

“When you cannot do
anything, that's the
greatest problem in life”

Place and Identity, Power and Agency among Karen
Refugees on the Thai-Burmese Border

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Chapter 1 - Setting the stage – Theoretical and Thematic Context

Burma is one of the poorest countries in the world¹, and it has been in a state of civil war more or less continuously since independence from Great Britain in 1948. People from the ethnic minority group of Karen in Eastern Burma are being systematically abused by the ruling military junta in a manner that has led several NGOs and human rights groups to claim that it can be defined as crimes against humanity (see for instance Amnesty International (2008); the Thai Burmese Border Consortium (2008); and Horton (2005)). The situation of refugees moving from Eastern Burma to the Thai side of the border is one of the most prolonged in the world (UNHCR 2010). That is the gloomy backdrop of this study.

The title of the thesis is a quote from one of my informants, a student at the school for Karen refugees in Thailand where I was a volunteer teacher during most of my time in the field. We were talking about her plans, and she was letting me in on her thoughts about the future. For her internship period – the final stage of her education at the school she was currently attending, she planned to work with the Karen Women's Organization, a well-organized and powerful organization in the Karen refugee community. After finishing her internship she would go back to the refugee camp and apply for resettlement in a third country² because she wanted to learn English and political science. However, on another occasion she told me that after finishing school she would go to work with children inside Karen State in Burma, where she originally came from.

This sort of apparently incoherent statements was a phenomenon I came across several times in conversations with students. As a refugee (characterized as "Temporarily Displaced" by the Thai government) with close to no rights in the host country; as a member of an ethnic group subject to systematic abuses by the ruling regime in Burma; and as a person with marginal economic resources her choices were limited, to say the least. Knowing this, she still told me about her plans for the future. The reason why I used her quote as a title is, in addition to the fact that it was uttered during a conversation which was deeply moving for me personally, that it illustrates, I believe, one of the overarching problems that Karen refugees in Thailand face: The lack of control of their own fates, the apparent hopelessness of their

¹ The CIA World Factbook (2010b) ranks Burma number 208 out of 227 countries listed, measuring GDP per capita. There are of course a number of other ways of measuring poverty.

² «Third Country» is the term commonly used for the destination of resettlement through the UN. Implicit, then, Burma is the first country and Thailand the second.

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situation, as it has been, more or less, for 25 years. Simultaneously however, these notions are, as in that quote, being clearly articulated.

In this thesis, driving forces behind a spirit that can be described as "we shall never give up" are explored (Chapter 2), and changing gender relations, presenting new possibilities and constraints, are pinpointed (Chapter 3 and 4). The apparent incongruity between the plans presented by many of my informants and the "real" and actual possibilities they had is also a central issue forming a key in my discussions of subjectivity formation among young Karen refugees (Chapter 4).

1.1. Problem statement and aim of thesis

I entered the field with the intention of investigating gender relations among Karen refugees in Thailand. As field work progressed I realized the perhaps obvious point that ideas about gender and gender relations are closely intertwined with other elements of identification. In the case of Karen, ethnicity stood out especially as a central factor of identification. Also, the relation to their homeland, Karen State, was a prominent element in people's consciousness, something much referred to and, apparently, thought about. When dealing with the question of how identity and gender relations are constructed and changed in a refugee situation therefore, I see this in relation to ethnicity, nationalism and the imagination of Karen State. I will also be focusing on young people, since the majority of my informants were in their early twenties.

Another prevalent issue that was discussed a lot amongst my informants during fieldwork was what and how they thought about and hoped for their future. I came to see this too as strongly related to feelings about Karen State, and notions of ethnicity in terms of belonging to one common territory. My problem statement can thus be read as follows:

How is the state of refugee leading to changes in identity construction and gender relations among young Karens on the Thai-Burmese border? How do they conceptualize their own existence as a refugee, and how do they deal with it? What does their perception of their own situation imply in terms of the relationship between people and place - of how they think about their homeland? And, as a prolongation - what is the role of notions of ethnicity and sentiments of nationalism in the subjectivity formation of Karen refugees? How does changing circumstances in the transition between Karen State and the refugee camp affect the ways young

Karen refugees think about themselves in the world? (How) does it affect what they think about their possibilities for the future – (how) does it affect how (or whether) they go about making meaning of their lives?

1.2. Background and brief history

1.2.1. The Union of Burma: ethnicity as a political instrument

Once called "the rice basket of Asia", Burma is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia, rich in natural resources such as petroleum, natural gas, hydropower, timber, precious stones and minerals. 70% of the total population is primarily occupied with agriculture, while 23% are service providers (CIA 2010b).

The relationship with neighboring countries is shifting in accordance with shifting political climates. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been hesitant to condemn Burma's military government since their inclusion in 1997. This is due to a number of reasons. Tense political histories in the other member countries make them hesitate to point out weaknesses in the government of the other countries of the Association. Moreover, an alleged approach of "constructive engagement" rather than fierce confrontation and criticism is generally applied (Amer 1999). The vast natural resources in Burma make the country an attractive trading partner. Thailand and China are the two major partners - Thailand buys 52% of Burma's export, while China contributes to 31% of the total imports to the country (CIA 2010b).

Internationally, Burma enjoys the more or less stable support of both Russia and China. Thus, attempts of raising the issue of Burma in the UN Security Council have been blocked at an early stage (American Society of International Law 2007).

Burma is culturally very diverse, with eight major ethnic groups and an official estimate of 135 subgroups (Gravers 2007)³. The largest ethnic group is the Burman (68%), then follows Shan 9%, and Karen 7% ((Smith (2007) in Berg (2009:8)). *Ethnologue* (2009) lists 111 different languages spoken, the number of minority language speakers ranging from around a hundred (Khmu) to 3,2 million (Shan). S'gaw Karen, the Karen language with the most speakers, counts to 1,280,000. The total population in Burma is estimated variously

³ This categorization is questioned by Gravers however, both in terms of the categories applied for "qualifying" as an ethnic group, and in terms of the reliability of the counting done by the Burmese regime.

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between 48 millions (Gravers 2007) and 52 millions (Taylor 2005 in Berg 2009).

Ethnic relations in pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms is hard to reconstruct. However, according to Gravers (2007:13) ethnicity was not "a part of the power model as a decisive mechanism of difference and as an instrument of vertical or horizontal inclusion/exclusion". Ethnicity was one of several concepts distinguishing people and shaping the sociopolitical landscape, but most of all it played a part on the individual level, and was thus important for personal relations (Gravers 2007:10). Conglomerates of alliances organized horizontally were intertwined with vertical class identifications, and hillside-lowland as well as urban-rural were distinctions which affected relations of power as much as ethnicity (Gravers 2007:9-13). Forested, non-Burman areas were often areas of rebellion against the shifting central powers, even though conflict was not first and foremost ethnically based (Gravers 2007:12).

The British took 62 years to colonize Burma through a series of three Anglo-Burmese wars between 1824 and 1886. Burma was then a part of the British Empire for another 62 years, between 1886 and 1948, up until 1937 as a part of British India (CIA 2010b). Ethnic differences became territorialized in an absolute sense when the British began mapping Burma in 1826. They split the country's population into "civilized" and "primitive", "tribal societies" excluded as subjects of the empire. They defined frontier areas where they argued that the Burmese kingdom had never de facto extended its authority, and these areas were not included in Burma Proper (or Ministerial Burma). This definition was later central to many ethnic groups', among them Karens' claim for autonomy. Ethnicity became *the* central definition of difference in colonial Burma, actively advocated by the British administration, and ethnic identity became "reified and bounded, based on absolute differences in race, religion and mentality" (Gravers 2007:14).

From the early 20th century a nationalist movement emerged, which came to be led by general Aung San. During the World War II, his group of Thirty Comrades, played a strategic game of shifting allies from the Japanese to the British to gain Burmese independence (Berg 2007:5-6). After the war Aung San emerged as the leading figure in the independence movement. He was in a unique political position because he nurtured close ties to leaders of the two largest, and fiercely competing, political parties in Burma at the time, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and the Socialists, who, despite their name, were politically quite right-wing. In his strife for national unity he also attempted political agreements with the ethnic minorities, and launched the Panglong Conference in February 1947, where leaders of the

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Shan, Kachin and Chin groups all signed such agreements. The scheme of the conference was to include all former frontier areas into a Union of Burma. Aung San guaranteed cultural autonomy, and the agreement included a right to secession from the Union after ten years. However, the exclusion from the British Empire on the grounds of alleged historical autonomy was used by some ethnic groups (among them the Karen) to refuse the agreement. The Karens expected the British to secure an independent Karen State as part of the independence negotiations (Gravers 2007).

Through the assassination of Aung San in July 1947 six months before independence, Burma lost a charismatic leader, a neutralizing factor on the central political arena, and a reconciliatory force towards the ethnic minorities which constituted almost a third of the population (Lintner 1994:xv). Within six months after independence, the communists and several ethnic minority groups, including the Karen National Union (KNU), had turned their guns against the government in Rangoon, demanding political power or autonomy for their region (Lintner 1994:xv). In spite of several attempts at cease-fire agreements, the state of war between the KNU and the Burman government army has lasted until today.

In 1962 General Ne Win and his State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took power in a military coup. The ideology guiding his leadership was termed the "Burmese way to socialism", "a hodgepodge of Marxism, Buddhist thinking and humanism which reflected an attempt by the military regime to be seen as belonging to Burma's specific political traditions" (Lintner 1994:171). People's freedom was severely restricted, and isolationist economic policies soon lead the country into poverty. Students demonstrated against the military take-over early on, and were met with disproportionate violence. An underground resistance movement developed in response to the developing totalitarianism of the authorities. Following an apparently uncalled for devaluation of the Burmese currency in 1987, the well-known 08-08-88 uprisings in Rangoon and other major towns and villages led to an unknown number of thousands of demonstrators being killed by the junta. Following the uprisings, General Ne Win stood down, but he remained an important figure behind the scenes, the military remained in power and even though the one-party system was formally abolished, the politics stayed the same (Lintner 1994).

The arrival of Aung San Suu Kyi - Aung San's daughter - in 1988 gave Burmese people a new unifying icon. Suu Kyi with her opposition party the National League for Democracy (NLD) traveled to all corners of the country giving speeches on democracy and

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non-violent resistance. Her house-arrest in 1989, which has continued on-and-off until today, did not diminish her status. When the NLD won a landslide victory in the general elections in 1990, SLORC refused to hand over power. Many party representatives who had been elected members of parliament were arrested, while others managed to flee the country. Simultaneously, warfare against ethnic insurgency groups continued (Lintner 1994).

In 1997 SLORC changed their name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). They still hold power under senior general Than Shwe. National elections have been announced in 2010, and though opinions differ among oppositional groups on the potential for improvement following the election, many observers agree that there is no intention on the government side of making serious efforts to facilitate a transition to democracy (Irrawaddy 2009; 2010). Several offensives against ethnic insurgency groups have been launched, and following student and monk demonstrations in Rangoon in 2007, raids against suspected protesters have increased. According to Human Rights Watch there are more than 2100 political prisoners in government prisons, and "the Burmese military continues to perpetrate violations against civilians in ethnic conflict areas, including extrajudicial killings, forced labor, and sexual violence" (Human Rights Watch 2010).

Ethnicity has been an important political instrument in Burma ever since they started operating as a national entity. Competing definitions and characterizations of ethnic groups signify battles over the definition of reality, and struggles for political influence. For instance, the government's insistence on focusing on the 135 "national races" instead of the eight "big races", can be seen as an attempt at weakening the foundation of struggles for autonomy based on for instance one pan-Karen ethnic identity. In the words of Gravers (2007: 8-9): "Ethnicity in Burma has become part of a political strategy of ethnic differences developed during colonial era and further escalated in the turbulent post-colonial time."

1.2.2. Karens and Karen State

Karen State is situated in the mountainous eastern border area of Burma towards Thailand (see appendix 2). It covers an area of a little over 30,000 km² (roughly the size of Belgium). Administratively, Burma is divided into seven states and seven divisions. States and divisions are units at the same administrative level, the difference being that states are associated with a corresponding ethnic minority group (Shan, Karen, Karenni etc.) while all the divisions are considered Burman areas. Karen State is one of the seven states. Each state is further divided into administrative units called townships, followed by divisions, and then the lowest level

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unit, the village.

A number of rivers run through Karen State, constituting important transportation routes and the foundation for livelihood for the people who live there. Most of Karen State is covered with sub-tropical rainforest. Physical infrastructure is limited.

Estimated numbers of Karens in Burma and the border area vary quite widely, due to both practical estimation difficulties and relative to who is doing the counting. *Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia* (Snitwongse and Thompson 2005:67) note that the Government of Burma estimates the number to around 6,2 million, while the KNU states that the number is around 7 million (KNU n/a), and other sources as high as 10 million (Mahn Aung Lwin in Engelbert and Kubitscheck 2004:89). The Karen occupy the eastern border area of Burma, towards Thailand. In addition it is estimated that around 300 000 Karens not originating from Burma live in Thailand, where they constitute the largest of the so-called hilltribes. Their subsistence is mainly based on agriculture, fishing and forestry, with local variations. According to Thawngmung (2008:3) 15-20 percent are Christian, 5-10 percent are animist whereas the majority of Karens are Buddhist.

The Karen "comprises of conglomerates of diverse ethnic groups" (Gravers 2007:228). Though Delang (2003) holds that ethnic identification among Karens is mainly linguistic, *Ethnologue* (2009) listed 10 different Karen languages, S'gaw Karen and Pwo Karen being the two largest ones. The two languages are related dialects of Karen, though too far apart for them to understand each other (South 2007b:2). The diversity of the different subgroups makes the existence of the concept of one Karen ethnicity questionable from a "cultural content" point of view. Why are they considered, by the Burmese government, and by themselves, as one ethnic group at all? However, in accordance with a transversive view of ethnicity following the lines laid out by Barth (1969) and paying attention to the history that has shaped both ascription and self-ascription of ethnic identity as much as being shaped by it, I will leave the debate about whether Karens are a "real" ethnic group or not. What matters here is the fact that perceptions of ethnicity and thus claims to political rights and autonomy related to these perceptions, are central in the case of Karen. Therefore, I will settle for describing them as one ethnic group. I will however, later on be giving attention to the contestedness surrounding their self-proclaimed unity and homogeneity, since such attention is vital to understanding the rationale behind the Karen struggle, as well as individual and collective identity construction.

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A number of reported hardships face people in Karen State. I will briefly account for the ones commonly considered the most influential ones affecting the quality of life.

Conditions in Karen State

It is estimated that a total of at least 451,000 people are internally displaced inside Burma (UNHCR 2010), many of them in the eastern parts. Altsean (2010) reports that 75,000 were displaced between July 2008 and December 2009 alone. Military offensives against Karen areas by the SPDC have been reported frequently the past year, forcing hundreds or thousands at the time to flee to Thailand. The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) warned in November 2009 once more about increasing security threats (DVB 2009; DVB 2010a). Forced relocation⁴ and the destruction of more than 3500 villages since 1996 is according to the TBBC recognized as the major single indicator of crimes against humanity in eastern Burma (TBBC 2007b).

Landmines is a major concern, and reports of civilians stepping on landmines being mutilated or killed are relatively frequent. The number of landmines in Karen State is not known, but the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (2008) reports that it is a registered problem in all of the townships in Karen State. Interestingly, the ICBL reports that both SPDC and a number of ethnic insurgency groups, including the Karen National Union (KNU), use landmines in their warfare.

Forced labor for the government army – the Tatmadaw - is another issue facing many civilians, especially in areas under stable SPDC control. Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) reported in March 2010 that forced labor was increasingly affecting the lives of people in Toungoo district, whether they are subject to it or live in hiding to escape it. Movement and trade restrictions, arbitrary taxation, forced labor in food production, construction, porter service for the army or even forced conscription or using civilians as "mine-sweepers" are amongst the tactics employed (KHRG 2010). A number of national development projects have been attempted in Karen State, including a number of planned dam projects on the Salween river in cooperation with Thai and Chinese authorities. This has led to an increase of forced labor and forced relocation on proposed dam sites (TBBC 2007b).

The KWO reports rape and sexual abuse of women by the Burmese army as "widely

⁴ Note that relocation and resettlement does here not refer to the same. Whereas resettlement denotes an organized moving to a third country through the overall administration of the UNHCR, relocation denotes the act of forcing people to leave their homes inside Karen State. Either alternative villages is pointed out, or they flee «into the jungle».

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committed in Karen, Karenni and Shan states" (KWO 2004:10). In their report, the KWO were able to document 125 cases of rape in Karen areas, but estimates that the real number is much higher. Similar reports have been published by the Shan Women Action Network (SWAN 2002).

General humanitarian situation

Burma in general ranks low on international standards of human development. The UNDP Human Development Index ranked Burma 130 out of 177 countries, and the WHO ranked the health sector 190 out of 191. Average income for the majority of Burmese is less than \$200 per year, a good deal lower than the UN limit denoting "extreme poverty". Eastern Burma generally ranks lower than the average. Infant and child mortality and malnutrition in children are high, and malaria, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, are considered epidemics in the area. Sanitation and hygiene facilities remain arbitrary and this causes diseases such cholera and diarrhea to be widespread (Mae Tao Clinic n/a).

In the field of education, a lack of school buildings, material and teachers compromise the accessibility of schooling for children of all ages, even though completion of primary school is compulsory. Only SPDC controlled areas are allowed to offer 4th to 10th standard education, and these levels are generally not found in rural areas (Mae Tao Clinic n/a).

White, black and brown areas

The Burmese regime use a three-part territorial categorization of Karen State; white, black and brown areas. Areas where the threat of insurgency has been removed and where the SPDC hold control are labeled "white" areas, while "black" areas are controlled by the KNU. Areas of fluctuating control are called "brown" areas. People living in black areas are subject to a more aggressive treatment from SPDC officials, as they are seen as potential insurgents. "The use of terror against the population is more intense here" and they "can be shot by government troops on sight" (Lang 2002 in Berg 2009:14). The political attitudes of people in white and brown areas concerning Karen nationalism is less known than the dominant black area discourse that seems to prevail in the camps. According to Thawngmung (2008) many Karen in white areas are sympathetic to the nationalist cause even though they have no possibility of joining the insurgency. People in brown areas generally have to be cautious about actively taking sides, since they risk sanctions from both SPDC and Karen soldiers. However, Smith (2007) points out that "little is known of what goes on in the minds of many Karens

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concerning their loyalties to Karen nationalism, since the great majority are poor rice farmers occupied with survival" (in Berg 2009:14).

1.2.3. The Thailand-Burma border situation

The Karen National Union (KNU) have been rebelling since 1949 and have increasingly been pushed back towards the Thai border since the mid 1970's. However, up until the mid 1980's the Burmese Army had only managed dry season offensives in Karen State, pulling back in the rainy season. The first wave of refugees from Burma to Thailand came in 1984 when the Burmese Army for the first time launched a major offensive after which they managed to hold their grip on captured areas. Around 10,000 refugees fled over to the Thai side and settled in temporary camps, mainly in Tak Province. During the following 10 years the Burmese army strengthened their grip on the area, capturing new areas every dry season. Between 1984 and 1994 the number of refugees increased to around 80,000 (TBBC 2007a).

In 1988 and 1990 the student uprisings and the general election won by the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi led to another wave of around 10,000 people crossing the border. Many went back in the following years, leaving the number of longer-term refugees stemming from that flight at around 3000.

The effective control of the border areas by the Burmese army has increased, and the KNU have weakened correspondingly. Following the fall of the Karen administrative capital of Manerplaw in 1995, the junta struck cease-fire agreements with a number of other ethnic minority insurgency groups, and in 1997 they launched another massive dry season attack on Karen areas. The number of Burmese refugees in Thailand now amounted to around/about 115,000 (TBBC 2007a).

Since gaining control in a significant part of the territories along the border, the Burmese army has initiated severe village relocation programs in order to uproot any continued insurgency. The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC 2007a) estimates that more than 3500 villages have been destroyed since 1996, affecting more than 1 million people. In January 2010, 136,519 people were on the rations list of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC 2010), while 106,613 people were registered by the UNHCR⁵. 61% of these have registered their origins from Karen State. The UNCHR estimates that out of the total, around 3000 people were new arrivals (after June 2009). In addition, an estimated

⁵ The TBBC figures include all persons living in camps and eligible for rations, while the UNHCR figures includes those with a refugee or PAB status (or pending one of these) and some students, but excludes new arrivals.

minimum of 451,000 people are internally displaced inside Burma (UNHCR 2009).

1.2.4. Thai authorities' policies and treatment of refugees

Thailand has not ratified the Geneva Convention concerning the status of refugees, and as such do not apply the legal term "refugee" to people crossing the border from Burma unofficially. However, they have served as hosts to Burmese people crossing the border for different reasons for nearly 25 years, using the term temporarily displaced persons fleeing fighting, which does not imply any legal commitments. They do allow the UNCHR to operate in the camps from offices in Thailand. Refugees and asylum seekers not living in camps are considered illegal immigrants and are subject to arrest and deportation. Media have also reported that camp dwellers have been pressured into going back "of their own free will" (DVB 2010b), and that intolerable material conditions in some camps have forced people to leave (DVB 2010c).

1.3. The Refugee Camps

There are nine refugee camps (officially called "temporary shelters" by Thai authorities) along the border (see appendix 3). Seven of them have predominantly Karen populations and are commonly referred to as "Karen camps". In this section I will give a brief account of the formal organization and workings of the Karen camps.

1.3.1. Formal organization of the camps⁶

All the camps along the border are under the ultimate jurisdiction of the Royal Thai Government (RTG), through the Ministry of Interior (MOI). The camp leadership is topped by a MOI local district officer, which is assigned Camp Commander. The gates are guarded by Paramilitary Rangers from the Royal Thai Army (RTA) and the Border Patrol Police, who also "assist in implementing policy and providing security".

Each of the ethnic groups of which there are people living in camps along the border, have their own Refugee Committee (Karen Refugee Committee, Shan Refugee Committee etc.). They coordinate assistance from NGOs, and communicate with the UNHCR, RTG and security personnel. The Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) oversees activities in all the Karen camps through Camp Committees which form the main administrative bodies of each camp.

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, the source of reference for this and the following sections is The TBBC website (TBBC 2007d)

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The Camp Committees coordinate the day-to-day running of the camps. Below the camp committee level is section level committees (usually just consisting of a section leader and a secretary), and, in a minority of the camps, household leaders serving as bonds between the section leadership and individual households, organized in groups of ten households per household leader. The camp committee members are elected, usually for two years at the time. The suffrage is 20 years, and everyone can in principle nominate candidates, including themselves. Three persons per hundred in each section are elected.

In addition to this linear organizational hierarchy there are the Community Elders' Advisory Boards (CEABs). The CEABs serve to "provide guidance" to the KRC and camp committees, overseeing elections in these bodies, and assisting in conflict solving. They are made up of elders appointed by "senior elders", and their term of office is seldom fixed. The degree of influence they exert on the Camp Committees is hard to assess.

