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# **A singing people**

Choir singing among the Karen people  
in Northern Thailand and Burma



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## Dedication

This Minor Field Study, “A singing people” is dedicated to the students and staff at *Karen Kawthoolei Baptist Bible School and College* that was tragically destroyed by a fire on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2012.

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## 2. Abstract

This Minor Field Study was carried out in Thailand and Burma during June, July and August 2011. The aims of this study were to investigate the role and function of choir singing among the Karen people, an ethnic minority group mainly living in Northern Thailand and Burma. Choir singing in four-part harmony (i.e. soprano, alto, tenor and bass) is primarily done by Christian Karens.

The research material consists of 123 questionnaires, 25 semi-structured interviews and numerous unstructured observations, participant and non-participant. The informants have in this ethnography been asked about their background in choir singing and why they consider or do not consider it meaningful to be a part of a choir.

The questionnaires were handed out by students at three Theological Seminaries: one in Rangoon, Burma, one in Chiang Mai, Thailand and one in Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand. The interviews were predominantly made with choir leaders and teachers active within *The Karen Baptist Convention* in Thailand and Burma where most of the observations were made.

The results clearly show that the vast majority of informants find choir singing very meaningful for both individual and collective reasons. Religious and identity strengthening aspects of choir singing are evident in the results together with musical, social, educational and language strengthening factors.

Keywords: ethnography, choir singing, religious choir singing, Christian choir singing, the Karen people, Mae La Refugee Camp, Karen Kawthoolei Baptist Bible School and College, Karen Baptist Theological Seminary, Siloam Bible Institute

### 3. Introduction

*“At the end of the choir practice a young woman gets on stage in front of the massive choir consisting of more than 200 students at Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College. One of the schools’ four choir leaders, my newfound friend Hay Thay Ler Pwe, translates from Sgaw-Karen to English for me: the woman on stage is asking that the volume of the piano be decreased during the choir practices. The reason is that she does not yet know Sgaw-Karen so well and has difficulty hearing the lyrics of the songs when the volume of the piano is so loud.”*

Notes from my journal visiting Mae La Refugee Camp in July 2011

*Mae La Refugee Camp* is by far the largest refugee camp in Northern Thailand, located approximately 5 kilometres from the Thai-Burma border. According to *Thai Burma Border Consortium* (TBBC), a consortium working with displaced people from Burma, the camp had a population of around 1 100 people when it was initially established in 1984.<sup>1</sup> TBBC estimates that 2,9% of the camp’s current population of Burmese refugees are Burman, the dominating ethnic group of Burma, while 83,9% of the refugees belong to the ethnic group Karen.<sup>2</sup>

Many inhabitants of Mae La are born inside the camp. Others escaped from their villages in Burma along with their families when the Burmese Army came and burnt down their villages. They and their families would have been exposed to the Burmese Army's systematic rape of women while both men and women would have been used as slave labour including forced labour as porters. Inhabitants of Mae La camp have seen their family members, relatives and friends tortured, raped and killed by the Burmese Army.

Every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night from 6.30-8.30 pm choir practice is held for all students of Divinity<sup>3</sup> at *Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College*. 200-300 people gather in the open-air hall with tin roof plates. Since all houses in the camp are located nearby, sounds of the choir practice are heard by many of the camp’s approximately 50 000 inhabitants.

I imagine the Karen culture, perhaps even life in Burma and Thailand, to be unfamiliar to many Swedish readers of this thesis. For this reason I have chosen, in dialogue with my supervisor, to present a detailed background that will contribute to the understanding of general as well as specific aspects of what is the basis of this thesis: Karen culture and choir singing in Burma and Northern Thailand.

It is possible for readers to start reading this thesis from chapter 8 where the results are presented. If so, I encourage you to keep a parallel eye on or returning to the background after finishing reading the results.

<sup>1</sup> Thailand Burma Border Consortium: Camps: Mae Sot Area: Mae La – retrieved May 7, 2012

<sup>2</sup> Thailand Burma Border Consortium: *Programme report July to December 2011*: 63

<sup>3</sup> Studies of Divinity is the same as Theological studies.

## 4. Background

### 4.1 Personal background of the author

My interest in singing, specifically choir singing, has sprung from training and practising at the church where I have been an active member since my confirmation at the age of 14. Since my adolescence I have been involved in choir singing and conducting in different genres.

I was a student at *Betel Folkhögskola*, a folk high-school run by *The Baptist Union of Sweden* located in Stockholm, when I first heard about the Karen people. My friend Malin and I saw a poster on the school's notice board advertising for volunteers in Northern Thailand through the *Swedish Baptist Youth Fellowship*.<sup>4</sup> The volunteer programme was at that time funded mostly by trainee subsidies from *Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency* (SIDA). We applied and were accepted to be volunteers in Northern Thailand for 11 months starting June 2005. Arriving in Thailand, we first studied Thai for two months in Chiang Mai, the second largest city of Thailand and the largest in Northern Thailand. After our brief orientation in the Thai language, we worked for 9 months as English teachers among Christian Pwo-Karens in Mae Sariang, a town with some 10 000 inhabitants. Besides teaching English and working as youth and recreation leaders primarily at a Christian Pwo-Karen dormitory (called "a hostel"), we were privileged to visit around ten Karen mountain villages with our friends from the *Thailand Karen Baptist Convention* (TKBC). Travelling to these villages on winding mountain roads is very demanding especially for the drivers. With sometimes no less than ten people sitting or even standing on the loading platform of the jeep, these brave and skilled drivers are frequent users of both the horn and prayers.

In the villages we met some of the parents of our pupils from the dormitory. It was a real eye-opener for me to see the background and contexts of the pupils at the hostel and understand the gigantic educational steps they had taken. They have moved from small mountain villages with poor access to education to a town where Thai is the only language spoken and where using a Karen accent in market can lead to obvious jeers.

I remember my first 'aha' reaction while attempting to speak Thai to the father of a pupil after a Sunday service in the village church. He did not understand me at all and I learned that it is not out of the ordinary for Karens in the mountain villages of Thailand to lack knowledge of the Thai language as well as Thai citizenship, despite having lived for generations in the same place.

My time in Thailand was the first serious and long-term interaction with another culture. It was my first visit to Thailand and South-East Asia in general and my first ever encounter with the Karen people. Our time as volunteers among the Karens gave us the opportunity to join in meetings, celebrations and the annual conference for TKBC. Since our work was mostly among the Pwo-Karens it was at these events where I first encountered the choirs of the Sgaw-Karens. The strong and completely unafraid voices, the interesting harmonies and the co-ordinated and colourful hand-woven clothes that all choir members wore at these events made a great impression on me but as far as I can remember, I did not once during my time as a volunteer in Thailand hear any Pwo-Karen choir singing.

<sup>4</sup> *The Swedish Baptist Fellowship* was a Christian youth organization that is now called *equumenia*.

During the year in Thailand I became very interested in the situation of the Karens in the neighbouring country Burma. Reading and hearing about the Karen peoples' situation in Burma from people who were working for organizations such as *Thailand Burma Border Consortium* (TBBC) was heartbreaking. One of the most poignant and memorable moments during my volunteer period was when we were granted the opportunity to visit *Mae La Refugee Camp* and meet with the Reverend and principal of the *Karen Kawthoolei Baptist Bible School and College* (KKBBS). I was very surprised to see and hear the preparations for a piano recital during this visit. Young students were setting up keyboards in the assembly hall of the Bible school and practised the last bits of the 'Grade'-pieces they were soon to present for a jury in the expectant atmosphere. We could not stay for more than two hours that time but I still remember *Reverend Saw Simons'* introduction about when he and his wife arrived to the camp to set up the Bible school and College in 1984. At that time the population of the camp was around 2 000 people.

Some years after I returned to Sweden I became involved in the *Karen Swedish Community* (KSC), an organization supporting and promoting integration for Karens in Sweden while advocating recognition of and encouraging action towards the situation for Karen people in Burma. Through my involvement on the board of the KSC as a treasurer, I got to know many Karen people living in Sweden some of whom are among my close friends today.

Since 2005 municipalities in different parts of Sweden have received around 2000 Burmese quota refugees in cooperation with the *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* (UNHCR). Most of these refugees are Karens and the vast majority are Christians. Through board meetings and other events with the KSC, I was able to visit many Baptist churches in Sweden where Karens are now active members. Some parts of the Sunday services include Karen choir singing very similar to the Sgaw-Karen choirs I had heard in Thailand.

When I heard about the possibility of writing my final thesis as a *Minor Field Study* (MFS), I immediately thought of and rejoiced over the possibility to combine two of my greatest interests: choir singing and the Karen people of Northern Thailand and Burma. I applied for a MFS scholarship at the international office at the *Royal College of Music in Stockholm*, where I have been a student in the Department of Music Education since 2007. I was given the scholarship and carried out my field study in Rangoon in Burma and in several villages, towns and cities in Northern Thailand for 10 weeks in June, July and August 2011.

The scope of this MFS is the role and function of choirs among Karen people in Burma and Northern Thailand. The relationship between music and society must be awarded sufficient consideration, why I believe it is important to initially give a concise and general background to the research field of Ethnomusicology.

## 4.2 Ethnomusicology

“Many anthropologists favor a definition of ethnomusicology as the study of music in and as culture; the study of how people use, perform, compose, and think about music; and of their general attitudes toward it.”<sup>5</sup>

Bruno Nettl (emphasis by author himself)

<sup>5</sup> Hood (1980): Foreword

Despite my previous experiences of the Karen culture as described in the background, I continue to be a student training to be a music teacher in the capital of wealthy Sweden looking at choir tradition among an ethnic minority group in two developing countries on another side of the globe. Not considering the Swedish spectacles I inevitably wear or not attempting to use the approach and awareness of an ethnomusicologist would therefore be highly irresponsible.

There are numerous indicators that music is, and has always been, an important and natural part of peoples' lives. Its manifestations are becoming more and more apparent in the light of globalization where information technology enables cross-cultural virtual meetings of various kinds.

The base of music phenomenology is the fact that music of various kinds exists in all cultures and among all ethnic groups. The field of research called Ethnomusicology is in the juncture of two separable disciplines:

1. *Comparative music*, the comparative study of sound and systems coming from different cultures and societies.
2. *Anthropology of music*, an integrated part of anthropology, and the field of research about the role music play in peoples' lives.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the area of Ethnomusicology strives to highlight comments, aspects and dimensions on both "What does the music do to people?" and "What does the music sound like?"

An ethnomusicologist operating today will remind us that there are certain aspects of music of a particular culture and that it cannot be taken for granted that these apply to music in all the worlds' different cultures. Degrations towards "primitive cultures" has unfortunately been a former both apparent as well as outspoken part of this field of research. Most ethnomusicologists nowadays agree that the previously obvious comparison to Western art music is problematic and stresses instead the importance of being aware of and attempting to avoid making generalizations.

The field of Ethnomusicology connects to many other recognized disciplines: "musicology, linguistics, psychology, anthropology and others".<sup>7</sup> Dan Lundberg and Gunnar Ternhag present their preferred key words when discussing the field of Ethnomusicology:

- *Quantity* – music constitutes an important and large part of peoples' lives.
- *Availability* – music can constitute a demarcated area of cultural studies.
- *Identity* – music functions as a mark of identity for various and different types of groups in every society.
- *Economy* – the music- and entertainment industry is a great transnational industry especially in the globalized world of today where music through digital media can be transferred across borders in split seconds.<sup>8</sup>

Other aspects of great importance in this discourse, as in all anthropological researches, are gender and class. It is also crucial to remember that aspects of identity can be difficult and almost impossible, perhaps even unnecessary, to distinguish in societies.

<sup>6</sup> Science Encyclopedia: Music Anthropology – retrieved November 11, 2011

<sup>7</sup> May (Ed.). (1980): 1

<sup>8</sup> Lundberg & Ternhag (2002): 25

## Music and identity

“Music is one of the major cultural characteristics that make up tribal identity and demonstrates each tribe as a distinctive ethnic group.”<sup>9</sup>

Victoria Vorreiter, in the preface of “Songs of Memory”

Withholding diversity in dynamics and volume, music plays a great part in the continuous process of creating identity, especially amongst young people. Music contains several empowering qualities; it can help to regulate and sort out moods and provide means for canalization and procession of emotions. Singing and playing together are scientifically recognized tools for integration, co-operation and dealing with separation. Furthermore music can develop, elaborate and embody tone and rhythm structures that can be transformed into other areas. A process of co-operation performed by an orchestra, a rock band or a choir can easily stand as an example for other co-operational events, through singing in a choir or playing in an orchestra or ensemble, human beings can achieve the possible simultaneous experience of combined unity and individuality. Moreover, scientific investigations show that musical elements can reinforce recollection and memory.

## 4.3 General facts about Burma

Burma, as a collective country, did not exist before the third Anglo-Burma war in 1885 when the country became a British colony under the name ‘Burma’. Up until 1989 the official name of the country was the *Union of Burma* when it was changed to the *Republic of the Union Myanmar*. ‘Burma’ as well ‘Myanmar’ is derived from the word ‘Bamar’ which is the majority ethnic group in the country. Several other countries as well as ethnic minorities inside Burma believe ‘Myanmar’ refers to the Bamar majority rather than the country as such and are therefore unwilling to recognize the name change from Burma to Myanmar. Myanmar is nevertheless still used by the United Nations. In this thesis I will consequently use Burma except for in proper nouns.

The British gave Burma independence in 1948. Colonial buildings in Rangoon, the previous capital of Burma that was a base for many of the British people living in Burma, are still today a distinguished part of the city’s scenery even though they have not been maintained. The capital of Burma was in 2005 officially changed from Rangoon to Naypyidaw, 320 kilometres from the former capital and Burma’s largest city Rangoon, requiring all officials to move there.

Since Burma became independent from British rule, the country continues in one of the world’s longest running civil wars. The fifty-five years of civil war is the main reason why Burma is considered one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2011 Burma/Myanmar was valued with the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) 0.483, which is above the average of 0.456 for the countries in the low human development group.<sup>10</sup> The country is ranked number 147 out of 187 countries and territories in the world. HDI measures “three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Vorreiter (2009): 1

<sup>10</sup> Human Development Report (2011): 3

<sup>11</sup> Human Development Report (2011): 1

Burma's population is estimated to range from 47-60 million people. According to the Swedish National Encyclopedia, Burma's population is around 54 million.<sup>12</sup> The government officially declares 135 ethnic minorities "under 8 major national ethnic races in Myanmar."<sup>13</sup> The government's approach has been criticized for creating division and labelling people within the ethnic minority community.

Together with Afghanistan and Somalia, Burma is considered to be one of the most corrupt countries in the world. *Transparency International*, a global organization fighting corruption worldwide, gives Myanmar/Burma a score of 1.4 ending up at 176<sup>th</sup> place together with Afghanistan in the Corruption Perception Index 2010.<sup>14</sup> Countries with scores from 5 – 0 are considered highly corrupt while countries with scores 5 – 10 are perceived as very clean. Sweden is ranked number four in the same index receiving a score of 9.2.

According to HDI Burma has a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.492, ranking it 96 out of 146 countries in the 2011 index. 4.0 per cent of parliamentary seats are held by women and

18.0 per cent of adult women have reached a secondary or higher level of education compared to 17.6 per cent of their male counterparts. For every 100,000 live births, 240 women die from pregnancy related causes and the adolescent fertility rate is 16.3 births per 1000 live births. Female participation in the labour market is 63.1 per cent compared to 85.1 for men.<sup>15</sup>

### **Current political landscape in Burma**

In October and November 2011 many crucial political changes in Burma started to take place. Burma seems to be moving towards a democratic transition although the country's Human Rights records are still questionable. The release of 200 out of more than 2000 political prisoners was met with great media attention. The country's somewhat improved worker's rights, such as the right to form Unions and strike under law was welcomed by United Nations.<sup>16</sup> Is Burma's military dictatorship realising the impossibility of isolating the country? Is this the beginning of democracy in Burma?

In November 2011 news agencies all over the world reported that Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the *National League of Democracy* (NLD), have been given the right to take part in Burma's next elections in 2013. It is most likely that Suu Kyi and the NLD will play an important part in these elections. Suu Kyi was elected as Member of Parliament (MP) in the by-elections held in some regions in Burma on April 1<sup>st</sup> 2012. NLD won 43 out of the 44 seats they contested in these by-elections enabling Aung San Suu Kyi to swear in as an MP on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May.<sup>17</sup> Suu Kyi has spent 20 years in house arrest in Rangoon and was forbidden to attend the funeral of her husband Michael Aris in 1999 as well as the ceremony in Oslo when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 1991. She was finally released from house arrest on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Swedish National Encyclopedia: Burma – retrieved May 4, 2012

<sup>13</sup> Myanmar.net: 135 Ethnic Groups of Burma – retrieved May 6, 2012

<sup>14</sup> Transparency International (2011): 40

<sup>15</sup> United Nations: Explanatory note on 2011 HDR composite indices, Myanmar (2011): 4

<sup>16</sup> Thay (2011, October 4)

<sup>17</sup> MacKinnon (2012, May 2)

#### 4.4 General facts about Thailand

Thailand, literally meaning ‘the land of the free’, is officially called *The Kingdom of Thailand* and was before 1939 and between 1945-1949 referred to as *Siam*. There are approximately 69,5 million inhabitants in Thailand whereof 5,8 million people living in the capital Bangkok.<sup>18</sup> The official language is Thai with four main dialects, spoken by around 80% of the population. Despite the homogenization in language, there are considerable regional and cultural differences within Thailand. The ethnic minorities of which the Karens are the largest group, characterize much of Northern Thailand sociological landscape. The largest minority group in Thailand is nevertheless the Chinese, making up 4-5 million or 14% of the country’s population according to the Swedish National Encyclopedia.

