JESSICA BIRD, MARK BROUGH, AND LEONIE COX

Producing solidarity: a settlement strategy of the Karen refugee community in Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

This paper explores the link between experience and context. It places the lived experiences of Karen refugees during settlement in Brisbane, Australia within the socio-political context of Burma, or particularly the historical context of persecution. Two key events – the Wrist-tying Ceremony and the Karen New Year – provide a link between experience and context. The findings of this study show a community strategically at work in a new and ongoing settlement process. This process pays respect to the complexities of cultural integrity whilst also engaging with the challenges of integration. The complexities are local (in terms of cultural, linguistic and religious diversity), national (maintaining a broader sense of community that includes linkages across Australia, as well as an engagement with the Australian socio-political context), and transnational (participating in a global Karen community). This transnational community encompasses Karen settling elsewhere in the world, Karen in refugee camps neighbouring Burma, and Karen living inside Burma. This paper argues that substantial "identity work" is involved in Karen settlement. The two key community events are useful vignettes of this identity work. Both events demonstrate how Karen cultural practices can meaningfully negotiate deeply historical ideas of Karen identity with contemporary challenges of settlement. In addition, they set out a version of settlement that departs from traditional settlement constructs; they show how the lived experience of settlement is messy, complex and dynamic, and not reflective of the neat, idealistic models that immigration policy and settlement theory project.

Introduction

The inauguration of Aung San Suu Kyi into the Parliament of Burma in May 2012 marked a symbolic transition for Burma. It raised hopes for practical changes in the democratic and structural conditions of Burma, as well as an end to a sixty-year ethnic war in Burma's societal periphery.

In real terms, though, democratic changes to the constitution of Burma are not manifesting into socio-political change for discriminated minority groups. Ethnic wars and discrimination are ongoing, despite public gestures of cease-fire and peace treaties (Human Rights Watch, 2012b). Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of people from Burma remain displaced or seeking asylum, despite the Burma Government's apparent transition to a more democratic system of governance (Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2011).

Thus, in the shifting political horizon of Burma, particularly in the context of resettlement, change and disruption are ubiquitous themes. This research examines change and disruption in the context of refugee resettlement from the Thai-Burma border. By focusing on an ethnic group from Burma, the Karen, this study explores the lived experience of individuals within a specific social space. This paper specifically analyses the role of solidarity in strengthening those Karen settling in Brisbane, Australia.

This study employed ethnographic methods, including participant observation, thick description and a range of interviews, in conjunction with a reflexive, interpretive perspective, to position Karen refugees in broader socio-political and cultural contexts of settlement.

The two community events described in this paper magnify Karen identity negotiations in settlement. They demonstrate the complexity of identity work in the settlement process, by addressing the community's multiple tensions. These tensions are cultural, political, religious and social, and they are negotiated in local, national and transnational spaces. A deeper insight into the public identity work of the Karen in Brisbane demonstrates how the lived experience of settlement is complex and inter-subjective. It is based on re-establishing meaningful interconnectedness across these spaces and in these spheres. It thus challenges neat conceptions of settlement theory, which emphasise a linear model (a fixed period of adjustment), measurable outcomes (such as buying a house), local strategy (connecting with local communities) and idealistic modes of adaptation (such as integration).

The first event, the Wrist-tying Ceremony, focused on cultural integrity and identity. Its origins can be placed within a long history of Karen oppression and majority-minority ethno-politics; but, within the Brisbane multicultural context it found new meaning in settlement strategy.

At the Karen New Year, Brisbane Karen enacted and attempted to reify solidarity in the context of national Karen identity in the diaspora. The event reflected a more contemporary notion of Karen identity, as well as a newfound freedom from oppression in the diaspora. It also reflected tensions between maintaining a politically-embedded Karen national identity and embracing a dynamic Australian and Karen one (which is referred to in the community as "Kanga-Karen").

In this paper, a connection is explicated between experience and context. I argue that contemporary Karen unity and identity is the consequence of centuries-old persecution, missionary and colonial interaction, and nation-building rhetoric. This interaction of histories is impacting on the experience in the Karen diaspora, particularly since identity work is a significant component of building interconnectedness in settlement.

