Stretching the Border: Confinement and Mobility among Baptist Karen Refugees across the Thailand-Myanmar Border.

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Introduction

While anthropologists have rightfully conceptualized borderlands as the far end of national identities where hybrid identities de-mystify essentialized identities of the state (e.g. Horstmann/Wadley 2006), ethnic minorities in Burma invent narratives, myths and symbols of nations for themselves. The Karen are a case in point. In political exile in Thailand and in the West, the Burmese Karen celebrate the Karen national day by raising the Karen flag. The imagination of a Karen homeland is at the heart of one of the world’s longest running dirty civil wars. Being squeezed between different armies, militias and warlords, the Karen civil population in Eastern Burma suffered from systematic human rights violations (Falla 2006; Grundy-Warr/Wong 2002). In the resulting refugee crisis, hundreds of thousands of Karen roam around in the jungle, or make their way to the camps inside Burma and Thailand on both sides of the border or have to self-settle in towns or villages in Thailand. The Thai border town of Maesot, in Tak province, Northwestern Thailand, home of many humanitarian organizations, is also home of the Burmese Karen National Union (KNU). The refugee camp in Mae La, 65 km from Maesot on the Moi river, has a population of 45 000

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1 We agree with Malkki (2002) that refugees are a mobile, highly unstable phenomenon and should not be studied as an essentialist category or anthropological “tribe,” but in relation to the social and political processes in which the refugees become positioned and embedded. The term “refugee” will be used here for humanist and definitive reasons, although displaced people are not recognized as “refugees” as Thailand has not signed the Geneva Convention of Human Rights.
people, and is also in the hands of the KNU. The Karen National Union’s military garrison of Mannerplaw used to be something similar of a capital of a free Karen quasi state in the buffer zone between Thailand and Burma until its capture in 1995. The socio-economic base of that Karen state was teak logging and trading taxes, both of which was lost after the rapid dwindling of territory to the KNU’s “enemy” forces.

While the media focus on the refugee camp, little is known about the strategizing of refugees in the Thai borderland in and outside the camps (Dudley 2010; Lang 2002). The religious aspiration of the Christian Karen leadership is also highly politicized as the proselytizing of Christianity operates under the umbrella Karen of the Karen National Union and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army. In the nightmarish experience of the civil war in the Karen-Burma spaces, Christian missionary networks are driving forces in the reproduction of Karen national identity in the Thai-Burmese borderland.

The Christian landscape at the Thai-Burmese border uses education as ethno-national instrument to socialize Karen refugees in a pre-dominantly Buddhist environment. While the Karen state of Kawthoolei becomes an illusion as the Karen National Liberation Army has lost ever more territory, Karen evangelists concentrate instead of spreading the gospel in Thailand, Burma and in the world. These efforts are directly following earlier efforts of Christianization in Burma in which the Karen emerged as keen evangelists who brought the word to other ethnic minorities. The cognitive model and map of Kawthoolei has been imposed on the Karen and ignored their internal diversity. In the refugee camp, it is the image of the common enemy and the narrative of suffering that has united the otherwise diverse Karen in the refugee camps. As more and more Karen resettle in the West, the propagation of ethno-nationalist ideas travels to a global and cosmopolitan Karen Diaspora.

**Stretching the Border**

My argument is that the Christian Karen succeed to “stretch” the border by claiming spaces in the borderland and mobilizing international support of humanitarian NGO’s, especially Christian NGO’s, on their behalf. By using the term “stretching”, I mean the extension of spaces on the Thai side of the border by establishing dense networks in an effort to resist the state’s structural violence of containing people in refugee camps and to counter the rapid shrinking of spaces on the Burma side of the border. Facing massive persecution and violence, relocation and loss of basic citizenship rights, Christian humanitarian organizations
increase the life-chances and mobility of the refugees by providing material and immaterial assistance. The project of the Karen missionaries is thus ethno-political and evangelical at the same time and calls the refugees at a point where they are in their weakest condition. The article thus promises to explore the connection of missionization, nationalism and refugees, a topic which has rarely been of anthropological concern. It is looking at the paradoxical nexus of becoming stateless, yet reproduced in religious networks.

