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Vernacular Refugees:
Displaced Karen, Self-settlement and Non-institutional Protection in the Thailand-Myanmar Borderlands

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
At the Australian National University

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis is the original work of the author
All sources used and assistance obtained have been acknowledged

Prasert Rangkla
July 2012

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the situation of Karen refugees in Mae Sot, a town on Thailand's border with Myanmar. It focuses on the specific case of Buddhist Karen who originate from the Hpa-an plain of Karen State, Myanmar, and who have settled outside the refugee camp system. This study investigates how relations of refuge are socially constructed in an intercultural non-institutional context. Drawing upon life history interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in a number of Mae Sot neighbourhoods, it delineates a mode of refugeedom which is locally created in the conjuncture between local perspectives on refuge and the universal notion of refugees, and through recourse to traditional and modern resources and idioms.

Rather than seeing refugees as victims, or as autonomous agents who become an objectified target of relief, this thesis emphasises that refuge is culturally constituted in social relations of the borderland. In adopting self-settlement, Hpa-an Karen people's access to security is intimately intertwined in the host-refugee relationship. Vernacular refuge is identified as the provision and receipt of informal and officially unrecognised forms of protection that are nonetheless intelligible cross-culturally as relations of refuge. These relations entail reciprocity, negotiation and hierarchy, nonetheless they confer a degree of safety, stability and dignity. The notion of vernacular refugees provides an alternative to the obsessive search for durable solutions for displaced persons by illuminating the practical arrangements for security and protection which have emerged out of this refugee group's struggle with powerful social forces.

In this study, I explore how conditions of displacement and refuge-seeking intersect with three subthemes: mobility, protection and place. The study traces Karen people's cultural conceptions of suffering in Myanmar and its relevance in
precipitating mobility toward Thailand. I go on to examine dynamics of Karen's access to protection on arriving at the Thai border and the genesis of the self-settlement option. My research reveals that this non-institutional form of protection is provided in relatively mundane and daily aspects of social life. Investigating domains of economic transaction and local administration, I argue that the potential for informal protection is embedded in the host-refugee relationship, both in sentiment-infused hierarchical employer-worker exchanges and in dyadic negotiations between local authorities and Karen residents.

Seeking to understand the Karen refugees' sense of place, I explore Karen people's active deployment of their cultural and religious repertoires to make a home in their new locality. Based on observations of the Karen wrist-tying ceremony, this study argues that a sense of individual well-being is reinforced by aesthetic and sensory experiences of ceremonial materials imbued with auspicious metaphors. I further pay attention to their Buddhist projects and practices and find that Karen locality is reconstituted by Buddhist cosmological symbols, protection from powerful beings and festive sociality. By exploring Karen reactions to options for durable resettlement and local integration, the study turns again to the issue of mobility and describes practical moves underway towards a post-refugee status through Karen people's engagement in mobile and multi-sited livelihood strategies.
Acknowledgements

Throughout the course of my academic journey, many people stood behind me, gave intellectual assistance and enduring care, and encouraged me to do the best. Above all, I am deeply grateful to Philip Taylor, my thesis supervisor. Honestly, the quality of this thesis could not be achieved without his dedicated guidance and our lengthy thought-provoking discussions. He is an exceptional academic fellow who enthusiastically engages with my research. For the past several years, he encouraged me to produce original and insightful ethnographic writing, not just to finish a Ph.D. degree. He steered me toward that direction with wonderful supervisory role. I also enjoyed his general support and our conversations about miscellaneous topics. I also thank the other two members of my thesis committee, Jane Ferguson and Ashley Carruthers, for their help to the completion of this thesis.

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List of Acronyms

BBC  Burmese Border Consortium
BSPP  Burmese Socialist Programme Party
DKBA  Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
IOM  International Organisation for Migration
KNLA  Karen National League Army
KNLP  Karen National League Police
KNU  Karen National Union
KYO  Karen Youth Organisation
MBBT  Mon-Burmese Buddhist Tradition
MOI  Minister of the Interior
MTC  Mae Tao Clinic
UNHCR  United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
TBBC  Thailand Burma Border Consortium
# Glossary

## Burmese Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cedi</td>
<td>pagoda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dokha</td>
<td>suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dokha the</td>
<td>refugees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gayuna</td>
<td>mercy, kindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kathay</td>
<td>monk robe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kathay pwe</td>
<td>monk robe offering ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kyat</td>
<td>Myanmar’s currency unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lei palay hpyat</td>
<td>four cuts policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mhaung kho</td>
<td>smuggling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pathatsa</td>
<td>wishing tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shwe hti</td>
<td>golden spire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tatmadaw</td>
<td>the Burmese Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yaku</td>
<td>a kind of sweet rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yetset te</td>
<td>to be cruel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zat pwe</td>
<td>a kind of Burmese performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Pwo-Karen Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S’meing Eing</td>
<td>Indra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aukou aukong</td>
<td>be in unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aumao</td>
<td>well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>auxae</td>
<td>ancestral spirit offering rite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boue</td>
<td>merit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cherla phadu</td>
<td>great teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chong khalu</td>
<td>hill Karen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ku mii aei</td>
<td>sweet glutinous rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lakhao khaichoo</td>
<td>wrist-tying ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ma boue</td>
<td>merit-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mao</td>
<td>pleasant, fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>payong</td>
<td>Burman ethnic group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pleu hla</td>
<td>person’s soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ploe</td>
<td>Pwo-Karen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ploe chaai</td>
<td>Karen shirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ploe thee</td>
<td>lowland Karen (speaking eastern Pwo-Karen dialect)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pwe mee</td>
<td>empty-hand boxing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>za</td>
<td>a kind of Burmese performance</td>
</tr>
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**Thai Terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>baht</td>
<td>Thailand’s currency unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chor ror bor</td>
<td>village security guard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khwan</td>
<td>person’s soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loy kratong</td>
<td>floating festival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mae</td>
<td>mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word</td>
<td>Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pamaa</td>
<td>Burman ethnic group, Burmese citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phooyai kariang</td>
<td>Karen village headman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>por</td>
<td>father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>porliang</td>
<td>affluent landlord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>samnaksong</td>
<td>temporary monks' residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sangha</td>
<td>monastic order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tangdao</td>
<td>aliens, illegal immigrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yang doi</td>
<td>hill Karen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yang nam</td>
<td>lowland Karen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wat</td>
<td>monastery</td>
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Introduction

Rationale

The thesis is about the lives of displaced Karen people fleeing from Myanmar and currently taking refuge in Thailand. As the first country of asylum, Thailand has been hosting ethnic Karen refugees on its territory since the 1980s. My research project emerged out of dissatisfaction with the pervasive depiction of Karen refugees as victims. International organisations, scholars and journalists often represent them as passive and vulnerable people fleeing protracted civil war and political conflict inside Myanmar (South 2008; TBBC 2004; Thornton 2006). The shortcomings of this representation include a lack of interest in investigating how people understand their flight and find safe shelter. Furthermore, some scholars of Karen refugees have criticised the narrow media human rights discourses that distort refugees’ complex experiences (Brooten 2004, 187-188) and humanitarian relief agencies’ collective objectification of refugees which minimises individual refugees’ agency (Lee 2004, 3).

It is a misunderstanding to assume that refugees have no other choice but to join camps and inertly wait to be given protection and assistance. A number of recent studies point out that many displaced persons opt out of the formal refugee settlement system and intermingle with local populations (Briant and Kennedy 2004; Bakewell 2002; Hovil 2007). These studies indicate that people fleeing persecution and conflict have found an alternative way of obtaining refuge and dealing with experiences of displacement. While the role of local hosts in offering hospitality to refugees is not well-researched, displaced people who obtain protection by living with and integrating into their host societies can be classed as refugees. Scholars of forced migration term this group of people ‘self-settled refugees’. It signifies those refugees who choose to place themselves outside the international system of refugee protection.
This type of refugee has been neglected by host governments, international organisations and researchers on refugee studies (Bakewell 2008). They are invisible and excluded from consideration for the protection given and endorsed by national governments and international agencies. The existence of self-settled refugees is not compatible with the current trend of refugee treatment. Jacobsen shows that both developed and developing host countries prefer the 'temporary protection and restriction, including encampment, of refugees until repatriation takes place' (2001, 2). Crisp (2004, 5) says that the hierarchical precedence of voluntary repatriation to the countries of origin over other solutions is prompted by concerns about the negative impacts of refugees' existence, anxiety about insufficient international burden-sharing, security problems, popular antagonism, and concerns about threats to national sovereignty. When the presence of refugees is increasingly regarded as problematic, the definition of genuine refugees is narrowed down to those seeking care and given relief in warehoused camps.

Indeed, the use of camps to administer refugees has been the focus of a longstanding debate (Black 1998a, 1998b; Crisp and Jacobsen 1998; Smith 2004). Scholars who oppose encampment or warehousing demonstrate that the confinement policy makes refugees dependent on external relief—a condition that causes adverse effects on refugee mental health and local resources, and generates hostility from local communities (Harrell-Bond 1986). Black (1998b, 31) argued that camps are not inevitable outcomes of refugee administrative policy, and examples of other possibilities exist. Similarly, camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border are not the only choice for Karen refugees. Camp-based refugees can be described as only the tip of the iceberg of the problem of displacement from Myanmar, while the greater part of the problem remains unseen.

My interest in the lives of displaced Karen in Thailand also comes from the theoretical discussion in anthropology on the equivalence of culture and place (cf. Fog Olwig and Hastrup 1997). Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argue that cultures are not naturally rooted in spatially bounded places, but rather are constructed in the
global spaces of hierarchical power relations. Appadurai (1996a) also suggests that current global flows bring about conditions where a sense of place is culturally constructed in the traversing of actual physical boundaries. The reassessment of relations between people, place and culture has challenged assumptions about refugees. Refugee individuals do not equally and necessarily experience a sentiment of abrupt displacement—a profound and existential loss of place, identity and sense of belonging.

When place and culture are in a state of flux, dislocation even in the sense of forced migration becomes 'a fact about sociopolitical context', not 'an inner pathological condition' (Malkki 1992, 33). Some anthropological studies have shown how refugees take control and reconstruct life (Korac 2009) and recreate a sense of belonging (Dudley 2010), without denying their precarious experience of physical displacement. It is challenging to explore how persons fleeing armed conflict and persecution can find ways to obtain refuge and hospitality in new societies, by living along with the host population and reestablishing their lives.

The study aims to examine a culturally specific modality of refuge and reception. It focuses attention on the relationship between refugees and local hosts in determining forms and patterns of refuge. I intend to look at dialectical relations and mutual understandings enacted between people in the face of adversity and powerful social forces. As forced dislocation does not annihilate human individuals' capabilities, it is possible to explore how the remaining potential is used in engaging local hosts and overcoming restrictions imposed by the host society. Throughout the study, I then investigate how informal, colloquial and sometimes tacit relations of refuge enhance and protect, or restrict and abuse, the out-of-camp, but not unconstrained, lives. Put differently, this thesis delves into the way informal and vernacular refuge is carved out by social interactions in particular contexts.

In the following sections, I undertake a review of literature across three themes, to develop a conceptual framework for studying the emergence of Karen vernacular
refugees. These themes are refugee reception in Thailand, Karen studies and forced migration studies.

**History of Refugee Reception in Thailand**

Thailand has encountered the arrival of refugees from neighbouring countries since the beginning of its modern political history. Since the end of World War II, it has become an asylum country for people fleeing political conflict and suppression, including Chinese, Vietnamese and ethnic groups from Myanmar. After defeat at the hands of Chinese Communist Party, about 13,000 Chinese Nationalist soldiers (Kuomintang) fled to Thailand between 1954 and 1961. Thousands of people from the Haw ethnic group from Yunnan Province of China also arrived there after escaping the new communist state (Robinson 1996). As an ally to the United States in the Cold War period, Thailand was quite tolerant to these refugees. While nearly 9,000 Kuomintang Chinese later moved to Taiwan, the remaining number of them and Haw Chinese were allowed to live in designated areas in northern Thailand, and later be awarded Thai citizenship.

Following the French reoccupation of Vietnam in October 1945, tens of thousands of Vietnamese took refuge in Thailand. The conservative Thai government at that time saw these Vietnamese as the ‘symbolic and actual vanguard of Vietnamese expansion and a challenge to Thailand’s considerable capacity for social and political accommodation’ (Poole 1970, 3). The Thai authorities then restricted their residential area, travel freedom and authorised occupations. A total of 34,750 Vietnamese were voluntarily repatriated to North Vietnam during 1960-1964, while a further 36,000 Vietnamese remained in Thailand and finally became Thai citizen in 1992.

The case of Indochinese refugees—Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian (1975-1992)—led to Thailand’s recognition at the international level as a host country. These refugees emerged from a series of political disturbances in the region,
ranging from the Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia, the Vietnam War, the fall of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), and the Vietnamese troop invasion in Cambodia and Lao and consequent armed conflicts. The number of these refugees was dramatically large. By the time of the peace agreement between the Cambodian factions in 1991, there were more than 353,000 refugees in camps on the Thai-Cambodian border awaiting repatriation.

The Thai government's response toward the Indochinese refugee influxes was framed by its interpretation of national interests and national security. After oscillating between border closure and opening at the beginning, the country mostly implemented a half-open and deterrence policy. The Indochinese refugees were allowed entry and temporary refuge in Thailand since their existence seemed to contribute to the prevention of communist expansion. However, these Indochinese refugees were usually treated with suspicion as being spies from communist-ruled countries.

The case of Indochinese refugees also shows that Thailand's response to refugees is actually determined by multiple components at local, national and international levels. Robinson (1996) argues that local communities' complaints about refugee impacts, the US government financial and political support, and the voices of refugees themselves were factors influencing the Thai policy on Indochinese refugees. Thailand greatly relied on the 'correlative response—or lack of response—of the international community shouldering the ultimate load' (Mantrabhorn 1989, 30). Thailand took the role of asylum country with a huge amount of international assistance. It received hundreds of millions of dollars to run humanitarian relief and manage a resettlement programme for 235,000 Cambodian refugees.

In general, the Thai government has had no official policy and legal framework for coping with refugee arrivals. Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention and the 1976 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Therefore, the government has never assigned the status of 'refugees' to displaced persons.
Rather, they are referred to as 'temporarily displaced persons' who obtain temporary asylum on the basis of humanitarian reasons. Permission for the refugees' entry and stay in Thailand has been authorised by another law—the 1979 Immigration Act (amended 1992). Article 17 of the Act entitles the Minister of the Interior (MOI) to authorise an entry and to exempt any alien from compliance with this Act.

Despite the lack of clear policy, the Thai government's own practical response to refugees characterises its patterns of refugee reception. A distinct character of the reception of refugees in Thailand is control through encamping measures. Displaced persons from neighbouring countries are exempted from compliance with the Thai immigration law as long as they live in confined refugee camps. The government allows international organisations and humanitarian agents to provide assistance to refugees, including food rations, housing materials, education and health care services. The camp administration is put under the supervision of camp heads who are officials from the Thai Ministry of the Interior. Protection in the sense offered by the Thai authorities is only about the refugees' physical safety, and does not equip them with universal refugee rights.

From an historical perspective, the contemporary Thai state has shifted its framework of refugee reception and administration. The notion of sovereignty supplants the previous approach towards migration, which was based on manpower control (Tambiah 1977; Wolters 1982). Those refugees entering and taking refuge in the past found a more relaxed reception. At the beginning of the 17th century, a number of people under the Mon kingdom, which was defeated by the Ava kingdom, escaped to live in western Thailand (Lieberman 1978). Different groups of Vietnamese also searched for refuge in the present Thailand (Poole
These refugee antecedents were able to obtain protection provided by local monarchs, and many were eventually assimilated into Thai society.

Thailand today seems to share the international preference for encampment and repatriation over other solutions (Crisp 2004). The government tries to make camps as unattractive and uncomfortable as possible, in order to discourage new refugee arrivals. It also imposes regulations constraining mobility and livelihood-making to reduce the chance of integration. These patterns clearly appear in the management of both Indochinese refugees and ethnic minority refugees from Myanmar.

However, it is a fact that the actual administration of refugees is usually different from the state's anticipation. As Mantrabhorn says, 'while the official policy has been to prevent or to deter [Indochinese] refugees from entering Thailand, in practice hundreds of thousands have managed to enter and have been granted temporary asylum' (1989, 30). Border areas between nation-states in the age of globalisation are an increasingly porous cultural landscape with high fluidity (Alverez 1995; Wilson and Donnan 1998; Sang Kook 2008); nation-states cannot control their physical boundaries without contested power and complicated negotiation. An example of the phenomenon is the authorities' failure in regulating correspondence and blocking remittances to Cambodian refugees from relatives living abroad. It is in the flawed and imperfect control of the Thai state over refugee reception that the informal mode of Karen refuge is situated—the focal point of this research.

Alongside refugees, Thailand has long tolerated the flow of labour migrants who are mostly undocumented (Huguet and Punping, 2005). This labour flow, as a component of human movements across the border, has profound implications for Thai economic interests. The situations of informal refugee arrivals and

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1 Examples are Prince Nguyen Anh and his remnant army in 1785 and Roman Catholic Vietnamese in the 19th century.
undocumented migrants actually cannot be easily distinguished from each other. Indeed, both groups share the similar condition of lacking formal protection. The borderlands economy in particular derives great benefits from employing many of them as cheap migrant labourers (Pitch 2007). The movements and social relations of these border crossers are not exclusively controlled by the Thai state, but rather by different groups, including these undocumented people (Lee 2007), local employers, traders, entrepreneurs and regional Thai military forces. This thesis focuses on the informal relations of refuge and settlement that occur within this broader borderlands context. The reception given to displaced Karen may, however, not be reducible simply to the operation of the invisible hand of the market, even as it is not necessarily visible to the central Thai state.

**Contributions to Karen Studies**

Basically, the term ‘Karen’ is originally an exonym from a Burmese word ‘Kayin’. Different subgroups of Karen people generally refer to themselves with endonyms following diverse dialects. Existing literature on ethnic Karen people admits diversity within the ethnic category, comprised of a wide range of subgroups of different languages, religious practices, political ideologies and arrangements, and ethnic consciousness (Gravers 2007a; Hayami 2004; Renard 1990). After Burma’s independence from the British in the mid-1940s, Karen people were categorised as either Burmese Karen or Siamese/Thai Karen. At present, the majority of them live in Myanmar and the estimated population is around 3-4 million (Smith 1991, 30), while there are 438,450 Karen inhabitants in a total of 1,925 Karen villages in Thailand (Khwancheewan 2005, 3).

In this section, I revisit the Karen studies literature in order to review different ways of seeing and understanding Karen. The so-called Karen people have been long studied by anthropologists. I present here two different approaches: as a tribal group with a distinctive identity, and as an outcome of ethnic differentiation and
political consciousness. Then I analyze to what extent these approaches can be applied to the study of Karen refugees living on the Thailand-Myanmar borderland.

Pioneering anthropological research in the 1960s–1970s (Iijima, 1965; Hinton, 1975; Hamilton, 1976; Kunstadter, 1979) is inclined to portray Karen people as a traditional tribal group. Based on the structural-functionalist approach, these studies describe the socio-economic and political institutions that constitute economically subsistent and isolated Karen villages. They are recognised as bounded communities with distinctive cultural and linguistic practices, especially animist belief and practices. Iijima (1965) and Rajah (1986) argue that swidden cultivation has cultural and ideological importance through its rituals to maintain Karen ethnic identity.

However, the approach depicts Karen communities as a static and self-contained society. Studies in the group inadvertently support the Thai state categorisation of Karen as one of the 'hill tribes'. Pinkaew (2003) points out that the rhetoric of hill tribe has placed Karen people in a vulnerable and marginal position, in relation to the modern Thai state, especially over natural resource use. In this rhetoric, it is difficult to see Karen how communities might experience changes and conflicts and yet maintain their distinct ethnic identity. The monograph of Yoko Hayami (2004) clearly argues that the ethnic category Karen has been formulated in the wider process of nation-building in Thailand and in regional contexts of inter-ethnic relationships.

Another approach to the study of the Karen pays attention to the intercultural contexts in which Karen identity has emerged. According to this approach, modern forms of Karen identity have arisen out of the cultural crises resulting from Karen people's interactions with hegemonic or destabilising others. In contrast to the previous approach, this research perspective attempts to understand Karen identity through the field of conflicting relations with others. Karen religious identifications, assertions of ethnic difference and political consciousness are seen
as emergent from a process of competition with and resistance against powerful others.

A classic example of this research approach is found in the study of Karen prophetic and millenarian movements. Explaining Karen rebellions as a response to Burmese exploitation, Theodore Stern interpreted Karen millenarian cults as a 'dramatic expression of discontent with the present order' (1968, 297). In dissenting from the idea that these movements were expressions of frustration and withdrawal from external forces, Peter Hinton contended that Karen millenarian cults are rather attempts to 'unite many Karen behind a common banner against an external threat' (1979, 91). In his recent research, Mikael Gravers (2001) suggested that rather than merely seeing Karen prophecy and rebellious movement in reactive terms, ethnographic studies of their complexity are necessary. He further argued that 'these movements signify a continuous revaluation of cosmology and ethnic identity, aiming at creating righteous social order and overcoming crises (ibid., 24).

In the larger context of Burmese political turmoil, scholars have been interested in the historical formation of the Karen ethno-nationalist movement (Gravers 1996; Rajah 1990; Smith 1991). Existing literature has argued that Karen people became conscious of ethnic differences and of oppression through their encounter with Christianity and British colonial rule, which led them to consolidate Karen identity in the late 19th century. In 1946, Karen ethno-nationalists demanded an autonomous Karen state. When the British later disappointed them, some of them became insurgent groups fighting against the Burmese government to materialise their aspirations for a Karen nation-state.

A fundamental element in these processes of Karen identity making is religious opposition. According to Mikael Gravers (2007b), Karen conversion to Christianity since the 1830s created a strong sentiment of pan-Karen identity and national imagination. This religious conversion essentialised and provoked serious opposition between Buddhist Burman majorities and Christian Karen minorities,
resulting in violent confrontation. On the other hand, ethnic identification through religion as homogeneous Karen also generated internal conflict, as shown in the separation of Buddhist soldiers from the Karen National Union (KNU), the main Karen insurgent group. This came about because the process of Karen identification has 'been symbolically enlarged beyond realities while local diversity and concerns have been ignored' (Gravers 2007b, 252).

The long armed conflict between the Burmese government and Karen insurgency impelled a massive movement of Karen refugees to flee and take refuge in Thailand. While the situation of oppressed Karen Christians have long dominated scholarship about these displaced Karen people, recognition of the internal diversity among Karen has led me to focus in this thesis on Buddhist-Animist Karen—the actual majority among both Karen populations and Karen refugees (Smith 1991). This research intends to expand Karen studies to a group of displaced Karen whose experiences diverge from the typical perception of conflict between Christian/Buddhist identities and of opposition between Burmese and Karen people. However, to read the intricacies of these Karen people’s cultural identifications and experiences of refuge, we need to move beyond the conflict/resistance angle.

Karen studies needs a new theoretical approach for understanding the fluidity of contemporary Karen cultural practices. The existing conceptual frameworks seem to be insufficiently accommodating for explicating the dynamics of Karen identity. The experience of forced mobility implies that it is impossible to perceive Karen as an isolated and changeless society framed within a singular or stable socio-political context. The primordial sense of Karen ethnicity is also problematic in itself. Charles Keyes (2003) reminds us about the genesis of the rigid and socially constructed Karen ethnic category and essentialised identity in the contexts of the British colonial administration, ethnographic studies, Christian evangelism and nation-state policies. At the same time, their social interactions with others are more nuanced and expansive than can be captured by the domination-resistance
dichotomy. The way that Karen people identify their culture and identity takes place in flexible and negotiated social interactions.

Recently, anthropologists have called for the need to create a new flexible conception in understanding ethnic identity and its dynamic characteristics. Based on the Vietnamese conception of ethnic minorities, Philip Taylor (2011) suggests that 'the contexts in which identities are defined are diverse and shifting... Ethnic differentiation is not the effect of isolation or resistance, but is articulated and tumultuously redefined in a range of intercultural contexts' (2011, 34). On the study of pagoda worship and prophet cults in Myanmar, Yoko Hayami (2011) argues that Pwo-Karen Buddhist practices exist in the contestation over religious space and power among various agents in a particular region. She argues that analyzing the hybridity of the Karen religious practices allows us to see them 'not as heterodox or immediately anti-state resistance, but as ways in which practitioners cope with the present situation' (ibid., 1086-1087).

Similarly, understanding the social lives of Karen refugees requires scholars to pay attention to the particularity of the social relations of the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. Karen ethnic identifications might no longer come from isolation or rebellion, but are recreated in specific interactions between an array of different actors in the region and in spatially extensive socio-political contexts. While bodies are forcibly mobile, we can see a shifting and flexible Karen identity as well as continuity and transformation in the social world of refugees, as reflected in the different social practices that I investigate in this study. Refugees' lives are not completely alienated or abruptly destroyed as it is taken for granted in conventional refugee studies. The diverse forms and patterns of taking refuge and refugees' neglect of institutional refugee protection even push me to emphasise the importance of diverse dimensions of social relations in the region.
Refugee Studies, Forced Migration and Vernacular Refugees

The scope of the category of refugees from Myanmar in Thailand is indefinite and controversial due to the obfuscated boundary between refugees and economic migrants. The categorical boundary has become considerably blurred in two ways. First, it is acknowledged that many refugees leave the camps temporarily or permanently for employment in cities. Consequently, persons in the category of refugees also penetrate into the category of economic migrants. Second, an unknown number of so-called economic migrants actually moved toward Thailand for reasons to do with armed conflict and its adversity, but they are not able to take shelter in refugee camps. Then they become illegal migrant workers in the Thai economic system. Positioning themselves out of camps seems to prohibit them to be persons that are eligible to be included in the category of refugees.

Overlap between voluntary and forced migration and indeterminacy of the current human flow are worldwide phenomena, as refugees often have a variety of reasons for their mobility across national borders. Increasingly, scholars (Bloch 2008; Engel and Ibanez 2007) point out that social rights violations, as well as poverty and economic deprivation, are factors underlying displacement equivalent to political conflict and physical violence. Instead of sticking to the voluntary-forced dichotomy, I find Richmond’s notion of a continuum between proactive and reactive migration (1993) to be more useful. The model prompts us to see great variation in the level of agency that people can exercise in their migrating process.

The emergence of forced migration studies has enlarged our perspective in thinking about the situation of refugees. Advocates of the new direction of forced migration contend that refugee studies should not adhere to the ‘old understanding of refugee situation as a string of unrelated and specific humanitarian emergencies’ (Castles 2003, 30). This is because such bureaucratic categorisation of voluntary/involuntary migration does not necessarily reflect the reality of people's lives, motivations and experiences.
Forced migration studies has two substantial contributions to understanding people living in exile. First, it takes into account certain types of persecution-induced migrants, who have hitherto been a neglected group. The field of study opens a new domain of academic investigation onto those falling out of the definition of convention refugees, like urban refugees and self-settled refugees. While some articles on refugees account for the conditions, possibilities and limitations of being urban refugees (Al-Shamani 2004; Campbell 2006), it remains under-investigated how protection and safety can be delivered outside the world of refugee institutions. Second, forced migration studies encourages social scientists in the direction of an analysis which is associated with social theories of social transformation and human mobility. According to Oliver Bakewell (2008), research questions, objects of study, and methodology and analysis about refugees can be expanded greatly by abstaining from an attempt toward policy relevant research and the adoption of the UNHCR definition of refugees. The approach encourages researchers to understand what people actually do in dealing with life in displacement.

In this thesis, I put aside the conventional category of refugees that doggedly conflates displacement with social pathology. Liisa Malkki vibrantly shows that to be a refugee is overwhelmingly constructed as ‘an anomaly requiring specialised correctives and therapeutic intervention’ (1992, 33). Based on scholars’ discussion of the disjuncture between the notions of people, culture and place, she argues that the deeply territorialising concepts of nation and culture—a conception of fixing people to place, and a sedentarist metaphor of rooting—have, as their analytical consequences, treating as self-evidently “displaced” and “uprooted” (ibid., 25) those categories of people classified as refugees. In being removed from homeland in a sense of arborescent uprootedness, the person is automatically assumed to have identity and cultural rupture, loss of self-care capacity, as well as becoming ‘a special social category’ (Malkki 1995, 497)—subjects of the international refugee system.
Scholarly study of refugees' lives requires a theoretical and methodological shift from the formal and bureaucratic definition of the refugee to other new frameworks that allow academics to understand people's actual experiences of displacement. Recent literature gives some examples of this attempt. Oliver Bakewell (2008) suggests academics should be policy irrelevant and abandon the category 'refugees'. In order to grasp understanding about refugees who are invisible to the international refugee protection system, he proposes a research approach that 'recognise the “normality” within their situation rather than privileging their position as forced migrants as the primary explanatory factor' (ibid., 432).

To avoid seeing refugees as a category burdened with loss, rupture and psychological problems, the thesis uses the term 'refugee' to denote a continuum of experiences and negotiated statuses from displacement to re-emplacement. The study is an attempt to depart from legalist approaches to the refugee as a person under unconditional protection of the international community, as specified by Hathaway (2007). To the contrary, treating the refugee within a continuum of experiences restores dynamics to forced displacement, which does not necessarily entail the loss of identity, agency and home in one fell blow. Subjective feelings of displacement are a fluid and potent condition, and individuals might find their own way to regain a sense of home.

This approach to refugees enhances an analysis of the process of refugees' cross-border mobility through the lens of the social theory of social transformation (Sewell 2005). In this new perspective, movements engendered by unprecedented historical events, although disjunctive, can be enmeshed within ordinary conceptions of life and processes of safety seeking. At the same time, those driven by conflict abruptly to depart their homeland as refugees may seek and obtain protection within historically constituted social fields and cultural identities that traverse national borders. Such cross-border mobility does not inevitably connote the desire to receive protective intervention and normative assistance from the
international refugee system. Social scientists are beginning to understand that being a refugee is not a conventional experience; there are various histories and patterns of refugeedom.

To subtly move beyond the universal and institutionalised category of refugee, this study suggests that a significant proportion of the world's displaced persons can be considered 'vernacular refugees'. It is a fact that people have been fleeing wars, persecution and natural disasters for thousands of years (Polzer 2009, Chalcraft 2009). These historical experiences of displacement cannot be comprehended adequately by recourse to the modern category of refugee, which was established only after World War II. The subsequent domination of the category by the international refugee system obscures understanding of ongoing experiences of displacement that are not handled through its institutionalised mechanisms. I suggest, instead, that the substantial number of displaced people who find refuge in alternative ways as self-settled refugees, or through processes of 'local integration' can be considered 'vernacular' refugees. Such a category allows recognition of the fact that in a probably immense variety of geo-political settings, and mediated through diverse cultural meanings, 'informal' social relationships and personal circumstances, people in exile are capable of seeking refuge and gaining hospitality. It recognises too that while some refugees easily find asylum and safety within a host population, others go through difficulties and protracted negotiations to obtain protection.

The concept 'vernacular refugee' is an attempt to make visible these commonly unrecognised experiences of displacement and refuge. The Dictionary Merriam-Webster Online explains that the term 'vernacular' is derived from the Latin words 'vernaculus' which means native, and 'verna', used in calling a slave born in the master's house. In general usage, it refers to the language or dialect native to a region or country or ordinary spoken form of language, rather than a literary, cultured or foreign language. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it refers, in architecture, to a local style in which ordinary houses are built. Furthermore, it can
be applied to dance, music and art, signifying those in a style liked or performed by ordinary people. In the religious field, the translation of canonical texts composed in classical language into the vernacular—the nonstandard local language or dialect of the laity—made widely accessible to lay populations the content of religious texts formerly known only to clerical elites. By implication, the process of translation into the vernacular also made the canon available for local re-interpretation and non-canonical or non-standard usages (McDaniel 2008).

Recently, the concept of ‘vernacular modernities’ has gained interest among anthropologists whose theories of modernity and sensitivity to space are in flux (Knauft 2002). The ‘spatial turn’—a revival of locality and sense of place—demonstrates the indeterminacy of modernism and internationalism, which tend to disregard place and to standardise particularities. The adjective ‘vernacular’ is brought into creating oxymora (concepts combining apparently contradictory opposites) that convey ambiguous coexistence and tension between universalism and an insistence on places. For instance, Pnina Werbner (2006) coined the term ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ to supplement a more complex and subtle understanding of cosmopolitanism. She argues that to be cosmopolitan is not only applicable to the elitist and globalised world of travelers, but is a dialectical conjuncture between local, rooted and culturally specific elements as well as transnational, universalist and modernist ones.

The term ‘vernacular refugee’ similarly links contradictory ideas of local specificity and modern universalism and encapsulates their coexistence. The idea of the ‘refugee’ has modern and universal significance, and is encoded in a discourse of transcendent rights. Missing in this notion, however, are locally contextualised understandings of refuge. What it means to be a refugee has never been defined solely by international doctrine. Rather, refuge is given and obtained within culturally specific logics and languages, and it also takes place in locally contextualised arrangements. To approach displaced persons living in diverse countries as ‘vernacular refugees’ enables us to capture their culturally complex
ways of conceptualising their loss and gains, finding and sustaining refuge, and making a sense of being in place. Furthermore, the approach will unfold subtle social practices of refugee reception. These complicated and tacit social practices encompass patron-client relations, borderland social networks as well as traditional and religious re-centering.

The notion of the vernacular refugee aims to resolve the 'conjunctural dialectics between a universal ethos and particular commitments' (Werbner 2010, 64) associated with refuge by examining the way that people across the globe actually seek and obtain refuge. The term reveals the inconclusiveness of the existing system of refugee protection. Its incompleteness is exemplified by those self-settled refugees who do not confine their displaced lives within the formal institutions of refugee reception, but instead adopt informal shelter (Bakewell 2002; Campbell 2006; Hovil 2007). It is also exemplified by the group of Karen refugees with which this thesis is concerned, who gain recognition and security through non-institutional channels in the borderlands. If the refugee is a product created by the modern world, the vernacular refugee raises the problem of 'an indeterminacy of the modern' (Umbach and Huppauf 2005, 7). I use the term vernacular refugee in this study as a complement to the modern category of refugees, rather than an anti-modernist modality.

By exploring the experiences of one group of vernacular refugees, the thesis aims to illuminate the demotic meanings and modes of informal refuge. The immense possibilities of alternative forms of refuge have not yet been fully explored by social scientists. This study intends to contribute to the understanding of cultural practices and social relationships which are fundamental to a particular way of seeking and giving refuge. Vernacular refuge can be a conceptual tool to account for the historically and culturally constituted idiomatic ways in which refuge is given and obtained in Thailand and elsewhere. It suggests that to be a refugee has local, rooted and culturally specific elements which are equivalent to the modernist and universalist components imbued in the international refugee protection regime.
Fieldwork for my research was conducted among a particular group of Karen refugees living on the Thailand-Myanmar borderland, known as Mae Sot valley. Mae Sot valley is a north-south strip of flat area on the Thailand-Myanmar border. I use the term Mae Sot valley here as a physical entity marked by geographical features. The valley's eastern edge, in Thailand, is bounded by Thanon Tongchai Range. Its western, northern and southern frontiers are surrounded by the rugged mountains of Dawna Range. Moei River (or Thaungyin River in Burmese), which flows northward through the middle of the valley, forms the international boundary between the two countries. It was demarcated in 1868 between British Burma and the Kingdom of Siam (the previous name of Thailand). On the Thai side of the border, five administrative districts of Tak Province roughly constitute Thailand frontiers with Myanmar. It has 540 kilometres of shared border with Myanmar. The official population is about 310,000 (Tak province 2009).

In a vast borderlands area, Mae Sot town of Mae Sot district is the most important centre in terms of the political administration and the general business and cross-border trade. It is the location of many regional Thai administrative offices and a central market for valley residents. The town itself was a small village several decades ago. Its urbanisation has been accelerated by the economy of cross-border trade between Thailand and Myanmar. It was first developed by smuggling transactions through the Karen insurgent-liberated black markets in the 1970s and 1980s. Today cross-border trade has been regularised into the international commerce recognised by the governments of Thailand and Myanmar. Mae Sot town, in principle, refers to the area within the administration of Mae Sot municipality. Its economic growth and urban expansion, however, integrate nearby administrative units into an expanded town, including parts of Mae Pa, Mae Tao, Pratad Phadaeng and Tha Sai Luad subdistricts. I use the term Mae Sot town in the study in this broader coverage.
Figure 1 Map of Mae Sot Location
Historically, Mae Sot town grew out of different flows of migrating populations. Local history claims a few Sgaw Karen communities were the first settlers there, followed by northern Thai from other provinces, who moved there in the mid-19th century (Anurak 1998). At the same time, merchants from various ethnic groups immigrated to the town, including Shan, Burman, Chinese, Indian Hindu and Muslim. Migration across the borderland took place slowly until the late 1970s, when the town experienced abrupt demographic change which was caused by two movements: merchants seeking opportunities in cross-border smuggling and a massive influx of Karen refugees fleeing civil war in eastern Myanmar. The number of the former was relatively small, but they have great potential in capital, commerce and employment creation. The latter group was much larger and became cheap labour for the town’s booming economy (See more in Chapter 1).
The incorporation of Karen refugees into the town's employment pool occurred in the context of the refugee camp management of that time. The administration of Karen refugee camps before the mid-1990s was carried out considerably by local actors. The establishment of Karen refugee camps was mostly the result of negotiation between the local Thai army, the Karen insurgent leaders and other local agents such as land owners. Camps, before the mid-1990s, had little intervention from the Thai authorities and no strict regulations over refugees' movement and livelihood-making. A number of Karen refugees could then live and work as integral parts of the town economy.

Karen refugees' lives have experienced more strictures since the mid-1990s when the Thai government imposed the policy of encampment and the consolidation of control. Nearly twenty small refugee camps scattered across Mae Sot valley in the first half of the 1990s were dissolved into three large camps, receiving more than 70,000 refugees. The Thai government, since then, has stipulated that genuine refugees must stay only in assigned camps. Otherwise, those refugees who leave are treated as illegal migrants with no rights to protection. However, the newly-imposed regulations do not correspond to the antecedent context of the town employment. Several Karen refugees staying outside confined camps today are then invisible and arbitrarily categorised as economic migrants. They form the group I call in this thesis Karen 'vernacular refugees'.

It is important to note here that it is not easy to identify the Karen vernacular refugees in Mae Sot town today, due to the significant increase of the Myanmar-origin population. In the past two decades, Mae Sot valley has received not only Karen refugees. Many Burmese students and political activists fled into Mae Sot town after the 1988 crackdown of the nation-wide democratic demonstrations. Economic migrants from Myanmar also escaped the underdevelopment of the

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2 The data is based on the Thailand Burma Border Consortium in December 2009 (http://tbbc.org/camps/2009-12-dec-map-tbbc-unhcr.pdf)
Burmese economy and found jobs there, especially in the garment industry (see Arnold and Hewison 2005; Arnold 2011).

The accurate and reliable number of the Myanmar-origin people in the town is unknown. While the official statistics mention 118,721 Thai citizens in Mae Sot district (Tak Province 2009), it is estimated that the Myanmar-origin residents certainly outnumber the host population, and are probably between 150,000-200,000. The term 'Burmese migrants', in public understanding, actually encompasses people from different ethnic backgrounds—Burman, Karen, Pa-O, Mon, Arakan, Karenni, Shan and Burmese Muslims. Due to the complicated situations in Myanmar, it is also difficult to distinguish whether each individual of the so-called Burmese migrants is a genuine economic migrant or forced displaced person. Today, many of them live in Mae Sot as undocumented immigrants working as unskilled cheap labourers.

In Mae Sot town and its nearby peripheries, Buddhist Pwo Karen form a major part of the so-called Burmese migrants. It is estimated that there are between 50,000-100,000 Karen in the area (Thawngmhung 2008, 24); the statistic indicates that ethnic Karen group is the biggest group. When I conducted a reconnaissance survey, the data revealed that most of these Karen are Buddhist Pwo Karen from Hpa-an plain (in central Karen State, Myanmar), whom I refer hereafter as 'Hpa-an Karen' (For more detail about the term, see Chapter 1). Since the main focus of this thesis is on these Karen refugees from the Hpa-an plain, I use 'Karen' and 'Hpa-an Karen' interchangeably throughout this thesis. In comparison to well-recognized refugees living in camps and Burmese migrant workers, this group has been overlooked by current journalist reports and scholarly writings. This thesis aims to fill this gap in studies of the 'refugee' or 'migrant' situation along the Thailand-Myanmar border by examining in detail the situation of the Buddhist Hpa-an Karen in the Mae Sot Valley.

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3 The number is derived from estimation by NGO staff working with Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot town.
Methodology

This research is based on a total of fourteen months of ethnographical fieldwork—from December 2008 to January 2010—in Mae Sot town and its nearby suburbs of Thailand. I was quite new to the field site, plunging myself into Mae Sot town only to find the difficulty in identifying Karen respondents. As I mention above, Mae Sot town has a ubiquitous presence of Myanmar-origin persons, and there are subtle differences between them. Walking in the central fresh market of the town, I met many of them but did not know who they were. I began a survey to differentiate these Myanmar-origin people by contacting a deputy of Mae Sot district head—a contact person who was suggested by a friend in Bangkok, as his close university classmate. The official surprised me by saying that he could see only Burmese in the town. He suggested that if I wanted to study Karen people, I should rather go to refugee camps. Myanmar-origin Karen people are thus invisible and conveniently taken for granted as a part of a general category of Burmese migrants.

