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Light Nelson Collection

The Camplight Project: *integration of Kayan refugees into a community through the language of textiles*

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Introduction

This article discusses an art and technology project displayed at a light festival in Nelson in 2016. It featured the remarkable back-strap loom weaving practiced by Mu Bar, one of 13 Kayan women refugees who originally made up the Sukita Project in Nelson, combined with LED lights which were responsive to music. Involvement in this event brought a sense of shared purpose and belonging to the resettled community and has become a benchmark for using art to assist with cultural integration.

Background

Nelson is home to about one hundred Kayan refugees who originally fled Myanmar for the Thai border because of conflict with the military regime in Myanmar. Kayan women are well-known for their unique cultural practice of wearing coils of ornamental brass or copper on their necks, accentuating its length.¹ Traditionally, girls start to wear brass neck rings when they are 5 years old and the heavy weight of the rings presses on the collar bone and shoulder, giving the illusion that they have long necks (Figure 1). Nai Soi or Long necked Karen Village in Mae Hong Son, Thailand was set up by businessmen as a tourist destination due to the relative novelty of this practice and its striking appearance. Gaining economically from the exploitation of the Kayan women who followed this practice, the Thai Government prevented their resettlement until 2008. After they resettled in Nelson, a journalist from The New Zealand Listener magazine interviewed Mu Lo Peh (also known as Zember). She said of tourists she met at



the tourist village in Mae Hong Son “Some were very honest with me and said it’s not a good idea to live here and earn money. We are all humans. They said, ‘you are in a human zoo.’”²

Resettlement of Kayan refugees in Nelson

As part of its humanitarian policies, New Zealand formally established a Refugee Quota Programme in 1987.³ Upon arrival, all refugees stay at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre in Auckland for the first 6 weeks before being allocated to different cities. The first Kayan family resettled in Nelson in 2008.⁴ There were several local organisations assisting them, including Red Cross Refugee Services and English Language Partners Nelson.⁵ Immigration New Zealand’s strategic goals for resettlement focus upon five aspects of the process: self-sufficiency, participation, health and wellbeing, education and housing.⁶ For the participation aspect, newly resettled refugees are encouraged to learn English. However, the language barrier often makes it difficult for them to feel settled and integrate into their new communities. A qualitative study was conducted in Australia to understand the difficulties experienced by Karen refugee women (from Myanmar) in integrating into a western society.⁷ It was found that their lack of English language comprehension, which restricted their communication with local people, was the first major problem affecting their emotional and psychological well-being.

Nelson has offered the resettled Kayan a new modern life in terms of housing and lifestyle. But while the younger generation of refugees are able to obtain employment, study or gain English language proficiency due to their greater adaptability in the face of new situations, the older generation (such as Mu Phou, pictured on the left) and young mothers (such as Mu Bar), face greater difficulties and are more likely to spend a greater proportion of their time at home. This situation can reinforce the language barrier, keeping them from employment and greater engagement with the wider community.

As part of resettlement efforts, the Kayan were encouraged to attend English classes organised by English Language Partners (Nelson branch), especially in the first few years of their resettlement (Figure 2).

Figure 1 (Facing page): Mu Phou in her traditional Kayan costume.
Photo credit: Josh Donnelly, Nelson.



Figure 2: A teacher talking to Mu Phou in an English class for former refugees at English Language Partners, Nelson. Photo credit: Tim Cuff, Nelson.

However, many older Kayan women struggled to learn English as they had not had formal educational opportunities before, either in their homeland or while living as refugees in Thailand for almost two decades. Furthermore, the Kayan custom for women of wearing their traditional neck-ring ornament set them apart, and was seen by some local people as exotic or strange. Unfortunately, this was the basis for some racist incidents in Nelson, with a group of older women being verbally abused on the street as they walked home together from an English class.⁸

Inauguration of the Sukita Project

It was partly due to the lack of understanding of this ethnicity that a project was conceived to utilise traditional Kayan culture and arts (weaving and folk music) to provide opportunities for community engagement. Recognising the importance of arts and culture for successful refugee resettlement, the Sukita Project (the word Sukita means “happiness” or “contentment” in Pali) was established in Nelson in 2010 to help Kayan women achieve integration by continuing their weaving using their traditional backstrap technique, a type of hand weaving widely used among indigenous people around the world.⁹ The Sukita Project’s basic tenet is that arts and culture are a fundamental part of identity. Development of a sense of belonging in a new community does not mean that one’s culture must be

left behind; rather it is important that this is maintained and nurtured with pride. This project has not only helped the local Kayan community preserve their craft and culture, but also encourages their involvement with the wider community of Nelson despite language and cultural barriers. Their hand-woven cotton scarves are greatly admired, and are available for sale at Nelson’s Suter Art Gallery.

