

**Role of indigenous religion in building community resilience: The case of the Karen, an ethnic minority group in the Myanmar-Thailand border region**

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### **Abstract**

Organisational researchers often conceptualise resilience as a quick recovery and operationalise it by return time, i.e., how quickly an organisational system bounces back to an initial state from an external shock. Such conceptualisation and operationalisation reflect an engineering perspective that emphasises the stability and survival of a system. However, this view neglects the ecological perspective that frames resilience as a long-term adaptive process. Taking an ecological perspective, this chapter aims to unpack how an ethnic minority community maintains its core identity while adapting to radical external changes. It explores the case of the Karen people residing in the Myanmar-Thailand border, focusing on how the Karen's animistic religious belief system brings them together and thereby supports the maintenance of their unique ethnic identity amid external political turmoil. Their resilience illustrates how indigenous religion enables ethnic minority groups to persevere and thrive in the face of adversity. By revealing the role of animism and framing it as a resilience factor, this chapter extends our understanding of community resilience.

**Keywords:** Community resilience, Ethnic minority, Animism, Myanmar-Thailand border, indigenous religion

## INTRODUCTION

Approximately five to seven million Karen people had maintained their traditional indigenous culture in Myanmar and western Thailand. However, radical external changes in the political environment have threatened the population. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Karen people have been severely oppressed and have suffered from a longstanding war with Burmese insurgents and separatists. Over time, political turmoil has forced Karen communities to flee to the border areas of Myanmar and Thailand, where they face complex socio-political issues. Those living outside the refugee camps are even viewed as illegal migrants, or painted as pro-communist, which highly compromises their safety.

Studies have found that despite hardships, Karen communities have long protected their unique ethnic identity and cultural practices (Rangkla, 2014). Many Karen communities continue their traditional practices, such as the wrist-tying ceremony, to remember who they were and what they did (Bird, Brough & Cox, 2016). These practices have enabled communities to forge strong social ties and stave off hostile forces that might threaten their solidarity (Platz, 2003). Scholars have demonstrated that practices such as the wrist-tying ceremony strengthen and reinforce the distinctive ethnic identity of the Karen people (Cheesman, 2002). These studies have revealed how an ethnic minority community adapts to radical external changes while protecting its identity through symbolic cultural ceremonies.

Drawing from literature review, this chapter asks *what factors, which I call resilience factors, build community resilience among ethnic minority people*. Because the theoretical focus of this chapter is resilience, I adopt resilience theory to identify the resilience factors (Linnenluecke, 2015; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003; Williams, Gruber, Sutcliffe, Shepherd, & Zhao, 2017). Resilience is generally defined as ‘the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedback’ (Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004: 4). In the past two decades, organisational researchers have extensively applied this concept to specific contexts, such as occupation (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016), human resource

management (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011), corporate sustainability (DesJardine, Bansal, & Yang, 2017), risk management (Williams et al., 2017), civic community (Rao & Greve, 2017), and long-term strategic tactics of the Roman Empire (Carmeli & Markman, 2011).

In this chapter, I opt for the ecological perspective because the specific focus of this study is to understand the adaptiveness of an ethnic minority community amid radical external changes. System ecologists posit that a macro ecosystem can be resilient by completing a long-term adaptive process that enables a system to keep its own identity while simultaneously adapting to external changes (Carpenter, Walker, Anderies, & Abel, 2001; Holling, 1973). Drawing upon this thinking, the scholars ask how a collective system balances the persistence of core identity (i.e., system persistence) and transformation to adapt to external change (i.e., system flexibility) (see also Farjoun, 2010). This adaptive aspect of resilience is central to the ecological perspective, yet it is largely missing in the engineering perspective. Using the ecological perspective, this chapter reveals the adaptive process and identifies the resilience factors of ethnic minority communities.

I begin this chapter with a brief review of resilience theory, which compares the engineering and ecological perspectives and explains why the ecological lens is more appropriate for examining community resilience. I then explain why and how the Karen people's religious beliefs may serve as crucial resilience factors. Finally, the implications of this study are described in the discussion section.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Ecological and engineering perspectives on resilience**

The concept of resilience is highly ambiguous. The theoretical approaches adopted to describe resilience thus differ in the relevant literature, including ecology (Holling, 1973; Holling & Gunderson, 2002), psychology (Bonanno, 2004; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), engineering (Hollnagel, Woods, & Leveson, 2006), strategic management (Carmeli & Markman, 2011; Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016), and organisational studies (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Powley, 2009).

The different approaches are typically divided into two camps: the engineering perspective and the resilience perspective (Desjardins, Barker, Lindo, Dieleman, & Dussault, 2015). Researchers who take the engineering approach mainly investigate how quickly a system returns to an equilibrium after a perturbation, often by operationalising resilience as the return time (i.e., the time it takes to bounce back from an external shock) (DesJardine et al., 2019; Maguire & Hagan, 2007). However, researchers who take the ecological approach focus on the adaptive capacity of a system to absorb and tolerate disturbances through adaptation (Adger, 2000; Carmeli & Markman, 2011; Walker et al., 2004). Because the comparison illuminates my choice of the ecological perspective, I further elaborate on the differences in detail.

