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Institutional Governance and Refugee Resistance: Displaced Karen in the Thai-Burma Borderlands

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Displaced Karen constitute a complex array of actors in the Thai-Burma borderlands. Forms of governance meant to contain and control these actors are framed by practices of territorial sovereignty and bureaucratic processes of identification and resource allocation. This article examines forms of institutional governance through two broad authorities, the state (predominantly the Thai government) and the humanitarian aid apparatus. It argues that the operations of these two authorities establish a series of control over space and movement and a system of administrative categorisation that works to identify and regulate displaced populations. Based on an ethnographic study of displaced Karen residing in the Thai-Burma borderlands, I go on to argue that the Karen challenge these institutional forms of governance because they do not adequately capture their claims for political autonomy. Key features of this political autonomy include Karen understandings of being a refugee and their experience of the refugee apparatus, their advocacy around human rights abuses, and their agitation for political and social change. I argue these challenges represent a re-framing of the discourse around refugeedom, where displaced Karen bring the experience of displacement back into the 'humanitarian case' and pursue a desire to be actively engaged in a political resolution to their displacement.

Keywords: Refugees; Humanitarian aid; Governance; Agency; Borderlands

Saw Ba calls himself an ‘illegal person’.¹ He is referencing the fact that he is displaced from Burma and now resides in the Thai community with no legal status. He refers to himself with other words, like a ‘prisoner’, an ‘undocumented person’, an ‘activist’, all words that describe who he is and what he does. When asked if he considers himself a refugee his response is pragmatic. ‘Sometimes I think that technically I am a refugee because I flee from my country because of the war ... but I don’t stay in the refugee camp for a long time, I go out, so that makes me an illegal person.’

Under the UN description of what constitutes a refugee, Saw Ba would certainly meet the requirements. When he was five he fled an attack on his village in Pa-an District of Karen State, escaping with his mother and brother and many other villagers. After some time in the jungle, they crossed the international border into Thailand, first staying in a Buddhist temple and then moving to a refugee camp. He has lived in a number of refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border over the twenty-odd years since he first fled.

To be considered a refugee in the complex structure of the Thai-Burma borderlands requires you to live in one of the nine officially recognised refugee camps along the border, and to be assessed under a process of refugee status determination (RSD) carried out by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Displaced Karen reside in the camps while they wait for their refugee status to be approved and resettlement to a third country confirmed. Some are therefore officially recognised as refugees while others are not. Not everyone is looking to be resettled. Many wait for years in the camps with the hope that the conflict in Burma will resolve and they will be able to return to their home, or what might be left of it. Others leave the camps to pursue work or education opportunities, to become activists for change in their homeland, or to give back to the communities still inside Burma who are at ongoing risk from military offensives.

Saw Ba has chosen not to remain in the camps, preferring instead to base himself in the Thai community and pursue community work with the Karen still inside Burma. This makes Saw Ba ‘illegal’, but it also gives him a sense of purpose and fulfils a need to actively contribute to resolving the conflict in Burma. The reasons people leave the camps are numerous and the labels they apply to themselves are rich, complex and insightful. The ways in which they live with and outside the refugee apparatus are both creative and realistic. Saw Ba’s story, and many others like it, highlight how institutional approaches to refugees tend to homogenise ‘a

refugee story', while the stories of displaced Karen show a far more complex and nuanced understanding of a refugee's life.

This article examines two broad systems of authority that govern the lives of refugees and displaced persons in the borderlands: the state (predominantly the Thai government), and the humanitarian aid apparatus. In particular, I look at how these bodies exercise authority through two key operational elements of coercive regulation. Firstly, operations of the state establish restrictions over space and movement that aim to contain and control displaced populations in ways that segregate and exclude the population. Secondly, a system of administrative categorisation (labelling) is used primarily to homogenise the refugee experience in order to determine a system of identification and regulation that further separates refugees from the rest of the population. In the second half of this paper I use empirical data collected over a number of research trips to argue that displaced Karen challenge these forms of institutional governance because they do not adequately capture their claims for political autonomy. Key features of this political autonomy include Karen understandings of being a refugee and their experience of the refugee apparatus, advocacy around human rights abuses, and agitation for political and social change. These resistances to operations of governance indicate a re-framing of the discourse around refugeedom, where displaced Karen bring the experience of displacement back into the 'humanitarian case' and pursue a desire to be actively engaged in a political resolution to their displacement.

Method

This paper is based on an ethnographic study of displaced Karen residing in the Thai-Burma borderlands. The findings presented in this paper come from three fieldwork studies that took place between 2005 and 2010, ranging up to six months. Saw Ba was one of twenty-five in-depth interviews I conducted with Karen living in the community in and around the Thai border town of Mae Sot as well as those living inside Mae La refugee camp, one of the largest refugee camps in the borderlands and located approximately 60km from Mae Sot. Interviews were also conducted with Karen community leaders who articulated a broader socio-cultural picture of the Karen within a historical context, as well as Karen working in organised political settings such as NGOs and civil society groups. All participants had one thing in common; they had been displaced from Burma. For one participant that

displacement had occurred 27 years before; for another it was only 10 months prior to our meeting.