*Phumiphon Adunyadet* is the monarch of Thailand since 1950. The King is well respected in Thai society and has several times influenced in political crises. It is against Thai law to make offence against the dignity of the King or any member of the royal family. With more than 60 years on the throne, Phumiphon is both the longest serving head of state in the world as well as in Thai history.

The current prime minister of Thailand is *Yingluck Shinawatra*, leader of the *Pheu Thai Party* (For Thai party). She is the first female Prime Minister in Thai history and holds the position since August 5<sup>th</sup> 2011. Yingluck Shinawatra is the sister of the controversial former Prime Minister *Thaksin Shinawatra* who was overthrown by a military coup in 2006. Thaksin served as prime minister from 2001 leading *Thai rak Thai party* (literally Thai loves Thai) that was later changed to Pheu Thai party. He is accused of corruption, treason and conflict of interest and currently lives in London from where many consider him to still play an important part in Thailand’s political landscape.

Buddhism is the state religion in Thailand since the 13<sup>th</sup> century and the largest religion with around 95% followers. There is a Muslim community in Thailand, particularly concentrated in the South. Many of the Malays who make up around 4,5% of Thailand’s population are Sunni-Muslims.<sup>19</sup> Not more than 1% of the country’s population are Christians that includes Christians in several ethnic minorities, particularly in the North.

Thailand receives a score of 3.5 and ends up in place 78 out of 178 countries in the Corruption Perception Index 2010 by Transparency International.<sup>20</sup> According to *United Nations Human Development Report* (UNDP) on Thailand issued in 2011, women hold 14 percent of the seats in the present parliament in Thailand. UNDP also states that Thailand has a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.382, ranking the country in place 69 out of 146 countries in the 2011 index.

25.6 per cent of adult women have reached a secondary or higher level of education compared to 33.7 per cent of their male counterparts. For every 100,000 live births, 48 women die from pregnancy related causes; and the adolescent fertility rate is 43.3 births per 1000 live births. Female participation in the labour market is 65.5 per cent compared to 80.7 for men.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Swedish National Encyclopedia: Thailand – retrieved May 4, 2012

<sup>19</sup> Swedish National Encyclopedia: Thailand – retrieved May 4, 2012

<sup>20</sup> Transparency International (2011): 40

<sup>21</sup> United Nations: Explanatory note on 2011 HDR composite indices, Thailand (2011): 4

In 2009 the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) calculated that around 1,4 million children in Thailand were orphans, handicapped or street children.<sup>22</sup>

### **Common Community issues in Thailand and Burma**

Burma and Thailand's social issues concerning drugs and human trafficking are closely linked. Drug trafficking is one of the largest current political problems in the Golden Triangle.<sup>23</sup> The Thai government has zero tolerance on drug trafficking and has sharpened the law and penalties connected to drug related crimes within the last decade. Many of the trafficked young girls who are forced to work in brothels in Thailand have been taken from, or voluntarily left, lives of poverty in Burmese villages with hopes of a better future. They are promised work in hotels and restaurants in the cities of Thailand only to find themselves being trapped in prostitution without knowledge of their rights. Young women from ethnic minorities are particularly exposed, especially those who are unable to argue for their rights in Burmese or Thai.

### **4.5 The Karen people**

“The Karen are a nation with an estimated population of more than 7 million. We have our own history, languages, and culture. By nature the Karens are peace living people, who uphold high moral qualities of honesty, community, and loyalty.”<sup>24</sup>

On the Karen National Unions website under the headline ‘Karen history’

The Karen people are an ethnic group mainly living in Burma and Thailand. There are no certain statistics on exactly how many Karens there are in the world today. The Swedish National Encyclopedia presents the figure 6 million saying that there are 3 million Karens in Burma<sup>25</sup> and 400 000 in Thailand.<sup>26</sup> The latest consensus records from 1983 state that 69% of Burmas' population are majority Burman (or Bama), 8.5% Shan, 6.2% Karen, 4.5% Rakhine, 2.4% Mon, 2.2% Chin, 1.4% Kachin and 1% Wa.<sup>27</sup> The *Karen National Union* (KNU) estimated in 2011 that there are around 7 million Karens living in Burma,<sup>28</sup> making the people a minority together with several other ethnic groups among the majority Burman population. In total, the ethnic minorities in Burma are estimated to make up 30% of the population.<sup>29</sup>

To attempt to understand the situation of the ethnic minority people of South East Asia in a Swedish, perhaps even Northern European context, a comparison can be made to the living conditions and situation of the Sami people of Northern Sweden around one hundred years ago. It is a plausible comparison in the sense that the Karens, as well as the Sami people, suffered and still suffer from systematic oppression and social exclusion. Exposed to different forms of discrimination, Sami children were for example forbidden to speak their mother tongue in schools. Many of my interviewees in this study have shared stories of how they have experienced belittlement and jeers because of their Karen identity, making them

<sup>22</sup> Swedish National Encyclopedia: Thailand – retrieved May 4, 2012

<sup>23</sup> Vorreiter (2009):1 – Vorreiter describes the Golden Triangle as the region in Southeast Asia where Laos, Burma and Thailand meet and where the three countries were not divided in the past.

<sup>24</sup> Karen National Union: About the Karen – retrieved February 24, 2012

<sup>25</sup> Swedish National Encyclopedia: Burma – retrieved May 4, 2012

<sup>26</sup> Swedish National Encyclopedia: Karener – retrieved May 4, 2012

<sup>27</sup> Swedish National Encyclopedia: Karener – retrieved May 4, 2012

<sup>28</sup> Karen National Union: About the KNU: KNU History – retrieved February 24, 2012

<sup>29</sup> South (2011): 10

uncomfortable to speak their mother tongue or talk about their Karen background outside of closed Karen contexts.

In the discourse of Karen people, there are certain aspects that need to be explained and elaborated which I will attempt to do in the following sections.

### **Collective culture**

If cultures overall can be labelled as either *individualistic* or *collective*, Karen culture is definitely of a collective nature. In the Karen culture, focus lies on the collective rather than on the individual. Among the Karens this will for instance be manifested in the way family and kinship relations are considered important. It is out of the ordinary to find a household where a married couple live alone or only with their children. Most often a large family with grandmother and cousins share the same house. Moreover, when a Karen introduces a family member as ‘a cousin’ or ‘an uncle’ it does not necessarily mean that they are related by blood. First, second and third cousins are considered to be an equally important part of the family, all entitled to corresponding social and financial care and consideration.

Different expressions of honour culture appear in various forms in collective cultures. If one family member does something considered by a relative as inappropriate, it can result in exclusion or other punishments from the family fellowship. This expression of honour culture has especially been brought to public attention concerning women’s rights.

### **Religion among the Karen people**

Beliefs and religion play an integral part in the cultures of the Ethnic minorities in the Golden Triangle where Karens are included.<sup>30</sup> A Karen person asked if he or she is religious, will probably find this a strange question since being religious is implicit for most Karens, it is more a question of which religious community a Karen is a part of.

Buddhism has been the main religion since the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Burma why the country sometimes is referred to as ‘the land of pagodas’. The dominant religion among Karens is also Buddhism. However, traditional Buddhism among the Karens also includes elements of ancestral devotion. Especially in the villages, the line between Buddhism and Animism (spirit worship) is not concrete. Rather, traditional Buddhism consists of many folklorist elements that are difficult to trace in canonical works. It is not out of the ordinary to find objects connected to ancestral worship on the Buddha shrines, both in more or less official places of worship as well as in peoples’ houses.

Animism can be described as “a belief that the natural world is organized and ‘animated’ by the supernatural world.”<sup>31</sup> The animistic belief constitutes a fundamental holistic dimension for many of the worlds’ ethnic minorities and is therefore of great importance even in a musical consideration. According to Vorreiter, Animism is not a single ideology<sup>32</sup> why it is probable that Karen cultures will, no matter what religion is practiced consist of the holistic dimensions described above.

<sup>30</sup> Vorreiter (2009):1

<sup>31</sup> Vorreiter (2009): 3

<sup>32</sup> Vorreiter (2009): 3

There are no certain statistics on how many of the Karen people are Christians, estimations range between twenty to forty percent of all Karen people.<sup>33</sup> The Christian Karen community consist both of Protestant and Catholics; the largest Protestant denominations among the Karens are Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist and Anglican, in the presented order. The choirs of Christian churches and Bible schools mentioned in this MFS are exclusively Protestant and the vast majority belongs to the Baptist denomination.

Naturally, the Karen villages differ to what degree they are multi-religious. It is not out of the ordinary to find a village where some families confess to Buddhism and practice animism, while their neighbours are Christian converts. It is however equally common especially in rural mountain areas, for entire villages to be Buddhists with animistic features and an uttered zero tolerance towards Christianity. There are numerous cases of in the context, fairly newly established Christian settlements as a result of compulsory transfers from animistic villages. The main reason why Christians are being forced to move from their village of origin is the belief that their practices will upset spirits and create bad harmony in the relationships between spirits and humans.

Since religion is of great importance for the Karens, many Karen communities, in villages as well as cities, are led and guided by religious leaders, Buddhists monks as well as Christian pastors.<sup>34</sup> Inter-religious marriages exist among the Karens, but are not common and often more than just frowned upon.

Religion plays an indubitably large part in Karen civil society and religious organizations are very involved in civil-society strengthening activities and political struggle. Burmese monasteries as well as Christian churches, contribute to health care services to a large degree since despite the evident great need of these, funding is not supplied by the government. It is actually out of the ordinary to find a church or a monastery in Burma that does not for example run a clinic, a school or a day-care centre.

The networks of the religious organizations have proven to be both strong and durable. After the Nargis cyclone that struck Burma on May 2<sup>nd</sup> in 2008 and was estimated to have affected more than 1 million people, *Diakonia*, the joint international development organisation of five Swedish churches, communicated that the established networks and co-operations they long since had with Burmese churches provided the possibility for relief support to actually reach the desired recipients,<sup>35</sup> which was clearly not the case for the relief canalized through the Burmese government.

### **Christian Mission among the Karens**

The first Christians arriving in Burma are likely to have been Portuguese soldiers and traders operating in Burma in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There are records that the first Catholic priests arrived in 1554. Their presence was not welcomed and their stay was not become long.<sup>36</sup> *Adoniram* and *Ann Haseltine Judson* are therefore considered to be the first missionaries in Burma. They had only been married for seven days when they sailed from America to India in 1812, sent out by the first *American Board of Foreign Missions*. The Judsons were refused entrance to

<sup>33</sup> South (2011): 10

<sup>34</sup> South (2011): 25

<sup>35</sup> Diakonia – retrieved February 24, 2012

<sup>36</sup> Za Go (2010, March 26)

India several times and found an opening in Rangoon in Burma 1813. Adoniram Judson completed the translation of the Bible into Burmese in 1834 but did not live to complete his work with the Burmese dictionary before he died in 1850 at the age of 62 years.<sup>37</sup> The Burman dictionary, mainly put together by Adoniram is still the preferred dictionary in Burma today.

Since the Judsons served for many years in Moulmein, a city considered to be the Karen capital at the time, many of the Christian converts at this time were Karens. The first known Karen person that decided to convert and be baptized was *Ko Tha Byu*.<sup>38</sup> Very soon after he became a Christian, Ko Tha Byu carried out missionary work among the Karens, supervised at first by the *American Baptist Mission* that led to the establishment of the Karen church in Burma. 'Ko Tha Byu Memorial Hall' exists at *Karen Baptist Theological Seminary* in Rangoon and 'Ko Tha Byu memorial hymn' is included in the Karen hymnal. Christianity among the Karens came to Thailand from Burmese-Karens missionaries in 1829 one year after the first Western protestant missionaries entered Thailand.

The works of the Judsons are, for obvious reasons, of great importance for both Burman and Karen Christians today. Every year a 'Judson Memorial Day' is celebrated and both the Burmese and the Karen Hymn book consist of a 'Judson Memorial Hymn'. The second centenary of the Judsons' arrival to Rangoon will be a reason for large celebrations in Christian churches all over Burma in 2013.

### **Different Karen groups and languages**

*Sgaw-Karens*<sup>39</sup> and *Pwo-Karens* are the two largest groups among the Karens. Sgaw-Karens is the majority group among the Karen groups as well as the most scattered one in Burma and Thailand and in the global diaspora communities created by refugee populations.

Karen language is within the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan linguistic divisions.<sup>40</sup> Sgaw-Karen and Pwo-Karen are two different languages consisting of an estimated 12 dialects.<sup>41</sup> All Karen languages are tonal languages where the tones are marked in the written language with tonal symbols. The similarities between Sgaw- and Pwo-Karen languages are often resembled by Scandinavians to the distinguished differences and correspondences between the Swedish and the Norwegian languages.

Karens in Thailand refer to themselves by using the word for people: *Pakanyau* in Sgaw-Karen and *Phlong* in Pwo-Karen.<sup>42</sup> Sgaw-Karen language in Thailand and Burma is written with letters from the Burmese alphabet whereas Pwo-Karen, since the Bible was translated into Pwo-Karen in Thailand, uses the Thai alphabet.

*Thaungthu* also called Pa O and *Kayah* (Karenni) are two other Karen groups.<sup>43</sup> The word *Kayah* translates to 'Red Karens'. A sub-group within the Karenni are the *Paduangs* that are

<sup>37</sup> Judson (1894): 2

<sup>38</sup> Za Go (2010, March 26)

<sup>39</sup> I will in this thesis consistently use the spelling *Sgaw Karen*. Other spellings are *Sqaw*, *S'qaw* or *S'gaw*. When I constructed the questionnaires I used the spelling *S'qaw* why this word is used in appendix 1, 2 and 3.

<sup>40</sup> South (2011): 6

<sup>41</sup> South (2011): 10

<sup>42</sup> Hovemyr (1989): 7

<sup>43</sup> Vorreiter (2009): 13

presumably best known for the large and numerous gold rings the women carries around their necks, an established and highly criticized tourist attraction in Northern Thailand.

### **Karen political identity**

A crucial part of Karen identity is the term *Kawthoolei*, the word in Sgaw-Karen for the Karen state. The modern day Karen state was established in 1952.<sup>44</sup> The Karen state is one of Burmas' fourteen states and divisions, located in the eastern part of the country. It borders Thailand to the east, the Mon state and Bago regions to the west and Kayah state to the south. Although the Karens are not the majority population in Kawthoolei, the geographical area continues to play an important part in Karen identity. Kawthoolei is a popular theme in Karen song lyrics, there are for example several songs about the 'Mother land' in the Karen hymnal which certainly refers to Kawthoolei.

Nowadays *The Karen National Union* (KNU) advocates for the Karen State to become a federal state rather than an independent country. The following objective can be read on the KNU:s website: "To establish a genuine Federal Union in cooperation with all the Karen and all the ethnic peoples in the country for harmony, peace, stability and prosperity for all."<sup>45</sup>

There does not appear to be a lot of controversy between religious and nationalistic thoughts among the Karens. 'The Karen National Anthem' is in Sgaw-Karen and can be found among the last songs included in the Karen Hymnal. It is sung at important celebrations such as the 'Karen New Year' and 'Karen Wrist Tying', at church services and at the end of annual meetings in Karen organisations all over the world. Among some Christian groups a parallel is drawn between the Karen people and the Israeli people in the Bible. It is not uncommon to hear statements like: "We need to be patient in our struggle. Remember the people of Israel were in the desert for 40 years", in a sermon during a church service.

### **Karen National Union (KNU)**

Karens all over the world know about the existence of the KNU, which is the leading political organization among the Karens and was formed in 1947. The Karen nationalistic movement can however, be dated further back in time than the actual formation of the KNU. It was then known as the *Karen National Association*.

On their website they state that they still follow the four principles of *Saw Ba U Gyi*, the founder and President of the Karen Nation Union, killed by the Burmese Army in 1950. The four principles are:

1. For us, Surrender is out of the question;
2. We shall retain our arms;
3. The recognition of the Karen State must be complete;
4. We shall decide our own destiny."<sup>46</sup>

The KNU with its headquarters located in the Thai border town Mae Sot, is by many international observers perceived and acknowledged as a united voice of the Karen people and

<sup>44</sup> South (2011): 10

<sup>45</sup> Karen National Union: About the KNU: Objectives – retrieved May 4, 2012

<sup>46</sup> Karen National Union: About the KNU: KNU History – retrieved May 4, 2012

the “sole legitimate political representative of the Karen nationalist community.”<sup>47</sup> *Naw Zipporah Sein* is the current general secretary of the KNU and the first female General Secretary in the history of the organization.

There are different opinions on whether or not the KNU can represent all Karen people. The *Democratic Karen Buddhist Army* (DKBA) breakaway from the legitimate KNU-army *Karen National Liberation Army* (KNLA) was said to be caused by the strong support to the KNU from the Christian community of Burma and Thailand and its evident connections and representations in the organization. Among the recommendations Ashley South makes in the report ‘Burma’s longest war – Anatomy of the Karen conflict’, is actually for the KNU to “do more to engage with the non-Christian Karen communities, especially Buddhist and Pwo-speakers, beyond the borderline”.<sup>48</sup> According to South, the KNU and the DKBA are the insurgent armed groups among the Karens. Besides these, there are five ceasefire groups some of which are the result of splits within initial groupings.

Split and division in Karen political parties and armies show that Karens are still struggling to find their independent political identity. The Karen political movement led by the KNU is largely supported by the majority of Karen people around the world. Their ambition has always been to solve political problems by political means. It is a great challenge for the KNU to represent and look after the interest of an international, multi-linguistic and multi-religious Karen community.

