Karen Nationalist Communities:
The 'Problem' of Diversity

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Abstract:
This essay describes how, since the colonial period, different actors in and
from Burma (Myanmar) have mobilized political support around sometimes competing
notions of Karen ethno-nationalism. Christian elites in particular have sought
to impose a homogenous idea of 'Karen-ness' on this diverse society. These
concepts and processes have been legitimized by outsiders, including
missionaries and (more recently) human rights activists and aid workers.
However, attempts to impose Karen unity from above have often proved divisive in
practice, and have helped to fuel sixty years of ethnic conflict in Burma. The
essay describes the re-emergence of civil society networks within and between
Karen communities over the past decade. It concludes by sketching the outlines
of a consociational approach to the problem of Karen 'unity in diversity'.

Introduction: What's in a Name? The Signification of 'Burma' and 'Myanmar'
In June 1989 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) re-named the
state Myanmar Naing-ngan. At the same time, a number of other place names were
changed - e.g. Rangoon became Yangon, Pegu became Bago, Moulmein became
Mawlamyine. In some cases, these changes represented a 'Burmanisation' of
indigenous names; in others, the new word more closely resembled local
pronunciation than had the old colonial-era Romanization (South 2005). The terms
'Burma' and 'Myanmar' are understood and used quite differently among Karen (and
other) communities in and from the country. The use of 'Burma' generally
signifies a rejection of the present military Government's legitimacy. Most
opposition groups, including the National League for Democracy (NLD) and a wide
range of ethnic nationalist organizations - and also the British and US
Governments - therefore still use the colonial-era name for the country, in
their English language pronouncements. To talk of 'Myanmar' on the Thailand
border is to invite categorization as an apologist for the military Government.
Public discourse inside 'Myanmar' being tightly controlled by the Government,
the use of 'Burma' is mostly restricted to the NLD et al. To talk of 'Burma' in
official circles 'inside the country' is to invite categorization as a supporter
of the opposition, and insurgent sympathizer. However, in private conversation,
most of the author's large number of ethnic nationality acquaintances 'inside'
the country still prefer to use 'Burma'. Among the Karen community in
particular, the regime's re-naming exercise is widely resented, and very few of
the author's acquaintances are happy to be referred to by the official exonym,
'Kayin'.

The Construction of Karen Identity
The Karen people of Burma (most of whom are Buddhists: Smith 2003) speak at
least twelve mutually unintelligible, but related, dialects (Burma Ethnic
Research Group 1998: p.34). Karen ethnic identity has at times been labelled an
artificial construction, based on speculative missionary ethnography and
politically expedient colonial classification (e.g. Taylor 1982 and 2006).
There are considerable differences of language, region, religion, culture,
political ideology and socio-economic status between different 'Karen'
sub-groups - i.e. Karen society is highly 'plural' (characterized by cleavages
and segmentation, along religious, ethnic, ideological and regional lines).
As Eric Hobsbawm (1990: p. 78) noted, "we know too little about what … goes on,
in the minds of most relatively inarticulate men and women, to speak with any
confidence about their thoughts and feelings towards the nationalities and

nation-states which claim their loyalties." The manner in which 'ordinary' Karen people construct self-identity, adopt ethnonyms, and respond to nationalist agendas is often unclear. The great majority are poor rice farmers and day-to-day survival is the prime consideration. Studies from Thailand and elsewhere indicate that minority people often adopt multiple ethnic identities, being 'Karen' in some contexts, and 'Thai' in others (Keyes 1979: pp. 16-20). Nevertheless, the author's fieldwork among Karen urban-dwellers and villagers (including Internally Displaced Persons - IDPs) in Burma, and among refugee and other populations in Thailand and beyond, indicates that very large numbers of people do subscribe to a distinct Karen identity. The more than fifty year struggle for the free Karen state of Kaw Thoo Lei is testimony to the enduring appeal of the Karen national idea.