First, from the ecological perspective, resilience is a *process* of evolution and not an *outcome* of evolution that implies *survival*. For example, Williams et al. (2017: 742) define resilience ‘as the *process* by which an actor (i.e., individual, organisation, or community) builds and uses its capability endowments to interact with the environment in a way that positively adjusts and maintains functioning prior to, during, and following adversity’ (italic added for emphasis). Extending a historical case of the Republic of Rome’s resilience to corporate settings, Carmeli and Markman (2011: 329) similarly suggest that ‘corporate resilience is about neither crisis management nor turnaround programs, but rather about an ongoing bundling and redeployment of capture and governance strategies.’ These studies conceptualise resilience from an ecological perspective and suggest that resilience is a long-term process of how a system adapts to changing environments, not necessarily survival or return time (Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2005). Scholars taking the ecological perspective thus claim that survival is only a necessary condition of resilience, such that a resilient system obviously survives; however, not all surviving systems are resilient if they lose their own identity and core functioning.

The second difference between the engineering and ecological perspectives is the mechanism of resilience. The distinction goes back to the system ecologist Holling’s thesis (1973, 1996), which focused not only on the different definitions of resilience, but also on the profound differences in

theoretical assumptions, mechanisms, and implications. In his thesis, the engineering perspective assumed a form of stability that drives a system to quickly return to a pre-disturbance single equilibrium. However, the ecological perspective pays more attention to evolutionary processes. This is because the ecological perspective does not presume a return to a single equilibrium, which is taken for granted from the engineering perspective. Rather, it emphasises the possibility of multiple equilibria between environmental changes (external change) and organisational responses (internal configuration) (Carmeli & Markman, 2011; Elmqvist et al. 2003; Holling, 1996). Thus, a long-term fluctuation between multi-equilibria is viewed as a necessary condition for a system to buffer and absorb environmental changes (Holling, 1996). Yet, fluctuation is considered an unstable, inefficient, and abnormal phenomenon from the engineering perspective (Holling, 1996).

This ecological approach is more suitable for answering the research question. It allows us to determine how an ethnic minority community continues to thrive in the face of external changes (system flexibility), while maintaining a community identity over an adaptive process (system persistency). By examining the adaptive process, this study aimed to identify the resilience factors. I now narrow down the literature review to community resilience, as the context of this study is *community*.

### **Community resilience from an ecological perspective**

The unit of analysis varies in resilience research, mostly conducted at the individual (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013), organisational (Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016), and macro-ecosystem levels (Folke et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2004). The unit of analysis in this study is a community. A community is generally defined as a group of people who live in the same geographic area and share a set of common values, behavioral patterns, and belief systems (Norris et al., 2008). A community often consists of systemically constructed socio-economic contexts, most of which lead to formal and informal interactions among its members (Norris et al., 2008).

In this study, I define a resilient community as one in which its members are collectively capable of preserving their community identity, tradition, and practices while adapting to a changing environment. From this perspective, building community resilience means gaining collective knowledge of external threats. Doing so enables community members to understand the external risks, determine where adjustments are required, and search for a collective solution to tackle negative repercussions from the outside (King, 1995). I argue that this process is highly related to establishing a strong community culture in which people build shared belief systems, collective prosocial behaviors, and community spirit to work together. This concern can perhaps be summarised as a brief question: *What is the collective capacity that a community develops to adapt to external changes while protecting its identity?* In other words, what are the factors that make a community resilient?

Some studies have attempted to answer these questions. Frounfelker et al. (2020), for example, suggested that collective efficacy, inward orientation, and high commitment to religiosity are potential resilience factors. Patel et al. (2017) highlighted the presence of tight social networks within communities. Pfefferbaum et al. (2008) listed the factors associated with building community resilience: shared values, collective participation, structured role, resources, long-term support, critical reflection, communication, and preparedness. In this study, I focus on an indigenous religion that is historically shared and recalled among community members. This is partly because, in an indigenous community, traditional religious practices are believed to strengthen the community spirit.

