

Chapter 3

Discussion

When the language question comes up in Karenni refugee society in Thailand, the contrast is sometimes made between the southern camp where Karen predominates and language use is often described as ‘clear’, and the northern camp with its wide range of different languages in use, which is often described as linguistically ‘confused’. The data presented in this dissertation, however, supports a picture of the northern camp not of confusion but of clarity. Karenni, Burmese and English accounted for 98.5% of all official¹ use in schools, while Karenni and Burmese accounted for 96.6% of official use in public meetings, and 93% of all language use in shops. In the Catholic services observed, Karenni and Burmese accounted for 100% of official language use, and only in Baptist services did their use fall to 35%, with Karen accounting for 63.7% and English 1.3%. Lesser-used languages

1 ‘Official’ use means the public speaking and writing of leaders (including teachers) and the public speaking of participants (including students). It excludes overheard private speech, and also the writing of students in schools, which is sometimes public writing on the blackboard, but is more often private writing in exercise books. See Chapter 2, section *Methodology*, esp. Table 2.

were mostly squeezed offstage into the unofficial discourse of participant asides, or the official discourse of students explaining to each other what the teacher was saying in Burmese or English (Figs 6-7, Chapter 2).

This clear picture of Karenni, Burmese and English predominating in the education system, with Karenni and Burmese predominating elsewhere, is supported by the data on language collected as part of the health clinic exit interviews. 74% claimed Karenni (ie Kayah²) as their first language, compared with 3.3% for Burmese, but Burmese was the most widely known second language, with 52% of respondents claiming some proficiency, compared with 20% for Karenni. Summing the first language and second or other language percentages gives a 'competency spread' for each language (ie all possible users) of 94% of respondents for Karenni and 55% for Burmese. In contrast to these, the next two languages in order of competency spread were Karen (14%) and Shan (11%), with the minor languages Kayaw, Kayan and Manaw accounting for between 6% and 8% each. English was reported known by only 1.1%.

In schools, speech is dominated by Karenni and Burmese, and writing is dominated by Burmese and English. Most students are Karenni native speakers³; but most study materials are in Burmese, and are those used in the Burmese school system⁴. As students progress through the school system, there is a shift from Karenni to Burmese in the speech of both teachers and students (Figs 2 & 3, Chapter 2). In particular there is a collapse in the use of Karenni by both teachers and students after middle school, and this corresponds to the point at which Burmese and Karenni stop being taught in

2 Two names for the same language; see Chapter 2, section *Karenni state, ethnicity and languages*.

3 extrapolating from clinic exit interviews in this study, which excluded children; also extrapolating from the household survey conducted by Consortium-Thailand (2001) which reported on the language proficiency of householders (but not their children).

4 See Chapter 1, section *Language policy of the Karenni National Progressive Party*.

schools, also the point at which English is supposed to take over as the language of instruction for all subjects.

While the data presented here do show a perceptible increase in the use of English as students progress through the school system, they show a much bigger increase in the use of Burmese. Karenni declines from 52% of teacher speech in primary school to just 3.5% at post-10, while over the same period Burmese increases from 37.4% to 66.8%. Although use of English rises from 10.5% of teacher speech in primary to 29.2% in post-10, it remains essentially an adjunct to Karenni and Burmese, as can be seen in Fig 14⁵.

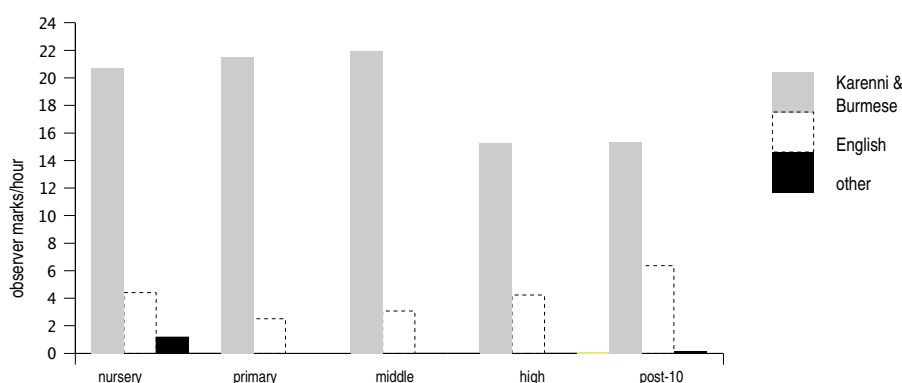


Fig 14: English in teacher speech contrasted with Karenni and Burmese
total recorded language occurrences - means for each classroom type

Teachers' language skills vary widely in the range of languages handled, also in level of proficiency, and this reflects the wide variety of education and personal history⁶. Language proficiency data collected in the northern camp in 2001 allows a comparison between teachers and householders, and helps to explain the pattern of language use in schools seen in the current study (see

⁵ Use of English in nursery schools is discounted from this argument as it consists of practising the alphabet and singing songs in English, rather than real communication. See Chapter 2, Fig 2, accompanying text and footnote.

