

## CHAPTER II

### KARENS: PATTERNS OF MOVEMENT

#### Population Mobility

This study deals with the movement of people. There are many kinds of movement and different frameworks for typing this mobility. Since the basic concepts regarding mobility, however, are not always well understood, and because Southeast Asians do not always conceptualize mobility in the same way as do people from elsewhere, a discussion of population mobility will provide the basis for analyzing this movement.

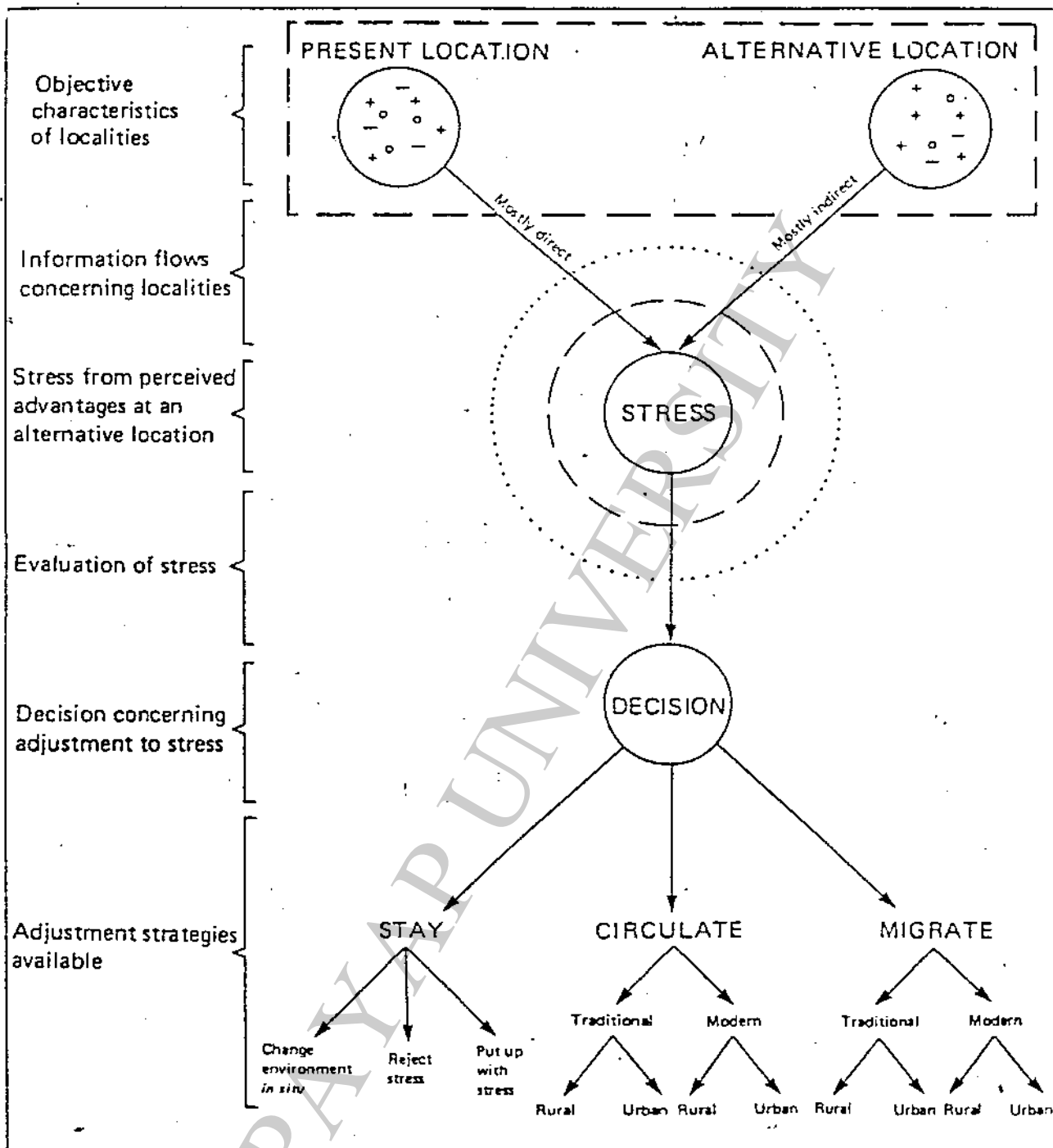
In the West, the permanent movement of people from one place to another has customarily been referred to as migration. Another kind of move, commuting or a daily move to work and back, has also been identified. Recent scholarship, in both the West and the East, however, has shown that there is yet another kind of population mobility which denotes short-term, repetitive, cyclical mobility. This has been often termed "circulation".

