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CREATING MARGINALITY AND RECONSTRUCTING NARRATIVE:
RECONFIGURING KAREN SOCIAL AND GEO-POLITICAL ALIGNMENT

by

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B.S. University of Central Florida, 1991

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science
in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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2008

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ABSTRACT

Pre-modern conceptualization of shifting borderlands and territories rather than fixed boundaries often allowed for the dynamic flow of peoples between polities. Until the late 1800s and the colonization of Burma in 1886 by the British Empire, this permeability of the borders of its territory was how Siam (currently Thailand) viewed its geo-political sphere (Thomson 1995:272). Britain extended the boundaries of its empire beyond India to guarantee the economic interests of the British Empire. With this push eastward, Siam abutted a polity that rejected the idea of shifting borderlands. The British ascribed to the modern concept of non-permeability of borders. This concept brought with it a rigidity of perception that extended beyond geographical frameworks to also psychologically limit the interpersonal connections of Siam's multi-ethnic minority populations and the Tai ethnic majority (Keyes 1979:54, Marlowe 1979:203, Thomson 1995:281). Ancient residents of what was once the borderland area, the Karen, lost their status as a valuable part of a symbiotic relationship with the dominant Thai polity and were placed within a discourse of opposing binary factions. The Karen, once respected as stewards of the remote forestlands, became part of a larger group of peoples all of which have been labeled as the "hill tribes" (Trakarnsuphakorn 1997:218). This paper addresses how globalization and these social and political changes have resulted in marginalizing a group of diverse peoples who are now viewed as a threat to the security of the nation-states in which they reside. The discussion continues with a look at how the narrative about the Karen has changed and introduces a proposal for constructing a new empowering for the Karen.

This work is dedicated to the Karen people,
keepers of the Wild for the Sown,
who dare to continue to dream
of their rightful place in the world.

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I would also like to thank my loving husband, Keith Ray, for allowing me the time and finances to follow my dreams and accomplish my goals.

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CHAPTER ONE: GLOBALIZATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Colonialism and Globalization

...in a globalized world the major point of reference is still the economic “infrastructure” rather than globality itself, which...transcends, though it certainly includes, the global economy.

[Roland Robertson cited in Li 2000:12]

...the wave of globalization that unfolded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries actually entailed the consolidation of the state’s role at once as a territorialized scaffolding for accelerated capitalist expansion and as an institutional interface between sub- and supra-national scales. Throughout this period, globalization and nationalization proceeded in tandem as mutually constitutive processes of socio-spatial restructuring.

[Neil Brenner 1999:45]

The transnational condition referred to as globalization is a term currently used in academic conversations as well as in more general discourses on contemporary social-political and economic conditions. However, what is meant by globalization is often vague and shifting. The inference in using this term is that there is unilateral distribution of goods, privileges, opportunity, and a global political unification of some sort (Li 2000: 20). This phenomenon is frequently viewed as emerging late in the 20th century and strengthening in the new millennium. It is often seen as a panacea bringing with it advancement and offering a beneficial flood of *good things* to the underprivileged less developed countries. The reality is far from this quasi-utopian image (Li 2000:27).

The Karen hill tribe people are an ethnic minority living in the Thai/Burma borderlands that have been radically impacted by the forces of globalization. The reconfiguration of the Karen hill tribe’s social and geo-political alignment that creates marginality is directly related to the processes of colonization and globalization. It is necessary to understand the definitions and

theoretical underpinnings of contemporary deliberations regarding globalization prior to considering borderlands in general and the Burmese (Myanmar)/Thai border region in particular. This paper investigates the ramifications of globalization on the Burmese/Thai borderlands and the indigenous Karen people living in this region. It examines how nation-state policies and ideologies of bounded, impermeable borders impact the individuals that physically move through these spaces.

Globalization is a slippery concept with various definitions. Douglas Kellner, the George F. Kneller Chair in the Philosophy of Education at the University of California Los Angeles, acknowledges the ambiguous nature of the term globalization (Kellner 2008:1). In order to clearly define *globalization*, Kellner takes a critical theorist's stance in regard to the complex elements comprising this phenomenon. He states that the means by which understanding can be reached is by "theorizing it [globalization] at once as a product of technological revolution and the global restructuring of capitalism in which economic, technological, political, and cultural features are intertwined" (2006:3). Kellner attempts to avoid the polarizing effect of taking part in a binary¹ analysis. His perception of globalization is as a "contradictory amalgam of capitalism and democracy" (2006:10) in which democracy is sometimes promoted and at other times repressed.

The polarizing effect manifested is not simply a product of binary views. The term 'globalization,' itself is polarizing, "seeking to convince us that globalization is our inescapable contemporary reality," (Li 2000:7) forming and focusing "our perceptions and understandings, thus helping to constitute the reality we know" (Ibid). However, Victor Li states that this power

¹ Binary implies only two views rather than use of the term opposing view which does not necessarily limit concepts to just two camps.

generated from the singularity of the concept is also its weakness, in that, “by its act of screening out or excluding other realities” (Ibid) its alleged “singularity” is challenged.

This singular view of globalization is held by well-known columnist and author Thomas Friedman, an apologist who takes part in the positive side of a dialectical argument regarding globalization (Kellner 2008:1). He sees globalization as the victory of a worldwide capitalistic free-market economy that has resulted in “flattening the world” (Ibid).² In contrast, Jerry Mander, President of the International Forum on Globalization, calls for a defensive stance against globalization, labeling the effects of the globalization process as disastrous socially and environmentally (Kellner 2006:1, Cavanagh 2004:3). Amy Chua, a professor at Yale Law School and lecturer on the effects of globalization on societies, also cautions against globalization and the distribution of “free market” democratic ideals to less developed countries populations (2004:7). She sees globalization as “inextricably tied” (Ibid) to the distribution of these free market democratic ideals. This combination, according to Chua, creates an unstable environment that breeds ethnic hatred and violence (Ibid).

The previous discourses sometimes gloss over a relevant issue regarding the framework under which inquiries are taking place. These arguments are based on the conceptualization and vocabulary that assume a static nature of the geographic constraints imposed upon the concept of nation-state. Neil Brenner recognizes the “‘territorial trap’ by which states are viewed as the self-enclosed geographical containers of socioeconomic and politico-cultural relations” (1999:40).

This ‘trap’ includes a vision of the “territorial nation-state as a pre-constituted geographical unit”

² Thomas Friedman refers to “flattening the world” with an analogy of a “level playing field” (Friedman 2005:7). He contends that globalization has created a platform from which persons in all corners of the globe can readily compete in the free market economy from essentially the same vantage point.

(1999:40). He calls for new innovative means of viewing the geographical constructs of the globe that “do not naturalize state territoriality and its associated, Cartesian image of space as a static, bounded block” (Ibid).

Brenner defines globalization as a continual “dialectical process” (1999:44) in contrast to a “static situation or a terminal condition” (Ibid). This is both a spatial and a temporal unfolding on “multiple, intertwined geographical scales” (Ibid) which include “production, differentiation, reconfiguration, and transformation of sub-global spaces such as territorial states, regions, cities, and localities,” (Ibid) and are not limited to global space. According to Brenner, a world economy has been in existence since the first sequence of “capitalist growth” in the 16th century (1999:44). However, the transition from “mercantile to industrial capitalism” (Ibid) was when “capital accumulation became intrinsically premised upon large-scale, socially produced territorial infrastructures” (Ibid). This transition, according to Henri Lefebvre, is a momentous conversion “from the production of things in space to the production of space” (cited in Brenner 1999:44).

Both of these notions, the historical placement of the process of globalization in time and the capitalism leading to space as a product, are significant for this discussion. With regard to the first notion, globalization as a historic phenomenon, Kellner refers to Adam Smith as engaging in one of the initial key discourses on globalization taking a positive perspective on this phenomenon. Smith envisioned a capitalistic worldwide market with global benefits (Kellner 2006:5-6). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels follow Smith in their appraisal of capitalism as global but take a negative view of capitalism in this process. They “envisaged the possibility of a world global crisis which would generate world revolution, enveloping the earth in a titanic struggle between capital and its opponents” (Kellner 2006:7). However, Kellner indicates that although

formal discourse on the notion may have started with Smith, globalization has been going on for centuries “on an increasingly rising curve, bringing more and more areas of the world into the world market-system” (Ibid).

This is supported by Roland Robertson who argues for a theory where globalization is understood as a “historical, civilizational process of increasing global awareness” (Li 2000:13). He breaks with purely capitalistic views of globalization stating that by focusing on the global economy globalization is conceived as “Western hegemony and non-Western cultural resistance” (Ibid). Robertson charts this process as going through five stages with the first “germinal” phase spanning the 1400s to 1700s and each of the five subsequent stages progressing toward “global unicity” (Brenner 1999:55). Robert DuPlessis states that the “modern world-system” (1988:222) evolved in Europe during the 16th century and is different from other similar systems prior to this time. This “modern world-system” is a “capitalist world economy” (Ibid) with economic forces that “operate over a broader area than any political entity can control” (Ibid). The relevant point is that globalization is not a phenomenon that erupted in the late 20th century. It is the renaming of an extant process of which colonial expansion of earlier centuries was a part. Immanuel Wallerstein makes this parallel clear in his argument regarding European development during the colonial era when “development” was the acceptable “buzz word” that legitimized exploitation of the non-European world (2005:1264). When this term fell out of favor, the term “globalization arrived in its wake” (2005:1265). In this paper, the term ‘globalization’ is understood to mean a multifaceted process inclusive of, but not limited to, economic expansion.

Borderlines and Borderlands

The use by the autocratic rulers of some Asian states of such terms as “Asian values” to defend acts that most democratically governed states would condemn as acts of tyranny is, at best, selective...But it does serve to remind us that if we wish to assert our belief in the universal, we have to begin by declaring our willingness to assume, and to defend, at least some of the values of a highly specific way of life.

[Anthony Pagden 2003:107]

The result of British colonialism in Southeast Asia was a change in the way people within borderlands were viewed by the dominant polities. This transnational phenomenon of 18th and 19th century globalization caused a dramatic shift in how the margins of sovereign lands were viewed as well as the people who lived within them (Battersby 1998-1999:474). Prior to the French and British era of “high imperialism,” a term used by socialists and established by Lenin in 1916, polities competing for hegemony viewed boundaries as “negotiable” (Oneal 1988:1). With the intervention of these Western colonial powers, the concept of fixed borderlines was introduced.

This notion of geographically-fixed borderlines versus flexible borderlands also relates to broader more abstract views of reality. Western cultures, according to Kathleen Higgins, adhere to a viewpoint based on Plato’s idea that stasis is “real” and “eternal” and that change is part of the visible world of illusion. This culturally specific view of a static reality infuses itself within the social sciences with the conceptualization of space “as a pre-given, unchanging territorial platform upon which social action occurs” (Brenner 1999:44) and appears in “major strands” of research including globalization studies. Social boundaries are tied to the bounded “territorial nation-state conceptualizing” (Ibid) a “spatially fixed community” (Ibid). This rigid construct conceptualizes change as taking place only “within the fixed territorial boundaries of a state,

society, culture, or economy rather than through the continual production, reconstruction, or transformation of those boundaries and the spatial practices they enclose” (Brenner 1999:48).

The tension between notions of borderlines and borderlands can be seen in the distinction that Henri Lefebvre makes between abstract space and social space. He views abstract space as hierarchical and relevant to the political realm for control over social structure where as social space relates to the “lived experience that is externalized and materialized through action by all members of society” (cited in Gottdiener 1993:131). Individuals utilizing the abstract model of space are constantly attempting to “reign in and control the social space of everyday life, with its constant changes” (Ibid). However, boundaries and “regulated forms” are transcended in social space. Lefebvre’s notion of space is one of a system in constant flux with instant deconstruction of “static oppositions or dualism” (Ibid) giving a “fluid dimension to social space” (Ibid). Space is viewed as complex, manifesting itself as “perceived, conceived, and lived” (Ibid). Gottdiener describes Lefebvre’s theory regarding space as being:

...at once a physical environment that can be perceived, a semiotic abstraction that informs both how ordinary people negotiate space (the mental maps studied by geographers) and the space of corporations, planners, and the like; and, finally, a medium through which the body lives out its life in interaction with other bodies. Social relations are also spatial relations. We cannot talk about one without the other [1993:131].

Lefebvre theorizes that social relationships are spatial relationships and this relationship cannot be severed. In light of this view, all notions of space including symbolic models, material creations, and other external expressions are interconnected manifestations that proceed from human “spatial practice” (cited in Gottdiener 1993:131). Interpersonal actions upon the *terra firma* within borderlands must be altered when alternate political conceptualization of that space is imposed.

Michael Kearney argues for this notion in his discussion about borderlands and the borderline between the United States and Mexico. He tells us that the formation of bounded nation-states is a necessary transformation from the flexible borders that functions “to consolidate internal social differentiation as national unity” (Kearney 1991:78) and affect “differentiation of peoples on a global scale (Ibid). This differentiation in the case of the United States and Mexico is from the “Anglo Self and Mexican Other” (Kearney 1991:79). For Kearney as well as for Lefebvre, the alteration of space with the abstract construction of a borderline is imposed upon the lived experience of those within the region.

Higgins discusses the view of abstract notions regarding the physical environment. Comparing notions from the East with those from Platonic philosophical roots, she asserts that the idea of relationships between the land and what is real developed very differently in many Eastern cultures. For them, she says, change and the natural world are what are real. This held true for culture in the Thai/Burmese borderlands prior to the 20th century. For people within these cultures, the concept of overlapping and shifting boundary lines and borderlands related to a generalized notion of the function of land and the natural world. The introduction of what Higgins identified as a “static, bounded” world-view from modern Western culture onto the geography of a region with a notion of shifting borderlands dramatically impacted social relationships. The porous boundaries that defined personal relationships became bounded reflections of the geopolitical territories imposed by the colonial powers.

The notion of porous boundaries is similar to the idea expressed by Higgins about the Native North American view of the land and the natural environment. The traditional Native American view is that the land is sacred and living; it would be disrespectful to enclose or own land. Native Americans felt this act of enclosing cut off the earth’s energy. The Karen

traditionally are animists who view all things as possessing energy and spirits. Like the Native Americans, adoption of the British concept of fixed borderlines in Siam³ and Burma conflicts with this view.

Both the Native American and the Karen relationship to the earth correlates with Aldo Leopold's land ethic in which he calls for a broader view of our vision of community. "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (Leopold 1987:204). Recognizing this cultural distinction in conceptualizing relationships to the natural world takes us beyond notions of fixed borderlines to an examination of what Susan Friedman calls "borderlands" and the territory "inbetween" in conceptualizing the world in general (Friedman 1998:67,135). Her definition of culture is:

...historically produced, ever changing, and always reactively and syncretistically formed (and reformed) in relation to other cultures. Any culture...is always already intercultural and syncretist...cultures tend to erect boundaries between themselves and other cultures, defensively defining their own identity through assertion of difference from others. Such boundaries - often erected as a means of dominance over disempowered others or protection from more powerful others - obscure the syncretist borderlands of cultural exchange, intermingling, and mutual influence. [1998:135]

This geopolitical⁴ conceptualization of cultural axes allows us to see boundaries, borderlands and the space "inbetween" "as the place where different axes intersect" (1998:109). She recognizes these axes as sets and subsets of individual or group identity or practices that are continuously in flux.

Anthropologist James Clifford relates a story about an elderly East Indian woman who reminisced about her experience in borderlands and questioned the reasoning behind the abstract

3 Siam and Siamese are used for the country currently known as Thailand prior to the name change that took place in 1941. Thailand and Thai are used for references post-1941.

4 Geopolitics is defined by Friedman as "questions of power as they manifest in relation to space on the planet Earth" (Friedman 1998:109).

boundary line imposed by nation-states. As she looked out of her airplane window, she was recalling the dynamic flow of the lived experience she had in earlier times when “cultural exchange, intermingling, and mutual influence” (1997:332) enriched the lives of individuals rather than the stasis that secures a state. This was a return to what she had left years prior to India’s being partitioned (Ibid). She asked her grandson if she would see the borderlines from the airplane as she traveled. He told her no, there would not be different colors like on a map. Her response was:

But surely, there’s something-trenches perhaps, or soldiers or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land...if there aren’t any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where’s the difference then? And if there’s no difference, both sides will be the same; it’ll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then-Partition and all the killing and everything-if there isn’t something in between” [1997:332-333].

The physical landscape this elderly Indian woman looked down upon remained open and free of barriers. However, the abstract, geopolitical landscape had changed, and with that, the way people conceptualized the region and moved through the space had also changed. The reconfiguration of the abstract concept regarding geography inhibited movement in the concrete world. This inhibited physical movement and placed the memory of catching “a train in Dhaka” to “get off in Calcutta” without intervention in a radically altered geographical context. Lefebvre’s view of binary forces, abstract space and social space, are clearly illustrated here as the “production of space” under political forces have “reigned in” the social movement that had previously been so fluid.

Social relationships, as Lefebvre theorized, are spatial relationships. The concept of bounded nation-states informed the notion this woman had of interaction with the “Other,” those on the opposite side of the line. This woman accepted the imposition of the theoretical constructs

established by the state so completely that she expected that a physical manifestation of this notion would be expressed on the landscape.

Marginality

Marginality as conventionally defined refers on the one hand to the dual impact that two cultures make upon an individual and, on the other hand, to the responses which an individual makes to this dual impact.

