

Intergenerational relations and rural development among the Karen in Northern Thailand

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Abstract. This scholarly article provides a qualitative analysis of how rural development - in particular changing modes of production and learning - shapes inter-generational relationships among the Karen people in northern Thailand. Based on long-term ethnographic research with the Karen, the author argues that inter-generational relations and household inter-dependency give meaning to ethnic Karen peoples' aspirations for work and family life. The author explains how traditionally, during childhood transitions, Karen adults guide children and young people towards mastery of culturally relevant skills and technologies and discuss how social transformations and rural development in the last decades have led to major changes in Karen household economies and inter-generational relationships.

Keywords: Intergenerational relations, rural development, Karen, Thailand, ethnography

Introduction

The global economy impacts on social relationships, economic and cultural life at different places. The global and the local are always related, so there is a "simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations at all geographical scales, from the intimacy of the household to the wide space of transglobal connections" (Massey, 1994: 168). This also holds good for relations between the generations (Harper, 2016). This research article explores intergenerational solidarity and economic life of families in ethnic Karen communities in northern Thailand. Focusing on the micro-level of the family, I analyse how patterns of intergenerational solidarity express themselves through working activities inside and outside the household.

The article starts out with some reflections on the theoretical framework, methods and ethics that inform this research. This is followed by some background information about the Karen people who participated in this study. The main part of the article discusses my empirical findings. I argue that among the Karen people in northern Thailand, childhood transitions

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are about girls' and boys' increasing participation in family work. I explain how in a traditional Karen economy based on subsistence farming, learning of practical skills and knowledge was largely organised within families and communities. Through communal work, adults guided children and young people towards mastery of culturally relevant skills and technologies. Young peoples' activities were largely organised according to their age and gender. Next, the article discusses how social transformations and rural development in the last decades have led to major changes in Karen household economies and family life. Boys and girls access increasingly modern education and spend less time learning practical skills at home. The fourth part highlights how intergenerational relations and interdependency give meaning to ethnic Karen peoples' aspirations for work and family life. In participatory research exercises, boy and girls expressed their concern for the flourishing of their individual, family and community lives. For their transition to adulthood, Karen children and youth in my study are aiming for professional careers. They say they hope to marry, have children and contribute with their skills and knowledge to economic processes within their families, village and regional communities. In this way they realise intergenerational solidarity at the micro, intermediate and macro levels of society.

Research concepts, methods and ethics

Around the world, intergenerational solidarity is a characteristic of family life. Yet, most theories of justice have difficulties including children: while individuals have rights and obligations in national and international legislation, to preserve society and let it flourish, there is no special emphasis on the parent-child relationship. Religious debate tends to be sensitive to the obligations of children to their parents. Even there, reciprocal obligations between different generations in families find less attention (Arrow, 2006).

In this article, I understand the word 'generations' as representing objective positions within a continuum of human development. 'Generations' can mean the parents or grandparents of research participants, their children or grandchildren. Intergenerational relations either show solidarity between the generations, or neglect it. Solidarity between generations can be conceptualised in various ways at the micro, intermediate and macro levels of society. At the micro-level, we can focus on inter-personal relations and on the different ways in which one generation may or may not be supportive of their seniors and juniors. At the intermediate level, inter-generational solidarity could relate to a particular social institution, like a work place or public school. We could then ask how far participation in work or school activities encourage solidarity between boys and girls, men and women of different socioeconomic groups. At the macro-level, 'solidarity' could relate to the consideration that a given generation manifests consciously or unconsciously towards the future of the mankind. Food, security and fertility would be examples. Importantly, macro, intermediate and micro levels of society are interrelated: an individual can be actively involved in all three levels at the same time. Therefore, a complete analysis of intergenerational solidarity would need to pay attention to all levels of society and see how these operate simultaneously in the lives of different individuals (Donati, 2002; Archer, 2004).

