Dr. Prasert Rangkla, recent PhD graduate from the Department of Anthropology at the College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU, was awarded the Australian Anthropology Society prize for best Anthropology PhD thesis of 2013 for his dissertation Vernacular Refugees: Displaced Karen, Self-settlement and Non-institutional Protection in the Thailand-Myanmar Borderlands, produced under the supervision of Dr. Philip Taylor.

Dr. Prasert's dissertation focuses on the vicissitudes of a group of Buddhist Karen, living outside the context of the refugee camps in the Mae Sot area (northern Thailand). The prize recognizes this work as a substantial contribution to the study of the borderlands between Thailand and Myanmar.

Abstract

This thesis addresses the situation of Karen refugees in Mae Sot, a town on Thailand’s border with Myanmar. It focuses on the specific case of Buddhist Karen who originate from the Hpa-an plain of Karen State, Myanmar, and who have settled outside the refugee camp system. This study investigates how relations of refuge are socially constructed in an intercultural non-institutional context. Drawing upon life history interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in a number of Mae Sot neighbourhoods, it delineates a mode of refugeedom which is locally created in the conjuncture between local perspectives on refuge and the universal notion of refugees, and through recourse to traditional and modern resources and idioms.

Rather than seeing refugees as victims, or as autonomous agents who become an objectified target of relief, this thesis emphasises that refuge is culturally constituted in social relations of the borderland. In adopting self-settlement, Hpa-an Karen people’s access to security is intimately intertwined in the host-refugee relationship. Vernacular refuge is identified as the provision and receipt of informal and officially unrecognised forms of protection that are nonetheless intelligible cross-culturally as relations of refuge. These relations entail reciprocity, negotiation and hierarchy, nonetheless they confer a degree of safety, stability and dignity. The notion of vernacular refugees provides an alternative to the obsessive search for durable solutions for displaced persons by illuminating the practical arrangements for security and protection which have emerged out of this refugee group’s struggle with powerful social forces.

In this study, I explore how conditions of displacement and refuge-seeking intersect with three subthemes: mobility, protection and place. The study traces Karen people’s cultural conceptions of suffering in Myanmar and its relevance in precipitating mobility toward Thailand. I go on to examine dynamics of
Karen’s access to protection on arriving at the Thai border and the genesis of the self-settlement option. My research reveals that this non-institutional form of protection is provided in relatively mundane and daily aspects of social life. Investigating domains of economic transaction and local administration, I argue that the potential for informal protection is embedded in the host-refugee relationship, both in sentiment-infused hierarchical employer-worker exchanges and in dyadic negotiations between local authorities and Karen residents.

Seeking to understand the Karen refugees’ sense of place, I explore Karen people’s active deployment of their cultural and religious repertoires to make a home in their new locality. Based on observations of the Karen wrist-tying ceremony, this study argues that a sense of individual well-being is reinforced by aesthetic and sensory experiences of ceremonial materials imbued with auspicious metaphors. I further pay attention to their Buddhist projects and practices and find that Karen locality is reconstituted by Buddhist cosmological symbols, protection from powerful beings and festive sociality. By exploring Karen reactions to options for durable resettlement and local integration, the study turns again to the issue of mobility and describes practical moves underway towards a post-refugee status through Karen people’s engagement in mobile and multi-sited livelihood strategies.