In this article, Christian Karen refugees become important agents of proselytizing, who use their cultural capital to reach out to the imagined community of Christians. In focusing on border-crossing religious networks, I am interested in two related aspects: I show how the Baptist tradition among the Karen developed in close relation to the civil war and continues to justify and legitimize what is called the Karen “struggle” against the Myanmar military régime. The Karen church not only provides a large selection of services, welfare and relief; In addition, Christians are able to re-enter Eastern Burma as soldier-medics-missionaries in a war-zone largely inaccessible for international humanitarian NGO’s. I argue that the Christian church exercises a form of governance in the refugee camps and in the Thai borderland by controlling the administration of the camp and the humanitarian aid, overtaking state functions. Fuelled by global alliances with American Christian churches, South Korean Pentecostals and international advocacy networks, this project of evangelization and reconstruction is still in the hands of the educated Christian Karen leadership. Reading the bible through Karen eyes, the indigenous tradition of Karen Baptism developed hand in hand with the plight of the Karen and their vulnerable position. Baptism provides spiritual guidance and authority. The Baptist churches are easily the cultural centre in the refugee camps that are politically taken hostage by the Karen National Union. Pastors in the Karen National Union and in the Refugee Committee of the camps are representatives of the Karen ethno-political movement. They increasingly compete with the Buddhist faction of the ethno-political movement that has established its own military organization, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which has allied with the Burmese military régime. KNU and DKBA now compete on the legitimate occupation of the national symbols. In the following, I will concentrate on the Baptists, while explaining their competition with the Buddhists.

2 In August-September 2009, I carried out a first preliminary fieldwork in Maesot, Maela camp and Huay Nam Nak, a border village in-between Thai and Burma border spaces. A second fieldwork in the Salaween region in Mae Sariang followed in December 2009-January 2010.
First, I provide a background to Christianity with a focus on the Karen in Thailand and Burma to show the development of a distinctive Christian identity. I show that Christian identity is intimately associated with Karen nationalism and the project of a Karen state. The Christians in the camps and in the borderland have established global connections with American churches and South Korean Pentecostal churches. Second, I will write about the reorganization of Karen lives in the spaces of the Thailand/Burma borderland, providing ethnographic data on the survival and reproduction of individual refugees in the camp and in the countryside organized in the collective transnational community of the Karen Baptist church. I argue that the Karen are not just recipients of humanitarian aid, but as Christians also claim spaces by introducing spiritual and political guidance. Unlike former Vietnamese refugees who converted to Christianity, the Christian Karen are old Christians who have a tradition of proselytizing among their own ethnic group and other ethnic minorities.

**Setting the Scene**

The experience of the Karen civil population in the Karen-Burma frontier has been harrowing (Decha 2006, 2007, 2009; Falla 2006; Karen Human Rights Group 1998). The Burmese military has been waging a war against the Karen secessionist movement. For cutting the Karen army from the Karen civil population, the Burmese military has established garrisons from where it is looting, burning houses, killing people, raping women, using people as porters, mine-sweepers and human shields. The Burmese military has established free-fire zones along the border from which the people are forcibly relocated to strategic hamlets. Karen people are forced to pay taxes to the Burmese and to provide soldiers. Besides, they have to pay enforced war tax to the rivaling Democratic Karen Buddhist Association and Karen National Union (Callahan 2005; Grundy-Warr/Wong 2002; Smith 1999, 2007).³ Thousands of people are forced to leave the villages as a result, roaming around or struggle their way to the Thai-Burmese border. Hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced people who inhabit the Burma-Karen frontier region. Many Karen crossing the border hide in the Karen villages across the border. Crossing the border to Thailand, they self-settle in border village or in border towns illegally or find refuge in the camps at the Thailand/Burma border, being considered Burmese national displaced people fleeing from

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civil war. Karen whose villages are close to the border are used to live on the border and to cross the “green” border anytime. Some Karen people live on the Thai side of the border, but have to visit their relatives by going through Myanmar territory. Some headmen in Karen border villages on the Thai side of the border accept refugees and do not declare them to the Thai authorities. People who live far from the border have to spend several days through mountains and rainforest to avoid Burmese military patrols. Some have to pay smugglers to bring them over to Thailand.

Although the Christians make up only 15-20 % of the Karen in Burma, the Christian Karen exercise a hegemonic position in the refugee camps in which the Buddhist Karen community plays only a subaltern role. The Buddhist Pwo follow their own Buddhist traditions, and Buddhist Pwo migrants in the Thai borderland rely on Buddhist monastery networks or support from the Thai Buddhist Sangha. However, many of the Buddhist and Animist villagers who had to flee from warfare in Karen state did not have anything to do with the conflict, but have nowhere to turn to after arriving in Thailand. These people are excluded from the transnational social formation and transnational religious community.