In Thailand, intergenerational relations are structured according to seniority. It is important to know the age and profession of a person, to understand whether an encounter requires senior or junior treatment. The Thai terms *pii* (senior) and *noong* (junior) derive from kinship language. Although they originally signify genealogical relations, the terms extend to the structure of wider society formed of Thai and other ethnic groups (Ewers Andersen, 1979/80; Kemp, 1984; Siriphon, 2008; Terwiel, 1984). A senior is perceived as older, stronger and more experienced, which in turn implies a superior social status. A junior is seen to be younger, weaker, less experienced and of lower status. Typical examples of senior-junior relations are parents and children, teachers and students, richer and poorer households. Importantly, these relations are reciprocal and entail social obligations and benefits for both parties. The junior pays respect and obedience to the senior, while the senior, in turn, returns these respectful signs through benevolent acts, thus supporting the welfare of juniors. In everyday life, verbal and non-verbal behaviour express seniority. The principle of seniority further applies to patronage relations. This means unequal social, economic and political exchanges between two parties of different status, such as richer and poorer households. They are not legally codified and last as long as both sides benefit from the agreement. Political patronage indicates reciprocal obligations and this often encompasses mutual assurance and aid, as well as validation of social status.

Thus, senior-junior relations permeate all levels of society, ranging from the intimacy of the household to national and international politics (Jolliffe, 2016). This becomes apparent when analysing individual life course aspirations and how they fit into a wider network of social relations:

Aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from a larger cultural norm. Aspirations are never simply individual...They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life' (Appadurai, 2004 : 67).

This means, as individuals identify ways to reach their own good, they become aware of the need to cooperate with others in a way that is mindful of their personal attempts to achieve their individual goods. Therefore, the making and sustaining of such networks of giving and receiving at different institutional settings - e.g. households, schools, work place - is crucial since the good of each can only be pursued through intergenerational solidarity - that is, in communion with the good of others (MacIntyre, 1999). Focussing on the Karen people in Thailand, this research article provides empirical evidence for cooperation between the generations as a way towards individual and communal flourishing.

Throughout this study, I opted for an ethnographic multi-method approach to understand how changing modes of production and learning shape intergenerational relations and life course aspirations (Wyness, 2012). My qualitative research methodology is particularly apt in capturing the Karen peoples' diverse experiences of social mobility, intergenerational relations and life course within a changing society. Data presented in this article stems from my long-term ethnographic fieldwork with Karen ethnic minorities in the highlands and lowlands of northern Thailand. The empirical findings presented in this research article are

based on 14 months of fieldwork in Chiang Mai province, northern Thailand. My first fieldwork trip covered a period of nine months between November 2007 and July 2008. During this time, I spent two months largely in Chiang Mai improving my Thai language skills and exploring potential research sites. In late December 2007, I moved to Huay Tong village, Mae Wang district, Chiang Mai Province for seven months of village-based fieldwork. Other fieldwork sites included Mae Ta La village (Mae Chaem district), Ban Kad (Mae Wang district), Chiang Mai city, as well as a range of other highland villages mostly in Mae Wang district but also in the surrounding areas. A second and third field trip comprised a period of three months between July and September 2009 (second field trip) and a period of two months between November 2013 and January 2014 (third field trip). In March 2015, I spent another week visiting Chiang Mai and meeting research participants. These subsequent visits allowed me to follow up key issues that emerged from my initial round of data analysis. Also, I learned about important changes in their lives. This added a temporal dynamic to my study on intergenerational relations, migration and economic life among the Karen.

My engagement with Karen children and adults is guided by the underlying premise that people of all ages are valid research participants, capable of accounting for their lives in relation to others such as peers, family members, teachers, and colleagues at work. Inspired by ethnographers working on intergenerational relationships, I opted for a combination of qualitative research methods to enable maximum participation and enhance the dynamic of the research process. Through interviews and the contributing remarks of the participants, I examined inter-generational relationships, in particular through focusing on children's working and learning activities. In addition, I engaged children and young people in participatory research exercises (both as individuals and in groups) to gather more in-depth information about their life course aspirations. My sample at Huay Tong (my major fieldwork site) included, in 2008, 24 boys and 21 girls of between 11 to 17 years of age, as well as 46 household members, teachers and fellow villagers. While it was possible to catch up with some of them when revisiting Huay Tong in 2013, several research participants had migrated out of the village for study and work.

At all stages of fieldwork, research assistants helped with translations. The highlands of northern Thailand are multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious. The Karen in Mae Wang province, and in my study village Huay Tong, speak Skaw Karen as their mother tongue and Thai as a second language. Throughout my fieldwork, I continued to improve my spoken Thai and Skaw Karen in everyday life and developed broad conversational skills in Thai. In addition, I found that non-verbal communication can sometimes be equally important and revealing than verbal discourse. Ethical issues have been treated thoughtfully throughout the whole research process of fieldwork preparation, data gathering, analysis and representation of research findings. Having said that, there are limits to how much any individual can grasp of other cultures. I accept the limits my culture places on me in understanding Karen culture, and ask only for acknowledgement that I have made every effort to be fair-minded in my research.