The Karen context

This paper analyses conceptions of Karen identity. From an historical perspective, notions of Karen identity are ill-defined. For how long the Karen have identified themselves as "Karen", in a national, ethnic, or community sense, for example, is contested by both Karen and non-Karen scholars (Rajah, 1986). Similarly, the origin of the name "Karen" has for the past century been debated. Besides sharing common oral traditions of early migration and ethnically-charged persecution, many "Karen tribes" had difficulty pinpointing exactly what characteristics linked them to the next. Language and culture between villages varied greatly – so much so that Karen dialects were mutually unintelligible to each other. When missionaries brought script, education, and a Western worldview to Karen villages in the Burma hills, conceptions of Karen identity were questioned (see, for example, Hinton, 1983; South, 2007).

According to Leach (1973) a pan-Karen identity could be therefore conceptualised through structural opposition to others. It was also crystallised through the discourse of foreign missionaries, ethnographers and military officials (for example, Cross, 1854; Marshall, 1922; Marshall, 1927; Morrison, 1947). As a consequence, scholars argued that foreign elite shaped Karen identity discourse; however, it can be argued that Karen elite also played a significant role. During nation-building processes of the first half of the twentieth century, and thereafter, educated Karen leaders published texts to contribute to Karen nationhood and identity constructs (for example, Aung Hla, 1932; Dun, 1980; Karen National Union, 2012).

After the Second World War, when Burma gained independence from Britain, ethno-political relations between the dominant Burmans[1] and minorities were deeply entrenched. Hostile relations between the Karen and the Burmans were further exacerbated by the Karen's well-established relationship with Christian missionaries and the British army. As a result, Karen identity in Burma's ethno-political landscape grew to be the "Christian-Western-influenced other", although Christianity was still very much a minority religion in the Karen state (Hayami, 1996). Much scholarly attention was paid to the ethnic relations in Burma during this period, because its unique ethnic diversity and complex ethnic relations were incomparable in the region (for instance, Leach, 1963; Lehman, 1967; Steinberg, 1982).

Following independence and the Second World War, the military-led Union of Burma Government employed a policy of discrimination. In their attempts to "Burmanise"[2] the ethnically diverse population, the junta consistently violated human rights, and more than sixty years later hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced or seeking refuge from political and ethnic persecution (Yuan Fu Yang, 2009). Despite this year's release of hundreds of political prisoners, many more remain in Burma's gaols (Human Rights Watch, 2012a) and an estimated half a million are internally displaced in eastern Burma. Millions have migrated, sought asylum or found refuge in Thailand, India, Bangladesh and Malaysia. On the Thai-Burma border alone, at least 140,000 refugees are semi-permanently "camping" while they wait for a solution to their situation. Many have been residing in what Thailand considers "temporary shelters" for a quarter of a century (Human Rights Watch, 2010, p. 274; Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2012).

In 2005, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registered asylum seekers living in the Thai-Burma camps and began mass global resettlement. Whilst the majority of Karen were resettled in America (76%; over 50,000), Australia resettled the second highest proportion of refugees from Burma than any other country (approximately 11%; over 7,000). Since 2005, the number of refugees from Burma settling in Australia increased significantly, and in the year 2009-10, people from Burma received the largest

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[1]Burman is the ethnic identity of the majority population in Burma. "Burmese" is a product of nation-building in Burma; it represents the national identity used for citizenship purposes and in government nation-building rhetoric. For greater discussion see, for example, Lang (2002).
[2] "Burmanization" (Lewis, 1924) has also been referred to as "Mynamarization" (Barron & Ranard, 2007, p. 29) or 'Myanmarfication' (Gravers, 2007, p. 4). Each definition centres on similar themes of assimilation; the difference being the adaptation of the state's official and non-official names (Burma or Myanmar). This paper uses Burma – and not Myanmar – to identify the Karen homeland country.

number of visas granted under the Australian Government's Humanitarian Program[3] when compared with other refugee nationals.

This is the context that has affected many of the Karen living in Brisbane, Australia. Their experiences of resettlement and settlement have been largely shaped by this context, particularly since public expressions of Karen identity in Brisbane engages in a transnational manoeuvre against identity discriminations in Burma. There is a connection, therefore, between the identity struggles in Burma and the ways in which the Karen express, perform, and reify identity in the relative sanctum of Brisbane.

Yet, the settlement experience is shaped also by institutional environments. The focus now turns to the roles of agency and self-determination in settlement, as well as outlining key concepts relevant to this study.

