

## **Chapter 5**

### **Continuity with the Distant Past Home: the Celebration of the Dee Ku Festival**

This chapter will explore how Karenni refugees seek to recreate familiar practices in Dee Ku festival and create it as a space for articulating the ethnic identity. Through the practice of the Dee Ku Festival, Karenni refugees actively maintain connectedness with the distant past home. In doing this, Karenni refugees recreate the practices of making the Dee Ku parcel, and engaging in ritual performances which constitutes to the sense of belonging to a group that they were a part of in the past.

Through an ethnographic study of the Dee Ku Festival by describing how the festival is celebrated and how people become involved in it, this chapter further examines the process of organizing the celebration of the Dee Ku Festival. Therefore, I will explore the meaning of the symbolic food and the ritual performances used in the Dee Ku Festival, the historical background of the invention of the Dee Ku Festival, and the role of BMN cultural committee and traditional leaders who are engaged in the process of leading the organization of the Dee Ku Festival.

#### **5.1 The Ethnographic Study of the Dee Ku Festival: 16-20 September 2015**

Through my participation observation of the festival activities over five days, I witnessed how people became involved, interacted, and shared a sense of joyfulness and how the festival is celebrated. Clearly, the celebration heals the refugees' trauma of forced displacement. Rather, they feel like they were back in their villages celebrating this Festival. In this section, my ethnographic study will provide a descriptive of celebrating the Dee Ku Festival moment.

## **Day 1, 16 September 2015: Making the Dee Ku Parcel as a Sign that the Festival is Beginning**

The annual Dee Ku Festival that Karenni refugees had been waiting for had finally come in the mid-September 2015. In the early morning hours, around 7:00 am, the Camp Committee announced, by loudspeakers, that the celebration of the Dee Ku Festival will begin on 16 September and end on 20 September 2015. Thus, it would be held for five days this year. The dates were determined according to the chicken bone divination conducted by the Ban Mai Nai Soi Cultural Committee.

During the Festival, the focus of my participation observations will be in the various sections. At the time of hearing the broadcast, I was at Nga Meh house at Section 5. Today was the day of collecting the leaves of making the parcel of the Dee Ku. Every year, the Karenni people collect wild sorghum leaves for making the Dee Ku parcel. In the early morning, Nga Meh a 54 years old woman and her daughter Bue Meh a 26 years old woman were ready to collect the Dee Ku leaves. The Karenni refugees collect the wild sorghum leaves in the jungle near the camp and along the road to the local Thai village. At the forest, there were already people, from the various sections in the BK Zone, collecting the leaves there. The number of females collecting the leaves was more than the males. This is since the making of the parcel of the Dee Ku and steaming it are the main roles of the women. The males help to collect the firewood and prepare the stove. Leave collectors brought bamboo baskets with them. They carefully cut the leaves with knives because the wild sorghum leaves are sharp which could cut the fingers and cause them to bleed. Nga Meh and Bue Meh helped each other to collect enough leaves fill one basket. Later we all returned back to home. At home, his son had already prepared the sticky rice, pot, and firewood. They took the leaves from the basket, placed the sticky rice in the bamboo threshing baskets, rolled the leaves into a cone figure, put the sticky rice into the cone, and then wrapped it in a triangle shape. The three bundles of the Dee Ku were tied together with thin bamboo strips. They made a large amount of parcels of the Dee Ku. Everyone at Nga Meh's house was busy with steaming the Dee Ku while Nga Meh was boiling the Karenni rice wine or "Ter Yae"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ter Yae is a Kayah traditional rice wine served in the Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe Festivals. It made of rice and has a sweet taste. Thus, it is quite easy for drinkers to become inebriated. Karenni people usually treat their friends with Ter Yae during the visits at the annual festivals.

Ter Yae and the Dee Ku are the main traditional food during the Festival; thus, it was also called an eating and drinking festival



Figure 5.1 Making three bundles of Dee Ku parcel, field work, September,2015

The steaming of the Dee Ku parcels took about three hours. After the Dee Ku parcels and the Ter Yae were ready, Nga Meh hung the three bundles of the Dee Ku sticky rice parcels together with a long bamboo bottle filled with Ter Yae on the wall. This was an offering to the spirit of ancestors, kin, and relatives. She told me that they offered the Dee Ku and the Ter Yae to those spirits because they believed that these spirits would enjoy eating and drinking during the Festival. This was the way of giving respect to their ancestor spirits. When the offering was completed, it seemed that people commonly recognized that the Dee Ku Festival had now begun.



Figure 5.2 Dee Ku parcels hanged on the wall, offering to spirits of ancestors, field work, September, 2015

In sections 5 and 6, the youth gathered at the Section 5 office as these two sections shared the same office and Kay Htoe Boe site. The youth group, in this section, was very busy with practicing the dancing. The youth group was accompanied by the elders and other adult males who also took a role in playing the music instruments, such as the gongs, drums, and cymbals, with the youth. In one group, there were around twelve youths and five elder men who played those instruments. The rhythm of the Beng Boe was beating and the young traditional dancers were eager to rehearsal their dancing. I was told that this year there were two kind of traditional dancing: the first one was traditional dancing with instruments and the second one was the dancing with modern Kayah music. One dancing group had twelve members. The children and youth practiced and enthusiastically wanted to join the competition. The children, between 7-12 years old, also danced with the modern Kayah music which they were taught by their section youth group.