⁶ anecdotal evidence.

Fig 15, below). Teachers' facility in Burmese, in contrast to their students, and their poor grasp of English, not much better than their students, explains the continued popularity of Burmese in the classroom, and the difficulties both teachers and students have experienced handling the switch to English. Fig 15 shows 'can speak easily' responses; only when 'with difficulty' responses are included does the use of English as the preferred teaching medium seem at all practicable - while only a further 11% of householders reported being able to speak English 'with difficulty', an additional 62% of teachers did⁷.

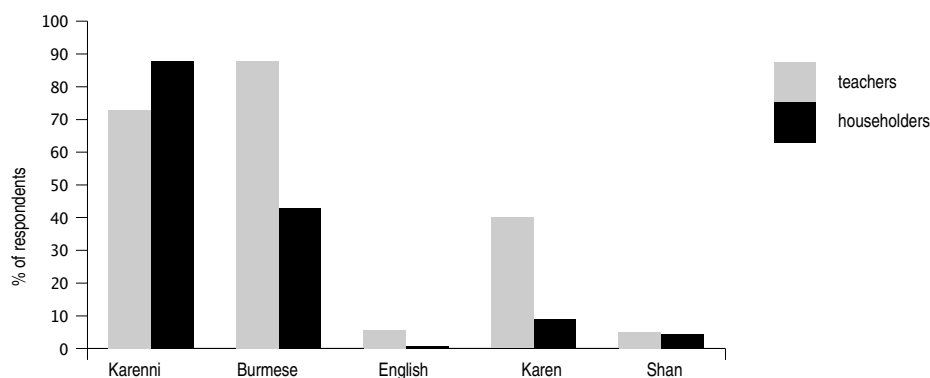


Fig 15: Languages known by teachers and householders, northern Karenni camp, 2001: 'can speak easily' responses
(Consortium-Thailand, 2001)

The switch from Burmese or Karenni to English in students' writing as they progress through the school levels can be seen clearly in the data (Figs 4 & 5, Chapter 2). Compared with middle school, in high school the quantity of writing in English more than doubles for teachers, and increases by 50% for students. Primary school teachers and students write twice as much Burmese as English in the classroom, but by post-10 the picture has been broadly reversed, with Burmese accounting for only 40% of writing by teachers and 50% by students, with almost all the rest in English. In the writing of both

⁷ Teachers' proficiency in Karen, evident in Fig 15, is discussed below.

teachers and students, Karenni plays only a minor role. The amount written by teachers never exceeds about half that written in English, and by students never exceeds about a third; in both cases, Karenni reaches its maximum use in primary schools, and thereafter declines until by post-10 it is hardly used at all.

When students reach post-10 there is a large increase in student speech, in whatever language, compared with high school (Fig 16, below). The contrast between quantity of student speech at high school and post-10 could not be more dramatic, with a difference factor of more than 3. In addition, the post-10 school is the only school where quantity of student speech exceeds teacher speech, and by a large margin⁸. Student and teacher writing show a similar pattern to speech.

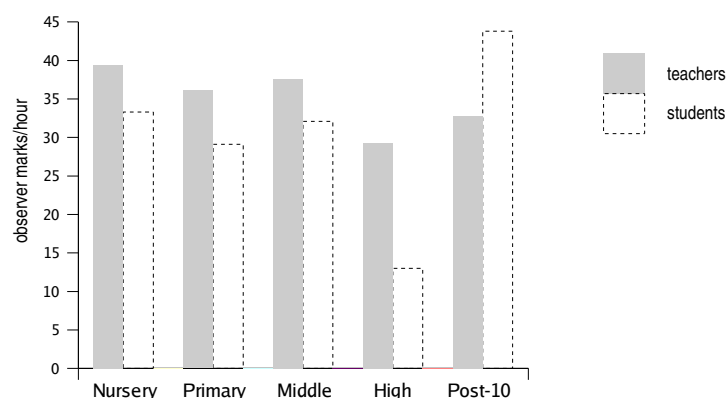


Fig 16: Teacher speech and student speech in any language, by school type, Karenni northern camp, July 2003:
total recorded language occurrences

The explanation lies firstly in the difference in educational culture between

⁸ Although the amount of data from the high school was less than planned, in the absence of evidence to the contrary it should be assumed that the data is representative. However, one informant did indicate current, and possibly temporary, management problems at the northern camp high school, and it may be that the data are in part reflecting this.

the post-10 school and the rest of the school system, and also in differences between the high school and other schools in the lower part of the system.

