

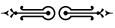
Introduction



This book is the product of my eleven-year (2010 to 2021) and counting relationship with the Htoo (Gold) family, a Sgaw Karen family resettled to the United States in 2007 via the US refugee resettlement program. The Htoo family represents one of the approximately 180,000 refugees resettled to the United States under the designation Burmese.¹ This longitudinal interpretive biography² spans the Htoo's journey from their native Burma³ to Thai refugee camps, their initial resettlement to the United States, and their current home in Sandville, Georgia (pseudonym). Throughout this book, I focus on what Norman K. Denzin calls "turning-point moments"⁴ for me as a researcher and those turning-point moments for the Htoo family. Chapters 1 and 2 also consider the key historical turning points for the Karen people more broadly.

This book aims to provide teachers and others working with the Karen people with a resource about Karen culture and history through the individual and collective stories of one Sgaw Karen family. In discussions with teachers and others across the United States, it is clear that many lack awareness of their Karen students' backgrounds. This story provides some background on Sgaw Karen culture, history, and language against the backdrop of the Htoo family's story that I hope will provide readers more context.

This account also aims to provide some context to the current debate in the United States and around the globe surrounding refugee resettlement. This biographical portrait brings to light the experiences of the broader Karen diaspora and other resettled refugee communities resettling in the United States from Burma and beyond. Though the Htoo family story is singular, their experiences fleeing Burma, two-decade internment in Thai refugee camps, and their experiences resettling in the United States are characteristic of other resettling refugee families.



I also hope this book may stand as a historical document of the Htoo family during the early days of their American experience and provide future generations a sense of their family's first years in the United States. It may also be of interest to future generations of Gilhoolys who show interest in my story with the Karen people.

Finally, this story of Htoos hopes to offer readers some insight into the ways teachers can serve the dual roles of teacher-researchers. The lessons I learned through the process of teaching and researching alongside the Htoo children and other Karen children may serve as models for others working in similar capacities as in-home tutors or as classroom teachers. The successes and mistakes I have made along the way also offer important insights for others working in similar capacities.

Importantly, this is a very personal narrative and discloses personal information about the Htoo family members. I have repeatedly asked each of the Htoos about using their real names, and all agreed that it was important to include their names and forgo using pseudonyms. When I last asked Brown Htoo (December 2020) about this, he exclaimed without hesitation, "It's history!"

Note to reader: The Sgaw Karen people do not have surnames. However, when the family arrived in the United States, their names were adapted to fit American conventions. The final "word" in their name acts as a surname. For example, the patriarch is named Brown Htoo, while the youngest son is Ler Moo. This, as you can imagine, poses Sgaw Karen individuals and families many logistical issues. The Htoo family is relatively lucky that five of the eight family members share a common word that acts as a surname in the United States, Htoo. For readability, I will refer to the family collectively as the Htoos.

I have elected to maintain the pseudonym Sandville in reference to the Htoo's Karen community in rural Georgia. I maintain this pseudonym to keep the community's location anonymous and in line with other publications that refer to the community as Sandville.

Background

Meeting the Htoos

My introduction to the Htoo family was serendipitous. I finished my first year as a doctoral student when I was unexpectedly offered a much-needed summer employment opportunity. A classmate's wife worked for the Georgia Migrant Education Consortium. She was looking for a tutor for thirteen culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD)⁵ learners

**Table 0.1.** The Htoo (Gold) Family (2011) © Daniel Gilhooly

Name	Name in English	Year of Birth	Place of Birth	Age upon Arrival in United States
Brown Htoo (father)	Brown Gold	1953	Myaungmya, Burma	53
Esther Htoo (mother)	Esther Gold	1962	Kawkareik, Burma	45
Sar Ah (female)	Sarah	1985	Myaungmya, Burma	22
Moe Tha Wah (male)	Life Heart White	1988	Myaungmya, Burma	19
Sam Ber Htoo (male)	December Gold	1990	Borna Refugee Camp, Thailand (now defunct)	16
Hser Gay Htoo (male)	Sweet Good Gold	1992	Ta La Thaw Refugee Camp, Thailand	14
Hser Ku Htoo (male)	Sweet Cool Gold	1995	Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand	12
Ler Moo (male)	Life Gold	1999	Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand	7

from four families, ranging in age from five to nineteen. I was told that a community from Burma had applied for summer tutoring through the consortium. I accepted without hesitation and with great curiosity. I had no idea that the families I was about to meet were ethnic Sgaw Karen⁶ and that they would define the next decade of my academic, professional, and personal life.

