

KAREN AND CHIN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES: UPLOADING MUSIC AND LIVED EXPERIENCE
TO SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

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In this paper, I investigate the Karen and Chin ethnic groups' use of the Internet, specifically social media, to create a virtual sonic space that is specifically Chin and Karen. I approached this topic by attending and interviewing people at the events of Karen New Year and Chin National Day and examined how those events were being uploaded to Internet sites such as YouTube. My initial findings led me to examine the ways that the Internet functions in Burma and how the Burmese government's approach to the Internet affects the ways indigenous groups such as the Chin and the Karen use the Internet within the country of Burma and within the Karen and Chin diasporas.

My preliminary examinations pointed to the Karen and Chin communities utilizing two main online sources: exile news media, such as *Kwe Ka Lu* and *Chinland Guardian*, and social media sites, such as Facebook and YouTube in which music videos play a primary role in communication. In the chapters of this thesis, I describe the interrelationship between exile news media and Chin and Karen music videos, examine how these videos constitute forms of communication, and discuss how the uploading of live events such as Karen New Year and Chin National Day allow for the formation of a connected and imagined virtual community that encompasses both homeland and diaspora within sonic borders of Chin- and Karen-ness.

This project is dedicated to the Karen and Chin communities in Indiana as well as their counterparts all over the world.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Music is a portal through which actors and institutions appropriate cultural signs into the national imaginary, actively contouring perceptions of the past in the service of the politics of the present...national identities are performed, embodied by social actors who collectively remember the past through a lens shaped by the ruptures of dispossession and dislocation. Inherent in these performances are the interventions of social actors, navigating deep-seated structures of feeling and consequence. Interpreting the scripts of these performances, seeking to understand the local power dynamics that inform these ruptured interventions, exposes the performativity of the nation and the poetics of resistance.¹

– David McDonald

The historical and current political situations in Burma (Myanmar)² have prompted the mass movement and relocation of multiple ethnic groups including the Chin and the Karen to refugee camps as well as to communities in North America, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia. The Internet, especially online news and social media, has provided new ways to reduce the perceived distance between diasporic communities and their homelands as well as between diasporic communities across the globe. Online engagements transform the Internet into a social space in which politics are addressed, identity is articulated, lived experience is uploaded, and culture and nationality are performed. These social spaces as well as online news media, allow people to imagine a virtual community that is Chin- or Karen-specific. People use these spaces to create an idealized version of the Karen and Chin nation that perceptually encompasses all communities of Chin and Karen around the world. These virtual nations reflect and influence the culture and politics of the geophysical world. Uploading musical events,

¹ David McDonald, *My Voice is My Weapon: Music, Nationalism, and the Poetics of Palestinian Resistance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 284.

² The name Myanmar was the result of a political renaming of the country in 1989 by the military government and not the citizens. Though the name change is acknowledged and accepted in most parts of the world, the diasporic communities, the United States, Britain, and Canada do not formerly recognize this name change. For this paper, I will use the name “Burma” when referring to the country since this is the name generally used in the United States as well as the name I have seen used most often among the Chin and Karen people in their speech and writing.

performances, and music videos is a sonic representation of Karen- and Chin-ness that reflects this idea of nationhood.

In this thesis, I examine online music media sharing among the Chin and Karen States and their diasporas, show how representations of Chin and Karen identity are being formed in online communities, and analyze how music is playing a role in the reterritorialization of a deterritorialized people. I address media sharing in terms of what cultural information (music, news, opinions, etc.) is posted online, the language it is in, and how people conceptualize the role of the Internet and the act of posting to the Internet (why certain videos are posted, who the intended audience is, etc.). Finally, I discuss the role music is playing in these communities and expressions of nationhood online.

After an introduction, this thesis is divided into two main chapters. In the introduction, I provide a brief history of the political situation in Burma with an emphasis on the beginning points of development of nationality among the Chin and Karen as well as the main events in Burmese history as a nation that affect the politics of the virtual. I then explain how and why I became interested in this topic. I outline of the differences in how the Internet is approached and conceived of through Southeast Asian and indigenous gazes as well as provide a brief description of some of the literature concerning diasporic music. Finally, I describe my research methodology and address the limitations and challenges of this project. Chapter 2 includes a description of how the politics of censorship has affected the sharing and access of information both within Burma and its diasporic communities followed by an examination of ways in which the Karen and Chin are using music, social media, and exile media to function as communication and community. Chapter 3 consists of two case studies: Karen New Year in Fort Wayne, Indiana and Chin National Day in Indianapolis, Indiana. In the Karen section, I describe the event as well

as the development of national instruments and dances for the purposes of expressing Karen national identity both within Fort Wayne and abroad. In the Chin section, I also describe the event but focus on the technological aspects. In both sections, I describe the types of technology in use throughout the day by individual attendees and what aspects of these performances were uploaded to social media. Finally, I explain how uploading music to social media functions in terms of Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities"³ by describing nationality on the Internet in terms of the musical. Both the Karen and Chin ethnic groups, though not existing within sovereign states, do view themselves as separate from the state of Burma, as reflected in the desire for independent statehood and national identity. The final chapter is the conclusion in which I summarize my findings.

Burma History: Chin and Karen Ethnic Politics and Nationality

Burma has a very intricate and complicated history, which cannot be discussed exhaustively in this chapter. I will, therefore, provide the reader with a brief synopsis of the history and formation of identity of the Burman, Sgaw and Pwo Karen⁴, and the Chin. According to Lian Sakhong, the director of the Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies, national identity within Burma has been intertwined with religious identity since the founding of the first Burman kingdom of Pagan in 1044.⁵ During this time, Buddhism was adopted as the official state religion and King Anawrata was viewed as both ruler and upholder of the religious faith.⁶ The relationship between the two was so entangled that Paul Bingadet wrote in 1887 that "religion

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983 [2006]).

⁴ There are roughly twenty subdivisions of Karen, but the Sgaw and the Pwo are the two main Karen groups that I focus on in this thesis.

⁵ Lian H. Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2003), 108.

⁶ *Ibid*, 108.

cannot be forsaken without giving up nationality.”⁷ Sakhong also mentions this quote and references the saying, “Buddha-bata Myanmar Lu-myo/to be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist.”⁸ This idea was so strongly prevalent in the Burman concept of statehood and nationality that anyone, including a king, who converted to an alternate religion immediately became cast as a *Kala* (foreigner) and would no longer be recognized as being a part of Burman society.⁹ The ingrained idea of religious association with nationality became an important factor during British colonial occupation in the ethnic tensions that built during Burma’s fight for independence. These historical tensions also influenced the Chin and Karen conception of the interrelationship between ethnicity and nationalism.

Before colonial occupation, the Chin people, located in western Burma on the border of India and Bangladesh, were an independent and sovereign people who had no history of being conquered by an outside force, including the Burman.¹⁰ The addition of the word *ram* after the Chin designation (*Chinram*) indicates the Chin population’s self-conception as an independent nation both culturally and politically separate from that of Burma.¹¹ The territory of the Chin originally expanded into the three nations of Burma, India, and Bangladesh, but was politically subdivided by the British during occupation and left that way after the British departed in 1948.¹²

⁷ Paul A. Bingadet, *An Outline of the History of the Catholic Burmese Mission from the Year 1720-1857*, 2nd Edition (Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1887 [1967]), 11.

⁸ Lian H. Sakhong, *Ibid*, 108. This saying was also quoted by Sakhong in his essay “Burma at a Crossroad” in *Prisms on the Golden Pagoda: Perspectives on National Reconciliation in Myanmar* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), 206 in reference to the policy of national reconsolidation, which promoted the idea of a single ethnicity, language, and religion in order to create a homogenous country.

⁹ *Ibid*, 110.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 101; Human Rights Watch, “‘We are Like Forgotten People’ The Chin People of Burma: Unsafe in Burma, Unprotected in India,” (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), 9, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0109web_0.pdf; Benedict Rogers, *Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads* (London: Rider, 2012), 114.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 212-213.

¹² *Ibid*, 102-104. For this thesis, I focus on the subdivision of Chin within the nation of Burma and their diaspora.

Map of the Original Territory of Ethnic Chin Tribes



Figure 1: Map of the Original Territory of Ethnic Chin Tribes. Map of original Chin territory spanning parts of Burma, India, and Bangladesh. Map from Lian Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics, and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), xxiv.

Unlike the Burman kingdom, which had written language and history, the Chin originally maintained an oral history. One of the old fables, which is also present in Karen culture, is that Chin originally had a written language as well, but lost it due to carelessness. The arrival of missionaries into Chin territory, roughly between the years of 1870 and 1896, and the subsequent recording and development of Chin dialect into a written form eventually encouraged many Chin youth to attend the mission schools and become converts to Christianity.¹³

The production of a written Chin language and the conversion of the Chin

to Christianity, according to Sakhong, became a defining point in the development of the Chin understanding of national identity.¹⁴ Today, an estimated 80% of the Chin population identify as Christian,¹⁵ though some still practice their original animist belief based on the concept of *phunglam* (“way of life”) in which divine power is inseparable from human interests.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid, 85, 110-127.

¹⁴ Ibid, xiv-xvi.

¹⁵ “Chin,” World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, 2005, www.minorityrights.org/4497/myanmarburma/chin.html.

¹⁶ Lian Sakhong, Ibid, 21.

The Karen, located in southeast Burma along the border of Thailand, were not sovereign or independent from the Burman kingdom.¹⁷ The Karen can be divided into two main groups on the basis of language and religion: the Pwo Karen and the Sgaw Karen. The Pwo Karen are mainly Buddhist while the Sgaw Karen are mostly Christian. A small minority of Karen are also categorized as animist, in which the natural landscape is inseparable from cultural meaning. According to independent writer Ashley South in his book *Ethnic Politics in Burma*, the Karen also maintained a story of lost written language similar to that of the Chin, along with a prophecy that the “golden book” would be returned to them by outsiders.¹⁸ This resulted in the Christian conversion of a number of Karen and later, the resultant rise of Christian Karen to prominent positions; in fact, multiple scholars link the Christian Karen population to the development of national identity.¹⁹ South, however, cites Mikael Gravers stating that Christianity and colonial influences are only two aspects in Karen identity.²⁰ The Karen collective experience and cultural memory of enslavement under Burman rule, passed down through oral tradition, is another significant factor in the shaping of Karen national identity as separate from Burmese national identity.

Ethnic tensions increased during the fight for independence since the Chin and Karen tended to ally with the British after being promised independent states in return. In 1947, the Chin, Kachin, and Shan met with the Interim Burmese Government led by chief minister Aung

¹⁷ In an article posted in *The Irrawaddy* titled, “Karen History: In Their Own Words,” Min Zin states that the Karen maintain an oral tradition of *hta* song poems that describe many of the abuses and suffering the Karen faced under Burman rule. See Min Zin, “Karen History: In Their Own Words,” *The Irrawaddy* 8, no. 10 (October 2000): 1. http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=2054&page=1.

¹⁸ Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 14-16. See also Charles Keyes, “The Politics of ‘Karen-ness’ in Thailand,” in *Living at the Edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the Highlands of Northern Thailand*, edited by Claudio Delang (New York: Routledge, 2003), 211-213.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 16. See also Mikael Gravers, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” in *Asian Forms of the Nation*, edited by Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlöv (New York: Routledge, 1996), 237-269.

San, which represented the Burman majority as well as non-Burman ethnic groups (Karen, Mon, and Arakan) that had originally been considered historically and geographically as part of the Burman territories by both the Burman and the British. The result of the Panglong Agreement was the creation of a unified Burma in which ethnic groups such as the Chin and Kachin were assigned state territories but would not exist as separate or independent from Burma.²¹ The Karen, who were not part of the agreement, were provided with the establishment of the Karen National Union, which included informal discussions of legal and political rights under the new Union of Burma.²² Later that year, Aung San and his cabinet were assassinated by political rival U Saw, and U Nu took over the fledgling union. According to Sakhong:

When U Nu became the leader of the AFPFL and prime minister of the Union of Burma, the ‘politics of nationalism’ in Burma did not accommodate non-Myanmar, non-Buddhist nationalities like the Chin and Kachin. Traditional ‘politics of nationalism’, which played a vital role for U Nu’s political legitimacy in independent Burma, were not only associated with the old Buddhist Kingdom of Burma but rooted itself in Burman ‘traditional nationalism’, in which Buddhism was of the utmost importance and the major component.²³

In 1949, the Karen entered into a civil war with the country of Burma in a bid for independence in what has been the longest civil war in Burmese history, lasting 66 years with a nationwide ceasefire agreement currently being discussed.²⁴ Since this is not an exhaustive history of Burma, the Chin, and the Karen, I will now skip ahead by a few decades and describe some pivotal events in history that have affected all populations in Burma and influenced the further migration of people to refugee camps as well as to other countries as immigrants.

²¹ “Panglong Agreement,” Typed PDF version of original document, 12 February 1947. http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MM_470212_Panglong%20Agreement.pdf.

²² Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948* (Boulder, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), xiv.

²³ Lian Sakhong, *Ibid*, 218.

²⁴ For a detailed description of the buildup to the civil war between the Burman and the Karen, see chapter 1 “The Rangoon Government” by Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*.

The promotion of an authentic Burmese culture and the acceptance of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961, led to a further crackdown on ethnic minority states and cultural practices including the banning of indigenous languages in Karen schools and further military incursions into ethnic state territories. In 1962, Prime Minister U Nu was arrested along with five ministers, a chief justice, and multiple ethnic minority leaders during a military coup by General Ne Win. During this new regime, the people of Burma were stripped of their freedoms of speech and expression in favor of a strict isolationist policy known as the Burmese Way to Socialism in which Western-style music and culture was banned in order to promote an authentic Burmese culture and national identity. Foreign news organizations were ejected from the country, Burmese writers and journalists were subjected to the government's Printers and Publishers Registration Act, and the music industry was denied import and export licenses.²⁵ In her article, "Burma: Music Under Siege," Aung Zaw describes this time period as the "dark ages for information in Burma."²⁶

On August 8, 1988 (8/8/88), a student led protest and resultant takeover by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)²⁷ resulted in a mass exodus of citizens from Burma after violent crackdowns brought about the deaths of thousands of citizens. During this time, the Chin joined the armed resistance against the military. Many people at this time were forced into exile and journalist Violet Cho states that this mass movement of people across borders led to the development of the current democracy movement.²⁸ Cho also explains that diaspora and exile

²⁵ Aung Zaw, "Burma: Music Under Siege," In *Shoot the Singer: Music Censorship Today*, Edited by Marie Korpe (London and New York: Zed Books, 2004), 41.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 41.

²⁷ The name was later changed to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

²⁸ Violet Cho, "Rearranging Beads on a Necklace: Reflections on Burmese Karen Media in Exile," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): 466.

media formed as part of continued struggle against the Burmese government.²⁹ According to the website *International Fort Wayne*, many Burmese ethnic minority groups began migrating to cities in the United States after the 1988 uprising by way of the monetary charities of Christian (mainly Baptist) organizations.³⁰ Ethnomusicologist Heather MacLachlan terms the movement of the Karen people around this time as “the migratory phase.”³¹

In the 1990s a portion of the Karen National Union (KNU) defected to the Burmese army pitting Buddhist Karen against Christian Karen.³² This disjuncture between the two Karen constituted a cultural trauma that is still in the process of healing. In her article “Singing and Dancing in the Karen Diaspora,” MacLachlan describes the societal impact of this trauma, stating that the rift between the Buddhist Karen and the Christian Karen was hardened at this time.³³ She further explains that community leaders in the diaspora were working hard to bridge the divide and regain a sense of unity among the Karen people.³⁴ The 1990s were also a time of Chin military expansion in order to protect the citizens within Chin State from human rights abuses, slavery, and loss of Chin territory at the hands of the military.³⁵

The 2007 Saffron Revolution was the moment when the Internet began to play a crucial role in the dissemination of music and “hidden transcripts”³⁶ across the globe. It was also partly the defining point in many of the policies and actions taken toward Internet use and regulation

²⁹ Ibid, 466.

³⁰ Fred Gilbert, “Burma Community of Fort Wayne,” *International Fort Wayne* website. 2010. http://internationalfortwayne.org/burma_community_of_fort_wayne.

³¹ Heather MacLachlan, “Singing, Dancing, and Identity in the Karen Diaspora,” *Asian Music* 45, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2014): 66-69.

³² Ibid, 67. KNU stands for Karen National Union, which is a democratic political organization made up of Karen in Burma. More information can be found on their organization’s website: <http://karennationalunion.net/index.php>.

³³ Ibid, 67.

³⁴ Ibid, 67.

³⁵ “Chin,” World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, Ibid.

³⁶ Term coined by James Scott. See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

within the country of Burma. In 2011, the military reorganized its structure and officially handed over power to civilian leadership. Many of the censorship practices established beginning in 1962 and in the wake of civilian uprisings in the years that followed were also abolished in 2011. The issues concerning ethnic minority state borders are still highly problematic since individual attacks on civilians as well as skirmishes between Karen forces and Burmese military forces are still occurring. Though temporary ceasefires have occurred and ceasefire talks are still underway, many online news sources including *Karen News*, *Chinland Guardian*, *The Irrawaddy*, *Mizzima*, and *Democratic Voice of Burma* as well as individual community members emphasize that there is still a long way to go before reconciliation.

Burma, the Diaspora, and the Internet

The movement of the Karen and Chin from refugee camps to relocated communities in the United States such as Fort Wayne and Indianapolis is relatively recent. Studying whether 1) the Chin and Karen are utilizing online resources in similar ways to other indigenous groups on the Net and 2) how much of a role music played within these online, virtual communities, will not only add to the growing literature on how the Internet is being used, conceived of, and accessed in indigenous and diasporic communities, but will also add to the growing literature of how music is being shared and circulated online.

My original investigations into online music and the Saffron Revolution, as well as the Karen Women's Organization and its fostering of Karen music and culture both on- and offline, inspired my examination of the Internet as an auditory space in which the Karen and the Chin sound their identity as a virtual community. I will discuss below some of my preliminary findings, beginning with a recap of my earlier research in order to 1) provide background for the data provided in the following chapters and 2) show how these processes shaped and changed

my initial expectations and assumptions for this project. Readings in anthropology and telecommunications concerning indigenous use of the Internet and my findings from my first two case studies listed below gave me the expectation that I would find active and engaged sites of virtual activism, forums, and blogs that, similar to what I found in my research on Generation Wave, would involve music and/or a musical community.

Case Study 1: Music, the Internet, and the Saffron Revolution

The first example I will discuss concerns the events of the Saffron Revolution, which occurred in September of 2007. Mass protests led by Buddhist monks against an almost 500% tax increase brought thousands of monks and ordinary citizens to the streets in a line more than a mile long. The protests ended abruptly when the military cracked down on the unarmed protesters on September 26, 2007, resulting in the arrests of an estimated three-to-four thousand civilians and monks. Unlike previous protests that had occurred in Burma, the rise of the Internet and the availability of technology provided the citizens involved with the tools to record and upload their experiences to cyberspace. Many added music to their videos. Ethnomusicologist Gavin Douglas described the varied choices of musical styles used to accompany the footage:

Dozens of Saffron Revolution vignettes appeared online in the months following the event. These “homemade” videos consist of video footage (visual and still pictures) of the events on the street backed by a wide range of music, which (usually) was not Burmese... The *Metta Sutta* [Theravada Buddhist mental state of “loving kindness”], one of the most significant sounds of the protest on the street, symbolizes much of the non-violent character of the protest. Instead, other musical traditions with other political associations are superimposed upon the images. For many it seems, pictures of bloodied monks would make a more significant impact not backed by Burmese music, monks chanting loving kindness, or audio clips from the event but, rather, sounds that indexed other types of protest (or comfort). Aggressive heavy metal, hip-hop, and reggae for many outside of Burma would index political protest; acoustic guitar ballads or hymns would provide comfort.³⁷

³⁷ Gavin Douglas, *Music in Mainland Southeast Asia: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 159.

Many of the videos can still be viewed online with musical styles ranging from rap to country-western to gospel. The extreme influx of protest footage, photography, and sound recording to the Internet led to a government shutdown of the Internet, as well as long distance calling, for two weeks. According to *Irrawaddy* online news reporter Min Lwin at this time, the online musical events surrounding the Saffron Revolution provoked further suspicion of and content restrictions for popular musicians and bloggers and intensified content restrictions within Burma's borders. She continues, "The authorities have also tried to break contacts between Burmese bloggers and the outside world by blocking and slowing down Internet transmission speeds."³⁸

The government's lethal handling and suppression of the Saffron Revolution also inspired many people to political action. The famous Burmese rapper Zayar Thaw founded and organized the pro-democratic youth movement known as Generation Wave before his arrest by the government in 2008. The group functioned as a youth activist movement comprised of musicians and artists, including graffiti artists, whose purpose was to inspire the citizen population of Burma to rise up against the government. They created an official website, a Facebook page, and utilized sites such as YouTube to publicly state their agenda and disseminate their musical materials. Since Generation Wave was engaged in anti-governmental, and thus illegal, activity, they often utilized their safe house in Mae Sot, across the border in Thailand, to prepare and create their agendas as well as undergo training.³⁹ Rachel Harvey, a reporter with the BBC, attended some training workshops in 2010 which included hip hop lessons such as music

³⁸ Min Lwin, "Popular Burmese Rap Performer Arrested," *The Irrawaddy*, news release, April 18, 2008, <http://archive.is/N3ZAe>.