The post-10 school was established and continues to be funded and overseen by an INGO. In earlier years it was staffed mainly by western teachers, using English as the medium of instruction, western study materials and an initial strong focus on English language. Although it is now almost entirely staffed by refugees, on the whole it retains a different teaching and learning culture from the rest of the Karenni education system, with more interactive teaching and a higher level of student speech and writing.

In contrast, the high school is probably the most Burmese part of the Karenni school system, and until very recently used materials entirely drawn from the Burmese system, with an emphasis on writing not speaking, using a high level of teacher talk⁹. This is not true of the middle school, which uses much more material created locally, with an emphasis on student participation. Additionally, middle school teachers in the camps receive more training than high school teachers, and for them teaching is probably more of a career. High school teachers are often educated non-teachers who are asked to do the job and are given no further training. Fresh graduates from the 1-year program of the Karenni Teacher College in the northern camp are not allowed to be placed in the high school – probably because they are by and large too young¹⁰, and probably because they are seen as having not enough education to teach in a high school.

If language use in education is dominated by the Big 3 of Karenni, Burmese and English, other public settings, as investigated in this dissertation, are dominated by the Big 2 of Karenni and Burmese. English appears on the

⁹ The information in this paragraph is from Katie Julian (personal communication).

¹⁰ In Burmese education culture, teachers who are only slightly older than their students have great difficulty establishing their credibility.

margin - as the third of three languages used for written materials at public meetings, amounting to 1.3% of all language use recorded there, or as joint 9th in a list of second or other languages reported known by clinic out-patients, constituting 1% of responses in that category. In places of worship it is not used at all except in Baptist pastors' non-singing speech, amounting to just 1.3% of recorded output of that type; and in shops a single 4-minute transaction in English constituted 0.1% of all recorded language use in that setting. English, however, is the language of most cross-cultural communication, internal and external, for INGOs working in Karenni camps. Many meetings, trainings and other communications are conducted wholly or partly in English, but none of this language use has been captured by the present data collection.

The data from places of worship confirm the expectation¹¹ of complexity and diversity in that setting. In two out of three sampled Catholic churches, all official speech was in Karenni, while in the third there was a partial role for Burmese. Baptist services were dominated by the use of Karen, but included a large role for Karenni in the pastor's speech, plus fragments of Burmese across all roles, and even a fragment of English. Catholic texts are mostly in Karenni roman script, but the newer Karenni camp script texts are used in some places; Baptist texts are mostly in Karen.

All the sampled acts of worship were remarkable for the simultaneous use of different languages when participants were praying, presumed to be the first languages of the participants. Some congregations have moved as a community from their displaced villages to the refugee camp. It is not known whether the use of simultaneous multiple languages reflects the fact of several different village congregations, originally monolingual, transplanted

11 See Chapter 1, section *Karenni orthography*.

to a multilingual camp setting, or whether the original village congregation was perhaps multilingual. As described in Chapter 1, there is considerable variety of linguistic practice amongst leaders of services.

The data from shops contradicts the researcher's expectation that in shops, particularly in small local shops, there would be widespread use of minor languages. Instead, shop data confirm the predominance of Karenni and Burmese in the northern camp, accounting for 93% of all recorded language in shops, leaving minor languages just 7%. Yet minor languages accounted for no less than 27.5% of all overheard speech at public meetings and 26% of first languages reported in health clinic exit interviews¹².

Table 6, below, summarises the statistics for reported use as first language, use in shops and unofficial use at public meetings. As mentioned above, use of minor languages in shops is lower than would be expected from the reported numbers of their L1 speakers and conversely, their use at public meetings is somewhat greater than would be expected.

¹² See Figs 7 and 11.

