Designing a Website for Karen Cultural maintenance and promotion: Karen Cultural Preservation in Utica, NY

A Master’s Project
Presented to
Information Design and Technology Program

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree

State University of New York
Polytechnic Institute

By
Jenjira May Htoo

May 2015
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

SUNY POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS AND HUMANITIES
CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Information Design and Technology

________________________________________
Date

________________________________________
Kathryn Stam, Ph.D.

________________________________________
Ryan Lizardi, Ph.D.
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

Abstract

This research examines the use of the Internet in preserving Karen Burmese culture, society, and ethnic identities in Utica, NY. The study explored the use of new media amongst Karen Burmese with specific attention to the function of new media in the process of identity formation. This study will expand on the literature though the uses and gratifications theory in new media and social network sites (SNSs) and by a specific case study of Karen-Burmese refugees, which examines the history and social context of Karen people, Karen refugees and resettlement and cultural identity. In particular the case study looks at the dong dancing, and how media is appropriated for purposes of cultural maintenance and for traditional values and ethnic identity. Information and communication technologies have become integral features in assisting the process of Karen refugees communicating with their families and relatives, and share their culture and identity online and offline.

The second part includes the consolidation of Karen cultural (digital) materials about the project of Karen Cultural Preservation. Karen Burmese refugees’ cultural heritages, identities, and community, a project of maintaining and promoting Karen culture were consolidated in a WordPress website. The paper covered the WordPress theme selection integrated features and designs and screenshots accompanied with annotations.
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the United Nations for arranging a great plan of refugee resettlement program for Karen refugees to resettle in third countries. Words of appreciation and thankfulness go to the United States of America for its generosity, welcoming Karen refugees to the United States, and my new hometown Utica, for offering me such great opportunities and privileges to grow. The SUNY schools gave me great educational experiences and personal growth that changed my life.

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Kathryn Stam, for her supervision, endless amounts of inspiration, encouragement, faith, and for making such differences in my life. I am so blessed to have her as a great professor, and wonderful friend, an inspirational person in Utica community. I would like to thank Professor Ryan Lizardi for being a second reader of my thesis/project paper and all of my professors at SUNY Poly for being nice, helpful and supportive.

I further would like to extend my sincere appreciation and gratitude to the Tabernacle Baptist Church, Karen Community in Utica, NY and Mohawk Valley Resources Center for Refugees for their support and motivation.

Lastly, my special thanks go to all my family, relatives and friends who have always remembered me in their prayers and thoughts. Nothing would have been possible without the relentless love, support, encouragement and care from my wonderful and supportive parents who always put me first especially for my educational pursuits.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ iii

Acknowledgments......................................................................................................................... iv

Introduction................................................................................................................................... 1

Literature Review........................................................................................................................... 4

Technology Platforms..................................................................................................................... 19

WordPress...................................................................................................................................... 19

WordPress Theme Selection ............................................................................................................ 20

Designed Features.......................................................................................................................... 21

Conclusion..................................................................................................................................... 29

References....................................................................................................................................... 32
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

List of Figures

*Figure 1*: Annotated screen capture of the Karen Cultural Preservation website color palette ................................................................. 22
*Figure 2*: Annotated screen capture color palette ................................................................. 22
*Figure 3*: Annotated screen capture of Karen Cultural Preservation of the home page features ...................................................................... 24
*Figure 4*: Annotated screen capture of the design of the page content and layout ............... 25
*Figure 5*: Annotated screen capture of photo gallery features .................................................. 26
*Figure 6*: Annotated screen capture of photo gallery features .................................................. 26
*Figure 7*: Annotated screen capture of the video page features .................................................. 27
*Figure 8*: Annotated screen capture of the contact page features .................................................. 28
*Figure 9*: A series of responsive website layouts (i.e., laptop, tablet, and mobile) ................. 29
Introduction

Coming to the U.S at the age of 18 in fall 2007 as a refugee, I undertook a journey of self-discovery, learning to embrace my native language, identity, history, cultural heritage and struggles. Most importantly, studying Psychology, Sociology and Information Design and Technology at university enriched my knowledge in research, methodologies, technology applications and tools to configure and design information into different platforms. Additionally, I experienced growth in personal and cultural values, and I became aware and better informed regarding maintenance of my own culture, developing a pride for sharing my native dance, traditional music, instruments and cultures while at the same time advocating to the community on behalf of the Karen people’s untold stories.

I have discovered that information and communication technologies have played significant roles in assisting the process of Karen refugees communicating with their families, relatives, and friends and share their culture and identify online and offline, and supporting these processes by providing online sources and information for Karen-Burmese refugees with access to media reports and news of human rights abuses in Burma and Thailand, political reform in Burma, events that occur in other parts of the world.

