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Abstract

This paper explores the complex ways in which Burmese Shan migrants in Northern Thailand utilise strategic practices of in/visibility and in/audibility to maintain emotional attachments to ethnic identity and belonging while negotiating a double exclusion from national belonging and citizenship in both home and host countries. Fleeing Shan State as a result of the long standing civil war and gross human rights abuses by Burma's military junta, over 200,000 Shan have entered Thailand since 1996. Based on research conducted among three Shan communities in the small town of Pai, this article examines how strategic deployment and concealment of ethnic identity – in/visibility and in/audibility – allows Shan migrants to navigate different spaces of safety and precariousness while located in a situation of permanent temporariness of national (non)belonging.

Introduction

Complex webs of mobilities and belongings are created through experiences of forced and voluntary transnational border crossings (e.g. Ho, 2009). These multiple connections challenge state-bounded conceptions of citizenship, driving interest in the politics, materialities and emotions of multi-scalar, multi-relational and multi-locational claims to identity and citizenship (Bailey et al., 2002; Jackson, 2015a). These daily negotiations of being and belonging invoke and require practices of in/visibility (see also Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014; Herbert, 2009; Nagel and Staeheli, 2008a) and in/audibility, deployed to 'fit in' (for documented migrants) *or* to remain hidden from the authorities

(for undocumented migrants). Based on research conducted among three displaced Shan communities near the small town of Pai in Mae Hong Son Province, close to the Thai-Burmese border we explore how Shan migrants negotiate and articulate multiple identities. In particular, we argue that their use of strategic practices of in/audibility and in/visibility contributes to the construction of a home-land-in-exile in northern Thailand.

These communities are part of a broader displaced Shan population in Thailand which comprises over 200,000 ethnic Shan who have fled Burma¹ due to persecution by the country's military junta (Fink, 2001). The Thai government's refusal to grant refugee status to those displaced by gross human rights abuses in Burma means these communities comprise both documented and undocumented migrants (Brees, 2008). Discrimination and oppression in both the 'homeland' and 'host' states means Shan migrants' claims to identity and belonging are complex and contested. Of particular interest are the strategic articulations of ethnic identity and emotional belonging enacted through social practices and spatial attachments to construct community in exiled spaces (see Eriksen, 2002: 145).

The construction of a home-land-in-exile, we argue, provides a physical and emotional space within which Shan migrants preserve a sense of attachment to and memories of Shan State through strategic and material practices of visibility and audibility. Beyond this relatively safe environment, Shan migrants utilise strategies of invisibility and inaudibility to 'pass' as Thai and minimise detection and harassment by Thai authorities. These situational performances demonstrate the continued emotional

¹ In this paper we refer to Burma instead of Myanmar in keeping with the terminology used by research participants.

attachment to and investment in Shan identity and nationhood, and the emotional work and costs of negotiating the precariousness of being ‘out-of-place’.

Emotional Belonging and Identity

Questions of identity and belonging can be particularly poignant for transnational migrants. These connections are often intensely political, and can invoke various emotions linked to multiple and evolving feelings of affiliation, being and belonging (see Conlon, 2011; Wood and Waite, 2011; Jackson, 2014). The practices and emotions associated with belonging encompass both substantive legal dimensions (e.g. *status* as documented or undocumented) and mundane, daily practices of being that are rooted simultaneously in multiple transnational sites (Jackson, 2014; Yurval-Davis, 2006). Emotional investments are integral to maintaining and reproducing these connections, and are continually adapted to the changing nature and strength of ties to the ‘home’ and ‘host’ spaces (Waite and Cook, 2011; Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015).

The experience of migration (as process and status) often leads to changes in emotional life through encounters with being more or less ‘out of place’ (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). These changes in emotional connections reflect both memory and current experience, occurring within *and* informing engagements with and experiences of specific places or spaces (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015; Pile, 2010: 7; Tolia-Kelly, 2004a). Belonging can thus be viewed as emotional citizenship, a condition for migrants

that is imbued with concerns relating to temporariness, (in)security and precariousness (Ho, 2009; Jackson, 2015a). For migrants with temporary residence status, those are denied the possibility of securing status as asylum seekers or refugees, or those are excluded from gaining citizenship, this sense of partial in/exclusion can result in feelings of displacement from both home and host communities (Bailey et al 2002; Jackson, 2014, 2015a; Mountz et al 2002; Waite, Valentine and Lewis, 2014). Under such conditions, the forging and maintaining of connections and practices of adaptation and remembering are integral to migrants 'placing' their identities and engaging with local society (Ehrkamp, 2005). Through everyday sociality, performativity and materiality, memories are entwined into the present and embedded in connections to the 'homeland' from which migrants are distanced as well as the local 'home' in which they reside (Ehrkamp, 2005; Ho and Hatfield, 2011; Tolia-Kelly, 2004a).

