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Karen Education and Boundary-Making at the Thai-Burmese Borderland

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that schooling and education are boundary-making devices in the volatile borderland straddling Burma and Thailand. We show that the development of Karen education was one of the ways in which the Karen National Union (KNU) erected ideological, symbolic and cultural boundaries to keep this borderland separate from the Burmese and Thai states. We draw attention to the conflict in what is considered valued knowledge, the recognition of learning, and who is considered the legitimate authority to manage education at the local and school levels. In fact, examining Karen education at the Thai-Burmese borderland is more than just a description of schooling: it is an examination of the struggle over governance and identity, and ultimately of understandings of sovereignty and nationhood. Moreover, the changing political landscapes in Thailand and Burma have now drawn this borderland and its education into the orbit of the national sphere, provoking a redefinition of notions of governance and nationhood.

KEYWORDS

Education; boundary-making; Thailand; Burma; Karen

Introduction

Borderlands are "domains of contested power, in which local, national and international groups negotiate relations of subordination and control" (Wilson and Donnan 1998, 10) and zones of cultural diversity, where "the twin processes of state centralisation and national homogenisation are disrupted" (Wilson and Donnan 1998, 10). Looking at education as one of the spheres in which this struggle is being enacted, we draw attention to the conflict in what is considered valued knowledge, the recognition of learning, and who is considered the legitimate authority to manage education at the Thai-Burmese borderland. Thus, examining Karen education in this borderland is more than just a description of schooling: it is an examination of the struggle over governance and identity, and ultimately of notions of sovereignty and nationhood.

Conventionally, education is regarded as the primary responsibility of the state. However, this does not hold in the Thai-Burmese borderland (nor in other Burmese borderlands) where education is a somewhat integrated system of cross-border schooling and training that has operated independently from central Burmese and Thai administration. Moreover, the education here has developed out of community efforts while establishing

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its own spheres of knowledge, values, practice and administration. In this article, we argue that this education system represents a boundary of this borderland, one that is in the process of being renegotiated as a result of the broader political currents sweeping through Burma and Thailand.

Our geographical focus is the border between Karen State in Burma,[1] and Mae Hong Son, Tak and Sangklaburi Provinces in Thailand. Like most of Burma's mountainous border areas, it is populated by ethnic peoples who have never truly been under Burmese sovereignty. In fact, most of Burma's borders are administered by a range of non-state armed groups, many of which have been engaged since independence in varying levels of armed resistance against the nation-building efforts of the Burmese state (Smith 1999; Fink 2001b). Some non-state armed groups and their administrative bodies govern large parts of the borders with departments comprising not just military and justice, but well-established social service systems including health, education and social welfare (Jolliffe 2014; South 2018). In the borderland of interest, there are myriad non-state armed groups, the largest one being the Karen National Union (KNU). Its education wing, the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD), known as the Karen Education Department (KED) until recently, administers Karen schools which cater to thousands of students from the locality and from other parts of Burma. It also coordinates closely with the organizations that manage education in the predominantly Karen refugee camps and in the migrant communities on the Thai side of the border.

Our argument is that the development of Karen education was one of the ways in which boundaries were erected to keep this borderland ideologically, symbolically and culturally separate from the Burmese and Thai states. First, since independence in 1948, government schools in Burma have been used as agents of the state to promote dominant ideologies about nationhood and ethnicity, which ethnic organizations such as the KNU reject (Cheesman 2003). Instead, the KNU has sought to establish schooling in areas it administers and in the refugee camps across the border in Thailand to promote Sqaw Karen as a common language,[2] to create a pan-Karen identity and to construct a certain form of national consciousness based on Karen culture, history and politics (Rajah 1990). The term "Karen", as used by the KNU, refers specifically to political and cultural identity: the Sqaw and Pwo are included but not the Kayah, as the latter group has a distinct political identity. In fact, the word "Karen" is used as an umbrella term for the many groups living in different parts of Burma and Thailand speaking related languages. It includes the Sqaw, Pwo, Bwè, Padaung, Kayah, Zayein and others, with the first two being the two largest groups (Marshall 1945). Here, we use the term "Karen" to refer mostly to the Sqaw and Pwo subgroups, as is commonly used by residents in the borderlands, with the understanding that not all people who define themselves as Karen would agree with this definition (see Thawnghmung 2012).[3]

Second, due to inaccessible terrain, political mismanagement by the Burmese government and resistance on the part of local communities, the Burmese government has not succeeded in establishing a substantial presence in the more remote, mountainous and conflict-affected areas of Karen State. Public services such as health and education in these remote and insecure regions are vastly more poorly resourced than in the more urban and central areas of Burma.

