

GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS, LOCAL CONCEPTIONS:
HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF COMMUNICATION
AMONG THE BURMESE OPPOSITION-IN-EXILE

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This dissertation has been approved
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Preface

It was the Burmese who taught me the importance of democracy. Before my involvement with the country I had very little interest in the operations of my own government, and even less in U.S. foreign policy. My passion as an undergraduate was with community radio, and I volunteered in many capacities at WXPB-FM in Philadelphia at the time that station was making the painful transition from a community-run station with an almost completely volunteer staff to a more professional-sounding station which found its market niche in world music and singer-songwriters. It saddened me to see the station lose its community staff – even then I was passionate about who had access to the airwaves and how this was limited, in this case by the constraints of the market.

My decision to travel to Thailand was large part whim. I wanted to travel and see more of the world, so in 1989 I left Philadelphia with my good friend Steve (to whom I am now married), our backpacks, and plane tickets to Bangkok. Stumbling upon a chance to volunteer as teachers in a camp of refugees from Burma living in Thailand, we never dreamed that we'd stay the two and a-half years we ended up staying, or that I would continue on to graduate school to study more closely the situation facing the people we met in the camp. Thirteen years later I am still fascinated by Burma and its people. Thus, although the field research upon which this dissertation is formally based was conducted in Thailand and Burma from October, 1999, through August, 2000, my involvement with Burma has lasted since my first introduction to the situation in late 1989 in the Huaykaloke refugee camp, home to Karen refugees from Burma.

As I learned more about these people and the situation they faced, I became angry about the situation the refugees had to endure – a situation not of their own making. After the first several months of teaching, Steve and I agreed to stay a full year. After that year, we moved to a smaller village along the border further north, called Pwe Baw Loo, where we helped develop the curriculum and taught in the opening year of the Karen Teacher Training College (KTTC), a project sponsored by the Karen National Union (KNU). During these years with the Karen, I came to appreciate a lot of things I had always taken for granted, such as the absence of war in my life, the availability of good food, and the chance to take a daily bath and drink unlimited quantities of clean water. I experienced things I had never experienced before in quite the same way, such as the power of community in times of trouble.

During those first years in Thailand I also met Burmese students who had arrived at the border just the year before, after the uprisings inside the country in 1988. I learned about these demonstrations and their aftermath, and about the students' flight to the border areas and their plans for the future. I found myself buoyed by the optimism they communicated in their enthusiasm for change in Burma, which back then seemed not just a possibility but an imminent reality as the Burman students allied themselves with the ethnic minorities for the first time in Burmese history. It was the hunger the Burmese students expressed for democracy, and the interest they showed in international news that made me realize how much I had taken my own democratic rights for granted, and how powerful they could actually be if engaged. It was this realization that caused me to rethink my involvement with the Burmese opposition. I was an English teacher, but I

believed I had skills that could be better utilized. I decided that graduate school would be a means for me to identify what those skills were and how to best make use of them.

After several more years in Asia in which I worked to save money to return to school, I returned to the United States to begin a graduate program in the Fall of 1995. I completed my master's degree in International Development Studies in November, 1997, by which time I had begun my doctoral program in telecommunications.

By the time I arrived back at the border in 1999 to conduct fieldwork for this dissertation, I had learned a great deal about the field of international development and its consequences around the world. Much of what I had learned was critical of the unanticipated consequences of “modernization” efforts by developed countries with aid programs in the developing world. I had learned about the disastrous consequences of structural adjustment programs and other efforts by major international monetary organizations working to bring developing countries into the global marketplace. It was with great interest, then, that I watched media coverage of the “Battle in Seattle,” the massive street protests that took place during the meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, Washington in late 1999. Coverage in the Thai press of the issues being raised by protestors was far more critical than any coverage I had seen of the WTO in the U.S. mainstream media. As the events of that meeting and the street protests unfolded, it occurred to me that they might have some relation to the work I was doing in Thailand, although at that point I could not yet see the connection. That there is a connection has become clear to me, and I will revisit these events in the final chapter of this work.

I dedicate this dissertation with great respect to all of those peoples of Burma working so hard to change the situation in their country. Yet I also offer it somewhat hesitantly, as it does not always portray the opposition movement in the best of lights. I hope that the perspective offered here will be useful for those in the movement willing to be self-reflective. It is also meant for those of us from other countries willing to take a critical look at how we may be doing more harm than good in our efforts to support the opposition struggle. I offer this dissertation primarily, however, to recognize and exercise those most valuable aspects of democracy – the space it provides for debate leading to change, and the potential it offers us all for recognizing our human differences not as threats, but as our greatest asset.

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Adapted from Silverstein, J. (1980). Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity, p. xii.

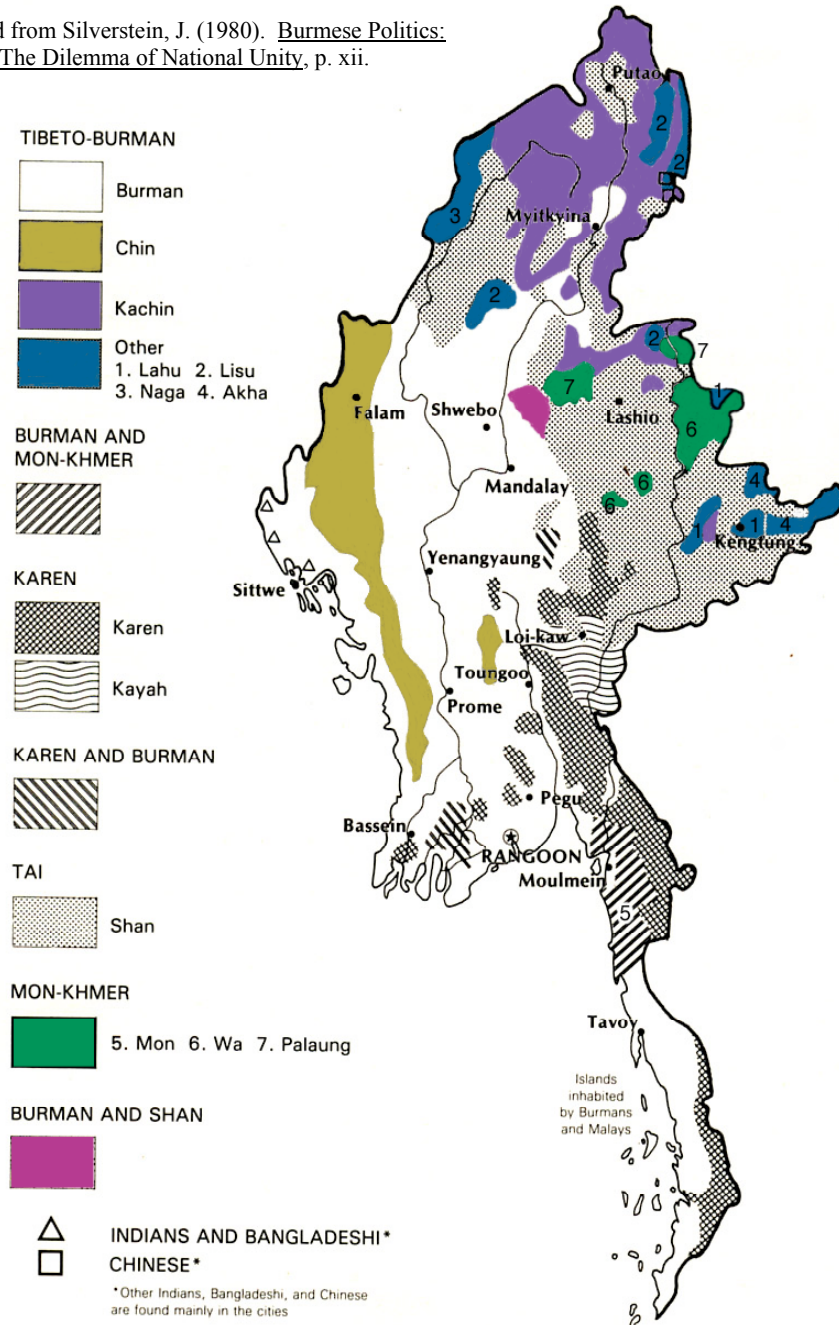


Figure 1. Ethnic Groups of Burma.

From Lang, H. (2002). *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*, p. 10.

