

**'With the Salween Peace Park, We Can Survive as a Nation': Karen Environmental  
Relations and the Politics of an Indigenous Conservation Initiative**

Andrew Paul

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## ABSTRACT

Global conservation has a history of displacing Indigenous peoples from their traditional territories, which contain many of the world's most intact and biologically-rich ecosystems. However, this has the potential to change with growing international recognition of Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas and Territories (ICCAs) as a protected area category. Indigenous peoples are declaring protected areas to conserve biodiversity, defend their traditional territories, and resist dispossession. This thesis critically examines the mobilization of Indigenous environmental relations and conservation politics to protect the land in the Salween Peace Park, a 5,485-square kilometre conservation initiative in the autonomous Karen territory of Kawthoolei, otherwise known as Karen State, Burma. I argue that paying attention to spiritual-environmental relations is essential in order to understand Indigenous environmental governance, and that conservation projects offer unique opportunities for Indigenous peoples to mobilize these environmental relations, engage in symbolic politics, and mount a sovereign refusal of state domination.

**Keywords:** Indigenous peoples and conservation; Indigenous and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCAs); Indigenous ontology; Indigenous law; animism; customary land; politics of recognition; Indigenous resurgence; sovereign refusal; Salween Peace Park; *Kaw* system; Karen people; Kawthoolei; Karen National Union; Burma (Myanmar)

DEDICATION



Saw O Moo (ca. 1975 – 2018) – စီးအိန်မူ (၁၉၇၅-၂၀၁၈)

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Saw O Moo, an Indigenous Karen village leader who worked tirelessly to protect the land, forests, and Karen cultural traditions he loved so well. Saw O Moo’s experience and insights were invaluable to the creation of this thesis. He will be missed by all who had the privilege of knowing him.

Rest in Peace, Uncle.

(On April 5, 2018, Saw O Moo was ambushed and shot by Burmese soldiers near his home in Ler Mu Plaw. He is survived by his wife Naw Paw Tha and their seven young children.)

လံာ်ဟ်ဖျါတဘျီအံၤမ့ၢ်တၢ်ဟ့ၣ်လၢကပိၤဆူ စီးအိန်မူ, လၢအမ့ၢ်ဝဲကညီပုၤထူလံၤဖိ ဒီးလိာ်ကဝိၤခိၣ်နၢ်တဂၤန့ၣ်လီၤ. အဝဲတအိန်ဘျးအိန်သါနီၣ်တဘျီဘၣ်, မ့ၢ်တခီအဝဲဂုၢ်ကျဲးစးဒီးသဒၢကဟုကယာ်က့ၤဟီၣ်ခိၣ်ကပံာ်, သ့ၣ်ပုၤဝဲၣ်ပုၤ, ဒီးပုၤကညီလုာ်လၢထူသန့တၢ်ဆဲးတၢ်လၢ လၢအနီၣ်ကစၢ်ဒၣ်ဝဲဟ်လုာ်ဟ်ပုၤဝဲဒိၣ်ဒိၣ်ကလဲာ်န့ၣ်လီၤ. စီးအိန်မူအတၢ်လဲၤစီဖျိဒီးတၢ်သ့ၣ်ညါန့ၣ်ပၢ်ကဲထီၣ်တၢ်မၤစၢၤဒိၣ်မးလၢလံာ်ဟ်ဖျါတဘျီအံၤကကဲထီၣ်အဂီၢ်န့ၣ်လီၤ. ပုၤတဂၤလၢလံာ်လၢအသ့ၣ်ညါအိၤန့ၣ် ကသ့ၣ်နီၣ်ဘၣ်အိၤသပုၤကတၢ်လီၤ.

အိန်ဘျးမုၢ်မုၢ်, တံၤစၢၤ.

(ဖဲလါအုၤဖြဲၣ် ၅ သီ, ၂၀၁၈ နံၣ်န့ၣ်, စီးအိန်မူ ဘၣ်တၢ်ခးသံအိၤလၢပယီၤသး ဖဲလၢမုၢ်ပျီလိာ်ကဝိၤ, အိန်ဘျးဒီးအဟံၣ်ဒၣ်ဝဲန့ၣ်လီၤ. အဝဲဘၣ်ဟ်တ့ၢ်ကွံာ်အမၤသးဘိ လၢအမ့ၢ်ဝဲ နီၣ်ဖိသၣ်ဒီးအဖိ ၇ ဂၤန့ၣ်လီၤ.)

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# တၢ်ကတိၤစံးဘျး

အဆိကတၢ်, ယသးအိၣ်စံးဘျးဘၣ်ကီၢ်သ့ၣ်ဂ့ၢ်ကမျၢၢ်ဖိ, ပုၤတတၢ်ဖိလၢအအိၣ်ဘျးဖဲန့ၣ်တဖၣ်, ယုၣ်ဒီးကညိဒီးကလုာ်စၢဖိၣ်ကရၢ ခိၣ်န့ၣ်သ့ၣ်တဖၣ်လၢ မ့ၢ်တြီၢ်ကီၢ်ရၣ်ဒီးလူၤသီကီၢ်ဆၣ်အပူၤ ခိဖျိလၢသုတၢ်သ့ၣ်စူၤသးစူၤဒီးတၢ်သးအိၣ်ဟ့ၣ်ခိဟ့ၣ်နီၤယၤလၢတၢ်ဂ့ၢ် တၢ်ကျိၤဘၣ်ယးဒီးလီၢ်ကဝီၤတၢ်အိၣ်သးအယိန့ၣ်လီၤ. ယစံးဘျးဘၣ်စီၤညၣ်ကံၢ်ထူ, နီၢ်လုၢ်လၢဝါ, ဒီးအဟံၣ်ဖိယိဖိသ့ၣ်တဖၣ်လၢ သုသးအိၣ်တူၢ်လိာ်မုၢ်ယၤလၢ လူၤသီဖိဒုပုၤတတၢ်အတၢ်မၤလီၢ် ဖဲယဟဲန့ၣ်လီၤယုထံၣ်သ့ၣ်ညါတၢ်အခါ, တကးဒံးဘၣ်လၢသုဟ့ၣ်ခိ ဟ့ၣ်နီၤသုတၢ်သ့ၣ်ညါန့ၣ်ပၢၢ်ဘၣ်ယးဒီးကညိပုၤထူလံၤဖိအလုၢ်လၢထူသန့ဒီးတၢ်ဆဲးတၢ်လၢအယိန့ၣ်လီၤ. မ့တမ့ၢ်လၢသုတၢ်သ့ၣ်အိၣ် သးအိၣ်မၤစၢၤယၤအယိဘၣ်ဒီး, တၢ်တီၢ်ကျဲၤတခါအံၤကဲထီၣ်တသ့လုၤတက့ၤဘၣ်.

စံးဘျးဘၣ်ပုၤကျိၣ်ထံတၢ်သ့ၣ်တဖၣ်, လၢအမ့ၢ်ဝဲ စီၤမိၤကြီၤ, သရၣ်ဆၣ်လၢလၢ, ဒီးသရၣ်မိာ်ခိၣ်, လၢသုကျိၣ်ထံန့ၣ်ယတၢ်လၢတၢ် ဝံသးစူၤအပူၤဒီးသုမၤစၢၤယၤဒီးတကတီၢ်ညါလၢယတၢ်ယုထံၣ်သ့ၣ်ညါတၢ်အဆၢကတီၢ်န့ၣ်လီၤ.

ယစံးဘျးဘၣ်စ့ၢ်ကိးပုၤမၤသကိးတၢ်ဖိလၢ ကညိဖိခိၣ်ယၢဒီးပုၤဂ့ၢ်ဝီတၢ်မၤပုၤဘျးစဲကရၢ (ခ့ၢ်) အပူၤတဖၣ် လၢသုတူၢ်လိာ်မုၢ်ယၤ ဒီးဟ့ၣ်ယၤတၢ်ခွဲးတၢ်ယၢလီၤလီၤဆိဆိ လၢယကမၤသကိးယုတၢ်ဒီးသု, တကးဒံးဘၣ်သုဟ့ၣ်လီၤစ့ၢ်ကိးသုသးလၢသုပုၤကညိက လုာ်အဂီၢ်အယိန့ၣ်လီၤ. သုဒးအိၣ်ထီၣ်အိၣ်ထီၣ်ယတၢ်သးသဟီၣ်လၢပတၢ်ဖံးသကိးမၤသကိးတၢ်အပူၤလၢတၢ်ကဲဘျးကဲဖိၣ်အဂီၢ်အ ယိယသးအိၣ်စံးဘျးက့ၤသုဒိၣ်မးလီၤ.

စံးဘျးဘၣ်သးခိၣ်ကျၢၢ်ဖုဘိၣ်ကီၢ်ဟဲ, မ့ၢ်တြီၢ်ကီၢ်ရၣ်ခိၣ်န့ၣ်သ့ၣ်တဖၣ်, ယုၣ်ဒီးမ့ၢ်တြီၢ်ကီၢ်ရၣ်ကမျၢၢ်ဖိခဲလၢၢ် လၢသုတၢ်အိၣ်သးမ့ၢ် ကီမ့ၢ်ခဲဘၣ်ဆၣ် သုတၢ်သ့ၣ်န့ၣ်သးန့ၣ်, သုတၢ်ဂ့ၢ်ကျဲးစၢၤ, ယုၣ်ဒီးသုတၢ်ထံၣ်စိကွၢ်စိလၢသုပုၤကလုာ်အဂီၢ်န့ၣ် ကဲထီၣ်တၢ်ဂံၢ်တၢ်ဘိး ဒိၣ်ညါလီၤ.

စံးဘျးဘၣ်စီၤဆၣ်ပဲၤမူ လၢနသးအိၣ်ဟ့ၣ်ကူၣ်ဟ့ၣ်ဖးဒီးဟ့ၣ်ခိဟ့ၣ်နီၤယၤလၢနတၢ်သ့ၣ်ညါန့ၣ်ပၢၢ်လၢအိၣ်အယိတဖၣ်အယိ, ယ လံာ်ဟံၣ်ဖျိတဘျးအံၤဂ့ၢ်ထီၣ်ဒီးလၢထီၣ်ပဲၤထီၣ်ဝဲဖးဒိၣ်ညါန့ၣ်လီၤ.

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စံးဘျးဘၣ်ယသကိးမုၢ် နီၢ်ရဲလုာ်ထူဒီးအပၢ်ဖါတၢ်စီၤဖါဘၣ်, ဒီးသုဟံၣ်ဖိယိဖိသ့ၣ်တဖၣ်လၢသုတူၢ်လိာ်မုၢ်ယၤလၢသုဟံၣ်ဖဲယဟဲ အိၣ်ဟဲဆိးလၢဂ့ၢ်ထီၣ်ရဲထီၣ်အခါန့ၣ်လီၤ. သုတၢ်တူၢ်လိာ်ခိၣ်ဆၢယၤအံၤမ့ၢ်ဝဲတၢ်ဆိၣ်ဂ့ၢ်ဖးဒိၣ်တခါလၢယဂီၢ်ဒီးလၢန့ၣ်အမဲာ်ညါ, သု တၢ်ဟ့ၣ်ခိဟ့ၣ်နီၤဘၣ်ယးသုတၢ်လဲၤခိဖျိဒီးသုတၢ်သ့ၣ်ညါန့ၣ်ပၢၢ်တဖၣ် ကဲထီၣ်တၢ်မၤစၢၤ ဒီးတၢ်ဝဲထံနီၤဖး လၢလံာ်ဟံၣ်ဖျိတဘျးအံၤ အဂီၢ်န့ၣ်လီၤ.

စံးဘျးဘၣ်စ့ၢ်ကိးစ့ၢ်ထီၣ်ရဲထီၣ်ကညိတတၢ်, ထီၣ်ရဲထီၣ်ကညိသးစၢ်, ဒီးထီၣ်ရဲထီၣ်ကညိဘျးထံခရံၣ်ဖိတၢ်အိၣ်ဖိၣ်, လၢသုတူၢ်လိာ် မုၢ်ယၤလၢသုကျိၣ်န့ၣ်လီၤ. မ့တမ့ၢ်လၢသုတၢ်ရဲလိာ်မုၢ်လိာ်ဒီးတၢ်မဲာ်မုၢ်နီၤဆၢဘၣ်န့ၣ်, တမ့ၢ်လၢယဟဲအိၣ်လၢဂ့ၢ်ထီၣ်ရဲထီၣ်အပူၤက မုၢ်ထဲန့ၣ်ညါဘၣ်လီၤ.

စံးဘျးဘၣ်ယသကိး လၢအမ့ၢ်ကညိဖိတဖၣ်လၢဟီၣ်ခိၣ်ချၢဒီးဖျၢၣ်ညါ, လၢသုဟ့ၣ်လီၤသုသးလၢသုပုၤကလုာ်ကညိအဂီၢ်န့ၣ်လီၤ. လၢသုတၢ်အဲၣ်ဘၣ်သုပုၤကလုာ်အယိ, ယန့ၣ်သပုၤကတၢ်လၢမုၢ်ကအိၣ်ဝဲတနံၤပကတုၤဆူပဖိတၢ်လၢအမ့ၢ်ဝဲတၢ်မုၢ်တၢ်ခုၣ်ဒီးတၢ်သ ဘျးအလၢအပုၤလၢပကီၢ်သုလုၤအပူၤန့ၣ်လီၤ.

လၢခံကတၢ်, ယစံးဘျးဘၣ်ယမိာ်ယပၢ်ဒီးယဒိပုၤဝဲၣ်သ့ၣ်တဖၣ်ဒိၣ်မးလီၤ. ယစံးဘျးလီၤဆိဒုၣ်တၢ်ယမိာ်လၢနန့ၣ်ယၤဒီးကဲထီၣ် တၢ်ဂံၢ်တၢ်ဘိလၢယဂီၢ်ဖဲလၢယလိာ်ဘၣ်န့ၣ်သပုၤကတၢ်အခါလီၤ. ယပၢ်စ့ၢ်ကိး, ယစံးဘျးဘၣ်န့ၣ်လၢနဟံၣ်ကဖၢလၢနသးလၢယယိဒီး နဟံၣ်ကဖၢစ့ၢ်ကိးနသးလၢယတၢ်မၤသကိးတၢ်ဒီးပုၤကညိဖိအဖိခိၣ်န့ၣ်လီၤ. ဆူယပုၤဒုမုၢ် Angela ဒီး ယပုၤဒုခါ Geoffrey, ပမ့ၢ် ဘၣ်အိၣ်စီၤစူၤယံၤလိာ်ပသးထဲလဲၣ်ဘၣ်ဆၣ်, ပကမ့ၢ်ဒုဒိပုၤဝဲၣ်တစီၤလၢပသးလီၤ. လၢယဂီၢ်, သုမ့ၢ်ဒိပုၤဝဲၣ်လၢအဂ့ၢ်ကတၢ်လီၤ.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ICCAs – Indigenous and Community Conserved Territories and Areas

IDP – Internally displaced person

IUCN – International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources

KESAN – Karen Environmental and Social Action Network

KNLA – Karen National Liberation Army

KNU – Karen National Union

KPSN – Karen Peace Support Network

KWCI – Karen Wildlife Conservation Initiative

NCA – Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

NGO – Non-governmental organization

OECMs – Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures

UNDRIP – United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples



## LIST OF KAREN LANGUAGE TERMS

*Au Kheh* (အိန်ယဲ) – a ritual feast of roast pork conducted to propitiate the spirits of the ancestors who have passed on and who are in the *Lo*.

*Blaw* (ဘျိုန်) – a ceremonial structure that traditionally is present in every animist Karen village.

*Bu Ma Law* (ဘုမာလဲ) – a roadside shrine that serves as the granary for the spirit of the deceased as it becomes established in the *Lo*.

*Day Paw Law* (ဒုပိလိ) – a special tree to which a bamboo case containing a newborn baby's umbilicus is tied.

*Hee Hko* (ဟံန်ခိန်) – literally, 'village head,' the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* ceremonial leaders at the village level.

*Htee Hko* (ထံခိန်) – literally, 'head of the water,' the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* ceremonial leader who performs the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony to care for the waters of the *Kaw*.

*Htee Meh K'Lah* (ထံမဲကလဲ) – literally, 'mirror water,' a spring-fed pool with no outflow; traditionally protected as a place of the *Nah Htee* water spirits.

*Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* (ထံပိကီကစါ) – literally, the 'masters of the water and land,' male ceremonial leaders in the *Kaw* administration.

*Hteh See* (ထဲန်စိန်) – a ritual that Karen animists do in their irrigated rice fields at the beginning of the ploughing season.

*Hto Mo Lo* (ထိးမိလိ) – a place along the path toward the *Lo* where pork bones from the *Au Kheh* feast are placed in a basket and deposited.

*K'Lah* (ကလဲ) – spiritual essences which in a Karen ontology inhabit every living human being and which must be safely returned to the land after death so that they do not disturb the living.

*K'Sah* (ကစါ) – literally, 'Lord' or 'Owner,' the spiritual owners of the land and water in a Karen ontology.

*Kaw* (ကီ) – literally, 'country,' the unit of Indigenous Karen territorial organization in Mutraw District.

*Kaw Hko* (ကီခိန်) – literally, 'head of the *Kaw*,' the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* ceremonial leader who performs the *Kyoh Tah* ceremony to care for the land.

*Koh Tee Koh Reh* (ကိုဒိန်ကိုရဲ) – ceremonial alcohol pots used for *Lu Htee Hta*.

*Kyoh Tah* (ကိုန်တါ) – a major ceremony to care for the land of the *Kaw*.

*Lo* (လိ) – in the animist Karen ontology, the final dwelling place of the spirits of the deceased.

*Lu Hku Thet Hku* (လှိုင်ခင်းသဲခင်း) – a ceremony that Karen animists perform in both lowland irrigated paddy and upland swidden fields as the grain heads are forming.

*Lu Htee Hta* (လှိုင်ထံထည်) – a major ceremony to care for the waters of the *Kaw*.

*Meh Ay Blay Thweh* (မဲအုန်ပျားသွေး) – literally, 'those with sharp teeth and rough tongues'; the elders' advisory council.

*Nah Htee* (နါထံ) – aquatic spirits that inhabit certain taboo places and may cause harm if the taboos are not followed.

*Naw* (နီ) – a Karen term meaning 'Mrs.,' used to address a woman.

*P'doh* (ပဒို) – a Karen term used to address government officials such as KNU leaders.

*Peh Kyoo Law* (ပဲန့်ကျူလ်လီ) – a ritual in the swidden clearing process. People partially clear the plot until noon before cooking rice and curry at the field shelter, feeding a portion to the spirits of the land.