The continuing negotiation of belonging in relation to both homeland and home, and to the past, present and future, contributes to an ongoing construction of identity linked to multiple belongings and attachments (see Erhkamp, 2005). Invoking multi-scalar connections and influences these negotiations are rooted in particular sites within which meanings, emotions and identities are generated and expressed. It is important, therefore, to look beyond emotions at the time of migration and consider the emotions and attachments that evolve after migration (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015: 3). This approach allows for engagement with the ways migrants negotiate both changes in citizenship *status* but also the expected *practices* and *feelings* of citizenship (see Ho, 2009; Waite and Cook, 2011). Increasing levels of transnational belonging (as emotional citizenship) produces alternative spatialities and temporalities of belonging to

those associated with Westphalian understandings of citizenship as territorially-bound (Black, 2006; Brees, 2010; Conway et al., 2008; Gemignani, 2011). For migrants in positions of permanent temporariness, or those who are excluded from both their ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries the emotional labour involved in maintaining a sense of belonging while under conditions of continued precarity deserves particular consideration. The displaced Shan in Thailand, who are excluded or marginalised from narratives of nationhood and belonging in both homeland *and* host states experience such conditions of continued precariousness and displacement (see also Mountz 2011).

Establishing a sense of home while ‘out of place’ can be a critical concern for migrants. This allows for a placing – or rooting – of emotion and emotional connection as they move from being out of place (or in a non-place) to being ‘in place’ (Burman and Chantel, 2004). The process of constructing a local sense of ‘home’ and belonging does not imply nor require a severing of diasporic belonging and attachments to the homeland (Brun, 2001; Christou, 2011). Instead, these connections are often integral to these practices, embedded through memories and other symbolic and material touchstones that underpin personal and social identity formations at local and transnational levels. These multi-scalar identities demonstrate how a sense of belonging and ‘home’ can be formed through flexibly located narratives about oneself and their lived experiences, while responding to conditions of precarity or temporariness (Eastmond, 2007; Gemignani, 2011; Tolia-Kelly, 2004a).

The idea of home thus provides a space of emotional connection and belonging that is separate from ‘homeland’ (which can be understood as the political territory and

dominant nationalist narrative of the state) (see Blunt, 2005; Ho and Hatfield, 2011; Lam and Yeoh, 2004). Home is produced through the rooting of emotions and the material and symbolic enactment of belonging and identity to create a sense of physical, as well as symbolic and emotional, safety (Ehrkamp, 2005; Jackson 2015b). An understanding of home, therefore, is inherently connected with feelings of belonging and emotional citizenship linked to both homeland and host state but also a sense of ethnic or ethno-nationalist belonging (see Eriksen, 2002). Furthermore, home is also constructed in relation to temporality through the grounding of these emotional connections to the past, present and future in social and material, visual and audible everyday practices. For many marginalised migrant communities, the construction of a sense of 'home' in exile is the culmination of strategic and symbolic performances of ethnic identity framed by migration and citizenship status and discourses of nationhood, as well as negotiations of temporariness and precariousness and attachments to multiple, transnational locations (see Ajrouch and Kusow, 2007; Chee-Beng, 2000).

Under conditions of uncertainty and precarity, as experienced by displaced Shan in Thailand, migrants seek to maintain emotional attachments and belonging to a community forged in space or of shared history (Jackson 2014). Attachments to a distant homeland can be an important component in these constructions of 'home', and may be rendered in everyday, material form, as expressions of memory and history (Tolia-Kelly, 2004a, 2004b). These inscriptions are often integral to migrants' efforts to cope with the contradiction of being physically present in and absent from particular locales. Thus, the deployment of particular markers of memory, history and identity through clothing, décor or signage provide material markers of connection that function

as shapers of identity (Tolia-Kelly, 2004b). For those who have been forcibly displaced, the imperative to maintain and demonstrate connections with multiple origins is particularly pronounced and may be indicated in everyday practices relating to language, appearance, deportment, mobility and interaction to express and embed emotional attachments to both home and host nations (for instance Bailey et al 2002; Christou 2011; Jackson 2014; Nagel and Staeheli 2008b; Tolia-Kelly, 2004a, 2004b; Waite and Cook 2011). These practices illustrate complex claims to belonging that are rooted in strategic practices of (in)visibility/audibility deployed to negotiate multiple connections: of being physical present and/or of emotional (be)longing.

These practices, that is efforts to render certain identity characteristics visible or invisible (as well as audible and inaudible) within certain spaces and in personal interactions, are deployed to facilitate a sense of 'home' while being aware of the temporariness or precarity of such a belonging. Used to overcome stigma or avoid surveillance, or reflecting imagined boundaries, these efforts allow migrants to "create and maintain separate emotional space from the host society" in material, audible and visible ways (Jackson 2015b: 6; Nagel and Staeheli, 2008a).

