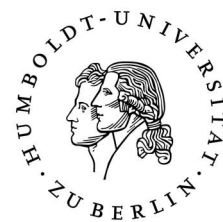


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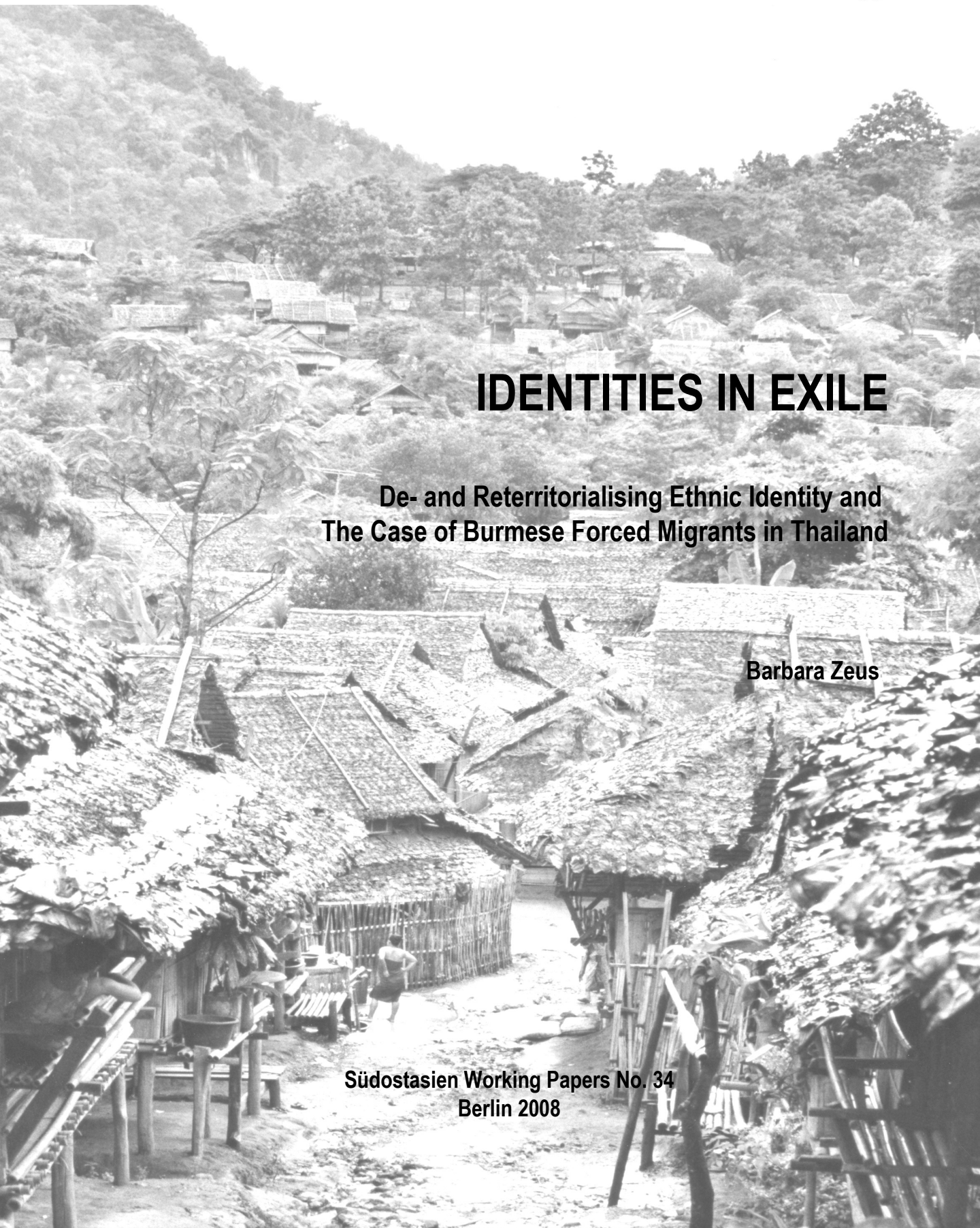


IDENTITIES IN EXILE

**De- and Reterritorialising Ethnic Identity and
The Case of Burmese Forced Migrants in Thailand**

Barbara Zeus

Südostasien Working Papers No. 34
Berlin 2008



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ABSTRACT IN GERMAN

Die vorliegende Arbeit beleuchtet und analysiert nicht nur Arten und Wege der Bildung und Artikulierung ethnischer Identität im Exil, sondern versucht auch für die hegemoniale Struktur unserer nationalstaatlichen Ordnung, innerhalb welcher Flüchtlinge agieren, zu sensibilisieren.

Als Fallstudie dient das Beispiel zweier Gruppen burmesischer Flüchtlinge, die unter unterschiedlichen geographischen, sozial-strukturellen, legalen und ökonomischen Bedingungen an zwei Orten (Stadt und Flüchtlingslager) in Thailand leben. Es soll gezeigt werden, wie die Erfahrungen von Flucht und Exil an diesen beiden Orten auf unterschiedlichen Wegen Voraussetzungen für eine Betonung von Ethnizität geschaffen haben. Ethnizität trägt hier dazu bei, ein Leben im Exil erträglicher zu gestalten und vermittelt als bedeutende Form kollektiver Identität ein Gefühl innerer Heimat.

Zwangsmigration aus der Heimat bringt ferner unabdingbar eine Neueinordnung in das globale nationalstaatliche Gefüge mit sich, woraus sich die Frage ergibt, ob dieses als Ergebnis der Fluchterfahrung vielmehr untergraben wird als dass eine Neueinordnung stattfindet. Die Fallstudie soll hier aufzeigen, welche erheblicher Signifikanz Formen reterritorialisierter Identifizierungsmuster und imaginierter Orte im Rahmen von Flucht und Migration zukommen.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Exiled Identities in a World of Nation-States

Forced migration, or the flow of refugees¹, across international borders, although not a recent phenomenon, is an issue of central importance in our present world whose national order enhances these flows and places people outside the protection of a nation-state. Those ‘displaced’ from our national order, that has come to be seen as a natural frame of reference, then often pose challenges to the existing system as they destroy the old trinity of people-polity-territory by blurring national boundaries and threatening national security and sovereignty, and from this their immense significance for the study of our present world order is derived. Nonetheless, forced migrants occupy rather liminal positions, geographically on the margins of nation-states’ territories as well as in political and scholarly discourses. Although greater understanding of displacement, exile, and refugeeism can provide new dimensions to the study of the global order of nations and the nation form by depicting how nationness may be formed in the absence of territorial bases, through deterritorialised forms of identification, or by clarifying how the national order constitutes a totalising, categorical order that attempts to control and tame liminality. The study of forced migration, in other words, will allow for a critical reflection on nation-states as often – despite their historical recency (cf. Anderson, 2006) – unquestioned natural frameworks and centres of power.

Researching reformulations of identity in exile among diaspora groups of the modern world is often neglected in a state-centre biased academic world notwithstanding such processes’ direct and indirect implications for efforts of nation-building. This study erects the centre stage of the analytical framework within the peripheral borderlands to examine the complexity of ways in which exile shapes forced migrants’ lives, their reformulations of ethnic identity and renegotiations of their place in the national world order. For the latter, at least two logical possibilities are conceivable in terms of displacement: Firstly, a renewed incorporation into the national order by creating a new nation or assimilating into an existing one, a reterritorialisation of identity, and secondly, a deterritorialisation manifested in a subversion of this order by refusing to be categorised and rooted within one national category.

This thesis grew not only out of the awareness of a general neglect of research on social processes within groups of people who live beyond the scopes of nation-states but also emerged from a perceived lack of inclusion of those groups’ voices in academic disciplines. Voices of forced migrants themselves are often unheard in the literature that claims to deal exactly with these. As the theoretical part will show, in both popular and academic imaginations refugees are portrayed as victims of political, economic or environmental change, as incapable of acting and in need of assistance having lost everything: their homes, their culture and even their identity (cf. Malkki, 1995a). While it cannot be denied that aspects of hardship and suffering form a constitute part of forced migrants’ experiences, by emphasising solely those aspects, such approaches ignore the creative and dynamic re-orientation processes brought about by the need not only to survive but to live in exile.

The conventional analysis of the theories surrounding the concepts of ethnic identity and discussions about the relationship between people, place and identity, that are seminal for the study of forced mi-

¹ The terms ‘refugee’, ‘displaced person’, and ‘forced migrant’ are used interchangeably in this paper; however, the latter is seen as the most neutral one in the context of this thesis as will become clear later.

For a definition of the terms, see: Forced Migration Online at: [<http://www.forcedmigration.org/whatisfm.htm> (21/06/08)]

grants, shall thus be enriched by a local perspective, that from the Thai-Burmese² border. This actor-oriented research will allow for an alternative view of refugees, not as victims but agents whose narratives and accounts of displacement and exile will be incorporated in the considerations on ethnic identity formations in exile.

Burmese refugees residing in Thailand in particular deserve more detailed research as relatively few thorough scholarly works have been written on this group³ despite some of the forced migrants having lived in their present situation for more than 20 years with only temporary leave to remain for humanitarian reasons. These forced migrants see themselves literally as standing in between two nation-states and feel looked upon as terrorists or insurgents by their own government and as illegal immigrants by the host government (cf. Grundy-Warr, 2004).

The upcoming case study that draws on research among two groups of Burmese forced migrants in Thailand, the officially settled camp refugees and the self-settled town refugees, will reveal essential differences in ways of generating and articulating ethnic identity in exile⁴ in a thesis that seeks not only to illuminate the ways of ethnic identity formation and reformation of groups of people who by virtue of their 'refugeeness' occupy liminal positions in the national world order, but also to bring into focus the hegemonic order of nations within and between which forced migrants find themselves operating. Before the theoretical analysis can be turned to, a few words on the methodology applied during fieldwork are required.

1.2 A Few Notes on Methodology

The analysis is based on fieldwork amongst forced migrants from Burma residing in the western Thai border town of Mae Sot in Tak Province as well as in Mae La Refugee Camp, 60 kilometres to the north. Within a period of three months in the beginning of 2008, altogether 63 (31 female and 32 male informants) qualitative half-structured interviews were conducted, 15 of which were with officially settled residents of Mae La Camp which is under the direct administration of the Royal Thai Government (RTG), the remaining number with self-settled, undocumented migrants in Mae Sot.⁵ Research in the camp mainly focused on the there dominant Karen refugee community while in the town, members of different ethnic groups were interviewed.⁶ Interviews were mostly conducted in informants' homes or offices of organisations they worked with and averaged one hour in duration.

To find new interview partners, the 'snowball-sampling technique' was applied where the interviewer is introduced to new potential informants through interviewees' social networks (Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004). This technique is particularly useful when researching amongst clandestine populations like the undocumented migrants in town. Although it can be claimed that this technique is biased in

² Burma's official name is Union of Myanmar, for reasons of consistency the name Burma is used throughout the paper; see also note 6.

³ A few exceptions are: Brooten, 2003; Lang, 2002; Liepe, 1995; to be forthcoming: Dudley, Sandra. Due out 2009. *Materialising Exile. Material Culture and Embodied Experience among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*. (information by the author);

⁴ This paper deals exclusively with processes in exile. For an overview of perceptions of ethnicity in pre- to post-colonial Burma, see for instance Gravers, 2007b; Smith, 1991; Taylor, 1982; Thant Myint U, 2001 amongst others;

⁵ All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. A list of interviews is given in Appendix A. See also Appendix B for a guideline used in interviews.

⁶ Interviewees classified themselves in nine different main ethnic categories: Karen (Sgaw/Pwo): 23; Rakhine: 12; Palaung-Ta'ang: 8; Kayah (Kayan/Kayaw/Yintale): 6; Burman: 5; Pa-O: 4; Mon: 2; Zomi: 2; Tavoyan: 1; in brackets subgroups interviewees identified with, are given.

Ethnonyms used throughout this paper are those used by the informants themselves and are thus not always consistent with official labelling by the Burmese Government and other external classifications. For reasons of consistency this is also true for the naming of the country Burma.

many ways, it was not seen as a detriment as it generated a sample with a fairly similar background, the corollary being that more reliable statements on trends within a relatively small population can be made.

Interviewees were all between 20 and 42 years of age, and had been living in Thailand for about seven years on average, a few already for more than 20 years, while some had arrived only two years ago. Conversations with more recent arrivals served as a welcome basis for filtering out what constitutes those who had longer experiences of living in exile and had established themselves in the new environment.

Likewise, this technique ensured interviewees were of a comparable social status, as it turned out that all had enjoyed a relatively high level of education with some form of post-tenth standard⁷ formal or non-formal education. Interviewees' English language proficiency was thus in general high, so that interviews could be conducted mainly in English with a few Burmese words or sentences mixed in, and only the occasional interview was partly done in Burmese when interviewees felt more comfortable that way.

