

The Karen Diaspora: Transnational Sense of Belonging and
Practices after the 2021 Myanmar Coup



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ชวาทะเห็รียงพลัดถิ่น: ความรู้สึกร่วมและปฏิบัติการข้ามชาติหลังรัฐประหารในเมียนมาร์ พ.ศ.
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งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาผู้พลัดถิ่นชาวกะเหรี่ยงด้านสำนึกความเป็นเจ้าของระหว่างชาติ การเปลี่ยนผ่านด้าน
อุดมการณ์ และกลวิธีที่มีการใช้ในกิจกรรมข้ามชาติภายหลังเหตุการณ์การรัฐประหารในประเทศเมียนมาปี
2564 โดยศึกษาจากเยาวชนชาวกะเหรี่ยงใน 5 ประเทศ ได้แก่ สหรัฐอเมริกา ออสเตรเลีย แคนาดา
นอร์เวย์ และไทย การศึกษาพบว่าผู้พลัดถิ่นเหล่านี้ยังคงรับรู้ความหมายของแผ่นดินเกิด และยังคงรักษา
อารมณ์สำนึกความเป็นเจ้าของของแผ่นดินเกิดหลังจากได้ลงหลักปักฐานในประเทศที่อยู่อาศัยเป็นระยะ
เวลานาน ซึ่งในบริบทของการรัฐประหารปี 2564 เยาวชนเหล่านี้ได้เข้าร่วมในกิจกรรมข้ามชาติต่างๆ อย่าง
แข็งขันโดยใช้กลวิธีที่หลากหลายทั้งในพื้นที่จริงและออนไลน์ การศึกษานี้ใช้วิธีการวิจัยเชิงปริมาณ รวมถึง
การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างและการสังเกตอย่างมีส่วนร่วมทางออนไลน์เพื่อทำความเข้าใจว่าเยาวชน
เหล่านี้เชื่อมโยงกับแผ่นดินเกิดได้อย่างไร เช่นเดียวกับเพื่อทำความเข้าใจว่าเยาวชนผู้ลี้ภัยเหล่านี้เข้าร่วมใน
ปฏิบัติการข้ามชาติด้วยเหตุใดและอย่างไร โดยหลังจากศึกษาเรื่องเล่าและงานด้านชาติพันธุ์วรรณมาแล้ว
ผู้วิจัยได้แย้งว่าสำนึกความเป็นเจ้าของระหว่างชาติของเยาวชนชาวกะเหรี่ยงเหล่านี้ก่อรูปขึ้นโดยเรื่องเล่า ความ
ทรงจำ และวัฒนธรรมกะเหรี่ยงที่ปฏิบัติกันในค่ายผู้อพยพ และค่ายผู้อพยพเหล่านี้กลายเป็นสถานที่แห่งความ
ทรงจำของบุคคลเหล่านี้ นอกจากนี้ ภายหลังจากเหตุการณ์รัฐประหารในเมียนมา เยาวชนชาวกะเหรี่ยงเหล่านี้
ได้แสดงออกถึงการเปลี่ยนผ่านทางอุดมการณ์จากชาติ-ชาติพันธุ์นิยม ไปเป็นประชาธิปไตยและความ
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This research examines the Karen diaspora's transnational sense of belonging, ideological transition and tactics embodied in transnational activities after the 2021 Myanmar military coup. Looking at young Karen people in 5 host countries including the United States, Australia, Canada, Norway and Thailand, it is evident that those people in the diaspora still perceive the notion of homeland and maintain an emotional sense of belonging to their homeland after a long period of resettlement in host countries. In the context of the 2021 coup, those young people have engaged actively in transnational activities with various tactics used both on-site and online. Quantitative methods were applied including semi-structured interviews and online participant observations to understand how those young refugees feel connected to their homeland, as well as how and why those young refugees have engaged in transnational practices. After examining the narratives and ethnographic work, I argue that the transnational sense of belonging of young Karen people were shaped by narratives, memories, and Karen cultural practices in refugee camps; and those camps also become their memorial places. In addition, after the Myanmar military coup, those young Karen people expressed an ideological transition from ethno-nationalism to democracy and cosmopolitan orientation when engaging in transnational activities.

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Thinh Mai Phuc

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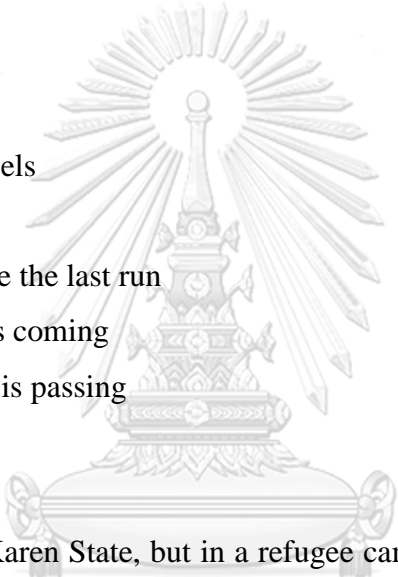
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Chapter 1. Introduction

Statement of Problem

Clashes between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the Myanmar military began on 15 December 2021 at Lay Kay Kaw Town. Over two thousand residents- including elderly people, women and children, have been displaced since. On December 20th, Myat, a participant in the research, shared a post on Facebook:



I see you
I hear your cries
I know how it feels
Stay strong
Hoping would be the last run
A brighter day is coming
The darkest day is passing
Just stay strong!

Myat was not born in Karen State, but in a refugee camp in Thailand. She did not set foot in her ancestral land until she was 20 years old. She applied for resettlement in the US when she was a teenager, and recently graduated with a degree in International Relations after living there for 10 years. Cases like Myat's demonstrate that young Karen people resettling in host countries still maintain a connection to their homeland, and such sentiments can be reshaped or heightened during turmoil. Myat's outlook is like that of many people of the diaspora, who, despite living in exile from an early age or even birth, maintain a strong connection with the Karen people and state. The narratives of Myat and other young Karen people present a colorful mosaic of belonging, homeland attachment and participation in transnational practices. This research examines how Karen people in the diaspora perceive the sense of belonging, and how they have engaged in transnational practices to support civilians and Karen internally displaced persons (IDPs) during the Myanmar military coup. The main question of this research is why have Karen people in the diaspora engaged in

transnational practices in the context of the 2021 Myanmar military coup? This can be further sub-divided into two more questions. The first being how have they perceived the sense of belonging after a long period of resettlement, and secondly, how have they engaged in transnational practices to condemn the coup and support people in their homeland.

There are few written records of the Karen origin story. The Karen people began to inhabit what eventually became Myanmar about two thousand years ago. They travelled from Tibet and China and settled largely in the hills bordering the eastern mountainous region of Myanmar. In the 8th and 9th centuries, the Burmese also began migrating to the area north of what is now the Karen State. Ethnic groups around this region included the Mon, Shan, Thai, Burmese and Karen. When the British colonised Myanmar in 1886, these groups all became part of Myanmar (Rajah, 2002).

According to Holliday (2007), Myanmar has never achieved national unity when in fact ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in the border areas often have struggles and conflicts with the military government. The Myanmar military-backed government grants privileges to the Bamar under Burmanisation policy, while marginalising other ethnic groups by failing to offer citizenship or relocation. When Myanmar gained independence in 1948, Karen people did not achieve autonomous rights as they expected. Therefore, a political organisation, the Karen National Union (KNU), was established in February 1947 to fight for Karen self-determination and ethno-nationalism against the persecution and cultural assimilation of the military regime. In 1984, the Myanmar military conducted a massive offensive that drove about 10,000 refugees into Thailand. Over the next 10 years, the military continued to encroach on more KNU-controlled areas. They also established new military bases and supply routes in newly occupied territory. In 1995, the Myanmar military captured 2 important bases including the headquarters of KNU.

The conflict within Karen State caused many civilians to be internally displaced and cross the Myanmar-Thailand border in search of asylum led to the forced migration of

many ethnic minorities to neighbouring countries including Thailand (Thawngmung, 2011). Since 1984, documented and undocumented refugees have been sheltered in nine major camps established along Thailand-Myanmar border. Since 2005, refugees living in the nine camps who have been registered by UNHCR and Thailand's Ministry of Interior have been eligible to apply for third-country resettlement. The majority of these were destined for resettlement in the United States, with the remainder accepted by Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Japan, and the United Kingdom (TBC, 2011).

After reaching host countries of resettlement, Karen people often struggle with social integration in new communities and maintain social bonds with their homeland. They are often caught between two or more senses of belonging and finding themselves in the betweenness (Bergquist et al., 2019). In addition to social integration in host countries, overseas Karen communities maintain their connections with those in Karen State and those in the camps through transnational practices (Lee, 2012). The transnational practices of refugees can contribute to the development and well-being of local communities. As the Internet becomes more popular and easily accessible, Karen people of the diaspora have more access to media coverage and political involvement in their homeland (Brees, 2009). In the same way, resettled Karen people can connect with one another around the world, with those in Karen State and with those in refugee camps in Thailand through social networking sites, especially Facebook. These online platforms will create understanding among diaspora communities and facilitate political mobilisation for reforms in their homeland.

The Myanmar coup of 2021 began on the morning of February 1, when elected politicians from the ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), in Myanmar's civilian government were deposed by the Tatmadaw¹, the Myanmar military, and handed power back to the junta. Since the coup, people of all ages, ethnicities, and faiths in Myanmar have demonstrated peacefully against a military rule that disregards human rights and exploits its authority to discriminate and persecute civilians. In March 2021, the Myanmar military began an airstrike

¹ The Myanmar armed force, or the official military organisation of Myanmar

campaign in Southeast Myanmar (Karen State) that often targeted civilian areas. These airstrikes devastated towns, killed many civilians, and forced villagers to flee their homes and ancestral grounds. Civilians are unable to go about their normal lives due to the high danger of death, injury, or detention at the hands of the Myanmar military. Rural villagers, despite these atrocities, have been engaged in supporting the anti-coup movement and protecting those who risk their lives in defense of human rights. Local villages in Karen State have sheltered and protected CDM participants, deposed parliamentarians and protesters. Additionally, they have engaged in peaceful protests despite a significant military presence (KHRG, 2021).

In recognition of the painful events since February 2021, as well as the long history of ethnic oppression by the Myanmar military, Karen people in the diaspora around the world signed petitions and posted publicly on Facebook to raise international awareness and accountability against the junta, in attempt to end the military's ongoing crimes. They have urged the international community to maintain its unequivocal support for the Myanmar people and to abstain from helping or supporting the junta's mass atrocities and violations of international law (KHRG, 2021).

This research examines the Karen diaspora's transnational sense of belonging, ideological orientation and tactics embodied in transnational practices after the 2021 Myanmar military coup. Quantitative methods were applied including semi-structured interviews and online participant observations to collect data. After a long period of resettlement in host countries, Karen people in the diaspora still perceive the notion of homeland and maintain an emotional sense of belonging to their homeland. In the context of the 2021 coup, transnational practices have been enhanced with various tactics used both on-site and online. I argue that the transnational sense of belonging of young Karen people were shaped by narratives, memories, and Karen cultural practices in refugee camps; and those camps also become their memorial places. In addition, after the Myanmar military coup, those young Karen people expressed an ideological transition from ethno-nationalism to democracy and cosmopolitan orientation when engaging in transnational practices.

Relevance and Justification

In the research on Karen refugees in Mae La camp, (Laocharoenwong, 2020) argues that refugee camps play an important role in reconstructing ethnic unity people as well as informing the ideas of homeland. More specifically, her findings suggested that strong ethno-nationalism and notions of Karenness were brought to refugee camps and passed to young refugees by Karen elites. In that context, the refugee camp was not merely a temporary shelter, but a place where collective memories and stories were kept. Her research paved the way for me to continue to trace the journey of the Karen people in resettled countries. In this research, I focused on transnational sense of belonging and the engagement in transnational practices of young Karen people in diaspora, mainly in Western countries. Most of the participants were not born in Karen State, and all of them experienced and grew up in refugee camps in Thailand. Therefore, it is significant to examine how they perceived the notion of homeland and preserved it in host countries after resettlement. Their transnational sense of belonging and ideology orientation constructed in host countries can affect their motivations and engagement in transnational practices after the Myanmar military coup in 2021.

Research Methodology

The research uses qualitative research methods. The primary data collection method was through semi-structured interviews with predefined questions. I also utilized online participant observations on social media to do ethnographic work which confirmed and demonstrated the narratives and sharing of the participants. Besides, documentary research was used to clarify political contexts and responses to interviews.

Semi-structured interviews and online participant observations

The selection of participants for this research was helpfully initiated by a Burmese classmate with in-depth knowledge of Myanmar politics and Karen refugees in Thailand. She has some close connections with Karen CBOs in Thailand and facilitated an interview with a core member of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN). As the first research participant, she provided a list of the Karen diaspora's Facebook pages for observation and participant connections. Additionally, she presented specific Facebook pages of Karen organisations and social networks abroad, including including Karen Organisation of America, Karen Culture Organisation of Minnesota, Karen Educational Resources, Karen Human Rights Group, Karen Information Centre, Karen Community of Canada, European Karen Network, Karen Peace Support Network, Karen Swedish Community, Australian Karen Organisation INC and California Karen Youth Connection.

I presented the administrators of these with the purposes and methodology of the research via email and Facebook messenger. They helped with research recommendations and facilitated connections with research participants. Initial participants often suggested others who were willing to participate in the interviews. In total, 10 participants aged between 25-40 years old took part in the research. They have resettled in the United States (5 persons, Thailand (2 persons), Norway (1 person), Australia (1 person) and Canada (1 person). All participants are core members in diaspora organizations, educated and communicate in English well. In terms of the sense of belonging and transnational practices, it is very practical and useful to interview these people. Firstly, they were mostly away from homeland since childhood, lived in refugee camps for a long time and then resettled in host countries. As they experienced different circumstances in exile, their sense of belonging is complicated and deserving of careful study. Secondly, these people are almost all young and pursuing higher education abroad. They tend to actively absorb democratic values and global politics. Along with ethno-nationalism that was built in refugee camps (Worland & Darlington, 2010), I would like to examine their ideological

transition when it comes to political conflicts in Myanmar and the engagement in transnational practices.

