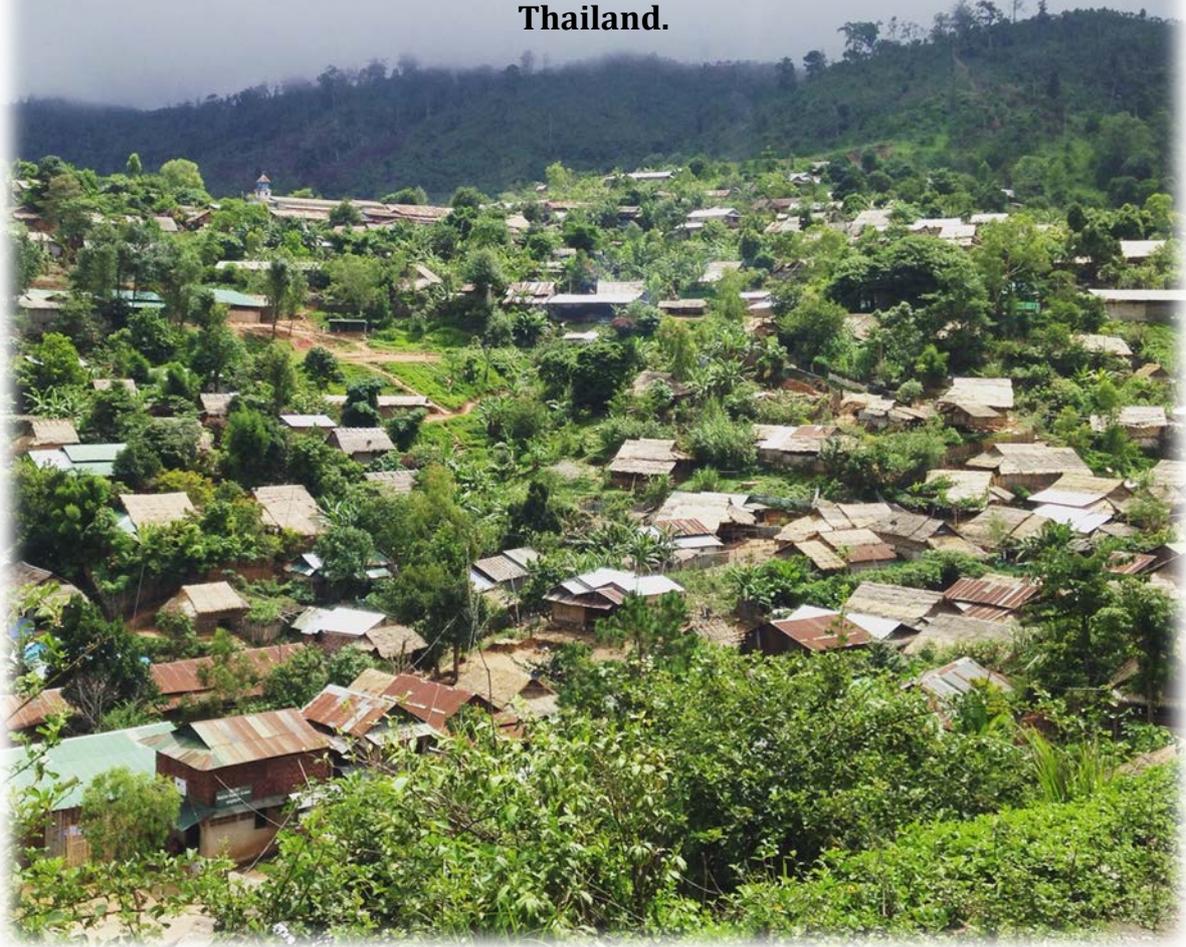


# **The meaning of Home while living in Exile**

**How a 'sense of home' is constructed by Burmese refugees residing in Thailand.**



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\* Cover photo: made by author in Umpiem refugee camp, Thailand.

## **Abstract**

Burma is the scene of one of the longest ongoing conflicts in the world, lasting over sixty years. However, in recent history the country has opened up and is undergoing a transformative political landscape into a democracy. Due to armed conflict and human rights violations by both the government and ethnic armed groups, thousands of people forcibly crossed the border into Thailand, in search for refuge and better opportunities. The aim of this thesis is to give voice to some of the young refugees living in a protracted situation in Thailand along the border with Burma. It seeks to uncover how these refugees, living in exile in refugee camps on the Thai/Burma border area, construct a sense of home in their past, present and future by identifying 'home as journey' as the dominant way they imagine, reproduce and construct home. The word 'home' is closely associated with identity and memory as well as territory and place. Therefore, in this thesis I discuss different conceptions of the relationship between people and places, conceptions that underlie the narratives of home and belonging of protracted Burmese refugees. The refugees construct and reproduce the past and future senses of home, which usurps the present. The refugees' search for home is translated into an abstract ideal, highlighting various practices and relationships based on their ethnicity and homeland.

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## I. Introduction

*"To be rooted is perhaps the most important and  
least recognized need of the human soul"*

Simone Weil (1987:41)

Myanmar, or Burma as the country was called until 1989, was a country isolated from the international community and has been plagued with conflict and violence for decades. Since its independence of the British Empire in 1948, it has been under military rule, causing conflict, oppression and many human rights violations. The conflict is known as one of the longest protracted conflicts in the world, lasting for over sixty years. Faced with much ethnic and religious diversity<sup>1</sup>, the post-independence military regime tried to purify the country through assimilationist policies, exacerbating the ethnic divisions. This has caused enormous hardship and grievances for ethnic minorities, resulting in massive displacements throughout the country and across its borders.

However, since the November 2015 elections, the country has undergone a major transition when a civil government took power. Though the military regime still has major political influence by having a fixed twenty-five per cent of the seats in parliament enshrined in the 2008 constitution, the country is slowly changing. Eloquently phrased, a NGO worker in Mae Sot, Thailand called the current political situation a 'democracy on a leash'.<sup>2</sup> While the country is opening up to the world and the international community is eager to get involved (economically), ongoing violence, reignited conflicts and human rights violations are still part of today's reality. The excitement of the political transition has hid ethnic hardships in the dark. Currently, there are over 1,5 million people of concern, counting almost a million internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees (UNHCR 2016b). The focus of this thesis will be on the latter, and with this thesis, I will try to illuminate some of these ethnic hardships.

Living conditions of refugees are often harsh and are intensified by discrimination, lack of integration, and uncertainty about the future. Especially in protracted situations, a situation in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and

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<sup>1</sup> There are 135 distinct ethnic groups officially recognized in Burma.

<sup>2</sup> Author's informal conversation with a NGO worker about the current political situation.

intractable state of limbo, basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years of exile (UNHCR 2004). Under such dire circumstances, how do refugees perceive themselves, their current place and their homes? Refugees offer an intriguing perspective into the theoretical discussions relating to place and identity and its interconnectedness “precisely because they experience such an overt severing of continuity with places” (Kabachnik, Regulaska and Mitchneck 2010: 316). It is this angle that allows me to explore how perceptions of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ are challenged and reshaped by young adult Burmese refugees in a protracted refugee situation in Thailand. In this thesis, I will examine how these Burmese refugees living in refugee camps on the Thai/Burma border interact with, and imagine, place and how they interact with and imagine the homes from which they fled, their future homes and their current living situation.

Within the refugee perspective, Malkki (1995) argues that refugees occupy a problematic liminal position in ‘the national order of things’, since in the present world order, having a nation-state and a nationality is regarded as ‘natural’ and identity is therefore naturally linked to a place. People who become refugees experience a sense of loss, as they move out of their place of origin. Malkki (1995) however, criticizes the ideas that define the refugees’ loss of culture, identity and roots. Similarly, Brun (2001) argues that displaced people are not torn loose from their culture, nor do they lose their identity or become powerless. According to Kibreab, for those who are compelled to live in a restrictive foreign environment, “the desire to return to one’s place of origin is invariably powerful” (1999: 404). Therefore, in this thesis, the Burmese refugees’ desire to return is also explored. It questions where this return is situated and how my informants construct a sense of home and belonging.

‘Home’ in this sense, is a contested concept, and challenging to define. It is a normative concept that can contain both understandings of a physical location and a set of feelings. The word ‘home’ is closely associated with concepts of identity and memory as well as territory and place (Black 2001). Through exploring narratives of identity, home and belonging (narratives derived from experiences), I seek to uncover vital connections between young adult Burmese refugees’ identities and their perception of home. By conducting an in-depth research into these narratives, this thesis aims to solve the following research puzzle: *As a civil war continues in Burma, how do young Burmese refugees living in refugee camps along the Thai/Burma border construct a sense of home*

*while living in exile?* I will use a constructivist point of view to uncover perceptions of place, home and belonging, and how they are shaped and reshaped by my informants. These concepts are multidimensional in which “temporality (past, present and future) intersects with spatiality (both physical and imaginary) and social relations” (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2009: 317). In this light, Mallet (2004) provides the bedrock for this thesis’ framework with her ‘home as journey’, which embodies the idea of home-making and the conceptualization of home as a continuous process, to analyze the construction of home of my informants.

In this thesis I build on the journey of home. This chapter provides a contextual background in order to get a deeper understanding of the prevailing narratives of my informants. This is followed by the relevance and objectives of the research. Chapter two discusses the academic debate around people, place and identity and will provide the conceptual framework. Chapter three addresses the methods used to conduct this research. My findings are presented in chapter four, in which I visit the past of my informants through their experienced survival, displacement, violence and memory of home; explore the future through their imagined homes; and portray their present lives in contrast to their past and future. The last chapter presents the conclusion with an answer to the research puzzle.

Regarding the name of the country, I intentionally use Burma instead of its formal name Myanmar. While Myanmar is the politically correct and official name of the country, I choose to use Burma, as almost all my informants continuously refer to Burma as their home country; a name that has a deeper meaning to them than Myanmar. One of my informants explained that he feels more connected to the name Burma, as for him, it is a more inclusive name with historical roots. Myanmar is a name that has been imposed on them by the military junta in 1989; a junta they have never supported.<sup>3</sup> In this light, I will continue to use the name Burma, as I have done throughout my research in Thailand and Burma, in order to show my empathy and engagement with the Burmese refugees and all of those involved.

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<sup>3</sup> Author’s interview with a Bamar refugee (m): 21 years old, 6 years in Mae La refugee camp (requested anonymity).

## 1.1 Setting the scene

This thesis deals with narratives derived from experiences of Burmese refugees. It is therefore crucial to understand where these experiences have taken place. A contextual background is provided in this section in order to get a deeper understanding of the experiences of Burmese refugees residing in Thailand.