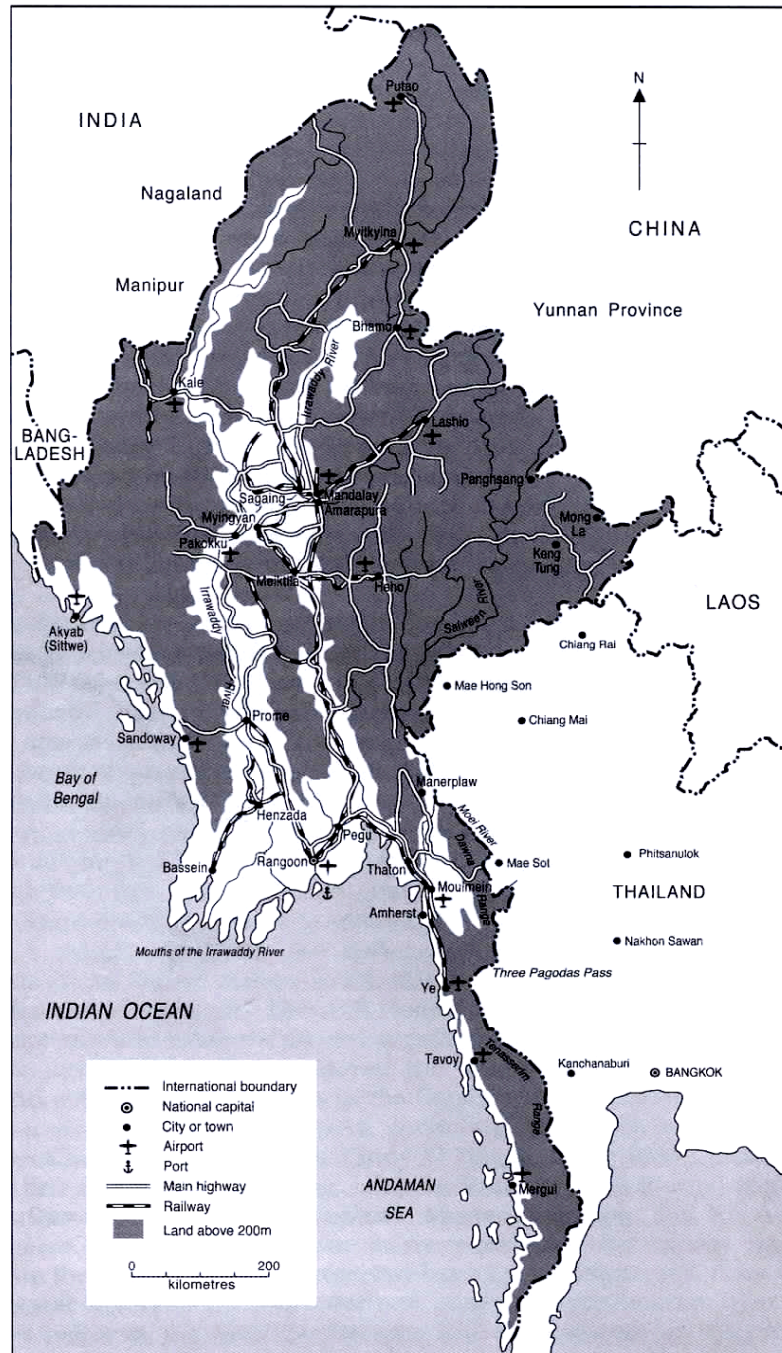


Figure 2. Burma and towns on the Thai-Burmese border

Table 1. Timeline of Historical Events

1824-1885	The British annex the territory that is now Burma in three campaigns: 1824, 1852 and 1885
1945	Burman nationalists turn against the Japanese
1947	Independence hero General Aung San assassinated by a political rival
1948	Burma gains independence from Britain; Karen rebellion begins
1958	Prime Minister U Nu asks General Ne Win to take over with a military-led Caretaker Government; military forms a new government
1960	General elections held; U Nu wins a majority and forms a new government
1962	The Burma Army led by General Ne Win overthrows U Nu's government and takes power in a coup; the 1947 constitution is suspended, and Parliament dissolved; the "Burmese Way to Socialism" becomes the ideological basis of the new regime
1964	All political parties except the government's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) are banned
1970s	Periodic student protests against the regime result in university closures; continuing rebellion by ethnic minority groups; alliance of ethnic groups form the National Democratic Front (NDF) on the Thai border (1976)
1980s	Offensives intensify against the Karen along the Thai-Burma border
1984	First Karen refugee camps established in Thailand
1987	Government demonetizes 25, 35 and 75 kyat banknotes without compensation, leaving 75% of the country's money worthless; students riot in Rangoon
1988	Student unrest erupts in Rangoon, escalating into massive street demonstrations against the regime; thousands are killed when the army opens fire on unarmed demonstrators; students flee to border areas and form the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF); Burman and ethnic opposition groups form the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB)

- 1989 Aung San Suu Kyi placed under house arrest and scores of NLD members arrested
- 1990 Elections are held; the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) wins in a landslide but the regime announces that a lengthy process will be required before the NLD can take power; National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) formed in exile
- 1991 NLD activists and elected Members of Parliament (MPs) form the National League for Democracy (Liberated Area) (NLD-LA) at the ethnic alliance headquarters at Manerplaw; ABSDF splits into two factions; Aung San Suu Kyi awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; students celebrate her award with demonstrations in Rangoon; universities closed “indefinitely”
- 1992 Manerplaw Agreement between the NDF, DAB, NCGUB and NLD-LA on a common platform for a “federal union of Burma”; Burmese regime intensifies its offensive to capture Manerplaw
- 1993 National Convention convened to draft a new constitution
- 1994 Burma joins the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an observer; breakaway group of Karen form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)
- 1995 Manerplaw falls to the Burmese troops; Aung San Suu Kyi released from house arrest; NLD withdraws from the National Convention citing lack of freedom of expression
- 1996 Student protests break out in Rangoon, but are quickly dispersed
- 1997 Burma becomes a full member of ASEAN; ethnic nationality groups hold a much-publicized Ethnic Nationalities Seminar, pledging to join hands with pro-democracy forces and Aung San Suu Kyi; the regime responds with intensified offensives against the Thailand border-based ethnic nationality groups; DKBA begins cross-border attacks on refugee camps
- 1998 Student protests break out but are quickly suppressed; tenth anniversary of the 1988 uprisings passes quietly
- 1999 The 9/9/99 date for the much-publicized “four nines” campaign passes quietly without anticipated massive uprisings

Table 2. List of Acronyms

AAPP	Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)
ABFSU	All Burma Federation of Students Unions
ABSDF	All Burma Students Democratic Front
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
BWU	Burmese Women's Union
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DAB	Democratic Alliance of Burma
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
DPNS	Democratic Party for a New Society
FTUB	Federation Trade Unions, Burma
HURFOM	Human Rights Foundation of Monland
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
KSNG	Karen Student Network Group
KWO	Karen Women's Organization
NCGUB	National Coalition Government Union of Burma
NDF	National Democratic Front
NLD	National League for Democracy
NLD-LA	National League for Democracy, Liberated Area
PPLO	Pao People's Liberation Organization
SHAN	Shan Herald Agency for News
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SWAN	Shan Women's Action Network
WLB	Women's League for Burma

Chapter 1

Burma: Violence in the Golden Land

Burma¹ is a land of contradictions. Often dubbed “The Golden Land,” the country is scarred with landscapes of scorched earth. Although most of the people of Burma practice the nonviolent tenets of Buddhism, the country is riddled with violence. During popular uprisings in 1988, the Burmese army reacted by firing on unarmed demonstrators, killing thousands.² The military regime has since gained worldwide infamy for brutal human rights abuses. Violent conflict has shaped the country’s history, most recently in the decades-long war between ethnic minorities and the central government. Burma, once known as the “rice bowl of Asia,” was one of the region’s richest nations.³ It is now one of the world’s poorest. The International Monetary Fund has estimated that 30-40 percent of the Burmese people now live below the poverty line (as cited in Steinberg, 2001, p. 203). And despite the fact that the people signaled their desire for democratic change during elections in 1990 by sending the opposition party to a landslide victory, they are still governed by a military regime that has ignored these results and systematically destroyed civil society in the country (Steinberg, 2001).

¹ The name “Burma” has taken on political connotations since the military government changed the country’s name in 1989 to the Union of Myanmar. While the government claimed the new name is ethnically neutral and would provide a greater sense of national unity, the opposition movement opposed the name change, since it was made without consulting the people through a referendum. “Burma” has been the term preferred by the opposition. While the UN has accepted the name change, the U.S. has not, and the terms have become an indicator of one’s political position in the struggle for control over the country. Since this dissertation focuses on the opposition movement, the term “Burma” will be used here.

² The number of people killed in 1988 is unknown, but according to reports published in the London *Times* and *The Guardian*, between 2,000 and 3,000 people were killed by riot police from the 8th to the 13th of August, 1988 (cited in Kraeger, 1991, p. 332). Estimates of the total killed during three months of unrest range as high as 10,000 people, including thousands of monks (Smith, 1999).

³ Prior to World War II, Burma was an exporter of both food and fuel.

This study focuses on the Burmese opposition movement, which is struggling to counteract one of the most troubling contradictions of contemporary Burma – that while the country’s peoples long for peace, they confront instead an environment of factionalism and violence. Ethnic minority groups have been fighting the central government since the country’s independence from the British in 1948. At the time of massive 1988 democracy uprisings in Burma, nearly twenty insurgent forces were active over about one-third of the country, controlling vast rural areas (Smith, 1995). These ethnic insurgencies and the government’s counterinsurgency operations have led to massive numbers of casualties⁴ and to the pattern of violence that perpetuates the longstanding distrust among the country’s different peoples, especially between the Burmans and the non-Burman groups.⁵ Factionalism is also widespread *within* the Burmese opposition groups. By the 1980s, all of the major ethnic groups had some element of their population in revolt (Steinberg, 2001), and anti-government student groups and political parties have shown a tendency to expel members expressing minority viewpoints or “to fragment around leaders of uncompromising positions” (Callahan, 1998, p. 64).