My attempt to locate the physical residences of Karen people continued during the initial months of fieldwork and was possible with two assistants—one from a funding organisation on migrant education and another from a non-governmental organisation on human rights issues. Visiting nineteen Karen residences across different administrative areas helped me make sense of displaced Karen locations. At the same time, I immersed myself in a Karen-dominated migrant school.4 I had a private tutorial in Pwo-Karen language with a Pwo-Karen teacher of the school. My Pwo-Karen language teacher's personal contacts also permitted me to visit some Karen students' families and to join other Karen social events, such as Karen weddings in both Thailand and Myanmar, the 60th anniversary of the Karen

4 The term 'migrant school' that is used throughout this thesis refers to the specific system of informal institutions providing almost free education to children of poor Burmese migrants in border districts of Tak Province, Thailand. According to Thailand's Ministry of the Education, these migrant schools do not qualify formally as schools, but rather 'learning centres'. See more detail in Lee Sang Kook (2007) and Premjai (2011).
revolution at a location of the Karen rebels' battalion, and the traditional New Year celebrations among Buddhist Karen.

It took four months to narrow down myself to the field site on the edge of Mae Sot town. My study areas are comprised of five villages which are collectively called as Pae; they are Nua Sae, Mao, Timboti, Sawtika and Pae.\footnote{All these names are pseudonyms.} In visiting the areas, I was introduced to a group of Karen men and women who are linked together as lay committees of two Karen Buddhist monasteries, situated in Timboti and Sawtika. The group of monasteries' lay leaders was quite generous in giving time for general talk and in-depth discussion, and welcomed me to join and observe their religious spaces and activities and take photos of the monasteries' events. My constant contact and involvement in the two monasteries' ceremonies helped me gain their trust. On the borderland where security is an important issue, some lay leaders conceded that they initially suspected me of being state security intelligence, similarly to many strangers they came across. It is through the group of lay leaders that I gained greater contact and access to other Karen residents in the neighbourhoods.

Along with participatory observation, I conducted semi-structured and informal interviews with about sixty Karen refugees who live in Pae. I selected these informants from a variety of backgrounds: they are based on differences in origins inside Myanmar, refuge patterns, income, economic status and social position. From that number, I had twenty-four informants who were willing to talk more and deeper in my later visits. Then I used the technique of life history interview to understand their experiences of being displaced Karen and living along with local Thai residents. The main interview questions concerned the circumstances in which they had sought and obtained refuge, their social relations with the local hosts, and feelings about their new place. Additionally, I had interviews with Thai local leaders who are the Thai official authorities over different administrative
villages of Pae, and Thai landlords and employers who have been in regular contact with Karen refugees residing nearby. All interviews were conducted by myself in Thai and Pwo-Karen, except six Burmese and Pa-O informants whom I talked to with an assistant in Burmese-Thai translation.

My long-term contact with some leading members of Karen refugee communities gave me privileges to gain an insight into the multiethnic relationships and local dynamics that have enabled Karen settlement on the Thai territory. I gradually become recognised as a part of the Karen community. I was invited to join in preparation and discussion for holding collective events among displaced Karen. I used my knowledge in Thai to write some invitation letters and ceremonial backdrops and to take care of some local Thai guests. The presentation of data in this thesis has shown special concern for the safety of informants and communities who are considered by the Thai state as illegal migrants. Therefore, I employ pseudonyms for all places and respondents' names throughout the thesis, in order to protect their personal identities.

**Thesis Outline and Notes on Usage**

In addition to this Introduction, this thesis has six principal chapters, followed by the Conclusion. Chapter One focuses on the way Hpa-an Karen understand their forced displacement. I highlight specific idioms of 'suffering' and 'refuge' that Hpa-an Karen use to make sense of their experience of maltreatment in chaotic post-colonial Burma and of making a move toward Thailand. In setting out the political and socio-economic contexts in which their forced mobility took place, I argue that displacement occurs in a continuum between exposure to and obviation of unbearable problems, rather than surrender to assault and adversity. Subjective understanding of displacement paves the way for creating informal modality of refuge-seeking.
The next two chapters deal with the economic and political terrains through which the strategy of self-settlement is constituted on the borderland. Chapter Two investigates the Hpa-an Karen's engagement in the local economy and its contributions to displaced persons' lives. Ethnographically, I examine economic transactions between Thai employers and Karen workers and their agreement through the lens of refuge. I argue in this chapter that sentiment-infused hierarchical relations in the economic sphere have the capacity to supply informal shelter and protection to displaced Karen individuals.

In Chapter Three, I explore the provision of protection in the small political unit of a village which is embedded in the Thai administrative system. The chapter focuses on the formation of a Karen civilian control mechanism and its interaction with local Thai authorities. I present the tactics and strategies that Hpa-an Karen employ in order to gain access to conditional refuge-seeking-and-giving and to sustain it. Illustrating the interactions between host locals and new residents, I argue that the modalities of such forms of refuge can be diversified and are based on the dynamics of local interactions.

In Chapter Four and Chapter Five, I explore the Hpa-an Karen's redeployment of their cultural repertoire and their creation of a feeling of being 'in place' in the new settlement. Chapter Four ethnographically presents the Karen wrist-tying ceremony and the way that ceremonial participants make sense of its metaphysical idiom of body-soul relations. I argue that through aesthetic and sensory experiences of ritual materials imbued with meanings, Hpa-an Karen culturally acquire healthiness and life balance and render their present lives spiritually secure. Chapter Five focuses on Hpa-an Karen's use of religious buildings and practices in a particular Buddhist tradition for making a sense of being at home. The chapter argues that refugees reproduce structures of locality in their new settlement through recourse to Buddhist cosmological symbols and their experience of sociality in festivals.
Chapter Six investigates Hpa-an Karen’s current projections of their life prospects after displacement. I highlight generational differences in responses toward resettlement to third countries and show that young Karen’s anxieties about the limitations of vernacular refugeedom induce them to see resettlement options as a positive change. Additionally, I analyze Karen responses to recent changes within their country of origin and their re-engagement with Myanmar with mobile and multi-sited livelihood strategies. The chapter argues that Hpa-an Karen’s prospects are being experimentally enacted in translocal and transnational spaces rather than implying a return to and re-rooting in ‘home’.

In the conclusion, I bring to bear the material and arguments presented in earlier chapters to refine the concept of ‘vernacular refugees’. I consider how displacement and the search for refuge are motivated and mediated through subjective understandings of adversity as suffering. I reflect how social relations between host locals and Karen refugees provide possibilities for protection and a space of refuge which is locally and culturally specific and morally ambiguous. I argue that refugeedom or a state of being refugees is a process that extends beyond displacement into other translocal socio-cultural practices such as place-making and onward mobility.

Throughout this thesis, I use both ‘Myanmar’ and ‘Burma’ to refer to the country. It has been a controversial issue whether to call this nation-state Myanmar or Burma. The term ‘Myanmar’ was actually introduced to replace ‘Burma’ by the military government in 1989. Political opposition activists prefer to use ‘Burma’ to show their disagreement with the military regime’s change. I use these two terms interchangeably here without taking a stand on either correctness or political position. At the same time, I employ the term ‘Burmese’ as an adjective for the country and as a name for its citizens in general, while some scholars have started to use the adjective ‘Myanmarese’ (e.g. Thawngmung 2011). ‘Burman’ is used to refer to the ethnic majority group, in distinction to other ethnicities of the Burmese people at large.
Chapter 1

Delineating Karen Refugees: Suffering, Flight and Self-Settlement

The objective definition of 'refugees' has dominated general comprehension and recognition of forcibly displaced persons. According to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, refugees are defined as persons outside their country of nationality 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted' (UNHCR 2012). Unwillingness to move is depicted as a basic attribute of being a refugee. Kunz Egon identified refugees as people with 'the reluctance to uproot oneself and the absence of positive original motivation to settle elsewhere' (1973, 130). Following this characterisation, existing literature describes Karen refugees as victimised civilians suffering armed conflict between the Burmese Army and the Karen insurgents, who crossed to seek refuge in Thailand (Rogers 2004; Smith 1991, 2003; South 2008; Thornton 2006). Using Maja Korac's phrase, refugeehood and victimhood for Karen are seen as one and the same (2009, 7). In the perspective of refugee agencies, disempowered Karen inevitably depend on humanitarian and relief services provided in physically confined refugee camps. It is in these camps where protection and human needs are ensured.

Indeed, the use of camps to administer refugees has been a longstanding and ongoing debate (Black 1998a, 1998b; Crisp and Jacobsen 1998; Smith 2004). The encampment policy is initiated and implemented in most host countries with two major concerns. First, host governments consider that camp confinement can minimise the negative consequences of refugee influx, either attacks by refugees' opponents or social and environmental impacts on host populations. Second, the camp is seen as an efficient mechanism in the distribution of aid supplies. It prevents refugees from integrating with local people, a condition desired to make
future repatriation easier. Scholars who oppose encampment or warehousing demonstrate that a confinement policy renders refugees dependent on relief, which causes adverse effects on refugee mental health and local resource constraints (Harrell-Bond 1986). Black (1998b, 31) argued that camps are not inevitable outcomes of refugee administration, and evidence of successful self-settlement exists.

Refugees living outside officially designated camps are not recognised by several governments of receiving countries. Their absence from camp-based protection and humanitarian aid disguises their de-facto refugee condition, to gain recognition of which they should keep living in camps. Host governments and host populations particularly in developing countries tend to consider them as 'illegal migrants' who migrated into their countries for economic purposes. Humanitarian relief agencies also do not accept this group of forced migrants as refugees. The leaked-out refugees are inclined to be seen as 'irregular movers', who move from camp without legitimate reason (Jacobson 2005, 41).

Can we simply deny that displaced persons living in non-institutional shelter are refugees? Is the condition of refugees solely defined by the institutionalised and legalised space of refuge? The conception of refugee is actually not bound by these objective criteria of persecution and protection from others. A number of displaced people profoundly experience hardship threatening their lives as well as their existential world, which compels them to seek refuge elsewhere. Refugeedom is then rather a subjective condition of resolving unendurable conditions through relocation. To move beyond the objective identification of refugees, this chapter addresses how the state of being refugees is constituted by culturally specific concepts of suffering and displacement. How do Karen refugees evaluate abnormal and unbearable situations that lead to displacement? And how might cultural connotations of being a refugee influence particular ways of refuge-seeking?

In examining the Karen subjective understanding of being refugees, the chapter situates Karen displacement within the historical context of the Thailand-Myanmar
borderland. It traces stories of Karen forced movement within changing political and economic contexts of the region. First, the chapter begins with an introduction of general character traits of these self-settled Karen refugees and their origin in Hpa-an plain. Then I discuss Hpa-an Karen's displacement as a result of their involvement with the Karen insurgency and the postcolonial state, adverse impacts from civil war and enduring economic constraints. Next, the chapter explores the Karen conceptualisation of displacement as a response to a notion of 'suffering'. Based on this cultural logic, the last three sections of this chapter investigate social dynamics in Hpa-an Karen's shelter and how they explain a recent shift from the system of aid-supplied refugee camps to non-institutional refuge-seeking in the form of self-settlement.
Pwo-Karen from Hpa-an Plain

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I used several channels, either friends’ suggestions or organisation contacts, to gain access to Karen refugee individuals who live in Mae Sot town. I found later that the population of so-called Karen refugees there mainly constitutes two subgroups. First, they are those Karen working with international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or with community-based organisations, such as migrant schools and health centres. The majority of them are Christian and Sgaw-dialect speaking Karen. They learn English in camps with foreigners who are church volunteers and organisation staff. They are present in Mae Sot town in accordance with job requirements. Given the language barrier, most international scholars build up their access to the larger group of Karen refugees through this group.

The second group are Karen labourers in private business sectors of Mae Sot town, including house-keeping, construction, shops and farming. While some of them are those who leaked out of camps to earn their livelihood, the others came to Mae Sot town directly, without a passage through refugee camps. In contrast to the first group, most of them are Buddhists and Pwo-dialect-speaking Karen with origins in the lowlands of Karen State, Myanmar. In comparison, the second group comprises a significant number of the Karen refugees of Mae Sot town. Different economic sectors of Mae Sot town have absorbed Karen refugees and offered plenty of unskilled jobs.

My long-term fieldwork made me aware of the Karen’s existence in Mae Sot town and nearby residential areas. A supermarket where I got various daily commodities hired more than 20 young Pwo-Karen women working in shelf-stocking, stockrooms and as cashiers. Many shop owners—mainly Chinese Thai merchants—preferred to employ Karen as workers in their business. Due to their low profile in public spaces, Pwo-Karen workers are an inconspicuous non-Thai population group. Outsiders only perceive them to be part of the broader population of Burmese migrants. They are inclined to form a distinct ethnic group;
their daily lives are surrounded by Pwo-Karen friends and relatives. Nevertheless, they do not entirely exclude other ethnic groups; they also have friends with other ethnic origins.

I got to know a Chinese merchant in the business of agricultural products and input supplies through the introduction of a Thai friend. The merchant revealed that he hires five Karen women in his shop and for domestic work, and 20 Karen men as porters at his agricultural product silo. He uses a land plot at the back of the warehouse as a housing compound for his male workers' families. He claimed that many other merchants in Mae Sot also rely on Karen labourers. For example, patrol stations, rice mills, construction agents, housing development, supermarkets, restaurants, and night pubs and bars. Moreover, I found that a number of Karen refugees pursue self-employment and independent careers, as petty merchants and tenant farmers.
In visiting several Karen residential sites around Mae Sot, I found that the majority of them are Pwo-Karen who have origins in the Hpa-an plain of eastern Myanmar (hereafter called in short Hpa-an Karen). Linguistically, they speak the Pwo-Karen dialect. Hpa-an plain geographically covers different administrative areas of the central Karen State and Mon State. In Karen State, it encompasses hundreds of villages in districts of Hpa-an, Kawkareik and Hlaingbwe. Hpa-an plain and Mae Sot valley are actually not far from each other. The north-south strip of the Dawna range is the only natural division between them. Mae Sot valley is on the east side of the range; while the Hpa-an plain is on the west. The distance between Kawkareik, the most eastern town of Hpa-an plain, to Mae Sot town of Thailand is 62 kilometres.

These Pwo-Karen refugees shared two important cultural attributes: Theravada Buddhism and lowland habitat. In the pre-colonial period, residents of Hpa-an plain were under the political influence of the Mon and Ava kingdoms. The close relationship with the Mon dynasty influenced local residents, including Pwo-Karen, to follow the Mon Theravada Buddhist tradition, at least since the 18th century. The Pwo-Karen people in the area are then sometimes called by Burmese speakers Talaing-Kayin (literally means Mon-Karen). Hpa-an plain is also considered, among Buddhist Karen, as the origin of the Pwo-Karen Buddhist tradition. The tradition is symbolically attached to Mount Khwae Ka Baung (or Zwegabin in Burmese), which is a table-shaped mountain rising 600 metres above the surrounding swamps and plain fields, located ten kilometres south of Hpa-an town. A golden pagoda and the Upper Yedagone monastery are situated on its summit.

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6 The word Talaing itself contains a derogatory sense that Burman ethnics have over Mon people.
The development of the Buddhist Pwo-Karen culture in Hpa-an plain reached its peak in the mid-19 century, with the creation and promotion of the eastern Pwo-Karen script. Womack (2005) vividly described the invention of the eastern Pwo-Karen script within the changing socio-economic context of Hpa-an plain. Three generations of Buddhist monks of the Upper Yedagone School created this script and propagated it. The encroaching influence of other cultural systems was seen as a catalyst for the initiation of the Karen writing system. These monks conceived the encroachment of Christian missionaries, as well as foreign immigrants, as 'a challenge to Buddhist and Karen culture' (Womack 2005, 139). The promotion of the script was a form of riposte to missionaries' allegation that Karen do not have literature. The script gave rise to a Karen Buddhist self-identity, although literacy in the area at the beginning of the 20th century was relatively low.

There are two types of Pwo-Karen script: the eastern Pwo-Karen script commonly used in eastern Myanmar, and the western Pwo-Karen script used by Pwo-Karen living in the Irrawaddy delta.
This literate Buddhist Karen identity, however, did not draw an exclusive ethnic boundary in Hpa-an plain. Before the full annexation by the British colonial administration in 1886, Burmese society did not care much what ethnic group a person was; ethnic identity was quite flexible and porous (Lieberman 1978; Thant Myint U 2001). Although the Pwo-Karen are predominant across the plain, they have been living alongside neighbours who are ethnic Mon, Burman and Pa-o. The Mon-Burmese Theravada Buddhist tradition, inherited from the Mon and Ava kingdoms, has been a common cultural attribute among people from different ethnic backgrounds. This coexistence of people contradicted the idea of plural societies (Furnivall 1956) in which various ethnic groups kept separate and did not mingle with one another. People of the Hpa-an plain were not strict or sensitive in regards to ethnic differentiation. Inter-ethnic marriage is a common phenomenon.

The Hpa-an Karen are conscious of being part of a lowland culture. Having an origin in Hpa-an plain implies that they are lowland Karen, not hill Karen. Physically, Hpa-an plain is a vast flood lowland surrounded by Dawna Range on the east and the Thanlwin River on the west. It is at the confluences of the Thanlwin River and several streams flowing westward from Dawna Range. According to local residents, Hpa-an plain is an abundant land of water and sedimentary areas which are suitable for cultivation. Flood paddy production has been an integral part of communities. Involvement in flood paddy culture also feeds into specific self-understandings by local Karen, who in scholarly representations and state classification schema are often perceived as an ethnic minority who rely on terraced paddy planting on steep hillsides.

This Pwo-Karen cultural identity draws symbolic resources from the geography of Hpa-an plain. Being lowland Karen influences the way that the eastern Pwo-Karen see themselves and other ethnic groups perceive them. The term is signified in Pwo-Karen dialect as ploe-thee. Literally, it means water Karen, used as an opposition term of hill Karen or chong khalu. People from other ethnic groups also

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8 According to the British ethnic categorisation, Pa-O is assumed to be a subgroup of Karen.
recognise the identity of Hpa-an Karen. The northern Thai hosts in Mae Sot valley applied a categorisation based on the topography of the Karen residences—lowland Karen and hill Karen. In the northern Thai dialect, Karen communities living in mountainous areas, either in Thailand or Myanmar, are yang doi (hill Karen); and those Karen coming from Hpa-an plain, on the other side of Dawna Range are yang nam (literally means water Karen, referring to Karen who live in the lowlands).

**Hpa-an Karen and Insurgency**

The flight of Hpa-an Karen toward the Thailand-Myanmar borderland took place as a consequence of prolonged armed conflicts in eastern Myanmar. It happened within the context of Burmese postcolonial political upheaval. Civil war broke out between the Burmese Army and the Karen National Union (KNU)—an organisation of the Karen ethno-nationalist and secessionist movement. The Sgaw Karen and Christian-dominated KNU took up arms against the Burmese government from 1949, demanding secession of the Karen nation. In brief, the Karen insurrection initially clustered around Yangon and other nearby towns in the Irrawaddy delta at the outset of armed conflict. In the mid 1950s, the KNU lost its control over major towns in the delta, and retreated into eastern Myanmar. In the late 1960s, the KNU actively operated within the area. It propagated Kawthoolei in lieu of Karen State. Its political and military wings were reorganised; many military bases were set up along the Burmese side of the border with Thailand, setting up Manerplaw as its headquarters. The KNU's capability at that time was intrinsic to the geo-politics of the Cold War era in mainland Southeast Asia. The KNU and other insurgent groups 'were recognised as the de facto authorities on the other side of the frontier [by

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9 The area of the KNU's Karen State or Kawthoolei is different from the area of Karen State as the official Burmese administrative division. The former is larger, incorporating Tenasserin Division, eastern Mon State and eastern Pegu Division.
Thai governments], as long as they blocked the advance of communist forces’ (Smith 2007, 17).

In recognition of a multi-faceted reception of the Karen insurgency among Karen subgroups in different regions, this section studies the pattern and the dynamics of the Hpa-an Karen’s involvement in the KNU. To what extent did the Hpa-an Karen people devote themselves to this nationalist sentiment and movement? What were the impacts of their involvement? Answers to these questions are relevant for understanding the arrival of Hpa-an Karen in Mae Sot valley.

The degree to which Karen individuals have embraced Karen nationalist sentiment and taking action in the movement is an ambiguous issue. South (2007, 15) mentions that the manner in which ordinary Karen people construct self-identity, is by adopting an ethnonym. However, it is difficult to compile a socioeconomic profile of the rank-and-file soldiers who participated in the insurgency. According to an account by General Smith Dun—a native Karen and the first commander-in-chief of the independent Burma’s armed forces—at the onset of the rebellion ‘roughly five percent of the total population was estimated to be directly involved in the insurrection, with the rest remaining loyal’ (quote of Dun 1980, 63 in Ardeth 2008, 9).
It would be going too far to consider the Karen rebels under the KNU’s lead as an inclusive or popular Karen uprising. In the British colonial period, most of the Karen nationalist movement’s members were Christian Sgaw Karen from Yangon and the Irrawaddy delta. The majority of Hpa-an Karen knew little if anything about the campaign for a distinct Karen ethnic culture and Karen nation-building. They were unlikely to accept the Karen nationalist ideology after the colonial period as their comrades from the delta had, but some Hpa-an Karen participated in the Karen nationalist movement after Burma’s independence.

Hpa-an Karen started joining the KNU only in the 1960s after the KNU lost control over Irrawaddy delta and shifted its operational area to eastern Myanmar. The Karen nationalist ideology was consequently propagated in the region of the Hpa-an plain through its civilian administrative structures descending to the village-
level. An ex-KNU leader described that his involvement in the KNU began when he was working as a school teacher in Pa-an town. He joined the KNU and helped to recruit and send new Karen volunteers into the KNU armed wing, known as the Karen National League Army (KNLA). He claimed other KNU civilian leaders in different districts also took the same responsibility.

By the late 1970s, it is a fact that later generations of the KNLA rank-and-file were those with origins in eastern Myanmar. They outnumbered the soldiers who had retreated from the Irrawaddy delta. The new generation of KNLA soldiers spoke Pwo-Karen or other Karen dialects and followed Buddhism and animist beliefs, rather than being Christian as their military and political leaders were. Besides taking duty on the front line, Hpa-an Karen were also involved with the KNU's other missions—intelligence affairs, army recruitment, civilian administration, school teaching and resource supply. The KNLA grew up to be a capable army that controlled certain liberated areas in eastern Myanmar. Smith (2007, 15) estimates that the KNLA had 10,000 men during the BSPP [the Burmese Socialist Programme Party] government era (1962–1988).

The active participation of Hpa-an Karen in the KNU was not only a consequence of the success of KNU nationalist propaganda, but also of the Burmese military's ruthless counter-insurgency operations. During my fieldwork in Mae Sot valley, I encountered several middle-aged Karen men who had experienced front-line fighting in the KNLA against the Burmese military. These middle-aged Karen were in their teens in the 1970s and 1980s when the Burmese military launched intensive counter-insurgency operations against the KNU's liberated areas, including in several rural villages of the Hpa-an plain. Their life histories cast into doubt the equation between political participation in the KNU and the acceptance of Karen ethno-nationalist sentiment. These ex-KNLA soldiers explained that the decision to join the insurgency was rather predicated on the detrimental impacts of the civil war on their civilian lives.
The persecution, fatal loses and frustrating experiences forced these Hpa-an Karen to join the KNU and fight against the Burmese military. Most of the informants mentioned that they became involved with fighting in the civil war when their families and villages were cruelly attacked by the Burmese military. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, the Burmese military launched succeeding offensive operations against the KNU's liberated zones. At the same time, Karen civilian areas were also targeted for their supporting role to the Karen rebels. This counter-insurgent strategy was known as 'four cuts policy' (in Burmese—lei palay hpyat). The strategy aimed at destroying civilians' support—food, funds, intelligence and recruits—to the Karen insurgent group. These circumstances changed eastern Myanmar into battlefields where civilians encountered great difficulties.

In the late 1970s, Hpa-an plain came under assault. Young Karen men were subjected to forced labour for the Burmese Army. They then had no choice but to leave their civilian lives and join the KNLA. An example is the story of Mia who narrated that he left home,

... when the Burmese Army invaded my village. They arbitrarily captured and exploited young men as forced labourers. I could not stay at home; I hid myself in the forest. They came so often. I was so scared. If I was arrested, they would force me to carry their weapons, give no food and beat me. Finally, I decided to leave home. I took arms and underwent military training with the KNLA.

The account exemplifies young Karen men's reasons for participation in the Karen secessionist movement; they ran away from their villages and inevitably took up fighting. For Mia, he left home and joined the KNLA's rank and file when he was 18 years old. When his uncle, who had held a senior position within the KNLA, visited Mia's village in the late 1970s, Mia and another two friends decided to go to the KNU's liberated zones on the Thailand-Burma frontiers along with the uncle. Several young and middle-aged Karen men shared the same experience of fleeing from the Burmese military's oppression.
Civil War and Adversity

The Burmese military's counter-insurgent operations caused devastating and destructive consequences to Hpa-an Karen lives. They attacked and burned civilians' property, including houses, rice barns and agricultural products, especially paddy fields. Certain Burmese military troops extorted food and confiscated land from local Karen civilians to support their missions. Numerous Karen individuals encountered physical harassment and persecution. Arbitrarily forced labour was commonly found during the 1970s to the 1990s, especially in tough and dangerous jobs as shouldering military supplies and leading Burmese troops into the KNU's mined areas. The KNU personnel were arrested, cruelly tortured and executed by Burmese soldiers, while unknown numbers of Karen women were raped by these soldiers.

During the intense civil war from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the relentless counter-insurgent operations of the Burmese Army made Hpa-an Karen households suffer physically and mentally. While some Karen men ran away to the insurgent liberated areas, the remaining Karen relentlessly experienced losses, threats, and other forms of oppression. More and more Karen civilians fled from villages toward the Thailand-Myanmar borderland—the KNU liberated areas and later to refugee camps on the Thai side of the border.

Women often remained at home during the fierce fighting. While young Karen men converted their bitter experiences into serving as soldiers fighting against the Burmese oppressors, many women remained at home, aiming to take care of their families' property. They did all kinds of work, including tough jobs like ploughing the paddy fields. Nevertheless, they were inevitably abused and persecuted by the Burmese soldiers. A Karen woman shared her horrible childhood experiences as follows;
My house was burnt down more than five times. They (the Burmese Army) destroyed everything, even ripened rice fields. What is terrible was that they raped my mother; she then got ill and died. I was once arrested and forced to work as a porter, but I could finally run away to the KNU area and later to a refugee camp in Thailand.

Karen communities in the Hpa-an plain from the 1970s until the mid-1990s were in a dire predicament. The Hpa-an Karen were caught up in a broader conflict between ethno-nationalist and state localisation projects. A small number of Hpa-an Karen engaged in the escalating notion of Karen nation-making in a subdued and low-profile manner, but their actions brought only negative consequences. Paradoxically, a large number of Hpa-an Karen were uprooted and displaced by political ideologies and institutional projects that attempted to sink roots in and render secure the localities in which these Karen resided. The Karen nationalist imaginary and its ideological construction of place came into confrontation with the nation-making project of the postcolonial Burmese state. Their disagreement resulted in brutal civil war and consequent loss and displacement for the Hpa-an Karen.

**Burmese Economic Collapse**

Besides protracted civil war, economic hardship inside Burma was another significant factor underlying Karen forced displacement. The military government, after the 1962 coup d'état, implemented an isolationist policy, known as 'the Burmese Way to Socialism'. The policy entailed several draconian measures, including nationalisation of private industries, expulsion of foreigners and demonetisation. Eventually, these state-centric policies triggered the sweeping

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10 The well-known initiative on demonetisation policy was in September 5, 1987. All 25, 35 and 75 kyat notes, which had been launched into the market in 1985, were replaced by 45 and 90 kyat notes. It was said to represent General Ne Win's obsession with numerical astrology, especially the number 9, rather than currency adjustment based on real economic
collapse of the Burmese economy (Smith 2007, 19). People from different social classes and ethnic backgrounds of Burma severely suffered from the economic failure.

For Hpa-an Karen, the economic closure fundamentally affected life in the plain. My visit to Hpa-an plain showed me that paddy cultivation is a major form of production there. At first glance, I could tell that Hpa-an plain is a fertile land suitable for paddy plantation. It is an alluvial flood plain where there is plenty of water for paddy planting. A Karen companion on that trip described how the Karen’s lives, before the civil war and the economic collapse, were quite self-sufficient. Local village economies relied significantly on paddy cultivation. ‘Big landlords gained surplus of rice production, poor families exchanged their labour to have rice for household consumption’.

British colonial promotion of rice exports, from the early 20th century, brought a significant change to the region. Paddy production created prosperity for plain dwellers. The market value of rice motivated the extensive production of paddy. Households could produce a surplus of rice which created opportunities for commodity exchange. In towns and large villages near main roads where more people engaged in a cash economy, rice was sold with the British India currency ‘rupee and penny’. In remote rural villages, rice was exchanged for modern goods, such as readymade clothes, kerosene, soap, mosquito nets and utensils. Many old houses of Hpa-an Karen were built of teak or other hardwood and corrugated iron roofs. My Karen companion explained that logs could be cut from nearby forests, while corrugated sheets were a luxury commodity that local people had to buy from towns or get from an exchange with their rice surplus.

The economic prosperity brought by the rice trade came to an end with the Burmese military government’s ban on rice exports in the early 1960s. The military performance. The demonetisation estimated made 70-80 percent of kyat notes useless. The negative impact from the policy triggered off the massive popular uprising in 1988.
stopped exporting rice and introduced the procurement system, which obliged rice producers to sell a quota of their paddy harvest to the local government officials at a very cheap price. In most rural areas, Karen peasants were further obliged by local authorities to pay tax in the form of rice produce. In this way, Hpa-an Karen suffered from both the failed economy and oppressive administration. Hpa-an Karen were furious at the hardship caused by the closure policy and military suppression, but they could do nothing.

The life history of a Karen man, named Kaw, exemplifies what happened in Hpa-an plain in the 1970s. Kaw was born in a village near Kawkareik town. He was an educated man, who completed high school and then ordained as a Buddhist monk. Two years later, he had to disrobe from the monkhood as his family's economic situation got worse and worse. The government's demonetisation policy in 1964 dramatically affected the family savings. His family reduced the area of paddy production to enough only for the family's consumption. It was not worth selling the produce to the government at a very cheap price. He commented on his family's deteriorated situation thus:

Money, which we had long accumulated for many years, diminished within a few years after the demonetisation. The military government was bad; it did not care about its own people, and exploited us even more. My family had a lot of trouble with livelihood-earning. I could no longer be a monk and leave my family hungry.

Kaw's departure from ordained life, prompted by sympathy and familial obligation, became the first chapter in his story of mobility across the Thailand-Myanmar border. He participated in the cross-border smuggling economy. He arrived in a black market controlled by the KNU in 1972 and earned his living from daily-wage employment and petty trading. His personal savings later were used for beginning a career as a middle merchant who bought commodities from Thailand and carried them for sale elsewhere inside Myanmar. On certain trips with a lot of commodities, he hired more than ten porters to carry them.
The overall socioeconomic situation of Hpa-an plain in the 1970s was debilitating. While some villages suspected of insurgent involvement were raided by the Burmese Army, most plain dwellers suffered from the economic failure of the country. It seemed not worthwhile at all to keep living in such difficult circumstances without struggling for other alternatives. Rice could no longer be a medium for exchange or income generation. The Burmese rice export business collapsed under the economic nationalisation policy. Farmers' paddy harvests were also arbitrarily seized or destroyed by the Burmese military. A number of Pwo-Karen men travelled to the Karen insurgent's liberated area and actively engaged in the illicit economy of the black markets occasionally or permanently, without being involved in armed conflict or embracing the Karen nationalist ideology.

**Emerging Opportunities in the East**

Many of my friends died during fighting, others have become physically disabled. I asked myself about the future. Being a KNLA soldier had disappointing results. My devotion seemed not to yield any concrete outcomes. I was quite bored with life as a fighter for a far-fetched goal. I fought against the Burmese military voluntarily. I got only free food, not wages. I walked away from the KNLA and moved to the border areas.

The account is narrated by Mia—a Karen ex-soldier whom I discussed in a previous section. It illustrates both the transition and consequent journey of a number of young Karen. Thousands of young Karen rank-and file members withdrew themselves from the civil war and went back to civilian life. However, for many Pwo-Karen men the return to civilian life did not equate with a return home but instead with a move to Mae Sot valley to work. This section explores how Mae Sot valley has become a magnet attracting Pwo-Karen ex-soldiers and civilians. Why and how did Mia, and many ex-soldiers, continue staying in Mae Sot valley?
Movement around the Thailand-Myanmar border enabled low-ranking Karen soldiers to comprehend the changing economic landscape and opportunities they could take up in Mae Sot valley. From the 1970s to the mid-1990s, the borderland was not only a battlefield, but also a commercial terrain of cross-border commodity smuggling. A boom in black market trade in the KNU's liberated areas along the Thailand-Myanmar border increased underground economic transactions as never before. The smuggling attracted a Karen workforce of civilians and soldiers to paid jobs. It provoked the insurgent ranks to reassess their personal situation. A big group of them then repositioned themselves to take up work that made more sense in the social circumstances.

In this period, Karen ex-soldiers worked as wage workers in troops of commodity porters. These commodities were transported across the border from Thailand to feed the demands of Burmese society after the 1962 coup d'etat. Most items came from manufacturers in central Thailand, passing through middle merchants in Mae Sot town. The clandestine trade transported the goods across the border and delivered them to towns and villages inside Myanmar. The cross-border trade stimulated a great demand for unskilled workers. The labour demand included porters for the transportation of commodities on several routes: between Mae Sot town and the Thai border, at the border crossing points, in the KNU-controlled black markets and between black markets to inner areas of Myanmar.

Mia left the KNLA and worked at a black market called Wang Kha. He carried illicit commodities to the meeting point where Burmese merchants from Yangon waited to buy merchandise. He talked about it as follows:

> From Wang Kha, we [porters] carried baskets of various goods on our backs. We walked across the mountain and plain for three days to Kyong-Do. Commodities varied from consumer goods like food, clothes and MSG [Monosodium glutamate] to army supplies such as medicine and batteries. I got paid for this kind of job.
Wang Kha was one of nearly twenty black markets situated along the Thailand-Myanmar border. It was said to be one of the busiest black markets for smuggling goods. The black market site was initially established by mutual cooperation between General Bo Mya—the top leader of the KNU—and a northern Thai merchant named Ko Tep. Geographically, Wang Kha was in an excellent location, just within Burmese territory, only 12–15 kilometres northwest from Mae Sot town. In the regional picture, the market informally linked the Thai and Burmese economies. The transportation of commodities from Bangkok—the business centre of Thailand—to Mae Sot, 500 kilometres away, was quite convenient. The highway (number 105) which was completed in 1970 made travel much easier. The new asphalt section (89 kilometres) through rugged mountains enabled travel to Mae Sot town in less time. On the Burmese side, Wang Kha was linked to Yangon 440 kilometres away.

Mia's resignation from the KNLA was not difficult at all, since the black market rendered benefit to both individual KNU leaders and the organisation. Wang Kha was under the control of the commander of the 101 Brigade (or Kawmoora)—one of the strongest KNLA bases before its fall in 1984. The KNU commanders obtained a huge income from this smuggling site. The KNU leaders could earn a lot of money by collecting tax and passing fees from merchants. The money considerably helped the KNU to equip its troops with modern weapons to fight against the Burmese Army. During the 1970s–1980s, it was estimated that as much as US$ 3 million or 40 percent of the Burmese GNP annually changed hands on the black market (Smith 2007, 98).

The emerging black markets greatly transformed Mae Sot valley's demographical landscape. Mae Sot town became a trading hub to where merchants—mostly Chinese Thai from various provinces of Thailand—relocated. The new economic opportunity seduced them into moving there to enjoy profits from cross-border trade. Mia also moved to the Thai side of the border after working in Wang Kha for a while. He thought that to work in the black market sometimes put his own life at
risk, especially when the market was attacked by the Burmese military. Mia was persuaded by a middle merchant to work as a porter at a shop in Mae Sot town. Then he left Wang Kha and has worked with the employers since then.

Traders in Mae Sot town created a lot of low-paid employment in Mae Sot valley. They offered their workplaces, which also could be shelter for displaced Karen. The trade expansion increased the demand for unskilled labourers in tough jobs, like portering. The mobile Karen who travelled around the KNU’s liberated zones fulfilled the need for labour. In the economic growth of the valley, Hpa-an Karen were pioneers in the group of so-called Burmese migrant workers of Mae Sot valley, while other ethnic groups of Burmese migrants did not arrive in Mae Sot until the 1990s.

Karen workers have become indispensable in the cross-border smuggling business. The more trading volumes increased, the more employees were required. These cross-border traders absorbed a number of Hpa-an workers who fled Burmese persecution. With the fall of black markets on the borderland, Thai traders today operate their business through Myawaddy—a former small village that was uplifted by the Burmese government to be an authorised cross-border trading channel.

The Karen Notion of Suffering

A stereotypical representation of Hpa-an Karen is often used to justify why they are predominant in Mae Sot town, in comparison with other Karen refugee subgroups. The common explanation from many Thai and Karen friends is that Hpa-an Karen are people from a cosmopolitan culture. From a lowland export rice producing area they bring experience in commodity production which can be utilised in their participation in the borderlands commodity economy. Living in a plain whose residents are ethnically diverse, Hpa-an Karen find it comfortable to mingle with others. They have been living along with other ethnic and religious groups like
Burman, Mon, Muslim and Hindu Indians, sometimes in competitive environments. According to this explanation, the open, multiethnic environment of Hpa-an plain tends to shape Hpa-an Karen to be outgoing, extroverts and flexible persons. On the other hand, hill Karen are inclined to live in closed self-sufficient communities and be more careful with outsiders.

This kind of answer provides some insights into conceptions held by Hpa-an Karen and their Thai neighbours of Hpa-an Karen identity, particularly in contrast with the hill Karen. However, it relies on a dichotomised and essentialist delineation of Hpa-an Karen culture. It does not elucidate the complicated situation of Karen displacement and its dynamics. Furthermore, it simplifies Hpa-an Karen social and cultural characteristics. As a part of overall displaced Karen who are designated to live in camps, why do Hpa-an Karen actually dare to sneak out of camps and struggle in urban areas? I argue here that we can understand Hpa-an Karen ubiquity in public spaces of the town by focussing on how the Karen express understandings of displacement, refugees and refuge.

For the majority of Hpa-an Karen who had never been involved in the Karen insurgency, it was really difficult to understand the situation they faced. They could not explain the reason why the Burmese military whole-heartedly hated Karen and tried hard to annihilate them. Adaw Malin Khin, a Karen female informant, told me of her experience of frustration:

I was quite anxious when the Burmese military suspected that my husband worked for the KNU. I was interrogated by the army. I told them I did not know about my husband's work, but they did not believe me. My house was kept under surveillance by a group of soldiers. It was real dokha. I could not sleep and was concerned about our safety. We finally decided to leave for a refugee camp in Thailand. We walked at night and it took four nights to get there.
I contend that the idea mentioned here, *dokha*, a Buddhist notion of suffering, has been a reference point in Hpa-an Karen people’s understanding of displacement. Karen individuals have experienced a lot of difficulties during their flight and settlement in Thailand. Concretely, they all blamed the brutal and fatal suppression of the Burmese military as the major cause of their physical displacement. At the conceptual level, all problems during flight and of being refugees in other countries are considered as ‘suffering’—an unhappy and unbearable condition of living.

Looking back to their flight into Thailand, Hpa-an Karen refugees usually explain themselves as *dokha the* (literally; people caught in troubles) or ‘sufferers’. It is a loan word from Burmese. The term is widely used to refer to displaced persons or refugees. *Dokha* means suffering—it is Pali and a concept derived from Theravada Buddhism—while *the* means persons. There is no specialised vocabulary for refugees in Pwo-Karen dialect, they inherited this word and its underlying principle from long interaction with Mon-Burmese Buddhist culture. In short, *dokha the* denotes a sense of being ‘sufferers’. Figuratively, *dokha the*, however, does not coincide with the institutional template of ‘refugees’. It reflects an idiomatic and religiously-mediated experience of suffering, rather than a self-evident objectively persecuted condition that spontaneously and materially prompts forced movement.

For Hpa-an Karen the notion of being a sufferer, *dokathe* implies an appeal for recognition on Buddhist grounds for compassion. In my discussions with them, I came to realise that the appeal for recognition in this idiom as a sufferer, assumes the existence of a powerful relational other (like the Buddha) able to exercise compassion. By contrast, the world is seriously awry when those who command such stature act arbitrarily or deny the obligations that come with power. This it seemed to me was a key framework through which Karen from Hpa-an comprehended their interactions with the Burmese Army, and which impelled their flight to Mae Sot. I will illustrate this with the following anecdote.
When I had a plan to visit Hpa-an for two weeks in September 2009, Adaw Malin Khin, who didn't know in detail about my trip arrangements, asked me whether I was scared of the tatmadaw (the Burmese Army). When I asked why, she elaborated, saying the tatmadaw were brutal and cruel (yetset te) and had no mercy. She told of when the tatmadaw physically abused Karen labourers and forced them to carry arms without feeding them and compelled them to walk into the KNU landmine zones. (The problem persisted in remote areas in 2009, but not in Hpa-an where I was going.)

