BETWEEN SCIENCE AND SPECTACLE: RECONSTRUCTING KAREN PADAUNG WOMEN'S MIGRATION EXPERIENCES AND THEIR LIVES IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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Abstract

In Thailand, Karen Padaung women (KPW) perform in ethnological expositions before a public avid for entertainment. Despite a breadth of scholarship that demonstrates the complex embeddedness of tribal knowledge and practices, there has been very little analysis of KPW's perspectives on their im/mobility, and minimal effort to elucidate their legal precarity. Having this in the background, the article explores the biographies of 20 KPW with an age ≥ of 18 years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, between 2019-2020. Discussions explored vulnerabilities to exploitation, as well as emotions, and social values around which KPW's attitudes to labor were formed. Audio recordings were transcribed *verbatim*, uploaded in NVivo QDAS, and studied via a hermeneutic phenomenological research method. On the one hand, outcomes suggest that in Thailand, there are fairs where the main objects on display are real people, and where available protection for rights is extremely volatile. On the other hand, they show that such sites offer destitute households a paid opportunity to retain traditional customs. The paper ends by stressing that the challenges are numerous, albeit not inevitable. Future studies should look at how KPW can resist being pigeon-holed into a condition of social nakedness. Besides, they need to assess the strategies adopted by Thailand to deploy essentialist rhetoric about a homogeneous national community to regiment historically heterogeneous populations.

Keywords: Thailand, Karen Padaung Women, Labor, Gender

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Introduction

The Karen have suffered from a prolonged state of exile in Thailand, due to sectarian conflicts in their home country, Myanmar. They are one of seven ethnic minority groups that have been persecuted by the Burmese armed forces – the Tatmadaw (South, 2012). Until 1984 only a few of them resided (permanently) in the Kingdom. They engaged in farming in mountainous highland areas, lived in hamlets in the forests, and had scarce contact with the central government in Bangkok (Bhruksasri, 1989). By the mid-1990s, as a consequence of systematic human rights violations, thousands fled to Thailand in a risky bid to escape the Tatmadaw (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008). As they continued to trespass, the country established temporary camps to accommodate them. The human exodus comprised of refugees searching for a new home, and persons attracted by the concentration of border-town factories (Pearson & Kusakabe, 2012). While the majority of immigrants faced barriers to acceptance (Mon, 2010) the women of the Karen Padaung tribe (KPW) were encouraged to stay and perform as tourist attractions. According to Heikkilä-Horn (2019), they wear sarong-like dresses, and sport brass neck coils that give the impression of an elongated neck. KPW born abroad, or children whose parents entered the Kingdom without formal permission, were not eligible for citizenship. Nonetheless, the Thai Nationality Act (1964) guaranteed the latter an exception when they could prove that their date of birth was between 1972-1992 (Vandergeest, 1993). Theurer (2014) argues that KPW live in ethnological expositions (otherwise known as open-air museums or ethnographic villages) where their bodies and gender are commodified. Today, the presence of KPW is central to the economy of northern Thailand (Ishi, 2012), yet their liminality is relevant to the administration of citizenship, and immigration programs (Nicoletti, 2013). This paper contributes to the growing literature on the social Implications of population displacement and resettlement in Southeast Asia. After a presentation of the methodological background, it presents an analysis of personal narratives. Data collection is based on a hybrid of semi-structured interviews and overt participant observation (OPO). To encourage an atmosphere of shared experience, the author conducted all face-to-face interviews in close vicinity to and within sight of two KPW’s settlements. Spending time there allowed him to observe

routines, financial exchanges, and spot potential research candidates. The paper concludes by emphasizing that a break from prevailing definitions of the (Siamese) national identity is needed if a more inclusive society is to be developed. Much is at stake when it comes to human equality, and thus investigating a variety of perspectives, including those utilized here, will no doubt help both academics, and policy-makers to better address justice in years to come.

Objective

In Thailand, KPW deal with a myriad of protection, and livelihood problems. This paper aims at rendering visible how they confront these challenges, and whether Thai society supports or undermines their efforts. The theoretical focus is on the normative intersection of migration, ethnicity, and nationality. In parallel, attention is given to the role of otherness (e.g., ethnic diversity, cultural hybridity, etcetera) in furthering liminality, and how the course of this relationship can be described.

