

Night-Time and Refugees: Evidence from the Thai-Myanmar Border

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The impact of night-time on the social life of refugees is under-researched. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with refugees from Myanmar in Thailand, this article argues that researching refugees' lives after dark is essential for a comprehensive understanding of refugees' social relations, education and economic activities as well as health and safety concerns. Findings of this article provide food for thought for researchers and practitioners working with refugees and internally displaced persons around the world and are likely to entice more research on the subject of night-time in refugee settings.

Keywords: Karen refugees, camps, Thailand, night-time

Introduction

The overall argument of this article is that researchers and practitioners need to pay more attention to the social life of refugees after dark. Empirical data presented in this article highlights that refugees make an active use of evenings, nights and early-morning hours. Findings suggest that refugees' time use differs during the day and during the night, in part due to the absence of non-governmental organization (NGO) workers. On the one hand, nocturnal hours in camps are likely to reinforce differences and injustices experienced during the day; on the other hand, they also provide opportunities for interactions and projects that are less feasible in a diurnal setting. Although nocturnal life differs in many respects from social life during the day, it is still under-researched and the daytime appears to be perceived as the standard for human existence (Ekirch 2006: 347). Anthropologist Lodewijk Brunt even uses the neologism 'diecentrism' to describe the long-lasting night-blindness within the social sciences and humanities (Steger and Brunt 2003: 5). The few accounts focusing on social life from dusk until dawn have mostly been concerned with elite members of Western industrialized societies. This scholarly ignorance of the economically disadvantaged, as well as of rural settings, is based on two widespread presumptions. First, scholars followed

the long-standing presumption that nothing of pertinence would occur in poorer households (Ekirch 2006: xxv). Second, there exists the assumption that electric lighting ‘revolutionized’ night-time by expanding the scope of possible human activities beyond nightfall (e.g. Melbin 1978; Alvarez 1995; Schlör 1998). Yet, whilst the impact of artificial light on nocturnal life is indisputable, no proportional relationship between the qualities of nightlife and a particular type of illumination can be established (Steger 2004: 43). Despite this insight, simplistic images of nocturnal behaviour in poor regions with limited or no access to electricity continue to be conveyed.

Recent research in rural and urban settings suggests that bringing different night cultures under scrutiny might provide new evidence not only on nocturnal phenomena, but also on socio-cultural life during the day (e.g. Chappette 2014; Beaumont 2015). In this respect, the imposition of curfews as artificial markers of nightfall deserves special attention. Typically, this artificial temporal frame for nocturnal rest serves those who hold powerful daytime positions and whose temporary withdrawal from their positions while sleeping exposes them to attempts to undermine their authority (Aubert and White 1959: 9).

This also holds true for refugees and forced migrants. In general, the night-time in refugee camps is discussed in regard to health and safety issues (Crisp 1999: 3; Hyndman 2004: 204; Da Costa 2006; Overbeek 2012). For example, Barbara Harrell-Bond points at the case of a camp in Somalia where a nocturnal intrusion disturbed refugees to such an extent that they turned to ‘retaliatory’ violence against the aid workers (Harrell-Bond 1999: 154).

There are few studies of night-time use and its effect on refugees’ socio-political and cultural activities. Within the anthropological literature, I have furthermore identified Marion Fresia’s (2009) study on Mauritian refugees in Senegal, in which she offers a sustained ethnographic description of the nocturnal gatherings of mostly male refugees. Under the shelter of darkness, in the past, these *veillées nocturnes* used to function as frames for the secret planning of political activities, while today they merely serve as convivial meetings (Fresia 2009: 267–268). Thomas Feeny’s research on Rohingya refugee children’s time use is also sensitive to the impact of nightfall on the daily activities of children growing up in refugee camps in Bangladesh. Feeny (2004: 10–11) and Hakiza (2014) found Congolese refugee merchants in Uganda using the night to migrate across the international border with Sudan for trade (Hakiza 2014: 16).

Apart from occasional references such as in the above-mentioned studies, focused surveys on the impact of night-time in refugee settings are still scarce. This research gap is not surprising when taking into account the methodological challenges accompanying any anthropological endeavour with regard to refugees’ nocturnal activities, especially within the research context at the Thai–Myanmar border.