Also accountable to the Camp Committee are the Women's and Youth Organizations, KWO and KYO, designed to "represent the needs, views and aspirations of the women and youth sections of the populations, through organizing various activities to raise awareness and promote issues relevant to their respective target groups. These include trainings and workshops, social services, research and documentation, advocacy, publications, competitions and celebrations".

Although not formally holding positions in the camp leaderships or refugee committees as such, it is held that leaders or former leaders of the KNU seem to gain influential seats in important organizations in the border area (Berg 2009:21).

1.3.2. Organizational environment in the camps and surrounding areas

There are a number of organizations present in the camps and the border area which provide different sorts of humanitarian aid and other services to refugees in camp, illegal immigrants in Thailand and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) inside Burma. There is a thriving environment for volunteer activity both with a local and less local base, funding and staff. I'll illustratively count that in Mae La Oon, in addition to the Camp Committee, section leaders and CEAB which are administrative bodies, and the KWO and KYO which are interest group organizations with close ties to the camp leadership, there is the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) which provide food, shelter and non food items; Malteser International (MI) providing health and sanitation services; Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand

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(PPAT) organizing activities related to reproductive health; ZOA Refugee Care responsible for primary and Secondary Education, the World Education (WE) providing special education; Handicap International (HI) dealing with mine risk education and rehabilitation; Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR) and Taipei Overseas Peace Service (TOPS) delivering social services; Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) in charge of libraries; and last but not least, the UNHCR responsible for overall protection (TBBC 2007e). Also worth noting, the Karen Education Committee (KED), which is the educational wing of the KNU, are responsible for the curriculum in Karen schools both inside Karen State and in the camps. They conduct standardization and approve of curriculum and exams.

All of these are members of the coordinating organization Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT), which work together with the UNHCR and create five-year plans that serve as platforms for the specialized organizations mentioned above (UNHCR 2010). In general, the humanitarian conditions in the camps are not acute in terms of pure survival. Food rations is provided, and so is building materials, charcoal for cooking, school materials, medicines and other health equipment, though the provisions are not abundant.

The above serves to illustrate the range of actors present on the border that the Karen people meet when they enter the refugee camps although the immediacy of this organizational presence in the everyday lives of dwellers in the camp cannot be taken for granted. Nevertheless, without assuming that everyone in Karen State are completely cut off from their surroundings, the logistical reality renders many parts of Karen State very hard to access from the outside. It is a fact that for the most part, non-governmental organizations and international organizations present in the camps do not enter Karen State, and it is fair to assume that the complexity of the organizational environment on the border compared to Karen State potentially represents new impulses and opportunities to people arriving in the camps. My own fieldwork supports this, as I will illustrate below.

Notably, this version seems to contrast with Berg's (2009) argument that the refugee camps serve to consolidate sentiments of Karen nationalism. I will leave this apparent contradiction for now, and discuss it more thoroughly in Chapter 2. It is one of my core arguments that the camp represents both opportunities and constraints compared to Karen State. In Chapter 3 I will explore how some of these contrasting developments turn out in terms of gender relations. In Chapter 4 I will take a look at how it affects the ways young

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Karen think about their future.

1.3.3. Resettlement

In 2005 the Thai Government allowed third countries to receive people from the camps who were legally registered as refugees by the UNHCR. Since then, more than 50,000 Burmese have resettled, more than 30,000 of them to the USA (Berg 2009:23). 15,000 more departures are expected in 2010 (UNHCR 2010). Only people legally registered as refugees are eligible for resettlement. People with special needs such as security concerns, medical or psychological problems and refugees who seek family reunification are given first priority. "Other individuals will be handled on a 'first-in-first-out' basis", meaning that the first ones to arrive in Thailand get resettled first (Berg 2009:24). During my fieldwork this implied that only people who got their refugee status before 2006 got resettled during the ongoing round.

1.4. Theoretical perspectives

In this section I will give a brief outline of the more overarching theoretical perspectives and concepts that forms the basis for my analysis throughout the thesis. Specific concepts related to issues covered chapter by chapter, will be introduced as I go along.

1.4.1. Structure and agency

Through my exploration of Karen people's negotiation of identity in different roles and subject positions, the relation between structure and agency emerges as an overarching analytical dimension informing my project.

Structure, according to Bourdieu & Wacquant (1993:26) denotes the material and mental, social and individual conditions and dispositions that guide human actions and choices. Mental and objective structures are mutually constitutive. Bourdieu, aiming to erase the perceived split between subjective and objective, combines phenomenological and structural views on structure in his model. While structuralism tends to reify action, seeing action as a pure enactment of structure, social phenomenology, seeing society as product of choices by conscious individuals, fails to explain the reproduction of structures. While society does have a real structure, it is equally and at the same time created by the agents. Even though social agents construct the social reality both individually and collectively, they didn't construct the categories they use for this construction (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1993:28).

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With Bourdieu, the key to social reproduction lies in his concept of *habitus* which is explained as a set of historical relations embodied in the individuals themselves in the form of mental and bodily schemes, perceptions, evaluation and action (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1993:34). It is a structuring mechanism that works in the agents, [...] "the principle which breeds strategies making the agents able to meet very different situations" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1993:35).

Underlying habitus is doxa, or "that which is taken for granted" (Bourdieu 1977:166).

Doxa is a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view - the point of view of those who dominate by dominating the state and who have constituted point of view as universal by constituting the state (Bourdieu 1998:57).

Even though the Karen elite does not constitute a state as such I believe this perspective can be applied. As I will show later, Karen National Union (KNU) is applying a nationalistic ideology by the book, so to speak, and I believe concepts of power applied in relation to the state are applicable to a large extent. Moreover, as I will also discuss throughout the thesis, there is scope for talking about those who dominate and those who are being dominated when talking about the KNU.

Doxa is reproduced most of all through the "dialectic of the objective chances and the agents' aspirations, out of which arises the sense of limits [...]" (Bourdieu 1977:164). Through doxa the symbolic order is maintained, unconsciously, because it is essential – it "*goes without saying because it comes without saying*" (Bourdieu 1977:167). In relation to my case, the range of imagined and imaginable Karen identities can be considered doxic. The dialectic of possibilities and aspirations which creates a sense of limits to what is possible, is relevant when discussing negotiations of identity both in terms of ethnicity and gender.

Doxa is distinct from *heterodoxy*, that which can be discussed, a concept implying "awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs" (Bourdieu 1977:164). In heterodoxy lies the potential for social change. Opinions differ on the scope for action, or creativity, the ability to produce change, in Bourdieu's theories. In sum, it can be said that he first and foremost explains social reproduction, although some see habitus as possibility for creativity (Parker 2005:8).

Drawing on Parker (2005) I use the term *agency* to denote "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001:112 in Parker 2005:3). The concept is seen as "concerned with the mediation between conscious intention and embodied habituses" (Parker

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2005:8 cf. Bourdieu 1977). It has commonly been posed as an opposition to structure, as "the individual who seeks to escape the constraints of society" (Parker 2005:4). However, following the logic of both Parker and Bourdieu, it is important not to fall into the trap of employing a simplistic opposition between structure (or victimhood) and agency, but rather see how the two exist as functions of one another.

Even though Bourdieu does stress that the actor is always interpreting through her actions (Moore 1994:77), Bourdieu as well as Foucault (1980) can perhaps be said to have more explanatory power when it comes to dominance, hegemony and reproduction than social change. In the Foucaultian view, where there is power there is resistance. Resistance is, however, never "free" from power (Foucault 1978:95 in Parker 2005:6). This is where the concept of agency can be useful - not as an opposition to structure or unconscious reproduction of the order of things, but as a sort of interface between subject and structure, individual and society, not as opposites but as mutually constitutive (Parker 2005:8).

There is no possibility of pure agency for an individual. Nor is the "measuring of the degree of agency" a meaningful task (Parker 2005:9). Moreover, "[...] under some social arrangements and in moments of crisis and trauma, the exercise of agency is simply not possible" (Parker 2005:13). The concept is nevertheless central to any discussion of identity. The focus on the relation, between structure and agency is useful for the rest of the thesis, when discussing representations of Karen State and the camp; the state of refugee; ethnicity and nationalism (Chapter 2); changing gender relations (Chapter 3) and thoughts about and desires for the future (Chapter 4).

1.4.2. Discourse, Power and Subject Positions

The concept of *discourse* is central in discussions of subjectivity and identity construction. A discourse can be understood as a set of salient notions about the world. These notions are framing what kinds of knowledge are considered possible, acceptable and true within a social field⁷. It is closely linked to power, which in the Foucaultian sense defines knowledge and is defined by knowledge (Foucault 1980). Power, moreover, is relational in Foucault's terms. It does not rest with individual actors but is enacted in relations between different actors. And the other way around, a relation can not be free of power (cf. Foucault 1980). Even though I identify certain powerful actors in the social field of the refugee community, I wish to stress

⁷ A social field is defined as "a set of objective historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1993:34)

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that I see power as manifest in relations between actors, and between actors and various institutions or systems, not as resting with certain individuals or groups as such. Power will always be "over", not merely "to". The exercise of the Karen National Union of power over "regular" refugees in the border community is such a relation.

Discourses, moreover, are structured through *difference*, along axes such as race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and gender. These differences intersect with each other and proffer various *subject positions* which individuals can take up or reject (Moore 1994).

Several competing, and possibly contrasting, discourses can play in a social field, and a discourse offers several alternative and contrasting subject positions. For example, notions of femininity and masculinity within a discourse shape what kind of behavior is acceptable for women/girls and men/boys in a social field. Such notions are rarely clear, unambiguous or free of contestation. Different expectations – or subject positions – occur in different settings and according to different people, and various social signifiers intersect with each other. This approach to subjectivity is a part of post-structuralist theory, and it incorporates notions of both structure and agency, of reproduction and resistance (cf. Moore 1994:4). I will return to the latter shortly.

Some discourses are more powerful than others in providing available and desirable subject positions within a social field. In other words, dominant discourses define reality, and the individual is positioned within structures of power and domination. *Resistance* and *complicity* are acts of agency within these dominant structures. But what is it exactly that dominant discourses determine? (cf. Moore 1994). How, where and amongst whom do "acceptable" subject positions in the Karen refugee community evolve, and how do relations of power shape available subject positions for individuals there? Drawing on Berg (2009) I find that one powerful producer of a dominant discourse in the Karen refugee context is the Karen National Union (KNU) which plays a significant part in shaping and reproducing notions of ethnicity and nationalism. Notions of ethnicity interplay with notions of gender, thus also affecting what a "proper" Karen man or woman has come to denote within this dominant discourse.

Henrietta Moore poses the question: "Can people actively recognize and choose subject positions they take up, and to what degree are they able to resist the terms of dominant discourses?" (Moore 1994:4) This question is a central one, and although I do not propose to answer it in a concluding manner, this too is worth keeping in mind throughout the thesis.

1.4.3. The Social Construction of Gender

Although human societies all around the world recognize biological differences between women and men, what they make of those differences is extraordinarily variable. We cannot deal, therefore, with the observable variability in the cultural constructions of gender across the world or through historical time simply by appealing to the indisputable fact of sexual difference" (Moore 1994:71).

In spite of biological differences between the sexes I hold, in line with Moore (1994), that the particularities of gender differences are socially constructed. Moore presents gender as a central axis for the discursive definition of *difference*, which pervades all spheres of human lives and interplays with other significant structures of difference, such as race, caste, class, religion and sexuality. Difference, as opposed to sameness, is central for the construction and maintenance of boundaries between groups, the formation of *us* and *them*. Gender is thus, in the words of Fagertun (2009) "constitutive of any social process" and can be "conceived in terms of a 'total social fact', i.e., something which is involved in all human activities and which shapes, and is shaped by, social practice" (Fagertun 2009:6). Discourses about gender are powerful because they render women and men as primary and inescapably defined by difference (Moore 1994).

Discourses on gender thus provide different, and possibly contrasting, subject positions which one can take up or reject. Furthermore, gender identification is a social and relational process, meaning that people position themselves in relation to others and to different systems and discourses. Gendered positioning is processual and not fixed, and can be said to form a constant negotiation within and between the available options.

Structures of gender inhabit a significant power dimension. The categories "woman" and "man" and the specific discourses which employ those categories, are involved in the production and reproduction of identity and agency. There is thus a link between gender differences and types of agency, implying that gender difference can be constitutive of patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Fagertun 2009). Therein lies a potential for domination of one group, or one type of agency, over others. In Chapter 3 I will discuss changing gender relations among the refugees in Mae La Oon camp, and these perspectives will be particularly relevant there.

1.4.4. Thematic context: Conceptualizing refugeeeness

An overarching question in this thesis is how to conceptualize the state of "refugee". Liisa Malkki provides important reflections on this issue in her book *Purity and Exile* (1995).

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Through exploring processes of identification among Hutu refugees in Tanzania, she questions dominant notions and perceptions of refugeeness and the link between place and identity, and problematizes the very categorical order of things that create and shape these notions. Within the framework of a global system of nation-states, a framework which pervades through all layers of contemporary social science, as well as "commonsensical" conceptualizations of the world, refugees as a category are rendered "matter out of place". Within the order of the "nation form" – characterized by Malkki (1995:5) as a hegemonic generative order of knowledge – refugees occupy a problematic, liminal position (Malkki 1995:1). Liminality, as framed by Turner (1974 cf. Malkki 1995) is a sort of transitional state where individuals find themselves "betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he passes through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or coming state" (1974:232 in Malkki 1995:7). Refugees are externalized; they are unclassified and unclassifiable, and this makes them particularity polluting. They represent an attack on the categorical order of nations (Malkki 1995:8).

According to Malkki (1995), the internationally standardized way of discussing displaced people, is by viewing them as in a limbo, as outside the world. Because culture is territorialized in the categorical order of nations, refugees are, through their deterritorialization, rendered outside of history, and outside of culture,. This common conceptualization of refugees - both in academia and in the domain of policy application and administration of programs directed towards refugee situations - leads to a pathologization of the *people* that are refugees. Malkki, drawing on Hannah Arendt (1973), argues that they are rendered *naked, bare humans* - and, importantly, pure victims.

Such a perspective is evident in Tangseefa's doctoral dissertation *Imperceptible, Naked Lives* (2003). According to Tangseefa, the Karen as a group are not regarded as proper political subjects by neither Burmese nor Thai authorities. Within a state-centered paradigm they are completely robbed of any institutional voice, and thus, also robbed of their humanity (Tangseefa 2003). Furthermore, we, subjects that are safely positioned within the statist discourse and have adequate juridical protection, cannot hear the cries of the Karens because they are not qualified subjects within that discourse - a fact rendering the lives of the Karens *imperceptible* (Tangseefa 2003). However, it is arguably this same state-centered discourse the Karens "use" in their attempt at empowering themselves by demanding their own nation-state. Nevertheless, they are living in a state of utter juridical *marginalization* and existential

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exception, carrying a dream of being a part of "the general" (cf. Tangseefa 2003). In the words of Berg (2009):

[...] refugees do not have any control over their future. This unpredictability caused by structural factors influenced the opportunity to lead a fulfilling life on the individual level, and thus the sense of being a true human (Berg 2009:78).

Malkki (1995) problematizes this view. In her account of identification processes among Hutu refugees in Tanzania, she argues that deterritorialization and displacement always presents at least two logical possibilities :

The first is that a liminal collectivity tries to make itself "fit" into the overarching national order, to become a "nation" like others. [...] The second possibility entails an insistence on, and a creative exploitation of, another order of liminality. This constitutes a sweeping refusal to be categorized, a refusal to be fixed within one and only one national or categorical identity, and one and only one historical trajectory (Malkki 1995:4).

Malkki's analysis (1995) shows that a refugee situation can have different outcomes in terms of individual and collective identity, attachment to the "homeland" and perceptions of nationality and identity. The particularities of the exile situation shape how people negotiate their existence as refugees, whether they operate within the framework of a system of nation states, or oppose it and refuse to be categorized in terms of it.

This perspective also touches upon questions of agency. Seeing refugees as pure victims, "understanding displacement as a human tragedy and looking no further can mean that one gains no insight at all into the lived meanings that displacement and exile can have for specific people [...]" (Malkki 1995:16).

Lubkeman makes a similar argument to Malkki (1995) in *Culture in Chaos. An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War* (2008), in which he seeks to re-theorize the conceptualization of war and migrants of war. Supported by his ethnographic study of social survival and change in Mozambique, a country which experienced successive wars between 1964 and 1992, he argues that:

For the inhabitants of such places war has not been an "event" that suspends "normal" social processes, but has instead become the normal – in the sense of "expected" - context for the unfolding of social life. [...] anthropologists should study the realization and transformation of social relations and cultural practices throughout conflict, investigating war as a transformative social condition and not simply as a political struggle conducted through organized violence (Lubkeman 2008:1).

Furthermore, "[...] Refugee migration is often seen as largely devoid of strategic calculation,

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indeed as virtually a 'non-decision' driven by a reflexive instinct for survival" (Lubkeman 2008:5), and in line with Malkki's argument, "War-time conditions are assumed to reduce individuals to acting on the basis of what are often described as 'more fundamental' and, by implication socially and culturally undifferentiated needs" (Lubkeman 2008:5).

While Malkki's perspective is firmly tied to the act of crossing a national border, Lubkeman pays less attention to the link between place and identity so central in Malkki's line of reasoning. Thus, his perspective is also very relevant for IDPs and people who live in conditions of war without fleeing.

I find these conceptualizations useful because indeed (as is also one of Lubkeman's points) the boundaries between conventional "refugees" and other war-time migrants is often blurry. The prevalence of the category of "students" in Mae La Oon refugee camp (see sub-chapter 1.5.1. about legal categories), illustrates this point. Moreover, people who now happen to have a refugee status in the eyes of the UN, may have had various experiences and different "statuses" prior to that. Also, the fact that only people with legal status as refugee were eligible for resettlement, may in fact have led to an unbalanced representation of people's actual motives and reasons for going to the camps (Berg 2009:65), in favor of the "I fled at gunpoint"-story. The category of "refugee", then, is far from clear-cut when looking at the reality of migration from Eastern Burma to Thailand. However, it is important not to "overdo" this argument, and not to be eager to identify agency with the crime of forgetting the utterly marginalized position these people find themselves in, after all.

In my exploration of refugeeness, Karen nationalism, and imaginations of their own place in this world (Chapter 2) and possibilities of creating a "better future" (Chapter 4) I return to these perspectives. In what sense do Karen refugees themselves have the feeling of being in between statuses, not belonging anywhere; or in a state of exception or emergency; and what kind of choices do they perceive to have in the refugee camp? In Chapter 3 especially I link these questions to a discussion of agency and subject positions in terms of gender. What gendered subject positions are available for Karen refugees on the Thai-Burmese border? How are the range of available subject positions changing with shifting circumstances and possible rethinking of dominant discourses on gender and ethnicity?

1.5. Methodological reflections

Methodology is not just about what to do and how to do it in the field. It is also about discussing concepts of social scientific knowledge, and the epistemological boundaries of research. Following the postmodernist turn, anthropology is commonly seen as an interpretive rather than a "disclosing" discipline (Keesing 1987). This is not to say that what to do and how is unimportant, but rather that a discussion of methods should be based on a principal epistemological discussion if it is to assist in asserting the validity of any claims that are made on the basis of fieldwork.

In this section I start by giving a brief account of the legal "categories" of people that live in the camps, since it is important to understand that they are in fact not all in the same boat. Then I will introduce the geographical and social area that constituted "the field", and reflections upon methods I applied during fieldwork. I will make a note of the concept of "ah na deh", borrowed from Berg (2009), which can serve to give an insight into some communicational obstacles a Westerner might meet when carrying out field work in Southeast Asia.

1.5.1. Legal categories: Refugees, IDPs and stateless people

People residing in the refugee camps can mainly be divided into three different legal categories: Refugees, PABs and students. New arrivals not registered will usually be pending one of these statuses. *Refugees* are registered and recognized by the UNHCR according to the Geneva Convention of 2006. They are eligible for resettlement through the UNCHR resettlement program. *PAB* is short for Provision Admission Board which is an ad hoc administrative unit registering new arrivals in the camps. It basically means that they are recognized as rightful dwellers in the camp, but they do not have refugee status. They are not eligible for resettlement. People registered as *students* have temporary permission to stay in the camps for educational purposes. They are expected to go back when their education is finished (Berg 2009). In line with Berg (2009) I use the term "refugee" to denote people who reside in the refugee camps along the border, regardless of whether they are registered as refugee, PAB or student, or pending one of these.

In addition to what I (in spite of the lack of legal recognition from Thai authorities) will refer to as refugees in this thesis, there are two other categories of Karens which are explicitly not included in this term – IDPs and stateless people. IDPs – Internally Displaced

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People – are people displaced inside Burma, they have not crossed the border to Thailand and do not live in the camps⁸. Though the distinction is blurry in reality – firstly people do go back and forth a bit provided they believe it to be fairly safe at the time, and provided they have the resources to organize the trip; and secondly there are a few so-called IDP camps inside Burma, and people currently living in camps in Thailand might have arrived from those camps and may still have family there – I will keep this distinction simply because I never visited Burma during my fieldwork and cannot speak for the people "inside". I will however refer to both IDPs and refugees as Burmese Karen wherever there is a need to make a distinction towards Karens not originating from Burma. The distinction is needed because of the second category not included in the term "refugees", namely Karens from inside Thailand. There are an estimated 3,5 million stateless people in Thailand (excluding people living in refugee camps) which are born in Thailand, might have lived there for generations but are not granted Thai citizenship. Most all of them come from the so-called hilltribes in the north of the country, and the majority are Karen. They will be referred to as Thai Karen, but they are not subjects of this thesis.

This is not an exhaustive list of possible locations where Karen people live. For instance, there are not insignificant populations of Karen in the Thai cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai not accounted for here.

1.5.2. The Field

My fieldwork was for the most part carried out in and around a three-year post-ten school for Karen refugees where I served as a volunteer teacher. The school had two branches, one of which was located in the small town of Mae Sariang in Mae Hong Son Province about 20 km from the Burmese border (see appendix 3). The senior students stayed at this branch, hereby referred to as "the Center". The first- and second year students' branch (hereby referred to as "the School") was located inside *Mae La Oon* refugee camp, and this was also the constituency of the school, as all students that attended school were residents of the camp⁹.

⁸ The TBBC (2007a) gives a conservative estimate of the total number of IDPs in Burma to around 500,000 people.

⁹ Some students also lived in the neighboring camp of Mae Ra Moo Luang. There is a significant degree of organizational communication between the two camps, and also, as I understand it, with other camps along the border.

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The Center

While the two first years at the school were spent at the School in camp, the graduate students went to study and stay at the Center, getting access to computers and internet, which is a much trickier affair to arrange in the camp due to infrastructure deficits and logistic difficulties. Many of the graduates have gone on to become teachers in camp or in Karen State, or to work for Community Based Organizations (CBOs) along the border.