After Britain granted Burma independence in 1948, the Karen people hoped for their own nation and independent state from Britain. However, the Karen failed to achieve the self-government they sought because Britain gave Burma to only the ethnic Burman. The military government vowed to defeat rebellion and unify the country by force. Due to that, the Karen declared revolution in January 1949 to protect the Karen
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

population and to gain their freedom and independent land. For decades, the Karen population along with other ethnic minorities in Burma have faced persecution in the form of force labor, rape as a weapon of war, forced conscription into the military, ethnic cleansing, burning and looting of villages, mass killings and forced relocation of villages. Additionally, the civil war has led to both internal and external displacement.

For decades, the U.S. has welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees from all over the world. According to MVRCR (2015), a small number of refugee arrivals from Burma (Myanmar) first showed in 1997. The large refugee population from Burma did not occur until the U.S government began resettlement of Karen refugees in 2006. In 2008, the greatest number of Karen refugee ever, 501, arrived in Utica from Burma (Myanmar). Today, the Karen population in Utica has increased to 3027, not including the second migrants, and the U.S born children. Refugee Processing Center (2015) reported that from 2008 through March 31, 2015, the population of Sgaw Karen speakers was over 38,000 and Kayah or Kareni (a Karen’s tribe) population was 10,560 in the United States.

WordPress, which collects information, photo galleries and videos, was used as a platform to consolidate this project. The iRobbon theme was chosen and designed for an entire website. The features that were consolidated in this website are stated and described.

Significance of the project

This project allows the researcher or the project designer to better understand issues surrounding the maintenance of Karen culture, identity, and heritage and also
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

better understand the applications and tools of information design applied to the website. It provides some knowledge of Karen history, cultural heritage in the diaspora, including transmission. This project is very important to the researcher since there is no other established Karen individual studying and designing projects for his or her own cultural heritage in New York State or nationwide. Further, the project designer found that many studies that have been done by non-Karen individuals were not described effectively and many words were not spelled right.

First, the purpose of designing this website is to teach and transmit Karen cultural heritage, history, struggles and identity down to the younger generation of the Karen population in New York State, and nationwide and to carry on, maintain and promote Karen culture in the diaspora situation. Secondly, the designer aimed to learn how to consolidate and configure digital materials into the WordPress platform. Further, the researcher noticed that the interaction and communications are key aspects in cross-cultural adaptation and media in contemporary everyday life.
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

**Literature Review**

In this literature review, the uses and gratifications theory in new media and social network sites (SNSs) and a specific case study of Karen’s history and social context, Karen refugees and resettlement and cultural identity, in particular the Dong dance, will be explored.

**Uses and Gratification Theory**

Uses and gratifications theory is an “audience-centered approach” to understanding mass communication, including social media. This approach identifies why and how people seek out particular media to gratify their needs (Sundar and Limperos, 2013, p.506). The uses and gratifications theory said audiences are goal-oriented and actively seek out media to satisfy their specific needs and expectations and actively choose media and media content to gratify their needs. (Johnson and Kaye, 2003; Zhang et al., 2011). Smock et al. (2011) state that the U&G approach offers technology and media researchers the opportunity to clarify users’ diverse goals when engaging with media, allowing for a better understanding of differing behaviors, results and views. The researchers highlight that U&G studies have two different approaches: “how needs are gratified by media and how gratifications reconstruct needs”(p.2323). The uses and gratifications perspective takes the view of the media consumer; it examines how users use the media and gratifications they seek and receive from their media behaviors.

According to Smock et al., (2011) many studies of traditional media have discovered audience activity and have concluded that an audience’s activity acts as an intervening variable between gratifications sought and obtained with motivations for
using the media influencing levels of audience activity. The uses and gratification of emerging communication technologies is very similar to what we already know about traditional media. The recent following researches that are the most comprehensive in relation to U&G are Internet and social network sites. Due to the growth of the Internet in the past decade, a large number of social network sites increased and dramatically changed the way the world interacts and communicates. There is strong support for U&G in relation to social network sites found in many studies. For example, the Park et al. (2009) study shows that 69.5% of the different reasons in joining Facebook Groups were accounted for by the four gratifications: socializing, self-status seeking, information and entertainment. Further, Zhang et al. (2011) conducted a study analyzing an online survey of 537 participants that shows Facebook users responded using Social Media to seek social information, get recognition and support from others, maintain and increase social connections, and seek entertainment.

Socializing

According to Ruggiero, (2000) the Internet has become a major site for social interaction since it began; individual social interaction with family, friends, and professional contacts has been changed from the offline into online due to the growing recognition of Internet and social network sites. The social factor is an important component to apply uses and gratifications approach in SNSs. Zhang et al. (2011) say that social network sites such as Facebook became the main reason why this site gains popularity by the functionally integrative nature and the networking ability. For example, Part et al. (2009) found that audiences use Facebook to gratify their social needs such as meeting and talking with others as well as receiving friends’ support and sense of
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

community. A study of Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) revealed that 87.1% of college students, both men and women, in the study used social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace, showing that this form of communication supported the uses and gratifications approach. The respondents who used social network sites to make new friends was 54.5%, to keep in touch with current friends was 91.1% and to keep in touch with old friends was 96%.