[Jiri Kolaja and Sidney J. Kaplan 1960:337]

But, what of those who do not 'buy into' the authority of and boundaries established by, the nation-state? What of those who live along and upon the land where this theoretical boundary line is supposed to exist? How does this binary relationship between "abstract space" and "social space" play out in the periphery, the margins of these spaces?

Forms of marginality can occur within any geographical terrain. It is a condition that exists when there is "incomplete socialization into the dominant value system of the collectivity to which one belongs" (Halsey 1990:203) occurs. Marginal individuals are confronted with incompatible and "competing social worlds." Kearney argues that America has tremendous power to "offset other bases of collective identity" (1991:79) gathering in those who potentially could be peripheral, or who exist in "competing social worlds," (Ibid) into the constructed image of an "American." However, this does not mean equality within the nation-state. The differentiation that existed outside the boundary of the nation-state is reformed under the state umbrella. It is a dualistic function simultaneously uniting under the banner of the nation-state while recreating the "social and cultural differentiation" (Ibid) that exists under the "disciplinary power of the state."

Thus, marginality is created as a result of the nation-state collecting a diverse group of people within its borders and evaluating how they measure up to standards established by the state. The disciplinary power of the state occurs when the state, establishing the frameworks within which bounded categories are determined and evaluation systems are set in place, thereby institutionalizes the Other within the state domain. For Kearney, public education is an example of this process. He argues that this is done by establishing a criterion by which schools are rated “good” and “poor” and then students are graded “such that they come to occupy the same social class position as their parents” (Kearney 1991:79).

This form of marginality is ‘systemic marginality.’ In it, a “socially constructed system of inequitable relations within a hegemonic order” (Mehretu 2000:92) is deliberately created by those who are dominant to “achieve specific desirable outcomes of political control, social exclusion and economic exploitation” (Ibid). Immigrants can experience this type of marginality when the issue of immigration status is used politically to rouse nationalist sentiment against them. Often, the immigrants are used as “scapegoats for local problems” (Mehretu 2000:93). The status of immigrants “is one of the most insidious factors of vulnerability for marginalization and exploitation worldwide” (Ibid). These same individuals can be victims of “contingent marginality” (Mehretu 2000:90) which takes place when there is “competitive inequality” and segments of the population are not prepared to navigate within the market due to “location, cultural restrictions, inadequate labour skills and lack of useful information about opportunities” (Ibid).

In speaking of marginality, Kolaja refers to an “axis of acceptance-rejection” (1960:337) within cultural perspectives. This is a systemic marginality that correlates with Kearney’s argument (Ibid). The tension established within the individual regarding identity and alienation is

an expression of the Other which does not 'fit' in the acceptable social space constructed by the dominant culture and nation-state. Alienated individuals traverse a shifting geopolitical landscape; although they are within the boundaries of the nation-state, they are outside the acceptable criteria-rated social norms. This marginalized position is inconsistent with the "rankings in any of the matters falling within the scope of the hierarchy" (Dickie-Clark 1966: 367) of the nation-state.

This marginalized Other is a necessary component in the nation-state process of criterion-based differentiation. Identifying an Other draws crisply bounded borderlines more clearly and also defines the acceptable Self. Friedman discusses the double meaning "imbedded" in the word *identity* and the method through which it is constructed (1998:19). A relational construction "through difference from the other" (Ibid) is created when group identity is established upon which group identification depends. This is a "binary system of 'us' versus 'them' (Ibid)." It is the difference that defines the group and yet, *identity* also indicates "sameness, as in the word *identical*; an identity affirms some form of commonality, some shared ground" (Friedman 1998:19). Thus marginality, creation of the Other, can be a tool used by the nation-state to sharpen the edges of distinction, thereby creating a rigidly-bounded social and geopolitical terrain.

A nation-state's power is threatened when the margins of its social and territorial boundaries become porous. Kearney states that an "assault on the integrity of its [a nation-state] border is an assault on its power-its power to order and to differ" (1991:89). This is not solely in reference to the negotiation of physical terrain; it is when the cultural criteria set out by the state are threatened. The subjugation of all other languages to that of English in the United States by making English the "official language" is an example of legislation designed to shift the "defense

of social and cultural spaces where the state still has power to legislate identities and practices” (Kearney 1991: 83). Here the English-speaking population is raised above the non-English speaking population on the hierarchal structure established by the nation-state. This marginalizes the non-English population and brings the relationship between those who do not speak English fluently and the nation-state into question.

With change taking place in the conceptualization of abstract space, the correlating change in social space and the notion of marginalization follows. Katherine Pratt Ewing states that Muslims conceptualized “space in terms of center and periphery without worrying too much about borders until late in the colonial era” (1998:26, 56). The Tuareg, a semi-nomadic Muslim group who travel though the borderlands, “get drawn into contemporary ‘border’ issues as their spaces are carved up into the contours of the nation-state” (Ibid). However, Ewing argues, the Tuareg experience territory and boundaries in a way that “cannot be mapped onto the image of border crossing. [It is the] centers, peripheries, and exile [that] would seem to be more salient images” (1998:264) for conceptualizing territory for the Tuareg. Ewing’s choice of ‘exile’ for a discourse on the Other who is outside the center relates to Kolaja’s “axis of identification-alienation” for ‘exile’ infers being outside the preferred zone of existence and thereby alienation from this region.

Like the Tuareg, the Karen were impacted by the mapping of the Siamese/Burmese borderline. The notion of bounded territories and mapping changed the social position of the Karen, disrupting their traditional relationships, and placing them in a marginalized position. This paper discusses the Karen people and how these shifts in geopolitical conditions continue to impact their lives today. The discussion is divided into five chapters. Chapter One is an introduction that lays out an overview of globalization and the by-products that came about due

to globalization throughout time. This provides a foundation for the rest of the discussion.

Chapter Two contains a discussion of two geographic discourses that collide during globalization. Within this chapter, differing views of boundaries, space, and political structures are examined as they relate to physical and human geography. The concept of geographical niches impacting human geography as a significant indicator of group identity is examined within this chapter. This discussion includes anthropologist Edmund Leach's classification of "Hill People" and "Valley People" as they correlate to anthropologist David Marlow's notion of the "Wild" and "Sown" respectively. For both Leach and Marlow, the Karen held a unique position as intermediaries between these groups.

Chapter Three traces the history of the Karen in Southeast Asia and the shift in their image as Western ideologies were established. As a consequence of the introduction of surveying and mapping, a new way of viewing boundary lines, territory, and sovereignty came about. The dominant peoples in this region dramatically changed the way they conceptualized the relationship of the minority populations to the land and to themselves. The Karen's century old position as intermediary, a symbiotic relationship between the "Sown" and "Wild" (Marlow 1979: 202), was disputed. Bounded categories of the Other were created pushing the minority peoples including the Karen into the margins of society.

Chapter Four examines the marginalization of the Karen on the contemporary Thai/Burmese borderland. As a result of the global processes, basic concepts were altered with regard to land, people, and political interaction. The conflicts and conformities taking place as result of the internal conflict in Burma (Myanmar) and the Thai government's pluralistic perspective of minorities that was formed in the last century and the resulting bounded categorizing of the Karen as hill tribe people are examined here. This realignment of the Karen

with the hill tribes was a shift in status that disempowered the Karen by grouping them with peoples viewed as aliens rather than with the Tai ethnic majority as in previous times. The term Tai as used in this paper refers to Tai-speaking people who are not confined to the geobody of Thailand. The term Thai refers to the citizens of the nation of Thailand.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I discuss the necessity of another realignment that needs to take place by constructing a new empowering narrative. This is happening to a limited extent with a portion of the Karen population who are taking a proactive stance and constructing a new narrative focusing on their role as stewards of the forests and their crafts. Although the Karen are used as a case study, this notion of creating empowering narratives has broader implications. These broader implications are discussed by means of the question “How can a narrative be created that depicts the Karen and other border peoples as individuals who ‘stitch’ nation-states together through their unique position?” This position offers the potential of fluidly moving through porous borderlands rather than as “security risks.”



Figure 1 Map of Southeast Asia (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/reference_maps/southeast_asia.html)



Figure 2 Map of Thailand and borderland area (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/reference_maps/southeast_asia.html).

CHAPTER TWO: A NEW GEOGRAPHIC DISCOURSE

Geography of the Thai/Burmese Borderland Region

There is no start to these mountains – they go straight up sheer out of the plain of the river – a dense steamy jungle forest [sic] of bamboo and teak full of fantastic birds and beasts and enormous butterflies...

[Edmund Leach 2000:218].

The geographic features described by anthropologist Edmund Leach in the quote above⁵ are in the Kachin state of Burma, a region that abuts China. A more subdued, but significant mountainous formation frames the eastern borderlands of Burma and spills over into modern-day Thailand. Some individual peaks here soar to a height of 8,000 feet with ranges ascending from 2,500 to 3,000 feet above the level of the surrounding terrain (de Terra 1944:72). These are the highlands of Southeast Asia which ignore the mapped boundary line, and embrace the land on both sides of the young, deeply entrenched Salween River Valley (Ibid, Anderson 1993:36). This region is shrouded in dense rain forests of teak and various other hardwoods, bamboo, and hundreds of plants used by the local people (Anderson 1993:84, 146).

The Karen have traditionally resided in the mountains of northern Thailand and eastern Burma with some villages penetrating into the lowlands of both countries (Hinton 1983:156, Keys 1979:15). The highlands are also home to a number of other tribal ethnic minorities referred to as “highlanders” or, “hill tribe people” who traditionally live in the forested highlands of northwest Thailand and southeast Burma (Myanmar). This mountainous terrain displays topographic features that range from alluvial basins or “valleys” that provide the perfect

⁵ This quote is from a personal letter Leach wrote to his mother on August 9, 1939.

environment for wet rice cultivation to mountain gorges with steep sloping “hills” where dry rice cultivation is practiced (Leach 2000:227, Marlowe 1979:166).

Boundaries, Space and Political Structure

...we may see numerous boundaries which might not be connected but which were flexible. Some might be thick, some might be blurred. Many disappeared or never existed. Siam was not like “an old axe,” but a discontinuous, patchy arrangement of power units where people of the different overlords mingled together in the same area...

[Thongchai Winichakul 1994:79]

The region in which the ancient Karen resided was not part of the kingdom of Siam or the ancient court of Ava⁶, which is also attributed to the Burmese kingdom (Winichakul 1994:64). The boundary was not a line but a “tract of mountains and forest...which could not be said to belong to either nation (Ibid).” For these Southeast Asians, a king presided over a sacred realm that was a porous and flexible area (Winichakul 1994:22). The “sacred space of the center” (Winichakul 1994:22) of this area reflects a “microcosm of the cosmic order” (Ibid).

The influence of Traiphum⁷ cosmology, a Theravada Buddhist⁸ concept of three worlds, as well as other types of sacred topography found in this region all impacted the spatial perception of the people living here (Winichakul 1994:20). This use of a sacred topography does

6 “The Court of Ava” was how the ancient seat of government of Burma was referred to and was the ancient capital city near Mandalay (Myint-U 2006:9)

7 Traiphum cosmology is, according to Winichakul, a type of sacred topography. (1994:33).

8 Theravada Buddhism is the dominant form of Buddhism practiced in all counties of South-east Asia with the exception of Vietnam where Mahayana Buddhism is the central faith (Houtart 1976:1). In Theravada Buddhist countries, there are close ties between the monarchy and the Theravada Buddhist faith (Houtart 1976:12). A distinguishing characteristic of Theravada Buddhism in Burma and Thailand was that the king was considered to be a living Buddha, and this tradition continues in some rural areas of Thailand today (Houtart 1976:10).

not preclude their having a working knowledge of towns, coastlines, and mountain ranges in their region, but that these elements were not defined in our Western scientific terms (Winichakul 1994:33). As the early residents of this region moved thorough space, they experienced “shifts from one kind of knowledge to another or from one domain of spatial conception to another” (Winichakul 1994:22). These “terrains of knowledge” (Ibid), like the polities upon their soil, were porous and flexible, providing overlapping and shifting layers that changed in response to a given situation. This manner of “imagining” the earth’s terrain and the territories upon its surface was radically different from the one prevalent in the West.

Within this flexible conceptualization of space, the tribal people living in the regions in between kingdoms maintained autonomy. The Mogaung realm existed in Burma during the 1600s and 1700s (Leach 2000:236). It is noted by Edmund Leach that in this realm the “Prince could only undertake effective military or political action with the aid and consent of the Hill subjects⁹, who were not subjects at all (Ibid). The Prince’s claims regarding territorial suzerainty were optimistic in the extreme (Ibid). Moreover, this example was “in no way an extreme or atypical instance nor have the conditions which prevailed in the eighteenth century altered substantially in recent time” [1959] (Ibid). This concept is reiterated by Leach in his appraisal of the polities in this region of Southeast Asia:

...nominal overlordship of a Valley prince over a tract of Hill country did not entail the merging of the Valley people with the Hill people in any cultural sense. Whatever the overall political structure the two categories remained distinct in language, religion, and ecological adaptation...they themselves [the Hill chieftains] claimed to be lords in their own right, subject to no outside authority [Leach 2000:234].

9 E.R. Leach uses the nomenclature “Hill People” or “Valley People” when categorizing people who fall into the ecological niches determined by the geographical elements within this region (2000:227).

Peoples coexisted within this region with “interpenetrating political systems” (Leach 2000:226) that were not “separate countries inhabited by distinct populations” (Ibid). The frontier in this region was a “border zone” where a dynamic interpenetration of cultures took place. Within this zone there “were not clearly defined lines but zones of mutual interest” (Ibid). Although not a new concept, “it needs to be distinguished clearly from the precise MacMahon¹⁰ lines of modern political geography” (Ibid).

Each of these “interpenetrating political systems” can be placed in two different categories with each category influenced by one of the two “*axis mundi*” (India and China) of development in Southeast Asia.¹¹ The ancient political entity named Nanchao serves as an example of the Indian type of political system, despite its historic location within what now is mainland China. Leach identifies this Indian political system with the “Valley People.” He states:

Nanchao was inhabited by people of Thai speech... it ceased to exist as an independent political entity in 1253, following conquest by Kublai Khan...Nanchao should not be thought of as a state with borders but as a capital city with a wide and variable sphere of influence. The inhabitants of Nanchao had no specific identification with the state, there was no Nanchao nation which would be dispersed by the elimination of Nanchao as a separate political entity. Indeed Kublai Khan’s occupation of the capital – which was notably peaceful – need have had no effect on the population whatsoever. [2000:231]

10 The MacMahon line, drawn in 1914 to separate China and Tibet from British India, was part of the defense policy of the British Indian Empire (Paul 2004:309).

11 Leach states that the entire frontier region addressed in this discussion was “continuously subjected to influences from both Indian and China” (2000:116). The Valley People were a “non-unilineal kinship organization linked with charismatic despotism” that was influenced by Indian “social organization and politics” (2000:17). The Hill People were patrilineal with hierarchical influence from the Chinese social organization and link their kinship system with trade practices (2000:17).

An unstable political environment is the result of this Indian prototype practiced by the Valley People where “charismatic leadership rather than bureaucratic continuity” (Leach 2000:230) existed. The organizational pattern is based on religious cults of Hinduism and Buddhism, with mythological texts serving as the “nucleus of royal tradition” (Ibid).

However, the system by which the Hill People live reflects Chinese influence. Hill People are animists, a spiritual persuasion that Leach identifies as “fundamentally a cult of dead ancestors” (2000:239) a practice resembling Chinese Confucianism. Both the Chinese and the Hill People connected their marriage practices with trade (2000:240). They created “ties of affinal kinship” (Ibid) that have broad ramifications. In contrast, the Valley People “do not give their women away to strangers” (Ibid). The political system for the Hill People is structured to contain offices that are “governed by rules” whereby individuals gain office through lineage or merit (Ibid).



Figure 3 Style of swidden field used for dry rice cultivation. Chiang Rai Province, Thailand (Verchot 2007).



Figure 4 Paddie Rice Farming, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand (Verchot 2007)

The “Sown” and the “Wild”

They [the Karen] were not of the “[S]own” alone, but the guardians and facilitators of those places that sown used but did not occupy. Conceptually they were the known that extended into the unknown, people like us but still different.

[David Marlowe 1979:205]

The traditional social structure used by the Hill People divided access to political, economic, and religious power and created an environment in which ethnic groups lived in a “symbiotic relationship” (Keyes 1979:30). Within this framework, the Karen are central to understanding the broad social relationships and processes that typify this area (Marlowe

1979:166). The Karen held a transitional position between polities and “between the ecological niches of the ‘hill’ and the ‘valley’” (Ibid). Without the Karen, the hierarchy of relationships seems to be a “set of polar opposites” (Ibid). Factoring the Karen into this equation reveals the comparative nature of “social identity and the process of transformation of identity” (Ibid).

The terms “valley” and “hill” are also thought of in terms of the “Sown” and the “Wild” respectively (Keyes 1979: 170). These “polar opposites” are defined by the modes of agriculture practiced (wet-rice cultivation vs. dry-rice slash and burn agriculture), religious practice (Buddhist vs. animist), lineage structure, (bilateral vs. unilineal), and political structure (centralized vs. decentralized) (Ibid). The “Sown” relates to the “civilized” valley cultures and the “Wild” to the “uncivilized” hills (Keyes 1979: 72). However, both cultures occupy porous “non-bounded realms” (Keyes 1979: 192).