Circulation has been observed in all regions of the world where it seems to be a strategy for maximizing benefits at both ends of the movement pattern. Thus, a taxi driver from a poor northeastern Thai village could move to Bangkok for a couple of months every dry season at a time when cultivating crops at his home village is impossible and earn cash which is hard to come by where he lives. Thus, through circulation, this man is able to produce food to eat (which has not too much monetary value) at home and the cash to buy needed items at the destination point, Bangkok.

In looking at the movement of the target group in this study, circulation is a very real movement possibility for virtually all of the respondents. The respondents almost always say they enjoy living in the hills; the peaceful environment restores them and the family atmosphere brings them calm. However, after having received advanced educations there is very little employment available to individuals so trained. This puts them in a dilemma; they enjoy the hills but they cannot see how to put their education to work. One outlet has been for them to seek, at least for a few years, until they settle on a career in their life, temporary employment through contacts in town. This might be menial work while they look for better opportunities or it might be work with the KBC. In some cases, development projects, such as the Thai-German Highland Development Programme, hire them, usually on a part-time basis for specific projects, to go into the hills where their experience in the hills becomes an advantage for work as interviewers, guides, or translators. Some also have become tour guides. The casual hiring system in northern Thai cities also facilitates circulation. many jobs are available on the spur of the moment. These jobs bring cash income but because there is no welfare, little job security, and often few jobs of long duration, high turnover results. Circulatory moves respond well to this situation.

Regardless of what type of population mobility chosen, the respondents move through a decision-making process that does not vary much. Attempts to relate this process specifically to economic factors, however, have failed. Instead, a wider spectrum of factors is involved in the deciding how and where to move (Hugo, 1981 pp. 189-194).

# MIGRATION DECISION MAKING



- + Favorable aspect of a particular location
- Unfavorable aspect of a particular location
- o Neutral factor of a particular location
- Individual characteristics influencing the decision to move or stay
- ..... Community norms influencing the decision to move or stay
- [- - -] Environment of social and spatial inequality which greatly restricts the choices open to the potential mover at both his place of origin and potential destinations

According to Hugo, before any movement takes place, there must be a crisis at the point of origin. Something must be lacking, be it money, education, excitement, chances for marriage, food, security, or something else. The destination, duration, and frequency of the movement process are strategies to resolve the crisis. A look at Figure 1 (Hugo p. 192) shows the steps and possibilities of this process. Decisions have to be made resulting in migration, circulation, or commuting or, possibly, for no movement at all.

The process of decision-making taken by the Karens under study in this project resembles the process diagrammed by Hugo. The Karens differ only slightly by having already moved to the city for education.

One major consideration is that the Karens in question look upon population mobility differently than do Westerners. In particular, the Karens believe that all movement is made with attachment to the home village being of paramount importance. Distance and duration of absence are secondary in importance to maintenance of links with home. During the course of this research, it became clear that the movement patterns on Karens resemble northern Thais, whose mobility behavior was studied by Anchalee Singhanetra-Renard (1982).