At the Center, students stayed in a boarding situation where the school building and the sleeping quarters were located in the same house – the offices, classrooms and dining area on the ground level and the bedrooms upstairs. The area outside the house consisted of a small courtyard between the Center house and the house of the man who owned the Center house. He was a Thai Karen, and his daughter, 14 at the time of my fieldwork, went to school in Mae Sariang and spoke both Thai and Karen. Outside there was also a dining shack, an outside toilet, a shack for the drying of various foodstuffs such as garlic and chili, and an area serving as a volleyball/cane-ball field. The whole area was perhaps 150 square meters altogether.

The refugees are formally not allowed to leave the premises of the refugee camp, and they have no legal rights in Thailand apart from the permission to stay in that camp. Thus, all students and most of the staff stayed there illegally. The Center could only exist and function at the mercy of a few well-intentioned (or well paid) Thai policemen in Mae Sariang, a position some policemen have happened to take advantage of on more than one occasion¹⁰. The illegal status the students held in Mae Sariang also meant that they could hardly go out of the school premises at all, and never by themselves or without a phone and the number of one of the staff. Trips to the center of Mae Sariang would be organized on special occasions such as Buddhist holidays when there were big markets and a lot going on so they wouldn't attract attention. The first trips into the town center most of the students seemed quite nervous, but there was a marked difference in peoples' attitude towards going into the center from the beginning of the school year and towards the end. Most of them grew braver as time went by.

¹⁰ During a stay at the same Center in 2005 I was told that just before my arrival Thai policemen had marched in and taken a computer without further explanation. Further, while I stayed there for this fieldwork in the fall of 2009, some policemen came to the Center one day demanding ten boys to follow them to the station. No explanation was given and when they came back later the same day I asked some of the boys what they had done. They said they had done nothing but give their fingerprint. However, both the boys that went to the police station that day and people that stayed behind at the Center were obviously scared. The question of what purpose this random visit served, remained unanswered to me.

The School in Mae La Oon Refugee Camp

Mae La Oon refugee camp was established in 2004 as a result of successive camp consolidations for a period of six years. People from smaller camps in different locations were moved to Mae La Oon. The camp is located around 2 km from the Burmese border, and walking distance to the neighboring camp Mae Ra Ma Luang. The total camp area is 320,000 m² - less than half a square kilometer. The population in 2008 according to feeding figures from the Thai-Burmese Border Consortium (TBBC) was 16,223 people, but this number is subject to a degree of flux due to changing circumstances in Karen State, ongoing resettlement to third countries, and the fact that people to a certain extent move back and forth between Karen State and the camp. Between 2006 and 2008, a little over 1700 people resettled to third countries from Mae La Oon (TBBC 2008b). The camp is accessible by car most of the year, but in the rainy season the normally three hour drive can take up to eight hours, and sometimes the car has to turn and go back due to very muddy paths. (TBBC 2007a) It is also possible to reach the camp by boat, but then only by passing Thai military check points. Foreigners are generally not allowed past these checkpoints.

Mae La Oon is located in a steep hillside down towards the river. There are roads of mud and rock, but they fall more or less apart every rainy season and require constant maintenance throughout the year. There are cars, mainly belonging to NGOs, going in and out on a fairly regular basis. Most of the international NGOs do not let their staff sleep in the camps if they can avoid it, and then generally not for more than a couple of nights. Volunteers going in on their own accord can usually get to stay up to ten days with a camp pass issued from the KRC, even though this is not in accordance with Thai regulations.

There are limitations to what kinds of agriculture are allowed within the camp premises. There are no possibilities for growing rice, but some varieties of vegetables are grown, and there is some household-scale breeding of pigs, chicken, ducks and fish. Though commonly bred in Karen State, in the camp there are no cows or buffaloes. Still, the camp does have its own economy, people running shops, workshops and small eateries, and there is a certain amount of money going around¹¹. The going currency is Thai baht.

The School campus was significantly larger than the Center. In addition to several classrooms and a computer room; offices and a large meeting room; the dining room and the boys' and girls' dormitories, there were a vocational room for handicraft workshops; a library;

¹¹ Though I regard it as fairly likely, the existence of a black economy based on smuggled goods is not something I have investigated in this thesis.

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a shop and one football and one volleyball field which they shared with the neighboring school¹². However, the material standard was generally lower than at the Center as all houses were made of bamboo and banana tree materials (except that a few houses had concrete floors). The result was rapid material deterioration and high vulnerability to nature's forces such as rain, wind¹³, mudslides and flooding.

Most of the students at the School were residents of the camp, either with a student status or more permanently. Some came from Mae Ra Moo Luang and moved to Mae La Oon for studying. Most of the people with student status did not have any family in the camp, while the refugees and PABs mostly did¹⁴. Both at the Center and the School the school provided food, basic toiletry and lodgings to the students, for an annual fee of 300 baht (around 55 NOK).

¹² At the time of my fieldwork there was a plan to join the two schools together in a coordinating effort launched by the KED. The new school was to become part of a post-ten network consisting of schools from altogether four camps along the border, each new branch providing a specialization such as engineering; economics etc.

¹³ One student told me that at the closing ceremony for the academic year of 2008/2009, two large trees fell down on the football field due to wind, smashing both the girls' toilet and the boys' shower shed. Luckily, everyone was gathered in the great hall for the ceremony so no one got hurt.

¹⁴ The easiest way to know the difference was to look at which students stayed at the school dormitories all the time, including holidays, and which students went home during weekends or even every day if they lived close by.



Illustration 1: Girls' room at the Center



Illustration 2: Relaxing in the common area, Center



Illustration 3: The dining shed at the Center



Illustration 4: Making chili paste at the Center



Illustration 5: Showering and washing clothes, Center



Illustration 6: Mae La Oon refugee camp. View from the road in Section 1



Illustration 7: The School football field, Mae La Oon



Illustration 8: Dining at School, Mae La Oon

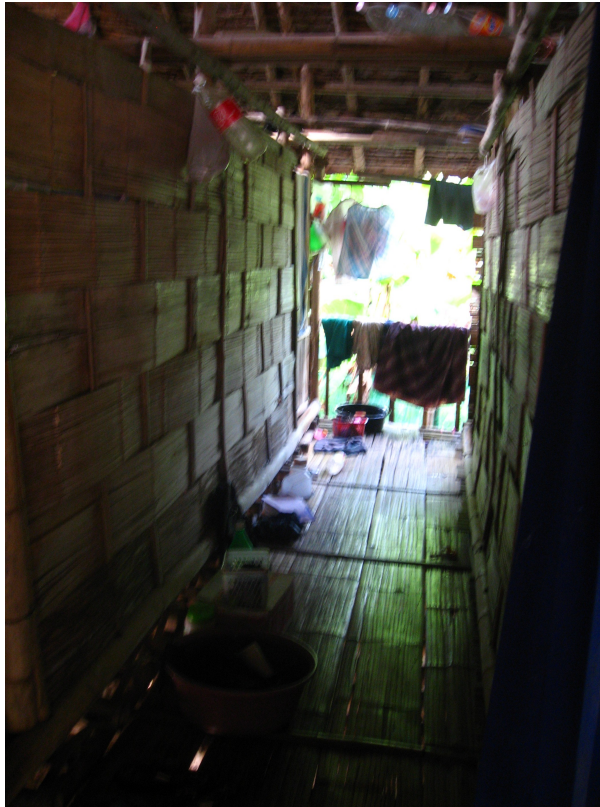


Illustration 9: Girls' dormitory, hallway, Mae La Oon



Illustration 10: Girls room, usually shared by two people, Mae La Oon



Illustration 11: Morning assembly at School, Mae La Oon



Illustration 12: Girls in the common area of the dormitory, Mae La Oon

1.5.3. Narrative Representations

Human experience is both conceptualized and conveyed through narrative. In the words of Bruner (1991) "We organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative - stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (Bruner 1991:4).

In anthropology, narrative is central in two ways: In the representations we meet during fieldwork through the accounts of our informants; and the narrative tropes we use when conveying our arguments in our texts. In the words of Wagner (1981): "The anthropologist makes his experiences understandable (to himself as well as others in his society) by perceiving them and understanding them in terms of his own familiar way of life" (Wagner 1981:36). The meaning I make of any information is dependent on my associations, and of "all sorts of contexts" (Wagner 1981:37).

As I will show throughout the thesis, Karens conceptualized and communicated central elements of ethnic identity in the form of narratives, about the origin of Karen people, providing stories behind certain ceremonies or prevailing states of affairs among Karens today, and about the history of suffering at the hands of the Burmans. Narratives had a normative function, they served to explain, to justify and to judge. But, if my understanding of Karen narratives is ultimately constituted through myself, my culture, my previous experiences, my values etc., how can I assert any validity to my interpretation at all?

According to Sanjek (1990) there are three ways of asserting ethnographic validity – through sound theoretical foundation; through making known our paths to information in the field; or through providing fieldnote "evidence" in order for the reader to judge for her- or himself (cf. Sanjek 1990). I have attempted to provide field notes illustrations that I hold to be fairly representative of my data. They could probably have been handled very differently by someone else, and this fact is impossible to escape. Reliability in terms of replicability is not the strong point of anthropological accounts (cf. Sanjek 1990).

One way of resolving, or at least of unmasking, this problem, has been to "bring the author back into the text", instead of masking her through a "disembodied narrative voice" (Moore 1994:116). However, this entails its own sets of problems. According to Moore (1994), postmodernists seem to assume that the authorial "I" is unproblematic - to assume the isomorphy of the "I" in the text and the "I" that write the text. By revealing the "I" it is assumed that strategies, intentions and meanings of the author are revealed. However, the relationship between the two will always be imaginary, and therefore there can never be a text

that "faithfully represents the fieldwork situation" (Moore 1994:117).

I have nevertheless tried to solve the problem of narrative interpretation and representation by being present throughout the text. Even though I can never escape the fact that the "I" presented in the text is my own representation of myself, I believe the way out of this catch-22 - if there is one - is to embrace the fact that this *is* my work, my invention. It is my understanding. I will provide interpretations. I will suggest relations of causality, and I will give a representation of the subjects in the field which to some extent is generalized and stable even though this is problematic. I will present my data in ways that attempt at coherence, even though things aren't always coherent. I will try to make sense of things even though things don't always make sense. The text will contain elements of narrative tropes. It is hard to avoid. The fieldwork conveyed itself to me as a story, and any other re-shaping of that experience would entail its own epistemological difficulties. The best I can do is to reveal that I am aware of this dilemma and that I had to make a choice.

1.5.4. Field Methods applied

The methods I applied were basically twofold: Participant observation - variously tilting towards participation and observation - and interviews. In addition to this I got access to a set of essays written for an assignment by the students both at the School and the Center.

Participant observation

Some insights can, arguably, only be gained through participation (see for instance Jenkins (1994) on fieldwork as an apprenticeship and Lyng (1998) on "co-presence"). What kind of impressions I hold on to from participating in "alien" practices and what I make of them through the process of analysis is of course a product of who I am. This issue can be discussed at lengths in terms of what kind of knowledge has actually been produced, and, in the prolongation of that discussion, a discussion of what "anthropological knowledge" is (Jenkins 1994:444). One of the weaker points of insights gained through participation, is that they are elusive. They are so situationally specific, and so contingent on the fact that we are there to participate in them, that they disappear the moment we do. Thus the focus on instance and situatedness can render our insights worthless in any and all other situations. It is, however, possible to turn the coin and assert the value of participation exactly because of its situatedness and its attention to context.

Experiencing the isolation of the refugee camp, although I am sure it came across very differently to me than to the refugees, I believe is one such instance where my insight would

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clearly have suffered had I not gone there. That is also the reason why I moaned when my planned trip to the Karen State was canceled due to “changing security circumstances” (battles broke out).

True participant observation instinctively seems a self-contradictory term. On the one hand, If you participate fully (if possible) you lose sight of the analysis. "Full participation" is immensely difficult, inadvisable, not to say impossible. In the words of Lyng: "[...] to record faithfully the lived experience of people who routinely manage their daily affairs deprived of adequate amounts of food or sleep and stressed by interpersonal crisis, for example, participant observers must immerse themselves in these same conditional circumstances" (Lyng 1998:225). On the other hand, every time you withdraw to observer position you risk losing whichever status you build up as a participant.

Admitting that there might not be such a thing as "true participant observation", means that one has to find a balance between the two that works in the field, and that gives you fairly valid data. For me this meant finding a degree of participation in the student's daily activities – from getting up at 4 am. to do the cooking; to eating rice and chilies three times a day; to classes; to adapting to unfamiliar hygienic habits – which gave me "insider points" but which at the same time could be possible to sustain for the whole period of the field-work. Moreover, doing this while at the same time being painstakingly aware that no matter the intensity of my efforts I was still, at the end of the day, considered different on a number of levels.

To exemplify: Being in the role of a volunteer teacher at the Center had its clear advantages and disadvantages. On the up-side I was immediately thrown into a situation where both sides were forced to interact with each other, I had to learn everyone's names quickly, and I early on got an impression of the different personalities in the class. Also, they all had to relate to me regardless of whether or not they would have approached me during their spare time. Another methodological advantage was that I was allowed to stay in the girls' dormitory. This gave me a good opportunity to shift between participation and observation, although language was often a constraining factor. English would not be spoken unless I was in the conversation, and sometimes not even then. However, the physical closeness of staying together six people in a room of 15 m², did after a while create a certain intimacy which would otherwise have been hard to achieve. Late night conversations had a different atmosphere about them, and different topics were discussed. At the request of the school administration I was also in charge of organizing evening activities, such as games, quizzes and movie-nights. This gave me a natural place also in the out-of-school activities, which I appreciated.

The down-side to the role of teacher and organizer was perhaps that I came into the

setting as a sort of authoritative figure. However, believing that I would not have been viewed as set apart from the group "no matter what", would be naive. My white skin, my economic status, my role as a researcher, and perhaps most of all, my status as a free person, *not* a refugee, rendered me as an *other* to an extent which I believe is impossible to undo. Participant observation however, was facilitated greatly by the fact that I was given a clear role that enabled me to participate - albeit not as an anonymous part of the group - in various activities throughout the day.

There were however, a number of activities in which I was not included. Daily chores such as cooking and cleaning it was, it seemed, more or less assumed that I didn't wish to participate in. When attempting to approach such a situation I was always welcomed, although with an air of wondering - why does she want to do the dishes when she doesn't have to? In spite of my expressed wish to learn how to cook Karen food, this was never followed up unless I pursued it vigorously, as if they somehow thought I didn't actually mean it. Many expressed a concern that the material conditions I had to live under were very poor, probably too poor for a *golawah*¹⁵ who was used to much better standards. The idea of me doing "housework" seemed to not find any resonance with them.

Doing interviews and collecting narratives

My intention was to conduct interviews with as many people as possible. After a while however, I came to experience interviews as an artificial situation where the small-talk was inhibited and both parties seemed to feel like we needed to be concise and concrete. With the people I got to know better, especially the students in the Center and at the School, a less staged setting was more relaxing and beneficial. This experience can be seen in light of reflections done by Sanjek (1990) that a dialogic approach to ethnography risks "removing speech from action", and is most useful when combined with close observation of the dialogue setting (Sanjek 1990:406). Avoiding the interview situation was a turn that most of the time brought me closer to the informants, and a lot of "small" details came through to a greater extent in smalltalk and participation than through the staging of questions and answers which were to be recorded. This sense of limitations can also be said to be the case with fieldnotes however, albeit in different ways. While the interview perhaps shapes the actual formulations of narrative by my informants, the narration in fieldnotes is my own. The tapes I got were after all a direct pathway back to the field (though re-interpreted by my interpreter in those cases where she was present), and as such a valuable tool for recapturing moments. In that

¹⁵ "Golawah" is S'gaw Karen for "white skin", and was used of all Western foreigners.

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sense fieldnotes and interviews are complementary kinds of data.

In the end however, I wound up doing interviews only with people I didn't have the chance to spend lengths of time with, especially in the camp since both my trips there were quite short. My data included two interviews with representatives from the Karen Women's Organization; two interviews with female members the Camp Committee and one of the Camp Committee staff; and five interviews with students at the School and at the Center. Most of the interviews I did were one-on-one. On one occasion, what was originally an individual interview after a while turned into a group interview.

Finding a balance between me giving directions and letting my informants set the agenda was a challenge. I had opted for a semi-structured approach where I asked some broad questions, and followed up the answers I got with more detailed questions, asking them to elaborate, give examples etc. My questions were related to gender relations in the camp; differences (both in gender relations and other social organizations) between the camp and Karen State; and thoughts about the future. This broad approach was deliberate, and I tried to let the interviewees direct the conversation as much as possible. The degree to which they did, varied.

Using an interpreter

Language was an ever-present barrier. Most people's English skills were not sufficient for having an unconstrained conversation, and many opted for Karen even though I was present. Doing interviews in camp I used an interpreter, since most of the interviewees there had close to no knowledge of English. My interpreter was a woman I have known for many years, which was both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, since she knew me well she was less hesitant to ask me to clarify, or to correct me if I misunderstood or said something wrong. Anticipating the next section on the concept of ah na deh, someone I knew less well would not have been likely to exhibit this sort of direct behavior. On the other hand, she might have believed that she knew what I wanted to know, and projected this understanding onto the interviewees without bothering to clarify with me first. She no doubt served as a gate-keeper for me, a fact I will have to take into account when using the data I obtained in the interviews.

Ethics and anonymity

When I first started teaching at the Center, I organized an orientation meeting with all the students and staff, in order to obtain permission from potential informants. Prior to the meeting I had discussed my project with my interpreter, explaining what I intended to do and

why, and that if anyone at any point didn't want to participate they were free to refuse it. My interpreter then informed the students and the rest of the staff, in Karen, in the meeting, whereupon a written declaration of consent was handed out. Everyone who agreed to participate signed the declaration. A similar procedure took place in the camp.

There was however, still the question of whether all of my informants, given their lack of exposure to the aims and practices of higher education, understood the full extent of what their consent actually entailed. Moreover, the relation between them and me could be expected to be of such a nature that I could not be sure that people actually said no even if they might have been skeptical. I was also aware of a general tendency for people to be unfrontational. All these elements induced me to be careful when approaching people in order to leave the door actually, not just formally, open for people to avoid me or refrain from answering certain questions.

When quoting informants I have not used their actual names, but replaced them with fictional names, some are real and some I have made up but they could have been real. "Naw" is a polite or formal prefix used together with girls' and women's names¹⁶, and "Saw" is the corresponding prefix for boys' and men's names. I have put 'Naw' and 'Saw' before girls' and boys' names respectively, as a pointer to the reader.

1.5.5. Embodied Knowledge - The concept of Ah na deh

I want to introduce the concept of *ah na deh*, a concept that I believe shaped relations and communication during my fieldwork. The concept is defined by Fink (2001:x) as "a feeling of obligation to others that makes one act in a restrained way". In the words of Berg (2009): "In a Burmese cultural context the objective is to maintain smooth relations by refraining from acting in a way that makes the other 'lose face'" (Berg 2009:30). Furthermore, there is a strong sense of social cohesiveness, respect for authorities is deeply engrained, and the norm is to avoid disagreements and not to stir up negative emotions. This concept can also be applied in the Karen context, and this has both methodological and analytical implications. Ah na deh had effects on the dynamics of conversation. For instance, disagreements in conversations were avoided, which meant that I had to be very careful not to imply too much lest my informants would "automatically" agree with my "suggestions". Moreover, emotional or touchy issues were extremely challenging to approach, since stirring up negative emotions can be considered a break with the norms of ah na deh. It also constituted an everyday

¹⁶ The Karens did not distinguish between first names and surnames. They usually used their full name in most situations (or nicknames in close relations), including "Naw"/"Saw" in formal settings.

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challenge for me as displaying strong emotions was more or less avoided and seen as loosing face.

Relevant for understanding the significance of this concept, is Jenkins' (1994) reflections that knowledge is practical. In his article "Field work and the perception of Everyday Life", he asserts the importance, and uniqueness, of fieldwork lies in learning these practical knowledges. This illustrates the clear connection between methods and knowledge – what we "find out" is dependent on our perceptions in the field, what we see is dependent on whether we notice what goes without saying – the 'embodied knowledge' (cf. Jenkins 1994). Putting these experiences into writing is also a difficult, if not impossible, task. "What is built up is a practical understanding, a form of knowledge that is not necessarily conscious and often cannot be brought into language" (Moore and Sanders 2006). Thus, the concept of ah na deh can be viewed in light of epistemological discussions concerning practical knowledge.

Karens have been described as exhibiting "control over sentiments, mind and mood" (Berg 2009:96), and I had to strive for the same in order to not expose myself in ways that were rendered embarrassing for me - me loosing face - as this would, I reasoned, alienate me further from my informants. Acquiring these "habits of action" (cf. Jenkins 1994) was a learning process, and though I honestly felt that I wasn't very successful at this, it nevertheless, as time went by, constituted an awareness of "the things that go without saying" (Jenkins 1994:437), of body language, of atmospheres, of "smelling out" when a conversation was of such a nature that I should stay away, of realizing (or at least suspecting) when things were being left out, glossed over, euphorized. etc. Skills of this kind cannot be learned outside of the field, a point which strongly favors participation in ethnographic research.

Analytically the concept is also significant. In this thesis I will several times point to contrasts in representations of reality - both regarding Karen State, the refugee camp, Karen ethnicity and plans for the future. I believe this can be viewed through the light of the concept of ah na deh. For example, suffering in silence, not exposing negative feelings to others is a trait that can be related to ah na deh; not hoping because hoping implies a possibility of being disappointed, and a display of disappointment breaks with the concept of ah na deh.

1.6. Structure of the thesis

In *Chapter 2* set off with noting an apparent paradox in peoples' representations of both the camp and Karen State - on the one hand it is imagined as a Perfect Place and on the other

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remembered as a place of utter terror and suffering. I use perspectives of ethnicity and nationalism (cf. Anderson 1991) to gain an understanding of how dominant conceptualizations of place become central to Karen peoples' understandings of themselves in the world. I argue that the prevalence of certain notions of Karen ethnicity and sentiments of nationalism, are produced and sustained by the Karen National Union (KNU) (cf. Berg 2009). I will also discuss different ways of conceptualizing the state of refugeeness with regards to marginalization/powerlessness and agency as somewhat conflicting views (cf. Malkki 1992; 1995; Camino and Krulfeld 1994; Tangseefa 2003; Parker 2005; Lubkeman 2008).

In *Chapter 3* I discuss how the situation of refugeeness leads to changes in gender relations, and especially observed changes in the division of labor in the refugee camp; and in how women's leadership, activism and out-of-the-house activities are viewed in the refugee community. This will be discussed in light of views on gender relations in Southeast Asia (cf. Wikan 1990; Atkinson and Errington 1990; van Esterik 1996; Parker 2005; Fagertun 2009), as well as more general theories on gender (Moore 1994). I point to the Karen Women's Organization as an influential actor whose activities result in a broader range of subject positions being available to girls and women, for instance women as leaders, within the wider prevailing discourse of Karen-ness. With an aim of rendering "female modes of action" equally worth as "male modes of action" – this can adequately be described as resistance towards the dominant discourse – I claim that they partially succeed. I do not claim, however, that there is a univocal shift in power in favor of women in the refugee camps.

