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# Life Histories of Refugees from Burma in Akron, Ohio

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Life Histories of Refugees from Burma in Akron, Ohio

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Honors Thesis

Spring 2015

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## Introduction

Akron, Ohio is a receiving city for refugees. This means that the city is recognized by the national government as an ideal area for refugees to settle in because it can provide many of the resources needed to help this relocation process, including access to jobs, housing, and public transportation. The refugees are brought to the city by and are aided by the International Institute of Akron, a federally funded institution. The Institute provides both financial aid and lessons, such as English tutoring. However, the International Institute eventually weans refugees off of the services they provide so that the Institute can focus on helping newer arrivals. Not all refugees make this transition without struggling.

This research began when a local pediatrician approached the Department of Anthropology at the University of Akron and expressed concern about one group of refugees, the Karen from Burma.<sup>1</sup> The Karen have a poor relationship with the International Institute and no longer benefit from the organization. The pediatrician was concerned about the health and diet of the Karen community. A small team of faculty and students undertook a project to understand how the Karen view food from a cultural perspective. Yet, it soon became apparent that the problems the Karen face extend beyond food such as difficulties communicating with people outside of their community. The Karen also expressed a desire to tell their stories, and through an analysis of their life histories and the larger historical context, it becomes possible to better understand the roots of the problems they face and to search for possible solutions.

This paper is the summation of my research with the Karen community of Akron. An overview of the history of modern Burma and the ethnic conflicts in the country is provided before an explanation of the anthropological research. This is followed by a discussion of the

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to my advisors Dr. Isa Rodriguez-Soto, Dr. Carolyn Behrman and Dr. Oghenetoja Okoh and my fellow student Emily Behrman for all of their help and advice.

results, the thematic codes found in the interviews. The interviews themselves are provided in an appendix, as well as the codebook used.

## Historical Background

Burma, also known as Myanmar, became an independent country in 1948. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Burma had been a colonial state of the British Empire. Like with its other colonies, the British did not respect ethnic and cultural boundaries when they drew the borders of the colony on their map; because of this, the modern country encompasses a multitude of ethnic minority groups. Today, the national government recognizes 135 separate ethnic groups within the county, but only seven of these ethnicities compose about 92 percent of the entire population. Of these seven ethnicities, the Burman, for whom the British named the country, are the majority.<sup>2</sup> They have held power in the national government since the 1960's in the form of a military junta, and even with recent reform movements the Burmese remain in power.

The modern borders of Burma were formed through a series of wars during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. European powers fought for dominance in southeast Asia, including Great Britain. Through a series of wars from 1824 until 1886, Great Britain came to control the area which now forms the modern borders. Originally a province of British India, Great Britain separated Burma into its own colony in 1937.<sup>3</sup> The ethnic Burmese who had ruled much of the area that Britain colonized kept a higher social position than other ethnic groups.<sup>4</sup> The name "Burma" comes from British rule; the Burmese state was at the center of the colony and many of the battles

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Le Bas, ed., (2013). *Insight Guides: Myanmar (Burma)*. Singapore: APA.

<sup>3</sup> "Myanmar profile- Timeline." *BBC News*. March 31, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12992883>

<sup>4</sup> Maung Htin Aung. *A History of Burma*. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967. Pg. 270

fought in their effort to gain control of the region were against the Burmese people.<sup>5</sup> The British named the colony after this one ethnic group, even though the colony encompassed many more.

During the Second World War, Japan invaded Burma and gained control of the colony. The Japanese army trained the Burmese Independence Army which they hoped would support them. However, the Burmese Independence Army quickly transformed itself into the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) which turned against the Japanese; the AFPFL was instrumental in helping the British repel the Japanese. The AFPFL was led by Aung San, an ethnic Burmese, who worked with the British towards independence. However, Aung San and other leaders of the AFPFL were assassinated by nationalist opposition leaders before independence was gained. U Nu, who was a part of the party which ruled Burma under Japanese occupation, was asked to lead the AFPFL. It was under U Nu that Burma gained its independence from Great Britain and he became the first prime minister.<sup>6</sup> The various ethnic groups struggled for power within the colonial system, and this struggle only increased after Burma gained its independence in 1948.

After independence, Burma was a parliamentary democracy. U Nu remained in power through the early 1960's. He worked to maintain Burma's new independence and remained neutral on world affairs.<sup>7</sup> However, internal struggles plagued the new country. The various ethnicities vied for power and respect. U Nu instituted Buddhism as the state religion, despite objections from the army and other religious groups. Furthermore, the military also objected to U Nu's support of separatist groups. Many of the ethnic groups in Burma wished to break from the country to form their own based on what they argued was their ancestral territory. Part of the agreement between the British and their subjects was that when Burma became an independent

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<sup>5</sup> Personal Communication, Oscar Baaye

<sup>6</sup> Aung pg. 304-308

<sup>7</sup> Charney, Michael W. *A History of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pg.78

country the different ethnic groups would be able to form separate countries after a period of time if they were unhappy being a part of Burma. However, some of these territories were agricultural or mineral rich areas, and their loss would have meant a loss to the Burmese economy.<sup>8</sup>

Displeased with U Nu, the Burmese military led a coup in 1962 and took control of the country. Led by General Ne Win, the military created a single party state which outlawed dissent. This single party, the Socialist Program Party, instituted a national economy and outlawed elections.<sup>9</sup> In 1974, a new constitution was adopted which removed power from the military and gave it to a body called the People's Assembly; however, this group was headed by Ne Win and was run by former members of the military. The People's Assembly embraced an isolationist policy, and as a result, the economy of Burma crashed.<sup>10</sup> Continued economic hardship and food shortages led to massive protests in 1988, primarily by Buddhist monks and students. The military once again took control of the country and used force to punish protesters.<sup>11</sup> During this protest, Aung San's daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi became the leader of the most prominent opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). Her party quickly became popular with the people of Burma, and won 82% of the national election held by the junta in 1990.<sup>12</sup> These results were ignored, however, and the junta arrested many members of the NLD and forced others to leave the country as refugees. It was also around this time, in 1989, that the junta renamed the country "Myanmar."<sup>13</sup> Many of the non-Burmese ethnicities saw this as a ploy to appease outsiders; much of the world was aware of the ethnic conflicts in

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<sup>8</sup> Key informant Oscar

<sup>9</sup> Charney pg. 108

<sup>10</sup> Ibid pp. 135-136

<sup>11</sup> Ibid pp. 163-164

<sup>12</sup> Jayshree Bajoria. "Understanding Myanmar." *Council on Foreign Relations*. June 21, 2013.

<http://www.cfr.org/human-rights/understanding-myanmar/p14385>

<sup>13</sup> Charney 171

Burma and had placed sanctions of the Burmese junta. Renaming the country was meant to be a symbolic gesture that other ethnicities would be recognized in a united state. However, “Myanmar” is a classical name for the Burmese people; in reality, it is no different than the Anglican “Burma.”

The junta was able to suppress most opposition until 2007 when large scale protests were once again led by Buddhist monks, known as the Saffron Revolution. The junta drafted a new constitution in 2008 in response, and the first elections under it were held in 2010 and Thein Sein was elected president. Thein Sein was a powerful member of the military junta and also chaired the National Convention, which drafted the new constitution.<sup>14</sup> While many humanitarian organizations argue the new constitution is inherently discriminatory, and that the 2010 elections were wrought with fraud, the new civilian government has worked towards reforms such as a relaxation of censorship and the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission.

The Burmese are not the only actors in Burma’s recent history. Several of the larger ethnic minorities have formed their own independence armies, which clash with Burmese forces. For example, the Karen National Union (KNU) and their military, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), has been fighting the Burmese since 1949 in an attempt to create an independent state called “Kawthoolei.”<sup>15</sup> The ruling Burmese have been criticized by many outsiders for their use of force against ethnic minorities; minorities are treated brutally by the military as they are often tortured and killed or made to do forced labor.