All interviewees cited predominantly political reasons for having left their homes. They had either been drawn into politics and found themselves caught in between fighting of government troops and the ethnic armed opposition or had actively chosen to join the armed or unarmed opposition and thus had a "well-founded fear of being persecuted"⁸ in their own country. Having been referred to new informants from friends or relatives, snowball-sampling further allowed for a certain degree of established trust towards the interviewer in a climate of chronic fear and mistrust towards strangers prevailing along the border. The particular circumstances and illegal status of interviewees made it necessary to conduct interviews on conditions of anonymity meaning that all names of people and places have been deleted from the transcription.

Apart from the large amount of qualitative data from recorded interviews, non-formal discussions with forced migrants took place in social situations and provided additional ethnographic information that is incorporated in the analysis. The study further draws on previous experience of living and working among the Burmese community in Mae Sot on a regular short-term basis since 2004, through which a greater depth of understanding of dominant discourses amongst forced migrants in the border area was enabled.

As is the case with most qualitative research, the underlying interviews of course cannot be representative of the whole population of forced migrants, and yet it is hoped that this case study can still contribute to giving insight into the lives of 'liminal' migrants who reside beyond our framework of nation-states and providing important information on trends of ethnic identity generation in exile.

⁷ Tenth Standard in Burma closes with the Matriculation Exam that enables students to enter university.

⁸ In the words of the UN's definition of a refugee from the 1951 *UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (UNHCR, 2007:16).

2 FORCED MIGRATION AND THE RETERRITORIALISATION OF IDENTITIES

In a globalised world, where borders are said to be increasingly obsolete, where these no longer function as barriers to people, goods and ideas, where we all have become mobile and find ourselves in a “generalised condition of homelessness” (Said 1979:18), the concept of the nation-state seems to “somehow inevitably disintegrate under the pressure of globalisation” (Dean, 1998). Post-modernist thinking sees people as in the course of becoming citizens of a deterritorialised global world where national identities are challenged by deterritorialised collective identities based on ethnicity, religion, opinion, class, or gender, as the modernist universalisation and homogenisation is undeniably also accompanied by localisation and the “fragmentation and multiplication of identities” (Cohen, 1996:516). Ethnicity is a principally important ingredient of collective identification, and as a source of political identification often becomes tantamount to nationality, a source of existential significance for those displaced from the national order who have to redefine their place in the political landscape.

What are the places and spaces forced migrants derive their identities from once they have stepped outside their own nation-state and not (yet) been assimilated into a new one, or are new forms of identity, disconnected from places, really emerging? The following pages shall deal with this question that will serve as an analytical frame for the upcoming case study. To set the stage for this analysis, the concepts of ‘identity’ and ‘ethnic identity’ first deserve further clarification within this thesis considering the voluminousness of their underlying literature and discourses therein.

2.1 Some Clarifications on Identity and Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity, or ethnicity, is often designated as a kind of ‘we-feeling’, the consciousness to belong to a certain ethnic group and the awareness of one’s particular group identity. Identity, in short, is the ability to differ time and again from other individualities but still remain the same person over time (continuity) and in different situations (consistency). While identity (in accordance with its Latin root *idem* meaning ‘the same’) has originally been regarded as primordial and natural, something stable, durable and immovable, the meaning of identity goes over to a lifelong process that is never to be completed.

First of all, the individual possesses a subjective identity, which develops during the process of socialisation. At the same time the individual has several collective identities. These result from common experiences, myths, symbols and rituals. Moreover, collective identities are formed by the creation of concepts of enemy as well as by creating borders; that means by excluding non-members from the collective (Us and Them). Thus, it becomes clear that identity is conveyed through self-perception but also perception by others, therefore identity can only be experienced in the collective. Ethnic identity likewise is not a cultural property of a group, but has a relational character, as “[g]roup identities must always be defined in relation to that which they are not” (Eriksen, 2002:10). These aspects of contrasting but also complementary relationships between groups are highlighted through the boundary, which itself is a social product and may change through time (Barth, 1998).

Considering the complexity of human reality, identity is dynamic rather than static and provides orientation in dealing with the unknown. The individual possesses several, complementing and partially

also contradictory identities and chooses between them. Whatever layers of identity are selected and emphasised depends on situational conditions, for example political conditions and different stages in a person's lifetime. This perspective presupposes that agents themselves, to a certain extent, have the power to actively decide on or consciously manipulate their identities in multiple ways and for a variety of purposes. Moreover, ethnic classifications "serve to order the social world and to create standardised cognitive maps over categories of relevant others" (Eriksen, 2002:60). Ethnicity thus is "a matter of social [and not rarely also political] organisation above and beyond questions of empirical cultural differences: it is about 'the social organisation of cultural difference'" (Barth, 1998:6).

When Anderson suggests that nationalism should be classified together with kinship and religion (2006:5), this should also apply for ethnic ideologies as these likewise draw on religion and myth for their symbolism and faith in a common origin, by community of culture, history and current experiences (Eriksen, 2002:107).

The constructivist approach faces however a primordial approach, which assumes that no one can escape one's ethnic origin, since each individual is by birth a member of a distinctive ethnic group and gets inculcated in substantial traditions such as language, value system, religion, behaviours and is taught knowledge about one's ethnic group's origins and history, over which one's own group defines itself during the process of socialisation (Schetter, 2003: 47). However, this theory has often been accused of supplying fertile soil for racist and nationalist ideologies. Therefore, scientific consent has developed over the fact that ethnicity is less a characteristic, but rather a form of acting motivated by one's interests, which can develop only in interaction with other groups and within a common social system. To fully understand processes of ethnic identity generation also in regard to refugee discourse, and further recognising the fact that people will not be able to completely eliminate their ascribed ethnic identity, it is necessary to acknowledge both situational and imperative aspects in these processes, processes that are continually renegotiated and are dynamic and relational in character.

These processes of ethnic identity formation then attain their greatest importance when they are elevated to particularly important aspects of personal identity as happens in situations of change, when ethnic groups' boundaries seem threatened or are not recognised by others. This "nonrecognition" (Taylor, 1994:25) and social marginalisation, oppression or discrimination are frequently followed by an overemphasis of ethnicity, whereby ethnicity can function as a source of empowerment, as a weapon to reevaluate one's own ethnicity (Ha, 2004:70) and has an important social meaning, since individuals obtain a feeling of collective security and internal homeland. Ethnic ideology does not only then have "an immediate appeal because it offers answers to 'perennial problems of life': the questions of origins, destiny and, ultimately, the meaning of life" (Eriksen, 2002:45). Rather, there is no doubt that ethnicity can be consciously exploited for particular ends as is the case for instance in ethno-nationalist movements.

In terms of forced migration, the experience of displacement and conditions in exile, whether interactions with people external to the group take place and how those, especially the host populations, regard the refugees, further add to the complexities of the processes of ethnic identity generation. The context of exile has often been seen as being conducive to the generation of a pan-ethnic identity and an overcommunication of ethnic identity, when it is formed in opposition to host societies and groups see themselves "sometimes for the first time, as unique" (Camino and Krulfeld, 1994:xi). Following Lord Acton, Anderson has termed exile the "nursery of nationality" (Anderson, 1996:734).

Researching these reformulations of ethnic identities in exile is the task of this thesis, the essential question being how ethnicity emerges and is made relevant through people's ways of coping with the demands and challenges of the experience of displacement and exile. Exploring the links between identity and place as an important issue in regard to those who have become displaced, will pave the way for this question to be answered.

2.2 Territorialising Identities

In Global Forced Migration Studies, especially since the 1990s, there has been an intense debate amongst scholars from different disciplines about the relationship between people, place and identity (e.g. Brun, 2001; Camino and Krulfeld, 1994; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997a, 1997b; Hastrup and Olwig, 1997a, 1997b; Kibreab, 1999; Malkki, 1992, 1995a, 1995b; Sorensen, 1997; Stepputat, 1994, 1999). This inclusion of spatial perspectives is highly relevant when dealing with refugees, people who have become displaced or forcibly ‘uprooted’ from their original homelands.

When people are forced to flee across borders, they will often be confronted with completely new conditions, geographically, climatically but also economically, socially and politically. These conditions can be both enabling or disabling in the processes of integrating into a new society and redefining one’s identity within this new context. During these processes, refugees might re-evaluate many of their own notions of culture and identity and will also have to grapple with new externally imposed labels and bureaucratic designations. Media, humanitarian organisations but also academics have often been inclined to portray refugees as helpless aid recipients and traumatised victims of conflict, war, genocide or other catastrophes one does not wish to experience. It is then less surprising how commonsensical perceptions readily view displaced people as being in a pathetic state and assumptions are repeatedly made about how territorial displacement from a national community automatically results in a loss of culture and identity rather than a transformation (Malkki, 1995a).

Besides the suffering, trauma and persecution already endured, and the loss of loved ones the refugee must now face up to loss of homeland, identity and former life. A new life in a strange land awaits. Anxiety, fear, frustration and emotional disturbance appear, and often the refugee regresses to a more infantile state, loses his or her willpower, and becomes apathetic, helpless or manic and aggressive. (Stein, 1981:324)

This assumption emanates from the concept of culture and identity being fixed to a certain territory (sedentarist or essentialist view) and the idea that every population has its own proper or natural ‘place’ and ‘homeland’ from which it obtains its identity. In this conception of a naturalised link between people and place, botanical metaphors are often adopted with people “being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness” (Malkki, 1992:27). Where roots form an integral part of identity, being uprooted consequently constitutes a “major psycho-pathological problem” and this view enables a general problematisation of refugees, who do not fit into our seemingly natural framework of nation-states (Brun, 2001:17). Refugees by virtue of their home- and statelessness then are portrayed as victims in this “sedentarist bias in dominant modes of imagining homes and homelands, identities and nationalities”, to use Malkki’s words (1995a:15). Nation-states in their seemingly natural composition try to establish spatial meanings by territorialising people, their cultures and identities and confine them within a bounded space that is then seen as a static form in which people are fixed and frozen (Laungaramsri, 2006). Accordingly, forced migrants who have broken out of this stasis then are in need of control and have to undergo a ‘normalisation’ or domestication process in territorially limited camps where they are to await repatriation that will bring them back into the ‘normal’ national order.

The naturalisation of the link between people and place indeed seems problematic in regard to those who are displaced. The very word ‘displacement’ being problematic as it implies that “in an ideal world, they would all be where they belong” which in turn means that “the identity people gain from their association with a particular place is in some way fundamental or ‘natural’ and that to be deprived of that identity is to lose some part of one’s very humanity” (Turton 1996:97, in Kibreab 1999:405). To get away from this victimisation of refugees and view them as actors of their own destinies instead, the need arises to challenge these territorialising concepts of identity.

2.3 De- and Reterritorialising Identities in Exile

Hence, the relationship between people and place has to be denaturalised and nomadic, rather than sedentarist views, have to be incorporated to take account of the complexities of displacement and exile. Contesting the territorialising concepts of identity also implies turning to an alternative understanding of space and place that separates identity from place “to show that though refugees have to move from their places of origin, they do not lose their identity and ability to exercise power” (Brun, 2001:15). This approach calls for a less static perception of the relationship between people, place and identity and for a different view of space as constituted by a multiplicity of social relations. Place in turn then is “a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings” (Brun, 2001:15), and people form attachments to places “through living in, remembering, and imagining them” (Malkki, 1992:38). Post-modern literature sees people as chronically displaced and continually uprooted, nomadic lifestyles are allegedly the new norm in our globalised world where people form their identities in the absence of distinct territories but rather through an increasingly common worldliness that breeds a lively hybridisation of culture and deterritorialised identities. And yet, globalisation

‘[...] does not ... signal the erasure of local differences or of local identity, but rather revalidates and reconstitutes place’ ([Watts]1992:122) Thus, from the point of those who are ‘uprooted’ from their places of origin and communities by violence or violation of basic rights, it is farfetched to talk about deterritorialised global identity and citizenship. (Kibreab, 1999:390)

Indeed, embellishing displacement and viewing exile and diaspora as the generalised conditions of modern life might be problematic in regard to forced migration, while adhering to territorialising concepts of identity on the other hand is to blind oneself to the multiplicity of attachments people form to places and to underestimate the flexible and ever-changing character of culture and identity. As has been clarified above, identity is less a characteristic than a never-ending process, which is negotiated in different discourses time and again. Evidently, the de-naturalisation of the relationship between people, places and identity has been helpful and leaves greater potential for conceptualising the experiences of forced migrants. And yet, the nomadic view bears the danger of romanticising experiences that are often painful for those forcibly uprooted from their homes.

These conceptions then again cannot be applied unconditionally for those groups of people who find themselves in a legal limbo without basic rights of citizenship outside the protection of the nation-state. Forced migrants most often face structural and attitudinal constraints in their host states which limit them in their freedom of movement and their livelihood opportunities. It is within this context that Kibreab argues that the concept of a ‘deterritorialised global identity’ does not apply to refugees and that the “identity people gain from their association with a particular place is an indispensable instrument to a socially and economically fulfilling life” as in his eyes, even in our globalised world, the globalisation process has not been accompanied by the opening of borders to those who are forced to move in search of safety, but rather by restrictive immigration policies (Kibreab, 1999:387). Rather, to him, the idea of a ‘deterritorialisation of identity’ in a cosmopolitan world seems wishful thinking and the “propensity of many societies [...] to define themselves on the basis of their ethnic, national or spatial origin, or religion, as well as culturally and ethnically distinct locations [...] has never been greater” (Kibreab, 1999:385).

