

Plurality and Plasticity of Everyday Humanitarianism in the Karen Conflict¹

Alexander Horstmann

People in Karen state, Eastern Myanmar are slowly recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxieties and depression, following decade-long brutal warfare targeting the villagers in an attempt to cut the support base of the Karen rebels. In the paper, I shall describe the humanitarian agencies and their work as a transformative project in which local humanitarians were trying to transform crisis into some form of normality. My hypothesis is that humanitarian assistance- organized local and from below- played a key-role in this effort. Hence, I zoom in on the politics of humanitarian assistance to the Karen to showcase their “humanitarian ecology”. With the resettlement of a Karen refugee elite to the West in the 1990’s, the humanitarian economy expanded to the global level as resettled families sent remittances and donated to civil society, the nationalist movement and missionary churches back home. While “humanitarianism” is defined to be a culture of humanitarian assistance, compassion and relief, I use a broader definition that includes agency, which encompasses a broad range of services - from emergency healthcare to advocacy work and human rights documentation. Decades of civil war and repression in southeast Myanmar have created a particular sort of humanitarianism in the borderlands that is characterised by the dense presence of local and international humanitarian organisations. These are taking over state functions of governance in the absence of crucial service sectors, such as economy, health and education sector in southeast Myanmar that either collapsed or were never installed in the first place (South 2012; Tangseefa 2006).

I like to see my case study into a larger picture on the mobility of persons in the emerging humanitarian government (Agier 2010). Worldwide, we observe a dramatic increase of refugee flows in which people in the global South flee from war, political persecution and natural disaster. While the emerging refugee regime seems to be one of the conditions of our time, we still lack strong ethnographies on the how. Questions taken up in this chapter are: How do humanitarian regime work on the ground? How are humanitarian regimes in the Southeast Asian massif influenced by larger geopolitical factors? And most significantly: How did the majority of Karen villagers benefit from humanitarian assistance and how were their livelihood influenced? Interesting work on refugee governance has been published recently on the Karen case (McConnachie 2014; Oh 2016; Oh forthcoming) and that work also connects to a larger academic debate on the political and moral dilemmas of humanitarian intervention (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). For this, I suggest that a concept of plurality and plasticity is appropriate. Plurality in the context of everyday humanitarianism describes not only ethnic and religious diversity, but also the plurality of the humanitarian field and the multiple agendas, aspirations and strategies of humanitarian/ political actors. Plasticity on the other hand describes the fact that landscapes are, according to Janet C. Sturgeon, “more than just physical topography and land cover, but sites for manoeuvre and struggle (Sturgeon 2005, p. 3ff). Humanitarian work, in its informal and underground nature (as in southeast Myanmar) or formal and engineered (as in camps of northwest Thailand) can be seen as what Sturgeon calls “landscape plasticity”, that is, a contribution to negotiated landscapes. In this sense, the presence of humanitarian organizations and city-like camps contribute to shaping the materiality of the borderland. Plurality and plasticity together are the foundation of everyday humanitarianism, that, in contrast to spectacular humanitarianism, describes a normality of everyday practices, in which the political character of humanitarian aid and the roots of the violence gets lost in the mundane, everyday management of everyday life. Sara Shneiderman, in her contribution to this volume, adopts a similar approach when

she writes that she finds multiple, contesting vocabularies and visions for the ways in which territories in Nepal are imagined and restructured.

Looking closer at the dynamics of humanitarianism from the grassroots level in the Thai-Burmese borderland, humanitarianism is not neutral or impartial, but constitutes an arena, in which geopolitical and local political strategies are played out. In accordance with work on everyday resistance of Southeast Asian peasants to modernization and political suppression (Kerkvliet 2009), I like to call this process of political community making on a local and global level the everyday politics of humanitarianism. This understanding of plural and plastic humanitarianism differs from the use of general humanitarianism in the singular. Case-studies of different humanitarian organizations clearly showed that the impartial ethos of the Red Cross is an illusion and that organizations such as the French Doctors without borders (Redfield 2013) or Amnesty International (Hopgood 2006) are forced to take political position and take critical political positions in negotiation with perpetrators. Organizations are also conscious that they are embedded in the political field and that they are often taken hostage by different actors and political players, state and non-state actors. We can go as far as thinking beyond the humanitarian field and call French Doctors without Borders or Amnesty political organizations. These organizations also critically reflect about their own work and performance and design political strategies to alleviate suffering more efficiently. Increasingly, these organizations also reflect the failure of international organizations to protect the most vulnerable people displaced by violence, their position in an increasingly geo-political game of power and interests, and their being taken hostage and extorted by powerful armies and governments. Nonetheless, these international humanitarian organizations become global players and are involved in fact finding missions (witnessing) and in the making of secular truth for an international audience (Redfield 2013). For efficient performance, these organizations depend on the cooperation of local NGO's who are equipped with a better knowledge and access to the most vulnerable ethnic minorities. I think this makes the study of grassroots initiatives on the ground and their alliances with international humanitarians so worthwhile and interesting. While James C. Scott writes on hidden transcripts, I am more interested in the development and mobilizations of public transcripts and, with Michel Foucault, the way that humanitarian aid is not only used for liberating and charity purposes, but for disciplinary purposes as well (see Michaud's critique on Scott's *Zomia* in this volume).

