



MASTERARBEIT

Titel der Masterarbeit

Reflections on encampment

An ethnographic study from the Thai-Burmese border

verfasst von

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2013

Studienkennzahl.It./Studienblatt: A 066 656

Studienrichtung It. Studienblatt: Masterstudium DDP CREOLE – Cultural Differences and Transnational Processes

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Dedication and acknowledgements

I dedicate this text to the courageous and generous people on the Thai-Burma border, whom I cannot name here. Thank you for entrusting me with your stories. I am grateful to Angela Glodschei, Eduardo Ayres Tomaz, Erin Lierl, Fatima Sasranova, Irina Scheitz, Jasmin Kashanipour, Jonathan Friedman, Ko Ko Thett, Maika Ono, Martin Lintner, Nicole Davis, Petra Dannecker, Ton Baars and Wolfram Schaffar for intellectual inspirations, to my supervisor Ayse Caglar for her continuous support, and to Vienna University for a short-term grant abroad. I am deeply indebted and grateful to Sayaphol Sackda for the precious gifts of Asia and anthropology.

*When we launched life
on the river of grief,
how vital were our arms, how ruby our blood.
With a few strokes, it seemed,
we would cross all pain,
we would soon disembark.
That didn't happen.
In the stillness of each wave we found invisible currents.
The boatmen, too, were unskilled,
their oars untested.
Investigate the matter as you will,
blame whomever, as much as you want,
but the river hasn't changed,
the raft is still the same.
Now you suggest what's to be done,
you tell us how to come ashore.
When we saw the wounds of our country
appear on our skins,
we believed each word of the healers.
Besides, we remembered so many cures,
it seemed at any moment
all troubles would end, each wound heal completely.
That didn't happen: our ailments
were so many, so deep within us
that all diagnoses proved false, each remedy useless.
Now do whatever, follow each clue,
accuse whomever, as much as you will,
our bodies are still the same,
our wounds still open.
Now tell us what we should do,
you tell us how to heal these wounds.*

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, 'You tell us what to do', in *The Rebel's Silhouette*

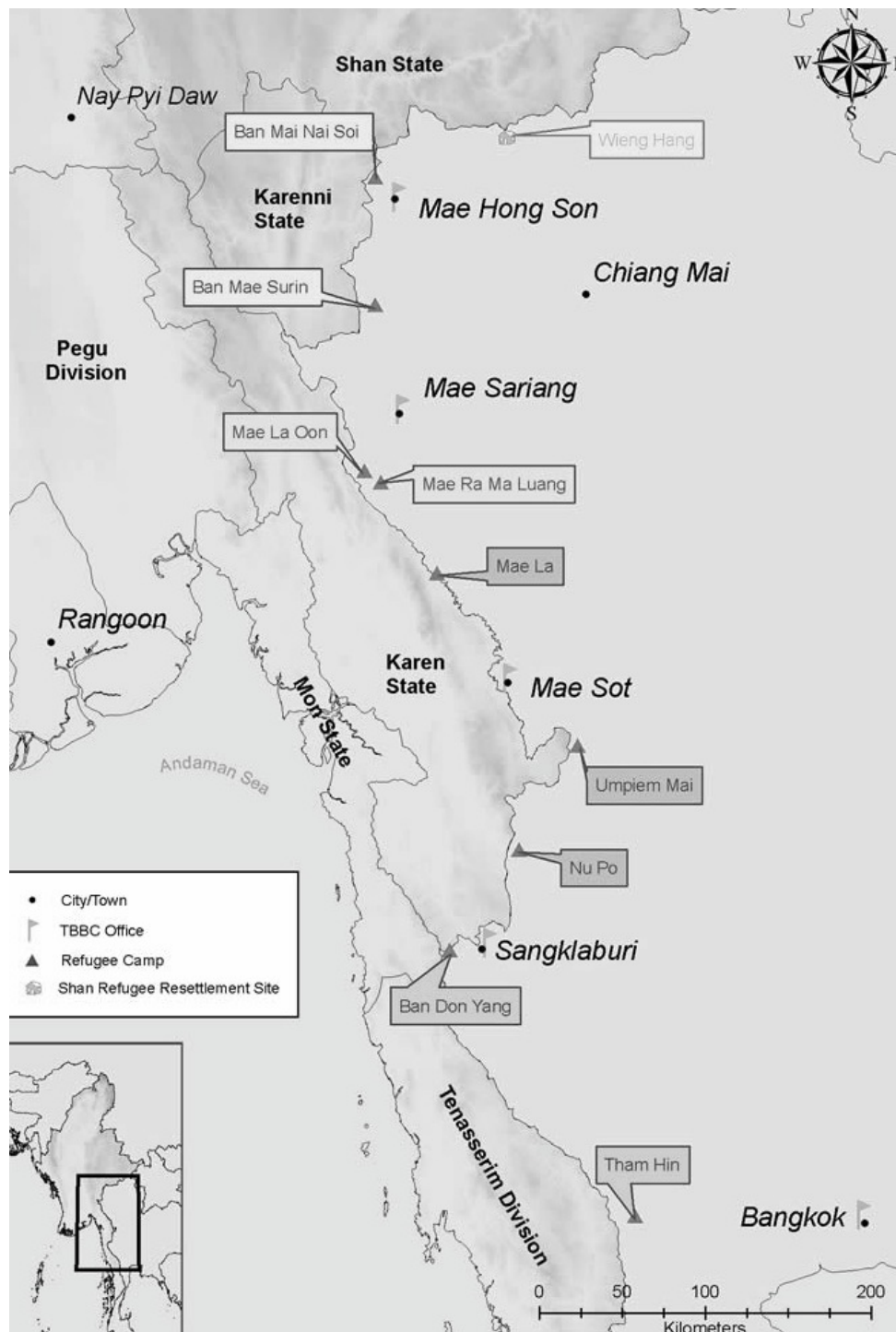
Free translation by Agha Shahid Ali, 1991

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Thai-Burmese border. Google Maps 2013



Location of refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border. TBC 2013.

Introduction

Reflections on encampment

The road snaked from mountain to mountain. Heaps of red earth and overturned trees with their roots reaching towards the sky, like gigantic dead spiders, were reminders of landslides caused by monsoon rains. The truck was packed. Women and children sat facing each other on two narrow benches and cowered on the floor. Men, young and old, sat on the roof clinging to their umbrellas. Four young men and one girl were hanging on to the roof plank, the girl's braid dancing in the storm. I counted 28 adults and six children – chatty young couples in jeans and t-shirts, proud women in stained sarongs nursing babies, grannies with towels draped around their heads chewing betel nut and exposing blood-red teeth stumps. An elegantly dressed Karen woman offered me sweet potato and violet corn. She spoke beautiful English. I explained I had come to teach in Nupo refugee camp and she told me that she was a teacher in the town of Maesot and on her way to visit a friend in Umpiem Mai refugee camp¹. She admitted that she dreaded the long *songthaew*² ride, but looked forward to seeing her friend again. There was also a motorcycle in the car, sacks of vegetables and several large bamboo baskets filled with gigantic fantastically shaped roots in purplish-blue shades. Children silently crouched around the motorcycle, clutching people's legs every time the car jerked in a curve or was shaken by some obstacle on the road. The adults slept, chewed betelnut, sniffed on tiny bottles of fragrant oil and occasionally leaned over the railing to vomit. We attached the blue plastic sheets to the side flanks of the car and the rain beat violently against them, searching and finding holes to enter. The car stopped just minutes outside of town, at the first police checkpoint. Chatting with the driver, the officers inspected

¹ Umpiem Mai refugee camp is located between Maesot and Nupo camp. It has been severely damaged in a fire in February 2012 with about one third of the camp razed to the ground.

² A *songthaew* or a 'line car' as the Burmese call it, is covered truck with two benches inside – a popular form of public transport in South East Asia.

the passengers' papers³. Everyone started rummaging around their bags, unwrapping sheets of A4 paper with photocopied photographs on them. They were refugees from Umpiem or Nupo camps. The woman on my right didn't have the right papers. The policeman motioned for her to climb off the car. She took a few banknotes from a white envelope inside her shoulder bag and silently made her way past the motorcycle, the children, the sacks of vegetables. She would have to wait for the next car while the officers notified the next checkpoint.⁴

The *songthaew* to Nupo takes about seven to nine or more hours from the Thai border town of Maesot. I changed cars in the village of Umphang. Two hours later the car approached a military checkpoint and slowed down. I peeked through a hole in the blue plastic sheet and saw a sprawling landscape of bamboo huts enveloped in thick jungle. Passengers knocked on the roof and the driver brought the car to a halt to let them get off. I did not know where the school was. We kept driving for several minutes. The huts continued. From the road, I spotted a football ground. The sprawl of huts was endless. Everything was soaked. "We call it 3D walk – dirty, dangerous and disgusting", a young Karen girl sitting next to me remarked. Her name was Lily. She was 19 and on her way to visit her mother in the camp for the first time since she left the camp to work in Maesot over one and a half years ago. Lily knocked on the roof, explaining that the school where I was going to teach was near by. I jumped off the *songthaew* and into a puddle, squirming under my raincoat. Two smiling figures in checked *longys*⁵ approached and stretched their hands towards me from beneath their umbrellas. One was a short, dark-skinned man with a warm and somewhat mischievous smile. "Welcome! I'm U Lin", he said, placing his umbrella graciously over my head. U Lin was the school's headmaster. The other man was tall and very thin. His eyes were tired and sad and at the same time intense. His name was U Soe Tun and he was a member of the school committee. They were both in their 50s.

Incessant torrential rain had turned the narrow path from 'Nupo terminal' down to the school into a muddy stream. The school was a two-story bamboo building with a thatched roof. Downstairs, there were two classrooms and an office and upstairs three rooms with bamboo partitions and a library. Shredded green plastic sheets lined the inner walls. It smelled mouldy. Brown, hairy spiders hung from the ceiling. From the balustrade on the second floor I saw more bamboo huts enveloped in a thick coat of mist and vegetation. We settled down in

³ For a fee refugees can obtain authorization from the camp authorities to travel to Maesot. The procedures vary from one camp to another and are highly arbitrary. Without an authorization (and sometimes with one as well) travelling refugees are subjected to bribes and risk arrest and deportation.

⁴ Refugees travelling without an authorization end up paying up to ten bribes at police and military checkpoints on the stretch between Maesot and Nupo refugee camp.

⁵ A *longyi* is the traditional Burmese sarong. Men and women wear different patterns and knot their *longyi* differently.

the office for *birdy*⁶ and introductions. The rain wrapped itself around us and melted with the sounds of the other jungle creatures. It would gain force and continue throughout August, September and far into October.

That very first *songthaew* journey to the camp revealed the paradox that became the backbone of my research – immobility born out of mobility and mobility born out of immobility. The camp is located in one of the most remote and isolated corners of Thailand, fenced off and guarded by the Thai military, preventing the encamped from spilling across its boundaries. Yet the car was filled with refugees returning to their temporary shelters from periods of work in Maesot's sweatshops, construction sites and surrounding farms. Camps confine mobile populations, seeking to limit their mobility. Yet, confinement itself and the lack of livelihood options inside the camp pushes refugees to return to mobility in order to survive encampment, often in an undocumented and dangerous journey into the depths of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore's economic underbellies.

Refugee camps conjure up images of emergency, victims, misery, disease, stagnancy, dependency on aid and endless waiting – waiting for refugee status, waiting for food rations, waiting for return, waiting for resettlement in a third country. And waiting evokes immobility, inactivity, anxiety and apathy. I expected to find a stagnant place, suspended in time and space. I expected its residents – except for the occasional insurgent or idealistic dissident – to be depoliticized bodies, *homines sacri* in Giorgio Agamben's words, embodying 'naked life' as opposed to the politicised form of life expressed in the notion of citizenship (1998)⁷. But I was to learn that refugees were challenging their *status quo* and expressing their 'right to have rights' (Arendt 1994 [1951]) not only by protesting but also by seeking out informal livelihood opportunities inside and outside the camp, exploring the edges and porous borders of encampment, bending legal boundaries and taking life risks in doing so. I found a vibrant social world, unconditional hospitality, resourcefulness, creativity, resilience, resistance and mobility among the 'ordinary' refugees, who had fled civil war, political repression, ethnic or religious discrimination and abject poverty. The camp struck me as a highly contradictory place, where mobility coexisted with immobility, resilience with dependency, hope with fear and despair and beauty with ugliness, creating its very unique dynamics. This essay, an ethnographic exploration of the lived experience of displacement and encampment, explores these dynamics and the environment that gave birth to them – the geographic, social and

⁶ Sweet instant coffee mix that is very popular among the Burmese and Thai.

⁷ Agamben's *homo sacer* (1998), a term borrowed from Roman law, is someone who has been excluded from membership in society and lost all rights attached to this membership. The *homo sacer* is thus reduced from a political being (a citizen) to a depoliticized, purely biological body. Under Roman law the killing of *homines sacri* was not considered murder.

political exclusion, the categorization and control of the encamped, the uncertainty of life in suspension and its impact, livelihoods in encampment and strategies of survival, life choices, the transformation of space and the emergence of unique socialities.

Reflections on ethnographic fieldwork in a refugee camp

It was July 2011 when I arrived on the border and the political situation was unstable. Burmese government troops and a faction of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) were fighting across the Friendship Bridge in the Burmese town of Myawaddy, sending tens of thousands to seek refuge across the Moie River in Thailand. Finding a way to conduct long-term ethnographic fieldwork inside a refugee camp was my major concern when planning this research project. The refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border are geographically isolated, fenced off by barbed wire and guarded by Thai border guards. They are closed to outsiders and even official NGO staff are banned from staying after nightfall and during weekends. I knew only of one researcher who had conducted independent long-term ethnographic fieldwork in those camps. In the 1990s, British anthropologist Sandra Dudley (2012, 2000) spent a year living in a Karenni refugee camp and teaching at a high school while conducting research for her PhD thesis. In recent years, amid growing criticism of its refugee policy, the Thai government has strictly limited access to the camps. Affiliation with an international organization or NGO seemed the most realistic scenario, but one that I was hoping to avoid out of concerns for my objectivity as a researcher. French anthropologist Michel Agier, who has done extensive research in different African refugee camps, has pointed out the difficulties of camp access and the dangers of the researcher being ‘annexed’ and transformed into an ‘expert or advisor’ by international organizations or NGOs (2011: 65-70). After Agier had been informed that it would take almost two years to get a study programme in a refugee camp approved by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), he negotiated access through an affiliation with the NGO *Médicins Sans Frontières*. His approach, however, was a goal in itself and the international humanitarian government of refugee camps, the foundations, contexts and political effects of humanitarian action were the focus of his research. Agier’s *Managing the Undesirables* (2011) became an intellectual inspiration for my own work on the Thai-Burmese border, which in many aspects came to be a confirmation and extension of Agier’s thesis.

With the help of the Burma Volunteer Programme (BVP)⁸ I was able to find a teaching placement in a school in Nupo Refugee Camp and thus avoid affiliation with international organizations, NGOs or politically active community-based organizations (CBOs), which I feared could undermine my independence as a researcher. The school was an informal English language school for adults. It was founded in 2007 by a group of refugees, former political prisoners, who wanted to create a space for intellectual exchange and an escape from boredom, gambling and alcohol. Some of its initial founders had since resettled in third countries, some had returned to Burma, others succumbed to alcohol and depression as years passed and time grew slower and emptier. Today the school is run by U Lin, U Soe Tun and Ko Maung on a ten-week-term basis. There are usually two local and/or one or two foreign volunteer teachers. In addition to English, volunteers have taught Spanish, Italian, social sciences, economics, literature and American culture. The school had about 90 students when I arrived and was running eight English classes. I taught three of them every day. Chemistry graduates from Rangoon University, former factory workers, poets and artists who had spent years in Burmese jails, farmers and fashion-crazy teenagers imitating Korean movie stars came together in the two bamboo classrooms to learn, interact, share and have fun. They were from at least a dozen different ethnic groups from all over Burma. Most were between 20 and 25, but there were also a few teenagers and some students well into their 40s and 50s.

Teaching provided me with a clear role in the community and allowed me to immerse myself immediately and deeply into the world of my students while being independent enough to conduct research. It also gave me the chance to live among my students and colleagues, who welcomed me into their worlds, homes and lives, shared their meals, their thoughts and extended their friendship.

Constructing, deconstructing and improvising ethnographic fieldwork

In 2005 the UNHCR initiated a third-country resettlement programme for refugees from Burma. Over 70,000 refugees resettled between 2006 and December 2011, the majority to the United States and Australia (TBC/TBBC 2012). The Royal Thai government had not signed the Geneva Refugee Convention, asylum in Thailand was not possible and repatriation to Burma remained unsafe. Despite no alternatives, only about half of all the registered refugees

⁸ BVP was an organization based in Maesot, linking volunteers with political and/or educational institutions along the Thai-Burma border. In January 2013, after supporting refugee communities along the Thai-Burma Border for 11 years, the BVP had to cease its activities, because donors began shifting their funding increasingly from the border to educational projects inside Burma.

had expressed interest in beginning a new life in a third country (Nupo Refugee Camp Resettlement Survey August 2011, TBBC 2010, Brees 2009). I set out with a fairly simple and precise question: What makes displaced people, who have spent long periods, if not most of their lives confined in camps, reject their only chance to live in freedom? I was also interested in observing the dynamics of such decision-making processes and in how they impacted people's lives and relationships.

In her inspirational essay on the role of improvisation in ethnographic fieldwork, Liisa Malkki compared fieldwork to Jazz: both are processual. The ethnographer needs to know her techniques well, but her 'precomposition' is bound to change during her 'performance' (Malkki 2007: 182-186). During my 'performance', between July 2011 when I arrived in the camp and June 2012 when I left, a series of unexpected political reforms and ceasefire agreements with several major ethnic armies shook Burma out of its four decade-long isolation. These events had vast implications on the refugee camps on the Thai-Burmese border. The third country resettlement process slowed down and came to a halt, rations were drastically cut and refugees began to return en masse to Burma or leave the camps to seek out livelihoods as undocumented workers in Thailand's South and in Malaysia among growing fears of forced repatriation. As these events gained momentum, I realized that my initial research question was becoming irrelevant unless I embedded it in the larger contexts of displacement and encampment. Sharing the refugees' daily routine, listening to their life stories and witnessing the very different ways in which they cope with displacement and uncertainty, I began to explore how the rapidly unfolding political events in Burma were affecting their lives and shaping their decisions and actions. I was profoundly touched by the depth of suffering, fear and hope, inspired by their resilience and resourcefulness, dazed by the speed of their movements and struggling to grasp what it meant to be confined to a 'temporary' state and space where 'temporariness' grew permanent. My initial questions became more fluid, evolving towards a broader exploration of encampment, mobility and immobility.

I realized quickly that formal interview situations would make refugees feel uncomfortable and put me in the awkward position of an investigator, possibly create mistrust and at best generate unreliable answers. At the same time, they were almost always too polite, too *anah-deh*⁹, to refuse. My Burmese colleagues warned me that refugees didn't trust researchers and might not reply honestly because in Burma, and even in the camp, if they

⁹ *Anah-deh* is a very commonly used Burmese verb that expresses shame, embarrassment, the fear of inconveniencing someone. It can also convey the feeling of being too proud to ask for help, lest the speaker's ah (strength) be hurt (nah) or undermined.

were questioned it was always with the purpose of trapping and harming them. So I avoided formal interview situations and relied on participant observation and informal conversations with colleagues and students. I decided to teach a social science research methods workshop in addition to my daily English classes. The school didn't have a curriculum, original course offers were welcome and there was a small group of 'veteran' students with a high level of English and a genuine curiosity and interest in almost everything. They met the course with enthusiasm and the following Saturday I was teaching a group of 15 students. The youngest were a 15-year-old girl from Mon State, a 16-year-old Karen boy who had grown up in the camp and a 16-year-old Burman girl from Yangon. The oldest in the group were U Lin and U Soe Tun, both from Yangon, in their 50s and university educated. There were Arakanese, Burmans, Kachin, Karen and Mon; Buddhists, Christians and Muslims. I scheduled the course for two school terms (about six months) to give the students time to acquire basics in methodology, formulate research questions, develop research plans, conduct fieldwork, transcribe and translate their interviews, analyse their data, present their work in progress and obtain feedback and finally write short academic papers on their findings. After an introduction to social sciences and research methods, the students began working on their own research projects in teams of two to three. They all worked on different topics, which overlapped with and complemented my own research. Generally they were conducting interviews without me and in their native languages, focusing mainly on friends and relatives. The idea was that a private and relaxed interview atmosphere would create more trust and reliable results. I met with the research teams afterwards and we discussed problems that had come up during the interviews.

My students had just begun doing their first interviews, when a rumour emerged that they were collecting information for the *Palat*, the Thai Camp Commander. Our project started just weeks after an official survey on resettlement had been carried out by the camp authorities. Despite my students' thorough explanations that the interviews were only for academic purposes, this coincidence reinforced the ubiquitous paranoia in the camp. Explaining the objectives of their research projects and gaining people's trust, even that of their friends and relatives, became a challenge for my students. During those six months, we conducted 40 semi-structured and narrative interviews on resettlement, uncertainty and life choices¹⁰. I was trying to involve my students in my own research and reflection processes, and they took me on a journey through their reflection processes. Our class conversations and

¹⁰ While all of the initial interviews were carried out by students on their own, subsequently I interviewed some of our interlocutors a second time in order to complete and expand upon certain questions that were particularly pertinent to my own research.

group discussions towards interpreting their interview data offered invaluable insights. The students unfolded the multiple layers of the gathered information and shared their own interpretations, drawing on their own experiences, cultural and linguistic sensibility and their proximity to their interview partners. While those interviews provided me with some 'hard data' for my own research, it was my continuous participation in the lives of and interaction with students and friends that helped me gain a more profound understanding of camp life and weave a much richer ethnographic fabric.

With the end of the research course in February 2012, I stopped asking questions directly related to my research topic. In his compelling memoir, *The Power of the Between*, Paul Stoller (2008: 152) wrote: "I now believe that one of our most important obligations is to use our skills to bear witness." Liisa Malkki juxtaposed the notions of the ethnographer as 'investigator' and as 'witness' (Malkki 1997: 94-96). While the investigative anthropologist collects evidence and hidden clues to reveal mysteries, the anthropologist as witness does not strive to find out 'everything'. Hebdige (1993, in Malkki 1997: 94) has argued for a new form of ethnographic work that would allow for more open critique and positioning than the ethnographic 'description'. By becoming a 'witness', the ethnographer carries a 'responsibility of testimony' (Hebdige 1993, in Malkki 1997: 94). Malkki agreed that such an approach was better suited to study phenomena that are ephemeral and irregular such as encampment (Malkki 1997: 94-95). As time advanced, I started to witness rather than research. The field stopped being the field. I stopped playing the fieldworker. I was simply a human being interacting with other human beings. I wrapped my academic books into plastic bags and stashed them inside my suitcase below the stack of mosquito repellent. I began being more attentive to my environment and things unrelated to my research questions. I started to see more clearly and listen more deeply, stopped worrying about how much I had 'found out' and whether what I had found out answered my research questions. As I became more present, a more subtle world began to unfold.

There was less excitement at that stage. The frenzy of the first months was gone. Every morning, I climbed out from under my mosquito net at 07:00 and ate a breakfast of fried rice at the morning market. I corrected papers and replied to student letters over strong tea with condensed milk, then hurried back to be on time for my beginners' class. After class, I bathed and washed clothes, chatted with students on the school compound, corrected more essays, prepared afternoon classes and wrote field notes. If there was time, I ate a quick lunch of rice and curry at a nearby shop that my student Moe ran with her family. My afternoon classes

started at 14:00 and finished at 17:30. After that I settled down with *Sayama*¹¹ Maria for my Burmese practice or joined my colleagues Dor and Ko Ko Naing or U Lin for a walk along the camp road. Then we would have dinner at a teashop or at one of our students' homes. We would sit for a long time, drink tea and talk, then return to school. I would climb up to my room and inside my mosquito net and write field notes holding a flashlight over my notebook. The days resembled one another and, like my students', my own life in the camp became more repetitive. Experiencing this monotony allowed me to see the camp the way it was, without the veil of over-excitement and anxiety about my research. In my last months, I grew more and more into my role as the *sayama* and into that liminal community that was dissolving before my very eyes. We followed the news from Burma and discussed rumours about resettlement and repatriation, the disappearance of friends who had left the camp and tried to reach Malaysia and those who had returned hopeful or disillusioned to Burma.

In *Being There*, Hammoudi and Borneman (2009: 270) describe fieldwork as “a process that entails constant revision of what one has learned”. Throughout my year in the field and beyond I continued to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct my research focus, struggling to make sense of life around me. Only months upon my return from the field, by rewinding events and by reflecting on them with more physical and emotional distance, I could finally begin digesting, analysing and theorizing them. Taking a “radically empirical detour” (Stoller 1989: 151-153), I tried to recreate the texture of daily life in the camp through narrative and to give a sense of what it means to be displaced and encamped on the Thai-Burmese border, and in this way to complement theoretical debates on displacement and encampment. Long-term participant observation in refugee camps remains rare due to difficulties of access for researchers. A more profound understanding of the lived experience of encampment and the organization of camp life, however, is critical for studies of displacement. Refugee camps, due their inaccessibility and the limited contact between humanitarian workers and refugees, remain mystified places, often misunderstood and misrepresented. The findings presented here are the results of continuous participant observation in Nupo Refugee Camp from July 2011 to June 2012 and an additional period of post-fieldwork observation from May to October 2013. Above all, these findings are the gifts of personal involvement in the lives of many generous people, who taught me about their lives in exile, opened their hearts and shared their losses and their victories, their fears and their dreams.

¹¹ *Saya/Sayama* means teacher (male/female) in Burmese. It is also commonly used as a form of address to show respect.



Road approaching Nupo Refugee Camp. 2011. Photograph by the author.



In the *songthaew* on the way to Nupo Refugee Camp. 2011. Photograph by the author.



Entrance to Nupo refugee camp. 2011. Photograph by the author.



Path to school during the monsoon. 2011. Photograph by the author.



View from the school compound. August 2011. Photograph by the author.



