Re-imagining the refugee camp
*Sovereignty and time-space formation along the Thailand-Burma borderland*

Laocharoenwong, J.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Portable homeland

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I showed that refugees settled down in the camp, that they live there, and that they intend to permanently stay there (or elsewhere along the Thailand-Burma borderland). Questions of a return to their Karen homeland, as a result, never figured prominently in the camp until 2014, when, unexpectedly, the Thai government announced plans of closing the camp in 2020. While such plans had been announced before, they were never carried out. This time, however, the announcement was accompanied by ration cuts and many humanitarian organizations started to move out, so the feeling became real, and there was suddenly a lot of anxiety that this undesirable return would become a necessity for many people.

When I did my fieldwork, narratives about the homeland were not my focus at first, but camp inhabitants shared a lot about this, especially after these plans were announced. Clearly, the narrative of the independent Karen nation and its alleged greatness in the past and future continued to play a vital role in the present and everyday lives of people in the camp, especially among political groups of refugees, students and camp elites. This chapter examines how the sense of permanence expressed by many camp inhabitants and the corresponding absence of a desire to return is informed by long-standing and actively reinforced narratives about the Karen homeland. It will show how the narrative is being propagated through camp institutions, such as boarding schools, churches, the camp committee, and camp-based organizations, as well as through ritual ceremonies and material culture.

Firstly, I will show that there seems to be a paradox in nourishing such narratives and longing for the Karen homeland on the one hand, while preferring to permanently stay in the Mae La camp on the other hand. (Quite a few camp inhabitants travel back
and forth to Karen state in Burma on a regular basis for family visits or ceremonies, yet still they feel their home is, or has become, Mae La). In diaspora studies, when following migrants or resettled refugees in their host countries, this dual feeling or paradox is commonly found and described. But, it challenges some assumptions in refugee studies, where focus is often solely directed to the time of refuge: from the refugee’s place of origin, via the refugee’s journey or movement, to finally the place of resettlement.

In refugee studies, while refugees reside in a camp, they are typically seen as ‘stuck in between’, either waiting to resettle or waiting to return home (Khosravi, 2014; Missbach, 2014). The refugee homeland, in this context, is typically tied to family, culture, and a geographic location or ‘the soil’, with the assumption that refugees desire to go back if the situation in their homeland improves or conflict ends, or otherwise hope for resettlement in a third country (see for example, Safran, 1991). Humanitarian organizations seem to think in a similar vein. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) Head of Communications and Chief Spokesperson Melissa Fleming recently proclaimed: All refugees want to go home someday⁸.

This chapter rejects such a generalization. Many refugees in Mae La do not express a desire to return to the geographical homeland, even though narratives about the homeland are strong and abundant in the camp. This chapter therefore argues that the common conflation of the presence of a strong homeland narrative with a strong desire to return does not hold true for many of my respondents in Mae La. The affinity to the homeland is actually more hinged to an idea than to the actual geographic location, and this idea of homeland is not tied to an eventual return, but serves another political (and social) function for the Karen Christian community in the camp.

Secondly, I will show that the notion of the Karen homeland, similar to refugees’ lives in the camp, is not static and frozen in time at the point that they enter the camp, but very much in development, too. As they have been able to build the camp over a long-term period, with Karen governance structures (the camp committee), and instill the narrative of Karenness in their schools, churches, and events, the Karen homeland idea gets projected onto the camp to the point where, I suggest, it gets deterritorialized, decoupled from its original geographic location.

THE DEBATES ON HOMELAND AND RETURN

Homeland and return are central concepts in diaspora studies, which focus on the long-distance relationships and complex feelings that migrants experience vis-a-vis their homeland after they resettle in a new society. Many diasporic migrants maintain transnational practices of interacting with, and going back and forth to, their home society, but they may never return to live there.

In forced migration or refugee studies, a return to the homeland is often not a possibility (hence the reason for seeking refuge). Sayad (1991) states, however, that return is a natural desire and dream of immigrants (Sayad in Bilgili & Siegel, 2016). Because of the involuntary departure, an eventual return (or alternatively resettlement in a third country) is often considered the natural outcome of a refugee cycle, even if such return to the homeland is only temporary, seasonal, or periodical (King, 2000). Return in the refugee cycle thereby encompasses more than the physical return, but can comprise different phases such as ‘imagined return’, ‘provisional return’, and finally ‘repatriated return’ (Long & Oxfeld, 2004). Even host states legitimize temporary stays in their societies with the expectation or even policy that refugees eventually return, and humanitarian organizations are allied with this state idea, giving refugees protection towards the process of return (Horst & Nur, 2016).

Van Hear (2014) introduced diaspora and transnational concepts to refugee and forced migration studies, trying to bridge the gap among the different disciplines, revealing a complicated transnational connection of refugees with their host and home country in terms of livelihood, remittances, and political support. Refugees may return or re-visit their home country and often establish transnational ties and integrate their resources into their cross-border livelihood activities, but do not live there permanently.

