

## **Karen Imaginary of suffering in relation to Burmese and Thai history : conflict, State, non-state segmenting and splitting on religion, community etc.**

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This paper is an attempt to explore the imaginary of the Karen people who have lived in between the history Thailand and Burma for centuries. The fifty-six years of ethnic war in Burma has been imprinted on the Karen and and labeled them as rebels Due to the politics of the modern nation - state formation, the Karen people have been marginalized and has become the non state subject. In order to survive the history the Karen has to be in to segment, splitting their religion, their community in order to create their space of existence. The Karen cultural producers have attempted to preserve their ways of life by diversifying their history so it can survive the discrimination.

One of the most sophisticated and powerful cultural heritages that humans have ever invented is language. Through language's signs, sounds and gestures, human beings are able to communicate beyond space and time. Through these abstract invented symbols humans can transfer and transmit knowledge throughout generations. Through intangible cultural artifacts human are able to understand each other across the globe and around the world from age to age, from generation to generation. In a primitive small clan society, the elders pass on their beliefs and ways of life to the new generation by storytelling, legendary imagination etc., which is a manifestation and representation of language in different forms. For the modern nation, language has the possibility of becoming a powerful tool for nation-state building and nation-state preserving. Therefore, language is in itself a power. (Bourdieu, 2005)

Language has many different potentials for power according to its different cultural practices and social organizations. It has active forces and energies to form or to unite human imagination, even to the extent that it could turn creative thought into an imagined nation or community. (Anderson,1991) such as one nation, one language. "Ba-

hasa Jeeva Bangsa" in the case of the Malaysian government's strategy of building their nation state. (Isager,2000) Therefore, in many places around the world, minority and indigenous languages are gradually disappearing due to the imbalance of power relations and the discrimination against the minority cultural language, both ancient strategy<sup>1</sup> and modern one.

In this paper, I would like to explore the creativity of a small group of people who live in the borderland of Thailand and Burma, who are constantly threatened by the powerful cultural group of linguistic oppression, who have been pushed around between two linguistic states: the Karen people. The Karen people have no nation of their own, have no nationality of their own in space of nation state apparatus, yet have creatively written their own language in four or more different ways as their tactic of linguistic preservation.

### **The Karen People: as Borderlanders**

The Karen people have been living in the borderland regions of different cultures throughout many countries. In Karen legend, they saw the world before the creation of the earth<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategy here I use according to the definition of Michel de Certeau, which he defined as a means of domination .

<sup>2</sup> The interview with an old Karen man who lives in the tool hill of kwai k'bau - he believes that he has remnant serriael of the flood of the world since Noon's time (Genesis 1:20) he form a umprunity of 500 tamiliys, practicing eclectic religious believe, mix between karen's traditional belief (animism) Bhudism,and Christianity. They have constructed their identity through legend of the world.

The origin of the Karen people is from the great desert in Gobi<sup>3</sup>. (Ronard,1980) They believe when a person is dehumanized to the edge of being human, such a person will strive for the best to regain their being. In many occasions, such a person is able to bring out what is the best of humanity. The Karen people have been pushed to the edge of being human in and during many different political states. They have been placed in the margins where the human conditions were so difficult to endure - placed against a wall of nothingness. Therefore, they had to struggle and strive for the best that they could be.

During the colonial stage of Western power in Burma, the Karen people took sides with the British. It was the political strategy of division and rule, and the Karen were used as the power against the Burmese rulers to control a large area along Burman-Siam border. In 1947 the new independent state of Burma recognized the area as Karen but the Karen themselves did not think the constitution granted them sufficient autonomy or adequate territorial holdings. (Schrock, 1970) One year later, in response to the Burmese government, the Karen mobilized and formed the **Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO)** in order to seize control of disputed areas and promote more autonomy for the Karen states.

Revolt soon broke out and a prolonged conflict was inevitable given the tenuous Burmese/ Karen relations over the past century. In 1952, the Karen declared an independent state consisting of the Swaleen area and several adjacent districts. (Schrock, 1970: 804) Today the KNDO (now changed to **KNU = Karen National Union**) still remains a force in Burma promoting the recognition of autonomy for the Karen. Currently thousands of Karen live in refugee camps along the Burmese border. Some of them get resettled into other countries, mainly the USA, Australia and various European countries.