She talked about the tatmadaw's cruelty by referring to an important Burmese word. The word is gayuna (noun) which literally means kindness or mercy (in a sense of being kind to someone whom they have superior power to hurt or punish). The word is derived from the Buddhist Pali term garuna which means 'compassion'. She put the word into the negative in a sentence in describing how the Burmese Army attacked her village: tatmadaw ka kyando kayintwe ko 'gayuna' ma shi bu. The sentence literally means 'the Burmese Army did not show mercy to us, Karen'. Instead of using a common word like tanaa (pity), she used the word gayuna to signify a strong feeling of sympathy or compassion that superiors ideally should display towards others.

In cultural reference to themselves as do kha the, Hpa-an Karen are inclined to perceive themselves as someone who has suffered a severe level of hardship and adversity that one could no longer bear. Adaw Malin Khin explained her belief that all humans experience physical and mental suffering in their lives. While some suffer from being impoverished, her life and those of other Karen refugees are filled with the pain and suffering arising from their encounters with the Burmese Army and armed conflicts. Karen people's suffering is linked to the failure of those who hold power to exercise self-restraint, to display the kindness or mercy expected from those with such power. The act of fleeing into Thailand, is then an attempt not only to be out of trouble and keep away from the source of the
problem. It also is impelled by a hopeful search for a context where compassion and mercy, instead of cruelty, prevails.

I suggest that with this insight it may be possible to enrich the literature on self-settled refugees. Self-settlement refers to the search by refugees themselves for shelter, for refuge outside of the confines of the international refugee protection system. But the notion of 'self' in this construction is anthropologically problematic for it implies an understanding of the self as universal; or at least as conventionally used, it does not problematise that notion of self. Anthropologists, however, have noted that personhood is a cultural construction mediated everywhere through particular cultural frameworks. Here, I believe we gain a glimpse into the notion of personhood operational among the Buddhist Karen on the Thailand-Myanmar border. It is a relational idea of self that assumes that in their interactions with others, the powerful should exhibit self-restraint, or mercy. Those who are less powerful expect mercy. It is premised on a notion of normalcy wherein suffering elicits compassion. I contend that the movement of Karen to Thailand is mediated through this particularistic notion of personhood, as a movement by those who feel deprived of mercy, and are in search for compassion. In sum, they are refugees and seek refuge in reference to a culturally meaningful idiom of suffering. However, being locally idiomatic, their status as refugees, albeit intelligible crucially within a transborder and inter-ethnic Buddhist context, may not be recognised for what it is either by institutionalised refugee criteria or by those who advocate for recognition of the category of 'self-settled refugees.'

**Village-Like Refugee Camps**

Through the lens of being sufferers, Karen are not persecuted victims but can ameliorate their exposure to cruelty and arbitrary treatment. Different strategies might be initiated to interact with the forces that affect them rather than passively submit to such forces. In encountering hardship from civil war, Hpa-an have attempted to mitigate suffering with trajectories of seeking refuge in safer places.
In this section, I demonstrate how the cultural lens of suffering influenced the historical process of refuge-seeking among Hpa-an Karen, on their arrival on the Thai territory.

In the mid-1980s, the political situation in eastern Myanmar became more dreadful and brought about loss and displacement. The Burmese offensive campaign eventually overran all the military bases of the KNU in the mid-1990s. From that time, the KNU could no longer control significant territory inside Myanmar, but launched guerrilla operations from small or mobile bases along remote parts of the Thai border (Pedersen 2008). A number of Karen civilians and Karen soldiers' families fled to seek refuge on the Thai side of the border. The first internationally recognised Karen refugee camp was established in 1984 on the north-western area of Mae Sot valley. It was located five kilometres away from the international borderline and ten kilometres from Mae Sot town. From that time, Mae Sot valley received a constant flow of Karen people escaping armed conflict and political persecution.

At the outset, most Karen refugee camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border appeared as small newly emerged Karen villages. By the end of 1986, there were 12 Karen refugee camps with a total population of 18,428 people (BBC 2004). The largest camp hosted a few thousand people, while there were a few hundred residents in each small camp. These refugee camps were administered by Karen camp committees. Hpa-an Karen fleeing from the collapsed Wang-kha market were served by a refugee camp named Huay Kalok (hereafter referred to as Huay Kalok refugee camp).

In the 1980s, Karen refuge-seeking was initially arranged within a network of social relations that enabled the Karen to become informally permitted residents in Thailand. The Karen's establishment in Mae Sot involved different local actors, including Thai business partners, locals and authorities. We can see details of this phenomenon in the formation of Huay Kalok refugee camp. Many Thai locals actively participated in transactions in Wang Kha black market; they had good
relations with Karen business partners. When the market was heavily bombed in 1984, some local Thai men sent their lorries to carry the fleeing Karen from a crossing point to a shelter which later was Huay Kalok refugee camp. The camp site was actually owned by a Thai merchant who had closely cooperated with the KNU's leaders in running Wang Kha black market. He offered the land, for free, to be a shelter for displaced Karen.

Furthermore, local Thai authorities tolerated the appearance of Karen refugees. Karen refuge-taking in Huay Kalok refugee camp was informally acknowledged by local army officers. Local officials, especially the third Thai Royal Army, have had a long established relationship with the Karen insurgents over border intelligence affairs (see detail in Lang 2002 and an example in Chapter 5 of this thesis). The border political contexts at that time enabled Karen insurgent leaders to negotiate to establish refugee camps. The central Thai government in the 1980s allowed local authorities to work out shelter provision for Karen refugees with little intervention. It kept the mission at a very low-profile to prevent international conflict with the Burmese government.

The atmosphere in these scattered Karen refugee camps was quite relaxed. Bowles (1998, 11-14) found that this traditional village-like atmosphere of early Karen refugee camp had advantages; it allowed refugees to be self-sufficient. A Karen friend, who grew up in Huay Kalok refugee camp, described similar conditions. Camp residents could use local natural resources from nearby streams and forests. They travelled to Myanmar to grow paddy and then crossed back to stay in refugee camps. They went out to earn income from daily employment in local Thai settlements and in Mae Sot town. Karen refugees were conspicuous in Mae Sot valley in those days. They were locally recognised labourers in the town's commercial and farming sectors. Some even made a journey further to find better-paid employment in big cities like Bangkok. My friend claimed that travel to Bangkok was much easier in those days. There were no immigration checkpoints on the highway as there have been recently.
Alternatively, Huay Kalok refugee camp was seen as a safe place where Hpa-an Karen could take shelter. Food rations and other basic necessities were provided by international donors. Kaw, a Karen merchant in commodity smuggling, also moved his family to stay in Huay Kalok refugee camp when his village in Kawkareik district was heavily attacked by the Burmese military in 1988. He explains that he brought his family there because it was a practical choice for him.

All members of my family obtained registration and received free monthly basic supplies. Sometimes I went away for several days to trade cattle. I just left them in the camp without anxiety. They lived along with other neighbours. It was safe there.

The living conditions of Huay Kalok and other refugee camps were dramatically changed by a huge influx of many thousands of refugees and political asylum-seekers fleeing Myanmar after the Burmese Army’s crackdown on the 1988 nationwide democratic demonstration. Huay Kalok refugee camp received a lot of these newcomers. It became an overcrowded and chaotic place which was full of unfamiliarity and anxiety. The succeeding fall of the KNU’s army base during the first half of the 1990s greatly increased the numbers of Karen refugees in some major refugee camps. Huay Kalok refugee camp had about 10,000 people by the end of 1994. Former residents lived along with new refugees and endured more compressed living conditions and competition over resources and assistance. However, in the tightly packed camp, Karen refugees still had freedom of movement around the valley until a change in Thai government policy.
Encountering the National Order

Hpa-an Karen people's relatively liveable mode of shelter in Mae Sot valley became subject to more pressured regulation when the central Thai government intervened in the refugee camp administration in the mid-1990s. The Thai authorities became more involved in refugee affairs out of a concern for their own national interests. During 1996–1997, some major camps were raided by the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a Karen army faction in alliance with the Burmese Army. The Thai top officials perceived these offensives as threats to national security. In consequence, they decided to exert more control on camp administration and dwellers. Major transformations included relocation of certain camps to assumed secure locations, camp consolidation by dissolving nearby

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11 The emergence of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) in 1994 is explained as a result of the Christian-Buddhist tension within the Karen nationalist movement. See more details on the Karen’s inter-religious dispute in Gravers (2007b); South (2008).
camps and combining their populations into single large camps, direct control by Ministry of the Interior officials and Thai militia, and the imposition of strict regulations on refugees' movement.

Figure 7 Map of Current Karen Refugee Camps on the Thailand-Myanmar Border

Before the new millennium, 16 dispersed Karen refugee camps in the valley were compacted into three camps (Mae La, Umpium Mai and Nu Po). Camp restructuring worsened Karen refugees' circumstances, it resulted in poorer living conditions, more dependency on assistance and more surveillance and restrictions. Karen
residents of Huay Kalok refugee camp also experienced such transformations. The camp was relocated to a new site after it was attacked and burned down twice. The new location is almost 100 kilometres from the previous one.

We have seen here and throughout the chapter that national imaginaries have been a principle factor underlying the condition of displacement. In Myanmar, Hpa-an Karen were displaced by a struggle between the Karen ethno-nationalist movement and the postcolonial assertion of unified Burma. In Thailand since the mid-1990s, the Thai government also has treated the dislocated Karen within its national imaginaries. Karen refugees are treated by Thailand as people who belong and are fixed to the territory of Myanmar; their presence in Thailand is not accepted. The national imaginary has influenced Thai policy toward displaced persons who have spilled into Thailand in specific ways. They are temporarily granted shelter in confined areas with the purpose of sending them back to their original country. Living alongside and integrating into the host society is deterred by state officials, although the phenomenon actually takes place on the ground in Mae Sot valley.

Karen refugees in Huay Kalok refugee camp were forced to move and live in new crowded camps in 1998, although many of them hesitated relocating to such a remote mountainous area. Some defiant Karen chose not to move, but dispersed into local Thai and Karen villages, sought employment and returned to Myanmar to live under the DKBA-controlled areas (see an example of the latter case in Chapter 6). The new camp is in a mountainous area which is quite far from Mae Sot business centre. The newly imposed restrictions of camp life motivated Karen refugees to find other alternatives. With limitations on employment, some refugees felt compelled to return to Mae Sot town.
Hpa-an Karen refugees' changes of living places during their time in exile reflect the persistent identification with the notion of suffering and refuge. Many Karen refugees first moved to refugee camps in Thailand as they perceived the relatively unbounded camps as a reasonable form of shelter. When the camp atmosphere changed, a number of them gradually sought other options. Camp restrictions since the late 1990s constrained their livelihoods and became another source of suffering. They lost access to localities and networks which used to provide supportive shelter and a viable means of sustenance. Difficulties of living in remote camps brought about economic pressure at the household level which compelled Karen youths to leave camps and find employment in big cities of Thailand, as undocumented migrant labours.

According to former residents of a refugee camp, the remote location of the new camps had several drawbacks. A Karen woman whose family moved back to Mae Sot town after six months of relocation observed:

The new camp was not suitable for lowland people like us. The weather was terribly cold. Living there was quite tough. We did not get used to it. I saw many sick old people who died when we first arrived there. Living there, we also had a problem earning money. It is in the mountains; we cannot find a job there.

The relocation and consolidation of Karen refugee camps that happened in the second half of the 1990s disassembled the local and informal form of protection. Local employment that had sustained refugees' livelihoods was critically obstructed by the new camps' long distance and new strictures on movement. The Thai state's increasing intervention in camp administration created a higher level of dependency on humanitarian aid, which was in fact insufficient for daily consumption. Significantly, refugees relied on cash for certain expenses, at least for clothes and food, beyond the very basic rations provided by relief agencies. A number of them sneaked out of the camps and
found different ways to make a living. This non-institutional refuge-seeking characterises a new initiative called 'self settlement' (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 3).

Basically, the modality of self-settlement has a great potential for alleviating personal suffering. After their relocation to the new camp, a group of Karen men who are family leaders felt deprived of self-esteem, as they could not take care of their own families. They lost their sense of pride and self-reliance. By contrast, self-settlement allowed them to earn some income for their families from jobs available in the urban economy of Mae Sot town. Accordingly, they could get back a sense of being capable persons who can manage problems that come their way and look after their family members. As one Karen man commented, explaining his return to Pae areas:

We had no money to survive there [in the new camp]. The difficulty drove me to despair. I told myself I must do something to improve my family's situation. That was a return to Pae where I knew some Thai people. Right here, I believe I can feed my children myself.

This example suggests that the ongoing mobility of Hpa-an Karen refugees has been shaped around an attempt to assert control of life. The move was made in conformity with expectations this Karen man felt to act as a responsible provider and hence also can be seen as an attempt to realign his circumstances around a certain model of selfhood. The quote shows that the man intentionally bypassed the conventional regime of refugee protection in order to regain a sense of meaningful existence and dignity. The strategy of self-settlement also enabled him and his family to satisfy fundamental material needs. In addition, the choice also helped him cope with his existential anxieties and family dilemmas. He emphasised that he felt immensely relieved when he could resume responsibility for his family's well-being. In other words, departure from remote refugee camps and settling outside the institutional protection regime are life affirming and self-
making strategies that mitigate the suffering caused by ongoing exposure to powerful and arbitrary sedentarising social projects.

Conclusion

Refugeedom for Hpa-an Karen is constructed out of a combination of objective encounters with persecution and subjective experiences of adversity. Externally, Hpa-an Karen's displacement and refuge-seeking took place in the context of political upheaval and power relations of the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. Their forced dislocation arose from multiple sets of national imaginaries—the unified Burmese nation, the Karen ethnonationalist state making project and the Thai definition of national security. At the same time, to be a refugee for Hpa-an Karen is not only delineated by exposure to fatal threats and security in the protection of others, but also a subjective experience of enduring and alleviating hardship. Ongoing problems experienced in a process of displacement are conceptualised through a cultural notion of 'suffering'. Hpa-an Karen subjectively evaluate abnormal and unbearable situations and reflexively develop a strategy of refuge-seeking through relocation.

This cultural logic of suffering underlies specific ways of seeking refuge and of choosing shelter. According to Karen understanding, being refugees signifies the status of persons getting caught in troubles or 'sufferers'. Displacement stories of Hpa-an Karen refugees challenge a stereotype of refugees as passive victims devoid of capabilities to cope with life. Their experience of suffering drove them to seek refuge in insurgent liberated areas, black markets and refugee camps. When strict camp management made them feel deeply constrained, these sufferers created a new mode of self-settlement. Their switch from one settlement to another was shaped by the way they perceived their encounters with arbitrary and powerful social forces. Their pattern of refuge-seeking does not easily conform to the institutional model of protection offered under national refugee policies and the international refugee regime.
The chapter demonstrates that Hpa-an Karen refugees' efforts to mitigate unendurable suffering were integral to their patterns of displacement. For these Karen refugees, room for manoeuvre has not been completely shut down, although states and humanitarian advocacy tend to categorise them as weak and dependant persons who need external protection and basic assistance. The Hpa-an Karen case thus contradicts Hathaway's notion (2007) that legal status is the best organising construct for the political category of refugees. Legal status is important to official recognition, but it has never been the sole determinant of the refuge accessible to people in exile. Rather, displacement and refuge-seeking are fashioned out of culturally constituted and historical conjunctures within different social, economic and political contexts.
Chapter 2

Shelter in Local Economic Relationships

Living in Mae Sot town for a while makes the outsider as researcher recognise that Hpa-an Karen (Karen speaking Pwo-dialect from Hpa-an plain) are ubiquitous in the town's economy. It was very common to meet them in my daily life. Three domestic workers in my guesthouse, where I stayed at the beginning, were Hpa-an Karen. I met Hpa-an Karen workers when going out to restaurants, filling up my motorcycle tank at patrol stations, buying some consumer products from the supermarket, and hanging out in bars. A number of Mae Sot town's merchants employ Hpa-an Karen as workers in their business. Some of them run a small business by themselves, such as selling vegetables in Mae Sot central market. In the town's suburbs, many Thai entrepreneurs hire Hpa-an Karen as labourers in construction work and many other different kinds of menial, low-paid and exhausting jobs.

In the first month of my fieldwork, I had the chance to visit a residential compound of workers for an agricultural product merchant. The compound is a small part of the corn warehouse, which is just two kilometres from the town central market. Within the warehouse area, the workers' residences are located at the far left corner. From the entrance to the warehouse, there are four connecting storage buildings, an open cement-paved ground for drying purchased products and a small business office. The compound is behind one of the storage buildings, concealed from passersby with a concrete wall construction. It is a dense and relatively small residential area. Behind the wall, I found a curved brick dwelling. It is partitioned into 24 small rooms; each is given to a worker family, except for two workers who are father and son—they live in the same room.
A room of approximately 24 square metres is the residential space where a worker, his wife, and their children live together. The discussion with Thoong, whose position is the informal leader of the compound, revealed that all residents there are Hpa-an Karen. Another four men who joined my conversation with Thoong mentioned that their journey to Thailand was caused by political persecution and civil war in Myanmar. Two of them accepted that they used to live in the Karen refugee camps and sneaked out to earn their own livelihoods. Another two and Thoong have never had camp-life experiences, but they fled home because of being subjected to intolerable forced labour by the Burmese Army. They are inclined to be long-term residents in Thailand. Four of them have been working there for more than ten years. For example, Thoong himself has been working and living there for thirteen years. He had worked somewhere else before and moved to work at the warehouse in 1996 with the persuasion of an uncle who was already there.

The pervasive appearance of Hpa-an Karen labourers in the central Mae Sot valley is an intriguing phenomenon in itself. On the one hand, it challenges the clear-cut distinction between refugees and economic migrants. From their backgrounds, they are surely refugees, but they refused to live within confined physical spaces. They are then assumed, by the public and host governments, to be a part of the wider group of economic migrants (Jacobsen 2005). On the other hand, the presence of these labourers raises a series of questions about the process and relations of settlement where these Karen vernacular refugees are embedded. What are the relationships between Thai employers and Karen workers? How do displaced Karen perceive employment opportunities in Mae Sot valley? To what extent does the economic sphere arise from other social fields of the Karen refugees' lives and how are they linked?

At present, scholars have not yet closely investigated the economic relations between local Thai hosts and Karen refugees on the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. Brees (2008) suggests that local employers in the area have made use of and benefited from the Burmese refugees' presence, ignoring state policy on
refugee warehousing. In a study of the informal economy of Mae Sot town, Lee Sang Kook (2007, 177) vividly shows that non-Thai petty merchants, mostly Hpa-an Karen and Muslim Burmese, have actively participated in the economic landscape of Mae Sot town. He points out that these merchants have established deep relations with the Thai locals in order to facilitate their engagement in market spaces. However, no further research examines the intricacies of their coexistence and social interactions. Some studies demonstrate how workers in industrial manufacturing in Mae Sot exemplify the categorisation of ‘Burmese migrant workers’ who are subjected to labour exploitation and vulnerability by the capitalist system and Thai state authority (Arnold and Hewison 2005; Pitch 2007). However, we need to be careful not to subsume all Myanmar-origin people in Thailand under the category, without considering the particularity of their approach to the economic sphere.

This chapter examines how Hpa-an Karen refugees have participated in the regional economy of Mae Sot town and how their engagement in economic relations have implications for their displaced lives. It explores the existence of Karen refugees in the commercial and farming sectors of the town, and approaches the material-labour exchanges between Thai and Karen people with a broadened perspective on work, transaction and economic relationships. First, the chapter provides a general picture of what low-income work is among displaced Karen. Second, it examines patron-client relationships as a particular mode of Thai-Karen economic transactions. The following two sections analyse how affiliations within this mode of unequal association can shape other social dimensions, particularly in terms of affinity and protection. Next, the study explores how reconceptualising working relationships within the framework of practice can supplement social dynamics to the analysis of patron-client relationships. Finally, I investigate the emergence and advantages of tenant farming as a new arena of Thai-Karen transactions. Overall, the chapter attempts to delve into how the taken-for-granted economic terrain is linked with other aspects of social existence, potentially
constituting a sphere of interactions that engender material and existential support for Karen vernacular refugees.

**Low-Income Workers**

Numerous merchants in Mae Sot valley employ Karen workers in diverse kinds of low-paid, menial and unskilled work, especially in loading and unloading goods. In my first visit to the corn warehouse mentioned above, I had a short conversation with the business owner. He is a Chinese Thai man in his early forties. He seemed a little nervous to discuss the employment situation of Karen workers, but still gave me a picture of the business of agricultural products and supply trade. In his estimation, there are about thirty large and small entrepreneurs in the business around Mae Sot valley. Most of them are middle merchants who buy farm products—corn, mungbean, soybean and rice—from farmers, and then sell them off to export merchants in central Thailand. The business clearly depends on Hpa-an Karen labourers. Some merchants in the group also operate shops selling agricultural inputs, wholesale and retail.

The business owner has both registered and undocumented migrants in his work place. He explained that all Karen workers are registered according to the 2004 policy reform on migrant workers' administration (see details in Huguet and Punpuing 2005). His illegal migrant workers are thus regularised into temporarily authorised workers through registering. Along with registering, each worker receives a one-year working permit, which allows them to live in Mae Sot with more freedom of movement, and free from fear of extortion, detention and deportation. He paid the registration processing fee for the workers (around 3,800 Baht or 130 US$ per migrant worker). He follows the regulation in order to avoid, in his words, 'the arbitrary police raid'. Yet the employers do not pay for the registration of workers' wives and children.
Employers in Mae Sot town mostly provide complimentary housing to displaced Karen who have ignored the international refugee assistance. At the corn warehouse, workers' family members are allowed to live there for free. All residents there share some basic facilities, for instance, toilets, a showering site and a groundwater well. The only expense item they must pay monthly is an electricity fee. Employment in the farming sector also allows self-settled Karen refugee families get access to housing. As permanent workers for a particular landlord, they build simple shanties on the farming land for their families. Consequently, travelling around Mae Sot town's outskirts, one can find hundreds of small houses in cultivated fields. In general, each landlord hires only one or two Karen workers and their families to live on their land. Most of these farming lands are cash-crop fields, while some are orchards and eaglewood plantations.

The main employment available for displaced Karen in Mae Sot town is as low-income unskilled workers. Most of them receive a small amount of compensation to work in three-D jobs (dangerous, dirty and difficult). For example, at Thoong's workplace, all workers are employed to work as porters, shouldering sacks of agricultural products, fertilizers and other farming inputs. However, the compensation that they get is quite low. Their employer uses a task-based payment system. Tasks are counted in numerical units (such as sacks of corn or fertilizer) and then converted into compensation. The payment system gives Karen workers an uncertain amount of income, dependant on job availability. When I visited Thoong in February 2009, he explained:

We get paid every fortnight, I got 800 baht (26 $US). There were few jobs in the last two weeks. We will be busier selling fertilizers in cultivating season and harvest season—May to July and October to December respectively. In a certain fortnight, I might earn up to 3,500 baht (116 $US).

The amount of income that workers receive is usually insufficient for family expenses. Some residents in the workplace admitted that they often face a problem
of money shortage. They solve the problem by finding other income sources. Many of them occasionally receive money from their sons or daughters who work in big cities as Bangkok and its peripheral provinces. Remittances are quite an important form of income support for their families. Thoong, who has four young children, also encounters the same problem. His wife tries to help the family by running a small snack stall in front of their room. In times of financial crisis, he asks for an advance from the employer, and the amount will be deducted on the next pay day.

Despite such financial limits, working at the warehouse is perceived as a stay in a safe place. Hpa-an Karen labourers at the warehouse have a sense of peace of mind, which emerges from their comparative experiences of working and living in different places. Basically, they compared the present life with the previous one inside Myanmar. Thoong complained that Myanmar is a country where ordinary people cannot attain the sentiment of well-being, because of the civil war and the arbitrary government. Being a worker at the corn warehouse, he is free from forced labour, extortion and tax. He said 'I can sleep without fear here'. Furthermore, Hpa-an Karen workers compare Mae Sot town with other places in Thailand. All workers once had experiences of working and living in Bangkok with a hope of better payment, and later returned to Mae Sot town. One of Thoong's colleagues commented that Bangkok is an expensive place, he could not bear its high living cost.

**Living in Patron-Client Ties**

The mixed sentiments of low-income Karen workers raise a series of questions. Why do they have a certain level of satisfaction in such seemingly exploitative employment? Is the kind of work a desperate choice in the displacement situation? And what can be the advantages and disadvantages of adopting low-paid employment in Mae Sot town? To answer these questions, it is necessary to explore how interpersonal relations happen, develop and gain significance in the context of the displacement experiences of these refugees. Little is known about the character
and quality of the inter-ethnic interactions. How do Thai employers and Karen labourers actually work and interact with each other in the local economy?

This section investigates Thai-Karen economic relations with a case study of a Thai employer and a Karen employee, named Poe. Similar to many other displaced Karen, Poe had a long story of forced mobility toward the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. After his parents died in 1975 during the civil war inside Myanmar, Poe moved to earn money as a commodity porter in a black market on the borderland. In 1977, when he first arrived in Thailand, he worked as a labourer in paddy cultivation for a *porliang* (northern Thai dialect, literally means affluent landlord) named Sai. When Sai went to the market and sought out workers to expand his paddy cultivation, Poe was the one who accepted the employment. A few years after arrival, he married a Karen woman who worked as a domestic worker at the landlord's house. The couple moved to live together on Sai's land. They have continued in the employment of the same landlord until the present.

Working with a particular employer for nearly thirty years did not significantly improve Poe's family's economic status. In the early 1980s, he received free rice for consumption, 3,000 baht as annual payment and other consumer goods such as clothes and sweaters. Then Poe had to find other sources of supplementary income. He went out for daily wage employment during his free days, on the one hand. The family also tried to live in austere style, on the other hand. Poe and his wife plant paddy in a flooded area that his landlord could not use for planting. The family then had free rice for consumption and sometimes sold the surplus for cash. Poe got increased compensation the longer he has been with the employer. Yet the amount of salary is still relatively small. For example, he got 1,000 baht a month in 2000–2003.

Clearly, the economic exchange between the Thai landlord and the Karen worker is an unequal relationship. It is the landlord who owns the land resource and makes a decision over the land use. Poe works as a general labourer, and his duty is to follow what is planned and ordered. He cannot choose what he wants to do and
how much he should get paid for various kinds of jobs on the farm. He could ask for higher compensation, but the increase totally depends on the boss's personal decision. There are no standard criteria evaluating whether the worker should be rewarded more. Most Karen workers experience this pattern of working conditions.

However, to displaced Karen such as Poe, the employer-employee transaction cannot be described as exploitation. Poe argued that there are dual advantages of working with Sai: a way of life and accommodation. He assessed that his survival and well-being after leaving home significantly relied on the economic contract. For him, the benefit derived from the work in terms of monetary value is quite small, but he also gains advantages in other material forms. Upon arrival on the Thai side of the border, Sai provided him with free food and dwelling. These employment conditions allowed Poe to decline humanitarian assistance from refugee camps. Such basic material-labour exchanges have created supportive conditions for former camp-based Karen refugees who have left camps and humanitarian aid behind.

The social interaction between Thai employers and Karen workers is a form of patron-client relationship. I use this term to refer to the pattern of dyadic relationship which is unequal and at the same time creates personal trust and interpersonal obligation (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1980; Scott 1972). The relation between two partners is imbalanced and hierarchical because there is disparity in resource control, autonomy and power. Sai is a landlord with superior economic status, while Poe is a displaced Karen who was economically deprived and owned no valuable belongings. The former owns resource that can provide essential benefits to a man in exile. The latter must depend on that resource for continuation of life. The domination of one-way reliance has created a sense of obligation that the subordinate feels fully committed to reciprocation and future mutual support.
Affinity and Burden of Debt

The patron-client tie and reciprocal arrangement engender a sense of affinity between partners. Within this economic transaction Poe has worked perpetually with the landlord for more than twenty years. A feeling of affection and loyalty is embedded in the relationship, which is expressed in fictive kinship terms by the involved partners. Poe and his wife call Sai and his wife, named Noo, por (father) and mae (mother). They also taught their children to know their employers as grandfather and grandmother. The use of words that are normally reserved for blood kinship reflects that the Thai-Karen transaction is not just an instrumental exchange, but is also a close association infused with durable trust and a promise of future mutual reliability.

Affection and mutual support in patron-client relationships tend to be diffuse. The patronage has expanded to Poe's children, especially in terms of higher education and future careers. When Poe's eldest daughter completed her primary education in the village school, he thought he could not afford to send her to higher school. When he consulted Noo about his daughter's employment, she felt pity for the girl and told him that she would help her achieve further study. Noo sent her to a well-known private Catholic school and paid tuition fees. Poe's second daughter also received the same educational opportunity. The two sisters moved to live in their patron's residence for convenient commuting to school.

However, the patronage created a paradoxical situation of the blurred distinction between potential exploitation and compelling obligation. The two girls were required to do diverse kinds of domestic work at Noo's house, as compensation for the opportunity given them. When the two girls finished their high schools (grade 12), they still worked in the house. Noo occasionally gave them a small amount of money, but they wished to go out to the wider world for employment. They asked the patron to let them leave to work somewhere else, but she rejected the idea.

This frustrating situation reflects the nature of 'unfinished debt' of the patron-client relationship. Poe's daughters are clients who accept the unequal exchange
relation in which they cannot entirely reciprocate. Poe knew that his daughters were unhappy with the exhausting work, but he could do nothing. The tension rose to a peak when Poe's eldest daughter ran away to follow her own destiny in Bangkok. Poe's second daughter did not dare to do so, as she was scared that the escape would negatively affect her parents who are also in debt and bond to Noo. Senses of debt and obligation require the family to handle dissatisfaction with delicacy.

Finally, the frustration was carefully managed by a satisfactory resolution—a continuity of affinity but in a diffuse manner. During six years of working there, Poe's second daughter knew all Noo's children. She contacted one of Noo's daughters who owns a jewellery shop in Bangkok and asked her for a job at the store. Noo's daughter accepted the girl's idea. She talked to her mother about the recruitment of Poe's daughter to work at her jewellery shop. The choice is a win-win for everyone. It does not cause any adverse impacts to her parents. Poe did not lose his close tie with the landlord. Noo's daughter is satisfied with a new active staff member. In Bangkok, Poe's second daughter works as a receptionist at the shop. Noo's daughter registered her new employee under the official Thai labour migrant registration scheme.

Protection in Employment

Historically, the Karen's appearance in Mae Sot valley is a result of the increasing integration of the local economy with the national and international economy. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, several businesses in Mae Sot valley grew up in the mid-1970s, in order to supply commodities into Myanmar through black markets located in the Karen insurgent-liberated zones. Today, Mae Sot town has retained its role as an economic hub of the region. After the fall of the black markets, the Thailand-Myanmar cross-border trade still persists at other locations, especially at nearly 20 piers on the Moeui River. Today, a number of Hpa-an Karen, along with
workers from other ethnic backgrounds, continuously work with particular employers.

Figure 8 Map of Commodity Warehouses and River Crossing Piers in Thailand
(Adapted from http://www.danmaesot.com/Maps.htm)

Further investigation into the Thai-Karen economic interaction finds that their exchange has a profound consequence on Karen living in exile. Their transaction does not only provide displaced persons with basic necessities and inherent opportunities, but also insurance against potential threats existing in Mae Sot valley. This section elaborates the intricacies of Karen worker-Thai employer
relations with a case study of a police arrest and its solution. It is the story of Yhu, a Hpa-an Karen man who has been employed as a farm worker for a Thai landlord in Pae neighbourhoods. Yhu and I had an appointment at his house on the morning of a day in March 2009. I met his wife at his house; she informed me that Yhu had just been arrested by the Thai authorities. My research assistant and I went to the police station and investigated the story.

While riding a motorcycle from Mae Sot market back to his home, Yhu was accidentally stopped on the roadside by a couple of police. He saw them from a distance, but he thought he could pass the checkpoint without a problem. They asked to check his identification card; Yhu showed them a type of temporary ID card. This card is officially known as ‘card for persons without status in the Thai registration system’ or informally known as the white card or the ten-year card. This type of card was issued, in 2007, by the Thai government for people on the waiting list for status verification; it enables the card holders to have freedom of movement around five border districts of Tak Province of Thailand.

Like many Karen residents, Yhu accessed the card through an underground method. He hoped that it would be useful in guaranteeing security when travelling around. In the past, he used to use a tactic of giving bribes to police at roadside inspections. He managed to get the card by paying an unrevealed amount of bribe to a middleman. The card which he received identifies him as a resident of a remote Thai Karen village which is really far away from where he lives. His name is on the card, but with an unfamiliar address. At that time, he handed the card to the police, who did not return the card to him as promptly as they normally did. On the contrary, they inspected the card’s details.

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12 The card for person without status in the Thai registering system was issued in 2007 and 2011. The district officers mentioned that the long-term card holders can later apply to obtain Thai citizenship, although there is no clear policy from the central Thai government.

13 The problem of corruption over identity cards is widely discussed in the borderland. It is a complicated and sensitive issue which I intend to not elaborate, to preserve the safety of concerned persons.
At that time, they (police) looked at the card and asked my name; then they asked my address. I carelessly told them my actual address. That is mismatched to what is written on the card. The police concluded that I am an alien claiming an ID card of someone else. I tried to convince them, but I failed and was finally put in prison.

The way that Yhu solved the problem really surprised me. I went to talk with a policeman. The policeman confirmed that the Karen man is an illegal migrant who should be deported. I felt pity for Yhu, but he looked more relaxed than I expected. He used a mobile phone to call his landlord and tell him about the arrest. The latter arrived at the police station an hour after the call. While Yhu was in jail, the landlord went into a room to talk with a policeman for twenty minutes. Finally, he could take Yhu out of jail.

Yhu explained later that his freedom was actually a result of corrupt practice. The exemption of his case was made possible with a bribe. Yhu's landlord is a retired public servant who was born and has lived in Mae Sot throughout his life. The landlord gave a thousand-baht banknote to the police for Yhu's release. The appearance of the landlord at the police station was to show his responsibility. As the owner of the imprisoned worker, he could effectively solve the problem. The cancellation of the arrest was an asking for 'help' from the police, and the landlord compensated the generosity with money. After being released, Yhu went home and continued working as if the problem had never happened.

The story highlights a unique practice of the Mae Sot borderland that makes ordinary Karen's cross-border mobility relatively secure. When a Karen labourer works as a permanent worker of a particular employer, the latter provides protection to their employees. A Karen research assistant, who helped me to collect data in Yhu's case, told how most employers in different businesses in Mae Sot town use bribes as a tactic in solving the arrest of their employees. If Karen labourers are detained by police, they will attempt to contact their Thai employers to intervene and discharge the arrest.
The employment of Karen workers, especially in the commercial sector, historically entails a pattern of unethical relations between the Thai employers and the Thai authorities. Merchants in Mae Sot valley have long hired undocumented migrant workers, notably Hpa-an Karen. The employment has existed since before the Thai government’s first permission for temporary employment of illegal migrant workers in 1996. Bribe-giving has been used to lessen the enforcement of laws on employment of undocumented workers. It is a corrupt reward to guarantee no police inspection of migrant employees in their business places. Mae Sot merchants and entrepreneurs acknowledge that bribe-giving has long been practiced as a necessity when running a business which employs undocumented persons.

Today, a number of businessmen still neglect to follow the Thai government’s policy on migrant worker registration. They still consider bribe-giving as a convenient and cheaper measure. As long as they can establish a good relationship with the police through material gifts, the immigration law is less stringently enforced over the unauthorised persons in their employment. There is a widely circulating rumour that most Mae Sot big merchants pay monthly tribute to the police. In the case of the arrest of their workers, they can easily get them out of jail with a phone call. It is not an over-exaggeration to say that the Thai employers have become important power agents in the borderland. These merchants share power in designing the scope of the borderland population to include the Karen workers, and the latter should be careful with their daily movement.

Paradoxically, an immoral act, like bribe-giving, has played a significant role in providing protection for Karen refugees from police and immigration law enforcement. The corrupt money becomes a means that borderlanders use to circumvent the imposed condition of ‘undocumented migrants’. According to employers, they pay the bribe to ensure the availability of a workforce in their business. For example, Yhu’s landlord said that Yhu’s freedom is directly relevant to his investment in cattle-raising and longan orchards. Thai employers then act as
guarantors of Karen safety. The Thai-Karen economic transaction has replaced, in this case, the international refugee system in procuring protection for refugees.

To Karen refugees, the quest for the patron-client bond embedded in economic employment is an attempt to redress their displacement problem. It is a demotic form of refuge-seeking, overcoming what they have lost and regaining a sense of human dignity. Earning a livelihood as employees of Thai merchants or landlords is not only an act of material self-provisioning, but also an art of achieving relative personal security. Compared with the protection afforded by refugee camps, affiliation to a particular economic patron is considered as a preferable form of post-flight settlement, although it is not economically attractive. Employers are patrons, who are capable of handling and alleviating problems encountered by Karen refugees, and thus indirectly dispense protection and care. These economic relations soaked with trust, obligation and compulsions in the borderland are adopted to support the Karen vernacular refugees' strategy of self-settlement. The patron-client relationship is asymmetric and hierarchical, but it is an implicit social bond that has fundamentally underpinned the category of vernacular refugees.

**Practical Working Relationships**

Examining Karen employment as a kind of patron-client relationship, suggests that the phenomenon of employment is best understood by using a flexible and non-determinist conceptual framework. In a situation where the delineation between refuge-seeking and economic migration cannot be clearly defined, it is easy to reduce the diverse range of people originating from Myanmar into the single category of 'Burmese migrant workers'. The most comprehensive study on the economic relations of Burmese workers at present focuses only on the vulnerable situation of textile industry workers. Dennis and Hewison (2005) found that the existing textile production is quite exploitative, and the introduction of the global chain supply has increased insecurity for the already poor Burmese workers in Mae Sot town. Their findings indicate that scholars cannot assume that all who fall
within the broad category of Burmese workers experience the same working conditions. This caution is especially important for studying Hpa-an Karen who are rarely in textile manufacturing, but rather in the commercial and farming sectors.

It can be argued that to understand the working relations of Thai employers and Karen workers requires conceptualisation that breaks with the influential vision of mainstream economic principles. In *The Social Structure of the Economy*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that 'economics' as a field of study is actually 'based on an initial act of abstraction that consists in dissociating a particular category of practices, or a particular dimension of all practices, from the social orders in which all human practices is immersed' (2005, 1). Economic agents' deeds are then approached only from the taken-for-granted model of economic rationality and what Bourdieu calls the 'spirit of calculation—universal capacity to submit behaviour to calculatory reason' (ibid., 7). This model restricts us to conceive of 'work' only as a way of earning monetary income, and to regard the 'transaction between strangers' as an activity driven by market force. Karen employment, as described above, reflects that work conceived as an exchange of services, or an economic transaction, also might be very personalistic and enclosed with human emotion. Such economic transactions cannot be reduced to acts governed by utilitarian motivation.

According to Bourdieu, economic practices are not generated from rational decisions and genuine calculation, but stem from the disposition which is endogenous and acquired through a learning process. He explained how economic practices function:

... agents are guided by intuitions and anticipations arising out of a practical sense which very often leaves the essential factors implicit and which, on the basis of experience acquired in practice, engages in strategies that are 'practical' in the dual sense of implicit—i.e. non-theoretical—and expedient—i.e. adapted to the exigencies and urgent pressure of action (ibid., 9).
To approach Karen working relations as 'practices' can enhance the analysis of patron-client ties to grasp the subtle dynamics of the Thai-Karen reciprocal relations. Both Thai employers and Karen workers came to existing economic transactions in accordance with the regional history of forced displacement, cross-border mobility, demographic change and commercial growth. As people seeking alternatives to arbitrary and cruel treatment, Karen refugees obtain practical refuge in affect-laden, hierarchal employment relations in ways that are both 'non-theorized' and 'exigent', in Bourdieu's terms. However, the unequal dyadic engagement does not remain in fixed and unfluctuating form. On the contrary, the two partners constantly manipulate their relationship, based on dispositions learned and acquired from their mutual interaction and from surrounding environments.

We can observe the two partners' practical strategies in their interactive negotiation to transform working relationships. I would like to elaborate on this by discussing changes in the employment relations between Sai and Poe. Poe's life underwent a big change from paid employee to tenant farmer when Sai passed away in 2003. At the time, all properties passed into the control of his wife, Noo. As land inheritor, Noo tried to succeed her husband as employer with predominant position and power, but she could not maintain that condition. The cultivation, in the first year under her supervision, had quite low productivity and could not make profits. The crop failure was partly a result of detrimental weather but largely due to her mismanagement. Noo had no experience in the process of farming, as she rarely engaged with farming and land use when her husband was alive.