In humanitarian perception, moving back (return) to the homeland often carries the two-way assumption that time and space in the homeland are frozen: that nothing has changed during the (extended) time of absence, and also that refugees themselves are still the same and that they could easily fit themselves back in their home society. In other words, a smooth return for refugees is often taken for granted. Literature on refugee studies, however, shows that returning refugees often find themselves marginalized, alienated, or feel as strangers in their original homeland (Stefansson, 2006). The idea that the process of displacement simply ends when refugees return must therefore be challenged (Black and Koser 1999). ‘The notion of belonging to a certain homeland is particularly fraught for refugees with histories of persecution,
flight, exile, and settlement, as evident in the ongoing tensions between definitions of homeland pertaining to physical places and those referring to symbolic and imagined space.’ (McMichael et al., 2016). In forced repatriations, people may be allowed to return only to their former nation-states, not to their former home (Black and Koser, 1999). This process, then, just changes their status from being a refugee to an internally displaced person. Even if refugees are allowed to return to their former homes, such returns radically change the social fabric, and returnees may return to a different social or class status (Stepputat, 1999).

Any return is complex. It involves temporalities and aspirations of the migrant as well as (host) state police (Sinatti, 2015). Moreover, reasons why returnees go back depend on the condition of life in exile and the circumstances of return. Stefansson (2004) suggests that the biggest concern among Bosnian refugees regarding the decision to stay or to return rests upon economic and material reasons, while the sense of belonging is put aside. They are searching for a normal life, want to stop the feeling of living in transition, and create a sustainable livelihood. If the condition of life in exile is poorer than in the home country, Bosnian refugees had a strong motivation to return, but they were willing to stay when the living standard in the host country is better.

The refugees in Mae La expressed similar sentiments to the Bosnian case from Stefansson, but as I will show later in this chapter, for Mae La residents, although economic and material conditions definitely also played a role, the conditions of life were less articulated in terms of poverty, but more in terms of stagnancy in the homeland, and more ‘modern’ opportunities in the camp and the borderland area in which the camp is situated. The unique situation of the refugee camp, moreover, gives this a rather different dynamic than in most diaspora studies: these refugees are not embedded in a host culture, but have managed to retain a certain amount of autonomy in essentially what comprises a Christian Karen enclave. Here they can actually exercise more ethnic and religious freedom, and freedom to govern themselves, than they would have in a Thai borderland village, for example, where they would always constitute a minority. One could argue that the state of exception, in a certain light, works to their advantage, too.

NARRATIVES OF KAREN HOMELAND

When I hung out with young people in the camp, visiting their houses and talking to their parents and/or grandparents, they often told me stories—stories of their
homelands and the places they came from, as well as stories that revealed something about their identity and who they believed themselves to be. Among those fragmented stories of homelands, I found that when refugees referred to homeland, it had many different meanings: symbolic, material, geographical or childhood nostalgia. For example, one Karen male farmer referred to his homeland with the symbol of Karen state, the mountain called Zwekabin. The mountain has twin summits representing the idea of the twin brothers, which refer to Paw Karen and Sgaw Karen, the majorities of sub-ethnicities among Karen. Meanwhile, when he talked about his village and his memories of his homeland, he referred to a peaceful place, a rural landscape with forests, waterfalls, and rice fields. My village at Karen state is like my old friend, every time I visited there, I felt like meeting someone I knew since my childhood. Interestingly, he refers to his Karen village as his old friend. He recalls a clear picture of the landscape and childhood memories in which he used to catch fish and crabs from the rice field in his village, play with his friends, and he remembers the smell of the soil that was mixed with buffalo poop. He felt that the camp was too crowded, and there was not enough space for growing vegetables. It was the only thing he said he missed about his Karen homeland. The story this farmer told of his homeland revealed a story of Karen identity and Karen migration.

We call ourselves Paganyaw, which means human, we desire to live in harmony and peace with nature. It is our way of life since our ancestors… Karen people migrated from Northern China around Gobi desert, moved down to the Southern of China and lived in the country called Burma long before the Burman people took control over the land.

The excerpted quote above reveals the way he views his story as integrated with a longer ethnic history of migration that goes far beyond just being a refugee. Narratives that refugees shared with me varied widely and ranged from an oral history about the birth of the Karen land, the original place of the Karen before they migrated to Burma, to being part of the Jewish lost tribe according to the Bible. These stories, fractured as they may be, all relate to the idea of the homeland and an identity as Karen people that started long before they became refugees.

In refugee camps, everybody is recognized as a refugee. Being refugee means that they are a group of people displaced by war. The definition of refugee reduces them to an uprooted people with no history. To tell the story of their origins helps refugees to remember who they are.
Among those narratives of homeland, the dominant story that was selected and lifted up by the Karen elites and political groups who believed in Christianity to be the official version of Karen ethno-history is about the glory of the Karen homeland. It is the only one that is consistently reproduced and orderly transmitted to Karen people living in the camp (South, 2011).