English students Swe Moe (24, Rhakine), Mi Nun (21, Mon), Moe Moe (31, Burman) and Ma Kyo (19, Muslim) 2011. Photograph by the author.

1

Exclusion and transformation

Exclusion

The map indicated a mountain road, curling south along the border from Maesot. My index finger followed its serpentine shape until Umphang, where the road abruptly stopped. My eyes continued searching in the empty, unmarked space outside mapped geography. The refugee camp was not on the map of Thailand, nor were the other eight Burmese camps that have existed for decades along the border.

Almost half a million people live in the three camps of Dadaab in Kenya (UNHCR 2013), the world's largest refugee settlement. This is roughly the population of Scotland's capital city, Edinburgh, or the inner city of Tel Aviv. These settlements do not appear on Kenya's map. They exist outside the national geography – as islands, isolated geographically, politically, legally, socially and culturally from their surroundings. The encamped remain outside “the national order of things” (Malkki 1995), denied access to economic, political and social life in their host country. Michel Agier's ethnographic research in the camps of Dadaab led him to conclude that refugee camps serve as tools “for the ‘humanitarian’ management of the most unthinkable and undesirable populations of the planet” (2002: 320), allowing to control and render the ‘undesirables’ invisible and voiceless by keeping them at a distance from the local population. Evoking Michel Foucault's statement that “refugees were the first people to be ‘imprisoned outside’”, Agier introduces the notion of ‘out-places’ (*hors-lieux*) (2011: 181) – “outside of the places and outside of the time of a common, ordinary and predictable world” (2002: 323). Their ‘out-place’ character or ‘extra territoriality’ together with a “permanent precariousness” are the most striking characteristics of encampment according to Agier (2011: 71).

In 1992, the French anthropologist Marc Augé coined the term ‘non-places’ (*non-lieux*) to describe the anonymous, transitory spaces produced by ‘supermodernity’ (*surmodernité*) – highways, airports, supermarket and hotel chains, amusement parks, hospitals, shantytowns and refugee camps. Augé's ‘non-places’ are spaces that have lost the identity, relations and

memory of anthropological places (1992: 69). Refugee camps are transit zones and spaces of legal and political exception, isolated from the nation states that surround them. At their foundation they are ‘non-places’ in Augé’s sense. Yet, my research suggests that they don’t remain without identity, relations and memory. Conceived as transit zones, their transitoriness turns permanent. They grow into complex social spaces and generate unique social dynamics. Ethnic and religious identities, memories of home and relationships with family members in Burma, Thailand and third countries continue to be nurtured and also transformed and reinvented in and by this novel social reality. Thus, they cease being ‘non-places’. The notion of ‘in-between places’ might be better suited to express this complexity and capture the refugees’ mobility and dynamic relationships with their country of origin, their host country and countries of resettlement in addition to the ideas of isolation, exclusion and transit.

The nine Burmese refugee camps in Thailand are all located within a militarized, mountainous and densely forested border landscape. Tham Hin refugee camp is less than one kilometre from the Burmese border. Umpiem Mai, which is located 12 kilometres from the border, is the camp furthest inside Thailand. With 46,133 refugees (TBC/TBBC 2012) Mae La refugee camp is the largest camp on the Thai-Burma border. It was founded in 1984. Nupo refugee camp is one of the newest and, with a population of 14,994, smallest camps. It was set up in March 1997 to consolidate two smaller camps and to shelter new arrivals after a major offensive by the *Tatmadaw*¹² in the Duplaya District of Karen State (TBC/TBBC 2012). Nupo is also one of the remotest camps. It is located in Thailand’s Tak Province, eight kilometres from the Burmese border and 13 kilometres by road from the village of Perng Klerng, a local border crossing point. The area around Nupo camp is very sparsely populated. The few villages in its surroundings are Karen. The nearest settlement that has a hospital and access to electricity and a cellular network is the village of Umphang, 68 kilometres away, reachable in two hours by *songthaew* on a partly paved mountain road.

Living conditions are rudimentary in all camps, but can vary slightly from camp to camp and even from section to section within the camps. Nupo camp with its thatch leaf roofs can resemble, at least at first glance, an oversized, poor village in rural Burma. Its sheer size, its inherent ‘out-place’ character, the absence of freedom of movement, the lack of livelihood options and perspectives, as well as a sharp sense of temporariness, unpredictability and fracture, make the camp radically different from an ordinary rural community. Its dense and dynamic population is a multitude of ‘accidental’ (Malkki 1997), highly diverse and liminal communities, a kaleidoscope of ethnic groups, religions and languages – unlike any rural

¹² Burmese name for the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF)

community. Further characteristics of encampment are the constant military presence, fences, night curfews, the absence of rule of law, the presence of NGOs, the extreme precariousness and proximity of the huts, and the lack of farmland and animals. In Thailand, even in the poorest and most remote areas, there are barely any villages where houses are still built entirely of bamboo. Even in Burma, it is rare except in the poorest and most isolated regions, often in civil war-torn areas and settlements of the internally displaced. In traditional villages in Mon or Karen State, where many of the camp's refugees are from, houses are more spacious and sturdy, built to house several generations under one roof. They are often a combination of wood and bamboo and sometimes concrete, and they have a plot of land around them, a garden, a well, chickens. Thai authorities do not acknowledge the refugee camps as permanent settlements. Seeking to preserve their temporary character, they prohibit the use of permanent materials in the construction of shelters. All huts in the camp are thus built with bamboo, thatch leaves and occasionally with plastic sheeting. Every year before the rainy season, the shelters need to be repaired and every three years entirely rebuilt. Within three years, if a bamboo house was left unattended, insects would devour it entirely and nothing would remain. In recent years there have been certain exceptions to the construction material rule in Nupo camp. Wooden poles are now used to keep the house structure together and some refugees, if they can afford it, use concrete for kitchen and shower room floors. Schools, religious and other official buildings tend to have tin rather than thatch roofs, as these don't need to be repaired every year. These developments are not necessarily a formal change in policy and perspective; they are rather by-products of arbitrary rules and a vast grey zone of border business transactions, varying from camp to camp. When refugees resettle or leave the camp and their shelter is identified as unoccupied, the camp section leaders are ordered to destroy it. Thus, the building materials and the organization of space become a source of power and exclusion and a symbol of temporariness, denying refugees the prospect of a permanent home and reminding them that they are merely tolerated, not welcome.

Transformation

Refugee camps evoke spectacular images of emergency tent towns with UNHCR plastic sheeting, immediate and overwhelming suffering, masses of starving people standing in line for food hand-outs and medical aid. A far less mediatised fact is that refugee camps tend to exist far beyond the immediate crisis that had led to the exodus and undergo important

transformations during their life span. They often exist for decades and produce several new generations of refugees, as in the case of the Palestinian and the Burmese camps. Protracted refugee situations have become the norm rather than the exception, with over half of the world's 10,000,000 refugees trapped in prolonged displacement (Zetter 2011).

Camps, either as informal rural settlements or emergency tent towns, develop into novel and unique types of places and experience urbanisation over time in terms of their infrastructure, economy and diversity of population. They “gradually become the sites of an enduring organization of space, social life and system of power that exist nowhere else”, argues Agier (2002: 322). He tentatively calls them ‘city-camps’ (*camps-villes*) (2002) and ‘camp-towns’ (2011). These ‘camp-towns’ continue to exist beyond the emergencies that brought them into being. Yet, despite their longevity, they continue to be governed as spaces of exception and temporary emergency shelters and this denies them the possibility to develop their potential as real urban spaces and their residents to escape life in limbo (Agier 2002). Liisa Malkki, who conducted research among refugees from Burundi in Tanzania in the mid 1980s, criticizes Agier’s generalizations based on the Dadaab case study. Dadaab with its heterogeneous population – a significant factor in Agier’s urbanization theory – represents the exception rather than the rule among refugee camps, she argues (2002). Even though my own research suggests a trend towards urbanization, I agree with Malkki that it is extremely difficult to generalize such observations. In the case of Nupo camp, the experience of urbanization is closely linked to a recent influx of a highly diverse, and largely urban, refugee population, which is specific to this camp and, in fact, only to one section of the camp. Thus, the analogy cannot be easily transferred to other camps on the Thai-Burmese border.

“This is Pansodan Street. You know, like Pansodan Street in downtown Yangon”, U Lin remarked as we walked down a wide red mud road, trying to keep our rain boots from getting stuck in the sludge. The road was lined with bamboo huts in various sizes. “That’s D.U. teashop. Very popular one”, said U Lin, motioning towards an open hut. Inside, groups of men were sitting on miniature pink and blue plastic chairs, smoking cigarettes and reading newspapers. “That is the *Palat* Office.” A group of women walked towards us, towels wrapped around their heads. “And this is the UNHCR office. That’s the Karen Camp Committee and that’s a shop. You can buy paper and pencils and shampoo here”, explained U Lin pointing at a large bamboo shack. We passed a Church on our left and turned into a busier street lined with small huts displaying sandals, blue and green rubber boots, camouflage rain coats, flowery umbrellas, batteries, teapots, instant coffee mix, yellow peas, t-shirts, soap,

radios, TVs and even counterfeit iPads. “This is the Muslim market”, said U Lin. A middle-aged man with a wavy orange beard reaching down to his white dress was rearranging rubber boots. “*Salam alaykum*”, he greeted. U Lin stopped to chat with the man. “How is your health? How is your wife’s health?” he inquired in Burmese. We entered a dark hut a few metres down the road. An old woman was stirring strong black tea inside a gigantic cauldron. “*Ba yu ma leh?*” “What will you have?” she asked without smiling. U Lin explained that we wanted our tea strong and not too sweet. She opened a can of condensed milk and poured the thick cream into two cups, then filled them up with tea. We sat down and watched an energetic young man at the back of the room kneading dough into balls and arranging them neatly on a low table, then smacking them one after the other onto the wall of huge white stone oven. U Lin shouted our order to the young man: “*Pepyo naan bya hniq bwe!*” Two portions of chickpeas and *naan* bread. The young man smiled at me. A small TV in the other corner of the shack played a Burmese rock concert. A blue plastic clock and a poster of the holy city of Mecca decorated the bamboo walls. “That’s Hollywood teashop”, said U Lin. “The best tea and *pepyo* in Nupo. Almost as good as in Yangon.” By giving places names like ‘Pansodan’ and ‘Hollywood’, refugees took ownership of the anonymous, transitory spaces, transforming them from ‘non-places’ into tangible social worlds.

We picked up our umbrellas and resumed our walk in the rain. “There are 16 sections in the camp and each has a local leader, who is appointed by the camp committee”, explained U Lin. I wondered if showing me around the camp made him think of the time when he was a tour guide in Burma. I did not ask. As we left the market street, a wide space opened up in front of us – a football ground, framed by a tall rock wrapped in mist and vegetation. “Nupo mountain”, said U Lin. “Please don’t try to climb it. Two years ago, a Swiss volunteer came to teach. After three days, he climbed up there and the Palat asked him to leave the camp immediately.” “Of course he climbed the mountain. He was Swiss.” I said and we laughed. U Lin pointed towards the other side of the football field. “Over there, that’s the cemetery. We call it section 17.”

We passed a ration house, a few huts and grocery stores and a mosque before entering a densely populated area, where tiny paths unfolded in all directions. The passages between shelters were barely wide enough for U Lin and myself. The huts leaned on each other, their thatch roofs touching. Bubbling sounds of laughter shot like gunfire through the alleys. Layer upon layer of chants from a nearby temple settled smoothly in between. Women sat on porches, chopping vegetables. Girls were wringing out laundry, young men kicking a caneball over an improvised net. Teenagers lingered on doorsteps reciting for school exams or playing

guitar. Here and there, we heard scraps from the Voice of America or BBC radio broadcasts in Burmese. Teashop televisions played Korean soap operas and football games. We were back in section 16. U Lin walked me back to school and returned home for his afternoon nap.

My students often complained about the lack of privacy and sleep deprived nights, on which they were kept awake by their neighbours' radios, their quarrels and crying babies, the smell of curries sizzling in frying pans, squealing pigs, religious rituals. The walls of their homes were plastered with plastic sheets, posters of Burmese pop singers and pages from Burmese and Thai newspapers to cover up the slits in the bamboo weaving and prevent passers-by from peeping inside. Portraits of Daw Aung San Su Kyi, baby powder and whitening cream advertisements, posters of Thai waterfalls and famous religious pilgrimage sites provided a minimum of privacy. By decorating their shelters with posters, flowers and religious objects refugees also personalised their living space, dispersing anonymity and creating temporary 'homes'. As they build and repair their shelters themselves or pay other refugees to do it (although in some cases refugees were assigned huts that had been abandoned), the makeshift huts vary considerably in style (i.e. the form, the pattern in the bamboo weaving), sturdiness and size. Most shelters are tiny due to the lack of space and building materials as bamboo and thatch are rationed. Refugees are forbidden to cut bamboo in the forest, but the lack of building materials forces them to violate this rule. A shelter for a family of four or more would typically have one living and one very small sleeping room, large enough to spread out two sleeping mats and a mosquito net. U Lin's hut consisted of a small, tidy front room, a cooking space in the back and a 'bedroom', slightly bigger than the mosquito net that he shared with his sisters Mina and Thuza.

The infrastructure in the camp has been created to a large extent by the refugees themselves and has developed tremendously in recent years. The camp economy is a dynamic microcosm, with a multitude of services and businesses. The Border Consortium (TBC/TBBC)¹³ distributes monthly food rations, consisting of rice, cooking oil, yellow beans, fish paste and sometimes chillies. These, however, are not sufficient and additional sources of income are essential for economic survival¹⁴. The camp, because of its remoteness, is off the electricity grid but hydropowered generators provide electric light – at least for those who can afford to pay for it. There is no mobile phone signal but in recent years refugee-run 'internet shops' have mushroomed, offering a slow connection, which has become the main means to

¹³ The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) recently changed its name to The Border Consortium (TBC), but it remains better known as The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC).

¹⁴ See Chapter 5 'Livelihoods'.

communicate with relatives and friends abroad. Some shops even propose a night flat rate, which allows the customers to surf all night for a more competitive price.

There is one medical facility in the camp, a clinic operated by *Aide Medical Internationale* (AMI). Its medical staff consists of refugees who were trained in the camp. A medical doctor from the hospital in the village of Umphang visits once a month. The makeshift bamboo clinic is not equipped to deal with serious illnesses or accidents but it has the authority and a car to send more serious cases to the hospital in Umphang, about two hours drive away, and very serious cases to Maesot. Such authorisations are given sparingly, and sadly sometimes too late. When Maria's friend Ma Nyi, 40 and mother of three young children, complained of severe pain for several days, she was given paracetamol, sent home and denied authorization to go to the hospital in Umphang. Only when her situation dramatically worsened, was she sent to the hospital. Ma Nyi passed away an hour after the AMI car reached the hospital. My student Dani, who was suffering from severe and regular malaria attacks, was repeatedly told that his fever was not high enough to be transferred to the hospital and left to fight the horrendous fevers on his own. The medicine in the camp clinic is largely limited to paracetamol handouts, which my students have nicknamed 'refugee medicine'. Non-Karen refugees also frequently complained about discrimination by the mainly Karen staff, who would make them wait longer, withhold medicine or refuse hospital authorizations.

There is a Handicap International office, supporting victims of landmines with recovery and prostheses. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) runs a maternity unit and a programme to prevent child malnutrition. There is an HIV Aids testing and information centre, as well as a gender-based violence prevention organization, and several community-based organisations (CBOs) such as the Karen Women Organization (KWO). All NGOs and CBOs are staffed with locally trained people.

The educational facilities in the camp are supported by ZOA¹⁵. There are nursery, primary, middle and high schools, working with a specifically created Karen curriculum, focusing on the Karen language, history and culture (in the Karen sections) and with the standard Burmese curriculum in section 16. As there are only few qualified teachers in the camp, committed individuals try to teach whichever subjects they feel capable of teaching. Refugee children are not allowed to attend Thai schools and there are no bridges to the Thai school curriculum. There are almost no chances for refugees to attend Thai universities, and

¹⁵ ZOA is a Dutch NGO providing relief in refugee crises. ZOA Thailand focuses strongly on educational and livelihoods projects in refugee camps.

there are also no official possibilities to learn Thai in the camp, with the exception of an initiative by a Thai volunteer teacher from Umphang, who was commuting every day to the camp to give a morning class at our school. There is one higher education programme in the camp, a three-year full-time study programme run by World Education and affiliated with a higher education institution in Ireland, focusing on community development and peace-building skills. The competition is fierce as the school can only accept 14 students at a time, selected among hundreds of applicants from all nine refugee camps and Thai towns through an entrance exam and interviews. All the post-10 educational programmes¹⁶ on the Thai-Burmese border have a strong focus on candidates whose objective it is to stay on the border and eventually return to Burma and invest their new skills into their communities. Hence, they do not accept students whose wish it is to resettle. With the resettlement process on the wane, however, more and more young people are left in the camps without any educational prospects beyond high school.

Nevertheless, even these limited medical services and educational opportunities and the recent infrastructure developments such as hydropower and internet shops are beyond what most villages in Burma's border areas and particularly the IDP settlements in conflict zones have to offer. Villagers from nearby Karen State travel to the camp to receive medical treatment, particularly for mine injuries. Young people come in large numbers from villages in Karen State to attend school and Thai-Karen villagers visit to the camps' markets to do their shopping. The diversity of the camp's population, its density, its mobility, its complex infrastructure, its economy and services, resemble more urban than rural structures, weaving and transforming the social fabric of the camp¹⁷. However, as Agier has pointed out (2002), the camp never fully develops its potential as a real urban space, impeded by its governance as a 'warehouse', an anonymous space of exception, by the camp's geographic isolation, the economic, political and social exclusion of the encamped, their confinement and the limitations put on their creativity and scope of action, as well as the permanently present feeling of temporariness that prevents the encamped from settling long-term, physically and emotionally, and transform their living environment accordingly.

¹⁶ Further educational opportunities for high school graduates

¹⁷ The aspect of social transformation is discussed in more detail in chapters 2 and 5 'The community of the encamped' and 'Livelihoods'.



'Nupo mountain' in the early morning. 2011. Photograph by the author.



Morning market on 'Pansodan Street'. 2011. Photograph by the author.



Section 16 (PAB section). 2011. Photograph by the author.



A Karen family in their shelter. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop taught by the author.



Morning market. 2011. Photograph by the author.



High school students. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop taught by the author.



Early morning in section 16 (PAB). 2012. Photograph by the author.



A young woman selling curry. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop taught by the author.

Seasons of mobility and immobility

The violence of the monsoon rains, the hostility of the cold season and the suffocating heat of the brief summer determine the pace and the conditions of camp life, encouraging or impeding the mobility of the encamped. The rainy season is the longest and most dangerous, stretching from June throughout October. The rains here are different from the occasional violent downpour I knew from other parts of South East Asia. They are incessant, pouring tirelessly day and night, turning paths into rivers and camp squares into mosquito breeding swamps, bringing Dengue fever and Malaria. In June 2013, at the very beginning of the monsoon, when I returned to Nupo for a visit, a severe dengue epidemic swept through the camp. Hundreds of children and adults were infected, several fatally. The squalid living conditions, the absence of adequate health facilities and the camp's remoteness, make it particularly prone to epidemics.

My first impression of the camp was one of a ghostly, Kafkaesque place. The muddy paths were deserted except for a few children jumping their way to school from puddle to puddle under oversized mushroom-like umbrellas. People's faces were barely visible tucked into their blue or green plastic rain caps as they rushed to collect their rations or pay a visit to their neighbours, focusing on the mud below their rubber sandals to avoid slipping. Inside their huts, they were stuffing *birdy* packages into the holes of their thatch roofs and running from corner to corner, emptying rainwater pots. Soggy rats huddled together, nibbling on mouldy books, soap, clothes, mosquito nets. The soft tapping of water on thatch roofs, the violent tapping of water on tin roofs, the hissing of water down the streams that once were passable paths and the rhythmic trickling of water into the bowl next to my mosquito net competed with the shrieking of cicadas and other insects, drowning all human noises. Nothing dried, everything turned damp and mouldy. Once every few days there was a glimpse of sunshine and people dropped everything they were doing and ran out to hang their laundry – only to see it soaked minutes later. The only way to dry clothes was to wear them and let your body dry them overnight.

The rains led to mudslides on the road from Maesot to the camp, sometimes making it impassable and cutting off the way for rations and goods that were sold at the camp's markets. The rainy season also meant that fewer vegetables could be grown in the camp to accompany the rice and bean rations. Sometimes the rains led to floods in the lower areas of the camp, forcing their residents to seek temporary shelter at friends' homes or in religious buildings. Strong winds caused century old trees to fall, crushing the fragile bamboo huts. "My sister is

afraid to sleep when there is a storm. She just sits on the porch and watches the trees swing forth and back all night”, U Lin confided to me one evening. On my last night in the camp, in June 2012, a tree crashed down onto our school library, badly damaging its tin roof. As the camp is located in a protected area refugees cannot cut down the trees that threaten to destroy their temporary homes without the permission of the forestry department.

During the monsoon life in the camp slows down, almost comes to a standstill, signalling another year of uncertainty, of waiting for a future with bated breath. People refrain from travelling due to the roads’ bad conditions and usually postpone decisions of returning or moving on until the end of the rains. The rainy season is also the time of the Buddhist lent when monks are banned from travelling and lay people refrain from alcohol and entertainment. There are no festivals, no celebrations, no weddings. The camp residents retreat to a sort of rainy season slumber, getting up later than usual, leaving their shelter only when absolutely necessary. The monsoon intensifies their feeling of isolation and being trapped.

One early morning, three months after my arrival in the camp, I woke up startled by the sound of nothingness. I hurried outside to hang my laundry, and from the second floor of the school building I saw a tall mountain rising out of the mist. Students had told me about that mountain, behind which lay Karen State. Yet it was the first time that I could see it. In the following weeks the sky cleared and turned a deep blue, the streams dried up and morphed once again into walkable paths. Children swapped rubber boots for slippers and Nupo camp came to life the way I had never seen it. The sounds of children’s voices, the rustle and bustle of dozens of different languages at the morning market and in teashops, the voices of teenagers humming their favourite love songs, radios playing Burmese rock and Thai pop, pigs shrieking, couples fighting, cocks carking, mosques calling for prayer, bells announcing the monks’ alms round, church choirs and deafening loudspeakers, women balancing trays of mustard greens on the heads advertising their goods, barking dogs – these once cushioned noises replaced the familiar sounds of water with a sudden and violent force. With the beginning of the cold season life resumed in a faster-paced, louder and more colourful rhythm. Weddings and religious festivals were celebrated, the morning market came to life with a larger array of vegetables and fruit, there were sports competitions, music and dance performances and plenty of new rumours about refugee registration and third-country resettlement. It was also a time of decisions. Anticipation of movement and hope were in the air.

Life was more comfortable during the cold season, at least until the months of December and January when a bitter cold set in. Temperatures soared during daytime to 30°C

or more and dropped to almost 0°C at night. The bamboo does not protect against the cold and the wind. Everyone sleeps in all their clothes, including hats, scarves and gloves if they own any, awaking from the cold and the icy bamboo floor beneath the thin plastic mats. Seasonal flu is common and chronic diseases tend to worsen during the cold months. Treatable illnesses often lead to deaths because of the lack of medical attention. In periods of extreme cold, refugees resort to lighting bonfires under their huts at night. The huts' roofs are so close that if the leaves caught fire, it would spread instantly. Nupo camp experienced only relatively small fires, but risks are enormous during the dry season and the consequences can be disastrous. In February 2012, a fire destroyed more than 1,000 shelters, several schools and two mosques in Umpiem Mai refugee camp within less than one hour, leaving over 5,000 people without shelter, water and clothes at temperatures around 0°C. These 5,000 people lost their last meagre belongings, UN papers and family photographs. Refugees extinguished the fire themselves with polyester blankets and buckets of water hours before the fire brigade arrived from Maesot. Long before NGOs brought supplies, refugees from Umpiem Mai and Nupo camps collected and donated clothes, blankets, kitchen utensils, soap and money for the victims and organized their transport to Umpiem Mai. A year later, in March 2013, 39 people died and over 2,300 lost their shelters in a fire in Ban Mae Surin refugee camp in the North of Thailand. It is still disputed what caused the fire.

Around March, temperatures climbed into the 40s. The once muddy paths cracked open and turned to dust. Water became a rare commodity, forcing many refugees to bath in the stream. Forest fires and slash and burn agriculture smoked the camp. Black ashes rained from the sky, mixed with the reddish dust and settled in thick layers on our feet, arms and faces, burned our eyes. The oppressive heat made people hide again under umbrellas and seek shelter in the shade of their huts and teashops whenever possible. Older people suffered particularly. But the hot season is also a time of hard physical work, as shelters need to be repaired before the first downpours of the approaching monsoon. The camp turns into a huge construction site as refugees, with the help of neighbours and friends, begin to replace their roofs and rebuild their huts with new bamboo and thatch.

April is the month of *Thingyan*, the Burmese New Year and water festival. It is the end of the school year and traditionally the time for boys and young men to join Buddhist monasteries as temporary novices and for adults to retreat to meditation centres. The almost weeklong festivities with their numerous sports and cultural events are a time of joy, relaxation and laughter. But they also mark the end of another 'lost' year in the camp and foreshadow another long rainy season ahead during which life will slow down again and bring

new risks. In April 2012 an atmosphere of disappointment and anxiety about the future poisoned the celebrations. Refugees with pre-registration numbers¹⁸ felt deceived by the UNHCR's long-standing promises that they would be given a registration number, which would allow them to apply for third-country resettlement. The realization that another year in the camp lay ahead, that resettlement was becoming more and more unlikely and not least the unexpected political changes in Myanmar led many refugees to reconsider their life choices, resulting in many sudden departures. The New Year's festivities and the generally more relaxed mood during that time of the year also meant less checkpoints on the road and allowed refugees, who decided to return to Burma or move to other parts of Thailand in search of work opportunities to travel more safely. An important time factor for families with children, who were considering a return to Burma, was the beginning of the new school year after the summer holidays in April. Refugees frequently mentioned April as a last deadline, beyond which they would give up waiting for registration and resettlement. Some indeed gave up. Others postponed their deadline for another year, and then for another one and another one.

