Sleeping as a Refuge? Embodied Vulnerability and Corporeal Security during Refugees' Sleep at the Thai-Burma Border

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Introduction[1]

Sleep plays an important role in our physical and mental well-being. Marked by the absence of waking consciousness, sleeping persons are unable to control their environment and are therefore obliged to devise means of protection before they experience a heightened state of vulnerability (Steger and Brunt 2003: 11; Steger 2004:355; Williams forthcoming: 15–17). This is even more acute in socially or economically hazardous situations, such as refugee camps in unstable border zones.

This chapter examines how forced migrants from Burma employ coping mechanisms to organise and protect themselves during sleep in a Karenni[2] refugee camp[3] located in the hilly jungles approximately 30 km outside of the town of Mae Hong Son, Thailand. I conducted fieldwork during January and February 2006 as part of an exploratory ethnographic study on livelihood strategies among Karenni refugee youth. In this study, I was particularly interested in exploring the structural difficulties faced by young refugees as well as the coping strategies they deploy in overcoming potential problems. I was particularly interested in what coping mechanisms young people use when they

1 I wish to thank Brigitte Steger, Lodewijk Brunt and Simon Addison for their comments on previous drafts of this paper.

2 The term 'Karenni' (red Karen) is an Anglo-Burmese term that first appeared in early colonial English literature, where it referred to an ethnic group that calls itself Kayah. Together with other ethnic groups they have proclaimed independence from Burma. The population of Karenni (Kayah) State is ethnically highly diverse. Although some of the groups are related, they often differ in language, socio-economic as well as educational background, religious practices, political aspirations and experiences of displacement. Despite this diversity, exiled persons originating from Karenni state tend to refer to themselves as 'Karenni' to lay emphasis on the (imagined) political unity of their territory (Dudley 1999, 2000:4; KDRG 2006:9; Smith 1991: 145–146).

3 Currently, there are nine refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border and the total camp population is estimated to be 150,849 persons. The site of this research is Ban Mai Nai Soi in Mae Hong Son. As of June 2006 the official population of registered refugees in this camp was 19,082 persons, mainly comprised of Karenni (TBBC 2006: 3).

are vulnerable, but did not want to probe too deeply into the sensitive issues of their lives. Inspired by social studies on sleep (e.g. Steger and Brunt 2003, Williams 2005) as well as by research and reports on young people in socially and economically difficult situations (Boyden and de Berry 2004, Gigengack 2006, OCHA/IRIN 2004), I assumed that a close look at refugees' 'sleep' might provide a window to individuals' vulnerability and also their agency in providing measures for basic safety in otherwise adverse environments.

The chapter begins with the theoretical and methodological considerations that guided this study, followed by a presentation of the social and material conditions of sleep within the Thai refugee camp. I then provide four examples of how embodied vulnerability is exacerbated within this setting and point to the strategies refugees devise in order to reduce these risks and vulnerabilities. In conclusion, I suggest that investigating sleep can indeed be a very useful tool for understanding the life worlds of people in hazardous circumstances. Talking and learning about sleep is not only a sensitive approach to more sinister topics, such as domestic violence, an unstable housing, etc. Examining sleep also points out the material, mental and spiritual resources people mobilise proactively in order to protect themselves.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

Human beings are embodied by virtue of their existence. Far from being a static concept, embodiment designates continuous engagement with one's own corporeal identity throughout the course of a life (Turner 1984:7, 2003: 277–278). Yet, through involvement with society, our corporeal and psychic integrity are prone to experiences of economic scarcity, emotional hardship and disease. 'Embodied vulnerability', is thus an inescapable part of the human condition: 'To be vulnerable as a human being is to possess a structure of sentiments, feelings and emotions by which we can steer a passage through the uncertainties of the social world' (Turner 2003: 277).

This condition of embodied vulnerability is particularly pronounced during minimal states of consciousness, such as sleeping and dying – when our involvement with society is temporally suspended (Williams 2003), or at least limited.

Therefore, in order to sleep well, individuals and groups need to make arrangements that allow for a maximum of corporeal security during sleep.

