

The Inaccessible Phlong¹: Religious, Linguistic and Socio-economic Hurdles for an Outsider²

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Abstract: A critical reflection on challenges encountered when conducting ethnography among the Phlong (Pwo) Karen migrant workers from Myanmar (Burma) in Thailand reveals the layered divisions intersecting the Karen. The Phlong have been little researched compared with the S'gaw and when they were, it was those in Thailand rather than in Burma where in-depth research opportunities were very limited for non-nationals under the military regime. The Phlong of Myanmar are part of the Karen ethnic minority but dominated by the more educated and outward-looking Christian S'gaw from the coastal areas. The unity of the Phlong and the S'gaw who have been upholders of the 'Karen' identity is a nineteenth century creation of the Christian missions and colonial administration. Nevertheless, this relationship kept the Karen insurgency against the Burmese government going till the 1990s when the Delta Christian S'gaw-dominated Karen National Union faced the defection by the newly-established Democratic Karen Buddhist Army. Historically engendered cleavages and hierarchies now work as structural barriers between the Buddhist Eastern Phlong of Myanmar and a white Christian researcher pursuing a PhD at a UK university. While the Christian S'gaw seemed to find me themselves, I struggled to locate learning aids for Phlong dialect and interpreters who would be fluent in Eastern Phlong and English. Since the Phlong have only recently started looking abroad for employment and education, I discovered I had to ditch my preconceptions of how an interpreter should be sourced and adopt a grassroots approach, looking for skills gained through practice rather than formal education.

Ironically, the act of doing fieldwork usually places the researcher in the position of being the Other. In the first minutes, hours, or even days of fieldwork most researchers feel trepidation about being an outsider, a stranger on the scene, looked upon with suspicion or even avoided. And in all fairness, the sense of being a stranger may never completely go away; it just becomes less pronounced as one's work and presence become more commonplace.

Marie D. Price, 2001. "The kindness of strangers". *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 1-2, p. 144.

Conducting ethnography should involve reinventing yourself interchangeably as an insider able to participate in the social setting researched and as an outsider distant enough so as to be able to reflect on it.³ Provided that access is granted, that is. Despite the abundance of good will and in the

¹ In the original article the name of the ethnic group was spelled 'Plong' but after a consultation with Mikael Gravers I have settled for 'Phlong' as rendering the word's pronunciation more accurately.

² My fieldwork (September 2012-August 2013) was partly funded by a SOAS Fieldwork Award and a SOAS Centre of South East Asian Studies (CSEAS) Small Grant. My sincere thanks go to all my interviewees, interlocutors and assistants in the field – whether mentioned here or not – for their patience and help. All the names mentioned in the text are real, although not necessarily official names of persons who have agreed for them to be used. Robert H. Taylor, Martin T. Smith, Sa Shine, Busarin Lertchavalitsakul, Samak Kosem and two anonymous reviewers provided valuable critical comments on the draft of this article that hopefully helped to improve it.

³ Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock, eds., *Anthropologists in the Field: Cases in Participant Observation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), xii.

absence of any purposeful hindrances, gaining access felt like an uphill struggle on many occasions during my fieldwork. I discovered that negotiating access to a field site is indeed a continuing process rather than a preparatory stage of research.⁴ In fact, restrictions to, diversions from and silences about my chosen group were so embedded that they actually seemed revealing.

My doctoral research project focuses on the Phlong (Pwo) Karen migrants from Myanmar (Burma)⁵ in Thailand. Plodding along through my year-long fieldwork, it became increasingly clearer to me why the Phlong have been relatively neglected in the otherwise rich field of ‘Karen studies’. My skin colour, my religion and my linguistic skills (especially the lack thereof) that made me an uncomfortable outsider among the Phlong Karen were quite an asset among their well-researched S’gaw ethnic cousins, many of whom were Christian and more educated. Reasons for this comparatively higher wall between my Phlong interlocutors and me seem to tell as much about the dynamics between the S’gaw and the Phlong as they do about my differences from them.

Who are the Karen – if they exist

The Karen are one of the best-researched transborder ethnic minority groups in mainland South East Asia. Scattered in the long wide strip extending from north to south along the rugged Thailand-Myanmar borderland, they have historically been mediators between the two rising lowland powers that eventually became today’s Thailand and Myanmar. Dwelling in between mountains and plains,⁶ they could also act as intermediaries between the Thai, B’mar or Mon lowlanders and the upland peoples recently rediscovered as ‘Zomia’⁷ – Akha, Hmong, Lahu, Lisu and others.

