Spring 2015

The Karen of Andaman Islands: Labor Migration, Indian Citizenship and Development of a Unique Cultural Identity

Tanvi Mittal
University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/anthro_seniortheses

Part of the Anthropology Commons

The Karen of Andaman Islands: Labor Migration, Indian Citizenship and Development of a Unique Cultural Identity

Abstract

The Karen of the Andaman Islands present a unique story—a story of migration, transformation and endurance. This paper presents the findings of my ethnographic fieldwork of 2014 contextualized through extensive secondary research of Andaman and Karen history. Some data supported my initial expectation of rapid cultural transformation of the Karen due to their gradual increase in contact and interaction with other populations. On the other hand, data that exemplified cultural constancies of the Karen problematized my research. This cultural endurance drove my research into the study of identity and I shifted focus to understand how and why the Karen are changing their identity in such a selective manner. In order to understand their motivations, I contextualized the Karen life in the larger historical context of the Andaman Islands. Through this secondary research, I understood the Karen motivation and drive towards their subjective state of development. This research attempts to start an academic conversation regarding cultural studies of immigrant communities and the overall role and impact of anthropology on the world it embeds itself in. It traces the cultural transformation of the Karen from a lifestyle of isolation to interaction and demonstrates the need to understand the new environment of this immigrant community in order to gain a holistic perspective of their motivations and behaviors. Lastly, this case study reveals how anthropology, as literature, has affected the socio-cultural reality of the Karen environment while having the potential to convey the voices of the Karen.

Disciplines
Anthropology

THE KAREN OF ANDAMAN ISLANDS: LABOR MIGRATION, INDIAN CITIZENSHIP

AND DEVELOPMENT OF A UNIQUE CULTURAL IDENTITY

By

Tanvi Mittal

In

Anthropology

Submitted to the

Department of Anthropology

University of Pennsylvania

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Brian Spooner

2015

Abstract

      The Karen of the Andaman Islands present a unique story—a story of migration, transformation and endurance. This paper presents the findings of my ethnographic fieldwork of 2014 contextualized through extensive secondary research of Andaman and Karen history. Some data supported my initial expectation of rapid cultural transformation of the Karen due to their gradual increase in contact and interaction with other populations. On the other hand, data that exemplified cultural constancies of the Karen problematized my research. This cultural endurance drove my research into the study of identity and I shifted focus to understand how and why the Karen are changing their identity in such a selective manner. In order to understand their motivations, I contextualized the Karen life in the larger historical context of the Andaman Islands. Through this secondary research, I understood the Karen motivation and drive towards their subjective state of development.

      This research attempts to start an academic conversation regarding cultural studies of immigrant communities and the overall role and impact of anthropology on the world it embeds itself in. It traces the cultural transformation of the Karen from a lifestyle of isolation to interaction and demonstrates the need to understand the new environment of this immigrant community in order to gain a holistic perspective of their motivations and behaviors. Lastly, this case study reveals how anthropology, as literature, has affected the socio-cultural reality of the Karen environment while having the potential to convey the voices of the Karen.

Introduction

During a recreational visit to the Andaman Islands (or simply Andaman) in 2013, I met

my first Karen. I was aware of the various tribal communities present on these islands, but I had

never heard of the Karen community. I had read about the Karen in the context of Burma (now

Myanmar) but their presence on the Indian Islands intrigued me. Although the Karen are

extensively studied in their native context, they are left out of most academic conversations of

Andaman due to the overshadowing presence of indigenous tribes. While most publications did

not delve into the Karen life of Andaman, I found an intriguing paper by Dr. Sameera Maiti,

titled *The Karen – A Lesser Known Community of the Andaman Islands (India)*, which was

presented at the 'Islands of the World VIII International Conference' in 2004. This paper

provided me with a brief historical background of how the Karen were "brought to India from

Burma (now Myanmar) for the first time as forest laborers" (2004: 967) and it also provided

details of the Karen socio-cultural lifestyle while noting a rapid ongoing cultural transformation.

Maiti ends her paper with an intriguing phrase:

> "The blind run for development and the rapid changes occurring in the Karen culture
>
> sometimes give an impression that in a few years from now the Karen may lose their
>
> distinct identity. This however, is just a partial view since acceptance of newer elements
>
> by the Karen does not necessarily imply that they are disregarding or neglecting their
>
> own culture. In fact, the Karen culture today provides a remarkable blend of tradition and
>
> modernity, which is proving most advantageous for them since they can now enjoy the
>
> best of both the worlds" (2004: 980)

After her in depth interviews with the Karen in November-December 2003, Maiti recorded a

rapid cultural change in Karen community but could not apprehend the trajectory of Karen's

3

cultural future. To study the unique history of the Karen, and to trace the cultural transformation that has taken place in this community, I planned an ethnographic field project for the summer of 2014. The Karen would have spent 89 years in India by then and I wanted to understand the intricate changes of Karen culture.

The Andaman Islands are situated in the Bay of Bengal between India and Myanmar and "consist of nearly 184 islands, 65 islets and 189 rocks" (Majumdar 1975: 1). They are divided into three parts – South, Middle and North Andaman (Figure 1) and occupy a total area of 6,408 square kilometers accommodating 343,125 people (Table 1). The earliest inhabitants of the Andaman Islands were of 'Negrito' origin (Majumdar 1975: 5). In his book *The Andaman Islanders,* Radcliffe-Brown presents his anthropological research of two years (1906-1908) and confirms "the Andamanese belong to that branch of human species known to anthropologists as the Negrito race" (1922:2). 'Negrito' refers to several different populations of the Southeast Asia and is characterized by certain physical characteristics. Radcliffe-Brown clarifies that "The Andamanese, the Semang, and the Philippine Negritos are so similar in physical characteristics that it is reasonable to suppose that they are descended from a single stock. It is on the basis of this hypothesis that they are all spoken of as belonging to one race, the Negrito Race" (1922: 407). Furthermore, he speculates "the aborigines of the Andaman Islands have been in their present home for a great many centuries" (1922:5). The natives lived in small, separated communities all over the island, which were independent and autonomous. The Island-wide British colonial control came to the Andaman Islands in two waves. "The story of Andaman's colonization is set in motion in 1780s with the British surveyors entering the waters of Bay of Bengal and the annexation of the