Most are, or had been, considered a refugee at some point in their lives, and many had spent some time in one of the nine Thai Government recognised refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. Of the participants from Burma, all were Karen and all were Christian. Over half the participants had lived and been educated in the refugee camps; although all but one now lived primarily outside the camps. Many of my participants also had links to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Some were former members of the KNLA and others had siblings or parents who were members. Many expressed a political affiliation to the Karen National Union (KNU), although their allegiances in a practical sense were much more complex, and included local community identification, pro-democracy identification, and affiliations with socio-political movements such as globalisation, anti-capitalism, and environmentalism.

During these periods of fieldwork I used other ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation, to help me understand the patterns of social relations and identity formation that were occurring. This complemented knowledge gained from archival research and literary analysis. By analysing the literature and archival information I was able to put the practices of displaced Karen into an historical context and tease out the complexities and the contradictions. In addition to the methods mentioned above, I also analysed cultural expression. This technique provided integral support material to my interviews and observations but also provided rare academic insights in their own right, drawing on more creative testaments to Karen experiences of displacement and identity. In using ethnographic methods, my aim was to study how displaced Karen lived in a borderlands space through a subjective examination of their socio-political narratives that could then be placed against a more conventional framework of institutional governance as practiced by the state and the humanitarian aid apparatus.

Overview of Governance Structures in the Borderlands

The fact that displaced Karen from Burma now reside in Thailand is part of larger historical and political processes. From the time of a military coup in 1962 until the early 1990s, Burma was politically and economically isolated, a position largely achieved through the socialist

path pursued by subsequent military dictatorships (Taylor 1987; Smith 1999; Callahan 2004; Fink 2009). With more than 52 million people and over 130 ethnic nationalities, successive military governments have largely attempted to contain and control the population through authoritarian rule, and with little tolerance for political plurality and ethnic diversity (Taylor 1982; Steinberg 1987; Silverstein 1997). The ramifications of these policies are particularly evident in Burma's border areas where ethnic populations are concentrated and armed ethnic groups opposing the military dictatorship are typically based (Smith 1999). Particularly since the 1970s, these policies have seen large numbers of people displaced within Burma and many hundreds of thousands forced to flee across the national border into neighbouring countries (BERG 1998; HRW 2005).

A consequence of this is that the Thai-Burma border has become a place of refuge and reprieve for those fleeing persecution in Burma (Lang 1999). While the focus of this paper is on ethnic Karen who have fled into Thailand, it should also be noted that refugees and displaced persons along the Thai-Burma border include ethnic Karenni, Shan, and Mon, and to a lesser extent ethnic groups that have fled Burma's western and northern border areas, namely Chin, Rakhine, Kachin and Rohingya. This forced movement of peoples is the result of long-running military campaigns targeting Burma's ethnic minorities (Smith 1999; Fink 2009). A large proportion of those fleeing fighting inside Burma end up in one of nine official refugee camps along the border, current estimates place this population at approximately 110,000 people (TBC 2015). There are also estimates of over half a million undeclared displaced persons living in the Thai community (UNHCR 2015). With the camps now existing for nearly three decades this is one of the most protracted refugee situations in the world.

There are specific characteristics of the Thai-Burma borderlands and its governance structures that make this space different to other areas of Thailand. Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and therefore is under no legal obligation to recognise or treat those that flee into Thailand as refugees. The Thai Government retains ultimate authority over the camps, often dispersed through a complex array of local authority types (Volger 2007), and tasks paramilitary groups and border police with providing security and surveillance of the refugees (Ball and Mathieson 2007). However, the day-to-day running and service provision for refugees relies on refugee committees and The Border Consortium (TBC). TBC provides food and building materials while the refugee committees effectively administer and manage the camps day-to-day

activities. In somewhat unique circumstances, UNHCR has had no substantive assistance role in the camps and has only become involved in a protection role through a formal and comprehensive resettlement program that was introduced in 2004.²

The refugee camps have been present in some form since 1984, following a large influx of refugees fleeing military offensives in areas of Pa'an District, immediately adjacent to the Thai-Burma border. Over that time, and as refugee numbers have grown, governance of the camps moved from a fairly localised, informal approach to refugee settlement to one that is increasingly restrictive and bureaucratised (Bowles 1998; Volger 2007; South 2011). Examples include the way authorities enforce camp passes which restrict NGO and refugee movement in and out of the camps, the way the camps are fenced and movement regulated through Thai military checkpoints, and how those inside the camps have limited or no opportunities for education, employment, sustainable livelihood initiatives or income generation projects.³

Despite Thai Government attempts to restrict their movement, there are also vast number of refugees and displaced persons in the Thai community. These include a number of Burmese refugees living in urban areas, particularly Bangkok, due in large part to a UNHCR 'persons of concern' program implemented for those who had fled the 1988 student uprising in Burma. 'Persons of concern' were given priority for resettlement due to their official status as UNHCR-recognised refugees and the political nature of their activities. This status distinguished them from those in the camps, both in their access to services and entitlements and their ability to move about within the community. The Thai Government eventually cracked down on this population, forcing many to move to the refugee camps and be resettled, while others, depending on what status they were able to obtain, have remained in the community. Others based in the community maintain connections to both the camps and the Thai community, moving with some element of risk between the two. If they are found outside the camp with no appropriate identification papers, they face demands of bribes, indefinite detention or possible deportation back to Burma. Others still choose to live outside the camps and contend with the illegal status this entails, but with what they see as greater freedoms for employment, livelihood and activism. Despite their differing circumstances, all would maintain some claim to refugeedom.