Research Context and Methodological Challenges

This article is based on several fieldwork visits with refugees¹ in Thailand (Vogler 2006, 2007). Fieldwork started in 2006 and, since then, I have revisited refugee communities several times, most recently in March 2015. Most of my research participants are Karen or Karenni. The term ‘Karen’ includes around 20 subgroups of Karennic-speaking peoples who live at different places in the world. The Karenni, too, cover around nine different ethnic groups. During decades of civil strife, the Karen people from Myanmar left their homeland and crossed the international border with Thailand to seek shelter in one of the nine camps along the Thai–Myanmar border. In December 2014, the majority of the 110,607 refugees in camps at the Thai–Myanmar border were Karen (79.1 per cent), followed by Karenni (10.3 per cent). Between 2005 and 2014, 92,000 refugees from Myanmar participated in one of the world’s largest resettlement programmes carried out by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and governments of third countries, such as the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom (McConnachie 2014; TBC 2014; UNHCR 2014). Multi-sited fieldwork for this article has been conducted at both sides of the Thai–Myanmar border, as well as in the city of Chiang Mai. My qualitative methodology is particularly apt to uncover the different meanings of night-time in refugee youth’s lives. Through interviews (Kvale 1996) and participant observation (Spradley 1980), I learned about refugee youth’s daily and seasonal time use in general and their nocturnal activities in particular. Observation methods have been a major tool for studying young peoples’ time use (Vogler *et al.* 2009) and can be distinguished according to the degree of participation the social situation under study allows: thus it is possible to distinguish direct observation with (semi-) participation and ‘spot observation’ with minor participation (Ben-Arie and Ofir 2002). Clearly, there exist particular methodological challenges to researching camps after dark. For example, with regard to participant observation, the refugee camp proved to be a difficult research site. Access was only possible for those who held a camp pass. This official entry document to the camp was issued by the Thai Home Ministry. Obtaining a camp pass was only possible through my affiliation with a local NGO. Volunteering with this NGO was a rewarding experience but also constrained my mobility, because I depended on my host organization for transport to and from the camp. At the time of fieldwork in 2006, camp policies were restrictive and required NGO workers to leave at between 5 and 6 p.m. Inside the camps, refugees had to obey an internal curfew set at 9 p.m. This regulation was literally a *couvre-feu* as it required camp residents to cover open fires and maintain silence within their homes. Although the mere setting of a curfew did not cause refugees to go to bed obediently, it arguably defined a temporal frame for collective rest. As a researcher affiliated with a local NGO, it was therefore impossible for me to stay overnight in the camp. Had the Thai authorities found out, this would

have caused grave problems for my refugee host and my host organization. Given these limitations, I also met refugees who lived outside the camps.

Fieldwork was always followed by analysis and triangulation of data. Moreover, I presented some findings at workshops and seminars. During the writing-up process, I became aware of the pitfalls of the ‘ethnographic present’: according to Fabian (2002), anthropologists obstinately use the present tense in their publications. The use of the present de-historizes the narrated events and frequently magnifies ethnographic accounts to general validity which they rarely have. Ethnographers have justified this choice, saying that this is a literary practice (Fabian 2002: 80–81). Therefore, this article is written in the past tense so as to account for the timing of ethnographic encounters with Karen and Karenni refugee youths at the Thai–Myanmar border.

Social Relations

For a millennium or more, walking at night has been regarded as a crime (Beaumont 2015: 15). Also, in refugee camps at the Thai–Myanmar border, there existed rules and regulations around men and women’s mobility at night. Darkness might impact on social relations and hierarchies. During fieldwork, I found evenings and early-night hours bringing those members of the refugee community together who were separated during the day. These were family members and friends, but also refugees and security personnel. Furthermore, certain actors only left their bamboo huts under the shelter of darkness. At the same time, the night separated refugees from diurnal actors such as humanitarian aid workers. With regard to this nocturnal union or segregation of social groups, the imposition of curfews as artificial markers of nightfall merits special attention.

Refugees, Aid Workers and Security Personnel

As mentioned above, at the Thai–Myanmar border, researchers and humanitarian aid workers needed to leave campsites by 6 p.m., whilst refugees had to respect an internal curfew set at 9 p.m. Thus, nightfall separated the camp population from diurnal actors such as humanitarian aid workers and researchers affiliated with them. Once these diurnal actors had left, the remaining authority was camp security and the Thai paramilitary force (*or sor*) that were respectively representing refugee and Thai authorities. Camp security was staffed by camp residents, while *or sor* paramilitaries were usually Thai citizens. Thus, nightfall marked an automatic shift of practical authority on a quotidian basis. With higher-ranking officials and aid-agency staff sleeping outside camps, fewer and lower-ranking officials were temporarily in charge of decision-making. Although the regulation of immediate communication appeared to be upheld at night, in practice, supervisors were not informed about relevant incidents before sunrise.