Challenging settlement conceptualisations: the agency of refugees in transnational spaces

Dominant discourses of refugee settlement are often framed by notions of victimhood, dependency and passivity (Edward, 2007); however a growing body of work critiques this passive construction. Studies thus now acknowledge the role of refugee agency in settlement. This study specifically acknowledges that the Brisbane Karen settlement experience is not linear, but is ongoing, flexible, inter-subjective, and full of possibilities for a life beyond settlement (including repatriation and secondary migration). It therefore does not reflect idealistic models of settlement adaptation, such as integration or assimilation, but portrays a messy, complex, and dynamic experience of settlement. Settlement is therefore not as simple as reaching state-defined settlement targets; it is more meaningful than this. It involves the re-establishment of interconnectedness within and beyond the settling group, particularly through identity work. Its messiness reflects the multiple spheres and multiple spaces that settlement is played out in. Lastly, settlement is about the ethnographic present, which is firmly rooted in the past, and, for the Karen, about looking towards a settlement future.

Habermas's notion of community is particularly relevant to this conceptualisation of settlement. He identified the role of mutual communication in developing a meaningful interconnectedness, which he sees to be the defining attribute of "community" (Somerville,

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[3] The number of Australian visas granted in the 2009-10 year under the Humanitarian Program for people from Burma reached 1959, according to a report released by the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship (http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/60refugee.htm; accessed 15/11/2010).

2012). In the same way, the Karen settlement process can be understood as reconstructing community through meaningful interconnectedness. That is, strategies of solidarity are central to the communications of Karen community events.

Integration models are neat frameworks of settlement policy that aim for connectedness within and beyond settling groups. Integration is fundamentally a two-way process of learning, adapting and understanding of equal rights between settling and settled communities. Sackmann, Peters and Faist (2003) developed a useful model of integration. Using Godfried Engbersen's initial framework, they identified three types of integration modes: functional (co-ordination strategies); moral (justice and community solidarity); and expressive (identity construction). Particularly in the Karen experience, this model of integration has significance, and the expressive mode (identity construction) has particular import in the two key events.

But, settlement models such as integration tend to position identity in linear terms. For example, a basic formulation of assimilation understands migrants to gradually become absorbed into the new society's culture and social structure, thereby foregoing past identities for new ones. This study has a more complex view of settlement and identity. It argues that neither move linearly; they are always in a state of flux and rooted in past constructions and future imaginings. Furthermore, both are multi-layered, adaptable, and public and private. In addition, public identity work can be a symbolic mechanism for establishing solidarity in times of change and disruption (settlement). Understanding identity in the settlement process is important, particularly since uprooting and emplacing oneself in new environments raises questions of home, loyalty, and selfhood. Identity in the Karen experience can be seen, then, as an intersection of discourses and contexts that carry with them tensions about selfhood and community identity (Ghorashi, 2005). The key events described in this paper reflect this conceptualisation of settlement and identity.

Especially, transnational theory has found import in refugee settlement studies. Vertovec's (2009, p. 3) definition of transnationalism resonates throughout many others: 'sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders'. Transnational theory is a mainstay of contemporary refugee studies because scholars recognise the potential for transnational processes and spaces to reconnect communities, and maintain a healthy sense of living 'here and there' (Portes, 1996, p. 156). Further, it speaks to the politics of resistance: refugees can use transnational spaces to construct identities out of

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the reach of the state and its discourse (Horstmann, 2002, p. 2; Peteet, 2000, p. 185). Smith and Guarnizo called this 'subaltern identity formation', whereby social actors resist, belong, or escape the nation-state 'from below' (1999, p. 23). Furthermore, transnational spaces allow for new forms of identity construction (Castles, 2002, p. 1158) and social imaginary (Ang, 2001, p. 25; Taylor, 2004, p. 25; Vertovec, 1999, p. 4), as well as new avenues to build social capital (Faist, 2000). These are essential for integration in refugee settlement. Some studies used transnational theory to describe the settlement experiences of diasporic Karen (Banki, 2006; Hyndman & Walton-Roberts, 2000; South, 2007), but none have explicitly focused on the link between public identity constructions and its impact on solidarity for community (re)building.

This paper now describes the methodology of this study.

Methodology

This research is based on PhD ethnographic fieldwork conducted from March 2010 to March 2011. Ethnography is the qualitative methodology employed in this study. Ethnographic philosophy centres on meaning and subjectivity. It explores a social phenomenon using unstructured, in-depth data. It also acknowledges the role of the researcher in interpreting and writing up that phenomenon, and that the researcher is responsible for constructing that version of social reality with integrity (O'Reilly, 2005).

