‘Mother died and time passed’

READING DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN KAREN HTA


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The emergence of exiled Karen language media is recent but significant as a site for the production and maintenance of Burmese Karen identities. The two main Karen-language/Karen-owned media groups in exile are Kwekalu and the Karen Information Centre, both of which operate within the Karen struggle for self-determination and as part of Burma’s democratic mediascape in exile. While these media groups are part of the Karen struggle, they play a broader role in being a container for expressions of cultural identity for the contributors and audience, many of whom are in the diaspora. Within both media, hta is a popular form of expression and provides an insight into ways in which Karenness is positioned outside the homeland.
Conceptions of homeland are central to many hta and the experience of displacement often involves group emotions of mourning and melancholia. In reading recent hta, these feelings have become an important part of Karen identity. In addition, fantasies of sacrifice in the homeland presumably provide a way of dealing with exile. That hta is a popular medium for the expression of feelings and emotions is significant in itself, as it is a 'traditional' literary form linking readers and writers to an imagined past. It also allows for subjective expression of feelings and cultural identity, arguably facilitated by the fact that it is a familiar form, in contrast to other writing genres, such as news reports and essays.

**Background**

The term Karen covers around 20 smaller ethno-linguistic groups with a population at between 3 and 10 million. The two dominant Karen languages are S'gaw and Pwo. The majority of Karen people are Buddhist Pwo speakers but S'gaw speakers have dominated the ethnonationalist movement, including the Karen National Union (KNU), a party to one of the world’s longest running civil wars. Hayami Yoko sees 'Karen' as a 'top-down term' as it is 'primarily used by others . . . not by the people themselves.' I rather see 'Karen' as an outside-in term. While what Karen means today may be intimately tied to colonial and missionary ideologies of race, the term has been indigenized, and many Karen people identify with it as a unifying label, although meaning remains highly subjective and contested. I therefore use the term 'Karen' in this article (and in reference to myself) with caution. The majority of Karen people are dispersed through eastern and southern Burma and the Irrawaddy delta, with smaller numbers in Thailand. Many Karen living in the lowlands of Burma regularly or primarily use Burmese language. This article will focus on ethnonationalist hta written by Burmese Karen who have fled civil war to take refuge in Thailand and other countries, notably Australia, the US, New Zealand, Canada, Norway and Sweden.

Little critical work has been done on the self-representation of being Karen. An exception is work by Nick Cheesman, who examined two formative S'gaw Karen nationalist texts written in the early twentieth century by Saw Aung Hla and T. Thanbyah. Nick Cheesman identified 'Karen as oppressed' and 'Karen as virtuous' as key themes in internal discourses of Karen identity. While these are still valid, the experience of diaspora has brought about new strands in these themes – while writers may position themselves as oppressed Karen, writers also often describe feeling of mourning as a result of loss or disconnection to home and/or nation. Themes of guilt and sacrifice are also deeply connected to narratives of oppression – sacrifice is virtuous and it leads to guilt for those who cannot give sufficiently sacrifice.
Deeply entrenched military rule has had a profound effect on the development of the country's media. Burmese media cannot fully develop under the military government as the government maintains a tight system of control through strict censorship laws. Media professionals are forbidden from operating independently in their respective organizations and journalists and reporters are serving long term imprisonments because of writings that offended and challenge the existing political values, power and authority of the ruling class. Burmese media in exile therefore fills an important role, as anti-government opinion can be freely expressed.

Karen language media has a long history in Burma, the country's first newspaper Morning Star being in S'gaw Karen. One of the first Karen-language media groups in exile was Kwekalu, which was set up in 1994. It was established as a monthly Karen language newsletter, for distribution in border areas in Thailand, inside Burma and overseas, and the focus of it has since shifted to web-based media. When set up, Kwekalu was part of the southern district of KNU with the aim to 'become a weapon to educate grassroots people and make them aware of the power each person has.' Kwekalu has relied on KNU news, which was sent by Karen soldiers in the frontline. Kwekalu is the most pioneering Karen online media group, an important part of a network of diasporic cultural production, linking news with pop music videos, documentary film and creative writing.

Karen Information Centre (KIC) is a media group that produces a monthly newspaper in Karen and Burmese. KIC was started in 1997 by the KNU central command, originally under the KNU Department of Information and Mobilization although it has since separated and become independent. In 2010, KIC opened a website and began publishing online. This is a small global operation, as the webmaster is based in Sydney and reporters are spread through the diaspora. The KIC monthly newspaper is in both Burmese and S'gaw Karen, while the website is in Burmese only.