In a broad sense, the term ‘Karen’ is applied to diverse groups speaking related but not necessarily mutually intelligible languages such as the S’gaw, Phlong, Pa-O, Bwe, Kayah (Karen),

⁴ Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 3rd edition (London: Routledge, 2007), 41 and 61.

⁵ In 1989, Burmese military government passed a law requiring the international use of Burmese place names in the country instead of the names inherited from the colonial era or given by the country’s numerous ethnic minorities. I use those Burmese names, with the previous versions in brackets when mentioned for the first time. The law also insisted that the country be called ‘Myanmar’ for official purposes, the literary form of its Burmese name. I use ‘Myanmar’ to refer to the post-1989 Burmese state.

⁶ Yoko Hayami, *Between Hills and Plains: Power and Practice in Socio-Religious Dynamics among Karen* (Melbourne, Vic.: Trans Pacific; Abingdon: Marston, 2004), 1-2; James W. Hamilton, *Pwo Karen: At the Edge of Mountain and Plain* (St. Paul: West Pub. Co., 1976), 5.

⁷ See James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 28. For an overview of the debate surrounding the concept, see Ruth Hammond, “The Battle Over Zomia.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 4, 2011. Accessed December 10, 2013. <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Battle-Over-Zomia/128845/>

Kayan etc. In the Karenic languages, however, there is no word equivalent to the English ‘Karen’⁸ that came into circulation in the nineteenth century during the British conquest of Burma (1824–1885) and stems from the originally derogatory Burmese/Mon *kayin* and Thai *kariang*, synonyms to ‘wild’ or ‘slave’.⁹ It is now recognised that these tribes, discovered to be related by the British and American ethnographers, probably did not feel particular affinity before colonisation – at least not to the extent that they would see themselves as one ‘nation’. Unsurprisingly thus, the question whether such a group actually exists has been raised.¹⁰

In today’s use, ‘Karen’ usually only refers to the two groups of the Karenic family – the S’gaw and the Phlong¹¹ – considered to be the most numerous. The latter are more frequently called by a S’gaw word ‘Pwo’ rather than ‘Phlong’ ('human being') as they call themselves. *Pwa k’nyaw* – the word that S’gaw use to refer to themselves – also means ‘humans’.¹² These terms were not used in the sense of ‘Karen’ before the advent of colonialism that gave rise to Karen nationalism in Burma.

Within the Karen nationalist movement, the S’gaw tended to speak for the Phlong from the nineteenth century till the 1990s, often falling silent on the question of which language should be this one unifying ‘Karen’ language.¹³ Many outside observers seemed to have accepted the S’gaw claim to representing ‘all the Karen’. Harry H. Marshall, one of the prominent ethnographers of the Karen (who, like many others, happened to be a Christian missionary) wrote in 1920: “I am convinced that in the main the Sgaw exhibit the general characteristics that are truly Karen in the broadest sense of the term.”¹⁴

⁸ See Jonathan Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 15 and 380.

⁹ Ronald D. Renard, “Studying Peoples Often Called Karen,” in *Living at the Edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the Highlands of Northern Thailand*, ed. Claudio O. Delang (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 1-15.

¹⁰ Peter Hinton, “Do the Karen Really Exist?” in *Highlanders of Thailand*, ed. John McKinnon and Wanat Bhrusasri (Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 155-168.

¹¹ In literature, S’gaw and Phlong are also called Sgaw or Sakaw and Plone or Phlon because it is difficult to convey the Burmese-Karen sound that falls between the ‘k’ and ‘g’ and the nasal ‘n’. Although this is not the most usual version, I opt for ‘S’gaw’ (except when quoting someone else) due to the silent ‘a’, same as in B’mar, more frequently called Bamar or – in older texts – Burmans.

¹² Pinkaew Laungaramsri, “Constructing Marginality: The ‘Hill Tribe’ Karen and Their Shifting Locations within Thai State and Public Perspectives,” in *Living at the Edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the Highlands of Northern Thailand*, ed. Claudio O. Delang (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 23.

¹³ For some examples see Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 232.

¹⁴ Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Et[h]nology* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997 [1922]), xii.

The foundations of S'gaw hegemony silencing the other groups of Karen were laid under the British colonial government. The data of the colonial population censuses suggested that the S'gaw made up the majority of the Karen.¹⁵ Underpinned by the primordial nationalist thinking and reducing each subject into one of the ready-made 'ethnic' shelves, such surveys were problematic in Burma.¹⁶ The proportion of the Phlong must have been seriously underestimated because the Buddhists among them were recorded as 'Burmans'¹⁷ (B'mar). Perhaps the combination 'Buddhist Karen' was unthinkable to the colonisers who knew the Karen as the early and eager converts to Christianity. Or perhaps it was because the Phlong, living on the plains and thus more interspersed with the B'mar, tended to speak more Burmese than Phlong.¹⁸ Even now the numbers of the (Burmese) Karen are obscure and contentious, with estimates ranging from three to seven million, depending on the source.¹⁹ And to this day the belief that the 'real' Karen cannot be Buddhists has some adherents.