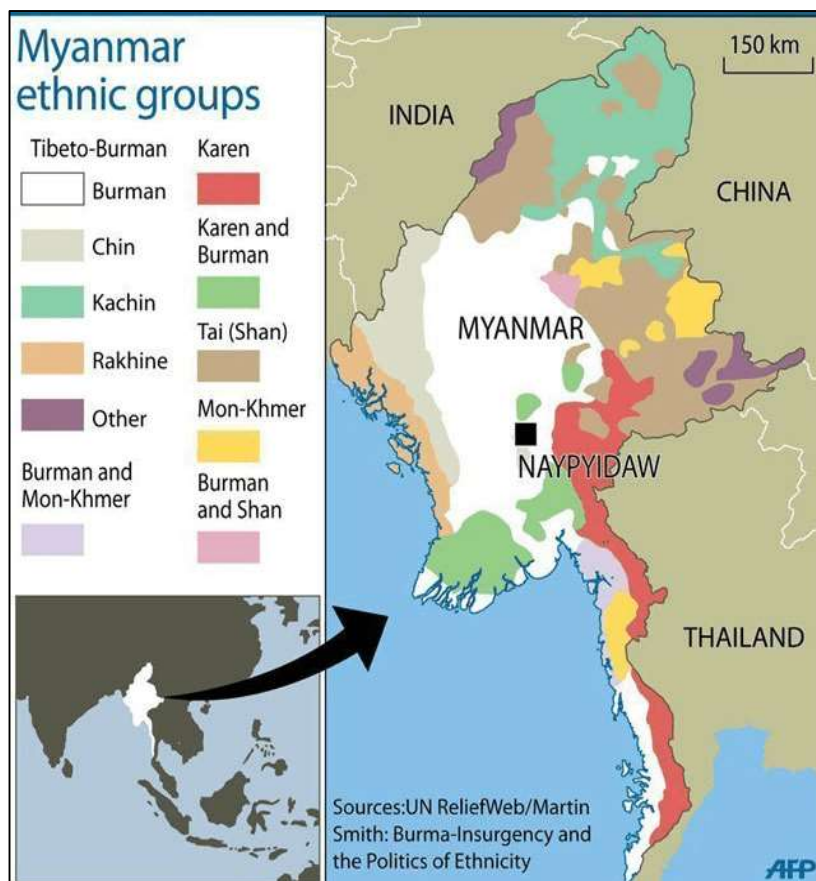
In the following section, I describe the origins and practices of the belief system that shape the identity of the Karen people. I then examine how it is linked to the building of a resilient community. To this end, I offer an overview of Karen culture and dig deeper into the important role of animism in Karen religion.

### **ANIMISM AS A RESILIENCE FACTOR IN THE KAREN COMMUNITY**

The Karen is an ethnic minority group living in Southeast Asia that share a common cultural identity (Moonieinda, 2011). Geographically, they are dispersed across the highlands bordering India,

China, Laos, and Thailand, and also inhabit the lowlands in central and southern Myanmar (Hayami, 1993; Thawnghmung, 2011). Figure 1 presents the geographic distribution of the Karen people in Myanmar. Although it is difficult to know the exact number of Karen, it is expected that about 300,000 Karen people reside in the Myanmar-Thailand border area (Hayami, 1993; Moonieinda, 2011). In 2002, The Royal Thai Government reported that approximately 438,131 Karens live in western Thailand (Buadaeng, 2007).

Figure 1. Ethnic groups in Myanmar



Source: (UN ReliefWeb, 2013: 93)

Researchers have identified the origin of the Karen people, but the evidence is still highly controversial. Some studies reported that they might have travelled from the Middle East and the Gobi Desert (MacLachlan, 2012). Others claimed that the Karen may be one of the long-lost tribes of Israel



(Delang, 2003; Petry, 1993). Perhaps, one of the most accepted views stems from Heppner's (2001) work. In his book *Suffering in Silence: The Human Rights Nightmare of the Karen People of Burma*, Heppner (2001) documented how the Karen migrated from Mongolia in numerous stages around 2,500 years ago and established their communities. He argued that some of them made their way into the hills from the central lowlands, now called the Irrawaddy and Sittaung basins in central Myanmar, which at the time was a largely uninhabited jungle. Overall, researchers seem to agree that the Karen people form a common ethnic community where an individual village is regarded as the largest social unit that makes up one socio-political and ritual society, where the social order goes hand in hand with individual order and personal well-being and communal well-being are inseparable (Haymai, 1993).

Two important characteristics of the Karen substantially differentiate them from other ethnic minority groups in Southeast Asia. The first is their language, and the second is their religion. The Karen's linguistic family consists of 17 to 20 subgroups (Thawngmung, 2011). Some trace their origins back to the Tibeto-Burmese language branch (Platz, 2003; Hayami, 1996), while others are much closer to the Sino-Tibetan language family (Delang, 2003). The Burmese Census conducted in 1921 recognised 14 dispersed hilltribes using different languages and characterised them into six tribes: the Sgaw, the Bwe, the Pwo, the Padang, the Karenni, and the Zayin. Based on this, Lewis (1924) categorised the Karen people into three main tribes: the Sgaw, the Pwo, and the Bwe. Danpongpee (2000) later added a fourth tribe: the Toungthu. Although linguistic differences occasionally make communication difficult among the tribes, all the languages spoken share the same linguistic structure, referred to as Sgaw Karen, which enables them to communicate and bond together (Thawngmung, 2011).