Research context

The ethnographic study on intergenerational solidarity and economic life among the Karen is situated in the geographical context of Chiang Mai province, northern Thailand. The term 'Karen' includes around 20 subgroups of Karennic speaking peoples who live at different places in the world. Therefore, there exists much cultural, socio-political and religious diversity between the Karen of different generations and at different locations. There are five to seven million Karen in Burma and an estimated number of 400,000 Karen who are born in Thailand. In addition, by September 2016, 79.6 per cent of the 103, 366 displaced persons in camps at the Thai-Burma border are ethnic Karen (The Border Consortium, 2016). The Karen people settled in the highlands of northern Thailand around 1804. They mostly live in the northern and western parts of the country, particularly in the provinces of Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son and Tak. My major fieldwork site, Huay Tong village, is located 1,010 metres above sea level in Mae Win sub-district, upper Mae Wang district, Chiang Mai province. In January 2014 Huay Tong village had 120 households and 586 registered residents. Karen households are generally composed of a nuclear family, and are matrilineal (that is, married couples reside with or near the wife's parents). Women hold a relatively strong position within the family and men are conventionally associated with ritual and public life (Mischung, 1984). Social relationships are structured according to the principal of seniority:

Karen frequently talk of their relations with others in terms of kinship, which may be a reference to the real facts of marriage or descent, may refer to a myth, or may refer to closeness of social relationships regardless of genealogical connections (Kunstadter, 1979 : 137).

Religion is an important element for Karen peoples' identity. The majority of Karen in Thailand are Buddhists, 20-30 per cent are Christians and many Karen practice animist ancestor worship (Worland & Vaddhanaphuti, 2013). In general, Karen people of different faith live peacefully together.

Agricultural transition and expansion of the cash economy in the highlands of northern Thailand are intimately linked to state development projects. Traditionally, ethnic Karen villagers have been engaging in seasonal subsistence wet rice farming. Wet rice farming tells of the interdependence of households and communities. A system of intergenerational co-operation ensures that the whole community manages their rice production in due time. The cash economy entered the lives of the ethnic Karen people in Mae Wang through the British teak companies. By the 1930s Karen men and youth were working largely for British logging companies, and from the early twentieth century until the late 1950s they worked for other national logging companies (Elliot, 1978). Against the backdrop of the Vietnam war and rising international concern for poppy production in the Mekong area, the Thai King established in 1969 the first *Royal Projects* in the highlands of northern Thailand (Leblond, 2010). Facilitated by infrastructure improvements, the cash economy thus expanded in the highlands while subsistence agriculture gradually diminished.

It can be argued that state and royalty sponsored development has improved lifestyles in many highland locations. Many villages welcome the expansion of infrastructure and state schools and inclusion in national development processes:

Rather than being swamped by commercialism, Karen communities appear to be exploring paths of market oriented diversification that support regularly under-producing paddy and upland rice systems (Walker, 2001 : 154-155).

Nevertheless, the developmental pace remains uneven. As a consequence, some villages, like Huay Tong, are well connected to national markets and education systems, while other places lack access to modern institutions. Such inequality because of location, in turn, explain diversity of life course experiences among Karen minority people residing at different places.

Childhood transitions and work in the family

In Thailand, relations between adults and children are reciprocal. Work during childhood is considered neither morally dubious, nor harmful. Instead, the work of girls and boys forms part of their cultural learning at home and at school. Children learn through watching, listening, and practice. Shared working activities are important for liaising and thus confirm intergenerational relationships.

Also among the Karen people, intergenerational learning takes place from early childhood on as children assist adults with simple chores in the household economy. Children come to be familiar with the gendered social roles of adults from an early age. Among the Karen people, children mostly play until around the age of five. The play of young children often consists in imitating adult behaviour through observation and practice: 'they watch the mother, then they are doing'. Toddlers accompany others in the rice field, and play alongside their working families. Boys also 'play' catching birds, imitating the hunting activities of their older peers. Mothers ask toddlers to go with them to take care of the buffalo or just stay around while they prepare food with an older sibling, thus children learn through watchful participation in the cultural routine of cooking.