The vocal S'gaw and the voiceless Phlong

Under colonial rule, higher numbers of S'gaw, especially those living in the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) delta, converted to Christianity and profited from missionary education, achieving leading positions in pre-independence Burma. Seen as allies by the colonial British government and as stooges by the Buddhist B'mar majority, the educated Christian S'gaw from Lower Burma became leaders and guardians of 'Karen' identity.²⁰ With Burma's independence – under B'mar leadership – looming

¹⁵ Based on the 1901 and 1911 Census of India data (the latter did not distinguish between the two groups), Marshall estimated the number of S'gaw in Burma and Siam (Thailand) at 550,000 as opposed to 535,000 Phlong (including another Karenic group of Pa-o). Marshall, *Karen People of Burma*, 3. See also Hamilton, *Pwo Karen*, 13-14; Martin T. Smith. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, revised and updated edition (London: Zed Books, 1999), 460.

¹⁶ Smith, *Burma*, 34; Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, new edition (London: C. HurstSmith, 2008), 460 and 158.

¹⁷ Renard, "Studying Peoples Often Called Karen," 8; Smith, *Burma*, 30.

¹⁸ See Transnational Institute, "Ethnicity without Meaning, Data without Context: The 2014 Census, Identity and Citizenship in Burma/Myanmar," *Burma Policy Briefing Nr 13*, page 8, February 2014, accessed March 6, 2014, http://www.tni.org/sites/www.tni.org/files/download/bpb_13.pdf

¹⁹ Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), xvii; Anders Baltzer Jorgensen, foreword to *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997 [1922]), i. All ethno-religious statistics in Myanmar are contentious and so is the implementation of the 2014 survey – see Transnational Institute, "Ethnicity Without Meaning." In Thailand, up to 500,000 Karen are now thought to live in the Northern Highlands as the most numerous Thailand's 'hill tribe'. See Claudio Delang, preface to *Living at the Edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the Highlands of Northern Thailand*, 2003, xiii.

²⁰ However, the Phlong claim guardianship of the ancient Karen traditions – see Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 16. For example, the Phlong have developed the dong dance – Min Zin, "Karen

after the Second World War, the expectations of these Karen who already saw themselves as an independent nation under the wing of the British were shattered. In 1948, a Karen rebellion led (though not exclusively) by the Delta Christian S'gaw but relying on Buddhist Phlong support flared up.

Although gradually splintering away, the Karen National Union (KNU) was able to mount formidable resistance to the Burma Army until the early 1990s. But then the heretofore invisible Phlong-speaking Buddhists took flight from the Christian S'gaw revolution. Their grievances took the shape of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) that allied itself with the military government. The KNU leadership eventually had to retreat to Thailand, joining the hundreds of thousands of refugees in the camps along the border. However, the KNU and DKBA, both prominent reference points for the Karen, retained a rather mixed membership after the split and their binary alone does not explain the diffused and shifting Karen cultural leadership where many other players such as prominent Buddhist monks also claim followers.²¹

The ‘political’ flows of migration into Thailand have been well publicised by the KNU sympathisers. In contrast, the parallel and interrelated process of ‘economic’ migration of the Karen has been more creeping and silent in nature. Within the past two decades, the Phlong from the villages deeper inside the Kayin (Karen) State that were pacified by the Burma Army earlier than the border areas have become the dominant migrant labour force in Bangkok. They now make up a significant share of the estimated three million Burmese migrant workers in Thailand.²² Although whole Karen villages have come to rely on employment in Thailand, the Karen refugees who had fled the Burma Army attacks may still look down on them. Given that S'gaw Christians are overrepresented among the refugees and most of the migrant workers are Phlong Buddhists, the ‘class division’, roughly coinciding with the religious and linguistic cleavages, lives on even among the Karen exodus in Thailand.

