

Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis offers a new notion of refugee studies by focusing upon the space making of refugees' identities within the context of confinement. This chapter provides an understanding of the overall aspects of this research. In this introduction chapter, I will discuss the background of the research, statement of problem, research questions, research objectives, and research methodology.

1.1 Background

Previous studies of forced migration have illuminated refugees as a group who typically loses rootedness and cultural identity. Yet some recent discussions in refugee studies have investigated the notion of displacement and rootedness. In exploring this, Malkki (1995) initially pointed out that refugees, or displaced people, reconstruct their identity and reinvent a home in the area of displacement through memories, claiming, and the imagination of the homeland. In another perspective, refugees emplace themselves by seeking to make their new social environment more familiar through continuing a sense of home (Dudley, 2010). Thus, these recent refugee studies provide insights into how the continuity of culture process and memories from pre-displacement enables refugees to act and adapt their lives to the circumstance of being displaced. While what is mentioned above is not the main focus of this research, it does however, give some ideas of what can be studied in regards to the cultural experiences of refugees from a new perspective. In this sense, this research is more focused upon the relation of refugees' identities and the cultural space.

This research specifically focuses on one of the Karenni refugee camps, Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp, where there is a continuity of cultural practices that is distinctively taking place among the diverse ethnicities of the camp's population. To an extent, this research will focus upon three communal events: Karenni National Day, Dee Ku Festival, and Kay Htoe Boe Festival. In essence, this research aims to investigate the relationship of these three communal events to space of identities and contribute to a better understanding of how Karenni refugees socially survive and recreate their community through the continuity of these three communal events.

Affected by the world's longest ongoing ethnic conflict and civil war in Burma¹, the Karenni, like other ethnic minorities, were forced to flee from their homeland and take refuge in Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand, along the Thai-Myanmar border, since the 1950s. Prior to 1995, most Karenni refugees were part of the Karenni revolutionist group who fought for self-autonomy or struggled for self-independence. Subsequently, the later arrivals were Karenni villagers who had been persecuted and eventually fled to Thai border as a result of a forced relocation policy enforced by the Burmese military government (Grundy-Warr and Wong, 2002). Since then, Karenni refugees have been displaced in Mae Hong Son for more than two decades without feasible durable solutions. Possible durable solutions are resettlement to the third countries, integration into Thailand, or return to their homeland (Sarinya, 2011). Currently, many Karenni refugees resettle to the third countries. It has been assumed that third country resettlement would be durable solution to continued habitation in the refugee camps; but in fact, new arrivals in the camp from Karenni State maintain an increasing number of refugees in the camp. Thus, resettlement to a third country cannot be considered as a feasible durable solution to the refugee issue.

¹ The term "Burma" is used as a reminder of the ethnic conflicts prior to democracy reform in Myanmar.

Originally, there were six Karenni refugee camps in Mae Hong Son Province. Later Camps 1 and 3 were merged with Camp 2. The combination of those three camps was recognized as Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp or Site 1 in 2001. Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp is among the nine refugee camps² in Thailand. It is a medium size camp located in the northernmost part of the Thai-Myanmar border. According to The Border Consortium (TBC) annual refugee population report in August 2015, the camp's population is 11,455. The camp population comprises people who belong to different ethno-linguistically, sub-ethnic groups and originally resided in Karenni State, Myanmar. The majority of the camp population is the Kayah ethnicity, and dominates various sub-ethnic groups: Karen-Paku, Bweh, Kayan, Kayaw, Shan, Pa-O, and others. Furthermore, Karenni refugees practice different religions. The majority of them are animists while others are Buddhist and Christian - Baptist and Catholic. Although the refugees in Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp are from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, they collectively define themselves as Karenni.

Based upon literature related to Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp and my own personal experiences working with a humanitarian agency in the Karenni refugee camps, I have learned about the displacement process. Moreover, I have simultaneously witnessed Karenni refugees participate as active actors who are able to preserve the continuity of their cultural practices in the confined space of a refugee camp. There are two aspects of survival within a refugee camp for such a prolonged period. The first aspect is physical: how refugees physically survive despite the reduction of basic needs that are supported by humanitarian organizations. The second aspect is social: how refugees socially survive in a way that allows the continuity of cultural practices and the reconstruction of ethnic identities in a confined space where their rights to livelihoods and movement are highly restricted.

