The Violent Imaginaries of Voluntary Repatriation

Young-Adult Refugees' Perceptions on Return to Burma

Bo Altena

6206115

Utrecht University

August 3rd, 2018

A Thesis submitted to the Board of Examiners

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Arts in Conflict Studies & Human Rights

Supervisor: prof. dr. ir. Georg Frerks

Date of Submission: August 3rd, 2018

Programme trajectory followed: Research Project & Thesis Writing Only (30 ECTS)

Word Count: 25.868

Cover photo: Thai-Burma border, Mae Sot Border Crossing the Friendship Bridge and the Illegal Border Crossing under the Bridge. Picture taken by Author, 20 February 2018.

Abstract

This thesis challenges the common conceptions of voluntary repatriation by demonstrating the dynamic and complicated nature of refugees' return decision-making through an in-depth case study of young-adult Burmese refugees in Thailand. While along the Thai-Burma border pressures that promote 'voluntary' repatriation increase, the different reactions among refugees are striking, and the perspective of youth has long been overlooked. In order to capture and comprehend these different reactions and perceptions, this thesis applies a discursive approach by applying of the analytical frame of violent imaginaries, as developed by Schröder and Schmidt, to show how different perceptions on return come about. Through this lens, this thesis has shown that because the young-adult refugees were often born and raised in Thailand, their detachment from 'home' influences their perceptions on return, and returning 'home' is not a natural step. Moreover, this thesis demonstrates that refugee youth overcome the image of refugees as 'passive victims' as they are active manufacturers of content, contention and contestation, most notably through social media. As a result, this thesis confirms that perceptions are crucial in understanding motivations for return, and that violent imaginaries, albeit amended, are useful concepts through which the complexities of return can be uncovered.

Keywords: Voluntary Repatriation; Burmese Refugees; Decision-making; Young-Adult Refugees; Violent Imaginaries; Thailand

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank several people who supported me in this thesis-writing process. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Georg Frerks, for his encouragement, support and help in keeping me going when I felt that I could not continue – and for trusting me in going my own way. Moreover, I would like to thank my friends and family for their patience, support and the strength they have given me – thank you for keeping me sane. Here, I would also like to thank my fellow MA Conflict Studies and Human Rights students. Thank you for your enthusiasm and for the backing you have given me nonstop, and for continuously celebrating the small wins. I am proud of us to have made it through.

Secondly, I would like to thank everyone I met in and around Mae Sot and who have facilitated my stay there, took time out to talk to me and enriched me with their experiences, expertise, resources and encouragement. I would like to especially thank Jo and Fi, you have been of tremendous help and abetted me to stay grounded during the whole mayhem of madness we – and I in particular – managed to get ourselves into. Furthermore, I would like to thank Miles for all his guidance, support and trust in both my research as well as its intentions. Without this support in Mae Sot, I would still be lost.

But, most of all, my biggest thanks, gratitude and respect goes out to the brave, strong and inspiring young men and women I spoke to along the Thai-Burma border. I still am lost for words when trying to describe your experiences and the impact you have had on me – and I am still a thousand per cent convinced that it should be you conducting this thesis research, not me. I wish you all the best, and hope you achieve all your dreams. I am convinced your vision will help achieve peace in Burma.
I hope I have done you, and your stories, justice.

Bo Altena

3rd of August 2018

The Hague

they have no idea what it is like
to lose home at the risk of
never finding home again
have your entire life
split between two lands and
become the bridge between two countries

- Rupi Kaur

Map of Refugee Camps along the Thailand-Burma Border

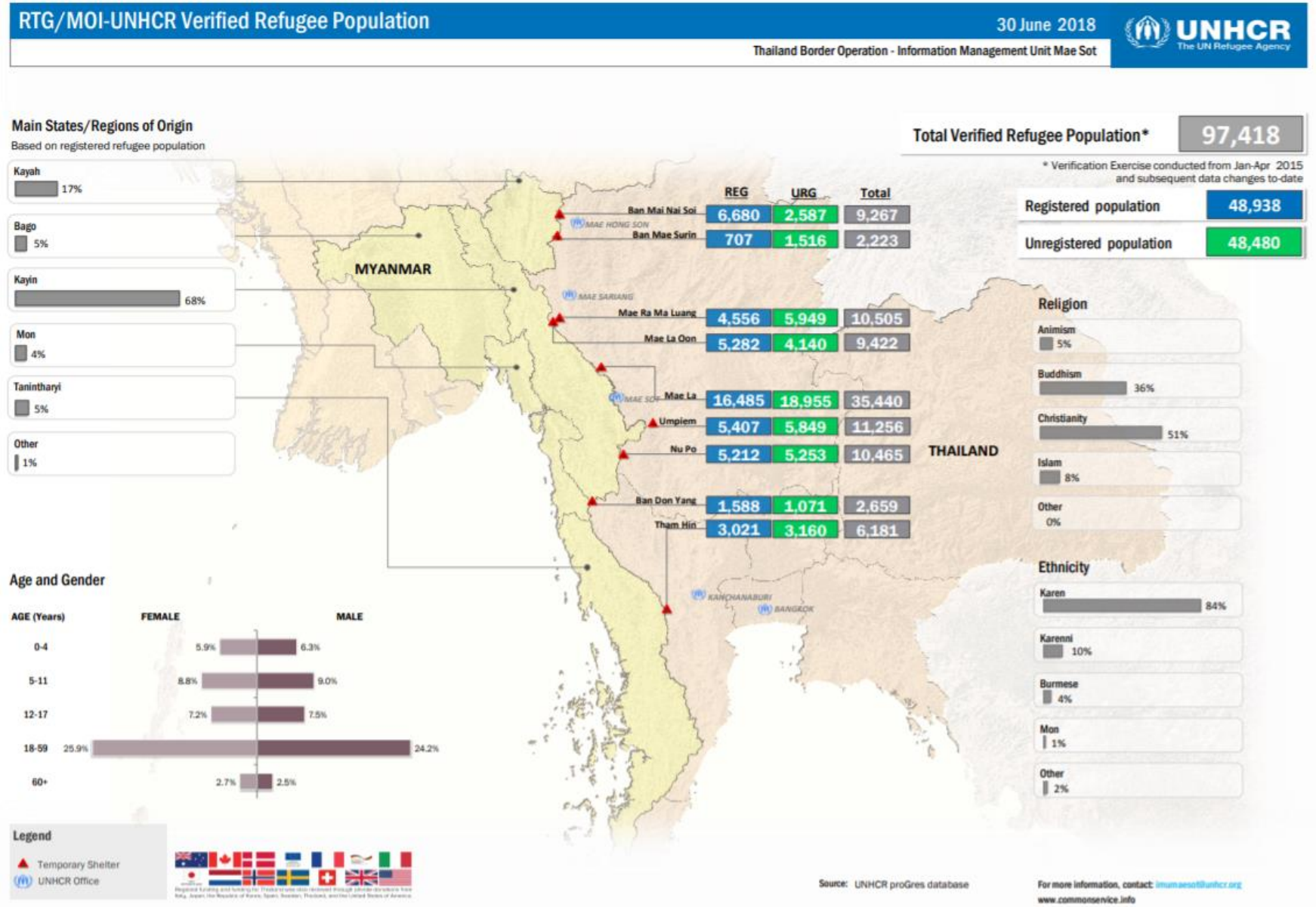

Figure 1: RTG/MOI-UNHCR Verified Refugee Population per June 30, 2018. Available at: http://data.unhcr.org/thailand/regional.php.

List of Abbreviations

CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CIT	Camp Information Team
CRR	Committee on Refugee Return
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organisations
GoUM	Government of the Union of Myanmar
KED	Karen Education Department
KnRC	Karenni Refugee Committee
KNU	Karen National Union
KRC	Karen Refugee Committee
KSNG	Karen Student Network Group
KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
KYO	Karen Youth Organisation
MLC	Migrant Learning Centre
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RTG	Royal Thai Government
TBC	The Border Consortium
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Terms

Tatmadaw	The Armed Forces of Burma/Military of Burma

Table of Contents

Introduction

"So, the people in the camps are in a dilemma – they go back, or they stay here. If they stay here [in the camps in Thailand], it is not really secure, because we can see that the donors are cutting the rations, including reduction of education, so the people face problems, and then some people cannot decide to go to that country – very difficult to decide, why should we go?"[1]

For more than three decades, thousands of refugees fleeing from political persecution and displacement in Burma (Myanmar) have resided in neighbouring Thailand.[2] Over the last years, Burma has undergone unprecedented democratic development, thereby raising hope for peace and, consequently, the return of refugees.[3] Frequently, at the end of a conflict, voluntary repatriation is the preferred solution to the 'refugee problem'.[4] However, after almost 60 years of civil war in eastern Burma, the prospect of refugee repatriation presents many challenges. These question the voluntary nature of return, the 'home' people are deemed to return to, and the availability of information, security and dignity in the process of return.[5] While the conflict that caused many of these refugees to flee is far from resolved, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has launched a repatriation programme to assist Burmese refugees to return, with the support of both the Royal Thai Government (RTG) and the Government of the Union of Myanmar (GoUM).[6]

As a result, tensions have intensified in the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border since the start of repatriation processes. The above-cited quote from Saw Daw,[7] one of the many inspirational young people I have talked to in my research, illustrates clearly the dilemma young refugees are trapped in: whether to return to *that country* – Burma, their supposed 'homeland' – or to stay in the refugee camps where they have lived most of their lives. Especially for young-adults, making a decision on 'return' is complicated. Their position on return is often based on secondary understandings and influences, as many of the young refugees in Thailand left Burma at a young age and therefore have no first-hand experience with the conflict or the cause of fleeing Burma. Yet, recent pressures, including the reduction of funding along the border, are forcing Saw Daw, and many of the other youth along the border, to decide on return. What is striking is that some refugees are eager to leave Thailand, demanding the repatriation process to be sped up, whereas many others fear going back.[8]

---

[1] Author's interview with C1, a young male refugee in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[2] M. Patrick Cottrell, "The Constitutive Effects of Time: Understanding the Evolution and Innovation of Refugee Governance along the Thai-Burmese Border," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 34 (2015): 22.
[3] Kim Jolliffe, "Refugee Decision-Making Processes, Community-Based Protection and Potential Voluntary Repatriation to Myanmar," External research commissioned by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2015), 2.
[4] Richard Black and Khalid Koser, *The End of the Refugee Cycle?* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999): 2-3.
[5] Victoria Jack, "Communication of Information on the Thai-Burma Border," *Forced Migration Review* 52 (2016), 96-98; Burma Partnership Initiative, *Nothing About Us Without Us*, YouTube, directed by Timothy Syrota, December 10, 2012. https://www.burmalink.org/nothing-about-us-without-us-refugees-voices-about-their-return-to-burma/.
[6] William Spindler, "First Myanmar Refugee Returns from Thailand under way," *UNHCR*, October 25, 2016, http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2016/10/580f1c0d4/first-myanmar-refugee-returns-thailand-under-way.html.
[7] Saw Daw is a pseudonym used for my interview coded as C1 in annex I. Names are only used as illustrations.
[8] Ron Corben, "Myanmar Refugees in Thai Camps Face Repatriation Challenges," *VOA News*, May 11, 2017, https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-refugees-thai-camps-repatriation-challenges/3847329.html.

If repatriation is not the most natural outcome for forced migrants, the conditions necessary for people to decide to return voluntarily, and when and on what basis, are crucial.[9] In order to uncover these different reactions and perceptions on return, this thesis assumes the decision-making process regarding voluntary repatriation to be discursive in nature. Thereby it acknowledges that the decision to return is a social product, and therefore entails a synergy between agency and structure.[10] Voluntary repatriation proves to be a good case study of the interplay between actors and institutions in interaction because the repatriation of refugees is highly complex and involves a range of factors operating at a variety of levels.[11]

The multiplicity and complexity of the factors that contribute to return migration suggest that there can be no universally applicable explanation as to why refugees return.[12] Hence, the decision to repatriate cannot be appointed to structural or instrumental theories alone. Drawing on a case study of young-adult Burmese refugees in Thailand, this thesis investigates the complexity of refugees' decision-making about whether to repatriate or remain in exile. By studying return from a discursive approach, this thesis pays attention to both the perceptions and position of refugees as active agents in return as well as to the structures, institutions and complex factors that contribute to return migration. This provides this thesis with two strengths. Firstly, it allows us to uncover the different dialogues from community and government levels that Burmese refugees experience, which is important since all actors involved (governments, assistance providers, and refugees) have different expectations of repatriation.[13] Secondly, it acknowledges that refugees constitute a highly heterogeneous group of actors in terms of migration experiences, length of stay abroad, and life plans,[14] and thus, that different people will react differently to similar conditions.

However, some gaps remain. While the discursive approach has been praised for its ability to show the meanings associated to return for both agents and institutions, it does not provide us with practical or analytical tools to study the various perceptions on repatriation.[15] Moreover, it does not show us how to understand change in the structure-agency dichotomy. Furthermore, even though various authors have conducted research into refugee perceptions discursively, many failed to take into account the

[9] Naohiko Omata, "The Complexity of Refugees' Return Decision-Making in a Protracted Exile: Beyond the Home-Coming Model and Durable Solutions," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, no. 8 (2013): 1282.
[10] Marieke van Houte, Melissa Siegel and Tine Davids, "Deconstructing the meanings of and motivations for return: an Afghan Case Study," *Comparative Migration Studies* 4, no. 21 (2016): 4; Laura Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation: Towards a More Proactive Theory of Return Migration," in: *The End of the Refugee Cycle?,* eds. Richard Black and Khalid Koser (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999): 230.
[11] Khalid Koser, "Information and Repatriation: The Case of Mozambican Refugees in Malawi," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no. 1 (1997): 2.
[12] Gaim Kibreab, "Citizenship Rights and Repatriation of Refugees," *The International Migration Review* 37, no. 1 (2003): 38-9.
[13] Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation," 230.
[14] Jean-Pierre Cassarino, "Return Migration and Development: The Significance of Migration Cycles," in: *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies,* ed. Anna Triandafyllidou (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016): 216.
[15] B.S. Chimni, "Refugees, Return and Reconstruction of 'Post-Conflict' Societies: A Critical Perspective," *International Peacekeeping* 9, no. 2 (2002): 164.

perceptions of those agents and structures that influence refugees.[16] Hereby, these authors focus merely on the 'refugee experience' overall and ignore the socio-cultural contexts in which they are embedded. This is especially complicated, as in this fashion, the voice of youth and other groups with specific views and needs are shoved together under the umbrella term 'refugee', thereby marginalizing these groups even further.[17] Therefore, a successful understanding of voluntary repatriation must take into account both the structural forces that promote or constrain migration and the motivations, goals and aspirations of the people who migrate.[18]

In order to overcome these gaps, I propose applying the framework of violent imaginaries, as developed by Schröder and Schmidt, so as to add a theoretical stepping stone to the study of repatriation and return.[19] The added value of this framework lies in its consideration of not only narratives, but also performances and inscriptions in the creation of perceptions that inform action. Hereby, this framework allows for the study of the interaction between agency and structure simultaneously. Moreover, the focus on imaginaries and perceptions, rather than space and place, allows for a deeper understanding of those factors and aspirations that facilitate or complicate return.[20] To that end, the research question of this thesis is:

> As conflict endures in Burma, how do violent imaginaries influence the voluntary repatriation of young-adult Burmese refugees living in refugee camps along the Burmese border in Tak Province, Thailand, since the start of the repatriation processes in 2016 until April 2018?

To understand how perceptions are created, contested and re-created in interaction, we use the frame of violent imaginaries. This frame assumes that before an act is committed, it needs to be *imagined* first. Thereby, it thus argues that before repatriation occurs, perceptions are formed, and these perceptions are crucial to understand the decision-making processes on refugees. Violent imaginaries are defined as: "the emphasising of the historicity of present-day confrontations [which] can be represented through narratives, performances, and inscriptions."[21] Each of these representational strategies are easy to manipulate and are highly fragmented in any larger social context.[22] The confrontations, namely, the various pushes for repatriation, are expected to instigate antagonistic relationships and contradictions in understanding between various actors, and thereby influence perceptions on return. This allows thus for a study of both agents and structures in discourse.

---

[16] Oliver Bakewell, "Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 10 (2010): 1693.
[17] Marie Godin and Giorgia Doná, "Refugee Voices, New Social Media and Politics of Representation: Young Congolese in the Diaspora and Beyond," *Refuge* 32, no. 1 (2016): 61-2.
[18] Bakewell, "Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory," 1693.
[19] Ingo Schröder and Bettina Schmidt, "Introduction: Violent Imaginaries & Violent Practices," in: *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001): 10.
[20] Cathrine Brun, "Reterritorilizing the Relationship between People and Place in Refugee Studies," *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 83, no. 1 (2001): 20.
[21] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 9.
[22] Ibid., 9.

While it was expected that youth are heavily influenced by the narratives of their parents and teachers, the influence of their community leaders and community-based organisations (CBOs) and performances by international organisations (IOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the various violent images and information they encounter in the media, this thesis will show that youth are only to a limited extent influenced by violent imaginaries and have started to develop their own narratives, performances and inscriptions on return. Together, these elements explain how youth interact with and contest the structures that exert influence over them.

In order to understand how these perceptions are influenced, and to illustrate the complexities of return, I formulate the following sub-questions:

i) How do narratives of former conflict and past violence influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma?
ii) How do public rituals and other performances influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma?
iii) How do visual images of conflict, both in the form of traditional and social media, influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma?

By focusing on youth and their perceptions, this thesis uncovers some of the common (mis)perceptions about return. Firstly, it complicates the notion of repatriation processes as 'homecoming'. The return of refugees back to their country of origin is considered as the most "durable solution" to the refugee problem,[23] as well as a "natural" phenomenon.[24] However, youth miss the attachment to the idea of 'home' and belonging many of their older community members embrace, which influences where, when and if they want to return. Secondly, it complicates the notion of 'voluntary' in voluntary repatriation: as will be shown, refugees receive pressures from various institutions, directly and indirectly, that influence their perceptions of return. Thirdly, the focus on youth allows us to show the complexities of return in the 21st century – their use of (social) media, not only to receive but also to produce and interact with information adds another layer to the complexity of return, and on the interaction between agency and structure. How youth use social media to break the 'uprootedness' from their home community, their life of confinement in the camps and the distance they feel, breaks many of the conceptions about refugees and as such is a necessary, useful and interesting addition to both academia and policy.

As Omata already indicated in his article, there is still a great need for more studied on voluntary repatriation based upon empirical research.[25] Furthermore, the role of young-adult refugees as a group

[23] Ine Lietaert, Ilse Derluyn and Eric Broekaert, "Returnees' Perspectives on Their Re-Migration Processes," *International Migration* 52, no. 5 (2014): 144.
[24] Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation," 232.
[25] Omata, "The Complexity of Refugees' Return Decision-Making in a Protracted Exile," 1282.

up until now has been overlooked both academically and policy-wise.[26] Academically, the focus on young refugees is often on psychological issues,[27] rather than on the experience of those that follow their parents in escaping violence,[28] and policy-wise, there is no platform for youth to express their opinions and go in dialogue with those institutions and actors that influence them. Often, refugee youth are perceived as "passive victims",[29] that have "little knowledge of life beyond the barbed wire, as they have been born and raised in the artificial environment of a refugee camp."[30] Yet, as this thesis will also show, refugee youth are active manufacturers of content, contention and contestation. Moreover, the perceptions of youth are fundamentally different from other refugees, and, also, from the relevant institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to study the distinct perceptions of this group, as well as the differences within this group.

To give voice to this marginalized group, as well as to uncover the complexities of return, the thesis is built up as follows. In the first chapter, I will introduce the empirical background and context of the thesis. In the second chapter, I will display the theoretical foundations of the thesis as well as introduce the analytical frame through which the issue of voluntary repatriation and its perceptions will be studied. In the third chapter, the design of the research and its methodological considerations are explained. Hereafter, I will analyse the various narratives (chapter 4), performances (chapter 5) and inscriptions (chapter 6) that influence youth in their perceptions of return, before concluding to what extent youth are confirming or contesting these influences and giving practical and theoretical recommendations for further research.

Finally, as in any research on Burma, it has become customary to make a brief note on the matter of how to name the country.[31] In 1989, the official name of the country was changed from Burma to Myanmar by the ruling military government at the time. The United Nations (UN) and many governments subsequently recognized these name changes. However, the name became politically charged, and many opposition groups call for a boycott of the name "Myanmar" as a form of protest against the regime's human rights abuses and lack of consultation in the name change.[32] In this paper, though, the consideration for 'Burma' over 'Myanmar' was more closely related to giving a voice to my respondents: most respondents referred to the country as Burma.

[26] Burma Partnership Initiative, *Nothing About Us Without Us*, 2:00.
[27] See, for example, Nancy Farwell, "'Onward through Strength': Coping and Psychological Support among Refugee Youth Returning to Eritrea from Sudan," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, no. 1 (2001).
[28] Kathrine Bek-Pedersen and Edith Montgomery, "Narratives of Past and Present: Young Refugees' Construction of a Family Identity in Exile," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no. 1 (2006): 94.
[29] Georg Frerks and Berma Klein Goldewijk, "Human Security: Mapping the Challenges," in: *Human Security and International Insecurity* (Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2007): 39.
[30] Barbara Zeus, "Exploring Barriers to Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations: The Case of Burmese Refugees in Thailand," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 2 (2011): 257.
[31] Hazel J. Lang, *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press (Southeast Asia Program Publications), 2002): 7.
[32] Lang, *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*, 8.

1. Research Context: Burmese Refugees in Thailand

"*I had to leave my homeland because of the Burmese military … they ordered that [in] 50 days, we had to leave our village. If we did not leave, they would kill us.*"[33]

The aim of this chapter is to empirically embed the thesis. In order to give an accurate description of my findings in the field, first, an introduction to the context and the situation along the Thai-Burma border needs to be given. Here, I will discuss the cause of the protracted refugee situation in Thailand, as well as the current situation and the structures of governance in which the refugees are embedded. Moreover, in this chapter, I will introduce the case study and its focus research population. This way, the reader gains a better conceptual understanding of the empirical complication(s) at hand.

1.1. Conflict, Ethnic Tensions and Life at the Border

Burma (Myanmar) has experienced one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the world and, as a consequence, one of the most protracted refugee situations.[34] Since Burma became independent from the British in 1948, Burma has been plagued by an extraordinarily lengthy internal war and has struggled to achieve peace and unity over the course of the seven decades since.[35] After barely three months of independence, the country was submerged in a complicated, long-lasting conflict between the ethnic Bamar (Burmese) majority, represented in the central government in Rangoon, and numerous anti-government rebellions from ethnic minorities.[36] In academia, it is often said that the conflict in Burma originates from the demand of the ethnic minorities for the autonomy of their states from the central government dominated by the Bamar majority.[37] This civil war, that started with the Karen armed opposition against the new government in 1949, has resulted in continuing clashes over territories along the border, and in ongoing persecution of various ethnic groups, including civilians, by the *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese military.[38] While numerous ceasefires have been signed, and there has been a decline in military activity in the border regions since, these ceasefires have often been broken. Consequently, up until today eastern Burma is affected by conflict, fighting and escalation as Kachin State, Shan State and Karen State are engaged in active fighting between the *Tatmadaw* and the Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs).[39] These continuous outbreaks of violence have caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from Burma, most notably of Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon ethnic minorities, to Thailand, the main destination for political exiles and refugees from Burma.[40]

---

[33] Author's interview with A2, a female migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 10, 2018.
[34] Burma Link, "Overview," October 6, 2016, https://www.burmalink.org/background/thailand-burma-border/overview/.
[35] The Border Consortium (TBC), "Brief History of the Border," accessed June 20, 2018, http://www.theborderconsortium.org/about-us/history/.
[36] Lang, *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*, 11.
[37] Jiwon Lee, "Settlements in the Civil Wars of Myanmar and Sri Lanka: The Success, Failure and Deception of the Peace Process," *Millennial Asia* 7, no. 1 (2016): 65.
[38] Sebastien Moretti, "The Challenge of Durable Solutions for Refugees at the Thai-Myanmar Border," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 34 (2015): 73.
[39] Mikael Gravers, *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2007): 2.
[40] Elisabeth Olivius, "Sites of Repression and Resistance: Political Space in Refugee Camps in Thailand," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 294.