The Thailand-Burma border areas have been headquarters to the opposition movement for decades, with alliances between ethnic minority nationalist groups forming and changing through the years. The resistance gained new impetus in 1988 when the border-based ethno-nationalist movements were joined by thousands of Burman student

⁴ Since independence, “an average of ten thousand deaths a year due to insurrection may well be an accurate figure,” according to Burma scholar Martin Smith (1995, p. 225).

⁵ The term “Burman” is used to refer to the ethnic majority of the country, while “Burmese” is used as an adjective to refer to the language and the various peoples of the country. Thus, an ethnic Shan, for example, is both Shan and one of the Burmese peoples.

activists who fled the country in the crackdown after the uprisings. A number of Burman opposition politicians arrived at the border after the 1990 elections as well, when a crackdown on the members of the winning party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), made it clear that the military regime planned to ignore the election results.

Between the time I first arrived at the border in 1989 and when I left in early 1992, the initial energy and optimism of the Burman students had begun to wane. Many of them had believed at first that they could topple the regime within a few years. During brief return visits I made to the border in 1992 and 1995, it became clear to me that people's frustrations were mounting. That there were long-held prejudices between the Burmans and non-Burman groups had become clear to me during my first stay along the border, but they seemed to have become increasingly manifest in explicit statements of suspicion between people of different groups. I had become aware of and disillusioned by these prejudices during my time teaching in the refugee camp and Pwe Baw Lu village, and they only seemed to be getting worse.

Adding to these tensions was the fact that the dramatic events of 1988 put long-forgotten Burma on the map for much of the world, and the struggle of the "democracy students" and their charismatic leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, became a *cause celebre* in the post Cold War ascendancy of the discourses of democracy and civil society. During the ongoing struggle to frame the post Cold War ideological debate, Burma and its opposition movement offer an interesting site for the study of the impact of global discourses on an emergent democratic movement attempting to unify a war-weary, multicultural opposition.

The arrival of the Internet also launched Burma onto the international political stage with a high-profile human rights campaign led in the United States by the Free Burma Coalition. This campaign was often cited as an example of a new cyber-democracy, initiated and carried out largely from outside the Thailand-Burma border area. On the border, however, the introduction of new technologies came a bit later. The fact that little has been written of their impact provided the impetus for this study.

Statement of the Problematic

I began this project with a desire to explore whether or not the introduction of new information technologies (NITs) was promoting a more inclusive public dialogue within the Burmese opposition movement that would help to ease tensions between different groups. The study set out, therefore, to explore the following questions:

- What communications technologies are being used, and by whom, among the Burmese opposition groups based in Thailand?
- How are NITs, specifically computers and the Internet, helping to reduce, maintain, or intensify ethnic conflict?
- How are global media and the discourses they promote being used by the opposition and with what effects?
- What implications do these issues have for political mobilization?

As the research progressed, I found I needed to learn about the differences in attitudes toward and access to NITs within the movement. This in turn led to a focus on

discourse and its uses, specifically on how conceptualizations of gender and ethnicity framed the ways people thought and spoke about their uses of media and communication technologies. In addition, although global attention to human rights and democracy has provided an important discursive tool for Burmese opposition activists, I examine how the discourses of human rights and democracy have been used with both liberating and oppressive consequences. This study is a multi-sited ethnography, conceived within the epistemological framework of standpoint theory, providing an empirically grounded exploration of the opposition movement in both its local and global contexts. It is to the global context that we now turn.

Globalization and borderlands

Globalization has led to an increasingly interconnected world, but also to the proliferation of localized conflicts. The rise of transnational corporations, the expansion of market economies, the growing strength of global military powers, the ability of new technologies to eliminate spatial barriers, and the development of an international legal system are all said to be undermining the sovereignty of the state (Featherstone, Lash & Robertson, 1995; Hall, 1991; Waters, 1996). The uncertainties caused by these global processes of deterritorialization have in turn led to the rise of fundamentalisms around the world (Appadurai, 1990), which Stuart Hall (1991) has argued are narrower, more defensive definitions of national identity, driven by an unusually aggressive form of racism. The end of the Cold War, which seemed to promise a respite from global conflict, has instead ushered in a complex variety of localized wars (Reed & Tehranian,

1999). New patterns of regional conflict and escalations in armed conflicts within states now seem to be taking the place of more familiar forms of warfare between states (Jacobson et al., 2000).

This increase in localized warfare in conjunction with changes in the organization of the world economy have in turn affected global political geography, leading to an increased interest in border areas around the world. The increasing globalization of travel and communication technologies, large-scale migrations across borders, and the internationalization of trade markets have all contributed to a decline in what used to be the protective function of international borders (Herzog, 1990). The distinction between the “border” as a boundary between two contiguous states, and a “borderland” or “frontier” as a zone of contact and interaction between these states has become more pronounced. While boundaries are the legacies of history, in particular of colonialism, the borderland “is a lived and negotiated political phenomenon, flowing across the boundary in different forms” (Lang, 2002, p. 127).

To understand conflict in international border areas of the developing world, we must recognize the failure of states to provide for the equitable participation, representation and distribution of resources for all members of their populations (Rumley, 1991). In mainland Southeast Asia, the politics of nation-building have often marginalized and undermined the interests of border area populations, leading to the existence of armed separatist movements (McVey, 1984). The analysis of border situations can thus provide insights into intra-state conflicts, especially in the case of

weak states such as Burma, which cannot control their border areas (Grundy-Warr, 1993).

Yet to date the study of borderlands has not seriously addressed the role of communication and media in the deterritorialization of nation, politics, culture or human agency. The Thailand-Burma borderland, for example, straddles the boundary between two states with very different approaches to communications and media. Authoritarian Burma tightly restricts the flow of information, while Thailand is considered one of the freest communication and media environments in the region. This borderland, then, home to the Burmese opposition movement, is the site of struggle between the opposition movement's efforts to democratize Burmese politics and the current regime's determination to maintain its grip on power. Before discussing the current situation, however, it is valuable to understand how the development of the modern state affected historical conceptualizations of identity and power in Burma, leading to an outbreak of conflict widely understood as "ethnic" in origin.

Power, the state and "ethnic conflict" in Burma

For more than 800 years, the people living in what is now Burma were ruled by absolute monarchs, from the establishment of the first monarchy in Pagan by King Anawrahta (AD 1044-1077) until the 19th century, when the British annexed the territory in a series of military campaigns. A sparse population and the resultant shortage of manpower meant that the pre-colonial political structure emphasized control over people as a resource rather than land. Interpersonal relationships were built on a series of

patron-client ties both with individuals and within institutions (Aung-Thwin, 1994). Power was organized hierarchically, from a “high centre” held by the king, whose legitimacy derived from divinity, moving outward to indistinct borders determined by the degree of protection offered by the monarchy (Anderson, 1991). There were as yet no political boundaries defining states in the form that we find them today. Allegiance was personal rather than to any ideology or institution, so that in the monarchy, loyalty was centered on the king of the moment rather than on the institution of kingship (Steinberg, 2001). Personalized loyalty meant that patron-client relationships were “highly developed” and in turn led to factionalism, since to be loyal precluded the possibility of opposition, and opposition meant ouster (Steinberg, 2001, p. 38).

During this time, different ethnic groups intermingled frequently, and at any given point in time there were large groups of the population undergoing acculturation (Renard, 1988; Smith, 1999). In the Burmese kingdom, rarely did political structures consist of a ruling center and a set of minority groups along imagined borders; the pattern was far more variegated (Renard, 1988). Identity was determined primarily by whether or not one was Buddhist, and secondarily, whether or not one was in alliance with the ruling dynasty. Culture was thus subordinate to religion and one’s tributary status with the monarchy (Gravers, 1993). Losing factions in conflicts over the throne fled to states populated by people of other ethnic backgrounds. People moved around a great deal, as the shortage of manpower led to wars fought to obtain prisoners, and people moved away from areas controlled by unpopular rulers.

The colonial period changed the way the peoples of Burma conceptualized the state, its territory and its power structure. By destroying the monarchy, the British changed the very order of things. The introduction of the census and the map during the colonial period in Southeast Asia created new ways of understanding space and power (Anderson, 1991, Thongchai, 1994). Power became defined increasingly in terms of control over territory as well as people, and the census created new “identity categories” which became increasingly more racial and less religious in nature (Anderson, 1991, p. 164). The introduction of the map meant that the conception of sovereignty as emanating from a sacred capital outward to an unidentifiable boundary began to shift as people began to perceive sovereignty as more equally distributed within a bounded territorial space (Thongchai, 1994). The concept of the nation-state and national boundaries was thus introduced into Burma.