² Nine refugee camps are located in four provinces along Thai-Myanmar Border and have been inhabited for more than twenty-five years without feasible durable solutions. There are seven Karen refugee camps: three camps in Tak Province and two camps each in Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi Provinces. There are two Karenni camps in Mae Hong Son Province. These nine camps have the same camp administrative structure and receive the same financial and technical support from humanitarian aid agencies (Premjai, et al., 2011).

In the term of physically surviving in the camps, the basic needs primarily consist of basic food items, health care, and educational services. Since 2012, humanitarian aid has been dramatically reduced. Food rations, such as rice, have been reduced by many kilograms. This reduction negatively impacts the refugees' food baskets especially since many have difficulties accessing economic opportunities to help supplement their basic

needs. Some refugees work as seasonal wage labors in the nearby farms that are owned by local Thai villages to supplement their basic needs. At the same time, refugees are not fully able to access healthcare services because the healthcare services, supported by humanitarian organizations, do not cover serious chronic diseases. Another major issue, which affects the youth in the refugee camps, is that of education - the education system in the camps is not recognized by either the Myanmar or Thai government. Consequently, many youths, who graduated from Grade Ten and Post-Ten³ schools in the camps, are not able to continue their post-high school education at the university level. Thus, they eventually end their educational future and career prospects through being trapped in the camps' educational system. All that becomes available to them is to work as stipend staffs⁴ in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or as school teachers. While the reduction of humanitarian aid has deprived refugees of much of their basic needs, they still struggle strongly for their best way for survival.

The second aspect is that of socially surviving in a refugee camp for such a prolonged period. Refugees have sought a way to engage their lives with two spaces of "here and there" even whilst displaced in a refugee camp for a prolonged period (Dudley, 2007). This means that refugees connect their current lives in the refugee camp with their lives pre-displacement through the continuation of their ritual and cultural practices in the camp.

³ Post Ten is or equivalent to Grades 11 and 12 of high school within the international education standard.

⁴ Refugees who receive monthly stipend payments as camp-based workers in NGOs' programs implemented in the camps.

In Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp, the celebration of Karenni National Day and the traditional practices of the Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe Festivals are held every year by Karenni refugees. Having an opportunity to attend these communal events throughout my life, I have perceived Karenni refugees to be conscious actors who actively produce and reproduce cultural space and maintain their ethnic identity in a space that is physically confined. Furthermore, I have learned that the traditional practices require various resources such as food, material forms used in traditional practices, and capital resources. Refugees, even with the difficulties in accessing sources of income and the right to national resources, are still able to carry on their communal events each year. To be critical of these communal events requires one to question why it is necessary for Karenni refugees to carry on these cultural practices while they are displaced and in difficult times and conditions. Continuity of cultural practices gives them a sense of a collective identity as Karenni refugees.

1.2 Statement of Research Problem

A refugee is seen, categorized, and stereotyped as a problem (Malkki, 1995). This premise illustrates that the refugee problem is irresolvable. As a result, many refugees remain displaced in prolonged refugee camps and become stateless since they are not entitled to any rights in the new nation-state to which they have fled. Along Thai-Myanmar border, more than 100,000 refugees from Myanmar have been displaced in the camps now for more than twenty five years without durable solutions (Premjai, et al., 2011). These refugees, therefore, have been trapped in a confined space and situation in which they are not recognized by neither the Thai nor Burmese government. They cannot integrate into Thai society nor can they return to the place they claim as a homeland. It can be said that they do not belong to any nation. To represent space where they feel a belonging, refugees have constructed and reconstructed their collective identities in the place of displacement.

Karenni refugees in Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp, like other camps along Thai-Myanmar Border, face uncertain lives. They do not know where they belong or can corporeally reside in the future. In Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp, refugees, within the diverse ethnic

groups, have collectively defined them with a new term of Karenni ethnic identity in the displacement. In the study of geographies of displacement, Grundy-Warr and Wong (2002) show that Karenni refugees have shared a sense of togetherness and constructed a collective identity in the camp. This means that Karenni refugees came to become aware and identify themselves as Karenni when they arrive in the refugee camp. Before that, they were not aware of their Karenni identity. In this respect, refugees in the camp produce the space of identity through common practices in the three communal events to define their collective identity or represent themselves as Karenni. It is, therefore, surprising to see that Karenni refugees do not wipe out their ethnic identity, but rather come to represent multiple-identities. For instance, individuals who identify as Kayah also represent themselves as Karenni refugees. These three multiple-identities defining individuals illustrate that identity is always constructed and contested.