The often-noted start of this displacement is in 1984, when the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen ethnic armed group, suffered from a major offensive by the *Tatmadaw*. This resulted in about 10,000 refugees fleeing into Thailand, and consequently, the first 'semi-permanent' refugee camps in Thailand were formed in Tak and Mae Hong Son provinces, in the western part of Thailand, between 1984 and 1986.[41] Continuing waves of violence and displacement kept pushing victims to Thailand throughout the years and by 2005, the official numbers in the camps in Thailand peaked at 150,000. In that year, a group resettlement programme was initiated, with the support of the Thai and US governments, in order to offer a durable solution to the tens of thousands of refugees from Burma.[42] Under the "largest resettlement programme in the world", over 50,000 refugees from Burma resettled in, amongst others, the United States, Australia, Canada and the Netherlands.[43]

Currently, there are 97,418 verified refugees inhabiting nine 'temporary camps' across the Thai-Burma border.[44] However, this number is merely an educated guess – since 2004, the RTG has stopped the official registration of refugees. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of people have arrived in the camps since, due to the lack of appropriate administrative mechanisms or controls.[45] Moreover, this number grows even bigger when taking into account the further undetermined numbers of displaced persons who move well beyond the camp structures on the border: many refugees never enter the camp structure, managing to "disappear", undocumented and illegally, into the immigrant workforce and beyond.[46] As this research will show, the permeability of migrant- and refugee communities, with young-adults often shifting between the two with less difficulty than their older equivalents, complicates a distinction between strict 'refugees' and 'migrants' even further. Thousands of students, for example, have entered the refugee camps solely for education whereas *de facto* refugees reside outside the camps as undocumented immigrants.[47] Therefore, my definition of 'refugee' in this thesis goes broader than traditionally, including "all persons who may be deemed to have been coerced for one reason or another to leave their country and/or to stay in another country", following Coles.[48] Hereby it also includes forced migrants such as people who have been moved for reasons of political control, dam construction, rural development and the like.[49]

---

[41] Supang Chantavanich and Aungkana Kamonpetch, "Introduction: Background of Protracted Conflict and Displacement in Myanmar," in: *Refugee Return and Displacement along the Thai-Burma Border* (Springer Briefs in Environment, Security, Development and Peace 28, 2017): 1.
[42] Vivian Tan, "US wraps up group resettlement for Myanmar refugees in Thailand," *UNHCR*, January 29, 2014, http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2014/1/52e90f8f6/wraps-group-resettlement-myanmar-refugees-thailand.html.
[43] Urara Furukawa and Kitty McKinsey, "Resettlement of Myanmar refugees from Thailand camps hits 50,000 mark," *UNHCR*, June 30, 2009, http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2009/6/4a4a178f9/resettlement-myanmar-refugees-thailand-camps-hits-50000-mark.html.
[44] UNHCR, "RTG/MOI-UNHCR Verified Refugee Population," June 30, 2018, http://data.unhcr.org/thailand/regional.php.
[45] Moretti, "Challenge of Durable Solutions for Refugees", 74.
[46] Lang, *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*, 12.
[47] Burma Link, "Overview".
[48] Rosemary Preston, "Researching Repatriation and Reconstruction: Who is Researching What and Why?" in: *The End of the Refugee Cycle?*, eds. Richard Black and Khalid Koser (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999): 25.
[49] Jan Gerrit van Uffelen, "Return After Flight: Exploring the Decision Making Process of Sudanese War-Displaced People by Employing an Extended Version of the Theory of Reasoned Action" (PhD diss., Wageningen University, 2006): 2.

Now that we have defined the number and scope of the predicament of Burmese refugees, the next part of this chapter will discuss the governance and structures these refugees fall under. Although Thailand is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, the RTG has repeatedly expressed a commitment to protect refugees in Thailand, including most recently during the UN Human Rights Committee review of Thailand's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in March 2017.[50] However, many organisations and governments are worried by the lack of progress in implementing these pledges and by the ongoing human rights violations affecting the situations of refugees in Thailand. The most important violation relevant to this thesis is that Thailand has long failed to respect the legally binding principle of *non-refoulement*, which entails the prohibition of "returning an individual to a country where they may face torture or other serious human rights violations", for example by returning refugees and others facing persecution to Turkey and China between 2014 and 2017.[51]

The approach of the RTG towards refugees has been a policy of strict exclusion. Officially, refugees do not have access to services provided outside the camps, nor are they permitted to leave the camps to earn an income. For long, the strong exclusionist policy towards the camps included not allowing any humanitarian or relief organisations to provide services in the camp, but eventually, since the 1990s, international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were authorised to work in the camps and to provide the most basic services in the areas of food, shelter, health, education, and community services.[52] Other important actors present in the camp structures include the camp committee, governed by Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) and Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC) representatives respectively.[53] These groups chaperon much of the day-to-day governance of the camp. Furthermore, various community-based organizations (CBOs) fulfil important tasks, acting as community representatives, in the camps. As a result, refugee camps are governed by a diverse constellation of international humanitarian organisations and host state authorities that do not necessarily agree on perceptions, goals, and priorities.[54]

[50] Human Rights Watch, "Thailand: Implement Commitments to Protect Refugee Rights," July 6, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/06/thailand-implement-commitments-protect-refugee-rights.
[51] Amnesty International, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Thailand's Refugee Policies and Violations of the Principe of Non-Refoulement* (London: Amnesty International, 2017): 10-13.
[52] Su-Ann Oh and Marc van der Stouwe, "Education, Diversity, and Inclusion in Burmese Refugee Camps in Thailand," *Comparative Education Review* 52, no. 4 (2008): 590.
[53] Of the nine camps along the border, seven are governed by the KRC, as the majority of their inhabitants are of Karen ethnicity, and the two northern-most camps are governed by the KnRC following that same logic.
[54] Olivius, "Political Space in Refugee Camps in Thailand," 292.

1.2. Recent Developments and the Impasse of Voluntary Repatriation

In recent years, Burma has experienced significant steps towards democratisation, including the release of the popular activist and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi, the formation of a civilian government[55] in 2011, the organisation of democratic elections and the following appointment of a National League for Democracy-led government in 2015, the release of hundreds of political prisoners as well as the signature of a number of ceasefire agreements signed between ethnic insurgencies and government since September 2011.[56] These changes, which would have hardly been imaginable ten years ago, have "increased momentum for preparing for a possible voluntary return of refugees from Thailand," and changed the tone towards return into one of optimism.[57]

While this constitutes a promising development, ethnic discrimination and persecution have not ceased, and violence between the government and armed insurgency groups endures.[58] Yet, despite the escalation of armed conflict, militarisation and investment-driven tensions in ethnic areas, the discourse of repatriation is becoming more prominent. In 2012, the UNHCR published the 'Framework for Voluntary Repatriation: Refugees from Myanmar in Thailand', which claims that, seeing "the unprecedented improvements towards a durable peace process and, with it, greatly improved human rights in Burma, it is prudent, therefore, that the humanitarian community initiates measures in preparation for and support of an eventual voluntary repatriation of the refugees."[59] With the closure of the resettlement programme in 2014, and the continued unwillingness of the RTG to let Burmese refugees integrate in Thai society, the only 'durable' solution left is repatriation.

Although the UNHCR emphasised that much still needs to be done in Burma before the facilitation of voluntary repatriation could commence, large-scale preparations for return have been put in place. Especially in recent years, now that new campaigns of violence in Karen state and other ethnic states in Burma, including Rakhine state, have erupted, organisations should critically question pressures for return. Nevertheless, the UNHCR and the respective governments of Thailand and Burma have embarked upon enabling return, organizing the first facilitated group return from Nu Poe and Tham Hin camps in October 2016. According to the UNHCR, the hope is that these returns "will help grow interest in repatriation among other refugees."[60] But, these efforts have been met by widespread criticism, both from Burma's civil society and from international NGOs, which emphasised that conditions in Burma were not yet suitable for large-scale repatriation.[61]

---

[55] Officially, the government is civilian but 25% of seats in parliament are still held by the military. The same goes for important ministries, including the ministries of Defence, Border and Home Affairs.
[56] Cottrell, "Refugee Governance along the Thai-Burmese Border," 38; Moretti, "Challenge of Durable Solutions for Refugees", 73.
[57] Moretti, "Challenge of Durable Solutions for Refugees", 70.
[58] Olivius, "Political Space in Refugee Camps in Thailand," 293-4.
[59] UNHCR, "Framework for Voluntary Repatriation: Refugees from Myanmar in Thailand," October 1, 2012, http://www.data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=12/.
[60] Spindler, "First Myanmar Refugee Returns."
[61] Karen Hargrave, "Refugee-State Distrust on the Thai-Burma Border," *Forced Migration Review* 49 (2015): 95.

Repatriation, in this paper, will be defined as "the preparation for return, the process of return, and the reception and arrangements for integration made immediately after arrival in the home country".[62] It is universally recognised that the repatriation of refugees, whether spontaneous or organised, must be governed by the following common principles in order to be defined as 'voluntary':

> i. Refugees have a right to return voluntarily to their country of origin;
> ii. Tangible efforts - by all parties to the conflict - are undertaken to address and remove the root causes of cross-border refugee movement and internal population displacement;
> iii. The repatriation of refugees takes place only upon the freely expressed wish of the refugees themselves. The voluntary and individual character of repatriation must be respected;
> iv. Voluntary repatriation must be carried out under conditions of safety and with dignity, to the refugee's place of choice in the country of origin.[63]

As such, the decision to return is formed both by the conditions in the country of origin (calling for an informed decision) and by the situation in the country of asylum (permitting a free choice).[64]

The UNHCR has since consistently affirmed that operations of repatriation from Thailand to Burma are currently only at a pre-planning stage and that the institutional standard of voluntariness will be safeguarded in any repatriation process. However, the label 'voluntary' is complicated enough on its own: whether something is voluntary or involuntary also depends on the lens of agency or structure.[65] Reduced rations and diminished access to basic services in the refugee camps, in addition to widespread armed conflict inside the country – including in Karen State just a few kilometres away from the refugee camps – are fuelling anxiety and worry in refugee communities about return to their homeland, contesting the element of voluntariness in this return process.[66]

As a result, refugees are stuck between a rock and a hard place: return to uncertainty in Burma or remain in uncertainty in Thailand. Therefore, in order to ensure the voluntariness of return, it is necessary to understand and uncover the various perceptions of refugees themselves, since in the end, the success of a repatriation depends on whether the refugees returned voluntarily or not.[67] Yet, the perspective of refugees have remained absent in the dialogue on repatriation, while it has been shown that the parameters used by refugees to determine when it is appropriate to return often differ from

---

[62] Preston, "Researching Repatriation and Reconstruction," 25.
[63] UNHCR, "Framework for Voluntary Repatriation: Refugees from Myanmar in Thailand (A revision of the October 2012 UNHCR Thailand Discussion Document)," May 2014, https://reliefweb.int/report/thailand/unhcr-framework-voluntary-repatriation-refugees-myanmar-thailand-may-2014, 2.
[64] UNHCR, "Framework for Voluntary Repatriation (May 2014)", 10.
[65] Oliver Bakewell, "Repatriation and Self-Settled Refugees in Zambia: Bringing Solutions to the Wrong Problems," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13, no. 4 (2000): 357.
[66] Progressive Voice, "Where do we go from here? A Snapshot of Recent Developments for Refugees Along the Thailand-Myanmar Border," Briefing Paper (December 2016), https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2016/12/19/briefing-paper-where-do-we-go-from-here-a-snapshot-of-recent-developments-for-refugees-along-the-thailand-myanmar-border/, 1.
[67] Burma Partnership Initiative, *Nothing About Us Without Us*, 16:50.

those used by involved agencies.[68] However, dialogue with camp residents is necessary in order for them to make informed decisions about whether, when and how they feel safe to return.[69]

This is especially true for youth, who have largely been overlooked both academically and policy-wise. Often, when referred to young refugees, they are thought of being formed merely by their life in the camp,[70] not having their own identity,[71] and hence having no understanding of the events and institutions that have influence over them, or of what is happening outside of the camp,[72] nor how to survive outside of the camp.[73] As a result, they are often marginalised. This thesis aims to give strength and a podium to this 'lost generation'. Hereby I refer to the thousands of youth who are living in limbo along the Thailand-Burma border, stuck between staying in Thailand or returning to Burma.[74] There are a couple of defining characteristics of this group that need to be taken account. Firstly, for them, return is especially complicated, as many of them are born, or at least largely raised, on the border, and have no personal recollection of the 'home' they are pushed to return to. Secondly, this group has received high levels of education and training in the camps and/or along the border, something their parents or peers in Burma are lacking.[75] Herein, the case of young-adult Burmese refugees in Thailand is unique: the refugee community in this particular region has strived to provide their youth with post-basic education, and as a result, their level of education is relatively high, also when compared with other protracted-refugee situations.[76]

Yet, these educated young men and women are still being side-lined in processes of peace, change and return. As a consequence of their education and childhood along the border, these youths have their own perceptions of the conflict, return and their needs. These are fundamentally different from those that exert influence over them. Therefore, the perspective of youth needs to be included if we want to create conditions under which it is favourable for them to return in safety and in dignity.

[68] Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation," 230; Lietaert et al., "Returnees' Perspectives on Their Re-Migration Processes," 147.
[69] Jack, "Communication of Information on the Thai-Burma Border," 96.
[70] Author's interview with the secretary of KRC as well as the lead of the Committee on Refugee Return in Mae Sot on March 13, 2018.
[71] Author's interview with the education lead at a local NGO in Mae Sot on March 8, 2018.
[72] Moretti, "Challenge of Durable Solutions for Refugees", 70.
[73] Author's interview with the project lead 'refugee camps' at an international NGO in Mae Sot on March 29, 2018.
[74] Leena Zieger, "Unrecognized and Forgotten: Refugee Youth in Burma's Transition," *The Irrawaddy*, March 11, 2017, https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/unrecognized-forgotten-refugee-youth-burmas-transition.html.
[75] Su-Ann Oh, *Education in refugee camps in Thailand: policy, practice and paucity* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011): 2.
[76] Zieger, "Unrecognized and Forgotten."

2. The Discursive Approach to Voluntary Refugee Repatriation

"*The Thai government says, 'go to your country', but you see a lot of children are born in the camps.. And they say, 'go back to your country'? This is the country they are born in actually!*"[77]

The aim of this chapter is to theoretically contextualise this thesis. Firstly, I will establish that decision-making processes of young-adult Burmese refugees on voluntary repatriation should be studied discursively. Secondly, I will situate this discursive approach, borrowing largely from structuration theory as developed by Giddens, in the academic debate on refugee repatriation, and show what gaps remain. Third and finally, I will take critiques on Giddens' and other discursive works and propose a new analytical tool in studying refugee decision-making regarding repatriation: violent imaginaries, as established by Schröder and Schmidt.

2.1. Discourse and the Repatriation of Young-Adult Burmese Refugees

In the previous chapter it has been identified that empirically, the complication arises that the pressures young-adult refugees are being put under with reference to repatriation creates a dilemma: whether to remain in the underfunded, temporary shelters in Thailand or to 'return' to uncertainty in Burma. Pressures for repatriation are not new, and we can observe similar contemporary repatriation movements during conflict, both forced and voluntary, to Afghanistan, Colombia, Somalia and Mali.[78] What is complicated however is the implication that the current facilitated repatriation to Burma is 'voluntary'. Voluntary repatriation, as defined by the UNHCR is "the free and voluntary return of refugees to their country of origin in safety and dignity."[79] Nevertheless, all actors involved in repatriation, from UNCHR to the respective governments and the refugees themselves, have their own perceptions on repatriation that influence their actions and have implications on those who are deemed to repatriate.[80] What is striking then are the different dialogues and understandings of what security, 'home', return and repatriation mean as held by different actors, and how these dialogues are interpreted and recreated.

Therefore, in order to uncover the reasons, motivations and beliefs relevant to repatriation, we should study the discourses that guide policy, decision-making and perceptions on return. Here, discourses on repatriation include both structures in which refugees are embedded, imposed on them by external actors, as well as the testimonies and descriptions given by possible repatriates themselves.[81] Thus, studying repatriation discursively allows this thesis to understand the links between the social and the individual, as it is the interaction and relation between the two that creates realities and informs action.[82] Hence, this interaction should be understood if we want to uncover the complexities of return.

---

[77] Author's interview with the education lead at a local NGO in Mae Sot on March 8, 2018.
[78] UNHCR, "Update on Voluntary Repatriation," EC/67/SC/CRP.13 (June 2016): 3.
[79] UNHCR, "Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities," (2004), http://www.unhcr.org/411786694.pdf, 8.
[80] Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation," 230.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996): 94-5.

The case of young-adult refugees is important and useful in studying this interaction between structures and agents that guides decision-making on voluntary repatriation as it uncovers two important assumptions in refugee studies: firstly, that of place, exclusion and belonging, and secondly, that of 'voluntary' return. Firstly, within refugee studies, the focus on 'home', belonging and identity has continually been paramount. The idea persisted that people who become refugees and 'move out of' their homeland create a challenge to the natural order of things.[83] Consequently, they are seen as 'uprooted', meaning, "to be torn loose from culture, to *become powerless* and to lose one's identity."[84] For long, it was thus assumed that once the conditions of refuge had been removed, i.e. the conflict had ended, things would 'go back to normal' and refugees would return to their homes.[85] However, as many academics since have shown, this clear-cut definition of repatriation is far from perfect: the assumption that repatriation occurs 'preferably to the place of residence of the refugee in his country of origin', or 'back home', is flawed as often, these refugees have no memory of their 'home' or have no home to return to since it has been destroyed.[86] This is especially true for refugee youth, who are often born in exile and have little history with the 'home' they are being pushed to return to. Thus, to accurately describe the discourses of young-adults refugees and others involved in repatriation, it is necessary to denaturalise the links between people and place, understanding that these are created through social relations.[87] Nevertheless, important practitioners in the field, including UNHCR, keep referring to the "return home" of refugees.[88]

Secondly, voluntary return is hardly ever completely voluntary, as multiple issues of security, safety, livelihoods and other important aspects of daily life in both in host- and 'home' country are at stake.[89] Refugees are often encouraged to return home, while conditions remain unstable. At the same time, refugees may wish to return home even when safety cannot yet be ensured.[90] Both these impasses can be observed amongst Burmese refugees in Thailand. However, refugee youth, as described in the previous chapter, are often marginalised and are deemed not to have a voice or influence on the process of return. Yet, if return is voluntary, at least to the extent that refugees have some options available, we need to give them agency when studying their process of return.[91] Therefore, the view of refugees as 'passive' and 'powerless' should be disregarded, and a successful understanding of voluntary repatriation should include both the discourses from those institutions that facilitate (or complicate)

[83] Liisa H. Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 26-8.
[84] Brun, "People and Place in Refugee Studies," 18. Emphasis added.
[85] Susan Zimmerman, "Understanding Repatriation: Refugee Perspectives on the Importance of Safety, Reintegration, and Hope," *Population, Space and Place* 18 (2012): 45; Chimni, "Refugees, Return and Reconstruction," 163.
[86] Omata, "The Complexity of Refugees' Return Decision-Making in a Protracted Exile," 1292.
[87] Brun, "People and Place in Refugee Studies," 20.
[88] UNHCR, "Myanmar refugees return home from Thailand with UNHCR support," May 8, 2018, http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2018/5/5af157e14/myanmar-refugees-return-home-thailand-unhcr-support.html.
[89] Marjoleine Zieck, "Voluntary Repatriation: Paradigm, Pitfalls, Progress," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2004): 36.
[90] Barry N. Stein and Frederick C. Cuny, "Refugee repatriation during conflict: Protection and post-return assistance," *Development in Practice* 4, no. 3 (1994): 173.
[91] Chris Dolan, "Repatriation from South Africa to Mozambique – Undermining Durable Solutions?" in: *The End of the Refugee Cycle?*, eds. Richard Black and Khalid Koser (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999): 93-4.

return, as well as those that are expected to make decisions on these matters. Thus, if we want to understand the complexities of refugee repatriation that young-adult refugees face, it needs to be studied discursively, meaning, as a social phenomenon that involves individuals, communities and states, in interaction. As such, any attempt to uncover the genesis of repatriation must incorporate the discursive and institutional continuities which render repatriation as a legitimate or illegitimate course of action.[92] By studying return and those involved in it discursively, this study gives the podium and emphasis to the experience of the individuals and the imaginations that guide their perceptions and actions.

2.2. The Discursive Turn in Refugee Studies

Various authors, including Hammond, Van Houte et al. and Omata have proposed applying such a discursive approach to refugee repatriation.[93] They hold that the decision-making process of refugee return is a social product and, as such, an interaction between agency and structure. Even though multiple approaches invoke discourse in their studies on identity, meaning, beliefs, and structures, authors of the discursive approach argue that discourse itself – the story – needs to be placed at the centre of study.[94] Discourse, then, is more than just the use of language, speech or text to achieve goals, but should be studied as active social relations and representations that are used to construct meaning.[95] Discourse structures the way a topic, such as repatriation, can be meaningfully talked and reasoned about.[96] At the same time, discourses are both the medium and output of social practice, renegotiated in social practice, and are thus, to a certain degree, dynamic.[97] Hence, in order to understand how reality is socially constructed and deconstructed, we need to study both agency and structure in interaction.

However, for long, repatriation research was divided in two main strands: one emphasising the role of human agency within outcomes, and one that mainly focuses on factors known to have influenced decisions.[98] Yet, neither of the two alone explains why some choose to return and others do not. Agency-based theorists such as Stein and Cuny, Moore and Shellman, and Gale have assumed that refugees in their return assess their migration based on opportunities, culture and costs of relocation, assuming free choice and full information availability.[99] Here, agency entails the "capacity of social actors to reflect on their position, devise strategies and take action to achieve their desires."[100] The crucial problem with agency-based or functionalist migration theory assumes that overall (migration)

---

[92] Taken from Jabri, *Discourses on Violence,* 3-4, in reference to her understanding of violent conflict as a social phenomenon.
[93] Omata, "The Complexity of Refugees' Return Decision-Making in a Protracted Exile," 1292; Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation," 230; Van Houte et al., "Meanings and Motivations for Return," 4.
[94] Jolle Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017): 126.
[95] Jabri, *Discourses on Violence,* 94.
[96] Georg Frerks, "Conflict, Development and Discourse," in: *Human Security and International Insecurity,* eds. Georg Frerks and Berma Klein Goldewijk (Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2007): 45.
[97] Frerks, "Conflict, Development and Discourse," 45.
[98] Zimmerman, "Understanding Repatriation," 45.
[99] Stein and Cuny, "Refugee repatriation during conflict," 174; L.A. Gale, "The Invisible Refugee Camp: Durable Solutions for Boreah "Residuals" in Guinea," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 4 (2008); Will H. Moore and Stephen M. Shellman, "Whither Will They Go? A Global Study of Refugees' Destinations, 1965-1995," *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (2007).
[100] Bakewell, "Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory," 1694.

preferences are more or less constant across societies and over time.[101] However, return migrants constitute a highly heterogeneous group of actors in terms of migration experiences, length of stay abroad, patterns of resource mobilisation, legal status and life plans.[102] These actors should be embedded in the *social* experiences and milieus they form an integral part of.