Thick description

Geertz' (1973, p. 5) thesis that 'thick description' makes for quality ethnography is applied in this methodology. It rests on the assumption that 'it does not just tell us *what* was done but *how* it was done' (Hammersley, 2008, p. 53). Geertz built upon Ryle's theory that focuses on the interaction of action, meaning and context (Hammersley, 2008, pp. 55-56). This study used thick description for the Karen New Year (17/12/2011) and the Wrist-tying Ceremony (13/8/2011), but for the purposes of this focused essay, a small portion of that thick description is presented. A significant component of this thick description is the participants' perspectives and interpretations of these events. An interesting outcome of using this method was finding multiple meanings ascribed to these events. That is, participants at the events had contesting points of view on what those ceremonies meant for the community, and what they meant for them. This is particularly the case for the Wrist-tying Ceremony, in which there is an ongoing debate as to whether its practices are embedded

in animism, tradition or culture (and especially since there are also multiple understandings of what animism, tradition and culture mean for the Karen).

Participant observation and interviews

Participant observation and informal interviews were the primary methods of data collection. Participant observation gave me entry to participate in the Brisbane Karen setting, as well as emic perspectives into the nature and significance of those settings. Interviews combined informal (conversational) and semi-formal (structured) methods. This aimed to keep the data collection process as unobtrusive and unsettling to the setting as possible, as well as to respect the reticent nature of the refugees participating in the study.

What is "refugee"? What is "community"?

The Karen refugee community in Brisbane is the sample for this study; however, both the refugee "label" and the notion of bounded communities are awkward ones. What constitutes a refugee, or indeed a refugee community, and who designates the refugee label, are important considerations (Edward, 2007). Moreover, at what point is one considered – or not considered – a part of a community? There is no neat answer to this, and as such the sample for this study focused on Karen social networks in Brisbane, Australia, Thailand, Burma and the diaspora.

This paper turns to a thick description of the two key events to provide the link between context and the Brisbane Karen settlement experience.

Key event I: Karen Wrist-tying Ceremony

Background

A popular Karen anecdote explains the Karen Wrist-tying Ceremony to be an historical formal celebration of Karen identity and ethnicity. It places the ceremony's origin at 739 B.C., when the Karen were forced by persecution into secondary migration from China's Yunnan province[4]. Before the Karen embarked on their migration south, the story explains that they ceremoniously tied white string around each other's wrists. These Karen ancestors felt that an annual practice such as this would help to identify "Karen brothers" from other

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[4]Website: http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs3/karenmuseum-01/History/migratory_period.htm, accessed 12/06/2012.

ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. According to this anecdote, the Wrist-tying Ceremony was therefore a means of ethnic identification; a tradition that marked cultural and ethnic identity when no other obvious markers were apparent (personal communication, 16/11/2011).

Yet following quotation gives insight into an alternative conceptualisation of the Karen Wrist-tying Ceremony:

> Before Buddhism or Christianity was introduced to the Karen people, our ancient ancestors and great grandmothers and grandfathers lived in fear of different spirits. Therefore, our parents and grandparents used white thread, which they tied on the wrists of children after calling back their spirits.[5]

The ceremony in August, 2011 in Brisbane combined these two explanations: it explained the ritual's historical significance of warding off spirits and retaining a person's own *k'la* (a person has around three dozen personal *k'la* or souls/spirits); it also explained the ability to identify other Karen in multicultural or multiethnic settings. But in the Brisbane context, in which spirit or Animist ritual goes against the beliefs of the predominantly Christian Karen community, the ceremony necessarily took on new meaning. It was a chance to learn about past cultural practice, to reconnect with Karen cultural identity and tradition, and to promote Karen solidarity in settlement.

The setting

The ceremony was held in Zillmere District Senior Citizen Club on the northside of Brisbane. Around 100 guests filled the hall, four fifths being Karen and the guests being a combination of friends, local dignitaries and settlement service or community development workers. The focal point – the stage – had instruments set up for a band. A 3metre by 4metre sign hung behind the stage on a wall, which read in English: 'Welcome to Karen Traditional Wrist-tying Ceremony 13-8-11'. The Karen translation was positioned underneath the English script in much smaller font. Flanking this banner were two hanging flags: an Australian flag and the Karen National Union flag, both of which shared equally a pride of place and size. In front of the stage, on the same level as the seated audience, a space of 3metres by 6metres had been intentionally left clear for other performances and rituals to take place. The nature of the event was casual and as a result the audience ebbed and flowed; people would perform, spectate, walk around, enter the celebrations late or leave the celebrations early. Similarly,

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[5] http://www.drumpublications.org/wrist.php; accessed 12/06/2012.

most were dressed in formal Karen clothing – brightly coloured, black or white thick cotton tunics, sarongs (longyis) or dresses – or a combination of Australian-style and Karen dress.

