

Book Reviews

Materializing Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experiences among Karenni Refugees in Thailand (Studies in Forced Migration, Vol. 27).
By Sandra Dudley. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010, 188 pp.

Sandra Dudley has written a well-crafted narrative about the experience of displacement in a little-understood part of the world. *Materializing Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experiences among Karenni Refugees in Thailand* explores the cultural experience of forced migration among Karenni refugees from Myanmar living in jungle camps on the Thai side of the border. The book is based on her field research conducted in a refugee camp from 1996 to 1997 and her ongoing involvement with the Karenni refugees up to the present day. During the time she has spent collecting data, Dudley witnessed a shift in camp organization. While it started off in the early 1990s by being headed by the self-styled government-in-exile formed by the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), since 1998 it has come under the direct control of the Thai state with support from relief agencies. She also observed a shift in the camp's population; the earlier arrivals were comprised mostly of well-educated, Christian, and politically-conscious Karenni whose claim was "we are not refugees, we are revolutionaries", whereas the later arrivals have tended to be apolitical, uneducated, subsistence farmers from remote areas, who have become refugees as a result of the forced relocation policy violently enforced on the Burmese by the Tatmadaw since 1996. This complex, shifting demographic situation forms the backdrop to Dudley's central question: What does it feel like to be a refugee?

Unlike the recent literature on refugees, which has tended to view them as helpless, passive victims of circumstance, Dudley explores displacement by focusing on objects, places, sensory perception,

and conceptions of time and space. Aspects of material culture and embodiment perspectives, not usually associated with studies of forced migration, provide an insight into what it means to be a refugee. Central to her argument is the notion of “home-making” or “place-making practices” which for refugees are an integral part of dealing with displacement. Being forced to leave their land and the temporal rhythms of life associated with it, the Karenni refugees, Dudley claims, have had little choice but to attempt to make the refugee camp a “home”. Throughout the book, Dudley analyses the multiple ways in which Karenni refugees have sought for and imagined a sense of being “at home” in the refugee camps, through material forms, physical objects, domestic and ritual spaces.

The book’s introductory chapter outlines how the concepts of material culture and aesthetics can be applied to studies of displacement, followed by an introduction to the Karenni, a relatively little known group from Myanmar with a population smaller than the Karen. Chapter Two provides a concise and well-informed overview of the recent refugee situation in Thailand and the Karenni camps in the northernmost region of the country. Dudley problematizes the notion of “refugee-ness” by examining the shifting ways in which people come to perceive themselves as refugees. To feel like a refugee is not only rendered by the experience of living in the physical space of the camp, but also defined by the arrival circumstances and the length of time of stay in the camp. This perception of refugee-ness can also change over time, as the long-stay refugees observe the arrival of their kin and relatives at the camp as a result of the recent, violent situation inside Myanmar. This “bond of suffering” explains the shift in self-perception of the Karenni refugees; in their observation of their kin’s suffering, it triggers in them a sense of shared history and ethnicity. Chapter Three begins with a well-elaborated description of the refugees’ reasons for coming to the camp, and how these reasons contribute to the different ways in which they perceive their experiences and remember their past. In this chapter, Dudley attempts to understand how past experiences are recollected, how people and places left behind are remembered and reconstructed, and what is felt

about them. As a result of her conversations with the refugees, she states that stories of how they came to the camp are often recalled as a depersonalizing narrative. She later argues that their attempts to remove emotion and personal specificity from these narratives can be explained by their desire to emphasize the wider suffering of the Karenni people, as well as convey the Karenni situation to a broader, international audience. The chapters that follow discuss the manifestations of memory in terms of time and place, as refugees attempt to connect two zones disconnected in space (the refugee camp “here” and the pre-exile location “there”), and two eras separated in time (the displaced “now” and the pre-migration “then”), through the use of physical objects, festivals, and rituals.

The points Dudley raises in *Materializing Exile* are important and convincing. Clearly, things, objects, and landscapes possess “real” qualities that affect and shape both our perception of them and our cohabitation with them (Olsen 2003, p. 88). The Karenni refugees show, despite their confinement, that they appropriate and domesticate space through the interlinking of actions and material forms. While highlighting the significance of material culture in the relationship to the spaces around those who are displaced is one of the greatest strengths of the work, I found that it also leads to the most frustrating flaw in Dudley’s analysis. Because of her focus on things, objects, rituals, and other related place-making practices, the Karenni refugees are presented as somewhat frozen in time and space; they do nothing but “work hard to preserve a sense of continuity with ‘home’” (p. 117). Through aspects of material culture, we learn that the “process of continued identity-construction through suffering is of tremendous importance to someone who has lost connections to the past through forced displacement” (p. 47), but other aspects of their lifestyle, such as education, religion, and networks with the other camps and the outside world, are entirely neglected. Such a treatment of material culture, relating it to the single, thematic content of home-making, obscures our understanding that refugees too have a life — a life that is not just about “spending time reminiscing and longing for ‘home’ in the pre-exile place” (p. 156) — but one that is

intrinsically connected with the outside world through education, church organizations, as well as new media technologies. The other missing point I found is that Dudley failed to incorporate the already existing rich studies on refugees along the Thailand-Myanmar border. It is certain that references to these previous works would have gone a long way to strengthening the discussion. Despite these flaws, I would recommend this book to scholars engaged in debates about refugee life, or those whose interests include a study of material culture.

REFERENCE

Olsen, B. "Material Culture after Text: Re-Membering Things". *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 36, no. 2 (2003): 87–104.

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