Lastly, in *Chapter 4* I discuss how the state of refugeeness – several aspects of which will already have been discussed in chapters 2 and 3 – are related to thoughts about and plans for the future, about possibilities and constraints. I have observed a contrast in the way young Karen refugees speak about their future, and this point is explored here. I frame this contrast in terms of a negotiation between imaginaries and "reality", where acts of dreaming and making plans that relate to their actual possibilities, are mixed in an what I argue is an attempt at making meaning. Acts of imagining a Perfect Place already discussed in Chapter 2, have also been projected towards a "third country", and this turn creates ambiguities, doubts, and guilt (cf. Berg 2009).

A brief examination of practices regarding courtship and romantic relationships among young, unmarried Karen refugeeness serves the purpose of illustrating the paradox of representation on the level of individuals. I show how people were hesitant to express themselves in assertive terms about their relationships. This example illustrates in a very direct way some of the effects of the unpredictability of life in the refugee camp, on identity

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negotiations, pulling people between different and contesting notions of ethnicity, refugeeness, gender, and the link between place and identity.

Many of the general points made in this chapter will already have been presented in the previous chapters, which have been discussing paradoxical representations of place (Karen State and the refugee camp) and gender roles and relations. Notions of ethnicity, sentiments of nationalism, conceptualizations of place and ideas about gender are all elements in the identity constructions for young Karen refugees on the border between Thailand and Burma. It structures the ways in which they think about their future. In that sense, Chapters 2 and 3, while providing important analytical points in their own right, also serve a purpose of leading up to Chapter 4.

Chapter 2 - Karen Identity Construction: Refugeeeness, Ethnicity and Nationalism

The aim of this chapter is to pinpoint important features of identity construction related to refugeeeness, ethnicity and nationalism. I start the chapter by discussing how my informants' representations of Karen State were highly contrasting, and sometimes contradictory, in an interesting way: Images were formed, where Karen State represented both unimaginable suffering and hardships at the hands of the ruling Burmans, poverty and lack of development; and a Perfect Place that they longed for and maybe the only place where they could be truly happy.

Displacement, or deterritorialization, is central to identity formation. To understand the reason for these contrasting representations of Karen State and the refugee camp, I need to take a look at how to conceptualize "refugeeness". I will discuss some contrasting, but at the same time complementary, perspectives on subjectivity formation among refugees (Malkki 1992; 1995; Camino and Krulfeld 1994; Tangseefa 2003; Lubkeman 2008). Questions related to marginalization and liminality will serve to highlight how processes of identification might happen in the camp and what factors play a part. I argue that exile has become integral to perceptions of Karen identity. Being suppressed, involuntarily driven into warfare with the Burmans, being pure victims, are central elements in representations of Karen history and ethnicity. The war, opposition, resistance, have become constitutive of what it is to be Karen.

I then turn to central perspectives on ethnicity and nationalism (Barth 1969; Anderson 1991; Eriksen 1993) which are also central elements in identification processes in the refugee context. I substantiate this discussion with cases and narratives from informants from Mae La Oon refugee camp. The aim is to illuminate the ways notions of ethnicity and nationalism are intertwined and constitute a dominant discourse in the refugee camp. I argue that these two elements - refugeeeness and nationalism - severely structure people's sense of being in the world by representing particular subject positions related to "What is Karen" and "how am I Karen". The Karen National Union (KNU) is a strong political and military organization among the Karen. I argue that this organization is a dominant discourse-producer providing a particular imaginary of Karen identity, shaping the reproduction of certain notions of "Karenness" and Karen nationalism.

Lastly I will return to empirical representations of the refugee camp, to observe how

the camp setting can work in two directions in terms of identification: Both as arenas of consolidated nationalism, and as potential multi-discourse providers.

The paradoxes of representation that I will discuss are also manifest in seemingly contradictory ways of thinking of and talking about the future for my informants, an argument I will discuss further in chapter 4.

2.1. Remembering and imagining Karen State – The paradoxical narrations of a "Perfect Place" and a place of suffering and terror

"My village is small but the villagers are united." (Saw K'ulu Wah)

"Karen State is a beautiful state. Even though I have to be away I never forget it. I always miss it. It is much better than other countries. All Karen people want to go back to it. It will always be in my life." (Saw Michael)

The above quotes are taken from a set of essays written by second year students at the school where I was a teacher. This particular essay assignment was given to the students by the school principal as a free assignment where the students could choose the topic and title of the essay. Out of 27 essays handed in, seven had topics revolving around the country or village they had left, and the contents were in some cases remarkably similar, in a few instances even to the letter. This might of course indicate that the students were saving themselves some schoolwork by cooperating rather more closely than what was intended. Nevertheless, the fact that nearly one third of the students who handed in an essay chose to write about their homeland¹⁷, illustrates a point that is perhaps not very surprising - that they thought a lot about the place they had left. The essays were moreover, strikingly coherent in their narrative content - even when controlling for somewhat leisure-minded students. One of the reoccurring imaginaries was the beauty and plentiness of whichever home village was described:

"The river is full of fish" (Saw K'ulu Wah)

"We raise different animals like buffalo, goat, pig, duck and cow" (Saw K'ulu Wah)

"There are many kinds of paddy in the field" (NKJC student 9)

"We also have beautiful flowers in my village, with many kinds of colors. When it's raining we plant the mustard and it's very delicious to eat and it gives energy" (NKJC student 9)

¹⁷ Notably, another seven students wrote essays named "my future plan" or something equivalent. I will return to these essays in Chapter 4, where I discuss the negotiations between imaginaries and "real" choices in relation to agency, identity and being and "becoming" Karen.

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For me, the Karen State is very small, beautiful, wonderful and important for the Karen people. It has enough mineral resources such as gold, silver, copper, jewels and more. It is evergreen and so has many animals. We have some high and popular mountains. The streams in Karen State always carry fresh water. (Saw Michael)

These statements illustrate, I argue, that Karen State was a focal point for the imagination of a Perfect Place which might not really exist, at least not exactly as described, but which nevertheless - or maybe *because* of its imagined nature - had an important function in the master narrative of Karen ethnicity: *This is the Place where the Karen People belong*. A similar pattern was observed by Liisa Malkki (1995) in her exploration of identity formations among Hutu refugees in a Tanzanian camp. There, the place they had left became an important signifier of identity, and was closely intertwined with their identity as refugees. I will return to this point.

At the same time as Karen State was imagined and described as a Perfect Place to which much Karen sense of belonging seemed to be attached, it was also frequently narrated in terms of terror and suffering. People in Karen State were described as poor, uneducated and even unenlightened, having to work hard to survive and as always living in fear of being subjected to the cruel actions of the government army – the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) – or alternatively, fleeing to the jungle.

We Karen people love peace and honesty, a peaceful life and wish to live like this in our homeland. But other nationalities use force and try to control our land (Saw Soe Win).

[...] many Karen people become IDPs (internally displaced persons). They do not have enough food to eat or enough clothes to wear and they are living without shelter. They must run to hide from place to place. Many people get diseases and some of them die. They do not have enough medicine to cure people. (Saw Soe Win)

Now, if we look to our brigade many of our people feel the hand of the SPDC soldiers (NKJC student 6).

Nowadays the situation in Karen State is very bad because the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) enter the villages and destroy them. The people are afraid of them and flee to another village to save their lives (Saw Kaw).

If we look at our own country there are many people living poorly under the oppression of an enemy. Many people have broken hand, blind eye and poor food (female NJKC student).

If the first function of narrations of Karen State was to create a romanticized image of it, the second function was to enhance a feeling of common suffering: *We the Karens are suffering because of the demonic Burman soldiers*. This line of narrating provides an explanation – this

happened because we are Karen – and a morale – the Burmans are bad, we the Karens are innocent victims. Burmans were portrayed almost as pure evil, as the opposition of what is Karen; as the ultimate Other. This is in line with observations made by Malkki (1995). In her case, narratives about the homeland were romanticizing and had clear didactic traits, and served a purpose of both educating and moral preaching about the situation Hutus found themselves in (Malkki 1995:53). The presence of a morale and an assertion of causality in the Karen narratives, is strikingly similar.

Thus, descriptions that might seem contradictory, illustrate how Karen State was simultaneously *imagined* as a Perfect Place and *remembered* through stories of suffering. The latter became vital in justifying a struggle for the first, sustaining nationalistic sentiments.

I will now go on to discuss two central factors which I believe can go a long way in explaining this paradoxical mode of representation: Perceptions of refugeeness; and notions of ethnicity and nationalism.

2.2. Conceptualizing Refugeeness: Victimhood and resistance

One perspective providing insights into the state of refugeeness is Tangseefa's (2003) doctoral dissertation on stateless Karens inside Burma. Tangseefa uses a constellation of a number of concepts in order to create a theoretical space for conceptualizing about forcibly displaced Karens. Drawing on Agamben (Tangseefa 2003:25), he uses the Greek concepts of naked life and form-of-life, where the concept of *zoe* refers to the simple fact of living common to all living beings. *Bios* is human life, it is possibilities of life, it is power (or possibilities of empowerment) and pursuit of happiness. The forcibly displaced Karens, he claims, have been "devastatingly deprived of potentialities for good lives and possibilities for happiness" (Tangseefa 2003:33). Tangseefa sees the forcibly displaced Karens as in a position where they are robbed of their humanity in the sense of form-of-life. Through the eyes of both the Thai and Burmese nation state apparatuses they are not considered proper political subjects. Within the state-centered paradigm, he argues, there is no space for the subjectivity of stateless peoples. Institutionally, Karen Internally Displaced People (IDPs) have no voice.

Even though Tangseefa (2003) discusses IDPs and not refugees, I find his conceptualizations useful. Many refugees have been IDPs previous to entering the camps. Being an IDP, a PAB, a student, an illegal immigrant, or even none of the above (see Chapter

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1), must, I believe, be seen as being rendered "outside" to the very extreme. A status as a refugee, marginal as it might be, at least grants you certain formal rights within the UN framework - at least renders you a "proper victim". The concept of "statuslessness" has been applicable to many individuals before entering the camps, thus shaping their experiences. Even though the people in the camps are slightly more visible to the outside world than displaced people inside Burma, I argue that there is an ongoing struggle also among the Karen on the border to define themselves as qualified political subjects. Through claiming status as refugees and through demanding autonomy for Karen State, they are trying to gain a place for themselves *within* the national order of things.

Malkki (1992; 1995) provides a very useful discussion of how the "categorical order of nations" renders refugees "out of category". Within a framework of nation-states, the state of refugee automatically becomes a state of "nothingness", because refugees don't have a place within any nation. The *rootedness* that is inherent, and often unquestioned, in the "scholarly common-sense" of place and identity is lacking for refugees. They are *uprooted*. The state of refugee then also automatically is assumed to be a temporary one. Liminality is taken for granted, because refugeeeness doesn't have a place within the "conceptual practice of spatial segmentation" (Malkki 1992:28) – they are automatically "betwixt and between" (cf. Turner 1974 in Camino and Krulfeld 1994). Malkki's (1992, 1995) argument rests on her exploration of identification processes among Hutu refugees in Tanzania. She accounts for two different "categories" of refugees, one group dwelling in a refugee camp, and the other consisting of people who had resettled in the Tanzanian town of Kigoma. The two "groups" demonstrated two very different – simultaneously contrasting and complementary – ways of dealing with displacement. The people in camp reproduced strong notions of collective identity; of themselves as "a people" and as "a nation in exile"; whereas the "town refugees" tended to seek assimilation and multiple, shifting identities (Malkki 1995:3). Identification processes were influenced by "the local, everyday circumstances of life in exile", and "the camp had become the most central place from which to imagine a "pure" Hutu national identity" (Malkki 1995:3). Displaced people, in this view, might well exhibit the agency to actively contest the categorizations that render them marginalized; voiceless; outside of the world.

Another perspective, which gives attention to the alleged scope for action in a refugee situation, is provided by Camino and Krulfeld (1994). In their view the articulation of ethnicity, the construction of identity, and gender relations are all subject to people's creative

adaptation in a refugee situation. A state of liminality, which the authors argue is suitable for describing existence as a refugee, enhances this scope for action exactly because it is a state "in between", leaving room for invention.

2.2.1. Representations of refugeeness

What then, is the most adequate way of conceptualizing refugeeness in the case of Karens? Are they utterly marginalized and "robbed of their humanity" (Tangseefa 2003); do they actively relate to, and possibly contest, the marginalization allegedly inherent in the refugee category (Malkki 1992; 1995); or do they utilize their liminal state to change and adapt in a pragmatic way (Camino and Krulfeld 1994)?

I believe all these perspectives have points that claim validity in the Karen case. Representations by my informants of their own situation tends to focus on hopelessness and marginalization, and so I see this as central elements of identification for many Karen refugees.

"Every day we wish our village was free." (NKJC student 9)

"Mae La Oon is like a prison, but better than inside Burma." (Saw Lah Minh)

"The first year I cried every day and I dreamed about my mother every night. But Naw Liberty comforted me." (Naw Wah)

"Everything is temporary for me." (Saw Lah Minh)

However, I also believe that they, similarly to the Hutu refugees in Malkki's (1992; 1995) case, used actively the very categories that render them marginalized within the conventional statist framework (Malkki 1995). They were operating firmly within it – as were the camp refugees in the Hutu case - by claiming historical rights to be viewed as a nation:

The camp refugees saw themselves as a nation in exile, and defined exile, in turn, as a moral trajectory of trials and tribulations that would ultimately empower them to reclaim (or create anew) the "homeland" in Burundi (Malkki 1995:3).

The Karen refugees simultaneously resented and embraced the very category of refugee because it was through that category that they could claim martyrdom. One could say that the notion not only of victimhood but also of resistance, had become *embodied* (cf. Bourdieu 1993). They were reproduced through means of powerful narrations of the history of Karen

suffering, and through this process, the category of refugee became associated with being a *noble victim*. As in Malkki's case, "exile was part and parcel of a more overarching historical trajectory of the Hutu as 'a people' [...]" (Malkki 1995:221-222). On the same trail, Karen refugees insisted on their own liminality, and on the temporariness of displacement, because it was necessary for the maintenance of the Karen struggle, the ultimate goal of which was to reclaim Karen State and create the Perfect Place there. In Malkki's case, "Being a refugee signaled a tie with the homeland and, hence, the possibility of an eventual return" (Malkki 1995:230). The refugee category became not a polluted one, but a pure one and, importantly, belonging to this category meant that Karens had the right to claim their nation back.

Thus, victimhood at the hands of the Burmans, and resistance towards the regime that forced them out of their country, became central elements in Karen understandings of their own ethnic identity. This active articulation and act of claiming a position in this world, I believe, can be seen as agency. Here, however, a discussion of discursive power is called for, and I will return to that shortly.

The experience of flight, of "becoming a refugee", was recorded by one of my informants to lead to a completely new awareness of the situation for Karens as a group:

Before I went to the refugee camp I didn't know anything. I thought we were the only ones. But in the refugee camp there were so many Karen people, and they told me about all the other villages that were destroyed, about the war. Before that I didn't know. (Naw April)

This observation corresponds with Berg's (2009:55-56) assertion that the refugee camps serve to consolidate notions of ethnicity. It also fits quite neatly into Mortland's (1994) account of Cambodian refugees in the United States. Mortland (1994:5) shows how most Cambodians were to a very limited extent aware of "having an ethnicity" prior to fleeing Cambodia. For many, the experience of flight brought with it a new conception of "being Cambodian in the world". In spite of some fundamental differences between Mortland's and my case¹⁸, I find it useful to compare the two since both deal with changes in identity construction and gender relations in a refugee population from mainland Southeast Asia.

As I have now pointed to they ways in which notions of refugeeness, of

¹⁸ The first substantial difference between these cases is that the people in Mortland's (1994:5-25) study have already resettled to a third country whereas the Karens in my study still live as refugees in the "second country". Secondly, the Cambodian conflict was in its acute phase for a period of around nine years (1970-79) when the Khmer Rouge fought for and gained power, in contrast to the conflict between the SPDC and the KNU which has lasted for well over half a century.

marginalization and victimhood became engrained in identification processes for many Karen refugees, it is now time to explore the second central element of identification in the refugee camps – also closely related to the points made above: Karen ethnicity and nationalism.

2.3. Ethnicity and nationalism

Expressions of ethnic identity can be regarded both as psychological responses to threats from the outside and as symbolic tools in political struggles. The social importance of ethnic identities is greatest when both are applied in enacted ethnic ideologies". (Eriksen 1993:76)

In this section I hope to illustrate how notions of ethnicity in the case of Karen refugees work both as an important source of identification for individuals and, through its link with Karen nationalism, as an instrument for the political project of fighting for an autonomous Karen State.

I argue in line with Eriksen (1993) (drawing heavily on Barth (1969)), who understands ethnicity as relational. Ethnic groups define themselves in terms of that which they are not, *the others*. Eriksen refers to Moerman (1965), who defines ethnicity as *an emic category of ascription* (Moerman 1965 in Eriksen 1993:12), focusing on people's own experience of belonging to a certain ethnic group. At the same time he stresses that, ethnicity being relational, some sort of recognition from the *others* which groups define their own ethnicity in terms of, is needed for this project to succeed. This can be seen in relation to distinctions between *external* and *internal* identification and, as in Jenkins (2004), between *ascribed* and *acquired* identities. "Ascribed identification is constructed on basis of the contingencies of birth", while "acquired identifications are assumed during the subsequent life-course" (Jenkins 2004:148). Rather than seeing ascribed and acquired identities as oppositions they should be seen as working dialectically in an everlasting process of identification, and the border between the two are blurry in real life. In other words, ascribed identities influence the course of acquisition of identities, while acquired identities can be (and often are) viewed by actors as ascribed. The process involves negotiation and transaction with others, and should thus also be seen as relational (Eriksen 1993:38).

Furthermore there are some common elements of groups that are described as ethnic entities. One is that they tend to have notions of common ancestry and shared culture justifying their unity. However, Barth (1969) holds that more important than the "cultural

stuff" within the group, is how the boundary of the group is maintained. Even though the cultural content can be perceived as the core of ethnic identity for the people holding it, it is not this content as such that creates the group or maintains the boundary of the group. Cultural differences may well be an effect, not a cause of boundaries. Both a relational and a processual approach is necessary, since the cultural content might (and will) change with time and through interacting with other groups, though the boundaries of the group might well be upheld. Moreover, the importance of maintaining boundaries arguably increases when the group perceives itself to be under pressure.

Perspectives on ethnicity can be categorized along two dimensions: Primordialist/instrumentalist and subjectivist/objectivist. While primordialists would hold that there is a fundamental cultural core at the base for every ethnic categorization, instrumentalists would claim that even though such a core might be felt to exist by the members of the group, it is constructed by elites struggling to control the content of the culture for political purposes. Eriksen (1993) is perhaps not as inclined as Barth (1969) to claim that ethnicity can be negotiated and changed. In the Karen context there are features limiting the available subject positions for individuals regarding ethnic identity. Whichever approach one wishes to take, it is evident that cultural content, either objectively and fundamentally existing or constructed for instrumental purposes and subjectively experienced, potentially carries a great deal of meaning for individuals perceiving themselves as holding an ethnic identity.

I hold that in the case of Karen refugees, ethnicity is both a primary source of identification and meaning-making, and an instrument for a political project, where the "cultural stuff" to a great extent has been created, and maintained, by the military, mainly Christian, mainly S'gaw Karen elite of the Karen National Union. I will substantiate this argument in the following section.

2.3.1. Nationalism and representations of myth and history

To understand the basis for the origin and continued existence of Karen struggle for autonomy Benedict Anderson's (1991) perspective on nationalism is useful. Following Anderson (1991), nationalism is an ideology that developed in Western Europe over a period of several hundred years, as a result of the constellation of a number of specific historical events. The technological development of print-languages is one key event in the development of nationalism. People

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gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands even millions, in their particular language-field, and at the same time, that only those hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. [...] These fellow-readers [...] formed [...] the embryo of the nationally imagined community (Anderson 1991:44).

Secondly, the fixating effect on the language of the printing technology gave room for representing history in a much more thorough and lasting way than before, and also helped form an image of historical continuity central to the idea of the nation. Thirdly it created languages of power - the spoken dialects that were closest to the written language "were elevated to a new politico-cultural eminence" (Anderson 1991:45). In the next round, the formal standards became models to be imposed - both exhibiting and reproducing social patterns.

These three ways in which a written language is important for the development of nationalism, can all be found in the Karen case. Even though the large majority of Karens were illiterate in the 1880's (around the time when a Karen national consciousness developed (Rendan 1980 in Rajah 2002:527)) or spoke a dialect so different from the written language of S'gaw Karen that it was unintelligible to them, there was (and is) a significant *attempt* to define "Karen-ness" by means of a written language. This is salient for instance in written representations of Karen history which were dominating in the refugee community, as I will illustrate shortly.

The written history of the Karen people is mainly produced by sources related to the Karen National Union (KNU). The following quote is drawn from the KNU-run web karen.org:

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. We have our own history, our own language, our own culture, our own land of settlement and our own economic system of life. By nature the Karens are simple, quiet, unassuming and peace loving people, who uphold the high moral qualities of honesty, purity, brotherly love, co-operative living and loyalty, and are devout in their religious beliefs.

Historically, the Karens descend from the same ancestors as the Mongolian people. The earliest Karens (or Yangs as called by the Thais), settled in Htee-Hset Met Ywa (Land of Flowing Sands), a land bordering the source of the Yang-tse-Kiang river in the Gobi Desert. From there, we migrated southwards and gradually entered the land now known as Burma about 739 B.C.. We were, according to most historians, the first settlers in this new land. The Karens named this land Kaw-Lah, meaning the Green Land. We began to peacefully clear and till our land from all hindrances. Our labors were fruitful and we were very happy with our lot. So we changed the name of the land to Kawthoolei, a pleasant, plentiful and peaceful country. Here we lived

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characteristically simple, uneventful and peaceful lives, until the advent of the Burman.

We the Karens could not enjoy our peaceful lives for long. The Mons were the next to enter this area, followed at their heels by the Burman. Both the Mons and Burman brought with them feudalism, which they practiced to the full. The Burman later won the feudal war, and they subdued and subjugated all other nationalities in the land. The Karens suffered untold miseries at the hands of their Burman lords. Persecution, torture and killings, suppression, oppression and exploitation were the order of the day. To mention a few historical facts as evidence, we may refer to the Burman subjugation of the Mons and the Arakanese, and especially their past atrocities against the Thais at Ayudhaya. These events stand as firm evidence of the Burman feudalism, so severe that those victimized peoples continue to harbor a deep-seated resentment of the Burman today (Karen National Union n/a b).