By talking about Karen identity as homogenous, the Christians conceal internal diversity and cleavages. It were the Christian missionaries and Sgaw Karen intellectuals who have constructed Karen identity as deeply opposed entity to Buddhist Burman identity. American Baptist missionaries played a key part in constructing Karen literacy and national identity. In making the Christian Karen a crucial ally of the colonial conquest of Burma, they were responsible for deep hostilities between the Christian and the Buddhist Karen. The Christian Karen were looking down on the Buddhists, whom they in tandem with the missionaries regarded as worshipping idols and the Animists who were regarded as uncivilized. The Western missionaries and the Christian Karen were drawn in the violent suppression of the Burmese anti-colonial rebellion that included Buddhist monks and Buddhist Karen. Burmese forces on the other hand responded by massacring Christian Karen in World War II. The hope of a Karen Christian nation Kawthoolei (flowering country) came not about and the Karen were disappointed about the missing assistance from the Western white brother. Gravers notes that the imagination of a Karen state was an entity with huge inner contradictions as

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4 I am very grateful to Decha Tangseefa, who extended his friendship to me and integrated me into his teaching at the College of Higher Education in Maela Camp.

5 The Buddhist Pwo and Animist Sgaw are generally speaking poorer and have had less education than the Christian Sgaw (Gravers 2007: 229).
many Buddhists and Animists did not want to share a space dominated by Christians. Instead, further confrontation was the start of a devastating civil war in 1949 that brought great suffering to all Karen, Buddhist, Christian or Animist, to whom no neutral position was available (Gravers, 247). Thus, the Christian national narrative is one that juxtaposes Karen pure Baptist Christian identity in stark opposition to the Buddhist Burmans. The staunchly patriotic and anti-communist president of the KNU, Bo Mya, suppressed the leftist wing on the Karen independence movement, while attracting assistance to the KNU by the Thai government and the CIA. A conflict between the Christian dominated KNU and Buddhist soldiers and monks culminated in the formation of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, which became a tool of the Burmese military and survives on looting, drug trade and illegal taxes. Although support of the DKBA dwindles, the conflict illustrates the rivalry between Christian and Buddhist factions in the KNLA. After the fall of Mannerplaw in 1995, parts of the KNU surrendered to the Burmese army, further weakening the dwindling resistance.

Gravers reports that the symbolic space of Kawthoolei competed with the Buddhist imagination of the Golden Land. A prophetic Buddhist movement, led by the monk U Thuzana, formed zones of peace around their monasteries, sanctuaries and sacred spaces, with Buddhist Pagodas in the centre, where several thousands of poor Buddhist Karen would look for refuge and free food (Gravers, 248).

Christian Karen refugees continue earlier efforts of Christianizing the Karen in Thailand from Burma that included concerted campaigns of Karen evangelists in the Thai hinterland. Karen from Burma are widely known and respected for their expertise in bible studies and Karen border villages regularly ask for Christian pastors for their churches in Burma. Solidarity is extended by Christian families in the hamlets of the mountains to Christian refugees. The arriving Christian families contribute to the Christianization of the hinterland and establish Christian villages, marginalizing Theravada Buddhism in this remote area. Solidarity is extended to every single community in the most remote corners as well as to the new arrivals in the new camps as well as in the many illegal settlements across the border. Christian missionary networks take care of the refugee camps for which they provide a huge spiritual umbrella and connect the Karen refugees to the networks of the Karen churches in Thailand as well as to the transnational Christian organizations that provide humanitarian aid and that keep the Christian Karen project of reconstruction alive. The Karen Baptist convention is well established and has established its own organizations in Thailand. Its
privileged position in the camp and its firm presence in the hills provide the basis on which the Christian Karen base their identity.

**Transnational Ties and Religious Networking**

My research on the transnational religious lives of the Christians adds to and complements important research on the economic and political practices of transnational refugees. Brees’ article in particular provides very valuable research about the remittance strategies of refugees and the practical difficulties they face. Another important contribution comes from Sandra Dudley whose work on the exiled Karenni in the Thailand/Burma borderland focuses on the transformation of Karenni refugees into modern educated subjects, Karenni identification and the rise of a Karenni nationalism (Dudley 2007: 77-106). The Karenni (red Karen) identity is born in the refugee camp and similar to Karen identity, conceals internal diversity, contradictions, tensions and plurality in favor of a united, Christian dominated Karinni-ness. In a recent full monograph on the Karenni refugees in Thailand, Dudley uses a material culture lens to analyze the formations of pre and post-exile Karenni identity (Dudley 2010).  

In the Thailand/Burma borderland, the Karen Baptist Convention is a network that is based on a set of material (alms, on donations, on American and South Korean churches) and immaterial, religious resources and that is bound together by use of advanced electronic communication on a local and a global scale. The question of inclusion and exclusion is one of the most fundamental in network society. Castells writes opportunities are created inside networks while outside the network survival is increasingly difficult (Castells 2000: 187). The concept of a transnational social formation gives a more coherent frame for explaining the dynamics of durable transnational exchanges.  