Systems of governance over this loosely banded refugee population provide an often complex, and sometimes confusing structure of refugee status and entitlement. The Thai

Government, UNHCR and the larger humanitarian aid apparatus of NGOs employ different processes of identification and sets of standards to this population. With no clear policy intent from the Thai Government, and no obligation to implement international frameworks or regulations, the situation is likely to remain this way for the foreseeable future.

This population of displaced Karen experience a precarious existence in Thailand, largely due to the system of institutional governance under which they operate. Most displaced Karen living in the Thai-Burma borderlands are effectively stateless; having no citizen's rights in Thailand and unable to return to Burma. As a result their options for legal status and access to essential services are limited. They face threats of deportation back to Burma and are often vulnerable to crime and discrimination. They are considered a burden on Thai state resources and a strain on the diplomatic relationship between the Burmese and Thai governments. This 'undesirables' (Agier 2011) status is linked to a form of governance that has come to dominate the borderlands space. This system attempts to contain and control displaced Karen in a type of 'territorial quarantine' (Agier 2011, 24), where they are both highly stigmatised and largely ignored (or at least that is the intent). In addition, a system of bureaucratic labelling is used to further consolidate the 'otherness' of this population by creating a system of identification and regulation that fit within a homogenised refugee story. It is to these operations of governance that the article now turns.

Nation-State Exercise of Political Authority and Control

With this background in mind, it is important to explore how governance and the exercise of political authority tends to be framed in the Thai-Burma borderlands. The first type of governance implemented is the use of the fixed national territorial boundary as an expression of political authority and control (Smith 1986; Donnan and Wilson 1999; Newman 2001). From this perspective control over space and movement within that territory becomes the right of the governing authority, and is implemented by established institutions that ensure its surveillance and enforcement. This is often described as the manifestation of a state's right to determine who can enter and stay in their country, and under what conditions. This constitutes typical nation-state operations of power for control over space and movement. Devices used to exert this control are familiar to state logic: checkpoints, detention centres, prisons, local bureaucracies, border control and other features typical of the modern socio-

political landscape (Malkki 2002). This controlled space is a well-established principle of territorial sovereignty (Malkki 1992; Tangseefa 2006).

An obvious example of this controlled space is the Thai Government's attempts to contain displaced Karen in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, essentially applying fixed territorial principles to their containment. Here we have delineated spaces aimed at segregating displaced Karen from the rest of the population, both physically and psychologically. This is evident in a number of ways. The camps are fenced and patrolled by Thai military and other paramilitary groups (Ball and Mathieson 2007) used by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) for security in the camps. Movement of people and goods in and out of the camp is regulated by a combination, sometimes contradictory, of Thai government policy and the disposition of the local authorities. The institutionalised bureaucracy attempts to register the camp populations for identification purposes for resource allocation and determining entitlements. The nature of the camps, being both geographically and psychologically isolating, create immense distances between the camps and other human populations. The result is that displaced Karen find themselves isolated in camps which reinforce their exclusion from the Thai nation-state, including benefiting from the state's protection. This was the case with the burning down of the Huay Kaloke and Don Pa Kiang camps. At Huay Kaloke the Thai military failed to stop members of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) entering the camps and burning 90 percent of the dwellings, as well as killing two people and injuring 33 (*The Irrawaddy*, April 1998).

The Thai nation-state conducts other operations which tend to exclude or isolate displaced Karen. These policies remove displaced Karen – those living in Thai communities rather than in the refugee camps – from what is common and normalised for the rest of the population. Thai identification cards, which are used to categorise and regulate citizenship and therefore nation-state membership, act as a form of exclusion for displaced Karen who are denied access to the card. Without this recognised identification, displaced Karen are also excluded from state health and education services as well as secure employment opportunities. Thai military checkpoints regulate the movement of people in to and out of the border area. A point commonly made by those I interviewed was that those who fail to meet the criteria for free movement (Thai identification card or foreign passport) are either put into detention or subject to fines. Similarly, it was felt that many of these operations act to instil and regulate fear. Fear can provide its own form of authority as it underpins a largely self-regulating system of control. Many of the Karen I interviewed indicated that at various

times they self-regulated their movements within Mae Sot out of fear of being picked up by Thai police checks.

Karen Resistance to Control Over Space and Movement

While these operations of state are designed to contain and control the displaced population, many Karen undertake activities that challenge the restrictions placed on them. Using empirical data, I will show how these stories constitute a retelling of the refugee experience, one that challenges the notions of segregation, control and exclusion – the underpinnings of the state’s approach to refugees and displaced persons.

