In the privacy of his bamboo hut, the First Mate asked us for the second time that
day how we felt about the Burmese government. Ethnically Burmese, he was a young, in
his early twenties, with one of the warmest presences in a person I can remember.

When we avoided the question, he pulled off his t-shirt and pointed to a round
scar above about the size of a quarter.

As a teenager, he had signed on to a five-year minimum enlistment with the
Burmese military. He was interested in being able to help his family and in the education
and training he would receive.

Shortly after completing basic training he was assigned to an infantry unit that
was engaged in suppressing the Mon resistance force along the Thai border. Despite this,
the First Mate recognized the Mon as a peaceful people. Many were rice farmers like his
family. He had never met anyone who was Mon, and had no reason to want to kill them.

He didn’t know if he had actually ever killed anyone in battle, and did not want to
die himself. In the middle of a firefight, he and a friend decided to desert. His
commander, aware of their decision, gave the order to kill the two men. As they fled
fellow Burmese soldiers shot his friend dead. A bullet struck him also, passing through
his body just above the right collarbone.

He never went home for fear of being found. Rather he fled to the Irrawaddy
Delta and eventually the Andaman Coast where he felt he believes he can live in peace.

To this day, hundreds of thousands of Burmese refugees remain in camps in
Thailand, Bangladesh, India, and China. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands more
are internally displaced. Despite recent rounds of ceasefire agreements, the Kachin and
Shan independence armies have once again gone to battle with the Burmese military.

Eight major ethnic groups represent the majority of Burma’s population; the
Bamar, Shan, Kayin, Rakhine, Chin, Mon, Kachin and Kayah. From these eight major
groups, the Burmese government recognizes one hundred thirty five distinct ethnic
groups living within its borders.

Historically few of these groups ever shared a common definition of modern
Burma. Rather, the tides of occupation of Burma set the stage for the deep mistrust,
resentment, and open violence between the central lowland Bamar of Ministerial Burma,
and the ethnic minorities of the Frontier Areas.
The British maintained a long tradition of excluding ethnic Burmans from the armed forces, until 1925 when they formally adopted a policy of only recruiting Chins, Kachins, and Karens. In the eyes of the Burman majority, “ethnic minorities came to be associated with colonial rule,” while the army was seen as, “an instrument to facilitate their oppression at the hands of ethnic minorities.”

In 1942, a young Aung San and a group of Burmese students who had received military training from the Japanese successfully ousted the British from power. Thus, under the circumstances, “it was impossible for the ethnic minorities to see the Burmans as a legitimate nationalist movement; instead, they were viewed as collaborators with an occupying power.”

“Disillusioned with their de facto role as a Japanese colony,” a new alliance was formed between the Burmese nationalists, ethnic minorities and British. By 1945 the Japanese had been expelled. Consequently, the Japanese “were defeated by networks of armed guerillas and soldiers fighting against the same enemy but fighting for very different visions of the future.”

As true independence became imminent, Aung San and his Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League began to set their plan for Burma. While the AFPFL was interested in the creation of a unified Burma, the ethnic minorities were not immediately agreeable to the idea.

A series of two conferences were held in Panglong, Shan State. Kachin, Chin, Shan and Karen delegates attended the first, held in March 1946. Of note was H.N.C. Stevenson’s (the British director of the Frontier Areas) proposal of the creation of “a United Frontier Union consisting of Chin, Kachin, Shan, Kareni, and Karen territory.” The AFPFL argued strongly against the idea.

Shan, Kachin and Chin delegates met with AFPFL delegates for the second Panglong Conference on February 6, 1947. General agreements were made on such foundational principles of federation with Burma including internal autonomy, the creation of a Kachin state, financial relations, and, most remembered to this day, the right to succession.

Five months later however Aung San would be assassinated and the work towards federation would be lost. In the years to come Burma would struggle with domestic communism, political instability and failed elections. On March 2, 1962 General Ne Win and sixteen other senior military officers, staged a coup d'état, ushering in the era of military regime and determined national unification.

The Panglong Conferences did more to create a common myth, widely interpreted, rather then lay the foundations for a federal system in Burma. For the Burmans was the hope of a completely unified federation of the Burmese territories. To this day, members of the represented minorities will tell you that although there was a willingness to try a federation, the Panglong Conferences, with their option for succession, were their best chance for complete autonomy.
More than anything else, the Panglong Conferences served to highlight the relationship between “ethnic identity and national identity” as a key factor in “identifying why national unity remains an elusive concept in multi-ethnic nations like Burma.”

Unfortunately the First Mate’s story was not a unique experience. Stories of rape, forced labor, genocide and torture were whispered to me over the years of travel in Burma. Since Panglong, the nation has witnessed almost continual civil war as the dispute over the idea of Burmese nationalism rages on.

When I arrived in Burma for the first time in 2007 the nation was seen as a global pariah ruled by General Than Shwe and his brutal military regime. To avoid unwanted international attention, the regime remained as isolated as possible from the rest of the world. Indicators that spoke to economics, civil liberties, access to health care, and participation in any kind of international arena all painted a daunting reality.

Not wanting to appear unwelcoming however, tourism was encouraged. Foreigners were allowed to visit the half of the country that was safely under the control of the central government. The other half of the Burma was off limits to foreign travel. These “Black Zones” as they are known, were occasionally areas of sensitive economic interests such as oil pipelines or mines, but more often are areas of ongoing military conflict with the ethnic minorities.

In 2009, I read Dith Pran’s “Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors.” The book immediately resonated. I felt that history should not be allowed to overlook the atrocities that had been going on inside Burma for decades. I decided then that I would do what I could to give voice to those who had decided to flee the country.