The Karen (also known as Kayin) comprise about 7 percent of the country’s total population. However, there are also Karen in Thailand and, since recent conflicts, around the

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<sup>14</sup> “Profile: Myanmar President Thein Sein.” *BBC News*, November 10, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12358204>

<sup>15</sup> Ananda Raja. “Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Nation-State: The Karen in Burma and Thailand.” In *Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia*, ed. Gehan Wijeyewardene. Singapore: ISEAS, 1997. Pg. 111



world in countries such as Australia and the United States. In Burma, the Karen typically live in rural areas and are subsistence farmers.<sup>16</sup> According to the Karen in Akron, their people had a privileged position under British colonial rule; as one key informant described, her grandparent's generation was fluent in English and highly educated as the British gave them prominent positions in local bureaucracy. While this account is important to consider, scholarly sources did not corroborate this information beyond that the Karen were given special representation in the Burmese Legislative Assembly under British rule and that they allied themselves with British forces during the Second World War.<sup>17</sup> This allegiance may have been influenced by the early adoption of the Christian religion by the Karen, the same religion practiced as the British, while many of the other ethnicities in Burma did not.<sup>18</sup> Since the departure of the British, the Karen have lost their privileged position and have lived under the threat of violence for several generations.

As one of the earliest groups to rebel against Burmese control of the country, the Karen have been the target for oppression by the Burmese military and paramilitary forces. The ultimate goal is to form a separate Karen State, Kawthoolei, carved out of territory that is currently part of Burma near the border with Thailand. Many of the Karen are not directly involved in the conflict, but the Burmese military continued to oppress them.<sup>19</sup> Entire villages were destroyed on the slightest of suspicion; a normal life was often impossible for the Karen in Burma. The Burmese also work to suppress minority cultures. For example, minorities can be punished for speaking languages other than Burmese and minority children are forced to go to Burmese school if they have access to school at all. Many of them were displaced internally,

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<sup>16</sup> Pollock, Nancy J., and Teferi Abate. 2012. "Culture Summary: Karen." New Haven: Human Relations Area Files. <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ap07-000>. Pg. 7

<sup>17</sup> Ibid pg5

<sup>18</sup> Ibid pg 5

<sup>19</sup> Aung pp. 316-317

hiding in jungles and struggling to survive. When left with no other options, the Karen flee to refugee camps on the border with Thailand. Yet, even in the refugee camps the Karen are not safe as informants report attacks from both the Thai and Burmese militaries on the camps themselves.

The vast majority of Karen in Burma and in Thailand are not actively involved in the conflict. In Thailand, the native Karen group have not attempted to create a separate Karen state. Thai authorities, while they encourage the adoption of Thai culture, do not force other ethnicities to give up their identities. It is possible for a person in Thai society to have multiple identities, meaning that the Karen in Thailand can remain Karen while also identifying as a Thai national.<sup>20</sup> The Burmese instituted policies which attempted to force the Burmese ethnic identity onto minorities. One scholar, Ananda Rajah, argues that it was the diversity within the Karen ethnicity which caused some Karen to focus on what made them different from other ethnic groups to find common ground within their own.<sup>21</sup> What it means to be Karen differs between people who self-identify as Karen. There are variations in the language and religion, two key components to the Karen identity. Furthermore, one key informant reported that she could tell which tribe a Karen came from, either mountain or valley, on physical features alone. Another scholar, David Brown, defines ethnicity as “an ideology which individuals employ to resolve the insecurities arising from the power structure within which they are located.”<sup>22</sup> Put simply, the creation or perception of ethnic identity is a result or reaction to outside forces as a way to distinguish one group of people from another. This agrees with what Rajah argues; the Karen national identity is a recently imagined one in response to Burmese attempts to control the resources in the area the Karen have claimed as Kawthoolei as well as in opposition to the (often

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<sup>20</sup> Rajah 118

<sup>21</sup> Raja “Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Nation-State: The Karen in Burma and Thailand.”

<sup>22</sup> David Brown. *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*. London: Routledge, 2014. pg. 1

forced) spread of Burmese culture. To create a separate Karen state, they needed to create a national identity which focused on how they are from different than the ruling Burmese. This process is then furthered as the Burmese also emphasize how the Karen are different from themselves so as to justify violence against them.<sup>23</sup> Yet, whether or not ethnicity is imagined is overshadowed by the effect ethnicity has on the individual; it is a major deciding factor in the economic and political resources a person has access to, and is often believed to be something that just is natural and always has been. It is important to recognize ethnicity because it has real, tangible effects. People tend to be ethnocentric, meaning that they give preference to people that they believe are like them. This can be seen in Burma, as these are the forces which make the Karen refugees.

Karen refugees typically first seek safety in refugee camps along the Thailand/Burma border. According to the Karen in Akron, they were approached by representatives of both the U.N. and a Christian NGO while in the refugee camps in Thailand. These representatives offered the Karen assistance in applying for permanent relocation. The first group of Karen came to Akron in 2006 and settled in the area of North Hill, which historically is a neighborhood where many immigrants have lived. Their transition was assisted not by local institutions such as the city itself, but by the nationally funded International Institute of Akron (IIA), which provided help finding housing and jobs, offered English classes and also financial aid. The IIA gives intensive aid in the first few months of relocation, but this aid scales back as the refugees become more accustomed to their new environment. The Karen community struggled with this transition away from the IIA. They felt abandoned and now shun any outreach from the IIA. While the community has banded together in an attempt to make up for the lack of services since their split from the IIA, there are still many gaps that need to be filled.

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<sup>23</sup> Raja 121

## **Anthropological Research**

This research began as a study of food and health in the Karen community. A pediatrician at Akron Children's Hospital, Dr. Joel Davidson, was concerned with the high rates of obesity and failure to thrive in the children of refugees. Dr. Davidson approached the Anthropology Department at the University of Akron to ask for help in designing and conducting a study to better understand food, nutrition and health in the Karen refugee community in Akron. During the initial stages of this work, we came to know some of the members of the Karen community. In conversations with them, it became obvious that they wanted tell their stories. Many of the Karen struggle to interact with people outside of their immediate community, and many people in Akron do not know that the Karen are in Akron, or even who they are. When the Karen first arrived in Akron, there were several physical conflicts between some of the younger people and their non-Karen peers. While there have not been any physical conflicts to our knowledge since their early days in Akron, the Karen, especially the older people, still struggle to relate and communicate with the other residents of Akron. The Karen, and we as anthropologists, believed that if their voices were heard, it would be easier for them to interact with the larger population of Akron because this could create a better understanding of who they are.

The goal of this research was to collect and analyze life histories of the Karen in Akron to gain a better understanding of their worldview, as well as find what type of aid the community needed and try to find ways to fill that need. Through coding transcriptions of informal and semi-structured interviews, it became possible to find the issues that concerned and affected the Karen the most. By understanding these issues, it makes it easier to provide the support the community needs.

There is not a great deal of information published about the Karen. One of the best collections of personal narratives is *Suffering in Silence: The Human Rights Nightmare of the Karen People of Burma* by Claudio Delang, Kevin Heppner and the Karen Human Rights Group. A collection of short narratives, it describes the life of Karen in Burma and in refugee camps in Thailand. It contains graphic descriptions of violence and accounts of torture of Karen by the Burmese army. However, it does not analyze the narratives or discuss them in depth. Around the United States, other researchers and community groups have started collecting information about the Karen. For example, another researcher, Dr. Roberta Baer, at University of South Florida works with a Karen community in her area. She is preparing to publish her findings about the Karen and diet. There is also a large Karen community in Minnesota which has collected personal narratives as well as folk stories. However, these accounts are not easy to access, and once again, there is no analysis of material. Locally, a community leader is working to preserve the stories of the younger Karen (teens to young adults) who spent time in either Burma or a refugee camp. The goal of the community leader is to spread awareness about the plight of the Karen.

This study used participant observation, informal interviews and individual and group semi-structured interviews, aided by a translator. Karen respondents were recruited through an English as a second language (ESL) class, as well as at several food and cultural exchange events we organized. The prompt for the informal interviews was very simple: "Tell me about your life." For the semi-structured interviews, the prompts were still simple and broad, but a bit more detailed (see page 35 titled "Karen Thanksgiving Interview Guide" for the semi-structured interview questions). These questions were based on earlier informal interviews and reflect the same pattern that the early participants followed. Most of the interviews were with individuals,

but several had multiple participants at once. In addition, some of the most valuable contextual information came from key informants during casual conversations.