The Beginning

I met the Htoo brothers for the first time on 1 May 2010, on a cloudless spring day among the rolling hills of eastern Georgia (about twenty-five miles from the South Carolina border). My friend's wife, Maria, from the Georgia Migrant Education Consortium, met me at a local Wal-Mart, and we drove together to meet my summer students. On the forty-minute drive, Maria filled me in on what little she knew about the two homes we



Figure 0.1. The Htoo family (2011). Back row from left to right: Ler Moo, Hser Gay Htoo, Sam Ber Htoo, Hser Ku Htoo. Front row left to right: Brown Htoo and Esther Htoo. © Daniel Gilhooly

would be visiting. I was going to meet the students and, hopefully, their parents to create a summer tutoring schedule. Maria thought they were new to the area, and she knew little more than that one of the children had applied for tutoring services through the high school, so she assumed it must be one of the Htoo brothers.

The first stop would be the Htoo home, and the second would be a home shared by the three remaining Karen families. Maria had met them all a few weeks earlier and indicated that they all were excited that she had found them a summer tutor. Throughout the entire drive, I was struck by how far into the country we were going and wondered how families from Burma had ended up in such a rural setting.

Three curious but sheepish adolescent young men emerged from a small white house at the sound of our approaching car. After a brief introduction, we discussed our summer tutoring schedule, and we decided that we would meet twice a week for two-hour study sessions during their summer break. Sam Ber Htoo, the eldest of the three young men, was the only brother to speak with me that day, but each of them seemed nervous and excited about the prospect of having a diversion from their quiet summer days in rural Georgia.



On the drive home, Maria and I drove in relative silence as I went over the visits in my head. After I bade her goodbye in the Wal-Mart parking lot, I drove home knowing I had stumbled upon my doctoral dissertation topic and the purpose I had hoped for when deciding to return to pursue a Ph.D. in language and literacy. I was elated and nonplussed that the Karen people had returned to my life in such a way and at such a time. I felt a sense of destiny at play and, as I was later to find out, so did Brown Htoo.

My History with the Karen

Meeting the Htoo brothers that day was not my first experience with the Karen people. More than twenty years prior, I had my first encounter with the people I would only later realize were displaced ethnic Karen. In 1989, I was first introduced to the Karen people during my senior year of high school (coincidentally, the same year the Htoos fled Burma) on a trip to Thailand with my parents and older brother, Brendan.

The late 1980s were an infamous time for Burma and the region. The year 1988 saw the fall of one military junta and the rise of another. The aptly named State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took power from the long-ruling general, Ne Win, in a coup led by generals Saw Maung and Than Shwe.⁷ However, it was the 8888 Uprising that gained world attention.

The 8888 Uprising (8/8/88; 8 August 1988) saw the brutal repression of student demonstrations, and, for a moment, Burma came out of the shadows and appeared on the world stage. However, at the time, I was woefully unaware that my comfortable hotel was less than a hundred miles from the longest ongoing civil war of the twentieth century. Burmese government troops were fighting multiple insurgencies from various ethnic minorities and political groups, and hundreds of thousands, like the Htoos, were being displaced internally and externally to neighboring Thailand.

In 1988, I was living in a war zone myself. From 1984 until 1989, I lived with my parents in Israel amid the first intifada (uprising). Each year my father's company paid for biannual R & R trips outside the country. That year we traveled to Thailand. While in Chiang Mai, we visited a border community of hill tribes⁸ that represented the liberated zones that preceded the establishment of refugee camps or, more officially, the temporary shelters that have continued to protect Karen and other displaced Burmese minorities and dissidents who have fled their native Burma. The conditions of those makeshift villages and the smiles on the children's faces made an impression on me. They provided a first glimpse of the Karen people and the paradoxes that often defined the Karen story.



Nearly ten years later, I would meet the Karen people again while traveling in Thailand. From 1997 to 2003, I lived and taught English in South Korea and often traveled throughout Southeast Asia. I traveled with my buddy Roger during our winter holidays to tour Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Each trip ended with a weeklong stay at a small beach resort on Ko Samet Island, a ninety-minute bus ride from Bangkok. Like most tourist spots in Thailand, undocumented Laotians, Khmer, Karen, and other economic immigrants from the region worked as boatmen, cooks, gardeners, guards, and housekeepers. On one of our earliest trips in 1999, we met Chi, a seventeen-year-old Buddhist Pwo Karen man working at the resort.

Like so many undocumented Karen, Chi had crossed the porous border between Burma and Thailand for employment opportunities in Thailand after the death of his mother and his father's ordination as a Buddhist monk. Unlike the Htoos, Chi fled Burma not in fear of persecution but for economic reasons. Even though we shared no common language, Chi became our buddy over the next four years. At first, we sat silently together, smoking cigarettes and watching Premier League football on TV.

As the resort was almost always empty, Chi and Jeab, a Thai manager, became our closest companions. Over the next four years, we visited Thailand once or twice a year and always made an effort to see Chi and Jeab. With the help of Jeab, we were able to communicate, and together we spent many an evening drinking Singha beer, playing cards, looking up at the stars, walking the beach, squidding (fishing for squid), and talking. When I think back on it now, I wonder how we could communicate since I spoke no Thai or Pwo Karen and Chi was just starting to learn Thai and spoke no English. And although Jeab spoke excellent English, she could not speak any of the Karen dialects. Yet, our friendship seemed a natural part of the experience at that time and in that place.