The new employer's naivety about farming gave Pae momentum in negotiating for better conditions. With her poor farming knowledge, Noo make a decision to grant Poe land to rent for his own production, although she had strongly opposed the idea before. What lay behind her initial opposition was paranoia; she was scared that Poe could run away without paying her rental fee if the farming production failed. In the new arrangement, the land was divided equally between two tenants:
Poe and another Thai tenant. Noo had little to do in this approach to land management, but gained constant revenue. Poe gained autonomy in farming and bore his own investment cost, while Noo received 70,000 baht of land rent fee annually. Tenant farming has a great potential in elevating Karen households' economic status. Poe's living conditions have significantly improved with the income created by this agricultural investment. The family could save enough money to build their own house on a small land plot that Poe bought several years ago.

Since the shift from worker to tenant, Poe has explicitly developed two types of dispositions toward his employer. Poe learnt more about his boss's propensities and tendencies. He could sense the insecurity of his tenant farming contract, as it was totally predicated upon Noo's personal decision. Noo often repeated that Poe's family progress possibly came from the opportunity given by her. Consequently, Poe retains a prevalent sense of debt and obligation. Although Poe is no more a paid worker, he remains as devoted to the care of his patron landlord as he did in the past. He takes responsibility in jobs which normal tenants will not do, such as weed-clearing in unused areas, fixing barb-wire fences, removing fallen trees and keeping his eyes on Noo's nearby land plots and reporting if there is something wrong.

Second, Poe interacts with Noo by implicitly conveying a message of being a diligent and honest tenant. In his opinion, a landlord and tenant can have an enduring relationship, if both sides' demands match together well. The learned knowledge is expressed in the way Poe pays the land rent. After finishing the harvest and selling all products to merchants, Poe usually reserves an amount of rent and pays it to Noo a few days later. He explained that the punctual and honest payment is very important. Such behaviour makes the landlord contented and willing to renew the land rent contract. He told me:

I find some Thai renting farmers are tricky. They tell a lie about small margins for a bargain in the rental fees. You imagine, if the landlord knows
later he was deceived, he might be very furious. I do not want to do it that way. I would pay rental fees first, even if that means we have less to eat. We can work and earn money somewhere else.

Simultaneously, the landlord's economic practices are also shaped by her own intuition and anticipation of the dyadic relationship. Noo seems to recognise that land in Mae Sot valley today has much more value. The period of clearing and opening up new land for farming with cheap labour from Myanmar has ended. At present, there are increasing demands for arable land. Contest over land rent is evident since the operation of a sugarcane-based ethanol alcohol plant—a joint venture business with a valued $65 million baht factory, on the south of Mae Sot town in 2008. The plant's demands for sugarcane supply and the lucrative price of sugarcane attracts experienced sugarcane farmers from nearby provinces to cultivate sugarcane there. The encroachment of sugarcane plantations causes contested relations over the present tenant farming. Renting land to sugarcane planters gives more lucrative fee payment to landowners, with double or triple the local rate of rent fee.

Accordingly, Noo currently gains superiority in negotiation over the land rent contract. In late 2009, she informed Poe about the fee increase in the next production year. She did that in recognising her advantageous position of being decision-maker over the farmland. The notification of fee increase became a test driving Poe to give feedback. Poe was quite upset with the new proposal. He tried to negotiate with Noo for low rent, while Noo insisted on the necessity to augment land rent. Noo seemed to have no intention of giving the land to new tenants and then gaining maximum profit from the land use. Implicitly she acted in this way to show her predominance and her preference for higher compensation. At the time I left fieldwork in early 2010, their negotiation was continuing, and no exact figure of the new rent was mentioned by the landlord. When I contacted Poe later from overseas, he acknowledged the fact about increasing land competition in the local
area. In recognition of the changing environment, he admitted that it might be necessary to eventually pay more rent to his landlord.

This anecdote shows how human agents make economic decisions as practical strategies rather than as a result of conscious calculation of interests. Both parties in the transaction embody economic interests on the basis of need, preferences and propensities acquired in practice. Apart from expectation of monetary benefits, their behaviours are generated by dispositions accrued from learning processes associated with social interactions. Their working relationships are not motionless and are actually open for change. Their mutual interactions are filled with the application of implicit and ad hoc knowledge.

Karen and Tenant Farming

In Pae neighbourhoods, my field site, a number of Karen self-settled refugees have departed from daily wage employment to make their own investment in tenant farming. The latter is perceived by displaced Karen as a more favourable way of making a living, as they can have greater autonomy over livelihood-earning and it usually compensates investors with lucrative benefits. The term tenant farming refers to an agricultural system in which landowners rent their land to Karen residents and receive rent payment after the harvest, which can be either cash or a share of the produce. According to pre-arrangement, landowners might co-invest in the cultivation by sharing inputs costs. Landlords receive a fixed rate of rent fee, irrelevant to the annual actual production.

This section demonstrates how the Thai-Karen economic relations have emerged in the local area and what their advantages and disadvantages are. I discuss a case study of a Thai landlord and a Karen tenant, named Tong and Koeuy respectively. Koeuy is a short Karen man with curly hair in his mid-30s. In 2002, Koeuy, his wife and three children left a Karen refugee camp and arrived in Pae neighbourhoods. Tong is a landlord from the lower middle class. At the age of 62, he is a retired
janitor of the Mae Sot Municipality Office. During the 1980s and 1990s, he also earned money from petty cross-border trade along with his permanent job. Tong and friends co-invested in the cattle trade through the Karen insurgent-liberated black markets. When he received the lump sum of his retirement allowance in 2004, he bought an eleven-acre piece of land from a friend in the cattle trade. The land itself is 13 kilometres far from Mae Sot town's centre where he lives.

The opportunity for displaced Karen in tenant farming is embedded in the informal coexistence of Thai and Karen residents in Mae Sot valley. Koeuy first got in contact with Tong for wage employment in cattle-raising in 2005. The low price of cattle at that time made Tong lose invested capital after selling the cattle herd. Tong was, however, quite satisfied with Koeuy's working character. Two years later he proposed that Koeuy rent land from him. Similarly to the general Karen employment in the farming sector, Tong and Koeuy's deal disregards the Thai official regulations on migrant worker registration. Tong informed the Thai village headman about the presence of Koeuy's family in the village administrative area. The communication guaranteed that Koeuy is a migrant worker under Tong's responsibility. The informal permission also enabled Koeuy to build a permanent house on Tong's land, without any legal problem.

The Thai landlord's preference for Hpa-an Karen tenants over other ethnic tenants originates from his impression of the Karen as honest and hard-working people. Tong was quite satisfied with the transition from the previous Thai tenant to Koeuy. He used to encounter cheating behaviour from that prior tenant, especially in payments. In contrast, he has found Koeuy to be straightforward on the same issue. In comparison, he further admired that Koeuy and his wife were doing well in cultivation. When I met Tong at the corn plantation he suggested that I observe how evenly corn plants grow up throughout the plantation and commented that it was the result of Koeuy's hard work.

The interaction between the Thai landlord and the Karen tenant can be characterised as the simultaneous exchange of two types of resources: land and
labour. In accordance with his retirement status and lack of new income, Tong seriously planned his future. He bought the farmland in order to secure sufficient rice for his family consumption. Therefore, he required tenants to do paddy planting. For Koeuy, the transaction provided advantageous conditions for his post-camp life. Through tenant farming, he could acquire both accommodation and a livelihood. Put differently, while landlords use their land ownership to gain material benefits, Karen self-settled refugees appropriate the economic relations as shelter.

In renting land from lower middle class landlords like Tong, the interpersonal transaction tends to develop through face-to-face relationships. In comparison with well-off landlords, Tong has strong affection for and close ties with his tenant. Tong and Koeuy's interactions are economic exchanges associated with trust and reciprocity and obligation. Therefore, a sense of care and protection is prevalent in their social interactions. Tong offers financial assistance to Koeuy's family from time to time. For instance, he provided food and beverages to workers whom Koeuy employed to build a small shack in 2007. When the family replaced the thatched roof, Tong gave the family half of the required corrugated iron sheets. In the beginning of 2009, he shared 3,000 baht (100 US$) for electricity pole installation. He also donates small amounts of money when the Karen family conducts certain annual traditional activities. Tong explained his offers as small things he can do to encourage Koeuy to work with him in the long term.

Tenant farming is a potential career; it can significantly improve a Karen family's well-being. In a discussion with Koeuy's wife who takes care of the family's financial matters, she mentioned that tenant farming offers a big amount of income, a condition that enables her to consider long-term plans for using money. In comparison, she said that daily wage income usually disappears quickly with everyday expenses. In the past, her family usually encountered a lack of money fluidity. But now, her family financial situation is much better due to the agricultural incomes and her careful scheme for spending money. The couple can
afford to send three children to Thai public school, instead of attending the poor-quality migrant educational centre.

In reality, tenant farming is not an investment without risk. Opportunities within tenant farming are sometimes limited by the high cost of production, and imprudent investment can bring farmers consequent problems. In addition to regular expenses on breeding seeds, chemical fertilizer and the hire of machines and labour in the harvest, tenant farmers must pay rent as an extra cost. In Pae neighbourhoods, most tenants take loans from local merchants with a monthly interest rate to cover all expenses. Koeuy's wife told me that she tries to be very careful with borrowing and repays as soon as she receives payment from selling the product after harvest. Among the broader group of Karen tenant farmers in the areas, there are some families who are heavily indebted to money lenders. Primarily, farming investment with borrowed money has saddled them with huge debts. There is a case of one who has a debt of more than 200,000 baht (6250 US$).

Conclusion
The chapter illustrates how working relationships in Mae Sot town are a multisided arena for providing material assistance, shelter and protection to displaced Karen spilling over from Myanmar into Thailand. In pursuit of earning a living, Karen workers have engaged in material-labour exchanges which embody a patron-client relationship. The mutual bond is substantially unequal and potentially exploitative, but it is not merely a matter of economics. The personal quality of the relationship inherently and implicitly entails certain informal forms of care and mutual support. These reciprocal relations sometimes even lead to the nullification of Thai state power on the borderland. This does not imply that such economic transactions provide ultimate security and a durable solution to their displacement. Rather, the working relationships have intrinsically supplied informal shelter and protection, which encapsulates a paradoxical combination of affection and compulsion as well as choice and constraint.
Reconceptualising what is called 'economics' has enabled us to broaden understanding about the working activities and material transactions that self-settled Karen refugees have been engaging in for more than three decades. Explicitly, the working relationships have social and emotional dimensions, as well as offering material gains and security. Placing oneself in the patron-client bond is a tacit option for Karen refugees. It is, however, limited and embedded in a restrictive field of social interactions. Obtaining refuge through such transactions requires them to be practical and adapt to a changing environment. What needs to be emphasised here is that these Thai-Karen economic exchanges have multifaceted aspects; they are a conjuncture of protection and exploitation and hospitality and implicit coercion.
Chapter 3

Refuge in Local Administration and Contingent Relations

The existing international refugee protection system has had mixed consequences for people seeking refuge across nation-state boundaries. The system has been underpinned and globally institutionalised by the enactment of international law and practices of humanitarian organisations around the world. It works on providing shelter and assistance for refugees by reference to the notion of universal inalienable human rights. In principle, the refugee has the right of access to aid, safety and human dignity. Within the international norm, refugees must be treated with a certain level of hospitality, even though they are strangers to the host societies.

In practice, the refugee protection system diverges from the ideal of universal refugee rights. In the nation-state system, many refugee-receiving countries show reluctance to give protection to refugees, as they are not citizens of the state. Recently, many western countries have employed diverse instruments to block the illegal migration of refugees (Black 2003). At the same time, numerous developing country governments prefer the policy of refugee encampment to local integration, because of their anxiety over economic and environment burdens, security concerns, xenophobic prevention and asserting of sovereignty over border areas (Crisp 2004). Encampment is largely criticised for its controlling approach, for putting constraints on the freedom of movement of refugees and generating idleness and dependency. The anti-warehousing campaign condemns the authoritarian and self-focused character of the humanitarian organisations (Harrell-Bond 2002). Smith (2004) even considers confinement unnecessary, wasteful, hypocritical, counterproductive, unlawful, and morally unacceptable.
Some recent research in refugee studies has discussed informal and non-institutional patterns of refuge-taking. Many cases from African countries explore alternatives to international refugee protection that do not depend on external intervention. Hovil (2007) demonstrates that self-settled refugees in Uganda live and work with the host population and carve out their own security by seeking acceptance from the local government, in a situation when camp settlement failed to ensure human security. Campbell (2006) also shows us that the Somali urban refugees living in Nairobi with illegal status have established clan-based trade networks between Somalia and Kenya and attain sustainable livelihoods through regional commercial trade. This research also challenges the traditional conception of local integration that focuses on the acquisition of legal citizenship and a high level of self-sufficiency (Ager and Strange 2008; Jacobsen 2001). They find that these refugees have potential for local integration, in spite of the encampment preference of the host governments and the lack of support for local integration in particular host countries.

Discussions of these overlooked and unrecognised refugee alternatives indicate the limits of the 'human rights' discourse of the international refugee protection system. Lisa Malkki (1995) suggests that dehistoricised and depoliticised constructions of the refugee figure discourage investigation into the way refugees actually respond to a new place in which they have arrived. Refugees attempt to seek safety and protection in many ways, not solely by claiming refugee rights in accordance with the institutionalised refugee protection regime. Tara Polzer (2009) argues that refugees may use other identities to claim access to resources in a local context, such as ethnic identification, kinship networks and political allies. Temporary or permanent solutions to particular displacement situations can appear in various forms. Refugees might not see the predominant refugee rights discourse as a universal answer to their experience of displacement.

The chapter aims to explore the way that refuge is provided and assured for Karen refugees through an indigenous mode of refuge. From existing literature, we know
very little how safety, protection, human dignity and basic rights access are guaranteed in the informal reception of refugees. We do not understand the mechanisms and dynamics of the delivery of refuge through vernacular models. It is therefore necessary to examine what may be in fact disguised, or invisible forms of hospitality and refuge. The chapter is drawn from a case study of Karen refugees living in a Thai village near the Burmese border. First, I introduce the general living conditions of informally settled Karen refugees in the village. Second, I trace the historical context of mobility in which this Thai border village has come to host these refugees. The chapter then examines informal mechanisms of Karen refugee self-governance and their interaction with the local Thai administration. The next two sections investigate the tactics and strategies that Karen refugees employ in negotiating for access to rights in the village context. Finally, I analyze the symbolic dimensions of Karen negotiations for refuge as embedded in local hierarchies of authority.

Karen Refugee Residents of a Thai Village

Sawtika is a borderland village on Thai territory. It is less than ten kilometres from the Mae Sot business centre. My visits to the village made me aware of its multiethnic character. Residents from various ethnic backgrounds live together there. The Mae Sot annual report (Mae Sot district, 2009) says that Sawtika has 362 households, with a population of around 1,228. The figure actually omits a group of people who are considered as illegal migrants. They are displaced persons who fled armed conflict from Burma into Thailand in the 1980s, and are comprised of two different groups. The first are ethnic Thai who grew up in Thai villages located on the Burmese side of the border. When the fighting between the Burmese military and the Karen rebels broke out in 1984, they fled and sought shelter with Thai relatives and friends in Sawtika village. The second group is refugee Karen who are interspersed amidst the Thai residents and in the cultivated areas surrounding the
village. There are around 110 non-Thai households in the village, with the number of residents at 450-500.14

Sawtika is one of several villages in Pae where, altogether, thousands of Karen refugees currently live. Pwo-dialect speaking Karen from Hpa-an Plain (hereafter Hpa-an Karen) is the predominant group among the refugees. Hpa-an Karen constitute around 80 percent of the total displaced persons. They arrived in Pae due to different historical and political forces, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Most Karen families rent small land plots for housing. Some Thai landlords have subdivided their underused land into small plots which they rent at cheap prices to Karen, who build simple shacks upon them. These Hpa-an Karen have been there for a decade. They seem to receive a certain level of hospitality from the local community.

There are a number of refugees residing in our village. They live with their landlords or rent small land plots from the Thai villagers. Most of them live in shacks built of leaf-thatches and eucalyptus poles. Even though they are illegal migrants, we allowed them to live here as long as they respect the community rules, such as having proper toilets.

This quote from Dam, a Thai assistant village headman, refers to the Karen refugees currently living in Sawtika village. It indicates that most of the displaced Karen live in the village as illegal migrants, according to Thai law, but are recognised and counted as village residents. Throughout my fourteen-month fieldwork, I heard no one talk about the arrest and deportation of undocumented Karen. Some Thai residents of Sawtika have empathic feelings towards their Karen fellow residents. They acknowledge how Hpa-an Karen have encountered life-threatening danger and economically stressful situations on the Burmese side of the border. I noticed this sense of empathy from Dam. In our discussion about a

14 The population figure is roughly estimated. It is difficult to find the accurate number since all non-Thai families seem to have some members working elsewhere when I did my fieldwork in 2009.
Karen family that lives opposite to his house, Dam expressed pity for the family's children. He also commented that their lack of citizenship obstructed them from gaining higher education and future opportunity.

The family has four daughters in total. The eldest one works as a domestic worker in Bangkok. The other young girls are studying in the village school. They speak and read Thai fluently, and do not know Burmese at all. I do not think they can survive in Burma. I think the Thai government should help these stateless children. They were born here and play with Thai friends at school. They can be naturalised as Thai citizens.

Karen residents of Sawtika are able to get access to basic rights, including ones denied to camp-based Karen refugees by the Thai state authorities. They comparatively attain more basic freedoms. They can move freely in the village and around Mae Sot valley, with the exception of the Thai police checkpoints. They have relative freedom to choose how to make their livelihood, ranging from daily-wage jobs, petty commerce, and tenant farming to migration for work to the big cities, although these options are not available for all Karen refugees. They can use local natural resources. For example, several displaced women collect forest tree leaves for thatch-making and sell them for cash. When I asked a few Thai grocery shop owners in the village about the refugee presence, they said that they are customers, not aliens whom should be eliminated. They even allow these Karen residents to buy on credit at their shops.

Furthermore, Karen villagers can obtain access to certain public services. The best example is childhood education. The public school of Sawtika village had enrolled undocumented children in classes even before the Thai government’s cabinet resolution of July 2005, giving children education access regardless of their registration status. In 2009, there were about 110 undocumented students in the school: half were displaced Thai children and the other half displaced Karen children. The school receives all students whose parents want them to study there.
Some children of Karen refugee families are, however, out of the Thai educational system because their parents do not want to or cannot afford the costs of their children’s uniforms and textbooks. The public schoolmaster has quite a positive attitude toward his Karen students:

They (Karen students) are children from families that tend to stay here in the long term. They are very active and hardworking at study and other activities, probably due to life difficulties. Many are school representatives in the inter-school academic skill and sport competitions. They get an educational certificate on graduation as do other students, but the certificate is useless for a job application, since they remain undocumented persons.

The inclusion of Karen refugees as members of the village is also reflected in the community resolution of inter-ethnic disputes. Disputes between Thai and Karen residents are fairly treated and resolved by the Thai leaders, without ethnic discrimination. As I started my fieldwork in December 2008, a Karen informant still recalled a case of dispute in the month past. In November 2008, many teenagers from Sawtika took motorbikes to visit night fairs during the floating festival (Loy Kratong in Thai) in Mae Sot town. Some also enjoyed drinking alcohol.

Two Thai teenagers riding a motorbike passed the house of a Karen man at 10 p.m. The Karen man shouted ‘ai-sak’. He presumed in the dim light that one of the youths on the vehicle was ‘ai-sak’—his nephew—but the young man actually was not. With the unclear pronunciation of the Thai language by the Karen man, the two drunk teenagers heard ‘ai-sad’, an insulting word which means ‘bitch’. They turned back to the Karen man’s house and punched him. The couple hit the Karen man with anger, while the attacked man did not understand what mistake he had made.

The latter group of children attended migrant learning centres that are financially supported by international charitable organisations.
The Karen can gain the full benefit of local arbitration even when Thai citizens are involved as parties in the dispute. This case of physical violence was brought into local arbitration at the Thai village headman's house the next morning. The bruised man made a complaint to the Thai village headman. The troublemakers were brought in for investigation, which revealed that it was actually a misunderstood communication. The case was judged before the disputants' relatives and friends. The two young men accepted their guilt. The two Thai men paid compensation to the Karen man. It was a sum of 600 baht ($20 US) for the medical expenses. My Karen informant who told me the story commented that the amount of money looks small, but it has a lot of meaning for him. It is a guarantee that Karen can live with dignity in the village. Other Karen residents also appreciated the way the case was solved.

The benefits that Karen refugees in Sawtika derive sometimes exceed what the Thai laws allow. An example is the Karen refugees' property tenure. Some Hpa-an Karen householders bought land plots from Thai landlords and built their own houses. The striking fact is that these undocumented Karen use different stratagems to circumvent their illegal status in order to possess private properties. It is no exaggeration to say that most Thai neighbours in the village know, in detail, how a particular Karen family completed the land transaction. Certain tactics are even drawn up cooperatively between the Thai landowners and the Karen refugees. Most of these methods are illegal in the eyes of the Thai law. Nevertheless, those involved in such deals see no alternative. A Thai man who engaged in such an unlawful transaction conceded that 'our Karen neighbours cannot buy land legally, we have to deal with the law in this way'.

The presence and actions of Karen refugees in the village, however, have attracted criticism about their effects on the host society. As Grundy-War and Elaine (2002) mention, state agencies and national media in Thailand often tag, intentionally or unintentionally, displaced persons as aliens and threats to national security. Some

16 I do not wish to describe these various tactics here due to concern for my informants' property security.
of Sawtika's Thai residents share the conventional Thai impression, which stereotypes people from Myanmar in Thailand as aliens who pose potential threats to their community's security. The perception is dominant among those working as public servants. A nurse who lives in Sawtika and works at Mae Sot district hospital claimed that her fellow Sawtika Thai are more vulnerable to health risks owing to the arrival of so many illegal migrants. In her view, these aliens worsen the public health situation in Thailand's border areas, for they spread infectious diseases, especially tuberculosis and malaria, to the wider Thai population.

Stories about the methods Karen adopt to secure ownership of land mentioned above also attract some comments from the Thai villagers. A public car (Sawtika-Mae Sot route) driver, who lives in Sawtika and was a Thai soldier during 1982-1986, is one who expressed concerns on this issue. He remarked to me that some well-off ex-leaders of the KNU illegally bought and own large amounts of land there. The situation, in his mind, signified that his fellow Thai have increasingly lost land to foreigners, which is a major threat to Thai national security. The driver's xenophobic sensibility quite exaggerates the actual situation. There are two ex-KNU leaders who own, in total, about 50-60 acres of land—a share that has little impact on the overall village land distribution, especially in comparison to big Mae Sot landlords who buy larger numbers of land plots from villagers. These kinds of comments form a sub-current of gossip among Thai villagers. I found no deterrent against or explicit dissatisfaction with the Karen land tenure.

**Situated Reception of Refugees**

The stories about Karen villagers discussed above imply ambivalence in the Thai reception of Karen refugees. On the one hand, it seems that the Thai village offers a relatively friendly atmosphere for Karen refugees. On the other hand, some Thai villagers feel uncomfortable and suspect the Karen presence is a threat to the village order. I explore here how the culture of refugee reception has been historically developed in the context of the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. I trace
the way that local residents identify village membership and how they responded to the arrival of the displaced Karen persons from Myanmar.

Basically, the Thai villagers’ response to Karen refugees from Myanmar can be contextualised within a history of mobility. Sawtika village was first established at the end of World War II through the immigration of ethnic Thai people. Many middle-aged and old Thai informants in the village I interviewed can trace where their ancestors came from: no one claims to be a genuine local. Prapai, a Thai woman, aged 61, told me that her parents moved from Lampoon province, while her surrounding neighbours also came from other provinces of present northern Thailand. Some Thai migrants went further to settle down on present Myanmar territory. Thai people on both sides of the border travelled back and forth for work and marriage. Prapai suggested that many Thai residents in the village today have a cross-border background. For example, Pang, the Thai village headman, was born of Thai-Mon parents and grew up inside Myanmar. He later married a daughter of the former village headman and moved into the village in the 1970s.

The village ethos, as outlined to me by elderly residents of mostly northern Thai ancestry, is that membership of the village – defined variously as residential proximity, kin affiliation, access to common resources or inclusion in community activities – has long been open to people of other ethnic groups. The Thai villagers use ethnic criteria in identifying cultural differences, but not to define legitimate residency as the modern Thai state does. They consider the ebb and flow of people from multiple backgrounds to be a common borderland situation. Prapai mentioned that Sawtika also had some non-Thai residents before the influx of refugees in the 1980s. The most memorable one to her is a Karen man named Cha, who has been in the village since the mid-1960s. Cha is a Thailand-born Karen man who traded cattle across the border in the 1950s-1960s. He married a Karen woman inside Myanmar and stayed there. Later, Cha’s family moved to Sawtika.

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17 The Thai term for village is moo-baan, which means a group of houses within a physical place. People living in a moo-ban are called chao-baan (villagers).
village. The local Thai authorities legally recognise Cha, his wife and their six children as authorised village residents. They were granted Thai citizenship in the 1970s. Their neighbours seem to accept the family as a part of the community.

Cross-border social dynamics, especially the black markets of the 1970s-1990s, as described in Chapter 1, have shaped the sociable disposition of the Thais in this borderland village. A number of Thai villagers were engaged in the cross-border trade and some developed close relations with Karen trading partners. Karen people living and working around the black market (commonly known among Karen by the Burmese word 'Mhaung Kho', which literally means smuggling), from Karen rebel leaders to ordinary men, befriended Thais from Mae Sot, who also had come to work there, through common business dealings. A Thai man whom I met during a pilgrimage trip to a Thai Buddhist temple in Myanmar described how he used to work in Wang-kha market, carrying consumer goods by ox-cart and selling them in Myanmar. 'I could earn some money and got to know some Karen merchants and workers there', he recalled.

The growth of the informal economy and the inter-ethnic relations it fostered, contributed to the later reception of Karen refugees. Upon the arrival of Karen refugees in 1984-1985, the Thai villagers accommodated the large influx of Karen people in a locally contextualised manner. Many Thai villagers employed Karen refugees as cheap labour for their intensive farming, as discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the Thai reception of Karen who fled the fighting was based on their enduring relationships. Owing to their interactions during the previous two decades in the black market, not all Karen arrivals were strangers to the Thai locals. Quite a number were friends and acquaintances.

The friendship, in some cases, has lasted until today and supports the Karen refugees' self-settlement strategy. After refugee camp relocation, many Karen were able to seek new residential places with their Thai friends' help. For example, I met a Thai villager who visited one of my Karen informants' houses in March 2009. He
came there to collect the land rent fee. He described how the arrangement had come about:

We got to know each other when we were cattle traders in the border market. He moved to the new camp site, but he later came back to ask for land to rent. This land was unused for a long time. I gave it since I knew he faced displacement hardship.

The case indicates that the Thai-Karen coexistence in the village relies on historically contingent relations. The local approach to the reception of new residents is socially contingent rather than fixed to the notion of citizenship. Local Thai responses to Karen refugees, to a certain degree, are situated within particular social relations of the region. Those Thai villagers who already were acquainted with Karen individuals seeking solutions to their forced displacement, were favorably disposed towards the latter as friends or acquaintances. The border dynamics in the second half of the 20th century influenced the way these Thai hosts responded to the Karen refugees.

It is important to note here that not all Karen refugees can manipulate the relations with Thai host locals to get hospitality in Sawtika village. Some Karen refugees are newly arrived refugees. They can stay in the village by drawing upon their personal networks with either Karen relatives or the senior ex-leaders of the KNU who have long settled down there. The Thai villagers seem to be able to live alongside these others, as they say they have done throughout their village's history. The presence of these new arrivals is tolerated as long as they are well-behaved. Karen arrivals for their part bring to the project of settling in the village their own mechanisms and standards for appropriate behaviour. In Sawtika, there is an informal control system that shapes Karen residents into proper local residents, and I will investigate that mechanism in following sections.
The Informal Karen Administration

Karen residents’ lives in Sawtika village are linked together under an informal system of civilian administration. I became aware of the existence of this informal authority from the beginning of my fieldwork in the village. A Karen friend suggested that I contact the Karen headman in the village, in order to get data on this Karen refugee community. That led me to get to know Timaw, a middle-aged Karen man. As the Karen village headman, Timaw takes responsibility for the Sawtika Karen community’s internal affairs. He collects basic data about people under his authority. When I asked him for information about the Karen households in Sawtika, he brought out a pile of A4 sheets and made a listing of all Karen household heads and household numbers. These paper sheets are actually registration forms containing Karen household data. They are written in Burmese, the language of officialdom in Myanmar, and used in spoken form as a lingua franca among migrants from different ethnic groups originating in Myanmar.

The Sawtika Karen residents consider the informal register made by Timaw as a form of semi-official permission for them to reside in the village area. They feel a sense of security living there under the Karen headman’s authority, notwithstanding their lack of a Thai employer who can give protection through patron-client relations, as discussed in Chapter 2. They see registration with the Karen headman as a requirement of residence in the village. For example, I found a Pa-O couple at Timaw’s house on an afternoon in May 2009. They came to ask for registration with the Karen headman. Timaw filled out the family’s details on one of the Burmese-language registration forms. When I asked about their visit, the husband explained:

We worked in Bangkok for three years and returned here a few days ago. Before that, we lived here and were under Timaw’s leadership. I withdrew my membership and now I want to re-register. I think it is useful. If I have problems, I can come to consult with him, as well as ask for help, if necessary.
The informal registration system maintained by the Karen headman follows a restrictive set of social networks. It does not include all persons moving from Myanmar as members. Timaw mentioned that the non-Thai residents under his supervision are more or less those people who have been in contact with each other or have been acquainted for a while. Some of them were neighbours who once lived together in a refugee camp in the 1980s, while others have been residing and moving around the Karen-controlled black markets and became friends. Although Hpa-an Karen are predominant among the overall non-Thai population, his administration also accepts as members some other ethnic groups who have long lived among the Karen refugees. Timaw is very careful in accepting new members' applications. He limits the registration to those households tending to live in the village more or less permanently and who are not involved in illegal activities. He accepts certain newly arrived families if their relatives who have already settled in the village guarantee the new arrivals' behaviour.

The responsibility of the Karen headman is to take care of the Karen community's internal affairs. Timaw has intervened in several cases to mediate and solve family quarrels, domestic violence and inter-household disputes. For example, a Karen woman ran into Timaw's house one night during the Karen traditional New Year celebration in 2009. She complained that her husband was drunk and hit her when she refused to give him money. Timaw told her to go back home and convey to her husband his order that he have no more to drink and go to bed. The woman left and did not come back for further assistance. I learnt of the result the next morning from Timaw's wife:

The drunk man complied with my husband's order and stopped beating his wife. He knew well that if he was stubborn, he would get into trouble when Timaw's assistants arrived.

The story raises the question of how the authority of a displaced person like Timaw is constituted. What kind of authority does the Karen headman's job rely on? The local Thai administration rarely gets involved in the everyday lives of Karen
refugees. Rather, it is the Karen village headman who is responsible for controlling his fellow Karen. My observations in the community lead me to suggest that the Karen village headman's authority in governing the Karen residents in the village is accumulated and situated, without any legal endorsement. His position has legitimacy in the displaced Karen community because of his facility in combining disparate modes of authority. The informal Karen leader has both the character of bureaucratic authority and of traditional authority, in Weber's classification (1947).

First, the leader adopts the hierarchical organisation of modern bureaucratic authority in the internal structure of the informal Karen administration. Timaw's village administration is supported by a group of Karen men called 'assistants', who serve as a relay to Karen residents. The Karen residential areas of the village are divided into seven clusters. Each cluster has one to three assistants working under Timaw's command. They monitor the general situation and household affairs within their own clusters, in the name of the Karen village headman. Their responsibilities include distributing news, requesting cooperation and mobilising resources for collective events. They collect money from households within their clusters and motivate Karen residents to provide labour services for communal events. Just as important is the leader's deployment of symbolic props of bureaucratic authority, from the title of 'headman', which parallels that of the Thai administration, to the use of Burmese language registration forms, emulating the administrative practices of both Thai and Burmese states.

Second, the Karen village headman's power has an element of traditional authority. Timaw accumulates it by personalistic flourishes such as his hands-on resolution of family disputes and by demonstrating accomplishment in building sentiment between members of the Karen community. Timaw tries to reconstitute a sense of community among the members, who come from diverse regional, social and economic backgrounds. One of the methods utilised for this objective is the cremation fund. Each household is required to pay 20 baht for donating to a Karen
family when one of its members passes away. The fund has a double impact. On the one hand, the family of the deceased gets some money to undertake the funeral, at least to buy a coffin. On the other hand and more importantly, the collective activity bridges gaps and builds trust between unfamiliar neighbours. The fund is gathered in advance and is refilled immediately after it is paid to a funeral host.

His authority among refugees in Sawtika is concurrently reinforced through sponsorship of other cultural and religious activities. These communal actions range from the founding of a Karen Buddhist monastery to the organising of several Karen traditional and Buddhist ceremonies throughout the year. Timaw has regularly organised these community activities since he took the position of Sawtika village headman in 1999. These activities have indirectly benefited the self-governance among the Karen. They show Timaw as a Karen headman with a great capability, since their arrangement requires skillful management, including planning, fund raising, labour division, and monitoring as well as accounting. Furthermore, these events bring people together. They are social spaces where Karen refugees gather and share the communal atmosphere.

Integration into Local Governance

The informal Karen administration I am discussing here is not a recognised part of the official Thai administrative system. Thai state authorities have never formally acknowledged the existence of the Karen civilian control system, even though they know that some Thai village headmen have Karen assistants taking care of the non-Thai population's affairs. According to Pang, the Thai headman of Sawtika village, in the monthly meetings at Mae Sot administrative district office, the district head usually discusses crimes and security topics related to alien persons—a category which refers to people labeled as unauthorised migrants. The Thai village headmen are required to deal with these problems. The Thai officials seem to not care what methods local leaders employ; their concern is only whether a particular problem
associated with Burmese migrants has been relieved and finally solved at the village level.

In stark contrast to the higher-level officials' neglect of the fine details, local village leaders on the Thailand-Myanmar borderland have worked in close cooperation with the Karen leaders. Pang elaborates that Karen headmen are found in other Thai border villages as well. At the very least, each village community has a contact person who helps village leaders to communicate with non-Thai residents. Pang is inclined to acknowledge the importance of the Karen headman in his own village. When I asked him about the role of the Karen headman, he explained:

Timaw works voluntarily for his own people. I asked him to work as a part of us, we have a lot of Karen refugees and Burmese migrants here. He becomes the headman among aliens. He is my assistant over the non-Thai internal affairs.

Pang's words hint that the Karen administration is indeed not an autonomous governing system, rather it is locally integrated into the Thai village administration. The term 'Karen headman' (in Thai, phooyai kariang) is the same as that used for the conventional position of village headman, which is part of the Thai state's formal system of administrative rule at the local level. Pang emphasises that the title Karen headman is a local term used for underlining Timaw's legitimate authority and increasing his leadership over the Karen and other non-Thai people in the village. The title encourages these people to respect him, and consequently enhances Timaw's power over people under his control.

Recently, the Karen civilian control system has gained much more relevance to the local Thai political administration. The Karen headman's work has become an indispensable part of local governance, especially in dealing with the problems related to the massive inflow of migrants from Myanmar. Nowadays, the non-Thai population in Sawtika has expanded to include more than the Hpa-an Karen refugee residents. Some Thai landlords hire Burmese migrants as long-term farm
workers to satisfy the demand for farming labour. Local labour agents also import temporary Burmese workers with three-month permits to solve the labour shortage problem during the harvest season. These workers rarely associate with the group of Karen village residents; they are not parts of the informal Karen political setting.

The recent influx of Burmese migrant workers has challenged the capacity of the village administration. An interview with Dam—the village's assistant headman—revealed that local leaders worry about their diminished control of village order. Dam spoke of a general upsurge in crime. He mentioned how there had been few cases of crime when the village had hosted hundreds of displaced person from Burma in the mid-1980s. He credited the social order during that period to the internal affairs administration of the Karen refugees. He contrasted such an orderly past with the current situation. In his opinion, the village nowadays encounters a lot of problems from the massive migratory flow. He told me what had happened in the past few weeks before our meeting.

A few weeks ago, there was a murder case at a bamboo hut in the cultivated fields to the far south of the village area. A middle-aged man was killed by his nephew, after they drank together and had a dispute. They were drunk, had a quarrel and a fatal fight. The murderer ran back to Myanmar. Last week, a Burmese man stole chickens from a coop of a Thai villager. We arrested the thief, and sent him to the Thai police.

The Thai village leaders have demanded that the Karen headman take overall care of all so-called Burmese migrants. These expectations of Timaw appear highly ambitious given the realities of the migration situation in the borderlands. The civilian control system among Karen originated in the specific context of a particular flow of displaced people. Correspondingly, Timaw can exert his authority over the Karen residents living permanently within Sawtika's areas. However, he has limited power over Burmese migrants in general. What he can do in the changing migratory situation is to help address criminal cases.
The assignment was given to Timaw owing to two of his personal qualities. First, Timaw has multilingual skills; he can communicate in Burmese, Thai and different dialects of Karen language. Since some Thai village leaders don’t know Burmese, Timaw can interview Burmese witnesses or disputants who mostly don’t know the Thai language. Then he can communicate what he discovered, in Thai, to the Thai headman and even to the Thai police. The second quality is his authority as a leader, which he can use to mobilise volunteers for tasks requiring unpaid labour. Timaw’s personal charisma, accumulated in the past ten years in the position of headman, makes his requests to his fellow Karen very important and undeniable. It does not require much effort for Timaw to assemble a group of Karen men to complete certain urgent tasks (see examples later in this chapter).

The informal Karen administrative system is integrated into the hierarchical relations of local politics. Under the Thai headman’s authority, Timaw’s work assists the Thai headman meet the responsibilities of village administration. Timaw accepts his supporting role, and other Karen residents realise the unequal relationship between the Thai and Karen village headmen. Other Karen villagers working with Timaw are enthusiastic to respond to the Thai leaders’ requests. To a certain extent, the Thai-Karen partnership helps the village administration to achieve control over local governance. While Sawtika’s political leaders gain benefit from the cooperation of the Karen administration, it is interesting to investigate how the Karen villagers perceive the partnership and what benefits they might obtain from it.

Negotiation for Hospitality

So far in this chapter, I have shown that the Karen refugees’ self-settlement has been constituted out of relations of familiarity with the local hosts and the valued self-governance resources deployed by the Karen. I would add here that the vernacular mode of refugee care and protection is localised and reconstituted in a continual process of negotiation. The non-institutionalised mode of hospitality-
giving and shelter-taking is not only the outcome of historically situated socio-economic contexts and forms of authority. It is also reinvented at every moment. In this section, I demonstrate how the Karen contribution to local village affairs should be understood within the context of political negotiation for hospitality. I present here an anecdote about the apprehension of a pair of motorcycle-stealing gangsters, in order to explore the political dimension of Karen involvement in village society and its implication for the self-settlement option.

In recent years, Mae Sot has experienced a serious problem of motorcycle theft. This crime wave is influenced by the economic disparities between Thailand and Myanmar. Motorcycles are a scarce commodity inside Myanmar, while second-hand Thai motorcycles can meet the demand of Burmese people. The trade in motorbikes has become a lucrative border business, which earns a large margin for those who take part. The peak demand occurs after the farm-harvesting season from November, when people in Myanmar have cash in hand and the travel-impeding monsoon rain stops. However, some Thai and non-Thai in Mae Sot town satisfy the demand from across the border by stealing motorcycles. Stolen motorcycles are usually transferred immediately across the border, and the Thai authorities cannot do anything after that. In only a few cases have the Thai police been able to trace and arrest the motorcycle thieves before the evidence, or culprits, disappears over the border.

In November 2009, the Thai police discovered the hiding place of a motorcycle-stealing gang. They distributed a newsletter to Thai village leaders. It informed them that two Burmese motorcycle thieves were hiding around Pae's cultivated areas. In Sawtika, the information spread from the Thai headman to the Karen headman. The newsletter with photos of the two criminals was circulated to Karen residential clusters. The dissemination yielded a fruitful result. A Karen man living in a corn field saw the two moving around his place. He passed this information to the cluster head, the latter reported to Timaw, and eventually the news reached Pang. The Thai headman asked Timaw to call people to search and arrest the two
criminals. The Karen headman mobilised nearly 20 men for the task. I was not allowed to follow them for my own safety. After two hours, some of them returned to Timaw's house and a rice-whisky drinking group was set up. It was there I heard the story of the thief chase.

The story was amusingly discussed during the drinking. A short version of the account is as follows. The two thieves had hidden themselves in a deserted field hut located in a far-flung corner of the cultivated fields. They ran away when they heard the noise of human encroachment. The Karen men chased after them for more than an hour before finally grabbing hold of the elusive culprits. A group of Karen men wrestled with them for a while, eventually managing to tie their wrists and ankles. The captives were trooped back and put in a giant iron cage in the backyard of one of the senior Karen men while they waited for the Thai police. Throughout the conversation, these men switched between Pwo Karen, as a language of the majority, and Burmese, as the language overcoming the unintelligibility of their various ethnic languages. A Karen man told me:

I was so furious at these two thieves, we spent a lot of time searching for them. I could not help kicking them as punishment after the capture.

