

TER IV

ANALYSIS AND SUGGESTIONS

Karen Mobility: Possibilities of a "Brain Drain"

This research was started with, as part of its objective, to determine means for halting what was feared to be a Karen "brain drain" from the hills. Upon completion of the research, the whole notion of "brain drain" has come to be seen as much more complicated than first imagined. Furthermore, there are other factors, such as the entire question of Karen pride, that are of major importance in determining the advantages and disadvantages of Karens coming to live in northern Thai cities.

First, we will review the advantages and disadvantages of "brain drain", whereby the most talented individuals in a society leave for one more developed will be discussed. The subject of "brain drain" became quite popular in the 1960s when it seemed that many of the newly independent African and Asian countries were losing their intellectual elite to the former colonial master countries. As a result, these countries, in addition to being already poor, were losing yet another resource than might enable them to become more economically developed. A similar fear regarding bright young Karens leaving the hills, not returning, and thus impeding highland Karen (one of the poorest groups in northern Thailand) development was a factor in undertaking this study.

Soon after recognizing "brain drain" as a potential problem, some observers came up with the concept of "brain gain". By this is meant that the intellectuals who leave a country or region will have a

chance to contribute more to society as a whole in the country to which they migrate than where they originated. Thus, for example, a bright Indian child from a poor village might be sent off to school and become a nutritionist and discover inexpensive, appropriate ways to improve rural Indian food habits. As a result, this will increase the body of knowledge in the world in such a way that eventually some of the benefits get back to their home country, benefitting his home more than would not have been possible had he never migrated (Beijer 1969, pp. 43-46). Thus, one cannot immediately conclude that intellectuals migrating from their homeplace for elsewhere always has bad effects.

How does the question of "brain drain" and "brain gain" apply to the Karens we have researched who come to study in northern Thai cities? Clearly these individuals are among the brightest young Karens and, as shown earlier in this report, they are moving into the cities and staying there. As noted in the above paragraph, it is impossible to say that this pattern is necessarily good or bad. To cite an example proving that benefits from "brain gain" can outweigh disadvantages of a "brain drain", one need only look at perhaps the first Karen to receive an educational scholarship to come out of the hills into the city to study: Khru Sant Khankaew. Khru Sant was born in Mae Kwat, Lampang Province. He received a scholarship first to attend Thra Ennie's bible school and later to attend The Prince Royal's College. Upon graduation he stayed in the city, eventually rising to be manager of the Siam Commercial Bank in Chiang Mai. At the same time, he became a leader in local Karen society and church work. Had he returned to the hills he may well have succeeded in whatever field of work he entered, be it evangelism or farming or

something else. However, as a prominent Chiang Mai citizen (who is extremely proud to be a Karen and tells people so readily) who can readily mingle with high-ranking Thai officials, he has had the opportunity to show the potential ability of Karens in a way he could have never done if he returned to Mae Kwat. Khru Sant has become a widely-recognized example of how talented Karens are. As a result of his migrating to the city (and no matter how many times he goes back on visits) whenever the various derogatory stereotypes about Karens are brought up it is possible to prove them wrong by reference to Khru Sant. Khru Sant is of course not the only such example of Karen success in the Thai world, but he is the best known. Surely benefits of his work in the lowlands have reached Karens throughout the hills of northern Thailand in ways that would not have been possible if he had returned to Mae Kwat and lived all his life there.

There are examples to the contrary. Some Karens who received scholarships to study in the city, completed their education and became teachers, in some cases head teachers. There is at least one example of a Karen head teacher who is embarrassed to be identified as a Karen. He does not want to be visited by Karens nor does he want to be heard speaking the Karen language. For all practical purposes, just as much as the one hundred Karen families referred to earlier in this report, he has ceased being Karen.

The question, thus, is not whether a Karen student who goes to study in the city stays or returns, but what he does with his life. Karens who maintain Karen identity, see it as a strong point in their life and who capitalize on the advantages of being Karen are an asset to other Karens and to their home villages. Karens who disavow or who

are at least highly embarrassed by their Karen ancestry cannot be considered assets to other Karens. Indeed, by taking advantages meant to benefit all Karens and then implicitly renouncing being Karen they are a discredit to their fellow Karens.