### *Burma's historical and political context in a nutshell*

Burma has experienced a turbulent history with roots dating back to the British colonial rule. Its historical and political context is challenging to understand as conflict and fighting plagued the country for years, causing a shift of power between different ethnic groups. Burma was an independent country until 1886, when it was incorporated in the British Empire (Steinberg 2010). Under British rule, the country underwent an administrative division into two areas, namely Ministerial Burma and Frontier Areas. The former was the more developed area where mainly ethnic Bamar people took residence and where the political center was established by the British. The latter were less developed areas, inhabited by ethnic minorities (Thomson 1995). Under the British 'rule and divide' policy, the Bamar (the ethnic majority) were given preference by solely having Bamar representatives in parliamentary rule in 1923. The British believed the ethnic minorities to be a weaker and less developed race and therefore should not interact with the civilized Bamar and participate in politics (ibid). After its independence in 1948, the Bamar continued to reign the country under a military regime, controlled by the *Tatmadaw*, or the Burma Army. This and the previous division by the British significantly affected the relationships between the Bamar and ethnic minorities, causing the onset of a more than sixty years lasting civil war, with the government ignoring the plight of ethnic nationalities ever since its independence (Steinberg 2010).

When a semi-civilian government took power under President Thein Sein's administration in 2011, many people raised high hopes for Burma's transition into a democracy. Although the new government was able to initiate a series of political and economic reforms, Burma remained under military power (Burma Link 2015). Under this 'pseudocivilian government' a continuance of systematic human rights violations,

oppression and discrimination characterized the new established rule. Four years later, the November 8<sup>th</sup> 2015 elections resulted in a landslide victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD), showing a powerful expression of desire for political change (International Crisis Group 2015). While the prevailing narrative is that Burma has now really set off on a road to democratic reform, this road has been extremely rocky, with renewed conflicts and violence, causing continuous human rights violations by both the Burma Army and ethnic armed groups (EAG). Burmese people are increasingly starting to lose faith again due to the government's inability and, according to some, unwillingness to make major changes. This is evidenced by news sources, interviews conducted for this thesis and informal conversations with Burmese people in Burma, and refugees, migrants and NGO workers living in and around Mae Sot, Thailand.

#### *Thailand's 'aliens'*

Despite decades of experience with hosting thousands or even millions of refugees, the Thai policies on refugees remain 'fragmented, unpredictable, inadequate and ad hoc' (Human rights Watch 2012). This leaves refugees in an extremely vulnerable position to arbitrary and abusive treatment. Despite the fact that Thailand has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol, it has to a considerable extent, abided by international law related to refugees and their protection (Brees 2010). Thailand's 1979 Immigration Act provides a legal framework which has the greatest impact on asylum seekers. The Immigration Act is Thailand's domestic law governing immigration and related activities and events. In short, it states that all those who enter the Kingdom of Thailand without any papers are considered illegal and are subject to imprisonment, fines and deportation (1979 Immigration Act). As regards to refugees, in reality Burmese ethnic minorities fleeing violence and conflict in Burma could seek refuge on a *prima facie* basis in the refugee camps without any consequences (Brees 2010). As such, refugees are permitted to remain in Thailand with executive discretion, entitled to protection and services in the camp on a temporary basis, provided that Burma's conditions do not allow for repatriation (Brees 2010). Here, *could* is mentioned, because in 2007, the Thai government pressured the UNHCR to stop the refugee status determination process, resulting in thousands of asylum seekers that have been left with limited access to international protection (Human Rights Watch 2008). In

Thailand's point of view, Burmese refugees and migrants, as well as other 'non-Thais' are seen by the government and the local population as a threat to their security, social order and public health (Brees 2010).

### *Refugees' living conditions*

Because of the ongoing conflict and human rights abuses in Burma, many had to forcibly flee their place of origin. Burma counts an estimated 450,000 refugees residing in neighboring countries. In Thailand, the estimated total population in refugee camps along the border with Burma in 2015 was set on 120,000 refugees according to The Border Consortium (TBC). However, this number is disputed by many. Currently Thailand shelters Burmese refugees in nine official refugee camps. These camps vary greatly in size, from the largest, Mae La, with around 38,000 residents, to Ban Mae Surin, with around 2,600 people (TBC 2016, see appendix 1). This number represents the official verified caseload but many more reside outside the camps, living in hiding and exile due to the fact that they are unable to obtain the refugee status. Within the camps, some existing for over twenty-five years, no permanent structures can be built, the environmental impact must be kept to a minimum and the people are not allowed to leave the camps to find job opportunities (Brees 2010). On top of that, many issues occur in the camps such as discrimination, alcohol and drug abuse, food shortage, fire breakouts and no or little access to electricity (amongst other things).<sup>4</sup> Besides, anyone caught outside the camps is by the Thai authorities considered illegal and is prone to fines, arrest or even deportation, regardless whether they are able to certify that they carry a UNHCR refugee registration card (Brees 2010). This makes the living conditions in the camps extremely difficult for the many refugees residing in Thailand.

## **1.2 Relevance and objectives**

This thesis presents a context specific case study of a more global issue. Nowadays in various parts of the world there are increasingly more protracted refugee situations: situations in which "refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo" (UNHCR 2004: 1). According to the 2015 Global Trends report (UNHCR 2016)

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<sup>4</sup> This became apparent from the interviews conducted throughout my research whilst asking about their current living conditions.

21,3 million people held the refugee status at the end of 2015, with an estimated 6,7 million refugees in thirty-two protracted situations. Furthermore, this rapport shows that Burma became the eighth-largest refugee source country, with a refugee population of approximately 451,800 by the end of 2015. By researching the case study of the Burmese refugees in refugee camps along the Thai/Burma border, I am able to shed some light and provide a better insight into the experiences of millions of refugees living in protracted situations throughout the world. With this case study, I try to clarify how refugees in protracted situations, although each situation unique, construct notions of home and belonging and what fundamental aspects underlie these notions. These are of importance in particular to government policies and discourses on repatriation, as repatriation ideally involves decision-making of refugees themselves, taking into account their perception of home and belonging.

The aim of this thesis is to give voice to some of the young refugees living in different camps in Thailand along the border with Burma. That is to “tell the stories of those who have been shoved aside by the rest of society” (Ragin 1994: 16). Refugees can often be seen as ‘shoved aside’, as they are placed in camps or other temporary forms of accommodations and cannot enjoy some of the most basic rights. Over the course of many years of displacement, unsurprisingly not much research has been done in regards to Burmese refugees residing in Thailand due to the covert and ignored conflicts in Burma. In an attempt to identify the perceptions of home and belonging, I intent to uncover the experiences of the young adult Burmese refugees living in the refugee camps and their attitudes towards their homeland, host state and the process of return. The foundation of these attitudes can be found in place and identity, concepts that form the theoretical backbone of this thesis.

## II. People, Place and Identity

### 2.1 Theoretical debate

When looking into the body of literature on concepts of 'home' and 'belonging', it becomes evident that place and identity take a central role in the debates. Before looking into the relationship between people, place and identity, the latter should be discussed shortly in more detail in order to get a better understanding of what the concept entails for this thesis. Identity as a concept is considered to be so obvious that it seems not to need any further explanation (Demmers 2012). However, issues of identity nowadays seem to take on a special character as we have come to live in a more globalized world (Gupta & Ferguson 1992). The identity of an, as Gupta and Ferguson (1992) call it 'hybridized subject' is shaped by interstitial zones of displacement and deterritorialization. Conversely, other scholars like Malkki (1992) argue that people's identity is still territorially anchored as people gain their identity from association with a particular place. This shows that there still exists controversy as to how identity is shaped. Identity is a normative concept and is inevitably linked to gender, migration, mobilization, culture, religion, ethnicity and nationalism (Demmers 2012). It tells you 'who or what you are'. This can emerge from an individual sensation of a person's unique sense of self or from one's membership of a social category or group (Demmers 2012), either territorialized or deterritorialized. The premise of this thesis is grounded in the membership of social categories, whether nationality, ethnicity or otherwise. It is this starting point from where identity is derived in this thesis.

The relationship between people, place and identity has often been at the center of debates in refugee studies. Since the 1990's, academics in the field of refugee studies started focusing more on concepts of space and place (Brun 2001). However, during that time an overall increased interest in space and spatial relations can be found in a wider field of social sciences. Hence, the theoretical debate on people, place and identity can be placed in a broader context. Academic work on space and place in refugee studies have led to a critique of the essentialist understanding of the natural relationship between people and place. In this essentialist view, culture has a place-focused understanding instead of a more fluid and uprooted state (Brun 2001). And "when people and cultures are understood as localized and as belonging to particular

places, places become fixed locations with a unique and unchanging character” (Massey 1994 in Brun 2001: 17). In terms of refugee displacement, how refugees who forcibly fled their homelands are viewed is often connected with an essentialist notion of place, as they had to leave their place of origin and cross a state border in order to be granted the status of a refugee (Brun 2001). This essentialist notion of people and place is based in that “all human beings, understood collectively as cultural groups, ‘belong’ to a certain place on earth and derive a primordial identity from that belonging” (Jansen and Löfving 2007: 4). Therefore, according to the essentialist understanding, to be territorially ‘uprooted’ means “to be torn loose from culture, to become powerless and to lose one’s identity” (Brun 2001: 18).

Malkki (1992) however argues that we need to rethink the question of roots in relation to identity and the forms of territorialization. Alternatively to the essentialist notion, this understanding of space and place separates identity from territoriality, and therefore place. Academics such as Appadurai (1988) and Said (1979) propose a view in which notions of nativeness become very complex as more people identify themselves in reference to deterritorialized homelands, cultures and origins (Malkki 1992). In today’s globalized world, people have become more mobile than ever before, consequently displacing themselves constantly and creating homes and homelands without territorial base. This globalized period is argued to be characterized by a ‘generalized condition of homelessness’ (Said 1979: 18). Identity has therefore become more or less deterritorialized (Kibreab 1999). Deterritorialization and identity are however deeply linked. To root people in a place, country or even space is based on sedentary thinking, a kind of thinking that is not anchored in the objective reality of today because of its globalization and mobilization (Malkki 1992). Displaced people are not torn loose from their culture, nor do they lose their identity or become powerless (Brun 2001). According to Stepputat (1999), there is a need for reconceptualizing and understanding space and place and to ‘de-naturalize’ the relationship between people, places and identities by exploring how, when and under which circumstances people and identities are connected to specific places.

Other writers such as Clifford (1988), Gupta and Ferguson (1992) and Rapport and Dawson (1998) also criticized the notion of rooting people in one place. Today, it can be argued that we live in a globalized world where boundaries have become vague, borders have become fluid and people have become cosmopolitans. Actual places and

localities become blurred; ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become more salient (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). According to Gupta and Ferguson, people have become more mobile, causing a “profound sense of a loss of territorial roots” and an “erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of places” (1992: 9). This however, does not mean that today, we live in a global homogeneous cultural setting. On the contrary; this makes it ever more clear how ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983 in Gupta and Ferguson 1992) come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cling to homelands, places or communities, either remembered or imagined, in a world that seems to reject such strict territorialized anchors. These imagined places are connected to notions of belonging, and belonging based on ‘homeland’ allows these imagined communities to form distinct identities. In terms of refugees, it allows refugee communities to form a collective in a host state based on their homeland (Chowdhory 2012). Homeland can thus be described as a moral destination as opposed to a territorial or topographic entity (Malkki 1992). In this sense, home can be constructed through memories of, and claims on places. It may also offer a site of resistance to the place in which refugees are physically located (den Boer 2015). Refugees in protracted situations often stay together, especially in camps, based on ties to their homeland (Chowdhory 2012). They continue to strengthen such ties and associate memories and a bond with ‘home’ while living outside their territory.

