges an interpreter and provides English language classes for them. The worker is not always a person of Burmese origin. Lack of interpreter is a common difficulty, and it is not rare for people to interpret via long distance telephone calls.

Most of the Karenni refugees work in meatpacking factories. Other works for them include box packing or line-operation in perfume, deodorant, or cake factories, sushi-making in buffet restaurants, room cleaning in hotels, picking vegetables, drink-label checking work, and carrying tasks in frozen pizza factories, and those less skilled workers receive a low salary. Wages range from seven to nine dollars per hour, and the income is unstable because the workday is adjusted according to demand. Life for them is not easy, especially owing to language barriers, work style, and health care,⁽⁶⁾ and some declared that they had been refugees twice, the first time in Thailand and the second time in America.

Karenni refugees began to resettle in the United States in larger numbers beginning in 2008 and 2009, and by 2012, when I conducted this research, the majority of the people I spoke to were receiving food stamps for their survival. Economically, life in the United States was hard for them, and hence with a view to seek a better environment, refugees tend to move to better places of residence. This secondary migration and dwelling together are some of the strategies they use to live in their new environment.

Secondary Migration and Refugee Experiences

Secondary migration is commonly seen as a way of life. They seek better places to live in, and so they move to towns where adequate assistance for Burmese refugees is provided. A survey of Karen refugees in City W found that just three years after arrival eighteen of 25 families had already moved to a different location, and only seven families remained.⁽⁷⁾

Dwelling together eases daily life to a degree, being able to use their mother tongue helps to make life less stressful, and children can easily find friends to play with in the neighborhood.⁽⁸⁾ As they do not need to use English, some people adopt the lifestyle of dwelling together in the same apartment, as “here, we are living like refugees (*doukhadee lou nee dee*.)” I shall analyze the significance of this phrase later.

As regards Asian countries, the United States has accepted tens of thousands of Hmong refugees from Laos, ever since the political changes occurred in the nations of Indochina. Although the Hmong and the refugees from Burma are both from camps in Thailand, their refugee experience is quite different. The main difference is the “quality” of refugee experience. Compared with Hmong refugees, the Burmese refugees stay in refugee camps for an average of more than ten years, and some even as long as 25 years. Protracted life as a refugee has many negative effects, especially as regards future prospects. One “positive” aspect of the prolonged refugee experience, particularly for youth, consists in the educational opportunities provided by non-governmental organizations. Indeed for some international NGOs, refugee camps in Thailand are a model case of providing educational aid to refugees. Education and the experience of working with international NGOs, contributes to re-establishing life and integrating into a third country.

Although many refugees come from rural mountainous areas, due to their time spent in the refugee camps, some can already communicate in English. Some “active refugees” set up committees or self-help groups in order to fulfill social welfare needs in the camps. Such refugees have gained various skills and are well versed in the methods and ideas used by aid providers. “General refugees,” or those who do not become involved in self-help activities, identify who they are vis-à-vis the norms of receiving assistance. One of the essential components of a protracted refugee experience is the recognition of the self as a beneficiary of aid, and this experience affects their resettlement in both positive and negative ways.

Simon Turner, who studied Hutu refugees from Tanzania, called educated refugees who act as intermediaries between refugees and aid agencies “liminal experts.”⁽⁹⁾ Liminal experts who have rich experiences working with foreigners in refugee camps can more smoothly integrate into new environments. They are good at communicating with English speakers and understand the policies of NGOs. They have been regarded as key persons to provide more efficient aid and promote refugee integration.

In Karenni society in the United States, Lii Reh is one of the key persons promoting refugee resettlement and solving problems for refugees in City S. Before the resettlement program was implemented, some institutions such as the Open Society Institute accepted refugees from Burma to provide educational and internship programs in the United States. Some educated refugees, including Lii Reh, had been living in the United States longer than resettled refugees, because of the internship. He was born in Burma but later moved to a

Karenni refugee camp in Thailand and studied there. As he lived in several refugee camps and Thai villages, he could speak Karenni, Burmese, Karen, Shan, Thai, and English.