*Peh Law Doo Kee* (ပဲန့်လီနီခဲ) – the practice of clearing three small sections to mark a swidden plot before the entire plot is cleared. Sacred red and yellow flowers may also be placed to protect the plot from the spirits.

*Saw* (စီ) – a Karen term meaning 'Mr.,' used to address a man.

*Su Tah Kah Tah* (စုတင်တင်တင်) – Karen divination rituals.

*Tah Hku* (တင်ခုန်) – literally, 'coolness,' the state of spiritual balance and moral order. If this balance is upset, people must give an offering as *Tah Hku* to the spirits.

*Tah Mu Kha* (တင်မုခါ) – spirits that inhabit certain taboo forests and may cause harm if the taboos are not followed.

*Tah U Tah Khaw* (တင်အူးတင်ယီ) – taboo species which are not strictly forbidden per se, but which possess spiritual power that can cause disaster if the taboos are violated.

*Thera* (ထရန်) – a Karen term that literally means 'teacher,' but is used for anyone who is seen to be in a professional or educated position, including pastors, medical professionals, or staff of an organization.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### *From Conservation Refugees to Indigenous Protected Areas*

Worldwide, Indigenous peoples are engaged in struggles for freedom and self-determination against forces of state enclosure, dispossession, and resource exploitation that disregard their rights and unique relationship with their territories. Indigenous nations, once self-determining peoples on their own lands, are now encompassed within the borders of nation-states, a situation that late Secwepemc scholar and activist George Manuel called the "Fourth World" (G. Manuel and Posluns 1974; A. Manuel 2015). Dispossession of Indigenous peoples' lands is a violent process: not only does it often inflict physical violence on Indigenous communities, but there is a deep social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual violence associated with undermining Indigenous peoples' political traditions and relationships with their ancestral territories (Tobias and Richmond 2014; Big-Canoe and Richmond 2014).

Global conservation has also been implicated in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their traditional territories. Indigenous peoples' territories contain many of the world's most intact and biologically-rich ecosystems (Watanabe 2008; Stevens 2014c). However, rather than being recognized as the rightful stewards of this biological wealth, Indigenous communities have often been forcibly displaced to create uninhabited nature reserves, a process some have called green grabbing (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012) and green colonialism (Zaitchik 2018). Millions of people have become "conservation refugees" (Geisler 2003; Dowie 2011). Although some conservation projects include local and Indigenous communities in co-management arrangements, almost invariably the state 'partner' in these arrangements retains ultimate authority and controls the terms of collaboration (Castro and Nielsen 2001; Sandlos 2014; Caruso 2014).

Although forced displacement in the name of conservation continues in many parts of the world (Tauli-Corpuz, Alcorn, and Molnar 2018), an alternative global conservation paradigm has begun to emerge following the 2003 World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa, convened by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). Under pressure from Indigenous delegates at the convention, the IUCN agreed to establish Indigenous and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCAs) as a protected area category (Stevens 2014a). Of course, Indigenous peoples have been caring for their ancestral territories for millennia, and they have also unilaterally declared conservation areas, such as the Tla-oh-qui-aht Nation's declaration of Meares Island Tribal Park on the Pacific Coast of Canada in 1984 (Murray and King 2012). However, international recognition of ICCAs has opened further opportunities for Indigenous peoples to use conservation designations to protect their territories and resist environmental dispossession by state and corporate interests (Kothari et al. 2012; Stevens 2014a). State governments are also beginning to pay more attention: countries as diverse as Burma<sup>1</sup> (GOM 2015) and Canada (Galloway 2018; ICE 2018) are recognizing that Indigenous peoples' protected areas can help them meet international biodiversity conservation commitments. The IUCN, in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme, hosts the international ICCA Registry, and a growing number of ICCAs are also being listed in the World Database on Protected Areas (Kothari et al. 2012).

Thus, despite global conservation's track record of misunderstandings, violence, and displacement, the goals of Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous conservationists still overlap, and there remains potential for collaboration (e.g., Schwartzman and Zimmerman 2005; Stevens 2014c; O'Neil 2017). Late Secwepemc activist Arthur Manuel called this collaboration "one of the most hopeful Indigenous/non-

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<sup>1</sup> In 1989, Burma's military dictatorship unilaterally changed the country's official name from Burma to Myanmar and Burmanized ethnic place names throughout the country (Dittmer 2010). Although citizens of the country now use both terms, the use of 'Burma' continues partly as an act of political resistance. In my thesis, I call the country Burma, and I use Karen local place names.

Indigenous alliances we have had in any sphere” (A. Manuel 2015, 180). Indigenous communities are engaging these relationships in an effort to transform conservation from a tool of environmental dispossession into a tool for environmental *repossession* (Big-Canoe and Richmond 2014; Tobias 2015).

This thesis explores how Indigenous peoples might engage conservation discourses to simultaneously protect their lands, culture, and rights of self-determination, while remaining mindful of the potential risks of such a project. To do so, I investigate the case of the Salween Peace Park, a proposal for integrated biocultural conservation (Pungetti, Oviedo, and Hooke 2012; Gavin et al. 2015; Chen and Gilmore 2015) in the autonomous Karen territory of Kawthoolei, otherwise known as Karen State, Burma.

Kawthoolei is tentatively emerging from decades of violent armed conflict between the central Burmese government and the ethnic Karen movement for autonomy, led by the Karen National Union, or KNU. KNU administrators, civil society, and local community leaders have proposed the Salween Peace Park as an Indigenous-governed conservation area to promote post-conflict peacebuilding, strengthen local livelihoods, conserve the region’s exceptional biodiversity, and preserve Indigenous Karen cultural traditions. Despite decades of war and displacement, the Karen people of the Salween Peace Park have maintained ceremonies and cultural traditions that have been weakened or lost in many other areas of Kawthoolei. In this thesis, I explain how, as an Indigenous conservation initiative, the Salween Peace Park draws upon Karen spiritual-environmental relations as a foundation for environmental governance of the park. I also explore how the Peace Park in turn functions as a political tool to protect the land, and thus Karen communities’ ability to continue practicing their spiritual-environmental relations and unique cultural traditions.

### *On Being Indigenous in Burma*

Articulation of Indigeneity is complicated in Burma, as it is in Southeast Asia more generally (Morton 2017b; Erni 2008b; Kingsbury 2008). In Southeast Asia, there is no clear distinction between the original

Indigenous inhabitants and settlers who came later. As Scott (2009) points out, there is a long history of ethnic fluidity between highland 'Indigenous' peoples and lowland state societies. Most modern states in Southeast Asia, including Burma, declare that all their citizens are equally Indigenous and reject the notion that some may be more Indigenous than others (Morton 2017a, 2017b; Kingsbury 2008). In addition, some ethnic armed resistance organizations in Burma have explicitly rejected the term Indigenous, fearing it would imply their subnational status as minorities in Burma (Morton 2017a).

Nevertheless, politics and discourses of Indigeneity are gaining traction in Southeast Asia, including Burma. One reason for this is the development of international human rights instruments, in particular the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or UNDRIP (Morton 2017b). In Burma, self-identifying Indigenous peoples “are seeking state recognition of their cultural distinctiveness and particular grievances while further linking themselves to a global [Indigenous peoples] movement with local emancipatory potential” (Morton 2017a, 1). At a “Workshop on the Concept of Indigenous Peoples in Asia” in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 2006, participants identified their common experiences as Indigenous peoples in Asia, including historical enclosure by modern states, denial of self-determination, and states' efforts to undermine their unique relationship with their traditional territories, from which they derive their cultural identity and customary governance institutions. Participants also acknowledged that they share these experiences with other Indigenous peoples around the world (Erni 2008a). As Geiger writes, Europeans have not been the only colonizers of Indigenous peoples and their territories in Southeast Asia: “one set of oppressors was replaced by another when the Caucasian colonizers left” (Geiger 2008, 188).

Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination and customary land rights are not to be confused with the exclusionary and often inflammatory rhetoric of nativism, which is also on the rise in Southeast Asia (Morton 2017b). Nativism has taken an extreme form in Burma's persecution of the Rohingya people, who are denied citizenship and are not recognized as one of the so-called 'national races' decreed by the central Burmese government (Cheesman 2017). Such discrimination and ethnic hatred

have little in common with the legitimate struggles of marginalized Indigenous communities to survive as distinct and self-determining peoples, as Tania Li discovered in her study of the Indigenous rights movement in Indonesia (Li 2001; see also Morton 2017b).

Civil society organizations in Burma increasingly articulate ethnic communities' relationship with their territories using the language of Indigeneity (e.g., KESAN 2005; BEWG 2009; KEAN 2016; TRIP NET & RKIPN 2016; CAT 2018). Unlike the land and forest policies of the central Burmese government, the KNU's Land Policy (KNU 2015) and Forest Policy (currently under review) both explicitly recognize the rights of Indigenous peoples and nonmonetary values of the land and forest. These policies reference UNDRIP and emphasize communal land rights and the "social, cultural, spiritual, economic, environmental and political value" (KNU 2015, Article 3.3.1) of the land for Indigenous communities, while committing to uphold the rights of all "vulnerable peoples and long-standing resident village communities" (KNU 2015, Article 1.1.2).

In sum, I frame my research in terms of Indigeneity for several reasons. The term Indigenous implies a deep and enduring relationship to ancestral territories (Kingsbury 2008), which forms the basis of my ethnographic research. It also denotes a set of rights that are increasingly recognized in international human rights instruments and discourses, including discourses around Indigenous-led conservation areas. Finally and most importantly, I use this term because those with whom I work have chosen to self-identify as Indigenous people.

### *The Karen National Union and the Struggle for Self-Determination*

As a proposal for biocultural conservation, protection of Indigenous people's land rights, and conservation for peace, the Salween Peace Park follows upon decades of armed conflict in southeastern Burma. The KNU is one of dozens of ethnic organizations in Burma which took up arms against the central government shortly after the country gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1948 (M. J. Smith 1991). Although the Karen nationalist movement, which coalesced under British colonial rule, initially

demanded a fully autonomous Karen State, Karen leaders envisioned their state as part of a federation of ethnic states in a democratic Union of Burma (KNU 2013; Jolliffe 2016). However, the Burmese government refused and instead attempted to impose centralized rule across the country. From 1962 to 2011, a succession of military dictatorships carried out brutal scorched-earth campaigns against the Karen and other ethnic resistance forces. Burmese soldiers committed egregious human rights abuses against unarmed civilians during these campaigns, including forced displacement, forced labour, destruction of villages, extrajudicial killing, torture, and rape (KHRG 1998, KHRG 2017). The International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School concluded in a 2014 report that Burma's generals could be guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity for their actions against Karen civilians (IHRC 2014).

Although the Karen Revolution began on the outskirts of Rangoon and in the Irrawaddy Delta, Burmese military operations gradually forced the Karen resistance into the mountains closer to the Thai border. Here the KNU set up its autonomous government over a territory eventually comprising seven districts, including not only the government-recognized Karen State but also significant portions of Bago Region, Mon State, and Tanintharyi Region (see *Figure 1*). In collaboration with Karen civil society, the KNU oversees health, education, a judicial system, and most pertinently for the purposes of my research, land and forest administration (KNU n.d.; Jolliffe 2016). In areas under KNU control, KNU staff collaborate with Karen civil society organizations such as the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) to demarcate community forests, establish wildlife sanctuaries, and register villagers' lands.

Since Burmese military campaigns against the KNU intensified in the 1970s and mid-1990s, the KNU has lost large swathes of territory to Burmese military and administrative control (Brenner 2017). Some areas remain under mixed administration, with the KNU and Burmese government operating simultaneously, taxing and providing services to local communities. In a recent report on KNU governance, Kim Jolliffe estimates that about 800,000 Karen people remain under at least partial KNU control, with an estimated 100,000 of these under almost exclusive KNU jurisdiction (Jolliffe 2016).



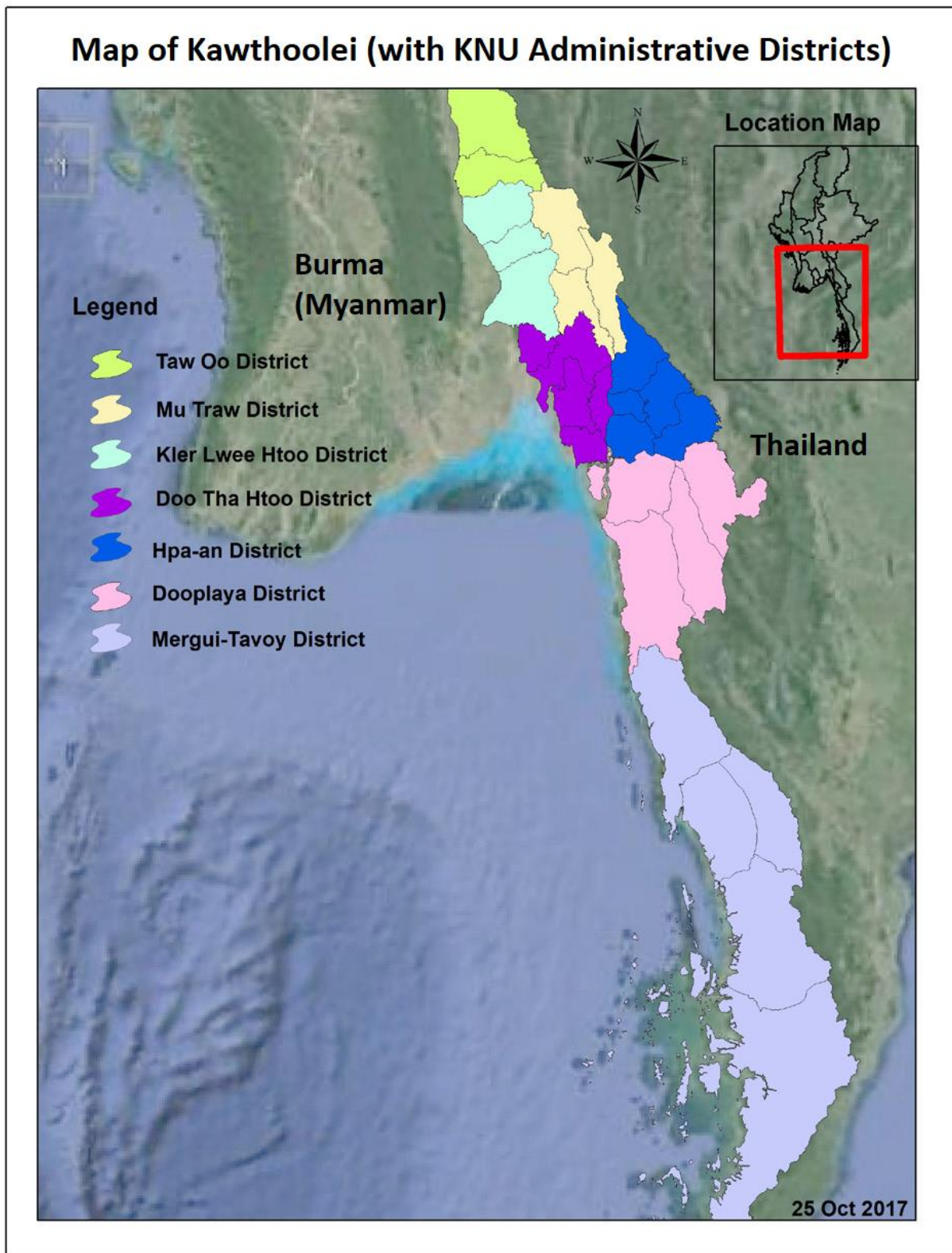


Figure 1. Map of Kawthoolei. Adapted from KESAN 2017. Kawthoolei Land Policy Briefer: "Land to the Native People"

In January 2012, the KNU reached its first stable bilateral ceasefire with the Burmese military since hostilities began in 1949 (Brenner 2017). Then in 2015, the KNU and seven other ethnic resistance organizations signed the so-called Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). The KNU's decision to sign these ceasefires met with strong disapproval from large sections of Karen civil society, who saw the agreements as another tool for the Burmese military to exercise control and deny the Karen people's aspirations for self-determination and protection of their lands (Karen CSOs 2015; Brenner 2017).

Indeed, the ceasefires have so far failed to bring lasting peace or resolve underlying causes of the civil war, and even long-time ceasefire proponents within the KNU are beginning to admit serious obstacles to further progress (KNU 2018; Mann 2018). Karen civil society and political leaders have long called for decentralized land and natural resource management, but the central government has refused to relinquish control over resource-rich ethnic regions of the country (Myanmar Peace Monitor 2013; ENAC 2017; BEWG 2017). In Kawthoolei, the most coveted resources include timber, gold, and the hydropower potential of its rivers, including the free-flowing Salween River (BEWG 2011). Centralized control of resource development continues to provoke armed clashes, including ongoing skirmishes near the site of the proposed Hatgyi Dam on the Salween River (Karen Rivers Watch 2014, 2016; KHRG 2018b). The Hatgyi Dam site is on the southern border of the Salween Peace Park.

A recent report by the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) explains how meaningful reforms and protection for communities' land rights are impossible in the current peace negotiation process (KPSN 2018a). Policy proposals from the KNU's consultations with Karen communities and civil society must pass through what KPSN calls the "Five Gates," where Burmese government and military representatives have blocked all proposals that challenge their control over land and natural resources in the country. KPSN argues that the entire peace process needs to be reconstituted, independent of the military-drafted 2008 constitution. In other words, there is a need for radical alternatives to the current peace process. The

Salween Peace Park is just such an alternative, a refusal of the current failed process and an initiative by the KNU administration and Indigenous Karen people of Mutraw (Hpapun) District to protect their lands.

### *Mutraw District During the Peace Process*

To understand the role of the Salween Peace Park as an Indigenous Karen political project, it is necessary to examine the position of Mutraw District within the larger KNU struggle for self-determination. Heavy Burmese military offensives targeted Mutraw during the 1990s and early 2000s, forcibly displacing more than 80% of the district's inhabitants; many fled to refugee camps in Thailand, while others sought temporary shelter in the mountain forests (Karen Rivers Watch 2004; KHRG 1998). Despite these attacks, Mutraw has remained largely under KNU administrative control, and the 6,777-square kilometre district now forms the heart of the most significant area of self-governing Kawthoolei remaining (Jolliffe 2016; Brenner 2017; see map in *Figure 2*). Of the 100,000 Karen villagers estimated to live under exclusive KNU jurisdiction, more than 70,000 reside in Mutraw District. Hpapun town is the only centre of Burmese administration in Mutraw District, although the Burmese administrative centre of Kamarmaung is located in a mixed-administration zone on the southern border of Dwehlo Township (Jolliffe 2016). Excluding these Burmese enclaves, nearly 100% of Mutraw's inhabitants are of Sgaw Karen ethnicity, and the three main religions are animism, Christianity, and Buddhism (Sha Bwe Moo pers. comm. 2018/10/22).