The project of the Karen community is kept alive through remittances from transnational humanitarian organizations and church networks and from the growing Diaspora. Transnationalism is an arena for transnational advocacy networks, NGO’s, sophisticated Internet-homepages and ethno-political formations in the Diaspora. The transnational social

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6 The Karenni live in Karenni state. Their customs and language differ slightly from the Karen and the Karenni have their own etno-national representation.

7 While I find Castells’ concepts helpful to conceptualize networks, the definition of network stays frustratingly vague. Writing from a post-Marxist lens, Castells was interested in the modern capitalist networks and social movements.

8 Vertovec provides a concise overview of transnational social formations (Vertovec 1999, 2009).
formation has a durable spatial location in Karen state, refugee camps, in the countryside of the Thai borderland, in the migration schools, in Mae Sot border town, and in the Karen communities in the US, Scandinavia and Australia. The consciousness of a Christian Karen identity in a durable transnational space makes the exiled Karen Diaspora a transnational social formation par excellence. This transnational formation takes up the social figuration of an ethnic and religious community. This community is bound to a common destiny or fate and the ties are bound through Christian spirituality. These spiritual ties oblige pastors in the Thai borderland to assist Karen displaced people in Karen state even if these people expose themselves in great danger. By defying this danger, Christians show their loyalty to the community. The circulation of powerful images of suffering and the emotions associated to them is bringing about this loyalty.

The refugee camp, the orphanages and migrant schools are important spaces of proselytization. The organization of the refugees in missionary networks often, but not always, collides with the interests of the national order and contributes to what Salemink calls the “cosmopolitization” of the refugees. Cosmopolitization here means a greater awareness of the world, and participation in the public sphere, but does not necessarily translate in de-ethnicization. A principle of a Karen bible school, for example, opened a virtual platform for Karen people, called “Karen Family”, promoting Karen culture and Karen language.\(^9\) I am interested to explore the imagination of a marginal, transitional society in-between the sovereignties of nation-states as “promised land.” While the state puts severe constraints on the movement of the refugees in the borderland by confining them to the borderland, Christian missionaries present themselves as saviors as they provide crucial access to humanitarian aid, social services, transnational networks and global ideologies that are closely associated with modernity and education. As the Karen state increasingly becomes an illusion, and as the Karen army quickly loses territory to the Burmese, the Christians now carry on a “spiritual war” and are engaged in proselytizing in all spaces. The mobility of the Christian Karen extends to several nodal points in different spaces in the borderland that are closely connected through Christian organizations.

Missionary agencies claim spaces in the borderland by establishing mental maps: the bible school, the migration schools, orphanages, hospitals, and the village churches. In a time in

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\(^9\) Find the Karen Family website at http://www.karenfamily.net/
which the movement of the Karen refugees in the limited spaces of the borderland is restrained, Christian missionaries make every effort to convert refugees. The Christian Karens and Christian partner organizations have woven the imaginary of the atrocities perpetrated by the Burmese military into a very powerful narrative about social suffering and Christian liberation. In the propaganda material that is shown in videos, magazines, and on websites, the suffering of the Karen people provides the platform for the heroic efforts of Karen Christian relief teams who provide humanitarian aid to the wounded.

Themes that I like to highlight are the metaphors of war and liberation. Christians are at war with the Burmese military that is portrayed as the devil. In this political discourse, Karen soldiers are the “angels” who provide relief to the displaced people. “They march with the Lord.” Karen nationalism mirrors the chauvinistic ultra-nationalism of the Burmese junta. This propaganda is used to mobilize international solidarity and donations.

Unlike many other forgotten ethnic groups, the Christians have succeeded in getting substantial public awareness and solidarity in the West, and funding keeps their project alive. I conclude by showing that the different spaces and segments of the Karen struggle—church, NGO’s, KNU, and Diasporas— are linked in one complex of organizing the Karen Christian community and governance from the leadership down to the grassroots level.

The Christian Karen in the Thailand-Burma borderland

It is as Christians that solidarity is provided and regarded as a God’s command. Religious attributes can even strengthen the boundaries to the ethnic other, e.g. the boundaries of the Christian Karen to the Burman Buddhists. However, Karen traditions and local cosmologies are eradicated in evangelical Protestantism, and reduced to Karen folklore. In a context of mobility, dislocation, uprooting, and economic anxieties, conservative religious movements provide social security, social organization, merit-making, prayer, shelter, and not least social recognition.