Based on extensive research in Japan and other countries, anthropologist Brigitte Steger proposes, 'the question of security is a key towards a theoretical understanding of sleep as social event' (Steger 2004: 357). Safety during sleep cannot merely be explained with reference to physiology. It is also intimately related to social, cultural and spiritual aspects at a particular time and place. (Aubert and White 1959a: 54, Steger 2004: 355).

Steger identifies four elements that facilitate emotional security cross-culturally: First, the stability of the sleeping place; second, the presence of trusted persons; third, the existence of repetitious rituals; and fourth, the social acceptance of a certain sleeping behaviour (Steger 2004: 415). While all of these factors appear to shape sleep throughout the world, their particular importance may vary in different cultural contexts.

Guided by Steger's theoretical considerations on the provision of security during sleep, I attempted to explore how Karenni refugees provide for essential protection whilst asleep.

Methodology

During this exploratory research I worked with qualitative research methods, such as participant observation, informal interviews with individuals and groups of young people and the collection of ethnographic material. In this endeavour, I encountered several methodological challenges.

First, the refugee camp as major social situation for participant observation proved to be a difficult research site. In terms of general accessibility, the obtainment of a camp pass – the official entry document to the camp – issued by the Thai Home Ministry would not have been possible without affiliation with a registered organisation operating within the refugee camps. For this reason, I volunteered with a local NGO. While this was a very rewarding experience, it also caused constraints during fieldwork. For example, introducing myself to the refugee population as an NGO volunteer and graduate student sometimes caused confusion among research participants. Also, my own moves during research in the camp had to be chosen carefully in accordance with my host NGO and partner organisations on which I depended for transport to and from the camp (for details cf. Vogler 2007).

The imposition of curfews as artificial markers of nightfall merits special attention. According to Aubert and White, the fixation of a temporal frame for

nocturnal rest serves in particular those who hold powerful daytime positions and whose temporary withdrawal from their positions while sleeping exposes them to attempts to undermine their authority (Aubert and White 1959b: 9). Similarly, imposed sleep simultaneity functions as a means of social surveillance.

At the time of research, humanitarian aid-workers had to leave Thai campsites by 6 p.m., while refugees had to respect an internal curfew set at 9 p.m. The latter regulation – literally a couvre-feu – clearly aims at curbing nocturnal traffic by requiring camp residents to cover open fires and maintain silence within their homes. Although the mere setting of a curfew does not cause refugees to go to bed obediently, it arguably defines a normative time frame for collective rest. Moreover, the curfew prescribes what kinds of persons are allowed to take a night's sleep within the camp. Like this, nightfall forcibly separates the camp population from diurnal actors such as humanitarian aid workers and researchers affiliated with them. At the same time, curfews engender proximity between refugees and other actors such as Thai paramilitaries who are deployed as night watchmen with special accommodation inside the camp. (cf. Vogler 2006) Bearing ethical considerations in mind, it was impossible for me to stay overnight in the camp. Had the Thai authorities found out, this would not only have shed a negative image on the NGO I worked with, but more importantly, it would have caused grave problems for my refugee hosts.

I remedied these limitations by visiting other living areas of refugees around the camp on a daily (and nightly) basis.

Second, I found myself faced with the dilemma encountered by most social researchers focusing on sleep, namely, the fact that as an unconscious activity, sleep is difficult to account for both by researchers and research participants. In most industrialised societies, sleep qualifies as a 'hidden private phenomenon' (Hislop et al. 2005: 7.1.) thus posing practical challenges to direct observations. The privacy of sleeping persons was not a major issue in the refugee camp, since it was usually unproblematic to visit sleeping spaces in and around refugees' homes. Notwithstanding this advantage, I experienced the limits of participant observation due to my own sleepiness. For example, when refugees allowed me to take a rest on their bedding during my camp visits they did so because of my obvious exhaustion. Accordingly, I always readily and thankfully accepted these offers from my side. Because these occasions always correlated with my own drowsiness, I ended up taking notes and pictures

before falling into comfortable slumber. At the same time, I had to be discrete in taking notes about the bedding as the sight of a tired person examining and writing about bedding instead of sleeping in it would have caused much amusement if not confusion!