³⁹ Rachel Harvey, "Burma's Youth Rapping for Change," *BBC News*, news release, February 24, 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8518137.stm>.

making and graffiti art as well as Internet security and maintaining and protecting email contact lists.⁴⁰ As their theme song “Left Hand of the Boxer” states, “You need to cover your tracks and protect your sources. It’s a matter of survival.”⁴¹ This piece is demonstrative of how communication through global media can raise awareness and create a space for hearing previously silent narratives. “Left Hand of the Boxer” was a collaborative effort initiated when the nongovernmental organization Operation Dagsværk discovered Generation Wave and enlisted the help of the Danish band Who Made Who to create the song. The collaboration also included the funding of a music video in which members of Generation Wave perform in Westernized hip hop clothing such as baggy pants, long shirts, and baseball caps, with masks over their faces to hide their identities. The video was posted to Internet sites such as YouTube, and was later picked up by formal media, as a way to raise awareness of the social and political situation within Burma. Generation Wave also produced their own music CDs and videos without going through the government controlled music industry. Whenever Generation Wave created a new CD, they would return to the Burma side



Figure 2: Photo of a Generation Wave Member. A member of Generation Wave poses in a mask bearing the group’s logo on his forehead. Behind him is an example of graffiti art made by the group with the initials of the group’s name. His t-shirt displays a picture of Gandhi, a person that the group idolizes for his political change through non-violence. (Photo by James Mackay. “Generation Wave,” DVB website. Photo from DVB.)

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Generation Wave and Who Made Who, “Left Hand of the Boxer,” *WhoMadeWhoVideos*, YouTube, uploaded 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVxlwNposSQ>.

of the border and distribute the CDs in local cafes and other public places. Though their lyrics were often in Burmese, the images in their online music videos such as photos of Aung San Suu Kyi and the Saffron Revolution, references to military violence against political prisoners and voter fraud, and visual comparisons of top political leaders to the Big Bad Wolf that eats Little Red Riding Hood clearly demonstrate their anti-government politics to non-Burmese speaking Western audiences.

Burmese diasporic communities also began circulating their musical voice through the Net as a form of both protesting the situation within Burma and expressing their solidarity with the Burmese citizenry. An example would be Myanmar Future Generations, a British virtual rap group that created and distributed its music purely online.⁴² Their website is no longer active but some of their tunes can still be accessed through other sites such as YouTube.

Much of the data uploaded to the Internet via YouTube and other sites entered a realm of reduced government control over the circulation of that information. The videos, photos, and personal stories uploaded to the Internet gained immediate attention and resulted in a global backlash against the regime in the form of political and economic sanctions. Meanwhile, news sources and non-governmental organizations outside of the country began focusing on issues and stories from the perspectives of citizens, giving greater weight to the voices of the populace.⁴³

The dissemination and consumption of information and dialogue on the Internet surrounding the events of the Saffron Revolution allowed the Internet to function as a global civil society. According to Wilma de Jong, Martin Shaw, and Neil Stammers, global civil society

⁴² Mark McCrum, "Burma Special: Rangoon Rappers Who Have to Be Careful How They Hip-Hop," *NewStatesman*, news release, August 14, 2006, <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/153977>.

⁴³ This is not to say that there was not a news focus or involvement from NGOs both inside and outside the country before 2007. It is, however, the event that helped get the world's attention focused on Burma, whose government had been working hard to maintain policies of isolationism.

is a newer term that arose during globalization debates and includes citizens within a community who share common activities and interests that are closely intertwined with democratic ideals, such as freedom of speech, and their promotion as well as mass media and transnational institutions, which can provide spaces where existing political relations, structures, and powers can be challenged.⁴⁴ When applied to virtual space, the reach and influence of these communities can be expanded, allowing people on the Internet outside of Burma to apply pressure to the country through direct or indirect virtual activism.

Direct virtual activism occurs when audiences are directly addressed through a virtual medium by an activist, or person with political intent, in which the content is defined by the speaker.⁴⁵ Virtual media used in these circumstances include personal websites, blogs, and social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and SoundCloud in which the poster has direct control over the content and presentation for a representation of oneself and agenda without relying on an outside influence. The effect of uploading media and virtually voicing the political tensions occurring within the country of Burma has led to greater international focus on the country and its music/musicians within national online media outlets including BBC, PRI, and even the *Huffington Post*. As these outside news sources relay interviews and interpret story lines, they participate in indirect virtual activism by relaying the narratives of others to a wider audience. Both direct and indirect virtual activism impact the power relationships and dynamics between the nation of Burma and its citizenry.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Wilma de Jong, Martin Shaw, and Neil Stammers, eds., *Global Activism, Global Media* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2005), 8-11.

⁴⁵ Wilma de Jong, Martin Shaw, and Neil Stammers, eds., *Ibid*, 1.

⁴⁶ The above case study was summarized from Karen Wijesekera, "Subverting Silence through Hip Hop and Rap in Burma: Musicians and Global Virtual Activism," Unpublished Paper, Bowling Green State University College of Musical Arts, 2014.

Case Study 2: Karen Women's Organization

Direct activism is also present in the utilization of the Internet by the Karen Women's Organization. The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) is one of the many non-governmental (NGO) grassroots social and political organizations working in Burma. Founded in 1949, the year after civil war broke out, the KWO has been working hard to assist the Karen community through social welfare programs and detailed reports on human rights abuses occurring within Karen State and in the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. According to their website, the KWO has an estimated 49,000 members whose Karen volunteers interview the Karen people and publish written reports from the Karen perspective for organizations such as the U.N. as well as the global community as a whole.⁴⁷ The KWO's goals, as listed on their website are to:

Assist women in the endeavor to be free from all forms of oppression; to promote women in all spheres of life, including education and general living standards; *to encourage women to participate in the struggle for freedom, democracy, and equality*; to develop women's knowledge, ability and skills, including political and organisational skills; to achieve the rights of women and equal status with men; *to promote and maintain Karen culture and traditions*; [and] to improve the well-being of women and children and to increase their access to adequate health, education and welfare service (emphasis added by author).⁴⁸

The online presence of the KWO has attracted a large amount of outside attention as evident by the diverse list of groups on their sponsorship and support page, which includes organizations such as America Jewish World Service, World Education Consortium, as well as from individual donations from members of the Karen diaspora. Not only has their direct virtual activism helped to empower the Karen (especially Karen women's) voices, but the funding they receive from outside sources allows for the promotion and support of cultural events. During her visit to the

⁴⁷ Karen Women's Organization, "Who We Are," last modified 2014, <http://karenwomen.org/>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Mae Khong Kha refugee camp in Thailand, ethnomusicologist Heather MacLachlan noted that the *don* dance had been organized and sponsored by the Karen Women's organization.⁴⁹

The use of the Internet surrounding the Saffron Revolution and by the Karen Women's Organization demonstrate the power of the cyberspace to function as a realm that potentially reduces the power of the nation-state. My initial investigations through these two examples appeared promising for the creation of online communities and cyber-nations among the Chin and the Karen ethnic groups. What I had not yet considered or realized until I began researching the Internet as a space, a mode of communication, and as a cultural artifact was that active and historical forms of censorship were impacting the ways in which Karen and Chin communities engaged online spaces. The Internet, like any other tool, is utilized, regulated, and conceived of differently in each nation and within each culture. My lack of experience in dealing with the Internet through anything other than my personal experiences affected my understanding of the Internet as easily accessible, and also shaped my perspective on how the Internet functions and is used. It was not until I began having difficulty finding the types of online communities and discourse that I was expecting to find that I realized that the Chin and Karen were not dialoguing in the ways I had predicted. I realized that the politics of censorship, both online and in Burma, are affecting the ways in which Karen and Chin engage in dialogue on the Internet. This caused me to shift my focus away from textual, dialogued forms of media such as forums and blogs, toward a focus on specifically music video related sites such as YouTube and the act of posting and viewing as a form of communication.

⁴⁹ Heather MacLachlan, "The Don Dance: An Expression of Karen Nationalism." *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* 32 (Fall – Winter 2006): 27-28.

Southeast Asia on the Internet

The Internet as a utility and a tool, whether it be for dissemination of information or socializing, is experienced and understood from the perspective of the particular culture to which a user belongs. Ethnomusicologist Adriana Helbig describes the limited scope of studies regarding music and the Internet:

A close examination of contemporary musicological research... reveals a disproportionate emphasis on Internet music in the West, and in the United States in particular. Studies tend to over-emphasize English-language music and rely on research that looks primarily at English-language chat rooms, electronic mailing lists, and websites. Though English is apparently the lingua franca of the Internet, an over-emphasis on English-language data and a tendency to disregard foreign language websites can lead to skewed interpretations and misleading conclusions.⁵⁰

She continues by stating, “Because meanings people attribute to the Internet differ according to these factors [cultural perceptions of the Internet], scholars who conduct Internet research must be careful not to project their particular configuration of assumptions and experiences with the Internet onto users elsewhere.”⁵¹ In their study of Asian cyberspace, Ronald Diebert, John Palfrey, Fafal Rohozinski, and Jonathan Zittrain expand on Helbig’s assertion:

These [Southeastern and Central Asian] nations are entering into cyberspace with a much different set of customs, values, and state-society relations than those, like the United States and Europe, out of which the Internet was developed and first took shape. Just as West Coast Californian culture motivated the first generation of Internet practices and principles, so too should we expect the next phase of these practices and principles to reflect a different regional flavor.⁵²

As the title of their book, *Access Contested*, suggests, Diebert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, and Zittrain approached the study of Asian cyberspace in terms of access and regulation of the Internet within the various Asian nations. From these studies, they divided the history of cyberspace use in Asia

⁵⁰ Adriana Helbig, “The Cyberpolitics of Music in Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution,” *Current Musicology* 82 (Fall 2006): 83.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁵² Ronald Diebert, Rafal Rohozinski, John Palfrey, and Jonathan Zittrain, eds., *Access Contested: Security, Identity, and Resistance, in Asian Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 6.

into what they called the “Four Phases of Cyberspace Regulation”: 1) The Open Commons from 1960-2000, 2) Access Denied from 2000-2005, 3) Access Controlled from 2005-2010, and 4) Access Contested from 2010 to present.⁵³

During the first phase described as “open commons,” the authors state that cyberspace was very lightly regulated, if at all, and actions that occurred online were not taken as seriously as actions undertaken in real space.⁵⁴ This period led to the general assumptions still very widely believed about the Internet today, especially in Western countries, such as the idea of the Internet as free space in which even citizens in strict regimes could exercise their voice free of government controls and state enforced media dialogues; the function of the Internet as a democratic force; and the idea that actions online are disconnected from social reality and the real world.⁵⁵

The second phase, referred to as “access denied,” beginning roughly around 2000, occurred due to the decision by many nations to begin regulating, filtering, and obstructing access to certain types of information or completely denying access to the Internet itself.⁵⁶ The authors state that though “the world may appear borderless when seen from cyberspace, [the] sovereign state lines are in fact well established online, as is regional variation.”⁵⁷ Investigations into the data most likely to be regulated on the Internet among Asian countries include native language and local sources more often than English-language and global sources.⁵⁸ The general availability of English-language sources over denied local-language sources makes it easy for researchers to fall into the trap mentioned by Helbig of relying on English-language sites and

⁵³ Ibid, 6.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 6.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 7.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 9.

sources, thus skewing results and data. Another trend identified by Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, and Zittrain is that even though citizens of a nation who possess decent technological skills can get around or override blocked content, these individuals exist in a smaller minority compared to the rest of the population.⁵⁹

The third phase named “access controlled,” indicates the movement toward strong regulatory stances by states and regimes in addition to the filters and blocks that were put in place during the second phase.⁶⁰ Stronger stances include state-issued media, cyber-attacks, and other forms of digital and technological espionage.⁶¹ This phase is of particular interest to this project since, as stated by the authors:

Many states also use registration, licensing, and identity requirements to control what people do online and to create a climate of self-censorship. In some jurisdictions, in order to publish information lawfully on the Internet, one needs to register oneself with the state as a publisher. The first-order controls associated with censorship are combined with legal controls and surveillance, the effect of which is to ensure that those publishing online know that they are being watched and that the state is capable of shutting them down or putting them in jail. These methods of regulation, working in combination, are highly effective, both as a means of law enforcement and through a chilling effect on online speech.⁶²

The fourth and final phase, called “access contested,” involves the use of pressure from corporations, citizenry, global civil society, and other nations to push for a return to a more open-access style Internet.⁶³ On the opposite end of this spectrum, nations are also using the Internet to virtually militarize and launch attacks against citizens, human rights and news organizations,

⁵⁹ Ibid, 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 10.

⁶¹ Ibid, 10.

⁶² Ibid, 11.

⁶³ Ibid, 14.

online dissident groups, as well as each other.⁶⁴ This phase, which is ongoing, will, according to the authors, be defined by the dynamics between self/state interests and values.⁶⁵

In her 1997 paper titled “Burma: Constructive Engagement in Cyberspace?” anthropologist Christina Fink states that while access was denied to members within the country of Burma, foreign nongovernmental organizations such as The Burma Project, as well as individuals in the Karen, Mon, and Shan diasporas who were educating themselves on technology, began creating online sites dedicated to listing human rights abuses, to network with other members of the diasporas, and to educate outsiders on indigenous histories and culture.⁶⁶ Fink’s work occurs near the end of the open commons period mentioned by Diebert, et al, and demonstrates the overlap occurring between the periods, since Internet access was already starting to be denied within Burma.

Indigenous and Minority Use of the Internet

Fink’s paper also presents the use of the Internet by the Karen and other indigenous diasporic groups as a means of connectivity. Hamid Naficy states that the Internet can function as a space of emplacement in which those who are displaced or exiled are able to find a community setting in which one belongs based on relative and cultural interests.⁶⁷ He further states that “one’s relation to “home” and “homeland” is based as much on actual material access as on the symbolic imaginings and national longings that produce and reproduce them.”⁶⁸ Anxieties, politics, associations, liberatory practices, and utopian ideals are also reproduced and

⁶⁴ Ibid, 16.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 23.

⁶⁶ Christina Fink, “Burma: Constructive Engagement in Cyberspace?” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1997). <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csq/article/burma-constructive-engagement-cyberspace>.

⁶⁷ Hamid Naficy, ed., *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 5.

reflected in the establishment of online communities and, as mentioned in the above section, are often subject to regulation by the state.⁶⁹

These ideas are also investigated in Landzelius's book *Native on the Net* with an emphasis on "ethnographic particularity" in which each culture's utilization and cognitive framing of the Internet must be approached and understood within that cultural context. In this way, minority and indigenous use and conceptualization of the Internet can differ from the majority demonstrating the diversity that exists within a globalized element such as the Internet.⁷⁰ Just as the Internet functions as a space of emplacement, so too, according to Landzelius, can it complicate the relationship with home and identity; both can now be represented and reproduced virtually, allowing users to transform cyberspace into their own image.⁷¹ Media communications scholar and sociologist Simon Cottle explains that the use of multiple forms of technology, including the Internet, "facilitate instantaneous flows of information and ideas as well as the ritual exchange of symbols and images, thereby serving to construct and affirm 'imagined' – and now increasingly 'virtual' communities."⁷² Such virtual communities were the subject of study in Hala Fattah's essay "Negotiating Nationhood on the Net," which demonstrates the re-ordering of cyberspace through the expression of indigenous Turcoman and Assyrian nationalism online to counteract a geophysical space of exclusion in Iraq.⁷³ In his essay "Discussion Lists and Public Policy on iGhana," John Philip Schaefer

⁶⁹ Ibid, 4.

⁷⁰ Kyra Landzelius, ed., *Native on the Net: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples in the Virtual Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 2. See also Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), 4.

⁷¹ Ibid, 3. See also Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

⁷² Simon Cottle, ed., *Ethnic Minorities and the Media: Changing Cultural Boundaries* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000), 3.

⁷³ Hala Fattah, "Negotiating Nationhood on the Net: The Case of the Turcomans and Assyrians of Iraq," in *Native on the Net: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples in the Virtual Age*, edited by Kyra Landzelius (New York: Routledge, 2006), 186-201. This concept is further elaborated in chapter two.

describes how nations can be represented virtually online and describes how the inclusion of the diaspora within these online nations expands the idea of nation beyond geophysical borders.⁷⁴

Diasporic Musics

The online expansion of the nation to include the people within politically demarcated borders and the diaspora overlaps with the “melodic boundary,” a term used by Maša Komavec, to describe how musics can extend well beyond geographical and political borders.⁷⁵ As people move, they take their culture and music with them, expanding this melodic boundary beyond the borders of a nation so that the melodic boundary encompasses both the homeland and its diaspora. The expansion of melodic boundary beyond physical borders demonstrates that nations are produced by ideas and the general conception of a person as belonging to a larger group. Diasporas are produced in the same way. According to political scientist William Safran, a diasporic community can be described as a community that maintains a sense of homeland with a cultural collective memory concerning origins and history of that home, demonstrates a desire to maintain culture and connectivity to their homeland, and form personal and cultural relationships with others connected to the homeland.⁷⁶ Milan Bufon’s description of territoriality in reference to nation and diaspora is also applicable:

Human territoriality is closely linked to man’s socialization within the framework of a specific social group. This is not merely an expression of the individual’s experience but rather of the assumed knowledge and customs which often appear in ‘mythological notions’ of a ‘sacred homeland’ and patriotism of the cult of ancestors and national history... Thus territoriality expresses the need for cultural control of the living space and

⁷⁴ John Schaefer, “Discussion Lists and Public Policy on iGhana: Chimps and Feral Activists,” in *Native on the Net*, Ibid, 202-219.

⁷⁵ Maša Komavec, “State Boundaries, Ethnic Boundaries and Musical Borders,” in *Manifold Identities: Studies on Music and Minorities*, edited by Ursula Hemetek, Gerde Lechleitner, Inna Naroditskaya, and Anna Czekanowska (London: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2004), 117.

⁷⁶ William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return.” *Diaspora* 1, no. 2 (1991): 83-84.

at the same time the need for its inclusion in political units, in other words for the political control of already formed social and cultural spaces.⁷⁷

A further distinction of diaspora from an immigrant community is the association with exile and persecution.⁷⁸

Deterritorialized Karen and the Chin fit the categorizations above as members of a diaspora. Both recognize and maintain ties to a homeland: Karen State and Chinland, they maintain personal and cultural relationships by forming communities around Chin and Karen culture in their host countries, they have and express a collective memory of persecution and desire for independent statehood, and they reterritorialize the spaces within the host country during important cultural festivals to express a sense of national identity. One of the ways this reterritorialization occurs is by establishing sonic boundaries that denote a space as essentially Karen or Chin through the performance of music and dance. Maša Komavec states that “folk [or traditional in this case] music today is still used as a kind of nation-building medium or as an aid to recognizing one’s own identity and to raising the self-confidence of a nation.”⁷⁹ Komavec continues by stating:

Music has several functions. It links people who belong to the same places, it gives a sense of homeliness, through song and music the group performs various rituals, music serves for communication both amongst themselves and outwards, towards the listeners. This particularly applies to groups performing “minority” music in a majority environment.⁸⁰

Thomas Turino and James Lea state that new experiences and locations alter the conception of layered meanings of culture.⁸¹ The movement of the Karen and Chin people outside of their

⁷⁷ Milan Bufon, “Naravne, kulturne in družbene meje,” *Annales* (1996), 182, quoted in Maša Komavec, *Ibid*, 119.

⁷⁸ Thomas Turino and James Lea, eds., *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities* (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2004), 6.

⁷⁹ Maša Komavec, *Ibid*, 118.

⁸⁰ Maša Komavec, *Ibid*, 121.

⁸¹ Thomas Turino and James Lea, *Ibid*, 13.

home states to diasporic communities has altered the function and meaning of musical performance. According to James Clifford:

Diaspora discourse articulates, or blends together, both roots *and* routes to construct what Gilroy describes as alternate public spheres (1987), forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference.⁸²

Karen New Year and Chin National Day are examples of alternate public spheres in which Karen and Chin roots are celebrated and adapted to fit local community needs and ideology, while maintaining solidarity and identification culturally, politically, and sonically with the Karen and Chin States who celebrate the same holidays around the same time of the year. Such performances of identity according to Martin Stokes, help organize collective memory and link these memories to a sense of place, which consists of both the present space and the relocated space (homeland).⁸³

Improvements in technology and increasing access to technological media such as the Internet and long distance calling have further affected the connectivity between diaspora and homeland. Roger Rouse explains that technology allows for the maintenance of and more active involvement in “spatially extended relationships” thus allowing for the formation of a sole community whose boundaries extend beyond the geophysical borders of the homeland.⁸⁴ Robin Cohen adds that:

In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together and re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through shared imagination...An

⁸² James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (August 1994): 308.