Andaman in 1789" (Vaidik 2010: 5). However, this first wave of occupation did not last long as the British abandoned the islands in 1796 due to rampant disease and high mortality rates. The circumstances of British abandonment are unclear but the reoccupation of the Islands in 1858 came with a strong desire to control the Indian Ocean. At this time, the British ruled over Burma as well as India and to control the islands that connect these two colonies would be ideal for the British. There was also a colonial desire to develop a penal colony on the isolated islands, which was fueled by the Indian freedom struggle gaining momentum in 1857 through the first large-scaled revolt. Locally known as the 'sepoy mutiny', the revolt came to be recognized as 'India's First War of Independence' and provided the British with political prisoners needed for the penal settlement in the Andaman Islands. Therefore, "On the morning of 22 February 1858, Colonel Horace Man, under the reverberating sounds of a 21-gun-salute, announced the British reoccupation of the Andaman" (Vaidik 2010: 7) and Andaman thus became a penal colony. The rising labor pressure within this settlement motivated the British to recruit convict and non-convict laborers. Consequently, "in November 1859, the government sanctioned the transportation of Burmese from Rangoon and Moulmein [Burma] as demands for larger labor force on the Andaman grew" (Vaidik 2010: 114). These Burmese convicts were different than the Karen settlers but this demonstrates that migration between Burma and India was ongoing under the British Empire. Apart from convict workforce, the British also recruited non-convict laborers like the local born children of prisoners as well as some aboriginal populations. Since the Andaman Islands are isolated, the British had to adopt "non-penal principles for putting the convicts to labour and settling the Islands" (Vaidik 2010: 104). Some convicts were converted to

'Self-supporters' meaning that they "had a ticket-to-leave and could take up any profession of their choice…The aim of the self-supporter system was to reform the convict and also to relieve the government of his maintenance cost and thereby make the Settlement financially sustaining" (Vaidik 2010: 105). These British policies caused settlement all over the Andaman Islands. Consequently, there was an expected clash between the native inhabitants and settlers. Sen, in Savagery *and Colonialism in the Indian Ocean*, informs the reader

> "When the colonists arrived, the islands were home to a substantial 'aboriginal' population, which probably outnumbered the convicts until the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Relations between Andamanese and the newcomers did not begin well. Convicts clearing jungles and building roads were frequently attacked by aborigines, outposts came under attack and reprisals and counterinsurgency operations continued into the twentieth century" (2010: 2).

Encroachment into the aboriginals' land thus caused tension in Andaman.

In the years of 1921-1925, there was significant transformation in the administrative landscape of the island. After the end of World War I, the British introduced a new colonial scheme of quasi-penal settlement with a two-fold aim: "to provide a suitable free population for the islands, and to be a means of mitigating the punishment for the convicts" (Vaidik 2010: 182). This new quasi-penal settlement carried with it the abolition of convict transportation. It was at this time that British required additional laborers to clear forest in other parts of the Islands. In 1925, Col. Ferrar (Chief Commissioner of the Islands) met with his cousin Dr. H.I. Marshall and published the news of the opportunity in a local Karen newspaper in Burma. Soon, 13 Karen families were brought into the Andaman Islands and many families followed the next year (Maiti 2004: 968; Singh 1994: 87; Roy 1995: 33). Once in Andaman, the Karen temporarily settled in

'Calolo Island', also known as 'Bonnington' (see Figure 1) and later moved to Webi Village in Mayabunder of the Middle Andaman (see Figure 1). Along with the Karen, the British also brought in Ranchi from Jharkhand (mainland India) as forest laborers.

The Andaman that the Karen entered was transforming from a penal settlement to a free island. There were hostile clashes between the natives and the settlers and the British were busy organizing the laborers. Therefore, the Karen encountered a unique environment and traversed a unique sociopolitical history – one that is different from that of convicts, natives and Indian settlers. This complex history had to have been accompanied by an interesting cultural transformation of a Burmese immigrant tribe settling into the cultural melting pot that was the Andaman Islands. To adjust into this amalgamated culture of Andaman, one would expect the Karen to undergo a significant cultural transformation – the kind of transformation that was noted by Dr. Maiti in 2004. Through my research, I intended to record these intricate peculiarities of cultural changes of the Karen and trace their socio-cultural history.

Research Design and Methodology

To study the cultural changes that have occurred in the past 89 years of the Karen's stay in Andaman, I spent three weeks in a Karen home in Webi, Mayabunder (Figure 1). With the help of ANET (Andaman and Nicobar Environmental Team), the University of Pennsylvania Museum, the University of Pennsylvania's Anthropology department and CASI (Center for the Advanced Study of India), I was able to conduct fieldwork in the summer of 2014. Through ANET, I met Saw John, a Karen man who offers researchers homestay in his house in Webi.I, thus, found my way into a Karen household and conducted ethnographic research for three weeks. By eating, sleeping and sharing a living space with the Karen, I learnt about their cultural

intricacies of everyday life. However, by disclosing my intention of writing about their cultural

life, I made them cautious of and added an objective stance to our otherwise intimate encounters.

I used traditional anthropological methods of participant observation, interviews and surveys to

accommodate the perspectives of various generations of the Karen. Participant observation

involved an active observer stance. I participated in their social life and recorded their daily

behavior and cultural particularities as my field notes. I interviewed 18 members of this

community aged 48-92 years to understand the sentiments of a people who are aware of the

cultural change that has taken place during their stay in India. I focused on the elders of the

community in order to record the soon-to-be-lost voices. Dr. Maiti notes that "it is essential that

this rich indigenous knowledge be perpetuated to the next generation or in a few years from now,

we may lose it to posterity" (2004: 980). Therefore, I found it of utmost importance to record the

elders' opinions and anecdotes. To document their personal experience and perspectives without

any miscommunication, a local translator accompanied me. He helped the elders express

themselves in the language they are most comfortable in. The interviews began with a disclosure

of my intent and my aims, followed by open-ended questions (Table 2), which aided the elders to

recount their experiences without any inhibitions. For instance, by asking them a simple and

broad question like "What are some of the cultural changes that you have observed over the

years?" I gave the interviewees the freedom to recount personal anecdotes and share as much

information as possible. Although I followed a script, these interviews were mostly unstructured

since I let the elders' answers guide the process. Finally, I documented the youth's opinions

about their understanding of Karen culture through a short survey (Table 3). The age of the

twenty-nine respondents ranged from 11 years to 23 years. Specifically, the survey featured

three open-ended questions about the features as well as ongoing changes of Karen culture. This

survey was administered in English and Hindi, and the participants could choose to respond in the language they felt most comfortable in. Through these ethnographic methods, I expected to record specific examples of cultural changes that have taken place in the Karen community and understand the Karen perspective regarding this ongoing transformation.

Results

When the Karen entered Andaman in 1925, they lived in 'Webi', meaning 'hidden village. They wanted a remote life and avoided interaction with their Non-Karen neighbors or "Khlathu" as they call them in Karen slang. An 86-year-old Karen man recounts, "My parents would tell me not to go close to any 'Khlathu' because they can attack me". He used the word 'Khlathu' for any Non-Karen Indian and used the word 'Kalua' for British. When I inquired about the translation of these words, he explained that 'Khlathu' literally translates to dark skinned and 'Kalua' to fair skinned in the their language. Upon further investigation, I found that although used as local slang, these terms did not carry any derogation– they are simply ways of differentiating between populations. The extreme Karen isolation was confirmed by a 74 year old Ranchi man who recounted that when he came to Webi in 1967 as a forest worker, "no Karen would talk to us [Non-Karen], only older men of the community would interact with us… earlier, Karen women and girls would not come out of their houses much". This Ranchi man lives in Deopur, another Karen settlement only two kilometers away from Webi and is now married to a Karen woman. Thus, the Karen's extreme isolation was apparent and can be understood through two perspectives – stability and defense.