Prior to that, the ethno-nationalistic narrative was shared, and also used to unite against Burmese ethnic domination, among both Christian and Buddhist Karen under the Karen National Union (KNU). The majority of KNU staff is Christian and they strongly believe that only Christianity can lead to salvation. They thereby also inserted Christianity into the construction of Karen identity (Rajah, 2002). As a result, the Buddhist Karen felt they were excluded from this history and, combined with other political factors, they separated from the Karen National Union and set up a new, separate, insurgency group, although they continued fighting for the same cause: to free the Karen homeland from Burma (Lang, 2002). Yet in 1994 the Buddhist armed group decided to attack the Christian group with the help from the Burmese army. In the fierce attack, the Christian Karen, the KNU, lost their fight and their headquarters in 1995. This led to more than 100,000 refugees fleeing to Thailand. Among those refugees there were members of the KNU, who previously held high positions in the civil administration, but who were dispersed throughout many refugee camps after the fighting. These former KNU members have administrative skills and a high education, which allow them to work in the camp committee (Thawnghmung, 2008). This relationship between the refugee camp committee and the KNU has continued until today.

As a consequence, after fleeing and having to live in the camp, the narratives of homeland became localized and adjusted to fit with the context of displacement. For example,

Fifty and one year under the successive regimes of Burma, rendered us to extreme frustration to the extent that we almost have lost faith and trust in God. We are displaced persons, stateless, and are free to move around, we live mechanically with no fear of the Burmans and no worry what we will eat the next day. But we are not happy. We who were once independent now find ourselves dependent and livening on charity. We have lost our dignity and have become dependent upon others which is degrading and disgraceful. We want to be independent, live and laugh, and enjoy the fruit of our soil in our own independent land – the domains of our ancestors, the land on which our forefathers nourishes and defended us with their blood and sweat.
This version of homeland was adjusted by inserting an experience of displacement; it combines a sense of chauvinism and patriotism, thereby incorporating elements from the past into the present, along the lines of what can be referred to as ‘mythico-histories’ (Malkki, 1995b). The ethno-nationalistic/chauvinistic narrative of homeland has become hegemonic among Karen refugees who live in the camp, but not among the Karen in Karen state. Refugees with a farmer background referred to their homeland as their village, their land, river and forest that they used for cultivation. It differs from the idea of homeland that is produced by the Christian Karen political group. But they compromised to the version of the elites because they shared the same experiences of being displaced, losing their lands and their beloved ones, exploited by the Burmese military (Rajah, 2002).

The desire of their own ethno-nation with self-determination, not just being an ethnic group under Burmese government, fits very well with being displaced and united under the political goal of the KNU. Thus, the idea of homeland takes its form and is reinforced to capture the experience of being refugees. Since the refugees have been living and building their community in the camp for more than three decades, the narrative of homeland is also reproduced and transmitted from one generation to another, or even across the border to those who resettle abroad, through camp institutions and culture.

What has been formed from and through those narratives in various phases and locally contextualized, is an imagined homeland, apart from the actual, geographic homeland. It is this homeland-idea, which is intricately tied to (camp) Karen identity and which refugees yearn for, more so than the actual homeland, because their frequent travels back and forth have shown them that this homeland cannot be attained in its original geographic location. And it is this idea, which gets transmitted, reinforced, and performed through the camp institutions.

HOMELAND-IDEA IN TRANSIT: PRACTICES AND TRANSMISSION IN THE CAMP

When Karen revolutionists and elites fled Karen state for refugee camps in Thailand, they carried with them a strong idea of their homeland and independence (from
Burma). This was also shown in the picture of Karen revolutionary leader Saw Ba U Gyi, of whom a refugee political leader put a picture on the wall in his house in the camp. His famous quote *Surrender is out of the question* is reprinted on t-shirts and worn by many Karen refugee activists. This strong homeland-idea took hold in the camp institutions and has also influenced and shaped the political values and identity of camp inhabitants. Ethno-nationalistic narratives of the Karen homeland, gradually developed as described above, are selected as the main message to transmit to the young generation of Karen refugees, whether they were born in the camp or came there later to study. These ethno-nationalistic narratives aim to create a sense of unity and a sense of belonging among Karen refugees, as well as puts a certain demand on refugees to sacrifice themselves to work hard and to do something good for their Karen nation. Camp institutions, such as the camp committee, camp-based organizations, schools and churches, play an important role to translate and concretize the idea of homeland into camp regulation, values, education, and practices.

**Camp committee**

The most important actor that brings and transfers the idea of homeland to the camp is the camp committee and Karen Refugee Committee. While the Karen Refugee Committee operates as an umbrella organization outside the camp arena, the camp committee is working from within. As I showed in chapter 2, the camp committee and its administrative structure derived from the existing Karen governing structures back in Karen state before flight. This structure is brought with them and applied in the setting up of camp administration. The camp regulation, laws, and administration are based on Karen traditional laws, and they have continued in this way since the camp was formed. Apart from this governing structure, the camp committee also plays a vital role in mundane camp politics, by setting certain norms and the agenda for activities and events.