As I illustrate, religion is very much entangled with politics and some of the antagonisms leading to armed violence can be traced back to British colonial history and its polarizing impact on ethnic relations in the area. Various actors are thus appropriating humanitarianism both as culture and resource and the sharing of the humanitarian cake can lead to distribution conflicts. The everyday humanitarian field that I describe reflects well how local actors are entangled with global political fields. Together, they continue to shape the political communities in the Southeast Asian massif. It would be very interesting to compare this study with the social history of humanitarian assistance to and resettlement of the Hmong from Northern Vietnam and Northern Laos, the Khmer from Cambodia and the so-called Montagnards from the Central Highlands of Vietnam in the context of the Vietnam War (Salemink 2015).

This paper is based on findings and insights gained from a research project on Thai-Burma border communities with my colleagues Decha Tangseefa (Bangkok) and Kwanchewan Buadaeng (Chiang Mai) on religion and politics in the Karen conflict. Subsequently, I directed my own project on the politics of everyday humanitarianism. Both initiatives were funded by Thailand Research Fund during my tenure at Mahidol University

in Salaya. I had local Thai as well as Karen assistants in my fieldwork on the Thai border as well as in Eastern Myanmar around Hpa-an. The research started in the refugee camp of Maela not far from Maesot in Northwestern Thailand, continued in migrant villages of Mae Sariang and Tak provinces, before I was able to do meaningful ethnographic fieldwork with human rights groups, local Christian missionaries and Buddhist monasteries in Kayin state. I travelled with and benefitted greatly from assistance from Karen peasants, a Karen Jesuit priest, Karen missionaries, Karen Buddhist monks, and local rights activists. During my research, I faced severe limitations of access to the rural communities in the conflict zone of Myanmar. I was really lucky to travel with local activists and local missionaries, but I still faced limitations to study traditional security networks of the villagers and their everyday interaction with the humanitarians, medics, nurses, teachers, non-state armed groups etc. I am afraid that my approach to study the social organization of aid from below is thus compromised in one way or the other. I was extra careful not to endanger my informants by publishing sensitive information.

OUTLINE OF A HUMANITARIAN ECONOMY

The culture of humanitarian assistance enabled Karen and Karenni people to establish a niche and the financial and material support to run a whole underground system of alternative, mobile healthcare, education and social support networks. It began to shape the borderland and its people in the early 1980s. The military assault of the Burmese army drove the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) over the border and its scorched earth assault produced massive refugee flows within southeast Myanmar and across the border to Thailand. Humanitarian assistance became firmly established in the 1980s after the installation of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium that replaced the antecedent consortium of Christian orientation.



Figure I Baptism in Mae Ra Ma Luang Refugee Camp

The Karen, Mon and Shan people with the help of Western missionary networks that quickly identified the situation as a humanitarian crisis and moved from the Thai-Cambodian and Thai-Laotian border to the Thai-Burmese border in the early 1980s established the first shelters. Unlike the Khmer and Hmong refugees, or the Vietnamese boat people, the first wave of overwhelmingly Baptist Karen refugees had a very high degree of cohesion and organisation. Organised Christians in the Baptist, Catholic and Seventh-Day Adventist churches worked smoothly with Western churches, brought their pastors and community leaders with them and immediately built churches in the emerging refugee camps. Buddhist refugees tended to settle in migrant villages where they became tenant farmers of Karen peasants with Thai citizenship as they felt increasingly uncomfortable with the Christian environment in the refugee camps.

The presence of humanitarian organizations quickly changed the face of the border town of Mae Sot. Once a sleepy market in the interstitial spaces of the Thai-Myanmar border, the entrepreneurial segment of Mae Sot benefitted greatly from the emerging markets across the border. The quick establishment of international humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Mae Sot also shaped the town and substantially contributed to its expansion. Humanitarian workers worked and slept in the offices around the town and accessed the camps from there in their jeeps. One could meet this group of expatriates with their laptops and smartphones in the cafés and restaurants of downtown Maesot. The nine shelters housed no less than 150 000 people at a time. The refugee camps thus became part of the humanitarian landscape; a form of dwelling that resembles urban informal settlements - bidonvilles - with their own cultural geography, architecture, markets, infrastructure, social services, schools, facilities, and resettlement programmes (Agier 2002).

