

DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS

GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS, LOCAL CONCEPTIONS: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF COMMUNICATION AMONG THE BURMESE OPPOSITION-IN-EXILE (MYANMAR)

Brooten, Lisa Booth
Ohio University, 2003

This study examines the impact of new information technologies (NITs) on the Burmese opposition movement-in-exile based in Thailand. The intent of the research is to determine whether NITs, primarily computers and the Internet, are helping to reduce, maintain, or intensify ethnic conflict within the movement. The study explores implications for political mobilization by examining what groups within the movement have access to which technologies, and how these groups understand and use global media and the discourses they produce. The research is a multi-sited ethnography conceived within the epistemological framework of standpoint theory, providing an empirically grounded exploration of the Burmese opposition movement in both its local and global contexts. It employs participant observation, in-depth interviews and discourse analysis to examine the impact of global communications at the local level. The work begins with an historical examination of the development of the modern state in Burma, which provides the context for exploring how militarization, gender and ethnicity have affected the development of nationalisms and conflict defined largely as “ethnic” in nature. This is followed by a discussion of how the history and current state of communications both inside and outside Burma constrain attitudes toward the possible uses of communications technologies and media among the opposition-in-exile. An overview of opposition media investigates the degree to which these media have opened a space for dialogue between groups. Interviews with opposition activists and refugees from Burma demonstrate how the Burmese regime's militaristic values are both perpetuated and countered within the opposition movement itself. The research finds that the introduction of NITs and patterns of foreign funding have reinforced existing hierarchies within the opposition movement. Finally, this study demonstrates how the “local” reinvents the “global” through the use of a global discourse of human rights which acts subtly but powerfully to shape social conventions within the movement. This results in an unstated hierarchy of human rights that perpetuates the inequitable

gender and ethnic composition of the opposition political groups and the hierarchy of access and use of technologies among these groups.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY BURMA AND THE DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY, 1634-1680

Wil O. Dijk

Leiden University, 2004

This study deals with seventeenth century Burma and the activities in that country from 1634 to 1680 of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie – VOC*). It is largely based on the unpublished primary sources that make up the vast VOC archives in the Dutch National Archives in The Hague. These hitherto unexplored materials pertaining to Burma have yielded a rich bounty of unique data that afford us a rare glimpse of life in seventeenth century Burma. They have also proved invaluable for VOC studies since they contain no lacunae whatever so that each set of statistics forms a complete, closed series, rendering all the business figures highly reliable. This has allowed a precise evaluation of volume of trade and profit and loss from which conclusions could be drawn about the commercial aspects of the VOC's Burma establishment.

The Dutch materials have unexpectedly revealed the extraordinary extent of the ethnic tensions that existed between the Burmans in the north and the Peguans in the south. These eyewitness accounts add significantly to earlier studies on ethnicity in Burma.

Dutch sources also confirm that by the mid-seventeenth century, the use of firearms in Burma's military seems to have been so common that Burmese conscripts were expected to bring their own gunpowder and flints when marching off to war.

There is now clear proof that Burma's trade in Indian textiles centred on cheap, coarse, simple cloth intended for every day use by the common folk. This refutes earlier assumptions that Burma's textile trade was mostly about luxurious fabrics intended for the elite. Burma had a labour market and the wages the labour force could command were so high that the parsimonious Dutch brought in slaves from across the Bay of Bengal to toil at their Burma factories. An additional comparative study suggests that in those days Burma's standard of living was considerably higher than India's.

The country had a monetary system of sorts, but it was privately operated and relied on lump metal coinage that went by weight, rather than a state-run system managed by the crown and using standard coinage. Monetization was quite

extensive and ganza and silver jointly were the country's official medium of exchange. The King and many high Burmese officials were actively and enthusiastically involved in foreign trade, both by land and by sea, particularly at Bhamo where their agents were sometimes guilty of blatantly unfair trading practices.

This study fundamentally revises the general, if meagre, existing understanding of how the Dutch operations in Burma worked. On balance, the VOC's Burma trade was not so insignificant and irrelevant as some would have it. In fact, the first comprehensive statistics on the Dutch commercial activities in Burma combine to prove that the VOC's Burma trade was profitable throughout. Almost from the start, the VOC regularly transported Indian merchants to and fro across the Bay of Bengal to Burma while the Company's factors in Burma provided many of these traders, particularly the ruby merchants, with loans on a regular basis in order to transfer the Company's surplus capital safely and profitably to Choromandel. The VOC's Burma trade was an integral and vital branch of the Company's inter-Asian trade in that it contributed substantially to the funding of the Company's Choromandel and Bengal factories. Moreover, Burma's export products were in great demand throughout Asia and in Europe so that the profits on these commodities helped fill the Company's coffers wherever they were traded.

In later years, the Dutch were also involved in the Sino-Burmese overland trade. They procured huge quantities of Chinese copper cash coins, initially for their high copper content but later the Company turned them into legal tender in Batavia and Ceylon. Dutch attempts to establish a trading post at Bhamo to gain access to the lucrative China trade came to naught. Burma's King would not hear of it.

Probably one of the main reasons the Dutch abandoned Burma was that considerations of a military and political nature tied to territorial conquest gradually gained precedence over the VOC's earlier aim, namely the development of a vigorous inter-Asian trade to amass additional buying power to sustain its expansion. When the Company began to concentrate its activities increasingly on its two main power bases, Java and Ceylon, and to focus its commercial activities on direct trade between Europe and Asia to the detriment of its inter-Asian sea-borne trade, Burma became irrelevant. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the Dutch made several attempts in the 1740s and 50s to re-enter the Burmese market. By then, however, the country was in the grip of a bloody civil war that would bring down the Restored Toungoo (1597-1752) and usher in the Kon-baung Dynasty (1752-1885). This is where the Dutch sources on the VOC's activities in Burma fall silent.

DISPLACEMENT & IDENTITY: KARENNI REFUGEES IN THAILAND

Sandra Dudley
University of Oxford, 2000

This thesis is about Karenni refugees from Burma, resident in camps on the Thai-Burma border. The Karenni have not previously been the subject of a full-length ethnographic monograph in English. The thesis explores the mutability of both Karenni-ness and refugee-ness, and how both are influenced by a context of ongoing interactions between displacement, population diversity and nationalism.

Karenni refugees are highly diverse in various ways. Furthermore, they are mostly engaged in an ongoing nationalist agenda dominated by a mainly Christian, political elite known as the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP). This group dominates processes whereby what it means to be 'Karenni' and 'modern' is deliberately reformulated in exile. Such processes operate through formal education, the re-appropriation (and transformation) of 'traditional' forms including religious festivals and clothing, Christian evangelism, etc. Important themes in these processes are Karenni interpretations of history and Karenni hopes, fears and attempts to manipulate the future.

I argue that both despite and because of displacement and diversity, Karenni-ness is self-consciously – and reasonably successfully – continually strengthening and remoulding itself, in order not only to give meaning to its current context of exile, but also to make sense of and define its future. Furthermore, I demonstrate that Karenni refugees work hard not only to make the best of their displaced situation but also to maintain imaginative and cognitive connections with 'home', processes ultimately inseparable from the negotiation of Karenni-ness.

Ideas about 'home' are relatively neglected in extant studies of refugees. Furthermore, while recent studies have critiqued the hegemony of nation-states that leaves refugees marginalised, I take a pragmatic approach that recognises that ideas of 'nation' dominate refugee frameworks too. The thesis thus speaks to refugee studies and wider anthropological debates on nationalism, identity, ethnicity and global contexts, as well as contributing to Southeast Asian ethnography.