Ceasefire dialogue between the KNU and the military government, the *State Peace and Development Council* (SPDC) began in Rangoon in January 2004. The dialogue was terminated because of an armed conflict that broke out a few months later where both sides blamed each other. The Burmese government has introduced the democratic process by holding the election in 2010. In 2011, the elected government proposed all ethnic groups to sign peace agreements with them. Currently all the ethnic groups, including the KNU but except the Kachin group, have signed peace agreements with the government and vowed to take parts in the democratic process. On January 12 2012 officials from the KNU signed a ceasefire agreement with Burma’s governmental peace delegation.<sup>49</sup>

## **Refugees and Internally Displaced People**

Since the civil war between the Burmese army and the KNU after Burma’s independence from Britain, the Karens and other ethnic minorities have been oppressed and persecuted. According to the organization the *Free Burma Rangers*, “a multi-ethnic humanitarian service movement” working with the people in the war zones of Burma,<sup>50</sup> at least 1 million of the Burmese population are Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and another 1 million people have fled the country.<sup>51</sup> The following comment is provided by the KWO on their website:

Karen people fleeing conflict and systematic human rights violations at the hands of the Burmese military regime have left their homes for the safety of Thailand for over 35 years. Today, more than 120,000 Karen refugees and asylum seekers live in refugee camps in Thailand. Refugees have no freedom to leave the camps. Inside the camps, people face overcrowding, widespread unemployment, a restricted diet, limited health care

<sup>47</sup> South (2011): 2

<sup>48</sup> South (2011): 5

<sup>49</sup> Nyar, K. (2012, February 23)

<sup>50</sup> Free Burma Rangers – retrieved March 8, 2012

<sup>51</sup> Free Burma Rangers: Features: Burma Overview – retrieved March 8, 2012

services, and lack opportunities for study and development. They live in fear of repatriation to Burma while the political climate is still insecure, and of attacks from the Burmese army and affiliated groups.<sup>52</sup>

Hundred of thousands of people from Burma has been granted permit of residence in a third country through the *United Nations*. The United States of America, United Kingdom, Sweden and Norway are among the countries that have accepted most quota refugees, the majority of these are Karens. Quota refugees are granted a permit of residence in a third country while still in the refugee camps where they are listed for resettlement with the *United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees* (UNHCR).

After the base for the KNU in the town Mae La fell in 1984, the Thai Government made a decision not to involve UNHCR when establishing the largest refugee camp with Burmese refugees in Thailand. Representatives from Christian Non-Governmental Organisations visiting the area therefore decided to set up the *Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC)*. Since then the TBBC have supplied refugees and displaced people with food, shelter and non-food items.<sup>53</sup> TBBC has grown considerably since 1984 and now consists of 12 members, all Non-Governmental Organizations based in 10 countries. Through these 12 members, TBBC receives 90% of its support from 15 governments plus the European Union. *Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency* (SIDA) is one of the largest donors through the Christian Development Organisation *Diakonia*, the largest Swedish member of TBBC. According to figures from January 2012, 135 579 people are the total feeding figure for all refugee camps cared for by TBBC. Of these 45 677 are refugees residing in *Mae La Refugee Camp*.<sup>54</sup>

### **The position of Karen women**

The Karen society is of matrilineal nature where kinship is determined from the mothers' side. Marriage status constitutes a crucial part of the Karen identity in general. When it comes to Karen traditional clothing however, marriage status is only shown in the way women dress. Before a woman is married she wears the traditional long, woven white dress with village varieties in the embroidery, starting from the wedding ceremony her Karen clothes are traditionally with a black embroidered blouse and a red skirt.

When a couple get married they often move to the village of the bride, either moving in with the bride's parents or to a house of their own. It is common that the youngest daughter remains with her new family in her parents' house. Traditionally the women are responsible for the household work. This is evident mainly in the villages but also in the cities and towns, where women work in household related positions outside their homes.<sup>55</sup> Karen parents prioritize and support schooling for both their daughters and sons.

KWO was formed in 1949 and has according to their website a membership of over 49 000 women. They describe themselves as "a community-based organization of Karen women working in development and relief in the refugee camps on the Thai border and with Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and women inside Burma."<sup>56</sup> They aim to raise awareness of women's rights in order to "promote women's participation in the community decision

<sup>52</sup> Karen Women Organization: Background – retrieved May 5, 2012

<sup>53</sup> Thailand Burma Border Consortium: Camps: Border history – retrieved May 4, 2012

<sup>54</sup> TBBC: Burmese Border Displaced Persons January 2012

<sup>55</sup> Ernvik (2009): 1

<sup>56</sup> Karen Women Organization: About – retrieved May 5, 2012

making and political processes.”<sup>57</sup> The KWO is a member organization of KNU and has got a lot of influence within the KNU. Naw Zipporah Sein who was the former general secretary of the KWO is the current general secretary of the KNU.

The KWO has released several reports depicting the situation of women in Burma and the abuse the Burmese military has inflicted upon them. The most recent ‘Walking amongst sharp knives’ was released in 2010. In the report they reveal ”The practice of the Burmese Army of executing village heads has led to traditional Karen culture being turned upside-down, with women now being appointed village chiefs as they are seen as less likely to be killed. However, this change has put women in the frontline of human rights abuses.”<sup>58</sup>

People active in parishes belonging to the *Karen Baptist Convention* (KBC) in Burma and *Thailand Karen Baptist Convention* (TKBC) constitutes an important element in this study, wherefore I find it important to include information about women’s positions within these contexts. Women fellowship groups within the KBC as well as the TKBC are often large and strong and exist in almost every local parish. These women groups organize one of the services celebrated each Sunday afternoon in Karen village churches. In many local parishes the women groups also have their own choirs.

A large number of women within the TKBC are active in a women empowerment project called *Tabitha handicraft project*. The project provides them with a marketplace to sell their locally produced traditional handicrafts and generate an income for themselves and their families.

There are no officially ordained female pastors within the contexts of the Karen Baptist conventions with the right to officiate at communions, baptisms and weddings. However, many women hold leading positions in the conventions and are frequent preachers at services and in other official contexts.

### **Karen music and instruments**

As in many of the world’s cultures, Karen traditional melodies are based around the pentatonic scale and narrow intervals. According to Vorreiter the melodies correlate with the six tones in Karen language.<sup>59</sup>

The *Te na*, often referred to as the Karen harp, is one of the most distinctive Karen instruments. The standard tuning of the *te na* is the perfect fourth. The harps are especially played for courting purposes and during festivals. Like other ethnic minorities in the mountains around the Golden Triangle, Vorreiter writes, “the Karens have a strong tradition of playing the mouth harp.”<sup>60</sup>

Another important instrument is the hand drum. The Sgaw-Karens called it *Der* while Pwo-Karens referred to it as *Dong*. The drum is made from a single piece of wood covered with

<sup>57</sup> Karen Women Organization: About – retrieved May 5, 2012

<sup>58</sup> Karen Women Organization: Reports – retrieved May 5, 2012

<sup>59</sup> Vorreiter (2009): 23

<sup>60</sup> Vorreiter (2009): 26

animal hide. The drum is small and is carried with a leather strap, allowing the drummer to dance and play at the same time.<sup>61</sup>

Very little has been written on the topic of Karen musical life, at least in English, until the recently issued 'Songs of Memory' by Victoria Vorreiter. Only one book in English covering the topic Karen music could be found at the library in Payap University, one of the biggest Universities in Chiang Mai, 'Some notes on Karen Music' a 30-page booklet written by Ronald D. Renard, Ruthjaporn Prachadetsuwat and Soe Moe in 1991.

Some of my informants in Burma were organized in the significantly important music team called *Klo & Kweh Music team* (KKMT), so I believe a description of their work is appropriate. The team was founded in 2001 in Rangoon where most members have their base by initiative from *Reverend Dr. Yaha Lay Lay La*. "Knowing that music is a very powerful medium that can cut through any boundary – cultural, social or otherwise", the idea is to convey "positive, inspirational social and cultural messages via music."<sup>62</sup> KKMT's main objective is "to preserve and promote Karen language and cultural identity, and engage in intercultural exchange activities through music."<sup>63</sup> Their name is composed from the two most important Karen traditional instruments: the drum *Klo* and the cow horn *Kweh*. KKMT is well known among Karens globally and their songs are sung in Karen villages and in place where Karens live in other countries. Members of the music network currently tour internationally, visiting and performing for Karens in Thailand or where Karens have third-country resettlement.

The Karens are the most well-known among ethnic minorities in Thailand and Burma for choir singing although it also exists among other ethnic minorities for example, the Lahu people and among the native Thai speakers. The tradition of choir singing that is most pursued today by Karen people originally stems from missionaries from Great Britain and America and has been developed and elaborated on by native Karens.

Overall, the tradition of song among the Karen people is strong, respected and well-known, both inside and outside the Karen community. It is predominantly the Christian Karens in Burma and Thailand who recognized and even famous for their choirs both among other ethnic minorities as well as in society at large. Choir singing among the Karens is a regular, distinguishable, highly regarded and elaborate part of church activities in Karen Baptist churches in Thailand and Burma.

## 5. Objectives and issues

In this Minor Field Study I will carry out a number of investigations that attempt to describe the use and function of choir singing among the Karen people in Burma and Northern Thailand.

<sup>61</sup> Vorreiter (2009): 22

<sup>62</sup> Klo and Kweh: About – retrieved May 9, 2012

<sup>63</sup> Klo and Kweh – retrieved May 9, 2012

I had a notion beforehand that it would be hard to find choir singing among the Karens outside the Christian context. At the same time, I did not want to exclude any possible discoveries, why I chose not to narrow the research to exclusively Christian choir singing.

I have chosen the following main issues:

- *How widespread is choir singing among the Karen people?*
- *What are the main, discernible effects linked to choir singing among the Karen people in Northern Thailand and Burma?*
- *Given the socio-geographical contexts explained in the background, what are the significant changes in choir singing among the Karen people within the last decades?*
- *What are the roles and functions of choir singing according to Karen students of divinity and choir leaders in Christian churches and Theological Seminaries?*

## 6. Methods of implementation

In cross-cultural communication, particularly when a study is taking place in a foreign culture for the researcher, there are many evident obstacles that demand a parallel use of a number of methods. This demand is apparent since “it may not always be possible to determine each stage of a research project a long time in the future”.<sup>64</sup> In this minor field study the following three main methods have been used; questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and unstructured observations, participant and non-participant.

Doing research in the area of ethnomusicology about the music of an ethnic minority group demands an interest not only in the life of the concerned groups but equally important is the society and context around them. This includes understanding as well as acknowledgement of historical and political backgrounds together with the current situation. According to Oliver, ethnographic research is highly dependent on “the researcher establishing an intimate contact with the research field or context”.<sup>65</sup> The researcher needs to become a social actor in the setting which is studied. ‘Go native’ is a term often used to describe the need for the researcher in ethnographical studies to master use of language, body language and gestures that is relevant in the social contexts of the informant. This is especially important when interviews are used as methods.<sup>66</sup> In this sense I had the great advantage of not being a complete stranger to the Karen culture. My background as a volunteer in Thailand provided me with a wealth of knowledge about various aspects of the culture important to this study. Also, the connections and acquaintances I have made with people arranged through the *Karen Swedish Community* (KSC), has considerably contributed to the knowledge about the Karen community presented in this thesis.

However, as Oliver argues, familiarity is not only beneficial to a study, it can also generate problems. When a researcher is familiar to the context he or she might find it difficult to mentally withdraw from the context and observe the field with the eyes of a newcomer. There is a risk for the ethnographer to ‘romanticize’ features in another culture, deliberately or

<sup>64</sup> Oliver (2008): 112

<sup>65</sup> Oliver (2008): 114

<sup>66</sup> Patel & Davidsson (2003): 78

unintentionally.<sup>67</sup> To sum up, Oliver arguments underline the advantages of using several research methods where some methods can complement what others miss.

## 6.1 Questionnaires

The questionnaires are included in appendix 1, 2 and 3

Constructing questionnaires that provide valid and useful knowledge data for the researcher is a difficult process. One bit of advice given by Ekbrand is to avoid the use of difficult words when constructing a questionnaire.<sup>68</sup> This is, among other things, important to prevent the respondent from losing the essence of the question. Another piece of advice is to avoid using emotionally charged words since these types of words can render various interpretations.<sup>69</sup>

The most common procedure in the field of sociology, according to Ekbrand, is to decide on the *population*, i.e. the group where the respondents in the questionnaires are found, beforehand and then choose a *sample* from the population providing a foundation for interviews and questionnaires.<sup>70</sup>

### Advantages of using questionnaires:

- They provide a possibility of receiving replies from many informants within a short period of time.
- With technological help and/or other assistance, questionnaires can be used in a completely different part of the world from where the researcher is found and therefore providing a possibility of a geographical widespread sample.
- They can give the informants the chance to be anonymous.
- It is a stress-free method if the informants are given the time to go through the questionnaire, reflect over their answers and write the answers they wish.

### Disadvantages of using questionnaires:

- The informants are not given more space to explain their answers than the A4 paper(s) or the Internet form constituting the conventional questionnaire.
- The method traditionally excludes illiterates and does not favour informants who are weak in expressing themselves in writing.
- If the questionnaires are not answered on the spot during time limitation there is a risk that the same person may answer several questionnaires and therefore create an unreliable foundation of answers.
- When a short time limit is applied, the questionnaires may cause the informants stress, affecting the quality and range of the answers.
- The results depend greatly on the phrasing of the questions in the questionnaires. If a question is poorly or thoughtlessly drafted this will affect the whole investigation.

<sup>67</sup> Oliver (2008): 115

<sup>68</sup> Ekbrand (2004): 19

<sup>69</sup> Ekbrand (2004): 19

<sup>70</sup> Ekbrand (2004): 7

## 6.2 Interviews

Interviews can be conducted in many different ways and do not necessarily involve an actual physical meeting between the interviewer and the interviewee. However, since all interviews in this thesis are oral interviews these are the kinds of interviews that I will elaborate on, therefore leaving out for instance telephone interviews from the following discussion.

When conducting interviews it is important not only to be aware of the way in which you, as an interviewer, are asking questions but also of the way in which you are listening. This is especially important in cross-cultural interviews where language misunderstandings can easily create wrinkles in the forehead of the interviewer or the interviewee. Since it is practically impossible to interview people without making interpretations using your personal cultural glasses, it is important to be aware of the researcher's constant and unavoidable interpretation.

Other important concerns to be kept in mind, especially in ethnography, are that interviewees may be eager to promote positive aspects of their culture, highlighting what they personally find excellent in their culture and context as well as hiding what they find embarrassing in their culture.

All conversations are more or less tinged by various elements. This applies to interviews and in ethnography especially includes factors relating to power.<sup>71</sup> This is a study involving an interviewer from a rich western country where the government provides students with the possibility of writing their thesis in a developing country, while the informants are from an ethnic minority where low levels of literacy, poor standards of higher education, poverty and oppression are parts of the reality.

### **Advantages of using oral interviews:**

- Provides a direct contact between the researcher and the informant.
- Gives rise to a co-creational conversation between the interviewee and the interviewer.
- Offers an opportunity for the interviewer to ask follow-up questions immediately.
- May deliver both details and depth to a research question making it possible for the interviewer to understand the comprehensive overall picture.
- Interviews are unlike questionnaires, most likely to render a higher frequency of answers.

### **Disadvantages of using oral interviews:**

- There is a risk of misunderstandings, both from the interviewer as well as from the interviewee. This risk is greater when the interview is conducted in another language than the mother tongue of either the interviewer, the interviewee or, in this case both.
- When using interpreters, cultural aspects unfamiliar to the interpreter but known to the interviewer, run the risk of being lost in translation.
- The possibility of anonymity for the interviewee is lost, at least in conventional interviews.
- Body language and facial expressions can be difficult to interpret and therefore generate unwanted effects. For the interviewer this can lead to misinterpretation of the

<sup>71</sup> Patel & Davidsson (2003): 69

interviewee's answers. For the interviewee on the other hand, the raise of an eyebrow or the twitch around the corners of the mouth of the interviewer can be disturbing and the cause of a sudden unwillingness to share information and feelings. In ethnography where the interviewer and the interviewee are from two different cultures this is especially important to consider.

### 6.3 Observations

It is hard to imagine a serious Ethnomusical research without the use of observations. Patel and Davidson state observations as the most important instrument for gathering information about our surroundings.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, they argue that observations are constantly being made, more or less structured or organized. This is definitely the case with observations in a cross-cultural ethnographic research since observations are in one sense being made constantly and even unintentional observations require preparation and careful consideration.<sup>73</sup> Waking up at the Christian student dormitory where I stayed in Chiang Mai, hearing the early sounds of the students preparing breakfast arrangements and the subsequent hymn singing at the morning devotion, I was constantly making observations.

Observations can be made in many different ways. In structured or systematic observations there is the use of an observation schedule where “the researcher employs explicitly formulated rules for the observation and recording of behaviour.”<sup>74</sup> This is the main difference from unstructured observations where an observation schedule is not used. Moreover, observations can be either participant or non-participant. The observer in a participatory observation is actively taking part in the observational event, for example singing together with the choir while taking mental or physical notes. However, in a non-participant observation the observer is not an active part of the observational event at all and can on the contrary be watching a video recording of the event.