The government policy promotes assimilation, and as has been shown, Karens are gradually assimilating into Thai life. We support this trend. The problem with many young Karens is that, because of a lack of pride in Karen culture, these young educated and newly assimilating Karens have a sort of inferiority complex about their own nature. This causes them to enter Thai life in the city at a disadvantage to others.

This is important because there is a definite trend towards moving into the city. Furthermore, when educated Karens move back to the hills, they almost never go back to their former kind of life. Instead, they work as teachers or for development agencies, by which means they move into national Thai life. In many ways this is the same sort of process as moving into the cities. Since the great majority of these are Christians, and as noted above in an earlier chapter, they will quite likely maintain their Karen identity. Thus, there can be expected to be a continuing, and increasing, movement of Karens into national Thai life.

An assessment of why these Karens move to the city, how they enter Thai life, and what their intentions are regarding being Karen, thus, are needed before making conclusions on the appropriateness of any particular mobility behavior. Forcing Karens to go back to the hills will not solve the basic problem of Karen ambivalence over being Karen. As has been shown, those returning to the hills, often live in non-traditional "Thai" ways.

What is needed is a means for evoking within these young Karens pride in being Karen so that they want to serve both the kingdom of Thailand and the Karen people. If this can be accomplished, no matter what occupation a young takes up, he will still be able to contribute to helping the poor highland Karen villages from which he came.

A number of means to carry this out have been discussed. Two will be mentioned here. The first, somewhat more technical, involves projects in which linguists at Chulalongkorn University, such as Dr. Theraphan L. Thongkham, are involved. This includes having young tribal children learn to read in their own language first, before learning Thai. The rationale for this is that a tribal child knows his own language better than Thai and that the skill of learning to read itself will be facilitated by starting in a language with which the child is already familiar. Then once the child knows how to read, the shift will be made to Thai, which will form the basis of the his education. There is no intention of starting a "separate but equal" Karen education system or curriculum; the purpose of teaching tribal children to read their own languages is to help them to learn Thai. This will also ease their move into Thai society. However, in the process, the children will also see that their own language has value and need not be considered an underdeveloped tongue not of any use.

This plan, though, has received considerable criticism from various government officials, including those in the Public Welfare Department. They feel that by allowing even a little tribal language into the curriculum even at the first or second year of primary school would give an opening to tribal separatist moves, such as are active, particularly among Karens, in Burma. It is difficult to see, though,

how the little amount of tribal language that would be taught could give rise to a rebellion that is rather effectively limited to Burma. None of the root causes of this rebellion exist in Thailand.

Perhaps the time has come for a reassessment of this line of thought. Just as Thais whose descendants move to the United States want them to learn Thai and love the King, Karen parents want their children to appreciate Karen tradition. If some Thai teaching can be facilitated by studying some Karen language this will also help build Karen pride, and can be expected to positively affect the development of the Karens and their loyalty to this country in the future. Experiments in teaching Karens Thai through using the method advocated can be made in Project areas.

The second means for accomplishing this is wider-reaching. This is the Mountain People's Culture and Development Project (NOVIB), of the Netherlands which has been active in Chiang Mai under the leadership of Dr. Leo Alting von Gausau. Although this project has become embroiled in a number of quarrels with other agencies working in the hills, notably the Baptist Church activities with the Akha under Dr. Paul Lewis, these problems are not pertinent to this research report and will not be further discussed. What is important are the principles of NOVIB and how they can be applied to work with the Karens.

NOVIB is based on the idea that tribal people need to know and feel pride in their own culture before development can occur. The project calls for educating young tribal people in both the ways of Thai life and the ways of their own tribe's life. This will facilitate their move into Thai life and make them better Thai citizens.

At the same time, an effort is made to educate young Thais about tribal ways. As far as any of the authors of this report know, there is only one Thai who has written a Ph.D. dissertation on the hill tribes (Chob Kacha-ananda, writing on the Yao) and one who has written on highland-lowland relations (Benchapun Shinawatra). This lack of Thai academic expertise has resulted in considerable misinformation being spread, which of course is to the disadvantage of the tribal peoples. Only rarely do Thai officials with responsibilities for dealing with hill tribes actually know a great deal about the tribal cultures. Whatever these officials do know has most likely come from firsthand experiences, traveller's tales, and stereotypes; not surprisingly considerable misinformation results in the further diminution of Karen pride. The move to give Thais in-depth knowledge information about one particular tribe seeks to redress this shortcoming (Alting, pp. 10-25).