Third, Thai state projects such as education were initially withheld on the grounds that certain communities living on the Thai side of this borderland, such as refugees, migrants and some villagers designated as "hill tribe", do not belong to the nation state. The Thai

government resisted providing education to refugee camp residents because it uses schools as the agent of the state in instructing the masses, particularly those in rural areas, to "know their place" in a society ruled by the urban elite (Keyes 1991). Although all children, regardless of nationality or legal status, have the right to 15 years of free basic education as a result of Thailand's signing of the Education for All Policy (2005), there continue to be real and practical obstacles to refugee children gaining access to these schools (Save the Children 2015).

Finally, non-state armed groups from Burma have a presence on the Thai border and engage in activities that promote their own agenda, including education. In addition, various community-based organizations (CBOs) assisted by INGOs are permitted to provide assistance to camp refugees and migrants in the surrounding areas for shelter, food, health and education.

The boundary that Karen education represents is now shifting. Our data[4] show that the changing political landscapes in Thailand and Burma have now drawn this borderland and its education into the orbit of the national sphere, making it increasingly difficult to continue operating separately from central governments. This is reflected in the sphere of education – schooling in the refugee camps on the Thai side is being dismantled, and Karen students on both sides of the border are beginning to look towards Burma to continue their schooling. The once clear-cut boundary between the Burmese education authorities and the Karen education leaders is being re-negotiated as these leaders now face the possibility of a future where the Burmese government and its national education system will play a larger role in the schooling of their constituents. To sum up, Karen education is a domain where the "symbolic boundaries of culture and identity" (Wilson and Donnan 1998, 2) are being re-defined at the same time that notions of governance and nationhood are being reconfigured.

Education, Borderlands and the Making of National Boundaries

The border between Thailand and Burma proclaims and preserves state sovereignty while defining the limits of territorial power and integrity (Newman and Paasi 1998). For decades, the Burmese state has attempted to enclose nation and people within boundaries of territory that it defines through cultural (Lewis 1924; Berlie 2008), social (Callahan 2003; Salem-Gervais and Metro 2012), political and spatio-territorial (Lambrecht 2008; Ferguson 2014) practices. However, these practices are often at odds with the way in which borderlanders perceive the border (Horstmann 2014; Grundy-Warr and Chin 2016). For them, the border is not a fixed and ahistorical entity, but a construct that is acknowledged, challenged and negotiated. Thus, we conceptualize borders and borderlands as sites of social, political and cultural change that define the nation (van Schendel and de Maaker 2014). In other words, borders are processes rather than objects (Berg and van Houtum 2003; Baud and van Schendel 1997; Paasi 1999).

Thus, borders and borderlands may be viewed not just in terms of the physical line or of cross-border transfers but also of the practices and interactions that create boundaries around culture, politics and space. In other words, "the boundary line itself may not shift, but the relations across it as well as within it – between a border people and their political core – may be subject to repeated redefinition" (Wilson and Donnan 1998, 21). With this in mind, we approach education as a cultural, symbolic and identity

boundary that is constantly being defined and negotiated, in turn influencing the way in which national boundaries are constructed.

The particular configuration of this border space enables the KECD education system to operate outside state control and to now adapt itself to operate within it as well. Sharples (2012) argues that this borderland "is characterised by a tension between a modern territorial domain and the intersection of a particular form of social relations, a tension that underpins the social practices and identity constructions that are mapped across the national border" (p. 43). The modern territorial domain is that of the nation state, which uses borders to delineate its jurisdiction. The social relations are framed around those of the borderlanders – the KNU, the KECD, the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC),[5] the displaced, the migrants, the local residents – which form networks that create a different type of cartography, notion of space and, hence, border. Furthermore, the intermittent support of the Thai state and the decades-long assistance of international NGOs have shaped armed conflict (Smith 1999), political economies (Tangseefa 2015), relational interactions (Sharples 2018), and the practices (Oh 2016) in this border space.

Understanding space as a product of inter-relations, as an arena of multiple phenomena and as constantly being constructed (Massey 2005) enables us to perceive border practices as simultaneously located in nation state frames of reference and in borderlanders' conceptions of space. This, in turn, helps us to comprehend how the Karen education system can integrate itself into the nation state system as well as operate independently from it.