Table 6: Karenni northern camp languages: L1 speakers, use in shops, and unofficial* use at public meetings, July 2003

<i>language</i>	<i>L1 speakers</i> % of responses outside clinics	<i>use in shops</i> % of transactions	<i>unofficial use at public</i> <i>meetings</i> % of overheard speech
Karenni	73.6	64.5	45.4
Burmese	3.3	28.2	27.1
Karen	5	0.7	3
Shan	4	3	4.1
Kayan	5.7	1.3	6.4
Kayaw	6	1.7	9.6
Manaw	2	0.1	3.9
Bre	0.33	-	0.5

*private speech or asides

It is remarkable that minor languages appear to be used four times more as informal circulators or explicators of information at public meetings than they are in shops. One possible explanation is that for some the language of the home does not reach even the local shop, but does reach a community meeting providing family members, and perhaps immediate neighbours, go to the meeting together. If true, this would be significant in a camp containing one shop per 191 residents¹³. An alternative explanation is that communities of lesser-used language users are clustered, and use of these languages is concentrated in certain parts of the camp. These possibilities are explored further in the following paragraphs.

Kayaw was used in 19 transactions, amounting to 2% of all transactions, at 10 of the 41 observed shops. Transactions in Kayaw were 83% with customers and the remainder with friends of the shopkeeper, in contrast to, for example, those in Kayan, which were distributed almost equally among friends and

13 In July 2003 there were 90 shops and in 2002 the population was 17,204.

customers. The Kayaw transactions were geographically clustered: there was a single shop with 4 transactions, 2 with 3 transactions, 2 with 2, and 5 shops each with 1 transaction. Additionally, four camp sections, out of more than 25 sections¹⁴, accounted for 18 of the 19 transactions, with a single section accounting for 7. A third of Kayaw transactions used only that language, in a further two thirds of transactions Kayaw was the primary language used and was shared usually with Karenni, and in the remaining third of transactions it was secondary, usually to Karenni.

The picture for the other minor languages is quite similar, all showing geographic clustering, most being used alongside other languages, usually Karenni or Burmese, sometimes being the primary language used, sometimes the secondary. The relative proportion of customers, friends and people visiting on other business varies from language to language, with Karen and Shan showing greater numbers of business (non-shopping) transactions, which perhaps reflects their wider regional roles as *lingua francas*. A similar variation is evident in the mean times of transactions, with Shan-language transactions at twice the overall mean time.

One explanation for the sharing of languages in transactions is code-switching; an alternative explanation, in the case where shopkeeper and visitor do not know each other, is that a transaction begins tentatively in one language and then continues in a language that both shopkeeper and customer know adequately.

Before being uprooted and dispersed, many villages in Kayah state were reported to be monolingual¹⁵. The current data support the argument that remnants of these language communities are now living in Karenni northern

¹⁴ The camp was being reconfigured at the time of the data collection, and sections were being moved and renumbered.

¹⁵ See Chapter 1, section *Karenni state, ethnicity and languages*.

camp. The shops where these languages are used are in clusters, and this suggests that the communities are clustered¹⁶. However, it is possible that speakers of languages such as Kayaw will use their community language in shops if they can, but if not they will use another language, and the clustering of shops may not signify anything about the wider language community. The fact remains that only 7% of language use in shops was in languages other than Karenni or Burmese, whereas outside health clinics 22.7% of respondents reported a first language other than Karenni or Burmese. This strongly suggests that most L1 speakers of lesser-used languages are using another language when they shop. If true, the implication is that for most users of these languages, their L1, probably used at home, and certainly used at public meetings to talk with relatives and neighbours, does not reach the place where they do most of their shopping.

Outpatient consultations at Karenni northern camp were conducted almostly entirely in Karenni (84% of responses) and Burmese (16%), and this probably reflects physicians' language abilities. It is reasonable to assume that patients communicate with physicians in the language they feel most comfortable in, and that they will use their first language if possible¹⁷. Clinics are the only locale where Karenni appears demonstrably to be used by numbers of L2 and L3 speakers – more than 10%, assuming that all L1 Karenni speakers use their own language and not Burmese.

May (2000) describes how minority languages, in order to survive, need *legitimation*, in other words they need to be given status within the law

16 In Burmese refugee camps in Thailand, ethnic and religious groups are often clustered, but this may not apply to members of small sub-groups.

17 Some educated Karen and Karenni informants have stressed the degree of technical development of Burmese compared to their own native languages. If they want to discuss technical or sophisticated or 'modern' ideas, even among themselves, there is a tendency to use Burmese. In the present case, most outpatients are likely to have a low level of education, and the argument about technical facility probably does not apply.

alongside any majority languages; and *institutionalisation*, in other words they need to be incorporated into civil society, to be in everyday use in a range of public domains. In the northern camp only Karenni, Burmese and English have either legitimation or institutionalisation. For Karen and Shan and perhaps Kayan, widely used elsewhere, this may not matter; but for community languages such as Kayaw, Manaw and Bre, the future would seem bleak. The evidence is that these languages are not officially supported in Kayah state¹⁸, so the argument cannot be made that it is only in Karenni refugee camps that their decline appears inevitable. The fact appears to be that these languages found their support in monolingual village communities that have now been dispersed.