The sports event also started today. In the evening, around 4:00 or 5:00 pm, some people went to Section 8 to join the sports competition. When the young people and children were very busy with their activities, the adults were preparing food, and inviting friends and relatives to visit their houses. At night, people in the camp began to visit one another on a large scale. The people, from several sections, came and visited their friends or relatives in Section 5. Other sections also had this kind of visiting pattern. The host served the Dee Ku and the Ter Yae to their friends and guests. They were enjoying the drinking, eating, and talking as the Dee Ku and the Ter Yae were very appetizing and created a sense of rapture. The Dee Ku Festival, during the first night was not quiet, but instead it was filled with various acts of socializing, such as having conversations, sharing stories, eating, and drinking together. Today was the starting day of bonhomie and it would greatly increase each day during the festival.

### **Day 2, 17 September 2016: Recalling the Sense of Rapture through the Traditional Dancing of Beng-Boe and the Gathering Night at the Dee Ku Stage Show**

Around 7:00 am, the rhythm of the Beng-Boe was becoming louder and louder in Sections 5 and 6 and the other sections in the BK Zone. The sense of rapture was beginning as the rhythm of drums, gongs, and cymbals were beaten loudly. Nga Meh told me that they beat the drums to expel the bad spirits at the end of the section.

Interestingly, I was told that the Section 7 people went to expel the spirit in the forest behind the section and this followed the pattern of practice in the village. Therefore, I went to Section 7 and met with Mu Preh Law, one of my key informants, and Mu Preh Nga Reh a 68 years old man. They actively led their people in their sections. Six men followed Mu Preh Law and Mu Preh Nga Reh to the forest. One man carried a gun and the five musicians were beating the rhythm while walking to the forest.

After reaching the forest, Mu Preh Nga Reh spoke in Kayah language to expel the bad spirits. He said “You all, please go back to your place”. While the five men were lining up, the man with the gun was standing ready to fire. After Mu Preh Nga Reh finished with the saying, the gun was fired many times. Mu Preh Nga Reh explained that, in the village, they expelled the bad spirits at the paddy farms because the bad spirits could damage their cultivation. The reminiscence of the life in the village played an important role in reinventing or the continuity of the ritual practices in the camp.

When I returned to Section 7, I was surprise to see a group of dancers and musicians, who were dressed like monsters, dancing at a house in the section. The rhythm of the Beng-Boe was loud while the dancers, who dressed like monsters, were really enjoying dancing. I saw a little boy, around nine years old, join the dancing. His face was painted in black and he wore long-sleeved black clothing. The children around there enjoyed watching the group so much. I curiously asked Mu Preh Nga Reh about this. He responded that this kind of a monster-like dressing was an enjoyable sight at the Dee KuFestival and used for inviting the spirits of the ancestors and kin to join the Festival. Those groups restlessly danced, and every section had this kind of dancing group.



Figure5.3 A group dressed like monster, danced with Beng-Bong rhythm, filed work, September 2015

One of my observations was that the performances created enjoyment and excitement for the children as they followed the dancing group until the end of section. In another corner of Section 7, the youth group was busy with practicing dancing for another round because tonight they had the dancing competition. Bae Meh a 17 years old girl, one of traditional dancers, told me that her section expected to get one prize or award because their dancing styles were creatively designed and their stepping was in harmony or unity.

The stage show night and traditional dancing was held at 6:00-10:00 pm. From the dancing competition, the young people also learned to accumulate cultural capital through participating in the dancing, and performing on the stage. The Dee Ku Festival night was a night enjoyed greatly by the young people. It was also attended by adults and social groups. I estimated that the number of celebrants was around 1,000 people who dressed in normal clothes, except the traditional dancers and musicians, who dressed in traditional costumes.

Most importantly, the traditional dancing on the stage presented the core values of the Dee Ku Festival as the dancing steps were about the rice cultivation activities.

Simultaneously in the section, the adult men, including the elderly, enthusiastically danced like monsters and were a surprise to the host's house. The rhythm of the Beng-Boe was loud in each section while the dancers and musician were becoming drunk. Most male dancers enjoyed the pleasurable taste of Ter Yae. I would say that it was like Halloween Day. It seemed as an endless night, but finally the noise stopped around the midnight.

### **Day 3, 18 September 2016: The Grand Festival and Beginning Night of the Poe Dee Kree Divination**

The traditional dancing, Beng Boe, continued around the camp. This day was the day of the grand ceremony on the show stage. The attendance of the KNPP reinforced the individual sense of collective identity because the KNPP has used the myth of the Dee Ku to construct Karenni history as a people, or the emergence of Karenni. On the show stage, the announcer invited the KNPP members to give speeches in the opening ceremony. There were two announcers, one spoke Burmese and the other spoke Kayah, to accommodate the language differences.

This year, there were three KNPP members who attended the ceremony and gave brief speeches related to the history of the Dee Ku myth. They also explained the meaning of the three bundles of the Dee Ku tied together. It was a reminder of the unity of the ethnic groups, inside Karenni State, which fought together in a battle to protect Karenni territory and people. Furthermore, other member of the KNPP also gave aspirational speeches to encourage Karenni refugees to understand the importance of tradition, preserve the Karenni tradition, and remind people about unity and the possibility of returning to the homeland. Shortly after the speech, the children performed Karenni traditional dancing which was a part of dancing competition mentioned earlier as occurring on the first day of the Dee Ku Festival.