Mutraw District is thus one of the last remaining strongholds of the Karen resistance movement (Jolliffe 2016). In fact, the area that is now Mutraw has never come under direct administrative control of any lowland kingdom or state. The Karen people of Mutraw, like many upland peoples in Southeast Asia, have long resisted incorporation into state structures of control (Scott 2009). During the British colonial period in Burma, Mutraw was part of the Salween District, administered as one of the semi-autonomous "Frontier Areas," where the British supported local leaders as extensions of their colonial apparatus

Map of Mutraw (Hpapun) District



Figure 2. Map of Mutraw District. Adapted from Karen Human Rights Group. [http://khrq.org/sites/default/files/karen\\_mu\\_traw.ipq](http://khrq.org/sites/default/files/karen_mu_traw.ipq) (accessed Sept 14, 2018)

(M. J. Smith 1991). These local leaders were tasked with upholding British colonial law and collecting taxes, but otherwise continued governing much as they had before. Although Mutraw is currently occupied by no fewer than 78 Burmese military installations (KPSN 2018b), most of the district remains beyond the reach of Burmese government administration (Jolliffe 2016).

Since the KNU signed the 2012 ceasefire and 2015 NCA, an uneasy truce has existed in Mutraw. Despite periodic clashes and occasional shootings, villagers have enjoyed greater freedom of movement and less likelihood of being shot on sight by Burmese military patrols (KHRG 2014, 2017). Burmese soldiers no longer indiscriminately burn Karen people's rice fields and villages, killing and raping as they did into the 2000s. Nevertheless, ongoing Burmese military presence throughout Mutraw prevents Karen refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from returning to their homes and lands (KHRG 2016; *Karen News* 2017; KWO 2018). Despite repeated requests from the KNU to demilitarize civilian areas (e.g., Naing 2017b), the Burmese military has not removed a single camp from KNU territory since the ceasefire began; to the contrary, they have reinforced their positions, adding no fewer than 13 new military camps since 2012 in Mutraw District alone (KPSN 2018b). In northern Mutraw where I conducted fieldwork, the military every year attempts to upgrade and expand its road network, violating ceasefire terms and provoking clashes with Mutraw District's armed wing, the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

Tensions came to a head in March 2018, when the Burmese military unexpectedly deployed an estimated 1,500 troops to seize an old strategic roadway between two military bases in northern Mutraw (KPSN 2018b, KPSN 2018c). The military's attempts to rebuild and expand this road through villagers' farmlands and forests provoked numerous armed clashes with KNLA soldiers, and more than 2,400 villagers were forced to flee their homes (KPSN 2018b). Tragically, my friend and research colleague Saw O Moo was ambushed and shot dead by Burmese soldiers near his home in Ler Mu Plaw on April 5 (*Burma Link* 2018). Although the Burmese military postponed the road after a May 17<sup>th</sup> meeting with KNU leaders,

they have not committed to stop construction (Nyein Nyein 2018). In fact, in a July 7<sup>th</sup> news article, Colonel Wunna Aung is quoted as saying, “We suspended the building of this road during the monsoon season and we will discuss restarting the building of this road in the coming open season” (Aung 2018, para. 3). The proposed road is located in the northern part of the Salween Peace Park.

Local people in Mutraw, KNU and villagers alike, distrust the Burmese military's intentions. KPSN accuses the Burmese military of “taking advantage of the ceasefire to accomplish what it was unable to do during earlier periods of widespread armed conflict: expand and upgrade its military infrastructure and capability to seize and control Indigenous Karen people’s lands” (KPSN 2018b, 3). Mutraw KNU leaders are also wary of the Burmese government civilian administration’s efforts to expand into southern parts of the district. They compare the “fire method” of armed invasion to the “submersion method” of expanding administrative control as the Burmese government uses education, health, and other services to expand its influence deeper into Karen territory (KNU Mutraw District, n.d.). Most KNLA leaders consider the expansion of central government administration to be an even greater threat to their long-term security than the ongoing Burmese military presence (Jolliffe 2016).

Thus, Mutraw District remains cautious and critical of a peace process that has so far failed to deliver on the KNU's chief demands of political autonomy, decentralized decision-making, and withdrawal of Burmese troops from Karen villagers’ lands. Mutraw is now at risk of political marginalization within the KNU, especially since KNU leaders signed the NCA in 2015, a decision steadfastly opposed by the Mutraw District leadership and their representatives at the Central KNU level, Vice-Chairwoman Zipporah Sein and General Baw Kyaw Heh (Brenner 2017). Both leaders lost their positions on the KNU's Standing Committee in the 2017 elections, although Baw Kyaw Heh remains Vice Chief of Staff of the KNLA (Naing 2017a; Jolliffe 2017).

It is in this context that the Salween Peace Park has been proposed. Rather than accepting peace on the Burmese military's terms, the Salween Peace Park articulates a local vision for peace that does not

abandon demands for self-determination and protection of the land and culture of Mutraw. The park plan also includes community development proposals in a bid to chart a radically different future for Mutraw District, an alternative to the militarized resource extraction that the Burmese military envisions for this place.

### *The Salween Peace Park as an Indigenous Conservation Initiative*

While the Salween Peace Park is a political tool to contribute to the peace process in Burma, it is much more than that. It is an initiative to seek international collaboration and assistance to protect the exceptional biodiversity and cultural values of Mutraw District from the threats of land expropriation and expansion of destructive development projects during the current ceasefire in Kawthoolei.

The Salween Peace Park is located within the “Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot,” which spans peninsular Southeast Asia and is recognized by IUCN for its exceptional biodiversity (Tordoff et al. 2012). Recent camera trap surveys in northern Kawthoolei by the Karen Wildlife Conservation Initiative identified seventeen mammal species with IUCN global rankings of Endangered, Vulnerable, or Near Threatened (S. S. B. Moo, Froese, and Gray 2017). Few areas in Southeast Asia remain with such an intact and diverse carnivore community; based on their data, the authors of the above study contend that northern Kawthoolei, including the proposed Salween Peace Park, harbour some of the most significant Bengal Tiger and Leopard populations, along with their ungulate prey, remaining in Southeast Asia. They also point out that this diverse and globally-threatened mammal community exists in close proximity to Indigenous Karen villagers who have inhabited these mountains for generations, and whose traditional taboos have historically protected these species from being hunted to extinction (S. S. B. Moo, Froese, and Gray 2017). The forests of Salween Peace Park can therefore be considered a biocultural phenomenon, a product of the relationship between Indigenous Karen villagers and their land (KESAN 2015a; Pungetti, Oviedo, and Hooke 2012; Gavin et al. 2015; Chen and Gilmore 2015).

The Salween Peace Park is also a proactive response to land expropriations happening in many parts of Kawthoolei during the ceasefire. Burma's preliminary reforms since 2011 have greatly accelerated foreign investment flows into the country, and the central government's classification of ethnic lands as uninhabited "waste lands" (Ferguson 2014) has produced an epidemic of land confiscation for industrial development purposes, as documented by the Karen Human Rights Group in numerous reports (KHRG 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018a). As Kevin Woods notes in his seminal piece on 'ceasefire capitalism,' Burmese military and civilian authorities "[allocate] land concessions in ceasefire zones as an explicit postwar military strategy to govern land and populations to produce regulated, legible, militarized territory" (Woods 2011, 747). In Kawthoolei, land confiscations are mostly correlated with hydropower projects, road construction, mining, and agricultural plantation development (KHRG 2018a).

Large-scale conservation also poses a growing threat to Karen villagers' lands in many parts of Kawthoolei. Despite commitments by some international conservation organizations, most notably the IUCN, to support community-based and Indigenous-led conservation (Kothari et al. 2012), others are promoting large-scale conservation in cooperation with central Burmese government agencies. Local communities increasingly experience a 'double squeeze' between land-grabbing for industrial development on one hand, and top-down conservation projects on the other hand. These pressures are already keenly felt in the Mergui-Tavoy District (Tanintharyi Region) of southern Kawthoolei, where international conservation organizations see Karen villagers' lands as places to implement large-landscape conservation projects for such charismatic species as Bengal Tiger (e.g., FFI 2016; UNDP 2017). These proposals have drawn skepticism from Indigenous Karen communities, who are striving to assert customary land governance and the right to conserve their own natural resources (TRIP NET & RKIPN 2016; CAT 2018).

In the highlands of Mutraw District, years of armed conflict have enforced isolation on the region. Central government land administration, industrial resource development, and top-down conservation



projects have not yet penetrated most of the district. The Salween Peace Park thus takes a proactive approach, articulating local people's vision for peace, conservation, and community development. Rejecting the government-dominated peace process, which fails to protect local communities' lands and natural resources, the people of Mutraw are offering an alternative rooted in their rights as Indigenous Karen people.

As an Indigenous conservation initiative committed to environmental peacebuilding (Barquet 2015), the Salween Peace Park thus presents an exceptional opportunity to explore links between biodiversity conservation, cultural survival, and Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination, all in a region emerging from more than 60 years of armed conflict between the Burmese military and Karen resistance forces.

### *Purpose of the Research*

There were two broad themes to my research. First, since Indigenous Karen land governance practices form the foundation of the Salween Peace Park, my fieldwork included an in-depth ethnographic case study into the ceremonial practices and spiritual-environmental relations of a largely animist Karen community within the Peace Park. My goal was to explore ways in which these spiritual relations constitute a foundation for environmental governance.

Second, my research explored the Salween Peace Park as a political tool to build peace, protect Karen lands, safeguard Karen cultural traditions, and promote Karen self-determination. My conceptual framework draws heavily on contemporary Indigenous scholarship from North America to understand how the Salween Peace Park navigates complex conservation politics while simultaneously constituting a sovereign refusal of the Karen people to be subjugated by the Burmese military and central government.

My research was applied activist research: although I was conducting fieldwork for this thesis, I collaborated with colleagues from KESAN and local communities to inform development of the Salween

Peace Park. These collaborations continue. In addition, I hope that findings presented in this thesis might be useful to other Indigenous communities who are faced with the need to codify their environmental governance practices as they engage in political struggles to protect their culture, assert inherent rights and responsibilities to their territories, and conserve the biodiversity on their traditional lands.

### *Research Questions and Central Argument*

My research explored the ways in which the Salween Peace Park initiative can strengthen and promote Karen communities' self-determination and the continued practice and evolution of Indigenous Karen land and natural resource governance, while also exploring the potential risks of such a project for local communities. Three main research questions guided my investigation:

1. What are the current community practices and protocols governing ownership, management, access, and use of land and natural resources among Karen communities in the Salween Peace Park area?
2. What are the proposed land and natural resource governance mechanisms of the Salween Peace Park? What is the relationship between these governance mechanisms and the community-based environmental governance practices identified in question (1)?
3. What are the political goals and strategies of the Salween Peace Park, and what principles from Indigenous political literatures of conservation can inform these goals and strategies?

Research findings presented in this thesis emphasize the importance of paying attention to the role spirits play in environmental governance in many Indigenous traditions, including those of Karen animists in the Salween Peace Park. I argue that Karen people's relationship with and obligation to the spirits constitute an administration for environmental governance in the absence of formalized rules, penalties, and human authority structures. In order to understand Karen environmental governance, it is therefore essential to take Karen spiritual relations seriously. These findings also have implications for

environmental research with other Indigenous and rural communities with spiritually-informed ways of relating to their traditional territories.

In my analysis of the Salween Peace Park as an Indigenous political project, I examine how Peace Park leaders are mobilizing Karen spiritual-environmental relations to protect the land. I argue that the politics of Indigenous conservation as illustrated in the Salween Peace Park can be broadly classified into two categories. First, there is the internal politics of strengthening social-spiritual relations and political traditions to assert Indigenous peoples' inherent existence as sovereign, self-determining nations. Second, the Salween Peace Park engages international discourses on Indigenous rights and biodiversity conservation, thus building alliances and drawing on various types of power in the struggle against ongoing Burmese military and administrative expansion. I argue that Indigenous conservation projects such as the Salween Peace Park must strategically engage politics of representation and recognition, while simultaneously mobilizing local people's political traditions and relationship with traditional territories to mount a sovereign refusal of state domination.

### *Thesis Outline*

In the following chapter, I present a review of literature that has guided and informed my understanding of Indigenous environmental governance and the politics of Indigenous conservation projects such as the Salween Peace Park. My research engages debates around ontology and draws heavily on the field of Indigenous studies to explore how peoples' spiritual relations and obligations to the land give rise to Indigenous legal orders, with unique expressions of territoriality and sovereignty. I also explore Indigenous political literatures, especially politics of recognition, sovereign refusal, and Indigenous resurgence, using these lenses to examine the Salween Peace Park's mobilization of conservation discourses to both build alliances and assert inherent rights and responsibilities to traditional territories.

Chapter 3 is my methodology chapter, where I describe my ethnographic research in a highland Karen community, and its basis in relationships established during previous work with KESAN. I also discuss my investigations of the Salween Peace Park. I pay particular attention to my positionality and its effect on my relationship with colleagues and participants in the research. My fieldwork was guided by community-based participatory research and Indigenous research paradigms, with a commitment to privileging Indigenous theory. The goal of my research, however imperfectly I was able to attain it in practice, was to understand Karen villagers' worlds on their own terms and to inform development of the Salween Peace Park as a political tool to protect the lands that these villagers call home.

In Chapter 4, I present findings from research conducted in the community of Kaw Thay Ghu, in the highlands of Mutraw District. Drawing on ethnographic descriptions from my fieldwork, I argue that the complex ceremonial practices and spiritual protocols of local people in this largely animist community combine to form a system of environmental governance. This chapter also describes how relations with the spirits create a network of protected forests in the inhabited landscape, and how spiritual taboos function to conserve biodiversity. In short, this chapter argues that spiritual relations and ceremonies are the most important driver of conservation and natural resource management among Karen communities in the highlands of Mutraw District, while also acknowledging physical management actions that are embedded within these relations and sacred responsibilities between humans, the land, and the spirits.

Chapter 5 focuses on the Salween Peace Park as an Indigenous political project. In this chapter, I explore the Peace Park's foundations in community-based conservation projects, including community forests, customary land protection initiatives, and wildlife sanctuaries. The chapter also discusses how the Peace Park mobilizes environmental relations described in Chapter 4 in a project to protect the land and assert Indigenous Karen peoples' inherent rights and responsibilities to their lands. I explore ways in which Indigenous-led conservation projects such as the Salween Peace Park complicate and enrich debates around politics of recognition, sovereign refusal, and Indigenous resurgence. Not only do Indigenous-led

conservation projects such as the Salween Peace Park engage political discourses beyond the occupying state entity, but these projects simultaneously constitute a sovereign assertion of social and spiritual relations, regardless of whether external actors recognize or acknowledge these relations.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by drawing together the threads of Indigenous ontology and the politics of Indigenous conservation, suggesting ways in which findings from this thesis can inform conversations with other Indigenous communities who are using conservation as a tool to reclaim and revitalize relations and responsibilities to their traditional territories.

## Chapter 2

### Literature and Key Concepts

My research engages with scholarship on Indigenous<sup>2</sup> ontologies, relations to the land, territory, sovereignty, and politics of recognition, with a particular focus on how these concepts apply to the relationship between Indigenous peoples and conservation. In my methodology discussion in Chapter 3, I explain my reasons for privileging Indigenous theory in my work, while examining my own positionality as a non-Indigenous settler from Canada. Suffice it to say here that I do not purport to speak with authority on Indigenous ways of knowing, but Indigenous scholarship deeply informs my approach to working with and for Indigenous Karen people in Burma. I hope that this chapter does justice to Indigenous relational ways of knowing, practices accountability toward relations involved in knowledge production (Wilson 2008), and engages with Indigenous theory in a respectful and "good way" (Kovach 2009, 146).

Indigenous scholars have been discussing their peoples' ways of knowing and political systems for decades (Todd 2016). However, to date much of this scholarship has not been widely applied to situations beyond white settler states. Similarly, although scholars such as Glen Coulthard (2014; see also Eisenberg 2014) question the ability of politics of recognition to advance Indigenous peoples' liberation, these critiques have so far not been extensively explored in the context of Indigenous conservation. My research therefore draws on critical Indigenous scholarship to understand environmental governance practices among Karen highlanders who are developing an Indigenous conservation initiative in resistance to violent state-making processes in southeastern Burma: the Salween Peace Park. In so doing, I hope to

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that Indigenous peoples worldwide have distinct cultures, and that there are risks in overgeneralizing this diversity. Nevertheless, many commonalities characterize Indigenous peoples' experience, including a spiritual relationship to traditional territories, a place-based cultural identity, typically non-state forms of social organization, and a marginalized position vis-à-vis state societies that occupy their territories. Thus, for the purposes of comparison and discussion, I use the term Indigenous in this thesis to refer broadly to people groups, including the Karen, who share these characteristics and experiences.

demonstrate not only the relevance of Indigenous theory to understanding ethnic politics in Southeast Asia, but also how such engagement can expand the empirical body of data that informs the development and application of Indigenous theoretical interventions in diverse contexts around the world.

### *Indigenous Environmental Relations and Relational Ontology*

To understand how concepts such as 'governance,' 'management,' or 'sovereignty' might apply (or not apply) within a particular Indigenous tradition, it is necessary to understand the ontology and epistemology that characterize people's relationship with their lands and natural resources. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines ontology as "the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being" ("Ontology" 2017) while epistemology is the "theory of knowledge," or how we know reality ("Epistemology" 2017). However, the line between ontology and epistemology may be blurred, especially in relational Indigenous knowledge systems. Cree scholar Shawn Wilson writes that, in an Indigenous knowledge paradigm, to know reality (ontology) is to form a relationship with that reality (epistemology); therefore, "reality is not an object but a process of relationships, and an Indigenous ontology is actually the equivalent of an Indigenous epistemology" (Wilson 2008, 73; cf. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, x).

Some scholars call such a relational ontology animism, defined in the *Encyclopedia of Anthropology* as "the belief that nature includes spirits, sacred forces, and similar extraordinary phenomena," and that "supernatural forces inhabit animals, plants, rocks, and other objects in nature" (Sponsel 2006, 81). However, this definition is problematic on at least two grounds. First, such an approach privileges a naturalistic western-scientific ontology and fails to take animistic ontologies seriously because it leaves unquestioned the ontological primacy of "objects in nature" while suggesting that animists merely 'believe' that such objects are imbued with supernatural forces. British religious scholar Graham Harvey calls this "the rather bad habit of thinking that 'we know' while 'they believe'" (Harvey 2013, 4; cf. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 192).