Sukita Project’s involvement in Camplight at Light Nelson

In 2016, the Sukita Project was invited to participate in the Light Nelson festival, an evening community art and technology festival based around the theme of light. To showcase Kayan art and culture, the authors initiated the project and installation ‘Camplight’. This sought to evoke the life of the Kayan people when they used to gather around village campfires to socialise and connect through folk music and dance.

We organised a series of participatory workshops at Community Art Works (a community art space) during weekends over the two months prior to the Light Nelson Festival. The workshops fostered a positive atmosphere of shared purpose and camaraderie. Through this, the participants were able to express their curiosity and share knowledge regarding the Kayan refugees, their origin and culture. This also provided an opportunity for them to meet three Kayan weavers who were invited to observe how the LEDs were sewn onto the banners.

The use of hand-woven banners in the Camplight installation was inspired by the use of such banners in the north of Thailand (called ‘*tung*’ in Thai). Traditionally, each banner is normally attached to a long bamboo pole and placed in the grounds of a Buddhist temple, regarded as a sacred place, as a means for people to connect spiritually with their ancestors.

The Camplight artwork sought to symbolise the coming together of different cultures by combining traditional and contemporary art with modern technology. The challenge was to merge these seemingly very different elements together in a way that would make them work as a cohesive whole. It was consequently seen as important that all elements be integrated as early as possible in the design and production process, rather than at the end. The aim was to achieve harmony and avoid the appearance of juxtaposition. Accordingly, we looked at whether electrically conductive thread (a cotton-like thread made from steel fibres) could be incorporated into the banners (*tung*) as part of the weaving process using

a traditional backstrap loom. Mu Bar, the principal Kayan weaver for Sukita Project, made the 20 colourful cotton banners over a two-month period.



Figure 3: LEDs sewn onto a *tung* (hand-woven cotton banner). Photo credit: Kay Sneddon, Nelson.

The idea was for the conductive ‘warp’ threads to provide power to multiple ‘wearable’ addressable LEDs (Figure 3). These tiny micro-electronic units are made up of three separate LEDs of different colours packed closely together and soldered onto a pad that can be sewn onto fabric using the conductive thread.

The light from each of the LED units can be adjusted by sending instructions through a control wire via a micro-controller (small computer) to produce a wide range of colours and brightness. The units are ‘daisy chained’ together, with each one passing on instructions to the next. With the addition of these input and output control wires to the positive and negative power wires, each LED unit required four connections to be sewn into the *tung*. But while the power lines were continuous, the control wires were not; hence they couldn’t easily be included into the weaving process, and had to be sewn in afterwards. A successful prototype was produced ahead of production of the complete set of *tung*.

From the outset, the project was intended to be a collaborative work, and that the creative process itself should work to bring people together. The LEDs

were arranged on the *tungs* in rows of six and in columns of either four or six, that reflecting the symmetrical layout of the woven patterns of the woven fabric. This gave a total of either 24 or 36 LEDs per *tung*. Over the entire project, a total of approximately 600 LED units were all sewn in by hand, requiring the establishment of some 2,500 conductive links. It was a laborious and sometimes tedious task, even with a growing team of volunteer sewers.

Because music was an integral part of the project, the concept called for the *tungs* to be reactive to sound. This required the attachment of a microphone that fed into the micro-controller fixed to the frame from which each *tung* was hung. It was further important that the LED display was complementary to the music and the weaving, and not overbearing. Numerous programs were developed and experimented with. The final version processed the sound into the different frequencies, with the peak frequency translated into a colour and the volume into brightness. These colours were fed into the top LEDs while at the same time shifting the previous colours to the LEDs below to give an effect like falling rain drops although the final effect was, to some, also evocative of fireflies.