The Karen are an imagined - not an imaginary - community. The terms 'Karen' (and indeed 'Karenni' and 'Kachin'), are constructions - based on deep-routed cultural cores (or ethnie), composed of both modern and traditional elements. According to Nick Cheesman (2002), significant themes of the Karen ethnie include the oppressed nature of the race, their lack of education (or dispossession of traditional Karen knowledge; thus the importance of literacy) and the virtuous nature of the Karen (thus the appeal of Christianity, with its imposing moral sentiments). Although the 'Karen' ethnonym incorporates ideas of ethnicity introduced during the colonial period, some of which have since become outmoded in anthropology and related fields, it is not less authentic for this. In his essay on 'The Karen Making of a Nation', Mikael Gravers (1996: p.239) challenges distinctions "between real ethnic categories and those invented by colonial power.... if we deny (Karen identity) as a mere colonial invention, we simultaneously deny these people any active role in history." Gravers (ibid. p.15) examines the nature of the Karen ethnie, and its associated "myths, memories, values and symbols." Whereas Anthony Smith (1988) concentrates primarily on the historical basis of the ethnie - wishing to defend the ethnic origin of nations against 'modernist' deconstruction - Gravers (1996: pp.265-67) celebrates the admixture of ancient and more recently acquired elements that make up the Karen ethnie. Although Karen identity may be an 'invented tradition', "authenticity is an act of self-representation of identity... (and) the KNU is making ethno-history and creating its own anthropological model as an authentic one."

Karen Diversity, and Mobilization
The richness of Karen history and society bestows complexity and dynamism. However, it has also been a source of factionalism, and competing attempts to impose a totalizing 'unity' upon the reality of Karen diversity.

Colonial Consolidation. As Martin Smith (2003) notes, "until the annexation of Burma in the nineteenth century, the Karens were largely a hill or forest-dwelling people without a written literature … as a result, the Karens appear as an ethnic group very much on the fringes of recorded history." Large numbers of Karen speakers became Christians in the nineteenth century, with profound consequences for this diverse society.

In 1842 the Karen language (S'ghaw dialect) Morning Star newspaper was established in Tavoy, under missionary patronage. One of the first indigenous language journals in Asia, the Morning Star helped to foster the emergence of a self-consciously Karen, S'ghaw-speaking (and Christian) 'imagined community'. Forty years later, elites within the Baptist community established a Karen National Association (KNA). A forerunner of the explicitly ethno-nationalist and separatist Karen National Union (KNU - founded 1947), the KNA grew out of a series of district and provincial Baptist conventions. However, as its name suggests, the KNA was not merely a religious organisation, but also an expression of Karen ethnic and national identity.

The historian John Cady (1958) was among the first to argue that missionary schools and church networks played a key role in forging a pan-Karen national identity, from disparate communities. As Will Womack (2005) notes, "like Furnivall, he interpreted the nineteenth century as a starting point for Karen nationalism, identifying the literate institutions of the Baptist mission as building blocks for national consciousness."

Keyes (in Delang 2003: p.211 & 213) goes so far as to state that "Christianity can be said to created 'Karen' identity in Burma… The ethnonym 'Karen' has come to be linked in the politics of ethnicity in Burma primarily with the Christian-led Karen ethnonationalist movements."

The first Baptist missionary, Andoniram Judson, landed in Burma in 1813.

However, it was only fifteen years later that he turned his attention to the non-Burman peoples, and began to convert large numbers of the king's "Karennic-speaking" subjects. Missionary scholars went on to investigate Karen oral history, recorded in the poetic htas recited over the generations, to produce often highly speculative accounts of the people's history, and their supposed origins in - or beyond - the Gobi desert. Based on intriguing similarities between several Karen myths and the early books of the Old Testament, some influential writers believed that the Karen were a lost tribe of Israel (Renard, in Delang 2003: p.6).

Particularly important to this nation-building exercise were the uses of literacy, in developing a common sense of community among diverse groups. (The first widely-used S'ghaw Karen script was devised by the American Baptist missionary, Jonathan Wade, in the late 1820s).

However, the best recent research (Womack 2005) cautions that the :
"English-language histories of Burma have cited the nineteenth-century introduction of Karen literacy by Protestant missionaries as an important precursor to the rise of pan-Karen ethnic consciousness. They have argued that Karen literacy and the literate institutions that developed in its wake gave rise to the Karen nationalist movement in Burma. Burmese ethnographic and historical works, in contrast, tend to present the missionary script as one in a range of different Karen writing systems. In fact, at least eleven different systems of writing the Pwo and Sgaw Karen languages appeared in Burma during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of these were tied to the great literate traditions, being the product of Christian or Theravada Buddhist missionaries or state bureaucrats. Other scripts came from syncretistic Karen religious leaders on the fringes of Buddhist and Christian literate practice…
Karen literacies have contributed to social cohesion along the lines of specific literate networks. These networks have not always coincided with the notions of pan-Karen identity that appear in the discursive frameworks of nationalism and ethnicity. On the contrary, Karen scripts have served as markers of difference - regional, linguistic, sectarian, and political - between disparate, and sometimes antagonistic, Karen groups."

Diverse Karen groups have long hosted competing social and cultural - as well as more explicitly political - 'communities of interpretation'. Crucially, some have had better access than others to resources, and to sources of external legitimization.