The second source that distinguishes them is religion. Religion binds the geographically dispersed Karen people into one ethnic identity. They have long held strong beliefs in animism. The Karen animistic belief system is even viewed by many scholars as a more original element of Karen identity than their linguistic root (Ikeda, 2012). Ikeda (2012) suggested that the shared belief in

animism explains why they still prefer to live together in the mountains, not the lowlands, and resist mingling with outsiders. I now dig deeper into animism in the following section.

### **ANIMISM AS A BELIEF SYSTEM IN KAREN CULTURE**

According to Swancutt (2019), animism is defined as a sociocultural mechanism of how indigenous people respond to other beings, forces of nature, objects, and even technical devices. The Karen people have developed various elements of animism as a belief system. Their animism plays two pivotal roles in their daily routines: (1) shaping a unique worldview of relationships between human and nonhuman entities, and (2) forming a normative basis for their moral code.

First, Karen communities believe that although animals and people have different bodies and characteristics, they possess the same type of soul. For this reason, Karen people believe that nonhumans and humans can form authentic relationships that may resemble the relationships among humans (Steenhuisen, 2020). Hayami (1996) observed that Karens believe in the existence of territorial spirits (e.g., the Lord of Water and Lord of Land), and that the spirits guard against evil spirits lurking in the inhabitable forest. They also believe that in addition to the supreme tutelary spirit, there are good spirits residing in villages (Hayami, 1996). The good spirits are believed to be elderly relatives who can be appeased through respect or small gifts, or enraged by social conflicts and moral violations (Moonieinda, 2011). Hayami (1993) further explained that the Karens believe that one's careless, indecent, and anti-community acts can incite good spirits to act against the entire community. This belief in a nuanced connectivity with nonhuman entities essentially plays as a mediating role between the community and the Lord of Water and Lord of Land, who are believed to govern the mountain (Rajah, 2008). The Karens believe that when harmony between humans and nonhumans is finally established, that harmony brings happiness and health (Hayami, 1993) and the forgiveness needed to appease the enraged spirit (Paul, 2018).

Specifically, each Karen community member is assumed to have 37 *k'las*, and these *k'las* are believed to be the vital essences of a person's health (Hayami, 1993). Among them, the head *k'la* is

considered the most significant because its permanent loss results in death (Hayami, 1993). Hayami (1993) stated that *K'las* are readily lured by bad spirits or become lost in the forest. Yet, Rangkla (2014) argued that they freely depart the body and arrive again when they are shocked or frightened. The ritual of calling and securing *k'la* by tying cotton threads around one's wrists, as shown in Figure 2, is practiced as a method of protection and of facilitating healing from attacks by bad spirits (Hayami, 1993). According to Hayami (2004), this symbolic ceremony primarily serves to initiate collective reflection and to honor the triadic link among individuals' well-being, nonhuman entities' well-being, and the socio-ecological order of the community.

Figure 2. Karen wrist-tying ceremony



Source: *Karen News* (August 12, 2013)

Second, the Karen's animistic belief system shapes their daily moral code. For example, according to Po (1928: 20), 'marriage is a sacred and solemn act'. White tunic dresses are worn by unmarried women to symbolise strict sexual morality (Hayami, 1996). In Karen life, sexual misconduct

is closely related to animistic punishment. Sex outside marriage is highly discouraged for fear of provoking a spirit that can not only harm the offending individuals but also destroy the entire community (Moonieinda, 2011). Likewise, sexually blasphemous words directed at the spirits are believed to bring about misfortune that harms the entire community's well-being over time.

For this reason, the Karen people try to reach what they call a *cool state*, which is a calm and stable mental state. Coolness is the most desirable condition for a community in which harmony is upheld stably with a good spirit (Hayami, 1993). The creation of a cool state in any given aspect of the Karen's life is morally valued as it brings about a harmonious condition (Rajah, 2008). It is assumed that people in a cool state seek to promote favorable conditions for their daily routine, crop growth, and even the success of married life (Rajah, 2008). Hayami (1993) concluded that this coolness is the most desirable condition at the community level, not only for the surrounding nature but also for the individual. Thus, village leaders and male elders engage in a number of rituals to communicate and negotiate with the tutelary spirit in order to maintain a good relationship and thus a cool state (Richthammer in Kyed, McConnachie, & Gravers, 2020).

### **ANIMISM AS A RESILIENCE FACTOR**

I build on these previous studies to argue that the Karen's unique belief system in animism enables them to be resilient (i.e., protecting their core identity while adapting to extreme external change). To do so, I describe the external changes this study specifically focuses on and explain the socio-cognitive mechanism of how animism plays the role of a resilient factor.