Participant observation is defined by Burnham et al as: “a research strategy whereby the researcher becomes involved in a social situation for the purpose of understanding the behaviour of those engaged in the setting. The researcher observes and records the behaviour of the people in the social setting and may collect additional evidence formal or informal interviews and the collection of documentary materials.”<sup>75</sup>

#### Advantages of using observations:

- The possibility of studying behaviours and phenomenon in their natural environment.
- Behaviour can be examined directly with the use of observations, “unlike in survey research, that allows behaviour only to be inferred.”<sup>76</sup>
- Is practically independent of individuals' willingness to give out information, writes Patel and Davidsson.<sup>77</sup> People in the sample where the observations are made might not have time to be interviewed so that observing is preferred.
- If the observations are recorded there is a favourable possibility of going through the material after the actual physical event has taken place.

<sup>72</sup> Patel & Davidsson (2003): 87

<sup>73</sup> Patel & Davidsson (2003): 89

<sup>74</sup> Bryman (2008): 257

<sup>75</sup> Burnham et al (2004): 222

<sup>76</sup> Bryman (2008): 254

<sup>77</sup> Patel and Davidsson (2003): 88

### **Disadvantages of using observations:**

- “The reactive effect” is unavoidable in observations. Bryman describes this as the questions whether or not people change or adjust their behaviour when they know that they are being observed.<sup>78</sup>
- A common critique of observations is that the method can be both expensive and time-consuming, according to Patel and Davidsson.<sup>79</sup>
- There is a tendency for observations, especially structured ones, to “generate lots of fragments of data”, according to Bryman. This provides a difficulty for the researcher to piece the observations together in order to “produce an overall picture.”<sup>80</sup>

## **7. Investigation**

The observations and interviews in Northern Thailand were done between June 24<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> and July 31<sup>st</sup> - August 28<sup>th</sup> 2011. The observations and the interviews in Burma were done in July 2<sup>nd</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup>. The questionnaires were handed out in Thailand and Burma between July 31<sup>st</sup> - August 28<sup>th</sup>.

### **Access to places in the ethnography**

Given the general suspicion of the authorities in Burma towards its citizens and especially foreigners doing research projects of their own, I was fortunate to be able to combine the time of my research with participating in an international summer course, funded by the *Church of Sweden*, called ‘Doing Theology under the Bo Tree’ at *Myanmar Institute of Theology* (MIT) in Rangoon. MIT was initially established as a Karen Theological Seminary and is therefore situated on the same campus area as the *Karen Baptist Theological Seminary* (KBTS). Its students and teachers are from many of Burma's various ethnic minorities. Not only did the course broaden my perspective of religious dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism and the challenges for Christian churches in Burma, it also gave me an essential contact platform for conducting my research in Burma, facilitating meetings with various choir leaders.

Knowing that the Thai authorities had increased the regulations for westerners entering *Mae La Refugee Camp* since my previous visit in 2006, I had prior to my departure established e-mail contact with the Chairperson of the Camp Management Committee in Mae La that enabled my entry to the camp. Once in Thailand I got information from my friends in *Thailand Karen Baptist Convention* (TKBC) that I also needed to apply for permission from the district officer in the area where the refugee camp is located. I did so but without receiving reply. It was however possible for me to enter Mae La Refugee Camp as a guest of *Karen Kawthoolei Baptist Bible School and College* (KKBBSC).

### **7.1 Questionnaires**

The questionnaires are included in appendix 1, 2 and 3.

In order to obtain opinions and answers to specific questions from many people in the sample

<sup>78</sup> Bryman (2008): 265

<sup>79</sup> Patel and Davidsson (2004): 88

<sup>80</sup> Bryman (2008): 265

I decided to use anonymous questionnaires which is considered an appropriate method to describe broad trends in a community.<sup>81</sup>

The questionnaires were constructed during the period of the Minor Field Study and handed out to students at three Karen Christian Theological Seminaries in Northern Thailand and Burma:

- *Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College* (KKBBSC) in Mae La Refugee Camp, Tak province, Thailand
- *Siloam Bible Institute* in Chiang Mai province, Thailand
- *Karen Baptist Theological Seminary* (KBTS) in Yangon Region, Burma<sup>82</sup>

The questionnaires had the headlines ‘Anonymous survey about choir singing among Karen people’ and consisted of 9 questions. They were handed out on a two-sided A4 page to the students at Siloam Bible Institute and KKBBSC and on two separate stapled A4 pages to the students at KBTS.

The students were first asked about their age, gender, ethnicity and village of origin. In the first question they were asked “How old are you?”. Concerning gender they could chose either “Female” or “Male”. About ethnicity there were three alternatives; “S’qaw-karen”, “Pwo-karen” or “Other \_\_\_\_\_” and on their villages they could chose between “A s’qaw-karen village”, “A pwo-karen village” and “Other village/place”. The students at KKBBSC could also chose the alternative “I am born in Mae La”.

The students at KBTS and Siloam were then asked if they had sung in a choir prior to their studies at the Theological Seminary while the students at KKBBSC were asked if they had done choir singing before coming to Mae La, where they also could chose “I am born in Mae La” besides replying “Yes” or “No”. All students were then asked: “For how long have you been singing in a choir?” followed by: “Do you think that it’s meaningful to be a part of a choir?” where they could chose “Yes” or “No”. In the two last questions they could chose between answering: “If yes, why do you think that it’s meaningful to be a part of a choir?” or “If no, why don’t you think so?”

At the end of the questionnaire I had typed my name and the date when the questionnaire was constructed, thanking the respondents in advance for their co-operation to my thesis.

### **Language considerations in the questionnaires**

Since there are substantial individual variations in the English language skills of people in Burma and Thailand, the students were given the possibility of answering the questionnaires in either Karen or Thai: Students at KKBBSC in Mae La and KBTS in Rangoon could chose to reply in either English or Karen to the question why or why not they consider or do not consider being a part of a choir as meaningful. Students at Siloam Bible Institute in Chiang Mai could reply to the same questions using either English or Thai.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Oliver (2008): 11

<sup>82</sup> The relationship between the place names Yangon and Rangoon is the same as the one between Myanmar and Burma described in section 4.3. The official name used by the military government and also the UN is Yangon. Exile-Burmese people and many other countries officially, however still use Rangoon when referring to the region where the former capital is located.

<sup>83</sup> I will further problematize the choice of language in the questionnaires in the Discussion in chapter 10.

## **Distribution and collection of questionnaires at the Theological Seminaries**

### ***Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College (KKBBSC)***

I stayed in the KKBBSC facilities in Mae La Refugee Camp<sup>84</sup> for four days due to the courtesy of *Reverend Saw Simon* and his wife. Apart from the questionnaires I was able to conduct several interviews with choir leaders living and working in Mae La who are active in the KKBBSC-connections in different ways. I had also the opportunity to make observations at choir practices and Church services where choir singing took place.

I attended two evening choir rehearsals at KKBBSC where I introduced myself in English with a subsequent translation in Karen. Here, I was given the chance to personally tell the students about the study and my background and could therefore promote the students' participation in the questionnaires. It is likely that this privilege helped to generate the many answered questionnaires. I had also the possibility of thanking them in advance for their contribution to this ethnography.

- 16 female and 21 male students answered the 37 questionnaires from KKBBSC.

### ***Karen Baptist Theological Seminary (KBTS)***

During my time in Burma, I made several visits to KBTS on Seminary Hill in Rangoon and conducted interviews with two choir teachers in practice. I did not personally hand out the survey to the students at KBTS in Burma since I had the idea of making the questionnaire after leaving Burma. I e-mailed the questionnaire in PDF-format on the August 18<sup>th</sup> 2011 to one of my informants, who had the opportunity and courtesy to print, copy and arrange for it to be handed out to students at KBTS. Since he knew about my thesis I am sure that he could motivate participation from the students resulting in the large number of answered questionnaires from KBTS. The students were provided with around one month to fill out the questionnaires. Since the postal service in Burma is very unreliable, my informant sent me the questionnaires from United States where he was on tour during October-December.

- 28 female and 22 male students answered the 50 questionnaires from KBTS.

### ***Siloam Bible Institute***

Since Siloam Bible Institute is located very close to the Christian Pwo-Karen dormitory where I stayed in Chiang Mai, I made several visits to the Bible Institute, providing me with the chance to introduce myself and describe the study before the students were given the questionnaires to fill out. I had met with the main choir leader at Siloam many times and had therefore had the opportunity to tell him about the questionnaires beforehand. However, I was not present when the questionnaires were actually handed out. I had made 50 copies of questionnaires for the choir teacher at Siloam Bible Institute to hand out to his students and more than 70% were filled out.

- 19 male and 17 female students answered the 36 questionnaires at Siloam Bible Institute.

<sup>84</sup> A fire tragically destroyed these facilities on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2012.

## 7.2 Interviews

If a broad generalization of cultures can be made at all, it is fair to say that the collective knowledge among the Karens are in many ways more based upon the spoken word rather than the written, especially in the area of music. This is the principal reason why I chose interviews as a method. Another contributing reason is that there is hardly anything written down in English on the topic of Karen music, let alone choir singing, meaning a literature study would be impossible.

Twenty-five interviews were carried out in Thailand and Burma. Some of the interviews were group interviews preceding or following a choir practice in a church, a Theological Seminary or at a dormitory. A couple of interviews that took place were with two people, but the interviews were for the most part made with one person at a time. Of these individual interviews, 20 interviews were made with choir leaders in current practice. Besides the twenty-five interviews, numerous short, informal chats were conducted with various people in the population.<sup>85</sup>

All interviews consisted of some open but mostly semi-structured questions which is why I chose to refer to the interviews on the whole as semi-structured interviews. Initially I told the interviewees about my own background followed by explaining about research and the interview. The interviewees were then asked an open question about themselves and their musical background and training, for example: "Tell me about your musical background". This part sometimes made up as much as half of the interview depending on the age, background, experience and present context of the interviewee (deciding the amount of preceding questions), but most importantly on how much the interviewee was willing to share. The general length of the interviews was from one up to one and a half hours.

### Language considerations in the interviews

All but one of the interviewees were Karens and thus they spoke Thai, Burmese or English as their second and sometimes third language. A couple of interviews in Thailand were made in English, however the majority were made in Thai, sometimes with a facilitator, or in Karen with an interpreter. All interviews in Burma were made in English. Since neither Thai nor Karen is my first or second language, the use of interpreters and facilitators were crucial in the processes of understanding the knowledge and background of the interviewees.

Many interviewees in Thailand spoke Northern Thai or Thai with a distinct dialect, which was hard for me to understand. Some interviewees were not used to speaking Thai with foreigners meaning that the help from the facilitators was invaluable. The role of the facilitator in Thailand was sometimes to simplify what the interviewee said or other times to develop this and once in a while translate the questions I asked from my basic Bangkok Thai into Northern Thai. Northern Thai was the second language after Karen for many of the interviewees in Thailand and when the interviewee used words in Northern Thai that was unfamiliar to me the facilitators were extremely useful. The facilitators could also help us to look up certain words in the Thai-English dictionary at hand since sometimes neither I nor the interviewee could read Thai well.

<sup>85</sup> I have presented the relationship between the *population* and the *sample* in section 6.1.

### 7.3 Observations

Initial cross-cultural social observations naturally build up around an ad-hoc approach, as it is not possible to predict what will be the actual outcome beforehand. The observations I made in this thesis were unstructured to their nature in the sense that I did not follow an organized observation schedule as suggested by Bryman for structured observations. Nevertheless, the observations were not performed without strategies.

Because of the nature of choir singing and my own background as a choir leader and singer I had decided beforehand to not only observe during the choir practices I visited. On the contrary I found it to be rewarding for the fieldwork to participate as a singer in parts of the choir rehearsal. I would, in this way, be able to get personal experience of Karen choir singing. Therefore, around half of the observations were participatory observations in the sense that I was asked to join in the choir practice and sometimes contribute to the rehearsal by teaching a song in English. I never suggested myself to teach a song but when asked to do this I did not decline.

The observations were made in choir practices at different Theological Seminaries in Thailand and Burma, two student dormitories both located in Thailand and Sunday services in Baptist churches where choir singing was performed. An asterisk (\*) marks that more than one observation was made in the context.

Observations at choir practices in Karen Theological Seminaries were made at:

- *Karen Kawthoolei Baptist Bible School and College*, Mae La Refugee Camp, Tak province, Thailand \*
- *Karen Baptist Theological Seminary*, Rangoon, Burma
- *Pwo Kayin Baptist Theological Seminary*, Rangoon, Burma
- *Hill Light Theological Seminary*, Huay Nam Khun, Tak province, Thailand

Besides the above mentioned, observations were also made in contexts with non-specified Karen choirs:

- Seminary Choral, *Myanmar Institute of Theology*, Rangoon, Burma\*
- Seminary Choral, *McGilvary Faculty of Theology, Payap University*, Chiang Mai, Thailand
- *Univoice*, freestanding choir with some Karen participants, Rangoon, Burma

Observations in Sunday services were made in seven different Karen Baptist churches, both Sgaw- och Pwo-karen:

- *Ban Pong Church*, Mae Sariang, Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand
- *Pwo Karen Bethel Church*, Chiang Mai, Thailand \*
- *Siloam church*, Thailand Karen Baptist Convention, Chiang Mai, Thailand \*
- *Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College*, Mae La Refugee Camp, Tak Province, Thailand \*
- *Yaowarah church*, Ban Huay Khom village, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand
- *Sanchung Karen Baptist Church*, Rangoon, Burma
- *Pwo-Kayin Britton Baptist Church*, Rangoon, Burma

Observations took place in the following churches and dormitories:

- *Bethany Baptist church*, Bogeow, Chiang Mai province, Thailand
- *Tha Thay Gong Baptist Church*, Rangoon, Burma
- *Nant Tha Gone Karen Baptist Church*, Rangoon, Burma

- Dormitory for young Sgaw-Karen students run by *Thailand Karen Baptist Convention*, Mae Sariang, Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand
- Dormitory for *The Karen young people reaching for perfection project*, Bogeow, Chiang Mai Province, Thailand

### **Language considerations in the observations**

Notwithstanding the global language of music, I definitely missed many aspects of the Karen choir context in my observations because of my limited knowledge of the Karen languages. In some choir practices and parts of services I understood that English was the language being used because of my presence. One of the choirs I visited in Rangoon had deliberately decided to use English as their main language for half their rehearsal time which made it possible for me to understand when the choir leader gave instructions about for instance the lyrics or the phrasing in a choir piece.

I did not make efforts to engage interpreters consistently for the observations. In some cases someone who could translate was present on the occasion, with or without my knowledge beforehand. However, because of the nature of a choir practice and since the observations was semi-participatory, only some of the choir rehearsal could be translated simultaneously, which is why it was very beneficial to the study that I could have interviews with the choir leaders before or afterwards.

## **7.4 Ethical considerations**

I am in strong agreement with the words of Oliver: “research is an activity which involves the lives of others, and it is important to show that you have reflected upon the impact of your research on other people.”<sup>86</sup> In this thesis I have met many people who have shared much of their life stories with me. With the confidence they have awarded me comes responsibility to render their stories as truthfully as possible and at the same time be aware of the constant cultural interpretation I was making, deliberately as well as unconsciously.

Many informants expressed their expectations of being interviewed for this thesis research material. In some cases I suspected that the anticipation of some of the informants were ones of a dissertation rather than a thesis. To the largest possible extent, I will try to send the thesis to the informants by post or e-mail. Since many of my interviewees have not got e-mail accounts I will ask the local connectors who provided me with the best of help in the different areas of Thailand and Burma to provide the informants access to the final thesis in some way. Since my thesis is in English, it is unfortunately probable that some of my interviewees will not be able to understand large parts of it.

I consider it a crucial part of the ethical considerations to make sure that the readers are well up into the context and background of the study. This is especially important in a cross-cultural ethnography why I chose to give a wide background in chapter 4.

### **Anonymity, freedom of choice and compensation for the informants**

I found it surprising that none of my interviewees asked me to assure them of their anonymity in the thesis. It is likely that many of the interviewees especially in Burma and Mae La

<sup>86</sup> Oliver (2008): 119

Refugee Camp have experiences of participating in research work and are content with this since it means that they will contribute to the knowledge of the outside world about the situation of hardship and oppression that is their everyday life. Regardless of this, I will not for obvious reasons reveal the identity of my informants in this thesis.

The questionnaires were presented as a voluntarily activity for students to take part in. In all cases the students were given at least a day or two to answer the questionnaire. The students at KBTS in Rangoon had a couple of weeks to answer the questionnaires. Despite my chance to present the questionnaires at both Seminaries in Thailand, the more direct instructions were given in Karen by the choir teachers at KKBBS and Siloam Bible Institute. This makes it impossible for me to know whether or not they stressed the importance of participation in my thesis and in that way created unintentional elements of compulsion to the students' participation in the questionnaires.

Everywhere I went to gather data for this thesis I was touched by the incredible hospitality of the people in the Karen community in Thailand and Burma and their willingness to contribute with their time and knowledge to my thesis. Offering economic compensation for such things as travel, food and lodging costs is a delicate issue in the Karen culture since it can be considered rude not to accept hospitality and friendship. None of the interviewees had long journeys to come for the interviews and mostly of the times I travelled to their whereabouts and could when needed stay over night with friends of friends in the villages and towns I visited. In Rangoon I stayed at a hotel as a part of the course I took at Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT), funded by the Church of Sweden. In Chiang Mai, where I stayed for a month, I had the opportunity to rent a room at a dormitory for Pwo-Karen students, which turned out to be very rewarding for my thesis.

A glass of water is both compulsory in the Karen culture and necessary given the weather conditions. Either myself or the interviewee were always offered a glass of water depending on if the interview was performed in their or my whereabouts. If the interview was performed before or after a meal, the interviewee or myself were always invited to come or stay for the meal.