More than a century after the formation n of the KNA, the Karen remain the largest minority group in Southeast Asia without a state of their own, in any meaningful sense. Anthony Smith (1988: pp.222-23) notes that "the result of turning nationalism into an 'official' state ideology is to deny the validity of claims by any community" - such as the Karen - "which cannot be equated with an existing state... If the state does not itself possess long and inclusive traditions, its dominant ethnic community is liable to seek to impose its traditions on the rest of the state's population, and this usually ignites the fires of separatism." Gravers (1996: p.240) describes this phenomenon as "cultural corporatism", in which an "imagined Myanmar has one singular cultural essence which is embodied in all individual citizens." The consequences of such heavy-handed state- and nation-building have been dire.

Militant Ethno-Nationalism. The approach of Burmese independence saw increased attempts to mobilize political support - and external patronage - around competing ideas of the Karen nation. The most well-known ethno-nationalist projects were those which emerged from western-oriented, mostly Christian-led, S'ghaw-speaking communities. For example, in 1928 the mission-educated jurist, Dr San C. (1928; 2001), formulated a classic expression of colonial era Karen nationalism, arguing for the creation of a Karen State, based in Tenasserim Division.

During the period of post-WWII positioning for independence, Christian and Buddhist - and pro- and anti-union - factions mobilized various overlapping constituencies, to provide support for their competing visions of Karen society. Different Karen groups enjoyed relationships with the Government in Rangoon, ranging for cooperative (even co-opted) to antagonistic (Smith 1999).

Following the failure of the Government and several dominant nationalist factions to compromise, the KNU went underground in January 1949. After fifty-seven years of (mostly) low-intensity conflict, Karen (and other ethnic minority)-populated areas of Burma today mired in a state of profound humanitarian crisis. Needs are especially acute in the fields of food and

livelihoods security, education and health, and civilian protection. Most of these problems are linked to longer-term structural issues, and can only be addressed in the context of socio-economic - and above all political - solutions to Burma's protracted state-society conflicts.

For many observers and supporters, the militarized nation-building project of the KNU is the only authentic expression of Karen nationalism in Burma. The militant and secessionist (more recently, federalist) Karen nationalist movement has dominated discourses regarding the place and future of the Karen in Burma. In the early days of the KNU insurgency - and especially in the 1950s, under the leftist Karen National United Party (KNUP) - debates centred on the correct political ideology with which to unify the Karen and other anti-government forces. However, since the rise of General Bo Mya in the 1960s, the KNU has been dominated by a right-wing, Christian (Seventh day Adventist and Baptist), S'ghaw-speaking elite. Many of these cadres come from the Irrawaddy Delta area, but have risen to prominence in the insurgent strongholds established along the eastern (Thailand) border (ibid.).

Historically, the KNU elite has included relatively few non-Christians or non-S'ghaw, while many (perhaps most) rank-and-file Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soldiers and Karen villagers, are Buddhist, and often speak Pwo or other dialects. The KNU leadership's reproduction of a stylized form of S'ghaw Christian culture as the 'official' culture-language of the nationalist movement, and thus by implication as the authentic expression of Karen identity is problematic - although not much commented-upon within the 'mainstream' nationalist movement, and its support networks. This 'S'ghaw-ization' of Karen society in the borderlands and refugee camps resembles aspects of the military-dominated state's 'Burmanisation' of national culture, for which the central Government has been criticized by ethno-nationalist opposition groups. Whether the KNU may be accused of 'internal colonization' is debatable. The processes described above have in large part been the product of a lack of strategic foresight, rather than any S'ghaw-Christian assimilation program. Nevertheless, combined with a lack of accountability among KNU leaders, and an often predatory and extractive relationship with the Karen peasantry (in whose name the insurgency is fought), during the 1970s and '80s the KNU military-political elite grew out-of-touch with the grass roots of Karen society.

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

Elements of the KNU leadership have been in denial over the issue of Christian-Buddhist tensions ever since. However, the emergence of the DKBA, at a time of great crisis in the Karen nationalist movement, was a result of both poor political skills at the top of the KNU, and genuine grievances within the Buddhist community. A decade ago, a study of Karen refugee communities (Coordinating Committee for Services to Displaced People in Thailand 1995) indicated that access to services and other opportunities is much easier for Christians and KNU families, than for Buddhists or Muslims (i.e. among the refugees, religion is a more important factor in structuring inequality than is gender). Similar patterns of inequality exist in the 'liberated zones'. According to this reading, the DKBA rebellion may be seen as subaltern reaction against an unrepresentative and unresponsive elite, which became problematized in religious terms, but was as much an expression political (class-based) grievances.

