

Chapter 34

Learning Inclusion in Thailand: A Case Study of Karen Education

Chaitut Rongchai

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

ABSTRACT

Compulsory Education (CE) in Thailand has been implemented since 1921 as part of a broader global move towards universal education. Yet while most nations have implemented CE, each nation may not always account for marginalized groups that exist on the periphery of mainstream society. A study by Oh and Van Der Stouwe (2008) suggests that Karen refugees from Burma may be such a marginal community, excluded from educational and other opportunities within Thailand. If Karen refugee children entered mainstream schooling, they may become possible candidates for citizenship in Thai society. This chapter asks what future inclusion might look like, and explores the benefits and drawbacks of such inclusion. Using scholarly works by prestigious authors on Karen education, refugee and migrant education and theories on citizenship and education, this chapter argues that Thai education may aid refugees in gaining access to new forms of Thai identity; however, these new identities may often stand in tension with Karen forms of personhood.

INTRODUCTION

Education can be a first step in obtaining citizenship for many immigrants, whether they come from a refugee or migrant context. However, the identity of the immigrant as a person can change due to the process of being educated in mainstream schooling. This chapter introduces the complexities of identity and personhood through scholarship on the case of Karen refugees in Thailand

from countries including Australia and Scotland, as analyzed by theories by Stephen Castles on migration, citizenship, and education in relation to immigration policy in Germany, France and Australia. This chapter articulates the messiness that occurs in migration from one country to another, where the final destination can be a difficult place to resettle due to immigration policies that make it difficult for immigrants to live prosperous lives. In the end, this chapter is explicitly asking

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whether Karen refugees can integrate into Thai society and constructively learn new ways to live a prosperous life in Thai culture.

BACKGROUND

The Karen descended from the same ancestors as the Mongolian people. The earliest Karen settled in Htee-mset Met Ywa, a land bordering the source of the Yang-Tse-Kiang or Yangtze River in the Gobi desert, migrating to Burma as early as 739 B.C. Burma was conquered by the British Empire in 1885 and ruled by the British as a province of India in 1886 (Buadaeng, 2007). In 1937, constant protest for self-rule by the people of Burma made Britain grant a separate constitution for Burma from British India. During World War II, Burmese rebels of British Burma allied themselves with the Japanese and then with the British, which eventually led to the independence of Burma after the war. The British made a classification system to determine what ethnic groups existed in Burma. Before the British, there was no ethnic group classified as “Karen”. Before the name existed, the Karen identified themselves as two groups: the Sgaw and the Pwo. They did not have their own state before British colonialism. They lived in the periphery of kingdoms ruled by other ethnic groups. The Burmese would call them the Kayin, the Mon would call the Pwo Karen as Kariang, and the Sgaw Karen as Karang, and the Shan would call them Yang (Buadaeng, 2007).

The Karen may be divided into several groups besides Pwo and Sgaw. There are Pa-Os, Paku, Maw Nay Pwa, Bwe, White Karens, Padaung (Kayan), Red Karens (Karenni), Keko/Keba, Black Karens, and Striped Karens (KNU, 1986). Even though there are so many different types, the Karen today are known as one single ethnic group. During the period of British colonial government, the Karen were visited by many Christian missionaries, though the first sizeable outreach came from American Baptists in 1826.

Assuming there was a combined effort of British and American Christian missionaries, 500 to 600 Karen were converted to Christianity compared to 125 Burman (the ethnic majority in Burma) in 1834 (Buadaeng, 2007). The Karen had a higher conversion rate than the Burman, who are mainly Buddhist. It was obvious that the establishment of churches would come about due to the amount of missionary work done with the Karens; however, there was also large support for Christian schools. There was a system of Christian schools, mainly primary schools in villages and secondary education in a central town. There was a Baptist college established in Rangoon in 1875 (Buadaeng, 2007).

During 1832-1853, British missionaries established the written language of Karen. The written language first started in 1832 by Johnathan Wade, a missionary who adapted Burmese characters to Sgaw Karen spoken language (Buadaeng, 2007). By 1843 Wade wrote a translation of the New Testament from English to Karen. By 1853, Francis Mason continued the work to finish the complete translation of the Bible from English to Karen (Buadaeng, 2007). This translation of the Bible by British missionaries obviously promoted Christian beliefs and practices. This promotion of Christianity reconstructed Karen history, traditions, and culture. This is because the Karen have their own written language in which they can communicate ideas and document these ideas for future generations to contemplate (Buadaeng, 2007).

In 1937, the British colonial government endorsed the Karen history of migration from southern China to Burma. This endorsement was established through a national holiday called the Karen New Year’s Day. This celebration not only showed the British alliance with the Karen but also recognized that the Karen had been in Burma long before the Burmans.

British respect for the Karen earned loyalty. The Karen became great allies in British imperialism and against the Japanese in World War II. The Karen served in the British army in the first

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