The income of liminal experts is much better than that of “general” refugees. A professional translator can earn up to forty dollars per hour, and a driver delivering refugees to hospitals can earn 150 dollars per day. Various jobs are open to liminal experts. Lii Reh, for example, also gives advice by telephone to refugees in Thailand waiting to have interviews with the DHS (Department of Homeland Security), if needed. Through these works the liminal expert literally mediates lives between the refugee camps and the United States.

Depending on the quality of the refugee experience, circumstances after resettlement, including employment, income, and living arrangements, differ. However, the “high” status of liminal experts is based on the thousands of unskilled and illiterate refugees. It is worth considering the “gap” based on refugee experience and mutual interdependence between “two kinds” of refugees. Based on this framework, I shall describe processes and modes of incorporation and experiences of the first generation of resettled people in the next chapter.

II. Ethnography of Crossing the Border

2.1. From Refugee Camp to the United States

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), arrange the resettlement of refugees from Burma. After everything is prepared for leaving the camp, refugees take an eighteen-hour bus ride from Mae Hong Son province to Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. After just a two-hour sleep break in a hotel in Bangkok, they head for the airport. The IOM staff support them until they board the plane, but after leaving Thailand, they have to get to their new home on their own. This includes transiting in Japan or Korea and oftentimes transiting again within the United States.

Before leaving the camp, refugees take cultural orientation classes to learn about the United States, how to check-in, how to use the lavatory seat, and the fact that they should not eat betel nuts in the airplane or in the United States. Yet, some of them secretly put small cut betel nuts in their pockets and eat them like candy. Food and drinks that they carried from the camp are dumped before boarding the airplane, and during their long travel they cannot buy anything, because other than a few Thai Baht coins their purses are empty.

In the airplane, some have no idea how to order something to drink when they feel thirsty. One said his children really wanted water to drink, but he did not know how to order it, and so he had to pretend he was not thirsty at all in front of his children. The airplane food was also unpalatable for them, and as I shall discuss later, eating habits are very important for adaptation.

Besides this, each refugee had to pay back the cost of the flight within three years, as it was technically a loan. The cost is approximately 1000 U.S. dollars per person. Repayment is usually set up in monthly installments of about 30 U.S. dollars, but for a large family this is difficult, because monthly incomes, particularly with irregular employment, are not

adequate. Poor families apply for an extension (or grace period) for repayment. In these and other ways, resettlement in the United States can sometimes drive refugees into debt.

After Arrival

Upon arrival in the destination city, a caseworker comes to pick up the refugees, and takes them under his or her charge. The caseworker may not necessarily be a Karen, Burmese, or Karenni language speaker, in which case it becomes difficult to communicate. It depends on the caseworker if refugees can be settled smoothly. Some caseworkers do not come to the airport to pick up the refugees, and in other cases, even though they are not ready, a caseworker arranges for them to go to school just three days after arrival. Some refugees point out that “busy” caseworkers do not answer their calls.

Appropriate translation is also a barrier, particularly when interpreting concepts that may be different across cultures. For example, a young man suffering from mental illness would have benefited from a CT scan of his brain, but his mother was afraid to “cut” his brain to see inside and so refused to allow the scan of her son. Although such medically related mistranslations are well studied among Hmong refugee communities, those lessons are not utilized.⁽¹⁰⁾

Experience of Initial Resettlement

Although the following is a verifiable story, it seems implausible. A son had arrived before his family resettled and was living on the sixth floor of an apartment. A few months later, his mother arrived and lived on the first floor of the same apartment. His mother decided to resettle in the US because her son was already living there, but they did not know they lived in the same apartment for six weeks. One day, both of them visited the office of a support agency and met by chance. It was the first time they came to know that they were living in the same place.

Due to the language barrier, unusual troubles also occur. For example, a refugee family was escorted to their new house by a caseworker. The caseworker prepared foods, drinks and snacks for the children in order to welcome the refugees. The caseworker returned home, leaving the refugees in the new house, but the family did not know it was their own house since they thought it was someone else’s house where they were staying just for a night. Hence they waited for the owner to come back. The children told the parents that they wanted to drink some juice and they complained of hunger, but the parents answered, “We should not take other people’s food and drink as our own.” After waiting a long time, and since no one returned, they decided to sleep on the floor and not in the bedroom. Finally, however, they knew the place was their home, when the caseworker visited them again the following day.