Figure 5.4 the Competition Dancing, children and youth group, September,2015

On the Festival's grounds, there were around 1,000 Karenni camp residents attending the grand ceremony, dressed in Kayah red traditional costumes or clothing with some dressed also in the Kayan, Kayaw, and Shan styles. After the program on the stage ended, the celebrants moved to next zone for the volley ball competition and were cheering their teams, especially the young people. Simultaneously, the traditional dancing groups, in each section, began to dance, honoring each section. During that time, the rhythm of the Beng-Bong became louder and louder in each section. The section youth group took the active role in dancing as giving honor to each household in their section or nearby sections. The dancers were dressed in Kayah western traditional clothing, while some were dressed in Karenni eastern traditional dress. They were accompanied by both old and young musicians, a section cultural leader and a section Dee Ku Festival leader (Kay Pe Je to support the dancing group. Every section has this kind of activity in common. I could describe this as restlessly dancing which was creating a sense of great joyfulness for both the hosts and the dancers. The hosts treated the dancers with the Dee Ku and Ter Yae, and gave financial donations to them. In regard to the donations, most celebrants believed that it is form of merit making and they will receive blessings in return.





Figure 5.5 Youth traditional dancers danced honoring to households, fieldwork,  
September, 2015

Moreover, it was the day of making the Poe Dee Kree figure and bringing the Poe Dee Kree figure to each section. Therefore, it was a busy day for a section Dee Ku Festival leader (Kay Pe Je), a section cultural leader, and the elders. They prepared the materials for making the Poe Dee Kree figure. I concentrated my observations on Section 10 to see how the section residents interacted and socialized during the ritual day of the Poe Dee Kree event. It is regrettable that I could not follow the group that was making the Poe Dee Kree figure in the forest. They said that the process of making the Poe Dee Kree figure should be done with only a few people because the Poe Dee Kree figure will be holy and must be made secretly by a few people.

At the end of each year's festival, the Poe Dee Kree figure is carried back into the forest. And when it was festival time, the Poe Dee Kree chose whom he wanted to leave the forest with, stay with, and carry him. So in the afternoon, the small group went to forest and played music, the rhythm was the Beng-Bong along the way to the forest. Around forty young, middle aged and elder men and twenty children walked to the forest. For this year, the Poe Dee Kree already chose whom he wanted to stay with a section Dee Ku Festival leader (Kay Pe Je). Consequently, he carried the Poe Dee Kree figure back to the section while the followers beat the gongs, cymbals, and drums very loudly. The children enjoyed following a man carrying the Poe Dee Kree figure back to their section.

In Section 10 around 7:00 pm, people gathered at the house which the Poe Dee Kree chose to stay to attend the divination which would be conducted until 10: 00 pm. It was

a surprise to learn that inquiries each year to the Poe Dee Kree were basically the same kind. Several attendees asked about their family health and decision to go to the USA. The children asked about their possibility of passing their examinations, while the elders asked about the possibility of returning to home with peace and security. Many attendees, in each section, asked similar questions to the Poe Dee Kree. Sometimes, the people said that the Poe Dee Kree was not always right. Tu Reh, a 50 years old man, a section 10 Dee Ku Festival leader (Kay Pe Je) described how the Poe Dee Kree did not always give the correct answers.

“Since the earlier years of the camp, the Poe Dee Kree always divined that the Karenni refugees would be able to return to homeland with peace and security within three years. But until now, we are still in the displacement with an uncertain future”. (Tu Reh, September, 2015)

In the past years, the Poe Dee Kree was seen as their hope and could divine how life would be for them. It could be described as the belief that was adhered to by the refugees. The Poe Dee Kree night was not only attended by Kayah animists, but some of other ethnic people, such as Karen-Paku in Section 10, who were curious to know how Poe Dee Kree divined. I observed around twenty non-Kayah animists who attended this night's event. The total number of attendees was about one hundred people. Tu Reh told me that, although much of the population had decreased due to resettlement, the number of attendees remained the same. He also said that the Poe Dee Kree was an important practice and he was glad that people still actively practiced it in the camp.

At the end of activities for the night, the celebrants continued to visit their friends' or relatives' houses, in the section or nearby sections, and increasingly shared stories and memories. The popular topic that people usually talked about was the friends and relatives in third countries. For instance, Tu Reh mentioned to his friends that their friend, in a third country, really missed the festival in the camp and that people in the USA would organize the festival in that country next week. Their relatives in the camp sent the wild sorghum leaves to them so they can make parcels of the Dee Kue. Apparently, the Dee Ku Festival is an important tradition that Karenni people, settling in different countries, reinvented or continued the practice. Visiting and conversations become main activities of the Dee Ku Festival. I could describe this day as the social interaction day since people began to visit on a large scale.

#### **Days 4 & 5, 19-20 September 2016: Restlessly Beng-Bong Dancing**

During the last two days of events, Karenni refugees continued visiting on a large scale, eating the Dee Ku parcel, and drinking Ter Yae. Many households made the Dee Ku parcel and Ter Yae in abundant amounts, so they could feed or favor their friends and the dancers. For instance, Nga Meh, my host, told me that she prepared an abundance of the Dee Ku to feed or treat her friends and the dancers.

In the late morning, the dancers from Section 5 and 6 came to dance at Nga Meh's house. Another group of Catholic dancers also came to dance. What I learnt was that the Catholic practitioners continue to carry on the Dee Ku traditional dancing although they had converted to Christianity. One of male musicians, who accompanied the Catholic youth dancing group, told me that the Beng-Boe dancing is an important performance of the Karenni tradition, so they have continued with this practice and see the practice of the Dee Ku related to Karenni culture and traditions, rather than related to sacred or religious space. Thus, this can be said that the Beng-Boe dancing intensified the socializing space.