In the next step, each participant was contacted directly via emails and Facebook messenger, explained my research one more time, sent them a consent form, and scheduled the time for interviews with them. Each interview was conducted via Zoom meeting and lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. Throughout the process, I tried to build rapport with the research participants, asking for permission to follow them and send them friend's requests on Facebook. While following participants' public posts on Facebook, I noticed posts related to the military coup or their homeland connection. There could be posts about the Tatmadaw attacks on Karen State, IDPs fleeing and crossing borders, Karen CBOs' delivery of essentials for IDPs. At the same time, I also focused on similar content from aforementioned Facebook pages and relevant websites.

Documentary Research

The participants granted access to publications of Karen organisations examining human rights abuses, atrocities, and attacks in Karen State such as “Military Atrocities and Civilian Resilience: Testimonies of Injustice, Insecurity and Violence in Southeast Myanmar” during the 2021 Coup” (KHRG, 2021). In addition, news, press releases, statements and petitions were closely monitored on the Facebook pages and websites of relevant organisations, including Karen Human Rights Group, Karen Information Centre and Karen Peace Network Support. The documents published by them provided access to pictures, testimonies, and information from the front line. Also, I could know how people abroad can contribute to help Karen IDPs through appeals online.

Limitations of the Research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study to ensure that its findings are not mechanically generalised to the Karen diaspora and that further studies should

be conducted for more understanding. First, the research focuses mainly on Karen intellectuals who can communicate in English and have access to the Internet and social media. As a result, other Karens were excluded from the study and their perspectives are not reflected in this study. In addition, the access to Karen people in diaspora was much more difficult than anticipated. The search for potential participants depended on the absolute and subjective decisions of the administrators of Karen Facebook pages as well as the personal relationships of my acquaintances. Moreover, all participants were second-generation refugees, so their experiences and narratives in exile, and homeland attachment were quite homogeneous. Additionally, contacting, building rapport and obtaining permission for interviews with participants took several weeks because of their political concerns and busy schedules, so this affected the number of participants that could be reached.

Another objective limitation is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic with travel restriction policies in Thailand. I planned to have field trips to Karen refugee camps in Northern Thailand, as well as the border areas at Mae Sot before collecting the data. I aimed to observe and engage in transnational practices through projects in refugee camps, as well as humanitarian practices in support of IDPs. Unfortunately, the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic was unpredictable and dangerous, and it was not possible to apply for required documents for accessing the refugee camps as well as travelling to the border areas during the limited time for my thesis.

Ethical Consideration

All potential participants were informed of the objectives of the research before they agreed to in-depth-interviews. A soft copy of the description of the purposes of the research as well as the consent form was sent to prospective participants. The in-depth interviews were conducted only when participants were fully aware of the interview procedure and consent with verbal confirmation. All participants had the right to refuse answering questions they considered sensitive and not relevant and withdraw from the interviews at any time if they felt uncomfortable. All participants in the study have been guaranteed privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. Specifically,

their identifying information has not been included in any documentation or research findings. Also, all recorded data was separated from identifying information. All other relevant identifying information including address, location, names and digital account names were also removed from the transcripts.



Chapter 2. Theoretical Discussion

This chapter discusses concepts related to research on Karen refugees, namely the diaspora, the sense of belonging and transnational practices. First, I refer to the notion of diaspora and studies on the diaspora and the homeland. Second, I examine a theoretical approach to the sense of belonging, particularly the place belongingness. Third, I investigate how transnational practices are defined and conventional trends in research into the diaspora's homeland political participation. Besides, I also justify how I can apply these concepts in the context of Karen refugees, as well as summarise the gaps in other studies to signify my research.

Karen refugees have complex processes of forced migration and exile, so it is important to learn about how they form an imagined homeland, shape identity and sustain their transnational practices after social integration and resettlement in Thailand and Western countries. This study borrows the concepts of diaspora (Cohen, 2008), place-belongingness (Antonsich, 2010) and transnationalism (Vertovec, 2009) as a theoretical framework for analysing the complexities of homeland attachment and involvement in transnational practices of Karen diaspora after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. First, Karen people resettling in host countries or living in refugee camps in Thailand can be considered diaspora. Though they were once dispersed from the original homeland and have lived in exile; they perceive collective memories and demonstrate commitment to preserving Karen culture abroad. Second, the concept of place belonging is relevant when examining the home attachment of the Karen diaspora, as they experienced dispersal from their homelands to the Thailand-Myanmar border areas, then to refugee camps in Thailand and finally to the host countries. Therefore, their homeland can be non-territorial and reimagined through collective memories and narratives in exile. Finally, based on the analysis of contemporary development trends of migration transnationalism by Vertovec (2009), the Karen diaspora is an illustrative community of this concept as they maintain strong social ties to their homeland, and contribute to economic, cultural and political improvements. More importantly, in the context of the humanitarian crisis caused by the 2021 Myanmar military coup, transnational practices are enhanced to assist and

save the lives of IDPs, which will be demonstrated in this study. The interactions and common features of the concepts can be seen in the diagram below.

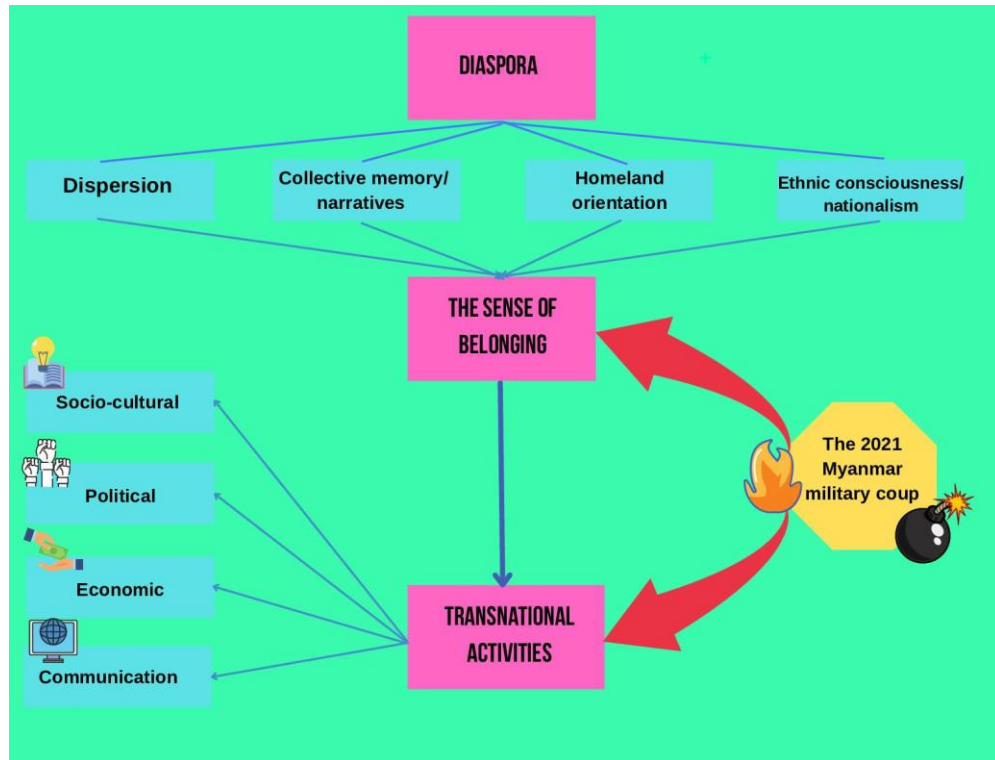


Figure 1. The main concepts applied in the research

Diaspora and Homeland

Over the last few decades, diasporas have become one of the most popular subjects among scholars and there is a growing literature analysing the role of diaspora as non-state actors in homeland politics. Generations of refugees have had to undergo the hardships of living outside their own country owing to forceful or violent circumstances. Exile is an experience that occurs outside of ones' home and belonging, and it is intimately linked to policies and attitudes in new societies. Although diaspora is increasingly being questioned as a concept and framework for its conceptual ambiguity (Brubaker, 2005), it is used here to refer to groups that have been distributed beyond their original countries to multiple new countries for an extended length of time (Cohen, 2008; Vertovec, 2009). There are no obvious demarcations between exile and diaspora, or between refugee and diaspora scenarios (Schulz, 2005). To an extent, diaspora makes room for multiple homeland

attachments and potentially new sentiments of belonging, causing complex relationships between national identities and citizenship (Mavroudi, 2008). According to Christou and Mavroudi (2016), diaspora is defined as being in-between and in constant flux, a state in which identity is influenced and constructed. This research applies the work of Cohen (2008) in which the diaspora is broadly defined as migrant communities dispersed outside a homeland's borders, which keep certain social, economic and political attachments to the homeland and mobilise under a collective identity.

Referring to core attributes of a diaspora (Cohen, 2008; Grossman, 2019), the collective distinctiveness known as Pan-Karen identity or umbrella identity combines geographical, social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and occupational diversity among Karen people (Rajah, 2002). Karen minority-consciousness, according to Kuroiwa and Verkuyten (2008), was founded on a reality of displacement, a feeling of belonging and ethnic differences, as defined by culture and history in a home territory "Kawthoolei". The Karen people are constantly subjected to Tatmadaw counter-insurgency tactics aimed at civilians, including as military attacks, mass murders, the deployment of landmines, and the confiscation of land and food supplies. As the Karen population is dispersed over the world due to relocation, its people are fragmented and transformed (Gravers, 2015). Despite fears of losing Karen culture and unity in host countries, resettlement did not pose a barrier to Karen culture for the majority of Karen who had been deprived cultural rights for several decades. Because intellectuals are typically crucial actors in the development of transnational identities and obligations, a high number of educated and competent Karen refugees are resettling can contribute to the reproduction of Karen identity discourse in host countries (J. N. Bird et al., 2016; Gilhooly & Lee, 2017). The relationship to Karen State, the rhetoric of displacement, exile, and the possibility of repatriation are critical in constructing Karen transnational identity (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008).

Refugees and the Sense of Belonging

Refugees' connection to their homeland might stem from a need for purpose, alienation, isolation, or restricted social and political engagement in host countries, all of which can result in the reproduction of the homeland culture (Wilcock, 2019). However, researchers have more recently investigated the extent to which refugees in the diaspora develop emotional and existential commitments to places which fall in-between host countries and the homeland, as they have frequently been conceptualized (Farah, 2009; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013).

The challenges of properly theorizing the homeland belonging add to the complexity, given the global diversity of migration experiences (Skrbiš et al., 2007). Nonetheless, Crisp (2010) defines belonging in terms of connectivity, demonstrating that exclusion and inclusion are not mutually incompatible processes, but rather overlap. Similarly, Gifford and Wilding (2013) describe belonging and social inclusion as an unstable scenario. Their research, which focuses on forced migrants, demonstrates how information and communication technologies (ICTs) can serve as alternative methods of belonging for exiled peoples, as ICTs enable connectivity and communication amongst globally dispersed persons (GDPs). From their perspective, belonging is an active network of GDPs; it is about finding a place to call home in new countries as well as becoming a citizen of a more globalized and de-territorialized world. Other research illustrates the utility of specific frameworks in the study of belonging; Yuval-Davis (2006) developed a three-tiered framework of social locations, identifications, emotional attachments, ethical and political value systems. extended Yuval-Davis' concept to emphasize both place-belongingness and the politics of belonging. Mason (2007) adopts a slightly different approach, examining belonging via the lens of generational disparities. Mason highlights heterogeneity and shifts in the meanings of belonging connected with various experiences of exile in her studies within the Palestinian diaspora. Thus, rather than being classified according to more common age or migration cohorts, generations are classified according to "whatever exilic generation they were born into" (Mason, 2007). As a result, both roots and pathways become crucial to belonging and settlement processes (Schulz, 2005). Thus, belonging goes beyond the relatively rigid borders of citizenship and national identification into more subjective and ambiguous spaces defined by connections,

symbolism, and senses. As a result, belonging research must acknowledge the broad range of possibilities involved in defining belonging.

This research adopts the framework of place belongingness by Antonsich (2010) to examine participants' sense of belonging, "trying to describe how feelings of belonging can extend beyond boundaries of time and place and into spaces characterised by yearnings, obligations, memories, and political attachments to homeland and social media connection". Antonsich relates homeland connection to a sense of security and comfort that exists on different levels and in multiple identities. In this view, homeland attachment is embodied through cuisines, customs, religious practices, revolutions, national flags, environments, landscapes and folklore that all contribute to the formation of a cultural identity and national spirit. These aspects manifest themselves through familial bonds, collective narratives and diasporic communities. Antonsich (2010) identifies six dimensions that contribute to place-belongingness:

1. auto-biographical (past experiences and histories that associate people with a place).
2. relational (personal and social ties with a given place).
3. cultural (language, traditions and religions attach to a feeling of home).
4. economic (the importance of work to maintain livelihoods in a place).
5. legal (citizenship and legal status providing opportunities for social integration and inclusion).
6. length of residence.

In the context of forced migration, sustained violence and persecution can cause refugees to suffer detachment from their homeland, and trigger obstacles to social integration in host society (Ager & Strang, 2008). To initiate a settlement or negotiate with social inclusion in host countries, refugees often struggle with emotional and identity complexities. On one hand, they may be tied to a sense of belonging with their homeland or even refugee camps when maintaining relationships and undertaking transnational practices. On the other hand, they need to shape their

identities and adapt to new communities in host countries. By emphasizing the juxtaposition of multiple forms of belonging, Brun (2001) challenges the notion of the homeland as a place inhabited in the past, favoured in the present, and desired in the future, by recognizing that migrants may feel as if their lives are currently being lived in the homeland, even if physically separated. Analyses conducted via diasporic and transnational perspectives have frequently reproduced the emphasis on migrants' and refugees' linkages to their homeland and new locations (Vertovec, 2009). This is seen in Mason's perceptive study of Palestinians in Australia, in which she claims that the connection between the "home" of the homeland in the past and the "home" of experienced reality in the present is critical to Palestinians in the diaspora's sense of belonging (Mason, 2007). While the homeland and the "home" of the lived reality are clearly important to individual and collective levels, there is still a gap in understanding about the complexities of being affected by and attached to not only the homeland and the current places of residence, but also other places that may or may not be physically inhabited by family members or other displaced people. For instance, even after refugees have resettled in host countries, refugee camps may become places of belonging and yearning (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013). In many ways, such studies have concentrated on the degree to which people and communities form and retain homeland attachments and political engagement in numerous locations inhabited by scattered family members and co-ethnics (Vertovec, 2009).