Structure-based theorists, such as Koser and Cassarino, argue that repatriation is subject to constraints by law, policy, infrastructure, human rights, family factors and, to an extent, economic considerations.[103] Hereby they focus on the "underlying structures of society which produce, shape, enable and constrain human actions."[104] Social structures can refer to how migration is perceived in society, social pressures to migrate, but also to other social structures such as patterns of discrimination and gender norms that facilitate or complicate migration.[105] However, pure structural approaches are also deemed undesirable since they fail to "suggest a conception of individual consciousness and the relationship between the individual and social collectively,"[106] as they ignore how refugees may *personally* perceive return. Since many do not return, or do so in different timeframes or periods, understanding these different discourses of repatriation is vital.[107]

Both agency and structure bring valuable insights to uncovering the complexities of return. However, it can be concluded that a successful understanding of voluntary repatriation must consider both the structural forces that promote or constrain migration and the motivations, goals and aspirations of the people who migrate.[108] Giddens' theory of structuration proposes an elegant compromise between agency and structure that has been adapted in social science substantially. Giddens establishes that structure has a dual nature as both the "medium and the outcome of the social practices they recursively organize."[109] Structure not only shapes social practice but is in turn reproduced and possibly transformed by these practices.[110] Hence, social structures are seen not just as constraints on individual actors, but also as enabling their actions.[111] In this, social actors are self-aware in that they continuously evaluate the effects of action within the embeddedness of the structure. While their action may be constrained, people's agency ensures that they always have some room for manoeuvre. As such, structuration theory thus assumes that contestation, from the side of agents, is continually

[101] Hein de Haas, "The determinants of international migration: Conceptualizing policy, origin and destination effects," International Migration Institute Working Paper Series no. 32 (April 2011): 21.
[102] Cassarino, "The Significance of Migration Cycles," 216.
[103] Koser, "Information and Repatriation,"; Cassarino, "The Significance of Migration Cycles."
[104] Ruth L. Healey, "Asylum-Seekers and Refugees: A Structuration Theory Analysis of their Experiences in the UK," *Population, Space and Place* 12 (2006): 258.
[105] Jorgen Carling, "Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002): 9-11.
[106] Jabri, *Discourses on Violence,* 61.
[107] Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation," 230; Zimmerman, "Understanding Repatriation," 45.
[108] Bakewell, "Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory," 1693.
[109] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984): 25.
[110] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society,* 5.
[111] Ibid., 25.

possible.[112] By moving beyond just looking at structures or just looking at agents, or giving a priori primacy to one or the other, structuration theory emphasises both.[113]

Therefore, structuration theory provides an accurate groundwork to study the discourse surrounding refugee repatriation as it takes into account both "the capacity of social actors to reflect on their position, devise strategies and take action to achieve their desires",[114] as well as the different rules, norms, structures, and procedures at play. By adopting a structuration approach to agency-structure and to refugees, we overcome the image of refugees as "as dependent, hungry, helpless and uprooted persons",[115] and recognise them as active members of the regime which is exerting control over them with the ability to engage in the discourse on repatriation and possibly change it. As 'voluntary' return "involves some elements of individual agency on the part of the refugee",[116] it is important to take into account their position, concerns and views, acknowledging that they "know a great deal about the conditions and consequences of what they do in their day-to-day lives."[117] Nevertheless, we also have to understand the conditions and structures surrounding return, that should allow for a free and informed decision. Thus, in decision-making on repatriation, structure and agency are in constant synergy.

Various authors have applied such a discursive approach to refugee repatriation. Omata, in his case study of Liberian refugees in Ghana, highlights the need to re-examine the complexity embedded in a refugee's decision-making process as a social product – neither as the sole result of individual decisions nor as the sole outcome of economic, social, cultural or political parameters, but rather as a convergence of all these elements in interaction.[118] His case study shows that the decision to go back to Liberia after the war had ended was not only based on the perceived level of security in Liberia but was also highly contingent on refugees' current personal and familial situations, on the pursuit of future objectives, on the possibilities of other durable solutions and on access to support networks to re-establish their lives in the country of origin.[119] Hereby, Omata underlines that the linkage between refugees' return and their personal aspirations, motivations and expectations is largely overlooked. George et al. show comparable repatriation struggles of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India. However, for this group, the main concerns included resources, infrastructure development, and intergenerational conflict and community loss.[120] In their study of Afghan return migrants from the Netherlands, Van Houte, Siegel and Davids show that the decision to return of Afghan migrants is mainly centred around the structural reality of changing

[112] Jabri, *Discourses on Violence,* 84.
[113] Rob Stones, *Structuration Theory* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005): 4.
[114] Bakewell, "Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory," 1694.
[115] Zeus, "Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations," 267.
[116] Dolan, "Repatriation from South Africa to Mozambique," 93-4.
[117] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society,* 281.
[118] Omata, "The Complexity of Refugees' Return Decision-Making in a Protracted Exile," 1292.
[119] Ibid., 1294.
[120] Miriam George, Wendy Kliewer and Sebastan Irudaya Rajan, "Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should be Talking to Tamils: Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Readiness for Repatriation," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 34 (2015): 15.

migration policies and their perceived impact.[121] These studies show thus a wide range of motivations, expectations and structures that influence the decision to return. Additionally, they show that none of the decision to return in their studies were entirely free nor completely forced, and thus, that agency and structure in interaction were always influencing return simultaneously.

Nevertheless, two gaps within the discursive approach remain. Firstly, by stating that agents have the capacity to induce change in a system, it lays the ontological burden with the actor rather than with the structure. Although this approach claims to do away with the distinction between agency and structure, it still relies on pointing at agency to indicate change. This is also evident in the methodologies applied by Omata, George et al. and Van Houte et al., who only took data from interviewing refugees themselves about their perceptions of policies, structures, and capacities, without going into dialogue with the actors responsible for many of the perceptions (governments, assisting partners, UNHCR).[122] Hereby, there is a risk of losing the political dimension of refugee experiences in mere personal accounts.[123] However, as Bakewell indicates, when studying both agents and structure this dialogue with all involved actors, structures and institutions is crucial, as the essential feature of a structuration model of migration "must take into account the interests and actions of individuals as well as those of social structures, including the household, the community, the state and other groups."[124] Following Hammond, all actors involved in repatriation (governments, assistance providers, and refugees) have their own different expectations of repatriation, and as such influence the decision to return.[125] Therefore, providing one part of the story does not help us uncover the complexities at hand.

Thus, it is necessary to study the interaction, contestation and social transformation present in repatriation. This links to the second impediment within the discursive approach thus far: while this discursive approach to refugee repatriation illustrates important elements that inform refugee repatriation, endorsing elements from both agency and structure-based approaches, it does not delve into the debate about *how* to link structure and agency in a coherent or detailed way.[126] Hence, it does not help us to understand change in the interaction between agency and structure, as agency and structure continue to interact in a 'black box'.[127] Consequently, research on repatriation has been characterised by the absence of a systematic theoretical framework that allows the various elements of repatriation to be derived from a crucial and integral understanding of the problems that refugees who return face.[128]

[121] Van Houte et al., "Meanings and Motivations for Return," 15.
[122] For the collection of data by these authors, see: Van Houte et al., "Meanings and Motivations for Return," 5-6; George et al., "Tamil Refugee Readiness for Repatriation," 6-7; Omata, "The Complexity of Refugees' Return Decision-Making in a Protracted Exile," 1282-3.
[123] Godin and Doná, "Refugee Voices, New Social Media and Politics of Representation," 60.
[124] Oliver Bakewell, "Refugee Repatriation in Africa: Towards a Theoretical Framework," Centre for Development Studies University of Bath Occasional Paper 04/96 (1996): 43.
[125] Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation," 230
[126] Stones, *Structuration Theory*, 3.
[127] Bakewell, "Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory," 1700.
[128] Chimni, "Refugees, Return and Reconstruction," 164.

Yet, if the goal of this thesis is to give voice (and agency) to young refugees, and to explain the way they perceive, interact and possibly change the structures that influence them, we need to show the contestation between agency and structure systematically. Thus, a more practical, analytical tool needs to be proposed in the study of refugee repatriation.

2.3. The Violent Imaginaries of Voluntary Repatriation

Considering the above-mentioned remaining gaps in studying refugee repatriation discursively, this thesis proposes applying the analytical frame of 'violent imaginaries' to refugee repatriation to show who moves from A to B and why, why these people and not others, and why now or then. Thereby, this research adds a theoretical stepping stone to the study of repatriation. Through uncovering the 'black box' of agency and structure by depicting the dialogue between those for whom repatriation is an option and those who facilitate this option, this research will increase the academic understanding of refugees and their decision to return or not, and to what extent they are influenced by – and influence – the structures and other actors they interact with. To do so, this thesis operationalised as follows.

Violent imaginaries are defined as "the emphasising of the historicity of present-day confrontations [which] can be represented through narratives, performances, and inscriptions. Each of these representational strategies are easy to manipulate and are highly fragmented in any larger social context."[129] A main underlying assumption in the work of Schröder and Schmidt is that before an act (of violence) is committed, it needs to be imagined.[130] Therefore, the discourses surrounding refugee repatriation are important as they do not only give meaning, but they inform action, i.e. the repatriation. Violence, then, is not sheer physical violence, but discursive. Herein, I follow the definition of Foucault in that discourse is "a violence we do to things".[131] This definition allows for a study of action and interaction in repatriation discursively using the frame of violent imaginaries.

The goal of applying this frame is to display the differences in perception between various actors, structures and institutions, and how understand how these differences in perceptions come about and lead to confrontations and, subsequently, to action. Confrontations, defined as "the perception of socio-economic contradictions by the parties involved as relevant",[132] are able to create antagonistic relationships between actors. In my case, the pushes for repatriation are cause for confrontation, and its subsequent responses are the perceptions this thesis aims to uncover. If these perceptions between various parties are fundamentally different, or contrasting, these can cause antagonisms between actors. These antagonisms, such as distrust and discrimination, can influence perceptions as well.

[129] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 9.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," in: *Language and Politics*, ed. M.J. Shapiro (New York: New York University Press, 1984): 127.
[132] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 19.

These contradictions in perceptions of various actors shape and are shaped by narratives, performances and inscriptions. These three indicators help us understand what discourses are relevant when informing the decision to repatriate, who is making claims, how these are interpreted, and what are the relevant actors, institutions, stories, policies and actions in repatriation, and, if so, how these are contested. These three indicators will be explained, operationalised and applied in detail in each of the subsequent chapters.

In sum, the aim of this thesis is to understand how the perceptions of young-adult Burmese refugees come about, and how they are expressed in these confrontations: do young-adult refugees confirm or contest the existing discourses in which they are embedded? And what is the result of these confrontations on their perception and possible action regarding return? In order to uncover these complexities, I ask the following research question:

> As conflict endures in Burma, how do violent imaginaries influence the voluntary repatriation of young-adult Burmese refugees living in refugee camps along the Burmese border in Tak Province, Thailand, since the start of the repatriation processes in 2016 until April 2018?

While it is expected that young-adult Burmese refugees are passive subjects of the existing discourses on repatriation, since they are thought of having limited knowledge and capacity regarding their current situation, this thesis will show that they understand the various discourses on repatriation and interact with them to formulate their own perceptions and inform their actions. Thereby, this thesis acknowledges their agency and capacity to induce change.

One of the major strengths of this approach is that it overcomes the dichotomy of agency-structure and provides a holistic understanding of various meanings involved in repatriation. Hereby, it acknowledges the heterogeneity of refugees, their agency, as well as the structures they are embedded in and in turn influence. Moreover, it adds to the debate on the 'voluntariness' of return: if return is voluntary, at least to the degree that refugees have some other options available, then asking if they want to go home, and why, is crucial to understanding repatriation and developing policies to deal with it.[133] If the expectations by facilitating structures are fundamentally different to those subject to repatriation, pressures can be placed upon refugees to return at times that they do not agree are safe or appropriate, or when they would prefer to be/remain elsewhere.[134] Thereby, we run the risk of providing unfitting assistance and of allowing legitimate needs of refugees to go unrecognised.[135]

[133] Bakewell, "Refugee Repatriation in Africa," 16.
[134] Zimmerman, "Understanding Repatriation," 45.
[135] Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation," 230.

Moreover, as mentioned before, by focusing on imagination, rather than having a fixed approach to space and place, this approach leaves greater potential for conceptualising the experience and practices of displacement.[136]

Another strength of applying this framework is that it provides three practical concepts to consider when studying discourses on repatriation: narratives, performances, and inscriptions.[137] Thereby, it shows the interactions between agency and structure through practical observations, not only looking at refugees and recognising the real experiences of returnees, but also at the perceptions and reactions by institutions and other actors that exert influence over them.

Yet, a couple limitations to this approach remain. Since this approach has not been applied to refugee repatriation research before, this research is explorative in finding out whether the three identified concepts are adequate to uncover perceptions, contestations over perceptions and consequent action. I believe this frame could provide important insights on the case of young-adult Burmese refugees living in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border: by concentrating on violent imaginaries of voluntary repatriation, we can uncover what the dominant discourses that influence their perceptions on voluntary repatriation are, and what parties, actors and institutions promote and reinforce narratives, performances and inscriptions relating to the voluntary repatriation of Burmese refugees. If my findings show that indeed the frame is accurate in describing discourses on return, more research is needed to substantiate this claim.

In conclusion, it can be said that through violent imaginaries, we can uncover the complexities of return for young-adult Burmese refugees along the Thai-Burma border. By applying a discursive approach to the study of repatriation, we assume repatriation and the eventual decision to repatriate to be a social construct, a synergy between agency and structure. In order to adequately study the various structures that influence, exert influence over and in turn are influenced by young-adult refugees along the Thai-Burma border we need an analytical frame that allows both for a study of the individual, his or her views, dreams, aspirations and perspectives and of the structures these refugees are embedded in, their action, interaction and non-interaction with these actors. However, it has been established that critiques on discursive and structuration theory indicate a lack of a practical analytical tool to study this interaction. Therefore, this thesis will apply violent imaginaries in the study of repatriation.

[136] Brun, "People and Place in Refugee Studies," 20.
[137] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 9.

3. Methodology

"*Do not put my name anywhere, because then the government will know, and I cannot risk that.. they will come and kill me! [laughs]*"[138]

In the previous chapters, I have explained my empirical research focus as well as the choice for a discursive approach and the analytical frame of violent imaginaries to research voluntary repatriation. In this chapter, I will elaborate on my methodological approach – the explanation to exactly *how* I will answer this research question. To that end, I will first explain the research design of the thesis. In the second section, the methods of data collection and data analysis are discussed. In the final section, both the ethical as well as the practical limitations of the thesis are reviewed.

3.1. Research Design

As established before, the analytical lens through which the issue of repatriation is to be studied is that of violent imaginaries. Following this framework, confrontations, such as the current perceived 'push' for repatriation, are influenced by the stories, histories and influences of structural actors who can manipulate the representation of history, meaning and action. Therefore, epistemologically, this research takes an interpretative stance, mainly focusing on discourse and its perception.[139] Hence, in this thesis, the nature of knowledge and *how* we can know what to study, is assumed to be social. However, ontologically, the discursive approach taken is harder to define. Structuration theory rejects both individualist and structuralist theories of violent conflict. Following Giddens, the "basic domain of study of the social science … is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time."[140] For that reason, ontologically, this research focuses on the interaction between structures and agency, rather than separating them in two different ontologies.

As the goal of this research is to give voice to a marginalised group of young refugees and interpret the "culturally or historically significant phenomena"[141] that influence them, the research strategy of this thesis is qualitative. This corresponds with the theoretical foundations of this thesis as "qualitative research … values subjective and social meanings represented through a variety of perspectives, which can provide insight into participants' knowledge and practices."[142] Quantitative methods like surveys and statistics do not uncover the complexities, backgrounds and motivations of perceptions, let alone show us how these are constructed and interact with other perceptions present. As this research aims at showing the world as a socially – and therefore subjectively – constructed whole of multiple meanings and interpretations, I will study perceptions on repatriation along the Thai-Burma border as a case

[138] Author's interview with a 24-year-old CBO employee focusing on education in Mae Sot, on March 8, 2018.
[139] Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict,* 126.
[140] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society,* 2.
[141] Charles Ragin, *Constructing Social Research* (Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 1994): 39-41.
[142] Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2009): 370.

study, which allows for the careful and in-depth consideration of the nature of the issue, historical background, setting and other institutional and political contextual factors.

3.2. Data Collection

The field-work component of this research was conducted along the Thai-Burma border during 10 weeks between February and April 2018. In total, 55 respondents were interviewed. I was based in Mae Sot, which proved the ideal base for the fieldwork as it is the administrative centre for humanitarian and community-based organisations providing services for refugees in the nine camps located along the Thai-Burma border. My focus was on the Tak province, in which both Mae Sot as well as three out of the nine refugee camps on the border are situated. Research sites included Nu Poe camp (from where the first returns were organised), Mae La camp (where no refugees had yet participated in repatriation)[143] and three schools: two migrant learning centres in Mae Sot, and one higher education programme that was moved from Nu Poe camp to just across the border in Karen State in 2014. My shortest stay in the camps was a one-day visit and my longest was eight days.

Engaging in the question of 'how' something is constructed, and possibly contested, requires exploring the motivations and aspirations of all actors relevant to the issue, including refugees, decision-makers and institutions. Therefore, I conducted research in two units of observation: refugee youth and international, local and community organisations/leaders involved in repatriation. For my first unit of observation, I interviewed 32 young-adults living along the Thai-Burma border in both individual in-depth interviews (10) and small focus group discussions (five groups of three to six participants each) on school grounds both in camp and along the border. These interviews were aimed at exploring their personal perceptions on the dominant discourses on repatriation. Participants were recruited for the study using non-probability sampling techniques. Selection criteria were 1) being between 18 and 30 years old, 2) having lived in one of the camps for longer than three years, in order to overcome first shock of displacement, either a) having been born in one of the refugee camps along the border, or b) having fled to Thailand as a displaced person from Burma, alone or with their family, between their childhood and adolescence,[144] 3) gender (both boys and girls, equally represented if possible), 4) ethnicity (representative of the Burmese population along the border, explained below),[145] and 5) whether they had the capacity to consent and understood the conditions and possible implications of the research.

[143] That is, before the end of my field-work period. On the 8th of May 2018, the second group of returning refugees was facilitated by UNHCR, including 27 refugees from Mae La Camp and 35 from Nu Poe Camp.
[144] One focus group from the school in Karen state included students that had never lived in the camps. However, this gave important insights in the influence of life in camp/on the border compared to staying in Karen state.
[145] While in designing this research I tried to keep matters of ethnicities subdued out of fear of reification, many of those I interviewed actively identified as being from a certain ethnicity, and took pride in that. As Gravers already explained, "ethnicity is not merely a political mode of identification, locally and globally, but an essential part of the way people imagine their place in the world and the way they reflect upon and sense their position." (See Gravers, *Ethnic Diversity in Burma*, 2) Therefore, ethnicity and different ethnicities included in this research could shed an interesting light on different positions towards return.

Of the 32 young-adults interviewed, eight were living in or around Mae Sot (four who were studying in migrant learning centres and four who were working (legally or illegally) after having left the refugee camps), nine were still living in the refugee camps and following education there, and 15 were now living in Karen state. Of these 32, the average age was 23, with most youth aged between 21-24.[146] Most respondents were of Karen ethnicity (66%); others were Karenni (12%), Shan (9%), Burmese (6%), and I spoke to one respondent each of the Naga and Mon ethnicity.[147] Of these respondents, sixteen were male and sixteen were female, thus an equal spread of genders was ensured.

As indicated before, an essential feature of a structuration model holds that I must take into account both the interests and actions of individuals, as well as those of social structures. Therefore, the second unit of observation in my research were the institutions, actors and organisations that influence youth. In this context, 23 representatives were interviewed, including the repatriation officer of UNHCR, three representatives of local and international NGOs, nine representatives of CBOs (of which five representatives were from youth-focused groups) and 10 community leaders (two teachers, two religious leaders, two camp leaders and four camp committee representatives). Interviews were mostly individual (15) – group discussions occurred spontaneously when multiple representatives were present in meetings, but were nevertheless helpful in uncovering the various reactions to specific strong perceptions. Most representatives were male, with only three female respondents out of 23. These informants were purposively chosen because they, according to the youth, should, could or might exert crucial influence over them.

In order to generate data, I held in-depth, semi-structured interviews. As mentioned before, I conducted both individual as well as focus group interviews. These interviews were organized in three stages: At first, I conducted interviews with organizations along the border to increase my understanding of the situation along the border. Secondly, I conducted individual interviews (10) with youth which can be described as 'life-story interviews', which aimed at starting to understand the difficulties and impediments of young-adult refugee youth along the border how these led to their motivations for return. This knowledge was used to both guide the interviews in my third phase, with both focus group discussions (5 groups with 22 youth), aimed at understanding the dynamics between various youth, as well as further interviews with the organisations and community leaders, to see how they would respond to different in opinions, perceptions and motivations. As the underlying causes for perceptions were the most important for this research, asking why and how participants felt about issues, especially in groups, helped understand what factors influenced their thinking and seeing what the dominant discourses were.

[146] For a list of respondents, see Annex I.
[147] This roughly corresponds with the ethnicity makeup along the border, with most refugees being of Karen ethnicity (83%), followed by Karenni (10%), Burmese (4%) and others. See UNHCR, "RTG/MOI-UNHCR Verified Refugee Population."

While I have taken all necessary steps to ensure that I would talk to all relevant actors and institutions, due to the limited number of youth and organisations interviewed, the claims made through the course of this research are tentative and I do not and cannot claim to speak for the experience of all young-adult refugees, nor the entire reality of refugees, forced migrants and repatriation in Thailand.

The interview methodology I used can be described as an "interview guide" approach.[148] In order to ensure the appropriateness of the questions asked, and to respect the sensitivity of both the participants and the conflict context, the first weeks of my field research consisted of familiarising myself better with the historical, political, and cultural context relevant to this population of refugees and adjusting the guide through informal conversations with key informants, other researchers and NGO workers along the border.[149] Moreover, the questions used for interviewing questions were phrased in consultation with one of my key informants, a former refugee and current NGO worker in the nine camps along the border. Furthermore, different questions were drafted for the different units of observation, in order to draw out their own motivations, interests and priorities in refugee return, as well as to solve issues of vocabulary. All formal interviews but one were recorded and transcribed later on.[150]

Since discourse is socially constructed, it quickly became apparent that there is little to no objective information, and all social facts and declarations are contested. This realisation is vital in combatting biases. Therefore, it is important to triangulate information from interviews with document research and (local, ethnic and international) media, as well as with other (informal) interviews and academic literature. Combining talk, text and observation helped to ensure the validity of my data. Besides interview-data, I kept detailed field notes throughout my stays in camp in order to capture details and facilitate reflection. I carried my notebook at all times so that I could write down significant phrases or descriptions, which I then revisited and expanded later. In these notes, I also captured observations such as graffiti and social behaviour both in the camps and in Mae Sot, and asked about them in my interviews in order to understand their significance or meaning for my research group.