¹⁸ See 'Categorisation and control' in chapter 3.



Children playing during the monsoon. 2011. Photograph by the author.



U Lin and Mina on the doorstep to their shelter at the beginning of the monsoon. 2012. Photograph by the author.



Umpiem Mai Refugee Camp devastated by a fire in February 2012. Photograph taken by a student.



A student's home. The family did not receive bamboo and thatch leaves to repair their shelter before the monsoon. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop.



A Karen woman carrying her family's annual ration of thatch leaves. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop.



Young woman preparing thatch for the monsoon season. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop.

2

The community of the encamped

Camps – “social voids” at their origin (Bauman 2002: 347) – grow into complex social spaces that are very much alive and transformative. They are birthplaces of unique socialities and new identities. The community of the encamped is an “accidental community” (Malkki 1997), made up of individuals with different ethnic backgrounds, religions, political affiliations and social status on the grounds of their ‘victimhood’ and need for protection, their statelessness and homelessness. Michel Agier identifies a “problematique of identity” in the camps, induced by the humanitarian government’s non-recognition of the social and political identities of the recipients of its aid (Agier 2011: 322). For the humanitarian system, the encamped remain anonymous case numbers – for the outside world identity-less victims or “human waste” as Zygmunt Bauman has phrased it (2004). Bauman argues that the anonymity that encampment and its management produces places refugees in a social void and robs them of the identities that their former “milieu defined, sustained and reproduced” (2002: 347). “Socially, they are ‘zombies’: their old identities survive mostly as ghosts – haunting the nights all the more painfully for being all but invisible in the camp’s daylight”, he writes (2002: 347). Liisa Malkki, based on her research with Hutu refugees in Tanzania, argues the reverse in *Purity and Exile* (1995) – that camps lead to a purification and a reinforced expression of national and ethnic identity, as opposed to self-settlement in urban areas that fosters a more cosmopolitan identity. Gaim Kibreab (1999), who conducted research among Eritrean refugees in Sudan, criticizes Malkki’s notion of cosmopolitanism among town-based refugees. He explains their cultural detachment with a ‘strategy of invisibility’ – the simple need to hide behind ‘fictitious identities’ in a hostile environment (1999: 398). Agier carries Malkki and Kibreab’s debate further, arguing that refugee camps generate *entirely new* identities – “both ethnic and non-ethnic” (2002: 333).

My own fieldwork in Nupo suggests that these apparently conflicting situations can and do coexist – even within the barbed wired fences of one single camp. Encampment can turn refugees into social ‘zombies’, but it can also strengthen feelings of identity and belonging as

well as bring new identities into being. Refugees, even more than individuals who have never experienced exile, build their identity around their life story, their childhood, their cultural and social environment. The camp does not erase former identities. As the familiar social environment and their own role in it cease to exist, the exiled identify stronger with their past and suffering. Their past is not only what caused displacement but also the key to their future as resettlement applications are evaluated based on the ‘drama’ of their life stories and the degree of their suffering. The past, now a resource for the future, is well guarded and rarely shared with anyone except the UNHCR and foreign embassy officials in charge of resettlement. The encamped dwell between the pain of their past and the anxiety and hope for a better future. Their daily struggle for survival, the shared uncertainty and the waiting create a unique togetherness in this ‘in-between’ space.

It is never possible to generalize from one specific refugee situation without carefully considering historical and political contexts. There cannot be a single story of displacement and identity. Civil war refugees from Mon and Karen States, political dissidents from Yangon and Muslims from Karen State fleeing religious repression, although sharing the same living space in Nupo, experience exile and encampment in different ways. And ultimately, beyond being members of an ethnic, religious or political group refugees are individuals with distinct personalities and life histories that elude generalizations.

My school was located in section 16, or PAB¹⁹ as it was called previously and to which it is still referred. The PAB section stands out as a highly diverse and dynamic, an almost ‘liquid’ space – to borrow Bauman’s metaphor (Bauman 2000, 2007) – within a more solid environment. It is distinct from the other camp sections with regard to its history, population and administration. The section was added in 2005 to accommodate a large number of Burmese refugees, who were forced to transfer from Thai cities to refugee camps as the UNHCR third-country resettlement programme was introduced. These were mainly political dissidents who had fled after the brutal crackdown of the 1988 student uprising and fought against the Burmese government troops on the side of the Karen and Karenni guerrillas, formed political opposition groups and continued their struggle for democratic change in Burma from Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Maesot²⁰.

Unlike the other camp sections, PAB is not administered by the Karen camp committee. It falls under the direct authority of the *Palat*, the Thai camp commander, who holds the ultimate power in the camp hierarchy. This makes the PAB section a separate political entity

¹⁹ PAB stands for Provisional Administration Board.

²⁰ For more information on the situation of this group before 2005 see Lang 2002: 161-166.

within the camp with distinct rules and an extremely heterogeneous population. With over 2,254 refugees, PAB is the largest, most densely populated and ethnically diverse section. Refugees come from all over Burma, from urban as well as rural areas. Burman²¹, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Mon, Muslim²², Nepali, Rhakine, Shan and other smaller ethnic groups such as the Naga, Lahu and Dawei live cheek to jowl. My student Ko San once explained to me that it would take about two weeks from the camp to reach his village in Nagaland on the frontier with India, including two days trekking through the forest. Many of the camp residents encounter such ethnic and cultural diversity for the first time in their lives, confronted with dozens of languages in their neighbourhood as different from one another as Japanese and English. In PAB, unlike in the other camp sections where Karen is the main language of communication, Burmese functions as the *lingua franca*.

The other 15 sections of the camp are more homogenous. Two smaller sections are mainly populated by a Muslim minority that fled Karen State together with the Karen following attacks by the Burmese government troops in the 1990s. The remaining sections are largely Karen. The Karen were Nupo's first residents and make up 78 percent of the camp's population today (TBC/TBBC 2012). They are mostly villagers²³ who fled civil war, the looting and destruction of their homes, their crops and livelihoods, forced labour, systematic rape, torture and murder.²⁴ Thousands of Karen, Mon and Karenni refugees, before crossing international frontiers, have spent years hiding in makeshift camps in Burma's eastern jungles. According to The Border Consortium (TBC/TBBC 2012), at least 400,000 internally displaced people remain in South Eastern Burma.

The Burmans make up nine percent of the camp's population, two percent are Mon and the remaining 11 percent is made up of numerous other ethnic groups. The great majority of the non-Karen refugees live in the PAB section. Among the Burmans, there is a high

²¹ The terms Burman, Bamar, Burmese, Myanmar are not always used consistently by authors. I use 'Burman' throughout the text to refer to the ethnic group and Burmese to the nationality (of all ethnic groups in Burma) and to the language.

²² Burma's Muslims, regardless of the State in Burma they originate from, identify themselves and are identified by the other ethnic groups not only as a religious but also a distinct ethnic minority, sometimes referred to as 'Bengali' by the Burmans. Racial and religious discrimination against Muslims, popular and institutionalized, has a long tradition in Burma, particularly in Rhakine State. In 2012, tensions in Rhakine State culminated in sectarian violence and brutal attacks by Buddhist mobs, burning Muslim villages and districts of towns, displacing thousands of families. In 2013, the violence spread to Central Burma and Northern Burma.

²³ Most Karen refugees are civilians, but there are also members of the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen de facto government, and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

²⁴ The Tatmadaw abduct men and boys as young as ten to carry ammunition and sacks of rice, to walk as human mine sweepers ahead of the soldiers and sometimes, if they are young and strong, to become soldiers. A recent report by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR 2012) on human rights abuses in Karen State can be found here: https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_Reports/burma-karen-rpt-ltr-2012.pdf. The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) monitors and provides information on the civil war and human rights abuses in Karen State. Their reports can be found on their website: http://khrg.org/reports/reportsbyyear/index.php?rep_year=all. For an overview of the situation in Mon State see: Lang 2002: 57-79.

concentration of political refugees, including numerous *persons of concern* (PoCs)²⁵ – high profile political dissidents and ex-political prisoners, who are often members of exiled political opposition groups, in particular of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) and the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS)²⁶ like U Soe Tun. Political refugees include 1988-generation students as well as organizers and participants of the 2007 Saffron Revolution, among them numerous Buddhist monks. Many of these refugees come from urban areas in Burma and have lived for many years in Thai cities before being forced to transfer to the camp in 2005. The level of literacy and education is significantly higher in the PAB section than in the rest of the camp. Some of the urban refugees with a university education, specific skills or fluent English were able to set up a small business, organize English or computer classes, or find work with one of the few organizations in the camp. Others, tired of waiting and unable to find meaning in their ‘suspended’ present, have succumbed to alcohol and depression.

*When we came here five years ago, we thought it was temporary. I spent all my life in Yangon, so at first I found it interesting to live in the jungle. But it has been too long. People are tired. We have no perspectives, little hope. We have to struggle to survive here. It gets very cold in winter and we are not used to that. People get sick and there are no doctors, no medicine except for paracetamol. The food is poor and we fear the poisonous snakes and spiders. At least, Karen people know how to build a house and they can go to the forest and collect plants and roots. They can hunt for birds and lizards and they know how to prepare them. They know the forest, they never get lost. We cannot do any of these things. We always depend on others here. I can teach maths and biology, but I don't know how to repair my house.*²⁷

Since his first day in the camp, U Lin²⁸ has been involved in organizing school activities, teaching and taking care of the volunteer teachers. In his free time, he helps high school

²⁵ Many of the political dissidents and students fleeing the 1988 massacres were registered as PoCs (Persons of Concern) by the UNHCR in Bangkok in the early 1990s. For detailed information see Lang 2002: 162- 179.

²⁶ The ABSDF, founded in 1988 by Burmese students in opposition to military rule, is a political and armed resistance group that has cooperated with the Karen National Union (KNU) and other ethnic opposition groups in the armed struggle against the Burmese government. The Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS) is another major political opposition party founded by students in 1988.

²⁷ Informal conversation, April 2012

²⁸ U Lin was born in Yangon to a Buddhist father and a Muslim mother. He was 18 when his father died. His mother suffered from a heart disease. U Lin ran the family's car painting shop, while studying at the same time, to support his six younger siblings. He never married, afraid to shake the family balance by bringing another woman into their home. He studied

students with their science classes. Despite U Lin's regular efforts to sound cheerful even if not optimistic, I often couldn't help thinking how utterly out of place he looked in this jungle camp. He always admonished me to wear rain boots and watch out for snakes, to carry my flashlight and umbrella, to be more selective with teashop food, and to tuck in my mosquito net at night against centipedes. U Lin rarely ventured far from the school compound. One sunny Sunday morning, I persuaded him to join a Karen friend and myself on a walk to a nearby waterfall. Somehow, we managed to lose the Karen friend and our way back. It took several hours, a bruised leg and two Karen hunters to get us back to the camp.

Ko Maung used to work as a photojournalist in Burma. When cyclone Nargis devastated Burma's Irrawaddy Delta in May 2008, killing 140,000 people and displacing two million, Ko Maung and his wife Ma Ma Aye collected food and clothes among their friends in Yangon. They smuggled them on trucks and boats to the disaster areas. Ko Maung documented the destruction of the area and the human suffering, as well as the misuse of international aid by government organizations. They continued their clandestine journeys into the Delta for several months – until Ko Maung's camera was confiscated and he interrogated. They went into hiding, later fled to the Thai-Burmese border. One wet Sunday morning in August 2011, Ko Maung and I sat in our school office, sipping lukewarm *birdy*. “Do you want to see some pictures?” he asked me. “From the Delta.” And he began flipping through photographs of bloated blue corpses hanging from treetops and floating through muddy swamps that once had been villages; of empty-eyed women and men huddled under blankets in monasteries and school buildings. “They were refugees ... now we are refugees. Ironical, isn't it?” Ko Maung helps with the school accounts. Ma Ma Aye used to attend different classes during their first two years in Nupo camp. As months turned into years, she stopped leaving their shelter except to collect rations or buy vegetables at the market. Ko Maung spends his days sitting in the windowless office room, looking through his photographs, reading newspapers and playing computer games.

U Soe Tun, son of a well-known Burmese writer and once a respected political leader in the resistance movement in Burma, spends his days drinking moonshine out of plastic bags in the school library, reminiscing about his lost youth in Yangon, arguing with Ko Maung or beating up his wife.

German at Yangon's University of Foreign Languages but was expelled before graduation when his younger brother became politically involved. He found work as a sous-chef in a big hotel, learned English, Spanish and Urdu through self-study, became a licensed tour guide and worked for eight years before being forced to flee Yangon in the aftermath of the failed 2007 Saffron Revolution.

Nupo refugee camp, and in particular the PAB section, represents a novel social space and what Agier has called an “ethnic ‘chessboard’ specific to the camp” where “each affiliation takes on its meaning and position in relation to the other ‘pieces’ on the board – competing, antagonistic or allied” (2002: 334). The Karen, a persecuted minority in Burma who have fought against the central government since 1948²⁹, are the majority in the camp and in charge of the camp administration and security for all camp sections except PAB. The PAB section, because of its diversity and its residents’ social and political backgrounds, is also a political minefield. Several exiled political and armed resistance groups, refugees of civil war and severe human rights abuses like the majority of the Karen, Mon, Chin, Kachin, defected *Tatmadaw* soldiers and Burmese government informants live side by side and rub shoulders in teashops and markets. In the first years of the PAB section’s existence, tensions between the different ethnic and the numerous political and armed groups were frequent. Today political arguments are rare and residents claim that there is a relatively a good understanding between the different groups sharing that very dense space. During my year in the PAB section I frequently heard about feelings of mistrust, but did not experience any serious intra-section tensions except for the occasional brawl between neighbours. One evening, in a ‘beer shop’ along the camp road, I met a group of former *Tatmadaw* soldiers. They were eager to drink and talk about their experience and frustration about their life situation in the camp. They were in their mid-30s and early 40s except for a young man who looked no more than 19. “I was a child soldier. You know?” he explained. These men had something deeply disturbing about them. They bemoaned that they were not able to apply for resettlement and that on top of that they were shunned by most people in the camp.

Another key moment that made me very aware of the complexity of people’s identities in the camp was when my student U Sandi, a Burman monk from Sagaing Division, announced in class that his father had been decapitated by KIA (Kachin Independence Army) soldiers. His mother had called the night before to let him know. “He was not with the Burmese army! I don’t understand why they killed him. I am confused”, he told us. While U Sandi spoke, I remembered an evening spent with a Kachin friend just a few days earlier, a former KIA soldier who was telling me about friends he had lost in the conflict. Likely U Sandi’s father had been suspected of working for the Military Intelligence.

Despite lingering mistrust and secrecy about the past, I did witness a lot of support among PAB residents, especially in times of hardship. Those with more resources helped

²⁹ In 2012, the Karen National Union (KNU) has signed a historical ceasefire agreement with the central government under President Thein Sein.

those with less, those with specific skills did not hesitate to share them. The support was strongest among, but not limited to, members of the same ethnic group. Ethnic and religious identification appeared strong among the Karen and other sizable ethnic groups in the camp like the Mon and the Chin – minorities with a long and bloody history of repression and persecution in Burma. Exile, exclusion from Thai society, encampment and the sudden confrontation with such cultural diversity seemed to intensify the need for conscious ethnic identification. In Karen State, where the majority of the population was Karen, identity was a given; differences such as cultural divisions between Sgaw- and Poe Karen or religious and political differences between Karen Christians, Buddhists and Animists might have been more significant factors for identification. An indication of a strengthened sense of ethnic identity among Karen refugees are the camp's schools (except in PAB), which follow a Karen curriculum with a strong emphasis on Karen history, culture and politics (see also Zeus 2011) – subjects that used to be banned in government controlled areas of Karen State.

Communities and networks in the PAB section are largely determined by ethnic membership as well as religion. The living space is ethnically divided – not in an officially organized way, but visibly enough. Many Chin refugees, for example, live in the environs of the Chin church. Muslim refugees in PAB live mostly in one area of the section near a small mosque. Rakhine refugees tend to live close to the main road around two Rhakine teashops and the Rhakine monastery and many of the ABSDF members (many of whom, although not all, are Burman) live close together. Churches and Buddhist monasteries are also ethnically divided. There are several Burman monasteries, a Mon monastery, a Chin church, several Karen Baptist churches, a Karen monastery, a Rhakine monastery and others. When I asked a Mon Buddhist monk why the Buddhist monasteries were ethnically separated and if there were differences in religious practices, he explained that although religious differences were not significant, tradition, culture and language mattered. “It’s also about trust”, he admitted. I remembered that in my first week in the camp another student had told me that there was suspicion over a monk in a large Karen monastery that also ordained monks from other ethnic groups. The other monks and lay people suspected him of being a spy for the Burmese Military Intelligence and were discussing how to address the issue.

Karen, Mon and Chin celebrations (cultural and religious, but also frequently political such as the ‘Mon revolution Day’ or ‘Chin National Day’) are organized in religious buildings and play a very important role in camp life. Even the poorest families wear traditional national dress for such occasions, on some of which (in the case of the Karen) national dress is even mandatory. The camp's religious sites function not only as spiritual but also as social

and cultural gathering and networking spaces; a safety net; cultural education centres (there are no Mon schools as the community is too small, but children can learn the Mon language and history at the Mon monastery); and offer practical and emotional support and a sense of ethnic and national belonging in exile. Exile can also strengthen religious and cultural communities by allowing them more freedom than in Burma, where an open display of ethnic identity was discouraged and in certain circumstances a reason for persecution – as in the case of my student Bagao, who had been arrested for teaching the Mon language to children at his village monastery and forced to flee to Thailand.

Political affiliations are another important way of identification in the camp communities. Former political prisoners and members of armed resistance groups like the ABSDF tend to identify also in these terms, which in some cases overrule feelings of ethnic or religious belonging. Without extensive fieldwork in the refugees' regions of origin, however, it is difficult to understand whether exile and encampment has really sustained and even reinforced feelings of ethnic and religious identities. As Malkki reminds us, it is important to study 'emplacement' in order to better understand displacement (2002).

Confirming Michel Agier's Dadaab observations, I have also found that the camp produces new social spaces – transforming, deconstructing and recreating traditional social, cultural and economic patterns. The camp presents a unique meeting place where a multitude of extremely different ethnic and religious groups interact on a daily basis, a space non-existent in such proportions and such density in Burma. U Soe Tun compared this diversity to what he experienced in his youth at the university campus in Yangon – before the protests of 1988 and the following shut-down of the country's universities, their break up and confinement to satellite towns and the transition to the today ubiquitous home-based study programmes that confine students to their home region and thus prevent too much interaction between different ethnic minorities.

When the PAB section was established Karen refugees were naturally suspicious of the new arrivals. To minimize conflicts, PAB was created as a separate entity and managed directly by the *Palat*. Today the divide between the PAB section and the Karen camp sections is still tangible and the interactions between their residents remain limited. The non-Karen refugees complain about discrimination in health care and the job market, and the Karen complain about the snobby behaviour of the PAB city people. But there has also been increased cooperation in recent years, particularly in the sphere of education. When I first arrived in July 2011, most students at our school lived in PAB, most were from larger towns, in their 20s and older and formally educated, learning English as a preparation for

resettlement in a third country. In the course of 2011 and 2012, large numbers of PAB refugees, among them many of our students, left the camp in search of livelihood options or returned to Burma. They were replaced by young Karen students, who had just finished high school in the camp. Many of them were born or had grown up in the camp. While in the first years of the school's existence few Karen ventured into PAB, it seemed that something was finally shifting, at least in education.

Many of the Karen refugees employed by NGOs and Community Based Organizations (CBOs), as well as those working in the camp administration used to be farmers in Karen State or come from farming families. They were unable to farm and pursue their traditional way of life in the camp. They were, however, able to acquire other skills and benefit from educational and vocational training opportunities in the camp, which allowed them to find work in community development. Education is highly valued in the camp and is more accessible and of higher quality than the almost non-existent education in many remote areas of Burma, particularly in conflict areas. There are large numbers of young people, who stay in the camp temporarily in order to attend school or learn English – something they would not have the chance to do in their villages. Education has transformed the lives and objectives of many young refugees “We cannot afford education in Burma. It is very expensive. That's why I would be a farmer now. Here, I can improve my education, because education is free in this camp. We don't have such opportunities in Burma”, 25-year-old Karen man told my research students in an interview.³⁰

Nupo camp has a relatively large minority of refugees from Mon State, a long-time civil war torn area in South-Eastern Burma. Some of them, mostly in their 20s, attended English classes. Few of these young people had had the chance to attend school regularly in Mon State. They had grown up in conflict areas and going to school was a life risk, as school buildings frequently became scenes of fighting. Some of the boys received informal schooling in monasteries, where they learned the Mon and Pali languages and studied Buddhist texts. Girls had less opportunities. There are fewer nunneries than monasteries and girls are needed at home to help with the household chores and younger siblings. In fear of being forced to become porters for the Burmese army, many young men fled Mon State in their teens and spent years working illegally in factories and in construction jobs in Thailand or in Malaysia before finding their way into the refugee camp. Today, in their 20s and 30s, they are enthusiastic students and appreciate the opportunity to learn. The exposure to information, education and new opportunities fuels their imagination and transforms their ambitions. “Now

³⁰ Interview, Nupo refugee camp, 13 October 2012.

I realize, that the longer I live outside Burma, the more I understand about Burma”, my student Ko Gyi told me. He was 17 when he fled his village in Mon State. Today Ko Gyi is 22 and follows very closely the developments in his country, something he was not able to do when he lived in Burma. He attended every single class and vocational training programme there was in Nupo and in 2013 started a highly sought-after GED preparation programme in Maesot, that accepts only 14 students each year and helps its graduates with applications for scholarships at Asian universities. Many young Mon people like Ko Gyi hope to resettle in third countries and further their education out of personal motivation or with the goal to return to their villages and support their communities. Had they remained in Mon State, they would probably not have thought beyond working in Thai or Malaysian factories, ships, rubber plantations or the new industrial border zones in Burma, sending money back to their families. These visions, however, do not necessarily represent real changes in people’s lives, because they do not reflect real possibilities. Only few had the chance to resettle and of those even fewer had the chance to pursue further education. Those who remain in the camp are increasingly giving up dreams of resettlement and education and quitting English classes to attend vocational trainings such as hair-dressing or mechanics, in anticipation of returning to Burma or having to carve out a living as undocumented workers in Thailand.

Nevertheless, the experience of exile, camp life and the exposure to other cultures and ways of life influence and transform people’s goals and projections. After five years in the camp, my student Ma Nu, an intelligent and timid 21 year old, returned last year to her village in a very remote and poor area of Chin State. She decided to make use of the English she learned in the camp and become a tour guide in Burma – rather than returning to work on the farm or looking for factory work in Thailand. Others who were fortunate enough to attend the few post-10 education programmes on the border are returning to Burma with new perspectives, ideas and the motivation to support their communities of origin by sharing their newly acquired skills, teaching or initiating community-based projects.

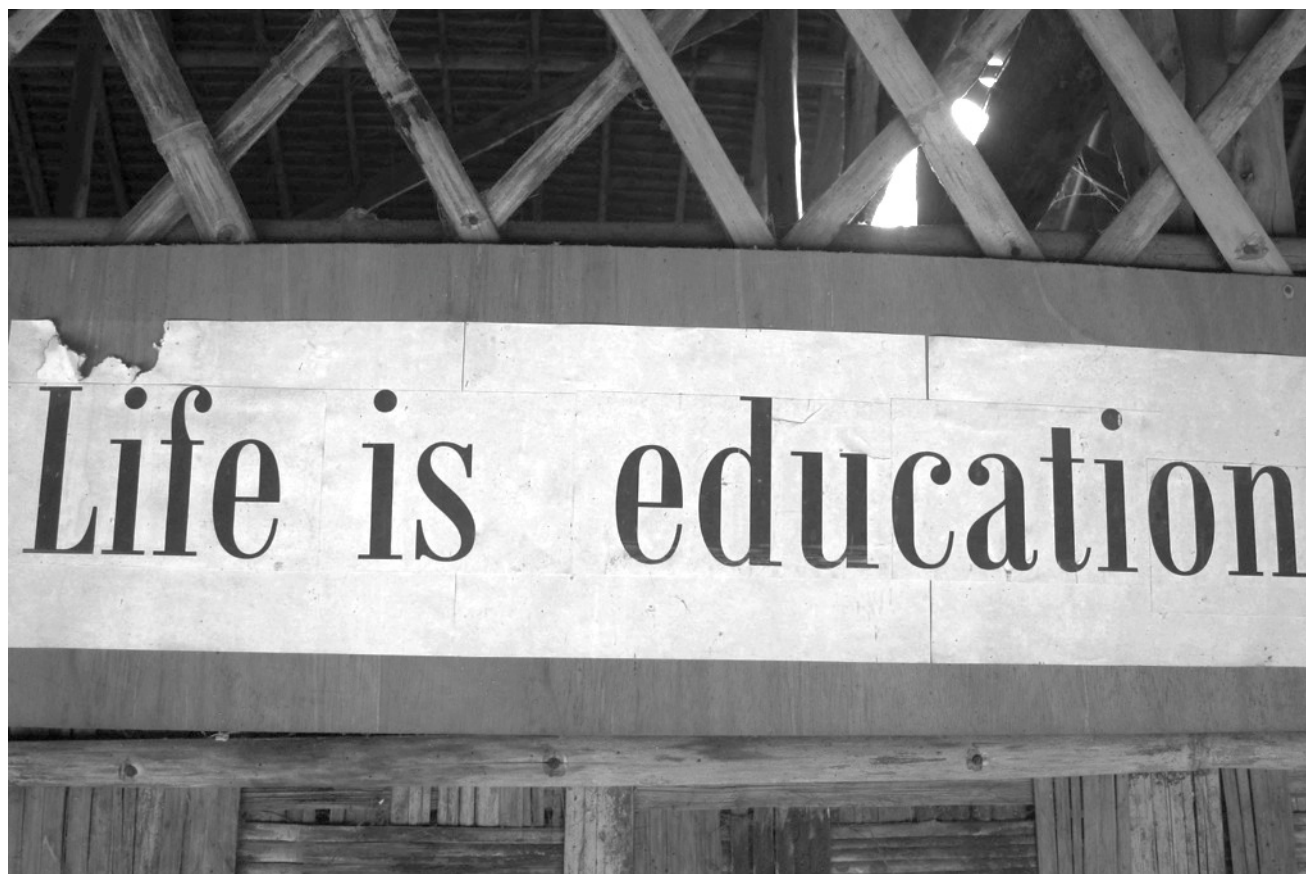
Interaction between young Karen refugees and refugees from other ethnic groups and parts of Burma has encouraged cultural exchange and created new social dynamics. My interviews have shown, for example, that increased contact between the different groups has influenced refugees’ life choices in significant ways, often in favour of resettlement.³¹ Some Burmese, Mon and Chin refugees, particularly children and young people who attend Karen schools, have learned to speak Karen – a highly unlikely occurrence in Burma. At the same

³¹ See Chapter 6. ‘Life choices, mobility and immobility’.

time, young Karen people have learned Burmese and other languages through their contact with refugees from other ethnic groups. Sometimes, these young people marry across ethnic membership and religion. Agier observed similar tendencies in the camps of Dadaab, where marriages between Ethiopian men and Somali women were on the rise, but met with strong opposition among the Somalis (Agier 2002, 2011). Mixed unions are not unknown of in Burmese society, but still relatively rare in the more traditional rural communities. Religious beliefs tend to play an even more important role than ethnicity in the choice of a life partner. In the almost urban-like density of the camp and a more fluid social environment some young people dare to break through ethnic or religious barriers, making personal choices in defiance of their parents' conservative expectations. In teashops, the 'elopement' of young, often mixed, couples is a hot topic. Unions between Muslim boys and Buddhist or Christian girls in particular are causing a lot of turmoil in families and in the camp communities, challenging traditional patterns of social life.