Although the armed conflict in this region has abated as a result of a ceasefire agreement between the Burmese government and the KNU in 2012 (albeit with occasional flare-ups of armed conflict), schools have long been sites where local, subnational and national agendas intersect in a space that has never fully been under the control of the Burmese government. In our article, the national level is represented by the Burmese and Thai central authorities, with particular emphasis on the Burmese; the sub-national level is represented by the Karen education leadership; and the local level is represented by schools. In this borderland, education and schooling are local contentious practices that rub up against the state's construction of space and social life and form part of the wider decades-long conflict between the Burmese government, non-state armed groups and local communities.

This struggle over governance, identity and nationhood is present in the scholarly literature on education in the borderlands, albeit to a lesser degree. Mostly it examines Latin American immigrants on the US-Mexico border with regards to educational policies (Balch 1990; Necochea and Cline 2005), the returns to education (Daly 2012), the relationship between migration and education (Fernández, Amastae, and Howard 2003), bilingual education programs (Rouk 1993), language (Pugach 1998), curriculum alignment and credentialing (Rouk 1993), pedagogy (Cline and Necochea 2003),[6] culture and identity (Rouk 1993) and inclusion (Patel 2013). The focus in this literature has been on helping immigrant students succeed in the US education system, rather than on promoting the recognition of alternate models of education within the central education system. That being said, one study examined non-formal educational projects and programing for children and youth who are not considered citizens in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya and the Rio Grande Valley in the US to draw attention to access and content in educational projects at the borders of the nation-state system (Krupar and Prins 2015).

Our article provides an account of a borderland education system that differs from the literature reviewed in the following ways. First, it frames education as a boundary-making device, by showing how Karen education was developed separately from Burmese and Thai state education, so as to maintain an ideologically separate ethnic borderland. Second, through an examination of current negotiations between Burmese state education authorities and the Karen education leadership, and of Burmese government expansion into borderland schools, it describes the making and unmaking of these symbolic boundaries.

The Independent Development of Karen Education in the Thai-Burmese Borderlands

The most compelling aspect of Karen education in these borderlands is that it is a trans-border system of non-state education developed independently from the Burmese state. It owes its existence to a combination of structural and ideological circumstances. These include the KNU's ethnic agenda, the poor resourcing of the Burmese government, harsh and inaccessible terrain in a context of armed conflict, and a border context of refugee settlements. The latter were established on the Thai side with minimal assistance from the Thai government, and then resourced by the refugee communities and later by the INGOs. In this section, we describe the characteristics which make this education system independent and which function as bordering devices, these being its administration and territorial reach, and its curriculum and currency.

An Independently Administered Transborder Education System

On the part of the KNU, the original aim was to develop an education system that would counter the ideological and political dominance of what they (and many other ethnic groups) perceive to be a state essentially dominated by the majority ethnic Burman while preserving and re-constructing Karen culture, history and nationhood. Thus, for the most part, education in KNU-controlled areas was administered independently of the Burmese state and formed part of the KNU's efforts to establish its own governance systems and knowledge production.

The Karen administration which exists today and under which the education department sits is the successor of the Karen National Association (KNA). This organization was founded by Karen leaders in 1881 to unite the Karen nation of Buddhists, Animists and Christians against Burman domination (Fink 2001a). The Karen Education and Cultural Department was established in the colonial era (Jolliffe 2014). The curriculum it eventually developed was influenced by the many Sqaw Karen leaders who received their education in England and in the USA when Burma was under British rule (Marshall 1945; Thawnghmung 2012), and who began developing Sqaw Karen literature for use in the schools they intended to establish after independence.

However, independence brought freedom from Britain but enclosure within the national boundaries of newly established Burma. The KNA had been disbanded in World War II, and a new political organization, the KNU was established to represent the Karen in Burma. This was followed by the founding of the armed wing of the KNU, the Karen National Defence Organization, (later renamed the Karen National

Liberation Army, KNLA) in 1948, which began its rebellion in 1949, a year after Burma's independence (Gravers 2014).

The KNU had control over territory in central Burma but lost much of it in the 1960s after the Burmese Army began implementing the "Four Cuts" strategy, forcing the KNU to retreat to the southeastern border.[7] Up until 1995, the KNU controlled large swathes of the southeastern border: areas inside the present Kayin State, some areas of Mon State and Bago Region, as well as areas of Tanintharyi region in the deep south, all where Karen people also live. All these areas at one point or another have had Karen schools administered by the KNU.