The state and nationalism

The modern conception of the state is of a public entity separate from those under its jurisdiction, a political apparatus involving land or territory. It is this complex political apparatus that distinguishes the state from the “nation,” conceived of as an “imagined community” looming “out of an immemorial past” and continuing “into a limitless future” (Anderson, 1991, p. 11). Because the nation(s) and the state are often not contiguous, the state’s existence depends on the generation of a national myth in which a dominant culture is produced and reinforced through the symbols created in written history, the mass media, the arts and popular culture (Satha-Anand, 1988). This

formation of a sense of collective “self” simultaneously builds and is built upon identifying those “others” who do not fit the collective. This can result in tensions between different communities, since it “curtails the potentialities of those inside to reach out and relate to those outside as equal human beings (Satha-Anand, 1988, p. 39). As this occurs, relationships between this state-sponsored culture and other cultural forms become inequitable. It is this process out of which nationalisms are borne.

Nationalism is generally viewed as a negative phenomenon, but it is not a unitary or fixed idea. Although nationalisms have proven “chameleon-like” and capable of adaptation and reformulation, sociologist Anthony Smith (1994) has nevertheless identified some recurrent themes in the goals of nationalist movements (p. 198). These include the development of a national identity, the need for unity, (which is directly related to) intolerance for internal division, and the desire to appear as a big, happy family. Nationalism is therefore productive of the group identity and cohesion that are at times a people’s only defense against oppression. Paradoxically, then, nationalism is at the root of conflicts attributed to ethnicity (and a main cause of the present plight of the world’s refugees), while at the same time providing a means of self-assertion for oppressed or vulnerable groups.

During the colonial period in Burma, increasing attention was paid to racial and ethnic differences, so that religion grew to be less important than ethnicity as a source of collective identity. The British divided Burma into geographic areas distinguishing mountainous “Frontier Areas” and their tribal peoples from the peoples of the valley, more closely controlled by the colonizers as “Ministerial Burma” (Smith, 1999). Only

during the colonial period did it become normal to speak of various groups in ethnic terms “as if they were unified national groups with ancient historical antecedents” (Taylor, 1982, p. 8). Those in the highlands did not practice the religion of the lowlanders, leading the lowlanders to see the hill peoples as wild and ignorant (Renard, 1988). Religious and cultural differences divided people socially, but these divisions were not generally seen as political (Taylor, 1982).

The British encouraged this cultural segregation “as the criterion of internal political administration” which became a fundamental strategy of divide-and-rule and a means of legitimating British control of Burma (Gravers, 1993, p. 29). As a result, Taylor (1982) has argued that while ideas of separate ethnic identity may have already been present, there had previously been no reason or mechanism for their demarcation. With the introduction of the state structure in Burma, “regional and local hill leaders were now encouraged to begin to articulate their interests in ethnic and nationalist terms understood by the modern world” (Taylor, 1982, p.9). Nationalist discourse thus became the means through which the newly-defined ethnic minorities made their concerns known, and they were encouraged to push for separate rights, opportunities and powers phrased as “national” demands (Taylor, 1982, p. 10).

Although the British abolished the monarchy when they colonized Burma, the nationalisms that developed during the British period, as well as the military regimes over the last several decades, have all drawn on Burma’s monarchical past. This pattern persists in the current opposition as well as the military. Gravers (1993) has argued that through attachment to the traditional hierarchical model and its patterns of power

relations, the Burmans have attempted to keep their past in the present and repair the break in their imagined community caused by the British colonizers. In fact, he has argued that the dominant culture's attempt to maintain the traditional hierarchical order in response to threats against it has made this hierarchical order "the quintessence of both Burman (ethnic) cultural identity and a part of modern Burman nationalism" (Gravers, 1993, p. 23)

Structural violence and "ethnic conflict"

Philippe Bourgois (2001) makes a useful distinction between four types of violence: political, structural, symbolic and everyday violence. Political violence refers to direct violence administered in the name of a political ideology, movement or state. Structural violence refers to the organization of society in such a way that it imposes conditions of physical and emotional distress on people. The inclusion of the word "violence" here is not merely a means of sensationalizing the issue. It distinguishes structural violence from the term "structural inequities" in that it underscores the extent to which such forms of social organization lead not just to distress, but also to death on a massive, although much less visible, scale. Structural violence can include such problems as high morbidity and mortality rates, poverty and other kinds of abusive conditions. Bourgois (2001) identified symbolic violence as that process that operates through the misrecognition by the dominated group of the power structures that make the social order seem natural and self-evident. Everyday violence as Bourgois (2001) defined it refers to "the routine practices and expressions of interpersonal aggression that

serve to normalize violence at the micro-level such as domestic, delinquent and sexual conflict, and even substance abuse” (pp.8-9). These four types of violence are inter-related.

If the state’s dominant culture emerges alongside or as a result of structural violence such as poverty or other types of social injustice, those among the minority cultures will resist, often through overt violence (Satha-Anand, 1988). A state’s minority groups are especially vulnerable in the formulation of the national myth, and can become defensive and more cohesive as a result. Simmel (1955) argued that this kind of group cohesion may actually require some form of external threat. It may even be “a piece of political wisdom” to ensure that the group has enemies “in order for the unity of the members to remain effective and for the group to remain conscious of this unity as its vital interest” (Simmel, 1955, p. 98). Marx (1843) also argued that the state requires differences and the divisions they engender in order to legitimize its existence and control. Differences are for this reason emphasized as threatening by the state, which is in turn legitimized through its ability to control these threats.

The nationalism that developed in Burma’s heartland caused unrest along the periphery. During Prime Minister U Nu’s time,⁶ personal power was linked to large-scale organizations that provided a bridge between the traditional patron-client relations and a new form of political organization that created opportunities for social mobility and the development of a more egalitarian society (Steinberg, 1997). U Nu also made

⁶ U Nu became Prime Minister of Burma after the assassination of independence hero, Aung San, in 1947, and remained so for most of the years between independence in 1948 and General Ne Win’s takeover in a military coup in 1962. There was a brief “Caretaker Government” from 1958-1960 headed by Ne Win, who was “invited” by U Nu to run the country for an interim period to avoid a brewing civil war (Steinberg, 2001).

Buddhism the state religion and introduced it into the school curriculum. But the development of mass organizations and a state religion, along with assimilation policies that involved sending Buddhist missionaries into minority areas, threatened minority groups. It was the Karen leader Dr. San C. Po who first initiated the call for ethnic “self-determination” with his writings in the 1920s, and this idea has since become the main demand of all the country’s nationalist movements (Smith, 1995).

These developments have all contributed to a process Whitten (1976) has called “ethnogenesis,” whereby ethnic identities become more distinct in reaction to a policy of homogenization by the state. If the state perceives a threat to its existence from coalitions or communities organized along ethnic or religious lines, it often responds by suppressing them with a state-sponsored ethnocide. This in turn may trigger a further development of “ethnogenesis,” whereby

people whose cultures are acknowledged by an application of ethnocidal policies often intensify and adapt ways of doing things which underscore their own implicit, transformable symbolic relationships. The symbolic template . . . provides a set of ethnic markers . . . in the face of inevitable state expansion” (Whitten, 1976, p. 28).

Bateson (1935) showed how this solidification of group identity can result in a cyclical process of “complementary schismogenesis” involving state oppression followed by intensification of group identity, followed by further state suppression (p. 194).

In Burma, the government and opposition have responded differently to conflict perceived as ethnic in origin, with the military conceiving of itself as at the top in a traditional hierarchical order. Some scholars argue that since independence, the military has been the only institution capable of establishing authority throughout the entire

country (Callahan, 1998), a claim the regime uses as its own argument for legitimacy. During the monarchical period, the order of Buddhist monks, or *sangha*, was the only body in the country financially independent of the crown, so it was able to counterbalance somewhat the wealth and power of the state (Aung Thwin, 1994, p. 35). The sangha, however, has been cowed into submission through various restrictions and arrests of monks. During this process, the regime's leaders made several references to the Buddhist code of conduct for kings,⁷ and to a royal purification of the sangha in the 13th century. Thus, while the military has "come to dominate all aspects of national and political life" in Burma (Smith, 1995, p. 227), it has justified its actions by representing itself as the divine presence at the peak in a monarchical hierarchy of power relations. This framing of the regime as a benign patriarch becomes clear in a perusal of the daily commentaries meted out by state-run media, as detailed in Chapter Three.

The post-1988 democratic opposition movement has been challenging this concept of power as centralized by building alternative structures of authority in exile that they hope will play a key role in the national life of a future Burma. Josef Silverstein (1997) has called this a "new politics" of Burma that began with the formation of the first alliance between Burmans and non-Burmans in the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), and has continued with such initiatives as the negotiations that have led to the drafting of a new constitution by opposition groups in exile. According to Silverstein (1997), this new politics is based on equality and promotes full participation, democratic procedure, and sensitivity to special interests.