In the camp, the rhythm of the Beng-Bong was all around. The dancers went from their own section to nearby sections with the children following them. The dancers danced restlessly from sunrise to sunset and even into the night for the first two days. The Festival ended in the morning of sixth day when the Poe Dee Kree would be sent back into the forest. The sending process of the Poe Dee Kree was as same as the day when people brought or invited him into the section. The male, who had brought the Poe Dee Kree figure out of the forest, would carry him on his back and head back to the forest. He was accompanied by many elders, children, and musicians. At the time, there were around seventy people, including around thirty children, following the group as they were curious to see the happenings. Similar to the first day, the music was rapturous. Upon reaching the forest, the carrying male said to the Poe Dee Kree, "I take you here, and this is your place". After that, he climbed up a nearby tree and hung the Poe Dee Kree figure on the tree along with a weaving bag that belonged to the Poe Dee Kree. The practice symbolized that the Dee Ku Festival has ended for this year.

My observation made it clear that the Dee Ku practice has helped refugees to remember and imagine their past home through eating food, drinking, socializing, and dancing. Even the young people, who had no experiences of how the life was in the pre-displacement, were continuing to imagine the home through their involvement in the ritual performances, particularly through the traditional dancing.

Furthermore, in conversations with the celebrants during the festival, I learned that the Karenni refugees have maintained the traditional patterns in the Dee Ku practice while they also invent new social activities. The patriarch society is clearly seen in the Dee Ku practice as the males dominated the roles in ritual performances, while females undertook the domestic work; preparation of the food and drink. Each particular age group had their own specific role: for instance, the adult males led the ritual activities and divination, while the youth took roles in the traditional dancing. A new social activity, such as sports and stage shows, caused the youth to become actively involved in the Dee Ku Festival.

This section clearly explained how the Karenni refugees sought to have the celebration of the Dee Ku Festival resemble the village setting through recreating the symbolic food, ritual actions, and dancing performances which they traditionally practiced in their villages. Thus, the following section will explore the meaning of the elements in the Dee Ku practice, the historical background of the reinventing the Dee Ku Festival, and the role of the traditional leaders and youth engaged in the process of leading and preserving the Dee Ku Festival. In the following section, I will also explore meaning of symbolic food and ritual performances used in the Festival, such as the parcel of sticky rice, the Dee Ku, the divination, and the traditional dancing.

## **5.2 The Symbolic Meanings: Symbolic Food and Ritual Performances**

The food and ritual performances are important components of the Dee Ku practice which integrate the present displacement with the past. Certainly, the eating and sharing of the Dee Ku parcel, divination, and the dancing are the prominent symbols in the Dee Ku annual rituals. They represent the culture and way of life, and intensify the social interaction among Karenni refugees. Thus, the continuity of recreating symbolic food and the ritual performances in the camp has reinforced the sense of collective identity among those who continually practice the Dee Ku ritual. It also reinforced the sense of

what they commonly shared in the past and continued to share in the present. In this section, I will explore the meaning of the three bundles of the Dee Ku parcel, the Poe Dee Kree divination, and the traditional dancing to examine how and why the Karenni refugees seek to recreate these symbolic patterns in the camp.

### **5.2.1 The Three Bundles of the Dee Ku Parcel**

The prominent symbol in the Dee Ku Festival is the three bundles of the Dee Ku parcel. The Dee Ku has a symbolism in both a ritual and a social context. For the ritual context, the Dee Ku is the most important traditional food which is offered to the ancestors and relative's spirits during the Festival. While visiting several informants' houses, I observed that the informants, who practice animism, hang two or three parcels of the Dee Ku on the wall with the Karenni rice wine in bamboo bottle. Mu Preh Nga Reh, one example of those who offer the Dee Ku to ancestors and spirits, told me that, during the Dee Ku Festival, the ancestors and relatives' spirits could also enjoy eating the Dee Ku with their friends. Offering the Dee Ku is one of the important traditional practices for Karenni animists or traditional religion practitioners, and it is continually practiced by large numbers of Karenni refugees.

For the social context, the myth of the Dee Ku has played a significant role in the construction of Karenni history as a peoplehood or the emergence of the Karenni. The myth of the Dee Ku originally spoke about a celebration for the winning of a battle. Mu Preh Law narrated the myth of the Dee Ku Festival which he had heard from his grandparents.

“In the ancient time, the ethnic groups in Karenni State brought several parcels of the Dee Ku along with them during a battle and they won the battle because of their unity. Thus, the three bundles of the Dee Ku represent the ethnic groups in Karenni State who fought together to protect their people and homeland”. (Mu Preh Law, September, 2015)



Figure 5.6 Three Bundles of Dee KuParcel

Making the Dee Ku parcel, in the displacement context, reminded people of the unity of Karenni. Regarding to this, Mu Preh Law said that “we people in the camp should be united as the three bundles of the Dee Ku are tied together”. Thus, the parcels of the Dee Ku, as a notable symbol in the Festival, significantly constituted a sense of collective identity that Karenni refugees seek to recreate. Moreover, the Dee Ku also symbolizes friendship because Karenni refugees, who make the parcels of the Dee Ku, always share their Dee Ku with friends, neighbors, and relatives. They also invited their friends, neighbors, and relatives to visit their houses and enjoy eating the Dee Ku together. In conclusion, the Dee Ku symbolized three meanings; offering ritual, unity, and friendship.

### 5.2.2 Poe Dee Kree Divination

In the Dee Ku Festival, the most exciting moment among the youth and children is watching the Poe Dee Kree divination which is specifically conducted and led by an older male and a section Dee Ku Festival leader (Kay Pe Je). He plays the important role in making the Poe Dee Kree figure and conducting rituals. Annually, every section in the camp makes their Poe Dee Kree figure. The Poe Dee Kree figure is made from a woven bamboo basket and wrapped with cotton fabric. On the top of the Poe Dee Kree figure, it was tightened with a red cloth and held a minus stone and chicken bone. The stone was considered as holy. At the end of festival, the stone is removed by the village headman and kept in a safe

place until the next year of the Dee Ku Festival. Mu Preh Nga Reh, narrated the story of the Poe Dee Kree.