Self-Status Seeking

Park et al. (2009) state that personal status through social network sites (SNSs) is actively pursued by users of these sites. The respondents in the study conducted by Park et al. (2009) reveal that students joined Facebook Groups to follow and maintain their personal statuses through the online environment to release peer pressure and make themselves look “cool, and to develop their career”(p.731). The study of Courtois et al. (2012) argues the outcomes of social network sites (SNSs) play an important role in today's adolescents' everyday self-representation and communication. Adolescents use online profile pages to know more about offline friends and distant friends. Online friendship gives valuable expression and social support, includes significant sources of peer influence, and provides a socialization environment to gain essential social skills. This study also indicates that social network sites benefit publically anxious teenagers by getting the conditions right to form more solid relationship with their peers.

Entertainment

Sundar and Limperos (2013) state that the entertainment gratification has been related with television, the Internet, video games, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. For
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

most people entertainment and mass media are nearly identical, triggering media use (Ruggiero, 2000). Park et al. (2009) say students used Facebook for entertainment gratification when engaging in Facebook groups for relaxation and entertainment needs. YouTube is one of the new features of social network sites that represents a social environment so users can be both a consumer and source of content and share their perspectives about content through comments, or share by email links to others (Haridakis and Hanson, 2009). In the study by Haridakis and Hanson, (2008) males who are socially active viewed YouTube videos to gratify their pursuit of entertainment and information seeking, and social interaction and gained socialization through entertainment.

**Information Seeking**

The Uses and Gratification model, when applied to information seeking, is driven by people’s desire to increase awareness and knowledge of one’s self, others, and the world. Park et al. (2009) said students who use Facebook Groups expected to learn about on and off campus events, to become involved in public and political engagement offline taking place around them and to get information regarding particular products and services. Chan et al. (2012) conducted a survey study of 499 users who used a social network site called Weibo and found that online discussion is one of the very few channels accessible for Chinese citizens to express their perspective about government, to seek information and improve a great understanding of politics in China in 2011. According to Ancu and Comaz, (2009) during 2008 presidential race, approximately one-half of social networks sites’ users gave political information, 8% added candidates as
friends and two-thirds of Americans younger than 30 participate in social network sites. MySpace has become a significant social network site that afforded information for the 2008 presidential election, along with letting the user to “befriend their politician” (p. 567). The findings in Ancu and Comaz’s study indicated that in response to seeking out political information on MySpace, 67% users used the SNSs to socially interact with their favored presidential candidate and other political supporters.

History of Karen People, Karen Refugees and Karen Identity

The Karens are native people to the Southeast Asia countries of Thailand and Burma (InfoMekong, 2010, Neiman et al., 2008). The Karen’s year of founding was BC 739 and the Karens calculated 2015 to be their year of 2754, (InfoMekong, 2010). According to their folktales, Karen came from Mongolia, the Gobi desert and Tibet. They crossed Gobi Desert into China, and eventually made their way into Burma. Thailand’s Karen came from the eastern border of Burma; the first Karen immigrated to Thailand before the Thai, and after the Mon Khmers. In Thailand, there are 438,450 Karen ethnic, and counting another several ten thousands of Karen refugees from Burma, there are more than 500,000 Karen living in Thailand. Chaing Mai province has the largest concentration of Karen people, about one third of Thailand’s Karen population. In Burma, Karen people live in many parts of southern and eastern Myanmar. The largest Karen population is in the Irrawaddy Delta area, massive agricultural lowland whose main city is Bassein, and they live in Eastern border with Thailand and in Karen state (Countries and Their Cultures, 2014, InfoMekong, 2010).
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

The Karen are made up of numerous subgroups and the two dominant groups are Sgaw and Pwo. Karen languages are considered the Tibeto-Burma family or Sino-Tibetan and dialects of Karen are Pwo and Sgaw (Countries and Their Cultures, 2010; InfoMekong, 2014). American Baptist missionaries developed Karen’s writing scripts from Burmese 25 alphabets and Karen Buddhists created an old Pwo script known as “chicken scratch,” because of the shapes of its letters.

According to Countries and their cultures, (2014) Karen people traditionally wear handmade loose garment and sarongs made of cotton and dyed into red, blue, and black colors. Men and married women wear a loose garment and sarong. The women's garments are often decoratively made with colored thread and seed-beads. The men's clothes are plain, having only fringed edges. Unmarried girls wear simple, long white dresses called Say Mo Wah. Men and women often wear headdresses. Women wear heavy bead necklaces, chains and coins around their necks, many silver bracelets on their wrists and upper arms, and earrings that are decorated with wool or silver chains (Countries and Their Cultures, 2014; InfoMekong, 2010). Among subgroups, Kayans are often known as Karennis or red Karens because of their primarily red plain clothing. The women wear short sarongs wrapped over one shoulder with a belt or band and cords of thin black rattan wrapped around their legs.