These practices often respond to awareness of the importance of "visual clues in marking and assigning particular meanings to social difference" (Nagel and Staeheli, 2008a: 85). While certain forms of 'difference' are difficult to render invisible, individuals may seek to mask 'difference' in order to 'pass' within particular contexts in order to reduce stigmatisation, discrimination and harassment. While these practices depend upon the decision and agency of the individual, it is informed by contextual

socio-political or legal factors, such as hypervisibility of negative stereotyping or illegality of residence (see Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014; Herbert, 2009; Nagel and Staeheli, 2008a; Samuels, 2003). The decisions to ‘pass’ or not is a continual process: it is not a solitary moment but an ongoing, complex, emotional and often strategic process framed by the context, interlocutors, purpose of activity and other factors at that moment in time and in that space (Samuels, 2003; Nagel and Staeheli, 2008). The resultant practices have profound implications for experiences of equality and discrimination as well as emotional outcomes including uncertainty, guilt or pride (Samuels, 2003).

For illegal migrants or unauthorised residents practices of invisibility are important daily practices to avoid state surveillance and prosecution by authorities (Coutin, 1999/2000). These efforts may include avoidance of certain spaces or routes, self-imposed limits on mobility and access to services, and opting to work and live clandestinely to minimise the risk of detection and prosecution by the state (Coutin, 1999/2000; Herbert, 2003). Local populations may seek to welcome and support undocumented migrants in existing ‘under the radar’ of governmental authorities, while having some benefits these practices may simultaneously the precarious situation of these migrants (Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014).

Building on these engagements, this article explores how displaced Shan in Thailand use practices of visibility and invisibility *and* practices of audibility and inaudibility to strategically ‘pass’ within Thailand but also as key mechanisms to construct a sense of home – of ‘home-land-in-exile’. After reviewing the contextual factors for Shan

displacement into Thailand, this study addresses the significance of language, space and memory in strategic in/visibilities and in/audibilities involved in the articulation Shan ethnic identity. Central to these practices are efforts to secure and maintained emotional attachments to a sense of ethnic belonging in a context of simultaneous exclusion from national belonging in both host and homeland countries.

Context

Under authoritarian military rule since 1962, Burma has endured decades of economic instability, armed attacks, persistent gross human rights abuses and internal conflict – including efforts by ethnic minority groups, such as the Shan, Mon, Karenni and Karen – to secure independence and territorial autonomy (Banki, 2006; Fink, 2001; Fong, 2008; South, 2008). Constituting approximately one-quarter of Burma’s landmass, Shan State historically comprised numerous principalities governed by hereditary chiefs until coming under Burmese rule during the sixteenth century (Jirattikorn, 2011; Taylor, 2009). In 1888 the Shan entered into an alliance with the British and remained a moderately autonomous region while ‘Burma proper’ came under direct British rule and was integrated into British India. Thus divided, the foundations for a separatist struggle for Shan nationhood based on ethno-nationalism and political claims to a distinct self-governing territory, were fostered by the British (Silverstein, 1958) and then fully mobilised at the end of colonial rule in 1948 (Jirattikorn, 2011).

Since independence Burma has pursued a largely ethnocentric agenda and privileged the “dominant ethnic community in terms of ideologies, its policies and its resource

distribution” (see Brown, 1994: 36). Between 1962 and 2011 Burman ethnicity provided the principle element of Burmese state identity, embodied in political, cultural and nationalistic norms (Fink, 2015; Smith 1999). Consequently, the languages, cultures and religions of ethnic minorities in Burma have been subordinated and, at times violently, oppressed (Freston, 2004). For the Shan, who comprise 10% of Burma’s population, these practices have been manifest through state-fostered inter-ethnic distrust and conflict (Karen Human Rights Group, 2000; for a more detailed overview see Pedersen, 2008; South, 2008) as well as direct and indirect operations under the government’s ‘Four Cuts’ counter-insurgency policy (South, 2003). This strategy sought to sever links between rebel groups and their civilian support () through forced relocation, terror tactics and crop destruction to isolate Shan resistance groups (Dale, 2011; Delang, 2000:16).