The Karen filled the role of “holders of the Wild and facilitators of the border” (Keyes 1979:200) for the polities of the valley princes. They were seen as a necessary “link between the hills and valleys in a scheme through which lowland polities were able to incorporate the hills as a functional part of their domain” (Ibid) and in effect the Karen formed the “physical boundaries of the [lowland] state” (Ibid).

Structural divisions both separated and connected the Karen with other ethnic groups (Keyes 1979:4&30). As will be shown below, these divisions varied in relation to a given context (Ibid). Ethnicity itself is understood as a mutable element for both individuals and groups (Kunstadter 1979:120-121). Possessing active boundaries that reconfigure in response to alterations within and without the designated group, ethnicity in the traditional Southeast Asian sense allowed for permutations to fluidly occur (Ibid).

Karen Identity

I am Pagagayaw, the free man who roams every place where there is woods and mountains. Other tribal fellows call me “yang aloe” – “kariang.” But I am of the tribe of human beings. “I am human being” is the proclamation of the name of my tribe.

[Pho Le Pa, cited in Laungaramsri 2001:31]

Ethnic boundaries could also reconfigure in response to alternations in behavior and language. “Any individual can start as a member of one category and end up in another” (Leach 2000:237). The ethnic boundaries of groups in this region are as loosely bounded as the territories these people reside upon (Ibid).

The Karen are a loosely-formed group of peoples who, despite a line of common descent, view the village as the largest social and political unit (Marshall 1997:127). They possess no history of a hierarchical society with a privileged class, royalty or chiefs.

For the Karen, the largest ethnic minority in Burma and Thailand, language is considered a fundamental cultural trait that solidifies their identity (Keyes 1979:10-11). Despite the fact that the Karennic languages are not mutually understandable, it is through their Karennic languages that the people of different Karen groups “place themselves in the larger family of Karen speakers” (Laungaramsri 2001: 33). Karennic languages are distinctive when compared to other languages in Southeast Asia. In fact, no relationship between these other languages and Karennic languages has been established (Ibid). The Karen people recognize the distinctive nature of their language (Keyes 1979:10, Delang 2003:134).

The Karen view of ethnicity is not based on phenotype but is cultural and social (Kunstadter 1979:159-160). If an individual’s “behavior is appropriate to a category, one is not subject to the rules of the category of origin. That is, a Karen who behaves as a Thai within a Thai setting transgresses no rules for Karen when doing so” (Marlow 1979:174). A Thai may

become Karen by speaking Karen and taking on Karen ways of eating and working (Kunstader 1979:158).

This is a common view of group classification in traditional cultures of Southeast Asia where ritual, language, and dress are the primary markers used for group identification (Marlow 1979:168). Of these markers language is the most significant if one is to be considered a Karen by the Karen (Kunstader 1979:124). However, with a change of language and behavior, an individual can shift from one ethnic group to another without any “question of ‘passing’ or ‘deception’” (Keyes 1979:169). The acceptance of an individual moving between groups is based on a presupposition by the Karen that there is one “common humanity – a fundamental sameness of all men” (Ibid). This view of a “common humanity” is prevalent in Southeast Asia and is incorporated into the many legends regarding the creation of humankind of various ethnic groups (Ibid). In regard to Karen creation myths, humans are considered to be all “children of the same parents” (Keyes 1979:170), giving humans “coevality and interrelatedness to each other in time and place” (Ibid).

For the Karen, identity is formed by a fusion of language with behavior. This behavior includes the notions attributed to the terms of the “valley” and the “hills” with the correlating terms of “Sown” and “Wild.” These are the important diacriticals used by the Karen rather than ethnicity (Jorgensen 1989:22).

Karen and the Hill Tribes

The various ethnic groups were, before their presence became less admissible, typical of “Thai” society. It was probably quite common for people to communicate with each other in several languages, as is still the case among the highland people in Mae Chan District, Chiang Rai, where several ethnic groups share the same location.

For the Karen, the sphere of the alien tribes is the hills. These aliens are members of tribes that have no connection with the lowlands (Marlowe 1979:196). The Karen feel no kinship with these people (Ibid). Tribes in this group such as the Meo, Lisu, Lahu¹², and so as forth are true “hillmen” who operate within a single ecological niche (Ibid). The Karen, however, weave the hills and the plains together with their presence in each. In this, way the Karen serve as mediators between the two. They see themselves as occupying “an interstitial place” (Ibid). They view themselves as an “extension of the civilized into the hills...as equally deeply invested in the universe of the sphere of these aliens is the hills” (Marlowe1979:196, Lehman 1979: 241). The Karen are equally vested in the realm of the ‘alien’ hill tribes and that of the ‘civilized’ lowlanders.¹³

The Karen also distinguish themselves from other tribes linguistically. When speaking about the ‘true uplanders;’ the Karen use the term *keh* as a prefix such as in *keh meo* (Meo) or *keh lissaw* (Lisu) (Marlowe 1979:196). The *keh* prefix is used for ‘people of the wild’ who are

12 The Karen reside in the low altitude region of the mountains, along with the Lua, Khamu and H’tin tribes with the Meo, Yao, Lahu, and Akha tribes categorized as high hill (mountain) dwellers (Fujioka 2002:3). This is an artificially constructed category, as the people designated as Karen do not call themselves by that name and are an amalgam of people who have different, although related, languages and cultures (Sponsel 2000:138). The groups recognized by scholars as Karen are the Sgaw (being the largest of the sub-groups), Bghe, Pgo, and Pa-O (or Taungthu) (Ibid.).

13 Charles Keyes states that the Karen who lived in Siam rather than the northern Thai region included “wet-rice cultivators” a lowland and valley practice rather than “swidden agriculture” a highland or hill practice (Keyes 1979:51). This is also noted by James Hamilton, who states that a higher percentage of Karen than of the other groups of people designated as hill tribes live in the lowlands and practice wet-rice cultivation. Many of these ‘hill tribe’ peoples practice slash and burn agriculture as the primary means of subsistence within this Himalayan foothill region also referred to as the hills (1976:1).

all swidden¹⁴ farmers and uplanders. However to describe those people speaking Tai languages the Karen use the term *zo* and when referring to themselves they use *bu kin yo* (Ibid). These three distinctions separate the people dwelling in the hills from those who dwell in the valleys and set the intermediary Karen apart. The Karen are thus in an in between group, neither entirely civilized lowlander nor wild uplander.

Karen Presence in the Lowlands and Valleys

The presence of the Karen in the region now known as Thailand is noted in an ancient chronicle of Haripunjaya, the first recorded kingdom of northern Thailand that was referred to as Yuan and then later as Lannathai¹⁵ (Keyes 1979:25-26). This chronicle, called *Camdevivamsa*, was written in Pali¹⁶ by a Yuan monk and dates between the late 1300s and the early 1400s. In this text, the Karen and Lua are said to have dwelled within the forests in the region of the ‘sown’ around the site that was the ancient city of Chiang Mai¹⁷(Keyes 1979:26-27). This fact is substantiated by other Yuan chronicles and legends and by Karen oral legend (Ibid). The Karen are not viewed as the ‘Other’ by the Yuan or the Siamese. Keyes makes the following comment:

14 Swidden agriculture is also known as slash-and-burn, rotational agriculture, and shifting cultivation (Anderson1993:47-48). This form of agriculture has been practiced in hilly areas of the world for thousand of years (Ibid). A common feature is the clearing the land of its vegetation, burning the debris, and planting crops in the soil enriched by the ash (Ibid). The term swidden comes from the Old English word, swathe, referring to the burned clearings made in the British Isles centuries ago (Ibid).

¹⁵ The inhabitants of Yuan or Lannathai were speakers of the Tai language (Keyes 1979:52).

¹⁶ Pali is an archaic language used in ancient Burmese and Siamese manuscripts (Mason 1872:26). Pali was disseminated along with Buddhist ideologies through Burma and Siam starting in circa A.D. 387 (Mason 1872:26, Michelson 1928:101).

¹⁷ Chiang Mai was built in circa 700 A.D (Keyes 1979:26)

This is not to say that the Karen are not culturally distinctive from the Yuan or Siamese. Indeed, some cultural and linguistic differences are presupposed whenever ethnic distinctions are made. The point is that cultural and linguistic differences do not themselves determine that a group will be ethnically distinct. For ethnic distinctions to emerge and be perpetuated there must be structural divisions among people who live in close proximity and maintain regular interaction in regard to religious truth, power, and/or wealth [1979:29].

What Keyes is establishing here is the relationship between the Karen and the ancient Yuan and Siamese who were “becoming the dominant people in northern Thailand” (Ibid). The Yuan and the Siamese are the ancestors of the current Tai ethnic majority in this Thai/Burmese region today (Ibid). Ethnicity is not perceived in the same way by all people. Keyes believes that as “traits that are manipulated in determining ethnic affiliation vary from one case to another and may, in fact, not be particularly distinctive even though they are believed to be” (Ibid). However, the constant is the “structural division of access to religious truth, power, and/or wealth” (Ibid). This is how the Karen viewed themselves and were viewed by ethnic majorities prior to intervention by Western political forces. It establishes a baseline from which the magnitude of change and the type of change that took place can be analyzed.

In Burma, there was also a fixed idea of class that impacted the ethnic minorities (Marlow 1979:197). This “fixity” was so rigid that G. E. Harvey recognized in it aspects of a caste system with “rights accruing from a certain office” (Marlowe 1979:197) and penalties for marriage outside ones fixed class, possibly subject to the King’s degrading the offender to a lower class. Leach also identifies “elements of the Hindu caste ideology” (2000:240) as having been “all along...present in the Valley culture” (Ibid) in the Burmese territory. He attributes this propensity to the strong Indian influence that “has been felt particularly in the fields of politics and religion and has affected the Valley People rather than the Hill People” (2000:229).

Although the Siamese did not have a system as rigidly fixed as the Burman, class distinctions of a sort did exist (Marlowe 1979:201). The Karen were incorporated into the Siamese social hierarchy, but at the lowest level (Ibid). This incorporation functioned both to integrate the Karen and separate them from the larger Siamese society (Ibid). For the Burmese and the Siamese, the Karens' class distinction facilitated the traditional role of the Karen as mediator between the hills and lowlands. They were viewed as a beneficial buffer between the Siamese (Thai) and Burmese kingdoms being the "boundaries between the domains" (Ibid). In Siam, the Karen did not have to contend with the same formal class structure as in Burma, but the relationships appear to have been structured in a similar fashion (Keyes 1979:198). Within both regions, the Karen served as "the necessary link between hill and valley in the scheme through which lowland polities have been able to incorporate the hills as a functional part of their domain" (Marlowe 1979:201).

In this linking position, the Karen were ranked both by the Siamese and the Burman to be above the hill tribe people, who are considered 'aliens' and outside the lowlands, but at the lowest hierarchal level of the Siamese and Burmese kingdoms¹⁸ (Marlowe 1979:197). The term 'kingdom' is used here in the pre-colonial sense of human geography and not bounded territories (Winichakul 2004:79). When considering kingdom in this manner, it is understood that the sovereignty of the kingdom was not threatened by changing territorial margins, since the political realm was 'mapped' by relationships, not by bounded territory (Winichakul 2004:79). The borderlands were protected by the Karen who were viewed as "holders of the Wild and facilitators of the border" (Keyes 1979: 220).

18 Several Karen are documented as having received hereditary office positions from the court of Siam (Keyes 1979:32).

Prior to the establishment of a fixed national boundary line, the king of Siam (Thailand) operated under a system in which multiple tributary kings ruled under him. All authority was gained through the establishment of appropriate lineage and access to ‘supreme cosmic powers’ (Winichakul 2000:533). Status was confirmed by bestowing honors and the giving of tribute, gifts and protection money (Leach 2000:234).

Establishing the loyalty necessary for sensitive borderland regions required the establishment of traditional reciprocal relationships (Laungaramsri 2001: 35). An account in the Yonok chronicle documents a 1783 event, which shows the relationship between the Prince of Chiang Mai of the Lanna Kingdom and a Karen:

Phraya Wachirapakan then assigned Phraya Samlan and thirty serfs to give 40 fine pieces of crockery as a gift to Yang Kaang Hua Taad, the guardian chief of the red Karen, persuading (them) to give allegiance (to the Lanna Kingdom)... Then Phraya Wachirapakan wrote a letter and arranged 30 sets of fine dishware coupled with a piece of silk cloth for Khun Michue to give as gift to Kang Saeng Luang, the outpost Karen chief of the western bank of the Khong (Salween) River. Yang Kang Saeng Luang agreed to give obeisance [Ibid].

In this situation, the Prince of Lanna was under the dominion of the King of Siam. Although the Siamese king claimed to be supreme, he in turn recognized the existence of the Burmese king as his peer and the possibility of the Burmese king’s making mutual claim over the same territories concurrently (Winichakul 2000:533). Beyond this, the kings of the Siamese and Burmese regions recognized China and India as the ideological “axis mundi” (Ibid).

Colonial Influence and Bounded Territory

...national self-determination represents a destabilizing force: it provides both a criterion and a moral imperative by which the boundaries of states should be redrawn to reflect the aspirations of national groups, and it empowers and legitimizes national groups as actors in their own right. On the other hand, national self-determination has added

powerful justification for the existence of separate nation-states and for obligations owed to them rather than to humankind in general.

[Andrew Hurrell 2003:283]

Tribal people have, of course, never been simply “local”: they have always been rooted and routed in particular landscapes, regional and interregional networks. What may be distinctively modern, however, is the relentless assault on indigenous sovereignty by colonial powers, transnational capital, and emerging nation-states.

[James Clifford 1997:254]

The wave of globalization referred to as colonization brought India under British domination and with it, a shift in the “axis mundi” from India and China to Europe (Winichakul 2000:533). In 1886, the British annexed Burma, forcing a new conceptualization of supreme powers under the ideology of sovereign nation-states (Thomson 1995:272). This changed perception of social and political relationships from an “unbounded patron-client and center-based abstraction to the Western idea of ethnicity and nation that was a bounded, mutually exclusive entity” (Thomson 1995:281).

The Western concept of ‘boundedness’ (applied to the people and the land) categorically fixed both ethnicity and territorial lines in contrast to the relational framework in which the peoples of Siam and Burma traditionally placed these elements (Thomson 1995:281). The traditional Southeast Asian grouping of people reflected their relationship to the ecological niches and geographical elements more suitably falling into categories of “Hill People” or “Valley People” (Leach 2000:227). This world-view clashed with that of the Europeans (Ibid). Peter Hinton calls the divisions into ethnic groups imposed by the colonists “fundamentally misleading” (Hinton 1983:154). He states that the key to understanding the Karen and “highlander” groups is in terms of “economic and political interests” (Hinton 1983:154) and not the “supposed ethnic boundaries” (Ibid). The traditional Southeast Asian manner of distinguishing among groups was permeable and mutable (Leach 2000:237). By adopting the

dress, habits, and language of another group, an individual could become recognized as a full member of that group (Ibid). Cultural groups interpenetrated each other creating “zones of interest” rather than within distinct boundary lines (Leach 1960:50). The ‘axis mundi’ of this region took a dramatic shift with the colonization of India.

The British did not understand the paradigms under which the systems of Southeast Asia operated nor the effects of abruptly replacing these paradigms. As a result, British and French colonial intervention caused disruption in the Southeast Asian region. Along with the classification of peoples into ethnic groups, colonization of Burma also brought the corresponding self-identification with those British ethnic categories.

Ethnic categorization coupled with the dramatically contrasting concept of mapped territorial lines versus “ephemerally bordered, hierarchically centered territories of mainland Southeast Asia” (Thomson 1995:284), created a forum for clashing values and philosophical platforms. The traditional Southeast Asian structure for political, economic, and religious endeavor began to be “seriously challenged” (Keyes 1979:30) and then radically altered during the 1700s and 1800s.

Winichakul points out that the concept of the “geo-body” and nationhood is so deep-rooted in Western thought process that it is not recognized it as “imagining.”

Geographically speaking, the geo-body of a nation occupies a certain portion of the earth’s surface which is objectively identifiable. It appears to be concrete to the eyes as if its existence does not depend on any act of imagining. That, of course, is not the case. The geo-body of a nation is merely an effect of modern geographical discourse whose prime technology is a map.[1994:17]

This lack of recognition of the Western manner of ‘imagining’ as opposed to the “absence of definite boundaries of the premodern realm of Siam is not taken seriously” (Winichakul 1994:18) by the ruling elite of Siam. Demarcation of the boundary of a pre-modern

nation according to contemporary technology and ideology is not uncommon (Ibid). This is a practice Leach warns against in reference to the Southeast Asian region, stating that if a “proto-history is to be convincing it must be sociologically probable; it must not neglect the fixity of ecological facts and it must not postulate sharp cultural and political boundaries in a region where none exists even to this day” (2000:229).

However, the British colonization of Burma did exactly this, much to the frustration of diplomats and officials on both sides. Captain Henry Burney, the British envoy to the court of Siam, was perplexed when he persistently urged the court of Siam to set boundaries with the court of Ava and was told that “no boundaries could ever be established between the Siamese and the Burmese¹⁹...Let them [the British] enquire from the old inhabitants residing on the frontiers...what they know respecting contiguous territories” (Winichukul 1994:64). The casual manner in which establishment of boundaries was handled perplexed the British, who observed that for the Siamese in 1825, the concept of boundaries was so insignificant that “a friendship was a sufficient reason to put aside a question of such low priority” (Ibid).