One example is the way refugee’s reference the camp attributes with terms similar to an urban town, rather than a place of incarceration or segregation. In Mae La refugee camp, many residents refer to the main thoroughfare through the middle of the camp as ‘the highway’, a familiar term in a typical urban environment. Churches and schools are built in an attempt to restore some form of normalcy to social and religious life. Administrative structures divide the camp into localised sections with accompanying leaders and mini-bureaucracies, similar to the village structures left behind in Burma. Some refugees set up small shops to sell fish sauce, rice and other commodities to the residents. Mobile phones, motorbikes and the internet connect Mae La to the outside world and introduce elements of a modern socio-political landscape. Such scenes are familiar in many refugee camps along the border and show that while the nation-state manages the refugee camps as spaces of exception – characterised by mechanisms that segregate, exclude and control (Malkki 1995, 498; Agamben 1998) – residents create and interact with the space in ways that are strikingly familiar to normal village life. But more than this, residents are challenging typical understandings of what camps should look like and how a refugee should act; in doing so they disrupt the accepted realities so often associated with institutional categories.

Other examples of these resistances, and I use the term similarly to James C Scott’s notion of ‘everyday resistances’ as acts of evasion and insubordination that are largely informal and covert (1985), can be found in the way refugees challenge the restrictions upon their movement in and out of the camps. They choose to move across the institutionalised boundaries meant to contain and control them. The reasons they do this fulfil complex needs associated with practical survival and the need to pursue political activities. For example, the

camp environment inhibits practical concerns around providing money, food and other material for friends and family. Aid organisations provide basic food supplies to the camps, but additional food income generation projects fall outside the scope of humanitarian aid and refugees are forced to look elsewhere to have these needs met. As a result, men and particularly youth, move outside the camps to find jobs and provide an income. One Karen man I interviewed talked about how he left the camp environment in order to help those still inside Burma.

When you stay in the refugee camp, lets say it is difficult. Before I stayed in the refugee camp for a year as a teacher. It is good to help people in the refugee camp. But the other thing is I didn't have an interest in working with the refugees. There are many people, educated people that can already take care of them. This is one thing why I decided to go outside the camp and get more experience working with the people inside Burma.

The camp environment is also spatially isolated and densely populated. These cramped and dispiriting conditions impact the physical and emotional capacities of displaced Karen to fight immobility and despair. This is a common concern for those who remain inside the camps. Moo, interviewed in 2005 said:

Now I live in Tham Hin [refugee camp] and I have no happiness because I live in another country and I cannot speak their language. My life is like an animal. I can only eat when people feed me, I stay here, I sleep here, I go to the toilet here, it is like we are a herd of cattle ... If we go outside looking for vegetables we are afraid of the police. We don't have space to grow our own vegetables or bury our own bodies.

Moo identifies a lack of control over the most intrinsic of human needs – that of living and dying. More than humiliating, this is a deeply dehumanising place to be. It goes beyond a denial of basic civil and political rights to include the most fundamental – the sanctity and respect for human life. Moo also highlights a practical concern. The camp is a place of idleness and powerlessness. She is a victim of rigid policy that restricts her ability to grow vegetables and make decisions over food and housing. Typical daily activities and decision-making are removed from her control. A consequence is a permeating idleness that threatens the social and cultural fabric of camp populations – the most visible of which are drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and gang-related incidents among youth.

In 2005 I spoke with members of the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) about their community theatre program, 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. This program aimed to address some of the concerns mentioned above, namely to educate refugee and IDP populations on social issues such as domestic violence and alcohol and drug use, the resettlement program and the importance of education, as well as larger social, political and economic issues at both the local and global level.

The root of oppression is social domination and it needed to be recognised that this oppression can be controlled by anyone. The oppressor is not just the SPDC, but also the KNU, your neighbours and friends, and even your family. Oppression mostly manifests itself in the social sphere. We see many big problems in the community, like drugs, domestic violence and poverty and we hope to change peoples' views through theatre and redress some of these issues.

In order to conduct these performances, members of the theatre group move with some risk to themselves throughout the border area (most are classified as refugees and do not have ID papers that allow them to move freely in this space). They have crossed the international border back into Burma to perform in Karen villages and to displaced populations, and they regularly perform in at least three of the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Their work encourages the concept of the 'active' person, enabled through education and knowledge to be a politically engaged member of the community, capable of resolving important social and political problems. Their work also challenges the restrictions placed upon the space in which they operate; they refuse to be contained to the refugee camps and they circumnavigate both domestic and international regulations of governance in the border area.

There are many other refugees who challenge the restrictions placed upon them in the camps and in doing so redefine how their space is controlled. One refugee explained to me that she weaves clothes and sells them to foreign organisations as a way of getting round camp restrictions on movement and provide an income for her family. The task counters her idleness and depletes feelings of uselessness and despair. The income ensures her children can receive an education. The ability of this particular woman to provide an income for her family has a considerable short-term impact upon their day-to-day lives. She is able to make decisions over her daily tasks and where the money is spent, giving her some control over the space in which she is forced to live.