The Karen faced volatile administrative conditions in the Andaman Islands and thus their isolation can also be seen as a planned introversion in response to the instability of their political

landscape. The Karen faced four phases of administration during their stay – British (1925 – 1942), Japanese (1942-1945), British (1945-1947) and Indian (1947-present). During the first phase of British occupation, the Karen were brought to India and they received their promised ration and land for cultivation. Just as the Karen were settling under the British Raj, the Japanese took over and confusion ensued. The Japanese were ruthless with the Indian islanders but did not trouble the Karen. For instance, "when they were allowed to enjoy themselves, they moved out in erratic mood. Some of them [Japanese] resolved to plundering and even molesting women" (Roychowdhury 2004: 118). However, the interviews depicted the Japanese time as a difficult yet peaceful time for the Karen. For instance, a Karen woman informed me that although "a [Karen] man from each household would have to work in the forest for the Japanese and women would have to weave thatch for them, no Karen was killed or harassed by the Japanese…. Japanese loved Karen kids - they took care of them and provided education for them as well". By setting up schools, "The Japanese [sought] to fulfill two purposes, first to have interpreters for easy communication and second to create a faction among the islanders by favoring a section of people" (Roychowdhury 2004: 137). Some Karen worked intently with the Japanese. For example, a 48–year-old Karen pastor disclosed that his father was a Japanese interpreter; while others saw the Japanese schools and facilities as an obligation rather than an opportunity. Most Karen preferred to focus on paddy cultivation and hunting. For instance, a 75-year-old Karen lady remembers how to count 1 to 10 in Japanese but she mentions that school was just an obligation she had to fulfill – she would wait for school to be over so she could run home and help her parents in the paddy fields. Therefore, the Karen isolation was further propagated through Japan's aim " to foster an Asian nationalism…promote discipline and instill Japanese spirit in the population" (Sareen 2002: 48). I assume that the favoritism towards the Karen was

not received well by the Indian populations present on the island, which must have driven the

Karen further away from any kind of Non-Karen communication. The Karen were well aware of

this favoritism as some of them speculated that the Japanese may have favored them because of

their 'Asian' facial features. Since they were aware of the Japanese bias, the Karen must have

kept a safe distance from the Indian populations. Just as the Karen were settling into the Japanese

way, the British reoccupied the islands temporarily before India's independence in 1947. Hence,

the push towards Karen isolation can be seen as a reaction to ensure the stability of the

community throughout the dynamic political conditions of the islands.

Another way to understand the Karen isolation is as a defense mechanism to avoid hostile

confrontations. As seen from the colonial history of Andaman, the Karen entered a hostile

environment—one where the aboriginals were in constant conflict with the settlers on accounts

of encroachment. Therefore, the Karen unsurprisingly witnessed violence by one particular

indigenous tribe –the Jarawa. The Jarawa have been known for their hostility towards outsiders

and as Sircar mentions in his book, *Jarawa: The Struggle Continues"*, "They [Jarawa] came into

contact of the outsiders with friendly gestures on several recorded occasions" (2011: 9) but

"towards the end of the 19th century, Jarawa raiding activities increased considerably…[and]

The Jarawa raids continued even after India attained independence" (2011: 27). The Karen recall

some Jarawa incidents in their personal past. For instance, a Karen man recounts that he was

hunting with a friend when they mistakenly stepped into a Jarawa animal trap. Next thing they

knew, they were sprinting away while arrows flew through the air. Ironically, the deer that they

were hunting distracted the Jarawas and ultimately saved their lives. Jarawa attacks were a

serious reality of the Karen past. The Karen were also hassled by the convicts of the Islands.

There was a time when five Burmese convicts escaped the penitentiary and made their way

towards Mayabunder. Most of the elders I interviewed mentioned this period as the most traumatic time of Karen history. They mentioned that there were five Burmese men who had run away from the prison in Port Blair and come to Mayabunder. They had somehow acquired guns and were torturing the islanders of the area. A 68 - year old Karen Reverend recounts that "Before the British returned and after the Japanese left, there was a short period when the Burmese [convicts] troubled the Karen a lot. For example, one Burmese married a Karen woman at gunpoint and forced her husband into banishment. The husband had to live deep in the forest for years at end". Another 92-year old Karen woman said, "They [convicts] would harass and rape ladies and kill people randomly… After a while, the convicts got into a fight and shot each other, with only one surviving. This Burmese man harassed the Karen until he was stabbed and shot by 'Tajji luku'". Maiti describes a 'Tajji' as "a liaison officer between the British administration and the Karen. It was his task to collect revenue, keep record of births and deaths and solve disputes" (2004: 973). All my interviewees agreed that they had peace only after the Burmese convicts had perished. The Karen have seen a fair share of violence during their initial years in Andaman with the older generations having faced Jarawa attacks and dangerous convicts. The Karen isolation can thus be understood as a defense mechanism or a safety drill in order to safeguard the community.

Although the Karen remained strategically isolated for the first part of their stay in the islands, they were soon forced out of their shell by the Indian government in 1947. With the newly establish democracy, the Karen received a stable political environment but their isolation tactic became obsolete. To avail the benefits of being Indian citizens they were compelled to communicate with Non-Karen populations of the islands. The Indian government directly influenced Karen life by improving the infrastructure around Mayabunder and founding two

schools for the children of the area. These administrative developments changed the lives of the Karen forever. For example, when asked about the changes in the post-independence period, a 90-year-old Karen lady recounted, "a road to the schools was created by the Indian government. Earlier, we had to walk through dense forest to get to places". In addition to construction of roads, the government sanctioned schools helped provide stable education to the Karen population. To avail the benefits of these government provisions, the Karen were forced to expand their nature and rate of social interaction by communicating with the "Khlathu". Today the Karen children attend the government schools and mingle with other Non-Karen populations without any inhibitions. Furthermore, the Indian government impacted the lives of the Mayabunder residents through a plethora of lucrative jobs offered all over the islands. The Karen are now involved with a variety of jobs. The forest department, administrative services and civil services are only a few examples of the offers extended by the government towards the Karen. For instance, a Karen man in his 40's is now the 'Pradhan' of the community, the head of the Panchayat (village council that governs all Karen settlements and comprises of fifteen members, enjoying a term of five years). Also, many Karen are now involved with administrative services in Port Blair. Although most elders I interviewed had retired, they remembered their steady jobs with the forest industry or the education sector as a result of the Indian Independence. These job opportunities not only incentivized education but also changed the Karen agrarian lifestyle. For instance, a 75-year-old woman narrates, "earlier, everyone would do their own housework (and paddy farming) but now people have started getting jobs (after being educated) and cannot manage their housework on their own and have to hire help". Today, many Karen hire people to care for their paddy fields while they engage in well-paid government jobs. Thus, Indian independence of 1947 brought with it many opportunities and changes in the Karen lifestyle.