⁸³ Martin Stokes, ed., *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music* (Providence, Rhode Island: Berg, 1997), 3-5. Also cited in Dale Olsen, *The Chrysanthemum and the Song: Music, Memory, and Identity in the South American Japanese Diaspora* (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2004), 5.

⁸⁴ Roger Rouse, “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism,” *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 13-14.

identification with a diaspora serves to bridge the gap between the local and the global, even if the outcome is a cultural artefact rather than a political project.⁸⁵

This, according to Cohen, creates communities of interest, which includes music.⁸⁶

Methodology

The research for this project includes historical and ethnographic research regarding the music and cultures of Chin and Karen ethnic groups in Burma and in their diasporas. The field for this project is what Katherine Meizel describes as polylocal and multisite in structure.⁸⁷ The sites of study include virtual study on the Internet and the attendance of two live cultural events: Karen New Year in Fort Wayne, Indiana and Chin National Day in Indianapolis, Indiana. I conducted virtual fieldwork through Internet browsing, reading of online news and social media material, and through email. Finally, I conducted in-person and over-the-phone interviews with people I met at two live events. In-person interviews were conducted by introducing myself to people at the events as well as by attending local churches that have a large Burmese diaspora in Fort Wayne to meet people in the community. I made a point to introduce myself to the leader of both events, both of whom introduced me to other attendees. Email interviews were conducted with the news organization *Chin TV* since they were working during Chin National Day and unable to be interviewed at the time. Most interviews were conducted at the live events and a few people in the Karen community agreed to meet before and after Karen New Year for longer conversations in a quieter environment. After both events, I spent time on Facebook and

⁸⁵ Robin Cohen, "Diasporas and the Nation-State: From Victims to Challengers," *International Affairs* 72, no. 3 (July 1996): 516.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 517. Further readings in diaspora studies include Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford, ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990); "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, Anthony D. King, ed. (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1991); Vijay Mishra, "The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora," *Textual Practice* 10, no. 3 (1996): 421-447; William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 83-99.

⁸⁷ Katherine Meizel, *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2011), 11.

YouTube to determine what aspects of the events were being shared and discussed online and examined other Karen and Chin community posts outside of Indiana to determine whether there were any similarities to the material, images, and music being presented online.

Virtual Ethnography

In the book *Shadows in the Field*, edited by Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley, Timothy Rice explains that the field is a metaphor which can take on various forms and meanings.⁸⁸ One of these forms includes fieldwork in the virtual in which there is no tangible space or location to which one goes to study. This virtuality, as described by Katherine Meizel, Timothy Cooley, and Nasir Syed, can be defined as:

The technological mediation of human interaction (for example, a telephone conversation places another's voice and ear virtually in your hand, and an email exchange can be a slow-motion texted conversation), and also technologically communicated and constituted realities (the online video itself, the email message itself, the chat room, even the Internet itself, as well as not-so-new technological products such as a film as it is screened, a sound recording as it is auditioned, etc.).⁸⁹

According to sociologist Christine Hine, one of the pioneers in the study of virtual fieldwork and ethnography, virtual ethnography allows the researcher to develop “an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it.”⁹⁰ This includes the study of perception and conception of the Internet by its users, the way in which social structures are organized and reorganized in time and space, ideas of authenticity and performed experience, and the boundaries between the real and the virtual.⁹¹ According to Hine,

⁸⁸ Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley, eds., *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1996]), 90.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 90.

⁹⁰ Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), 8.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 8.

a proper approach to conducting fieldwork online consists of approaching the Internet both as culture and as a cultural artifact.⁹²

Research and communication in virtuality is often text-based and does not always involve face-to-face interaction. William Cheng explains that the virtual and the real are closely interconnected terms in that the virtual is often very similar to the real and the two regularly overlap.⁹³ According to Meizel, Cooley, and Syed, the cultural artifacts produced within the virtual are just as real as cultural artifacts produced in the geophysical.⁹⁴ Works such as Meizel's *Idolized*, and Halah Fattah's and John Schaefer's articles from *Native on the Net*, demonstrate how scholars are merging the virtual and the geophysical into multisite fieldwork structures.⁹⁵ In his book *Music and Technoculture*, René Lysloff states that he prefers to think of cyberspace in terms of a ghost town, which he calls "Softcity."⁹⁶ In this city we are able to perform almost all the functions we would in reality without needing to physically leave our houses or gather together to perform culture. Websites such as Amazon enable us to shop, while educational and cultural clubs and organizations post information about groups to encourage members both inside and outside of nations and societies to engage in the process of learning about one another. Social media sites such as forums, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube work as forms of social interaction and potential platforms for political, social, and cultural engagement on a global scale. Finally, news websites and watchdog organizations disseminate news as well as

⁹² Ibid, 9-10. Term applying the Internet as a cultural artefact from Steve Woolgar, "Technologies as Cultural Artefacts," in *Information and Communication Technologies: Visions and Realities*, edited by W. Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 87-102.

⁹³ William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.

⁹⁴ Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley, eds., Ibid, 92. Also cited in William Cheng, Ibid, 11.

⁹⁵ See Katherine Meizel, Ibid; and Kyra Landzelius, Ibid.

⁹⁶ René T.A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay Jr., eds. *Music and Technoculture* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 22-23.

propaganda reflecting the print nation in virtual form. These are just a few of the ways that the virtual can be a reflection of the geophysical in terms of culture, politics, and social interaction.

As with more traditional types of ethnographic fieldwork, virtual ethnographers seek to understand the experiences, behaviors, and cultural productions of certain groups of people in online and virtual spaces. Kiri Miller outlines some of the problems that virtual ethnographers face:

The ethnographic “field” for this kind of work is hard to locate or circumscribe. Its research sites include a preponderance of Internet-based communities, leading some to wonder whether digital ethnographers are interacting with flimsily constructed virtual personae rather than real people enmeshed in genuine social relationships.⁹⁷

Unlike face-to-face interaction, there is a certain amount of anonymity that occurs online making it difficult to know for sure who we are communicating with. Many scholars utilize both virtual and traditional fieldwork in their studies as a way to counteract some of the anonymity and demonstrate how the virtual intersects and overlaps the geophysical. In this thesis, I will be utilizing the same approach by looking at postings to social media and news sites by both identified and anonymous persons whose sites are associated with Chin and Karen culture as well as talking face-to-face with Karen and Chin at local events in Indiana about their uses of technology and media.

Limitations and Challenges

There are certain limitations to my project, which will need to be addressed in future study on such a topic. The major concern that affected my research was the written and spoken language barrier, especially on some of the news websites and blogs. Despite the complications caused by the multiple languages, I did my best to circumvent this issue by relying on what

⁹⁷ Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

members of the Karen and Chin communities told me about the sites they visit and how they conceptualize the function of the Internet as a mode of communication. I also made a point, even if I could not readily translate the material on various blog sites, of noting when the site was last updated, the amount of involvement from community members in the comments and discussion sections, and the type of material (news, media, music, other) being shared. It would be ideal to be completely fluent in Burmese, Pwo Karen, Sgaw Karen, and Chin dialects, or at least have a project partner who is, but due to the time constraints of this project, learning these languages was not feasible. This impacted my general approach to the topic, in accordance with the information I could attain from these sites, as I considered how best to represent and avoid misrepresentation of the topic.

Due to the historical events and politics that have affected the Karen and Chin experience, certain labels are considered more appropriate than others. I have been informed that due to Burmanization policies, as well as the fact that the Chin consider themselves to have historically been a sovereign nation, the Chin should not be lumped into the term “Burmese” when discussing the country as a whole. Articles in the *Chinland Guardian* have mentioned Chin who remain within the borders of Burma as “Burma Chin” or “remnant Chin.”⁹⁸ In order to respect that view, I will also be using those terms as well as referring directly to Chin State, though this can also be problematic as many Burma Chin also live outside of Chin State. Members of the Karen and Chin communities have also expressed that they do not like the term “ethnic minority” to be applied to them. This view was also made apparent to Ashley South who mentions that the ethnic groups prefer to refer to themselves in terms of nationality rather than

⁹⁸ See example Biak, “Coordination Between Diaspora and Remnant Chins towards Rebuilding Chinland,” *Chinland Guardian*, February 15, 2011, <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/commentary-opinion/item/321-coordination-between-diaspora-and-remnant-chins-towards-rebuilding-chinland>.

minority since minority potentially removes the factor of self-determination from the mindset of those who apply the term.⁹⁹ According to Karen journalist Violet Cho:

Identity is a key area of contestation in contemporary Burma. The term “Burmese” is ambiguous because it has two meanings. One usage refers to Burman people, who are the dominant ethnic group. The other usage denotes Burmese citizenship, which includes all ethnic groups in the country. In Burmese language, ‘Burman’ and ‘Burmese’ is the same word. National identity is therefore ethnicised because of the underlying ethnic meaning of the term. This in turn strengthens ethno-nationalism and separatism. Karen nationalism serves as a pertinent example.¹⁰⁰

Ardeth Thawngmung describes the formation of the ethno-nationalist movement and states that:

A pan-Karen identity was constructed by an amalgam of foreign missionaries, British colonial authorities, and an educated Karen Christian elite, who utilized existing communal sentiments about the differences between Karen and Burma; transmitted ideas about the uniqueness of Karen identity, culture, experience, and history; and provided legal justification for their separate, independent existence.¹⁰¹

Lian Sakhong uses the term “ethnic nationalism” in his works to describe the Chin people.

Sakhong references ethno-symbolic theory and quotes Anthony Smith, stating that the Chin actively maintain collective memories, solidarity, common culture, myths of descent, and a proper name.¹⁰²

Since politics and preferences of the Chin and Karen dictate a preference for nationality, I will be applying terms such as “national identity” or “ethno-nationalist identity” when discussing issues of identity and representation rather than terms such as “ethnic minority.” I will also use

⁹⁹ Ashley South, *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 218-219.

¹⁰⁰ Naw Violet Cho, “New Media and Burmese Diaspora Identities in New Zealand” (Bachelor’s thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2009), 17, http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/Dissertation-Violet_Cho-red.pdf.

¹⁰¹ Ardeth Thawngmung, *The Other Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), 58.

¹⁰² Lian Sakhong, *Ibid.*, 1. See also Smith Anthony, *Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 21-24.

words such as “indigenous” when I need to discuss differences between the Karen and the Chin peoples and the majority Burman population.

Finally, this thesis draws on my experiences attending two separate events in person. These comprised celebrations of Karen New Year on January 18, 2015 in Fort Wayne, Indiana and Chin National Day on February 21, 2015 in Indianapolis, Indiana. Though I talked to multiple people, future in-person investigations should be made as to how the Chin and Karen conceptualize their personal participation on the Internet within the context of posting online.

CHAPTER TWO: CHIN AND KAREN USE OF THE INTERNET

My initial examinations into activity on the Internet by Burmese citizens were based on events surrounding the Saffron Revolution and the activities of the Karen Women Organization, the development of virtual spaces of cyber-activism¹⁰³, and finally exile news media articles detailing the strong and involved link between the Chin and Karen diasporas and their home states.¹⁰⁴ This research left me with an assumption about what kinds of material I would find on the Internet concerning Karen and Chin cyber-communities. I had expected that after eighteen years of development, the starter sites mentioned by Fink would have multiple linked sites that included forums, blogs, and individual websites. These sites, I thought, would be similar to the iGhana media platform discussed by Philip Schaefer¹⁰⁵, in which members of the Chin and Karen diasporas would be openly discussing their involvement with Chin and Karen holidays such as Chin National Day and Karen New Year – and the musics – from home. What I found was very different. Virtual communities were still being created by the Chin and Karen, but the original media platforms I was investigating were not the virtual areas in which these communities were strongly engaging nor was the type of communication I was looking for how information was actually being transmitted. Instead of forums and politically active blogs, I found music videos and recordings of events posted to social media sites such as Facebook and

¹⁰³ Christina Fink, “Burma: Constructive Engagement in Cyberspace?” Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ See Eh Na, “Karen Communities in Australia Celebrate to Protect their Culture,” *Karen News*, August 20, 2012. <http://karennews.org/2012/08/karen-communities-in-australia-celebrate-to-protect-their-culture.html/>; Thawng Zel Thang, “Chin Communities Maintain Traditional Celebrations,” *Chinland Guardian*, October 22, 2012. [http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/news/item/1401-chin-communities-maintain-traditional-celebrations](http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/news/item/1401-chin-communities-maintain-traditional-celebrations;); Biak, “Coordination Between Diaspora and Remnant Chins towards Rebuilding Chinland,” *Chinland Guardian*, February 15, 2011. <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/commentary-opinion/item/321-coordination-between-diaspora-and-remnant-chins-towards-rebuilding-chinland>; Saw Kyaw Kwee, “Karen Artists Call for Diaspora to Keep Its Culture Alive,” *Karen News*, September 12, 2014, <http://karennews.org/2014/09/karen-artists-call-for-diaspora-to-keep-its-culture-alive.html/>.

¹⁰⁵ See Philip Schaefer, “Discussion Lists and Public Policy on iGhana: Chimps and Feral Activists,” in Kyra Landzelius, ed., Ibid, 202-220.

YouTube with little commentary. In this chapter, I discuss censorship on the Internet and examine how politics have affected Karen and Chin engagement online. I then discuss the interrelationships between exile news media and online social music communities and explain how uploading and viewing music functions as a form of communication that expresses Chin and Karen experiences and identity. By describing this online engagement I lay the groundwork for my analysis in the next chapter, in which I show how uploading live musical events creates virtual nations.

Burma and the Internet Post-2007

My preliminary investigations came up short as I searched for online blogs, forums, and music sites that served as a virtual meeting ground for people to discuss and dialogue, share cultural artifacts such as music online, and disseminate news. When I asked Karen people what sites they visited and whether any of those sites had social media connections, both Fred Gilbert, a retired social worker in Fort Wayne who is heavily involved in the Karen community, and Saw Jo Naing, the current chairman of the Karen community in Fort Wayne, mentioned the site *Kwe Ka Lu*, a news and multimedia website, and one of the only news websites written in the Karen language.¹⁰⁶ One of the page links for *Kwe Ka Lu* includes a list of social sites and blogs in Sgaw Karen, Pwo Karen, Burmese, and English related to Karen issues and culture. Almost all the sites, when I tried to visit them, were either permanently down or had not been updated for years. In my general searches for Karen and Chin social media, I continually found outdated sites, most of which had ceased posting between 2010 and 2012. Also, the few sites that were in operation had very few comments or digital interaction occurring among page viewers.

¹⁰⁶ Saw Jo Naing and Fred Gilbert, Interview. Karen New Year 2015, January 18, 2015. I was interviewing Jo Naing and Fred came over to introduce himself and joined the discussion.

One of these downed sites, called *Burma Online*, gave me a possible clue as to why a lot of online activity has seemed to cease. The website was up but contained no content except for a brief description of the organization's original project purpose and this announcement:

Burma Online was a non-profit capacity-building project founded in 2008, to give grassroots groups and people from Burma the opportunity to have an online presence without censorship or the need for registration. After three years, over two dozen independent sites were running, with news, articles and photos being posted daily to an audience of tens of thousands of regular visitors. **Unfortunately, on Monday 16th May 2011 the *Burma Online* server was destroyed by a deliberate DDOS attack.** For security reasons, it was not considered safe to begin operations again. This current site, which was developed very quickly and does not contain most of the original information, now exists purely as an archive (Emphasis by *Burma Online*).¹⁰⁷

Before the cyber-attack, *Burma Online* had about 46 project sites attached to it, which it stated were being independently run by individuals and groups on the Thai-Burma border as well as in the international Burmese community.¹⁰⁸ The groups were receiving roughly six million views per year, though it was not stated exactly what content existed on these sites before the attack or whether music or indigenous ethnic media was involved.¹⁰⁹

According to the website *Digital Attack Map*, which allows people to map and trace trends and foci of attacks against groups and nations, a DDoS attack, short for Distributed Denial of Service, is:

...an attempt to make an online service unavailable by overwhelming it with traffic from multiple sources. They target a wide variety of important resources, from banks to news websites, and present a major challenge to making sure people can publish and access important information. Specialized online marketplaces exist to buy and sell botnets or individual DDoS attacks...Using these underground markets, anyone can pay a nominal fee to silence websites they disagree with or disrupt an organization's online operations.

¹⁰⁷ "Burma Online Now Offline," *Burma Online: Capacity Building and Hosting for Grassroots Groups*, Social Media Forum, 2011. <https://burmaonline.wordpress.com/>.

¹⁰⁸ "About *Burma Online*," *Burma Online*, Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ It is important to note that the site began in 2008, which demonstrates what I stated earlier about non-governmental organizations and activist groups becoming more extensively involved in Burmese politics post 2007.

A week-long DDoS attack, capable of taking a small organization offline can cost as little as \$150.¹¹⁰

This takes us back to the events discussed earlier surrounding the uploading of images and video of the events surrounding the Saffron Revolution in 2007. After the Saffron Revolution, tighter media control was enacted throughout Burma. According to malware and cybercrimes specialist Jose Nazario in his report “Politically Motivated Denial of Service Attacks,” the dissident multimedia group *Democratic Voice of Burma* and related organizations came under a DDoS attack in 2008 in “an attempt to censor the sites and to thwart planned 8-8-2008 protests around the world.”¹¹¹ The censorship of online websites did not stop there. Prior to the 2010 elections in Burma, the country experienced one of the largest DDoS attacks recorded, which took the entire country of Burma/Myanmar offline. The attacks also targeted Internet media groups outside Burma’s borders such as independent news organizations *The Irrawaddy*, *Mizzima*, and *The Democratic Voice of Burma*.¹¹² *Reporters Without Borders* quoted *Media Frontiers* director Thomas Hughes on the need for action on the part of global civil society, stating, “It is important that the international community comes together, not only in condemning these attacks, but in actively seeking to provide any means necessary to keep these sites online and accessible.”¹¹³

Nart Villeneuve and Masashi Crete-Nishihata explain that after the events of the Saffron

¹¹⁰ “What is a DDOS Attack?” *Digital Attack Map: Top Daily DDOS Attacks Worldwide*, 2013. <http://www.digitalattackmap.com/understanding-ddos/>.

¹¹¹ Jose Nazario, “Politically Motivated Denial of Service Attacks,” in *Cryptology and Information Security Series Volume 3: The Virtual Battlefield: Perspectives on Cyber Warfare*, edited by Christian Czosseck and Kenneth Geers (Fairfax, Virginia: IOS Press, 2009), 168.

¹¹² “Burma’s Exile Media Hit by Cyber Attacks,” *CPJ: Committee to Protect Journalists*, September 27, 2010, <https://cpj.org/2010/09/burmas-exile-media-hit-by-cyber-attacks.php>. Accessed January 28, 2015.

¹¹³ “Stop Cyber Attacks Against Independent Burmese Media,” *Reporters without Borders for Freedom of Information*, October 5, 2010, <http://en.rsf.org/burma-nouvel-article-05-10-2010,38494.html>. Accessed January 28, 2015.

Revolution, DDoS attacks became a popular form of attack that reoccurred annually around the anniversary of the Saffron Revolution. They state:

...the regime had learned an important lesson: although Burma's technical filtering system was successful in censoring access to information coming into the country from opposition media Websites, it was unable to prevent information from flowing out of the country to the sites for global consumption.¹¹⁴

The series of DDoS attacks served as a way to prevent and discourage opposition and out-of-country and exile media sources from communicating information to the rest of the world and were often utilized to prevent sharing of information during sensitive moments in the country's history.¹¹⁵ Journalist Violet Cho explains that "media professionals are forbidden to operate independently in their respective organizations and many journalists are serving lengthy prison sentences because of writings that offended and challenged the existing political values, power and authority of the ruling class."¹¹⁶ The attacks have also not been limited to news organizations. In 2000, emails tainted with viruses were sent to known Burmese political activists.¹¹⁷ Such displays of power affect and reinforce the power dynamics already at play within the country of Burma and attempt to extend the act of silencing to the online citizenry and the diaspora.

Further investigations into the politics concerning the Internet in Southeast Asia led to my discovery of the work *Access Contested* by Diebert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, and Zittrain and their outline of the various stages of Internet censorship in Southeast. According to the authors, the time period in which personal websites and smaller civil society organizations began to be shut-down fall within their third stage of Internet censorship, which they call "Access

¹¹⁴ Ronald Diebert, Rafal Rohozinski, John Palfrey, and Jonathan Zittrain, eds., *Ibid*, 153.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 154.

¹¹⁶ Violet Cho, *Ibid*, 467.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 156.

Controlled,” which has roughly occurred between the years 2005-2010.¹¹⁸ This phase overlaps with their fourth phase, “Access Contested,” which has been occurring from 2010 to the present. In this phase outside communities such as Burmese diaspora groups and global civil society actively engage and fight for the return of more open forms of Internet access.¹¹⁹ For Burma, these two phases began overlapping following the events of the 2007 Saffron Revolution and, as evident by Thomas Hughes’ quote above, are still in the process of being actively contested.

The limited availability of active blogs and social forums outside of news outlets and human rights organizations that would engage in online community discussions, led me to begin searching for smaller and more separated groups of online activity among the Chin and Karen. I began looking for groups on Facebook and YouTube to determine if and how people were engaging in online communities.