For the Siamese, the boundary issue was “not at issue and nothing needed to be done” (Winichukul 1994:65). Burney finally persuaded the court of Siam to come to an agreement about boundary demarcation in 1826 (Ibid). After more that six months in Siam, Burney realized that the best he could do was have something about the boundary in the treaty he was negotiating. The lengthy article written into the Siamese British treaty simply noted that if there

¹⁹ This was not due to a lack of agreement but rather due a different concept of what a boundary was comprised. For the Siamese, the issue was not a relevant one and if anyone should decide it would be the local people not the court in Bangkok (Winichakul 1994:64).

was a dispute on either side “some officials and people from the frontier posts” (Ibid) would investigate the issue and “settle mutual boundaries in a friendly manner (Ibid).”

For the British, the “ideology of modern international politics” (Leach 2000:225) where “all states are sovereign and every piece of the earth’s surface must, by logical necessity, be the rightful legal possession of one and only one such state” (Ibid) was of utmost importance. This ideology springs from the European notion that wars are fought to defend frontiers and that from these wars emerges a “definite boundary line” that coincides with “differences of culture and language” (Ibid). For the Siamese and the Burmese, the defused edges of the realm of influence varied according to alliances established with the local people. These alliances shifted, retracting or expanding in response to battles between Ava and Siam and the court’s alliances with the people living in these outlying regions (Leach 2000: 231, Winichakul 1994: 62-63). As a result of the new geographical discourse that displaced the indigenous one, conflict, confrontation, and misunderstandings were generated (Winichakul 1994:18).

To understand how the new geographic discourse discussed above unfolded within the territory inhabited by the Karen, a short history of the Karen in Southeast Asia will be given in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: THE KAREN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

A Short History

History is always written from a sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary state apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads. What is lacking is a Nomadology, the opposite of a history.

[Deleuze and Guattari cited in Laungaramsri 2001:177]

A name is more than a label...The term is pejorative, misleading but so firmly established in daily speech that mention of "hill tribes" leaves no doubt about who is being named.

[John McKinnon 1989:307]

Early Migration

The Karen are believed to have occupied the area now known as Burma for about eight centuries, before the Burman and Tai ethnic groups arrived (Keys 1979:31). The oral history of the Karen relates that in ancient times their people lived in *Htee-Hset Met Ywa* (Land of Flowing Sands), a place believed to be in the Gobi Desert (KNU 2000:5). Although not supported by scholars, the oral history of the Karen recalls their ancestors having migrated into the region now called Burma as the first settlers there in approximately 739 B.C. (Ibid). They initially named this new land *Kaw-Lah* meaning "Green Land" (Ibid). Over time, because the land was productive and the Karen people were happy with their lives there, they changed the name to *Kawthoolei*, meaning "a pleasant land that is plentiful and peaceful" (Ibid).

This peace was disrupted when first the Mon²⁰, and then Burman people migrated into

20 The Mon are an ancient people who migrated into Burma and Thailand from southwestern China (Schliesinger 2000:30). They established the Dvaravati kingdom that extended from

this region (Ibid). Both groups practiced feudalism. In the Karen's historical memory, the Burman were brutal oppressors who subjugated and exploited the other groups. This view is still held by the Karen today. The KNU (Karen National Union)²¹ reports that "so severe [was the treatment by the Burmese] that those victimized peoples continue to harbor a deep-seated resentment of the Burman even today" (KNU 2000:6).

According to this account, many Karen fled to the east into the mountainous jungle as a result of this abusive treatment. They settled in the region that straddles the border of the nation-states of Burma and Thailand. In the Karen consciousness, being forced into this isolated region put them at a great disadvantage by cutting them off from "progress, civilization, and the rest of the world," eventually reducing them "to backward hill tribes"(KNU 2000:6).

The KNU account is substantiated by many historical accounts of the 1700s into the early 1900s (Fink 2001: x). Documentation about the Karen prior to the Konbaung dynasty²² (1752 – 1885) is rare since the records that exist are almost entirely "dynastic chronicles" (Fink 2001: x). During the Konbaung period, however, detailed documentation of Karen beliefs, customs, and experiences were recorded (Ibid). In these documents, accounts can be found of Karen living on both the plains of Burma and in the hills that straddle the Salween River (Ibid). In both the mid-1750s and 1780s, the Burmese kings attacked the Mon kingdom that existed in the region the

southern Burma to northern Thailand. This kingdom was sovereign from circa 200-900 A.D. (Ibid). The Burmese call the Mon the Talaing (2000:31).

21 The Karen National Union (KNU) is a political organization formed on February 5, 1947 by Saw Ba U Gyi, who was a Karen nationalist (Fink 2001: xxvii). The intent of this organization was to bring together Christian, Buddhist, and animists Karen "with a shared vision for a separate state (Ibid)." As it was at its formation, the KNU today is composed primarily of Sgaw, Po and Kayah Karen (KNU 2000:22)."

22 The Konbaung dynasty was the last dynasty of Burma prior to the British annexation of central and north Burma in 1885-1886 (Aung-Thwin 1992:654, Fink 2001:17).

British called Lower Burma. The Karen suffered severely for having supported the Mon with whom their villages intermingled. As a result, many of the Mon and Karen fled their homeland that extended onto the plains and went into the eastern hills – a territory under the influence of the Siamese court (Ibid). Those Karen and Mon that remained in Burman territory were treated abusively by their overlords. Both remaining Karen and Mon were subjected to a differential taxing system that was heavily weighted against them and favored the Burman (Fink 2001: xi).

The British, already deeply entrenched in India, sought to buffer their interests from the French who were occupying the territory now known as Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (Fink 2001: 17). As the British expanded their Indian empire, they implemented the idea of states as “fixed and bounded, and...set about delineating their territory” (Ibid). Between 1824-1826, the British and the Burmese waged war over sovereignty and the boundaries that the British had established for the eastern limits of their Indian empire (Fink 2001: xi, Smith 1999: 38, Winichakul 1994: 62). Burmese forces crossed into an area the British claimed as part of the Indian empire (Ibid). The British responded by sending troops into Burma, taking Rangoon and the Konbaung capital at Ava (Ibid, Smith 1999:32). In settlement of the conflict, the Arakan²³ state and the Tenasserim²⁴ division were ceded to the British (Ibid).

In both the case of the Burmese and the Siamese, misunderstandings sprung from two disparate geographic discourses. The traditionally “ill defined” boundaries of Burma and Siam conflicted with the British concept of the geo-body (Smith 1999: 38). For the Siamese, the result was an ambiguous treaty, but for the Burman the consequence was takeover by the British.

23 The Arakan state is on the Bay of Bengal and abutted the British Indian Empire. (Figure X).

24 The Tenasserim division is on the Andaman Sea and abutted Siam. (Figure X).

During the 1824-1826 conflict, some of the Karen aided the British in their campaign to oust the Burman regime in Ava (Fink 2001:x) The Karen hoped for an improvement in their condition if the Burman rulers were defeated (Ibid). This alliance combined with the openness the Karen showed to the ideas of the West, particularly Christianity, further incited the Buddhist Burman against the Karen (Fink 2001: xii). The Christian missionaries who preached to the Karen resided in the British territory of Lower Burma prior to the Anglo-Burman war and then expanded to the Arakan and Tenasserim after these regions came under British control (Ibid).

The Karen were motivated by the idea that the British, who were foreigners, were determined to aid the Karen materially as well as spiritually (Ibid). Thus, many Karen readily converted to Christianity (Ibid). Other Karen from regions controlled by the Burman traveled into the Arakan and Tenasserim to hear about this new religion (Ibid). The Karen's sympathy with the British war effort and their ideologies resulted in overt assaults on Karen Christians within regions still under Burman control (Ibid). Missionaries reported the burning of Karen villages and torture, crucifixion, and disembowelment of Christian Karen (Po 2001: 2). To escape this brutal oppression, many of the Karen fled to the remote hill regions of the eastern hill area, which was difficult to access (Hinton 1989:158, Battersby 1998: 474). In 1885-1886, the British expanded their control over the area we now know as Burma by capturing the Kanbaung kingdom, its capital, Mandalay, and the remainder of Upper Burma (Fink 2001: xiv). For the Burmese, under British colonial rule, the bounded territory represented by the mapping of the geo-body of Burma was just a portion of the "mapping" that was taking place. The "locations of identity" (Friedman1998:19) of the ethnic populations within Burma were also being reshaped. The British imposed an "erection of boundaries between people" (Ibid) that was "ever more intent on difference, on distinction between selves and others, whether based on history or

biology or both, as a form of dominance or resistance” (Ibid). A vast amount of damage was done to inter-communal relationships during this time period due to preferential treatment by the British to varying ethnic groups over the Burman majority (Smith 1999: 46).

The Karen were one of the groups that benefited under British rule. Viewing the British rule as relief from the harsh treatment of the Burman, the Karen bloomed under a system that provided opportunities for their advancement (KNU 2000:6). Dr. San C. Po, a Karen medical doctor educated in the United States, wrote in his book *Burma and the Karens* that,

[The] Karens are not ashamed or afraid to proclaim to the world publicly or in private that they owe what progress and advancement they have made, to the missionaries whom they affectionately call their ‘Mother,’ under the protection of the British government whom they rightly call their ‘Father’ [Fink 2001:xiii].

However, this “progress and advancement” did not occur in the eastern hills where many Karen had fled. This region was claimed by the British Empire but was hardly touched by the British colonial officials (Hinton 1989:158, Battersby 1998:474). The chronic neglect of these hill tracts was both political and economic. In this isolated area, known as the Frontier Area, the British essentially left the various minority groups to be ruled by their traditional leaders (Ibid). At the same time, the British imposed the burden of a rigidly-fixed social system that did not allow for the fluidity that had previously given these people the power to oust tyrants under their old system (Smith 1999:47). By 1944, Noel Stevenson, the British director of the Frontier Areas, wrote that the situation had “increased a hundredfold the ancient animosities between the hills and the plains” (Smith 1999:48).

With traditional political alliances destroyed, the blurred edges of territories were replaced with rigid ones. The permeable boundaries of shifting identities were replaced with the Western principle of ‘otherness.’ The indigenous geographic knowledge of the people living on

the land did not align with the framework of mapped territory and rigid social structures put in place by the British (Winichakul 1994:130). The mapped space in the geo-body and in “cultural formations” (Friedman 1998:19) had a profound impact on the lives of the people who lived in a political space where multiple loyalties could no longer legitimately function. As history played out, one’s freedom, welfare, and identity, even one’s survival, depended upon which side of these abstracted divisions of space one landed (Buchanan 2003:231).

As the eastern boundary of British Burma was surveyed and mapped in the manner of a “modern state system,” the “modern borders of Siam” (Laungaramsri 2001: 39) were being created primarily as a result of Siam’s involuntary function as a “buffer state” (Laungaramsri 2001: 39). Siam’s role as a buffer took place during French and British encounters with each other in Burma, Malaya, and Indochina in the late 19th century (Hurrell 2003:275-6, Laungaramsri 2001:39). Siam was now thrust into a new world order and was obligated to “abide by such European inventions as a fixed national boundary and the laws and customs associated with it” (Winichakul 1994:74). With the new technology of mapping in place, boundaries under this new order would be sanctioned by a central authority (Winichakul 1994:75). Territory would now be contiguous rather than the “political territorial patches with a lot of blank space in between” (Ibid) that had existed under the old order.

The Karen in Siam

Along the Salween River on the western frontier of Lanna was the territory of Kayah people, also known as the Red Karen or Yang...the tiny Kayah states formed a dynamic, fluctuating frontier between Burma and Lanna because they gave allegiance to both sides and had defied the authorities of both from time to time since the late seventeenth century. Sometimes the Kayah even demanded tribute from tiny towns under Chiangmai’s power.

[Thongchai Winichakul 1994:98]

The Siamese court was familiar with some European ideas and romanticized Siam's being located on a map or globe with the other civilized countries (Ibid). However, imposing this abstraction on the concrete reality of their lives was yet another matter (Ibid). It could be said that this was a new geographical language with new parameters for thinking, imagining (Ibid). An understanding of individual words and phrases existed but these linguistic segments had not yet been formulated into a fluid process that allowed for comprehension. Due to this lack of understanding of how boundaries were being drawn, the Siamese court did not fully comprehend until 1866 that the British and French were negotiating boundaries to divide up Southeast Asia among themselves (Ibid). The loss "of the northern periphery to the British and the western part of Mekhong to the French as part of Indochina, finally rendered it clear to the Siamese elite that the pre-modern, non-territorial concept of a national boundary was no longer applicable" (Laungaramsri 2001:39).

The impending threat of the colonial powers propelled the creation of the Siamese geobody forward. Had Siam not acted on its own, its territory would have simply been a region between the mapped regions of the British and French colonial powers left to serve as a buffer between the colonies of the two European powers. Although Siam did indeed serve as a barrier, it became a modern nation-state "as an effect of the hegemony of modern geography and mapping" (Winichakul 1994:131). The Siamese political elite took part in determining the geobody of Siam by using European mapping technology and forming a partnership of sorts with the British and French to determine the boundary lines of the colonial states abutting Siam and in turn those of Siam itself (Ibid).

The Construction of “Otherness”

The creation of the Thai geo-body within fixed boundaries brought into focus people living at the edge of the new national boundary; they were forced to cease their practice of multiple loyalties. The state needed to know who these people were, questions about which took place alongside the construction of the new Thai national identity.

[Pinkaw Laungaramsri 2001:3]

As in Burma, the construction of Otherness was an important element in the creation of the Siamese nation-state and the corresponding concept of *Thainess*. Bangkok elites adopted the European “idea of racial categorization” (Laungaramsri 2001:40). This notion of constructing the Other produced the ethnic classification of the *wild man* or *khon pa*, in the late 1800s (Ibid). This category was composed of people who lived in the “forests and mountains distant from cities, and do not settle in one place” (Ibid). The Karen, as people who lived both in the *Wild* and the *Sown*, were classified as a high level of *khon pa* as “they were the known that extended into unknown, people like us but still different (Laungaramsri 2001:41, Marlowe 1979:205).

The pre-modern use of the term *pa*, translated into English as *forest*, has a significantly different connotation than the Western word *forest* (Laungaramsri 2001:67). There was a mystical implication that suggests the forest is an arena possessing supernatural powers and a spiritual aura (Ibid). The inhabitants of this realm, which included the Karen, were special human beings who struggled with emotional temptations and the material world to acquire mystical powers as the Buddhist hermits and monks that pursued an ascetic path (Ibid). Trees and the forest play an extraordinary role in Buddhist ideology with Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and cessation all taking place under trees (Jorgensen 1989:20). Thus, trees and the forest are important symbols and provide a moral environment (Ibid).

The Karen as part of this environment could weave in and out of the mystical realm. By the late 19th century, the image of the *pa* was changing and evoking images of wealth for the elite Siamese and British colonialists rather than that of the spiritual or the mystical (Laungaramsri 2001:68). The Karen represent the familiar/unfamiliar or “he who is too close to be too different, whose differences and capacities we know, and the limits of whose power we can comprehend” (Marlowe 1979:205). The very qualities that had been the Karen people’s asset, weaving together the Sown with the Wild, became the characteristic that made them a ready target. All peoples within the boundaries of Burma and Thailand were now expected to have loyalty to the geo-body rather than to the soil or the enchantment of the *pa* (Laungaramsri 2001:67, Winichakul 1994:132,133).

Similar to the pre-modern connotation of the word *pa*, the notion of motherland, deeply rooted in Southeast Asian cultures, contains a connection with the soil which is mystical (Ibid). It is not a bounded fixed concept of land but a connection through the earth goddess or the underworld serpent called the *naga* (Ibid). Before the imposition of Western concepts, an individual was not bound to a state but to his lord, who might not be the ruler in that area (Winichakul 1994:164). Power over the individual and power over the land were separate with loyalty to the lord taking precedence (Ibid). A realm or kingship was viewed as the extended body of a divine king and not relegated to bounded territory (Winichakul 1994:133). This concept is illustrated in the *Ramakian*, the traditional Thai version of the Indian *Ramayana*, which says:

All the cities are the body,
The king is the mind,
Which is the lord of the body (Ibid).

Like the naga, snake god of the underworld, the king's body was also perceived as penetrating the earth and inhabiting the land and the structures upon it (Winichakul 1994:134). This body could move in response to the populations migrating from one region to another. The new geographic discourse required a shift in loyalty to a bounded realm where loyalty was owed to the geo-body. By the early 1900s, the framework for this new geographic discourse that arbitrarily and violently separated ethnic people, assigning them their nationality, was being used in Siam to bring the reality in line with the conceptual model of nationhood that had been created (Winichakul 1994:130).

The presence of the Karen in the Siamese/Burmese border area began to be perceived as a security threat for the geo-bodies of both Siam and Burma (Laungaramsri 2001:42). This region once served as a broad buffer zone, with the Karen people residing there as extensions of the Sown but also part of the mystic Wild. Now these areas were considered sources of vital resources necessary for the "eco-system of the nation" (Marlowe 1979:207) The notion of multiple ecological niches was therefore reduced to just one in which "the state's ecological niche is the entire territory" (Marlowe 1979:208).