However much the essentialist notion of people, place and identity seem outdated and, perhaps, too exclusive, this does not mean we should totally dismiss the idea of the essentialist understanding of space, “as long as it is included in the way displacement is experienced” (Brun 2001: 22). According to her, territory is a spatial extension as well as a demarcation of social relations. Kibreab argues that although there is a recent desirability to view people as global citizens, “territory still remains the major repository of rights and membership” (1999: 387). This is especially illustrated in cases where land constitutes as the social anchor and agriculture is the main source of livelihood, as in most third world countries. Here, rights of access to, and use of, sources of livelihood are often allocated on the basis of territorially anchored identity (Kibreab 1999). Moreover, Brun argues that the de-naturalization of the links between people and places have resulted in a neglect of “the location where displaced people and migrants are present” (2001: 20). By neglecting the ‘local perspective’, host communities are consequently often ignored. According to Allen and Turton (1996), in

order to analyze the situation, identity creation and the place making of displaced people, the local perspective is crucial. With this in mind, Brun (2001) argues for a 'reterritorialization' of the relationship between people and places. It can be understood as the way "to look at the changing status, power and meaning of territories" for displaced people (Brun 2001: 24). Even though refugees or displaced people may not wish to stay in their (temporary) place, this is the place where they have to survive, make their livelihoods and develop strategies to gain control over their own lives, thus, socially constructing the place where they are present (Brun 2001).

In addition, Kibreab (1999) explains that the reactions of the host state towards refugees and displaced people are territorially constructed. They have the right to exclude or deny outsiders, as well impose conditions of entry and residence on them and use their resources, therefore evidently portraying the territorialization of space. Territorialization in this sense means to be able to affect, influence or control people and their actions by asserting control over a specific geographical area (Sack 1986). Moreover, Kibreab (1999) argues that living in a time where spaces are more territorialized than ever before, we cannot speak of a deterritorialized identity. Therefore, displacement does not erase the connection to the previous place of displaced people. Rather, their present homes "become the venues through which they can reterritorialize their place-based identities, even while spatially removed from the places they identify with" (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2009: 332). With regard to identity construction, place can be seen an important indicator, even when wholly imagined or remembered (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2009). In this view, the debate about place and in particular about place and belonging and place and home is connected to discussions about identity.

## **2.2 Conceptual framework**

In the light of this discussion, the vital connections between people, place and identity have become evident. In order to analyze the narratives of young adult Burmese living in exile in refugee camps on the Thai/Burma border, I will explore the notions of place and identity further by hollowing out the concept of 'home'. The word 'home' is closely associated with concepts of identity and memory as well as territory and place (Black, 2001). Home can be made, re-made, imagined, created, changed, lost, moved,

remembered or desired (Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Black 2001). It can be attributed to both beliefs, customs and traditions, and to physical places (Black 2001). The conceptions of home are subject to constant reinterpretation and flux. Ergo home is a multidimensional concept “in which temporality (past, present and future) intersects with spatiality (both physical and imaginary) and social relations” (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2009: 317).

In this regard, Mallett’s (2004) idea of ‘home as journey’ will help me navigate through the narratives about place and identity of the Burmese refugees interviewed for this thesis. Moreover, “the conditions under which people leave their homelands, their journeys beyond and away from home and their destinations are all said to impact on their identity and understanding of home” (Mallett 2004: 78). Through this framework, I strive to make sense of the experiences and ideas of home and belonging of my informants. ‘Home as journey’ embodies the idea of home-making and the conceptualization of home as a continuous process. According Mallett, it is a “place of origin (however recent or relative) as well as a point of destination” (2004: 77). The journey captures the experiences of displaced people as they are displaced from, and hope for a return to, their homes (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2009). ‘Home as journey’ is seen as the permanent process of transition between a displaced person’s original home to their ideal or future home (Mallett 2004). Therefore, in this thesis I will follow the journey of home by remembering home (past), imagining home (future) and feeling home (present), as the evocation of memory of the past and hopes of the future are reproduced in the present according to Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck (2009).

As previously mentioned, place is an important indicator of identity construction. And according to Hirschon (1989) and Peteet (1995), there is clear evidence that the foundation of the identity of the displaced can often be found in the places where they are originally from; their old homes. Within the framework of ‘home as journey’, I seek to explore if this is the case. Furthermore, I examine how the young Burmese refugees conceptualize home within their current circumstances of displacement, economic hardship, living conditions and lack of integration in a protracted situation. A dialectic relationship exists between home and identity formation, as the construction of identity can occur through the ideas of place or imagined place, and is not only territorially based (Morley 2000). This thesis will adopt both of these meanings, “as it is impossible to separate personal experiences and subjective meanings and associations from the

actual structures where people live” (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010: 320). A more inclusive interpretation, provided by Blunt and Dowling (2006), will be used in this regard. They argue that “home is both a physical location and a set of feelings... a process of creating and understanding forms of dwelling and belonging” (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 254).

### **III. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Ontological and epistemological standpoints**

The way this thesis is built is grounded deeply in beliefs about the world, resulting in shaping the approach to theory and methodology. Both the ontological stances of structured-based or agency-based describe insufficiently how to look at the process of meaning-making of social phenomena. Giddens (1984) provides an alternative to this dichotomy in his theory of structuration. He argues that we must reconceptualize the subject matter as the duality of structure: “structure’s two-sided existence as both a medium and outcome of social practices” (Demmers 2012: 120). Agency is the element that enables creation of the society’s structures, yet people are constrained by our social structures (Lamsal 2012). Here, structure is described as a set of rules and resources that engages human action. These rules restrict actions but the resources facilitate it. In other words, people recreate through their actions the structures that in turn constrain those actions (Demmers 2012). In this thesis it becomes clear that Burmese refugees are born into structures that constrain them, however they are active agents who are able to develop strategies to gain control over their own lives and use power to reconstruct the link between people and place through social relations, therefore socially constructing the place where they are present (Brun 2001).

Epistemologically, understanding the link between people and place from a social constructivist point of view allows me to uncover meanings and relationships between the two and how they are reshaped. This view has its foundations in the beliefs that the world is socially constructed. Social realities are not objective or external, nor are they a physical entity or a material object that is outside the human consciousness (Jackson and Sørensen 2006). Social realities are constructed through social interactions. Therefore, the link between people and place is not externally enforced, but constructed and reconstructed through social relations. According Jackson and Sorensen (2006), the social world is in part constructed of physical entities. However what is of importance is “what those entities signify in the minds of people” (Jackson and Sørensen 2006: 165).

The research objective of this thesis is to narrate stories of young Burmese refugees and to uncover how they construct a sense of home. These stories are unique

experiences of each individual. The aim is to synthesize these experiences to come to an understanding of the meanings that refugees give to notions of home. Hence, it is the interpretive stance that is needed in order to understand the ways in which meanings are constructed from shared ideas and rules of social life (Demmers 2012). Here, I encounter what is called the 'double hermeneutic', a term coined by Giddens (1984: 20) which means to "make an interpretation of an interpretation" (Hollis 1994: 146 in Demmers 2012: 52). In other words, this thesis focuses on examining how young Burmese refugees make meaning of their life experiences. In qualitative research this is called 'interpretative phenomenological analysis', taking both the participants' and researchers' interpretation of phenomena into account in the process of analysis (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2012). An important element in this kind of research is 'epistemological reflexivity', which refers to critically questioning the findings and the way they have come to be (i.e. how has the way the research has been executed affected its data and analysis), and pointing out the limitations. This reflexivity will help me and the reader be aware of the pitfalls of adopting an objective truth.

### **3.2 Data collection techniques**

This thesis was conducted using a mixture of primary and secondary research methods. It consists of literature and documentation research and two types of qualitative in-depth interviewing methods. Collecting theoretical data from the body of literature on the concepts of home and belonging, intimately linked to identity and place, enabled me to gain more insight into the relationship between these concepts and to connect them to the specific case study. In order to make this connection and to conduct the interviews with my target group, I did three months of field research in two refugee camps, namely Nu Po refugee camps and Umpiem refugee camp, and in and around Mae Sot, Thailand between March and June 2016 (see appendix 1).

Secondary research was important in order to contextualize the research puzzle of my thesis in the Burmese refugee setting, to find out more about the pre-existing knowledge regarding the topic, and furthermore to gather existing data on known cases of refugee identity and notions of home and belonging to provide insights into the socio-political context of refugee identity. By collecting and digesting news items and media articles related to the current situation in Burma and Burmese refugees living in camps

around the Thai/Burma border, complimented by analyzing academic literature, reports and documentations of NGOs concerned with Burmese refugee issues, working at an advocacy based NGO, and by having informal conversations with NGO officials living around Mae Sot, I gained a more in-depth insight into the contextual setting of the border area regarding the Burmese refugee situation. This preparation was needed in order to set the groundwork for the primary research, which was based on conducting two types of interview methods, namely individual in-depth interviews and focus group interviews with a minimum of three interviewees.

With these interviews I aimed to uncover the interviewees' perceptions towards their culture and identity, home and belonging and how these perceptions affects their life and the choices they make. Therefore, the questions focused on stories about displacement, reception in Thailand, the ongoing conflicts and the political transitioning phase in Burma, livelihood opportunities, future goals, culture and identity, conceptions of home and attitudes towards repatriation. For the individual interviews, a relatively detailed interview guide was used with twenty-seven formulated questions (see appendix 2). However, not all of the questions were covered in every interview as this depended on the interviewee and the nature of the interview (i.e. conducting a more conversational interview or a more structured interview due to time limitations or a language barrier). For the focus group interviews, a slightly different topic guide was used (see appendix 3). With the focus group interviews, I aimed to get discussion going amongst my informants, as this could further deepen my understanding of social relations and conceptions of identity, ethnicity, and home and belonging as they could discuss them amongst each other.

Before every interview, I asked my informants whether they wanted to be anonymous and if they agreed on recording the interview. Furthermore, I encouraged my informants to take their time, think about the questions and ask for clarification when needed. In addition, I emphasized my respect for them if they were unwilling or unable to answer a question, as some of the questions could inflict emotional distress. Therefore, building rapport with my informants was of importance, due to the sensitivity of the topics. By starting with small-talk, introducing myself, mentioning my age and the purpose of this research, and by dressing informally, I strived to make them feel at ease.

### *Research sample*

The research sample consists of forty-six Burmese refugees under the age of twenty-five<sup>5</sup>. All except for two Burmese interviewees held refugee status; either a UN (pre-) verification or (pre-) registration. All of them lived at least four years in a refugee camp, some lived in different camps and some of them were even born in a camp (for a map of the refugee camps, see appendix 1). Therefore, they have been able to overcome the first shock of displacement. The target group of this research is young adult Burmese refugees under the age of twenty-five in a protracted situation. They all have obtained some level of education, either in the camps or in Burma.