**Hta**

_Hta_ is the originary S'gaw Karen literary form and is a fundamental part of Karen culture. According to the 19th Century Thesaurus of Karen Knowledge, compiled by the American missionary Jonathon Wade, _hta_ refers to conventionalised speech and song for multiple purposes, including encouragement, fantasy, criticism, dialogue, argument, humour, praise and the discussion of taboo topics. According to Wade's definition, speech becomes _hta_ when it follows rhyming conventions. It is therefore an oral form. Roland Mischung, who did research on S'gaw Karen in northern Thailand in the early 1980s, wrote that villagers saw the knowledge and use of _hta_ as marking 'real' Karen from outsiders. _Hta_ is intimately connected to systems of knowledge – if ideas are not transformed into _hta_ they have little value. Poets who can compose and use _htathus_ have high status in Karen communities. As _hta_ is an oral tradition, authorship is attributed to ancestors. The
perception that hta is ancient – linking Karen to an imagined ethnohistory – makes hta important to cultural identity. Perhaps partly as a result of displacement, as well as the privileging of writing linked to the spread of Christianity and modernity, hta has evolved into a written form. Hta published in Kwekalu and KIC is text-based only.

There are two conventional forms of hta – one consists of stanzas of 3 or more couplets, referred as hta daw yu, meaning ‘whole hta’. The other consists of stanzas of two couplets only, referred to as hta loh pwi, meaning ‘a broken piece of hta,’ as though it were incomplete or imperfect. Both forms consist of seven syllables per line. In hta daw yu, the final syllables in each couplet must rhyme and the first word of each line must pair. Word pairs are formal sets of collocations that have a related meaning. Examples of word pairs are mountain and range; old and dead; happiness and peace; young liver and young heart; need and want; mother country and father country. Word pairs follow already established conventions, and given the poor development of Karen literary research and education, few diasporic writers choose to compose hta in this form. In hta loh pwi, the stanza is broken up into two couplets and the final syllable of the lines within each couplet must rhyme. Word pairs are optional. Hta loh pwi is therefore easier to compose, since constructing word pairs requires highly complex linguistic skill. The majority of new Karen poetry online is therefore hta loh pwi. Some contemporary writers compose hta loh pwi loosely, not always following the rhythmic conventions.

According to the Karen Thesaurus, hta are classified into genres such as sickness, music, praise and insults. Htoo Hla Aye, a Christian theologian who researched and wrote about hta in the 1950s, came up with a classificatory system that involved 26 genres. These include god and creator, death and the afterlife, ancestors, hymns, teaching, children, marriage, romance and instruction. As Htoo Hla Aye was attempting to use hta to legitimise the spread of Christianity, there is a strong ideological bias to his classificatory system.

Hta I have looked at do not fit easily into Htoo Hla Aye’s categories, so I would like to propose a new genre: separation hta. This can include common themes of separation from nation, homeland, community and family. Many of these writers have followed rhyming conventions loosely – often only rhyming similar but not exact vowel sounds. In addition, reflecting the multi-lingual nature of Karen literary culture, I include Burmese-language poetry in my classification of hta, and have looked at Burmese poems published on the KIC website along with more traditional S’gaw Karen hta. Burmese language Karen poems do follow the S’gaw Karen linguistic conventions of hta, and are obviously influenced by Burmese poetry. However, Burmese and S’gaw Karen hta are closely linked in relation to content and emotion. Hta is therefore adaptable to the linguistic space of writers in the diaspora while still being hta – so in the future we may increasingly see, for example, English-language hta, Norwegian-language hta and Finnish-language hta, all of which can
be valid expressions of Karen identity, hybrdising the 'traditional.' For this essay, I have examined 10 hta prominently placed on the two websites. Eight were published in Kwekalu, with no date, and two were published in KIC between 2010 and 2011. As KIC's website is recently established, there have been relatively few hta.

**Hta and homeland**

Ideas of homeland are important themes in many of the hta I looked at, and the concept of a homeland is part of Karen cultural identity. In archaeological terms, there is no evidence of a Karen monarchy or similar entity that can be used to give historical legitimacy to the modern idea of a Karen nation. There are however conceptions of land, country and nation in oral literature which have been used to argue for a Karen state. Hta, as an originary oral form, helps constructs the authenticity of the Karen nation. Hta functions as a container for knowledge and truth and therefore can act as an irrefutable confirmation of the historical basis of a Karen nation.