#### **External threats to Karen communities**

One of the most compelling external threats to Karen communities originated from the Burmese juntas and insurgents that tried to remove anti-Burmese ethnic groups (Rajah, 2002). Table 1 depicts some of the milestone events and describes how the Karen's collective movement shifted, in response to political threats. Since the British colonisation of Myanmar, there has been strong antagonism between the Karen and Burmese (Chesman, 2002; Rajah, 2002). During World War II, the Karen

strategically sided with the British, while the Burmese aligned with Japan (Neiman, Soh & Sutan, 2008). After the war, the Karen were denied ownership of their own territory, and even worse, Burmese authorities took the territory and legitimised their status as the country's main ethnic group. It has been claimed that they often mistreat the Karen and have unfortunately massacred Karen villages (Moonieinda, 2011).

Table 1. External political turmoil that directly or indirectly threatened the Karen community and the Karen's response to the threat

Years	Description	Source
1824–26	The first Anglo-Burmese war took place in Myanmar.	Cheesman, 2002
1881	The Karen National Association (KNA) was established to promote Karen identity, leadership, and education and to secure socio-economic advancement.	Rajah, 2002
1886	As anti-British sentiment emerged in Myanmar, the British recruited Karen armies against the Burmese government.	Rajah, 2002
1928	The initial call for an independent Karen state was made.	Smith, 1991
1939	An attempt to establish an independent Karen state was made, yet it was unsuccessful. As a result, Karen-Burmese hostility increasingly became violent.	Cheesman, 2002
1947	Burmese-dominated government policies had both highlighted and suppressed ethnic distinctions.	Cheesman, 2002
1948	The Karen advocated for independence from the Burmese with the British after WWII. However, following Burmese independence in 1948, the British promise to review Karen independence was suddenly forgotten.	Neiman, Soh, & Sutan, 2008
1949	One year after Burmese independence, an unyielding Karen separatist movement with a primarily Christian leadership arose.	Rajah, 2002
1962	A Burmese military government took over the parliament, and all people were subject to its jurisdiction.	Cheesman, 2002
1974	The practice of dictatorial authority was codified into law with the 1974 constitution.	Cheesman, 2002
1988	A national movement for democracy took place in Myanmar in 1988. The Karen National Union headquarters became the base of operation for pro-democracy organisations.	Moonieinda, 2011
1994	The Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army was established in December 1994.	Karen Human Rights Group, 1996
2007	The Karen National Union/Karen Liberation Army (Peace Council) was established.	Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2019a; 2019b
2009	The Burmese government announced the Border Guard Forces scheme to suppress any military actions in the border area of Myanmar and Thailand, forcing many minority ethnic groups to move from their territories. This occurred without the promised political discussions.	Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2019; 2019b

As a result, most Karen people have been at war with the Burmese armies, especially since the Burmese attained independence in 1948 (Buadaeng, 2007; Cook et al., 2015). In the late 1990s, the violence became even more intense and could have been considered genocidal, according to several reports. Most Karen people who have been displaced by attacks faced severe physical and social adjustments that were required for their survival. Over the process, long-term relocations were implemented to push the Karen to the periphery of mainstream Burmese society (Cusano, 2001). Unfortunately, the Karen National Union and other guerrilla armies split into various factions, some of which ended up battling each other (Moonieinda, 2011; Rajah, 2002).

### **Animism as a resilience factor: system persistency**

Because of the radical political turmoil that the Karen experienced, Karen communities were required to develop some ideas or practices that can unite them. Their animistic belief system played an important role in this process. First, their religion united them by supporting the recall of their collective identities. For example, in the midst of external disturbances, many Karen leaders use wrist-tying ceremonies as symbols of reunification and togetherness (MacLachlan, 2012). MacLachlan (2012) found that wrist-tying ceremonies played a pivotal role in recalling a sense of oneness that helped mitigate the geographical and potential socio-cultural differences among Karen communities. Specifically, Karen leaders used two narrative strategies to solidify the people. First, they stressed that the belief in Karen animism was already embedded in Karen identity and not something externally given (MacLachlan, 2012). Second, the leaders formed a universal understanding of *Karenness* through ancestral legends, myths, and stories about wrist-tying ceremonies (MacLachlan, 2012). MacLachlan (2012) referred to the wrist-tying ceremony as ‘old and pure Karen practice’ that has been passed down to the present Karen communities from the ancestors.

One compelling narrative is perhaps the origin of the wrist-tying ceremony. According to a Karen legend, the first Karen immigrants from Southern China to Northern Myanmar started the wrist-tying ceremony. A sandstorm erupted as they crossed the Gobi Desert. Frequent sandstorms eventually

scattered all of the people. Overtime, they settled across the mountainous areas of Southeast Asia. They developed a symbolic ritual to recognize themselves, hoping that they could reunite someday. This ritual was the wrist-tying ceremony. Community members wore white threads on their wrists, so that in the event that they were separated again, they would have a common method of recognizing that they belong to the same ethnic community. This was because although individual Karen communities' lifestyles, rules, and other ethnological elements eventually might become different, their belief in animism could remain the same. Thus, the ceremony was well accepted among all Karen communities. According to the legend, the sandstorm was a severe threat in the past that drove the people to invent the symbolic wrist-tying ceremony. In the present, the political turmoil triggers the resurrection of the ceremony.