During the course of her studies, she determined that the northern Thai typology of move included three major types of mobility. The first involves circular mobility in which the movers maintain total membership in the present village. These movers make daily or nearly-daily commutes to work and participate in all major activities of village life. The second type of movement involves circular mobility that takes the movers out of the village for longer periods of time. Because of the duration of their absence, these movers

cannot participate in all the major village activities. However, in spite of moves that can take these individuals away from home for months at a time, they still consider themselves full village members. The third involves a shift of allegiance from the present village to a new location: this linear movement is called migration and sometimes involves moves of very short distances, such as two or three kilometers until the next village.

The Karens studied in this project share the same views regarding attachment to the home village as do northern Thais. In the interviews of the Karen respondents, they invariably exhibited a strong desire have a close relationship with the home village. Even among those who showed little or no inclination to actually return home to live, there was a strong feeling that they probably ought to in fact do so.

This represents a high-level of ambivalence among the Karen respondents, many of whom had not come to terms with what it means to be Karen. When Karens are among other Karens in hill villages, there is no question but that virtually all there identify themselves and others as Karens. However, when Karens, particularly younger Karens who have received a considerable amount of Thai education, are in the city and working in a Thai environment, they often find it somewhat embarrassing to be Karens, at least in the middle of Thai society. Although of course denying this when asked about it directly, or even indirectly, there was an undeniable show of embarrassment when greeted as Karens by the interviewers. "How did you know I was Karen?" was very frequently the response to the

interviewers when they first met the potential respondents in this study.

Clearly, many of the Karen respondents surveyed in this study possess an inferiority complex about being Karens. These respondents have heard many of the stereotypes about Karens common in Thai culture: Karens are dirty, dress sloppily, speak Thai with an accent, are poor, and lack sophistication. Since many of the respondents do not fit these stereotypes and, when not wearing Karen dress, easily pass for Thais, they often do not wish to be identified as Karens, preferring instead to be considered Thai.

How much of a new development this inferiority complex is has been difficult to determine. From what can be told about traditional Karen life, there seems to be some indication that Karens in northern Thailand long ago felt in awe of the major lowland kingdoms. But this awe roughly seems to parallel the feeling of rural Thais towards the same centers. Any inferiority that was felt historically towards the center, thus, was not racial--but cultural: the powerless feeling in awe of the powerful. This seems to have contributed to the popularity of the almost universal Karen belief that they are orphans, abandoned by Ywa, the Karen god, and are awaiting for the return of their white younger brother to redeem them.

Very little or any of this awe by Karens seems to have been directed at nearby rural northern Thai villagers, who themselves were in awe of the same kings, palaces, and religious sites in the major lowland centers. Furthermore, the Karens had considerable strengths which were sources of pride in their own Karenness. As noted elsewhere in this report, Karens were proud of the environment in which they lived, their ancestral ties, and their adeptness in forest

lore. They considered Thais as somewhat immoral, unctuous, invidious, deceptive, arrogant, and perhaps not even as good looking physically. In 1912, a Christian Karen from Burma came to Chiang Mai and was shocked to find that crickets, beetles, and small quantities of wild greens were sold in the market. The visiting Karen asked for Christians in Burma to pray for the impoverished Thais of Chiang Mai (The Morning Star 1912).

Although the Karens generally recognized themselves as minorities, they were nonetheless proud, independent, and capable; although bemoaning (except in the case of Karenni who for decades were able to exert political power over nearby Thais and Shans) their lack of political power, they did not envy the Thai's culture.

This pride seems to have begun to decline at about the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, when the central Thai government took full control of northern Thailand. As noted elsewhere in this report, when this happened the northern Thai royalty's power and wealth deteriorated, undermining the close Karen links with northern royalty.

Karen pride was also damaged by changes in the Thai conception of minority. The western notion of "race" became popular in Thailand, according to which the world's population was broken up into groups of different ethnic units that were mutually exclusive from one another and between which little or no assimilation could take place. A popular trend of thought at the end of the nineteenth century was that to best understand something it should be broken down into small units. In terms of human population, these European thinkers believed that to understand people they had to be divided into respective

ethnic groups. Not surprisingly it was at this time, about 175 years ago in Europe that romantic nationalism became popular. Believers in this concept were convinced that each group possesses a mythical individuality based on a shared heritage and a common culture. When devotees of this concept came to Thailand, it was only natural that they conceptualize the different groups in Thailand in the same way.