Through the portrayal of the plight of Christians in Burma, the KNU leadership was able to attract many supporters from abroad. In the words of Benedict Rogers from Christian Solidarity Worldwide: “Although the majority of Karen are still either Buddhist or Animist, they are often

History: In Their Own Words,” *The Irrawaddy* 8, no. 10 (2000), accessed March 5, 2014. http://www2.irrawaddy.org/print_article.php?art_id=2054

²¹ See more in Ashley South, *Burma's Longest War: Anatomy of the Karen Conflict* (Transnational Institute, Burma Center Netherlands, 2011), 23-26, accessed March 3, 2014. <http://www.tni.org/sites/www.tni.org/files/download/Burma%27s%20Longest%20War.pdf>

²² Official numbers are much lower but this is an estimate that many activists give, e.g. during my interview at [Burmese] Migrant Worker Rights Network in Samut Sakhorn, Thailand, 5th June 2013.

considered a “Christian tribe”. Most of the leadership of the Karen resistance is Christian.”²³ Again, unverifiable estimates abound, with the KNU and the Baptists (the dominant Christian denomination) claiming 30 or even 40% Christians among the Karen in Burma but 15-20% is more realistic.²⁴ The percentage of Christians is much higher among the S’gaw and urban or Delta residents. The reason why the Delta S’gaw were more receptive to Christianity could be that, as non-literate animists, they had very low social status in the pre-colonial Burmese Buddhist kingdoms,²⁵ whereas conversion offered free missionary education and further avenues of advancement.

Thus the Karen insurgency basically followed the pattern already established in the nineteenth century. Christians took up the leadership of the Karen, thereby assuming the right to define who was worthy to be called a Karen and who was too ‘Burmanised’. The Delta S’gaw Christian-dominated KNU has tended to claim the right to speak for all the Karen but neither its ranks nor the refugee populations in Thailand displaced by the conflict were representative of the whole range of options available to the Karen. According to one estimate, only as little as one tenth of the (Burmese) Karen may have joined the insurgency when it started.²⁶ Many Phlong and S’gaw living inside Myanmar or toiling abroad as migrant workers as well as most of the Thailand’s Karen,²⁷ did not identify with KNU’s struggle. Even in Twante, a small town in the Delta where the KNU rebellion originally started,²⁸ I met two older S’gaw Karen who had served in the Burma Army and were sent to fight the Karen insurgents.

Paying my respects to pastors and monks

In April 2012, I visited Hpa-an (Pa-an), the capital of the Kayin State in Myanmar for the first time. I was lucky that even before this trip Agnes Aye Htun, a Kayah (Karen) from Myanmar I knew in Bangkok, had already put me in touch with a young community leader among the Phlong Karen in

²³ Benedict Rogers, *A Land without Evil: Stopping the Genocide of Burma’s Karen People* (Oxford and Grand Rapids, Mich.: Monarch Books, 2004), 41.

²⁴ See Rosalie Hall Hunt, *Bless God and Take Courage: The Judson History and Legacy* (Valley Forge, Pa: Judson Press, 2005), 353; Jorgensen, foreword, xii; Mikael Gravers ed., *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2006), 228 and 255; Smith, *Burma*, 44; Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 46.

²⁵ See Taylor, *State in Myanmar*, 156; Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power*, second edition (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 22.

²⁶ General Smith Dun, 1980. *Memoirs of the Four-Foot Colonel*. Data paper No. 113. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University cit. in Thawngmung, 2012, p. 101.

²⁷ Ananda Rajah, “Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Nation-State: The Karen in Burma and Thailand,” in *Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia*, ed. Gehan Wijeyewardene (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 117.

²⁸ Mary P. Callahan. *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 130.

Bangkok. Sa Shine was a curious outlier among the Phlong as well as a unifying link. The coordinator of the Phlong migrant worker learning centre that later became one of my scattered research sites told me that Sa Shine was “the only Christian I have”. Not only was he Christian, he was also a son of a Bible school teacher and himself a Baptist preacher, while everybody else in the learning centre was Buddhist. As I was just starting to grasp my ‘constituency’, Sa Shine made it clear: “You’ve got to understand that Christian Pwo can only be like me – of S’gaw-Pwo mixed origin or S’gaw brought up in a Pwo community.” Throughout my fieldwork, his hypothesis proved right about the Eastern Phlong who, like Sa Shine, were from the Kayin State rather than the Delta.²⁹

Had I not known Sa Shine, my understanding about the Karen may have stayed dangerously skewed. In his early 30s, he already belongs to the new generation of Karen who want to move on from the sectarian past and to reconcile the different factions. And had he not recommended his Buddhist friend, also a community leader who became one of my gatekeepers in Hpa-an, my access to Buddhist Karen networks may have been even more complicated than it proved to be. Both in Myanmar and in Thailand, I found it much easier to access the Burmese Christian networks.

To make matters worse, I had almost no practical knowledge of Buddhism at the beginning of my fieldwork. For me, Buddhism was something I had read about in books but I did not understand how that comprehensive cosmology translated into actual rituals meaningful to its followers in a South East Asian context. I knew about ‘Buddhist New Year’ or ‘Water Festival’ (*Thingyan* in Burmese and *Songkran* in Thai) but not the religious meaning of it or any other holidays making up the Buddhist year and month cycle. I was a complete beginner in Vipassana meditation widely practiced in Burma, especially around Thingyan, but discouraged by Christian priests. I would take off shoes in a pagoda but I did not know how, for example, one should behave next to a Buddhist monk.