Looking at the emergence and installation of this specific humanitarian and advocacy sector, I am interested in resource mobilisation and symbolic communication. My understanding is that this situation has produced a certain “culture of suffering” and subsequent help that binds certain people and organisations together in a specific place and geography. The humanitarian sector, financed by the international community, has been running for decades and has produced a specific humanitarian culture in the border landscape. Unfortunately, and not in the interest of the villagers affected, the discourse on suffering is sometimes used for ethno-political mobilizations and aspirations. At stake is a specific defensive Karen nationalism that has been fuelled by decades of violence and oppression and has been indirectly boosted by humanitarian resources and remittances from the Karen diaspora in the West.

The situation has changed lately, as the growing openness of Myanmar has created more breathing space for a local civil society in eastern Myanmar, but remains framed using the discourse of healing the wounds. It is these atrocities committed by the Burmese army in the Karen conflict that have motivated different types of organisations to mitigate the suffering endured by villagers. The humanitarian economy thus contrasts with the advocacy economy - development organisations that provide services and with the more activist NGOs carrying out more political work organising villagers to document human rights violations and claim their rights. In a context where international organisations are severely limited in movement and activities by a repressive political environment, grassroots organisations seem to fill a crucial vacuum as mediators between social support networks of Karen villagers and international humanitarian organisations, organised as the Border Consortium (TBC)².

Much activism on the Thai border was closely associated with Karen nationalism and the Karen National Union (KNU) in particular, although the new community organisations emancipated themselves and quickly developed their own agenda. Much of humanitarian

assistance was also politicised and local-global alliances of Christianity play a particularly pertinent role in many initiatives. Now, after decades of political oppression, civil society in eastern Myanmar is picking up and interesting new initiatives and civil society networks are emerging. Again, many initiatives in eastern Myanmar are related to the idea that the Karen are a chosen race and a nation with several of the new initiatives focus on the revitalisation of Karen culture and literature. Humanitarianism from the ground is thus tied not only to expanding rights regimes, but also to the consciousness of Karen national identity and a unified construction of Karen “culture”. It is also possible and realistic that the impact of some organisations is minimal and that the organisations are struggling increasingly for their own survival by justifying their existence vis-à-vis international sponsors.

This leads me to the impact of humanitarian projects from the ground and the question of how the presence of so many, indeed hundreds, of very different initiatives on the border, are perceived and connected or not connected and the provocative question of whether some organisations actually “impose” themselves on the Karen villagers. Another crucial question is the relationship of the organisations to the state and non-state ethnic armed movements. Political environments crucially condition humanitarian organisations and many organisations on the Thai border moved under the radar of the state and crossed the border illegally. At the same time, the same organisations have operated under the protection and in the shadow of non-state armed movements and can be seen as the ‘humanitarian arm’ of that movement. The current rapprochement of many organisations, such as the bag-pack health workers, with the Burmese government illustrates the dilemmas of cooperation and non-cooperation and the compromises that organisations have to make if they decide to legalise or make their engagement in society an official part of their formal work. On the other hand, the non-state ‘enemy’ spaces that humanitarian organisations carve out may endanger villagers who are identified as working with the enemy. The current peace process may not only empower new civil society networks or facilitate ownership, but may also lead to a takeover of human rights advocacy by more powerful organisations, quickly marginalising subaltern groups within that population (Horstmann 2012, p. 257).

The Karen conflict has been politically charged and associated in the international media with persecuted Christians, more so than with Buddhists, despite the fact that Mon/Karen Theravada Buddhism is the dominant culture and religion among the Karen. Southeast Myanmar and the Thai-Burmese border zones provide a very interesting case study for the power workings of religion, as northwest Thailand has become a hub of Christian outreach, and faith-based humanitarianism delivers the structure for the mobilisation of people and the circulation of money. In the next section, I make a theoretical contribution by focusing on humanitarian assistance as reconstruction after civil war and utopian thinking in the form of ethno-nationalisms and religious utopias, driving development in Karen State. This utopian thinking comprises patriotic, ethno-nationalistic ideas about the reconstruction and future of Karen State, neo-Buddhist ideas about liberation from suffering and Christian ideas about progress and development, and recently quasi fascist ideas about the ethnic cleansing of Muslims (Gravers, Hayami 2004).

Against my earlier position that Karen nationalism and the KNU in particular have developed in tandem with Christianity (Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist) (Horstmann 2011, p. 522), my more recent research with secular organisations has convinced me that a broad nationalist feeling exists among human rights NGO activists, whatever their religion. This sentiment, which defends Karen cultural rights in a general sense, has been very visible in the recent Karen Unity meetings in eastern Myanmar, where many different political and cultural organisations and factions came together to symbolise Karen unity. Moreover, Karen