The first episode indicates that on paper family members are arranged to stay close to each other, however, the information is not handed over to the field staff. In this case, the relatives saw each other only by chance. On the other hand, as seen in the second episode, various misunderstandings occur because of the communication problem.

What They Know in the United States: The Meaning of Registration

In their earlier lives as refugees, resettled people had no official registration except for a UNHCR designation as a “displaced person.” Now however, the refugees began to know the meaning of registration through life in America. Even their names and most basic details could be changed in accordance with the registration.

Karenni people do not have family names. In the case of a male, “Reh” is used at the end of a name, as for instance “Bo Reh.” For a female however, “Meh” is added, such as “Saw Meh.” Yet in America, this commonplace addition becomes an official surname. Such a lack of cultural understanding is common. The misspellings of names are also registered by mistake, as for example the name Htaw Reh was registered as Thaw Reh. One woman was registered with her father’s name, because her own name was just a single word, and staff decided that the latter part of her fathers’ name should be the family name. Even though they tried to correct the name it was difficult to prove that it was a mistake, because they did not have any documentation other than the original UN registration.

The refugees could not imagine so many different kinds of registrations. In refugee camps in Thailand, the “official” UN registration had no special meaning. Food and other rations were delivered based on population statistics collected by an NGO. Some parents registered their son or daughter's name as a nickname, but now it had become their official name in America, and they had no way of modifying it. It was not rare for people born in mountainous areas not to know their exact birthday, and in such cases the birthdays allocated were December 24 or January 1.

Though many refugees expect to get a higher education after resettling, in some states, those over twenty years of age could not attend high school, and for this reason they had to go through a special program to attain a high school diploma. Visions of the future that they had before leaving their camps, often did not meet expectations.

Unintentional declarations during the registration process suddenly became “official records” that influenced the refugees in their new lives. Resettled people said they had no ID cards before their resettlement, but in the United States they had numerous cards, such as their green card, social security card, and food stamp card. Viewed from this standpoint the refugees had indeed integrated into the new nation-state politically, and yet, were they also integrated into the state socially? In the following sections, I shall discuss how social connections and lifestyles are constructed through the case study of City A in Minnesota and City B in Wisconsin.

2.2. Case Study (1): Minnesota

Minnesota has one of the largest populations of resettled refugees in the United States. According to a Karen self-help organization, more than 7,000 Karen refugees live mainly in the central part of City A. Due to secondary migration, the exact number of refugees is unclear, but when I researched City A in 2012, there were 89 Karenni households (409 individuals).

Churches are among of the most important social places for resettled Karenni people. Whatever the denomination, they gather every Sunday at the church. C Church in City A is located near the charter school where refugee children study, and a school bus service is

provided every Sunday for those who do not have transportation. At the church service, Karenni people sit together with local Christians singing hymns and attending communion services. Christians sit in the front rows while the other (non-Christian) Karenni sit at the back. A core member of the Karenni tradition and religious committee in the refugee camp also attends the set of church services, although she never attended church services when she lived in Thailand. She does not have a Christian name and is a member of the traditional religious group “*Elyu-Pu*,” which practices animism. Even so, in America, she comes to church to meet friends and exchange information.

The church service begins on 10:00 AM, and after finishing the service the refugees move to the gymnasium next to the church, to have lunch together. The lunch the day I attended consisted of fried Thai style noodles. In the hall of the gymnasium several round tables were set up, where the youth who can read and write English have consultations with other refugees. Since there was no other opportunity to talk about work, residence, or to confirm the bills and documents that are written in English, if those Karenni translators could not deal with certain issues, they could immediately ask the help of the Americans sitting around.

The church is a place of religion as well as a place for consultation, in order to reconstruct social relations and facilitate lives in a new and strange place. It is not rare to find a new residence and job through an opportunity that arises when people gather at church. Those who resettled alone tend to be lonely, while the church is an important place for social interaction.⁽¹¹⁾

It was in 2008 that Karenni refugees began to settle in City A, and since then the number of Karenni has been increasing. According to a Catholic priest working in the church, Karenni refugees began to come in just as he was going to close the church, because the number of local parishioners was declining. He declared that the number of Karenni participants attending church services was higher than that of original residents.

