

Chapter 7

Conclusions and Discussions

In studying a group of Karenni refugees living in the Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp, I explored how the Karenni refugees seek to maintain the continuity of three communal events; Karenni National Day, Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe annual ritual festival. Significantly, this research examines the space of identities and its relation to the three communal events. This research argues that despite the insecurity, restrictions, and uncertainty of the displacement circumstance, the Karenni refugees work hard to carry out the three communal events to create space of identities which helps them to maintain a connectedness with the past and connect with broader context, and to an extent, be used as a means for articulating the Karenni identity as a negotiating identity. This thesis connects refugee studies to broader concepts in social science; the concept of space of identity, agency, and community as a process are applied.

Literature on the studies of the refugee communities in a Thailand context has recently paid attention to the notion of the sense of belonging and place which the refugees seek to feel more like home or emplace themselves in a new settlement by recreating rituals or familiar practices in religion. In examining the role of religion in the emplacement process, a study demonstrated that the familiar Buddhist practices help the self-settled Karen refugees to reconstitute a sense of belonging in a new home and reproduce locality (Prasert, 2013). Similarly, the recreation and continuation of the element of pre-displacement past life, material forms, everyday practices, rituals, and festivals serve, in a way, to maintain a sense of continuity with the past in which Karenni refugees work hard to recreate themselves and

a sense of being at home in the displacement (Dudley, 2010). Clearly, these two studies illuminated the notion of “place-making” which focuses on how the refugees recreate a meaning of place and the elements of past life, such as making things, rituals, and everyday practices, to create a sense of familiarity or turning place in the displacement to home.

While the work of Dudley about the Karenni refugee community inadequately examines the ritual or sacred space and its relation to refugees’ identities, this research observes that the three communal events are created as a space of identities. Significantly, the space of identities is socially constructed in notable physical spaces which are imbued with the symbolic meanings of materials, ritual and sacred objects and performances, both in political and tradition contexts and intensified by the social relations within the community. Crucially, this study demonstrates that, through the three communal events, the Karenni refugees are able to overcome the circumstances of confinement in a way in which they engender sense of belonging.

Rather than viewing the refugee as a passive actor or helpless victim, the work of Dudley and Prasert reveal that, as part of the place-making process, the refugees engage as active agents in recreating the sense of being at home or maintaining the continuity with the past. In this thesis, I focus on how the Karenni refugees develop their agency in a way which they reconstruct their identities and recreate their own sense of community through the three communal events. The concept of agency is applied to key community actors who actively engage in leading, organizing, and negotiating for the continuity of the three communal events despite the circumstance of confinement. In such a way, this research has seen the validity of the concept of agency described by Giddens: the structure does not always place constraint on an individual’s action, but often it allows agents to act independently from what they have been limited. In this sense, considering the refugees as a group constrained by the structure of highly-regulated restrictions imposed by the Thai hosting authorities, the group resists against the power of the authority while the authority itself also allows the group to resist against the power in the structure.

Drawing upon the concept of community, this thesis moves beyond the traditional concept of community as structure. Rather, this thesis suggests that community in the

camp can be also illuminated by the concept of community as a process which is a new inventing concept. The imagining community, which is embedded in the conception of community as a process, compels to the conception of imagined community. In this sense, the imagining community pays attention to the marginalized places at local or border space rather than at nation space (Tanabe, 2008). Approaching Tanabe's notion of community as a process, community is defined as the way that people imagine and create their own sense of community, knowledge, and identity. In the light of the power of the nation-state and its homogenizing process, the concept of community as a process pays attention to the struggle and resistance of the marginalized communities in reference to the local population, ethnic minorities, and displaced people. The concept is also concerned with the population at the borders, particularly the ethnic minorities and the displaced people who are "forced to be marginalized in the nation space" (Tanabe: pp7). Intrinsically, the concept informs the process in a way in which the people seek to recreate or re-identify themselves to engender their existence in a national discourse. In this regard, the refugee camp, as a community at the border struggling in recreating and re-identifying their collective identity, would illuminate the concept of community as a process. Thus, the community in the Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp is described as community as a process, apart from its well-designed community as a structure.

Like the other refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, the Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp has a self-administration system with the rules and regulations that are well-constructed and commonly shared in the community. The camp is not merely a refuge space where people seek protection and to settle down, but the camp extends to the community and is involved in the process of making a place meaningful. The Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp is one of the Karenni refugee communities, comprising a diversity of population with ethno-linguistic backgrounds, traditions, and culture. In this sense, it is questionable how people from different ethno-linguistic groups collectively come to identify themselves as Karenni and share the sense of community in the displacement area.

Doubtlessly, the forced displacement moment has brought the refugees to share a sense of togetherness which is constructed by the sense of being displaced by the same cause and struggle in the same uncertain circumstances in the displacement. Furthermore, it

also creates social relations among the various sub-groups who previously were rarely in contact back in their pre-displacement life. For instance, various Karenni sub-groups have come together to interact through the daily contact in the camp. Aside from the forced displacement moment, the research clearly informs that the community is also constructed by the continuity of practices.