A notion of a common ethnic destiny – of *suffering because we are Karen* – was evoked, giving historical explanations showing how Burmans had terrorized Karens ever since the two groups "met", and how the Karens were now forced to live in exile. I argue that these historical narratives were fundamental elements in embodied notions of victimhood and resistance. Notions of Karen-ness, including quite selective representations of Karen history, served to assert their ethnic uniqueness; to explain their current suffering; to mobilize people for military conscription; to justify claims for autonomy and claims as "rightful natives"; to support flattering descriptions of the "nature of Karens"; to claim historical moral superiority to their suppressors, the Burmans; and to stress the unity of Karens in general. This is in line with Malkki (1995) who found that Hutu refugees in a camp in Tanzania to a large degree resorted to mythical imaginaries of the homeland and Hutu history, and where exile became a point of identification (Malkki 1995:3).

The most unusual and prominent social fact about the camp was that its inhabitants were continually engaged in an impassioned construction and reconstruction of their history as "a people". [...] These narratives, ubiquitous in the camp, formed an overarching historical trajectory that was fundamentally also a national story about the "rightful natives" of Burundi. (Malkki 1995:3)

The act of turning to myths (mythico-history, in Malkki's (1995) terms) to support and protect ethnic identity, was also observed by Mortland (1994) in her study of Cambodian refugees in the United States. In coping with staying as a minority group in a dominant society, everyday arrangements exerting continued pressure on what was perceived as Cambodian ways of life, the act of "defining a mythical Cambodian" became a valuable identity-creating activity (Mortland 1994:16-17). Conceptions of proper Khmer¹⁹ men and women and "[...] myths of

¹⁹ The largest ethnic group in Cambodia

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"before" not only demonstrate Cambodians' losses and struggles, but anchor them as Khmer. [... It] is the myth which solidifies identification and not the actual behavior" (Mortland 1994:16-17). Following the conceptualization of Pellizi (1988, cf. Mortland 1994),

Khmers are developing additional "images of belonging", and in so doing they are calling upon what Pellizi (1988) calls a generic, disembodied memory. They are remembering the grandness of their past, identifying themselves as the descendants of the Angkorean Empire. To be Cambodian is to be of Angkor (Mortland 1994:23).

I argue that the mythical representations of Karen history were communicated and reproduced in refugee camps all along the border. They were applied both individually and collectively, and served both to structure individual meaning-making and as instruments for the Karen nationalist project (cf. Berg 2009). I will discuss these processes in more detail below. For now, let these quotes drawn from students' essays illustrate how KNU-influenced representations of history were reproduced among the students:

At first, Karen people called this place Kaw Lah, which means green land. Our land was so beautiful so we changed the name to Kaw Thoo Lei, which means a pleasant, plentiful and peaceful country. (Saw Soe Win)

Burma was Karen country before. The native Karen people came to this country first. Pee Pan Say and Pu Hser Kaw buried a fishing rod and then they hung a Karen shirt on the fishing rod. (Saw Michael)

These observations can also be seen in relation to the previous discussion about remembering and imagining Karen State, and the embodiment of victimhood and resistance inherent in the conceptualization of refugee. The line between myth and reality was blurred, shaping notions of ethnic identity, and the ways in which identity was connected to place. Nationalism was sustained.

I now turn to what I argue is the dominant discourse-producer, the Karen National Union (KNU). Then I explore the workings of this reproduction in more detail, as I turn to the refugee camps asking whether they are merely arenas for the reproduction of nationalism, or if they might also have potential to be multi-discourse sites.

2.4. The Karen National Union as dominant discourse-producers

Anderson (1991) holds that, "[i]t was generally recognized that the intelligentsias were central

to the rise of nationalism in the colonial territories" (Anderson 1991:116). Among the Karens, the people who were most extensively in touch with the Baptist missionaries from the 1820's onward, and later colonial administrators, were generally S'gaw Karen from the lowlands. In the second round, Christian, S'gaw-speaking Karens from the lowlands were the ones who traveled to Rangoon or even to Britain, got a western-style education and were influenced by Western political thoughts (cf. Lintner 1994). Policy-levels of official nationalism includes "compulsory state-controlled primary education, state-organized propaganda, official rewriting of history, militarism and endless affirmations of the identity of dynasty and the nation [...]" (Anderson 1991:101). In Karen society, the center of power when it comes to both administration, military and education, mainly lies with Christian, S'gaw-speaking Karens (Berg 2009:15). I hold that the so-called educator-intellectuals selected a set of myths and narratives and constructed an official version of Karen history, with the goal of legitimizing the idea of a Karen nation through means of ethno-history (cf. Smith 1991 in Berg 2009:54; Rajah 2002 and South 2007). This endeavor, fundamental to the production of Karen nationalism, "presupposed a modern education of an elite who was informed about the model of modern states as introduced by the British colonialists" (Berg 2009:54).

The Karen National Union (KNU) is still the dominant political party and military organization representing Karens. It is arguably one of the major forces in the refugee camp producing and shaping narratives of the kind presented in the above section. In a prolongation of this argument, I believe (in line with Berg 2009) that they have come to represent a dominant discourse on Karen ethnicity and nationalism, giving powerful, even doxic (cf. Bourdieu 1977) imperatives on what it is to be Karen, which structure available subject positions. To substantiate this argument, I will take a look at the history of the organization. I then discuss their claim to legitimately represent a unified Karen people.

2.4.1. The birth of ethnic and national consciousness and claims for autonomy

There is no authoritative written account of Karen history, but research suggests that they arrived in the area today constituting eastern Burma in the 6th or 7th century A.D. (Lintner 1994:41-42), though the Karen themselves, relying on myths of origin, date their settlement to 739 B.C.²⁰. (KNU n/a a). Illiterate, and with no significant academic tradition, "the Karens

²⁰ Whichever is closest to the truth, the fact remains that they were probably already there when Burmans entered the area around a thousand years ago (Lintner 1994).

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suffered more at the hands of the aggressive Burman invaders than any other people in the region" (Lintner 1994:42). They were treated as inferiors by the Burmans; forced to provide labor; subjected to high taxation and their villages were frequently raided. Stories of suffering at the hands of the Burmans are prevalent in Karen mythology. When missionaries (mainly American Baptists) arrived in the 1820's, a few decades preceding the British colonialists, the Karens proved receptive to the preachings of the Christian god. This stands in peculiar contrast to neighboring highland groups, for instance the Akha, which were much more reluctant to conversion. Pinpointing the reasons for these variations is not a straight-forward exercise, as both local and wider sociopolitical variables must be taken into consideration (Kammerer 1990). However, I consider such an exercise beyond the scope of this thesis. For now I will point to two commonly mentioned factors: The empowerment that came through being associated to the white men; and an old Karen myth about a white younger brother who was supposed to arrive with a book of true knowledge, made the missionaries job easier than expected (Lintner 1994:42).

The religious conversion from animism and Buddhism to Christianity brought several elements that would prove crucial to the development of Karen national consciousness. A Karen script was developed in order to be able to print the bible in Karen. The conversion "implied a political identification" and gave Karens access to Christian schools and Western knowledge (Gravers 2007:234). At one time, Christian Karens numbered 22% of the student body at the University of Rangoon (Lintner 1994:44). Thus, Karen national consciousness developed in the 1880's (Rajah 2002). In 1881 the Karen National Association (KNA, later Karen National Union (KNU)) was established as the first political organization in British India (Lintner 1994:45), leading to a political consolidation of Karen culture²¹.

The relatively beneficial relationship that Karens maintained with the missionaries (compared to the Burman majority which was much less open to conversion), in addition to a historical mutual mistrust between Burmans and Karens²² were among the factors that contributed to the Karens being prone to support the British colonization.

The first claim for a separate Karen State was made in 1928 (Lintner 1994:45). In the Second World War many Karen fought on the British side, hoping that their loyalty would pay

²¹ This organization was dominated by a small group of S'gaw and Pwo Karens (recapturing chapter 1, these were the two largest of the several existing Karen subgroups), for the most part Christians, who had been educated in Rangoon or Britain, and this domination has continued ever since (Lintner 1994:45).

²² Karens were generally viewed as primitive, barbaric peoples by the urban majority. The Karen were commonly viewed by Burmans as "no better than cattle" (Tangseefa 2003:77).

off in terms of British support for their claims to autonomy after independence. Initially enjoying such support, KNU lost a lot of British political goodwill after continually claiming vast areas of the country, and boycotting the repeated attempts from the Burman side at national unity within the confinements of parliamentarism (notably the Panglong Conference in 1947) (Lintner 1994). Content with nothing less than being granted full autonomy, the insurgency aimed at maintaining the administration of Kawthoolei²³, and engaged in open warfare from early 1949.

The following decades the KNU enjoyed de facto control over substantial parts of the border area towards Thailand. Here they were allowed to consolidate their organization, establishing a civilian administration, and coordinated health and education systems (South 2007:10), all under the ideological umbrella of the KNU and with Karen independence as the ultimate goal.

From the early 1970s until 1995 the KNU headquarters were situated at the city of Manerplaw, which served as the center not just for Karen, but altogether for Burmese opposition at the time (Lintner 1999; Smith 2007 in Berg 2009:8). Smith (2007a) holds that KNU, like other armed ethnic groups, were engaged in a lucrative black market trade enabling them to build up a well-equipped army. In the early 1980s, KNU had 10.000 soldiers under arms.

Since the mid-1970's however, the power, influence and size of the KNU have declined steadily. In 1984 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took control of strategic KNU bases, and in 1994, internal opposition in the KNU led to the break-away and establishment of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). Subsequently, the DKBA, now associated with the SPDC, captured Manerplaw, forcing the KNU to relocate their headquarters. This constituted "a major blow for both the KNU and all the democratic and ethnic alliances"²⁴. The following years, SPDC succeeded in claiming the majority of formerly Karen-held territory, and for the first time in history more or less controlled the border area. Now followed a massive village relocation program in order to eliminate ethnically based insurgency. It is estimated that between 450,000 (UNHCR 2009) and 500,000 (TBBC (2007a) people are fleeing internally in the Eastern areas of Burma. The camps along the border had a population of more than 130,000 in January 2010 (TBBC 2010), and an

²³ The administrative name of Karen State at the time. Translates to "land of flowers" in S'gaw Karen.

²⁴ <http://www.tbtc.org/camps/history.htm>

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unknown number of illegal immigrants from the eastern parts of Burma reside on the Thai side of the border.

Today the KNU is counting 5-7000 soldiers. Still they are described as the largest, and one of the most significant and influential ethnic opposition groups in Burma (South 2007a). In line with South (2007a) and Berg (2009) I claim that the KNU remain ideologically strong in the refugee community, to the extent that they are the dominant discourse producers proffering certain subject positions regarding "Karen-ness". This serves a purpose of sustaining sentiments of Karen nationalism. I will discuss this more thoroughly in the next section.

2.4.2. Karen National Unity? Questioning KNU representations

In addition to drawing on historical claims to sovereignty, and on narratives of suffering, the rhetorics of the KNU have a number of other elements that serve as arguments justifying their dominance and the Karen struggle. The uprisings in the fall of 1988 led to around 10,000 activists fleeing to the border area and forming alliances with Karen resistance. In the following years and after the fall of Manerplaw, many of these activists have ended up in refugee camps along the border alongside ethnic minority groups. Claiming to be allies of the democracy movement in Burma, the KNU website promptly states that they have followed democratic procedures in their requests for an independent nation, and democratic government is one of their demands towards the Burmese regime. However, the KNU continues to be run along authoritarian lines (South 2007a).

Expressions of the Karen struggle are mainly militarized. According to South (2007a), "the discourse is hegemonic in the sense that today's supporters of the Karen struggle see this 'militarized nation-building project [as] the only legitimate expression of Karen nationalism in Burma" (South 2007b:4).

Dating their own arrival in Burma to 739 BC, and also claiming that the areas they seek to regain and achieve independence for are predominantly Karen, the KNU evokes primordial ethnic arguments to justify their claims for Karen State. However, their representation of history is hardly supported by any other historical source (Lintner 1994). Also, as Eshce (2004) points out; the Karen population in today's Karen state constitute the narrowest majority possible, of 51%, while the remaining 49% of the people carry various

other ethnicities. Also, as many as 75% of all Karens live elsewhere in Burma (Esche 2004:89). This makes the claims of the KNU of Karen State as the main and predominantly Karen area seem less justifiable from a demographic point of view.

Though the Karen ethno-history put forward by the KNU intends (according to South (2007b)) "to ensure a unity that presupposes a political and cultural consensus. [...] *such a unity does not exist* among the Karen with its variety of religions, languages and traditions" (in Berg 2009:15) (my emphasis). As already pointed out, a Christian S'gaw elite has created and maintains the dominant discourse, and there is an ongoing "struggle between the ethno-nationalistic discourse of the KNU and those of alternative Karen discourses related to which version is going to represent all Karens, regardless of faith, language and political ambitions" (Berg 2009:15). Alternative Karen voices are seldom heard by outsiders, one important reason being that the areas in which they live are difficult for outsiders to access. It is indicated however, that even though little is known by outsiders on their political views and how they feel about ethnicity, far from all sympathize with the KNU or even identify with other Karens more than with Burmese in general (Berg 2009:14). This thesis does not attempt to give voice to these other views.

The important point for the purposes of this thesis, is that neither calls for democracy or geographic belonging, nor arguments regarding Karen unity necessarily hold if contradicted by other accounts. The proclaimed unity of Karens, and the degree to which the KNU can justly claim to represent the majority of Karens through a pan-Karen nationalistic ideology, can definitely be questioned. Nevertheless, these notions constitute a dominating discourse in the refugee community. It is a fundamental factor shaping available subject positions for Karen people in the border area.

To sum up the chapter so far, I have pointed to the prevalence of contrasting representations of Karen State, both as a Perfect Place and as representing terror and suffering. I have argued that notions of victimhood and resistance have become embodied notions for Karen refugees. A state of refugee is given shape as a "pure" category (cf. Malkki 1995), necessary for claiming that Karen ethnicity qualifies as a national one. Perspectives on ethnicity and nationalism has helped me illuminate how the Karen National Union emphasizes a selective historical representation, romanticizing images of Karen State and Karen people, and one-sided stories of suffering at the hands of the Burmans. Thus, the contrasting representations serve the purpose of maintaining sentiments of nationalism. I will now move

on to the refugee camp, showing how nationalism, as produced and sustained by the KNU, is a being reproduced there. However, this claim will be met with observations suggesting that this is not the only side to the story.

2.5. The refugee camp: Consolidation of ideology or multi-discourse arena?

So far I have discussed conceptualizations of refugeeness, and I have drawn a picture of the KNU as ideologically dominant in the refugee community. Both issues provide important elements to the discussion of identity formation. I will now take a more concrete look at the situation in the camp. How did staying in these particular camps under these particular circumstances affect peoples' thoughts about themselves in the world? I present two slightly contrasting interpretations of how existence in camp can be said to affect identification processes, both of which can be said to be supported by my findings.

2.5.1. The camps as arenas for consolidation of nationalism and certain notions of ethnicity

From the within-perspective Karen culture appears reified and the explanations of the difference between Karen and Burmese seem ethnocentric. Stereotyping is abundant, and the discourse has a primordial and deterministic character (Berg 2009:53).

Berg (2009:56) points to the education and ceremonies in the camps as important arenas where the dominant discourse is reproduced "through the recursive narrations of national identities". The result is, according to Berg (2009) "hegemonization of a specific knowledge" about Karen-ness, and "[t]he recursive use of narratives is part of a deliberate process of turning an ethnic discourse into the dominant national discourse" (Berg 2009:56). When looking at students' representations of the circumstances surrounding the war, it seems that certain understandings of causality and morality are being reproduced:

My village is very interesting for me. It is very satisfying for me but I am very sad. Because before, Karen people were pressed by SPDC reign so the Karen revolution began in 1949.(NKJC student 9)

Karen people do not wish to fight with the Burmese government. They wanted peace but the Burmese government did not want peace and use violence against the Karen people. Therefore the Karen people started to defend ourselves. (Saw Soe Win)

The Burmese government started to abuse Karen people – burn houses, kill people and rape women. So the KNU officially declared the beginning of the revolution at Insein in

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1949. Therefore the civil war in Burma began. (Saw Soe Win)

I want to encourage my people in Karen State like this: Never surrender when you stay anywhere and when you do anything. (Saw Kaw)

Karen people do not want community strife and civil war, they want national unity and peace. (Saw Soe Win)

Karen State needs peace and democracy too. It needs the help of the future generation to erect. I hope everyone who passes the NKJC and goes on to become a leader, goes back to our mother homeland. We have to try hard to help it be free forever. (NKJC student 6)

The Karen Education Department (KED) is a strong organization in the border area that enjoys a considerable degree of influence especially in the camps because it coordinates education initiatives in the entire refugee community.

Typically for organizations institutionalizing nationalism (Anderson 1991), the KNU have close ties to the KED, and exert considerable influence over the curriculum taught at most of the schools both in Karen State and the camps (Berg 2009). The KNU have themselves published a number of books on Karen history and culture. The first one, published in the early 1970's, lists what a Karen heritage consists of: "the knowledge that there is a God, the Divine Being; high moral and ethical standards; honesty; simple, quiet and peaceful living; hospitality; language; national costumes; and aptitude for music" (Rajah 2002:530). These books, along with the Karen history from 1931 was and is taught at schools, and, along with the national anthem, the flag and celebration of Revolution day on January 31st serves to reproduce Karen ethno-history and nationalism (Rajah 2002:529).

In the library of the school where I worked, books on Karen history produced by the KNU were available, and subjects like Karen history (which was a subject set apart from "regular" history) seemed to be taught using a mixture of those books and the teacher's memory of stories and myths. Berg (2009) goes as far as pointing to the schools in and in connection to the camps as s for continued "S'gawization". Indeed, the impression one got from staying in the camp was that stories of people's home villages were similar, representations of Karen-ness were homogenous, and the variation suggested in academic literature on Karens in terms of language, religion and way of life was thoroughly downplayed. I hold that this unifying identification is used as a tool for arousing patriotism, mobilizing military participation and encouraging Karens to die for their nation.

While acknowledging the camps as central arenas – and not wishing to underestimate

the potential for discursive domination inherent in the production and control of knowledge (cf. Foucault 1980) – I want to point out that there are other arenas in camp, possibly providing alternative interpretations of reality and thereby alternative subject positions. I will discuss this in the next section.

2.5.2. The camps as multi-discourse providers

The difference between here [Mae La Oon] and Karen State is that here they [the women] get in touch with workshops and education. Many people change their thoughts. But still many are still in the old ways. (Naw April)

When I was a child and some leader, elder or teacher asked me, what would you do of you grow up, I mostly replied them I will become the military leader. Because since I was a child I have never seen peace. I always see fighting and war. When I was nine years old my parents sent me to school. In my village there is only primary school, so I [thought] when I finish primary school I will become a soldier and go to war. My father also meant for me like this. [But when i was in primary school the SPDC attacked my village] so in 2006 I came to Mae La Oon camp. [There I continued my education] and now I am proud because I can speak a little bit English. Now [I want to be an interpreter]. I don't want to go back to my village to become a military leader (Saw Ku Nay).

In the majority of the interviews I did, and in essays written by the students, a very common statement was that the education opportunities were a lot better in the refugee camp than in Karen State. Primary education is scarce, and secondary and higher education practically non-existent in Karen State. Also, by law all education has to be in Burman, which people in Karen State usually don't learn at home. I was told that this order was handled by most schools by keeping materials in both Karen and Burman, usually only using the Karen one, and whenever they suspected that they were being spied upon, or whenever inspections took place, they switched both the materials and the language to Burman. However, the fact remains that the school situation in Karen State generally is very poor. It might be natural here to include a discussion on the liberating potential of education versus the potential of exercising symbolic power over those subjected to the education system, along the lines of Foucault's (1980) theory of power and knowledge. However interesting, I consider that beyond the scope of this thesis. For now I will settle with claiming that Karens in the refugee camp are exposed to different kinds of knowledge than they were inside Karen State, and that this might well have a liberating potential.

Most of my informants who spoke about the education situation in camp and in Karen State, referred to people inside Karen State as being less knowledgeable. "They are behind in

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education"; "they don't know their rights" and "they have less knowledge" were phrases that many used. What they actually considered as knowledge was not clear, but it seemed that many used the phrase to denote "the information and experience you get from going to school and attending workshops". Knowing about and sustaining traditional ways of doing things was not referred to as knowledge. On the other hand, several training programs in the camp were directed at teaching women how to weave traditional Karen clothes. However, this was more commonly referred to as an income generation effort, and though definitely seen as culturally important, it did not seem to pass as education or knowledge.

The "access to knowledge" argument was by my informants often used in relation to women's situation. Many women, through getting in touch with women's organizations (notably the KWO), attended workshops and income generation projects and realized that they "didn't have to be dependent on men", as one woman phrased it.

My husband is educated but I am uneducated. I always had to obey him. But after I came to the camp I started working with the KWO. And now I know more about my rights. I went back and discussed with my husband and told him "Now I understand, I know more about the war and the situation. I don't want to be in the house and do the housework anymore, I want to try more." In the end he gave up and said "I give up! You can try more."(KWO representative 2)

I will discuss more thoroughly how the refugee experience leads to changes in gender relation in Chapter 3.

In the refugee camps the access to the outside world, or more perhaps a better way of putting it, the access the outside world has to the refugee camps, was better than in Karen State (a fact I will elaborate in Chapter 3). Community Based Organizations that did enter Karen State consisted mainly of Karen refugees operating from the Thai border area, and going inside was considered risky, although it depended on which part you were going to and the state of the war at the time.

To sum up, the KNU exerts considerable ideological influence in the refugee camp serving to consolidate notions of Karen identity. However, there is simultaneously a certain potential for the camps to serve as providers of alternative knowledges; as representing alternative discourses 'embodying' different subject positions.

2.6. Chapter Conclusion

Through my informants' descriptions of Karen State I have discussed the contrasting ways in which it is imagined and remembered – on the one hand it is imagined as a perfect and harmonious place, and on the other hand it is remembered in terms of suffering and suppression. I argued that the refugees conceptualized their own refugeeness as being utterly marginalized and "statusless", while simultaneously using these very categories to claim a status, a place within the conceptual order of nation states (cf. Malkki 1995). This understanding is supported by Malkki (1995) who explored identification processes among Hutu refugees in Tanzania, arguing that they conceptualized the state of refugeeness as a state of purity.

The prevalence of KNU is strong in many of the camps, and it can be claimed that the camps serve as arenas for consolidation of nationalism, homogenizing and "S'gawifying" its population (cf. Berg 2009). Exile became related to ethnicity, and nationalism, within this dominant discourse, became part of what was to be Karen – a certain range of acceptable subject positions was provided (cf. Moore 1994). Moreover, I have questioned the legitimacy with which the KNU can claim to represent Karens as a group.

The refugees linked their current suffering to a historical suppression at the hands of the Burmans, simultaneously projected it into the future by stating that the struggle would last until they were granted autonomy for Karen State. This act of linking the past, present and future, constituted a powerful link between place and identity. Karen State was in a sense the center of their imagination *because it was not free*, and thus, Karens were not free.