The priest was very cooperative with regard to the Karenni. Every September the Karenni traditional *Deeku* festival is now held in City A, and the priest provides the gymnasium and church site for the festival. He knows that the festival is based on animist practices, but he does not withhold his cooperation with regard to holding the event. The priest’s ancestors originally came from Germany and he emphasized the fact that the Karenni should build a sense of community in City A. He understands the event as a way to rebuild the community rather than as a religious one.

Refugees come to dwell together in City A because there are places for the Karenni to gather and interact with understanding Americans, and based on this cooperation, several “Karenni” traditional festivals that were reconstructed in refugee camps in Thailand, have now been reconstructed once again in the United States. That is to say, a “Karenni” concept that originated in the refugee camps has now spread to the United States.

In this church, donated items are given out free of charge to refugees once a month. This is called the “free store,” and it operates on a first-come-first-served basis. Clothing, vegetables and other groceries were disposed of immediately, but breads were not popular, since they remained until the end. As we shall consider in the next section, eating habits are an important aspect of re-adjusting to life in western countries.

Residence and Food Concerns in the United States

Typically a Karenni family consists of at least five people, but it is not rare to find seven or eight family members living in two bedrooms, and sometimes a house may be too narrow for the number of its inhabitants. Incongruities between the structure of the residence and the manner of living of the residents are common.

As refugees around the world have commonly experienced, the smell of cooking is a source of trouble. Within a house located in a refugee camp that is made of leaves and bamboo, there is no need to refresh the air. However, some apartments are fitted only for microwave cooking, the smell of fish paste and Asian seasoning is confined to the apartment. In Area E of City A, 32 households are living in two buildings of an apartment complex, and the smell that arose from Karenni homes as a result of their cooking evoked so much trouble with the neighbors, that the owner of the building had to take measures to move all the Karenni into a single building, while the other residents were dispatched to the remaining buildings in order to prevent complaints.

The custom of not using carpets does not fit their situation as well. In their earlier life in Thailand, a bamboo-made house was easy to keep clean. For example, if a child urinated on the floor, they could either clean the place with water or just ignore it. However, carpets absorb smells and dirt immediately, and leave a lasting problem. Karenni children eat on the floor, sitting on plastic mats. In the Karenni style of feeding, children eat while moving from place to place, and not by sitting at a table. Food particles fall down to the floor, and people tend to leave them as they are, and as a consequence the rooms tend to become messy. Some Karenni people pick up furniture from the garbage dump, and the spread of bedbugs from room to room and house to house is a source of headache.

Resettled people report that they were able to obtain in the USA all the ingredients they could obtain in Thailand, except jackfruit, and so they eat food that is similar to what they ate in Thailand. One of the major changes however is the fact that they use beef more often than pork, because it is cheaper. However, they share a common feeling that when compared to the refugee camp, where local products were consumed locally, food in the United States was not so delicious because everything was packed and put in refrigerator, or frozen for storage. During my fieldwork, one young woman who was seeking fresh food was feeding birds in order to cook them. In these and other ways, some continue to maintain elements of their earlier “mountainous” lifestyle in the central city. As they had earlier been living without a refrigerator, they tend not to preserve leftover food, and so similar to what they did in Thailand, they just throw out unwanted food from the dishes. The difference is that in Thailand the swill went to the hogs, but in the United States it went to the garbage can.

One liminal expert, Lii Reh, pointed out that the difference of habits was a source of trouble with Americans, and that it caused difficulties in adapting to life in a western country. On the other hand, for people dwelling together in the same apartment, there was no need for them to behave like Americans. Judging from the perspective of the local residents, refugees might be the “others” who do not integrate into mainstream society, but who continue to live in their own way. In the following sections, I shall examine the approach of the resettled people with regard to building a community and social inclusion.

Building a Community and Living like Refugees

Football is a popular sport in the refugee camps as well as in areas of resettlement, and almost every day after work, youth in City A gather and play football until dark. In City A the youth organized a team with the name “Karen United,” and this team plays against other Karen and Karen refugee teams from other states. Almost all the youth gather together in one place to play football.