Karen and Chin Use of the Internet

The most active sites that people use appear to be Facebook and YouTube. Karen and Chin music videos (both popular and traditional) garner thousands of views and hundreds of “likes” on both of these social media sites, though hardly anyone chooses to start a dialogue in the comment section. When people have left comments, they are usually extremely polite and very supportive of the artist, congratulating the group on their performance. Saw Jo Naing, explained that when he is using social media, he mostly just watches the videos, but he states that he also leaves comments of encouragement for young people to keep up their good work and encourage others to form a band.¹²⁰

I use sites such as YouTube on the Internet. On YouTube, I watch Klo and Kwe. They are professional musicians that sing about Karen culture, history, and how the people are

¹¹⁸ Ronald Diebert, Rafal Rohozinski, John Palfrey, and Jonathan Zittrain, eds., *Ibid*, 10-11.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 14-16.

¹²⁰ Saw Jo Naing, Follow Up Interview in Person, January 25, 2015.

suffering. I also view news sites such as VOA [Voice of America], RFA [Radio Free Asia], and BBC [Burmese Broadcast of BBC]. I also read *Karen News*. Every year we have a Karen New Year in Myanmar. They send to us how they celebrate the Karen New Year and they send news to them too, not only to Burma, but to all the world and show the Karen New Year... I stay in contact with people from home. We also plan to make a website for the Karen community in Fort Wayne... I like to listen to Iron Cross; they are a popular group and performed in Fort Wayne last year. I listen to them on YouTube and also on CD. YouTube is up-to-date, but CDs can be also. After I listen to Karen music, I feel very peaceful; we should always remember our Karen people and it's really harmonious to me.¹²¹

Many of the news and social sites that are currently active are in Karen written language such as *Kwe Ka Lu* (also spelled *Kwekalu*) as well as a few blogs written in Burmese that focus on Sgaw and Pwo Karen issues by copying articles and videos from various news organizations into their posts.¹²² *Kwe Ka Lu* also maintains an active Facebook page, posts its videos to YouTube, and has downloadable radio broadcasting talk available on SoundCloud. According to Violet Cho, *Kwe Ka Lu* was the first indigenous Karen exile media group, which began in 1994, and is currently based in Thailand where much of their news is received from KNU members.¹²³

Kwe Ka Lu's website states that:

Kwe Ka Lu (KKL) is the first ever Karen language newspaper designed to help give the Karen people of Burma an awareness of the situations that are affecting them, with the hope that they can use this information to develop strategies to rebuild their communities and regain the dignity and power which people everywhere deserve.¹²⁴

Kwe Ka Lu further state that their aims in creating their site were, “to produce news and information that is [*sic*] a tool for united empowerment among Karen people by increasing their awareness of local, regional and global issues and by encouraging them to express their views on issues affecting their lives.”¹²⁵ Violet Cho explains that the word “*kwekalu*” describes the sound

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Karen written languages were originally based on the Mon script.

¹²³ Violet Cho, Ibid, 467.

¹²⁴ Kwe Ka Lu, “Donation,” 2012. <http://kwekalu.net/donation.html>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

of the buffalo horn, a Sgaw Karen national instrument.¹²⁶ The horn, as explained to me by Saw Jo Naing, was sounded as a way to bring people together and announce important events.¹²⁷ Many of the websites and blogs listed by *Kwe Ka Lu*, however, are no longer active and while the site has over 2,000 likes on Facebook and their various YouTube postings have had as many as 46,000 views, people rarely comment or open dialogue about any of the issues discussed. The same is true for social media sites on Facebook designed for dialogue such as We Are Karen Official, I Love Karen, Chin National Front, Chin Human Rights, I Love Chinland, and Chin National Day. Each of these pages ranges from a couple hundred to a couple thousand followers and all of the postings receive an extensive number of likes, yet rarely anyone leaves comments, especially on the more politically oriented pages. The same applies to music videos on YouTube. It is obvious that people are connecting through the Internet due to the number of viewers, followers, and likes of pages on specific social media sites, but how are dialogues being communicated in the absence of the written word?

YouTube and Facebook

While the news and political sites provide articles and videos outlining the current news and politics in both Karen and Chin States as well as in their diasporas, other sites focus on music videos and the posting of photography. We Are Karen on Facebook mainly posts photography of Karen women and men in national Karen dress with uplifting sayings as well as Karen New Songs, which are pop-style love songs performed in one of the Karen languages. The pictures and the music posted to this site multiple times a day emphasize Karen identity or what Heather MacLachlan refers to as Karen-ness.¹²⁸ Multiple times, there have been news posts

¹²⁶ Violet Cho, *Ibid*, 467.

¹²⁷ Saw Jo Naing, Interview, Karen New Year Celebration in Fort Wayne, IN, January 18, 2015.

¹²⁸ Heather MacLachlan, "Singing, Dancing, and Identity in the Karen Diaspora," *Asian Music* 45, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2014): 58.

concerning events happening to indigenous ethnic groups, Karen State, or the refugee camps, such as the rape and murder of two Kachin teachers on January 19/20, 2015. While some people do comment and express outrage, the percentage is quite small compared to the number of views the post received. The first, and sometimes only, comment on all serious posts is a link to a YouTube music video titled, “All Our Struggles,” featuring an emotional pop song over video of a teacher and students in national dress hiding in the woods after gun shots sounded near their school. In this way, the act of posting and re-posting this particular video serves to speak and produce the commentary that is not being posted by individuals. The choice of sharing and posting a politically-oriented music video with a title that emphasizes hardship, is an indirect political statement that, when viewed, constitutes dialogue.

Other music videos posted by members of the Karen and Chin include videos of dance performances usually uploaded shortly after the celebration of national holidays such as Karen New Year and Chin National Day by both members of the diaspora and members of Chin and Karen States. According to Carol Vernallis, music videos comprise the bulk of YouTube’s most viewed content.¹²⁹ Since anyone with basic technology skills is capable of creating and uploading a music video to the Internet, Vernallis states that the definition of music video has been expanded beyond the music industry to encompass “a relation of sound and image that we recognize as such.”¹³⁰ Vernallis also states that:

...part of what separates YouTube from other media are the clips’ brevity and the way they’re often encountered through exchange with other people: a clip’s interest derives from its associations with colleagues, family, friends, and contexts within communities. Often a clip gets forwarded because there’s an intensity of affect that can’t be

¹²⁹ Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video and the New Digital Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

assimilated: humorous or biting, only forwarding it will diffuse its aggressiveness or power to hold us fast.¹³¹

Clips that are forwarded among the Chin and Karen Internet users are those related to news and ideas of Karen-ness and Chin-ness. Facebook functions as one of these forwarding mediums, allowing for further dissemination of cultural identity among Karen and Chin Internet users.

In his book *Watching YouTube*, Michael Strangelove describes YouTube as:

...an intense emotional experience. YouTube is a social space. This virtual community reflects the cultural politics of present times and is rife with both cooperation *and* conflict... YouTube is not merely a new window on the frontlines of regional and global conflicts. It has become a battlefield, a contested ground where amateur videographers try to influence how events are represented and interpreted.¹³²

The posting of video online by individuals deemed ordinary allows for the perception that YouTube is a site of authenticity.¹³³ Part of this online representation is the emphasis on identity. Representation of Karen-ness or Chin-ness online includes the wearing of identifiably Chin and Karen cultural clothing, speaking in indigenous language, and often includes the presentation of culturally recognizable imagery and symbols such as national icons and well-known landscapes. One music video uploaded by GarNay Music titled “Karen New Year Song” by Karen artists Ku Hser and Wah NayMoo is somewhat contrary to my general findings. The video has 191,621 views and contains 151 comments (though still small in proportion to number of views) in both Karen dialects and English. The comments are mostly positive but there are also a few critiques based on the clothing choices of the artists in the video. The two singers (one male, one female) wore black leather jackets and jeans while they performed a light pop song with heavy auto-tune.

Su: the song is so nice but , if the singers ware karen clothes , it will be perfect just suggestion

¹³¹ Ibid, 9.

¹³² Michael Strangelove, *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 4.

¹³³ Ibid, 65.

Karen: this song is very very awesome and significantly understandable. But to give a very satisfy and honest feedback, in the video they should wear KAREN shirt...and dress..

lay: u guy sing pretty good but without karen shirt look no good if u wear karen shirt will good then without karen shirt :D¹³⁴

The critiques above suggest that there is an expectation of how Karen people should present themselves and their Karen identity on the Internet, though the lack of commentary on most posts makes it difficult to determine how prevalent this expectation is. Many of the Karen New Songs and videos feature a mix of traditional Karen dress and Western clothing. Other Karen New Songs that feature only Western dress did not receive these types of critiques, but they also had very few comments to begin with. “Karen song – ma gay ta eh” uploaded by Kwe Baw, has received 1,605,273 views and includes video of a live performance with red stage lighting using electric piano, amplified guitar, bass guitar, drum set, and male and female vocalists. Though the performers were not wearing Karen traditional clothing, the 263 comments were mostly positive (with the exception of a few chastising a commenter for confusing Korean and Karen language) and related to how great it was that the song had received so many views. No one commented on the clothing choices of the performers at all.

Real Karen: Top Hit Karen Song in YouTube History.

Pae: Im glad that karen song is on youtube.. Im proud to be karen.. i live in Thailand but studying in Sweden now..¹³⁵

“Chin Hills Myanmar,” posted by tootoolay on March 4, 2009, features a soft pop song with synthesized accompaniment by singer San Pi while scenic images of Chinland appear on the screen. Since its posting, “Chin Hills Myanmar” has been viewed 37,121 times and has received

¹³⁴ GarNayMusic, “Karen New Year Song – Ku Hser and Wah NayMoo,” *YouTube*, January 3, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qquAxSKOZ_Q. Commenters’ names, though publicly listed, have been altered in consideration of privacy.

¹³⁵ Kwe Baw, “karen song – ma gay ta eh,” *YouTube*, August 30, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8Xpzmxi66I>. Commenters’ names, though publicly listed, have been altered in consideration of privacy.

22 comments, all of which, except for one, are in English. All of the English comments focus on the beauty of Chinland and how hearing the music and seeing the photos makes individual commenters homesick:

Liang: o how beauty is our Hills an incredible charms and scenic beauty capture my mind i love you Chin Hills let a new day dawn in Chin Hills.

Maung: I've never been to Chin state ...I listened that song ..i miss my native land very very good..

Tha: I always miss my country.I love all the lands that include in my myanmar. I promise I will be back.¹³⁶

The statements above demonstrate how the music combined with photos of Chin Hills creates a sense of nostalgia for both people who originated from Chinland, such as Tha, and people like Maung who were born outside of Chin State. Viewing images of Chin State as well as listening to specifically Chin music helps to reterritorialize the virtual space in which the video and comments are located as well as momentarily reterritorialized the geophysical, auditory space of the listener at the computer as being distinctly Chin. Not only do these online videos help create collective memory organized around a sense of place (*Chinram*), but according to Martin Stokes, that sense of place consists of both the present space in which the videos are being watched and heard as well as the homeland that the videos represent.¹³⁷ This virtual connection that links the geophysical spaces of the Chin diaspora and Chin State (as well as the “imagined” Chin State) is an example of what Roger Rouse terms “spatially extended relationships.”¹³⁸

¹³⁶ tootoolay, “Chin Hills Myanmar,” *YouTube*, March 4, 2009.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7t_dbingAXA. Commenters’ names, though publicly listed, have been altered in consideration of privacy.

¹³⁷ Martin Stokes, *Ibid*, 3-5.

¹³⁸ Roger Rouse, *Ibid*, 13-14.

Chin TV

An example of a spatially extended relationship in which the Internet serves as a virtual point of connection between multiple diasporic communities and their homeland is Chin TV, located in Indianapolis, Indiana. This news group is based solely online and has thousands of followers. Reporter Lian Ceu explained to me that the news posted to YouTube was not meant for just the Indianapolis Chin community, but also for Chins everywhere around the world. He explained to me that YouTube is currently a very popular site among the Chin because it is accessible and easy to use, plus it provides more perspectives than just the Chin. “We don’t just watch our videos,” he explained, “We live in America too. Sometimes we have to balance.”¹³⁹ Lian mentioned that he noticed that many community members do not comment online. “We are afraid that we might say something offensive, especially to the poster or the artist. Many Chin are not yet accustomed to computer technology and might not post because they are not used to doing so.”¹⁴⁰ This brings us back to two issues: the lack of technological access and self-censorship. Chin and Karen within the diaspora may be gaining more access to technology than they previously had in Burma or within the refugee camps on the borders of neighboring countries and, therefore, the production of an online state or community involving dialogue among members of these groups could occur in the future as technology becomes more prevalent and citizens gain increased access and technical knowledge. The lack of commentary could also be due to the ingrained culture of silence that existed within Burma, especially between the years of 1962 and 2011.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Lian Ceu, Interview, Chin National Day. Indianapolis, IN. February 21, 2015.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ For further studies on Burmese dictatorship, see Monique Skidmore, *Karaoke Fascism: Burma and the Politics of Fear* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) and Aung Zaw, “Burma: Music Under Siege,” in *Shoot the Singer: Music Censorship Today*, Edited by Marie Korpe, 39-61 (London and New York: Zed Books, 2004).

Public and Hidden Transcripts

In his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott discusses public versus hidden transcripts. Scott conceptualizes the public transcript as a dominating narrative comprising of any action, symbol, or dialogue that reinforces the dominant power hierarchy.¹⁴² The public transcript also serves to deny the subordinate or marginalized voices within society.¹⁴³ Scott defines the hidden transcript as an informal conversation among subordinate groups that can serve to critique the public transcript and the ruling power.¹⁴⁴ Hidden transcripts are made up of actions, speech, and practices that according to Scott “confirm, contradict, or inflect upon what appears in the public transcript.”¹⁴⁵ Examples of hidden transcripts can be observed in the actions, music, and speech of groups such as Generation Wave and Myanmar Future Generations as well as in the videos uploaded to YouTube, and the commentary and reports made by dissident media and the Karen Women’s Organization.

Scott makes a point to remind us that a hidden transcript is not a definitive representation of the truth.¹⁴⁶ Instead, Scott suggests that we should examine the “discrepancy *between* the hidden transcript and the public transcript [so that] we may begin to judge the impact of domination on public discourse.”¹⁴⁷ Jose Nazario notes that he has seen an increasingly political use of DDoS and similar cyber-attacks used as a tool to silence sites of opposition.¹⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Diebert, et al describe ways in which in-state laws and regulations of cyberspace affect individuals on a daily basis, stating that citizens of Burma must verify their identity and

¹⁴² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 45.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 45-46.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, xii.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 4-5.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Jose Nazario, Ibid, 172.

submit to logging requirements and surveillance in order to access the Internet at Internet cafés.¹⁴⁹ Most citizens, as well as many members of the diaspora, do not possess the computer skills necessary to safely get around government blocks, leading to self-censorship as a way of avoiding trouble with the government.¹⁵⁰ In her book, *Burma's Pop Music Industry*, ethnomusicologist Heather MacLachlan describes how ingrained self-censorship has become in many parts of Burmese society, especially in the music industry. She states that “censorship occurs at the level of the individual”¹⁵¹ while explaining that:

This hidden transcript [of Burmese citizens] is indeed an offstage narrative, and many Burmese people, while acceding to it, deeply fear it being spoken aloud. Like other visitors to Burma, I have participated in numerous conversations in which my Burmese interlocutor has resorted to whispering words like “democracy,” “refugees,” “Aung San Suu Kyi” and “KNU.”¹⁵²

The question then becomes how are the transcripts of the Karen and Chin being addressed online? According to Cho, “simply reading news in a Karen language is a political act of resistance against threats to the language both in Burma and in the diaspora.”¹⁵³ Reading news sources about the issues concerning the Karen and Chin back home can help create and “maintain a sense of persecution and strengthen feelings of solidarity with those back home” while the “recognition of suffering is like a political act in itself and the desire to garner sympathy is one part of local diaspora activism.”¹⁵⁴ Cho also explains that English media forms such as *Karen News* and *The Irrawaddy* are also important strategic tools to garner sympathy and

¹⁴⁹ Ronald Diebert, Rafal Rohozinski, John Palfrey, and Jonathan Zittrain, eds., *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁵⁰ See Aung Zaw 2004; Heather MacLachlan 2011; Ronald Diebert, Rafal Rohozinski, John Palfrey, and Jonathan Zittrain, 2012.

¹⁵¹ Heather MacLachlan, *Burma's Pop Music Industry: Creators, Distributors, Censors* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 142.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 146.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 200.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 201-204.

action from international audiences.¹⁵⁵ Politically related transcripts in music videos in indigenous Karen languages have also been posted to YouTube. Most of these videos, such as “karen nice song thu poe lun moo dah pon KNU,” which has 23,712 views, have no commentary attached to them by individual commenters even though they have thousands of views. The upbeat song includes male vocals and backup singers, an almost Latin-sounding rhythmic accompaniment on drum set, bongos, and bass; electric piano set to resemble a saxophone section, and electric guitar. The upbeat music is juxtaposed with footage of the KNU with rifles running drills and going on patrol.¹⁵⁶ Another example, “Karen Hip Hop Song – We are Karen,” posted by Karen New Life begins with a quote of the buffalo horn call used in the introduction to *Kwe Ka Lu* online video broadcasts along with a picture of Ba U Gyi, “father of the Karen Resistance,” a large “I Love Karen” logo, and a list of the KNU’s four main principles which are 1) “Surrender is out of the question,” 2) “We shall retain our arms,” 3) “Recognition of the Karen State must be complete,” and 4) “We shall decide our own political destiny.”¹⁵⁷ The tune includes background chords with male singer RK using heavy auto-tune while artists MK and Star King rap in the background in Karen. The footage used in the video includes photos of life in Karen State intertwined with video of *Rambo IV* in which Rambo fights Tatmadaw soldiers (Burmese armed forces) on the Thai-Burmese border. Halfway through the video, parts of the rap switch to snippets of English in between Karen lyrics and represent a personal story of persecution of the Karen people and personal anger for non-Karen speakers to understand. Lines include “On a day in 1995, when I was born,” “our people are all dying,” “our land destroyed,”

¹⁵⁵ Violet Cho, “Rearranging Beads on a Necklace: Reflections on Burmese and Karen Media in Exile,” *Ibid*, 468.

¹⁵⁶ Poe Si, “karen nice song thu poe lun moo dah pon KNU,” *YouTube*, May 22, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpQfHqpVSWM>.

¹⁵⁷ Karen New Life, “Karen Hip Hop Song – I Love Karen – By – RK, MK, and Star King 2014,” *YouTube*, August 9, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGsWSDFf1N8>.

“I will never forget ‘til the day I die,” “everywhere we go...represent Karen boy...I’m a Karen,” “man, if you don’t like us, f(censored) you, haters!”¹⁵⁸ Similar to reading news from sources back home, politically-minded music videos that highlight historical and current conflict occurring in Karen State can help members in the diaspora maintain a sense of persecution and solidarity with those still living in Karen State. Similar to the music videos of the Saffron Revolution uploaded to the Internet, many videos containing political footage are accompanied by a variety of different music styles including pop, soft and hard rock, metal, and hip hop, which are not only all very popular genres performed by Karen youth (all these genres were represented at Karen New Year in Fort Wayne 2015), but could also be utilized for garnering sympathy from Western audiences who also listen to and enjoy those musical genres.

Meanwhile, indigenous language media is also useful for connecting to people within Burma.¹⁵⁹ When used together, exile media works to reduce fragmentation among indigenous factions and reinforce a sense of unity.¹⁶⁰ Another potential for combined media, not mentioned by Cho, is the potential for organized unity or solidarity among ethnic groups since many of the larger organizations such as *The Irrawaddy*, *Mizzima*, and *Democratic Voice of Burma* produce articles relating to multiple ethnic groups including the Chin and the Karen. Both Karen and Chin posts on social media share these news stories, which are also picked up by ethnic specific

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. The profanity was censored by the group in their own song and all that could be heard was the “f” sound at the beginning.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 468.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 468. See Biak, “Coordination Between Diaspora and Remnant Chins towards Rebuilding Chinland,” *Chinland Guardian*, February 15, 2011. <http://chinlandguardian.com/index.php/commentary-opinion/item/321-coordination-between-diaspora-and-remnant-chins-towards-rebuilding-chinland>; “Chin National Day: Interview with Salai Kipp Kho Lian,” *Chinland Guardian*, February 18, 2010. <http://chinlandguardian.com/index.php/component/k2/item/543-chin-national-day-interview-with-salai-kipp-kho-lian>; “Chin National Day: Interview with Pu Lian Uk,” *Chinland Guardian*, February 19, 2010. <http://chinlandguardian.com/index.php/component/k2/item/545-chin-national-day-interview-with-pu-lian-uk>; See also “Burma’s Exiled Media Calls for a United Front,” *The Irrawaddy*, March 20, 2012. http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=23244.

news organizations including *Chinland Guardian* and *Karen News*, when they relate to shared conditions of oppression among the various ethnic groups. This larger idea of unity and solidarity was also expressed by members of the Fort Wayne Karen diaspora community who stated that many of them also attend Mon National Day, Burmese New Year celebrations, and other non-Karen festivals as an expression of solidarity with the larger community.¹⁶¹

Karen Story, an active online blog, focuses on collecting and sharing media including news, non-professional articles, YouTube videos, and music related to politics, family, Karen fashion, health, and more. The online postings have the option for commentary but very few blogs include discussion. Many of the blogposts are actively picked up by Karen Facebook groups in order to be shared and liked. News and human rights organizations run by Karen and Chin also post their videos to Facebook and YouTube, which are further picked up and shared by members of the Chin and Karen communities. These visible actions further support the idea that the act of posting, viewing, and personally interpreting online content are forms of online identity, cultural and political representation of the Chin and Karen people, an act of virtual activism, and a movement of the private transcripts of the Chin and Karen ethnic groups in Burma to a more public space online. The acts also express and share the multiple lived experiences of the Karen and Chin people.