Programs were disseminated, which were decorated with Karen flags and mostly written in English. Some were written in Sgaw Karen – an increasingly dominant Karen language in the diaspora. Any speeches delivered in Pwo Karen (a language more frequently used by Buddhist Karen in Burma), Burmese or even Thai were translated into both Sgaw Karen and English by the young Masters of Ceremony (MCs).

Linking experience and contexts

The ceremony was opened with silent salutation to the Karen and Australian flags. The Vice-Chairperson of the AKO (Queensland Branch) delivered the opening speech, which acknowledged the Indigenous Traditional Owners of the land on which the club stood. The opening message iterated ideas about the survival of Karen identity and culture in the diaspora, and the role of the ceremony with such cultural survival. It thus emphasised the importance of Karen cultural practice in the diaspora. Additionally, it brought into focus the placement of the Karen community in the Australian socio-political context, by saluting the Australian flags and acknowledging the land's Traditional Owners.

Traditional cultural performances by younger Karen followed, which included a poetic reading, instrumental and singing performances, a Done Dance, and choir songs. These performances centred on solidarity themes. As an example, the dance's allegory ran as follows: an old man, with seven sons, asked them each to retrieve firewood from the jungle. Upon their return, each son was asked to break the wood they collected. The oldest son was asked to break his first. He broke it easily. Each of the seven sons took their turn, and each broke his own wood collection with ease. The old man then tied all of the wood pieces together and asked the sons to try to break them again, starting with the oldest boy. He could not break the wood, and neither could his brothers. The old man said, "we Karen are like this firewood. We need to stick together otherwise we will end up like broken firewood".

Whilst this story has old connections, its applicability in the context of the Karen diaspora is unquestionable. It is clear that notions of community strength are central to the cosmology of the Wrist-tying Ceremony and that ancient lore taught principles of social solidarity. It is also clear that these folklore principles are increasingly becoming significant for contemporary Karen who endured forced migration, resettlement and global dispersal. It is in

these situations that the notion of community strength is gaining new meaning and new direction towards different outcomes – that of emplacement and meaningful connectedness in the diaspora.

A message from the President of the Karen National Union (KNU) was delivered. The KNU is a proxy government in the Karen state. It has an armed wing and is highly political, although it has well-developed social programmes. Its influence extends beyond the Karen state, into Thailand particularly (where its headquarters operate from) and into the diaspora through organisations such as the Australian Karen Organisation. The KNU's message was delivered in two languages – Pwo Karen and Sgaw Karen – but was not interpreted into English. The letter addressed 'the Entire Karen People' who are 'beloved brothers and sisters' bound together by communal kinship and struggling together under the oppressive dictatorship of Burma. The message echoed ideas about oppression, unity and unique opportunities for identity reconstruction in the diaspora[6].

An elder of the local community preached in Burmese, Karen and English about Karen culture and tradition. This man analysed a line from a longstanding song, '*te kaw*, *te kaw'*, to demonstrate the Karen's link to history. He argued, '*te'*, meaning water, linked with '*kaw'*, meaning land or country, is a binding life principle for the Karen. *Te kaw*, in this context, symbolises the essential need for the land and the country. It is perhaps also a reference to the recent loss of country or homeland, but at the same time a reminder that being Karen, being *with* Karen, and sharing in the Karen communal life can emplace the Karen *kaw* anywhere. The speech concluded with a profound comment about the inexorable nature of their refugee journeys: 'Karen people have a commitment to understand language and culture. Traditional Karen depends on finding truth, purity, brotherhood, loyalty. If you can't change your situation, change your mind.'

To this point, the ceremony's discourse centred on Karen history, oppression, heritage and brotherhood. Although, the participatory element of the ceremony – the actual wrist-tying moment – required its symbolic elements to be deconstructed and explained to the lay audience (this was not solely for non-Karen guests' benefit). This was an educational gesture that had practical applications; it ensured the ceremony's ostensible purpose did not lose itself in complex and symbolic abstraction.