## People with history

The construction and re-construction of Karen history can be viewed as a political economy of meanings. The Karen do not have their own world, the world belongs to “Mu qa”<sup>4</sup>. They don’t have their own land, the land belongs to Ywa. The Karen don’t have their own time – the time belongs to the sun and the moon. And they don’t even own themselves, this belongs to the guardians of the Gods. From a standpoint of ancient Karen mythology, nothing belongs to them. The only thing that the Karen own is their ability to take action.

This ability and desire for action has manifested itself through different myths and stories. Stories such as the tale of the Orphan and the King - Hpo qai and Cau Pa. Hpo qai had been deprived of all his rights of land cultivation by the King Cau Pa, who only allowed him to plant on a cliff of rocks. Undeterred, Hpo Qai worked very hard to develop the land, cutting different trees to put onto the rock face, borrowing soil from his neighbors and rice grain from his friends. With great perseverance, toil, and help from the Gods eventually he was able to grow on the rocks and was very successful. He became a famous local hero.

The Orphan character is very prominent in Karen mythology and history. This is the way they understand themselves – as coming from nothing and having to take action to create themselves. Another story of an orphan surmounting adversity is the tale of Tiloola. Tiloola was orphaned at a young age and lived with his Aunt. He had a big appetite and his aunt decided she could not feed him anymore, so Tiloola was cast out of her house. Alone and with nothing, Tiloola started his solitary journey. But along the way he met some friends, each one personifications of the abstract: wide ears, long hands, tall teeth, hotter than

<sup>3</sup> The Karen believe 2010 to be their year 2749. This means that they look to BC 739 as the year of their founding. In their legends Karen speak of coming from the land of “Thibi Kawbi” which some have thought may indicate Tibet and the Gobi desert. Some Karen oral traditions refer to crossing a river of “running sand” as an important event in their history. There are Chinese sources which refer to the Gobi Desert as the “river of sand,” and it is probable that the Karen originated in an area bordering Tibet. They crossed the Gobi Desert into China, and gradually made their way into the mountainous areas of Burma. In ancient times most of Thailand’s Karen came over the eastern borders of Burma, and this is still true today. The first Karen most likely immigrated to Thailand before the Thai, and just after the Mon Khmers. Today almost all of Thailand’s Karen live in the western part of the country along the shared border with Burma.(Roland,1981)

<sup>4</sup> “Mu qa” is the good deity of the Karen myth. It is a different species of spirit than “ta mu qa” which is like ghost. Normally this ghost for the Karen is a bad spirit

fire, cooler than water, heavier than rock, lighter than wool, and sharper than a knife. His friends all traveled with him on his journey, and Tiloola was able to use their superhuman abilities along the way. If he wanted to catch some fish to eat he put the long teeth into the stream to stop the water and collect the fish. And if he had no fire to cook the fish he used his friend hotter than fire. During storms and strong winds he used heavier than rock to keep him grounded and protected. And when the drums of war were heard he used long hands to stretch out to take his enemies weapons, and big ears to listen to the enemies' plans from afar. So even though Tiloola was a "nobody", a marginalized orphan with not one possession, he was able to live in this world successfully and be protected by his friends.

The actual history that we have of the Karen people comes from many different sources – primarily oral traditions and social memory (the Tha), and the interpretation and documentation of history by the Missionaries during the Colonial period. What we know is that the Karen have been wandering around from the Running Sand region in the Gobi desert down to the bank of the Salawin River since time memorial. Always moving around and living in different mountain regions and plains. Since the start of the Burmese Kingdom, the Karen people have been pushed into the frontier and border regions, becoming people in-between kingdoms (the Burmese and Mon). They have been marginalized from civilization, but always hoping to regain their right in the world.