Concerning interviews, sleep turned out to be an easygoing topic with Karenni refugees. They not only seemed to enjoy recounting childhood memories of co-sleeping or jaunty episodes of putting overprotective parents to sleep with alcohol, moreover, discussions of sleep allowed them to approach sensitive issues regarding the vulnerability and protection of individuals' corporal integrity that may be difficult to obtain when asked directly. However, ethnographic conversations and interviews were limited due to language constraints. At the time of research I did not speak any of the local languages and, therefore, interacted mostly with those who spoke English. This choice immediately limited my informants to young educated refugees. Engaging a translator would have been possible, though difficult, since people in the Karenni camp speak various languages. Furthermore, the brevity of fieldwork did not allow for sufficient time to identify a trustworthy person to engage for the delicate task of translation. Since my research also involved visiting refugees who resided irregularly outside the camp in the evening and night-time hours, I considered it safer to see people alone rather than in the company of a second person.

Finally, I also collected visual sources depicting or discussing sleep. These include photographs and drawings by refugees as well as illustrations printed in books and calendars. I also found it useful to shape my understanding of Burmese sleep habits through the analytical reading of non-academic literature describing everyday customs inside Burma. Despite their semi-fictional character, these texts proofed helpful in forming initial ideas on the 'social acceptance' of sleep behaviour among Burmese refugees.

The social and material conditions of sleep in the refugee camp

Sleeping places inside the Thai refugee camp consist mostly of unstable bamboo huts built by refugees. The physical condition of the camp area appears to be a major obstacle for the construction of stable housing: located in the deep jungle on steep hillsides, the area designated by the Thai government does not allow for generous space between individual houses. Bamboo and eucalyptus

are used as general building materials and roofs consist mostly of leaves. These materials are also customarily used for houses in rural Burma as well as in Thai villages close to the camps (TBBC 2006: 70).

Although the bamboo weakens rapidly and has to be replaced every two years, refugees are not allowed to use other building materials. The houses are therefore prone to various natural hazards. The porous roofs, walls and floors cannot truly protect the inhabitants from the weather conditions in northwest Thailand, whether the oppressing heat during March and April or heavy rainfalls during the monsoon period lasting roughly from May to September. In particular during the rainy season, landslides and falling trees might completely destroy or wash away individual bamboo huts. In addition, the permeability of the huts exposes their inhabitants to malaria transmitting mosquitoes and disturbing noises.

Despite the limited options in housing design, refugee homes – and thus their sleeping spaces – differ according to the economic status and gender composition of household members. Also, for children, birth order is an important factor structuring their sleeping location.

Economically better-off families appear to have at least one room for married couples and several other rooms for children who often share space with same-gender siblings. In the absence of an adequate number of rooms, a minimum of protection is maintained by curtains, which divide the beds of siblings, relatives, and friends who are not of the same sex. Exceptions to gender separation are married couples and pre-pubescent children. Husbands and wives tend to share either a room or a corner within the bamboo huts. Babies and infants sleep with their parents and usually leave the parental bed when a neonate joins the family. Notwithstanding this general rule, several informants mentioned that they practiced parental co-sleeping until their teenage years, in particular with their mother. One young man only ceased to share the parental bed when he reached the age of fifteen (Oh Thay[4], personal communication, 13 January 2006). Michael, another refugee, recounted the emotional hardship caused by his exclusion from the parental bed at the age of nine: 'I was cryin', is cold and lonely.' (Michael, personal communication, 13 January 2006). Pitying their younger brother, Michael's older siblings started to shelter him alternatively under their blankets. Since one of the siblings was an older sister it can be assumed that co-sleeping among different genders is not

4 All names of research participants are pseudonyms.

problematic during childhood. By contrast, unmarried adults are expected to sleep separately. In general, the co-sleeping of adult men and women is only permissible for a married couple within their own household. A household is considered 'polluted' if any other couple shares bedding in a home that is not their own. Therefore, overnight guests usually sleep in groups of men and women with children joining the female group for sleep. It is uncommon to provide a private sleeping place for invited couples or families. Within Karenni state itself, whole villages may visit each other for major celebrations. At these occasions, the host villages provide men and women huts to shelter the people of the invited village (Reh Mi, personal communication, 29 November 2008).