Educated Christians are at the forefront of the secessionist Karen movement. Christianity provides the ideological underpinning of Karen nationalism. At the same time, the camp provides a site for mobilization of young soldiers for the “revolution” of the Karen. This is why the camps provide dangerous sanctuaries: In various instances, Burmese military and DKBA soldiers were storming the camps, shelling the camps and burning houses and looking
for KNLA-soldiers. Unlike other more silent minorities, the Christian Karen constitute a very articulate English-speaking minority that historically differentiated itself from the Burmese Buddhists and overcomes its marginality by drawing on the infrastructure of local and transnational Protestant churches, transnational religious networks and a pool of transnational financial support (cf. Salemink 2009: 53). Many scholars suggested that evangelical Protestantism is an attractive religious option for many marginal ethnic groups. For the Karen refugees from Burma, this is not entirely convincing. A substantial proportion of the Karen in Burma stick to their local spirit beliefs. Christian pastor is the head of the border committee that is responsible for the distribution of humanitarian aid. In the New Year, a mass Baptization ceremony is carried out in which pastors from bible schools, churches, refugee camps and American Baptist missionaries are invited.

As many of the villages in the war zone have been forcibly relocated, burned or totally destroyed, the Karen Christian refugees cannot return to their homeland to which they are nevertheless emotionally attached. Two million refugees in Thailand and hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Karen state need to organize their survival and reproduction in a hostile environment. The educated Christians in Thailand assume a leadership role as pastors, headmasters, professionals and activists. They re-organize in the different spaces in the Thai borderland in constant tension and negotiation with the Thai state. In the limited space, which they are provided and with the support of transnational churches and Christian organizations, Karen refugees create a transnational imagined community in which the church is a stable. Education is used to instill Karen national values into children and youth. Education also holds the future alive. Without education, the refugees are degraded to a life of “animals” limited to eating and sleeping.

**The Re-entry of Christian Refugees into Burma**

Christian Refugees in Northwestern Thailand thus establish strategies to make a living, to assist friends and relatives in Thailand and Burma and decrease their vulnerability in Thailand, depending on faith-based organizations. Family-splitting strategies are among the strategies to spread opportunities and incomes. For many Christian refugees, it is not enough to care for the own survival, but the educated Karen activists use their institutional resources in Thailand to re-enter Burmese territory and to actively support displaced people in Karen state. Diaspora groups, Karen Human rights organizations and middle-class activists
collect a mass of information and supply international organizations and NGO’s in Europe and in the US. These international groups channel resources to the activists on the ground coordinating education and health services to displaced people.

One prominent example is the Karen Teacher Working Group, which comprises 10,000 volunteers, called “bag-packers”, from the communities who walk three weeks in the jungle to transport school materials in their bags to 1000 schools in war-torn Burma. The volunteers also bring remittances, medicine and bibles with them. The back-packers who carry the sick to Mae Tao hospital in Maesot in Thailand undergo training in Mae Tao clinic as nurses and volunteer teachers in the migrant schools.

The Karen Baptist Convention also uses institutional resources to assist the refugees at the border and displaced people in Burmese territory. Thus, pastors and evangelists who have an intimate knowledge of the area re-enter Burma by foot to spread the word, and assist church services.

Another prominent example is the Free Burma Rangers. The Free Burma Rangers (FBR) was founded by a retired member of the US army special forces who wanted to help the Karen for humanitarian and religious reasons to provide emergency relief to displaced people in war zones. FBR is a non-armed evangelical humanitarian organization that prepares volunteers in paramilitary sessions to walk into war zones protected by the KNU or ethnic armies. The volunteers undergo intensive health care training and are able to help immediately people who suffer from illness, starvation and violence. Video-cameras and voice-recorders are used to document human rights abuses. In the US, FBR runs a campaign to collect donations and Christmas presents for displaced people in Burma. The FBR is a missionary agent that makes no secret that it operates based on the Bible, but emergency work has been extended to non-Christian populations. In the war zones, the FBR organizes a “Good Life Club” in which the volunteers entertain the children and try to encourage them. The FBR also prays together with the displaced people and provide church service for them. The FBR uses Christian rhetoric in cyberspace to mobilize solidarity networks in the US. International prayer requests and prayer sessions are organized for Burma. The images that the FBR disseminates in cyberspace provide material for a powerful narrative of the Christian community on the suffering of the Karen and play a central role in mobilizing advocacy.

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10 Find the website of the Free Burma Rangers at [http://www.freeburmarangers.org/](http://www.freeburmarangers.org/)
networks and donations for the work of Karen groups. The Free Burma Rangers show that Christians are prepared to expose volunteers to great danger and succeed to dramatize the human rights violations on websites.

Re-entering war-torn Burma with bag-packs is reserved to well-trained staff of humanitarian organizations, including evangelists and pastors, and is not recommended to the old or the young people. The consecutive visit of the conflict zones is not a strategy of individual families along kinship lines, as this would be much too dangerous, but is part of a collective, spiritual project in which qualified activists and civil rights organizations go to help internally displaced people protected by battalions of the KNLA.

