

Preservation of Karen Culture in Mae La Camp Karen Traditional Wrist Tying Ceremony – August 26-28, 2007



Over the last several years, residents in Mae La refugee camp have increased their efforts to preserve and continue Karen traditional practices in the face of continuing civil war in Burma, competition with Western culture in the refugee camps and the dispersal of the Karen community through the resettlement of Karen people from the camps to third countries. Many children who were born in Mae La camp know little or nothing about their own traditional culture, but thanks to the efforts of concerned members of the community and with support from KTWG (Karen Teacher Working Group), KESAN (Karen Environment and Social Action Network), and IKAP (Indigenous Knowledge and Peoples Network), Karen cultural knowledge is surviving and Karen cultural practices are being preserved, celebrated and transmitted from grandparents and parents to younger generations of Karen.

Pu Sein Tin, one of the Karen community's most knowledgeable and respected traditional practitioners has been leading the effort to maintain Karen traditional practices.



The establishment of a Karen Culture Group within Mae La camp, has been important to furthering this cause. Over the past year, the group received funding from IKAP. The funding was used in many ways. Materials were purchased to build musical instruments. Recently, the organisation has been able to build it's own cultural center, office and small library.



The Mae La's cultural organisation has recognised that the interest of Karen youth is essential in maintaining traditional practices. Young people are engaged in Karen traditions through literature, learning traditional stories, learning to sing and play traditional music and instruments and learning traditional dances and rituals. All of these skills and knowledges really come

together in the practice of traditional Karen ceremonies, such as the Wrist Tying Ceremony, which has been officially celebrated in Mae La camp for the last three years. The Wrist Tying ceremony is rooted in animist beliefs. The following is how the ceremony is explained by the Karen Culture Group in Mae La:

The practice of Karen Wrist Tying started at Gobi desert, where our ancients came across to get into Burma/Myanmar hundred years ago. We traditionally believed in spirit, and in order to protect bad spirit from harming us, we used white needle, twisted it on our hand as a sign of pure spirit to defeat evils. White needle on our hand also reminds us that we're Karen: we are the same group of people. In the past, our ancients stayed closed to other groups of people and in order to separate or notice themselves from others, older Karen marked their children with white needle.

Today, we celebrate Wrist Tying every year to remember our ancients and maintain our culture. On this day, every Karen in the near and far celebrates and practice the Hand Twisting as our ancients did in the past. We stop working, traveling to far place and we gather to celebrate the day.

There is a debate within the community whether the 'Auspicious Wrist Tying Ceremony' should be made so popularized and accessible to persons who neither share these beliefs nor practice these traditions. However, while that issue continues to be contested, the wrist tying ceremony clearly does promote particular Karen cultural knowledge and practices that appears to be in decline – especially amongst the younger population.

Much time and effort goes into the preparation of the ceremony. The following examples highlight some of the training and preparation involved in celebrating the Wrist Tying ceremony:

Karen craftsmen have been engaged in making traditional musical instruments with financial support from IKAP.



Traditional weaving is being taught and practiced to make dresses and other clothing for the ceremony. Actually, Pu Sein Tin with the help of Kaw Lah Films was able to raise funds by selling a mini-dv of traditional music performed by him and his students in Mae La camp to an Australian Karen organization who themselves were seeking ways to revitalize appreciation for Karen music amongst the resettled community there. The funds they raised were then used to purchase weaving materials. Students learned to make Karen clothes using this material. In fact, it was these clothes that they wore during the Wrist Tying Ceremony celebrations.



Pu gives the young people their traditional Karen shirts.



The young people have been engaged in intensive teaching and learning of singing, dancing and playing traditional instruments. They practice over three months in preparation for the ceremony.



Over the last three years that the Wrist Tying ceremony has been celebrated in Mae La, the number of young people involved as performers and audience members has been increasing. Although some of the students who have participated in the past have been relocated, many new young students have become interested in their Karen culture and taken part in the ceremony and other traditional cultural activities. Pu explains that it is important for the young people to learn the traditional skills and practices even if they do leave the camps and resettle elsewhere, because the traditional skills and knowledge they take with them will connect them to their Karen identity for the rest of their lives, wherever they are.

The Ceremony

Traditional singing and dancing –





Traditional courtship ritual –



Traditional music competitions -





The Mae La community, participants and spectators -



Seven special ingredients are important to the celebration of the ceremony, each one having traditional symbolism for the Karen. The preparation of these ingredients for the ceremony is a great community event.

Here we see the tradition of preparing the sticky rice being passed down to the younger generation of the community -



The Mae La community is not only interested in maintaining traditional practices, but also recording and archiving them so that Karen traditions and history can be preserved for current and future generations. One way of learning about Karen traditional culture is by asking the older members of the community. The Karen Cultural Center at Mae La is interested in preserving these stories by finding different ways of documenting the richness of Karen traditional culture, such as through writing, audio recording, photography and filmmaking.

Here we see Lin Let Soe, a member of staff at the Cultural Center, recording an older member of the community as she describes the meaning behind the Karen's use of sticky rice in the Wrist Tying Ceremony -



The meaning of the sticky rice

The sticky rice means that like our Karen people we can not be separated. If you want to throw rice it will scatter, but sticky rice is different. You can not throw it, it always sticks together. The Karen people are like this...they do not want to be separated. Right now many Karen people are being resettled to third countries, but we don't want this, as a community, we want to stick together like sticky rice...even if we are being separated through resettlement we will still find a way to stick together by holding onto our traditional Karen culture.