⁷ This code included ten royal precepts, four kingly virtues and seven kingly rules the monarch was expected to follow in order to maintain the traditions and customs of the land (Maung Maung Gyi, 1983).

While this optimistic view does provide hope for the future, there still exists great distrust of “others” and a degree of factionalism within the opposition movement that requires acknowledgement and attention. Bertil Lintner (1994) put it succinctly when he noted the “inescapable fact” that

there is no term in any language that covers both the Burmans and the minority peoples, as no such entity ever existed before the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century. Burma, as we know it with its present boundaries, is a colonial creation rife with internal contradictions and divisions. (p. 41)

Despite the exacerbation of ethnic divisions during the colonial period in Burma, there has been some controversy regarding the degree to which specific ethnic groups have “developed” as a result of the history and circumstances of the colonial and postcolonial political milieu. Robert Taylor (1982), for example, has argued that “ethnic conflict” in Burma has been conceived in such a way as to pose a false and irresolvable problem in the practice and study of Burmese politics. This, he argued, has occurred because Western political thought has conceptualized ethnicity with implicit assumptions of “primordial antagonisms between different groups . . . rather than as a relational attribute” reflecting sub-cultural characteristics (p.7). The politics of Burma, he argued, “have been shaped to some degree by the idea of ethnic conflict as conceived in Western ascriptive terms” (Taylor, 1982, p. 10). In an article reviewing studies of culture in Southeast Asia, Mary Steedly (1999) warned that researchers risk regarding the violence of the region as primordial, “making it appear as inherent in and distinctive to Southeast Asia as a world region” (p. 445). To get around this problem, Steedly (1999) suggested that researchers “localize” violence by exploring the details of each incident in context to

see “how it is produced in certain circumstances; how it is deployed, represented, limited, imagined, ignored, or instigated; how it is identified, disciplined, interrogated, and, of course, punished” (p. 446).

Although the causes of conflicts labeled “ethnic” in origin may be too complex to pinpoint with certainty, the fact that conflict occurs between groups is recognized much more often than the fact that there is also a great deal of conflict *within* groups. Although conflict between groups may provide individual groups a cohesion they would otherwise lack, it also brings into sharp relief personal conflicts and other aspects of intra-group relations. Unanimity among members is the ideal each group strives for, which “subjects them to such a uniform impulse that they either must completely get along with, or completely repel, one another”(Simmel, 1955, pp. 1-2). Mary Callahan (1998) has suggested that the intolerance for dissent that characterizes Burmese political culture stems from the country’s history of “colonial, parliamentary, socialist, and post-1988 military rule, [when] conflicts over views, visions, and policies have always been winner-take-all battles” (p. 64). The only answer to conflict, then, has been to eliminate it, and to do this required enforcing unity (Callahan, 1998). She has argued further that

common to both the SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Council] and the [opposition National League for Democracy] is an overarching emphasis on unity and solidarity that is simply inimical to the development of institutional mechanisms that can accommodate the needs and demands of the broad range of social forces that exist throughout the country. (Callahan, 1998, p. 65)

Thus, as Gravers (1993) argued, both the Burmese military and the opposition demonstrate characteristics of the traditional hierarchical model and its patterns of power relations. This has left its mark on nationalist movements.

The dominant problem in Burma's nationalism is that all have had to subject themselves to the hierarchisations of the social order whereby classification takes place according to race, culture/civilization, religion and ethnicity/nationality (Gravers, 1993, p. 76).

What is missing from Graver's (1993) analysis and from most works that analyze the Burmese situation is the recognition that gender is also a means of placing people within a social hierarchy, and that a gendered hierarchy is required in order to make possible other hierarchies. This is particularly crucial since a gendered hierarchy is a necessary foundation upon which militarized systems are built. Because militarization is a central focus of this dissertation, I turn now to a discussion of this process.

Militarization

We live in an increasingly militarized world. Considering only military casualties, the eighteenth century had a casualty rate of 50 per 1 million population per year, compared with 60 per million during the nineteenth century and 460 per million in the twentieth century (Tehrani, 1999, p. 156). In the twentieth century more than any other, the sophistication and efficiency of information and military technologies enabled governments to subdue their enemies, resulting in the deaths of millions in the process. In addition, new forms of warfare targeted civilians more than ever before with grenades, mortars, landmines and small arms (Jacobson et al., 2000). If we add to the victims of

direct warfare those trapped in forms of “structural violence” that cause death to millions annually from famine, malnutrition, epidemics or homelessness, the twentieth century must be seen, in Majid Tehranian’s (1999) words, as “a century of death by design” (p. 156).

While the end of the Cold War offered hope for reducing the degree of global militarism, subsequent outbreaks of violence have dampened that optimism. The process of militarization has been attributed to the current global structures of government, as Chinkin (1993) states succinctly:

Peace, in the sense of not just an absence of conflict but as a substantial modification in the inherent tendencies of the international system to conflict, is not fostered by the prevailing patriarchal ideology of most nation States, the prevailing emphasis on statism within the international legal order, nor the militarism that sustains them (p. 409).

Militarism and militarization are defined in various ways, but all recognize some common characteristics of the phenomenon. Militarism is generally understood as a state or condition, whereas militarization is a process. The World Council of Churches has defined militarization as “the process whereby military values, ideology, and patterns of behavior achieve a dominating influence on the political, social, economic and external affairs of the State; and as a consequence, the structural, ideological, and behavioral patterns of both the society and the government are ‘militarized’” (Churches Commission, 1982, p.5). Militarism has been defined as a belief system providing legitimacy to “the assumption that military values and policies are conducive to creating an orderly and secure society” (Chinkin, 1993, p. 408). And Reed and Tehranian (1999) identified two primary forms of militarism discussed by scholars: the institutionalized

relations between and within states in which “military behavior comes to be preferred” on the one hand, and on the other, individual behavioral preferences for violent responses rather than nonviolent means of influence (p. 27). The study of militarism has focused primarily in three general areas: the armed forces and their inculcation of military values; the effects of militarization on gender relations; and the role of militarization in shaping national cultures (Simons, 1999).

One thing these studies and various definitions of militarism have in common is the recognition that militaries are institutions dominated by men and supported by conceptions of an aggressive masculinity. Yet militarism is not limited to acts of male competition or the promotion of specific concepts of masculinity. The recognition that women, sometimes as members of the military, are often complicit in violent acts (Jacobs, 2000), or that some acts are violent in non-physical ways calls for a broader concept of militarism, such as its definition as a “habit of violence” that cannot be resolved without “the deinstitutionalization of coercion” (Yawnghwe, 1995).

Militarism as I use the term in this study can most usefully be regarded as a *culture* that legitimizes violence as a way of resolving conflicts and ordering relations, so that a militaristic culture can exist whether or not war is actually being waged (Kelly, 2000). Militarization, then, is the process through which this culture develops and comes to seem natural. Using this definition, a militaristic culture can exist within groups of women, or among people pursuing nonviolent yet coercive means of problem-solving. Militarism is self-perpetuating, creating division by dichotomizing “self” and “other” in a process that functions by dehumanizing the enemy (Simons, 1999, p. 89). As Tehranian

(1999) has noted, “the organization of warfare . . . has been totalized by involving every social institution in society” (p. 170). Supported at local, national, and international levels through a complex series of hierarchies, militarism provokes uprisings among the disadvantaged that challenge governing structures and in turn act as justification for enforcement of military “security.”

It is impossible to understand how international politics is played out today without examining gender and militarism, since “the global forces of militarism, the accumulation of capital, and the exploitation of natural resources depend on a gendered order” (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1996, p. 7). Chinkin (1993) argues that it is not just that the patriarchy of the nation State fosters militarism, but that the two – patriarchy and militarism – “are interdependent and mutually supportive” (Chinkin, 1993, p. 408). She argues that the same forces that work to maintain marginalization and oppression of women at home also work internationally in actions by stronger states against weaker states. “The methods used are also identical – rape, battering, aggression, economic exploitation, rendering invisible and humiliation” (Chinkin, 1993, p. 408). Militarism, in other words, takes many forms, not all of which are overtly violent.

Militarization in Burma

Burma’s modern history is a tale of increasing militarization. Mary Callahan’s (1996) doctoral dissertation, *The Origins of Military Rule in Burma*, traces the emergence of coercion as a primary method of social control to the state-building project of the British. Burma was simply appended to India within the British empire, and in a project

“initiated by and organized around coercion,” a colonial state, complete with trained civil servants and soldiers, was transplanted into Burma (p. 41). The armed forces were composed primarily of non-Burmans, mostly professional soldiers or mercenaries from India, but also some recruits from Burma’s ethnic minorities. This led to tensions between these groups and the majority Burmans. By the mid-1930s, most major nationalist or religious organizations in Burma had (surprisingly) been permitted by the British to establish their own small army, or “tat.” Such tats soon became a prominent feature of public life, reinforcing “the primacy of violence in non-state and anti-state organizations” (Callahan, 1996, p. 515). In addition, state violence took explicit form in Burma’s first national army, established during the Japanese occupation. Then in the 1950s, the leaders of the “tatmadaw,” or armed forces, began a program of institution-building in order to create a modern, bureaucratized army structure out of what was really “an array of networks,” in a process that extended army influence over more of the state’s territory than any other national institution (Callahan, 1996, p. 19). After the military took power in a coup in 1962, it subsequently “eliminated any legal centers of pluralism” and replaced them with “centralized military control that brooked no local power” (Steinberg, 2001, p. 49).