I explore the sense of belonging of Karen diaspora as an example of the complexities of settlement faced by forced migrants. In the case of Karen people, diasporic communities' experience in reaching their destination countries, or to temporary shelters, varies considerably. The following exploration has been indicated by (J. Bird et al., 2016):

Some Karens were born in Myanmar, and for many decades lived as exiles in the Burmese jungle or in Thai refugee camps before resettling to host countries. Some were born in refugee camps, never knowing their Karen homeland but having nostalgic ties to it through their parents' and grandparents' collective memories. Some Karens were born in host countries,

never knowing the camps or Myanmar, and are forging belonging to the Karen homeland and camps particularly through family left behind.

Therefore, the sense of belonging among Karen is complex and diverse due to experiences, memories and social ties in exile. They can perceive multiple places as their homeland to fulfil their place of belonging. These places can be their home or shelters in Myanmar, refugee camps in Thailand or accommodation in current host countries.

Refugees and Transnational Practices

After experiencing various degrees of feeling of belonging as a result of distinct homeland attachments and ethno-nationalism, the diasporic community tends to strengthen bonds to the homeland via transnational practices. Vertovec (2009) defined transnationalism “as widening of networks, increase in practices across distances and speedier communication including individual orientation, fundamental political frameworks, and integral process of economic development”. According to Ong and Nonini (2003), transnationalism “denotes moving through space or cross lines, as well as a changing nature of something”. Some scholars claim that the favorable prospects in host countries allow diasporas to exert significant influence in their homelands and to advocate host country governments on their behalf (Adamson, 2012; Lyons & Mandaville, 2010). They seek to gain a deeper understanding of the elements that contribute to their mobilization. According to Koslowski (2005), even relatively young diasporic populations have the potential to become significant political and economic forces in homeland and international politics through transnational practices.

The comprehension of the political linkages and impacts of diasporas on their homeland has been enriched by the study of diaspora politics (Baser, 2016). Most case studies explored the subject from the perspective of host countries, which either promotes or discourages transnational practices. Besides, citizenship and integration as key areas of focus can influence political mobilisation (Van Houte et al., 2013).

Additionally, citizenship and integration as key elements of concern may influence political mobilization (Van Houte et al., 2013). Other academics have examined host countries' foreign policy and the ways in which alignment with diasporic aspirations may pave the way for effective lobbying or strategic collaborations (Koinova, 2014; Rubenzer, 2008). These studies have made a significant contribution to our understanding of the policies, circumstances, and conditions that shape transnational political practices. However, the ability of people in the diaspora to contribute politically to their countries of origin is contingent not only on the host countries' political structural factors, such as favorable political scenarios, attitudes toward citizenship and foreign policy alignment, but also on the positionalities in the homeland that influence who can mobilize politically (Koinova, 2013). Recent studies from Africa, Turkey, and Sri Lanka demonstrate the critical necessity of evaluating the homeland political context and its influence on transnational practices. For instance, ethnic and religious conflicts in the homeland influenced how Eritreans in the diaspora associated with the Liberation Front, with some identifying with specific factions rather than with a national vision of an independent Eritrea (Koser, 2007). In other circumstances, people in the diaspora may readily turn their backs on homeland politics and choose instead to focus on the humanitarian or developmental efforts aimed at bridging ethnic divides (Kleist, 2008). In the case of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, the prohibitive situation in the homeland has fueled Turkish Kurds' activism, where their ethnic identities are recognized, and transnational political practices flourish through various ethnic political entities lobbying host country governments and collaborating with host country civil society organizations (Baser, 2016). The case studies presented above are reflective of Karen diaspora and demonstrate how an ethnically or religiously divided homeland can influence the transnational practices of groups and individuals living in the diaspora, because their social positioning in relation to their homeland can either inhibit or encourage their transnational practices. More empirical research is required to understand how homeland conditions may influence, modify, and shape transnational mobilization within the same migrant group.

There are several methods for members of diasporic communities to engage in transnational practices while resettling in host countries to reform their homeland. Brees (2010) argues in his study of refugees and transnationalism along the Thailand-Myanmar border that Burmese refugees have participated in economic, social, cultural, and political transnational practices despite of the constraints on their capacities. While refugees are typically portrayed as passive victims, his research discovered that refugees were in fact predominantly remittance senders. Resettled refugees were often willing to share their earnings with family members in Thailand or Myanmar, bearing responsibility for the livelihoods of relatives who were not presently with them. Remittances are particularly essential for humanitarian assistance and economic recovery after hostilities and crises (Al-Ali & Koser, 2003). Similarly, in another research on Burmese transnationalism, Brees (2009) notes that political transnational actions are carried out securely to expose Tatmadaw's human rights abuses against ethnic minorities when refugees escape their country. Refugees are not subject to Myanmar's coercive authority after they arrive in their destination countries, allowing them to speak out loudly against the atrocities in Myanmar and gather people in similar circumstances to launch transnational organizations.

Summary

Conventional studies of diaspora and refugee studies do not provide sufficient understanding of Karen refugees who have resettled in host countries, especially Western host countries. Brees's studies (2009, 2010) on refugees along the Thailand-Myanmar border, focuses on transnational practices carried out by refugees living in Thailand, the refugee camps and related CBOs without delving into the involvement of Karen people living in other diaspora communities. Regarding refugee homeland attachment and the sense of belonging, studies conducted with Palestinian refugees and others from Middle Eastern countries show that some refugee camps become places of belonging or where refugees can imagine their homeland. This served as motivation for this research to find out about the homeland attachment among Karen refugees as they were often born in exile, raised in refugee camps and resettled in other countries. Many of them do not know about their territorial homeland, so it is

crucial to examine the ways in which Karen homeland is culturally, socially and symbolically produced and regulated in refugee camps in Thailand, how Karen cultural identity is perceived and preserved in host countries, and how Karen diaspora attach themselves to their homeland through transnational practices. The 2021 coup is a historic shift, demonstrating the country's political upheavals and instability. Therefore, I would like to find out how refugees, specifically Karen refugees as an ethnic minority in Myanmar, perceive the coup and whether it was a factor to enhance transnational practices of Karen people in host countries to help those inside Myanmar. Finally, a study on homeland attachment and transnational practices of Karen diaspora will, hopefully, offer a better understanding of their struggle, contribution and engagement in social movements, and humanitarian aid in the context of the 2021 Myanmar military coup.

This study borrows three key concepts including diaspora (Cohen, 2008), place belongingness (Antonsich, 2010) and transnationalism (Vertovec, 2009) to examine how Karen people in the diaspora feel connected to their homeland, and why they engage in transnational practices. These three concepts interact with one another in the context that Karen people have experienced multiple places. Living in exile as a diaspora can influence the formation of place belongingness. At the same time, despite being geographically dispersed, the Karen cultural identity and definition of home were recreated by Karen elites in the refugee camps (Laocharoenwong, 2020). This can lead to social ties and connections with homeland that foster transnational practices among Karen people in the diaspora. In the wake of the military coup in 2021, these transnational practices can be diversified and enhanced to help IDPs and support movements politics in Myanmar.

Chapter 3. Transnational Sense of Belonging and Homeland Narratives in Exile

In an interview with Shein, who was born in a border village but has lived in the US for 15 years, I asked if he still considers Karen State as his homeland, and if he feels a sense of belonging to there, he stated that:

Although I am grateful to the US for accepting me as a citizen, in my heart I feel like I do not belong here. Karen State is still my original and authentic homeland where my ancestors and parents once lived. I can integrate well into the society here, but I know exactly where I come from and who I am. Although I have spent most of my life in exile, I do not want to deny my homeland. I am here, but my people are there. I can be far away from homeland, but I sustain the commitment to preserve our Karen identity here and help my people there.

From the thoughts and feelings about homeland of Shein, I believe that young Karen people, even though they were not born on Karen land, maintain their feelings of belonging to their homeland after many years in exile. In the case of Karen diaspora, they have dealt with a variety of circumstances to reach border areas and refugee camps in Thailand, and then resettle in host countries. They have lived and reproduced the notion of homeland and Karen cultural practices in exile. Meanwhile, they have new citizenship, enjoying social benefits and career opportunities that Western countries offer. Therefore, a dilemma arises when it comes to questions like where they belong, where do they want to live permanently, whether they still see Karen State as homeland, whether they will return and live there. This chapter examines how Karen people in the diaspora perceived the notion of homeland, and why they retain homeland sentiments despite years of resettlement.

The Citizenship and the Sense of Belonging to Homeland: I Am Here, but Belong There

In 2010, 11,107 Karen refugees were accepted for resettlement, bringing the total number of people who have left Thailand to more than 64,513 since 2006 (TBC, 2011). Approximately 76% of these are intended for resettlement in the United States, with the remainder being accepted by Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Japan and the United Kingdom (TBC, 2011). After a certain length of living and settling abroad, the research participants became naturalised citizens in their host countries. However, in the early days when leaving refugee camps to integrate into Thai society or resettle in host countries, the participants faced similar difficulties to other refugees, notably language barriers, cultural differences, lack of access to social services and discrimination. Among them, learning English or another native language was considered the biggest challenge when they came to their destination countries. However, with personal efforts and support from CSOs and host country governments, most of the participants report having an acceptable life in their host countries. Myat, who was granted the right to resettlement in the US at the age of 15, shared her experience of her first days there.

As a 15-year-old teenager, I faced many challenges to start a new life in the US. I was admitted to high school. There, I experienced culture shock. As you know, in the refugee camps, I was dominated by a collectivist culture, while American culture emphasises individual freedom. Also, the language barrier is my biggest challenge. In the end, my school had over two thousand students from different countries and cultures. I felt panicked and completely lost in the first days and missed my dear Karen in the refugee camp. I was a refugee, a teenager and a woman, so I had to work hard to adapt to the multicultural environment as well as overcome discrimination and inferiority complex.

Htet, who has lived in Australia for about 20 years, opened about the difficulties caused by relocations.

I was born in a village in the state of Karen. My studies were constantly interrupted. I completed kindergarten in Karen state, and then my family escaped to a Thai refugee camp because of the Tatmadaw attacks. I studied Thai language and informal education there for 2 years. Fortunately, my family was eligible to resettle to Australia. In this country, I started my education again from zero.

Fortunately, after initial difficulties and challenges for social adaptation, all participants were generally satisfied with resettlement in the host countries. Shein, a Karen-American, shared about being recognized for the first time as a human being: “I felt as if I was born anew with the full freedom and dignity of a human being. With my legal status, I can easily seize opportunities for education, employment and income that were once my dream in the refugee camp”.

In the same way, Kyaw, a Karen-Norwegian woman shared her happiness of naturalisation though she was not optimistic at the beginning of social integration there.

I am grateful to the Norwegian government for identifying me as a Norwegian citizen with the same rights and legal status as those born here. I used to think I was only an outsider here, a developed country, and could not believe one day I was one of its citizens. Fortunately, I can adapt to the new life here and see it as my second hometown.

After living in Norway for a long time, Kyaw also expressed a practical relationship to Norwegian identity. Specifically, she thought she loved both Norway and Karen State equally. She holds the opinion that the positivity of Norwegian society is its openness, freedom and democracy. Those aspects were totally contrasted with the Burmese politics that were often portrayed as dictatorship and authoritarianism.

Appreciating democratic values of Western countries can be seen as a criticism against the junta and conservative values in Myanmar.

Despite receiving citizenship and social benefits in host countries, Karen participants generally endorse sentiments about their homeland, Karen State. More specifically, Western countries give them legal status with basic rights and obligations, but Karen State is an ancestral land with social and relational ties for generations. They still want to be perceived as a Karen because they want to assert their ethnicity and want to be differentiated from the majority of Myanmar, the Bamar², especially who resettle in Thailand. Marlar with her Burmese passport shared her identity:

Though I lived in a refugee camp in Mae Hong Son, I still have a Burmese passport. After 10 years in Thailand, I still identify as a Karen even though I try to integrate into Thai society and culture for my education and life. When introducing myself to a stranger, I would rather acknowledge my origins, a Karen, than a Burmese. Many people do not know my ethnicity and they often mistake me for being a Bamar person. I am proud of my people and ancestry than to accept myself as being in the majority.

Also, Hla who did not visit Myanmar until adulthood feels the sense of belonging to her homeland and Karen people, but still shows her gratitude to Thailand for help and residency.

I appreciate the Thai government's help with temporary shelters in refugee camps. I have integrated into Thai society and have a full-time job here, but I don't really belong here. I am using my resources to help my compatriots in Karen State. Though I am not living there, my blood is Karen and people there are always my concern and motivation.

The other participants who have been accepted to resettle in the US, Australia and Norway, class themselves as people with a mixed identity. Specifically, they do not

² The majority ethnic group in Myanmar

want to deny their blood is Karen, but they also want to integrate into society as a citizen in the host country. They think they deserve the right to claim membership in the Karen ethnic identity because they inherited this right through their roots. There was a very primordial understanding of their ethnic identities. Paing, a 40-year-old man exemplifies how ancestry was used by the diaspora to affirm to their ethnic identities:

I have lived in Canada for 8 years and have citizenship there. Then I got married and moved to live with my wife in the US, and got citizenship. After the relocation, I sometimes identified myself as Karen-American or Karen-Canadian, and Karen always dominates. Although I have the rights and duties as an American citizen, I do not really consider myself to be part of American society. My feelings and heart always belong to Karen. I went through many years of exile, socialisation and cultural integration, but I still carry the Karen culture and origin with me. My homeland and people are still in Burma, not here.

