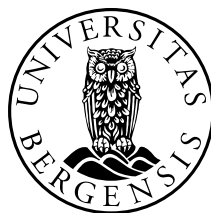# Common Dreams and Individual Goals

Negotiating Identity Across the Thai-Burma Border

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the M.A. degree

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Front Cover Photo: Taken in the area around Mae Sot, Thailand. The mountains in the distance are in Burma.

Contents

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First and foremost I wish to thank all the wonderful people who made this thesis possible by letting me into their everyday lives along the Thai-Burma border. Sharing experiences, thoughts and feelings with them have forever altered my view on life. You are all in my heart.

I also want to thank the volunteer initiative program that accepted me as a volunteer, and thereby facilitated my entrance into the two field sites.

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Karine Røthe, Bergen, Norway, September 2013.

Abstract

Within a socio-historical framework of how modern nation-states and ethnic labels came to be in the Southeast Asian Mainland, this thesis sets out to explore how young individuals, currently engaging as cross-border activists in two distinct ethno-political communities, use the borders in their everyday lives to conceptualize feelings of identity in relation to community - as ethnic group, and self - as individual.

Together, the two fields presented in this thesis form a comparative analysis to explore the driving forces within current ethno-political communities along the Thai-Burma border. While I argue that the differing histories of the two ethnic groups - Mon and Karen - is a necessary framework to understand their current position towards the national politics of Burma and surrounding countries, the individual border-crossers seem to be subject for similar means and expectations while engaging as activists.

While the Post 10 students at the Karen migrant school negotiate feelings of identity in relation to the possible future life paths presented through the different social networks they are currently part of, the female staff at the Mon woman's organization have to balance their roles as 'static symbols' according to established expectations from their local communities, and 'dynamic actors' through their current engagement as cross-border activists.

I argue that while ethnic identity as Mon and Karen continue to be tied to current discourses about national identity in Burma; personal identities among the individual border-crossing activists are increasingly tied to 'global flows' contributing to the increased development of a specialized skills set acquired at the border as 'space-in-between'.

As such, the border as used by the people who cross them as part of their everyday lives, could be seen as 'alternative spaces' to the legitimized geographical spaces of modern nation-states. While the borders represent lines of demarcations on geo-political maps, they represent spaces of transformation for the people engaged as cross-border activists.

While the 'common dreams' of the Karen Migrant School and the Mon Woman's Organization as part of larger 'imagined communities' might be seen as driving forces of the two communities, an increased awareness and capability to reach 'individual goals' seems to form a parallel outcome.

Notes Regarding Places, Names and Titles

Burmese or *Myanmar*; used as adjectives, refer to all citizens of contemporary Burma.

Burman, on the other hand, refers to the major ethnic group in the country.

Regarding the name of the country; *Burma* or *Myanmar*, which one to use has been politically charged even since the SLORC changed the name from the 'Union of Burma' to the 'Union of Myanmar' when they took power in 1988. They also changed the names of some large cities and administrative divisions; Rangoon became Yangon, Moulmein became Mawlamyine, and so on. While SLORC claimed that it had simply reinstated the original names for the country, its political opponents regarded the changes as illegitimate[1]. During my fieldwork, my Karen informants largely used the name *Burma*, while my Mon informants for most part used the name *Myanmar*. I will, mainly of practical reasons, refer to the country as *Burma*, except for in the cases my informants or references have done otherwise.

Hongsawathoi The (imagined) homeland of Mon.
Kawthoolei The (imagined) homeland of Karen.
Tatmadaw The Armed Forces of Burma.
Mandalas Historical circle-shaped kingdoms.

Mi Titling women in Mon.
Mehm Titling men in Mon.
Naw Titling women in Karen.
Saw Titling men in Karen.

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[1] Foreign governments have responded variously to the official name changes. While the UN and many governments recognized them, Australia, the United States, and several European countries have until recently continued to refer to the country as "Burma" (Lang 2002). The last years, and especially since the military regime was abolished and replaced by a (at least nominally) civilian government in March 2011, foreign countries and international agencies have increasingly adopted the name "Myanmar" to refer to the country.

Akronyms

ABSDF All Burma Students' Democratic Front. Burmese insurgent organization of student activists founded in November 1988

ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations

DAB Democratic Alliance of Burma. A coalition of twenty-three anti-government groups formed in November 1988

HURFOM Human Rights Foundation of Monland

KNLA Karen National Liberation Army

KNU Karen National Union

MNLA Mon National Liberation Army

NDF National Democratic Front

NMSP New Mon State Party

SLORC State Law and Order Restoration Council. The military regime that ruled Burma from 1988 to 1997

SPDC State Peace and Development Council. The new title adopted by the SLORC regime in November 1997. Abolished in March 2011 (replaced by a civilian government)

TBC The Border Consortium

UNHCR United Nations High Commission for Refugees

USDP Union Solidarity and Development Party. A political party led by President Thein Sein (a former general of SPDC). Registered in June 2010

The specific goal of ethnography is to give faces and names to mass movements, to make sure that human beings are not viewed as mere cogs in the wheel of social change. Each community is unique, and while it may be possible to study many of them and make some larger theoretical claims, it is still crucial to pay attention also to local circumstances and the ways in which people themselves make sense of the processes happening in their lives.

(Ghodsee 2010:203-204)

Prologue

Transnational Engagements

"I am still in the stage of learning and sharing", declares Mi Jinseneng while the mini-van accelerates to gain even higher speed on the winding road through the tropical forest. We are on our way to Sangkhlaburi, a town situated only a few kilometers from the Burmese border. We only met an hour ago, but as I am her organization's new volunteer she is eager to exchange as much knowledge and experience as possible on the four hour long journey remaining. She is not wasting her time. She tells me about Buddhism, the concerns of Mon people both inside and outside Burma, her domestic and political life as the daughter of a central Mon figure, the aims and objectives of the NGO she is currently coordinating, and her plans for the future. All the time she is eager to compare her stories with mine. "Now I will go to sleep", she says after three hours of intense conversations. "This is the worst part, we have to cross some mountains before we arrive". She puts in her earplugs, turns on some music, leans back and closes her eyes. The tones streaming into her ears are in Mon. The lyrics are about love, and the importance of helping their own people towards a better future…

- Kanchanaburi Province, 2011.

1 Introduction

Mon and Karen have historically lived in the same areas of Burma; comprising the central-, southern-, and eastern parts of the country, including the area now constituting the border between Thailand and Burma[2]. During the reign of *mandalas*[3], people today referred to as Karen, mainly lived as slash-and-burn agriculturalist under smaller chiefdoms in the highland areas, while Mon alternately ruled and subdued to larger lowland kingdoms.

As stated by South, "elites among the Mon, Karen and Burma's more than one hundred other ethnic minority groups have long sought to define themselves in opposition to the Burman majority" (2003:4). With the changes that followed the Colonial period when Burma was under British rule from 1824, and the subsequent independence from 1948, such opposition took form in new ethno-political organizations based on ethno-national sentiments. The Karen migrant school and the Mon woman's organization focused on in this thesis are part of such networks organized around The Karen National Union (KNU) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) respectively. The two communities forming the empirical ground of this thesis have in common an ethno-political engagement across national borders. Both the Karen migrant school and the Mon organization were part of larger networks, aiming at improving the rights of 'their own people' within the modern nation-state of Burma. The Karen migrant school, situated outside the border town of Mae Sot, aimed at preparing representatives of the younger generation of Karen to take part in further education, training and work - that would benefit each individual student as well as the Karen as group. The Mon organization situated in the border town of Sangkhlaburi - some 200 kilometers further south - filled similar means by facilitating further training and education for young women to partake in the development of Mon society both within Burma and on the border. The two communities represent two of the largest ethnic minorities within modern Burma, who are still fighting for their rights as distinct ethnic nationalities. This thesis sets out to explore how this is done in the scope of the

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[2] There are also groups of Karen and Mon living in Thailand, but these 'Thai Mon' and 'Thai Karen' - who are often descendants of earlier migrants from Burma, are outside the scope of this thesis as they do not longer identify as Burmese.
[3] A somehow circle-shaped kingdom. I will return to this concept in much further detail in chapter 3.

border in the interplay between common dreams and individual goals. The main research question which I seek to explore throughout this thesis is as follows:

How can the border be said to function as a 'liminal space-in-between', where young cross-border activists – currently engaged as either students in the Karen migrant school, or staff in the Mon Woman and Child Organization – negotiate and transform their feelings of identity in relation to ties and opportunities present in the transnational space of the Thai-Burma border?

I will further elaborate the aim of this thesis below, before I give a short historical introduction to the history of Burma before and after the 1980's. From there, I will continue by introducing the two fields forming the empirical ground of this thesis, before I turn to methodological considerations in relation to the fieldwork conducted in the two field sites. At the end of this chapter, I will give a short outline of what follows in the preceding chapters.

Aim of Thesis

Inspired by Barth (1969,1994), and Leach ([1954] 1969) I argue that social identity is based on what is perceived as the most desirable and advantageous choice within a certain socio-historical framework. All individuals inhabit several 'social identities'; and which one prevails depend on the social environment the individual is currently part of. Further, I argue that while ethnic identity continues to be tied up with national identity; individual identity is increasingly tied up with 'global flows' (Appadurai 2001).

As I argue throughout this thesis, people seemingly trapped in the marginal spaces created in the scope of the borders separating the so-called nation-states of Thailand and Burma, are using these 'spaces-in-between' to transform and re-vitalize transnational ethno-political communities according to current 'flows' present in this highly ambiguous 'liminal' (Turner 1969) space. At the same time, I argue that the people making up these communities - the Karen students and the Mon female staff - make their own individual use of the border as 'space-in-between' while engaging as cross-border activists. Throughout this thesis, I seek to elaborate such transformations at both individual- and group-levels to trace current frictions in feelings of identity among these young border-crossing activists. The underlying argument is that although the ethno-political organizations of the Karen migrant school and the Mon woman's organization are continuously re-vitalized according to leading discourses about nation-states and their own particular relation to the Burman government - which must be understood in a socio-historical perspective; the individual cross-border activist currently representing these ethno-political movements seem to gain an increased value as self through

the information and knowledge acquired at the border as 'space-in-between'. Freed from the limitations of connected time-space (Giddens 1994) that they have experienced 'inside Burma'; and the increased access to 'global flows' (Appadurai 2001) in the form of alternative frameworks, education, and communication in the border as 'space-in-between' - the future life-paths of the young border-crossing activists seem less obvious, and more connected to what the different social networks they were part of and somehow represented have to offer for each individual on the basis of their current engagement.

I will return to the theories mentioned here in much further detail in chapter two. But now, I will turn to the historical background of Burma and the ethnic groups of Karen and Mon.

A Short Historical Background

The history of Burma and its many ethnic minorities is multifaceted and complex. Although the full picture is necessary to understand all aspects of the current politics within Burma, I only point to the major happenings influencing today's situation for the people in my focus.

Today, a 2400 km long border consisting of mountainous areas and dense jungle is dividing Thailand from Burma. As I will turn to in much further detail in chapter three, this is a rather new arrangement. In pre-colonial times, what is today known as the Southeast Asian mainland and the modern nations comprising it, consisted of the centers of traditional circle-shaped kingdoms fading out into mainly 'ungoverned' peripheries. From the period under British Colonial rule starting in 1824, this was to change. As part of the British administrators' strategy to control its new-won area and the people within, the western method of geo-political mapping of nations into absolute demarcated geographical areas was introduced to the Southeast Asian mainland (Thongchai 1996). Further, the people of Burma were for the first time subject of censuses classifying the diverse population into different ethnic categories (Rajah 1990, Buadaeng 2007). For the people living within and across the geographical areas forming these new territories within geo-political boundaries, this new way of mapping came to have enormous effects on their movements, ways of life, and forms of identification. Two such peoples were the Karen and the Mon - two of the largest ethnic minorities today inhabiting Burma and its borderland to Thailand.

The 'traditional' tributary relationships - where everything from small chiefdoms to large kingdoms formed intricate networks of alliances - falling and rising according to shifting power-relations - transformed into seemingly static power-holders claiming legitimacy to rule a demarcated geographical area and all the people within. Together with the

mapping of the Southeast Asian mainland into demarcated nation-states, came the development of a national consciousness among its subjects. Not only by the dominating ethnic groups - which in this case were the Burmans (and in Thailand the Thai), but also among the ethnic minorities defying their domination.

When Burma officially regained independence from the British Empire in 1948, political parties representing most of the largest ethnic groups[4], failed in their initial efforts to establish a federal Union of Burma under which they could enjoy semi-independent rule. Although military arms of both ethnic groups had been able to hold the towns of Moulmein (Mon) and Rangoon (Karen) for a short time after independence, counterattacks by the Burmese forced them to abandon the armed struggle in the cities and towns, and move their activity to the countryside, where resistance to the central government is still present today (South 2003:9). Since then, Burma has been subject to the longest-running civil war recorded through world history. The country has been characterized by military coups, corrupted elections, ethnic revolts, and armed conflicts between *Tatmadaw* (the Burman armed forces) and the country's many ethnic forces. As a result, civil society has been increasingly drained for resources in the form of education, basic human rights, and possibilities for income within a country largely closed off from international influences - except for economical investments favoring the few in the power-holding circles. Censored media and an absence of freedom of speech has led to imprisonment for those individuals uttering opinions not accepted by the regime. In addition, the civic populations living in areas adjacent to the Thai-Burma border have been particular subjects of violent persecution by the *Tatmadaw*, often accused of supporting the ethnic resistance simply because they share the same ethnic labels as the ethno-political armies, splinter groups, or local militias operating in the area. The significant drainage of resources within the Burmese society has led the country from being the richest economy in the Southeast Asian mainland at the end of colonial rule, to being the poorest economy up to the present.

From the 1980´s Onwards

From the time of the dry-season of 1983-84, *Tatmadaw* intensified its operations against the main ethnic strongholds along the Thai-Burma border. Their aim was "to drive rebel forces and civilians from the area, strangle their funding from the lucrative black market border economy, and establish a presence right on the border" (Lang 2002:78). After the crackdown

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[4] With the exception of the political elite of Karen who already then resisted incorporation into a federal state in favor of achieving their goal of their own independent nation.

on the pro-democracy students' uprisings in 1988, some 10 000 students and activists fled to the Thai-Burma border, where the urban political opposition united with the ethnic insurgents. The arrival of educated, urban-based refugees on this scale to the border area was a new phenomenon, as explained by Lang; "until then, exposure to the civil war and life in the border areas had generally been remote from the lives of most of the urban Burmese population, and ethnic insurgent groups were not involved in the 1988 uprising" (2002:163).

This new alliance represented a real threat to the legitimacy of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), who until then had been able to somewhat control and restrict the ethnic oppositions' influence to the border areas (South 2003:13). This renewed optimism within the opposition would nevertheless not last too long. The roles of its neighbors to the north and east - communist China and capitalist Thailand, played a major role. Thailand was the first state to develop positive official ties with the SLORC; intimately tied to business opportunities in the border areas (Lang 2002). Burma also became a chair-member of the ASEAN - leading a politic of 'constructive engagement'[5]. In the case of the Mon, NMSP was left with little choice but to agree a ceasefire with Rangoon in 1995, as result of the commercial and geo-strategic realignments of the post-Cold War era. The withdrawal of support by their erstwhile backers in the Thai military was especially central regarding this decision. While this counted for fifteen other armed ethnic groups before them, the greatly weakened KNU was the only major insurgent group in Burma not to have agreed to a ceasefire (South 2003:4).

As *Tatmadaw* through various periods has gained increased control of geographical areas previously held by ethno-political groups such as KNU and NMSP, such groups have seen it necessary to move their activity across the border and into Thailand in order to be able to uphold their resistance. This includes ethno-political leaders, educational institutions, and different organizations aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of their own people. Since the *Tatmadaw* managed to seize the NMSP headquarters at Three Pagoda Pass in 1990 and the KNU headquarters of Mannerplaw in 1994, KNU has been forced to lead their struggles from smaller bases along the Thai-Burma border. After NMSP signed a cease-fire agreement with SPDC in 1995, they have maintained their bases in Mon state, but are also present in Sangkhlaburi. Meanwhile, regular residents who have been subject to the ongoing civil war between *Tatmadaw* and the many ethnic forces have also been pushed towards and across the Thai-Burma border. This has led today's network of ethno-political activists and

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[5] Which by all practical means implies the member-countries to mind their own business except for in economical cooperation.

organizations to expand along the border zone and partly mix with people fleeing fighting - or its consequences, as well as people who have been living in the border zones for generations.

In 2011, the military regime made an unexpected change when it officially replaced itself with a civilian government - although containing many of the former generals. Since then, many things have changed within Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi, the very symbol on democracy in Burma, was elected to a seat in the parliament not long after she was released from house arrest. Political prisoners have been freed, and media censorship has been abolished. As a result, many international agencies and countries have opened up for trade and investment with Burma. Nevertheless, many things still stay the same, and one of them is continuing tensions between the government - through its local military arms - and the many ethnic communities along its borderlands.

A Karen Migrant School and a Mon Woman and Child Organization

The Karen migrant school (KKCS[6]), which was the first of my field sites, offered general education to students from grade one to Post 10 College[7]. In addition, the school offered what for most was the first insight into Karen language, culture and history as seen from 'their own peoples' perspective. Arriving from localities where their ethnic identity for the most part had been marginalized and downplayed to avoid trouble, the migrant school celebrated Karen nationality as something to be proud of. Although most students seemed to have been aware of their ethnic identity prior to their arrival at KKCS, the meanings implied by such an identity seemed to vary greatly according to the localities they grew up in. Many had not known about the Karen resistance going on along the Thai-Burma border prior to their arrival at the borderlands themselves. Many more had grown up in the midst of the fighting, which had finally forced them to flee.

The Mon Woman and Child Organization (MWCO), which was my second field site, served similar means. Depending on where the staff came from, some had not known about the violations experienced in Mon communities along the borders - themselves growing up in more urban and central parts of Southern Burma. Others had grown up in the areas subject to

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[6] *Kawswer Kanyaw Chrip School* - a pseudonym directly translated meaning 'Christian Karen Border School'.

[7] Post 10 College is a program for students who have already graduated grade 10, but do not hold any official certificates enabling them to continue with further studies. By offering grade 11 and 12, KKCS aim at preparing the students to pass the General Education Development (GED) exam – which certify that the taker has American high-school level academic skills, and thereby enable them to apply for higher education.

such violations[8], but without the conceptual and material tools to properly deal with it. At the MWCO, the young women had access to alternative forms of knowledge and education not accessible 'inside Burma'. This included knowledge about 'fundamental human rights' as declared by the United Nations, and training and education enabling them to apply local development projects and empowerment trainings 'inside Burma' and on the border.

In addition, both communities gave its members the opportunity to gain higher education by preparing and mediating the students and staff to attend Universities in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. In short, their engagement as cross-border activists increased the social networks they were part of - and thereby their possible life-paths. To cope with the different and often conflicting ties, obligations and opportunities connected to the different social networks; their families, their home communities, the ethno-political organizations, and the international community present in the scope of the border - members of both communities seemed to imagine a multitude of possible future life paths.

Approaching the Field

There are several reasons why the focus of this thesis fell on the Thai-Burma borderlands and the people crossing them. During my Bachelor degree, one of my favorite subjects was the course held by Anh Nga Longva called 'State, Culture, and Identity'. The way people are seemingly 'trapped' within discourses about modern nations and their boundaries - governing their movements and rights (or lack of rights) as 'citizens' or 'non- citizens' especially caught my attention. But what I found even more interesting is how people crossing such national boundaries in their everyday-lives deal with such formal discourses. For the 4th and 5th term of my BA, I then chose to attend a one-year *Thai-studies program* at the University of Thammasat in Bangkok. My year of living in a city founded on a tremendously complex fusion between western influences and Thai interpretations further deepened my interest in how prevailing concepts about nations and nationality had come to be. When I went on a two-week holiday to Burma, it felt like traveling back in time. From trousers to longyies, from pink taxies to World War II trucks, from Bangkok's skyscrapers to Yangon's worn out buildings. Later, one of my classes at Thammasat University went on a short fieldtrip to Sangkhlaburi to visit the Mon village close to the Thai-Burma border. Visiting 'Mon side' of the lake dividing the town in two felt like going back to Burma, while walking across the 300-meter wooden bridge to 'Thai side' was like slowly walking back into Thailand. This place

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[8] Including exploitation in form of forced labor, high taxes, and local conflicts between *Tatmadaw* and Mon splinter groups.

was clearly a space where different 'cultures' mixed and intervened, at the same time as holding on to their distinct traits in form of dress, housing, food and language. On my return to Bergen, the focus of my Bachelor-essay was a natural continuation of the interests gained through my studies so far. I focused on the implications of the borders for ethnic belonging among Mon and Karen situated in the borderlands between Thailand and Burma.

When I started to plan my fieldtrip for this thesis, the geographical area of study was clear. I wanted to engage in fieldwork along the Thai-Burma border. My initial thought was to focus on the descendants of so-called 'upland anarchists' (Scott 2009) who have long sought to avoid incorporation into state systems - be they traditional *mandalas* or modern nations. As both Thailand and Burma through recent years have sought increased control of their borders, such people have typically been seen as belonging to neither of the nations. While Thailand has labeled such people 'hill-tribes'[9] with very limited and restricted access both to land and rights as citizens, they have felt the same destiny as most other ethnic minorities within Burma. As I see it, such peoples have only recently been enforced subjects within discourses about nationalism and ethnicity, as the areas they have inhabited have become the very symbol of where the modern nations' sovereignty starts and ends. Along the Thai-Burma borders, such peoples have been caught in the crossfire between ethnic forces - and have in many cases become involved in such struggles themselves. As such, the people who according to Scott have avoided accommodation into state structures for as long as possible, today suffer the effect of being largely excluded from it – 'belonging to no-where'. The original aim of my research was to explore how such peoples are caught up in the discourses and policies of the modern nation-states, and how this affects their feelings of identity in relation to community (group identity) and self. Nevertheless, this aim soon proved to be far from the reality of the people I was to encounter during my fieldwork, as I will turn to next.

The Thai-Burma border is full of international actors. Everything from international humanitarian organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Les Medicines Sans Frontier (MSF), to The Border Consortium (TBC) - all focus on displaced people from Burma on the border. In addition, there are a wide variety of donor- and partner- organizations supporting the many ethnic and political organizations and institutions present in the borderlands, many of them Christian. Finally, there is a wide range of individual researchers and volunteers engaging in different ways on the border. Due to the relatively high presence of foreigners along the Thai-Burma border, just to 'meet up'

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[9] See for example Toyota (2007), Sturgeron (2005) and Buadaeng (2005).

somewhere along the border seemed potentially challenging as I could easily 'drown' in the midst of settled expats and curious tourists. Instead, I chose to apply for a volunteer position through a volunteer initiative program, which would thereby secure me direct entrance to a field site. That meant that the field to which I would get entrance, was dependent on which organizations currently sought volunteers through the program. A week into my stay at the Thai-Burma border, I was therefore placed as a volunteer teacher at a Karen migrant school in the area around Mae Sot, where I conducted fieldwork from January to April 2011.

The ethnic category 'Karen' is mostly used to refer to peoples who traditionally have conducted lives as upland cultivators in the peripheries of traditional realms, and could therefore fit into the category of upland anarchists as presented by Scott (2009). But as their position within Burmese society transformed greatly during colonial times, schools and churches were introduced to their communities and many chose to move to the lowlands where they were greatly involved within the British government (Keyes 1979, Rajah 1990, Budaeng 2007). The Karen migrant school with its Christian leadership, felt far from these upland anarchists - although many of its students were children of regular farmers living in villages adjacent to the Thai-Burma border. Instead, my attention was soon directed towards the seeming friction - between the Christian Karen ideologies as presented at the school, and how the individual students seemed to negotiate their identities in relation to actual opportunities.

At the Karen migrant school, my main method for gathering data was indeed participant observation. My role as a teacher - which in practice only lasted for a few weeks - stuck with me the entire stay. The students would address me as 'teacher', or the Karen word for it: *'thraw mu'*. When I told them I was also doing research, most expressed they already had an idea of what that implied - as there had been other researchers there before me. Nevertheless, my role as teacher seemed to somehow overshadow my role as researcher in a positive manner. Although they would frequently tell me about Karen history and habits they thought I could have interest in learning, they mostly seemed to relate to me as to the previous volunteer teachers that had been living in the community. They would ask me questions about everything 'between heaven and earth', and generally appeared open and interested in getting to know me. The fact that I myself is a woman, naturally made me connect more easily with the women/girls, than the men/ boys. The boys were eager to talk with me during classes and common activities. But during free time, most of my time was spent with the Post 10 girls, the female teachers, and visiting several of the residential houses in the community. During my entire stay, I shared dorm with the Post 10 girls and two of the female teachers. A potential

'gatekeeper' to the way I perceived the Karen migrant school was a foreign sociologist who was very involved in the community. She is referred to later as 'Pi' (Karen for 'grandmother'). She continuously infused me with information about the community and 'how things worked'. While I chose to use the information she gave me as some sort of 'background information', I was nevertheless aware of getting my own first-hand observations about how things at least seemed to be.

