Sai to Tsunagari no Minzokushi: Kita-Tai Sanchi Karen no Minzoku to Jenda is the result of a 20-
plus year relationship between the author
Hayami Yoko and the community of Senyakhi, a
Karen village in Northern Thailand. The richness of ethnographic detail, depth of analysis
and vibrant pulse of personal experience makes
this a dense but engaging narrative. Hayami
Yoko, professor at Kyoto University’s Center for
Southeast Asian Studies, demonstrates the
power of Kyoto’s commitment to field-based re-
search.

The Karen are now well-known in the litera-
ture on mainland southeast Asian as a people
“living in the middle,” straddling a pliable bound-
ary between marginalized upland society and
lowland mainstream society. Hayami’s previous
major work Between Hills and Plains: Power and
Practice in Socio-Religious Dynamics among Karen
[2004] is solidly located within this framework.
In Sai to Tsunagari, Hayami has stepped outside
of this comfortable framework, into a broader
and more illuminating discussion of identity and
interaction, center and periphery, self and other.
At one level, the book deals with what it has
meant to be Karen for the women and men of the
community as Thailand moved through differ-
ent stages of “development.” At another level,
Hayami elaborates how differentiation — partic-
ularly through the lens of gender relations —
melds into opportunities for new connections.
The book is composed of three main analytical
sections: 1) Ethnicity and Gender: Ethnic Mi-
nority Karen in the Thai Nation-state, 2) Gender in the practices of daily life, and 3) At
the Intersection of Differentiation: Gender within
an Ethnoscape.

In order to highlight the stream of change in
their position within Thai society, Hayami re-
views how speakers of Karen languages have
been perceived and named in a historical con-
text. Originally known as “Yang” in the times of
nation-state building and proselytization, the
Karen were a forest people on the fringes of
civilization. Potential for converts drew the at-
tention of both Buddhist and Christian missions,
although the Karen remained “others,” in opposi-
tion to the emerging nationalistic image of
“proper Thai.” Moving into the era of develop-
ment, Karen identity shifted to “Kariang,” denot-
ing an ethnic minority group worthy of study in
this period of nation-state growing pains that
included communist insurgency, environmental
degradation and an opium problem. At the same
time, the Kariang were part of a development
problem, which was to be addressed through
policy and project interventions. Finally, start-
ing in the 1990s, an alternative understanding of
upland people emerged, stressing environmental
sustainability derived from traditional lifestyles,
indigenous knowledge and customary manage-
ment of forests. The Karen themselves played an
active role in this redefinition of identity, as the
name “P’gakanyaw” became a symbol of the
Karen as a solution to the human-nature coexist-
ence problem.

These changes are intimately linked to the
creation and recreation of gender relations. The
basic starting point for understanding gender in
Southeast Asia stresses a high level of independ-
ence and the high social position of women. The
first work on gender in Karen society stressed
the importance of bilateral social organization,
contributing to the understanding of a Karen
gender “complementarity.” However, Hayami ex-
plains, gender research in the uplands and low-
lands progressed without much interaction or
mutual influence throughout the 1980s. A discourse of sexuality emerged as a common phenomenon in both upland and lowland gender analysis, as the “exotic woman” captured the imagination of men from the outside. In the mountains particularly, perceptions of the sexually free Akha prevailed in Thai society. Unmarried Karen women, on the other hand, wearing the traditional white one-piece long Karen dress, came to represent purity, which still reinforced the same element of the exotic within the discourse of sexuality.

Against this backdrop, Hayami draws on the realm of daily practice in explaining the changes in women’s roles, spaces and contributions to Karen society. Two areas of ritual practice underscore these change dynamics. First is the practice of the au xe ancestor ritual, which is traced through the female lineage and led by the oldest woman of the household. As such, the au xe, centered spatially on the household hearth, represents the continuity of reproduction and nourishment within a household. At the same time, it creates broader linkages in society through participation in the rituals and associated social interactions. As religious conversion and other economic pressures have brought about a reduction in the practice of the au xe, the living space has been physically transformed. The hearth loses its ritual meaning, and the household shifted from a women’s space into a men’s space.

The management of ritual life at the village level is conducted by the hi kho, a position of ritual leadership passed through patrilineal descent. The hi kho presides over four main rituals, all of which are concerned with maintaining village harmony: village soul-calling, offerings to the spirits of the swidden fields and irrigation canals, the retrieval of lost articles and animals, and the appeasement of spirits in the case of improper sexual relations. This final ritual is conducted in the village of the women, asserting the male hi kho’s control over unmarried women’s sexuality. Thus, gender roles are defined through ritual practice and given form in the lifecycle of the village’s men and women, from birth, through adolescence and marriage, childbirth, aging and death.

The differentiations created through gender relations in the practice of daily life play out at a broader level of multi-ethnic society as well. Hayami describes the intersection of differentiations using two windows on the ethnoscape: inter-ethnic marriage and the mobility of individuals. Marriage between Karen and non-Karen is not rare. In the past, northern Thai and Shan men would on occasion marry into a Karen village, and the wife would continue to conduct the au xe ritual. More recently, however, there is a more marked trend towards the out-marriage of women, and it is much more common for Karen women to marry non-Karen men than the converse. The reason for this lies in recent changes in the socio-economic foundations upon which these relationships develop; namely the mutual reinforcement between non-Karen men searching for the “added value” of morally pure young Karen woman and the Karen woman looking for new opportunities on the outside. It is interesting to observe that the intersection of gender and ethnicity in the upland ethnoscape is not simply about the continuation or extinguishment of a social category, but rather embodies a new departure, and thus, connection. The second aspect of connection is the experience of crossing borders; that is, the movement of women to cities for work, adventure and relationships. This is explained as not only the individualization of morals or ethic, but should be considered as decisions made based on the availability of options — agency created within a context of constraints. In this final section, Hayami leaves more of the argumentation to the Senyakhi women themselves, presenting longer narratives to
allow them to speak for themselves. This comple-
ments nicely Hayami's use of Karen terminology
throughout adds flavor to how social dynamics
are expressed by the local people.

As Hayami asserts and shows throughout,
her intention is not to demonstrate how upland
women are marginalized and oppressed. Nor
does the book try to paint a picture of some
idealized lifestyle. The message of the book
about how “otherness,” created in the process of
ethnic and gender differentiation, is transformed
into connection and relatedness. Thus, differenti-
ation does not simply end in unidirectional dom-
ination. Rather, the differentiation observed
within the realm of daily practices preserves
some form of relationship, and becomes the basis
for the creation of new linkages.
（Nathan Badenoch • Visiting Associate Profes-
sor, CSEAS）

Reference

Hayami, Yoko. 2004. *Between Hills and Plains:*
*Power and Practice in Socio-Religions Dynam-
ics among Karen.* Kyoto University Press.