Second, Sponsel's definition of animism suggests that animist societies consider *all* "animals, plants, rocks, and other objects in nature" to be animate. Such a definition overlooks the relational character of an animist worldview. An entity is only animate in the context of relations that make it so (Ingold 2006; Sprenger 2016b). Among the Nayaka people in India, for example, entities as diverse as stones and elephants may possess spiritual forces (*devaru*) when they interact with humans in a special way; the rest of the time, they are just stones and elephants (Bird-David 2002). Similarly, among Anishinaabeg in Manitoba, some stones are animate, while others are not (Hallowell 2002 [1960]). Thus, an animist ontology is more than just the imputation of sentience and supernatural power to nonhuman beings and supposedly inanimate objects. It is a relational way of being in the world, or as Wilson (2008) writes, a reality that is relatedness itself.

In a relational Indigenous ontology, the category of "person" as a being with whom one can enter into relationship extends beyond humans: "'person' [is] an overarching category within which 'human person,' 'animal person,' 'wind person,' etc., are subcategories" (Hallowell 1960, cited in Bird-David 2002, 82). Nishnaabeg<sup>3</sup> scholar Leanne Simpson writes that her people recognize the personhood of nonhuman social beings and have traditionally maintained treaty relationships with animal and plant nations (Simpson 2011, 2017). Similarly, Niigaan Sinclair, another Anishinaabeg scholar, writes that

Indigenous nations are built on a notion of kinship that stretches not only to human beings but to the non-human world. It was the non-human world, we must remember, who adopted us to their nations. Gave us a place to live, their skins to wear, their bodies to eat. We are guests in these territories and must meet, confer, and offer gifts with them too (Sinclair 2017, para. 9).

This type of ontology, in which relations may be forged directly with animal nations which in turn are organized into human-like societies, is common especially among hunter-gatherer societies, not only on northeastern Turtle Island (North America), but also among Pacific Coast nations (Boas and Tate 1916),

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<sup>3</sup> Anishinaabeg and Nishnaabeg refer to dialects of the same Indigenous language in the central and northeastern parts of Turtle Island (North America).



hunters in Amazonia (Viveiros de Castro 2004; Blaser 2009), and among Chewong hunter-gatherers on the Malay Peninsula (Århem 2016b). This is what Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has called "perspectival" animism: a world in which each type of person, whether jaguar or salmon or human, lives in a human-like society but sees and experiences the world through "species-specific 'eyes'" (Århem 2016b, 17).

Most Indigenous societies in Southeast Asia, including the Karen, inhabit a slightly different cosmological landscape, albeit one that is no less relational. These societies are predominantly agricultural, with hunting playing a relatively minor role. These societies have also long interacted with lowland kingdoms and religions, in the Karen case mainly Buddhism and, within the past two centuries, Christianity.

Therefore, Southeast Asian animism differs from the 'perspectivism' that characterizes many hunter-gatherer societies in the Americas and circumpolar north (Århem 2016a). In Southeast Asia, ritual attention tends to focus on powerful spiritual "Owners of Land, Forest and Water" (Århem 2016b, 19), with whom villagers maintain mutual relations, "socializing humans and non-humans in the project of life-producing difference" (Sprenger 2016a, 44). Although hunter-gather societies may also form relations with powerful nature spirits (e.g., Feit 2004), direct relations between humans and animal and plant nations are vital, in contrast with Southeast Asian societies for whom direct spiritual relations between humans and wild animals and plants tend to be of less cosmological importance. I now turn to discussions of how spiritual relations lead to the emergence of Indigenous legal orders with particular attention to land and environmental governance.

### *Indigenous Law and 'Natural Resource Management'*

An ethic of reciprocity and mutual obligations to nonhuman social others guides Indigenous societies' relations with their lands and 'natural resources.' Dene scholar Glen Coulthard writes that

it is a profound misunderstanding to think of land or place as simply some material object of profound importance to Indigenous cultures (although it is this too); land ought to be understood as a field of relationships of things to each other (Coulthard 2014, 60–61).

Indigenous scholars write about "relational accountability" (Wilson 2008, 97) and the responsibilities to honour "all our relations" (Louis 2007, 133; Whiteman 2009), including nonhuman social entities such as animals, plants, and spirits. Each of these entities possesses agency within an Indigenous ontology, and each one therefore shares responsibility for upholding relationships, both among each other and with humans (McGregor 2009).

These social relations and mutual obligations constitute one of the sources of Indigenous law (Napoleon 2013; Borrows 2010), or what Cree legal scholar Tracey Lindberg calls natural law when she argues that "[Indigenous] law was not man made. Laws are natural and a reflection of the environments and territories that we as Indigenous citizens came from" (Lindberg 2007, 18). Indigenous law is also internalized law, passed on through stories and sacred teachings; Lindberg notes that "the law is inside us and we are obliged to live and enact it" (Lindberg 2007, 45). Such a legal order is fundamentally different from statutory legal systems grounded in a state-centric ontology, and which find their primary expression in human-legislated rules, regulations, penalties, and authority structures. While state legal ontologies are predicated on hierarchical authority, Indigenous legal ontologies tend to be more relational and emergent, involving numerous sources of agency beyond the human (Napoleon 2013; Borrows 2010). Therefore, humans cannot unilaterally change or annul these laws (Lindberg 2007).

Thus, Indigenous law is a set of mutual obligations and responsibilities between humans and nonhuman social others, where the land constitutes a "field of relationships" (Coulthard 2014, 61). The language of property relations and control over land are inappropriate, and it is just as accurate to say that land owns the people as it is to say that people own the land (Lindberg 2007; Ingold 1986). More than that, in an Indigenous ontology, land is a subject in social relations, not merely an object of property relations.

The concept of land as a social relation has profound implications for understanding natural resource management. Multiple initiatives globally aim to integrate Indigenous and western scientific knowledges to improve resource management, with varying degrees of success (Ludwig 2016; Berkes 2012; Berkes, Colding, and Folke 2000; Johnson et al. 2016). In many cases, scientists and bureaucrats treat local and Indigenous knowledge as merely another form of data to incorporate into existing scientific knowledge and management regimes. Knowledge that challenges scientific ontology, such as social-relational understandings of the world, is frequently dismissed or marginalized (Ludwig 2016; Nadasdy 2005). Although scholars have critiqued the reification of Indigenous knowledges as fundamentally different from scientific knowledge (e.g., Agrawal 1995), the reality is that *all* knowledge systems, including post-Enlightenment western science, operate within a culturally-informed ontological understanding of the world and how it works.

Ken Lertzman seems to overlook some of these ontological differences when he promotes "blending of traditional [Indigenous] and western science-based management systems" (Lertzman 2009, 352). Granted, this is a laudable goal, and there is certainly potential for productive collaboration (Ludwig 2016). However, although Lertzman acknowledges that Indigenous peoples' environmental relationships "reflect . . . the deep structure of their beliefs about their role in the world, their cosmology and values" that "focus on reverence and respect for the resources being used and their environmental context" (Lertzman 2009, 340, 351), he never interrogates the ontological categories of 'management' or 'resources.' To the contrary, Lertzman elucidates a supposedly universal definition of management as "a set of actions taken to guide a system towards achieving desired goals and objectives" and a management system as

the sum of these actions, the goals and objectives, the process through which they are legitimized by social norms, values, and institutions, and the actors involved in carrying them out. These definitions should apply equally to management in both modern and traditional societies. (Lertzman 2009, 342).

But what if "actors" include nonhuman social others? What if the very concept of management lacks intellectual purchase within a world that includes nonhuman social others with agency? For example,

among many Indigenous peoples in Australia, "human affairs are always contextualized in sentient landscapes," and therefore "management as a deliberate intervention into human–environmental relations towards specific goals is almost literally unthinkable" (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006). Although Indigenous peoples, like any resource managers, may have desires and values that guide human interactions with the land, these are enacted from a different ontological position, and the imperative becomes to govern oneself in relation to both human and nonhuman social others, who also have agency within this relationship. In other words, nonhuman social beings and spiritual entities are key actors in 'natural resource management,' and 'resources' may be social actors in their own 'management' (Brightman 1993; Feit 2004; Nadasdy 2007; Blaser 2009). This exposes the contradictions of trying to force Indigenous environmental relations into a western scientific ontological framework, which assumes that human managers exert a certain level of control over the resources that they manage.

In sum, 'management' within an Indigenous ontological framework ought to be understood as managing oneself and maintaining respectful relations with social others in a sentient landscape. Indigenous peoples tend to see land as a field of social relations and mutual obligations, while conservationists and resource managers tend to be more interested in ownership and access protocols, management regulations, and penalties for infractions (e.g., Ostrom 2009; Cox, Arnold, and Villamayor Tomás 2010). These are not the same thing, and it is a question whether they are even commensurable. In order to form socially just collaborations between Indigenous peoples and conservation interests, it is thus necessary to rethink the "conceptual building blocks" (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006, 323), such as management, that inform relations between human and nonhuman beings on the land.

Environmental relations among Southeast Asian animist societies such as the Karen also constitute a system of Indigenous law and environmental governance that resembles the legal orders that Indigenous scholars in North America write about. Since, among most Southeast Asian highlander societies, the most important relationship is between humans and the spiritual owners of the land and water, human

obligations to these spirits shape the emergent legal order. Scholars of Southeast Asian societies write of so-called "founders' rituals" (Århem 2016a, 297) or "founders' cults":

typically, founders' cults are based on a contract between the original founder/s of a settlement and the spirit owner/s of the territory cleared for human use. In return for regular offerings, the spirit/s ensure the fertility of the land in the form of bountiful crops . . . (Kammerer and Tannenbaum 2003, 3).

This contract between Southeast Asian villagers and the spiritual owners of the water, land, and forest establishes reciprocal obligations that villagers cannot unilaterally disregard without facing spiritual consequences. As will become clear in Chapter 4, Karen villagers' ceremonial and ritual obligations to these spirits constitute a legal and administrative framework for governing villagers' relationships with the waters, lands, and forests of their village territories. Therefore, it is impossible to understand Indigenous Karen 'natural resource management' outside of this ontological framework of spiritual relations, along with the ceremonial and ritual obligations that these relationships entail.

### *On Territory, Sovereignty, and Environmental Dispossession*

The modern Westphalian state model defines sovereignty in terms of exclusive control over a Cartesian bounded territory, control over the borders of that territory, mutual recognition by other states, and autonomy from coercion by other states (Krasner 2001). This ideal of state sovereignty is never fully realized in practice. States may voluntarily surrender some of their autonomy, as in international agreements, while power imbalances may allow stronger states to exercise influence and control over weaker ones. In addition, a state's claim to ultimate authority within its borders frequently encounters domestic actors who resist that authority, to varying degrees of success (Lunstrum 2013; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995).

Nevertheless, a state-centric model of territory and sovereignty emphasizes power and a "monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force" (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995, 385) over people and land. This model emphasizes land in terms of property relations as an object, "a finite resource that is distributed,

allocated and owned. . . a resource over which there is competition" (Elden 2010, 804). State institutions tend to see land as state property, a source of natural resources for national development (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011).

Indigenous peoples' political traditions present a direct challenge to state-centric ontologies of territory and sovereignty. Since, in Indigenous ontologies, humans maintain social relations and mutual responsibilities toward the nonhuman, it is unthinkable to consider land as a material object of control and exclusive jurisdiction. Many Indigenous scholars argue that the modern concept of sovereignty, a product of European imperial and colonial statecraft, is itself problematic (Alfred 2005; McCue 2007; Lindberg 2007). For many Indigenous peoples, the goal of self-determination does not necessarily mean the creation of an independent state, with its own bureaucracy and exclusive jurisdiction (Coulthard 2014; Day 2001). Rather, Indigenous sovereignty movements strive for freedom from state control and repression, and the ability to practice cultural and political traditions that maintain people's relationships and responsibilities to each other, to other human societies, and to the land (Coulthard 2014; Alfred 2009; Simpson 2011; Monture-Angus 1999; McCue 2007). Indeed, Lindberg suggests that the responsibility to uphold natural law and maintain obligations to the land constitutes "more than sovereignty" (Lindberg 2007, 63).

A relational understanding of Indigenous 'more-than-sovereignty' also sheds light on how Indigenous peoples might share their territories with human others. Numerous scholars have pointed out the problems that arise when Cartesian understandings of territory as bounded, mutually exclusive polygons are imposed on Indigenous territorial relations, whether in Coast Salish territories in western North America (Thom 2009) or Karen communities in the uplands of Southeast Asia (Roth 2009). Leanne Simpson describes how a relational understanding of territory informs her Nishnaabeg Nation's dealings with their human neighbours:

'boundaries,' in an Indigenous sense, are about relationships. As someone moves away from the centre of their territory—the place they have the strongest and most familiar bonds and

relationships—their knowledge and relationship to the land weakens. This is a boundary, a zone of decreasing Nishnaabeg presence as you move out from the centre of the territory. This is a place where one needs to practice good relations with neighbouring nations (Simpson 2011, 89).

Incidentally, this spatial pattern also characterized the territoriality of pre-modern states in Southeast Asia which, rather than having sharply-defined borders like modern states, possessed a territorial sovereignty that gradually diminished with increasing distance and/or inaccessibility of the terrain from the state centre (Scott 2009). However, the basic characteristics of that relationship are still quite different from what Simpson is describing, since these ancient states were imperial powers whose main aims were control, domination, wealth accumulation, and territorial expansion, even if these aims were sometimes concealed behind religious obligations (Scott 2009).

Of course, warfare, including struggles over land and natural resources, has always existed in Indigenous societies, just as it has in imperial state-building societies. In addition, as McCue points out, many Indigenous peoples "exercise attributes of sovereignty similar to those upon which Western societies found their state systems – such as protecting and defending territorial boundaries" (McCue 2007, 26; see also Napoleon 2013). However, an Indigenous relational ontology would suggest that what at first glance appears to be merely a struggle over land and natural resources is likely more complex and informed by obligations to nonhuman relations, including the land itself. For example, ancient headhunting traditions in much of Southeast Asia promulgated extensive warfare between neighbouring groups, the primary objective of which was usually not to seize control of land and natural resources, but rather to obtain human heads as sacrifices to placate the spirits (Århem 2016a).

Processes of state territorialization have historically visited terrible violence on Indigenous social relations with the land, and they continue to do so today, not least in Burma. According to Vandergeest and Peluso (1995, 388), "[t]erritorialization is about excluding or including people within particular geographic boundaries, and about controlling what people do and their access to natural resources within those boundaries." In other words, it is the active creation of territory as an object and technique of

control. State territorialization, legal fantasies of *terra nullius* aside, never occurs on a blank slate, but rather on the socially-inscribed territories of Indigenous peoples. In other words, the state must first undermine or deterritorialize Indigenous peoples' social and spiritual relations to territory, before it can reconfigure or reterritorialize these spaces as state property and natural resources.

State territorialization relies on representational discourses that redefine Indigenous peoples' homelands as state forest (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Peluso and Vandergeest 2011), abstract nature (Laungaramsri 2002), or industrial resource frontier (Berger 1977). This abstraction of Indigenous peoples' social, lived space is accomplished through techniques of mapping and land-use planning. Although scholars such as Vandergeest and Peluso, as well as Robin Roth (2009) and Brian Thom (2009), have explored the violence inherent in rendering rural peoples' social-territorial relations as abstract space, these accounts tend to overlook spiritual relationships to land and territory of Indigenous peoples such as highland Karen in Thailand and Burma. The persistence of Indigenous peoples' social and spiritual relations to their lands partly explains why state territorialization of Indigenous lands is always a contested and incomplete project.

Taking Indigenous relational ontologies of territory seriously means that analyses of environmental dispossession solely in terms of access to resources, livelihoods, or food security remain conceptually incomplete. In fact, the terminology of dispossession itself is misleading since it implies land as property rather than social relation. For Indigenous communities, land is not merely a resource, and therefore dispossession is not merely loss of that resource; rather, dispossession undermines Indigenous peoples' social obligations and responsibilities to practice proper relations with the land. As Leanne Simpson writes, for Indigenous peoples such as her Nishnaabeg nation, "the opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual *attachment*" (Simpson 2017, 43, emphasis in original). Narratives of dispossession that fail to attend to problems of ontology risk commodifying and misrepresenting the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their ancestral territories.



### *Engaging Ontological Pluralism: Politics and Practice*

As the discussion so far demonstrates, Indigenous peoples experience land as a field of social relations and reciprocal responsibilities, and this has implications for understanding Indigenous communities' environmental governance systems, 'natural resource management,' territoriality, sovereignty, and impacts of environmental dispossession. However, the academy has often failed to take Indigenous ontologies seriously. As Kwakwaka'wakw scholar Sarah Hunt writes,

Indigenous knowledge is rarely seen as legitimate on its own terms, but must be negotiated in relation to pre-established modes of inquiry . . . Knowledge production within dominant institutions . . . involve[s] epistemic violence – the work of discourse in creating and sustaining boundaries around what is considered real and, by extension, what is unable to be seen as real (Hunt 2014, 29).

Hunt challenges scholars to confront this epistemic violence in their work by resisting academic authorities' limitations on what knowledge is considered legitimate or real.

Such an ethical and methodological commitment has been taken up in anthropology and related critical social sciences by the so-called ontological turn (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Far from the metaphysical project of elucidating the nature and character of the 'real world' that might be associated with the word ontology, the ontological turn is a call to resist all claims to ultimate reality and to keep the "[ontological] horizon perpetually open" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 11). It is a radical commitment to embrace the partiality and situatedness of all knowledge. The ontological turn challenges scholars to rethink taken-for-granted concepts such as "society, culture, politics and power" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 5) – or things like land, natural resources, management, conservation, peace, and self-determination. It is a challenge not only to interrogate how these concepts operate in the world, but to question assumptions about what these things are in the first place. The ontological turn is therefore a call to overturn the privilege of analytical theory over the contingencies of ethnographic cases, and to allow ethnographic contingencies to inform and reform our most basic concepts, an extension of what J.K. Gibson-Graham (2014) refer to as a weak theory approach.