According to Neiman et al., (2008) when British colonized the area of modern Burma in 1886, they grouped these diverse ethnic nationalities within one country. The arrival of British colonization in the mid and late19th century brought a new sense of safety to the Karens. The Karen welcomed Western missionaries and British who brought literacy and education to Karen people. Karen were recruited as British police and armed
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

forced by the British administrators (Countries and their cultures, 2014). During the Second World War, Karens were insurgent fighters for the Allies against Japanese occupiers and Burmans. Because the Karen were helping British, many massacres were committed against the Karen people by the Burmans and the Japanese (Countries and their cultures, 2014; Neiman et al., 2008).

Karen Revolution and Struggles

As Britain granted Burma independence in 1948, Karen politicians hoped for their own nation and independent state; the Karen failed to achieve self-government they sought (Country and their cultures, 2014; South, 2007). Instead Karen, along with other ethnic populations, were grouped into the new Union of Burma. Karen endeavored to live peacefully with the Burma majority, and some Karen were in government and army leaders. However, when the Burmese government-sponsored political guerrillas known as Sitwundan troops attacked and killed Karen villagers and a Karen who was an Army Chief of Staff General Smith Dun was removed from his place and imprisoned, the problems began immediately (Countries and their cultures, 2014; Neiman et al., 2008). The military government vowed to defeat the rebellion and unify the country by force.

In January 1949, Karen declared their independence and went underground fighting for freedom against Burma’s totalitarian politics of repression, cultural homogenization and power centralization. The main supported political organization representing the Karen is the Karen National Union (KNU) and together with the military body Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) demand an independent Karen state “Kawthoolei” within a Burmese federation (Rajah, 2002; South, 2007). The Karen revolt
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

sprang up and rapidly gained motion until it threatened to take control of the Burmese capital, Rangoon.

Countries and their cultures (2014) further state that when the dictatorship took power in 1962, the Karen rebels was driven back by the regime troops. Although major and strategic land under Karen control have been lost to the State Peace and Development Counsel (SPDC) and the Karen military resources ran out throughout the fight, the Karen National Union or KNU has attained to support some level of state institutions and has administered Karen population. South (2007) says that after 60 years of conflict, Karen conflict became the world's longest running rebellion. Karen populations in Burma as well as other ethnic minorities are still living in the state of intense humanitarian crisis.

Karen Refugees

The Karen population has been suffering from a counter-revolution approach targeting civilian population as military attacks, use of landmines and seizure of land, food and medical supplies, schools and clinics are frequently attacked and burned down. Karen people became internally displaced due to human rights abuses and military attacks. According to Fuertes, (2010) the Karens displacement came as a consequence of the strengthened efforts by the military rulers and human right abuses by the government against ethnic minority civilians since the late 1980s (Fuertes, 2010). In early 1984, Karen people fled their homeland to find safety along Thailand Burma border and where Karen refugees’ camps were established (Fuertes, 2010).

In four different provinces inside Thailand, there are nine refugee camps along the border in remote area in entirely dependent on humanitarian aids from the outside; food
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

Rations, medicine and other supplies as well as education and medical services are provided by international humanitarian society (The Border Consortium, 2014). According to The border consortium’s report in July 2014, Thailand hosted 115,997 refugees from Burma and estimated 12,769 IDP populations in 6 IDP camps along Burma border side. Among 115,997 refugees in feeding figure category, only 75,463 are in the Mol/UNHCR registration. Karen ethnic group made up of 77.6% of camp inhabitants.

**Repatriation or Resettlement**

Fuertes (2010) conducted trauma-healing study in Mae La Camp (one of the largest camp in Thai/Burma border) and workshop participants described their lives experiences in the refugee camp was just like the metaphor of “Birds inside a cage: Karen refugees are birds inside a cage that get fed on a regular basis but are not able to fly. When the owner comes and opens the cage and lets them go, chances are that most of the birds cannot fly anymore because they did not have the opportunity to learn or practice how to fly for a very long time now. Many do not even know what it means to fly” (p. 20).

According to UNHCR, (2011) resettlement has provided millions of people, who meet the 1951 Conventional criteria, with protection and the opportunity to build new lives for themselves and their families in over 60 years. The enormous majority of refugees was lack of the options to return home due to insecure and unsafe situation in their homeland and untrusted of regime government. For example, the majority who participated in the workshop study conducted by Fuertes expressed their feelings that
repatriation was not an option to them because they were concerned about their safety to return to their homeland and they showed no trust in the Burmese government. Many camp inhabitants applied to resettle in third countries.

Most Karen refugees referred to resettlement as an opportunity to build new lives and to stand on themselves. The single main motive to resettle amongst the refugees was higher education opportunities. According to The Border Consortium (2014) over 90,000 Burmese refugees from nine camps along the Thai-Burma border have resettled in 13 countries and over 170 cities around the world: the top five hosted countries are USA, Australia, Canada, Finland, and Norway. Fuertes (2010) describes as “the largest refugee resettlement program in the world since the UN Refugee Agency began its resettlement project in January 2005” (p.23). The United States alone hosted 72,142 Burmese refugees (The border consortium, 2014).