In regards to the interviews, I mainly relied on key persons who worked in organizations dealing with education for refugees. As the target group was Burmese refugees under the age of twenty-five, getting contacts at organizations concerned with education was a favorable option. By establishing a contact in Umpiem Mai refugee camp at the Office of Camp Education Entity (OCEE), this contact was able to arrange seven individual interviews and four focus group interviews. This contact was established through a teacher from the English Immersion Program (EIP) who I met in Mae Sot and knew a former student living in Umpiem Mai camp. This former student was also interviewed. In addition, through a snowball sampling method I was able to conduct two more interviews using this contact. By establishing a contact at the Global Border Studies (GBS) in Nu Po, I was able to conduct eight individual interviews and one focus group interview in Nu Po refugee camp. Additionally, four more alumni students from GBS were interviewed in Mae Pa, Mae Sot area thanks to that same contact. In total thirty-one men and fifteen women were interviewed, ranging between the age of fifteen and twenty-five with the exception of one, as mentioned before. Although the aim was to have a sample with equally diverse ethnicities, almost seventy per cent of my interviewees are Karen. This was mainly due to the fact that in both camps where I conducted the interviews, the camp residents predominantly have the Karen ethnicity. In both camps, more than eighty per cent of the residents are Karen (TBC 2014). In addition, all of my respondents are religious, mostly Christian and Buddhist, while a handful of others are animists.

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<sup>5</sup> Only one of them was 27 years old, however the interviewee participated in a focus group interview and therefore I did not exclude him from the interview and this research.

Since the majority of the respondents were able to speak at a limited working proficiency level of English, as requested, no interpreter was needed for most of them. Only on five occasions an interpreter was needed in order to conduct the interviews. During the first focus group interview an interpreter was used as well. The insufficient level of English was due to the age of the participants, as they were all seventeen or eighteen years old. After this interview I requested individuals older than nineteen for the following focus group interviews in order to overcome the language barrier. Furthermore, the respondents of the first focus group interview were in my opinion too young, shy and inexperienced to fully understand the questions and to answer them sufficiently, even with interpreter. The interpreters that were used are either teachers or teacher trainers who all live in the camps and have the refugee status themselves, making them more than competent to understand the questions and knowledgeable to how to approach and establish rapport with my respondents.

### *Processing primary data*

Due to the interpretative character of this thesis, I substantiated my findings with the use of quotations. By using quotes of my informants, I was able to depict the setting and to illustrate my findings. These quotations had to be somewhat adjusted in order to become more understandable. I adjusted them slightly to ensure both the authenticity and readability. Throughout this thesis, I use quotations in the running text but also as a separate section, emphasizing its importance and significance. Furthermore, throughout this research, feelings, hopes and memories were analyzed in order to explore perceptions of home, belonging, and the desire of returning and expectations of the future. This takes an interpretative stand, and should at all times be read with discretion and the reflexivity in mind.

### **3.3 Limitations**

Research on refugees sometimes deeply affects the researcher, especially when field work is done in a violent war-like context. This demands special considerations, both ethically and methodologically (Gren 2012). In addition, researching abstract notions such as 'home' and 'belonging', will naturally lead to an interpretative, subjective

analysis. While reading this thesis, the reader must bear this in mind at all times. There are some constraints connected to interviewing refugees and analyzing the data which will be addressed in this section.

According to Omidian (2000), working with refugees can put the researcher at risk of emotional bombardment, feeling acutely the losses, deaths and seemingly endless struggle to cope with present life. This is especially the case when researching sensitive topics which can directly evoke memories connected to emotional distress. It is therefore important when working in such circumstances, to be prepared for fieldwork as a turbulent and emotional period. For me, coping with this meant keeping a level of abstractness and distance of my informants. By doing this, I was able to detach myself from the emotional involvement to a certain extent.

In the context of Burmese refugees in refugee camps in Thailand, it is difficult to find informants in a random manner. Therefore, I was heavily depended on my capacity to build networks and to use key figures established in the camps. As I was able to make some requests, such as the capability of my informants to speak English and an age limit, still, my sample was depended on these key figures. As I made the request of the capability of my informants to speak English, this did not always take away from the language barrier as the level of English varied amongst my informants. Consequently, some of my informants were not able to understand all the questions properly. Therefore, I had to elaborate on certain questions and sometimes had to give examples, which could bias the answers of my informants beforehand. In addition, when using an interpreter, this naturally leads to an extra layer of interpretation, which accordingly means 'to make and interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation' in this research. This is an important notion to bear in mind.

Furthermore, interviewing Burmese refugees with completely different backgrounds (i.e. culturally, religiously, ethnicity, life experiences etc.), limited my understanding of their situations. To overcome this, I visited different villages in Burma where I stayed overnight and participated in their daily activities. In addition, I also stayed overnight in the refugee camps in the homes of families with different ethnicities. In doing so, and having as many conversations as possible, I was able to get a deeper understanding of what their living conditions entail in Burma and in the camps, although I am aware that I would never be able to truly understand what Burmese refugees experience.

## IV. Home as Journey

### 4.1 Then and There

According to Mallet (2004), places have no fixed or essential past. The identity and meaning of a place in the past is constructed and negotiated through nostalgia and memory (Ray 2000). Memory can be seen as a 'cultural practice', "a form and system of action that relates to a domain of knowledge and a locus of experience" (Riaño-Alcalá 2008: 3) and places memory practices in the realm of experience. This chapter will therefore seek to understand how the homes of my informants are situated in the past through their experiences of displacement, livelihood opportunities, violence and remembrance.

#### *Displacement*

The idea of displacement entails the forced and unwanted loss of home (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010). For many refugees, this displacement is set in a protracted situation. Throughout the world, people live in conditions of protracted exile with little prospect of durable solutions to their predicament due to state fragility, conflict, political violence and ongoing human rights violations (Zetter 2011). According to Zetter, displacement "lies at the heart of chronic regional insecurity" (2011: 6). Burma has been regionally insecure and unstable for decades with severe and episodic eruptions of conflict which has propelled recurrent displacement of people internally and in neighboring countries. Main drivers of the displacement of Burmese refugees have been economic hardship, no or little access to service provision, lack of livelihood opportunities, landmines, ethnic violence and denial of (citizenship) rights (Burma Link 2015). These drivers have pushed Burmese ethnic minorities to seek shelter elsewhere, either internally or by crossing the border, especially in the war-affected border regions (Lang 2001).

According to Bakewell (2011), displacement can be seen as social processes. Firstly, the physical displacement may end when the displaced have found a place to settle. However, according to him, the social process does not end here. It results in a "continues state of being displaced that can be maintained over time and reproduced

through generations” (Bakewell 2011: 22). Therefore, displacement does not become fixed, rather it remains an ongoing condition which is about “not being where one wants to be” and is often referred to living in exile (ibid). The condition of displacement is commonly related to people’s self-perception of being out of place. Bakewell argues that “I am only displaced as long as I feel myself to be displaced” (ibid). Considering this line of thought, displacement becomes a major psycho-pathological problem where roots are an existential part of identity (Brun 2001).

When I asked my informants about their displacement and their reasons for leaving their place of origin, most of them answered they left their place of origin in search of a better life, better opportunities and to continue their education. A common answer to this question was ‘to find a better place where we can attend school without any interruptions from military activities. Also to look for a better place. More opportunities’.<sup>6</sup> However, by delving a bit deeper, it became clear that continuing their education was often a secondary motive. In many cases the underlying cause of displacement was because their families could no longer support and provide for them, the lack of livelihood opportunities or the bad living conditions, forcing them to leave their place of origin and often their families, and find refuge in the camps across the border. In the third focus group interview, Saw Nay Lin responded:

I came here [Thailand] to continue my education. We had problems to follow up on education. I just finished grade eight in Myanmar. To follow up on my education there were some problems for me because of the transportation. We live in a rural area, and to go to school, there is no dormitory for us and we need to have money to buy some snack for lunch, that is a kind of problem for me. Especially in the rainy season, to reach to the school, we face a lot of flooding so to go is very difficult for us. My parents are in Bangkok right now to work, they need to support us. If they live in Myanmar they cannot support us.<sup>7</sup>

In other cases, the main motive for leaving their place of origin was the ongoing ethnic violence. The reoccurring conflicts between the Burma Army and ethnic armed groups affect villagers as the armies regularly enter villages and violate human rights, forcing them to porter, destroying their homes and plunder their rations. Christ Mo Hsor explained she had to flee for the Burma Army:

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<sup>6</sup> Author’s interview with a Bamar refugee (m) – 21 years old, 6 years in Mae La refugee camp (requested anonymity).

<sup>7</sup> Author’s focus group interview with Saw Nay Lin (m) – 21 year old Karen, 6 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

We had to flee because of the Burmese soldiers. They came to our village and they asked the villagers to work for them. All of them, they came and killed the animals and burned the houses down, so my parents worried that the soldiers would call him [father] to work for them so we left the village and went to Nu Po camp. (...) When we stayed in the village, sometimes the Burmese soldiers, they look at us like different people. They always come and check us and then we have to stay in our home because they ask our ID, so we have to sleep in another house. Every night we have to check. That is not good for us.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of displacement as social process, the feeling of displacement has not stopped when they settled down in the camps. Many informants explain they continue to feel displaced. Their current homes are viewed as a temporary situation in which they cannot feel 'at home'. This is reinforced by Thai policies on living conditions in the camps; they cannot build permanent structures, the environmental impact must be kept to a minimum and the refugees are not allowed to leave the camps (Brees 2010). This continuance of feeling displaced is illustrated by Zayar Min's experience of living in the camp. He explains that he does not feel at home and that 'this is just... we have to take a rest here to go to another state [situation]. This is just temporarily. This is not our home.'<sup>9</sup>

### *Surviving in Burma*

As became apparent from the reasons of displacement described above, economic hardship and the struggle to survive have been one of the many challenges Burmese ethnic minorities faced and still face. More than one-third of Burma's population, an estimated fifteen million people, appears to live below the poverty line (Goodbody, Kurbanova, Coslet, Wise, Branders and Goudet 2016). The population is predominant rural, with most ethnic minorities living in rural areas. Around sixty per cent are dependent on agricultural livelihoods (Goodbody et al. 2016). The ethnic conflict, continuance of fighting and volatility result in a constant struggle for these people to sustain themselves and maintain their livelihoods. The presence of armed groups, fighting, increased militarization by the Burma Army, land tenure insecurity, restricted livelihood opportunities, landmines, lack of recognition for health and education and arbitrary arrests have been part of the struggle for survival for years (Burma Link

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<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with Christ Mo Hsor (f) – 20 year old Karen, 10 years in Nu Po refugee camp.