Remembering that the refugee situation on the border has lasted for 25 years, it is safe to say that the contrasting, but simultaneously closely linked, notions of victimhood and resistance have become embodied (cf. Bourdieu 1993). I will indeed claim that it is this twist that allows the discourse of the KNU to remain dominant. The only way, I believe, that Karen nationalism in its current shape – and the understanding of the world that it both results *in* and is a result *of* – can have any appeal, is that the romanticizing imaginaries of place, society, past, present and future continues, while at the same time the narratives of suffering are reproduced.

On the other hand, I have argued, there is a large variety of organizations present, both Non-Governmental Organizations, Community-based Organizations and International

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Organizations. The access to impulses from the outside, so to speak, is far higher than inside Karen State. This environment inhibits a potential for providing contrasting, or competing, discourses to the KNU nationalist one. Any actual prevalence of multiple discourses in camp is however, not clearly evident.

Chapter 3 - Changing gender relations in the Karen refugee context

Recalling Chapter 1 I see gender as involved in all human activities, as a central axis for the discursive definition of difference (cf. Moore 1994 and Fagertun 2009). Negotiations of gender identity are constant, and social changes will lead to changes in gender relations. Discourses which employ specific gender categories provide and reproduce notions of identity and agency. Inherent in the notion of gender as fundamentally defined by difference, is a possibility for structural imbalance of power. Gendered types of agency can render persons, or be perceived as rendering persons, in stronger or weaker social positions. Therein lies a potential for domination.

When I have chosen to focus more on women than on men under the name of "gender" it is not because I am unaware that this approach is inflammable. Not only women have gender, and we are passed the time when scholars could focus on women only to "catch up" because social science research up until then had had a tacit masculine focus. The two main reasons why I still think that I should get away with it are: 1: Notions of power and ethnic narratives in the Karen refugee community are, as I will illustrate, notoriously (and mainly not outspokenly) masculine, and women thus have a submissive position in that sense. 2: Notions of female emancipation is a hot issue in organizational circles in the refugee camp, whereas male emancipation is not. This alone does admittedly not justify a solely female focus, because the lack of questioning of masculine roles is also interesting. Not taking a closer look at men's roles just because they are not obviously discussed in the community itself (other than as a function of discussing women's roles) is quite a banal trap to walk into. However, the scope of the thesis had to be limited somewhere. This time the limit was drawn by selection of sex.

In this chapter I will give a brief introduction to what has been said about gender relations in Southeast Asia, before moving on to discussing gender relations among refugees. I discuss my own findings regarding gender relations among Karen refugees, and how these are perceived to be changing in the transition from Karen State to the refugee camp. Changes that are perceived to be affecting gender relations include division of labor; better access to education; and meeting the Karen Women's' Organization (KWO). New types of knowledge

are provided, and these also lead to an emergence of new views on female activism and leadership.

My central argument in this chapter is that in a situation of transition gender relations are changing, as new elements are brought into gendered identity constructions. Notions of "what is up for discussion", are changing (cf. Bourdieu 1993). I point to the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) as a powerful organization which provides new gendered subject positions (cf. Moore 1994), thus representing a node of resistance towards the masculinized notions of power salient in the dominant KNU discourse. At the same time however, I argue that they remain rooted in this discourse, trying to include the new subject positions proffered (especially for women) in overall notions of Karen-ness.

3.1. Gender in Southeast Asia

A common opinion in the social sciences was for a long time that men and women in Southeast Asia enjoy a relationship of complementarity. It has been said that though their traits and roles are distinct, they are considered relatively equal in terms of power (see for example Winzeler 1996:167). According to Geertz and Geertz (1975), in Bali there is "no sharp conceptual opposition between masculinity and femininity, and the division of social roles or spheres of activity according to sex is blurred and weak" (in Winzeler 1996:166). Atkinson and Errington (1990) points to how the alleged equality, or complementarity, of gender relations have commonly been generalized to Southeast Asia (Atkinson and Errington 1990:6). There are several reasons why this has been a gatekeeper. One is, according to Devasahayam (2009) that there is a high instance of matrilineal and bilateral kinship systems in Southeast Asian societies²⁵. Moreover, the relatively autonomous role many women play regarding household economics and work outside of the home, have also been taken as signs of women's strong position. As in Fagertun's (2009) case study from Bali, women and men were commonly conceived by anthropologists as "different but equal" (Fagertun 2009:5).

However, this approach takes for granted a Western notion of the emancipatory power of wage work (Fagertun 2009:5). As Atkinson and Errington (1990) point out: "In many parts of island Southeast Asia, executive power is associated with a lack of spiritual power"

²⁵ Notably Devasahayam et. al. do not account for what they call "tribal" societies in their book.

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(Atkinson and Errington 1990:5), and

[...] Women in many of these societies are assumed to be more calculating, instrumental, and direct than men, and their control of practical matters and money, their economic "power", may be the opposition of the kind of "power", or spiritual potency that brings the greatest prestige; it may assure them of lower rather than higher prestige (Atkinson and Errington 1990:6-7).

Devasahayam (2009) does admit that many Southeast Asian women suffer from structural inequalities rendering them low-wage workers and their work often second-class, but goes far in blaming colonialism, neoliberalism and the spread of global capitalism for having forced these structures on Southeast Asia. This is too simple. Scholars have noted both structural and symbolic subordination of women in Southeast Asia, among them Wikan (1990): "[...] my own evidence, corroborated by observations [from both North and South Bali], points to extreme gender differentiation both in ritual and symbolic activity and in the more mundane life" (Wikan 1990:67). In the words of Errington:

Although the social and economic equality of women in island Southeast Asia is certainly impressive, terms like "equality" and "power" barely begin to tell the story of how differences between men and women, and the powers to which each has access and may exercise, are understood and constituted here (Atkinson and Errington 1990:7-8).

Similarly, Mills (1999) in her exploration of women's roles and modernity in Thai society, argued that "[a]lthough gender distinctions may appear muted in the context of day-to-day social interaction, gender meanings and identity have an important place in northeastern Thai cultural beliefs and practices" (Mills 1999:18).

The conclusion that women and men have been viewed as having complementary roles and functions, underscores the fact that complementarity, as well as hierarchy, implies *difference*, and difference inhabits the potential for dominance. Even though subjects themselves may carry a notion of complementarity, difference inhabits a potential of equipping men and women with different *types of agency* (see Chapter 1). Thus, gendered structures of difference might well manifest themselves in structures of unequal power. Indeed, I hold in line with Fagertun (2009) that the notion of complementarity "illustrates that *gender is present and given social force* as a structuring principle for many activities, as many practices are formed by this very notion" (Fagertun 2009:5).

3.2. Gender relations among Karen refugees – changing balance of power?

In Chapter 2 I discussed the notion of refugeeness, arguing that it was both conceptualized as a marginalized status, and simultaneously "used" in an attempt at claiming a status and making meaning. In other words (and most important here), I argue against a notion of refugees as complete non-agents.

One of the key traits affecting gender relations in the Karen refugee community was the substantial changes people experienced when moving from Karen State to the refugee camps. Even though the KNU have effectively been at war with the SPDC since 1949 and refugees from Karen areas have been crossing the border for more than 25 years, making it one of the most prolonged refugee situations in the world (UNHCR 2010), for individuals effected by this warfare and forced to flee, the changes are no less severe and probably impossible to prepare oneself for. Karen State is by no means a place in total isolation, and the organization of everyday life in Karen State varies along lines such as rural-urban, highland-lowland, distance to the river and not least, the ascribed "color" of the area (see Chapter 1). I nevertheless make the assumption that life in camp is qualitatively different from life in Karen State not only in material and geographical terms but also in terms of connectedness to "the outside world". The thriving organizational environment in the camps (also accounted for in Chapter 1) illustrates this. Furthermore, I do not believe that gender relations in Karen State are static and original, untouched or essential in any way. However, the degree of change, and possibly the nature of change as well, differs from more predictable situations.

I will use my data to illustrate, in line with Camino and Krulfeld (1994) that "in the face of altered access to resource allocations and new differential employment opportunities, changes in gender roles and statuses, and ultimately, often, in gender models themselves are fostered in refugee communities" (Camino and Krulfeld 1994:xii). The range of available subject positions is likely to change (cf. Moore 1994).

In sub-chapter 3.1. I argued that an alleged complementary organization of gendered division of labor might nevertheless entail structures of dominance. In the refugee camp, there seemed to be a prevalent notion of power as masculine and militarized. Traditionally, women were not supposed to take up leading positions, but remain passive and home-bound.

This was not however, an uncontested notion. A question can be posed as to whether

the changes that occurred, and still are occurring, when moving from Karen State to the refugee camp, have the potential of shifting the balance of power in favor of women. I will explore this through looking at some of the factors that my informants commonly claimed were changing when moving from Karen State to the camps. Among these were a change in the division of labor; better access to education for girls; workshops, leadership training and income generation projects for women; and the prominent position of the Karen Women's Organization (KWO). I argue that the KWO played a significant part in the production of an important discourse regarding gender and ethnicity, alternative to the one proffered by the male-dominated Karen National Union (KNU). I will then turn to show that this resistance, nevertheless, was ultimately rooted within the KNU discourse – it did not, I believe, represent a rebellion against it. But let me first show how gender relations did change in the camp, and how the KWO played a central role in these changes.

3.2.1. Change in the division of labor

There is a problem for the men in the camp because there is less for them to do. For example there are many income generating projects for women but less for the men. In Karen State they would for example cut down the trees but in camp they cannot do that (KWO representative 1).

Traditionally, I was told, the husband was the head of the household. In general, the wife's chores were related to taking care of the family and the things that had to do with the house, while farming and procuring food and money was the husband's responsibility. This took the husband out of the house more whereas the wife was more bound to the house, cooking and taking care of children. This was generally however, not considered a hierarchical organization, but more of a convenient and complementary division of labor. *"The men can do the things that they can do, and the women can do the things that they can do" (KWO representative 1)*. This notion fits well with views presented in sub-chapter 3.1., that gender roles were commonly represented as complementary, not hierarchical, in many Southeast Asian societies.

In the camps however, people were not allowed to grow rice, and a limited amount of other crops or animal breeding was possible. Men lost substantial tasks in their area of responsibility, whereas women's tasks were still more or less unchanged. This, some of my informants claimed, led to many men feeling frustrated.

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[...] Some men don't want to face [problems], because when the problem is really hard so you don't want to face, you're just having alcohol to forget everything. Why? The reason that she wants to explain is that especially in the camp, most of the women try to get more income for the house, for the children, like weaving and sewing, knitting. But for thing like that, the weaving, knitting, the men are not doing like that but they can do like cut down the trees [...] But in the camp they cannot do that. She wants to compare like this: When woman are try to get something like the small income like the weaving, knitting, sewing, the men also have to do something to for income but in the camp it's disappear. They are try to make a hat and try to make bamboo basket (KWO representative 1).

Similar observations were made by Camino and Krulfeld (1994) in their studies of changing gender relations among Cambodian refugees in the United States. In their cases, it seemed that a wider range of opportunities was being created for the women. The studies referred to reported that Cambodian men felt threatened by women's increased opportunities and changing identities. Krulfeld (1994b) shows how marriage had functioned as an important way of controlling female sexuality, and through behavior such as going to school or work, getting in touch with other men, driving a car and using contraceptives, Cambodian men were robbed of some of that control. Moreover, the fact that women to a greater degree started working outside the home constituted a change in the division of labor in the household. Women's role was held to be as the head of the domestic sphere, where she was in charge, also financially (Krulfeld 1994b).

However, it is not clear whether this change in the division of labor led to women's emancipation or empowerment by their own definitions. Wage labor is not necessarily a universal criteria for female empowerment. Benson's study (1994) suggests that many Cambodian women in fact, in contrast to their American neighbors, did not justify working with individual assertions, but through a "needs of the family" approach (Benson 1994:76). She therefore concludes that "[there is no] neat correspondence between work outside the home (however important that factor may seem to American feminists) and social esteem and authority in other aspects of life" (Benson 1994:93). What lies within concepts of liberty and equality, is not universally given.

As the above quote suggest, not only did the change in division of labor potentially lead to women having more work to do than before. It also led to men having a lot less to do than before. Many informants talked about the fact that men often turned to drinking, which in turn composed its own problems for the women. Increased domestic violence was a problem in the camp communities (Lambert and Pickering 2003). Similar developments were reported

among Cambodians in the United States by Krulfeld (1994b).

On the other hand, a development where women were more active on new arenas could also be seen as an opening for more women to take charge – perhaps filling a gap left open by men with alcohol problems:

When you face the biggest problem, like the real problem, when the two people try to solve a problem that is really difficult to face. At that time the women try to solve the problem but for the men they just having alcohol or something to forget or to solve the problem, so it becomes a problem after having too much alcohol, something like that. So for her opinion, at that time women can be power more than men (KWO representative 1).

The shift in the gendered division of labor then, might - but does not necessarily - lead to a shift in the balance of power in favor of women.

3.2.2. Access to education

Education access was better for girls in the camp than in Karen State. It was better for the boys as well, but my impression from informants was that the gap to be filled was larger for the girls to start with, because it was less common for girls to go to school in Karen State. The notions of difference between boys and girls (evident in for example the division of labor) in Karen State, even though not widely regarded as inhibiting an unequal balance of power, often meant that parent's would not see the point of sending their daughters to school because eventually their job was going to be in the house anyway. In some cases schools in camp made a point of promoting their openness to both boys and girls. Though it was a common opinion that women also in camp were lagging behind in education and general participation in civil society, and the husband was still the head of the household in many cases, the common perception was that more possibilities were open to the girls in the camps.

In 2004 we moved to Mae La Oon camp. Here we have a chance to go to school. Both boys and girls can go, they don't discriminate like they did in the past. (NKJC student 9)

Access to schools meant access to new types of knowledge, and perhaps it meant a better insight into the logic of state and administration²⁶. The effect of the Karen educational regime on gender relations is, however interesting, not explored there. Suffice to say that girls got

²⁶ For an excellent exploration on the reproduction of notions of Karen nationalism through the Karen education system, see Berg (2009).

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better access to a new sphere of life that had to a greater extent (though not totally) been boys' domain inside Karen State. Notably there was still an over-representation of boys in the schools in camp.

3.2.3. The Karen Women's Organization (KWO)

The Karen Women's Organization was, as already mentioned, a powerful organization in the Karen refugee community with an influential institutional position both in the camps and in villages along the border. They organized a broad range of activities for women, from education and training, via income generation to documentation of abuses towards women. The stated objectives of the KWO are as follows (KWO 2008 [online]):

- To assist women in the endeavour to be free from all forms of oppression.
- To promote and empower women in all spheres of life, including education and general living standards.
- To encourage women to participate in the struggle for freedom, democracy and equality.
- To develop women's knowledge, ability and skills, including political and organisational skills.
- To achieve the rights of women and equal status with men.
- To promote and maintain Karen culture and traditions.
- To care for the well-being of girls and children.

KWO aims to empower women through offering various capacity building trainings to teach skills, build confidence and create new opportunities so that women will be better able to solve problems. We are working hard to educate ourselves and our communities so that we can work more effectively and advocate for our struggle on the international stage.

We believe that women's contribution is an essential factor in the peace-building and national reconciliation processes of Burma.

Upon discussing the objectives of the KWO with a representative from the KWO in Mae La Oon, I got the following explanation:

Like empowerment means [...] to educate people, to get more knowledge. So the woman that are educate they should train them to be like weaving or sewing, knitting, something, to earn the money for them to survive. And also for the young women they have to like be active and to learn more. And like, to be a leader. Because most of the Karen women they are afraid to be a leader, afraid to have the high role. So we [should] empower them to have more. To be active and like more educate, especially the women. Not to look back on the past, to be active and to be strong (KWO representative 1).

To this representative then, empowerment was deeply linked to knowledge, to earning money, and to be able to be a leader, but yet:

Equality does not mean that you have to do the same job, you are weaving so the men

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have to weaving, when the men cut down the tree you have to cut down, not like that, you have to share. You have to share each other. Like, the thing that you can do you have to help. And the men can do, we have to work together, that's equality. Equality is not doing the same thing. (KWO representative 1)

According to this utterance the KWO, or at least this representative, held a notion of empowerment and equality not as "women and men doing the same things", but of "female traits" becoming more valued, and of women being able to sustain themselves through "female activities". In other words, her aim was to raise the value of female modes of action to the level of male modes of action. The fundamental notion of gender difference was not contested.

Many women in camp got in touch with the KWO through attending workshops, leadership training courses and income generation projects, and many *"realized that they didn't have to be dependent on men"* (KWO representative 1). This seems very similar to the Cambodian case referred to earlier. I argue that through the KWO Karen girls and women staying in the camps gained new possibilities and were exposed to new types of knowledge. In other words, many women experienced that new gendered subject positions became available as a result of the strong ideological position of the KWO.

[...] now situation is change. Karen women cannot stay in the house and take care of the children. Not more today.[...] today woman power is better then men. Because we have activity more than men today. We have strong [organization] at KWO so they have many community to work, some in Karen State and some in Mae Sariang and some in the camp. (Naw Say Paw)

My general impression however, was that there was a significant gap between stated views by women activists and lived realities for people in camp who were less engaged in politics or organizational life. As I will show below, even though young Karens learned at school that "men and women should have equal power" this did not always or immediately result in a change in thought.

Activism and leadership

Women being leaders does not collide with Karen culture (KWO representative 1).

In the past the men were always thinking that the woman can't do anything. They are shy, they cannot be a leader (KWO representative 2).

When it came to taking formal leading positions in the community, there were altogether more men than women doing so both in Karen State and in the camp. This corresponds with the idea

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of women's responsibilities being tied to the household. I came across a number of ways of reasoning about this, though they could be broadly put into one out of two categories: One was the opinion that *Karen women can be leaders if they want to, but they are still stuck in the old ways of thinking, so we have to encourage them*. The other can be summarized as *Karen women cannot be leaders, because that is a masculine trait*. This difference can be interpreted as reflecting different views on women's abilities to act upon the world; that is, female modes of action. The first view reflects a view of female modes of action as potentially equally powerful as male modes of action whereas the latter does not.

Traditionally, I was told, women were supposed to be "shy". The Karen word for which they gave the English translation "shy" - "meshah" - also meant "to want to cry". Being shy entailed being quiet, polite, stay in the background or maybe even hiding, not try to solve problems or do anything actively unless asked to, and avoiding attention from, and maybe even being afraid of, strangers.

It's like, traditional and, how to say, it's long from the older, when the girls grow up they have to be respect and they have to be very shy and not be active. If they are active so the older, like the grandma and the mother always tell her to be very polite, to be very quiet, not to be very active as men. Because of the, I don't know how to say, because of the past. But right now it's getting less (KWO representative 1).

One of my informants explained women's lacking ability to be leaders in terms of their shyness and their physical weakness:

Saw Htoo Minh: Tharamu²⁷, what do you think about gender? Men and women should have equal power or not? I think men should have more power.

Me: Why?

Saw Htoo Minh: Because women are weaker than men, they cannot do the same things. They give up easily and they are shy. They say "I can't" without trying hard. Especially in the Karen culture. What do you think? You think they should be equal, right?

Me: Yes.

Saw Htoo Minh: Why?

Me: Because I think that they can be equally strong and achieve equally if they believe it themselves. I believe "shy" is possible to change.

Saw Htoo Minh: We are learning about gender at school now, that's why I ask.

Me: What are you learning?

Saw Htoo Minh: That they should be equal.

²⁷ The S'gaw Karen word for female teacher.

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- Me: And you disagree?*
- Saw Htoo Minh: No, I agree. But not for Karen, especially Karen women, they cannot do things, be strong, climb the tree...*
- Me: So you have to climb the tree to be a leader?*
- Saw Htoo Minh: No, that's not what I mean. [...] Women cannot be leaders because they have not been soldiers.*
- Me: So you have to be a soldier to become a leader?*
- Saw Htoo Minh: Yes.*

(Conversation with male student in the refugee camp)

In the above conversation we see that this boy saw female physical weakness as a hinder for female leadership. Being a soldier and being physically strong was seen as important qualifications. This quote illustrates the centrality of a militarized, masculine, leadership ideal. It reveals the prominent position of soldiers (KNU) as rightful and suitable leaders in Karen society, a leadership ideal which has, as I have shown in previous chapters, historical roots and is continuously being reproduced. Interestingly, when confronting a girl working as a secretary for the camp committee with Saw Htoo Minh's statement, what she resented was not the fact that he regarded physical strength as important for leadership, but the accusation that Karen women didn't have it:

- Me: So I was talking to some of the students at the KNFEP, and they said they had just been learning about gender now. And then some of the boys asked me "do you think that men and women should be equal?" and I said "yeah, what do you think?" and they said "no, women cannot be leader because they are useless and they cannot climb the tree, they have never been soldiers, so they can not be leaders", something like that.*
- Naw Say Paw: But Karen women can climb the tree! Especially me! (laughing)*
- Me: Do you think that many Karen boys and men think that Karen women cannot be leaders?*
- Naw Say Paw: Can be leader!*
- Me: But what about the opinion of the men? Do you think that they agree that you can be a leader?*
- Naw Say Paw: But especially the girl. Because they a little bit be shy. So the men let them to become a leader, but they don't want to be a leader so they a little bit shy to become a leader. We have the right to become the leader.*
- Me: So it's up to [the girls]?*
- Naw Say Paw: Up to them.*

This girl was of the opinion that Karen girls themselves had to take responsibility for

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becoming leaders. Others stressed the complementarity of "male" and "female" traits as a qualification for female leadership, and though arguing that physical differences gave men and women different roles, rejected the argument of masculine traits being better "leadership qualities":

Yes, some men have the view like that [women are too physically weak to be leaders], the same as before. Her opinion, she said for the men and women evenly. Women can do more than men, even the woman cannot be soldiers, cannot do the hard thing, but they can do many things. Like when you have the organization or something to do there is many part to do so the women can do the other part, not to cut down the tree, to be a soldier. So you can do the thing that you can do and the men can do the thing that they can do. Some things women can do but men can't do. Some things that men can do, women can't do because of the energy of the people, the human. Because we are women so we are a little bit weak so we cannot be soldiers or do the hard thing but we can do other things (KWO representative1).

Thus, even though this informant did not reason that complementarity in gender roles potentially inhabited unbalanced power relations, she nevertheless saw a clear divide between male modes of action and female modes of action. This line of reasoning is supported by observations made by Krulfeld (1994b) in her study of Lao refugees in the United States. Caring and nurturing was traditionally the power base of Laotian women, implying a notion of gender complementarity. However, Krulfeld argues, as do I, that "women's power is also limited by the [Lao] concepts of appropriate gender roles and behavior" (Krulfeld 1994b:102).