Paing's explanation for claiming both an American and Karen identity illustrates the rationale that many participants demonstrated. Their identity of host countries was gained through citizenship (either through birth or naturalisation). Their Karen identity was often argued to be something that was inherited. In other words, it belongs to them because it belonged to their parents and ancestors. As Paing clearly states, he can claim his American identity because he was naturalised and offered legal status, and he is able to claim his Karen identity because of the origin of his ethnicity.

Besides, some other Karen refugees are flexible in their identity based on situations and communities. Win, who has resettled in the US for about 15 years, details how he changed his identity under different circumstances.

I have multiple identities due to my social and geographical displacements. First and foremost, I was born a Karen and I will always be a Karen. My

American identity is important when I travel abroad with a US passport. Here in the US, I am not really in a situation where I must identify my nationality. I loosely associate myself with other Asian Americans. I also consider myself a Burmese when I interact with my fellow ethnic brothers/sisters from Burma. My Burmese identity is rather weak, partially because I was officially never a citizen of the country.

Using Win's example, some Karen people can realise the benefits from multiple identities as they integrate with diverse communities such as Karen, Bamar and other ethnic minorities from Myanmar or even Asian people in the US in general. Even though they still remember and feel proud of their ancestral origin as a Karen, they use other identities in different situations to be accepted as a part of those communities and networks.

In summary, despite a long period of resettlement, they still emotionally maintain social bonds with Karen identity and consider Karen State as their homeland because they are aware of their origin. Although almost all participants were not born in their homeland, they carry a great deal of pride in their ancestral roots. In public, they may identify themselves as bearers of dual identities, but the Karen identity tends to dominate. With their citizenship, they cannot deny the rights and responsibilities in host countries, but there is reluctance for them to believe that they fully belong to their new societies. They want to let foreigners know who they are and distinguish them from Bamar people, although in some situations they can identify themselves flexibly. This shows that ethno-nationalism still exists among young Karen despite the integration and resettlement in host countries after many years.

Collective Narratives and Memories Nurturing the Sense of Belonging to Homeland

To young refugees in my research, they have never lived and experienced life in Karen State, so auto-biographical narratives told by word of mouth through their

families or people in refugee camps are sometimes little more than vague memories but offer sentimental linkage between them and their homeland. They can feel the pain and loss in the past to recognize themselves as insiders in the process of fighting for the liberation of their homeland. Some participants only knew their cousins through pictures or stories. It was not until later, when they had settled abroad in their 20s or 30s, that they met their relatives for the first time in person.

More significantly, some participants remembered bitter narratives of their families' suffering from oppression by the military junta- being tortured, hunted down, or arrested as they stood up to fight against the Tatmadaw. Likewise, they felt a sense of resentment when told that the Karen villages had been burned down and forced them to flee their ancestral lands. Although they have not witnessed it with their own eyes, they still feel anger and indignation at the Myanmar military leaders, while feeling the collective pain of their people. Karen State is the ancestral land of the Karen people, but generations of them were not born there and have become refugees due to displacements and attacks. Shein expressed his emotion as he recalled the times, he ran away from the Myanmar military with his parents during his childhood.

During the early 1980s, my family did not have a stable life in Karen state because of the village burning and bombing by Tatmadaw. My parents crossed the river to escape to Thailand at midnight while my mother was pregnant. I have no memory of my homeland. My childhood was associated with times of relocation and escape. Although we lived in temporary shelters on Thai territory, we still could not avoid the attack of the Burmese military. We had to leave everything behind for new shelters. The stories I heard from my parents were all very bitter about human rights violations in our villages.

For Hla, home attachment is represented by bitter stories of the Myanmar military oppression towards her family. She was born and grew up in a refugee camp in Thailand, but she heard stories about the inhumane repression by the Myanmar military from her parents and relatives. Her father joined the armed insurgent against Tatmadaw and was hunted down. When the army came to the house and could not

find her father, they arrested and tortured her grandparents. Although she did not witness it with my own eyes, she still has anger and resentment towards the Myanmar military, as well as feeling the pain of her people.

In addition, some participants emphasise memories of family members or good times of childhood regarding homeland attachment rather than mourning traumas and hardships. Part of this may be because they did not directly experience the brutal repression of the Myanmar military, or they were too young to understand why they had to flee to the border or seek refuge in Thailand. Kyaw explained her journey in exile:

The world of a little girl who had to flee with her parents from village to village along the border was only the deep blue sky above and vast forests. Even though I had to leave everything behind and run away many times, I left happily as I did not understand the conflicts thoroughly. My family was poor and made a temporary living, but I felt comfortable in the small villages. We used to have livelihoods there associated with farming and animal husbandry. I remember the villages along the border were very tranquil with rice fields, orchards and trees. However, those beautiful things could have been destroyed in just one day by Tatmadaw's attacks. I only found out why I ran away from Karen State when I was in the refugee camp for 5 years.

Then was born in Karen State and left at the age of 19 to seek asylum in a refugee camp in Thailand. In terms of homeland attachment, he has strong feelings with family members and memories with them. He remembers his childhood with siblings when they could play together in their small village. He used to wish that if they did not have to go into exile, they could live happily in their homeland now and have more beautiful memories together. Similarly, he missed his grandfather who passed away 20 years ago. In his recent dreams, his grandfather treated him like an adult, and they had conversations about what it means to be a homeland and family according to the collective society of Karen people.

In the same way, Paing perceives the connection with Karen State through childhood memories and how he grew up in the refugee camp. His family crossed the border to refugee camps in Thailand. They had to flee and leave everything behind because of the fighting between KNU and the Tatmadaw. At that time, he was too young and naive to fully realise what was going on and why we had to run away so many times. His childhood was hard but memorable. He remembers playing folk games with his peers along the border areas and helping his parents feed the animals. After moving to refugee camps in Thailand, things became more boring when he did not have many practices to experience without animals, fields and forests. However, he still considers refugee camps as an important part of his formative years, as he lived there longer than in his homeland. His upbringing in the refugee camp, in proximity with community leaders and elders, helped to shape his ideas of Karen identity and culture. He was also immersed in Karen cultural spaces with cuisine, traditional costumes, musical instruments or religious rituals.

In another interview, Khin, who has lived in Canada for more than 10 years, spiritually values the umbilical cord and the spirit tree Karen State.

Regarding my connection to the homeland, I think about the umbilical cord. I was born in a remote village in the state of Karen. There, we had a tradition that after babies were born, their umbilical cords were cut and placed under a spirit tree in the village. This marks the importance and spiritual value of the roots of each Karen. Although I have lived in exile for most of my life, nowhere can I find the tree of souls, except in my own village. I still hold on to the hope that one day I will return to live in my village where my umbilical cord was buried.

Win feels a strong emotional bond with his homeland. The natural beauties of the mountains, rivers and forests in Karen villages always capture his imagination. He also believes that the Karen customary practice of burying their children's placenta in the ground has a profound emotional impact on how they feel about their homeland. Indeed, homeland in Karen also connotes a physical place for their placenta. He

strongly hopes that he can see the end of Myanmar militarization so that Karen people and other ethnicities there can live in peace with human dignity.

The Preservation of Karen Cultural Identity and the Connection of Diasporic Communities in Host Countries

When arriving in host countries for resettlement, Karen refugees face several challenges, including a diversity of cultures, lifestyles, and foreign languages. In the early stages, they put a lot of effort into adapting to new circumstances and establishing new social networks. In many cases, social integration and resettlement are led by members of the diaspora. After settling into a new life, they begin connecting and organising community activities to preserve the culture and core values of Karen people. They pay attention to the awareness of the third generation of refugees who have been brought up entirely in foreign societies. Htet expressed her connection with the diaspora through cultural activities and religious communities:

In Melbourne, we have a large Karen community with thousands of people. We connect and relate to each other through religious groups such as Buddhism and Christianity in each area. Despite our own worries and the pressures of daily life, we try to gather and organise anniversaries and festivals such as Karen New Year, Revolution Day and other religious and cultural activities. Karen's roots and culture bring us together. We see gatherings and community activities as opportunities to preserve Karen culture and traditions, and to showcase our cultural identity in Australia.

Shein is concerned about the cultural awareness of young Karen people in the US:

Because I was not born in my homeland, I learned about Karen culture in the refugee camp. I acknowledge the relentless effort and dedication of community leaders in refugee camps to preserve our culture. Under the poor conditions of the refugee camps and the strict surveillance of Thai authorities, the camp committee tried to comprise to maintain the Karen cultural identity.

We were able to wear traditional Karen costumes once a week or at festivals and celebrations. I also learned about the glorious revolution, the sacrifices of Karen heroes throughout the homeland's history. During my resettlement, I try to pass on what I experienced and absorbed in the refugee camp to the next generations.

The refugee camps in Thailand turned into a space to preserve and redefine the Karen cultural identity in the context of exile and displacement. Young Karen people feel their homeland in the refugee camp itself, not in Karen State where they perceive as their ancestral home. Under the guidance and dedication of the camp committee, community-based and religious organisations, Karen's cultural identity and history were passed on to second generations of refugees. After that, these people then become "cultural ambassadors" and preserve Karen cultural identity in the context of cultural diversity in Western countries. Paing states that he can reorganise Karen cultural activities in the US, staying the same with what happened in the refugee camp.

Because the US has cultural diversity and freedom, it is easy for us to maintain the Karen culture. We have a large Karen community in Minnesota. We sometimes organise religious and cultural activities or conduct seminars about Karen culture for the younger generation. Sometimes I find that we can bring the original Karen culture in the refugee camps to a country as far away as America because we can create cultural products such as costumes and musical instruments here. Everything stays the same.

Paing said that traditional holidays were important to maintain Karen cultural identity in Western countries like the US. Organising and participating in traditional performance, spirit celebration and meetings has allowed Karen people in the diaspora to remain connected to their homeland culture despite the geographical distance. Paing also introduced me to the wrist tying ceremony celebrated annually. This ceremony shows the unity of all Karen people as an ethnicity and helps to disseminate a shared history, allowing the Karen to participate in their culture while dispersed

geographically. He said that the threads put on their wrist means that Karen people united.



Figure 2. Information about the Celebration of Karen Traditional Wrist-Tying Ceremony (Karen Culture Organisation of Minnesota, 2021)

Similarly, Win describes the importance of religious activities among Karen people abroad and his pride of passing the religious faith to his children.

In my city and other cities where the Karen people have settled, we have Karen CBOs to organise cultural events and Karen national holidays. Religion is an important part of the Karen people’s ways of life. For a Christian Karen parent like me, our lives pretty much revolve around our church. It is important not only that my children get to socialise with other Karen children during Sunday church services and learn some Karen language, history, and cultures, but more importantly, that the faith can be passed down from generation to generation.

Karen celebrations and cultural activities organised by diasporic communities are an important element of social life abroad because it is an occasion for Karen people to meet in large numbers, while short-lived communities can be formed during such events such as religious groups, hobby clubs or career networks. Cultural activities in diasporic Karen communities reflect the old homeland, serve as a symbolic substitution for it, connect members of the community and ensure the Karen ethnic continuity and cultural identity in the context of cultural diversity. The significance of traditional events strengthens the Karen identity. Paing and Shein agree that most Karen people in Minnesota communicate with one another and share education and career opportunities. Importantly, these celebrations also attract younger generations who have only retained a symbolic ethnicity. Therefore, they can feel the sense of ethnic belonging even though they don't have any memories of their homeland or experiences of refugee camps. In such events, young generations can learn to cook traditional dishes, perform folk songs and take part in religious rituals.

However, some participants expressed concerns about the cultural perception and awareness towards the Karen homeland of young Karen in the US, especially the 3rd generation, who lean more towards American culture, rather than Karen. Generally, some participants believe that preserving the ethnic minority culture and passing it on to the next generation is considered the responsibility of Karen people in the diaspora, and they are also in charge of educating younger generations about the Karen ancestral land. Shein shared his opinion about how to raise the awareness of young people:

With my knowledge, I work as a volunteer at a diasporic CBO with the hope of imparting Karen culture, history and conflicts to young Karen people. I used my own stories and lessons from the refugee camp as “living proof” to teach young Karen people here our history. Although they may be able to absorb Western culture and way of life, they must at least be aware of their origins and ancestry. With that, they don't get lost with their future and don't forget their homeland, helping and fighting for our people inside the country until we have liberty and peace.

They believe that language plays an important role in the cultural identity of each ethnicity. He adapts his language usage to context as he concerns that his children may forget their origin and ethnicity when they only speak English.

I have always spoken Karen in my family and want my children to be able to understand and use it. Specifically, I use Karen in my family and some friends, Burmese in the groups of Burmese diasporas and speak English at the workplace. Karen is not an official language in Myanmar. It has unique grammatical rules and dialects. I respect and feel proud of my homeland by keeping our language alive here in the US. No matter where I live, I always value and preserve my roots and culture.



Figure 3. California Karen Youth Forum, the 8th Conference, which was held on August 2021 in California, the US (California Karen Youth Connection, 2021)

He also shared with me that the California Karen Youth Forum is held annually to connect Karen teenagers, educate them about Karen origin, history and revolution,

advocate for Karen people back home, and empower them to fulfil their responsibility to maintain Karen cultural identity in California.

The Return Visits: We Can Be Strangers in Our Homeland

Reasons for return visits to the homeland differ. For those born and raised in Myanmar, they long to see their birthplace once again and reconnect with their relatives. On the other hand, those born in refugee camps, along the border or after resettlement, especially younger generations of refugees in Western countries, wish to explore their roots, identity and family connections.

Karen people think about their first visit to their ancestral land differently. Some participants in the interviews are disappointed with the changes in their homeland under the influence of the Burmanization policy, and struggle to find the remnants of their old villages. They are also saddened by the changes under modernization and assimilation, unable to find the cultural authenticity of a Karen village they once lived in. Some feel indifferent and alienated, confronting the unfamiliarity and differences of mindset after years of geographical separation. Such emotions can be seen as the result of their imagination of an ideal homeland, resulting from the collective narratives of the Karen community in refugee camps or their childhood memories. It can be said that the true image of the homeland can be quite different from the socially constructed one. Myat stated that she faced culture shock in her homeland for the first return visit to Myanmar.