The form and scale of the supporting frame for the *tungs* was dictated by the need to balance an open and welcoming space with a sense of enclosed intimacy to experience the musical performances. The relatively open installation space in Nelson’s Queen’s Gardens worked well for a circular structure as well as the use of a natural material in the form of bamboo, which was chosen also for its aesthetic alignment with traditional crafts. The final design was a circular ring approximately 8 metres in diameter, supported 2.5 metres off the ground by 25 vertical support staffs.

The original vision was to use heat to bend and form the bamboo for the frame; however, it became evident that this would likely require a more involved and lengthy process using steam. But with the involvement of the Kayan people and their traditional skill with bamboo construction, the frame swiftly took shape from sections split to precisely balance flexibility against strength. The final structure incorporated only bamboo elements, including all lashings and other fastenings.



Figure 4: Jazz musicians performing at Camplight installation. Photo credit: Kay Sneddon, Nelson

Musical performances were another key aspect of the Camplight project. (Figure 4) Music is a universal language that enables people to connect. The Kayan musicians and singers played their folk music using a range of instruments, many brought with them from the refugee camp in Thailand. These included bamboo flutes and handmade guitars built from scrap wood and other adapted elements available in the camp. This traditional music, with song lyrics in Kayan, was presented in the context of a wide range of other musical styles and sources, emphasising the diversity of cultural influences within the wider community of Nelson.



Figure 5: Mu Bar weaving at her house while supervising her young children. Photo credit: Kay Sneddon, Nelson.

Mu Bar's perspective

Mu Bar was interviewed (in the Thai language) about the Camplight project by the authors in September 2019. The interview was recorded on video and was presented at the Costume and Textile Association of New Zealand (CTANZ) Symposium in Nelson that month. Examples of the main questions and answers of interest are transcribed as follows:

Authors: *How has weaving with Sukita Project helped you?*

Mu Bar: *The weaving has helped me to have something to do, otherwise I would feel frustrated. It helps me to earn pocket money to buy some food for my children. I can also help my husband to earn some money, so I feel useful.*

Authors: *Do you remember the time when you wove banners for the Camplight Project? What do you think about it?*

Mu Bar: *I had an opportunity to gain new knowledge and experience. It was a lot of work, but I was glad that the banners come out beautifully and many people liked them.*

Authors: *What did other Kayan people in Nelson think about their arts and culture being displayed in the Light Nelson festival? And what did they think about your weaving and their participation? For example, some of them played music and some men such as Muang Hla and his friends helped to build the bamboo structure to hang the banners?*

Mu Bar: *They were happy to participate in the Camplight project. Without this project, they wouldn't have had a chance to participate and to experience the new LED technology (incorporated with the weaving).*

Authors: *How did you and your Kayan friends and family feel when so many people from Nelson and other cities came to the event and saw our Camplight installation?*

Mu Bar: *They were happy and proud.*

Authors: *Would you like to be involved in other projects like this in the future?*

Mu Bar: *I don't know the future but if I don't have a demanding job, I might get involved. And if it's possible, I want my children to maintain the Kayan weaving.*

Conclusion

From our own experience, we saw that the Camplight Project achieved its goal of bringing people from different cultures and backgrounds together, at least temporarily. Promotion of the arts (weaving and music) and culture of the Kayan community had been kept central at every stage of its development, not only at the festival itself. From the early stages of the project, we were lucky to have a dedicated team of volunteers to achieve the considerable amount of effort in repetitive tasks. This was only possible due to existing community networks (both formal and informal) established by a range of prior initiatives involving the participants, a situation that underscores the vital importance of continuing support.

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Since the Camplight Project was an integral part of the Light Nelson festival, the inclusion of the Kayan people throughout its design and production process gave them not only a sense of pride in their arts and culture but also a sense of belonging and shared purpose with the Nelson community. Mu Bar was proud that her traditional Kayan weaving was promoted at the festival and was admired by the community.¹⁰ A positive public reaction to the promotion of minority cultures is the best way of ensuring their continuation, preserving a positive sense of community diversity and avoiding the loss of cultural identity with its consequent negative social effects.