Initially, I had plans of conducting my entire fieldwork in this community – but unfortunately I got sick just weeks into my stay. At first, I treated the illness as regular travel-sickness, and continued my fieldwork for several more weeks. But as conditions only got worse, I ended up hospitalized in Bangkok in two periods of together two weeks. The first time I was diagnosed with *e coli*, and went back to the field after an intensive treatment of antibiotics. But as the treatment did not work I went back to the hospital, for the second time to be diagnosed with *tuberculosis*, and consequently put on anti-tuberculosis treatment. I was recovered from the dehydration, but extremely exhausted after weeks of illness. And although the anti-tuberculosis medication did temper the symptoms, it did not make them disappear. I decided to go home. After putting the fieldwork, my MA, and in general my life on hold for several months, the doctors in Norway finally gave me a diagnosis called *ulcerative colitis*, which by then had gotten its time to develop quite badly. Fortunately, the treatment I was given finally worked. In my excitement of finally feeling better, I wanted to jump 'back in the field' as soon as possible. Against my doctor's advice, I chose to return to my fieldwork only days after I finished treatment of this acute period of my newly acquired chronic disease.

My point of telling this is first and foremost to explain why this thesis is based on two field sites. Secondly, this experience of illness during my fieldwork, and the following diagnosis of UC and side effects of this chronically disease have obviously had consequences for my thesis. During the first part of my fieldwork, the sickness prohibited me from following my informants when they went to one of the (refugee) camps or other places along the border. There were thus field contexts I had access to, but unfortunately did not get the chance to observe. The negative impacts regarding the sickness experienced during the first fieldwork, also made me choose to 'start fresh' when I returned to Thailand. The sickness has also influenced the writing-phase of my thesis. If I was to choose again, I would not have had such a quick return to the field, but rather given my body the chance to get back some of its strength before I returned. I have experienced several setbacks after the initial treatment - the last one during spring 2013. The plan is to initiate a new treatment later this year, which is likely to make my life with UC much closer to 'normal'.

On my return to the Thai-Burma border, my previous engagement as volunteer through the volunteer initiative program, gave me the privilege of choosing freely from the list of organizations currently requesting volunteers. My choice ended up at a Mon woman and child organization based in Sangkhlaburi. As this was the only 'mono-ethnic' organization currently seeking assistance, I found this to be the easiest one to view in a comparative perspective with my first field. Thereby, I ended up doing fieldwork among the same ethnic groups that I had focused on in my bachelor essay. The second part of my fieldwork was conducted between October 2011, and February 2012.

The second part of my fieldwork was thus even further away from the people I initially intended to study. It was conducted among ethnic Mon - a people known for ruling some of the most powerful and influential kingdoms through the Mainland Southeast Asia's recorded history. In Sangkhlaburi, I volunteered as an English teacher and helped edit documents, proposals and news at the organization in which I also focused my research. Initially, I was unsure whether to focus on this particular organization, or on another arena in the Mon society of Sangkhlaburi. Except for the coordinator of the program, the female staff initially acted considerably reserved around my presence, and I had already gotten to know some male 'activists' in the community who were much more open and including. The first two weeks while I shared house with the youngest half of the organization's staff in a house located on 'Thai side' of the lake, the girls barely spoke to me. It was hard not taking it personally, and as a matter of fact, that was exactly what I did. After spending a whole morning from about 9 am to around 4 or 5 pm in the afternoon around a table outside the office-house, making flower ornaments to put on the lake at night for the local celebrations of *Loi Kratong* (flower festival), of which someone had spoken to me directly maybe five times - regardless of my own countless initiatives - I had enough. Walking across the wooden bridge back to the house on 'Thai side', my curious appearance was replaced by a grumpy face. Fortunately, that worked. Upon our return to the house, Mi Nondar asked me to take a walk with her. She told me they were not used to foreigners wanting to get to know them and spend time with them. Other volunteers just did their hours of teaching and editing before they went off to hang out with other foreigners. After that - although with frequent setbacks - I was gradually involved in the young women's everyday life. They embraced me as a 'sister', giving me access to their everyday lives while engaging as cross-border activists at the border. It soon became obvious that it was not only towards me they were reserved. In all public matters outside the office house and the house we lived in – the girls would to some extent 'close off' and restrict their behavior. When I asked them why, Mi Hong Sajin once

answered 'it was part of their culture'. Focusing on marginal people at the margins of nations, it felt right to give face to yet another marginal position - Mon women engaging as cross-border activists.

In both field sites I joined my informants on trips and excursion to nearby locations as far as I could. At the Karen migrant school, I visited two other Karen schools based along the border, as well as participating in several weddings at nearby locations. At the Mon Woman and Child Organization, I went on a highly unofficial visit to 'Monland', as well as on small excursions to 'the Old Village' and other nearby locations. Both at KKCS and MWCO, I was invited to go with them across the border. Unfortunately, different practical circumstances prevented this to happen. Except spending time in 'the fields', I also spent some of my free time with other foreign volunteers working with other organizations around Mae Sot and Sangkhlaburi.

At MWCO, the coordinator of the program – Mi Jinseneng – could be seen as sort of a gatekeeper. From the very beginning, I informed her that I did research - something she expressed she was very positive about. As the organization's own tasks were based on different methods of fieldwork, and Mi Jinseneng had a master's degree from a Bangkok University, she seemed rather aware of what this implied. If I wanted to go somewhere, she would do her best to arrange it, and she called me several very early mornings to invite me on different happenings. In addition, she would sometimes say, "have you heard Mi Sajin's story? It is very interesting" while gazing at Mi Sajin and thereby introducing me to have a chat with her. Further, Mi Jinseneng and I had many long conversations about everything from Thai prime ministers, flooding, gas pipelines, boyfriends, children and so on. In the beginning of my stay we started of by spending a lot of time together. But as my close relationship with her seemed to create a distance between me and the rest of the staff (as she was their superior coordinator), I reluctantly had to chose away a close relationship with her to get more access to the rest of the staff.

I was to some extent an intervening actor in both communities through my engagement as volunteer - exchanging and discussing knowledge and experiences in class, and assisting with the production of different documents in English. Overall, I feel that this gave me a more natural entrance to participating in my informants' everyday lives, compared to if my only role would have been that of a researcher. It also gave me valuable access to different sorts of 'background information' I might otherwise not have gotten. At both sites, I felt that I to some extent was seen as a resource for my informants. In the Karen school community, some of the teachers asked if I could help them move to

Norway. One of the shopkeepers further envisioned me working with her and the Karen guerilla after the completion of my studies. In the Mon community, I felt that I was seen as more of a collaborating partner they could exchange experience and knowledge with. In both communities, our language of communication was English. This naturally made me miss out on many of the everyday-conversations. Nevertheless, I soon got good at asking them what they were talking about, and they increasingly got good at telling me before I asked. Further, the language barrier also implied positive outcomes. It made me even more aware of all the things that are not said in words, but played out in various different manners; how they moved and in relation to whom, how they dressed, lived and ate, who and what they showed interest for, and so on.

In the end, I wish to underline my awareness that the people and places making the empirical foundation of this thesis are political sensitive. This is kept in mind when choosing which information to share and which to hold back in the following text.

What Follows

In this first chapter, *Introduction*, I have aimed at giving a general introduction to my field of research. As such, most of the topics touched upon in this chapter will be further elaborated in the following.

In the second chapter, *Theoretical Framework,* I go on to discuss theories relevant to understand the current engagements of cross-border activists and the communities they are part of. By looking at studies on Southeast Asian borders and the people crossing them, I seek to connect the recent history of Burma with anthropological studies done in the same period.

In the third chapter, *Ethnicity and the State,* I then turn my focus to how modern nation-states and ethnic labels came to be in the Southeast Asian mainland. To understand current dynamics regarding identity - and how this is negotiated across national borders - it is crucial to have knowledge about the interplay between 'traditional' and 'modern' concepts of group identity. Therefore, I seek to connect historical perspectives on 'Karen' and 'Mon' as ethnic groups with the communities forming the empirical ground of this thesis.

In the fourth chapter, *Cross-Border Engagements,* I seek to elaborate the four main types of cross-border engagement I argue characterize my informants. Although I argue that my informants were currently engaged as 'cross-border activists' during my fieldwork, they were in varying degree simultaneously connected to three other types of engagement – what I term 'cross-border residents', 'camp dwellers', and 'migrant workers'. The presentation of

these four ideal types of engagement is meant to provide an analytical order to the complex reality of border-life experienced during my fieldwork.

In the fifth chapter, *Transforming Identities,* my focus turn to the everyday life of my informants at the first field site – the Karen migrant school. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the seeming friction between ideal and lived life-paths, as the Post 10 students are presented with alternative forms of concepts and knowledge in the transnational scope of the border. I suggest that the time the Post 10 students spend as cross-border activists can be seen as a liminal period of transition where their feelings of identity in relation to community and self are challenged and transformed according to their current ties and opportunities.

In the sixth chapter, *Female Activists: Static Symbols and Dynamic Actors,* I seek to follow the thread of the previous chapter by discussing whether a similar friction between ideal and lived life paths can be said to be present among the female staff at the Mon woman's organization. While that seems to be the case, the ways this friction is evident differ between the two communities - and thus seems to be closely tied up with the ideology promoted by the communities' leadership. While the Karen identity promoted at the migrant school is closely tied up to religion, the Mon identity at the woman's organization seems to be inseparable from their roles as female.

In the *Postscript,* I attempt to summarize the main points discussed throughout the thesis, to suggest what these two empirical cases - from two distinct ethno-political communities - can tell us about the negotiation between common dreams and individual goals. While I argue that historical continuities have consequences for the social space each individual border-crosser is part of either as Karen student or Mon staff, the everyday dynamics influencing which life-paths the border-crossers follow seem to be very much shared in the two communities. This is especially recognizable in the increased awareness of 'value as self' through the individual skill-sets acquired while engaging as cross-border activists.

2 Theoretical Framework

Since the critics of structural functionalism in the 1960s, anthropology has moved away from the study of societies as closed off 'natural' entities. Instead of focusing on structures and primordial ties, anthropological studies have turned to a larger emphasize on process. Change is not any longer regarded as aberration, but as an inherent aspect within social systems. Further, anthropology has moved away from the study of function, towards the interpretation of meaning (Hylland-Eriksen 2004).

An important contributor to this change within anthropological studies was Edmund R. Leach ([1954] 1969). Leach broke away from the anthropological thinking in England at his time. He disagreed with the then dominant discourse established by Radcliffe-Brown – that spoke of social systems as naturally existing real entities. With empirical foundation in Northern Burma, he came to argue that shifts between political organizations were part of a dynamic flow of people back and forth between different 'ideal types', according to which choices of alternative actions the individuals faced in real life. My empathy with Leach's way of thinking makes up an important foundation of the theoretical position applied throughout this thesis. In the next chapter, I begin by discussing how today's prevailing notions on ethnic identity and nationalism have been formed and transformed throughout the historical past of the Southeast Asian mainland. This view is further supported by the ideas of the Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul[10] (1996), who have supplied scholars focusing on nationhood and the Southeast Asian mainland with an alternative history of how today's geo-body known as 'Thailand' - and its surrounding countries, came to be through the influence of western imperialists. Thongchai underlines the importance of getting to know the history of margins - as opposed to the official history of the nations, which involves political connotations favoring the ruling elite - in order to understand prevailing concepts about identity related to nationhood. Thongchai's account of the formation of today's Southeast Asian nations corresponds well with Benedict Anderson's influential theory about nations and nationality as based on 'imagined communities' (1983). With this theory, Anderson implies that any

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[10] Hereby referred to by his first name - Thongchai – as is the standard way of reference in Thailand.

community larger than the local society where 'everyone knows everyone', can only be imagined through a set of common traits such as language (print capitalism), history (cultural roots) and the educational system. It is imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them"(Anderson [1983] 2006:6). Anderson especially stresses the importance of print capitalism as a key feature to the development of a national consciousness. Written accounts of people's history and the accumulation of knowledge have altered the ability to presuppose common cultural roots among people otherwise not related. As I will return to later in this thesis, nationalist elites of both Mon and Karen have made extensive use of written material about the presumed common traits and origin of their ethnic groups, to spread the consciousness of their so-called 'imagined communities'. An influential anthropologist and political scientist who represents much of what has been said about the peripheries of the Southeast Asian mainland and the people inhabiting them, is James C. Scott. In his recent book from 2009, he presents the 'anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia' - where he claims that people, up until fairly recently, have actively worked against incorporation into state-centers by adapting a mobile life-style not applicable to the ruling patterns of sedentary kingdoms. The upland peripheries of classic *mandala* states have been the central arena for such 'anarchist' peoples. The entire Thai-Burma border is argued as part of this region referred to as *Zomia*.

The theories above together make up a central foundation for the next chapter, where I seek to trace the continuities and discontinuities throughout the history of the Southeast Asian mainland that have led to today's understanding of terms such as 'ethnicity' and 'the state'. All human beings - as social actors - have to adapt to the time and place they live in. This seems to include a continuous quest of having a choice. Now, I will turn to the anthropology of the Southeast Asian mainland. The specific focus will be on borders and peripheries, and the ethnic groups transcending them.

The Anthropology of the Southeast Asian Mainland and its Peoples

In line with the anthropological tradition at the time, the first accessible accounts on Mon and Karen as ethnic groups in Burma (and Thailand) consists of detailed ethnographic monographs depicting most aspects of life within the two peoples. During British rule in Burma, Marshall (1922) and Halliday (1917) did ethnographic studies amongst the Karen and the Mon - or the *Talaings* as referred to in Halliday's book - in more classical anthropological terms focusing on describing the 'cultural stuff'. While Marshall was an American Baptist

Missionary dedicating his book to the "the great missionary enterprise, which seeks to lift the less fortunate peoples of the worlds to a higher plane of life and enjoyment, and to bring to them the best of our Christian civilization" (1922 preface), Halliday had the position as superintendent within the British government in Burma. While scholars today argue that much of what is regarded 'Burmese culture' is in fact adapted from Mon (South 2003), Halliday (1917 preface) stated that "it is not always possible in Burma to say what has been inherited by the *Talaings* from their ancestors and what has been introduced from the Burmese". Halliday's account on Mon history was based much upon accessible native records written in Mon language and script. Marshall's account on the history of Karen, on the other hand, was based on myths of origin mainly distributed orally from one generation to the next.

As mentioned above, Leach (1954) departed from the focus on describing the 'cultural stuff' in itself to study shifts between different forms of social organization. With his empirical basis in the Kachin Hills in North-eastern Burma, he argued that shifts in ethnic identity were rather unproblematic affairs following a natural flow of people among and between different groups of mobile highlanders and sedentary lowlanders. His study of the political structures in upland Burma laid a lasting foundation for the anthropologists later to engage with Burma and its borderlands to Thailand. Since the establishment of military rule in Burma in 1962, research within Burma has been highly limited as the country became closed off for 'outside scholars' (Keyes 1979). Since then, most scholars focusing on ethnic groups originating in Burma has used the Thai-Burma border as their geographical 'point of departure' - thereby leading to an increased scholarly interest in the people leading their lives on this 'frontier'.

When modern nations, their borders, and the people crossing them won 'renewed' analytical interest among anthropologists focusing on the Southeast Asian mainland from the turn of the 1980s onwards, several scholars turned to the Thai borders. The book edited by Wijeyewardene (1990), is a 'case in point'. In the introductory chapter, Wijeyewardene explains how there was a popular notion when anthropologists first started to show interest in modern nation-states, that they would lead to an extensive cultural homogenization. But although modern nation-states by large have managed to create so-called Pan-ethnic labels, and 'imagined communities' (Anderson [1983] 2006) based on common language and history, he also argues that it has led to an increased re-vitalization among people who are not incorporated into state-systems (Wijeyewardene 1990). Wijeyewardene also points to the ongoing tension between describing ethnicity on 'display', and Barth's critique, downplaying 'cultural stuff' for the benefit of studying the boundaries between different ethnic groups. He

argues that this tension must be considered part of the phenomena of ethnicity itself rather than "merely a consequence of the re-thinking of anthropological theory"(1990:4).

Together, these chapters - all but one written by anthropologists focusing on different mainland borders and how they affect the marginal people living across them - have given valuable basis for borderland-studies on the mainland Southeast Asia today. Especially relevant for this thesis is the chapter by Bauer (1990) on Mon linguistics, representing a turn in received attention regarding people identifying as Mon. Against the until then prevailing notions that Mon was a dying language[11]; he argues there is no evidence to support such a claim when studying the use and spread of the language in Burma. Instead, he argues that publications in Mon, written in Burma, are likely to represent the largest number of books and magazines after Burmese. Classes in Mon language was first and foremost taught in Mon monasteries - something that still seems to be the case today.

An important account on Karen ethnicity is represented in another chapter in the same book. As argued by Rajah (1990), we should move away from thinking about ethnic minorities across national boundaries merely in post-nation-state terms. Instead, we should look at how what can be seen as more traditional states are prevented from engaging as states on the basis of the nationalism underlying modern nation-states. According to Rajah, there was at the time of his writing a Thai border, and a Burmese-Karen frontier region. As such, the Karen seperatist movement – and perhaps even the Burmese state – might in fact be viewed as a kind of traditional state (Rajah 1990:122-123). Therefore, a focus "on the interaction between boundaries, ethnic and national, rather than ethnic relations in the context of the state in more conventional terms" can be useful in the interpretation of notions such as 'ethnicity' and the 'nation-state' (1990:131). According to Rajah (1990) and Keyes (1979), the Christian missionaries were probably the most important factor in the development of a Karen national movement - attracting many non-Christian Karen. It was the Christian missionaries who initiated the development of a Karen literate tradition through the introduction of schools and printing presses, and who provided a supra-local network of connections an organizations through the Karen Christian churches (Keyes 1977:56, cited in Rajah 1990:110). The *re*-presentation of Karen identity as constructed by Christian missionaries and British colonizers was further promoted by ethno-political leaders (Rajah 1990).

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[11] Bauer argues that, "Mon themselves tend to equate ethnic identity with language" (1990:14).

Although the KNU now have lost most of its former territory to the *Tatmadaw*, I argue that Rajah's and Keyes' analysis of Karen nationalism is still relevant to understand the role KNLA and its network continue to fill today. Further, I argue that modern information technology such as the Internet and mass media have provided new arenas for the 'imagined community' of Kawthoolei. KNLA, and the ethno-political organizations identifying with it, experience continued success in the recruiting of people identifying and acting under its label. The same applies to NMSP. Although they did sign a cease-fire with the Burmese government in 1995, they did not give up their claims as an ethno-political organization. This is among other apparent through the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), which holds office in Sangkhlaburi. Founded by pro-democracy activists involved in the '88 uprisings, the foundation is greatly involved in monitoring the human rights situation in Mon 'territory' and other areas of southern Burma, as well as to aid with local development projects. Further, the NMSP's school system has expanded since the mid-90s. According to South (2003:37) the NMSP Education Department was by 2001 running 148 Mon National Schools and 217 'mixed schools', teaching about 51 000 students and employing 917 teachers.

Ethnicity as an aspect of Social Identity

In line with the studies of Keyes (1979) and Rajah (1990), I argue that ethnicity - as a symbol of identity in group relations - first became a central element in the lives of people today identifying as Karen and Mon, when traditional *mandalas* were delineated into the modern nations known as Burma and Thailand. When Burma regained independence from the British colonizers, the political elite within most of the ethnic groups formed ethno-political parties to claim their rights within the new-drawn boundaries. When their initial attempts to establish a Burmese Union failed, such ethno-political parties went underground. While Mon continued to aim for a federal union under which they would enjoy semi-autonomous rule, the Karen national elite settled with nothing less than their own independent nation.

About a decade after Leach (1954) published his theories on political organization in Northern Burma, Barth (1969) received attention for his theories about ethnic groups and boundaries, based on his own studies on Pathan identity in adjoining areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The perspectives of Leach and Barth have many similarities in that they both argue that the symbolic and political meaning of 'cultural traits' are more important than the cultural traits themselves to understand social meanings in group relations. An ethnic group is defined

through its relations to other ethnic groups - the boundaries between them itself a social product. That said, Leach's focus lay on the dynamic shifts and compromises *between* two polar political organizations or 'types'; that of *gumlao* 'democracy' (anarchistic and egalitarian) and *Shan* 'autocracy' (resembling a feudal hierarchy) - where the majority of actual Kachin communities were neither *gumalo* nor *Shan* in type, but organized according to a system described by Leach as *gumsa*, which, in effect, was a kind of compromise between *gumlao* and *Shan* ideals (1954:9). As such, he argued that each individual subject living in the Kachin Hill Areas could be thought of as being part of several social systems at one and the same time. Thereby, the overall process of structural change in the society in question comes about as the sum of choices done by each individual subject with an aim of social advancement (Leach 1954). Barth, on the other hand, focused on the persistence of ethnic groups and boundaries *despite* a flow of people across them. According to him, "categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life stories" (1969:9-10).

As I argue in this thesis that ethnic identity should be understood in relation to national identity, I also argue that ethnicity – as an aspect of social identity – implies how people act in accordance to their social circumstances in everyday life. Individual human beings have many potential identities depending on the different social networks they are part of. Which social identities are perceived as the most relevant under given social circumstances is therefore an empirical question. When I throughout this thesis refer to both individual identity – as 'self', and group identity – as 'community', it is first and foremost as an analytical tool to attempt to understand the interaction between the two aspects of identity, in order to see which one influence each individual border-crossing activist in his of hers quest of choosing what is perceived as the most advantageous life-path.

In accordance with Barth (1969, 1994), I argue that ethnic identity is first and foremost a trait within a social organization. Only to the extent people feel as members within an ethnic group, will they act upon it and thereby transform ethnicity into a behavioral reality (Barth 1969). In this way ethnic identity has a political, organizational aspect - as well as a symbolic, meaningful one. When the political leaders of an ethnic movement make demands over a state, the ethnic movement therefore by definition becomes a nationalist movement (Hylland-Eriksen 2010:10). Barth points to a close connection between ethnic identity and state structures in relation to a competition about resources in the form of rights over what he refers

to as niches. This competition takes places within the framework of the state, which acts directly upon groups and categories of people and seek to regulate their lives and movements (1994:182). As different states have different agendas, they will pursue completely different political programs in relation to ethnic categories and movements within the peoples they strive to control (1994:182).

Barth's division of 'the study of ethnicity' into micro, median and macro (1994), can be useful in explaining the analytical view adapted in this thesis. My focus is on how feelings of identity are transformed among the individual border-crossing activist, through his or her engagement in the transnational ethno-political communities of either the Mon Woman and Child Organization or the Karen Migrant School. These engagements are traced by following the feelings, thoughts, acts and expressions displayed by young Karen students and female Mon staff in their everyday life as cross-border activists. As such, the main focus employed in this thesis is on a micro-level - tracing the dynamics that leads to identity-formation within the social context of the Karen migrant school and the Mon Woman and Child Organization. This leads on to the next level, where this micro-perspective is seen in the framework of the communities where such individual transformations regarding feelings of identity take place. The Karen Migrant School and the Mon Woman and Child Organization are part of social networks together forming what might be understood as 'imagined communities' (Anderson [1983] 2006) based on Mon and Karen nationalism. The 'imagination' of the communities of *Kawthoolei* for the Karen, and *Hongsawathoi* for the Mon, are shaped by the two groups' ethno-political elites in the form of organizations such as the New Mon State Party and the Karen National Union. At the same time, the individual cross-border activist's negotiation of identity is also influenced by opportunities and constraints presented by the other social networks he or she is part of. In the words of Barth - processes on this level inflict limitations on people's expressions and actions on the micro-level; package-solutions and either-or-choices lay the premises for many of the traits and dichotomies marking the boundaries of ethnicity (1994:184). Finally, I seek an understanding of the basis of formation and maintenance of the ethno-political groups of Karen and Mon in relation to larger state-structures within Burma, as I go into a deeper elaboration of the formation of both ethnicity, modern nation-states and nationalism in chapter three. Thereby, my micro-perspective on the individual cross-border activists' everyday life is continuously informed by the specific socio-historical circumstances they were born into and thus operate within. At this level, I also take into consideration the increased role of global discourses present in the transnational space of the border. Through international organizations and agencies, and social media and

information technology - the cross-border activists are in the center of new, alternative influences regarding feelings of identity, which are further affecting the social networks they are part of.