The renewed efforts to eliminate ethnic insurgencies on the part of the Burmese Army in the late 1980s brought structural violence to the lives of borderlanders, causing tens of thousands to become internally displaced and/or to cross the border into Thailand in search of sanctuary.[8] Many in the latter group eventually found themselves confined in isolated refugee camps, dependent on limited humanitarian aid and subject to Thai government restrictions.[9] Despite initial resistance on the part of the Thai government to allow schooling in the refugee camps, the refugee communities were eventually given official permission to provide primary schooling, and subsequent to that, secondary and post-secondary schooling. As the Thai government refused to provide Thai education and to allow international NGO staff to live in camp, camp schools were staffed almost entirely by teachers and headteachers from the refugee community, using textbooks they had brought from Burma, some of which had been developed by the Karen in the 1960s.

Thus, the territorial boundaries of the Karen education system do not coincide with that of the Thai or Burmese states. Instead, it corresponds with the territorial jurisdiction of the KNU (where there are 1573 basic education schools, 173 631 students and 10 840 teachers), in the seven predominantly Karen refugee camps in Thailand (64 basic education schools, 22 438 students, 1 005 teachers), and in some of the Karen-related migrant schools on the Thai border.[10] In addition, textbooks, learning materials, teacher training and people circulate through these schools. For example, some KECD-administered schools on the Burmese side of the border use the KECD textbooks developed in the refugee camps, many receive teacher subsidies and teaching materials from KECD, and their staff attend teacher and management training developed on the Thai side of the border through the efforts of border-based Karen education organizations.

In addition, the administration of education in the camps has always been unified with that of the KNU. The Karen Education Department (now the Karen Education and Culture Department, KECD), which grew out of these efforts and was inaugurated in 2000, oversaw schooling in KNU-controlled territories in Burma as well as in refugee camp schools in Thailand. At the same time, education management structures beyond the KECD were set up for the camps. The Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) is responsible for coordinating all forms of learning in the camps including adult and informal learning. The Karen Teacher Working Group (KTWG) was formed in the 1990s[11] by Karen community teachers to improve teaching quality, and spawned the Karen State Education Assistance Group (KSEAG) in 2005 to fundraise and to deliver textbooks to schools. The Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE), which sits under the KRC, was formed in 2009 to manage refugee camp education exclusively, while the KECD's role was reduced to that of education management within KNU-controlled territories in

Burma.[12] Nevertheless, the KECD, the KTWG and the KRCEE have always coordinated their efforts on basic education since the establishment of the KRCEE in 2009, when they also began coordinating with the KECD on post-secondary schooling. Thus, in terms of management, Karen schools in this borderland have come under the broad jurisdiction of the KNU rather than the Burmese state for several decades.

Separate Curriculum and Value

The KECD curriculum is used in the refugee camps and some of the migrant schools on the Thai border, and in the KECD-administered schools in Karen State.[13] Textbooks are written in Sqaw Karen (although some of the textbooks for the high school cycle are written partially in English) and the curriculum includes subjects such as Karen history and politics that do not appear in the Burmese curriculum. This curriculum was developed by the KNU and further refined in the refugee camps over time, with the assistance of the KTWG, the KSEAG and INGOs. This led to increased quantity and quality of teaching materials, improved school infrastructure (to a limited extent), contributions to teachers' and headteachers' incomes, the development of textbooks and curricula, improved pedagogical techniques through teacher training, enhanced school management through headteacher management training and a measure of standardization across the camps.

In particular, the INGOs had significant influence over how education on this border has developed through their focus on curriculum development, the printing and distribution of standardized textbooks (an endeavor that had previously been prohibited by cost and logistics) across all camps and the capacity-building of camp education management personnel. On one hand, the INGOs accepted and reinforced Karen dominance of the education system in the camps which consist of residents of other ethnicities. They had sympathy for the Karen cause and they operated on the basis of consultation with the Karen refugee community leaders. Also, they were only permitted by the Thai government to assist in education long after the camp communities had set up the schools. On the other hand, the underlying aims of the INGOs, such as the shaping of universal humanitarian subjects and the implementation of global policies and practices based on apolitical and areligious precepts, were often antithetical to the values and ideologies of the Karen education leadership. However, on the whole, the INGOs were involved in the transmission of Karen ethno-nationalism through the development and distribution of curricula in the camps.