Eleven people participated in recorded interviews. According to work done by Greg Guest, the saturation level for interviews can usually be reached with twelve participants.<sup>24</sup> This research found that saturation levels were beginning to be reached with this number of respondents. The majority of the interviewees were middle aged women, but there was one young woman and two older men. The interviews were then transcribed and read through several times looking for common themes. A codebook was constructed and the text was coded using MAXQDA software (see pages 51-52 titled “Codebook”). Several coded segments were checked against coding performed by another researcher using the codebook and a sample of the interviews. This was done as a precaution to see if the codebook and the coded segments aligned.

## **Results**

A narrative pattern was apparent from the interviews. The first seven informal interviews used the simple prompt, “tell me about your life,” followed the same pattern. The refugees tended to describe their lives in three segments based on geographical location: their time in Burma, in the Thailand refugee camp and in the United States/Akron. This format was used to create the semi-structured interview questions that the last four participants answered. Nine major themes appeared: oppression, run/running, refugee camp, education, health, laughter, freedom, Akron/USA and citizenship. These are forces that have greatly shaped the lives of the Karen who have come to Akron and continue to affect them. Some of these themes are often

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<sup>24</sup> Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce and Laura Johnson. “How Many Interviews are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability.” *Field Methods*, 2006.

seen as presenting together, for example, oppression and run/running are commonly expressed together as a pair.

### **Oppression**

“Oppression” was originally coded as “Burmese.” The name was reassigned, however, when it became apparent that the interactions with Burmese by the Karen were never described in a positive manner. Examples of oppression range from interruptions to daily life to torture and slavery/forced labor. This was one of the codes that appeared most frequently - 40 times - meaning it accounts for 20% of the coded sections of the interviews. In the narrative pattern, oppression appears while talking about life in Burma and, to a lesser extent, life in the Thai refugee camp. It could be suggested that this oppression is a cause of continued mistrust of government and authority figures. After living in fear for the majority of their lives, it is understandable that it would be a slow adjustment process. While the Karen we interviewed did not express a direct concern about police or other authority figures in the United States, they have discussed their hesitation in addressing people outside of their community. This could also be a result of oppression by outsiders. However, more in depth questions would have to be asked to truly understand their perception of the outsiders, and it is not clear whether they would be completely honest with us as we are outsiders to their community.

### **Run/Running**

Run/running was used to code instances of forced migration, usually due to Burmese soldiers or other forces and often correlated with oppression. This migration was a defining factor of life in Burma, and to a lesser extent, in the Thailand refugee camp. It affected all aspects of their lives and is often attached to other codes such as education and health. It was a source of stress, and when the Karen talk about running, it is rarely a singular “run,” but the

word is repeated multiple times as in “we ran and ran and ran.” This emphasizes to the listener both the strong affect it had on their lives and the extended periods of time they spent migrating. Running resulted in a lack of stability and control over their lives as the Karen constantly had to react to other actors. In many ways, it is a loss of agency and is another example of a form of oppression used by the Burmese army.

### **Refugee Camp**

All of the Karen interviewed spent time in a refugee camp, and many of the first Karen in Akron spent time together in one of the camps. There are multiple camps along the Thai/Burma border, but it is not clear which ones the refugees who participated were in. For many of the Karen, life in the refugee camp was not much of an improvement over life in Burma. They express their dislike of control over the refugees in the camp by the Thai military and also discussed their problems with authority figures. The Karen once again showed their mistrust as they clashed with the Thai military over the Karen possession of weapons; the Karen wanted weapons for protection but the Thai military did not allow the refugees to cross the border with weapons. Their desire to protect themselves was not unfounded. In informal discussions with some key informants, they describe Burmese troops attacking the camps and the Thai troops allowing it, and even to a lesser extent, Thai soldiers attacking them. The refugee camps were also extremely poor. They had to rely on aid given to them by the U.N. and NGO's. The Karen did not have a great deal of agency in the refugee camp as they did not have opportunities to make their own decisions about their lives: they could not find a job, find alternative food sources, or even leave. Just like their time in Burma, they were unable to control their actions. They were not allowed to leave the camps to look for work or forage for food. However, some



of the younger people report having access to education while in the camps, something they did not have before.

## **Education**

The Karen have reported that education is very important to them and their culture. This could be biased, however, as participants were recruited through an ESL class that not everyone attends, meaning that it was a self-selected group. Furthermore, we assisted in teaching this class which put us in a position of educational authority (the students continue to call us “teacher” after we have repeatedly said that they could call us by our names if they would like). When discussing their time in Burma, many of the Karen are almost apologetic when they say that they did not have access to education. Very few Karen had access to education in Burma, and if they did it was usually limited to young children and was interrupted often because they were forced to run away and hide for their safety. According to one key informant, a Burmese run school was also the only option the government would allow. The same key informant also told us that her grandparent’s generation had easy access to school, but after the coup by the Burmese junta, ethnic schools were outlawed. If someone wanted to have a Karen school, it had to operate in secret.

The Karen had slightly easier access to education in the refugee camps. Yet, some Karen expressed that part of their decision to come to the United States was a desire that their children would have access to education. We know of several young people, the children of the participants who are currently in schools in Akron, including at the University of Akron. Karen students struggle with school in the U.S. mainly due to language barriers. As our translator experienced, some university professors are not understanding of the situation and are unwilling to work with the refugees to make classes and assignment accessible. The local public high

school in the North Hill neighborhood, by contrast, is accustomed to assisting immigrant and refugee children and offers an “English Learners” class.

### **Health**

Many of the refugees in Akron have serious health problems, such as diabetes. The Karen were usually diagnosed either at the refugee camp or in the U.S. With one exception, the Karen do not describe having or witnessing health problems in Burma excluding those directly caused by violence at the hands of the Burmese. Diabetes is the most prevalent illness seen in the Karen surveyed, or at least the problem they are most willing to discuss. How seriously the Karen view diabetes ranges from it not being seen to be much of a problem to realizing how dangerous it can be. However, the Karen do not see food as having much of a connection to diabetes; only one participant said that they changed their eating habits, and it was only to reduce portion size. Some of the Karen have expressed a fatalistic outlook on health; they believe that if something is going to happen, or already has, there is not much that they can do. It could be argued that this could be a result of their loss of agency and a loss of control as much of their lives during the past few decades have been lived in reaction to others.

### **Laughter**

Laughter is an odd code to have amongst descriptions of violence and torture, but the Karen use laughter as a coping mechanism. Laughter occurred throughout the interviews, and in regular conversation, in various contexts. Sometimes the context was culturally appropriate by U.S. standards, and other times this was not the case. The Karen openly laugh at descriptions of pain and hardship. During one ESL class, an older man told us about the struggles in his life: the loss of his homeland, going deaf, having back problems and pain. During his story, the entire class and our translator laughed. Finally, we asked if we had missed something and our

translator explained that the Karen use laughter to deal with their problems. While this code does not appear often during the interviews, it should be acknowledged as it is something we experience in many of our interactions with the community.

### **Freedom**

In discussions with the Karen, freedom tends to appear in three ways: a lack of freedom, a desire for it, and the obtaining of it. The Karen recognized the lack of agency they had while living under repressive regimes and actively sought to gain freedom by migrating. When asked why they decided to leave the refugee camp, a common response was that they wanted to find a place where they would be free. For the Karen, freedom tends to align with stability. Locations where they did not have to live in fear or constantly react to the actions of others are places where they are free.

Freedom takes multiple forms for the Karen. The ability to find a job and go where they want, when they want are privileges that many people around the world take for granted. This is especially true for most people who live in the United States. The Karen, however, were denied these rights previously and are so happy to have them that they do not discuss, at least with us, the rights and freedoms that they still do not have in this country. For example, the Karen cannot vote in elections, or in other words have a voice in who will make the laws they live under, until they become citizens and many are not. In both Burma and Thailand, the Karen did not have political power just as most in the community do not have political power in the United States. However, they seem to be more concerned with obtaining day-to-day freedoms as discussed previously.

### **America/Akron**

The Karen are very mobile within the United States. While many of the Karen in Akron have friends and family in different cities throughout the country, most of the Karen have lived in this city their entire time in the country. Discussions of the United States and Akron were grouped together because the Karen will freely talk about the two interchangeably. Most of the Karen who participated in conversations with us said that the United States was the best place to live because they have freedom here. This may have been biased though, as it was a U.S. citizen and lifelong Akronite who interviewed them. However, most say that they never considered permanently relocating to the U.S. until after U.N. representatives approached them. They saw the U.S. as a place where multiple kinds of freedom could be obtained: freedom to be educated and go to school, freedom to seek healthcare, and freedom to select food for example.