To understand how this might work in practice, consider Marcel Mauss's famous treatise on gift exchange by people in South Pacific cultures, for whom these 'gifts' contain spirits (Mauss 1990 [1950]). A classic approach to the problem of the gift would be to assume that Indigenous interlocutors and anthropological investigators have different "perspectives" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 179) on the same object. The problem of what the gift is thus becomes merely a matter of perspective. The ontological turn, by contrast, challenges the ethnographer to ask, "what is it about the way I define gifts that makes this native assumption appear incongruous? How do I need to change my definition in order to remove this intensional incongruity?" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 188). The implications are far-reaching:

When it comes to taking people seriously . . . the problem is not with people's beliefs [as if they were in error or mistaken], but with our own inability as anthropologists sensibly to convey what these people say and do . . . doing so may involve modulating [our] conceptual repertoire . . . so as to be able to arrive at sensible descriptions of the ethnographic objects in question (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 194).

The question then becomes, how is it possible to translate between different ontological positionings and advocate for respect and accommodation of Indigenous peoples' unique ways of being in the world, especially given oppressive power relations that characterize Indigenous peoples' interactions with state societies that occupy their lands?

Drawing on his work with Amazonian Indigenous peoples, Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro proposes what he calls "controlled equivocation" (Viveiros de Castro 2004). Although it is often necessary to translate Indigenous peoples' concepts into terms that the modern state society might recognize, such as management or conservation, Viveiros de Castro admonishes researchers to "avoid losing sight of the difference concealed within equivocal 'homonyms' between our language and that of the people we study, since we and they are never talking about the same things" (cited in Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 187). Controlled equivocation embraces and acknowledges difference, rather than trying to subsume difference into familiar referents of the dominant culture, what Blaser calls "saming" (Blaser 2014, 52).

The ontological turn is a political project that links ontological self-determination with political self-determination of Indigenous peoples and other marginalized minorities (Viveiros de Castro 2003; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). As Mohawk scholar Marlene Brant Castellano asserts, “fundamental to the exercise of self-determination is the right of peoples to construct knowledge in accordance with self-determined definitions of what is real and what is valuable” (Brant Castellano 2004, 102). In the context of conservation and natural resource management, Ludwig writes that

the political self-determination of a community to pursue its own goals . . . requires ontological self-determination . . . [which] implies, for example, that collaboration in conservation projects should not require that Indigenous communities articulate their knowledge in terms of Western scientific ontologies (Ludwig 2016, 43).

The ontological turn as elucidated by Holbraad and Pedersen makes a valuable theoretical and methodological contribution to this struggle. This approach espouses an “anti-normative stance” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 294), rejecting claims to absolute truth and committing to radical conceptual reflexivity. It therefore opens up space for a politics of potential, a politics of worlds as they could be, which after all are constantly forming and being formed (Ingold 2016).

Such a radical anti-normative stance warrants a caveat, and that is simply that not all worlds are equally desirable (Blaser 2014). Furthermore, actualization of some worlds may preclude the very survival of others, such as when industrial development projects destroy Indigenous peoples' lands and undermine relations to the land and spiritual beings (Blaser 2014; Feit 2004). Blaser (2014) thus proposes the concept of political ontology to acknowledge that there are multiple worlds perpetually in the making that, while distinct in certain ways, overlap in others. Blaser intends this to stimulate discussion about the inherent value of multiple worlds to exist, clashes between incommensurable worlds, and choices that people make between desirable and undesirable worlds.

Related to political ontology is what Glen Coulthard calls “grounded normativity,” a system of ethics and actions (worlding, if you will) deeply informed by his Dene people's unique relationship with and obligations to the land, to each other, and to nonhuman social persons (Coulthard 2014, 60; see also

Simpson 2017; Coulthard and Simpson 2016). At first glance, grounded normativity might seem contrary to Holbraad and Pedersen's anti-normative approach. However, grounded normativity is rooted in *particular* cultural traditions, legal orders, fields of relations, and mutual obligations between humans and social others. This seems consistent with Holbraad and Pedersen's call to reject claims of an ultimate normative reality, which is what I understand them to mean when they propose an anti-normative stance. Thus, the ontological turn makes space for different projects of grounded normativity to develop in the constant process of worlding, and the 'groundedness' of a grounded normativity approach emphasizes respect and mutual obligations to all relations, both human and non-human, making it compatible with Blaser's political ontology approach.

In sum, in order to support Indigenous peoples' struggles for political self-determination, a concomitant struggle must also be waged for ontological self-determination and ontological pluralism, both within the academy and in the world of policy. The ontological turn is an effort to grapple with such issues. This approach advocates overturning the privileged position of analytical theory over ethnographic observations, arguing that ethnographic materials (and research participants, for that matter) should inform conceptual frameworks, not the other way around. The ontological turn eschews normative commitments in favour of keeping ontological horizons open and employs techniques of 'controlled equivocation' to communicate difference without subsuming one ontological position into another. Insights from political ontology and grounded normativity complement and add nuance to the anti-normative stance of the ontological turn, joining together in the rejection of a universalist normative view of the world in favour of one grounded in political-ethical commitments and mutual obligations to the land and social relations.

Conflicting ontological viewpoints permeate Indigenous peoples' struggles for recognition of their rights in a context where the dominant state society's ontology holds near hegemonic status. In the

remaining sections of this chapter, I review key debates around the politics of recognition, especially as these politics might apply in the case of Indigenous conservation projects.

### *Indigenous Sovereignty, Power, and Politics of Recognition*

In relations between Indigenous peoples and colonial nation-states that occupy their territories, there is a tendency for previous regimes of genocide, exclusion, and forced assimilation to give way to seemingly more benevolent forms of accommodation couched in the language of rights and recognition (Coulthard 2014). Even in Burma, where violent military campaigns against non-Burman ethnic peoples continue in many parts of the country, ongoing negotiations with armed organizations, including the KNU, increasingly involve discourses around recognition: recognition of self-determination rights, recognition of land rights, recognition of cultural, linguistic, and education rights, and so on (Jolliffe 2016; South and Lall 2016; Crouch 2015). In this section, I sketch out debates concerning the usefulness of this recognition paradigm for Indigenous peoples striving to assert their sovereignty and protect ancestral territories.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to briefly review two related concepts. The first of these is sovereignty, which I have already introduced in the discussion on Indigenous ontology. Recall that, in contrast to state-centric models of sovereignty that entail exclusive control and jurisdiction over a bounded territory, Indigenous peoples' understandings of sovereignty tend to emphasize freedom and the ability to practice and uphold cultural and political traditions that maintain people's relationships and responsibilities to each other, to other human societies, and to the land (Alfred 2009; Simpson 2011; Coulthard 2014). The corollary to sovereignty is self-determination, which is expressed as freedom from coercion and control, the ability to practice autonomy within these relationships, and respect for the autonomy of others (Simpson 2017).

The second concept is power. Many Indigenous scholars emphasize spiritual power as something that is inherently invested in humans and other social beings within a relational world (McCue 2007;

Lindberg 2007). Such a theory of power emphasizes power within rather than power as a tool of control over another. This sacred and inherent source of power should not be overlooked, and in fact is a key source of power within the Indigenous resurgence movement, described in more detail below.

Power may also refer to the ability to exercise agency within relationships that are often characterized by unequal power relations – that is, unequal abilities to exercise free agency. Although an exhaustive study of how power operates is beyond the scope of this paper, I find Murray and Burrows' (2017) tripartite distinction between material, institutional, and discursive sources of power useful for my analysis. Material sources of power refer to access and control over material resources; institutional power denotes rules and social structures that differentially empower and constrain different actors; and discursive power refers to the ways in which notions of what is good or right may confer legitimacy on certain actors vis-à-vis others within a contested power relationship (Murray and Burrows 2017). Also, as Murray and Burrows point out, it is useful to view power as pluralistic and always contested, not merely a case of a stronger power dominating a weaker one.

Subaltern social groups' struggles against oppression and marginalization have often involved a quest for legal recognition by the dominant state society. In his essay on the subject, Charles Taylor writes of the ways these groups seek recognition of their right to maintain identities that are unique from the cultural mainstream (Taylor 1995). The recognition these groups seek is an acknowledgement that their culture is worthy of protection, and the quest for recognition includes demands for political rights which may be distinct from rights enjoyed by other groups, but which are necessary to ensure the marginalized group's survival. Especially critical for my analysis in this thesis, recognition by others may allow marginalized communities to build alliances and draw on new sources of material, institutional, and discursive power in their struggles against oppression.

The terms of recognition are very important. Many scholars have questioned the ability of a politics of recognition to transform oppressive relations between state societies and Indigenous peoples

(Coulthard 2014b; Eisenberg et al. 2014; Alfred 2009; Simpson 2011). Unequal power relations between state societies and Indigenous peoples preclude mutual recognition. In the absence of mutuality, a politics of recognition is bereft of emancipatory potential, since the dominant state society does not depend upon nor require reciprocal recognition by Indigenous nations (Coulthard 2014). Within such a recognition framework, the state unilaterally defines the terms on which recognition may be granted or withheld. As Williams notes,

[s]tates' strategic interests—in maintaining sovereign authority within their territories, rendering populations legible for the purposes of administration, fostering economic growth, and containing and managing social conflict—actively shape and significantly constrain the policies of recognition that they embrace (Williams 2014, 5).

With such constraints, for an Indigenous nation to seek recognition as a thing that can be either granted or withheld by the state is to subordinate itself to the authority and superiority of that state (Day 2001; Tully 2000). Even when limited political rights are recognized within such a paradigm, it is always on the terms of the state as the recognizer, and therefore these rights inevitably remain subordinate to the demands of the dominant society (Day 2001).

When the dominant state society's values frame the relationship with Indigenous peoples and constrain the terms of recognition, the process of seeking recognition may itself compel people to conform to the state society's ontology. Coulthard describes how this has apparently occurred in Dene struggles for self-determination in northern Canada: there has been a

reorientation of Indigenous struggle from one that was once deeply *informed* by the land as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations . . . to a struggle that is now largely *for* land, understood here as some material resource to be exploited in the capital-accumulation process (Coulthard 2014, 78, emphasis in original; see also Lindberg 2007, 329–30).

This is perhaps one of the most insidious risks of engaging in politics of recognition: rather than attaining recognition of their ontologies, political traditions, and ways of life, Indigenous peoples' engagement in dominant state discourses may erode these distinctive values, as negotiators are compelled to speak the language of the state to attain recognition. This kind of "deep colonizing" (Rose 1996) happens at an

ontological level and can often be an unintended consequence of engaging politics of recognition given the frequent unwillingness of state societies to accommodate Indigenous peoples' unique relationships with their traditional territories. Coulthard writes that "the colonized will [fail] to reestablish themselves as truly self-determining: as creators of the terms, values, and conditions by which they are to be recognized" (Coulthard 2014, 39).

Critics of the politics of recognition point out that the problem is not seeking recognition per se, but rather the terms of recognition (Williams 2014). Political philosopher Patchen Markell concludes his book on the subject by suggesting that hope for an emancipatory politics of recognition

might lie in the multiplication and diffusion of the sites around which struggles for recognition are carried out, resisting the putatively sovereign state's implicit claim to hold a monopoly on the distribution of recognition and to be the ultimate arbiter of contests over identity ... (Markell 2003, 188–89).

As will become evident in this thesis, Indigenous conservation projects such as the Salween Peace Park do just that, expanding the scope of recognition beyond the confines of hierarchical state-subject relationships and opening possibilities for Indigenous peoples to negotiate the terms of recognition and alliances with Indigenous and non-Indigenous others. In addition, these projects are grounded in Indigenous peoples' practice of self-recognition, as they "[shape] their own social orders without the approval or permission of any authority beyond themselves" (Williams 2014, 10). This is the essence of sovereign refusal and the Indigenous resurgence movement, to which I now turn.

### *Sovereign Refusal, Indigenous Resurgence, and "Tradition"*

Perceiving that struggles for recognition on the state's terms are ultimately incapable of achieving the liberation of Indigenous nations, many scholars and activists increasingly advocate sovereign refusal of state domination (Alfred 2009; Simpson 2011; Coulthard 2014). This strategy focuses on "building or practising alternative cultures of politics from the ground up" (Singh 2014, 48), rooted in the political traditions and worldviews of the Indigenous society; it is, in essence, a form of self-recognition and self-



affirmation (Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2017). By strengthening and rebuilding from the inside, Indigenous nations assert their values, worldviews, and vision for peaceful coexistence with non-Indigenous societies on their territories. Kanien'kehá:ka scholar Taiaiake Alfred notes the power of this approach:

If the goal is to obliterate the oppressor's power altogether, any challenge will fail; if we seek instead to initiate a different kind of challenge, in the form of regenerating our own existences in the face of the oppressor's false claims to authority, legitimacy, and sovereignty, we cannot but succeed and, thus, force the state to transform itself (Alfred 2009, 202).

Some scholars call this revitalization of Indigenous political traditions "Indigenous resurgence" (Simpson 2011, 2017; Alfred 2009; Corntassel 2012; Yerxa 2014). Indigenous resurgence involves building self-determination from within the strength of Indigenous peoples' relations to the land, to each other, and to all social beings in their territories (Simpson 2011, 2017). Resurgence is a sovereign refusal of the state's efforts to sever these relationships. Rather than seeking recognition of rights granted by the state, the resurgence movement asserts inherent rights and responsibilities that flow from Indigenous peoples' unique relationship with, and mutual obligations to, their ancestral territories. In other words, this is a movement for self-determination from within an Indigenous relational ontology.

Resurgence emphasizes revitalization of Indigenous cultural and political traditions. Alfred advocates what he calls "self-conscious traditionalism" as a way for Indigenous nations to identify "core values and principles from the vast store of [their] traditional teachings, and selectively [employ] those aspects of their tradition that are appropriate to the present social, political, and economic realities" in order to "construct a framework for government that represents a viable alternative" to oppressive state governance structures (Alfred 1999, 81). Indigenous peoples' mobilization of tradition, including ways that traditions are reformulated, modified, adapted, and even invented (Dickson-Gilmore 1992) may occur as a self-conscious revival, a way to assert identities, values, and histories in opposition to state oppression (Lynes 2002; Dickson-Gilmore 1992; Alfred 2009; Scott 2009). The form traditional practices take may change, while core values and principles remain, albeit in ways adapted to contemporary realities. Thus,

Simpson urges Indigenous peoples to “reclaim the very best practices of our traditional cultures, knowledge systems and lifeways” (Simpson 2011, 18) in ways that respect the dynamism and fluidity of the cultural contexts in which these traditions developed. This is grounded normativity in practice (Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2017).

On the other hand, when the dominant state society’s values frame the relationship with Indigenous peoples, the latter may be compelled to perform a particular Indigeneity that state discourses prescribe as authentic and deserving of recognition or cultural protection (Eisenberg 2014). In other words, rather than traditions being defined by the values and contemporary lived realities of Indigenous peoples, as Alfred and Simpson advocate, these traditions instead come to be defined and constrained by the dominant state society. Tania Li identified these issues in her work in Indonesia. She writes that, in the struggle to protect lands and livelihoods in Indonesia, “[e]ven NGOs dedicated to the restoration of the integrity of indigenous cultures and the preservation of traditional environmental knowledge imagine an ideal state (sometimes projected as a prior state) to which people should conform” (Li 2001, 651–52). In such a discourse, rights and protections as distinct communities become conditional upon the performance of essentialized identities, living in imagined harmony with nature (Li 2002).

Mobilization of tradition as grounded normativity, within a politics of sovereign refusal and resurgence, helps to mitigate the risk of being compelled to perform essentialized identities in the quest for recognition, either from the state or from powerful non-state actors such as conservation organizations. This approach to politics centres reciprocal recognition “as a mechanism for nurturing and strengthening internal relationships” (Simpson 2017, 182) – including relationships with the land and the spirits of the land. Coming from this place of self-recognition, Indigenous peoples then seek to “make contact with all who would engage [them] in a constructive manner” (hooks 1990, 22, quoted in Coulthard 2014, 48). Indigenous resurgence thus strives to disrupt and challenge hierarchical structures of oppression by mobilizing Indigenous peoples’ political systems and sacred rights and responsibilities

within their traditional territories – rights and responsibilities that are inherent and that flow from ancient relationships between people, the land, and social beings that inhabit their territories. These political rights and responsibilities are not something that can be granted or withheld by the state.

### *Politics of Recognition and Indigenous Conservation Politics: Opportunities and Ruptures*

My thesis investigates Indigenous peoples' efforts to protect traditional territories, including people's relationships and responsibilities to the land. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Indigenous peoples seek to harness the potential of conservation designations to transform these tools of environmental dispossession (Dowie 2011; Orozco-Quintero, Burlando, and Robinson 2015) and "green grabbing" (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012) into tools of environmental *repossession* (Big-Canoe and Richmond 2014; Tobias 2015). Indigenous conservation initiatives strategically engage symbolic politics at many scales to unsettle oppressive power relations. However, to date there has been little scholarly investigation of Indigenous conservation models through the lenses of politics of recognition and Indigenous resurgence (but see Garcia 2015).

In this section, I briefly sketch out the political contours of two models of Indigenous peoples' engagement with conservation: co-management arrangements on the one hand, and ICCAs on the other hand. Indigenous conservation projects complicate debates around politics of recognition, since these projects engage symbolic discourses far beyond the limits of state authority structures that occupy any one Indigenous community's territory. Thus, although many of the general risks of recognition politics remain, engaging conservation discourses also afford possibilities for disrupting state power. This is particularly so in the case of ICCAs.

Although co-management arrangements may hold some potential for Indigenous peoples to regain partial jurisdiction and 'participate' with state agencies in the management of their traditional territories, these arrangements often fail to transcend oppressive relationships between Indigenous peoples and

state societies. Similar to ways in which a politics of cultural recognition often marginalizes Indigenous peoples' political movements for emancipation, co-management arrangements tend to focus on technical aspects such as the application of Indigenous knowledge to resource management problems, while persistently marginalizing Indigenous peoples' political goals. This 'antipolitics' is a source of frustration for Indigenous peoples who hoped that co-management would be a way to regain control over processes that affect their communities and relationships with their traditional territories (Nadasdy 2005; Caruso 2014; Youdelis 2016). In nearly all co-management arrangements, the state government retains ultimate authority to make management decisions, and Indigenous peoples' inherent rights to access, use, and steward their own lands may be reduced to 'privileges' granted or withheld at the pleasure of the state (Sandlos 2014; Stevens 2014c; cf. Day 2001).

The structure of state-Indigenous relations in co-management agreements rarely permits significant disruption of the state regime and its ontology of management, conservation, and natural resources (Sandlos 2014; Nadasdy 1999; Ludwig 2016; Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006). Again, this demonstrates the futility of seeking recognition on the state's terms, whether in conservation co-management or in negotiations between Indigenous peoples and state societies more generally: these negotiations consistently fail to achieve equal respect for Indigenous peoples' governance systems, ways of knowing, and ways of life. Political marginality and ontological/epistemological marginality coincide and mutually reinforce one another (Stevens 2014b; Nadasdy 2005). Co-management arrangements tend to only recognize limited cultural rights, stopping short of recognizing inherent governance rights that flow from Indigenous peoples' relationships with their traditional territories.