There is an entire generation of young refugees, mostly Karen and Muslims from Karen State, who were born or grew up in the camps or on the border. Some have never lived in Burma or in Thailand outside the camp. Their identities have been shaped by exile and encampment, and in the case of the Karen a highly politicised and militarized environment, but also by contact with different cultures and ways of life, by the alienation from their family's traditional way of life and by the emergence of new opportunities, an education different from that of their parents and dreams of third-country resettlement.

Exile and encampment profoundly impact and transform individual as well as collective identities. Encampment shapes a community of the encamped, an accidental community with its very own dynamics and characteristics. The importance of religious and national celebrations and the preservation of language and culture among ethnic minorities such as the Mon, the Chin and the Karen shows how encampment reinforces ethnic, political and cultural identification. At the same time, individual life stories, particularly those of younger refugees, demonstrate, how new and unique forms of social life and identities emerge in situations of prolonged displacement and encampment.



A signpost at the entrance to our school. 2011. Photograph by the author.



English students Nini (19, Rhakine), Mi (16, Muslim) and Lin (21, Chin). Photograph by the author.



Monks from the Mon monastery on their early morning alms round. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop.



Mon language class at the Mon monastery. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop.



Buddhist Kathein ceremony at the end of the monsoon to collect and offer donations to the monasteries. 2011. Photograph by the author.



Lily (18, Dawei) participating in the Kathein procession. 2011. Photograph by the author.



Muslim girls at the Eid celebrations. 2011. Photograph by the author.



Chin students celebrating Chin National Day in their church. 2012. Photograph by the author.

3

Protection – a euphemism for detention

“While some want to protect refugees, others want to protect themselves against refugees”, Michel Agier pointed out (2002). Officially, camps exist to protect refugees from conflict and persecution. In reality, refugee camps are rarely in safe territories and their inhabitants face a multitude of insecurities – attacks by armies of their country of origin, economic insecurities because of the absence of livelihood options, health risks because of unsafe shelters and poor nutrition and the inaccessibility of medical care (Agier 2002, Horst 2006). Concerns over safety and security emerged in my research as the major reason for refugees to favour third-country resettlement over continued encampment and repatriation.

The Thai armed forces and the fences are there to protect refugees from cross-border attacks – at least in theory. The Karen camp security is responsible for the internal camp security. In the 1990s, at the beginning of every hot season, the camps were torched by Burmese soldiers in cross-border attacks (Human Rights Watch 1998). The Thai Army did not intervene. Even though there have been no recent attacks, a climate of fear persists in the camps. Before a historical ceasefire agreement between the KNU and the Burmese government was signed in January 2012, the sound of gunfire from across the border kept refugees alert during the dry season. In September 2011 rumours circulated that the water in the Nupo’s wells had been poisoned by Burmese spies and that they had been identified and detained by the Karen camp security.

Refugees do not have a clear legal status nor documents that can protect them outside the camp. They receive an A4 sheet of paper with the names, birthdates and photocopied photographs of the registered members of their household from the UNHCR. These have no protection value outside the camps as Thailand has not ratified the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor the 1967 Protocol, and refugees are not allowed to reside outside the camp or seek work. For a fee it is possible to obtain an authorisation from the Thai camp authorities to travel to Umphang or the border town of Maesot for a maximum

of seven days. The authorisation does not guarantee protection from persecution, arrest or harassment by the police. Several of my students who travelled with such authorizations, described incidents where they had been aggressed, accused of faking the documents and coerced into paying bribes by police officers in Maesot. Some were beaten and detained when they were not able to pay.³²

Refugees from Burma neither have access to the Thai justice system nor real legal options. Although there is a small 'prison' inside the camp, managed by the Karen camp security, cases of assault, rape or domestic violence are rarely reported. Gender-based violence is a particular sensitive topic in Burmese society and the scale of the problem is difficult to estimate, but conversations with students and class debates as well as organizations like the Karen Women Organization (KWO) have revealed harrowing stories of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Frustration with life in the camp, the lack of occupation and alcohol abuse fuel aggression and domestic violence. Women do not live alone in the camp, not only because it is culturally unacceptable but also because the bamboo shelters offer little protection against intruders. Single women usually live with other single women or with a male relative or, if they do not have relatives in the camp, they share a shelter with a male person from their home region or village, referring to him as *ako*, older brother.

The security rules vary a lot from camp to camp and within camps, depending on the political situation and the security situation across the border. In general, camps are fenced in and refugees cannot leave the camp territory without passing through a military checkpoint, which requires an official authorization. At night, after 21:30, refugees are not allowed to leave their camp section, but can visit the homes in their neighbourhood. One night, over tea in his home, U Lin recalled their first years in the camp:

You know, five years ago, when we first came here, we could never sit like that in the evening, eat together and talk. It's now past nine and we still have light. At that time, we could not even use candles after nine o'clock! Every night, soldiers walked through the section. And they beat with their bamboo sticks against the walls when they saw a candle or heard voices. We went to sleep at nine; we had no choice. Now, at least I can read in the evening, and we can sit and talk.

³² A recent report by Human Rights Watch (2012) provides ample examples of incidents of extortion.

As we discussed the issue during one of our class debates, most students agreed that the night curfew was a necessary security measure as it was during the night that they felt most vulnerable. Almost all, however, experienced the isolation of the camp, the ‘enforced dependency’ on rations and the fact that they were not permitted to live, study or work legally outside the camp as discrimination and detention. They referred to the camp as an open-air version of *Insein* prison³³, agreeing that if they had the possibility to live and work legally outside the camp, they would feel safer. In class, I once wrote ‘refugee’ on the blackboard and asked my students to fill the space around the word with their associations:

Homeless prisoner beggar bird in a cage
orphan waiting for an invitation in front of a stranger’s home
unemployed stateless dependent on others
homesick disabled lonely strong slave
without family depressed

In its 2012 Detention Guidelines, the UNHCR defines detention as “the deprivation of liberty or confinement in a closed place which an asylum-seeker is not permitted to leave at will, including, though not limited to, prisons or purpose-built detention, closed reception or holding centres or facilities” (UNHCR 2012). The refugee camp confines the displaced to a remote and closed area in the borderlands – a ‘non-place’, an ‘out-place’, an ‘in-between place’ that allows to count, classify, contain and control masses of unwanted populations. The borders between protection and detention, between protégés and prisoners dissolve. Protection becomes merely a “euphemistic justification for controlling the undesirables” (Agier 2011: 211).

Bagao: from political refugee to ‘illegal’ migrant and back

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees is the legal basis for defining who is a refugee, the rights of a refugee and the legal obligations of nation states. According to Article 1 of the Convention, as amended by the 1967 Protocol, a refugee is:

³³ Insein prison in Yangon is known as one of the most notorious jails in Burma, particularly for prisoners of conscience.

A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Bagao's red Karen shoulder bag containing a Thai-English dictionary, a notebook and a pen, swings to the rhythm of our steps as we walk along the dusty camp road. Thick black hair, cropped into a short fringe frames his curious eyes. He is 26 and looks no more than 19. We speak in English. His voice is so soft that I have to move my head closer to his to make out his questions. Bagao asks me for words and scribbles them on his palm, then whispers them over and over again to memorize them. He loves learning languages. As a child living in a monastery on a remote island in Tanintharyi (former Tannesarim) Division, he learned to read Pali as well as Mon, his mother tongue. At construction sites in Malaysia he picked up Malay. In the camp he has learned Thai. He speaks it well, better than Burmese he says.

Bagao is my student. I learned about his life during many informal conversations over the course of one year. In April 2012, I asked him if I could record his life story. We recorded some 20 hours of narrative interviews. These were not biographical interviews in the strict sense. They focused on rather specific instances – Bagao's childhood in his village, the flight from Mon State, his journey from Thailand to Malaysia and eventually to the refugee camp, his daily life in the camp, his hopes, fears, imaginations of the future, life choices. For reasons of scope, I have chosen not to include the entire interview, but to complement selected passages from the interviews with narrative as a source for the discussion that follows.

The army and the village headman forced the students at my monastery to become guards. They put up notes all over the village. Me and two other monks decided to tear down their notes. After that, they arrested us. They interrogated us for a long time. After the villagers apologized for us and asked to release us, they let us go. Then, we heard rumours that they would arrest us again, and the other villagers

suggested that we should leave. I left together with the two monks. I didn't know what to do. We had no time to think much, because most people said we cannot stay in the village. Some people helped us to get to the border. When I arrived in Thailand, I contacted a friend in Malaysia. He suggested I go there. It is easier in Malaysia than in Thailand if you don't have a permit. This is what he told me. So I went with carry men. I had to pay 12,000 baht. We were in a truck, about ten people. There were Mon and Burmese and Chin. I was really afraid of the police. When we arrived at the border, it was night. We had to walk for a long time. There were many of us walking. At that time, it was very dark and I was very afraid of snakes. The carry men brought instruments to cut the barbed wire. We cut a small hole and then we had to climb through and run. It was very dangerous. They were shouting "Hurry up! Hurry up!" When we arrived on the other side, we had to walk for one hour. A truck brought us then to Penang.

In Penang, Bagao finds his friend and begins looking for work. They move from place to place, doing construction and painting jobs. At night, they sleep in the forest, fearing of raids by the Malaysian military. Many undocumented workers live like that in Malaysia, Bagao explains. If a person is caught, they are deported to one of the notorious detention centres at the Thai border, where hundreds of people are kept together in cells, not able to lie or sit down for lack of space. They are forced to call their families and friends and beg for bribe money for their release. Those who fail risk being sold to fishing boats.³⁴

Bagao meets a foreigner in Malaysia, a Haitian missionary from New York, who teaches English in Bangkok. Bagao wants to learn English, so he returns to Thailand. In Bangkok, he lives with a Mon friend.

At that time, I had no permit to stay in Bangkok. I could not walk around. My teacher said to me that if the police catches me I will be in trouble. I was afraid and I thought a lot how I could stay in Bangkok. My friend in Malaysia said he had a plan to go to Singapore and find work there. He said he would swim there. I thought about going with him. Then I heard from another friend who was in Nupo Refugee Camp. I phoned him and he said to me: "If you get into trouble in Bangkok you can come to Nupo. You can learn here. There are many schools, many classes in Nupo." So I decided to go to Nupo. It was safer for me than to stay in Bangkok without a permit.

³⁴ A Rhakine friend once described his experience in such a detention centre, referring to it as the worst time of his life.

But when I arrived at the bus station, the police caught me. I had to pay 1,000 baht. After that they allowed me to go to Maesot. I arrived at about 4am on December 2nd in 2007. My friend in Nupo knew a KNU general there. He asked him if he could help bring me to Nupo and the general agreed to help. We went on a truck with many Karen and some Burmese people. There were many checkpoints and I was worried, but it was OK. We arrived in Nupo at 5pm, on December 5th. I had never seen a refugee camp before. I didn't know how it would be. I saw it and I thought: "What if the houses burn? Where will I stay then? When one house starts burning, then the fire will spread and all houses will burn. People will suffer." That was the first thing I thought.

The KNU general let me sleep at his house that first night. In the morning, the general's wife brought me to the Mon monastery and I met my friend again. I was happy then! I didn't know any other people there, only that one. He was a monk at that time. He said I should stay with a Mon family. I had to pay 1,000 baht to live with them. At that time, I didn't know anything. I stayed with that family for six months. After that, I moved to another house. Some people said that new refugees don't get rice, oil and other things. I did not know how things worked. Some people said one thing, other people said something different. The section leader explained that the TBBC³⁵ comes once a year to register new arrivals. After I was in the camp for eight or nine months, the TBBC wrote my name down. They didn't give me any document or anything. They just took my name and from then on I could receive rations. Only after two years, I got a paper from the UN³⁶.

During that first year I stayed here and I studied English. But then I had trouble to buy food and the ration was not enough. So I decided to go work in Umphang for one or two months and then come back and study again. I worked on a construction site and the work was very hard. At that time, it was very hot and I was sweating a lot and I didn't drink any water. So I had no energy and I fell from the roof. That afternoon, I took a rest and the next day I went to work again. When the TBBC came to check people, I went back to Nupo. After that, I returned to work in Umphang. This time, I brought my dictionary. After I came back from work, I read vocabulary until I was tired and went to sleep.

³⁵ The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) has been renamed to The Border Consortium (TBC). Already mentioned earlier.

³⁶ In 2009 all refugees who arrived after 2005 and did not have the NPO certificate received a pre-registration number, and the promise to be registered soon. This registration never took place.

After some months, I phoned my sister. She was working in a shrimp factory in Mahachai near Bangkok. For about one year, she sent me 1,500 baht per month so that I could stay in the camp and attend English classes. When she went back to our village she stopped sending money. When I needed money, my friend gave me 50, sometimes 100 baht. At that time, I had no home in the camp. I slept at the monastery. In the morning, I could eat there. At lunch, I had to find somewhere to eat. From September to December, no one sent me money, so I had no dinner and sometimes no lunch, but I tried to finish my English class.

In January 2010, Bagao falls ill. He doesn't recognize his friends who bring him food to the camp clinic. A friend takes him in and takes care of him, but he remains weak for many months, unable to work or study. He contacts his friend in Singapore tells him about his illness. His friend sends Bagao TBH 20,000, which lasts him for one year. When his friend returns from Singapore to Mon State and then goes a second time, again swimming from Malaysia to Singapore, he disappears.

He had to struggle himself, but he always helped me. Without his help I don't know how I would have survived. I don't know what happened to him. I don't have news from him in over two years and I worry for him.

After I was ill, I stayed here and I studied Thai and English. I could not decide to go anywhere. I want to learn languages, because I think they can help me. I wasted a lot of time. I drank a lot. At that time, I didn't think about my life. I could not decide what was good for me. I missed my parents and my friends. So I thought, OK, I'll go to the shop and I drink. I didn't think about what I can do for my future. Now I don't think like that anymore. Every day, I am getting older. I cannot stay here my whole life. I have to go somewhere. I don't have any skills. This will be difficult for me in the future. So if I am in good health, it is very good for me to go to class, to learn something. If the UN doesn't bring me abroad, I will have to stay in Thailand. If I can speak Thai and English, it will be helpful.

Bagao decided to move to the refugee camp, because he wanted to learn English, and because his friend told him it was safer than living in Bangkok without documents. He hoped to be able to return to his village after a year or two or find a way to stay in Thailand and get a work

permit and support his family. He had no concept of a 'refugee' or the rights attached to the label and started using the term 'refugee' only after he moved to the camp and had been told that he was a refugee. He learned about the third-country resettlement programme when he had been living in the camp for several months.

After three or four months, I asked my friend about resettlement. He explained to me that I needed to wait to get the NPO number. Then, I can apply to go to a Western country. My friend said to me that I have to go somewhere where I can stay peacefully. I said that I don't want to resettle. I said I want to learn English for one year and then I want to go home. I worry about my parents. They are old. What if they get sick? I don't want to live far away from them. If I get a job and make enough money, I want to move my parents to another place. I don't want them to stay in that village. That's what I first thought when I left. At that time, I didn't think about anything else. I imagined I can come back and stay with my parents, take care of them. If I get the chance, I will have my own family. I thought like that. But then I thought what if I cannot go home? What if I get in trouble with the Burmese soldiers when I go back to my village? After that, I decided to resettle. If I get the chance, I would like to go to school in a Western country. I want to finish school. If I don't get a certificate, my education is not recognized.

Like most refugees I encountered in Nupo, Bagao always emphasized the value of education. For the encamped, education symbolized hope, future and freedom.

Having grown up in a conflict zone, where going to school meant risking forced recruitment, Bagao was sent to a *poungyi kyaun*, a monastery school, where the monks taught him to read and write in Mon and Pali. There were about 200 boys, including Bagao and his brothers. His sisters stayed at home and helped their parents. For five years, he attended classes at the monastery, but lived at home and helped with the farm. Only when he turned 14 was he ordained as a novice and moved to the monastery. At 19 he started teaching Mon to the children. When his father's health deteriorated, Bagao, then 21, left monkhood and began working again at the farm. But he continued teaching at his monastery. When the army banned their classes, the monks continued to teach. Shortly after that, the *Tatmadaw* announced that all boys over 15 should become security guards for the army, also the students at their monastery school. On that day, when Bagao decided to tear the army notices down, his life took a different turn, away from his home, his family, his friends and his students, taking him on an odyssey of uncertainty.

I am upset about my life, this year especially. I think about that. Living here is difficult. I worry about how long I have to stay here. I don't know how many more years – two years, three years or five years? I am getting old. I cannot see my future. This is the most difficult for me. I have no chance to go somewhere else. For example, if I want to work in Bangkok, I have no permit. If I want to go back to Burma, I am afraid of Burmese soldiers. I think like that. So I stay here, and while I stay here I can learn English. I am trying to learn a lot. But sometimes, there is not enough food for me. Every day, I have to think how to struggle for my life. Every day I stay here, I suffer, because I always think. I cannot decide if I should stay here. And if I don't stay here, where should I go? If the UN brings me to another country, I can decide something for my future. Right now, I cannot decide anything. I only decide to go to class. This is one good thing. And I have friends here. This is another good thing. When I suffer or have trouble, they help me a lot. Now many friends have gone to find work in Thailand or in Malaysia, and some have gone back to their villages.

My parents said to me that I can come back home, but I don't believe. For the moment, I have decided not to go back. I don't know, for another two or three years. When I left home, I thought I can come back. Right now, I don't know. It is more difficult to go home. At that time, I didn't know, but I had to do like this. I had to leave. I had no choice. To think about my parents is difficult, because I cannot stay together with them. For five years, since I left home, I have not seen them. They worry about me. They want me to come back home. They did not want me to go away. When they phone me, they always tell me to come back home. When I say that I cannot come back, my older sister always cries. She doesn't know anything about the situation in the camp. She lives with her husband at home, takes care of her kids. She also takes care of my parents. And my younger sister, she has lived in Thailand for three years and now she came back home. After my younger sister came back home, I have never spoken to them. I don't know how they are. Since last year, I have not talked to them. To call me, they have to travel to Thanbyuzayat. We have an uncle there and they can call. It takes the whole day to get to Thanbyuzayat from my village. They take the boat and then they go by line car³⁷, and there are always too many people in the line car. They are old and it is difficult for them. But they don't dare to call from my village. They are afraid.

³⁷ Burmese equivalent of the *songthaew*.

I want to see them, but I don't believe the Burmese. I know from the past. When they have meetings, the politicals, they say they will have change for the people. After the meetings, they don't respect what they said. It happened many times like that. Now, many people say that in Burma there is a really good chance. But how long there will be a good chance in the future, I don't know yet. If I have a good opportunity to come back to Burma, if Burma really changes, I will come back. If nothing changes and if the UN does not bring me abroad, then I will have to stay along the border. Not in Nupo. Here, we can do nothing. Somewhere else. Where I don't know, how I don't know, because I have no permit to live in Thailand. I have to find a way. Right now, I have decided like that. I have to wait and see what the UN says, how long we will have to stay here. When I really know about the UN resettlement registration, at that time I am going to think where I will stay at the border. Right now, I cannot think.

Some people make passports. It is very difficult to make a passport. Very expensive! You have to go to Yangon. I got these news from my friends. They think like that. To do a passport to go abroad is impossible for me. It will never be possible for me. My whole life, everywhere I arrive, I never get the chance to do something. I arrive in Thailand, I need a permit. I arrive in Malaysia, I need a permit. I arrive in Burma, I am afraid of the soldiers. My life is like that. When I arrive somewhere, I have to hide. My whole life, I will have to live like that, I think, if we don't have the chance to go somewhere else.

Bagao's journey embodies a frantic mobility in the grey zones of human existence. It is not representative for all refugees, but certainly for a large number of young, mostly male Mon, Chin and Burmese refugees I have encountered in the camp. Their mobility is not produced by encampment, but rather encampment is part of their mobility, a stopover in their complex itineraries. They are incessant 'illegal travellers' to borrow the title of Shahram Khosravi's inspiring 'Auto-ethnography of borders' (2010) – moving to survive, searching for safety and security.

Bagao fled his village in Mon State after having been detained for teaching the Mon language to children at his village monastery and for protesting against a military initiative to force boys in his village to become border guards. Being persecuted for his political opinion and activities qualifies Bagao as a refugee according to the Convention. But he cannot claim asylum in Thailand as the Royal Thai Government (RTG) is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention. He can, however, seek refuge in a UNHCR refugee camp and, at least theoretically, be recognized by the UNHCR as a refugee and eventually apply for resettlement

in a third country. Although the RTG has not signed the Convention, it has allowed access to the UNHCR and provided shelter for displaced people from Laos, Cambodia and Burma in refugee camps. In 2005, the RTG agreed to the UNHCR-initiated option of resettling Burmese refugees in third countries; the biggest resettlement programme worldwide that has been initiated. 73,284 registered refugees were resettled between 2006 and December 2011 (TBC 2012). During that period, 6,290 refugees resettled from Nupo camp, the majority to the United States (TBC 2012).

As more than a third of all remaining displaced people in the nine camps on the Thai-Burma border, Bagao has not yet received a UN registration number, which would confirm his refugee status. Is he a 'potential' refugee? If Bagao is a 'potential' refugee while waiting for refugee status in the camp, does he remain one when he leaves the camp temporarily to find wage work in Umphang? Or has Bagao already relinquished his rights to refugee status by hiding in the Malaysian forest and working on construction sites instead of contacting the UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur? At the time of his flight from Burma, Bagao did not know about refugee status, nor did he learn about the refugee camps until much later. Does that make him an economic migrant instead of a political refugee, or maybe a candidate to 'refugeehood' inside the camp and an illegal migrant in Umphang, Bangkok and in Malaysia? Is it the reasons for and circumstances of a person's flight that make her or him eligible for refugee status or are the physical presence in a refugee camp and the bureaucratic classification and registration processes that determine whether someone is a refugee and deserves protection?

Bagao's path – fleeing political persecution, becoming an undocumented migrant worker in Malaysia; then being an undocumented student in Thailand before seeking the relative safety of Nupo refugee camp; then leaving the camp to work outside; and lastly returning to wait for refugee status – is not unusual. The transition from the status of victim to that of an 'illegal' is frequent and random for the displaced, observes Agier (2011: 182). Bagao's story is not representative for all camp refugees, as no single story can be. Yet, Bagao's itinerary illustrates well this frantic mobility that I so often encountered, particularly among young male refugees, but also among some families. Like Bagao's, other refugees' itineraries are rarely linear. Mobility is often assumed to be limited to the journey from home to the refugee camp and eventually from the camp to a resettlement country or back to the country of origin. The trajectories that I observed among the displaced people from Burma, particularly those in the camp's PAB section, are much more dynamic and unpredictable. Bagao's itinerary illustrates how blurred the borders between the categories 'refugee' and 'economic migrant' are, and how these categories are constructed with political interests in

mind (Dannecker and Shaffar 2013). Livelihood considerations play an important role in refugees' movements, but economic, social and political factors are very closely intertwined and cannot be separated that easily. Flight and exile lead to economic precariousness as the displaced leave their homes, farms and jobs behind. Like Bagao, refugees who flee political, ethnic or religious discrimination are often not aware of their 'right to have rights' (Arendt 1994 [1951]). Like Bagao, many do not learn about the existence of refugee camps until they have already spent years in exile. They have to find livelihood options to survive, also increasingly inside the camps as aid is being dramatically reduced – even if that means leaving the relative safety of the camp and embarking anew on a journey of illegality.

Categorisation and control

Refugee camps are spaces where refugees are managed through formal processes of identification, classification, selection, expulsion or admission (Agier 2011: 47). Upon arrival, refugees are identified, categorized and numbered. The endless 'screening', interviewing and registration procedures, biographical and medical screenings are bureaucratic control mechanisms, serving political and economical interests of nation states. The construction of the categories 'refugee' and 'economic migrant' (Dannecker and Shaffar 2013) reduces displaced people to a legal category, case numbers, 'depoliticized bodies', *homines sacri* (Agamben 1998). They make the masses of displaced populations manageable (Agier 2011) and disposable (Bauman 2004).