After graduating from university here (the US), I had the opportunity to visit Karen State. It was the first time I spent 2 months staying in Myanmar. I had thought I could experience Karen culture authentically in my homeland. However, I found life in Karen State to be somewhat modern and quite like Bamar people, far from what I had imagined and experienced in the refugee camp in Thailand. Anyway, I was happy to be able to reunite and spend time with some of my relatives there.

Thein was impressed with the scenic and tranquil landscapes in a Karen village in Myanmar where he grew up. He appreciated the beauty of the countryside where there were orchards, rivers, mountains and rice fields. He never wanted to leave that place as it was a part of his childhood. He does not like the changes of modern Myanmar when he returned there 5 years ago. Many things in the village have disappeared forever. He heard about a traditional Karen rice wine when he was a child. He could not drink it then and was unable to find it upon his return. Likewise, the traditional beliefs and collective values of the village gradually disappeared in a context of urbanisation and development projects from Burmese government.

However, some participants were touched and excited by their return, expressing their feelings of homeliness. Shein said: “How did I feel when I visited Myanmar for the first time? The only answer was that I felt as if I had set foot in my home for the first time, especially because I could see my cousins with my own eyes. Before that, I only knew them through pictures and stories of my parents.”

In the case of Karen people, place attachment is an integral part of personal narratives through interactions with different spaces in exile. Specifically, a person can identify with a place but not belong to it (e.g., Paing lives in the US and identifies himself as a Karen-American but claims that he does not belong to American society), while one can feel a sense of belonging to a place, but they do not want to live there. Some participants said that they would not return to the Karen state permanently. The main reason is that most of their family members and relatives are resettled in Western countries, diasporic communities are formed there, and they establish social networks with the native people. For example, Kyaw’s parents and siblings are living in Norway. Though she always feels like she belongs to Karen State, Myanmar, she does not want to return and stay there for a long period of time. She hopes to enjoy the peaceful life in Norway, with the freedom to return to Karen for short-term visits. She doesn’t feel confident to fully integrate into homeland society, her career prospects and Norway’s extensive social welfare system are very satisfactory to her. In the future, she wants to help Karen people in her own way, through educational projects in refugee camps and integration assistance for newcomers in Norway.

Refugee Camps as Memorial Places to Form the Sense of Homeland Belonging

Besides Karen State as the territorial homeland of Karen people, refugee camps are memorial places for recreating Karen communities and enabling second-generation refugees to understand and acquire Karen history and culture. The social and cultural life of Karen people in the diaspora was initially organised in refugee camps in Thailand, thus becoming the meeting place of these communities in exile. Those refugee camps have helped to nurture patriotism for the homeland. Some Karen cultural symbols that can be found in camps (flags, costumes, paintings, photos, or memorabilia) bear witness to the symbolic significance these places hold for the diaspora. The camps serve as a substitute for the lost homeland and as a place where they meet other displaced Karen people. The senior members play an important role in conveying ethno-nationalism, history, culture, and brave revolution of the Karen people to those born in the camps. Shein talks about the refugee camp with pride:

Although I was not born in my homeland, Karen State, I learned about Karen culture in the refugee camp. I acknowledge the relentless effort and dedication of community leaders in refugee camps to preserve our culture. There was a church in the camp where I could see traditional Karen attire, old photographs of Karen villages and heroes, artwork by Karen artists and musical instruments from Karen State. I needed to relocate many times before arriving in the camp, so that was the first place I felt like home when living with a Karen community.

Notably, in the case of Marlar who studied at a primary school in Myanmar, she only knew and understood Karen's history when her family sought refuge in Thailand. In Burmese educational system, she was taught that armed groups of minorities were bad and needed to be defeated. Myanmar history textbooks are like a brainwashing tool, serving as propaganda for the Burmese government, military and the Burmanisation policy. All information in Myanmar is strictly controlled and censored, making it very difficult to determine the truth about her country and people when she lived there. As

a result, she was conflicted about her own ethnic identity. Only when she left Myanmar due to land concession, she understood the ethnic conflict and the Karen armed groups' fighting for justice and freedom. Obviously, refugee camps are a place that young Karen people can study and discover the truths about ethnic conflicts and civil war in Myanmar without the intervention and brainwashing strategy from Tatmadaw.

With the experience and life in refugee camps, some participants find a connection to their homeland through cultural concepts such as food, musical instruments, and the countryside that they cannot fully find in their host countries. In addition, the scenery of rustic villages where the Karen community lives in harmony with nature in a fresh atmosphere is also an indispensable memory of homeland among those who experienced their childhood in Karen State. Myat remembered the time she lived in the refugee camp where she experienced and understood Karen culture:

I was aware that Karen State is my homeland due to my upbringing in a refugee camp in Thailand. From stories and anecdotes from my parents and grandparents, I learned about the hospitality of the Karen people, the livelihoods close to nature, raising animals or weaving. The Karen people are considered an indigenous community in Southeast Asia, so our culture is unique. I'm not sure I'm a patriot, but I love my people and my hometown in positive ways through sharing and memories. Even though I live in the US, I still enjoy listening to traditional Karen songs about people and the natural environment because they help me remember the familiar sounds from the instruments in the refugee camp.

With Marlar, she always loves Karen food and looks for its authenticity in Thailand. She loves the traditional and local cuisine in Karen State because people often use vegetables, plants and herbs in our dishes and even some animals in the forest. When she moved to Thailand, living in big cities like Bangkok or Chiang Mai, it was difficult to taste Karen dishes authentically. She also recalls her childhood environment when her community lived in harmony with nature in the fresh air.

Conclusion

Karen people in the diaspora still consider Karen State their homeland and where they emotionally belong because of their ancestral roots, ethno-nationalism and collective narratives in exile. Based on the factors fostering the place belongingness by Antonsich (2010), the sense of belonging to the homeland among them has been constructed by auto-biographical, relational, cultural and economic factors. Moreover, for them, the homeland is non-territorial and is largely imagined through memories and narratives across generations. Though many of them were not born in Karen State, the setting of an authentic Karen village was also somehow recreated in the refugee camps thanks to the community leaders. Most of them emphasise the collective narratives of family members, remembrance, traumas and struggles for decades. Young Karens describe how their parents and grandparents transmit their stories of Karen, as well as how they learn Karen history and culture in refugee camps in Thailand. Although refugee camps are considered temporary shelters, they often become homes and memorial places for Karen refugees for many years. The camps provide meaning to the symbolic Karen homeland. Karen people brought the notion of homeland and Karen cultural practices as “the intangible luggage” to the host countries to pass on to next generations there. They are still aware of their responsibility to preserve their culture and roots, educating and disseminating Karen culture and history to younger generations born in host countries. They are also concerned about the dominance and influence of foreign lifestyles and cultures. This can be seen as a commitment to the preservation of Karen cultural identity in the countries of residency, which is a common feature of diaspora, according to Cohen (2008). Meanwhile, after a long period of resettlement in Western countries and Thailand, Karen people not only have adapted well there, but also absorb progressive thoughts of democracy and equality, which can be seen as being driven by the factors of citizenship and length of residency (Antonsich, 2010). Even though they can assert their Karen identity, they want to think “outside the box” as global citizens for their homeland’s future. Regarding the possibility of repatriation in the future, most of the participants do not intend to return and stay in Karen State permanently. According to them, Karen villages there were transformed quite negatively and not the same as they

imagined and expected. Furthermore, after integrating in host countries for more than 10 years, they find it hard to adapt to the society in their own homeland.



Chapter 4. The Unsurprising Coup and Transnational Practices: The Ideological Transition with Democratic Orientation

As mentioned in the previous chapter, despite being granted citizenship and enjoying freedom in the host countries of resettlement, Karen people still feel connected to their homeland and reimagine the notion of homeland through narratives and Karen cultural practices learned in refugee camps. Though the coup in 2021 was not surprising for Karen diaspora, it has enhanced their social bonds with the homeland through transnational practices in both host countries and in Myanmar. In the interview with Win, he expressed his sadness and sympathy for those who are going through the suffering caused by the coup.

I had traumatic childhood experiences from hearing stories of atrocities and destruction of my own village at the hands of the Tatmadaw. Now, seeing pictures of children killed and villages burnt to the ground reminds me of my negative childhood experiences. I live thousands of miles away in a different country, but my mind is closer to the people there in Myanmar in sharing their sufferings and their desire to live free and establish a government of the people, by the people and for the people. All the people of Myanmar deserve better.

The coup brought back the painful history of the Karen people. From narratives and memories of conflicts and turmoil, they understand and sympathize with the victims, specifically all people in Myanmar under the coup. This not only strengthens the homeland attachment of these young Karens, but also demonstrates their deep concern for freedom in Myanmar. With the sense of belonging to homeland and hopes for the future of democracy in Myanmar, Karen people in the diaspora have raised their voices, contributing to transnational practices to condemn the junta and address humanitarian crises in Myanmar, especially Karen State. This chapter examines the motivations and roles of young Karen people in transnational practices and the facilitation of those practices both on-site and online.

The Unsurprising Coup and Karen Diaspora

The 2021 Myanmar military coup was unsurprising for the Karen people, since they have been dealing with military dictatorships for more than 70 years. The military enjoyed special privileges and economic opportunities soon after the country gained independence. They have always been heavily involved in national politics. The government led by NLD had no control over the country's security apparatus such as the Tatmadaw, the border and interior ministries. They would fabricate a national emergency as an excuse to take back full control of the country's administration at any moment if they felt threatened in any shape or form. Voting fraud was their manufactured national emergency to justify their blatant power grab. Kyaw believes that Myanmar has never been a true democratic country even before the coup:

I was always very sceptical about the democratic process in Myanmar. The government apparatus was not tough to limit the military's power and did not take advantage of the peaceful time to transfer power and unite the ethnic minorities. It could be said that the so-called democratic government had somewhat believed in the change of the military and did not control them resolutely.

However, for those who were optimistic about the positive changes and democratic transition in Myanmar in recent years, they feel lost and hopeless. After a series of bilateral ceasefire agreements with EAOs, the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed in 2015. NCA, peace talks and other ceasefires in ethnic-controlled areas gave people hope that the country would open its doors to peace and democracy. However, the coup in 2021 has forced the country back to the dark ages. Bloodthirsty and violent soldiers fighting for power and economic benefits rule the country, while the people live in fear and poverty. Shein showed his disappointment and sorrow when mentioning the coup:

I used to hold out hope that Myanmar could become a democratic country where everyone could live in peace and enjoy freedom peacefully. At that

time, ethnic minorities also could have many opportunities and privileges to develop their communities. The country would be more advanced in a context where everyone could access education and interact with international networks. However, when the military toppled the government this year, it put an end to all hope and optimism.

A military coup is a terrible nightmare for everyone. Although ethnic minorities have lived in turmoil and conflicts in remote or border areas for decades, the coup in 2021 was far more brutal. Many innocent civilians including young men, women and children have been brutally and openly murdered in big cities like Yangon or Mandalay. Thein Baw shared that this coup has been more serious and bloodier than the previous ones when he grew up on the front lines of the war zone between KNU and the Tatmadaw, when he happened to see pictures and videos of the killings during protests in major cities. He could not imagine the cruelty and inhumanity of the junta when soldiers and police openly killed civilians, even kids and students. In the age of social media, the junta cannot cover up its crimes and persecutions as it did before. He used to be indifferent to homeland politics, but he started to self-study history, international law, and human rights with the aim to educate and mobilise people for advocacy and being the voice for the voiceless inside Myanmar.

Given that the coup leader had anticipated this level of public opposition, the junta has tarnished their reputation. It is pretty much a consensus among the democratic forces that the junta has no place in the future reconstruction of Myanmar. Unlike the previous military coups, strong oppositions to this coup have sprung up not only in cities, but down to townships and villages across the country, even in the Burmese heartland. This can lead to a connection between the Bamar and Karen people, and other minorities in general. The people of Myanmar, regardless of our different ethnic backgrounds, are united in opposition to this junta. For decades, most of the country did not really pay much attention to the numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Tatmadaw in ethnic minority areas. The Rohingya story is just the latest example.

In summary, almost all participants oppose the 2021 military coup in Myanmar and see it as a collapse of democracy-building progress. They had hoped for development and positive changes under the previous NLD's administration, but it was the NLD that balked at Tatmadaw's dictatorship. Thus, the coup seemed inevitable and not surprising to Karen people in the diaspora. However, the aftermath and humanitarian crisis caused by the coup strengthened the bonds between those abroad and those inside the country as Myanmar became a fierce battleground and many people have been displaced internally. Notably, they felt sympathy and compassion for the Bamar people who were arrested and killed during protests in major cities. However, all participants agreed that the coup enhanced Bamar people's understanding and acknowledgement of human rights abuses targeting ethnic minorities, now that they are also suffering the brutal nature of "the butcher" Tatmadaw.

A Mutual Understanding Has Been Built: The Bamar, Karen and Other Ethnicities

Karen people have been suffering for more than 70 years. In their history's darkest period, there was no Internet or social media, so the rest of the world could not see persecutions and atrocities towards them. With their own ethnic nationalism, some Karen people never consider the Myanmar-backed government as their leaders. In Karen territory, the Myanmar military did not totally rule over the Karen people. However, Tatmadaw then sought to isolate them by Four-Cuts strategy to cut off essential resources of Karen and other ethnic groups. They waged skirmishes with the KNU and massacred civilians to gain control over their territory. Khin emphasises the loss and sacrifice of his people:

What has happened to us, Karen, over the past 70 years has been more tragic than what Bamar people are suffering. Tatmadaw soldiers killed and tortured my people like animals. They burned villages and shot anyone they saw. Thousands of people were displaced internally, fled, and lived in exile for many years. Not many people in the big cities knew about these traumatic events and no one spoke up to protect us. The Karen people have never lived a

peaceful and safe day in their own territory. After the ceasefire agreement with KNU in 2010, Tatmadaw was still very close to us. They divided Karen State into several regions with varying degrees of control. They did not invade or bombard some areas but suppressed others in order to rob our land for economic benefits.