The term of identity issues and the construction of refugees' identities do not cause others to perceive them as ethnic people, but merely as refugees. The fact is that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Thailand, the hosting state, tend to see the Karenni people in the camps as refugees or displaced persons (DPs). Moreover, they generally perceive cultural practices as just a process of making familiarity or coping with life in the prolonged displacement. Here, I argue that continuity of cultural practices or any traditional practices in Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp is much more related to the sense of identity because the continuity of cultural practices bring Karenni refugees to connect with their past, homeland. Therefore, this research aims to analyze how three communal events contribute to the space making of identity and recreating a Karenni community within the context of displacement.

In this research, the term "reconstruction of Karenni identity" is used because the term "Karenni" has previously existed. The term "Karenni" was initially introduced by the British to define people as those who resided in the territory of Karenni State. The Burmese government legitimately used the word "Karenni State" in its 1947 Constitution; however, it changed the name to Kayah State because the Kayah ethnic group is the majority and dominates the other sub-ethnic groups. The term "Karenni" is

not actually simply defined for a certain ethnic group, but is generally used to describe all diverse ethnicities who reside

inside Karenni State. Since Burma's independence from the British, Karenni identity has been reconstructed among those who refused to live under the rule of the Burmese government. They then created the political ideology of Karenni nationalism and the struggle for self-autonomy and independence. The Karenni revolutionists, who established their ethnic political movement and entity, called themselves the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)⁵.

The fighting between the Burmese military and Karenni insurgents⁶ has been going for many years. Serious fighting broke out in 1995 when the Burmese military government broke a ceasefire agreement and enforced a forced relocation policy. As a result, many villagers in the armed conflict zones were persecuted and relocated to villages established by the Burmese military in so-called "relocation zones" where there was no food and livelihood security. Some villagers eventually decided to flee directly to Thai refugee camps, while others were guided and accompanied by Karenni soldiers to Thai border camps. Subsequently, these people arrived in the camps and met with their fellow Karenni refugees who had previously settled there. They then identified themselves as part of the Karenni people since they no longer physically belong to their homeland and were essentially in exile. However, the decision to become a refugee is not directly motivated by political ideology, but rather as a response to the intolerable conditions inside their homeland. For those people who remain inside Karenni State, they tend to identify themselves to a sub-ethnic group and be politically influenced by the Burmese government. In the refugee camp, the KNPP has the dominant political influence. The Karenni Refugees Committee (KnRC) and the Camp Committee (CC) have their own camp administration structures, setting up rules and regulations, managing their camp's affairs, and taking care of the well-being of Karenni refugees with financial and technical support from humanitarian agencies and NGOs. However,

⁵ Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) is a Karenni revolutionist group, established in the 1950s, which has struggled for self- autonomy and independence. The KNPP has armed fighters and bases in Karenni State along the Thai- Myanmar border.

⁶ Karenni insurgents refer to Karenni armed groups or soldiers are fight for self-autonomy under the command of the KNPP.

they are being supervised by the KNPP. Although people inside Karenni State and the Karenni refugee camps have been politically influenced by different political entities, they still continue with the same cultural practices.

Karenni refugees do not solely live in the community through sharing the common rule. They also recreate their community as a process; enabling them to become involved in common practices and recreate or define their collective identity. Two communal events, stemming from animism belief, have been reinvented in the camp. However, Karenni National Day has been invented only in the camp and outside of Karenni State. In this sense, these communal events have been imbued with new meanings by Karenni refugees in the camp and as well as sets to provide specific meanings to the Karenni refugees. For these three communal events, the symbolic meanings of the cultural practices, such as flags, and poles, become the space of identity. In preserving their traditional practices, they also add something new in their existence inside the refugee camp. Each cultural event entails different meanings and purposes.