Notions of a homogenous and militant pan-Karen identity are also fostered in the growing diaspora, among refugee and exile communities, especially in North America, New Zealand and Australia, and on the internet. Indeed, for Karen and many other refugee communities, the experience of exile seems to reinforce the most 'hard-line' elements of socio-political identity. Driven by the imperatives of protecting a sense of self and community in a distant land, exile communities are often the source of strident uncompromising rhetoric.

The Impacts of Assistance. Since the early nineteenth century, Christian networks have played key roles in modeling and supporting expressions of 'Karen-ness'. In recent years - and especially since the 1988 'Democracy Uprising' - international media and humanitarian-advocacy organizations have

paid increasing attention to the plight of the Karen, and other oppressed minority peoples in and from Burma. A recent account of Karen history views the nationalist movement from an almost exclusively Christian perspective. Benedict Rogers (2004) portrays the Karen as a largely Christian people - although in fact no more than a third are non-Buddhists. He thus perpetuates the image the of the Christian elite-dominated KNU as the only legitimate representative of the Karen.

When the author first started working on the Thailand-Burma border, in the early 1990s, the 'international community' (itself a complex construct) was largely unaware of the impacts of 'low-level' armed conflict on ethnic minority/ nationality populations in Burma. As a result of a series of well-documented reports, produced over the past decade by various indigenous and international rights-oriented groups, the appalling human rights and security situation in the borderlands and elsewhere in Burma is now well-know, at least by those who choose to enquire.

Increased levels of international awareness have been matched by rising aid budgets - at last for refugees and IDPs along the Thailand border. International agencies have played various roles in mediating ideas of Karen nationalism. In particular, the roles of NGOs supplying the refugee camps bear some examination. Had donors asked more question in the early-1980s, when the first Karen camps were established in Thailand, they may have been less inclined to accept a self-selecting, Baptist-S'ghaw elite as the refugees' natural and legitimate representatives.

The KNU-controlled Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) administered the camps with little interference, throughout the 1990s (although since then, considerable progress has been made in encouraging greater participation in and accountability from the refugee leadership: Thailand-Burma Border Consortium 2006). If more efforts had been made in the 1990s to encourage the KRC to adopt participatory approaches, and become more genuinely representative of the refugee population, some of the inequalities against which the DKBA rebelled might have mitigated, at least in the refugee environment.

It would be unfair to blame international non-government organizations (NGOs) for the emergence of DKBA. However, few Thailand-based agencies have investigated the impacts of aid on the conflict in Burma, and the ways in which their rice and rhetoric have supported the KNU's program of militarized nation-building, during a period when the Karen insurgency became increasingly centred on the refugee camps in Thailand, as sources of refuge and legitimacy. During the 1980s and '90s, as the KNU lost control of the once-extensive 'liberated zones' of Kaw Thoo Lei, the organization became increasingly dependant on cross-border trade with, and supply lines from, Thailand (Smith 1999). As it became pinned-down along the remote eastern border, the KNU lost contact with Karen communities inside Burma (many of which remain fervently nationalistic, but not necessarily pro-KNU: see below). Meanwhile along the border, foreign aid insulated the KNU and its supporters from the realities of life in Burma, while empowering one among several competing concepts of Karen nationalism, which became the dominant form of discourse among border and exile/opposition communities.

The KNU 'Ceasefire'. In December 2003 the KNU announced a 'gentleman's agreement', to cease fighting with the SPDC. Although substantial talks began in January the following year, the purge of the relatively progressive prime minister (and military intelligence chief), General Khin Nyunt, in October 2004, presented a serious set-back to the peace process.

If the provisional KNU-SPDC ceasefire had been consolidated, it might have delivered a substantial improvement in the human rights situation on the ground, creating the space in which local and international organizations could begin to address the needs of a war-ravaged population, and begin the urgent task of moving onto a positive, 'peace-building' phase. However, since early 2006, the Tatmadaw has launched major operations against a diminished KNU insurgency, and its civilian support base, displacing at least 20,000 people in northern Karen State (although in parts of Tenasserim Division, and central and southern Karen State, there is still less fighting, and somewhat fewer human rights violations, than before the 'ceasefire': South 2006).

In the meantime, for the Karen community living beyond the zones of on-going armed conflict, the daily struggle of life under a brutal dictatorship continues. Those living in Government-controlled areas constitute a sizeable majority of the Karen population in Burma. For many - and especially young people - identification with the KNU's militant nation-building exercise constitutes a central element of political belief. It should not be doubted that

the KNU is a key political actor - with perhaps a unique role to play. However, it represents only one strand of Karen nationalism.