In order to preserve their traditional culture and maintain their cultural identity, the camp committee invented new regulations to wear the traditional dress on every Wednesday, while any other day refugees can dress as they please. The old Karen generation worried and feared that the young generation would forget about their own identity, because they were exposed to the Western/modern culture from the media. To wear the Karen dress every Wednesday is an identity manifestation and cultural preservation. Notably, this Karen cultural practice can be observed in the camp territory, but not in the Karen migrant community in Mae Sot or in Bangkok. Wednesday is the day that Karen identity stands out; in this way, the camp has an even more distinct identity of Karenness than in Hpa-An, the capital city of Karen state. It
feels like this place is not in Thailand, but in a (mini) Karen-land. Why Wednesday was chosen for wearing the traditional dress is still unclear. But what is clear is that the camp committee wants to keep the value of Karen culture alive.

**Church**

The church also actively propagates notions of Karenness and homeland in the camp, where they get intermixed with Christian narratives and faith. Church attendance is high: each Sunday almost all Christian camp inhabitants make their way to one of the more than 70 churches in the camp. In their sermons, preachers pray for family and friends, but also specifically for their Karen nation. The priest also taught followers not only about being a good Christian, but also a good Karen, and thereby doing good for the nation. The priest encouraged camp inhabitants to participate in anti-drug campaigns in the camp which require camp inhabitants to keep an eye on drug dealers and report it to camp security staff. The priest referred to the participants of this campaign as doing good for the community since they help to protect young refugees from drugs, and therefore being a good Christian and doing good for the Karen community (nation).

In a similar vein, there is a strong belief that only Christianity can lead to the salvation of the Karen people, with certain millenarian myths figuring prominently:

> Our younger white brother to whom God temporarily entrusted the Book of Silver and the Book of Gold is coming back to return then to the elder Karen brother. So, when news was received that the white brother had arrived in Burma there was no little stir in Karendom (Karen Refugee Committee Manifesto, 2000)

This is an excerpt from the Karen Refugee Committee Manifesto, but the idea of the younger and white brother originally derives from the Golden Book that Christian Karen believers refer to as their Karen bible. This idea of salvation corresponds to the strongly-felt anticipation in the Karen nationalist movement that one day they will have their Karen homeland, a promised land, where their ideas about a rightful homeland come to full realization.

**Buddhist temple**

The story of the Karen glorious homeland is not mentioned much among Karen Buddhist refugees. As stated above, the ethno-nationalistic homeland narrative that is widespread in the camp is shared among Christian Karen and this is a reason why
the Buddhist Karen left the Karen National Union and separated from the Christian Karen. They set up another group called ‘Democratic Karen Buddhist Army’ which later changed to ‘Democratic Karen Benevolent Army’. This movement is led by the famous Buddhist monk, U Thuzana. His aim is to build a zone of non-violence and sacred field of merit (Gravers, 2001). Inside Karen state in Burma, the monk built a Buddhist town called Myain Gyi Ngu, which is a place where many Karen took refuge in an Internally Displaced Persons camp. His ambition was to re-invent the Karen Buddhist scripts, and therefore he asked the Buddhist Karen to research and write the Buddha Tripidaka in Karen Buddhist Script, which is to be written on thousands of stones in his temple in Myain Gyi Ngu, Karen state. He has many followers, from Buddhist Karen refugees, migrant workers and local Thai Karen. In the camp, U-Thuzana has a close relationship with one temple in zone A. At this temple, the Buddha’s words were written in Buddhist Karen script and the monk tried to spread these scripts among the young generation. However, other Buddhist temples focus on teaching and spreading Buddhism to those who are interested. It is a center of the Buddhist refugee community and local Thai Karen from the village nearby. It does not play much of a role in the Karen ethno-nationalist narrative in the camp.

College/ Boarding school

The camp provides high quality education that attracts many young people from Karen state to come and study there (more on this in chapter 5). Some schools are free of charge due to support from an international Christian organization. While all Karen camps provide education until grade 10, Mae La also has several colleges. Students who want to further their education post grade 10 come to Mae La. As part of the education curriculum, some colleges also reproduce and transmit an ethno-nationalist idea and the college itself bears the name of Karen homeland. Figure 4.1 shows the lecturer with two important Karen insurgent leaders attending the graduation ceremony of students receiving their bachelor’s degree.