As a result, hundreds of thousands of Burma’s civilians have fled to Thailand (Latt, 2011; Murakami, 2012; Verma et al, 2011). At the end of January 2013, according to UNHCR (2013) figures, there were 84,479 Burmese refugees, 14,580 Burmese asylum seekers and 506,197 Burmese classed as ‘stateless persons’ residing in Thailand. Denied opportunities for resettlement or asylum and refused the status of ‘temporarily displaced people,’ the 200,000 or so Shan that have been forcibly displaced to Thailand since 1996 have become victims of discriminatory policies that deny them international protection and lawful residence in refugee camps (Brees, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2004).² Thailand’s consistent refusal to grant the Shan refugee status is partially due to ethnic and linguistic similarities between Shan and Thai peoples and government fears

² Data on population movements in this region are often unreliable. This figure is drawn from a 2004 Human Rights Watch report which has subsequently been used by agencies including the UNHCR, and is used here for indicative purposes.

over assimilation (Jirattikorn, 2012).³ Thus, Thai authorities consider the Shan to be ‘economic migrants’ in search of work and not in need of refuge - unlike the Karen, Karenni or Mon who have been allowed to establish refugee camps (Jirattikorn, 2012). Resultantly, most Shan survive as vulnerable and oppressed illegal migrant workers in Thailand, stereotyped as ‘troublemakers’ and drug traffickers in popular and political discourse and subject to police harassment and restrictions on mobility and employment (Grundy-Warr and Yin, 2002; Latt, 2011; Sell, 1999) whilst simultaneously being valued as hardworking labourers .

Methods

This research focusses on the town of Pai, in Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand. With a population of over 2,000, Pai has developed into a tourist (mainly backpacker) hub in northern Thailand. Close to the Thai-Burma border, it is home to a significant number of Shan migrants, most of whom are resident in three enclaves: Moobaan, Nam Yen and Sabai.⁴ Moobaan is the smallest household cluster with five families. Nam Yen and Sabai are home to considerably larger Shan populations. Aside from Sabai, which contains some concrete homes, the majority of families within these communities live in bamboo shelters and have been self-settled in Pai for between one and over forty years. The three enclaves are socio-economically similar and are geographically concentrated in forested areas away from main roads but central enough for residents to seek work.

Although most of the adults did not benefit from formal education in Burma, the

³ Authors such as Thongchai (1994, 2000) would argue that these exclusionary practices relate to the discursive construction of the Thai geo-body and efforts to ensure Siam, and later Thailand, was recognised as *siwilai* (‘civilised’) and superior to internal and external ‘others’.

⁴ The names of Shan settlements and individuals have been altered to protect the anonymity of participants.

majority of children have attended Thai schools. While most of these Shan have acquired work permits through sponsorship by a local employer, allowing them to remain in Thailand without fear of deportation, the cost of these permits (\$100/year) is a significant burden as most households have an income of \$4-7 a day through hauling rocks or working as day labourers on local farms.

We draw on 6 weeks of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in June and July 2011 within the three Shan communities.⁵ Detailed observational notes, including participant observation while working as a volunteer teacher in two communities, provide detailed insights into local daily identity practices, rituals and socio-political context. Purposive sampling, aided by snowball sampling through introductions via participants, was used to undertake twenty-four semi-structured interviews with Shan migrants aged between 18 and 75 years old. This strategy allowed for intergenerational identity and memory to be explored, drawing attention to the diverse ways in which young adolescents contest, negotiate and ‘inherit’ identity claims and practices. Interviews lasted for, on average, one hour and were conducted in respondents’ homes with a local guide translating questions and responses between English and Shan. Where possible interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy; three participants refused to be recorded, fearing their voices would be recognised by Burmese officials and in these instances notes were made during the interviews.

Interviews focused on respondent’s understandings of their identity and sense of belonging, with particular attention to everyday practices of identity including religion,

⁵ Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the Geography Department of the University of Sheffield.

dress and language use. Personal histories of mobility, meanings of home and hopes of return were also discussed, while questions concerning the Burmese government and on-going civil conflict were avoided due to political sensitivity. Interview transcripts (in English) were subject to open coding with key themes identified from the data, resulting in an iterative development and coalescing of codes coalesced around core thematic concerns (Cope, 2010). Within this process particular attention was paid to four key areas – conditions, consequences, strategies/tactics, and interactions (Cope, 2010: 442) – as key contributors to and outcomes of identity negotiations and practices.

Spaces of Emotional Attachment: Visibility and Audibility

Shan migrants, both with and without legal migrant worker status, are excluded from the Thai geo-body and occupy a marginalised socio-cultural and political location in the national imaginaries of both Burma and Thailand. This dual marginalisation undermines the development of emotional attachments to either country. Many displaced Shan instead spoke of a sense of belonging and connection to Shan-ness, both as an ethnic identity and as a place (Shan State). The strategic deployment and performance of particular identity practices within specific spaces underpinned an emotional connection to Shan identity inscribed through material, visible and audible texts. These practices contributed to the construction of safe spaces of ‘home’ in exile that had social, symbolic and physical significance to Shan identity. The material and social practices enacted within these spaces, including use of language, attire, culture, festivals and religious observance, simultaneously utilise and invoke spaces of identification. These

spaces can thus be understood as both constituted by and constitutive of Shan identity practices and emotional attachments.