In contrast to most co-management arrangements, ICCAs empower Indigenous nations to assert their own governance, independent of formal recognition by state societies that occupy their traditional territories (Stevens 2014a). As Kothari et al. (Kothari et al. 2012) point out, ICCAs differ from other conservation designations because they explicitly legitimize Indigenous-led conservation, rather than the

mere participation of Indigenous communities in state-controlled protected areas. Although external advisors from state or civil society organizations may assist communities with the development or management of ICCAs, “these would not have a decisive say in the decision-making” (Kothari et al. 2012).

In many cases, ICCAs are not officially recognized by state governments. However, even under these circumstances, ICCAs are a way for Indigenous peoples to assert “sovereignty over contested terrain” while “developing a sort of counter-governance” on their territories (Murray and King 2012, 389, 390). In other words, ICCAs uphold Indigenous law, affirm Indigenous peoples' mutual obligations to their territories, refuse state claims to sovereignty, and resist states' efforts to neutralize and subsume Indigenous sovereignty within a hierarchical recognition framework.

ICCAs also engage in politics of recognition as they build alliances with conservation and Indigenous rights interest groups, allowing Indigenous peoples to draw on sources of material, institutional, and discursive power (Murray and Burrows 2017) beyond the confines of state authority structures. Conservation alliances may provide funding (material power) and technical training. Formalization of traditional law, combined with other regulations, asserts counter-governance and provides a source of institutional power that resists and refuses the state's unilateral assertion of authority while countering the state's claim that Indigenous peoples' lands “would exist in a vacuum if government influence was excluded” (Garcia 2015, 99). Finally, engaging in international conservation and Indigenous rights discourses lends discursive power and legitimacy to Indigenous peoples' efforts to protect their lands.

Although Indigenous nations' unilateral declaration of conservation areas avoids many of the problems associated with seeking state recognition or inclusion in co-management regimes, Indigenous peoples who deploy the former strategy must still navigate complex symbolic politics and conservation discourses. In fact, ICCAs constitute a form of international recognition under the IUCN (Kothari et al. 2012). Thus, ICCAs remain susceptible to potential problems of recognition politics. As Stevens (2014b, 295) writes, “[t]here is great concern that increased international policy and funding emphasis on ICCAs

may spark action by states and NGOs that may co-opt, undermine, or destroy ICCAs by inappropriately recognizing them.” There are also concerns that new forms of recognition might attempt to constrain and standardize Indigenous environmental governance systems in ways that undermine the dynamism, diversity, and cultural rootedness that make these systems of conservation successful expressions of Indigenous sovereignty and environmental governance in the first place (Stevens 2014d).

Political risks notwithstanding, ICCAs afford new possibilities for Indigenous peoples to draw on the material, institutional, and discursive power of international conservation and Indigenous rights discourses in their struggles against state oppression. Conservation alliances afford more space for mutual recognition and negotiated terms of recognition; unlike state authorities, conservation organizations usually do not claim ultimate jurisdiction over Indigenous peoples and their traditional territories. Finally, Indigenous conservation initiatives simultaneously draw on the internal power inherent in Indigenous peoples' political traditions and relations with their land. These initiatives thus combine strategies of symbolic recognition politics with strategies of renewal, revitalization, and resurgence, in order to protect the land and social relations with the land.

### *Theoretical Contributions of the Salween Peace Park case*

In this chapter, I have covered a lot of conceptual territory that informs my thinking about Indigenous peoples' environmental relations and engagement in conservation politics. I have explored Indigenous relational ontology and the ways Indigenous peoples' social relations and obligations to the land give rise to Indigenous legal orders and environmental governance. I have also discussed ways in which concepts such as natural resource management, territory, sovereignty, and dispossession might carry different meanings within different ontological frameworks, noting implications of such ontological dissonance for collaborations between Indigenous peoples and state actors in conservation and natural resource management. This chapter also engaged with scholarship on the so-called ontological turn in the social

sciences, which challenges scholars to employ a weak theory approach and allow ethnographic materials to inform their theoretical frameworks (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

This chapter also discussed the role of Indigenous environmental governance and relational ontology in conservation projects to protect the land, examining these projects through the lenses of politics of recognition, sovereign refusal, and Indigenous resurgence. Indigenous peoples' engagements in conservation and international Indigenous rights discourses complicate and enrich these debates by "[multiplying] and [diffusing] the sites around which struggles for recognition are carried out" (Markell 2003, 188). In contrast to forms of recognition on terms defined by the state, which are the subject of most analyses that interrogate politics of recognition (e.g., Coulthard 2014), Indigenous conservation initiatives draw on a wider field of symbolic politics that is beyond state control. Thus, while many of the potential risks of recognition politics remain, Indigenous peoples' engagement in conservation discourses also have the potential to decentre state power.

Two questions for Indigenous conservation remain pivotal: how can Indigenous communities remain in control of the terms of recognition while engaging conservation politics, and how can Indigenous peoples communicate their ontology and relations with the land in ways that powerful conservation actors will respect? My research on Karen environmental governance and the Salween Peace Park seeks to contribute to these conversations.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology and Research Design

Knowledge production is inescapably political, and research has long been implicated in colonial and neo-colonial projects that oppress Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups (L. T. Smith 1999; Kirby and McKenna 1989). In Southeast Asia, as in other parts of the world, anthropologists and other social scientists accompanied the colonial project, investigating the alien other to be managed and made knowable to colonial authorities. Ethnographic descriptions of the Karen during British colonial rule in Burma include the works of Donald Smeaton (1887) and American Baptist missionary Harry Marshall (1922).

In the previous chapter, I discussed the issue of ontology and the necessity of making space for ontological pluralism and Indigenous knowledges in the academy. For too long, academic researchers and institutions have been “creating and sustaining boundaries around what is considered real and, by extension, what is unable to be seen as real” (Hunt 2014, 29). Indigenous scholars such as Kovach (2009) and Smith (1999) argue that decolonizing research means returning control over research to Indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities. As I grappled with these methodological and ethical challenges while designing my research, I drew on principles of community-based participatory research approaches and Indigenous research methodologies.

Community-based participatory research emphasizes researcher-community partnerships to define research priorities, processes, and outcomes. Such research may include research *for* communities, in which communities’ priorities take precedence, or research *with* communities, which may provide benefits to both the researcher and communities (Koster, Baccar, and Lemelin 2012). In either case, researchers and community partners collaborate through various stages of research: conceptualization, research design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Ball and Janyst 2008; Pain 2004; Tobias,



Richmond, and Luginaah 2013). In community-based participatory research approaches, research is “harnessed by communities for change on their own terms” (Pain 2004, 654; see also Kirby and McKenna 1989).

Indigenous research paradigms have many features, but for the purposes of my research with Karen communities, three characteristics are pertinent. First, Indigenous research paradigms recognize and include Indigenous epistemological perspectives. By centring Indigenous epistemologies, Indigenous research paradigms avoid “reproducing Western epistemology as a normative standard within research” (Kovach 2009, 41). Second, Indigenous research paradigms acknowledge relations in which all research is embedded, and an ethic of relational accountability focuses on strengthening these relations, including social, ecological, and spiritual relations (Wilson 2008). In this axiology, all relations are important: “one relationship is not more significant than another” (Kovach 2009, 62). A third aspect of an Indigenous research paradigm is a focus on decolonizing research that promotes self-determination and challenges unequal power relations between Indigenous communities and colonial governments (Kovach 2009).

The focus on relational accountability in an Indigenous research paradigm helps address some of the most common pitfalls of community-based research approaches. For example, in some community-based research projects, a focus on ‘the community’ obscures the role of the researcher, and sometimes “participatory research is reported almost as though there is no researcher/writer voice or perspective, only a ‘community’ view” (Pain 2004, 658). Similarly, focus on ‘the community’ as a reified unit of participation may overlook or obscure unequal relations within that community, including among those who for various reasons do not participate in the research project (Pain 2004; Nakamura 2015). In her “Ally Bill of Responsibilities”, Lynn Gehl urges researchers to privilege the needs and voices of the “most oppressed” (Gehl, n.d., para. 11). Similarly, Wilson’s admonishment to be accountable to all relations in research is a reminder to acknowledge and commit to strengthening these relations (Wilson 2008).

In sum, my research was guided by a conviction that research should be community-led and bring benefit to the community, defined in an inclusive sense; that research with Indigenous communities should privilege an Indigenous epistemology and ontology; that research should be accountable to all its relations; and finally, that research with marginalized communities must actively challenge oppressive power relations. I did not always fully succeed in applying these principles in the field, but they remain an ideal to which I aspire.

### *Introducing Myself and My Relationship with the Karen People*

The ethic of relational accountability in Indigenous research requires acknowledging the researcher's role as a relation in producing and interpreting knowledge (Wilson 2008). Thus, to situate myself in the research upon which this thesis is based, I now briefly describe my background and the path that led me to community-based solidarity research with Karen communities.

I identify as a settler in Canada (Veracini 2011), and this reality has shaped how I have come to understand relations between Indigenous peoples and oppressive colonial structures, including in places such as Burma. I was born in Calgary on Treaty 7 territory (Treaty 7 Elders 1996), and I grew up on the traditional territories of several different Indigenous nations in what is now Alberta and British Columbia. My undergraduate studies at Athabasca University and the University of Victoria impressed upon me a greater awareness of the dispossession of Indigenous lands and lives in Canada and around the world, and what it means to be a settler on Indigenous peoples' territories. These understandings were further deepened during my graduate studies at York University, where I took courses in Indigenous research methods and Indigenous politics. These intellectual experiences prepared me for solidarity research with Indigenous communities.

My connection with the Karen people of Burma began when I became friends with members of the Karen refugee community in Canada. From my friends, I learned that as Indigenous peoples the Karen in

Burma face fundamentally similar issues to those experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, including cultural suppression and violent dispossession of community lands and natural resources. In 2014, I interned with KESAN, a Karen organization based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. I remained with the organization for a year, and relationships that I formed during that time both within the organization and with local people in Kawthoolei provided the foundation for me to pursue solidarity action research in combination with my thesis fieldwork.

As I noted in chapter 1, there are several reasons why I chose to privilege an Indigenous epistemology and research methodology in my work. Although I am not Indigenous in Canada, I seek to be an ally in the struggle against ongoing colonial oppressions, both in Canada and in my work in Burma. I wish to engage with Indigenous and other anti-colonial intellectual traditions in the struggle for decolonization and opposition to imperial domination. Troubled by the lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous thinkers and sources of knowledge in the academy (Todd 2016; Hunt 2014), I wish my research to honour Indigenous epistemologies and to “bridge epistemic difference” (Latulippe 2015, 6). Finally, I wish to adhere to the principles of solidarity research, relational accountability, and a commitment to research that benefits those with whom I work.

I recognize that truly decolonizing research requires more than merely adopting Indigenous research methodologies. As Tuck and Yang write, decolonization is not a metaphor; true decolonization “brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1). Their work reminds me that my engagement with Indigenous epistemologies is no substitute for material actions to confront colonial power structures, even as it means confronting my own privilege as a beneficiary of Canadian colonialism. Decolonization must be material, not metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2012). As an elder reminded me several years ago at a Cree culture camp in Alberta, it is not necessary to travel halfway around the world to work in solidarity on Indigenous land issues. He is right, of course, and his words remain with me as I search for ways to continue working in solidarity with both Indigenous Karen from Burma and Indigenous peoples in

Canada. This is perhaps the most important reason I have chosen to privilege Indigenous research methodologies and analyses in my work in Kawthoolei: to explore ways in which anti-colonial struggles in Burma can both inform and be informed by similar struggles in Canada, with which I also wish to remain engaged.

### *Research Design*

My research fieldwork consisted of two distinct sets of activities. I spent two periods of about six weeks each living in a remote community in the mountains of Mutraw District conducting ethnographic fieldwork to investigate Karen Indigenous environmental relations. The aim of this fieldwork was to gain a greater understanding of how the spiritual relations, Indigenous knowledge, and everyday practices of this largely animist Karen community constitute governance of the waters, forests, lands, and natural resources. My fieldwork also investigated ways in which these spiritual-environmental relations are being mobilized in the Salween Peace Park. For this portion of the research, I attended two public consultations and conducted key informant interviews with community leaders and activists involved in developing the Peace Park initiative. In total, my data collection activities lasted from November 10, 2016 to March 6, 2017.

KESAN, the local Karen organization with which I collaborated for this project, has worked with conflict-affected communities in Kawthoolei since 2001. Nearly all staff are Karen, many with direct ties to the communities with whom they work. KESAN collaborates with local communities and KNU leaders to provide programs in environmental education, agricultural livelihoods restoration, community land protection, community forests, biodiversity surveys, wildlife protection, environmental advocacy, and KNU land and forest policy development (KESAN 2015b).

In November 2014, KESAN staff and villagers from Mutraw District initiated a community-based case study research project to investigate Karen customary land governance and to identify ways to protect

and defend the lands of communities practicing this type of communal tenure. I was interning with KESAN at the time, and I was tasked with compiling data gathered by the community-based field researchers. This experience taught me how far I still needed to go to be a true ally to my Karen friends in the Mutraw mountains. By failing to critically assess my role in project, I allowed myself to assume too much ownership in the project, and I was strangely disappointed at first when I learned that local people had begun the data collection process without me. This experience was a reminder to be more reflexive and mindful of my true motivations in research.

My thesis research grew from the initial KESAN project, specifically to investigate Indigenous Karen land governance traditions as a foundation for the emerging Salween Peace Park initiative. Although my thesis fieldwork involved more of my own questions and I was now the principal investigator, I endeavoured as much as possible to maintain the original project's collaborative focus. As a researcher working in solidarity with marginalized, conflict-affected Karen communities, I knew that my research needed to benefit these communities if it was to honour the principles of relational accountability and reciprocity (Wilson 2008; Baker 2016). Research solely for academic purposes, or "knowledge for knowledge's sake" is a luxury that these people simply cannot afford (Kovach 2009, 93; see also Wilson 2008). Worse, it can be considered a form of knowledge extraction (Baker and Westman 2018). I have developed close working relationships with research colleagues and others at my fieldwork sites, and I count them among my best friends. I care deeply about these people, and I wish to support them in their struggles against oppression and injustice.

Ideally, a collaborative research project involves community partners at all stages of the research process, "from the inception of the proposed research to the dissemination and publication of research findings" (Shiu-Thornton 2003, 1362). However, despite the foundation that had already been laid with the community-based research project, collaborative design of my thesis research proved challenging. I often wished for greater input, but my colleagues assured me that they trusted me and that whatever

research I did would be useful for them. To clarify the research relationship and my responsibilities as a researcher, I drafted a research agreement between myself and KESAN, based on a template from the National Aboriginal Health Organization in Canada (First Nations Centre 2007). A copy of this agreement is included in Appendix 1.

Funding for my fieldwork was provided through two grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Master's Scholarship provided general financial support, while fieldwork costs were funded by my supervisor Dr. Robin Roth's multi-investigator, SSHRC-funded project called Canadian Conservation in Global Context (CCGC). Thanks to these generous financial contributions, I was able to conduct this research without incurring any financial costs to KESAN.

The research project received ethics approval from York University's Human Participants Review Committee. Given the cultural context of working in rural Karen communities, I sought oral consent from participants in the research, rather than requiring written consent. Before an interview, I would ask my research assistant to explain the purpose of my research and request consent for an interview. Although a few participants in my research decided to remain anonymous, others specifically requested to be named. Generally, anonymity of research participants was a difficult concept to explain in a society that has had virtually no contact with foreign researchers. Nevertheless, over the year that I had spent interning at KESAN from 2014 to 2015, I had developed mutual trust and close working relationships with both KESAN staff and local community partners in Kaw Thay Ghu. These relationships greatly facilitated the conduct of my thesis fieldwork.

#### *Fieldwork Account: from Kaw Thay Ghu to the Salween Peace Park*

For the ethnographic case study, I spent two extended periods in the mountain villages of Mutraw District. The first of these sessions took place from November 10 to December 23, 2016, and the second

phase lasted from January 20 to February 28, 2017. The purpose of KESAN's initial community-based research project was to investigate a case study of Karen customary land governance in order to more effectively advocate for Karen communities' rights to govern and manage their own ancestral territories. KESAN staff, together with local community leaders, had selected Kaw Thay Ghu as the site of their case study, and this is where I conducted fieldwork for this thesis.

Kaw Thay Ghu is a group of villages inhabiting the mountains and high valleys of Luthaw Township in northern Mutraw District of Kawthoolei (see map in Figure 3). Due to isolation imposed by decades of war, these villages do not have vehicle road access to either Thailand or Burma. Although there are three Burmese military camps within the villages' shared territory, this area remains under the full administrative control of the KNU. Due to the war, relatively stable village organization of the past has given way to a prolonged displacement situation with scattered IDP communities, many of whom have been displaced for more than 20 years. Although some inhabitants of Kaw Thay Ghu have converted to Christianity, many villagers continue to practice the animist beliefs and rituals of their ancestors.

Most villagers in Kaw Thay Ghu practice a subsistence economy. Wherever there is adequate water and flat or gently-sloping land, villagers have transformed the landscape into terraced paddies for growing irrigated rice, the staple crop. However, there is insufficient irrigated land to meet local people's needs, so they also practice upland rotational agriculture, or swidden. Accompanying the rice in a typical swidden field is a diversity of cucurbits, legumes, chili peppers, sesame, cotton, and the red and yellow flowers that Karen animists use for ceremonies. In addition to practicing agriculture, local people hunt and gather food, medicines, and building materials from the forests surrounding their villages. Villagers also forage for fish and frogs in the rivers, streams, and irrigation canals. Aside from irrigated rice paddies, domestic bamboo groves, and orchard gardens, which are individually owned, most lands and resources in Kaw Thay Ghu are managed communally.