For a non-Buddhist female, it was not straightforward. As a woman, you are not supposed to ever touch a monk, even when handing something to him. As a Christian, how much do you submit to the Buddhist ritual? When Buddhists salute a monk by prostrating three times in front of him, what was I to do? I had no definite answers and was confused each time. When I followed the ritual, I could sense that my interlocutors were pleased and saw me as a ‘cultured’ person versed in the local conventions. But the bows were meant to honour the Buddha, the *dhamma* (Buddha’s

²⁹ As usual, there are no reliable statistics but my conversations with Christian pastors in the Hpa-an area have returned these estimates: 10% of the Kayin State population could be Christian as opposed to 25% in the Delta and 4-6% of the Phlong could be Christian. A ‘triple minority’ (Christians among the predominantly Buddhist Phlong dominated by the S’gaw in a B’mar-dominated country) the Christian Eastern Phlong are nevertheless an active community also trying to carve their own separate niche in the multipolar field of ‘Karen-ness’.

teachings) and the *sangha* (the monkhood). I had also heard that there was special vocabulary in Thai and in Burmese that one should use to address the monks but I was not as proficient. Nor did I know how those hierarchy-producing terms should convert into the egalitarian English ‘speak’ that I reverted to in the field. Hence I relied heavily on lay Buddhist mediators to arrange interviews with monks and, once it was arranged, to interpret for me.

Although monks were not my main interviewees, they are important gatekeepers and knowledge guardians in the deeply Buddhist Phlong community. They are even more prominent than the Christian ministers in their respective realms where, being a Catholic, I felt at ease. In those circles, I was free to socialise with Baptist, Anglican, Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist pastors and priests as they spoke at least some English, I understood their rituals and was happy to take part in them. These ministers were also interested in a fellow Christian from Europe – seen as a rarity sometimes, e.g. in the Burmese circles in Mae Sot where most foreign volunteers and employees showed no interest in morning or evening prayers, saying grace before meals and Sunday services or ridiculed their colleagues’ fright of ghosts. Even though all I could actively join in was the occasional hymn in English, my attempts to take part in the communal activities were welcome and further participation in Sunday services, birthday prayers or ‘home cell’ gatherings encouraged.

I was grateful for this acceptance but at times it made me feel tangled in Christian networks, remaining an outsider for Buddhists. Jonathan Falla who conducted ethnography inside the KNU-held area commented on a similar predicament of unequal access: “I am not a Christian, but I was there at the invitation of a political and military elite that is dominated by Christians [...] My image was fixed [...] and I need not have wondered why I never got close to the poorer, forest-dwelling animists who kept themselves to themselves and for whom this war and its pan-Karenist leadership have at best an uncertain appeal.”³⁰ Even Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, herself an S’gaw Baptist, has mostly interviewed the Christian S’gaw for her book on the ‘other’, ‘non-KNU’ Karen, citing “their role and significance in the emergence of collective Karen identity” and her “easy access to this community.”³¹

Sometimes the hospitality of the Christians felt like an inadvertent attempt to divert my efforts. The educated Christian S’gaw were articulate in their views and eager to share their stories. Two respected elderly Christian S’gaw-origin community leaders told me that the Buddhist Karen were no longer Karen – they were already ‘Burmanised’. What about the animists? They were just like the Buddhists, said one of them. As if in agreement, the Buddhist Phlong I interviewed often

³⁰ Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 288.

³¹ Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The “Other” Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), xxii.

seemed to dismiss themselves as ‘worthy subjects’ of any research. Unlike the Christian S’gaw leaders, the Phlong were not used to talking about themselves to outsiders, as if they did not have a vocabulary³² to do so.

Looking for non-existent dictionaries

Sharing some part of identity, though important, with the Christian S’gaw did not break down other barriers. The most prominent among those was my own linguistic inadequacy to the task I had taken up. And although I did not become any more proficient in the S’gaw dialect than in Phlong in the course of my research (relying on English or basic Thai when unaccompanied), there were more opportunities to pick up the former than the latter.

My fascination with the linguistic complexity of the Karen started before my fieldwork, at the SOAS library. My search for Karen language learning aids returned curious results. I came across a few books on the S’gaw Karen language. Online glossaries were also for S’gaw. As for Phlong, all I managed to get my hands on was a thin yellowing textbook published in Rangoon by American Baptist Press almost a century ago³³. It was missionary-oriented and pushed to master the Burmese-based script immediately, which I did not succeed in until after my fieldwork. Still hopeful at the time, I took photocopies from the book with me when leaving for Asia.