Buddhism has developed staunchly nationalist positions, whereby the competition for power, resources and influence have crossed and blurred religious boundaries. I believe that it is valuable to analyse the interplay of non-religious and religious dynamics because a focus on either alone would be reductive and because the human rights activism of some NGOs can be explicitly evangelical as in the case of the Rangers or become, in Oscar Salemink's words, "a quasi-religion". Many secular human rights NGOs working on the Thai border are sponsored by churches and many of their personnel are young educated Christians. Moreover, many churches that are engaged in humanitarian assistance have also built a wide-reaching ecumenical alliance of missionary societies and local missionaries who double as teachers, medical doctors and development workers. Take the example of Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) Myanmar. While ADRA separates humanitarian assistance from development and religion, it is an openly Christian evangelical organisation that follows the tenet of Christ caring for the poor. ADRA benefits greatly from the local embeddedness of the Seventh Day Adventist movement throughout southeast Myanmar. The area has been a missionary focal point of the Seventh Day Adventist church for at least one hundred years established by way of proselytising an extensive web of local schools and clinics in the area. ADRA Myanmar acquires funds from international donors (Caritas, Johanniter, International Red Cross, governments, etc.) for diverse projects on health, livelihoods, water supply, and education and, more recently, on political training. ADRA remains one of the few international NGOs which only employs locals for managing day-to-day operations in the project sites and is thus a sought-after partner for organisations that are unable to carry out their projects *in situ*.³ This initiative can be juxtaposed with a political initiative of a charismatic monk in Hpa-an. Just like U Thuzana (see below), the Taunggalay monk is a politically engaged monk who writes columns on democracy for a Burmese magazine, supports education and philanthropic foundations, is looking after 150 volunteer teachers, buys land and offers this land to displaced villagers who become servants of his monastery. The monk has many followers even among the military and is thus protected.

THE HISTORY OF HUMANITARIAN ENGAGEMENT

While the humanitarian economy and advocacy sector is now firmly entrenched in the Thai-Myanmar border-scape, a map of humanitarianism reveals a complex picture in which humanitarian agencies of very different types operate side by side. The humanitarian landscape has been divided by the border and has developed differently on both sides of the border, creating a specific spatial order of plurality and plasticity.

Humanitarian in eastern Myanmar has been, for a variety of reasons, notoriously difficult. The most important hurdle remains the surveillance and repression by the military regime, which regards NGOs as potential allies of the insurgents and civil society as a political force. The territory in eastern Myanmar is a highly contested one and many military factions share pockets of the same area and are eager to impose themselves and exercise control. While the Border Guard Force receives salaries from the *Tatmadaw* (the Burmese army), the KNU units still tax the populations under their control. Every humanitarian project has to be negotiated with local militia and their bosses. The area is highly militarised and full of military checkpoints. Nobody knows how many landmines are still active or being planted so much so that villagers sometimes step on their own mines. These factors limit the movement and operation of the NGOs that either work close to the Thai border or close to Hpa-an or Dawai.

The military assault on the Karen civilian population in the early 1980s worsened rapidly when it was no longer possible for the villagers to return to their homes in the rainy season and the KNLA had to retreat to the border area. International organisations responded to this humanitarian crisis by mounting a comprehensive effort to provide shelter and food to no less than 140 000 people in nine refugee camps. A border consortium (the *Thailand Burma Border Consortium*) emerged, succeeding in sheltering and feeding all the families in the camps. This is a feat that they have managed for over thirty years now. A Christian consortium in the beginning, it eventually transformed into a non-faith institution and incorporated numerous organisations, both secular and faith-based. Taking into account the long time frame, young people in the camp may have lived in the camp throughout their lives and have had little or no contact with Myanmar. The camps were governed and guarded with barbed wire by the Thai border guard force, but administered on a day-to-day level by the internal Karen refugee committee. Basic decisions and administration of the distribution of aid and basic law decisions were left to the internal refugee committee and thus largely bypassed the Thai courts.

This new geopolitical situation framed the next few decades and placed international humanitarian organisations in a huge dilemma. The Border Consortium received the mandate from the Thai government to provide relief in the emerging camps, but international organisations were generally barred from crossing the border to help desperate people caught in the forests and hills. Yet, while many displaced people from the immediate border area moved to the Thai border, many more remained inside Myanmar, suffering from food crises, taxes, military assaults, human rights violations, relocations and forced labour. These people could only be reached by local organisations that came from the Karen organisations themselves.

The church was the community centre in the camp and Mae La refugee camp had fifty-four churches, bible schools and Christian community centres. The pioneer Christian consortium identified in the beginning with persecuted fellow Christians and made a strategic choice to collaborate closely with the internal refugee camp committees to distribute rations as fair and effectively as possible. The 'refugee warriors' working with the KNU emerged as a 'natural partner' for the Border Consortium and many international organisations in the Consortium that were eager to gain access to the families. While the alliance and identification with the KNU and KNU-proxies was strong in the beginning (to the benefit of the families in the shelters), the relationship of the Consortium and the Karen refugee administration gradually became more democratic and transparent (cf. McConnachie 2012; South 2012). By far, the best space to provide rations, trainings, workshops, etc. was the controlled space of the refugee camp in which social welfare services were also provided, especially education and healthcare. In addition to basic relief, the people in the camps also organised themselves in networks and community based organisations, covering many domains. However, while the Border Consortium, the international organisations and community organisations did an admirable job, many families resented the controlled space and the depressing livelihood conditions in the camps and eventually left to self-settle in migrant enclaves in the countryside of the Thai hills if they could find a place with a Thai Karen patron (Prasert 2012).