The 'Union Karen' Perspective. A set of competing ideas of Karen nationalism are associated with the 'Union Karen' perspective, which is prevalent particularly in Rangoon, and in the Irrawaddy Delta. This less aggressive nationalist discourse has been adopted by elites who - unlike the KNU and its predecessors - have sought an accommodation with the state, rather than challenging its foundations. The broad range of pro-Rangoon perspectives were quite well-represented through the independence and parliamentary periods (Smith 1999). However, since the imposition of military rule in 1962, and especially following the events of 1988-90, the 'Union Karen' voice has been marginalized, in comparison with the uncompromising rhetoric produced by opposition groups along the Thailand border.
In part, this exclusion may be explained by Government restrictions on international access to Karen groups working inside the country. However, relatively few outside agencies have actually made efforts to engage with this sector of Karen political society. Members of the Burma activist community often assume that any socio-political actors working 'inside' the country must be 'stooges' of the military Government. (In its most extreme form, opposition discourse seeks to deny the legitimacy of any activity carried out in Government-controlled areas, beyond the out-and-out opposition of the NLD and its allies.) Furthermore, due to the restrictions and frustrations of working in military-ruled Burma, the 'Union Karen' have had to adopt the strategies of subterfuge, working 'behind the scenes' in ways which do not attract attention, and producing writings which have to be read 'between the lines' (interviews with Karen CBO workers, Pa'an, Toungoo and Rangoon, 2005-06).

The author's fieldwork reveals that Karen community and ('small-p') political leaders have been active in Burma throughout the period of military rule, and especially since the mid-1990s, when civil society networks have re-emerged within and between many ethnic nationality communities (South 2004). In most cases, these 'Union Karen' networks operate under the patronage and 'umbrella of protection' of a small handful of mostly elderly politicians, many of whom are retired state officials, or politicians who 'returned to the legal fold' in the 1950s and '60s (often due to frustration with the KNU's hard-line nationalist position). In most cases, these elites subscribe to a broad, and not particularly sophisticated, Christian-oriented Karen identity, similar to that held by border-based groups (as described above). However, they do not perceive a fundamental contradiction between citizenship of a centrally-governed state, and the pursuit of greater economic, social, cultural and linguistic autonomy. In order not to expose vulnerable individuals, this paper refrains from quoting from (the limited volume of) material produced by the 'Union Karen'. In general, the discourse seeks to engage with the military Government, to win concessions, and create the social and political space within which community-based organizations (CBOs) may operate. While the history of the Government-dominated National Constitutional Convention (South 2004) illustrates the limited success of the first strategy, the wide range of activities carried out by affiliates of this loose network (described below) demonstrates that it is possible to forge space for autonomous community organization, at least at the local level in Burma.
A Karen civil society leader from Rangoon recently stated that (confidential document 2005; parenthesis added):
"The Karen people in Myanmar have become very weary and fed up with the prolonged civil war and its consequences. They are of the opinion that it is imperative … to direct their energies to mobilizing their cultural wisdom, [inter-faith] religious knowledge and social understanding so as to constructively work towards a better future.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, various Karen groups in Myanmar have been trying … to build confidence and strengthen capacities of the various elements in the Karen community and to foster cooperation between them. The Karen leaders in Myanmar have projected the idea of transferring the 'armed struggle in the battle field' to the 'political struggle around the table' … [including] Peace building: through initiatives for development and humanitarian assistance … [and] Peace nurturing: initiatives for community mediation and conflict resolution."

'Primordial' Voices. Karen society has produced other, sometimes competing, expressions of ethno-nationalism, many of which emanate from subaltern sections of the community. These projects (including millenarian sects) have generally not been granted legitimacy by outsiders, as they are not framed within the 'rational-bureaucratic' discourse favored by socio-political analysis.

Mikael Gravers (1999) has described the emergence of rebellious millenarian sects among Karen communities in Burma, since before the nineteenth century. As noted above, during the colonial era, elements of the (growing) mission-educated Christian community articulated, and - with the help of their missionary patrons - attempted to consolidate a 'modern' pan-Karen identity, which broadly supported the colonialists' 'civilizing enterprise'. Meanwhile, other elements of Karen community were engaged in more localized forms of mobilization.