This education serves the needs of a broad population of young people along this border (and from other areas within Burma) in a context of conflict and deprivation. More often than not, these young people are seeking educational opportunities in this borderland which they believe are of a higher standard and cost less than those available in Burma. In fact, the KNU's efforts provide education to populations that the Burmese government has little access to because of inaccessible terrain and/or a lack of trust, thereby helping Burma achieve its education targets (Jolliffe and Speers Mears 2016). This education has currency in this region and beyond: community-based organizations (CBOs) and INGOs in the locality recognize and value the quality of learning in the refugee camps when hiring staff; universities around the region and in other parts of the world accept border graduates[14]; and various NGOs in Burma's neighboring countries take interns from post-secondary programs in refugee camps and sometimes offer them jobs.

Viewed as a whole, Karen institutional networks in education, the circulation of educational objects and training, and the linkages between people in Karen schools have created a somewhat unified Karen transborder educational landscape, independent of Burmese or Thai state education systems. Although this fairly integrated education structure and the content of Karen ethno-nationalism in the curriculum resonate strongly in this borderland, they do not readily fit into the Burmese education administrative system nor into Burmese state notions of identity and nationhood. For several decades, this separation served the interests of the KNU and, to a certain extent, the borderlanders, and proclaimed the boundary between the state and the borderland. However, in the context of post-conflict transition and potential national reconciliation, the boundary is no longer as clearcut as it once was.

The KECD's Struggle for Legitimacy and Recognition in the New Burmese Political Landscape

The specific set of circumstances in the Thai-Burmese borderlands made it possible for Karen education to develop independently. However, a new political landscape has emerged in Burma since the military began transitioning to power-sharing with a citizen-elected government in 2011, heralding a fundamental shift in the relationship between the Burmese state and the KNU. While before, they were engaged in armed conflict and forged separate trajectories of development, the fates of these two entities have now become intertwined. At present, the interactions between the Burmese state and the KNU are tentative due to the unsettled nature of the peace process. Nevertheless, this represents a blurring of the once clearly demarcated line between the two actors and their education systems.

After the military coup in Thailand in 2014, the Thai government increased its restrictions on movement in and out of the refugee camps and reports of Thai state-initiated repatriation have circulated even more widely. In addition, since the Burmese general election of 2011 (the first in over 20 years) which ushered in a pseudo-civilian government of ex-military men, the Thai and Burmese governments have been in talks about the refugees and repatriation. Moreover, since the ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and the Burmese government in January 2012, the Burmese state has been expanding education provision in its south-eastern border. The accelerated flight of donor funding from the Thai side of the border has resulted in many organizations pulling out entirely and/or moving their operations or funding into areas under Burmese government administration. This has left Karen education leaders having to identify aspects of their schooling to link with the Burmese education system in order to retain the elements they deem most important and to ensure that students on the Thai side of the border are able to continue their schooling upon repatriation to Karen State and other parts of Burma. These leaders are now actively forging relationships with the Burmese authorities and other agencies to advocate for the recognition of Karen education as an ethnic education system within the national Burmese education system, so that they may have a say in decisions relating to education affecting those they consider their constituents (the Karen). One of the main stumbling blocks here is that the Burmese MoE has much greater power than the KECD in (re)negotiating their relationship.

The Karen education leadership's attempts to engage with the central Burmese authorities are a bid to assert their legitimacy in representing the people of this borderland, to retain certain ethno-nationalist components of schooling and to obtain recognition for the learning therein. However, as the political context of the border is strongly tied up in ethno-nationalist driven armed conflict, the legitimacy of non-state armed groups (and border CBOs) as governance bodies in education is disputed within the framework of the central state government. From the state perspective, it is the Burmese Ministry of Education (MoE) alone, with its Burmese language curriculum, that is the rightful administrator of education across the country. Despite having changed its political objectives from separatism to federalism, the KNU, the parent organization of the KECD, is still viewed by many Burmese government officials, civil servants and the army as working for the dissolution of the "union" – the country. In their eyes, the KNU's "rebel" administration (over schools, health services and so on) cannot be recognized as a legitimate governance body. For example, the State Minister for Border and Security Affairs in 2016 made official complaints about the fact that the KECD and the schools exist.[15] His main concern was about the use of Karen as the language of instruction, the weekly Karen national dress day and the raising of the Karen national flag (not the KNU flag, which would have been even more contentious) in these schools. These overt symbols and rituals of Karen ethno-nationalism are considered provocative in a country where ethnically-motivated civil war has wrought a tumultuous political history, but where ethnic communities feel that acceptance of their ethnic background is the crux of reconciliation.