How does the KNPP's language policy fare when set against the data on language use presented in this dissertation? Firstly, it perhaps needs restating that the KNPP's administrative zone hardly extends beyond the two Karenni camps in Thailand, with their total population of about 20,000. Beyond the border in Burma lies a 100-km square of territory containing perhaps 200,000 Karennis of various ethnicities, a territory changed irrevocably by insurgency, suppression and displacement, whose linguistic picture is largely unknown. Not only that; the southern Thai camp presents a quite different linguistic picture to the northern - dominated by Karen, a place where it appears Karenni is hardly spoken. Nevertheless, considering just the northern camp, the following summarises the data on language use and provides a concluding comment on KNPP language policy.

In the northern camp Karenni is flourishing as a spoken medium, accounting for 60% of spoken language use at the sites observed. In contrast, only about 17%¹⁹ of writing at these sites was in Karenni (see Figs 17-18, below).

18 See Chapter 1, section *Linguistic unification in Burma*.

19 Quantitative data for written materials at places of worship and clinics was not available,

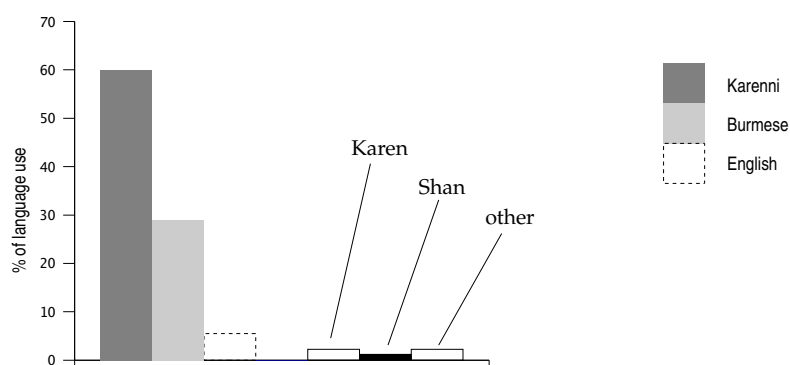


Fig 17: Spoken language use across all observed sites:

*observation categories combined, good data only, weighted by hours observed or reported**

*reported in the case of clinic consultations; schools data weighted by nos. of classrooms of each type

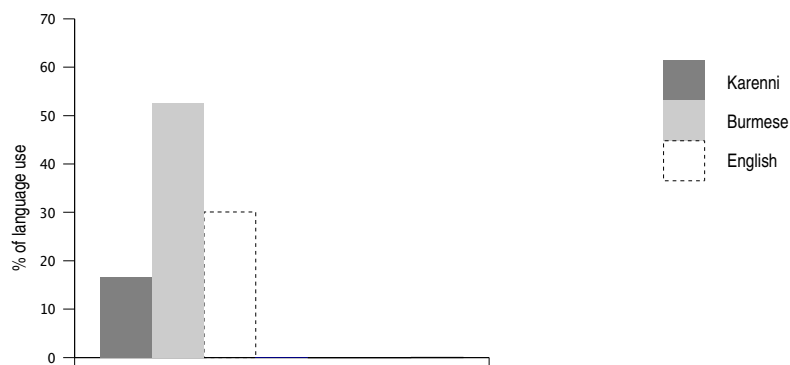


Fig 18: Written language use across all observed sites:

*schools and public meetings, good data only, weighted by hours observed**

*schools data weighted by nos. of classrooms of each type; no quantitative data available from places of worship or clinics

Burmese remains immensely important, being 29% of all spoken language and 52% of written. Burmese is the main lingua franca used by Karennis of different ethnic groups, whose languages only partially overlap, and more than half the population know Burmese as a second or other language. It is the main language for speaking and writing in the high schools and the post-10 school, and most school texts are written in it. It is not clear what effect the KNPP's promotion of Karenni as the national language has had on the use of

and the figure quoted is therefore probably an underestimate.

Burmese, and data on language use at similar sites in Kayah state would provide a fascinating comparison exercise.