In the aftermath of the 1988 uprisings and the September 18, 1988 “coup” that brought the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to power,⁸ the Burmese tatmadaw expanded rapidly. At the time of the 1988 demonstrations, the army numbered approximately 186,000 (Callahan, 1998).⁹ By mid-1995, the regime was reporting a

⁸ This “coup” essentially provided for the rearrangement of the military power structure.

⁹ As is common when discussing Burma, exact statistics are not available.

force of 300,000 men, with a goal of 500,000 by the year 2000. Callahan (1998) has estimated that 35 to 40 percent of the central government's expenditures have gone into expanding the country's military power every year since 1988, including a concomitant influx of new arms and equipment (p. 89). The Burmese army, navy and air force have all grown dramatically, and recruitment is continuing (Callahan, 1998). Nevertheless, she also points out that the rapid expansion has caused problems such as shortages of manpower in some areas, inadequate training, poor leadership, "outmoded doctrine" and poor morale (p. 92).

Martin Smith wrote in 1999 about an institutional self-view that had developed within the upper hierarchies of the *tatmadaw* during the previous decade. He argued that a "state-of-siege mentality" had become deeply ingrained throughout the army's history, with many of the army's senior officers rising through the ranks, fighting internal wars and seeing very little of the world outside (p. 423). Military officials believed that the *tatmadaw* was the only organization capable of keeping the country together (Smith 1999). Steinberg (2001) maintains that the Burmese regime has come to focus on the military itself as an ideology. Detailed daily communications regarding the plans of the military for the people, the military's motivations and its good will were all "directed toward adulation of the military in its leadership role" (p. 45).

For the outsider to Burma, the most obvious effects of Burma's militarism can be found in the country's border areas, with its refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs), migrant workers and political dissidents and their stories of abuse. Here the impact of militarism is felt most violently at the level of everyday experience. Because it is those

with the least formal power in society who are most adversely affected by militarized forms of violence, whether physical, mental or structural, many peace activists argue that these most marginalized people must form the core constituency around which peace is built (Reardon, 1996). For researchers, those in the most vulnerable positions in a society can best clarify and give voice to the significant problems and contradictions posed by the current situation. Thus, it is from their lives and experiences that we must begin in order to identify the most significant obstacles to demilitarization and the achievement of a more equitable social order. As in most countries, women and ethnic minority groups are the most vulnerable, and it is therefore worthwhile to review how these groups are both victimized by and help to reinforce the process of militarization.

Gender and ethnicity

The invisibility of women in military affairs and policy-making makes clear the “taken-for-granted international assumptions about the maleness of war” (Lorentzen and Turpin, 1996, p. 6) and the “maleness” of global governing bodies. Yet it is women who suffer the most from the violence of military actions. An oft-cited statistic from a 1983 study undertaken for the International Symposium on Children and War is that in World War II, civilians represented 50 percent of the casualties, but that civilian casualties in subsequent wars has exceeded 80 percent and in some conflicts has been as high as 90 percent, the majority of whom are women and children (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1996; Vickers, 1993). More than 80 percent of the world’s refugees are women and girls who often experience violence during their flight and in exile (Lorentzen & Turpin, 1996).

The widely perceived role of women as guardians of a people's cultural identity helps to explain women's vulnerability during conflicts perceived as ethnic in origin (Jacobson et al., 2000).

Overt physical violence is the primary focus in reporting on and theorizing wars, but this often masks the structural violence within militarized systems. The victims of this structural violence are also primarily women, but also ethnic minorities in a system where "the means for the satisfaction of basic needs, for the expression of these and for the attainment of certain rights is controlled by the group in power" (Reardon, 1996, p. 214). Scholars and activists have argued that the concept of security must itself be demilitarized, and that women's voices and a gender perspective must be integral to foreign and security policy decisions (Kirk et al., 2000).

Despite the need to highlight the impact of war on women, there is now enough of a scholarly history to convincingly make the point that in any field, "gender *is not usefully equated simply with women*" (Indra, 1999, p. 4). Nevertheless, the common approach to gender is exemplified by conferences which offer the obligatory "special" sessions on gender *and* the conference's main theme, such as "gender and mental health," "gender and the environment," and so on, creating a kind of "gender ghetto" (Indra, 1999). This approach presents the main theme of the conferences as though the issues raised are essentially genderless or gender neutral, or as if gender were one of a host of attributes that might affect how the main topic plays out (Indra, 1999). In the field of development, this has been called the "add women and stir" approach (Harding, 1987). It is problematic because "it allows these other topics to continue to be presented as

mainstream, primary, and central – the big picture – framed as they are in ‘universal’ and ‘general’ categories” that imply that the “little picture” of gender involves only the degree to which women affect or are affected by the topic at hand (Indra, 1999, p. 4). Doreen Indra (1999) challenges this central framing assumption and argues instead that gender should not be equated solely with women or their activities, beliefs, goals, or needs.

In escaping the association of gender with women, scholars have realized the importance of seeing gender as a socially constructed notion of the differences between men and women, and have recognized the role of social theory in shaping and organizing what and how we see. Militarized masculinity, for example, involves characteristics such as “physical strength, emotional detachment, the capacity for violence and killing, and the appearance of invulnerability” (Kirk et al, 2000). To maintain such a conception of masculinity requires specific ideas about what is feminine – vulnerability, emotional involvement, physical delicacy – both to contrast with the masculine and as a means of justifying the “protector” aspects of stereotypically masculine characteristics. This involves defining what it means to be a man as well as a woman, and thus effects everyone (Indra, 1999).

This way of seeing gender as a fundamental organizing principle of everyday life highlights the point that gender matters greatly even in empirical situations where there are only men or only women, and where nothing is ever spoken of women or men, maleness or femaleness. (Indra, 1999, p. 6)

A relational approach to gender acknowledges that conceptions of gender vary from place to place and over time, and that while the overall situation of violence against

women may benefit men as a group even if they do not directly participate, in certain situations specific men do not benefit. Men may be harmed, for example, by violence against female family members. Such an approach also recognizes that some women, as a result of their class or racial position, may themselves wield power that results in violence against others (Jacobson et al., 2000). Restricting analysis to women or women's issues obscures how gender conceptions involve stereotypes of men and affect them as well in any given context.

This approach, then, requires that social researchers take a gender relational approach to **all** research topics. By doing so, previously taken-for-granted facts, categories, and structures suddenly appear as unnatural, gendered, social, cultural and historical **constructions**, possibly problematic and open to challenge. While this approach to gender has become axiomatic in some areas of research, the tendency among many theorists to study "women" rather than "gender" has not disappeared. Structural gender inequalities and their accompanying statuses and roles in this way come to be seen as "natural," non-problematic differences between women and men. Their effect, however, is to reify the distinctions between the public sphere of politics and community leadership, and the private sphere of the home and family (Indra, 1999).

It is crucial to understand that the phenomenon at play here affects not only women, but also adversely affects men, especially men of minority groups who find themselves limited within national and international patriarchal and militarized structures. Militarism is directly linked to racism and ethnic conflict through ways of thinking that define people as inherently unequal. This makes the idea of violence against others

palatable, whether those others are seen as less important, “evil” or in opposition to authority (Reardon, 1996: 226). Political scientist Cynthia Enloe (2000a) argues that gender affects relationships **between** men, so that “introducing masculinity into a discussion of international politics, and thereby making men visible as men, should prompt us to explore differences in the politics of masculinity between countries – *and between ethnic groups in the same country* [italics added]” (p. 13).

In Burma, concurrent with a rising tide of what have been regarded as “ethnic conflicts” since the 1990s has been an increasing recognition that these conflicts, also called “ethno-nationalisms,” are intrinsically gendered. Women’s bodies have historically been seen as spoils of war for the victorious, yet it is only recently that rape has been recognized as a weapon and a “cost” of conflict (Jacobson et al., 2000). Women have suffered not only from the rapes themselves, but also from being shunned and excluded because “they embodied the failure of militarized men to ‘protect’ their homeland” (Kelly, 2000, p. 53). Yet given the fact that males can also be oppressed by the military, gender analysis must resist “the notion of a ‘one size fits all’ model of masculine aggression and female victimhood” (Jacobson et al., 2000, p. 12). It is important to recognize that women can have a stake in patriarchal or racialized arrangements in which they have benefited from the positions of power available to them (Kandiyoti, 1998; Mukta, 2000).