NOVIB also seeks to build pride in hill life and to find means for tribal peoples to function both in the hills and in the city. Developing pride among the Akha through a supportive program regarding their own culture as well as by educating Thai people about the values of Akha culture aim to do this.

There is evidence that the Karens themselves are aware of this situation. Recently the Karen Baptist Convention organized a meeting of Karens in the cities for the purpose of fellowship. Over one hundred attended this first meeting. This may prove to be the most suitable forum for reaching the Karens in the city and for instilling pride in their background in these Karens. Even if there are no overt programs emerging from this, this fellowship will provide the chance

for less successful Karens to meet with those who have succeeded in obtaining good jobs. This will give the less-advantaged Karens the will to work harder as well as providing them with role models to seek to emulate. Although this get-together occurred after the end of the research period and was not observed by the research staff, we are convinced that this sort kind of activity can create the environment needed for evoking pride in being Karen among the Karens who seem to have the least such pride.

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Suggestions

The research teams makes three major proposals, each of which has a number of lesser, related, points (in no particular order of priority):

1. Continue providing educational scholarships to Karens. This is the only way to continue building a base of educated Karens. However, there must be a means for raising the level of self-confidence in these scholarship recipients in their status as Karens. One possibility is to provide material on praiseworthy aspects of Karen culture to both Karens and Thai officials with whom Karens deal. Perhaps the Karen Baptist Convention can experiment with the preparation of such material in both Thai (so the public at large can read it too) and in Karen. There is already an large body of Karen-language material, of which some can be translated. One good example is The Karen Thesaurus, a kind of Karen encyclopedia prepared in the 1840s and now very rare. Another would be articles about Thailand in The Morning Star (incidentally, the first vernacular newspaper in Southeast Asia). This material can then be distributed through its various hostels and churches in the north of Thailand. TN-HDP can facilitate this effort. At the same time, there should be material on Karen city dwellers to give the hill Karens a better idea appreciation of the experiences of those who attend school in the city. This might be a way to encourage better acceptance of returning Karens in the highland villages.

2. Once this material, or enough of it, has been assembled, it can be introduced to Karens deemed to be disinterested or not quite proud of being Karen. This distribution, of course, has to be handled in an informal, non-overt way. Perhaps TN-HDP can bring some of these

individuals together in a casual way (once or several times) that will appeal to Karens living in the city to discuss Karen life, helping villages, and related topics. Although it is unlikely any concrete plans will be made or that any Karens will suddenly become "reborn" Karens, this sort of activity can lead to improved attitudes about Karenness. Furthermore, the interchange created through such exchanges can lead to better ideas and more effective techniques. Then, further action can be planned.

3. The respondents frequently said that if suitable jobs were available, they would return to the hills. While this can be taken with a grain of salt, there is a serious lack of suitable employment in the hills. TN-HDP should seek means to solve this problem without becoming a huge welfare project.

Possible efforts include bring potential employers together with recent graduates in a job fair, making a survey of what kinds of jobs will be available in the hills in the coming decade and then providing scholarships for an education that will give them the training for those kinds of jobs, and the promotion of Karen free enterprise.

The latter could include efforts to give seed money (loans or gifts depending on situation) to promising ventures. This would have to be closely administered but once a couple of projects succeeded, and the means for achieving success was shown, individual Karens would be more prepared to try on their own. Possible initial ventures could include projects capitalizing on individual Karen's talents in agriculture (passion fruit juice and other minimally processed products) or in crafts (studying Burmese Karen dress or that in Ban Baw, Ratburi and producing them for sale in the villages of the

north). TN-HDP should consider this an all other possibilities, perhaps in a workshop/seminar (one that really works at discussion-- not just so many talks, name cards, foam lettering and all the other paraphernalia so often associated with these functions in Thailand) with the Karen Baptist Convention, the Public Welfare Department, representatives of local government, the Northern Industrial Promotion Board, Thung Hotel Road, Chiang Mai, as well as other interested parties.

These ideas hopefully will both be of direct benefit in solving the problems discussed above as well as in generating newer ideas for the same purpose. As much as possible the Karen movers themselves should be involved in this process although the very fact that they are losing their Karen identity will make this a delicate problematic task. This should not deter TN-HDP and others from making the effort.