“In the past, the Poe Dee Kree was an elder spirit in the valley and his name was Jaw Kue Toe. He would damage the paddy farms if he was not offered food as were the other spirit around the farms. Later, villagers learnt that Jaw Kue To, was the one who had damaged their farm. Thus, they used fire to expel Jaw Kue Toe and eventually he had to move to the jungle. Later, the villagers called his spirit back to stay in the figure of the rice basket and he was renamed as the Poe Dee Kree”.



Figure 5.7 The Poe Dee Kree

Linguistically in Kayah, “Poe Dee Kree” means the “grandfather in the woven bamboo basket”. The term “Poe” means “grandfather”. The Poe Dee Kree is therefore respected as a grandfather. When people asked him questions, they usually called him “Poe”. The figure of the Poe Dee Kree was made in the jungle by two or three men, and brought back to reside in one particular house that the Poe Dee Kree chose to stay. At that house, the Poe Dee Kree conducts divinations for three nights.

In the divination process, two males hold the Poe Dee Kree figure and ask the questions. The Poe Dee Kree gives the typical answer of “yes” or “no” by hitting floor. It swings side-to-side until it hit the floor to give the answer to the questioner. The question that the Poe Dee Kree night

attendees always ask is about how long before they are able to return to the homeland. Others talked about their health and work. Some students asked about the possibility of passing examinations. Mu Preh Nga Reh also described that back to their village life, the Poe Dee Kree was asked about the villager's cultivation or the flourish in paddy growing. While in the camp, this kind of question is missing as the people have no paddy farm anymore. Most importantly, Poe Dee Kree divination is a certain practical component of the Dee Ku Festival and represents a symbol of the Dee Ku myth and narrative story.

### **5.2.3 The Traditional Dancing and Instruments**

During the Dee Ku Festival, the rhythm of the Beng-Boe was loud around and could be heard all around the camp. The Karenni refugees, in the camp, enjoyed welcoming and watching dancers continuing to dance group-by-group at their houses. Five or six men carried music instruments and played them while five or six pairs of males and female, who were dressed in Kayah traditional clothing, danced. The typical dancing stepping was that the male and female dancers tramp on their feet and moved their arms around in accordance with the rhythm of music in the village. However in the camp, the dancing stepping was reinvented with the addition of some new steps. The Beng-Boe dancing portrayed the activities in rice paddy cultivation in the field. However, the dancing stepping, like the ones in the villages, is still practiced in the camp.

The dancing steps, in the camp, portray that Karenni villagers enjoy farming lives in growing and harvesting paddy in their homeland. Mu Preh Nga Reh related that the rhythm of instruments and dancing give the sense of rapture. The traditional dancing and music in the Dee Ku Festival are played for two purposes. The first purpose celebrates of the likelihood of success of the paddy farming. The second purpose is to remember the ancient times when Karenni ancestors won battles and



celebrated. The instruments in the Dee Ku Festival are drums, gongs, and cymbals. Each instrument has a different meaning. Furthermore, the rhythm of the drums is to celebrate joyfulness and chase away the spirits that could damage or harm the livestock in the village. The Dee Ku traditional dancing portrayed a way of life and culture, and how the subsistence farming was very important to Karenni livelihoods. This dancing constituted the imagination of the past for young people who had no experiences of how the life was in the pre-displacement

### **5.3 Historical Background of Reinvention of the Dee Ku Festival**

In the two preceding sections, I described how the Dee Ku Festival is celebrated in the context of displacement, and explain the meaning of the important components of the Dee Ku practices, such as symbolic food and ritual performances. Therefore in this section, I will explore why and how the Karenni refugees initially reinvented the Dee Ku Festival. The tradition of celebrating the Dee Ku Festival had been practiced in the camp since 1994. The resources for the Dee Ku Festival were more accessible than the resources used in the Kay Htoe Boe Festival. Furthermore, the Dee Ku Festival did not need a large physical space for the ritual site. In fact, the reinvention of the Dee Ku Festival had two significant purposes: First, the Dee Ku Festival is traditionally practiced by two ethnic groups: Kayah and Kayaw. Second, the myth of the Dee Ku has represented the historic emergence of the Karenni and symbolized the unity in the camp.

The significant practice of the Festival was the making of the Dee Kuparcel. The important pattern of making the Dee Ku parcel have been continued by the Karenni refugees, especially the Kayah and other sub-Karenni groups who traditionally practice the Dee Ku annual ritual in their life before displacement. As mentioned above, the origin myth of the Dee Ku characterized the historic emergence of the Karenni and represented their unity. Thus, this myth corresponded with the KNPP ideology and consequently, the KNPP has logically been involved in the continuity of Dee Ku practice as it strengthened the sense of unity in the camp. In regard to the KNPP's involvement in the continuity of the Dee Ku practice, the former camp leader, Khu Ei Reh described that in the early years of displacement, the KNPP and the Camp

Committee distributed sticky rice to the refugees because Karenni refugees were not able to afford it.

Through the continual practice of the Dee Ku Festival, the Karenni refugees remember their way of live in the villages, especially their memories of the paddy farms. Mu Preh Law vividly narrated that, in the villages, the Dee Ku Festival was held when the paddy started to bear grain. This Festival also celebrated the likelihood of a successful harvest and thankfulness for fertilized agriculture products. In the camp, there are obviously no paddy farms and consequently no need for celebrating the likelihood of successful harvests. However, Karenni refugees seek to maintain their continuity of a sense of home in the refugee camp through recreating the familiar practice of the Dee Ku Festival. Making offerings, eating and sharing parcels of the Dee Ku, visiting, drinking, attending divinations, and enjoying dancing or watching traditional dancing are practical components of the Dee Ku Festival which help refugees to remember their home and the rapture they had in the past.