In Bangkok, I showed the sheets to the coordinator of a Phlong Karen migrant worker learning centre where unschooled children of the migrant workers, among other things, were taught the Phlong script. To my surprise, she could not read it and turned to the teacher of Phlong language. After scrutinising the Karen text, the teacher’s verdict was the same: it was ‘father’s side’ (S’gaw) rather than ‘mother’s side’ (Phlong) Karen.³⁴ Later Sa Shine who knew both dialects clarified the matter – it was the *Christian* Phlong script, not the same as that taught at the predominantly Buddhist-attended learning centre or in Karen monasteries in Myanmar.

The imbalance in literature I had read before my fieldwork did not prepare me for the diversity I discovered. I had read that, despite Catholic missionaries’ experiments among Thailand’s Karen with Thai and Latin scripts, the main way to become literate in Karen was to master the

³² A discourse, as Foucault would say: Michel Foucault, “Orders of discourse,” *Social Science Information* 10, no. 2 (1971): 7-30.

³³ C. H. Duffin, *A Manual of the Pwo-Karen Dialect* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press., 1913).

³⁴ Another misunderstanding happened when I asked a S’gaw-origin Christian in Mae Sot claiming to speak both S’gaw and Phlong dialects to teach me some Phlong. When I later tried using the phrases learned, the Phlong told me they were S’gaw – perhaps because my teacher was from the Delta where the S’gaw dialect is said to be closer to the (Western) Phlong rather than the (Eastern) Phlong spoken around Hpa-an that I needed.

Burmese-origin S'gaw writing system.³⁵ It was invented for the previously non-literate Karen in the 1830s by the American Baptist missionary Jonathan Wade.³⁶ His colleague Francis Mason also devised a Phlong version still used in Phlong Christian hymn books or Bible editions. Nowadays in Myanmar, varieties of the S'gaw and Phlong script that are taught in the Buddhist monasteries (but not at state schools)³⁷ also exist. Frustrated with this layered heterogeneity of Karen vernaculars and scripts, my interviewee in Bangkok, a bright Phlong community leader, once exclaimed “Who did this to us?!” as if suspecting an ill-will intervention. Yet the outside intervention was originally aimed at creating unity – the Christian missionaries were dreaming of ‘welding the Karen’ into ‘a lovely nation’³⁸.

This ‘inner’ diversity is hardly discernible from outside Myanmar. But the situation has been changing recently and the Phlong are trying to speak for themselves. For example, just recently localised initiatives started compiling Buddhist Phlong vocabularies as opposed to those using the Christian spellings. During my third trip to Hpa-an in April 2013, I received an Eastern Phlong-Burmese-English thematic dictionary “Phlon Classified Words” probably published in 2011. Mu Tyhee, one of my assistants in Bangkok, used a Burmese-Eastern Phlong dictionary – perhaps the first of its kind – compiled for a project.

Since the S'gaw have been constructed as the majority group, their dialect has been promoted as a *lingua franca* among the Karen – for example, by the Baptist missionaries. Christian education created a mostly S'gaw elite³⁹ who were supposed to mediate between the Karen and the outside world. After all, it was the Delta S'gaw Christian converts who came into the earliest and closest relationship with the American Baptist missionaries and the British colonial government – to

³⁵ Charles F. Keyes, ed., *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: The Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1979), 17.

³⁶ Marshall, *Karen People of Burma*, 31.

³⁷ Practiced in insurgent-controlled areas, minority language teaching is illegal in Myanmar's schools but the question is now being reconsidered: Samantha Michaels, “In Burma, a Debate Over Mother-Tongue Teaching,” *The Irrawaddy*, October 23, 2013, accessed March 5, 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/feature/burma-debate-mother-tongue-teaching.html> accessed; Ei Thae Thae Naing, “Ministry to train ethnic minority language teachers,” *Myanmar Times*, August 25, 2013, accessed March 5, 2014, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/7954-ministry-to-train-ethnic-minority-language-teachers.html>.

³⁸ Donald Mackenzie Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma* (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1887), 12; Francis Mason, *The Karen Apostle: or, Memoir of Ko Thah-Byu, the First Karen Convert, with Notices Concerning his Nation* (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1843), 45.