## **8. Results**

Since music is a universal language in which melodies travel across languages and country barriers, it is clearly favourable to conduct research in this area. In general, people have very positive connotations towards music – it is normally not an area connected to either reluctance or controversy. On the contrary, since music is an art form in which most people have a personal relationship towards in some way making conversation about music is easy as most people are either practicing music, listening to it or enjoying both. I am sure that my area of studies facilitated the initial processes in the fieldwork since it was unnecessary to work hard to inspire the interest of many of the informants.

It is clear that the manner in which the objectives and issues were formulated yielded substantial research material, more than enough for a dissertation in my opinion. I ended up returning to Sweden from Thailand and Burma with contact information to additional informants that I did not have time to meet during the summer that constituted the research period. After every completed interview or observation I obtained more impulses and ideas

for future observations and interviews. Furthermore, the questionnaires generated the possibility of drawing many conclusions and making different comparisons.

## 8.1 Questionnaires

Altogether 123 questionnaires were answered by students of Divinity studying at Karen Theological Seminaries in Chiang Mai, Mae La Refugee Camp and Rangoon<sup>87</sup> and can be broken up into:

- 50 answers from respondents at *Karen Baptist Theological Seminary* (KBTS) in Rangoon, Burma
- 37 answers from respondents at *Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College* (KKBBSC) in Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand
- 36 answers from respondents at *Siloam Bible Institute* in Chiang Mai, Thailand

### Disposition of material

Naturally there were great variations in the answers on the question where almost all informants gave more than one reason why they consider being part of a choir meaningful. I have therefore, with the help of one of my translators, categorised the answers in the following paragraph together into what we consider appropriate categories. One example is the responses: “Praise the Lord” and “Worship God”, that we considered to be more or less the same reason, so they have been placed in the same category. With this said, I have tried to be as clear as possible on the many variations of answers in the disposition in appendix 4.

Unfortunately, all the 36 answered questionnaires from Siloam Bible Institute were lost before I had the chance to transfer all the answers into a disposition, which is why the answers from respondents at Siloam Bible Institute in this paragraph do not include some of the parts reproduced from the questionnaires answered by students at KBTS and KKBBSC.

The replies on the why the respondents consider it meaningful to be a part of a choir, what I consider to be the most crucial part of the answer material, was luckily part of the analysis material that was transferred into the disposition prior to the loss.

## 8.2 Interviews

Needless to say, conducting interviews in ethnography is different from other forms of research.

- 25 interviews were carried out: 20 individual interviews, with 11 male and nine female informants together with five gender-mixed group interviews.

### Choice of interviewees

My initial plan was to find informants outside of the Christian church community, as I have already written. However, this turned out to be more difficult than I anticipated since choir

<sup>87</sup> The questionnaires handed out the students are included in appendix 1,2 and 3. The disposition of answers from the questionnaires is included in appendix 4.

music among the Karens is specifically conducted in a Christian context, which I will elaborate in the next chapter.

All but one of the interviewees were choir leaders, choir teachers, musicians, composers, church leaders or chairpersons within the Karen Baptist contexts in Northern Thailand and Burma. It is actually fair to say that many of the interviewees had some and a few had all, of the functions mentioned above. Only one interviewee, a music teacher at *Payap University* in Chiang Mai, can be considered to be without a close connection to the Karen Christian Baptist Community.

### **Disposition of interview**

After giving me their personal background and present involvement in choir singing, the interviewees were asked some or all of the following questions:

#### *Reasons for and function of choir singing*

- In your opinion, are the Karens in general keen and well known for singing?
- Comment on the function of choir singing among the Karens?

#### *Sgaw- and Pwo-Karen choir tradition*

- Comment on the domination of Sgaw-Karens involved in choir singing.
- Say something about the Pwo-Karen choir tradition.

#### *Gender and age aspects*

- In your opinion, are there more male choir leaders than female in the Karen community?
- Are you familiar with any female composers of Karen choir music?
- Are young people in general attracted by choir singing as older people?

#### *Choir singing in a Christian context*

- Why do you think Karen choir singing almost exclusively takes part in a Christian context?
- Have you experienced or heard about choir singing among the Karens outside a Christian context?
- In which ways is choir singing an important of the parish life?

Choir leaders in Mae La Refugee Camp were asked questions on the role and importance of music in a general Karen context. Naturally many of their replies generated follow-up questions like “Why do you think there is a domination of male choir leaders?” or “How come choir singing among Pwo-Karens are out of the ordinary in your opinion?”.

I also find it important to mention that some of the questions, because of my pre-understanding and that which I gained as the study went along, were phrased in other ways. In the last interviews, the interviewees were more asked to comment and give their opinion on, for example, the domination of Sgaw-Karen choirs compare to Pwo-Karen choirs, or about Karen male composers compared to female, rather than answering “if” there is a domination of Sgaw-Karen choirs and male Karen composers.

Since most of the interviewees were active choir leaders, they were asked to describe the function and the organization of the choir they lead or belong to in different aspects, including:

- How many times a week does your choir practice?
- How often and in which contexts does the choir perform?

- What does the choir repertoire mainly consist of?
- Which languages do you sing in?
- Is all music learned by ear or do you use sheet music as well?

At the end of the interview they were asked to comment on the future of Karen choir singing and lastly if they wanted to add anything else to the interview.

### **Group interviews**

All group interview sessions was actually intended as individual interviews beforehand, in most cases before or after a choir practice. I had initially set up the interviews with only one person at a time. This person always remained in the interview throughout the whole session. However, other choir members, pianists, assistant leaders or family members also joined in the interviews when they arrived to the place of the interview. It was almost impossible to predict that the individual interviews would turn into a group interview. Some interviewees remained in the interview session until they left in order to for example prepare something for the coming choir practice or to go back home, if the interview took place after a choir practice. Others arrived together with the initial interviewee and stayed for the whole interview session.

Against this background, I find it difficult to account for exactly how many people were interviewees in the group interviews and also how many female and male interviewees there were in these sessions. In some of the session it was evident that the initial interviewee had asked for example a daughter, husband or a friend to come along and help with language facilitation or translation.

### **Collection of information and ethical considerations**

The collection of the information gathered from the interviews depended greatly on the circumstances. Notes were taken during all the interviews, preferably and principally on computer, but also using pen and paper. This depended on the weather and on whether the interview took place inside or outside. Most of the interviews were also, with the permission from the interviewee, recorded with a recording device and then transcribed. None of the interviews were video recorded.

## **8.3 Observations**

The observations are closely linked with both the interviews and questionnaires. Each observation was made in a choir context where I had, either before or after the observation, an interview with at least one of the choir leaders.

One of the most important questions when thinking about the choice of method after the actual observations had been made was whether or not the informants reacted in an “atypical way” during the observations. When an observer is present, it can lead to what Bryman explains as a “reactive effect” from the informants, which I have elaborated more in section 6.3 of the thesis.<sup>88</sup>

*Farang* is the generic Thai word used for a western foreigner. Coming from a western country

<sup>88</sup> Bryman (2008): 265

and visiting Thailand you will, without a doubt, hear the word more than once. Visiting Karen villages, my experience is that hearing the words *Kolle* (Sgaw-Karen) as well as the Pwo-Karen word *Kolla*, which has got the same meaning as farang, is definitely standard. My presence in Rangoon, Chiang Mai, villages of Northern Thailand and Mae La Refugee Camp was of course noticeable. In Mae La I could not for example, during my three days in the camp, see any other farangs except for a few other guests invited to the Karen Wrist Tying-celebration that was held during my stay in Mae La. This is despite the large number of international Non-Governmental organizations that work inside and close to the camp. When I attended Sunday service at the church in KKBBSC, I was, as far as I could see, the only non-Burmese or Thai present among around two hundred participants. One presumable explanation is the recent harsher regulations on foreigners' presence inside Mae La. Requesting and obtaining permission to enter Mae La is now considerably more difficult compared to a couple of years ago.

It is of course impossible to know whether or not my presence affected the natural behaviour of the informants or not. In many cases, I was invited to sit on the bench in the very front of the church during the service. In some cases it is likely that my presence made the informants nervous. I witnessed nervous burst of laughter several times during many of the choir rehearsals, especially the ones at the Theological Seminaries. Since the fear of 'losing face' and its possible manifestations is a known part in of Karen culture, it is impossible for me to know whether or not my presence was the main reason for this.<sup>89</sup> In other cases I was actually surprised that my presence was not perceived as anything unusual. One example was at a choir practice that took place at a Theological Seminary in Chiang Mai where the teacher began the choir rehearsal with scolding at the students in a gentle way, before realizing that he had forgotten to introduce me.

### **Collection of information and ethical considerations**

I always used pen and paper to take notes during the observations. For most part of the observations I took photos and made short video recordings with a simple digital camera. I also made voice recordings of parts of the choir practices or services using a handheld digital audio recorder.

When I made an observation at a choir practice I would introduce myself, my study and also ask for permission to take photos or make a video or a voice recording. I tried to make sure that my introduction was translated to either Karen or Thai, attempts which succeeded in perhaps half of the cases. Many times I got the impression that the Karen choir leaders wanted their students to get a chance to practise their English, since they were somewhat reluctant to translate what I said.

When I was observing choir singing in a service I did not always have the opportunity of introducing my study or ask for permission to record and take photos, since I and other present visitors, were introduced in Karen and asked to stand up from the benches where we were seated.

<sup>89</sup> In many Asian cultures, undoubtedly including the Karen culture, losing face by for example admitting to lack of sufficient language skills is considered as a great embarrassment. This is therefore something most people strive to steer clear of to a large extent even if it means a misunderstanding.

In this paragraph I find it appropriate to add that I was never told, neither did I get the impression that my photos or recording would make any of my informants uncomfortable. On the contrary, I had the impression that many informants actually felt proud to be part of videos and voice recordings for an ethnographical study and that this did not jeopardize their safety in any way.

## 9. Analysis and conclusions

In this chapter I will analyse the results and elaborate conclusions in the discourse of Karen choir music based on the objectives and issues presented in chapter 5. The analysis and conclusions presented below are based on the findings from the Minor Field Study carried out in Rangoon in Burma and in several villages, towns and cities in Northern Thailand for 10 weeks in June, July and August 2011.

### **The research material has been yielded from:**

- Observations in the Karen community, especially among Christian Karens organized in the Karen Baptist Conventions in Burma and Northern Thailand.
- Twenty-five individual and group interviews, the majority made with Karen choir leaders active in the Karen Baptist Conventions in Burma and Northern Thailand.
- 123 questionnaires answered by students at three Theological Seminaries in Northern Thailand and Burma; *Karen Kawthoolei Baptist Bible School and College* (KKBBS) in Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand; *Karen Baptist Theological Seminar* (KBTS) in Rangoon, Burma and *Siloam Bible Institute* in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

### **The conclusions are drawn from the following objectives and issues:**

- *How widespread is choir singing among the Karen people?*
- *What are the main, discernible effects linked to choir singing among the Karen people in Northern Thailand and Burma?*
- *Given the socio-geographical contexts explained in the background, what are the significant changes in choir singing among the Karen people within the last decades?*
- *What are the role and function of choir singing according to Karen students of divinity and choir leaders in Christian churches and Theological Seminaries?*

Referring to the background about the Karen culture we can conclude that the collective identity is in a special nature and not immediately understandable from 'a Swedish perspective'. The collective endeavours are generally much more established, acknowledged and respected in the Karen culture compared to individualistic western cultures. The collective aspects of the Karen culture are strengthened, deepened and encouraged by a religious context and community. Belonging to a religious group that can sometimes comprise the whole village, strengthens the religious identity as well as the Karen identity. Music, especially when being played or sung in groups, plays an important part in this aspect.

Before going deeper into the results, I find it important to once again outline that all but one interview in this study was made with people who are active in a Karen Christian, and more specifically Baptist, context. Furthermore, the observations made in specifically Karen choirs

were exclusively made in choirs in Christian churches or at Theological Seminaries, Bible schools and dormitories run by Christian organizations, predominantly Baptist.

## 9.1 Widespreadness in choir singing among the Karen people

- *How widespread is choir singing among the Karen people?*

When answering this objective it is important to initially decide which definition of 'choir singing' should be applied. For obvious reasons, I've decided to use the definition created by my informants. When defining 'choir', interviewees that were choir leaders in both Northern Thailand and Burma put emphasis on four-part harmony singing, i.e. soprano, alto, tenor and bass. This is also confirmed in the questionnaires where many of the informants underlined the importance of four-part harmony in choir music. A 24-year old man studying at KKBBSC comments in his questionnaire: "When we sing choir it has to be four parts. Otherwise we cannot say that it's a choir." When one of the choir leaders in Thailand was asked during an interview if a group singing in two-part harmony could be considered as choir singing he was most hesitant. In his opinion, three-part harmony could perhaps constitute choir singing, but he was clear that the preferable amount of harmonies in choir singing is four.

When choir singing is defined as group singing in four-part harmony it is mainly carried out in a Karen Christian context. Christian Karens in both Burma and Thailand are famous and well known for their choir music both within the Karen community as well as in the society around them and what today is known as 'Karen choir music' has sprung of Hymns in four-part harmony, brought to Burma by the English and American missionaries. These hymns were brought to the Karens in Thailand by the Karens in Burma. Hymn-melodies still constitutes the general structure for Karen choir music and is elaborated and developed within the Karen communities in predominantly Burma, but also in Thailand.

There are also four-part harmony choir songs in Karen with non-Christian lyrics as well as non-specifically Christian occasions when a Karen choir performs. New choir compositions in Karen are mostly based on four-part harmony structure, but also contain specific features that can be considered as 'typically Karen'.

### **Music theory, sheet music and notes**

Many interviewees stressed knowing sheet music or notes as an important part of choir singing. One informant, a 26-year old man, an active choir leader at a Bible school in a town in Northern Thailand, gave his view when he was asked about his opinion on why singing can be considered representative for the Karen music life: "Karen people are not so skilled when it comes to choir, but they like to sing." When he was asked why he did not consider the Karens "skilled" in choir singing, he answered: "Few people know sheet music" and explained that in a typical village church, only one or perhaps two people who understand notes can be found. He added: "But if somebody teaches them, they can learn." On the question why he considers it important for children to learn notes, one interviewee, a 25-year old man, working as a volunteer in a dormitory in a large village, answered that if the children does not learn notes, they will not be able to sing precisely. If they do not learn notes they will be able to sing in "one voice". Most important was however in his opinion to "sing with the heart".

Music theory constitutes a large part of the music teaching in the majority of the Theological Seminaries in this study. Approximately one hour a week, sometimes more, is devoted to sight-reading and other music theory elements. The students at KKBBSC have two music theory sessions each week. However, despite the emphasize on music theory, the choir leaders at KKBBSC never use sheet music when they teach a new song to their students making this Seminary choir different from KBTS in Rangoon and Siloam Bible Institute in Chiang Mai where sheet music was handed out to the students when they were taught a new song.

### **Singing together among the Karens**

As mentioned above, when choir is defined as four-part harmony singing it exists almost exclusively among the Christian Karens in Northern Thailand and Burma. However, if singing together in general is ‘choir singing’, this can be considered as a popular activity among all Karens, according to my informants. Group singing among the Karens go back to the time before the missionaries came to Burma from America and England at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore if reciting or singing traditional Karen melodically poems constitutes choir singing, the Karens have a great history of doing choir singing.

One interviewee, a 33 year-old male choir leader active in Burma, explained the history of singing among the Karens as: “Karens have sung since before there were instruments.” The same choir leader described the love for singing among the Karens: “Many young people like to sing when they are working, cooking, in their every day lives, even when they are taking a shower, riding their motorbike or driving. They sing to forget their worries”. A 28-year old male choir leader active in Mae La Refugee Camp comments on all Karen peoples love for singing: “Also Karen people who are not Christian like to sing. Singing is a strength, a victory for our Karen people.” When asked to elaborate his statement he said that choir singing creates freedom in their hearts and “unity for the future”.

### **Karen ancestral poems *Tha***

“No Htar no Karen, know the Htar and you know the Karen.”<sup>90</sup>

Quote on the website Karenvoice.net under the headline “Karen ancestral poems”.

*Tha*, *Ta* or *Htar*, are Karen traditional poems that can be read or sung solo or in groups. *Tha*s constitutes a very important part of the Karen cultural heritage. The *thas* is still a crucial part of the Karen storytelling where the most famous *thas* are the ones describe the creation of the universe and nature. One of my interviewees, an anthropologist teaching at a University in Chiang Mai resembles the *thas* with haiku-style poems. According to the same anthropologist, *thas* are mostly sung or recited in animistic villages nowadays in Thailand.

The knowledge and recognition of *thas* is probably greater and more encouraged to retain among Christian Karens in Burma than in Thailand. At KBTS there are open *tha* workshops organized every week. The leadership within some Karen churches, more in Thailand than in Burma, frown upon the *thas*, or at least consider the heritage unimportant. It is however likely that most Christian Karens find the *thas* utterly unproblematic considering the clear monotheistic belief expressed in the poems.

Since the *thas* can be sung or recited with accompaniment, many interviewees consider the

<sup>90</sup> Karen Voice: Karen Ancestor Poems – retrieved May 9, 2012

thas as a contributing factor as to why choir singing is so widespread among the Karens. Singing and reciting thas was prior to the arrival of American and English missionaries in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One female 38-year old choir leader working at a Theological Institute in Burma describes: “The spirit of singing was already there before the missionaries.” Another interviewee, a 28-year old man, working as a choir leader in a Bible school outside Mae Sot, explains that the Karens liked singing even before the missionaries came. The Karens had sung thas and other songs since the time of their ancestors. When the missionaries came to the Karens, they brought new songs with them, choir songs and hymns. “The tradition of singing became a tradition of singing choir music. Karens in general like to sing songs”. A 33-year old female choir leader active in Mae La Refugee Camp confirms this statement: “Most Karens like music since this is our inheritance. /---/ Even the Buddhist Karens like singing”.