The relation between refugees and these nocturnal surveillance bodies was ambiguous. During fieldwork, I had the chance to observe and participate in a camp party organized as recognition for the Thai paramilitary's work. The celebration was within the camp, and participants included (apart from the paramilitary) humanitarian aid workers, refugees and the inhabitants of neighbouring villages. The venue was set at the easily accessible *or sor* check-point at the entrance to the camp zone. Upon my arrival at 18.30, I already found a happy gathering of Thai aid workers and villagers seated on benches alongside long tables. In a speech, one Thai official welcomed the UNHCR staff attending the event and then expressed his gratitude to the *or sor* paramilitaries and to aid agencies as well as to the Camp Committee for constructive cooperation with the Royal Thai Government, which he was representing in Mae Hong Son. The speech ended with the official opening of the buffet and most guests started to eat food prepared on barbecues. At the same time, an official launched the karaoke equipment by performing a Thai rock song on stage, while some of the paramilitary soldiers joined in by dancing. During dinner, aid-agency staff prepared a game in which people were chosen randomly for karaoke performances. Thus, the refugees, soldiers, villagers and Thai aid workers joined in merriment. For the duration of one night, it seemed as if these stakeholders, whose relations are otherwise marked by distance, acted as part of a community. Bearing in mind the exceptionality of this event, the party nevertheless neatly illustrated how social relations might change after dark and how those who are strangers during the day can turn into playmates at night. Curiously, with the exception of myself and another senior aid worker, no Westerners attended the party. One Western health worker later explained to me that she 'never considered going there' (Anna, personal communication, 10 February 2006). The young woman left me to wonder whether she was alluding to a possible political sensitivity related to the event or just the fact that aid workers are not supposed to attend a party with the recipients of their services. However, interestingly enough, their organization not only sponsored the karaoke equipment for the party, but their Thai supervisor also turned out to be one of the best karaoke singers. The maintenance of cultural distance rather than the political delicacy of the event seemed to discourage Western aid workers from joining the event.

Family and Friends

While nightfall in the camp separated certain actors, it reunited others. Notwithstanding the importance of curfews to formally regulate activities within the camp, work and socializing occupied many families beyond curfew hours. Refugees normally rose at dawn and started working and lighting up their cooking fires. After the completion of domestic chores, refugee children and youth spent several hours either in schools or workshops, earning money or hanging out with peers. Women were highly industrious,

foraging food in the jungle, fetching water, feeding livestock, brewing rice-wine, etc., for example. Male adults were involved in tasks such as the building of bamboo houses and woodcutting.

Thus, whether idle or industrious, household members were usually dispersed throughout the camp area during most parts of the day. Families and friends tended to reassemble in the early evening before sunset when some sort of dinner was served. However, this moment was not necessarily associated with general positive sensations among the refugee community. For instance, one research participant, a young single woman, stated in her article rather contemptuously:

I dislike in the evening because all of people come back home and most of children cry and shout. So it noisy for me. I like early morning because it is quiet.²

The hours after dinner signified for many a period of relaxation, a bracket between daily chores and community and family obligations. Following the accounts of research participants, these hours were often spent in the company of close friends: women and adolescent girls used the twilight to enjoy the company of female friends, while some youth reported visiting friends' houses where they played and listened to music, completed their homework or chatted. Others spent their pocket money on movies or karaoke.

In general, the impact of nightfall appeared to be different depending on the context of individual lives. Those sharing a bamboo hut with senior caretakers as well as students dwelling in a border house seemed to return home, whilst for others residing alone or with peers, nightfall did not necessarily mean an interruption of their evening activities. Once at home after dark, refugee youth recounted pursuing rather quiet activities such as reading and studying by candlelight or in one case even watching TV.

Besides drawing together families and friends, the night-time is also perceived as advantageous for courtship. Although the Karenni like to woo through letter-writing, young men were also encouraged to perform songs in order to discover the intentions of their prospective lovers and present them after nightfall until roughly 10 p.m. (Khon 2004: 116). If the courtship is more serious, youthful suitors were allowed to visit girls during evening hours in order to converse with them under parental supervision until midnight. Similar practices exist among the Karen (Ewers Andersen 1979/80: 315; Vogler 2010: 234).