Verandas also appear to be used for both nocturnal and diurnal sleep. If a household does not possess enough space, visitors are asked to spend the night on the veranda. The same holds true for families who lack space and who send their sons 'outside' to sleep with friends. Moreover, I observed sleeping or dozing men, women and children on their verandas during the early afternoon hours.

While the above descriptions concern sleeping places within individual households, many young refugees are sheltered in boarding houses and schools run by different organisations and charities. These establishments mostly house unaccompanied minors who arrive at the camps. In these boarding houses and schools male and female students sleep in separate buildings. Boys sleep in an open dormitory with beds located next to each other in a long row on the wooden floor. This pattern is not peculiar to refugee camps, but can also be found in orphanages for migrants in Mae Hong Son and in Buddhist orphanages inside Burma. In contrast to their male peers, girls are sheltered in buildings that allow for more intimacy. Usually two to three girls are allocated one room. Teachers explained these different spatial arrangements with reference to the need for privacy, which is supposedly more pronounced among girls. Yet, according to another informant, male students of this boarding school complained about their sleeping places and asked repeatedly for dormitories in the style of their female peers (Maud, personal communication, 29 November 2007).

Sleep items such as clothes and bedding often serve the immediate purpose of protecting the sleepers' corporeal integrity. Moreover, their usage may also hint at reassuring rituals that either facilitate one's falling asleep or are 'called forth by the latent fears which may be aroused by the imminence of sleep' (Aubert and White 1959a: 50).

Similar to refugees' sleeping places, there is also a variety of bedding used inside the camp. In general, NGOs provide refugees with blankets, non-impregnated bed nets and plastic sleeping mats. The common distribution rate consists of one blanket for every two refugees as well as one family-size bed net and one sleeping mat per three persons. During unusually cold winters, refugees may also receive knitted blankets. Used in conjunction, the mats and nets provide an essential protection against wind and malaria transmitting mosquitoes.

Apart from official aid material, refugees develop their own strategies to create comfortable bedding. Although pillows are not among relief items, cushions exist in almost every household. Furthermore, women, children and men support their heads with bunches of clothes and logs. These pillow alternatives should not be interpreted as a sign of poverty, since cushions are not commonly used in Burma (Thanegi 2004: 35).

Most refugees sleep on the floor by putting a thin mattress on a plastic mat and by covering themselves with distributed blankets. Depending on their economic situation, they may acquire additional items such as quilts and thicker blankets either by purchase them from shops within and outside the camp or by bartering. During the daytime the bedding is usually removed in order to provide space for other activities. According to research participants this is even the case in households with specifically allocated sleeping rooms. In the absence of drawers and other furniture, mats and blankets are folded into neat packages and stored at discreet posts in the hut.

In addition to blankets and quilts, refugees protect their bodies directly with their clothes. It is noteworthy that the practice of wearing clothing reserved for nocturnal sleep does not exist among the Burmese refugees. Instead, women and men sleep in their *longyi*[5] or other clothes worn during the day.

Sources of vulnerability and means of protection

Four key elements are likely to cause distress that may prevent refugees from sleep or interrupt their slumber in an unpleasant if not perilous way, namely: the permeability of bamboo huts, the refugee community, the militarisation of

5 A *longyi* is a sheet of cloth, often sewn in a cylindrical shape. It is worn around the waist and runs to the feet. *Longyi* are worn by both men and women in countries like Burma, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

refugee camps as well as the belief in supernatural beings. Yet, despite the threats these elements signify for individual sleepers, they function simultaneously as protection against other hazards.

As described above, housing within the refugee camp consists of bamboo huts, which are not only characterised by the poor quality of building material but also by unavoidable neighbourly proximity. It does not take much to imagine the impact that these conditions have on sleep and nocturnal tranquillity.