Next to my formal interviews, I also spoke to numerous other researchers, NGO workers, IO employees and youth informally, through social activities, volunteering at schools and networking. An important example of this is a group-discussion I facilitated at a Migrant Learning Centre (MLC), where 24 students discussed issues related to repatriation through the creation of mind maps. Additionally, I visited a congress organised by another MLC where students presented their own school research projects – here, they could pick their own topics which shed valuable light on the issues students themselves find the most pressing, with topics ranging from military groups in Burma

[148] Interview guides were adjusted to fit the relevant research participant. An example can be found in Annex II.
[149] D. Christopher Fike and David K. Androff, "'The Pain of Exile': What Social Workers Need to Know about Burmese Refugees," *Social Work* 61, no. 2 (2016): 128.
[150] The representative from UNHCR objected against recording.

to cultural heritage sites in Asia. These experiences allowed me to embed my findings in the context of the Thai-Burma border. I also followed local news, both in the form of English publications by Thai and Burmese newspapers as well as Karen and other ethnic news, and publications by CBOs, local NGOs and advocacy groups. However, it cannot be emphasised enough that the focus of this research is discursive, focusing on the voices of refugees themselves, and that fact-making or generalisation is not the objective.

Since the perceptions of the young refugees constitute the main part of the research data, a narrative approach was employed when analysing the material. This means that the main themes, questions and concerns that came forward in my interviews were the main 'codes' along which I reviewed my data, drawing out themes, structures, and patterns. As it became apparent that the three analytical concepts of narratives, performances and inscriptions were highly relevant to my empirical data, I engaged also in a more systematic deductive analysis where I linked the emergent descriptive patterns to the concepts of the analytical frame. As a result, the frame shapes the format and structure of my thesis. This way, this thesis allows for a both empirically-grounded and theoretically-informed analysis of voluntary repatriation from the perspective of young-adult Burmese refugees in Thailand.

3.3. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Ethical issues have been treated thoughtfully in the whole process of fieldwork preparation, data gathering and analysis of research findings. As mentioned before, the questions used for data gathering were cross-referenced before asked to the sensitive young refugee population. Throughout the research I established informed consent orally and made every effort to guarantee confidentiality and mutual trust as well as ensuring my participants of their rights to anonymity and to object to any question asked or certain information being used in the research. This was not only done during the interviews, but also through building of rapport with respondents in informal contact before and after the interviews. All informants appear under pseudonyms, and in some cases other personal information, such as locations and organisations, have been omitted to ensure the anonymity of the informants.

Due to the sensitive context of refugee studies, which is marked by fear, uncertainty and mistrust,[151] establishing access and finding informants was complicated. Especially in the context of the Thai-Burma border, where over the last years controls on the refugee camps have increased and Thai authorities are purposefully keeping researchers, and foreigners in general, out of the camps, access was complicated. Therefore, an important limitation of the research was my dependency on both my capacity to build networks as well as the willingness of certain key informants and gatekeepers to support my research. For example, it was not rendered feasible to speak to government or border

[151] Richard Hugman, Linda Bartolomei and Eileen Pittaway, "Human Agency and the Meaning of Informed Consent: Reflections on Research with Refugees," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 4 (2011): 655.

officials. Moreover, this limited my capacity to capture images of the camps and incorporate visual images along the border as extensively as I initially planned.

However, through snowball sampling, I build a strong network of respondents and got access to camps and organisations which I did not deem possible before. I ensured as many entry-points possible and put a lot of effort in establishing relationships with key informants. These relationships were pivotal. I base this claim on the responses of respondents who commented about the referring informant – our mutual contact – and the positive comments they had made both about my research and me personally.

It is well known that refugees are a vulnerable group in terms of psychological and physical well-being.[152] This is particularly true in the case of young refugees, who are affected not only by the traumatic events which may have occurred either during flight, but also through indirect trauma, hardship of living conditions along the border and insecurity about the future.[153] Hence, asking questions about repatriation causes stress and dismay. Therefore, my approach to respondents has been one of mutual respect and of an exchange of ideas, information, and informal chats. Many youths were happy to share their stories, as they felt they had not been listened to before. Moreover, by asking my respondents what *they* thought was lacking in my research, what topics were the most important and who were important groups or individuals to talk to, I gave them a strong role in my research, rather than merely imposing my questions upon them.

I was impacted by a general distrust of westerners along the border: most respondents saw me as either an UNHCR employee, pushing their repatriation, or as a donor.[154] Common reactions in my interviews were "why do you ask me about Myanmar time and time again, what can you change?"[155] and "after you get all this information, how can this information reach UNHCR?"[156] Especially respondents working for CBOs along the border were concerned with the benefits of my research. Often, I was asked what my research would do for the people that participate in it and their communities: for long, the Thai-Burma border has been used as a research site, resulting in a 'research-fatigue'. Respondents expected participating in my research would help their community attract more funds, gain more prominence in the international arena and would influence governments and important actors such as UNHCR. To that end, I had to pay extensive attention to expectation management by being explicitly honest about the size, (anticipated) impact and relevance of my research as a mere graduate study. By underlining my status as an independent researcher and student, not tied to UNHCR or any other organisation or government, I was able to obtain the trust of my respondents.

[152] Flora Cornish, Karl Peltzer and Malcolm MacLachlan, "Returning Strangers: The Children of Malawian Refugees Come 'Home'?" *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12, no. 3 (1999): 266.
[153] Cornish, Peltzer and MacLachlan, *Returning Strangers*, 267.
[154] Johan Pottier, "Relief and Repatriation: Views by Rwandan Refugees: Lessons for Humanitarian Aid Workers," *African Affairs* 95, no. 380 (1996): 404.
[155] Author's interview with A1, a 25-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot, on March 6, 2018.
[156] Author's interview with A5, a 24-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.

Since this thesis takes an interpretative epistemological stance, and the research strategy is that of a single case study, there are certain limitations in terms of the claims I can make throughout this research. This research, its context and its participants, are context dependent, and historically and culturally specific. Therefore, it will be difficult to conclude that the conditions, specifics and motivations for return found in this research will be as relevant in other situations. Moreover, it must be stressed was that my first unit of observation consists mostly of educated youth. Even though this choice was deliberate, placing emphasis on the unique characteristics of this generation of Burmese refugees in Thailand, research into non-educated youth could bring about completely different perceptions and conclusions.

An additional limitation of this type of research is what Giddens already coins as the "double hermeneutic"[157] since my research focused on gaining knowledge by interpreting how actors understand their social world. In order to research perceptions, I was constantly making interpretations of interpretations, which means that some specific sentiments may have been lost in translation, interpretation or perception. This was further complicated by the use of translators in certain interviews, which adds another layer of interpretation to my analysis. Sometimes respondents, such as CBO leaders and higher officials, brought their own translators, which complicated the level of their independence. However, for the second half of my interviews, I got my own translator, familiar with both the context as well as the premise of my thesis. Nevertheless, due to language barriers and a focus on interpretations, this research requires an extra level of self-reflection.

Further unavoidable practical limitations include the timing of the research. Mid-April marks the celebration of Songkran and Thingyan, the Thai and Burmese New Year Festival respectively. As a result, offices start closing the end of March, schools close for multiple weeks, and refugees get the chance to return home as the RTG temporarily opens the borders for them in Mid-April. Consequently, this provided a natural end-date for my research. This meant that I was not able to include the second wave of return, organised on the 8th of May, nor the reactions on, and implications of, this long awaited wave of return.[158] As a result, the research period of this thesis, as indicated in the research question, mainly concerns the period from the first returns, which was mentioned by all of my respondents as relevant, up until the point I left the field in the middle of April 2018.

[157] Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 20.
[158] UNHCR, "Myanmar refugees return home."

4. Narratives of Repatriation, Return and Going 'Home'

"*If I say my feelings: I really hate the Burmese because we have to be here [in the camps], we had to leave [our village], everyone… they ask why we are here, and they say it is because of the Burmese – that is why we hate them.*"[159]

In this chapter, the analytical tool of 'narratives' will be introduced. By analysing the way in which young refugees perceive narratives of past and present experiences of war and violence, we can start to understand how these narratives influence their experience of being a refugee in exile, and how these narratives influence their propensity to return. In order to do so, the chapter is constructed as follows. Firstly, I will show why it is important to discuss narratives when studying return. Secondly, I will discuss the various memories of former conflict that influence return, and how they influence youth. Thirdly, I will discuss the perspective of young refugees on their current experiences and perceptions of both host and 'home' country. Finally, the chapter will conclude with displaying how youth confirm or contest the narratives related to return they encounter along the border.

The aim of this chapter is to answer the question: how do narratives of former conflict and past violence influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma? According to Schröder and Schmidt, narratives "keep the memory of former conflicts and past violence alive in stories, either by glorifying one's own group's achievements and benefits or by the perceived injustices, losses, or suffering incurred by one's own group."[160] There is a broad consensus across the social sciences that stories, memories and history are essential ingredients in constructing and maintaining social relations.[161] In this view, history, then, provides narratives that tell individuals and groups who they are, where they came from and where they should be going and are thus central to the way individuals and groups face current challenges, including the issue of repatriation.

Narratives of history and how they influence decision-making are important for two reasons. Firstly, histories, memories and stories along the Thai-Burma border are filled with traumas of fear and violent conflict. As a result of these traumas, as stated by Essed, Frerks and Schrijvers, some refugees "do not recognise the (new) opportunities available to them."[162] Therefore, it is important to grasp the traumas, histories and stories young-adult refugees experience as these narratives shape the manner in which refugees perceive conditions at home, which is of central importance to the decision to repatriate (or

[159] Author's interview with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.
[160] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 10.
[161] James H. Liu and Denis J. Hilton, "How the past weights on the present: Social representations of history in their role in identity politics," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44 (2005): 539.
[162] Philomena Essed, Georg Frerks and Joke Schrijvers, "Introduction: Refugees, Agency and Social Transformation," in: *Refugees and the Transformation of Societies: Agency, Policies, Ethnics, and Politics* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002): 2.

not).[163] Moreover, as this chapter will show, it is not only important to look at the perceptions on the conditions in the home country, but also to look at the conditions in the host country.[164]

Secondly, narratives are important in the formation of social groups. In this, history "defines a trajectory which helps construct the essence of a group's identity, how it relates to other groups, and ascertains what its options are for facing present challenges."[165] Schröder and Schmidt already explain that this type of social memory can "easily be capitalised upon by state élites and elaborated into a hegemonic ideology of violence."[166] That way, these violent imaginaries can create a strictly polarised structure of 'we:they' that, according to them, no individual can escape.[167] Following this logic, the push for repatriation would instigate feelings of injustice and suffering on ethnic groups, increasing the polarisation they feel towards others. Therefore, history is not only the product or outcome of social interaction, but also a medium of reproduction: it shapes and is shaped by the structure along which societies construct their identity and their perspective on new challenges.

4.1. Role of History

History, and the way in which history is shared, perceived and contested, is especially important for the 'lost generation' of Burmese refugees along the Thai border. Many of the organisations I spoke to during my time in Mae Sot, including UNHCR, express their concern that youth have no objective position on history, and, consequently, on return, since they are heavily influenced by their parents and their respective ethnic groups.[168] They feel that youth are expected to have no knowledge of what is happening outside of the camp and are expected to depend mostly on the perspectives of their parents and community leader in receiving information. Furthermore, since many young-adult refugees were born in the camps, or left Burma at a very young age, they have little to no personal recollections of the 'home' they are often told about and are now pushed to return to.[169] At the same time, histories, stories and memories of the conflict are constantly present as the camps are important breeding grounds for narratives of ethnic groups towards the conflict and are significantly linked to a broader ethnic struggle for self-determination in Burma.[170] However, the history of Burma is controversial since political circumstances have made all ethnic nationality groups to have their own historical narratives and view of the conflict, which are used to emphasise the own cause and morality.[171]

---

[163] Koser, "Information and Repatriation," 3.
[164] Brun, "People and Place in Refugee Studies," 20.
[165] Liu and Hilton, "How the past weights on the present," 537; Kibreab, "Citizenship Rights and Repatriation," 24.
[166] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 10.
[167] Ibid., 10.
[168] Author's interviews with the Repatriation Officer at UNHCR and the education lead at a local NGO.
[169] Author's interview with The Border Consortium (TBC)'s field coordinator in Mae Sot on March 16, 2018.
[170] Alexander Horstmann, "Uneasy Pairs: Revitalizations of Karen Ethno-Nationalism and Civil Society across the Thai-Burmese Border," *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 34-5; Olivius, "Political Space in Refugee Camps in Thailand," 294.
[171] Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery, "Young Refugees' Construction of a Family Identity in Exile", 96;
Rosalie Metro, "Developing history curricula to support multi-ethnic civil society among Burmese refugees and migrants," UNHCR New Issues in Refugee Research, Research Paper no. 139 (2006): 1.

Consequently, according to the literature, refugee youth experience multiple influential narratives – by their parents,[172] in their education,[173] and through other social interactions in the camp[174] and outside of it[175] – when it comes to their view on the 'homeland', the host country and whether they should return or not. Therefore, we need to investigate the stories they hear and the groups they identify themselves with, and the extent to which these experiences shape their perspectives, in order to understand the position of young refugees on return.

Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery, in their research on young refugees, already show that the way in which youth handle experiences of war and violence depends, to a large degree, on the way families communicate about, and deal with, traumatic experiences.[176] Many of the youth I interviewed explain that their view of Burma and the conflict is closely tied to the experiences of their parents. This is possible because Karen and other ethnic Burmese families are traditionally tight units.[177] Often, when I asked about why the youth do or do not want to return to Burma, they recall stories of their parents:

> Our parents – they had a lot of experience with the conflict, and when we came to the camp, they told us that we are here because the Burmese people, they came to our houses, burned our houses, killed the animals, killed the people … so, because of that, we hate the Burmese.[178]

While some of the youth I spoke to have direct experiences with the conflict, recalling stories of hiding and fleeing,[179] many of them came to Thailand without direct involvement with the military. Instead, traumas and fears of their parents are transferred upon the youth almost daily, and are often the only recollection of Burma they have before coming to the camp. Thus, the stories of older community members and parents are the narratives along which youth can shape their thinking.

These narratives of fear make return a far-removed option. As one woman at a local CBO illustrates: "When I was young I saw the ethnic groups fighting each other, so when I hear the words "you have to go back to Burma" my heart is diseased, it is a nightmare for us."[180] The mere mention of return haunts those who saw the fighting happening just in front of them. Herein, the view persists that fighting will continue and that if they return they, they will have to flee again and "become a refugee twice in their lives".[181] Hence, many of the older generation have no faith in change, due to the traumatic experiences they have been through, thereby limiting their perceived options to return.[182]

---

[172] Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery, "Young Refugees' Construction of a Family Identity in Exile", 95.
[173] Zeus, "Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations," 257.
[174] Horstmann, "Uneasy Pairs," 38; Olivius, "Political Space in Refugee Camps in Thailand," 294-5.
[175] Yu Shi, "Identity Construction of the Chinese Diaspora, Ethnic Media Use, Community Formation and the Possibility of Social Activism," *Continuum* 19, no. 1 (2005): 61.
[176] Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery, "Young Refugees' Construction of a Family Identity in Exile", 96.
[177] Jolliffe, "Refugee Decision-Making Processes," 16.
[178] Author's interview with C1, a young male refugee in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[179] Author's interview with A1 in Mae Sot, on March 6, 2018 and with A2 in Mae Sot on March 10, 2018.
[180] Author's interview with Karen Women's Organisation (KWO)'s Secretary in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018.
[181] Author's interview with TBC's field coordinator in Mae Sot on March 16, 2018.
[182] Author's interview with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.

Due to the fear of their parents and the injustices that happened to them, many of the youth admit their feelings of revenge and hatred towards 'the Burmese', since most of the youth in the camps have lost relatives in the conflict.[183] In their narratives, the military regime and all its citizens are generalised, as if all "Burmese" committed these violent acts against them. As one respondent explains: "Before I came here, sometimes, I wanted to be a soldier. Because I know the Burmese are really, really bad: my stepfather was killed by a Burmese."[184]

This fear and one-sided view is further strengthened in their education. As Zeus explains, in long-term crises, education efforts can play a role in helping communities understand and cope with their fate and can be a critical part of providing meaning in life,[185] and, following Metro, what children learn about history is widely recognised to influence their perceptions and behaviour.[186] Having no personal recollection of the conflict, the view persists that "young people have to learn from the history books what has been happening in the past".[187] However, education along the border, both in refugee camps and in the migrant learning centres is often controversial. In the seven refugee camps that are predominantly inhabited by refugees from the Karen ethnic group, the education system is administered by the Karen Education Department (KED), the ministry of education of the exiled government, and the KNU.[188] As a result, the curricula along the border were largely designed along ethnic lines, meaning that youth are often taught "only Karen history, not Burmese history,"[189] focussing "only on how the Karen suffer, not really about other groups,"[190] which my respondents describe as "one-sided".[191] These one-sided curricula and stories have an important impact on refugee youth. Naw Hsar,[192] born in Thailand 21 years ago, and having lived in two different refugee camps since, illustrates this clearly:

> Well, in the camps, people do not know [about Burma]. I studied in the camps, so I did not really know, and we also did not really care. Because for us, seeing our worst, people teach us in the history that because the Burmese people attacked you guys, that is why you are here [in the camp]. We refuse to learn Burmese, because we really hate them! We do not really care about them about what happened, we just needed to know how to survive now.[193]

[183] Author's interview with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.
[184] Author's interview with C4, a 30-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp, on March 23, 2018.
[185] Zeus, "Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations," 257.
[186] Metro, *Developing history curricula among Burmese refugees,* 1.
[187] Author's interview with a staff member of the Karen Student Network Group in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018.
[188] See Oh and van der Stouwe, "Education, Diversity, and Inclusion in Burmese Refugee Camps in Thailand," 590: the two other northern camps are administered by the Karenni Education Department and differs from that in the Karen camps in terms of language of instruction and content. However, as this research focuses two Karen camps, this is the main emphasis in this chapter.
[189] Author's interview with A5, a 24-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.
[190] Author's interview with C2, a 24-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp, on March 23, 2018.
[191] Author's interview with D7, a 23-year-old student in Karen State on March 24, 2018.
[192] Naw Hsar is a pseudonym used for my interview coded as A6 in annex I. Names are only used as illustrations.
[193] Author's interview with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.

In like manner, many of the migrant learning centres on the Thai-Burma border are also largely shaped along ethnic lines. As a result, some of the schools only teach Burmese history, glorifying the recent changes,[194] and in some other migrant learning centres students do not learn about Burmese history, only about Karen history.[195] Ethnic groups hold on to their version of history, as it is not only important to understand the reason for flight, but also in maintaining ethnic identity through history, cultures, traditions and beliefs.[196] These celebrations of traditions, including history, are an important social tie for displaced people in the camps, hence strengthening social groups.[197]

These narratives heavily influence the perception on return of youth. As in the case of Naw Hsar, she explains that her parents will not go back to Burma, being influenced largely by their fear, their experiences of violence and what caused them to run. She tells me that her parents have no faith in a change of situation: "even if you show us there is peace, and no more civil war, they will still not go back because they are afraid."[198] This view is influenced by the antagonisms between various groups that are amplified in the camps: Karen and other ethnic groups have a general hatred against 'the Burmese', the "enemy",[199] resulting in discrimination against and amongst Burmese refugees both in the camps and in the migrant community.[200] This corresponds with the view of Schröder and Schmidt, who explain that "elements of history are decontextualized and reinterpreted as part of a communal legend of confrontation, creating an imaginary of internal solidarity and outside hostility."[201] As a result, these antagonisms and shared social hatred for the other influence their perception on return and limit the options available to them. However, many youth, including Naw Hsar, start to acknowledge a difference between their perspective and that of their parents and their (ethnic) teachers and leaders:

> I think there is a difference [between parents and us] because they just stay in their own ethnic Karen community, they have never stayed with other ethnics like us, so this way … we accept many different groups, present our own history, so we know each other and learn more about each other's history.[202]

This quote represents the overall feeling many of my respondents felt: a sense of detachment from their ethnic community and a sense of multi-ethnicity simultaneously. This can be understood through two linked developments: firstly, in many of the schools in the camps and migrant learning centres along the border, students are encouraged to come in contact with other ethnicities, foreign teachers, humanitarian actors and organisations, and diverging views on history and the current conflict, thereby

[194] Author's interview with the head of a Migrant Learning Centre (MLC) in Mae Sot, on February 27, 2018. See Annex III.
[195] Author's interview with A1, a 25-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot, on March 6, 2018.
[196] Metro, *Developing history curricula among Burmese refugees*, 18.
[197] Nasreen Chowdhory, *Refugees, Citizenship and Belonging in South Asia* (Singapore: Springer, 2018): 21.
[198] Author's interview with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.
[199] Author's interview with Christian Religious Leader in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018.
[200] Author's interview with A3, a 18-year-old migrant worker in Mae Sot on March 12, 2018.
[201] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 11.
[202] Author's interview with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.

broadening their perspectives.[203] For example, in the education programmes along the border, youth learn about issues in Burma from multiple perspectives, encouraging them to be critical and objective in their view and understanding of the conflict.[204] For many, this was completely new, as education in Burma itself is also very one-sided: as it is government imposed, only the Burman/Burmese perspective is included, and critical voices towards the government were not tolerated.[205]

Secondly, many of the youth feel that they lost their strong ties to their community, either having the feeling that they do not have any community to relate to,[206] or that their life in camp is their identity.[207] Youth along the border furthermore feel disjointed from the 'home' they are being forced to return to. While in refugee studies and policies, it is often thought that return is the favoured options for refugees, for whom the refugee cycle can at last end when they 'go home', youth feel detached. For example, they referred to Burma as "that country"[208] or "that side"[209], and only making mention to "the homeland" when explaining the position of their parents vis-à-vis return:[210]

> Mostly the young they do not want to go back, but their parents and the older generation really, really want to go back, it is their homeland they say … they want to go back and they say, "I want to die in my homeland," but I do not have that.[211]

From this quote we can see that this 'home' has different meanings for different people, and the way youth identify 'home' differs vastly from the older generation. For example, when I asked a Burmese migrant teacher where he would like to return to when moving back to Burma, he answered "I will go to my village. I really love my village, I want to stay there. All the trees, a lot of fields.. I will be a good gardener there."[212] Here, the nostalgic longing for "our homeland"[213] is ideologized. For long, researchers indicated that rather than losing collective identity because of violent upheaval and migration, it is for many in the refugee camps that a collective sense of ethnicity and community is born.[214] However, the youth see Burma as "a new country"[215] and distance themselves from the 'home' of their parents. As one female student of a migrant learning centre exemplifies: "For my mother, she wants to go back because it is her home, her homeland."[216]

---

[203] Author's interviews with D6, a 19-year-old student in Karen State on March 24, 2018, and with the education lead at a MLC in Mae Sot on March 1, 2018.
[204] Author's interview with A7 and A8, two students in Mae Sot. Both interviews on March 15, 2018.
[205] As became apparent in author's focus group discussion with C1, C2, C3 and C4 in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[206] Author's interview with A1, a 25-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot, on March 6, 2018.
[207] Author's interview with B1, a 21-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[208] Author's interview with C1, a young male refugee in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[209] Author's interview with B1, a 21-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[210] Out of my youth respondents (A, B, C and D), only A2 refer to Burma as her 'homeland'.
[211] Author's interview with C7, a 23-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 25, 2018. Confirmed by C5.
[212] Author's interview with the head of a MLC in Mae Sot, on February 27, 2018.
[213] Author's interview with a 24-year old CBO employee focusing education in Mae Sot, on March 8, 2018.
[214] Gravers, *Ethnic Diversity in Burma*, 80. See also Liisa H. Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 495-523.
[215] Author's interview with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.
[216] Author's interview with A7, a 25-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 15, 2018.