Language remains a core marker of identity for displaced Shan and means through which attachments to both local and distant others and places can be maintained. For Shan migrants their common language (Shan, a member of the Tai-Kadai language family) is a vital carrier of culture and a symbolic means of conveying an emotional attachment to Shan State and Shan identity. Sai Leng, now 32 but who arrived in Thailand at the age of 14 to avoid recruitment into a rebel army, explains the multiple ways the Shan language provides an emotional connection to a distant place and an ethnic identity. ‘Our language is very important to me. The Shan have a long story. We once had a king, prince, our own land, culture and language. My language comes from Shan State ... my homeland. I show I am Shan and proud by always speaking Shan with others, even though I am not in my home’ (interview, 11 July 2011). By speaking Shan, Sai Leng has maintained an attachment to a distance ‘home’ constituted as a place (Shan State) *and* a collective history and memory. This connection was not simply an individual sense of belonging, but was part of a collective strategic audibility of identity: by speaking Shan, Sai Leng rendered his ethnic identity audible, demonstrating pride in this attachment and creating a separate space – imbued with emotional resonance – from the Thai geo-body (see Jackson, 2015b).

The importance of the audibility of Shan identity through spoken language was clear in ongoing strategic decisions to audibly pass or not pass as Thai. In situations involving interaction with the local Thai population, Shan migrants would switch to local Thai

dialect (*Kam Muang*), to minimise evidence of social distance. Within the Shan migrant community, however, the Shan language remained a marker and maintainer of identity, providing an aural space in which emotional attachments to Shan history, identity and nation-hood were expressed and maintained between generations. For Larn, a 57 year old woman who left Shan State when she was 32 and ‘still dreams of the homeland’, the Shan language was important for maintaining a sense of community, ‘speaking Shan is part of my culture and I speak Shan in Pai just like I did in Shan State, we all speak Shan together here as a community’ (interview, 9 July 2011). For many Shan migrants, language use provided a means of retaining and expressing an emotional attachment to an ethnic rather than national identity, providing an emotional attachment of ‘being’ Shan while they can never ‘be’ or ‘become’ part of the Thai nation.

This inscription of identity, a public and audible action, provides a sense of positive emotional belonging amongst Shan migrants, a performance that contains meaning, collective history/memory and a sense of belonging. For Malee, a 24 year old migrant who grew up in Pai from infancy, the use of shared language and maintenance of cultural practices and traditions – materiality and sociality – has provided a strong sense of ethnic attachment and belonging, ‘If people speak Thai, I still ask them in Shan. They can understand it but not speak it, so they can answer in Thai. Speaking Shan makes me happy and lets them know who I am, so I try to speak it as much as possible’ (interview, 7 July 2011). It is clear that language is not only an ‘active’ attribute of ethnic identity but also a means of articulating emotional attachments to a shared identity, history, memories and space (conceptual and physical) of Shan state. As Pa Jong (a 33 year-old migrant who has lived in Pai for 18 years and holds hope of one day returning to Shan

State) identifies, '[speaking Shan] brings us all together, shows we are Shan and shows we are the same' (interview, 7 July 2011).

The centrality of language in developing and maintaining this sense of community and solidarity amongst the Shan in Pai is underscored by inter-generational socialization into and rituals of ethnic belonging and attachment. Histories of ethnic persecution and oppression were used as shared memory in narrating Shan identities in exile across generations. In the words of Waan, a mother of three, 'my grandparents taught me about my culture and I do the same for my children. They learn by watching me and the rest of the community. I do this so they can keep the Shan culture alive' (interview, 9 July 2011). These practices are integral to socialisation practices of Shan youth: Malee, who left Shan State at the age of 4, has been taught Shan family values and traditions by her parents in exile. Attending Shan festivals, speaking Shan and practising Theravada Buddhism, has contributed to Malee identifying herself as 'more Shan than Thai' and asserting that her residence in Thailand is only temporary as 'the land does not belong [to us]' (interview, 7 July 2011).

The importance of communicating Shan culture and ethnic identity between generations was a core concern for many parents, who strategically used material, visible and audible practices to provide their children with a locus of contemporary identity and belonging as well as historical roots and connections to the territory of Shan state: as Sumalee (a 37 year old with two children) explained, 'More young people will forget they are Shan if they stop practicing the Shan culture and

language. I will teach my children Shan to make sure this does not happen’ (interview, 8 July 2011). These concerns were also evident in a discussion with Dok Mai (interview, 6 July 2011), ‘When my grandchildren grow up, I do not know what will happen and worry that the culture will not survive. That is why it is so important to make sure the children keep on speaking Shan’.