I wanted to see how isolation, military oppression, years of open conflict, and an extremely isolating landscape affected the lives of those living in the Black Zones. I was curious to know what was left of the conversation over Panglong in the eyes of the ethnic minorities who held so much hope in its future.

I spent October of 2010 living in the Peing Luang and Mae La Refugee Camps, and the remote farming valley of Oo Thu Ta. Mae La and Oo Thu Ta Valley lie just on the Thai side of the border, opposite Karen State on the other side of the Salween River. Mae La is home to some sixty thousand refugees while Oo Thu Ta was an ideal location to interview Burmese day laborers and internally displaced. Peing Luang Refugee Camp is almost entirely populated by Shan, again whose home state in Burma bearing the same name, is just a few miles to the west. The Karen and Shan populations have historically posed some of the greatest resistance to Burmese occupation.

My goal was to create of a collection of first hand accounts of life in the Black Zones as told by Shan and Karen refugees or migrant workers. I also hoped to explore what was left of the myth of Panglong. To facilitate this process, research was conducted using two well-established methods. I would begin by conducting in-depth interviews,
following which I would schedule a follow up visit to conduct photo-elicitation interviews.

I had created a collection of sixty-eight images from my own archive of Burma. The edit intentionally threw a wide net as far as subject matter was concerned. I felt that each of the goals I had for the project, life in the Black Zones, and Burmese federalism, were big subjects in their own right. Images designed to elicit comments about the day-to-day life inside the Black Zones were of homes, farming practices, and hunters; common themes. Images meant to elicit comments about nationhood tended to be of ‘unifying’ elements such as national treasures, religious practices, and other ethnic groups.

At the onset of the project I was operating under the assumption that the in-depth interviews would yield far less information than the photo-elicitation interviews. In my experience the Shan and Karen tend to be socially very conservative. Furthermore I was concerned that fear of reliving trauma and concern over how project would be disseminated would inhibit the desire to share personal stories. Rather, the strength of these interviews would lie in establishing rapport and trust with my subjects while gaining perspective on their individual histories.

It was my belief that the process of seeing a set of images would facilitate the larger conversations I was hoping for. Over the course of the project I conducted twenty-five in-depth interviews with twenty-three different subjects and nine photo-elicitation interviews.

The results of both the in-depth and photo-elicitation interviews couldn’t have been further from what I had expected. Without failure, the information and insight gained from the in-depth interviews was astounding. I hadn’t expected these interviews to be so rich in content and personal in nature. In many ways these interviews spoke directly to daily life in rural Burma; the lifestyle, the atrocities, the hopes, frustrations, fears, and motivations of people living under a military dictatorship.

The concerns I had for the most part proved to be without reason. Most subjects needed little more than an invitation to recount their entire story. Many invited me back to add details that they had missed in previous sessions.

Initially, I was not satisfied with the information yielded by the photo-elicitation interviews I had conducted. They seemed to speak largely to the minutia of day-to-day life rather than add to the conversation about Burmese nationalism. It was not until much later and a shift in my own perspective, that I began to realize the value of the results. I had missed the point. The Devil, as they say, was in the details.

Rather then creating a direct dialog, the subtleties of the responses created a very definite commentary about isolation, subsistence life style, and shifts in cultural values between generations, and lack of education or exposure to life beyond a very small world. As further evidence of this nearly as many questions were asked about the images during the interview as were statements made about them.
Mary Htoo and others had never seen a car or a truck. “We do not have wire or nails. We tie (our homes) with bamboo.” Saw Plew Lay had never heard of Mandalay.

Images related to construction or pottery styles, agricultural practices, or religious iconography, were often scrutinized by subjects. One of the many unexpected results of this project seems to be the vast possibility for photo-elicitation in cultural mapping of inaccessible areas. Subtle variations in design elements often determined exactly who was living in different regions or villages.

Occasionally, these images of the everyday brought forth much larger conversations. An image of two hunters was incredibly successful at creating larger context about the realities of life in the Black Zones.

Saw Plew Lay noted that there were no guns in his village. When asked if not even to hunt he responded, “only slingshots. You cannot use flashlights either. You cannot wear shorts or have long hair, or wear camouflage shorts. If the army catches you using a flashlight they will kill you on the spot.”

“They would think you are a KNU spy. Not even in the village. If they even find a battery for the flashlight they will take the whole family. They will take your money and then let you go. Otherwise you go to jail.”

Humor on the part of Sai On emphasized the Shan peoples belief that the Gnats (protective spirits worshiped alongside Buddha) could help protected them from the Burmese. “At the Gnat Shrine we used to put spears or swords or whatever the blacksmiths could make, now its M-16’s or grenade launchers. Its lucky the Shan have never seen the missile otherwise they would put them on the Gnat Shrines also.”

Although much was said of the Burmese army during in-depth interviews, it was of no surprise that a portrait of a Burmese soldier drew a response from every interviewee.

Pa Reh a Karen subject gets quiet. “They came into my village to take porters two or three times. I would go out to hide, either to another village or sometimes in the forest.”

Although many images made in distant parts of Burma were recognizable for universal themes, the portrait of the soldier was the closest many subjects came to understanding social organization beyond their villages. Results of the photo-elicitation interviews showed little to no exposure to national treasures such as Schwedagon Pagoda or the temples of Bagan.

The use of photo-elicitation in this project did prove to be moderately successful. Many images did elicit additional information, or augmented stories told in earlier in-depth interviews.

The shortcomings of the methodology speak more to the difference between my own hopes for the project and my subjects’ ability to speak to them. Despite this, where one door closes another opens. With a shift in perspective, and perhaps an edit tailored
more towards the world-view of the refugee community, the potential to expand upon the project could be incredible.

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iii Walton, 894.


vi Ibid, 895.

vii Ibid, 902.