In the camp, Karenni refugees collaboratively create a space, continuity of past to present, or bring past to present. Karenni National Day crucially becomes the space that is a reminder of why they are here and why they have to fight. This inspires them to carry on the past to the present and then to the future. Karenni National Day is organized annually and celebrated by Karenni refugees. Most of the participants are from the KnRC, CC, KNPP, community-based organizations (CBOs), and students. Karenni political or nationalist ideology has been spread among students since they will form the future generation and need to have an ethnic consciousness so as to rebuild the Karenni community. Karenni National Day is seen as politic and an issue of concern to the Thai authorities. Eventually, the KnRC and CC have been able to successfully negotiate with the Thai authorities to organize this event annually. Karenni National Day was originally established by the KNPP and it remains involved in this event annually in the camp. Conversely inside the Karenni State, Karenni National Day was not recognized until 2014 when the Burmese government eventually allowed Karenni people in Karenni State to hold the event for the first time. Therefore, Karenni National Day gives different meanings to Karenni people in different contexts and the different

nation-states in which they reside. For those Karenni who are displaced, this event brings a sense of togetherness and collective identity among the ethnic diversity of Karenni refugees.

A cultural space is involved with religious practices; so the ritual space is always produced and reproduced at a local place. Most importantly, the Dee Ku Festival is a traditional practice in a ritual belief and mainly involves the ritual practices among Kayah, Kayaw, and Kayan families who believe in animism. The traditional practice of Dee Ku is one of the two communal festivals in Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp and is held annually during a cultivation or rainy season which falls between mid-September and early October. “Dee Ku” is a phrase in the Kayah language and means sticky rice wrapped in wild sorghum leaves. Dee Ku is wrapped into triangular shapes and tied in bundles of three. It has been said that the bundles of three Dee Ku symbolize Karenni unity. The mythical and historical significances of Dee Ku are illustrated through the celebration of likelihoods of a successful harvest and paying respect to ancestors. In the villages inside Karenni State, Karenni people celebrate the Dee Ku Festival for the likelihood of a successful harvest in paddy farming and give thanks for it. For the Karenni people who have been displaced in Thailand, the Dee Ku Festival is celebrated only to pay respect to ancestors because, in the camp, they cannot grow paddy.

The myth of the Dee Ku Festival, in the context of displacement, narrates the importance of Dee Ku to ancient Karenni soldiers. In this narration, Karenni leaders and soldiers, in ancient times, brought Dee Ku along with them into battle. This reminded them of their families who they left behind at home. Later, those spirits of the ancient soldiers were recognized as Karenni ancestors who had protected the Karenni people and their homeland. Cooking Dee Ku therefore reminds Karenni refugees about the devotion of their ancestors to the Karenni people and their homeland. By offering foods and Dee Ku to ancestors as a way of paying respect, Karenni people believe that this will bring blessings and well-being to their families.

Symbolic meanings are a part of making space: the pole used in festival of Kay Htoe Boe represents a symbolic meaning in a cultural space. Kay Htoe Boe or E-Lue is also a

communal festival in Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp. The phrase “E-Lue” in the Kayah language means to offer to a god in animism and also the term “E-Lue” is called as a pole. It is important event within the public sphere because the symbolic pole for the festival is collectively chosen, carved, and erected by the Karenni people. As Kay Htoe Boe and E-Lue are linguistically Kayah, Kay Htoe Boe literally means the pole erected in a homeland. Thus, presence of a pole, or E-Lue, must be alongside a Karenni village or the pole is erected whenever the Karenni village is established. Interestingly, the Karenni people carry on the Kay Htoe Boe Festival wherever they corporeally reside. Simultaneously, the Kay Htoe Boe Festival is also recognized as the Karenni New Year celebration. The Festival is usually held in the summer season around April. Karenni animists believe that E-Lue connects them to a god and this god will bless them with a flourishing harvest. Karenni people erect and decorate E-Lue, and offer foods and dance around the poles every year as a way of giving respect and praying to the god. Inside Karenni State, the Karenni people celebrate this ceremony as a New Year celebration and for the purpose of receiving blessings from the god in order to have a flourishing harvest. Differently, the Karenni people in Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp carry on the Kay Htoe Boe Festival with more than that of being blessed for harvest. Some animists also participate in the Festival as a gathering space and recognize the symbol of E-Lue and the festival as a Karenni New Year celebration. Therefore, this Festival reminds them about the myth and of their homeland. The Kay Htoe Boe Festival has illuminated the Karenni people as a group who are still culturally rooted.

1.3 Research Questions

- 1.3.1 How do Karenni refugees create a space of identity within the context of confinement through the three communal events?
- 1.3.2 How do Karenni refugees in Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp organize, participate, and negotiate in the production of the three communal events and to some extent, what do the three communal events mean to them?
- 1.3.3 How do the three communal events contribute to the process of reconstruction of collective identity and creating community?