The narratives and stories told of identity and place allow ethnic identities to remain rooted in historical senses of place and belonging: of home. At 74 years old, Boon-Me has now accepted Thailand as his home but states that ‘I tell our children about our old life in Shan State, our history and culture. How hard it was to find work and food. Telling them this is a way for them to remember where we are all from’ (interview, 5 July 2011). Past narratives of life in Shan State play a powerful role in younger generations’ self-identification, ‘my parents have told me about their lives in Shan State and how they had to sell bananas for money. I know that Shan State is where I belong and I can’t forget as I am reminded by their stories’ (Ying, interview, 10 July 2011). Memories are flexible yet located in place: Shan migrants are determined to not forget their past and tell stories to (re)establish their sense of home (see Tolia-Kelly, 2004a). The narrative deployment of memories – of places, spaces, people, language – are constitutive of connections and attachments to the past and the physical, social and psychological locations of that past (Gemignani 2014). These stories and memories provide vital links across time and space that allow migrants to construct identities that reach across boundaries and borders. Therefore, even if the individual’s physical mobility is constrained, a psychological mobility and connection is maintained through audible recounting of history and memory.

The audibility of identity is particularly important for those raised in exile, providing an oral history and narrative of belonging and emotional attachment to the homeland. In the words of one young woman, who has lived in Thailand from infancy, ‘this community is very ‘Shan’. We practice our culture and all speak and learn our language together’ (Busaba , interview, 5 July 2011). However, when the Shan move beyond their ethnic enclaves into Thai-dominated spaces, this forces them to ‘pass’ and switch languages. As Ying explains, the requirement that she speak Thai in school makes her feel ‘a bit more Thai than normal’ as she is not able to not speak the ‘language of home’ (interview, 10 July 2011). However, once she returns to the Shan community she becomes ‘Shan again by speaking Shan and being with the others’ (interview, 10 July 2011), a feeling that resonates with Valentine et al’s (2008: 385) contention that ‘you are what you speak and what you speak is *where* you are.’

In addition to practices of audibility, Shan migrants use everyday material and social practices and rituals to continually visually (re)inscribe ethnic and emotional attachment. Due to state surveillance, both audible and visible expression of Shan identity are strategically deployed and confined to relatively safe spaces of their enclaves (Nagel and Staeheli 2008b; Jackson 2014). Advertising of ‘Shan’ cultural products and services provides a visible inscription of the ethnic Shan population in Pai, a visibility echoed through clothing and language use. The sense of safety in these ‘home’ spaces mean residents such as Dok Mai feel able to embody and represent their ethnic identity and attachment, ‘In a community like this, I can be

Shan. I can dress like a Shan and speak like a Shan here because everyone around me does the same' (interview, 6 July 2011).

Having lived in Pai for over 22 years, Dok Mai is an actress in both Thai and Shan festivals and explains that she never felt like she had to hide being Shan. For her, these spaces not only allow the continuation of cultural practices, as reiterated by Kamala (interview, 12 July 2011) who explained 'I am able to continue my culture here. I feel just as Shan here as I did in Shan State', but also the ritual performance and memory of a shared history and culture (Jackson 2015). Through the quotidian practices inscribing ethnic identities within the safe physical spaces of the enclaves, the Shan are able to construct an emotional space that allows them to link across history/memory and space to create a place, and a sense, of home and belonging (see Burman and Chantler, 2004).

By virtue of their compact structure and high co-ethnic concentration, the Shan enclaves provide a sanctuary in which Shan ethnic and cultural identity may be preserved. The open expression of the ethnic group's collective identity demonstrates the importance of socio-political context and socialization into ethnic identities among Shan migrants in rural areas and is framed by the permanent sense of temporariness – of never being able to 'become' part of the homeland or host nation, but instead *being* Shan (see Chee-Beng 2000; Mountz et al 2002). Instead, the construction of these enclaves in which ethnic identity is made audible and visible illustrates the dynamism of place and the ways in which these places are constructed as home-land-in-exile simultaneously provide for the construction and expression of

identity while also themselves being reproduced through the social relations and practices of the Shan migrants (Ehrkamp, 2005).

The development of ethnic enclaves as ‘safe’ spaces means that these can act as ‘psychic anchors’ that provide a constant sense of community identity and homeland attachment (Bailey et al 2002; Mazumdar et al 2000: 320) as well as facilitating rituals and practices that give expression to (and simultaneously support) emotional connections and attachment (Ho and Hatfield 2011). These activities encompass the everyday and mundane (such as wearing cultural clothing, presenting bananas and water to visitors, or daily religious observances) to episodic festivals and celebrations (such as Poi Sang Long, the Buddhist ordination festival observed by Shan). Through these everyday and episodic ways the enclaves served as communal places within which ethnic identities were expressed and thereby reinforced the social production of these enclaves as safe spaces (Ehrkamp, 2005). This contrasts with Ehrkamp’s (2005: 360-361) argument that Turkish migrants’ experiences in Germany led to their neighbourhood being “turned into a place of belonging that is not tied to particular communities or activities... [but] leads to place-based identity: attachment to [the neighbourhood]”. For displaced Shan, while they place and make audible and visible their ethnic identities within the enclaves theirs is not a place-based identity linked to the enclave but rather remains linked to Shan ethnic or ethno-nationalist identity.