### **Citizenship**

Although this code rarely appeared in the interviews, citizenship is an important topic in the Karen community. Citizenship comes up in casual conversation frequently, and one Karen man specifically requested that we help prepare the community to take their citizenship exam. With their refugee status, the Karen receive federal aid, including health care. This is especially important because many Karen have serious health conditions. However, this aid is lost when their refugee status expires after seven years. It is expected that after this length of time, refugees will apply for citizenship and, if they pass their exam, can keep the aid. It is clear from the interviews that passing the citizenship exam is a tremendous source of stress, especially for the older Karen who struggle to learn and speak English (the test is not offered in Karen). As previously mentioned, the Karen community in Akron has a strained relationship with the International Institute, in part because of citizenship issues. The Karen view the IIA as a gatekeeper which prevents them from taking their exams as the Karen need someone or an

institution to support their bid to become a citizen. According to the Karen, the IIA requires a level of English fluency which prevents many Karen from taking the exam, even if they know the material needed to pass it. While the exact reason why the Karen refuse to work with the IIA is unclear, it is clear that the Karen are missing valuable resources and services as a result.

A major component of this work has been helping the refugees prepare for the United States citizenship exam. As the findings suggest, citizenship is an important and complicated issue for the Karen. Many Karen want to obtain U.S. citizenship because of the advantages it offers. Some Karen want citizenship because they want to become a full member of U.S. society with voting rights. However, some of the Karen, in both the interviews and in conversation, have stated that they do not want to obtain citizenship because it would mean a loss to their identity as a Karen. Some Karen remain hopeful that they will someday be able to return to Burma, or even to an independent Karen State. Unfortunately, medical realities force the issue and makes it vital that they become citizens. As someone who teaches the information needed to prepare Karen for the exam, this information helps me to be more sensitive of their needs and internal conflicts.

## **Conclusion**

This study has worked towards understanding the Karen in Akron and the problems they face. Through an exploration of their life histories, it is possible to see many of the problems the community faces at the individual level. It is important to consider the larger historical context which has shaped their lives and their journeys from Burma to America. The reasons and experiences that have led them to Akron continue to have lasting effects on how they view the world. Many of the other people in the greater Akron community do not understand, or even

know, about the Karen and the horrors they have faced. Therefore, they cannot understand and truly communicate with their Karen neighbors, and this has led to problems in the past. These problems continue to a lesser extent today as the Karen struggle to interact with people outside of their immediate ethnic community in everyday situations like at the grocery store.

This study's interest in the entire life of the participants instead of just the problems they face in Akron, possible explanations and solutions for why they experience the problems they have can be suggested. One of the problems found in this study, the stress of gaining citizenship, is currently being addressed through tutoring during the ESL class from which the participants were recruited. After learning more about their lives, it is now possible to tailor the lessons in a way which will hopefully make the material more relatable to the Karen as well as make explanations more culturally sensitive. One of the most important issues, however, is a way for the community to gain U.S. citizenship while keeping their Karen identity. This is not easy for many of the Karen as many do not seem to see themselves with multiple identities. First and foremost, the community sees themselves as Karen, ethnically and nationally. Fortunately, some of our participants have found ways to reconcile their new lives with their Karen identity; it is my hope that many others will find this balance as well.

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## Transcriptions

### Interview 1

IRS: I'll put this here and you can sit if you want

T1A: We will start with my childhood first

T1A: We grow up we go to school in order to go to school we have to ride a boat half way when we go to school if the Burmese military come we have to run away

T1A: And because of go and come back and go and come back they never go back to school anymore

T1A: We stay with our parents and do farming and then we do gardening

T1A: We grow up and even if sometimes and even if we are in our own land in our own farm when the Burmese military come we have to run run to

T1A: Run away and if they go back then we will go back and repeat the same thing and if they come back again then we have to run again

T1A: Even if I have my whole family I have children I have to run and run until I have to come to US

Laughter

T1A: I don't know what to say anymore

Laughter

T1A: Zzz 2:37-2:45 Her first half she can talk about life in refugee camp but she already talked about life in us so she cant go back and talk about life in Thailand

IRS: you can

T1A: I don't know what to say anymore

IRS: we're just interested in your experiences whatever you want to share

T1A: The life is like live life work to eat live and struggle run away and its keep going like that

IRS is there a story she would like to tell, one particular story for us to collect

T1A: She wants to compare the difference between here and there

T1A: Over there is running and come back and moving but as long as she settled in us right now she can move freely she can go freely she can live freely, no afraid of anything no worries about anything or anybody come to hurt her

T1A: Back over in Thailand she is giving example like she want to go out she want to travel she wants to go and pick up vegetables but she cannot do that is she go out someone will arrest her and put her in jail

T1A: Here its a lot better

T1A: Here is better

T1A: That's all

IRS: that's all thank you

Sunday Does somebody zzz 5:20

IRS: okay thank you thank you

## **Interview 2 5:30**

So do you want to tell us about life in Burma, a story about life in Burma

T1b: I was born in 1966 February 12

T1b: I was born in Burma grew up in Burma but I was not in the town I was grow up in the jungle

T1b: My village had school up to fourth grade

T1b: No high school

T1b: After I graducate from my village school I never go back to school again

T1b: And I never learned English in my life

T1b: My parents are a poor family so they don't have money to send me to a town to a school a city school

T1b: And I have seven to eight siblings so we have to share and eat poorly

T1b: In 1998 when I was 23 years old I come I came to Karen state and in 1992 I was married

T1b: In 1997 because of the civil war happened in Burma so that I had to flee down to Thailand

T1b: When they are uh coming to Thailand but when they arrive at the border there is a village called zzz 8:56 the thai border said that adult men and women and children can enter into

Thailand but that the men and younger age that can carry a weapon they don't let them enter into the country and then they ask them to go back into the Burma but then the Burmese military is behind them

T1b: And in the car that they have to ride they pack people like you pack clothes fit as much as they can and sometimes some children cant breath because it is too tight

T1b: And when they arrive in Thailand there is a place called zzz10:08 each family gets about 8 feet square to build their house

T1b: There is no freedom or right to go out and work or go do something you like

T1b: And there is no money to buy things for the family

T1b: So sometime the head of the house the man has to sneak out in the middle of the night to get a job

T1b: And when they go out and they get some money and when they planning to come back home sometimes they get away and sometimes they don't get away to arrest and the police take all their money and send them to another city they never been before

T1b: And in 2006 we cross UN registration and the government open the zzz 12:01 so some people resettle to US some people go to Australia

T1b: In America after arriving in America there are some things that make her happy and there are some that make her not happy about

T1b: The things that does not make her happy is because of that she does not know the language so it is hard to communicate

T1b: She is say that she is learning English right now but because of when she was a child because of she never learned it before so it is very hard to learn a language after your older age that's why she never learn it

T1b: Some older people after five years or seven years they want to apply for citizenship but because of they don't have any English abilities so that they it is hard for them to apply for citizenship and in five years if you don't get citizenship they will cut out your benefits and when they cut out your benefits that means that if you go to the hospital you don't have any coverage any medical coverage so some people even if they are really sick they stay home they don't want to go because they are afraid to get a big bill from the hospital

T1b: She is comparing life Minnesota life 14:59 many adult people life who don't know English but they study for the citizenship test in Karen and when they go for their citizenship test they get interpreter so that they pass their test but here we cant do something like that she said

T1b: Because here you have you have to uh

IRS what Is the difference here from Minnesota ? abli

T1b: She is saying that like in her case you go to international institute they would test your English ability a little bit and then they would help you apply for citizenship but now they make it harder when you go to see them they test your English and if they wanted to see you be fluent English then they put the application for you

IRS: really zzz16:20-23

T1b: She is say that there is like two steps right for zzz 16:57 (example?) you have to go through international to put the application for you and in the application there are like yes and no questions and so that she said that if they can provide the interpreter for that part that will be very helpful and again if uh like the government agency provide interpreter for 100 question that will be helpful

IRS: yeah yeah we didn't know any of this information

T1b: And she is saying that at her time when she applied for her citizenship maybe the caseworker is good she the caseworker asked her like do you speak English and she said no just a little bit and she asked her like do you know that they don't provide interpreter at the interview and she said no and she just asked her to go ahead and take her passport picture when you put the application and she is say that even if the question that they ask she didn't understand it but they lower the register and then use the language sign so that it is easier for her to understand but now they don't do that they just ask you like a question and you dont understand it then

IRS: so it was easier before

T1b: Yeah she said before is kind of uh they make it easier

Zzz 19:22 Background noises or IRS?