Through the main activities of making the Dee Ku parcels, giving offerings, treating friends, traditional dancing, and the Poe Dee Kree divination nights during the Dee Ku Festival, each section respectively celebrated the annual festival at their sites in the early years of the camp. The Dee Ku Festival in each section was led by a section Dee Ku Festival leader (Kay Pe Je) and a section cultural leader. The Festival was held for five days during late August or September in rainy season.

Khu Ei Reh said that the Dee Ku Festival had created a sense of enjoyment among Karenni refugees, especially the youth. A great concern arose about the festival disturbing the school week in the camp. In response, the Dee Ku Festival was made into a camp public holiday in 1999 with the celebration date determined by one chicken bone divination. Since then, the Dee Ku Festival has been considered as the Important communal festival in the camp.

In 1999, the Dee Ku Festival was expanded to include more public events through the organizing of stage show nights, traditional dancing competitions, and sports events. These activities generated excitement among the youth. Mu Preh Law told me that, to preserve the traditional practice of Dee Ku, the KNPP had financially supported the

public events, such as contributing to the prizes that were awarded in the sports and traditional dancing competitions in the year 1999-2010. In addition, the KNPP's members had been invited to attend the Festival and give speeches along with the local Thai authorities and the Camp Commander. Each year, the event was held at the BK or BT zone. Karenni refugees, who resided in the BT zone, also attended the Festival in the BK zone. The stage show night lasted last three days. Many Karenni had never experienced attending a stage show night or participating in sports events during the annual festival in their village life. Consequently, these events in Dee Ku Festival created great excitement and entertained Karenni refugees. The public events were greatly enjoyed by the Karenni refugees. It needed the youth to maintain and carry on their traditional dancing through the traditional dancing competition. Thus, the Dee Ku Festival added further socializing space. It was not merely a ritual and sacred space anymore since those who are not ethnically Kayah and Kayaw animists commonly involved in the Festival.

Since 2011, the funding for the Dee Ku Festival, previously supported by the KNPP, has not become available as in the past. In response, the Karenni Cultural Committee and the Camp Committee asked for contributions from the households who were animists or whoever else desired or was willing to give contributions for the Dee Ku Festival. The funding support for the public sphere event has recently contributed by Karenni refugees. The Karenni Cultural Committee also requested some contributions from the NGOs. The Border Consortium had supported the provision of the sticky rice to the camp for several years. But since 2012, there has been a reduction of food assistance and the, Karenni refugees have not been distributed sticky rice. Therefore, the Karenni refugees work harder so as to be able to afford sticky rice for the annual Dee Ku Festival.

During the Festival, the females played their traditional roles in the preparation of the food, especially making the Dee Ku parcel and the Karenni rice wine or Ter Yae. Pleh Meh, a 32 years old housewife, described that in each year her household would cook a large amount of the Dee Ku. They then had to buy more sticky rice since the NGOs had not supplied the sticky rice as in the previous years. She also said that making contributions to camp public sphere event was considered as a way of making merit.

Significantly, one of my observation was that the Dee Ku Festival had fewer outside's support, especially from the KNPP as it had in previous years. Despite this, the camp residents were still trying their best to preserve the Dee Ku practice for their children.

This section explore the purposes and meaning of the Dee Ku Festival, and explains how the Dee Ku Festival was initially reinvented and who is engaged in the process of organizing and celebrating the Festival. Therefore in the following sections, I will examine the role of a section cultural leader, a Dee Ku Festival leader (Kay Pe Je), the camp youth group, and youth traditional dancers.

#### **5.4 The Role of Traditional Leader in the Camp**

In the research, it became clear that each section is comprised of a number of villagers with common family and village ties. Related to this, Mu Preh Law explained that Section 7 is comprised of the residents who originally came from three villages in the same township of south Baw Lae Kae and most of the households are close family kin. In such a manner, the refugees seek to maintain their village setting in the camp including the presence of traditional leaders in ritual or sacred space.

Since each section celebrates their own annual ritual traditional festival in their sites, they each have traditional leaders who take significant roles in leading the ritual procedures and traditions. There are three of these traditional leaders with such roles. The main traditional leader is the section cultural leader who oversees all the traditional rituals and practices, and the annual ritual festivals in his section. The other two leaders are: Dee Ku Festival leader (Kay Pe Je) and the Kay Htoe Boe festival leader (E-Lue Pe Je), are assigned specifically to lead the annual ritual festivals of Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe. The festival setting in the camp greatly resembled the village festival as each section attends each other section's festival as they did in the village. The sections in the camp always take turns to be the host and support the rest of the camp. Certainly, the important change has been that the practices of the annual festivals in each section have been integrated into the camp festival and created a sense of commonality. The traditional leader in each section, especially the section cultural leader, joins with the BMN Cultural Committee in organizing the annual festivals, both the section and grand festivals. Here, it is important to look at how the traditional leaders play significant

roles in leading the annual festival and have become the important actors in the preservation of culture and tradition. Furthermore, the camp has organized youth groups with each section having their youth group involved in the official organizing of two annual ritual festivals of Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe. In particular, this section will explore the roles of two traditional leaders, the camp youth group, and youth traditional dancers in the Dee Ku Festival.

#### **5.4.1 A Section Cultural Leader**

A section cultural leader has very important roles since they oversee all the ritual performances and lead the celebration of the two annual festivals. The roles of the section cultural leader and the chairperson of the BMN Cultural Committee are comparable, in a number of ways, because the section cultural leader organizes the festival, manages all resources and funds, and calls for the participation and the involvement of section residents. Furthermore, they also lead and support the youth group, particularly in regard to the youth traditional dancing activities.