The difference between the two lines of reasoning, then, lay in whether one mode of action was perceived as stronger than the other. There were different opinions regarding what qualified to be a leader, whether it was the ability to adopt what was generally seen as masculine, or whether a strong person was fit, regardless of whether their strength was "masculine" or "feminine". To put it another way: Some (illustrated by the two first quotes) seemed to hold that "masculine", physically strong, militarized traits reflected a stronger ability to act than the "feminine" counterpart which was shy and weak. Others (illustrated by the last quote) argued that feminine and masculine capabilities were of equal worth reflecting a view which juxtaposes female and male agency. However, both stances imply a clear definition of *difference* between feminine and masculine traits, and women and men's capacities, (cf. Moore (1994), Fagertun (2009)). The aim of the KWO seemed to be to increase the value of female capacities in women's own eyes and in the eyes of men.

What most people seemed to agree upon however, was that even though it might have happened in the past, men no longer denied women access to leadership, *if they were able*.

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What kept some women from taking leading positions was their lingering shyness:

If they have the ability they can (KWO representative 1).

In the camp situation is changing so it's depend on your case. [...] If you are right then more people will follow you. Even like two ideas, even the women idea and the men idea, It depend on the idea, if it's a good idea so if the women has good idea then many often follow, agree with her idea. If her idea is a little bit like strange to the men so they follow the other. (Camp committee representative 1).

But who defines what ideas are "good" and what ideas are "strange"? This was not a question that was asked, at least not out loud. The discursive power to define what "proper" knowledge is, is the basis for dominance (cf. Foucault 1980), and that definition was not up for discussion.

One of the KWO activists I interviewed stressed the importance of urging young Karen women to become leaders. This was part of their notion of empowerment, and girls' shyness was seen by the KWO as a hinder for female leadership. But encouraging girls to not be shy, was not, I believe, seen as destructive to the girls' Karen-ness. As much as Karen women might be supposed to be "shy", they were also supposed to be strong, and encouraging strength on the girls' own premises seemed to be the approach of the KWO. In other words, through their activities they provided new gendered subject positions for women, making them more prone to take leadership positions, while remaining the sense of Karen-ness. To the KWO, the "shy" could and should be lost without having the effect of rendering girls less Karen.

[...] in the camp women are get equal right to do with the men. But as you know for the past the women are [...] they don't want to be a leader they don't want to be [...] and talk to the men so they always go back to the bad. But they try to solve the problem but she hopes that more and more will be like the leader, more and more later. We have to try, to encourage them, like that. (KWO representative 1)

I have shown that in the camp community there was a discursive obstacle against girls and women becoming leaders. Notions of how proper Karen women were supposed to act were not easily united with them standing out and speaking out. Nevertheless, KWO members I spoke to insisted that it was not "against Karen culture" for women to be leaders (as in the first quote in this sub-chapter). I believe that in order to achieve and maintain an influential position in

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the refugee community, the KWO had to try to unite these two notions of Karen femininity as smoothly as possible. Outright rebellion against the dominant, masculine ideal would – in addition to being contrary to the principle of ah na deh – probably not have given them the broad support they enjoy today. I thus argue that even though the KWO was a powerful organization with a lot to say regarding notions of gender, they still operated within the doxic notions laid down by the dominant discourse of the Karen National Union (KNU). However, in the light of reflections made by Parker (2005), agency should not be conflated with resistance, neither is it always the same as activity:

Women's agency may take a range of forms [...]. Anthropology has been at the forefront of social science research which has represented women's "activity" or "active agency". [...] it is [...] necessary to note that the emphasis on women's activity as the principal index of agency might be a particularly Western way of perceiving agency (Parker 2005:11-12).

I am also reminded of Foucault's reflection that resistance is never completely exterior to power (Foucault 1978:95 in Parker 2005:6). Moreover, the fact that issues related to female leadership were discussed at all, might suggest a shift in what was possible to put into question (cf. Bourdieu 1993). I suggest this with great care, since I know very little about what was discussed and not regarding gender relations inside Karen State.

3.3. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the social transition resulting from leaving Karen State for the refugee camp led to a number of changes which affected gender relations. Contrary to the early claims about gender relations in Southeast Asia, and in line with more recent argument (cf. Fagertun 2009), I have shown that gender relations in the Karen context were fundamentally defined by *difference*, and entailed an unequal relation of power. The discursive power executed by the Karen National Union (KNU) was fundamental in defining acceptable subject positions, and this included notions of femininity and masculinity.

I have illustrated how changes related to life as a refugee might be contributing to a shift in gendered power relations. A change in the gendered division of labor; increased access to education and new types of knowledge; and the existence of a broad range of activities offered to women on basis of their sex (coupled with a lack of corresponding possibilities for men), all

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served to bring new elements into gendered identity negotiation.

However, the actual emancipatory power of increased access to what were previously men's domains in a society, is not a universal given. This argument was supported by Camino and Benson's (1994) observations that L;ao women did not install the same individual prestige in for instance having a job as many American women did.

Moreover I argued that the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) was a powerful actor in the refugee community, with the aim of proffering new knowledge and skills to Karen women and girls. Though this can be interpreted as exhibiting a mode of resistance, I believe they represent a sub-discourse remaining within the dominant discourse of Karen-ness. "New" subject positions (cf. Moore 1994) made available to women were still embedded in the dominating overall notion of Karen ethnicity. I argued that the aim of the KWO was to increase the value of what was seen as female modes of action, in the common opinion in the refugee community, enabling girls to take up leadership positions without risking losing their Karen-ness. Thus I argued that they can be said to reproduce a notion of fundamental difference between feminine and masculine modes, as they through their work enhanced the idea of complementary gender relations. All in all I have argued that they operated within doxic notions of gender differences (cf. Bourdieu 1998).

I have not concluded as to whether power was actually shifting in favor of women in the refugee camp. I have pointed to alcoholism among men and an alleged increase in domestic violence in camp as factors that continued to render women powerless (cf. Lambert and Pickering 2003). Moreover, though the KWO was a powerful organization there was not a univocal accept for a stance that female types of agency should be regarded as equally strong as male types of agency.

The discussion about changing gender relations can be related to more overarching questions posed in this thesis concerning how to conceptualize, and deal with, life in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burmese border. Significant elements are changing in the transition from Karen State to the camp, resulting in constant renegotiation of identities, of what is seen as true and acceptable; of ethnicity, and also gender relations. One significant change that has happened during the past few years, is the possibility, for some, of being resettled to a third country. I believe that the great unpredictability of the situation for Karen refugees leads to *ambiguity* when thinking and talking about the future. It is towards this ambiguity I turn in the last chapter.

Chapter 4 - Ambiguous Thoughts about the Future

In Chapter 2 I argued that the dominant ethnic and nationalist discourse produced and sustained by the KNU played a central role in shaping processes of identification and meaning-making for refugees in the camps. I have also showed that the transition to the camps induced changes in gender relations and ideas of gender (Chapter 3), even though this was a multifaceted process.

In this chapter I will show how feelings of marginalization and insecurity were often met with an act of mixing dreams and wishes with "realistically" oriented thoughts and plans. I believe that similarly to the paradoxical use of narratives about Karen State discussed in Chapter 2, thoughts about the future were often conveyed in a contrasting fashion. I argue that the refugees used paradoxical representations as a resource in their relation to reality. I believe it was a way of coping with the situation of utter unpredictability and lack of influence on their own destiny, within the dominant discourse of what was seen as acceptable and true.

I start off this chapter with reminding the reader of the point made in Chapter 2: How Karen State was simultaneously imagined as a Perfect Place and remembered as a place of terror and suffering. Then I move on to new territory, showing how this imagery could also be projected towards a Third Country. I argue that ambiguity and doubts related to the nature of the link between identity and place in a situation of utter unpredictability, led to paradoxical representations of thoughts about and plans for the future. In the last sub-chapter I will illustrate the apparent inconsistency between thought and actions through a discussion of how young Karen refugees dealt with pre-marital romantic relationships.

4.1. Imagining a Perfect Place

4.1.1. Karen State - belonging to a place, and a community of solidarity

Karen State is a beautiful state. Even though I have to be away I never forget it. I always miss it. It is much better than other countries. All Karen people want to go back to it. It will always be in my life (Saw Michael).

Recapturing this quote²⁸ from a student at the School serves as a reminder of the point already

²⁸ All of the quotes in this sub-chapter are drawn from the essays written by students at the school which I referred to in Chapter 2. While seven out of 27 students wrote about their homeland, another seven wrote essays named "My future plan" or something similar. Also, I have drawn quotes from an essay named "Karen traditional ceremonies".

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made about how Karen State was imagined as a Perfect Place (Chapter 2). At the same time, the hardships from which they had escaped formed fundamental elements in the narrations of their life as well as being tied up with ethnicity and ethnic virtues. I have framed this as the difference between *remembering* and *imagining* Karen State. Karen State was the central focal point for Karen nationalism, tightly linked both to the political and military mobilization and to a sense of ethnic identification. I have argued (Chapter 2) that even though, or maybe because, the romanticized images might be far from the "actual" state of Karen State, it was possible to create such imaginaries of a Perfect Place. Strong emotions of territorialized belonging and identity were evoked, as is the core of nationalism.

Another central element in the images of Karen State was the notion of a community where people had close ties to each other, helped each other and remained true to Karen values. Going back to Karen State after having finished school and Helping The Community through sharing their knowledge, setting up schools, hospitals, orphanages etc. was quite a common plan among the students at the school.

When I finishing KNFEP school I think I will [continue to] study at KWO, finishing, I will work in KWO because KWO work is very advantage for me. More over many people live in the Karen state they need to help for us they are very pity, so will help them (Naw Moo Dah).

My plan is is I finish KNFEP I will be a teacher in Karen state. Because my family live in Karen state. Moreover my people need education and need many people to works in Karen community. I strongly know our Karen people have many problems from SPDC. So I should try to save them (Naw Bae Paw).

After finish my study I want to become a good person for my community. I will try to help them as much as I can. Because my people really need me. My people have many problem to face (Naw Julia).

After finishing KNFEP school, I will help some thing in my community about doctor, or teacher (Naw Jade).

This sense of community was far from absent in the refugee camp. Efforts to maintain it were constant. Through schools, churches, community based organizations and organizations related to the camp administration there were open activities and ceremonies going on in different parts of the camp almost constantly the times I was there²⁹. At the School, students

²⁹ I once came across a term schedule lying around at the Center, from the CCSDPT (the major umbrella organization coordinating all organized activities for refugees in the camps and along the border), with an overview of activities under their coordination. There were several «special days» listed such as the World Refugee Day and the International AIDS Day. The CCSDPT had found it necessary to stress that these were not mainly days for ceremony and celebration, and urged the organizations under their flag to organize activities related to the day in question, not «only» «traditional Karen celebrations».

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had to wear Karen clothes every Wednesday (every Friday they wore a western-style school uniform). One student essay pointed to the importance of ceremonies for the Karen people in terms of remembering their origins, in order to maintain the Karen culture, and to remind people how important it was to remain united in these difficult times:

I would like to tell you about Karen traditional ceremonies that I attended in refugee camp. I had many thoughts about it that I would like to share with you.

The wrist-tying ceremony is as old as the Karen people. It was started by Tawmeipa. He wanted to unite his family once a year because they lived far away from each other. The family met and became more united when they were celebrating the ceremony together. I think this is very important for our people.

Another part of the celebration is Karen traditional clothes. When we go somewhere we use Karen clothes because we are Karen so we should use Karen clothes. We shouldn't forget Karen clothes in our life. When we have the Karen new year we wore the Karen traditional clothes, bracelet and necklace. We saw that they had to work well together to be successful. If we have unity, we will always win. We should remember the proverb "united we stand, divided we fall".

In the past, only individual families performed the ceremony but now it's important that our entire Karen community comes together as a family for this very special event (Naw Say Paw).

The idea of a perfect community then, was a community organized along lines of Karen tradition and based on unity, solidarity and cooperation, where peace ruled and people respected each other. The image of a proper Karen person not only contained an element of helping the community – of being "useful". Another fundamental point was the wish to go back to Karen State – that was how the link between place and identity was "properly" constituted.

Karen State needs peace and democracy too. It needs the help of the future generation to erect. I hope everyone who passes the [school] and goes on to become a leader, goes back to our mother homeland. We have to try hard to help it be free forever. (NKJC student 6)

As I am a Karen lady, the Karen blood speaks to me. I must be useful to my people. I will return to Karen State and help my people as much as I can. (female student)

We are Karen and we shouldn't let ourselves be discouraged, instead we should try hard to improve our lives. If we live in another country we should not forget who we are, and we should maintain our culture. We have a responsibility to help our people and nationality. We should [...] cooperate for peace. We shouldn't be shy to speak our language and wear our traditional clothes. We shouldn't be afraid to speak for justice. Hopefully one day we will get [freedom] in our own country. (Saw Soe Win)

Karen-ness was fundamentally tied to having a strong relation to Karen State, a strong longing for it. As discussed in Chapter 2, ideals of Karen-ness and solidarity colouring images of Karen State as the perfect community can be tied to the dominant discourse on

ethnicity and nationalism. The dominant discourse proffered certain subject positions related to Karen-ness which were more acceptable than others (cf. Moore 1994).

I argue, then, that the act of creating an image of Karen State as a Perfect Place was simultaneously a result of three elements: 1) A conceptualization of refugeeness as both marginalized, ultimately liminal and temporary (Malkki 1995), 2) an outcome of normative images of Karen ethnicity, with the dominant nationalist discourse pushing in the direction of national romanticism; and 3) These imaginaries of Karen State provided consolation for people who had fled from it, and offered a way of imagining the homeland that gave room for dreaming about going back. This dream could only exist if one thought about Karen State not only in terms of its "real state", but also in terms of what it ought to be, its connection with Karen identity, and as the ultimate (almost unavoidable) result of the Karen struggle.

The role expectations related to ethnicity, I believe, were powerful in shaping identification processes in times where new opportunities were emerging. The possibility of resettlement, a reality from 2005 when the UNHCR launched their resettlement program, brought new possibilities for forming images of a Perfect Place, bringing new elements into the linkages between place and identity.

4.1.2. A Third Country

In spite of the limitations on who could go to a third country (see Chapter 1), many people spoke of going as if it were realistic option for them when in fact in the current situation it was not. Similar ways of expression among Karen refugees in camps on the Thai border is also reported by Berg (2009). Some of my informants would express a desire to go and speak as if it was a possibility for the future, even though they did not in fact have refugee status.

On the other hand, some people told me on one occasion that they planned to go back to Karen State to help their community, while I later found out that they were in fact applying for resettlement. A wish to go to a third country, even though many carried it, was often associated with guilt, with a feeling of leaving your people behind, of failing your fellow Karens in a time of utter need (Berg 2009:94-95).

During my time in the field I got many questions about life in "The Third Country". Resettlement was a hot conversation topic, and something "everyone" related to in one way or another, whether because they were pondering whether to go or not; knew someone who had left or were planning to leave; were struggling to accept the fact that they couldn't go because

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they didn't have the right legal status; or were actually in the process of applying themselves. Questions were many and varied from everyday details via practical issues such as food and temperature, to speculations about whether people in third countries were happy all the time or not. Some were, naturally, quite knowledgeable about conditions outside the sphere of Karen State and the border area. Others had gathered information from foreigners and relatives who had already gone, and were thinking in a more critical manner about how life would be in another country. Many of the younger students especially seemed to associate it with complete happiness and a conspicuous absence of problems. In other words, the act of creating an image of a Perfect and harmonic Place could be directed both towards Karen State, and towards a rich and peaceful Third Country. The same person could carry both images.

However, as already mentioned and as explored by Berg (2009), an urge to go was tempered with a sense of guilt, of not being a proper Karen, of letting one's people down. A proper Karen should, if going to a third country, return to help their community:

Now we live in here but we have the opportunity to apply for a third country. So some people leave and go to a third country to get skills, improve their English and have a better standard of living. They want to live in a free country. They don't like fighting as their village. They want their child to have better quality of life. One day, if the country is free they will go back to their country and share their skills to people and help their nation. They don't forget their nation. I think they always remember their village who faced problems in the past. Even though they left to another country I think they will help their people as much as they can to get a free country, a free life and luxury. (NKJC student 9)

I see that most of the people with high education they don't want to work for their community. Mostly they find benefits for themselves [...] I want to tell you this my beloved brother and sister: Don't forget everything that your grandparents have done for the community. [...] If you work for your community in some way, work until the people tell you oh, teacher, uncle, aunt, brother, sister, you do so much for your community, that is ok, you have fulfilled your duty for your nation, right now you can leave and take a rest in [an]other country. You can choose any place that you want and stay well for your whole life. (Saw Wah Eh)

These utterances reflect a negotiation concerning whether a desire to go could be fitted into the notion of "Karen-ness".

However, many people saw difficulties related to going to a third country. Some of my informants uttered concern that young people didn't understand that they would face problems in a strange place where their knowledge was less worth than in the refugee community.

Being in the third country is like being in the neighbor house, you are not free because [...] it's far from your culture, far from your native. So it's just like being to someone's

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house. [...] But if you try very hard you can get something. But it's different. (KWO representative 1)

One of my informants in particular, expressed concern about what she saw as people thinking they could run away from the problems they experienced in camp, not seeing the new set of problems they would face:

Naw April: [...] there is a problem for the refugee moving to the western country. That they are uneducate people. The cannot read and write so they have to start and learn from the beginning so it will be very boring for them. Even they don't want to study, they don't want to learn because they are uneducate and they are very old. So it will be difficult for them.

Me: Yeah, I think it can be difficult.

Naw April: She says that many people want to go but the real problem is lack of education, so if they go there they have to start education so it's really hard for them. As for her opinion it is hard to start in the beginning. As you said like when the husband is getting drunk and beating the wife they [in a third country they cannot do it]. She said that many women in the camp they want to escape that kind of behave because of the husband drinking alcohol and beating him and something like that. Just want to escape and they want to go to third country. They just think that it's easy, like if they go to the third country they will escape for that, escape for the husband beating them. But they don't think that they, some, because they are uneducate so they don't know and they don't think about the other because they have to face a big problem like they have to strive in the beginning. So it's difficult for them. But even they live here, if they know their right, if they know how to protect themselves so it's ok but they are not try to follow the solution but they just want to go to the third country to escape.

Me: Yes, I think many of the people I have been talking to think that they can go to a third country and then they can be happy all the time.

Naw April: Yes, but for her, her opinion is not like that. You have to solve the problem here. If the wife and the husband don't understand each other you will escape for that kind of behave. So if you are not try to solve the problem so when you be there, f something happen, you will be take care of by the police, the family will separate, something like that. So her idea, she doesn't think like that.

(From interview with KWO member in Mae La Oon refugee camp)

Thus, the act of imagining a Perfect Place in a Third Country was not unproblematic. These "new" projections of dreams of a perfect and harmonious Karen community onto a place that was not Karen State were full of insecurity, doubt, moral conflict and ambiguity. The question of whether dreaming about going or deciding to go to a third country implied a violation of Karen-ness, brought new and disturbing elements into identity negotiations – am I less Karen if I decide to go? Was it possible to create a space where a decision to go could fit into a notion of Karen-ness?

A chance to go to a third country implies a drastic change in circumstances. In the

next section I will discuss how such changes affected identification processes for people in the refugee community, in terms of negotiations between images and "reality".

4.2. Negotiating between Imaginaries and Reality

When you cannot do anything, that's the biggest problem in life. (Naw Eh Paw)

I see the suffering of my people but I cannot help and set them free. (female NJKC student)

My other ambition is to go to Canada but they didn't allow me. (Saw November Htoo)

When I finish this school I will teach in my village or I will help my community. But not really. If I go to a third country I will study there to improve my English. But this is my first year out of four in this school. Maybe I will teach in the camp, if I don't go to a third country. Maybe if I don't teach in camp I go to my village. If I don't teach in the camp I will find a job in Thailand. Sometimes I think if I pass this school I won't work at all. I have an aim to go to a third country. But my future plan is not real. I stay in this camp. (Saw Lah Htoo)

I believe the Karen concept of *ah na deh* is central for understanding why such statements where informants openly conveyed feelings of hopelessness were very rare. The norm of proper behavior was to always be in control of one's feelings, not exposing any lack of control and not stirring up bad emotions in others. This led to a general avoidance of talking about issues of insecurity, sadness, loss, disappointment etc.

This description of norms regarding the expression of feelings has some striking similarities to points made by Wikan in *Managing Turbulent Hearts* (1990), which is based on fieldwork in northern Bali. According to Wikan, everyday life was characterized by

an experienced ubiquitous endeavour of "making one's face look bright and clear" in a world where there is, as they say, "so much to care about". What Westerners have perceived as an innate aesthetic mood, an ingrained disposition to be graceful and poised, I found instead to reflect a deliberate attitude, a willed response of "not caring", "forgetting" the bad that has come to pass, and "letting bygones be bygones" if one is to thrive, or even to survive (Wikan 1990:xvi).

Within the framework of the concept of *ah na deh*, hoping can be a risky project. Hoping implies a possibility of being disappointed, and thus risking breaking with the norms of remaining in control of one's expression. Nevertheless, some of my informants did express a spirit of "it is possible":

I'm just talking to her about moving to third country. She says that some parents they

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[send for the children to] become teacher even the children are going to third country, if they are not try hard they ill not get nothing, they will just finish high school and if they are not try hard, it is the same here. Even people here and even people in Karen State if they try very hard and they are very clever they can go to university, they have chance, but not everyone. One of my cousin he is now in Bangkok to study but the parents are inside Karen State because he is smart than the other but he also try very hard and he also holding a Burmese passport, but he have to try very hard. I want to say even the refugee, even if he is a refugee from Karen State he try to get the opportunity. I think he will graduate on March, something like that (Naw April).

This story could be interpreted as a protest against conceptualizations that render the Karen refugees "outside of everything", robbed of their humanity, completely marginalized – in other words, as resistance. This voice seems to say "there *is* a place for us, and we can claim it, even though we are refugees". It seems to contradict perspectives that leave no room for people with no nation, that render their identities "damaged" and their agency against all odds.

I want to stress the diverging views I observed during my field work regarding conceptualizations of the future, as illustrated in the two above clusters of quotes from informants. This indicates an intense ongoing negotiation not only internally for individuals, but between different currents within the Karen refugee community about linkages between ethnicity, place and identity.

I will now substantiate this argument by pointing to one manifestation of ambiguity in identity negotiations. I use some observations regarding young Karens' romantic relationships, showing how unpredictability, insecurity and doubts led to contrasting thoughts and representations. I argue that this way of relating to insecurity can indeed be seen as a form of agency.

4.2.1. Courtship and romantic relationships

Pre-marital romantic relationships were quite common in the Karen refugee community, although sexual relations before marriage were not accepted, and were sometimes sanctioned by community leaders or elders. Although I did not investigate the prevalence of arranged marriages, Naw April put it like this in a conversation³⁰: Divorce was not accepted, except in extreme cases, and even then you had to prove for a community committee that you had a good reason and they would decide. Therefore it would be a good idea to let your parents help decide who you should marry. Because parents were wiser, and they probably knew the family of the boy and could tell you if that boy was a good worker or if he was lazy and

³⁰ I have rephrased this conversation on basis of my field notes.