In addition, later waves of refugees were more scattered and much less organised and belonged to different ethnic groups, spoke distinct languages and observed different religions. The majority of this group practised Buddhism and Animism, and a minority practised Islam. As a consequence, the camps became much more diverse, with considerable tension and competition developing among the different segments of the refugee population, and between

the old and new residents. There were multiple reasons for the tension. The new residents were not Christian and often felt discriminated against and excluded from decisions taken by the camp administration. In response, the Consortium reformed the administration, introduced more democratic and transparent decision-making and also included Buddhists in the refugee committees (The Thailand Burma Border Consortium 2010). Without that assistance, the reconstruction of the nationalist movement on the Thai border and its humanitarian engagement inside Myanmar would not have been possible. However, humanitarian assistance in Karen State was largely limited to the KNLA-controlled areas.

While I argued that the camps became centres for proselytising, that does not mean that all incoming refugees became Christians. Far from that, Sandra Dudley has described how Animist Karenni villagers persisted in observing major rituals under difficult conditions in the camps and how these rituals and the traditional ways of weaving were central to safeguarding cultural identities (Dudley 2010). Some of the Animist groups felt that they had to propagate their Animism as a religion and ritual system in order to claim rights and create a niche in camp society. However, it is true that the camp elite mobilised resources to evangelise the newcomers and that young people were exposed to Christianity in the orphanages and schools. It is no secret that Karen pastors and personnel of the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Churches actively aimed to bring 'the lost' to Jesus Christ. The 'soft' evangelisation in the camps belongs to the utopian thinking of the Christian churches to build a heavenly kingdom in the camps.

HUMANITARIANISM IN PRACTICE

The Thai border has provided refuge and sanctuary for rights-orientated as well as service-oriented groups, secular as well as religious projects for decades. Karen Burmese nationals have operated in a dense network, organising mobile schools, alternative schoolbooks, health services, human rights documentation, advocacy work and constant reports about the situation and condition of Karen villagers inside Myanmar (Horstmann 2012, p. 10). Local community based groups have become professional NGOs that recruited from the educated spectrum of Karen migrants (McConnachie 2012).

Interestingly, all these organisations depend heavily on volunteers and staff in Karen State to do anything meaningful. These networks in Karen State were probably crucial for the survival and training of displaced villagers in Karen State for decades.

The Back Pack Health Worker Team and Free Burma Rangers have developed into very efficient local agencies that provide badly needed healthcare not only in Karen State, but also in many other ethnic minority regions. These teams literally walk with medicine, clothes and money through the rainforest, mountains and rivers to isolated communities. The Free Burma Rangers also document human rights violations and campaign actively in churches in Chiang Mai and in the West. They finance themselves through donations and are doing well - unlike Burma Issues, which focuses on advocacy and rights training and whose budget is dwindling as donors shift their priorities to other organizations and priorities in Myanmar.

Young Karen migrants who volunteer for Free Burma Rangers are drawn to its spirituality and political nature. In my project on refugees and Christianity, I have followed the life histories and refugee careers of young men who at different times of their life in exile have joined the journeys of the Free Burma Rangers whose teams regularly travel to the conflict areas. These young men saw it as their obligation to serve God and their communities and were quickly entangled into political projects.

The situation inside Myanmar in the heart of Karen State looks entirely different. Thanks to the recent partial political opening of Myanmar, the Border Consortium has been invited to open an office in Yangon and to operate from Myanmar as camp closure and repatriation become imminent. This would have been unthinkable even in 2010 before the ceasefire talks began. The NGOs on the Thai border were filled with Karen educated activists and students and hence politicised. However, political organisations were unable to survive censorship, surveillance and arrest in Myanmar. Karen indigenous intellectuals like pastors or grassroots activists who were associated with the KNU or even provided shelter were sentenced to long jail terms.

Organisations that survived the ordeal and constantly provided assistance under extremely difficult circumstances were faith-based. Political organisation and missionary work were both outlawed and the churches had to keep a low profile. Only recently has partial democratisation enabled the mushrooming of many different civil society organisations in Hpa-an that have one common feature: they are all Karen. Many of the new organisations have now taken up projects of community mobilising and political issues such as land confiscation and legal assistance. Many organisations concentrate on pressing problems of community organising without calling attention to the name of the organisation. Different associations working in education, health and development and cultural rights are members of the Karen Affairs Committee in which there is an interesting generational change taking place: young activists, female and male, have transcended the boundaries of potentially antagonistic political Karen organisations. Much of the new engagement is inspired by faith, even though religion is not always in the foreground of humanitarian work.