The term *chao khao*, or hill tribes, came to be used officially in Thailand in 1959 when the Thai government established a special committee to deal with hill tribe issues (Schliesinger 2000:4). In the 1920s, the Thai terms *chao khao*, hill tribes, or *chao rai*, cultivators of the dry rice clearings, began to be used to refer to people who traditionally lived predominantly in the mountainous borderlands and included the Hmong, H'tin, Khamu, Yao, Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Lua, and Karen people (Hanks 2001:50, Laungaramsri 2001:41, Kesmanee 1994:673). *Chao khao* has a literal meaning of "hill" or "mountain people" and a second meaning when "used as a pun with the term *chao rao* meaning "us people" acting in "binary opposition in its other meaning of

“them people” (Laungaramsri 2001:44).

The post-World War II period was a turning point in what had been a slow falling away of the traditional geographic and political discourse to that of nationhood (Ibid). During this time and into the ‘cold war,’ ethnic differences with the *khon pa* were seen as a threat to national security by both Siam and Burma (Laungaramsri 2001:42). Already labeled as the uncivilized and strange Other, the Karen or *khon pa* were now also labeled as ungovernable by the Siamese government (Ibid). Along with the official Thai use of the new category of *chao khao* for people residing exclusively in the hills, came the reclassification of the Karen as *chao khao*. Boundaries had been drawn not only around the edge of the geo-body, but also between the residents of the hills and valleys through the use of ethnic categorization. For the Karen, their position as the keepers of the Wild for the Sown had been taken away (Marlowe 1979:208). It was from this eliminated function that the Karen had received their political power (Ibid).

The marginalization of the Karen was completed with the reshaping of their ethnic boundaries. A new narrative was imposed on the Karen as they were grouped into the general hill tribe category. They became part of the “hill tribe problem.” As such, they became part of an illegitimate body within the two geo-bodies. They have been displaced in the social consciousness of the region’s people due to the shift in boundaries and now are labeled as hill tribe people who threaten national security by both the Thai and Burmese governments (Laungaramsri 2001:46, Smith 1999:37).

With the creation of the geo-bodies of Siam and Burma the past was “lifted out of its context” and was reshaped with the Siamese inferring that their geo-body and nationhood existed during the ancient Sukhothai and Ayudhya realms and that the Burmese inferring that their geo-body and nationhood existed during the reign of their ancient kingdoms (Winichakul 1994:155).

Knowledge of the ancient presence of the Karen in the region is pushed aside and a narrative stating that the kingdoms of the Thai and Burman had always bounded the land of the Karen into the ethnic majority's geo-bodies was put into place. Today, the Karen are no longer thought of as a necessary link between the wild and the sown but are national security risks. Chapter Four contains an evaluation of how the impact of these changes affect the Karen today.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE STATE OF THE KAREN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Technology of Mapping: Alienation from the Web of Life

The trilogy of matter, motion, and mathematics with a First Cause in a God of the machine constitutes the absolute mechanism of Descartes. It follows consistently that organic bodies are automata, and that man, except for his rational soul, is also a machine. Descartes likens the organization and functions of the human body to machinery of a fountain activated by a flow of water.

[Edward W. Strong 1938:331-332]

When considering how the technology of mapping imposed on Southeast Asia by the Western colonialists affected the traditional relationship of people with the land, the repositioning of the people who were once revered as mystical because of their deep intimate relationship with the spirit-filled earth logically follows.

As discussed previously, the technology of mapping caused a dramatic shift in how the Southeast Asian political powers viewed their relationship to the land. This shift in view required a remapping of the mental terrain through which the synthesized view of the land and the people as an extension of the body of the king shifted to reflect the analytical notions of Western technology and thought (Winichakul 1994:134). This was, according to Winichakul, a semiological shift with the body of the king “now a little patchwork on a blue planet” relinquishing his position of the center of the universe and transferring the “sanctity of royalness” to the geo-body (Ibid).

This tremendous shift in thought to a mechanical view of the universe was well established in the ideologies of the West. These notions were based on Rene Descartes’ writings in which he strove to prove certainty in physical science and assumed that nature is “nothing but extended ‘corporeal substance’ in motion (Strong 1938:330) and can be reduce to mathematical

relationships. The thinking mind was separated out from the body. A “reasonable soul” (Strong 1938:332) is infused into the human machine and connected in the brain.

The result of this mechanical view, which is a material model that dissects the universe segregating one piece from the other, is that humans are removed from the natural system, standing fully outside as observers (Strong 1938:332). The transition from humankind being an integral part of the natural world as traditionally held by Southeast Asians into being an objective dominator of the environment lies in the ability to abstract experience from the immediate lived experience. The abstract concept of mapping supplants an image of humankind as an extension of the earth for one in which humankind is the dominator who devalues the natural world unless it adversely affects human self interest. In this view, humankind’s behavior is not modified by a concern for the earth, since the earth does not factor into the equation. Instead, the earth is inert and lifelessness serving only as a resource to be exploited for humankind’s benefit.

Preceding the introduction of Western thought, the Southeast Asian natural world was not a thing categorized and labeled by the analytic mind, but a mingling of sensuous experiences. In this framework, people were not outside the natural world, but were woven into its fabric of existence. Experiences were immediate and prior to thoughts which “conceptually freeze it into a static space of facts” (Abram 1996:40). This experiential world is organically experienced and is enigmatic in its “multiplicity and open-endedness” (Abram 1996:40).

The new ordering of the Siamese-Burmese borderland disconnected the king of Siam from a portion of the body of his kingdom, which conceptually had been a peripheral portion of his own body (Winichakul1994:134). The king of Siam declared that the loss of his remote territory was “like the loss of our fingertips...distant from our heart and torso” (Ibid). Thus, the hill country was more than a metaphor for the body of the king. It was seen as a physical part of

his body since he “was” Siam. This is yet another difference between Western and traditional Southeast Asian thought. Westerners have learned to view many parts of existence as metaphor while traditional people see it as reality. We take psychedelics to experience “the trip,” reflecting on it later as changes in brain chemistry, while traditional people take the experience at face value and see it as interacting with the supernatural world which they consider “real.”

A Shift in Nomenclature

Even if any terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality, and to this extent it must function as a deflection of reality.
[Kenneth Burke cited in Li 2000:1]

The essentially performative character of naming is the precondition for all hegemony and politics.
[Ernesto Laclau cited in Li 2001:1]

The shift in perception from a naturalistic view of the world to a mechanical one is reflected in the vocabulary used for the people who were part of the extended body of the kingdom. Today an estimated seven million Karen people live in the Thai-Burmese geo-bodies (KNU 2000:5). The territory in which the Karen live is divided by the Thai-Burmese borderline. The movements of the Karen through this region conflict with the new analytical scheme created by the idea of national sovereignty and its accompanying borderline. The consequence is that the Karen are now classified as illegal immigrants, displaced peoples, and refugees (Laungaramsri 2001:48-52). These labels negatively influence the perception of the Karen by both the Thai and Burman ethnic majorities and by the Karen themselves (Ibid). The Karen and these two ethnic majority groups have become polarized (Laungaramsri 2001:58). The idea that the Karen were once people united through the bodies of the Siamese or Burmese king no longer exists. In

addition to the national security discourse that surrounds the Karen's residence in their homeland, the complex web of symbiotic economic relationships that once existed has degraded into competition for natural resources (Ibid).

Indicative of the change in status of the Karen and other hill tribes is the use of the label of "ethnic minority" (McCaskill 1997:50-53). The term "tribal" infers "a relatively homogeneous, non-modern people isolated from the nation-state" (Ibid) and the term "ethnic minority" infers contact with other groups including the ethnic majority (Ibid). Although the term "hill tribe" is still applied, "ethnic minority" has become more prominent as policies of assimilation and "natural integration" are pursued in Burma and in Thailand respectively (McCaskill 1997:51,265). Central to the notion of ethnic minority is the supposition that ethnic minority members should or do aspire to adopt the culture of the ethnic majority (McCaskill 1997:53).

For the Karen, recognition of contact with the ethnic majority heralds back to their traditional role of keepers of the Wild for the Sown. This was a time when the Karen were thought to weave the environmental niches of the dry rice cultivators (wild) with the wet rice cultivators (sown), acting as the familiar/unfamiliar. However, instead of regaining a more empowering position with the reference to interaction with the ethnic majority, the Karen are now stereotyped as ignorant, dirty, superstitious people, sometimes violent and promiscuous, with few skills that are useful in "civilized" society (McCaskill 1997:52-53).

The resulting dichotomy is that the Karen feel that the only option is assimilation, yet their minority status precludes their being accepted as equals within the dominant society (Ibid). Their assimilation is thereby impeded by their being set apart as the Other (Ibid). Exclusion of the Karen is accomplished by the ethnic majority defining what constitutes an acceptable way of life and the criteria necessary for qualifying for access to the necessary means to participate in

the dominant society (Ibid). The minority groups, however, are debarred from participating in mainstream society by virtue of their being classified as the Other (Ibid). Once defined as ineligible for participation in the dominant society, those thus defined as ineligible become as “unequal as they are treated,” (Ibid) perpetuating this segregation.

In Thailand, this debarring is often contradicted by government policies that imply that access to the resources of society at large are available to the minorities should these individuals become “modernized” (Ibid). However, for the individuals in a minority group who embrace the values of the dominant society and choose to compete for jobs and housing the problems of integration actually become more profound (Ibid).

For the ethnic minorities in Burma, the sentiment held by the government is made clear in this statement by Burmese leader General Ne Win:

Today you can see that even people of pure blood are being disloyal to the race and country but are being loyal to others. If people of pure blood act this way, we must carefully watch people of mixed blood. Some people are of pure blood, pure Burmese heritage and descendants of genuine citizens. Karen, Kachin and so forth, are of genuine pure blood. But we must consider whether these people are completely for our race, our Burmese people, and our country, our Burma [Smith 1991:37].

Religion in State-Building

Monks and lay people were particularly incensed by what they perceived as British disrespect towards Buddhism. The British refused to take off their shoes in monasteries, as was required by local custom. Many Burmese were also upset that the colonial administration would not install a new religious patron to replace the banished king
[Christina Fink 2001:18]

Contributing to this image of alien Other being firmly established in the minds of the Thai and Burman majorities are also religious differences. Both ethnic majorities and their governments believe that to be Burmese or Thai citizen is to be Buddhist (Fink 2001:13. Keyes

1979:19). This is exemplified by the statement of a Thai government official who said “To be Thai is to speak only Thai, to be Buddhist” (Keyes 1979:19).

The roots of the relationship between state identity and the Buddhist religion are deep starting with the ancient Burmese emperor, Asoka (Myint-U 2006:49). Asoka converted to Buddhism and created a form of righteous government that became the prototype for governments throughout South-East Asia (Ibid). Buddhist ideology and the strong, ancient ties between Buddhism and the state are thought of as a unifying force in the political sphere (Houtart 1976:6, 18-21). Buddhism is an integral part of the Thai and Burmese identities, and has had profound impact on state-building efforts by the governments of these countries (Ibid). In these countries the *sangha*²⁵ is used as a “powerful instrument of ideological transmission” (Houtart 1976:11) and there exists a vital need for the heads of state to be Buddhist to ensure this strong union.

The monarchy in Thailand is viewed as the protector of the sangha and this legitimizes the monarch (Ibid). Due to the Thai “soft” approach to promoting Buddhism entailing Buddhist monks bringing aid to people in need in outlying areas with these monks placing an emphasis on self-respect and esteem for traditional values, conversion to Buddhism within the ethnic minority communities has occurred (Keyes 1971:56,McCaskill 1997:38). A 1998 statistic from the Hilltribe Welfare and Development Center of Thailand indicates that a significant number of Karen have converted to Buddhism yet some of these practitioners retain their animist practices

25 The sangha is the Buddhist monastic institution (Kirsch 1977:245). In Thailand, this institution maintains unity through a common core of rituals and doctrines (Ibid).

(Keyes 2003:216). Although the majority still consider themselves Karen Animists²⁶, some go to Buddhist ceremonies periodically while still retaining some of their Animist practices and even merging them with Buddhist practices (Hamilton 1976:45, Iijima 1965:422).

Burma traditionally had an integrated relationship between state and religion (Thomson 1995:272). People who lived in the lowlands believed that only one cultural entity existed within the kingdom and that entity was Buddhism (Ibid). In 1960 (Smith 1999:157-158), an attempt to strengthen the connection between the pre-colonial kingdom of Burma and the post-colonial military junta, the military regime of Burma sought to legitimize itself by strongly linking itself to the ancient tradition of a righteous Buddhist government (Fink 2001:14, Myint-U 2006:49). The military junta officially designated Buddhism as the state religion under Prime Minister U Nu (Smith 1999:158) and then rescinded this act, but it remains the de facto religion of the state (Fink 2001:13, Thomson 1995:272). Although the military junta claims to be striving to unify the country, a preferential stance toward Buddhism has proven to be divisive, causing resentment and fragmentation between the ethnic majority and the many ethnic groups within the borders of this country (Fink 2001:13).

During the British colonial period, an influx of American, British, and European Christian missionaries into this region occurred (Smith 1999:44). Many of the Karen people living in Burma had legends of one god, of a Golden Book, and a Garden of Creation so they were readily converted to Christianity (Smith 1999:44). The missionaries provided education, healthcare, and created a written form of Karen using Burmese script (Smith 1999:44-46). This

26 People who practice Animism believe that the world is full of spirits with whom they constantly interact (Anderson 1993:169). Ceremonies, potions, and sacrifices are believed to play a role in protecting people in their encounters with the spirit world (Ibid).

positive attention cultivated loyalty in the Karen to the British and helped consolidate a national²⁷ identity of being Karen in opposition to the Burman (Ibid). The Burmese nationalists vehemently resented the relationship between the Karen and the foreigners (Ibid). This resentment continues today (Ibid). The association between the assertion of ethnic identity and self-determination is connected with colonial rule and the humiliation the Burmese government felt they suffered under that rule (Ibid). As a result to not assimilate, to be a non-Buddhist, or to express an ethnic identity is to threaten the military junta and the nation-state of Burma.

Globalization and the Contemporary Discourse on the Thai/Burmese Borderland

One of the many ironies of globalization, the spatial hardening of states, underlies the tensions and opportunities that shape Thailand's border relations and its broader economic and political relation with neighboring countries.

[Paul Battersby1998:473]

Globalization in its many manifestations has changed the face of Southeast Asia. Direct imposition of Western thought began with the intervention of colonial powers and then through the decolonization process. It continued with international pressure during the 1950s to curtail opium production and thus opium poppy cultivation (Keyes 2003:214). Curtailing activities involving opium was difficult for the Thai government as this activity took place in outlying regions. Even in the 1950s and through the '60s and '70s politics in Southeast Asia region were fragmented (Battersby1998:474). The political influence of these central governments did not reach into the frontiers that international law conferred on Thai and Burmese governments as

27 In 1881 the Karen National Association was formed to unite Karen of all subgroups (Fink 2001:xiii). Members of this group advocated nationalist ideas and appealed for a separate Karen nation (Ibid).

their jurisdictions (Ibid). They were much more a “cartographic illusion” (Ibid) than reality. The Burmese government was rife with political chaos and plagued by civil war and the trade in illicit drugs (Smith 1999:27, 94). Communist insurgents were actively trying to gain a foothold in the region (Ibid). Given this situation, the artificially imposed boundary lines that the British and French designated were not capable of being defended (Battersby 1998:474).

The Thai government’s response to seemingly unrealistic international demands to curtail opium poppy cultivation and production was marked in the political realm in the late 1950s by taking a closer look at the “hill tribe problem” (Laungaramsri 2001:47). This pressure pushed the Thai government to research all groups who were inhabiting the area where the crop was produced (Keyes 2003:214). In doing this research, a means of classification was formally put in place that resulted in grouping all highland people not of Thai ethnicity as *chao khao* or hill tribes including the Karen (Ibid, Laungaramsri 2001:45). Opium poppy requires high elevation for cultivation and is grown in the upper end of the elevation range of 2600 to 4600 feet where the Akha, Lahu, and Mien tribal peoples live (Anderson 1993:22). The Karen, when living in the hills, prefer lower elevations of 1300 to 2600 feet (Ibid) and often create terraces for wet-rice cultivation. In spite of these facts, the Karen are grouped with others stereotyped by Thai government as people who are:”...distinguished by their practice of upland swidden cultivation, by their production of opium, by their low level of economic development relative to the rest of the Thai population, and by their “alien” status as recent and illegal migrants to Thailand” (Keyes 1979:13).

Because the Karen were grouped with the opium producers under the hill tribe classification known as *chao khao* in Thai, the stigma of opium production associated with hill tribes affected the national and international image of the Karen as well. At the same time that

the classification *chao khao* was officially put in place, a shift was occurring in Thailand in terms of how the notion of ethnicity was being defined (McCaskill 1997:52-53). This shift solidly placed the Karen outside of majority Thai society.

Compounding matters, with the Thai government classifying the Karen as *chao khao*, a law banning the practice of slash and burn agriculture was enacted in Thailand (Iijima 1965:420). The agricultural systems traditionally practiced by the Karen are currently viewed as a threat to the northern Thailand forests and water-sheds (Keyes 1979:13).