The open expression of ethnic identity outlined above needs to be understood as a strategic performance of visibility – and audibility – that is framed by spaces of safety

and danger, of inclusion and exclusion. Due to the precarious position of Shan migrants within the Thai geo-political imagination, such inscriptions of identity and belonging are often constrained. Outside the safety of 'ethnic enclaves' or other 'safe' spaces, Shan migrants would often adopt practices of strategic invisibility and inaudibility in order to avoid detection, discrimination or arrest.

Strategic Invisibility and Inaudibility

Practices of strategic invisibility and inaudibility were utilised to respond to imposed restrictions on right to travel and/or due to illegal migratory status within Thailand. Moving beyond the relatively safe space of Pai presents a significant challenge to Shan migrants, hindering their ability to find employment or to access essential services. As Busaba (interview, 5 July 2011) explains, 'I understand Thai laws. They mean that we cannot do anything. We cannot move around freely. When my child was sick and I needed to get to the hospital in Chiang Mai I had to ask for permission in the District Office'. Such restrictions limit Shan migrants' abilities to realise basic human rights and leave them prone to mistreatment and exploitation. These difficulties stem, in large part, from the Thai government's refusal to recognise the Shan as migrants and resultant restrictions upon their ability to obtain work permits or identity documents (Latt 2011; McKinnon 2005). Even for those who do secure a work permit tight restrictions remain, preventing them from changing employers or moving residence for the duration of the permit (Latt 2011).

Without a work permit for the previous four years, Sunti has been unable to gain a permit to travel to visit his wife, who lives in Bangkok. Although he could take risk travelling to see his wife by 'passing' as Thai, were he to be caught this could result in his deportation. As he explains, this leaves him feeling dislocated and disjointed, 'I feel like I am split in two, one part of me here and the other in Bangkok. I do not want to risk leaving without permission, as I could be sent back across the border' (interview, 7 July 2011). For Shan migrants without travel permits, any movement beyond the province requires 'strategies of invisibility' (Bailey et al 2002) to elude police checkpoints.

These 'strategies of invisibility' (Bailey et al 2002) include the strategic deployment of language, dress and demeanour that downplay commonly perceived markers of Shan-ness and are more commonly associated with Thai communities. In essence, Shan migrants deploy 'situational identities in response to the practical necessities of their immediate environments' (Zeus 2008: 16) by camouflaging their ethnic identity when travelling. Within Shan enclaves, Shan migrants speak Shan and wear traditional styles of clothing. However, when travelling, such markers of ethnicity become limitations, increasing the chances of detection and deportation. Instead, Shan migrants mask such markers of ethnicity and adopt clothing and deportment associated with Thai culture. Yindee (interview, 4 July 2011) outlines how wearing trousers and changing her make up allows her to adopt an external appearance to enable to her to pass-as-Thai, 'When I have to travel, I wear trousers, make-up like lipstick and powder and I style my hair too. So I look like a Thai person. I am not less Shan in Pai but when I travel this changes'. Larn (interview, 9 July 2011) utilises

a similar set of behaviours, ‘One time I was caught and put in jail. I had just come from Shan State, had no ID card. I was wearing a sarong and they could tell I was Shan. Now I change how I look when I travel and only speak Thai’. By strategically making their ethnic identity invisible and inaudible, these practices allow Shan migrants to ‘pass’ in Thai culture.

These practices do not undermine the individual’s sense of Shan-ness but are ‘personal tricks’ (Sai Leng , interview, 11 July 2011) used to present a façade of a different ethnic identity in order to circumvent state surveillance by making themselves ‘look rich, like Thai people’ (Yindee , interview, 4 July 2011; also Nagel and Staeheli 2008b). While Shan women adopt trousers and make-up, Shan men cover up other markers of Shan ethnicity – namely tattoos. Common amongst most Shan men, forearm tattoos are perceived to provide ‘protection and strength’ (Boon-Me, interview, 5 July 2011) and are an important part of the Shan culture. However, as the tattoos are identifiable as Shan they are often masked by the wearing of long sleeved tops when crossing police check-points, as Sum (interview, 6 July 2011) explains ‘My tattoos have magic in them and are important to our culture as Shan. I have to cover my arms though when I travel, just in case the police see. If they do, they will know we are Shan immediately’.