Kibreab’s conclusion, however, that “people tend to identify strongly with their territories because of the opportunity this offers regarding rights of access to resources and protection by virtue of being a member or citizen of that territory” (Kibreab, 1999:408), seems at first sight contradictory in relation to refugees who are often forced to flee from their territory due to the very fact that they had been denied basic rights there.

Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that displacement and migration of people are often accompanied by the development of a strong notion of attachment to certain places or territories. It is precisely under conditions of challenge and threat to connections between peoples and places that identities are most strongly reterritorialised which implies being torn loose from one's original homeland and then constructing a new territorialised link to a real or yet imagined territorial entity. Hence, the nomadic view seems to overlook that essentialist conceptions of place may be of importance to the strategies applied by people, who were forced to flee, in creating places and boundaries. It is therefore problematic to view forced migrants by virtue of their statelessness as "unwitting representatives of a cosmopolitan alternative to the idea of a homeland" (Xenos, 1996 in Grundy-Warr, 2004:266) when people who find themselves outside the nation-state system are barred from this alternative. People who are forcibly on the move do not necessarily become citizens of the world, and neither the state nor territorialised identities have completely vanished. Although there is no question that the nation-state's monopoly of power has been considerably weakened in the wake of globalisation, it is still perceived as the natural framework and repository of rights and protection, and from this its still immense power is derived.

Malkki's study of Hutu refugees in two settings in Tanzania revealed how those in the camp had come to see themselves as a "nation in exile" whereas town refugees had developed a "lively cosmopolitanism" (Malkki, 1995a:3). It remains the task of the upcoming case study to verify whether these findings can be accepted implicitly and applied for Burmese forced migrants in Thailand as well. Yet, the experience of displacement and relocation cannot only be rendered as a linear process with a final termination that de- or reterritorialises identity, "but must be understood as a multiple process that stretches its influence in many directions and continues to include new aspects in an ongoing process of identifications" (Sorensen, 1997:161). The local perspective of forced migrants themselves thus has to be included in the analysis in order to be able to portray a livelier picture of processes of ethnic identity formation that take place in exile. Relevant to this local perspective is the awareness of refugees' underlying conditions in exile, such as the attitudes of the host population, the policy environment as well as refugees' livelihood opportunities within their respective settlements. Therefore a brief description of some of the wider political and social context and the factors shaping their lives shall be given next to introduce the case study.

3 THE CASE OF BURMESE FORCED MIGRANTS IN THAILAND

The armed conflict between the Government of the Union of Myanmar, the country's official name, and several of the ethnic opposition groups along the state's borders has produced large numbers of refugees⁹ trickling into neighbouring Thailand in cognizable numbers since 1984 when the first refugee camp, Mae La, was established just across the border on Thai soil.¹⁰ Back then, arrivals had hoped to be able to return to their homes when government troops would recede at the onset of the

⁹ There are approximately 140,000 Burmese refugees in nine camps in Thailand, an unknown number live illegally without any documentation in towns. Actual figures are difficult to verify, estimates put the figure at between 1.5 and 2 million people who have either no legal status or only temporary migrant worker status (cf. IRC, 2008; TBBC, 2008a, 2008b; UNHCR, 2008).

¹⁰ That year saw a number of successful attacks by the Burmese army on KNU strongholds which resulted in larger flows of Karen 'villagers' seeking shelter across the border, a flow that has not ceased to this date. Another group of refugees are the so-called 'students' who relocated their political struggle to Thai exile after the crackdown of protests in 1988 and the elections of 1990 (cf. Human Rights Watch, 1998). A renewed surge has been observed after the 'Saffron Revolution' of September 2007.

rainy season. The RTG has likewise understood their seeking shelter as merely temporary in character, as under Thai law – the country not being a signatory to the 1951 *UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* nor its 1967 Protocol – there are no refugees. Instead Thailand, when faced with a large influx of refugees from Indochina, in its 1954 *Regulations Concerning Displaced Persons from Neighbouring Countries* defined a ‘displaced person’ as someone “who escapes from dangers due to an uprising, fighting, or war, and enters in breach of the Immigration Act” (Lang, 2002:92). Strictly speaking, refugees are thus ‘illegal immigrants’.

In line with this logic, camps are termed ‘temporary shelters for displaced persons fleeing from fighting’ (Grundy-Warr and Wong, 2002:113), and this is the main reason why no permanent materials like concrete and stone are being allowed as construction material. Refugee camps therefore may from the outside easily elicit impressions of being idyllic conglomerates of thatched bamboo huts set almost naturally in the borderline’s mountainous terrain far off from urban settlements. Nonetheless, Thailand’s encampment policy deliberately tries to prevent spontaneous integration of refugees and thus to facilitate repatriation once the circumstances that prompted displacement have changed. This policy further allows for easier control of refugees and alleviates Thailand from the financial responsibility for meeting refugees’ needs by shifting it to the international donor community. Since 1999 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has become officially operational with field offices along the border and is accepted by the RTG in an advisory function. The ultimate decisions, however, remain within the government’s hands allowing for greater flexibility and independence in its response to its ‘refugee problem’. In 2005 the RTG finally approved the option of resettlement to third countries from all refugee camps as durable solution to the ‘refugee problem’ and simultaneously agreed to permit greater access to education and work opportunities for those not opting for resettlement.

This perception of forced migrants as a problem or even ‘threat’ to the Thai nation is not uncommon among Thai politicians, the media but also the local host population¹¹ and through those is eventually reflected back on migrants making it difficult for them to feel welcome in exile.

Refugees living within the confinements of Mae La Camp, fenced off from the outside world by barbed wire, even after many years, cannot gain any official rights of settlement, travel or employment in Thailand and are thus fully dependent on external aid agencies for even the most basic forms of support such as food or other supplies for livelihood. As a result, there is a whole generation who have no knowledge of life outside the gates of the camp and have not been able to practice traditional life skills, such as hunting, planting or harvesting.

Theoretically, camp-based refugees enjoy the protection of the UNHCR, and yet, practically, interviews have shown that camp residents do not feel safe as cross-border attacks by Burmese government troops are feared and memories of the series of attacks on camps in the 1990s are still rife (cf. KHRG, 1998). At the time of research, new rumours of imminent attacks by the pro-government Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a splinter group of the oppositional Karen National Union (KNU) spread around Mae La Camp after the latter’s Secretary General, Pado Mahn Shar, had been shot dead in his Mae Sot home in February 2008.¹² “The psychological stress of not being able to work or travel is [thus] compounded by the threat of attack” (Weldone, 2005).

On an area of four square kilometres Mae La Refugee Camp currently gives home to around forty thousand people¹³ of which 97 per cent subscribe to the ethnic category Karen (UNHCR, 2008) lead-

It has to be noted that the two groups of ‘villagers’ and ‘students’ are found in both camp and town and are not distinct to one location.

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion on ways of perception by the host country, see Grundy-Warr and Wong, 2002:112f.

¹² cf. [[http://antidictatorship.wordpress.com/2008/02/17/assassination-of-pado-mahn-shar-lar-phan/\(01/06/08\)](http://antidictatorship.wordpress.com/2008/02/17/assassination-of-pado-mahn-shar-lar-phan/(01/06/08))]

¹³ Note that Thailand’s population density stands at 117 people per square kilometre (corresponding figure for Bangkok: 5,111) [<http://www.thaibossy.jp/thailand/e-profile.htm> (21/06/08)].

ing to a relatively low level of interaction of Karen with members of other ethnic groups from Burma in addition to minimal interaction with local Thai communities due to geographic confinement. Interethnic relations between members of different groups from Burma, however, take place on an everyday basis in the bustling multi-ethnic border town of Mae Sot. Conditions in this urban area display a different picture. Here, accurate estimates of the many undocumented migrants or their breakdown by ethnicity are problematic. Considered illegal migrants, they are subject to arrest or detention and “constantly fear the authorities, which have the power to repatriate them or exploit their vulnerable position by demanding bribes” (Grundy-Warr and Wong, 2002:111). And this poses additional financial burdens on the self-settled migrants who have to struggle for their survival. Interviewees representing the group of politically motivated forced migrants – as opposed to economically motivated migrant workers who are employed as cheap labour in the town’s many factories – most often make their living through support of their respective political organisations, and some work with non-political local Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

These differing conditions of exile pose for an interesting comparative study of two groups of forced migrants, the officially settled and the self-settled, and it is now possible to address the question of how the experiences of displacement and exile have affected the generation and articulation of ethnic identity in these completely different areas of settlement offering contrasting sets of living conditions, physical as well as human environments and different degrees of exposure to the local host population.

3.1 Generation and Articulation of Ethnic Identity in Exile

Acknowledging that “identity is not merely a static quality held fast in memory, but is rather a plastic concept that can be moulded and remoulded to fit ongoing contingencies”, the following part of the thesis will ask how the refugee experience serves as a mirror to reflect and deflect expressions of ethnicity and how in turn ethnicity is used as a mirror to view the refugee experience (Camino and Krulfeld, 1994:1). Therefore, forced migrants’ own narratives and accounts shall be introduced to enrich this analysis of ways in which the experiences of displacement and exile have generated ethnic identity, of how refugees can articulate their identity and of whether they, as outsiders in the national world order will reformulate their identity within the system of nation-states or rather subvert it.

In line with numerous assumptions of exile generally being conducive to formations of ethnic identity as outlined above, fieldwork findings from Thailand suggest that forced migrants identify strongly in terms of ethnic categories. Identification in terms of gender is in some cases the only category that is seen as more important than ethnicity¹⁴ whereas identifications with social groups come second or third.

The refugee label, for instance, that supposedly serves as a protective legal status, is vehemently denied, not least to avoid arrest and harassment. Amongst the whole sample population, the term ‘refugee’ is further not simply understood in terms of the UNHCR’s definition, but is rather associated with only those who have registered with the UN and live in camps, as opposed to self-settled migrants who rather view themselves as ‘politicians’ or ‘activists’. And yet, both groups, including those holding Refugee Identity Cards, refuse to be categorised as ‘refugees’ due to the word’s negative connotations¹⁵ as is shown by this statement of a 42-year-old Karen man living in Mae La Refugee Camp:

¹⁴ This is true for about half of all female interviewees while none of the male survey participants actively emphasised his gender in his self-identification.

¹⁵ It has to be noted that the Burmese, and also Karen equivalents of the term ‘refugee’ ဒုက္ခသည် [dou' kha. dhe] and ပုခံခံရသူများ [bwar bar kaw bar kae] respectively, translate as ‘people who suffer’.

I don't think that I am a refugee, I think that I am a person who struggles for my people. So, I am not only a refugee and helpless. My life is not helpless, I have rights! We are not like animals, people can keep faith. We also have a life like other people! (Interview 31)¹⁶

While refugeeness is commonly associated with helplessness or victimhood and is therefore rejected as a stigmatised collective identity, proud assertions of Karen or Rakhine identity, for instance, are ubiquitous in both camp and town; however, ways of identification and the articulation of ethnic identity differ in the two sites where field research was conducted. What had soon become apparent during field research was that while in the camp ethnic identity is commonly accounted as something natural, inherited through blood and is thus seen related to skin colour or sex, interviewees in town from all ethnic groups are far more liable to range ethnicity next to religion as something convertible. This is revealed in answers to the question of the possibility of access of the interviewer or other non-members to interviewees' ethnic group.

No, it is impossible, you are German, not Karen; you cannot change your blood. But in the future, I am not sure, but I think you can maybe become a Karen citizen when we have our Karen country. (Interview 8)

If you want to become Karen, you have to try to speak the language and if you believe in our culture and traditions and follow [them], yes, if you really believe in that identity, why not. It depends on you and on your heart not your hair or your skin. (Interview 13)

The latter statement from town already discloses the major assumed components and attributes of ethnicity which shall be explored in the upcoming sections. While ethnicity is perceived as something rigid and immovable in the camp, it will be shown that it is still subject to transformation and reformulation in exile. The former statement by a young Karen camp resident moreover hints at the internalised dream of a Karen nation. In this context it is less remarkable that forced migrants in the camp are far more inclined to elevate their ethnicity to the realm of nationhood. Analogously, political statements are made when asked about their ethnicity and nationality, whereas interviewees in town across all ethnic groups included in the survey, are more likely to cherish the vision of a future democratic and federal Burma¹⁷ and avow themselves more readily to their Burmese nationality as these statements, from camp and town respectively, demonstrate:

My ethnicity is Karen. My nationality is Karen also, not Burmese, I don't accept that. I have my Karen nationality! (Interview 32)

I am Karen, Sgaw Karen. My ethnicity is Karen and my nationality is Burmese, because we come from Burma, so we have to say Burmese, and, why not? All people from Burma are Burmese. (Interview 10)

To continue the analysis and elaborate on the questions of why and how forced migrants in the two settings have developed different ways of articulating and generating ethnic identity, sites for further exploration of these questions have to be opened up by exposing and examining the essential markers, attributes and processes in negotiating ethnic identity. The limited scope of this thesis, however, will neither allow for all the voices and all the issues brought up in the interviews to be included nor to be portrayed here at length and in depth. Hence, the analysis shall concentrate on recurring themes and discourses that were found throughout field research including traditionalism and pragmatism manifested in notions of the past, present and future, purity and authenticity, the temporariness of exile, perceptions of the 'other', oppression and feelings of inferiority as well as freedom and citizens' rights. These issues are now being addressed in multiple ways throughout the three upcoming chapters

¹⁶ Quotes from interviews have been referenced according to the interview number and can be cross-referenced with the table in *Appendix A* for further information on interviewees' backgrounds.