Materials and Methods

1. Design

To assess the everyday reality of KPW in Thailand, the author chose a hermeneutic phenomenological research method after a reading of Ricoeur's work (1976) For the French philosopher, such approach helps to shed light on the lived experiences of individuals and unveils personal differences in perception of the world (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In this context, data-location, data-gathering, and data-storage methods are always specific to the social phenomenon being observed and its main stakeholders (Kafle, 2013).

2. Settings, and Recruitment Procedures

The study took place in two KPW' settlements, in Northern Thailand, between 2019-2020. The snowball sampling technique was adopted to recruit subjects who met the following criteria: (1) Being a KPW; (2) Being engaged in tribal performances for at least 1 years; (3) Being an adult; and (4) Being able to speak English and/or Thai. When these conditions were respected, there were no exclusion criteria. Those who declined to be interviewed were not asked repeatedly, instead their names were dropped from the list of referrals. This was done so that nobody felt pressured to attend if he/she did not want to do so. In total, twenty persons with a median age of

41 years volunteered. Eighteen were married, of whom 6 had husbands who were left in Myanmar. Ten had relatives who arrived in Thailand about the same time, and 4 had kin who had been in Thailand for several years. Taken together, they had 16 children whose ages ranged from 1 to 10 years. In this sample, KPW had low levels of education: eleven were literate without formal schooling, and 9 were illiterate. On average, their families were comprised of five members, and were headed by a male who had no more than primary education, and worked as a farmer.

3. Data Collection Tools

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, and participant observation (PO). The interview schedule consisted of three parts: (1) Questions about biographies; (2) Questions about decisions KPW have taken with regards to their life, and the consequences of such choices; (3) Questions about gender enactment at work, and redress for victims of abuses. These parts were first compiled in English and then translated to Thai to ensure consistency of meanings. Overt participant observation (OPO) facilitated record-making, data analysis, and interpretation.

4. Data Collection Procedures

The interviews had two facilitators: the first one was the author himself, and the second one was a Karen volunteer who possessed the relevant language expertise and ensured that all the respondents could voice their opinions. Ongoing supervision took place throughout the data collection period. The respondents were asked to use pseudonyms or omit names altogether, to protect their identities. The interviews were digitally recorded and lasted for 50–120 min. (mean length = 80 min.). The author advised each of KPW about the right to withdraw, and the lawful basis for retaining data, along with the right to object. Files were erased from audio-recording devices as soon as the tracks were stored in the author’s password-protected hard drive. The author let the interviewees know the risks, and benefits associated with the project. At the same time, he explained to them that they were free to refuse participation or to withdraw from the study without fear of retribution or loss of benefits to which they were otherwise entitled. This process involved using a language free of technical jargon. The author had no conflicts of interest that could bias the investigation or negatively affect accountability, and care.

5. Data Analysis

After each meeting, data were transcribed verbatim, uploaded as Word files in NVivo (MacOS version). Since the analysis was built on hermeneutic phenomenology, the interpretation of texts entailed three phases: (1) naïve reading, (2) structural analysis, and (3) comprehensive understanding (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). In the first section, the documents were read several times to obtain a broad picture of their contents. In the second section, the texts were read carefully, and meaning units were identified. The patterns that appeared between meaning units were grouped into sub-themes that were in turn grouped into main themes. In the third section, the main themes, and the sub-themes were summarized in relation to research questions, and the context of the study. The analysis offered 8 insights; (1) The Kingdom divides aliens between those who are worthy of being accepted, and those who do not have the social prestige (or money) that would qualify them for inclusion; (2) The present-day reconstruction of KPW's habitus is economically successful but morally controversial; (3) National debates on KPW are formed along with quasi-racial arguments; (4) While Thai law plays a substantial role in making identities seemed fixed, its shifting definitions unveil the fundamental plasticity of legal categories; (5) KPW disrupt the assumed continuity between birth, and state membership; (6) Thai Citizenship is formulated in ethnic/racial terms, and although contested, there is strong public resistance to any form of change; (7) Encampment programs are a cornerstone of humanitarian responses to displacement in Southeast Asia; (8) KPW's society is built on legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) (Block, 1994) or the process through which newcomers are apprenticed into a community by old-timers with diverse expertise.