Football communities work as social monitoring opportunities of youth who could easily fall into trouble. Lii Reh carefully watches the hairstyle, clothes, and attitude of youth coming to football games every evening, and concluded that some youth misunderstand the meaning of freedom and of being American. Some young males conclude that American youth should wear untidy clothes, have their hair dyed to a gold color, have many piercings, and visit discos at midnight. Lii Reh judges that these signs indicate potential sources of trouble, and he cautions the youth that if they do not behave and follow his counsels, they were likely to be ousted from the football team.

While playing football is an opportunity for social interaction, the football field is also a place for senior refugees to check the behavior of their youth. In this way, refugee communities are formed through sports and efforts of liminal experts.

Refugees dwelling together in a single apartment describe their conditions of residence as “living like a refugee (*Doukhadee lou nee dee*).” The word *Doukhadee* was originally Buddhist terminology, and in Burmese it indicates suffering and those in trouble. However it also refers to refugees. Unlike the English term “refugee” which originated from Latin and means “a person fleeing from oppression,” *doukhadee* has a connotation closer to the Japanese term that is used for refugees, namely *Nanmin*, which means a person facing difficulty.

However, in this context, “living like refugees (*doukhadee lou nee dee*)” does not mean experiencing suffering as a refugee. Rather, the use of the term conveys the fact that even now, after their resettlement, they continue to live as they had been doing in the refugee camps. While living in the camps, people often used the term *doukhadee* or its colloquialism “*doukhabee* (which means ‘trouble has come, it cannot be helped’)” to describe their experience, such as having no ID card to protect themselves, being limited in their freedom of movement and right to work, receiving discrimination from Thai people, and no future prospects.

In contrast, after resettlement the term refugee (*doukhadee*) is used with a relatively positive nuance, signifying that the *lifestyle* of the refugee camp continues, however without the sufferings linked to that experience. The term is used, for example, in the following situation. As in Thailand, they do not lock the doors of their apartments except when they sleep. In an apartment where many refugees live together, they freely visit the rooms of their friends and relatives. American style rooms are designed to have some private space, but they use their rooms for welcoming others who live in the same site. They do not use the doorbell to call the owner of the house, but just open the door and call him/her. Even when they have nothing special to talk about, they still visit each other. This way of interacting is similar to their way of life in Thailand and Burma. In this way, as I explain later in detail, a new social relationship is being created in the United States. They refer to

this way of life as “living like refugees.”

This term is also used in expressions such as “because we are living like refugees, please join us and let us have dinner together.” At first sight this sentence may seem strange. However, in this context, the term “refugees (*doukhadee*)” indicates that according to Karenni custom, travelers or guests are offered food and drink. Hence, the expression may be translated as “we are still living as Karenni, so please join us for dinner.” Karen and Karenni people traditionally believe that they should hospitable and provide foods and drinks to guests, as otherwise they believe they would lose “face” or social prestige. Hence, guests offered food must consume at least a bite, for refusal to do so would be judged as impolite.

The expression “living like refugees” is adopted positively in the new lives of the resettled people, as it indicates the transnational continuity of their living space and customs. Although most people need a mutual aid society, some use the term “living like refugees” with an alternate nuance.

2.3. Case Study (2): Wisconsin

As of 2012, 31 households had resettled in City B in Wisconsin, and sixteen of the 31 lived together in the same apartment site. They were all together resettled at the site from refugee camps, which means to say that the site was not chosen during secondary migration. As I stated earlier, the living sites of resettled people are important elements towards building a community of the same ethnic group, and yet this case reveals that such an interpretation is not always clear, since a “community” may be built around more than one ethnic group, namely the “Karenni”.

The First Resettled Refugee Family in City B

Klu Reh and his wife and two daughters were the first resettled family in City B, and they were the only Karenni family in the city. He could not speak English, as he had only finished Grade 4 in the refugee camp school. The agency in charge of the family was the Lutheran Church. Three days after their arrival their house was not yet ready to live in, so they resided with an American family on a homestay basis. The host family provided them with bread, pasta, canned food and some rice, but as everything was so unappetizing, that they could barely eat at all. Soon the host family took them to a Chinese market to prepare Asian foodstuffs for them. Now the family rents land from the church and raises vegetables such as pumpkin, chili, zucchini, and cucumber.

Klu Reh studied English for several months at the church, but classes were not held every day. Life was so tedious that he killed time travelling the whole day by bus, around the city. He tried to remember all the city bus routes, and this experience proved very useful after he had obtained a driver's license.