¹⁷ This is often expressed in form of an ethnic federalism that is to ensure democracy and ethnic minority rights; underlying detailed concepts of this vision are complex and cannot form part of this paper; for more information see for example the website of the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) and its Federal Constitution Drafting and Coordination Committee (FCD-CC) [<http://www.enccburma.org/index.html> (24/06/08)].

that will deal with strategies of invisibility and the purity of ethnicity, the emergence of a ‘mythico-history’, and finally with the maintenance of ethnic boundaries and liminality in the system of nation-states. It is hoped that in spite of its brevity the analysis will still be able to give an intelligible picture of trends within the sample, and it has to be kept in mind that there were always exceptions to this trend, and opinions presented here are, needless to say, not those of the whole sample.

3.1.1 *Strategies of Invisibility and the Purity of Ethnicity*

As has been stated above, although both fieldwork sites have revealed strong ethnic identifications by individuals, ways of articulation differ greatly as a result of different settings and environments. By giving special consideration to everyday practices, attachment to material culture and traditional values, this section shall now carefully examine the implications camp and town life have had for ethnic identity formation through which notions of pragmatism and traditionalism will be revealed.

Town-dwellers’ liability to perceive ethnicity in flexible terms is consistent with their requirement to accommodate a number of more situational identities in response to practical necessities of their immediate environments. Town can be described as an ambiguous space for these undocumented residents; it is familiar and foreign at the same time. It is familiar inside the compounds of their organisations, where they are often surrounded by members of their own ethnic group, sometimes also others. It is foreign as soon as they leave this place of safety and find a different world on the streets of Mae Sot, where they will sense a fear of conspicuousness even on short trips to the market and therefore think of strategies of invisibility either by pretending to be what they are not or by not revealing who they are. “I have to avoid speaking Karen loudly, because my neighbour will hear I am not Thai. [...] But if I act like a Thai, I am ok”, is one interviewee’s strategy (Interview 17). Repeated accounts of successful circumvention of police checkpoints and strategies to avoid the authorities by deliberately changing outer appearance and pretending to be a member of the host population expose a great deal of creativity in managing multiple identities and reveal how undocumented town-dwellers have learned to navigate in a world that bears the dangers of detention and deportation.

It is very dangerous here. We have to avoid the Thai police as much as we can, but I go out a lot, I cannot stay like in a jail. So, I usually make sure that I wear a new helmet and that my motorbike is ok, so the traffic police don’t stop me. And then I make like [pretend to be] a Thai. *How do you do that?* Oh, it is easy! You just keep your hair short, like sportsmen style, and never wear a *longyi*¹⁸! It is better to wear a yellow shirt¹⁹ like the Thais! (Interview 5)

The above account by a Kayan resident of Mae Sot illustrates the importance attached to physical appearance and clothes worn when travelling in town, a theme that was present in all interviews in town without exception. “If we wear a *longyi*, they will arrest us” (Interview 19), was a frequent statement exemplifying how adjustment in outer appearance gives undocumented residents a feeling of greater security and facilitates everyday life by opening possibilities of freer movement. While town-dwellers stated to feel free to wear their ‘old’ clothes within the safety of their own compounds and offices, not all actually stick to those which is, according to informants, due to acquired habit and lack of availability. A few interviews disclosed objection for reasons of lack of convenience in everyday situations and one informant even pointed out negative associations of backwardness, while the majority still cherishes clothes as distinct part of their ethnic identity like this 27-year-old Rakhine:

Since we were young, we wear those kind of clothes [...] it is because it is our identity as well, if we don’t have our identity or our culture, our Rakhine people will be no more, you know, it will

¹⁸ Burmese sarong, here that worn by men.

¹⁹ Referring to the yellow shirts Thais wear to express their loyalty to King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who was born on a Monday. According to Thai astrology, influenced by Hindu mythology, Monday which is generally associated with the moon, is assigned the colour yellow.

all be mixed up. So, it is important not only for me, but [for] all Rakhine. We have to preserve our culture, our identity, our traditions. If we don't preserve our identity, who will? You? No! But, now, I can wear it [*longyi*] only in the office, according to the current situation in Thailand [...]. If I wear a *longyi* they [authorities] can easily recognise me, so when I go outside I have to pretend something, actually I don't want to pretend but, unless I pretend, I will be in jail. Jail is no problem, but deportation will mean many years imprisonment in Burma. So we feel oppressed here and according to psychology, if we feel oppressed or we are badly treated, we want to preserve something even more [...]. So our feeling is quite strong compared to inside [Burma], because of oppression, because of the situation; and when we have traditional ceremonies here, we are more united compared to certain people inside, because we have that strong feeling. (Interview 21)

This account also exemplifies the widespread opinion of how the experience of exile has supported the development of a stronger ethnic consciousness, and how this is even reinforced by oppression experienced there as has been hinted at in the theoretical part. Oppression moreover has led to more unity within ethnic groups as opposed to “certain people inside”. This reference to their home country as ‘inside’ is very common among forced migrants in Thailand and illustrates how they regard the Burmese nation-state as a closed entity of which they have been exiled. As politically active people, they have remained strong emotional links with home and perceive life in exile as a sacrifice for the salvation of their homeland. In their willingness to make sacrifices by living apart from family and friends and subordinating personal life goals to political ones they resist the restrictions of exile and maintain that the political movement based ‘outside’ still offered more freedom of expression and opportunities to expedite the political process and strengthen civil society ‘inside’. Most importantly, exile has enabled them to make contact with the wider world, learn English²⁰ and gain knowledge about the international situation which had opened their eyes compared to their former lives ‘inside’ in a “dark society”, “isolated from the rest of the world”, as one interviewee put it (Interview 25).

Besides, being ‘outside’ and in a different or even hostile environment, forced migrants have become aware of the necessity to preserve their culture and traditions as opposed to those ‘inside’ for whom it might be natural. Exile, in bringing people of different ethnic backgrounds together in relatively close localities, has thus only brought about awareness of one’s ethnic identity and the understanding of its cultural value, as the following extract illustrates:

In our Palaung area, people don't know how important it [ethnic identity] is, because usually everybody around them is Palaung. I also didn't know. But here, many people try to maintain our traditions and let other people know about who we Palaung are. They know how to promote their culture and they can also reflect on their own culture, this is very important. (Interview 54)

Since town residents are limited in ways of openly showcasing their true identity, their offices have acquired a multifunctional character of serving as a base for the political movement while simultaneously having developed into sanctuaries for the expression and preservation of their ethnic identity which bestows upon them a museum-like character. Alongside pamphlets and poster exhibitions of past campaigns, walls are frequently decorated with ‘national’ flags, pictures of ‘national’ heroes or revolutionary leaders, former kings of their own dynasties and their palaces like that of the Palaung *sawbwa*²¹ for instance. Moreover, pictures of traditional dances or ‘fashion shows’ in traditional clothes, the fabric itself, ornaments and traditional musical instruments like drums which all have their individual stories of how they had made their way across the border into exile, are on display. Most organisations celebrate annual holidays that are important to their ethnic group with music, dance and most remarkably speeches by their leaders who will remind members of their identity, their legacy,

²⁰ Not least due to the presence of numerous NGOs and an increasingly large expatriate community from outside Southeast Asia, English learning facilities have been growing in last years; the same is true for the camp, where schools apparently offer better English classes than local Thai schools, as a result Thai parents have occasionally inquired admittance of their children to Mae La's English classes according to one Interviewee (Interview 29).

²¹ Hereditary prince or regent in the Shan and Karenni States.

their present struggle and their future endeavours. This situation clarifies how town-dwellers are attempting to make their immediate surroundings as familiar in material ways as possible in an otherwise strange and unreceptive environment that demands adjustment in many ways.

It is this adjustment in particular which is seen in a critical light in the camp where forced migrants obviously have more freedom in openly expressing their ethnic identity within the boundaries of Mae La. Camp residents see town as a dangerous environment which, by blurring boundaries and mixing categories, threatens the purity of ethnicity. Being forced to hide their true identity in town amounted to a loss of identity in the camp refugees' eyes whereas the camp allowed for its maintenance:

Inside [Burma, Karen State], they [Karen people] have a lot of burdens, so it is difficult to control their traditional culture. But here, in Mae La Camp, we can more and more retain and control and keep our culture pure here, but in Mae Sot area, I think they are not interested [...]. In the towns, they are afraid to wear their traditional clothes, they are afraid to speak their language. You know, you don't want people to look down on you. So they slowly lose their identity, their traditions and culture. (Interview 31)

This statement makes clear how the camp by purportedly being the only locus that enables maintenance of identity, traditions and culture is perceived as having the monopoly on the purity of Karen ethnicity. It was often pointed out in interviews how Karen people living as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) inside Karen State had more pressing needs than to keep their traditions alive while those living in towns in Thailand and abroad were "controlled by other cultures" as one interviewee put it, and had thus become assimilated into majority societies and were not interested in the value of their traditions but rather in their work (Interview 23).

Inside Mae La Camp, the Karen are the overwhelming majority and this fact stands in stark contrast to their minority status in both Burma and Thailand. This 'power' acquired through rather unfortunate circumstances is not to be neglected in ideological and psychological terms and has endowed forced migrants with direct control over the definition of 'Karenness' or the purity of ethnicity by allowing them to delineate proper personal and collective conduct and values. In camp residents' eyes, ethnic identity in the camp then is lived and celebrated unfettered by any major outside influence and viti-ation.

Similar to town, clothes is attributed great significance as a symbol of ethnic identification, the difference being that in the camp they can not only be worn freely but this is also actively promoted from above. Karen schools in the camp for instance have students come in their Karen dress every Wednesday to foster communal spirits. Traditional clothing can also be seen on other days in the camp while the most refined sets are taken out on Sundays as a weekly ritual when attending church service.

Religious devotion in the camp is another aspect of purity especially among the Christian Karen²², who believe that they will "become known to every peoples in the world through God [...], not only through [their] education or political movement" (Interview 29). Town residents explain the great importance attached to religion in the camp with 'boredom' and 'lack of purpose' prevailing there and admit that they used to be more religious before getting involved in the political movement which now kept them so busy that they sometimes "forget it is Sunday" (Interview 18). By some, religious devotion in the camp, however, is seen as dangerous Christian fatalism that hindered people from taking their lives into their own hands and rather sit and wait for change than to work for it. As plausible as these fears might be, it has to be acknowledged, however, that the same means and opportunities that are available to town residents, most importantly regular access to the internet, are not available in the

²² Christian Karen constitute the majority in the camp, followed by Buddhists. Strong dissociations to Muslim Karen are observable in Mae La as these are occasionally accused of opportunism in 'falsely' ascribing to Karen ethnicity to pave the way for resettlement. "Karen are not Muslims, they only want to go to the US", said one interviewee (Interview 9). The exploration of divisions along religious lines among the refugee community is highly interesting; it would however go beyond the scope of the present thesis.

camp. Where there are neither many work opportunities, nor many responsibilities nor entertainment facilities, church service might also give variety and strength to an uncertain and monotonous life. Therefore, turning to God can be explained as another way of coping with the present situation and nurturing hopes for its ultimate end.

While town-dwellers who are rather dispersed in different neighbourhoods have to be more careful outside their familiar surroundings to expose their identity and have come to cope with this by juggling situational identities, the camp setting has produced essentialist and traditionalist notions of ethnicity which must be seen in relation to its seclusiveness and proximity that allows people mostly to live together with their kin and stay close to their community. Therefore, the camp by virtue of its locality, condensed structure and the Karen's majority status has developed into a sanctuary not only for forced migrants but also for their culture and traditions, similar to offices in town but on a much larger scale. Unlike the town setting, the camp has allowed residents to develop control mechanisms to keep their ethnic identity 'pure' and it is also this ethnic purity which gives camp residents a sense of being worthy of gaining the right to self-governance in their own nation-state.

The town residents' strategies of invisibility and inconspicuousness on the other hand cannot be seen as a manifestation of a lost identity but must rather be seen as mere tactics that enable them to "operate effectively in exile and outside the framework of the host country's institutional and attitudinal constraints" (Kibreab, 1999:399). They testify a vitality to create and negotiate new roles and behaviour to achieve both necessary and desired ends. On an ideological level, the political movement has provided fertile soil for nurturing greater awareness of one's ethnic identity and has simultaneously served as a means to keep town residents busy and ascribe meaning to their present situation and like camp residents maintain hope for an ultimate end to exile. The restrictive policy of the host government has moreover intensified intrinsic ethnic identification while the need to undercommunicate one's true identity and keep a low profile in public serves as an innovation for survival.