An Anthropology of Borders

The anthropology of borders as we know it today, mainly developed from the 1980's, and focuses on three main dimensions of borders: cultural, territorial, and social (Donnan 2001). This thesis touches upon all three dimensions of borders, as is necessary to understand the empirical lives of my informants. The territorial border is the geographical and political borders separating Thailand from Burma. This border is marking the limits of proposed sovereignty of the two modern nation-states. This geo-politics of nations (Thongchai 1996) by mapping territory into absolute demarcated areas is a rather new 'invention' in the Southeast Asian mainland, as I will turn to in much further detail in chapter three. As my informants identified as either Mon or Karen, they also belonged within certain social and symbolic borders. In the meaning implied by Barth (1969), they identified within the 'ethnic groups' of *Mon* or *Karen* - although they themselves most often referred to their *Mon* or *Karen* identities as 'nationalities'. While I argue throughout this thesis that these 'ethnic' or 'national' identities evolved along with – and in relation to – the modern nation-states of the Southeast Asian mainland, and that their boundaries are maintained according to their position within – and 'outside' – the Burmese state, I further argue for an empirical focus on how the implications of these boundaries are negotiated and transformed in the everyday actions of each individual cross-border activist. I argue that the Thai-Burma border should be understood as a 'liminal space-in-between' that exist where the different 'types' of borders meet and intersect. In my analysis of the empirical lives of my informants - as they engage as cross-border activists in two transnational communities, the areas in which they find themselves can also be seen as cultural borderlands - as "zones of cultural overlap characterized by a mixing of cultural styles"(Donnan 2001:1290). The presence of foreign influences in the form of donor- and partner- organizations, tourists and Thais, alternative ways to knowledge and education, and access to information technology and mass media, makes the Karen migrant school and the Mon organization into 'liminal spaces' where individual cross-border activists' feelings of identity are transformed through new experiences. As such, these spaces can be seen as "simultaneously dangerous and sites of creative cultural production open to cultural play and experimentation as well as domination and control" (Donnan 2001:1290).

To sum up, all these three dimensions of borders intervene and interrelate in the real life of my informants. While the symbolic borders of Karen and Mon - into ethno-political (or nationalistic) groups in relation to the territorial borders of the modern nation-states of Thailand and Burma - is what forms my theoretical framework, my main interest in this thesis lies with how the 'cultural space' of the border influences – and is influenced by - my informants' feelings of identity in relation to community and self. In the words of Donnan; "It is in this emphasis on how borders are constructed, negotiated, and viewed from 'below' that the value and distinctiveness of an anthropology of borders arguably resides" (2001:1293).

Recent Studies on Southeast Asian Borders

Most current scholars seem to agree that borders must be understood as dynamic spaces of transformations. Inspired by Lefebvre (1991), Rajaram & Grundy-Warr (2007) presents the border as a socially constructed space in which meaning differs between perceived, conceived, and lived space (Lefebvre 1991:39, cited in ed. Rajaram and Grundy- Warr (2007:xiii). The border must thus be studied as mobile, perspectival and relational (2007:x), as always in *the process of becoming* rather than a temporally fixed space (2007:xxiv). Human mobility, and conditions of moving from one place to another are regarded as a norm or, "where coercion is involved, as a common aspect of human existence (Appadurai 1996) rather than as an aberration of human life" (2007:xxviii). 'Borderscapes' is presented as an analytical term to think "through, about, and of alternatives to dominant landscapes of power" (2007:xxxviii).

Despite the military authorities' perception of the Thai-Burma border as a boundary-line showing the reach of their legitimized authority, this internal sovereignty does not exist in the lived space, which is dictated by the ongoing guerilla war between many ethnic armies and the *Tatmadaw* (Dean 2007). According to Dean:

> A border-line can be "seen", since one side (in China and Thailand) boasts cars, four-wheel drives, sleeper buses, Internet shops, international telephone booths, and ATM machines, in contrast to the buffalo carts and WWII-period trucks and dirt roads, the nonexistence of Internet and other forms of modern technology, of the Burma side. Electricity, phone lines, and most roads generally stop at the border on the China and Thai side.
>
> (2007:196)

Dean argues that although the border was not visible for the ethnic villagers when it was initially established between the states, they have come to learn to see and utilize it today. Further, she argues that while the state works to enforce stronger perceptions of the boundary, lived moment work to diverge these. While there is a continuous shift between the borderless lived space and the conceptual symbolic space, the life-world – according to Dean – is always resiliently borderless (2007:197-198).

Another relevant study is done by Buadaeng (2007), who shows how the ethnic identity as Karen has "interacted with and reacted to the respective nation-building processes of Burma and Thailand" (2007:6). This has lead to two distinct identities as Karen in the two countries. The approximately 440 000 Karen living in Thailand have been categorized as a 'hill tribe', and have until recently (the 1970's) been living in relatively autonomous local communities. The approximately four million Burmese Karen, on the other hand, have been subject to the mobilization of an ethno-political community that has waged a secessionist war against the central state for about five decades. While Karen in Burma have developed a national consciousness, Karen in Thailand did not begin to speak out until the 1980s - when they organized environmental movements to fight against the labels put upon them by Thai authorities as 'forest destroyers'. According to Buadaeng, the Karen as a group did not exist before colonization. Instead, "several of the small, scattered groups that would later come to compose the Karen had their own autonyms" (2007:75). In line with Buadaeng, I claim that although the KNU has experienced serious setbacks since the 1980's, it still leads one of Burma's largest rebel groups. Further, this group still embodies a nationalist dream - although the path ahead is unclear. By contrast, the Karen in Thailand have only attracted the attention of the Thai public with a clear definition of 'Karenness' the last two decades, and this in order to deal with stereotypes as forest destroyers set out by the Thai government (Buadaeng 2007).

Horstmann & Wadley (2006) follow in the footsteps of Leach and Wijeyewardene, arguing that frontiers and borderlands may be seen as complex social systems that deserve special attention in regard to boundary-producing practices when it comes to people categorized as ethnic minorities in a national framework. As such, they stress the importance of looking at the spaces created by the borders, rather than thinking in terms of the nation-state and transnationalism (2006:vii). Horstmann & Wadley's theories correspond with that of Dean (2007) mentioned above, in that there exist several perceptions of a border. There is one narrative by the state, and one by the populations that inhabit the borders. As they argue, the

anthropology of border is interesting, by and large, in the narrative of those inhabiting the borders, "though that of the state must necessarily inform our study as it impinges on borderland narratives"(2006:5). Further, they claim that 'the globalization concept' is well suited to the border context, as the border is conceived as a multicentered and flexible phenomenon, with connectedness and transnationalism at its core (2006:12). As they argue:

> Globalization sparks the revival of religious and ethnic identity in Southeast Asia in many ways and presents the borderlands in a new spotlight. The flow of people, commodities, and ideas is not arbitrary, but is driven by historical ethnic and religious ties in local spaces. Partitioned ethnic minorities, trapped in marginal spaces of the nation-state, are especially using the new spaces to reconstruct transnational ethnic and religious communities.
>
> (Horsmann & Wadley 2006:13)

Davis (2006) gives a great empirical example of how pre-modern flows regarding ethnic identity are revived in accordance with postmodern flows among the Sipsongpanna Tais in China. She argues that monks has a long history as cultural bearers in many parts of Asia, transmitting ideas, texts, practices, rituals, and organization models (Davis 2006:92). But, together with national domination of ethnic minorities from the 20th century, the Buddhist network was forced to go underground. That said, it did not eradicate itself, but instead created fertile conditions for its revival "as a conduit for pan-ethnic flows"(2006:92). As such, Davis argues that globalization travels along old roads - which must be seen as a process of both continuity and rupture. Using Anderson's theory of the important role of print capitalism for the development of shared identities within larger groups, she tells about the resurrection of temple networks in the 1980s and 1990s, when monks began distributing floppy-discs with the Tai alphabet, cassette tapes, music videos, Mac software, and even karaoke. Davis refers to this as 'transborder modernity'. Drawing on Malinowski´s (1922:92, in Davis 2006) "networks of relations that form interwoven fabrics", Davis argues that:

> It is easy to see that in the long run, not only objects of material culture, but also customs, songs, art movies, and general cultural influences (and we might add, ethnic identity) travel along the Kula route.
>
> (2006:102)

Davis further argues that many rural areas of the world have been managed by networks of multicentered ethnic tribes. Like Sipsongpanna, many of these small states have historically

retained their independence from larger polities through face-giving diplomacy, yet found their networks disrupted by the border drawing of nation-states. Today, many such marginalized groups are banding together across borders to form powerful ethnic and religious communities (2006:104). In line with Dean's perspective, I argue that the Karen migrant school and the Mon woman's organization might be seen as other examples on such communities.

Other Relevant Theories

So far in this chapter, I have presented theories connected to the Southeast Asian borderlands in particular, and to borders in general. Further, I have discussed studies and theories accounting for people crossing such borders, including the ethnic groups focused on in this thesis – the Karen and the Mon. Also relevant for the analytical approach in this thesis, are theories about liminality, modernity, globalization and gender. Below, I therefore present the theories I have found especially useful when analyzing the empirical material presented in the later chapters.

Liminality

Throughout this thesis, one of the most central terms employed is that of 'liminality'. I use this term in line with the meaning given by Arnold Van Gennep (1909, in Turner 1969:94) and Turner (1969), as the 'liminal phase' of *rites de passage*. According to Van Gennep, *rites de passage* is defined as "rites, which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age". Further, all rites of passage are 'transitions' marked by three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation (Turner 1969:94). Defining liminality, Turner states that "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1969:95). In line with this definition, I argue that the individuals focused on is this thesis, find themselves in a 'liminal space-in-between' in the period of time in which they engage as cross-border activists. Further, I share Turner's use of the term 'community'; in that he prefers its Latin counterpart 'communitas' – as it distinguish "the modality of social relationship from an 'area of common living'" (Turner 1969:96).

Modernity

According to Giddens (1994), modernity refers to the social life and organizational forms, that emerged in Europe around the 17th century. The source of the dynamic nature of

modernity can be explained by the disembedding of time and space[12], and the reflexive structuring and re-structuring of social relations in light of continuing input of science that affect individuals' and groups' actions (1994:12). Through the disembedding of time and space, social relations are 'lifted out' of local contexts and interaction and restructured across unlimited time-space distances. As such, "modernity is capable of connecting the local with the global in ways that would have been unthinkable in more traditional societies"(1994:25). This opens up many possibilities to be freed from the local habits and practical limitations experienced when time and space are connected through the situatedness of place.

Although most societies in today's world experience some degree of disconnected time-space in the meaning of Giddens, I argue that in the case of the cross-border activists, the disconnection of time-space is considerably more visible in the transnational 'space-in-between' of the Thai-Burma border, than 'inside Burma' - where local societies have had considerable less access to means of communication and technology making it possible to communicate across different time and space. As Giddens argues; "the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options"(1991:5). According to Giddens, transitions in individuals' lives have always demanded physic reorganization. In traditional cultures this was often ritualized in the shape of rites de passage, as when an individual moved from adolescent into adulthood. But in such cultures, the changed identity was clearly staked out as things stayed more or less the same from generation to generation on the level of collectivity. In modern societies, in contrast, where the local and global are connected in new ways, Giddens argues that "the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change" (1991:33). Inspired by these theories, I argue that time spent as a border-crossing activist can be seen as a 'liminal period of transition', representing a modern version of *rites de passage* transforming the individual's feelings of identity and self in relation to 'global flows' present in the border as 'space-in-between'. Especially, this implies an increased reflexivity of self, and the acquirement of a specialized skills set.

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[12] In pre-modern settings, Giddens explains, time and space were connected through the situatedness of place.

Globalization

Although human societies have always been in interactive relations with others, the means of such interactions has changed. According to Appadurai, anthropological research on globalization is defined as "the ongoing effort to link broad structures and processes in the world economy to the subtleties of communication, interpretation, and translation that govern everyday life in all societies" (2001:6266). The idea of global cultural flows[13] open up new questions about the relations between legal and illicit flows of commodities and persons, the changing nature of border and boundaries, the implications of new regimes of financial circulation and cybercommerce, and the evolution of new forms of diasporic identification and mobile tradition building (2001:6267). The processes of identification and the production of identities have to be reexamined in a world characterized by massive information flow, heightened media images of life possibilities for ordinary people, and new fantasies of wealth and mobility. As Appadurai argues, all these factors make it impossible "to presume the image of the local as an unchanging ground against which the tableau of global change is played out" (2001:6278). As such, many anthropologists have come to take as great an interest in 'the production of locality' (Appadurai 1996) as in the dynamics of globalization (2001:6278). I argue that such 'global flows' are especially present in the space of the border, where the cross-border activists are exposed to international media- and information- flows to a considerably larger degree than they where while living 'inside Burma'.

Women as Cultural Symbols versus Social Actors

Women as social actors first and foremost became a research topic from the 1970s onwards. An important contribution to this anthropological genre was the book edited by Rosaldo & Lamphere, which argued that "any full understanding of human society will have to incorporate the goals, thoughts and activities of the 'second sex' "(1974:2). In line with perspectives in 'feminist anthropology', I argue that women have not been able to 'escape' their local ties in the same way as men due to their roles as mothers. Typically, women have been confined to the 'private sphere' of society, while men have predominated in the 'public'. As Ortner (1974) has argued, it may seem that the exclusion of women from 'cultural projects' in the past have led women to be seen as more 'natural' and less 'cultural' than men; thereby conflicting their roles as 'public actors' in modern

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[13] "The idea of 'flow' was used to capture a complex dynamic in which objects, ideas, ideologies, technologies, and images were placed in a single economy of circulation, with an eye to distinguish different emergent mosaics of cultural form and social design"(Appadurai 2001:6267).

societies. Nevertheless, "recent research on gender has argued that gender should not be seen as primarily biological, but rather as a cultural construction whose legitimacy is justified through references to biology"(Hylland-Eriksen 2010:211).

In chapter six, I discuss the position of the female staff at the Mon woman's organization in relation to notions of women as 'static cultural symbols' versus 'dynamic social actors', to show how the young border-crossing activists seem to juggle their current positions as 'social actors' with their apparent ties as representatives of 'Mon women'. I argue that the female staff at the Mon woman's organization might be seen as 'markers' on current dynamics in the negotiation of identity in the different networks they are part of, as they provide an alternative, more marginalized perspective on border-dynamics than their male counterparts. In other words, I hold that the friction between community and self among border-crossing activists, is more visible among females than men - as women have tended to be more tied to their local communities than men. Through the alternative framework of the border as 'space-in-between', women's participation as 'dynamic actors' is promoted in the 'development' of Mon society. This is simultaneously giving the women access to other notions of 'how to be a woman' through the 'global flows' present in the space of the border - among them knowledge about international women's rights. Further, as long as the women engage as cross-border activists, they constantly challenge their bio-cultural ties to motherhood and 'wifing'. At the same time, their behavior and representation while engaging as cross-border activists still seem to be closely tied to expectations of women within Mon society.

What Follows

Although I have tried to limit the theoretical scope of this thesis, I have seen it necessary to touch upon a wide range of perspectives that has inspired my arguments throughout the following chapters. Instead of incorporating the theories into the empirical chapters, I have chosen to give a full presentation here so that the division between the everyday lives of my informants, and the theoretical perspectives of scholars, is as clear as possible. Now, I will move away from theoretical perspectives and comparative examples, and turn to the socio-historical background of the Southeast Asian mainland and the people inhabiting it. In the next chapter, I seek to connect historical perspectives on 'Karen' and 'Mon' as ethnic groups, with the communities forming the empirical ground of this thesis.

3 Ethnicity and the State

- A Socio-Historical Perspective on the Southeast Asian Mainland-

> Even as the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia become separate nations called Russia,
> Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, and so on who can say for sure whether
> Burma and Sri Lanka deserve to be unified nations or the separate states of Myanmar, Mon,
> Karen, Shan, Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu, and others? What has been believed to be a nation's
> essence, a justifiable identity, could suddenly turn out to be fabricated.
>
> (Thongchai 1996:14)

As the ethnographic study presented in this thesis has been done on two ethnic communities spanning across today's national boundaries, I find it essential to view their current way of life as a partly continuation of its past. With the history of the Southeast Asian mainland as my point of entrance, I have therefore chosen to focus this chapter on how today's nations and ethnic groups came to be. Especially, I will focus on Mon and Karen positions in relation to states and peripheries, and how this might have changed up to the present. I will end this chapter by presenting the two particular communities forming the empirical ground of this thesis.

The Premodern Southeast Asian Mainland

In pre-modern times, what is today considered the mainland Southeast Asian region comprising Cambodia, Laos, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Vietnam, and Peninsular Malaysia, consisted of a scheme of power relations known among scholars as *mandala*. A *mandala* was a somehow circle-shaped kingdom, whose size correlated with the centers' executive power. *Mandalas* would expand and contract according to shifting political situations, and were part of hierarchical relationships where small chiefdoms and city-states were under the lordship of larger realms[14].

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[14] See Thongchai (1996), ed. Wijeyewardene(1990) and J. Scott(2009) for more information about the premodern *mandalas*.

The two ethnic communities in my focus can both be seen in this historical context, although with differing roles. While the Mon kingdom through much of recorded Southeast Asian history was one of the largest and most powerful overlords in the mainland, scattered groups of Karen presumably lived in smaller chiefdoms in the peripheries of such powerful overlords, and were in most practical sense autonomous as long as they tended their relations to the more powerful realms. On one side, one can argue that the Karen chiefdoms "were weaker and more fragmented than the larger realms, and paid submission to any superior who could provide protection or inflict wounds upon them"(Thongchai 1996: 96). On another side, the smaller groups of Karen who tended to live in villages - or clusters of villages - scattered throughout the mountainous jungles of more upland regions, probably experienced a larger degree of autonomy from such centralized *mandalas* as the Mon communities were part of. Such communities were typically based on a structure of local village chiefs, whose main task was to organize the cycle of shifting cultivation, including the search of a suitable place to cultivate new crops every year. Both groups have historically been living in the areas today comprising South-Eastern Burma and western Thailand; the geographical area concerning this thesis. Accordingly, their movement between what is today considered the nation-states of Thailand and Burma is nothing new. That said, the meaning and implications of such movements have certainly changed.

From Peripheral Border Zones to Centralized Borders: Influence From the West

During the reign of *mandalas*, the center of each realm was the focus of attention. As the seat of the ruler, it was from here all taxes were collected and tributaries paid. Battles settling uncertain hierarchical relations were common - as was the rise and fall of *mandalas*. But as long as the center of the kingdom remained sovereign, the borders could very well be blurry and ambiguous.

The border to Burma differed from the rest of Siam's borders. While other borders in the south, east and north of Siam traditionally consisted of shared tributary chiefdoms between Siam and other powerful kingdoms in the areas today comprising Vietnam and China, the border between Siam and Burma have traditionally comprised a large and unbound border zone belonging to neither of the kingdoms[15]. In fact, this ungoverned border zone had functioned as a buffer between the two contesting kingdoms, which through recorded history have fought many disreputable wars (Thongchai 1994). This fact seem to have made the

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[15] This area is considered as part of the 'ungoverened' region of *Zomia* presented among others by Scott (2009).

unbound zone between Siam and Burma a favorable place for people seeking to avoid the governing powers of centralized *mandalas*. While Karen represented one group of peoples organized into small mobile chiefdoms in the upland areas of this border zone, people recognized as Mon lived in larger villages and towns in the lowlands adjacent to this area, connecting the southeastern parts of Burma and the western parts of Thailand.

When the European colonial powers begun the quest of expanding their Empires onto Southeast Asian mainland from the middle of the nineteenth century, two of the most powerful *mandalas* in the area were that of the Burmese Kingdom of Ava, and the Siamese Kingdom covering large parts of today's Thailand. These two *mandalas* had been rivals for several centuries, so when the British turned to Siam[16] for alliance after winning the first of three wars with Burma in 1826, they soon came to terms with having a common enemy. However, these terms proved to have very different connotations between the two powers. Their methods of mapping the reach of their power came from two fundamentally different traditions (Thongchai 1994). For the Siamese court, it was hard to understand why the question of boundaries should be so important. For them, this was a matter of the local people, not those in Bangkok. If the relations with neighboring kingdoms were friendly - as they considered it to be with the British - it was customary to keep the borders relatively open and ambiguous. Thus, the British attempt to demarcate the boundary between Siam and British Burma by western means of geographical mapping; involving the demarcation of absolute boundary-lines marking the reach of each kingdom's absolute sovereignty, induced confrontations between different concepts of political space. For several decades, this friction between 'Southeast Asian' and 'European' ways of mapping went largely unrecognized by the parties involved. They used similar words seemingly denoting the same thing. But while the administrators of British Burma took the border literally, the central authorities of Siam regarded the borders to be rather fluid and unbound. As follows, while the British meaning of 'boundary' was that of a line, the Siamese meaning of 'frontier' was that of a zone.

But as both parties became more and more puzzled by the seemingly illogically requests posed by the other, they gradually begun to recognize and negotiate which practices of boundary-demarcation to use. The long-time requests from the British, eventually led Siam to adopt their alternative concepts of borders - including the methods of marking boundary-lines in the modern sense - and the use of maps. The Kingdom of Siam, British Burma, and

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[16] During colonial times, Siam - the only nation in mainland Southeast Asia avoiding colonization, did so mainly of two reasons: i) it was regarded a buffer zone between the two competing empires of Britain and France, and ii) it mainly agreed with the British Empire in the delineation of the border between itself and British Burma.

French Indochina[17] began the demarcation of the Southeast Asian mainland, and within half a century managed to put less powerful tributary kingdoms and chiefdoms - which used to be more or less autonomous - under their own 'absolute' rule (Thongchai 1996).

From Peripheries to Borders: From Natural to Illegal Movements

As I have shown, the western imperialists had a major role in the formation of the Southeast Asian mainland and its nations, as we know them today. During the last five or so decades, scholars studying the area have therefore been increasingly engaged in tracing the pre-colonial organization of the Southeast Asian mainland and its peoples. Tracing traditional livelihoods in the area, Edmund Leach (1960, cited in ed. Wijeyewardene 1990:71) was one of the first to argue that the colonial era created artificial boundaries in a collective, ethnographic region including parts of northern Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Burma's Shan states and the Southwestern parts of China. Four decades later, James C. Scott (2009) presented a theory about a geographical area referred to as *Zomia*; an area inhabited by an anarchist people without official history. This upland region expanding large parts of upland Southeast Asia, including what is now considered the Thai-Burma border, is according to Scott one of the last places of the world were people have managed to actively remain stateless. As Scott himself declares, this is not a new theory, but an incorporation of theories acknowledged in different ways from different perspectives by many scholars on the subject. Together with Thongchai's work on the geo-body of Siam, these alternative accounts of the history of the Southeast Asian mainland tell us the importance of viewing today's geo-political space through the spectacles of its own past.

In the years succeeding the Second World War, the countries that had been under colonial rule of the British and French Empires, gradually regained their independence. Together with their 'freedom' followed a new way of mapping their territory introduced by western imperialists. Southeast Asia was no longer a realm of *mandalas*, but an assemblage of bordering nations - each belonging to its corresponding national ethnicity. It was no longer room for lesser realms, and 'ethnic groups' like Mon and Karen, which previously had formed tributary kingdoms and smaller chiefdoms in the peripheries of larger realms[18], faced the ultimatum between assimilation and resistance. In the years to follow, activist arms of both ethnic groups came to develop their own ethno-nationalistic ideology in an attempt to earn

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[17] Comprising Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.
[18] The last Mon kingdom fell in 1757 (South 2003). Since then, Mon people have largely been subdued to Burman rule, although their towns and villages largely 'stayed the same'.

their place among modern nations. In the beginning, such ethno-political organizations were formed in central parts of Burma in the hope of gaining their own autonomous areas shortly after Burma's independence. But as such ethno-political organizations continuously met resistance from the Burma government; they soon moved their headquarters towards the Thai-Burma border.

Although local communities along today's border to some extent still tend to traditional conceptions in the use of the border zone - including beneficial cross-border relations between local villagers and military representatives on both sides - the mode in which the central authorities in Bangkok and Yangon (or Naypidaw which was founded as the new capital in Myanmar in 2005) regard this use of the border, has changed dramatically. In pre-modern times, the peripheries of *mandalas* were largely outside the interest of ruling centers. Today, the boundaries delineating the nations of Burma and Thailand have become the very symbol of their sovereign power. As a result, both Burman and Thai central authorities are largely engaged in controlling what they now perceive as illegal border-crossings. Where military border patrols used to turn a blind eye to guerilla activity and cross-border movements by ethnic minorities; improved bilateral relations between the two countries have led to increasing respect for each others autonomy, thereby increasing measures to control the movements across their common borders[19]. Consequently, people who for several centuries have been able to move relatively freely in the area today constituting the national borders - and have done so according to access to labor, season, family-ties, trade, and practices of shifting cultivation, to mention some of the motivations, have gone from being 'legal' to being 'illegal' in the view of the modern nation. In the words of Tapp:

> In the discourse of the modern nationalism, one is dealing with economic phenomena classified as "smuggling" and human mobility categorized as "refugee" or "illegal immigrant", rather than the free movements of commodities and agents which we are to suppose characterized the pre-colonial past.
>
> (1990:150)

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[19] Scholars like Wijeyewardene(1990), Rajah (1990), Keyes (1979) and Thongchai(1996) have indicated the existence of traditional alliances between Mon, Karen and Thai, as the guerilla activity of the ethnic resistance forces served as a buffer between Thai and Burmese troops, and in earlier times that Mon and Karen subjects served as soldiers in Burmese and Thai armies. Such alliances have decreased greatly since the midt-1980s, when bilateral relations between Burma and Thailand began to improve.