During this coup, people in major cities were oppressed and killed by the junta. With the spread of news on social media and the Internet, the international community has become more aware of what is happening in Myanmar. Many Bamar people have started to know and understand what happened to other ethnic minorities, joining the CDM and calling for ethnic unity against the junta as they themselves are now victims. Htet mentioned her Bamar friend's change of mind about ethnic minorities when he recognized the brutal nature of Tatmadaw.

My friend is a migrant worker in Melbourne. He used to stay in Yangon before living here, so he had not known what happened to other ethnic minorities before the coup. He was surprised that many people like me must take refuge along the border. He simply thought we crossed the border for better opportunities and income to build insurgents fighting against the Tatmadaw. After noticing that many young protesters and urban dwellers were mass killed by the junta during the coup, he realised the true face of the junta and felt sorry for those who had to live in exile. I agree that the coup is an opportunity for Bamar people to understand ethnic cleansing and oppressions in Myanmar which have been hidden by the junta.

Burmanisation policies caused great misunderstandings of the revolution of EAOs. The military-backed government imposed forced assimilation and indoctrination programs in education to promote the Burman-centric ideology. This gradually ingrained in the awareness of the Bamar and urban people that EAOs were rebel groups and terrorists. Marlar herself also doubted and misunderstood the righteousness of her Karen people when she studied at a public primary school in Myanmar. In the subject of history, teachers only talked about the good things of the

Myanmar military and saw other ethnic minorities as terrorists. That was the reason why she considered KNLA and KNU as bad insurgents even though she is a Karen person. After moving to the camp, she truly learned Karen's history and revolution, and understood the reason why her family escaped their land and lived in the refugee camp. She realised that what was taught in the Myanmar education system was the military's brainwashing campaign to enforce the Burmanisation policy and ethnic cleansing. This deepened hatred and misunderstanding among people in Myanmar.

Burmanisation policies and privileges to the Bamar do not guarantee Myanmar democracy. People must realise that democracy can only be exercised when all people live in peace, freedom and enjoy equal rights. Look at the Rohingya, they are also victims of ignorance and ethnic discrimination. They believe those Bamar people have come to understand more about the serious human rights violations against other minorities. Win shared that with the political mobilization of the shadow government, NUG, some young people, students, politicians and celebrities are seeking refuge in ethnic territories, so they can know more, sympathize more and change their mind about those who they considered to be insurgents or terrorists in the past.

When seeing that violence is on the rise in the major cities of Myanmar, Karen people also open their eyes and recognize the contribution and sacrifice of Bamar protesters and activists who they once saw as people supporting the military. Some Karen people who fled Myanmar to refugee camps believe that their homeland is only the territory of Karen State. They have claimed that they are not part of Myanmar and never believe in the Bamar people. They think that the Bamar and the Tatmadaw are on the same boat. However, in this coup, the Karen saw that the junta was willing to point a gun at their own people, so this coup was bloody for even those who were considered privileged before. Therefore, Karen people agree that not only they have been suppressed, but the Bamar as the majority have also suffered. All people feel more united and closer with a common enemy, the Tatmadaw.

In summary, the coup can be seen as an opportunity for the Bamar people to recognize and understand the revolution of Karen people and other ethnic minorities.

In fact, before the coup, Bamar people, especially those living in urban areas, used to consider Karen rebel groups as terrorists and violent insurgents because of the Burmanisation policies and national propaganda, but now they understand that other ethnic minorities like Karen have only fought for their rights, equality and freedom. Karen people have been suppressed for a long time, but many people only heard and believed in the military news. Now, when the violence and oppressions have come to them, they may want to apologise and respect other ethnic minorities including their Rohingya brothers and sisters.

After the coup, almost all people, regardless of their ethnicities, are supporting the people's movement and helping those persecuted and abused by the junta inside Myanmar because they have one common enemy, the junta. This can be seen as positive signals for a federal union in Myanmar once the junta is defeated. Some participants told me they felt and saw the initial solidarity of the Bamar and other ethnic minorities abroad. Paing shared that when his Karen community in Minnesota held fundraising activities for Karen IDPs, many Bamar and other ethnic groups like Chin or Kachin came to their place to donate and show support. He was touched to see people loving and helping each other during the dark period of Myanmar. Though he was not sure how long that solidarity would last, he valued those moments and emotions as a big step towards ethnic unity and political mobilisation for future revolution.

Transnational Practices Conducted during the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup

Online Transnational Practices: Social Media as the Alternative Platforms to Make Voice for the Voiceless

Before the coup, Myanmar was a poor country and the digital technology there was not very developed. After the coup, the junta cut off communication between people in Myanmar and the outside world to hide their crimes and violence with Internet restrictions and the ban on social media. This is a malicious trick by the military to conceal and justify their violence and cruelty towards civilians. This meant that the

international community could not be fully aware of what is going on inside Myanmar, as well as people in diaspora, cannot connect or confirm the safety of their family members. Seven out of ten participants stated that they had a hard time connecting with family members, relatives, and friends in Myanmar. They used to leave messages and wait for responses only when people inside the country were in a safe place with Internet connection. Updating information depends a lot on friends in Myanmar and Thailand, underground media, and journalists working on the front lines or the battlefield. Participants usually follow the information in Karen State and Myanmar pages and groups on Twitter and Facebook such as Karen Information Centre, Karen National Union and Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG). For example, Htet was not able to contact any relatives in Karen State 3 months after the coup. After that, she knew that some of her relatives had to flee into the woods and caves when she talked with a KNU soldier. She tried to contact another one in Thailand who travelled to the battlefield to provide food and medicine for the IDP. At that time, she was informed all her relatives crossing the border to Thailand were safe and healthy.

Under the strict control of the junta, civilians have been strictly monitored to not reveal information about the violence and crimes of the junta to the world. Therefore, it is not safe to exchange information with people abroad. Myat, Meelay and Shein did not dare to contact or leave messages to people inside. According to these participants, Tatmadaw soldiers have blatantly confiscated phones, checking each person's personal information and messages every day. Myat told me she stopped communicating with many friends and associates in Myanmar because she did not want to be the reason for them to be tortured and detained by the evil soldiers. She knows that the junta is targeting influential young people for arrests and forced disappearances. She decided to postpone many educational projects in Karen state and refugee camps because she did not want her colleagues, trainees, and students there to be targeted and investigated by State Administration Council (SAC) troops. She also recommended that they locked personal social media accounts and messenger history for safety. Meanwhile, Win agreed that military intelligence is intercepting people's communications and they have pressured telecommunication companies to comply

with their order to spy on the people. Therefore, he only kept contact with local leaders near the Myanmar-Thailand border. Since those people often travel back and forth between Thailand and Myanmar, he has had some communication and connection difficulties from time to time. They did not have access to the Internet all the time. However, the connection was easier and smoother when they were on the Thai side. In addition, he regularly participates in online meetings with Karen representatives in diaspora communities around the world to agree on strategies for supporting internally displaced people.

Fortunately, thanks to social media and digital technology, news and visual content can spread and be shared in seconds. Most participants have used social networking sites to share information and visual content related to military crimes and murders. Not only were the Burmese in general persecuted and openly murdered in big cities like Mandalay or Yangon, but the Karen people were also hit hard by air raids, village burning, and skirmishes between the KNU and Tatmadaw. As a result, Karen diaspora believes they should not be indifferent to such abuses. Also, people living abroad are not subject to control or censorship of information about Myanmar's human rights abuses by the junta. Therefore, they take the responsibility to speak out for the IDPs and victims in Myanmar. Marlar shared how she uses social media to disseminate the information and report the junta's communication platforms. At the beginning of the coup, she would follow and share the news of young protesters in big cities being killed publicly, tortured to death, or detained arbitrarily. After the airstrikes and the burning of villages in Karen State, she began to shift the focus on social media to Karen issues. She has tried to write posts in English to spread the news to international friends and colleagues about the crimes and cruelty of the junta. She is also a graduate student, so she started discussions about the coup with her classmates and colleagues. In addition, she and Karen groups on Facebook have also reported pages or posts supporting the junta. With a huge number of reports, their platforms were quickly deleted. In the same way, Htet emphasised the importance of the Karen diaspora to speak out the truths on social media about what is happening in Myanmar when the crimes there are hidden.

I follow the pages of Karen community organisations such KHRG and KIC that are updating the news on the front line. I share information about crimes, humanitarian crises, and touching stories of victims. Social media is effective for getting updated news quickly. With freedom and democracy in host countries, I believe that Karen people abroad should be the voice, advocating for those abused by the junta. However, we also need to be careful to consider what to share and avoid fake news because the cyber troops of Tatmadaw are doing strategies to investigate civilians and justify the coup on social media.

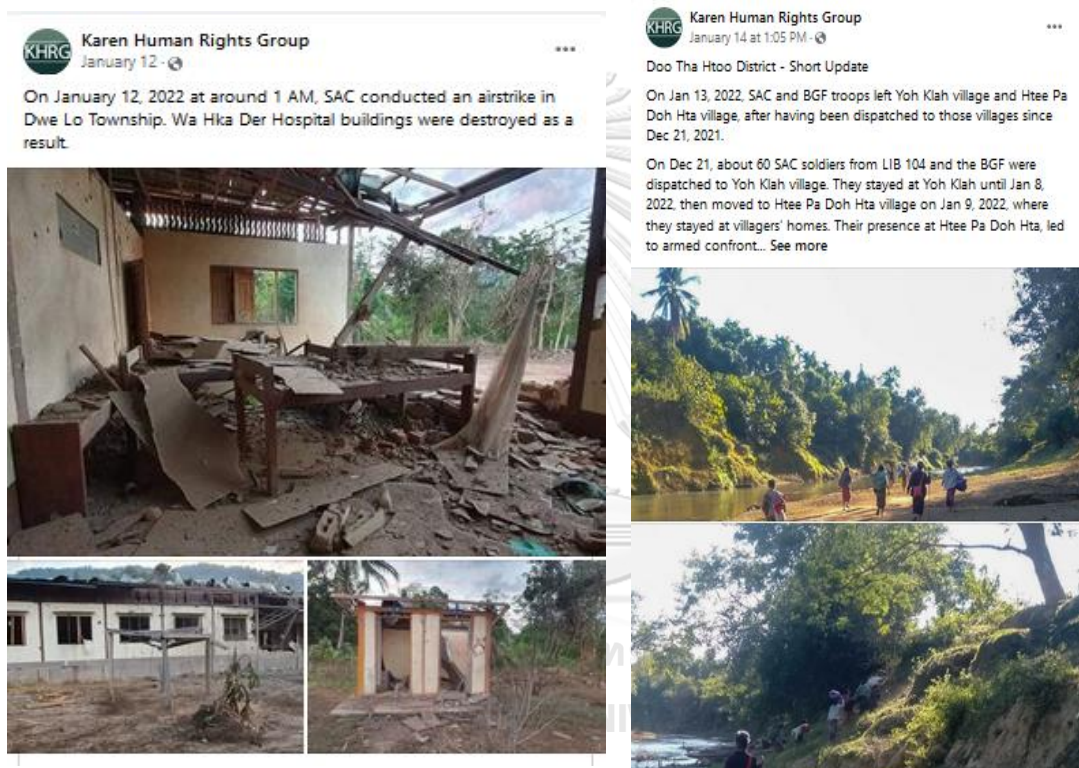


Figure 4. Karen Human Rights Group updates the situations in Karen State every day on its Facebook page (Karen Human Rights Group, 2022)

Participants are driven to raise awareness of Myanmar's plight in their host countries through social media, sharing photos and stories of IDPs in Karen State on social media and reporting human rights abuse and violence of the junta. They tried to look at things objectively and neutrally, but he found himself empathising with the insiders because of his roots and sentiment to Karen people. He believes that the Karen people cannot enjoy peace and freedom when the military takes power. He usually shares the truth about the crimes committed by the junta with his colleagues in California in case

they have political knowledge and interests in Myanmar. Some of his friends have social connections with Burmese people, so they actively understand the situation there. Ethnic conflict and the dominance of the Myanmar military are not as simple as they appear on the surface of the international news, or media. Therefore, he is willing to be a storyteller, sharing what his people have suffered for decades under the junta. Though not what would be described as a social media influencer, Kyaw read news about what is happening in Myanmar, especially in Karen state from Karen pages and groups. She shared how to spread the news in Myanmar to her social network in Norway.

I have written messages or posts in English and Norwegian to share information and narratives to my Facebook friends. As a representative of the Karen diaspora in Norway, I joined group chats on Messenger and Telegram to discuss the political crisis with other representatives in Myanmar and how we can help the victims and IDPs in Karen State. When my foreign colleagues learned of crimes and violence caused by the junta through her Facebook and Twitter, they showed sympathy for people in Myanmar and opposition to the junta. With information from online meetings and social media, I wrote reports, and had discussions with the city council and the Norwegian government twice. I was also a guest speaker to lecture about what is happening in Myanmar in some colleges here.

With Myat, she has many social networks on social media such as her professors in college, foreign classmates and colleagues, Burmese, and Thai friends, she thinks that information should be shared selectively and limited so as not to overload people with harmful content. She chose to refrain from posting violent content on her Facebook. She wants everyone to be strong and optimistic for the fight and avoid spreading negativity to other audiences. She has shared brief information with infographics on what is happening in Myanmar on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. More notably, she has participated in panel discussions with Karen community leaders and journalists in Thailand and Myanmar, as well as representatives of the diaspora from the US and Norway. Due to communication difficulties and interruptions, online

meetings were very helpful as members could propose strategies and mobilise resources from various diasporic communities around the world.

However, some participants do not use social media to share and post news about what is happening in Myanmar regularly but read posts on a regular basis to keep themselves up to date with the situation on the ground. For example, Win strongly condemned the coup and all people associated with it. “As a person of Myanmar descent, it is his honour to be a voice for the voiceless.” Though he was not an active user on social media, he read the news about Myanmar silently on a Messenger group chat and some Facebook pages. After that, he summarised and synthesised the updated information for reports sent to international organisations and the website of his workplace. With Thein, he did not post much about the coup on his platforms, but he has followed the news on some Karen channels to see the public reaction and sentiment. He thinks that social media is convenient and shareable, but the information there is sometimes annoying and difficult to check for credibility. He also connected with Karen people in Hong Kong and Thailand to update information in conflict zones.