Most importantly, the Karen were forced out of their shell into the larger networks of the Andaman Islands. Therefore, Karen journeyed from isolation to interaction. This amplification of social interaction brought with it tremendous cultural change.

This paper focuses on three main changes that took place in the Karen culture. This is not to say that these are the only or the most important changes. However, they were easily noticeable and most prevalent in my conversations with the Karen. First, the Karen dress is slowly becoming obsolete while Indian fashion becomes more common. The typical Karen clothing features handmade cloth –"men wore a garment that is white above, except for red selvedge lines along the seams, and has the lower third woven with red [Figure 3]" (Marshall 1922: 36) and "women's attire is the *ochiyebo* (blouse) and *nee* (wraparound skirt) while men wear the *ochithaaso* (shirt) and *theku* (lungi) [Figure 4]" (Maiti 2004: 976). During my visit in 2014, I only saw the elderly sustaining this fashion. An 89-year-old man recounts that in the earlier times, "Karen women would only wear '*mekhla*' [Lungi or loincloth fashioned like a long skirt] but now they wear Salwar-Kurta and Saris [traditional Indian wear] and even jeans". A 24-year-old woman, who teaches middle school children also agrees - "Ever since I was made to wear a Salwar in high school [as a uniform], I have gotten used to it… sometimes I would rather wear a long skirt but everyone else is in a Salwar so I wear a Salwar too". Thus, the typical Karen dress is lost among the lives of the youth and Indian clothes have replaced the typical Karen dress.

Second, the Karen food has transformed since the Karen arrival in 1925. Traditional Karen foods include rice and meat. Karen eat rice as their staple diet and grow "*Burma Dhan*, an indigenous variety of rice, cultivated for personal consumption" (Maiti 2004: 974). Today, they sell the excess for profit but the primary purpose is still self-subsistence. Fishing is the secondary

source of food supply for Karen household and hunting expeditions bring home venison and pork frequently. Roy reports, "Pork is their [Karen's] favorite meat and is served as a special dish during feasts" (1995: 101). The most iconic Karen dish is "nappy - a fermented paste made from sea fish and eaten with rice" (Roy 1995: 95), which Marshall calls "fish paste..."ngape"...greatly prized by the Karen who think it adds a very savory flavor to their food" (Marshall 1922: 66). Although the food sources remain the same - rice, fish and meat, the Karen method of food preparation has changed dramatically. When I asked a 68 year old man about the changes that occurred due to Karen - 'Khlathu' interaction, he replied that "the taste of the Karen food has changed drastically due to Khlathu influence...earlier, the Karen would mostly cook their food by boiling it and it was very healthy...but now the Karen have started adopting Indian ways of frying and adding spices to their food". My host family also agreed that the cooking methods have been affected drastically by Non-Karen interaction. When the Karen came to Andaman, the most common method of preparing food was boiling and steaming yams and vegetables. However, during my stay in Webi, I noted that most dishes were similar to Indian dishes - like lentils, curry, etc. Even the pork and fish were fried or cooked in spicy Indian style curry. According to the elders, the Karen have changed their food preparation methods from healthy boiling and baking to frying their food in spices due to their interaction with the South-Indian populations in the islands. For instance, a 77-year-old woman reported "Karen used to use pig fat's oil (like the oil released from the meat), but now the Karen use the sesame oil used by other Indians". However, it is important to note that the transformation of food is more syncretic than substitution. The Karen still consume Nappy, Burmese rice and beef. These habits are in stark contrast to their Indian counterpart islanders and although special dishes like nappy and pork are still prepared for special occasions, the Karen have began to use Indian food on a daily basis. For

example, my host family would prepare *Maggi* (packaged noodles sold all over India) for the children's lunchbox frequently. Therefore, although the Karen preserve some traditional recipes there has been a significant change in the taste and preparation of Karen food.

Third, the Karen architecture has changed drastically over the past few years. The Sgaw Karen in Burma lived in very typical housing units. Since "this batch of settlers [Karen brought to Andaman in 1925] came from the forest areas of Bassein and Henzada in Upper Burma" (Roy 1995: 33), their typical houses consisted of two stories with the ground floor used as storage for granary. The main entrance had a wooden ladder attached to access the second floor and this ladder was removed at night, which kept the house safe from wild animals in the forest. These houses were typically built from bamboo, wooden poles, cane and thatched leaves (Figure 5). "The overlapping of convex and concave halves [of the bamboo] gives a tight roof...the walls are constructed of flattened bamboo lengths nearly long enough to reach from the floor to the wall-plates" (Ignatius 1922: 58) and sometimes thatch leaves are weaved and set on top of the bamboo roof to cool the house during summer. These were the houses that the Karen built when they settled in Webi. As time passed, however, with increased interaction with 'Khlathu' like the Bengali and the Ranchi, the Karen began to adapt their construction methods. When Roy visited the Karen in 1995, he found three different types of Karen housing: "the Oraon type with mud walls, the Rural Bengal type with its four "Chalas" or roofs, and the piled dwelling, which resembled the Karen housing built in their native Burma" (94). The Karen had already adapted other construction methods and on my visit, I noticed very few piled dwellings in the Karen villages. Thatch roofs have been replaced with tin roofs and bamboo replaced with cement (Figure 6). While some elders that I interviewed still live in these typical houses, most young Karen families have forgotten this architecture. Today, most Karen houses cannot be

differentiated from the other houses in Mayabunder area. Therefore, Karen food, clothing and housing are undergoing a dramatic transformation as a result of the Karen conversion from isolation to interaction.