<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with Zayar Min (m) – 20 year old Bamar, 7 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

2015). Studies have shown that sixty-nine per cent of household incomes in Burma was spent on food, indicating vulnerability to food security (Human Rights Documentation Unit 2009). When I asked my informants about their (family's) livelihood in Burma, it became evident that their living conditions have been very poor, resulting in grievances towards their homeland and people. Saw Eh Bar Htoo explained he faced a lot of problems with his family, saying that 'we have a lot of family members and we don't have enough for food. (...) It's not free for economy and to grow our lives in Burma.'<sup>10</sup> In addition, in the fourth focus group interview, Naw Gray Gray explained to her fellow discussants:

I feel sad for my people, some of my people are very poor. It is very difficult for them to do a life. Some peoples have jobs so it is easy for them but those who are poor, it is very difficult for them. They don't have jobs, there will be starvation. I feel sad, for others as well, not only myself. We love each other.<sup>11</sup>

When I asked them about their own opportunities in Burma, most of them answered in a very sober way. P'Saw mentioned that quite a lot of young people have some level of education, either obtained in Burma or across borders. However, they do not have jobs according to her. And it is very difficult to get a job. Even if they do have jobs, the wages are very low or even non-existent.<sup>12</sup> This has been the case for many years, due to discrimination and oppression by the Burma Government, and ongoing conflicts in rural areas. This struggle for survival and opportunities have influenced my informants' perception on how they view Burma's past and present. During the interviews I felt a lot of despair about Burma's history and current situation, as most of them clearly grieved about the struggle for survival and the lack of opportunities in Burma.

### *Experiencing violence*

In current anthropological approaches to violence, there is a tendency to overlook the role of place. Jansen and Löfving (2007) argue that a relationship exists between violence, displacement, and emplacement by conceiving them as practices that (re)constitute conceptions, embodiments, and inhabitations of space. This relationship

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<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with Saw Eh Bar Htoo (m) – 24 year old Karen, 7 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

<sup>11</sup> Author's focus group interview with Naw Gray Gray (f) – 21 year old Karen, 8 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with P'Saw (f) – 23 year old Karen, 5 years in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp.

between place and violence illuminates tensions of the processes that mobilizes people and those that keep them in place (Jansen and Löfving 2007). However, in sedentary thinking, when people and cultures are understood as “localized and as belonging to particular places, places become fixed locations with a unique and unchanging character” (Massey 1994 in Brun 2001: 17). This indicates that the perceptions of the place that the refugees left, do not change over time. Yet, Jansen and Löfving do not agree with this idea of an unchanging place. Home has not simply been left behind in another place, but also in another time and therefore, “irrevocably lost both spatially and temporally” (2007: 10). Displacement because of violence, and therefore the loss of home, is not merely a property of memory but continues beyond memory, affecting people on the move and their home-making efforts (Jansen and Löfving 2010).

Experiences of violence in this sense can change the relationship refugees have with their place of origin, therefore, illustrating the temporal nature of ‘home’. When I asked P’Saw about her past, she told me that ‘because we are in the mountains we are very peaceful. We go to the field after that we go back, have dinner, we are so happy with each other. It is very nice.’<sup>13</sup> However, later on she explained how she feels about her ‘home’, saying that ‘we have nothing, we have no income, they [Burmese soldiers] take everything from us, so that is so difficult for us, I do not like it, I feel sad’. Clearly, the violence experienced by P’Saw affected her relationship with her place of origin, as she now no longer views it as peaceful, but as a hostile environment.

Similarly, Phaung Noon expressed negative emotions towards her place of origin, caused by deprivation and violence. I felt resentment in her voice whilst saying the following:

There is nothing good for me in Burma. I can’t study, I have no chance to work and they [Burmese Army and ethnic armed groups] keep fighting. (...) I do not want to go back anymore... I do not want to go back!<sup>14</sup>

The impact of deprivation and violence on my informants made me realize how powerful these memories are and how they influence their perceptions of their old ‘homes’, therefore having a transformative character. Christ Mo Hsor shared her story with me about her violent experience with Burmese soldiers that makes her not want to return:

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<sup>13</sup> Author’s interview with P’Saw (f) – 23 year old Karen, 5 years in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp.

<sup>14</sup> Author’s interview with Phaung Noon (f) – 24 year old Shan, 4 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

When I was nine, I feel like we always had to be afraid of the Burmese soldiers. Even when I go to school, I always remember, I can't forget, my body is shaking, I'm afraid of them. They look at you if you are a different people. (...) Sometimes if I think about this, I do not want to go back.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, as Jansen and Löfving (2007) argue, the experience of violence reconstitutes conceptions of space. According to Trentelman (2009), this transformative character can be understood as a 'sense of place', which allows for both the negative and the positive emotions to be associated with place. This draws the attention to the subjective nature of human experience in relation to place. From the narratives describe here, it becomes clear that some of my informants have attached an emotional and negative character to their notions of place and home, therefore illustrating the power of violence in relation to place.

### *Remembering home*

Within Mallet's (2004) framework of 'home as journey', the journey is described as the continuous process of transition between one's original or previous home to one's ideal or future home. Leaving one's home and embarking on the journey is seen by Mallet as "a sentimental and nostalgic journey for a lost time and space" (2004: 69). According to Jansen (2008), forced migrants often cling to the past and focus on places in the past. Therefore, home is situated in the past as it is constructed and reproduced through nostalgia and memory (Ray 2000). According to Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck (2007), homes in the past are remembered through their present living conditions. They argue that their loss of home is being defined, and made more significant, by contrasting their current living conditions. I wondered if this was the case with my informants and I was curious to learn how they remembered their homes in the past.

When asking about their original home in Burma, indeed, most of my informants answered in a comparative way with regards to their present living situation. Day Chit told me: 'I miss my hometown. Every season, rainy season. Here is a different situation, different community, different people. I am homesick.'<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Saw Bo Bo said that 'it is different from here. Living in my village and my country is more freely, we can go

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<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Christ Mo Hsor (f) – 20 year old Karen, 10 years in Nu Po refugee camp.

<sup>16</sup> Author's interview with Day Chit (m) – 23 year old Karen, 7 years in different refugee camps.

everywhere. I have a lot of friends. I miss home. I feel sad.' In addition he mentioned that:

It is a different environment in our village. (...) The life in Burma is different. In our village most people are helping each other in harvest time, helping each other. They are more honest. It is different there. I grew up very peaceful home.<sup>17</sup>

Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck (2010) state that the memories of the past are silently being contrasted with the present, and by contrasting the past with the present they implicitly highlight their current abnormalities, different social relations and restrictions, like Saw Bo Bo's statement clearly evidenced. By implicitly contrasting their remembered homes in Burma with their current living situations, my informants construct a relational understanding of home which highlights their drastic losses through the memories of their normal and unrestricted lives in the past.

## **4.2 When, Where and How**

The temporality of home is not just located in the past, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, but in the future as well. Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck (2010) argue that people maintain 'home' by reproducing the past, with their memories, and through their hope of return. In this chapter, I try to provide insight into how home is re-imagined through their experiences.

### *Hope of return*

According to Mallet, home, be it defined as a dwelling, a homeland, or even a constellation of relationships, "is represented as a spatial and relational realm from which people venture into the world and to which they generally hope to return" (2004: 77). In current government policy and in the discourse of the UNHCR and international community, it is seen as 'natural' and 'desired' to return home, which is translated in repatriation (Al-Rasheed 1994). Repatriation in this light is viewed as the 'natural solution' to displacement (Brun 2001). If human beings are seen as being collectively rooted in a particular place, and as deriving their meaningfulness, or culture, from this rootedness, then anticipated return re-establishes the 'natural' way of the world (Jansen

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<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Saw Bo Bo (m) – 25 year old Karen, 9 years in Nu Po refugee camp.

and Lövving 2007). This would mean that the desire to return is seen as a “direct function of the depth of national belonging” (ibid: 9). It however ignores essential questions such as ‘natural for whom?’ or ‘desired by whom?’ (Al-Rasheed 1994). Due to the ongoing conflicts, oppression and lack of livelihood and opportunities in Burma, I wondered if there exists a strong desire, or hope to return home amongst my informants.

When I asked my informants whether they wish to return, I received a variety of responses, not all particularly pointing in the direction of a hope of return. In total, thirteen of my interviewees expressed their unwillingness to return to Burma. Most of them have their mind set on resettling in a third country, an option not even available for many because they do not carry a UN registration card, which is needed in order to resettle.<sup>18</sup> Htwar Reh, who does not have a UN registration card and has lived almost his entire life in Nu Po refugee camp, explained to his fellow discussants in the focus group interview that instead of a wish to return, he wants to resettle:

I want to resettle, because if I go back, I will have to work a lot, like go to the farm like that. So that would be really hard for me, because I don't know it, I do not want that.<sup>19</sup>

Even though he was born in Karenni State, Burma, he clearly does not feel rooted in his place of origin by stating that he does not know it and does not want a life like that. According to Appadurai (1991 in Brun 2001), this comes down to deterritorialization; the loosening of the bonds between people, wealth, and territories. Consequently, this leads to what he sees as a new power in social life; “the imagination where more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they did before” (Appadurai 1991 in Brun 2001: 19). In accordance with this idea, Jansen and Lövving (2007) argue that it is simply presumed that the refugees’ ‘real identity’ is their belonging to an ethnicity territorialized in relation to the homeland and the past. However, Htwar Reh’s case shows this to be a false presumption. He does not identify himself with his (or his family’s) former life and is hoping for another, imagined life.

In contrast, a little less than half of my informants said they wish to return, with again, a variety of answers to where they want to return to.<sup>20</sup> P’Saw told me that ‘My

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<sup>18</sup> Only three out of thirteen carry a registration card provided by the UN.

<sup>19</sup> Author’s focus group interview with Htwar Reh – 20 year old Karenni, 20 years in Nu Po refugee camp.

<sup>20</sup> Without a timeframe; this could indicate a direct return, or perhaps in the future.

hope is to go to Burma because it is my original place, my country'<sup>21</sup>, therefore showing a sense of nativeness and belonging in an essentialist way. According to Stepputat (1999), the displacement of people is often accompanied by the development of a strong notion of attachment to certain places or territories. Moreover, "neither the state nor territorialized identities have vanished" (Stepputat 1999: 418), as evidenced by P'Saw's strong sense of attachment to 'her country'. Additionally, Naw Wain Su, who was born in Nu Po refugee camp, said she wants to go back to Karen State 'because they are my family. That is why I want to go back.'<sup>22</sup> The thought that came to mind was whether you can 'return' to a place you are not originally from or, even more striking, have never been. In this case, "'home' is where family lives, and is imagined as a place of harmony providing a homogeneous haven of refuge from external conflict" (Olwig 1998: 226). Accordingly, Malkki provides me with a feasible answer by stating that "to plot only 'places of birth' and degrees of nativeness is to blind oneself to the multiplicity of attachments that people form to places through living in, remembering, and imagining them" (1992: 38). In this view, Naw Wain Su is imagining home through family relationships and ethnic bonds, intimately linked to their territorialized homeland Karen State.

A third common response from my informants was the wish to return *eventually*. According to eleven of my informants, the time is not right and the circumstances are currently not stable enough to go home. Saw Eh Bar Htoo explained that he does not want return to his place of origin yet, because of the ongoing conflicts. He told me 'Now I don't want to go back, because the soldiers still have conflicts with the citizens, so I don't want to go back because of the civil war. I think in the future I will go back.'<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Saw Aung Kyaw Oo explained that 'My hope is that Burma will get better so that we can go back and stay there and have a good life. (...) I want to go back to my village.'<sup>24</sup> Implicitly, Saw Aung Kyaw Oo expresses a hope of return *only* if Burma's situation will improve so that he can have a good life. In the next section it will become clear how these improvements are articulated by my informants.