6. Limitations

The first limitation was linked to overt participant observation (OPO). The author, who was known to many KPW, may have inadvertently influenced participants' responses. Nonetheless, the conclusions derived from the fieldwork(s) are scientifically valuable since all the steps and methods during and before the interviews were fully disclosed to everyone involved in and with the project (Jackson, 1983). The second one was associated with power relations. As underscored by Eyben (2008), biases in terms of power both enable and constrain social actions. Given the researcher-

researched imbalance, KPW may not have been as willing to share ideas as freely as the author had hoped. To solve this issue, he encouraged disclosure, and authenticity between himself and the participants. The third factor that could have undermined the quality of the scholarship was the time interval between the interviews. Data were collected progressively during 12 months, but the amount of knowledge that could be created at each visit was influenced by the teaching schedule of the author. To deal with this problem, he conveyed his scientific intent, made a space for online post-interview reflections, and, whenever possible, recorded the meetings.

Results

Agamben (1995) adopts the term *homo sacer* (Latin for the sacred and/or accursed man) to designate someone whose life constitutes the threshold of a juridico-political community. Remarkably, the *homo sacer* is not simply cast out but held in particular relation to the norm: it is through his exclusion that the norm can exist. The *homo sacer* – he points out - is the 'key by which not only the sacred texts of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries' (Agamben 1995). In Thailand, KPW epitomize the existence of this figure of Roman law. They dwell in places on the margins where they are paid to wear traditional garments, perform typical daily tasks, and pantomime old rituals. Whereas such spectacles stir up moral controversy, the images they involve, and the forms of observation they offer, ensure a stable source of income to disenfranchised households. Although the participants were not free (*de facto and de jure*), we would be wrong to assume a simple linear model in which ethnicity, illegality, and gender constitute a triple whammy. Likewise, we should not view them as non-agentive victims of circumstances: KPW built relationships, gained access to resources, and mobilized social capital. On top of that, not everybody was forced into labor. For instance, the majority of the respondents were willingly involved and expressed gratitude to the host government for having been granted a sanctuary. KPW's status was driven by their role as the bearers of culture and income producers. For a couple of people, the flight from Myanmar took place against the wishes of their parents, and in some cases, the latter put up strong resistance to the women's project. Aspirations to move abroad were partly, for them, aspirations to escape sectarianism, violence, and poverty. In this

sample, job dissatisfaction included complaints of: (1) Long working hours; (2) Multiple activities to maintain livelihoods; (3) Being discouraged to dress like Thais and/or Westerners; and (4) Being stuck in areas with minimal infrastructures. For almost all KPW, living the good life consisted of having the means to do business, to clothe themselves with traditional garments, and to procure necessities for their families.

Contribution to Theory

KPW's ethnological expositions accommodate seemingly incompatible polarities. They socially isolate their inhabitants but permit outsiders to visit them; they are elements of Thai cities. Still, they never truly integrate with other metropolitan areas. KPW's environments amount to 'a technology of care and control' (Malkki 1992), nevertheless, they offer refuge from repression and exile. The artificial settlements are, in theory, temporary; they are never meant to remain where they are. In practice, they are quasi-permanent. KPW are trapped in places where time grinds to a halt (Turner, 2015). Not only is the limbo that they inhabit a time pocket with reference to persons free from captivity (and iniquity); it is also a limbo with no end in sight.

Discussion

In the legal literature, citizenship is seen as a combination of status, rights, and identity (Joppke, 2007). The first dimension denotes formal state membership and the rules of access to it; the second is about the capacities and immunities connected with such condition; and, the third refers to the behavioral aspects of individuals acting (and thinking of themselves) as members of a collectivity. In this setting, citizenship claims bring people to negotiate from varying power stances within hierarchal, and often unjust institutional structures (Schramm, 2020; Marshall 1950). Tajfel (1982) and Yildiz (2016) assume that individuals tend to have less favorable views of subjects belonging to an out-group, particularly one that has been historically oppressed, and humiliated. Elrick & Schwartzman (2015) note that the term 'migration background' refers to persons considered outsiders, regardless of their citizenship. How the term is understood by the masses and reiterated in public discourses is what impacts the future of those it addresses (Bessone, 2017). For example, it may reinforce xenophobic conceptions of belonging among persons both ascribing and being ascribed to it (Moffitt & Juang, 2019). In this scenario, a form of micro-aggression involves the perpetual foreigner