Rather pragmatically, Thai planners during the reign of King Chulalongkorn shaped a definition of "Thai" that was to apply to all the peoples of the kingdom. However, for practical reasons--budgetary shortfalls, remote groups and inaccessible areas, as well as resistance by some peoples--this plan was allowed to lapse. Laws calling for universal conscription and education were not enforced as those beyond the limits of Thai power, were left alone according to a policy of benign neglect. Thus, those people included in this newly-created definition of "Thai" were mostly lowlanders (of whatever ethnicity) in central Thailand, the northeast and the north. The far south (predominately Muslim), highland areas, and a few pockets scattered throughout the country were excluded. However, by this process, the powerful and important minority group of overseas Chinese was included and they are essentially "Thai" at present. As can be seen, this concept of Thai is not essentially a racial term but a consciously created group devised for political reasons. Although based on the those actually ethnically Thai, the present group "Thai" includes many whose ancestors never were Thai in the past.

The Karens, however, for the most part were left out of this process and came to be considered as non-Thai. Although this new definition of Thai had at first been interpreted pragmatically, it later came to be seen defined more racially. Particularly during the



Field Marshall Pibul era and under the guidance of Luang Vichit Vadakarn an entire literature was created about the "Thai Race" as if such a thing really existed and as if all those then defined as "Thai" could trace their ancestry back to some aboriginal Thai group. Karens, except for the few who had somehow been included under the early definition as Thai and whose children had begun entering Thai military service and schools, came now to be considered as virtual guests in Thailand, the new name (1938) of the country which had formerly been called Siam. Very few Karens, for example, were registered as citizens or had national identity cards (bat prachachon). By thus effectively excluding Karens from public life in Thailand the Thai government had dealt a major blow to Karen pride. It also served to keep the Karens in a subservient position since there was no encouragement for Karens to enter school, the major avenue to social mobility in the new Thailand.

Another facet of Thai national policy that kept Karens down was the promotion of central (national) Thai writing and speech. During the reigns of King Vajiravudh and King Prajadhipok as well as during the Field Marshall Pibul Songgram era, this policy was promoted. At the same time, other scripts, such as Lao, northern Thai, and Karen were discouraged, and only central Thai was heard on Thai mass media. The absence of Karen languages on television and radio as well as the discouragement of Karen language publications further undermined Karen pride in being Karen.

As a part of the development projects starting in the 1950s, these policies began to change. Citizenship was extended to many

Karens which facilitated quite a few young Karens attending Thai schools. Since Thai schools often require citizenship for students, the extension of formal citizenship to Karens (on a village to village and case to case basis that is still not complete), significantly encouraged many Karen youth to begin attending Thai schools. This had a twofold impact. First many Karens for the first time began to be integrated into the educated portion of the Thai population. Second, virtually all of these Karens came to learn about Thai ideals and about the stereotypes regarding the Karens. Learning about this "semi-official" disparagement of Karens further encouraged these young Karens to want to become Thais. A number of the respondents, for example, talk about inequality between highlanders and lowlanders. One, showing clearly the effects of having been taught that he is a Thai, noted that when lowlanders called Karens the disparaging name "Yang", he didn't like it: "I am fully a Thai, except that I was born in the hills and I speak a different language."

Another factor serving to encourage Karens to enter the Thai mainstream is a very practical orientation common to almost all Karens towards solving problems. As with many Southeast Asians, the Karens are very "present-oriented". In a survey of Karen religion among Karens in the Pha Mon area on Doi Inthanon, Chiang Mai Province, the German anthropologist, Roland Mischung, found that rather than being very traditionalist or heedlessly radical, the Karens prefer "a strategy of adaptation to the conditions of the present situation". The adaptation, however, "implied flexible adherence to the values of the past" (Mischung 1980, pp. 47-48). If Mischung's data can be generalized upon, ideally, Karens would seem to prefer a situation in which they could maintain their Karen identity but at the same time

prefer one in which they could adapt to modern life and enjoy the benefits of present-day life.