Hence, we see a stark contrast between the young generation and their parents and leaders. Whereas for many of the older generation refugees, narratives of fear make their perception of the opportunities available to them limited, and make them relate stronger to their own ethnic group, these narratives do not have the same effect on youth. Seeing the difference between the influence of history, and narratives in general, between the older and the new generation, it is thus necessary to set out what expectations youth have of both home and host country that influence their perception on return.

4.2. Youth Perception of Home, Host and Future

When asked what the biggest obstacle is to return to Burma, almost all of my respondents in the CBOs and ethnic groups refer to the security threat, as do roughly half of my youth respondents. Although there is a National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in place, fighting between ethnic groups and the *Tatmadaw* is still ongoing,[217] and therefore, there is no trust in the military,[218] in the changes in government,[219] and in the future of the country.[220] People from the ethnic areas in Burma are still fleeing to Thailand up until today. Many, both young and old, predict that it will take a long time before "Burma can sing again."[221] As a 28-year old migrant worker in Mae Sot, who fled from Burma 15 years ago, describes metaphorically:

> If you have a cup, and you put it in the garden for a long time, for many, many years, and you come and take that cup, and you want to clean it immediately, that is impossible. We have to give time for the government to change.[222]

Those that put a bit more trust in the government, or perceive change is possible, explain that once fighting ceases, and the country had peace and it is safe, everyone will go back, without question.[223] They expect the same from the youth: if the military is removed from their villages, they can go back to Burma and work.[224]

However, educated youth hold more reservations with regard to going back, and have different demands besides safety before they return.[225] One of the biggest obstacles to return, according to 22 of my 32 young respondents, is education. The level of higher education in Burma is low, and the lack of education opportunities there is a main reason why many youth fled to Thailand in the first place.[226] Youth who received education along the border, either in the camps or in one of the MLCs, are often

[217] As became apparent from author's interviews with A4, C2 and the project lead for refugee camps at an international NGO in Mae Sot.
[218] Author's interview with B1, a 21-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[219] As became apparent from author's interviews with A3 and A7, and in the focus group discussion with D1-5 in Karen State on March 24, 2018.
[220] Author's interview with C4, a 30-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp, on March 23, 2018.
[221] Author's interview with the education lead at a local NGO in Mae Sot on March 8, 2018.
[222] Author's interview with A4, a 28-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 12, 2018.
[223] Author's interviews with representatives from the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) in Mae Sot on March 17, 2018, and with the Camp Leader in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018.
[224] Author's interview with a staff member of the Karen Student Network Group in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018.
[225] As became apparent in author's focus group discussions with D1-5 and D7-11 in Karen State on March 24, 2018.
[226] Author's interview with the education lead at a MLC in Mae Sot on March 1, 2018.

unable to continue studying in Burma, as the government does not recognise their certificates.[227] These certificates were mentioned throughout all my interviews with youth, and are a strong narrative in their motivations for not wanting to return to Burma. Another constraint is that because many of the refugees were born or largely raised in the camps, their education and upbringing was in Karen or another ethnic language, meaning that they cannot access education or employment in Burmese.[228] Therefore, many of my young respondents indicate they will only return once education opportunities improve or their certificates are acknowledged.[229]

Another consequence of the difference in perceptions is that youth are starting to explore not only the 'if' of returning, but also the 'where' – while many of the older generations have nostalgia for not only returning to their 'homeland' but also to their own village, the young generation does not have this fixation on the 'old' space. This is not only true for those who lived only in the camps and/or along the border, but also for those who arrived recently and often still have a family or village to return to. Albeit their reasons for fleeing Burma might have been different, and thus their reasons for return as well, all respondents display a similar detachment from Burma. Youth overall are more focused on employment, education and other opportunities, and can hardly see themselves going back to work on a farm.[230] As one 23-year old Burmese student in Nu Poe camp explains:

> For example, if I go as a young person, if I arrive in Myanmar, if I want to get a job I have to go to the city, I don't want to go to the rural side, what would I do there? Work on a farm? No.. I decided definitely I want to go to the city side! I have my education, so I want to work there.[231]

This demonstrates that the education received in the camps, in combination with new perspectives and perceptions on opportunities in the 'home' country, have guided youth to pursue other goals than their parents. However, this remains hard for them to admit to their parents and teachers. Here, we can observe the difference in needs, opinions and thus perceptions of return between parents and youth: many of the youth still feel pressured to return to their original villages and work for their families.[232] For example, a young male in one of my focus groups, who lived in Um Piem camp for 10 years, hesitated to admit he wanted to move to the city – it was only after encouragement from peers that he told me his dream.[233] Thus, even though youth have developed their own narratives that guide return, more focused on employment and education rather than safety, these contrast with the perceptions that parents hold for their children.

---

[227] As became apparent in author's interviews with A7, A8, B2 and C5.
[228] Author's interviews with A3, a 18-year-old migrant worker in Mae Sot on March 12, 2018 and with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.
[229] As became apparent from author's interviews with A3, A6, C2, D6 and D11.
[230] As became apparent from author's interview with D3, a 20-year-old student in Karen State on March 24, 2018 and with representatives of the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG) in Mae Sot on March 29, 2018.
[231] Author's interview with C5, a 23-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 25, 2018.
[232] As became apparent from author's interviews with A3, A8 and D3.
[233] Author's interview with D3, a 20-year-old student in Karen State on March 24, 2018.

A further effect of this detachment, the difference in priorities and needs, and the narrative of education and employment over going 'back to the farm', is that youth are starting to seek options in Thailand. They perceive Thailand as bringing them more opportunities,[234] and the pay is better.[235] Often, refugees try to find employment along the border with one of the many NGOs or in the services industry.[236] However, also here, two problems remain. First, officially, refugees are not allowed to work, and these conditions are getting more restrictive with new labour laws being introduced that limit employment opportunities for migrants who lack official papers and documentation, as is the case for most refugees.[237] Moreover, youth and other Burmese refugees in Thailand often face discrimination: the youth explain that they are "treated unfairly, not really equal, not as their own citizens."[238] Nevertheless, some interviewees explain that "I will stay here, even if they don't recognise me as a citizen, because I am pretty sure I can survive here even if I don't have anything."[239] Hence, some respondents, especially those already having left the camps and living in Mae Sot, indicate a desire to stay in Thailand.

As Shi explains in her study of Chinese diasporas abroad, youth have their own high expectations on how "returning will feel like, and they are willing to do everything to make it a perfect experience."[240] This can also be observed with the young-adult Burmese refugees in Thailand: youth hold on to the need for hard "guarantees",[241] or "insurance",[242] in areas of survival, education, employment, freedom of expression, democracy and livelihoods.[243] Herein, many of the youth I interview hold on to their education. This is not only important in their own consideration whether to return or not, but also on what they want to do *if* they return: many respondents tell me that they hope to one day return to Burma, to educate the new generation.[244] Thus, their perceptions on return are largely shaped by the narratives of education and employment. The role education has played for them, in providing them with hope for the future and perspective on their current situation, is something that they want to give back to the new generation of youth in Burma. This, for many, is an important factor when they are considering return.[245] Yet, as mentioned before, their attitudes are critical of change in Burma, and a lot needs to change before they deem this possible.

[234] Author's interview with A3, a 18-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 12, 2018.
[235] Author's interview with A4, a 28-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 12, 2018.
[236] Author's interview with the project lead on refugee camps at an international NGO in Mae Sot on March 29, 2018.
[237] Author's interviews with the head of a MLC, the education lead at a local NGO and with a representative of the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) in Mae Sot. See also Inge Brees, "Refugee Business: Strategies of Work on the Thai-Burma Border," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 3 (2008): 387.
[238] Author's interview with A2, a female migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 10, 2018.
[239] Author's interview with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.
[240] Shi, "Ethnic Media Use," 61.
[241] Author's interview with a representative of KYO in Mae Sot, on March 17, 2018.
[242] Author's interview with a representative of KYO in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018.
[243] As became apparent from author's interviews with representatives from KSNG and KYO in Mae Sot.
[244] As became apparent from author's interviews with A1, A4, A6, A7 and A8.
[245] Ibid.

4.3. Discussion and Conclusion

The main issue discussed in this chapter was how narratives of former conflict and past violence influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma. The dominant narratives according to organisations and leaders along the border, namely the stories and fears of parents and the subsequent group-feel and prejudice towards others, do not resonate with youth as much as expected. Therefore, they are able escape the polarised 'we:they' structure which according to Schröder and Schmidt is inescapable.

Violent imaginaries, defined as "the emphasising of the historicity of present day confrontations," can help us understand the differences in perceptions. Besides the narratives of fear and conflict as told by their parents, youth have access to another source of narratives: their multi-ethnic education. Hence, the confrontation between youth on the one hand and their parents on the other comes from a different interpretation of history: where for older refugees, history and memories of past violence invigorates their ethnic affiliations and hate for the 'other', the 'Burmese', for youth these stories provide them with different perspectives. As described before, youth have their own specific views on the conditions of return and have high demands in terms of education and employment. Feeling distanced from the "homeland" and lacking the nostalgic longing many of their parents and older community leaders experience, they focus more on the future in assessing return. For youth on the Thai-Burma border, this is mainly through their focus on education and employment. Their high demands, especially in terms of education, cause youth to set different priorities in return, and to explore staying in Thailand more. Thus, rather than limiting their perception of the opportunities available to them, the narratives that guide youth allow them to explore further options, both inside Burma as well as outside of it.

However, this finding, and especially explaining it, remains a chicken-or-egg game – I have not been able to answer whether the detachment youth feel from 'home' is because of their multi-ethnic education and perceived ability to stay in Thailand, or that this detachment was already there and led them to pursue other education and options. Nevertheless, it has been shown that the narratives of fear, as imposed on youth through stories of parents and ethnic history, do not reach youth in the same way they influence older generation refugees. Because of the different views of history, confrontations such as the push for return have different effects on these two respectively.

Thereby, this chapter has important implications on the remainder of the thesis. Firstly, it complicates the notion of returning 'home' that persists in voluntary repatriation. While in refugee studies, the 'homeland' remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for displaced people from which they draw identity, perceptions and group-feel, for youth 'home' is more and more defined by where the opportunities are. Secondly, it shows that there are many issues that remain, in terms of security but also education and employment that prevent refugees from returning 'in safety and dignity' at this stage, which are important structural constraints on their return, which we will come back to in next chapter.

5. Performances and Pushes for Return

"*If they break the idea of us as refugees, maybe our lives will be the same as other people. We want to study, we want to work, but if we stay a refugee, we cannot do anything.*"[246]

In this chapter, the analytical tool of 'performances' will be introduced. By examining the various pressures, acts and influences that institutions exert over refugees and the way refugees react on, and interact with, these pressures, we gain a thorough understanding of the structural implications of voluntary repatriation. In order to do so, this chapter is built up as follows. Firstly, I will describe the public space in which rituals of antagonism are displayed, as well as the relevant policies and the various pushes for return, both direct and indirect. Secondly, this chapter dives into the trust and distrust between actors that result from these pushes, and its consequences, and finally will show the room for contestation by young-adult refugees on the matter of voluntary repatriation.

While this thesis aims at giving agency to refugees, it is important to understand the way in which they are embedded in structures and how power relations play out for us to understand the different influence(r)s of repatriation.[247] As this chapter will show, it is not only the public appearances of leaders and institutions that affect perceptions on return, but also the broader policy environment and room for rumours, fears and other narratives that result from these public rituals. After all, voluntary repatriation is a complicated policy process, based on principles, procedures, laws, different actors and institutions.[248] In this, it is important not only to look at the role and actions of institutions, but also at the social meaning they acquire and the interpretations of history they represent.[249]

Therefore, this chapter aims at answering the question: how do public rituals and other performances influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma? Performances are "public rituals in which antagonistic relationships are staged and prototypical images of violence are enacted".[250] Public rituals are "performative" and "public appearances of leaders" that reinstate feelings of fear and consequently influence perceptions. These performative, public appearances have two important implications on refugees, their lives and the decisions they are able to make. Firstly, public events related to return should then provoke prototypical images of violence, which are observed through feelings of "the identification of 'our' side with the survival and well-being of every single individual: the struggle is of vital importance for the life of the group and the lives of each of the members."[251] Secondly, following Schröder and Schmidt, these public displays and events related to voluntary repatriation should reinstate antagonisms between actors towards "the other".[252]

[246] Author's interview with B1, a 21-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[247] Zeus, "Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations," 257.
[248] Moretti, "Challenge of Durable Solutions for Refugees", 79.
[249] Cottrell, "Refugee Governance along the Thai-Burmese Border," 27.
[250] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 10.
[251] Ibid., 11.
[252] Ibid., 10.

In this chapter, these public rituals include both the direct acts and performances by leaders, such as the presence of the respective governments and CBOs in the camps and acts organized by UNHCR as well as indirect effects of policies and measures. Repatriation often involves financial as well as political pressure from donor states, organisations and governments.[253] At the same time, refugees' own institutions and leadership also exert influence over refugees and the decision to return.[254] These actors interact with each other and amongst each other, influencing refugees' perceptions and hence action regarding return.

5.1. Public Rituals, Public Space and Pushes for Return

In order to accurately describe the various public rituals that influence youth, first, I will describe the stage where these events occur. Often, a refugee camp is seen as a 'non-space' where traumatised people are degraded to do little more than wait, dependent on rations and subjugated under a military administration.[255] They are defined as "extraterritorial, exceptional and exclusionist,"[256] in that they exist to contain the refugees constitute in a special place that falls out of the 'national order of things' in a country of asylum.[257] However, refugee camps are also places where people live their everyday lives,[258] and where diverse norms, language and forms of social organisation meet at the crossroads,[259] creating possibilities for social interaction and thus contestation.[260]

Moreover, refugee camps are also political spaces.[261] Since the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border are mostly governed by the ethnic community groups and community-based camp management, refugees have a considerable degree of self-governance.[262] At the same time, we observe the presence of "the international refugee regime,"[263] spearheaded by international organisations such as the UNHCR and including donors, agencies and the media. As a result, refugee camps are governed by a diverse constellation of the vulnerable populations themselves, host governments and state authorities, international organisations such as UNHCR, NGOs, community-based organisations, major donors of humanitarian aid, and beyond,[264] that do not necessarily agree on perceptions, goals, and priorities.[265]

---

[253] Black and Koser, *The End of the Refugee Cycle?*, 4-6.
[254] Jolliffe, "Refugee Decision-Making Processes," 10.
[255] Zeus, "Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations," 257.
[256] Michel Agier, "Introduction: L'encampement du monde," in: *Un Monde de Camps* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014): 20.
[257] Simon Turner, "What is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 140.
[258] Olivius, "Political Space in Refugee Camps in Thailand," 290.
[259] Turner, "What is a Refugee Camp?" 143.
[260] Alexander Horstmann, "Stretching the Border: Confinement, Mobility and the Refugee Public among Karen Refugees in Thailand and Burma," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29, no. 1 (2014): 57.
[261] Olivius, "Political Space in Refugee Camps in Thailand," 290.
[262] Sally Thompson, "Community-Based Camp Management," *Forced Migration Review* 30 (2008): 26.
[263] Karen Jacobsen, "Factors Influencing the Policy Responses of Host Governments to Mass Refugee Influxes," *The International Migration Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 657.
[264] Cottrell, "Refugee Governance along the Thai-Burmese Border," 22-3.
[265] Hammond, "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation," 230.

For many NGOs, IOs and major donors, the democratic changes in Burma have created a tone of optimism for return. Since 2012, the UNHCR has engaged in "extensive consultations" about voluntary repatriation with the RTG, the GoUM and other affected NGOs, IOs and CBOs and started preparing for return of Burmese refugees in Thailand.[266] Currently, this 'facilitation phase' of voluntary repatriation entails that refugees themselves have to request repatriation, which are assessed by UNHCR on a case-by-case basis.[267] The facilitation phase will require the agreement of GoUM and RTG and a procedure to verify the voluntary nature of the return through individual interviews, managed by UNHCR.[268]

For UNHCR, the return was celebrated as a beacon of "hope".[269] However, the 'homecoming' of the 71 individuals who repatriated in October 2016 has not been a happy one so far, as 17 of the returned refugees quickly indicated that they regretted their decision to return due to the lack of housing provided by the GoUM.[270] Moreover, the various CBOs, camp structures and leaders were side-lined in the process.[271]

These returns have had serious impact on the refugees and migrants along the border, increasing their worries and concerns for return, as described in the previous chapter, substantially. Those in contact with the returning families were warned personally not to make the "same mistake" they had made, and the word of the "failure" spread fast.[272] As a student who currently lives in Nu Poe Camp, from where the first returns were facilitated, explains:

> Well.. the first group [of returnees] is not going well, so people hesitate to repatriate, they stop … they do not trust the UNHCR based on the stories of the real people that repatriated to Yangon. The UNHCR did not take responsibility for them.[273]

According to my interviews, youth along the border have all heard the stories and rumours about return, and the effect of the perceived 'failure' of the first group is momentous.[274] Despite promises of housing, income, education and opportunities for employment upon return, these expectations were not met: "even though they went back, they had no place to live, no house, they just have to start from the beginning!"[275] As a result of the uncertainty about, and disappointment with, the return, many of

[266] UNHCR, "Strategic Roadmap for Voluntary Repatriation: Refugees from Myanmar in Thailand, 2015-2017. Update January 2017," January 2017. https://data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=1544, 1-4.
[267] Author's interview with the Repatriation Officer at UNHCR in Mae Sot on March 19, 2018.
[268] UNHCR, "Strategic Roadmap," 3.
[269] Spindler, "First Myanmar Refugee Returns."
[270] Ye Mon, "Refugees rue return amid housing woes," *Myanmar Times*, November 2, 2016, https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/23424-refugees-rue-return-amid-housing-woes.html; Burma Link, "First Organized Refugee Returns from Thailand Take Place, Despite Concerns over Readiness on the Ground in Myanmar," November 2, 2016, https://www.burmalink.org/first-organized-refugee-returns-thailand-take-place-despite-concerns-readiness-ground-myanmar/.
[271] As became apparent from author's interviews with the Camp Leaders in Nu Poe (March 25) and Mae La (April 3, 2018).
[272] Mon, "Refugees rue return."
[273] Author's interview with B2, a 21-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[274] As became apparent in my interviews with B2, C3, D11, D14 and the education lead at a local NGO in Mae Sot.
[275] Author's interview with D14, a 22-year-old student in Karen State on March 24, 2018.

the refugees along the border distrust the UNHCR, fearing that they will force refugees to return when they are not ready yet.[276]

Another public ritual that influences the perceptions are the acts by both the Thai and the Burmese government. Thailand, having hosted individuals fleeing persecution and armed conflict for years not only from Burma, but also from other neighbouring countries, was increasingly viewing refugees as a burden.[277] The RTG has often represented refugees, exiles and migrants from Burma as "threats" to the nation,[278] and accordingly, continually raises the issue of preparing conditions for return.[279] As a step in this process, the military has been conducting head counts in the camps, and has done multiple announcements about camp closure since.[280] Also the GoUM has pressed for the return of refugees: Aung San Suu Kyi, on a visit to Mae La camp in 2016, publicly welcomed the refugees back, said they were Burma's responsibility, and later in June, announced that the GoUM would repatriate 196 refugees from the border camps as an initial step.[281] Since then, Burmese officials have made multiple visits to the various camps, encouraging refugees to come 'home'.[282] As a 21-year-old student, who lived in two of the refugee camps along the border, recalls:

> They come and ask and ask.. they interview us and ask, "will you go back?" or "will you go to a third country and resettle?" They say that if you go back, they will give you a little bit of money and will look after you, so you can go there, live there and survive there, but if you stay here, we will not give you anything – like rice, or other materials.[283]

5.2. Trust, Distrust and Antagonisms along the Border

These pressures, and the presence of these governments, are perceived as hostile and make refugees fearful for their futures.[284] For Schröder and Schmidt, this is best described as the "principle of totality",[285] which makes that every notion of fear, threat, including a head count or surveying of refugees is "taken to be an aggressive acts that calls for defensive action."[286] As a result, the overall distrust in UNCHR and the two governments is substantiated, which has consequences on the perceptions of refugees.

---

[276] Author's interview with A8 in Mae Sot on March 15, 2018 and with B2 in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[277] Hazel J. Lang, "The Repatriation Predicament of Burmese Refugees: A Preliminary Analysis," UNHCR New Issues in Refugee Research, Working Paper no. 46 (2001): 5.
[278] Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, "The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer: Migration and Detention in Australia, Malaysia and Thailand," *International Migration* 42, no. 1 (2004): 53.
[279] Karen News, "Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Clarifies Its Position on Refugee Return," July 18, 2014, available at: http://karennews.org/2014/07/thailands-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-clarifies-its-position-on-refugee-return/.
[280] Burma Link, "Repatriation of Refugees," February 19, 2015, https://www.burmalink.org/background/recent-developments/repatriation-of-refugees/.
[281] Saw Yan Naing, "Refugee Return Centres to be Opened on Thai-Burma Border," *The Irrawaddy* Aug 1, 2016, http://www.irrawaddy.com/burma/refugee-return-centers-to-be-opened-on-thai-burma-border.html.
[282] Author's interview with the Secretary of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) in Mae Sot on March 13, 2018.
[283] Author's interviews with A6, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018, and with A7, a 25-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 15, 2018.
[284] As became apparent from author's interview with A3, A8, B2 and the education lead at a local NGO in Mae Sot.
[285] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 10.
[286] Ibid.

This distrust is further substantiated by another push for repatriation mentioned by almost all my respondents: the reduction of funding along the border. Reduction of funding already started in the beginning of this decade,[287] and has only continued now that development organisations are allowed to work inside Burma rather than having to support the people in Burma from outside.[288] Respondents tell me about how "some of the donors, they come to the camp and announce that the situation is changing, so we can go back safely!"[289] and the push they feel because of these actions. Organisations along the border admit that they have created a "culture of reliance,"[290] and want refugees to start preparing for their lives after the camp and for their futures, however hard they might find it to imagine that.[291] Some have claimed that "if that is perceived as a push, maybe that is good."[292]

The perceived failure of the first returns, the presence and pushes of the respective governments and the further reduction of funding are important confrontations that emphasised the antagonisms between the UNHCR and the international actors, both governments and donors, on the one hand and the refugees on the other. Refugees feel misunderstood and abandoned, because they know that there is still fighting going on and still a lot needs to improve before Burmese refugees can return. This caused many of my respondents to underline their suffering and the injustices towards them: for example, at the time of my research, the rainy season was just around the corner, and many camp committee members and refugees fear that they would not be able to take care of their houses.[293] Since refugees are not allowed to work, but rations are below living standards and refugees do not have access to enough thatch or leaves to fix their houses, despair is near.[294] This is also true for youth, who especially talk about the decrease in funding of education along the border and in the camps.[295] Many of the education opportunities in the camp and along the border have moved to Burma, or are planning on doing so, impeding the prospects of youth on the border.[296] A young Burmese student, having lived in Nu Poe Camp for 10 years, exemplifies this sentiment:

> At this time, everything started to reduce: the rice, the rations. In all the camps, we have a lot of organisations, but the donors cannot support them, and then they move.. most of the organisations move to Rangoon because the government changed at that time. People hope that Myanmar is already changed, and the donors think they everyone wants to move to Myanmar – here also, [in the camp] they start to reduce everything.[297]

[287] Moretti, "Challenge of Durable Solutions for Refugees", 74-5.
[288] Author's interview with the KRC's Secretary in Mae Sot on March 13, 2018.
[289] Author's interview with C7, a 23-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 25, 2018.
[290] Author's interview with TBC's field coordinator in Mae Sot on March 16, 2018.
[291] Author's interview with the project lead on refugee camps at an international NGO in Mae Sot on March 29, 2018.
[292] Author's interviews with TBC's field coordinator in Mae Sot on March 16, 2018, and the Repatriation Officer at UNHCR Mae Sot on March 19, 2018.
[293] Author's interview with the Zone B Leader in Mae La Camp, on April 3, 2018.
[294] As became apparent from author's focus group discussion with the camp leadership in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018.
[295] As became apparent from author's interview with the education lead at a MLC in Mae Sot, and with A2, A3, A5, and A6.
[296] Author's interview with the education lead at a MLC in Mae Sot on March 1, 2018.
[297] Author's interview with C5, a 23-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 25, 2018.