I like to think my friendship with Chi was one of mutual curiosity, and through him, I would begin to learn more about the Karen people. Soon after meeting Chi, I realized his intelligence and resourcefulness. With each visit, Jeab would praise Chi for his fast acquisition of Thai, allowing us to communicate on a wider range of topics. He effortlessly picked up card games we taught him, and he won nearly every game and looked bored and unimpressed with his accomplishment. He was also skilled with his hands, and it was clear that despite his lack of formal education, Chi was precocious and had a natural intelligence and resilience that I admired and envied. I marveled at how he took each task assigned with the same easy grace. He unloaded a boatload of heavy supplies from the mainland with the same ease of movement when sweeping the frangipani-strewn paths between bungalows. Yet, such a calm countenance belied his precarious situation.



As an undocumented person in Thailand, Chi was always on guard in case of immigration raids by the Thai authorities. He and so many undocumented in Thailand live in perpetual fear of the inevitable police raid when they are forced to pay bribes or face deportation. He and the other undocumented Karen, whom he shared a bungalow with at the resort, had made an escape hole in the floor of their bamboo hut in the eventuality of a surprise raid. Yet, unlike many of his peers, Chi remained in Thailand for nearly twenty years without being detained, a testament to his wit and resourcefulness. He is now married, has two children, and recently built a house back in Burma. The dream of saving money and returning to Burma with some capital was realized. He now owns a fast-food chicken restaurant, and I am certain of his success. However, back in the early 2000s, he was a wide-eyed Karen youth who had little experience with the wider world and tried his best to save his money and stay under the radar.

On each visit, Roger and I would leave him dollars in the hope he would save or treat himself to something special. And each time we returned, he would proudly show us the gold he purchased with his savings. It was his way of showing us that he had put his money to good use. Gold has long been the currency of choice for those living within the margins of many societies, and Chi knew the safety and security of gold compared to the volatile Baht. And, as I would later learn, gold was easier to conceal.

Meeting Chi also allowed me to begin connecting the dots on the Karen story in the region. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, various Karen insurgency groups were still actively fighting the regime in Rangoon, and the war was a hot topic in both the Thai and international press. I first read about the Karen in the *Bangkok Post*. And because of Chi, I began to read whatever I could about the Karen people. I soon found that the international press was having a field day with two Karen brothers, Johnny and Luther Htoo⁹ (no relation to the Htoos in this book).

The brothers were the infamous leaders of a band of Karen child soldiers known as God's Army. At that time (2002), the brothers were ten years old. It was purported that Johnny and Luther, protected by their bodyguard Rambo, were reincarnations of two Karen generals who had long fought the Burmese Army for a free Karen state. The brothers had taken on legendary status within the Karen resistance and international media for obvious reasons. The chain-smoking twins were reported to have magical powers that kept them and their band impervious to Burmese government bullets and landmines. Moreover, the brothers were professed Christians, Baptists no less!¹⁰ I was shocked, confused, and I was hooked. I read what I could. The brothers were infamous for their fighting ability, strict diet, austere lifestyle, and deep conviction that Jesus was their savior who protected them in battle. While Johnny and Luther Htoo



seemed a far cry from my buddy Chi, I was intrigued by the Karen story and Burma, and in 2000, Roger and I began planning a trip.

In 2001, due to the ongoing skirmishes between the Burmese Army and one of the dozens of insurgent militant groups, much of Burma was off-limits to foreign travelers. Despite these limitations, we could visit on a three-week tourist visa. The Burmese authorities severely monitored our movements around the country, and we had a government-issued driver for our five-day foray out of Rangoon north to Bagan. Maung Maung (pseudonym) was a cool guy who gave us some experiences I am not sure the generals would have appreciated.

Along the way, he introduced us to friends who were forthcoming about their mistrust of the government and fear for the country's future. We were told of a government campaign of "kidnapping," or the forced conscription of young men from various ethnic groups to serve in the ever-growing Tatmadaw (Burmese Army). His friend told us about people he knew being "taken" from bus stops across the country and forced into military service as a means of creating what the generals called a more "unified" country. The friend also spoke of his fears for the future of his Burma. And, tragically but unsurprisingly, these fears were warranted as I watched as the Saffron Revolution¹¹ played out on TV and computer screens around the world only six years after our visit.

In October 2007, only one month after the Htoo family left Thailand for the United States, the Saffron Revolution saw another brutal crackdown on demonstrators; this time, the brutality included the repression of Burma's ubiquitous saffron-clad and revered Buddhist monks and novices who were leading peaceful mass marches through Rangoon. During our visit in 2001, tensions were simmering, and the pot had yet to boil over, but the signs were ominous.

The roads outside the cities were nearly empty of any travel other than military convoys, and in 2001, the government limited personal travel by putting a cap on daily petrol purchases. There was also a heavy military presence in cities and frequent roadblocks. I took audio notes of the trip, and I listened to them while writing this book as much to relive the adventure as to inform this book.