Although I often heard stories of arresting burglars and offenders, that occasion was my first time to learn how Karen men engage, high-spiritedly and sometimes impulsively, in the host society's affairs. The story of arresting the criminals was a popular subject during the next few days in the Karen community. It was perceived as a difficult and challenging, but fun, duty. Many Karen men actively responded to the request for collaboration in bringing social order back to the village. A Karen man in the drinking group could not resist showing off his courage. It seemed he wanted to prove how the whole village could enjoy the advantage of the Karen presence in the area.

Thai people may look down on us and call us as tangdao [aliens]. But, I have never seen any Thai work as hard to keep the village's order as us. I
bet you! The Thais won't scramble to catch the thieves running around the thick growths of corn and weeds like we did. It is us who can do this.

I brought up the topic of this Karen contribution in a discussion with Dam, the village headman's assistant. He accepted that the Karen existence in the village is beneficial rather than threatening to the area's security. They play a significant role in supporting the Thai leaders' authority over village administration. He explained that the Thai residents rarely want to do that kind of job, and Thai leaders cannot force them to do so. The Thai residents do not feel an obligation to follow any headman's order, and they are much busier making money. He spoke about the co-existence of both ethnic groups in the village as follows.

Thai and Yang (Karen) live together and depend upon each other here. It is similar to the northeastern Thais working and living everywhere in Bangkok since the 1980s. Right here, we must rely on their labour in our cultivation and community activities. The authorities may see them as alien, but I do not see it as problematic. They have lived here for a long time. We know most of them. They are normal people as we are.

I would contend that Karen people's voluntary and active participation in these kinds of community work illustrates the refugees' agency and their political lives. We can no longer see refugees as vulnerable and dependent persons. Rather, they are capable of employing resources to gain access to certain rights and to solve their problem of forced displacement. The work of Tara Polzer (2009) on Shangaan-speaking Mozambicans in South Africa points out that the self-settled refugees use negotiating tactics for access to rights. They construct moral legitimacy through the invocation of ethnic identification, historical association and political allegiance. The ethnic connection enabled the Shangaan-speaking local government in South Africa to welcome and to integrate Shangaan-speaking Mozambican refugees into South African society in the mid-1980s.
The Karen discourse about their devotion to local community is then a strategy of political negotiation, an interactive process where Karen refugees persuade and sanction more powerful actors for a degree of opportunity, freedom and rights. Although Hpa-an Karen do not share ethnic or historical backgrounds with the host community, they opt to create a sense of shared responsibility for the community's well-being and development. They employ labour power as a resource in negotiating to be locally-accepted and legitimate village residents, even though outsiders still label them as aliens. In short, the Karen vernacular refugees on the Thailand-Myanmar border live in the host society not by claiming the legal and moral rights of the universal refugee protection regime, but by appropriating existing resources in negotiation with local actors for the continuity of hospitality provision.

The Karen strategy of engagement and adherence to the host community can come sometimes at a high price and requires supplementary external support. An example of this kind of costly cooperation is the establishment of the official village security guards (in Thai, chor ror bor) in late 2009. The Thai village headman asked Timaw to select 15 Karen men, together with another 15 Thai men, to form the village volunteer group following the Mae Sot district office's order. Chor Ror Bor members are required to work in accordance with the Thai headman's commands. This request provoked a debate among Karen men over the task, because the selected men must pay for soldier-like guard uniforms themselves. Some Karen men in the group complained to Timaw about the uniform's cost. Some even declared the payment overburdened their personal expenses. The topic was a debate for a few weeks, until Timaw received some personal financial support from an ex-leader of the KNU. The dispute was calmed with the solution of shared payment. Each of the 15 men would pay half of the uniform cost, and the other half would be covered by the ex-KNU leader's sponsorship.
The Ethics of Courteous Guests

Many of the contributions made by displaced Karen to the host society have been indirectly coordinated by the Karen National League Army (KNLA—the army wing of the KNU), represented, in the Pae area, by a battalion named Kawmoora. After losing their liberated areas inside Burma, several KNU army battalions and civilian organisations moved and regrouped among the mass of Karen refugees in Thailand. They could run their operations from within Thai territory because of the unofficial collaborative relations between the KNU and the local Thai army. After the relocation of refugee camp to a remote area in the late 1990s, many of them chose to stay around Mae Sot town and operate their missions from small offices or personal residences. While some elder leaders stopped their role in the Karen insurgency, others keep actively working with the KNU.

My interviews with the present Kawmoora battalion commander and an ex-civilian leader of the KNU reveal that the KNU leadership plays a significant role in influencing the everyday lives of their fellow Karen, who independently live around Mae Sot valley. Both of these leaders have a great concern over the impact of the Karen presence in the local area. One of their meetings in the past led to the establishment of the Karen civilian control system in Mae Sot valley. In 1999, they set up a committee of the Karen Youth Organisation or the KYO, in order to use it as a mechanism for Karen civilian control. This was a revival of the KYO which, before that, was only a voluntary group. The commander mentioned that a new civilian administrative structure was necessary to cover the widely scattered Karen, as hundreds of Karen refugees did not move to the new camp site. These

18 The relations between the Thai army and the Karen army are sometimes in tension. With pressure from the central Thai government and the Burmese government, the Karen army leaders are forced to leave Mae Sot and are barred from coming back (Irrawaddy March 17, 2009). However, I find many of them could come back and secretly work as they could in the past.

19 Hereafter I use the term KYO in this study specifically to the one under the auspices of the Kawmoora Battalion commander.
Karen families are dispersed throughout different areas of Mae Sot valley. They do not live together in a bounded location as they were in the refugee camp.

The new system was designed to have a Karen village headman in accordance with the Thai administrative village boundary. Karen residents living in a particular village were called to a meeting and asked to choose a Karen headman and village committees. Timaw, the Karen headman in Sawtika, is an offshoot of this process. Each Karen headman was required to control Karen people within his assigned boundary. Then all Karen village headmen automatically became members of the central KYO committee. The committee has four more senior advisors, a secretariat and a vice-secretariat. Based on the 2008 KYO meeting report, there are, in total, 18 Karen villages under the supervision of the KYO. They are scattered across Mae Sot valley. Most of the Karen villages use the Thai village boundary as their working scope, with the exception of two sites which are private working places where Karen are employed as permanent workers.

The KNU army wing's influence over the Karen civilian population can be said to have shifted from constituting the Karen as resistance fighters to mobilising the Karen to act appropriately as guests. Also, its function has shifted from being a command structure for a fugitive refugee army and mobiliser of resistance against the Burmese state to a guarantor to the Thai state of the collective good behaviour and loyalty of the Karen under their command. The senior advisors of the KYO are the former or present leaders of Kawmoora battalion. They used to work in the ambience of the political alliance between the Karen rebels and the Thai army. They recognise that the Thai hospitality to the Karen refugees since the 1970s has been conditional and contingent. The presence of the Karen refugees in Thailand, in these Karen leaders' minds, is guaranteed by adherence to certain standards of behaviour that create trust and prolong the given hospitality.

The KNU leaders have promoted two important ethical principles among their fellow Karen. The first is that Karen residents should be 'honest' and 'well-behaved' guests. The importance for the Karen to be honest individually in their behaviour is
emphasised to remind the KYO followers that their shelter-taking in Thailand should not cause any negative impacts to the host society. The ethics of honesty is constantly reiterated in the everyday lives of Karen civilians.

In Sawtika, this ethic is explicitly reproduced in the biannual meeting of Timaw's team of assistants. Timaw prefers to hold the meeting in an informal way—as a pork curry feast. Timaw spent his own money to buy a pig. Some assistants helped to slaughter the pig. Half of the meat was used for the feast, and the other half was sold to recover some costs. About twenty men gathered at the meeting place in December 2009, most of whom were Timaw's assistants. Some came at dawn and were busy at slaughtering the pig and cooking the curry. Around 7.30 am, Timaw called everyone together to open the meeting. He informed them of some upcoming events and requested their assistance. After finishing his talk, he asked Pathee, one of the senior KYO advisors, to give a talk to the participants. A brief version of this speech is as follows.

We take refuge here because living in Burma is desperately tough. We can live here with the Thai generosity. As long as we behave well, respecting the Thai laws and community regulations, the host people will not see us as threats to them. Then our settlement here will be less problematic.... You must keep away from any criminal offence, including drug smuggling. Otherwise your involvement in illegal activity would damage the Karen reputation of being moral persons.

Pathee's speech bluntly outlined that respect for the Thai legal system and good behaviour from Karen residents are necessary conditions for the Karen to continue to obtain refuge in Thailand. He exhorted his listeners to take responsibility for upholding the good reputation the Karen collectively enjoyed in the eyes of Thai hosts by personally steering clear of crime. His speech was an attempt to inculcate into assembled members of the displaced Karen community a disposition and identity as self-disciplined guests. This talk's content is not surprising if we know Pathee's background. He is an ex-chief of the Karen National League Police (KNLP),
which was a civilian organisation of the Kawmoora battalion. The KNLP was dissolved after the battalion fell. He left the insurgent life in the late 1980s and lives as an ordinary civilian. However, Pathee still can be called upon to act as a drillmaster for standards of conduct to which, as his speech maintains, all Karen must adhere as a condition of their enjoyment of Thai hospitality.

The second ethical principle of the hospitality-taker is that Karen must contribute to the social order of the host society. An important aspect of this contribution is active cooperation with the Thai authorities in crime suppression. In one discussion with me, Chong, the current KYO vice-secretary, said that since the 1970s, the KYO has helped to solve the increasing social problems along the border. These include cases of murder, robbery, raids, narcotic smuggling and physical violence. Although the central Thai government no longer considers the Karen rebels as a close political ally on the borderland, the KYO still performs its role as a reliable partner to the host society. Chong and his consociates have been quite active in investigating and solving criminal cases.

One of our successful cases is the murder of five Karen workers by Thai employers in 2006. The workers disappeared and it was suspected they had been killed, but the police could not find evidence of the crime. Then we asked Karen workers living in that area to search surrounding forests and mountains, until we found burned corpses and hidden bones in a cave. We reported the finding to the Thai authorities, leading to the criminal prosecution.

In Sawtika, the imperative to contribute to social order is enjoined on the Karen villagers in a variety of mundane ways. Throughout the period of my fieldwork, I heard several times that the Thai village leaders had asked Karen men to provide their labour free of charge for the village's public affairs. The labour requests ranged from acting as security guards at community events to capturing thieves and criminals hiding in the village area, as I discussed in the previous section.
Overwhelming Reciprocation

The Karen maintenance of an ethical disposition as courteous guests recognises the fact that the village-level Thai authorities are important actors who sympathise with Hpa-an Karen settling in the Thai border villages, while there is little sanction for them to do so from the central Thai government. The tacit reception of refugees in the village domain takes place in spite of the Thai government’s policy preferences for refugee encampment and the ultimate solution of repatriation. The local neglect to enforce immigration law with respect to the Karen refugees indirectly facilitates their long-term presence in the villages. The Karen residents seem to recognise the contingent nature of their settlement, especially through their interdependence with the local authorities and their contribution to village affairs.

The hospitality obtained by refugees in Sawtika is an exchange relationship in which hosts and guests are in a continual process of give-and-take. The self-settlement strategy seems to offer Karen refugees more advantages in comparison with those in confined camps. However, it also locks them into a particular set of power relations. Since the Thai village headman holds significant power over local affairs, Karen refugees actively build and retain good relationships with this figure. Their efforts to do so take the form not only of gifts of physical materials and labour, but also of ritual acts that symbolise a sense of gratitude or reciprocation. In the section, I delve into how Sawtika Karen residents make use of the Thai tradition—the water-pouring rite—to convey the message of reciprocation.

For ten years Karen residents of Sawtika have held a water-pouring rite for the Thai headman in mid-April. The time is a celebratory week of the traditional New Year festival. Both Thai and Hpa-an Karen residents share a similar festival with slightly different activities. Based on the Mon-Burmese Buddhist tradition, the Hpa-an Karen New Year focuses on home decoration to welcome deities, religious rites at Buddhist temples and water splashing. Recently, Karen residents have adopted
the Thai tradition of the water-pouring rite—an act of paying respect to the people of higher status, who can be monks, teachers and elder relatives. The water-pouring rite is also about asking for forgiveness for any given offence, and the young people receive blessings in exchange. The Sawtika Karen appropriate it to show their reciprocation of hospitality.

On an afternoon in mid-April 2009, about a hundred Karen gathered in the centre of Sawtika village for the water-pouring rite. A gift set and other materials were prepared for the event. I observed among the gifts two one-liter bottles of soft drink, a big box of biscuits and a new loincloth. There was also a plate of dried betel nut, betel leaves, packs of candles and incense and two 100-baht notes. A cassette player and loudspeakers were connected to a mobile battery. Karen music was played on amplifiers to attract people to gather in front of a grocery shop. By five o'clock, the place was occupied by Karen. The procession moved toward Pang's house, led by Timaw and his assistants. Others followed their leaders, and a group of women enjoyed an amusing dance to the Karen songs amplified on the speakers.

On arrival, the host welcomed the procession with sweets and soft drink. The water-pouring rite took place a few minutes later on the house's veranda. Pang and his wife sat on a teak bench. The Karen crowd sat on the cement-paved ground. Timaw, as the Karen representative in the village, poured scented water on Pang's and his wife's hands, and the gifts were given. Pang expressed his thanks to the Karen audience. He gave a blessing to all Karen participants not in Thai words, but a short Pali chant wishing all Karen physical and mental healthiness. In general, this sermon is exclusively used by revered Buddhist monks at the end of laymen's offerings. I would suggest that Pang's use of the chanted blessing underscores the hierarchical nature of Thai-Karen relations, no matter what his intention.

The sentiment of indebtedness to and the obligation to compensate for the Thai hospitality are strenuously cultivated among Karen residents by Timaw and his assistants. The behind-the-scene preparations for the water-pouring rite clearly illustrate this point. The cultural rite is organised in the name of all the Karen
residents of Sawtika. Every single household is expected to join the event, at least
by resource share—20 baht (two-thirds of a dollar) per household. Several of
Timaw's assistants arrived at Timaw's house with collected money on 16 April
2009. It was spent on the gift set for the Thai village headman. Timaw phoned Pang
to make an appointment, but the latter asked Timaw to postpone the rite to the day
after. The evening of that day was replaced by a water-pouring rite among Timaw's
relatives. Several of Timaw's assistants also joined that. When the event finished, a
drinking group was set up. A discussion about a problem in the money collection
spontaneously took place there.

One of Timaw's assistants reported that he had collected 280 baht from 14
households, from a total of 19 households in his group. This meant there was a
deficit of 100 baht from five households. The assistant claimed the non-paying
households said they did not have money. Timaw and other assistants complained
about that. A Karen man was sent to ask the non-contributors to show up. Three of
them came, handed over 20-baht notes and made a verbal apology. Another two
men repeated that they really did not have money. One elaborated he did not go
out to work for several weeks, because he had to take care of his sick wife. Another
assistant replied heatedly that the two men could not be exempt from the rule with
such an excuse, since other poor households were seriously committed to it. The
couple remained listening in silence. The tension was relieved when a man
proposed that he would lend them the money, and then they could repay him
within two weeks. That was an irrefutable solution for them.

After the two men left, the group continued their argument over the duty of Karen
residents. A Karen assistant pointed out that they should not show pity to the two
men, otherwise irresponsible members will always be in the habit of making
excuses. Another man added that it is necessary to tackle a similar problem with
the collection of the cremation fund. Many members avoid paying their share by
making an excuse of financial hardship. From the physical appearances of the two
families' shacks, I found it obvious that they really are impoverished. The forced
payment to buy a gift set for the Thai headman, on the one hand, seems quite harsh on such poor families. On the other hand, it shows the Karen's collective proposition of political allegiance to the Thai village leader. Timaw said to his assistants:

We are displaced from home and live quite peacefully here... Why don't we show our gratitude to the Thai headman who gives us shelter? Paying 20 baht a year is only a small thing we can do. We live here without paying any tax to the host. Compare it to my friends resettling in Singapore and Malaysia: they are charged with high taxes.

Timaw's words evoked his concern about the need to reciprocate the hospitality provided by the local authorities. He tried persuading his fellows that the gift procurement, given along with the water-pouring rite, is a low-cost action in which all Karen residents can easily join. The Karen power in the negotiation is inferior to the power held by the local Thai authorities. Their subordinate position in the local power hierarchy drives the Karen to be quite serious about reciprocation. The water-pouring rite is staged as a collective activity conveying the Karen's recognition of the Thai village head's power. It can be described as a rite of paying a tribute to the local political authority. They participate in the event with a hope that the hospitality given will last long.

Conclusion
The chapter provides insights into the intersubjective aspects of refuge and hospitality. Understanding how self-settled Karen refugees have obtained protection after flight requires attention to the socio-cultural dynamics between the Thai hosts and the Karen refugees. To understand how the refugees' access safety and human dignity, it is not enough to focus exclusively on the culturally singular meanings of refuge to the displaced Karen alone. Hospitality and refuge actually take place within transcultural contexts. The Karen refugees' access to
basic human rights and protection is embedded in situated and localised social relationships. The Karen's alternative form of obtaining refuge is based on practical understandings achieved between different cultural spheres, rather than on written protocols or institutionalised refugee protection principles. The outcome provides them safety and protection, while simultaneously entailing hierarchical power relations. Every aspect of the vernacular refuge secured by the Karen is contingent upon the transcultural (Thai-Karen) and host-guest interaction. The relationships are littered with political negotiation taking place in everyday life. The self-settled Karen refugees mobilise resources in negotiating for secure and stable village membership.

This informal refugee system supplements the notion of refugee protection with a contingent mode of hospitality and refuge-seeking. I do not wish to claim that it offers the best possible solution for Karen refugees. My intention in this chapter is to examine a particular example of the diversity of existing forms of refuge. There is no single way of refuge giving-and-taking. We can find different modes of sanctuary around the world. The notion of refugees did not just emerge with the legal enactment of the Refugee Conventions after World War II. The domain of hospitality and protection for people fleeing persecution has always been with us and appears in multiple ways, beyond the modern and institutionalised refugee care system. Throughout the chapter, I have tried to make the informal mode of refuge tangible as an actually existing alternative to the formal international refugee protection system. Documenting this, alternative modality shows that people in exile have different ways of addressing the experience of displacement and goes a way towards demystifying the monopoly held over refugee care generally known as the universal refugee protection system.
Chapter 4

Karen Soul, Well-Being and Wrist-Tying Ceremony

Recently, social anthropologists have raised the question of Karen nationalism and Karen ethnic identity. Based on the constructivist approach, a category of 'Karen', as a separate and unique ethnic boundary, is construed as an invention of modern external worlds. Ananda Rajah (1990) characterises the Karen identity as an 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbaum and Ranger 1983) and the Karen nation-state as 'an imagined political community'. Rajah advanced his post-colonial argument in a subsequent article (2002), arguing the Karen nationalist movement emerged out of ethno-nationalism that was fostered by Christian missionary interest and ethnological attempts to set out a Karen ethno-history. Charles Keyes (2003) similarly noted that the label 'Karen' is a product of Christian missionisation, colonial and post-colonial ethnographic research and nation-states' policies on ethnic minorities. In other words, 'Karen-ness' is an historical product of 'modernity'.

Studies applying a post-colonial analytical framework to Karen ethnic identification engender a predicament in the study of Karen culture and identity. These writings have raised scepticism about the authenticity of the Karen culture overall; this is because, as argued by Jolly and Thomas (1992), 'the phase invention of tradition implies de novo creation, falsity and fabrication'. These perspectives perceive the ethnic people's cultural practices as discontinuous and modern derivatives of nationalist ideology, which imply that they are not worth further academic attention. A difficult situation is created through the question: how should anthropologists understand the phenomena of the Karen's great enthusiasm for certain seemingly-invented cultural activities? This is similar to
what Hastrup and Olwig (1997) write: 'while anthropologists are preoccupied with
de-essentialising the concept of culture and deconstructing the notion of bounded,
localised cultural wholes, many of the very people we study are deeply involved in
constructing cultural contexts which bear many resemblances to such cultural
entities'.

It is a fact that the displaced Karen persons in Mae Sot valley keep actively
participating in several Karen cultural practices, including the August wrist-tying
ceremony. The ceremony is one of the few occasions when displaced Karen crowds
assemble in public space; it indicates the high level of the Karen fascination with
their tradition and culture. The way that Karen people practice their cultural
traditions, I argue, should not be considered as a product imposed by the modern
condition of ethnic differences and the nation-state power system. The Karen
wrist-tying ceremony appears overwhelmed with ideological influences from the
Karen ethno-nationalist movement. However, the influences do not come from
nothing; rather they are derived from a certain indigenous conception of idiomatic
body-soul relations. The ethnographic endeavour in this chapter aims to explore
how the ceremony draws upon such local elements. I also explore the way that
Karen participants make sense of the ceremony, by asking how the Karen cultural
sensibility shapes the experiences of the personal and social lives of the Karen
community in exile.

The material in this chapter is mainly derived from my interviews and
participatory observation in the wrist-tying ceremony in Sawtika village. The
chapter begins with a brief description of different types of wrist-tying practised in
the Hpa-an Karen community. Second, it examines how the Karen nationalist
movement has influenced and appropriated the ceremony to reinforce a nation-
making project. In the following sections, I trace the Karen tradition back to Karen
notions of the body-soul harmony, exploring how Karen spiritual elements have a
continuing role in shaping the modern representation of Karen identity, including
the Karen nationalist ideology. Next, the chapter delves into the way Karen make
sense of the ritual materials used in the ceremony through analogical reasoning. Finally, it explores how Karen sensory experiences, embedded in the ceremony, are put together to shape Karen community life. Overall, the chapter argues that Karen people have their particular way of identifying themselves with the Karen cultural tradition; the wrist-tying ceremony, rooted in spiritual antecedents, gives a space where they experience Karen social life.

Karen Wrist-Tying Rites

The wrist-tying rite is widely practised among different ethnic groups in mainland South East Asia. It is primarily associated with the notion of soul (or spiritual essence) of individual human beings. In a study on northeastern Thailand, Tambiah explained ‘khwan (or soul in Thai) resides in the human body; it is attached to the body and yet can leave it...The very act of its fleeing the body in turn exposes the owner to suffering, illness and misfortune’ (1970, 58). The well-being of an individual person thus depends on the coherence of the body-soul components. The rite of calling the wandering khwan to return to the body and tying it to the owner is an effective way of remedying discomfort and diverse problems.

In general, the wrist-tying rite aims to strengthen individuals' well-being at different stages of life and when they are at personal risk from troubling circumstances. People from several groups in Mainland Southeast Asia use cotton threads to tie their own wrists with subtly nuanced meanings. People in northern and northeastern Thailand perform wrist-tying (in Thai thamkhwan) in rites of passage like marriage and ordination, in rites of integration after the return from a long trip or recovery from illness, in healing rites for prolonged illness and in rites for dispelling bad luck (Tambiah 1970, 58; Heinze 1982, 45). The central and northern Thai also bind cotton string around the wrist of newborn infants, in order to implore the soul to stay firm and to enjoy its pleasant surroundings (Terwiel 1975, 52) or to protect them from evil spirits (Pranee 2009, 218). Gary Lee (2010) mentions that Hmong people tie cotton thread as a rite of blessing for babies and
for persons who rename after marriage, trauma and sickness. Mary Beth Mills (1999, 182) finds it is also employed in enacting the solidarity of the Thai migrant worker movement; the act of blessing by wrist-tying represents a gesture of concern and compassion between members.

Similarly, displaced Karen people living on the Thailand-Myanmar borderland currently conduct wrist-tying at different opportunities and for different purposes. During my fieldwork, I found that wrist-tying is performed on three different occasions. First, it is conducted as a part of the traditional treatment for those suffering from prolonged illness. I learnt this kind of wrist-tying from Tipadu, an old man who is acclaimed as cherla padu—literally meaning the great teacher. He offers various kinds of treatment to patients or ill-fated sufferers living in the Pae area; one of his cures is wrist-tying. He states that it has been a typical way used in healing any diseased persons. If an individual encounters adversity and feels mentally exhausted, it means their soul has dislodged from their body. The person can recover by undergoing a wrist-tying rite, in order to appease the shocked soul and to arouse it from fright.

According to Tipadu, in the past, the traditional rite of wrist-tying for a sick person was a complicated activity. The rite should be performed by respected elders in the community. A set of offerings is sacrificed and used for luring the persons' soul back. Before tying the patient's wrist, the elders conducted the soul-calling rite to ensure the soul's return. This phase of the rite was a time-consuming practice. It was performed at the site where unfortunate or shocking incidents had happened, at the entry ladder of patient's house, beside the patient's bed and at the cooking pole in the kitchen. In each place where the soul-calling rite was performed, Karen elders applied a different way to check the soul's return. For example, they burned

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20 Cherla padu (Pwo-Karen) is a compound word which is quite complicated in itself. In this chapter, I use it to refer to traditional healers who can use their magical and herbal knowledge to conduct various rites for dispelling misfortune caused by inauspicious happenings or curing prolonged illness.
white cotton strings near the patient's bed. If the string flamed toward the patient's body, it meant the soul was back with the body. A similar rite was repeated for three evenings; then the rite of wrist-tying was conducted on the morning of the fourth day.

However, Tipadu said that Karen people today no longer follow the healing wrist-tying rite described above. No one wants to spend so much time and do so much preparation for the rite. Nowadays, Karen sick persons have become increasingly oriented toward western medical treatments. Consequently, the wrist-tying rite has been largely modified to suit modern lifestyles. It tends to be sought out only after a disease cannot be treated by modern medicine. When in need of this alternative treatment, Karen patients visit Tipadu and ask him for a short version of wrist-tying healing. He prepares cotton strings by himself, and the sick person just brings a simple offering like tobacco, betel nuts, betel leaves, candles and compensation money. The rite lasts just ten minutes from start to finish. Tipadu recites a soul-calling chant and ties cotton string to the wrist of the person.

The second type of Karen wrist-tying is performed to bring auspiciousness to a couple in a wedding ceremony. The wedding wrist-tying among Karen is considered an important rite. It represents the acknowledgment of marriage. Marriage is a major transition in human life as a personal soul is exposed to the soul of another person. The cooling of the couple's souls by the rite is believed to enhance the couple's married lives. The groom’s and bride's parents and grandparents tie the couple's wrists with white cotton strings. They call their children's souls to be with the bodies before tying, and give them a blessing while tying. The opportunities I had to attend Karen weddings held in both Thailand and Myanmar showed me that they consider wrist-tying as the most important procedure of the event. The wrist-tying rite is compulsory for any wedding couple. Many financially poor Karen couples who met each other on the borderland just do a simple rite of wrist-tying to mark their wedding.
The last type of wrist-tying is the one called (in Pwo-Karen dialect) lakhao khaichoo, which literally means the eighth month (August) wrist-tying. It is an annual ceremony collectively and exclusively held among the Burmese Karen. The ceremonial date is set on the full moon day of the eighth month of the Buddhist lunar calendar, which mostly falls in August. The forcibly displaced Karen in Mae Sot valley actively participate in the event. In each Karen refugee camp, the ceremony has been continuously organised by the camp committees. Those Karen living outside the refugee camps can join the ceremony supported by the Kawmoora Battalion Karen Youth Organisation, a civilian organisation of the Karen insurgent group. The KYO has been holding the event since 1982 to serve a number of forcibly displaced Karen living and working in and around Mae Sot town.

Community-wide wrist-tying practices are inclined to develop in opposite directions among Karen of Thai and Burmese origin. Thai Karen communities near Mae Sot town presently no longer hold the wrist-tying ceremony. This is similar to Hayami's observation about declining participation in the ritual in her study area (Chiang Mai Province), due to discontinuity in the office of traditional ritual leaders and the economic difficulties experienced by Karen families (2004, 146-153). In contrast, lakhao khaichoo is a significant occasion for the displaced Karen. It is a public event for Karen to reassemble annually. In Mae Sot town, lakhao khaichoo has been held continuously for 18 years at Dawya Kyaung (Burmese—literally means forest temple). The ceremony at this temple is open to any Karen people living in Mae Sot valley. The organiser (KYO—see Chapter 3) facilitates participants' journey to the venue by coordinating with the local police to allow Karen people to travel around Mae Sot centre without the risk of being arrested on the day. Many Karen take the day off and walk to the ceremony to get their wrists tied with white cotton strings.

Recently, other small displaced Karen settlements around Mae Sot town have also initiated lakhao khaichoo for and by themselves. In 2009, I found three Karen communities in Pae areas holding the ceremony in their village areas, including the
villages of Sawtika, Timboti and Mao. Karen informal leaders in these villages coordinate with the local Thai village leaders in arranging the activity. While about four to five thousand people took part in the ceremony at Dawya Kyaung in 2009, around one to two thousand participants gathered in each of these village ceremonial sites. Some Burmese migrant schools (as far as I know, at least four schools), where the majority of students are Karen ethnic children, also celebrate the *lakhao khaichoo* in their schools, which they open for students' parents to attend the event. The multiple venues of *lakhao khaichoo* indicate the popularity of this rite among the large ethnic Karen population in this Thai town.

The growth of *lakhao khaichoo* among the forcibly displaced Karen raises several questions for the anthropological study of this traditional Karen custom. A number of Karen people participate vigorously in the ceremony, although they are physically uprooted from their homeland and disconnected from the paddy cultivation cycle. How has *lakhao khaichoo* been transmitted over the course of six decades of suffering in civil war? In displacement, why does the ceremony remain so important to Karen people, and attract such large crowds? Why are the ceremonial organisers so determined to hold the event? And how do ordinary Karen refugees perceive the ceremony in their present living context? This chapter attempts to answer these questions by the ethnographic investigation of a wrist-tying ceremony in Sawtika village.

**Karen Nationalist Influences**

This section explores how the present *lakhao khaichoo* is organised and how its ritual elements are influenced by the Karen National Union—the Karen nationalist movement. I will discuss ethnographically these points, based on what happened in the ceremony held by Karen leaders in Sawtika village. *Lakhao khaichoo* in Sawtika village is a significant cultural event, attracting a large number of Karen

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21 These village names are pseudonyms
participants living in the vicinity. Timaw and his assistants, as informal Karen leaders of the village, have annually held the ceremony for the past ten years. Its arrangement is largely made possible by financial support and donations from Karen residents living on both sides of the border. In 2009, the ceremonial date was set to be on 5 August. The ceremony is doctrinally unrelated to Theravada Buddhism, but the main hall of Sawtika Buddhist monastery was borrowed as the ceremonial venue.

As a large event, the ceremony required extensive preparations. A day before the ceremonial date, Sawtika Karen leaders and several residents gathered together for final preparations at the monastery. They were mostly occupied with preparing a feast for participants on the ceremonial day. More than ten Karen men chopped firewood and worked in front of an oven and giant cooking pots. Around forty Karen women lent a hand in cooking-ingredient preparation—cleaning, peeling and chopping a large pile of vegetables. Inside the hall, two young men worked on stage-making and decoration. The stage was simply created by hanging a giant blue cloth sheet on one wall of the hall. That demarcated the front stage without raising the floor. On the cloth backdrop was written both in Pwo-Karen and in Burmese ‘the 10th traditional Karen white-thread wrist-tying ceremony – Sawtika 5 August 2009’.

The Sawtika wrist-tying ceremony is characterised by the prominence given to distinctive markers of Karen cultural ethnicity, both in venue preparation and in cultural and ritual performances. The stage decoration in the Sawtika Buddhist monastery hall was filled with cultural symbols of Karen ethnic identity, which the KNU has continuously disseminated, including Karen clothes and materials. Two life-size drawn figures—a man and a woman—were hung on the right and left sides of the backdrop. They were dressed in traditional Karen costumes. While the man played a Karen banjo, the female figure was drawn in a Karen-dancing pose.
Pictures of a Karen bronze drum and two water buffalo horns were also put on the top of the cloth sheet. Chodee, the stage decorator, considers the drum and horns as important symbols of the Karen ethnicity. They are used by the Karen insurgent movement on its national flag and badge. The use of these figures seems to come out subconsciously. Chodee explains that he designed the stage scene from his childhood observation of several Karen ceremonies in a Karen refugee camp where he grew up. All these symbols are very familiar to those who have spent times in the camps.

In addition to the stage decorations, the night entertainment is another good illustration of the imagery intrusion of Karen National Union (KNU) into the way *lakhaokhaichoo* is held. All ceremonial sites that I visited organised a Karen cultural performance competition on the night before the ceremonial day. The competition includes a variety of single and group cultural performances. In Sawtika, the 2009 night entertainments included singing, chorus singing, dances, short drama and a children fashion show in Karen costumes, and the top three winners received awards. The performers were local residents of the village and guests from other Karen communities situated either in Thailand or Myanmar. One of the ceremonial committee members explained that the night session is for fun and to encourage participants to learn Karen culture and Karen language. The issue of Karen cultural appreciation is often stressed by elders who used to be KNU leaders, even though it contradicts the general ceremony atmosphere where the use of Burmese language is very common. The latter is a lingua franca among Karen subgroups.

Karen nationalist elements become much more explicit on the day of the wrist-tying ceremony in Sawtika. The ceremony began in the morning with quite a formal atmosphere. As soon as all participants arrived at the venue, Timaw, the Karen

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22 According to Richard M. Cooler (1995), the Karen bronze drum is characterised by a less-bulbous cylinder, a protruding lip on the tympanum and three-dimensional frogs at four equidistant locations around the periphery of the tympanum. This is why it is sometimes called 'frog drum' or 'klo' in Sgaw-Karen and Pwo-Karen.
village headman and ceremonial moderator, announced the opening of the ceremony. Most participants sat down on the hall’s floor, facing the stage. Those remaining outside the hall were required to be quiet. Timaw greeted and welcomed Karen participants in Pwo-Karen dialect. Then he asked everyone in the audience to stand up to sing the opening song of the ceremony, named *aukoo aukong* (I will discuss details about the song later in this chapter). Then three elders sitting on the stage were invited one by one to give a speech before the audience. One of the three elders reminded the audience that Karen are actually people migrating from the same origin; their current cultural differences are only the results of separation in the migration and of choosing different settlements. He emphasised that *lakhaoo khaichoo* was a Karen traditional custom that all Karen subgroups shared before converting to other world religions (Buddhism and Christianity). The performance of *lakhaoo khaichoo* is then an annual occasion for the reunification of Karen subgroups. He emphasised the importance of all Karen individuals’ participation in the ceremony. For him, the practice contributes toward the ethnic Karen group’s prosperity because it represents Karen national unity, which means the ethnic Karen group then cannot be easily destroyed or separated.

A sense of pride in the distinctiveness of the Karen ethnic group and an emphasis on Karen national unity are ubiquitous in the event of *lakhaoo khaichoo*. I found a similar atmosphere in two other sites of the ceremony that I joined in that year. In the journal *Karen Heritage* edited by The Karen History and Culture Preservation Society, is an English-language report about the 2004 wrist-tying ceremony held in a Karen village on the Myanmar side of the border. It quotes an anonymous speech:

Lakhaoo khaichoo is a Karen National’s Traditional ceremony, which reminds every Karen nationals around the globe to love, to help, to unite one another, and live in harmony... by doing wrist-tying every year brings unification and strength of Karen people together and show Karen is one of nationalities of the world (sic) (2005, 50).
The quote demonstrates that the Karen nationalist movement has actually appropriated *lakhao khaichoo* in the interest of the Karen nation-making project. The KNU infused a sense of ethno-nationalism into the traditional ceremony practised by some, not all, subgroups of the so-called Karen people.

The KNU's tactic of inserting the ethno-nationalist notion appears in the creation of its own version of the origin and function of this Karen ceremony. An example of this kind of historical narrative is found in the Burmese-language paper titled 'The Karen traditional wrist-tying ceremony' by Saw Aung Than. Twenty copies of this writing were distributed in the ceremony in Sawtika village. The paper narrates the story of the origin of the wrist-tying ceremony supporting the Karen nationalists' accounts of the Karen ancestor migration. It describes how Karen ancestors evacuated from the high plateau of present China to lower Burma, in search of peaceful settlement. During the journey, the boat trips along rivers separated them from one another, resulting in the existence of diverse Karen sub-groups and dialects. After separation, a meeting of Karen leaders and elders then chose to organise *lakhao khaichoo* to be an annual activity for the Karen reunification celebration.

Saw Aung Than's work makes it clear that the Karen nationalist movement has fostered *lakhao khaichoo* as a collective ceremony in a single venue for the whole community. The ceremonial pattern first happened in the first half of 20th century. In discussion with Tipadu, he did not deny that the present-styled *lakhao khaichoo* is influenced by the Karen nationalists like the Karen National Union (KNU). As claimed by Tipadu, *lakhao khaichoo* in the past was only a household-level practice. Each household within a community conducted the rite on the same day at their houses, then elders and visitors moved from house to house, in order to tie wrists

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23 It is common that most documents of the Karen nationalist movement are produced in Burmese.

24 See the full description about the Karen migration into the present Myanmar in Saw Aung Hla (1939).
for different families. In Myanmar today, lakhao khaichoo has become a large single event in towns or large rural villages, while some remote rural Karen villages still practise it at the household level.

This section shows that the ceremony has become saturated with the sentiments of Karen cultural boundary-marking and Karen ethno-nationalism. Applying the term used by Rajah (2002), the wrist-tying ceremony seems to be a 'manifestation of a pan-Karennic-speaking nation of intent'. While the wrist-tying ceremony as a large event was initially organised by the nationalist Karen in the first half of the 20th century, does it imply that lakhao khaichoo is only an invented tradition (Hobsbawm 1983) of the Karen nationalist movement? From a constructivist approach, this Karen cultural practice might be explained as a product of modernity. It is discontinuous with the Karen social and cultural repertoire in the pre-modern era. It is a fabricated and inauthentic tradition which people just accept without questioning its underlying social forces. This kind of criticism provokes important questions about Karen nationalist influences and actual Karen experiences of the wrist-tying ceremony. The next two sections of the chapter will discuss these points thoroughly.

Karen Soul Theory

To what extent is the Karen wrist-tying ceremony continuous with pre-existing practices? The question seems to be put aside by scholars framing their research with the notion of invented tradition. It is unnecessary to investigate the point in detail, since the existence of such tradition itself is the creation of powerful modern social forces. I would argue that the reductionist approach should be revised and anthropologists must strive for more holistic insights into the relevance of the enduring tradition. Ethnographic description is important because social phenomena can have subtly nuanced and multiple coexisting meanings—either contradictory or supplementary. Following this position, the section provides an ethnography of the way Karen conduct the wrist-tying ceremony. The next section
discusses further how the ceremony's alternative meanings determine the continuing role of this tradition in the modern world.

While most external visitors joined the Karen wrist-tying ceremony only on the main ceremonial day, I found personally that participatory observation of the whole procedure was much more useful. My immersion in the whole preparation gave me an insight into the way Karen participants comprehend the ritual. There are other rites happening on those days, but they are rarely discussed in public representations made by Karen about their traditional culture. One of them, which I discuss in this section, is the soul-calling rite. The rite is a part of the lakhao khaichoo ceremony, but it is conducted in a voiceless mode. Although this cultural expression entails alternative understanding of the ceremony, I find it is intentionally overlooked in interviews with many leading members of the Karen community in Sawtika.

On the preparation day, I found a group of women sitting at one corner of the monastery hall, preparing a type of sweet made from glutinous rice mixed with red beans and wrapped in banana leaves. Two stuffed packs were bound together with plastic bands before being brought to cook in a giant steaming pot. The sweet is called in Pwo-Karen ku mii aei (literally sweet glutinous rice). Ku mii aei is said to be one of the seven compulsory ritual objects used in the soul-calling rite, which is conducted in the late evening of the day before wrist-tying. The soul-calling rite requires seven ritual objects: water, white cotton threads, sugarcane, flowers, banana, rice ball and steamed glutinous rice. At Sawtika, all were put together on a bamboo woven tray, and seven trays were arranged for the coming rite.

The examination of the soul calling rite provides an insight into lakhao khaichoo, as it is predicated on Karen soul theory. The rite aims to call pleu hla (a person's soul) back to live in harmony with their body. It reflects the spiritual belief and animist practices; every human body has a custodial spirit that Karen call pleu hla. Generally, the pleu hla tends to leave the body when a person is shocked or frightened—its departure results in physical or mental sickness and misfortune to
the person. Therefore pleu hla must be called back to restore personal health and strength. According to Karen elders, the rite should be performed at dusk because they believe that the evening is the time when wandering souls get tired, become conscious that they are far away from home and then wish to be back. In discussion with elders, there are no unanimous ideas over what the pleu hla is. Some say it is a single entity, while others believe that there are seven pleu hla on seven physical parts of the human body.

The soul calling rite was conducted under the instruction of a revered ritual leader. In the Sawtika ceremony, Tipadu, a cherla padu of Karen residents in the Pae area, was invited by the ceremonial organisers to take responsibility for the duty. While Karen refugees in Sawtika do not have a permanent community ritual leader, this traditional healer was seen as the appropriate person to conduct the rite. At the last sunlight on the 4th August, the rite was conducted at the monastery’s entrance. The passage represents the residential gate through which pleu hla will come back to home and the body. It was led by Tipadu, other elders and seven teams carrying seven bamboo trays. Each team comprised an elder (a man or a woman), a girl and a boy, and thus symbolised the succession of Karen generations.