In most cases, colonial era rebellions originated with charismatic leaders in the remote hill-tracts, who often aspired to the status of min luang (Buddhist messianic prince, whose store of righteousness and karma equip and entitle him to seize power). Concentrated especially in the Papun-Salween areas, colonial-era millenarian projects were as much expressions of religious and localized political identity, as emanations of a self-consciously 'Karen' nation-building project. Nevertheless, many of the main actors were Karen-speakers, whose aims included the creation of a socio-political space, for the enjoyment and expression of proto-Karen identities. Such charismatic individuals and their followers have long been active in the Karen hills of Burma - and Thailand - including into the contemporary period.

Atavistic Activism? Locally-centered millenarian sects - led by charismatic figures credited with occult powers - have continued to emerge among Karen communities in crises, in the modern period. Among the most well-known of these are the Telecon (or Telakhon) and Likae (or Leke, Lekhai) cults. Both of these millenarian, syncertic Buddhist-animist groups await a Karen saviour, generally identified with the Buddha-to-be, Ariya, who will lead a Karen spiritual and social - and perhaps, political - revival.

Telecon: At least two branches of the long-haired Telecon sect exist, in Kya-In Seik Kyi and Kawkareik Townships of Karen State (KNU Sixth, and parts of Seventh Brigade). Sadly, the majority of the original 40-odd Telecon villages Kya-In Seik Kyi have fled to the border, as a result of Tatmadaw offensives in the 1990s (author's field notes, February-May 1997).

The Telecon sect was founded by a charismatic spiritual leader (or Poo Kyaik) in the mid-nineteenth century.. While acknowledging the importance of the historical Buddha (Gautama), the Telecon look the coming of a 'white monk', who will prepare the way for the future Buddha-to-come (Ariya). In the meantime, members of the cult (who include both S'ghaw and Pwo speakers) - and especially its cadre of monks - keep numerous taboos, and perform various rituals (many associated with the Karen animist heritage), which they believe maintains their Karen identity. As such, Telecon leaders have at times positioned themselves as the 'true' Karen, in opposition to the modernist KNU.

Until quite recently, Telecon monks in the Kawkareik area engaged in military activities, especially during the full-moon period, when their faith and purity - together with various magical practices - was considered to make them invulnerable. With the aid of various supernatural entities (including life-size, animated statues) they have engaged the Tatmadaw (and at times the KNU) on a number of occasions - but with only mixed success.

In 1972 in KNU Sixth Brigade, the previous Poo Kyaik - who was twelfth in succession from the sect's founder - challenged the KNU for local leadership of the Karen nationalist community, calling the Telecon the only 'true and pure' Karen. Having been invited to the brigade headquarters for talks, a dozen Telecon leaders were executed on the order of the Sixth Brigade commander (Smith 1999: Appendix).

Likae: Established in 1860, at Hnitya village near Pa'an, Likae villages are today found in the Megatha Forest complex, on either side of the border around Three Pagodas Pass, and in the Gwe Ka Baw (Zwe Kabin) area, near Pa'an. Less militaristically inclined than the Telecon, the Likae refer to a holy book - composed in Karen 'chicken-scratch' script (possibly the earliest Karen orthography: Womack 2005). - which marks them as inheritors of special Karen traditions (Fink 1997).

'God's Army': Karen millenarian tendencies came to the fore further to the South, in Tenasserim Division (KNU Fourth Brigade), in the immediate aftermath of a Tatmadaw offensive against the KNU, in 1997. 'God's Army' - or The Soldiers of the Holy Mountain - was composed of an ad hoc collection of (mostly Christian) villagers and KNLA soldiers. Following the collapse of the KNU forces

in February-March, people in the Htee Hta-Mor Hta area rallied around two twelve year old twins - Johnny and Luther Htoo - who guided their followers to some minor victories, in armed clashes with the invading forces. Manipulated by local Karen elders, the twins and their rag-tag 'army', enjoyed some notoriety (including in the international media), before the group broke-up, under pressure from the Thai authorities, following an insurgent siege of a hospital in Ratchaburi (Thailand) in January 2000. This incident was blamed on 'God's Army', but was in fact instigated by the shadowy 'Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors', whose members were taking refuge with the twins and their followers, at the time of assault (author's field notes, February-May 1997; January 2000).