1.4 Research Objectives

- 1.4.1 To explain how Karenni refugees reconstruct Karenni identity as a collective identity through the three communal events despite the circumstance of the camp
- 1.4.2 To analyze how Karenni refugees organize communal events, participate and negotiate for the three communal events, and to some extent, understand the meanings of the three communal events
- 1.4.3 To analyze how the three communal events contribute to a process of the reconstruction of collective identity and recreating a Karenni community as a process in the context of displacement

1.5 Research Methodology

1.5.1 Research Site

This research was conducted in Ban Mai Noi Soi Camp, commonly known as Camp 1, located in Pang Mu Sub-District, Mueang District, Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand. Ban Nai Soi Camp is one of nine refugee camps located in the northernmost part of Thailand. From among the two Karenni refugee

camps, Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp was chosen as the research field because it is more accessible than the other Karenni refugee camp, Ban Mae Surin Camp or Camp 2, located in Khumyuam Sub-District. It takes only one hour from town to reach the Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp. On the other hand, Ban Mae Surin Camp is considered as a remote camp since it is located in a national forest park which is three hours from town.

Furthermore, I am personally familiar with Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp due to my Kayah linguistic skills and previous working experiences at a humanitarian organization in this camp. Since I spent my working life in this camp and gained precise understanding about the displacement process there, the circumstances of the camp, and the way of refugee life, I found this a new and interesting topic for refugees' study which differs from previous refugee studies. In this sense, the study of refugees' identities would provide a better understand about how refugees perceive and recreate themselves in the displacement or deal with life within the circumstance of confined space. Thus, the focus of my research was the study of Karenni refugees' identities in relation to the three communal events.

Unlike Ban Mae Surin Camp, Ban Mai Soi Camp is also comprised of a diversity of population with varied ethno-linguistic backgrounds, religions, and traditions. Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp is middle size camp with a population of 11,455 people and 2,477 households (TBC, August, 2015 Report). The population ratio is: Kayah - 80.5%, Karen (Paku) - 10%, Shan - 5%, and other (including Kayan Kayaw, Bre, and Bwe) - 4.5%. These ratios clearly indicate that the Kayah are the major population in the camp.

There is also a variety of religion in the camp. The religious belief ratio is: Animist (which is identified as the traditional religion among the Karenni refugees) - 51%, Catholic - 33%, Baptist - 9%, and Buddhist - 7% (UNHCR Nine Refugee Camp Report, 2011). Similar as the ethnic population ratio, the animists were the largest group and animism is widely practiced by the Kayah

population. The camp is divided into twenty sections with people of different ethnicities resettling together in the same sections. Consequently, refugees from different ethnicities come into contact and interact more with one another in the camp than they did in their previous village life. Thus, the camp setting has intensified the social interaction among the different groups of the camp population, from occasion to everyday contact. This study observed that, despite the diversity of population, Karenni refugees continually carry on the three communal events to reconstruct their collective identity in articulating Karenni identity within the area of the displacement.

The camp has become a kind of home for Karenni refugees who continually engage in the continuity of the three communal events. It is questionable why the camp becomes more like home. My observation is that the element of traditions, particular symbolic foods, and ritual objects are clearly placed in the camp. In particular, the Kay Htoe Boe Site is the most notable landscape of the cultural space throughout the camp. Moreover, the practical components, such as ritual actions, sacrifice, divination, and dancing which were done in the villages have been continued in the camp.

The national symbolism was usually absent until it was later invented by the KNPP. However, the national symbol is not displayed in the camp. Rather, celebration of the Karenni National Day brought Karenni refugees together in the public event and enabled Karenni refugees to remember and imagine their homeland or nation which they could no longer inhabit.

Through continuity of the pre-displacement traditions or ways of life, the camp resembled the village setting in the ways in which each section organized and celebrated the two annual ritual festivals on a small scale while also participating in the camp grand festival and other public events. Because Karenni refugees experienced the participation or celebration of festivals within both small and large scales, the research studied the festivals at both section and camp levels to explore how refugees become involved in the

section festival and the camp festival. The twenty sections were large enough to study people's experiences in real settings, social interaction and the patterns of practice. From these twenty sections, three sections, which were different in various aspects, were selected for study. The selected sections were Section 5, 7, and 10 for conducting participant observation of the festivals and researching informants who become involve in the festivals. To clarify this, Sections 5 and 7 are comprised of Kayah populations who try to keep all practices similar to the ones they did in their villages. Conversely, Section 10 is comprised of a diversity of population in ethno-languages and tradition, including Kayah. Unlike the two festivals, the Karenni National Day celebration was studied in different way which did not focus on sections, but was focused on one particular public event which involved Karenni refugees.