The main part of the soul-calling rite is the soul-calling chant. Tipadu starts the rite by asking elders at each tray to light a candle and then tap their trays with wooden spoons. According to Tipadu, candle light makes the way back home visible to wandering souls, and the tapping sound from an accustomed utensil helps souls to recall the place to which they should come back. At the same time, he improvised a soul-calling chant. Parts of what Tipadu says are as follow.

Wherever you, soul, have floated away, please come back to your home, to your residence. Come to live together with your parents, your brothers and sisters, as well as your children. Don’t stay in improper places; don’t go in the unpleasant and dangerous areas. Don’t believe in ghosts and evil’s lying. Come back to be with your parents, relatives and friends. Pleu
At the end of the chanting, the elders stopped tapping their trays. Tipadu asked: *pleu hla kaey thai voeyao aah?* (Have all souls come back?) and all trays holders as well as other participants replied simultaneously: *kaey thai voe yao.* ([they] have already come back). The question and answer were repeated three times, and the rite has then ensured that *pleu hla* have come back already. The soul, in Karen thinking has consequently been restored to the body that evening. It stays and relaxes overnight at home. As it will be relieved and calm in the following morning, the wrist-tying rite then takes place. When the *Pleu hla* is reunited with the body, physical well-being is restored.

Except for elders and teenagers I mentioned above and some ceremonial committee members, no other Karen residents attend the rite. I asked an elder the reason for the absence. She said people have to work on that day, while their residences are also far away from the ceremonial venue. According to her opinion, the soul-calling is quite relevant; it is compulsory before the act of wrist-tying. She said that, within the time and transportation constraints, Tipadu will conduct the rite again on the main ceremonial day, where people stop working and bring all their family members to attend the ceremony. A small group of people will take part in the soul-calling rite on that evening, and the short rite is repeated for everyone on the following day.

The soul-calling rite shows clearly that *lakhao khaichoo* is not exclusively about the ethnic Karen's imagined community, but is a matter of human security and psychological well-being. The returned of the *pleu hla* to the body was further reinforced by an added protective and strengthening measure. For Karen, the world outside the residential areas is full of malevolent spirits that can harm or weaken wandering souls. Blessing from powerful beings can ameliorate the well-being of individual souls. So a short Theravada Buddhist rite was intentionally conducted after finishing the soul-calling rite, although Karen leaders frequently
claim that the wrist-tying ceremony is a quintessentially Karen custom separate from Karen's people involved in Buddhism or other religions. The seven trays were brought back to the monastery hall, and a Buddhist monk was asked to recite a set of Buddhist chanting before these trays. Tipadu explained that the Buddha's teaching (or the chant verses) is powerful, providing protective and cooling effects to the returned souls. It is obvious that the Karen's animist rite was supplemented by a Theravada Buddhist element, for ensuring the body-pleu hla connection. After the monk's chanting was completed, all seven trays were reserved in waiting for the wrist-tying rite on the next morning.

Continuity of Tradition

Recently, several anthropologists and historians have discussed about the continuity of traditional practices in the modern social structures. In a vibrant writing about the study of ethnic minority in Vietnam, Philip Taylor proposes a new approach of 'minorities at large', that emphasises 'their capacities for agency, spatial relationships and representation of their identity by themselves and others' (2011, 33). In arguing for the ethnic minorities' agency, he argues for the moderate recognition of structural forces over social transformations. The approach acknowledges the continuing role of the minorities' tradition and competencies in the modern world of capitalism, state power and other social changes. He points out that 'the modern condition, in which ethnogenesis, boundary-marking and assertions of traditional authenticity occur,... are not historically unprecedented conditions, and... the contemporary dynamics of ethnicity may have important "premodern" antecedents' (2011, 33 original quotation).

Another interesting work on the continuous conditions of particular traditional practices is Ian Harris' study (2010) on the political discourse on territory in Cambodia. Harris suggests that the modern understanding of a state as bounded territory did not result merely from the imposition of western concepts such as modern mapping and surveying techniques. His historical research is predicated
on Carl Schmidtt's argument (1985) that most elements in the modern doctrine of the state are 'secularised religious concepts'. Harris's paper then points out that the Cambodian border obsession and xenophobia about neighbours' invasion of Khmer territory 'contain strongly exorcistic and purificatory dimension deriving from indigenous religious categories' (2010, 239). By exploring the transition of the concept of sima (the monastic boundary) in Cambodian Theravada tradition, Harris finds that it is only after Cambodia's purified and rationalised Sangha reforms and the rise of Buddhist modernism 'that this creative tension began to unravel and the "fluid" frontiers of the past transmogrified into the fixed or solid boundaries of the present' (ibid.).

Based on these conceptual discussions, I suggest that it would be too simplistic to conclude that the Karen nationalist emergence resulted only from the Karen exposure to external forces and modernity. The concept of 'imagined community' by Benedict Anderson (1983) largely debunks the primordial origins of nationalism, seeing this identification as merely a modern and derivative social artifact. Rajah (1990, 2002) represents Karen nationalism as a product of modern invention. Perhaps, he might be too extreme in his assumption about the discontinuity of nationalism. I agree with Gravers' criticism (1996) of the postmodernist position. He argues that populism ought not to be read as a sign of unauthenticity; the Karen have indeed been active participants in the making of their own history. Anthropologists then can examine the complex social realities of ethnic representations without judging them as true or false.

I would like to argue that the Karen nationalist movement structures the Karen traditional culture and is reciprocally structured by it. The thorough examination of the Karen wrist-tying ceremony indicates that the relationship between Karen nationalists and lakhao khaichoo has never been in a one-way direction. Not only did the Karen nationalists appropriate lakhao khaichoo to promote the ideas of the Karen primordial identity and the unified Karen nation-making project, but the Karen soul theory implied in the ceremony also has a significant influence on the
Karen nation-making ideology. An example of the interactive relations explicitly appears in the opening ceremony song named aukoo aukong, which means 'be in unity' in Pwo-Karen. Historically, aukoo aukong was composed by a Karen nationalist in the 1930s to support the Karen nationalist movement in Burma. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

Hey Pwo-Karen come back, Hey Sgaw-Karen come back.
Come back to join together with unity. Everyone must know yourselves.
We must revolt. Don't leave it away. All must be in unity.
Don't be whining all brothers and sisters. Love one another.
We have the same heart, with Buddhists with Christians.
With Taleku, Pwo and Sgaw in the west and in the east.
In a day, for the prosperity, we must be in unity.
Be in unity, for our ethnic group.
Don't destroy our nation, don't until you died away.
Love our nation, Pwo and Sgaw Karen.
Be in unity. The sun will shine from the east. Be in unity.

(Source: an interview with Tipadu, translated from Pwo-Karen by Eh Thamawk.)

The song lyrics seem to have double-layered meanings, if we investigate them. At a glance, it seems a genuinely nationalist song, attempting to assert the notion of unique Karen ethnic identity, aiming to overcome internally religious, dialect and origin diversities among the so-called 'Karen' people. Put differently, the Karen nationalist song also has its root in Karen soul-body theory. Its lyrics also show that Karen nationalism has spiritual connotations or inspiration from the Karen belief in soul-body essences. I would like to suggest that the nationalist
intellectuals invented tradition and vice versa. The song also entails continuously primordial and vernacular Karen idioms of identity and well-being. The composition speaks about Karen nation-making as analogous to the creation of a super-sized soul.

The analogy between the song’s lyrics and the soul-calling chanting reveals their close connection. The song calls back dispersed Karen like calling wandering souls, asking Karen individuals to live in proximity similarly to the body-soul association. While the soul should not wander away from the body to dangerous places, Karen should not be separated religiously, geographically and linguistically. The reunion of soul-body is a metaphorical reference to the Karen realignment. Body-soul togetherness gives personal well-being, and then as well the alignment renders Karen collective well-being as well. Finally, Karen would live in close association until death, like the soul-body companion. I wonder whether the Karen nationalist movement could be popular and efficacious as a political utterance without borrowing structure and content from the soul-calling incantation.
Premodern elements of the Karen ethnogenesis today are also explicit in the Karen nationalists' use of material symbols. A Karen bronze drum and two water buffalo horns, which I found in the Sawtika's wrist-tying ceremony, are usually claimed as Karen cultural symbols. While the drum is used on the Karen national flag, both drum and horns appear as the KNU symbol. In one of my trips to Hp-an plain inside Myanmar, a Karen nationalist friend also tried hard to find the drum collection and show me one of the few remaining Karen drums today. Both drums and horns are actually musical instruments that Karen used for spirit worship in the premodern times. Richard M. Cooler notices that the Karen ancestors initially used the drum in the last quarter of the first millennium A.D. and that drum ornamentation was gradually developed to express their beliefs (1995, 108). In borrowing Taylor's terms (2011), the Karen fascination with cultural materials and traditional practices has important premodern antecedents; it is not only a part of the invented tradition of the Karen ethno-nationalist sentiments.
Ritual Objects and Metaphors

At the end of the opening session, the wrist-tying ceremony turned into a mode of ritual action, led by Tipadu, the ritual leader of the ceremony. As I mentioned above, the soul-calling rite was first conducted on the eve of the main ceremonial day, but the repeat took place in the monastery hall with about 1,500 participants. The soul-calling incantation was chanted. The short interrogative dialogue asking whether the pleu hla has returned was loudly and brightly uttered three times. After assuring the plue-la's return, the ritual leader and participants started the wrist-tying rite. Tipadu ordered those Karen sitting beside trays used in the soul-calling rite to start tying wrists. The elders picked up white cotton thread from trays to tie the wrists of boys and girls who sat next to them. The elders rubbed the threads toward the children's bodies, spelled out a short soul-calling chant, wound strings around their wrists and then tied knots. Other participants lined up in queues waiting to be tied. Ritual objects in seven bamboo trays were split into additional trays to create more service spots for wrist-tying. In the next few minutes, the monastery hall was full with different small groups as the young Karen queued up to ask revered elders to tie their wrists.

As anthropologist observing the rite, I attempted to conduct informal interviews to extract the significance of lakhao khaichoo, but it was not as easy as I anticipated. In my talks with a number of informants in the ceremony, I received two broad types of answers. On the one hand, some Karen described the act of tying as a fixing of pleu hla to their body, but could not explain what pleu hla actually is. On the other hand, many interviewees just said that it is a traditional ceremony that Karen people have long practised and they inherited it from ancestors. My attempt to explore the symbolic meaning (Geertz 1973) of the Karen's lakhao khaichoo failed, not because the tradition is invented, but because the ritual elements seem to operate in a non-conscious extent and are unable to be expressed verbally.
What struck me during the Sawtika's wrist-tying ceremony was the Karen's fascination with materials used in the event. Ritual materials seem to have a great appeal for Karen participants; they spend a lot of time preparing them and treat them as if they have their own special charm. In a moment of the wrist-tying rite, all Karen participants hold small portions of ritual objects in their hand. When these objects were nearly depleted, many attempted to grasp a bit of the remaining ritual objects before getting their wrists tied. What do ordinary Karen people actually perceive materials brought into this cultural practice? In this section, I try to answer the question by continuing to investigate the Sawtika wrist-tying ceremony's atmosphere and then integrating some theoretical discussion into the analysis of the wrist-tying ceremony's relevance in Karen worldviews.

I find that several Karen participants actively employed analogical reasoning to explicate ritual objects. The most well-known metaphor, both among leading and ordinary Karen, is the use of two packed *ku mii aei* as an analogy with unification and integration. In a part of the senior Karen's speech on the Sawtika stage, the seven ritual materials were claimed to represent particular qualities of the Karen people. While *ku mii aei* was talked about as an example of unified harmony, he also drew analogies between water and coolness, between cotton thread and strength, between banana bunch and well-ordered coexistence, between flower and resilience, between evenly-jointed sugarcane stems and consistency, and between rice and power-giving. Overall the metaphors, he claimed, promise a future of prosperity, harmony, well-being and betterment for the Karen people and the continuity of the Karen race.
I would argue that the seven ritual materials are used in the ceremony as 'the meaningful vehicle of ritual' (Turner 1967), suggesting the referents' meaning in polarised relations between physiological terms and normative values linked to the Karen principles of social life. Christopher Tilly (Tilley 1999) points out that '[m]etaphor is part and parcel of cultural creativity... It allows an understanding of ritual in its performative and social context, and in terms of the individuals who take part in them and their improvised and contingent transmission of knowledge' (1999, 29). The use of these materials and metaphors mentioned above lays the foundation for Karen ethno-nationalism. The ceremony becomes significant to Karen who have embraced this ideological sentiment. I found some senior KNU ex-leaders earnestly urged passersby to attend the ceremony. A hard-core Karen elder
took it seriously and condemned Karen fellows for being absent from the traditional event.

However, many ordinary Karen ceremonial participants seem to have their own way of drawing upon and getting the meaning of object analogies. While a small proportion of the Karen nationalists borrow the metaphors of these materials to invoke the notion of Karen national uniqueness, most Karen residents are inclined to imagine the order and the well-being of individual human lives. Among the common Karen, the ways of making sense of the seven ritual objects are also diverse. These referents embodied potentially multiple meanings, as Turner (1967) says about multivocality—a symbol represents many different things and actions. Tilley (1999, 29) also argues that ‘[a] ritual message can be interpreted simultaneously by different participants using different keys for decoding’.

I find that there are at least two interpretations of the use of ritual materials in the ceremony, and these are sometimes ambiguously combined together for some Karen informants. The first type of interpretation sees these objects as food to satisfy the returned soul. In the ceremony of Sawtika, I asked a few elders to do wrist-tying for me, and a few familiar elders approached me to tie my wrist. Among these elders, Moe Tin Tin intoned a distinct soul-calling chant as she rubbed my upper wrist with a cotton thread. What she said is:

Soul, come back. It is time to come back and stay calmly at your sleeping place. Come back home and eat all prepared foods and sweets. Take as much as you are satisfied and be with your body. If you wander in jungles or far-flung fields, come back and be at your home.’ (My own emphasis)

For Karen, soul is a spiritual essence that knows hunger and can become satisfied after eating. Moe Tin Tin explained that wandering souls are usually tired and hungry. As soon as it hears calling and returns home, they are pleased with a feast which comprises rice (the staple food of the Karen people) fruits and sweets (such as ku mii aei). Once souls come back, they become a part of the participant’s body,
and only a soul whose stomach feels full, as she claims, tends to be pleased and wants to stay with the personal body, eventually rendering ritual participants healthy and enjoying the well-being.

Another interpretation takes ritual materials as non-literal and to have implicit cultural relevance, to which Karen people get access by means of their presence in the ceremony. Ordinary Karen people take these objects in hand as a way of acquiring auspiciousness for their personal lives. They hold bits of rice, sticky rice, flower, sugarcane and banana in one hand, because these objects embody properties they would like to acquire. While young Karen held ritual materials in their hands, elders dipped cotton thread in a glass of water and tied the thread around receivers’ wrists. The thread’s tip was pulled off and placed on the receivers’ heads, one of the bodily spots where the souls reside. The bodily gesture of carrying objects, while being tied at the wrists, hosts social meaning in itself.

In Van Esterik’s study on Thai gender relations, she argued that ‘the Thai gains access to their gender and identities and their sexuality through their bodies’ (2000, 205). In the emphasis on bodies as repositories of cultural understanding, I would like to argue that Karen participants gain access to the qualities of materials through bodily sensations such as tactile and palate experiences. While a dual pack of *ku mii ctei* encodes the soul-body reunification for some Karen participants, others might not be able to explain its literal significance. I found a Karen woman took a bit of *ku mii aei* into her three children’s mouths and for herself. She acquired the symbols’ efficacy for herself and her children through somatic experiences and analogical processes. For her, ritual objects do something rather than having explicit meaning; they operate for the well-being and health of her family members.

The investigation in this section implies that *lakhao khaichoo* ritual objects produce different experiences of the Karen’s wrist-tying ceremony. These materials possess no single meaning shared by the Karen ceremonial participants, but allow different interpretations that make sense to particular individuals or groups. This
ambivalent understanding indicates the coexistence of nationalist animist and magical sentiments. While the Karen nationalist narrative presents the objects as metaphors of Karen people's unity and prosperity, this discourse does not eliminate other ways in which the ordinary Karen people experience the ritual elements. Ordinary Karen support the seemingly-nationalist-dominated ceremony because they have their own personal preferences over materials, which are based on the pre-modern notion of soul-body harmony. By internalising lakhaokhaichoo's material elements to their bodies, they acquire the meaning of balanced life and reorient their present lives toward spiritual security which is based on body-soul harmony.

Karen Social Aesthetics

The discussion in the previous section tells us that the wrist-tying ceremony becomes a relevant event for Karen participants by sensory experiences, rather than by explicit symbolic meanings. The ceremonial participants' bodily gestures—holding and associating objects with their bodies—have multiple meanings and provide a sensation assuring a well-balanced life. Whatever the meanings imbued in ritual materials, healthiness is always perceived and interpreted through a lens of the aesthetic values of bodily harmony and balance. Basically, the term 'aesthetics' I use in this chapter is not about the notion of beauty and artistic or performative genres—art, music, poetry. Rather, I adopt Robert Deajarlais's definition of aesthetics that sees it as 'the tacit cultural forms, values and sensibilities... that lend specific styles, configuration and felt qualities to local experiences' (1994, 65). He argues that the attention to 'experiences' enables anthropologists to grasp 'the way in which social actors compose, manage, and evaluate their actions and of those others in everyday social contexts' (1994; 66). Karen aesthetics then patterns the local ways of being—from body, family to community—and shapes the sensory grounds of experiences of well-being.
Furthermore, David MacDougall (1999) suggests a concept of 'social aesthetics' for reuniting the analysis of sensory aspects with the cultural landscape of anthropology. He argues that to understand the relations of individuals to their societies requires analysis of these societies as a 'complex sensory and aesthetic environment' (ibid., 1). MacDougall also points out that the social aesthetic field is the physical manifestation of the largely internalised and invisible embodied history or 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1990, 56). He suggest that Bourdieu's term 'physiognomy' (ibid., 60) represents well the notion of 'habitus', which is more than 'a system of structured, structuring dispositions' (ibid., 52) and not only an attribute of the self, but exists all around 'in the disposition of time, space, material objects and social activities' (MacDougall 1999, 6). If social aesthetics, as MacDougall argues, have an active role over events and social life, along with other social forces of politics, economics and histories, it is interesting to examine how a particular aesthetic design in a large ritual event, like the Karen wrist-tying ceremony, has been appropriated for exhibiting the Karen cultural landscape.

The Karen body movement and expression are closely associated with the Karen principle of social aesthetics, especially the notion of well-being (aumao, in Pwo-Karen). Karen social aesthetics focus on habitual body gestures, posture and movement. Throop and Murphy discuss how Bourdieu's concept of body hexis, as 'the collection of ways in which our bodies are conditioned to habitually stand, speak, walk and move, is a central means by which identities become somatically informed and grounded' (2002, 188). Therefore, I would argue that the ways Karen participants act, move and respond in the wrist-tying ceremony do not only create the body-soul harmony of individuals, but also relate individuals to the larger Karen society. Karen people, as social actors, consciously and unconsciously, appropriate the aesthetic field to revive basic forms, such as family, kinship and community, that characterise the Hpa-an Karen social life. The study of Karen aesthetics here focuses on their body movement and clothing in the wrist-tying ceremony.
The social interactions in the wrist-tying ceremony put a great emphasis on the aesthetics of social life. The act of tying and being tied between elders and younger stresses the significance of familial and kinship relationship. Hayami (2004), a Karen scholar, describes the way that family and dyadic relationships—for example husband-wife, parent-children and younger and elder sibling—are fundamental to Karen social life and are expressed through the ancestral spirit offering ritual named auxae. The aesthetics of family harmony remain very important to Hpa-an Karen, even though many of them have converted to Theravada Buddhism and abandoned animist practices. The sentiment of yearning for social life that has many relatives living nearby for mutual assistance is reflected in the Karen’s body movement in the wrist-tying ceremony.

In the Sawtika wrist-tying ceremony, I found several Karen participants seriously approached Karen elders and sought wrist-tying from them. Young Karen approached their parents, grandparents and respected elders for this purpose. The often-repeated phase during the wrist-tying was ‘please come back to live with your parents, brother, sisters’. The act of tying and face-to-face interaction then reinforces aesthetic experiences of the family and relative’s reunion. This soul-calling incantation phase underpins the inter-personal process in the world of the Karen family and kinship.

Social aesthetics, as embodied through visceral experiences, also emerges in other forms of sensory experiences in the Karen wrist-tying ceremony, including clothing. Karen participants seem to have a great aesthetic preoccupation about their clothes; they dressed with Karen traditional shirts. The shirts are cotton, mostly with two stripes, originally woven on a simple back-strap loom. The cloth is folded in half, and the folded part forms the shirt shoulders. It is stitched together, leaving the head and arms sections open. The shirts are usually embellished by braid around the shirt’s neck, arms, sides and hips. Karen men and women wear colourful Karen shirts along with sarongs and pants; Karen girls might have bright or gaily coloured Karen long dresses. The factory-made fabrication has produced a
variety of Karen shirt colours and patterns which might be made into jackets and waistcoats. Some conservative Karen complement their outfits with cotton-woven headbands around their heads.

Figure 12 Karen Wearing Karen Shirts at a Wrist-Tying Ceremony.

The way that Karen people clothe themselves with the Karen garments is actually a physical manifestation of their social life. Clothing is an aesthetic experience reproducing a metaphor for the existence of the distinct ethnic Karen community. Karen shirts, as material culture, are conspicuously used to materialise Karen community life. MacDougall (1999) observes that some societies stress the aesthetics of social life more than others because they find aesthetic experience unifying among diverse background members. The statement is also true among the Karen since wearing the so-called Karen shirts (in Pwo-Karen, ploe chaai) benefits the Karen ethno-nationalist project of combining different subgroups into
a single ethnic group. Karen shirts are consciously and unconsciously used in every festive event markedly related to the Karen ethnic identity.

A Karen woman whom I met in the Sawtika ceremony explained the reason why her family members wore Karen clothes.

'I am not quite happy to be called by Thai people *pamaa* [Burman ethnic group in Thai], since I am not *payong* [Burman ethnic group in Pwo-Karen]. I dress up myself and my children with our Karen clothes and attend the Karen traditional ceremony to remind ourselves that we are *ploe* [Pwo-Karen].'

Some Karen residents in the Sawtika village also have a similar feeling of dissatisfaction when many Thai urban and village residents, having less sensitivity to ethnic differences, just see everyone from Myanmar as Burman. However, they rarely argue against this perception with their employers or other host locals, only with some close friends. The Karen woman supplemented that 'I find it is useless to do so with my boss who will not care about what I say.' Her words tell us that the unequal host-refugee or employer-employee relationship seems to inhibit these Karen from expressing their ethnic belonging verbally.

The clothing aesthetics has gained more momentum these days because Mae Sot valley has hosted diverse ethnic minorities from Myanmar. Consequently, Karen residents in different residential areas are enthusiastic about holding *lakhao khaichoo*, in order to emphasise their ethnic identity. They encourage people to dress up in Karen clothes for joining the cultural celebration. Karen clothing reconstitutes a sense of Karen identity among the Karen refugees residing in Thailand. Wearing Karen clothes on their body and attending the Karen cultural events become a chance of showing who they are and who they are not.

I contend here that dressing in their ethnic clothes is an aesthetic way that Karen individuals contest for a sense of an ethnic belonging. Living as illegal migrants and cheap-paid workers, they could not explicitly fight to change the Thai perception
about them, but the aesthetics of bodily adornment can, to a certain extent, affirm their ethnic distinction to outsiders and assure their younger generations of their own cultural identity. Travelling around Mae Sot town on either the Karen wrist-tying day or the Karen New Year day, we easily find some passersby dressed up in Karen clothes, making their ways to attend the celebrations.
Chapter 5

Refuge and Emplacement through Buddhism

The Thailand-Myanmar borderland has hosted, officially and informally, hundreds of thousands of Karen refugees since 1984, especially in Mae Sot valley—the Thailand-Myanmar border area in Tak Province, Thailand (Lang 2002; South 2008). Currently, there are three refugee camps in Mae Sot valley providing shelter to 70,000–80,000 Karen refugees, or more than fifty percent of the total Karen refugees according to official statistics. Long-running humanitarian assistance programmes and journalists who focus on the ongoing armed conflict in the region have represented the Karen as uprooted and vulnerable displaced persons fleeing civil war inside Myanmar and crossing the border to Thailand. Karen refugees are often perceived as helpless victims and dependent recipients (see examples in BBC 2004; TBBC 2010).

Recent discussions in refugee studies question the stereotypical understanding of refugees and revise the linkages between people, place and identity (Malkki 1995; Kibreab 1999; Korac 2009). Maja Korac emphasises that lives in exile entail concomitant dual dimensions: the process of displacement and emplacement. The process does not deny the profound disruptions and painful experiences, but points to the refugees’ orientation to the place in which they currently reside. She aptly suggests that ‘(b)ecoming and being a refugee is a transformative experience and practice, a process rather than a set of static (disempowering) structures’ (2009, 7). Displacement and emplacement are each part of the experience of being a refugee but are not fixed conditions, and nor is either solely determinant of refugee experiences.
This chapter makes a contribution to scholarship in two important fields—refugee studies and Karen studies. First, amidst the re-conceptualisation of refugee-ness, refugee studies still largely overlooks how refugees reconstitute a sense of belonging in their forced mobility by employing certain cultural attributes, for example religions and religious practices. In transnational migration studies, scholars have clearly demonstrated that religions play a diverse role in migrants' lives, ranging from providing supportive resources in new societies (Glick-Schiller, Caglar and Gulbrandsen 2006) and re-territorialising unfamiliar landscapes (Werbner 1996), to sustaining memberships in multiple locations (Levitt 2004).

Second, academics have paid little attention to Buddhist Karen. It is a fact that Buddhist Karen practitioners constitute the majority of the overall Karen population and a large number of Karen refugees seeking shelter in Thailand. However, they have long been ignored by political and social analysis in Burma/Myanmar studies, in comparison to Christian Karen. The initial interest in Buddhist Karen arose from the divisive Buddhist-Christian conflict in 1994 within the Karen insurgent group—the Karen National Union or the KNU (examples are Gravers 2001, 2007). A group of Buddhist soldiers, led by a Buddhist monk, split themselves off and formed a new army faction called the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (the DKBA). The DKBA politically aligned with the Burmese military in fighting against the KNU (Rezenburg 2010). Since the joint military operation defeated the KNU, the DKBA has largely controlled the Karen State's areas. Knowledge about the social and cultural aspects of Buddhist Karen, however, remains a big void in the Burma studies scholarship (exceptions are Gravers 2012; Hayami 2011).

Therefore, the chapter focuses on the social and cultural life of Buddhist Karen as both refugees and religious followers. It aims to investigate relations between Karen refugeehood and their practice of Theravada Buddhism. I explore specific features of the Buddhist tradition followed by Pwo Karen refugees, examining its importance in their lives as refugees and the ways they mobilise the religion in the
context of displacement. Specifically, the chapter asks how Buddhist Karen refugees have been able to secure the implantation on Thai territory of their religious tradition despite its 'alien' character and their illegal residential status, and explores the roles their religion plays in facilitating their emplacement. It examines how they render secure their lives in new social and spatial contexts, by drawing upon the resources of their transplanted religious tradition.

My investigation in this chapter focuses on the way Karen refugees anchor themselves in the new environment through the Buddhist tradition they have practised since the pre-exile period. I begin the study by introducing the character and history of the Mon-Burmese Buddhist Tradition (MBBT) in Mae Sot valley. I then discuss how the MBBT second wave, steered by Buddhist Karen refugees, emerged in the vicinity of Mae Sot town. The chapter explores how Buddhist Karen informal residents negotiated for the establishment of their religious institutions by teasing out the entangled nature of state power in the borderlands. The last three sections of the chapter examine Karen Buddhist practices of pagoda worshipping, everyday religious security and participation in festivals. They demonstrate how, in their individual and collective religious practices, Karen refugees draw upon familiar cultural schema to create a sense of place, security and belonging in a new home. I argue in this chapter that the displaced Karen's religious practices exemplify the '(re)-production of locality' in a spatially extended mode. The religious life of these Karen refugees entails a new beginning and search for emplacement.

The Mon-Burmese Buddhist Tradition (MBBT)

Mae Sot, today, is the western-most town of Thailand on the Thailand-Myanmar border. Before the mid-19th century, Mae Sot town was only a forest area. Later, it grew with the immigration of a variety of ethnic groups, including northern Thai, Shan, Burmese and South Asian-origin people. The visit of an official from Bangkok,
the national capital, in 1892 recognised the fact that the Mae Sot border post was an area with diverse ethnic inhabitants (Phaya Surasak 1892).

The diverse origins of residents in Mae Sot valley was a result of the growth in long distance trade during the 19th and 20th centuries across the border between the two present-day nations. The British colonial occupation of lower Burma, from 1824, boosted trade on the route between Moulmein and Chiang Mai, which passed through Mae Sot valley. The Kingdom of Siam (Thailand) and the British Province of Tenesserim reached an agreement on boundary demarcation in 1868. However, people kept travelling across the frontier as if the international boundary did not exist until the Thai authorities imposed stricter rules on border-crossing in the late 1980s. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, the settlement of a group of people from present-day eastern Myanmar in Mae Sot and the establishment of four MBBT monasteries in the town area oriented the lives of people in the valley toward Mon-Burmese cultural influences, rather than Thai ones.25

The emergence of the Mon-Burmese Buddhist Tradition monasteries in Mae Sot valley is related to the trans-border mobility of people between present-day eastern Myanmar and present northwestern Thailand. These MBBT monastery founders were mostly merchants from British-ruled Burma who settled down in Mae Sot town before World War II. For example, the lay head of one MBBT monastery explained that the monastery was founded with financial donations from Burmese merchants who operated cigarette factories in Mae Sot, in avoidance of the British colonial manufacturing tax. Each MBBT monastery is currently under the auspices of a group of laypersons who are descendants of the monastery founders, with most having acquired Thai citizenship.

At present, all four MBBT monasteries conduct weekly rituals and annual ceremonies based on Theravada Buddhism for MBBT followers and practitioners.

25 These four monasteries are Hpaya Gyi Kyaung, Mae Tao Kyayng, Daw Ya Kyaung Ahao and Daw Ya Kyaung Atiq. They were founded in 1890, 1902, 1902 and 1904 respectively.
These MBBT supporters consist of Mae Sot-born residents, who are descended from the Burmese-origin ancestors, and newly arrived Burmese. The latter group also includes an influx of forcibly displaced Buddhist Karen who speak Pwo-Karen dialect (hereafter Pwo-Karen). It is not clear why, at present, Pwo-Karen Buddhist monks rather than those from other ethnic groups from Myanmar are the predominant monastics in three of the four monasteries. A senior monk of a MBBT monastery explained that it is because of their adjacent location between the central plain of Karen State (where Buddhist Pwo-Karen are the majority) and Mae Sot Valley. However, the recent mobility of Pwo-Karen people might be an important factor. In certain monasteries, Pwo-Karen senior monks tend to recruit new resident monks through ethnic and kinship connections, which are considered reliable networks.

A unique characteristic of the MBBT institutions is that their religious services have never been limited to a particular ethnic group; they function across ethnic partitions. They are open to MBBT followers from diverse ethnicities, as long as they enjoy participating in the MBBT practices and accept the use of Burmese-Pali language chants. For the Buddhist Karen, the use of Burmese-Pali chants in rituals or ceremonies has never been incompatible with their Karen ethnic identity. Pwo-Karen Pali Buddhist chanting can be found inside the Karen State of Myanmar (see Womack 2005), but as claimed by the same monk, it has never been as popular as Burmese-Pali. According to him, Burmese-Pali is the common language of MBBT followers in holding any rituals and ceremonies and it is irrelevant to ethnicity.

However, the MBBT monasteries, as a distinct religious institution, have been much weakened by the restraints imposed by the Thai authorities and legislation. Their existence and institutional arrangements have been regulated by the Thai state. Under the jurisdiction of the 1962 Thai Sangha (monastic order) legislation, they are integrated into the Thai Sangha administration through registration. The Thai state's intervention has brought about conflicts in certain cases.
The best-known problem concerned the nomination for the abbot's position of Daw Ya Kyaung monastery in 2004. The Mae Sot subdistrict monastic dean exerted authority over the monastery; he declared that the monastery's abbot should be a Thai citizen. However, there was not a single monk with Thai citizenship in residence there. The dean planned to appoint an external Thai monk as Daw Ya Kyaung monastery's abbot, but it was opposed by the monastery's lay leading group. Lay leaders from different ethnic backgrounds preferred a Pwo-Karen senior monk who had been there for 20 years. In that conflict, these lay leaders were quite strong. They were able to deter the intervention conducted on behalf of the Thai state. As a consequence, the monastery since then has been without an officially authorised abbot. The tension has not yet been resolved; rather it has been temporarily suspended. Potential violence may happen, such as the assault on a part of the monastery in January 2012 (Manager Online 2012).

These MBBT monasteries continue to serve as venues for religious practice for MBBT followers, but they are inclined to be low-profile and to hold religious events in a modest manner. Due to the strict mode of control found in the modern nation-state, the expansion of the MBBT institutions in Thailand seems impossible. These MBBT monastic orders have been frozen out. They could not develop their institutions in accordance with the dramatic growth of MBBT followers. Consequently, I found some Pwo-Karen attending religious rituals and ceremonies at Thai monasteries located near their residences. They nevertheless have problems of social dialogue with the local hosts and the language used in chanting. Some say they have experienced discriminatory manners from some Thai Buddhist followers who look down on Karen refugees as illegal Burmese migrants.

The Mon-Burmese Buddhist Tradition has been an indispensable part of life for non-Thai residents of Mae Sot town throughout its history. Recent intervention by the Thai state over the Thailand-Myanmar frontier, however, put restrictions on the MBBT monasteries. The increasing state control has limited their capabilities in
The New MBBT Wave

Despite non-Thai residents' limited access to Thai and MBBT monasteries, I witnessed at least three projects of founding new MBBT monasteries on the periphery of Mae Sot town and other similar projects elsewhere in the broader Mae Sot valley. They constitute a new MBBT wave with its own characteristics. The first wave of MBBT monasteries was established with support from multiethnic merchants in the absence of Thai state control at the beginning of the 19th century. The latest wave of MBBT monasteries, in the early 21st century, has been led by Buddhist Pwo-Karen who have a refugee background. This section explores how monasteries in the new MBBT wave could emerge and play an important role in forming a Buddhist Karen community. I examine this issue by investigating a case study of a new MBBT monastery known as Muglaw monastery.

Muglaw monastery is located in a residential area called Timboti, ten kilometres from Mae Sot town. Timboti is a self-settled Karen refugee community with residents who are dispersed around cultivated fields. The area attracts Burmese-origin Karen because of the availability of land for tenant farming and daily employment. However, its distant location causes difficulty for residents wishing to attend Buddhist monastery rituals and ceremonies. This prompted some Timboti Karen residents to establish a Buddhist monastery within their own vicinity.

The monastery founding project had its inception in two individuals' religious aspirations. In 2005, two Karen friends invited a visiting monk they had met at the Buddha's footprint stone in their vicinity to stay and promised to raise funds for building a monastery there. Their project came to an end, however when the monk fled from the proposed monastery site with all donations a half year later. The couple concluded that they had imprudently supported a fake monk who had
travelled across the border and deceived them. The misadventure, nevertheless, did not demolish the two men’s zeal for monastery founding. In 2007, the two men met a Karen monk called Muglaw doing meditation at the stone. After investigating the monk’s personal history and finding him a well-practised monk, the monastery-founding initiative re-emerged. They handed the monk their proposal and he accepted it. The place has since then been known as Muglaw monastery.

During the past three years (2007–2010), Muglaw monastery has developed quickly. Before that, Timboti was just a remote cultivating area that could not be accessed by road. The Buddha footprint stone was occasionally visited by wandering monks seeking tranquility for meditation. The building of the monastery has since dramatically changed the area. In 2008, a new laterite road to the monastery was constructed by a Thai businessman. In 2009, a large concrete hall replaced a dilapidated wooden one; more concrete monk cells were also built.
Muglaw monastery is currently a centre for Buddhist Karen practices and Karen culture. It regularly holds both Buddhist rituals and non-religious events. Examples of the former are monk and novice ordinations, offering ceremonies and Buddhist Sabbath day services, while non-religious events are the Karen wrist-tying ceremony and the *yaku* rice- (a kind of sweet) offering ritual. These Buddhist and Karen customary occasions bring Buddhist Karen living inside and outside the area and their material support to the monastery and aid its continued development. Visitors to the monastery come from a variety of origins, ranging from a group of Buddhist Karen from Mae La refugee camp where once Muglaw used to live, people from villages surrounding the monastery and those from the Burmese side of the border where Muglaw's mother is currently living and where he has contact with some Buddhist Karen monks.

The case shows us that the Buddhist Karen network has centred on a particular charismatic monk, a figure exemplifying what Keiko Tosa called the ‘Burmese saint’ (2009). Many Buddhist Karen have visited Muglaw with a belief in his supernatural power. For example, a number of followers seek his blessing for material prosperity and sacred water for healing. While local Buddhist Karen have limited resources and have only their labour to donate to build the monastery, Muglaw's reputation attracts substantial financial support from some local northern Thai, Thai entrepreneurs from Bangkok and some Pwo-Karen women who married middle-class or well-off Thai men in Mae Sot town.

Muglaw monastery represents a transnational space where Buddhist Karen can recover their familiar cultural environments. All religious rituals there are conducted in Burmese-Pali, a lingua-franca that several ethnic Buddhists share. It is a site for the circulation of people and artefacts across the national border. Buddhist Karen monks from some monasteries in Myanmar are invited to participate in certain annual ceremonies at Muglaw monastery. Photos of revered Buddhist monks (such as Thamanya and U Thuzana) and of sacred Buddhist sites of Myanmar are commonly used for decoration in the monastery hall and monks'
residences. The golden pagoda is consecrated with a golden spire imported from Yangon. During my research there, I also found skilled Karen sculptors from Myanmar occasionally visiting the monastery and working on various Buddhist-related sculptures in the Burmese style.

The emergence of Muglaw monastery exemplifies the reconstitution of a Karen Buddhist community in the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. The community has developed its own network around the monastic order's leader. It is independent and links to other MBBT monasteries on the borderland through the monk's personal relations and exchanges. For example, a group of monks from a given monastery participate in important ceremonies held by other MBBT monasteries. The Buddhist Karen network is not a hierarchically structured movement and an institutionalised organisation as found in the case of Christian Karen refugees (see Horstmann 2011). However, the scattered centres of self-supporting Buddhist Karen monasteries collectively embody the Buddhist Karen practices in Thailand. The Buddhist Karen practitioners living in exile have formed multiple small networks enhancing their religious aspiration.

Borderland and Negotiations

The founding of Muglaw monastery elicited a variety of responses from among the host population. The difference of opinion turned on various degrees of acceptance and reaction to the existence of the MBBT monastery. One of these reactions was suspicion and distrust. In the beginning, some Thai village headmen came to investigate the monastery and reported the case to the head of Mae Sot district office. When there was no reaction back from these higher-level Thai authorities, the headmen monitored the Karen religious project. These local leaders are somewhat xenophobic about migrants and refugees: they perceive them as potential threats to national security. These sceptics have the suspicion that Muglaw probably is connected with clandestine activities. One Thai village headman said: 'I wonder whether the temple is involved in human smuggling.'
far-flung location makes it suitable to be a temporary shelter for those being transported from Myanmar to Bangkok.

The appearance of some Thai residents at Muglaw monastery demonstrates that some local hosts actually favour the development of the religious project. A Thai man I met there told me that some locals also believe in the sacredness of the Buddha's footprint stone. In 1981, a group of Thai locals had built a boat-shaped cement structure surrounding the stone and a small Buddha image shrine nearby, but the place was deserted and covered with shrubs until Muglaw's arrival. The man considered that the building of a monastery was a satisfactory development project for the sacred Buddha site. In his opinion, there are more similarities than differences between Thai Buddhist and MBBT practices; both revere the same Buddha and follow the same teaching.

The majority of the host population seems to be unconcerned with the Pwo-Karen's religious project. While many locals do not know about the recent monastery, others have heard about the place but are not interested in making a visit. A Thai landlord, who rents land to a Pwo-Karen tenant farming family, told me that he did not want to go to the monastery because it belongs to non-Thai people. When I asked how the local authority should deal with it, he suggested that the non-Thai religious temple be controlled but not closed. In his opinion, 'the monastery is useful; it instills righteous behaviour into aliens'. The statement reflects a degree of xenophobia on the one hand and, on the other, expectations of the religious project as a tool in making non-Thai residents docile and tame.

The Thai ambivalence toward the existence of the Buddhist Karen monastery founding raises a serious question which requires further investigation: how can unauthorised people, such as self-settled Karen refugees, found a new MBBT monastery under host suspicion and state surveillance in Thailand? Literature on borderlands (Wilson and Donnan 1998) suggests that the meanings of borders are dynamic and based upon negotiation between people at the border and the nation-state, and thus borders, as contested spaces with multiple interpretations, embody
highly fluctuating relationships between borderlanders and state power. To answer the above question, it is necessary to examine the process of negotiation between Buddhist Karen and the Thai state on the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. This reveals the way Buddhist Karen have appropriated the Thai state authority in the realisation of their religious desire.