The Nations of Burma and Thailand - The Ethnicity of Burmese Mon and Karen

Based on what is presented above, a more nuanced perspective on the rise of modern nation-states in the Southeast Asian mainland seems to suggest that the reason why Siam (Thailand) and Burma (Myanmar) became separate nations, and Karen and Mon did not, might be that the two former held most forming power during the period when modern mapping was introduced to the Southeast Asian mainland by western imperialists. There are no primordial rules making Thailand and Burma more legitimate nations than Karen and Mon. But in 2013, this is the current result of the shifts and dynamics following the area's preceding past. As nations and citizens have become fixed in a way that was unknown in the era of *mandalas*, the notion that this form of geo-political arrangement has come to stay have come to dominate the thoughts of many. But as scholars focusing on the borders of such modern nation-states mostly agree upon, people inhabiting these modern political arrangements are constantly defying and challenging these seemingly fixed entities. As argued by many, the borders of these nations and the people crossing them in everyday life represent a center for such frictions. Until now, I have discussed the rise of the modern nations of Burma and Thailand. Now, I will turn my attention towards two of the largest ethnic minorities inhabiting these nations – the Karen and the Mon.

The Karen Chiefdoms

According to Marshall's account from 1922, different sub-groups of Karen were widely scattered throughout central-, coastal-, and southern parts of Burma, as well as the western parts of Siam (1922:1-2). Their ways of life differed greatly with respect to housing, cultivation and preparation of food, clothing, and so on - according to whether they lived in the plains, on the foot of mountains or further upland. Marshall especially points out the Pegu Hills as an area of 'traditional Karen settlements'. Here, he tells us, Karen live in longhouses built on stilts; accommodating on the average consists of between twenty and thirty families, each family having their own room. Their way of cultivating rice and other crops are through practices of slash-and-burn agriculture, re-settling every year to grow new fields. Political life is organized through villages and village chiefs more than tribes. Karen living in the lowland plains, on the other hand, have housing and methods of cultivation similar to the general Burmese population, which has a more sedentary lifestyle (Marshall 1922).

Marshall's account was based on fieldwork conducted during British rule. He himself was an American Baptist missionary. It is therefore likely that the Karen he refers to as lowlanders are to some extent 'products' of the last century's missionary work, which by then

had experienced large success in converting Karen subjects. Converted Karen often ended up re-settling to lowland towns and cities to engage in further education and religious activity. Due to the positive relations between the British government and the Karen, many also ended up working in the services of British rulers. Today, Karen communities still exist throughout large parts of central and southern parts of Burma, although the ones that are politically active almost exclusively live in the border zone between Burma and Thailand. Most of the people portrayed in this thesis were born and raised in this area, either as farmers or in families of political activists. A few also came from other areas of Burma. According to Rajah (1990), Karen communities were at the time of his studies still organized by village-identities, based on living in the same village or district.

As an *ethnic category*, Karen is understood as a highland people residing in upland areas of eastern Burma, as well as in western parts of Thailand. Similar to several other ethnic groups in Burma, they claim to be descendants of people migrating southwards from Mongolia - crossing the 'river of sand' thought to be the Gobi dessert. In line with their ethno-nationalistic ideology, they assert to have been the first group of people migrating to the region now known as Burma, where they settled in the valleys of Mekong, Irrawaddy and Salween. Since then, they claim to have been gradually pushed towards more mountainous and inaccessible regions by succeeding immigrants such as the Mon and the Burmans. As with other ethnic groups in Thailand, the number of people identifying – and being identified - as Karen, is highly uncertain due to unreliable and greatly varying sources. While the Burman government has probably tended to underestimate the number, the Karen National Union has probably tended to do the opposite. Rajah (1990) estimated the number of Karen in Burma to be 2,2 million, against 242 000 Karen in Thailand. According to Buadaeng (2007), a 1911 survey counted 1,1 million Karen out of a total Burmese population of 8 million, while in 1931 the number of Karen in Burma was estimated to be 1,4 million. In 2003, the KNU themselves estimated a population in Burma of between 8 and 10 million. A tentative number could be about 4 million Karen in Burma, and 440 000 Karen in Thailand (Buadaeng 2007).

As a term, the word *Karen* apparently came into being as a pan-ethnic[20] label referring to a rather heterogeneous lot of people not sharing common language, culture, religion, or other material characteristics. According to Buadaeng, "several of the small, scattered groups who would come to be known as the Sgaw Karen and the Pwo Karen called themselves *pga*

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[20] Pan-ethnicity "denotes the process whereby dialect and cultural distinctions which once created divisions are reinterpreted as minor variations within a broader ethnic community" (Brown 1988, p. 65, cited in Lilley (1990:179).

gan yaw and *plong,* respectively" (2007:75). Further, they were known by different names by the ruling kingdoms on whose peripheries they lived.

During colonial times, the position of the people referred to as Karen changed dramatically within Burma. When the British administrators took power, they abolished the Burman rulers and thereby the Buddhist doctrine as the official religion. By 1834 - eight years after the British won their first war with the Burmans - between 500 and 600 Karen had converted to Christianity, against fewer than 125 Burmans (Buadaeng 2007:77)[21]. The high conversion rate of Karen attracted the attention of missionaries, and in subsequent years, more churches were established in Karen areas than anywhere else in Burma. Along with the churches, the missionaries established schools, and tens of thousands of Karen moved down from the mountains to urban lowland areas to attend higher-level schools (2007: 77). In 1832 a missionary invented a written Karen language to be able to translate and thereby spread the words of the Bible. In 1875, a Baptist College was established in Rangoon. This College later became a meeting place for many of the ethnic group's future leaders who established their first association in 1881: The Karen National Association (KNA). In 1937, the Karen New Year's Day was declared a national holiday. The entire period of British rule, the Karen served in the British army, fighting many wars against the Burmans. Thereby, the foundation was laid for a "legacy of hatred, mistrust, and deep conflict between Burmans and Karens"(2007:79).

When the British finally granted Burma independence in 1948, they had laid a solid foundation for the development of Karen Nationalism. They had greatly facilitated the construction of a national history, a common language, and an 'imagined community' based on a network of educated, Christian Karen. Nevertheless, the Karen nationalists' requests for their own independent 'Kawthoolei' was not fulfilled. This lead to the formation of the Karen National Union, who have fought for independence ever since.

A Karen Migrant School Community

Situated on the outskirts of a small town about two hours drive from the border town Mae Sot, lies a migrant school community with about 400 students ranging between 1st standard and Post 10. Surrounded by tropical Burmese jungle and majestic mountains marking the border area on three of four sides, the school has students from further inside Burma, as well as from

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[21] One of the reasons for the high conversion rates of Karen is thought to be that several of their myths of origin share similarities with the stories told in the Bible. Examples are the story of the Golden Book, and the story of Ywa.

villages in near proximity to the river marking the local border between Thailand and Burma. As far as I experienced, the absolute majority, if not all – identified as Burmese Karen, even in the cases they were born on Thai-side. Since the community was initiated with a simple church built by crossed bamboo sticks, and a house inhabiting the founder known as *Harmony* and his family, the community has experienced a steady growth in size and number of residents. Since its establishment, KKCS has been based on a Christian religious foundation, economically sponsored by foreign partner-organizations. Consequently, the school experienced regular visits from Christian missionaries holding seminars or arranging activities. The school itself was free of charge on the premise that the students were willing to partake in the obligatory Christian schedule consisting of morning- and evening- devotions every Monday to Friday, as well as church service up to five times every Sunday. Although this was a general rule for the school, the pressure to participate in all the services as well as the degree of consequences if not, were definitely highest amon the oldest youth, and especially among the Post 10 students.

> Su Mar, a 24 year-old first grade teacher who finished Post 10-College the year prior to my arrival, was one of the few who did not follow the daily Christian schedule. As a teacher, she was not obliged to do so, although it was still preferred by the leadership. I got to know her the second day of my stay in the community. It was Sunday, and I chose not to attend church service, as Harmony had repeatedly emphasised that I didn't have to, as I was not Christian. I had already attended two services the day before, and felt like exploring other sides of the community[22].
>
> Despite the strong pressure from the community's leadership to attend such religious events, some people still chose not to go. Among these were mostly teachers who were not obliged to, but at several occasions, students would also avoid the religious events. However, this did not not involve the daily morning- and evening- devotions, which seemed cherished and much appreciated by most of the students.
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> To continue the story, Su Mar was one of the persons who did not go, and I carefully asked why. The answer was simple. She told me she came from a Buddhist family, and that she herself was also Buddhist. "I am Buddhist, not Christian. I don't like to go to church". On

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[22] As a consequence of not attending church, I was later to experience the effects of my first of many 'wrong' behaviors and otherwise misunderstandings. My absence from church had obviously gotten negative attention from many of my fellow dorm-mates and Post 10 students, who upon their return would completely overlook my presence for several hours thereafter. But as I soon learned, regardless of how uncomfortable such effects of doing 'wrong' might feel on my own personal behalf, few things gave me more valuable insight in how things really worked.

many later occasions, she would inform me whenever there was a Buddhist celebration, and sometimes she even brought leftover snacks from different ceremonies after visiting her mom or aunt. Her mom lived nearby Mae Sot, while her aunt lived in the Burmese town right across the river from Mae Sot. "This is what we eat when we celebrate full moon", she said one time, handing me a piece of a brown, sugary mass made of coconut sugar mixed with something else sweet-tasting.

When I talked with other students and teachers about their religious beliefs, most of them told me they were Buddhist, although they took part in the Christian schedule and daily gave me God's blessings. That said; it soon became a habit on my part as well to use the words "God Bless You" instead of just saying "goodbye", or "see you later". It was just what felt natural (in the community). Paw Htaw, a male Post 10 student, gave me one alternative answer about this behavior; "I am Buddhist by family, but I like the Christian belief because it is much easier for me to understand. To learn about Buddhism in Burma is very complicated. You have to memorize a lot". At KKCS, Christianity as 'way of life' stood much more central than memorizing verses from the Bible. In contrast, the Burman school-system seemed by large to be based on memorizing rather than 'digesting' the curriculum presented - a practice apparently also followed by most Buddhist learning centers held at local monasteries (inside Burma). Further, I soon came to experience that the routines and sense of fellowship the devotions represented, were much desired aspects in an otherwise unpredictable everyday life.

Su Mar on the other hand, gained most of her knowledge about Buddhism from her family, who were devoted practitioners of the Buddhist way of life. She had been a bright student at the Post 10 College, but faced difficulties continuing her education. This is not unusual among Post 10 graduates in the border communities, as there are many more applicants than scholarships handed out. In addition, she failed her GED-test, which is a mandatory requirement for many of the scholarships available. Nevertheless, Pi - the Australian woman who worked as a co-director of the Post 10 College, herself a devoted Christian - saw her as the most likely candidate to get a scholarship that year. After all - as she was born on the border, she had a Thai id-card and could easily apply for a Thai passport. This made it possible for her to attend university as a regular Thai student without the requirements of a GED-certificate. The 'only' thing she needed was funding. And although limited, this could be provided through KKCS and its partner organizations. If it had not been for her faith. As an outspoken Buddhist who never went to church service or devotions, her relationship with Harmony was tense. He did not show willingness to invest in her future, and clearly favored those who showed devotion to the Christian religion.

From the river marking the local border between Burma and Thailand, there was only one road leading away from the border and the small village situated along the riverbanks. This

road went past the migrant school before it connected with the main road of a small town a few kilometers further up. The students at KKCS often enjoyed swimming and playing in this river, and we went to several weddings in the little village, which was inhabited by a mix of Burmese Karen, Burmese Mon, and local Thai families. Whenever we would head down towards the river - two or three heads on each motorbike - the students told me not to stop at the Thai military checkpoint on the way. Instead, we would slow down our bikes, smile, and occasionally throw out a "Sawadii- kha[23]!" while we slowly passed the checkpoint. Down by the river, the best place for swimming was the place used as an unofficial border-crossing point. Here, the water was shallow and still, and there was a flat area where families could enjoy a pick-nick while taking a bath and washing their laundry. A few men were relaxing in their long-boats waiting for potential customers who would pay a few bath to go up or down the river; women crossed the river from Burma with baskets on their head filled with fruits, vegetables, eggs and other things to sell on Thai-side; and some other men used the river to float timber cut on the Burmese side. In the shades of some tall trees, a handful of Thai soldiers seemed to have a relaxing time in a little 'hut' of sandbags. They paid little notice to the daily activities at the river, seemingly content as long as everything was peaceful. One time I dared to wade across the river and step onto Burmese ground. They didn't mind that either.

Naturally, the proximity to the border was evident during our everyday life in the community. We had a fabulous view of the Burmese mountains to the west, and many of my students told me their families lived within one or two days walk from the school. Therefore, it was quite disturbing when I first heard gunshots from the Burmese side of the border. But maybe even more disturbing when I after some time didn't notice the distant shooting anymore - until we got visits from other *farangs* (foreigners) and some of the students would tell them about the situation with a form of obstinate pride in their voices. The students at KKCS came from different places inside Burma as well as the border zone between Thailand and Burma. Most came from villages within a day or two's march from the school and the local border, while some were born on Thai-side of the border. Common for them all was that they had parents identifying as Burmese Karen. Most of the students' families who lived in villages on the other side of the border, had arrived there as a result of persecution from the Burmese military. Many of these had since been more or less forced to cross the border and settle temporary in camps and border villages on Thai side, because of local armed conflicts

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[23] Thai greating meaning "how are you?" or "are you having a good day?".

between DKBA, KNLA and SPDC. Except for the students attending KKCS, the community was inhabited by a dozen of Burmese Karen families who had arrived there for different reasons. Some were relatives of Harmony; others were friends who escaped with him. In addition, several of the families had arrived there at later times escaping local conflicts or hardships.

The local border at KKCS in many ways seemed quite porous. Despite - or maybe because of several Thai-military control posts, people seemed to move relatively freely back and forth between Thailand and Burma. Although the river was marking the national border, the border zone between Thailand and Burma in this area seemed to cover a much wider and dynamic area, where people could move relatively freely between the so-called sovereign states of Thailand and Burma. The students and the rest of the residents in the community often went on trips across the border into different areas of Burma. They went to visit family across the nearest mountains, and to Yangon to apply for Burmese identity cards. They went on regular visits to the refugee camps, and people from Burma and the camps often visited the school. I will look into the different motivations for-, and ways of-, border-crossing in much more detail in the next chapter. But for now, I will leave KKCS to take a look at the second site of my fieldwork.

The Mon Kingdom

For a period of more than a thousand years, Mon and Khmer kings ruled over much of the mainland Southeast Asia. But when the last kingdom in Pegu fell in 1757 - defeated by a Burmese warrior-king, many Mon subject fled to Ayuthaiya (Thailand) where they settled in the border areas adjoining Burma. Since then, it has been supposed by many that Mon has been a dying language, and so the people identifying as Mon. As such, Mon history - since the fall of Pegu - has much in common with the Karen and other persecuted 'hilltribe' groups, as they have fled or been displaced within their traditional homelands (South 2003:3). Once the predominant ethno-linguistic group in lower Burma, Bauer (1990) estimated the population of Mon speakers in Burma to be approximately one million at the beginning of the 1990's. He estimated the descendants of Mon speakers to be considerably larger - somewhere between two and eight million. As with Karen, there are no reliable numbers on people identifying or being identified as Mon. More recently, South estimated the number to be "between one-and-a-quarter and one-and-a-half million Mon people in Mon state, and as many as two million in all of Burma" (2003:22). "However", he says, " nationalist leaders have claimed a Mon population in Burma of four

million people, plus as many as three million in Thailand"(2003:22). While the Mon-Khmer peoples have been residents in Southeast Asia for at least two thousand years, it is possible that their ancestors may have lived in the region for as long as five thousand years (2003:55). While one theory suggests they came southwards from Mongolia through Yunnan, Mon myths suggest they the came from Southeast India around the end of the first millennium B.C. (2003:55). Nevertheless, this ethnic group is considered one of the earliest peoples to reside on the Southeast Asian mainland. As part of the Mon-Khmer language family, they are related to today's Khmer people in Cambodia - a fact stated with pride by Mi Jinseneng, the coordinator of the organization I worked with. In one of our many conversations, she eagerly told me that they were still able to understand certain dialects of Mon-Khmer descendants living in eastern Thailand (Isan).

As Mon traditionally has tended to live in larger communities comprising towns and districts situated in the lowlands or at the foot of mountains, they were probably rather accessible to exploitation from the Burman rulers after the fall of their own realm. From ruling one of the most powerful realms through history, they came to experience the reality of the other side of the hierarchical pyramid. According to Thongchai, the Mon region lay in-between the arch-rivals of Siam and Burma, making it crucial for both sides in their warfare. As most of the area between the two kingdoms consisted of vast rainforest and huge ranges of mountains, the Mon towns were regarded by both sides as rich sources for food and manpower for fighting. "From time to time, people and towns came under the control of one side to cultivate food for the troops while they were at the same time the targest of destruction from the other to prevent them from supplying the enemy" (Thongchai 1994:62).

When Burma regained its independence in 1948, the Mon asserted their identity and right of self-determination by establishing several Mon cultural- and political organizations. Nevertheless, then Prime Minister U Nu rejected to recognize Mon as an ethnic group, claiming that the Mon and the Burman were identical as people. According to Mon activists, this resulted in a Mon national upsurge, which further escalated Mon demands to reclaim their old homeland, presumably covering the whole of lower Burma (South 2003, Lang 2002). Mon nationalists have since risen in revolts against the central Burman government on a number of occasions. Initially under the Mon Peoples Front, and from 1962 through the New Mon State Party. As part of this, a partially autonomous Mon state – Monland - was created in 1974 covering areas of Tenasserim, Pegu, and Ayeyarwady river in Burma. The area between Sangkhlaburi and Three Pagoda Pass in Thailand is also considered part of Monland (South 2003, Lang 2002).

In 1988, the famous student uprisings and its following defeat forced several of the people involved in Mon national movements to flee to liberated NDF (National Democratic Front)-controlled areas along the border to Thailand. Since then, Mon political organizations have increasingly moved their activities to Thai-side of the border as well as to Bangkok - although an important branch of the NMSP continue to have its base in Mon state[24]. From 1995, when NMSP signed a cease-fire agreement with the Burman junta - and bilateral relations between Thailand and Burma improved, NMSP were no longer allowed to have their headquarters in Sangkhlaburi (Three Pagoda Pass). Today, Mon settlements are found mainly in the Southeastern parts of Burma (Karen state, Mon state and Tenasserim Division), as well as in some small, scattered communities between Sangkhlaburi and Bangkok in Thailand. Individuals and families of Mon origin are also residing throughout central parts of Burma.

A Border Town and a Mon Village

Today's Sangklaburi is a small town of approximately 15 000 residents, including around three thousand ethnic Thais; five thousand Mon; a few thousand Karen; and a smaller Muslim population. The Thai population is the only community in Sangkhlaburi with full citizenship[25] (South 2003). Far west in Thailand's Kanchanaburi province, the district is placed in between the Tenasserim Division, Mon state, and Karen state of Burma to the west; and Thailand's Tak province to the north. The town is situated forty kilometer east - and twenty kilometer south of the present border-crossing point at Three Pagoda Pass (South 2003:155).

According to South, the earliest inhabitants in the area were the Pwo Karen and the Mon, both of whom came to the area from Burma several centuries ago. As he writes, "Old Sangkhlaburi may have been settled by the Mon as early as the thirteenth century"(2003:155). This assumption is supported by Bauer (1990), who stated that the Sangkhla settlements are not a result of recent sporadic refugee-movements, but that Mon societies in Thailand and Burma have always been internally and externally mobile (1990:21)[26]. The original Mon village was situated right next to the Sangkalia River at the bottom of the valley now forming the grounds of a huge reservoir. The reservoir was built in 1984, when the central Thai

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[24] At the same site as the Mon National College - in which the second year of the Post 10 College is held in Sangkhlaburi.
[25] According to South (2003:156) "Few Mon in Kanchanaburi, or the other border provinces, have full Thai identity papers, although several thousand people who fled to Thailand from Burma before 1976 were issued with 'pink cards', allowing them to stay indefinitely. Even second or third generation immigrants often only have a very circumscribed status in the kingdom, whilst most of the indigenous Karen have only *baat chao kao* 'hilltribe' cards (a kind of second class Thai citizenship)".
[26] According to Mi Jinseneng, the names of villages around Sangkhlaburi and Three Pagoda pass are mainly Mon or Karen - as these are the groups traditionally inhabiting this area.

government[27] initiated the building of the Vajiralongkorn Dam to ensure hydroelectric power to central parts of Thailand. East of today's reservoir is the so-called 'Thai side', which in accordance with its name is dominated by Thai residents. 'Thai side' is also home for a considerable percentage of Karen and so-called Bangladeshi Muslims, as well as the work-place and place of residency for many Mon. It is here the buss-station is located, and right next to the market you find a Seven Eleven and a food mart, both of which are air-conditioned. 'Thai side' is also the location of about a dozen of guesthouses aimed at both Thai- and western tourists. Spanning across the lake is the longest wooden bridge in Thailand - a four hundred meter teak bridge connecting 'Thai side' with 'Mon side', the latter resting on the hills just west of the reservoir. 'Mon side' is also known as Wangkha village. The bridge is one of the most popular spots during leisure times in Sangkhlaburi. When the water is high, kids are jumping from the bridge to play and swim in the water, and youth come to have a dip after the afternoon's soccer-practice. Adults enjoy relaxing in the afternoon breeze, chatting with friends while gazing at the beautiful view. The use of the names 'Thai side' and 'Mon side' makes sense when you compare the two sides. While 'Thai side' looks like a typical Thai small-town, although with a multi-ethnic twist, 'Mon side' truly reveals its Burmese inspirations. Everything from food to clothes, buildings to language - goes from being predominantly 'Thai' to 'Mon' when you walk across the bridge. While people on 'Thai side' wear typical Thai clothing, eat Tom Yam, listen to Thai pop and speak Thai - people on 'Mon side' wear longyies, eat Moghinga[28], listen to Mon music and speak a mix of Mon, Burmese and Thai language. Where the bridge meets solid ground on 'Mon side', you find a dozen of shops selling all kinds of souvenirs aimed at Thai and western tourists regularly visiting the "exotic" Mon village.

According to Mon, the area today known as Sangkhlaburi, as well as the land covering the area between Sangkhlaburi and Three Pagoda Pass, has historically been used by Mon people. As with the rest of the border, it was first demarcated as part of Thailand and Burma during colonial times, when British and French colonial administrators put extensive work in mapping the Southeast Asian region into the absolute demarcated nations we know today. Nevertheless, there is still not full agreement about the exact location of the border. The more recent and traceable history of the 'Mon side' of Sangkhlaburi is strongly connected to the period after Burma regained its independence from British rule at the end of the Second

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[27] The Electric Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) (South 2003:153).
[28] Mohinga is a noodle soup considered by many to be the national breakfast dish in Burma. The soup is made of rice noodles served with fish soup and topped with garlic, onions, lemongrass, banana tree steam, ginger, fish paste, fish sauce and catfish.

World War. Central was the arrival of the revered Monk Uttama, who settled in Sangkhlaburi with a group of fellow villagers fleeing the reemerging civil war in Burma. When Thai authorities decided to build the Reservoir in 1984, Monk Uttama was granted land to raise a new Mon village next to the artificial lake, as the original settlement was flooded. Monk Uttama then declared that this land was not for sale, but that anyone who whished to build a home on it - now or in the future, was welcome to do so. Wangkha village have since been regarded a safe-haven for members of the Mon community who have been seeking sanctuary or better opportunities on Thai-side of the border. Further, a large part of the area between Sangkhlaburi and Three Pagoda Pass is still considered 'Monland' by the people using it.

During my stay in Sangkhlaburi, Wangkha village was inhabited by what I refer to as two categories of Mon: i) regular residents, and ii) ethno-political activists. As I will elaborate these two types of engagement in further detail in chapter four, I will for now focus on the category I argue my informants belonged to; the ethno-political activists. The ethno-political part of the Mon population in Sangkhlaburi was headed by the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), which held a large office on 'Mon side', and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) who was also present in town. Most of the staff today leading these organizations came to Sangkhlaburi and the border after the unsuccessful student uprisings in '88 - when they joined forces with the Mon nationalists already there. HURFOM itself was first founded in 1994 - when the NMSP signed the cease-fire, to ensure that ethnic Mon could continue to fight for the rights of their people. HURFOM's main aim is as they write:

> To bring about the restoration of democracy, human rights protection and genuine peace in Burma through the two objectives of i) To monitor the human rights situation in Mon territory and other Southern parts of Burma, and ii) To protect and promote internationally recognized human rights in Burma.

Several smaller organizations and projects have since been organized under the 'wings' of NMSP and HURFOM. This includs several news agencies, the Post 10 College, the MWO, and several other projects operating both in Thailand, on the border, and inside Burma. The organization where I volunteered was one of these.

The Mon Woman and Child Organization[29]

The Mon Woman and Child Organization got its own office only a couple of years prior to my arrival. Its official target as organization was to document and advocate for the rights of women and children in southern Burma, but its daily routines revolved around everything from training of new interns from Burma, conducting development projects inside Burma based on need assessment done by field workers from MWCO, and arranging workshops both in Burma and on the border. Working to improve the situation for Mon people both in Burma, on the border, and in Southeast Asia as a whole, these women often came from villages and towns with poor socio-economic circumstances, apparent through problems like alcoholism, lack of opportunities for income and education, and lack of men in the society - as a large portion of them were employed as migrant workers in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. Some came from villages, others from towns and cities. Some came from relatively peaceful areas like the capital of Mon state; Mawlamyine, a few from so-called 'brown'or 'black' areas with no established control by neither Mon nor Burman forces. Many came from villages with dangerous environmental conditions, where gas pipelines were built through their areas of settlement, or were dam constructions threatened to flood their houses[30]. In the villages and towns controlled by the Burman military there were frequent reports of economical, sexual and violent abuse of villagers done by military representatives.