In 2001, all trips to Burma began dubiously. First, all travelers were compelled to exchange \$200 for 200 Myanmar dollars—a currency unrecognized outside the country and only selectively accepted by hotels within Burma. It was a way for the government to add much-needed greenbacks to their coffers. Then, as we had been warned, our customs official asked for a "gift," and we dutifully handed over more dollars without having made it through customs. The airport was filled with warnings about



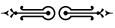
photography and video regulations, and all our cameras were inspected to confirm we were not foreign press.

In 2001, Aung San Suu Kyi was still under house arrest, adored by so many within Burma, and was still a hero in the West, having won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1991. Burma was under US and European sanctions, and our decision to travel there was not without controversy and consideration. Many travelers were boycotting Burma in protest of the military junta's brutal crackdowns in 1988 and their continuing atrocities against minority groups. Even Hollywood took notice of Burma with films like *Beyond Rangoon*¹² and later as part of the Rambo franchise.¹³

Most of the country, including the Karen state, was off-limits. Attempts at bribing Maung Maung to take us into Karen state were met with stern rejections. However, we were able to meet some Karen. Our first brief encounter came at a train station outside Kalaw, Shan state, while on a three-day trek. A nineteenth-century British train stopped just as we were hiking into town. I clearly remember the look on those passengers' faces, and there was a haunting look in their eyes that stayed with me. And they seemed as taken with us; many rushed to the windows to get a glimpse of three white guys who looked equally wild and disheveled after a day trekking. Our guide later told us with some trepidation that it was a train bound to or from the Karen state and that people we had seen were most likely ethnic Karen.

During that trek, we had the chance to stay in Pa'O (Black Karen) villages. Walking the trails between villages and through paddy fields, eating their food, and sleeping within their bamboo homes and Buddhist monasteries, provided me an experience that has colored my readings of the Karen people since and provided me some insights into the Karen story in Burma beyond my friendship with Chi and stories told to me by the Htoos and other Karen. Unlike other villages I had visited in the region, the Pa'O Karen would be my first experience with Karen reticence. Whereas in most villages in Southeast Asia familiar with tourists, children would approach us in large groups looking for candy or pens and laughing and screaming, these children kept their distance. When we approached a group returning from school to give them some pens we had brought, they stayed clear and were unwilling to come within fifty feet of us.

After that visit, I saw Chi one last time before leaving South Korea to return to the United States in 2003. He had left the island for the safety of crowded Bangkok, where he found old friends and a reprieve from the constant fear of police raids. It was much easier to remain anonymous in Bangkok than on a small island where illegal workers were fish-in-a-barrel for Thai police. He became a night watchman for a famous shop-



ping mall in Bangkok, and we met for our last time at a local Bangkok park.

After I returned to the United States, I would receive a call from my mom every few months saying someone had called but all they would say was “Dan, Dan, Dan.” I later came to find out it was Chi. Though we had (and have) kept up via Facebook, I had thought that Chi and the Karen people were no more than a fading chapter in my life. I had no idea that in 2006, Karen and other Burmese refugees had started resettling in towns and cities across the United States. Moreover, Burmese resettlement would represent the largest US resettlement program of the new millennium, with over 70,000 Karen alone resettling and an additional 100,000 ethnic Chin, Karenni, Burmese, Rohingya, and other ethnic minorities resettling to towns and cities across the United States (see table 0.2).

The Setting: Sandville, Georgia

From that first meeting with the Htoo brothers on 1 May 2010, until 13 July 2016, I was a regular visitor to the Karen community in Sandville, Georgia (the setting for much of my story with the Htoos). I first visited as an in-home tutor but soon became a researcher, cultural broker, collaborator, ad hoc caseworker, and friend of the Htoo family and two other Karen families that became the focus of my teaching and research.

From 2010 to 2012, the Htoo family was the primary focus of my research. Initially, I was researching them from the perspective of a teacher-participant observer, but in 2011, I collaborated on a research project with the three Htoo adolescent brothers—Sam Ber Htoo, Hser Gay Htoo, and Hser Ku Htoo. I was inspired by participatory action research (PAR), which led to our collaboration. This collaboration is described in more detail in chapter 4.

Methods

Through the various drafts and years of refining and rewriting this manuscript, I have come to realize that this is as much a story of me—the researcher, teacher, the white outsider, and friend of the Htoo family—as it is about the Karen people or the Htoo family members. And though this is not intended to be a purely academic text, I believe some description of what theories and methods informed me is important. My approach to teaching is better described in chapter 4.

