



Schooling, Identity, and Nationhood: Karen Mother-Tongue-Based Education in the Thai–Burmese Border Region

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Abstract: Modern Karen education began in the early 1800s when introduced by British and American missionaries at roughly the time the British colonial powers arrived from India. After independence from Great Britain in 1948, Burma faced revolt from ethnic groups including the Karen, in large part, over issues of language and cultural self-rule. This led to the forcible closing of Karen-language schools by the military junta beginning in the 1960s and the re-establishment of Karen schooling by the Karen National Union (KNU) in independent self-rule territories, often near the Thai border. In this context, beginning in the 1980s, Karen-medium language spread into the highlands of Burma and into Thai refugee camps where Karen had been living for nearly four decades. Karen medium education is an important element establishing what Benedict Anderson called the “imagined community”. With mass Karen literacy, a national consciousness emerged, particularly in areas where schools were sustained. This separate consciousness is at the heart of the Karen of Kawthoolei. The Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) was established in 1947 by the KNU. Karen schools provide mother-tongue-based education. Much of the development of the Karen medium curricula was undertaken by the KECD, and it is significantly different from that of the Burmese government’s curriculum, particularly in terms of language medium, literature, and history. Karen schooling reflects the Karen political consciousness, which will be at the heart of any peace agreements negotiated in the still-ongoing Burmese Civil War.



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1. Introduction

Burma¹ is home to more than 100 ethno-linguistic groups and 50–60 million people. The Karen (K’nyaw)² are one of the larger ethnic groups, with 5–7 million living in the Irrawaddy Delta around Yangon, in the highlands along the Thai border, in Thailand, and in diaspora (Lenkova 2015). The Karen were among the earliest arriving indigenous people of today’s Burma, along with a number of other groups including the Chins, Kachin, Karenni, Mons, Arakan, Shan, Naga, Pa’O, Palaung, Wa, and other smaller groups.

This article describes specifically the emergence of Karen education beginning during the British colonial era and how the Karen then established spheres of knowledge, values, and school administration using the Karen language. This led to the establishment of hundreds of Karen medium schools centered around Rangoon and Bassein by the time of Burmese independence in 1948. The curriculum was in Karen in the lower grades and then switched to English at secondary levels. Our article then describes the development of Karen education and how it fragmented after 1962 when the older Karen school systems were nationalized by Ne Win’s military dictatorship and the Burmese language curriculum was imposed by the Burmese Ministry of Education. As Yeo et al. (2020) describe, out of this fragmentation emerged three independent Karen education systems administered by

the Karen National Union (KNU) and other Karen entities in Thailand and Burma. The three are the following:

- (1) A system in Karen State/Kawthoolei in Burma under the administration of the Karen National Union's (KNU) Karen Education and Culture Department;
- (2) Karen education programs in Thai refugee camps administered by Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRC Education Entity); and
- (3) Migrant Karen schools under the Burmese Migrant Worker's Education Committee (BMWEC) in Tak Province, Thailand.

The Karen education emerging inside Thai refugee camps in particular emphasizes modern education with multilingual and mother-tongue-based education practices (MTB-MLE). This is desirable because Karen is well-developed as a written and spoken language.

A Karen alphabet, presses, and newspapers emerged by the 1880s, and mass schooling was also organized beginning at that time in the Irrawaddy Delta around Bassein. "Hta" poetry emerged as a Karen literary style (see, e.g., [Pwe 2018](#), p. 222; [Alwyn 2021](#); [Yeo et al. 2020](#)). Since that time, a twelve-year Karen primary and secondary curriculum has also gone through multiple revisions in the decades it has been in use (see Karen Languages Social Studies and History Textbooks ([KECD 2008](#)) in Karen).

The use of Karen in schools was sanctioned first by the colonial British government in the nineteenth century and, for a brief period, by the government of independent Burma from 1948 until the 1960s.³ However, Karen is no longer officially recognized as a medium of instruction in schools nor of administrative settings in Burma. Nor, for that matter, has Karen ever been recognized in Thailand. It is only in the KNU and KRC sponsored school that there has been the development of a mother-tongue-based Karen education.

Finally, this article will review the challenges faced by Karen education service providers. While this article is primarily descriptive, aiming to highlight the complexities of Karen education system across the two nation-states of Thailand and Burma, the conclusions are rooted in political anthropology. The persistent Karen schooling systems are emphasized, reflecting what Benedict Anderson calls the "horizontal comradeship" of a nation, an entity the international community with its Westphalian principles insists comes only through formal recognition by the world's pre-existing nation-states. In this sense, the Karen education exists as a "nation without a state" ([Waters and LeBlanc 2005](#)). Despite an established system of governance, Karen education is internationally a non-entity. However, among the Karen, this system has persisted since its nineteenth century origins.

1.1. *The Story of the Karen*

Historical record and oral traditions collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries indicate that the Karen were a large "tribe" that migrated south from the steppes of northern Asia into today's Burma beginning about 3000 years ago. What [Rajah \(2002, pp. 521–26\)](#) calls a "conjectural history" has emerged as the basis for an assertion of Karen identity via the school system described here. This history conjectures that long before the Burmese and Tai (Thai) civilizations appeared in Southeast Asia, just over 1000 years ago, the Karen ancestors lived there and kept to themselves and lived in the mountains between what is today Thailand and Burma and in Burma's southern river deltas. Linguistically, Karen belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family.⁴

After Burma gained its independence from Britain in January 1948, political problems crystallized between Karen leaders and the new Burmese government, dominated by ethnic Bamar. The new government refused to acknowledge Karen sovereignty over a "Karenistan", as putatively promised by the departing British ([Callahan 2003](#), p. 105; [Garbagni and Walton 2020](#)). This led to the Karen revolution, which began on 31 January 1949 under the leadership of Karen National Union led by Saw Ba U Gyi, the first president of the Karen nation known as "Kawthoolei".⁵ Saw Ba U Gyi was assassinated by the Burmese military in 1950. Karen-language texts refer to him as the "father of the nation", which are used in the Karen schools described here. Such hagiography, of course, is a feature not only of Karen schools but common to all national school systems.

The Burmese military viewed the Karen as a threat to national unity at the time of independence, in particular, following the rebellion, and in response, Karen units of the Burmese military rebelled in 1948. Much of the difference between Karen and Burmese was focused by the Christianity in Karen culture, even though by British definitions, most Karen were classified as Buddhist or animist. After Burmese soldiers massacred Karen churchgoers at a Christmas service in 1948, the Karen rebellion ignited and has not yet stopped (Gravers 2015; Mirante 1993, p. 32; Callahan 2003, pp. 130–35).⁶ The Karen were pushed out of government and military services, where they had been influential under the British. Of all the many ethnic groups rebelling against the Burmese government, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) was among the largest and best organized, beginning in 1948 and continuing until today. Today, the KNLA controls a large area of Karen State and adjacent areas and have a more-or-less functioning administration with schools, infirmaries, legal system, and social services (Klein 1981; South and Lall 2016a; Yeo et al. 2020).

Prolonged conflict led to an exodus of Karen refugees to Thailand beginning in the 1970s, a movement formalized in international eyes when the refugees came under UNHCR protection in 1984. This escalated even more quickly after 1996, when the Burmese army captured the Karen capital in Manerplaw and on the Thai border just inside Burma (UPCD 2023). As they fled, the Karen refugees brought along the education system that first emerged beginning in the 1880s during the British colonial era. The KNU Karen government in Karen State continues to be attacked by Burmese soldiers and aircraft in 2022, causing casualties and damages, including to schools.