Some couples circumvented this official courting procedure by sneaking out under the shelter of darkness. Even in the absence of senior vigilance and the possession of one's own bamboo hut, unmarried couples preferred, for the sake of discretion, visiting each other after nightfall. It is not only Karen or Karenni couples that find time together during the nocturnal hours; I also heard repeatedly of secret encounters between Karen and Karenni girls and Thai security personnel during the evening. Of course, this was frowned upon by the young refugee men, as they felt that the *or sor*, though not wealthy,

could offer the young refugee women more than they could with regard to material goods and treats which gave them an unfair advantage.

Celebrations

The night-time also allows for merriment including larger gatherings, parties and festivals. The Karen and the Karenni made use of darkness for carrying out several of their biggest festivities. At the beginning of December, the Karen and the Karenni celebrated ‘*Sweet December*’. According to research participants, *Sweet December* is celebrated among Christians in Myanmar and in the temporary shelters for refugees in Thailand. During this night, men and women usually gather in a festive setting to anticipate the Nativity, the birth of Jesus Christ. From sunset until shortly before midnight, young people usually have a meal followed by some merriment, such as singing songs and playing music. At midnight, there will be a prayer after which everyone says ‘*Sweet December*’.³ Of course, the most important night of advent is the Holy Night of Christmas. Refugees carefully prepared and joyfully celebrated this night. In December 2013, I had the opportunity to celebrate the Holy Night of 24 December and Christmas Day 25 December with the displaced Karen people on both sides of the border. We arrived on the 24th during daytime in a refugee camp in Tak Province. Throughout the afternoon, refugees were busy with choir rehearsal, flower decorations and other steps to prepare for the liturgy at night. After dark, at 7 p.m., the church bell of St Mary Catholic church rang for the Holy Mass of Christmas Night. During the liturgy, I discovered that the Christmas songs in the camp, like ‘*Silent Night*’, are the same as Christians sing in other parts of the world. Mass was followed by pious merriment—sharing sweets and singing songs together before going to bed. It was very cold but the Karen refugees generously provided us with enough blankets to sleep well. Early in the morning of the 25th, we started with a festive breakfast. For this breakfast, several refugee men had been cooking pork in a special kitchen all night through. After breakfast, we got ready to continue our journey crossing the river Salween towards the internally displaced camp Ee Tu Hta, situated on the Burmese side of the border. There, we found even more poverty than in Mae La. The villagers needed to walk up and down a hill to access water at the river Salween. They also washed in the river. The Border Consortium distributed 10 kilograms of rice per month for each villager, which is enough for two daily meals. Primary and secondary education were available, but not on a regular basis. The Christmas celebration consisted of singing songs until after dark. At some point, noodle soup was served to mark the very special moment of Christmas and to honour us as visitors. We slept in the church building because, unlike in the refugee camp the night before, the internally displaced persons had no separate space to accommodate a group of guests. Early the next morning, we shared a large Christmas breakfast before returning to Thailand.⁴

The above observations concerning refugees' sociability after dark give proof of the rich cultural potential within the community. Whilst some humanitarian aid workers recognize that merely diurnal interaction with refugees excludes them from various social events, many appear to link the nocturnal camp hours only with danger and security issues.

Education

The hours of darkness also appeared to allow refugee youth to pursue educational and intellectual activities. Research participants mentioned repeatedly that they used evenings and nights for study. In the absence of electric light, most students used candles to complete their homework. This trend was also reflected in a survey conducted by the Karenni Student Union according to which candles feature among the three items most needed by camp students (the other two being hygiene products and dictionaries) (KSU 2011: # KSU Activities). The 2007 UNHCR-CCSDPT (Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand) plan addressing the needs of the persons along the Thailand–Myanmar border urged for 'lighting, preferably with electricity supply where feasible' to target education and health needs:

There is a widespread need for improved lighting for students to study in the evenings, preferably electric lighting. This might be provided through land power lines in accessible areas or generators maintained by the education agencies (CCSDPT and UNHCR 2007: 15).

With regard to study activities during the evening and night hours, it is also noteworthy to mention that two of the seven Karen refugee camps examined in a 2010 survey on education offered alternative schooling through night schools. These night schools are predominantly attended by adult learners as well as children and youth who interrupted their formal educational path (Oh *et al.* 2010: 48). Given the high percentage of illiterate adult refugees and the large numbers of school dropouts among youth within the camps along the Thai–Myanmar border, it might be helpful to increase the number of night schools. As refugee youth and adults often stop their education for economic reasons, evening classes might be a realistic alternative for those who are busy with income generation during the day.