The second role of animism in unifying the Karen people is related to the strong bond between the living space and its surrounding natural environment (Hayami, 1993, 1996). It is important to note that Karens peacefully coexist with their wider environment. As discussed earlier, they place equal value on both known and unknown forms of nature, including human, nonhuman biological species, the land, trees, rocks, and even ghosts (Steenhuisen, 2020). Thus, the Karen people treat nature as a neighbor. Such a strong bond with nature, which originated from animism, formed a spiritual sense of duty to protect the space in which their ancestors lived. This prevented them from abandoning their land or moving to other areas. Thus, it served to keep them in the current space where they settled.

In fact, many Karen communities settled in the mountainous areas of Myanmar and northern Thailand and converted the harsh land into rice beds or flower gardens (Santasombat, 2004). They developed knowledge and skills related to mountainous cultivation, which later became significant elements of their way of life (Santasombat, 2004; Trakansuphakorn, 2008). The strong interconnectedness with the land, water, and trees in the wild was developed through cultivation (Hayami, 1993). This means that not only did the spiritual bond with nature form a moral duty to protect their living space, but it also gave them a collective ability to learn how to protect their land. An

interdependency was manifested in the Karen's animism and animistic ceremonies, which played an important role in strengthening their bond with nature. This is one of the reasons they still stick to their original settlement despite the external threat and forced migration.

Perhaps, one ideal example of the strong bond with nature is the collective calling 'owners of the water and land,' performed during animistic ceremonies (Paul, 2018). The ritual is aimed at preserving and restoring homes from external invasion (Paul, 2018). Some scholars even found that many Karens still believe that the longstanding war between their own armed groups and the Burmese militaries means a glorious fight to protect the ecological diversity of the region and the ownership of their land (Trakansuphakorn, 2008). For example, all administrative divisions of the Karen National Union, including the Karen State in Myanmar, are referred to as *Kawthoolei*, 'where control over territories (security), authority over population (governance), and access to resources (development) are being contested and renegotiated as a way to build peace.' (Kham, 2021: 15).<sup>1</sup> According to Paul (2018), it is a statement about Karen people's right to reject any development projects that may negatively affect their water, land, and natural resources. He further argued that the Karen's efforts to preserve clean water, natural forests, and endangered species, even in the face of civil war and forced migration, are evidence of the strength of their animistic beliefs. Animism, therefore, is an important factor in their connection to nature that fuels their desire to maintain their harsh mountainous lifestyle.

Ecological value has been even prominent in Karen communities. Recently, many Karen communities have been recognised for their environmental activism because of their bond with the land and their dedication to protecting it. There is growing re-awareness among the younger generations of the forest that a crucial component of Karen ethnic identity is eco-centrism, as the ecological movement of the Karen strengthens young generations' animistic beliefs in nature and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Kaw* is a Karen word that refers to 'country.' It also refers to a territory that consists of 1 to 10 villages in a certain region. A *kaw* often includes communal forests and highland farming regions. In the Pwo Karen language, *kawthoolei* is often translated as 'green country,' 'land without evil,' or 'land of the cool caves,' although most Karen people would translate the term as 'Karen country' (Thansrithong & Buadaeng, 2017). Additionally, it evokes the idea of an original homeland that the Karen defend and restore (Thansrithong & Buadaeng, 2017).



interdependent relationship between human and nonhuman (Steenhuisen, 2020). Younger Karen people gain a deeper sense of identity and self-reliance as a result of the unique sensibility of their intimate bond with and reliance on the forest (Steenhuisen, 2020). For example, some have formed the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, a community-based, non-governmental, and non-profit organisation that strives to increase livelihood security and fights against external agents that threaten the ecological diversity of their living space.

The strong belief in animism compels individual community members to uphold community values rather than pursue individual aims that might conflict with collectivistic values. This internal mechanism of community solidarity helped the Karen people pursue collective goals, thereby preventing potential deviators. For example, Hayami (1993) defined a traditional Karen community as a politico-religious social order that played a watchdog role in monitoring community members. *Thout kyar*, translated as ‘being faithful’ in English, operated as the most fundamental law-like moral quality of the Karen community. Both young people and older adults see this quality as an essential societal norm to define one another and force themselves to be morally compatible. Having *thout kyar* means living as a relational being embedded in their family and community rather than an entirely independent being that may conflict with much larger social units (Chambers, 2019). This contributed to reducing internal conflicts among numerous Karen communities and establishing a pan-Karen identity across Myanmar and Thailand (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008).