1.2. *Imagining Karen Political Communities*

Benedict Anderson (2006, pp. 37–46) locates the origins of national consciousness in print capitalism. Print capitalism, as described by Anderson, is what drove the standardization of language, the spread of literacy, and ultimately a sense of “horizontal comradeship” that reading the same basic texts and, particularly, common newspapers, generates. From this, a new consciousness arose, a shared silent communion created from consuming the same news, even of distant places never before seen. Thus, someone as distant from another as a nineteenth century citizen of Boston with someone from San Francisco who they never met before could immediately feel comradeship by engaging in a discussion of the shared customs they experienced, acquiring literacy in the context of a common schooling, and consuming newspapers.

Anderson emphasizes the nature of how markets in print media spread during the centuries after Gutenberg invented a costly press, which needed a market in print media in order to recoup the investment. Anderson primarily focuses on the standardization of language and literacy that emerged as languages as diverse as Parisian French, the King’s London English, Bangkok Thai, and Javanese became the “high” version of each language through standardization via newspaper distribution. He emphasized less that such standardized print capitalism emerged from the mass production of primers designed to teach literacy to entire cohorts of children. This would, of course, be how the Karen national consciousness would spread and the medium through which generations of Karen children acquired the narratives of Karen identity (see Gravers 2015).

What Anderson does not really elaborate on, however, is that the generation of mass-produced literature via the printing press also requires mass literacy, which is attainable only through the compulsory education via schooling. Such schools are indeed critical “construction sites” where new national identities are created. This new identity, in turn, uses the new “horizontal identity” to claim the power of the nation-state.⁷ As Anderson puts it, the nation that emerges from the traditions of print capitalism, whatever the language, will seek to create a nation-state. Indeed, this relationship is at the heart of why the Karen of the KNU have sought independence from Burma for the last 100+ years.

Education and literacy are important elements for Karen society and play vital roles in creating the sense of belonging and a shared identity via the production of primers, newspapers, and religious texts. Karen literacy is a foundation for the shared Karen

consciousness, which is similar to that of other nations (See [Anderson 2006](#), pp. 37–46) and is an imagined political community. As with other nations, this Karen political community is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. Anderson explains how the elements of culture become a driving force in the nationalism that is the basis for national imaginings. Many of these imaginings come from beliefs about dominance and subordination, such as that between Bamar nobles and the Karen held in bondage, which persisted for centuries (see also [Fujimora 2020](#), and [Rajah 2002](#) for specific application of ideas regarding Karen nationalism). The traditional pre-colonial dominance of Bamar nobles over the Karen resulted in communal tensions, mutual avoidance, and stereotypes in which Bamar and Karen political units saw each other as political and cultural opposition. How this works from the KNU perspective is described below.

1.2.1. Today's Karen Political Consciousness, Gemeinschaft, and the International System

The KNU Karen political consciousness has roots in British colonialism in Burma (1825–1948). The Karen, unlike the Bamar, viewed British rule as relatively benevolent because the Karen enjoyed a greater political and social autonomy after centuries of domination from the Bamar-speaking courts in Mandalay, Ava, and Pegu (see [Fujimora 2020](#); [Alwyn 2021](#); [Callahan 2003](#), pp. 33, 35–36). As [Fujimora \(2020\)](#) emphasizes, such nationalist feelings among the Karen emerged in opposition to the Bamar and even led to the establishment of the Karen National Association (KNA) in the early 1880s. As [Callahan \(2003, p. 36\)](#) points out, the Karen also readily staffed regiments for the King's Rifles, who participated in suppression of Bamar rebels in the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1947, the Karen National Union (KNU) itself was founded to represent the Karen people's desire for independence as the British left. As the leader of the Karen National Union (KNU), Saw Ba U Gyi petitioned the British directly for an independent Karen Nation (also called Kawthoolei). In 1949, the Karen revolt against Burmese rule began. However, while engaged in peace negotiations with the Burmese, Saw Ba U Gyi in 1950 was assassinated and buried at sea by the Burmese military (see [Pu S'kaw Ler Taw 1977](#) in Karen).

Karen history is taught using the Karen curriculum whether in refugee camps, in Karen-run migrant schools, or in KNU operated school systems inside liberated areas of Karen State in Burma. The Karen curriculum developed independently from the Burmese curriculum produced by the Burmese Ministry of Education, which has a history of Bamar Kingdoms at its center, and ignores Karen history (see [Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012](#)).⁸

The emphasis on different history, language, literature, and cultural curricula is obvious; however, differences extend to the overall organization of schools as well. A particularly important articulation issue being that graduation from a Karen School requires twelve years, while the Burmese government schools traditionally require ten. Additionally important is that English is the primary foreign language in Karen schools, and English as a Second Language instruction begins in primary school. Parts of the Karen secondary school curriculum are English medium, as well. In Karen schools, Burmese is typically only offered as a subject in the Karen schools, and attendance is encouraged at the behest of school administrators. However, it is not a popular elective among Karen populations, which were subject to decades of military confrontation between the KNU, and Burmese military.⁹ Students in schools threatened with attack by the Burmese military are unlikely to take much interest in studying the language of the soldiers. According to [Sharples \(2017\)](#), the continuing fear of attack and memories of persecution have long shaped the identity of the highland Karen living in the Thai–Burma border area.

Suppression of Karen medium schools using the dissident curriculum became particularly strong after 1962 when schools in the Irrawaddy Delta, including those in Bassein, Rangoon and Myaungmya, were closed by the newly installed Ne Win government under policies of “Burmanization”, which required the Burmese language be the medium of instruction.¹⁰ Strategies implemented during this time included a National Education

Strategic Plan, which remained policy until 2010. Schools in the highlands that, today, fly the Kawthoolei flag are still subject to violent closure by the Burmese military.¹¹

Karen education and literacy is still a source of national identity and creates the elements of a “nation” in Anderson’s thinking (See also [Waters and LeBlanc 2005](#)). The dominant Bamar group, with their internationally recognized government, instead of creating the space for common interests, use their military (*Tatmadaw*) to suppress the Karen institutions. *Tatmadaw* practices are facilitated by an international state system based in a United Nations system uninterested in “seeing” insurgent nationalities, such as the Karen. Instead they seek to preserve the Westphalian system of mutual recognition by pre-existing nation-states. This is despite the fact that independent ethnic groups operate mother-tongue-based schools in Burma, including Kachin, Mon, Shan, Wa, etc. (see [Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012](#); [Lall and South 2018](#)).

Max Weber calls this shared sense of belonging “*Gemeinschaft*”, which he describes as the most basic and enduring social structure that is “society.” To Weber, “*Gemeinschaft*” is rooted in beliefs about the persistence of honor and prestige and reflects a social identity about who is “us” and who is “them” (Waters and [Waters and Waters 2015](#), pp. 4–6), or in other words, in Burma, who is the Bamar and who are the KNU Karen.

1.2.2. The Three Systems of Independent Karen Education

There are three different types of independent Karen education schools operated by dissident Karen (see [Yeo et al. 2020](#)). These are summarized in Table 1, which will give the reader a sense of how extensive, vibrant, but fragmented Karen education is today, even as over 200,000 students are educated using the Karen curriculum.

Table 1. Summary of three types of Karen education system.