³⁹ John Frank Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1958), 138; Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), 57; Thawngmung, “Other” Karen in Myanmar, 22-23.

the extent that they have been called the founding parents (by extension) of all the Karen.⁴⁰ S'gaw literature proliferated at the hands of the missionaries in the form of Christian readings, the first Karen periodical and even a 'Thesaurus of Karen Knowledge.'⁴¹ If other groups of Karen sought education through the missionary school network, they were most likely to become fluent in S'gaw.⁴²

Interpreting the interpreters

Until now, in contexts nurturing bilingualism, it is usually the Phlong who speak S'gaw rather than vice versa. However, even though some S'gaw are not aware of that, their dominance is geographically patchy. The S'gaw make up the majority along the Thai-Burmese border around Mae Sot or Mae Sariang and the few Phlong there tend to be bilingual at least. But the residents in rural environs of Hpa-an do not speak S'gaw unless they are from mixed families. On the other hand, only the eldest villagers with no formal education know no Burmese, the use of which the proximity of Hpa-an and contact with Myanmar state institutions necessitates. Migrants from this area living in Greater Bangkok are native speakers of Phlong but as they nurture ethnic networks, they hardly ever use Burmese.

In my search for a decent interpreter, the S'gaw predominance became an increasingly tangible fact. Having chosen to focus on the Phlong, I hoped to interview them in their mother tongue. Yet finding someone who would be fluent both in Phlong and English as well as available for lengthy in-depth interviewing proved to be a real challenge. As our research tutor had advised, I would have also wished to work with someone who had social science background and thus an understanding of how social research is conducted⁴³ but I discovered that it was too much to ask in my situation.

In Bangkok, I lived in a neighbourhood heavily infused with students from Myanmar studying in English-language programmes so at first finding an assistant did not seem a daunting task. However, I soon discovered that students of Karen origin were mostly S'gaw or Kayah rather than Phlong. Moreover, the Phlong (unlike some S'gaw) were mostly studying more practical and

⁴⁰ San C. Po, *Burma and the Karens* (London: Elliot Stock, 1928), 58. Also see Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia*, 78.

⁴¹ Renard, "Studying Peoples Often Called Karen," 5; Violet Cho, "Rearranging Beads on a Necklace: Reflections on Burmese Karen Media in Exile," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): 467.

⁴² For example, Karen (now called Kayah) Christians would go for education to missionary S'gaw-language schools – Alonzo Bunker, *Sketches from the Karen Hills* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1910), 74.

⁴³ See also Mary Ditton and Leigh Lehane, "The Active Role of Interpreters in Narrative Development in Two Cross-cultural Studies in Thailand," *Current Narratives* 1, no. 2 (2010): 11.

applicable subjects than anthropology, sociology or political science. And even those who seemed suitable and willing at first would not stay for long – either because they found the job too difficult or because their English skills could be marketed for much more than I could afford to pay.

My first assistant was a Christian S'gaw Karen student from the Thai-Burma borderland rather than Hpa-an. She was fluent in Burmese, English and Thai but spoke little Phlong. When contacting the interviewees by phone on my behalf, she used Burmese instead. When she soon quit, I approached my neighbour from Kayin State. Of mixed S'gaw-Phlong background and with a first degree in English from Hpa-an under her belt, she seemed a promising candidate. She said she knew both dialects but when it came to interviewing, she again opted for Burmese. Speaking Burmese came as more natural to her: she would fire words onto our interlocutors so fast that they later complained to her successor. Coming from a well-to-do Seventh Day Adventist family paying for her studies abroad, she also found it difficult to identify with the Buddhist migrant workers toiling for their living and trying to support their families back in Myanmar.

By then I had come to the conclusion that S'gaw was a dominant ‘gene’ suppressing the ‘recessive’ Phlong component. My next assistant, another MA student with a first degree from Hpa-an, was from a Phlong family. He spoke both Burmese and Phlong but again was more used to Burmese as he hailed from the town of Hpa-an rather than a village. When I pointed out that he conversed in Burmese to another Phlong during an interview, he replied: “We [the Phlong] speak Pwo Karen when we want to get closer, when we want to talk about serious things.” To me discussing a person’s life story seemed a situation serious and intimate enough.

This way I learned that the urban/rural divide was also important. So when he also quit, I turned to a migrant worker from the same learning centre who had learned spoken English while working for foreigner families in Bangkok and was now teaching it to others. Herself from a village near Hpa-an, Nan Sandar Aye could sympathise with our interviewees and engage them in their native variety of Phlong. Having studied in Hpa-an and spent around ten years working in Thailand, she was also fluent in Burmese and Thai, which was an asset in situations where long-timers were switching between Phlong and Thai as they pleased, while peppering in some Burmese to make up for the lack of accepted terms for, say, state institutions in Phlong.