The use of gender by both men and women to manipulate minority or marginalized populations is not new. Ann Stoler’s (1991) writing on carnal knowledge and imperial power shows that during the colonial period the relationship between sexual

desire for and sexual control of the “other” was “a fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power” (p. 55). Quoting Edward Said, who described Orientalism as “a male power fantasy in which the Orient is penetrated, silenced and possessed” (as cited in Stoler, 1991, p. 54). Stoler (1991) argued that by demasculinizing colonized men and hypermasculinizing European men, the colonists asserted white male supremacy. As Enloe (2000a) has shown, colonial rulers emphasized the Victorian code of feminine respectability and the corresponding standards of manliness necessary to protect these respectable ladies. Native men were held in contempt when compared with these ideals. In India, for example, colonial officials created the stereotype of the “effeminate” Bengali male, accused of lacking those manly qualities that obligate men to protect and revere women. This inability was then used as a justification for the colonial project (Enloe, 2000a). Gender thus became a crucial tool in defining power relations and constructing racial categories of difference. By characterizing Asian men as feminine while simultaneously devaluing the feminine or relegating it to limited realms of action, colonizers asserted their racial, class and gender superiority. Specific stereotyped conceptions of women were necessary to maintain this superiority, and colonial women largely accepted these stereotypes.

One rare example of an approach to gender in studies of Burma that does not focus exclusively on women is Betsy Apple’s (1998) *School for Rape*. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with defectors from the Burmese army and male and female villagers from rural Burma, this report examines sexual violence by the Burmese military. Apple (1998) described in detail a Burmese military system characterized by aggression

and destruction, abusive of both the women who are raped and the male perpetrators.

Apple's (1998) preface describing the Burmese army is worth quoting at length, as it sums up the story which unfolds throughout the book from interviews she collected.

Take over 300,000 men, many of them under the age of 17 and largely uneducated. Force some of them to enlist at gunpoint and promise all of them a salary they never receive entirely. Give them guns and bombs. Train them to shoot, to crawl through the jungle at night, to ambush. Convince them that their enemies are ethnic minorities, students, women, anyone who disagrees with the government, and that these millions of people are traitors or infidels. Starve them. Withhold their mail and don't allow them to send any letters. Forbid them from visiting their families. Force them to beat each other for punishment. Abandon some of them if they are too sick to walk. Abuse them verbally and physically every day. Allow them plenty of alcohol and drugs. (Apple, 1998, p. 9)

Apple's account examines the psychological effects of this relationship between the military leaders and the rank-and-file soldiers, and the culture of fear and silence it has engendered. Apple (1998) has shown how the Burmese military has grown in direct proportion to its own power base over the last several decades. In arguing that notions of masculinity and femininity are adapted by a militarized society to suit the needs of the dominant military culture, Apple (1998) described how these categories are constructed through difference:

In such a context, soldiers. . . are, of necessity, defined as strong and bold, and women are seen as weak and in need of protection. In the Tatmadaw [Burmese army], these ideas about masculinity and femininity are taken a step further. The Tatmadaw is pervaded by a brutal ethos that requires soldiers to accept violence and domination as quintessential characteristics of masculinity. Popular myths about the Burmese army portray this institution as noble, protective, and fierce. (p. 33)

Ethnic differences are arguably as important as gender differences in the Burmese military strategy. Apple (1998) argued that for Burmese soldiers, rape provides an outlet for anger and a gratification of the desire for revenge against the ethnic insurgents. By raping ethnic women, the Burmese army communicates with ethnic soldiers through the bodies of ethnic women. As one Burmese army defector said,

I think the soldiers bully the ethnic groups. I think they behave badly to all the people from the ethnic groups. . . . The women I know who were raped were Mon nationality. The soldiers were Burman. I do not think soldiers ever raped Burman women. It might happen, but I never heard of it. (as cited in Apple, 1998, p. 43)

Soldiers perpetuate the process of militarization through a cycle of violence and its resultant insecurity. All oppressive structures trade on such insecurity in order to justify armaments and technological development in the service of war and its requisite security needs. This is achieved partly through preventing the circulation of alternative ideas, and it is in this regard that the use of communications technologies and the development of a pluralistic public dialogue becomes so crucial for change.

Militarized communication and media

Divisive media messages and militarized technologies have developed much faster than technologies of peace-building. While 100,000 landmines around the world are removed each year, another 2 to 5 million are deployed (Tehrani, 1999). Global cultural forms have also played a role in militarization, such as the transnational movement of super-masculinized sports programming (Messner et al., 2000) and martial

arts films, creating “new cultures of masculinity and violence” that in turn spur the arms trade (Appadurai, 1990, p. 305). News programming is also implicated. As Tehranian (1999) argues,

As the mass media dichotomize, dramatize, and demonize “them” against “us,” reified images of the “Islamic terrorists,” “satanic Americans,” “cunning Japanese,” “evil Chinese,” and “uncivilized Africans” become frozen in minds of mass audiences as justifications for the next cycle of violence. (p. 158)

The control of communication is key to maintaining the fiction of a benign patriarch in authoritarian states such as Burma. Steinberg (2001) maintains that in Burma during the 1980s, the military systematically destroyed civil society by disbanding or subduing all organizations not under its own control, including the association of monks, or *sangha*, and the education system. The military also controlled the channels of social mobility. The *tatmadaw*, or armed forces, developed “a pervasive atmosphere of political fear and a rigid command system, which did not allow for bad news to filter up to the top of the hierarchy” (Steinberg, 2001, p. 23). The extent of government control over communication and media in Burma is the focus of Chapter 3, which demonstrates that it is only outside Burma that opposition activists are free to use communications technologies and to gain access to information unavailable inside. Only in a free communications environment such as this can media develop as a vital participant in the process of democratization.

Media and democracy

In assessing the impact of communications technologies on the Burmese opposition movement, we must examine what has been learned about the process of change from militarized forms of centrally controlled communications and media characteristic of authoritarian states to more decentralized communication and media structures. This process is widely conceptualized as replacing a “top-down” with a “bottom up” approach to communications and media. A “top down” or “engineering” approach (Freidrich, 1954) attempts to control the behavior of people in order to control events (Scruton, 1990). The role of communication technologies and media in such a system is not to represent society’s diversity and a diversity of opinions, but rather to act as a force in unifying society through the evocation of common language, symbols, values and interests (Hutin, 1993). Diversity is often seen as a threat to the existing social order in an authoritarian system, so the media become instruments to transmit the orders and symbols of the state, rhetoric becomes stiff and controlled, and a superficial surface picture of social unity develops (Hutin, 1993). Conflicts in society are “resolved” or suppressed, resulting in a media system that rarely addresses contentious issues (Pryliuk, 1993). To control masses of people requires instilling a pervasive sense of terror by utilizing mystery and secrecy to depict the leaders as possessing an “all-embracing omnipotence” (Arendt, 1958, p. 352).¹⁰ Messages such as these are then repeated endlessly, convincing people of the absolute power of the leaders and the consistency of the system (Arendt, 1958; Kecskemeti, 1950).

¹⁰ How this is accomplished in Burma will be discussed in Chapter 3.

A “bottom-up” approach to communications and media, on the other hand, invites diverse ideas and information from various sources, including and especially those from the grassroots level, to circulate in society (Hutin, 1993; UNESCO, 1993). The transition to a more democratic system replaces the hierarchical, monolithic media system with a polycentric, non-hierarchical form where messages often contradict one another (Pryliuk, 1993). The changing nature of media in this process is characterized by a redistribution of power within the media system, and the increasing importance of equal power relations as new media groups emerge and change the media environment, which in turn changes society (Pryliuk, 1993).

Countering the monolithic power of centralized and tightly controlled systems of communication and helping to redistribute power within the media system are those media outside the mainstream, variously called “radical media,” “citizens’ media,” “opposition media,” and the catch-all term, “alternative media.” Alternative media is the most common, and though vague, it is generally understood to refer to media that encourages participation by a broad cross-section of people of differing socio-economic levels, minority or subcultural groups and various organizations within a society. Lewis (1993) maintained that alternative media have evolved from several sources, including from new social movements such as the women’s movement, ethnic minority movements, and environmental groups, from struggles on behalf of rural populations against urban centers of power, from the push for human rights, trade union and other rights, and from the new political demands of indigenous peoples.