While the Karen have faced some degree of cultural dilution due to their interactions with the Indian population on the island, they have held on to certain cultural characteristics firmly throughout their dynamic sociopolitical history. Karen language, behavioral characteristics, religious faith and mythical origin are some examples of cultural preservation among the Karen. The Karen language is a cause for community pride and thus has been preserved through all the volatile conditions of Karen life. Maiti notes that the Karen "speak their own indigenous dialect, Karen, and use the Burmese script. For corresponding with outsiders, they use English and Hindi" (2004: 969). I noticed a similar trend—although the younger generations are fluent in Hindi, they would talk to each other primarily in the Karen language. Moreover, A 48-year-old Karen man believes that "once you kill the language, that community will die or disappear… so we [Karen] try to promote our language". Therefore, in spite of having learnt other languages the Karen in Mayabunder have made an effort to keep their language alive and they are most comfortable speaking the language they brought with them from their motherland. Also, there are certain behavioral characteristics that the Karen are proud of embodying. Radcliffe Brown in *Structure and Function of Primitive Society,* while explaining social sanctions, writes "In any community there are certain modes of behavior which are usual and which characterize that particular community. Such modes of behavior may be called usages" (1965: 205). Most of my interviewees took pride in a set of behavioral features of the Karen that revolved around being peaceful, non-confrontational and obedient. The Karen did not partake in hostile behavior depicted by other tribes present on the island, and many Karen believed this to be the reason why

the British wanted to hire them as forest laborers. Thus, these 'usages' are certain personality traits that the Karen proudly embody and pass on from generation to generation. The Karen faith is the most well preserved aspect of their culture—Christianity is the sturdiest constant in the life of a Karen of the Andaman Islands. All the Sgaw Karen brought to Andaman in 1925 were converted to Christianity by American missionaries who travelled to the hills of Burma. In the hills of Burma, "the Karen were quick to respond to the missionary activities that proliferated under the British rule. With the acquisition of Christianity many of them...began to emerge as a modern educated class" (Suu 1990: 32). Although there is not much written evidence of their conversion, it is established that the Karen were converted specifically to the Baptist denomination. "The Baptist mission demands total surrender of all animistic religious practices… [and] is convinced that these requirements have been the means of social and economic progress" (Marshall 1980: 303). Thus, the Karen equated Christianity to development and the Baptist mission to a hope of a better life. There were two additional reasons why the Karen conversion was so rapid and easy. First, the early missionaries "were surprised to find that these people [the Karen] professed having received from their forefathers, monotheistic traditions in which the story of creation was almost parallel to the Mosaic story of the genesis" (Marshall 1980: 10). The commonalities of the two religious schools made Christianity very relatable to the Karen. Second, the Karen believe in the Y'wa legend, which is "the prophecy of the return of the white brother with the lost book, which inspired the Karen with the hope of a better future and furnished an admirable foundation on which Christian teachers could build in promoting the development of Karen nation" (Marshall 1980: 211). Therefore, the association of Christianity to an imagined development, the commonalities of monotheism and the Y'wa prophecy enticed the Karen into converting to Christianity. Through dynamic political

landscapes and difficult social times, the Karen held on to their religious faith tightly since it brought stability to their lives. Christianity is integrated into the Karen culture so much so that it was difficult to pose questions about their culture, distinct from their religion. For instance, when asked whether the Karen culture has changed over the past few years, a survey participant denied it and justified his answer by saying that the Karen are just as religious and faithful towards Christianity as they always have been. This shows the extent to which Christianity is embedded into the Karen culture. Moreover, Baptist values dominate the Karen social rituals—marriage, birth and funeral ceremonies are performed in a typical Baptist manner. Thus, the Karen often confuse Christianity to be representative of Karen culture in stead of being a part of it, which makes this study of cultural identity difficult yet unique. Along with their faith, the Karen also preserved what they know to be the myth of their origin:

> Htaw Meh Pa - the mythical founder of the Karen race lived with his family in some unknown land to the North, where their fields were ravaged by a great boar. The patriarch went out and killed the boar and made a magical comb out of one of the boar's tusks. The comb had the power of conveying eternal youth to all who used it. Soon their country became overpopulated and they set out to seek a new and better land. They travelled together until they came to a river called "Hti Seh Meh Ywa" (River of the running sand). While others attempted to cook shellfish, the impatient old man went on ahead and promised to blaze his path so they could follow. After a while the Chinese came along and told the Karen how to cook the shell. Having eaten, they followed the old man only to find that the plantain stocks he had chopped had shot up so high that it seemed impossible to find his path. Thus, they [the Karen] settled down in this vicinity and Htaw Meh Pa went on with the comb, never to return (Marshall 1980:5).

The story reminds the Karen that they "migrated to Burma, coming from the ancient home of early tribes inhabiting the country of China, with whom they are related by tribal, linguistic and possibly religious affiliation" (Marshall 1980:14). In this way, "the early history of the Karen remains problematic… it appears that they originated in the north (central Asia)" (Khin 1996: 4). This mythical story of origin resonates within the Karen community to the present day. Through their unique stay in the Andaman, the Karen have managed to hold on to their language, usages, faith and origin myth in order to maintain an imagined connection to their motherland and establish stability through volatile times. An ethnographic study of the Karen thus revealed the changes as well as the constancies of the cultural journey the Karen have endured in India. From isolation to interaction, the Karen culture has undergone tremendous change causing the Karen to arrive at a crossroads of identity.

Discussion

The Karen did not expect this sudden acceleration of social interaction, and with it came the question of identity. In a way, my data drove my theory into studying the crossroads of cultural identity that the Karen are faced with today. Maiti predicted this crossroads when she wrote "if this trend [of cultural dilution] continues, it may not be long before a great deal of the external indicators of Karen culture fades out. However, the fact also remains that there are several Karen households where the traditional culture persists, be it in material or non-material aspects" (2004: 979). While the Karen preserved certain aspects of their distinguishable identity, they selectively changed others. This is what Maiti calls "the best of both the worlds" (2004: 980). However, this change is not as straightforward as it seems. The strong constancies of Karen culture made me rethink and revisit the cultural changes observed in my fieldwork. Although

these cultural changes of food, clothing and housing were attributed to an obvious developmental trajectory, they seemed counterintuitive as a response to Andaman environment.

The Karen dress is most comfortable for paddy farming as well as for the high and humid temperatures of the Andaman Islands. The change from Karen to Indian clothing seems un-advantageous in every way. It is not economically better, nor does it increase comfort. Similarly, the Karen method of food preparation is easier, healthier and more economical than the Indian counterpart. The ingredients are cheap – yams, vegetables, meat and rice. Boiling is the easiest method of food preparation and is healthier than frying food, which is the most common method used in Indian kitchens. Despite these disadvantages, Karen are increasingly adopting Indian tastes and cooking. Karen architecture is a perfect fit for Andaman weather but again the Karen depict a counterintuitive change to cemented houses. Karen thatch roofed 'machaan' houses are perfect for the extreme monsoon and summer of India. The torrential rain, frequent earthquakes and occasional storms make the monsoon difficult and the summer brings with it extreme dry heat. The piled dwellings of Burma with thatch roof and bamboo walls are tailored for such harsh conditions. The thatch roof and bamboo walls provide better ventilation and effective cooling and living on the second floor protects the family from wildlife. The cemented houses are neither cheaper nor better for the environmental conditions. They do not compare to the Karen architecture.