The participation and interviews with the events' participants provided a good understanding of the purposes of these three communal events and how Karenni refugees seek to reinvent, recreate, organize, or celebrate the annual festivals. Moreover, the experiences also provided an understanding how social relations have been developed or intensified through the three communal events.

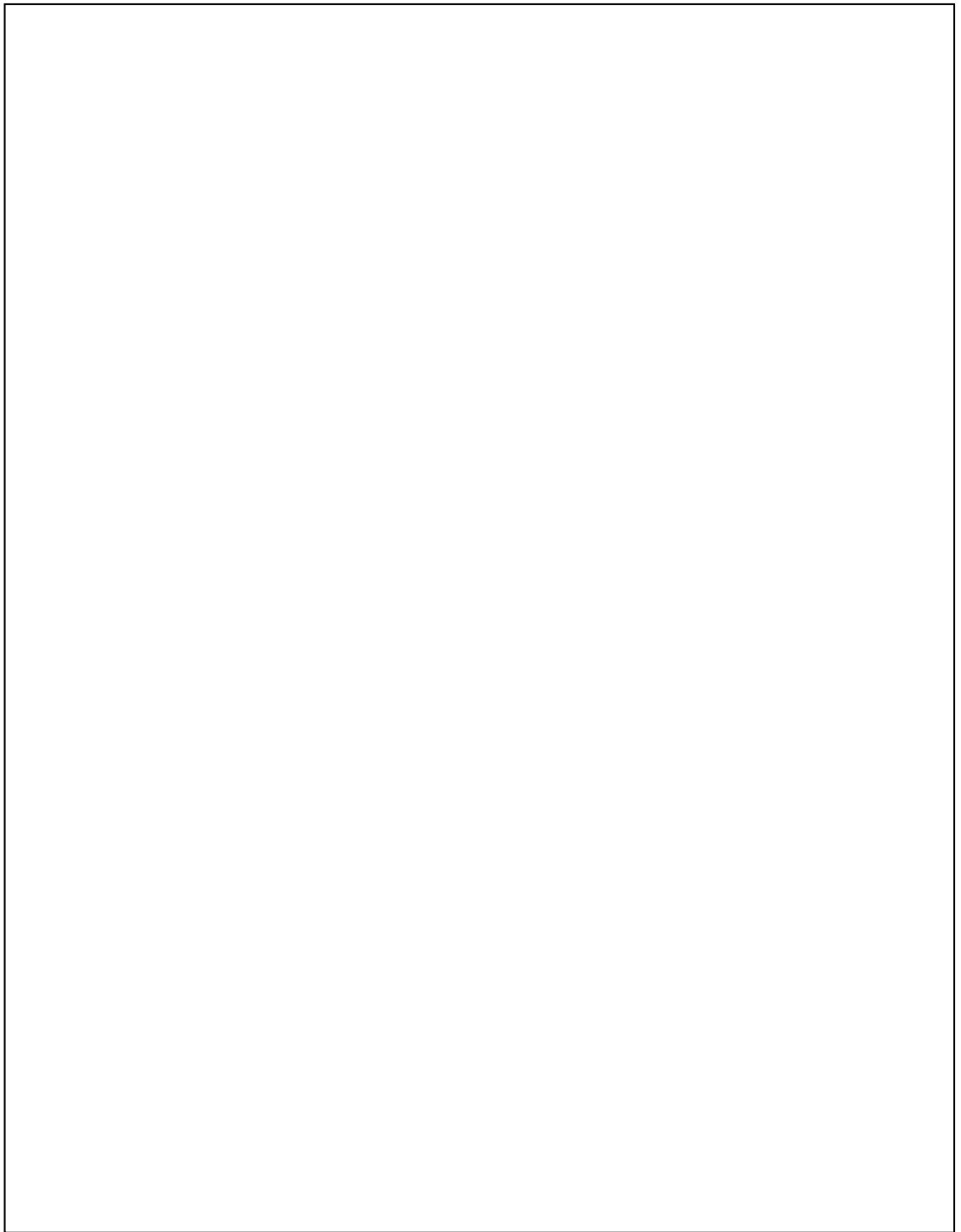


Figure 1.1 The Map of Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp