

‘Mother died and time passed’

READING DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN KAREN HTA



© Violet Cho. Karen Martyr's Day in Omaha, Nebraska, 2010.

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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 ethnonationalistic *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 *hta* thus 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 to 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, hybridising 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 construct 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 Kaw* 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:

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

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:

Remember the words of our ancestors
Our language and our culture
As you are a child
Keep holding onto thine

Feelings of guilt and a desire to sacrifice are a common theme in contemporary diasporic *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 *hta* is one medium where individuals deal with this. The guilt that often accompanies themes of sacrifice in *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 *hta* by Thoo Lei Wild Grass:

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
Lets 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

In this *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.

Conclusion

Imagining an ethnic homeland is an important recurrent theme in contemporary Karen *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 *hta*, although sacrifice can be challenging to grapple with from afar, which can lead to guilt, in turn expressed through *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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