T1b: She is say that because when they go immigration a counselor for question you have to prepare only a hundred question if you know a hundred question then uh then that's okay for them but when in order to pass through like international they have to see that you speak fluent English so that you are ready for the citizenship

Berhman: so international institute is like a bottleneck, it's a block, it's in the way

T1b: They make things harder

Berhman: okay

T1b: She is say that her experience when you arrive at the immigration office to do the interview as long as you know the hundred question that's fine with them

T1b: And now like some people they already know the hundred question but in order to pass through the gates they don't pass this gate

IRS :mhm

T1b: So that they are kind of stuck over there

IRS: thank you for the information

T1b: She is say that after you arrive in the immigration office they will ask you if you violate the law or zzz 21:38 if you say no they ask you the hundred question, ten out of a hundred, and if you know the ten then

IRS: okay (Was there a gesture of some sort? Sunday trails off but sounds almost like a "swhhh" sound at 21:47, like someone would make while move their hand to imply movement or progress)

Berhman: but you have to get through international first

Sunday: zzz 21:54 whoever apply

T1b: She is say that uh actually her want to say that older people like 50, 60, they need help in this area, at least if you can help these older people

Berhman: we'll try

IRS: yeah

T1b: They have to go

IRS: aww

T1b: She says that she likes coming to the class but that she has to go

IRS: Bye I'll see you in August (laughter) Bye

### **Interview 3**

Keh Translating

IRS: So the same thing, just tell us about your life in Burma and the process that brought you here to the US

T2: When I was young I hurt all the time my mom was complaining about the Burmese armies all the time they have to run and hid

T2: But when I was like young and my parents, we had like a lot of brother and sister, so my parent always we have to run and hide from the Burmese soldier so we don't have a place to stay constant and plant and like to go to school so we have to run and hide I was the one who had to take care of my sister brothers and my mom had to work

T2: That's why I don't have education at all so when I grow up older and start to get married and have children and then all we have to worry and uh worry for the soldier come up and torture or burn the city so when we hear the soldiers coming up and we have to run

T2: When I run my back I have like uh the big thing I have to carry like of clothes, food stuffs and in front of me I have to carry my baby so it was like all the time we have to run

T2: We have to run and run and run and when the Burmese soldiers come and like uh come zzz 2:57 and burn the village and they not go back they just stay over there so we have to run in jungle for three or four months and we cannot go back to the city that we are grow up and the food and stuff like that so we (zzz 3:11 stock or stop?) over there and went up like up zzz 3:15 that set up people to the Thailand border so we just come back to the uh they call us so we just follow them to the Thailand border and the city name is zzz 3:28 (quigloot?)

T2: Since I was running and enter into the Thailand border the city name is (zzz 3:56) its 1984 and we stay there through 1999

IRS: wow

T2: Between 1984 and 1999 between that uh in one years it was like uh Burmese soldiers were like uh fighting a lot and uh destroying the powerful fight between Karen and Burmese so one of the cities named zzz 5:08 was like burning down and they just uh fight and when the Burmese soldiers win that city so we have to flee again and run to another city to the Thailand border refugee camp and when in 1996 it was like the soldier named like they have a group the leader's name is zzz 5:31 and the Burmese soldiers they are walking together they say that they're going to give a piece something like that and like that they come to the refugee camp and torture and burn them

IRS: to the refugee camp

T2: Yeah and then they burn again the refugee camp

T2: They just come into the refugee camp they shot the people like three times uh three years, like every year they come once at a time

T2: One of the organizations called "UI" when they saw the happenings over there and they just wanted they see it's not good to live over there so they call us to move another place so when we move to another place in 1999

T2: We move to another refugee camp and we settle over there 1999 through 2005 and then we got photo ID's

IRS: okay

T2: When we move to the refugee camp UI sent us so we live there like a couple of years and then another organization from here they go over there they just uh register to come to the America

T2: I have never thought and think about to come to America because like the country, the place, and the language are totally different so we never dream about to come here but in zzz 7:54 we register for it and we just want the freedom that's why we come here

T2: When I live in Burma I have no education at all that why when I live in Thailand Refugee camp I have children attend school so that they just have freedom to go to school

T2: That's why when I moved to America it was so hard for me to just learn a language and to get citizenship test for my children they already learn it in Thailand so its easier for them to learn here and to get citizenship test

T2: When looking back and see all the place I was zzz 9:14 and compare with those to the America like Burma, Thailand and America, America is the best place to live, we have freedom everything

T2: When I live here and I look up to the government they have like they take care of good, they take care of good, they have very good care for the sick for the citizen people so when I look back to my leader over there they do not have like a place for care for their people, always they have to run, so it was nice for the America government that they have good care for something

IRS: Thank you

T3: When I was young I was have like many problems, that's why I don't have time to go to school

T3: That's why like they have to I don't go to school that's why because we have to ran we have to pay for teacher zzz 0:42 because living in the jungle, a lot of people live in the jungle so we have to pay for teacher to come to teach us when we go to the city to look for the teacher on the way they have like army and soldier so if they saw that just like take us out with the teacher so we don't have teacher and no people to teacher

IRS: Okay

T3: Because of this situation I was grow up with no education so when I grow up I had like a married and had husband when I live in the city this is not safe like a lot of Burmese soldiers are like fighting with Karen people and they need slaves so they go over there and slaves and they



ask people slaves they say like okay you need to pay me money if you don't pay me money you have to go with me so they don't care if you have food or if you live well or poorly anyway you have to go so we have to run and run and run

T3: She say if they don't catch your husband for to make the slave to do the hard work, if they don't catch your husband they catch the women and the children and then they make them follow them to the like sunburn and the room and it was really hot outside they put your head/hands? zzz 2:57 with the plastic bag and they tie it and put the water in it

T3: Some of the men that they captured they just tie really tight with the feet and they use big bamboo and they just put in on the top of the feet and they just make like uh broke the feet and some of them zzz 3:40-44 its really pain,

T3: I don't want to talk about that I want to cry

T3: I have zzz 3:56 with my mom and my relative and that's why I don't want to continue to talk about it because of these zzz I have to run

T3: I was a scary as well

IRS: Thank you

#### **Transcription 4**

T4: When I was young and I know what uh I know like right and left I have not know my father was still with me the entire time

T4: All the time we have to be the soldiers slave they ask for the money we don't have money that's why they have to go with them and work for them

T4: And then Later on the army would just come into the village and city and they torture the people and burn the house down

T4: That's why we have to leave and flee, run away and hide in the jungle, so there's no school in jungle

T4: When I was 6 years and I know about when one day the soldiers came and burned the city down and my father was carry me and run to the village

T4: When we ran away we had to carry enough food so because if we do not they gonna come in or not so immediately we have to run so we carry just portion of rice so we have enough for the family so my father was cook only for the children not the adult

T4: When 1990 I was running and we just live near by the city but we not allowed to go into city we have to run and hide all the time

T4: When 1991 and my brother was run and run and enter into the border of Thailand

T4: When we ran and we enter into Thailand about like June and July it was raining over there

T4: When we ran it between the two months it was heavy rain but we don't have like umbrellas or anything to cover us so we just get wet everyday

T4: When we come into the Thailand a little bit and we live there for two or three and the Thailand soldiers know about that and told us to move back to Burma

T4: That's why we start in 1991-1995 we don't have school to attend and there is no education at that time

T4: Start in 1996 we have to run again and enter into the refugee camp again

T4: When we ran back to Burma and the soldier were coming kill us when we ran back to Thailand the Thailand soldiers told us to go back to Burma

T4: We just run back and forth and back and forth and start in 1997 we settle in the refugee camp called zzz 4:31 (pad doh ya?)