Economic Activities

Refugees and forced migrants are sometimes obliged to pursue their livelihoods under the cover of darkness. During fieldwork, I found that refugees at the Thai–Myanmar border were socio-economically active during the night.

Indeed, within the parameters of the camp, many refugees engaged in trade and household work during evenings and night-time. Activities carried out within the confines of the campsite were not considered 'illegal', but problems

were likely to arise when peoples' activities entered into conflict with curfew hours. For example, some women were earning an additional income by selling home-made snacks in front of their bamboo huts during the evening hours. Economically well-off refugees with access to one of the few generators available in camp were selling electricity and bulbs for 40 baht per month to individual households. Others made money by displaying movies at night or organizing karaoke events.

Furthermore, many household chores were carried out towards the end of the day. One female research participant said she preferred fetching water in the evening at around 8.30 p.m. in order to avoid queuing up for water supply early in the morning. Her peers agreed on the difficulties related to fetching water at daybreak and mentioned that some girls and boys would even head out to a communal tap/well at midnight. A teacher also told me that her student used to catch frogs at night to sell for food.

In addition to economic activities carried out inside the camp, refugees also used the night to pursue ways of income generation that required them to leave the camp. It goes without saying that, in contrast to the business and chores described above, these activities were more delicate, as refugees were officially forbidden to move outside their assigned living area. For instance, shop owners used the night-time to transport consumer items for resale into the camp. However, these operations were not without risk for refugee tradespersons:

I heard that one shop owner from zone B in the camp brought some snacks and materials from outside the camp to his small shop at night. Suddenly, the Thai leader and his soldiers came and made the owner of the shop to take back his goods to outside the camp. Things like this keep the price of food high (Saw Poe Kler Htoo 2005: 7).

During the rainy season, many refugees found employment at Thai farms in Mae Hong Son province. For this occupation, people tended to get up at midnight. Equipped with rice that had been prepared the evening before, they left the camp during the late-night hours in order to be on village streets at 3 a.m., where they waited to be picked up by farmers in search of daily labour forces. Usually, refugees waited there until 10 a.m. and then—in the absence of any labour demand—returned to the camp.

Migration

Despite official restrictions of their movements, refugees and forced migrants along the Thai–Myanmar border used migration as a livelihood strategy for a variety of reasons. In these cases, moving at night had, above all, the advantage of an increased degree of safety. First, inside Thailand, with fewer authorities posted on roads and other routes, travelling during the night appeared to be safer than in the daytime according to the testimony of forced migrants (Caouette 2001: 112). Thus the famous refugee author

Pascal Khoo Thwe describes in his autobiography how the difference of day and night-time impacted on him and his friends when they crossed the Burmese jungle towards Thailand:

Traveling by night turned out to be the best way of keeping terror at bay, because then we could not see the possible dangers such as landmines, booby traps, cliffs and awaiting guns. It behoved us all the more to watch our steps... We held each other's hands and moved slowly in the dark, smiling. We desired, above all, a good night's sleep, but that was not possible... We tried to see each other's smiles in the darkness. We traveled together at night, but stayed apart during the day (Khoo Thwe 2002: 195).

This passage is interesting, since it highlights how the night-time altered the perception of security threats, thus enhancing the watchfulness of these nocturnal migrants.

Speaking about nocturnal movements of refugees and asylum seekers, it is also noteworthy that deportation transfers from Bangkok to the border town Mae Sot usually occurred during the night. This timing, in turn, was a major obstacle to the successful monitoring of deportation movements.

Health and Safety

Changes in social relations that occur in the camp might facilitate nocturnal security threats to body and spirit, thus urging refugees to devise original ways of coping with such hazards. Informal interviews with refugee youth and adults working with them suggested that camp residents at the Thai–Myanmar border are at night-time particularly prone to domestic and sexual violence often committed by household members, as well as aggressions by Thai security personnel and drunken fellow refugees. Furthermore, during the dry season (roughly December until April), refugees have reason to fear that fighting between the Burmese Army and ethnic non-state-armed actors might spill over the border to the refugee camp. Moreover, I identified other security concerns related to the permeability of refugee housings and the consequences of culturally inappropriate sleeping positions. Finally, night-time fears related to machinations of supernatural beings also appear to play a salient role among refugees.