The Thai state has exerted great influence, by either legislation or de facto regulations, in controlling Buddhist monasteries within its territory. Siam (Thailand)'s internal administrative reforms in the late 19th century established a centralised administrative system for Buddhist institutions. The two important pieces of legislation are the Sangha Administration Act 1902 and the Sangha Act 1962 (revised 1992). According to the stipulations, a Buddhist monastery can acquire authorised status if it has two characteristics: the monastery abbot must hold Thai citizenship and be a member of the Thai monastic order, and the monastery must be registered with the centralised Sangha administration that vertically controls all Buddhist institutions on Thai territory.

Faced by this exertion of Thai state authority the Buddhist Karen had to act tactically in order to accomplish their monastery-founding project. Muglaw, the monastery abbot, drew upon his informal cross-border social relations in negotiating the Thai legal system. Muglaw is a Sgaw Karen who was once a child soldier with Karen rebels. He then was inducted as a Buddhist novice when he was 13 years old. His ordination into the monkhood took place in a Thai Karen Buddhist monastery in Um-phang district, Thailand, under supervision of a Thai monk named Kruba Thavorn in the 1990s. As the monastic dean of Um-phang district, Kruba Thavorn granted a monk's identification card to Muglaw, although he was not a Thai citizen. The paper has enabled him to be a legally recognised monk and eventually an authorised abbot of the monastery in Timboti.

The application to register the monastery as an authorised Buddhist institution was also approved using the same strategy. As soon as Muglaw moved into Timboti and agreed to build a new monastery there, he again sought assistance from Kruba
Thavorn. The Thai monk, who also has another position as the subdistrict monastic dean over the area where Muglaw monastery is situated, saw through the processing, by Mae Sot district's monastic dean, of Muglaw's application to register the monastery, and finally it got approved. Being a monastery which is less than five years old and has less than five permanent monks, the institution was registered as a samnaksong, not as a full wat (monastery). The term signifies a temporary monks' residence which is legally registered and permitted under the Thai Sangha centralised administration.

Kruba Thavorn's involvement in the Muglaw monastery is predicated on his personal history embedded in the informal politics of the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. From the 1960s to late 1980s, the Thai security authorities were in alliance with many ethnic rebel groups, including the KNU. The Thai policy, at that time, employed these insurgent areas as buffer zones against the expansion of communist ideology. Kruba Thavorn, before his ordination, was a cattle trader who ran his business in the KNU-liberated black market. He knew well many of KNU's top leaders. The Thai army asked him to use his personal network with the KNU for intelligence, although he later became a senior Buddhist monk. Kruba Thavorn's story implies that military, political, economic and personal interests are entangled in the Mae Sot borderlands and intertwine through the lives of borderlanders. It is this nature of borders that makes possible the Karen negotiation for familiar religious life.

The case shows that Buddhist Karen refugees have circumvented Thai state surveillance by drawing selectively on threads of historically constituted personal connection that reach into the Thai Sangha administration. They seem to be fully aware of the extent to which the Thai state has exerted authority over its physical sovereign boundary, including in the matter of religious institutions. They conformed to Thai legislation on monastery founding in their own way, in order to have the religious spaces to which they are accustomed. The strategy had a productive result. Kruba Thavorn had great empathy for Karen refugees and
played an important role in the Muglaw monastery founding. Before his death from cancer in December 2008, Kruba Thavorn occasionally visited the monastery on invitation from Muglaw, but he has never intervened in the general affairs of the monastery.

Furthermore, the case of Karen Buddhist monastery founding emphasises the contested nature of borderlands power. The state cannot always control its borders as it attempts to delineate the national boundaries and impose restrictions on people living there. Rather, borders are spaces in which local and national actors interact and negotiate relations of control and the meaning of border life. I would also argue here that the web of connections constituting the Mae Sot borderlands have created a culturally accommodating space that enables the Karen to maintain continuity in religious practice. In the following section, I investigate what comes after putting much effort into establishing the MBBT monastery in Thailand. What is the relevance of the religious structure in the lives of Buddhist Karen refugees?

**Pagoda and Protection**

The physical conditions of Muglaw monastery rapidly improved in the three years since its founding. The pagoda in the Muglaw monastery was built in the year the monastery was founded. Generally, a pagoda, or in Burmese, *cedi*, is a reliquary mound enshrining the Buddha's relics. It is considered a sacred symbol of the Buddha. The *cedi* is the most fundamental material symbol of the presence of the Buddha in monasteries of the MBBT. The *cedi* in MBBT monasteries are usually crowded with pilgrims on Buddhist Sabbath days and on important Buddhist ceremonies. The pilgrims pay homage to the *cedi* with simple offerings like flowers, candles and incense.

Muglaw monastery's leading monk has his own interpretation of the Buddha elements encapsulated in the *cedi*. Muglaw explained that three Buddha images, instead of Buddha relics, were embedded in the *cedi*. The three Buddha images are
old artefacts he acquired from different places on his religious pilgrimages; he carried them back from India, Cambodia and Chiang Mai. These images, he claimed, possess magical power equal to that of Buddha relics. The Buddha images were stacked vertically inside the cedi during its construction at one-foot intervals. In consequence, the cedi is deemed to have a sanctity equivalent to other grand pagodas.

The cedi construction in this Karen residential area has put the Buddhist Karen at ease, for it has a specific attribute of protection. It represents the existence of the Buddha, who has been highly accredited with supernatural power (Tambiah 1970). In the Buddhist Karen's understanding, his powerful aura penetrates the surrounding landscape. The cedi imparts spiritual tranquillity to the residential areas and people living there. To live in proximity to the cedi creates a sense of living under the radiance of the Buddha's power. For people who have been displaced, they feel they are living in a secure place, in the Buddha's presence, even though Mae Sot valley is not their homeland.

Several new Karen settlements across the borderland have attempted to construct a cedi when building a place of worship. One is Aung Sun Tha, a Buddhist Karen village inside Myanmar, where around thirty Pwo-Karen households who fled the civil war from various localities have settled since 2006. They began founding a monastery by building a small wooden monk's residence, since most village households were quite poor. During my visit in 2009, they had not yet finished the cedi project, which required a lot of manpower and budget. The attempt at creating a space for the Buddha was, however, explicit there. They built bamboo walls around an empty area of 25 square metres, in which they planned to build a cedi in the future. Despite their apparent lack of money, the spatial demarcation demonstrates the desire to live under the Buddha's power.

Interestingly, the Buddhist Karen's pursuit of protection also includes entreaties to other beings, especially the celestial guardians around the cedi. The Buddhist Karen believe that the area where a cedi is built is further shaded by these powerful
deities. The top of the cedi is magnificently decorated with a golden spire or umbrella (called shwe hti in Burmese) referred to as the celestial abode of King Indra or S'meing Eing (in Pwo Karen). King Indra (Thagya Min in Burmese) is the head of all heavenly gods—whose pantheon is at Mount Meru’s summit. Mt. Meru is also the centre or axis mundi of the earth, around which revolve all planets in the universe. The shwe hti in the architecture of the Mon-Burmese Buddhist tradition is a symbol of Mt. Meru’s summit.

Figure 14 A Buddhist Cedi and Chambers of Eight Deities

Many Buddhist Karen individuals believe the cedi emanates the sacred power of both the venerated Buddha and other holy deities. In my discussions with a number of Karen women who visited Muglaw monastery’s cedi, they explained that the sanctified ambience around the cedi comes from the enlightened Buddha, Ata and planetary deities. A Karen lady suggested that I take a look at the base of the cedi, where I found eight small chambers located around the quadrangular base.
These chambers, she explained, are residences of eight planetary deities, named according to the days of the week—ranging from Sunday to Saturday. Wednesday is exceptional: there are two different deities for that day, corresponding to daytime and night-time.26

The design of the cedi embedded with eight celestial beings is a unique characteristic of the MBBT, and is not found in other Theravada Buddhist societies. The tradition derives this architectural style from Hindu influence. According to the lady who served as my guide in this matter, the eight deities shield the pagoda from dangers from the eight directions. They yield peace to the physical space of the monastery on the one hand, and provide protection to the Buddhist followers on the other. She explained that the eight chambers specify the position where each layperson should pay homage to the pagoda. By orienting themselves spatially towards the cedi in the correct way, those who make offerings are in the custody of both the Buddha and other deities. The personal circumstances of each person determine this orientation. A layperson must place their offerings and pray to the cedi at the specific chamber corresponding to the day they were born. The deity of that day then protects the supplicant from adversity: troubles, dangers and losses.

The Karen’s approach to cedi shows that they possess their own way of utilising the familiar Buddhist tradition to secure refuge in a new settlement. In the Mon-Burmese Buddhist tradition, the cedi is of practical benefit to the Karen. In the cedi, they have a venue for venerating the Buddha and receiving the protection of the Buddha and surrounding deities. The religious practice—veneration of powerful beings at the cedi—provides its builders with a spiritual technology for averting dangers in a new settlement. This pursuit of protection from powerful beings is what Tannenbaum (1995) calls the principle of power-protection—the capability to control and achieve one’s wishes, to obtain protection, and to give protection to others. Through their construction of cedi, the Buddhist Karen have materialised

26 Sunday = tannin-ganwe; Monday = tannin-la; Tuesday = in-ga; Wednesday (daytime) boug dahu; Wednesday (nighttime) = yahoe; Thursday = ca-dhabade; Friday = thaug-ca; and Saturday = sa-neh.
this principle in a spatial schema that practically transforms their new borderlands home into a place of refuge, self-control and hope.

**Everyday Forms of Spiritual Security**

![Figure 15 A Buddha Shrine in a Buddhist Karen House](image)

Seeking power and protection is pervasive in Buddhist Karen people’s lives. A number of them treat their religious practice as a means for solving everyday problems, and we can observe this feature in individual lives. The most ubiquitous site for worship is the Buddha shrine installed in their residences. While a well-off Buddhist Karen household’s shrine might be a separate room with luxurious decorations, a poor households’ shrine might be only a few photos of Buddha images and a small jar of flowers. Whatever the style, in each household, one member always pays homage to the Buddha and chants before the altar as soon as they wake up. A Karen woman explained that those who prostrate to the Buddha in
the early morning will receive blessings and have an auspicious day enhanced by the Buddha's power.

Propitiating the Buddha is an idiomatic religious practice that is central to the way Buddhist Karen understand and find resolution to a variety of life's problems. An interesting example of this approach comes from a Karen woman I call here Adaw (a fictitious name, the word itself means 'aunt'). After her parents passed away, Adaw rarely visited her home in Myanmar. She explained that since then, she has been occupied with her family matters and four children in her village on the Thai side of the border, as well as with the Buddha. Her mother taught her to be a good Buddhist. According to her mother's advice, to pay homage to the Buddha every day, to be devoted in following the Buddha's teaching, and to take care of monastic orders enhances a happy life. She was convinced of the truth of that advice by her own experiences.

Once I quarrelled with my husband and did not talk with him for a few weeks. Then one of our cows disappeared. Friends told us they saw it here and there, but we found it nowhere. After days, I recalled my mother's words that if we do not control our extreme emotion as the Buddha taught and let it hurt and harm others, our life will get into problems. Then, I sat down before the Buddha altar and made an apology. After I returned to good relations with my husband, the cow surprisingly walked home itself.

Adaw gave an explanation as to why many Karen feel at ease with Buddhism, in comparison with the ancestral cult which animist Karen had followed in the past. She commented that worshipping the Buddha is much easier than worshipping the ancestral spirits. Karen would not encounter problems, no matter which way they prayed to the Buddha. However, they will be punished if they give an offering to ancestral spirits in the wrong way. Adaw said her own family in Myanmar gradually abandoned the Karen cult of matrifocal ancestor spirits. Her mother kept practising some ancestral offering rites when she was young, but these practices were conducted with more flexibility than in the previous generation. Before
passing away, Adaw's mother suggested that she could discontinue the family's animist-related practices. Adaw, as a consequence, agreed to disconnect her family life in Thailand from the Karen ancestral cult.

Adaw's life story testifies to a shift in religious practice from ancestor worship to Buddhism that occurred over a passage of time, across the generations, and across space. These transitions in time and space occurred gradually but in her view, the breaks have been decisive. And yet despite this narrative of fundamental disjuncture, Adaw attributes to the Buddha the power to overcome dissension and separation in her family, a power attested to by the miraculous disappearance and reappearance of the family cow. The 'here and the now' religious practices of this Buddhist Karen woman, and those of her many Buddhist Karen neighbours, may be not so fundamentally distinct from practices that her life narrative associates with the past, with her deceased mother, and a now rarely visited birthplace.

Hayami Yoko (2004) rightly suggests that the Karen reception of Buddhism does not take place exclusively, but is influenced and complemented by the customary Karen rituals. In her later work on Buddhist Karen inside Myanmar, Hayami (2011) pointed out 'multi-layered' and 'hybrid' religious practices which link Buddhism, spirit worship and Karen custom and culture. In the same paper, she analyzed how the self-claimed Buddhist Karen's practice of Duwae pagoda worship 'emphasises the immediate relationships of kinship and marriage, securing a sense of generational continuity in the domestic realm' (ibid., 1102). Similarly, we see in the examples drawn from the lives of the Buddhist Karen in Mae Sot a reliance on Buddhism for security in kin-oriented or familial concerns, such as restoring harmony between spouses as in Adaw's case, and obtaining daily auspiciousness for one's family. Karen claims on Buddhism as a source of security also relate to wider concerns such as obtaining tranquility and security in residential neighbourhoods. The powerful protectors to whom Buddhist Karen make recourse include not only Buddha, but also various celestial and planetary deities.
Attention to the aspect of power-protection in Buddhist Karen religious practice shifts focus away from the well-researched millenarian framework toward religious technologies of place-making deployed by the forcibly mobile Karen. A lineage of studies on the Karen has interpreted millenarian expressions among the Karen as a radically transformative religious response to profound socio-cultural crisis or cosmic catastrophe (Stern 1968, and recent literature—Gravers 2001; Hayami 2002, Khwancheewan 2007). Arguably, the recent dislocations experienced by the Karen of Mae Sot valley are as critical as at any other period, yet one is hard-pressed to regard their responses—an efflorescence of monastic construction, or the proliferation of family-based veneration of the Buddha—in millenarian terms as an expression of discontent with the present order or an expectation of fundamental transformation. Neither are these religious practices of the Buddhist Karen in Mae Sot seemingly radically disjunctive with 'pre-crisis' forms of religious practice, or with those followed, in the past or present, in their places of origin.

The patterns of religious continuity, hybridity and gradualist transformation observed among the Buddhist Karen in Mae Sot, appear to differ significantly from the disjunctive religious dynamics reported in Karen millenarian contexts. This may have something to do with the flexible and place-transcendent qualities of the Mon Burmese religious tradition to which most Buddhist Karen in Mae Sot adhere. Significant numbers of Karen inside Myanmar are open to pan-MBBT institutions and practices. When fleeing to take shelter on the Thai side of the border, they have reproduced this Buddhist tradition across the nation-state's border. Another significant aspect of this tradition is the faith invested in the Buddha as a powerful protector, providing security in various arenas from the personal to wider communal spheres. It may be that these protective aspects of the tradition have been emphasised in the circumstances of dislocation and upheaval which many Karen have experienced. Nevertheless, in venerating the Buddha and other spirits as protectors, these displaced Buddhist Karen search for spiritual security and
sacred protection in personal, familial and communal domains, not in an autonomous Karen realm or in a fundamental break with the past.

Re-emplacing through Festive Events

As in other place where the Theravada Buddhist tradition is practised, Karen participants in different Buddhist rituals often ask for merit or boue (Pwo-Karen). The practice of ritually enacted merit-making importantly defines the relationship between the monastic order and laypersons. Swearer (1995) explains that the logic behind such rituals is reciprocal exchange. This kind of relationship is evident in the interaction between laypersons and monks. Lay persons provide basic necessities for sustaining the monastic order or Sangha. In return, the accumulated power of a well-practising Sangha is available to donors as merit. Lay participation in the ritual exchange is a way to gain more merit, which enhances the donors' balance of karma. One of the great merit-making events is the festival called kathay pwe—the monk robes offering ceremony. The ceremony takes place on any particular date within a month after the full moon of the eleventh lunar calendar, around October. Most families have finished their harvest before the event. Daily wage-earning Karen stop work to join this annual Buddhist ceremony.

At the Muglaw monastery in 2009, I observed the event as follows. On the ceremonial day, each family arrived at Muglaw monastery with a set of gifts consisting of a new monk's robe, sandals, an umbrella and a cloth fan. Buddhist Karen from each residential area formed processions and walked to the monastery. Each group was accompanied by a drum-and-cymbals band. On arrival at the ceremony site, different groups kept playing the percussion instruments and dancing at different corners of the monastery compound. Around noon, all participants circumambulated the monastery three times, carrying ceremonial gifts on their heads or in their hands. Many profusely sweating dancers also took part in the parade. These kathay pwe processions took place in a joyous and crowded atmosphere.
At the end of the third round, participants entered the main hall and the religious ritual got underway. Some could not find vacant sitting space inside the crowded hall and sat outside the building. All gifts were put before the twenty-seven monks who had come from different monasteries on the Thai and Burmese sides of the border. The ritual began with a set of chants by the laypersons and the monks. Then three _kathay-ma_ (major sponsors) were asked to make an offering of gifts to the monastery's abbot, which they passed directly from their hands to his. Some laypersons gained smaller prestige by giving gifts to other guest monks. Next, a senior monk gave a sermon, teaching how support for the monastic order can yield the benefit of merit to those who did so. The ceremony finished before three o'clock in the afternoon.

Recent historical studies contend that the popularity of robe offerings in Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist societies illustrate how people of this region have taken up Theravada Buddhism through their own interpretations and practices. Andaya (2002) argues that Theravada Buddhism was quite successful in this region because of its emphasis on _puja_, or religious devotion through gift-giving. Through _puja_, the religion allowed people who were used to making offerings to supernatural beings and were ignorant of text-based knowledge to achieve salvation. We can say that _kathay pwe_ has a multi-faceted meaning to Buddhist Karen in Mae Sot valley. I found that the Karen's enthusiastic participation in the ceremony is a way of manipulating the religious event for a hybrid purpose. _Kathay pwe_ is relevant according to its semantic notion of merit-making on the one hand, and it also generates sociality among spatially dispersed Buddhist Karen households on the other.

A good example of the double-layered meaning of _kathay pwe_ is found in the activities of the volunteer cooking team. A group of Buddhist Karen men described their voluntary work as a chance for _ma-boue_ (merit-making). _Kathay pwe_ is an event that usually brings large crowds. Food provision for thousands of participants is a tough job. These participants attend the ceremony with the aim of
supporting the religion and its monastic order. The cooking team can accumulate merit by cooking food for other Buddhist laity. Food preparation for a thousand *kathay pwe* participants in Muglaw monastery was the responsibility of a group of about twenty men. After preparing ingredients with Karen women, the team worked around the stone tripod stoves from 6 p.m. until the next morning. Cooking steamed rice, four types of dishes and Karen-style curry for the vermicelli noodles meant these men had to lift giant pots up and down as well as to carry them to the monastery eating hall. Those who were tired went to sleep for one or two hours and then resumed work.

Discussion with some members of the group helped me understand the tacit and implicit meanings of their bodily presence and provision of labour in the sweaty job. Tuposeng, a Karen man in the team, said that he joined the cooking team for the religious prosperity as well as for the pleasure (or *mao* in Pwo-Karen). For him, working with friends in *kathay pwe* imitated the festive atmosphere of the village in the central plain of Karen State of Myanmar from where he came. He described the community members who would gather at such events as mostly relatives and friends with one another. All communal festive events depended on villagers' voluntary contributions. When different families moved to the Thai side of the border, they lived separately from one another and rarely had a communal experience as they once had at home. Their yearning for sociability can be met with a religious and social gathering such as the *kathay pwe*.

The overnight work permitted these Karen men, originally from different villages, and presently living at a distance from each other, to get together and know one another better. They enjoyed chatting, exchanging information and sharing jokes and amusement. The night was also accompanied by familiar entertainment. The cooking team enjoyed *pwe mee* (the empty-hand boxing) played on a CD player connected to a television screen. The audiences before the screen shouted and cheered at their favoured boxers. The CD was sometimes changed to show Karen *za*. *Za* is a word derived from *zat pwe* in Burmese, which refers to a popular
Burmese genre of mixed drama and dancing, but the Karen version is performed in Pwo Karen dialect. The festival offered the dispersed Karen residents an opportunity of village-like sociality and consumption of familiar entertainment.

The festive sociality was also evident in the collective gift preparation for the monastic order. In addition to a set of monk robes, another important kathay gift is pathaysa—the wishing tree. Small pathaysa could be trees of banknotes or colourfully wrapped coins. Those large, two-metre-high pathaysa were hung with basic necessities for the monastic order, and beautifully decorated with colourful papers and flowers. Swearer (1995, 23) noticed that the wishing tree in the northern Thai Buddhist context is actually a palace shape, showing the hope of merit accumulation that imparts life in a heavenly abode in some future lifetime. The Buddhist Karen near Muglaw monastery, however, never mentioned what it actually represented. The preparation of pathaysa took time and labour, but it was also a sensual experience of social gathering and communal belonging, as the following example demonstrates.

Three days before the Muglaw monastery’s kathay pwe in 2009, a group of thirteen households assembled in O-mia’s house to make a pathaysa for the event. The pathaysa was constructed with mainly natural materials. Bamboo or wood sticks were used as its base, and it had a vertical trunk made of bound rice straws and small bamboo branches for hanging gifts. The pathaysa was hung with basic gifts, comprising banknotes, candles and incense packs, kitchen utensils, instant coffee packs, handkerchiefs and napkins. Its presence there attracted neighbours to O-mia’s house to adorn the tree and enjoy dancing. A Karen person might spend ten to fifteen minutes in decorating the tree, then he or she joined in the white-whisky drinking and dancing along with the rhythm beat out by two drummers. O-Mia’s veranda became a place that set pathaysa associates at their ease.

On the ceremonial day, the associates carried the pathaysa to join in the three-round procession at the monastery. Karen celebrants moved and danced alongside the pathaysa. Numerous heavily sweating dancers also took part in the parade. The
kathay pwe was filled with a convivial atmosphere and a tumultuous crowd of participants. Buddhist Pwo-Karen from disparate backgrounds and neighbourhoods combined and recreated themselves in the sensuous and exciting festive environment. The festival constituted a sense of belonging to a new community and place through the re-enactment of familiar social and cultural schema. I suggest that for the Karen the pathaysa has enabled a sense of normalcy and familiarity to take root in their new residential space. When I interviewed a Karen woman from a poor economic background, she claimed her dancing in the festival is also a kind of merit-making as it created a more enjoyable atmosphere. The forms of merit-making are then not solely limited to material gifts. In addition to constituting a sense of embodied community, the dance is also a tacit practice that enabled the accrual of merit through giving oneself over the festive occasion.

Conclusion

In a recent monograph on the Karenni refugees in Thailand, Dudley (2010) argued that Karenni refugees maintain continuity with the pre-exile past by performing Karenni festivals, in order to preserve 'a sense of continuity with home' (ibid., 117) and 'the creation and reinforcement of belonging and place' (ibid., 138). In this chapter it has been shown that the religious practices of Karen refugees, such as the MBBT monastery founding, Buddha veneration and participation in rituals and festivals, share a similar notion of place-making. The Buddhist Karen work hard to emplace themselves through religious institutions and ritual experiences. For self-settled Buddhist Karen, these MBBT practices enable a means of being in and of their new place, rather than of longing for the homeland after being displaced.

27 The Karenni (Red Karen) are not a part of the Karen refugees in Mae Sot valley mentioned in this chapter. Ethno-linguistically, Karenni is, however, a subgroup of the broader Karenic family.
Within demotic contexts, the Karen religious life entails a new beginning and search for emplacement. This is not to deny painfully disruptive experiences from displacement and obstacles to reconstructing lives in the receiving countries, but it implies that lives in exile can also be rendered meaningful and secure, and a sense of belonging created through the recreation of familiar religious practices. These forms of Karen re-emplacement take place in a context of contested power in the borderlands. The Thailand-Myanmar border is a space in which powerful and disruptive state-emplacing projects intersect, yet also in which marginal actors such as Buddhist Pwo-Karen refugees can find refuge and recreate the meanings of place.

I argue that the displaced Karen’s religious practices exemplify the ‘(re)-production of locality’ in a spatially extended mode. I use the term locality here in line with what Appadurai (1996) sees as a phenomenological quality constituted by a sense of social immediacy, technologies of interaction and the relativity of contexts. For these Buddhist Karen, locality is recreated through strategies of material symbols of cosmological security, sociality and festive structures of affect that are reconstituted across the geographical boundary. These Karen have strong attachments and commitments to a religiously constituted locality rather than to ethno-nationalist and millenarian yearnings for a ‘lost’ homeland or ethnic identity. Their locality emerges in the re-enactment of MBBT institutions and practices.
Chapter 6

After Displacement:

Mobility and Prospects for Karen Post-Refugee Futures

It has been our dream for twenty years that democracy will come to Burma and that the refugees will return home to rebuild their lives and prosper... But today peace and reconciliation seem as far off as ever.

(Jack Dunford, Executive Director of the Burmese Border Consortium (BBC), Introduction to Between Worlds: Twenty Years on the Border (2004, 12)

The long-term prospects for refugees often are imagined through a set of alternative 'durable solutions': repatriation, local integration and third country resettlement. From this perspective, Karen refugees on the Thailand-Myanmar border are seen as people who are in desperate hopelessness and legal limbo. From the viewpoint of humanitarian organisations, there is no suitable solution to the protracted Karen refugee situation due to the continued civil war between ethnic minority insurgents and the Burmese military. Repatriation to Myanmar is depicted as a detrimental alternative because of the Burmese military autocracy. Refugee advocacy, aid agencies and Karen refugee camp leaders argue that the return would lead displaced Karen to further persecution (Guardian 2010; The Independent 2011). Additionally, their integration into Thai society has been shut down by existing Thai legislations. Within an appraisal of the care of refugees as a burden, the Thai state has currently placed strong emphasis on discontinuing refugee camps and gearing up for repatriation of Karen refugees.
The notion of repatriation gained powerful momentum in 2011–2012 as Myanmar made considerable changes toward political democracy and signalled a decrease in the military's role in its national politics. Several positive political reforms included the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in late 2010, the national election in November 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi's success in parliamentary by-elections in April 2012 and incredible progress in cease-fire pacts between the Burmese government and diverse armed ethnic groups. A significant event which is relevant to the mass of Karen refugees in Thailand is the KNU's Yangon's visit and talks with the relevant Burmese government minister on the peace-making process (Mizzima 2012). Most recently, there appeared a report in May 2012 about a multi-lateral meeting for preparing for the repatriation of war refugees in eastern Myanmar (Irrawaddy 2012).

Public discussions over refugee prospects have typically proceeded toward a particular understanding of refugees. Existing durable solutions to the refugee problem are fundamentally underpinned by formalist notions of refugees that enduringly anchor them in a protective shelter and render them motionless, and objectify them as tacitly acquiescent displaced persons. What I have scrutinised in previous chapters challenges the presumption of pure, stationary and passive refugeeness. In addition to conceptualising Karen as a special refugee problem, contemplation of Karen refugees' futures also neglects the actual dynamics of their displacement. The commonly proposed 'durable' solutions of repatriation, local integration and resettlement isolate displaced Karen from wider historical contexts and socio-economic transformations of the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. Researchers have argued that the application of a simplistic model of repatriation to displaced persons tends to make claims about solutions to refugee problem without asking their priorities (Zimmermann 2012) and neglect social factors involved in individuals' decision on movement (Bakewell 2000). Repatriation programmes then inevitably result in failure or even worse erode the resilience of refugees.
In this chapter, I do not intend to discuss the appropriate solutions to refugee resettlement. Rather, I investigate how vernacular Karen refugees have imagined and approached their prospects and to what extent they have attempted to realise them with actions. The chapter examines opportunities situated in changing local contexts, options offered by external intervention, and the way vernacular Karen refugees have interacted with them. Rather than simplifying Karen cross border movement to a special refugee problem needing durable solutions, the chapter tries to capture directions that they have been using to rebuild their lives. Furthermore, it asks whether onward mobility can be an integral part of solutions to Karen displacement. First, I introduce the resettlement programme on the Thailand-Myanmar border and describe how the Karen remaining in the borderlands learn about resettlement to third countries. Next, the chapter discusses young Karen people's impressions of this resettlement programme and shows how limitations of living as vernacular Karen refugees prompt these youth to grasp at opportunities for onward mobility offered by others. It also investigates Karen adults' reluctance to embrace resettlement and their own distinct way of identifying life prospects in their extended socio-cultural system. Among these prospects, the chapter examines to what extent they have embraced the choice of a physical return to Myanmar. Finally, I examine how mobility can be a vital part of the process of repatriation to the country of origin, and provide de facto solutions for Karen refugees.

Resettlement Programme

During my fieldwork, resettlement to third countries was a topic of everyday talk among numerous Karen refugee friends as well as Burmese migrant friends. The resettlement programme for displaced persons from Myanmar has operated under cooperation between Thailand's Ministry of the Interior (MOI) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At the beginning, the programme was focused on the persons of concern (POC) who were mostly
political activists fleeing Myanmar after the 1988 Burmese military crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations. Later, the programme extended its working scope to give priority to individual refugees who are most in need of protection. The programme expansion was authorised by the mutual agreement between the UNHCR and the receiving countries' governments. Since then, Mae Sot town has been the locus of processing the resettlement programme for the Burmese-origin people. A single application includes the identification of potential candidates, screening procedures28 and logistical preparation before travelling.

Through the UNHCR-facilitated resettlement programme, the figures of successful applicants for the third-country resettlement have increased at an unprecedented rate. The statistics from the International Organization for Migration (or IOM)—an intergovernmental organisation that arranges transportation and a cultural orientation programme before the refugees' departure—give a clear picture of the tendency. An important milestone in the programme was the trebling of the Myanmar-origin people's departure from 4,911 persons in 2006 to 14,636 persons in 2007. The numbers increased to 17,172 and 16,690 persons in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Since 2007, refugees from Myanmar have become the majority of the programme participants, constituting around 96 percent of the total annual volumes of departure through the channel of the IOM-Thailand office.29 As of the end of October 2010, 66,885 refugees from Myanmar had left Thailand since the programme started in 2004, to 11 countries including Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. The majority of them resettle in different states of the United

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28 The government and its agents of a particular receiving country conduct the resettlement process in coordination with the UNHCR. The overall procedures on considering applications can be different from one country to another.

29 In fact, the majority of the so-called Myanmar-origin people joining the programme are ethnic Karen and other ethnic minorities.
States. For example, 76.84 percent of the 2009 IOM-Thailand office's Burmese-origin clients departed to the United States.\(^3\)

Being immersed in Mae Sot and having my social life around Karen friends, it was not uncommon for me to see daily scenes related to the resettlement programme. A number of Karen informants who considered resettlement as a forward-looking solution sent their applications, checked their progress in screening procedures and waited for departure. Riding my motorcycle on the highway, I passed the Mae Sot-based IOM office and saw IOM vehicles taking applicants from camps to hospitals and its office, and coaches transferring Karen refugees from camps to the Bangkok airport. A number of vernacular refugees kept revalidating their UNHCR-registered residential status, while they continued residing and making a living outside assigned refugee camps. They said they might have to use it for applying to the resettlement programme in the future.

After years in operation, the resettlement programme has provoked a relevant debate among the Karen refugee community, particular on the brain drain problem. Susan Banki and Hazel Lang (2008)'s research on the programme's consequences mentions that the Karen refugee camps have rapidly been depleted of skilled workers, especially in two essential sectors of camp life: health and education. Outside refugee camps, the negative effect of brain drain is quite clear on the Karen community development organisations. For example, Mae Tao Clinic (or MTC)—a Karen-dominated community-based organisation which offers low-cost medical health services to undocumented Burmese migrants in Mae Sot town—has lost a number of skilled and experienced staff. In discussion with Naw Htoo, one of the senior MTC management team, she confessed that the MTC has lost a number of qualified medics. She seemed to despair at the unsolved problem,

\(^3\) Statistics in this section are derived from different secondary sources on the organisational websites, including the UNHCR, the IOM and the IRIN.
saying: 'We have talked about it for a few years, but we cannot do anything. It is an individual's right to do whatever they think it is good for their future'.

At the household level, the choice of resettlement has created different reactions among the vernacular Karen refugees. Although they have opted to be beneath the radar of the institutional assistance system, Karen individuals seek details about the consequences of choosing a life outside Mae Sot. They acquire the information directly from resettled Karen or indirectly from daily conversations with their relatives and friends. Karen refugees interpret the received information and decide their own attitude and position towards the programme. In the following section, I examine the transnational information flow between the resettled Karen and the Karen remaining on the borderland, as well as the Karen's reception of the resettlement programme.

**Knowing Resettlement**

Information about new lives overseas, in both positive and negative aspects, has flowed back to the Thailand-Myanmar borderland. The departure to third countries does not mean a complete separation between the resettled Karen and those remaining behind. The latter are able to learn how their resettled Karen friends overseas encounter and adapt to unfamiliar social environments. When I introduced myself as a researcher from Australia, certain informants shared their impression that Australia is one of the good destinations in the resettlement programme.

Many Karen residing in third countries keep contact with friends and relatives and confer with them about their experiences of living in new societies. The contact is mainly made through mobile phones—a common personal asset of many Karen refugees today. Many Karen individuals seem to know at least one person who has resettled to western countries. They might be kin, neighbours or friends whom they knew before. When a person makes contact with someone living overseas,
what they exchange and discuss is widely disseminated in a few days. Knowledge of different aspects of overseas life spreads widely through displaced Karen communities and kinship networks.

Here I would like to give an example of the Karen information flow with the case study of Ae-thong. Ae-thong works as an excavator driver in an agricultural produce warehouse on Mae Sot town’s periphery. He often got a call from a female cousin who had resettled in North Carolina, the United States. I was present for one of these calls. Their conversation lasted for twenty minutes. They exchanged news about each other’s situation. However, the cousin's main purpose in that call was to ask Ae-thong to be a middleman transmitting remittances to her own family members. The cousin transferred money through a global money agent named Money Gram. Then Ae-thong went to take the money from the agent’s allied commercial banks. He used a copy of his temporary work permit for the transaction.

Interestingly, the scope of money distribution determines more or less the scope of the information flow about resettled person’s life. In the case of Ae-thong’s transaction with his cousin, he received a total of 20,000 baht (670 US$). She asked him to give 5,000 baht to her mother in Hlaing Bwe township, Karen State of Myanmar; 3,000 baht to each of three siblings residing in Mae Sot, Myawaddy (Myanmar) and in a Thailand-based refugee camp; and 2,000 baht to Ae-thong and his two siblings who live in a central province of Thailand. After sending money through Thai commercial banks or underground Burmese brokers, Ae-thong called the recipients on his mobile to inform them about the transfer. These conversations included stories about the resettled cousin. People in her kin network learnt how their cousin’s life was going on the other side of the world. It is not unimaginable that knowledge of her resettled life will disperse further among Ae-thong’s colleagues and neighbours as well as relatives of his wife.

In general, Karen people remaining in the borderland are active in learning about different aspects of the resettled people’s lives. The hottest topic concerns the
livability of different receiving countries. Livability among the Karen is usually measured by the reception and the support programme that the resettled Karen receive at the early stage of arrival and in the long term. Ae-thong can give a comparative view of the resettlement schemes in different countries. He claimed that the application process for the United State resettlement takes less time than other countries’ processes, but it also offers fewer benefits. He found those who moved to Australia gain more generous support. One of his ex-soldier friends resettling in Australia obtained housing assistance, basic furniture, stipends, and English tuition. Although the man has been there for two years and remains unemployed, he can survive with unemployment benefits.

Another aspect of resettled refugees’ lives overseas that impresses many Karen in the borderland is the economic opportunities and remunerative employment. The movement to other countries is considered a chance to earn big incomes. Those Karen in Mae Sot valley are so thrilled to hear about hourly-rate wages in the US, European countries and Australia. The financial advantage of resettlement is recognised in the remittances and revisits by some resettled Karen. A Karen informant admired the much improved economic status of his resettled friends. One of his friends, who moved to Canada, came back and contacted him for a land transaction. The Canadian Karen wanted to buy a land plot for his future housing. My Karen friend appreciated the way that his companion’s status had changed so much, saying:

When we were in a refugee camp together, he was just a poor man who did not have rice even for himself. You see how well-off he is today. He comes back and asks to buy land, while I still live on a rental plot.

At the same time, Karen in the borderland hear about the unfavorable and ambiguous aspects of resettled lives. It mostly concerns difficulties in adjusting into the new physical and social environments. The problems range from freezing weather to unsociable neighbourhoods. Their life in western societies which are embedded with individualistic values confronts the resettled Karen with loneliness.
and depression. A young Karen woman told me a story of her Karen friend who used to work as an experienced medic at the Mae Tao Clinic (MTC).

She went to the US and has struggled for her own family. I sometimes get a call from her. She felt isolated. She complained her life was nothing but working. She has long hours of work in a factory and has no chance to pursue higher education. Her health care expertise is useless there as she is considered unqualified. She seems to experience a tough life and she cannot afford to fly back here.

The circulation of stories about the Karen refugees who have accepted overseas resettlement, as illustrated above, plays an important role in shaping Karen positions on the resettlement issue. The vernacular Karen refugees each interpret these stories in line with their own circumstances to construct images of a desired future. Consequently, they have different positions toward the UNHCR-supported resettlement programme. There exists a divergence between those who are reluctant to take up resettlement, as they doubt the prospects it offers for a good life, and those who wish to resettle, due to their expectation of positive changes. The pros and cons of third-country resettlement are widely discussed. In the following section, I explore what impresses Karen youth about resettlement and why they are enthusiastic to accept it as a life option.

**Youth and Life Prospects**

The programme of resettlement to third countries elicits great interest among displaced Karen youth. To them, the benefits derived from resettlement sound very attractive. A number of young Karen explicitly told me that they wished they could resettle to third countries. Why do Karen refugee youth have this interest in resettlement? In this section, I attempt to answer the question by exploring how young Karen refugees evaluate their present situation, and how their positive
perception toward the resettlement programme develops in response to limited social mobility.

I am totally bored with being unemployed. I went to work on a construction site as a daily worker for a few weeks. I found it was a terribly exhausting job. Living with an illegal status causes me great difficulty in finding a good and well-paid job. Every job application here requires a Thai ID card—a document which I do not have.

This expression of despair was uttered by a young Karen informant named Thoh. At the age of 22, Thoh graduated high school (grade 12) from a migrant school. His comment implies that life for the Karen vernacular refugees in Mae Sot valley has ambivalent characteristics. Their long-term settlement in this Thai border town and residence in Thai communities has provided safe shelter to Karen people fleeing civil war. The first generation of Karen refugees has attained a relative freedom of movement and opportunities for making a living. These advantages are, however, contingent and situated in local social relations and negotiated interactions. Living as vernacular refugees in Mae Sot valley is a conditional and provisional form of refuge-taking. The majority of them remain legally barred from gaining naturalisation as Thai citizens. Their vulnerable status in relation to the Thai state authorities has imposed restrictions on their lives. Occasionally, they are subjected to arbitrary arrest and extortion by the state authorities.

Restrictions on life induce some second generation Karen refugees to perceive the Mae Sot valley as a constraining world. For some young Karen vernacular refugees, this borderlands valley seems to be a restrained parochial bubble. In the case of Thoh, he became nervous about his future earnings even before his high school graduation. His legally demeaning and limiting status obviously obstructs his personal life progress. During my fieldwork, other young Karen informants told me their subaltern and degrading personal stories. For them, a lack of legal citizenship discourages social mobility. They were not satisfied with the poor low-paid jobs such as daily employment in farming and construction that their parents had relied
upon for a living. They were anxious about their prospects of living in Mae Sot valley.

Young Karen refugees seriously reassess the living conditions available to them locally and prefer to ease out of the restrained cage. They promptly grasp the more favourable opportunities open to them. This disposition is reflected in their present life anxiety and enthusiasm for further mobility. I would like to illustrate the internal tension experienced by young Karen with a story of a teenage man named Jor Pii. Jor Pii’s parents make a living from planting vegetables on a rented land plot and selling them in Mae Sot town’s morning market. The family has five children: four daughters and a son. The two elder daughters work in a bakery shop in Bangkok and occasionally send some money back to their parents. Jor Pii was 15 years old when I met him in August 2009. He had dropped out of a migrant school a half year earlier, explaining:

I am not good at study. I also think that to go to school is a waste of time for me. We are tangdao [Thai word for aliens]; we cannot use the education certificates for job applications in Thailand.