In addition, although the Karen education organizations and the education system are valued in the locality, the latter is not ranked in national and international systems of educational recognition. Thus, although graduates of the Karen education system are qualified and experienced in their fields, they lack state-backed certification, and thus any formal means of recognition.[16] In fact, access to Burmese government schools for returnee students has been inconsistent (Dare 2015) and there are fears that the lack of recognition will be an obstacle to refugee students continuing their schooling upon return to Burma, and to teachers and graduates finding employment in Burma. The latter issue is particularly daunting as white-collar jobs in Burma are only available to graduates of Burmese government universities.

It has not helped that in the political dialogues since the signing of the nationwide ceasefire agreements between the government and eight[17] non-state armed groups (including the KNU), social issues such as education have been de-prioritized, making it difficult for the KECD to further its agenda on education at the central level. Moreover, as peace negotiations in the country go through cycles of peaks and troughs, the KECD's negotiations with the Burmese Ministry of Education (MoE) are alternately advanced and stymied.[18] In an effort to strengthen their position in Burma, the KECD has worked with border-based INGOs with head offices in Burma to create platforms for advocacy in Naypidaw, the capital, and in Yangon where many INGOs and embassies are still based. In 2013, the KECD met officially in Yangon with the UN, INGOs, Burmese civil society organizations, and representatives of foreign agencies. In addition, negotiations are being held between the KECD and the Burmese MoE about transfer certificates from community schools to government schools, but the policies on transition have not been implemented systematically (World Education 2016), with opportunities mostly depending on local arrangements (Speers Mears et al. 2015).

At this point, it is necessary to state that the official Burmese government narrative about the KECD's legitimacy and the existence of KECD-administered schools is not held by all central-level officials and civil servants. Rather, we believe that these actors often feel the need to maintain this discourse in public and when acting in an official capacity. In addition, in a country burdened by an inefficient centralized bureaucracy and undeveloped technical capacity, it is sometimes easier to achieve objectives through unofficial and informal means. For example, Burmese government ministers have unofficially encouraged local bodies not to wait for official decisions and policy, but rather to go ahead and create their own opportunities in education, as official channels usually take too long.[19]

To this end, the KECD, the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) and the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE) have attempted to forge relationships with state-level authorities, local authorities, individual institutions and individuals in Burma to facilitate access for students in the refugee camps wishing to transfer to government educational institutions.[20] Nevertheless, they still come up against a centralized bureaucracy requiring state-level authorization.[21] This is because most decisions on education are centralized at the Union level as set out by Myanmar's 2008 constitution. Thus, despite the KECD's engagement with the Burmese MoE at the State and local levels, not much can be accomplished without successful negotiations with the MoE at the Union level in Naypyidaw.

The boundaries that previously defined the borderland in the realm of education management are shifting. Both the state and the KNU/KED are having to reconfigure the edges of identity, governance and nationhood as represented by education. This process is proving to be complicated and uneven. Given the unsettled nature of the state-level negotiations and the delays of the Myanmar bureaucracy, the Karen education leadership is now focusing on pragmatic rather than political considerations. This involves ensuring student continuity and teacher recognition in Myanmar rather than working out the exact nature of integration between the Karen schools and the Myanmar education system. In addition, the strategy is now to concentrate on facilitating the transfer of students and teachers from the refugee camps to schools affiliated with the KECD.

While the Karen education leadership would like to facilitate the transfer of students to Burmese government schools as well, this has been challenging due to the structural flaws in the Burmese political and bureaucratic systems. What this means is that the boundaries of Karen education are shifting geographically as the Karen education leadership finds it easier to facilitate the transfer of schools and students from the camps into KNU-controlled areas rather than into Burmese government schools. In other words, the geographical domain of Karen education is contracting.[22] At the same time, as the next section shows, the boundaries between the Karen education system and that of the Burmese one is being challenged and negotiated at the school level.

Contesting Centralization and National Homogenization in Borderland Schools

The contestation over legitimacy at the macro level is also being played out at the micro level of the school. For decades, schools on the Burmese side of this borderland have had relative autonomy from the central Burmese state because of remote location, poor

infrastructure and armed conflict. However, the education reforms taken by the Burmese MoE, coupled with the signing of the ceasefire agreement, have pulled these schools into the orbit of the central Burmese state education authorities, re-configuring the boundaries between the state and the borderland in this domain.