There are three common terms for the Karen nation in S'gaw. One is Kawthoolei, which has multiple meanings. One common way of translating Kawthoolei is as 'land without darkness.' Darkness here can be a metaphor for evil. Another meaning can be 'land of thoolei' where thoolei is the name an edible plant abundant in eastern Burma. Kawlah means 'land which is green' and is used to evoke images of Karen land as lush and natural. Finally, K'nyaw Kau means Karen land or nation. While these words have some currency as loan words in Pwo Karen, a more common way of referring to the Karen nation in Pwo is plone ti kaung, literary 'Pwo nation.' The meaning Pwo and the meaning of K'nyaw are ambiguous, as they can refer to a single socio-linguistic group or a pan-Karen identity.

Being in exile means being outside one's home, unable to return. 'Home' in hta includes physical space, such as a house, a farm, a village, a town, a stream or a mountain. It also includes fantasy space, such as scenes, marked as Karen, that exist without war, poverty and ethnic division. It is unsurprising that the homeland or nation is an important theme in Karen diasporic hta. If the homeland provides a physical and historical anchor to cultural identity, then coming to terms with being apart from it is a profound struggle that Karen writers are dealing with.

Ways of writing about country in poetry of exile include description of place and geographical features, country as well as a loved one: a parent, lover or friend. More literally, geographical writing evokes places, which are like ethnonationalist symbols. These include the Irrawaddy delta, the Salween River, Mount Kwekabaw and the towns of Pa'an and Taw Oo (Taungoo). Hta as a poetic form enables the free imagining of time and place, a requirement of diasporic writers who may have long been away from the places they describe, if they have ever been there at all. Villages and towns are depicted as happy,
peaceful and beautiful and nature scenes are romantic, as is the case in the following extract from the *hta* 'Hoping to see you again' by Thoo Lei Wild Grass;

When the first tha lei is turning  
To Karen land I am longing  
I close my eyes and visualise  
Karen the world over actualise

Boothow peak at Mount K'ser Doh  
Delta Karen who are mother's folk  
Kwekabaw looks alluring and grand  
Beside the Salween's banks

Pa'an town and Taw Oo town  
Taw Naw cliff and Naw Ta Yar down  
The sun shines and the Moei River flows  
Under Klo Yaw cliff shade grows.

For the above *hta*, written in Australia in commemoration of Karen New Year 2011, cultural identity and ideas of nation are intimately tied to place and nature. This is even the case with the poet's pen name, which combines a term for Karen nation, *Thoo Lei*, with a nature term, 'wild grass.'

Another common way of expressing the idea of homeland is through metaphors of place as an intimate friend, relative or lover. Naw Sa Blut Moo, based in Australia, writes about the Karen land as if it were her best childhood friend in the *hta* 'My fate and my *Kawthoolei*':

Since one nine nine five  
*Kawthoolei* I've parted to survive  
And until today  
I am still away  
*Kawthoolei* do not be perturbed  
Just wait, I will return.  
[. . .]

I beg you please  
Wait for me with tears  
Beautiful *Kawthoolei* of mine  
I do promise you this time  
I will definitely come back  
the day when my plan is intact.
Here, Naw Sa Blut Moo addresses Kawthoolei directly, as a person to whom she has a promise with and needs to explain her feelings of guilt and frustration as a result of being apart. She seems to be longing for a past that may be based on memory or fantasy. This is in contrast to exile life in the West, which involves constant experiences of new and unfamiliar places and faces. For Kalu, in the hta 'Thu Lei the orphan' homeland is a mother figure and at the same time an orphan:

Soft whisper in the jungle
Began to say and sung
Grow up – red-skinned baby,
Carry the stone of liberty.

Poisonous mosquito bite,
[She] caresses it just right,
Poisonous mosquito prick,
[She] squeezes out its blood with bliss.

To the owner of the soft sound,
I'm longing for your sweet resound,
The path that you have shown,
Orphan Thu Lei does follow.