The three communal events are constructive practices, produced or re-produced to intensify the social interactions in the community. The context and meanings of the three communal events are differently constructed. Firstly, the Karenni National Day, as a commemorative occasion, is definitely involved within the political context as it was invented by the KNPP in the attempt to formulate the Karenni nationalist identity and raise the conscious awareness of nationalism, especially among the younger generation. It is constructed to the meaning of remembering and imagining of homeland and reconnects the Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp with Karenni State and the Karenni communities abroad.

Secondly, the Dee Ku Festival, which is involved in a tradition context, is recreated by particular Karenni sub-groups that share the common traditions. This festival is largely practiced by a group of Kayah and Kayaw. The event has greatly contributed to the sense of remembering and imagining the past rapture, life as subsistence farmers, and ritual festival which greatly helps the Karenni refugees to recreate their pre-displacement way of life in the camp and the festival is recreated to articulate ethnic identity.

Thirdly, like the Dee Ku Festival, the Kay Htoe Boe Festival is largely recreated by the Kayah and Kayan population. The festival has contributed to the meaning of continuity of the practice in the traditional religion and the origin identity. In such a way, the Kay Htoe Boe Festival allows the Karenni refugees to maintain the connectedness with the past and mobilize the sacred network with the Karenni communities in broader contexts.

In examining the space of identities and its relation to the three communal events, this thesis discloses three major findings. First, the research reveals that, despite the confinement circumstance where the Karenni refugees are recognized by neither the

hosting country nor the country of origin, the Karenni refugees continually created two spaces of identities through the three communal events.

The Karenni nationalist identity is constructed through the Karenni National Day event. Students or younger generation continually participate and engage in the celebration of the Karenni National Day event which was invented by the KNPP to formulate and raise the awareness of the Karenni identity. In doing this, the KNPP has used the role of formal schooling in formulating the Karenni nationalist identity through teaching the history of Karenni independence, the practice of the school assembly, and the singing of the national anthem. All these practices in the school have become important practical components in the agenda of the Karenni National Day. Therefore, the students have become the central group in the participation of the Karenni National Day event while the Camp Committee and the CBOs actively engage together in the committee for organizing the Karenni National Day celebration.

Simultaneously, the ethnic identity is also created through the two annual ritual festivals of Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe. In recreating sense of belonging, the Karenni refugees work hard to maintain their familiar traditional practices in the two annual ritual festivals by recreating sacred symbols, rituals, and dancing performances which they traditionally practiced in the past. In the Dee Ku Festival, the Karenni refugees recreate the practice of making the Dee Ku parcel, rituals, and dancing performances to remember their past life. Similarly, through the Kay Htoe Boe Festival, the Karenni refugees continually erect the pole and perform traditional religious ceremonies and dancing to continue their sacred space in a new spatial context, maintain the practices of the religious tradition, and reconstitute the sense of belonging that they were part of in the past.

Secondly, the research reveals that key community actors, the Camp Committee, the BMN Camp Cultural Committee, the Karenni National Day Committee, and the traditional leaders, continually engage as active agents who lead the process of organizing the events and negotiating for the continuity of the events which help the Karenni refugees to connect broader communities. In celebrating the Karenni National Day, the Camp Committee and the Karenni National Day Committee are active in interactions with the hosting state to negotiate for the right to celebrate and maintain the

connectedness with Karenni State by organizing the Karenni National Day in 2014 in Karenni State. Similarly, the BMN Camp Cultural Committee, the Camp Committee, and the traditional leaders continually work hard to preserve the familiar practices in the two annual ritual festivals through negotiating for financial support from the NGOs and the right for movement and space from the local Thai authorities. More than that, the BMN Camp Cultural Committee mobilizes the sacred network of the Kay Htoe Boe Festival with the Kayah and Kayan communities in Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province and lately in Karenni State through exchanges visits. Thus, it can be said that a web of connection is developed through the sacred network of the Kay Htoe Boe Festival.

Thirdly, the research reveals that not all three communal events constitute to the sense of collective identity as Karenni, particularly two annual ritual festival of Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe festival. Rather, the two annual ritual festivals serve as a space which Karenni refugees seek to recreate sense of belonging to a religion group or group they were part of it in the past. This is because rituals in the Dee Ku and Kay Htoe Boe Festival are conducted for the well-being of household and individuals, Thus, the grand festivals which supported by KNPP nationalist sentiment does not bring Karenni refugees identify or aware of Karenni identity. However, the three communal events have brought Karenni refugees from different ethnic background to involve, interact, and relatively construct community.

Applying the three concepts, this thesis contributes to an understanding of the phenomena of the space-making of identities within the context of the refugee camp which is rarely discussed in relevant refugee studies. Thus, focusing on the topic of identities is difficult, especially among the Karenni group which is more complex in various terms of history, traditions, ethno-languages, religions, culture, and political awareness. It is, thus, complicated to analyze in which way and how the Karenni refugees perceived themselves in the displacement area where they do not know where they will belong to in the future. It is still questionable whether the Karenni identity, which is constructed in the camp, will be a temporary one or a continued one when they return to their home of origin.