> At the end of my second week in Sangkhlaburi, most of the staff currently working for the organization where I volunteered while doing fieldwork finally arrived in town. Until then, the only one present had been Mi Jinseneng; the coordinator of the program – which had returned from a fieldtrip to Myanmar the same day as my arrival, and Mi Chan – one of the longest working staff at MWCO. There had been little work to do at the organization so far, and as Mi Jinseneng shared my passion for swimming, we had spent some of the time floating on our backs in the huge reservoir and doing other leisure actvities. During working hours, I sometimes went with Mi Jinseneng on her numerous meetings with different organizations and people, and sometimes I stayed in the office with Mi Chan.
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> When the staff finally arrived, we had already expected them for several days. But as none of them had any form of identity-card officially legitimizing their presence in Thailand or in

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[29] This is not the real name of the organization, and it should not be mistaken with the Mon Woman's Organization (MWO) that is a real existing organization with office in Sangkhlaburi. Although I had several encounters with MWO, it is not the organization focused on in this thesis.

[30] When I first arrived Sangkhlaburi, Thailand experienced its worst flooding in decades. A common joke between my Mon informants was that the government in Thailand should have used the same method as the Burmese government to get rid of their over-flooded water pools: just empty them all at once without warning the people. "Then there would be no complaining and no problem".

Sangkhlaburi; they had to wait until one of the HURFOM staff came to meet them with signed documents from the NMSP office stating their right to cross the border under their protection.

During my entire stay, people continuously came and left town. Most of the staff at MWCO left Sangkhlaburi for a couple of days up to several weeks for differing reasons. Mi Champ had to go back to Burma for a couple of weeks when her mother got sick and her family needed her help at home. Mi Nondar went back to partake in the funeral of her grandfather when he died, and Mi Hong Sajin went to stay with her parents just outside Bangkok while applying for a Thai passport. While Mi Champ and Mi Nondar crossed the border by car, Mi Jinseneng went back and forth between Thailand and Burma by air from Bangkok to Yangon. Raised both in Thailand and Burma, she had been lucky to obtain both a Burmese passport and a Thai identity card.

When I first met the staff members referred to above, they had all been engaged either in fieldwork, development projects or trainings inside Burma. At the end of my stay, two of the most experienced staff members - Mi Hnin Phy and Mi Mon Chan, went back inside Burma to prepare a new project. For the first time, MWCO planned to set up a new organization inside Burma, as the government had recently opened up for the registration of such projects. Movements across the Thai-Burma border were thus a general part of the activity for most people engaged as activists in Sangkhlaburi. It was the rule more than the exception.

From Traditional to Modern Cross-Border Movements

From the era of pre-modern *mandalas* to today's nation-states of Burma and Thailand, the reasons for, ways of, and implications of cross-border movements have certainly changed. In line with increasing focus on nations, borders, and ethnic identity during the last centuries, new aspects of cross-border movements have emerged, and these new conditions are in focus of this thesis. One of these aspects seemingly forming a practical reason for my informants' cross-border movements was their use of today's national borders when engaging in ethno-political activities. From being spaces that people in pre-modern times have utilized to avoid the governing powers of centralized states, today's border between Thailand and Burma has become one of the central operating spaces of ethno-political groups resisting the domination of the Burman rulers from which they can no longer escape. The border zone still serves as a space of 'sanctuary' for people resisting the governing hand of more powerful groups and organizations, but the methods adopted to prevent such dominations seem to have changed. From a tactic of avoiding the total structure of the state, today's ethno-political groups aim at becoming legitimized as belonging to their own 'imagined' nation. As such, ethnic minorities in Burma have

applied the 'tools' of modern nations ever since they were first introduced by Western imperialists and their technology of mapping. Since the failed establishment of a multi-ethnic Union of Burma in 1948, nationalist movements within the ethnic groups of Mon and Karen have come to nurture a 'common dream' of their own (semi)-autonomous nations. For an increasing number of people, these 'nations' – which are envisioned as free and democratic - are known as *Hongsawathoi* and *Kawthoolei* respectively. Further, these 'nations' are envisioned to cover much of the same geographical areas as today's Mon state and Karen state.

Another important aspect following the change of borders from zones to lines, from peripheries to symbols of sovereignty, is that the borders have been given increasing attention from 'outside'. The border is no longer only a 'matter of the locals', but increasingly a place where people seek sanctuary from wars and disputes fought inside the borderlines of a nation. Since the Second World War, predominantly western countries have been engaged in international aid aimed at re-building societies and people that have suffered from different humanitarian crisis. Together with improved infra-structure and the access to information technology along the border, the transnational space of the border between Thailand and Burma have in many ways become an intersection between local and global dynamics regarding most aspects of life.

Almost all my informants arrived in their border communities on the basis of being part of- or recruited to- an ethno-political network. In the Karen site, the students at KKCS were enrolled on the premises that they followed a strong ethno-religious schedule at the school. The leader of the community – Harmony, was strongly engaged in a transnational and even global network of Christian Karen. And apart from offering basic education, the school aimed to develop potential leaders for the Karen community, as well as Karen representatives with higher education who could later advocate for the rights of their people. As for the Mon, the staff at MWCO was most often recruited through relatives and friends who were already part of the ethno-political cross-border network of Mon. A few had been recruited by MWCO fieldworkers and were as such new members of the network. MWCO and the other ethno-political movements in Sangkhlaburi at large aimed at improving the general situation for Mon both inside Burma, in the border area, as well as in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. Although many of the projects aimed at improving the situation for all people in the areas where Mon are living - regardless of ethnicity, the organizations themselves consisted exclusively of Mon members, except for a few temporary foreign volunteers. The Karen at KKCS on the other hand, had a strong and almost exclusively religiously based network of

Christian partner- and donor- organizations from abroad, except for a few occasional independent volunteers. While KKCS was funded as a migrant school, MWCO applied for funding based on each individual project.

Summing up, KKCS and MWCO were part of similar networks formed by two different ethnic groups. In KKCS' network, there were organizations and projects similar to MWCO. And in MWCO's network, there were Post 10 schools similar to that at KKCS. In order to understand the practical meaning of borders for those who cross them in their everyday lives, I will focus the next chapter on the different motivations for and types of border-crossers that I argue are evident in my empirical material. This context is necessary in order to understand current transformations in identity with respect to the common dreams of the Karen migrant school and the Mon woman's organization, and the individual goals of people engaging in these communities.

4 Cross-Border Engagements
- Along the Thai-Burma Borderlands -

In this chapter, I suggest that the total Burma-originating population living, working, and moving across the border between Thailand and Burma today, roughly can be divided into four *ideal types* of engagement. The four ideal types represent different circumstances for cross-border life as evident in the case of the Thai-Burma border.

As I argued in the previous chapter, it is not a new phenomenon that people move across this geographical area. What is new is the measures of control inserted in relation to human mobility in this historically peripheral highland; an area that used to be inhabited by small, mobile, and by practical means highly ungoverned chiefdoms. Today, the same geographical areas that used to be peripheral zones outside the direct influence of *mandalas*, have been turned into national borders marking the beginning and end of the modern nation-state's sovereignty - and thereby its own legitimized use of power. That said, the types of engagements people partake in when crossing today's border share many similarities with historical movements. Through the era of *mandalas,* it is easy to imagine that violent conflicts between competing realms and kingdoms continuously lead individuals and groups of people to escape the areas of conflict in search of more peaceful ground (cf. Scott 2009). But while marginal people in pre-modern times were drawn to peripheral grounds out of reach of the power of centered states, the people who today lead their lives across the Thai-Burma border must be seen in relation to current socio-political circumstances. Due to the highly different politics of the modern states known as Thailand and Burma[31], human mobility has through the last centuries had a tendency to move *from* the geographical area of Burma, *to* that of Thailand. In other words, the people in focus in this thesis are those with a sense of belonging to the Burmese side of the border. In modern times, the border itself has been utilized by several marginalized groups such as the Karen and Mon resistance-forces and their followers as 'in-between-spaces', partly enabling them to sustain their resistance against suppression and assimilation by the Burmese military rulers.

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[31] While Thailand has worked to integrate all its peoples under a Pan-ethnic national Thai identity; enabling them to sustain secondary identities nominating their 'ethnic' identities, Burma's (up to recently) military government have tried, and partially succeeded - in enforcing its peoples to adopt an all-embracing Burman identity.

Today, large portions of Burma's residents suffer the consequences of this more than 60 years-old conflict through poor socio-economic circumstances in the form of low income, lack of jobs, human rights abuses including forced labor, rape and murder, lack of social, and health services, lack of educational opportunities and so on. Further, violent conflicts between government military and the ethnic resistance forces have led people to leave their homes in search of more peaceful grounds. While many re-settle to so-called *IDP*-areas[32] or liberated areas[33] on Burmese side of the border, many others cross the border into Thailand as a way of coping with the hardships they are facing in their everyday lives. From the viewpoint of contemporary socio-historical circumstances such as this Post-Colonial conflict in the 'era' of modern nation-states, I argue that movements across the Thai-Burma border must bee seen as a partly continuation of traditional ways of life in this geographical area. Only by studying local life as part of national and global discourses about identity, can we fully understand the effects and uses of borders to both accommodate and challenge such discourses. As the places constituting national borders make up centers of negotiations both as ideal markers of limits and dynamic spaces to traverse, I argue the Thai-Burma border to be a particularly fruitful empirical focus when seeking to understand contemporary discourses about identity and belonging. In chapter five and six, I will discuss how people themselves make use of discourses about identity in their everyday lives as border-crossers. But first, I will look deeper into the types of border-crossings in which they engage.

Ideal Types of Engagement

Inspired by Max Weber's methodology of 'ideal types' (*Idealtypus*), I have categorized the different engagements of border-crossings as evident in the lives of my informants into four distinct types. Based as they are on my empirical observations in two differing cross-border communities, they might be understood as 'individualizing historical ideal types' (Skirbekk and Gilje 2000:534) as seen in relation to the specific socio-historical circumstances discussed in the previous chapter. To the extent the four ideal types presented here can be applied when analyzing other cross-border engagements in other parts of the world with other socio-historical circumstances, they have the potential to be seen and utilized also as "generalizing social ideal types"(Skirbekk and Gilje 2000:534).

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[32] Internally Displaced Persons- areas.
[33] Geographical areas controlled by one of the resistance forces.

According to Weber, *ideal types* are meant as formal instruments in scientific theoretical approaches making it possible (for the scientist) to arrange the endless diversity of real empirical life into distinct models of reality. In other words, the four types of border-crossers presented below are first and foremost meant as analytical concepts; ideal types, to make it easier to make sense of the myriad of engagements people partake in when crossing the border. As such, none of my informants outspokenly suggested separating border-crossing people into these four ideal types of engagements. However, they did sometimes refer to the people crossing the border as 'activists', 'migrant workers', 'residents' and 'people living in camps'. The categories are both relational and situational, and real people often fit into several of the four analytical categories as presented here.

Cross-Border Residents

In this thesis, *cross-border residents* are used as a category to denote those people who cross the border between Thailand and Burma in search of better conditions and opportunities in their everyday lives. In other words, this category of people involves people who cross the border for different socio-economic reasons. This type of engagement entails regular people who have previously lived in communities inside Burma, but have felt it necessary to cross the border into Thailand in order to escape different hardships experienced in their home communities. Their everyday lives are in various degrees connected to both the Thai and Burmese side of the border, making it reasonable to refer to this category as cross-border residents. The cross-border residents I encountered during my fieldwork was either living in small improvised settlements such as the one situated between KKCS and the river marking the local border, or in larger more established villages and towns such as Mae Sot and Sangkhlaburi. Common for the cross-border residents was their continued tie to Burma through networks, travels and everyday life - often with a hope of an eventual return. Further, they seemed to have little if any interest to engage in any form of activism. Typical livelihoods among cross-border residents were among others as subsistence farmers, plantation workers, fishermen, shopkeepers, drivers, and factory workers.

In the Karen migrant school community, several of the residents, teachers, and families of the students could be categorized as cross-border residents. Most of the people residing at KKCS had arrived to the community after escaping different hardships in their home communities in Burma. Several had fled villages put on fire by the Burmese armed forces, and one family had arrived to the community after loosing their house in the cyclone

Nargis that hit Burma in 2008. Other families living in the community were relatives of Harmony or one of the original families who had first established the community with him. The most common livelihoods for the residents at KKCS were as tailors making traditional and modernized Karen outfits, and as small-shop owners selling everyday necessities. Further, most of the Karen teachers fit into this category. Several of the male teachers explained that the only reason they worked as teachers was that "it was nothing else to do".

One of these teachers was John. One time while we were sitting outside the house of one of the tailor-families discussing the situation of 'their people', he openly expressed his dissatisfaction with working as a teacher at KKCS. "I don't want to be a teacher, but I have nothing else to do", he said. "If I can find something better, I will leave… Maybe you can help me?", he asked. "Do you know someone in Norway that can help me move to Norway?" John expressed little hope for the future of the Karen people. "We are forgotten", he said. " Only God cares, and he can do nothing".

Directly related to the community - although only occasionally present - several of the students' parents could also be categorized as cross-border residents. Living in settlements along the border, they sent their children to school-communities such as KKCS. Thereby, they were able to give their sons and daughters a chance to access education, stay safe, and secure basic access to food and shelter in otherwise turbulent circumstances. As such, it was quite common among the students to quit school when they got old enough to engage in wage work or otherwise help their family make ends meet. Among the female students, several also risked to be taken out of school to marry – if they did not choose it themselves. Whether the students fit into the category of cross-border residents depended on their individual agenda. But those who quit school to engage in work or otherwise help their families - or because they themselves want to spend time on something else - could very well be said to fit into the category of cross-border residents.

In the Sangkhlaburi Mon community, a large portion of the Mon residents fit into the category of cross-border residents. These people were in most part a mix of the original group of 60 families who had settled in Sangkhlaburi together with Monk Uttama in 1949 - together with their children and grand-children -, as well as individuals and groups of people arriving Sangkhlaburi at different times thereafter. As with the Karen residents, most of the Mon residents had also left Burma because of hardships in form of local conflict or otherwise unsafe or difficult living conditions. That said, there were fewer Mon than Karen escaping

violent conflicts, and more Mon than Karen settling as cross-border residents due to otherwise difficult living conditions such as lack of jobs or opportunities for education, or unsafe living conditions due to state-initiated buildings of gas pipelines or hydro-electric dams in their home communities. Cross-border residents in Sangkhlaburi included people owning small shops and restaurants; people preparing and selling what my informants declared as the Burmese national breakfast *mohinga*; families cultivating and preparing different kinds of crops - including chilies and beatelnuts, both for their own use as well as to sell on the market; families renting out house boats; people working as tailors in local factories producing clothing and shoes; people involved in the black-market; as well as families receiving funds from family members who were working or had resettled in other countries.

Mi Lime - a 67-year old woman - had lived in Wangkha village for over forty years. She was born in Burma, but had moved to Sangkhlaburi in 1975, when Burmese soldiers had settled down in her home village in Burma, and her family decided to escape the effects of their misrule. Owning one of the two-storey wooden houses situated along the main streets of Wangkha village, Mi Lime and her family had used the border to their advantage in their everyday lives. For several decades, they had owned and run their own jewelry shop at Three Pagoda Pass (the nearby border-crossing point). Further, her family owned a plot of farmland in the area between Sangkhlaburi and Three Pagoda Pass, where they grew different sorts of fruits and vegetables. But now, after a long life as cross-border resident in Sangkhlaburi and its environs, she was retired. Her husband had died, and the jewelry shop was closed down. Her three daughters had grown up and moved out. One of them was still working at another jewelry shop at Three Pagoda Pass, another was working in Bangkok, and the third had married and settled down inside Burma. Now, Mi Lime spent her days paying tribute to the Buddhist way of life by making daily merits in the local pagoda.

Cross-Border Activists

The second type of cross-border engagement I term in the case of the Thai-Burma border, is that of people who cross the border to engage in different ethno-political movements. As far as I could observe during my fieldwork, cross-border activists resided and moved about in the same areas as cross-border residents, and were in many cases part of the same transnational networks. What differed the most was the type of engagements they partook in during everyday life as border-crossers. While cross-border residents typically engaged in moneymaking livelihoods or subsistence farming, cross-border activists focused their attention on more ethno-political engagements. Often, these engagements were founded on

the '88 generation of activists resisting the political regime forced upon them by the Burman government. In addition, both Mon and Karen activists engage in a wide range of movements and organizations focusing on different forms of development projects and other sorts of community work aimed at improving 'their own peoples' lives. Targeting communities both inside Burma, on the border and in other Southeast Asia countries, the movements are most often established on mono-ethnic sentiments, although often collaborating with other ethnic- or political- groups holding similar goals.

In Sangkhlaburi, the project in which I volunteered as editor and teacher - and whose members made up most of my main informants - was part of this local network of Mon organizations and movements. The organization's main focus was to improve the rights and circumstances of women and children from Southern Burma through a wide range of activities. It implemented development projects inside Burma by funding materials to improve school facilities and repair water wells. It arranged teachers and supplied villages with medicine and other needed equipment. It worked to empower women by holding training and workshops - both in local communities inside Burma and on the border - focusing on relevant issues such as human rights, confidence building, and processes of decision-making. And at last, it worked with research and documentation of current issues related to the rights and opportunities of women and children from Southern Burma. In the words of Mi Jinseneng[34];

> In Sangkhlaburi there are many organizations in which you can involve yourself if you want to
> be an activist, but there is more social work here than it is strong political engagements. It is
> okay to stay here if you are a soldier, but you cannot be part of an armed group.
>
> (Mi Jinseneng)

While the Mon organization I study is centered on training and documentation in relation to (the lack of) rights and opportunities for women and children from Southern Burma, the Karen migrant school is an educational institution based on strong ethno-religious sentiments.

At KKCS, the students had classes in Karen language and Karen history - subjects unknown for many when they first arrived to the school. Further, every weekday begun and ended with a religious devotion that in the case of the Post 10 students were held in Harmony's own house. There, the students would sing hymns from the Bible as well as traditional Karen songs. The one leading the devotion - often Harmony himself - would tell a

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[34] Because of the difference in sentence building and structure in the languages of Karen, Mon, Burmese and Thai in contrast to English, I have somewhat modified their spoken language to better display the meaning of their words.

story or give the students advice, before they would end the session with a common prayer. Every Sunday there were several services in the community's own church, and the school experienced regular visits from Christian partner- and donor- organizations based both on the border and from abroad. At last, the school was part of a large transnational and even global network of Christian Karen. The network arranged summer schools, music contests and soccer tournaments where Karen youth from different cross-border communities would gather.

Camp Dwellers

The type of engagement I term *camp dwellers* denote those people who settle more or less permanently in one of the UNHCR-registered refugee-camps located on Thai-side of the border in search of refuge or potentially a chance to resettle in a third country. In addition, this category also entails people seeking refuge in other improvised settlements (including IDP-areas) along the border, in order to escape consequences of the civil war in Burma. I argue that this type of engagement is a direct consequence of the internal war going on in Burma since independence in 1948, and the consequent rise of modern nations. While people have fled towards and across the border ever since, the first 'semi-permanent' refugee camp was established by the Karen in 1984 (Lang 2002). In accordance with Lang, I take the term 'refugee' "to encompass persons forced to flee their homes due to fear, danger and sociopolitical violence associated directly and indirectly with war"(2002:17).

Karen and Mon have quite a different history when it comes to relations with the Burma regime. The New Mon State Party agreed on ceasefire with SPDC in 1995, and their camps were consequently shut down in agreement between Thai and Burman authorities. As the Mon were officially 'no longer in civil war with Burma, the camps were not needed', and international relief agencies such as the *UNHCR* and *Les Medicines Sans Frontier* had to remove much of their presence from the former refugee-camps located in the Thai-Burma border zone. Many people were consequently left with 'nowhere else to go' in an ever more challenging situation.

> We had not very much choice like the Karen. They still have forest. They have some resources which they can rely on; they have the KNU and their camps. But the Mon people felt the pressure. We had no others to rely on, so we didn't have a choice. We had to agree on ceasefire. Now we have no camps, and there are more migrants among Mon than there are among Karen.

Situated in the same geographical location as the former camp, *Halochany* still serves as a place of relative sanctuary for people in distress. Marked by the presence of Mon activists, it was an important arena for different meetings, celebrations and happenings in the cross-border Mon community during the time of my fieldwork. Examples are the yearly gatherings for the Mon Woman's Convergence, and the celebration of Mon National Day. At MWCO, none of the current staff members had themselves engaged as camp dwellers. However, all of them had visited one or more such IDP-areas on several occasions in relation to their work at MWCO - including the two events mentioned above.

At the same time as the Mon-dominated camps were shut down, Karen's armed struggle against the SPDC further escalated as KNU chose the opposite path and refused to sign any ceasefire. The increased attacks on Karen communities by Burman military forces following this event, led the number of camp-dwellers to increase manifolds in the Karen-dominated camps. These incidents further seemed to correlate with a subsequent raised awareness and presence by international agencies - of whom a large portion were based on Christian ideologies. The ties between KKCS and the camps were close for several reasons. Many of the current students had arrived to the school after first having engaged as camp-dwellers for various periods of time. Most still had families and friends residing in camps - whom they often visited during weekends and holidays. In addition, the school itself partook in different arrangements in the camps including worships, music contests and soccer tournaments. Several of Harmony's friends and colleagues from the network of the 88' generation now filled positions in camps. All these ties made trips between KKCS and the different camps a frequent arrangement. While the camps' main function was that of sanctuary and entrance towards resettlement, they also served as arenas for marriage, education, and a place where newly established families could settle while looking for better options to sustain their livelihood. While some of the students at KKCS had parents residing in one of the camps in hope of getting a chance to resettle, many eventually gave up camp life and moved to other locations at the border, as camp life by most was associated with few opportunities and poor socio-economic lives.

Purple; one of the shop keepers at KKCS, had spent several years of her life in Mae La Camp in hope of getting the UN card required for resettlement. Her sister together with her husband had qualified for the UN card while Purple was still staying in camp, and had eventually

resettled to Europe. But Purple had not been that lucky. Eventually, she and her husband got tired of the monotone camp life with few opportunities to lead a somewhat 'normal' life, and had thereby chosen to move to KKCS. As her husband was a relative of Harmony, Purple was upon their arrival given the task of tending Harmony's old father until he died a few years later. After moving out of the camp, Purple would continue to go there whenever rumors reached KKCS that UNHCR was handing out a new round of cards, until the day her camp-id eventually expired.

Migrant Workers

The fourth type of engagement among border-crossers is what I term migrant workers. As the name suggests, this category of people include those individuals who for differing periods of time engage in wage-work by crossing the border from Burma into another country; in this case either Thailand, Malaysia or Singapore. While the reasons for engaging as migrant workers were as complex and multifaceted as with the three other types of engagements discussed above, this category in general consisted of people looking for better opportunities for income-generating work due to high unemployment rates and low salary in their home communities in Burma. A sub-category of migrant workers can be said to be that of cross-border workers; meaning people who cross the border on a more daily- and weekly- basis to engage in labor offered in the very border-zone itself - typical occupations being those of traders, factory workers and prostitutes. But, while the latter can also fit as a sub-category of cross-border residents, the former engage in work further away from the border. In addition to the occupations shared with cross-border workers, a large share of migrant workers are hired as cheap labor at construction sites and plantations, in restaurants, factories, hotels and bars, and within cleaning and housekeeping. Those engaged in prostitution are often victims of trafficking. Many of my informants both at KKCS and MWCO had siblings, parents, friends, or even boyfriends engaged as migrant workers outside Burma. While those working in Thailand often seemed to lack any sort of identity papers or work permits - consequently leaving them vulnerable for exploitation regarding working conditions and salary -, those working in Singapore and Malaysia most often seemed to hold some sort of temporary working-permit allowing them to engage in wage work in their host countries.

The organization I volunteered with in Sangkhlaburi regularly worked on special reports concerning issues such as trafficking and human rights abuses of migrant workers from Southern Burma. During my stay, the different organizations and movements were especially concerned about the current flooding in and around Bangkok and its effects on the

conditions for migrant workers from Southern Burma. When I first arrived in Sangkhlaburi in October 2011, the town was full of migrant workers and students who could afford the trip back to Sangkhlaburi and even across the border into Burma - thereby escaping the current flooding affecting their work places and universities. Among personal ties at MWCO, the former coordinator Mi Su had a brother working in Singapore and a sister working in Bangkok. Mi Champ's brother was currently working at a construction site in one of the Bangkok areas that was closed down due to the flooding. Mi Champ spent several weeks worrying about his whereabouts as she could not get hold of him, and was thus greatly relieved when he eventually called her. The reason why she had not heard from him earlier was that he had changed jobs to a place that was not affected by the flooding, and that bad phone service in the area had prevented him from calling. Mi Nondar had her childhood boyfriend working at a construction site in Singapore, and as mentioned earlier, Mi Hong Sajin's parents had owned a small shop next to a football field in the Bangkok area for many years already. According to Mi Jinseneng, it was not unusual that people engaged as cross-border activists later became migrant workers. It was hard to combine social and political work with family-life.