This has resulted in an environment of fear and distrust in the camps, not only towards the GoUM and RTG, but also against the UNHCR, donors and other humanitarian actors along the border.[298] Herein, the suffering of the refugees was emphasised: often, when asked about whether they would want to return, respondents start with what is *pushing* them to return rather than why they would *want* to return. This, in combination with the perception of many acts by UNHCR, governments, donors and NGOs as hostile, has resulted in feelings of hopelessness:

> The UNHCR, even though they force refugees to go back, but for them, they just see the cover – they do not see what is inside in Myanmar. The refugees have faced those problems, they do not live that far from Myanmar too, they just live along the border, so they know it is not a good idea to put pressure like that.[299]

This quote adequately describes the sentiment that is currently felt in the camps. Youth feel powerless and confused, wondering "why do they [the donors, IOs] only focus on Burma – not just the people who are supporting us now: all the others, why do they force us to be interested in return?"[300] Therefore, we can see that the public appearances and acts by the international refugee regime have caused antagonisms in the camp, as Schröder and Schmidt predicted. Because of this uncertainty, and the related increased antagonisms between the refugees on the one hand and the international actors on the other, refugees start to rely more and more on their own leaders, most notably the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), religious leaders and camp leaders.

As Jolliffe has also shown in his research on refugee decision-making processes, many respondents Burmese refugees, particular those in older generations, said that they would default to their leaders on whether, when, and even to where, they should repatriate.[301] To fit these needs, KRC set up a Camp Information Team (CIT) to distribute reliable information on both the conflict and return and try to combat rumours, as well as setting up a Committee on Refugee Return (CRR), which organises own 'go and see' visits, and provides information on return.[302] Due to the uncertainty described before, a lot of trust is put in the camp committee and CBOs such as the Karen Women's Organisations (KWO). CBOs and other camp structures often receive questions from the refugees about rumours and other worries.[303] These organisations have thus filled the void many refugees feel in their distrust of IOs and governments. As an important Buddhist leader in Mae La camp explained to me:

> About the return to Burma.. it is not the right time. [We know this because] when you look at a tree, all its leaves fall under that mother tree. That is also true for us. We, the leaves, have to

[298] For an example of these antagonisms and how they are displayed in visual images, see Annex III.
[299] Author's interview with A8, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 15, 2018.
[300] Author's interview with A5, a 24-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.
[301] Jolliffe, "Refugee Decision-Making Processes," 15.
[302] Author's interview with the KRC's Secretary in Mae Sot on March 13, 2018.
[303] As became apparent in author's interviews with the Camp Leader in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018, and Karen Women's Organisation's Leader in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018.

> stay close to and check our mother tree – the KNU, the Karen National Union, who is our leader – and they say it is not ready yet for the return.[304]

However, due to the hierarchy and complicated structures of leadership within an ethnic organisation such as KNU, many of its representatives have issue reaching the 'mother tree' and hence retrieving the correct information.[305] Furthermore, camp leaders and other camp committee structures as well as CBOs are cautious in their spread of information – often, they do not have the correct information themselves, and they stay clear of spreading information that is not thoroughly confirmed or checked, since they fear spreading even more rumours.[306] As a result, these organisations are often unable to answer pertinent questions, and with youth the view persists that "those organisations do not have any authority … they can just make a small change. The UN, the government [can make the change]."[307]

While some youth groups have arisen along the border to protect the particular interests of youth, also on return, these youth groups still feel marginalised not only with official organisations such as UNHCR, but also within their own mother organisations KRC and KNU: often, the views of these youth or student groups are equalised with those of other CBOs, and they have to share the platform in order to share their ideas.[308] Therefore, these youth groups experience difficulties in reaching other actors, and often do not receive feedback or responses when they voice their concerns,[309] and it became clear that the youth perspective is not included or emphasised.[310] Yet, as we have seen in the previous chapter as well, the needs of youth are fundamentally different and need to be taken into account. As I was talking to an experienced NGO worker along the border, who fled from Burma 10 years ago himself to work along the border, he explained to me that youth are not involved in important decision-making processes and dialogues:

> *Q: Is that [non-involvement of youth] because they do not want to or because they are not allowed to?*
>
> You can say they are not allowed to. Because in the camp, there is only one camp committee that can participate [in dialogues on return]. At the committee level, maybe some women groups are included, but not the youth. So that is a challenge.[311]

[304] Author's interview with the Head of the Livelihoods Committee in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018. BL ML
[305] Author's interview with representatives from the Karen Student Network Group in Mae Sot on March 29, 2018.
[306] Author's interview with the Camp Leader and Head of the Camp Information Team (CIT) in Nu Poe Camp March 25 and 26, 2018, respectively.
[307] Author's interview with A4, a 28-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 12, 2018.
[308] Author's interview with representatives of the Karen Student Network Group in Mae Sot on March 29, 2018.
[309] As became apparent from author's interview with KSNG and KYO representatives in Mae Sot.
[310] Author's interview with the Camp Leader at Nu Poe Camp on March 25, 2018.
[311] Author's interview with the education lead at a local NGO in Mae Sot on March 8, 2018.

This demonstrates the level of inclusion of youth in important decisions made for or about them. Even though some NGOs and CBOs work on the encouragement of youth participation in the community,[312] the view persists that the leaders and the old generation know better, and young people are not involved as they are still being marginalised and looked down upon.[313] Consequently, youth explain that they do not rely on organisations in their pursuit of information, but just contact their own friends, families or others living in their original villages or areas they might want to return to.[314] While many NGOs, IOs and academics expect refugee youth to depend on superior power structures, such as parents, teachers and other community leaders,[315] youth have started to steer away from these traditional power structures, choosing to rely more on their own networks, friends and close relatives, when it comes to return. Moreover, many of the young respondents I talked to explain that they themselves often go to Burma, to visit friends, family and/or their former villages, and get their information this way.[316]

As a field coordinator who works for The Border Consortium (TBC) observed:

> We do see the increase of the engagement of the people in the camp, including the youth, with the return community. But it is informally, just go with themselves, their family, sometimes with their school, their church, their monastery, just to engage themselves.[317]

As this quote depicts, amongst the youth, a sentiment of self-dependence, rather than the dependence on leaders we observe with the older generation, arises. Respondents indicate that "we have to rely on someone – I don't want that, so, I try to stay by myself, because I don't want to rely on anyone anymore."[318] As a result, the idea persists that in order to survive, young people have to find their own ways,[319] explaining to me the sentiment of "you have to go by yourself, and study."[320] As this research shows that the new generation of young-adults defers from this leadership structure, they contest the passive and subordinate position expected from them. As a young female student in a migrant learning centre, having fled Burma 12 years ago, explains:

> In my view, young people should return to Burma because the young, we can change the situation. The older people, their lives have been lived and their ideas and thinking are old-fashioned. The young, we have new and fresh ideas.[321]

[312] Author's interview with the project lead on refugee camps at an international NGO in Mae Sot on March 29, 2018.
[313] Author's interview with the education lead at a local NGO in Mae Sot on March 8, 2018.
[314] Author's interview with A2, a female migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 10, 2018.
[315] Author's interview with the education lead at a local NGO in Mae Sot on March 8, 2018.
[316] As became apparent in author's interviews with A2, A3, A7, A8 and B1.
[317] Author's interview with TBC's field coordinator in Mae Sot on March 16, 2018.
[318] Author's interview with A2, a female migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 10, 2018.
[319] Author's interview with a 24-year-old CBO employee focusing on education in Mae Sot, on March 8, 2018.
[320] Author's interview with A8, a 21-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 15, 2018.
[321] Author's interview with A7, a 25-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 15, 2018.

As already briefly touched upon in the previous chapter, many of the youth I have talked to believe that through the education they have received in Thailand, they have a chance to improve the situation in Burma.[322] This is because many youth do not feel that they can influence the older generations or leaders, as indicated in the quote above.

5.3. Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has shown various institutional and structural pressures along the Thai-Burma border and how they influence refugees. In the beginning of this chapter, I asked how public rituals and other performances influence the perceptions of young-adults. We have identified three public rituals that, in the eyes of the refugees, are pushes for return that provoke feelings of suffering, namely, the presence of the Thai and Burmese governments in the camps, the first facilitated return and the news of the perceived failure of this return and the reduction of funding along the border. These acts complicate the notion of 'voluntary' repatriation: when I asked my respondents why they would (not) want to return to Burma, their answers were mostly framed in what was pushing them to return rather than why they would want to return. Here, the own suffering was underlined. As a result, even stronger antagonisms between refugees on the one hand and the facilitators of repatriation on the other have developed along the border, which makes refugees even more distrustful of future acts and public rituals by these actors.

However, an important observation in this chapter is that while most refugees default on their own leadership as a result of these confrontations, and the resulting antagonisms towards the 'international refugee regime', youth have started to defect from this and have assumed a more active role than is expected from them. Thus, even though youth and older refugees experience similar public acts and consequences from these acts, their reactions are different. Through their inability to engage in dialogue with those institutions that exert influence over them directly, they have started to gather their own information.

Theoretically, this chapter has the following implications on the remainder of this thesis and the academic debate in general. It has shown that similar structural constraints, such as the reduction of funding or perceived failed first returns, have different effects on different people. Where other groups start to assemble more closely with traditional power structures, thereby being more subjective to the stories, injustices and violent imaginaries the leadership propagates, youth are less and less influenced by these structures. Due to the detachment of youth from traditional narratives as well as a detachment from traditional power structures, the deficiency of information and the lack of trust in both official institutions and community organisations, youth start to find their own way to find information and exert their influence. This will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

[322] As became apparent in author's interviews with A4, B2, C1 and C2.

6. The Social Network of Inscriptions

Q: *Do you still keep contact with your family?*

A4: *Yes, by Facebook. Thank you Mark! [laughs]*

Q: *Mark?*

A4: *Yes, Mark Zuckerberg. He created Facebook, so we can use messenger, and call via messenger. So, my family, and now, the young people use the social network to contact people, so it is getting easier.*[323]

In this chapter, the analytical tool of 'inscriptions' is discussed. By analysing the various images and pieces of information that reach young-adult Burmese refugees along the border, we can start to understand how these inscriptions influence their position on return. These inscriptions are of crucial importance in shaping their perceptions of the past, the future and of the options available to them. As seen in previous chapters, the difference in perceptions thus far between the young-adults and those that exert influence over them is fundamentally different. This chapter proposes that a possible cause of this divergence is in their sources of information and use of media, most notably, through social media. To do so, first, I will show why it is important to discuss inscriptions when studying return, and how to do so. Secondly, I will discuss the images youth come across, and how they confirm or contest their perceptions of return. Finally, I will reflect on the role of social media within violent imaginaries and voluntary repatriation.

The aim of this chapter is to answer the following question: how do visual images, both in the form of traditional and social media, influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma? Inscriptions, following Schröder and Schmidt, are defined as "images displayed in banners or murals" or in "TV images" that instigate feelings of fear, polarisation and moral superiority of the own cause.[324] Thereby, Schröder and Schmidt acknowledge that imaginaries and perceptions are not only influenced by textual representations, but also by visual ones. Visual images along the Thai-Burma border include murals, celebrations of traditional events, and in the information available to refugees, and are important in the formation of identities and perspectives.[325] As a violent imaginary, these visual displays can be used to reinstate and strengthen memories of conflict, underlining the cause of conflict, the suffering of victims of conflict and focus on military victories defeats, thereby instigating antagonisms.[326] Since the reception of images, information and media is highly subjective,[327] how youth understand and construct their perceptions following this reception is crucial in understanding their perspectives on return.

[323] Author's interview with A4, a 28-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 12, 2018.
[324] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 10-11.
[325] Koser, "Information and Repatriation," 9.
[326] N.T. Robinson and M. Schulzke, "Visualizing War? Towards A Visual Analysis of Videogames and Social Media," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 4 (2016): 995.
[327] Koser, "Information and Repatriation," 9.

As Schröder and Schmidt themselves already indicate in 2001, the influence of visual media, with the broadcasting of TV images, is becoming increasingly important.[328] This is even more so in 2018, where the use of internet and social media has infiltrated the lives of everyone, including refugees, considerably.[329] These social media have important implications on the formation of perspectives and imaginaries: following Appadurai, today's various electronic media can "offer new resources and disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and worlds."[330] Social media, in addition to serving as personal communication tools or mere means of receiving information from 'back home' and what is happening outside of the camp,[331] have become important information distribution channels,[332] and consequently, allow refugees to consume, produce and share content and opinions within and across networks.[333] Therefore, social media enable refugees and diaspora members to exercise agency in managing the creation, production, and dissemination of their voices.[334]

In order to be relevant to the study and accurately describe the images that youth encounter and consequently influence their perceptions, a definition of inscriptions should thus not be limited to visual images in traditional means but include all information-sharing methods relevant to refugees along the Thai-Burma border. In an important contribution, Koser already established in 1997 that the way in which "refugees in exile receive, evaluate and use information from home in the decision whether or not to repatriate" is of central importance in the repatriation decision.[335] Even though refugees might have left 'home', these "moving images meet deterritorialized viewers",[336] meaning that media and available information also generate collective diasporic imaginations that influence refugees in their perceptions on return. Furthermore, the availability and perception of information is important to ensure the voluntary nature of return: following UNHCR guidelines, to help make a voluntary return sustainable it must be ensured that refugees are regularly provided relevant information to make a free and informed decision about whether to return, and where to return to.[337] Especially in situations of uncertainty, risk and distrust of people and organisations, the information disseminated by people and organisations (offline and online) is crucial for the production of meaning and, more concretely, for making personal decisions, such as whether to return to Burma.[338]

---

[328] Schröder and Schmidt, "Introduction," 10.
[329] See, amongst others, Heike Graf, "Media Practices and Forced Migration: Trust Online and Offline," *Media and Communication* 6, no. 2 (2018).
[330] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 3.
[331] Cindy Horst, "'In Virtual Dialogue' with the Somali Community: The Value of Electronic Media for Research amongst Research Diasporas," *Refuge* 23, no. 1 (2006): 53.
[332] Rianne Dekker and Godfried Engbersen, "How Social Media Transform Migrant Networks and Facilitate Migration," *Global Networks* 14, no. 4 (2014): 401-2.
[333] Amanda Alencar, "Refugee Integration and Social Media: A Local and Experiential Perspective," *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 11 (2018): 1592.
[334] Godin and Doná, "Refugee Voices, New Social Media and Politics of Representation," 60.
[335] Koser, "Information and Repatriation," 1.
[336] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large,* 4.
[337] UNHCR, "Framework for Voluntary Repatriation (May 2014)," 6.
[338] Graf, "Media Practices and Forced Migration," 150.

While with my older respondents the view persists that youth have no interest in receiving information, and still rely mostly on their parents, education and leadership, the youth put forward different sources and means of receiving information in my interviews, which I displayed in the table below:

Means of receiving information mentioned by respondents

Method	Freq. used by youth (n=17)[339]	Expected use (n=14)[340]
Social media/Facebook	15	5
News on internet	11	4
Traditional news	0	5
Own visits to Burma	7	4
Engagement with returnees to Burma	3	2
Engagement with stayees in Burma	7	0
Leaders/Community in Thailand	3	5
Youth organisations	3	3
Teachers/Education	4	3
Parents	0	3
Other organisations (e.g. UN)	3	1

Table 1: Means of receiving information

Following the findings displayed above, I propose elaborating the definition of 'inscriptions' to 'visual images displayed in both traditional and social media that influence a certain individual or group in their perceptions'. This then allows the study of all images that may influence perceptions.

Various researchers have indicated the importance of social media, social networks and other means of receiving information in influencing decision-making in migration.[341] Yet, the theoretical understanding of *how* social media and other information influence perceptions is limited. Therefore, in order to understand how these inscriptions of information then influence youth, I apply the two concepts that Gurak and Cases propose: Trust and affinity. These "can attract people to return as well as keep them in their original area."[342] Trust determines what sources of information are deemed as valid, relevant and legitimate. Affinity determines how this information resonates with youth, and whether they take them into account in their perceptions and consequent actions. These will be the concepts used to discuss the resonance of the various information mechanisms used along the border with youth.

[339] In the last three focus group discussions, the issue of information was less relevant, as these were conducted in a school already relocated to Burma. These interviews were mere geared towards how the differences in perceptions played out rather than where they came from.
[340] What older generation respondents indicate *they* think youth use to get their information.
[341] Cleophas Karooma, "Reluctant to Return? The Primacy of Social Networks in the Repatriation of Rwandan Refugees in Uganda," Refugee Studies Centre, Working Paper Series no. 103 (2014): 8, 19; see also Graf, "Media Practices and Forced Migration," and Dekker and Engbersen, "How Social Media Transform Migrant Networks."
[342] Douglas T. Gurak and F.E. Cases, "Migration Networks and the Shaping of Migration Systems," in: *International Migration Systems: A Global Approach*, eds. Mary M. Kritz, Lin Lean Lim and Hania Zlotnik (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992): 156.

Along the border, various visual reminders of the conflict and of the antagonisms, both against the military, the 'Burmese' and against the UNHCR can be found. However, these fit mostly with the traditional views of the conflict and with the fears related to those, rather than with the views of youth put forward in this thesis.[343] Moreover, the availability of these images was limited. An argument to understand why youth do not seem affected by these is that of trust and affinity. To see how youth resist these images and find their own, we turn to their need for information as brought forward in the previous chapter through the mechanisms they deem the most important.

6.1. Official Information Flows

An important factor that is complicating the relations between actors along the border is the perceived lack of information. Various authors have highlighted the lack of information about conditions both in home and host country along the Thai-Burma border.[344] Yet, the provision of information is crucial in repatriation. Eastmond and Öjendal, for example, question the voluntary nature of return of Cambodian refugees from Thailand by criticising the incentives used and the information provided about conditions in Cambodia.[345] This lack of information has created a fertile breeding ground for rumours. For example, buzzes about camp closure have been going around since 2014.[346]

Although UNHCR and others have put considerable effort in the provision and spread of information,[347] including the spread of pamphlets, posters and informative images on announcement boards, respondents indicate that they do not have enough information to contest these rumours or to receive accurate information, complicating their ability to make an informed decision to return.[348] Moreover, my respondents feel they cannot contact those organisations that should contribute information, in order to ask them to clarify, or go in dialogue with them.[349] Nevertheless, dialogue about conditions of return and other matters is necessary if camp residents are to make informed decisions about whether, when and how they feel safe to return.[350] However, this dialogue is far to be seen: refugees feel that they can only reach UNHCR when you have a sincere interest in repatriation or case for resettlement.[351] UNHCR itself, for example, already indicated that they feel that they reach youth only partially.[352] While they try to go in dialogue with refugees, this occurs mainly with refugee leadership and high-level stakeholders, and not directly with the people.

---

[343] See Annex III for some of the visuals I have encountered during my stay.
[344] As became apparent in author's interviews with A8, B1, C5, C7 and D3.
[345] Marita Eastmond and Joakim Öjendal, "Revisiting a 'Repatriation Success': The Case of Cambodia," in: *The End of the Refugee Cycle?*, eds. Richard Black and Khalid Koser (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999): 52.
[346] Author's interview with B1, a 21-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018; Karen News, "Thailands Ministry Clarifies Position on Return."
[347] Author's interview with the Repatriation Officer at UNHCR in Mae Sot on March 19, 2018.
[348] As became apparent in author's interviews with B1, C5, C7, and D3.
[349] Author's focus group discussion in Nu Poe Camp (C5-7) on March 25, 2018.
[350] Jack, "Communication of Information on the Thai-Burma Border," 96.
[351] Author's interview with C5, a 23-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 25, 2018.
[352] Author's interview with the Repatriation Officer at UNHCR in Mae Sot on March 19, 2018.

Due to the complicated official information flows in the camps, many of my respondents feel insecure about the amount of information they have.[353] As a consequence, respondents start looking for their own information rather than relying on official information sources. As seen in the previous chapter, for many of the older respondents, this entails that they rely more and more on traditional leadership structures. Their flows of information come from camp management, community leaders and CBOs. For example, the camp structures communicate with UNHCR and other facilitating partners to give "the people the information on what is happening, what they need to know."[354] They also engage in 'go & see visits' to check the conditions in prospective return areas, and correspond with relevant NGOs, including TBC. Furthermore, as a result of the relative stability and recent changes in government in Burma, many CBOs can now travel to "the other side", to set up offices, collect information by taking videos, interviewing returnees and 'stayees',[355] which they then send back to the camp through news, mail and camp sections of their respective organisations.[356]

With the older generation refugees, these information flows are sufficient and fit their expectations, which can be explained by their high levels of trust and affinity with these leadership structures as displayed in the previous chapter. Yet, youth have distanced themselves from these traditional associations. While they experience similarities in lack of information,[357] lack of dialogue and inclusion,[358] and pressures to return,[359] these do not result in the same perceptions. For youth, this distrust makes that they do not resort to leadership, but to their own social networks. Therefore, I will discuss the information youth receive through these networks.

6.2. Information for Youth: Internet, Network Groups and Social Media

Following the results in table 1, the most prominent means of information for youth include social media, own engagement with communities and news on the internet. As one of my respondents in a focus group in Nu Poe Camp clearly explained:

> I would like to say that all of us, even though we stay here [in the camp], we get our news from internet, from Facebook, we go and ask our friends, read the news, and contact our relatives. For me, when I contacted my relatives in the brigade [in Karen State], they wrote to me 'you should not go back to Burma, it is not safe for you, because there is still fighting going on here!'.[360]

[353] As became apparent in author's interviews with A4, A5, A7 and A8.
[354] Author's interview with the leader of the CIT in Nu Poe Camp on March 26, 2018.
[355] Term used for those individuals/population who remained in the country of origin while others fled. See, for example, Gaim Kibreab, "When Refugees Come Home: The Relationship Between Stayees and Returnees in Post-Conflict Eritrea," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20, no. 1 (2002).
[356] As became apparent in author's interview with representatives from an international NGO, KYO and KSNG, as well as with B2, a student in Nu Poe Camp.
[357] As became apparent in author's interview with A4, A5, A7 and A8.
[358] Author's interview with C1, a young male refugee in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[359] Author's interview with B2, a 21-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[360] Author's interview with C1, a young male refugee in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.

Since internet became available in the camps and in Burma itself, youth have started to use it to get information about the conditions in Burma and collect news about their country and recent developments.[361] Before the arrival of internet in the camps, youth and others were highly dependent on organisations, both international as well as community-based, had to come to the camps to tell them the news, but this is no longer the case.[362] Now, social media was the most important theme in the replies of my respondents to the question 'how do you get information about conditions in Burma?'