Type of Education System	No. of Teacher	No. of Students	No. of School	Subjects	Grade/Level	Organization Affiliated
1. Karen Education and Culture Department (Burma)	11,309	179,767	1589	Karen, English, Burmese, History, Geography, Math, Science, and Social Studies	Primary to High School and Junior College	Karen National Union
2. Karen Refugee Committee—Education Entity (Thailand)	1515	26,775	160	Karen, English, Burmese, History, Geography, Social Science, Maths, and Social Studies	Nursery to Grade 12 and Junior College	Karen Refugee Committee
3. Migrant Learning Centre (Thailand)	176	3682	24	Karen, History, English, Geography, Burmese, Maths, Science, and Computer.	Primary to Grade 12 and Tertiary education	Burmese Migrant Workers’ Education Committee

(Sources: KECD and KRCEE Annual Reports, 2018–2019. Typology adapted from [Yeo et al. 2020](#)).

This paper is specifically about these three systems. However, it should be noted that a number of “joint administration” schools were also opened in the relatively open period between 2012 and 2021. Joint administration schools included curriculum from both the KNU schools and the government schools. (See [Yeo et al. 2020](#)).

Since the 1 February 2021 Burmese coup, the Karen school system is reported by school administrators to have grown, because many teachers in the Burmese medium schools of Karen State are engaging in the civil disobedience movement (CDM), leading to the closure of Burmese government schools, including the jointly administered programs. Parents in Karen State are seeking an education for their children in the KNU administered schools, which anecdote indicates are in many areas the only education still available in the face of widespread resistance to the 1 February 2021 coup in Burma.

1.3. Beyond Nationalism and Gemeinschaft

Benedict Anderson and Max Weber provide a fundamental understanding of the relationship between the imagined community and how it was given expression in moder-

nity. Anderson describes primarily the eighteenth to the twentieth century origins of such imaginings in print capitalism, an origin that overlaps squarely with the first Karen printing operations in nineteenth century Rangoon and Bassein. Arjun Appadurai (1996) explicitly takes Anderson's ideas about imagining communities, including nations, a step further by noting that electronic media fundamentally changes how such imaginings now go beyond print and include media such as music, film, radio, television, and the internet. He writes that "diasporic public spheres emerge in such context", which spread not just within national boundaries but are "rhizomic" (Appadurai 1996, pp. 21, 28).

Karen nationalism began in the context of the emergence of print capitalism, as described by Anderson, in the same respect that other national languages did. However, in recent decades, for not only global languages but also Karen, the emergence of the electronic media of music, radio, television, and since the early twentieth-first century, the internet has been profound. There are Karen news channels operated by the KNU and allied units, and atrocity films documenting attacks by the Burmese military are widely shared, as are films celebrating the Karen National Army, patriotic celebrations, and religious services. These operate wherever the Karen diaspora is found. Karen pop stars also emerged in this public sphere in recent years, creating rap songs and videos in Karen, which are readily available on YouTube (see Hill 2022a, 2022b) and speak to issues of nationalism, parent–youth tensions, and of course, romance. A widely disseminated song about status as an internally displaced person in Myanmar spoke straight to political issues (Sharples 2022, p. 701). Such expressions of culture both create and reflect shared imaginings in the early twenty-first century, as surely as the newspapers Anderson described a standardizing identity earlier. This is why Appadurai emphasized that including the expansion of Anderson's approaches to electronic media as fruitful.

Appadurai, of course, was not the first one to notice this; at the most basic level Marshall McLuhan's prescient observation that "the medium is the message" is perhaps the beginning for understanding how national consciousness operates in the post-modern world. Other media theorists such as Harold Innis (1950) explicitly wrote about the spread of written words and their role in establishing empire, starting with the Egyptian use of papyrus and the communicative systems that medium generated. Innis concluded his study by describing how the printing press led to the more efficient spread of rules and laws across Europe and the British Empire, with the irony that the use of the press was encouraged in England, while at the same time, the ownership of presses was restricted in British colonies such as Burma. Presses were seen by the British as so powerful that they established licensing and censorship regimes.¹²

Relevant to the case of Burma and the Karen, Innis notes how the mastery of administrative techniques rested on the use of paper records that permitted the British Empire to dominate distant lands for several centuries. Additionally relevant is Innis's (1950, pp. 12–13) point that the definition of a group is not strictly dependent on the written words, as intellectuals with their bias toward writing, but also on the spoken words of poetry, music, and other spoken language that spreads via electronic media far and wide (see also Waters and Philhour 2019). More recently, *The Shallows* (Carr 2011) traces the story of how writing, books, and newer forms of media have shaped how human groups form and are shaped by the capacity to communicate and imagine across great distances, including in diasporic communities such as the Karen.

2. The Development of Karen Education, 1840s to the Present

Karen education began in the 1840s with the development of Karen literacy, the establishment of a printing press, and the emergence of schooling. The earliest efforts were in the Irrawaddy River Delta, which became British Burma's capital in Rangoon in 1854 (Alwyn 2021). This led to a rapid expansion of the Karen school systems, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century. The programs flourished around the large Christian mission compound in Bassein in the Irrawaddy River Delta. However, after 1962, these schools began to decline as government support was withdrawn in favor of a "Burman-

ized" curriculum promoted by Prime Minister Ne Win's Education Ministry. Intensive mother-tongue-based Karen language instruction moved first into the highlands, where independent schools were sustained, and after 1984, also into refugee camps in Thailand supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. At the same time, independent "Migrant Centers" in Mae Sot, Thailand, in particular, opened up, offering mixes of Karen, Burmese, Thai, and English language instruction from pre-school to post-secondary levels.¹³

2.1. Karen Education in Nineteenth Century

The origins of the formal Karen Education, begun in the 1840s, are in the lowlands of the Irrawaddy River Delta. Baptist Mission primary schools among Karen were opened by Rev. Beecher, an American missionary in 1852 at Bassein. A Karen secondary school was opened in Koesue in 1854, and The Karen Baptist Theological Seminary was established in 1845 in Rangoon to train pastors literate in Karen and English. Rev. Beecher started a secular Karen institute in 1858 as the Bassein Sgaw Karen Normal and Industrial Institute, teaching English, Bible, Mathematics, Geography, History, and Health, along with industrial and housekeeping subjects. Industrial subjects included carpentry, joinery, and wheelwright. The science of rice cultivation, including harvest, processing, and storage, was also taught. Finally, the institute taught courses in bamboo, furniture care, and sewing. There was no indication that Burmese language was taught in the Karen schools as a subject before Burma's independence (see [Pwe 2018](#); [Oh et al. 2021](#), p. 5).

A Karen printing press was established in 1881. The printing press published five books in Burmese, twelve books in Karen, and ten books in English. It also began publishing the first Karen newspaper, called *Dawkalu*, meaning "Entire Race", in 1885. Thus, the press, as well as the first modern proto-nationalist organization in what is now Burma, The Karen National Association, was established ([Pwe 2018](#); [Fujimora 2020](#)).

The Karen schools developed a written alphabetic script to write both *Sgaw* and *Pwo* dialects of Karen. The scripts use an alphabetic system that is similar in appearance to Burmese. A growing level of literacy emerged among the Karen and was used for both religious and secular purposes. By Burmese independence in 1948, there was a network of primary schools teaching basic literacy in Karen that fed into English medium secondary schools, and colleges. These schools were funded by the independent Burmese government and were found across Rangoon and southeastern Burma both inside and outside of what is today considered Karen State ([Rebecca 1989](#)).¹⁴ These independent schools continued under the newly independent Burmese government after 1948.

2.2. Karen Educational Autonomy before 1962

At independence, the Karen schools were accredited by the central government, which then recognized Karen and English medium instruction. The Karen education system the government supported was primarily composed of private institutions or schools established by American and British missionaries; though by the 1950s, they had substantial autonomy from the foreign mission societies, receiving funding from the Ministry of Education in Rangoon.