When the colonial era began the British aim was to develop and conquer the "uncivilized" kingdom: a "white man's burden" ideology, and also a strategy of divide and rule. When the British came into power they re-shuffled the power structure, giving equal rights to different ethnic nationalities. With the help of the British, Karen became the ethnic nationality, not a minority, of the Union of Burma. Many Karen joined the military, many holding important positions in the British Army. They learnt the process of democracy and developed a political consciousness about themselves and their society. The colonial period thus created a new space for the development of Karen history.

The first American and British missionaries arrived in Burma in the early 1800s, marking an important development in Karen cultural development and history. Through the study of the Christian Bible, the Karen re-discovered

myths from their "Lost Golden Book". the collection of wisdom that God had given to all of their people which had been lost. The missionaries were aware of the connection and let the Karen know that the bible "was their book." The Karen transfigured different traditional deities into concepts found in the Bible. In certain periods of history, the Karen even believed that they were one of the lost tribes of Israel. (*refer to Feuilles missionaries*) (*how the missionaries presence shaped Karen history*)

The Karen have a long history of social suffering, a history as long as it's ancient myths. As stated earlier, one of the only things that Karens own is their ability to take action. Making connections has been one of the most important ways for the Karen to utilize their ability for action. From the beginning the Karen never had social rituals that united the community (a collective spirit), only rituals that connected individual families. So they developed religion, language and song that would connect them. Connecting and developing Christianity also helped them to develop a bigger and stronger social network. Connecting with the British Army helped them to gain power, something they were able to obtain through their characteristics of honesty, loyalty and hard-work that the British admired. The Burmese were fervently loyal to the British, even more loyal than many of the British troupes who betrayed their own army and fought on the side of the Japanese.

When the British left Burma they left the Karen with a sense of abandonment and an enormous debt left unpaid for all of their loyalty and lives lost fighting the British war. The Karen had to learn to stand on their own again and find another system of connection to a different group of people. Now that the Burmese dictatorship was back in power, and the country was left with a new regime lacking widespread popular legitimacy, the Karen moved out of the cities and into the border regions. They developed their religious structures, education and land. They formed a new state called Kawthaoolei (free state). And this new state created an imagined community and united the Karen, starting the process of re-connection within their community. At the same time they started to connect with democratic societies outside of Burma such as the United States. In 1949 a sixty-two-year-old revolutionary period commenced where the major aspect of Karen culture became the science of war. This has become the main pre-occupation in the lives of the

Karen, up until the present time.

After the fall of Manerplaw<sup>5</sup>, the capital of the revolutionary state, the majority of the Karen people had to move into refugee camps on the Thai border to avoid forced labor, rape, starvation and death in the hands of the Burmese military. This created a new aspect in the history of the Karen, as they crossed over into the camps. The Karen people saw the refugee camp as an opportunity for new opportunities and connections - with the UN, NGOs and other ethnic minorities - to improve the health, education and quality of life (including the right for children to play). The refugee camp became a space of transformation, a temporary shelter that was in many ways better than home. In the Karen state there was no community like the big community in the refugee camp. It was like creating a new city, and they had the experience of living together with a diversity of cultures and histories. The refugee camp is the new face of the history of the Karen people. They are able to practice their culture, religions and political views freely. The composition of the camp extended their cultural ability to deal with different opinions and adversity. The refugee camps are a space of interaction and story-telling that stimulates the discussion of history, and therefore acts as an agent to transform the history through the collective.

### Imagination as aspiration

Along the nation state border of Thailand and Burma, the Karen people have accumulated their stock of knowledge for survival – in particular the science of war<sup>6</sup> and the science of figuring. The Karen revolution began in 1947, right after the British granted independence for Burma. Since that time, the science that has become the hegemonic paradigm of life is science of war.

In my research area, inside the Karen state, along the border region and even in the refugee camps, the main con-

versation that is animated and vivid in their memory is the story of fighting against the Burman.