Karen Identity

According to South (2007), Karen identity was found based on “speculative missionary ethnography” and “politically expedient colonial classification” (p.56). The Karen are not bound by features used to label as an ethnic group because they have diverse ethnic groups with different languages and dialects, regions, religions, culture, political ideology and socioeconomic status between different Karen sub-groups and societies (South, 2007). South (2007) states that the Karen are “an imagined” community, a society structure based on deep cultural cores, both “modern and traditional elements” and a unified nationalist vision (p.57). Before British colonization, Karens were forest and hill dwellers without a written literature. During British colonization, large numbers
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

of Karen speakers converted to Christianity after missionaries from Britain and America came to Burma in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Colonization and missionary played a significant role in setting early Karen identity; missionary schools and church networks built a “pan-Karen national identity” with deep consequences for this diverse society (South, 2007, p.58).

The first American Baptist missionary Andoniram Judson arrived in Burma in 1813. After he had spent 15 years in Burma, he turned his attention from Burmese to non-Burman peoples and began to convert large numbers of Karen speakers (South, 2007). Sgaw Karen written script was created from the Burmese alphabet by an American Baptist missionary, Jonathan Wade in 1820s (Neiman et al., 2008, South, 2007). Missionary academics went on to explore Karen oral history, recorded in the poem as narrated over the generations, to make often highly speculative accounts of the people’s history, and their supposed origins in or beyond the Gobi desert (58). Rajah (2002) states that these advances brought educated Christian Karen of the “pre-modern world into the modern;” they shaped a transformation in manners of consciousness so that educated Karen were only able to foresee a shared or common descent for all “Karennic-speaking peoples,” but also how to form the Karen trans-locally (p.527). Rajah further says that church based “supra-local” associations were a model for the structure of social groups and new forms of association (p.527).

In 1881, the Baptist community established a Karen National Association (KNA), an indication of the openly ethno-nationalist and separatist Karen Nation Union, in Toungoo (Rajah, 2002, South, 2007). The KNA grew out of a series of regional and provincial Baptist convention; the KNA was not only a religious organization, but also an
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

expression to promote of Karen ethnic and national identity, education and writing and to bring Karen people to social and economic development. More than a century after the foundation of the KNA, the Karen remain the largest minority group in Southeast Asia with no state of their own, in any meaningful sense (South, 2007).

In this diaspora situation, Karen people still continue upholding and promoting Karen culture and identity while exile from their homeland. For example Brees (2010) states that in order to promote national identity and economic projects and maintain the tie with their motherland, Karen diaspora organizations within Thailand organize cultural and social activities, celebrate traditional festival, national holidays and ceremonies inside and outside the camp. Further Brees says that Karen network group in Tak province collected money or support from foreign donors, refugees, and NGOs to create activities inside Thailand, and to construct churches and schools inside Burma. Brees (2010) finds that Karen refugees who resettled in third countries send money to their family members in Thailand and inside Burma.

South (2007) also found in her study the impressions of a homogeneous pan-Karen identity are adopted in the growing diaspora between refugee and exile communities in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and on the Internet. Resettlement communities found a strongly impressed Karen ethnic identity determined by defensive a sense of self and community in abroad (South, 2007). For example, in a study of Miner et al. (2013) reveals that Karen women in Utah who participated in their study reported training their daughters to weave and having their children wear traditional Karen clothing are effective ways to help their children maintain and remember their culture. Further, expressing their culture and identity by wearing traditional clothes on
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

ceremonies and celebrations was identified as a great opportunity to them. In the same way, Maclachan (2006) also mentions that Karen refugees in Thai camps and resettled Karen refugees in New York state developed a deep respect for the Karen’s determination to preserve their cultural and ethnic uniqueness through traditional dong dancing during community event with the purpose of reuniting and bringing all Karen together. In Utica, Karen New Year is celebrated every year in January. It is the significant celebration that brings every Karen individuals together. The ceremony usually includes the done dancing, bamboo dancing, singing, speeches, honoring elders and eating of diverse of Karen food.

In Utica, New York, where the Karen population has been growing over the past decade, and many Karen children came to the United States at early age; some were born here rarely speak their native Karen language. In response, a small group of Karen mothers who are the members of Tabernacle Baptist Church of Utica, New York banded together to address the needs of their children and community by developing a Saturday late afternoon/early evening Karen School. In 2013, the Karen Language School was founded and classes are taught in Tabernacle Baptist Church. The missions of the Karen Language School are to combat the loss of cultural identity by teaching spoken and written Karen, to preserve Karen culture, benefit Karen children and serve the community, to support the academic success of students in the Utica City School District through tutoring, academic assistance, and mentoring, to promote Biblical knowledge and nurture Christian faith through Bible reading and memorization in the Karen language and to celebrate the giftedness and promote the empowerment of Karen women as leaders and teachers in the Karen School. In the 2013-2014 academic year, the Karen Language
School enrolled about 100 students who attended three-hour sessions each Saturday evening during academic year. Since it was established, there have been more than 140 students who are mostly members of Tabernacle Baptist Church Utica New York, but classes are opened to anyone and students are not charged fee.