Karen Buddhist Nationalism. Outsiders have generally regarded the traditionally-oriented movements sketched above as historical or cultural oddities. The Telecon et al have not been deemed legitimate in the sphere of public action - largely because such millenarian groups have not expressed their concerns and aspirations, or organized their activities, in the 'rational-bureaucratic' manner expected by western (or western-trained) outsiders. Another group of non-Christian (mostly Pwo) Karen political actors is also associated with traditional elements of the community, but in the more easily (for outsiders) digestible for of the Buddhist sangha.
The DKBA (the origins of which are described above) is of particular interest, as it represents a full-blown Karen nationalist project, in direct military and political competition with the KNU. The Buddhist-nationalist idea of 'Karen-ness' is derived from many of the same historical roots as the 'mainstream' KNU, with additional themes drawn from the rich Buddhist tradition (both KNU and DKBA discourse claim KNU founder Saw Ba U Gyi as a key progenitor).
It is important to note that many DKBA units serve as little more than proxies for the Tatmadaw, commit a wide range of human rights abuse (Human Rights Watch 2005), and enjoy very little legitimacy, even within 'their' local communities. However, over the past decade, some individual monks and DKBA commanders have articulated and reproduced a vision of Karen identity.
A number of Karen language schools (and at least one cultural museum) exist in DKBA-controlled 'ceasefire areas'. More broadly, local cultural-education and development projects associated with ideas of Karen nation- (and capacity-)building have been implemented in many Buddhist communities, often with little-or-no outside support or recognition beyond the local community (see below).
The author's fieldwork indicates that a very large (if diverse) body of S'ghaw, Pwo, Bre and other dialect-speaking Buddhist (and indeed, animist) people in Burma consciously identify with Karen ethnonym - but do not recognize the leadership of the KNU. In the author's experience, many of these communities - and their leaders (including several Buddhist monks) - despise the Government, respect Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and would like to support a specifically Karen solution to the problems of under-development and human insecurity experienced in their daily lives. Many are gravely disappointed by the outcome of the DKBA adventure - but have also been alienated by the KNU. They are available for political mobilization - but within what framework, and according to what idea of 'Karen-ness'?

Karen Actors, and Strategy
For fifty-seven years the KNU has pursued a policy of armed conflict with the Government (with intermittent - but largely unsuccessful - peace talks). Particularly since the fall of the KNU headquarters at Mannerplaw in 1995, other elements within the nationalist community - including breakaway ex-KNU factions, such as the DKBA - have sought to pursue political and social agendas from 'within the legal fold'.
The fragmentation of the insurgent movement notwithstanding, the last few years have seen an expansion and deepening of contacts between Karen elites - and within Karen civil society more broadly - including across the 'front-lines' of armed conflict (author's field notes, 2005-06). However, most outside observers still focus only on the military-political situation in the borderlands, rather than on various community development and civil society capacity-building initiatives undertaken by Karen groups 'inside' the country. In part, this distortion is due to lack of contact with Karen communities 'inside' Burma; in part, it reflects ideological assumptions regarding the legitimacy of certain actors and strategies.

Karen Civil Society in Zones of On-going Armed Conflict. Over the past decade, civil society networks have expand considerably in non-Government controlled areas of Burma (South 2004). As their ex-cold war patrons, China and Thailand, withdrew support from Burma's ethnic insurgents in the 1980s and '90s, the rebel armies declined in military - and thus political - significance. Perhaps ironically, the decline of the old insurgent paradigm opened the space for the emergence of new and more participatory forms of social and political organization among opposition ethnic nationality communities. A number of local NGOs have been organized by Karen (and also Chin, Kachin, Shan, Lahu, Karenni, Tavoyan, Mon and all-Burma) student and youth, women's, environmental and human rights groups in the border areas, which have begun to occupy some of the political space created by the declining influence of mainstream armed groups. Representing new models of organization, these networks constitute one of the most dynamic aspects in an otherwise bleak political scene. As a result of their activities, those engaged in the struggle for ethnic rights and self-determination in Burma have been obliged to acknowledge the importance of women's rights, community-level participation and democratic practices - not just as distant goals, but as on-going processes.

In a parallel development, the refugee and other relief and welfare organizations along the Thailand border have also grown in interesting ways. As noted above, the KRC was originally controlled by a S'ghaw-speaking, mostly Baptist elite, within the insurgent hierarchy. As the KNU lost ground throughout the 1990s, the number of refugees in Thailand grew annually, and assumed a new importance as civilian support base, source of recruits and safe haven for the KNLA. As the refugee situation along Thailand border was gradually internationalized, with the presence of more INGOs - and since 1998, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees - the refugee committees have been obliged to become more responsive to their clients, the refugees.

A particularly dynamic sub-sector was composed of local relief and development groups which continue to work cross-border, with displaced communities inside Burma. Since the early 1990s, Karen - and later Shan, Karenni and Mon - teams have provided humanitarian relief (food and medicines) and undertaken community development and educational work among displaced communities, in what had once been the 'liberated zones' (behind the front-lines of war), but were now mostly zones of on-going armed conflict.