The system of refugee registration is intricate with a multitude of stages in its opaque process and an inherent incoherency. Refugees who arrived in Nupo refugee camp before 2005 have received a UN registration number for Nupo Camp, the NPO³⁸ number. The NPO number recognizes them as refugees and allows them to apply for third-country resettlement. It does not, however, change their status in Thailand. They remain confined to the camp, unable to reside, seek work or attend school or university in Thailand. Refugees who arrived in Nupo camp (and in three of the other nine camps) after the registration in 2005 have received a pre-registration number in 2009. "We have refugees, semi-refugees and non-refugees here", U Lin explained. "We are PREs, or semi-refugees if you want." U Lin and his sisters Mina and Thuza arrived in Nupo refugee camp in 2007. In 2009, they received 'pre-

³⁸ Every refugee camp has its own acronym for the UN registration number.

refugee status' and were reassured that the pre-number would soon be upgraded to an NPO number, which would allow them to apply for resettlement and eventually join their brother in the US. Patrick, a teacher who has been living on the border for 13 years and was in Nupo during the 2009 pre-registration recalled the atmosphere³⁹:

When people first heard about the pre-registration, many were happy and hopeful. In Nupo and other camps, a lot of people had not been registered yet. (...) After 2005, no new people were registered. Some of my students did not have a UN number at that point, even after several years in the camp. And of course most people in PAB were also waiting for a UN number. What everybody seemed to be thinking was that after the pre-registration it would take a few months, that UN numbers would be handed out and the resettlement process would start. As you know, rumours and stories are abundant, and even when people are convinced that something is just a rumour, they believe it anyway! Just in case.

So on that day, about 6,000 people were invited to the big football ground to sign up and receive a wristband. This meant that 6,000 out of between 15,000 and 18,000 people were not yet registered. Of course this process also drew in new 'refugees'. Mostly from Maesot, but also from Burma. Add the waves of refugees after Cyclone Nargis and the Saffron Revolution and you have those 6,000 people.

The wristband hand-out was, if I am remember right, in March 2008, and the first PRE numbers were handed out in August. People were promised a fast process, but history shows that fast is not the same for everyone. The day of the pre-registration, the atmosphere was one of hope and excitement, even though the Thai soldiers were pushing people at some point and I heard (didn't see) that some used canes to keep people in order. So after the wristbands came the waiting and then the PRE numbers. The biggest wave of resettlement was already underway and I wonder if everyone who had left before actually had a UN number or could go without.

Since then, people have been in and out of hope. They still only have PRE numbers. And now people are thinking about returning to Burma of course. There is depression because of this false hope. At least two times, people demonstrated in front of the UN office because of the slowness of the process. When the USA announced they would take around 90,000 Burmese refugees, I immediate

³⁹ Private correspondence, February 2013.

calculated that 50,000 refugees in the camps could not go. And with a new influx of people after the announcement (an influx partly as a result of the announcement) even more of the 140,000 people in the camps would have to stay. Of course, this reasoning didn't stop people from hoping.

The great majority of the refugees in the camp's PAB section are 'pre-holders', waiting for registration and the possibility to apply for third-country resettlement. In a camp survey carried out in September 2011 all PAB residents had stated that they wished to resettle. When I returned in June 2013 none of the pre-registered refugees had received an NPO number. Still 'semi-refugees', they continue to wait and hope for registration and the possibility to apply for third-country resettlement. Over 50,000⁴⁰ of the 130,000 remaining displaced people in the nine camps on the Thai-Burma border have not received a UN registration number. They have no legal status in Thailand nor access to third-country resettlement.

Some pre-registered refugees have been accepted by third countries under a family reunification programme for children under 18 and spouses, but have not been able to depart. Without UN registration they are legally banned from travelling through Thailand's sovereign territory, which mean that they have no legal way of leaving the country or even reaching Bangkok airport. My student Ma Thida, a 36-year-old Burman woman, has been waiting for six years to join her husband in the United States, who had been registered before she joined him in the camp. Being part of the UNHCR family reunification programme, Ma Thida went through all the necessary administrative procedures, including a humiliating Department of Homeland Security (DHS) interview. In September 2011, she was scheduled to go to Maesot for the interview. She was waiting at 5am in the morning for the car to pick her up from the camp. UNHCR filled up three cars, but she and several other people were not able to fit in. They were left standing by the road. In May 2012, Ma Thida was finally taken for her DHS interview. "Will you work as a prostitute when you arrive in the USA? They asked me this!" Ma Thida told me after she returned to the camp. She was also questioned about intimate details of her and her husband's sexual relationship. Her application was approved. Then she was told that she would not be able to leave the camp until she obtained the NPO number. In June 2013, when I returned for a visit, Ma Thida was still waiting.

⁴⁰ TBC, April 2013. The numbers are fluctuating as displaced people move from the camps back to Burma or search for work outside the camp.

For registered refugees the resettlement application process was no less insecure. This insecurity caused mistrust and rivalry, turning neighbours into competitors and their life stories into a highly valuable resource to be carefully guarded. The verification and registration processes were far from transparent. Inaccuracies, mistakes, random decisions and accusations of fraud were rampant. Some claimed that when the resettlement process was first launched, only UNHCR registered refugees from Maesot were able to apply. Then there were those who had been in the camp since the 1990s, but had missed the registration. Others could not apply as a family because they had a spouse, children or siblings who had been working outside the camp at the time of the registration or arrived too late as Ma Thida and were thus not registered. Every family I met in the camp had been torn apart by war or prison and then broken further by the flight to Thailand, by the lack of livelihood options in the camp, by resettlement. Every person I spoke to had a parent, a sister, a brother, children or a spouse left behind in Burma, in a different border camp, in a factory in Southern Thailand, a construction site in Malaysia or Singapore, or resettled in the United States, Australia or Europe. Families are frequently spread across continents, with barely any contact over decades, especially between refugees and relatives remaining inside Burma. War, prison, Burma's notorious military intelligence, exile as well as the isolationist politics of encampment and not family-oriented resettlement have ruined the only safety net in Burmese society.

During one of his monthly Malaria attacks, shivering, wrapped in a green nylon blanket on the porch of his auntie's hut, my student Dani told me about his family:

I want to go back home and to see my family. I miss my grandfather and my brother ... Here, this is my mother (shows a photograph). I don't remember her. She died when I was little. My father was a KNU soldier. Sayama, do you know KNU? ... He was always in the forest and on the border, fighting. My brother and I, we stayed with my stepmother close to Mawlamyane.... Then my father died. I was ten and they sent me to live with my grandfather in Yangon. I was very happy in Yangon. I had many friends and my grandfather was a kind man.... My brother? No, I don't know. He is a soldier in the Burmese army, in Shan State, I think. But he did not want to be a soldier! They took him when he was going by train to Mawlamyane. We heard from him only one time, three years ago. I miss him. I hope he is OK.... Me? I arrived here two years ago. Relatives of my father helped me find the way. We walked many days to get here. That's how I got Malaria, I think.... I live with my auntie and my uncle. They came here in 1997

*when the Burmese burned their village (in Karen State). They don't want to resettle in a third country. They say they can't speak English and they are too old. But my cousins have applied to resettle in America.... Me? I want to be a scientist. And I want to travel. But we cannot, because we are refugees. Maybe one day I can go to England. If not, I will stay on the border and learn English and then go back to my country.*⁴¹

Dani showed me the faded photographs that he had carried with him from Burma. His father – a thin and serious young man in green fatigues. A beautiful young woman with a waist long shiny braid – the mother he cannot remember. He and his brother playing with a puppy in their village. He and his brother as teenagers posing in front of a banner advertising a popular Korean movie in Yangon. Dani's fractured family is only one of millions Burmese families torn apart – not by divorce, but by war and exile. 21-year-old Dani was one of my brightest student, always full scores on all tests, usually a little bored, but always helping the others. He would stay after class and carefully study the world map on the bamboo wall, his finger travelling from one unfamiliar name to the next, his imagination travelling along. Because Dani arrived in the camp after 2005, he has not been able to register and thus cannot apply to resettle in a third country. The camp gave him refuge from a similar fate as his brother's; it also bestowed him with better English, Malaria, a severe burning in an accident and the habit of drinking locally brewed moonshine⁴².

Refugee camps are little kingdoms with unpredictable and often arbitrary rules and security measures. "The refugee camps are not zones of 'non-right', but rather zones of exceptional rights and power, where everything seems possible for those in control", writes Agier (2011: 82). As more refugees arrived after the registration in 2005, the registration numbers and different statuses and rights associated with them inspired a dark economy. Refugees complained that registration papers and biographical information were traded with and stolen. When the resettlement process first began many long-time refugees, mainly Karen and Muslims, did not intend to resettle and decided that they could improve their livelihoods by selling their papers and biographical information to others who had arrived after the registration. The going rate was US\$100 at that time. Years later, when some of them changed their mind and decided to resettle, they had no way of retrieving the lost status and documents.

⁴¹ Informal conversation, December 2011.

⁴² Moonshine is a strong liqueur brewed from palm trees in the forest and sold in plastic bags for a low price.

They found themselves in the same situation as the new arrivals, waiting for registration, which has not taken place to date.

My student Ko Gyi, 23, is from a small village in Mon State. After his father's death, his older brother, aunt and uncle fled to the camp. They arrived before 2005 and received an NPO number, which allowed them to apply for resettlement. Their application procedure, however, was not unproblematic. During an interview with the United States Department of Homeland Security, Ko Gyi's brother was told that someone with the same name as him had already resettled in the United States. Their application was put on hold. Ko Gyi explained that this was a frequent problem as corrupt officials were said to be selling biographies and registration documents to the highest bidder: "There are plenty such cases, especially in the Karen sections. Last year, several UNHCR staff members have been fired because of their involvement." Every time I spoke to registered refugees about their application process, the 'same name problem' resurged, sparking anxiety and mistrust.

4

Uncertainty

People in prison are better off than us because they know the date they get out.

(Refugee from Mae La Camp in an interview with Burma Link, 17 June 2013)

Not long after I had arrived in the camp, I met a Karen man who was spending his days drinking and rambling in the muddy alleys. After 11 years in Nupo camp, U Paw had been accepted for resettlement in the United States. He received his departure date and called all his neighbours for a farewell dinner. He distributed his cooking pots, his charcoal stove, his dishes, his sleeping mat and his table – all of the things he owned except for a few family photographs, some clothes, an umbrella, a flashlight, a mosquito net and a blanket, which filled the 20kg plastic bag that he was allowed to bring with him to his new life in America. The following day, he left the camp in the big blue IOM (International Organization for Migration) bus, heading to Maesot for the last administrative steps and then to Bangkok airport. A week later, another blue IOM bus returned U Paw to the camp. His case “was not clear” he had been told.

Two weeks later I learned about the death of a 48-year-old monk. His resettlement application to the United States had been ‘on hold’ for three years. Before U Nanda joined the *Sangha*⁴³, he was drowning his sorrow in moonshine. Buddhist teachings and the monastic routine helped him cope with uncertainty and find peace of mind. Meanwhile, his application to the United States was rejected, but he was accepted for resettlement in New Zealand. He successfully completed all the administrative procedures and received a departure date. But then, as an earthquake hit New Zealand his departure was indefinitely postponed. Two days later, he died from heart failure. A small white *stupa* in ‘section 17’ reminds of his passing.

⁴³ Buddhist monastic community

These are cases of extraordinary misfortune, but they are not isolated incidents. ‘Hold cases’ cause enormous distress and create mistrust. Among pre-registered refugees, waiting for registration and resettlement brings waves of hopeful anticipation that turn into bitter disappointment as rumours come and go.

*I don't trust anyone here! Not even uncle U Lin. Bot even Jonas. How can I? I love Jonas, but I don't want to get married here. It is not official and I am afraid to have children here in the jungle. We don't know what will happen to us, if we can resettle or not. We can barely feed ourselves and there is no medical care. We have no future here and we are getting old. If we can go to the US, then we will marry.*⁴⁴

My student, Burmese teacher and friend Maria confided to me. Maria is 26 and a Karen Christian.⁴⁵ She has been a volunteer English teacher in Nupo for the past five years. Waiting for refugee status and resettlement, Maria spends her days between teaching and studying English, helping the young Karen woman, with whom she shares a shelter, with the newborn baby and attending service at the Catholic Church. Three years ago, Maria fell in love with Jonas, a young Kachin man. But their uncertain situation does not allow them to settle into the present, forcing them to live in limbo, between hope and fear.

Interior politics, diplomatic and economic relationships between Thailand and Burma, as well as diplomatic relationships with resettlement countries have direct and indirect impacts on refugee policy. Third-country resettlement programmes are complex processes involving a multitude of actors – the Thai government, the UNHCR, the IOM and the governments of resettlement countries being the principal ones. The cooperation and coordination (and the lack of it) of all these actors lead to complicated and long bureaucratic processes. Decisions are taken behind closed doors in Geneva, in Washington DC and in Bangkok. Representatives of the refugee communities are rarely consulted in the decision-making processes. The decisions travel slowly and arrive in the camps more frequently in forms of rumours than official announcements. The lack of formal information, the gossip and the resulting uncertainty were overwhelming. No one knew anything for sure, yet everyone had heard something from a neighbour or a friend, and the friend from another friend, who

⁴⁴ Informal conversation, February 2012

⁴⁵ Maria was brought up in Yangon, studied economics at the university, learned English, French and Japanese and used to work as an elementary school teacher. When Maria was five, her mother went to work in Japan so that the children could eat and go to school. She never returned. The journey was simply too expensive. Maria has a brother in Yangon and a sister in San Francisco, whom she hopes to join.

happened to have an uncle who knew someone in Maesot who had a cousin who worked for the UNHCR. Like remittances, information travels along informal channels and on the way inevitably something gets lost, embellished or transformed by the messenger's own ideas, hopes and fears.

Once every few months the *Palat*, the Thai camp commander, gave a public speech in the PAB section about the current situation. People cancelled all their appointments, dropped their daily chores and waited for hours in the rain or in the burning sun, bursting with excitement and anxiety. On the two occasions when I was present, the information in the almost one hour long speeches was limited to consolation and the appeal to wait for more information. Those speeches disappointed refugees, but since they usually did not contain any concrete negative information, they were at the same time a source of new hope.

The rumours determined the atmosphere and pace of life in the camp. Positive rumours brought hope and joyous anticipation, the teashops filled with people eagerly discussing the news, and even my students were more zealous than usual in their English studies. Whenever there was a rumour that a registration would finally take place, new students registered, eager to learn English in preparation for resettlement. When there were rumours of repatriation or that the resettlement process would be discontinued, students dropped out, businesses in the camp closed down and more people left the camp in search for livelihoods elsewhere.

When I arrived in Nupo in June 2011 resettlement seemed merely a question of time for pre-registered refugees. Over the following year, I observed how it gradually turned into a distant and unlikely dream. When I returned in 2013 resettlement seemed a most unlikely scenario. Yet for many of those remaining in the camp, it remains the last thread of hope and a reason for surviving another rainy season and its epidemics. In the absence of a formal announcement that pre-registered refugees will not be registered and allowed to apply for resettlement, refugees continue to hope. Eventually, their hope turns sour and leads to disappointment and depression. My friends often said that uncertainty was the most difficult about their situation, much worse than the definite knowledge that there would be no more registrations or resettlement. Uncertainty makes it impossible to take a decision. They live in constant worry about their future – hoping, waiting, fighting, despairing, leaving. Uncertainty and rumours govern people's lives, paralysing some and provoking restlessness in others, resulting in both immobility and mobility.

The following field notes, capturing rumours over five days in Nupo, will hopefully give a taste of their force and the excitement and agony they produced⁴⁶.

29th August 2011

President U Thein Sein is welcoming all political exiles back. They showed his speech on DVB the other day. There is panic in the section. With over 2,000 prisoners of conscience remaining behind bars, it sounds like a bad joke.

Everyone talks about forced repatriation. Yesterday, they asked all political groups in the camp to provide lists with the names of their members – for the first time ever. Speculations are running wild. Some say the lists are for the Military Intelligence and they will all be handed over to the junta. Others hope that the lists are for the UNHCR so that it can speed up the resettlement process for political refugees.

30th August 2011

I struggle to keep up with the gossip, catch only fractions of what is going on. In the library, U Soe Tun is having his fifth cup of birdy. “We’re chickens in a basket. They watch us and then they pick. And the UN will not protect us.” He says between cheroot puffs.

U Lin is walking around with a fever, rambling something about all of them returning to Burma and me having many friends to visit in Yangon, or in prison, very soon. He picks up the guitar, sits down, strums a few cords and puts it down next to the ashtray. “They will come and take your picture and make copies of your passport this afternoon” he tells me. “Really? Why?” “We don’t know. They never asked before.”

31st August 2011

Maria and Jonas are late for class. Jonas is preparing for a meeting between the political groups and the Thai camp administration. Something regarding registration, he says. U Soe Tun comes over, hands me a birdy and a cigarette. Then they discuss in Burmese. Sounds like they’re having a heated argument.

⁴⁶ These selected (and shortened) notes do not represent the totality of rumours during that period. They are a selection of the rumours that were shared with me, an outsider with limited trust and knowledge of the Burmese language, by my students and friends. Nor did rumours circulate with the same speed every week. Nevertheless, they do give a sense of the collective paranoia and agony.

“The Karen camp leaders are going with the Thais to check out the situation on the other side and look for a place to move the camp”, he finally says in English. In the 1990s, the Thai government moved a Mon refugee camp across the border into Mon State and turned thousands of UNHCR refugees into IDPs without access to international aid nor possibility for resettlement.

1st September 2011

Two new rumours. 1: All Thai soldiers in the camp will be replaced with new ones and there will be a new Palat. And 2: The NPO process will be accelerated. There is confusion about the first rumour and scepticism about the second. But the waves of anxiety seem to be settling and things are normalizing.

3rd September 2011

There might be good news. The Palat announced plans for a survey – the section leaders will interview the residents of their sections about whether they wish to resettle, return to Burma or stay in Nupo. Ko Ko Naing says ‘PREs’ will be finally given NPO numbers and will be able to apply for resettlement.

4th September 2011

Saya John comes over and gives me some papers to correct – his neighbour’s life history. He called the UNHCR in Maesot yesterday and they told him they didn’t know anything about any upcoming registration.

Retrospectively, I realized that none of these rumours – neither the repatriation nor the handover of the political activists to the Burmese regime, nor their accelerated resettlement, nor their registration, nor the replacement of the *Palat* and the soldiers, nor any of the other rumours that came and went after that – were true. Yet, they caused immense distress and influenced life choices – sometimes with tragic consequences. More recently, new rumours about forced repatriation, including leaked images of relocation sites across the border in Karen State have been causing panic. The incisive short film *Nothing about us without us* by Burma Partnership and Timothy Syrota (2013), that sparked controversy for its unflattering portrayal of the UNHCR, points out the lack of transparency, consultation with refugee representatives and information about the planning of repatriation. It also documents the panicked reactions that rumours provoke.

In March 2012, a rumour emerged that the UNHCR in Malaysia would register Chin and Kachin refugees. Within days thousands embarked on perilous journeys, often on foot through the jungle. The following Sunday, I realized that the Chin church across from the school stood empty. Several of my Chin students disappeared. Jonas was getting ready to leave the next day. His sister in Kuala Lumpur asked him to come. Maria was devastated. She could not come along as she was Karen, not Kachin or Chin. My student Ariya, a 40-year-old Chin woman, left with her two sons. After five years in the refugee camp, she hoped that they would be allowed to register with the UNHCR in Malaysia and eventually apply for resettlement. She spent all her savings and borrowed more from friends to pay the smugglers. It was still not enough to make the entire journey by car. “We will walk”, she told me when I met her in the internet shop the day before her departure. Several weeks later, I heard about the accident. They walked for two days through the jungle carrying their belongings on their backs. For the remaining part of their journey, the smugglers had arranged a car. Somewhere in Southern Thailand, attempting to escape a police car that was following them, their car collided with a truck. Zarni, Ariya’s 10-year-old son died on the spot. When Ariya regained consciousness in a provincial Thai hospital, she and Paw, her 14-year-old son who had survived the accident, were deported to the Burmese border town of Myawaddy. Eventually, with the help of friends, she was able to return to the camp. In June 2013, I met Ariya in Nupo. Her Chin neighbours were looking after her. She looked pale, gazing empty-eyed into the space above her, drips hanging from both arms. When she saw me she smiled. When I asked how she was feeling, she said “better, teacher”. Then she told me that she wanted to die.

None of the Chin refugees who did reach Malaysia have been registered by the UNHCR. Some found undocumented work. Others were arrested and deported. Jonas and others eventually returned to Nupo, where the uncertainty and insecurities of their confined lives continue to torture them. These insecurities are not limited to worries about their and their children’s future. They are firmly rooted in their daily struggle to find ways to support themselves and their children, to survive encampment.



U Nanda's grave at the cemetery in Nupo Refugee Camp. 2012. Photograph by the author.



Dani and Ariya before her tragic journey. 2012. Photograph by the author.

5

Livelihoods

The monthly food rations consist of rice, cooking oil, yellow beans, fish paste and sometimes chillies. They are neither sufficient in quantity nor nutritious enough to keep an adult healthy. To supplement their diet with vegetables and protein and buy other things that they might require, refugees need money. One of the first things that strikes visitors to the camp is the informal economy and the circulation of money. I was intrigued to see refugees buying vegetables and fruit in grocery stores and at markets, eating curries in restaurants and sipping tea in teashops, buying clothes, flashlights, radios, umbrellas, shampoo. On one of my first days in the camp, during a small tour on a wet and windy August morning, I asked U Lin, slightly bewildered: “How do people make money to buy these things?” I had imagined a much greater dependency on international aid and had not expected the camp’s economy to resemble that of a village or even a small town.

“We have to struggle for our lives”, was his reply. These words as well as their variant, “We have to try hard”, were echoed often by other refugees over the following months. In fact, it is a phrase that came up in almost every single of my students’ essays, regardless of my question. What U Lin was telling me was that since there was no access to employment, there was no direct and simple way to earn money. One had to ‘struggle’ and ‘try hard’, take risks such as being arrested and deported, be inventive and resourceful and work constantly just to survive. In recent studies (i.e. Agier 2011, Brees 2009, Dudley 2010, Horst 2006, Khosravi 2010, Zetter 2011), researchers have argued against the portrayal of refugees as passive victims, calling for more attention to their agency, resilience, self-sufficiency and mobility.

Ironically, the very inactivity that has been forced upon refugees through confinement and the lack of livelihood options also gave birth to resilience, creativity, resourcefulness. The informal economy that has emerged in the camp over the years demonstrates the refugees’ agency, hard work and ingenuity. In the PAB section alone, refugees have set up several grocery stores, shops selling toiletry items, coffee-mix, soft drinks and snacks. They have opened at least four internet cafés, two hairdressers, a beauty salon, several video rental shops,

a silversmith and even a jeweller workshop and a snooker salon. There are several tea- and ‘rice-shops’⁴⁷ and some refugees sell *mohinga*⁴⁸, *samosas* and other snacks out of their homes. Some have invested in small TV sets, which they put to profitable use by charging entrance fees to watch soccer games while others have set up video-rental shops offering the highly sought-after Korean soap operas and Hollywood blockbusters. Another niche-market that developed quickly and proved very profitable is hydropower electricity.

ZOA organizes vocational training in sewing, hair-dressing, cooking and bakery, auto-mechanics and child and elderly care, aiming to equip refugees with new skills. Since refugees do not have access to the formal labour market their possibilities to make use of these skills remain limited, but some refugees manage to set up small shops in their homes. Others raise pigs, ducks or chickens and have little vegetable plots attached to their hut or in a separate location. Although refugees are not allowed to farm around the camp, in 2011 ZOA began to organize agricultural trainings, distribute seeds and provide course participants with small plots of land inside the camp to grow gourds, onions, greens and herbs. However, the available land is limited and only few refugees can benefit from these opportunities.

A morning market operates on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Some refugees sell vegetables or clothes for Thai traders. Others sell vegetables that they grow themselves or snacks that they make or parts of their rations. If they have some initial capital they can start their own little business, like my student Ma Swe who sells flowers at the morning market. There are also a few stalls on the road outside the camp that have fruit and vegetables at slightly higher prices than the morning market. The shop owners are Thai traders from Maesot, paying refugees about TBH 40 per day to work at their stalls. In another section of the camp, the ‘Muslim market’ offers electronic items, batteries, rubber boots, umbrellas, flash lights, clothes, dishes, candles, toiletry and food items, and its popular teashops have the standard fare of *leq-paq-yee*⁴⁹ and stone-oven baked *naan* bread with chickpeas. The market is located close to the big Mosque, and as its name suggests the majority of its stalls are owned by Burmese Muslims – a fact that causes envy and resentment among some of the other groups. In recent years, the camp has grown into a regional commercial centre, attracting locals who are coming from neighbouring villages to buy products that are difficult to find in this remote part of Thailand.

⁴⁷ A restaurant is called *tamin sain* in Burmese, literally ‘rice shop’.

⁴⁸ *Mohinga* is traditional Burmese Fish soup with noodles widely eaten for breakfast.

⁴⁹ Traditional Burmese black tea with sweet condensed milk.



Karen refugees selling home-grown greens and bananas at the morning market. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop.



Marli's hair salon in PAB section. 2013. Photograph by Nina Hawkins.



Moes's 'Golden Border' restaurant in PAB section. 2012. Photograph by the author.



Karen children searching the trash for plastic bottles and other things to sell. 2012. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop.



Ko Than Than (32, Burman) in his jewellery workshop in PAB section. 2011. Photograph by the author.



U Paw (83, Karen) showing a chicken basket he has made for sale. It takes him one week to weave a basket, which earns him 60 baht. Photograph taken by students in the framework of a photoessay workshop.

Social recomposition

Social life in the camp is not only resilient, but also transformative. It shapes a novel social space, questioning traditional hierarchies and generating new social categories. Michel Agier has observed that in Dadaab the economic and social environment of the camp had shaken the construction of the traditionally intensely hierarchical Somali society and even broken through ethnic barriers (Agier 2011). The particular circumstances of the camp allowed certain groups to access privileged social functions and economic opportunities, which they would not have been able to access in Somalia.

Agier identified four levels of social hierarchy in the Dadaab refugee camps: 1) A small minority of Somali traders, stock-raisers and heads of clans, who often also held representative functions in the camp management. 2) 'Voluntary community workers', who had a similar income as the traders (c. €75 per month) but were smaller in number (less than 2%). They benefited from a high social status and were envied because of their close relationships with NGO and UN staff and some of them were also section leaders. 3) Petty traders, informal employees (30-35%). And 4) Beneficiaries of minimal aid with no resources of their own (by far the most numerous group, c. 60%).