**Spaces of the Karen Christians in the Thailand-Burma borderland**

**Maela Camp**

Maela camp is the biggest of the camps at the Thai-Burmese border. “Mae La” means cotton field. Maela is well known as a study centre, thousands of students come from Karen state to study there. Built in 1984, it has always been very crowded. There were 46,855 people in the shelter, with a density of 105 persons per acre. It is located ca. 65 km from Maesot on the Moi river. Very hot in summer, Maela is very cold in winter and very muddy after rains. The camp is guarded by ca. 100 border patrol police forces and fenced with barbed wire. The camp was shelled in 1997 and many compounds were burned by DKBA-forces. The UNHCR, the International Labor Organization and the European Union keep offices in the camp. The people live in simple bamboo houses. They use cheap wood, bamboo, earth and plastic sheets to build houses as they would build them in their village. Most shelter residents had no income or land to farm, and they have therefore become dependent on aid. The families receive calculated rations of rice, charcoal, oil and drinking water. Early shelter residents had small plots for gardening.

The camp is governed by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium. The TBBC was initially called the Consortium of Christian agencies and comprised the Karen Baptist Convention, Church of Christ, the Seven Day Adventists and the Mennonites. These organizations provided the first assistance to the border and established the infrastructure for the first camps in 1984. What was provisional became a durable phenomenon. Later, governments and humanitarian NGO’s joined the large-scale provision of humanitarian assistance. The
Karen Baptist Convention not only chairs the organization of relief assistance, but also organizes education in the schools and kindergartens, the infrastructure of the camp, protection, the political organization and public relations. The KBC is the spiritual umbrella of the refugee camps and for the Karen resistance. While the consortium should not be discriminatory for the distribution of rations, the Christians represent most of the refugee families and comprise the leadership of the camp and school.

The Baptist church and Bible school constitute the centre of camp life, church services and religious life. Pastors provide daily church service in the bible school. In addition, the church organizes bible study circles and large choruses. After New Year, a mass Baptist ritual is held in Mae Ra Ma Luang. A dense network of pastors, evangelists, bible schools, and political activists thus operate under the roof of the Karen Baptist convention. Other churches involved in the camp are the Roman Catholic Church, the South Korean Pentecostals and the Seven Day Adventists.

Reverend Dr. Simon Saw, principle of Maela bible school, recounts that the church began very modest as houses were primitive and people did not have access to electricity and water. Moreover, when they installed electricity, the military told them that they have not the right to it. But the Karen leadership persisted and transformed the camp into a livable place with pathways, trees and beautiful gardening. Korean Pentecostal Presbyterian missionaries bought lamps and computer hardware and installed light and internet connection. They thus succeeded to transform a form of desolate and regressive place into a livable, friendly space in which communication is maintained through the many offices both inside and outside the camp. In a sense, the lost Kawthoolei Karen state in Burma is reconstructed symbolically in the refugee camps.

A committee of Christian pastors and evangelists look after the church service, social welfare, and the ritual life of the camps. Pastor Robert, who is the head of the Karen Refugee Committee, presides over the Thailand Burma Border Consortium and facilitates the entry of the Christian NGO’s that provide humanitarian aid and social training. Pastor Robert also presided over the yearly Baptist mass ritual in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp where 2010 more than 400 people and youth were baptized. American, Korean and Japanese missionaries joined Karen pastors and missionaries by baptizing the converts in the river. Karen members from Christian NGO’s in Northern Thailand visited the refugee camp on that
day to participate in the Baptist ritual. The church service is regularly held on the main public place in the camp open-air to reach a wide audience. The influence of the church in the refugee camps is all-encompassing. The church provides spiritual guidance to the everyday life, education and national “struggle” of the Karen. Karen pastors and evangelists play a key role in the Christianization of the Thai borderland. Many Karen refugees who visit Christian kindergarten and schools want to become Christian because of exposure to Christian discourse, prayer, singing and mission. Conversion to Christianity provides relief to the memory of atrocities, membership in a lively community, social security and connections to modernity. As Dudley suggests, foreigners who come to the camp provide access to the outside world, sources of help, and the promise of a better world (Dudley 2007: 94).