### **Four-part harmony singing among Christian Karens**

Choir singing in four-part harmony is much widespread in Christian contexts of Karens living in Thailand and Burma. In the Karen Baptist Conventions in Northern Thailand and Burma where the majority of my informants are organized, choir singing is considered a very important part of the parish life and is therefore promoted and encourage by the Convention in various ways.

A parish within *Thailand Karen Baptist Convention* (TKBC) should have at least 50 members in order to be called a parish. Parishes belonging to *Karen Baptist Convention* (KBC) in Burma and TKBC are likely to have at least one mixed church choir. If they do not have a choir, this is considered as something strange, making the parish “incomplete”, according to several of the interviewees in Thailand. Parishes in towns or cities with many members have often more than one choir: a church choir, a women’s choir, a youth choir and a children’s choir. The choirs meet in the church for rehearsals on different evenings in the week and are encouraged to sing in one of Sunday services.<sup>91</sup> Sometimes the choirs also rehearse in peoples’ houses.

The mixed church choir sings at weddings and funerals in the parish, more in the villages than in the cities. The church choir have their main performance on the Sunday service at 10:30 or 11:00 am. This service is referred to as the ‘noon service’ and is the time when the church choir sings what they have been practicing during the week. The women’s choir sings in the afternoon service, which is organized by the women’s group, while the youth choir sing either in the morning or evening service. There are of course local variations when these performances take place, depending on the local parish organization.

When the collection is gathered during a Sunday service in a parish belonging to TKBC, this is almost without exception done during what in Thai is called “a special song”. If the choir has prepared something they will sing this piece during the collection, if there is no choir piece, a solo or duet song will be performed.

One interviewee, a 52 years-old man who is a well known Karen musician and composer in Thailand described the choir singing in his village as one of the most distinct sounds during his childhood. “Growing up, there were no sounds of airplanes, cars or motorcycles. The

<sup>91</sup> Most part of parishes within KBC and TKBC, especially the ones in small towns and villages, offer at least three services each Sunday.

sounds that were heard were from the choir, the rain and the animals around the village”. Another interviewee, a well-known 70-year old choir leader and composer confirm this picture: “Ever since the Karens are young they have heard choir singing. All churches have got choirs. The Karens are brought up singing.”

On the question whether or not he considers all Karen people fond of singing in choir, one interviewee, a 26 years-old male choir teacher working in a Bible school in Northern Thailand, responded that this applies for people living in the refugee camps, however not in general in Karen villages. “Perhaps 40% of all people in the villages like to sing in choirs. There are not choirs in all villages, but people like to sing songs accompanied by guitar.” When I asked the same informant on his opinion to why there are choirs at all Karen Bible schools, he simply answered: “Well, that must be because Karen people enjoy singing”.

### **Choir singing among Christian Pwo-Karens**

The specifically Pwo-Karen speaking churches were established and organized long after the Sgaw-Karen-speaking ones. The entire Bible was published into Sgaw-Karen in 1853, while the Pwo-Karen translation was completed in 1878.<sup>92</sup> Choir singing is not as elaborated in the parish life in Pwo-Karen speaking churches as in the Christian Sgaw-Karen community. Several Sgaw-Karen interviewees said they considered the Pwo-Karens good at and famous for other things than choir singing. One female interviewee, a choir leader in Rangoon, expressed that she considers Pwo-Karens to be “blessed in other senses”. One interviewee, a 77 year-old Pwo-Karen choir leader active in Burma gave his explanation: “The Sgaw-Karen choirs are more advanced because the missionaries gave more time to the Sgaw-Karens. The Pwo-Karens lack leaders in the music and in the church work.”

For obvious reasons the choir repertoire in Pwo-Karen is not as large as in Sgaw-Karen. However, many Pwo-Karen in Burma as well as Thailand are fluent in Sgaw-Karen as well as their mother tongue which is why some parishes sing four-part harmony in Sgaw-karen.

Choir singing is much more common among the Pwo-Karens in Burma than in Thailand and is encouraged and part of the teachings at *Pwo Kayin Theological Seminary* in Rangoon. The Christian Pwo-Karen community is a minority within the minority in Burma but to a much larger extent in Thailand. The Pwo-Karen speaking district of TKBC is called *Bethlehem district*. In Chiang Mai, the Pwo-Karen speaking parish of TKBC gathers around 40 people for the Sunday service.

Since there is no Pwo-Karen speaking Bible school in Northern Thailand yet, Pwo-Karen pastors and church workers tend to choose a Thai speaking Bible school or Seminary above a Sgaw-Karen speaking one even if many of them are fluent Sgaw-Karen speakers. Choir singing is not a large part of the teachings in the Thai-speaking Bible schools. The worship music repertoire consist more of so called ‘praise songs’.<sup>93</sup> Since the majority of Pwo-Karen church leaders in Thailand have been trained at Thai-speaking Theological Seminaries and Bible schools and the repertoire of choir music in Pwo-Karen is not large, four-part harmony singing is not common among the Pwo-Karens in Thailand.

<sup>92</sup> Hovemyr (1989): 98

<sup>93</sup> I use praise songs to describe songs that has sprung out of large Christian churches in English-speaking countries, often referred to as ‘mega churches’: such as *Hillsong* in Australia and *Willow Creek* in Chicago. These songs have been spread to churches all over the world where they are translated into other languages.

### **Four-part harmony singing outside the Karen Christian context**

All interviewees were asked if they had any experiences of Karen choir singing outside a Christian context. None of the interviewees responded that they had great experiences of leading, or even being part of a four part harmony choir singing in Karen that was not organized with a Christian connection. One informant, a 23 year-old woman working with music in Mae La Refugee Camp, commented on non-Christian Karen choirs: “I have never heard about a Karen choir that is not Christian, only solo and duet that are non-Christian singing.”

A well-known choir leader, musician and composer active in the Christian Karen contexts in Thailand left his comment on the situation: “The Karens think that choir music belongs to the Christian people. They don’t understand that choir singing is for everybody.” Another interviewee, a 61-year old man, active in a Karen large village outside of Chiang Mai, describes that people who are not Christian will sometimes come and participate in the choir practices he leads. He considers this unproblematic, but explains that many of these choir singers do not dare to perform together with the choir at the Sunday services.

Many interviewees had however experiences of ‘non-religious choir singing’ at for example on the Karen National day or on other occasions. When for instance a county council would organize a celebration on a public holiday, it is common for the local Karen church choir to be asked to sing songs with specified or non-specified Christian lyrics on this occasion. In Thailand, songs about the Thai King constitute a large part of this repertoire. In the Church services it is not out of the ordinary that the choir sings a song with non-Christian lyrics, for example a choir piece generally honouring Mothers on Mothers day. In one of the observations, carried out at a dormitory run by TKBC, the teenagers at the dormitory were rehearsing a song about the King and the ‘country spirit of Thailand’ that would be sung on the following Sunday service. One interviewee describes that Karens 50-60 years ago, used to sing songs together with lyrics about for example the nature, at concerts that were not specifically Christian. He now considered these songs as a repertoire that has been lost.

## **9.2 Significant changes in choir singing among the Karen people**

- *Given the socio-geographical contexts explained in the background, what are the significant changes in choir singing among the Karen people within the last decades?*

The Karen will always be an ethnic minority no matter where in the world they are situated. The Christian Karen community is a minority within the Karen minority itself, both in Thailand as well as in Burma. Their minority identity is affected and strengthened by choir singing. Choir singing and other musical activities support and create a shared cultural fundament; a fundament that is not static, on the contrary it is a constantly being developed.

Since Burma's military government started its systematic oppression of ethnic minorities, many Karens have been forced to flee from Burma to Thailand, which has led to the establishment of refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Choir music is an important and highly promoted activity in the refugee camps, uniting the Karens and actively maintaining and developing the (Christian) Karen cultural heritage to which choir music is a large part.

Migration is impossible to separate from culture since crossing borders lies in the nature of culture in general. This is apparent in the discourse of Karen choir music: sheet music that is written and produced by the teachers at KBTS in Rangoon will at some stage reach the choir leaders active within TKBC. CDs recorded in Mae La Refugee Camp with the choir at KKBBSC are sold among the Karens in Chiang Rai province or passed on within the Karen community in Sweden or in another country where there is a Karen diaspora.

The refugee camps along the Thai-Burma Border are of great significance for the Karen cultural development. The situation for the Karens in Burma is not always well known among Karens in other parts of the country and in Thailand, however, almost all Karens in Thailand has a personal connection in one way or another with a fellow Karen inside a refugee camp. The refugee camps, especially Mae La Refugee Camps since this is the largest one, provides cultural connections between Karens in Thailand, Burma and the rest of the world. The actual event of Karen choir singing is in Mae La Refugee camp, as well as in other refugee camps where there is a large Karen population, carried out by the most Karen people at the same time compared to any other place in world.

The interviewees underlined the significance of the influences from American and English missionaries in the development of four-part harmony choir among the Karens. With the missionaries came the gospel message, in words as well as melody. The missionaries brought their hymnals with four-part harmony arrangement that became translated into Burmese and Karen and became a given part of the Karen Christian contexts. It was the Christian Karens in Burma who became missionaries to their fellow Karens in Thailand.

Choir singing is still a very important part of the Karen parish life, especially in the villages: A parish without some sort of a choir is out of the ordinary. One choir leader, a 25-year old man active in a Christian dormitory outside of Chiang Mai explains: “Our ancestors cherished the choir heritage well, they brought it with them wherever they went”, which according to him is the reason why around 80-90% of all parishes in TKBC have choirs today.

Even if choir singing has occurred since the first Christians and is an important part of the Karen Christian culture, it is clear that many of interviewees consider ‘the golden age’ of choir singing to be over now. Many interviewees expressed their worry about the future of choir music since young people in general does not show as much interest in choir singing as they used to. “Karen young people are not interested in choir anymore”, said, a well-known composer and musician. He reckons that the disinterest from young people can be linked with their lack of knowledge of the Karen language. He describes that he has to write out the words in Thai phonetics for his choir members, as they are unable to read in Karen. “Young people like singing in choir, but they cannot read Karen.” Another interviewee, a 24-year old male student from Siloam, doing his internship in a fairly large village also underlines language aspects. He explained that there are many Karens who do not dare to speak their own language because they fear that they will be looked down upon. Instead they speak Thai even with each other. When the Karen language is not maintained it becomes more difficult for the choir leaders to encourage their parish members to sing choir songs in Karen. The step to start singing in a choir for a Karen person today is higher than it has been historically.

Some interviewees describe the influences of pop and rock music in the parish music life as a contributing factor for the decline in popularity of traditional choir music. Young people in the parishes today are in general considered to be more interested in playing pop and rock music than singing in choir. One of the interviewees in Rangoon explained that the interest for

choir is very weak right in Burma now, a contributing reason why many musicians interested in choir will chose to study abroad.

Many interviewees told about the older generations love for choir music. Some of the older people in the parishes do not like instruments being used in the services - they prefer to hear the choir. A 23-year old female interviewee from Mae La Refugee Camp explained: “They say, if they hear about the choir they become a strength”. The 24-year old Siloam student mentioned above considers that there is a need to encourage choir singing for people of all ages where grown-ups needs to be encourage in one way and young people in another.

A 38-year old choir teacher at a Theological seminar in Rangoon considers “the lack of qualified teachers” as the contributing factor to why many young people have lost their interest in choir singing. If more teachers where specifically and formally trained in choir music they would be able to encourage young people to sing choir music, she said.

Despite many interviewees expressing that they consider choir music to be unpopular or even in decline among young people, around half the choir leaders that were interviewees in this study are under the age of 40, which can also be considered as representative for the general population of Karen choir leaders. Also, choir performances and competitions at the annual meetings and conferences organized by the Karen Baptist Conventions have remained important. The choirs singing at these events consist of both old and young people.

It is important to remember that Rangoon and Chiang Mai are not representatives for all Karen people. Being a part of the city Rangoon with its population of more than 4 million undoubtedly differs from living in a village with less than 200 inhabitants. It is clear that there are more and also stronger choir singing activities in the villages than in the cities, especially among young people. Some interviewees estimate that a reason is that the choir practices for the youth choir often take place during the general youth gatherings that are on Friday and Saturday nights. Many interviewees confirm that there are not many other activities on Friday or Saturday nights in the villages except for meetings in the church and choir practice. On the other hand, young people in Chiang Mai and Rangoon can choose among a broader range of possible leisure activities besides choir singing that most likely affect to what extent they chose to participate in the youth choir. In the villages, says one interviewee now living in Rangoon, there are no pubs or restaurants where young people can choose to meet, like in the cities. The given place for meeting your friends is still in the church.

### **The future for choir singing among the Karens**

As already mentioned, many interviewees are concerned about the future for choir singing among Karens because of many young peoples’ decline in interest. One choir leader, a 33-year old female choir leader active in Mae La Refugee Camp considers choir to be a given part of Karen heritage and thereby important to retain. She is worried that choir singing is disappearing since she knows that some churches, even some in Mae La, do not have choirs anymore. However, interviewees also underline other aspects that worry them when they were asked about their opinions on the future or development for Karen choir singing.

When asked what he reckons to be the development for choir singing among the Karens and how choir singing will look like within ten years time, one interviewee, a well-known male composer active in Chiang Mai, reckons there to be more choir groups that are not specifically Christian as well as more choir songs with non-Christian lyrics.

When asked whether or not he considers Karen choir music progressive, a well-known choir teacher and composer, a 59-year old man working at a University in Chiang Mai, answered: “Yes, in the cities, but not in villages. They still sing the same songs in the villages.” The same choir teacher also expressed a need for a music department within the TKBC, something which he has longed for and made efforts to establish during some time. He describes the possibility of the music department functioning as a ‘music central’ where composers of Karen could distribute their music and where musical training could be provided.

A 28-year old male choir leader, active in Mae La Refugee Camp, underlined the need for training when he asked what he imagined the difference was between singing in a choir in Sweden and in Mae La. “The level is perhaps different. We need teachers to teach us.” He described the lack of music schools in Burma from where he had fled: “If we have our own land, our own country, we would start schools. We would invite you to teach in our school. Now we are weak.”

### **9.3 Role, function and discernible effects linked to choir singing among the Karen people**

- *What are the role and function of choir singing according to Karen students of divinity and choir leaders in Christian churches and Theological Seminaries?*
- *What are the main, discernible effects linked to choir singing among the Karen people in Northern Thailand and Burma?*

Informants have in questionnaires, interviews and observations expressed the aspects of choir singing among the Karen people listed below. Some of which are also what I identify as the main, discernible effects linked to choir singing among the Karen people in Northern Thailand and Burma.

In the following disposition I will therefore analyse the results using these headlines:

9.3.1 Musical factors and effects

9.3.2 Identity aspects and identity strengthening effects

9.3.3 Social factors and effects

9.3.4 Religious aspects

9.3.5 Educational and training factors

9.3.6 Language factors and language strengthening effects

9.3.7 Gender aspects

#### **9.3.1 Musical aspects and effects**

“It can be meaningful to be a part of a choir because – when we can sing, we can teach others also. And we know more how to sing and how to do with our vocal voice. For me choir is very meaningful.”

Female respondent from KKBBSC

Choir singing is the main musical performance in services within parishes of Karen Baptist Convention in Burma and Thailand. At the Karen Theological Seminaries it is the musical expression awarded with the most attention and time. It is considered meaningful by the informants for musical reasons and it develops voice technique and vocal skills. Furthermore it provides training in sight-reading and four-part harmony singing.

Informants stress musical reasons for singing in a choir in both interviews and questionnaires. It is however evident that the majority of informants in interviews and questionnaires do not underline pure musical reasons as the main motivation to why they consider choir singing to be meaningful. Many informants stress the importance of music and specifically choir singing as an element in the services, something I will develop in section '9.3.4 Religious aspects'.

From the respondents at KKBBS, three respondents give an explanation that has to do with music in their answer to why they consider being a part of a choir meaningful. Seven respondents from KBTS regards choir singing as something that improves their musical skills. Eight respondents at Siloam Bible Institute write in their answer that being part of a choir is an activity that gives them a chance to practice or learn more about singing. Five respondents from Siloam also write that they find it important to be a part of a choir because they get a chance to practice singing in harmony.

### **9.3.2 Identity aspects and identity strengthening effects**

“The family that live together sing together”

Church choir leader in Rangoon

Choir singing strengthens Christian Karens as a religious minority within the general Karen minority. Interviews, questionnaires and observation all gave a perspective of strengthening their identity in choir singing especially when the songs are in Karen and many interviewees stressed inheritance as an important part of the choir tradition. To cherish the heritage from their ancestors was stated as a reason why choir singing is important among the Karens also in the questionnaires. Six respondents stated inheritance/tradition as a reason why they consider it meaningful to be a part of a choir.

One interviewee, a 33 year-old female choir leader active in Mae La Refugee Camp, considers that Karen people have suffered more than other ethnic groups. Parts of the suffering are relieved by singing together: “When they sing a song they feel better. /---/ Most Karen people like music since it is part of our inheritance”.

Many informants explained that choir singing generates both identity and language strengthening effects and highlighted the importance of helping young people to discover these. Through singing in Karen the children are reminded of their identity as Karens, said one interviewee, a 25-year old man teaching choir in a dormitory outside of Chiang Rai city.

One interviewee, a 23-year old choir leader active in Mae La Refugee Camp explained that she considers music to be important “not only in church” and mentions Karen state and the celebration of the Karen New Year there and in other places as situations where music is important for the Karens. She had been to Karen state once herself to celebrate the Karen New Year one time when she was 13-years old.