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<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with P'Saw (f) – 23 year old Karen, 5 years in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp.

<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Naw Wain Su (f) – 21 year old Karen, born in Nu Po refugee camp.

<sup>23</sup> Author's interview with Saw Eh Bar Htoo (m) – 24 year old Karen, 7 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Saw Aung Kyaw Oo (m) – 24 year old Karen, 17 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

### *Desire for change*

Although the November 2015 elections changed the political landscape of Burma, most of my informants are reluctant in believing the new elected government. In order to return to Burma, a visible change must take place. According to Rohwerder (2015), security, access to adequate services, housing and livelihood opportunities are key to refugees for returning. However, according to many of my informants, these aspects have not or insufficiently been addressed by the government. This is evidenced by Zayar Min's view as he states that 'Now we cannot go back because we don't have any home, any house in Burma'.<sup>25</sup> In addition, he expressed his distrust in the government and current situation:

I dare not to trust to go back to Myanmar. But we can visit but I dare not to trust up till now. Because we had to leave Myanmar before so I feel sad at that time. I hated it. Due to that situation, the arrest etc., we had to move to here. So I dare not to trust the situation. If we do trust them [the government], and if they behave like they did before, then what will happen to our lives? We would have to move back to a refugee life again.

Similarly, Phaung Noon mentioned she has decided only to return 'if it has really changed in Burma', implying that she has not seen adequate change yet.<sup>26</sup> One major concern for refugees living in the camps is the situation regarding education in Burma. Currently, the Burma Government does not recognize any certificates obtained in refugee camps. Because almost all my informants have enjoyed some level of education, there is a strong desire amongst them to get their education recognized. Christ Mo Hsor, who finished her education in Nu Po refugee camp, told me 'even if I go back, I have to go to school again. Our education is illegal, we don't have the certificate. They think the refugee education is not good for them. But it is. They need to accept our education.'<sup>27</sup> Without the recognition of the refugees' education, they are not able to get jobs and provide for themselves. There is thus an urgent need for these aspects to be addressed by the Burma Government in order to secure a return for refugees. Whilst talking to one of my interviewees, I was stunned about his conflicting feelings; his passion and love for, and his anger and distrust towards Burma:

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<sup>25</sup> Author's interview with Zayar Min (m) – 20 year old Bamar, 7 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

<sup>26</sup> Author's interview with Phaung Noon (f) – 24 year old Shan, 4 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with Christ Mo Hsor (f) – 20 year old Karen, 10 years in Nu Po refugee camp.

Honestly, I really like my country and I really really want to live in my country, my homecountry Burma. Because our country is very beautiful and rich in resources but the main problem is, even if we are very rich in the resources, the people are very poor because of the bad government. And when you do not have money, everything is like hell. The current government isn't very good because we do not see any improvements yet. The only thing is we do not have a good government and economic or educations or healthcare. If we have all those things, ok that's going to be a good place.<sup>28</sup>

This view is commonly shared amongst most of my informants. Still, some believe that positive changes are happening and have hopes for Burma's future. However, distrust in the government and the unseen changes are the prevailing narrative throughout my interviews. Clearly, Burma needs visible changes before many of my informants are willing and daring enough to return 'home'.

### *Quest for safety*

To feel safe is an important element of the perception of home. Safety and home are intimately linked, and the home represents a comfortable, secure and safe space (Dovey 1985) that offers freedom and control (Darke 1994). However, the forcible displacement of people from their homes illustrates how unsettled the notion of the home as safe haven becomes to forced migrants (Brun and Fábos 2015). Safety is a normative value of home, not necessarily associated with the actual home as place, but may be found beyond its reaches (Mallet 2004). Safety in that respect becomes a sense of feeling secure and comfortable, and the realm of home understood as the 'quintessential place' defined by caring, safety, and belonging (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010). In my interviews, it became apparent that most of my informants are extremely worried that they will have to return to a place where they cannot find safety. Phaung Noon says she just worries for her family and her baby: 'If I get a safe place for my family, then it will be okay for me. If I don't have a safe place, I will stay here [Thailand]. (...) I will do my best for him [baby] not to be or live like me.'<sup>29</sup> When I asked her about her perception of home, she told me that home to her is 'safe and warm and kind and love'. In this sense, safety has become a normative value (Mallet 2004) and Phaung Noon's journey to her future home is a quest for safety, comfort and caring. Her

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<sup>28</sup> Author's interview with a Bamar refugee (m) – 21 years old, 6 years in Mae La refugee camp (requested anonymity).

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with Phaung Noon (f) – 24 year old Shan, 4 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

comment should also be read in comparison to her current unstable life, dominated by harsh circumstances and scarce resources, and her future home signifies a safe place for her and her child, unlike the way she lives right now.

Safety amongst my informants is not just viewed as a normative value, as evidenced by Saw Bo Bo's worry about going back 'Because back home, there is a lot of fighting. The political situation is not stable. Some people believe that a lot of areas are very difficult to go back to.'<sup>30</sup> Clearly, Saw Bo Bo is worried for people's actual safety as ongoing conflicts and violence make it difficult to return. This view is shared by Saw Eh Thar Khu, who explains that 'If we have to go back to the Burma now we have no democracy and no freedom. So if we go back to them and we give it our life and more so the soldier make it out easily and may make us into a porter.'<sup>31</sup> Safety in this sense becomes linked to freedom and control, a space in which they can live a secure and comfortable life without having to worry about violence and human rights violations, bringing back the normative value of safety.

### *Imagining home*

People's experience of home influences the meaning and significance of their journeys beyond it. Notions of 'identity', 'belonging' and 'culture' emerge as key in the ways people contest and negotiate meanings of home (Al-Ali and Koser 2002). By describing home as the experience of 'being-at-home', it can be understood as a (stative) verb rather than a noun, "a state of being which is not necessarily bounded by a physical location" (Mallet 2004: 79). It focuses on practice, on the diverse ways people 'do' and feel home through their identity, belonging and culture. In this way, home can be imagined abstractly, as a longing for a nostalgic past or a utopian future (Al-Ali and Koser 2002: 7). In this light it may be understood not as a fixed location but as a set of relationships, to both humans and non-humans. What Al-Ali and Koser (2002) view as a utopian future is derived out of peace, opportunities and 'a sense of possibilities' (Hage 1997 in Al-Ali and Koser 2002). In addition, a longing for a nostalgic past is often linked to the emphasis on family (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010). According to Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck (2010), family is a critical component that helps to

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<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with Saw Bo Bo (m) – 25 year old Karen, 9 years in Nu Po refugee camp.

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with Saw Eh Thar Khu (m) – 24 year old Karen, 7 years in different refugee camps.

construct the notion of home in the future. Both a utopian future and nostalgic past are noticeable in my informants' narratives whilst imagining home.

When I asked my informants what home meant to them, and where they wanted home to be, it became evident that the vast majority situates home through abstract terms in relation to practices and relationships. P'Saw mentioned she views home as 'very peaceful' for example by stating that 'I imagine my family, my grandmother and father. We are eating together, we are happy together. Very peaceful, very happy, that is what I want.'<sup>32</sup> Both a nostalgic past and a utopian future can be derived from her answer. Here, the meaning of a positive memory of the past in Burma is projected onto their future ideal of home, exemplifying the idea of 'home as journey', which can offer refugees a 'sense of possibility' that their home will improve in the future (Hage 1997 in Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010). When I asked Saw Aung Kyaw Oo to think about the word home, he explained that:

The word home is like, you stay in your home freely and you can do anything you wish. You hope, you want to do, you want to go. Home means you have a family and you stay together and you help each other.<sup>33</sup>

In this sense, home is grounded "less in a place and more in the activity that occurs in the place" (Jackson 1995: 123 in Mallet 2004: 80). Additionally, social relations remain an important component in my informants' conception of home. Pwae Moo explains that home is 'like a big community. It is full of love. We stay with our siblings, our parents. And with extended family. I want that to be in Burma. It's my home.'<sup>34</sup> While home is mostly articulated in abstract terms, often my informants territorialize their conception of home, as evidenced by Pwae Moo. However, what matters about territory is its symbolic aspect. According to Al-Rasheed, exiled communities "emphasize their link to a geographical centre which is perceived to be a sacred habitat, a 'homeland'." (1994: 202).

When I asked my informants in the focus group interviews to write down one word that comes up whilst thinking about the word 'home', most of them wrote words such as 'peace', 'safe', 'happy', 'family' and the name of their ethnic group, implying a nostalgic past yet utopian future. This became evident as they discussed the answers with each other, and territorialized sense was noticeable, as almost all of the

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<sup>32</sup> Author's interview with P'Saw (f) – 23 year old Karen, 5 years in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp.

<sup>33</sup> Author's interview with Saw Aung Kyaw Oo (m) – 24 year old Karen, 17 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

<sup>34</sup> Author's interview with Pwae Moo (m) – 21 year old Karen, 19 years in different refugee camps.

discussants reflected their notion of home on either their home village or their state of origin (based on ethnicity) in Burma. Therefore, it became evident that the word 'home' is closely associated with concepts of identity and memory as well as territory and place (Black, 2001).

### **4.3 Here and Now**

In the previous paragraphs, home is situated in both the past and future. And many scholars highlight the multiple temporalities of home, wherein refugees have been shown to focus on the past and future. In this chapter, I show a temporalization of home for my informants, "as the home of the past and the future usurps the focus on the home of the present" (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010: 317).

#### *Present localities*

According to Brun (2001), attempts to de-naturalize the relationship between people and place have taken an important place in conceptualizing refugee experiences. However, she argues that this focus on 'imagination' is accompanied by a neglect of the local perspective, therefore neglecting the possibilities and constraints that come from being in a particular place. Moreover, refugees' places are constructed out of the social interactions that intersect the specific location where they are present (Brun 2001). This is emphasized by Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck, who acknowledge that the focus on the past and the future does not mean refugees "are somehow not living in the present, as this would also ignore the role of place in their lives" (2010: 329). How refugees conceptualize home lies in the construction and negotiation of home in the past and future. These different temporalities of home are utilized as a coping strategy to help them deal with their current, harsh living conditions (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010). In this view, it is important to examine where refugees live, and I wondered if and how my informants actively produce and reproduce their understandings of home through practices in their current homes.

When I asked my informants about their current living situation, many of them see themselves as being 'a guest' in their present host state Thailand. One of my informants mentioned 'I just always feel like I'm a guest. I'm a guest here and I'm not

going to stay here for a long time.’<sup>35</sup> This view of being a long-term guest implies that one is away from home spatially and temporally. Saw Aung Kyaw Oo, amongst many others, shared this view and states that ‘here it is still like you are in someone’s home as a guest. When the time comes, you have to go home, back to your homeland.’<sup>36</sup> In addition to feeling like a guest, Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck argue that the failure to improve the refugees’ poor living conditions in the camps, as is evidenced in this case study, “intimately shapes their connections with their living spaces as well as their conceptions of home” (2010: 322). They argue that “the lack of economic opportunities and poor living conditions create an obstacle to more substantial and lasting attempts at home-making practices, effectively preventing the construction of home in the present” (ibid).