After Nan Sandar Aye left Bangkok to join a community training programme in Mae Sot, I started working with Mu Tyhee and her friend who had just come back from one. Also a long-timer in Thailand, Mu Tyhee was not confident about her Thai and English (for no good reason, to my mind), but she bonded with our Phlong informants and corrected mistakes left by another interpreter. Her own vast experience of shuttling between Kayin State and Bangkok helped to plug the many gaps in my understanding of Phlong migration to Thailand. Meanwhile, her friend’s near-

native fluency in Thai had already started eroding her command of her native Phlong, pointing to the very fine balance in multilingualism.

My adventures with interpreters in Hpa-an also suggested strongly in favour of such assistants who had been through the same migration experience rather than those with academic credentials. My first helper had worked in Thailand and studied in a migrant school in Mae Sot before coming back to his village. Not only was he more able to literally understand where our interviewees were coming from, but his English was also better than his successor's, who had only studied in Myanmar since teaching there often reminded of Buddhist chanting in a chorus.

By trial and error, I discovered what Axel Borchgrevink had advised in his exploration on the little-discussed use of interpreters in anthropological research. Despite warning that they may have multiple loyalties, Borchgrevink recommended working with local interpreters.⁴⁴ In my case these were Eastern Phlong migrant workers themselves. However, although originally not intended, working with so many people who differed in various aspects of their identity was a learning process in itself. As successive interpreters checked the quality of each other's translation, not only did I eventually discover what arrangement worked best, but their differences each time also highlighted some new characteristics in the group I was researching.⁴⁵

Shifting hierarchies of knowledge

The structural barriers I faced made me acutely aware of the 'internal' complexity of the group usually subsumed under the blanket term of 'Karen'. From a foreigner's point of view, Eastern Phlong have long been conspicuous by their voicelessness. The previously marginalised animist Delta S'gaw became outward-looking as they managed to turn their fortunes around with missionary education and civil service careers. To an outsider, they were the only ones visible at the helm of the Karen nation. Meanwhile, the Eastern Phlong indigenous to the Hpa-an plains were already Buddhist and, as Saw Miketar and another Phlong migrant in Bangkok told me commenting on the presentation of my fieldwork, the only education they saw as worthy of achieving was studying the Buddhist scriptures. Living in the villages, the Phlong fed themselves through the work of their hands. If they needed advice, they would go and ask a monk. The Phlong are still ready to admit their lack of sophistication, mocking themselves as *thaung nah* – the 'thick ears' who would not listen to anyone's instructions and stick to their own ways.

⁴⁴ Axel Borchgrevink, "Silencing Language: Of Anthropologists and Interpreters," *Ethnography* 4, no. 1 (2003): 110-113.

⁴⁵ "Depending on whether an interpreter is male or female, rich or poor, or differs along other fundamental dimensions, different aspects are likely to be emphasized in the translation." Borchgrevink, "Silencing Language," 113, also see 104 and 110.

Living as an ethnic minority embroiled in a long-term civil conflict started by the Delta Christian elite, they faced layers of double subjugation in Myanmar, itself a country isolated for decades. Those who escape the Burmese oppression and the dominance of the S'gaw in the Thai-Burma borderland to the anonymous urban jungles of Bangkok, still face discrimination from the Thai. Along with religious, linguistic, local and socio-economic differences, the hierarchies of knowledge intersect the Burmese Karen population. My own lack of knowledge about the Phlong as well as my unhelpful status as a PhD candidate in London, the former colonial metropolis, exacerbated the situation. All these relative hierarchies of knowledge towered like a tangible wall between me and my informants when I could not find a Phlong dictionary or secure a suitable interpreter. I failed at the latter at the beginning because I was looking through the networks of education instead of those at the grassroots.

However, as Myanmar is opening up to the world, so are the Phlong. While the Burmese Christian S'gaw political scientist and ethnographer Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung is already publishing books, the first generation of Eastern Phlong is now studying abroad and those in and around Hpa-an are keen to learn English. With the help of my gatekeepers and assistants, my initial challenges also proved to be malleable. I did not become an insider and probably never will for all the same reasons. However, similarities, like differences, always abound. In other words, as Temple and Edwards note: "It is impossible to set up stable definitions of 'them and us' as there are many borders of fluctuating significance."⁴⁶ When the Phlong migrants or returnees would wonder why I was interested in the life of the simple people, I would tell them that my father had also left Lithuania a decade ago and was working in the UK, initially in lowly jobs because of his poor English. As Marie D. Price's insight quoted at the beginning of this article suggests, the feeling of strangeness eventually wears off. As time went by and I stuck around, I hope to have become accepted as a nonthreatening Other.

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⁴⁶ Bogusia Temple and Rosalind Edwards, "Interpreters/Translators and Cross-Language Research: Reflexivity and Border Crossing," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1, no. 2 (2002): 8.

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