While many of the relief and development projects are coordinated and funded by Protestant Churches in coordination with international NGOs (e.g. the Norwegian Refugee Council), Catholic and Protestant Churches in southeast Myanmar operate their own missionary societies. Local missionaries are completely integrated into the local communities in which they are embedded. As local missionaries do not want to be a burden on the community since they have to share resources and food with the villagers, they contribute to education, basic healthcare and gardening. The missionaries are basically local volunteer teachers who operate on very modest allowances and who are extremely committed to their mission. These missionaries and other project field staff regularly travel to remote villages by motorbike, boat and on foot.

Relief and development in Karen State are always geared towards the vague idea of the self-determination of the Karen people. The Karen Affairs Committee has been highly involved in the organisation of the recent Karen Unity seminars where hundreds of people from different Karen organisations and political factions came together under the ideological umbrella of Karen nationalism. While some observers have emphasised the key role of American Christian missionaries for the emergence and development of Karen nationalism, ethno-nationalist thinking is very pronounced in the Buddhist Sangha, the DKBA, and in the NGO/civil society scene as well (see Gravers 2007).

Civil society organisations and political parties in Karen State are highly patriotic and word their discourse in terms of Karen blood, Karen suffering in the hands of the Bamar and the early history of the Karen people (cf. Horstmann 2015). Karen monasteries and churches keep alive spoken Karen and Karen literacy in a country where the Karen language is not taught in primary schools. Sometimes Karen children are punished by their parents for conversing in Burmese at home as Burmese is seen as the language of the oppressor and a threat to the Karen language. Karen traditions, popular religion and festivals are kept alive in the communities. For example, the very popular *Don* dance has changed from a symbol of

social cohesion and village solidarity to a symbol of the Karen nation. Competitions in reciting Karen poetry and verse, Karen literacy, *Don* dance and Karen national drilling skills are held regularly outside of the government framework in locations near the Thai border. There is no doubt that much of Karen humanitarianism is highly defensive. This defensive position is structural, ideological and practical. It is practical as all humanitarian projects are heavily limited by political constraints.



Figure II Stateless Children Day in Mae Sariang, on the Thai border.

Thammanya used to be a Buddhist pilgrimage centre in Karen State (not only for the Karen) which was named after U Thammanya who is a Buddhist saint and ethnic patron who represents the fifth future Buddha (*Maitreya*) who appears from heaven and liberates the Karen from suffering and brings prosperity. This hugely popular monk was embalmed after his death, but his corpse was stolen mysteriously from the monastery. In his lifetime, U Thammanya's hilltop monastery was seen as a Karen spiritual centre of resistance to the military regime in Yangon. The centre of the DKBA is a monastery under the leadership of U Thammanya's student and successor, U Thuzana. U Thuzana is not only a monk practising in the Forest monk tradition, but also a development monk, a military leader and a staunch nationalist. For a long time, the KNU insurgency has long been seen as Christian, although this might not be fully accurate. The ethnic character of Karen humanitarianism has partly estranged the Burmese democratic movement from the Karen one and the Karen have rarely worked with the more progressive and better-educated Burmese NGOs and professionals than in the centre of the country. The organisations in the Karen Affairs Committee are recruited from the Karen ethnic pool and are thus very inward-looking. Due to the huge hurdles in collaborating with Christian organisations abroad, Christian churches in Karen State have not benefitted from international church networks and donations in the way that Karen churches in Thailand - which are supported by missionaries and funding - have been. Christian Karen were perhaps more cosmopolitan and had contacts with the Western world and more

opportunity to travel abroad than, for example, Buddhists. Ethno-nationalist thinking in Karen State was fuelled by resettlement from the refugee camps to the West where resettled communities have donated to churches and the KNU. Thus, the Karen are influenced by symbols in globalising flows and also feed these flows with symbols of ethnic dress, discourse and funding. Christian churches have organised a yearly seminar in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, on “Reading the Bible through Karen Eyes”.

Theravada Buddhism and millenarian utopian thinking can also be seen as a modus to install a new normative order to bring law, security and stability into a world that is characterised by cultural chaos (e.g. Gravers 2007). As shown above, some monks create small empires in which they propagate development by benefitting from government funds, probably drug laundering and donations from Thai business people. Christians talk about God’s kingdom on earth while the Buddhist monkhood also wants to defend land demarcations in which Buddhist order and rules are prevalent. Christian volunteer-missionaries convert villagers and install small chapels in the conflict zone. Humanitarianism thus comes in very different forms and constellations. Local organisations work together or vie with international faith-based NGOs and foreign missionary networks. Pentecostalism is quickly establishing itself in Karen State, building on existing structures of the Assembly of God. Pentecostalism focuses much less on social work or humanitarian assistance and more on worship and proselytising, to the dismay of the declining Baptist churches and the Buddhist Sangha that denounces Pentecostal churches as a threat to the Buddhist Sangha. Big international faith-based organisations like World Vision now have come in as powerful partners, but again are still highly limited in their mobility and scope. Both secular and faith-based organisations rely heavily on existing social support networks of villagers, which may be Buddhist or Christian. Without those networks that allow organisations to work effectively with the community, too many hurdles obstruct efficient humanitarian assistance and entire organisations that criticise the constraints imposed by the government find themselves confined or sanctioned or even more constrained. Others conform to the government’s regulations.