On-site Transnational Practices: “We are not happy here when they are suffering there”.

Fundraising activities

Karen people in the diaspora have contributed much of their time and resources to raise funds and send remittances to help IDPs in Karen State as quickly as possible. With air raids and skirmishes between Tatmadaw and the KNU, the IDPs needed urgent support with shelter, food, medicine, and humanitarian aid. At this time, the role of the Karen people in Western countries has become more prominent. These funds can come from monthly income, cultural programs and fundraising concerts, sale of items, or direct donations in refugee or diasporic communities. Some people have contacted and connected Burmese immigrant communities or Karen diasporic communities to raise funds and send them to CBOs in Mae Sot. In addition, some

participants have raised funds through the sale of food or traditional Karen clothing while they were struggling with residency and taxing status in the host countries. They think this is a way to raise funds and to attract the attention of foreigners to the situation of the Karen people in Myanmar. Marlar shared that she is not happy though she is living with safety in Thailand. She can feel the suffering of people living there and is extremely worried for those affected by the Tatmadaw crimes and for her loved ones. She has participated in fundraising activities with Karen migrants in Bangkok. The money raised by donations was sent to CBOs to provide food and medicine for IDPs along the border. Though she cannot contribute much to the humanitarian aid in Karen State, she takes this transnational connection as her duty.

We are not rich but at least we have freedom and security. Therefore, I want to contribute as much as I have to IDPs in my homeland. Karen CBOs in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot helped us deliver necessities to victims. I contacted a friend who just had a baby after she escaped into the forest. The first week of the air raid, she almost died from lack of food and medicine. Fortunately, she received necessities from our people on the front lines.

With Htet, she stated her concerns about people inside Myanmar though she keeps busy with her work in Australia. She is a full-time social worker for a refugee organisation in Melbourne, so she can connect with Karen people and other Burmese migrants in Australia easily. She has organised fundraising activities to support the victims back home. Though she still struggles with taxation and living costs there every day with life here, she tries to give much of her income during this time to Karen IDP. In her free time, she has cooked Karen and Burmese dishes to sell online to raise funds. She also helps to sell Karen costumes and products sent from Thailand. The news in Myanmar sometimes frustrates her, as she finds herself useless not being able to help more because of travel restrictions due to Covid-19.

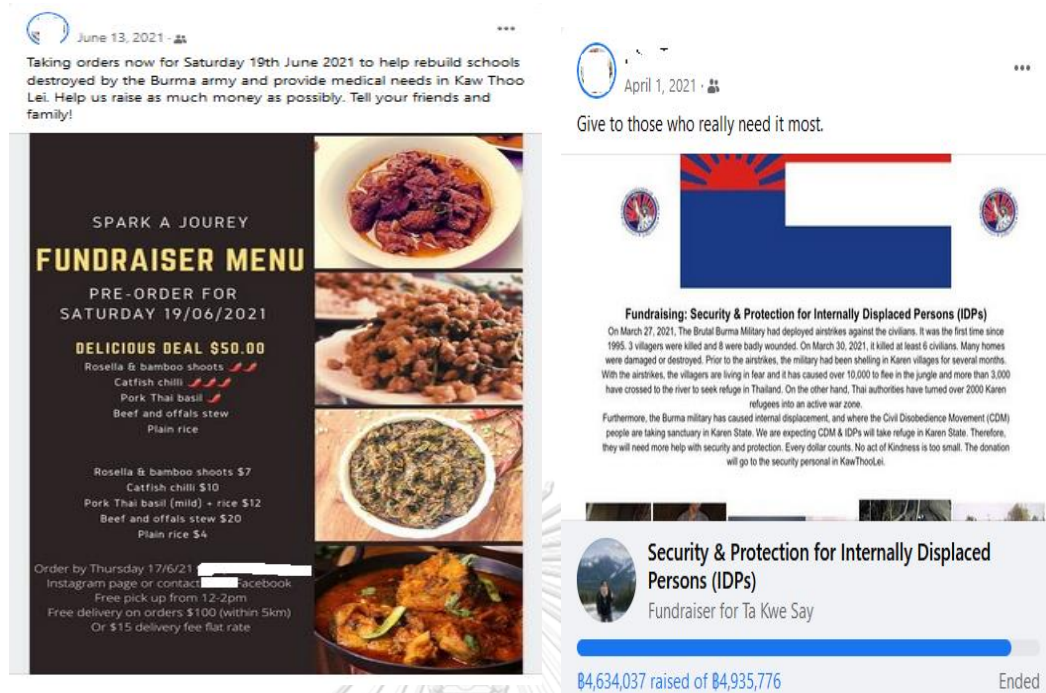


Figure 5. The participant sold Karen foods online for fundraising and shared the appeal for donation on Facebook (The participant's Facebook, 2021)

Due to geographical limitations and Covid-19 travel restrictions, remittances and donations are the most practical and effective tools for them to support the affected people in the country. All participants feel helpless when they are unable to contribute strongly to social movements and rescue people inside their homeland. Although before the military coup, they still maintained social ties with relatives in Karen State, remittances did not play an important and urgent role while domestic people still had enough resources to live. At that time some participants thought that Myanmar could move towards democracy, and everything was going well and peacefully every day. Therefore, they mostly focused on their career, life, and relationships in their host countries because they knew their Karen people were safe. However, amid the humanitarian crisis caused by the coup, most participants try to devote all their resources and do everything in their capacity to help IDPs. With Paing, although he lives safely and freely in America, he knows his Karen compatriots are suffering from violence and hardship. In addition to sharing stories and brutal truths in Myanmar, he wants to work in the frontline as a real insider. He feels more attached to his homeland after the coup. His communities and ancestral lands are tormented by the

devil, and he lives in a democratic country. Therefore, he is aware that he has many opportunities and responsibilities to advocate for victims and IDPs. He constantly participates in fundraising activities in Minnesota, uses some amount of his income for donations as well as calling for donations from colleagues and friends there.

In the same way, Myat states that connecting Karen diasporic communities creates enormous capacities for humanitarian aid and strategies. She emphasises that Karen in diaspora should use their potential, favourable conditions and resources in host countries to help the people inside Myanmar. She participates in food sales and cultural performances to raise funds and support the civil disobedience movement and for internally displaced people in Karen State. Likewise, she also called on people to participate in online donations for CBOs to help the victims who crossed the border into Thailand.

Humanitarian aid

During the coup, Karen people living in refugee camps or working in CBOs along the Thailand-Myanmar border have many favourable conditions for direct and active humanitarian assistance. The coup destroyed villages, homes, schools and roads in Karen state. Many people have been forced to hide in forests, bunkers or across borders to find temporary shelter in Thailand. In such extreme conditions, humanitarian aid is urgently needed to ensure the safety and health of internally displaced persons.

The Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) is a network of more than 20 Karen CBOs and CVOs along the Thailand-Myanmar border. KPSN and its network members together with local leaders start responding to the emergency needs of IDPs on both the Thai and Burmese side. The clashes between KNLA and Burmese military started from 15 December 2021 at Lay Kay Kaw town, currently displaced over two thousand residents including old people, women, and children. The displaced communities are hiding nearby forest and villages. Families with children and elderly have faced severe hardship as they were unable to carry anything with them when

fleeing. On its Facebook public page, KPSN appeals for help for those IDPs through donations to provide shelter, medicines and food that are urgently needed for them. The donations can be made by contacting the organisation via Whatsapp and Signal.



Figure 6. KPSN and its members respond to some emergency needs of IDPs on June 2021 (KPSN, 2021)

They receive donations from international organisations, the general public and from Karen diasporic communities in Western countries to be sent directly to refugees or to buy essential items for those displaced in the country. More specifically, the internet was severely restricted and social media banned during the coup, so information about fighting and violence could only be updated through a network of freelance journalists, KNU soldiers and volunteers. Therefore, the participants shared that Karen people in Thailand serve as primary communication channel for providing updates on the safety and whereabouts of their family members in the homeland. The work of those on the front lines is dangerous and arduous because the air strikes and attacks of the Myanmar army can kill people indiscriminately. Hla talked about her experiences working on the front lines to provide humanitarian aid to people living in temporary shelters along the border

I often go to the border area or to the Myanmar side with some frontline defenders on weekends to provide food and medicine and to repair houses, roads and bridges damaged by Tatmadaw's airstrikes. I also ask for donations from Myanmar and Karen people in Thailand to actively support the refugees along the border. This job is dangerous. I used to have to hike through the woods to help the elderly and children find safe shelter while the air raid was overhead. Occasionally, my colleagues and I had to cross rivers to reach the war zone. I feel happy to put myself in danger to help the IDPs. I cannot sleep well while my people suffer from such intense violence. Equally as important, I am working as a freelance journalist to document the damage and casualties caused by the junta attacks.

Lobbying against the junta

Participants agreed that the coup in 2021 was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for political change and they are trying to take advantage of the opportunity the coup has created in ways that could help liberate Karen people and all the people of Myanmar from this corrupt and brutal military regime. They have raised international awareness through their host country governments to increase economic pressures on the military junta to reverse its course and implement democratic reforms. Four participants from the US took part in demonstrations to protest the coup and petitioned for economic sanctions against the assets owned by the Myanmar military. They do not think that tough sanctions will be implemented immediately, but it is one of the things they can do to give their voice to the peace, freedom and human rights of people inside the country. Shein stated how he could do to put pressure on the junta

I used to identify myself as a Karen-American, but after the coup I want to emphasise my Karen origin. I shared and discussed with my social networks including friends, colleagues, local politicians the story of my family, who I am, where I come from and what is happening there now. Together with members of the Karen community organisation here, we regularly have

discussions with local politicians and authorities to propose what they can help and how they can apply pressure on the junta. Obviously, we could see some economic sanctions by the Biden government against Burmese military-related actors, as well as continued condemnation of violence and intimidation. However, we need stronger international interference to put more on pressure the junta, stop them killing civilians and hold them accountable for their crimes.



Figure 7. Karen people joined the rally at Des Moines, Iowa State, the US to condemn the coup on May, 2021 (Karen Association of Iowa, 2021)

With the participation in protests, they also want to show solidarity for the ethnic groups who have been IDPs and abused by the junta. Though it can be just a small step at the beginning, they hope that Karen, Bamar and other ethnic groups can continue to stick together for justice and democracy in Myanmar.

The Ideology Transition with Democratic Orientation

In the process of social integration and education in Western countries, young Karen people have transformed their thoughts mind towards cosmopolitan thoughts. They

still want to assert origin as a Karen person, but do not want to perceive and solve conflicts in their homeland as an insider. They interact actively with social networks and their counterparts in Western societies and see political and ethnic issues in Myanmar as international citizens with cosmopolitan mindset. In other words, they have adopted Western democratic values more strongly while still feeling affection for Karen homeland. Remaining as objective outsiders helps them to be free from constraints and biases towards political conflicts in Myanmar. According to the participants, within the Karen ethnic group, there are also certain divisions and contradictions. In Myanmar, the Karen people not only live in Karen State but are also dispersed throughout the country. They are influenced by diverse social and ideological factors. In addition, the conflict of ideas and strategies between the old and young generations is also very difficult. Young Karen people resettling in Western countries have ideological advantages over those in refugee camps or Karen state, namely the balance between ethno-nationalism and democratic values. They were born and raised in refugee camps, but subsequently attended high schools and colleges in host countries and became Western citizens with full legal status. Therefore, they can see both sides of cultures, contradictions, positives and negatives between the young and old Karen generation, between people abroad and people in Myanmar as they experienced those kinds of contexts. In some cases, they can act as intermediaries and provide impartial advice on transnational practices or strategic decisions. Myat told me when she engaged in transnational practices and talks, she considered herself as a bridge builder. She wanted to connect people from the diaspora with people in the homeland to bring them closer together and close the gap of ideological differences. Sometimes those people could not talk or accept thoughts and opinions of one another. In such cases, she was the one bringing them together and having constructive discussions for more understanding.

Most of the people in Myanmar have now identified a common enemy, the junta, and believe that the only way to liberate people and bring peace to Myanmar is through democracy. Therefore, not only for the Bamar and other peoples but also for the Karen, if they want to defeat the junta, they must agree with the core values, namely, they should know what they are standing and fighting for. For the past 70 years,

Karen people have been fighting for equality, human rights and peace. They held the ethno-nationalism to liberate everyone and protect their ancestral territory because dictatorial leaders who implemented policies to erase ethnic minorities. Some Karen people who fled Myanmar to refugee camps believed that they did not belong to Myanmar, but that their homeland is only the territory of Karen State. They claimed that they were not part of Myanmar and did not the Bamar people. As a result, they had certain misunderstandings with the Bamar and often fought with each other. This not only proves the ethno-nationalism of Karen people, but also reveals extreme thoughts. However, the coup has been extremely violent against even those who were considered privileged before, the Bamar. Therefore, participants agree that not only Karen people in the diaspora, but also those in Karen State and refugee camps should open their minds to the freedom and democracy-building process in Myanmar. It is important that everyone enlarges the picture for balance and a realistic view instead of blaming each other. Myat showed a distinction between the opposition to the junta and the support for Bamar civilians:

We do not hate the Bamar, but we do hate and oppose the Burmanisation in Myanmar and now the junta. Before thinking about fighting and advocacy, Karen people should understand this principle. We do not attack and blame innocent civilians, but we do not accept authoritarian policies and ideologies. It is important for everyone to understand the value of democracy and equality.