*“My mother has been running away from the military since I was 2 years old. When the “bi be”<sup>7</sup> signals to the villagers that the enemies are approaching the village, we have to grasp whatever is close to our hands that is useful for short living in the forest. We have to do that immediately. We run without crying, we walk at night without light. If we use a torch light, the enemies will shoot us with a basket of bullets. Therefore, we learn to bear pain without crying. Walking in the dark without seeing the ground.”*

Running away from the Burmese soldier is part of the Karen's life and culture. It is a social collective memory that sustains a commonality in living and caring for each other. The most learned person in the village is the one has been to the “front” since a very young age. The science of war means not only going forward fighting with danger, it is also a science of escaping from the enemies. The playground for the Karen children is playing with weapons and guns. War has become their sport for learning to win and learning to lose. The war zone is their school for live and death. Therefore, escaping is one of the best practices to survive domination and discrimination.

In *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (Scott, 2009), Scott argues that the art of escaping is not only in the physical, it is also a cultural escaping from being governed. According to Scott, the verbal non-script cultural people who live in Zomonia, the range of highlands in Asia, their strategy of escaping. The written culture of the low-land state is tools of domination and control. The Zomonian people who live in the mountains have no written text, thus their story, their ways of life, their history will not be entrapped and frozen in the written text.

<sup>5</sup> Ma ner plaw is literally means victory field. It had been the Karen revolutionary capital for many years. It is the place for the development of Karen culture and a sense of belonging.

<sup>6</sup> War as Sciences is manifested very clear on any occasion in the Karen conversation. On one occasion, I interview a young man who has been soldier since he was 14 years old. The most vivid and lively conversation is about the war. He could explain in all detail of escaping, hiding, retrieve and forward in time of war. The act of threaten and creation of fear for the enemies and the encourage word for their fellow soldiers, are all learned during the war time. Even love, he has felt love most in the war field.

<sup>7</sup> “Bi be” is the civil secret service established by the Karen National Union for spies and village watchman in all the Karen territory. When “bi be” comes to live in the refugee camp, they became the security guard of the camp.

Their verbal stories could be transmitted freely without being confined to any written form. Therefore, the people in the mountains could create a new story every moment and contextualize their practices in a real situation.

Scott also discusses the “escaping crop”, crops people choose to plant, such as cassava, which is difficult to pull up from the deep ground. The Karen people in the borderland have been practicing a rotational agriculture which is also a tactic of escaping from the oppressor. For instance, after harvesting they would put their rice in bags and place them in the forest in different trees, covering them with sheltering material. They will get their rice from the forest only when they need it for their family’s consumption. They don’t have a rice barn in the village but they have rice holes in the tree.

Deep in the Karen state in my research area, which is a black zone for the Burmese government, the Karen people live in small villages with only seven to ten families living there. They keep a distance from the next village, but stay close enough to hear warnings and escape the enemies. The practice of small strategy has become part of their daily culture. They don’t want to work in a big group. They believe that escaping in a small group could help them survive more than escaping as a big group. “Escaping in big group die all, escaping in a small group you save more”. The Karen group that I have been following is called the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)<sup>8</sup>. They separated from the Karen National Union eighteen years ago.

During the 16 years of the separation between the Karen National Union (KNU) and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a DKBA’s spiritual leader U Thu Za-na has been successful in creating a Buddhist moral community around the eastern Karen state, Myaing Gye Nyu. The Karen monastic lay movement or network emphasizes that spiritual and moral capital must define the morally enchanted subject as a fundament for political power and rule. Leadership has to be morally enchanted and all subjects must strive to acquire knowledge about Buddhist ethics and use their knowledge in practice. The moral subject is thus at the fore of this movement and the basis for the possible transforma-

tion of the social order. A moral order and spiritual politics are preconditions for a righteous rule. (Gravers, fort coming)

The formation of the moral “subject” who should live a life of abstinent from all kinds of violent actions against nature. They will not nourish human live by killing of other species of live. They will not live a happy life on the suffering shoulders of their fellow man and woman. They have to work hard in order to accumulate “merits” for the next better life.