As part of its bid to reform the education sector, the Burmese Ministry of Education, assisted by UNICEF, has taken some steps towards introducing mother tongue-based multilingual education across the country. However, the way this has been carried out, along with its outcomes, has been criticized for giving preference to improving its own education system rather than that already existing in the borderlands, a lack of genuine engagement with ethnic education providers, inadequate resourcing, inappropriate teaching materials and resistance on the part of some state/regional governments (Jolliffe and Speers Mears 2016). Nevertheless, education-sector coordination meetings facilitated by UNICEF have taken place at the state level and dealt with a range of challenges concerning MoE expansion, the transition of students between the different education systems and the recognition of qualifications (Jolliffe 2016).

In addition, since the ceasefire agreement, it has become somewhat easier for the Burmese education authorities to provide support to schools in some previously inaccessible areas. As a case in point, the proportion of schools supported by the KSEAG that have been assigned MoE teachers has increased from 26.6% in 2012–2013 to 49.3% in 2015–2016 (Jolliffe and Speers Mears 2016). Many local actors perceive this as a benefit as it allows their children to study in schools registered by the government, providing them access to further education and employment in Myanmar. At the same time, ethnic language education reform has been implemented in the 2014 National Education Law, where regional and state governments can introduce the teaching of ethnic languages (as a second language) and literature at the primary level and upwards, and ethnic languages can be used alongside Burmese as a classroom language (to explain the curriculum rather than as language of instruction). However, this has also been viewed as "a deliberate attempt to undermine their community education systems, as well as their ethnic language and identity" (World Education 2016, 10). The arrival of government teachers has upset the balance of power between school staff members, and in school management. First, government teachers, with their officially recognized qualifications, have claimed a higher position in the school hierarchy because community teachers generally have relatively little training and no official accreditation. Moreover, the higher pay received by the former reinforces their dominance. Community teachers only receive stipends and support from the community, and they feel undermined and discouraged by their lower pay. Consequently, some community teachers have left their rural schools for better-paying jobs in urban centers (World Education 2016).

Second, at the level of school management, MoE teachers have adopted seniority over community teachers and school committee members, resulting in parallel systems of management, and tensions from competing school management systems. In certain cases, this has resulted in the school committees no longer being able to function as a mechanism for school management and decision-making, contributing to the loss of community ownership of schools (Lenkova 2015; World Education 2016).

Third, government teachers – who are mostly Burmese speakers – have been perceived as preventing community teachers from teaching in Karen language and from using the KECD curriculum. As a result, community members fear that their schools will no

longer be able to teach in the students' mother tongue and are concerned that they will lose their Karen language and identity (South and Lall 2015; World Education 2016).

These matters have been shaped into a narrative of Burmese government domination and national homogenization by borderlanders (Lenkova 2015; Jolliffe and Speers Mears 2016; World Education 2016). The point of interest here is that it is possible to use other narratives to make sense of these power struggles. For example, it has been reported that government teachers have difficulty integrating into the community (Lenkova 2015). This, combined with the power struggle between government and community teachers in schools, may be indicators of tensions created by social class and the urban-rural divide rather than solely by ethnicity and national politics. Therefore, we posit that the particular narrative of dominance and ethnic politics is part of the process of boundary-making that occurs in this borderland. Where once the lines between government and community education were clearly demarcated, they now require realignment and negotiation.

Conclusion

This article has provided an examination of state-borderland dynamics through the lens of education. Our focus has been on Karen education, a somewhat integrated system of education that has been developed and run by the local community outside the state system, with the assistance of humanitarian aid and border differentials against a background of armed conflict and remote geography.

The key argument is that the boundaries of these borderlands are undergoing seismic shifts as a result of the changing political context of both Burma and Thailand, and the reduction in aid funding on the Thai side of the border. These events herald the dismantling of education support on the Thai side and the possible repatriation of refugees. Consequently, refugee and migrant students are beginning to look towards Burma to continue their schooling. All this makes it necessary for Karen education leaders to negotiate with the central Burmese authorities, and to begin to re-calibrate their curricula and educational objectives for a future where the Burmese national education system will play a larger role in the schooling of their constituents.

While this brings further opportunities for improving the position of ethnic education in Burma, it has also generated conflict in two arenas. The first surrounds the recognition of the KECD as a legitimate education authority and the Karen curriculum as a valid body of knowledge. In other words, non-state armed group administrative bodies are seeking to re-construct notions of authority, legitimacy and recognition through dialogue and negotiation with central government bodies. The second arena concerns the struggle over systems of governance, and the bid to maintain culture through curricula and language of instruction in local schools. This means that the various stakeholders in education are having to make sense of and re-define the boundaries around education, and hence around the borderlands.