Until the age of five, children help with washing dishes and fetching water. Then, around the age of seven, children's contribution to household chores increases gradually. Girls spend much more time in the household than boys. Earlier in life they start to help their elders with household tasks such as fetching water, cooking rice, washing dishes, clothes and cleaning. They also know how to wash themselves and their own clothes. Some girls care for younger siblings, for example, by taking them along when playing with their peers. Boys work less inside the household than girls. They contribute to providing for the household, for example, through fishing with spears, as well as hunting snakes or birds with slingshots. Boys are aware of the privilege of being able to move around, and often value it highly. At the age of 10 or so, children are considered to have achieved their first responsibilities, whereby instead of just cooking the rice, girls are by that age entrusted with

the preparation of side dishes. This way, adults convey to children the idea of contributing little bits to the successful completion of larger working processes. With the onset of their teenage years, working responsibilities increase. By the age of 12, girls and boys are fairly familiar with the gendered mastery of culturally valued tools and technologies. Weaving is a traditionally female activity, whilst boys learn to work with the plough and hunting tools such as slingshots and guns. Most girls learn weaving from their grandmothers, mothers, other female relatives or foster mothers.

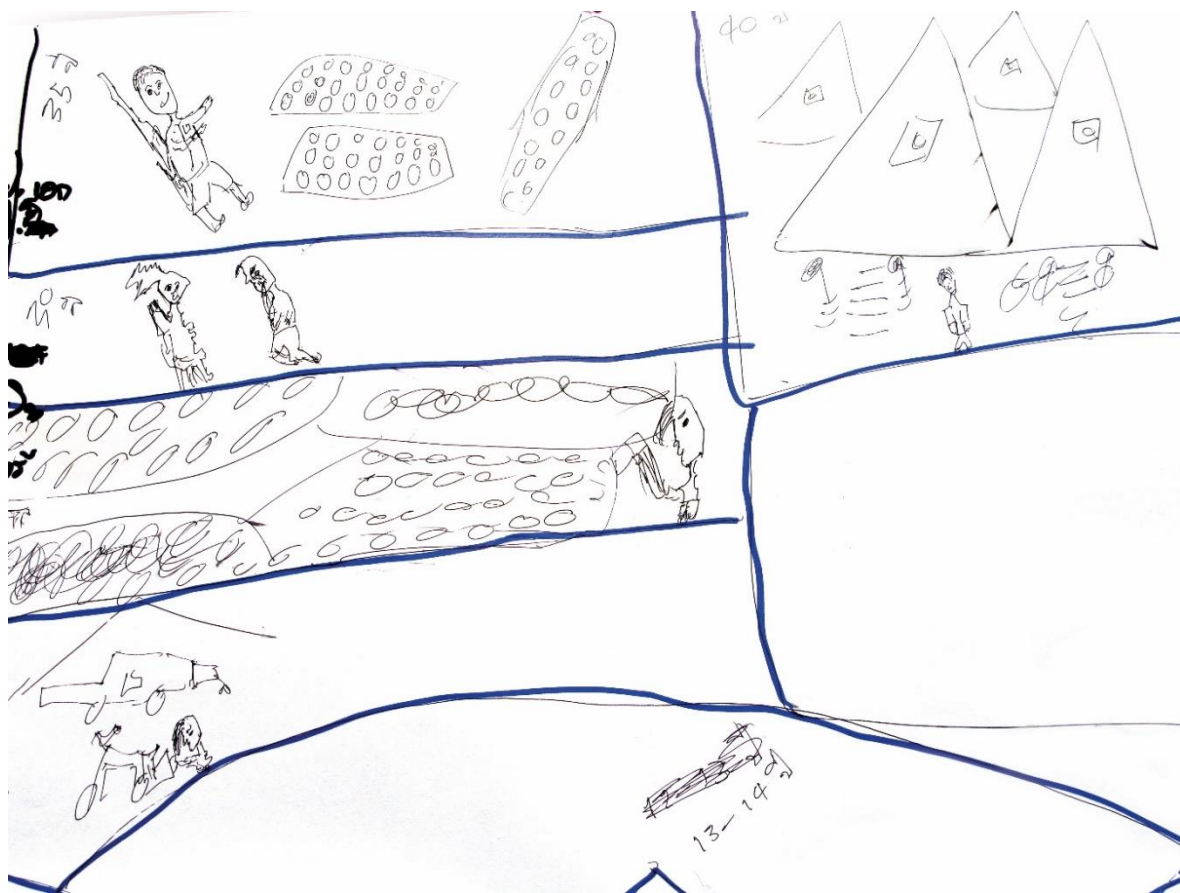
Sometimes, girls produce a garment together with a more experienced weaver. In general, girls are considered more mature than boys. At the age of 12, boys and girls also participate in unpaid seasonal agricultural work on villager's fields. The hot and rainy seasons are the most labour-intensive periods for rice production and children's working assistance is highly demanded. School holidays cover cultivation and harvesting periods, thus allowing children to fully support their household's subsistence economies. Rural development processes impact on young peoples' transition to adulthood. Among the Karen, a youth becomes an adult when he is economically independent. As outlined above, in a subsistence economy, children reached the status of economic independence of adults by the age of 12. This age usually coincided with mastery of culturally relevant working skills, such as weaving and ploughing. In an expanding market economy, rising educational aspirations and growing household need for cash, young peoples' adult status is linked with their ability to earn an income. Today, in Huay Tong, children's financial contributions to the household income are increasingly important. My study found children around the age of 15 assuming responsibility for income generation at different occupations. Therefore, processes of uneven development in rural mountainous areas of northern Thailand impact on patterns of intergenerational working activities among the Karen.