Both highland and lowland Karen are marginalized by this labeling process although lowland Karen are wet-rice cultivators (Laungaramsri 2001:45). This marginalization occurs in spite of the Karen being native-born Thai residents living much the same as their ethnically Thai neighbors who use the same agricultural methods (Keyes 1979:13). The ancient history of the Karen who predate the Thai in this borderland region is forgotten or denied (Smith 1999:82). The shift of the Karen from their valuable position as mystical forest inhabitants, keepers of the wild, to outsiders infringing on the rightful resources and territory of the Tai and Burman majorities now dominates the nation's perspective.

Karen and the Mapping of the Forest

The establishment of the Wildlife and Conservation Law and national parks in Thailand has pointed to the world that Thai people have moved beyond the barbarism of people who are aware only of food for stomach, to the era of civilization. It is time now to know of the food for eyes, for ears, and for the brain.

[Dr. Boonsong Lekhakul in Laungaramsri 2001:77]

Nation building was never a British priority. The British annexation of Burma was piecemeal and always peripheral to the main British concern which was India. Rather, the twin motives were of security and profit, and colonial administrations were to display a destabilising readiness to trade territory.

Thailand

Exacerbation of the degradation of the Karen position in this region is connected to conservation policies held by the Thai government. Some of these policies are a result of pressure upon the government by international conservation agencies. The Thai government implemented conservation policies based on the belief that the only way forests could be protected and sustained was for them to be untouched by humans (Laungaramsri 2001:65). The Karen who live within these forests are labeled an “antagonistic nuisance” with regard to conservation interests and are considered a destructive force in the ecological ruin that is taking place (Bryant 1996:344-345, Laungaramsri 2001:66). This negative stereotype exists in spite of members of the ethnic majority group living in these same areas and practicing the same slash and burn agriculture that has been identified by the government as destructive (Ibid). Slash and burn agriculture entails clearing the land of savannah, brush, or forest and then burning the cut debris (Anderson 1993:48). Crops are then planted on the ash-rich soil for one or more years and then allowed a fallow period of several years to regenerate (Ibid).

Ethnobotanist Edward Anderson feels that the Karen people, blamed by many Thai nationals for much of the destruction of the virgin forests, are actually conservators of forest resources. His research shows that most destruction is due to excessive logging and intrusion into the hills by the lowlanders who are part of the ethnic majority (1993:195-196). Additionally, deforestation as a result of legal and illegal harvesting of timber including teak and forest products contribute significantly to the problems of this region (Ibid). Much of the illegal

harvesting, estimated to surpass the legal harvest (Ibid), is done by the Thai ethnic majority using loopholes to circumvent the law (Ibid). A staggering total of 1.3 million rai (208,000 hectares; 513,968 acres) of forest in the north are being destroyed annually (Anderson 1993:45). Although slash-and-burn agriculture also contributes to this deforestation, accounting for approximately 500,000 hectares (1,235,500 acres) (Ibid), the practice of this agricultural method is not limited to hill tribes (Ibid). More lowland Thai utilize this form of cultivation than all hill tribes combined (Ibid).

In Thailand, a plan was devised by the government to purge the forests of any threat to the ecosystem (Ibid). This came about as a result of a study and subsequent report on forestry in Thailand by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (Laungamsri 2001:74-75). Encroachment on, and poaching, in the forests were cited as a problem in the report and slash and burn farmers were identified as perpetrators of these acts (Ibid). The recommendation by FAO was to preserve 40 percent of the land mass of Thailand (Ibid). For the Thai government, a national park system was the desirable answer (Ibid). A park system would enhance the Thai international image by providing visible evidence that Thailand had entered the world of modern civilization (Ibid).

Forest destruction was viewed as a criminal act (Laungarmasri 2001:66). Communities inside designated national park and conservation areas were to be resettled outside of the conservation area because they were deemed a destructive force “analogous to [a] forest bulldozer” (Ibid). The “alarmist and apocalyptic” (Ibid) rhetoric that accompanied these government policies co-opted the media and public. To violate conservation policy and law was not simply destruction of the forest, but destruction of the nation (Ibid).

The ethnic minorities that lived in these conservation areas were targeted (Ibid). In the case of the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary, it was the residents of a 200 year old Karen village within the sanctuary that were besieged by the forestry department of Thailand (Buergin 2003:43-44). The Karen tradition at this village is to have an annual ceremony to honor the mythological hermits or saints who they believed had lived in the savannahs in the center of this sanctuary (Ibid). In 1999, during this ceremony, Plodprasop Surasawadi, Director General of Thailand's Royal Forest Department, arrived by helicopter (Buergin 2003:43, Laungaramsri 2001:105). He stopped the religious ceremony and had soldiers burn the religious shrines of the Karen (Ibid). Plodprasop waved an assault rifle at the Karen while demanding they leave government land and then had their rice barn, personal belongings, and homes burned to the ground (Ibid). Reportedly, Karen identity cards and house registration papers were confiscated by soldiers accompanying Plodprasop without just cause leaving the Karen vulnerable to further government reprisals (Ibid). The Karen in Dong Lan Forest Reserve suffered the same aggressive display by Plodprasop but were ordered to dismantle their homes (Ibid). Although Plodprasop was vigilant in protecting the forests against the Karen, he did not take the same stance against other groups. Plodprasop sanctioned the construction of roads through Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in spite of outcries against this road construction by the environmental community. Plodprasop responded that the roads would not have a negative impact (Ibid).

Approximately 10 million people or one-fifth of the Thai population lives "illegally" within forest reserves and protected areas (Buergin 2003:49). However the aggressive policies followed when dealing with ethnic minorities are not followed with Tai ethnic majority people living in a similar manner using slash and burn agricultural practices in protected areas (Laungaramsri 2001:119). A blind eye has also been turned on illegal lumber harvesting by the

ethnic majority (Anderson 1993:195-196). The resulting environmental degradation has had broad ramifications. Catastrophic flooding and sedimentation of waterways due to extensive erosion from deforestation have alarmed both the Thai people and government (Anderson 1993:44-45).

One of the responses by the government to this deforestation problem is a relocation program for tribal peoples (Ibid). The Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary and Don Lan Forest Reserve cases mentioned above are examples of this relocation procedure (Ibid). Families removed from these protected areas are relocated on 15 rai (2.4 hectares; 5.93 acres) of land per family (Ibid). This amount of land has been arbitrarily established by the Thai government as the quantity of land necessary for each relocated family to produce their crops (Ibid). However, the 15 rai parcels are not necessarily enough land or the appropriate type of land for agricultural practices (Ibid). Establishing this measure of land does not take into account the need for land to lay fallow and thereby eliminates the option of crop rotation (Ibid).

The demonizing of tribal people by portraying them as the sole cause of deforestation and the lack of accountability on the part of the Tai and Burman ethnic majorities for their participation in deforestation activities have perpetuated the environmental problems. Deforestation in the border area has been rapid and startling and is cause for concern (Anderson 1993:42). The mountainous regions of northern Thailand now retain only 30 percent of the forests above 2625 feet comprising important watershed areas in the country (Ibid). Although this is traditionally a hill tribe area, an important question to ask is to what extent have the hill tribes been involved in deforestation? In the east and northeast of Thailand in non-hill tribe areas, only 21.5 percent and 14 percent respectively of the forests remain intact (Ibid). The facts do not

support the government's claim that the Karen and other hill tribe people are solely or primarily responsible for the rapid deforestation. As pressure from population growth in lowland regions created a demand for more agricultural land, forests were removed from most of the area traditionally inhabited by the Tai ethnic majority (Anderson 1993:43). Migration into the foothills by Tai began as pressure for agricultural land increased (Ibid).

The loss of these forests was once considered "like the loss of our fingertips...distant from our heart and torso" (Winichakul 1994:134). However, they are no longer mysterious peripheral buffer areas harboring people with a special connection to the sacred and enchanted that could be accessed through the forest or *pa*. They no longer occupy the treasured position of being part of the body of the king albeit only his finger tips. In line with the spirit of the British colonialism in Burma and in response to the contemporary international demands for forest resources, the forest is viewed as a material asset, a commodity, to be harvested without spiritual or cultural value (Laungaramsri 2001:68-70, 75). Forests are a fundamental part of the trade and industry of the nation-state housing valuable teak that must be protected from the Other who may appropriate or damage resources justly due the nation-state. The acquisition of forest resources for the national economy or the Tai ethnic majority is not held to the same standard as the government holds for the Karen and other ethnic minorities.

Burma

Forced relocation is also part of life for the Burmese Karen (Heppner 2000:16). While there has been environmental rhetoric, the focus of the Burmese government on its forested

borderland has not been one of conservation, but of a dramatic scorched earth policy started in the 1950s by the Burmese military, the Tatmadaw (Smith 1991:220, 258).

This scorched earth policy is continued as a part of the *Four Cuts*²⁸ (*Pyay Ley Pyay*) (Heppner 2000:16) strategy that is designed to cut off food, funds, intelligence, and recruits for insurgency groups within the borders of Burma (Sheppard 1997:592). The villages, crops, and surrounding forests are then burned so there is no place to return to and no where to hide (Smith 1991:259). The depletion of forests in Burma has increased dramatically with a deforestation rate of 6000 square kilometers per year since the late 1980s (Bryant 1996:352). This is due in part to the personal agendas of the country's leaders that place maximizing revenue as a top priority rather than conservation efforts (Bryant 1996:343, 346). As a result, legal logging concessions are readily sold by the Burmese government and illegal logging and wildlife trade goes unchecked (Bryant 1996:353). By turning a blind eye to the participation of the Tatmadaw and other individuals courted by the military junta for political patronage, illegal logging feeds a system of "crony capitalism" (Bryant 1996:355).

These activities combined with the controversial UNOCAL/Total gas pipeline project have accelerated the depletion of Burma's forests and their resources (Bryant 1996:353). In order to access offshore natural gas resources in the Andaman Sea, the UNOCAL/Total pipeline has

28 Although the existence of this Four Cuts program has been refuted by Tatmadaw (Burmese military) spokesmen due to criticism from the international community, the use of this policy and the accompanying destruction has been well documented (Smith 1991:259). To implement this program the Tatmadaw has divided the mapped geo-body of Burma into a checkerboard with each square in this board shaded in black, brown, or white (Ibid). Black squares represent insurgency areas, brown squares are guerilla zones, and white squares are zones without resistance activity (Ibid). The black and brown squares are slated as "areas prohibited for security reasons" (Grundy-Warr 2002:101) and thus warrant intense military efforts including face forced relocation of villagers to fenced compounds under military surveillance (Smith 1991:259-260).

been routed through biologically diverse forest (Ibid). This construction entailed extensive clearing of forest without any environmental impact study done to assess potential damage to this forested region (Bryant 1996:356). Additional degradation occurred as a railway system was put in place to transport construction materials and military personnel for the pipeline (Ibid).

Ecological Issues and the Karen as the Other

The crises in rural environments are concurrent with at least three major trends in Thai Society. The first trend is the increasing conflict and competition over natural resources resulting from rapid increase in export oriented industrial development. Consequently, natural resources that the rural poor depend upon for their survival are taken away.

[Santasombat 2003:5]

These ecological issues and the categorizing of the Karen as the Other are the legacy of Western ideologies forced upon Southeast Asia as a result of the globalization phase known as colonialism. Today international intervention in regional policies and pressure to participate in the global economy continues (Laungaramsri 2001:103). With a utilitarian materialist ideology in place, the forests are easily viewed as a resource for the people the governments consider the *rightful owners of the land*, the dominant Burmese and Thai ethnic majorities. The tribal people are depicted as a “fixed, unchanged, and homogenized object, always standing apart from conservation” (Laungaramsri 2001:107) and placed within the conservation dialogue as ignorant, illiterate, poor, and overpopulated people.

With the technology of labeling in place, the state legitimizes the exclusion of the Karen and other tribal people from conservation discourses (Laungaramsri 2001:108). To disagree with the state policy is viewed as deceitful (Laungaramsri 2001:107). The tribal people and their place in the forest are demeaned and ridiculed (Laungaramsri 2001:103). For example, a 1991 report

published by the Thailand Development Research Institute and based on research by social scientists and economists was criticized by a senior forest academic: “Social scientists don’t know anything about forests. The research was guided by a preconceived idea that people can live with forests and thus the methodology and research questions were geared toward this answer” (Ibid). No clarification was given by the critic as to the criteria used to make this judgment. But, according to Laungaramsri (2001:104) the forceful and rigid stance inherent in this statement “wards off any possibility of sharing of ideas and knowledge among different disciplines.” The stance appears to indicate that social scientists’ knowledge is invalid if outside the realm of what the realm of forestry accepts (Ibid).

Equally rigid, Plodprasop Surasawadi, director of the Royal Thai Forestry Department, contends that eviction of tribal people from the forest is necessary for conservation of the forest:

The forest exists [sic] for hundreds of years but you (villagers) are [sic] just born. You could not claim that you have lived before in the forest. You can live in the forest if you live like barbarians. But now your life is civilized and we have no more forest left, so you have to go. [Laungarasri 2001:105]

The Karen Within the Thai Geo-body

Due to periodic political unrest in Myanmar, an estimated 100,000 Karen refugees have fled to Thailand to avoid persecution, arrest, execution, and other abuses.

[Leslie Sponsel 2000:143]

National security, environmental degradation, and the eradication of opium production have been the main focus of the Thai government in the borderland (Kesmanee 1994:683). Border issues in Thailand are exacerbated by ever increasing numbers of Karen fleeing to Thailand as the military activity by the Tatmadaw (the Burmese military) intensified against the Karen (Smith 1999:451).

The line of demarcation that exists between Thailand and Burma theoretically serves to designate regions of common linguistic, cultural, social, and political affiliation (Laungaramsri 2000:47). Homogeneity is assumed on the Thai side of this line and a different homogeneous group on the Burmese side (Ibid). Yet, in fact, this homogeneity is imagined and incomplete (Ibid). Karen people straddle this line of demarcation and as do their characteristics and affiliations. The result is that cultural differences displayed by the Karen and all other groups subsumed as hill tribe people are viewed as outward expressions of disloyalty and unlawfulness and as such a threat to the security of the border and the nation (Ibid). This problem is compounded by political issues surrounding the Thai/Burmese border that include illegal trafficking and production of drugs, political insurgency, and infiltration (Battersby 1999:485).

Within Thailand, the Karen and other *chao khao* are deprived of rights that are granted other peoples living in local communities and in similar circumstances (Keyes 2003:214-215). Citizenship is one of these rights (Kesmanee1994:682). Although national policy is that all ethnic minorities born in Thailand are entitled to citizenship, in practice the availability varies from province to province (Ibid). Without written documentation, it is difficult for government officials to determine who was or who was not born on Thai soil (Ibid).

Just how the hill tribes fit within the Thai framework vacillates with labels such as “illegal immigrants,” “aliens,” and “naturalized” being applied (Fujioka 2002:3). Many of the hill tribe people are unaware of the broader political issues whirling around their presence in their homeland. However, this land has been home to many hill tribe groups for up to 200 years and the Lua and Karen people for over eight centuries (Keys 1979:31).

The Thai press and government question whether the Karen can be good Thai citizens and reinforce the stigma already borne by the Karen in the minds of Thai nationals

(Laungaramsri 2001:54). This stigma is reinforced through media coverage about the Karen people fleeing into Thailand from the Burmese military as the media, the government, and many Thai citizens regard this influx of refugees as a threat to Thai national security (Laungaramsri 2001:46).

The Karen Within the Burmese Geo-body

Only after contact with the British did minorities in Burma become a concern. Increasingly accurate mapping and the intensified European belief that a country ought to include only members of one nation prompted the awareness of ethnic-group identity and unitary strategies among the various ruling elites.

[Curtis N. Thomson 1995:272]

For the Tatmadaw in the Four Cuts campaign there is no such thing as an innocent or neutral villager. Every community must fight, flee or join the Tatmadaw.

[Martin Smith 1999:260]

The Burmese side of the borderland has the added hardships of a 60 year-old civil war (Fink 2001:23). The direct impact of British colonial rule on Burma created a forum where ethnic identity was strengthened (Rajah 2002:4). The concepts of bounded territory, discrete, unchanging ethnic groups, and sovereignty instilled in ethnic minority groups the awareness of and desire for equal status with majority groups. As a result, the Burman majority and ethnic minorities have become more polarized as they create their individual national narratives (Ibid).

During British colonial times, many of the Burman ethnic majority harbored deep resentment against the Karen for their loyalty to the British crown (Sheppard 1997:573). The Karen expected reparation for this loyalty by way of receiving a separate state where they could have sovereignty (Ibid). Starting in the 1920s, Karen people such as American educated Dr. San C. Po, pressed British colonialists for such a state (Fink 2001:xxi). He warned that without a

federated Karen state within Burma Karen extremists would evolve (Ibid). Warning signs of Burman suppression of ethnic minorities were already apparent with Burmese nationalists appropriating the term *thakin* (master) (Fink 2001:xxii) for themselves in an attempt to show that the land called Burma belonged only to them. The result of the Burman desire to elevate their status and resentment of the Burman toward the Karen alignment with the British was a concerted effort to suppress the Karen. By the 1940s, the warnings of Dr. Po and other Karen leaders were manifest in massacres and rapes perpetrated by the Burmese Independence Army against the Karen (Sheppard 1997:573).