stereotype, in which someone's affiliation to a state is questioned through queries such as 'are you really from here?' and 'Are you one of us?' (Armenta et al., 2013). Agier (2002) and Heuer (2007) explain that while people who are permanently resettled obtain the protection of a new community, those who are in refugee camps are liminal figures in an extraterritorial zone (Jasso, 2011). It is worth recognizing that the space occupied by the 'undesirables' still offers opportunities for political encounters, and the reworkings of identity (Diken & Laustsen, 2002). Rifkin (2009) insists that in a polity, the notion of citizenry stands less for the actual assemblage of populations than for the group of those who fit the ideal body, and culture.

Since the French Revolution (May 5, 1789 – Nov 9, 1799), the idea that legitimate states are constituted by their citizens has become a universal norm not in the strong sense of popular sovereignty, but the weak sense that all polities divide their citizens from people temporarily subject to their territorial jurisdiction (Vink & Bauböck, 2013). Citizenship at birth is granted on the principles of *jus sanguinis* (the right of blood/parentage) or *jus soli* (the right of the land). The first means that the nationality of the children is the same as their parents or ancestors. In contrast, the second is the right of a person born inside a country's national boundaries, with or without additional conditions. The process of acquiring citizenship is referred to, in academic parlance, as naturalization. In Thailand, the first Nationality Act of 1913 included *jus soli* but the 1952 Nationality Act rescinded it, due to anti-immigrant sentiments, and the encroachment of politics of race. Land-based rights were put back by the Nationality Act of 1956 (Suryadinata & Beng, 1997). In 1972, to contain Southeast Asian communist insurgencies, the Act was amended to grant citizenship only to children whose parents were legally residing in Thailand, for at least five years before the enactment of the law. Art. 23 of the Nationality Act of 2008 restored citizenship in those who lost it with the 1972 Act. Today, children neither of whose parents are Thai, and those who have one illegal parent are excluded from becoming nationals (Loos, 2018). Between 1965-1985, policy-makers crafted the 'contingent' or 'temporary' citizenship scheme (Laungaramsi, 2015). The program took the form of colored ID cards which divided holders on ethnicity/race criteria, and/or political ideology (Ishii, 2012). The existence of the Border Patrol Police (BPP) was premised upon the continued appearance of the

undocumented whose illegality has long been equated with the disposable character of the commodity that is their labor (Horstmann, 2011). Sadly, the economic benefits to employers of a cheap, workforce have historically fueled a strong public backlash against aliens and constrained Thailand's ability to respond effectively to it, resulting in symbolic restrictions with little substantive effect other than further marginalization (Pearson & Kusakabe, 2012). To capture the contradiction between the demand for immigrant workers, and social ostracism, Zolberg (1988) coined the expression 'wanted but not welcome'.

The Karen are nomadic tribes from South-East Asia, most of whom resided in Myanmar (Kayin state) until state-led persecution pushed them en masse into neighboring countries. In Thailand, they settled alongside the North-West regions, the Andaman Islands, and/or Nicobar Islands (Walker, 2001). Notably, their exodus is not a product of modernity. The borders were porous, in the past as well. But, in the eighties, the army began to shoot and arrest tribesmen to demolish Karen national-cum-territorial unity and pan-Karen identity (Supadhiloke, 2014). Today, the Karen can be spotted in refugee camps scattered across Thailand's western borders (Dannecker & Schaffar, 2016). They have little or no liberty and survive on aid from international NGOs (Oh & Van Der Stouwe, 2008). Overcrowding is a reality, and the lack of adequate shelters makes existence difficult. Not all of those who reached the Kingdom are in facilities, however. Thousands are in cities, and towns, working in destitute labor environments and facing the risk of arrest (Bert, 2004). Technically, they can benefit from *jus soli* provisions, or apply for citizenship when they have to leave to remain, but numerous clauses are barring them. On the one hand, Thai legislation requires all applicants to be of good behavior, and hence it excludes those who entered illegally. On the other hand, it is hard for the Karen to satisfy the residency requirements of the 1992 Nationality Act. One of the reasons is that the 2009 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Myanmar permits Burmese citizens to apply for a 2-year VISA, with a possibility of a 2-year renewal (Dannecker & Schaffar, 2016), yet after four years, it forces them to leave and bars their entrance for at least 3 consecutive years (Leiter et al., 2006). To make things worse, Thailand did not sign the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees (GCSR), nor the 1967 Protocol, and Myanmar

does not recognize subjects born abroad, regardless of their parent (Burmese) nationality.