Figure III Local Missionaries and Buddhist monks in solidarity

Until recently, much of humanitarian assistance in Karen State was faith-based, and both Christian and Buddhist local organisations occupied a niche and were able to help

effectively, with very modest means. The faith-based local organisations are unable however to shoulder the new challenges of a more open Myanmar, with new problems of relocation and land confiscation and resource exploitation. Local faith-based organisations are going into new domains of rights claiming and political rights training which they have difficulty handling. Local secular organisations that were influenced by the Burmese democratic student movement on the Thai border are superbly equipped and have substantial experience, but seem to face a serious decline of international funding for capacity building and advocacy work. Karen organisations mushrooming in civil society are now better integrated into mainstream Burmese civil society networks and social movements and young community leaders are able to overcome at least partly ethno-nationalist self-limitations.

As such, we have a structure of parallel humanitarianism with both secular and faith-based community organisations and international NGOs working with social support networks in the rural areas. The employees in these organisations are sometimes identical, as they tend to move from one organisation to another. The culture of humanitarianism developed completely differently in Thailand and in Myanmar because of the political environment and the advocacy work of organisations working in political exile on the Thai border. While humanitarianism in southeast Myanmar has been faith-based, the position of the churches in humanitarian assistance and development is diminishing, although faith-based networks are still active in relief. The reason is that the new issues of advocacy work, human rights training and more political issues of land and environmental conflict cannot be satisfactorily tackled by Christian churches or Buddhist monasteries, although some church leaders and some monks are getting involved. The spatial aspect also remains important as community organisations on the Thai border still cross to work in ceasefire areas, while organisations working from Hpa-an are much more limited and have to undertake long journeys to access remote villages.

Community organisations in Thailand on the other hand do not have a wide enough reach into Myanmar and are still uncomfortable working in areas controlled by the Burmese government. Funding constraints may push the politicised organisations on the Thai border to compromise and to move offices to Myanmar's capitals. Faith-based organisations in eastern Myanmar urgently need international exposure, training and international partners to move ahead in the difficult political transition. Christian and Buddhist actors are crucial in southeastern Myanmar and still provide the frame and infrastructure in which humanitarian and human rights organisation may work, but advocacy organisations are becoming more important in the near future. The next step will be cautious collaboration of NGOs with the Myanmar government and this collaboration will attract funding from the international community and has the potential to marginalise humanitarian assistance and human rights work being done in non-state spaces.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the formation and dynamic development of a humanitarian sector and how this sector has been instrumental in helping people go on with their lives and gather new hope. It is in this space that social services were provided to displaced Karen, where resistance to the repression of the state could be enacted and where a parallel form of governance and economy could be established that enabled the Karen to plan for a future. I have argued elsewhere that humanitarianism allowed for the creation of corridors and *routes de passages* for re-entry into the dangerous area of southeast Myanmar (Horstmann 2014, p.

2-3), although the ceasefire has changed the conditions by greatly facilitating border crossing. Different governments in the USA, Canada, Australia and Europe have accepted Karen refugees on quotas given to the UNHCR. Christian Karen became preferred refugees, as they used to fight an unpopular socialist regime in Myanmar.

This chapter has started an ethnographic study of the humanitarian economy, which contrasts starkly with the capitalist economy, and the flow of migrant labour into the migrant enclaves of Mae Sot. Humanitarianism in different shapes will continue to mark the landscape in southeast Myanmar for some time to come and many Karen have used this sector extensively to contribute to a better future for people in Myanmar. The humanitarian intervention provided alternative education and health services in a time when neither was available. Of all the ethnic minority areas, the humanitarian economy, the specific humanitarian milieu and culture and humanitarian network on the Thai-Myanmar border was the most extensive. Regarding the transformation of Myanmar's marginal areas, one can say that the partnership that has evolved between humanitarian aid and the Karen is somewhat unique. I hope that the chapter has pointed in some innovative directions in studying the politics of everyday humanitarianism and the conspicuous role that ethno-nationalism plays in the shape of the humanitarian intervention and distribution of assistance and in the political game in which humanitarian assistance crucially contributes to the enforcement of a specific type of political community and to the construction of a unified, yet arbitrary, notion of Karen national culture and identity.