### **9.3.3 Social factors and effects**

“Singing choir is like a football team – you cannot be selfish”

Sgaw-Karen singer living in Rangoon

Choir singing is deliberately and actively encouraged by the Karen Baptist Conventions in Burma and Thailand. Choir practices constitute an important, as well as an expected, social

and musical gathering in the weekly parish life within the Karen Baptist congregations today as well as a part of the (Christian) Karen inheritance.

Choir singing is highly considered by the informants in interviewees and questionnaires as an activity that creates unity and improves co-operational skills among its participants. In the questionnaires and interviews the word “unity” was brought up and stressed by many informants. In several interviews, this was the first aspect stressed by the interviewees and it was often in the context of specific religious unity. 16 respondents at KBTS and five respondents at Siloam Bible Institute state “unity” as a reason why they consider being part of a choir meaningful. Eight people from KBTS also writes “co-operation”. From KKBBSC, only two respondents writes “Creates/improves co-operation”, however all interviewees from KKBBSC underline social aspects of why they find choir sing meaningful.

Some informants elaborate aspects of manifesting unity by choir singing. If people see and hear us singing together, one interviewee said, they will understand how unity can be preserved. “You can see a team from listening to a choir” said the Sgaw-karen singer mentioned above.

Informants also stressed co-operational aspects in singing together. Choir singing is hard work where unity and cooperation skills emerge, said one choir leader. When asked why choir singing is preferred over for instance football, this male choir leader explained that in his opinion choir singing is something which can be done by all people, “especially all Christian people”. It is a way for Christian people to create, develop and show unity.

One interviewee, a 61-year old man explains that one of the main objectives the Thai government has for its people is for them to “get along”. He connects this to a parish context: “There are people in church who do not like each other, they gossip about each other. If they sing in the same choir they will get an opportunity of seeing each others faces and talk to each other”.

#### **9.3.4 Religious aspects**

“Choir must be included in the church service.”

Female 22-years old, studying at KBTS

It is evident that choir singing is not considered meaningful by the informants for mainly musical reasons and that the choir practices are not exclusively musical activities. On the contrary, prayer and Christian fellowship are important ingredients when the choirs gather for their rehearsals and choir singing is considered by informants in interviewees and questionnaires as an expression of religious praise. In the majority of interviews, “worship the Lord” or “praise God” was among the first or second reason given by the informants when they were asked why they considered choir singing meaningful. “Praise the Lord” is also the dominating answer in the questionnaires, given by 27 respondents from Siloam, 22 from KBTS and three from KKBBSC.

The weekly Sunday services constitute the main event where choir singing is performed within the Karen community. Choir singing is considered a very important and expected element at the services and many informants consider choir music to be something that can help the congregation to establish a closer, or even initiate relationship with God. Choir music in a service can provide the congregation with a “focus for their worship”, as one interviewee

puts it. This is also highlighted in some of the questionnaires where five respondents from KBTS considers choir singing meaningful because it encourages the congregation.

Many of my informants stressed the fact that if a parish has at least one choir it is a parish that is a well-kept. Having a choir is important in the parish life, both in the Sunday service as well as the weekly parish activities. One interviewee described the importance of choir music in a service as: “Without an arm you can live, but not perfectly.”

With no exception the choir practices that I visited started and ended with a short prayer. In the Theological Seminaries, one student was often asked to lead the initial moment of prayer and another student the closing prayer. In the parish choirs it was a choir member or the choir leader who lead the prayer. The prayer was some minutes long and often involved thanking God for the choir practice. Also, when I was present, I could understand that the closing prayer often included a blessing for my coming journeys and fieldwork. In this context, I find it important to add that the prayers at KKBBSC were often longer than the initial and closing prayers in other places I visited. I imagine that these prayers were probably consisting of more aspects to life than the choir practice.

The prayer before and after the choir practices highlights the fact that the choir practices are not only considered as musical session by the informants. On the contrary, choir practices are a crucial part of the parish and Seminary life and if these can be separated, they include religious, social as well as musical dimensions. One informant, active in a large village outside Chiang Mai, explained that the choir practice provides the congregation with an occasion to come together and celebrate a service.

Informants from all three Seminaries describe the choir singing element in a service as “the second preaching”. *Ter yu ta yu* in Sgaw-Karen, which literally means “the first preaching”, is in this context the spoken word i.e. the gospel being told in a sermon during a service or a Bible study. The word combination *Ta si ta tel lor kei yu ta yu* however literally translates to “the second preaching”. Interviewees as well as respondents describe choir singing as a way of preaching the gospel in another way. Many informants stressed that a service without music would get boring. One interviewee, a 23-year old women in Mae La Refugee Camp explains why she considers choir singing an important part of the service: “If we don’t have music, only preaching, we feel sleepy”. Two respondents from Siloam express “second preaching” as a reason why they find singing in choir meaningful compared to four at KBTS and seven at KKBBSC.

### **Significant choir performances within Thailand Karen Baptist Convention**

Annual conferences within *Thailand Karen Baptist Convention* (TKBC) include prestigious choir competitions which motivate choir rehearsals during the year. The choir competition is, and has been for a long time, mandatory at the conferences and all parish choirs are encouraged to perform. It was stressed by several interviewed choir leaders that if a parish would arrive to the conference without a choir ready to perform, it could cause embarrassment to the whole parish.

Among the churches in TKBC the Christmas celebrations are well prepared and invested in. Since choir performances are important elements at these celebrations, besides Bible readings, food, entertainment and distribution of gifts many interviewees mention the Christmas celebrations as important an incitement for choir rehearsals during the whole year. In almost

every Karen village where there is a Christian population, a Christmas party will be organized sometime during December. In a town with a large Christian community, several Christmas celebrations will be held during December since all Christian churches, organizations and dormitories operating in the town want to host a Christmas party of their own. In the villages the whole village population, regardless of religion, are invited to attend these events.

The Christmas celebrations are of missionising character and many informants consider choir singing an important part of sharing the gospel and a significant part of the parish's yearly missionary activities. Participants at the celebrations will be keener to listen to the gospel message being sung rather than being read. Some informants mentioned that they know of people who became interested in Christianity or even decided to become Christians after hearing choir singing in a village during for instance a Christmas celebration.

### **9.3.5 Educational and training factors**

“By the time I finish school, I will teach young people and members of the congregation to sing choir. /--/ Most important thing with choir is to praise the Lord.”

Man, 19-years old studying at KKBBS

The Karen Theological Seminaries provide their students with a great deal of training and encouragement in singing, conducting and composing four-part harmony choir music. Students and teachers at the Theological Seminaries and Bible schools involved in this Minor Field Study agree that there are considerable, outspoken and reciprocal expectations on the choir training for students of divinity. This is confirmed by the choir teacher at Siloam Bible Institute who explained that his students know when they start their training at Siloam, that when they return to their village for holidays and visits, the members of their parishes will ask them to share new songs they have learned at Siloam. After finishing their education at Siloam, many of the students will work in a village in different functions, but they will all be expected to teach choir. This future request motivates the students to learn new songs and attend the daily choir practices. However, the choir teacher at Siloam did not withhold that not all of his students find choir singing their favourite subject and explained the need for continuous motivation.

The extension and design of the choir music in Karen churches is related to the training given at the Karen Theological Seminaries and Bible schools and students coming from contexts where choir singing is not an elaborated part of the parish activities are provided with their first choir music encounter at these Seminaries. The choir music repertoire and influences given to the students at the Seminaries are likely to be more discernible in the music life of the parishes where the students have their future ministry.

One of my observations was made in a village church where a student in practice from Siloam made his internship. He was keen on choir singing, like most of his fellow-students, and when I later interviewed him he was clear that he had during his internship realised how important the studies of choir singing was to his future ministry in within the TKBC.

Another interviewees a former student at Siloam Bible Institute, now serving in a dormitory for Karen children, was clear on the important role that the training at Siloam has on the choir music within TKBC. In his opinion Siloam is the most important place for the development of choir music within TKBC.

### **9.3.6 Language factors and language strengthening effects**

“If we sing in Karen, the audience will understand”

Male choir leader, 28-year old, working in a Theological Seminary outside Mae Sot

An important aspect in choir singing among the Karens singing together strengthens the Karen language since the majority of choir pieces sung by the choirs in this study were in the Karen language. When singing in Karen strengthens the vocabulary and pronunciation.

In most choir rehearsals and performances, the choir songs were exclusively in Karen. One interviewee, a student at Siloam, actually mentioned that he has never sung in any other language than Karen. However, parts of the choir repertoire for many choirs in Burma, were also in Burmese and English and some Karen choirs in Thailand sung one choir piece in Thai.

Many of the interviewed choir leaders considered language development as one of the benefits with choir singing. Nevertheless, language preservation and development were not among the dominating or most important functions stressed by the informants in interviews or questionnaires. On a direct question, the interviewees did of course confirm that the Karen language was strengthened and improved by singing and especially affects young peoples' language skills in a positive way.

One interviewee working with children mentioned language development as a reason why he considers it to be important for children to sing choir: “They will learn Karen through singing songs with Karen lyrics.” The same interviewee also highlighted that the children's English will be improved through singing in English.

Through the observations I have made I consider it much apparent that singing strengthens the Karen language skills. In my opinion it is therefore surprising that language preservation was not a frequent given reason in the questionnaires to why the respondents consider choir singing meaningful, as well as the interviews. What is the reason for this not being acknowledged and established among Karen choir leaders? Is the Karen language not valued as important? Is singing and speaking in Karen taken for granted? Being a minority as the Karens are in both Burma and Thailand, where neither government encourages the preservation of the Karen language, singing musical lyrics in Karen on a weekly, sometimes even daily, basis naturally strengthens the knowledge, pronunciation, vocabulary and capacity of the language.

### **9.3.7 Gender aspects**

“Men have got a stronger voice. There are of course women with a strong voice. But they show initiative less than men”.

Male choir leader, 26-years old active in a Bible school in Northern Thailand

Since Karen choir singing is defined by most as singing in traditional four-part harmony, there are not many isolated women's or men's choirs among the Karens, rather the choirs are traditionally gender mixed. Men and women are considered equally important as participants of the choir because sopranos, altos, tenors and basses are all needed in order for the choir to be able to sing preferred choir repertoire and arrangements.

From my visits to churches in Northern Thailand I can conclude that men dominate as choir leaders. However in the Karen churches in Burma, more or less fifty percent of the choir

leaders are women. Many of the female choir leaders who are interviewees in this study are daughters of church leaders and pastors. The women are now active in the same church where they grew up with their fathers working as pastors.

The difference between Thailand and Burma in this aspect can possibly be linked to the fact that Feminist theology is, and has been for some while, a natural part of the theological education and further training for church ministry at the *Myanmar Institute of Theology*, where most church and choir leaders in Burma, if not all, have received at least some part of their training. In Thailand, feminist perspective on Bible readings and Theology is not yet as elaborated.

It is clear from the observations that there is a general shyness from the students to practice conducting, and I consider this shyness even more striking among the female students. One interviewee, a female choir leader active in Mae La Refugee Camp considers there to be more men than women conducting choirs. In her opinion, women are encouraged to lead choir, but “when choir leaders call them, they do not want to conduct because they are shy.” There are of course exceptions, this interviewee mentions a friend who can conduct and has graduated from KKBBSC. In her explanation as to why some women are reluctant to conduct, she mentions that some women are afraid that their traditional Karen sarong (a long skirt tied in a special way) will fall off in front of everybody, causing them embarrassment. On the question why she finds it the nature of Karen culture to be shy she answers: “Some are shy and others are not. People are shy because if they play wrong... Some will tell things about them.”

A 33-years old male Pwo-Karen choir leader active in Burma answers the question why he reckons that there are more men than women active as choir leaders: “Women believes that only men can be choir leaders. They think that they are only allowed to sing soprano or alto.”

The question as to why it is out of the ordinary for women to play instruments within the Karen community, a well-known Karen musician and singer in Rangoon, explains parts of the discourse around *Klo*, the Karen drum: Women have not been trusted with playing the klo because if the drum is displace it will cry blood and demands to be washed with soap and fragrance. “The Karen culture is a primitive culture. Women are not regarded as sacred as men. That’s why women have not been able to play.”

Apart from the informant quoted in the beginning of this chapter several interviewees stresses that the domination in male choir conductors is not a question about gender, it has to do with training. Women have within the last decades become positioned as choir leaders and teachers within the Karen community, but more men than women have been trained in choir leadership and have therefore been provided with a mandate to lead and conduct choirs.

Three of the four choir leaders at KKBBSC are men. The head choir leader at KKBBSC, a male 28-years old, comments on the situation: “It has got to do with ability. If women can lead choir singing, we can choose them.” The choir leader also added that many of the pianists are women, which is significant not only at KKBBSC. Female and male pianists, often young people, accompany choirs singing in rehearsals as well as performances to a larger extent in Burma than in Thailand. Beside the piano, I did not see many people playing instruments, except for string ensembles in Mae La Refugee Camp, which constitute an extraordinary part of choir music life in general.

## **10. Discussion**

### **10.1 Choice of informants**

My fieldwork is limited to the conclusions on choir music and its function based on the interviews, questionnaires and observations I have made. As I have described I made efforts in finding informants outside of the Christian contexts, something which turned out to be more difficult than I thought. Therefore, it must be remembered that people actively involved in Christian churches, especially within the dominating denomination among Christian Karens, the Baptist denomination, express their opinions on the function of choir singing among the Karens in this study. The statement that Karen choir music is four-part harmony singing primarily done within the Christian community must be understood in the light of this.

In a broader research on choir singing among the Karens, it would of course be natural to include more informants outside of the Christian context and investigate their opinions on choir singing among the Karen people. Are Christian Karens really famous for choir singing? Have for instance a Buddhist Karen activated musician ever experienced choir singing in Karen outside of a Christian context?

### **10.2 Comments on and critical aspects of methods**

#### **Choice and implementation of methods**

Since the terrain of research is in another culture, to some extent unknown to me, there lies a somewhat ad-hoc approach to the initial choice of methods. Nevertheless, in my considerations of methods I have found it difficult and perhaps unnecessary to think of alternative methods afterwards. However, it is not possible to decide upon the exact implementation of methods beforehand when doing research in a relatively unknown domain. With this said, I can still imagine that the methods could have been modified, polished and given more structure before, during as well as after the study. One concrete example is that I waited sometimes too long before transcribing or finalizing my notes from the interviews, generating quite a large workload afterwards. Another example is that neither interviews nor observations were made with a formal checklist, ensuring that important aspects were not forgotten or neglected.

#### **Comments on and critical aspects of the questionnaires**

The questionnaires generated the possibility of drawing many conclusions from which I have only been able to depict a small part in this thesis. I have not for instance drawn any conclusions from the answers on why being part of a choir is considered meaningful using neither an age nor a gender perspective.

I have described the possibility for the respondents to use different languages in the questionnaires in section 7.1. There are also additional language aspects that should be given consideration under this headline. Since Thai is not used much as a spoken language and to an even smaller extent as written language in Mae La Refugee Camp, I suspected that if the students in Mae La would have been provided with an explicit possibility of answering in Thai it would not actually generate many answers in Thai. There are however a couple of Thai citizen students and a small number of students from other ethnic minorities studying at

*Karen Kawthoolei Baptist Bible School and College* (KKBBS) in Mae La Refugee Camp, where it can be argued that the students should have been more clearly granted the opportunity of replying to the questionnaire also in Thai. For the same reasons it can also be questioned why the students at *Siloam Bible Institute* in Chiang Mai were not given the possibility of answering the questionnaire in Karen and the students at *Karen Baptist Theological Seminary* (KBTS) in Rangoon to answer the questionnaire in Burmese.

Naturally, if the students had asked if they could fill out the questionnaires in another language than stated on them, they would have been granted this possibility. Also, the students had of course the possibility of asking their friends and teachers for a translation of the questionnaires. However, it is fair to say that the step of doing so is rather large since admitting to a lack sufficient language skills are considered to be an embarrassment and to a fear of 'losing face'. Since English is more or less included in the teachings for the students at all the Seminaries, it is likely that the teachers at the Seminaries encouraged their students to answer the questionnaires in English perhaps without consideration to the individuals knowledge of English and therefore providing some students unintended stress. It however just as probable that answering the questionnaires in English did not give the students any problem or stress that they were instead glad to be given a chance to practice their English.

It can be argued that the use of the word "meaningful" in questions 8 and 9 in the questionnaires might have led to unnecessary confusion among the respondents, since the word can be considered as a source for various interpretations. Personal interpretations of words are however hard to avoid in questionnaires and interviews, which is why it is important to be aware of the constant interpretation that constitutes the nature of human communication.

### **Comments on and critical aspects of the interviews**

The informants had not been given the possibility of looking at transcriptions of the interviews that were made with them. This would have been a much time-consuming process, as well as financially costly in the cases where the interviews were translated. This is the reason why I chose not to present such a possibility to the informants beforehand. I was never asked by any of the interviewees if they could look at transcriptions or translations of their interviews.

Considering Thai is my fourth language and often the third language for the interviewees (next to Karen and Northern Thai), I am certain that some research material got lost in the interviews that was made in Thai. Speaking in another language than one's mother tongue can yield more plain and easily communicated and understandable answers, which was my overall experience of the interviews. Nevertheless, during the interviews, both the interviewees and I would get stuck on a word that none of us could find in the different dictionaries lying on the table or on the floor between us. Sometimes a facilitator helped us but in many cases the word was not translated and the intention of the interviewee was therefore lost.