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would leave all the work to you. Most of the time the parents would not force you, but it was wise to listen to their advice.

Avoiding marriage was a possibility, but since that meant staying at your parent's farm (back in Karen State), you would face difficulties when your parents got too old to work, because taking care of a farm was too much work for just one person. The situation in the camp was quite different, since farming was not the way of life anymore (see Chapter 2). According to Naw April, this, in addition to the increased access to higher levels of education for both boys and girls, resulted in a lot of women getting married at a later age than before. In Karen State, she said, girls would often get married between 14 and 18, whereas in the camp they were often older than 20. Pre-marital romantic relations were fairly common, and high school sweethearts frequently ended up getting married when they finished school.

Many of my informants were students in the age 19-21. Romantic relationships was an unavoidable issue when staying together in a boarding situation. From what I gathered through observation and tentative inquiry, the process of courtship should follow just about a pattern such as this: If you liked someone you would write them a letter stating that you loved them and asking if they wanted to be your boyfriend/girlfriend. Both boys and girls could apparently do this. If the recipient of the letter "liked you back", he or she would answer either by letter or face to face, and you would be considered a couple. You were then "allowed" to stay in a room alone together during daytime, and people would generally be aware of the fact that you were a couple. The bold ones would after a while hold hands in public sometimes, and maybe even touch each other discretely, like laying an arm around the waist when standing in a crowd. However, kissing was regarded as a sexual act and was reserved for engaged and married couples, and even then people did generally not kiss in public. In general, in public situations it was hard for an outsider to spot who were together and who weren't, since they would very rarely act in an obviously different way towards boyfriends/girlfriends and other friends of the opposite sex.

This norm can perhaps be related to the concept of ah na deh, the norm of constraining the expression and keeping strong feelings hidden on the inside, to keep things "smooth". The concept as I understand it does not only relate to negative feelings. Uncontrolled expressions of joy or excitement were typically met with an allegation of being "crazy". For example, one of the Karen teachers at the school frequently used "crazy" of students who were disorderly, joking and laughing in class. "Crazy" could also be used of a person in order to turn down a

love request. When an informant told me she had gotten a love letter by a boy she didn't want, she had turned him down by smilingly exclaiming "you crazy boy", acting as if the request was a laughable non-matter. The term "crazy" seems to have been used in resembling ways in Wikan's (1990) field, where a crazy person seemed to denote someone incapable of hiding or constraining their feelings (Wikan 1990:7).

4.2.2. The ambiguity of pre-marital relationships

Talking about romantic issues was considered intimate, and was mostly done either in the girls' room (I don't know about the boys' room since I couldn't go there), or in a joking manner in the common areas. Hesitancy to "admit" being in a romantic relationship with someone seemed ever-present. There was a clear threshold between the outsider (me) and "everyone else". This was an area where language problems were clearly prevalent. Every comment in English seemed to have a double meaning, and was often followed by a stream of talk and laughter in Karen. Methodological issues aside, what seemed to repeat itself was that when being asked for the first time if they were in a relationship, people would deny it, even though other people's statements sometimes hinted otherwise. Again, the concept of *ah na deh* is usefully remembered here, as these were probably emotionally loaded issues. Telling me that someone else was in a relationship was a popular way of teasing each other, and the person subject to the teasing would then deny it and there would be laughter and fighting over who was lying to me. This could perhaps be described as straight-forward pubertal behavior and not very surprising (an explanation not taking into account that coming of age can be very different experiences in different cultural contexts). However, when going into the refugee camp for the first time after having stayed at the Center for around a month, the incongruity between claims made at the Center in Mae Sariang and in the School in the refugee camp became obvious. In fact, all of the girls at the Center had claimed to be single and many of the boys too, whereas in camp I would be introduced to their alleged boyfriends and girlfriends. This difference between representations was such a reoccurring phenomenon that I caught myself thinking that there was a pattern to this secrecy surrounding romantic relationships. I pondered whether it was because they were not sure that their partner would admit it and wanted to play safe to avoid getting hurt or losing face, or if it might be because they wanted to keep their options open since one of them had left the camp. I continuously got the impression that what was being said could not be taken literally, and sometimes the "truth" as

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I experienced it would be a complete opposition from what I had deduced from what people said. In the field this developed into a kind of mystery to me, which I wanted to solve.

Then, one evening when I was in camp, I met a Canadian volunteer teacher at the neighboring school. She happened to be an anthropologist, and we started discussing my project. The thought that I need to credit this Canadian anthropologist (whose name I have unfortunately forgotten) for, is that the general insecurity of the situation for these young people made so many of them hesitate to admitting, in a consistent way, to having any "real" dreams or plans. When speaking about the future you had, crudely put, two options. Either you could throw all your stakes in there and dream about peace in your home country or resettling and building your life and future somewhere distant and wonderful, or you had to fully realize, or admit, your own marginalized situation with its utter lack of possibilities for choice and self-determination. So when asking if someone had a boyfriend or a girlfriend, I might unknowingly have pushed them into a corner so to speak, and asked them to spontaneously choose between dreaming without conditions - acting as if they had options, acting as if they had a choice, and realizing the hard facts of physically being stuck, subject to forces beyond their control, and not having a clue whatsoever of what future years would hold.

Thus I came to see this ambiguous mode of expression regarding romantic relationships, as illustrating something more general. I came to see it as an expression of a negotiation between dreams and reality, of which I have pointed to various examples throughout this thesis. This, I argue, was one of the ways the Karen refugees acted upon insecurity; it was a way of *making meaning*. It can, indeed, be seen as a kind of agency.

The way Karen refugees seemed to insist that there was hope, that there was sense to their struggle, can be viewed in light of the same trail of thought. Without falling into the trap of suggesting that there is anything "natural", "given" or "functional" about the traits I have pointed to, I do believe that the ambiguity in people's representations of place, past, present and future, was a reaction to the circumstances they found themselves in as refugees. It became central to identity construction. Although a sense of liminality and historically based marginalization might be constructed by a dominant discourse-producer operating within a nationalist framework, it was simultaneously fundamentally engrained in processes of identification. For the Karen refugees the sense of insecurity was very real, and something they dealt with as persons.

4.3. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has been devoted to discussions of how refugeeness affects identity construction, with special attention to how people think about the future. In light of these discussions, how *do* we conceptualize an existence as a refugee?

First of all, a part of the answer is that conflating the whole population of Karen refugees (regardless of their legal status), will not capture the situation adequately. As I have shown in this thesis, power differences among Karens – in terms of connectedness to the military; in terms of relation to the Christian S'gaw elite; and in terms of gender – are significant axis of difference in the Karen refugee community. Moreover, individual stories are different, as are their "real", as well as perceived, opportunities.

In this chapter I have argued that presented with constraints of crippling dimensions, many turned to a romanticized image of Karen State as a place for dreams, a Perfect Place, and a powerful nationalistic discourse was sustained. I have showed how images of a perfect place could also be directed towards a Third Country where dreams could come true, especially among young people. This turn, I have argued, constituted a new element in terms of identity negotiation, especially ethnic identity. In other words, significant changes in the social field affected habituses (cf. Bourdieu 1993), as notions of the links between place and identity were renegotiated. An attempt at including "wanting to go" into Karen-ness necessarily included a redefinition of Karen-ness, and of the link between Karen-ness and Karen State. This process was characterized by friction.

I have showed how contrasting, yet closely linked, processes of relating to place and identity manifested themselves in an apparent blurring of the line between dreams and reality, possible and impossible. I substantiated this argument through a discussion of how young people talked and acted in relation to the future, and how they dealt with pre-marital romantic relationships. I also applied the concept of *ah na deh* as a partial explanation for ambiguous representations. Comparing with Wikan's (1990) case from Bali, I argued that the two cases were similar in that there were strong behavioral norms demanding that people show constraint and control over their emotions, and that this had a direct effect on how problems were dealt with.

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Without claiming that these acts somehow solved the refugees' problems or gave them the sense of humanity or voice which they struggled to achieve (cf. Tangseefa 2003), I have argued that these two features – the imagining of a Perfect Place, and seemingly contradictory ideas about the future – were defining features of identification processes among Karens in the refugee context. I believe that they *did* sense the marginalization inherent in not having a country within a global system of nation-states; in having lost their place; in having been uprooted. At the same time however, the fact that these very notions were so clearly articulated, the fact that they were central in the common Karen narratives, gives them an air of resistance.

I will end this chapter with a conversation from the very beginning of my field work. It illustrates the deeply felt hopelessness that I believe must, at least occasionally, take hold of people in the Karen refugee community. This boy longed for something else, despaired at his current situation and – being faced with me, representing some perfect life he knew he would never have but nevertheless dreamed of – almost took to his tears.

Teacher, sorry..." August Htoo starts every sentence by excusing himself, even though we are just sitting at the porch staring at the passing cars. "How long will you stay in Thailand?" I tell him I will stay until the end of December. He nods and gives a small, careful laugh. He stares straight ahead with a wrinkle on his forehead. He's sweating, it's hot, and his hands are shivering slightly. "Teacher, sorry... How many brothers and sisters do you have?" I tell him I have one older sister and one younger brother. He nods and grunts confirmatively. Another pause while I am wondering whether he is talking to me just to be polite or if he actually wants to but just can't find the words. "Teacher, sorry... I want to practice my English, but... my English is very weak," he stutters. It's true. I have problems understanding him even though I have gotten used to the Karen accent. "Don't be shy," I say "you should speak, you should practice." The conversation goes on like this for an hour, we take turns asking and answering questions. Suddenly he looks straight at me, somehow firmly and hesitantly at the same time. "Teacher, I think... You are lucky. Because...you have a country." Pause. "And..." Long pause, his eyes wander. "Peace." -"Yes." I answer. "I am lucky." -"We have to stay in Thailand," he proclaims. -"You are not happy in Thailand," It is more a statement than a question. -"No. I want to go back to my country".

Illustrative to my central point in this chapter though, Saw August had already at this time decided to apply for resettlement to the United States.

Chapter 5 - Concluding Remarks: Ambiguity and Agency

In this thesis, I have argued that Karen refugees in Thailand are in a state of *ambiguity*. This is important for how they make meaning and for how identity is constructed, how they see themselves in the world and how they think about the future. Throughout the thesis I have discussed several elements that I hold to be central to identity construction.

On the one hand marginalization, liminality and unpredictability render the refugees with a sense of powerlessness, hopelessness and insecurity. On the other hand, these traits become key to identity construction, and enable them to claim rights to a category as "deserving" refugees (cf. Malkki 1995). While marginalization is individually "real" and central to identification processes, I have argued that the dominant discourse on ethnic identity and Karen nationalism (cf. Berg 2009) proffers certain subject positions that can be seen as instrumental in this representation project. This can be conceptualized as an act of *resistance* (cf. Moore 1994) towards the dominant system of nation states (cf. Malkki 1995), and towards the ruling Burmans. Further I argued that this dominant discourse is potentially challenged by the range of NGOs the refugees meet when entering the camps. I noted a certain potential for the refugee camps to serve as multi-discourse arenas, paying special attention to the Karen Women's Organization (KWO), which aims at the empowerment of women. I showed that gender relations do change as a result of life in the camp, and I argued that the KWO is an active organization proffering alternative subject positions (cf. Moore 1994) for women in the camp. In the end however, I believe that the Karen National Union (KNU) remains fundamentally unchallenged and power remains masculinized and militarized.

In Chapter 2 I discussed the conceptualization of refugeeness among the Karens, which I labeled as somewhat paradoxical. Drawing on Malkki (1992; 1995), Tangseefa (2003) and Lubkeman (2008) I created a conceptual space for discussing the refugees' representations of their situation. While Tangseefa (2003) focuses on the victimhood and "statuslessness" of Karen IDPs, Lubkeman (2008) argues that a state of war does not automatically render actors complete "non-agents". I have argued that both perspectives have their valid points in this case: On the one hand the state of refugee was conceptualized as complete victimhood, marginalized, temporary and liminal. Life in the refugee camp, away from Karen State, as someone who has been forced to move away from their home and who has been bereft of their nation, was narrated in terms of suffering and misery. On the other hand, the very articulation

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of this notion victimhood, and the way it becomes instrumental in the nationalistic struggle, I have argued, are signs of agency.

This view is supported by Malkki (1992; 1995), who discusses the conceptualization of refugeeness among Hutu refugees in Tanzania. I have noted similarities between my case and hers: In both cases the refugees seemed to conceptualize refugeeness as a "pure" category, rendering them rightful natives and deserving of a nation. National identity was used instrumentally to claim political rights. At the same time, however, I have argued that the paradoxical, but simultaneously closely linked, pair of victimhood and resistance have become engrained in identification processes and are central in attempts at making meaning for the refugees.

Another side to the linkages between place and identity, was the noted paradoxical representations of Karen State. On the one hand it was conceptualized as a place of suffering and terror. On the other hand it was represented as a Perfect Place, and narrated in terms of an imagined Karen community where peace, solidarity, prosperity and happiness prevailed. This paradox of representation, I argue, was fundamental to the workings of Karen nationalism. I have showed how the narratives placed the lives of the Karen into a historical trajectory where myth and reality were mixed. It had a clear beginning, a story-line, a plot and a moral, and the Karens were portrayed as the innocent victims of never-ending terror at the hands of the Burman rulers. These reflections are supported by Malkki (1995), who saw the construction of a "mythico-history" (cf Malkki 1995) as central to Hutu camp refugees' understanding of themselves as "a people" with the rights to "a nation".

Central to this struggle – it can indeed be argued, the origins of it – was the Karen National Union (KNU). I have argued, in line with Berg (2009) that this organization represented a dominant discourse in the Karen refugee community, proffering certain acceptable subject positions (cf. Moore 1994) related to Karen ethnicity. Utilizing Anderson's (1991) and Eriksen's (1993) perspectives on ethnicity and nationalism, I have showed how they produced and sustained notions of Karen-ness and Karen history, and stressed the unity of the Karen People, thereby justifying their continued dominance. The production of history justifying the right to define themselves as a nation was a central tool in the production of nationalism (cf. Anderson 1990), and can be conceptualized as establishing doxa (cf. Bourdieu 1998). In line with Berg (2009) I have pointed out that the KNU underplayed the heterogeneity that actually characterizes Karens as a people, for instance the significant

linguistic divides.

While I argued in Chapter 2 that the refugee camps were social arenas ideal for the consolidation of nationalism and continued – if not enhanced – dominance of the KNU (cf. Berg 2009), I have also pointed out their potential as multi-discourse arenas. The organizational environment in particular, and the relatively high accessibility to and from the "outside world" compared to Karen State, were main reasons for this. A central way in which life in the refugee camp represented change, was the social transformation that seemed to occur in terms of gender relations. In Chapter 3 I argued that some of the marked differences in everyday life have especially affected women's roles and identification processes. Changes in the division of labor within the household, better access to schools, and being faced with a number of organizations especially directed towards women, providing new modes of action, were among the central elements. I have argued that the range of available subject positions for women have increased (cf. Moore 1994). Moreover, I have pointed to the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) as a central actor. Their aim was the empowerment of women through providing them leadership training, income generation projects and various workshops. Many informants reported that they had started thinking differently after getting in touch with the KWO, that they had started thinking that they "didn't have to be dependent on the men". This development was further facilitated by the combination of the facts that in camp, agriculture no longer demanded the labor of women (or men), and that more girls went to school in camp than in Karen State.

Female leadership was a central issue for the KWO, and I have argued that their work has indeed taken female leadership a long way towards a more general acceptance. In other words, development was moving towards a larger range of available subject positions for women (cf. Moore 1994). At the same time however, the situation in camp led to its own problems related to changing gender roles, and overall it is hard to estimate whether there has been an actual shift in power in favor of women. Moreover, I have also argued that the KWO conceptualized Karen gender roles as complementary, not hierarchical, and thus install women and men with different capacities for action. This notion remains unquestioned, and can perhaps be labeled a doxic notion (cf Bourdieu 1977). Moreover it is in line with what was commonly asserted by scholars and activists alike up until a few decades ago (cf. Atkinson and Errington 1990 and Fagertun 2009), that gender roles in Southeast Asia are "equal but different". In line with Moore (1994) and Fagertun (2009), I hold that this notion

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nevertheless implies a notion of fundamental *difference*, and as such inhibits the potential for dominance.

While the KWO was a central actor which could arguably be seen as resisting the dominant KNU discourse in certain ways, I argued that they did not challenge the fundamental sense of Karen-ness proffered by this discourse. While this approach could perhaps be interpreted as the KWO being unable, or unwilling, to challenge the dominant discourse, I have argued, in line with Parker (2005), that this form of resistance can indeed be seen as agency. Moreover the concept of *ah na deh* (crudely interpreted as a tendency to avoid direct confrontation) possibly favors working "behind the scenes" over rebellion.

In the face of resettlement options, ideas about identity, ethnicity and aspirations were renegotiated. In Chapter 4 I discussed how the linkages between place and identity (cf. Malkki 1995) proffered within the discourse of Karen nationalism, where Karen State was fundamental to Karen ethnicity, were challenged in the face of change. The friction that occurred included doubt, ambiguity and guilt related to a desire to go to a third country (cf. Berg 2009), and there was an intense ongoing negotiation within the refugee community as to how or whether this could fit into fundamental notions about ethnic identity. Was it possible to be a proper Karen and actually choose to resettle to a third country? Given that the resettlement program has only been going on for a little over five years, outcomes are hard to predict.

Moreover, in Chapter 4 I showed how the unpredictability and uncertainty related to life in the refugee camp – on the one hand getting in touch with something "other", while on the other hand sensing one's own low status and lack of options within this system, led to young Karen refugees talking about their future in markedly paradoxical ways. While the narratives discussed in Chapter 2 were fundamental to most peoples' representations of their ethnic identity, their individual histories and their values - "everyone" presented plans to go back to Karen State and Help Their Community - many simultaneously made more or less firm plans to get resettled. Similar contrasting ways of thinking and talking about the future were manifest in the ways young people dealt with pre-marital romantic relationships. I noted how people talked about romantic relationships in seemingly inconsistent ways, apparently hesitant to "admit" to being in one. I drew lines to the concept of *ah na deh*, arguing that norms of behavior inducing people to show constraint, to be in control of their emotions and not stir up bad feelings, might lead to a certain care when dealing with emotionally loaded

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issues. Similar norms of behavior have been noted by Wikan (1990) in her monograph from Northern Bali. Constraining emotional expressions was fundamentally important in Wikan's (1990) case, and it had a direct and severe influence on how people dealt with problems. In the Karen case I have argued that remaining ambiguous was a turn that allowed people to hope while "staying Karen", and without the great risk of losing face if and when their plans changed.

Several of the traits discussed above can be said to be characterized by a *paradox of representation*. Conceptualizations of refugeeness; representations of Karen State; Changes in gender roles; and peoples' thoughts about the future, were all characterized by a degree of ambiguity. These ambiguities, I argue, led to representational paradoxes, and were fundamental to identity construction. They were a way of *making meaning* for Karen refugees, constantly faced as they were with unpredictability and non-fulfillment of their ambitions. I see this turn as an exhibition of agency. Thus, the conceptualization of refugeeness pointed to and criticized by Malkki (1995) and Lubkeman (2008) as 'bare humans' with no agency, driven by an almost biological urge to survive, generally does not apply here.

Let it be noted however, that I do not wish to underplay the suffering many Karen people have experienced as a result of the more than 60 year long war. Even though I point to the active use of Karen history, and to attempts at making meaning; and even though I suggest that factors in the refugee camp improve certain aspects of life for women – I do by no means suggest that the suffering they talk about isn't "real", that they don't "actually" feel marginalized, powerless and insecure. The fact that it is now being debated whether to define the atrocities committed against Karens in Eastern Burma as crimes against humanity (see for instance Amnesty International 2008), should more than suffice to stress this. The title of this thesis, as well as the last quote in Chapter 4, were included as a reminder, to myself and to the reader: For the past six months I have struggled to obtain an analytical distance to my empirical material, and can thus (hopefully) point to some abstract processes going on among Karen refugees. However I have tried to tie my analysis to informants' voices throughout the thesis, reminding myself and the reader who this is all about. I hope I have managed to pay respect to their experiences.

List of expressions and abbreviations

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Border, the: Refers to the national border between Thailand and Burma.

Burma/Myanmar. The official name of the country is Union of Myanmar. The opposition prefers the name Burma.

Burman/Burmese: "Burman" refers to the largest ethnic group in Burma, which dominates the central and urban areas of Burma. "Burmese" refers to all nationalities which consider themselves to belong in Burma, and as such also includes, in addition to Burmans, the ethnic minorities of Shan, Karen, Kachin, Mon, Rohingya, Kayah and Chin. Indigenously however, Burmese usually refers to Burmans.

CCSDPT: Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced People in Thailand.

CPB: Communist Party of Burma

DKBA: Democratic Karen Buddhist Army. Fractioned out of the KNU in 1995 and are now in alliance with the SPDC.

KED: Karen Education Committee. The educational wing of the KNU

KNLA: Karen National Liberation Army. The military wing of the KNU.

KNU: Karen National Union. The largest Karen insurgency group/opposition party

KRC: Karen Refugee Committee. The overall representatives of Karen refugees in Thailand.

KWO: Karen Women's Organization

MOI: Thai Ministry of Interior

Naw: Used before girls' and women's names in polite or formal settings. The prefix is used regardless of age or marital status.

PAB: Provincial Admission Boards: Administrative units that register refugees in the camps on an ad hoc basis. Also used to denote a person that has been registered as a legitimate dweller in the camp but which does not have refugee status.

RTA: Royal Thai Army

RTG: Royal Thai Government

Saw: Used before boys' and men's names in polite or formal settings. The prefix is used regardless of age or marital status.

SLORC. State Law and Order Restoration Council. The previous name of the SPDC.

SPDC: The State Peace and Development Council. The military junta of the Burman central authorities. Refers to both government and military, as the head of state also is the head of the military (Senior General Than Shwe). Commonly used by the Karens to denote the Burmese Army.

Tatmadaw: The Burmese Army. Commonly referred to as the SPDC, even though the SPDC also includes the Government.

TBBC: Thailand Burma Border Consortium. Handles deliveries of rice, cooking oil, yellow beans, vegetable mix, charcoal and building materials to all the camps along the border. Member organization of the CCSDPT.

ZOA: Zud Ost Asien. Provides primary and secondary education in most of the camps. Member organization of the CCSDPT.

MI: Malteser International. Provides health and sanitation services to the camps

PPAT: Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand. Organizing activities related to Reproductive health in the camps

WE: World Education. Provides special education in the camps.

HI: Handicap International. Provides mine risk education and rehabilitation in the camps.

COERR: Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees

TOPS: Taipei Overseas Peace Service

SVA: Shanti Volunteer Association. In charge of libraries in the camps

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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Appendixes

1 - Map of Burma



2 - Map of Karen State



3 - Refugee camps in the Thailand-Burma border area³¹



³¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e4877d6> [17.03.10]