My primary researcher role with the Htoo family was as a participant observer. As an in-home tutor, I observed their individual and collective

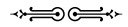


Table 0.2. Burmese and Karen Resettlement in the United States, 2006–2020. Data extracted from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (interactive reporting). © Daniel Gilhooly

Year	Burmese resettled	Karen resettled
2006	2,294	1,993
2007	14,225	9,779
2008	19,000	12,588
2009	19,920	5,987
2010	17,176	7,417
2011	15,713	7,094
2012	15,112	5,455
2013	14,580	6,073
2014	15,971	4,892
2015	17,483	4,407
2016	4,078	2,224
2017	3,722	1,059
2018	3,711	1,065
2019	4,932	unknown
2020	2,115	unknown
TOTAL	181,604	73,373

learning styles and gained perspective on their home life and schooling. I had the chance to meet with and interview their English Language Learner (ELL) teacher multiple times. I also had access to all their transcripts, which helped me connect the dots of their educational experiences from their arrival in the United States throughout the time I worked with



them. I also interviewed the brothers regularly during our two years together. But I was also a participant observer in so many other contexts where I accompanied them—at the grocery store, doctor's office, summer school programs, and at many Karen weddings, festivals, and within the homes of their friends and family.

I remember the first time I entered a convenience store with the brothers. Each stooped frozen beneath the neon lights, overwhelmed by this new space. Finding something to drink was far less familiar to them than I had anticipated. Such informal moments provided important perspectives on each of the brothers and their acculturation process. Over time, we went to Atlanta Braves baseball games, the movies, restaurants, and other excursions, and I documented everything. I filmed, took field notes, and made audio diaries from our first meeting until the writing of this manuscript.

Interpretive Biography and Friendship as Method

This book is modeled after what Norman Denzin refers to as interpretive biography.¹⁴ Denzin defines interpretive biography as “creating literary, narrative, accounts and representations of lived experiences. Telling and inscribing stories.”¹⁵ My methods can best be conceptualized through what Lisa Tillman-Healy refers to as friendship as method.¹⁶ Although I did not come across the work of Tillman-Healy until after I worked with the Htoo family, her ideas about friendship as method have since provided me a language that describes my ethnographic work with the Htoo brothers in particular.

Like any friendship, my relationship with the brothers took time, and I had to gain entry¹⁷ into their world and include them in mine. This entrée was not easy due to the deference paid to teachers, especially white teachers, and our age differences created gaps. Yet, like most friendships, we bonded over shared interests, experiences, and inside jokes. Our love of sport gave us a starting point, and the role cane ball played in our friendship cannot be underestimated and is described in more detail in chapter 3 in my discussion on rapport.

Over time we began to talk more personally about relationships, fears, mistakes, and they would ask my advice on a range of topics. And they were my teachers of Karen culture, customs, beliefs, and language. And although these relationships formed naturally and differently with each brother, I was committed to the brothers meeting me as a whole person and not solely as a teacher. This bond helped create the kind of trust required in any such collaboration.

Another important aspect of friendship as a method is how friendships affect the actual fieldwork methods. In describing friendship as method,



Tillman writes: “our primary procedures are those we use to build and sustain friendships: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability.”¹⁸ Like all friendships, we had disagreements, but their willingness to challenge me was a sign that I had gained their trust and friendship over time.

Moreover, a longitudinal approach has enabled me the requisite time to understand the family and Sgaw Karen culture better and earn that trust. Importantly, the past ten years have allowed the Htoos and me the time to bridge our worlds, thus blurring simple binaries of teacher-student or researcher-participant. We were simultaneously friends, teachers, students, and collaborators.

Another aspect of this method for Tillmann-Healy is the time required to build friendships and how the relationships must build at the “natural pace of friendship.”¹⁹ One of the strengths of my research is the longitudinal nature of my work. My relationships with the Htoo family and the other Karen families I still contact regularly are lifelong. My prolonged hanging out with the Htoo family and other Karen families contributed to building relationships of *confianza*²⁰ or mutual trust that I have always viewed as being of paramount importance to teaching and collaborative research.

According to Lisa Tillmann-Healy, the last and most important aspect of this method relates to conducting research “with an ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice and even love.”²¹ Tillmann-Healy continues: “Friendship as method is neither a program nor a guise strategically aimed at gaining further access. It is a level of investment in people’s lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project.”²² As I look back, I realize that this “investment” maybe my greatest strength as a researcher. I believed then and I believe now that by investing in their lives and serving them in various capacities I was putting their well-being “on par” with my own research goals. I had little idea of what research looked like at the time, but I knew how to help as a teacher, cultural broker, driver, English speaker, teacher, and friend. And over time, I think I have been a more ethical researcher and advocate of the Karen people.

My Interpretations

Similar to other interpretivist approaches, this book does not claim scientific neutrality nor hold any universal truths about the Htoo family or the Sgaw Karen people. Rather, through authentic and sustained relationships with Karen families, the following pages reveal relational truths²³ that we came together through our interactions as friends and collaborators.

This book is inherently subjective. I lay no claim to speaking on behalf of the Htoos or the wider Karen diaspora. In the following pages, I try to



relate the many stories I was told and experienced with the Htoo family honestly and without embellishment. I followed certain protocols to substantiate my interpretations, choices of representation, and claims. Over time, these procedures evolved as I became a more sophisticated and conscientious researcher and writer.