### **Comments on and critical aspects of the observations**

None of the observations were made without the establishment of a contact with a choir leader or teacher beforehand implying that the research topic and myself could be introduced to the choir or congregation, which I have elaborated in 8.3. I recorded, filmed, took photos and notes in most observations. Sometimes all of these data collection methods were used in

the same observation. A video camera can create expressed and unexpressed feelings of discomfort and give rise to stress for the individuals that are being filmed which should be considered ethically. However, since I was never asked to stop or refused to take photos, film or record, I consider the possible disadvantages neutralized by the many benefits of being able to go back and look at the recorded material.

### **10.3 Additional results and conclusions**

The minor field study yielded a great deal research material of which I have only been able to process some in this thesis. Naturally there is so much more to say about music and choir singing among Karen people. After all, my aim has never been to describe for instance harmonious aspects of Karen music, since it clearly deserves a thesis of its own.

I find some additional results and conclusions that has come out of the research important to describe:

#### **Composers of choir music among the Karens**

Most composers of Karen choir music can be found in Burma where there is a much larger Karen population than in Thailand. As a matter of fact, the choir leaders that I interviewed in Thailand could only name a few composers of choir music living in Thailand. Karen composers of choir music are at a large extent living in Burma or in the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border and compose almost all of the Karen choir music that is sung in both Burma and Thailand. Well-known Karen female composers of choir music are still and have historically been very rare in both Burma and Thailand.

Among Karen choir composers, the name *Revered Roland* completely stands out. Revered Roland has written hundreds of choir music pieces and his compositions were a given part of the repertoire for the majority of choirs I visited in Burma as well as in Thailand. His son *Revered Newton* functions as an advisor and part-time staff at *Hill Light Theological College* in Huay Nam Khun, a twenty-minute drive from Mae Sot, where he cherishes his fathers' compositions and inheritance.

#### **Dynamics in Karen choir music**

Some of the informants discussed the lack of dynamics in Karen choir singing. This is something I also noticed from the observations. Many choir pieces that consisted of four verses were sung with no difference in dynamic. The informants that were asked about the probable reasons for the lack of dynamics argued that a choir leader needs to have been formally trained in music, in order for choir music to include dynamics. The lack of dynamics in choir singing among the Karens had in their opinion to do with tradition, the many choir leaders in practice without any formal musical training as well as and the fact that dynamical elements are not an elaborated part of choir compositions. "We don't have that ability, and it's not the Karen tradition", said one interviewee, a 28-year old male choir leader active as a choir leader outside Mae Sot.

It was clear that many of my interviewees considered themselves, despite their formal musical training, lacked of the authority to speak about dynamics and apply it to choir singing in their respective choirs. Some of them considered it not worth giving instructions on dynamics in the choir practices since they suspected that their choir members would not follow these instructions anyway.

One interviewee also discussed a lack of tone quality and management within Karen choir singing in relation to dynamics that was confirmed by another interviewee, the 28-year old choir leader mentioned above. He described his experiences of chamber choir singing in India, where he received his formal training. The Indian chamber choirs practiced vocal health care as well as choir singing, which he did not consider an elaborated part of the Karens choir music context. However this choir leader now teaches his students voice control since he wants to include dynamic elements in his own compositions that are sung by his students.

### **Warm-up and conduction in Karen choir**

The vast majority of the choir practices where I made observations lacked vocal and body warm-up exercises in the beginning of the choir practice. As far as I could understand, the use of warm-up exercises in choir practices or before various performances were clear exceptions. The choir leaders who did apply initial warm-up exercises had all been formally trained in music, many of them in other countries. The choir teacher in Burma, which held the most prepared and thorough warm-up session for her choir, had studied music, including choir conducting and leadership, in Singapore for several years. Even among formally trained choir leaders and teachers I could in my observations notice that the use of body movement and conduction was out of the ordinary. In a couple of interviews the interviewees expressed that they wanted to use more conducting or introduce different methods in their choir management, but that they hesitated to do so since they knew that their choir members would not be keen to follow new approaches to choir singing. This conclusion is also confirmed by observations where most choir practices, with some exceptions, followed more or less the same structure.

## **10.4 Possible future research topics**

Since the choir phenomenon among the Christian Karens contains so many interesting aspects, this thesis does indeed provide me with many ideas for future research work. As that there is a global Karen diaspora, comparisons on how Karen choir leaders and member of choirs in other parts of the world consider different function of choir singing can be made. A study on the role and function of choir singing among the Karen Swedish communities in for instance Sandviken or Hudiksvall (two of the towns in Sweden where many Karen refugees have arrived) could generate many interesting comparisons with the already processed research material: Do Karen people living in Sweden find choir singing equally meaningful compared to Karens in Thailand and Burma? Is it meaningful for the same reasons? Does choir singing provide additional functions for Karens living in Sweden compared to Thailand or Burma? Is choir singing encouraged by the *Swedish Karen Baptist Fellowship* as by for instance *Thailand Karen Baptist Convention*?

Other possible comparative studies could be between other ethnic minorities in Thailand and Burma. How is choir singing defined among for example the Mhong, the Lisu or Akha people? Is there four-part harmony choir singing among these ethnic minorities? If so, has it related to the Christian missionaries?

Another idea could be to investigate if members of an ordinary church choir in a Baptist church in a random village in Sweden find it meaningful to be part of a choir and compare these results with the results yielded in this study: Do choir singers in the Baptist parishes of Delsbo, Hjältanstorp or Motala share the same conviction as choir singers in Mae La Refugee Camp? Are the reasons why people chose to be take part in choir singing much different, or are people in general, no matter of location, a singing people?

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**APPENDIX 1**

**KAREN KAWTHOOLEI BAPTIST BIBLE SCHOOL AND COLLEGE (KKBBSC)**

**Anonymous survey about choir singing among Karen people**

1. How old are you?

2. Gender

Female

Male

3. Are you...

S'qaw-karen

Pwo-karen

Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. Is your village...

A s'qaw-karen village

A pwo-karen village

Other village/place \_\_\_\_\_

5. Did you sing in a choir in your village before coming to Mae La?

Yes

No

I am born in Mae La

6. For how long have you been singing in a choir?

7. Do you think that it's meaningful to be a part of a choir?

Yes

No

8. If yes, why do you think that it's meaningful to be a part of a choir?  
(You can reply in English or Karen and give many different reasons)

9. If no, why don't you think so?  
(You can reply in English or Karen and give many different reasons)

Thank you for your co-operation in my thesis.

Eva-Maria Munck  
August 2011

**APPENDIX 2**  
**KAREN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (KBTS)**

**Anonymous survey about choir singing among Karen people**

1. How old are you?

2. Gender

Female

Male

3. Are you...

S'qaw-karen

Pwo-karen

Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. Is your village...

A s'qaw-karen village

A pwo-karen village

Other village/place \_\_\_\_\_

5. Did you sing in a choir in your village before starting your studies at KBTS?

Yes

No

6. For how long have you been singing in a choir?

7. Do you think that it's meaningful to be a part of a choir?

Yes

No

8. If yes, why do you think that it's meaningful to be a part of a choir?  
(You can reply in English or Karen and give many different reasons)

9. If no, why don't you think so?  
(You can reply in English or Karen and give many different reasons)

Thank you for your co-operation in my thesis.

Eva-Maria Munck  
August 15 2011

**Anonymous survey about choir singing among Karen people**

1. How old are you?

2. Gender

Female

Male

3. Are you...

S'qaw-karen

Pwo-karen

Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. Is your village...

A s'qaw-karen village

A pwo-karen village

Other village/place \_\_\_\_\_

5. Did you sing in a choir in your village before starting your studies at Siloam?

Yes

No

6. For how long have you been singing in a choir?

7. Do you think that it's meaningful to be a part of a choir?

Yes

No

8. If yes, why do you think that it's meaningful to be a part of a choir?  
(You can reply in English or Thai and give many different reasons)

9. If no, why don't you think so?  
(You can reply in English or Thai and give many different reasons)

Thank you for your co-operation in my thesis.

Eva-Maria Munck  
August 2011

## Disposition of answers from the questionnaires

Note: I will in this disposition consistently use the spelling *Sgaw-Karen* as I have done in the thesis. When I constructed the questionnaires I used the spelling *S'qaw-karen* why this combination is used in appendix 1, 2 and 3 and in the quotations in this appendix.

### 1. Karen Kawthoolei Baptist Bible School and College (KKBBSC)

In question 3 where the respondents were asked about their ethnicity, 33 people checked the box for “S'qaw-karen” and two checked the one for “Pwo-karen”. One respondent checked the box “Other” where she specified her ethnicity as “Lahu”. One respondent did not check any box in question 3, although checking the boxes for “A s'qaw-karen village” and “Other village/place” (without specifying) in question 4, where the respondents were asked about their village of origin.

30 respondents answered “S'qaw-karen village” on question 5. Six respondents checked the box for “Other village/place”: three of these respondents specified by writing “Chiang Mai”, “Patein” or “Mae Ra Mae”. Two respondents answered that their village is a “Pwo-karen village”.

23 respondents answered “Yes”, on question 5: “Did you sing in a choir in your village before coming to Mae La?”, 12 persons answered “No” and two respondents checked the box saying “I am born in Mae La”.

The answers to questions 6: “For how long have you been singing in a choir” can be broken down as follows:

- 0-1 year - three respondents
- 2-5 years -19 respondents
- 6-10 years - seven respondents
- More than 10 years - three respondents

The longest specified choir-singing period was 13 years and the shortest 3 months.

The answers from five of the respondents on question 6 cannot be placed in the table above for various reasons. One respondent wrote: “I have been singing in a choir for five years before coming to Mae La”, another respondent wrote: “I have been singing just some time” while the hand writing of a third respondents was impossible to make out. Two other respondents did not answer the question.

On question 7: “Do you think it is meaningful to be part of a choir”, 35 of the respondents from the students in Mae La Refugee Camp checked the box for “Yes”. One respondent checked both boxes and one respondent checked the box for “No”. The 21-year Sgaw-Karen old man who answered “No” explained in his answer in question 9: “Because it is not interest for the people of the world. Mostly the people like modern music, today. <Why do you ask this question and what do you want to know?>.” The 22-year old Sgaw-Karen woman who checked both boxes wrote in her answer to question 9: “Because choir is a second message for

us so I think choir isn't give meaningful to be apart. If someone not feel well or have heartache if they hear the choir. They will heal.”

In their answers to question 8, the students at KKBBSC show great diversity in the explanations as to why they consider it meaningful to be a part of a choir: the same reason was not given from more than ten informants from KKBBSC.

**The most common reasons, given from five respondents or more were:**

- Choir singing is a second preaching - seven respondents
- It is meaningful - five respondents

**Reasons given from three respondents were:**

- It is important
- It gives strength
- Makes us happy
- Because it is four part harmony
- Praise the Lord

Three respondents also gave different Biblically motivated reasons why they consider being part of a choir is meaningful, for example writing about when *Paulus* and Silas sung worship hymns in prison as told in Acts 16:25.

**Reasons given from two respondents were:**

- Singing is powerful
- For my own benefit
- Singing makes God happy
- It is a beautiful sound
- Creates/improves co-operation
- Attracts listeners
- Gives us satisfaction
- Because of the different harmony parts

**Reasons given from one respondent were:**

Encourage listeners, it gives energy, it is interesting, because of the meaning of the songs, it makes listeners happy, it heals listeners, because of the demand for choir from the listeners, it is good to listen to, to show unity, because of inheritance, choir is sung everywhere around the world, it is something I can contribute with, for future needs.

Two respondents answered with a specific reference to voices: “When there is a bass needed I help them” and “A bass makes it powerful”.

## **2. Karen Baptist Theological Seminary (KBTS)**

When answering question number 3, 47 respondents ticked the box “S’qaw-karen” and three ticked the box “Other”. One respondent ticked both the box for “S’qaw-karen” and the one for “Other” where he specified: “Kayan”. Supposedly this student has one Karen and one Kayah parent. None of the respondents answered “Pwo-Karen”.

42 respondents answered “S’qaw-karen village” when asked about their village of origin in question 4. Eight respondents answered “Other village/place”, specified as “Kayah” by six respondents. No respondent answered “Pwo-karen village”.

45 respondents answered, “Yes” on question 5: “Did you sing in a choir in your village before starting your studies at KBTS?” while five informants checked the box for “No”.

The answers to questions 6: “For how long have you been singing in a choir” can be broken down as follows:

- 2-5 years - 19 respondents
- 6-10 years - 18 respondents
- More than 10 years - 11 respondents

Two respondents did not give a specific answer. One of these, a 24-year old man answered: “I can’t say exactly for I have been singing in a choir. I often participated in singing choir but not always”. A few of the KBTS-respondents elaborated their answers to this question. A female 25-years old writes: “Since I was a child at Sunday school, I sang the choir”. Another female, 28-years old, writes: “I have been singing in a choir for six years. I have been familiar with choir since my childhood. In my junior age, I have sung junior choir after that I entered to youth choir. I do enjoy it!”

On question 7: “Do you think it is meaningful to be part of a choir”, 49 of the informants in Rangoon gave a positive answer. Only one respondent, a 23-year old man, gave a negative answer to this question and elaborated in his answer to question 9: “/---/ I started singing when I was young. Therefore, I cannot sing according to note, only listening. I can sing but it was not meaningful to be part of a choir. But now, I can sing choir well.”

The questionnaires generated a broad range of answers from the students at KBTS to question 8 where the respondents were asked: “If yes, why do you think that it’s meaningful to be a part of a choir”.

**The most common reasons, given from more than ten respondents were:**

- Praising God/Important part of praising God - 22 respondents
- Second message/second preaching/preach the gospel - 14 respondents
- Creates unity - 16 respondents
- Makes me/us happy - 12 respondents
- Important part of the church service - 10 respondents

**Reason given from less than ten but more than three respondents were:**

- Co-operation –eight respondents
- Improves musical skills - seven respondents

(Also specified as: learning notes/four part harmony singing)

- God likes it - six respondents
- Part of the religious identity - six respondents
- Encourage the congregation - five respondents
- Gives spiritual strength - five respondents
- Gives strength - four respondents
- Gives encouragement - four respondents
- Natural/essential part of the congregation - four respondents

- People's lives can change when/if they hear choir singing - three respondents
- Singing releases burden - three respondents

**Reasons given from two respondents were:**

- Improves voices
- It gives peace
- It helps with understanding
- It can heal sorrow
- It maintains inheritance
- Singing creates fellowship
- It is a sweet sound
- It satisfies the congregation/makes the congregation feel good
- Singing touches God's heart
- Singing is an important part of the body of Jesus Christ
- To express our inner mind/feelings towards God
- Because of the message
- It brings us/me closer to God

**Reasons given from one respondent were:**

Honour in front of God, choir tells about heaven, entertaining the congregation, enrich the congregation, help the congregation to remember the message, it encourages church attendance, it is a sense of sharing the same belief, common mind-set, to reach out to people, the service would be boring without a choir, it shows the love of God, it makes us love singing, because of the harmony, because of the structure, because of nationality, because of identity, because it changes our minds, choir singing is an article of great value, it is a modern attraction, it is enjoyable, because of humbleness.

**3. Siloam Bible Institute**

Because of the loss of questionnaires from Siloam Bible Institute that I described in the beginning of this section, I am not able not give an exact figure of the respondents ethnicity. It is however fair to estimate, based on the observations, interviews and the fact that Siloam is a Sgaw-Karen speaking school, that the majority of the students are Sgaw-Karens and would have given this answer in question 3. It is possible that one or two of the students who answered the questionnaire are Pwo-Karen. There is also a chance that one or two of the students have a non-Karen ethnicity.

Provided that the Sgaw-Karen students comes from Sgaw-Karen villages with a Christian church it is possible to estimate that many of them had done choir singing prior to their studies at Siloam, as asked in question 5: "Did you sing in a choir in your village before starting your studies at Siloam?". However, it is also likely that some of the respondents are not from Christian villages meaning that their first encounter with choir singing could very well have taken place at Siloam Bible Institute.

Unfortunately, due to the loss of the questionnaires from Siloam I cannot state exactly how many respondents that answered "Yes" or "No" to question 7 (if they consider it meaningful to be a part of a choir). I did of course look at the questionnaires before the loss of material occurred, and remember that the answers from Siloam on question 7 did not strike me as much different from the answers from the other Theological Seminaries, i.e. that the majority

of respondents answered that they consider being part of a choir meaningful, hence the reasons given in their responses to question 8. It is however possible that one or perhaps two respondents answered “No” on the question. At the same time it is equally probable that all respondents answered that they consider choir singing meaningful.

On question 8, “If yes, why do you think that it’s meaningful to be a part of a choir”, **the most common reasons, given from more than ten respondents were:**

- Praise the Lord - 27 respondents
- It makes us happy - 13 respondents

**Reasons given from less than ten respondents but more than three were:**

- Make other people happy - nine respondents
- Chance to practice/learn more about singing - eight respondents
- Inheritance/tradition - six respondents
- It shows/creates unity - five respondents
- In order to teach others - five respondents
- Practice singing in voices - five respondents
- Singing helps understand the lyrics - four respondents

**Reasons given by two respondents were:**

- Encourage others
- Choir singing is a second preaching
- It is beautiful to hear the voices
- Singing is good fun
- Singing makes me calm

**Reasons given by one respondent were:**

Thank God, serve God, choir singing is a testimony, I learn more about God through singing, singing makes me proud, because of the lyrics, I receive blessings from the Lord when singing, it makes other people repent, because of fellowship, to transfer love, singing makes it possible to communicate, for my own experience, singing is something I can use in the parish; to practice other musical elements, improved musical skills, I love music.

A male student at Siloam underlined the musical aspects of singing in his answer: “I need to sing. I love everything with choir singing. Singing, composing and listening.”





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