T4: At that time I was 13 so I just started school when I was 13

T4: My mother and father had like a lot of zzz 4:51 with the torture the running and the zzz 4:57 (experience?) Really bad so they don't talk to us about anything they wanted us they afraid that we gonna

T4: They don't want to told us they think were gonna feel bad about it

T4: Whats uh when my father came by a Burmese soldier they cut his neck with a knife they cut a neck

T4: That's why my mother don't want to talk about the father and zzz 5:44 in the back they don't want she don't want us to feel about it so I don't think about going back to Burma because I had a bad experience

T4: It's a lot but I don't want to talk no more I just want us to end here

IRS: thank you

### **Transcription 5**

T5: When I was young I live in my city in the village in Burma and I live well

T5: I live well in the village but at the at the moment the Burma soldier come up and destroy the city that's why we have to live run to the jungle

T5: Even though the village we cannot allowed to go because it is surrounded by the Burmese army so we just live in the jungle and hide and run all the times

T5: Even though I live in jungle the Burmese soldiers go try to find us and so we have to run again and run and run until we enter into the Thailand border into the refugee camp

T5: When I run and enter into the border of Thailand the city name is zzz 2:08

T5: When I leave the city I cannot am not allowed to go outside if I go they zzz 2:45 (cast off?)

T5: And onetime when I go outside and they try to find me so I run back inside the refugee camp

T5: I don't know how to talk I don't know how I can talk next

T5: And that living over there is not good that's why I thinking to come to America to for my children they wanted to continue education so we just come to America

IRS: Yeah its just anything that she wants us to know about her life either Burma, Thailand refugee camp, US whatever story she wants to tell us

T5: I just wanted to let you know that when I was in Burma I cannot allowed to live in city so I lived in village even though I mean jungle even though in jungle you cannot allowed to plant rice or make a noise we have to quiet there is no school or education at all

T5: I never learned or go to school

IRS: is that her son

T5: Yes my youngest son

IRS: (laughter) he's very well behaved

IRS: Anything else she wants to share with us?

T5: No

IRS: thank you

## Karen Thanksgiving

### Interview Guide

Start with consent!

State your name, location and event, and ask for their age and gender

1. Where were you born?
  - a. How long did you live there?
  - b. What do you remember about it?
  - c. Tell me about your life and experiences there
    - i. Leading questions
      1. What did you like best about there?
      2. What didn't you like?
      3. Is there anything else you want to talk about from that part of your life?

IF NOT BORN IN UNITED STATES, if born in the US, skip to 2b, or 4

1. Where did you go next?
  - a. What was your life like there?
    - i. What did you like about?
    - ii. What didn't you like about it?
    - iii. How did you get there? And what was the journey like?
      1. If refugee camp, did they have problems at the Thai border? Did any aid groups assist them?
    - iv. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
2. Where did you go after this place?
  - a. If not the United States
    - i. What did you like about?
    - ii. What didn't you like about it?
    - iii. How did you get there? And what was the journey like?
    - iv. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
  - b. If somewhere in the US but not Akron
    - i. What did you like about?
    - ii. What didn't you like about it?
    - iii. How did you get to Akron?
    - iv. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
3. How is Akron different than anywhere else you have lived?
4. Tell me about your education?
  - a. Did you have access to a school growing up?
  - b. What did the school focus on?

- c. Was religion important in your education?
5. Are you very religious?
  - a. What religion do you believe in?
  - b. Were you raised in this religion (most likely Christianity)?
    - i. If not, what made you decide to become part of this religion?
  - c. How important is religion in your life?
  - d. Do you attend church?
    - i. Is the service in Karen or English?
  - e. Do you use any services (such as food supplements) from a church?
6. What kinds of foods do you typically eat?
  - a. Would you classify most of the foods you eat as Karen or American?
  - b. How important is food to maintaining your cultural identity?
    - i. Some of the older people may not understand this question, so leading questions like
      1. How important is food as a link or reminder of your life in Burma?
      2. Does food remind you of your life before coming to America or of your family?
7. How is your health?
  - a. REMIND THEM THAT THEY DO NOT HAVE TO ANSWER IF THEY ARE NOT COMFORTABLE
    - i. Do you have any major health problems?
      1. When did you develop the health problems?
      2. Do you think its as a result of your time in...
        - a. Burma
        - b. Jungle
        - c. Refugee Camp in Thailand
        - d. The United States
    - ii. Do you have access to health care?
      1. Are you able to communicate with your doctors, nurses, etc
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your life or about your culture?

## Notes:

- Typically life journey for Karen: born in Burma, flee to Thailand refugee, come to America
- Some younger people were born in the refugee camps and have never been to Thailand, and some older children don't remember the refugee camp even if they were born there
  - Ask them if they ever differ from their parents or other elders as far as lifestyle, beliefs and actions (ie music, food, religion)
  - Adults from Burma but who have children who have been raised mostly in America should be asked the same question

- Just try to guide the conversation
  - Most of the Karen want to share their stories and conversations are typically easy
- Don't be too concerned if an interview does not follow this plan, as long as the focus is on the person's life and experiences.
- Remember to relax and be friendly!

[The remaining interviews used this guide]

## Interview 7

MP: Alright, so we're here at the Community Center at Patterson Park and I'm here with participant number 18 and participant number 33. Okay, so tell me about your life, where were you born?

P7: He was born in Karen state.

MP: In Burma?

P7: In Burma

MP: So how long did you stay there? How long did you live in Karen State?

P7: Fifty years

MP: Fifty years? Oh my gosh. So what was life like in the Karen State?

P7: Life in Karen state is like fighting for land that like but umm participant in our land but we don't have country so we have to fight for it to protect our people

MP: So did you participate in fighting?

P7: No he does not participate in army but he is like villager, farmer, stuff like that

MP: So is that like where you started your family? Like did you have a lot of family in the Karen state?

P7: In the village theres a lot of relatives, yeah

MP: So why did you leave the Karen state?

P7: Because of war, civil war, so umm some fighters came to burn the house, so he ran away

MP: So where did you go after the Karen state?

P7: Before we moved to refugee camp, we ran and hide in the mountains, stuff like that for ten years

MP: Ten years? So fifty years in Karen State and then ten years in the mountains?

P7: Yes

MP: What was life like in the mountains?

P7: It's not good, but because of wars, to run away from it and live, suffer through it

MP: So you said that the mountains were before the refugee camp, so after the mountains you went to the refugee camp?

P7: Yes

MP: What was life like in the refugee camp?

P7: It's good life there's like no war, stuff like that, yeah, you can live through it, that's what he say

MP: So you left the refugee camp, where did you go after that? Is that when you came to Akron?

P7: Yes, he came to refugee in 1992, and then he

MP: How did you get to Akron? What was that process like?

P7: He say that he live in refugee camp and some day he heard about OPE the UN people working there with Americans can help you, so that's the way he got here

MP: Okay, so what Is life in Akron like for you?

P7: Because here its not where he born, so when he first come here the weather changes so it's hard for him to

(laughter)

MP: It's hard for me too! What do you do here in Akron besides the weather, what is your life like? Like, are you working? Are you retired? That sort of thing?

P7: For him, when he came here, he's old enough to retire so he retire, and his wife and his kids work

MP: That sounds nice. So I have a few specific questions for you, starting with education. Did you have any access to education during your time in Karen state, Thailand or even in America?

P7: He don't learn anything, he don't have an education.

MP: So did, was, was it possible for you to access education at all?

P7: For education, he says that he wanted to, but that his brain is not working so he don't try

MP: Okay. So then religion, are you a religious person?

P7: He is a Christian

MP: And how big of a role does the church play in your life?

P7: Excuse me?



MP: Like is the, is it very important for him to have access to the church and to go to the Christian church, that sort of thing?

P7: In here, whenever the troubles come, like when his faces hard, the other thing that makes him happy is when he goes to church and works with the community in the church and pray

MP: So do you go to the church at Urban Vision or do you go to a different one

P7: Yes he goes to a Karen church at urban vision

MP: So then, how about food, is food an important part of your culture?

P7: What?

MP: Like, kind of, how about a different question...

P7: It is important because we were born that way and we eat that way so it is important to eat Karen food

MP: So eating Karen food, does that remind you of your life in Karen state and family members or anything like that?

P7: Yeah, it reminds him, and he don't want to forget.

MP: And how about, and remember you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, and the reason I say that is because the last question is about health and health care, so if you're not comfortable you don't have to answer. So my first question is, do you have any health problems?