Sharing of Lived Experience

The act of posting, sharing, writing and reading news, commenting (when it occurs), and culturally representing Karen and Chin identity on the Internet serves not only as a presentation of the Chin and Karen transcripts but also as an expression and sharing of the Karen and Chin

¹⁶¹ Lydia Win, Phone Interview, Fort Wayne, IN, January 16, 2015; Saw Jo Naing, Interview, Karen New Year Celebration in Fort Wayne, IN, January 18, 2015.

lived experience from the perspective of those living in Chinland and Karen State, in the many refugee camps in neighboring countries, and in the many diasporic communities around the world. Ethnomusicologist Adriana Helbig examines this concept through her online studies of Ukraine's EuroMaiden protests and explains that the Internet's *live-ness* is determined in the moments of clicking and re-clicking in both real and delayed time, which transfers and creates lived experiences in the world within the confines of one's home.¹⁶²

Michael Strangelove describes YouTube as a social space in which the virtual reflects contemporary times in geophysical space.¹⁶³ This idea is in line with the spatial models created by Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre and political geographer Edward Soja to describe how the social or lived experience is informed by history, perception, and conception. Lefebvre's

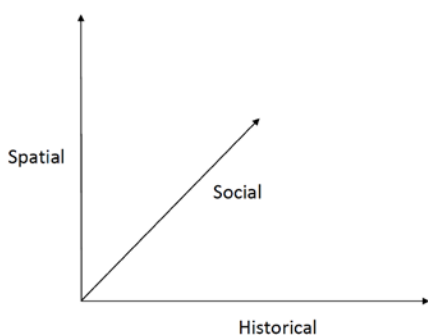


Figure 3: Lefebvre's Trialectic Model of Space. Idea from Edward Soja's *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, p. 3. Illustration conceived by author.

model includes three planes labelled the "spatial" or geophysical place; the "social," which describes societal experience and imagination; and the "historical" in which meaning can change based on the point in time of occurrence or by a society's conception of that history.¹⁶⁴ According to

Lefebvre, the interdependence and intersection of these three variables defines our understanding of space through our physical perception and our cultural and historical conception at a particular moment in time. Edward Soja expanded upon

¹⁶² Adriana Helbig, "Cyber-Mobilization, Informational Intimacy, and Musical Frames in Ukraine's EuroMaiden Protests," *Sound Networks: Socio-Political Identity, Engagement, and Mobilization through Music in Cyberspace and Independent Media*, Society For Ethnomusicology Annual Conference Pittsburgh 2014, unpublished paper.

¹⁶³ Michael Strangelove, *Ibid*, 4.

¹⁶⁴ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 3.

Lefebvre's trialectic model by redefining the planes into what he coined Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace. Firstspace functions as an expanded version of Lefebvre's spatial plane, including not only geophysical place, but all that we deem to be concrete, real, conscious, as well as the material aspects of society.¹⁶⁵ Firstspace incorporates our physical senses and our conscious perceptions of the realities in which we engage. Secondspace occurs when we begin to conceive ideas and interpret what we perceive in Firstspace.¹⁶⁶ The intersection of these two spaces is where the real and imaginary come together to form and make sense of signs. Finally, Thirdspace is the lived experience of a person and society in which perception and conception intersect with culture.¹⁶⁷ In summary, the spatial/Firstspace plane consists of the individual locations of Karen and Chin engaging in Internet activities, the content they post and view online (news, Facebook, YouTube videos, etc.), and their daily experiences as people who identify as Chin and Karen both on- and offline. The historical/Secondspace plane includes their conception of Karen and Chin histories, their recognition and understanding of national symbols, as well as their interpretation of news articles, media, and life events related to Chin and Karen culture both within their diasporic communities and in Karen and Chin States. The social/Thirdspace plane exists at the intersection of these first two planes,

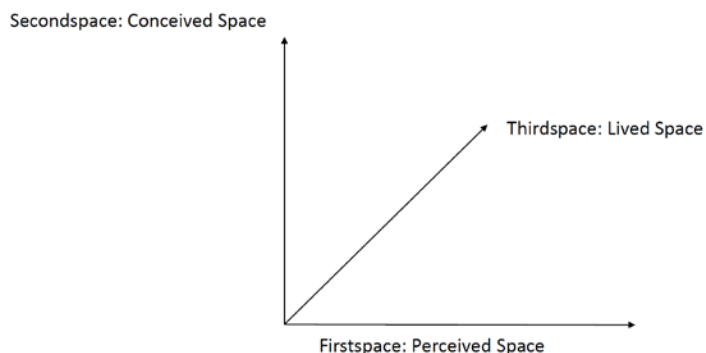


Figure 4: Edward Soja's Trialectic Model of Space. Ideas from Edward Soja's *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, p. 3-10. Illustration conceived by author.

in which perception and conception merge to inform the cultural and lived experience of an

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 10.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 10.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 67.

individual. When uploaded to the Internet, lived experience can further function as a form of communication. This point addresses one final spatial model addressed by musicologist Guerino Mazzola called “Cube of Local Topography” or the “Cube of Musical Ontology.”¹⁶⁸ This cube was designed to assist with the conception of how musicologists interpret musical semiotics in a historical context, but it works well with Lefebvre’s and Soja’s models as a way of defining how lived experience is being transferred and shared online. Mazzola’s model consists of three planes further subdivided into three categories. The “Reality” and “Semiosis” planes are reworded descriptions of the first two planes on Lefebvre’s and Soja’s models. It is his addition of “Communication” to the lived space plane that is of interest here. While Mazzola defines communication in terms of the musical, which is still very applicable for the music videos discussed earlier, it can also be expanded to “poster,” “post,” and “viewer,” in order to accommodate the non-musical aspects of Chin and Karen cultural and political artifacts on the

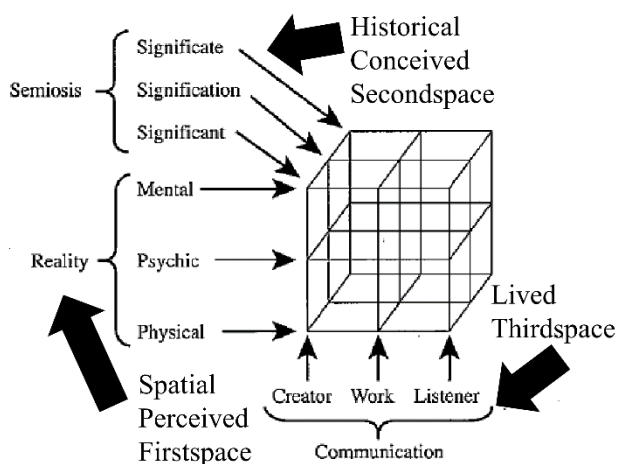


Figure 5: Guerino Mazzola’s Cube of Musical Ontology. Mazzola’s cube is overlapped with Edward Soja’s and Henri Lefebvre’s models of space. Found in *Topos of Music: Geometric Logic of Concepts, Theory and Performance*, p. 20. Overlap additions by author.

Internet. In this way, Karen and Chin are sharing their representations of Karen-ness and Chin-ness online for other members of these ethnic groups to see and interpret (both within the multiple diasporic communities and in Chinland and Karen State). The communication of multiple lived experiences of Chin-ness and Karen-ness online, not only contributes to the

¹⁶⁸ Guerino Mazzola, Stefan Göller, and Stefan Müller, *The Topos of Music: Geometric Logic of Concepts, Theory, and Performance* (Boston: Birkhauser Verlag, 2002), 19.

social space of media sites such as YouTube, but contributes to a larger construction of what it means to be Karen and Chin. Robin Cohen uses the term “shared imagination,” to describe how the constant connectivity of cyberspace can serve as the connecting point (the communicatory line) connecting members of an ethnic group across the globe¹⁶⁹ and allows for maintenance of culture, as well as form and maintain personal and cultural connections to homeland.¹⁷⁰

Online exiled media organizations such as the *Karen News* and *Chin TV*, as well as Chin and Karen related Facebook communities, music compositions on SoundCloud, traditional recipes online, and music and non-music videos of Karen and Chin culture on YouTube all constitute ways in which the Internet helps diasporic communities reterritorialize the space around them such that one’s physical presence within a demarcated border or territory is no longer necessary when identifying with or belonging to a group, culture, state, or nation.¹⁷¹ This constant connection also allows for what Kyra Landzelius refers to as “a sustainable identity-construction” in which technology reduces the perceived distance between a person’s current location and his place of origin.¹⁷² The ability to stay informed on current events, download cultural artifacts or instructions on how to recreate them, and the ability to transform any space sonically by reproducing non-local soundscapes both breaks down borders and momentarily redefines them within the virtual imagination of the cultural participant. This transfer also demonstrates how the perceived and the physical inform the virtual and the cognitive, which thus influence and re-imagine the perception and meaning of the geophysical.

¹⁶⁹ Robin Cohen, *Ibid*, 516.

¹⁷⁰ William Safran, *Ibid*, 83-84.

¹⁷¹ David Holmes, ed., *Virtual Globalization: Virtual Spaces/Tourist Spaces* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 8.

¹⁷² Kyra Landzelius, *Ibid*, 20.

Chapter 2 Conclusions

My investigations of the Internet reflect a complicated view of its function within the Chin and Karen States as well as in the diaspora. It is clear that Chin and Karen are utilizing the Internet as a way to disseminate information and stay connected to other diasporic groups as well as the home state online. Online news organizations that focus on indigenous ethnic news assist in the maintenance of national identity by expanding the physical borders of Chin and Karen States to incorporate the diasporic communities. There is contestation, however, as to the reach and effectiveness of some forms of dialogue and whether the intent to globally connect with the other Chin and Karen communities in Burma as well as around the world is actually reaching all communities. Limited accessibility of the Internet and strict controls prevent many people within Burma from maintaining a constant access to the online communities and continued fighting along the borders of indigenous ethnic states and limited resources in neighboring refugee camps also hinder widespread access to such technologies. Though conditions have been recently changing in Burma since the move toward a civilian-led parliament in 2011, many issues concerning minority rights, security, and free press are still prevalent and highly concerning.

Also noted in this chapter was the extent to which outside websites can be and are affected by the online politics occurring within Burma and Southeast Asia in general. Sites such as *Democratic Voice of Burma*, *Mizzima*, and *The Irrawaddy* have the resources, expertise, and funding to recover from cyber-attacks launched against their respective organizations. This is not necessarily so for the everyday citizen in any country. It is quite possible that the decrease in amount of active websites by individuals is directly correlated to the continuous attacks and a long term atmosphere of censorship that has existed within the country of Burma. With that in mind, social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook are large enough to also be relatively

resilient to such attacks and are also quite user friendly. This creates a good platform for expression by individuals that differ from the lack of security represented by individual blogs, forums, and individual sites.

Facebook and YouTube are also good platforms for the dissemination and sharing of music/sound related media, including music videos, and are ideal for the transfer of lived experience in near-real time from one point of the globe to another. Unlike cyber nations such as John Philip Schaefer's study on iGhana¹⁷³, media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube are not limited to the virtual representation of a single nation and its diasporic community. Rather, one must view the multiple Karen and Chin websites (exile news and social media) as an expansion of the Karen and Chin nation to an online space. As Middle Eastern studies scholar and Iraqi historian Hala Fattah outlines in her article "Negotiating Nationhood on the Net:"

At once virtual meeting place, ethnicity index, cultural club and political barometer, the internet brings diasporic communities together and shakes them up into a heady mixture. What emerges is a field of dreams that achieves its greatest actualization on the world wide web. By allowing the convergence of dozens of sites...to project the histories of indigenous peoples, and their collective visions of the future, the internet makes possible the renegotiation of identities and nationalities that had long been relegated to the backwater of exile.¹⁷⁴

Though the various Chin and Karen sites may not be directly interacting (although they most likely share similar viewers/visitors), each site or social media post serves as part of a collective whole of Karen and Chin self-representation, identity, culture, and history. Grace Wang, however, notes that while YouTube is not limited to the representation of a single group or

¹⁷³ See Kyra Landzelius, ed., *Ibid*, 202-220.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 199.

nation, the emphasis placed on its power of connectivity allows its users to envision a space in which a single community can be located and imagined as connected.¹⁷⁵

Since direct dialogue among members is minimal or absent in many of these online representations, we should instead view the *act* of posting music, video, and photography (the main elements of the visual and auditory that can be transferred online) as the dialogue itself.

According to Walid El Khachab in his article “Arab Video Music:”

Arab video music has also contributed to the emergence of an Arab ethnoscape (Appadurai 1996), a virtual space where Arab ethnicity is produced, without leaning on geographic ties to the actual Arab world, and relying solely on cultural signs identified as part of an Arab cultural code, for example, belly dancing, the use of certain instruments such as *‘ud* (Arab lute), and distinctive dress, such as the men’s *dishdasha* (robe).¹⁷⁶

This compares to the theories of spatiality mentioned above since the material aspects of society such as clothing and cultural dances are being interpreted as part of a larger cultural code. This intersection of the material and interpretation is where the Arab lived experience is being expressed in virtual space. In a similar way, the Karen and Chin are also using specific material markers in Soja’s Firstspace such as clothing and Karen language (and dances) and uploading them to the Internet to be interpreted by other Karen and Chin in order to communicate the Karen and Chin lived experience and create a larger sense of Karen- and Chin-ness. The act of posting photographic images of Chin and Karen people in national dress; the posting of music videos portraying Chin and Karen peoples, musics, and culturally identifiable symbols including well-known landscapes, and production of online news media all contribute to what Khachab terms the “shattered experience” of Karen and Chin identity in a “cluster of imagined (virtual)

¹⁷⁵ Grace Wang, *Soundtracks of Asian America: Navigating Race through Musical Performance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 121.

¹⁷⁶ Walid El Khachab, “Arab Video Music: Imagined Territories and the Liberation of Desire (or: Sex Lies in Video (Clip)),” in *Music and Media in the Arab World*, edited by Michael Frishkopf (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 267.

territories.”¹⁷⁷ The act of viewing and sharing posts, as well as reading and disseminating news in both indigenous languages and English, also assist in the maintenance of identity, reinforce solidarity among members of Chin and Karen communities world-wide, and express the Karen and Chin voice to outsiders who could act as cultural and political allies. Since music as dialogue expresses the transcripts of the Chin and Karen experience, the act of liking, posting, and sharing music media is inherently political. Finally, the participation in posting and viewing Karen and Chin related content online functions as a form of communication of Chin and Karen transcripts among and between members of the diaspora and the homeland as well as serves to create a larger shared imagination of what it is to be Karen and Chin in a larger community through the sharing of multiple lived experiences from various Chin and Karen perspectives. It is with these ideas in mind that I attended two national events, Karen New Year and Chin National Day, in order to determine whether these national days, celebrated around the world, were indeed being shared online and what the Chin and Karen perspectives were about the act of posting music from these events and the intended audience of their online posts.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 267.

CHAPTER THREE: KAREN AND CHIN COMMUNITIES IN INDIANA

Two events celebrated annually in Chin and Karen communities include Karen New Year and Chin National Day. I had the opportunity to attend each of these events hosted by the Chin and Karen communities in Indianapolis and Fort Wayne, Indiana respectively. These local diasporic celebrations of identity demonstrated themes of unity, ethno-nationalist pride, and the politics of solidarity. Throughout the day, music and culture were celebrated and recorded. These local, lived experiences of the Indiana Karen and Chin communities were later uploaded to YouTube, mostly in the form of music-related video recordings of national dances as well as folk, pop, rock, and hip hop songs. These videos not only reflected the music performed in local contexts, but also the many themes that were prevalent throughout both events. In this chapter, I expand upon my findings in Chapter 2 to demonstrate how musical lived experience is not only reflecting ethno-nationalist identity and politics, but also how it is being reinterpreted by other Karen and Chin communities in order to form an imagined online nation that encompasses both the diaspora and the homeland.

Karen New Year: A Case Study

The parking lot of South Side High School in downtown Fort Wayne was filled with cars. I had arrived a little late from the Baptist Church down the street, which was still holding both Burmese and Karen church services. Even as I was trying to find parking, I was aware that I was in the correct place; there were no signs or advertisements for the event but I could see people bustling toward the auditorium from their cars, one of which advertised a colorful decal in the rear window proclaiming Karen heritage and addressing the political situation that affects many Karen within the diaspora. The image on the car displayed the rising sun from the Karen State flag as well as the frog drum: both symbols of Karen nationalism.

The entrance to the auditorium was a long hallway filled with people. There was an ITT Technical Institute stand off to the left handing out information to young Karen to encourage continuing education after high school. On



Figure 6: Photo of a Karen National Car Decal. Car in South Side High School parking lot during Karen New Year Celebration. Photo by Karen Wijesekera, January 18, 2015.

the right side of the hall were long tables piled high with brightly colored, traditional Karen clothing, bags, flags, and calendars for the New Year. After the clothing stands, was a table that displayed the Karen flag and on top of it, a carved buffalo horn for people to examine closely, touch, and play. The smell of home-cooked food wafted from just up the stairs where people went to get soft drinks and eat traditional Karen cuisines.

Though the celebration began at noon, the events in the auditorium were just getting started at 2:00 p.m. Most people had come to eat or were trickling in from their various church services. People were dressed in a mixture of American fashion and traditional Karen clothing; almost everyone had at least one item that identified them as being a participant in Karen culture. The auditorium was large, with an upper and lower level, dimly lit, and packed full of people. People greeted, talked, and laughed, while children ran through the aisles. The middle walkway between the upper and lower levels included a row of camera men and women with video and sound equipment aimed at the stage.

The stage contained microphone stands, a podium, and a large banner displaying the Karen New Year date of 2754 and the location in which it was being celebrated. On the left side



Figure 7: Photo of Karen New Year Auditorium Stage. Saw Jo Naing addresses attendees at Karen New Year in Sgaw Karen during one of the opening speeches. The American flag can be seen on the right and underneath it are two drums, a bass drum and the taller, thinner *ozi* drum. On the other side of the banner hangs the Karen flag, which can also be seen attached to the speaker's podium as well as waving in the center of the main banner. The center of the banner shows the head of the frog drum and the tips of two buffalo horns. Photo by author.

of the banner hung the Karen national flag, and on right side hung the American flag. Below the American flag was a bass drum (representing a frog drum), which would later be used in some of the music and dance performances.

New Year: Unity in Diversity

Karen New Year is a celebration that occurs each year both in Karen State and throughout the diaspora in the months of December and January. The date of the celebration is locally determined within each Karen community; not having a set date allows for members of other Karen communities to attend multiple events as both participants and spectators. The Fort Wayne celebration began at noon when people gathered to socialize and eat together before the music and dance exhibitions in the auditorium. Since the event occurred on a Sunday, the performances did not begin until around 2 p.m. in order to give Christian Karen time to arrive from church.

The auditorium events began with a recorded performance and crowd participatory singing of the American national anthem followed by the Karen national anthem, an English translation of which is provided below:

Oh, *daw ka lu* of mine, The best people abide
 I love you the best, You value honesty
 And hospitality, All noble qualities
 I love you most the Lord's chosen children
 The folks expecting God, Blessed you are
 You'd been persecuted, Though been enslaved as well
 White brother liberators, God sent them back
 The God of our fathers, Our hope from olden days
 We worship thee, To be thy disciples
 Carry gospel message, To very sea and land
 Bless us, Oh Lord¹⁷⁸

According to Chin scholar Ardeth Thawngmung, the Karen national anthem was composed by Christian Sgaw Karen Thra San Ba in 1900 as a hymn.¹⁷⁹ Thawngmung states:

The seeds of the Karen nationalist movement were therefore sewn by a few educated Sgaw Baptists who attempted to unify Karens across diverse religious, regional, and linguistic backgrounds by creating a common awareness of shared experiences, historical origins, language, and identity – an awareness disseminated through Karen schools, literature, mass media, and the activities of the KNA [Karen National Association].¹⁸⁰

Historical origins include the line "...Lord's chosen children," which can be linked to the story that the Karen are one of the ten lost tribes of Israel as referenced in the Bible. Even though the Karen include a mix of Buddhists, animists, and Christians, Karen pastor and chairmen of Karen community Saw Jo Naing, one of the main speakers and community members in charge of the Karen New Year event, explained that Christian symbolism is present in the Karen origin stories, the traditional dress, as well as Karen music itself. According to Ardeth Thawngmung, this viewpoint reflects the Christian missionary teachings and the strong role mission school educated Karen played in the formation of ethno-nationalist identity among the Karen.¹⁸¹ The lyrics "You'd been persecuted/Though been enslaved as well," serves to remind Karen people of the

¹⁷⁸ Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and Struggle Without Arms* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), 30. Lyrics originally cited in Petry 1994.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 30.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 30.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 20-31.

shared cultural experience and history as a persecuted people. This is reminiscent of the act of reading and sharing news as a way of maintaining solidarity and feelings of persecution.