All participants agree that the coup is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for political change and reforms in Myanmar. They are trying to take advantage of the opportunity to bring their Karen people freedom by mobilizing all the people of Myanmar to fight against the corrupt and uncivilized military regime. Therefore, they have raised international awareness with their host country governments as a part of transnational practices to increase economic pressures on the military junta to reverse its course and implement democratic reforms. At the same time, respective Karen and Burmese communities have organized fund raising activities to support CDM, NUG and IDPs in the armed conflict areas as mentioned above. In addition, when the coup has

brought all the different ethnic groups, especially the Bamar majority, closer together, it is necessary and ideal to establish a genuine federal democratic union. Young Karen participants believe that a federal union in Myanmar can provide all ethnicities with a certain degree of autonomy in their own territory, while at the same time they enjoy equality, respect and dignity through a proper legal system and an elected government to contribute to the prosperity of the whole Myanmar. Win asserted that “it is time to build a federal union that would answer directly to any future democratic governments”. Karen participants believe that raising awareness about the role of democracy and human rights is very important for young Karen and for younger generations in Myanmar in general. When young people are properly oriented towards democracy and freedom, unity and peace in Myanmar in the future becomes a real possibility. In addition, diasporic communities should invest in local businesses to create jobs for Myanmar’s youth. When they have stable livelihoods, they will have more motivation to join the people defense force, instead of joining Tatmadaw for money. In addition, overseas Karens should inspire young people in Myanmar with their own stories of success and overcoming adversity in exile. Through that, they can build concrete role models for young people in the country or in refugee camps to develop their capacities, especially in the pursuit of education. Finally, when I asked about their role and motivations for engaging in transnational practices, Karen participants from the US all emphasized the phrase “global citizens”. They think of themselves as a global citizen in a sense that they all belong to the same human race and now there are so many challenges facing our globalized world. To address these challenges together, especially the humanitarian crisis and violence of the coup in Myanmar, it is important that they think more broadly beyond their own traditional territorial boundaries. In other words, they are aware that fighting for justice and moving towards democratic reforms in Myanmar is the key to opening the door to freedom and equality for Karen people. To conclude this chapter, I quote Their's point on participation in transnational practices:

We are human beings born with freedom and dignity, so we hold duties to fight for freedom and democracy in our country, for Karens, for everyone in Myanmar. I actively participate in transnational practices, not only because I

am a Karen who is advocating for my people and my homeland, but also because I am an ordinary human being who appreciates humanity and cannot be ignorant of violence and atrocities in Myanmar. In this dark time of Myanmar, everyone should forget about their own interests. Instead, they should work together to defeat the junta, heal ethnic divisions, and work towards a democratic Myanmar. I know this will be a long revolution but changing the mind will be an important first step on this arduous road.



Chapter 5. Conclusion

This thesis analyses the homeland attachment of Karen diasporic communities where those refugees are often caught in between, how the Karen identity is perceived and preserved in exile, and the transnational practices associated with it in the context of the 2021 Myanmar coup. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted on Zoom online meetings with the participation of 10 participants from the United Nations, Canada, Australia, Norway and Thailand. This final chapter presents discussion and reflection on the key findings based on relevant theories and concepts. After that, I would like to offer recommendations on further research to fill in gaps in mine and broaden my findings.

By using diaspora, place belongingness and transnational practices as main concepts for analysis; and drawing on the historical context of displacement, exile, and resettlement of my interviewees' narratives, the research shows three main discussion points. Firstly, Karen people sustain the sense of belonging to their homeland by collective memories, narratives, and Karen cultural practices. Refugee camps serve as a memorial place to reproduce and maintain Karen-ness for those not born in Karen State. Karen people brought the stories and ceremonies from the camps to their new countries. They want to preserve and pass Karen cultural identity to next generations. The sense of belonging to homeland motivates them to perform transnational practices, both before and after the military coup. Secondly, those practices have been enhanced both on-site and online with increased resources and significant contribution of Karen people in the diaspora when the 2021 Myanmar military coup can be seen a driving factor. Finally, I argue that transnational practices during the coup not only express Karen ethno-nationalism, but also the support for freedom and democracy in Myanmar which those young Karens have learned and absorbed in Western society. Therefore, there is an ideological transition towards democracy and justice when they have broader perspectives as global citizens to join in transnational practices.

Reflection on Diaspora Studies and The Sense of Belonging: Collective Narratives and the Formation of Place Belongingness in Exile

that although their experiences are characterised by a considerable degree of diversity, they are also connected by the sense of belonging to homeland as expressed by homeland sentiments, social bonds and transnational practices.

For those Karens not born in their homeland, the meaning of homeland is mainly sustained, reproduced and strengthened through narratives, public rituals and celebrations, education and informal social relations in refugee camps, which confirms the work of Laocharoenwong (2020) and Worland and Darlington (2010). My research can be seen as a continuous transition to the work of the mentioned-above scholars. In particular, the Karen people retain their sense of belonging to their homeland, keeping their social bonds and bringing with them Karen cultural practises that were established in the refugee camps in Thailand. In other words, the perception of homeland for young Karen refugees is not territorial, as most of them were not born and did not live in their homeland. This finding is partly similar with the research on Palestinian refugees of Gabiam and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2017). They showed that Palestinians abroad could continue to have emotional and social connections with many spaces, including refugee camps and temporary shelters. Even if those refugees and their families had never lived there, the places were seen as exemplifying the collective narratives that identify with the displacement and suffering of Palestinians.

Cohen (2008) elaborates one of the diaspora features, namely “a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time” which is totally reconfirmed with the case of Karen diaspora. Resettlement to democratic host countries does not in itself represent an obstacle to performing Karen cultural practices. The commitment to cultural preservation and maintenance of Karen unity lies within individual responsibility of those who resettle although they still confront with assimilation as other diasporas.

Baldassar et al. (2017) showed that although Vietnamese identity and community diaspora connections remained strong in the Vietnamese diaspora in Australia, those Vietnamese people maintained a very weak relationship with their home country for a long time in a variety of aspects. Home visits, political involvement, and remittances all show relatively low levels of attachment to the home country. The authors argue that the Vietnamese diaspora is characterised by a lateral relationship with diaspora members in Australia, rather than a vertical relationship with the home country. Obviously, this is a partial contrast to the Karen diaspora based on the findings in this research. In particular, the Karen diaspora maintain social ties to their homeland, and maintain transnational practices on a regular basis. More significantly, these practices have been greatly enhanced by the political crisis from the 2021 coup. This can be attributed to the reproduction and reshaping of the notion of homeland and Karen cultural practices in refugee camps in Thailand. However, it should also be said that the relationship of Karen diaspora communities in the resettled countries has not been closely studied and evaluated in terms of extent.

Reflection on Transnationalism: The Unsurprising Coup and the Facilitation of Transnational Practices

After reproducing Karen cultural practises and perceiving the sense of belonging to homeland in the new geographical setting, homeland orientation is also sustained transnational activities. Resettlement to third countries creates a profound shift in Karen identity, social, political and economic organisation from local to global, and the Karen diaspora can develop into a political, social and economic actor. The Karen can benefit substantially from resettlement increasing their potential to mobilise; the democratic host countries can provide a platform for political activism as well as humanitarian aid towards the homeland. Furthermore, a long tradition of Karen self-management and organisation such as leadership in refugee camps as well as active Karen CBOs and CSVs operating in exile might contribute to creation of Karen transnational organisations. Karen diaspora in some Western host countries in my research shows strong political orientation towards the Western democratic society, and in each country of resettlement, there are diasporic organisations that work

towards political mobilisation and improvement of Karen transnational facilitation. Before the coup, transnational activities of Karen people were quite scattered through small remittances to kin, individual donations to organisations, schools and churches in Karen State and refugee camps in Thailand. After the coup, with air raids and attacks on Karen villages, the Karen diaspora turned to their homeland more with increased resources and contributions for transnational practices though they are still facing challenges in host countries themselves. Transnational practices are enhanced through fundraising events, online appeals for donations, humanitarian aid and rallies in host countries. These practices often mobilised large numbers of Karen participants as well as people from other ethnicities. Karen people living in Thailand near the border are responsible for frontline work to provide urgent needs for IDPs such as food, medicines, and shelter.

It could be argued that the sense of belonging to the homeland of Karen people is like an on-off switch. In daily life in host countries, they can identify themselves situationally and flexibly based on respective social networks such as colleagues, family, Burmese groups or Karen groups. However, the notion of Karen homeland, which was reproduced and shaped in refugee camps in Thailand, plays an important role in connecting with homeland and helping their fellow compatriots. This sense of belonging has become dominant and strong as the 2021 Myanmar military coup has forced thousands of Karen people to flee and seek temporary shelters along the border. The homeland being in jeopardy is a factor for Karen people in the diaspora to feel more connected to their homeland, sympathise with those suffering in Karen State and in the rest of Myanmar, as well as to try to use all their resources to support victims and IDPs under attacks and air strikes of Tatmadaw.

It is important to mention the importance of social media in facilitating transnational practices when Karen people in diaspora understand media literacy and can apply various tactics to help their people in Karen State. With the flexible utilities of modern devices and the Internet, news and digital content about the battlefield and IDPs were spread continuously and accurately. As mentioned above, some Karen people in Thailand work on the front lines, gathering information, taking pictures of

the scene, and writing about the situation on the Karen State side. In addition, CBOs have been able to contact KNU via satellite. The Karen people in host countries have been trying to spread information and expose the truth about the crimes and violence committed by the junta. Most participants use their social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to share and update Karen state news through narratives and posts in Burmese and English. The meetings among representatives of Karen diasporic communities and Karens inside the countries were mainly conducted on Telegram, Whatsapps and Zoom for security, privacy and safety. More importantly, many of the Karen communities' Facebook pages also call for donations directly via Paypal accounts and credit cards.

Argument: The Ideological Transition with Democratic Orientation

I agree with all participants that this coup provides an opportunity for the Bamar and ethnic minorities to unite for the common goal of peace and freedom, and fight against the common enemy, the junta. Unity is a short and simple word, but the road to it will be long and complicated. From the findings, I argue that there is a focus of democratic orientation among young Karen people. While they still hold on to their feelings of belonging to their homeland and of ethno-nationalism, they agree that the freedom and peace of the Karen people depends greatly on the people's victory over the Myanmar military. In other words, they show their ethno-nationalism by preserving and promoting Karen cultural practices and ethnic prides in host countries, and at the same time they also want to change the way of thinking and their strategic approach to deal with the political crisis in Myanmar. Young Karen participants focus on democratic values and the future of this country instead of only liberating the territory of Karen people. They appreciate and support CDM and NUG in transnational practices. They also called for an understanding and solidarity to defeat the military junta because the path to democracy in Myanmar can only begin as soon as the military dictatorship collapses. Only a new democratic Myanmar civil government can guarantee the rights and equality of ethnic minorities including the Karen. Clearly, social integration and education in Western societies with democratic institutions has shaped the international thinking of young Karen people. They show

ideological shifts as they can see a broader and more likely picture of democracy and freedom in Myanmar. More specifically, their participation in transnational practices is not simply supporting and helping the Karen people but also represents a voice as international citizens for justice and freedom of Myanmar. Young Karen can become an important factor in the democratic process in Myanmar and the democracy movement in Southeast Asia in general.

Recommendations for Further Research

Readers should notice that what is presented in this research is only a small detail in a colourful picture of the Karen diaspora, and that socio-political contexts may have changed after the research is completed because of ongoing conflicts and political upheaval in Myanmar. Therefore, the fundamental recommendation for future research of this topic would be to expand both the scope and timeframe. Expanding the scope of research would provide the opportunity to reach a larger number of Karen people from different diaspora communities and different religious groups to share their diverse perspectives and beliefs, and the way they perceive homeland, Karen identity, and their motivations to engage in transnational practices during the conflict. More significantly, as some participants admitted that it was undoubtedly challenging to and preserve Karen cultural identity and homeland perceptions while passing them to the next generations in the context of Western culture. Third generations of refugees, born and raised in Western countries, are strongly influenced by Western culture and society. Therefore, it is important to expand research on Karen identity, home attachment and possibilities to engage in transnational practices among third-generation Karen young people in Western diaspora communities. In addition, the extension of the study's duration would be promising and ideal for monitoring, observing and evaluating the implementation and impact of transnational practices, especially given the political upheaval in Myanmar has been complicated with increasing violence in the towns of Karen State. Allowing more time for observation, documentation and fieldwork would strengthen the research further in facilitating more accurate assertions. Besides, it is possible to think of comparative studies on Karen identity, homeland attachment and the extent of participation in

transnational practices among those resettling in Western countries, those leaving refugee camps, negotiating and integrating into Thai society.

It should also be noted that many participants expressed opposition and condemnation towards the military junta. However, the transnational practices carried out by the Karen diaspora are focused mainly on addressing the humanitarian crises and displacement in Karen State. Further extended research is needed to understand the transnational practices of the Karen people in support of political movements with the participation of the Bamar and other ethnic minorities. Recently, the Facebook pages administered by the shadow government NUG regularly have updated and condemned the Tatmadaw's airstrikes and killings of civilians in Chin and Karen states, showing a good signal about the possibility to create progressively democratic changes and Federal Union in the enduring revolution against the military junta. Therefore, the political situation in Myanmar in general and the engagement of the Karen diaspora need to be continuously monitored and studied for prevalent accuracy.

Appendix 1. List of Interviewees

No	Name	Sex	Country of Residence	Citizenship	Length of Resettlement	Date of Interview
1	Hla	F	Thailand	Thai	30 years	May 27th 2021
2	Myat	F	The US	American	15 years	July 10th 2021
3	Marlar	F	Thailand	Burmese	10 years	July 13th 2021
4	Htet	F	Australia	Australian	20 years	July 23rd 2021
5	Shein	M	The US	American	15 years	July 23rd 2021
6	Kyaw	F	Norway	Norwegian	15 years	August 24th 2021
7	Paing	M	The US	American	12 years	August 25th 2021
8	Thein	M	The US	American	14 years	August 25th 2021
9	Win	M	The US	American	15 years	September 01st 2021
10	Khin	M	Canada	Canadian	10 years	October 04th 2021

Appendix 2. Abbreviations

CBOs	Community-based Organisation
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
EAOs	Ethnic armed organisations
IDPs	Internal Displaced Persons
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KIC	Karen Information Centre
KNU	Karen National Union
KPSN	Karen Peace Support Network
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government of Myanmar (a Myanmar government in exile formed by elected lawmakers and members of parliament ousted the 2021 Myanmar military coup)
SAC	State Administration Council (Myanmar)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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