Nau hku, is a thirty-eight years old with three children, but looks many years older than her age. She has three sons, one is nine-years-old and the other one is 6-years-old, the youngest 4 years old. Her husband is a soldier in the conflicted area. She has set up a small shop on the newly built road constructed by a famous monk (U Thu Za-na). The monk road is constructed to connect Tha Song yang, Thailand and Myaing Gye Nyu, Karen state. The road is built for the Karen people not for the Burmese soldiers. U Thu Za-na ordered not to use the old Burmese military built road, but make a new survey and cut the new road. He strictly orders his DKBA soldiers not to allow the Burmese army use this newly built road. The territorialisation of the area by making road is new strategy that derived from the old beliefs of the Karen Buddhist traditional practice. In the myth of “the Lord footprints” which have been found among the beliefs of Karen people that the Lord Buddha has marked the land by leaving his foot print on different mountains. Wherever the Lord Buddha left his food prints, the ground has become a sacred place, the people who live in such area have to be also a holy people by practicing the Lord teaching especially the five precepts. Along the road sides where he newly built, he also ordered the people to build pagoda at the highest point of the mountains top.

Nau hku one of the monk soldier’s wife, she was allow to do a small trade at the road side. She sells several products brought from Thai borders. She communicates with people who stopped by her shop in Sgaw Karen, Plong Karen, Burmese and also in Thai. She was very good at persuading her

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<sup>8</sup> The formation of the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Organization Army (DKBA), in December 1994, was one result of the KNU leadership’s denial of legitimacy to elements of the Karen’s grass-roots. General Bo Mya and colleagues failed to deal effectively with this subaltern rebellion, and by the end of January 2005 the DKBA had allied itself with the Tatmadaw, and overrun the KNU’s Mannerplaw headquarters. A new wave of 10,000 Karen refugees fled into Thailand, and life in the insurgency would never be the same again.

customers to buy a small thing from her. Prior to her business of becoming a small vender on the road side, Nau Hku was working in Bangkok, Thailand as a housemaid. Being a housemaid in Bangkok for the Thai elite is considered a very undignified job for most people. But for her, a poor woman, being a housemaid was a big step for her in life. She was able to accumulate skills and learned to communicate with people on a different level.



She did not want her photo be taken



This is the look she wanted to be taken

The concept of accumulation of imagination is manifested in Nau Hku's reaction when I wanted to take her photo. She refused to let me take a photo of her, no matter how much I insisted. When I tried one last time to convince her, she asked me to wait for her. I agreed to let her take as much as time she needed. After I had been waiting for almost twenty minutes, she came back totally transformed and ready to be photographed. She was so confident when she returned that I lost my confidence to take her photo. I could not understand how she could come back so confident after such a long refusal.



Photo of their cousin who live in the third country

At first I thought it might be because she wanted to look modern, but this was not the case. She needed the photo to send to her cousin who lived in the **third country** and had been sending their photograph into the border. She wanted to be seen as having a good time in at home in the border.

The new Karen identity during the last 30 years are 'suffering borderlanders'. They have accumulated all sort of suffering as identities (See Esther Benbassa and G. M. Goshgarian, 2010). They defined such experiences as suffering by referring to the original definition of human being as "Pga haw hko hpo". Pga haw hko hpo could be defined into two dimensions; children of the earth or a crying people. Most of Karen studies have represented the Karen as a suffering people; a crying children and a non being or an imperceptible naked being (Decha, 2006). It seems to repress the active agent of being human.

Yet all human are condemned to be free as Satre believed. Therefore, the refugee camp is a inventive tactics of borderlanders to challenge the state hegemonic discourse of power over borders, frontiers, borderline, borderland - the sovereignty over borderland and subvert it to a place of liveable space. The most powerful argument of borderlander has been "We have never been transgressing state boundaries, but the state has always been transgressing our lives". Borderlanders do not cross the line but the "line" has cross their lives. Then we need to cross the lines.

**I would like to view this as the capacity for human beings to become the imagination that they create for themselves, and of themselves. Imagination become aspirations in life. Because this imagination of being something to her cousins than who she really was, it fulfilled a subjectivity of her being. I would like to argue that the**

**subjectivity of a person could better themselves in any opportunity they could have. We do not need a position or high status in society in order to feel our subjectivity. In a little gap of situation, human being could insinuate their subjectivity which give the meaning to life. The accumulation of imagination become real in their life and sustain their culture. In living in such difficult situation.**

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