Dong Dancing

According to MacLachlan, (2006) the dong dancing was invented by the Pwo Karen, who established it as a way to strengthen community values. Typically, the dong leader had composed a song criticizing the transgressions of a community member, and all of the dong dancers would sing the song while dancing, thereby openly judging the person’s actions and supporting the group’s moral values. Zin, (2000) also states that the don dance was used to promote creditable behavior, served as a manifestation of honorable harmony within the community and it was served long before religions had been introduced to the Karens. The dong dancing was claimed as an expression of democratic values, it played an important function in keeping social and cultural control in the community.

Dong dancing is considered the most recognizable and widely appreciated ethnic dances in Burma because of the liveliness of the dance. According to MacLachlan, (2006) the distinctive body movements, which include hand gestures and constantly moving legs draws a boundary around the Karen distinguishing from their neighbors. For example, the hand gestures used in the dong dance are “reminiscent,” very energetic and free, and dancers actively move their legs. The dong dance was composed of a
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

complicated designed routine of men and women accompanied by the dancers’ shouts and song.

Karen musical instruments accompany the dance: the G’weh, a horn made from water buffalo horn, the Tnar, a harp that made of wood and has 5 to 7 strings and are turned or adjusted with hooks or pins along the neck of the instrument, the Klo, a round drum made of cast bronze with symbols of frogs and elephants (MacLachlan, 2006, Countries and their cultures, 2007). Countries and their cultures (2007) further state that the Klo is an icon of Karen culture. Drum along with flute and political songs are played as military marching music in the rebel areas.

MacLachlan (2006) says that the function of dong dance has changed after the military dictatorship took control of Burma in 1962. The song that was composed could not include the expression of democratic values; the don dances were established to songs praising the glories of Burmese collectivism. Zin (2000) says that the traditional form of don dancing decreased and the new form of dong dance that continues to practice in Karen communities are known as “Yin Kye Mu Dong” or “Culture Dong.”

MacLachlan (2006) found the dong dancers in the refugee camp were participating in the don dance as a way of maintaining their cultural heritage. Their purpose of practicing the don dance is not only to preserve Karen tradition, but also to signify the ethnic and cultural uniqueness of Karens. This difference is of major importance because it justifies the Karen claim that they are not Burmese, they are culturally distinct from Burmans. In Utica, New York, Karen youths have a little or no prior experience in participating in hands-on indigenous dance practices. They were motivated by a strong desire to participate in cultural maintenance as well as learning
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

practical indigenous dance skills and repertoires. The practice of dong dancing was usually begun early in spring, and continued until the Karen New Year ceremony, which was held in January. The dong dancing was the main significant performance in the whole ceremony, and the performance takes longer than an hour.

Technology Platforms

Nowadays, there are many technology platforms offering the online ability to collect informative and powerful sources, photos, and videos. For this project, I selected WordPress as the technology platform to design the website and to collect sources, information, photo gallery and videos.

WordPress

According to WordPress (2015), WordPress.com is an open source and popular online web platform that lets users create and customize everything from their simple blogs to entire websites. WordPress sets up and designs users’ custom domain names, which makes it possible for users to use their sites in seconds. Today, WordPress has welcomed 50,000 new sites of small business, artist portfolios, and blogs and enormous media organizations such as Time and CNN. Each month, there are more than 409 million people viewing more than 15.5 billion pages, and there are about 41.7 million users publishing new posts and leave 60.5 million new comments. Since WordPress was founded in 2005, it has brought experiences to more and more audiences and has been powering more than 26 percent of the Internet. Further, search engine and SEO crawlers
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

such as Google, Bing, Yahoo and others are friendly to users’ sites on Wordpress.com or Wordpress.org.

WordPress is a hosted version of the open source software, where users can create their blogs or websites or by the use of a third-party hosting environment. WordPress makes it possible for users who known little to nothing about HTML, CSS and technical knowledge. There are thousands of plugins and themes available to transform users’ sites into almost anything they want. WordPress also offers upgrades for plans, custom domains, and products like anti-spam software, Akismet and VIP hosting partnerships with major media outlets to users. For this project, WordPress was installed in a third party environment and the domain name and web-hosting service were paid.

Theme Selection

The iRibbon theme was chosen for this project. According to CyberChips (2015), “iRibbon theme is a fully Responsive Drag & Drop Starter WordPress Theme that adds amazing new functionality to your WordPress website.” The “Drag and Drop” elements consisted of iFeature slider, header and logo options, portfolio, callout section, widgets, boxes, breadcrumbs, carousel, recent Posts, and social media bar. The iRibbon theme offers fun, friendly, responsive and clean design with great flexibility and powerful features for users to design anything from a blog to an entire website. iRibbon came with free version of slider called iFeatures Slider; however, the disadvantage was it allowed three uploaded images to slide. This theme allows users to customize their blogs or websites: Site title and tagline, customize background changing color or adding background image, adding widgets on sidebar, footer or header.
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

Since it was launched in July 2014, it has been downloaded more than 250,000. iRibbon came with a package of custom background, custom colors, responsive design layout and page elements, ribbon like menu bar, light and featured images and it responds to all type of devices such as mobile phone, tablet, laptop, and desktop. iRibbon works well with the free version of its plugins; however, the pro upgrade is available for more powerful, advanced features.