Intergenerational relations and rural development

In my study village Huay Tong, commercialized agriculture was introduced in 1978 through the *Royal Agricultural Project* (Maniratanavongsiri, 1999: 152). Since then, intergenerational working activities in the family have changed. For instance, because of the scheduled working hours at the *Royal Agricultural Project*, women in Huay Tong find it difficult to prepare food in the evening. Very often, this task is handed over and becomes the responsibility of teenage daughters. Moreover, with most adults working at the Royal Project, hunting and gathering tasks have been delegated to boys and girls, thus creating new intergenerational responsibilities children have towards their parents. Most households in Huay Tong rely on the help of teenagers to earn cash income. Karen teenagers in my study are aware of the economic value of their work as contributions to household economies. They usually combine their studies with income generation for their households. Assisting their parents adds value and meaning to their work and makes them feel well. In their own words, "I like it, because I can help mother, and she does not have to feel tired. I feel well when I can help mother, it makes me be someone who is not lazy".

Thus, during the time of fieldwork most high school girls in the village found paid employment with the Royal Project during weekends and school holidays. Especially during labour-intensive periods, such as the rainy season, intergenerational solidarity is important and mothers may ask daughters to cover their working hours at the *Royal Agricultural Project*. That way, the mothers are free to transplant rice in their own fields. Moreover, commercialized agriculture at the *Royal Agricultural Project* is also perceived as a 'safe haven' for unemployed youth. Dei's life course drawing illustrates this.

Figure 1: Dei's life course, June 2008



In 2008 Dei was 16 years old and had just graduated from lower secondary school. At that time, he said he would like to move to the lowlands and learn to be a mechanic. In addition, he said he would be interested in studying agriculture academically in order to become a researcher in this domain. He said that during his studies he would stay a while outside the village. Yet, he expected to be unemployed when he was 30. After losing his job, Dei explained he would return to Huay Tong for unpaid work. For example, in his drawing he portrayed himself at 35 roaming the forest as a hunter equipped with a gun. This indicates

he knows how to earn a livelihood in the forest. At the age of 40, he anticipated being employed at the Royal Agricultural Project. When I revisited the village in December 2013, Dei's twin sister said he was working in a hotel in Chiang Mai. He occasionally sends money to support their mother. So, intergenerational solidarity and interdependence between girls' and boys' work and their family and village economies are very important in young peoples' life ambitions.