First of all, informants repeatedly mentioned the sounds of human activities and animals. While morning sounds related to peoples' household chores seem to be accepted as part of the day's start, sounds during night time have rather been identified as disturbing sleep. For example, several refugees reported being woken up in the morning as soon as their neighbours began woodcutting as well as feeding pigs and chicken. Indeed, wood cutting is one of the first morning activities, since it is indispensable for the preparation of morning rice. Rather than as disturbing 'noise', the sounds of morning work should therefore be interpreted as 'background sounds' marking the transition from the dormant to the waking condition. Those responsible for these morning chores are not necessarily working in silence but usually start chatting in normal voices. There seems to be no social rule requiring 'consideration for the neighbour' during early morning hours. By contrast, other noises such as snoring, footsteps in neighbouring bamboo-huts, or the noises of roosters and frogs were described as nocturnal sleep disturbers. Furthermore, my co-worker Julian mentioned that camp residents would call security personnel if drunkards were too loud (Julian, personal communication, 21 January 2006), while a refugee woman reported a 'crazy' woman who would sit on the roof of her hut during full-moon nights singing the whole night through (Ree Meh, personal communication, 25 January 2006).

Second, refugees and foreigners who happened to spend nights with official permission in the camp complained that the permeability of the bamboo huts exposed them to harsh weather conditions during sleep. For example, a Swiss civil engineer mentioned the noises of footsteps and an unpleasant draught going through the gaps of the floor and walls when he spent a night inside the camp during his consultancy (Henri Stalder, personal communication, 19 February 2006). An Austrian NGO worker experienced similar exposure during her stay in the camp two years ago and came to the conclusion that a night in a bamboo hut is like sleeping in an 'open cardboard box' (Gabriele Schaumberger, personal communication, 4 January 2006).

Acute health-related problems may arise during the monsoon period when constant rainfall endangers those who are sleeping under leaky roofs. In an attempt to counter this hazard, refugees have developed various techniques for sealing roofs. I observed people using blue plastic sheets or blankets distributed by NGOs to cover holes in the roofs. As protection from malaria transmitting mosquitoes, bed nets used in conjunction with plastic mats are invaluable relief items and as such are regularly distributed by NGOs. Yet, notwithstanding their protective function, mosquito nets may also become fire dangers. Apart from sleeping, refugees also pursue other nocturnal activities under their bed nets such as learning and reading. In the absence of electricity they use candlelight, which is likely to burn the nets. At the same time, the permeability together with the proximity of bamboo huts may also provide social protection by virtue of neighbourly vigilance.

Domestic and gender-based violence constitute the single largest group of offences committed in refugee camps around the world (Da Costa 2006:10). This holds true for the refugee camps alongside the Thai-Burma border. Women and children, in particular, live with the threat of various forms of sexual harassment, and other forms of violence, which more often than not are perpetrated by members of the refugee community, including of one's own household.

Social studies on the impacts of domestic violence in other settings have found that abusive relationships are likely to cause sleep problems that may persist even long after victims and perpetrators have been separated. For example, a study with women in British shelters highlights that forceful sleep deprivation is often part of domestic abuse. The disturbed sleep of women may moreover translate to the sleeping behaviour of children living in the same household (Williams 2005: 134).

The account of a Thai social worker responsible for child-centred programmes in Mae Hong Son confirms these findings. Apparently many Karenni children experience difficulties falling asleep due to quarrelling parents (Thiphawan Teethong, personal communication, 20 January 2006).

Sleeping women may also be vulnerable to assaults committed by nocturnal prowlers. For instance, anthropologist Sandra Dudley describes how during her research stay in a Karenni camp an unknown man supposedly repeatedly sneaked into all-female households – including her own – molesting young sleeping women. The first attempts to catch the prowler consisted of male youths moving into the concerned bamboo houses where – equipped with sticks and stones – they spent the night in the public areas of these households.

Yet, their protective efforts remained unsuccessful. The problem of the nocturnal intruder persisted and was even aggravated when refugees started to ascribe these machinations to supernatural beings (Dudley 2000: 274).