Notes

1. We use the term Burma, to refer to the country known as Myanmar, as this is the term used by our respondents. Their preference for this term reflects the pro-democracy movement's

dismissal of the decision made by the military regime in 1989 to change the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. The use of the terms Karen State and Kayin State is not just a matter of political preference but also geographical difference. Karen State is the territory perceived by the KNU as belonging to the Karen which is physically larger than Kayin State as designated by the Burmese government. When referring to places in present day Burma, we shall use the current terms. The term Burmese is used as an adjective and to refer to the language.

2. There are other ways in which the term "Sqaw" is spelt but we use this version as it includes different ways of pronouncing the term.
3. The terms "Sqaw" and "Pwo" were coined by the British; the Sqaw Karen call themselves "Pgha k'nyau" and the Pwo "Phloung".
4. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected using two surveys (over 4000 respondents for each survey), focus group interviews (50 respondents), semi-structured interviews (20 respondents), participation observation in different time periods between 2005 and 2017. The respondents in the surveys were representative of the teachers, head teachers, primary and secondary students of the seven predominantly Karen refugee camps. The respondents who participated in the focus group interviews consisted of teachers, head teachers, school management staff and students in the refugee camps. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the different Karen education leadership groups and other actors involved in the provision of education in this borderland. The majority of the respondents were Karen, although a small percentage were of different ethnicities.
5. This body has oversight of the management of all seven predominantly Karen refugee camps on the Thai border.
6. See Ramirez and Jimenez-Silva (2016) special issue of The High School Journal.
7. The "Four Cuts" policy is a military strategy used by the Burmese army to cut off insurgents' access to resources of food, funds, recruits, and information.
8. Structural violence in this instance refers to social, economic and political oppression generated by militarization and associated abuses.
9. The Karen State border with Thailand hosts two camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) in Karen State and seven refugee camps in Thailand, which are primarily populated by refugees from the Karen ethnic group but also those of Mon, Karenni, Burman and other ethnicities.
10. The statistics were collected from the KRCEE in May 2017 and from a presentation given by the KECD in May 2017.
11. Different dates have been given for the year that the KTWG was established, some sources citing 1993, while our respondents claimed it was 1998.
12. The KRCEE has been and is staffed by former KECD members and members of other KNU departments, amongst others.
13. There are three main types of schools on the Burmese side of this borderland. KECD-administered schools are managed by the KECD, with policy, curriculum and teacher training organized by the KECD. They are not officially registered or recognized by the Burmese government. "Mixed" schools are mostly former community schools that have recently been registered by the government. They comprise Karen community and Burmese government teachers, are funded through a variety of sources, and/or teach a mix of the KECD and Burmese Ministry of Education (MoE) curriculum. These schools are the result of the expansion of Burmese state education into former Karen community schools, some of which were using the KECD curriculum, while others were using the Burmese MoE curriculum. Finally, government schools are funded and administered by the Burmese MoE, and use the Burmese MoE curriculum. The teachers are certified by Burmese institutions and appointed by the MoE at central levels (World Education 2016).
14. S'Phan Shaung (2016) Migrant Students offered Scholarships to Enter Thai University. Karen News 9 July 2016 http://karennews.org/2016/07/migrant-students-offered-scholarships-to-enter-thai-university/ and Thabyay Education Foundation website http://www.thabyay.org/partners-corner.html.

15. Interview with KECD representative, Mae Sot, Thailand, 12 October 2016.
16. Interview with KECD representative, Mae Sot, Thailand, 12 October 2016.
17. Two more non-state armed groups signed ceasefire agreements in February 2018, bringing the total number to 10.
18. Interview with KECD representative, Mae Sot, Thailand, 12 October 2016.
19. Interview with KRC representative, Mae Sot, Thailand, 22 October 2016.
20. Interview with KRC representative, Mae Sot, Thailand, 22 October 2016.
21. While the three main education bodies are bound in some way to KNU mandates, other CBOs are able to work independently to smooth the transition of refugee students into schools in Burma. Also, as they have no desire to be part of central level talks in Burma, they can, to a certain extent, continue to operate independently of the Burmese authorities.
22. Interview with KRC representative via Skype, 28 July 2019.

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