All these changes are not only counterintuitive, but also disadvantageous for the Karen life in Andaman. In a way, they are reversing adaptation. The communities in and around Andaman should adopt the Karen ways in order to acclimate to their challenging environment but instead the Karen are conforming to the Indian ways – this is not development, it is regression. Why then were the Karen calling these changes 'development'? My survey findings

21

answer this question. The survey revealed that the Karen youth is proud of how the Karen have developed into a "more civilized community". This shows that there is a drive towards a subjective development—one that is based on Karen observation of the lifestyle of other islanders. Therefore, the problem lies in the definition and understanding of 'development.' If we define it as adaptation to the changing environment, these cultural changes are disadvantageous and cause regression. However, if one delves into the history of Andaman and understands how the Karen perceive 'development', their cultural change and identity shift are rational.

When the Karen arrived in the Andaman Islands, there were three existent categories of islanders – the colonial British, the Indian convicts and laborers, and the aborigines of the island. However, these categories carried with them the undertones of a stringent developmental hierarchy. While the British and the Indians represented the 'civilized', the natives were always termed 'savages'. This dichotomy began long before the British and continues to the present day. Sen explains "when the occupation of the islands was first contemplated by the British regime in India, there already existed a body of work and imagination that was traced by Europeans to antiquity" (2010:2). Radcliffe-Brown describes this knowledge of early explorers and their contact experiences with the Andaman Islands through Marco Polo's words: "The inhabitants are idolaters, and are a most brutish and savage race, having heads, eyes and teeth resembling those of the canine species. Their dispositions are cruel, and every person, not being of their own nation, whom they can lay their hands upon, they will kill and eat" (1922: 7). Such fantastical accounts were the historical background available to the British colonial surveyors before their arrival in Andaman. Although these surveyors invalidated most myths about the Andamanese, they persisted with the cannibalistic accounts (Vaidik 2010:23). Vaidik details the perseverance

of the 'cannibalistic savage' by first explaining the role of spatial stereotypes and then the role of

established natural hierarchies of the time:

> "Litterateurs such as Daniel Defoe and Jonathon Swift embellished the islands with their
>
> literary imagination and anthropologists and ethnologists worked these spatial imageries
>
> into acquired wisdom" (2010:26).... "There was thus an indictment of the hunter-
>
> gathering societies in the tropics as lazy and indolent, their savagery a product of their
>
> natural bounty of their islands...Thus, in the British imagination, cannibalism as the most
>
> primal form of existence was the only recourse in such godforsaken land. This reinforced
>
> the belief in the existence of cannibals as a 'natural' phenomenon, and the practice of
>
> cannibalism as a necessity, an unquestioned reality " (2010:28-9).

Satadru Sen in his book *Savagery and Colonialism* correctly identifies the category of 'savage'

as a political tactic of British colonial power: "Savagery, I argue, emerges in identifiable

historical and political stages, but always at the intersection of precarious power and nervous

pleasure. It reflects a common anxiety about the adequacy of the power of the modern, civilized

and colonial, and a connection between the colonial deviance and political competition" (2010:

12). This 'primitive' category of the 'savage' encompassed all native populations that the British

encountered when they first settled in Andaman. During the colonial rule, the 'savage' was

associated with primitive lifestyle, violent behaviors, and fetishized bodies. Thus, the term

'savage' was introduced by European explorers and exploited by the British. Unfortunately,

Indian Independence proliferated the 'savage' as the '*adivasi'* (Hindi term for aborigines) while

the Indians replaced the British as the 'civilized' other. The connotation of the word '*adivasi'* has

now changed from tribal populations to a primitive state of mind. Sen correctly explains the

endurance of the 'savage' by writing "what remains of the savage now that Britain has left the

jungle? The residue is an ideological and administrative dilemma... The problem is rooted in the very idea of aboriginality. It is a political construction initiated by non-aborigines, and in India, where there is no significant settler colonialism, the concept of *adivasi* is quite painfully contrived" (2010: 210). Today, the aborigines of Andaman have become a tourist attraction due to their 'isolated, primitive lifestyle'. For instance, an article from The Guardian, titled *Andaman Island Tribe Threatened by Lure of Mass Tourism*, showcase tourists treating Jarawa as a public spectacle. Therefore, in a way, the aboriginals remain 'savages' in the eyes of the outsider. And although the Andaman Islands have undergone tremendous change, they have always been a space of strictly defined categories of Islanders. When the Karen came to India – they could not be slotted as Indian or British, which meant that the only category left for them was the dreaded 'savages'. Since they were forest laborer and lived in makeshift housing in the jungles of Middle Andaman, they became a part of the larger category of 'primitive' beings. Today, under the Indian government, the Karen are recognized as ST (scheduled tribe), which is a formal acknowledgement of a tribe living in isolated conditions, with the connotation of a primitive lifestyle. The Karen are thus attempting to change their categorization based on their subjective understanding development, which relies on 'fitting in' with the rest of the island's Indian population as a means to leave this 'savage' slot and enter the 'civilized' category.

Once I understood this Karen need to change their identity and revisited the ongoing changes, I realized that the Indian citizenship granted to the Karen in 1947 and the nationalism that came with it helped this identity transformation. The adoption of Indian citizenship is what led the Karen to convert from isolation to interaction. It is this same citizenship that continues to send Karen children to government schools today. These schools promote a strong feeling of nationalism – the Karen abide by the same curriculum as all other Indian children. The cultural

aspects of education are also dominated by national sentiments, without accommodating for the unique Karen culture. For instance, a cultural dance competition of the middle school features dances from mainland India and the unique Karen Bamboo dance is left out of the conversation (Figure 2). The Karen children learn detailed Indian history but know very little of their ancestors' lifestyle in Burma before migration. Not only are the schools promoting a pan-Indian identity, the media channels consumed by the Karen are also aligned with a nationalist character. Most Karen homes today own televisions – the Karen watch the same TV shows and movies as every other Indian on the mainland. Today, the Karen youth is engaged in Indian entertainment shows, while Karen folk songs and dances are disappearing. The elders revealed their disappointment as many of them mentioned "the popular source of entertainment [among the Karen] has changed from folklore (stories, music and dance) to Bollywood films". Therefore, the adoption of Indian citizenship increased Karen interaction with Non-Karen islanders and nationalism propagated Indian values, which helped accommodate the Karen into the Indian categorization facilitating the shift from 'primitive' to 'modern'.

Conclusion

Through my secondary research and ethnographic fieldwork, I collected evidence to show that the Karen have undergone tremendous cultural transformation due to change in their social life. However, by finding strong constants in their culture I was drawn to understand their underlying motives to shift their cultural identity in a way that accommodates them into a national category, while preserving their Karen character. Although anthropologists working in this area and the Karen themselves dismissed this change in identity as a byproduct of social development, my research shows that it is actually a complex change resulting from an

ideological definition of development—one based on changing categorization in a way to fit the strict dichotomy of "savage" and "civilized".