While working on my dissertation, I came across the metaphor of crystallization used to describe the procedures I used to understand better or validate the multiple perspectives that I was able to draw from. Laurel Richardson writes of crystallization: "I propose that the central image for 'validity' for postmodern texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imagery is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach."²⁴

While I do not see this book as strictly guided by postmodernism, this definition of crystallization suits me as it seems to capture the multiple perspectives or vantage points that I was able to attain over the past eleven or so years. The Htoo brothers met multiple colleagues, friends, and family members who could hang out with the Htoo family and me throughout our time together. Such meetings not only strengthened our relationship but also provided new insights and "alternative interpretations."²⁵ Since I was working with an ethnic/cultural group different from my own, the wisdom of other ethnicities, genders, races, and ages proved invaluable in disrupting my interpretations, assumptions, and biases.

I also made a concerted effort to include the Karen brothers in my life. I am especially indebted to my Asian friends and colleagues who offered invaluable interpretations of cultural behaviors and mores that often demystified some of my interpretations and confusion.

During the years I worked with the Karen of Sandville, I had close Korean friends with whom I would often discuss my research and they would continually educate me on Asian cultural practices. For example, one day during a break in teaching, as I sat writing some field notes, I witnessed a grandfather talking to his baby grandson in the harshest of tones, and it struck me as at odds with what I knew about interacting with a baby. I thought, "What a grump!" None of the gentle cooing or silly talk I associated with talking to a baby was evidenced, and it struck me as somewhat cruel. After talking about this with one of my Korean friends, I came to find out that Korean culture has the same tradition. It seems that speaking harshly is a means of tricking evil spirits. It is believed that babies are vulnerable to evil spirits, so by speaking harshly, you fool the spirits—no spirit would want anyone who was being spoken to so harshly.

Although I was not married at the time and my wife has had minimal interactions with the Htoo family, she has worked with other Karen families



and has been instrumental in helping me. As a Sinhalese woman, she has also helped me better understand Karen culture, the effects of colonialism, the challenges acculturating, and what it is like to live through civil war.

While friends and colleagues would provide me with new insights, the literature on the Karen provided me broader context on the Karen story. Not long after speaking to my Korean friend about the grandfather, I came across this passage from Harry Marshall's 1922 study of the Karen. He writes:

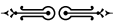
Nicknames of a special class are those given by parents to disguise their love of, and their satisfaction in, their offspring, in order to keep the demons away from the latter. Such names suggest parental contempt and lack of affection in the hope of deceiving the evil spirits into thinking that the parents cannot be injured through the injury or loss of their children. This practice is illustrated by names like Stink-pot, Rotten-fish, Lame-dog, etc., which often stick with men for life.²⁶

After reading this passage, I asked the brothers about such a practice, and they asked their dad, and a new conversation would emerge. I found these kinds of dialogic interactions important for confirming information. They also became a means for the brothers to learn more about their culture from their father. This was a fascinating aspect of our collaboration that I had not envisioned.

These external audits²⁷ with colleagues and friends led to reflexivity and member checking.²⁸ I turned to the Htoo brothers for clarification throughout our time together and throughout the writing of this book. As I transcribed, read, and reread the corpus on Karen history and culture, looked over my field notes, watched video recordings we had made, read and reread transcripts, and discussed with friends and colleagues, more and more questions arose. I discussed my reflections, assumptions, questions, and confusion with the brothers and other family members via texts, emails, and video chats.

A critical component of this manuscript and other works I have written on the Karen is the use of various modes of data. The use of video and audio served the dual function of data preservation and multimodal representations of data. The brothers' perspectives were captured via what, who, and when they chose to film. A collection of their videos and the videos of other Karen youth is available on the Internet.²⁹ This video is an important visual and audio companion to this book.

I have also conducted formal and semi-formal interviews with the Htoo brothers, their father, Brown Htoo, and their mother, Esther, less frequently. From May 2010 to May 2012, I visited the Htoo home more than 150 times. At visit 151, it seems I stopped counting, and subsequent visits are solely labeled by date rather than by visit number. These vis-



its lasted between three and ten hours. These interactions provided me rapport with the family and access and acceptance to the other Karen families in the area. I was and continue to be the “camera” guy, the white guy who can play cane ball to many Karen in the area. I was also a regular attendee at all community events such as weddings, church events, and other Karen celebrations from 2010 to 2016. However, for the Htoos and the other two families I tutored, I was Mr. Dan or Thera Dan (teacher Dan).

The Htoo family gave me access to paperwork the family possessed. I was able to take photographs of all their paperwork from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which helped in their resettlement from the Thai camps to their first destination in the United States. These documents were the family’s only official records before arrival. They were among their most treasured and guarded possessions, and I am forever grateful that they allowed me such access. It confirmed key dates and other data related to their resettlement application. I also collected all the Htoo brothers’ school records from their schools in Phoenix to their respective graduations from high school. Transcripts, schoolwork, and other writing assignments they completed became important artifacts that chronicle their language development and attitudes and opinions on a host of issues. Each of the brothers was encouraged and motivated to write about their experiences. These biographical writings were important sources of information. Through these writings, I learned more about their lives before arriving in the United States and their feelings about school and life in the United States.