It is said that the area where the family lived was not safe, and so people living in the central part of the city tended to avoid that area. They said that ignoring traffic signals was a daily occurrence and that occasionally children were kidnapped, and for this reason adults always kept an eye on children when they played outside. This was in contrast to other sites where refugees lived together, and children played freely until dark. Klu Reh's wife was

very concerned about security, and so she locked all the doors when they slept or went out. She had heard about a Karenni refugee living in an area similar to hers in a different state, whose house had been raided at midnight.

Before long, Klu Reh obtained a job at a deodorant packing factory, working from (2:00 to 10:00) PM or (3:00 to 11:00) PM. Before obtaining a driver’s license he used to go to the factory by riding a series of buses, and as he had to ride the buses quite late into the night he was scared to getting into trouble with “bad guys.” Hence he pretended to talk to someone by phone on his way home, in order to protect himself.

Connection with Refugee Camps

Three months after arrival, Klu Reh found out that some Karenni families were living in the same city, about a fifteen-minute drive from his house. He obtained this information not from the refugee agency, but from his wife’s friend in the refugee camp who communicated the news to them by telephone. If a refugee's case is processed via a different agency, they have no way of knowing each other across the agencies. From that time onwards the social relations of the Klu Reh family with other Karenni people began. He told other refugees how to get a driver's license, and offered them tips on how to live in the city. He always said, “ In America, the car is as important as the sandal is for the Karenni.”⁽¹²⁾ In 2011, the Karenni National Day was celebrated, and as in City A, resettled refugees reconstructed their ways of life in new places.

Even though the security situation of Klu Reh's living area was much worse than where other refugees lived, his family does not want to move from the apartment, because some difficulties might arise. At the apartment site people visit friends’ rooms freely, house items go missing, rooms become dirty before long, and drunk people continually complain about the burden of their lives. The family describes this situation in the words, “we do not want to stay in the southern part, because they are living like refugees (*doukhadee lou nee lo*).” The term *doukhadee*, in this case, is used in a communal sense as shown above, but its connotation is negative.

The term “living like refugees” is the key to understanding the experience of resettled refugees in relationship to their earlier lives, but of course, terms like refugees, and Karenni, are not monolithic. The “Karenni” society in the United States may be termed a transnational community, but this analysis alone may be misleading, as it may not describe the actual conditions of the resettled refugee society. However another transnational refugee community beyond the “Karenni” is being constructed in City B, through an attempt to establish a charter school for “Myanmar” refugees in the city.

Establishing a “Myanmar” School in the United States

A charter school is a new kind of public school, that is established when parents, teachers, or a community-based organization applies to the board of education, and demonstrates its need for it. There are an estimated 3,000 refugees from Burma in City B. The largest group is Burman, then follow Karen, Rakhine, Chin, Mon, Shan, Kachin, and Karenni. In actual fact each ethnic group does not have many dealings with other groups, but now people of different ethnic backgrounds are planning to organize a charter school for

refugee children.

A Kachin man, named Zau La leads this project. Zau La obtained a scholarship to study in London when he was a student in Burma. One day at a Christmas party he met a professor from a famous university in the UK, and was able to study in a Ph.D. course under the supervision of this professor. When he was about to finish his course he decided that he would not return to his country, since he was afraid that his study on Christianity in Burma would be opposed by the junta, and he hence decided to move to the United States. He first settled with a student visa, as it was the easiest way for him, but later he sought asylum and obtained permanent resident status. Now he teaches several subjects at a public school as an assistant teacher for Burmese refugees. Even though he was eager to become a formal teacher, his degree from the UK was deemed insufficient, and so he said he would have to make a new start to acquire a teacher's license.

Having a license is most important both for him as well as for the refugee children whom he teaches. According to Zau La's observation, the basic academic ability of refugee children is quite low, particularly in science and math. In addition, in the house of uneducated parents, the environment is not suitable for study, as often the television is turned on the whole day and parents do not prepare a desk for their children's study. He affirmed that parents had to study at the same time as their children, and for that purpose he collects donations to establish a charter school for the children of refugees from Burma, through a consultant from the refugee agency. They were able to collect 5000 US dollars in a brief period of time, much more than they had expected, and in August 2012 they held an adult literacy class as a trial, the first step of the future charter school. He is of the opinion that it will take about ten years to stabilize the life of the Burmese refugees resettled in the United States.