Notwithstanding the potential danger embodied (mostly) by male members of the refugee community, refugees also find emotional comfort through the presence of others during sleep provided that dormant bodies are decently covered and arranged properly according to gender. As mentioned above, Karenni refugees neither change into sleeping clothes nor sleep naked. They keep on wearing their clothes, but are supposed to arrange these carefully in order to cover their skin while asleep during daytime and night time. Both genders manage to wrap their clothes tightly around their waists thus ensuring that the fabrics will not move during sleep. This holds especially true for refugee women who are expected to cover their legs down to the ankle with their clothes and an additional blanket. According to refugee Moe Nyo, female friends and relatives are expected to re-cover a dormant person should the *longyi* or blanket be misplaced. By contrast, if men – other than husbands – observe an uncovered woman, they may look away, move on or ask someone else to re-cover the dormant body. Moe Nyo, furthermore, indicated that the sight of such a 'messy' sleeper might appear ridiculous to the beholder: 'in their heart they will say something. They want to laugh' (Moe Nyo, personal communication, 12 January 2006). Among Karenni women, the wrapping and tightening of their longyi therefore seems to function as a primary sleeping ritual.

In contrast to the sleeping demeanour of women in visible places, the shelter of one's bamboo hut seems to allow for more relaxation. Thus, while men and boys appear to have greater freedom in choosing their sleeping place and are sometimes even sent outside to spend the night on the veranda, girls and women are encouraged to seek the privacy of the bamboo hut for a decent sleep.

Although not located in an open combat zone, the ongoing atmosphere of civil strife and political violence translates from the Burmese to the Thai side of the border and thus into the refugee camps. Also, with the exception of those already born in Thailand, refugees are likely to suffer from sleep disturbances caused by memories of individual experiences of armed conflict and internal displacement.

Research among refugee children from the Middle East in Denmark by Edith Montgomery and Anders Foldspang (2001) suggests that a violent family

history in conjunction with a continuing stressful family situation may serve as a strong predictor of sleep disturbances. The authors found that while long-lasting exposure to violent environments enhances the likelihood that children will live in a constant state of arousal, sleep disturbances are mainly the result of witnessing or experiencing more specific incidents of violence (Montgomery and Foldsprang 2001: 21).

It has to be kept in mind that the above research findings apply to a specific group of refugee children and, therefore, cannot simply be generalised to other contexts of forced migration. Notwithstanding this limitation, these insights suggest that a research focus on sleep may reveal how experiences of structural and direct violence are likely to continue haunting individuals for a very long period.

In contrast to the resettled children in the above case study, everyday life of Burmese youth in Thai camps occurs in proximity to the ongoing civil strife within the Burmese jungles. This also explains the strong politicisation and militarisation of these camps. Between 1995 and 1998, for instance, refugees and Thai locals alike suffered from an estimated 152 cross-border attacks of the Burmese Army and its allies. Refugee camps constituted the main target of these assaults (including five camps that were completely burned down), since the Burmese Army suspected them to be strongholds of non-state armed groups (Lang 2002: 154–156). Partly as a result of these cross-border attacks, Thai paramilitary sentries were installed for the first time within the camps in 1997 (Bowles 1998:12).

Yet, far from being perceived as exclusively protective, the presence of Thai security personnel may impact negatively on peace of mind during nocturnal hours and, thus, on the sleep of some refugees. Accounts of Thai soldiers aggressively treating individuals strolling around after curfew hours, on the one hand, and cases of refugee girls entertaining romantic relationships with Thai soldiers, on the other hand, are likely to stir parental fear that may prevent household elders from falling asleep. Compared with the Karenni boys, the Thai soldiers are socially well off, they wear uniforms and move around on motorbikes and thus attract the attention of quite a few girls. Since the soldiers are, however, unlikely to marry their Karenni girlfriends, parents are concerned about these relationships. For example, when I discussed the issue with a group of young refugees, it transpired that parents tend to worry if their daughters do not return between 10 p.m. and midnight (Group discussion, 17 January 2006). Because these hours are already far beyond the fixed curfew

hours, the group discussion also suggests that official regulations do not necessarily hinder refugee youth in their nocturnal projects.