Most respondents replied that they frequently use social media to contact family,[363] and keep in touch with friends.[364] Furthermore, through Facebook, Skype and other new mechanisms of telecommunication, youth can use social media to check the security situation.[365] When I asked my respondents about whether they thought it was safe to return to Burma, they often referred to Facebook as a source of information to substantiate their answers. Through social media, they collect information about their prospective or desired area(s) for return, checking whether has been occupied, their land has been taken, or that fighting is continuing in their respective brigade or state.[366] As one young male respondent, currently living in Nu Poe Camp, displays:

> I do not think it is safe to return. If the situation is safe, everyone will know, because everyone will talk about it, and that news is easy to spread. If the conditions are not good, that is also easy to spread: nowadays, everyone uses Facebook and internet here [in the camp], so we all know directly within one day what is happening there.[367]

This quote represents the trust youth put in Facebook to inform them and the role of spreading information. When I asked my respondents to see some of their Facebook accounts and posts, I have witnessed numerous videos of speeches by officials, both from the GoUM and the ethnic representatives, on important conferences, ceremonies and memorials being shared, as well as several posts spreading information about recent fighting, with photos and videos, and statements by relevant organisations, including ethnic (youth) organisations.[368] For example, one respondent showed me a video explaining the contents of the NCA and its shortcomings. Other examples include videos showing footage of military campaigns, accompanied by messages that state "I want to wage war with the military in April, as it would be a good way to commemorate the New Year."[369] Posts by KNU and other military groups are also shared amongst friends.[370]

---

[361] Author's interviews with B1, C5, D3 and a young CBO worker focusing on education.
[362] Author's interview with A4, a 28-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 12, 2018.
[363] Author's interview with A1, a 25-year-old migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot, on March 6, 2018, and A2, a female migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 10, 2018.
[364] Author's interview with A2 in Mae Sot, B2 in Nu Poe, and a staff member of KSNG in Mae La Camp on April 3, 2018.
[365] As became apparent in author's interview with A4, A8, C3 and KSNG in Mae Sot.
[366] As became apparent in author's interview with A3, C2 and C3.
[367] Author's interview with B2, a 21-year-old student in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[368] Author's focus group discussion with C1-C4 in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.
[369] Facebook account as shown to me in by respondents in Nu Poe Camp Focus Group 1 on March 23, 2018.
[370] Ibid.

These inscriptions are thus violent images along which youth can formulate their perceptions on return, due to the perceived risks, violence and fear. The images on the internet reinforce their view of Burma as unsafe, and correspond with the narratives of revenge, distrust and fear as described in the chapter on narratives.

Gillespie et al. already warn that a lack of trust "drives refugees towards unofficial, potentially dangerous and exploitative resources."[371] Due to the short but complicated history with Facebook and social media Burma has, many people remain suspicious of the platform: when Facebook entered Burma in 2014, Buddhist extremists seized on the platform, spreading misinformation that set off a deadly riot that year, and in 2017, hate speech on Facebook contributed to ethnic cleansing against Burma's Rohingya minority.[372] As a result of these events, and insecurity about the platform, many of my older respondents remain anxious of its use: they fear the youth might use it with wrong intentions and come in contact with pornographic or violent images that encourage the conflict.[373] The presence of "fake news", hidden agendas in messages and photoshopped content is an issue raised by many participants of my research. As one representative of the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) explains:

> People share a lot of information that is not true.. this depends on their personality. Some people can use Facebook, they feel it, if they think it is bad [incorrect] than they do not share it, and if they think it is good, they share it to other people … if we want to know the true information, we have to come to the leader and ask.[374]

Thus, in the CBOs, we still see a dependency on the leadership in terms of information. The structures put in place by the refugee leadership, such as the CIT, have a specific focus on providing only "true, reliable media"[375] and thus experiencing difficulty combatting rumours, as most rumours (both on social media and in real life) are on facts or events the refugee community is not involved in or has no information on. Moreover, due to the distrust in social media, older generation refugees do not make as extensive use of the medium to gather intel, information and thus perceptions on return. As Alam and Imran has also shown in their research, the use of social media can create "digital divide" between generations, which exuberates the existing discrepancies between generations, as mentioned above and in previous chapters.[376] While now, both old and new generations have equal physical access to technologies, the willingness and lack of skills in how to use or process these technologies differ:

---

[371] Marie Gillespie, Lawrence Ampofo, Margaret Cheesman, Becky Faith, Evgenia Iliadou, Ali Issa, Souad Osseiran and Dimitris Skleparis, "Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks," The Open University/France Médias Monde, Research Report, May 2016: 18.
[372] Amanda Taub and Max Fisher, "Where Countries are Tinderboxes and Facebook is a Match," *The New York Times,* April 21, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/21/world/asia/facebook-sri-lanka-riots.html.
[373] As became apparent in author's interviews with the head of a MLC, TBC's field coordinator and D3, a 20-year-old student in Karen State on March 24, 2018.
[374] Author's interview with a representative from KYO in Mae Sot, on March 17, 2018.
[375] Author's interview with the leader of the CIT in Nu Poe Camp on March 26, 2018.
[376] Khorshed Alam and Sophia Imran, "The digital divide and social inclusion among refugee migrants: A case in regional Australia," *Information Technology & People* 28, no. 2 (2015): 346.

older respondents in my research often tell me how short internet has been around, how distrustful they are towards the medium, and the dangers that lie in it.[377] As a consequence, both groups have access to different sources of information, influencing their perspectives.

However, youth do not distrust the platform as much. Although respondents show that they understand (some of) the risks, they often remind me that social media does not only allow them to receive information, but especially they highlight its ability to interact with the information and "follow up" on information.[378] Youth use social media to connect with their friends, family and teachers, both in Burma and along the border,[379] and these contacts were important in their decision-making processes: for example, respondents indicate that contact with friends along the border was instrumental in their decision to search for jobs in and around Mae Sot, in applying for schools and universities they otherwise would not have heard of and to move to certain areas, whether back in Burma or in Thailand.[380] Also friends back 'home' were crucial networks of information, informing youth about the stability in villages of origin or other desired areas of return, such as the major cities.[381]

Moreover, through social media, youth are also able to connect more intimately with 'far-removed' contacts. Often, when trying to contact family, they must contact neighbours first, as many of their parents and other family members do not have mobile phones or are not able to use them.[382] As one female respondent, who left Burma at the age of 10, tells me:

> I know [about Burma] because of Facebook, here I can see how people in my village, such as my family, are doing. I contact the people who have had education, teachers. I cannot contact my family directly, I have to ask other persons to connect me with my father and mother.[383]

Additionally, through social media, youth are able to keep in contact with those they met in the camps, including foreign teachers, youth who resettled to a third country such as the United States or Canada, those who entered the illegal job market in Mae Sot or other Thai cities, those who went to other camps or areas along the border, and those who have returned spontaneously on their own account.[384] Through quick messages on Facebook or other social media channels, they can get updates on where their friends are and how they are doing.[385] Furthermore, their point of view broadens through their contact with foreign visitors. For example, multiple of the respondents I talked to asked me at the end of the interview if they could add me on Facebook.[386]

---

[377] As became apparent in author's interviews with the head of a MLC, the education lead at another MLC and TBC's field coordinator.
[378] Author's interview with a 24-year-old CBO employee focusing on education in Mae Sot, on March 8, 2018.
[379] Author's interview with A2, a female migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 10, 2018.
[380] As became apparent in author's interviews with A1 and A5.
[381] As became apparent in author's interviews with A1, A2, A3 and A4.
[382] Author's interview with A1 in Mae Sot, on March 6, 2018, and with A2 in Mae Sot on March 10, 2018.
[383] Author's interview with A2, a female migrant worker/refugee in Mae Sot on March 10, 2018.
[384] Author's interview with A5, a 24-year-old student in Mae Sot, on March 14, 2018.
[385] Author's interview with a 24-year-old CBO employee focusing on education in Mae Sot, on March 8, 2018.
[386] As became apparent in author's interview Nu Poe Camp Focus Group 1, March 23, 2018.

Because youth can, and sometimes must, establish broader networks, connecting not only contact direct friends and family, both along the border as well as thousands of kilometres away, but also with other community members, they thereby establish new collective networks of interaction, including returnees, stayees, those that have resettled, foreign teachers and peers. Through the relations with their sources of information, trust is ensured. Moreover, youth feel highly affiliated with these sources of information as they resonate with their existing perceptions, the critical way of thinking they obtained through their education and individual character. As with the contact with foreign teachers and visitors to the camp described in the previous chapters, these different contacts thus impact their perceptions, and makes their position vis-à-vis return different.

Although social media creates a 'digital divide' between older and newer generations, it also gives youth new channels and means of exerting influence over existing power structures. Specifically, the ease and proficiency in which youth are able to use social media to further their goals has led to a puncture of the divide between youth and older generations in leadership, now that the latter more and more depends on the former in the use of technologies. Especially with decreasing traditional flows of funding, older generations need to reach out to youth for help: for example, as the headmaster of a migrant learning centre explained, his school needs the internet to apply for scholarships and funding for his students.[387] The same goes for the CBOs and other community organisations aiming at achieving change, who also need the youth and their knowledge.[388] As such, the gap between leaders and youth, that we saw clearly in the previous chapter, could be overcome through the use of social media and other new means of communication and information.

6.3. Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored what visual images and other sources of imaginaries youth encounter, interact with and use in their formation of perceptions on return. The hypothesis as put forward by Schröder and Schmidt is that these visual images will remind youth of the causes of conflict, the suffering of their respective ethnic groups and thereby would reinstate antagonisms as described in the chapters on narratives and performances. While it is true that on social media visual images of war, conflict and other issues related to Burma are depicted, youth use it mostly to gather their own information, through educated peers, friends and family – in Burma, along the border and beyond – and internet news sources. Hence, whereas the images on social media are sometimes violent, these do not resonate with their perceptions. Thus, youth resort to other sources, in their eyes more trustworthy, to check and validate this information.

[387] Author's interview with the head of a MLC in Mae Sot, on February 27, 2018.
[388] Author's interview with TBC's field coordinator in Mae Sot on March 16, 2018.

This corresponds with the views of youth in the previous chapters, namely, that in order to achieve their goals, they must go by themselves and get their own information that resembles with the individual and multi-ethnic attitudes as described in the chapter on narratives.

Yet, it needs to be underlined that the digital divide in information between older and younger generations leads to different perceptions. Here, a distinction must be made between close networks, focusing on family, friends and community ties, that resonate strongly with mostly the older generation refugees, and those based on more distant relations. To accurately study how these numerous different sources are perceived, I applied the concepts of trust and affinity, which give a possible explanation on why certain images persist over others. However, social media also provides opportunities for young-adult refugees.

We have seen that social media are an important contradiction between youth and older generations. Nevertheless, although the social media create a 'digital divide' between old and new generations, it also gives them new channels and means of exerting influence over existing power structures, as older leaders rely on young people in handling, producing and controlling information flows. Thus, it could be an important mechanisms through which discrepancies between various groups and perceptions amongst refugees can be resolved, but further research on this specific topic is needed. More specifically, while this chapter has shown that social media is an important aspect through which youth can exert their influence and display their perceptions, my respondents did not indicate they have tried to use it to reach UNHCR, the respective governments or international organizations. This could be both useful and interesting in shaping their perceptions on return. Moreover, the use of social media could be an important mechanisms through which organizations such as UNHCR can increase their reach to youth. If support to young-adult refugees is to be accurate and fitting to their needs, this source of imaginaries needs to be considered, both in the community as well as in policy.

Through studying and examining the mechanism of social media, this chapter has uncovered some of the complexities of return, as well as contrast some of the persisting ideas of refugees as 'uprooted', 'passive' or 'detached'. Through news and media refugees are able to obtain knowledge from outside of the camp or border-area. Furthermore, they can interact with this information, and contribute their own. Thereby, the medium allows for an interaction between agency and structure, and even for refugee youth to possibly change the structures that embed them.

Conclusion

> *"We have had education, we can share the knowledge, our experience … [but] the current situation is [that] we are not the decisionmakers, and we cannot reach the powerful people."*[389]

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the connection between violent imaginaries, expressed in narratives, performances and inscriptions, and the perceptions of young-adult Burmese refugees on return and repatriation. By analysing the impact of various dialogues and discourses on repatriation, simultaneously from the perspective of agency as well as structure, I have indicated that the perspective of youth is fundamentally different from that of older generations and different from those structures and institutions that exert influence over them. In this conclusion, first, I will shortly summarise the findings as presented in the empirical parts of this thesis and answer my main research question. Second, I will indicate how this research relates to the debate on voluntary repatriation and discursive approaches in academia, and what the contribution of this research is to that debate. Third, I will reflect on other implications and limitations this research may present, and I will propose areas for further research.

The question asked in the beginning of thesis, namely, 'As conflict endures in Burma, how do violent imaginaries influence the voluntary repatriation of young-adult Burmese refugees living in refugee camps along the Burmese border in Tak Province, Thailand, since the start of the repatriation processes in 2016 until April 2018?', can be answered by first shortly summarising the findings through my sub-questions, and later making overall analyses and conclusions. It was established that voluntary repatriation and the perceptions on this should be studied discursively. In order to study and accurately describe and understand this, this thesis took into account both the structural forces that promote or constrain repatriation and the motivations, goals and aspirations of the people who are expected to return, using violent imaginaries as an analytical frame.

The first sub-question asked how narratives of former conflict and past violence influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma. In this, youth and their perceptions were expected to be shaped mostly by the stories their parents and teachers tell them, thereby adopting the fears, worries about return and consequent antagonisms towards 'the Burmese'. However, through life in the camp, detachment from 'home' and contact with other ethnicities and nationalities in the camp, their narrative towards return and Burma is fundamentally different from their parents and other older generation refugees. Youth lack the nostalgic longing many older refugees feel, and hence often do not adopt the related prejudices and antagonisms. Thus, youth along the border have developed their own narratives of return, focusing more on education and employment. The result that narratives have on refugees as put forward in the literature, namely, that the emphasising of stories of past violence would lead to a limitation in the perceived options available to refugees and the formation and strengthening of social groups, is only partially true: for youth, their perception of options goes beyond that of older generations,

[389] Author's interview with C1, a young male refugee in Nu Poe Camp on March 23, 2018.

focusing not merely on return to 'the homeland' when it is safe, but setting higher demands and looking beyond their original villages in return.

The second sub-question asked how public rituals and other performances influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma. While an important implication of this research was to give agency to young-adult refugees, it still needs to be acknowledged that they are embedded in powerful structures. Pressures to return come from confrontations with IOs, governments and other organisations, both directly and indirectly, for example through the presence and pressure from governments, the perceived failure of the first facilitated returns and the reduction of funding. The fear and despair that followed reinstates the narratives of suffering and fear already present amongst the refugees and has resulted in a distrust of NGOs and IOs, as the view that these organisations are purposely pushing them towards conflict persists. As a result, older generation refugees to default on leadership, strengthening the antagonisms towards the other already observed in their narratives and emphasising the own suffering, as expected from the literature. Still, for young people it is especially difficult to contact and contest the institutions that exert influence over them. As such, their level of trust is low, and they find their own sources of information to shape their perceptions.

The third sub-question asked how inscriptions, visual images in the form of both social and traditional media, influence young-adult Burmese refugees' perceptions on return to Burma. This question arose from an adaptation of 'inscriptions' to not only include traditional media and visual images on TV, such as in the original definition by Schröder and Schmidt, but also social media as an important means of communication, contestation and discourse for young-adult refugees. The divide between older and younger generations, between community leaders and young-adult refugees and the difference in perceptions I noted in answering the previous two sub-questions has been invigorated by the use of social media, as it allows youth to receive and interact with different sources of information than the older generations, and thus, shape different perceptions. In order to describe *how* this happens, I applied the concepts of trust and affinity: where older generations and groups look at social media through a lens of distrust, youth view these media as an opportunity not only to gather more reliable information from more varied sources, but also as a means of engaging with sources, actors and institutions. Although certain violent images that correspond with we have seen in the chapter on narratives are also present on social media, such as calls to action for military and brutal displays of war, these do not guide youth in their thinking. I explain this through affinity: these images do not correspond with the view of Burma and the future youth encounter in their education and daily lives. Rather, they use social media to collect information as well as share information with networks beyond the confinement of the camp and engage with this critically. Findings are shared with own groups, not with external actors. Thus, the inscriptions that influence refugees in their position on return differ fundamentally between youth and other groups.

Therefore, my main question, namely, how violent imaginaries influence the perceptions of young-adult Burmese refugees, can be answered as follows. While imaginaries are indeed important to the construction of perceptions, the difference in *how* these imaginaries influence perceptions of older and new generations is paramount. It is clear that young people have different concerns and needs. This difference, for one part, comes from the different perceptions of 'home', history and longing for 'the motherland', hence contesting the 'homecoming' model to repatriation. The detachment youth feel from 'that country' makes them more sceptical, raise more concerns and have higher demands for eventual return. These perceptions come about via education, contact with other ethnicities and nationalities, and the different sources of information available to different groups. This makes that refugee youth react differently to confrontations on return, such as the failed first facilitating returns and the violent images in stories from their parents and as shared on social media. Albeit the pressures on refugees are similar, with funding being reduced all along the border, and an overall lack of trust and information along the border remains, the result on perceptions and action is fundamentally different: where older refugees rely on leadership, both in their information as well as in their decision to return, youth depend on their own networks and sources, in turn leading to different perceptions.

While these three concepts of narratives, performances and inscriptions have thus proved important in uncovering the complexities of return and the various dialogues that guide it, it does not tell us exactly *how* these influence perceptions, and why some dialogues resonate better with specific individuals than others. This is partially explained by the subjective nature of information, perceptions and discourse, as pointed out by Koser and other researchers before, but also by the synergy between agency and structure. As mentioned before shortly in the conclusion of my chapter on narratives, understanding what perceptions exist and how they are influenced by, and in turn influencing, other perceptions, is a chicken-or-egg-dilemma: the question which one came before the other is still unknown. This thus shows the dynamic and complicated nature of refugees' return decision-making and the constant action and interaction of perceptions through narratives, performances and inscriptions, and how the three are interlinked. Hereby, this thesis thus underlines the importance of structuration theory and discursive approaches to studying voluntary refugee repatriation.

Nevertheless, this makes answering the research question complicated. Despite the fact that I have shown *what* violent imaginaries guide perceptions, to answer *how* violent imaginaries influence perceptions, a further step needs to be taken. Here, the concepts applied in the final chapter on inscriptions prove helpful: that of trust and affinity. Although youth are continuously bombarded with images, stories and rituals of Burma, of Thailand, and of return itself that could influence their perceptions, some of these narratives, performances and inscriptions persevere whereas others do not. Herein, trust – trust in other ethnicities, trust in the future, trust in their education, and trust in their own personal networks – is crucial in determining what information influences them, and what actions they take. While stories, acts and images of conflict are numerous along the border, youth are mostly

influenced by those that resemble their thinking, and further their perceived needs: education, employment and personal development. Herein, the discourses of importance to youth, namely that of education and employment, shape what sources they deem relevant and how they react to this. Yet, these still lead to different reactions – while some of my respondents were more than ready to return to Burma, others said that they would remain in Thailand until their education was certified.

Hereby, this research adds to the understanding of voluntary repatriation both in academia and in policy. Firstly, it has contributed to the study of voluntary repatriation and its perceptions through proposing a new analytical tool to study change and interaction between structure and agency: violent imaginaries. As this thesis has shown, this tool is highly relevant as it takes into account not only textual representations of discourse, but also performances and inscriptions in media. Through these concepts, this thesis uncovered that imaginaries are fundamental in the formation of perceptions, and furthermore that the perceptions of these imaginaries differ substantially between generations, and even within expected 'groups', such as refugees. Therefore, more focus, both in policy and academia, should be put on intergenerational conflict and differences within groups, and how they influence perceptions and actions.

Secondly, this thesis confirms important ideas on the study of repatriation, namely, by showing the difference in perceptions between the refugees and those institutions that exert influence over them. Earlier research has already indicated numerous factors that influence these perceptions, including changing migration policies, availability of resources and infrastructure, sense of community and the perceived level of security in both 'home' and host country. This thesis adds to this existing body of literature because it emphasises that dialogue and its influence of the *perception* on these factors is what proves to be fundamental in informing action. Especially for youth, mere security is not enough to promote return, and thus, the idea that return is a 'natural result' at the end of a conflict is flawed, as is the notion of repatriation as a 'homecoming'. This has important implications on policy as well: if the governments, UNHCR and other facilitating organizations want to truly facilitate voluntary repatriation, if and when the conditions in Burma are conducive, simply stating these conditions are present is not enough. Rather, they should focus on the *perceptions* held by refugees, focus on the issues most important to them, and make sure these conditions are all met before return is facilitated.

Third and finally, this thesis has implications on further research on the topic of 'refugees'. I have shown that in designing research on these issues it is thus not enough to merely interview 'the refugees' (certainly not as one umbrella group), but also engage in dialogue with those institutions, actors and organisations that form the structure in which the refugees are embedded. Hence, both theoretically and methodologically, the interaction between agency and structure is of upmost importance. To that end, studies on repatriation should include all voices, as each actor has their own specific views and perceptions on return that in turn influence that of others. Moreover, a successful understanding of

repatriation should reject the idea of refugees as passive receivers of aid and victims of war. Especially through social media, the idea that refugees are victims enclosed in a camp with little knowledge of life beyond the barbed wife, is flawed. Furthermore, if repatriation is truly 'voluntary', agency should be granted to refugees in considering their options. However, especially for young-adults, there is no official platform to speak out or counter those structures that exert influence over them, whether on international organisations and actors (UNHCR, governments) or local leadership structures (CBOs, camp). This questions the ability of refugees to make a free and informed decision on return, one of the requirements for repatriation to be 'voluntary'.

Despite these interesting findings, several limitations remain. While the case study approach taken in this thesis was invaluable as it revealed the subjective understandings of youth, in order to verify the value of violent imaginaries on perceptions on return, more research must be conducted. Likewise, as my sampling method consisted mainly of non-probability snowball sampling, it was not possible (nor the objective of this research) to make widely applicable generalisations to the refugee community along the Thai-Burma border, let alone refugee youth in general. This is also because the Thai-Burma border is a particular context of a protracted refugee situation, with its own stories, histories and collective memories, which may not be appropriate elsewhere. Especially its structure of refugee-led governance in the camps and beyond is unique. Therefore, research must be conducted in more contexts to assert the worth of this theory and frame to the study of decision-making in voluntary repatriation. Additionally, the little focus on young-adult refugees as active agents, both in return and in general, requires more attention in research to be able to state their specific needs and position.

Although this research has indicated the importance of social media in the construction of imaginaries, it is not clear how social media may contest imaginaries held by others. Many of my respondents indicated that they indeed use social media to gather information and interact with it, but the exact mechanisms of this interaction, and possible contestation, remain vague. Hence, further research needs to explore how social media can be a new 'space' for contestation – not only for groups, but also individuals, and how they are used by youth. As this research has shown, social media hold opportunities for youth to engage, both virtually and with their own respective communities. Their skills concerning media and the growing importance of social media internationally makes that leadership structures, in both local and international organisations, open up to youth. Yet, none of the young-adults I spoke to during my research used these means of communication to try and exert influence over those structures they deemed to be of importance while there lies a chance for contestation from the side of young-adult refugees here. More research, not only in the field of conflict studies but also in communication and psychology, has to be done to show and understand these complexities.

Bibliography

Agier, Michel. “Introduction: L’encampement du monde.” In: *Un Monde de Camps*. Paris: La Découverte, 2014.