Taken individually, these examples constitute small, informal acts of defiance, similar to Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance' (1985). It may be difficult to see them as indicative of any larger political consciousness or motivation, however, taken together, these singular acts develop a story of resistance to the state operations that intend to segregate, control and exclude. En masse they contribute to a growing Karen political presence offering an alternative refugee narrative to that of the state and humanitarian aid apparatus. This alternative narrative provides a counterpoint to what it means to be a refugee, as well as advocating for political and social change around how a refugee or displaced person should be treated.

Institutionalised Labelling

The second way in which political authority is exercised is through a series of labels used to determine a person's position and associated treatment, as well as providing clear identification to assist bureaucratic classification and resource allocation (Wood 1985, 9; Zetter 1991, 44). This is most visible in the humanitarian aid apparatus, though not singularly attributable to it, which works within a system focused on managing the numbers of displaced persons. For example, identifying them (through administrative categorisation) for resource allocation purposes, and so that displaced persons can either be expelled or resettled. This is framed by a process of justification of status (proving you are refugee – persecuted, a victim) rather than recognising a person's rights as a citizen or political being.

In many ways labelling can provide a taxonomic listing of society, creating a logical and recognisable means to describe and allocate the complexities in our social structures (Wood 1985, 7). In the messy political space of the Thai-Burma borderlands, labels fulfil a need for clear identification pathways that assist bureaucratic classification and resource allocation in relation to large numbers of displaced persons from Burma. Labels can be beneficial, for example a UNHCR registered refugee in one of the camps along the Thai-Burma border has access to the resettlement program, and once resettled in a third country should gain benefits equal to the citizens of that country. Without labels it would be difficult to define the parameters in which such a complex process would be carried out. Undoubtedly, there are important and positive outcomes that emerge from a system of labelling, but in the interviews I conducted with displaced Karen between 2005 and 2010, people spoke about institutionalised labelling from a very different perspective. Common themes that emerged

included the use of labelling as a means of control and restriction, the disempowering associations related to many of the labels, and the unbalanced power relations involved in label identification and resource allocation.

A number of externally-imposed labels are applied to displaced Karen. In most cases these labels are created in response to a change in the political nature of the borderlands and to manage institutional responses to Karen displacement. The most obvious of these labels are the range used by the Thai Government to identify and categorise the different groupings of Burmese in Thailand. I interviewed Loo Ne, a Karen man who had lived both in refugee camps and in the Thai community, who spoke of how he saw the Thai Government's identification process working.

They use refugee registration just to find out who is in the refugee camps. In the same way they try to register migrant workers: these people are workers, they are not fleeing war. They are just trying to find out who is who: this is a refugee, this is the KNU, this is the migrant worker, and this is a stateless person. So if anything happens in Thailand they know who is responsible for it. Really they are trying to separate all the groups so they can identify them.

For Loo Ne, labels are a way of identifying for political purposes. This inventory – refugee, migrant worker, KNU member – comes with prescriptive methods of treatment. In the case of the refugee camps the 'refugee' label is a means of identifying the recipients of humanitarian aid such as food, education and healthcare while at the same time excluding those who have not obtained the label.

There are challenges related to label terminology. The Thai Government does not refer to displaced Karen in the refugee camps as 'refugees'. This is partially due to the earlier point I made regarding Thailand not being a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It would also lead to overt acknowledgement of Burma's political unrest and its impact upon the region, a position Thailand is reluctant to take. Instead, the Thai Government labels those in the refugee camps 'displaced persons'. After 1997 this term acquired further limiting elements when Karen in the camps along the border were categorised as 'bukkhon thi nee jak karnsurop', the Thai phrase for 'Displaced Persons Fleeing Fighting'⁴ and the camps became 'temporary shelters'.⁵ The refining of this term was an attempt to restrict the number of displaced Karen entering the camps in Thailand. It also provided a set of rules related to incarceration in the camps, for example no movement

outside the camps and the provision of basic food and shelter being contingent on the assistance of international aid agencies.

In addition to identifying, labels are also used as a means for allocating resources. In the Thai-Burma borderlands labels are used most visibly in the resource allocation associated with the humanitarian aid industry attached to the various refugee camps. The international community, including international governments and humanitarian aid organisations, refer to those in the camps as ‘refugees’. UNHCR, prior to the camp registration process that began in 1999, referred to this same group of people as ‘prima facie refugees’, refugees who on the face of it appeared to be refugees, but who had not been assessed on any evidence-based criteria. The nuances in this type of terminology had a profound impact upon the way Karen in the camps were acknowledged and treated. As a ‘prima facie’ refugee there is the implication that claims are not yet legitimate or proven. Such a categorisation also restricts entitlements to refugee protection and resettlement in third countries.

Humanitarian labels can also work to de-politicise the stories of the recipients of the label. It does this by prioritising the humanitarian aspects of the case, rather than the political aspects, creating what Liisa Malkki describes as a ‘humanitarian case’ (Malkki 1997). In this scenario, displaced Karen become victims of violence, reliant on others for food, education and health services, silenced subjects, and therefore a ‘humanitarian case’. In such an instance, the execution of power inherent in the label allocation reduces the political potential of displaced Karen stories. Karen claims of political grievances of ethnic persecution, human rights violations, religious and cultural intolerances, lose their political potency in such a scenario.