Features

The design is hierarchically arranged: a header, which includes a logo on the left side, a navigation bar, which has five buttons floating on the left, and the search bar floating on the right. The content section consolidates with slideshow, photo gallery, videos, and texts. The textual elements within the website are implemented using whitespace and Georgia typeface and MS Serif was applied for headings to improve legibility and meet the varying needs of diverse audiences. The website was responsive in terms of menu text, layout for small screen devices, and the menu will collapse in small screen devices.

Color Palette

The color palette used was white, dark grayish cyan, light grayish yellow, dark gray, moderate orange dark moderate orange and very dark gray, which added lively colors into the overall color palette and layout and gave some consistency between the imagery and the design. Silver gray was used for the background, and darker gray is used for footer color. The light grayish cyan used in the navigation bar and the hover color of the menu text was light grayish yellow. The text color was dark gray. The color of the
link was blue and it turned to orange when the cursor hovers adding contrast.

![Color Palette](http://karenculturalp.com/)

Figure 1: Annotated screen capture of the Karen Cultural Preservation website color palette. Image retrieved from [http://karenculturalp.com/](http://karenculturalp.com/)

![Color Palette Feature](http://karenculturalp.com/resources-2/)

Figure 2: Annotated screen capture of color palette feature. Image retrieved from [http://karenculturalp.com/resources-2/](http://karenculturalp.com/resources-2/)

**Layout and Page Content**

The overall layout was clean, and effectively used content elements; a boxed layout was used. Every page was customized differently by using “Drag and Drop Options.” The Home page had a different appearance than other pages: the iFeature slider was used for the slideshow, three columns contained icons of information, photo, and
video; these sections expanded a few sentences and included the “Click here” buttons that would take audiences to explore other pages. The About menu had six sub-menus below. Each page displayed information regarding each topic and images were applied to accompany subject matter. The Photo Gallery had one sub-menu, videos. The collections of photos included Karen traditional musical instruments, the Karen New Year ceremony, and the Karen community in Utica, New York. All images’ widths were resized to 800 pixels. The Videos page consisted of a variety of different stories, ranging from the Karen New Year Ceremony, to traditional music and instruments, to the Karen people’s struggles and individuals’ stories. The Resources page included many useful sources of Karen organizations, educational sources, and news in English, Karen and Burmese languages. The Google map and the contact form were added in the Contact page.
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

**Figure 1**: Annotated screen capture of the Karen Cultural Preservation website the home page feature. Image retrieved from [http://karenculturalp.com](http://karenculturalp.com/)
The Karen are native people to the Southeast Asia countries of Thailand and Burma (InfoMekong, 2010, Neiman et al., 2008). The Karen’s year of founding was BC 739 and the Karen calculated 2015 to be their year of 2754 (InfoMekong, 2010). In their folklore, Karen came from Mongolia, the Gobi desert and Tibet. They crossed the Gobi Desert into China, and eventually made their way into Burma. Thailand’s Karen came from the eastern border of Burma; the first Karen immigrated to Thailand before the Thai, and after the Mon Khmers. In Thailand, there are 438,450 of Karen ethnic, and counting another several ten thousands of Karen refugee from Burma, there are more than 500,000 Karen living in Thailand. Chiang Mai province has the largest concentration of Karen people, about one third of Thailand’s Karen population. In Burma, Karen people live in many parts of southern and eastern Myanmar. The largest Karen population is in the Irrawaddy Delta area, a massive agricultural lowland whose main city is Bassein, and they live in Eastern border with Thailand and in Karen state (Countries and Their Cultures, 2014, InfoMekong, 2010).

Karen are made up of numerous subgroups and the two dominant groups are Sgaw and Pwo. Karen languages are considered the Tibeto-Burma family or Sino-Tibetan and dialects of Karen are Pwo and Sgaw (Countries and Their Cultures, 2010, InfoMekong, 2014). American Baptist missionaries developed Karen’s script from Burmese 25 alphabets and Karen Buddhists created an old Pwo script known as “chicken scratch,” because of the shapes of its letters.

Figure 2: Annotated screen capture of the page content and layout feature. Image retrieved from http://karenculturalp.com/karen-identity-2/
Figure 3: Annotated screen capture of photo gallery feature. Image retrieved from http://karenculturalp.com/photo-gallery/

Figure 4: screen capture of photo gallery feature. Image retrieved from http://karenculturalp.com/photo-gallery/
Figure 5: Annotated screen capture of the video page feature. Image retrieved from http://karenculturalp.com/videos/
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

Figure 6: Annotated screen capture of the contact page feature. Image retrieved from http://karenculturalp.com/contact/

The Google map is in one column, full screen, and the Contact Form is in 1/3 column were added in the Contact page.
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

Responsive / Mobile Layout

The layout is responsive regardless any device, mobile phone, tablet, laptop and desktop. Overall, feature slides, photos, videos, boxes and texts, menu text, and menu collapse in small screen devices.