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[6] *KNU Letter of Felicitation to Karen Traditional Wrist-Tying Ceremony: 25 Aug 2011*, sourced at http://karennationalunion.net/index.php/burma/news-and-reports/news-stories/knu-letter-of-felicitation-to-karen-traditional-wrist-tying-ceremony on 14/05/2012.

Along with white string, seven edible materials were used in Brisbane's ceremony (it is said that up to 13 can be used; pers. comm. 16/11/2011). Each material is representative of ideas about Karen identity, fellowship, community strength and self-understanding. These included flowers, sugar cane, bananas, rice, sticky rice, water, coconut, candles, and the white string. This paper will not allow for a full deconstruction of the symbolic elements in this ceremony, but as an example it will explain the significance of the sticky rice as it is most relevant to settlement analysis. 'It means Karen people stick together. If you pound and pound you make it stick. It means the Karen people will have love and be tight, honoured, kind, and love each other tightly' (pers. comm. 16/11/2011). But, it also extends beyond this. 'Sticky rice sticks together; especially with religion, although this isn't a religious ceremony and there are many religions for Karen. Whatever you believe in, stick with it.' Organisers of this ceremony attempted to make it accessible to all the community, irrespective of religious and political agenda. It therefore aimed to unite in ceremony all local Karen people, in spite of the sometimes conflicting intra-ethnic political, religious and linguistic differences. In this way, the local complexities of cultural, linguistic and religious diversity and their impact on community solidarity were made clear. Moreover, the symbolic import of the sticky rice also clearly articulated for the audience the *intended* impartial nature of the ceremony; it reinforced a will for acceptance of intra-ethnic diversity.

A guest from Sydney spoke to the audience in Pwo Karen about network strength and community. For the most part, however, only a minority could understand the Pwo Karen speech. The Chairperson of the Queensland branch of the AKO gave particular recognition to the community, which by its attendance was showing respect for Karen cultural heritage and identity. Importantly, the presence of an inter-state guest and the AKO manifested a broader sense of the Brisbane Karen's connection with the Australian Karen community.

The Karen national anthem was sung, which brought into focus the link between a homeland context and a local cultural experience. The ceremony as practiced in this Zillmere Club was no longer localised in Brisbane's socio-political context but part of both a Karen national discourse and a transnational social field. The anthem symbolically awoke a collective consciousness – a transnational imaginary – but localised this imaginary by positioning it within the lifeworlds of the Karen living in Brisbane during that moment.

The audience was invited to participate in the wrist-tying ritual, and most eagerly waited in line to have their turn. For the younger crowd, whose experience with the ceremony was

limited, participation was mostly a novelty. Mostly all who attended the ceremony participated in the wrist-tying, which involved white string being tied around the wrist, the symbolic edible items being placed in that wrist's hand, water being sprinkled over the same arm whilst a blessing was performed by an elder. The process was repeated on the other arm, and the person's wrist-tying "partner" waited for their turn.

Key event II: Karen New Year

Background

The first official Karen New Year (KNY) was held in 1938; a bill was passed by the Parliament of Burma after Karen leaders began lobbying for a national Karen day in 1936.[7] It is held on the first date of the month of Pyathoe, and often not every year, for the Karen calendar is based on a lunar cycle that can run for twelve to thirteen months in an annual cycle. It is said that the celebration traditionally marked the closing of the rice harvest and consumption of the crop. In contemporary societies, though, it has become a political expression of national Karen identity, and allows Karen people to celebrate "being Karen" without having religion, language or tribal affiliation affect participation.

The KNY's symbolism is based on freedom from oppression and building national solidarity. When the bill was passed for a national Karen holiday, it symbolically marked an official recognition of the Karen identity, political destiny and rights as a national entity.

The setting

About 150 people attended Brisbane's 2011 KNY, despite estimations by community leaders that most of the community would do so. Many Karen – and some non-Karen – were dressed in traditional Karen clothing, or were wearing Western-style clothes such as collared shirts, or vests made from Karen cloth. The event was held in the Logan Civic Parade Gardens. Two open-sided tents facing a stage accommodated rows of people sitting and standing; others stood in the wings or sat under trees shaded from the sun. The non-Karen guests were seated in the front two rows, including local members of parliament and settlement service representatives, although other non-Karen guests mingled amongst their Karen friends. I initially sat with my Karen friends, although they ushered me to sit with the other guests.

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[7] Global United Ethnics newsletter, source:
http://unitedethnics.org/front/bin/ptdetail.phtml?Part=046&Rcg=566 accessed on 11/4/2012.