### *Discrimination*

Besides their poor living conditions, refugees in- and outside the camps experience issues such as discrimination, which obstructs them from constructing ‘a home’ in the present. According to Al-Rasheed (1994), people experience withdrawal from public life as a result of discrimination, lack of understanding, racism and lack of commitment to meeting their needs, therefore making refugees prone to marginality due to certain perceptions of exile and its time scale. The majority of my informants explained they feel discriminated against, not only by the Thai people but also by their own people. With regards to the Thai, many feel the Thai people treat refugees like they are beneath them. According to one of my informants, “They look down on us, they treat us very badly.”<sup>37</sup> This view is shared by many. For instance, P’Saw told me with anger and some hopelessness in her voice that:

We are refugees, they [Thai] discriminate us. We feel not free. We have to stay inside the fence. We are like pigs, we have to stay in the stall. Whatever the food they give, we have to eat because we have no chance. It’s not enough and even if it’s not good, we have to take it. If we don’t take it, we have no chance to live!<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Author’s interview with a Bamar refugee (m) – 21 years old, 6 years in Mae La refugee camp (requested anonymity).

<sup>36</sup> Author’s interview with Saw Aung Kyaw Oo (m) – 24 year old Karen, 17 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

<sup>37</sup> Author’s interview with a Bamar refugee (m) – 21 years old, 6 years in Mae La refugee camp (requested anonymity).

<sup>38</sup> Author’s interview with P’Saw (f) – 23 year old Karen, 5 years in Mae Ra Ma Luang refugee camp.

Furthermore, Christ Mo Hsor experienced discrimination by the people in Burma and even by her relatives. She explained that ‘Some people told us that we are refugees, like discrimination between us. They [people in Burma] see us like refugee people. Even our relatives, they see us like refugee people. I feel sad.’<sup>39</sup> This feeling is also expressed by my informants towards the Burma Government. Saw Nler Nay Soe feels that ‘the Burma Government is so bad, because they are untrustworthy. The Burmese Government only helps their people, not my people.’<sup>40</sup>

As mentioned before, refugees’ places are constructed out of the social interactions that intersect the specific location where they are present (Brun 2001). The impact of harsh living conditions and the failure, or unwillingness as some might see it, to improve these, and discrimination (amongst other things) are constraints that obstruct my informants from (re)constructing their present lives, either in Thailand or in Burma. However, it goes beyond the actual constraints, as it also impacts their self-image, or sense of self, evidenced by P’Saw’s comment about feeling like a caged animal. These constraints effectively cause withdrawal not only from their public life, but also from (re)constructing their present homes, as it is hard to imagine constructing a notion of home while feeling like a caged animal.

### *Everyday life*

Despite of the existing constraints my informants experience, in many cases of protracted refugee situations, efforts to repair or re-establish continuity with the place of origin takes a central role in the tasks of attempting to produce locality in their current place (Turton 2005). This is exemplified by their daily practices and social networks. As demonstrated by Malkki (1995 in Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010), places with high concentrations of displaced people can facilitate the ‘myth of return’ and the reproduction of memories of the homes they left behind. The myth of return represents an idea of returning to a fixed point (place). This however, does not mean that the person actually will return, but whether this is desired through homeland orientation (Al-Rasheed 1994). Throughout the interviews with my informants it became evident that the myth of return is present in their narratives. Most expressed

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<sup>39</sup> Author’s interview with Christ Mo Hsor (f) – 20 year old Karen, 10 years in Nu Po refugee camp.

<sup>40</sup> Author’s interview with Saw Nler Nay Soe (m) – 19 year old Karen, 19 years in Nu Po refugee camp (was two months old when his family fled to Nu Po refugee camp).

their desire to return one day, although none of them actually know when or whether they will go back, and where, if they will return, to exactly. In regards to high concentration of displaced people; a refugee camp is naturally such a place. As most of my informants live in refugee camps, they evidently surround themselves with other Burmese refugees. However, what is interesting, is that the refugee camps are divided into sections according to ethnicity. This means that most people with the same ethnicity, as they wish, live together in the same section.<sup>41</sup> Hence, their social networks exists generally of Burmese refugees with the same ethnicity. Consequently, refugees are spending much of their time with people with similar experiences and with whom they share a hope of return and/or general memories of their Home State. Following Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck's rhetoric, this helps to create the conversations and contexts within which the construction of their homes in their ethnic Home State, "both in the past and future senses, is produced and reproduced" (2010: 329). These social networks thus play a vital role in how my informants understand home in the present.

As evidenced by the narratives of my informants, ethnicity is eminently important to them, as they derive their identity from their ethnicity as well as their daily routines and social practices. When I asked my informants what it meant to them 'to be' their ethnic communal group, Day Chit explained:

It is important because I identify as Karen. Wearing traditional clothes, speaking the language, the food that we eat. Also the sounds. If in different community, maybe I will try to meet with other Karen around the community and form a group to create our culture.<sup>42</sup>

By wearing their traditional ethnic clothes, celebrating their traditional ethnic events, practicing their religion in traditional ways, cooking traditional food, speaking (and teaching) their languages, and actively forming groups based on ethnicity, they are preserving their ethnic roots outside of their territories.<sup>43</sup> The context of their daily routines are constituted by their social networks and cultural practices, coupled with the places where the interactions occur (Kabachnik, Regulska and Mitchneck 2010). In this sense, home-making practices are not only physical acts but also conversations,

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<sup>41</sup> This does not account for every person/family but in general, ethnic communal groups live together in specific sections with their own section leader.

<sup>42</sup> Author's interview with Day Chit (m) – 23 year old Karen, 7 years in different refugee camps.

<sup>43</sup> Evidenced by almost all of the interviews conducted for this research.

memories, ideas, shared ethnicities and shared experiences, which all play a significant role in the construction of home. According to Al-Ali and Koser, “often a great sense of belonging to a specific place is accompanied by the wish to reproduce and/or reinvent ‘traditions’ and ‘cultures’ associated with ‘home’” (2002: 7). This sense of belonging even lies in the ‘sense of self’, or one’s identity, which corresponds to various conceptualizations of home (ibid). Clearly, my informants’ homes are imagined and reconstructed through various practices and relationships associated with home in the past and future, in order to attempt a ‘sense of home’ in the present.

### *Feeling home*

Although through their cultural practices and relationship they attempt to reconstruct a ‘sense of home’ in the present, when I asked my informants whether they feel at home in their present habitats, the vast majority expressed they do not feel at home. Only six responded otherwise. Phaung Noon for example told me ‘I feel like this is my home. At first, before I moved here, I had no chance and no opportunity to improve my life in Burma. When I arrived here, I had a chance to study and now I have my own family so I feel a lot better. I feel more at home.’<sup>44</sup> For her, reflecting on her difficult past and imagining a brighter future due to opportunities for a better life, coupled with having created her own family, her conception of home lies more in the present. Additionally, when I asked Phaung Noon to which community she feels she belongs to the most, she correspondingly expressed she feels she belongs most to the refugee community. Interestingly, only two others responded in a similar way. The other three explained they feel they belong most to their ethnic community. Perhaps this might also be connected to the fact that divisions of ethnic sections are so clearly made in the camps. While this is an interesting notion, to assume a linkage as such exists, lies beyond the scope of this research. Notwithstanding, within this research and against my expectation, no explicit linkage can be found between the duration of their residency and feeling ‘at home’ in the camps, as three of the respondents who do, have been living in a camp less than seven years. The other three informants have lived in the camps for over ten years, respectively ten, nineteen and twenty years.

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<sup>44</sup> Author’s interview with Phaung Noon (f) – 24 year old Shan, 4 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

In contrast, the vast majority of informants declared they do not feel at home in their current habitat. Most of them said to belong to their ethnic community. Saw Aung Kyaw Oo, who was six years old when he moved from Karen State to Umpiem refugee camp, explains he does not feel at home by saying “This is not my homeland, this is Thailand. (...) I want to go back to my village. Because my family belongs there. We go back to where we belong.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Pwae Moo, who fled to Nu Po camp with his family when he was only two years old, explained that he does not feel at home

It is just temporary. Because it is not suitable, there is no stability. It is just temporary. Because we know that someday we need to go back to our homeland. I want to go back, because our homeland is there. So we need to be there.<sup>46</sup>

Pwae Moo keeps referring to the temporality of his displacement, even after nineteen years of refuge in Nu Po camp. One can assume that he does not remember living in Karen State, however, the feeling of Karen State being his homeland is deeply engraved, as he derives his identity and belonging from his ethnic background. Despite attempts to re-establish continuity with their place of origin, they are unable to reconstruct a ‘sense of home’ in the present due to their current living conditions, experiences of withdrawal, their hope of return and their sense of belonging.

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<sup>45</sup> Author’s interview with Saw Aung Kyaw Oo (m) – 24 year old Karen, 17 years in Umpiem refugee camp.

<sup>46</sup> Author’s interview with Pwae Moo (m) – 21 year old Karen, 19 years in different refugee camps.

## V. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined how 'home' is constructed by young adult Burmese refugees living in refugee camps along the Thai/Burma border. The research puzzle I aimed to solve was: *As a civil war continues in Burma, how do young Burmese refugees living in refugee camps along the Thai/Burma border construct a sense of home while living in exile?* Home and belonging are intimately linked to place and identity, a theoretical debate which served as the backbone of this thesis. Within this scope, I sought to uncover how these Burmese refugees, through their experiences, interact with, and imagine place and how they interact with and imagine the homes from which they fled, their future homes and their current living situation. As my findings are based on a case study, this conclusion does not propose generalizations of other protracted refugee perceptions of home but, instead, tries to give an analytical understanding of the relationship between place and belonging and place and home, connected to discussion about identity. By embarking on 'home as journey', three sorts of significant place as well as time were derived throughout this thesis: a remembered lost place, a future imagined place, and a lived present place. This research illustrates how important it is to consider the refugees' experiences of the past, future and present, for through these experiences, a notion of home is constructed.

In the 'there and then' it became evident that through my informants' experiences of displacement, violence and struggles for survival in Burma, home is remembered through a relational understanding of the past and present. My informants show a continuance of displacement in their current situations, as the vast majority points out the temporal character of their displacement in the present. These ideas are emphasized through the harsh living conditions in the camps. Although most of my informants grieve about their past due to their experiences, their homes are often still seen as a nostalgic past, highlighting their drastic losses through the memories of their 'normal' and unrestricted lives in Burma. In the 'where, when and how', a hope of return for many is desired only when there is clear evidence of improvements in Burma. This change should include an environment where they can find a safe place for them and their families, in which they can provide for, and sustain themselves. The imagined home is related to practices and relationships wherein their positive memories of the past are projected onto their future ideal of home, as was illustrated by my informants.

This exemplifies the idea of 'home as journey', which offers refugees a 'sense of possibilities' about having an improved home in the future.