In contrast to the somewhat ambiguous role of Thai soldiers, the Burmese Army continues to be perceived as a serious threat by the refugee population and those working with them. During fieldwork, several people recalled in detail the last serious engagement between the Burmese Army and the Karenni Army. The armed clash took place during the 2005 dry season as the absence of rain facilitated Burmese soldiers' access to Karenni territory:

> *During that time the sound of gunfire and explosions was a daily backdrop and a curfew was imposed in the camp. Every night everyone had to be home and candles out by 8 p.m. for fear of the Burmese invading the camp (they have done it before so this was not an imagined threat). There was real fear in the camp and the curfew also impacted on study and entertainment. At that stage our boarding master refused to take in any new students as he was finding it so difficult to control the boarder students, as they were so restless. (Maude, email-correspondence, 26 March 2006)*

During a group discussion, students also spoke about this period. Recounting the fighting at the border, a male student mentioned how insecure he and his friend felt because of the sounds of shelling and gunshots. An aid worker who lived inside the camp at that time confirmed that the shelling was audible in particular during the evening and early night hours (Mary, personal communication, 21 February 2006). Many refugees had already packed their belongings and remained in a constantly alert state. They were ready to leave the camp at any moment (Group discussion, 21 February 2006).

These accounts suggest that fighting does take place during evening and night time and that this hazard may impact on refugee's sleep. At the same time, it transpired that the presence of Thai soldiers – originally meant for protection – might also be perceived by some members of the refugee community as a nocturnal threat to their peace of mind.

Parallel to Theravada Buddhism as the official state religion, animist beliefs in supernatural beings are widespread in Burma. In particular the belief in *nats* is very popular. According to anthropologist Melford Spiro (1996) '*nat*' refers to a class of supernatural beings who are more powerful than humans and who can affect them either for good or for evil (Spiro 1996:41). Together with witches, ghosts and demons, *nats* constitute a system of supernatural beings

that appear to play a salient role in the everyday life of most Burmese, including ethnic minorities (Spiro 1996:4).

Although *nats* are believed to possess the power to affect human beings in various ways and situations (including sleep), humans are not passively subjected to the whim of ethereal creatures. Instead, people can irritate but also appease supernatural beings. Accordingly, while one remains vulnerable to the deeds of malevolent *nats*, the belief in miraculous things can also provide protection and refuge from mental distress caused by the empirical world.

Yet, while waking agents are capable of keeping supernatural machinations at bay, sleepers seem to be particularly vulnerable to ghostly visitations. For example, during fieldwork in Burma anthropologist Monique Skidmore encountered a woman who claimed that the ghost of her husband would haunt her every night (Skidmore 2004: 202). Also, the former Karenni refugee Pascal Khoo Thwe recounts in his autobiography his grandfather's ghost paying his sleeping wife and grandchildren a visit (Khoo Thwe 2002: 93–94). Years later, when the young man lived and studied in Cambridge, his troublesome past continued to manifest itself during dreams and caused him nights of fitful sleep. Similar to the resettled refugee children researched by Montgomery and Foldspang (2001), direct experiences of political persecution and violence continued to trouble Pascal long after he had left Burma, once his consciousness ceased to follow wakeful discipline and started operating according to the opaque regulations of the dormant condition. Since he was in exile, recourse to indigenous healing methods in order to sooth these spiritual torments proved to be impossible.[6] The situation was further exacerbated by the fact that he could not confide in his British colleagues due to his fear of being misunderstood:

> *Ghosts and nightmares returned to haunt my nocturnal world. Sometimes my ancestors visited me to offer their blessing, while at other times evil Nats haunted me and bullied me into giving up the struggle. The ghosts of dead friends came often to my assistance, and the goodwill of living ones was a balm of my horrors. Yet, much of the time I felt that I was under the*

[6] In this respect, it is noteworthy that there exist examples of extreme repercussions of spirit belief that are summarized as Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS). Since the 1970s, SUNDS has been striking Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees and migrants in their sleep. Medical anthropology explains these nocturnal deaths with Southeast Asians' geographical detachment from their ancestors' lands and ghosts and the resulting spiritual dilemma (Adler 1995: 1626).

> *spell of evil powers I could not talk about any of this to my friends. They had not conception of our 'ghost culture', of how we took for granted things that to them would have seemed quaintly superstitious or mad (Khoo Thwe 2002: 278–279).*

Sleep, therefore, constitutes a particularly vulnerable condition for those holding animist beliefs. Accordingly, keeping potentially sleep-disturbing fears and dangers at bay, requires the performance of special rituals. For example, if we return to Sandra Dudley's account of nightly intrusions into her and other women's bamboo huts, Dudley further reports that after a while most refugees were largely convinced that these incidents were caused by nats who had been offended by the camp community. At this point the majority of the camp population was already alert and extremely disturbed by these stories that accompanied ongoing incidents of nocturnal intrusions. Eventually, an end to the intrusions was only achieved through the intervention of a shaman (Dudley 2000: 275–276). Remarkably, this was an effective way to expel the intruder.