The stage was flanked by six Karen flags, a banner with Karen and Australian flags, as well as a sign decorated with "Karen New Year" in Karen and English decorated the back of the stage. Two drawings at the front of the stage represented the Karen horn and drums that are traditionally used to bring in the New Year; and the harp, horn and drums were placed on either side of the stage for decoration. They were not sounded during the ceremony 'because nobody knows how to play them' (pers. comm., 17/12/2011). Stalls sold Karen cloth, clothing, Thailand-manufactured drinks, and fundraising trinkets for the Karen Women's department. The overall nature was causal; people were free to come and go as they pleased.

Linking experience and contexts

All those who spoke at this KNY thanked the Traditional Owners of the land, thereby again situating the public ceremony within the Australian socio-political landscape. The Karen and the Australian national anthems were sung by the audience.

After a performance from a local Karen Baptist church choir, a community leader set the KNY within a context of historical persecution, missionary and colonial enterprise, and nation-building processes.

A young Karen man asked his Australian-born girlfriend to read the message from the KNU. Its message addressed 'the Karen around the world' and spoke of peace and prosperity, and the historical and contemporary oppression of the Karen. Lastly, it iterated the importance of Karen languages and custom for succeeding generations in the diaspora. This articulated the tensions between maintaining a sense of cultural integrity whilst also engaging with the challenges of settlement.

The KNY was then situated again in the local Australian context; speakers from settlement service agencies spoke to the audience. They thanked the Traditional Owners and gave motivational speeches about 'keeping culture alive' and maintaining positive community values. The speakers were presented with gifts of appreciation.

A vote of thanks from another Karen community leader followed the guests' speeches, and a presentation was made to the elders, in a mark of respect for their knowledge and social position in the Karen community. Karen music played in the background, chairs were placed in a row in front of the stage and six elders were escorted to these chairs to receive their gifts from six young Karen girls associated with the local Baptist church. Wreaths were placed

around their necks which sported the national Karen colours: red, white and blue. An elderly woman spoke into the microphone on behalf of her peers, reiterating the importance for the young people to 'maintain culture'.

A young Karen girl choreographed an interpretive piece named *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. Three male/female pairs performed the piece. The first pair – two five year old children – represented "traditional Karen". The girl acting as a women had a rice sifter, and the boy acting as a man played a horn. The "today" pair and the "tomorrow" pair modelled Karen outfits in catwalk fashion, showing contemporary modern dress. The first couple, the "yesterday" pair, then sat down at the front of the stage and wrist-tied cotton around each other, to symbolise their cultural integrity and commitment to practice. The "today" couple pretended to eat together and the "tomorrow" pair courted. The 13-year-old choreographer explained the symbolism to represent the challenges of generational dynamism and the significance of Karen custom and dress for identity construction in settlement. This piece therefore demonstrates the emplacement of Karen identity constructs in the context of change and disruption; it brings into focus the effects of settlement and multicultural contact in Australia on Karen practice and identity.

Cultural performances enlivened the event; two Done Dances were performed that consisted of a dozen Karen girls and boys in full Karen costume performing a soft, flowing, and highly repetitive dance in two rows to traditional slow-tempo Karen music. On a more social note, a representative from the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland presented awards to the winning teams of the Brisbane Karen volleyball and cane ball competitions.

To conclude the ceremony, a visiting Karen Baptist pastor from Burma said grace in preparation for the feast, and a community leader jokingly explained in not-so politically-correct terms, and in English, 'It is our culture at home to pack sticky rice with banana leaves. Here it is difficult because the weather, so here it is half-cast food – we put it in plastic boxes not banana leaves!' Again, the experiences and challenges of settlement, and maintaining culture, are clearly articulated in this statement. The guests in the front rows of the tents were then delivered containers of sticky rice and chicken drumsticks, and the rest of the audience helped themselves. A youth band entertained for another hour whilst people ate, wandered, socialised and bought from the stalls.

Discussion

The two public ceremonies show how members of the Karen community in Brisbane can create multilayered solidarity discourse. They are multilayered because they attempted to bridge a complex level of diversity within the community. The diversity came from the linguistic, political, religious and historical differences that affect Karen everyday experiences. These experiences are further complicated because they were located in multiple Karen spaces – local, national, and transnational – as well as Australian spaces of Indigenous politics and integration. But, as a consequence the emic meanings ascribed to these ceremonies were diverse; some saw them as culturally meaningful, others as contributing to politics, for instance. As such, the ceremonies became symbolic attempts to bring unity to diversity; a unity that aimed to overcome local cultural, linguistic and religious diversity by making the ceremonies accessible to all.