Figure 7: A Series of Website Layout (i.e. Mobile, Tablet and Laptop). Image retrieved from http://karenculturalp.com/

Conclusion

Having gone through the process of writing and designing this project, the researcher gained a better understanding of the meaning of cultural and identity maintenance for Karen people throughout their journey from Burma to the third countries. Findings from research, personal experiences, and the literature showed that awareness of Karen culture and identity maintenance and promotion were increased in the diaspora situation, as well as in the third countries. Further, I had a clear sense of
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

Karen people in Utica maintained their culture and identity by celebrating the Karen New Year annually, speaking their native language, teaching their children to be literate in the Karen language, and wearing their traditional dress or clothing on ceremonies, events and attending church services.

As the Internet along with information and communication technologies have played significant roles in supporting the process for Karen cultural maintenance as part of nurturing Karen identity, communicating and reconnecting Karen people with their families, the researcher learned how to properly apply cultural artifacts or materials into information design such as creating and configuring a website of cultural maintenance and promotion. Taking Information Design and Technology courses enhanced my knowledge and skills on using different design tools or applications and how to appropriately apply information design principles in order to display content to audiences. I have gained design skills and understanding of information design and principles after using WordPress to create this project, which was my first project using WordPress as a technological platform.

WordPress.com offered a wonderful online web platform to create and customize this project’s website. It came with a package of custom backgrounds, custom colors, responsive design layouts and page elements, menu bar, featured images and it is responsive for all type of devices such as mobile phone, tablet, laptop, and desktop. The overall layout of this project was clean, and effectively used content elements; a boxed layout was used. Every page was customized differently. It was consolidated with slideshow, photo gallery, videos, and texts. The textual elements within the website are implemented using whitespace and Georgia typeface and MS Serif was applied for
Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion

headings to improve legibility and meet the varying needs of diverse audiences. To visit
the website, go to: http://karenculturalp.com/

The project of the Karen Cultural Preservation has a strong presence and benefit
to Utica Karen community, which it has not done by any Karen individual before in
Karen community. The researcher has a positive experience in designing this project.
Further, she personally experienced growth in personal and cultural values, and as a
result, this project would increase awareness, and better informed others regarding
maintenance of Karen culture, Karen traditional dance, music, cultures, and community
while this project plays a role as a media advocating to the world on behalf of the
“untold” Karen stories.
References


Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion


Designing a Website for Karen Cultural Maintenance and Promotion


Zin, M. (October 1, 2000). Karen history: In their own words. *Irrawaddy online*.

Jenjira M. Htoo

Born: October 31, 1988 | Tha Song Young, Tak, Thailand
htoom@sunyit.edu

EDUCATION

Master of Science, Communications and Humanities May 2015
SUNY Poly, Marcy, NY
• Major: Information Design and Technology
• GPA: 3.81

Bachelor of Art, Social Behavioral Science December 2013
SUNYIT, Marcy, NY
• Major: Psychology
• Minor: Sociology
• GPA: 3.67

Associates in Art and Science May 2012
Mohawk Valley Community College, Utica, NY
• Major: Psychology
• GPA: 3.82

ACADEMIC HONORS

SUNY Chancellor’s Award for Student Excellence, SUNY Poly Spring 2015
The Information Design and Technology Program Award, SUNY Poly May, 2015
SUNY Diversity Fellowship Award, SUNYIT Spring 2014
President’s List, SUNYIT Spring and Fall 2013
Dean’s List, SUNYIT Spring and Fall 2012
Phi Theta Kappa, MVCC 2011
Dean’s List, MVCC 2011-2012
President’s List, MVCC 2009-2011

ORGANIZATIONS

Worship and Witness Ministry Team, Tabernacle Baptist Church 2013-Present
Member, PSY/Social club, SUNYIT 2012
Member, Phi Theta Kappa, MVCC 2011
Member, CSTEP, MVCC 2009-2011

OTHER EXPERIENCE

Compass Interpreters-MVRCR, Utica, NY 2013 to Present
Karen/Burmese Interpreter
Interplast Group, Lalita, TX May, 2013 to Aug, 2013
Packer
Lutheran Care Nursing Home, Clinton, NY  
Certified Nursing Assistant  
May 2008 to Dec, 2012

Turning Stone Casino, Verona, NY  
Housekeeper  
Nov 2007 to May 2008

VOLUNTEER WORK
Mohawk Valley Resource Center For Refugees, Utica, NY  
Teaching illiterate refugee adults naturalization tests  
Summer 2012
Tabernacle Baptist Church  
Substitute Sunday schoolteacher  
Summer 2012
Utica School District  
Assist Karen students from Proctor High School with assignments  
Fall 2012

SKILLS
Technical skills: Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and HTML, WordPress  
Languages: English, Karen, Burmese, Thai

INTERESTS/HOBBIES
Traveling, music, mentoring, photography, health and fitness, traditional herbs, cultures and languages