Corporal Integrity

Despite the existence of all kinds of nocturnal traffic in camp, it goes without saying that the majority of the camp population uses the night-time for sleeping. As 'the farthest refuge from the throes of daily life' (Ekirch 2006: xxvi), sleep holds decidedly a recreational function in forced migrants' daily life. However, due to the absence of a waking consciousness, sleeping persons are unable to control their environment and are therefore obliged to find means of protection in this heightened state of vulnerability (Williams

2005: 134). This is even more so when night-time fears add to insecurity, as might be the case in enclosed refugee camps in unstable border zones. In light of these considerations, it appears worthwhile to consider the corporal security not only of those who are awake, but also of those who are sleeping when enquiring about refugees' vulnerability and coping mechanisms during the night. During fieldwork, particular attention was focused on the organization of sleep within the camp. It indeed transpired that such an enquiry has the potential of revealing valid information on individuals' fears and worries, as well as their social relations.

I identified five factors causing worries with regard to corporal integrity at night-time: namely assaults on refugees by camp personnel; exposure to armed conflict; domestic and gender-based violence; the permeability of bamboo huts; and 'indecent' sleeping positions.

First, the fear of Thai security personnel assaulting, molesting or seducing refugee men, women and children was repeatedly expressed by research participants and fostered by the observations of humanitarian aid agencies. In a group discussion with five refugee girls, it transpired that parents tended to worry if their daughters did not return home between 10 p.m. and midnight.⁵ This parental fear apparently stemmed from accounts of Thai soldiers harassing individuals who strolled around after curfew hours. Indeed, incidents of verbal and physical abuse occurred frequently and, in one camp, a drunken security guard allegedly fired gunshots into the air, thus causing fear among camp residents. Moreover, Thai security staff reportedly used excessive force against a refugee who did not respect the night-time curfew.⁶ Violence reached a peak during the December 2007 incident in a camp in Mae Hong Son which led to a refugee student being shot dead and refugee youth destroying the *or sor's* camp and their vehicles and motorbikes. According to the online newspaper *Asian Tribune* and other confidential witnesses, scuffles between refugee youth and Thai soldiers erupted in the evening during a stage show as part of the refugee students' Annual School Games events. As a consequence, the Camp Committee asked the teachers to cancel the next evening's event. However, the teachers insisted on going ahead, adamant that the *or sor* should not be allowed to attend. Thus the second evening of the Annual School Games events started seemingly without problems. Yet, while a quiz was taking place, shooting was heard. Apparently, the Thai paramilitaries felt there was a security concern and therefore went to the event in spite of their agreement to stay away. Refugee youth and adults were reportedly waylaid, injured and threatened with guns. These events upset the young people who expected to enjoy a night of singing, dancing and other competitions. They left the venue and started walking towards the area where the *or sor* lived. Under the threat of the angry students, the *or sor* opened fire and a refugee youth named Aik Oo was hit in the neck below his ear. Although his friends tried to save him, the youth died. The shock of seeing one of their number dying incensed the young people, who started to destroy the property of the *or sor*. This all

happened after 8 p.m. For their safety, the *or sor* had to flee into the jungle and hide there throughout the night until they could leave the camp safely on the morning of the next day. This nocturnal incident upset the refugees, the Thai authorities and international NGO workers, and raised questions with regard to the camp administration, especially concerning the *or sor* remaining in the camp when others withdraw after dark (*Asia Tribune*, 22 December 2007).

Secondly, the Burmese Army continued to be perceived as serious threats by the refugee community. According to a research participant, fighting between the Burmese Army and the Karenni Army took place during the dry season, as the absence of rain facilitated Burmese soldiers' access to Karenni territory. Also, during the cold season in late 2004 and early 2005, fighting erupted:

During that time the sound of gunfire and explosions was a daily back-drop and a curfew was imposed in the camp. Every night everyone had to be home and candles out by 8p.m. for fear of the Burmese invading the camp (they have done it before so this was not an imagined threat). There was real fear in the camp and the curfew also impacted on study and entertainment. At that stage a boarding master refused to take in any new students as he was finding it so difficult to control the boarder students as they were so restless.⁷

During group discussion with refugee students, participants started describing the fighting at the border and a male student mentioned how insecure he and his peers felt because of the sounds of shelling and gunshots. As a result, many refugees were ready to leave the camp. An NGO worker (who was at that time also living in camp) confirmed that the shelling was audible, in particular during the evening and early-night hours.⁸ Pascal Khoo Thwe also frequently mentioned scenes of night combat or surprise attacks between Karenni and Burmese troops, thus conveying the impression that evenings and night-time were indeed the favoured periods for armed clashes and organized assaults (Khoo Thwe 2002). These accounts suggest that fighting also takes place during evening and night-time and that this hazard might increase refugees' perception of insecurity.