The anthems were followed by guest speakers who educated the audience on the history of Karen New Year in the languages of Sgaw Karen, Pwo Karen, and Burmese while those who spoke English only could follow along on a hand-out given to guests as they entered the auditorium. Ardeth Thawngmung's quote above mentions the "activities of the KNA" (Karen National Assembly) as integral to creating a Karen national identity. The speakers and the handout support Thwangmung's statement by identifying the KNA as the principle organization responsible for the founding and implementation of Karen New Year as a Karen national holiday in 1938.¹⁸² Due to disagreements between colonial administration and Karen parliamentary representatives, the creation of Karen New Year took almost a year and multiple proposal attempts to be ratified.¹⁸³

Saw Jo Naing took me out to the hallway outside the auditorium in order to show me a wall of photos that included the members of the Karen parliament who were instrumental in ratifying the proposal for Karen New Year. Under each photo was a name, the person's Karen ethnicity (Pwo, Sgaw) and their respective religion. Saw Jo Naing made it clear that the holiday had been equally supported by both Buddhist and Christian Karen showing that a person's identity as a Karen was stronger and more unified than one's religious affiliation. The month of Pyathoe was chosen for the New Year celebration because it was already a month that signified cultural solidarity between the Sgaw and Pwo Karens and the rice harvest festivals that occur during that month could not be claimed as distinctly belonging to any religious group.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Karen New Year English Translation Handout. January 18, 2015.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Unity is important and in the Fort Wayne Burmese diaspora, unity and solidarity extend beyond the Karen community. Saw Jo Naing explained that “Here we have Karen, Burmese, Mon...we all share special events. We contact each other.”¹⁸⁵ Lydia Win, a Karen woman, stated that she takes her family to both Burmese and Karen New Year events.

Karen is my root, so it is important to stay connected. I am an American citizen. Being a Karen is still going to be part of my life. America, one unique thing, no matter where you came from, your culture, your root, you can still embrace that and pass it on. Depends on how you believe in it and how you are going pass it on.¹⁸⁶

Use of Technology

Technology played an active role in the unfolding and recording of Karen New Year. Microphones were positioned across the stage and on the podium, which were hooked up to a mixing console located in the middle of the auditorium. The man at the console adjusted the sound, feedback, and microphone output while a laptop hooked up to the system provided pre-recorded audio for the first six dance performances. Next to the console was a row of about five to ten people with video and sound recording equipment (the number alternated throughout the day). The people working the console and the cameras were busy focusing on their job of recording the event, but they put me in touch with Saw Jo Naing who answered my questions about the purpose of recording the music and dance performances.

Naing explained to me that no professional company or individual was hired to record at Karen New Year. Instead, everyone recording was a volunteer. All recorders will take their equipment home or back to their church or other Karen organization that they participate in, in order to begin making media recordings. These recordings, he explained, would be produced on

¹⁸⁵ Jo Naing, Interview, Karen New Year Celebration in Fort Wayne, IN, January 18, 2015.

¹⁸⁶ Lydia Win, Phone Interview, Fort Wayne, IN, January 16, 2015.

CD, DVD, and uploaded to Internet sites such as YouTube.¹⁸⁷ The purpose of producing multiple media formats is to allow the music and the event to be accessible to as many people as possible. CDs and DVDs provide local access to those who do not use the Internet or wish to personally own a performance in which they, a friend, or family member participated in while uploading the performances to YouTube provides access to everyone. “We are all over the world,” Naing explained, “On the Internet, our relatives elsewhere can see.”¹⁸⁸

Lit screens from tablets and smartphones and flashes from digital cameras and camcorders could be seen throughout the audience. People held their phones and tablets up in the air to record specific performances and take pictures. Some people even stood at the edge of the stage to take pictures and record the music. People accepted calls and texted throughout the day, took group pictures, and uploaded items to social media through their phones. The use of digital recording devices was even more apparent near the end of the night when teenagers rushed to the front of the auditorium and cheered on their friends who participated in a Karen fashion show as well as popular music and hip hop performances.

Karen National Instruments

The two instruments that appear constantly throughout the event and on Karen websites are the frog drum and the buffalo horn. The visuals of these two instruments are mass produced and disseminated throughout Karen culture and the frog drum appears on the Karen flag amidst a rising sun. According to the no longer active, blog by a poster known only as *Karen State* who identifies herself as a Karen girl born in Burma and majoring in bio-technology, the frog drum is recognizable throughout Karen culture and is used in most performances of Karen-identified

¹⁸⁷ Jo Naing, Interview, Karen New Year Celebration in Fort Wayne, IN, January 18, 2015.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

traditional music including, but not limited to, the *don* dance.¹⁸⁹ Southeast Asian art historian Richard Cooler states that these drums are cast and stamped bronze drums, also referred to as Karen “rain drums.”¹⁹⁰ These drums were originally introduced from Vietnam and adopted by many of the Burmese indigenous ethnic groups.¹⁹¹ The drum features frogs on the tops and sides of the drum, usually at least one in each of the four directions (north, south, east, and west) and often has a stamped design of a tree or other plant on its side. The addition of the stamped tree or plant design, according to Cooler, is a distinctly Karen addition to the making of the drum.¹⁹² Blogger Karen State explains that the frogs on the drum symbolize the prosperity that the rainy season brings to the Karen during planting season and Cooley states that the drum originally helped encourage spirits to cause rain.¹⁹³ The drums were also used for funeral and marriage rituals. Planting, funerals, and marriages are all occasions which generally include the gathering of people. The use of drum as a symbol of gathering together reinforces the central theme for the Karen New Year, which is the unity of the Karen as a people.

The buffalo horn (*gweh*), so called for the material it is made out of, is a loud, carved horn that people blow into to create sound. The one on display at Karen New Year had the image of the rising sun, which also appears on the Karen flag, carved into its side. As Jo Naing was pointing the instrument out to me, he explained that the buffalo horn was a symbol of unity since it was used to gather people together. “Whenever there is a funeral, or a house that needs to be built, you blow the horn and people will come together.”¹⁹⁴ He continued stating, “The horn is

¹⁸⁹ Karen State, “Karen Flag,” *Karen Culture* blog. 12 November 2009. <http://karenstate.blogspot.com/2009/11/karen-flag.html>.

¹⁹⁰ Richard Cooler, “Chapter 1: Prehistoric and Animist Periods,” *SEAsite* Center for Southeast Asian Studies website. http://www.seasite.niu.edu/burmese/cooler/Chapter_1/Chapter_1.htm.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Karen State, Ibid. Cooley, Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Saw Jo Naing, Ibid.

also used during New Year and to alert people when fighting an enemy.”¹⁹⁵ Jo Naing explained that the buffalo horn was the most frequently requested instrument by Karen who come to Fort Wayne. “I have to order a lot from Karen State. It is a symbol for people of being Karen and shows that we have something in common.”¹⁹⁶ In her essay, “Home, Smell, Taste, Posture, Gleam,” culture and media studies specialist Margaret Morse explains that the idea or sense of “home” is directly linked to the senses and the imaginary of memory.¹⁹⁷ Objects such as the Karen buffalo horn function as a visual, auditory, and tangible link to memories surrounding the intangible homeland or, in the case of younger Karen, serve to create a sense of memory surrounding an imagined place since they have not been to Karen State in person.

Musical Events at Karen New Year

The music and dance exhibitions at Karen New Year were reflective of both Karen national pride and identity as well as the pan-Burmese solidarity expressed by Jo Naing and Lydia Win. One guest speaker, who was identified as Oo Nyunt Shwe, addressed the audience in Pwo Karen but switched to English near the end of his speech and stated, “We [the diaspora] are the future of Burma. Burma will become a democracy because we are many people. We will lead that. Know your culture; teach your language.”¹⁹⁸ Since the speeches were all in different languages, not everyone was able to understand or follow along with all the speeches, or the music, which was also showcased in a variety of styles and languages.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Saw Jo Naing, Follow Up Interview, January 25, 2015.

¹⁹⁷ Hamid Naficy, ed., *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 63.

¹⁹⁸ Oo Nyunt Shwe, One of the speakers at Karen New Year. There was no program at the event and most of the speeches were in Pwo Karen, Sgaw Karen, or Burmese. I was told the speaker’s name.

¹⁹⁹ There were quite a few instances during speeches and musical performances where the people around me would identify the language a person was speaking in or a song was being performed in, but they could not tell me the meaning of the lyrics. The typical response was, “I am Sgaw/Pwo Karen; I don’t understand the other language.”

After the speeches ended, the musical exhibitions began and continued until the end of Karen New Year (roughly 3:00-6:00 p.m.). People could go out into the hallway to eat or buy clothing, but most people stayed in the auditorium and socialized during the performances. Music at the beginning of the event included Karen traditional style dances to recorded and live music. There was also a demonstration of Burmese-style theater with Burmese instruments including the *pattala* (xylophone). The end of the event included live rock, pop, and hip-hop performances. Jo Naing explained that while everyone strives for unity and equal representation throughout the event, the performers are more likely to be Buddhist Karen early on and Christian Karen near the end during the popular music performances.²⁰⁰ Christian Karen were more likely to participate in the rock, pop, and hip-hop instrumental ensembles because those musics are generally promoted and performed in church groups.²⁰¹ Many of the bands performing later in the evening were self-identified Christians, including Saw Jo Naing on piano, and a couple I had seen performing their music at church a few hours earlier.

Don Dance, Bamboo Dance, and Hta Song-Poems: A Brief History

The two dances that occur at every New Year event are the *don* dance and the bamboo dance. The *don* dance includes an equal number of men and women on stage. The women wear colorful and detailed sarongs while the men wear a loose-fitting top. The music for all *don* dances observed is performed live on cymbals, a gong, an *ozi* drum, a woodblock, and sometimes accompanied by the buffalo horn or a double-reed shawm (called a *hne* in Burmese ensembles). In communities within Karen State and on the border of Thailand, a bronze drum (frog drum) is also used, but I have only read about its use for these performances and have yet

²⁰⁰ Saw Jo Naing, *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

to discover a video of the frog drum being used in the dance context.²⁰² In the diasporic communities, a bass drum painted with thick red, white, and blue stripes on its sides with a star painted on the drum head is used. This is most likely a replacement for the frog drum, which also has a star stamped on its head. Performances generally begin with a solo performance of a *hta* song-poem by one of the female dancers while the rest of the group sings in a chorus behind her. Short percussion breaks are taken in between the soloist's verses where she performs a quick solo dance while the chorus sings in response to her. After introducing the *hta* song, the female dancer will dance her way back to the female line while the choir sings. The group will work through their verse before breaking into different formations, or groups, of women and men. The dance is very active with a constant hop-like step to the beat. The dancers sing while continuing unified and stylized movements, sometimes together and other times in a call and response between the men and the women.

The bamboo dance is performed by creating a grid of bamboo poles of even numbers, often 6x6. A group of people sit around the outside of the grid and each person controls two of the poles. The people who control the bamboo on the top layer of the grid will tap their poles on the bottom layer to the beat, closing the poles together on the last beat of the measure. Dancers, usually four male, and four female, step in and out of the grid in patterns similar to contra dancing (right or left hand stars, spinning around with a partner, or moving in a circle) while maintaining the beat. The dance requires a lot of time and practice to learn where to step without getting one's ankles caught between the closing poles. Another version of the dance includes

²⁰² See Zoya Phan, *Little Daughter: A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West* (New York: A CBS Company, 2009), 65; Karen State, "Karen Flag," *Karen Culture* blog. 12 November 2009. <http://karenstate.blogspot.com/2009/11/karen-flag.html>; Jack Chance, "Himal South Asian: Burmese Songs of Exile," *BurmaNet News*, uploaded January 26, 2011, <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2011/01/26/himal-south-asian-burmese-songs-of-exile-%E2%80%93-jack-chance/>.

standing the poles upright and tapping the ends on the ground to the beat. On the last beat of the measure, the poles are placed into the formation where the dancers are performing. In this version, the dancers must pause on the last beat of the measure to avoid running into the poles. The music for this dance can be pre-recorded, live using traditional instruments, or live using Western instruments such as electric guitar.

In her essay “Singing, Dancing, and Identity in the Karen Diaspora,” MacLachlan divides the development of the *don* and bamboo dances into three historical phases: the premigration phase, the migration phase, and the diaspora phase.²⁰³ According to MacLachlan, the premigration phase included the time period in which most Karen still lived in villages within the borders of Burma and on the border with Thailand, which lasted until the 1960s.²⁰⁴ MacLachlan stated that she had difficulty piecing together the history of the bamboo dance due to the limited number of sources, references, and oral descriptions of the dance.²⁰⁵ She was able to determine from the writings, photos and descriptions from Reverend Harry I. Marshall, ethnomusicologist Judith Becker, anthropologist Christina Fink, and writer Jonathan Falla that a dance referred to as *ta see klee* was an almost direct match for the bamboo dance performed throughout the Karen diaspora.²⁰⁶ This dance began in the Sgaw Karen community as a funeral game and eventually became popular among both Sgaw and Pwo Karen by the late 20th century.²⁰⁷ MacLachlan also found that the *don* dance had a similar history, arising out of funerals and courtship rituals, but was developed by the Pwo Karen.²⁰⁸ She continues, stating:

²⁰³ Heather MacLachlan, “Singing, Dancing, and Identity in the Karen Diaspora,” *Asian Music* 45, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2014): 64.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

The pattern I am outlining – that Sgaw Karen (usually Christians) developed and became associated with the bamboo dance and Pwo Karen people (usually Buddhists) did the same with the *don* dance – persists in Burma today. Some *don* dance competitions in Karen State, where the most active troupes reside, are filmed and shown on State television, with the result that the *don* dance is generally associated with the Karen “national race.” However, it seems to only be danced by Buddhist Karens.²⁰⁹

During this time, the *don* dance, which means “to be in agreement,” was traditionally performed by the women in a Karen village and was often used as way to chastise community members who violated local rules or traditions.²¹⁰ A *hta* song (song-poem concerning important events) would be composed about the event and sung by the community of dancers during the *don* dance.²¹¹ These song-poems were originally a practice developed and used by the Sgaw Karen, so the fact that these song-poems are being utilized by the Karen community as a whole and have been adopted as part of an originally Pwo Karen dance, demonstrates the adoption of Pwo and Sgaw Karen artifacts as being distinctly Karen. *Hta* songs are not only used for the *don* dance. According to Violet Cho, these narrative song-poems were used to spread news, share customs, remember historical events, and for courtship.²¹² Cho continues, stating that:

Hta is intimately connected to systems of knowledge – if ideas are not transformed into *hta* they have little value. Poets who can compose and use *hta* thus have high status in Karen communities. As *hta* is an oral tradition, authorship is attributed to ancestors. The perception that *hta* is ancient – linking Karen to an imagined ethnohistory – makes *hta* important to cultural identity.²¹³

The second phase MacLachlan identifies is the migratory phase in which Karen people began leaving their villages, whether by force or by necessity, and began relocating along the

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 66.

²¹⁰ Heather MacLachlan, “The Don Dance: An Expression of Karen Nationalism,” *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* 32, no. 3-4 (Fall –Winter 2006): 26.

²¹¹ Min Zin, “Karen History: In Their Own Words,” *The Irrawaddy* 8, no. 10 (October 2000): 1. http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=2054&page=1. Accessed April 15, 2014.

²¹² Violet Cho, “Reflections of Burmese Mass Media in Exile,” Ibid, 471.

²¹³ Violet Cho, “‘Mother Died and Time Passed:’ Reading Diasporic Identity in Karen Hta,” *Poetry International Rotterdam*, July 27, 2013, http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/item/23184/Mother-died-and-time-passed/en.

Thai border, eventually leading to the development of refugee camps in the 1980s.²¹⁴ MacLachlan's paper cited cultural anthropologist Christina Fink's findings that during this time in the refugee camps, dances and other cultural traditions were being reorganized and altered to embrace new meanings of both Karen identity and Karen nationality as a way to unify increasingly displaced peoples.²¹⁵ Displacement as well as the continued military and political strife with the government led to the increased political nature of the *hta* song-poems that accompanied the *don* dance.²¹⁶ Jack Chance writes about *hta* songs and storytelling in refugee camps on the border of Thailand, stating that these song poems accompany not only the *don* dance, but also *tha'na* (Karen harp), *kana* (mandolin), mouth harp, and the bamboo dance.²¹⁷ During this time, the *don* dance also began to become more equal in terms of gender (both male and female dancers) as well as in terms of Sgaw and Pwo Karen representation within the dance.²¹⁸

The third and current phase, which MacLachlan terms the "diaspora phase," began around 2006 with the movement of Karen out of the refugee camps to communities in multiple countries such as the United States (including Fort Wayne, Indiana), Canada, and Australia.²¹⁹ During these three phases the *don* and bamboo dances moved from funeral performance contexts to secularized symbols of nationality and unity.²²⁰

²¹⁴ Heather MacLachlan, "Singing, Dancing, and Identity in the Karen Diaspora," *Ibid*, 66-69.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 67.

²¹⁶ Min Zin, *Ibid*, 2.

²¹⁷ Jack Chance, "Himal South Asian: Burmese Songs of Exile," *BurmaNet News*, uploaded January 26, 2011, <http://www.burmanet.org/news/2011/01/26/himal-south-asian-burmese-songs-of-exile-%E2%80%93-jack-chance/>.

²¹⁸ Heather MacLachlan, "The Don Dance: An Expression of Karen Nationalism," *Ibid*, 29.

²¹⁹ Heather MacLachlan, "Singing, Dancing, and Identity in the Karen Diaspora," *Ibid*, 69-70.

²²⁰ *Ibid*, 69.

The two dances performed at the 2015 Karen New Year festival demonstrated this unified shift. Jo Naing explained that, while the dances accept anyone who wants to participate, the goal is the highest level of equal inclusion possible among both Sgaw and Pwo Karen as well as among male and female dancers.²²¹ This idea ties back into the theme of unity that is prevalent throughout every performance and decoration at Karen New Year. Naing explained that:

When all men dance, wake up, go to work, they have unity. Dancing is like a story. Some of the dances here are about how we are all brothers and sisters. We eat at the same plate. Five to six family members will sit and eat five or six portions from the same plate. This is representative of unity. Some Karen have different dialects. I speak Sgaw. They [pointing to the performers on stage] are Pwo Karen. I don't understand all that they are saying, but I always encourage our people to study so they can have community... We try to unite everyone because whether Christian or Buddhist, we are still Karen. We focus on unity here [in the Fort Wayne diaspora]. We will always be one heart.²²²

Part of the focus on unity is to help heal the rupture between Pwo and Sgaw Karen after a Pwo Karen Buddhist faction of the KNU defected to the Burmese army. This was a very traumatic event for Karens in Karen State and in the diaspora and has resulted in many efforts to reunite factions and heal the wounds of this rift. Part of that effort is the use of these two national dances, one more associated traditionally with Pwo Karen (*don* dance) and the other traditionally belonging to the Sgaw Karen (bamboo dance), as representative of Karen people as a whole. Other efforts of Karen New Year to display the idea of unity were the inclusion of all genres of music important to Christian and Buddhist Karen as well as multiple age groups rather than only those associated with traditional Karen culture.

Other aspects of unity include the dancing itself, generally equal gender distribution, and the traditional association of the dances with community events such as funerals. The *don* dance and the bamboo dance are both highly choreographed dances that involve extensive practice,

²²¹ Saw Jo Naing, *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*

especially in the bamboo dance where a dancer's ankles could get hit by large bamboo poles that are snapped together on the beat if one does not move in time with the music and one's fellow dancers. Both of the dances were originally used at community events and so are already associated with the concept of coming together as community and are part of a group experience. Finally, the dances are inclusive of both male and female dancers. While the male and female movements are choreographed differently for the *don* dance, male groups and female groups move in unison within their groups and in complementary and often symmetrical motions to each other. In this way unified and complementary movements within the dances reinforce the themes of unity present throughout the Karen New Year event.

According to Violet Cho, *hta* song-poems are also being widely used in the Karen diaspora and are present in online exile media websites in indigenous language such as *Kwe Ka Lu* and *Karen Information Center*.²²³ Cho states that general themes of *hta* poetry include ideas of homeland and expressions of the reality of displacement.²²⁴ This is demonstrative of ways in which the Karen diaspora is maintaining solidarity with Karen State through expression of suffering and by referencing a real and imagined homeland. Written, text-based *hta* uploaded to the Internet, have also taken on hybridized forms by incorporating non-indigenous languages such as English.²²⁵ However, I have not heard any *hta* songs performed in anything other than a Karen language either at Karen New Year in Fort Wayne, nor in the multiple uploads of the *don* dance to the Internet.