The first generation Karen youth participates in a long-distance B.A. program at the Kawthoolei Management and Leadership School. The school is a Christian school for Karen youth, but also accepts Buddhist Karen. Graduates from the school become community leaders who work in the Karen NGO’s, churches and as teachers in the migrant schools. Dudley (2007) has rightly emphasized the reinforcement of Karenni ethnicity and national identity in the refugee camp. Confined to the limitations of the camp, pupils are taught effectively about a nationalist agenda developed by the Christian-dominated Karenni National Progressive Party (KNNP). Education therefore ultimately serves the national struggle of the Karenni against the Burmese Junta. Karenni graduates aim to work in foreign and Karen NGOs, in the health-sector or support the “struggle.” The positions in foreign NGOs in particular are highly desired, but require a solid education and some level of English. Many Karen focus on education, as education seems to be the only resource left in the refugee camp as work is not allowed.

Christianity is obviously a crucial element of the educational project. The teaching of the Holy Scriptures is given high priority. The emotional aspect of Christianity in providing hope should not be underestimated. While the mobility in the camp is highly restricted, the relationship of people to God is intensified. This intensification of religious feeling in the camp is expressed by pastors in the camp. The religious feeling of committing oneself to God penetrates all spaces in which the refugees live and learn. Humanitarian aid and humanitarian projects have a strong ideological underpinning.
Many families have registered for preparation to settle in a third country, but have only a vague idea about life in the United States or in Europe. With memory of a horrible past and illusions of a better life, many are ill-prepared for a second life in the US. The Christian KNLA targets young men in the refugee camp. Some refugees, especially young men are recruited by the KNLA and some refugees join the KNLA by their own choice. On Sundays, the Christian Karen visit the service at the chapel of the camp. Near to the chapel, the bible school at Maela camp is located. The bible school offers a service every day. Here, the connection of Christianity and Karen nationalism becomes even clearer. I had a long conversation with Reverend Simon, the principle of Maela Bible school. Reverend Simon obtained a doctoral degree from the Asian Graduate Baptist College in the Philippines. Before teaching at Maela bible school, he has been a professor of theology at the Burma Institute of Theology in Yangoon. The ministry in the camp does depend on outside support. Due to generous funding from American and Korean churches, Maela bible school expanded to an officially recognized college in which students come from far places outside the camp to learn about the bible. Reverend Simon is talking about God’s mysterious plan to liberate the Karen from the suffering and to return them their promised land. He compares the Karen to the saved ones on Noa’s ark. Maela Bible school thus becomes a key project in the missionary world plans of American and South Korean churches. In Maela camp, Christian, Buddhist and Muslim communities have established their own places of worship. Religious missionary movements, Protestant evangelists, Pentecostal movements, Buddhist charismatic movements, and the Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jama’at have all established a presence in Mae La camp. Mae La Camp is thus imagined as God’s plan to establish “heaven on earth.” While institutional development was difficult in numerous camps, the durability and concentration in Mae La camp enabled the élite to pursue their political project.

The countryside

The Christians in the villages extend their solidarity to the refugees and provide shelter and food to them. However, this solidarity is limited. As many Karen villagers struggle with the capitalist economy and have just enough rice to eat, the refugees are a burden. The refugees then try to build their own poor houses with cheap materials and work as wage-laborers for the Thai Karen farmers, who are mostly landowners. Here, I want to give the examples of