> When you engage in community work you work for free. But when it is time for marriage, you cannot work for free anymore. You have to provide for your family. Earn income. Most migrant workers work hard, and for a long time. Before they leave, they say, " I will work for three years and then come back". But when they leave, they stay for thirty years, not three. By then they have lost a lot of social capital, and often their goals have not come true.
>
> (Mi Jinseneng)

Likewise, in the Karen migrant school, several of the students had siblings and parents who had migrated outside Burma to work. But in contrast to the Mon community, of which many were employed in Singapore and Malaysia, Karen migrant workers were first and foremost employed in central parts of Thailand. The most obvious reason for this was that many of the Karen individuals who engaged as migrant workers were refugees due to the local dispute between Karen and Burman armed forces, most often lacking any sort of identification enabling them to officially apply for work in other countries. Thereby, their only opportunity to engage in wage work was through the illegal workforce that Thailand's economy so heavily relies on. The Mon working in Singapore and Malaysia on the other hand often engaged as migrant workers on the basis that there were better opportunities for income

generating work in these countries than inside Burma. Although there were often insufficient socio-economic conditions where they came from, they were nevertheless able to obtain Burmese passports or identity papers enabling them to apply for work permits as guest workers in other countries.

What Follows

All these types of engagements - residents, activists, camp dwellers and migrant workers - are also found on the Burmese side of the border. What makes the cross-border versions of these engagements particularly interesting is the fact that they utilize transnational spaces in order to better fulfill their engagements.

What I seek to illustrate through the empirical cases of a Karen and a Mon community in the following chapters, are how the individual border-crossers, through the transnational communities and networks they are part of, both accommodate and challenge discourses of identity and belonging. In agreement with current perspectives on national borders, I argue that the transnational communities and networks border-crossing people create through their movements should be understood as alternative spaces challenging the meaning and use of geographical space in relation to discourses on nationalism and ethnicity. In the next two chapters, I seek to narrow this discussion of cross-border engagements by presenting two cases of how cross-border people conceptualize and utilize feelings of identity in relation to the different social networks they are part of. The first community I will look into is the Karen Migrant School.

5 Transforming Identities

- **Ties and Opportunities among Students in a Karen Migrant School**-

> Culture is thus not the tied and tagged baggage that belongs with one national, ethnic, or religious group, nor is it some spur-of-the-moment improvisation without roots or rules. Culture is two things at once, that is, a dual discursive construction. It is the conservative "re"-construction of a reified essence at one moment, and the path finding new construction of a processual agency at the next moment.
>
> (Bauman 1999:95)

In the previous chapter, I suggested that the people originating in Burma and its border zone to Thailand - who are crossing today's national borders between Thailand and Burma as part of their everyday life - in line with Weber's methodology could be categorized into four ideal types of engagement. From the macro perspective on identity in relation to modern nation-states and historical *mandalas* discussed in the previous chapters, I will now turn to a micro-perspective on how identity is negotiated in the everyday life of my informants, in order to trace frictions between the 'commmon dreams' of the communities they are currently engaged in and the 'individual goals' of my informants. In particular, I seek to trace how the increasing number of social networks each individual is part of and represent while engaging as cross-border activists – together with an increased access to alternative information and knowledge in the border as space-in-between – affect feelings of identity and belonging.

Ideal Types in Everyday Life - My Informants' Engagements

My informants were currently engaged either as Post 10 students at one of the Karen migrant schools along the border, or as staff in one of the Mon organizations based in Sangkhlaburi. As such, they currently fit into the ideal type of cross-border activists as representatives of communities based on a transnational network of political activists formed around the '88 generation. But while the foundation of their projects and institutions was ethno-nationalistic sentiments aiming to somehow improve the situation of 'their own people', the individual border-crosser also had his or her own personal agenda - an agenda that seemed to be greatly influenced by the circumstances of the border. I argue that the students at KKCS as well as

the staff at MWCO seemed to develop an increased sense of reflexivity freed from the limitations of connected time-space (Giddens 1994). This reflexivity was evident in two ways. First, an increased ability of critical thought in relation to the conceptual frameworks they grew up with, including the ability to educate themselves through the means offered in the transnational space of the border. And secondly, connected to the first; an increased 'awareness of self' in the sense that my informants through their engagements as cross-border activists experienced a specialization of individual skills-set giving them increased individual value outside the framework offered 'inside Burma'. As I seek to show through empirical examples in this and the following chapter, this increased reflexivity seems to challenge prevailing concepts of identity in the two communities they are part of. While the ideal communal identity as Christian Karen was the concept at stake in the Karen migrant school community, the ideal communal identity as Mon Woman was the concept at stake in the Mon Woman's organization. What I argue is that the communal identity as promoted by the two ethno-political communities was challenged by individual members in much the same way as marginal ethno-political communities challenge the state in Burma. In their everyday lives, my informants both accommodated and resisted the ties and obligations put upon them as representatives of communities with particular goals and ideologies.

In this chapter, the focus will be on the Post 10 students at the Karen Migrant School, as it was here I first came to observe what seemed to be a friction between the ethno-religious identity promoted at KKCS, and the identity 'lived' by its individual members. A friction between i) an ideological identity as Christian Karen promoted by KKCS, ii) a practical identity as Buddhist Farmer applied in their home communities inside Burma, and iii) an alternative identity present in the border as space-in-between.

'The Ideal'

A Karen Migrant School

My main impression of KKCS' function in the transnational Karen network was that of a constructed stepping-stone or rest stop representing something common for its 'users'. It appeared much like a 'bubble', where young people could seek shelter from the turmoil in their home communities while figuring out the next step in their lives. The belief in the Christian God shared by most of the community's management seemed to provide a form of structure in an everyday reality otherwise surrounded by chaos, uncertainty and coincidence, thereby relieving the powerlessness many seemed to feel about their lives by 'laying their fate

in God's hands'. While almost all of the students came from families with Buddhist traditions, most seemed to appreciate the daily devotions in Harmony's house, and weekly worships in the community's own church. They told me they enjoyed the companionship and the routines.

2010/2011 School Closing Ceremony

It is one of the hot, dry days typical for mid-March when most of the students at KKCS have gathered to celebrate the School Closing Ceremony of the Academic year of 2010/2011. Except the students and some of their parents, the teachers, a local Thai politician as well as a local Thai police officer - representatives of the school's main donors[35], and the leadership of the school also witness the ceremony. Most are Karen, with exception of the American teacher, myself, the Australian co-manager (Pi) and the representatives of the donor organization.

Today's ceremony is marking an important event in KKCS' history: For the first time since the school opened in 2002, this year's two graduates of Post 10 have been accepted to preliminary studies at the University of Chiang Mai. The two students are seemingly perfect 'seeds' of the community. Expressing their apparent devotion to Christianity and their re-vitalized Karen identity, they are eager to service the needs of their own people by raising their voices through higher education.

I thank God for standing here today. It is through his blessings I got the chance to get educated and to know about the struggles of our people. When I grew up in my village in Burma, I didn't know about the Karen rebels and their fight against oppression (from the Burmese government). I knew I was Karen, but nothing more. I didn't care about my future. I didn't care about education. Many people in Burma are blind like that. Now, I have the chance to go to University, and to help the rest of my people to see, so that we together can fight for our freedom.

(Niny Du, female Post 10 graduate holding a speech at the Ceremony)

I was born in Burma, but had to flee from my village when I was nine years old. Since then I have lived in Thailand. The first four years in Camp, the last five here at KKCS. KKCS is better than staying in camp. Here, we get to study, to learn English, and to meet foreigners. If I had stayed in Burma, I wouldn't have learned about God's blessings. Now, my plan is to continue to University so that I can be useful for my own people. Then I can go back to

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[35] An organization also based on Christian values.

Burma and teach those people who don't have the chance to study. I want to thank God for this chance I have been given.

(Joseph, male Post 10 graduate holding a speech at the ceremony)

'The Lived Ideal'

While KKCS promoted an ideal ethno-religious identity in the form of a Christian Karen who would sacrifice him- or herself for the people's common goods, the highest target of KKCS as an educational institution was for its students to qualify and receive scholarships and thereby attend higher education. So, while KKCS - as I will return to further down in this chapter - *as community* very much functioned on the basis of the 'sharing of self' in everyday life, KKCS' success as an *educational institution* was dependent on the students individual achievements. Both in the form of high scores, and in the form of practical requirements such as holding the necessary identity papers to enroll into preliminary studies or continue to higher education at Universities in Thailand. As such, the *ideal* identity as Christian Karen did not correspond fully with a *lived* identity as Karen. An example of this is the case of Su Mar, the young woman I introduced in chapter three: She wanted to apply for University, but did not receive any support or funding through Harmony due to her Buddhist faith.

While Harmony had told Su Mar that she would never manage to be accepted to University, she was in fact the first student from KKCS to enroll in higher education. Pi finally managed to collect enough money for a scholarship through her Christian network, and by holding a Thai id card, Su Mar was accepted as Thai Karen to an acknowledged Bangkok University where she is currently attending a BA-program in International Relations and Development Studies.

In this way, the border as space-in-between had first offered Su Mar a chance to attend Post 10 studies in a community where her identity as Karen was the accepted norm rather than a marginal identity. Then, by the means of her Thai identity card – obtained on the basis that she was born and raised on Thai-side of the border – she was accepted to University as Thai Karen. The fact that she was fluent in Thai language and follower of the Buddhist faith, probably further facilitated her attendance at the Thai University. Being enrolled as student at a Karen Migrant School - thereby being part of the transnational network of cross-border activists - thus proved to be her stepping-stone towards higher education; while her Thai identity secured her entrance.

The school's explicit goal was to create independent individuals equipped to stand up for and represent 'their own peoples' cause. When asked, this complied well with what the students replied as their own goals: to get scholarships and go to University so that they could get educated and help their own kind. But the more time I spent with the Post 10 students, the more complex their actual 'life strategies' seemed to be. It appeared to exist a significant friction between the idealistic dreams about *Kawthoolei* - seemingly shared by all participants of the community -, and realistic expectations for the future held by the younger residents.

The students at KKCS came from localities inside Burma which had suffered the effects of a government leading its country from the richest to the poorest economy in Southeast Asia. Not only has Burma been cut off from most of the developments in infrastructure and technology that charactertized its neighboring country Thailand. The official school system has also put considerable effort into indoctrinating its subjects that they should listen and follow, rather than reason and digest. Arriving in the migrant school and other cross-border communities, these young border-crossers found themselves in a space where their conceptual tools seemed to be challenged. At KKCS their choices in life could no longer follow the patterns of their home communities inside Burma, but were influenced by a multitude of different impulses and circumstances present in the transnational space of the border.

> Nini Du stressed on several occasions, and especially in front of foreign visitors, how most people in Burma - including herself prior to arriving at KKCS - thought that the government in Burma was good, and that everything was as it was supposed to. According to her, few people knew about the Karen resistance going on along the Thai-Burma border before they arrived there and experienced it themselves.
>
> Kew Thoi who herself had grown up in near proximity to the continuous fighting between the *Tatmadaw*, KNU/ KNLA and DKBA, said that her father had taught her that education was the most important thing for their people to gain freedom. Her father was a farmer, and her family was poor. As the student with highest scores for the school year of 2010/2011, she aimed at one day becoming a successful businesswoman so she could help her people improve their economic circumstances and thereby facilitate "a happy life in Kawthoolei".

For many of the students, arriving in the transnational space of the border was their first extensive experience with 'modern' technologies and inventions. In the localities they came from in Burma, buffalo charts, WWII- trucks and dirt roads (Dean 2007:196, my own experience) formed regular means of transportation, and phone-calls were made with stationary telephones rented out per minute at high costs. On Thai-side of the border, on the

other hand, the students had access to relatively cheap mobile phones and services; good satellite signals and free access to Internet. This made it considerably easier for the students to connect with other people along the border and abroad, as well as to access new information and knowledge. KKCS had its own – although limited computer area with Internet access, and most of the older students had their own cell phones. They could watch TV in one of the community's houses, and the nearby town had its own Internet café that some of the students occasionally paid a visit.

Finding New Ways

In addition to more traditional livelihoods which for men included farming, fishing, trade, shop-keeping and migrant work; for most women domestic work in the form of housekeeping and motherhood; and for a few elite individuals higher education and official work, the border as space-in-between offered an alternative range of possible career paths for the students.

First and foremost, the education offered at KKCS gave the students a unique chance to get educated outside the Burmese system. Many of the students at KKCS expressed how the Burmese School system was corrupted by the government; which let everyone pass until high school, for then to fail the acquirements to attend further education. The school-system in Burma further focused the teaching on memorizing information, instead of understanding the meaning of the information taught. According to Tangseefa (2007), the education offered in migrant communities and refugee camps along the border give the students an opportunity to acquire skills that are much closer to an international level than inside Burma. If they themselves or their parents chose for them to quit their studies, they had several options offered through engaging as border-crossers. They could join with their families in one of the camps and apply for UN-cards making them candidates for re-settlement in a third country; or if their families were still living inside Burma - move back to help them make ends meet. They could receive a wide range of training in Thailand, on the border, or even inside Burma - enabling them to work for different NGOs (both local and international) and CBOs (Community Based Organizations) as teachers, journalists, interpreters, nurses, fieldworkers and so on. At last, a few qualified students able to complete the Post 10 program and pass the GED-exam could compete for a limited offer of scholarships at Universities in Thailand or other Southeast Asian countries.

Which path the students at KKCS eventually followed, was not an easy calculation. As sort of a coping strategy, most students seemed to imagine several different outcomes of their future. By visualizing a wide range of career-paths, they seemed to measure each step in the

maze of ties and obligations to the different social networks they were part of on one side; and the opportunities presented in the border as space-in-between on the other. Tied to their local neighborhoods and the Karen Migrant School on one side - given opportunities as 'global citizens' in the transnational space of the border on the other. As such, the young students seemed anchored in their local communities, while simultaneously being part of transnational flows of people and ideas in the circumstances of the border. By taking into account as many of the options as they could, they seemed able to keep a certain sense of control over their own lives and future.

The Ideal Path

Paw Htaw had been born in camp, as his mother and older sister had to flee their home village in Burma when the military put in on fire. Later, they had moved back to Burma, where he grew up in an area dominated by Burman residents. He attended Burman elementary school where they spoke the Burmese language and dressed in Burmese clothes. He said he hated Burmans. In school, the other students had mocked him saying things like "you have no country", and looked down on him being Karen. But he had enjoyed learning as much as he had enjoyed his childhood, until his mother got sick and later died of tuberculosis. As his father had already died of the same diagnosis when Paw Htaw was just a little boy, he and his sister were left to the care of their uncle and aunt. But as they could not afford to take care of two orphaned children, they had sent Paw Htaw to KKCS, while his older sister had settled in one of the camps. Paw Thoi explained that he wished to apply for a ten-year card like many other of the students at KKCS. But as his uncle and aunt didn't care about going with him to the police station, he had no relatives to confirm his identity and could thereby not apply. Paw Htaw had many dreams about the future. He dreamt about becoming a politician to help his people realize their goal of getting their own country. He dreamt about opening a school for Karen children in Burma. He dreamt about a democratic Burma where he could promote the beauty of his country to foreign tourists. He dreamt about *Kawthoolei*.

But with no relatives or family to go to in Burma, and no identity card enabling him to move outside the Thai-Burma border zone, life outside KKCS seemed to have little to offer. As way of coping with this sense of helplessness connected to his future, Paw Htaw seemed to embrace the feeling of identity and belonging offered by KKCS with much joy. Paw Htaw was clearly proud of being Karen. Along with most other of the male students, he wore his Karen shirt almost every day. He used Facebook as an active mediator to express his identity by posting religious sayings from the Bible as well as Karen symbols like the flag, pictures of KNU leaders, or pictures from Karen communities inside Burma. He proudly told about the

Karen history he had learned at KKCS, and about his dream that the Karen one day would have their own democratic state within Burma. "Before, we wanted our own nation, but now we want our own state and government within a federal system in a democratic Burma. Our nationality is Karen, but we belong to Burma".

Kew Thoi did not like Paw Htaw's hatred towards Burmans in general, and tried to persuade him to a more varied view on the issue. She herself had also attended a Burman elementary school inside Burma, where she grew up after being born on Thai side of the border. But in contrast to Paw Htaw she had many Burman friends, as well as a favorite teacher who was also Burman. "It's not her fault that she has to teach what the Burman government tells her to. Many Burman teachers don't like the military even though they work for them. It's the military that is bad. Not the people. The junta doesn't want children to develop any skills that can threaten their rule. Therefore, everyone in Burma pass every grade until high school no matter how bad their achievements and scores. In that way, students fail when they attempt higher education. The military wants us to be blind and deaf!"

Kew Thoi came from a family themselves engaged in the 'struggle of their people'. Compared to Paw Htaw she had achieved better grades at KKCS, and seemed to have several options available for her future. She could return home to her family in Burma, attend further training at the border, and maybe even continue on to preliminary studies at a University in Thailand. While Paw Htaw came to KKCS as he had no parental figures to take care of him back home in Burma - Kew Thoi attended school at KKCS because she came from a poor family with many siblings. Therefore, her parents could not afford to pay her schooling, leaving the Karen migrant school the best option for her further education. Along with the two graduates of this year's Post 10 College, these two students seemed to follow the ideal career-path at KKCS. Following the ethno-religious schedule they aimed at higher education that would eventually enable them to advocate for a better future of their people. Nevertheless, far from everyone seemed to follow this ideal path.

Alternative Paths

Saw Khu, Pinky and Amie Poe were all attending Post 10 College during my fieldwork. They had all left their homes in Burma due to unsafe living-conditions, and all three had been living in one of the camps for different periods of time before arriving KKCS. While Saw Khu and Amie Poe's parents were living in one of the camps, Pinky's parents were living inside Burma.

Saw Khu did well at school, but Pinky and Amie Poe seemed to struggle with their motivations. They thought school was hard and held that it was unlikely they would pass the GED-test necessary to apply for scholarships.

Like most other Post 10 students, Pinky said she would try to apply for a University Scholarship if she could pass the GED-exam, but expressed that option as unlikely. Rather, she planned to attend a medical course in Mae Sot after graduating Post 10. Then, she could obtain a Burmese passport that her brother - who had re-settled to the United States - had said he would pay. Using her acquired skills in Computer, Burmese, Thai and English, she could then get work with one of the NGOs in Thailand. She had several friends who had done this before her, and it was one of the alternative options talked about in school.

Amie Poe, on the other hand, seemed more interested in other things than school. During weekdays she spent most of her time talking in the phone or listening to music. In the weekends she often hung out with friends from outside the school-community. She seemed little motivated in classes, and often copied her homework from other students. When the school year of 2010/ 2011 was finished, she went to stay with her parents in camp. Only weeks later, it came out that she was pregnant. She had already been pregnant for a while, but had told no one. When I visited KKCS in October the same year, this was still a hot subject. Amie Poe had stayed in camp ever since she left, and was now planning to marry the father of her unborn child. The wedding would be held in camp, and many of her fellow students at KKCS planned to go.

Saw Khu, who did well at school, never got the chance to graduate Post 10 College. After the school-closing ceremony of 2010/ 2011 he went back to his family in Camp, whose application for resettlement had finally been approved. A few months later, they resettled to a European country.

Another Post 10 student who did well at school was Saw Ywa. Nevertheless, he had no plans of going to University. As his girlfriend had resettled to a third country a few years earlier, and he was unsure if he would ever see her again, he was thinking about going into the army (KNLA) during my stay. His brother was already an important military figure, and he proudly showed me pictures of him together with his brother and other KNLA soldiers. On the pictures, Ywa and the others wore camouflage outfits and held AK-47's in their hands. One of the pictures was taken on the occasion of the Karen National Day celebrations on the Burmese side of the border.

One time we sat in church practicing a play the Post 10 students would perform when getting foreign visitors, he also showed me some videos of fighting between Karen soldiers and the Burmese army. He pointed to a man lying dead on the ground, explaining he was an important general who had been shot just some weeks earlier. Joseph – who together with Nini

Du was the only Post 10 graduate of that school year – sat next to us: "You know, I am afraid of going home during summer vacation. Then I might have to work as a soldier. I'm afraid to die. I don't want to be soldier; I want to be a politician. To fight with words, not my life!" Joseph was one of many male students choosing not to go home during vacations due to the risk of being recruited as a soldier. Together with Saw Sky and other Post 10 students, he instead stayed to work in the maize fields for one of the nearby landowners, or spent the summer in one of the camps.

Where Local Meets Global

The empirical examples above show how students at KKCS have access to a range of different career-paths – in the form of education, training and work – that are based on their current engagement as cross-border activists in a transnational Karen network. From being part of specific social networks grounded in their local communities inside Burma, the students – through their engagement as cross-border activists – also gain access to a transnational (and even global) community of Christian Karen. Further, the geographical location of the Karen migrant school on the border facilitates the students' access to 'global' information and knowledge[36]. The case of Su Mar shows how she was able to utilize different social networks to reach her goal of attending University and gain higher education. While her engagement as a student at the Karen migrant school made her part of Pi's social network and thereby secured her scholarship funding; her Thai identity card combined with good scores made it possible for her to attend the University as Thai Karen. It might even be argued that the border as space-in-between had given Su Mar both the conceptual tools (through information and knowledge otherwise not accessible) that made her aim for higher education instead of choosing another life path; and the proper means to apply them.

When I came back to Thailand to carry out the second part of my fieldwork, I gave Su Mar a call. She answered from her dorm at a Bangkok University where she eagerly told me she had already begun her first semester. Although she had left the migrant school, she was still in contact with many of the Post 10 students and other cross-border friends. She was able to keep in touch both through her new Facebook-profile, her cell-phone and her e-mail. Her family, whom she planned to visit during school-break, was still living in the border area.
Upon my return to Thailand, Saw Khu had already moved to Europe with his family. Instead of graduating Post 10 College, he had now started preliminary studies to prepare for upper

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[36] E.g through access to international agencies like the UNHCR, TBBC and Les Medicines Sans Frontier, access to social media and information technology, access to knowledge about international human rights, and a chance to access training, work and education not accessible inside Burma.

secondary school in his 'new' country. He was beginning to learn the language, and spent much of his free time hanging out with other Karen migrants. Together, they had started a rock-band. He missed his fellow students and friends at KKCS and the times they spent together, but was still able to keep in touch through Internet and especially Facebook.

Kew Thoi and Paw Htaw had begun their last year at Post 10 College. Pinky her second last. When I visited them in late September, there had been several changes in the community since my leave in April. The Post 10 College had new roofs and floors, and they had built a new and larger computer room with more computers outside Harmony's house. Further, the students had begun growing their own garden plots with different vegetables for own use. The plots were located outside the dorms, and each student had two hours of obligatory gardening every day. While the two first improvements had been funded by their Christian partner organizations, the latter had been initiated with the help of a Karen gardener who had received special training in how to establish and sustain self-sufficient and organic crops through a program in one of the camps.

Self as Part of Community

As I have argued, people are part of several social networks and thereby inhabit several potential identities according to which social networks they currently engage with. The Karen migrant school community - forming the empirical basis of this chapter, represents one such social network - the basis of participation for my main informants being their role as students at the Post 10 College. But to understand what such social networks imply for my particular informants, it is necessary to understand what sort of communities they have been born into and brought up within.

When Marshall described what he defined as upland Karen in the 1920s, he stated that the village was the center of common life, where everyone was "thrown into intimate contact with everybody else in the village" (1922:127). Further, "there was little occasion for individual initate among the Karen, on account of the important part played by communal activity amongst them… One never set out on a journey or attempted any special work alone." (1922:139). In accordance with this much earlier account of the Karen people of Burma, the Karen school community was first and foremost collectively orientated. This was not only confined to the sharing of material goods such as money, flip flops, longyies, food, beds, rooms, and so on; but also extended to the sharing of 'self' in the everyday life of the community.

'Leppe-le?' was a frequently asked question during my stay at KKCS. It is *Sgaw Karen* for 'where are you going?' - and seemed to imply that the one asking was ready to join

you wherever you planned to go. The question was typically asked when my informants were leaving the place they were currently at – as for example when someone were leaving the dorm for the classroom. In the same manner, the students would ask someone to join them if they planned on going somewhere. "I am going to the classroom, are you?" would be a typical request implying the one asked to join. As might follow, I rarely witnessed any of my informants walking about in the community by themselves. A similar sense of community seemed to apply for the dorms. The boys' dorm in itself made up one large room shared by all students, each having their own area marked by their sleeping mats and some few personal belongings. The girls' dorm, on the other hand, did have a limited sense of privacy as the old church building had been separated into 'rooms' shared by two or three students. That said, the 'walls' were made out of nothing but different fabrics of curtains and blankets hanging down from poles in the ceiling, and the curtains were often pulled aside as to welcome anyone feeling to share their company. As such, the girls would peak beneath or across the improvised walls pretty much whenever they felt like, and although the improvised walls to some extent gave the residents privacy from other people's sight, sound travelled easily through the thin walls of fabric.