In researching the role of the section cultural leader, I spoke to several of them. Su Reh, a section 10 cultural leader from told me that he had been the section cultural leader for almost fifteen years. The section cultural leaders always attended the meetings held by the BMN Cultural Committee and the Committee informed the section cultural leaders about the details of the celebration of the event, especially the dates and duration of the Festival.

Within a section, the section cultural leader would manage the funds which are received from the financial donations of the section's residents. These funds are used by the Kay Pe Je and E-Lue Pe Je to organize the annual rituals. In discussing about the community contributions, Su Reh described that the circumstances of the camp were totally different from the life in the village where the necessary resources, used in the traditional or ritual practices, were abundantly

available. Differently, in the camp, they did not have sufficient resources, so they depended upon the financial donations from each household in the sections. The section cultural leader takes the role as the financial donation collector and manages the funds for section's ritual practices and the youth's activities. In this section, I will discuss the role of section cultural leader in the Dee Ku Festival.

As the Dee Ku Festival requires fewer resources than the Kay Htoe Boe Festival, the section cultural leader does not need to collect financial donation from the section residents. The significant of the section cultural leader in the collecting funds is the supporting the youth traditional dancers to raise their fund. In doing this, the section cultural leaders always lead the traditional youth dancers team dance honoring in section or nearby section. Su Reh explained that the musicians are middle-aged and older men who accompanied the youth dancers. Once the youth dancers earn sufficient funds, they are then able to purchase the traditional clothing and sports shirts for participation in the public events at the annual festivals. This is a very close relationship of the older and younger generations in the cultural process. For the Dee Ku Festival, the section cultural leader roles were less involved than in the Kay Htoe Boe Festival since the collection of financial donations and preparation of the sacred space was not large scale.

#### **5.4.2 A Section Dee Ku Festival Leader (Kay Pe Je)**

The Dee Ku Festival, in the ritual context, is the practice of offerings to the goddess, or female god, which referred to as the god in the soil and cult of the Kay Htoe Boe religion or traditional religion. The goddess of Dee Ku is related to the god of E-Lue, but the practice of their offerings is different. To perform the offering, the section Dee Ku leader or Kay Pe Je, in the Kayah linguistic form, takes the prominent role in leading the offering, sacrificing animals, and carrying on the other proceedings for the Dee Ku Festival. The Kay Pe Je is a middle aged or elderly man,

but must be very knowledgeable and skillful in the practice. More importantly, he must be a Kay believer, not an E-Lue believer. The Kay Pe Je position is passed from generation to generation; this means that current Kay Pe Je has taken the role from his father.

Apparently, the Kay Pe Je leads the activities of making the Poe Dee Kree figure, overseeing the Poe Dee Kree divination night, and also accompanying the dancing group. In exploring this topic, I spoke to several of the Kay Pe Je's about their roles. Tu Reh, the Kay Pe Je from Section 10 and who has been a Kay Pe Je since 1996, related that the busiest day for the Kay Pe Je is the day of making the Poe Dee Kree figure since it requires various necessary resources to make this figure. Following this activity, the Kay Pe Je also leads the Poe Kree divination night and sends Poe Dee Kree back to the forest. This clearly shows how each section needs its own Kay Pe Je to take active roles in leading the rituals in the Dee Ku Festival.

## **5.5 The Camp Youth Group**

The Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp Cultural Committee also officially established the camp youth group in 2016. This is a volunteer group supervised by the camp cultural committee. This group is comprised of the youth from the sections including some section youth leader or section youth group members. In 2016, there were thirty-five youth in the camp youth group. The age of these members was 16-25 years old. Before this, the members of the youth group were voluntarily associated with the Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp Cultural Committee in organizing the annual festivals. Khu Poe Reh, the current BMN Camp Cultural Committee leader, was the person who formed the youth group. He said that the youth are important actors in working with the camp cultural committee to lead and organize the two annual festivals. The purpose for the establishment of the camp youth group was to build their capacity and accountability in leading and otherwise participating in the preservation of the Karenni traditional practices. Crucially, the youth group is an example for young people and section youth group in terms of traditional practices.

I approached the camp youth group and found that this group vigorously volunteering for community work, especially being involved in the supporting the preservation of Karenni traditions and important ritual practices. They have been involved in this role since 2012 and actively joined the numerous related training sessions that are given by the camp cultural committee. After attending the training, they have skills for leading ritual procedures and more knowledge about Karenni traditions such the history of each ritual, such as the Dee Ku Festival, the Kay Htoe Boe Festival, and the practice of chicken bone divination. They were then able to apply these skills in the camp, especially leading the ritual worship of traditional religion of Kay Htoe Boe. This clearly shows that leading rituals is other significant role of the camp youth group and they are able to take accountability in leading the rituals as their skills and knowledge become developed.

By having members from both the camp and section youth groups, the camp youth group is able to have the section youth groups become involved and helpful in organizing the annual festival. This is especially important in the preparation of the materials and the agenda for the public events and the stage shows. Bue Meh, a current the camp youth group leader described that, during the festival, the camp youth group helped the BMN Cultural Committee with the stage agenda and welcoming the KNPP, the Thai authorities, and other guests to the event. Another significant role is training the section youth to perform the dancing of the Dee Ku. In the Dee Ku Festival, the camp youth group works closely with the BMN Cultural Committee to integrate the section youth into the camp grand festival, particularly leading the traditional dancing

## **5.6 Youth Traditional Dancers**

Many youth, who grew up or lived in prolonged displacement, had no experiences of pre-displacement way of life and celebrating the annual ritual festival. Some of them just have a blurred memory of the homeland or a blurred memory of experience attending ritual festivals in the village life. Thus, it was surprising to see that the youth in the camp did not wipe out their culture and traditions. Instead, they actively sought to preserve the Karenni substantial patterns of traditional practices. In doing so, the youth apparently took active roles in preserving traditional dancing in the camp while also being traditional dancers themselves. Their significant role is to stay involved in serving



the community and performing community services during the annual festivals, ritual practices, and as needed.