The new Revolutionary Council formed in 1962 after a military coup led by General Ne Win proclaimed a political program entitled "*The Burmese Way to Socialism*". This policy led to the nationalization of all schooling under the authority of the Ministry of Education in Rangoon. This became known as a program of "Burmanization" as power was concentrated into the hands of the centralized military authorities in Rangoon. This laid the foundation for the centralized "socialist" education system and the nationalization policies of society focused on ethnic Burmese culture and Buddhism ([Smith 1991](#); [Eh Htoo 2021](#)). As a result, the older Karen schools began to disappear from the lowlands where the Burmese military regime insisted on the hiring of teachers certified in Burmese-medium government teacher training institutions. In the context of the Burmanization and socialism policies of the Ne Win government, approximately 300 schools around Bassein and Rangoon switched

languages, and the Burmese government stopped accrediting the older curriculum and withheld teaching licenses from Karen teachers, effectively banning the study of Karen ethnic history and non-Burmese identities (Rebecca 1989). This happened in the Karen schools, as well as the other schools of the highland peoples (see, e.g., Sharples 2022, p. 695; Williams and Iwasaki 2022).

2.3. *The Emergence of Independent Karen School Systems in Burma and Thailand*

The KNU, other ethnic armed groups, and Burmese civil society actors resisted Burmanization through a number of strategies, including armed conflict and by establishing their own schools.¹⁵ As Oh et al. (2021, p. 5) notes:

The most compelling aspect of Karen education in these borderlands is that it is a transborder system of non-state education developed independently from the Burmese state. It owes its existence to a combination of structural and ideological circumstances. These include the KNU's ethnic agenda, the poor resourcing of the Burmese government, harsh and inaccessible terrain in a context of armed conflict, and a border context of refugee settlements. The latter were established on the Thai side with minimal assistance from the Thai government, and then resourced by the refugee communities and later by [International Non-governmental Organizations].

In parallel development were the education systems that favored, preserved, and reproduced language and culture under difficult circumstances, particularly in the remote highlands (South and Lall 2016a, 2016b). In this fashion, Karen education survived despite hostile military rule after 1962. So even as Karen education disappeared in the Irrawaddy Delta and former capital in Rangoon, it thrived in the highlands, in the Thai refugee camps, and in the migrant areas in Thailand, typically using the KECD curriculum (Lall 2021; Yeo et al. 2020).

The Burmese military in the early 1990s undertook military offensives that eventually resulted in the fall of the KNU capital at Manerplaw in 1995–1996. Relocating the KNU “Ministries” to Mae Sot in Thailand put them in contact with international non-governmental organizations interested in educational reform. Once established in the 1990s, the new ministries evaluated how modern pedagogical approaches would be used effectively and encouraged young Karen to study these techniques in the United States, Australia, and Canada where they had resettled and then return to implement programs in the refugee encampments and in Mae Sot. In this context the refugee schools received not only Karen students from KNU controlled areas of Burma but also ethnic students from Rangoon/Yangon, Irrawaddy, and Thanintharyi Divisions desiring a Karen and/or English curriculum.

2.4. *Independent Karen Education in Thailand Today (Refugee Camps, and Migrant Centers)*

The first formal “temporary shelter” (i.e., refugee camp) for Karen in Thailand was established in Tak Province in 1984, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. This happened as the Karen retreated from Burmese army attacks. Although the Thai government is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it allowed the Karen to set up temporary settlements so long as international non-governmental organizations provided the assistance (Song 2015). According to the Karen Refugee Committee,¹⁶ initially, there were 52 designated refugee camps along the Thai–Burma border in six provinces, beginning in 1994. Later, the camps were consolidated into four provinces, including Mae Hong Song, Tak, Ratchburi, and Sangklaburi provinces. At its peak in the mid-1990s, Thailand registered more than 150,000 refugees from Burma, the majority of whom were Karen. Since then, the number of refugees declined as many have left for third countries,¹⁷ resettled themselves legally and illegally in Thailand, or returned to Burma, typically to Karen State.

There are five main para-governmental programs KRC offers in the camps staffed by KRC, including health, livelihood, education, social affairs, and camp management.

Schools are staffed and managed by refugees themselves under the leadership of the KRC's "Education Entity". Teachers are recruited from refugees and are trained under the leadership of this Education Entity, which is funded by donor countries.¹⁸

The KRC's Education Entity developed the Karen curriculum by adapting the older KECD curriculum, which in turn, was based on the Karen curricula developed during the colonial era of British Burma. The school systems developed a primary and secondary curriculum lasting twelve years, plus offering opportunities for teacher training. The refugee camp schools had an advantage in the development of Karen education because they were not subject to attacks by the Burmese military, and modern pedagogical techniques emphasizing critical thinking were introduced by international non-governmental organizations, and instructors from the Karen diaspora trained in modern teaching techniques.

The shared consciousness that emerged among the Karen crossed international boundaries "rhizomatically" as refugees grew up in the camps and in diaspora, including those who have no personal memory of Burma. For Karen attached to the KNU and refugee areas, home has become a place where they belong or were born. Ironically, refugee children born in the camps consider camps their home and the Karen diaspora and Kawthoolei their nation.

How clear was this consciousness? In 2015 KED published an education policy with the following four basic principles and, notably, leaves out references to national boundaries.

- Every Karen shall learn his own literature and language
- Every Karen shall be acquainted with Karen history
- The Karen culture, customs, and traditions shall be promoted
- Our own Karen culture, customs, and traditions shall be made to be respected by the other ethnic nationalities, and the cultures, customs, and traditions of the other ethnic nationalities shall mutually be recognized and respected. (quoted in [Lall 2021](#), p. 251).

3. Karen Education Curriculum and Administration

In Thailand, there are two types of Karen schools. First, within the refugee camps, there are schools supported by the Karen Education Committee Education Entity (KRC Education Entity). These schools have educated hundreds of thousands of Karen children since their establishment in the 1990s. These Karen language schools are permitted by the Thai government but instruction is limited to the refugee camps. In addition, there are smaller migrant learning centers inside Thailand itself where Karen language instruction also occurs. These schools are licensed (but not accredited) by the Thai Ministry of Education and often focus on having students graduate into accredited higher education programs in Thailand.

Governance of curriculum and administration are as [Oh et al. \(2021\)](#) note, in the interstitial places between the established states of Burma and Thailand. As they describe, this has emerged in a world where the recognized state players, i.e., Burma and Thailand, created conditions where the system could first emerge and then become a focus of a national consciousness, which the Burmese may not have intended but, as a result of their persecution, somehow cultivated.

3.1. Karen Education in Refugee Camps

KRC Education Entity schools and learning centers are staffed and managed by the refugees residing in the camps with help from international non-governmental organizations. The camps are ultimately under the authority of the Thai government but funded through donations coordinated and administered by international non-governmental organizations. The KRC Education Entity, in coordination with an "Office of Camp Education Entity", are camp-based bodies of the KRC Education Entity that operate the day-to-day educational programs for the schools. In 2020, there were 18 KRC Education Entity central administrative staff managing schools in seven Karen refugee camps with 1220 teachers, 20,881 students, and 160 schools from basic to post-higher-secondary school level.

Post-secondary education plays an important role in refugee camps as students cannot typically seek higher education in Thailand or Burma. Currently, there are nine higher education schools with 913 students and 95 teachers operating inside the camps. Much HE is focused on teacher preparation for Karen language schools in the camps and the KNU-controlled areas of Burma.