This sharing of self 'as part of community' seemed also to extend to most other aspects of the students' life at KKCS. Showers were done in common (with shower-longyies); money was shared according to who had some and who knew about it; food was shared through large bowls of rice and fish paste available for all within proximity; clothes were shared by borrowing others new-washed laundry from the clothes-line; and flip flops were definitely shared according to which pair was the most accessible at any moment. This is in line with Marshall, who claims that:

> This communal sharing was so much the order of the day that personal rights were more or less disregarded. If a man got a few seeds and planted a garden near his house, he was fortunate, as is sometimes still the case in the hills, if he gathered half the crop he had planted. His neighbors, asking no leave, helped themselves generously without hesitation and perhaps without intending to steal.
>
> (1922:130)

> At one occasion just after Kew Thoi had visited her family inside Burma - and she and Su Mar was visiting me in my room - she suddenly took a couple of Burmese notes out of her pocket. It was two thousand *Kyat* equalizing about two dollars. "Look what I got from my mother," she said with a bright face waving the money in the air. To my surprise, Su Mar suddenly

grabbed one of the notes and put it in her pocket. "One for me and one for you" she said smiling. Without any noticeable reaction, Kew Thoi put the remaining note in her pocket, and the conversation carried on.

There were hardly any answers involving the words 'no, 'maybe', or 'not now' when favors were asked among the students. Rather, it seemed that they would do what they could to fulfill the favors requested upon them, whether it was joining someone to the market; covering another student's duties; or "borrow" someone's money. In most cases, this reciprocity so evidently characterizing life at KKCS seemed to be so much the order of the day that questions were not even asked. People would simply take or borrow what they needed whether it was food, clothes or favors. The few times some of my informants were asked a favor they seemed unable or unwilling to fulfill, they would simply overlook both the question asked and the one asking it – by such avoiding any of the parts involved to lose face. As such, the form of sociality of KKCS seemed to have many similarities with those described by Marshall almost a century earlier.

One morning, Su Mar came to my room asking me to do her a favor. She had to go to the police station to apply for a ten-year card and needed someone to come with her to confirm her application. She planned to go the same day, and asked if I could go with her. The police officers usually seemed more benevolent if the applicants came together with a foreigner. As much as I wanted to go, I told her I had several classes this day that I had to show up for, and thereby could not come. But maybe I could go another day if she gave me a notice. The disappointment in her face was obvious, as she answered that "off course I had to show up in class. I could not skip them to go with her to the police station…" It was not until a few weeks later that I realized that my own conceptual tools regarding the importance of being conscientious about my appointed duties, did not fully apply to KKCS. The students were used to teachers not showing up in classes without further notice. Thereby, the 'right' thing for me to do in that situation would probably have been to skip my classes and follow Su Mar to the police station. After all, it was more of a request than a question. My 8th and 9th grade students would probably not have thought it as anything else than normal.

But - while 'self as part of a community' was the apparent order of everyday life at KKCS, it appeared that decisions about the individual students' future life paths were to be made alone. Although the students were seldom (physically) alone while staying at KKCS, they never seemed to know how long that would last. Some students suddenly left in the middle of the

school year as their parents needed their help back home. Others got a chance to re-settle to third countries, while others again quit school to enroll as soldiers in KNLA/KNU. The reasons for leaving KKCS were as many as the students who actually left.

> When the day finally came for Nana Poe to leave KKCS after quitting her job as a primary schoolteacher for a better offer at a school just north of Mae Sot, few seemed to pay any special attention to the occasion. She had been at KKCS for a year, and seemed to be appreciated by most of the community's residents. But as she was standing outside the dorm with two huge bags containing her clothes and personal belongings while waiting for a friend to pick her up, the other students went on with their daily tasks as usual. Most were preparing to go for a wedding in the village situated next to the river marking the border, and as they were leaving, Nana Poe was left to wait alone.

The students were used to people coming and leaving. They were used to uncertainty and unpredictable happenings governing their lives. Most found themselves several days of travel away from their homes and families, with months and even years between the times they got to see them. Some – like Paw Htaw – had few family members left to miss.
Pinky, the girl who planned to attend medical training in Mae Sot when graduating Post 10, told me she had cried every day when she and her brother first had to leave their parents in Burma for one of the camps. But now she was used to her family being far away. The last time she had seen her father was two years ago, but she was looking forward to see her mother who would come to visit her at the border this summer. Her brother - who had stayed in camp when Pinky went to KKCS - had ended up resettling to the USA. Although KKCS and its students still seemed to follow similar notions of collectivity as the Karen described by Marshall - the implications following the long-running civil war and their related engagement as cross-border activists seemed to have developed more independent individuals capable of dealing with the uncertainty governing their everyday lives.

Another indication of the increased individualization – or value as self – experienced among the young students at KKCS, was that to reach the practical ideal of getting a scholarship and thereby higher education, the students had to defy the symbolic ideal of sharing so much characterizing the community. Unlike money, clothes, housing, food and favors, scholarships could not be shared between several persons, but depended entirely on the individual student's skills in the form of grades and specialized knowledge; practical circumstances in the form of identification papers, language, religion and so on; and social

networks in the form of people, institutions and organizations that could facilitate and/or fund further development in form of education, training and work. Thereby, the development of an individual skills-set seemed to imply a prioritization of individual development, necessarily put above the established 'sharing of self'.

Conceptualizing New Space

Although the ideological claims made at KKCS proclaimed higher education as important for the Karen as a people, it seemed that applied to real life Harmony was more skeptical about the idea. Not because he didn't think it was important or necessary (for the future of his people), but because his experience seemed to have convinced him that trying more often led to failure than success. He had worked hard and long to create the Karen safe haven KKCS had truly become; a place where Karen youth could learn to be proud of and fight for their Karen nationality while acquiring skills and education offered within an ethno-religious framework celebrating the identity as Christian Karen. Outside this 'bubble' on the other hand, the real world seemed to threaten this ideological 'dream'. Persecuted in their homelands, and with few rights and opportunities outside the space of the border; the world outside seemed to have little to offer. Further, the opportunities present at the border as space-in-between seemed to constantly challenge this 'bubble'. One example of this was when the entire Post 10 College was offered a trip to Phuket.

- A Trip To Phuket -

"Are you coming with us to Phuket?" Kew Thoi asked me a few days after I my arrival at the migrant school. "Phuket!?" I said with confusion. "The Tourist Island?" As far as I knew, few if any of the current Post 10 students had ever been outside Tak province on Thai side of the border except for those who had been in Bangkok for the GED-exam, and none of them held any identity cards permitting such a travel. What was this talk about Phuket, a tourist Island over 1000km south of KKCS? When I a few days later got to address Pi about the issue, she eagerly confirmed what the students had told me: "Oh, yes! We're going to Phuket in two weeks!"

Pi explained that they had finally obtained the official papers a few days earlier, but it was still not a hundred percent sure that they would go. Thinking it would never happen, Harmony had allowed Pi to go one with the preparations for a possible trip for almost a year now. But now that it actually might happen his opinion about it seemed to have changed. He might refuse them to go, Pi said.

As the day of departure came closer, the evening devotions increasingly revolved around the possible trip to Phuket. Harmony had deep and long conversations with the students about what such a trip could imply. Only a week before the planned departure, Harmony, Pi, Will and I stayed behind after the day's evening devotion. It was clear that Pi and Harmony represented opposite sides regarding the issue; Pi pushing for the trip to be realized, while Harmony just as stubbornly refused to make a decision. "I don't want my students to serve as a tourist attraction!" Harmony said, obviously skeptical about how his students would be treated by the western foreigners and Thai school children that had funded the trip. "Of course they won't be tourist attractions!" Pi replied. "*They* will *be* the tourists! Think about what a rare opportunity this is for the students!" Then finally, after several rounds of discussions, Harmony did allow for the trip to be realized. In excitement, Pi pushed further in hope that Harmony would join the trip. "This is your show now" Harmony replied. "I don't want anything to do with it. Just make sure to take good care of them".

A few days later, we went on a school-trip to Phuket. A special invitation from a state school in Phuket secured the officially recognized travel documents for all the Karen students and teachers to go. Although we spent some time at what is known as the strictest checkpoint leading out of Tak Province - while the officers copied and checked our travel documents - we all made it through.The trip itself took two days each way, and nights were spent in another Karen migrant school and Bible College situated next to the border some further south. When we finally arrived late afternoon on our second day of travel, the school that invited us had arranged for the students to stay at a resort in a small hidden bay.

The days in Phuket were filled with new experiences for the students. One day they visited the Thai school that had helped realize the trip, where they participated in classes where Thai and Karen students interviewed each other, before performing a play they had put up for the occasion. The same afternoon, the hosts had arranged for the students to visit one of the large shopping malls in Phuket to see a movie. They took their first step onto an escalator, tasted their first burgers on Burger King, and went the first time to a 'western' toilet. The rest of the days were spent sailing, visiting the aquarium, and going on sight-seeing to one of the popular tourist beaches filled with half-naked, sunburned foreigners, before taking tons of pictures at a near-by viewpoint where the students would pose in a million different ways. The last evening, the owners of the resort where we were staying had prepared a delicious buffet and invited the donors so they could meet with the students.

Before our departure to Phuket, several of the students expressed difficulties conceptualizing what Phuket even was. Pinky had continuously referred to it as 'Bangkok' as that was her only clear point of reference of 'Thailand outside Tak'. While hearing stories about the capital

of Thailand, where several of the prior Post 10 students had gone to take the GED-exam, she had never heard anything about Phuket. When leaving Phuket, on the other hand, Pinky had a wide understanding of its concept both as a tourist destination and as a place where Thai students lived and went to school. She knew it was an Island with many popular beaches for the foreign tourists, and that it had several large shopping malls where you could eat at Burger King and go to the cinema. From an abstract name, 'Phuket as experienced' had become part of her conceptual world.

Time Spent as Border-Crosser: A Liminal Period of Transition?

More than anything else, KKCS functioned as a gathering point for people sharing an ethnic identity as Karen. From the leadership's point of view, it was a base for recruiting a 'new generation' of cross- border activists through the school's daily routines revolving around an ethno-religious ideology as Christian Karen. Together with subjects such as English, Math and Physics - preparing the students for higher education - the students had classes in Karen language and Karen history. They learned about their people's resistance against suppression from the Burmese government ever since Burma regained its independence from the British; the beneficial position they had held during British rule; and the centrality of their Christian faith as part of this history. But maybe most importantly, they learned the importance of their contribution to this struggle - as representatives of their ethnic group's future. The ultimate goal was to (re)-gain control of a free and just Kawthoolei - their own 'imagined nation' (Anderson 1983) covering large areas of today's Karen state. From the students and their parents point of view, KKCS filled several different functions and roles depending on their individual circumstances. For many it served as a place of sanctuary while waiting for the situation in Burma to change to the better so they could return home[37], or until other more long-term options appeared. For others, it proved to be a stepping-stone toward further education, training or work. For others again, it was a place to nurture their mission as 'true Christian Karen' by sacrificing their lives for the sake of God and the common good.

While KKCS - as an educational institution based on ethno-religious sentiments - worked to strengthen its ethnic boundaries and expand the network of people identifying within these boundaries, the meaning implied to being a Karen seemed to be constantly challenged and transformed in the scope of the border. The students' feelings of identity

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[37] It was first and foremost the youth who crossed the border into Thailand to settle temporary in camps or attend migrant schools such as KKCS, when the local circumstances in their home communities became to unsafe. Their parents often stayed behind to take care of their homes as long as they could.

seemed to be tied to which opportunities the different social networks offered, and which future life path the students' planned to take. Whether to be a Thai Karen, a Christian Karen, a (Buddhist) Karen farmer, a displaced Karen, or a Karen migrant worker thus seemed to depend on the individual student's ties and opportunities connected to the different social networks he or she were part of. The more networks the students were part of – the better equipped they seemed to be in relation to future possibilities.

The final decision about which path to take seemed to lie on each individual border-crosser, carefully balancing opportunities with ties – thereby trying to figure out the most profitable option available in the border as space-in-between (Leach 1954, Barth 1969). Depending on each individual's social circumstances and personal goals, some graduated Post 10 College, while some quit early. Some resettled to third countries, while others moved to one of the camps. Some went back to Burma, others aimed for higher education in Thailand, while others again aimed at attending further training to work in the space of the border. Which path they chose to follow is not the central point here. The central point is how the decisions they made were influenced by their feelings of identity and belonging to the different social networks they were part of and somehow represented.

In this way, I suggest that time spent as border-crossing activist could be understood as a liminal period of transition (Turner 1969) in which each individual student stand in-between contesting concepts of what their ethnic identity as Karen implies. The border as space-in-between gave the students a unique opportunity to educate and 'enlighten' themselves in new ways – thereby transforming their feelings of identity and belonging according to newly acquired concepts and knowledge about the world, not accessible in the social networks they were part of before engaging as cross-border activists. As such, their understanding of self and others were transformed, and an apparent outcome of this transitional period seemed to be an increased individualization tied to more global feelings of identity and belonging. This increased sense of reflexivity - expressed through the individual border-crossing student's ability to educate him or herself within a more critical framework - might further challenge the 'imagined communities' they are part of – in much the same way as these 'imagined communities' challenge prevailing concepts about nation-states and their borders.

Evidently, many Karen in Burma don't know about the Karen 'revolution' going on in the borderlands between Thailand and Burma. They don't know the Karen language, or the Karen history. Of the students at KKCS, many came from families like that – Buddhist farmers hoping to be left alone by the Burmese government and its army while tending their

work and everyday struggles in a country that have suffered the effects of the longest lasting civil war recorded in history. But, when the civil war reaches their villages through local fights and persecution - or by shortage in work, money and other necessary resources, they are often left with no other option than to flee. Their children go first, while the parents stay behind in hope of saving what is left of what they know as home. Many end up in camps, while others end up in migrant schools such as KKCS. Here, their life worlds transform. Children of Buddhist farmers become part of communities run by Christian activists. Many learn Karen languages and Karen history for the first time. Families and communities are split. Some stay in Burma, others go to Thailand to work, others resettle to foreign countries. Their local neighborhoods are expanded into transnational networks.

In the next chapter, I will turn my focus to the second field site among young Mon activists in Sangkhlaburi. My aim is to follow the thread of this chapter, by discussing whether a similar friction between idela and lived life paths can be said to be present among the female staff at the Mon woman's organization.

6 Female Activists

-Static Symbols & Dynamic Actors-

- Ties and Opportunities Among Staff in a Mon Woman's Organization -

The symbol of nation-as-woman[38] puts real women in a double bind as they are simultaneously sacralized and profaned, honored and dishonored, protected and restricted. In order to position themselves in the international field, for instance, postcolonial nations have negotiated the contradictions between tradition and modernity, between sovereignty and westernization, by making women the symbols of a purportedly pure national tradition.

(Alonso 2001:10378)

In this chapter, I wish to further develop the arguments presented in the last chapter, by discussing whether similar dynamics regarding feelings of identity and belonging to those present in the Karen migrant school, exist in other ethno-political communities along the Thai-Burma border. I will turn to the second location of my fieldwork: The activist Mon community in Sangkhlaburi, and one of its particular projects run by and for women from Southern Burma. As I argue, life as cross-border activist entails much of the same dynamics in the two transnational networks that KKCS and MWCO are part of. Nevertheless, their differing socio-historical circumstances seem to have led to a different focus in relation to feelings of identity and belonging. While the *religious aspect* of ethnic identity was an important marker at KKCS, the negotiation of *gender roles* seemed to be creating the most friction among the young women at MWCO. With this assertion, I am not saying that religion was not ground for feelings of identity and belonging in the Mon community, or that gender roles were irrelevant at KKCS. What I am trying to say, is that in the particular spaces these two distinct localities made up in the border as 'space-in-between', and as part of larger social networks - different social fields have gained increased relevance in the two communities according to their particular socio-historical circumstances.

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[38] As biological and thereby cultural reproducers (see Alonso 2001 for a more elaborate explanation).

The Activist Mon Community of Sangkhlaburi

It seemed a common agreement among Mon engaged as cross-border activists that they themselves had to act in order to experience improvement in their communities inside Burma. "We can not just blame the Burmese government" Mehm Hong Sa once explained, "we have to take responsibility for ourselves and do whatever we can do". As mentioned, the ethno-political part of Sangkhlaburi's population consisted of a network of people organized around the so-called '88 generation of political activists, who had fled the unsuccessful demonstrations held the same year. In the offices around Sangkhlaburi, you would find piles of stickers with the numbers 8888 and the slogan 'Free Burma' both in English, Mon and Burmese language. Ever since, different organizations and projects established and run by Mon activists have used Sangkhlaburi as one of its bases. One such project was the MWCO, which was currently coordinated by a charismatic woman in her early thirties named Mi Jinseneng. As someone looked up to by most of her current staff, I will begin by introducing how she herself got engaged as a cross-border activist.

A Transnational Engagement

Mi Jinseneng was born in Sangkhlaburi, Thailand, in the beginning of the 1980's. As her father had been involved in political movements working against the suppression by the Burmese government, her parents had little choice but to move across the border for safety. Still, they had seen it as natural that Jinseneng and her siblings grew up and went to school in Mon state. When she was just a few years old, she and her siblings therefore moved to live with their aunt inside Burma. Jinseneng remembered how happy she was in the aftermaths of the political uprisings in Burma in '88, when the schools closed and she had to return to her parents in Sangkhlaburi for a while. But three years later, she was sent back to Mon state to finish high school, as she grew up with clear expectations from her father. She was to get educated.

> It is important, important, important, he said. I just know that. I don't know why. But he used to say that if you are not educated you have to be hard working. You (have to) finish 10th grade before you think about other things, he said.
>
> (Mi Jinseneng)

After finishing most of her grades with high scores, Jinseneng lost her eagerness to aim high within Burmese society. When attending lower grades in school, she and her brother used to

dream about becoming doctors or lawyers. But as she was receiving one high score after the other, several of her friends failed and dropped out. By the time she graduated, she was fed up by the system: "I don't like fixed style, I don't like frame, I like open". Instead of working hard to get good grades so she could continue on higher education, she got more relaxed – and was satisfied with just passing her 10th standard. After her graduation, Jinseneng moved back to her family in Sangkhlaburi. There were few opportunities for further education inside Burma, and through his connections her father found work for her in the project she was now coordinating. She was still young, and neither she nor her parents wanted her to marry. As she said, she had become more relaxed when she realized that good grades couldn't give her the life she wanted - until she started working with documentation and advocacy related to human rights abuses in Southern Burma.

> When I came to work here in Sangkhlaburi, I felt that education was needed. I remembered situations inside Burma such as forced labor and gas pipelines and begun to think: What is the problem? I think one of the problems is us (local societies). We don't know our responsibility! One of the main reasons for this is that we don't have enough education enabling us to negotiate with the Burman state agencies; they don't care to consult us. So when people come from outside, we are not able to speak out for and protect our community. That is why other people come and take benefit from us; it is not merely their fault. We are not strong enough… When I came here (to Sangkhlaburi) I realized that is our problem. I accepted that this is our problem, and decided to join MWCO in order to try and solve it. That is why I decided to engage in community work.
>
> (Mi Jinseneng)

Since she first arrived in Sangkhlaburi after her graduation, Jinseneng's 'transnational engagement' has expanded along with time. She is now holding a Master's degree from a University in Bangkok; have attended trainings held by both local and international actors held in the border areas; and frequently travel both within Thailand and Burma in relation to her work for the people of Southern Burma in general - and the Mon society in particular.

At the time of my fieldwork, Mi Jinseneng had become an important ideal for other border-crossing women. Not only was she a female leader - but she also strived to live up to the 'traditional' expectations of her family and the local community. Almost every day, she went home for lunch and dinner; and to take part in the daily chores of her family. At the same time, she was extremely busy, engaging in several different projects and organizations at the same time. "We have to start the change at home - from within" she once explained. "I

will push the boundaries as far as I can" she said, pointing to the fact that as long as she was single - and her sister and mother could take care of the house - she was free to involve in community work.When I asked Mi Jinseneng how she had been able to meet with the expectations of being both a devoted activist and a dutiful daughter, she said that much of the reason was that her father had supported her work outside home. "Normal women (who are not part of activist or political interested families) don't have any biological leader or supporter. For them it's difficult". That said - Mi Jinseneng expressed that she was not particularly proud of herself. "If people are not educated, they don't understand my goals. They might think I'm lazy".

A Mon Woman and Child Organization

The staff at MWCO consisted of women between the age of about twenty and thirty-five. All but the coordinator had been recruited from different places in Southern Burma. Although all staff members had been born inside Burma, several had grown up on each side of the Thai-Burma border. The staff had been recruited to the organization in mainly two ways: either, they were recruited through their network of family and friends already involved as cross-border activists, or directly through MWCO fieldworkers. The basis for recruitment had been the same for all: They were to enroll training in English and Computer. First when arriving to the border-town of Sangkhlaburi, they were introduced to the entire curriculum of their internship. In addition to acquiring basic skills in Computer and English - as they had been told, they also got training in Human Rights, with a special focus on the rights of women and children. After completing a three-month internship, they were than to engage as fieldworkers inside Burma for another three months. Either by working with documenting the current situation for women and children, hold empowerment trainings focusing on female participation in decision making in local communities, or engage in small-scale development projects - initiated on the basis of need-assessment done by the fieldworkers themselves. They were thus to engage as cross-border activists. As an example of how many of the staff had ended up engaging as cross-border activists at MWCO, I will now present the story of one of them.

> My name is Hong Sajin. I was born in the 1980's in a village in Karen state (Burma). I have one younger brother. My parents sold spices and other things needed for cooking in our village. When I was seven years old, my parents left to Thailand for work. My brother and I moved in with our grandparents who lived in the same village. When I passed 2nd grade, we

left with our grandparents to (Burmese side of) Three Pagoda Pass to stay with my aunt. All of the teachers and students in Three Pagoda Pass only spoke Burmese. Therefore, I had many problems attending school because I couldn't speak the language, and didn't get any friends. Fortunately I learned the language after one year. Then I was happy to go to school. At grade 4, my parents came back from Bangkok and we left to stay with them on (Thai side of) Three Pagoda Pass. My parents encouraged me to work hard and to get a high level on the exam. Our family got the Thai ID card this year. Then, my brother and I attended Thai school while my parents worked at a candle factory. When I had reached grade 9, my parents bought a car to carry passengers from Burma to Three Pagoda Pass. When I had finished one year of boarding- school at grade 11, I started working at a factory near Three Pagoda Pass. Then, when I got the results for grade 11, I applied an entrance course at the Technology University at Mawlamayine (Capital of Mon state), and then completed a five years Master´s Degree in Information Technology (IT). After that, I asked a friend to find me a job in Yangon, as I wanted to attend a course in English and Computer Training. But instead, one of my relatives connected me with Mi Jinseneng, the coordinator of MWCO. Consequently, I joined the Internship Program of MWCO in Sangkhlaburi a few years ago for six months. Then I learned about Human Rights and Child Rights. At my second year of IT, my parents sold their car and left to Bangkok again. Now they are selling tea, coffee and many other things in a football field. My brother is attending University in Thailand. Thai education is much better than Burmese you know. With Burmese education you just waste money.

(Sangkhlaburi, December 2011)

Mi Hong Sajin had been recruited to MWCO through her family's network. She had no prior intention of engaging in the activist community in Sangkhlaburi, but as her uncle was an important figure within the ethno-political network, she had embraced the opportunity given to attend what was presented as training in Computer and English. Mi Nondar, another staff member, had currently been volunteering as a teacher at the local primary school - where she was living together with her grandmother in one of the so-called black areas[39] inside Burma - when MWCO fieldworkers a few years ago had presented her the chance to attend training in Computer and English in the border town of Sangkhlaburi. Since then, she had attended a six month internship at MWCO, and later a five month inter-ethnic training through a Youth Forum in Chiang Mai. Now, she was part of the Mon traditional dancing group while working as a staff at MWCO; among other helping Mi Hnin Pyu with empowerment trainings as well as taking care of the organizations economical accounts.

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[39] An area in dispute; not controlled by either NMSP, Tatmadaw, or other armed groups.

Most staff members explained that their parents supported their decision to cross the border into Sangkhlaburi for training, although most of them did not know exactly what such training implied. Most explained to their families and neighbors inside Burma that they participated in trainings in Computer and English; the same they themselves had initially been told. Between themselves, the staff members thought that MWCO was a good place to be. Food and accommodation were covered, and they had good advisors to help them make the best of the alternative possibilities offered in the space of the border. As explained by Mi Nondar:

> As for me, I want to learn English and get a lot of knowledge. I want to work in the community, and I also want to attend the school. When I first came here, we began learning Computer Skills for two months. Then we had English every morning. At noon we had Computer class and learned about human and women's rights. This was the first time for me to learn about human rights, woman rights and child rights. Then, when I finished my internship I went back to Burma. Our coordinator ordered us to think about whether we see what is happening in our home communities differently after learning these new skills… Later when I went on training in Thailand, I lived with different ethnic groups. When I then saw Mon people, I got so happy. I learned how to talk and discuss with people I didn't know. Before I went on training I did not dare to speak in front of people... When I visit home, I encourage people to come here (to Sangkhlaburi), because they don't know. I want them to know human rights, woman right, and child rights. If they know these things, then they can see what the problems are in our area.
>
> (Mi Nondar)

As Mi Champ - the newest staff-member - explained, she enjoyed her freedom in Sangkhlaburi. Here, she could watch TV, use Internet, and be with friends while learning about English, Computer and Human Rights. Mi Jinseneng even helped her attend medical training so she could become a nurse one day, as she had always wanted. And she only had to cook once a week. At home she was the youngest of her siblings, and the only daughter. Although she loved her family and missed them while she was gone, it soon became boring to stay at home. There, she would stay inside all day, cleaning and cook food.