The Leadership and Management college, for example, is one of those colleges, which trains and promotes students to become politically active with the Karen National Union. The college is called Kaw-Thoo-Lei college by the Karen refugees, which literally means the college of Karen’s homeland. Meanwhile, the name ‘Leadership and Management college’ is used only for registration with the Thai government and international organizations, a neutral name so as not to identify it with any political agenda. Among the Karen, however, everybody knows the college aims to train students to be future leaders, bringing change and development for the Karen people. The curriculum is divided into two tracks: Science and Humanities. Yet both of
these tracks require students to study (Karen) history and international politics which, actually, is not officially allowed to be taught in the camp by the Thai government. Apart from the curriculum, the college requires students to sing the Karen national anthem (which was invented by the elite group of Karen refugees, and which is quite different from the anthem sung by Karen people in Karen state) before going to the classroom. This shows the college is an outcome of transferring the homeland-idea to the actual space in the camp.

Student said they learned Karen history in the camp but not in Karen state:

When I was living in Burma, I didn’t know about the [Karen] revolution or history. In reality, we (Karen people) don’t know about the revolution, we don’t have interest in it and we don’t study it. The history of Karen struggle was not taught at school because school was under the (Burmese) government. Here, in the camp, I learnt so many new things about Karen, a history of Karen people and culture, the Karen struggle for Independence, our Revolution, our former Karen leaders. We have our own government, our land, and we sing the Karen national anthem. We are proud to be Karen!
(Saw Tin, 20 years old, male student)

The quotes above show that the college does not restrict itself solely to the topics required in the curriculum, but also positions itself clearly as a Karen institution, with the aim to further the development of the Karen people. Students are seen as valuable resources in the struggle for their Karen nation and the hope of their future; it is strongly believed that a good education is key to this struggle. There is also, explicitly, a development project, or ‘fieldwork’ involved in the curriculum, in which students have to contribute to society through their own projects. These projects can include helping to build a school in a rural village in Karen state, creating a small-scale water irrigation system, strengthening gender equality, or engaging in other community development projects. These community service projects provide help to other Karen in Karen state since the Mae La camp is seen as being in a better situation. Furthermore, the service projects may be interpreted as a way that they (Karen refugees) can somewhat absolve a feeling of guilt for leaving the Karen homeland. This practice was used before by the Hmong Laos refugees after they resettled in the US, as those refugees were former fighters for the American government and were accused by the Laos government
as betrayers\textsuperscript{9} of their own nation. So, the refugees mitigated the feeling of guilt of betraying their former country by giving back and doing philanthropy for community development in Laos.

Figure 4.1 Graduation ceremony, college staff with two Karen leaders source: Saw Day Po

**Camp based organizations**

If the camp college functions as an transmitter of ideas and values for young people, the camp-based organizations play the role of the implementer. There are various camp-based organizations working on different issues inside and outside of the camp. For example, Karen Youth Organization promotes the role of Karen youth in politics; Karen Women’s Organization focuses on gender equality, reducing domestic violence, and enhancing women’s rights; the Karen Cultural Organization preserves traditional culture, music, and identity. Meanwhile, the Karen Human Rights Group works on promoting human rights and monitoring human rights violations in Internally Displaced Persons camps and communities that are under control of the Karen National Union. The organization produces an annual report on human rights issues. Interestingly, these organizations’ mandates and values are aligned with universal values. But, this does not

\textsuperscript{9} Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath (release date 21 November 2008) The Betrayal (‘Nerakhoon’), USA.
mean that they do not continue to work in accordance with the Karen homeland-idea. On the contrary, this strategy helps them engage with the international community as well as distance themselves from the Burmese government. Many young Karen people believe that to serve their Karen nation is to work with those Karen organizations.

Overall, the Karen camp-based organizations have a high trust among Karen people as the people believe that they work for the Karen nation. Moreover, their organizations were set up before refugees came to live in the camp, and they operate via a strong network and connections linking people inside and outside of the camp together. Many Karen politicians and leaders in high positions used those organizations to train themselves or gain recognition for obtaining a higher position. The Karen organizations thus play quite a crucial role not only in promoting ethno-nationalist ideology, but also to recruit people to work with them and train them. Karen diasporic refugees who resettle in third countries also stay connected by providing monetary funds to the camp-based organizations.