In the above poem, Thu Lei, which is short form of Kawthoolei, carries out maternal duties, such as looking her child's mosquito bite and killing the mosquito. At the same time, Thu Lei is portrayed as an orphan obedient to the words of parents. In a poem written in Burmese by Sydney-based Linga Di Pat, Kawthoolei is positioned as a fellow Karen nationalist, with the values of honesty, bravery and determination. Linga Di Pat writes that Kawthoolei 'saw the mistakes and accepted them.' Politically, Kawthoolei is therefore cast as a moderate with whom the poet is in alliance. One interesting feature of poetry about the homeland is the positioning of the writer/subject as being in the Karen land, when in fact they are writing from exile. This fantasy of being able to return home gives power to exiled poets, as they can return through literature without any of the fear and obstacles associated with physical return. In one poem, also by Linga Di Pat written in Burmese, a boy in a Karen village writes to a girl in exile, urging her to return for wrist-tying ceremony.

In July and August
The water is full
Let's pick the Eugenia flower
And offer it to the Lord
Return along with this rain.
The writer seems to position himself as the boy in the village, but since he is writing from exile, he can also be the object of the poem, with a split self. Writing of the homeland as a loved one is a common feature of exiled poetry. This metaphor implicitly involves a deep sadness since the writers are away from the one they love with no opportunity to reunite.

**Mourning, melancholia and sacrifice**

Freud describes mourning as 'the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.' Karen diasporic poetry typically expresses a deep sense of mourning – and this emotion appears to be a key part of the representation of Karen cultural identity. Descriptions of homeland can therefore be seen as a process of mourning for the loss of land, property, individuals and a real or imagined way of life. Stuart Hall writes that identity is something that is actively produced through representation, rather than representation being a mirror image of identity as an already existing fact. Mourning and melancholia – as represented in this poetry – are therefore a fundamental part of the continuation of Karen identity as, in distinct form, positioned from within the diaspora. In the above excerpts, there is a deep sense of melancholia when writing about a place integral to identity but where one may never return. In this sense, representing homeland can a key but tragic part of maintaining cultural identity from exile. For example, in the line 'return along with the rain' the writer and reader knows that return is impossible, which gives the poem a feeling of melancholia. In contrast, Saw Hsa May Oo, writing from small-town Sweden, seems to mourn the loss of homeland while perhaps attempting to accept that it is irretrievable:

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Mother died and time passed
Father died and time passed
Also their children
Also their grandchildren
Thu Lei land with freedom
Can no longer be seen
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In this didactic poem, Saw Hsa May Oo offers little hope of returning to a free Karen land, but imagining and mourning the past that is already lost is an important part of his hta. Instead, his construction of the Karen nation is diasporic:

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Remember the words of our ancestors
Our language and our culture
As you are a child
Keep holding onto thine
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Feelings of guilt and a desire to sacrifice are a common theme in contemporary diasporic
\textit{hta}, and are part of Karen social psychology. Sacrifice to the nation can be complex to
manage amongst ethnic group members who are in the West, and \textit{hta} is one medium
where individuals deal with this. The guilt that often accompanies themes of sacrifice in
\textit{hta} can come from an inability to give up something significant – which can be intense
when people are distant from the homeland. The management of guilt in relation to
sacrifice can be seen in the following excerpt from a \textit{hta} by Thoo Lei Wild Grass:

\begin{quote}
The burden of our people  
Must be carried by individuals  
From your place, from my place  
It's not a burden for us to brace  
[...]  
Karen people are sprawled  
With much love I will call  
Today and in coming time  
Let's take our duty prime  
Those who don't have country  
Won't be respected by others  
For Karen dignity's sake  
Satisfaction we cannot take
\end{quote}

In this \textit{hta}, the writer seems to carry guilt for her lack of sacrifice for the nation – and is
passing this guilt on to the reader by urging them to take responsibility and sacrifice. Thoo
Lei is clearly writing this for a diasporic audience, as in the line 'from your place, from my
place.' The line 'satisfaction we cannot take' could be particularly aimed at Karen living in
the West who may assimilate into a more affluent society. In this sense, perhaps carrying
the guilt and consciously expressing it is part of a culture of sacrifice that is integral to
Karen cultural identity. Thus if Karen identity is tied to sacrifice, those who do not
sacrifice, or who do not have a sufficient sense of guilt in relation to sacrifice, can be seen
as less Karen.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Imagining an ethnic homeland is an important recurrent theme in contemporary Karen
\textit{hta}, which involves the representation of a shared past and common purpose for the
future. The Karen past and present is also a story of sacrifice for the nation – and this
continues to be a theme in \textit{hta}, although sacrifice can be challenging to grapple with from
afar, which can lead to guilt, in turn expressed through \textit{hta}. Exiled Karen media are a
conduit for these poetic discourses, and through the form of *hta*, provide an important place for the production of Karen identity.

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