The appropriation of the term *thakin* by Burmese nationalists was an overt move to elevate the Burman at the expense of ethnic minorities. Nomenclature played a role in placing the Karen in the role of the Other with the conceptual shift from *khon pa* (forest people) to *chao khao* (hill tribe). These are Thai terms, however, and they conceptually followed from the legacy the British had readily established in Burma.²⁹

Under British colonialism even though the Karen had lost their traditional standing by being aligned with the crown they were able to transition into desirable positions of authority (Fink 2001:22, Smith). The *thakin* movement was the Burmese ethnic majority's response to British preferential treatment of the Karen (Fink 2001:xxxii). It fueled divisions already in place and foreshadowed the ethnic chasm that exists today.

The Burmese authoritarian government oppresses all people within its border. However, the actions of the military junta of contemporary Burma toward ethnic minorities are particularly

29 Research from within Burma has been suppressed for the majority of time starting in 1952 and continuing today (Kunstadter1967:851).

egregious (Fink 2001:155, 161). Reports of human rights abuse leak through the bamboo curtain that include forced labor, torture, and rape used as weapons of war (Fink 2001:155, 161). Little tolerance is held by the government for minority groups that do not assimilate and the Karen have pursued a course that inflames the military junta against them (Thomson 1995:284). The Karen State³⁰ in eastern Burma, where the largest concentration of the Karen are located, is a black region on the Tatmadaw map. Under the premise of national security, the Tatmadaw relocates villagers who live there, appropriates or destroys food supplies, burns homes and fields and often places landmines around the perimeter of villages (Grundy-Warr 2002:102). In implementing these actions, the military does not distinguish between civilians and the insurgency groups they claim to be targeting (Ibid). Due to the broad scope of Tatmadaw activities in the Karen State, it is estimated that within the Karen State alone are one million internally displaced people as of 1999 (Smith 1999:451).

Many of the civilians who are displaced by the military flee to the jungle for what may be days or years (Grundy-Warr 2002:108). Living in the jungle is filled with insecurity, death from disease is frequent, food is scarce, shelters are make-shift, and people live in constant fear of being caught by the military (Ibid). For many, however, life in the jungle, no matter how hard, is better than the deprivation of life in relocation sites (Ibid). These sites are fenced and have military barracks in the center (Smith 259-260). Villagers, including primary school children, are forced to guard the compound day and night (Ibid).

The Karen living in the borderland on both the Thai and Burmese sides are directly

³⁰ After years of negotiation, in 1952 the British administration established a Karen State for the Karen people in a 11,600 square mile mountainous and heavily forested region abutting the Salween river and the Thai border (Smith 1999:146).

impacted by the influx of refugees and the accompanying military activity by both the Thai and Burmese governments (Smith 1999:441). Marginalization as a result of ethnic categorization and mapped geo-bodies is complicated by this activity.

In the concluding chapter a proposal is made for a creation of a new narrative for the Karen. The mapping of the Thai-Burmese borderland not only created the bounded geo-bodies of Burma and Thailand but also created the bounded category of the Other. Without trying to turn back time, but with the purpose of moving forward in a positive manner, an affirming “alternative construct” of Karen “peoplehood” (Steinmetz 1992:490) can be designed for both the Karen and the outside world. The shift in perception of who the Karen are has been traced from the implementation of boundaries, to the change in vocabulary used for the Karen, and the way the Karen as the Other are perceived by the dominant culture. A new paradigm can be presented that empowers the Karen and highlights the shared history they have with the dominant Burman and Tai cultures. By sharing a vision of the Karen as a unique but integrated component of Southeast Asian peoples their distinct cultural expressions can be framed as assets for the community as a whole.

CHAPTER FIVE: NAVIGATING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES: CHARTING THE COURSE FOR THE KAREN OF THE THAI-BURMESE BORDERLAND

As the globe shrinks, as racially and ethnically inflected confrontations increase worldwide, as weapons become ever more deadly and available, as transnational economies further polarize wealth and poverty, as...demographics...move toward an even more multicultural society, our survival as a species depends on our ability to recognize the borders between difference as fertile spaces of desire and fluid sites of syncretism, interaction, and mutual change.

[Susan Stanford Friedman 1998:66]

I was born between 2 heritages & I want to explore that empty space, that place-between-2-places, that walk-in-2-worlds. I want to do it in a new way.

[Diane Glancy cited in Friedman 1998:67]

Cultural Narrative

The narrative of a culture, understood through the notion of the cultural group constantly in flux, creates a forum for a multitude of perspectives. History is not singular in its telling, but necessarily a pliable medium changing even as the narrative is told by one individual through time and space. This change lends authenticity as, for example, an encounter experienced as young mother is seen, felt, and experienced differently than the same experience told as wife, lover, sister, refugee or aged crone. Friedman defines heuristic writing of history as a way of ordering “the past in relation to the needs of the present and future” (Friedman 1998:201). She sees this as a vehicle to assign “meaning to the past” and that it “potentially intervenes in the present and future construction of history” (Ibid).

This pliable nature of history allows for the creation of positive narrative for the hill tribe people. Their past can be organized in an empowering manner providing a strong foundation for conceptualization of a successful “present and future.” This is not a revisionist version of history but a retelling of history as it has happened.

Prior to the intervention of colonial powers and the mapped geo-body, the Karen people wove together the Wild and the Sown.³¹ With colonialism, the Karen role of “holders of the Wild and facilitators of the border” (Keyes 1979:200) was now unnecessary. Drawing inflexible boundaries around both territory and ethnic groups annulled the Karen’s purposeful position in society. An unbounded fluid existence was unacceptable to the colonial powers. Later, the narrative used by the ethnic Tai and Burman majorities for the Karen and their culture was changed from one that legitimized their activities and their relationship to the land to a marginalizing one.

A new binary narrative of Us and the Other destroyed any commonalities the Karen were seen to have with the ethnic majority. Colonial bounded concepts set in motion a series of socio-political changes manifest in language. Does the construction of a new narrative hold the possibility of repositioning the Karen once again?

The flexibility of a group and the multifarious ways of organizing and framing elements of a culture are addressed by James Clifford in The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art. He states:

³¹ The terms “valley” and “hill” were also thought of as “sown” and “wild” respectively (Keyes 1979:170). “Sown” relates to the “civilized” lowland cultures and “wild” to the “uncivilized” hill cultures (Ibid).

Groups negotiating their identity in contexts of domination and exchange persist, patch themselves together in ways different from a living organism. A community, unlike a body, can lose a central 'organ' and not die. All the critical elements of identity are in specific conditions replaceable: language, land, blood, leadership, religion. [1988:338]

Clifford's recognition that a culture and a cultural group's identity are not dependant on a fixed concept of self is a liberating idea. As the hill tribes adopt new ways and ideas from the cultures with which they interact, they do not necessarily lose their identity. The construction of a new affirming narrative for the Karen along with the ability of groups to "patch themselves together" allows for choices. Hill tribe culture is not lost but transformed into a structure that answers their current needs. Clifford sees cultural transformations as a natural part of an interactive group of people that is "not living alone but 'reckoning itself among the nations'" (1988:338). The power to "shape-shift" culturally and to create the emotional context from which a history is read holds the potential for empowerment or disempowerment.

The Mashpee Trial

Clifford's case study of the Mashpee tribe in the northeastern United States describes a group that was not able to "frame" and "name" elements of their history to their advantage. A land-claim suit was brought to court by the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council, Inc to secure 16,000 acres of land that they regarded as tribal property (Clifford 1988:277). The trial that ensued brought questions regarding the Mashpee tribal status to the fore. Because the Mashpee Indians had a poorly organized "marketing program" for themselves as a political-cultural group, they did not convince the jury that they had a cohesive history as a tribe. The Mashpee's record

was an oral history that the court regarded as fallible when compared to the written word, the history of the dominating culture, which the court regarded as truth (1988:335 - 341).

During the Mashpee trial, Clifford says an “either-or” mentality prevailed (1988:341). He states that “the possibility of a group existing discontinuously, keeping open multiple paths, being *both Indian and American*” was not part of the consciousness of the legal body adjudicating this case (1988:341). Here, there were no borderlands, only borderlines. The Mashpee’s understanding of their identity correlates with Thongchai Winichukul’s description of Siam. The Mashpee’s notion of identity is comfortable with permeability. The shifting, expanding and contracting of the borderland did not negate their “tribalness.” For the dominate culture in the northeastern United States, the concept of shifting borderlines on either the physical plane or conceptual one denoted a poorly defined or nonexistent entity. Borderlines, for those with a worldview of stasis, must be nailed down and histories fixed in print to be authentic.

Constructing Narrative

It was perhaps a decade ago that psychologists became alive to the possibility of narrative as a form not only of representing but of constituting reality...

[Jerome Bruner 1991:5]

In contrast to the Mashpee case, the Jewish people were able to overcome the borderline problem. Although they did not fit the conventional Western paradigm of a cultural group, Jews were able to create a narrative that framed their cultural traits in a manner that the legal bodies in the Western world could comprehend. A look at the 1851-1940 international exhibitions where the Jewish people put their culture on display reveals how they, as a cultural group, closely monitored “framing” and “naming” parts of their culture. They were able to move the

conversation about who and what they are as a culture from a static image defined by boundaries to that of a diverse group of people dispersed throughout many lands and still maintain their identity as one people. They moved their audience to the place “inbetween” or the place in the conceptual borderlands. In Destination Culture: Tourism, Museum, and Heritage, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett carefully examines these strategies. She tells us that “Jews negotiated how and where they would be seen in the world staged by these fairs [international expositions between 1851-1940]. Their approach to this question illuminates the constitutive power of display” (1998:81).

In the catalog for the international exhibition *Exposition Universelle*, held in Paris in 1878, Jewish artifacts were billed as “a remarkable collection of works of Israelite art...from the private collection of Isaac Strauss...” Ceremonial objects were displayed as exemplary *objects d’art* worthy of collection by a respected connoisseur elevating the culture from which the objects came (Ibid). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that by defining “ceremonial objects as art, the exhibition integrated things Jewish into the discourse on civilization and recast Jewish “particularism” in the universalistic terms of art” (1998:84).

During the late 19th century to early 20th century, the Jewish people successfully traversed the borderlines and founded a territory “inbetween.” They understood and implemented what Susan Friedman notes as “an ongoing process of formation and reformation” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:153). She continues by telling us that “identity depends centrally upon narrative...The spectacular, the visual, the figural, the metaphoric—all, of course, also contribute to the production of identity” (Ibid). The Jews made broad cultural connections with the dominant cultures in the areas in which they lived, scripted their history to connect to concepts

valued by the dominant cultural groups, and marketed themselves to those cultures. Close attention was paid to the nomenclature used for themselves, cultural concepts, and their ethnographic objects. This attention to nomenclature created a vocabulary that bound a set of cultural elements into a meaningful whole. The Jewish identity was established and brought into a cultural borderland that the Jewish community controlled and to which the Western world could relate.

The Zapotec: A Contemporary Success Story

A contemporary example in the Global South of creating a successful narrative are the Zapotec weavers of Teotitlán del Valle, Mexico who have “recast” their image from one of impoverished peasants making primitive goods to one of accomplished artists with a highly sought after marketable product to sell (Selcraig 2003:72-78). Zapotecs women weave rugs that are now sold worldwide through galleries and internet websites (Ibid). Although they use traditional techniques such as natural dyes, the artists are not enslaved to the past. They feel free to create designs that respond to cultures with which they interact. The success of the Teotitláns has been more than an economic boon for families and the city as a whole. It has resulted in extensive positive social change that includes elevated social status and confidence for women, along with financial independence (Ibid). Barbara Mauldin, curator of the Latin American collection at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico feels the Zapotecs “have a great product, but it’s all about people-their artistic talent, perseverance, marketing savvy, plus the good fortune of being near a major tourist market” (Selcraig 2003:72). The

Zapotec people have “renamed” and “reframed” themselves as a culture of people who “adapt and survive” (Selcraig 2003:72).

The Karen: The Same but Different

Although for centuries they have been living in close proximity with Burmese, Thai and many other ethnic groups, from which they have adopted some customs, the Karen have been able to maintain particular sets of customs, including a language, a religion, a dress code and particular social relations which can be said to differentiate them from other ethnic groups of the region.

[Claudio Delang 2003:167]

To desire narrative reflects a kind of fundamental desire for life and self that finds its source in our neurologic makeup.

[Kay Young and Jeffery L.Saver 2001: 80]

...cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality.

[Jerome Bruner 1991:3]

For the Karen to bring the global community into their conceptual borderland, two major goals must be achieved. They need to frame their history in a way that the dominant society respects and wants to hear and see, and they need to present their culture in a framework that highlights the important contributions they make to the nation-states they reside within. As seen in the Jewish example, it is by accomplishing these two goals that the Karen people themselves begin to reconceptualize who they are and what they produce socially as well as economically. For this new narrative, the renaming and reframing of the Karen *vis-à-vis* society at large must be integrated into the Karen concept of self to be effective. Karen “particularism” of an isolated, poor, shy, clumsy group of country bumpkins living in dark huts (Laungaramsri 2001:46,54) without a culture of value must be “recast” through “universalistic” values and shared history.

The shared history of the Karen with the dominant cultures of Southeast Asia includes migration from their ancient roots in mainland China. Rewriting their cultural script from a position of strength, highlighting universal values and shared heritage will give the Karen the tools necessary to market themselves as an important contributing element in the collective history of Asia. This trans-cultural heritage of the Karen can be scripted to reflect shared experiences with the Burman and the Tai ethnic majorities. Anthropologists Yoko Hayami, Roland Mischung, John McKinnon, and Ronald D. Renard, have conducted research on aspects of the history of Karen (Delang 2003:viii). Continued research by these scholars and others can provide an excellent foundation for scripting a positive narrative for the Karen. Mischung has additional interests in inter-ethnic relations, local history, and mainland Southeast Asia all valuable research areas in clarifying the shared experiences and history of the Karen with other Southeast Asian people. Dr. John McKinnon has served as an advisor to the Tribal Research Institute, Chiang Mai, Thailand. He is a founding member of Kinsa Associates, a group aiding indigenous people to strengthen their voices by using participatory learning and action (PLA) and information technology (Ibid). The resources and skills McKinnon has access to combined with those of other anthropologists are a potential aid to structuring a positive narrative for the Karen.

As I described in previous chapters, prior to the intervention of colonial powers in Southeast Asia, the Karen acted as intermediaries between the lowland kingdoms of the region. The epistemology in place at that time accepted fluid relationships as valid and omitted 'hard-edged' delineation of mapped physical terrain as well as a 'hard-edged' view of ethnicity. There was overlapping territory within which a syncretistic mixing of cultures could take place. It is to

the overlapping territory between the differences that common elements need to be identified those elements should be used in renaming and reframing the Karen culture.

From the standpoint of fluid porous borderlines the histories of ethnic majority peoples are also a part of the history of the Karen people. Acting as liaisons of the Wild for the Sown, the Karen wove in and out of these realms back into the remote mountain communities. This intricate web of connection provided a conduit for the knowledge and the cultural experiences of the Karen and those groups that they interacted with to be diffused throughout the region.

The Karen can “rename” and “reframe” themselves as they navigate the borderlands by identifying the place “inbetween” rigid borderlines where they lived. Then, within these borderlands with their overlapping elements the possibility for an entry into meaningful dialogue with the ethnic majority exists. There is an opening within the Thai community to assist in creating this dialogue. A group of scholars at Chiang Mai University in the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) have started conversations in academic journals and in books that reframe the way the Karen are viewed in regard to nature conservation and agricultural practices. One of these professors, Dr. Yos Santasombat, states that “During the past decade, the general public has begun to show more interest in, and gradually recognize the importance of, indigenous knowledge in sustainable development” (2003:56). Dr. Anan Ganjanapan, and Pinkaew Laungaramsri, of Chiang Mai University, are also among those who have contributed to the academic conversation and published on Karen ecological knowledge. Dr. Edward Anderson, Whitman College senior research botanist at the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, Arizona, has authored “Plants and People of the Golden Triangle: Ethnobotany of the

Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand.” In his work, he critically evaluates the agricultural practices of the Karen, the Thai ethnic majority, and the conservation practices of both groups.

All of these scholars recognize how the process of formation and reformation creates a space for the Karen to identify the strengths in their traditional methods of nature conservation and also provides a platform to highlight these contributions to the ethnic majority. This dynamic process of formation has been discussed as it relates to the deconstruction of the pre-colonial Karen image where the Karen connected the lowland kingdoms to the remote forest lands and served as a buffer. However, another discussion is necessary. Reformation requires the construction of a new empowering vocabulary to articulate the contributions the Karen make to their countries.

The reformation of this narrative must include multiple themes or threads that help to position the Karen more favorably within their rapidly changing society. Conservation is only one element of a complex story that needs to be told. Another element is weaving. Because these two themes have been approached by others, I will discuss them in some detail as examples of how the Karen can use their own cultural resources to reframe the narrative.

Nature Conservation: A Universalistic Value

People living in the forest, they put their hearts, their lives into taking care of forest. But foresters only use laws to look after the forest.

[Pati Joni Odochao cited in Laungaramsri 2001:157]

Karen call this type of forest koe noe mue-female forest. Female forest is usually moist and cool all year round. It is a source of life where water is generated and large trees grow to give shade and shelter to all living beings...Male forest [koe noe pha], on the other hand, provides suitable soil and land for swidden cultivation.