English accounts for only 5.5% of spoken language at the sites observed, but 31% of written, and together with Burmese it dominates writing in schools and is also used for much written material at public meetings. As mentioned earlier, it is also widely used at sites not covered by this study. The KNPP's policy of de-emphasizing Burmese and emphasizing English in the upper school system has had to face the reality of a lack of English proficiency of teachers and a lack of teaching texts in English. It is worth recounting here that the purpose of the policy is both to allow students to access international knowledge, but also to look forward to a situation where, nationally, no ethnic group will be privileged, as Burmans are now, by having its language as the standard language of instruction²⁰. The impact that the 'officialisation' of English is having on indigenous languages in Karenni northern camp is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is clearly an important issue; for an example of its negative effects in a post-colonial setting, see Brock-Utne (1997) on Namibia.

Karen and Shan, which account for 2.2% and 1.2% of spoken language only, are languages widely known in other parts of Burma, and have roles as lingua francas. This is not true of other minor languages, which accounted for 2.2% of all speech at observed sites. These community languages are at serious risk, as discussed above. The KNPP's policy of leaving 'linguistic minorities'²¹ to teach and learn their languages out of the school system will probably count as a contribution to their eventual demise, although such a policy probably does not contradict the 2001 NHEC education seminar's conclusion that the medium of instruction at primary schools should be the

20 See Chapter 2, section *Opposition language policy*.

21 See Chapter 2, section *Language policy of the Karenni National Progressive Party*.

mother tongue of the majority of children in the school. Almost a quarter of the northern camp population are L1 speakers of languages other than Karenni and Burmese, and they are probably clustered in particular sections of the camp. Whether they form majorities in the catchment area of their primary schools is unknown. Although in nursery schools about 1% of teacher speech is in languages other than the Big 3 of Karenni, Burmese and English²², at primary school and higher levels even that small use of minor languages is gone, and all teacher speech is in the Big 3 only. In other words, language minorities are not being catered for in primary school, formally or otherwise. A strong view of this is to see it as the exclusion of some community members from the education system.

Conclusion

Language use at public sites observed in the northern Karenni camp is dominated by Karenni, Burmese and English. Karenni and Burmese predominate in spoken language, while Burmese and English are the most important languages in written discourse. However, the use of English as the preferred medium of instruction in upper secondary schools has been limited by lack of teachers' proficiency and lack of texts in English. Burmese continues to be the leading medium of instruction in the upper school system.

Language use at Christian places of worship depends on the denomination of the church. Catholic churches mostly use Karenni, and Baptist churches mostly use Karen. Written texts in churches vary, with some in Karen, some in Karenni roman script and a few in Karenni camp script. At all churches congregations were observed praying in several first languages simultaneously.

²² See Chapter 2, Fig 2.

Although 23% of the camp population are speakers of languages other than Karenni and Burmese, these other languages are underrepresented at the sites investigated. At schools and public meetings minor languages feature mainly in the speech of students or participants who are probably explaining to each other what the teacher or speaker is saying in Burmese or Karenni. At shops there are clusters of locations where minor languages are occasionally used, but the vast majority of transactions are in Karenni or Burmese. At clinics, the language of consultation was either Karenni or Burmese.

About one half of the population of Kayah state has been displaced since 1996, and half of its villages destroyed or relocated for security reasons. Many refugees have been displaced from monolingual villages. Those who now live in Karenni northern camp find themselves in a linguistically complex environment where in some cases their own language now cannot probably be used at the local shop, and is not supported in the school system at any level. Although some of these languages, for example Kayan, have quite large core communities elsewhere, some probably do not, and these languages must now be at risk of disappearing completely. They include Kayaw, Manaw and Bre.

The Karenni camps in Thailand have been a hothouse of community development funded by foreign organisations, and this has fed into the KNPP's nation-building grand plan. This is an important dimension which has not formed part of this dissertation. There are some parallels with the Khmer Rouge camps of the 1980s in Thailand, and perhaps also the Hutu camps of the late 1990s in Zaire/Congo. Dudley's view of this aspect is harsh: the camps are 'a space within which nationalist principles are put into practice, propagated and reinforced amongst a captive, immediate target audience, a population heterogeneous in knowledge and experience'

(Dudley, 2000: 255). In this process, although the outside influences are important, it is, she claims, the influences of Karenni on Karenni that count for most (Dudley, 1999: 5). Analysis of this political context lies outside the scope of this dissertation, although it is probably necessary for understanding the full significance of the language data collected.

R Sproat, Mae Hong Son-Bangkok-Chiang Mai, July 2003-October 2004