Throughout this thesis it became apparent that my informants construct home in the past and future as a coping strategy to help them deal with their present living conditions. This is evidenced by the adoption of various cultural and ethnic practices and their relationships associated with their home in the past in an attempt to construct a 'sense of home' in the present, as their current situation is one wherein they have to survive, make their livelihoods and develop strategies to gain control over their lives. Through these strategies, most of my informants cling together based on ties to their ethnicity and homelands. This offers a site of resistance to the place in which they currently reside. In the future however, once it has been decided that Burma's conditions allow for repatriation, all my informants will have to face a crucial decision on whether or not to return after years spent in exile, and if so, where to return to. Most seem ambivalent towards this question. On the one hand nostalgia, memories and the hope to return to the home they remembered was part of their narrative. On the other hand, a more pragmatic way of thinking was noticeable. Due to their experiences, either remembered or imagined, they are only willing to return when their desires for change, i.e. economic, political, educational, social and in the sense of safety, are being met by the Burmese Government, a government they do not seem to trust or believe.

Although my findings showed a difference in their wish to return (only thirty-one respondents expressed their explicit wish to return), it nevertheless became evident that most have not given up on their homeland orientation, wherein ethnicity is eminently important and shapes their identity, daily practices and social networks. This homeland orientation is based on ethnicity and their homelands in Burma, as my informants cling to their homelands, places or communities. And it is in this light that, despite attempts to re-establish continuity with their place of origin, they are restricted in reconstructing a 'sense of home' in the present due to their current living conditions, experiences of withdrawal, their hope of return and their sense of belonging. Therefore, it is the current place where my informants live that forces the focus on home in the past and future. Home is imagined by them as an abstract ideal, highlighting various practices and relationships based on their ethnicity and homeland. In this sense, it remains eminently important to leave space for processes of essentialization in the way we analyze and represent the refugee experience in relation to home.



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### **Semi-structured individual interview questions**

- This interview will be recorded and the information given will be used for my Master Thesis, do you agree with these terms?

#### Background information:

- Anonymous – yes/no
- Name
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Place of origin (you/family)
- Languages – which language do you speak with your direct family
- How many family members (Who)
- Born in Burma or Thailand
- Do you have ID papers
- Do you still live in the refugee camp?
- How long have you been living/lived in the refugee camp?
- Do you attend a school currently? (if yes, which grade)

#### Interview questions Home/Belonging/Identity:

1. Why & how did you (or your family) leave the place of origin?
2. Have you lived in the same refugee camp since arriving?
3. Can you describe to me life as a refugee (what were some challenges you've experienced)?
4. Can you tell me how you feel about your host country Thailand?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of staying here?
6. Are you able to go back to your country of origin and if so, how often do you go back?
7. Can you describe to me how you feel about your country of origin and what you miss most? (Sounds, scenes, food, culture, people...)?
8. How important is it for you to keep in touch with people and/or places in your country of origin?
9. Is keeping your culture important for you? Tell me why and how you keep your culture alive, away from your place of origin?
10. Can you describe some important cultural events to you?
11. Can you tell me what it means to you to be (ethnicity)?
12. If you think about identity, which place do you identify with most?

13. Do you feel at home where you live right now? (is there something missing?)
14. Do you think you will stay here or do you think you have to leave? Why?
15. Do you want to go back to your place of origin?
16. What do you want for your future? (job, family)
17. What has influenced you to want to become that person in the future?
18. In what culture/community (if any) do you feel like you belong to as a full member?
19. Is this community the same as you parent's or grandparent's community?
20. Do you feel there is a generation difference between you and your parents in the way you grew up?
21. In what way do you think education has influenced your identity?
22. How has living in your host country (Thailand) influenced your identity formation?
23. If you think about the word home, what comes up in your mind (what does home mean to you)?
24. If/When you are leaving, where would you like to have a 'home'?
25. What are your main concerns / worries for the future?
26. What are your thoughts/feelings when the word repatriation comes up?
27. How do you feel talking about these things?

Is there anything else you want or like to add?

### *Appendix 3 – Focus Group Interview Guideline*

#### **Focus Group Interview**

- This interview will be recorded and the information given will be used for my Master Thesis, do you agree with these terms?

#### Background information:

- Names & Gender
- Ages
- Ethnicities
- Religions
- Place of origin
- Languages
- Born in Burma/Thailand
- Burmese ID / UN ID
- How long in refugee camp

- Which grade

In-depth Questions:

1. What was the major cause for you to leave your place of origin
2. Can you describe to me your life as a refugee
3. What are the main challenges of living here
4. How have you experienced settling in in this refugee camp
5. Has living in a refugee camp influenced who you are
6. Discuss with each other how you feel about Burma (what do you miss)
7. Is your culture important for you
8. How do keep your culture alive
9. Do you have a cultural event/activity that everybody in this camp celebrates
10. Do you feel like an effort is being made to make the camp feel unified
11. Thinking about your personal identity – can you identify yourself with you fellow discussants
12. In what community do you feel like you belong to as a full member
13. What has influenced you most to become the person you are right now
14. Do you want to go back to your place of origin
15. What do you feel when you hear the word repatriation
16. What would you do if you have to leave the camp right now
17. Write down one word that comes up when you hear the word home - Discuss
18. Write down one word that comes up where you feel you belong to

*Appendix 4 – List of Interviews*

**Individual Interviews**

|                     | <b>Date</b> | <b>Place</b>     | <b>Name</b>              | <b>Ethnicity</b> |
|---------------------|-------------|------------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Interview 1</b>  | 24-5-2016   | Mae Sot          | Anonymous (21)           | Burmese          |
| <b>Interview 2</b>  | 26-5-2016   | Mae Pa           | Day Chit (23)            | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 3</b>  | 26-5-2016   | Mae Pa           | Saw Bo Bob (25)          | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 4</b>  | 27-5-2016   | Mae Pa           | P'Saw (23)               | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 5</b>  | 29-5-2016   | Umpiem RC        | Saw Aung Kyaw Oo (24)    | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 6</b>  | 29-5-2016   | Umpiem RC        | Saw De Mo (25)           | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 7</b>  | 29-5-2016   | Umpiem RC        | Zayar Min (20)           | Burmese          |
| <b>Interview 8</b>  | 30-5-2016   | OCEE (Umpiem RC) | Phaung Noon (22)         | Shan (Thai Yai)  |
| <b>Interview 9</b>  | 30-5-2016   | OCEE (Umpiem RC) | Anonymous (22)           | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 10</b> | 30-5-2016   | OCEE (Umpiem RC) | Saw Eh Bar Htoo (24)     | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 11</b> | 30-5-2016   | OCEE (Umpiem RC) | Saw Eh Tar Khu (24)      | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 12</b> | 31-5-2016   | OCEE (Umpiem RC) | Saw Wah Eh Htoo (22)     | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 13</b> | 31-5-2016   | OCEE (Umpiem RC) | Saw Has Nay Blu Moo (19) | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 14</b> | 31-5-2016   | OCEE (Umpiem RC) | I'saac (15)              | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 15</b> | 11-6-2016   | PDJC (Nu Po RC)  | Naw Waing Su (21)        | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 16</b> | 11-6-2016   | GBS (Nu Po RC)   | Saw Khan Wah Khu (24)    | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 17</b> | 11-6-2016   | PDJC (Nu Po RC)  | Christ Mo Hsor (20)      | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 18</b> | 12-6-2016   | GBS (Nu Po RC)   | Tha Eh Klain (21)        | Karen            |
| <b>Interview 19</b> | 12-6-2016   | GBS (Nu Po RC)   | Pwae Moo (21)            | Karen            |

|                     |           |                 |                          |         |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------------------|---------|
| <b>Interview 20</b> | 12-6-2016 | GBS (Nu Po RC)  | Baw Reh (21)             | Karenni |
| <b>Interview 21</b> | 13-6-2016 | PDJC (Nu Po RC) | Saw Nler Nay Soe<br>(19) | Karen   |
| <b>Interview 22</b> | 13-6-2016 | PDJC (Nu Po RC) | Beh Meh (21)             | Karenni |

## Focus Group Interviews

| FOCUS GROUP #1 (INCLUDING INTERPRETER) |                  |           |                |
|--|------------------|-----------|----------------|
| OCEE (Umpiem RC) - 01-6-2016           | Name             | Ethnicity | How long in RC |
| Interviewee 1                          | Wah Eh Hser (17) | Bogo      | 4 years        |
| Interviewee 2                          | Baw Mu Paw (18)  | Karen     | 6 years        |
| Interviewee 3                          | William (17)     | Karen     | 7 years        |
| Interviewee 4                          | April Htoo (18)  | Karen     | 10 years       |
| Interviewee 5                          | Kaw Pa Mwe (17)  | Karen     | 6 years        |

| FOCUS GROUP #2             |                   |           |                |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|
| GBS (Nu Po RC) - 12-6-2016 | Name              | Ethnicity | How long in RC |
| Interviewee 1              | Zin Min Htet (19) | Burmar    | 8 years        |
| Interviewee 2              | A Thin (23)       | Naga      | migrant        |
| Interviewee 3              | Wai Yan Myo (21)  | Burmar    | 10 years       |
| Interviewee 4              | Y'San (27)        | Naga      | 7 years        |
| Interviewee 5              | Plosatin (20)     | Karenni   | 7 years        |
| Interviewee 6              | Htwar Reh (20)    | Karenni   | 20 years       |

| FOCUS GROUP #3               |                        |           |                |
|------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| OCEE (Umpiem RC) - 17-6-2016 | Name                   | Ethnicity | How long in RC |
| Interviewee 1                | Saw Zayar Oo (23)      | Karen     | 4 years        |
| Interviewee 2                | Sai Myo Kyaw kyaw (22) | Shan      | 8 years        |
| Interviewee 3                | Saw Nay Lin (21)       | Karen     | 6 years        |
| Interviewee 4                | Naw Htoo Nay Paw (21)  | Karen     | 5 years        |
| Interviewee 5                | Naw Bathager Moo (21)  | Karen     | 10 years       |

| FOCUS GROUP #4               |                    |           |                |
|------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|
| OCEE (Umpiem RC) - 17-6-2016 | Name               | Ethnicity | How long in RC |
| Interviewee 1                | Myo Win Tun (21)   | Karen     | 16 years       |
| Interviewee 2                | Eh Tha Blay (20)   | Karen     | 9 years        |
| Interviewee 3                | August Moo (21)    | Karen     | 11 years       |
| Interviewee 4                | Kaw Tha Blay (22)  | Karen     | 8 years        |
| Interviewee 5                | Naw Gray Gray (21) | Karen     | 8 years        |

| FOCUS GROUP #5               |                       |           |                |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| OCEE (Umpiem RC) - 17-6-2016 | Name                  | Ethnicity | How long in RC |
| Interviewee 1                | Mike Phaung (22)      | Karen     | 4 years        |
| Interviewee 2                | Soe Man (21)          | Mon       | 5 years        |
| Interviewee 3                | Saw Tun Lin Kyaw (17) | Karen     | 6 years        |