

IRIS Post Fieldwork Report 2025

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I began my summer pilot study a week after the end of Spring semester, 2024. The plan was to connect with the Kachin diaspora communities in the US, learn about their past experiences, observe present endeavors, and hear their future hopes. I wanted to know what it meant for them to leave Burma, and how they connected with one another and their homeland. Most of all, I wanted to meet as many community members as possible, since my goal was to establish grounds to eventually return and carry out extensive fieldwork in the future. Leaning on my past work with Kachin migrant communities in Thailand, I presupposed that similar to their Thai brethren, the Kachin in the U.S still observed (and adapted) Kachin culture and tradition while remaining actively concerned with the six-decades-long Kachin civil war in Burma. Since many of them live in Southern “red states”, I also assumed that most would align with the GOP. Likewise, I thought – whether in Thailand or the U.S, Kachin worldviews and political outlooks flourish through pulpit and gatherings in the Kachin church. Only slight generalizations indeed.

I arrived in Fort Worth, Dallas with Kachin diasporic communities, church networks, and transnational politics in mind. The Kachin I met, such as the entrepreneurial couple who graciously hosted me, the pastor of the Kachin church, and countless others in and out of the church affirmed for me that religious gathering, Kachin identity and transnational networks remained an important part of their lives. Yet navigating immigrant life, building a future, and situating themselves within a polarized political milieu demanded a new form of sensemaking. The kind that the Kachin pulpit, despite its authority on Kachin principles, could not provide. In some churches talking U.S politics is taboo. Others prefer to prioritize talking points from a headquarters 9,000 miles away in Burma. As much as local politics divide the Kachin American community, kinship and religion unites. Or so it seemed. The earliest division within the Kachin Baptists began in 70s Burma. Add to that preexisting denominational diversity and one of the first questions any Kachin abroad must ask themselves is “which (Kachin) church to affiliate with?” In the U.S, this question has only become more divisive. The Kachin in the U.S have church acronyms per capita than any part of Burma. This led me to wonder: is the organizational splintering of Kachin churches in the U.S. primarily a response to diasporic circumstances, or does it reflect pre-existing structures from Burma?

For the second leg of my study, I traveled to Omaha, Nebraska. My purpose was to attend the graduation of the one and only Kachin theological school in the U.S. On the day before the ceremony, I found myself in a graveyard with 50 other Kachin, all dressed in maroon cap and gown. There, in front, beside and behind the monument of Dr. Ola Hanson and wife, Minnie J. Hanson, flowers were laid, countless photographs were taken, and a service was held. Dr. Hanson was one of the most prominent Baptist missionaries to the Kachins. He devised the Kachin (Jinghpaw) script used today, translated the Bible, and wrote the first Kachin-English dictionary. It was only fitting that these Kachin graduates, from all

over the U.S, came here and that their Bible institute was named the Ola Hanson Bible Institute. What I found in Nebraska, was the enduring drive to continue the ethno-religious dream of being evangelists in any country they lived. To work and live for the gospel, was one way of sensemaking.

On the other side, as I was hosted by yet another Kachin couple, who are in the real estate and insurance. The business enterprise of the Kachin mirrored the entrepreneurial couple I met in Dallas, whose shipping venture boomed to the point of moving 40,000 pounds of goods per month between the U.S. and Burma. Something about that connection between the pulpit and the marketplace unsettled my earlier assumptions. I had presupposed that the Kachin diasporic project in the U.S. would be carried mainly through the church. Yet here, alongside the ethno-religious enterprise of training evangelists, stood equally powerful business enterprises – networks of trade, property, and insurance that sustained families, created wealth, and redefined what Kachin identity could mean abroad. This led me to questions more complex than the ones I carried from Thailand: are these business ventures to be understood as secular departures from the pulpit, or are they another expression of the same ethno-religious drive to secure a future and preserve belonging? Do they mark a shift in how Kachin diasporic life is organized – no longer only around faith and homeland politics, but also around entrepreneurial success in the American landscape? And if both church and business serve as parallel sites of ethnic formation, what does this mean for how Kachin identity is negotiated, reimagined, and carried forward in diaspora?

For the final part of my 2025 summer study, I traveled to Louisiana. There, I met with a small but tight-knit Kachin community, many of whom work in the sushi chain business. Family ties were deeply felt throughout my trip, but in Louisiana they came into sharper focus, revealing the delicate bonds that hold families together. What struck me most here, and across my encounters with Kachin families throughout the summer, was the generational gap marked by silent omissions, unspoken pains, cultural dissonance, and signs of diverging futures. Through a mix of quiet patience and sometimes loud determination, there was a palpable sense of enduring one another for the sake of harmony and stability. Yet the divergences still lingered. How parents and children will navigate these differences remains uncertain. What seems clear, however, is that the Kachin community in diaspora continues to balance both fragility and resilience, by holding space for what is, while leaving open the question of what may become.

I conclude my 2025 summer study with more questions than answers, and for that, I am grateful. Pilot research is meant to challenge assumptions, disrupt the routines of graduate student life, and spark curiosity for further inquiry, and this study has done all of that. For that, I sincerely thank the Institute for Regional and International Studies for providing me the funds that made this study possible. This opportunity has given me an invaluable introduction into the lifeworlds of Kachin Americans, and I am determined to continue exploring and learning as my work progresses.