A third fear is domestic- and gender-based violence inside camps and their immediate surroundings. The nocturnal reunion of households bore a high potential of erupting domestic violence ranging from petty quarrels to serious acts of violence. This was probably so because members of refugee households, and thus potential perpetrators, were more likely to be together at home during the evenings and at night. In fact, domestic violence and alcohol abuse were major concern within the camp and children found it difficult to sleep when they were plagued by worries about their quarrelling parents.⁹ Refugees never referred explicitly to me of their individual experiences of domestic or sexual violence. However, silence in problematic social settings is often very expressive in itself, and it would be wrong to assume that such incidents are not occurring during the night-time. The presence of a women's

refuge house in the camp demonstrated the prevalence of domestic abuse against women, though it was not unknown for the perpetrator to be the woman against a male member of the household.

Fourthly, it emerged that refugees at the Thai–Myanmar border were further endangered by natural annoyances. Sleeping places inside the refugee camp consisted mostly of unstable bamboo huts built by the refugees themselves. The instability of the huts could not be linked to weak construction skills of the refugees. Instead, the physical condition of the camp area appeared to be a major obstacle for building stable houses. Due to their weak structure, the houses were prone to various hazards, such as fire. Throughout recent years, serious fires have broken out in several refugee camps and destroyed hundreds of houses. Night-time enhances the danger of fire because refugees use candle light inside their bamboo huts and may fall asleep before extinguishing the flame. For example, in March 2014, fire broke out at night in a Karen camp and the camp leader commented:

According to our inquiry, the fire was caused by a candle from a house in section 4 [of Zone B] where a mother of a young baby fell asleep with the light on [candle] and set fire to her house. We found out that 19 houses were destroyed by the fire while another 31 houses were dismantled to prevent the fire spreading (*Karen News*, 25 March 2014).

Moreover, the porous roofs, walls and floors cannot completely protect the inhabitants from the sometimes extreme weather conditions in Northern Thailand, be it the oppressive heat during March and April or during heavy and constant rainfalls of the rainy season that lasts until October. In particular, during this monsoon period, landslides and falling trees were likely to completely destroy or wash away individual houses. The cold conditions of the winter months were also difficult for locals and refugees. In addition, the permeability of dwelling places exposed their inhabitants to malaria transmitting mosquitoes and disturbing noises. Generally, NGOs provided refugees with blankets, bed nets and plastic sleeping mats. During exceptionally cold winters, the refugees also received knitted blankets. Used in conjunction, the mats and nets provided essential protection against wind and mosquitoes (TBBC 2005: 70). According to my observations, the actual usage of blankets, mosquito nets and plastic mats seemed to differ according to refugees' economic status. While most people seem to use the sleeping items distributed by aid agencies, well-off refugees acquired additional items such as quilts and thicker blankets. These were obtained either through purchase at shops within or outside the camp or by bartering. In contrast, destitute households appeared to trade their own donated sleeping items for other goods, thus endangering the corporal security of family members during sleep.

The weakness of bamboo huts exposed inhabitants not only to severe climatic conditions and malarial mosquitoes, but also to a variety of disturbing noises. These included sounds of footsteps in neighbouring bamboo huts, snoring, the waking-up of neighbours and the sounds of woodcutting in

the early morning. Furthermore, one research participant mentioned that camp residents would call the security personnel if drunkards were too loud.¹⁰ The noises of pigs, chickens and roosters in the morning and noises of frogs during night count as factors of disturbance. While research participants reported the annoyance of neighbouring noises, it would be worthwhile to ask to what extent the permeability of bamboo huts also provided security, as incidents of domestic dispute and violence are easier for neighbours to monitor.

Finally, the proper arrangement of individual bodies appears to be an important factor for securing corporal integrity during sleep. More so than their male counterparts, women and girls are expected to cover their skin carefully when sleeping. Emphasized is the importance of the *sarong* covering the legs down to the ankles. In order to guarantee maximum protection, women used a blanket, notwithstanding the weather conditions. Should the blanket be removed, female friends or relatives were expected to re-cover the sleeping person. According to a female research participant, when men—apart from husbands—would see an uncovered woman, they would look away, move on and ask someone else to re-cover the body. She also indicated that the sight of such a ‘messy’ sleeper might appear ridiculous to the on-looker: ‘In their heart they will say something. They want to laugh.’¹¹ Therefore, while men and boys appear to have greater freedom in choosing their sleeping place and are sometimes even sent outside to spend the night on the veranda, girls and women are encouraged to seek the privacy of the bamboo hut.