Alternative media are part of a much more horizontal process: not only democratization and demystification of the processes of making media (thus raising the very important issue of the production and control of knowledge), but also being at the very heart of struggles for democracy and social change. Their stakes are very clearly with the people, unlike those of the mainstream, which can often be said to be with the State, although they may occasionally (and usually opportunistically) address themselves to the people. (Butalia, 1993, p. 53)

An important category within the rubric of alternative media is what has been called “ethnic media,” “ethnic minority media,” and in some cases “indigenous media.”¹¹ Such media play a leading role in preserving minority cultures and languages, increasing the self-esteem and combating negative images of the group, networking with other minority groups for lobbying strength, and providing an outlet for creative production (Browne, 1996). These media are often the first channels through which indigenous or ethnic minority peoples have been able to enter the public sphere to present themselves in their own voices (Browne, 1996). These media often play both an assimilationist role, in which they help to assimilate the ethnic minority group into the majority, as well as a pluralist role, in that they promote the cohesion and cultural maintenance of the minority group (Riggins, 1992). Interestingly enough, although ethnic minority media require the recognition of a group identity, there is also evidence that these media also have a high regard for the dignity of the individual, and place more emphasis on displaying the voices and faces of marginalized people than majority culture media often do (Browne, 1996). Finally, the existence of injustice, inequality and other forms of discriminatory treatment

¹¹ The differences between “ethnic minority” and “indigenous” are contested, with the term “indigenous” generally reserved for those peoples who inhabited a particular region “centuries or even millennia before anyone else did,” who were at one time sovereign in their lands, and who have suffered the consequences of stereotypes longer than other minorities in the society (Browne, 1996, p. 5).

of minority groups stimulates their interest in having a media outlet through which they can present themselves to the rest of the society.

Ethnic media's focus on a specific group has both positive and potentially negative consequences. As Riggins (1992) pointed out, ethnic minority media are not always objective in their reporting, since they are concerned primarily with their responsibility to a community or movement. Pellegrini (1996) has noted that while there are benefits from the bonds created by media focused on the needs and interests of minority or special interest groups, such media also risk a process of "inbreeding," when they become the only means of communication open to a specific interest group (p. 97). She argued that such exclusively intra-group communication ignores the inter-group contact necessary for change, adaptation and membership in the larger community, and thus stunts the evolution of a democratic society.

The benefits of other alternative media are also debated. Hamilton (2000) has observed that most alternative media practitioners work within the theoretical framework of a mass culture perspective, viewing their role "more or less explicitly as one of educating and mobilizing the 'masses' in the service of the cause or movement" (p. 359). Paradoxically, then, as alternative media grow they must struggle against the tendency to become less "alternative." Others find this observation to be based on several problematic assumptions, including the notion that effective social movements are necessarily mass movements, that these mass movements require mass media to create, maintain and support them, and that the larger the scale of production and distribution, the greater the impact (Downing, 2001; Hamilton, 2000). Downing (2001) urged

attention to the concept of the “slow burn” impact of what he preferred to call “radical media”¹² in contrast to the focus on the instantaneous that characterizes much audience research. He argued that the energy put into and derived from radical media projects continues on in other projects over decades, in ways that cannot be measured yet should not be underestimated. The role of radical media, he maintained, especially if the struggle seems prolonged, “is to keep alive the vision of what might be, for a time in history when it may actually be feasible” (Downing, 2001, p. 9). Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) coined the term “citizen’s media,” maintaining that these media make use of resistance strategies that strengthen the symbolic dimension of everyday life, creating spaces for dialogue and participation, encouraging creativity, and demystifying the mass media.

An unquestionably important function of alternative media is the development of a pluralistic public dialogue. Pryliuk (1993) has identified five closely interrelated factors necessary to the development of a pluralistic mass media. These are the development of multiple sources of information, and of multiple political positions, multiple communication technologies, multiple forms of media ownership (such as private and public), and multiple mass media addresses (i.e. where the media are

¹² John Downing (2001) rejects the term “alternative media” as “almost oxymoronic” since all media are alternatives to others (p. ix). He prefers the term *radical media* which he defines as “media, generally on a small scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” of the power structure (p. v). It would be difficult, however, to conceive of the Burmese opposition media using this definition, which is concerned primarily with theorizing media offering an alternative to capitalist media structures rather than to authoritarian or totalitarian states. Burmese opposition media is clearly in opposition to the Burmese regime, but the regime’s control could hardly be described as hegemonic (see James Scott (1990) for a relevant and interesting critique of theories of hegemony). Radical media do have in common with Burmese opposition media, however, that they break somebody’s (the regime’s) rules, to “express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and against its behavior” and “to build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure” (p. xi).

“located” both demographically and professionally). These factors are so closely interrelated that they cannot operate independently. The importance of such pluralism is clear even in totalitarian systems, where it is either allowed on a limited basis, or mimicked (Pryliuk, 1993).

Alternative media promote pluralistic dialogue by encouraging popular participation and blurring the distinction between audience and producer. This is in contrast to the function of media as a source of information, and moves towards a view of journalists as facilitators of social communication and community organization, generating democratic practice (Tomaselli & Louw, 1989). This also promotes controversy as taboos on what can be covered are lifted. During the democratic transition in Brazil, for example, Busato (1993) noted “a rapid emergence of information topics that couldn’t be touched on before,” appearing first in the alternative press, and spreading later to the more conservative one (p. 186). In a multi-ethnic society like Burma, then, alternative media has a vital role to play in democratization. Ethnic minority media can contribute not only by alerting a group to the most pressing problems it faces and potential means of solving them, but also by teaching different groups more about each other. Although different alternative media achieve different results, they can contribute to the demilitarization of communication and media to the extent that they help to break down hierarchies, put an end to forced silences, and rid themselves of dichotomized images, the concepts of “us” versus “them” arising from militarized media.

Preview of the dissertation

Chapter One, “Burma: Violence in the Golden Land,” described the contradictions of this predominantly Buddhist yet violent land, as well as my intent in undertaking this study. I then listed the specific questions that motivated the research. This was followed by a discussion of globalization and its impact on the Thailand-Burma borderland, the primary site for this research. A historical section followed, detailing the development of the modern state formation in Burma, changing conceptions of power, and the development of nationalisms and conflict increasingly defined as “ethnic” in origin. Next I demonstrated the interdependence of militarization, gender and ethnicity. Finally, the characteristics of militarized communications and media were contrasted with what is known about the process of democratization of communications and media.

In Chapter Two, “Methodology: Globalization and Movements,” I lay out the epistemological foundation and specific methods that guided this research. I discuss the value of multi-sited ethnographies and the usefulness of discourse analysis in examining global communications and their impact at the local level. By exploring the role of the ethnographer in such a project, I detail my personal involvement in the multiple sites involved in this study and some of the dilemmas I encountered in doing this research.

Chapter 3, “Communication and Media in Burma,” offers a brief history of communications and media use inside the country. I examine communications leading up to the 1988 uprisings and student demonstrations in 1996 and 1998, as well as communications among ethnic nationality groups, including the impact of the ceasefires brokered with many groups by the military regime. Controls on communications and

media in Burma contribute to a climate of fear and uncertainty, yet I also describe how people resist these controls. Finally, I reflect on the role of foreigners in political communication in Burma by examining some high-profile communicative acts carried out in the last few years by visitors to Burma.

In Chapter 4, “The Politics of Communication in the Burmese Opposition,” I describe life for the Burmese in Mae Sot and elsewhere in Thailand, and examine how this environment constrains conceptualizations of the possible uses of communications technologies and media. I examine the ways communications technologies are used in attempts to change the political situation inside Burma and assess the impact foreign funding has had on groups in the movement. I delineate a hierarchy within the movement that has been reinforced by the introduction of new information technologies (NITs). I argue that the discourse of human rights acts subtly but powerfully to shape social conventions, resulting in an unstated hierarchy of human rights that mirrors and perpetuates both the inequitable gender and ethnic composition of the Thailand-based opposition political groups and the hierarchy of access and use of technologies among these groups.

Chapter 5, “Opposition Media,” explores the circumstances giving rise to a significant number of new ethnic opposition media, and their goals as described by founding members. Media staff members take various positions in the debate regarding freedom of expression and the degree of media independence permissible during times of community crisis, and these are examined. I explore to what degree these media have opened a space for dialogue between groups, and whether or not the militaristic

characteristics of the Burmese political climate are beginning to break down. Media staff and audience members raised several concerns, and these are discussed along with the opposition media focus on human rights and its impact on different groups in the opposition.

In Chapter 6, “Militarization and Rights in Umphien Mai Refugee Camp,” I provide a brief history of the Karen and the Karen refugees, highlighting the militarization perpetuated by recent violent events in the lives of the people now living in Umphien Mai. Stereotyped gender roles and militarization reinforced each other to form a dominant “frame” through which people understood their own media and technology use, and the refugee camp as a privatized, apolitical space. I examine refugees’ descriptions of two media events they identified as important – the October, 1999, attack on the Burmese embassy in Bangkok and the seizure of a hospital in the Ratchaburi province of Thailand in January, 2000. The different ways Umphien Mai refugees used human rights as a concept in discussing these events provides insight into whether or not individual and group rights are incompatible concepts and demonstrates the need for a flexible and contextually-based understanding of rights. This chapter also demonstrates how attention to physical violence tends to mask the underlying structural violence from which it arose.

Chapter 7, “Violence, Invisibility and the International Order,” revisits the issues raised in this dissertation and places them within a larger global context. First I discuss some of the concerns raised by activists regarding the introduction of NITs and funding patterns among opposition groups. I then return to the discussion of gender, describing

how this research has made me aware of the taken-for-granted “nature” of gender stereotypes, including within myself. I conclude with thoughts on the global patterns of militarization and peace, and how the “local” in this study both reinvents and mirrors the “global.”