These social identities were a product of encampment. They relativized and challenged established social patterns and cut across ethnic membership (Agier 2011: 140). My own observations in Nupo have led me to conclude that certain economic inequalities were generated in the camp and would not necessarily exist in the same way in Burma. At first glance, the camp appears to be an egalitarian space. Former academics, factory workers, political dissidents, artists, guerrilla soldiers, farmers and businessmen – all live in almost identical bamboo shelters, stand in line for food rations, anxiously exchange resettlement and repatriation rumours. The differences are more subtle than in a Burmese village or town, but a closer look reveals significant financial, status and political power differences. Economic disparities among refugees are due to their financial status upon arrival in the camp, the duration of exile, remittances from family members abroad, individual skills and resourcefulness.

I have borrowed Michel Agier's approach to illustrate Nupo's economy and social structure. Five broad social categories became apparent; they do, however, overlap:

1) At the top of the social ladder are the traders, owners of larger shops selling electronic equipment, and owners of profitable businesses such as internet, snooker shops and

hydropower plants. This is certainly the smallest and the most affluent group. Their incomes vary and are difficult to estimate. They often also benefit from good relationships with the camp authorities. The traders are to a large extent Burmese Muslims (who arrived with the first refugees from Karen State in the 1990s) and the more recent city refugees in the PAB section, who have benefitted from initial capital, good business ideas and in some cases connections.

2) The second group, equally small in numbers, are the camp committee members and section leaders. Their income is insignificant (THB 400 to THB 800 per month) in comparison to that of the traders, but they benefit from a high social status associated with their political power, proximity to the Thai camp authorities and access to information. They are frequently accused of supplementing their income by accepting bribes. Some refugees in this category are also owners of businesses in the camp, and/or receive remittances from resettled relatives.

Over 70% of the camp's residents are Karen and have lived in the camp for more than a decade under their own governance in the form of a Karen camp committee. When refugees from other ethnic groups began to arrive in large numbers and the PAB section was added in 2005, it was decided that the section would be under the direct control of the Thai camp commander rather than under the Karen camp committee in order to avoid tensions. Hence, almost all camp committee positions are held by Karen, many of whom were or are also members of the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen *de facto* government, or its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

3) NGOs staff, medical personnel, interpreters, teachers and teacher trainers form the third group. Similarly to the camp administration staff, their income is often small (depending on the organization, position and experience between THB 500 and THB 2000), but they are respected in the community for their skills, high level of education and their proximity to international NGO and UN staff. They sometimes also hold positions in the camp administration and might receive remittances from family members abroad. I often heard complaints from non-Karen refugees that most NGO workers were Karen and that despite good qualifications it was difficult to find jobs without knowledge of the Karen language(s). As the number of non-Karen refugees in the camp increased, however, more non-Karen speaking refugees seemed to find employment in NGOs.

4) The fourth group are petty traders and occasional wagedworkers. They have small street stalls, selling betelnut or noodle salad, run sewing or repair workshops, sell lottery tickets, raise pigs or ducks, collect, prepare and sell thatch leaves for roofs, occasionally take

on paid jobs such as selling products at the market for Thai traders, wait tables in the Thai eateries on the main road, help with the construction and repair of shelters or do seasonal work for Thai farmers outside the camp. In the PAB section, almost all refugees who are not employed by NGOs or schools belong to this category. Their economic activities are sometimes supplemented by remittances.

5) Those on the bottom of the social camp hierarchy are refugees without any resources of their own. They survive on food rations, small vegetable plots and food they forage for in the jungle. Some can rely on occasional support from resettled friends and relatives. The majority of the Karen refugees belong to this category.

These economic disparities are also reflected in the camp's geography and stand out on a walk from the more prosperous even if very cramped PAB section, through the Muslim market towards some of the poorer, but more spacious Karen sections of the camp. While the Karen exercise more political power, PAB refugees often have economic advantages. Some refugees, particularly from urban areas, arrived in the camp with savings. They had sold property in Burma or borrowed money from relatives abroad before fleeing to Thailand. Differences are also created and reinforced by remittances. Financial resources allow refugees to supplement their food rations, to buy extra materials to improve and repair their huts or to pay labourers to carry out repair work (this is especially important for city people who don't have the know-how and experience to build a shelter on their own). They can use the money to set up a business, cover additional expenses such as using the internet and phone to stay in touch with family and friends, buy clothes, attend classes, pay bribes for diverse services or travel to Maesot or Umphang for medical care. In the PAB section, refugees are often better dressed, some own laptops or small TV sets, and men tend to spend more time and money in teashops. Around the 'Muslim market', where businesses have existed for a long time, some shop owners have motorcycles or cars, travel frequently to Maesot to buy supplies and even buy cows for the *Eid* festivities. These business owners, however, are an exception rather the rule among the camp's very poor Muslim population. In the Karen sections as well as in many parts of the Muslim sections, precariousness is palpable. Children wear neither slippers nor pants. Adults are clad in donated, old and torn longys and t-shirts, while many of the more affluent and fashion conscious young people in PAB wear jeans. A young Karen woman who had stopped coming to class, explained to me that she felt uncomfortable and embarrassed about her old clothes in front of the more stylish PAB students. In the Karen sections, there are less internet and teashops, but houses are a little more spacious than in PAB as there was

more available space at the time when these sections were first settled; there are more vegetable plots, fruit trees, animals, and even babies. People in these sections tend to grow more vegetables themselves and forage in the jungle for roots and plants rather than buy food at the markets. Life feels more settled and less transitory and ‘camplike’ than in PAB.

As refugees don’t have access to formal education and employment, the camp’s social hierarchy does not necessarily resemble social structures in Burma. The reversed power relations between the majority Karen population and the minority Burmans (and other ethnic groups living in PAB) and the privileges associated with political power are certainly the most striking differences. Education and technical know-how also play an important role. Those with a higher education or specific skills can make use of these resources to find NGO, administration or teaching jobs, which places them high in the camp hierarchy. Although many of the urban refugees benefit from a better education, they lack the language requirements (knowledge of the Karen language) to be considered for most NGO jobs. At the same time, educational and vocational programmes in the camp have allowed refugees from rural areas, who had no access to formal education, to gain new skills and find work in administration, in schools and in community-based organisations.

Another significant factor for the social and economic transformation of the camp are financial remittances from resettled relatives. The camp’s elaborate informal economy and almost urban-like infrastructure are fairly recent developments. Infrastructure developments came essentially after 2005, benefiting from an influx of urban refugees, remittances and a relative relaxation of restrictions by the camp authorities. A few years ago, there were no internet cafés and almost no means to connect to the outside world. There were fewer shops and businesses than today. In 2005 a large number of urban refugees were transferred from Thai cities to refugee camps, and more arrived after the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma. Some had engineering skills, and discovered niche markets such as hydropower electricity or internet services. Some new arrivals from urban areas brought capital with the help of which they could buy equipment and set up small businesses. The initiation of the UN third-country resettlement programme in 2005 significantly increased the influx of remittances. As refugees began to resettle, they remitted money to their relatives and friends who remained in the camp, allowing the recipients to supplement their rations without having to take on wage work outside the camp and risk arrest and deportation. Among the Karen, many young people tend to resettle while their parents remain in the camp. Their remittances allow their families to live a little more comfortably than previously or set up a small business enterprise in the camp.

I was not able to find any data on how many refugees benefit from remittances and how

much they receive. It seemed obvious, however, that there were more remittance beneficiaries in the PAB section of the camp than in the Karen sections as many of the PAB refugees already had relatives or friends in third countries. Not all remittances come from Western countries though. Some of my students told me they received support from relatives working in Thailand, Malaysia or Singapore. Some receive regular remittances, others only from time to time, others none at all. My student Ma Swe does not only not receive any support; she even remits money from her camp earnings to her mother in Burma. One of my students, a single 22-year-old Mon refugee told me that he received TBH 2,000 every month from his older brother, who works in a clothing store in Bangkok. He doesn't have any other income, but that relatively generous sum allows him to survive without taking on wage work outside.⁵⁰ Remittances are mostly sent through informal channels and operations such as 'moneychanger' that request refugees to pay fees of 3-10%.

U Lin, who lives with his two younger sisters, told me that his brother, who resettled to the United States in 2008, sends them about TBH 9,000 once every six months. That gives the three of them about TBH 1,500 per month in addition to the TBH 1,000 stipend that he receives from the school. It is not easy to survive on that, but he says they manage⁵¹. U Soe Tun receives TBH 4,700 for his family of three every month from his brother, who lives in Singapore. When I asked him how he felt about being dependent on his younger brother, he replied: "Like a bum. An internet bum actually, because we use the internet to ask for money."⁵² Like U Soe Tun, refugees, who depend on their relatives' or friends' generosity, often harbour feelings of shame and uselessness.

Not all refugees can rely on help from relatives abroad and even for those who can remittances rarely remain a stable source of income. As months turn into years and years into decades, relatives and friends might not be able or willing to continue their support. Ma Mi, a 34-year-old Burmese woman and mother of a three-year-old son, told me:

I have a small snack shop and I sell flowers at the morning market, but it is not enough for my family. I am not satisfied with my life here, because we depend on our relatives for money. Sometimes, they cannot help us and then we get into trouble. It is difficult to survive here for a long time. My husband has to get a job outside the camp, so our family is separated. Many men get depressed in here. They drink too much alcohol and beat their wives. I have a three-year-old child. I

⁵⁰ Interview, Nupo refugee camp, 12 January 2012.

⁵¹ Interview, Nupo refugee camp, 16 January 2012.

⁵² Interview, Nupo refugee camp, 17 January 2012.

*worry about my son's future. It is OK to stay here temporarily, but it has been eight years for me. We waste our future.*⁵³

One direct consequence of the recent political changes in Burma is that international aid has almost instantly been shifted from the border to organizations working inside the country. This has had an immediate impact on refugee rations. Food and charcoal were reduced twice during the year that I spent in the camp. Bamboo and thatch leaves, which are normally distributed by the TBC around January and allow refugees to repair their shelter before the Monsoon, were not distributed in time. Desperately, refugees tried to find money to buy materials to repair their huts as the Thai authorities do not allow refugees to cut bamboo in the forest. Those who had the necessary skills, discovered a niche market, collecting leaves and making thatch for sale. In June, with monsoon rains and storms already in full swing, many still had not repaired their homes. Roofs were leaking and people improvised as they could, tearing up plastic bags and coffee-mix packages to stuff the holes, running from one corner of their home to another and emptying rain-filled cooking pots. Occasionally, rotting bamboo structures collapsed and caused tragic accidents. During a birthday party for my student Swe Moe, the rotten bamboo of his kitchen floor fell in, causing a cauldron with litres of boiling *mohinga* soup to overturn. Dani, stirring the soup in the cauldron when the floor collapsed, was showered from waist down with the boiling liquid. The students tore up *longyis* to improvise a stretcher and carried Dani to the camp clinic, where nurses cut the burned skin from his legs and stomach and put him on a drip for three weeks.

The lack of jobs inside the camp and the insufficiency of rations force refugees to search for ways to circumvent the rules. To physically survive the camp, to afford materials to repair their shelter and to buy food and clothes, those who cannot rely on support from abroad have no other options but taking on wage work outside the camp, risking arrest and deportation. Belgian researcher Inge Brees (2009) concluded her timely study on Burmese refugees' livelihood strategies by emphasizing the importance of creating more opportunities for refugees to become and remain self-reliant by increasing the protection of waged workers through legislation and providing access to work permits for camp- and self-settled refugees. Her appeal to the Thai authorities and the international community becomes more urgent as aid rapidly decreases, pushing the refugees' resilience and resourcefulness to their limits.

⁵³ Interview, Nupo refugee camp, 15 September 2011.

One day in the Life of Ma Swe

Ma Swe climbed out from beneath the green mosquito net, careful not to wake Maung Thu and Ko Aung. He son and husband lay huddled together under an orange polyester blanket, covered by a green roof-shaped net dotted with little knots where rats had eaten away the fabric. Ma Swe tiptoed to the washing room. The bamboo floor creaked and crumbled beneath her feet. She dipped her hands into the icy water and splashed some on her face, brushed her teeth and lit the charcoal stove. She unlocked the chain on the bamboo door and stepped outside. Her hut was on Pansodan street, facing a monastery. The air was still, cool and crisp. The neighbours were asleep. It was already past four and she needed to set up her flower stand. Every market day, Ma Swe sells flowers. All Buddhists have an altar in their home and buy flowers to make offerings to the Buddha. Flowers are a good business. Ma Swe orders them from traders in Maesot, who send them the day before on the *songthaew*.

She arranged bundles of pink roses and daisies in big green buckets along the bamboo table. On her right, a sleepy young man in jeans and a baseball cap spread out pumpkins, greens, hairy roots, mangoes and green papayas on a woven plastic mat. Across the street, an old Muslim lady unwrapped coconut rice cake and freshly fried *ikyakwe*, long Burmese doughnuts – a popular breakfast treat. At 05:00 Ko Aung came down with Maung Thu in his arms. He moved swiftly and gracefully on his crutches, the missing right leg barely impeding his movements. Ko Aung has big sad eyes and an open smile exposing small red teeth stained by betelnut.

It was February. At this time of the year, the sun does not rise before 06:30. The market unfolds by candlelight into a flurry of shapes, draped in towels and blankets, scarves and woollen hats against the morning chill. Shoppers with cylinder-shaped bamboo baskets spilled from the narrow lanes into the market street. Around 07:00 the market was at its busiest. People squatted, poking fingers into sweet-sour yellow mangoes and betelnut, exchanging the rumours – in Burmese, Karen, Mon, Chin and other languages. As on almost every market day, when I passed by Ma Swe's stand to say hello, she pressed a big bouquet of flowers against my chest – for Dor's and my classrooms. She also gave me a bag of mandarins and apologized for having to work so much and not being able to treat us to dinner as often as she would have liked to. Her generosity was limitless.

By 08:30 the last customers dispersed into the two teashops on the market street and the sellers began to pack up. Pansodan Street returned to its sleepy slumber. I wondered why people, who have nowhere to go got up in the middle of the night to go into the cold and buy

vegetables. Would it make a difference in a refugee camp if the market started at 09:00 instead of at 05:00? Was this a way to reproduce a familiar routine, a sense of normality in a situation of exception and create a sense of ‘home’ as a way of coping with displacement? Sandra Dudley’s study of a Karenni refugee camp in Thailand shows how by making a ‘home’ in the camp, keeping busy and thereby creating habit, refugees cope with displacement and alienation, structure their daily lives and give meaning to it (Dudley 2010: 9, 60).

Back home, Ma Swe made fried rice and cut up some fruit for Maung Thu. The four year old vehemently refuses to eat rice. He demands watermelon, which is a luxury for Ma Swe. After a quick breakfast, Ko Aung walked their son to the nursery school and Ma Swe dedicated herself to the second business activity of the day – selling lottery tickets in their neighbourhood. Improvised lottery tickets have become a lucrative business in the camp, rapidly taking over other economic activities. Ma Swe had an old sewing machine and used to make pullovers, scarves, bags and dresses to order. But sewing was time consuming and brought her little income, so she switched to selling lottery tickets.

“I hate doing it, but I have to make money for my family”, she explained. There were other women like her. Ma Win, a young Hindu woman and mother of three children used to make *dosa*, a delicious Indian rice flour crêpe served with a flavourful tomato and yellow pea sauce near our school. Her *dosa* were my breakfast favourite and I made sure to be there early to get some, as they were also popular with other customers. A portion of three *dosa* with a serving of both sauces cost TBH 18. Ma Win sat on a small bamboo platform that was an extension of their family hut. A small charcoal stove and a large pan were placed in front of her. As she poured the dough into the pan, her husband served the customers seated around the only table. The children helped to wrap the *dosa* in plastic bags for take away. Scrawny chickens and fluffy ducklings scurried under the table, picking on *birdy* plastic packages floating in the sewage. A few months after my arrival in Nupo, Ma Win quit making *dosa*. She told me she was not feeling well. Later I learned that cooking oil and charcoal had become too expensive since food rations had been reduced and that she was not making enough money with the *dosa*. Ma Win, too, entered the lottery ticket business. There are different types of lottery tickets, ranging from simple ‘two digit numbers’ to quite complex stock market-based ones, the type that Ma Swe sells. Gambling is an ingenious and important means of income generation (and loss) and after alcohol the second greatest addiction in the camp. Snooker, chess, card games, cock and beetle fights, football games – all provide occasions for gambling. While lottery is favoured by women, the latter gambling activities are mostly male.

In the afternoon, Ma Swe hurried to get Maung Thu from nursery school. Maung Thu devoured another big slice of watermelon and stretched out on his belly, hypnotised by the cartoons on the tiny TV screen – a luxury in the camp. Ma Swe took advantage of the quiet moment to look over her English homework. She was working on an essay about her 12 years in a Maesot garment factory and her engagement in a Burmese migrant worker association. Ma Swe's formal education ended after grade four when her mother took her out of school so that she would help her siblings with work on their farm. She was a keen student and had made impressive progress in English, determined to be prepared for the new life abroad that she and her husband were hoping for. Ko Aung spent much of the day with political discussions, betelnut and tea at the teashop next door. When he came home, Ma Swe left for a second round of lottery tickets sales. It turned out a good day; she had made THB 120. Part of what she earns, she sends to her ailing mother in northern Sagaing, whom she had left 20 years ago as a 16-year-old girl to work in the jade mines of Hpakant in Kachin State before leaving for the Thai-Burmese border.

There was tremendous grace in Ma Swe's strength, courage and generosity. I only once remember her expressing anguish over their situation. It was a hot March afternoon and Ma Swe had just treated Dor and me to a delicious lunch. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she told us her story. Ma Swe and Ko Aung have been in Nupo camp for over seven years. Their son was born in the camp. In 2005, they received the NPO, the UN registration number for Nupo camp, and were allowed to apply for resettlement. They applied to Australia as Ma Swe's younger sister had resettled there a few years ago. But they were rejected because of Ko Aung's role in the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), an armed resistance movement established by Burmese students after the brutal government crackdown on the 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations. They applied again and were rejected again. They decided to resettle in the United States, but their application was 'put on hold'. At that time the USA was qualifying all armed resistance groups as terrorist organizations, denying resettlement to its members. Several years later, the US authorities revised their position towards certain organisations, among them the ABSDF and began to review and reassess Ma Swe and Ko Aung's application. They were hopeful, but soon a new problem occurred: they were informed that a family with the same personal names had already resettled. The process was once again frozen and they were told to wait while their biographies were being verified. Ko Aung, like other men in the camp, sought solace in Burmese whisky and, when there was no money, in homemade moonshine.

“I try very hard for my family. Our life is very insecure. We have lived here for seven years. Now, the government invites ABSDF members to come back to Myanmar. My husband is all excited. He attends meetings, discusses with his friends. He says he wants to go back.” She looked at her son, wiped the tears with her sleeve and added: “I will not to go back there. Even if he goes, I will stay and wait. I want my son to get an education.” In March 2013, Ma Swe and her husband could finally resettle in the United States.

Dependency and resilience

The camp struck me as a highly contradictory place – a place of immobility, dependency, fear and despair, but also a place of mobility, unpredictable resilience, courage, creativity and hope. Ma Swe and Bagao embody this resilience and mobility.

The term ‘refugee camp’ evokes misery, stagnancy and dependency. Agier used the expression “waiting room” (2011) to describe the atmosphere in refugee camps – waiting for refugee status, waiting to return or waiting to resettle in a third country. And waiting produces anxiety, restlessness and depression. Inactivity causes distress for most refugees, particularly for those who had formal employment before fleeing home. This is very tangible in the camp’s PAB section, temporary home to a large number of urban refugees. Like the Somali refugees in Michel Agier’s study of the Daadab camps in Kenya, refugees in Nupo frequently express feelings of boredom, uselessness, physical and mental confinement. Their ‘inactivity’ is not chosen and it rarely translates into merely sitting around and waiting for handouts and resettlement. It often brings out strength to adapt or resist. It is a mute, frantic activity perceived as inactivity – a constant and desperate struggle for physical and mental survival, a stifled cry that rarely escapes camp boundaries and seldom yields more than the minimum to survive. Ma Swe never rests simply in the hope that the UNHCR will rescue them. Like her, most women work fulltime – caring for children and relatives, doing household chores, sewing, foraging for edible plants and roots in the forest, selling charcoal, vegetables or lottery tickets, attending classes or vocational trainings. Others work for NGOs in the camp or teach in the schools or vocational programmes. Children help in the house, look after their younger siblings, carry water, sell snacks, rummage for plastic bottles and other recyclables to sell. Men have less domestic responsibilities and tend to enjoy more idle time. Men from urban areas seem to be more prone to inactivity than men from rural areas, who feel less

alienated in the new environment and can apply their skills more easily, for example in the construction of shelter or farming or in occasional wage work in neighbouring villages.

“We’re just killing time here” is a complaint I often heard – from male and female refugees, from urban as well as rural areas. What they meant by ‘killing time’ was not necessarily sitting around and drinking tea – although there are certainly men in the camp who do split their days quite efficiently between tea and moonshine. What they meant was that they were doing the necessary to stay alive but not sufficiently to live, and that their activities were rarely constructive for their future, and even if they were that there might be no future for them. My student Ma Jin, a young and bright woman from Chin State, who had finished high school in Burma, told me⁵⁴:

Sayama, do you remember when I attended that cooking and bakery training? Now I can bake cakes and I sell them at the market, because we need money to buy food. I am happy that I learned to bake, but the money I make is not enough. I also feel bored. I was 21 when we arrived here. Today I am 26! We have to struggle for our life here and we cannot leave the camp. I worry about my little sisters. I worry about our education. We cannot continue to study. Even in the camp, I cannot come to class anymore, because I have to make money. We cannot get passports to find work in Thailand. What will happen to us, I don't know.

By learning to bake, Ma Jin had acquired a new skill and a way to support herself and her two younger sisters with whom she had fled Burma. The reason for her ‘boredom’ as she called it was that her efforts were not doing more than keeping them physically alive. She felt that she was merely busy while waiting for ‘real’ life to begin. “In a very pragmatic fashion, the exiles live, survive, have encounters, organize their existence.... But it is still nothing more than an enduring present”, writes Agier (2011: 78-79). Keeping busy is necessary to survive, it creates routine and helps ‘kill time’, but it is rarely satisfactory as there is little room for development and few perspectives, if any.

In Thailand, refugees are not allowed to seek work outside the camp. If they do, they are considered illegal migrant workers and risk arrest and deportation to Burma. They are also vulnerable to exploitation by employers and have to accept daily wages between TBH 50 and TBH 120, a fraction of the Thai minimum wage of TBH 300. My student Mi Nun, a 21-year-

⁵⁴ Informal conversation, March 2012

old Mon girl, had come to the camp five years ago with her parents and three younger siblings. Her father was suffering from a respiratory illness that could not be treated in the camp clinic. They didn't have the means to pay for his treatment in Maesot. He passed away two years after their arrival. Mi Nun regularly disappeared from school for periods of several weeks. One day, when she returned to class, she told me this ⁵⁵:

We have to struggle for our lives here. The rations are not enough for the whole month and we don't have family or friends in a third country who could send us money. There is not much work that we can do in the camp. My mum makes charcoal and my brother sells it at the market. We also make samosas and sell them to teashops, but it is not enough for us. The last two weeks, I worked on a farm for Thai people. They gave me TBH 100 per day, but I have only TBH 500 left although I worked for two weeks. You see, I had to buy food there. I spent a lot and now it is not enough for my family. But it is better than what we make if we sell vegetables for Thai business people at the market here. They pay you only TBH 40 per day.... On the way back I fell sick. When we arrived in the camp, I went to the clinic, but they just gave me paracetamol and it did not help. This is why I could not come to class, sayama.

Formal employment opportunities in the camp are limited to schools and the few NGOs, which only hire refugees with a secondary education and specific skills, connections and knowledge of the Karen and Burmese languages. This is frequently criticized by the non-Karen refugees who often have a good education or specific skills, but do not speak Karen. Refugees, who work for NGOs, teach in schools or do other kinds of community work, are in the privileged position to feel needed, appreciated and respected even though their 'stipends' do not suffice to feed their families (TBH 500 to 1,500). Their activity creates a sense of meaning beyond physical survival, yet as I have seen with refugee friends who were teachers or worked for NGOs – for most it provided only a temporary relief from the painful confrontation with their situation.

Saya John was a legendary figure in Nupo and one of the most prolific and infatigable people I had met in my life. A Karen Christian raised in Yangon, he fled Burma after participating in student protests during which several of his friends had been arrested. Saya John spent a decade living undocumented in Bangkok, teaching English to Thai and Burmese

⁵⁵ Informal conversation, April 2012.

students. He moved to the camp with his wife and baby daughter in 2006 when the third-country resettlement programme was launched in the hope of being able to save his family from ‘illegality’ and join his mother in Chicago, where she was a university lecturer. In his mid 30s, he was energetic, passionate, and often quite opinionated. He found work as an English-Burmese interpreter for the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which conducts interviews with resettlement applicants to the US. He also taught English and history in several high schools across the camp. In the evenings, he met with a group of particularly keen students and translated articles from *Time* magazine into Burmese, seated on the floor of a friend’s hut, sometimes by candlelight and with a passion I have never seen anyone translating newspaper articles before. He constantly helped other refugees to write or translate their letters and biographical statements; organized events in his church; played and gave Badminton training in the early mornings before going to work; and organized a Christmas choir and spent weeks practicing, then going from house to house every night, singing Christmas carols. *Saya* John had the reputation of a somewhat eccentric, but excellent teacher and was very respected in the community. Two of his former students and protégés had gotten scholarships and went on to study at Thai universities – a path normally closed to refugees. One evening, *he* organized a party for Ma Nu, who had received a scholarship for an international BA programme in environmental studies at a university in Bangkok and was back in the camp to visit her parents. After a few glasses of *High Class*⁵⁶, *Saya* John, Dor, several of our students and myself were saying goodnight on our school’s Badminton court. *Saya* John, in his green rubber boots, an old white t-shirt tucked into his striped purple ration *longyi*⁵⁷, a bright orange woollen cap pulled down to his eye brows, spread out his arms, and glaring at the moon screamed:

“I want to fly! I want to spread out my wings and fly!”

He paused, then:

“But I am a prisoner in this camp. WHY?”