²²³ Violet Cho, "'Mother Died and Time Passed:' Reading Diasporic Identity in Karen *Hta*," Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Uploading the Don and the Bamboo Dance to the Internet

The performance purposes of the *don* and bamboo dances are different in the diaspora than in Karen State. In Karen State, the *don* dance is often performed multiple times by various groups as part of a competition during Karen New Year. The Karen diaspora of Fort Wayne, however, only performs the *don* dance once, more as an exhibition of maintenance of cultural heritage among Karen youth as well as an expression of Karen national identity and solidarity. Other reasons why the dance is only performed once include the smaller community of Karen involved in the Fort Wayne celebration as well as the fact that competition is not necessarily congruous to the central theme of unity which permeates the Fort Wayne event.

Though the *don* and bamboo dances serve slightly different functions in their local contexts of Karen State and in the various points of the Karen diaspora, both local events are recorded and posted to YouTube after the New Year celebration. The act of posting the videos online creates both a new context and a new purpose for the now digitized dances. Some Karen diasporic communities recorded and uploaded the entire Karen New Year, showcasing the speakers and a variety of dances while others posted individual performances. The Karen community in Buffalo, New York held their 2754 (2015) New Year January 10 and published their video on January 18, the same day as the Fort Wayne Karen New Year celebration. The video contained between thirty-second and three-minute clips of every performance and the format (presentation of American and Karen flags, singing of both anthems, Karen dances to recorded pop music, bamboo dance, *don* dance, and youth rock, hip hop, and dance) was almost identical to the event in Fort Wayne.²²⁶ Other groups, such as the Karen in Syracuse, New York

²²⁶ See Poe Saw, "Happy Karen New Year in Buffalo 2015," *YouTube*, January 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKfzzIEUiMs>.

and in Utica, New York posted individual clips starting with the *don* dance. Other posts include communities from the states of Iowa, Arizona, Texas, North Carolina, Georgia, Utah, Oregon, Kentucky as well as the countries of Burma, Thailand, Japan, Sweden, the UK, and Canada. General searches for the *don* dance reveal that diasporic communities use the name “*don* dance” in the title, while communities in Karen State and displaced within Burma often add the words “competition” or “contest” after the dance name.

Uploads to the Internet for Karen New Year not only include recordings of the celebratory events in Karen State and in the diaspora, but also include Karen New Songs such as “Blue – Karen New Year,” which showcases both forms of the bamboo dance as well as the *don* dance in a field in Buffalo, New York by the Mu Mu Team with a giant Karen rising sun, located in the corner of the Karen flag resting on the slight hill behind the dancers. Dancers switch between dancing the bamboo, *don* dances, and waving flags with the Karen colors of red, white, and blue.²²⁷ Karen New Song “I Show You Our Karen Culture,” was uploaded to YouTube by the Facebook group We Are Karen and includes a Karen popular song with a male singer on guitar with synthesized accompaniment and *don* dancers performing on a river bank in Burma with Karen State’s Mount Kwekabaw visible behind them. About halfway through, the music video switches over to scenic photographs and footage of the dancers enjoying the Karen landscape.²²⁸ “We are One,” a Pwo Karen New Song begins with footage of multiple Karen celebrations as well as video of a *don* dance competition in Karen State displaying multiple dance troupes and Karen flag bearers while an electric guitar solos in the background. The video

²²⁷ TQCMusic, “Karen New Year Song Music Video 2013 (Blue),” *YouTube*, uploaded July 15, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ree5Ph4w9tU>.

²²⁸ WeAreKaren, “Karen New Song 2015 – I Show You Our Karen Culture (MV),” *YouTube*, uploaded February 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnB-9S7WSwI>.

introduces a line of young men in Karen shirts clapping to the beat and singing, then alternates this footage with imagery of Mount Kwekabaw and various videos of people celebrating. Most of the footage includes large-scale *don* dance competitions, but at 1 minute 19 seconds, a few brief clips show smaller-scale versions of the dance in front of a large picture of Mount Kwekabaw, which suggests that this footage was probably taken from a diasporic New Year celebration.²²⁹

“65 Years Revolution for Karen People,” is a hip hop song by J-MIC, B black, AKR, Saw DL, TPN, and Roe Hero that opens and closes with footage of the *don* dance being performed in Karen State as well as a video of its performance in the diaspora. The performers wear baggy pants, long t-shirts, shades, and ball caps in hip hop fashion, with one rapper sporting a Karen shirt, while waving a miniature Karen flag and wearing a full-size flag as a cape. Their rapping is in Karen with a repeated English phrase of “We don’t give a fuck!” appearing in the chorus.²³⁰ The following English description appears over their musical intro, “In a land ravaged by war, persecuted people cling to hope. This is a film to share their story.”²³¹ The music video switches between footage of the men rapping, the two *don* dances, and fighting occurring in Karen State. About 6 minutes and 54 seconds into the video, one of the performers switches from standard hip hop motions and gestures to masculine *don* dance steps and arm movements before the video switches back to *don* dance footage from Karen State.²³²

Not only are New Year celebrations and dances being recorded and uploaded to the Internet by multiple communities both within and outside of Karen State, but the examples above

²²⁹ Ehhsoushar, “We Are One – Khant Su Line (poe karen song MV),” *YouTube*, uploaded August 2, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eThPILduJis>.

²³⁰ Mic ufo, “65 Years Revolution for Karen People J-MIC, B black, AKR, Saw DL, TPN, Roe Hero,” *YouTube*, uploaded September 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzDz83b_nJo.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*

demonstrate how Karen members of the online social media community are taking excerpts from these celebrations and incorporating them into Karen popular culture music videos. Karen New Songs as well as music videos that are not specifically tied to the celebration of Karen New Year, such as “65 Years Revolution for Karen People,” use the Karen national dances and imagery to reinforce their social or political goals in the presentation and representation of the Karen on the Internet.

Themes of unity present in the Fort Wayne Karen New Year are also being represented in other diasporic communities as well as in the titles and subjects of the Karen New Songs that are posted to Facebook and YouTube. The announcer for the Minnesota Festival of Nations Day introduced the *don* dance, stating, “The story tells of the unity of a people striving to preserve their traditions and their memories. The bright colors of their clothes represent bravery, solidarity, tranquility, and harmony.”²³³ These themes, present in music video titles and dance movements, represent a merging of online performance between the diaspora and Karen State. Many uploads that include pre-recorded music performances demonstrate that many of the same folksong recordings are being used in multiple diasporic communities. Many of the posted videos have at least a few hundred, and often a few thousand, views suggesting that the similarities in New Year presentations may be partially determined by seeing what other communities have previously done for their New Year events.

Finally, Violet Cho states that *hta* often reference geographical places well known to the Karen such as Mount Kwekabaw, the Irrawaddy Delta, and the Salween River.²³⁴ These places have also been displayed in the many Karen State and diasporic music videos on YouTube and,

²³³ EhNine .KCOM, “Karen Don Dance 2012,” *YouTube*, uploaded May 30, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Myi3fkK0QW0>.

²³⁴ Violet Cho, “Mother Died and Time Passed: Reading Diasporic Identity in Karen *Hta*,” *Ibid*.

like the textual description of these places in the *hta* song-poems, help evoke a sense of time and place concerning Karen State. According to Cho, this includes both physical space, which include areas identified as Karen territory, and fantasy space, which includes “scenes marked as Karen, that exist without war, poverty, and ethnic division.”²³⁵ Since Karen State is not a politically sovereign nation separate from Burma, the concept of the ideal, sovereign Karen nation exists as an imagined ideal to Karen both within Burma and in the diaspora. The act of posting music videos that specifically link ideas of nationality, combine footage of national dances from both Karen State and the diaspora, and evoke verbal and visual imagery of an idealized Karen State allow members of the online Karen community to be “able through YouTube to imagine and enact membership within a larger community that is connected virtually and, at times, coalesces at live events,” such as Karen New Year.²³⁶

Karen New Year Conclusions

Music played a prevalent role in the statement and performance of Karen culture and identity at the Karen New Year celebration in Fort Wayne, IN. The overall emphasis on cultural, political, and religious unity was demonstrated through the varied performances of dances that represented cultural histories of Sgaw and Pwo Karen as well as some Burmese influences. As stated in Chapter 1, the Karen suffered a serious trauma in the 1990s when Christian and Buddhist Karen took opposite sides in the fight for Karen State. The secularization of dances, which now include members of both religions; the incorporation of musical styles such as pop and hip hop, which are performed in Christian as well as youth culture; the emphasis on the founding of the Karen New Year by both Christian and Buddhist Karen; and the use of

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Grace Wang, Ibid, 124.

instruments such as the frog drum and the buffalo horn as symbols of unity, all work to close the political and religious rifts among Karen while making a statement both within their community as well as to the online community (both Karen and non-Karen) that the Karen are a united people who belong as a part of one ethnic national identity despite their linguistic and religious differences.

The uploading and sharing of Karen New Year events from Fort Wayne, other diasporic communities, and Karen State serve as a connecting link of direct contact between the diaspora and Karen State. This helps create a conception of an extended community made up of Karen from all parts of the globe for which uploads of Karen-specific holidays serve as focal points around which members collectively engage and express their Karen-ness. Finally, excerpts of these uploads are being taken and utilized in Karen popular culture music videos online creating an idealized and imagined Karen nation defined virtually through sonic borders.

Chin National Day: A Case Study

Chin National Day occurs annually on February 20 and is celebrated by Chins in *Chinram* as well as all over the diaspora. The Indiana Chin community was no exception and held a statewide celebration of Chin-ness on Saturday, February 21, 2015. Despite the snowstorm and the predicted eight inches, high winds, and weather advisory, the parking lot of the Southport International Center filled quickly as police and parking officials helped direct people into the lot in an orderly fashion. The small lobby of the convention center was filled with tables of many of the event sponsors in the community and photos could be taken for free as people filled in their contact information before having their portraits taken with friends and family. The main kiosk contained a program of the day's activities, a newsletter, and a statement of intent about Chin National Day.

At the end of the lobby was the entrance to a large concert hall with chairs set up facing the stage. In the center of the seating arrangement was a sound and equipment manager who worked for the convention center. People sat quietly in the chairs waiting for the speeches and announcements to begin. People greeted and talked quietly, texted and played with their smart phones, and took videos and photos with their cameras, camcorders, and tablets. Down the hall from the conference room was a gymnasium filled with tables of traditional Chin food, games such as darts, ball in a cup, and betting on Chin wrestling matches in which two men (though I was told that for \$5 I would be allowed to fight as well) sat on a long board and hit each other with pillows until one fell. Most people surrounded the wrestling ring or sat at the tables to eat and socialize while in this room.

People wore traditional/national dress of varying styles and colors, but the most prominent colors were red, black, and green. Many of the men wore dress pants, and boldly patterned blazers, sometimes with a sash or blanket over their shoulder while the women wore *longyis*²³⁷, blouses, and silver belts. Some of the women also had a braided, silver coil wrapped around their hips. Some of the dresses were heavily beaded and jangled while the wearers walked about the event. Multiple attendants told me that many of the beaded dresses and coil belts cost \$500 or more.

The audience in attendance was very diverse and included members of the Chin community, teachers and administrators from the Perry Township school district (where a majority of the Chin population in Indianapolis attends school), members of city and state government, and representatives from the Indianapolis police force. There was also a

²³⁷ This is an ankle-length piece of fabric that is wrapped around the waist. *Longyis* can be worn by both genders, but I did not see any men wearing them at the Indianapolis event.

combination of Asian Americans, Caucasians, and African Americans in the audience and participating in the event. The first session that occurred within the auditorium appeared quite formal; people listened quietly and attentively to speakers and applauded lightly and politely after each speaker and all performances. Very few people moved about or spoke during the talks and performances.

Politics of Chin National Day

Chin National Day developed as a celebration of the Chin nation as an independent state after the signing of the Panglong Agreement and the adoption of a democratic system of state government. Lian Sakhong describes the cultural and political significance of the Chin National Day celebration, stating that:

The observance and celebration of Chin National Day for five-decades has been important and meaningful for Chin people everywhere. It strengthens their sense of oneness in the name of Chin, which holds them and ties them together into an integral people. It also serves as a symbol of unity, as a springboard from which all affairs can be made to reflect the common cause, common interest and common goals of the entire Chin population. It is also a means to proclaim to the world that the Chin people share a distinct national identity and also a common ideal for peaceful co-existence among all races and religions, in Burma, in India and throughout the world. It also strengthens their inspiration for freedom and democracy, denouncing despotism in all its forms. It has become a Chin tradition and thus its celebration means much to every Chin. In short, Chin National Day is the most powerful political and national symbol, one that holds and ties all the Chin people together in the midst of three multi-racial and multi-religious countries – Burma, Bangladesh and India.²³⁸

This event has spread beyond the tri-part borders of *Chinram* and now occurs within the Chin diaspora all over the world, including Indianapolis, in which this event was being culturally performed.

Chin National Day began in the auditorium space with two announcers, Mai Ni Len Lian and Mai Delhi Julie Thang, who alternated addressing the audience in both Chin and English.

²³⁸ Lian Sakhong, *Ibid*, 223.

Before any of the speeches or music began, the entire congregation joined in group prayer. There was also a moment of silence for those who had sacrificed their lives for the Chin cause and Chin land. After this, was the formal welcoming speech by the president of the Chin association Pu San Hlei Thang followed by a reading in English of the “Statement of the Chin Community of Indiana 67th Chin National Day,” which was also handed out in paper form as people entered the convention center. Though the statement and the event occurred on the 21st of February, the paper was marked with the official date of the Chin holiday, February 20, 2015. The reader, Pu Van Tuah Piang, opened the statement with an acknowledgement to the global Chin community followed by a brief history of the “Panglong Agreement” in 1947 and the Chins’ role as “co-founders of the Union of Burma.”²³⁹ The statement was continued with the Chin community of Indiana taking an active stance on the politics occurring in Burma:

The Chin community of Indiana urges our fellow Chins not to lose sight of this meaningful celebration and what we owe our forefathers and to our motherland. Today, we are proud and grateful to celebrate Chin National Day freely whereas the Chins in Burma are allowed to celebrate ‘Chin National Day’ only in limited function after more than 30 years of [the] military regime’s oppression.²⁴⁰

Over the years, the Burmese government has made multiple attempts to change the name of Chin National Day to “Chin State Day,” which serves to reduce the national tendencies of the celebration away from Chin culture toward that of a larger Burmese culture. According to the program for the Chin National Day celebration in the UK, any banner or sign displaying the words “Chin National Day” is forbidden and violations are subject to military enforcement.²⁴¹

The Indianapolis Chin statement continued with a call for change and action in multiple parties:

²³⁹ Chin Community of Indiana, “Statement of the Chin Community of Indiana 67th Chin National Day,” Speech handout. Chin National Day. Indianapolis, IN. February 21, 2015.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ *The 60th Anniversary of Chin National Day, London, UK*, Event Program. 23 February 2008. http://www.freewebs.com/poem_in_chin/CNDFlyer.pdf.

We urge the government of Burma to continue nationwide [the] ceasefire agreement process with all ethnic armed forces and democratic forces to achieve nationwide ceasefire [and] meaningful political dialogues, so that equality, unity, peace, and democracy [will] be in Burma. We urge all political parties, civil societies, ethnic groups, and democracy loving people of Burma to work hand in hand to try to amend the Constitution of Burma so that Burma will become a prosperous federal democratic nation. We urge the international community, the United Nations, especially the United States of America, to take necessary steps and actions toward Burma so that national reconciliation, peace and democracy would be fully achieved in Burma.²⁴²

The global celebration of Chin National Day and the political involvement of the Chin diaspora sustains the ideals stated by Sakhong by maintaining the understanding of a culturally united Chin people beyond the physical borders of Chin State and by politically promoting democratic reform in Burma. Cultural unity and the politics of ethno-nationalism were performed through music, the reproduction of national symbols in the form of dress and imagery, and the sharing of games and Chin foods.

Musical Events at Chin National Day

Music included solo voice and guitar performances as well as three cultural dances: *Phengphehlep nupa lam* (butterfly couples' dance, also called *Falam lam*), *Zawlkhaw sir*, and *Cong lai zonh*. All three dances included an even distribution of men and women and were, according to the announcers, couples' dances. *Zawlkhaw sir* was described as an example of the Chin carefree spirit and the words were interpreted by the announcers as, "Far from this mountain, the flowing stream, rippling long, rippling long."²⁴³ The principle movement of the dance included waving hands and the women had ribbons tied to their wrists to emphasize the flowing movement. Nature and water sounds had also been added to the recording of the guitar and the piano. *Cong lai zonh* was the only dance to be performed with live music, which

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Mai Ni Len Lian and Mai Delhi Julie Thang, Chin National Day. February 21, 2015.

included two female vocalists singing in harmony, a Chin drum and horns, drum set, piano, and electric guitar. According to the announcers, this is a folk dance originally performed at festivals and to celebrate the trophies of successful hunters.²⁴⁴ Another performance of the piece from a 2014 Chin National Day included a description of the dance as a way for Chin to relieve their sorrow in times of hardship and loss.²⁴⁵ The first session of the day ended with a “Chin Traditional Costume Show” followed by a pop and rock concert by a local church band. Most people left after the first session and gravitated to the gymnasium for food and games. The people who stayed for the band moved to the front of the auditorium, held their phones like lighters, and cheered throughout the performances.

I interviewed a nineteen year old dancer who introduced herself as Chhan. She was born in Falam, Burma and immigrated to the United States with her parents and siblings. Almost all of the dancers, singers, and musicians were in their late teens and early-to-mid-twenties. “I dance because we should keep our traditions,” she told me, “I like our dances and I worry if we don’t dance, we will eventually not be able to perform them at all.”²⁴⁶ Chhan continued to explain that the dances change every year, “We used to do a bamboo dance, but we decided to do something different this year.”²⁴⁷ She explained that before she came to the United States with her family, she used to perform at the *Falam* and *Fan ger* festivals. “I also support local groups such as the Mizo Shadow Band because they are members of my church.”²⁴⁸

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Asung Rahtin, “Lai Lam, Cong Lai Zonh,” YouTube, 24 February 2014.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XeBMQ9iwaM>.

²⁴⁶ Chhan, Interview, Chin National Day, February 21, 2015.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

Technology and National Symbols at Chin National Day

Technology was an important and prevalent aspect of Chin National Day. People recorded the day's events with cell phones, tablets, digital cameras, and camcorders. Many attendants were texting and using their various technologies throughout the speeches and performances during both sessions. Media was also present in the stage presentation of speeches and performances. All sound was amplified electronically through a microphone and a sound mixer while visuals were present in two large screens on either side of the convention stage. The displayed a PowerPoint outlining the event in which dances, performances, and speakers were announced as well as a constantly changing slideshow of national images recognizable to the Chin. Images included geography well known in Chin State such as Mount Victoria and Rih Lake; the hornbill, which is the national bird and symbolizes faithfulness; the rhododendron, which is the national flower and symbolizes courage, blood, honesty, and patriotism; and photography of people performing music and dance as well as photos of daily life in Chin State.²⁴⁹ The three cultural dances listed above can be found on YouTube posted by people from multiple locations, not just Indianapolis, showing that these dances are part of a global repertoire being displayed by the Chin. Chhan stated that presenting the dance videos online is "important because we still have relatives in Chin State. Since we live here, we have to keep our culture, language, dance, dress."²⁵⁰ Chhan's statement resembles the sentiments I heard at Karen New Year. Part of the reason people post musical and cultural performances of Chin-ness online is to demonstrate to other Chins in the diaspora as well as Chins in *Chinram* that Chin culture and

²⁴⁹ Symbol meanings from *The 60th Anniversary of Chin National Day, London, UK*, Event Program, Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Chhan, Ibid.

identity is being maintained and is continuing to be an important part of life beyond the borders of Chin State.

The last use of technology I would like to describe is the presence of Chin TV at the event, which is an online news organization that produces videos in Chin language about Chin issues and posts them online to their website chintv.org as well as to YouTube. According to their website, Chin TV was founded in 2012 by local Chin youths with the aim to “inform and educate the Chin people, preserve and promote Chin language, serve Chin people, and uplift Chinland.”²⁵¹

Van Tuah Piang is a board member of the Institute of Chin Affairs (ICA) and the executive producer at Chin TV, a volunteer position that includes interviewing members of the Chin community, collecting and making news, as well as shooting the camera footage for the program.²⁵² According to Van, Chin TV now has 1.5 million followers worldwide. “We thought it’s pretty impressive,” he stated, “Many Chin speaking people are so grateful to see Chin TV. It is very positive.”²⁵³ The local and the global are both present in the background images displayed behind the news reporters in the newsroom of Chin TV. Half of the backdrop includes a photo of the Indianapolis River Walk in downtown Indy and the other half of the backdrop includes a rotating globe. Van continues by stating there is a high a level of interaction between *Chinram* and the diaspora:

By using Internet and video, many young generations who are born and raised in the United States, they can taste and see what it looks like back in Chinland and they can also see the richness [of the] culture of our people. [These online sites] are very important, especially for older adults who are having a hard time adapt[ing] to new cultures in USA and who are [dealing with] language barriers, these sites are get-away sites for them to

²⁵¹ “About Us,” *Chin TV*, 2012. http://chintv.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=108.