Spiritual Health

The discussion above focused on factors perceived by Burmese refugees as threatening to their physical security. While these fears were merely relating to empirical threats such as human beings, insects and weather conditions, there also existed spiritual factors that influenced refugees’ wellbeing. In Myanmar, animist beliefs in ghosts exist parallel to the official state religion of Theravada Buddhism. In particular, the belief in the *nat* (ghost-spirit) is popular throughout Myanmar (Skidmore 2004: 201–202). *Nats* constitute a system of beings that play a salient role in everyday spiritual life of most Burmese, including the ethnic minorities. Clearly, such belief systems are not limited to the Burmese. In fact, they appear in many Asian societies where pre-Buddhist beliefs coexist with Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim or Christian religions.

Thus, Karen and Karenni people in Myanmar and Thailand perceive ghosts who pay nightly visits and wake people. During my own fieldwork with the Karenni and the Karen, research participants of all generations mentioned fear of ghosts, especially after dark. One research participant made explicit reference to a case of nightly spirit possession. The young Karenni woman described how her neighbour, a woman with four children,

loitered around the camp during full-moon nights. Moreover, the woman sang during these special lunar nights on top of the roof of her bamboo hut.¹² The research participant referred to her neighbour as ‘crazy woman’ and added that there are ‘many crazy’ inside the camp.

Against this backdrop, it would be worthwhile to study the impact of religion and animism on the spiritual health of refugee individuals and communities as well as the corresponding healing mechanisms.

Conclusion

This article started out with the assumption that social life in refugee camps and settlements is likely to differ according to day and night-time. My ethnographic fieldwork supports this assertion. I am convinced that more exploration of refugees’ nocturnal livelihood and coping strategies might reveal important information in at least three regards. First, research on refugees’ social lives after dark would enhance our understanding of the social and cultural life of their communities, thus correcting simplistic imagery of refugees. Second, an exploration of the night-time in camps and settlements would decidedly improve assessments of security problems and help identify and improve existing coping strategies employed by refugees. Finally, this research suggests that a focus on nocturnal stress factors would deepen our comprehension of refugees’ protection needs. For example, my research highlights the salience of threats to spiritual health. Sadly, however, the Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees does not yet recognize threats to spiritual health as a form of persecution.

Let us also face realities: any research project on night-time will likely be accompanied by methodological challenges. For example, anthropologists studying primarily the social situation of refugee camps may be obliged to negotiate accessibility to nocturnal research settings. Likewise, other environments such as impoverished urban neighbourhoods or isolated settlements may be difficult to enter due to urban curfews or lack of transport. Moreover, access to information is not enough when there is no genuine willingness to deliver findings on the night-time. This is not self-evident, since nocturnal research practices do differ from diurnal ones. There would be much to say in this respect, but suffice for now to consider the simple fact that researchers, like aid workers, often follow an agenda that foresees personal leisure time at the end of the day. Furthermore, some might rightly point at security concerns after dark. It goes without saying that such threats have to be assessed prior to embarking on research. This leads directly to the major ethical concern I perceive with regard to studying the nocturnal worlds of refugees and forced migrants, namely the possibility of repercussions unintended by researchers. There exists the risk that knowledge and information about nightlife in settings already imbued with social control may be used to justify the enforcement of existing surveillance mechanisms. It is thus the responsibility of researchers to find a sound balance between the disclosure

of potentially sensitive information and the presentation of findings capable of challenging existing views on refugees.

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1. I use the term 'refugee' according to the 1951 Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (UNHCR 2010: 14). At the time of writing this article, Thailand was not yet a signatory state of this important human rights treaty and classified the camps as 'temporary shelters'.
2. Interview, 17 January 2006.
3. Group discussion, 25 March 2015.
4. Fieldwork, 24–25 December 2013.
5. Fieldnotes, 17 January 2006.
6. Fieldwork, 16 February 2006.
7. Interview, 26 March 2006.
8. Interviews, 21 February 2006.
9. Interview, 20 January 2006.
10. Interviews, 21 and 25 January 2006.
11. Interview, 12 January 2006.
12. Interview, 25 January 2006.

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