Further complicating this position is an expectation of behaviour that is associated with the label. Liisa Malkki calls this the ‘performative dimension’ (1997, 231) of refugee status where the tendency is to identify what a ‘real’ refugee looks like and how a ‘real’ refugee acts. This performative dimension is evident in the borderlands in a number of ways. Over months of fieldwork in 2005 many camp residents I interviewed made references to first time visitors to Mae La refugee camp who would comment on its village-like atmosphere, or compare the camp’s liveability to the surrounding Thai villages. They told stories of visitors who commented that people with motorbikes and mobile phones could not possibly be considered a refugee, and that people who leave the camps should not continue to receive the support of the aid agencies. The implication in such comments is that a ‘real’ refugee must

look and live a certain way, and that refugees should only receive institutional support if they appear to be helpless and immobile. The use of the refugee label here suggests a model of how a refugee should look and behave. When refugee behaviour no longer constitutes the conditions prescribed by the label, needs and entitlements change. While not explicitly stated, behaviours which reflect action taken outside of the principal label – behaviour that is not passive or helpless – constitutes other less sympathetic labels: an insurgent, a trouble-maker, a political activist, a migrant. By extracting the political aspect, those applying the label remove a very important outlet for grief and justice. It is this failure, on the part of both the humanitarian apparatus and more broadly the modern nation-state, which has forced displaced Karen to look elsewhere for a space in which their political aspirations can be met.

Karen Resistances to Institutional Labelling

Similar to Karen responses to restrictions over their movements, displaced Karen in the borderlands challenge the limitations inherent in the allocation of these labels. Throughout the interviews I conducted a common theme emerged, that of label politicisation. While labelling can be a bureaucratic necessity, and at times beneficially useful for displaced Karen, it is also contested terrain for political action. Many Karen expressed clear dissatisfaction with the labelling process and questioned its larger motivations.

For Loo Ne, who had spent many years living in a refugee camp but was now living in the Thai community, it was the ambiguous nature of entitlements that go with the refugee label that he found problematic.

I don't really call myself a refugee because if I'm a refugee then I am entitled to rights as a refugee. If this was the case then I would accept it but people who register under UNHCR or with the Thai authorities they are not really refugees. According to the declaration a refugee has the right to work, the right to study or have an education. If you're born in Thailand after 1990 and you've lived here for more than 7 years then you should be able to apply for citizenship. We don't have any of these rights.

To Loo Ne the label refugee is in a sense meaningless, because it has not brought with it the associated entitlements. This makes it difficult for him to accept the refugee label or see a benefit to himself in acquiring it. For many displaced Karen the refugee label also carries

with its connotations that do not adequately address the realities and aspirations of their lives. While certainly not characteristic of all displaced Karen's position on being a refugee, the Karen I interviewed spoke of the label carrying implications of helplessness, passive victimisation and reliance on external support, all terms they considered disempowering and unrepresentative of their active struggles. One Karen person I interviewed called himself a 'human rights defender', while another described himself as a 'community worker' and the Karen more generally as 'political asylum seekers'.

When I asked one Karen man to describe himself he said he was 'an illegal person' because although he is registered in the camp as a refugee he lives outside the camps and works for an NGO. Saw Ba does not deny being a refugee but it is not a defining identity. Instead he chooses to be defined by the work he pursues to find a resolution to Burma's conflict.

Yeah, communication is important because for me, it's like this. Here [outside the camp] you can stay freely, you can move, you can go anywhere, you know the situation very well. When you stay in the refugee camp you cannot see, you cannot hear. Here, if you want to call or communicate with other people, you can talk easily with other people, you can search the Internet ... I find ways that I can do something. It is a big problem what has happened in Burma and I can find a way to solve this problem.

Saw Ba, like many others who participated in my research spoke of their work in terms representative of their active struggle. For many displaced Karen in the borderlands it is their participation in a struggle for political survival and recognition that defines their lives in the borderlands, not their incarceration as refugees. In such instances disempowering concepts associated with how the label of refugee is implemented – such as victim or aid-dependent – fail to account for individual identities and capacities that constantly defy the limitations of the label.

My argument is not whether the label *should* be used but rather that there is a need for greater analysis of which label is allocated and by whom, and what implications this has for displaced refugee populations. The Karen have at various times used the label 'refugee' or 'migrant worker' for their own identification purposes as well as their own political purposes. But there are often disparities in how these labels are used and distinctions between the various labels or groups can be ambiguous. For example, in the borderlands a refugee may often refer to herself as an IDP, and a political dissident may live at various

points in a refugee camp. In addition to the disparities caused in the naming process, movement between the categories is also common. One can simultaneously be a refugee and a political activist, or a displaced person and a migrant worker. These are the realities and complexities of how displaced Karen live in the borderlands. Yet these diverse groupings with their complex motivations and needs have been tagged with what Geoff Wood calls a 'principal label' (1985, 11): refugee. This effectively forces the IDP, the displaced person, the activist and the artist, with all their associated experiences and stories, into one stereotyped group, with its singular understanding of identity. Problems of political identification arise when this externally-imposed principal label (refugee) takes precedence over other forms of identification, particularly self-designated ones. It can become another way of silencing non-institutionalised forms of identification.