The central office of the KRC Education Entity also implements and manages general education activities such as trainings, teacher recruitment, school exams, school inspection, reporting on behalf of schools, and organization of coordination meetings. The KRC Education Entity also coordinates communication with the camp committee on daily camp's activities. There were, in 2020, 48 KRC Education Entity staff, comprised of a coordinator, secretary, data officer, administrator, logistics, and training in-charge. In addition to school programs, KRCEE helps coordinate with other related camp activities days such as World Teacher's Day, World Peace Day, Karen New Year, Karen Revolution Day, and other Karen social activities.

There is some progress toward Thai accreditation of learning in the camps so graduates can apply to study at Thai and overseas colleges and universities. However, the Thai government has long been reluctant to recognize refugee education systems, which would be seen as a direct challenge to the sovereignty of the Burmese government's Ministry of Education (see [Oh 2011](#)). A Framework of Cooperation with the Office of the Vocational Education Commission under the Thai Ministry of Education was signed in 2020 with certification/accreditation as one of the objectives. The Royal Thai Government also provides sanctuary to the refugees and allows local and international organizations to operate in the camps, including those delivering educational services. Nevertheless, despite a robust school system in the camps, school completion certificates are accredited only by the KNU and KRC and do not give refugee graduates access to outside educational opportunities in Burma or Thailand.

3.1.1. Refugee School Curriculum

The camp-based curriculum is similar to the KECD curriculum offered in the KNU-held areas of Kawthoolei (see [Yeo et al. 2020](#)). Since 2008, the refugee camp's education system was standardized with new curricula designed and supported by Karen education stakeholders and international non-governmental organizations. The KRC Education Entity curriculum promotes critical thinking and uses student-centered pedagogy. From primary to post-secondary schools, English is taught as a subject while the Karen language is the medium of teaching. Consistent with mother-tongue-based education principles, the Burmese language is taught only as a subject but not as a teaching medium. The Thai language is also occasionally taught in some schools as an elective. Karen and English are the primary languages of the KRC Education Entity schools. At all levels, Karen history, literature, poetry, and world history are taught.

The subjects taught include Karen, English, Burmese, Mathematics, Science, Geography, History, and Thai (optional). In higher education programs, all subjects are taught in English and only occasionally in Karen.

Karen History is not taught in Burmese government schools. This creates divergent understandings of "Burmese history", much of which is contradictory when Karen and Burmese accounts are compared (see [Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012](#), pp. 68–70). Karen history textbooks teach about the positive legacy of the British parliamentary system and the American education system, which were inherited from the British colonial era, whereas Burmese history textbooks refer to Britain as an external enemy trying to destroy the country, and describes the British as imperialists and collaborators as "stooges".¹⁹

Karen history also teaches that the Bamar culture and its Kings dominated and enslaved the Karen before the arrival of the British. The British arrival in the nineteenth century is described as a liberation from Burmese domination, which permitted the re-emergence of indigenous Karen culture ([Saw Aung Hla 2014](#) in Karen; and [Alwyn 2021](#)). On the other hand, Burmese history teaches that the Karen are rebels and a threat to national

unity, particularly in the context of the highly centralized government structures insisted upon by the Bamar leaders. The Karen leaders in the camps encourage Burmese language to be included in their curriculum, but not surprisingly, most young refugee students resist learning the Burmese language, which is viewed as a tool of domination.²⁰

3.1.2. Examples of the KRC/KNU Refugee School Curriculum

Karen texts treat the Karen rebellion after Burma's independence in 1948 very differently than do Burmese government texts (see Social Studies and History Textbooks of [KECD 2008](#), in Karen; and [KECD 2022](#), in English), and discussion in [Salem-Gervais and Metro \(2012\)](#).²¹ In terms of cultural specifics, in addition to Karen being the medium of instruction in primary schools and in portions of secondary and post-secondary education, there are other dissimilarities; a few examples follow.

1. Karen poetry (Hta)—Karen poetry is studied from Grade 6–8 in the Karen subject. The writing style of the Karen essay is studied, drawing from Karen Hta literary styles. Beginning in Grade 8, the varieties of Karen Hta and its interpretation are reviewed. In Grade 9 and 10 of the Karen subject, different classifications of Karen Hta and its history are studied. ([KECD 2022](#)). The details of Karen Hta refer to what writer Saw Taw calls a kind of Karen Poetry (Karen Baptist Theological Seminary, Rangoon ([Saw Taw 2014](#), in Karen).
2. Aung San—General Aung San is not specifically mentioned in the Karen history curriculum and is mentioned only in a brief history of the Burma revolutionary movement. The conflict between the Burmese Independence Army commanded by General Aung San and the Karen during World War II is described in History in Grade 7, including the massacres of Karen undertaken by General Aung San's army.
3. Saw Ba U Gyi—Saw Ba U Gyi is studied in Karen school in Grade 6 and Grade 10 as the national hero and father of the nation. In Grade 6, Saw Ba U Gyi's biography is also studied in both Burmese and Karen subjects. His writing is studied in Grade 10 and 11 in Karen History. Saw Ba U Gyi's writing was originally in English, and the Grade 10 and 11 materials about him are taught in English ([KECD 2022](#)).
4. Religious diversity—is studied in Grade 6, 7, 9, and 10 of Social Studies. In Grade 6, 7, and 9, it is studied in the Karen language, and English in Grade 10 is discussed. The importance of religion and the religious diversity of Burma, including Christianity, Islam, Hindu, and Buddhism are studied ([KECD 2022](#)).

3.1.3. Teacher Training and Examinations

Academic evaluations for secondary schools graduation are conducted through a Board Exam for Grade 10 and Grade 12 by the KRC Education Entity. The exams are primarily in Karen but also have portions in English. KRCEE is responsible for conducting and evaluating the result of the examinations. Students failing to sit for board examinations are allowed re-examination with any reasonable excuse. Any student seeking to study in the higher education program must pass an entrance test, which is conducted after the school board exam is completed. English, Mathematics, and general knowledge are important subjects on higher education entrance tests.

Basic teacher training for Karen schools is offered in the refugee camps and accredited by the KNU. Graduates staff KRC schools in the refugee camps and in the KNU schools in Kawthoolei. Teacher trainings are also organized twice a year for in-service and pre-service teachers as part of the basic education program. In addition to this, subject training is also provided once a year that helps teachers to improve teaching quality. The KRC Education Entity, along with the education service providers, organize trainings with support from camp-level staff. For higher education programs, teacher training is provided upon request from the schools. Training commonly requested by the higher education schools includes curriculum development, classroom management, lesson-planning, and financial management.

Higher education programs run semi-independently in terms of curriculum and teacher training. The KRC Education Entity does not monitor them directly but includes them in the school report of activities to KRC and KNU.

A challenge faced by KRC Education Entity is teaching staff turnover. This is because teaching is basically voluntary. Teachers are paid, as of 2020, stipends of 800–1200 Thai Baht (25–35\$US) per month. Salaries come from a mix of donations from international non-governmental organizations, overseas Karen, and parents. Staff turnover happens when a refugee teacher resettles in a third country, returns to Kawthoolei (Karen State) or Burma proper, or seeks another job in Thailand. Regardless of these circumstances, many refugee teachers remain committed largely out of a sense of Karen patriotism, and schools in refugee camps continue to receive students from Karen State (Burma) and from as far away as Rangoon. This is not surprising as schools in the camps are stable, providing modern education with mother-tongue-based and multilingual education.