A Lao refugee also supports the learning center. The headquarters of the project is in the Lao family leaning center, which is used for education and the daily consultations of refugees from Laos. The owner of the building, who was originally a Lao refugee, provides the space at a low price. If there were no church similar the one in City A, there would be no place for them to meet. The Lao family learning center, which was created more than thirty years ago, works as an assembly place for refugees from Burma.

The most important thing is that the core members of the project decided to use the name "Myanmar" for the new learning center. In Article 1, Section 1 of the constitution of the center, it was declared that "Myanmar" shall inclusively refer to all peoples from Burma. I was present at the meeting that decided upon this language in the constitution, and there, everyone agreed that if they used the word "Burma" it would signify only Burmans, but that "Myanmar" would be better as the name of the center, since it included all ethnic groups. The group decided that the name "Myanmar" is more of a neutral term, which referred to all people from the country.

The junta has used this explanation, and in 1989 the junta changed the English name of the country to the Union of Myanmar. Originally Burma and Myanmar had little difference, since the first was used in the spoken language and the latter in the written language. However, both terms refer to only to Burmans. As the junta took the decision to rename the country without regard for the will of the people, the pro-democratic groups rejected it.

Those people, including refugees who fled to neighboring countries and were resettled in western nations, continue to call the country Burma as an act of defiance of the junta. While originally the relationship between the two terms was Burma “and” Myanmar, it was converted into a dichotomy of Burma “or” Myanmar during the civil war.

Refugees, asylum seekers, and activists intentionally refer to the country as Burma, and not Myanmar. However, for the educational activities of the leaning center, “Myanmar” was a unifying force for refugees, even though it is the “Myanmar”-centric junta that is the cause of the protracted refugee situation.

Conclusion

In general, the resettlement of refugees is regarded as a one-way trip. If refugees have nothing to rely on, then aid for them must be substantial. Considering the unstable prospects the refugees are faced with, this is true. Yet, this is not an adequate explanation of the reality that the refugees face in their lives. As I stated, the contribution of liminal experts (namely former refugees who help those being resettled) for example, cannot be measured by an index of aid used by humanitarian agencies.

Rather, ethnographic research reveals certain common characteristics among resettled people, such as secondary migration and the lifestyle of “living like refugees.” The resettlement process is an extension of their previous lives. First, resettled refugees are being incorporated into American society by maintaining a “Karenni” identity, as is visible in their reconstructing once again their traditional festivals, and organizing football communities and teams such as the “Karenni United.” The constructed community of “Karenni” that was created in the refugee camp thus spread to their new location.

In an anthropological framework, the movement and settlement of the refugee is analyzed as an analogy of a rite of passage, which progresses from separation (fleeing from the original place), transition (living in a refugee camp) and reintegration (reintegrating into another country).⁽¹³⁾ Yet this ethnographic study of the refugee resettlement process clearly demonstrates that refugee resettlement is not a straight-forward course towards integration, but rather a more complex process that includes various modes of incorporation into the new society. The modes of incorporation of refugees are not merely assimilation or integration. Rather, they are based on a transnational living space. As they consider themselves to be both “Karenni” and “Myanmar” refugees, there are plural modes for entry into a new society.

Originally the term “Karenni” indicated the political significance of being against Burma, or the Myanmar-centric junta. However the resettled people now identify themselves as “Karenni”. Being “Karenni” in the American context does not always mean to be politically against “Myanmar”. In City B, refugees who have been opposed to Burma’s military junta are constructing a social sphere of “Myanmar”. We must also discuss nationalism in Burma/Myanmar, because modern history after independence from the British is a history of civil war. Has the country ever achieved the status of a true nation-state since independence? As Hazel Lang declares, the main goal of the Burmese Army (the

Tatmadaw) in the ethnic regions was simply to depopulate them.⁽¹⁴⁾ The Tatmadaw viewed all citizens as potential enemies.⁽¹⁵⁾

Refugees displaced by the government never had a consciousness apart from that of their own “nation state”. For those stateless people, the term “Karenni” was accepted in their context of being refugees. In other words, it was through being refugees that the Karenni finally received an opportunity to view themselves from the perspective of the state. This experience of seeing themselves as part of a nation, contributed to creating a community based on the concept of “Myanmar” in their third country.