Alam, Khorshed and Sophia Imran. “The digital divide and social inclusion among refugee migrants: A case in regional Australia.” *Information Technology & People* 28, no. 2 (2015): 344-65.

Alencar, Amanda. “Refugee Integration and Social Media: A Local and Experiential Perspective.” *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 11 (2018): 1588-1603.

Amnesty International. *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Thailand’s Refugee Policies and Violations of the Principe of Non-Refoulement.* London: Amnesty International, 2017.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Bakewell, Oliver. “Refugee Repatriation in Africa: Towards a Theoretical Framework.” Centre for Development Studies University of Bath Occasional Paper 04/96, 1996.

———. “Repatriation and Self-Settled Refugees in Zambia: Bringing Solutions to the Wrong Problems.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13, no. 4 (2000): 356-73.

———. “Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 10 (2010): 1689-708.

Bek-Pedersen, Kathrine and Edith Montgomery. “Narratives of Past and Present: Young Refugees’ Construction of a Family Identity in Exile.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no. 1 (2006): 94-112.

Black, Richard, and Khalid Koser. *The End of the Refugee Cycle?* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999.

Brees, Inge. “Refugee Business: Strategies of Work on the Thai-Burma Border.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 3 (2008): 380-97.

Brun, Cathrine. “Reterritorilizing the Relationship between People and Place in Refugee Studies.” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 83, no. 1 (2001): 15-25.

Burma Link. “Repatriation of Refugees.” February 19, 2015. https://www.burmalink.org/background/recent-developments/repatriation-of-refugees/.

———. “Overview.” October 6, 2016. https://www.burmalink.org/background/thailand-burma-border/overview/.

———. “First Organized Refugee Returns from Thailand Take Place, Despite Concerns over Readiness on the Ground in Myanmar.” November 2, 2016. https://www.burmalink.org/first-organized-refugee-returns-thailand-take-place-despite-concerns-readiness-ground-myanmar/.

Burma Partnership Initiative. *Nothing About Us Without Us*. YouTube. Directed by Timothy Syrota. December 10, 2012. https://www.burmalink.org/nothing-about-us-without-us-refugees-voices-about-their-return-to-burma/.

Carling, Jorgen. “Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002): 5-42.

Cassarino, Jean-Pierre. “Return Migration and Development: The Significance of Migration Cycles.” In: *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies,* edited by Anna Triandafyllidou. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016.

Chantavanich, Supang and Aungkana Kamonpetch. “Introduction: Background of Protracted Conflict and Displacement in Myanmar.” In: *Refugee Return and Displacement along the Thai-Burma Border*. Springer Briefs in Environment, Security, Development and Peace 28, 2017.

Chimni, B.S. “Refugees, Return and Reconstruction of ‘Post-Conflict’ Societies: A Critical Perspective.” *International Peacekeeping* 9, no. 2 (2002): 163-80.

Chowdhory, Nasreen. *Refugees, Citizenship and Belonging in South Asia.* Singapore: Springer, 2018.

Corben, Ron. “Myanmar Refugees in Thai Camps Face Repatriation Challenges.” VOA News. May 11, 2017. https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-refugees-thai-camps-repatriation-challenges/3847329.html.

Cornish, Flora, Karl Peltzer and Malcolm MacLachlan. “Returning Strangers: The Children of Malawian Refugees Come ‘Home’?” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12, no. 3 (1999): 264-83.

Cottrell, M. Patrick. “The Constitutive Effects of Time: Understanding the Evolution and Innovation of Refugee Governance along the Thai-Burmese Border.” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 34 (2015): 20-44.

De Haas, Hein. “The determinants of international migration: Conceptualizing policy, origin and destination effects.” International Migration Institute Working Paper Series 32, April 2011.

Dekker, Rianne and Godfried Engbersen. “How Social Media Transform Migrant Networks and Facilitate Migration.” *Global Networks* 14, no. 4 (2014): 401-18.

Demmers, Jolle. *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

Dolan, Chris. "Repatriation from South Africa to Mozambique – Undermining Durable Solutions?" In: *The End of the Refugee Cycle?*, edited by Richard Black and Khalid Koser. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999.

Eastmond, Marita and Joakim Öjendal. "Revisiting a 'Repatriation Success': The Case of Cambodia." In: *The End of the Refugee Cycle?*, edited by Richard Black and Khalid Koser. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999.

Essed, Philomena, Georg Frerks and Joke Schrijvers. "Introduction: Refugees, Agency and Social Transformation." In: *Refugees and the Transformation of Societies: Agency, Policies, Ethnics, and Politics.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002.

Farwell, Nancy. "'Onward through Strength': Coping and Psychological Support among Refugee Youth Returning to Eritrea from Sudan." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14, no. 1 (2001): 43-69.

Fike, Christopher, D. and David K. Androff. "'The Pain of Exile': What Social Workers Need to Know about Burmese Refugees." *Social Work* 61, no. 2 (2016): 127-35.

Flick, Uwe. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2009.

Foucault, Michel. "The Order of Discourse." In: *Language and Politics,* edited by M.J. Shapiro. New York: New York University Press, 1984.

Frerks, Georg. "Conflict, Development and Discourse." In: *Human Security and International Insecurity,* edited by Georg Frerks and Berma Klein Goldewijk. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2007.

Frerks, Georg and Berma Klein Goldewijk. "Human Security: Mapping the Challenges." In: *Human Security and International Insecurity*. Wageningen: Wageningen Academic Publishers, 2007.

Furukawa, Urara and Kitty McKinsey. "Resettlement of Myanmar refugees from Thailand camps hits 50,000 mark." *UNHCR*. June 30, 2009. http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2009/6/4a4a178f9/resettlement-myanmar-refugees-thailand-camps-hits-50000-mark.html.

Gale, L.A. "The Invisible Refugee Camp: Durable Solutions for Boreah "Residuals" in Guinea." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 4 (2008): 537-52.

George, Miriam, Wendy Kliewer and Sebastan Irudaya Rajan. "Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should be Talking to Tamils: Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Readiness for Repatriation." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 34 (2015): 1-22.

Giddens, Anthony. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.

Gillespie, Marie, Lawrence Ampofo, Margaret Cheesman, Becky Faith, Evgenia Iliadou, Ali Issa, Souad Osseiran and Dimitris Skleparis. "Mapping Refugee Media Journeys: Smartphones and Social Media Networks." The Open University/France Médias Monde Research Report, May 2016.

Godin, Marie and Giorgia Doná. "Refugee Voices, New Social Media and Politics of Representation: Young Congolese in the Diaspora and Beyond." *Refuge* 32, no. 1 (2016): 60-71.

Graf, Heike. "Media Practices and Forced Migration: Trust Online and Offline." *Media and Communication* 6, no. 2 (2018): 149-57.

Gravers, Mikael. *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2007.

Gurak, Douglas T. and F.E. Cases. "Migration Networks and the Shaping of Migration Systems." In: *International Migration Systems: A Global Approach,* edited by Mary M. Kritz, Lin Lean Lim and Hania Zlotnik. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

Hammond, Laura. "Examining the Discourse of Repatriation: Towards a More Proactive Theory of Return Migration." In: *The End of the Refugee Cycle?,* edited by Richard Black and Khalid Koser. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999.

Hargrave, Karen. "Refugee-State Distrust on the Thai-Burma Border." *Forced Migration Review* 49 (2015): 95-7.

Healey, Ruth L. "Asylum-Seekers and Refugees: A Structuration Theory Analysis of their Experiences in the UK." *Population, Space and Place* 12 (2006): 257-71.

Horst, Cindy. "'In Virtual Dialogue' with the Somali Community: The Value of Electronic Media for Research amongst Research Diasporas." *Refuge* 23, no. 1 (2006): 51-7.

Horstmann, Alexander. "Stretching the Border: Confinement, Mobility and the Refugee Public among Karen Refugees in Thailand and Burma." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29, no. 1 (2014): 47-61.

———. "Uneasy Pairs: Revitalizations of Karen Ethno-Nationalism and Civil Society across the Thai-Burmese Border." *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 33-52.

Hugman, Richard, Linda Bartolomei and Eileen Pittaway. “Human Agency and the Meaning of Informed Consent: Reflections on Research with Refugees.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 4 (2011): 655-71.

Human Rights Watch. “Thailand: Implement Commitments to Protect Refugee Rights.” July 6, 2017. https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/06/thailand-implement-commitments-protect-refugee-rights.

Jabri, Vivienne. *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered.* Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Jack, Victoria. “Communication of Information on the Thai-Burma Border.” *Forced Migration Review* 52 (2016): 96-8.

Jacobsen, Karen. “Factors Influencing the Policy Responses of Host Governments to Mass Refugee Influxes.” *The International Migration Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 655-78.

Jolliffe, Kim. “Refugee Decision-Making Processes, Community-Based Protection and Potential Voluntary Repatriation to Myanmar.” External research commissioned by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015.

Karen News. “Thailand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Clarifies Its Position on Refugee Return.” July 18, 2014. http://karennews.org/2014/07/thailands-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-clarifies-its-position-on-refugee-return/.

Karooma, Cleophas. “Reluctant to Return? The Primacy of Social Networks in the Repatriation of Rwandan Refugees in Uganda.” Refugee Studies Centre, Working Paper Series no. 103, 2014.

Kibreab, Gaim. “When Refugees Come Home: The Relationship Between Stayees and Returnees in Post-Conflict Eritrea.” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20, no. 1 (2002): 53-80.

———. “Citizenship Rights and Repatriation of Refugees.” *The International Migration Review* 37, no. 1 (2003): 24-73.

Koser, Khalid. “Information and Repatriation: The Case of Mozambican Refugees in Malawi.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no. 1 (1997): 1-18.

Lang, Hazel J. “The Repatriation Predicament of Burmese Refugees in Thailand: A Preliminary Analysis.” UNHCR New Issues in Refugee Research, Working Paper no. 46, 2001.

———. *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press (Southeast Asia Program Publications), 2002.

Lee, Jiwon. “Settlements in the Civil Wars of Myanmar and Sri Lanka: The Success, Failure and Deception of the Peace Process.” *Millennial Asia* 7, no. 1 (2016): 63-76.

Lietaert, Ine, Ilse Derluyn and Eric Broekaert. “Returnees’ Perspectives on Their Re-Migration Processes.” *International Migration* 52, no. 5 (2014): 144-58.

Liu, James H. and Denis J. Hilton. “How the past weights on the present: Social representations of history in their role in identity politics.” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44 (2005): 537-56.

Malkki, Liisa. “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees.” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 24-44.

———. “Refugees and Exile: From “Refugee Studies” to the National Order of Things.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 495-523.

Metro, Rosalie. “Developing history curricula to support multi-ethnic civil society among Burmese refugees and migrants.” UNHCR New Issues in Refugee Research, Research Paper no. 139, 2006.

Mon, Ye. “Refugees rue return amid housing woes.” November 2, 2016. *Myanmar Times.* https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/23424-refugees-rue-return-amid-housing-woes.html

Moore, Will H., and Stephen M. Shellman. “Whither Will They Go? A Global Study of Refugees’ Destinations, 1965-1995.” *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (2007): 811-34.

Moretti, Sebastien. “The Challenge of Durable Solutions for Refugees at the Thai-Myanmar Border.” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 34 (2015): 70-94.

Oh, Su-Ann. *Education in refugee camps in Thailand: policy, practice and paucity.* Paris: UNESCO, 2011.

Oh, Su-Ann and Marc van der Stouwe. “Education, Diversity, and Inclusion in Burmese Refugee Camps in Thailand.” *Comparative Education Review* 52, no. 4 (2008): 589-617.

Olivius, Elisabeth. “Sites of Repression and Resistance: Political Space in Refugee Camps in Thailand.” *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 289-307.

Omata, Naohiko. “The Complexity of Refugees’ Return Decision-Making in a Protracted Exile: Beyond the Home-Coming Model and Durable Solutions.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, no. 8 (2013): 1281-97.

Pottier, Johan. “Relief and Repatriation: Views by Rwandan Refugees: Lessons for Humanitarian Aid Workers.” *African Affairs* 95, no. 380 (1996): 403-29.

Preston, Rosemary. “Researching Repatriation and Reconstruction: Who is Researching What and Why?” In: *The End of the Refugee Cycle?,* edited by Richard Black and Khalid Koser. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999.

Progressive Voice. “Where do we go from here? A Snapshot of Recent Developments for Refugees Along the Thailand-Myanmar Border.” Briefing Paper (December 2016). https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2016/12/19/briefing-paper-where-do-we-go-from-here-a-snapshot-of-recent-developments-for-refugees-along-the-thailand-myanmar-border/.

Ragin, Charles. *Constructing Social Research.* Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 1994.

Rajaram, Prem Kumar and Carl Grundy-Warr. “The Irregular Migrant as Homo Sacer: Migration and Detention in Australia, Malaysia and Thailand.” *International Migration* 42, no. 1 (2004): 33-64.

Robinson, N.T. and M. Schulzke. “Visualizing War? Towards A Visul Analysis of Videogames and Social Media.” *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 4 (2016): 995-1010.

Schröder, Ingo and Bettina Schmidt. "Introduction: Violent Imaginaries & Violent Practices." In: *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

Shi, Yu. “Identity Construction of the Chinese Diaspora, Ethnic Media Use, Community Formation and the Possibility of Social Activism.” *Continuum* 19, no. 1 (2005): 55-72.

Spindler, William. “First Myanmar Refugee Returns from Thailand under way.” *UNHCR.* October 25, 2016. http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2016/10/580f1c0d4/first-myanmar-refugee-returns-thailand-under-way.html.

Stein, Barry N. and Frederick C. Cuny. “Refugee repatriation during conflict: Protection and post return assistance.” *Development in Practice* 4, no. 3 (1994): 173-87.

Stones, Rob. *Structuration Theory*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.

Tan, Vivian. “US wraps up group resettlement for Myanmar refugees in Thailand.” *UNHCR*. January 29, 2014. http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2014/1/52e90f8f6/wraps-group-resettlement-myanmar-refugees-thailand.html.

Taub, Amanda and Max Fisher. “Where Countries are Tinderboxes and Facebook is a Match.” *The New York Times.* April 21, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/21/world/asia/facebook-sri-lanka-riots.html.

The Border Consortium (TBC). “Brief History of the Border.” Accessed June 20, 2018. http://www.theborderconsortium.org/about-us/history/.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). “Handbook for Repatriation and Reintegration Activities.” 2004. http://www.unhcr.org/411786694.pdf.

———. “Framework for Voluntary Repatriation: Refugees from Myanmar in Thailand.” October 1, 2012. http://www.data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=12/.

———. “Framework for Voluntary Repatriation: Refugees from Myanmar in Thailand (A revision of the October 2012 UNHCR Thailand Discussion Document).” May 2014. https://reliefweb.int/report/thailand/unhcr-framework-voluntary-repatriation-refugees-myanmar-thailand-may-2014.

———. “Update on Voluntary Repatriation.” EC/67/SC/CRP.13 (June 2016).

———. “Strategic Roadmap for Voluntary Repatriation: Refugees from Myanmar in Thailand, 2015-2017. Update January 2017.” January 2017. https://data.unhcr.org/thailand/download.php?id=1544.

———. “Myanmar refugees return home from Thailand with UNHCR support.” May 8, 2018, http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2018/5/5af157e14/myanmar-refugees-return-home-thailand-unhcr-support.html.

———. “RTG/MOI-UNHCR Verified Refugee Population.” June 30, 2018. http://data.unhcr.org/thailand/regional.php.

Thompson, Sally. “Community-Based Camp Management.” *Forced Migration Review* 30 (2008): 26-8.

Turner, Simon. “What is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29, no. 2 (2015): 139-48.

Van Houte, Marieke, Melissa Siegel and Tine Davids. “Deconstructing the meanings of and motivations for return: an Afghan Case Study.” *Comparative Migration Studies* 4, no. 21 (2016): 1-17.

Van Uffelen, Jan Gerrit. “Return After Flight: Exploring the Decision Making Process of Sudanese War-Displaced People by Employing an Extended Version of the Theory of Reasoned Action.” PhD dissertation, Wageningen University, 2006.

Zeus, Barbara. “Exploring Barriers to Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations: The Case of Burmese Refugees in Thailand.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 2 (2011): 256-76.

Zieck, Marjoleine. “Voluntary Repatriation: Paradigm, Pitfalls, Progress.” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2004): 33-54.

Zieger, Leena. “Unrecognized and Forgotten: Refugee Youth in Burma’s Transition.” *The Irrawaddy*. March 11, 2017. https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/unrecognized-forgotten-refugee-youth-burmas-transition.html.

Zimmermann, Susan. “Understanding Repatriation: Refugee Perspectives on the Importance of Safety, Reintegration, and Hope.” *Population, Space and Place* 18 (2012): 45-57.

Annexes

Annex I: Overview of Research Participants

i. Officials, community leaders and NGOs/IOs

a. Individual Interviews

Date	Description	Sex	Category	Location
27-02-2018	Head Master MLC1	M	EDUCATION	Mae Sot
01-03-2018	Education lead MLC2	M	EDUCATION	Mae Sot
08-03-2018	Education lead NGO	M	NGO	Mae Sot
10-03-2018	Young Employee Education CBO	M	CBO	Mae Sot
13-03-2018	Secretary KRC/Lead CRR	M	CBO	Mae Pa
16-03-2018	Field Coordinator TBC	M	NGO	Mae Sot
17-03-2018	Information Coordinator KYO	M	CBO	Mae Pa
19-03-2018	Repatriation Officer UNHCR	F	IO	Mae Sot
25-03-2018	Camp Leader Nu Poe	M	CAMP	Nu Poe Camp
26-03-2018	Leader Camp Information Team	M	CAMP	Nu Poe Camp
29-03-2018	Project Lead Camps NGO	M	NGO	Mae Sot
03-04-2018	Chairperson KYO in Mae La	M	CBO	Mae La Camp
03-04-2018	Christian Religious Leader	M	RELIGION	Mae La Camp
03-04-2018	Buddhist Religious Leader	M	RELIGION	Mae La Camp
03-04-2018	Staff member KSNG Mae La	M	CBO	Mae La Camp

b. Focus Group Discussions

Date	Description	Sex	Category	Location
29-03-2018	Karen Student Network Group Head Office			
	President	M	CBO	Mae Pa
	Representative Board of Advisors	M	CBO	Mae Pa
03-04-2018	Camp Leadership Mae La			
	Camp Leader	M	CAMP	Mae La Camp
	Zone A Leader	M	CAMP	Mae La Camp
	Zone B Leader	M	CAMP	Mae La Camp
	Head Livelihoods Committee	M	CAMP	Mae La Camp
03-04-2018	Karen Women's Organisation Mae La			
	Organisation Leader Mae La KWO	F	CBO	Mae La Camp
	Secretary Mae La KWO	F	CBO	Mae La Camp

ii. Youth

c. Individual Interviews

Code	Date	Description	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Location
A1	06-03-2018	Working, 10 years in Thailand	25	M	Karen	Mae Sot
A2	10-03-2018	Working, 17 years in Thailand	26	F	Karen	Mae Sot
A3	12-03-2018	Working, 5 years in Thailand	18	M	Burmese	Mae Sot
A4	12-03-2018	Working, 15 years in Thailand	28	M	Karen	Mae Sot
A5	14-03-2018	Student, 7 years in Thailand	24	M	Karenni	MLC Mae Sot
A6	14-03-2018	Student, 21 years in Thailand	21	F	Karen	MLC Mae Sot
A7	15-03-2018	Student, 12 years in Thailand	25	F	Karen	MLC Mae Sot
A8	15-03-2018	Student, 7 years in Thailand	21	M	Karen/Mon	MLC Mae Sot
B1	23-03-2018	Student, 21 years in Thailand	21	M	Karenni	Nu Poe Camp
B2	23-03-2018	Student, 7 years in Thailand	21	M	Naga	Nu Poe Camp

a. Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

Code	Date	Description	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Location
FGD1	23-03-2018	Focus Group RLC A 1				
C1		Student, 5 years in Thailand	21	M	Karen	Nu Poe Camp
C2		Student, 9 years in Thailand	24	M	Karen	Nu Poe Camp
C3		Student, 10 years in Thailand	23	F	Karen	Nu Poe Camp
C4		Student, >10 years in Thailand	30	M	Shan	Nu Poe Camp
FGD2	25-03-2018	Focus Group RLC A 2				
C5		Student, 10 years in Thailand	23	M	Burmese	Nu Poe Camp
C6		Student, 12 years in Thailand	23	F	Karen	Nu Poe Camp
C7		Student, 8 years in Thailand	23	F	Karenni	Nu Poe Camp
FGD3	24-03-2018	Focus Group RLC B 1				
D1		Student, >16 years in Thailand	21	F	Karen	Karen State
D2		Student, 5 years in Thailand	23	F	Karen	Karen State
D3		Student, >10 years in Thailand	20	M	Shan	Karen State
D4		Student, 8 years in Thailand	23	M	Karen	Karen State
D5		Student, 5 years in Thailand	21	F	Karen	Karen State
FGD4	24-03-2018	Focus Group RLC B 2*				
D6*		Student, never left Burma	19	F	Karen	Karen State
D7		Student, >6 years in Thailand	23	F	Karen	Karen State
D8*		Student, never left Burma	27	M	Karen	Karen State
D9*		Student, never left Burma	22	F	Karenni	Karen State
D10*		Student, never left Burma	23	F	Mon	Karen State
D11		Student, >10 years in Thailand	23	F	Karen	Karen State
FGD5	24-03-2018	Focus Group RLC B 3				
D12		Student, 3 years in Thailand	22	M	Shan	Karen State
D13		Student, 4 years in Thailand	24	M	Karen	Karen State
D14		Student, 6 years in Thailand	22	F	Karen	Karen State
D15		Student, 6 years in Thailand	20	F	Karen	Karen State

* Group consisted largely (4/6) of students who had never left Burma but came to study with refugee youth. While not officially in the scope of this research, this difference brought forward important insights and varying perspectives.

Annex II: Example of Interview Guide

i. Interview Guide Youth

Introduction

Introduce who I am (not UNHCR, not a donor! but a student) – why I am here, what I am doing, what I am interested in. Discussion of consent, confidentiality and anonymity, the option to skip a question if they do not want to answer or do not know. Also ask if I am allowed to record, use data in research. Finally ask if there are any questions before the start of the interview.

General/background respondent

1. Can you introduce yourself (name, age, ethnicity, time in camp, time in Thailand)

Repatriation/return

2. Do you want to go (back) to Burma? [ask about sentiments, culture etc]
3. What is the biggest problem concerning return?
4. Pressures/stories about return, role of rumours
5. What still needs to change [if in group, compare to others – if answer is government, ask if they trust the government]
6. [if point to education] Can you tell me about education in the camps and in Burma? What is the difference? [role of history]

Information

7. How do you get your information about Burma/conditions in Burma/…
    a. Contact friends/family
    b. Contact NGOs/IOs/UNHCR
    c. Contact camp committee
    d. Contact outside?
8. Have you been back to Burma since arriving in Thailand? Why (not)?

Future

9. How do you see your future? (of Burma, of youth in Thailand, of yourself?)
10. [if possible, ask about difference between old and young generation]
11. What do you think I should include in my research? / Who should I talk to / What perspective is still missing?

End

12. Anything else you want to share or ask? Ask for consent again.
13. Thank respondents, if he/she wants to read the results, clear about implications of research.

Annex III: Examples of Visual Images

Figure 2: Images at a Burmese migrant school, Mae Sot

Figure 3: Graffiti next to the UNHCR Office, Mae Sot