3.2. *Karen Education in Thai Border: International Migrant Learning Centers*

Karen State shares a border with Thailand and is crossed by international highways between Bangkok and Rangoon. Many people from Burma come to work in Thailand as migrant workers from the neighboring Karen State. Mae Sot, one of the districts of Thailand's Tak province, is a commercial town, largely relying on workers from Burma. According to the Mae Sot Labor Department, there are 143,012 registered migrant workers in Mae Sot, although as many as 200,000 more, including their dependents, are thought to be living and working without legal permission (Pyne 2007; Lwin 2019). A large proportion speaks Karen as a mother-tongue. Migrant children's parents often work in garment factories and agriculture.

Migrant learning centers are operated by Burmese Migrant Worker's Education Committee (BMWEC) in Thailand. Classes reflect Burmese, Karen, English, Thai, and other systems. The actual courses are typically conducted in Karen, Burmese, English, and Thai. The Thai Ministry of Education recognizes such schools as "Learning Centers" but not as accredited schools. BMWEC itself is a community organization based in Mae Sot. BMWEC aims to provide opportunity to as many children and young people as possible to have access to quality education. In 2020, there were 3682 students, 176 teachers, and 24 learning centers under BMWEC (see Table 1). Approximately 3000 of the students lived on the Thai side of the border but were originally from Burma. Many lived in shanty houses with their parents, who worked as daily laborers in factories, building construction, or in agriculture. A good number lived in boarding houses attached to schools. Many students were Karen but the language of instruction varied, though the dominant language was Burmese. The popularity of Burmese was followed by Karen, English, and other ethnic languages, reflecting the diversity of students from Burma in Mae Sot.

Most BMWEC migrant teachers are former teachers, former political activists, or migrant workers from Burma (Lwin 2019). Under BMWEC, the teachers are trained each year with support from international non-governmental organizations. Teacher training in reading, writing, and critical thinking is offered to pre-service teachers, and subject training is offered for in-service teachers. The Burmese Migrant Teacher's Association was formed by BMWEC to manage and assist the migrant teachers (Pyne 2007). Migrant learning center teachers are often undocumented migrants who graduated from at least sixth grade and do not have a day laborer or factory job in Thailand (Johnson 2013). According to Thai Labor Law, migrant workers cannot be employed as teachers in Thai accredited schools, which require a teacher's license and certificates.

Migrant learning centers themselves are licensed but unaccredited in Thailand and, therefore, cannot give recognized diplomas. Since 2005, others have operated with the tacit approval of Thai immigration officials, even though they may not have documentation allowing them to legally exist as schools in Thailand. Due to the diverse background of students, the instructional medium used in the migrant learning center classrooms are most

often Burmese ([Johnson 2013](#)), although there are quite a number of them managed by ethnic Karen that use the Karen language as the medium of instruction.

3.2.1. Education System/Curriculum of Learning Centers

Migrant learning centers are established near where migrant workers live in Thailand. Some learning centers do not have a permanent structure or building because of the mobile nature of the work, especially in agricultural and farming areas. Thus, there is no fixed structure for the schools or education levels, and many provide only primary school level basic literacy, numeracy, and cultural programs. A few offer high school level education and preparatory courses for the American General Education Development (GED) certificate. The curriculum used at migrant learning centers is independent of Thai schools, and some borrow from Burmese, Karen, or other ethnic curricula from Burma. MLCs are sometimes established based on ethnicity so the curricula are not uniform. Therefore, some learning centers do not have a formal structure or formal school setting. The main subjects taught are English, Burmese, Karen, Math, Science, Geography, History, and Thai.

BMWEC is the only body managing the migrant schools, and its main work is focused only on funding, teacher trainings, and teacher recruitment supported by non-governmental organizations and the Burmese Migrant Teacher Association (BMTA). During recent years, migrant schools began codifying their curriculum in order to seek recognition by the Thai Ministry of Education. For specifically Karen Migrant Schools run by the Karen, the curriculum is as similar as possible to that of the KECD in the Karen State of Burma and KRCEE in Thai refugee camps. However, other ethnic learning centers prefer to teach their own syllabi using Burmese or other languages.

3.2.2. Articulation with Thai and Higher Education Systems

Under 2015 policy of the Thai Ministry of Education, many migrant students now pursue their studies in Thai public schools and universities if they master Thai well enough to pass Thai exams ([ILO 2014](#)). However, due to low proficiency in the Thai language, many migrant students prefer Thai private universities where international programs use English as the medium of instruction. These programs require a secondary school leaving certificate from an English-speaking school or the equivalent, such as the American General Education Degree (GED) certificate. This substitutes for the unaccredited Karen secondary leaving certificate. Ironically, this means that Burmese and Karen students become proficient in subjects such as American History, American Government, and American Literature to pass the GED exam and study in Thai universities.

Following political reforms after 2015 in Burma, some migrant schools are now registered with Burma's Ministry of Education, and Burmese-speaking graduates are eligible to sit for Burmese matriculation and board examinations. However, migrant schools serving them are reluctant to have students sit for these exams because ethnic students lack necessary Burmese language skills. Any interest in studying in Burma, of course, disappeared after the 1 February 2021 coup, which resulted in the closure of many institutions of higher education in Burma.

4. Challenges in Karen Education

Earlier sections of this paper discussed the origins of Karen education in the nineteenth century. It emphasizes that Karen schooling, identity, and understanding of nationhood were achieved through education, as happens in other nations (see [Anderson 2006](#); [Waters and LeBlanc 2005](#); [Yeo et al. 2020](#)). However, despite having well-established institutional independence, the Karen education systems under KECD and KRC Education Entity face inevitable challenges because they are still outside the state education systems of Burma and Thailand and lack international recognition.

Nevertheless, the "horizontal kinship" Benedict Anderson described in *Imagined Communities* is felt across the border regions of Burma and Thailand. The schooling and education systems, irrespective of the lack of international recognition, reflect this hori-

zontal kinship and an imagined national community. This reflects much more than an economic unity or what Weber called a *Gesellschaft*, i.e., an anonymous rationalized marketplace where identity does not matter. Rather, the deep horizontal ties emerging from the schooling system instead reflect a *Gemeinschaft*, which means that there is a strong bond of community and kinship expressed in social interaction, in this case, through the independent schooling and education of the Karen. This is how Karen-language schools sustained themselves across a period of at least 170 years.²²

However, the KNU is recognized only as a non-state actor by the international community rather than legitimate recognizable government. Thus, KECD as one of the departments of KNU does not have international legitimacy even though it has provided mother-tongue-based educational services since its inception in the 1950s. Likewise, a large proportion of the Karen population in highland Burma considers KNU a legitimate government, reflective of a *Gemeinschaft*.

4.1. The Karen Imagined Community and Schools

Benedict [Anderson](#) (2006, pp. 37–46) described the importance of mass literacy for creating feelings of nationalism and the demand for a state, and [Appadurai](#) (1996) described how electronic media effect such consciousness. Out of the Karen literacy efforts of the nineteenth century, such feelings of nationalism emerged, and a shared identity in large part was created at schools sponsored by the KNU and other entities.

However, in the modern world, having a nationality, while sufficient to create a demand for a state, is insufficient to gain international recognition in the Westphalian system, which is the ultimate basis for nation-statehood, not simply a national consciousness. The tension between these two realities is ultimately at the heart of the on-going civil war. Whose sense of national identity—Karen or Burmese—is most salient? The answer is actually transcribed in the hearts of the Karen who have attended and created the schools of the KNU and Kawthoolei. For these people, unlike perhaps their cousins in Yangon, the answer is in Kawthoolei and the on-going revolt, which is in response to decades of attacks by the Burmese government.