**Cultural and material manifestation**

The Karen New Year is the biggest event of the year. When I was in the camp in 2015, it received much attention. The camp committee prepared and led the ceremony. Many Karen refugees and migrants who lived outside of the camp or abroad visited or returned to the camp to participate in this celebration. Participants were fully dressed in Karen traditional clothes and carried the Karen flag. The celebration started early in the morning to avoid the afternoon heat. It began with the sound of a buffalo horn and the ancient gong, which are both considered national symbols, followed by a Karen girl singing about the beautiful homeland and playing a traditional Karen musical instrument. The Master of Ceremony announced the celebration of the New Year, which is counted in the Karen calendar as the year ‘2754’. Although the speaker did not explain where the year of 2754 came from, he emphasized the Karen year since it relates to the long history of Karen people that settled down in Burma before the Burmans. He continued talking about the gloriousness of the Karen nation in the past, their pride, and the essence of Karenness.
Not far from the stage, an exhibition that displayed many facets of their Karen identity, and divided into different zones. The first zone was dedicated to Karen ethno-history and politics. There were boards showing biographies of Karen leaders, and a board showing Karen scripts as can be seen in figure 4.2. Staff from a student group told me that the Karen script was in some part similar to Burmese script, but their script was older than the Burmese. There was a strong emphasis on the ways in which the Karen differ from the Burmese. Their society had developed sophisticated ideas and language before the Burman people had. She stated that the Karen Education Entities wanted to increase awareness among the young generation to be able to read and write in the Karen script both for every-day use and also for academic purposes, helping to protect it from disappearing. The second zone showed Karen traditional music instruments, folklore and agricultural tools that used to be necessities in the Karen livelihood. This cultural manifestation brought together the collective feeling and remembering of the Karen homeland, their history, as well as shared identity and roots.

In figure 4.3, students from Karen Student Network Group sold t-shirts with a picture of Saw Ba u Gyi, the Independent Karen leader. He is a well-known and respected leader among Karen people and refugees as a great fighter. Interestingly, the ideology
of Karen homeland here is transmitted to a t-shirt. T-shirts are, of course, influenced by modern material culture. For the young generation producing a political logo and wearing the t-shirt represents their political ideology as well as their modern identity. It can be interpreted that this is a way of transmitting cultural-ideological value in a style more agreeable to the younger generation either as rebellion or as compromise. When I went to buy a t-shirt, they told me that it is part of a fundraiser to support student networks and activities in the camp. Therefore, buying a t-shirt is not only an economic exchange, but also a symbolic gesture of doing good to the Karen people by supporting student activities.

![Figure 4.3 Karen students selling t-shirts on Karen New Year](image)

The Karen flag, the buffalo horn, calendar and t-shirts relate to the Karen ethno-nationalistic identity and the Independence of Karen homeland. They believe that Karen state deserves to be a nation-state since they have a territory, sovereignty, people, and its own government, similar to other state countries around the world, and thus should not be treated just as an ethnic group. They want to gain the universal recognition and legitimize their claim of national-separation. The Karen New Year celebration is more of a political message than a cultural issue. This specific cultural manifestation and ceremony is located and celebrated among refugees in the Karen refugee camps, the
area in Burma that is controlled by the Karen National Liberation Army, and probably among Karen diasporic refugees abroad. The Karen Buddhists in Karen state in Burma celebrate the Karen New Year on the same day, but ethno-nationalism and politics are less pronounced.

It will be clear from the above that all the institutions in the camp, from the administration, schools, script, and religious institutions to cultural manifestations have all ingrained Karenness into their operation, where they hark back to the history of the Karen homeland in their daily operation. They have also adapted this notion of Karenness into life in the camp, where it gets propagated and instilled into the younger generation. What we can see then, is that the idea of the Karen homeland has gradually become dislodged from the geographical area, or memories of their past, and transferred and instilled itself into the institutions of the camp and thereby its inhabitants, the refugees. This is not unlike Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 2006), albeit at a smaller scale.

The way the camp institutions practice Karenness also makes the camp population feel that the camp resembles their idea of their homeland or the land that they left behind before being refugees more than the actual, current homeland in Karen state where the Burmese military or other military group took control earlier and as a consequence looks nothing like the place they remember and the stories they tell.

PORTABLE HOMELAND

On the one hand, we see that the ideal of the Karen homeland is actively nurtured and reinforced, but on the other hand we see that the refugees have gradually made the camp their home, even to the extent that it has led to a significant decline in the desire to return to the physical territory. An experience of displacement not only shapes their Karen identity, but the camp is also a fertile space for Karen identity. Refugees have constructed the camp as a piece of their homeland and they have transformed the camp space according to their imagination of their homeland.

In refugee studies (as in the case of Palestinian refugees and many other studies in the literature) the traditional interpretation of such ethno-nationalist narratives about the homeland and the active transmission and reinforcement of these narratives through various camp institutions, is that it is focused on, and serves the purpose of, a ‘return’ to this original, territorialized homeland. Here, however, it is focused more on the idea
of the homeland, which serves a variety of functions in the camp.

First, it gives the Karen refugees a sense of unity and community, uniting the Karen against the Burmese, and the feeling of redressing past political injustices. Here, the camp also serves as a perfect place for the Karen to project the political ideology and mobilize the young generation to participate in political activities both inside and outside the camp. As the camp segregates and concentrates Karen refugees, it is a fertile place to embed and grow their culture and cultural identity. This also makes the camp similar to an enclave. Moreover, the camp is a place where the spotlight shines on their plight; this helps them to gain international attention, strengthening their case as a people being displaced and fighting for their independence.

Second, for the camp inhabitants themselves, the strong homeland narrative consolidates political allegiance and loyalty to the KNU, and it serves to maintain the status quo by the Karen elites, as the people do not question their legitimacy. It additionally serves to mobilize people to support their political movement in order to negotiate with the Burmese government (backed up by numbers of refugees and the unstable/conflict situation).