### **Animism as a resilience factor: system flexibility**

The ecological perspective highlights the balance between system persistence and flexibility (Folke et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2004). Indeed, excessive persistence makes a system potentially rigid, whereas too much flexibility can be detrimental to a system’s core functioning and identity. Therefore, understanding the balance between persistence and flexibility is central to unpacking the adaptive aspects of a resilient system. A relevant question in this context is how Karen communities change aspects of their core practices and cultures that may conflict with ancestral traditions.

One striking aspect of Karen flexibility is the adoption of external ideas through unique hybridisation with foreign religions. Interestingly, Karen animistic beliefs have been increasingly integrated with Western Christianity and Theravada Buddhism. This has led to institutional and even financial support from Western and mainstream Thai society. Relevant observations are reflected in anthropologists' fieldworks. In the case of Christianity, Ikeda (2012) demonstrated that Karen communities were voluntarily christianised and willingly embraced Western influence. When Karen people encountered the Baptist missionaries in Myanmar in the early nineteenth century, they considered potential integration rather than simply rejecting or attacking them. Surprisingly, some Karen religious leaders even viewed themselves as a lost tribe of Israel, based on the compelling similarities between a number of Karen myths and the early books of the Old Testament (Platz, 2003; Delang 2003). The leaders strategically viewed the Bible as 'the lost book' and treated missionaries to be 'white brothers' that brought the Bible to them (Platz, 2003; Ikeda, 2012). Their traditional values were also highly consistent with Christian notions of morality (Platz, 2003; South, 2007).

In a sense, the Karen could easily understand Christianity through the connections with their own religion. When Christianity reached their communities, many people voluntarily converted to it. The first baptism of a Karen person, Ko Tha Byu, by the American missionary Adoniram Judson in 1828 marked the beginning of the widespread conversion of Karen people to Christianity (Platz, 2003; Ikeda, 2012). After learning about the legend of 'the lost book,' another American missionary, Jonathan Wade, was motivated to create the Sgaw Karen script in 1832 and the Pwo Karen script in 1852 (Platz, 2003; Ikeda, 2012).

The second integration with other religions occurred with Buddhism. Existing sources reveal that by the eighteenth century, the majority of Karen accepted Buddhism as a legitimate religious belief to stabilise relationships with Thailand (Ikeda, 2012). They were called 'Buddhist Karen' to distinguish themselves from dispersed Karen communities (Ikeda, 2012). For Buddhist Karens, there is no superior religion; that is, all religions are considered the same (Platz, 2003). Since the ancient form of Buddhism

also emphasised harmony with nature and ecosystems, Buddhism has historically been much more receptive to animist beliefs and practices (MacLachlan, 2012). Buddhists may differ from Karen animists only in that Buddhists do not practice ancestor worship and instead give offerings to the monks. However, Buddhist Karens often treat elderly monks and the Buddha as their ancestors. Thus, integration with Buddhism does not oblige someone to quite ancestral worship (Platz, 2003). The majority of Buddhist Karens still respect ancestral traditions and practice spirit cults (Hayami, 2004; Buadaeng, 2003). Even though they openly identify themselves as Buddhist Karens, they combine Buddhist principles and moral codes with animist beliefs in spirits, as indicated by their dual reliance on Buddhist monks and spirit mediums (Richthammer, 2020).

One may view the current internal strife between Christian and Buddhist Karen as potentially threatening to the sense of oneness that the Karen people have developed (Mang, 2016). However, the changes have not resulted in replacement of tradition but have instead fostered hybridisation and integration. Traditional animistic rituals such as wrist-tying ceremonies are still practiced, and animistic beliefs in powerful spirits remain at the heart of pan-Karen identity. To briefly illustrate, the figurative unification of body and soul and the soul-calling chants still serve as reminders to all Karen people to recall who they were and what they did (Rankla, 2014). Regardless of their conversion, all Karen religious leaders urge community members to attend wrist-tying ceremonies (Rangkla, 2014). Platz (2003) points out that despite the rise in ethnic and religious tensions worldwide, the Karen are highly flexible in integrating foreign elements of other religions with their traditional belief system.

Table 2 summarises how the Karen's belief system in animism ensures the resilience of their community. It plays an important role in recalling their ethnic identity, making them stick to their living spaces, and offering a normative basis for maintaining community ethics. These functions allow Karen communities to protect their collective identity and maintain their cultural practice against external turmoil (i.e., system persistency). It also serves as an open filter for accepting outside ideas

and religions that enables them to connect to much larger entities that may support them (i.e., system flexibility).