4.2. Karen Gemeinschaft and The International Nation-State System

In the Karen case, a national consciousness was reinforced by Ne Win's policies of Burmanization, which asserted a *Gemeinschaft* rooted in a Bamar identity that trumped Karen identity in schools and elsewhere (See [Holmes 1967](#); [Boshier 2016](#); [Eh Htoo 2021](#)). In the name of Ne Win's centralization, Karen schools were nationalized, and the curriculum shifted to that prescribed by the Burmese Ministry of Education, which included an insistence on Burmese medium instruction and an implicit assumption of Burmese mother-tongue. This was based on the belief that the country needed a unifying sense of national identity based on one culture, one language, and one religion ([Lall 2021](#), pp. 34–36). Under such policy, nationalization of the schools meant that Karen-speaking Christian teachers were replaced with Burmese-speaking teachers accredited by the Burmese Ministry of Education. The centrality of Burmese language and identity was highlighted by military officers who took over the government, with the result that in the 1960s, Karen-medium instruction began to disappear, particularly in Rangoon and the Irrawaddy River Delta. In other words, the Burmanization programs were successful. However, in the highlands, where the KNU established itself and its schools, Burmanization was unsuccessful. In the Karen highlands, the Karen sense of distinction was sustained and even rigidified as the Karen identity was cultivated and interaction with Burmese-speaking peoples declined.²³ The inevitable problems of sustaining such an ethno-nationalist school was highlighted during the brief period of the National Ceasefire Agreement (2015–2021) between the KNU and the central government. The government's position was highlighted in [Oh et al. \(2021](#), p. 645) in this fashion:

... the political context of the border is strongly tied up in ethno-nationalist driven armed conflict, the legitimacy of non-state armed groups ... as gover-

nance bodies in education is disputed within the framework of the central state government. From the state perspective, it is the Burmese Ministry of Education alone, with its Burmese language curriculum, that is the rightful administrator of education across the country

In essence, there is a mutual acknowledgment of the importance of schooling in sustaining the *Gemeinschaft* underpinning political legitimacy. The question though is whether there is a way for Karen and Burmese *Gemeinschaft* to compromise and share in this legitimacy. The answer during the brief Ceasefire period seemed to be “maybe”. Post-coup the answer is “no”.

Admittedly, this distinction is eroded in the context of internal divisions within the Karen *Gemeinschaft*, where there are splintered identities reflecting language, geography, political boundaries, educational history, and cultural orientation. Especially in cities and towns such as Rangoon, the “Other Karen” speak more in Burmese rather than Karen as a consequence of long-term Burmanization policies that resulted in the elimination of Karen schooling and the decline of Karen literacy (see, e.g., [Thawngmung 2011](#)). On the other hand, the Karen in refugee camps or territory under KNU use Karen as the dominant language and may not even speak Burmese as a second language. In the same way, in Karen-run migrant schools, the Karen language is used as the medium of instruction and for daily communication ([Kuroiwa and Verkuyten 2008](#); [Yeo et al. 2020](#)).

Still, a common shared vision emerged from this hodge-podge of Karen schooling and literacy, the sort that is at the heart of an imagined community that, as Anderson notes, are “the origins of national consciousness”. This came as publishers, teachers, and leaders made decisions regarding standard languages in ways that made the mass production of religious and secular literature financially feasible. This was how the newspapers of the 1880s were sustained, which gave birth to a persistent and successful Karen school system that has been independent from central control by either Burma or Thailand for more than a century.²⁴

The schools also constructed and reconstructed symbolic elements of Karen society, including language, foods, dance, ritual or religious practices, and music. Outside the schools, the Karen wrist-tying ceremony is considered the most important religious festival, drawing Karen across the world to celebrate. The Karen traditional dance (or Don Dance) is popular and performed during important events, especially Karen New Year. Given this strength of institution and traditions, it is inevitable perhaps that political symbolism emerges as well. The Karen flag flying by itself in front of the KNU operated Karen schools of Kawthoolei is a challenge to Burmese authority and makes the schools subject to attack by the Burmese military. The Karen national anthem, borrowing from the Karen Protestant hymnal, promotes values of honesty, hospitality, and goodness. The flag and anthem are taught in Karen Schools on both sides of the Thai–Burma border. They make for a nation, an imagined community, but only a pseudo-state.²⁵

The point is that the Karen living in Thai refugee camps, and in KNU controlled Kawthoolei, assert social boundaries using cultural habits, governance, and education distinct from the dominant Bamar and Thai society, similar to other incipient communities described by Anderson. This distinction gives the Kawthoolei Karen a sense of security and ownership rooted in the nationalism taught in the school system and other institutions. Ultimately, this is the sense of “horizontal comradeship”, i.e., consciousness ([Anderson 2006](#), p. 7) described in *Imagined Communities*. The Karen living in the border regions responded by re-creating themselves as a *Gemeinschaft* that maintains and establishes a national identity (see [Fujimora 2020](#)).

5. Conclusions

Though mother-tongue based-Karen education in Irrawaddy and Rangoon regions deteriorated after the 1962 coup, Karen education in Thai refugee camps and migrant areas thrives, nurturing hundreds of thousands of refugee and migrant children. Indeed, Karen education in Thai refugee camps is a progressive system due to innovations introduced

by NGOs and the Karen Diaspora, providing education opportunities to what must be at least a million Karen children over the last seventy years. This was done in the context of on-going curriculum development and teacher training. Refugee students graduated and served as community leaders, school teachers, military, medics, social workers, human right defenders, farmers, business leaders, and peace builders. Oddly, this system is now strengthened yet again by the post-2021 coup, as Burmese leaders in Karen-dominated areas join the Civil Disobedience Movement, closing Burmese-medium schools, while the Karen-language schools remain open.

The Karen education system began over a century ago and is now using modern education with multilingual and mother tongue based (MTB-MLE) education practices. Karen history, literature, and language are keys to maintaining the Karen education system. This is despite being “unrecognized” by the international system and outside official accreditation settings, whether from the international community, Burmese government, or Thai government.

Nevertheless, the Karen education system reflects a common shared vision in what [Anderson \(2006\)](#) called the “Imagined Community”, reflected in what Weber called the *Gemeinschaft*. In the case of the Karen, this community is reflected in its persistent school system, rooted in linguistic and literacy traditions that are sustained independently from either Burma or Thailand. The problem is that it exists only as a pseudo-state Kawthoolei.