P7: There is no big deal health problem, but he has diabetes, that's it.

MP: That's it?

P7: That's it.

MP: When were you diagnosed with diabetes?

P7: He say he found when he in Thailand refugee camp, and when he came here, he still told that he had diabetes, nothing had changed

MP: So you didn't change your diet or start taking medications for it?

P7: In the past he had a lot of medication to take, but now he hasn't seen his doctor, so he doesn't take medicine

MP: Do you not visit your doctor regularly?

P7: He hasn't seen for so long

MP: If you wanted to go see your doctor, would you be able to go see your doctor?

P7: He don't know what his doctor's name is anymore

MP: So if you needed medical care, where would you go?

P7: Hospital

MP: Okay, is there anything else you want to tell me about your life, your culture, anything at all you can think of?

P7: For his people, he said, for freedom and the right to live in their country war is not zzz 13:49

MP: Well thank you so much, both of you

P7: Thank you

MP: And did you want to be interviewed as well?

P7: No

MP: Thank you again

### **Interview 8**

MP: Today is December 6 were at patternson park community center. I'm with participant number seven and participant number 33 is translating for me once again, thank you. Okay, so where were you born?

P8: Burma.

MP: In Burma?

P8: Yes.

MP: Okay so then, what was your life like there? How long did you stay in Burma?

(Laughter)

P8: She lived there until she left, she doesn't know what you'rezzz ) 0:46

MP: So when you left, were you married? Did you already have your kids at that point?

P8: When she left her last daughter had already been born

MP: And was he like a child, was he an adult, or was he still a little baby, type of thing?

P8: When she moved her daughter is just born.

MP: Okay, so she's still a baby, alright. So what was your life like in Burma?

P8: Umm, in there, there's a lot of wars going on, there's a lot of trouble, stuff like that, so when her youngest daughter about one years and seven months, he father is (desperate? Zzz 2:24) so she's widowed

MP: Oh, I'm sorry. Is that why you left Burma?

P8: Umm, in, in where, when she moved, before she moved, when she still in Burma because of a lot of tax, she cannot pay, she's widow, she only live with her baby, and the rest of her child moved out because of marriage and stuff like that, so she moved to Thailand.

MP: So that's when you went to the refugee camp in Thailand? So what was your life like in the refugee camp?

P8: Life in the refugee camp, every month, people like give food, give out food, and umm

MP: Like, people's like charities or, like, the government, or who gives out the food?

P8: It's UN

MP: The UN? Okay

P8: They give out foods, so that's how we survive

MP: So then you left the refugee camp, where did you go after that?

P8: Here, Akron

MP: You came to Akron directly from the refugee camp? So how did you get from the refugee camp to Akron?

P8: With airplanes and cars

MP: Was there like an organization or anything that helped you get here, or did you decide to come here on your own?

P8: It's UN

MP: Okay, alright, so what is your life like here in akron?

P8: Good, it's wonderful

(laughter)

MP: So how does your life here in akron compare to, like, life in Thailand or life in Burma? Like how is it different?

P8: In here, there's a freedom, like, her child can go to school and get an education, so back in Thailand and Burma they can't afford so this is better place for her and for her children.

MP: So then I have some specific subject area questions. How important is food to you as far as, like, maintaining links to Burma and Thailand and your life before Akron.

P8: Can you say again?

MP: How about we start with, do you eat more Karen foods or foods that you would consider American?

P8: Karen food

MP: Is it important for you to eat Karen foods?

P8: Yes

MP: So why is it important for you to eat Karen foods?

P8: We mix Karen, I mean Karen food and American food together because we cannot eat only American food and zzz 7:10. We born and we eat that way and we survive that way.

MP: So eating Karen foods does that remind you of your life before Akron, like your past in Burma?

P8: It is reminding her, but you know when you born so your heart is there but thing about it, she would go back

MP: So what about education, did you have access to any education, either in Burma or Thailand?

P8: In Thailand or Burma, she don't have education she cant go to school because she's have to like live through the day and work with farm and stuff too

MP: Was there a school around, was it just that you couldn't attend it?

P8: There was a school, but it was expensive

MP: You specifically mentioned your children and grandkids going to school in Akron, I'm guessing education is important for them? To you? Or education is important to you for them to have it, is that correct? Or...?

P8: Yes

MP: Okay, umm, Let's move on to religion. Are you a religious person?

P8: She is Christian

MP: So do you go to a Christian Church?

P8: Yeah a Karen Church

MP: So the Urban Vision Church?

P8: Urban Vision

MP: Were you born a Christian or did you convert?

P8: Because of her parents were already Christian, so

MP: Okay. How important is religion to you? How important is it for you to be Christian?

P8: In her life, God has a plan for her, and it was like impossible way to get here, but she comes here anyways, so she believes in God

MP: Okay

P8: He provided for her

MP: So then my last question is about health, and keep in mind you don't have to answer questions you don't feel comfortable answering. How is your health? Do you have any medical problems that you know of?

P8: Good, good health

MP: If you needed to go see a doctor, are you, would you be able to go see a doctor?

P8: If she need she can

MP: So do you ever go to a doctor? A yearly or just for a check up?

P8: In june she went to see her doctor for check up

MP: Mmkay, so what's it like when you go to the doctor? Like are you able to communicate with them, are you able to get there easily?

P8: Her daughter is the translate

MP: The daughter who comes with you to class?

P8: She's the youngest

MP: Oh a different daughter? Okay, your youngest daughter who was a year when you left Burma?

P8: After his, her husband died, she still there for four years because she, she's really wants to come to refugee camp, but she can't so she found a way to travel around the mountain. For travel it takes two weeks to get to refugee camp, walking

MP: So you walked from your home in Burma to the refugee camp?

P8: Yes

MP: Oh my goodness.

P8: She said that she can't travel in boats because of Burmese

MP: So did you go through the jungle or were there roads or what was it like?

P8: There is no road, roads, just walking zzz 15:03

MP: Oh my gosh, that's incredible

P8: While they travel they cannot make any noise because of the army so they have to be really quiet

MP: So was it just you or were you in a group of people travelling to the refugee camp?

P8: She's the only one who travelled with kids, the other ones did not

MP: Is there anything else you want to tell me about your life? Your travels? Anything like that?

P8: When her husband died, passed away, she moved to another village and then she had to work, sell some vegetables, stuff like that to pay for her daughter to go to school, but then later on there's a lot of tax, there's more tax and she cannot pay, one time she was gonna put into jail so she prayed to god and got rescued

MP: Alright well thank you for so much for doing this

## **Interview 9**

MP: So were here at Patterson park community center, its December 6, umm with participant number 86 and could you move your jacket please? And 85

MP: So im going to start by asking you guys where were you born?

T9: Born in Burma

MP: Both of you were both born in Burma?

T9: Yes

MP: And how long did you live in Burma?

T9: I was not sure, it was as long as, very long time, when I was young I had children and I had a child that married and they had a girl, daughter

T9: I was living in Burma for 25 years and then I moved to Thailand

MP: So what was your life like in Burma for both of you?

T9: It was hard to live in Burma when the Burmese soldiers would scare you and you had to hide and run in the jungle

MP: So would you agree with that? Was that the same kind of thing that happened for you?

T9: I would agree with her and the same thing I had to run and run and run and hide

MP: So you went to, did you go to Thailand after Burma or?

T9: Yes

MP: And what was that like?

T9: It was better but not that much you have to scare for Thailand soldier

MP: Mhm so you have problem with the Thailand soldiers, was that inside the refugee camp or outside of the refugee camp?

T9: Sometime inside the refugee camp and sometime outside of the refugee camp, most of the time outside of the refugee camp

MP: So is there anything else you would like to tell me about your time in the refugee camp?

T9: Life in the refugee camp was really hard and we don't have opportunity to go out and find job to get money to buy like healthy food and you have to eat what they give me and you have to use what they give you like you don't have money you don't earn nothing and you don't eat healthy foods and sometimes, it was hard to live like that, so sometimes they sneak out and go out and find a job to get money

MP: So is that, well why did you leave the refugee camp?

T9: I leave the refugee camp because of opportunity, because there was no opportunity for me to get more educated, or to get healthy food, or to earn something in the future so I leave the refugee camp to find a better place in America to just have to like eat whatever you want and to stay healthy

MP: So after the refugee camp you came to America, where at in America did you come first?