These strategic deployments of identity markers illustrate adeptness in managing and negotiating multiple identities, deploying a ‘portfolio of ethnic identities that are more or less salient’ depending on the various audiences and situations encountered (Nagel 1994: 154). In order to move around Thailand, the Shan temporarily and

contextually suppress the visible expressions of their ethnicity through the adoption of the behaviour and dress associated with Thai ethnic identities. Although these openly acknowledged practices are not always successful, many Shan migrants continue to utilise them in order to travel to access services, find employment or to visit relatives; as Sumalee (interview, 8 July 2011) explains, ‘We look like Thai, so sometimes people cannot tell the difference. I use this to my advantage and pretend to be someone else. If I wear trousers and speak in Thai, the police sometimes do not ask me for ID. Although, often, they can tell I am Shan by my accent and send me back to Pai’.

The performance of ethnicity by the Shan migrants alters once more when attempting to cross the Thai border back to Shan State. Many of the Shan in Pai return to Shan State for short periods of time, usually to visit relatives or to participate in Shan festivities such as Poi Sang Long. When attempting to cross the Thai-Burmese border, the Shan do not discard their ‘Shan-ness’ but instead choose to emphasise it. Sai Leng , who returned to Shan State two years ago to visit his mother, stated that to cross the border successfully he must wear a traditional Shan shirt, remove his watch and essentially ‘become more Shan’ (interview, 11 July 2011). As Sai Leng explains, ‘I take off my watch as I cross the border, so I look poorer and the authorities realise that I am just a poor Shan person. If I dress like a Thai man they will think I am rich and bribe me more than normal’ (interview, 11 July 2011). At the border of Shan State, ‘being’ Shan represents a viable ethnic category within that particular time and place and, temporarily, removes the identity constraints faced by the migrants within the space of

Thailand. It also has strategic advantages – in Sai Leng explanation, it is a way of protecting himself against being asked for a larger bribe by the border authorities.

These practices are means by which Shan migrants seek to circumvent the restrictive policies faced by those displaced in Thailand. Despite not indicating identity loss, the restrictive policies of the host country do impose serious constraints on the expression and experience of Shan-ness for those living undocumented or without permission to travel in Thailand. Whereas Bailey et al (2002: 138) discuss strategies of visibilities as a response to and attempt to influence the structural context of daily life of Salvadoran migrants in the US, these practices have a subtly different premise for Shan migrants in Thailand. In this context, the Shan migrants cannot ‘become’ part of the Thai or Burmese nation/state and their inscriptions of in/visibility and in/audibility are not intended to alter the political structure framing their situation. Rather, they incorporate everyday and episodic practices and rituals that provide an emotional attachment and maintenance of ethnic belonging and identity in a dual condition of exclusion from citizenship (in homeland and host countries). The privileging of specific ethnic identities within the national narratives of the homeland and host country (McKinnon 2005) excludes the Shan from both national constructs, leaving them in limbo and needing to mediate (ethnic) belonging and (national/citizenship) non-belonging (Jackson 2014).

Conclusions

Shan migrants in Pai maintain powerful imagined links to their lost ‘home-land’ (a physical space of emotional attachment separate from the Burmese nation-state and the dominant nationalist narratives associated with this) of Shan State and a home ‘nation’ – not the Burmese nation, but a Shan ethnic nation. Extending their cultural practices and values to the distant space of Pai, the Shan have been able to maintain an emotional attachment to their ethnic identity and express this through strategic in/visibilities and in/audibilities. At times these emotional attachments have a clear spatiality through the construction of Pai as a safe space, a home-land in exile which provides a significant and symbolic space in which Shan migrants express and articulate an ethnic identity. Being excluded – not only in terms of status, but also practice and feeling (emotion) – from belonging in Thailand, Shan migrants maintain a strong ethnic identity through being in one physical location while ‘at the same time living with a feeling of belonging somewhere else’ (Brun 2001: 23), but with that ‘somewhere else’ not being the Burmese nation, but the Shan ethnic nation and state.

The sense of Pai as a safe space in exile provides a location in which emotional attachments to ‘home’ can be rendered visible and audible through everyday and mundane practices of being. Shan migrants have become adept at negotiating strategic practices of passing and not passing in order to maintain their residency in Thailand. The concentration of Shan migrants around Pai provides for a safe space in which an emotional connection to ‘home’ is maintained and expressed materially, visually and audibly. Integral to this process, we see how these enclaves have themselves been created as spaces of ‘home’ to which migrants hold emotional attachment and within which they feel secure in expressing identity and belonging in visual and audible ways

despite the permanent temporariness and precarity of their position. Such practices not only challenge and de-naturalise assumed relationships between people, place and identity, but demonstrate that territorial displacement does not automatically lead to a loss of culture and identity. Instead, displacement can construct conditions for the expression and articulation of ethnicity in particular ways and rooted in emotional belonging and attachment. In the case of displaced Shan in Thailand, they have constructed a ‘home-land-in-exile’ through strategic and symbolic practices of in/visibility and in/audibility which underpin a construct of ‘home’ that, while grounded in a particular site, transcends national borders and provides a locus for emotional belonging.

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