Rather than accepting an identity based on this idea of an undifferentiated static mass, a 'homogenised refugee story', the Karen choose to refer to themselves in more dynamic terms: 'human rights defender', 'activist' and 'community worker'. This type of terminology conjures action based on an injustice: I am a human rights defender because my human rights have been taken from me. In these types of responses the Karen create what Wood calls a 'shift in power to deploy time [personal experience] as an ingredient of identity' (1985, 13). By bringing personal experience into the narrative of political identity, displaced Karen are responding to a system of governance that too often has the effect of containing and silencing their political agency. The Karen are re-shaping the refugee discourse in terms of their claims for political autonomy, their understanding of being a refugee and their experience of the refugee apparatus, their advocacy around human rights abuses and their agitation for political and social change.

Claims to Political Autonomy

In bringing the empirical case studies and the theory together, I argue that stories of Karen defiance and resistance highlight how operations of governance tend to treat displaced Karen in ways that segregate, exclude and control. This process has created a humanitarian case that tends to ignore substantiated claims by displaced Karen of political neglect and persecution by the Burmese state. These include failed economic policy, inadequate ethnic identification and representation, social fragmentation, institutional denial of basic education

and health rights, nationalist and racist policy, and challenges to state sovereignty – social and political factors that have led to Karen displacement to begin with.⁶

Becoming a refugee is one possible outcome of displacement, and perhaps its most visible form. However, as Malkki points out, any forced movement resulting from displacement is ‘only one aspect of much larger constellations of socio-political and cultural processes and practices’ (1995, 496). Displaced Karen who arrive at the border are the product of pre-existing political tension. Their displacement has deep roots in modern historical processes that have discriminated against ethnic plurality and marginalised democratic principles (Smith, 1999; Fink 2009). The current manifestation of such policies has resulted in the destruction of villages and crops, extrajudicial killings, rape and torture, extortion, and forced labour. Instead of addressing the political problems that cause displacement, as well as the corresponding political claims of those experiencing the displacement, current institutional responses tend to focus on the Karen as a humanitarian case (Malkki, 1997; Bowles, 1998). In this type of scenario the refugee label is used to project an image focused on the need for humanitarian assistance rather than enabling Karen to be proactive members of society. This type of institutional response has deeply dehumanising connotations (Malkki 1995, 518), because it strips the Karen of their story (history, agency, experience) and forces them to become simply a ‘victim’. Saw Ba told me that many Karen people did not want to come to the refugee camps. They would prefer to stay with their homes and land. Only when this is no longer possible, because of military operations, do they resort to the refugee camps. It is only when we listen to the stories of refugees that we are given a context to the ‘homogenised refugee story’. People don’t choose to flee to Thailand; they leave because of larger systematic socio-political problems. And rather than simply fleeing fighting, these stories provide a far more complex barometer of the problem. Some people flee because their crops and their livelihood has been destroyed by a military battalion, others flee because they can no longer afford to pay the corrupt taxes demanded of them, still others because they face starvation, their primary provider has been killed or they have a family member in the armed insurgency. These stories alone cover a wide range of political, economic and social reasons indicative of state failure to provide protection and a livelihood.

In Saw Ba’s story, and the many others, we gain a range of insights into the political circumstances behind Karen displacement. In Moo’s story she talks about the history of the Karen conflict, ‘Why do we Karen people have to suffer from our grandparents through to now?’ Her story emphasises a political will: a grassroots resolution to the conflict, and to

return, 'If I go back I want to stand in the shade of a tree that provides coolness and it should be a tree that we plant ourselves'. Loo Ne, in talking about his refugee status, recognises the civil and political rights that are denied him, and the political motivations he perceives are behind this. For these Karen, the circumstances that forced them to leave must be resolved if they are to fulfil their dream of one day returning to Burma.

The sense of discrimination and unresolved political injustice is not confined to Burma's political and territorial structures. This silencing is also transferred to the borderlands and reinforced by the structures of institutional governance that treat the Karen as apolitical. Saw Ba described it like this:

Sometimes we make a joke that we are like a pig in the garden or something like that. People come and feed you, you only eat and sleep and when you go outside the garden people beat you. There is no freedom. It's not like you are human ... you don't have any future, any choice.

Loo Ne talked specifically of the dangers of the resettlement program, which he considered to be an institutional humanitarian resolution rather than a political one.

They look at us and just see us as Human Beings; they don't see us as a Nation. That is why the resettlement program was born ... I feel like the 'Resettlement Program' is taking away the power of our people ... I would like to encourage the countries also to help find the solution and help end the civil war in Burma. Let us work together to remove the military dictator and bring back democracy in Burma.