During her interview, Mu Bar was asked about her experiences with racism in Nelson but she chose not to answer this directly. Instead, she replied “I’m happy every time I see people wearing the Kayan scarves in Nelson.” From this, it can be inferred that, while there is an acceptance that the complete elimination of such attitudes to immigrants is unlikely, this is balanced by a sense of pride that aspects of her culture have been genuinely appreciated by her adoptive community. The empowerment and positive social outcomes that flow on from such experiences should not be underestimated.

It is clear that Mu Bar’s experiences in being a weaver with Sukita Project over the past 10 years have helped foster a sense of self-worth. She felt useful in earning some income to help her family financially, albeit in a small way. In addition, the fact that people are keen to purchase her scarves makes her feel good and validates her sense that her traditional knowledge has real value in her

new community, encouraging her to make efforts to pass this knowledge on to subsequent generations.

Refugee resettlement is a long-term process that benefits greatly from assistance from the community. For maximum benefit, this assistance should come not only from local organisations responsible, either directly or indirectly, for their welfare, but also from wider community initiatives actively supported by local government policies. While there is no doubt that practical assistance with housing, school and GP enrolment, English classes and financial management is crucial, these do not always fully address the potential for cultural isolation. Inevitably, there are some former refugees who have difficulties with learning English as a second language, especially the illiterate, the elderly or mothers with young children such as Mu Bar. These people are likely to face an ongoing struggle to integrate into the community and, without strong support, will be left feeling increasingly isolated. An effective alternative route to empowerment is the provision of channels by which they are encouraged to use their traditional skills in arts and crafts to help them feel accepted and valued. In many instances, the universal aspects of artistic expression have the power to break through otherwise persistent cultural and language barriers.

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About the authors:

Dr. Kay Sneddon is originally from Thailand. She was inspired by the Kayan weavers in Nelson after meeting them via volunteer work with Red Cross Refugee Services and established Sukita Project in 2010, aiming to create a bridge between the immigrants and Nelsonians through arts and culture. Dr. Sneddon is currently a tutor and researcher at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT) which has provided the necessary resources to produce this article.

John-Paul Pochin is a photographer and digital artist based in Nelson. He was a founder of the Light Nelson festival as well as the Light Nelson Collective and has been a contributor to the Sukita project over the years. Working on the Camplight Project, he felt very fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet such a wide variety of people from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

Notes:

- 1: See Pascal Khoo Thwe, *From the land of green ghosts: A Burmese odyssey*, (Harper Collins Publishers: New York), 2003.
- 2: Rebecca Macfie, "Escape from the 'human zoo'", *New Zealand Listener*, 20 February, 2010, Vol.222, no. 3641, 28–32.
- 3: Immigration New Zealand <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2018-09/Refugees%20and%20asylum%20seekers%20factsheet.pdf>
- 4: Alice Cowdrey, "All kinds of peoples make one big party", *The Nelson Mail*, 18 March 2010, 11.
- 5: Alison Gibbs, *New beginnings: Refugee Stories—Nelson*, (Nelson Multicultural Council; Speedy Print: Nelson, 2012), 13.
- 6: Immigration New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/documents/refugees/refugeeresettlementstrategy.pdf>
- 7: Paula G. Watkins, Husna Razee, Juliet Richters, "I'm telling you...the language barrier is the most, the biggest': Barriers to education among Karen refugee women in Australia", *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 56, no. 2, 126–141.
- 8: Sally Kidson, "Women weave the stories of their lives", *The Nelson Mail*, 20 September, 2013. <https://www.pressreader.com/new-zealand/nelson-mail/20130920/281681137570332>
- 9: Kay Sneddon, *The Weavers' Journey*, in Maclean Barker (ed.), *Mu Lar's weaving*, (English Language Partners Nelson Marlborough Inc.: Nelson, 2012), 17–18.
- 10: Tasha Leov, "Light Nelson looks set to break attendance record", *The Nelson Mail*, 11 July 2016, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/nelson-mail/news/81963431/light-nelson-looks-set-to-break-attendance-record>