For example, there is a network of some 400 Karen village schools inside Burma, most of which are loosely supervised by the KNU Education Department (KED). In many areas, these schools consist of little more than a few bamboo benches under the trees, which must move repeatedly, as villagers are displaced by the on-going armed conflict. In the face of such difficulties, many displaced communities attempt to provide their children with some form of continuity, and a basic education. In a sometimes uneasy partnership with local teachers and self-help organizations, the KED attempts to standardize the curriculum and examinations within this massively under-funded system, which still enjoys close links with schools in the refugee camps.

The explicitly nationalist-oriented school system promotes a view of Karen society as quite separate to that of the rest of Burma. This agenda is reflected in curricula which have grown increasingly divergent for the Government's educations system - especially in the refugee camps, where international NGOs have supported the development of a secessionist-oriented education-in-exile. Like the new refugee-based organizations, cross-border assistance groups have developed relatively independently of their 'parent' insurgent organizations - although they still rely on the latter for security, and share most of the same broad ethno-nationalist goals. In demonstrating transparency and accountability to donors and beneficiaries (their local communities), these civil society networks have emerged as important models of social mobilization.

Karen Civil Society in Ceasefire and Government-Controlled Areas. Although the state generally inhibits their formation, a variety of local civil society networks exist among ethnic nationality communities 'inside' Burma. These include Christian and Buddhist organizations, and many traditional village associations (e.g. funeral societies), as well as more formally-established CBOs and local NGOs (e.g. literature and culture associations and business-support groups).

The tentative re-emergence of civil society networks among and between local communities in Burma is a complex phenomenon, owing much to the political space created by the ceasefire process since 1989. Other factors in the realignment of state-society relations during this period include the increased presence of

international agencies in Burma, and the partial opening of the economy in the early 1990s. Although Karen civil society networks in Burma are often associated with Christianity, many Buddhist associations exist too. Many senior monks may have been co-opted by the military regime, but the sangha still has great potential as a catalyst in civil and political affairs.

The danger of exposing vulnerable groups and individuals precludes a detailed description of Karen civil society 'inside' Burma. However, at least thirty-five Karen groups are registered with the authorities. In addition, two Karen political parties are tolerated by the Government – the Karen National Congress for Democracy (KNCD, founded in 1989, and allied with NLD; banned by the Government in 1991, but not actively suppressed), and the Union Karen League (UKL, founded in 1946; attends the National Convention).

Karen actors 'inside' Burma operate in a very constricted – and shifting – political space. Civil society groups from the Karen, Kachin, Mon and some other ethnic nationality communities are building associational networks, which in the future may form the basis for more explicitly political initiatives.

Conclusion: Unity, Diversity and Consociational Democracy

Since before independence, various actors have attempted to impose a homogenous idea of 'Karen-ness', and a monolithic political unity, upon this diverse society. Historically, Christian elites within the ethno-nationalist insurgency have presented themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of the Karen, often suppressing dissenting or alternative voices. This approach is fundamentally undemocratic, and has actually served to further fragment the community – as well as alienating Karen military-political leaders from the very constituencies they seek to represent.

Aspirations to self-determination are deeply held by many members of the Karen and other ethnic nationality/minority communities in Burma/Myanmar. However, history has proved the quest for Karen unity to be elusive – and perhaps illusory. In contrast to efforts to establish a single identity and political leadership, a consociational approach to Karen social and political diversity would accept the segmented nature of this 'plural' society as a starting point – and seek to make a virtue out of this necessity.

The classic text on consociationalism is Arend Lijphart's Democracy in Plural Societies (1977). The main elements of consociational democracy are rule by 'grand coalition', the provision of minority vetoes, proportional representation in decision-making (and in allocation of funds and services) and segmental autonomy – or federalism. The basic idea is that - if a high degree of cooperation and good-will can be achieved between elites - then 'unity in diversity' may be accepted, and even celebrated.

The literature and limited practical examples of consociational democracy have generally focused on inter-communal issues, and political structures at the level of the nation-state (e.g. Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland; and in the Asian context, Lebanon from 1943-75 and Malaysia from 1955-69: ibid. Chs. 2 & 5). However, consociational analysis and engineering may also be applied at the level of a particular community, such as the Karen.

Rather than trying to change Karen society, and re-form its norms and values, a consociational approach would aim to work with elites (from the different constituencies described in this essay), to build models of cooperation within and between different sectors of the community. The diversity of Karen society might then become its strength, rather than a source of perceived weakness.

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