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two villages. The village of Huay Nam Nak is located on the Thai-Burmese border at the Moi river in Tak province and is accessible via a small lane. Huay Nam Nak has a Buddhist temple, a protestant Baptist church, and a Catholic church. Huay Nam Nak is a large village. Huay Nam Nak lies on the Moei River, the river is very shallow, and Karen live on both sides of the border. After the fall of KNU-Mannerplaw in 1995, and during the dry-season, many Karen flew from poverty and violence, and cross the shallow river. After days in the jungle, they find refuge in the villages, dozens sleeping in cramped rooms. People in the village provide shelter, although they many do not have kinship relations or food to spare. After some time, these families try to return or construct their own huts. Plenty of people thus stay on in the houses, especially young people, who lost their parents or relatives. They work as helping hands in the house, without income, but for shelter and food. These people are invisible on the first sight as they live hidden in small huts in the fields. Some people, like Ray, marry with local women, and build their own houses. Some people survive by working the land of local people or raise chicken. There are some interesting connections of Burmese nationals living in Huay Nam Nak to other spaces of the Karen Christians. The assistant to the pastor in the protestant village chapel is a Burma national who cannot converse in Thai and thus teaches Bible in Karen language. He is graduated from bible school in Maela camp. On every Sunday, the church offers services for parents, for women, for youth. In a warm atmosphere, they pray, study the bible and sing hymns together. Because of the closure of the Catholic Church, prayer, singing and studying is hold in the private space of the house. A missionary from Karen Baptist Convention in Chiang Mai also moved to Huay Nam Nak. The Foundation provides educational scholarships for Karen children of poor parents. A Catholic missionary also stays in the village. Ray, a young man, comes from a remote village in Karen state. Ray made his way through the jungle to the Thai border and Meala camp to study. Back in Karen state, Ray has heard about the educational opportunities in the refugee camp through mouth-to-mouth propaganda. While doing training as a nurse in Mae Tao clinic, Ray converted to Christianity and joined the Free Burma Rangers. Tilling some land of his wife’s family in Huay Nam Nak, he also employs some refugees, and joins the Free Burma Rangers regularly. He employs a friend who prefers to stay in the village and is making a living by raising livestock. This man is a friend of a colonel of the Karen National Union who comes to visit in the village. He left his wife and children in Mae Ra refugee camp, as his children are entitled to free education and food in the camp.
While many people are without papers, Burmese nationals are not harassed as long as they stay in the village. Children who visit school and learn Thai language can obtain Thai citizenship. For the parents, the missionaries help them to get papers, but a lot of money is necessary to bribe the officials. Through the educational foundation, the church and the missionaries, the Karen Christians of Huay Nam Nak is embedded in Catholic and Protestant Baptist networks. While Huay Nam Nak is easily accessible to the road from Maesot, the children’s day for stateless children is hold in the remote village of Ban Hin between Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Son. Ban Hin is located a hundred miles from Mae Sariang. Karen displaced families from Burma join the few families settling in an area that has been officially marked as a national park. The village is inaccessible by road and has to be reached via the small river by four wheel truck. The journey is exhausting and time-consuming. Before, precious teak wood was logged and driven out of the area, but little teak is left in the area. The families settling here grow rice on the hills, without having land ownership, but it is hardly enough. Thus, the Thailand Burma border Consortium brings free rice on lorry through the rivers to the refugees. In a pre-dominantly Buddhist environment, Ban Hin is a mixed Christian Baptist and Catholic community. Most of the settlers arrived here ten years ago from Burma. They had to leave their property behind and had basically no resources. They have become stateless people. Take the example of Roger. Roger lives with his extended family in a modest house in Ban Hin. When I first met him in Ban Hin, where I joined the stateless children’s day, he spoke in fluent English to me. Roger was born in a Mae Ra Mu refugee camp, before the village headman invited his family to join Ban Hin. The village headman visited the camp to sell some cattle and to buy some rice. Although the family was not supposed to leave the camp to live on Thai territory, this is exactly what they did.

As Roger wanted badly to go to school, he joined the bible school in Tah Song Yang. He was to become a pastor in the community church. Roger had no means to pay for the school fees. Thus, he stayed on in the holidays to work for his fees. Now, Roger is an assistant pastor in Tah Song Yang, commuting between Ban Hin and Tah Song Yang in Tak province. Every time he is commuting, he needs the approval of the Provincial governor of Mae Hong Son. As he does not even possess a motorcycle, he has to pay a fee to go on a lorry for the four-hour ride to Mae Sariang. A young man, Roger is not yet married. Besides, he is interested in soccer and mission. In his leisure time, he walks to remote villages to spread
the word of God. This ethnographic vignette shows that the people in Ban Hin, although vulnerable, have settled in remote villages, living Christian lives and immersed in Christian networks. Roger has been socialized in an American bible school and is now a pastor. Without any personal savings, Roger’s life is in the hands of Christian networks. But Roger is not just the recipient of humanitarian assistance and Christian education, but is also a keen evangelist who eagerly participates in the missionization of this remote corner of Northern Thailand. He is part of a whole community of Christian refugees who participates in the missionization of the Karens in Thailand. The example of Ray in Huay Nam Nak shows that many Karens who are not Christian, convert on their journey to Thailand by becoming embedded in Christian networks.

**Conclusionary Remarks**

In this paper, I show the centrality of Christian networks for the social security and social mobility of Karen refugees. In a hostile environment, and harassed by the state, unable to return home in Burma, the Baptist church on the side of the Karen National Union provides a key location for mobilizing the resources for a new life, solidarity with other refugees and a vision for the future. Far from being passive recipients of humanitarian aid, the refugees emphasize their aspirations by actively participating in evangelical efforts. I show that Christian refugees across the border use the spaces for reconstruction and re-organization, healing and mobilization, education and nationalism. Strategizing on the openings that the ambiguity of the Thailand-Burma border offers them, the Christians establish formal and institutionalized networks in Thailand which they use for training and empowerment. Stunningly, the Christians use the assistance by international humanitarian organizations to establish a resistance and a collective project against all odds that includes the consecutive re-entering of the conflict zone in Burma to establish civil society structures and to provide humanitarian assistance to people, villages, schools in a space that remains inaccessible for international NGO’s.

**Bibliography**