Intergenerational solidarity and life course aspirations

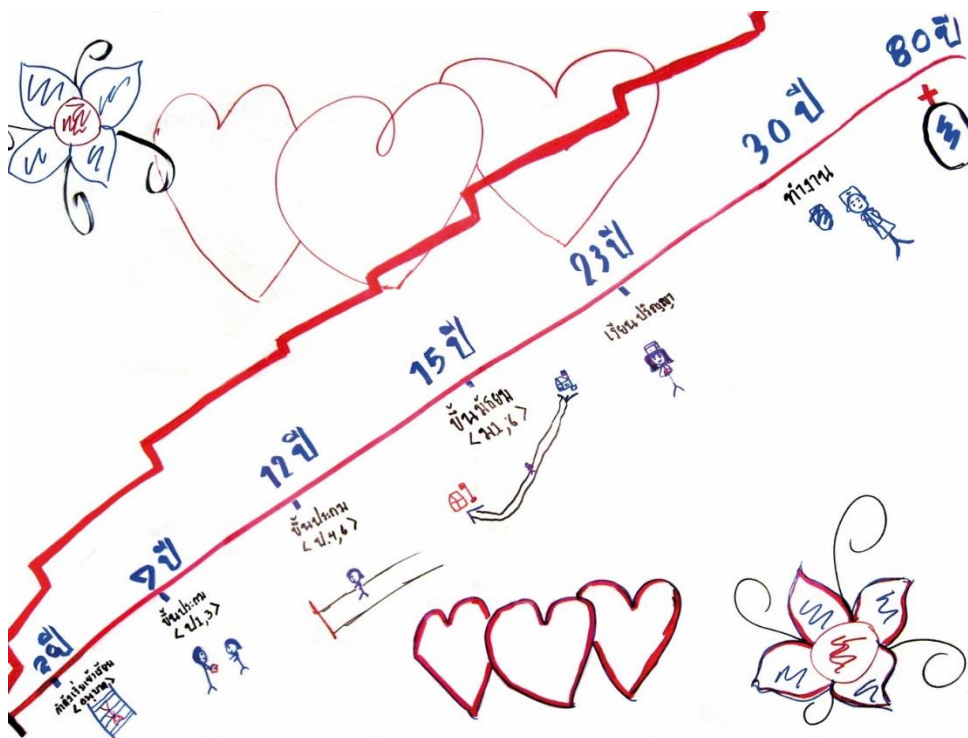
As outlined above, Karen girls' and boys' economic activities always fit into a wider socio-political context of family and community life. Accordingly, their life ambitions are interdependent with the economic needs of their families and communities. Individual case studies highlight how the context (whether political, or economic or social, or cultural), shapes young peoples' intergenerational relationships and aspirations in different households and places. For instance, Bee's life course drawing clearly illustrates intergenerational relationships during working activities in his past childhood and his future adult life.

Figure 2: Bee's life course drawing, June 2008



According to his life course drawing, in 2008 Bee expected to finish his studies and learn the skills of a mechanic in the lowlands. Afterwards, he planned to return to Huay Tong and to work for the *Royal Agricultural Project*. At the same time, he wanted to continue working with his parents, thus contributing to the household income. Furthermore, he said he would like to earn an academic doctorate and afterwards cultivate his own vegetables and keep cows as well as chickens. He emphasised he wanted to have two cars and a house. The idea of two cars indicate an aspiration towards upward social mobility because his family owned one already, thus considered as one of the economically better-off villagers. Revisiting Huay Tong four years later in 2013, his mother told me Bee was indeed continuing his studies outside the village and visited the family regularly. Nok also planned to migrate for education and work out of her village.

Figure 3: Nok's life course drawing, May 2008.



According to her drawing, in 2008 Nok planned leaving the village temporarily for studies and work in town. She envisaged a school transition to secondary school in Chang Dao district. After graduation from high school she considered continuing her studies at a nursery school in the city. At the age of 30 she thought she would work as a nurse. Nok also signaled a return to Huay Tong, where she said she would like to live her adult life. Finally, Nok also reveals in her drawing that she hopes to make her final transition – from life on earth to life eternal – in Huay Tong and be buried in her home village. When revisiting Huay Tong in December 2013 I met Nok who just returned to her village for