Emotional security, however, may also be reinforced through concentration on or complete immersion into the spiritual world itself. The Burmese intellectual Ma Thanegi, for instance, describes nat-storytelling as a helpful strategy when sending children to sleep (Thanegi 2004: 27–28). Striking indeed are Skidmore's accounts of Burmese citizens deploying supernatural beliefs as coping mechanisms within an environment severely characterised by structural violence. According to her study, individuals apparently manage to withdraw from distress by putting themselves intentionally into unconscious states such as sleepwalking, daydreaming and soul wandering (Skidmore 2004: 188–199).

Concluding remarks

While sleep in general puts the body into a state of vulnerability, this is particularly pronounced in the case of refugees. In this article I outlined how Karenni refugees in northern Thailand devise coping mechanisms in order to protect their corporeal and mental integrity during sleep. I argued that the sleep of forced migrants is, on the one hand, overshadowed by certain vulnerabilities and dangers. On the other hand, I suggested that far from being mere victims to adverse circumstances, refugees are capable of developing mechanisms and strategies in order to cope with potential sleep-disturbing elements.

Steger's (2004) theoretical framework on emotional security during sleep proved very helpful in discerning aspects of refugees´ vulnerability and agency. Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that issues she identified – stability of sleeping places, presence of trusted persons, existence of repetitious rituals and social acceptance of sleeping behaviour – are also relevant for sleep within the refugee camp. Observations of refugees' sleeping places illustrated how camp inhabitants have to work continuously on the maintenance of the stability and impermeability of their bamboo huts. Refugees' comfort during sleep seems also to be enhanced by the presence of trusted persons, whether friends or relatives. The necessity of the social acceptance of a certain sleeping behaviour is illustrated by strict rules separating sleepers according to gender. Furthermore, I explained how Burmese women, in particular, are expected to avoid the demeanour of a 'messy sleeper' by adequately covering their body. There are also rituals that support individuals' smooth transition into the dormant state and back into a waking condition: spreading out one's bedding may already be an important ritual as well as the obligatory adjustment of cloths for proper sleep. Moreover, research findings thus far suggest the existence of religious rituals meant to abate the negative influence of supernatural beings upon sleepers.

This research found a frequent blurring of the distinction between elements causing 'vulnerability' and those signifying 'protection': What some may experience as nuisance (e.g. exposure to sounds due to the permeability of bamboo huts), may be perceived by others as protection from more sinister dangers (e.g. escalation of domestic violence). More research is needed on the impact of social categories such as age, gender and class on the organisation of refugees' sleep. Thus far, research on Karenni refugees' livelihoods suggests that refugee women sleep less than their male counterparts due to domestic obligations. Moreover, men tend to be less occupied due to the official Thai prohibition of paid labour and agricultural work for refugees. In particular, engagement in paid labour can have a strong impact on the organisation of refugees' sleep since this activity often causes refugees to leave campsites secretly under the veil of darkness (cf. Vogler 2006).

Methodologically, I found 'sleep' a useful window for further explorations of social settings marked by political and economic adversities as well as structural inequality and injustice. Yet, this was not always an easy process. Exploring the provision of emotional security during sleep within the Karenni refugee camp was complicated by the research context as well as by the condition of sleep itself. Official regulations as well as the particularity of sleeping

situations rendered constant observations very difficult. At the same time, approaching sensitive issues through sleep-centred conversations, interviews and observations proved very fruitful. In particular, it had the advantage of being less obtrusive and probing than more direct inquiries into peoples' intimate lives and fears. Indeed, while talking about sleep, refugees recount at their own pace details about their social relations, their emotional vulnerabilities as well as protection mechanisms.

Therefore, I am convinced, that further research on sleep of 'vulnerable populations' can provide important insights into individuals' vulnerability and also into their agency in providing measures for emotional security in otherwise adverse environments.

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