His hoarse voice echoed in the hollowness of the night. That evening, standing there on the Badminton court, *Saya* John held a long monologue. He spoke about his lost homeland, about love and about loss, about his dreams and his fears, and the pain of it all. As he spoke, tears ran down his cheeks and turned our initial amusement over his theatrical performance into shame.

Two months later, *Saya* John came to school to say goodbye. He had decided to get his

⁵⁶ A very popular and cheap Burmese whisky smuggled from Burma and sold in the camp.

⁵⁷ The ration *longyi*s distributed by the TBBC were easily recognizable by their pattern: stripes. My students used to call them ‘refugee *longyi*s’.

family out of the camp. They moved to the border town of Maesot, where he and his wife found jobs as English teachers in schools for Burmese migrant children. They remain undocumented and continue to live in fear of being arrested and deported⁵⁸. *Saya John's* departure was one of the biggest losses for the camp community, yet his students accepted that he, like everyone else, was doing what he had to in order to preserve his family's physical and mental health. Prolonged confinement, the dangers and daily struggles of camp life, the repetitive routine combined with the lack of perspectives and the hopelessness that was settling in, seeped into the bones and hearts of even the most energetic, active and resilient of refugees, people like *Saya John*, Ma Swe, Bagao and U Lin, causing distress and depression, draining their energy and creativity and paralyzing them in their life choices.

⁵⁸ Their school provides them with cards that say that they are educators, making an important contribution to the education of migrant children. These cards, however, do not have any official status and protection power in case of arrest.



Ma Swe at her flower stand. 2011. Photograph by the author.



Maung Tu and Ko Aung at home. 2011. Photograph by the author.

6

Life choices, mobility and immobility

In a recent publication Roger Zetter has argued that displaced populations “are neither static nor immobile despite intentions of host governments and humanitarian agencies to anchor them sur place”. Zetter’s research has shown that prolonged displacement “stimulates new patterns and processes of mobility which are motivated by a variety of livelihood, security and social needs and may be supported by social and family networks” (2011: 10).

Ariya’s choice to embark on another dangerous journey to Malaysia – a journey that ended in tragedy – was influenced by uncertainty and anxiety about her children’s future, by the lack of safety and livelihood options in the camp and ultimately by the rumours about UN registration in Kuala Lumpur and the dream to resettle. Like her, thousands have been leaving the camps on the Thai-Burma border – temporarily or permanently. Their mobility, as Zetter has also observed among Iraqi and Somalian refugees, is more likely to be temporary and undocumented and can have different objectives such as a search for livelihood options, the need to send remittances to family members left behind in Burma, a search for economic and legal security, ‘experimental return’ or ‘peacebuilding’ in their risk-management and “part a trial-and-error search for other more favourable opportunities, given that permanent options are blocked”, Zetter points out (2011: 10-11). Mobility, as Bagao and Ariya’s itineraries show, can result from exasperation and be directed by coincidence. Yet, it is always also a strategy of survival and resistance against control and confinement by host countries and humanitarian agencies. That doesn’t mean that all displaced people are mobile. It has long been argued that long-term confinement in refugee camps produces dependency on aid and fosters passivity (see also Horst 2006), and this is certainly the case for many refugees in Nupo, particularly among the Karen camp population that has been displaced for decades and has adapted well to life in the camp. For many of the older Karen refugees the prospect of resettlement in third countries is as terrifying as repatriation for the younger ones. A survey commissioned by the Thai authorities in September 2011 showed that out of the 14,969 refugees in Nupo 6,741 refugees expressed the wish to resettle, 6,258 to remain in Thailand

and 18 to return to Burma⁵⁹. With the exception of six individuals, all refugees from the PAB section (registered and pre-registered) wished to resettle, which means that almost all of the 6,258 refugees who refused resettlement were Karen and Muslims from Karen State. But also among the ethnically more diverse PAB group, who have been displaced for five to ten years on average, uncertainty did paralyse and make it extremely difficult to choose between remaining and continuing to wait for registration or taking the risk of ‘experimental return’ (Zetter 2011) or undocumented secondary migration like Ariya did.

In the framework of the six-month social science research methods workshop that I taught in the camp, we conducted 40 semi-structured and narrative interviews, focusing on uncertainty and life choices – on how choices were made and on the factors and actors that influenced the choice between resettlement, repatriation and remaining in Thailand. My students chose their interviewees largely among relatives and friends in order to establish a much-needed atmosphere of trust. I had 15 students from different sections of the camp, different ethnic and religious groups. Among them were Burmans, Kachin, Karen, Mon, Rhakine, Muslims and Shan. The majority, however, were pre-registered refugees from the PAB section, waiting for registration and the possibility to apply for resettlement. Although it is certainly difficult to draw general conclusions from such a small and uneven sample, the interviews, their analysis in class and the discussions they stimulated among the students showed that positions differed immensely between Karen refugees and PAB refugees, between urban and rural refugees, between women and men, between the old and the young.

We consolidated our results and grouped the answers, I. for refugees who chose resettlement over repatriation and remaining in Thailand (including pre-registered refugees, who are not able to apply due to the lack of refugee status); and II. for refugees who did not want to resettle.

I. In favour of resettlement

1) Future – education – livelihoods

All interviewees expressed anxiety and sorrow about the loss of their and their children’s future. They favour resettlement because of the lack of educational opportunities for their

⁵⁹ 1,943 out of the 14,969 refugees had neither a UN registration nor a pre-registration number, and were not included in the survey.

children or for themselves, the absence of formalized and recognized education in the camp and access to the Thai education system.

The poor quality of life, the insufficiency of rations and the lack of livelihood opportunities in the camp and outside are other major factors for refugees to prefer resettlement. It was mentioned by all interviewees.

I have been living in the camp like under house arrest for four years. The longer I live in the camp, the more I worry about my education and future. I don't worry about being given NPO or not. The only thing I am concerned about is to be able to live a normal life outside the camp like other people.

Ko Min, 23, Mon (Nov. 2011)

According to Cindy Horst, *buufis* – ‘resettlement dreams’ in Somali – were closely related to the refugees’ desire for peace and the unstable political and security situation in Somalia, which made return undesirable (2006: 148). Horst has also argued that one of the main reasons for *buufis* was the poor quality of life in the camps (2006: 147). My research complements Horst’s, confirming that the lack of livelihood options and formal education in the camp and the impossibility of a life outside the camp in Thailand or in Burma – felt as the absence of present and future – led refugees to dream of resettlement. Horst quotes a refugee saying that he feared the loss of his children’s future although his own had already been lost. I heard these words constantly echoed in Nupo. “Losing our future”, “waiting for a future” were worries that came up in daily conversations with friends, in class, at more formal gatherings.

It's very hard to keep going, looking at our children's faces. We do not think about ourselves. The children are losing their time. We feel sorry about their lives.

U Nay, 65, Muslim (Oct 2011)

In one of my poetry classes I encouraged the students to write a poem in free-writing style, on any topic they wanted. All their poems spoke in one way or another about worries concerning their future, confinement and the absence of opportunities in the camp. My student U Lu, a 52-year-old Burman man, a political refugee, wrote a poem that he entitled ‘My future’.

*Future, future
My future
Can you tell me my future?*

*Once, I live in Seoul
Now, I live in Nupo
In future, where will I be?*

*Once, I'm with family
Now, I'm alone
In future, how will I be?*

*Once, I own a bank
Now, I own a tent
In future, how will I be?*

*Once, I'm in military
Now, I'm an ordinary
In future, what will I be?*

*Once, I'm in heaven
Now, I'm in hell
In future, where will I be?*

*Future, future
My future
Can you tell me my future?*

When pre-registered refugees staged a demonstration against the denial of refugee status and resettlement in April 2012 and again in May 2012 in front of the UNHCR office in the camp, their banners read “A peaceful protest by people without a future”.

Kibreab (1999), based on research with Eritrean refugees in Sudan, argues that access to social and economic rights in the host country and in the country of origin are important factors in the decision to return or to remain. Kibreab has observed that even informal access to rights in the host country has an impact on refugees' choices. My research confirms Kibreab's findings. Refugees, who have found a way to support themselves through informal work in Maesot or in central and Southern Thailand, carefully consider risks and benefits. The

benefits of work and remittances that support relatives in the camp or in Burma might outweigh the risks of arrest and deportation or the risks of voluntary return to Burma. Many of my former students have left the camp to find work in Maesot and other parts of Thailand, risking long and dangerous journeys with smugglers. Recently, after long periods of illegal work in factories and sweatshops or semi-formal employment in migrant schools and community based organizations on the border, some were able to register under the ‘Nationality Verification’ programme, which temporarily legalizes their migrant status in Thailand. These migrant worker permits are difficult to obtain and at US\$400 beyond the financial means of many migrant workers. They require the applicant to have a valid Burmese ID card – which most refugees do not have – and an employer in Thailand at the time of their application. There have been scams by agencies in Maesot that, for a high fee, assist migrants in obtaining those authorizations and the police in Maesot have been accused of accepting bribes by factory owners and preventing migrant workers from leaving Tak Province despite valid permits⁶⁰.

For refugees, even if they possess an ID and have the money for a migrant worker permit, applying might also mean to relinquish their refugee status and part with the hope for resettlement⁶¹. My students who applied for a migrant worker permit only had a pre-registration number in the camp, no income possibilities inside the camp and had already given up hope for registration and resettlement. Trying to find work and legalizing their status can thus be seen not only as a strategy of survival, but also an act of acceptance.

2) Confinement – lack of rights

The majority of the interviewees pointed out the lack of access to rights and citizenship in Thailand, physical confinement in the camp, the lack of respect for human rights in Burma, in Nupo camp and in Thailand towards refugees, religious discrimination in Burma (particularly directed towards Moslems and Christians) as important factors in their decision to resettle. Many refugees mentioned ‘having heard’ that resettlement would give them access to citizenship and the rights attached to it.

3) Uncertainty – lack of safety – insecurity

⁶⁰ Private conversations with migrants in Maesot in June and July 2013.

⁶¹ Due to the usage of different names and birthdates, as well as the lack of communication between the responsible parties, refugees do not automatically lose their registration or pre-registration when they obtain a migrant worker permit. They do, however, fear complications in the case of resettlement and tend to perceive the legalization of their status as a choice between ‘refugeehood’ and waiting for resettlement.

Another important consideration in their wish to resettle was the lack of safety in the camp, in Thailand and in Burma. The threat of forced repatriation, the lack of trust in the Burmese government and no belief in prospects for peace and democracy in Burma exacerbated feelings of insecurity and the wish for resettlement in a third country. Personal safety, health risks, depression, alcohol addiction and domestic and sexual violence were also mentioned by interviewees.

4) Family ties

The wish to reunite with family members who had already resettled played a significant role in their wish to resettle.

5) Cultural alienation in Thailand

Some of the interviewees, particularly from urban areas in Burma, described feeling unwelcome and alienated in Thailand, both geographically and culturally. The language barrier played an important role as they often spoke good English but found the prospect of learning Thai daunting.

II. Rejection of resettlement ⁶²

1) Fear of culture shock

Interviews and informal conversations revealed that refugees were rejecting resettlement primarily for cultural and social reasons: fear of culture shock, lack of education, formal skills, language skills (particularly older refugees), involvement in the armed struggle and politics, discouraging feedback from resettled relatives and friends (especially in the US), stories of solitude and cultural alienation, no relatives abroad.

2) Attachment to their place of origin

Geographic and cultural proximity to Karen state and their home villages, the wish to return to Karen State (mainly older refugees), ethnic/national pride, involvement in the armed

⁶² Organizing formal interviews with refugees who rejected resettlement proved difficult for my students. The main reason was that most of my research students lived in the PAB section and had little contact with the Karen refugees in the other sections. There were linguistic and cultural barriers as well as fear and suspicion. It was only my Karen students who were able to conduct these interviews. I carried out only three formal interviews and it is, of course, impossible to generalize from such a small sample. Class discussions and numerous informal conversations over the course of my fieldwork have contributed to and gradually completed the analysis.

struggle and politics, and more recently the ceasefire in Karen State have played a significant role in (Karen) refugees' decision to reject resettlement.

3) Family ties

Other important decision factors against resettlement were disagreements about resettlement within families, as well as unregistered family members in the camp and in Burma who could not be left behind.

4) Livelihood options

Economic considerations also play an important role – the lack of employment opportunities for refugees and precarious jobs (mainly in factories) in the US, little support and high living costs. Remittances from resettled relatives allow for a better life in the camp and discourage many older refugees from resettling. Families are increasingly sending one or two younger family members abroad to study and work and support the family with remittances. Some of the Muslim refugees are reluctant to give up their businesses in Nupo and/or Maesot and leave, while others prefer to explore the new economic and political opportunities in Burma rather than resettling.

5) Insecurity and length of the resettlement process

Others give up resettlement because the process is too long and too insecure. Instead of continuing to wait in insecurity, they explore alternatives such as work in Thailand or Malaysia or 'experimental return' to Burma.

6) Lack of official information

The lack of information about resettlement and host countries plays a central role in refugees' decisions to reject resettlement. An elderly Muslim couple from Karen State who have been in the camp (and never left the camp) since it was established in 1997, applied for resettlement in Oslo where one of their sons had resettled. They missed an interview in the application process and their application was rejected. They applied for resettlement in Australia, where one of their daughters was living. They were rejected and applied a second time and a third and a fourth time and were rejected again, without further explanations.

We have already applied to resettle in Australia four times, but we are still refused. I do not understand their law and why they refused us. I do not know our weakness

since they did not mention it. We are wasting time with these rejections. I feel upset. If they gave us the reason, we would be able to decide, but they do not give any reasons. I feel sorry.

When the UNHCR proposed resettlement in New Zealand, they refused and insisted on applying again to Australia. They had never heard anything about New Zealand or even where it was located and were afraid to be too far away from their children. When they realized that they could not apply for Australia any more, they tried applying to the United States (where they had no relatives) and their application was put on hold. When a neighbour explained to them that New Zealand was closer to Australia than the United States, they went back to the UNHCR to apply to New Zealand, but were told that it was too late as they had already signed a paper, declaring that they rejected the option of applying to New Zealand. When I returned to the camp in June 2013, their application to the United States was still being processed.

We cannot move forward or backward. Our applications have been refused and we struggle to survive here. Also, our children's education cannot be recognized abroad. So I feel sorry and depressed.

U Nay, 65, Muslim (Oct 2011)

In all cases, the wish to resettle or not to resettle was based on a combination of these factors. The research has shown that Burman, Mon and Chin refugees from the PAB section were more likely to opt for resettlement and secondary migration than the Karen and the Muslims from Karen State, who have been longer in the camps and are often more established in the region (geographic proximity to Karen State, migration history in the region, involvement in the KNU/KNLA for the Karen, businesses in the camp and in the region for Muslims). The PAB refugees have spent less time in the camp (although not necessarily less time in displacement), they have less ties to the region and many have lived and feel more comfortable in urban areas. Resettling in the United States or looking for work in Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur will certainly appear less daunting than spending the rest of their life in a jungle refugee camp to those who have previously lived in cities or already have an extensive migration history like many of the Burman and young Mon refugees I met. They will be more likely to accept the risk of secondary migration than refugees from very rural areas with no migration history beyond the border region. More exposure, often (not always) higher education, better English, some formal skills and work experience, less fear of culture shock,

relatives abroad – all these aspects play a role in refugees' mobility. The research has also shown that group pressure played a certain role in refugees' choices. Frequently, refugees in the Karen and Muslim sections were persuaded by neighbours or refugees from the PAB section that resettlement was the better option. And while those who decided against resettlement were mostly Karen, large numbers of PAB refugees like Ariya have been giving up waiting for resettlement and embarking on secondary migration – because the process was too slow, too insecure, because of rumours and, recently, also because of the political changes in Burma.

Another argument that Horst makes is that migration has been part of Somali tradition for centuries. Their mobility has helped them overcome insecurity (2006: 153). My research has shown that the Mon in Nupo, who seem to have a stronger migrant worker tradition than the Karen, were also more mobile in displacement. This was also the case for the Chin who were already significantly farther away from their homeland than the Karen and the Mon. Horst argues further that flight, although “an immediate and radical response to acute danger, it still entails some form of choice” (2006: 154). Bagao's itinerary shows that, although he didn't have much choice the moment he fled, he did make choices later – to follow his friend to Malaysia, to return to Thailand to learn English, to leave Bangkok for the refugee camp, to leave the camp to work in Umphang, to return to the camp, to wait for resettlement and, most recently, to give up waiting for resettlement and to try getting a migrant worker permit to stay and work in Thailand. These choices were influenced by chance, by encounters with people, by safety considerations, by livelihood opportunities, by rumours and by personal preferences. Constant uncertainty and insecurity does not allow any space for a linear decision making process. Although refugees often spend years thinking about their future and possibilities of getting out of limbo, decisions are made ad-hoc when an opportunity presents itself, often following rumours such as the Malaysia registrations, repatriation, political changes in Burma. Refugees rarely announce their decision to leave. They disappear discretely at dawn with the first *songthaew*. Big announcements or goodbyes are reserved for joyous and formal occasions like resettlement. Movements between the camp and Burma are kept secret when possible as they are undocumented and carry risks, and many of those who leave try to keep the option of returning to the camp open in case of difficulties in Burma, or if registration or resettlement becomes a more likely prospect.

The changing political climate in Burma has reinforced ‘compassion fatigue’ of international donors, leading to a dramatic reduction of humanitarian aid. Stronger economic ties between Burma and Thailand have decreased the likelihood of registration and access to

resettlement for the remaining refugees. In June 2013 the United States, their principal recipient country, stopped resettling refugees from Burma. With resettlement options appearing more and more unlikely, survival in the camps more difficult than ever and the political situation in Burma looking optimistic for the first time in decades, refugees are returning en masse, unassisted. Many of those, who were hoping for resettlement and were resolute about staying, have changed their minds and returned. Most of the returnees had something to return to – relatives, a home, livelihood opportunities or at least the confidence of safety, while the majority of those who remain in the camps have nothing left to return to.

In December 2011 my student Zar Li, 21, told me he would visit friends in Maesot. He seemed upset when I wished him a safe trip and said we would see each other again in January. A few weeks after he had left, he wrote to me that he was in Yangon, on his way to his native Chin State. His emails from Burma were short and never included the words ‘camp’, ‘Nupo’, ‘Thailand’. They were substituted by ‘there’. Zar Li was eager for ‘news’ from the camp, meaning registration and resettlement. His dream had been to join his sisters in Australia and attend university. In one of his letters, he asked me what he should do – come back to the camp or remain in Burma. He could not decide, feeling that he had already lost five years of his life in the camp. He was also hesitant to repeat the expensive, long and dangerous journey. As he wrote to me I heard rumours that there might be a registration in the coming weeks. I imagined the possible scenarios: giving up the dream of resettlement and returning to Chin State; becoming a farmer, risk land confiscation and abuse by Burmese soldiers; moving to Yangon and live in a tin shack village on the city’s outskirts and working in construction; taking the risk of returning to the camp and live in limbo for another two, three, four, five or more years not knowing if there will be any registration; eventually resettling in the US (and get a factory job) or in Australia (and maybe get the chance to study); or being repatriated to Burma from the camp, or going South to Malaysia for undocumented work in a factory or construction site. I couldn’t give any advice and Zar Li stayed in Burma and helped his parents for a while, then found a place in an English missionary school in Yangon before moving on to Malaysia to look for work and support his family, hoping to be able to register with the UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur and eventually resettle.

My student Ko Thant, a 28-year-old political refugee from Yangon, wrote this essay in November 2011:

Since I arrived in this camp, I was longing for Burma. All I want is to meet my dad and mom once again. I want to go back to Burma – honestly. But I can't. There are many reasons to choose resettlement. Yes! It is all about our brutal government. Yes I am afraid to get caught. At least 3 years in prison if you crossed the border illegally. It doesn't include any clandestine activities, in which you participated. It is not only me, who chose to find a place that would give me safety, but also two thirds of the young population in Burma choose to resettle – in many ways. You can say this is not true, but trust me if I make a phone call back to Burma to talk to my old buddies, I will get the answers – he is in Singapore or Malaysia or somewhere else, a place which can guarantee their education and livelihood. I love my country and all of my friends also feel the same, and I will always try to get back one day. But right now I have decided not to go back even if one of my parents would pass away before I will be freed from here. I will never regret about what I have done and chosen, because this is my life and my own choice and all those things are because of this stupid government.

I want to resettle, because I want a better future, which will be filled with better education and opportunities. I believe that my life would be better in a third country. Why not in Burma? I grew up under the dictatorship. I've heard clearly and seen clearly all of the injustices and oppression by the government of Burma. They don't care about people's education, health, the economy and the infrastructure of our country. One thing they care about is their power, power to control and rule the country so that they could keep their own wealth. All the generals and army guys never hesitated to capture activists and crack down on all the protests, which were likely to threaten their power. Our people are full of fear and lack education. You can see that Burmese people are not greedy, they are content. All they want is a peaceful life and a good enough income to support their families. I don't mean higher class families, I mean the majority of people from all the different states, and also poor farmers. All of the different ethnic people in this camp want to live in their home villages until they die.... For over 60 years, people got oppression, torture and injustice from the government. Many activists have been captured and killed, many villages have been burnt down and many youths have lost their future. Who can wait any longer for any change?

As for me, living in the camp is safer than living in Burma and also choosing to resettle in a third country is better than living in this confined place. Better

education, a proper job, access to new technologies and a life guarantee are necessary for me. I want to sleep safely at night, I mean, I don't want any worries that will keep me awake. So I won't go back to Burma and I prefer to resettle or I will die here gazing at my country's mountains from the borderline.

Six months after Ko Thant wrote this letter, he returned to Yangon.

Like Zar Li and Ko Thant, about two-thirds of my former students have left the camp – either to return to Burma or to seek work outside. Those who remain are considering alternatives, while continuing to cling to the paling beacon of resettlement. Not all refugees are as mobile as Zar Li, Bagao or Ariya. In the PAB section, the uncertainty and ambiguity of their legal status make it extremely difficult for many refugees to choose between remaining and continuing to wait for registration or taking the risk of “experimental return” (Zetter 2011) or undocumented secondary migration. There are thousands who continue to wait and live in limbo.

When I arrived in the camp in July 2011, U Lin was speaking with confidence about joining his brother in Indiana. Returning was out of question and resettlement seemed merely a matter of time. In six years U Lin has never left the camp, occupying himself with work at the school. By the time I left Nupo in June 2012 he was speaking about his desire to return to his native Yangon, feeling disappointed and tired. At night thoughts of returning or finding work in Maesot kept him awake. Yet, he always insisted that he did not want to live the life of an undocumented migrant in Thailand. His English was excellent and the prospect of a new beginning in the US where his brother lived seemed less daunting to him than starting over as an undocumented migrant in an unwelcoming Thai border town. Constant worries about his sisters' and his own future caused chronic shoulder pain and fed his insomnia. As we climbed the dusty road that lined the camp one evening in April 2012, U Lin told me:

I think about going back sometimes. I miss Yangon. I miss my friends and my work. I am tired of life here. When we get sick, we don't get treatment. And the most difficult is that they don't tell us when and if we can resettle at all. Five years, five rainy seasons. We eat, we sleep. We eat, we sleep. We eat, we sleep and we wait, but nothing happens!

I am happy working at the school. I have met you and other friends, and my English is better now, but it has been a long time. More and more students leave

and we are all getting tired. At the same time, if I leave, I worry what will happen to the school.

I don't know. It is difficult to decide. Mina always talks about Yangon, but Thuza says she will never go back! And they both want to see our brother, the troublemaker!

I have not been able to renew my tour guide licence after I left. They will ask many questions – where I have been all those years and about my brother. You know, even now, he is still involved in politics.... My sisters demonstrated in 2007 and we hid a monk in our home, you remember my Spanish teacher. He was later arrested. This is the other problem why it is difficult to go back.⁶³

We reached the 'viewpoint' – a small platform with a wide view over the valley, where we used to rest during our walks before returning to school. The farmer's little bamboo hut had been burned down together with the field. The barking dogs were gone. The soil stretched black and thorny before us. Remains of burned plastic bottles, shreds of clothes, pieces of glasses and bamboo were strewn around the empty space. The air smelled of burned earth and ashes danced in the heat. U Lin picked up a piece of bamboo and sat on it, tucking his *longyi* around his knees. Then he continued:

And we are Muslims. It is more difficult for us, you know. They will ask questions and will watch us all the time. And what if I cannot get my tour guide licence? How can we survive then? I really don't know what to do.

When I returned for a visit in June 2013, U Lin and his sisters were still in Nupo and he was more torn than ever. The registration process was dead, yet his mind kept swinging between and despair as rumours came and went. U Lin longed for Yangon more than ever but at the

⁶³ U Lin's brother was the principal reason why he and his sisters fled Yangon. U Lin's brother has been a political activist, a member of the NLD, and is a close friend of Daw Aung San Su Kyi. He had been sentenced to 11 years in jail and served seven years in Insein and Tangoo prisons. Suffering from epilepsy, he was released in a prisoner amnesty. Every two weeks, U Lin made the ten-hour train journey to Tangoo, where he was allowed to spend 15 minutes with his brother, deliver a food package from their sister Mina and, usually, a message rolled into a cheroot. Prison had alienated his brother from his former life. He could not find work and his former friends and colleagues shunned him in fear for their own safety. He married the woman who had waited for him to be released since their university days. Together they fled to the Thai border, then to Nupo camp. Their daughter was born in the refugee camp. Because of his illness and high status as a former political prisoner, they were able to resettle in the United States within two years with the help of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) in Maesot. After his brother disappeared U Lin's family was questioned and watched even more closely by the Military Intelligence. Fearing arrest, U Lin and his two sisters fled to the border.

same time feared the spread of anti-Muslim sentiments in Burma. He was also worried whether he would be able to earn a living if he returned to Yangon.