This idea of the ethno-nationalistic homeland is even carried with refugees who resettle to third countries. They are active and ready for political mobilization and maintain their diasporic relation with elites in the camp. In 2017, the Karen diaspora gathered and demonstrated in front of the Capitol in Washington DC, condemning the Burmese embassy in DC that they wrote a letter publicly denying their Karen identity as shown in figure 4.4. Moreover, when they resettled there, they still carry with them the material such as calendar, flag and Karen Revolution leaders’ pictures. This was also shown in the media when they demonstrated at DC. It shows how the idea of homeland is detached from the actual/original territory homeland. The political material that they carry with them shows that homeland is manifested in material and can be portable into the diaspora. This is also how the t-shirts and calendars should be interpreted: as a means to hold onto Karen identity; as recognition of a people, but, unlike for example in the Palestinian case, not as a claim on the land.
I taught Physics, but I also taught them about Marxist ideology, and global politics. I assigned them to read Chomsky, as I wished they could gain a critical thinking instead of being indoctrinated by the Burmese propaganda...If we cannot liberate our people, we will always be a victim under an evil socialist system (means Burma). Finally as a group of people, we will basically disappear.

(Jay, 72 years old, college teacher)

The quote above clearly shows the fear of being forgotten or the fear of the disappearance of Karen identity, so the only safe place to keep this is in the memory of the people. It signifies a strategic change, making the new point of reference for the identity to not stick to the land but stick with the people. The entire Karen history of homeland and their politics also shifted from territory to people, identity, and awareness.

**AMBIVALENCE OF RETURN**

This idea of the homeland does, for most, not equal a desire to return. Despite the fact that the camp’s closure is supposedly imminent, refugees actually prefer to stay...
or continue living in the camp. There are various reasons that refugees are ambivalent or lack a desire to return: economic, socio-cultural and political factors in homeland situation, or they prefer to live a transnational life.

As explained in the previous chapter, the regularity of aid distribution, stable condition of infrastructure similar to other Thai villages, and opportunities for education and work as a productive life, are all aspects that make refugees feel a sense of permanence and normalcy while living in the camp. It is a different story than often presented in the news that the refugees cannot return because they fear war or their homeland is not safe. There were some voluntary returnees in 2017 when the camp closure was announced: around 90 refugees mainly from Nu Po camp returned to Karen and other ethnic states. They mentioned that the reason why they decided to go back was due to ration cuts and a lack of opportunity to work outside the camp. However, other refugees who heard about voluntary returnees said their decisions to return were likely due to being offered a piece of land and a small amount of resettlement money.

Most of the refugees at that time stayed, though. Due to a geographical benefit, Karen state is so close by, refugees I met in the camp go back and forth between the two places quite regularly. They go to Karen state for business, to visit family, lead or attend a religious ceremony or a pilgrimage, participate in wedding, and other ceremonies such as ‘Eating New Rice’ which is an important tradition among Karen farmers. This regularity of going back and forth between Karen state and the camp is considered to be part of everyday life activities for some Karen refugees. Refugees may not want to return to their homeland permanently, still they want to have access to their assets, to maintain their networks that they have back in their homeland. Van Hear (2014) suggests that refugees are living in transnational social fields where they maintain their transnational connection among their families and friends in different places as they prefer to live in this transnational life.

Apart from the two explanations above, refugees mentioned many other reasons why they prefer to stay in the camp, only visiting their homeland for a short time. Here, I categorize people’s responses into two groups. The first group is non-political relationship with homeland, and second group is strongly engage in political and ethno-nationalism homeland.

First, the older generation which experienced the war is often simply fed up with the long-lasting conflicts between the ethnic armed groups and they want to live their lives in a peaceful place, a desire which is stronger than the desire to return to their
birthplace. Among the old generation are farmers and rural people, and the image of homeland in their mind, when I asked, is a rural land, with rice fields and ancestral links. Many refugees remembered their Karen homeland as peaceful and wooded. Discussions of the homeland evoke a sense of nostalgia. This nostalgia is related to their lives in the camp and the way of life in Karen state. As one of the farmers said the camp was too crowded, and the way of life is similar to a city, and there was not much space for growing vegetables. If he wants to eat fresh vegetable or bamboo shoots, he has to buy it from the market instead of getting it from the forest nearby his house. Karen state, on the other hand, still has large green areas that can cultivate rice, recalling his childhood memories with friends, and the agricultural way of life. When he visits his homeland in Karen state, it is still like that, but at the same time he now enjoys the more convenient life in the camp, e.g. education and healthcare, or urban life in Mae Sot. So, many refugees want to stay on the Thai side along the border even if the camp would close, more so than to return and rebuild a life in Burma.