Table 2. Role of animism in promoting community resilience among the Karen people

Two elements of system resilience	Role of animism
System persistency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Recalling collective memories:</i> Animistic religious ceremonies solidify the oneness of the Karen people by supporting their collective identity through the recall of collective memories.</li> <li>● <i>Ecological attachment to land:</i> The Karen’s belief in animism promotes a strong bond with their living space and nature, which prevents them from easily moving to other regions and remains in their territories.</li> <li>● <i>Collective moral norm:</i> The Karen’s collective belief in animism compel each community member to keep shared values through strong community-based ethics.</li> </ul>
System flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Karen communities integrate the foreign thoughts and religions of outside cultures with their traditional belief system by actively searching for commonalities between them.</li> </ul>

## DISCUSSION

Previous studies on resilience were skewed toward the engineering perspective, which conceptualised resilience as recovery capacity (Gittell, Cameron, Lim, & Rivas, 2006; Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). In their studies, resilience refers to the ability to quickly bounce back from a specific external disturbance. Scholars have accordingly operationalised the concept based on return time or survival. Deviating from the previous studies, this chapter draws upon an ecological perspective that emphasises a system’s dual capacity, namely system persistency and flexibility (Folke, 2010; Farjoun, 2010). In doing so, it brings a unique case in which the indigenous belief system, the Karen’s animistic beliefs, plays a crucial role as a resilience factor that strengthens ethnic identity in response to external political turmoil. Based on this case analysis, I conclude this chapter with discussion of an important implication.

Previous studies have focused on formal rules, practices, and institutions that can improve the resilience of a system, thereby framing resilience factors as formal engagement. However, at the community level, this chapter suggests that a resilience factor can be an ethno-cultural, informal element of a community. Among others, my focus was the indigenous religion that has historically

been passed down from one generation to the other and is still manifested in current generation's daily ceremonies. The wrist-tying ceremonies symbolise the sense of pride and togetherness of Karen communities. As discussed, Karen communities consist of diverse religious groups, and thus present differences in status, class, and language (Gravers, 2007). The term 'Karen' itself is inclusive, referring to people who speak one or more Karenic languages and whose ancestors have spread widely across Southeast Asia (Hayami, 2004). However, the wrist-tying ceremonies have aided the Karen people in overcoming the differences within Karens. It does so by serving as a collective recall mechanism for all Karen people to support, unite, and live in harmony. This brings them together and keeps shaping their identity, demonstrating a sense of oneness and their willingness to protect themselves against external political threats (Rangkla, 2014).

In fact, the Karen people who have migrated to North America and Europe are also willing to participate in wrist-tying ceremonies. It takes place in their homes around the August full moon. They ward off evil spirits by tying white threads together. They still wear traditional Karen clothes and relate to each other under the umbrella of Karen identity, even though they now speak different languages. Thus, although the practice has its roots in animism, Christian Karen and Buddhists alike celebrate this ceremony. By uncovering how such an ethnological element serves as an informal institution that shapes community identity and further strengthens solidarity, this study extends our understanding of community resilience factors.

This discussion and the contributions now lead us to introduce a specific term, 'cultural resilience,' in the context of indigenous communities (Harper, 2016). Cultural resilience refers to the capacity of the indigenous community to rebalance the collective lives of community members in the face of extreme external threats (Harper, 2016). As discussed earlier, the Karen people's ethnic identity evolved into the community's identity amid their resistance to the tyranny they faced (Rajah, 2002). The Karen continues to engage in community-centered exchanges despite significant disruptions (Lewis & Young, 2019). This shows that they live as a unique cultural community where people

continue their core cultural practices and do not simply survive by compromising with external pressure.

Here, we see that community resilience does not merely mean the survival of the community amid external events and disturbances. In organisational literature, survival is merely an outcome variable at the population level (Hannan & Freeman, 1993) that is not related to the process of being culturally resilient. It is measured by the mortality rate (Carroll & Delacroix, 1982) or survival time (Brüderl, Preisendörfer, & Ziegler, 1992). A culturally resilient community needs to retain “essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedback” (Walker et al., 2004, p. 4) while surviving. This means that survival is only a necessary condition for community resilience. Not all surviving systems (communities in this case) are resilient if they lose their own cultural identity. This chapter suggests that cultural resilience can be ensured once communities survive and simultaneously protect their unique cultural identities.

I conclude this chapter by highlighting the need to explore community resilience. Many ethnic minority groups worldwide are exposed to various external risks. The threats are not only socio-political but also include complex ecological and moral concerns that are major threats to human rights. Thus, tackling the risks is often a sustainability issue in these regions. This chapter suggests that although their resilience used to be dependent on external aid, the source of community resilience can be achieved through endogenous forces such as cultural and religious practices that serve to solidify people. To reveal this, I focused on a Southeast Asian minority group’s unique belief system in animism and examined how the belief system makes their community resilient. Further research can investigate the resilience of ethnic minorities to extend our understanding of resilience at the community level and ultimately to resolve sustainability issues in the region.

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