As far as can be told, though, many Karens have long been content to simply assimilate into Thai life. When a Karen breaks contact with his ancestor cult, there is little besides language and dress that links him with the Karens he has left behind. From this point on, it has been customary for Karens to gradually adopt Buddhism (to which many are already well-acquainted). With Thai language ability and the adoption of the Western dress many Thais wear, an educated Karen can easily move into Thai society.

Ironically, Karens who are Christian have shown the greatest resistance to assimilating into Thai life. The reason for this has to do with Christianity being a minority religion in Thailand; the total Christian population (including Catholics and Protestants) is less than one-half of one percent of the population of Thailand. Thus, when a Karen becomes a Christian or a Karen Christian enters the city, he is still a member of a minority. Although Christianity gives the Karen many of the social advantages that Buddhism does, in Thailand becoming a Christian does not help the Karen too much in joining the mainstream. The result is that Karen Christians have shown a very strong tendency to remain Karen. Whereas animist or Buddhist Karens can shift slowly but surely into becoming Thai, Karen Christians find their religion an obstacle to total absorption to being Thai. Interestingly, in a study of Burmanization of the Karen made over half a century ago, James Lee Lewis found that "the Christian Karens of all tribes will be the last to succumb, [to Burmanization], if they ever do" (Lewis, 1924, p. 163). In Burma, too, Christianity is a minority

religion and Christianity served as a barrier to complete assimilation.

This interest in both the hills, where the Karens' heritage lays, and in the cities, where many would see their future, has contributed to a mobile population. Before this study began, the researchers were well aware that the Karen population is a highly mobile one. This mobility is both in terms of distance and in duration. Karens frequently travel far afield, including across the border to Burma to buy goods, visit relatives, or to engage in other activities such as evangelization. This has resulted from a past in which experience as guides, spies, and hunters has made the Karens well able to subsist on their own and to have contacts in many distant locales. Furthermore, the present experience, with Karen hostels throughout the lowlands near schools has contributed to continued mobility.

Because many young Karen have a Thai education they are now willing to move beyond areas traditionally within the Karen sphere of mobility. This has opened new opportunities for these Karens but it has also created the potential of new problems for these Karen movers. What will the relationship of these Karens be with their home villages? Will contact be maintained? If this contact is lost, what are the negative aspects? Will they continue to be Karens? Will they live in the city? What are the advantages and disadvantages of Karens migrating to the city?

#### Effects of Migration

One of the purposes of this research has been to ascertain what the mobility pattern is of Karens coming to the city for education.

Having collected considerable data on this, an analysis must be made of what this data means.

There is a popular tendency of thought among both Thais and non-Thais that Karens belong in their home villages. Those holding these beliefs are very probably not longterm residents of where they are not living. This parallels notions regarding other rural people. Planners in the Greater Bangkok Metropolitan Area probably are very much in agreement that the mover/migrants from the northeast would be better off (as would Bangkok) if they returned to where they came from. Those holding these beliefs are very probably descendants of migrants from up-country or from China themselves. This, in turn, parallels a tendency of thought in North American and European countries that peoples from developing countries ought to return to where they came from. In the United States and Canada, those holding such beliefs are very probably migrants or descendants of migrants themselves.

There seems, therefore, to be a hidden conviction that migration or mobility is satisfactory for oneself but not for someone else. Migrants and circulators today oftentimes move for many of the same reasons that people did in generations past: opportunity, income, and self-betterment. Mobility cannot be easily regulated and it cannot morally be restricted in terms of race, ethnicity, or income.

What should be initiated is the means to solve the root of the problem, which is one of pride in being Karen. In order to look into this problem, it will be useful to see the responses to the questionnaires administered in the course of this survey. This will provide the basis for eventual analysis and suggestions.