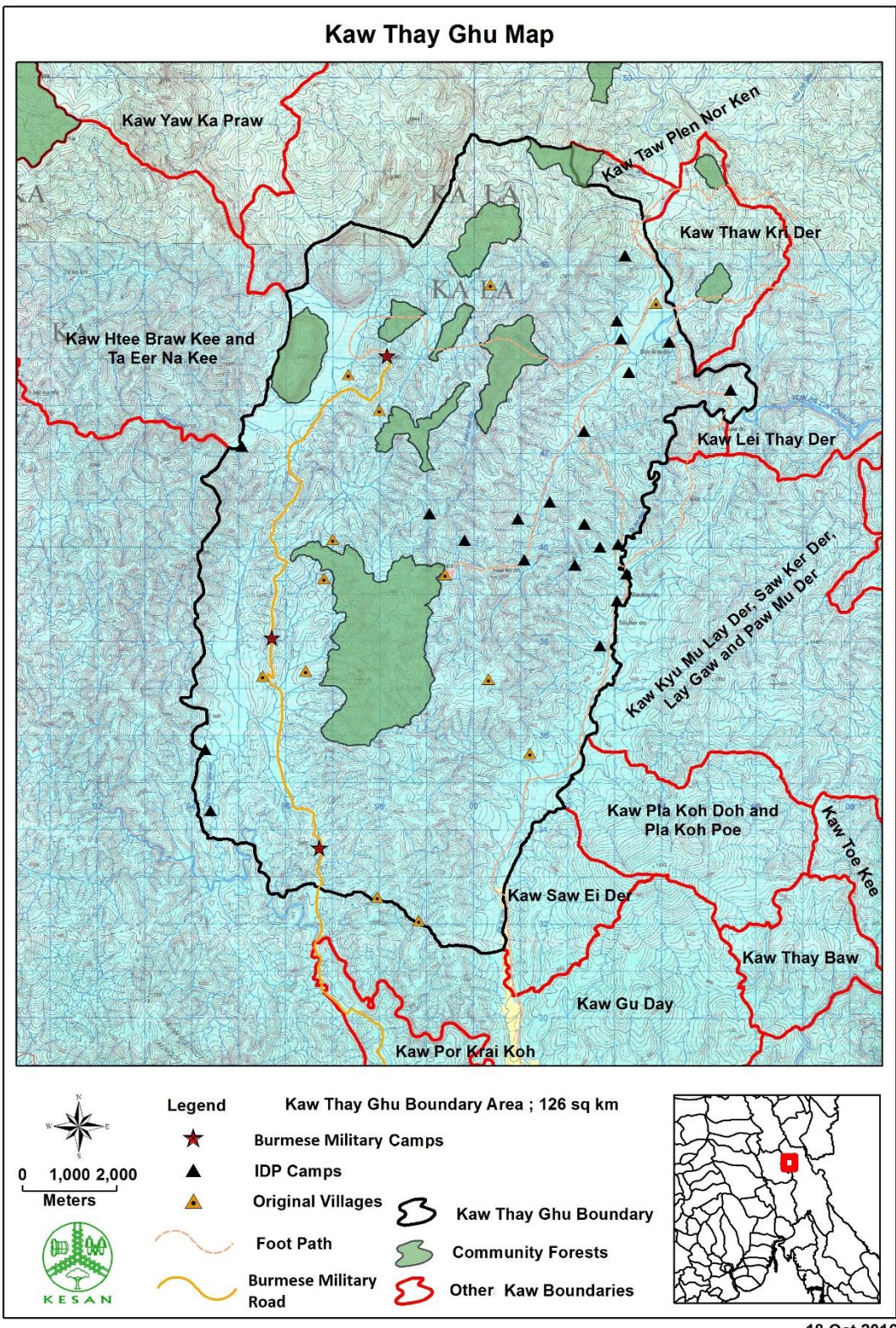


Figure 3. Map of Kaw Thay Ghu. Adapted from a map produced by KESAN.



In this area of Mutraw District, the unit of Indigenous Karen territorial organization is called *Kaw*, or 'country,' and often includes multiple villages with a shared territory. Japanese anthropologist Yoko Hayami (2004) notes that in the Mae Sariang area of western Thailand, such multi-village territories existed in the past, but that this form of territorial organization has given way to single village territories. In Mutraw, however, such multi-village territories continue to exist.

As I learned more about Kaw Thay Ghu, I realized that it is an exceptional *Kaw*. It is the largest *Kaw* remaining in Mutraw, as many others have split into smaller territories comprising one or two villages; Kaw Thay Ghu includes twelve original villages and a territory exceeding 120 square kilometres. In addition, forced displacement is particularly severe in Kaw Thay Ghu due to Burmese military offensives targeting the most populous areas between the 1970s and early 2000s. Eastern parts of the *Kaw*, on the other hand, have long hosted IDPs fleeing offensives in other areas of Kawthoolei. The chaos of war and displacement has strained customary land governance in Kaw Thay Ghu, making field research a challenge. Often, our discussions focused not only on the current practice of customary law in Kaw Thay Ghu, but also on what research participants and colleagues remembered of the past and what they envisioned for the future.

Some neighbouring *Kaw* have more intact administrations and ceremonial culture than Kaw Thay Ghu does, as they have not been as severely impacted by the war and displacement. However, there are several reasons that KESAN chose Kaw Thay Ghu as a case study of *Kaw* governance. The animist culture in Kaw Thay Ghu remains strong despite decades of war, displacement, and conversion to Christianity. KESAN's goal is to strengthen *Kaw* in Mutraw as a foundation for community-based land and natural resource governance. Their strategy is to focus on Kaw Thay Ghu as a large, influential *Kaw*, because *Kaw* revitalization activities there are more likely to inspire similar actions in smaller neighbouring *Kaw*. Thus, my fieldwork focused on Kaw Thay Ghu, although I conducted research in some neighbouring communities as well.

Prior to my thesis fieldwork, I had been working on the KESAN-led research project for two years, and I had visited Kaw Thay Ghu twice. Gaining access for fieldwork was therefore a simple matter. I began fieldwork already having built relationships with local community leaders who were involved in the community-based research project. I call these people colleagues and research collaborators, since they guided my research and frequently suggested new areas for inquiry. I refer to all others involved in the fieldwork as research participants. I eschew the term 'informants,' since this label fails to acknowledge the interactive and collaborative nature of community-based ethnographic field research (Louis 2007).

Saw Maw Grow, a young man with whom I had worked on KESAN's earlier research project, was my main research assistant and translator. Two local schoolteachers, Thera<sup>4</sup> Hsa Lah Lah and Thera Maw Koh, also provided translation assistance. However, there were extended periods, especially during my second session of fieldwork in Kaw Thay Ghu, when no translators were available, and I was forced to work solely in the Karen language. Most casual conversations and everyday interactions with local people took place without translation. At these times, I was thankful for my basic proficiency in the Karen language, cultivated over the previous three years of friendships and working relationships with Karen people, including resettled Karen refugees in Canada.

My fieldwork relied heavily on the ethnographic technique of participant observation. Living for an extended period in Kaw Thay Ghu allowed me to observe local people's relationship with the waters, lands, and forests of their homeland. Participant observation requires the researcher to be constantly open to contingencies and the unexpected (Crapanzano 2010). My days rarely proceeded as planned, and many of my most important breakthroughs occurred due to chance meetings with community conservation actors and invitations to witness ceremonies or participate in community conservation events. I joined two community forest meetings and a community forest field trip, attended a fish

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<sup>4</sup> 'Thera' is a Karen term that literally means 'teacher,' but it is used for anyone who is seen to be in a professional or educated position, including pastors, medical professionals, or staff of an organization.

conservation area dedication event, and participated in numerous prayer ceremonies. With research collaborators, I visited sacred sites and hiked across northern Kaw Thay Ghu; although these journeys were not structured transect walks, they allowed me to understand the spatial configuration of sacred places on the landscape and ask questions that I would not otherwise have thought of (see Evans and Jones 2011). Talking with elders was important, but it was often only when I was able to witness ceremonial practices or visit places in person that I began to understand how everything fit together. My close working relationships with collaborators paid off, as they understood the research and what we were trying to accomplish.

I also spent much of my time based at the Luthaw Paw Day community centre. As the hub for KESAN's programs in northwestern Luthaw Township, the centre gets many regular visitors including ceremonial leaders and community conservation actors. Luthaw Paw Day also hosts workshops on community conservation and food security projects such as rice banks. Not only was I able to observe these meetings, but I also joined conversations around the hearth in the evening as attendees from across northwestern Luthaw shared their knowledge, ideas, and hopes for the future. In between these bursts of activity, Saw Nya Ki Htoo and Naw Lay Lah Wah,<sup>5</sup> the centre's managers, shared with me their extensive knowledge and passion for Karen animist traditions. We spent many evenings together as they helped me to understand the ceremonies and ritual protocols.

During research fieldwork in Kaw Thay Ghu, I used a large-scale topographic map of the *Kaw* that KESAN had produced. Using transparency sheets, I conducted several mapping sessions, both one-on-one and in groups, to explore land use patterns and the location of protected forests on the landscape.

I supplemented observation, participation, and casual conversation with semi-structured interviews. Similar to what Megan Youdelis notes in her Masters thesis, my interview approach was "flexible and exploratory while maintaining focus on research questions" (Youdelis 2012). I constantly reworked

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<sup>5</sup> 'Naw' is a Karen term meaning 'Mrs.,' while 'Saw' means 'Mr.'

interview questions to build on what research participants were telling me. Even when interviews were more structured, I tried to keep conversations open-ended and pay attention to the stories that people were sharing with me (see Kovach 2009; Wilson 2008). This approach proved challenging at times. Sometimes, research participants would tell long stories that were only vaguely connected to the research questions I was trying to explore; other times, the language barrier and translation challenges prevented me from fully understanding what people were trying to tell me. Nevertheless, as my research progressed, I learned to appreciate these stories, and I began to understand the complex social and spiritual relationships within which they were embedded.

For most interviews and many of the casual conversations, I used a voice recorder. If this was the first time a research participant was working with me, I first sought the participant's consent. I used voice recordings for review and backup purposes; due to time and language constraints, my research assistant and I were unable to transcribe interview conversations. My main data recording method consisted of written notes, which I filled in with extensive reflections as soon as possible after each encounter while the material was still fresh in my mind. I also developed preliminary analyses of the research data in my daily field journal.

Finally, my research included several informal focus-group discussions. Toward the end of my fieldwork, collaborators and I convened two days of workshops at the Luthaw Paw Day community centre. I synthesized my research findings, preliminary analysis, and outstanding questions, presenting this data for discussion and validation by the leaders and community members of Kaw Thay Ghu. Nearly a year later, in January 2018, I had the privilege of travelling back to Kaw Thay Ghu, and I carried back a draft copy of Chapter 4 of this thesis to present to community representatives for validation.

The Salween Peace Park portion of my research was interwoven with my ethnographic fieldwork in Kaw Thay Ghu. In discussions with local people and community leaders, I included questions about the Salween Peace Park, its connection to *Kaw* and community conservation projects, local people's

understandings of the Peace Park initiative, and people's vision for the future. In addition, I participated in two public consultation meetings for the Salween Peace Park during my fieldwork, and I observed a third consultation event when I returned to visit Kawthoolei in December 2017.

Observations at the Peace Park consultations allowed me to formulate questions for seven key informant interviews (see Tremblay 1982) with community activists, KESAN staff, and KNU leaders involved in the initiative. Interviews with KESAN staff were conducted in English and transcribed for more in-depth analysis. I complemented these observations and interviews with an analysis of media and KESAN promotional materials about the Salween Peace Park, including print, audio, and video sources. Having interned with KESAN when they were developing the first Salween Peace Park concept note in 2015, I had followed many of the internal discussions and email threads, which also guided my inquiry. Each of these sources helped me gain a better understanding of the ways in which the Salween Peace Park functions as an Indigenous Karen political project.

The analysis presented in this thesis began to take shape during fieldwork in journal reflections and conversations with research colleagues. I then used NVIVO qualitative data analysis software to code and organize the data, facilitating more in-depth and comprehensive analysis.

### *Foregrounding Indigenous Ontology and Community-Led Research in Practice*

During ethnographic fieldwork in Kaw Thay Ghu, my research approach shifted in a way that demonstrates the importance of foregrounding issues of ontology and Indigenous research methodology in my project. When I had first become involved in the Kaw Thay Ghu research project in 2014, I had approached the research largely in material terms. I was looking for evidence of a system of Karen natural resource governance and conservation, involving permissions, rules, penalties, and enforcement; in other words, the sort of "management system" that Lertzman (2009, 342) talks about. I continued this approach during the first portion of thesis fieldwork. However, when I asked people questions such as whether

anyone in the village managed hunting or gathering of certain species in the forest, or what penalties existed for breaking taboos or clearing watershed areas, I could never obtain a satisfactory answer. There seemed to be no such system of rules, penalties, and formal management.

Finally, thanks to the patience and persistence of my research colleagues, I began to focus on the spiritual taboos and ceremonies, and things started to make sense. By subconsciously holding onto preconceived notions of what management could look like, I at first had not recognized the spiritually-mediated system of governance that exists in Kaw Thay Ghu. As I spent more time listening to what colleagues and research participants were trying to tell me, I began to catch a glimpse of their world and how natural resource governance and conservation function in a Karen *Kaw*. Only once I began to grasp the significance of spiritual-ceremonial relations in ordering the *Kaw* could I make sense of material conservation practices such as community forests, watershed protection, and fish conservation areas. My research focus shifted, and spiritual relations became the primary locus around which I organized my research. This is explained further in Chapter 4; suffice it to say here that entering research with an open mind, and in collaboration with community members, is a prerequisite for allowing Indigenous theory to emerge (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005; Kovach 2009; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

I am grateful to my colleagues and research participants for being patient with me as they kept directing my attention back to the ceremonies and spiritual taboos. It took me a long time to learn. I recall my initial excitement when, in the final month of field research, I encountered the human-managed fish spawning channels described in Chapter 4. Finally, I thought, here was an example of 'practical' Indigenous resource management and conservation, and I too was tempted to overlook the ceremonies and taboos as equally important actions to manage and conserve the fish. Of course, as my research colleagues impressed upon me, the ceremonies and spiritual taboos are every bit as important.

A commitment to centring Indigenous ontology and adhering to principles of community-based research requires that foreign researchers such as myself engage closely with local Indigenous colleagues

in analysis and developing theory (Swancutt and Mazard 2016). All too often, academic researchers collect data in collaboration with local colleagues, only to then take the data back to the academy, where analysis becomes the sole prerogative of the foreign researcher (Schlosser 2014). Reasons for this include the distance between the academic institution and the community, as well as the time demands of academic research (Schlosser 2014). My research was not free from these challenges. However, the extended time I was able to spend in Kaw Thay Ghu (about twelve weeks), as well as my existing relationships with local people, allowed for a greater degree of feedback and joint theorizing than might be possible in many research projects. In addition to regular discussions with Nya Ki Htoo and Lay Lah Wah at the Luthaw Paw Day centre, the community workshop at the conclusion of my fieldwork provided a forum for community members to collaboratively develop the analysis. When I presented research results again in January 2018, the resulting discussion considerably strengthened the analysis in Chapter 4, resolving outstanding questions and clarifying things I had misinterpreted.

The analysis presented in Chapter 4 has also benefited from discussions with my KESAN colleague Saw Sha Bwe Moo, who grew up in Kaw Thay Ghu but fled to Thailand as a young man, where he eventually obtained a master's degree in forestry. Sha Bwe Moo is one of those individuals who successfully "bridge[s] epistemic difference" (Latulippe 2015, 6) between positivist science and Karen Indigenous knowledge. As someone who is intimately familiar with Karen Indigenous traditions as well as academic modes of enquiry, Sha Bwe Moo has been an invaluable source of knowledge to guide analysis of the Kaw Thay Ghu case study. Similarly, discussions with KESAN staff, especially Saw Paul Sein Twa and Saw Mabu Htoo, have guided my analysis of the Salween Peace Park as an Indigenous political project. KESAN staff often expressed similar ideas to what I was drawing from the literature in terms of politics of recognition and sovereign refusal, validating the analysis presented in this thesis.

### *Reflections on Positionality*

Collaborative community-based and Indigenous research methods require researcher reflexivity, which may be defined as “reflection upon the conditions through which research is produced, disseminated, and received” (Matless 2009, 627). During my fieldwork, I kept a daily journal in which I recorded such reflections, including reflections on my own positionality in the research. Not only is reflecting on positionality important for attending to the power dynamics in community-based research (de Leeuw, Cameron, and Greenwood 2012), but it is also a way of honestly validating research and practicing relational accountability (Wilson 2008). By acknowledging and making explicit the situated embeddedness of knowledge, attending to positionality is “a way of making responsible knowledge claims that simultaneously chart their limits” (Pratt 2009, 556).

My positionality as a white male from Canada who has had the privilege of attending university meant that villagers with whom I worked in Mutraw often looked up to me. People would often call me *Thera*, a title used to refer to anyone who has specialized knowledge or training, such as schoolteachers, pastors, medical practitioners, and NGO workers. I tried to object, assuring people that I was the one learning from them; nevertheless, villagers and leaders often asked my advice on difficult matters, such as how to get the occupying Burmese military to leave their lands.

Close working relationships with research colleagues helped to mitigate some of the power imbalances between us. I knew that they trusted me. However, formalized research procedures such as those for obtaining consent tended to increase the distance between me and other participants in the research, impinging on the camaraderie and familiarity of informal conversation that we enjoyed. There were also times following an interview session when I felt that the exchange was not as reciprocal as I had hoped. It felt like intrusion, what Crapanzano calls “the inherent violence of field research” (2010, 57). On the other hand, the best interview encounters ended when I invited research participants to ask me questions, briefly flipping the researcher-participant dynamic. People would ask about life in Canada,



sometimes asking questions about Indigenous peoples or community forestry. These exchanges helped me to practice fieldwork as a reciprocal encounter (Rundstrom and Deur 1999).

Language barriers presented a challenge for my research. Although I had achieved a reasonable proficiency in the Karen language prior to my field research, I was not fluent, and my ability to grasp complex topics remained limited. Although my interpreters provided great help, there were times when we had difficulty understanding each other; in addition, they were not always available. Especially during my second fieldwork session in Kaw Thay Ghu, I conducted more of my conversations in the Karen language without an interpreter. These conversations ultimately promoted more natural and interactive conversation, as I was forced to ask follow-up questions to ensure that I understood. Upon reflection, I realized that sometimes I had been hiding behind my interpreter to avoid direct interaction with a research participant, especially if I was feeling uncomfortable in the interview for any reason. When I conducted interviews without an interpreter toward the end of fieldwork, it felt so much better to remove the barrier of the interpreter between us, even if it meant that I did not fully understand everything. To check the accuracy of information collected in these Karen language conversations, I took voice recordings and reviewed the data with my colleagues.