References

- Agier, Michel. "Humanity as an Identity and its Political Effects. A note on camps and humanitarian government". *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 1, 1 (2010): 29-45.
- Agier, Michel. "Between War and City: Towards an urban anthropology of refugee camps. *Ethnography* 3, no. 3 (2002): 317-43.
- Dudley, Sandra. *Materialising Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experience Among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*. Oxford: Berghahn, 2010.
- Fassin, Didier and Pandolfi, Mariella. *Contemporary States of Emergency. The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2010.
- Gravers, Mikael, ed. "Conversion and Identity: Religion and the Formation of Karen Ethnic Identity in Burma". In *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007: 227-258.
- Hayami, Yoko. *Between Hills and Plains: Power and Practice in Socio-Religious Dynamics among Karen*. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2004.
- Hopgood, Stephen 2006. *Keepers of the Flame. Understanding Amnesty International*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Horstmann, Alexander. "Uneasy Pairs: Revitalizations of Karen Ethno-Nationalism and Civil Society across the Thai-Burmese Border". *Journal of Maritime and Territorial Studies*. 2015 Jul 1; 2 (2): 55-75.
- Horstmann, Alexander. "Ethical Dilemmas and Identifications of Faith-Based Humanitarian Organisations in the Karen Refugee Crisis". *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 3 (2011): 513-32.

_____. “Mediating the Suffering of Karen Refugees and the Representation of their Rights”. *Sangkomsat Chiang Mai Journal of Social Sciences* 24, no. 1-2/2555 (2012): 243-284.

_____. “Stretching the Border. Confinement, Mobility and the Refugee Public among Karen Refugees in Thailand and Burma”. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, no. 1 (2014): 47-61.

Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG). “Truce or Transition? Trends in Human Rights Abuse and Local Response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 Ceasefire”. Mae Sot: KHRG, 2014.

_____. “Losing Ground. Land conflicts and Collective Action in Eastern Myanmar”. Mae Sot: KHRG, 2013.

Kerkvliet, Benedict J. Tria. “Everyday Politics in peasant societies (and ours)”. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36, no. 1, (2009): 227-243.

McConnachie, Kirsten. *Governing Refugees. Justice, Order and Legal Pluralism*. London: Routledge, 2014.

McConnachie, Kirsten. “Rethinking the ‘Refugee Warrior’: The Karen National Union and Refugee Protection on the Thai–Burma Border”. *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 4, no. 1 (2012): 30-56.

Oh, Su-Ann. “Navigating Learning, Employment and Economies in the Mae Sot-Myawaddy Borderland.” Su-Ann Oh (ed.): *Myanmar’s Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes. Local Practices, Boundary-Making and Figured Worlds*. Singapore: ISEAS, pp. 191-214.

Prasert, Rangkla. “Karen Refugees’ Self-Settlement: Refuge in Local Administration and Contingent Relations”. *Sangkomsat Chiang Mai Journal of Social Sciences* 24, no. 1-2/2555 (2012): 159-195.

South, Ashley. “The Politics of Protection in Burma”. *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2012): 175-204.

Redfield, Peter 2013. *Life in Crisis. The Ethical Journey of Doctors without Borders*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Salemink, Oscar. “*Revolutionary and Christian Ecumenes and Desire for Modernity in the Vietnamese Highlands*”. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 16, No. 4 (2015): 388-409.

Sturgeon, Janet C. *Border Landscapes. The Politics of Akha Land Use in China and Thailand*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005.

Tangseefa, Decha. “Taking Flight in Condemned Grounds. Forcibly Displaced Karen and the Thai-Burmese in-Between Spaces. *Alternatives* 31 (2006): 405-429.

The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC). “Nine Thousand Nights. Refugees from Burma: A People’s Scrapbook”. Bangkok: Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2010.

¹ The paper incorporates recent observations from my project funded by the Thailand Research Fund entitled *Humanitarianism from Below* community-based organisations of the Karen and the role of the international community. Fieldwork for the project was done in conjunction with the project group Streams of Knowledge along the Thai-Burmese Border Zones: Multiple Dimensions of People, Capital and Culture, co-ordinated by Decha Tangseefa (Bangkok). All data collected are my own and based on observations gained from ethnographic fieldwork. I would like to thank Sirijit Sunanta, Decha Tangseefa and Su-Ann Oh for their warm and friendly support and for inspiring this article. Note that I use the designation of Karen and Karenni, which I

prefer to the official designation Kayin and Kayah.

² The Border Consortium, the former Thailand Burma Border Consortium, consists of voluntary humanitarian organisations that oversee and manage humanitarian assistance and rations to the camp and support Karen voluntary groups working with the Karen on all aspects of livelihood in the camps. See the excellent report of the Consortium's experiences and moving engagement in TBBC (2010). I would like to thank the board of The Border Consortium for answering to all of my questions relating to their wonderful work.

³ I would like to express my gratitude to the staff of ADRA who generously accepted me as a guest researcher and opened many doors for me in eastern Myanmar that would otherwise have been closed for me.