Both settings have thus achieved to defy the limitations of exile and find ways to preserve ethnic identity and communicate it to the outside through different means and on either traditionalist or pragmatic tracks and thereby formulate ethnicity as the essential part of personal identity.

While this section has largely dealt with strategies for survival in the presence of restrictions in town, the next section shall turn to attempts of forging a common Karen 'national' history and the meanings ascribed to historic consciousness in the camp. This will exemplify how the past is made present in the camp by adjusting it to the present context, and how this is perceived in town by subsequently exploring similarities or differences in town-dwellers' endeavours.

3.1.2 The Production of a Karen 'Mythico-History'

As the theoretical part has outlined, notions of a common history and origins are crucial for ethnic identity, and "interpretations of history are therefore important to ideologies seeking to justify, strengthen and maintain particular ethnic identities" (Eriksen, 2002:59). This seems particularly true for members of the Karen group living in Mae La Camp, who are often found to turn to history in trying to ascribe meaning to and come to terms with their present situation, a history that is here regarded as being a key factor in strengthening their ethnic identity.

Malkki's study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania is seminal to this analysis as she demonstrates the importance of narratives and historical consciousness to identity construction and maintenance. Finding that narratives she encountered in Tanzanian refugee camps were neither myths nor history, she described them as "mythico-history" (Malkki, 1995a:54). Like the Hutu in Malkki's study, the Karen in Mae La are involved in "an impassioned construction and reconstruction of their history as 'a people'"

and see themselves as a nation in exile, whereby exile would “ultimately empower them to reclaim (or create anew) the ‘homeland’” (Malkki, 1995a:3). The camp turned out to have become the locus of the production of a mythico-history of the Karen as a naturally peace-loving people who had been forced to flee throughout their history and recently also to fight in self-defence as victims of Burmese politics (cf. Brooten, 2003). History thus has seized a key role in social life in the refugee camp where it frequently becomes the topic of informal discussions and conversations and is seen as “a source of power, knowledge and purity” (Malkki, 1995a:233).

The Karen mythico-history serves several purposes, namely to render credible to both in- and outsiders the history that had brought them in their present situation and make this very same situation bearable. Further, it serves to foster a feeling of collective identity and thus to establish a basis of social cohesion and action in the present. Through the construction of a mythico-history, the forced migrants in Mae La Camp have created an identity for themselves, while at the same time creating an oppositional other of the Thai authorities and the Burmese Government.

The mythico-history consists of reoccurring themes which bring into being formulaic expressions of the group’s past and explore, reiterate and emphasise the “boundaries between self and other” and between “good and evil” (Malkki, 1995a:54). Talk about Karen history is of a quite particular form of heavily moral narratives reminiscent of biblical stories that can also provide guidance for conduct. Needless to say, during field research this mythico-history was not told by one interviewee as a coherent complete story from early beginnings to the present; rather accounts consisted of many stories presented in different ways and contexts by different persons. The overlapping parts have then been joined together for this analysis that reveals key elements of the mythico-history which are seen as being found in motifs of oppression and flight besides assertions of autochthony and peacefulness as is illustrated by the following account of a 20-year-old Karen post-secondary student in the camp, who, upon having been asked to briefly introduce himself and the circumstances that brought him to Mae La, quickly seized the opportunity to give a short lecture on Karen history:

I was seven when I came to Mae Ra Moo Camp with my aunt and uncle, we had come there step by step from Karen State. And after High School, I moved to Mae La Camp. You know, our Karen people move many times. Before our people came here, they stayed in China, then they came to Burma, we called it *Kawlah*, the Green Land. There was nobody and they lived peacefully. Then another group of people came from another country, they followed the Karen. /Who were they?/ The Burmese!²³ They had good economic skills, and we have a saying that the people who have those skills, they can get what they want easily. They were clever and they tried to influence the Karen. They make a lot of noise. But the Karen don’t like noise, they like peace. The Karen don’t like fighting each other, they want only peace. So, they go to another place, they move their place step by step. [...] The Burmese came here to fight, but Karen are friendly and don’t harm any other people. Why [the] Karen people moved their place only for unity and peace, we must know, it is very important to know. [...] If you want to know more, I want to help you, because it is important to know why the war started. It started in 1949; on January 31st 1949 we started our revolution. Before, we lived peacefully for more than 2000 years. [...] Now we need freedom! (Interview 24)

Assertions of autochthony are repeatedly made next to those of the Karen being an intrinsically peaceful group. Different stories or myths are drawn upon to support claims of indigenesness which underline the ethnic group’s “legitimacy derived from precedence and nativeness” (Malkki, 1995a:64). Those claims to autochthony are however not only restricted to the camp, interviewees from almost all ethnic groups included in the survey²⁴ made similar assertions. According to Horowitz this is the most common claim of ethnic groups to legitimate their distinct ethnic character (1985:202f.). Since so many groups declare themselves as indigenous, the challenge for each is to trace their history further

²³ Meant is the ethnic group of the Burmans (or Bamar) that is mostly referred to as ‘Burmese’ by Interviewees when speaking English, although this term is one of national rather than ethnic categorisation.

²⁴ Exceptions being members of the Zomi and Tavoyan groups of which, however, relatively few were included in the survey.

back and prove prior arrival to other groups. Gravers sees authenticity as a “mode of presenting and representing identity in the history and as a meaningful basis of social interaction” (1996:265f.).

By constructing a harmonious past in a golden age when the Karen were in self-control and were able to live peacefully prior to the arrival of other groups, the past is reinterpreted in absolute terms, and in doing so, rigid identities are coined through the image of the ‘malevolent other’ in opposition to the ‘good’ Karen. Narratives of Karen history are rife of images of the Karen as an honest and innocent people who had become victims of foreign invasion and malicious intentions. One such story hinted at in interviews tells of Karen forefathers marking land for their ‘children’ by putting a fishing rod with a Karen tunic hanging on it into the ground before the arrival of the British, Burmans and Mon who each ignored the former group’s territorial markers and claims to the land and instead buried their own markers lower beneath the surface of the ground in order to return later to rule the land. This led to the Mon ruling the land first, followed by the Burmans and British and thus leaves the Karen as the rightful owners of the land after the British retreated. A story that endows Karen nationalist endeavours with hope, and demands justice from the Burmans. Such ethno-nationalist tendencies are felt to a considerable degree inside the camp, some evolving into irredentism by claiming that parts of Northern Thailand, including Chiang Mai actually belonged to the Karen. In this context, a 32-year-old Karen hinted at the irony the demarcation of borders entailed especially for camp residents: “So now we are actually in our own historical land, but we have to ask permission from the Thai authorities to go out [of the camp]” (Interview 2).

The Karen’s intrinsic peacefulness, however, has made it impossible for them to counter offensives by other groups in the past, and this explains why they had never been able to establish their own state, instead had constantly been forced to further retreat until they reached the mountainous areas of today’s Karen State. More recent historical events then had forced them to finally use force in their ongoing armed struggle against government troops and to seek shelter across the border in refugee camps in Thailand. The production of the image of the ‘malevolent other’ in personification of the Burmans in a “cosmic logic where evil plays an important part, is congruent with the current ethnic hostilities and serves as a rationalisation for the use of force” (Eriksen, 2002:112).

The failure to ‘liberate the Karen from Burman rule’ up to this day is moreover attributed to the Burmans’ superiority in warfare and their policy of ‘divide and rule’ which had further weakened the Karen armed forces that are now comprised of many splinter factions, making the strive for unity a major theme among the Karen. Another aspect of the Karen’s inferiority is explained in mythical narratives of how the Karen lost the book of civilisation through neglect (cf. Renard, 2006).

Moreover, the mythico-history renders the present situation of life in a refugee camp on foreign soil understandable, and this is to be communicated to the outside world as well, as the wording of the above account demonstrates. It is often spoken of a ‘duty’ or ‘responsibility’ interviewees felt to make the ‘suffering of the Karen nation’ known to the world community. An endeavour that could be further facilitated in future, as Mae La Camp was connected to the outside world by the erection of an antenna pole at the end of 2007 that now – at least theoretically – enables camp inhabitants to use mobile phones, and via those, still very limited, access to the internet is possible from inside the camp. One young Karen has already used this new opportunity to express “the unique identity of the Karen people, to document the struggle of the Karen nation, and to introduce the Karen culture and way of life to the world community” by posting a very detailed version of Karen history online.²⁵

In line with narratives heard in Mae La Camp, this version depicts a history of a peace-loving and honest people who have repeatedly been forced to move by other groups who destroyed the golden era of the harmonious past. The conception of an originally outstanding position of the own people beside the others which is lost through neglect or foolishness, however, is relatively frequent in the mytho-

²⁵ cf. [http://karenvoice.net/e_karenInThePast.html (20/05/08)]

logy of marginal peoples, and also a cognitive basic pattern particularly characteristic of the Karen in general (cf. Keyes, 1979).

What is special to the mythico-history produced in the refugee camp, however, is its migratory element. Karen history was frequently portrayed as a series of long journeys that date back to the third millennium B.C. and started in Mesopotamia. Having been asked about the origins of Karen people, a 22-year-old Karen camp resident, promptly answered: "They came from Babylonia." And as if she anticipated her response might be challenged or questioned, quickly added: "Most Karen history books say that, that is a fact, there is no way for any different version" (Interview 32). Another young Karen man was more cautious in his assertions: "Some of the books tell a different story; but the main writings on the history of Karen say the Karen came from Babylon and wandered step by step to Tibet and China and *Kawlah*" (Interview 12). Although there is general awareness among informants of the doubtfulness of Babylon²⁶ being the origin of the Karen, this element is readily incorporated into the mythico-history. There is no question that such myths that are frequently dealt with as historical facts form an important element in the generation of ethnic identity (cf. Barth, 1998). This endows the Karen with a long history and a migratory past that has also religious significance as this 'fact' amongst others had led some missionaries to draw conclusions about the Karen being one of the lost tribes of Israel (cf. Renard, 2003). One of the few writings on Karen history that actively support the Karen's Babylonian origins was the missionary-educated Karen Saw Aung Hla (cf. Cheesman, 2002). The fact that his 1932 publication was recently reprinted by the Chiang Mai-based NGO *Images Asia* and has been circulated in refugee camps might partly explain how the mythico-history is produced.²⁷

In an enclosed environment like Mae La Camp, it is indeed crucial to examine what sources are available inside and who controls the flow of such material, as the selection of history also is a type of political power since it determines what memories are worth preserving and which symbols come to be valued. Another such source nurturing the mythico-history is the camp school curriculum developed by the Karen Education Department (KED) of the KNU, and it is obvious that the KNU's version of history bears much resemblance to the narratives heard in the camp: "Here [*Kawlah*] we lived characteristically simple, uneventful and peaceful lives, until the advent of the Burman." What is more, the KNU's version is introduced with this statement: "The Karens are much more than a national minority. We are a nation with a population of 7 million, having all the essential qualities of a nation" (KNU, 1992). Rajah sees in this rhetoric a "fully fledged nationalism asserting claims to territory, sovereignty and political rights founded on ethno-nationalism" and points out that Karen ethno-nationalism was initially coined by Christian missionary interest and via the KNU's rhetoric as well as the political conditions inside Burma has been made to reoccur in refugee camps (2002:522).²⁸ The camp's history curriculum beside shaping and reinforcing what it means to be Karen also inculcates a sense of belonging and duty or identity and purpose among the young Karen in the camp which not only helps them cope with being a refugee but is also an important part in the process of dissemination of a nationalist ideology. Studying history in the camp is a much appreciated opportunity as was underlined by students there who would not be able to learn their own history across the border in Burma, and although teaching history is not supposed to nurture ethno-nationalism or sow seeds of hatred against Burmans as was assured by a high school principal (Interview 31), it becomes clear how

²⁶ Further connotations of the place 'Babylon' are interesting to explore as the word evokes a sense of exile and alienation and "became a code-word among Jews (and, later Africans) for the afflictions, isolation and insecurity of living in a foreign place, set adrift, cut off from their roots and their sense of identity, oppressed by an alien ruling class" (Cohen, 1996:508). It remains unclear, however, in how far the authors of the Karen mythico-history are aware of these associations, and yet, biblical analogies are striking.

²⁷ According to *Images Asia* 2,000 copies were reprinted "to let the Karen people know of their own history that was written by a Karen author" (Email correspondence with *Images Asia*, 1/07/08).

²⁸ Although the KNU officially does not promote secession from the Union, but rather a right to self-determination in a 'genuine' federal union, its current preoccupation with forging unity often employs strong rhetoric that can indeed be read in those terms. See in this context also Harriden (2002) on the KNU's promotion of a pan-Karen identity.

certain forces within the Karen camp community have still been successful in disseminating such ideas.²⁹

And yet, maintaining that the camp were a stronghold of ethno-nationalism would do wrong to the camp population as a whole. Ideas of federalism, ubiquitous in town, have without question arrived in the camp as well, and some people there do think critically about the realisability of a separate Karen nation-state. The immediate surrounding, and lack of interethnic dialogue, the “continuation of closed ethnic boundaries mixed with ethnicised victim-hood” (Gravers, 2007b:27) there, however, makes federalism less easily conceivable which is why the camp has proved a more fertile soil for nurturing and elaborating ideas of ethno-nationalism and has led some to hold the student movement of 1988 and ensuing infiltration of the border area with ideas of federalism responsible for weakening Karen nationalism.