This paper showcases the power of anthropology—both positive and negative. On one hand anthropological writing was responsible in propagating the island's spatial stereotypes as a breeding ground for 'savages'. Trouillot explains the role of anthropology in 'savage slotting': "the 'scientific' study of the savage qua savage became the privileged field of academic anthropology… [And] anthropology came to fill the savage slot of a larger thematic field, performing a role played, in different ways, by literature and travel accounts" (Trouillot 28-9). In the case of Andaman, the 'savage' was promoted through works of literature and soon the dichotomy of savage-civilized became a part of social reality of the Islands—causing Karen desperation to adjust their categorization. Thus, anthropology as literature has the power to impact social realities—the realities it ironically attempts to record in a pristine manner. On the other hand, anthropology attempts to discover an underlying social structure, one that may even be invisible to the members of the society. For instance, while studying the Kula Ring, Malinowski notes the oblivion of the participants when he writes, "They have no knowledge of the total outline of their social structure. They know their own motives, know the purpose of individual actions and the rules which apply to them, but how, out of these, the whole collective institution shapes, this is beyond their mental range. Not even the most intelligent native has any clear idea of the Kula as a big, organized social construction, still less of its sociological function and implications" (Malinowski 1922: 83). Similarly, during my ethnographic encounters I realized that the Karen were aware of the cultural changes observed in their everyday life but were oblivious to their underlying motivations. Only when I understood the colonial and academic history of Andaman, did I fully understand why the Karen identity is changing the way

it is. Therefore, I was able to put the Karen voice in perspective and understand their true motivations of shifting identity – motivations that were not apparent to them.

Thus, anthropology can fill the gap between the native opinions and their underlying structure. However, the ethnographer runs a risk of imposing an imagined structure to the society. It is crucial to avoid overstepping the voices of the insiders. To keep my work in check and avoid imposing my opinions onto the field, I carefully studied the agency of cultural transformation of the Karen. If what the Karen communicated to me was the entire truth and the only story with no underlying structure, then the change in Karen identity should have been passive and inevitable—a byproduct of social development. However by selectively choosing to change certain aspects of their cultural identity in order to be perceived as 'civilized', the Karen represent agency of change. I studied the Karen shift of identity as an active transformation towards a subjective 'development' and kept the Karen voices alive.

Anthropology has the potential of good and bad. Although it was a culprit of savage slotting, it has come a long way into the 21st century. The sources cited in this paper are perfect examples of how the anthropology of the Andaman Islands has developed over the years. Radcliffe-Brown's *The Andaman Islanders* represents the beginning of anthropology in the region. It exemplifies the 'privileged field that studied savage qua savage'. However, recent anthropological work has moved onto new subjects of research. For instance, Sen's PhD dissertation *Disciplining Punishment* focused on the convict society in the British penal settlement and his subsequent book *Colonialism and Savagery in the Indian Ocean* explores the life of aboriginals in the colonial context. Sen's work represents an emerging anthropology that is moving beyond the fetish of the 'savage'. Similarly, Vaidik's *Imperial Andamans: Colonial Encounter and Island history* attempts to describe the liminal space between justice and injustice

in Andaman history. Vaidik uses the native population as a subject of study in this book but only to understand their place in imperial space. The transformation in the research landscape of Andaman is tremendous and it shows a development in anthropological thought as well as maturity.

As this paper begins a conversation in cultural studies of immigrant communities, it also reminds the reader of the impact anthropology can have on the world it looks into.

References

Chamberlain, Gethin

  2012   Andaman Islands Tribe Threatened by Lure of Mass Tourism. The Guardian (London).

Coomar, Palash Chandra and Manis Kumar Raha and Sudip Bhui

  2009 Tradition and Transformation in an Immigrant Island Society: The Karen of

      Andaman Islands. Abhijeet Publications, Delhi Press.

Gyi, Maung Maung

  1983 Burmese Political Values: the Socio-political Roots of Authoritarianism. Praeger

      Press.

Khin, Nancy Pollock

  1996 Encyclopedia of World Culture, vol. 3: Karen

Kyi, Aung San Suu

  1990 Burma and India: Some Aspects of Intellectual Life under Colonialism. Allied

      Publisher Pvt. Ltd.

Maiti, Sameera

  2004 The Karen – A lesser Known Community of the Andaman Islands (India). Paper

      presented at the Islands of the World VIII International Conference, Kimmen   Island

      (Quemoy), Taiwan, November 1-7.

Malinowski, Bronislaw

  1922 Agronauts of the Western Pacific. London: Routledge &KeganPaul

Marshall, H.I.

  1980 The Karen People of Burma: A study in Anthropology and Ethnology. University of

Columbus.

Mittal, Tanvi

2014 The Ethnography of the Karen of the Andaman Islands. Unpublished Field Notes.

      July 15- Aug 10

Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred

  1922 The Andaman Islanders: A study in social Anthropology. Cambridge University Press.

  1965 Structure and Function in Primitive Society. The Free Press, New York

Roy, Shree Bhagwan

  1995 Bio-Social Change among the Karen of Andaman Island. Tribal studies of India

      Series. Inter-India Publications.

Roychowdhury, Rabin

  2004 Black Days in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. New Delhi: Manas Publications.

Sareen, Tilak Raj

2002 Sharing the Blame: Subhash Chandra Bose and the Japanese Occupation of the

      Andamans, 1942-1945. Delhi: SS.

Sen, Satadru

  2000   Disciplining Punishment: Colonialism and Convict Society in the Andaman Islands.

      New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

  2010 Savagery and Colonialism in the Indian Ocean: Power, Pleasure and the Andaman

      Islanders. Routledge.

Singh, K.S. , ed.

  1994 People of India, vol.7: Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Anthropological Survey of

      India.

Sircar, Pronob Kumar

  2011 Jarawa: The Struggle Continues. New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House.

Topich, William J. and Keith A.Leitich

  2013 The History of Myanmar. ABC-CLIO.

Trouillot, M.R.

  1991 Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness. Recapturing

      Anthropology: Working in the present (17-44)

Vaidik, Aparna

2010 Imperial Andamans: Colonial Encounter and Island History. Palgrave Macmillan.

Tables

Table 1 Indian Census (2011) depicting the demographics of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Provisional Population Totals, Census of India, 2011
Directorate of Census Operations A & N Islands

District Code	State/District	Total Population			Population in age group 0-6			Sex Ratio (0-6)	Proportion of 0-6 population		
		Persons	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females		Persons	Males	Females
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS	379944	202330	177614	39497	20094	19403	966	10.40	9.93	10.92
010	NORTH & MIDDLE ANDAMAN DISTRICT	105539	54821	50718	11647	5890	5757	977	11.04	10.74	11.35
011	SOUTH ANDAMAN DISTRICT	237586	126804	110782	23625	12050	11575	961	9.94	9.50	10.45
020	NICOBARS DISTRICT	36819	20705	16114	4225	2154	2071	961	11.48	10.4	12.85

*These figures are provisional and compiled from the Enumerators' Abstract.

*These figures may vary with the final figures to be released after processing.