Moreover, due to the protracted conflicts among Karen insurgent groups and Burmese government, Karen state has been stuck in this conflict zone for such a long period of time. Although some of the areas have already agreed to a ceasefire, still there is not a lot of economic investment or development projects. Refugees who made a visit to Karen state thought of Karen state as a place lacking development compared to the Thai side just across the border that is far more developed, even the camp is more equipped and convenient than Karen state.

Second, for the group that relates to the political homeland and has a strong sense of ethno-nationalism, their ideology of the ethno-nationalistic homeland is contested by the reality on the ground in Karen state, e.g. the Christian Karen in the camp view the Karen National Liberation Army or the Karen National Union as powerful political entities, but actually in Karen state, there are many other just as powerful civilian and military groups. Similarly, this group of patriotic Karen refugees feel that they are minority in Karen state, while in the camp they feel like being a majority. Moreover, refugees do not relate to the political system and structure in Karen state. In the last general election in 2015, a few refugees returned to vote, but many of them did not. They said there is no candidate that they think can represent them. Refugees, including those who currently have or used to have positions in the camp, feel excluded or have no place in Karen state. They share a feeling that they are like a stranger in the place that they came from.

For some of Karen refugee revolutionists, the notion of return is equivalent to defeat,
to accept that they have lost their beloved Karen nation forever. This means that they surrender and give up their ideology, the reason that they have been fighting for more than six decades. Already in 2011, a former Vice President of KNUU, Naw Zipporah Sein, stated that the Burmese government uses ‘development’ as a weapon to destroy and wipe out the resistance groups and persuade ethnic groups to forget about their struggle\(^\text{11}\). The KNU leaders viewed the term ‘ceasefire’ as synonymous with ‘surrender’. They also viewed the term ‘economic development’ as synonymous with ‘personal profit’, so the idea of development stimulates political distrust.

In terms of social status, a male Karen camp committee member is anxious about return as he may lose the social status that he has in the camp. He pointed out that the political structure in Karen state is not a democracy, and full of corruption, unlike in the camp, which he said is more transparent. (This is partly true, although there is corruption, despotism and nepotism in the camp too.) This is because he is someone in the camp, but may be no one there in Karen state. He gained a rather high social status through his language and personal skills. He spoke Thai quite fluently, which helps him to be close to the Thai authority both inside and outside of the camp. Camp inhabitants always go to him if they needed to contact with the Thai authority or when there was a conflict between Thai people and camp inhabitants; in these situations he acts as a negotiator, and at the same time he is gatekeeper to outsiders.

In terms of culture, some refugees indicate that they are strangers in their homeland due to religion and identity differences. In Karen state, Buddhist people form the majority population. Moreover, the refugees are seen and labelled as lazy since they live in the camp and receive care and help from international organizations. It is not easy for this group of refugees to return and re-integrate in Karen society.

However, some young political activists who have an ethno-nationalistic idea as they studied in the camp, do not share these anxieties about returning that the older generation have. The reason that they want to return, and actually the reason they go back on a temporary basis, is to develop Karen state. Meanwhile, they also want to find a job and work in Thailand.

CONCLUSION

The specific configuration of the camp allows the refugees to build their home in the camp guided by the idea of the Karen homeland, but not an actual hope and plan to return to it. Because of the setting as a refugee camp, refugees do not integrate into the Thai society and the Thai government does not want them to do so either. Yet this segregation makes the space of the camp more conducive to re-flourish their identity. Space was often seen as a vacant category in refugee studies, reduced to a neutral stage upon which other forces were at play in the narrative of migration. Space was rarely seen as an active part in the field of identity formation. In this case, the camp is a fertile place to grow Karen cultural identity and political ideology and is a dynamic field in which Karen identities are in constant state of interaction with the ‘idea’ of homeland but the reality of everyday life.

In this chapter I have focused on what the homeland means to refugees in Mae La camp, based on the many stories and thoughts that refugees shared with me during my fieldwork and thereafter. Unlike what appears to be a consequential relation in most refugee studies, I argue that the focus on the homeland, in this case, should not be seen as tied to, or imply, a desire for return, and, therefore, that it should also be analytically decoupled from the geographic notion of the land, because the idea of the homeland is very prominent in the camp. It is often talked about, and this chapter has shown how the homeland-idea is actively propagated and reinforced by a variety of camp institutions. Therefore, the homeland is not tied to a geographical location. I have furthermore argued that the notion of homeland has become portable: refugees can take it along and reproduce it. Even for the Karen refugees who are less politically active themselves, the pervasive narrative of the homeland in the camp makes it easier for everyone to accommodate the narrative and there are few critical voices against it. Although the homeland represents a physical place and a reference point for the refugees, it also operates as a site of contestation between the desire to return and the sense of belonging that go beyond a confined territory. By looking at deterritorialized homeland that does not fit neatly with the territorial boundaries, it invites refugee scholars to reframe our way of understanding and produce knowledge that goes beyond the national territory.