To get back to history, it is furthermore noticeable from informants’ narratives, also from the young Karen’s ‘lecture’ above, how readily and naturally personal experiences are linked with the group’s history. The phrase ‘to migrate step by step’ was ubiquitous in the accounts both referring to individual experiences as well as those of the group as a whole. History is thereby made to fit personal life experiences and ascribe meaning to these by placing the current condition within a history of migration and displacement. This conception allows for the current place of residence to be seen as temporary, as it represents one of the many steps eventually leading to freedom and the establishment of a Karen nation. Resettlement to third countries likewise is then not perceived as an expression of lost hope in the Karen struggle, but can be seen as counting to one of these steps as well.

The historical interpretations depicted so far present a repository of identification for many of the Karen living in the camp and help them cope with the refugee experience and ascribe meaning to a life that otherwise often lacks purpose. The proximity of residents within and the seclusiveness of the camp as a whole no doubt have facilitated the emergence of the mythico-history and “helped to create a new historical sense of collective uprooted-ness that makes people more receptive to notions of togetherness such as a ‘common identity’ and ‘homeland’” (Grundy-Warr and Wong, 2002:109).

Critique of and challenge to the camp-made mythico-history comes from members of the Karen group themselves who live just 60 kilometres to the south in town. A number of them see those nostalgic memories of an idealised world the refugees had to leave behind as an element of self-suppression and self-victimisation rather than a means to maintain ethnic identity and engage future generations, who adhere to a land they have never seen but long to return to, in the struggle. “Our Karen people are too shy. They always wince at the prospect of confrontation and instead recollect and rely on old history”, was one interviewee’s concern, the reason why she wants to encourage her people “to take their lives into their own hands” (Interview 22).

The danger in clinging to mythico-history cannot be denied, and yet, according to the camp residents’ logic, the danger lies more in dismissing mythico-history as merely myth. In town, however, history turned out to be attributed far less meaning than in the camp. It is, unlike in the camp, not seen as something essential to know. While some regretted ignorance in terms of one’s own ethnic group’s history and expressed the wish to study and learn more, others stated there were more pressing needs in the current situation than to go back a long time in history and keep old hostilities alive. “If you want to know about our history, go to the camps and ask the elders there, they will know!” (Interview 17), was one town-dweller’s advise making clear that the camp version of history is still more appreciated than ‘school history’ they had been taught back in Burma, which is widely classified as the government’s story that ignored the minorities. It became clear that the camp’s mythico-history’s function as a coping mechanism is not so much necessary in town where meaning to the present situation is

²⁹ For a discussion of the challenges of developing history curricula in the Burmese refugee camps in Thailand, see Metro, 2006.

ascribed more through the political movement, and this often being ethnic in character, collective identities are derived rather from politics than from history. While there is generally greater awareness and more critical reflection on historical discourses in town where residents have the opportunity to avail themselves of all kinds of information on the World Wide Web, nostalgic memories of the past are still ubiquitous. These are however, more often accounts of personal experiences than narratives collectively experienced by one's ethnic group. As forced migrants in town do not lead the same lifestyle of staying in close proximity to their community, those individual experiences can furthermore not as easily be transformed into a "collective, standardised narrative of the past [...] based on embodied knowledge" as has been the case in the camp (Sorensen, 1997:153).

The above elaborations must have made clear how these different living conditions and degrees of exposure to and interaction with the outside world have resulted in different meanings ascribed to history as a repository of ethnic identity generation. While camp residents draw on history, town-dwellers are more inclined to turn to politics in their negotiations of ethnic identity. Both strategies nonetheless manifest forced migrants' determination to face the challenges of their environments, not only to survive, but also to ascribe meaning to their present situation and to strive to take their lives into their own hands with whatever means are available to them.

The following section shall now deal more explicitly with differing degrees of interaction and boundaries between ethnic groups and will carve out what these entail for the formation of ethnic identity and the integration into the world order.

3.1.3 *Ethnic Boundaries and Liminality*

Considering that the level of everyday interaction is the locus where ethnicity is created and re-created (Eriksen, 2002), this section shall explore the significance of differing degrees of interaction between ethnic groups from Burma as well as with the host population in terms of ethnic identity generation in both camp and town. Processes of establishing and maintaining boundaries between ethnic groups in interaction shall be studied through three concise examples of perceptions of the 'other', practices of intermarriage and of 'vernacularisation', while the examination of relations with the host population will draw on the recurrent theme of spatial liminality in the nation-state system and will thus finally reveal the sample's tendencies for reterritorialisation of ethnic identity in an imagined homeland that will be the subject of the next section.

The camp setting in elevating the Karen to an unprecedented majority status has produced clearly demarcated ethnic boundaries as has been hinted at in the last sections whereas Mae Sot as the setting that enables more interethnic dialogue through the interlinked political movement and visions of a federal Burma seems to be the place where ethnocentric and ethno-nationalist tendencies are far less strongly pronounced without this entailing the ultimate loss of ethnicity. On the contrary, town-dwellers might be more liable than before to critically reflect upon the distinctive character of their ethnicity in relation with others and thus become a self-aware people, and this stresses the relational aspects in the formation of collective identities. As restrictive as life in exile might be, many informants in town emphasised how it had opened their eyes especially in terms of perceptions of the 'other' in form of non-members of their respective ethnic groups. Palaung interviewees for instance mentioned how they had been made to believe by government-run media back home that the Karen are terrorists. Living in remoter areas of northern Shan State, they had not been able to see with their own eyes who or what the Karen really are, exile and direct contact with Karen there only had helped them readjust this perverted image which now evokes in them partly humour and partly anger at the government's propaganda. Especially relations with and perceptions of the Burman majority had improved in exile according to many interviewees in town. The long civil war along Burma's borders had infiltrated many

ethnic minority groups with hatred against the majority, as the Burmese army was thought of as consisting mainly of Burman soldiers. A picture that must be particularly deeply rooted in Kayan people's minds, as their language only knows one word (*katan*) for Burmese, Burman and soldier. "In my hometown people really hate *katan*, but here we realised that not all Burmese are soldiers and that many are actually on our side in the political movement" (Interview 5).

While the town setting has allowed members of ethnic groups to see non-members with different eyes and become aware of the distinctive character of their ethnicity in relation with others, this greater degree of interaction has also enabled the boundaries to become subject to more negotiation. One example that clearly depicts this situation is intermarriage between different ethnic categories which will first be examined in the camp.

The importance attached to the maintenance and strengthening of ethnic boundaries' impermeability in the camp poses constraints on individuals in terms of the partners to choose, not only those for marriage but also for social relations as was depicted by a young Karen woman who had become involved in political activities of a multi-ethnic women's organisation and thus demonstratively prioritised women's over ethnic issues. "They called me 'Burman wife'", she said citing it as the main reason why after finishing high school in one of the refugee camps she had opted to join the political movement in Mae Sot as she "could not live in that society any longer" (Interview 45).

Traditionalism among the Karen in the camp undoubtedly discourages intermarriage as it sees the mixing of categories as a dangerous blurring of boundaries. Perceived threats to these boundaries coming from the outside again require the maintenance of purity of ethnicity and thus ethnic endogamy is generally preferred, as this account by a 22-year-old woman shows:

I have made the decision to get married to a Karen man, because I am a Karen girl, a Karen woman, so I don't want my next generation's name to be lost. I don't want them to be mixed people or mixed children. They should have just a pure culture whose name is Karen. But it doesn't mean that I don't like the other people. (Interview 32)

Interviews in the camp further revealed the existence of an unwritten 'policy of ethnic endogamy' that is passed on from the elders to young people who are eager to adhere to it to strengthen their ethnic identity. That this policy does not perceive intermarriage only as a key channel to the loss of purity but even the loss of the ethnic category as such becomes clear from this account: "It is our policy. If we don't do like this [maintain ethnic endogamy], later in 2030 or 2040 our Karen identity will be lost and they must live in the museum" (Interview 23).

This situation stands in stark contrast to the town setting where the prevailing pragmatism nonetheless does not actively encourage the mixing of ethnic categories through intermarriage as similar traditionalist policies still rest in interviewees' consciousness, and yet, intermarriage is not seen as the ultimate road to relinquishing ethnic purity and it is most importantly not despised. By some interviewees this is already practised and a number actually favour intermarriage as they even see benefits in such a relationship: "I will have the chance to learn another language, and my son or my daughter they will have a chance to know two cultures and learn two languages. This is very useful, if you know many languages, you have many opportunities!" (Interview 36).

Language forms an important part of ethnic identity and is one of the central boundary markers as not only in the Burmese context one mostly aligns oneself into an ethnic category through one's mother tongue. It is therefore not surprising that much importance is attached to one's ethnic language in both camp and town and the wish to pass on one's language to the next generation was expressed unexceptionally, however, again this is articulated in differing ways. While the 'vernacularisation' (Eriksen, 2002:103) in the camp has led residents to perceive Karen as the main language of the borderline, the town setting's multi-ethnic character reveals a potpourri of languages.

Mae La Camp with a 97 per cent Karen population is largely a Sgaw Karen zone in terms of language, apart from a few areas, it can be heard in all corners of the camp and many signs are also written in Sgaw Karen script. The usage of Karen is actively promoted in the camp and this vernacularisation has led the camp population to consider their language as *lingua franca* of the whole border region.

The whole border area is Karen land and Karen is used widely until Chiang Mai. Now many people come here who only speak Thai and after 1988 many came who only spoke Burmese or other languages. Actually they should all learn Karen. This is Karen land! (Interview 31)

The border between Burma and Thailand is indeed home to many Karen who have settled in villages and towns for which the Karen have their own names different from the official Thai names, requiring others to learn Karen in order to settle in the camp again exposes ethno-nationalist tendencies within the camp. This becomes apparent also in a reluctance to speak Burmese and not being willing to speak Burmese serves as an explanation for the fact that not much contact with non-Karen camp residents has been made. English, in contrast is highly regarded and being able to speak English offers the opportunity to communicate to the outside world, and if not now then in the future.

The same is true for Mae Sot where English is already an established part of the political movement for links to the international community. Besides English, a great variety of ethnic languages are in use in town. As opposed to those in the camp, forced migrants in town show greater interest in learning basic phrases in other ethnic languages, and interviewees who speak three to five languages fairly fluent to fluent are not rare, while at the same time they attach great importance to the development of their own languages.

We care about our culture and we would like to maintain and improve our language. When we have a meeting, we try to speak in Palaung only [...]. We try to understand each other, even if we come from different areas. We also try to develop our language, because for some words we don't have Palaung words. (Interview 55)

What both sites have in common again is a lack of interest in studying Thai. Although it would seem that at least basic proficiency in the host population's language facilitates everyday life in exile, learning Thai was most often seen as a waste of time, again illustrating the assumedly temporary character of exile. Research has shown that boundaries towards the host population are those most strongly demarcated. In conversations about the relationship to the host population it became clear that very few forced migrants in town have Thai friends and none of those in the camp have established social links to the host population. Those conversations further disclosed that interviewees most often feel 'looked down upon' by the Thai which is explained not only in historical terms as being a result of a long hostile history between Burma and Thailand, and the Thais' alleged ignorance of Burma's ethnic diversity which had led them to perceive all people coming from Burma as Burmans without acknowledging the – in interviewees' eyes – huge distinctions between ethnic groups. The reason which has more far-reaching consequences is that explained in terms of the Thais' superiority within the power structure of the present world order.

Now we are called refugees and if we go somewhere [...], we feel like that Thai people look down on us, because we don't have citizenship, we don't have ID cards, we don't have anything, we are refugees, that is what they [the Thais] think. (Interview 10)

Especially conversations with interviewees about their desire for integration and assimilation into the host population have brought to light an overall desire for freedom and citizenship in both settings since their feelings of inferiority to the Thais are typically derived from their lack of citizenship. Interviewees instead see themselves as occupying liminal spaces and not being part of neither the state they had fled from nor the one they had come to seek shelter in. Both camp and town residents feel they have remained outsiders of both systems and do not feel at home in their present place of residence. Mainly as a result of their 'nonrecognition', none of the informants expressed the wish to assimilate into the host society, they do not imagine themselves as part of this society due to their feeling of be-

ing excluded from it in the first place and thus make every effort to develop their collective identities in opposition to the Thais and transmit these to the next generation as well.

Resettlement to a third country is by some seen as the only way to acquire citizenship while others equate this option with abandonment of the common cause which leads to conflicting decision-making processes: “I am happy to be a Karen. Actually, I don’t want any other country’s citizenship, but I want their freedom, I want the same opportunities these countries have, but I want them as a Karen” (Interview 32). All in all, resettlement is seen as a temporary means to avail oneself of the citizenship of another country to end one’s liminality and enjoy basic rights only to return to one’s homeland after the political situation there will have changed.