> When I first came here, I didn't know about woman rights. But when I finished my internship, I did. Then I got interested in medicine, because when I went back to my village, I saw that many people had difficulties with their health, most of them women. When I stay here (in

Sangkhlaburi) they help me with everything. We have many rights, and we can talk freely about the news. We can say the truth. We have classes. They even pay for traveling and eating, and when we come here, they provide us with the documentation needed (to cross the border).

(Mi Champ)

Border as Space-in-Between

In much the same way as the Karen migrant school discussed in the last chapter seemed to function as a stepping-stone for young Karen students, the Mon woman's organization is a stepping-stone for young – mostly unmarried - Mon women in their careers. It is a place to access training and education, to gain knowledge and get empowered to involve themselves in their local communities, and to gain experience through volunteer work. When the initial six-month internship is completed, the women are 'free' to decide the next step in their careers from a range of opportunities presented in what I define as a transnational 'space-in-between'.

Our interns don't really work. We are only educating and empowering them; building their capacity. We cannot give them a paid position, so when they are finished with their internship, many leave to other organizations to work. But I haven't heard about any who have gone back to just live as normal people after their internship. At least they join another organization. As with Mi Eimay, even though she will not improve formally with a BA or an MA due to her lacking educational background, she will have some experience through training. I hope she will not just return as a normal woman - just be a housewife. At least all of them will be good mothers. Good for their child.

(Mi Jinseneng)

Many chose to continue as staff at MWCO or other similar projects after gaining knowledge about international human rights and the political situation in Burma as seen from the border. Others used their position as cross-border activists to attend other sorts of trainings offered in the space of the border. This included everything from weeklong workshops in subjects such as leadership and women empowerment, to several months of trainings and internships at different NGOs. Further, it included more unofficial trainings in topics such as medicine and journalism, enabling the participants to engage in one of the NGOs based along the border. Of those holding Thai- or Burmese passports, some were also able to apply for and get accepted to Universities in Thailand. As with the students at KKCS, the young Mon women's engagement as cross-border activists in Sangkhlaburi also gave them increased access to modern technologies in the form of Internet, mass media and communication technologies.

Although several of the staff members came from larger townships and cities where access to information technology was possible, it was nevertheless considerably more limited inside Burma than on the border[40]. In addition, the women stressed that "in Sangkhlaburi we can talk freely about news and what is going on inside Burma, while inside Burma we can say nothing" (Mi Champ).

Common Dreams and Individual Goals

While together working to reach the goals of the organization, each staff member was at the same time working on developing their own skills to fill specific positions necessary to become involved in their communities. However, these newly acquired skills also seemed to help each individual to reach their own personal goals. Mi Nondar assisted Mi Hnin Phuy with holding empowerment trainings - so that she would be able to hold them herself in the future. Mi Champ and Mi Lin both studied medicine-related topics on the side of their tasks within the organization, to prepare for the medical training they were to attend in a few months. Mi Hong Sajin prepared to go abroad for training by challenging herself in new situations, among others by talking to strangers and practicing her English. Mi Eimay was applying for an internship with one of the INGO's, and Mi Jinseneng was considering to apply for a PhD program in Bangkok. While the women explicitly told me they had gained a sincere interest in community work and human rights after getting knowledge about the political situation in Burma - and ways to improve it, they had also acquired an increased understanding of their own personal goals as part of this interest. Through their engagements in different kinds of trainings, education, and community work - the women expressed an increased sense of self-confidence and ability to speak their minds. From being quiet and shy, and not knowing which path to chose in their lives - the women had become increasingly reflexive, opinionated and enterprising. At least partially, it appeared, because compared to their male counterparts also engaging as cross-border activists, there still seemed to be a considerable gap.

While the activist community clearly encouraged the women to partake in the development of Mon society, the very focus on ethno-politics and Mon nationalism simultaneously seemed to somehow turn Mon women into ideal symbols of Mon nationhood. It seems as if the female staff at MWCO and other activist organizations in Sangkhlaburi was expected to be both dynamic representatives of their people's activist engagements to improve

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[40] It was among other things very expensive to use, and with limited access due to censorship by the government.

the circumstances of ethnic Mon, and cultural bearers of their people's identity by representing more static symbols based on established conceptions of what it implies to be a Mon woman. In the words of the coordinator Mi Jinseneng:

> While the country (Burma) has been blocked, the people who have been coming out (of the country) are men. By working outside Burma, they have had access to information. So men have traditionally gained more outside knowledge (than women). Women have mostly been occupied with domestic work. Currently, some women are also coming outside (Burma), but still, mostly women are left behind. Now when the country is opening quickly, I worry that this will have more negative effect on women than men, because women are not prepared.
>
> (Mi Jinseneng)

So how did the young female border-crossers themselves relate to- and cope with, these apparently conflicting roles? On one side as cultural caretakers of an established female identity, on the other side as cultural producers of a dynamic transnational identity? I will argue that they seem to create their own 'space-in-between' in this situation – a kind of 'sisterhood'. First, however, I will discuss the close interrelation between women and the nation – and thereby their ethnic group.

Women as Static Symbols and Social Actors

Similar to how Alonso (2001) describes the role of women as symbols of a nation (see quote above), the female members of the activist community in Sangkhlaburi seemed to bear the roles as symbols of the established identity as Mon Woman. As the identity of minority communities has been transformed and re-vitalized in relation to the development of modern nation-states, borders and citizenship, the ideal cultural content of such minority groups' identity might seem to have become more stagnant as compared to the dynamic of their members' 'lived' lives. While living on the border, the female staff at MWCO seemed to face both ends of the scale at the same time. They seemed expected to act as embodiments of the 'established ideal' woman, at the same time as they were to meet expectations as enterprising cross-border activists.

Gender roles among lowland people in Burma seem to follow similar historical traditions. While both sexes have typically collaborated on tasks concerning agricultural work, women have been expected to take care of the household and family, while men have been committed to the public sphere through work and social relations. This division of tasks

and obligations between the domestic and public sphere seems to have greatly influenced how the two sexes have moved through and related to different spaces and places in the past. Women have always been part of mobile groups, but then mostly between or as part of families. Men, on the other hand, seem to have old traditions as long-distance commuters, among others as traders, warriors, fishermen and 'migrant workers'. In this way, it seems likely that women in most part have been related to - and identified themselves with - their local communities and the corresponding values and 'ways of doing things'. While men, on the other hand, historically have been part of geographically more extensive networks and thereby related and identified themselves simultaneously to both local and foreign norms and standards.

Through the last decades, women's movements outside local neighborhoods and across national borders have according to my informants increased in correlation with the hardships faced by Burmese subjects in relation to the misrule of the Burmese government. Further, as my informants explained, many of their home villages and towns were currently almost emptied for adult men as they had gone abroad to engage as migrant workers. The unemployment rate in Burma was high, and the salary for those who could find work low. As a consequence, the women who themselves did not cross the borders to engage as migrant workers or activists, were left with much of the responsibility of their local communities. Therefore, they had to expand their established roles as 'mere' wives and mothers, by taking more responsibility outside their homes and the 'domestic sphere'. In the words of Mi Champ:

> When my mother was young, the women could not attend the school. They could just stay and work at home, while the men went to school. Now, the women can also attend the University. Then they have more education.
>
> (Mi Champ)

In a similar way, women were offered new experiences outside the framework most of them and their mothers grew up in, when stepping outside their local communities inside Burma and into the transnational communities at the border.

In line with Ortner's (ed. Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974) theories about cultural constructions of gender; where women have been seen as more 'natural' and less 'cultural' than men – thereby conflicting their roles as 'public actors' in modern societies, it might seem that the traditional roles of women in Mon societies to take care of their houses and raise their

children, are making it difficult for today's women to free themselves from expectations tied to these roles when engaging as cross-border activists.

The assistant leader of MWCO - Mi Hnin Phyu - had been working for the organization for the last seven years, and was thus one of the most experienced staff at the organization. A charismatic 28 year-old woman, she was sharing room with her unemployed and newly wed husband in the second floor of the office building. One of their biggest dreams about the future was to move back into Burma to start a family, if only they could find work.

Conveniently enough, their dream could soon turn into reality if she was appointed one of the leading positions within a planned new project, which was to be established inside Burma. Hnin Phyu displayed good qualities as the assistant leader of MWCO, and held good reputations for the trainings she held both within Burma and on the border, focusing on the empowerment of women in the public sphere. During our daily work at the office, she was opinionated, respected, and committed to reach the organization's targets. The coordinator of MWCO saw her as the perfect candidate for the new project.

There seemed to be only one obstacle. As soon as Hnin Phyu found herself in the presence of the management of the organization that was to make the final decision about who would be appointed coordinator of the new project, her behavior changed. She got shy, quiet and unwilling to express her opinions or to take part in processes of decision-making. The management of the organization making the descision was without exception older men, most of them influential within the Mon activist network. According to the norms and traditions Hnin Phyu grew up with, she behaved just as expected. But according to the expectations of a future coordinator, she failed. The management would not approve her as candidate for the new project. She was not able to display the skills and qualifications necessary to be a good leader in front of the management, despite the fact that she herself was working with developing these qualities in other women.

While men appeared to have few obligations restricting their choices as cross-border activists, it seemed that the women had to balance their roles as women and activists. Of what I observed in the female staff's everyday life while engaging in MWCO, the women were constantly shifting roles between eager outspoken activists, and shy introvert women – depending on which social setting they found themselves in the moment. At the same time, the view of how women should act seemed to change among young men themselves engaging as cross-border activists:

Many Mon women are not good for marriage. They are good at following traditions, but they are not open-minded. They are too shy and introvert. We don't live in the 18ᵗʰ or 19ᵗʰ century you know. Women should get more possibilities to work outside the home. Those who work outside the home now, are often over-qualified for their work, doing improper and heavy work. I want to marry a Mon woman, but I want her to be open-minded and independent.

(A young male volunteering at a Mon ngo in Sangkhlaburi)

Sisterhood

Outside their local neighborhoods, the young MWCO women were temporarily separated from the socio-cultural frameworks they grew up in. On one hand, this seemed to temporarily free them from many of the obligations and expectations tied up with their roles as housekeepers and potential wives and mothers at home. At the same time, they were offered an alternative framework of opportunities presented through the border community in the form of education, training, work and other experiences. One the other hand, it seems that being outside their local framework made it necessary for the women to develop an alternative framework to somehow govern their actions in relation to ties and expectations to the different social networks they were part of. It seems that the governing structure of family and neighbors of which they were part inside Burma were at least temporary replaced by a 'sisterhood' in the border community. As such, the office-house on Mon-side, and the dwelling house on Thai-side seemed to have replaced their families' houses as 'private spheres' in which they could 'be themselves' – as opposed to the 'public sphere' outside the two houses in which they were representatives of Mon society. In short, the sisterhood and the two houses forming the basis for their communal life in Sangkhlaburi, seemed to replace the role of the family-structure among these female cross-border activists: A sisterhood necessary both to promote and limit the young women's movements, actions, choices and behavior – thereby protecting their role as Mon women, and promoting their role as cross-border activists.

As I mentioned earlier, the staff expressed one of the positive aspects of being involved in the activist community in Sangkhlaburi as having access to good advisors. Mi Jinseneng and her achievements was looked up to by most of the staff, and many – among them Hong Sajin and Champ – told me that the older women at MWCO helped them with everything from making decisions about which trainings and education to partake in, to how they should behave and act in the activist community of Sangkhlaburi.

In our culture the parents always control their daughters and sons. Like me, when I stay with my parents I don't drink Spy (alcoholic beverage), but here I drink a little bit. But Ma Hnin Phy and teacher Mi Jinseneng and the other women who are older than me, control (my behavior). They say that I should not drink alcohol or chat with strangers on Internet. Things like that.

(Mi Hong Sajin)

Through one of their partner organization, Mi Jinseneng was offered a scholarship for one of her staff to attend an international internship in Europe. As applicants had to fill certain practical requirements like holding a Thai passport, and have intermediate skills in English, Mi Hong Sajin was the only staff at MWCO currently qualified to apply. Some of the older and more experienced staff - such as Hnin Phy and Mi Chan Rot, did not think she was ready for such a challenge. They thought she was too shy and inexperienced, and that she should first attend other trainings offered along the border. But Mi Jinseneng wanted to give it a shot - and Hong Sajin wanted to take it. As Mi Jinseneng saw it – it was better to go for it than not, after all it was a 'once in a life-time' opportunity. Mi Hong Sajin further told me that; "When I am afraid of something, I should do it… I want to be busy like Mi Jinseneng, and work with education for Mon children… I think this opportunity is good for me".

The rest of my stay, Mi Hong Sajin was told by Mi Jinseneng to "follow me like a shadow" to prepare her for her stay in Europe. Therefore, she was the only one coming with me to a Thanksgiving party held by one of the American Post 10 teachers. At the party, Mi Hong Sajin sat quiet right next to me while sipping on a bottle of SPY. Several of the other guests at the party came to speak with us, and many addressed directly to Mi Hong Sajin. The whole time, she looked indeed both terrified and shy, but when we finally came back to our house, Hong Sajin whispered eagerly not to wake up the others: "That was the best party I have ever been to!" with a sincere smile lighting up her face.

Later, I found out that Mi Jinseneng had tried to prevent Mi Hong Sajin from joining me to the party. There had been a fire in the local gas station the day before that had temporarily shut down all the electricity on Thai-side. Although the party was still on, Mi Jinseneng had called Mi Hong Sajin and told her that it was cancelled due to no electricity. When I was ready to go, I therefore found Mi Hong Sajin in her pyjamas – ready to go to bed. She looked confused when she saw that I was dressed for the party, and asked me if the party was still on. After I confirmed her question, she quickly run into the bedroom to change her clothes. When I assured her that she didn't have to come if she didn't want to, she told me that she did want to come. I asked again if any of the other girls wanted to join us, but they just shook their

heads as a "no". That said, one of the interns visiting from Burma, overcome her apparent fear for me the next day and mumbled; " I want to come with you on a party too!". As I remembered back to my first meeting with Mi Jinseneng - on the minivan from Kanchanaburi to Sangkhlaburi, she had carefully told me about the traditions of Mon women: They were not to go outside the house after working hours; they were not to drink alcohol or party; and they were not to dance in a 'western' style. As she said, the earlier volunteers had also followed these traditions, and I should too as long as I stayed in Sangkhlaburi. It would make things easier for me. When she later found out that I was more interested in spending time with the Mon staff than other foreign volunteers, she seemed to somehow let down her guard on the girls, but she clearly still held an eye on their whereabouts.

An interesting fact in relation to this was that the MWCO staff never seemed to invite Mi Jinseneng when they were having a dinner out, or went to the river to swim. At first I thought they might not like her that much, but as time went by I found them to both respect and look up to her. Rather, it seemed that her presence as their coordinator – and thereby an authority figure – restricted their behavior by making them act modest and quiet. When she on the other hand was not around, and we by example went out to enjoy a Korean Barbeque, they seemed free to speak their mind, laugh and joke without thinking that they had to restrict their behavior. Another aspect of the staff's social behavior that especially caught my attention was their seeming lack of interest in extending their social network with other people within their local immediacy. They did speak with people they were connected with and knew through their work; or who came from the same communities inside Burma as themselves – but otherwise, they seemed more connected to their social network not physically present (through Internet and phone), than the people who were actually there in their physical surroundings. If we went to have dinner at a local restaurant, the girls would almost certainly feel free to make a call to one of their friends or family-members while eating. The same applied when the organization rented a houseboat to celebrate for example Christmas Eve. The girls would participate during the dinner and the proceeding social activities – for then to lock themselves into their room to talk in the phone. This behavior was especially apparent among the younger and more inexperienced staff. The older and more experienced staff on the other hand, seemed more open to partake in social settings in the activist community. It could seem as if time spent as cross-border activist somehow transformed the conceptual tools, and thereby the 'proper ways' to act and behave applied by the female staff to their everyday lives – by functioning as a sort of 'testing ground' for alternatives to established norms and expectations. This is what I will turn to next.

Finding New Ways

The staff at MWCO seemed to agree that their self-esteem had been low when they first arrived in Sangkhlaburi. They also agreed that although they had known they wanted to develop themselves and get experience and training, they didn't know how. Many had considered engaging as migrant workers, if they were not married with children. Or even re-settle in third countries. It was hard to find a job, and if they wanted education there were few opportunities. As mentioned, few had known about the activist community in Sangkhlaburi beforehand. It was not something that was talked about inside Burma. Most of the staff thus became engaged as cross-border activists by coincidence. What they thought were training in Computer and English - presented as such by their connections or by MWCO fieldworkers; turned out to be an opening to engage in the development of their own communities through means and concepts they hardly knew existed before they came to the border.

All staff members acquired new skills while engaging as cross-border activists, not only in the official subjects. They also learned how to hold empowerment trainings, conduct fieldwork, and write different kinds of documents including news, proposals and reports. They learned to speak their mind, be opinionated and think about and digest information and knowledge instead of 'just' memorizing. But maybe most important, they acquired a new understanding of their home-societies in Burma – and what existed outside. Most of them, except for Mi Jinseneng who grew up in the environment, had very limited, if any, knowledge about the political situation of their people (as seen from an international and ethno-political point of view) prior to their engagement as cross-border activists. They did not know about human rights, the New Mon State Party, or abuses by the Burmese government.

So, while most of their friends were either married with children inside Burma, had gone to Thailand or other countries as migrant workers, or just stayed at home taking care of the house or 'doing nothing' - the staff at MWCO increasingly developed their skills-set. In the words of the previous MWCO coordinator:

> In this situation, women are changing. Before women stayed at home taking care of the family, whatever. (Whether) single or married. They still do this; clean, cook, whatever. But, before they left their hometown, they didn't have any income (on their own). They had to rely on the family. But now they might go to another country, they might earn income by themselves. So

their roles are changing. They get outside their home. They gain more experience and more knowledge instead of staying in the home.

(Mi Su, the Old Coordinator)

Mi Su herself arrived in Sangkhlaburi in 2001. Growing up in a poor family with eight children, she was the only one who had become engaged as a cross-border activist. Most of her siblings were currently engaged as migrant workers. Similar to Mi Jinseneng, she explained that it was her religious beliefs that had influenced her to work for other people instead of for her own economy. As both she and other staff members explained, most people in Burma just cared about getting rich. But – even though she had known that she wanted to work for the community, she had not known how. As she told me, her 'vision' had come from the man recruiting her to MWCO – who was one of the leaders of the activist community in Sangkhlaburi.

When you are young, you want to do many things. You are not satisfied. You want to acquire every skill possible. You want to be proud of yourself, but you don't have any specific goal. That's what you want, but you are not able to separate what you want from what you need. Later on, when you have gotten the chance to enjoy more training (and get more experience and knowledge), you know what you need.

(Mi Su)

Border as Space-in-Between: A Liminal Period of Transition

The activist community of Sangkhlaburi and the transnational network of Mon activists that it was part of thus seemed to offer places of 'sanctuary' for dreams and realities that could only come to exist in the space of the border. For men, it seems that the opportunities created and presented in this transnational space can be understood as a continuation of their historical mobility. For women, on the other hand, engaging as cross-border activists seems to be a considerably more controversial experience. For them, stepping outside the domestic sphere and their local communities is a rather new experience. Accordingly, it seems that they have to balance two partly conflicting roles; i) Their established identity as Mon women based on their roles as 'mother and wives' in their local communities, and ii) Their 'new' roles as cross-border activists in the transnational network of Mon activists. While the first role is tied to the domestic sphere of their family and house, the second is tied to the public sphere of 'Mon society'. To cope with this friction, I have argued that the female staff at MWCO

seemed to create a 'sisterhood' to protect and govern their ties and opportunities to the different social networks they were part of and represented. By such, they seemed more able to grasp the opportunities given while engaging as cross-border activists, at the same time as they behaved according to established expectations of a 'Mon woman'. Away from the fixed time-space of their local neighborhoods (Giddens 1994), the border as space-in-between gave the female cross-border activists at MWCO a limited period of access as 'global citizens'. They were more connected to 'global flows' (Appadurai 2001) through social media and information technology, at the same time as acquiring knowledge and education offered in the transnational space of the border. The organization's particular focus on human and women's rights, also seemed to give the staff at MWCO a unique position while engaging as cross-border activists. They were not only 'Mon'; they were also 'Women'.

In this process, I have argued that the female staff at MWCO felt an increased value as self both as activists and women. Through the acquirement of a specialized skills-set in the form of training, education and practice while engaging as cross-border activists, the women expressed an increased self-confidence and an increased ability to take charge of their own future. Further, they expressed an increased ability to view the frameworks they grew up with through new, more critical spectacles. Their understanding of self and others were transformed during their liminal statues as cross-border activists.

> We have learned. It is not our tradition. (Even if) we come back or not, we will not forget what we have been learning here. And we can apply. For married women their families become a big burden. Women are single not because they don't want a husband, but because they want to be leaders… My strategy is to step carefully to find my way… With small baby- steps, I sometimes step wrong, but I get closer and closer to my target. I cannot go too fast. The change must come from within. In the past I wanted to go abroad, I wanted flexibility. But now I have accepted that is not for me. I work for others, not myself. I didn't want to become coordinator of this project. I wanted to be second or third, but there is no one else to take it.
>
> (Mi Jinseneng)

7 Postscript
- Common Grounds, Different Circumstances-

Every individual of a society, each in his own interest, endeavors to exploit the situation as he perceives it and in so doing the collectivity of individuals alters the structure of the society itself.

(Leach 1954:8)

With the history of the Southeast Asian mainland as my point of entrance, I have argued that current transformations in feelings of identity and belonging among the cross-border activists discussed in this thesis partly can be seen as continuations of the socio-historical past of the ethnic groups they are part of and represent. At the same time, I have argued that today's border as 'space-in-between' give access to 'global flows' of information and knowledge that transform such feelings of identity in new ways. While ethnic identity as Mon and Karen continue to be tied to current discourses about national identity in Burma, personal identities among the individual border-crossing activists seem increasingly tied to 'global flows' that contribute to the development of a specialized skills set acquired at the border as 'liminal space-in-between'. During the period my informants were engaging as cross-border activists, they seemed to stand in-between contesting concepts of identity as applied in the different social networks they were part of. As a way of coping with this situation, it seems that the individual border-crosser made use of their different social statuses – or identities - to find what was perceived as the best path for their individual future. Moreover, the sum of these individual transformations regarding feelings of identity and belonging might have the potential of transforming the very socio-historical frameworks from which they emerge.

My comparison between the Karen migrant school and the Mon woman and child organization has shown that while the dynamics the individual cross-border activist experience through their engagement is very much the same in the two communities, the socio-historical circumstances their communities are based within, have important implications for which identity is negotiated and potentially transformed. While the religious

aspect of ethnic identity was an important marker at KKCS, the negotiation of gender roles seemed to create the most friction among the young women at MWCO.

I will round off the thesis by discussing how the differing socio-histories of the two ethnic groups in relation to the national politics of Burma seem to have led to different approaches to the political changes taking place in recent years. During my stay, MWCO – together with most other organizations in Sangkhlaburi, aimed at gradually moving their activity from the border to inside Burma, by planning and setting up new projects and organizations in Mon state. As such, the Mon community seemed to direct their activities towards more collaboration with the Burman government - encouraging the government to apply International Human Rights. KKCS, on the other hand, seemed to keep their attention on nurturing the international network of Christian Karen, as well as their ties with Christian donor- and partner-organizations, in order to reach the 'common dreams' of their people.

Keeping in mind the history of the two ethnic groups, I argue that there is a historical continuity in these approaches. While the ethno-political network of Mon through recent history has applied a strategy of negotiation with the Burman government, the ethno-political network of Karen has resisted incorporation into the dominant Burman society.

As such, the border as 'space in between' can be seen as facilitating differing agendas for the two ethno-political networks: One aiming at developing civil-society from below by training people at the border that could then apply their new skills inside Burma - the other aiming at strengthening its ethnic boundaries by offering an ethno-religious education based on an ideal identity as Christian Karen.

At another level, the new political situation within Burma also affects the 'global' space of the border. Also international donor- and partner- organizations are now increasingly moving their support from the border to inside Burma. Although this is seen as a positive long-term change by the ethnic- and political- organizations operating on the border, most nevertheless seem to think that the moving of resources is happening too fast. They argue that it is important for organizations to uphold their bases on the borders until they can re-establish projects inside Burma, and most are still reluctant to take the changes for granted.

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