

A sense of home in exile

Sandra Dudley

Material objects and the physical actions of making and using them are a fundamental part of how forced migrants, far from being passive victims of circumstance, seek to make the best of – and make a home in – their displacement.

The Karenni are the second largest grouping remaining in camps in Thailand and by late 2007 numbered around 23,000, about 13% of the total Burmese refugee population.¹ Humanitarian conditions in Karenni State are by all accounts dire, even by Burma's low standards.

The Karenni refugee leadership is dominated by the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), which has remained committed to armed opposition to the Burmese regime. There are also various other armed groups vying for control of territory, resources and people inside Karenni State. High-minded ideology is often lost as conflict and its civilian consequences become a way of life and ultimately contribute to patterns of displacement. In the four years between 1996 and 2000, for example, it is estimated that more than 15% of Karenni State's population were displaced because of military activity.²

The basic structure of assistance provision to Karenni refugees has changed relatively little in the past 12 years, despite increases in the refugee camp population, camp mergers and the tighter physical and legislative confinement of all border refugees since 1998. The increasing impact of UNHCR's large resettlement programme, whilst an understandable approach

to a prolonged refugee situation, has also augmented anxieties and tensions within the camp. Unsurprisingly, Karenni refugee life is increasingly problematic – and, as a result, all agencies appear variously to be identifying and seeking to address a significant rise in both mental ill-health and social and legal problems.

'Materialising' exile

Displacement inevitably complicates and changes people's relationships with objects and places, as well as with each other. In order to live as 'normally' as possible within a new place, Karenni refugees seek to make it as familiar in material ways, and as like the old, as possible. In so doing, they are attempting to connect two points in space (the refugee camp 'here' and the pre-exile 'there') and two time periods (the displaced 'now' and the pre-migration 'then'). The connections are continually being renewed through ritual practices, clothing, food and myriad everyday activities.

Essentially, this is about creating a sense, however flawed, of 'home' – somewhere people feel is comfortable and intrinsically linked to who and what they perceive themselves to be. While it is unhelpful for relief agencies and anthropologists alike to idealise the worlds that refugees have left behind, refugees

often do precisely that. It renders the experience understandable and the present more bearable.

The cultural experience of displacement is reflected in how refugees act in the physical world of which they are a part. How, for example, does life in the camps relate to cultural aesthetics about the 'right' or 'best' way to live and feel? In what ways do the memories and imagination of the home that has been left behind influence the ways in which refugees seek to create a sense of home in the camp? What particular material objects and aspects of the physical environment (if any) are important in these processes, and why? What does it physically feel like to be a refugee?

At least three elements in human interaction with the physical world have become particularly significant in Karenni forced displacement. Firstly, opportunities to repeat physical actions familiar from the past, such as building houses and other creative processes possible in the camp, are important – and not only because they ameliorate the boredom and anxiety of displacement and provide necessary physical objects. They may be comforting in their familiarity, enable the structuring of time, and provide distraction and a sense of doing the best one can. They also allow the continued development and practice of valued skills. Furthermore, the reassurance provided by utilising subconscious cultural knowledge to use one's body in established ways, while hardly unique to



Suthep Krisanavarin for TBBC, 2007

*Karenni
refugees in
Site 1/Ban
Mai Nai So
refugee camp,
Thailand.*

refugees, does have particular importance in forced migration as another means of simultaneously preserving continuity with the pre-exile past and adjusting to the loss of some of life's rhythm. Indeed for Karenni refugees, being busy, be it in making things such as textiles or baskets, teaching or cooking, is

a key component of mechanisms for coping with displacement.

Secondly, material forms such as photographs can stand for past personal and communal experience and create connections with that past. Many people possess photograph albums, for example, which include

images not only of friends and activities in the camp but also of persons and places significant in life before displacement. The value of such artefacts is evident in both their continued existence in the refugee camp and in the ways in which they are kept and frequently engaged with in private or with visitors as a springboard for remembering and re-telling the past.

Thirdly, as well as being an important vehicle for memory and link to the past, photographs and other personal objects, as with building houses in a familiar style and weaving traditional textiles, also enable Karenni refugees partially at least to colonise or possess a new place within which they otherwise feel inadequately at home.

A better understanding of these cultural and material processes would contribute to more effective and sympathetic assistance for refugees.

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1. Thailand Burma Border Consortium 2007 'Burmese border refugee sites with population figures: November 2007', www.tbbc.org/camps/2007-11-nov-map-tbbc-unhcr.pdf
2. Human Rights Watch 2007 'Burma: army attacks displace hundreds of thousands' <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/10/25/burma17168.htm>