3.2 Reterritorialising Ethnic Identity in an Imagined Homeland

The camp setting has responded to this marginalisation in the nation-state system with the imagination of a new nation-state that is to be gained through the purification of ethnicity. The very acts of being displaced, forced into another nation-state and being granted refugee status emphasise the ultimate temporariness of exile and ‘not belonging’, as this voice from inside the camp shows: “We have no country. This is not our country, this is a refugee camp” (Interview 12). This statement indicates that a re-rooting in exile has not taken place, and as long as they remain uprooted in exile and continue to perceive it as temporary, the option for an eventual return home remains open and forced migrants continue to be linked with their homes. According to Said, exile by definition implies a ‘thereness’ (Malkki, 1995a:192), a vital link to a homeland and thus culminates in the eventual return.

The purification of ethnicity in the camp has envisioned its residents to be worthy of ultimately gaining their still non-existent utopian homeland in the form of a nation-state like others. This wish signifies a strong reterritorialisation of camp residents’ Karen ethnic identity in the imagined home rather than a reterritorialisation at their present place of residence which is largely due to the latter’s restrictive environment. The host government’s policy does not allow for this. It then seems all the more paradoxical that this policy has actually generated a challenge to the host nation’s territory. The camp, actually set up as a mechanism of control, a Foucauldian “technology of power” (Malkki, 1995a:236f.) has become the locus of the imagination of a new nation, which is exemplified by ethno-nationalist tendencies in the camp that in some cases have evolved into irredentism.

In contrast to the town setting, the institution of the refugee camp has allowed for a collectivisation of identity on a greater scale. By confining forced migrants to one place largely sealed off from the outside, limiting their mobility, putting them in overcrowded temporary housing conditions in a protracted refugee situation, people are deprived of their basic rights as essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile. Since there are not many work opportunities and responsibilities as the camp population is dependent on outside assistance and cannot maintain their traditional cultivation and building skills, residents see their traditional culture and communal values threatened by this dependence as well as by the reputedly unwelcoming world outside the camp and are thus more inclined to retreat to traditionalism to defy these threats. The social and spatial density and lack of entertainment opportunities in the camp not only lead to emotional stress, anxiety and boredom but strong community associations which give individuals guidelines to social control and cultural stability, and most importantly are a source of identification. The refugee camp rather exacerbates their marginalisation in the host society as well as in the system of nation-states and puts forced migrants down as refugees, and this imposed label of identification is then assumedly incorporated into the individual and collective identity. Since it is so vehemently rejected also in the camp, however, another collective identity has become the concrete frame of reference: that of Karen ethni-

city which is largely overcommunicated and elevated to the realms of nationalism as they perceive themselves as liminal or marginal members of a “globally hegemonic system of nation states, and this self-image may help to initiate and maintain nationalist movements” (Dudley, 2007:103).

In this way, the camp that essentially is to control flows of forced migrants and to secure the nation-state has turned out to challenge the existing nation-states as the powerless margin is being transformed into a meaningful site of identification, creative cultural production, the imagination of the homeland and further allows for ethno-nationalist, secessionist and even irredentist tendencies to rife within it. Although the camp setting does by no means challenge the institution of the nation-state as such, it does pose a threat to the Burmese Government’s declared ‘non-disintegration of the Union’³⁰ while irredentist claims threaten – albeit to a minor extent – the Thai nation. That this threat is moreover none of imminence is illustrated by the following account that is exemplary of the continued belief in the long-term goal of a Karen nation-state. Having been asked whether he himself was planning to return to Karen State, a 33-year-old camp resident exclaimed:

YES! We will go home! After having completely destroyed the SPDC government, but it will take a long time, because now the Karen are not educated, we can’t manage the Karen country. So, it will take a long time to be united and to get our own country. Yes, but we believe that we can get [it] one day, because Israel had to fight for over 2000 years to get their country. And we have fought for our Karen country only 59 years. This is the encouragement for us. Some of the old guys they tell the youth who lost their confidence and say that we will never get our own country. ‘Hey, this is only 59 years; Israel had to fight [for] over 2000 years!’ (Interview 2)

This optimistic account further depicts how the nationalist ideology passed down from one generation to the next succeeds in keeping alive in Karen minds the possibility of eventually fulfilling the nationalist dream that they themselves might not even live to see.

That those refugees who were spatially isolated and insulated because of their categorical liminality and danger in the national order of all have set about so single-mindedly to construct another nation rather than subvert and dissolve the national order exemplifies the immense power of the system of the nation-state. Those who live outside this system find no other sources of identification available in our world order, as, unlike Malkki suggests, ‘cosmopolitan forms of identity’ are not readily accessible for these groups of people. For those who migrate out of free will and have their place within the system, for those who enjoy rights of citizenship and freedom of movement, a deterritorialisation of identity might be more easily conceivable.

Therefore, also the self-settled forced migrants interviewed in Mae Sot have not generated anything close to Malkki’s vision of a “lively cosmopolitanism” among town refugees in Tanzania (Malkki, 1995a:3).³¹ Indeed, due to their exposure to a more multi-ethnic setting and their connection to multi-media networks, town residents seem more oriented towards the wider world and often have less traditionalist views on communal values and have allowed ethnic boundaries to become more porous or blurred for instance expressed in a general acceptance of intermarriage while simultaneously raising awareness of one’s ethnic identity and attributing importance to maintaining its cultural value. It would, however, be wrong to conclude from these developments towards worldliness that town-dwellers were trying to eschew national categorisation by developing “rhizomatic” (Malkki, 1995a:174) forms of identifications and were engaged in constructing a world beyond the nation-state system. It became apparent from research in town as well how the entire sample thinks in deeply manifested national categories. What is more, common identification with the country Burma is increasing in town

³⁰ Beside ‘non-disintegration of national solidarity’ and ‘perpetuation of sovereignty’, this is one of the ‘three main national causes’ that can be read frequently in the government-run newspaper *The New Light of Myanmar* [<http://www.myanmar.com/newspaper/nlm/index.html> (21/06/08)].

³¹ It has to be noted, however, that Mae Sot is smaller than the town of Kigoma where Malkki conducted her field research. Many of her informants were involved in business and trade and some further had intermarried with the locals.

where concerns about the nation's political future are rife. The general longing for citizenship and the adherence to the vision of ethnic federalism that emerged in interviews in town further underlines a strong tendency to attempt to make oneself fit into the existing national order. In contrast to ethno-nationalist tendencies in the camp, the town setting has allowed for the development of a yet fragile collective identification beyond ethnicity, closer contact with members of other ethnic groups living within the Burmese nation-state has facilitated this trend. Anything beyond the national order is inconceivable and largely unspoken of, the idea of global citizenship is thus far beyond forced migrants' reach and is as such only indirectly touched upon by one interviewee who was talking about continued wars between ethnic groups and between nations when he expressed his wish: "One day, I want the world to be only one country" (Interview 33).

Again, town-dwellers' propensity to align themselves to the existing system has to be explained in terms of the restrictive policy environment that does not allow for cosmopolitan desires to be developed. National identity indeed is one amongst many, but it is one that is associated with basic rights, the corollary being that cosmopolitan identities can not emerge where basic rights as those of citizenship are inaccessible; or as Kibreab puts it: "Cosmopolitan identity cannot be wished into existence in societies where identities are determined and rights are apportioned on the basis of territorially anchored identities" (Kibreab, 1999:399). It has to be acknowledged that cosmopolitanism has been formulated as a post-modern form of lifestyle by those within the national order and can also only become conceivable for those who enjoy basic rights in the first place, which clarifies the immense power emanating from the concept of the nation-state that plays a "crucial role in the popular politics of place making and in the creation of naturalised links between places and peoples" despite its alleged loss of meaning in a globalised world (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997a:41). Moreover, it becomes clear that people living beyond the nation-state system can hardly subvert this system so strongly established that it is so readily perceived as a natural frame. Thus, "rather than challenging the order of nation-states to which they perceive themselves as not properly belonging, [forced migrants] seek to join or reproduce it" (Dudley, 2007:103). There is no question that flows of refugees challenge the nation-state, its sovereignty and territoriality by being forced to transgress international boundaries, and yet, if Burmese forced migrants were trying to actively subvert something, then it would undeniably be the military regime they had fled from rather than a global system. Forced migrants as the minority in our world of nation-states can only follow patterns of identification predetermined by the majority, the citizens of nation-states.

Consequently, their feeling of not belonging in either nation has fuelled the imaginations of the homeland and has enabled those to be more lively which leads to the conclusion that forced migrants in both settings are engaged in a process of reterritorialising their ethnic identity 'there' rather than 'here' in exile and 'then' rather than 'now'. For interviewees in both settings the link with the homeland has never ceased to play a vital role and has, combined with restrictive policies and an unwelcoming environment in the host country, hindered them from re-rooting in their present place of residence while imaginations of a still utopian Karen nation-state in the camp and of a future democratic and federal Burma in town have led forced migrants to reterritorialise in the future rather than in the present situation of temporary exile. "It is here that it becomes most visible how imagined communities [Anderson, 2006] come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997a:39). And this reterritorialisation is therefore more than only the process of moving from one location to another and back again, it may be understood as the way forced migrants establish new, or rather expand networks and cultural practices that define new spaces for daily life, as 'spatial processes' and strategies they "develop in the contradictory experience of being physically present in one location, but at the same time living with a feeling of belonging somewhere else" (Brun, 2001:23).

4 CONCLUSION: IDENTITIES IN EXILE

This study has sought not only to illuminate the forms of ethnic identity formation and reformation in exile, but also to bring into focus the power of the hegemonic order of nations within and between which forced migrants find themselves operating.

While ethnic conflict that ensued the colonial period in Burma has already contributed to an intensified thinking in ethnic categories, the experiences of displacement and exile have yet strengthened ethnicity. It has been shown that rather than entailing a loss of identity and ethnicity “displacement creates conditions for the articulation of ethnicity” (Eriksen, 2002:145).

These conditions and spaces within which ethnicity is articulated in exile have been examined in two different settings that are home to Burmese forced migrants in Thailand. While the camp setting has led forced migrants to retreat to traditionalism and perceive their ethnicity as something fixed, natural and given, those in town have to manage a multitude of more situational and pragmatic identities due to their illegal status. Nevertheless, both settings have revealed that ethnic identity is elevated to an essentially important part in personal identification processes and is redefined, emphasised and practised in spite of the structural and attitudinal limitations of exile.

Research in Mae La Camp has illustrated that despite essentialist notions of ethnicity, it is still subject to reformulations as it depends on the particular and variable circumstances of camp life and social interaction therein, the corollary being that the experiences of displacement and exile have been absorbed into ethnic identity which is constantly being negotiated and adjusted to the present situation. This adjustment to and rendering understandable and more bearable the present situation of life in a refugee camp has been examined with help of the example of the development of a Karen mytho-history in the camp that has become necessary and useful in the context of everyday life and the challenges of camp life and also to learn to come to terms with externally imposed labels like that of the refugee. The camp by virtue of its locality, condensed structure, communal lifestyle and by vesting the Karen with a majority status has enabled them to autonomously and sharply define the boundaries of ethnicity, as well as the cultural values within these, and develop control mechanisms to keep their ethnic identity ‘pure’. It was found that it is precisely this purity of ethnicity which gives camp residents a sense of being worthy of gaining the right to self-governance in their own nation-state.

Notwithstanding the self-settled undocumented migrants’ need to juggle with more situational and unwanted invented identities in public in response to less permitting conditions of their immediate environments, field findings from Mae Sot suggest that they have still found ways to accentuate and practice their ethnicity. It was often emphasised by interviewees how the experience of displacement and exile in bringing people of different ethnic backgrounds together and transforming Mae Sot into a microcosm of ethnic and cultural diversity has only brought about awareness of one’s ethnic identity and understanding of its cultural value. While ethnic boundaries have indeed become more porous through daily interethnic relations than in the camp, rather than eradicating ethnic differences, exile has actually created a new form of self-awareness expressed in concern about roots and origins as well as the preservation of traditional culture. Unlike in the camp, the past seems less important in town where meaning to the present situation is ascribed more through the political movement, and this mostly being ethnic in character provides a context not only for the transformation but also for the strengthening of ethnicity. Town-dwellers’ exposure to a more multi-ethnic setting and also the wider world which they are linked to via the internet as well as via the expatriate community from outside Southeast Asia

has not enabled ethno-nationalist tendencies to develop on a comparable scale to the camp, rather visions of a future democratic and federal Burma prevail here.

Both visions, however, sustain forced migrants' hope for an ultimate end to exile and by thus delineating exile as temporary make the present situation of an often harsh and stressful life in exile more endurable while strong collective identities in form of ethnicity allow for encouragement in the ongoing political struggle and give exiles a feeling of collective security and internal homeland.