KPW reside in ethnological fairs before being pushed back to Myanmar, resettled to other countries, or granted indefinite leave to remain. Some are smaller in scale, but all are similar in content: the exoticization of the 'other' (Cohen, 2016). In his diary, Mirante stresses that KPW 'posed, expecting the foreigners to photograph them. They also posed because they couldn't help it. Their movements were so restricted, and stylized by gleaming brass—not only the neck spirals but coils immobilizing their knees as well—that they carried themselves like languid, elegant fashion models' (Mirante, 1994). KPW's artificial settlements are famous for their extremely low levels of male presence in the workforce, technical skills notwithstanding. In short, men have to manage carefully their own, and others' anxieties about their fitness as husbands, and fathers. Concerning the Karen diaspora, one participant mentioned the following points: "*Five years ago our friends were arrested by the army* [...] *Thailand gave us a sense of normality that we did not have before* [...] *We can leave our houses at night without being physically harassed.* Spiritual practices rooted in nature were among the resources endorsed by KPW to cope with the memories of trauma. Suffering, both mental and physical, was thought to be part of living. Some even embraced pain as a way to progress on a transcendent path, to be tested, and to learn from it. Most KPW have lived in Thailand for many years. Everybody reported persecution and flight, but younger individuals were less likely to have experienced the same extent of traumatic stress as the elders (who had spent more time in Myanmar). To this author's knowledge, the responsibility KPW felt toward one another permitted them to endure and overcome hardship. "*Well, I am curious about the tourists. I see them all the time, but I have no idea why they find our culture so fascinating".* The respondents did not just talk about past and present events. On the contrary, they offered in-depth insights into KPW's successes, limitations, and prospects. Seven interviewees complained about being othered and, in an attempt to claim control over their lives, stopped acting out the role of the native. Two described the situation with a few poignant sentences. "*I feel trapped, and I hate these rings"* and "*I am tired of this peep show*". The same folks later told the author

that they eventually panicked and offered apologies to their kin and friends. Eight interviewees criticized the behavior of institutions and authorities that defend tribal practices that seem more politically acceptable to them (irrespective of their historical origins and trajectory) while largely ignoring the current needs of the Karen population that, to a large extent, has been profoundly changed by migration flows. Others discussed citizenship, and residency, portraying them as powerful forces of subordination, and sites for resistance. KPW youth underscored the value of speaking about private matters with an outsider. As family conversations often end up in quarrels, and feelings of guilt, the encounter with the author was a novel and somehow 'healthy' occasion. KPW youth dealt with all the uncertainties of any adolescents but with very few prospects of gaining enough knowledge, and the skills required for an easy transition to adulthood. Poignantly, they realized that many Thais still ignore the challenges faced by aliens at all stages of migration, and hoped the research would lead to improvement.

Conclusion

KPW told their stories in a surprisingly frank way, although emotionally involved from time to time. Overall, they tolerated life in Thailand but were pressured to perform stereotypical selves, and stylize their culture (turning it into a cabinet of curiosities). In terms of struggle, the moves they made were tactical, resulting from both improvisation, and planned action. KPW lend each other a hand and showed empathy with the less fortunate. Many activities were done collectively. They provided each other company, protection, and chaperonage. KPW's quotidian life exemplifies the limits of Thai law, and on a more abstract level, the fallacies of a model of national membership where an individual has to be a member of a state (Sigona, 2016). Is there a way out from spatial confinement, and institutional compartmentalization? Yes, but it would need a drastic rethinking of the idea of citizenship as the only point of departure from which the world is looked at. In parallel, Thailand ought to expand its general attitude to 'otherness', offer welfare support to foreigners, and end essentializing stereotypes of particular minority ethnic groups. Taken together, these factors will foster a more inclusive, and democratic future.

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