Table 2 Interview Questions

1. Age
2. What can you tell me about the Karen's history? About Burma, the British administration as well as the Japanese administration. How did you hear about Burma and the Karen past? How much of this information have you passed on to your children?
3. What are some of the cultural changes that you have observed over the years? Comparing your childhood to now, how do you think the Karen culture has changed? What are some concrete examples of cultural losses and gains?
4. Why do you think this cultural change took place? Did the Church or the government play an authrative role in this transformation?
5. Do you know any Karen folktale, music or dance? How did you learn it? Have you passed it on to your children?
6. Is there any other interesting experience, story or anecdote you would like to share with me?

Table 3 Survey Questions

1. What do you know about the Karen history and how do you know this?

2. What are some of the unique features of the Karen culture? What is your favorite thing about the Karen culture?

3. Has the Karen culture changed over the past few years? If yes, how and why (you can give examples)?

Figures

Figure 1 Map of the Andaman Islands

Figure 2 Photo from the Annual School Magazine (2013-2014) of the Government Secondary School, Webi
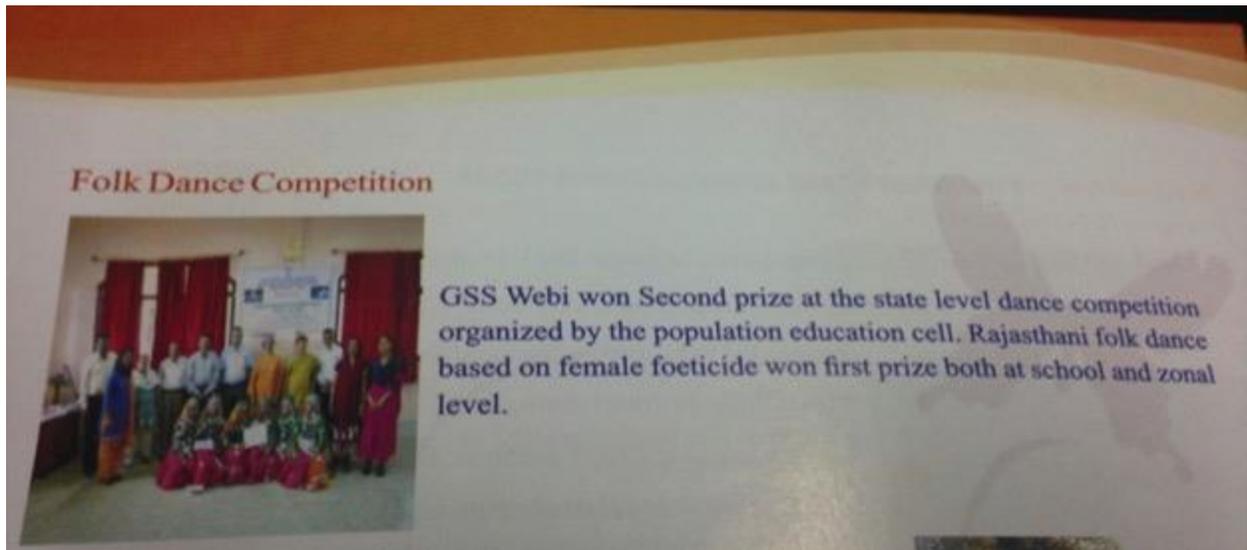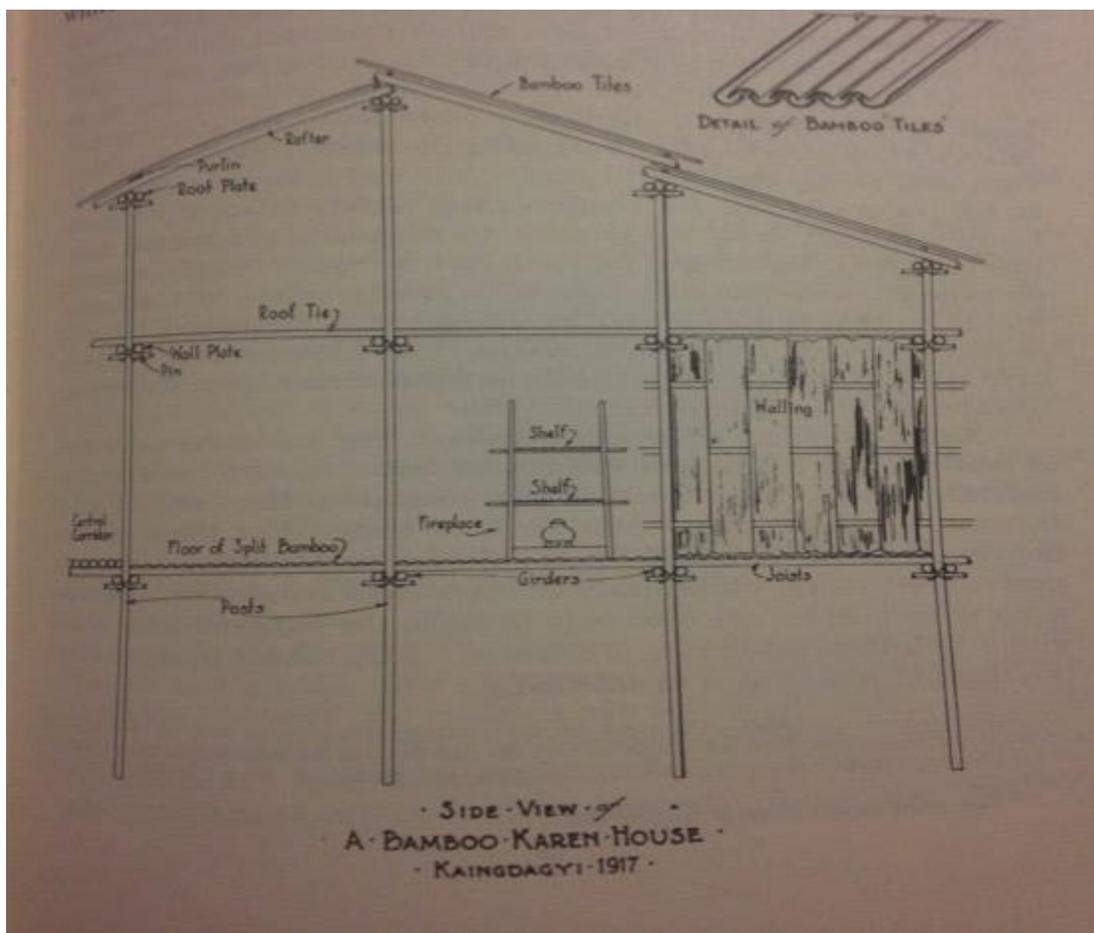

Figure 3 Smock worn typically by Karen men (Marshall 1922: 36)

Figure 4 Karen girls in the wraparound skirts (Marshall 1922: 47)

Figure 5 Bamboo Karen house (Marshall 1922: 65)

Figure 6 Karen house in Andaman (2014)