Callahan argues that the concept of the country is well characterized as a relationship of dichotomy between state and society. The state sees society as potential enemy. However, this framework, seeing society as an enemy, is too simple to analyze multi-ethnic nation. Considering that even refugees who fled the nation of Burman have been able to see themselves in terms of the nation of “Myanmar”, what is important is to examine how the concept of a nation as “Myanmar” can be built, after an oppressive regime has been established with such a name.

As the case study reveals, although their situation of being refugees, they are reconstructing a sense of belonging in the name of “Myanmar”. A more dynamic, transnational nation building process is developing. The “Myanmar” social sphere being built in City B indicates that a genuine national reconciliation is not brought by a simple problem-solving approach, such as dichotomy Burma or Myanmar. In earlier studies on ethnic issues in Burma, even though ethnicity was the key concept for sense of unity as a nation, focusing on it was partial. Its theoretical framework was oppression or resistance. In other words, only a politicized ethnicity was examined such as Burmanization or Karenni in the context of civil war.

However, the case of resettled refugees shows that even they no longer exist as refugees, as well as citizens of the country of origin, they reconstruct their ties with their origin as “Karenni” and form a sense of unity as “Myanmar”. The current nation-state then can be relativized through transnational existence of refugees. When questioning the form that nationalism will take, it is worth considering the perspective of emigrants, including refugees. The point of view of an outsider could make inner issues more visible. This paper discussed one manifestation of Myanmar nationalism, through a case study of the process of refugee resettlement in the United States.

Notes

- (1) Research was conducted in 2012 among communities of resettled Karenni refugees in California (1-4 August), Minnesota (6-19 August), Wisconsin (20-31 August) and North Carolina (1-13 September). All names are pseudonyms. I acknowledge all the Karenni people who warmly welcomed me in the United States.
- (2) Callahan, Mary P., *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Ithaca and

London: Cornell University Press, 2003.

- (3) *Ibid.*, p.13.
- (4) As for “Karenni,” see also Dudley, Sandra, *Materialising Exile Material Culture and Embodied Experience among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*, New York · Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012 and Kubo, Tadayuki, *Anthropology of Refugees: Movement and Settlement of Karenni Refugees on Thai-Burma Border*, Tokyo: Shimizu Kobundoshobou, 2014 (in Japanese).
- (5) Kubo, Tadayuki, “Thai Refugee Policy toward Burma,” *The Journal of Thai Study* 9, 2009, pp. 79-97 (in Japanese).
- (6) Mitschke, Diane B., Aaron E. Mitschke, Holli M. Slater and Consoler Teboh, “Uncovering Health and Wellness Needs of Recently Resettled Karen Refugees from Burma,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 21, 2011, pp. 490-501.
- (7) Kenny, Paul, “A Mixed Blessing: Karen Resettlement to the United States,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24(2), 2011, p.219.
- (8) Secondary migration is seen everywhere in the world. About Hmong refugees from Laos in the United States, see Vang, ChiaYouyee, *Hmong America Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- (9) Turner, Simon, “New Opportunities: Angry Young Men in a Tanzanian Refugee Camp”, in Philomena Essed, Georg Frerks and Joke Schrijvers (eds.), *Refugees and the Transformation of Societies: Agency, Policies, Ethics and Politics*, New York · Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005, p.103.
- (10) Fadiman, Anne, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- (11) At the D church in Wisconsin, carols were sung in Spanish, Lao, Hmong, Karen and Karenni language.
- (12) A research on Nuer in Saint Pale, Minnesota pointed out that the Nuer people described the importance of cars as being similar to that of cows in their society in Sudan. The Nuer try to adopt the “strange” American culture by articulating it with their cultural value. Holtzman, Jon D., *Nuer Journeys, Nuer Lives: Sudanese Refugees in Minnesota*, Allyn & Bacon, 1999.
- (13) Malkki, Liisa H., *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Cf. Turner, Victor, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967.
- (14) Lang, Hazel J., *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*, Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2002.
- (15) Callahan, *op.cit.*, pp. 223.