My extensive reading also informs this book on the Karen people. As the example above illustrates, the literature was often a source of information that led to the family’s interesting and provocative questions. Over the years, I have read much of the corpus of English literature on the Karen, from missionary accounts to more contemporary academic accounts. Reading about the Karen became an obsession of sorts, and I relished in the nineteenth-century missionary accounts and more contemporary academic and non-fiction accounts.

I have also made a concerted effort to read as many Karen authors as possible. This includes the important writings of San C. Po, The Venerable Asanda Moonieinda, Ardeth Thawngmung, and Violet Cho and the autobiographies of General Smith Dun, Saw Spencer Zan, Zoya Phan, and the more recent co-authored biographies of Saw Ralph and Naw Sheera.³⁰ I am also indebted to scholars who have spent much of their professional lives studying the people called Karen: Yoko Hayami, Martin Smith, Ashley South, and the late Dr. Ananda Rajah.

This book has morphed over the years in terms of goals and scope. Since 2016 I have taught pre-service and in-service teachers about working with



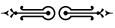
CLD learners. In many ways, they have become my target audience. My work with the Htoos colors how I teach my American students, providing examples that my students seem to appreciate. In many ways, the Htoo family's educational experience in the United States is similar to other CLD students' and families' experiences. Drawing on my experience with the Htoos has helped shape my current enthusiasm for biography-driven instruction (BDI)³¹ as a means to culturally responsive teaching. More about my teaching approaches are addressed in chapters 4 and 5.

Finally, throughout the writing of this book, I have continually checked and double-checked my facts with the family via online chats, phone calls, and biannual visits. However, despite my attempts to verify all my "facts," I must confess to my reader that verification of some information was often met with added layers of confusion. This was primarily due to language barriers, the memories of the storytellers, or my misunderstanding or misinterpretations. One example relates to a story first recounted to me in 2011 about the power of tattoos and the story of Uncle James, a notoriously brave and "untouchable" Karen fighter who, it was related to me in 2011, had a stomach tattoo that protected him from Burmese bullets.

The Follies of Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Interactions

When I recently called Hser Ku Htoo to confirm my notes on this story, he asked his aunt Htoo Htoo (James's sister-in-law), who was conveniently visiting his home at the time. I simply asked where James's tattoo was located on his body as my field notes were unclear. I could overhear him ask his aunt and the ensuing silence made my stomach drop. It was clear she was unsure what I was talking about. After some reflection, she indicated that James had no such tattoos and then reconsidered and decided that such a tattoo existed but that it was hidden! This invariably led down another rabbit hole as it was difficult to qualify what she meant by a hidden tattoo or if her nephew's interpretation may have been off. I was able to verify from James's daughter that her father indeed had multiple visible tattoos but was never able to confirm that they were the source of his magical shield. However, everyone agreed that James had some form of protection from Burmese bullets.

I have tried to avoid including such stories throughout. Still, such examples speak to the inherent confusion when the interviewer and interviewee do not share a common language or culture and how memory and stories change over time. We also did not benefit from a trained Sgaw Karen-English interpreter, a major limitation of this study and addressed in the epilogue.



Note to the Reader: An Unexpected Turn

I have found it difficult to write the Htoo story in chronological order as I had anticipated, and I realize this may confuse the reader. This story provides information about all the Htoos at different stages of their lives, but the focus was those dates when I worked with them directly (2010–2012). For example, I have found it hard to include the three years the Htoo family lived in Iowa, so I have decided to provide my reader some sense of the family chronology in advance (see table 0.3).

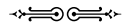
As noted earlier, I taught the brothers weekly from 2010 to 2012. In 2012, we were studying and collaborating on research when, quite unexpectedly, they informed me that the family had decided to move to Des Moines, Iowa. Sarah, the eldest of the Htoo children, was living in Iowa and was buying a house in Des Moines, intending to bring the Htoo family together again under one roof. So, on 2 May 2012, at the request of Brown Htoo, I rented a U-Haul, and we packed the Htoo home and made the sixteen-hour drive north to Iowa.

After the Htoos relocated to Des Moines, I remained connected to them once or twice a year. I continued to work with the Karen community in Sandville but limited my teaching and research focus to two Karen families I taught. From 2012 until I left the area in 2016, I visited these two remaining Karen families two or more times per week and engaged in all manner of activities. When my funding for tutoring ran out in 2014, I continued to teach but much less formally.

I became what the children called Tee Wah (White Uncle). I wanted to provide the younger children (ages ten to sixteen) experiences with English beyond school limits. It was clear that they lacked any non-religious English socialization out-of-school, and I wanted to fill in that gap with the types of activities I enjoyed doing with all my nieces and nephews and thought would be meaningful to them.