T9: Ohio

MP: To akron specifically or somewhere else in Ohio?

T9: Ohio akron specifically

MP: Okay so how long have you been in Akron

T9: Seven and a half

MP: Seven and a half years? Okay so whats your life like in akron?

T9: Better

MP: Better?

T9: Uh hm

MP: Uh, is there any way that it is, uh, similar to your time in either Burma or Thailand?

no

MP: So its pretty different? Like, is there anything in specific, anything in particular that you can think of that is specifically different in Akron rather than in Burma or Thailand?

T9: The difference from Thailand and America and Akron because you here is that they don't have any soldiers to walk on the outside and you can just go to the company and apply for any job you want so in Thailand zzz 6:15 you have no opportunity to find a job

MP: So do you have a job here in Akron?

T9: I don't work but I'm a housewife

MP: Okay, that's a job!

(laughter)

MP: So is there anything else you want to tell me about your life in akron, or anything like that?

T9: I was of living here, health problems and I cannot apply for a job because I do not have good health and in the future I am afraid for my health because Medicaid will cut out because I don't work

MP: Okay, so then I have some topic questions, so let's start with education. Did you have any education at all in your life, either in Burma, Thailand or in Akron?



T9: I have no education, I did not go to school when I was young

MP: Was there a school available for you to go to? Would you have had to pay for it, or did it not exist?

T9: In Burma?

MP: Anywhere.

T9: In Burma, there was a school, but you don't have a choice of going to school, because you have to hide and run every time and they make you scary, and there is no choice to go to school because they're going to come and kill you like that so you have to run so do not have time to go to school. When I was in Thailand, there was no opportunity for adult people to go to school, only young people and high school students. In here in America, Akron, when I first arrive I go to school and it was like two hours a week, two days a week and two hours a class, and then until I was, until three years and then I stopped to go to school.

MP: Okay, so what about food? Do you consider the foods you eat to be more Karen, or more American?

T9: I prefer to eat Karen traditional food.

MP: How important is it for you to eat traditional Karen foods?

T9: I usually eat it every meal

MP: So why is it important for you to eat traditional Karen foods?

T9: It's not a big part, but if I don't eat it I feel hungry so I have to eat it

(Laughter)

MP: Do you see food as a link, traditional Karen foods, as a link to your life in Burma or in Thailand, just your life before you came to America? Or do you just never think about it?

T9: I usually eat like that for every meal so I used to that so I have to eat everyday

MP: Okay. So then what about religion? Are you guys religious people? Is it important for you to be religious?

T9: Its not zzz 12:03 but I was a Christian

MP: So you don't go to church or anything or?

T9: Yes I go to church

MP: Is it the Karen Church at Urban Vision or it a different church?

T9: Karen Church at Urban Vision

MP: So then I guess the last thing is health, and keep in mind you don't have to answer these questions. Do you have any health problems?

T9: Yes I have a lot of healthy problems, the most important was diabetes.

MP: Diabetes? When were you diagnosed with diabetes?

T9: Since I was arrived to America, about eight years.

MP: So did you get diagnosed, did you just go to the doctors, or were you not feeling well?

T9: When I was at the hospital, diagnosed the doctor diagnosed.

MP: So...?

T9: I feels not good, I feels not well, and not normal so I went to the doctor for the treatment.

MP: So do you have to do anything specifically like take medications, eat certain foods, to help with your diabetes?

T9: Yes I just like to reduce the amount of meal I eat every day.

MP: So when you need to go see your doctor, how easy is it for you to go see your doctor?

T9: When I had a problem with the health I make schedule and it was easy for me to see the doctor.

MP: How was it communicating with your doctor, was there a language barrier? Did you have any problems like that?

T9: It's easy

MP: Do you have a translator when you go to the doctor? Or does he speak Karen, do you speak the same language?

T9: I use translator

MP: Is there anything else you want to tell me, or is there anything you want to add? Do you have any health problems?

T9: When I was listening to her, what she discuss with you is the same thing that happened to me so I have nothing to add to it

MP: Oh okay

Keh: You can ask me if I go to my doctor

MP: (Laughter) Okay, do you go to your doctor?

Keh: Now you get two, you get four, and if you get me you get five

MP: Wait, what?

Keh: If you get another two patients

MP: But I already interviewed you! You can tell me though

Keh: You don't interview me hard

(laughter)

Keh: Like when I went to see my doctor it was horrible

MP: What happened?

Keh: In the beginning I don't speak at all, I don't speak English and I use an interpreter, says you cannot use restroom until the doctor is coming, and I was want to go pee

(Laughter)

Keh: I'm serious! Oh my goodness

MP: Thank you guys so much!

Karen Life Stories  
Project Codebook

<b>Mnemonic</b>	<b>None = Burma</b>
Short Description	Burma
Detailed Description	The country of Burma, Karen state is within Burma.
Inclusion Criteria	Must be mentioned by participant
Exclusion Criteria	Interviewer mentions it. Not included in Burma if talking about the Burmese people.
Typical Exemplars	“When I lived in Burma...” ; “I was born in Burma”
Atypical Exemplars	
Close, but NO	Burmese
<b>Mnemonic</b>	<b>RC</b>
Short Description	Refugee Camp
Detailed Description	Refugee camp in Thailand
Inclusion Criteria	Must be mentioned by participant
Exclusion Criteria	Interviewer asks about life in the refugee camp.
Typical Exemplars	“We crossed the border to the Thai refugee camp”; “I lived in refugee camp”
Atypical Exemplars	
Close, but NO	
<b>Mnemonic</b>	
Short Description	Burmese
Detailed Description	Description of violence or oppression by Burmese government or soldiers.
Inclusion Criteria	Must be mentioned by participant
Exclusion Criteria	Interviewer mentions it.
Typical Exemplars	“Burmese soldiers...” “The Burmese...”
Atypical Exemplars	
Close, but NO	
<b>Mnemonic</b>	
Short Description	America/Akron
Detailed Description	Mentions of life in the United States and Akron
Inclusion Criteria	Must be mentioned by participant
Exclusion Criteria	Interviewer mentions it.
Typical Exemplars	“...moved to America” “...came to Akron”
Atypical Exemplars	
Close, but NO	
<b>Mnemonic</b>	
Short Description	Citizenship
Detailed Description	Mentions of the importance of becoming a US citizen, hints at stress in relation to attaining citizenship
Inclusion Criteria	Must be mentioned by participant
Exclusion Criteria	Interviewer mentions it.
Typical Exemplars	Applying for citizenship

Atypical Exemplars	Mentions of benefits related to being a citizen, difficulties becoming one
Close, but NO	
<b>Mnemonic</b>	
Short Description	Freedom
Detailed Description	The ability (or denial of it) to move around without fear in Burma, Thailand or the US
Inclusion Criteria	Must be mentioned by participant
Exclusion Criteria	Interviewer mentions it.
Typical Exemplars	“I have freedom” “I am free”
Atypical Exemplars	“Can move freely”
Close, but NO	
<b>Mnemonic</b>	
Short Description	Laughter
Detailed Description	People laughing!
Inclusion Criteria	
Exclusion Criteria	
Typical Exemplars	
Atypical Exemplars	
Close, but NO	
<b>Mnemonic</b>	
Short Description	Health
Detailed Description	Mentions of health problems of the participant or people they know, also access to medical care
Inclusion Criteria	Must be mentioned by participant
Exclusion Criteria	Interviewer mentions it.
Typical Exemplars	Doctor visits, injuries, diseases
Atypical Exemplars	Diabetes,
Close, but NO	
<b>Mnemonic</b>	
Short Description	Education
Detailed Description	Participant’s experience with education or access to school
Inclusion Criteria	Must be mentioned by participant
Exclusion Criteria	Interviewer mentions it.
Typical Exemplars	Went to school; couldn’t go to school
Atypical Exemplars	Family members’ access to school
Close, but NO	
<b>Mnemonic</b>	
Short Description	Run/Running
Detailed Description	Forced migration due to violence, specifically soldiers or other Burmese forces
Inclusion Criteria	Must be mentioned by participant
Exclusion Criteria	Interviewer mentions it.
Typical Exemplars	Run away; “we had to run;” “we were running”