²⁵² Van Tuah Piang, Personal Interview. March 5, 2015.

²⁵³ Ibid.

ease their home-sickness. Also, it plays very important role in maintaining our cultures.²⁵⁴

Chin music is both covered as a topic in episodes of Chin TV as well as represented in two separate themes: traditional and contemporary. The opening musical introduction to the Chin TV broadcast is percussion using a drum and two horns which are struck together along with vocal accompaniment. The horn and drums, which also appeared in the *cong lai zongh* dance on Chin National Day in Indianapolis, are national symbols that represent the victory of the Chin.²⁵⁵ According to Van, this opening theme “is a genuine Chin traditional folk song and music. It represents Chin culture and pure Chin traditional music which we want to keep it alive for generations to come.”²⁵⁶ The contemporary musical selection is used for transitions from the newsroom to on site interviews. It includes a soft rock beat on drum set with gentle, yet upbeat piano chords in a major key. This music, says Van, “represents contemporary new generations.”²⁵⁷

Uploading Chin National Day to the Internet

Narrative poetry is not only well known and popular among the Karen, but also a technique utilized throughout Burma including Burmese-poetry and Chin poetry. *Chinland Guardian* has a section on their website devoted to Chin poetry written by journalists and contributing members. The London, UK Chin program referenced above also included a poem by Chin writer Van Biak Thang titled “One Voice,” which also appears in *Chinland Guardian*:

No longer could the Chins stand the colony
 Nor could they bear the hands of nobility;
 Undaunted yet united they made their ways
 Towards liberty they thus yearned in one voice.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ *The 60th Anniversary of Chin National Day, London, UK*, Event Program, Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Van Tuah Piang, Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

Despite steep mountains and deep vales in between,
 Days and nights on foot they traversed to the scene;
 No rains and storms stopped their long journey and choice;
 Together the Chins sought and fought in one voice.

Many a hand had tried but failed to part them
 In course of seeking their national anthem;
 Many years ago today penned a Chin song
 Which in one voice they all sang along so strong.

Years of struggles for equal rights and freedom
 To the Chins begot a national custom –
 Chin National Day, brought up in harmony,
 Marking the strength of one voice in unity.

Today ought the Chins to heed the tapestry
 That history wove into a net of beauty,
 Intertwined in the spirit of brotherhood,
 In one voice firmly and steadily they stood.²⁵⁸

Themes present in Chin poetry are similar to the themes discussed in the Karen *hta* song-poems and include topics of homeland, life in exile, persecution, expressions of unity and ethno-nationalism, representations of history, and expressions of the ideal and imagined sovereign Chinland that exists free from poverty, strife, and political oppression.

Chin National Day events were posted to YouTube from Indiana, Texas, Maryland, Arizona, Michigan, Washington, Iowa, Georgia as well as the countries of Australia, Malaysia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada, and Norway. Almost every group showed footage of the *Falam lam* dance, and almost every Chin group used the same recording for the dance. The Phoenix, Arizona Chin diaspora also posted video of the Chin bamboo dance, which differed slightly from the Karen dance by having a 4x4 bamboo grid as opposed to 6x6 and included eight men and nine women. In this version, the men sat on the ground tapping the poles while the

²⁵⁸ Van Biak Thang, "One Voice," *Chinland Guardian*, February 6, 2008, <http://chinlandguardian.com/index.php/others/poem/item/381-one-voice-chin-national-day>.

nine women danced in the grid, with one dancing alone in the center. The tapping pattern was also different. The bamboo poles would be snapped shut on beats one and two and tapped on the lower grid on beats three and four. Other dances displayed include *Matupi* and *Zotung Liaccaw Ccavae*. Almost all versions of the dances listed, and all the dances at the Chin National Day in Indianapolis, included an equal number of male and female participants. All the dance moves were in unison or symmetrical to a partner's movements. According to Myanmar International TV (MITV) "At the event [Chin National Day], there are many Chin traditional songs and dances that were performed. The participants are very proud for joining this celebration, which highlights the unity and friendship of national brethren."²⁵⁹ The newscast continued by interviewing David Law Thang, the leader of a dance troupe at the Chin National Day event they were covering. Thang stated that, "I believe that we can enhance more friendship and unity by celebrating this event."²⁶⁰

With the exception of the MITV newscast, two posts by Innpi Videos (a documentary showing excerpts of 2015 Chin National Day events being held throughout cities in Burma and short news clip about a celebration in Hakha), a 2006 recording of a Chin National Day celebration in Chin State, and a 2013 celebration in Yangon, very little Chin National Day output is coming out of Burma.²⁶¹ Part of the issue of minimal posting from Chin State could be related to the amount of access the Burma Chin have to the Internet since Chin State has been labelled as

²⁵⁹ mitv – Myanmar International, "mitv – 67th Chin National Day: Unity & Friendship," *YouTube*, uploaded February 21, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCoWJeACwIw>.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ See mitv – Myanmar International, Ibid; Innpi Videos, "2015 Chin National Day (All Over Myanmar Cities)," *YouTube*, uploaded February 21, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnf87pNTkao>; Innpi Videos, "67 Chin National Day, Hakha (President Visits) MRTV," *YouTube*, uploaded February 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6OW9L4opH4>; Grace Obadiah, "58th Chin National Day 2006, Tahan, Kalamyo, Myanmar," *YouTube*, uploaded January 18, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmHeGDouZMI>; Thawng Siangpa, "65th Chin National Day, 2013 in Yangon," *YouTube*, uploaded March 2, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyWmj-uoE7Q>.

the most poverty stricken state in the country of Burma.²⁶² Another reason is the fact that Chin National Day was banned from being celebrated in Burma from 1988-2013.²⁶³ *Irrawaddy* journalist Salai Thant Zin interviewed multiple Chin in Chin State about the effects of the government regulations on culture and language. According to Zin, only about 1 in 10 Chin in the Myanaung, Ingapu, and Kyangin townships are able to speak and read in their indigenous language and many of them are elders in the community.²⁶⁴ The banning of ethnic celebrations and language has had an effect on the music of the Chin in Burma as well. When Chin National Day was allowed to be resumed in 2013, Burma Chin mentioned that many did not understand the lyrics of the Chin national and folksongs being presented on Chin National Day.²⁶⁵ Zung Chin, a Chin art student from Yangon, states that, “There are many gifted poets, poetess[es] and writers as well. Unfortunately, we are not allowed to publish books or produce films and songs in our own language. Even if we get permission, it is still limited.”²⁶⁶ Many youth also had to refer to recorded media of dances in order to learn how to perform them since the oral line of transmission had been broken in many places for 25 years.²⁶⁷ I found this statement in Zin’s article particularly interesting since the few performances shown by the sources listed above seemed to follow almost an exact event format, dance presentation, and often used the same recorded music that I saw on Chin National Day in Indianapolis as well as in the many diaspora videos on YouTube. *Chinland Guardian* journalist Thawng Zel Thang states that diaspora Chin

²⁶² Zung Chin, “Thinking About My Identity: Reflections of a Young Chin Woman,” *Chinland Guardian*, July 8, 2011, <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/commentary-opinion/item/328-thinking-about-my-identity-reflections-of-a-young-chin-woman>.

²⁶³ Salai Thant Zin, “On Chin Day, Bittersweet Reflections on a Fading Culture,” *The Irrawaddy*, February 24, 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/feature/chin-day-bittersweet-reflections-fading-culture.html>.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ Zung Chin, *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ Salai Thant Zin, *Ibid.*

have the freedom and the ability to maintain and promote Chin cultural practices and traditions.²⁶⁸ Zung Chin states, “I strongly believe that the new generation of the Chin Diasporas, who flee their native places and get educated in foreign countries, will one day come back and lead us into a better future. They are the ‘treasured’ jewelry of Chinland.”²⁶⁹

Chin National Day in Indianapolis included speakers of Chin dialect, music in Chin language, and ChinTV media presented on the Internet in Chin. Since the remnant/Burma Chin community is not extremely active in online posts, the form of communication between homeland and diaspora through the Internet functions differently than with the Karen. The banning of indigenous language in education and publication as well as the banning of the celebration of Chin National Day for 25 years has greatly impacted the transmission of cultural and musical practices in many remnant Chin communities. The reinstatement of Chin National Day in 2013 led to the use of media by Chin youth as a way to learn dances and revive Chin National Day celebrations. Since there are multiple similarities in the Chin National Day procedure in Burma, based on the few videos I was able to find, and within the diaspora, it is quite possible that the Internet is serving as cultural archive and mode of transmission of cultural heritage back to Chinland. One of the biggest challenges facing members of Chin State and its diaspora is the issue of assimilation into majority/mainstream cultures in the countries in which these communities reside. The producers of, and participants in, diasporic social media are major contributors to the maintenance of cultural, ethnic, and national identity among the Chin.

²⁶⁸ Thawng Zel Thang, “As Diaspora Chins Celebrate Cultural Event, Uncertainty Looms for those Living Inside Burma,” *Chinland Guardian*, October 5, 2011, <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/news/item/1163-as-diaspora-chins-celebrate-cultural-event-uncertainty-looms-for-those-living-inside-burma>.

²⁶⁹ Zung Chin, *Ibid.*

Chin National Day Conclusions

Chin National Day is celebrated and maintained in the diaspora for multiple reasons including the practice and maintenance of Chin culture, expressing unity and solidarity with Chin people both in Chin State and worldwide, and as political statements of ethno-nationalist identity and protest over the fact that Chin National Day as a celebration of Chin identity that is sovereign and separate from that of Burman identity has not been permitted within the borders of Chin State until recently. Technology is playing a large role in the Chin community by reproducing national symbols and dance both visually and audibly and by maintaining language. These symbols, musics, and language/poems express ideas of homeland, persecution, unity and solidarity, life in exile, and expressions of an idealized or hoped-for Chinland. Many of the national dances performed during Chin National Day include equal numbers of male and female performers as well as exact and unified movements further reflecting the themes of unity expressed in Chin National Day. This unity is also expressed online in the few comments posted. In response to the uploading of the video “65th Chin National Day, 2013 in Yangon,” a commenter that I am identifying as Bless responded, “We are one in Chin and One in Christ. God bless all of Chin People.”²⁷⁰ Uploading Chin National Day to the Internet serves two functions: the creation of a larger community of diasporic Chin and the formation of a cultural and musical archive for remnant Chin who are seeking to access and regain aspects of their heritage lost in the long decades of Burmanization of the Chin people.

Chapter 3 Conclusions

Karen New Year in Fort Wayne and Chin National Day in Indianapolis are examples of how both the Karen and Chin are representing themselves as a culturally united people.

²⁷⁰ Thawng Siangpa, Ibid. The screen name has been altered in consideration of privacy.

Interviews with members of both communities demonstrate the conceptualization of both of these events on a global scale in which Karen and Chin State exist both as a physical homeland within the borders of Burma as well as in an expanded form in which all the diasporic communities are connected through the performance of these events worldwide. Part of this maintenance of connectivity is through the uploading of photos and videos of event performances and music to online social media sites, especially YouTube. Both events included national symbols, music and dances, and written and sung poetry that serves to create solidarity between diaspora and homeland through the expression of themes of persecution, exile, the beauty of home, representations of history, and the idealization of Chin and Karen State as the ought to be in a world without poverty, strife, and war. This idealized virtual nation is also emphasized through the connectivity between the diaspora and the home state. By reducing the perceived distance between the two groups, the diaspora, in a way, can come home and the homeland can be brought to the diaspora.

The act of performing national dances and songs that serve to promote solidarity as well as the act of posting these musical events online around the same time fit with Benedict Anderson's idea of unisonance. Anderson states that:

There is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – above all in the form of poetry and songs. Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance. Singing the Marseillaise, Waltzing Matilda, and Indonesia Raya provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community... How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us all but imagined sound.²⁷¹

²⁷¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983 [2006]), 145.

This idea of unisonance as expressed by Anderson can be found in the group singing of the Karen national anthem at Karen New Year and in the multiple postings of the *don* and bamboo dances as well as the Chin national dances such as *Cai lai zonh* and *Zawlkhaw sir*. The act of performing the same repertoire at the same time can also be expanded to mass media and the idea of viewing the same footage with a similar knowledge of unisonance; other people from the same nation are also watching and listening to this media.²⁷² Stuart Hall explains:

[Mass media] have progressively *colonized* the cultural and ideological sphere. As social groups and classes live...increasingly fragmented and sectionally differentiated lives, the mass media are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an ‘image’ of the lives, meanings, practices and values of *other* groups and classes; (b) for providing the images, representations and ideas around which the social totality, composed of all these separate and fragmented pieces, can be coherently grasped as a ‘*whole*.’²⁷³

In diasporic communities, mass media is also functioning as form of connection in which the fragmented members of a homeland can connect virtually and represent a whole. Anderson also mentions the idea of a fragmented nation, stating that when “substantial groups of people were in a position to think of themselves as living lives *parallel* to those of other substantial groups of people – if never meeting, yet certainly proceeding along the same trajectory...[they] imagine their communities as *parallel* and *comparable*.”²⁷⁴ Members of the Karen and Chin diaspora have relocated to disparate countries in which their travel and lived experiences as member within these new national communities are inherently unique to the social and political context of the host nation. They do, however, share a common homeland and the idea of parallel and comparable experiences as members of the same diaspora. On national holidays such as Karen

²⁷² Walid El Khachab, *Ibid*, 267.

²⁷³ Stuart Hall, “Culture, the media and the ‘ideological effect,’” in *Mass Communication and Society*, edited by James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (London: Sage Publications, 1979), 340. Quoted in Michael Frishkopf, ed., *Music and Media in the Arab World* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 117-118.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 188-192.

New Year and Chin National Day, cultural dances and musical performances recognizable as distinctly Chin and Karen are simultaneously uploaded to YouTube and Facebook from multiple communities around the globe. Anderson's unisonance is again reflected in the simultaneous performances of nationality represented through online music videos as statements of unity and pan-Karen/Chin identity.

Social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook are the connecting fibers that link Karen and Chin diasporic communities together and also serve as closer points of contact and communication with the homeland. The online Karen community includes posts from multiple diasporic communities as well as Karen State, which are then borrowed and quoted in Karen music videos that expand the sonic borders of the Karen nation to encapsulate all Karen, both in the diaspora and in Burma. These posts are not only reflections of the lived experiences of Karen-ness and Chin-ness in local communities, but also a reflection of a worldwide Chin and Karen experience through online communication, music video watching, and music clip borrowing.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Ethno-nationalist politics, and diasporic identities contribute to how online music media functions in Chin and Karen virtual communities. Online communication is a form of reterritorializing a deterritorialized people through creative and sonic place-making. The Karen and Chin communities in Indiana view themselves as part of a global community of Chin and Karen. Statements from individual interviews as well as from Chin TV also emphasized the importance of the Internet as part of cultural maintenance. Acts of online posting, viewing, sharing, and liking, all constitute types of communication around which Chin and Karen social and virtual communities form.

Virtual and in-person research has revealed that Karen and Chin online communities are mainly centered around two sources: exile news media and audio-visual social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook. These two sources are highly interrelated since news media is not only uploaded and shared through social media, but music videos also utilize many of the same techniques as exile news to establish a sense of Karen-ness or Chin-ness online. Music and music videos uploaded to social media allow Chin and Karen Internet users to affect the representation and interpretation of their culture, politics, and identity.²⁷⁵ Part of this representation of Karen-ness and Chin-ness is demonstrated through the wearing of traditional or national dress in music videos, speaking or singing in indigenous languages, and the presentation of culturally recognizable imagery such national instruments and landscapes. Other factors of representation online include the transmission of distinctly Chin and Karen transcripts such as defiance of Burmanization policies by maintaining, actively performing, and reading in indigenous language, promoting and maintaining ideas of persecution as a way to create solidarity between the

²⁷⁵ Michael Strangelove, *Ibid*, 4.

diaspora and homeland, utilizing the English language in some media forms and song lyrics to help garner sympathy from outsiders, and visualizing an ideal homeland free from strife.

Furthermore, the act of viewing, liking, sharing, posting, and personally interpreting online content are also acts of political and cultural representation as well as an expression of identity.

The above representations of identity, transcripts, and politics help to create Karen- and Chin-specific collective memories around a sense of place and reterritorialize the auditory space of the computer viewer into a distinctly Chin or Karen environment. In this way, the sharing of media through the medium of the Internet functions as a direct line of connection between multiple Karen and Chin diasporic communities and their homelands creating what Roger Rouse terms, “spatially extended relationships.”²⁷⁶ This technology also helps reduce the perceived distance between a diasporic community and its place of origin leading to what Kyra Landzelius terms a “sustainable identity construction.”²⁷⁷ Uploads that reflect the perspectives of Chin and Karen from various locations also assist in the transfer of lived experience and functions as a form of communication that allows for the formation of a larger construction, or shared imagination²⁷⁸, of what it means to be Karen or Chin. This larger construction forms an imagined and idealized virtual nation that cannot be otherwise realized.

Karen New Year and Chin National Day reflect this idea of shared imagination and the uploading of lived experience. Both events produced and emphasized themes of unity and nationalism that were reflected in the music, dancing, instruments, dress, and imagery utilized. Many people expressed identity by wearing culturally identifiable clothing, using national instruments such as the buffalo horn instruments (present in both Karen and Chin events) to

²⁷⁶ Roger Rouse, *Ibid*, 13-14.

²⁷⁷ Kyra Landzelius, *Ibid*, 20.

²⁷⁸ Robin Cohen, *Ibid*, 516.

reinforce ideas of nationality, and displaying images of Chin and Karen States to reinforce diasporic solidarity that serve as a link to a remembered, or imagined, homeland. The most often uploaded aspects of Karen New Year and Chin National Day were music and dance performances. Dance performances at Chin National Day and Karen New Year reinforce unity and community through their cultural origins as performances for community events, the inclusion of an equal number of male and female dancers, the unified or symmetrical motions and gestures of the dances, and, in the case of the Karen, the inclusion of members of Pwo and Sgaw Karen dancers.

Karen *hta* song-poems and Chin poetry, found on online exile media sites, are closely related to sung music forms at Karen and Chin events as well as popular music genres. These songs and poems express the themes of homeland, persecution, unity, and exile presented in Karen New Songs and Chin music videos discussed in Chapter 2. Unity is also reflected in online song and poem titles. The lyrics and verses of Chin and Karen poetry and song reflect the lived experiences of the artists in the diaspora and the homeland who share their music online.

Other forms of lived experience include the uploading of the *don* dance to YouTube. Though it has separate performance purposes in Karen State and the diaspora, the dance takes on a new context when uploaded to the Internet. Members of the Karen online community are re-interpreting these performance contexts by quoting clips from *don* dance videos and using them in Karen online popular music and New Song videos. The act of combining the two *don* dances with popular music genres serves to encompass Karen State and its diaspora within virtual, melodic borders. Finally, since Karen State is not sovereign, it exists as an ideal imaginary in both Karen State and in the diaspora. The posting of national imagery and the combining of the two versions of the *don* dance help represent that ideal within the online Karen community.

Chin songs uploaded to the Internet as discussed in Chapter 2 also displayed this creation of the ideal, but in terms of sharing the lived experiences of Chin National Day online, the Chin diasporic communities were the main contributors. This is not to say that remnant Chin are not actively engaged in online Chin National Day performances through the act of viewing. Since Chin National Day was banned in Burma for a 25 year period from 1988-2013 and since younger Burma Chin do not learn their indigenous languages in the school system, knowledge of song language and cultural dances used for Chin National Day in Chin State are being partially learned from media resources.

The varied sites of Facebook, YouTube videos, and exile media websites help created a shattered experience of virtual nationhood primarily based in the visual and the auditory. Since commentary and written dialogue is minimal among online Chin and Karen who are not part of the news media, the main form of daily, interactive communication occurs through music and music videos posted to YouTube and shared on Facebook. The posting of Karen- and Chin-specific musics and dances around the same time of year (Karen New Year and Chin National Day) as well as the mass viewing of certain musical themes and genres such as Karen New Songs, create a virtual form of Benedict Anderson's unisonality in which Chin and Karen Internet users can "experience simultaneity [in the] echoed [virtual] realization"²⁷⁹ of a unified and idealized online Karen and Chin State. Karen community elder in Fort Wayne and daughter of the founder of the Karen Revolution, Hti Mu, summarized this function in a conversation with me before the start of Karen New Year. She stated, "When I hear Karen music, I'm home."²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Ibid*, 145.

²⁸⁰ Hti Mu, Personal Interview, January 18, 2015.

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BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

DATE: December 17, 2014

TO: Karen Wijesekera

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [681288-2] Chin and Karen Diasporas in Virtual Space: Imagined and Sonic Borders to Preserve Ethnic and State Boundaries

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: December 16, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: November 23, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 100 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on November 23, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.