In each section, the traditional youth dancers represented their section and led the young people in the section to become involved in section and camp festivals and ritual ceremonies. There are twelve or sixteen youth traditional dancers in each section with their ages of youth around 12-22 years old. For the two annual ritual festivals of Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe, the youth also represent their sections by participating in the traditional competitions and dances honoring the households within the section, camp, or local villages. Apparently, the traditional dancing is considered to be the most important practice at the annual festivals, and the youth have become active traditional dancers. The Dee Ku traditional dancing is comprised of both males and females. In contrast, the Kay Htoe Boe Festival is comprised of only male dancers (which I will discuss in Chapter 6).

Moreover, the question arises why the youth seek to preserve the traditional practices and how they accumulate the skill of traditional dancing. Da Reh, was a youth who was involved in dancing for eight years ever since he was fourteen years old. He is currently section 10 youth leader. Da Reh as one example of youth in the several youth groups in the camp, said:

“We must carry on what our parents or grandparents had traditionally practiced. It is our Moe Le Klo Peh Kha Le<sup>2</sup> (the path way of the parents or literally, the traditions practiced by the parents), so we must preserve the continuity of our Karenni traditions or the traditional practices. When I was young, I always followed the traditional dancers in the section, or to nearby sections, or even to the end of the camp. I could feel how the music and dance stepping was amusement and full of a lot of joy. So when I grew up, I was overwhelmed by the desire to join the dancing. Importantly, the traditional dancing portrays the Karenni culture and way of life. Thus, I am happy to dance to represent the Karenni culture even though I have no memories of the homeland or not experienced, by myself, how the life in village was”.

In the interview with Da Reh, I was able to see the way in which children were following the dance practice occurring in the camp. One of my observations at the Dee

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<sup>2</sup> I refer Moe Le Klo Peh Kha Leh to local code in as a Kayah linguistic phase which is always mentioned by research informants and literally means the Karenni traditions in this research.

Ku Festival was that the children were very happy and became very excited when following the dancing groups. These children, when they grow older, are expected to become involved in the dancing as Da Reh has narrated about his experiences. This is actually so because the children are learning the Karenni traditions and practices by imitating the adults or their parents while they are young. Thus, it can be said that the continuity of the ritual practices in the camp increasingly raises the awareness of having culture or traditions among the youth or children.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The ethnographic study clearly shows the Dee Ku festival is created as a space which helps Karenni refugees to engender sense of belonging and articulate broader identity as Karenni. Through the celebration of Dee Ku festival, the Kayah and Kayaw groups seek to recreate sense of belonging to a group that they were part of it in the past, especially as animists or Karenni sub group. The recreating of making Dee Ku parcel, the Poe Dee Kree divination, and the traditional dancing, as the important components of the Dee Ku festival resembles the one they did in the village. Thus, all these practical components of the Dee Ku Festival help the Karenni refugees to remember and imagine their past, home, and life as subsistence farmers. Moreover, the practice of making Dee Ku parcel and traditional dancing help younger generation, who have no experiences of how their pre-displacement life was to imagine their homeland and know where they originated from. Crucially, this study also observes that the Dee Ku Festival serve as a way to heal the Karenni refugee's trauma of forced migration, and the feeling of losing home and life in the past. As this study observed, the familiar practices in Dee Ku Festival is emphasizes on the personal and household's well-being. Therefore, this study clearly demonstrates that Dee Ku festival does not constitute to sense of collective identity as Karenni.

The Dee Ku festival is extended to social space which articulates broader identity as Karenni. In articulating this space, the KNPP has used the Dee Ku parcel as characterizing the history of the emergence of Karenni and symbolizing the Karenni unity and set up the Dee Ku festival as public event. The sport and stage show have been set up in order to draw the participation of Karenni refugees in the festival. Crucially, the BMN cultural committee has played active role in organizing the

celebration of Dee Ku festival. Thus, this can be said that despite the circumstance of confinement, the BMN Camp cultural committee is engaged as active agent in leading the process of the reinvention and the preservation of Dee Ku practice. Furthermore, the BMN Camp cultural Committee has exercised their agency in a way which they communicated and negotiate with the humanitarian organization and the Thai authorities for support and the right of continuity the ritual practice. Aside from the BMN Camp Cultural Committee, the traditional leader in each section also plays a crucial role in leading the Dee Ku Festival in the section and integrating the section's festival into the camp grand festival. Thus, it can be said that at section level the traditional leaders are also engaged as active agents who work hard to preserve the practice of Dee Ku festival.

This study shows that Dee Ku Festival has been set up as grand festival in order to create space for articulating Karenni identity which formulates through KNPP's nationalist sentiment. In examining a sense of collective identity as Karenni in the Dee Ku Festival, the study found that Karenni refugees do not always follow the agenda of KNPP in celebrating Dee Ku festival, but they also have their own agenda. In this sense, they celebrate festival in their sections for seeking for sense of joyful and sense of belonging which not strict to Karenni identity. Indeed, in this research I demonstrate that the celebrating of Dee Ku Festival allows particular groups, especially Kayah and Kayaw to retain their identity and continually create their space which they traditionally had in the past.