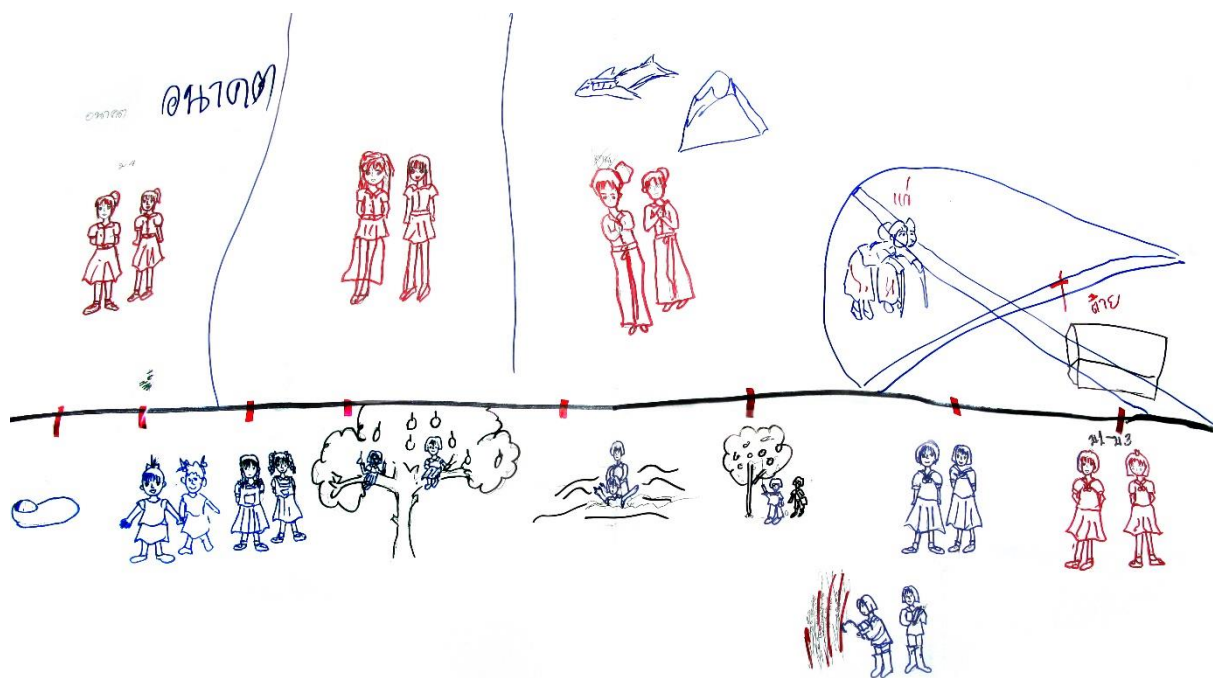
Christmas with her family. We saw each other during Christmas celebrations in the village and this is when she told me she was attending 11th grade of higher secondary school in Ban Kad – a different school than she thought she would attend back in 2008.

The case studies of Nau Eu and her friend Nau Mugi also illustrate how life courses may develop in different ways. I met Eu during fieldwork in 2008. She is the second of three siblings in a Buddhist-Christian household in Huay Tong. Her parents cultivate their own garden and rice field. Eu's family earns additional income thanks to Eu's mother's employment with the Royal Agricultural Project and some production of alcohol for sale in the village. Since I met Eu in 2008 her working and learning activities are connected to the needs of her family. Intergenerational solidarity is particularly pronounced between Eu and her mother, a Catholic Christian married to a Buddhist husband. Like her mother, Eu is a Catholic and participates in Buddhist ceremonies when visiting members of her father's side of the family. Her father, by contrast, is a burden to the family. He used to consume drugs and drinks a lot of alcohol. Since childhood Eu's working activities have been interdependent with her home and related to the wider national economy. For example as a teenager, in order to help her mother, Eu took on a lot of economic responsibilities. At home, she was responsible for preparing food. She downplayed her own cooking talents, saying that she only made rice. However, once we became friends, she invited me for evening meals and I learned that she was also in charge of preparing side dishes, a skill usually reserved to mature women in a Karen household. When Eu cooked, she sent her father on errands. This highlighted to me her ability to take decisions.