[Pinkaw Laungaramsri 2001:148]

Anderson identifies conservation as a universalistic value that the Karen possess. He reframes our ideas of the Karen from viewing the Karen as a people who are simple agrarian subsistence farmers to a people who possess outstanding knowledge of the flora of northern Thailand ethnobotanists who have a great deal to teach the rest of the world about their plants (1993:196-198). He also feels that the Karen people, blamed by many Thai nationals for much of the destruction of mature forests are actually conservators of the forests and the wildlife within them. Anderson feels that the Karen have an “intimate knowledge of the mountains in which they live” (1993:196) that “must also be conserved.” His call for the Thai government to involve the Karen and other hill tribe people in the preservation and restoration of the critically depleted forests provides opportunities for the Karen to recapture their position as *khao pa*, forest people, in Thai consciousness (1993:196-198). Anderson is asking that the knowledge possessed by the Karen be placed on the cognitive map of the ethnic majority and the global communities.

Yos Santasombat provides an argument that supports Anderson’s appeal. He notes that the close relationship that the Karen have with their environment provides a well-established knowledge base (Santasombat 2003:57). Unfortunately, according to Santasombat, the use of local knowledge that was responsive to a given site has been replaced with the general classification of areas in accord with Western technology and the implementation of strict legal codes (Ibid). Along with the expansion of the market economy into these rural areas came the promoting of monoculture and cash cropping that resulted in the disappearance of low impact traditional agricultural methods and consequently brought about the destruction of forest lands (Ibid). The newly introduced commercial agricultural practices encouraged by the Thai

government resulted in fewer crop species being grown overall and large expanses of one species being cultivated, thereby compromising the integrity of the ecosystem (Ibid). Monoculture not only led to an increase in the size of areas being cultivated, but to an increase in the need for pesticides and chemical fertilizers used, water contamination and soil erosion (Ibid). The end results for the forest lands were the opposite of the conservation and sustainability desired by the Thai government.

In contrast, traditional agricultural practices of the Karen have resulted in adapting to various forest ecosystems by cultivating a great variety of rice and other agricultural crops (Laungaramsri 2001:193). An example of this practice are the Karen of Mae Ning Nai village who use 25 different rice varieties and typically plant an assortment of varieties in one season to ensure a successful crop (Ibid). Additionally, the mix of over 78 plants growing with the rice in these biologically diverse fields act as a natural pest and disease control agent (Laungaramsri 2001: 194). Some of the plants that grow in Karen swidden fields are not found growing elsewhere, attesting to the great biodiversity these farmers typically achieve (Ibid).

Traditional Karen ecological knowledge is so woven into the fabric of who they are as swidden farmers that they relate the passing of time and significant events to their swidden agricultural cycle (Laungaramsri 2001:191). An example of this intrinsic connection is calculating the age of a child. The parents recall what swidden plot was being cultivated when the child was born and then count the number of swiddens cultivated up to the current year (Ibid). Additionally, knowledge of the manner in which the soil and wildlife habitat are restored is given special language, with each transitional stage in the swidden process having a distinct name (Ibid). The cycle usually occurs over a period of seven to 12 years and the land transitions

from fallow to forest with the fertility of the soil restored by the seventh to eighth year (Ibid). During this time period an abundance of wildlife returns to the regenerating land to take advantage of the naturally occurring food available to them (Laungaramsri 2001:193).

Life inside and outside of the village revolves around rice production and agriculture. Different varieties of rice have been exchanged for generations to ensure that the rice does not get “weary of the place” (Santasombat 2003:77). When traveling to visit friends, or for a special occasion such as a wedding or new year celebration exchanging rice cultivars or the “germ” of the rice is standard practice (Ibid).

Another way the Karen have worked to preserve their ecosystem is to keep alive the ancient tradition of the community forest where a sacred forest was established to protect the watershed of the area (Ganjanapan 1998:78-80). In response to environmental degradation impacting their water supplies, the Karen have expanded this system in the last 30 years to include three types of forest (Ibid). They are the sacred forest, the watershed forest, and the communal woodland (Ibid). A sacred forest is a section of the forest that is believed to be inhabited by guardians of the forest (Ibid). In this sacred forest, utilization of forest products is prohibited and it is reserved for ritual purposes (Ibid). The Karen also protect both their watershed and the guardian spirits believed to reside there by reserving large areas of forest and allowing only minimal use of forest products (Ibid). These areas are typically 1,000 to 10,000 rai (400 to 4,000 acres) in size. The communal woodlands are used for grazing of livestock and harvesting woodland products (Ibid).

Santasombot argues that the Karen have played a vital role in the management of the ecosystem and in preserving biodiversity (2003: 209-210). He states that they have not acted as “mere consumers, exploiters, or beneficiaries” but have “developed their ways of life, belief systems, customs and practices, and knowledge systems on the basis of interdependent relations with – and sustainable use of – the environment” (2003:209-210). Indeed, the Karen’s relationship with the environment is integrated into their lives with personal stories imprinted in each stage of the seven to ten year swidden cycle and seeds for their cultivated plants exchanged during their visits to neighboring villages (Laungaramsri 2001:191-192).

The Karen possess a great deal of “local knowledge” that can contribute to environmental conversations about highland agriculture, forest preservation, and land-use policies. By joining in a dialogue with biological conservationists and ecologists, the Karen can contribute their local knowledge about plants and wildlife. Taking a part in such a process provides a platform for the Karen to regain their lost status by having their knowledge respected in terms understandable and meaningful to the modern nation in which they reside. This coming together to share knowledge with academically trained conservationists and ecologists would provide an opportunity for the Karen to appropriate new tools for communication and new agrarian skills to add to those they already possess. It would also provide a forum for biological conservationists and ecologists to learn about the plant varieties use by the Karen and the cultivation practices they have developed in response to changing environmental conditions.

Anan Ganjanapan observes how important the knowledge gleaned from this type of dialogue is for Thai forestry and agricultural policies:

Without an understanding of the complexities and dynamics of shifting cultivation as actually practiced in Northern Thailand, sometimes produces adverse and contradictory effects on both forests and forest settlers. Several development programs have given only lip service to the sustainable agriculture or agro-forestry concepts stated in their objectives, relying mainly on cash crops...Instead of sustainable land use, one finds the greater exploitation of forest land...(1998:76).

The Karen have shown that they have the ability to organize themselves and to interact with other agencies or to oppose government actions that they feel negatively impact their lands (Ganjanapan 1998:79). This has been demonstrated with a long history of legal opposition to logging within their watersheds (Ibid). However, the Karen have not limited their activity to being an opposing force, but also have been proactive by participating in workshops that increase their skills and share their views (Ibid).

Sharing alternate views of ecological issues, agriculture, agro-forestry and conservation suggests that the participants in a dialogue come together with the stance that they are open to alternate views. This is decidedly different than a monolithic view of knowledge where indigenous people or the scientific community are regarded or regard themselves as having the complete and final word. Kent Redford and Allyn MacLean Stearman caution against a mindset that supports the concept that environmentalists and conservation biologists are obligated to always involve indigenous peoples in efforts to save the natural areas that the indigenous people have made their home (1993:250). They warn that the agendas of the native peoples may not be in line with those of the biological conservationists (1993:250). Definitions for biodiversity used by the indigenous people may not be in accord with that used by the biologists (Ibid). Of course, clearly establishing what the agenda of each group is and having a mutual understanding of what terms mean is an important part of communication and must be established for meaningful

interaction to take place. Establishing a common vocabulary is necessary for the Karen to communicate their body of knowledge to a broader audience.

For the Thai highland people an important audience is foresters. In Thailand, the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) and its foresters have “full authority in controlling forest management and policy direction” (Laungaramsri 2001:168). The immense impact of British colonial “bureaucratic politics” upon forestry and its administration are still seen today (Ibid). Forestry is segregated from other civil services including the Ministries of Interior and the Land Department that deal with matters such as population and land registration (Ibid). In some areas, villagers may have been given official land titles to their homesteads yet these same areas are classified as state forest by the Forestry department (Laungaramsri 2001:94). The resulting bureaucratic tension causes confusion at the village level where taxes are paid for registered land yet the villagers are accused of encroaching on forest reserves by the RFD (Ibid).

A positive development occurred in the mid 1980s as a result of the influence of the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization (Laungaramsri 2001:95). “Social Forestry” was instituted as a new segment of the RFD and the Faculty of Forestry, Kasetsart University (Ibid). The Social Forestry Program at Kasetsart combined courses in forestry and sociology with economic and business administration (Ibid) providing a course of study sanctioned by the Thai government that incorporates social understanding into its curriculum.

Due to the RFD’s powerful position in the Thai bureaucracy, it is of utmost importance for the Karen to find pathways where they can become part of conservation dialogues with people within this power structure. Although social forestry does not play a major part in how

the RFD implements its programs and policies at this time (Laungaramsri 2001:96), the creation of such a course of study demonstrates that inroads can be made.

A forum that allowed such an opportunity took place in 1995, when the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC)³² collaborated with other NGOs to provide map-reading training for Karen³³ (Laungaramsri 2001:155-159). By means of this training the technology of mapping was offered to the Karen. This training provided the Karen with the language and skills to convey their knowledge of the forest to forestry officials (Ibid). During the course of the training a map was created that included elements that the foresters had never considered (Ibid). The Karen learned the new technology of mapping and the Karen provided the foresters with additional information about the forests (Ibid). None of these foresters had ever had the opportunity to travel extensively in the forest and therefore lacked the intimate knowledge of the landscape that the Karen had (Ibid). Traversing new conceptual territory created a new geographical discourse.

Deconstruction of the Karen narrative from the 18th through 20th centuries involved a complex series of interactions between the Karen, the ethnic majorities, and colonialist powers.

³² The Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) was formed in March 1987 in response to the need for “community forestry training, research, and information exchange” as recognized by the international community. The concept for this center came from discussions during the Jakarta Declaration of the Eighth World Forestry Congress in 1978. With the support of the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Swiss International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), Thailand became the host to the center that is based at the Kasetsart University (KU) Faculty of Forestry (<http://www.recoftc.org/site/index.php?id=35>, accessed March 13, 2008).

³³ The goal of this training was to develop the skills in “reading and using modern aerial maps to identify traditional resource use and formulate local resource planning” (Laungaramsri 2001:155).

In a similar fashion, the construction of a new narrative will necessitate the involvement of multiple groups of people. The academic community, NGOs, government agencies, and the Karen people all play a crucial role in constructing this narrative. The Karen can extricate themselves from a negative position within Southeast Asian societies and place themselves in a more favorable position because they hold some of the answers for the community at large. This is an opportunity to work together to solve mutual problems and the Karen would benefit significantly from this partnership. Concern about the environment in the international community provides a ready forum for the Karen who have developed strategies to utilize forested areas while maintaining soil conditions within these areas.



Figure 5 A Karen woman in traditional hand-woven attire. Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand (Verchot 2003).



Figure 6 Karen man in traditional hand-woven man's shirt (left) displaying the traditional tattoos. Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand. (Verchot 2003).



Figure 7 Young Karen child in traditional hand-woven white garment of unmarried girls. Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand (Verchot 2002).



Figure 8 Karen school girl being taught traditional weaving skills. Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand (Courtesy of Keith Ray 2003).

Karen Crafts – The Universal Language of Art

Another theme that can be developed in a new Karen narrative is ethnographic objects connected with traditional Karen culture. Both the Jewish and Zapotec examples previously discussed inform how elements of the Karen's negotiation of the borderland may be handled. The Zapotec did not degrade what they produced or reduce the skill set of their people by attempting to mass-produce their rugs. They reframed their image from one of needy, poverty-stricken people to one of highly skilled artists. This approach elevated the traditional rugs they weave to the position of fine art. Likewise, the Jewish population sought public forums to carefully display their cultural objects as art with the paradigm shift they desired as the outcome.

However, like many indigenous people in our global community struggling for subsistence, the Karen have acquiesced to market pressure to produce inexpensive tourist items at low prices that has created an outpouring of inferior items (Scrase 2003:454). These items are devoid of the “meaning-rich, specialized” (Ibid) elements that were inherent in the items produced for ritual purposes and local utilization. Both the Jewish population and the Zapotec people sought to maintain the integrity of their people, their cultures, and the items they displayed. They did not seek to display their culture before the mass consumerist markets. Instead, they chose to elevate the members of their population that produce their cultural expressions to the level of artists and the products they produce are given to the status of art. There is an opportunity here for the Karen to do the same. The Karen have traditionally been recognized for their weaving skills (Lewis 1998:72, Tiyaon 2000:48). As Paul Lewis noted in 1984, “[t]he name Karen has become almost synonymous with ‘Weaver’, so outstanding are the products of Karen looms” (Figures 6, 7, and 8).

The Tribal Research Institute of the Thai Department of Social Welfare and Development has also identified the weavings of the Karen as a significant part of their cultural heritage (Tiyaon 2000:48). The Institute encourages more research into this theme in the Karen cultural narrative (Ibid). Sociologist Eric Cohen, a researcher of tourism in Thailand, has approached this topic by investigating the commercialization of crafts in Thailand including those of the hill tribes. (Cohen 2000:90-98). Anthropologist Katherine A. Bowie notes the importance of textiles in her work on the textiles of Thailand stating that they have been an important part of the “political economy” (Bowie 1993:138). These researchers all provide a springboard for more research and dialogue about Karen weaving.

The textiles, baskets and other objects made by the Karen are currently appreciated and marketed as crafts. They are sold primarily by street vendors and government stores. This nomenclature relegates the objects, and their creators to charming anomalies that attract tourists. Using the previously mentioned case of the Jews, renaming the hill tribe weavers as fiber artists and jewelers also reframes how these individuals and their objects are conceptualized. Carefully selecting venues for display of Karen arts in an arena of dignity is an important component of this process.

Karen art, when viewed from this position, is the work of skilled, intelligent artists and not quaint primitives. It is work of the living dynamic culture that pulsates, changes, and “collects” new ideas and grows in response to cultural exchange. Clifford depicts this image of the continuum on which culture truly exists in his description of the concluding works of an exhibition at the Northwest Coast collection at the IBM Gallery. He says:

...this exhibition of traditional masterpieces ends with works by living Northwest Coast artists. Outside the gallery in the IBM atrium two large totem poles have been installed. One is a weathered specimen from the Museum of the American Indian, and the other has been carved for the show by the Kwakiutl Calvin Hunt. The artist put the finishing touches on his creation where it stands in the atrium; fresh wood chips are left scattered around the base (Clifford 1988:211-212).

These fresh wood chips are symbols of a living interactive culture constantly remaking itself in response to the needs and desires of the people within cultural borderlands. As with both the Zapotec and Jewish people, the Karen can rewrite their narrative and choose to elevate their

ethnographic items and themselves by producing items that maintain the integrity of their traditional ways while framing these items within a vocabulary that speaks to society at large.

Conclusion

Globalization has dramatically affected the people of Southeast Asia. During the colonial period, the imposition of the Western technology of mapping went against traditional Southeast Asian patterns of living on the land. The ramification of this new technology was far reaching. It brought with it the concept of circumscribed and bounded spatial organization that went far beyond physical geography. Changes took place in the both the physical and political terrain, the relationship people had to the land, and to each other. Ethnicity and the concept of the Other became firmly fixed constructs under the colonial system imposed by the West.

With the deconstruction of the Karen's position as intermediaries came the deconstruction of the cultural narrative within which they lived. A change in nomenclature transpired as political forces came in line with the new technology of mapping and the accompanying bounded thinking. The Karen went from being *chao pa*, mystical intimates with the forest, to being *chao khao*, hill tribes, a classification that alienated them from the ethnic majority. The result was the marginalization of the Karen people who once functioned as the mediators between the Sown and the Wild, but who are now are viewed as national security risks.

Today, the Karen need to create a new empowering narrative. The academic community, NGOs, and government agencies can assist the Karen in constructing this cultural description. A

small amount of progress has been made in the area of nature conservation, and craft production offers another fertile area for strengthening the Karen's position in their societies. No doubt, there are many others, as Jerome Bruner points out a narrative contains an "ensemble" of elements (1991:6).

This narrative should recognize the Karen as people having an ancient history in the Thai-Burmese borderlands and who are people who live close to the land and listen to the ecological voices inherent in the forests. For the Karen, "humans without forests constitute an empty space without meaning" (Laungaramsri 2001:196). Whether practicing swidden agriculture in forest lands or wet rice cultivation, the Karen develop agricultural practices that respond to the environmental niches they cultivate resulting in an accumulation of knowledge that would benefit society at large.

In their position as weavers of the Sown to the Wild, the Karen have been interacting with the Tai and Burman people for hundreds of years with each party sharing parts of the customs and history of the other. This shared history provides common ground that should be incorporated in the Karen narrative and both the similarities and the differences between the Karen and the other ethnic groups celebrated. Traditions of the Karen reinforce the knowledge that all things are woven together. One ceremony that demonstrates this recognition of interdependence is called the "7 holes of mother rice" (Santasombat 2003:146). This ritual provides a metaphor for the new narrative of the Karen and their relationship with the Tai and Burman ethnic majorities and the global community at large. "The ritual of planting 7 holes of mother rice, and invoking the descent of the rice goddess, emphasizes the resolution for harmony, mutual assistance and unity in working together to ensure community stability"(Ibid).

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