The elaborations have tried to depict that even though forced migrants have been uprooted from their homelands they have not lost their identity but have maintained strong imagined links to the places they had left behind. The study has further tried to show that forced migrants can not per se be described as powerless and passive victims in an abnormal state of being by virtue of their statelessness, but rather as active agents who are able to develop strategies not only for survival but for rendering their present situation meaningful.

Post-modernist conceptions of deterritorialised forms of identity have been crucial for understanding the particular situation of forced migrants in our system of nation-states. However, these conceptions often tend to embellish and romanticise the experience of becoming physically uprooted from one's homeland in a borderless world where there are no more homes and nomadic lifestyles are about to become the norm. Hence, they cannot be applied for those groups of people who are forcibly uprooted and find themselves without basic rights of citizenship in a legal limbo beyond the protective system of nation-states.

While representatives of the nomadic thinking on the relations between people, place and identity are right in their assertions of territorialising conceptions of identity depicting forced migrants in a pathetic state, they still overlook that essentialist conceptions of place may be of importance to the strategies applied by people, who were forced to flee, in creating places and boundaries. It is therefore problematic to view forced migrants by virtue of their statelessness as developing 'cosmopolitan forms of identity' (Malkki, 1995a:4) when people who find themselves outside the nation-state system are barred from this alternative.

Although the nation-state's monopoly of power has been considerably weakened in the wake of globalisation, it is still perceived as the natural framework and repository of rights and protection and from this its still immense might is derived. The local perspective from the Thai-Burmese border has illustrated exactly this reality. By redefining their identity and ethnicity in exile, forced migrants lay claim to yet imagined territorial homelands. An overall desire for belonging and citizenship became apparent in conversations with interviewees as well as their visions of the long-term future as located in their homeland, be it an ethno-nationalist state or a federal Burma. The border as a zone of liminality is not seen as a home, living there is rather perceived as a necessary sacrifice for realising their dream of a future in their country. Informants in both setting try to make themselves fit into the overarching national order by either creating a new nation or by imagining an existing nation with a different political and administrative system. As opposed to Malkki's vision of 'cosmopolitan forms of identity' among town refugees in Tanzania, those in Thailand have not been found developing a "creative exploitation of another order of liminality trying to elude national categorisation altogether" (Malkki, 1995a:253).

The central conclusion to be drawn from the case study then is that ethnicity is an essentially important collective identity and flourishes where it helps render surroundings and experiences meaningful and is thus produced and elaborated as a result of experiences of displacement and exile along with the requirements of everyday practice beyond the order of nation-states. That due to their exclusion from this order, forced migrants defy and subvert it, would be wrong to assume and has not been confirmed in field research, rather Burmese forced migrants in both Mae Sot and Mae La Camp try to fit into this system and reterritorialise their identities by imagining their homeland.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: List of Interviews

Interview	Ethnicity ³²	Gender	Age	Religion	Marital Status	Social Status (Occupation)	Years in	Place of Interview	Date of Interview	Duration of
1	Rakhine	m	24	Buddhist	relationship	translator	5	Mae Sot	06-Jan-08	57
2	Karen	m	32	Baptist	single	teacher	3	Mae La	09-Jan-08	76
3	Kayan	m	23	Catholic	single	activist*	4	Mae Sot	22-Jan-08	57
4	Kayan	m	34	Catholic	single	accountant*	5	Mae Sot	25-Jan-08	47
5	Kayan	m	26	Catholic	single	office administrator*	4	Mae Sot	25-Jan-08	58
6	Kayan	m	30	Catholic	single	jobless	5	Mae La	26-Jan-08	43
7	Karen	m	20	Baptist	single	post-ten student	20	Mae La	26-Jan-08	51
8	Karen	m	20	Baptist	single	post-ten student	7	Mae La	26-Jan-08	45
9	Karen	m	20	Baptist	single	post-ten student	2	Mae La	26-Jan-08	39
10	Karen	f	29	Baptist	single	accountant*	15	Mae Sot	30-Jan-08	43
11	Karen	f	20	Baptist	single	post-ten student	18	Mae La	02-Feb-08	38
12	Karen	m	20	Baptist	single	post-ten student	13	Mae La	02-Feb-08	37
13	Karen	m	23	Baptist	single	network administrator*	3	Mae Sot	08-Feb-08	39
14	Rakhine	m	21	Buddhist	single	politician*	<2	Mae Sot	12-Feb-08	49
15	Rakhine	m	26	Buddhist	single	member*	<2	Mae Sot	12-Feb-08	40
16	Rakhine	m	26	Buddhist	single	member*	<2	Mae Sot	12-Feb-08	87
17	Karen	m	40	Baptist	married	staff*	18	Mae Sot	13-Feb-08	76
18	Karen	m	32	Baptist	married	staff*	5	Mae Sot	19-Feb-08	69

³² Categories 'Ethnicity', 'Age', 'Religion', 'Marital Status', 'Social Status', 'Years in Thailand' as stated by interviewees themselves.

* Interviewees are members of various Community Based Organisations (CBOs).

19	Rakhine	m	27	Buddhist	single	activist*	4	Mae Sot	21-Feb-08	73
20	Rakhine	f	23	Buddhist	single	accountant*	2	Mae Sot	21-Feb-08	43
21	Rakhine	m	27	Buddhist	single	activist*	4	Mae Sot	22-Feb-08	96
22	Karen	f	24	Baptist	single	interpreter and activist*	19	Mae Sot	22-Feb-08	45
23	Karen	f	20	Buddhist	single	post-ten student	14	Mae La	23-Feb-08	62
24	Karen	m	20	Baptist	single	post-ten student	13	Mae La	23-Feb-08	82
25	Rakhine	m	39	Buddhist-Catholic	single	interpreter	9	Mae Sot	24-Feb-08	104
26	Karen	m	23	Anglican	married	camp coordinator*	13	Mae La	25-Feb-08	46
27	Karen	f	23	Baptist	single	camp coordinator*	23	Mae La	25-Feb-08	43
28	Karen	f	32	SDA	married	staff*	24	Mae Sot	27-Feb-08	54
29	Karen	f	23	Baptist	single	school staff	18	Mae La	29-Feb-08	39
30	Rakhine	m	27	Buddhist	single	retailer	2	Mae La	29-Feb-08	39
31	Karen	m	42	Baptist	married	school principal	29	Mae La	01-Mar-08	51
32	Karen	f	22	Baptist	single	post-ten student	8	Mae La	01-Mar-08	46
33	Rakhine	m	25	none	single	Political defence trainer*	2	Mae Sot	03-Mar-08	89
34	Tavoyan	f	28	Buddhist	single	woman activist*	2	Mae Sot	04-Mar-08	53
35	Palaung	f	20	Buddhist	single	student*	<2	Mae Sot	05-Mar-08	45
36	Palaung	m	27	Buddhist	single	politician*	2	Mae Sot	05-Mar-08	65
37	Palaung	m	26	Buddhist	single	politician*	2	Mae Sot	05-Mar-08	45
38	Burman	f	42	Buddhist	single	journalist*	3	Mae Sot	06-Mar-08	39
39	Palaung	f	28	Buddhist	married	woman activist*	7	Mae Sot	07-Mar-08	55
40	Palaung	f	22	Buddhist	relationship	politician*	4	Mae Sot	07-Mar-08	67
41	Burman	f	28	Buddhist	single	teacher	4	Mae Sot	07-Mar-08	43
42	Pa-O	m	25	Buddhist	single	student*	2	Mae Sot	08-Mar-08	45
43	Pa-O	m	24	Christian	single	politician*	7	Mae Sot	08-Mar-08	38
44	Zomi	m	23	Baptist	single	politician*	2	Mae Sot	11-Mar-08	55
45	Karen	f	24	Baptist	relationship	activist*	11	Mae Sot	11-Mar-08	53
46	Kayaw	f	25	Baptist	single	activist*	9	Mae Sot	11-Mar-08	45

47	Yintale	f	23	Buddhist	relationship	woman activist*	8	Mae Sot	11-Mar-08	40
48	Karen	f	20	Buddhist-Christian	single	activist*	5	Mae Sot	11-Mar-08	50
49	Pa-O	f	25	Buddhist	single	politician*	11	Mae Sot	14-Mar-08	61
50	Mon	f	37	Buddhist	engaged	woman activist*	6	Mae Sot	17-Mar-08	78
51	Palaung	f	20	Buddhist	single	politician*	2	Mae Sot	18-Mar-08	53
52	Pa-O	f	22	Buddhist	single	student	3	Mae Sot	18-Mar-08	46
53	Mon	m	20	Buddhist	single	teacher	<2	Mae Sot	20-Mar-08	52
54	Palaung	f	27	Buddhist	relationship	woman activist*	3	Mae Sot	21-Mar-08	95
55	Palaung	f	24	Buddhist	single	woman activist*	3	Mae Sot	21-Mar-08	56
56	Rakhine	m	26	Buddhist	single	freedom fighter*	3	Mae Sot	23-Mar-08	58
57	Karen	f	21	Buddhist	single	post-ten student	<2	Mae Sot	24-Mar-08	64
58	Burman	f	20	Buddhist	single	post-ten student	<2	Mae Sot	24-Mar-08	87
59	Burman	f	22	Buddhist	single	post-ten student	<2	Mae Sot	26-Mar-08	63
60	Burman	f	23	Buddhist	single	post-ten student	<2	Mae Sot	27-Mar-08	48
61	Karen	f	20	Christian	single	post-ten student	<2	Mae Sot	27-Mar-08	67
62	Rakhine	f	20	Buddhist	single	post-ten student	<2	Mae Sot	30-Mar-08	50
63	Zomi	m	20	Christian	single	post-ten student	<2	Mae Sot	30-Mar-08	67

Appendix B: Guideline for Interviews³³

1) Introduction

- Gender, Age, Marital Status, Ethnicity, Nationality, Religion, Social Status (Occupation), Hometown, Present Place of Residence, Date of Arrival at Present Place of Residence

2) General Remarks on Interviewee's Background and Circumstances of Flight

3) Ethnicity and Identification

- May I ask you about your ethnic background? ...and your nationality?
- How would you **identify yourself** (in your present situation)?
- What social group do you feel you belong to?
 - e.g. if answer is 'refugee':
 - What does it mean to be a refugee? What is a **refugee's life** like? How would you describe it to an outsider?
 - When will you cease being a refugee?
- You say you are *Karen (etc.)*. Do **other people mostly identify you** like that as well? How do you feel about this?
- Would you rather **belong to any other social or ethnic group**? If yes, to which group and why?
- Is it possible to **change one's ethnic identity**? Do you know someone who has done it or have you heard of someone? Why and how did they do it?
- Can I or other non-members **become a member of your ethnic group**? How can one become a member of your ethnic group?

4) Traditions and Culture

- **What does it mean** to you to be *Karen (etc.)*?
- How do you live your ethnic identity, culture and traditions?
- Would you say you are a very **traditional** person? What are your traditions/culture?
- How important is **religion** for you personally?

³³ The questions listed here served as an aid to memory during the interviews and were mostly not asked in such direct ways and often not in this order as interviews took rather the form of conversations.

- How important is religion for people around you and for people from your hometown? Do you see differences?
- Do you often wear **traditional clothes** distinct to your ethnic group?
- What **festivals** are most important to you? Can you celebrate them here?
- Do you like **traditional music, dance**?
- What is your favourite **food**? Is there any food you miss here?
- Do you see differences in the way people in your **hometown** live their ethnic identity, their culture and traditions?
 - How do for example ‘new arrivals’ in the camps/ in town differ in their lifestyle?
- Do you think people are becoming **less or more traditional** after leaving their home? For what reasons?
- Do you see **differences between people in Mae La and Mae Sot** in terms of their identity, culture and traditions?

5) Interactions

- Your **circle of friends**: does it mainly consist of people from your own ethnic group or do you also have friends from other groups? Which groups?
- Have **interactions with other ethnic groups** changed since you are here?
- Have your **views on other groups** changed as well?
- What do you think are **other people’s views on your ethnic group**?
 - Have you heard people insulting your ethnic group or making bad jokes? How do you feel about this?
- **Marriage**: Do you prefer marrying someone from your own ethnic group or could you imagine marrying someone who does not belong to your ethnic group or someone who has a different religion? From which groups or which groups not?
- What are your views on **intermarriage**?
- How many **languages** do you speak?
- How important is your language to you? Do you want to teach it to your children?

6) History

- Do you **study** a lot **about** your ethnic group and its origins and history?
- Is your ethnic group’s history **important** to you?
 - Have you heard different versions of your ethnic group’s history? How do you feel about these?

7) Living in Exile

- Living in Mae La: do you ever **leave the camp**?
- Living in Mae Sot: do you **go out a lot**? Preferably by what means of transport? What are you particularly **careful** of when you go out?

8) Links to Home

- Do you **contact** people in your **hometown** on a regular basis? How?
- Have you ever considered **returning to your home**? Under what circumstances would you go back to live there?
- **Where** are you going to stay until your return home? Are you considering the option of **resettlement** to a third country?

9) Anything else you feel like you want to tell me or anything you want to know from me?

10) Reflections on the Interview: Impressions of Interviewee's degree of ethnic identification and attachments to home

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