The prospect of limited post-school life opportunities encouraged Jor Pii to dream about a more fulfilling life elsewhere outside Mae Sot valley. After leaving school, he worked raising cattle for a local Thai employer and earned a small amount of money, but he disliked it. He asked his parents to invest in his plan to seek employment in Bangkok, like his sisters. Jor Pii finally managed to travel from Mae Sot to Bangkok which cost about 13,000 baht. He claimed the transport was actually operated by Thai authorities. Jor Pii got a job packaging at a fluorescent tube factory in Samut Prakarn Province, an industrial area east of Bangkok. Working there had for him both pleasant and unpleasant aspects. He spent a lot of money on hanging out with migrant friends he met there. The factory, however, required him to work eight to nine hours a day, six days a week, while his sleeping place was a crowded dormitory. After six months of work, he had an accident after work hours. His left foot was injured by broken fluorescent glass. The employer
denied responsibility for the case and accused him of being drunk and walking around on fragile commodities. Jor Pii’s injury was grave and he could not work for weeks. Finally, he decided to return back home.

Stories of Thoh and Jor Pii emphasises that there are limitations of living as vernacular refugees, and young Karen refugees are dissatisfied with the constraints such a life imposes. Both of them told me that they were interested in applying for overseas resettlement. Nevertheless, only Thoh was eligible for the programme, while Jor was not since Jor Pii’s family members were out of the UNHCR refugee registration system. After I left my fieldwork, I was informed that Thoh succeeded in submitting an application for resettlement and later moved to the United States, while Jor Pii made another trip to find work again in Bangkok.

From Karen youth’s point of view, resettlement seems like an attractive option because it has lucrative material advantages. An example come from a young Karen woman named Naree whom I met on her return to her parents’ house in late 2009. She left Bangkok in order to follow her resettlement application. Naree’s desire to go abroad was fostered by contacts with one of her close friends whom she knew in a refugee camp. That friend has been resettled in Buffalo, New York, the United States, since 2007. They often talk to each other on mobiles and on the chat programme which Naree can access at internet shops. Naree was quite impressed by what has happened to her resettled friend. She told me her motivation for going overseas:

My friend is studying the final year in a high school. She also works in a part-time job as an English-Burmese/Karen translator. I wish I can have a similar opportunity. It is good to be able to continue study and simultaneously earn some money. She occasionally sends money to her grandmother here (in the village).

This positive perception of resettlement seems a response to the limitations Karen youth have experienced. Before her return from Bangkok, Naree had worked as a
domestic worker for three years. According to her account, her work entailed the routine tasks of cleaning and taking care of two young children after school, with a 5,000 baht monthly salary. After working for three years, she got bored and saw no progress. She worried that she might be like her elder sister who had been in the same tiring jobs for more than ten years. When she heard how much money her friend in Buffalo could earn, she felt in a self-pitying mood. Three years before I met her, she had nearly succeeded in her resettlement application, but she later gave it up due to her mother's strong objection to the plan. She resubmitted her application again in 2009 and hoped it would easily pass the screening process.

Liminality and Mobility

Young Karen people's interest in joining the resettlement programme signifies that they give a high value to mobility as a way to alleviate the socio-economic constraints. The phenomenon of staff fluidity at Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) also reflects Karen youths' desire for mobility. An investigation of the process of MTC staff's entrance and departure stress this point. I gained access to details about fluctuations in MTC staff in a talk with Sophie, who has been working there since 1998, and was nominated as the head of the department of reproductive health.

For a number of young Karen, MTC has been targeted as an initial means of movement. MTC is a philanthropic organisation aiming to improve the health situation of poor Myanmar-origin patients living on both sides of the border. According to Sophie, MTC develops human resources for basic medical treatment through different medical training programmes, such as a two-and-a-half-year course for medics and an eight-month scheme for reproductive health workers. These programmes have attracted young displaced Karen to leave refugee camps or their impoverished communities, learn medical knowledge and practices, and get paid employment. Some trainees chose to work at MTC, instead of going back to camps or their origin villages at the end of training courses. The salary of MTC workers is not high, but it is better than other local options.
Sophie also commented that numerous young Karen refugees have managed to take advantage of the workplace as an opportunity to facilitate future mobility. MTC has recently encountered the constant outflow of staff, especially those staff departing to resettle in third countries. Certain MTC staff stayed there for a few years in order to get certificates and then went elsewhere. Some of them list their medical work at the clinic on the application for the resettlement programme and later gained resettlement in third countries. One in this group is Sophie's sister, who followed the same pattern of movement. She succeeded in the application for Australian resettlement and moved there in the beginning of 2009.

When I asked Sophie why young Karen staff at her workplace are so interested in the resettlement programme, she said:

Many of us were born in camps or worked here for long. We do not dare to go back to Myanmar. We are scared that the Burmese military understood us as the Karen insurgent's sympathisers, even we are not. Neither could we live with freedom in Thailand. Then moving to third countries with granted legal status sounds much better. Some friends were scared about how long MTC will have the right to remain here. One day, the Thai government might intervene and stop its operation.

Based on Sophie's account, Karen youths' interest in the resettlement programme seems to stem from a feeling of 'in-betweenness'. Turner (2004) and Hamshire et al (2008) define 'youth' as an interval phase between children and adulthood. Potential adulthood for displaced adolescents is, however, interrupted by flight and livelihood constraints. Their transition into maturity is not socially supported by their personal status; they remain dependents even after their physical bodies have changed into those of mature adults. Simultaneously, economic difficulties obstruct them from establishing a family in Thailand or living as peasants in a physically bounded community as their ancestors did. The Karen's displaced lives then resemble Victor Turner's notion of liminality—a phase in 'betwixt and between' and 'interstructural situation' (Turner 1967, 93).
I argue here that the liminal phase that young Karen vernacular refugees experience creates an interval of being in-between that prompts them to mobility. This liminal phase ambiguously affects Karen youth. On the one hand, they cannot proceed into maturity in conformity with their physical status and traditional or modern expectations. On the other hand, liminality opens up other possibilities and creates room for manoeuvre in the displacement situation. Resettlement appears as a resolution during this ambiguous interval—they can live neither in Thailand nor Myanmar and be neither this nor that. The in-betweenness drives Karen youth to imagine the formal resettlement option as positive change for the future. Several young displaced Karen make use of their liminal status as a springboard for achieving entry into adulthood. Resettlement receives great attention among the youth because it promises escape from the restrained life choices of Mae Sot valley.

This recalls Simon Turner's term for young Burundian Hutu refugees in a Tanzania refugee camp as 'liminal experts' (2004, 99). It is well recognised that young refugees are not universally dependent and vulnerable, but rather able to find their own way of managing adversity, healing stressful experiences and regaining strength (Boyden 2003; Hinton 2000; Turner 2006). I would like to supplement this with my own observation that young Karen refugees are also adept at appropriating 'mobility' to change things to their own advantage. The second generation of Karen refugees seriously assess their circumstances and attempt to overcome displacement-induced adversity. They ride on the wave of liminality to pursue mobile and migratory livelihood strategies. Naree, a Karen lady I mentioned in the previous section said that she hoped her resettlement can eventually benefit the well-being of her parents. When I did my fieldwork in Pae neighbourhoods, I heard some families received remittances from their children who have resettled overseas. There was a case of an old Karen woman who bought a small plot of land for housing, and her neighbour explained the transaction was financially supported by her daughters in the United States.
Karen Adults' Views of Resettlement

As mentioned above, not all displaced Karen unequivocally accept resettlement as their life solution. In scattered settlements of Pae areas, the divergent responses to the resettlement scheme clearly cut across the Karen generations, both in the general Karen community and at the family level. While Karen youth conceive of optimistic changes brought by resettlement, most Karen vernacular refugees of the middle-aged and above generations are somewhat ambivalent about moving abroad. They acknowledge the economic prosperity enabled by overseas mobility. However, such positive changes come at the cost of difficult adaptation and struggles in an unfamiliar society.

An informant named Dai—a Karen man in his late fifties—showed me that he is equivocal about the promising future of overseas resettlement. Dai knew several resettled Karen who had been his neighbours in a refugee camp in the past. These overseas contacts made him aware of the unpleasant aspects of resettlement. He decided to keep living on the borderland, despite having documents that would allow him into the programme. His reluctance arose from his conception of the alien physical and social environments of prospective resettlement societies. This attitude discouraged him from sending an application. He explained:

My friends in the US told me that they have a very long and terribly cold winter there. I don’t think I can tolerate such weather. Neither can I work in strictly disciplined workplaces like factories. I am 58 years old now; it is tough to stand at a machine for an eight-hour shift a day, five to six days a week.

From a broader perspective, I argue that the resettlement programme not only brings out generational differences in attitudes towards mobility, but implicates culturally embedded ways of identifying desired futures. External observers might find middle-aged Karens’ reluctance to make an overseas journey puzzling. The resettlement option seems to propose full-scale freedom and a legal status that is more secure than settlement through contingent relations. Why are not they
excited about the material gains and favourable prospects in third countries? What are middle-aged Karen’s understandings and expectation about their own future?

During the fieldwork, I personally encountered a situation in which a Karen family's members could not reach an agreement on their future path. A son of the family, at the age of 22, asked his parents to apply for the resettlement programme, but the idea was strongly rebuffed by his mother, whom I call here Ama. The tension related to the resettlement issue in the family existed a while before I met them. My integration into the family’s domestic sphere allowed me to construe the cultural forces in their rejection of resettlement. Middle-aged Karen's unwillingness to resettle elsewhere to a certain extent lies in their conception of human security and well-being. Here, I examine Ama’s personal circumstances to shed some light on how Karen people in her generation identify their life prospects.

At the time I did my fieldwork, Ama worked as an assistant in a Thai school’s kitchen that prepares lunch for students. The employment gives her 4,500 baht (150 $US) a month—an amount that she considers as supplementary income to her husband’s earning. During many months of close contact, I found that her daily schedule was quite busy. Her working conditions took a lot of her time and energy. She woke up early at four o’clock in the morning and started working in the school canteen kitchen. Her work usually kept her busy until two or three o’clock in the afternoon. After that, she took an afternoon nap and then cooked dinner for her family. After dinner, she went to bed around eight o’clock to be able to wake up early the next morning. She worked in this same schedule for six days a week. Sunday—her only work-off day—was the only day that she could enjoy chatting with Karen friends and neighbours.

Cheerful moments among hard-working Karen seem to take place in their sociality with familiar and like-minded people. I came to realise this when I joined a trip to a wedding of Ama’s cousin in a village on the Burmese side of the border, named Wahlae, in April 2009. The village is about 60 kilometres from where the family lives. Ae-thong and his wife took four days off and travelled along with two sons to
Myanmar. The bride’s mother is an aunt who brought up Ama and her siblings at an early age when their mother passed away. The wedding lasted for three days from preparation to the religious (Buddhist) wedding ritual. There were many details about the wedding ceremony that I do not have space to describe here, but what really struck me was Ama’s interaction with the event. She looked very happy when meeting and chatting with many relatives and friends. The event was an occasion where Ama could reunite with them. Some of Ama’s relatives to whom I was introduced included her father and her brother who travelled from her hometown village, and her mother’s siblings and their children.

Right here, I have many relatives and friends. Before I started working at the school two years ago, I was only a housewife. At that time, I used to come here frequently by public transportation, even when my husband was occupied by his work and could not join me. I used to have much fun here.

Ama’s contentment in the convivial company of her kin and friends was obvious during the wedding ceremony. After the groom and bride’s breakfast offered a meal to the Buddhist monks on the final day, a group of women including Ama set up a group dance on the ground floor of the host’s house. The type of dance imitates the popular Burmese performance named *zat pwe*, known in Karen as *za*. A few buckets were used as drums, and they sang many Pwo-Karen folk songs. Two or three persons danced along with a particular song, others sat around and cheered on their dancing friends. Ama danced twice and laughed at her friends’ dancing gestures. When one of the dancers made a lot of jumping dance—a difficult dancing movement—the others sitting around were more exhilarated. Ama brought out a 500 baht note and attached it to that friend’s T-shirt with a pin. She mentioned it was a reward for the friend’s dance, which considerably impressed her, though the amount of money equals one-eighth of her one-month salary. I would suggest that the reward more or less indicates how cheerful and happy Ama was on that occasion.
The way that Ama had cheerful moments reminds me of the Hpa-an Karen notion of well-being or aumao. In everyday language, aumao is used in a question sentence—aumao ah or how are you? The word signifies a sense of being healthy—physically and mentally. Furthermore, it also means being happy and joyful in being with loved parents, relatives and friends, and of participation in festive events or performances. I think it is the latter kind of well-being that Ama prefers to have. Moreover, it becomes the cultural force underlying her refusal of the resettlement option. Ama seems to have had a cheerful and exhilarating time in the four-day break of the family and friends reunion. She had nostalgia for the good old days when she had more free time and often was able to be there. She said she has a close relationship with her aunt. She thinks of her as her own mother. On the occasion of her cousin’s wedding, she was then quite enthusiastic to be a part of the large family clan.

Extended Socio-Cultural System

The story of Ama indicates that Karen sociality through kinship networks has been spatially extended across national boundaries. Hpa-an Karen’s world and communication are not bound to a small community as they were in the past. At the outbreak of civil war in the 1970s, Karen families and individuals dispersed toward Thailand. They have moved to and settled in different locations within the Mae Sot valley, either in Thailand or Myanmar. Ama’s aunt also fled fighting to a Thailand-based refugee camp and later settled at Wahlae—a village that is situated just across the river border. In the dispersal, Karen sociality has been subsequently stretched into cross-border patterns.
Karen desire for sociality with beloved and like-minded persons to a certain extent is fulfilled by the Karen extended socio-cultural system. Life-cycle events, like the wedding, serve as social spaces where family members can reunite. Karen people also experience happiness during sporadic meetings, such as when Ama's father visits her family several times a year. Besides her father, Ama's family always has relatives as guests at their small residence, such as Ae-thong's grandfather, Ae-thong's siblings and cousins, and Ama's own cousins. They come, stay overnight and have a meal with the family. Ama said that 'I am happy to have them here. I love to eat in a big group. I get more appetite to eat with many people'.

It is well acknowledged that Karen animist belief and practices have been a traditional impetus for Karen sociality. Anthropological literature has discussed Karen matrilineal kinship and its spirit cult; the ritual focus of the cult is the
ancestral spirit offering called *auxae*, at the household and clan group levels (Hamilton 1976; Hinton 1975; Iijima 1979). Yoko Hayami argues that the *auxae* ritual's essential character focuses on ‘sacrifice and communion’ (2004, 128). Sacrificing livestock as an offering is a form of mediation to propitiate ancestral spirits and solicit blessing for well-being and fertility. At the same time, the ritual also emphasises the communion between human beings and spirits and Karen intergenerational sociality, as it requires that all maternal relatives gather together in the ritual. As Ananda Rajah mentioned, the ritual entails a ‘connecting up’ (1984, 353) of generations in such a way that ‘the surviving parents call upon the souls of their deceased parents to heal and restore the well-being of the descendants’ (ibid., 352).

In a context of modern transformations and physical displacement, the chance of being with parents and receiving the foregoing type of blessing and well-being have decreased dramatically. Karen studies scholars clearly mention a decline in spirit ritual practitioners and the increasing conversion to other world religions in Thailand (Hayami 2004, Khwancheewan 2003). Similarly, a number of my Hpa-an Karen informants discontinued practices of spirit offering as they came under the influence of Buddhist or Christian orthodoxies. Furthermore, the armed conflict and its adversity discouraged some animist Karen from performing the practice, since people bound within a particular set of kinship ties were scattered in different locations. However, spatial dispersion does not completely dissolve the Karen kinship inclination. This type of Karen sociality is explicit among the Karen female adults. They have attempted to fulfill their cultural desire by participating in the social occasions that gather relatives together, like the wedding that Ama joined.

Under different forces of modernity, some Hpa-an Karen women still preserve their animist customs, especially the belief in ancestral spirits. In my supplementary fieldwork in July-September 2011, I found that a wife of my friend prepared a trip to her village inside Myanmar. The travel aimed at conducting a ritual for her
matrifocal ancestral spirits, but I had no chance to follow the case. In the same fieldwork, I also found that Ama actually kept conducting small animist practices. She made an offering to her maternal ancestral spirits, by putting small pieces of food over the head of her bed. Ama explained that she as the eldest daughter of the family is responsible for taking care of the family spirit.

I keep following what my mother did in offering to our ancestral spirits. It is for the sake of our family's well-being. I think it is compulsory, otherwise we might get sick, if the spirits get angry at our ignorance. I also ask my father to do regular offering on the behalf of me at home.

The personal story of Ama suggests that the Karen's well-being is engendered and fostered by the close connection between deceased parents, surviving parents and their descendants, or what I call here 'Karen spiritual commensality'. Some Hpa-an Karen women have retained ancestral spirit-related beliefs which are reproduced through small animist practices and social gatherings. In being displaced Karen in Mae Sot valley, they have attempted to maintain this traditional Karen approach to obtaining well-being. I argue that Karen spiritual commensality contributes to the resistance to resettlement among the first generation of Karen refugees. In Ama's case, commensality, experienced both as an obligation and a pleasure, might become too difficult to practise if she complied with the proposal to resettle overseas. Such a movement might be too extreme for Karen adults to accept.

The Karen adults' attitude toward mobility overseas reflects not only the way different generations think of their life prospects, but also the importance of generation-specific ties to place as a social force determining actions. While young Karen refugees formulate positive responses to the resettlement programme based on their dissatisfaction with the constraints and contingencies of life in the borderlands, Karen adults' affiliation with that same local lifeworld shapes their disposition as sceptics towards the journey overseas. Their generation questions and does not immediately embrace resettlement—the so-called durable solution to displacement, because such a future as they imagine it conflicts with the
attainment of wellbeing through commensality with the spirits, kin and consociates. If indeed they do not move along with their children, the potential opening up of new transnational connections would be an intriguing terrain of investigation for further study.

Reengaging with Myanmar

At the time of writing this chapter (May 2012), the prospect of Karen refugees' return to their country of origin is ripe for discussion, as is the notion of what 'repatriation' might mean. Repatriation is depicted as return to home or status quo, an idea heavily imbued with the persistent 'sedentary bias' (Bakewell 2008) in representations of durable solutions. However, it is an illusion that persons remaining on the borderland and preferring like-minded sociality will be prompt to endorse the idea. Rather than assuming all Karen refugees want to go 'home', the section asks to what extent Karen vernacular refugees have interacted with their country of origin in the past decade. It explores the decision some have made to again sink roots in their country of origin as a variety of 'reengagement' constrained by opportunities available locally and in their homeland.

Recently, Karen contact and connection with their country of origin have tremendously depended on the changing geopolitics on the Burmese side of the border. Most lowland areas in Karen state since the late 1990s have been under the shared control of the Burmese military and the DKBA. The Burmese military government unofficially has permitted the DKBA leaders to run businesses along the border, as a reward for their political allegiance in fighting against the KNU. In general, there has been no fatal armed fighting; guerrilla warfare has been limited to only mountainous and forested areas. Consequently, since the beginning of 21st century, Karen refugees and those remaining at home can contact and travel to visit each other. During my fieldwork, I found that several Karen informants in Mae Sot town occasionally have relatives visiting from Karen State. At the same time, some of them recently travelled to Karen state to attend some religious ceremonies.
and visit their relatives. I even found a Karen man who temporarily returned to his home in Karen State to help his parents rebuild a new house.

In the present political context, Karen families' return to the Burmese side of the border is not uncommon, but these moves have been shaped by the political particularities of the borderlands region. The largest movement back across the border was the result of a great deal of persuasion by DKBA for people to return. I found several new villages along the border where Karen repatriates reside. These new residences are not their home villages; they are just situated on the Burmese side of Mae Sot valley (eastern side of Dawna Range). These villages were mostly established and have been controlled by the DKBA; some also became locations of the DKBA battalions. One of the large settlements I visited is Shwe Khoko (literally: golden rain tree). Shwe Khoko in 2009 had about 4,000 inhabitants, and a part of the village area is the 999 army division of the DKBA.31

The DKBA, at that time, encouraged displaced Karen to leave Thailand and settle in Shwe Khoko with a land offer. A Karen informant in the settlement said that some Karen refugees moved to Shwe Khoko after the claimed DKBA raid and arson attack on a Karen refugee camp. He explained that he and other friends decided to settle there because the DKBA provided tenured possession of land for cultivation to Karen returnees. The campaign succeeded to a certain extent; hundreds of Karen refugees deliberately went back to the Burmese side of the border and got rewarded with farming land. The group of returnees ended their refugeehood and became Shwe Khoko residents and farmers.

Geographically, the location of Shwe Khoko gives advantage to Karen farmers living there. The village is opposite a village on the Thai side of the border, named Wangpha. They have access to an agricultural products market in Thailand, just

31 In 2010, Myanmar's military government tried to incorporate numerous armed ethnic groups into a single border guard force. The DKBA agreed to the requirement and today become a Border Guard Force (BGF) subordinate to the regional Burmese military commanders, except DKBA troops of Brigade 5 that opposed the group's decision.
across the river border. Transport of bumper harvests to merchants in Mae Sot town is then quite easy. Producers load their products in boats to cross the river. At Wangpha, some merchants wait to buy farm produce and then use trucks to transfer it from the border to their warehouses. To reduce the cost of transport, many farmers do their transaction through middle merchants living either on Thai or Burmese side of the border. These middlemen earn margins from differences in the products' purchase and sale price.

The same informant observed that the departure from Thailand-based refugee camps to Shwe Khoko has several advantages. According to this man, returnees' households have better access to resources and security of residency. On arrival, he received a free housing plot and 30 acres of arable land which he uses for planting corn and mungbeans. Living in Shwe Khoko means that his life is more self-reliant. He can earn his living from agricultural production; his family greatly depends on this annual income. The disadvantages of living there mainly come from the demands of the DKBA, which can include requests for free labour, military conscription of young men and arbitrary taxes. However, he finds that benefits of being a Shwe Khoko resident outweigh those derived from refugee camps.

The example of Karen movement to Shwe Khoko indicates that displaced Karen have commenced to consider and trial reengagement with Myanmar. They have actively learned about the major changes that have happened there, and have experimented with reconnecting with their country of origin. Karen refugees carefully assessed conditions offered in the choice of return before making a decision. Some displaced Hpa-an Karen grasped the opportunity and resources offered by the DKBA on the Burmese side of the borderland, while still maintaining a connection with the Thai market. To date their movement has not gone as far as Hpa-an plain because there is no access to markets there. At present, market-oriented production such as in farming is impossible amidst constraints imposed by the collapsed Burmese economy. These Karen refugees' return to Myanmar then
is not 'repatriation' in the sense of a return home, but rather onward mobility to reengage with the home country.

**Mobility in Practical Solutions**

The Karen refugees' onward mobility described above reveals complexities embedded in the phenomenon of Karen displacement. Karen forced migration is not just a problem of political persecution and conflict aversion, but has been inextricably intertwined with persistent deprivations of social and economic rights in the broader Burmese society. While there has been a prospect of things improving toward peace during 2010-2012, I have wondered how Karen refugee might embrace repatriation when reconstruction in the state of origin has not yet progressed. The lowland area in the middle of Karen State has had no armed conflict and political persecution for a decade, but for many Hpa-an Karen it remains socially and economically unattractive to return there.

What I guess is that Karen prospects might be found in increasingly complicated patterns of mobility, rather than the termination of movement according to a simple model of repatriation. Hpa-an Karen’s social lives will engage more in transnational spaces. Inge Brees (2010) argued that refugees from Myanmar are active in transnational engagements, predominantly as remittance senders. I would add that Karen refugees engage in transnationalism not only in terms of carrying materials across national boundaries, but Karen individuals themselves have been involved in multi-sited social lifeways. I present here a case study of how a Karen individual has reengaged with his country of origin and simultaneously created social networks across national boundaries.

Ako is a Karen man who grew up as an orphan. His parents died in the civil war within Karen State in the late 1970s. As a 13-year-old boy, Ako fled from his home village to take refuge with employers in Thailand. After 22 years of work in Mae Sot town, Ako currently lives in Myawaddy, a Burmese border business town, which is
just opposite Mae Sot town. He earns a living from the operation of an inter-town transport service. The business involves carrying people and commodities between Myawaddy—a gateway town to Thailand—and Hpa-an—the capital of Karen State. The vehicle he uses is a mid-size pickup with two-story seating on its rear body. Making the journey every other day, Ako’s mini truck is one of an estimated more than 200 pickup trucks providing public transport between the two towns.

Ako’s return to Myawaddy in 2004 was a thoughtful movement which was carried out with political sensitivity. He moved there with two Hpa-an Karen friends; all of them realised the economic opportunity in the booming Myawaddy economy. The three Karen men received the DKBA’s permission to be public transport operators on the Myawaddy–Hpa-an route. Ako relied on his family’s saving to accomplish this planned move. Ako bought a second-hand pickup from Thai side of the border and a small plot of land in Myawaddy where he built a small wooden house. He conceded that to do this business required a lot of effort dealing with several constraints in the military- and warlord-controlled society. First, he sought Burmese car registration by paying several hundred thousand kyat of bribe to local authorities to get a registration plate. Car registration is something that car owners in Myanmar must pay for, because of the Burmese government’s strict control of private car ownership. Ako and other public transport operators also have to pay two hundred thousand kyat per month to the influential DKBA for the concession.
Ako and his wife found that their relocation to Myawaddy and the transport business quite satisfactory. Three assistants were employed by the family to staff the business; a Burmese man as the driver, and two Karen men as porters of luggage and other cargo. The team makes the six to eight hours drive to Hpa-an, stays overnight there and drives back to Myawaddy on the next day. The three assistants sometimes carry out the business by themselves, if the car owner is occupied by other jobs. Ako has discovered that the operation of inter-town transport is a profitable career. The passenger fee is 5,000 kyat per person; other freight items, which can be a box, a motorcycle or even a chicken cage, are charged by shape and size. On average, Ako earns 100,000 kyat per two-day trip in the dry season, when people most often travel back and forth between Myanmar and...
Thailand. By contrast, the income might drop to one fourth of that in the rainy season.

Close scrutiny of Ako's personal life reveals that his family has become intensively engaged in transnational spaces. While the family resides in Myawaddy, his eldest daughter still studies at a migrant school in Mae Sot town. The girl travels to stay with her parents in Myawaddy during the school break. Weekly, Ako or his wife visits the daughter and gives her pocket money. Meanwhile, their frequent trip to Mae Sot town is also a part of the business of money transfer. The inter-town mini trucks have been an important channel which young Karen working elsewhere in Thailand use to send home remittances. Ako acts as an agent in this money transfer service. Senders transfer money through the Thai banking system into Ako's bank account. He has owned the account since he worked with his Thai ex-employer. After the transfer, senders inform Ako via mobile phone. Then he goes to Mae Sot to withdraw the money. The remittances are changed into Burmese currency (kyat) and then carried in the pick-up to be handed over at the doors of receivers in Hpa-an Plain. Ako as agent charges a transaction cost of five percent of the total transferred amount.

Ako's relocation to Myawaddy not only appears as an example of transnational mobility, but also strengthens his ties with Karen sociality. The move is valuable; it gives him both material benefits and strengthens his kinship network. On one trip to Hpa-an that I joined, Ako introduced me to some of his relatives. Although he was away in Thailand for long time, he maintains close relationships with them. One of his important kin is his elder sister. On the way back to Myawaddy, Ako stopped his pickup at his sister's house. He loaded up a sack of rice and told me that he got it free for his sister cultivates rice paddy. Rice is actually given in exchange for free transport and delivery of consumable commodities from Myawaddy to his sister's grocery shop in Hpa-an. The exchanges are by implication livelihood earning strategies by members of a family with translocal networks and relationships.
In *Home alone?: a review of relationship between repatriation, mobility and durable solutions for refugees*, Katy Long suggests that there is a need for a paradigmatic shift to integrate mobile and migratory strategies into understandings and international approaches to repatriation and reconstruction as durable solutions to refugees. Based on Castles (2003), Nyberg-Sorensen (2004) and Van Hear (2006)'s discussion on transnational mobility as a de facto solution for forced displacement, Long argues that mobility can play an important role in promoting the process of repatriation and reconstruction. Refugees who return to post-conflict states usually develop various forms of mobile and migratory livelihood strategies rather than simply return, and these strategies can contribute to reconstruction prospects.

Following the argument, we should understand Ako's movements as representative of a complex mixed flow which cannot be easily distinguished into voluntary/involuntary or forced/economic migration. Beyond the refugee-migrant nexus, such forms of mobility are not incompatible with the existing framework of durable solutions. In the context of a broader social transformation of Mae Sot valley, Ako's expeditions and his miscellaneous assortment of cross-border practices entail potential socio-economic and political contributions which suggest that mobility can reinvigorate refugee repatriation and reconstruction of fragile circumstances both in Karen State and Myanmar in general. Within partial changes in Myanmar in the past decade, refugee individuals such as Ako have integrated mobility into their reengagement with Myanmar. His specific case, the maintenance of translocal kin exchanges and the transport and cross-border money transfer business, significantly underpins benefits to Karen people on both sides of the border and provides one indication of how refugee mobility might figure in the process of Myanmar's post-conflict reconstruction.
Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that Hpa-an Karen refugees diligently read life alternatives proposed by surrounding environments, and interact with them according to their life status, social circumstances and hopes for the future. In embracing the resettlement programme, young Karen are attracted to movement overseas for they portray their current lives as self-settled refugees as being fraught with limitations. Their earnest acceptance of resettlement to third countries reflects both their dissatisfaction with their present circumstances and the prospect that movement holds as an expedient means of entering maturity. In contrast, a number of Karen adults are ambivalent about and hesitate over the radical form of movement. In the meantime, many have developed extended socio-cultural system on the Thailand-Myanmar border to connect themselves with the past and sketch out a desired prospective life. Hpa-an Karen people remaining on the borderland have observed changes unfolding in their country of origin and have experimented with novel forms of repatriation and reengagement.

To understand the life prospects of displaced Karen people requires incorporating what they have been practising into the consideration. Karen vernacular refugees are not passively waiting for sustainable solutions to their displacement, but have actively developed practical avenues into an array of potential post-refugee futures. The chapter illustrates case studies of displaced Hpa-an Karen who embrace translocal and transnational practices as a way of making a living. Mobile and multi-sited livelihood strategies, among Hpa-an Karen, go beyond the traditional division between forced and economic-induced migration. Furthermore, their mobility seems to have potential role in supporting future repatriation and the time-consuming process of post-conflict reconstruction of their homeland in Myanmar.
Conclusion

This thesis is concerned with a group of Karen self-settled refugees living in a border town of Thailand and their non-institutional approach to protection. This study suggests that the modern bureaucratic definition of the refugee is inadequate to account for the actual experiences of displacement and refuge-seeking in this context. Rather than considering refugees as 'a specific social category and legal problem' (Malkki 1992, 497-8), it investigates processes of refugees' cross-border mobility and their passages through a continuum of displacement and emplacement experiences as informed by locally relevant conceptions of 'protection'. Drawing upon literature on the history of Thai refugee reception, Karen studies, forced migration studies and critical refugee studies, this thesis explores alternative non-institutionalised modalities of refuge that displaced persons may opt for, outside the norms of the international system of refugee reception. It focuses on how Karen refugees can secure informal forms of protection, which are constituted in the specific historical and socio-cultural circumstances of the Thailand-Myanmar borderland.

This research argues that the phenomenon of refugees' adopting shelter informally, instead of in officially designated camps, can be illuminated by the concept of 'vernacular refugees'. The term vernacular refugee emphasises locally contextualised experiences of refuge in contrast to the modern idea of the refugee which is imbued with a discourse of transcendent rights. It reveals that people across the globe actually seek and obtain refuge not only in reference to the universal doctrine of refugee rights, but also in the 'conjunctural dialectics of a universal ethos and particular commitment' (Werbner 2010, 34). The notion vernacular refugee has been coined to capture the multiple local and inter-cultural idioms through which experiences of displacement and refuge are made
meaningful and acted upon. The concept recognises the historically constructed, contingent, hierarchical, empathic, and negotiated dimensions of the relationships between refuge-seekers and those who offer hospitality. It also incorporates the cultural schema and sensibilities that practically compel displacement, shape mobility and infuse efforts to secure safety, belonging and emplacement in a new home.

The displacement of Hpa-an Karen from their homeland in Karen State, Myanmar occurred in oppressive conditions of civil war and maladministration, mediated through their subjective and culturally specific understanding of lives encountering 'suffering'. Political and socio-economic difficulties in Hpa-an rendered life corporeally and materially unendurable. The displacement, however, was not prompted by a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted' (UNHCR, 2012), but by idiomatic assessments of arbitrary and cruel treatment, ideals of normalcy, and expectations for compassion. Karen people's self-conceptions as 'sufferers' compelled departures from their homeland and opened vistas onto potential sites and modalities for seeking refuge. Insurgent liberated zones, refugee camps and Thai border villages were considered as preferred shelter in different periods of time. The vernacular identification that informed their search for refuge was discrepant with the legal and institutional category of refugees. Yet as an identity which was intelligible inter-culturally within Thai-Karen social networks that traversed the political border, protection could be obtained in informal and non-standard ways among the local population, despite the Thai government's preferred policy approach of containing border-crossing refugees in strictly regulated camps.

Self-settlement is best understood as a refuge space which is embedded in local social relations and cultural understandings. Self-settled refugees, living within varying shades of local integration, do not bear the institutionalised spatial, documentary or de jure markings of the refugee as defined by the international refugee protection regime. Self-settlement represents a pattern of refuge and
protection that is constituted by everyday interactions between host locals and refugees. Seeking protection and obtaining hospitality are cultural practices that are materialised through the social networks of the borderlands. Self-settled Karen refugees embody a socially and culturally-embedded method of refuge-seeking, which generally is invisible to the eyes of international and host authorities. At the same time, it loosens the grip of legal entitlements under which Karen refugees may in theory take shelter.

To move beyond the concealment of refugees engendered by institutional approaches and rights discourses, this thesis reveals that refugees are capable of seeking protection in mundane and daily aspects of social life, such as informal employment or residence arranged through local authorities. Working as hired labour and tenant farmers for local employers, Karen engage not only in economic relations, imbued with calculative rationality and utilitarianism. Simultaneously, the exchanges between refugee labourers and host employers also embody patron-client ties that undocumented refugees can draw upon to secure shelter informally. These patron-client relationships, littered with affect, obligation and compulsion, serve as a socially constructed form of shelter. The so-called 'economic' field offers promising grounds for seeking refuge and obtaining protection. Similarly informal and invisible forms of shelter have developed relationally between Thai village administrators and Karen refugees. Negotiated political arrangements at the local level have integrated the latter residentially into local administrative units, and provided them a certain extent of freedom and rights.

These relationally-secured forms of refuge and hospitality demonstrate that access to protection is actually an ongoing process rather than a definitive or durable solution to displacement situations. Physical shelter and relative access to freedom and security obtained by Hpa-an Karen are contingent upon local host-refugee negotiations. The quality of the relationships developed between Thai employers and Karen workers, and between Thai village leaders and Karen residents, significantly determine possibilities and degrees of protection. These informal
spaces of refuge can be an expedient strategy for dealing with immediate impacts of forced displacement before the arrival of humanitarian relief agencies. However, if refugees want to maintain this form of refuge in intermediate and long-term stages, they must be able to read its dynamics and respond to them with continuous colloquy and exchanges. Refuge and hospitality are provisional and conditional: the status of being a self-settled refugee is always in the process of making.

Furthermore, this informal shelter is assembled out of relations of social hierarchy and unequal power; to maintain refuge necessarily requires strategies of dealing with asymmetric power relations. Vernacular refugees’ lives are situated in ambiguous, intermittent settings and ambivalent distinctions between genuine hospitality, compelling obligation and implicit coercion. The provision and acquisition of residential permission for refugees in this border domain fundamentally have relied on relations of mutual trust and reciprocity, rather than on clear-cut written rules. Such contingent access to care and protection impels refugees to develop practical strategies and dispositions to maintain the conditions of unofficial settlement. These strategies include a diligent work ethic, reciprocal obligations, individual self-discipline, collective self-regulation, and voluntary contributions to local communities. Persevering with these practical strategies is necessary for sustaining mutual trust and good will in the host-refugee relationship.

In addition to cultivating social relations of material protection, vernacular approaches to refuge-seeking also entail processes of ‘refugee emplacement’ (Korac 2009, 37). A criticism potentially applying to both informal and formal reception systems is that they may support refugees ‘being “in”, but not being “of” the space they physically occupy’ (Bauman 2002, 344). Taking asylum in the specific geo-political and socio-economic setting of the Thai-Myanmar borderlands, Hpa-an Karen refugees have endeavoured to create a sense of belonging to the place they currently inhabit. The thesis discusses several Karen cultural, ritual and
festive practices that exemplify the attempt to convert displacement into re-emplacement.

A sense of belonging is created in rituals and activities that embody a quest for wellbeing. For Hpa-an Karen, wellbeing means not only physical safety and material access, but also the attainment of body-soul balance. They seek this distinct form of wellbeing through recourse to traditional resources. In their wrist-tying ceremony, Hpa-an Karen interact with ritual objects infused with metaphoric power to acquire their auspicious efficacy and achieve wellbeing. Buddhist Karen practitioners also seek protection from powerful spiritual beings, redeploying in their new place of residence religious beliefs and practices from their pre-exile existence. Furthermore, individuals maintain contact with kin and new neighbours in festive events and in cross-border social networks. The kind of sociality among like-minded persons becomes an integral part of the feeling of being in and of place.

Through devotion to Buddhist institutions and practices, displaced Karen develop a sense of being at home in their new place. Hpa-an Karen have negotiated with powerful local and national actors to found monasteries in their distinctive Buddhist tradition that serve as centres for accessing spiritual power, merit-making and festive sociality. Their religious practices exemplify the 're)'-production of locality' in a spatially extended mode. Buddhist Karen re-centre themselves cosmologically in their new settlement around symbolic axis-mundi and protector deities, appropriating their supernatural power for protection. Karen refugees carry out religious practices across geographical and national boundaries in order to cultivate a sense of sanctity, security and community. Although most of them live in impoverished conditions, their investments in religious institutions and rites are constructive practices that give them a sense of being at home.

Unquestionably, self-settlement, as a socially contingent mode of refuge-seeking, is not a definitive, durable or desirable solution for all refugee individuals. The limitations of vernacular refugeedom prompt many to include onward mobility
into their life itineraries after displacement. On the one hand, some of the second generation of Karen refugees find the conditions of contingent refuge to be unendurable, a state of suspension between more appealing places and social statuses. Their dissatisfaction with liminality drives them to conceive of resettlement to third countries as a positive alternative for their futures. On the other hand, some displaced Hpa-an Karen have tried to re-immerse themselves in their country of origin. Their pattern of reengagement with Myanmar, which recently has been undergoing positive political changes, are representative of experimental and complicated patterns of mobility that point the way to alternative prospects for post-refugee existence other than making a return in a simple mode of repatriation. Mobile and multi-sited livelihood strategies promise to be a predominant feature of Hpa-an Karen future prospects. Their tentative actions in these directions have the potential to support future repatriation and the post-conflict reconstruction of their homeland in the Hpa-an plain.

This study of Karen refugees through the framework of vernacular refugees makes scholarly contributions in three relevant areas. First, this research reveals multifarious modes of shelter in a Thai refugee reception context. Studies focussing on legal and state-centred policy arrangements for refugees are inadequate to comprehend actual practices of refuge and protection. Alongside the official camp system, unknown numbers of displaced Karen prefer to find refuge in a non-institutional 'self-settlement' approach. This is not to argue that displaced persons' lives are unrestrained by legal measures of the host state. Rather, the Thai reception order unleashes 'conjunctural dialectics' between an officially authorised humanitarian system and locally specific arrangements of refuge. This conjuncture allows a numbers of Karen refugees to disregard formal categories and mechanisms of support and develop their own forms of shelter and protection which are socially constructed in the borderland context.

Second, the examination of vernacular refugees in this thesis discloses that 'displacement' is dynamic and closely connected with other social transformations.
A sense of displacement—which is actually a self-perception rather than a fixed category—can come to resolution in new modes of emplacement and senses of belonging. Moreover, displacement entails a processual condition of humans on the move, as re-emplaced persons adopt onward mobility for desired prospects elsewhere. The array of prospects for 'post-refugee' status is not limited to institutionally favoured durable solutions like repatriation, local integration and resettlement to third countries. Rather their futures can be encompassed by a wide range of prospects, including strong attachment to receiving societies under complicated and ambiguous forms of legal status, experimental reengagement with homelands, as well as involvement in mobile and diversifed livelihoods across translocal and transnational spaces. These social practices are potential issues for future research on Karen refugees.

Finally, this thesis connects Karen studies to broader theories in social sciences, especially those on intercultural relations, place-making, mobility and migration. It moves away from framings of Karen ethnic identity articulated through scenarios of isolation, resistance, continuity and disjuncture, and shifts toward a conceptualisation of Karen social and cultural identities that are dynamically constituted in a variety of cross-cultural interactions. The Karen identities discussed here elude universal, institutional or national categorical capture, yet are historically constituted and shaped through interaction with other cultures, and modern social forces, such as the market economy, nation-state ideology and transcendent religions. This approach allows us to grasp the dynamic and heterogeneous characteristics of the socio-cultural practices through which Karen constitute and emplace themselves, and make themselves known to the wider world. Extended to the study of ethnic identities in other national and transnational contexts, this approach points to how anthropological analysis can be unbound from the tropes of subjugation, spatial containment and formalist classification (Taylor 2011, 34) that in many places and in pervasive ways have constrained the study of so-called minoritarian peoples such as the Karen.
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