To Loo Ne, recognition simply as a human being is the equivalent of a life without history or agency. In contrast, to be viewed as a nation incorporates the idea of a political life – of rights, entitlements and political representation – and in turn recognises possible resolutions to political injustices. Given that the resettlement program has targeted skilled and educated Karen, decimating a key resource of the Karen political movement, this participant makes a legitimate point: any help provided by the international community needs to be more than humanitarian alone, it needs to address the political, social and cultural causes of the current situation and their impediments to achieving justice in Burma. Why are the Karen in the borderlands? How have they come to be there? What grievances do they carry with them? How can their predicament be resolved? Karen stories can provide some of these answers;

bringing context to a space that has been monopolised and homogenised by the uniformity of institutional responses.

The danger of the modern institutionalised approach to Karen in the borderlands is its propensity to treat the Karen as ahistorical, as generalised victims stripped of personal narratives and identity, and therefore denying their claims to political autonomy. Displaced Karen counter this approach through their attempts to privilege the political voice; and in turn re-link the story/ies to the case.

Part of re-linking the story to the case is the ability to see the Karen as ‘refugees’, ‘displaced persons’, and ‘illegal migrants’. To be victims, opportunists or both. But also to see them as politically and socially engaged activists, or a community with history, identity, rights and grievances able to be heard. Even more so, we need to see the Karen as being able to live both ends of the spectrum simultaneously. The Karen are refugees at the same time as they are activists, they are displaced persons that continue to maintain strong cultural and historical ties to land and identity, they are victims at the same time as they are socially and politically engaged members of society.

Over the course of this article I have examined the activities of a range of organisations and individuals who pursue politically-engaged activities that challenge restrictions relating to their refugee status. These include artists and musicians who create works that document their culture or are critical of Burmese military persecution; Environmental activists who run campaigns against persecution and environmental destruction relating to state dam projects; Community theatre activists who stage shows about drug use, family planning or community development techniques; and women’s organisations that set up collectives to sell their produce and create income generation projects. These are examples of more informal types of political activity that can occur because they sit predominantly outside of the state-centric discourse. They are conducted by people who continue to go unrecognised as qualified political subjects (Tangseefa 2006) in either Thailand or Burma. Their tenuous residence in Thailand means they are not beholden to the political restrictions they would otherwise face in Burma. Their state-less position in Thailand gives them some flexibility in creating alternative political opportunities for Burma. These types of political activity may lack formal political organisation, yet they fill the gaps left from the inadequacies of the current system of institutional governance; they give a political voice to displaced Karen who are otherwise rendered mute by their illegal status. This political voice articulates claims for

political autonomy, expresses understandings of being a refugee and the experience of the refugee apparatus, advocates around human rights abuses, and agitates for political and social change. Karen claims for political autonomy are changing the discourse around refugeedom, bringing individual stories of the experience of displacement back into the 'humanitarian case' and providing an outlet for the desire to be actively engaged in a political resolution to their displacement.

Conclusion

Institutional failure to adequately address long-term and ongoing persecution and displacement, has led displaced Karen to protest, construct and redefine the parameters of their political life in the borderlands. In doing so they challenge and in some cases renegotiate the administrative frameworks that govern their political existence, reframing the discourse around the experience of refugeedom. While processes of institutional governance have worked to contain and control Karen in an 'undesirables' quarantine, as well as assign a prescribed set of needs and entitlements upon them, displaced Karen have pursued a path of political engagement that challenges a system they see as homogenising and devaluing their experience. Examples of the way these challenges occur include taking on the role of advocate for the political persecution they and others continue to experience; documenting state abuse and searching for lasting solutions to the conflict; becoming the keepers of cultural knowledge and acting as conduits between their homeland and the international community.

Displaced Karen have provided a framework for how we can better respond to the political and social needs of displaced populations. The 'victim' is also 'political', capable and able to speak authoritatively on the political elements that impact life in the borderlands. They have created a space that is partially defined by political agency and evidenced through patterns of activism, and which gives meaning to their political and social aspirations. Not content to be driven by processes of governance that see them as 'victims', 'illegals', a 'refugee case', displaced Karen show they are capable of articulating their own place in the political domain.

* Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of those who participated in this study.

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Notes

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2. UNHCR began camp registration in 1999 but only limited data was collected at this time. A more formal and comprehensive registration process began in 2004.
3. CCSDPT and UNHCR have put out a number of plans and strategies over the period 2005-2011 on how best to implement a development approach to the protracted refugee situation along the border. These would allow refugees increased self-reliance, including skills and training and higher education opportunities, participation in income generation projects and employment opportunities. While the response from the Thai Government has seemed to be positive and small-scale projects have been introduced, there seems to be no substantive practical application of the larger strategic plan.
4. Technically, this terminology would exclude IDPs, or those who had hidden in the jungle for a long period of time; those who had fled for economic reasons such as destruction of their paddy fields; and those who feared for their life because of affiliation to an ethnic armed group.
5. For example, in a presentation at the 2011 Refugee Day Seminar in Bangkok, a member of the Thai Government National Security Council consistently referred to the camps as 'temporary shelters' and the people in the shelters as 'people fleeing fighting' (World Refugee Day Public Seminar Report, 2011).
6. For further discussion around claims of persecution see reports put out by Amnesty International, the Karen Human Rights Group, Human Rights Watch and various ethnic political parties such as the KNU, MNSP and KIO.