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Notes

- ¹ The name “Burma” is used to reflect the pro-democracy movement’s dismissal of the decision made by the military regime in 1989 to change the country’s name from Burma to Myanmar. The term “Burmese” is used to refer to ethnic Bamar or language spoken by them. In this article, Bamar and Burmese are used interchangeably (see also [Oh et al. 2021](#)).
- ² Karen names are represented with Karen characters. Note to journal: in the event this paper is accepted, we will provide the publisher with Karen software compatible with your system.
- ³ When writer George Orwell was a policeman in Burma between 1921 and 1926, he spoke Burmese and Karen and attended Karen churches (see, e.g., [Hitchens 2002](#), p. 31).
- ⁴ See various descriptions of Karen historiography and ethnicization in ([Gravers 2015](#)). [Mirante \(1993\)](#), [Alwyn \(2021\)](#), [Saw Aung Hla \(2014\)](#) (in Karen), [Lall \(2021\)](#) are also good sources for understanding how Karen history has developed.
- ⁵ “Kawthoolei” is the name of the Karen Nation and literally is translated as “land of flower” or land with flower plants grown in Karenland called “Thoolei—in the Karen language.
- ⁶ Saw Ba U Gyi was a charismatic figure born in Bassein in 1905 to a wealthy land-owning Karen family (see [Keenan 2008](#)). Bassein at the time was the site of a large Christian mission station where Karen medium language schooling flourished, following the establishment of primary and secondary curriculum in the late nineteenth century. Bassein in the Irrawaddy River Delta was a center for Karen society at that time. After completing his degree at Rangoon University in 1925, Saw Ba U Gyi went to

London and became a lawyer. He served as Information, Transportation, and Communications Minister in the governments of British Burma between 1938 and 1947. During World War II, he wrote his Four Principles for Karen Independence that are still well-known today and include: (1) For us, surrender is out of the question; (2) The recognition of Karen State must be complete; (3) We shall retain our arms; and (4) We shall decide our own political destiny (Keenan 2008). Fears of Burma soldiers among the Karen populations date back to pre-colonial times when many Karen were held by Burmese nobles in forms of bondage; as a result, the arrival of the British was welcomed by many Karen. Beginning in the 1920s, the British began to form Karen military units to support the colonial enterprise against rebellions erupting in Bamar areas. During the invasion of Burma by Japan, the Burmese Independence Army (BIA) under General Aung San cooperated with the Japanese and, during the invasion, massacred Karen villagers. In just Myaungmya, as many as 1800 Karen were massacred by the BIA (Callahan 2003, p. 75).

See Cornell and Hartmann (2006, p. 170).

A good description of the Karen consciousness in rural areas is found in Ashley South's 2017 article "Peace and Trust in the Karen Hills" in *The Irrawaddy Magazine*. The world governed by the KNU is one with Karen institutions politically and socially independent from Myanmar. The dominant language is Karen, and Burmese is little understood. Schools and other institutions are conducted in Karen. Myanmar is a source of fear since that is where the Burmese military and Air Force come from. See <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/peace-and-trust-in-the-karen-hills.html>, accessed on 1 March 2023.

Karen is also absent from Thailand's history curriculum, even though approximately one million Karen currently live in Thailand and are Thai citizens. In Thailand, however, the Karen are not a source of separatist consciousness, as they are in Burma.

See Saw Eh Htoo (2021) for a full discussion on "Burmanization Policies".

An example reported in the Karen News from 2016 describes precisely how this was done in a school under "joint administration" by the KNU and the Myanmar Ministry of Education. Flags are well-known in the Karen community to be targets for Burmese soldiers, particularly in the areas administered solely by the KNU.

James C. Scott (1998, 2009) has written about how bureaucracies of any sort seek to classify and simplify through the written medium in his book *Seeing Like a State*, which indeed has much in common with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. In his follow-up book, *The Art of Not being Governed* (Scott 2009, pp. 222–24), he writes specifically about the relationship of the Karen and how they lost writing, as they were persecuted by the lowland Burmese. Saw Alwyn (2021) writes specifically about this with respect to the writings of the Karen historian Saw Aung Hla.

See Kuroiwa and Verkuyten (2008) for an excellent overview of how young Karen students studying in Mae Sot in Thailand viewed Karen identity vis a vis the Burmese. A point of this article is that at the schools where these students studied there were new ideas about what it meant to be Karen emerging. See also (Pwe 2018).

The modern Karen State (Kayin in Burmese) was created only in 1952, which is the date when, administratively, the Burmese state began to expand into the highlands. The boundaries only roughly approximated the traditional Karen boundaries, and large numbers of Karen continued to be found in other provinces and the capital Rangoon. The KNU today administers schools in parts of the Karen State, as well as portions in neighboring states.

Violence and discontent were not confined to ethnic minorities. There was widespread discontent among the urban-based Bamar populations as well. This erupted in massive demonstrations in 1988 and after. The army suppressed these demonstrations violently as well.

The Karen Refugee Committee is a community-based humanitarian organization formed in 1978 in response to the refugee crisis at the Thailand–Burma border. KRC has been playing an important role in terms of camp management and coordination between local non-governmental Organizations, international non-governmental organizations, Thai government, UN agencies, and community-based organizations.

These countries are Australia, America, United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Finland, New Zealand, Denmark, Netherland, Ireland, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and Czech Republic. The Border Consortium and international NGOs providing services for more than three decades reported by the The Border Consortium that as of September 2020, Thailand officially hosts 71,861 refugees living in seven Karen refugee camps, of which 33,957 are registered refugees and 37,904 are unregistered. The earliest groups of refugees were mainly ethnic Karen. After 1988's student uprising in Burma, many students fled to the Thai border and became refugees. Those students were from different ethnic groups such as Karenni, Kachin, Mon, Pa-O, Arakan, Shan, Naga, Bamar, Muslim, and other smaller ethnic groups. However, in 2017 more than 80 percent of refugees in Thailand, according to the International Organization for Migration are ethnic Karen.

The word "Entity" is used in the title of "Karen Refugee Education Entity" in order to avoid terms such as "Ministry" or "Department", which in international relations imply sovereignty for an "entity." Pseudo-sovereignty is what the "Karen Refugee Committee" in fact exercise in their development of curriculum, schools, and other governmental functions in the interstitial spaces between the KNU government, Burmese government, Thai government, UN agencies, and international non-governmental organizations.

For description of how Burmese history curricula are developed, see Metro (2006), and Salem-Gervais and Metro (2012). For a description of how history is used in the Burma–Thai border areas, see Metro (2013).

The senior author of this paper attends meetings in his role as an educational administrator where this issue is discussed. Administrators in Karen schools generally encourage students to study Burmese as a second language, but particularly students

in the refugee camps will not sign up for the courses. On the other hand, Burmese is the medium of instruction in some migrant schools in Thailand, and Karen students who feel capable of handling the courses do attend.

- 21 There are Karen-language translations of Burmese textbooks used by Burma's Ministry of Education in government-controlled areas of Karen State, Rangoon, and Irrawaddy that describe what is in effect a Burmese history and literature. The texts are straight translations of approved Burmese government texts. Mention of the Karen rebellion is absent.
- 22 We are using the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as used by the sociologist Max Weber. See Waters and Waters (2015, pp. 3–6).
- 23 Salem-Gervais and Metro (2012) wrote about how different curricula in ethnic areas of Burma emerged not only in KNU-operated schools but in other areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations. As they write, curricula often defined the Burmese as the “other” and the “enemy” of the ethnic group. Thawngmung (2011) wrote an excellent book about the “other Karen” who remain in Yangon and other parts of Burma, integrating into Burmese schooling systems and institutions, albeit often with difficulty. Notably, these people who also self-identify as Karen do not necessarily share political views, or *Gemeinschaft*, of the KNU affiliated Karen discussed here. For a survey of how this worked not only among the Karen but among each of the ethnic groups operating schools, see Lall (2021, pp. 241–43) section “Education the Litmus Test”, which describes the range of ethnic programs. Her point is that education and the use (or lack of use) of the Burmese language in ethnic schools is fundamental for understanding the nature of identification with the central state and the options for peace.
- 24 See also description of the persistent identity in (Kuroiwa and Verkuyten 2008, pp. 393–95). They assert that this identity emerged in the context of alliances created between elite Karen and the British in the mid-nineteenth century.
- 25 In the Thai refugee camps, the Karen flag flies alongside the Thai flag.

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