Eu's economic activities were also linked to the wider regional and national economy. During weekends, she helped with income generation at the Royal Agricultural Project. She replaced her mother, for example, in working with saplings in a greenhouse. This allowed her mother to cultivate their family garden. During school holidays, Eu accompanied her mother for half-day work in their garden. Eu's mother valued her daughter's working activities. As recognition for her solidarity, but also as a sign of confidence, Eu was granted by her mother certain freedoms other girls her age did not enjoy. For example, Eu was allowed to use the family's mobile phone. Access to the telephone enhanced her social status among her peers. Eu used the mobile phone to build up social relations with her peers, e.g. lending the phone to her girlfriends, who otherwise had no way to make or receive calls. At Huay Tong school, Nau Eu was a good student and very responsible. After graduating from Huay Tong lower secondary school, Eu made the transition to a high school in Mae Sot (Tak Province) in May 2009. In this way, she left her home village Huay Tong and moved as a foster child into the household of her older maternal uncle in Mae Sot. This uncle was a widower with two adopted Karen children from Myanmar. One of the children was a handicapped girl on crutches. Since she and Eu were the same age, Eu was called to help in the household and befriend the girl. As a foster child, Eu cleaned the laundry, cooked rice and side dishes and drove her peers on the motorbike to school. Because of the geographic distance between Mae Wang and Tak province, it was impossible for Eu to return to her home village, except for major seasonal school holidays.

In 2008, Eu and her friend Mugi took part in research exercises where those interviewed actively participate by suggestions. Together they prepared a drawing of a life course line that tells about their ambitions for adult life.

Figure 4: Eu and Mugi's life course line, June 2008.



When I met Eu again between November 2013 and January 2014 she was enrolled in a teacher training programme at the Buddhist Wat Chedi Luang in Chiang Mai. Her ongoing formation has been made possible through a church-based scholarship programme run by the Jesuit Order in Chiang Mai. Eu was specializing to teach the Thai national language as a school subject in primary and lower secondary schools and she told me that with this formation she would hope to find employment in the highlands and help Karen children to learn Thai. As in the past, Eu still had a very good relationship with her mother and tried to visit her home village every weekend. During these visits, she assisted her parents with household tasks and income generation at the Royal Agricultural Project. When we met again in late 2013, Eu was 21. She told me she is not yet thinking about marriage and childbearing because she wants to finish her studies first. By contrast, her friend Nau Mugi married a man from Mae Hong Son in December 2013. She was already five months pregnant. Mugi and her husband usually work in Chiang Mai where they help caring for the elderly and providing income. They also support relatives in the Karen villages in the highlands. Their wedding was in the mountains because according to Karen custom a

wedding takes place in the bride's home village, followed by a ritual visit to the groom's native village. So compared to their aspirations in 2008, both Eu's and Mugi's lives turned out differently than planned. While both emigrated to receive secondary education to different places, none of them became an air hostess. Instead, Mugi married and prepares for motherhood, while Eu continues to be enrolled in tertiary education in order to become a teacher of the national Thai language and assist younger generations with Thai.

My research evidences how Karen families aspire for their children's secondary and if possible even tertiary education and children emigrate to different locations and institutions of learning. Despite this general trend of emigration, my research suggests that young people maintain a sense of intergenerational solidarity. While employment situations in cities and towns are unstable, intergenerational relations are safety nets which allow young people to aspire to return for marriage and childbearing to their native villages to support their household and village economies through paid and unpaid economic activities.

Conclusion

In this article the author explored intergenerational solidarity and the economic life of families among the Karen people in northern Thailand. It was argued that through participation in practical working activities, Karen people enact intergenerational solidarity at the micro, intermediate and macro levels of society. Empirical data evidences showed that from early childhood, Karen adults guide children towards increasing participation in culturally valued working activities. Throughout their childhood transitions, girls and boys learn to assume increasing responsibility at home and at school. As the economy changes, likewise young people's economic contributions to their families and local communities change. Indeed, following the lives of research participants allowed the researcher to understand young men and women's awareness of their growing intergenerational responsibility. In order to fulfil intergenerational responsibilities in their interdependent households, young Karens hope to find paid employment in an insecure Thai labour market. Yet, lifetime ambitions can be difficult to realize, because of the Karen people's marginal status (socially, economically and politically) in Thai society.

Therefore, in this research young people have no illusions about their transition to adulthood. They showed acute awareness of family, household and community needs, as well as of structural constraints within an insecure labour market. Having completed secondary education, students increasingly enter tertiary education. Sometimes young people stay in the city and work. After completing their formation, many say they plan for marriage and childbearing in their rural highland communities and transmit their newly acquired knowledge and skills to older and younger people in their village. Through this transmission of knowledge and experience, young Karen adults participate in local, regional and national processes of economic development. In this way, inter-generational solidarity is reinforced: at the micro level of the family; the intermediate level of the village economy; the macro-level of the nation state. More research is needed to explore the impact of fertility decline and population ageing on intergenerational relationships in rural communities in northern Thailand.

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