The ceremonies attempted to reify Karen identity through cultural practice and community building. The public expressions of identity at these events were local, in that the local Karen community, as well as service providers and members of parliament, participated in the ceremonies' identity constructions. They were national, because they linked local Karen with guests from other states, and because the Australian Karen Organisation actively participated in the ceremony. In addition, the consistent link to Indigenous Australian discourse placed the ceremony within Australia's national political framework. Lastly, the public expressions of identity were enacted in transnational spaces. The transition between English, Karen and other languages, the national symbolism demonstrated through the Karen and Australian national flags, and the enactment of both Australian and Karen practices such as the national anthems brought together the "here and there" elements inherent in transnational practice. The ceremonies thus drew upon contexts, histories and imaginations from the homeland and by doing so connected the locally-acted events with others at home and in the diaspora. Additionally, the symbolic presence of the KNU at these ceremonies highlights the ability to take a locally-performed ceremony and place it within the KNU's transnational space – one that speaks to the 'Entire Karen People' in the diaspora. Importantly, participating in transnational spaces allowed for new forms of Karen identity construction (Castles, 2002), ones that are subaltern (Smith & Guarnizo, 1999) and therefore defy the historical identity-based oppression from the homeland.

Yet, whilst both of the ceremonies were embedded within historical notions of Karen identity – notions that reflect oppression, cultural maintenance and unity in diversity – they also acknowledged the changing nature of Karen identity in the Australian settlement

environment. Tensions exist now between historical Karen "ideals" and Australian Karen identities. The KNY's expressive performance about Karen identity "yesterday, today and tomorrow" clearly demonstrated the community's acknowledgement of a changing Karen identity in settlement. Dynamic and multidimensional Australian Karen identities are thus emerging, particularly in the younger generations who are finding more opportunities for socialisation with the wider community. These younger Karen are often described as 'Kanga-Karen' (a word play on the iconic Australian animal, the Kangaroo), and they participate in varying degrees with both Australian and Karen spaces.

In Australia, Karen identities are therefore being shaped by historical contexts of persecution, missionary and colonial enterprise and nation-building processes, as well as self-determining identity constructions.

Conclusion

Over the six years of Karen settlement in Brisbane, Karen leaders embraced a self-deterministic approach that is highly organised in its structure. Particularly, there are a number of Karen local, national and transnational organisations such as the Logan City Karen Community, the Australian Karen Organisation, and the Global Karen Youth Organisation, that work towards establishing a meaningful connectedness through identity work and solidarity strategy.

The ceremonies described in this paper demonstrate how this meaningful connectedness is played out publicly and symbolically. They show how the Karen community is a close-knit one that has values of unity, responsibility, and empathy at its core. They also highlight the ways in which structural forces such as religion, politics and culture can impact on solidarity and settlement strategy. Yet these strategies are more than symbolic expressions; they are produced and institutionalised in the form of local, national and transnational organisation and practice.

Thus, the KNY and the Wrist-tying Ceremony reinforced themes of community solidarity and identity work. They were invoked by demonstrations and statements, altogether making the symbolic abstraction – the poetic devices – of the ceremonies accessible to the local Karen. In addition, a deeper insight into these ceremonies reveals the complexity and multidimensional nature of identity work, and how identity work is deeply embedded in historical context and significant to processes of emplacement in the new society.

Furthermore, negotiations of "here and there" reflect the ability of this community to operate in transnational spaces; ones that are grounded locally but extend throughout the diaspora. It is this ability to operate in transnational spaces that gives agency to the Karen settlement beyond that provided by local immigration policy. And it is the transnational capabilities of this community that provide the opportunity to establish a meaningful connectedness with a globally resettled community.

In sum, Brisbane Karen settlement reflects a connection between context and experience. It demonstrates how settlement is more than a period of adjustment or mode of adaptation; it is an ongoing set of negotiations to establish meaningful connectedness and community in the context of change and disruption. Public identity work is especially used as a platform to address these tensions and negotiations in settlement. This study thus emphasises how settlement is locatable in the past (context), present (experience), and future (imaginings of solidarity and connectedness). Furthermore, it argues that settlement can be produced and symbolised in local, national and transnational spaces. This study therefore conceptualises settlement as multidimensional and dynamic, and reflective of the "messy" lived experience that ethnography aims to explore.

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