As an uncle of sixteen nieces and nephews, this avuncular role suited me perfectly. Importantly, since my tutoring services were no longer funded, I felt a degree of freedom to create a learning atmosphere built around activities. Thus, these weekly sessions consisted of hiking, fishing, museum visits, tours of my university, the movie theater, the zoo, sporting events, and trips to the beach. These experiences helped me continue my research within the community and have informed all of my work on the Karen since.

Upon leaving the area in 2016, I began writing this book. I have continued to visit the Karen of Sandville, including the remaining Htoos, at least once a year.

**Table 0.3.** Htoo family residences (1990–2020) © Daniel Gilhooly

Date range	Place of residence	Family members
1990–2007	Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand	Brown and Esther, Sarah and five male children
2007–2010	Phoenix, AZ	All except for eldest child, Sarah
2010–2012	Sandville, GA	All except for Sarah
2012–2015	Des Moines, IA	Brown, Esther, six children and three grand children
2015–present (2021)	Sandville, GA	Brown, Esther, Hser Ku Htoo, Ler Moo
2020–present (2021)	Des Moines, IA	Sar Ah, Moe Tha Wah, Sam Ber Htoo, Hser Gay Htoo

Organization of Chapters

I view the chapters of this book to be discrete, and they can be read independently. Chapter 1 will provide readers some insight into the Karen people and their history, culture, language, and diaspora. This chapter describes the major events that have impacted the Karen people, primarily the Sgaw Karen, over the past two centuries. The chapter attempts to draw parallels between the Htoo family and their Karen community in the United States and Karen traditional practices, beliefs, and customs in Burma.

Chapter 2 begins with the backstory of the Htoo parents, Brown and Esther, in relation to more contemporary Karen historical events. I relate Brown Htoo and Esther's story based on our multiple interviews and informal conversations. This will include a description of their early years and inevitable flight to Thailand. The chapter describes life in the camps, the resettlement process to the United States, and the Htoo's arrival in Phoenix.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Htoo experience in Sandville, Georgia, from 2009 to 2012 with an account of the development of the Karen community



of Sandville, Georgia. The chapter concludes with an overview of my process of gaining rapport.

Chapter 4 focuses on our studies and portrays their lives when I was a regular visitor. The chapter also provides accounts of our research collaboration and our studies from 2010 to 2012.

Chapter 5 focuses on each of the Htoo brothers. The chapter looks specifically at their schooling experiences, English language development, and updates on each of them up until 2021. The focus here is on the four brothers I knew best.

The conclusion offers some final thoughts about the Htoo story and implications related to refugee resettlement, education, and a consideration of some of the limitations of my work.

Notes

1. Burmese is the generic term used for all refugees regardless of ethnicity resettled from Burma.
2. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, 11.
3. I use the name Burma throughout rather than the official name of the country, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, out of respect to my Karen friends who prefer the appellation Burma.
4. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, 22.
5. I use the term culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners throughout rather than the more common labels English learners (EL) or English language learners (ELL) as CLD incorporates the culture of students as an important consideration.
6. I use the terms Sgaw Karen and Karen interchangeably throughout. When referencing another a non-Sgaw Karen subgroup I will identify that subgroup rather than only using the appellation Karen.
7. Charney, *History of Modern Burma*, 185.
8. Hill tribes are considered by many to be a derogatory reference to the many ethnic minorities in northern Thailand, and I use those terms only because this is how it was advertised at the time tourists like my family visited the region.
9. Beech, "We Were Bulletproof."
10. Beech, "We Were Bulletproof."
11. Charney, *History of Modern Burma*, 19.
12. Boorman, *Beyond Rangoon*.
13. *Rambo IV* sees John Rambo along the Thai-Burmese border.
14. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*.
15. Denzin, *Interpretive Biography*, 11.
16. Tillman-Healy, "Friendship as Method," 729.
17. Tillman-Healy, "Friendship as Method," 732.
18. Tillman-Healy, "Friendship as Method," 734.



19. Tillman-Healy, "Friendship as Method," 734.
20. Gonzalez et al., "Funds of Knowledge," 3.
21. Tillman-Healy, "Friendship as Method," 735.
22. Tillman-Healy, "Friendship as Method," 735.
23. Tillman-Healy, "Friendship as Method," 733.
24. Richardson and St. Pierre, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," 934.
25. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 113.
26. Marshall, *Karen People*, 170.
27. Poduthase, "Rigor in Qualitative Research," 25.
28. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*, 115.
29. CMHtoo, "Karen Movie," 27 July 2021. <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/580045395>.
30. Po, *Burma and the Karens*; Moonieinda, *The Karen People*; Thawngmung, *Karen Revolution in Burma*; Cho, "Rearranging Beads"; Cho, "Searching for Home"; Dun, *Memoirs*; Zan, *Life's Journey in Faith*; Phan, *Little Daughter*; Smith, *Fifty Years in Burma*.
31. Herrera, *Biography-Driven Teaching*, 20.