U Lin is more hesitant in his choices than many other refugees and thus less mobile. But then, he has an interesting occupation in the camp, receives remittances from his brother and is thus not forced to look for work outside. Also, he is in his 50s, has two sisters to look after and is overall a very thoughtful and careful person. His hesitation and indecisiveness are not signs of passivity but rather of his thoughtfulness and fear to take the wrong decision and endanger his family. U Lin's struggle to make a choice illustrates several important factors in such decision making processes: the importance of family ties (he will not be able to leave one of his sisters behind and return); safety considerations (fears of political persecution and religious discrimination); cultural considerations and feelings of 'home' (no ties to Thailand, nostalgia for Yangon, his friends and the work he loved); livelihood considerations and dissatisfaction with the current situation (the loss of his tour guide licence, dependency on his brother's financial support, difficult living situation in the camp, health hazards); and social and professional responsibilities in the camp (concern about the future of the school and students that he is responsible for).

U Lin's case shows how complex and dynamic decision processes are, influenced both by multiple internal and external factors. They are shaped by social factors but they are also highly individual processes, and it is difficult to draw general conclusions beyond having identified decision factors that resurge in all interviews and conversations with refugees – whether they are mobile or immobile, whether they want or do not want to resettle.

Indecisiveness and hesitation are a direct result of the lack of official information. Not being well informed about resettlement options and procedures makes it extremely hard for refugees to take decisions about their future, as in the case of the elderly Muslim couple who rejected the possibility to apply for resettlement in New Zealand simply because they did not know that New Zealand was closer to Australia (where their daughter was living) than the United States.

Zetter's (2011) observation that "displaced populations themselves increasingly resist formal national or international initiatives to provide solutions" is a crucial indicator that the humanitarian government and host countries need to pay more attention to the refugees' own responses to protracted displacement and encampment. A 2011 camp survey revealed that about half of all refugees in Nupo welcomed third-country resettlement. At the same time, they criticise and resist the passive role that they have been assigned, the management and the lack of transparency in the registration and resettlement processes. Those, on the other hand,

who reject resettlement also reject forced repatriation and prefer to return on their own when they deem it safe. The current rumours about forced repatriation will push thousands more to disperse in Thailand, where they will remain in the grey-zones of human existence, illegal, unprotected, risking exploitation and deportation. Strategies of “irregular secondary migration” among refugees demonstrate their resistance and autonomy and suggest that the solutions currently proposed by the humanitarian government are not suitable and “that they prefer to seek their own solutions” (Zetter 2011: 3-4).

My research echoes Zetter’s appeal to place refugees “at the centre of decision-making about their present and future circumstances” as the only way of finding durable solutions to protracted displacement (Zetter 2011:11-13). The refugees’ strategies of coping with displacement need to be studied and supported in formal ways by the humanitarian government and by host countries. Undocumented work migration from the refugee camps indicates the need for livelihood opportunities inside and outside of the camp. Work permits would protect refugees from exploitation and arrest by acknowledging and legalizing an already existent condition. Pre-registered and non-registered refugees, having waited years for registration and resettlement, need to be recognized as refugees through formal registration and given the opportunity to apply for resettlement. The processes of registration, resettlement and repatriation need to be more transparent and inclusive, allowing refugee representatives to take part in the decision-making processes. Clarity and transparency will reduce uncertainty, the resulting anxiety and the impact of rumours and help avoid further acts of desperation and tragedies like Ariya’s.

Increased experimental return migration over the past year indicates a growing desire among refugees to return to Burma. In this critical moment it is essential that the humanitarian system in cooperation with the Thai and Burmese governments keeps repatriation a voluntary option and works towards increasing the safety and security of returnees through protection from persecution, citizenship rights, clearing of landmines in the refugees’ regions of origin and creating livelihood opportunities beyond the special economic zones that are currently under development. Ensuring a safe environment and farmland for returnees should be a priority. If this framework is given communities will be able to develop according to their own needs and organize their own space accordingly.

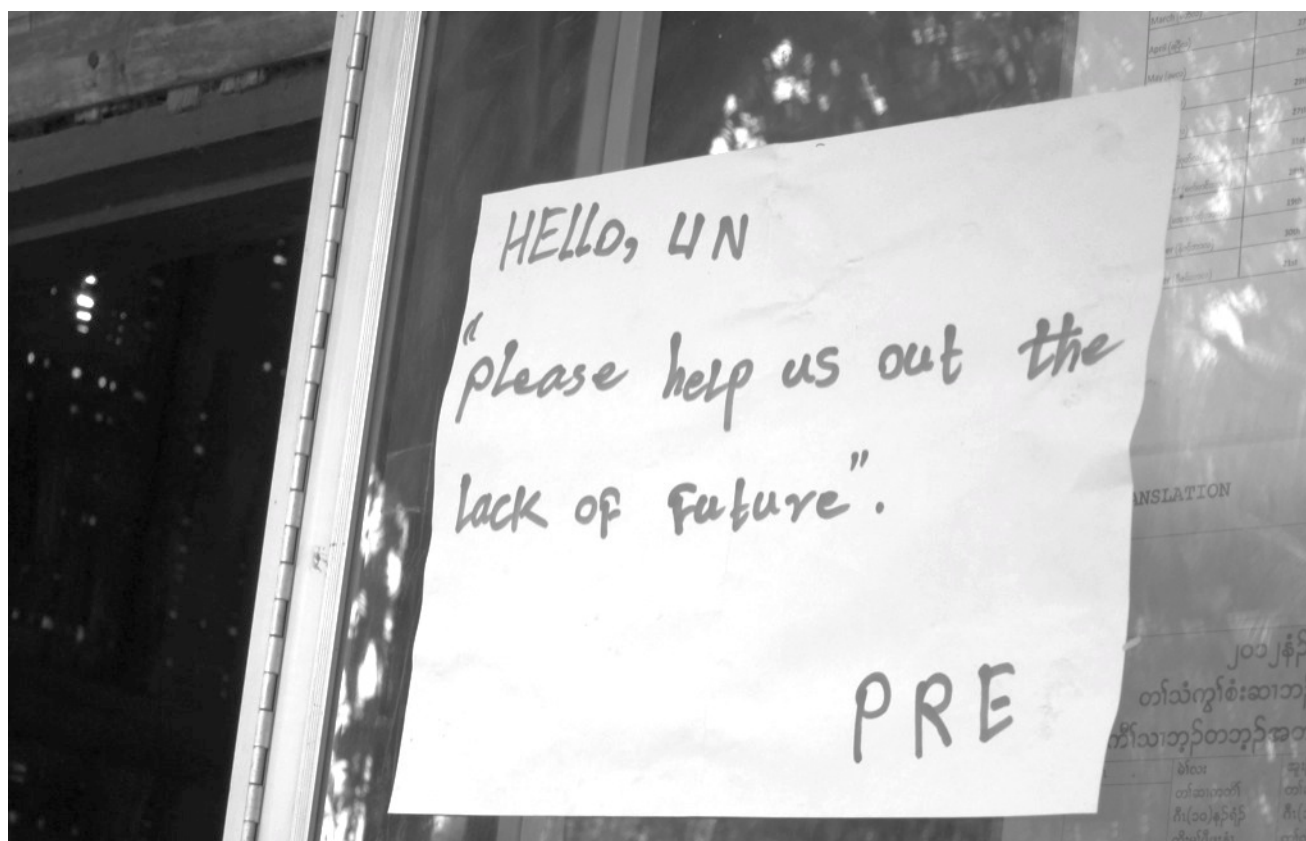
For refugees, who wish to remain in the camps, independent livelihoods such as farming and small business enterprises as well as access to the Thai language and education system need to be encouraged and supported. Gradually, the camps could transform themselves into small and independent rural settlements, integrated within local communities.

More transparency and support in the processes as well as the legalization of the status of refugees working undocumented outside the camps will also contribute to shrinking the dangerous grey zones of illegal labour and human trafficking and increasing safety and control – for refugees, for the humanitarian system, as well as for the Thai authorities.

Dukkha-theh, the Burmese word for refugee, comes from Pali and means ‘the one who suffers’. Unable to make themselves at home in the present, refugees dwell between past and future, between hope and fear. This state of permanent anxiety causes suffering. Ultimately, hope and fear, deeply entwined, lie at the heart of every choice, of every action. U Lin and Mina will keep waiting as long as their hope for resettlement remains alive or as long as their fear of returning remains too powerful. Ariya decided to travel to Malaysia, hoping for refugee status and fearing that her sons would lose their future if they remained encamped. Hope for change, for belonging and home, safety and freedom brought Ko Thant back to Burma. Others, whose hope withers away and who struggle to find meaning in their ‘suspended’ present, find themselves in the grip of depression and apathy. Questions around fear and hope open up interesting perspectives for further exploration of exile and the lived experience of encampment through the engagement with the anthropology of hope, notably with the works of Miyazaki (2006), Appadurai (2004), and Crapanzano (2003).



'A peaceful protest by people without a future' in front of the UNHCR office in Nupo camp in April 2012. Photograph by the author.



Pre-registered refugees put up this note, signed 'PRE', on the door to the UNHCR office in Nupo. April 2012. Photograph by the author.



Four out of eight siblings, born and raised on the border, getting ready to resettle in New Zealand. 2013. Photograph by the author.



A family leaving the camp for resettlement in New Zealand. 2012. Photograph by the author.



U Lin's sister Mina preparing *ono khauq swe* for our dinner. 2013. Photograph by the author.



Students U Wisara and U Pandita (Mon, 35 and 30) preparing sticky rice in bamboo for Dor and me. 2012. Both returned to Mon State since, came back to the camp for several months and returned to Burma again. Photograph by the author.



My student Ma Kyo (Muslim, 19) presenting her work in 2011. Ma Kyo was born and grew up on the border. She resettled with her family to Minnesota last year and now works now as a maid in a motel. Her family feels very isolated in the US and is saving money to return to the camp. Photograph by the author.



My student Lily (Dawei, 18) with her youngest brother in 2011. In 2012, Lily's family left the camp for the port town of Mahachai in southern Thailand, where Lily is now working in a squid factory and supporting her parents and two younger siblings. She suffers from a lung disease. Photograph by the author.

Epilogue

In May 2013 I returned to the region for another six months, reconnecting with people and places across Burma, Thailand and its border region. The small patchwork of field notes that follows will hopefully give a taste of those encounters as they occurred in real time. I wish to conclude this journey and this essay as I began them – exploratory, experimental and open in spirit.

Yangon, 15 May 2013

Vertical rain. A cyclone moving towards the western coast. A jungle in the city. A city in the jungle. A concrete jungle swallowed by exhaust fumes and greed. Crows carking. Frogs chanting, drowning out traffic noise. The city – a gigantic construction site. Sledge hammers hammering away on crumbling colonial palaces. Dusty skeletons smash stones with bare hands, building flyovers, shopping malls and condominiums in a frantic race towards modernity. Young men and women, pushed off their land by poverty and desolation, dams and tourism development projects settle in a belt of tin-shack villages around the city. Yangon expands. Dissolves. Children meander barefoot through the morning traffic, bartering jasmine strings to cab drivers. Worn-out Ladas roll past cream coloured mansions behind massive walls and barbed wire. Teenage couples steal time on the shores of Inya Lake, faces hidden under umbrellas, absorbed by romance and mobile phones. Downtown, street stalls display memorabilia with the Lady and her father's portraits. Teashops display *samosas* and tired faces. Taxis and buses display 969 stickers⁶⁴ and Islamophobia. Streets crumble beneath my feet. Betelnut stains on sidewalks and staircases, blood red, evoke the pain and hatred boiling beneath the soothing sounds of swaying palm trees and pagoda bells.

I take a sticker-free cab to meet Ko Kyaw in his office. The car makes a bend around Inya, then drives along dusty side streets, dodging rickshaws and dogs. I notice more cars, less government propaganda billboards and more advertisements for whitening creams and mobile

⁶⁴ 969, at its origin a sacred Buddhist number, symbolizing the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* (teachings) and the *Sangha* (monkhood), has become the symbol of a growing Islamophobic campaign calling to boycott Muslim businesses. The movement, encouraged by the Buddhist monk U Wirathu, has been rapidly gaining supporters throughout the country, igniting communal violence and sparking fear among Burma's Muslim minorities.

phones. The driver is delighted that I speak Burmese and asks me to marry him. Ko Kyaw meets me in the lobby of the editorial office. We sit down across a much too wide glass table on cold leather sofas, fans blowing into our faces. He suggests we have a tea, so we walk out into the dust and heat and sit down on pink miniature plastic chairs on what feels like the middle of a busy intersection. It's been a year since I last saw him in Maesot. He's grown taller and slimmer. I remember that he turned 18 this year. He looks serious and mischievous all at once. I am proud of him. When he was 13 his family fled to Nupo camp. His father, an artist and political opposition leader, who had served four prison sentences including years in solitary confinement, set up a gallery in the camp and gave drawing classes in his home. He took Ko Kyaw out of high school after grade eight, declaring it was useless. Ko Kyaw came to English class instead. He was brilliant, bored and cynical. At 16, Ko Kyaw left the camp, starting to work as a translator and website editor in a migrant worker association in Maesot, sending money to his mother and little sister in the camp. Last year, he returned to Yangon and found work as an editor at the biggest weekly paper in the country. With his salary, he was able to bring his family back to Yangon, rent a small apartment and send his sister to school. As we sip our sweet tea surrounded by dust and noise, Ko Kyaw talks about his work and life in Yangon. He tells me it was hard to return and to face friends after a five-year gap in his life that he could not talk about to anybody. I ask him if he misses Nupo and he says: "Of course. But I'm glad I'm not there!" Then, he talks about computer games and jokes about girls and reminds me more of a teenager than the serious journalist and family man that he has become. We finish our tea and say goodbye, for today. Ko Kyaw has to return to work. He usually spends the nights in the office – on call, he explains.

Yangon, 20 May 2013

At least nine of my former students are here in Yangon now, most of them from the advanced class. I meet Ko Thant in eastern downtown, in front of his parents' home. He gives me a casual American-style hug, looking smart in his jeans, white shirt and sunglasses. "So good to see you. Welcome to Myanmar!" We wander through the neighbourhood, then sit down to eat Mon-style *Mohinga* at his favourite corner shop. Ko Thant asks me for news from the camp, common friends, my thesis. He attended advanced class and also my research class in Nupo. He also taught as a volunteer at another English school and worked as an interpreter for the US Home Department of Security, translating resettlement interviews. Ko Thant has a BA degree in English and used to volunteer with Save the Children in Yangon. He fled to Thailand after organizing student protests at his university six years ago. Having always said

that he would never go back, he returned to Yangon last year. After several months of job hunting, he found work with a tour company, organizing trips for wealthy Burmese tourists to Thailand and Korea. I ask if he's happy about being back and he says: "You know, we have been gone for a long time. We have to learn everything again, like a child when it does its first steps. It's not easy, but at least it's our country and we're not discriminated like in Thailand. And I'm happy being close to my parents. They're getting older and their health isn't good. Soon they won't be able to work anymore, so I have to prepare". "How is the job?" He hesitates. "It's ... well, it's a job. We have to struggle, at least for the next few years. It's a lot of stress and responsibility. If I make a mistake with the reservations, I will have to pay for it. I work late every day, also on weekends, sometimes until ten or 11 at night. And it's not too much money – 70 dollars per month. And you know Yangon is so expensive now! If I didn't have my parents' home to stay at it would be impossible. But at least, I have a job. And I'm not in a refugee camp." As Ko Thant talks about his parents' work at the daily market, I wonder how those without a degree or skills, without English, without connections and without family support can survive here in Yangon.

In June 2013, I return to the border.

Nupo Refugee Camp, 3 June 2013

A candle glued to the lid of the *High Class* whiskey bottle dimly lights a corner of the room. I sit cross-legged below the shrine, laptop on my knees, typing notes. Tiny flies flock to the light of my computer screen. I crush them between my fingers. The rain taps on thatch and leaks in drizzles on my hair. A drunk man whistles an old Burmese song. Hushed voices next door, a guitar a few huts down the path. A monk's voice recites Buddhist sermons. As I lift myself up, the bamboo floor crushes below the weight of my feet and crumbles away. Anna⁶⁵ and I are staying in the abandoned home of our student Ko Nay. He left Nupo several months ago with smugglers, to find work in the coastal town of Pattaya, notorious for its nightclubs and sex trade. "There won't be any more resettlement", he had said.

It rains day and night. Anna has a fever, lying inside the mosquito net under a pile of blankets. Ko Ko Naing kneels at her side, rubbing a wet towel into her forehead and dripping water through a straw into her mouth. There is a Dengue epidemic. Babies vomit blood. Masked men parade through the sections, spraying clouds of chemicals. The camp is quieter

⁶⁵ Also a former volunteer teacher

than I remembered it, eerily so. As I walk thorough the PAB section, piles of rotting bamboo remind me of students and friends who have left, their abandoned homes gone now. Those who are still here do not have anywhere to go.

Nupo Refugee Camp, 6 June 2013

Since I first arrived in the camp in July 2011, Burma has emerged from a pariah state as the new magnet for Western and Asian investors, international organisations and NGOs, embassies, politicians, researchers, artists, travellers and tourists. Daw Aung San Su Kyi has been released from house arrest and swapped her iconic status against a seat in parliament. President Thein Sein's new government has signed ceasefire agreements with several ethnic armies. Western heads of states and delegates, including Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have come on historic state visits. At the same time, a wave of sectarian violence between the majority Buddhists and the minority Muslims has swept from Rhakine State in Western Burma into the country's heart. Armed conflicts in Shan and Kachin States continue; tens of thousands of displaced people are pushed forth and back between IDP camps in the forests of Northern Kachin State and China. Meanwhile, investment booms. Real estate prices have skyrocketed in Yangon, fuelling the construction boom and pushing the city's poor into shantytowns on the city's outskirts. Government cronies and wealthy real estate owners are stashing profits away in bank accounts in Singapore; the poor are becoming more destitute and marginalized.

Here in Nupo, there is little talk about democracy or excitement about the new gold rush. Instead, there is worry about surviving the Dengue epidemic and anxiety about a very uncertain future. International attention and money has rapidly shifted from the border to within the country. Meanwhile, the situation of the remaining 130,000 refugees on the Thai-Burma border remains unresolved, their lives suspended. The areas in Karen, Karenni and Shan States, to which most refugees in the nine camps have fled, have not been cleared of landmines and the ceasefires remain fragile with occasional fighting regularly erupting across the border. There are no livelihood opportunities, no infrastructure, health care or education for refugees to return to and rebuild their lives after decades of encampment. Instead, there are rumours about the setup of special economic zones in the border areas of Karen State, replacing farmland with factories, where refugees will be transferred to and expected to work. Political refugees, on the other hand, are not guaranteed any legal protection in case of return. Nevertheless, like Ko Thant and Ko Kyaw, thousands have been going back experimentally, testing the newly acquired freedoms, hoping to participate in the political process and/or

finding livelihood opportunities thanks to the ongoing growth in tourism and other sectors as well as the expanding NGO landscape. But they are the exception – the English speakers, the skilled and educated. Many of the returnees, disillusioned with the lack of security and perspectives for them in Burma, embarked again on risky undocumented journeys to Thailand or to Malaysia not long after their return to look for work in factories or in construction. Others returned to the camp.

My last visit to Nupo is in October 2013.

Nupo Refugee Camp, 8 October 2013

I meet Moon at the Muslim market. He tells me he is leaving this afternoon, to Umphang. Then he smiles and says he has a ‘happy secret’ he wants to tell me later. We drink tea and eat tofu salad at Moe’s shop. He can’t resist and tells me he’s going further away than Umphang. I already know. I read it in his face before he tells me. He is going to Malaysia, to join Bagao. Next to him sits a striped plastic bag – inside a red Mon sarong, a pair of jeans and two t-shirts, a photocopied novel about a Mon boy I had given him two years ago. Bagao is already in Kuala Lumpur and arranging the journey for him. The smugglers will take him on foot through the jungle to Bangkok, then to the Malaysian border and finally to Kuala Lumpur. He has 5,000 baht inside a white envelope, a fraction of the smugglers’ fee. The trip will cost 30,000 baht. He will have to pay it off once he finds a job. Bagao will help, he says. I worry. He worries, too, he admits. He smiles his beautiful smile and places a key chain into my palm. I fumble in my purse and give him a pendant from a Lao monk that I had been carrying with me for the past five years. I think of Ariya, whose ten-year-old son died in an accident fleeing a police car on that same route last year. Ariya was paralysed in the accident, deported and returned to the camp. My stomach turns. I protest: “It’s too dangerous. Don’t go!” “I know”, he replies. Will I see him again? “Why do you have to go?” I ask, realizing how pointless my question is. “I need to make money to help my parents and my little sister finish school. And anyway, there is nothing to do here anymore”, he says. We get up and go down to the main road to buy sugarcane juice. We drink in silence, watching the road. I know he’ll be all right. I already miss him.

Nupo Refugee Camp, 10 October 2013

Moon is back in the camp. The smuggler said there was a problem – too many arrests. He has to wait for another four or five months. He smiles his beautiful smile, looking relieved. He

says he's happy because now he can take me to see that waterfall I've never seen. I am relieved, too. He says he will stay in the camp and wait.

Nupo Refugee Camp, 11 October 2013

No registration. A contact at the UNHCR told me in confidence that it is not going to happen. No one is talking about resettlement any longer. Yet, they continue to wait and hope, in silence and in disappointment. Repatriation rumours continue to send waves of fear, particularly among civil war refugees who have spent most of their lives in the camp and recall their former lives in Burma with horror.

Nupo Refugee Camp, 11 October 2013

I walk with U Lin to the viewpoint – our conversation a déjà-vu. “Will you return home?” U Lin takes off his left sandal, puts it carefully on the ground, then sits down on it. He gazes at the cornfield on the hill, that same hill that was all ashes and smoke last time we had been there together. “I am always thinking about it, but I worry about the problem – you know, the problem between Buddhists and Muslims. There has been more violence in Rhakine and also in Northern Burma. We call our sister in Yangon once a month. The news are not good for us.”

Nupo Refugee Camp, 12 October 2013

U Lin's sister Mina invites me for dinner. “*Nupo hma pyaw la?*” She greets me. “Are you happy in Nupo?” “*Pyaw-deh, ayan pya-ba-the!*” I exclaim. “I'm happy, very happy!” “*Ama go, pyaw la?*” “Are you happy, sister?” I add without thinking. “*Ma pyaw bu, sayama. Nupo hma ma pyaw bu.*” “We're not happy, *sayama*. We're not happy in Nupo”. “We will wait for another year”, she says as she refills my bowl with coconut broth and egg noodles. They still hope. “If there is no resettlement, we will go home.” U Lin doesn't say anything. He sprinkles coriander on top of the noodles and squeezes lime into my soup.

Maesot, 13 October 2013

Moon calls me on my mobile. He left Nupo and is working on a corn farm in Umphang. He asks me about my trip and what I had for breakfast. “Is the work hard?” I ask. “I need to drink a lot of water, I think. It's too hot.” he says. “Do they pay you OK?” “Not much. But tell me about your trip. Are you happy?”

Vienna, 22 October 2013

A Facebook message from Moon and a picture entitled 'Waiting for the bus in Mon State'. On the picture – Moon with two friends from the camp, sitting on the sidewalk in their traditional red Mon *longyis* and white shirts, big smiles on their faces. He has left the corn farm and returned to Burma. He will try to get a migrant worker permit with which he can return and find work in Thailand, he writes. Or maybe he will try to join Bagao in Malaysia.



The Moie river separating Burma (left shore) from Thailand in Maesot. 2012. Photograph by the author.



Young people passing an afternoon at the 'viewpoint' where we used to talk with U Lin. 2012. Photograph by the author.

*When we launched life
on the river of grief,
how vital were our arms, how ruby our blood.
With a few strokes, it seemed,
we would cross all pain,
we would soon disembark.
That didn't happen.
In the stillness of each wave we found invisible currents.
The boatmen, too, were unskilled,
their oars untested.
Investigate the matter as you will,
blame whomever, as much as you want,
but the river hasn't changed,
the raft is still the same.
Now you suggest what's to be done,
you tell us how to come ashore.
When we saw the wounds of our country
appear on our skins,
we believed each word of the healers.
Besides, we remembered so many cures,
it seemed at any moment
all troubles would end, each wound heal completely.
That didn't happen: our ailments
were so many, so deep within us
that all diagnoses proved false, each remedy useless.
Now do whatever, follow each clue,
accuse whomever, as much as you will,
our bodies are still the same,
our wounds still open.
Now tell us what we should do,
you tell us how to heal these wounds.*

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, 'You tell us what to do', in *The Rebel's Silhouette*

Free translation by Agha Shahid Ali, 1991

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Abstract

This study is an ethnographic exploration of the lived experience of displacement and encampment. Drawing on 12 months of participant observation in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burmese border, it seeks to give a sense of what it means to be displaced and encamped, to exist in a state of permanent ‘temporariness’. Mobility and immobility, resilience and dependency, hope and despair form its core issues. Refugee camps – at their origins ‘non-places’ in Augé’s sense (1992), devoid of memory, identity and relationships – grow into complex social spaces and generate unique social dynamics. This thesis explores these dynamics as well as the processes that bring them about – the geographic, social and political exclusion, the categorization and control of the encamped, the uncertainty of life in suspension and its impact, livelihoods in encampment, strategies of survival and life choices, the transformation of space and the emergence of unique socialities.

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Forschungsarbeit, das Ergebnis von 12 Monaten teilnehmender Beobachtung, ist eine ethnographische Studie eines Flüchtlingslagers an der thailändisch-burmesischen Grenze. Sie setzt sich mit Mobilität und Stillstand, Widerstand und Abhängigkeit, Hoffnung und Verzweiflung auseinander. Das Flüchtlingslager ist zunächst ein Ort ohne Identität, Beziehungen und Erinnerungsspuren, ein „Nicht-Ort“ im Sinne von Augé (1992); es entwickelt sich jedoch zu einem einzigartigen sozialen Raum, der sich als Schnittstelle komplexer sozialer Dynamiken erweist. Die Studie widmet sich diesen Dynamiken und den Prozessen, aus denen sie hervorgehen - dem geographischen, sozialen und politischen Ausschluss der Flüchtlinge, den Klassifizierungs- und Kontrollmechanismen des administrativen Apparats, der allgegenwärtigen Unsicherheit einer Existenz im Schwebezustand und ihrer Auswirkung, den Überlebensstrategien und Lebensentwürfen, der aktiven Umgestaltung von Raum sowie der Entstehung von neuen sozialen Lebenswelten.

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