My positionality as a male also impacted the research outcomes. Even when I spoke with a couple or mixed group, the men tended to do most of the talking. When I convened a women-only focus group discussion with three representatives of the Karen Women's Organization at their local office, they seemed hesitant and one of the women, who had already become my good friend, did most of the talking. Perhaps it would have been different if I had had a female research assistant, as I had initially hoped; however, that did not work out, and my interpreters were always male. Nevertheless, I was able to conduct some very productive interviews with a few of the women with whom I was able to establish rapport. In addition, some of the focus group sessions had high participation of both men and women, including the workshops at the conclusion of my fieldwork.

Perhaps the most important consideration in terms of my positionality was my affiliation with KESAN. With more than 15 years of experience, KESAN maintains close relationships with local communities across Kawthoolei, but especially in Mutraw District. Not only does KESAN promote environmental conservation and land rights, but they also have programs for agricultural livelihood restoration. Thus, many communities in Mutraw, including those in Kaw Thay Ghu, have benefited from KESAN's work. Although KESAN staff declare that it is villagers' free choice to decide their own development path, they nevertheless pursue campaigns of 'awareness-raising' to draw attention to the risks of industrial resource extraction such as gold mining. Thus, whomever I talked to about gold mining readily agreed that it was destructive, except a few Luthaw Township leaders who were promoting mining. Partly for security reasons, I never was able to interview open proponents of the mining; however, this was not a problem, since I was more interested in investigating ways in which opponents were resisting the mining, not the relative number of supporters and opponents.

My affiliation with KESAN also partly determined the people to whom I had access. Saw Nya Ki Htoo, who runs the KESAN-affiliated Luthaw Paw Day centre with his wife Naw Lay Lah Wah, suggested that I should mostly talk with him, since he could explain the Karen ceremonies and spiritual protocols in ways that I could understand. This was partly true, but I explained that I also needed to talk with people in their homes and visit important places on the landscape. In the end, I was able to conduct casual conversations and group interviews in eleven villages and IDP communities across northern Kaw Thay Ghu, where the ceremonial leaders reside. I also visited the nearby Luthaw Township KNU headquarters and the neighbouring community of Kho Kyaw Der. Due to the sheer size of Kaw Thay Ghu, I was not able to conduct fieldwork in the southern parts of the *Kaw*. At the Luthaw Paw Day centre, Nya Ki Htoo helped me to interpret the data in conversation with other community leaders.

In considering who comprises 'the community' in Kay Thay Ghu, I recalled Nakamura's caution against assuming a unified community voice, and that every "community has multiple interests and actors"

(Nakamura 2015, 170). During my time in Kaw Thay Ghu, I encountered dissenting voices who criticized the political direction of the *Kaw* or who were concerned about boundary disputes with neighbouring *Kaw*. I discussed these concerns with KESAN staff, who were already largely aware of the issues. They are facilitating community-based solutions for people to work out these problems on their own. Nevertheless, these ruptures in the community-based project gave me pause to consider how my research could contribute to strengthening all relations in the research: social, spiritual, ecological, and so on. This is the imperative of relational accountability (Wilson 2008). I do not know all the answers, but I did my best to listen to different sides and to support local people's ongoing efforts to promote equitable community-based land tenure in the *Kaw* system.

### *Continuing the Relationship*

As outlined in the research agreement with KESAN, I have deposited all raw research data, including voice recordings, photographs, and digitized fieldnotes, with KESAN for safe-keeping and future reference. This data will be used to inform efforts to advocate for and strengthen customary *Kaw* institutions in Kawthoolei, and it will also contribute to ongoing discussions about developing governance of the Salween Peace Park.

Relationships created and sustained through the research process do not necessarily end when the project ends (Crapanzano 2010). As Janelle Baker writes, embodying an ethic of “research as reciprocity” may mean conducting research or other services for the community beyond one’s main project (Baker 2016, 109). Wilson (2008) writes that the function of research is to build up relationships between people and the research topic. I have had the privilege of seeing this relationship-building in action as I shared preliminary findings from my research with Karen communities across Canada. Many Karen youth in Canada were born in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, and they have never experienced firsthand the places and ways of life that their parents knew. Thus, being able to share these stories and pictures

has been very gratifying, as elders' eyes light up in recognition and youth gain a greater understanding of the Karen people's natural and cultural heritage.

I do not intend my involvement with KESAN and the communities of Kaw Thay Ghu to end upon successful defence of this thesis. To the contrary, KESAN staff and I have begun discussing how we can use principles from the research to create instructional materials and build capacity for good governance of the Peace Park. I will also continue to contribute to KESAN's advocacy work for *Kaw*, the Salween Peace Park, and other campaigns as I am called upon to do so.

## Chapter 4

### Maintaining Relations with the Spirits: Karen Indigenous Environmental Governance in Kaw Thay Ghu

During my fieldwork in Kaw Thay Ghu, research participants and collaborators shared with me a Karen cosmology and resource management praxis mind-boggling in its complexity. A relational ontology guides local people's interactions with their natural environment, and maintaining relations with the spirits is paramount to ensure human well-being and to maintain healthy water, land, and natural resources. Therefore, it is impossible to understand Karen environmental governance without taking spiritual relations into consideration. In this chapter, I discuss the role of animist spiritual relations and ceremonial practices in Karen Indigenous environmental governance in Kaw Thay Ghu, relating these findings to discussions of Indigenous relational ontologies and environmental governance more generally. The research findings suggest that ritual obligations to the spirit world constitute the foundation of environmental governance among Karen communities in Mutraw District.

This chapter is organized as follows: I begin with an introduction to *Kaw* as a Karen social, ceremonial, and territorial unit, following this with a discussion of Karen ontology, spiritual relations, and ceremonies. The Karen world is imbued with spiritual forces to whom humans have reciprocal obligations. I discuss how these spiritual protocols operate as an internalized law to govern people's interactions with their lands in the absence of coercive human authority; the discussion also demonstrates how Karen spiritual relationships and ceremonial protocols constitute the territorial and administrative structure of a Karen *Kaw*. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how war, displacement, and religious change have affected local people's relations with the waters, lands, and spirits, and people's visions for how they wish to actualize these relations into the future. The research findings presented in this chapter illustrate the

importance of taking Indigenous ontologies seriously, not only in terms of understanding environmental governance in Indigenous communities, but also in terms of understanding the impacts of environmental dispossession on Indigenous peoples.

### *Karen Spiritual-Ecological Relations: Kaw and the K'Sah Spirits of Water and Land*

Like many Indigenous peoples, Karen in the mountains of Mutraw inhabit an animate world permeated by spiritual forces. In this section, I attempt to convey what research participants and collaborators shared with me about humans' relationships with the spirits, and the ritual obligations and ceremonies that Karen villagers must perform to maintain healthy spiritual relations. These protocols govern Karen villagers' use of their lands and natural resources, and they also constitute an enduring bond between Karen villagers and their ancestral territories, or *Kaw*.

As explained in Chapter 3, *Kaw* is a Karen word meaning 'country.' This is the same word that Karen people use to refer to nation states such as Thailand or Burma. In Mutraw District, *Kaw* denotes the basic unit of Karen social, ceremonial, and territorial organization. As will become clear later in this chapter, the boundaries of the *Kaw* have spiritual significance. The concept of *Kaw* also refers to the ceremonial institutions, social roles, and spiritual relationships that shape local people's interactions with their natural environment.

I will return to the subject of *Kaw* as a social and ceremonial administration. Suffice it to say here that the most important people in a *Kaw* administration are male ceremonial leaders known as the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah*, the 'masters of the water and land.' In Kaw Thay Ghu, most villages traditionally have a head *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* and one or two assistants. These men perform ceremonies to supplicate the spiritual owners of the water and land and to ensure the well-being of the *Kaw* and its inhabitants. Together with the council of elders, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* also remind community members of spiritual taboos and

rituals that must be followed, as well as spiritually powerful places that must be respected to avoid causing harm to the community.

One of the most important spiritual relationships exists between humans and the *K'Sah* spirits. The Karen word *K'Sah*, meaning Lord or Owner, refers to the guardian spirits of nature, the "Owners of Land, Forest and Water" (Århem 2016b, 19) that exist in many Southeast Asian animist traditions. One evening as I engaged in conversation with a group of villagers who had been displaced from their village for over 40 years, I asked about their hopes for the future. A young woman with an infant at her breast spoke, and her answer helps explain the relationship between *K'Sah* spirits and Karen animists in Kaw Thay Ghu. She said that she wants the *K'Sah* to watch over them, protect them, and care for them and their children (fieldnotes 2016/12/18). The villagers discussed further with my research assistant, who is Christian, and they compared their prayers to the way that Christians pray to God. They noted that, in addition to the generic *K'Sah* of the water, land, sun, moon, and so on, there are also *K'Sah* associated with local mountains and rivers. Reciprocal obligations define the relationship between *K'Sah* spirits and Karen villagers. Villagers perform ceremonial sacrifices and offerings to the *K'Sah*, and they in turn pray to the *K'Sah* spirits for protection, prosperity, and overall well-being for themselves, their lands and waters.

In addition to performing ceremonies to obtain the goodwill and protection of the *K'Sah* spirits, Karen villagers must maintain moral order in their communities (cf. Hayami 2004). In Karen ontology, restoring this moral order after a violation requires giving *Tah Hku*, which literally means 'coolness,' the idea being to maintain harmonious human-ecological-spiritual relations (see Hayami 1993). In the Karen language, the term for peace is *Tah Mu Tah Hku*, a couplet literally meaning 'happiness and coolness,' as opposed to *Tah Koh Tah Ghaw*, 'hotness and redness,' the term that Karen people use to refer to trouble and conflict (fieldnotes 2017/02/20; cf. Hayami 1993). A hot *Kaw* is prone to disaster, such as droughts, floods, and failures in the rice harvest.

Various human actions may make a *Kaw* 'hot.' However, my research confirms the findings of Hayami (1993) and Buadaeng (2003) that sexual relations out of wedlock are the most serious transgression against the spiritual balance of a Karen *Kaw*. The need to restore coolness in the *Kaw* is so great that all agricultural activities must be postponed until ceremonies to restore ritual order have been completed, as I learned when I visited Kho Kyaw Der, a village neighbouring Kaw Thay Ghu. A premarital sexual relationship had recently been discovered in the village, and so although it was time for villagers to select land for the upcoming swidden cultivation season, no one in Kho Kyaw Der could do so until after the ceremonial leaders had sacrificed a buffalo and performed rituals to restore the coolness of the *Kaw*, and the couple had been properly married.

Research participants and colleagues consistently maintained that the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* are the most important managers of water and land in the *Kaw*, yet their roles are almost entirely ceremonial in nature, and their purpose is to maintain life-giving relations between the villagers and the *K'Sah* spiritual owners of the water and land. The *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* perform annual ceremonies and make offerings to the *K'Sah* spirits, praying for proper rainfall, agricultural productivity, and general well-being. I will now describe two of these ceremonies that, ideally, are performed annually in Kaw Thay Ghu: *Lu Htee Hta* and *Kyoh Tah*. While the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* in Bler Ghaw village performs the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony to care for the waters of the *Kaw*, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* in Hee Gho Lo Der village conducts the *Kyoh Tah* ceremony to care for the land.

#### *Lu Htee Hta and Kyoh Tah: Restoring Spiritual Relations, Caring for the Lands and Waters*

*Lu Htee Hta*, literally 'to make an offering at the mouth of the stream,' is a ceremony to ensure proper rains and an abundant rice harvest, as well as protection from disasters such as floods or droughts. Villagers perform *Lu Htee Hta* at the place where Klaw Klaw Lo Klo stream empties into the Bwe Lo Klo river. Lah Pweh Say, the head *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* from Bler Ghaw village, described to me how they



conduct the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony at the beginning of the annual monsoon rains in May. After building a bamboo platform, they sacrifice a pig, dabbing blood onto the platform's seven posts (fieldnotes 2016/12/16). The *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* then place offerings of Karen rice alcohol, betel nut, pork, and rice on the bamboo platform, while placing a pitcher of water on the ground at the foot of the structure.

Once they have presented these offerings to the water spirits, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* pray for the upcoming monsoon season, asking for blessing, sufficient water, and protection from floods and droughts (fieldnotes 2016/12/16). Like all prayers to the *K'Sah* spirits, these prayers are said while holding a bowl of Karen rice wine and dribbling it on the ground. Following the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony, the people leave the ceremonial alcohol jars at the site for three days. During that time, no one is allowed to visit the site, and no one in Bler Ghaw village is allowed to fish during those three days (fieldnotes 2016/11/19).

The counterpart to *Lu Htee Hta* in Kaw Thay Ghu is *Kyoh Tah*. The *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* from Hee Gho Lo Der traditionally perform this ceremony at the base of Ler Mu K'Ser mountain, in the western part of the *Kaw*. Stories explaining the origins and cosmological significance of Ler Mu K'Ser are told far beyond the boundaries of Kaw Thay Ghu. For example, a Karen freelance reporter whom I met through KESAN remembered learning stories about Ler Mu K'Ser while growing up in a refugee camp in Thailand (fieldnotes 2016/12/03), and Dr. Prasert Trakansuphakon, a Karen academic from Thailand, learned the story from his grandfather. Ler Mu K'Ser is the place where, long ago, a woman used her supernatural powers to build a tower reaching the sky. The woman then married the thunder spirit; however, the thunder spirit later destroyed this tower, leaving a series of seven mountains stretching from Ler Mu K'Ser into Karenni State to the north, a distance of some 100 kilometres (Prasert Trakansuphakon, pers. comm. 2015/03/05). To this day, local villagers consider Ler Mu K'Ser to be the centre of the entire Karen country, and therefore the relationship between local people and the *K'Sah* spirits of Ler Mu K'Ser has implications for the health, peace, and productivity of all Karen lands, not only Kaw Thay Ghu (fieldnotes 2017/01/22; 2017/02/08).

For the *Kyoh Tah* ceremony, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* lay branches on the ground, carving a circle in the earth around the branches. Villagers bring offerings of buffalo rope, betel nut, betel leaf, and tobacco, which they place on the ground in the centre of the circle. As in *Lu Htee Hta*, a sacrificial pig is killed. The pig's blood is mixed with uncooked rice, and the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* scatters this mixture on the ground within the circle as an offering to the spirits of the land (fieldnotes 2016/12/07).

As in *Lu Htee Hta*, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* pray while dribbling rice alcohol to the ground. When I asked Saw Thet Ki Htoo, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* of Hee Gho Lo Der village, why they *Kyoh Tah*, he replied that they need to *Lu Kaw* (make offerings to the *Kaw*) for happy people, happy animals, and abundant food. *Kyoh Tah* prayers therefore emphasize the health and well-being of the land. Referring once again to local people's understanding of *Ler Mu K'Ser* as the centre of the Karen land, Thet Ki Htoo told me that they perform the *Kyoh Tah* ceremony for the whole Karen country, to promote peace, harmony, and prosperity (fieldnotes 2016/12/07). Although Burmese military occupation and displacement currently prevent *Kaw Thay Ghu* villagers from performing the large *Kyoh Tah* ceremony, ceremonial leaders wish to revive the practice.

Research collaborators and participants repeatedly emphasized that the *Lu Htee Hta* and *Kyoh Tah* ceremonies are the most important actions to manage the water, land, and natural resources upon which people depend. Both ceremonies involve offerings to the spirits to renew the contract between human inhabitants and the spiritual owners of the water and land. In return, the people invoke the spirits' blessings for prosperity, peace, and protection from harm.

*Lu Htee Hta* and *Kyoh Tah* are examples of the "founders' rituals" (Århem 2016a, 297) that scholars have described among many societies in highland Southeast Asia. These ceremonies maintain the original contract with spiritual owners of the land that allowed human newcomers to clear farms and establish villages (see Hayami 2004; Kammerer and Tannenbaum 2003), and the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* inherit these contractual obligations to the spirits in a direct line from the original founders of *Kaw Thay Ghu*. An ancient

story illustrates how this contract was established between the *K'Sah* spirits and human newcomers to

Kaw Thay Ghu:

Saw Thay Ghu, the founder of Kaw Thay Ghu, bought the *Kaw* from two brothers named Loo K'Ser Pah and Paw K'Ser Pah. Thay Ghu and the people with him began cultivating the land, but no matter how much rice they grew, the harvest was never enough to feed the people. Disaster struck when the people held a communal wrist-tying ceremony [a common practice among animist Karen], and Thay Ghu's daughter died. Thay Ghu and the people with him had not known that communal wrist-tying is taboo in Kaw Thay Ghu, but they now realized that something was very wrong. Thay Ghu called back the original owners, who had relocated to another district after selling the *Kaw*. They returned and performed the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony at the mouth of the Klaw Klaw Lo Klo stream. Three years later, one of the brothers gave his son in marriage to another one of Thay Ghu's daughters; this son also brought with him the *Koh Tee Koh Reh* (ceremonial alcohol pots for *Lu Htee Hta*). From this union, two sons were born. The older one founded Bler Ghaw village and inherited the responsibility to *Lu Htee Hta* for the health of the waters, while the younger one founded the village of Hee Gho Lo Der and inherited the responsibility to *Kyoh Tah* for the health of the land.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the ritual obligations and unique contract between the *K'Sah* spirits and the villagers of Kaw Thay Ghu were transferred from Loo K'Ser Pah and Paw K'Ser Pah to Thay Ghu's descendants. The current generation of *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* in Bler Ghaw and Hee Gho Lo Der villages have inherited the ceremonial obligations to *Lu Htee Hta* and *Kyoh Tah*, maintaining relationships with the *K'Sah* spirits and thereby maintaining the health of the water and land in Kaw Thay Ghu.

In addition to the major annual ceremonies, individual households practice a host of rituals connected with the seasonal agricultural cycle. One day while we were relaxing together at the Luthaw Paw Day community centre, my research collaborators Saw Nya Ki Htoo, Saw Jackson, and Saw Ray Kay Moo shared with me the ritual sequences involved in selecting land for swidden rice cultivation. A family will scope out potential forest fallows and consult with relatives, neighbours, and friends in the village before selecting an area that they intend to clear. They then enlist the services of a diviner (*Pwa Su Tah Kah Tah*) to determine whether the plot of land is spiritually propitious for farming. They mark the land (*Peh Law Doo Kee*) by clearing three small sections. The final ritual that Karen animists practice before

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<sup>6</sup>This account was compiled by drawing on unpublished KESAN research, combined with fieldnotes from 2016/12/15 and a review workshop on 2018/01/02.

they clear the land is called *Peh Kyoo Law*. The people clear a section of the plot until noon before returning to the field shelter, where they cook rice and curry. The male head of the household offers a portion of the food to the spirits of the land, calling them to come and eat. The people eat at their field shelter and return home to the village, coming back to clear the rest of the land over the following days (fieldnotes 2017/01/29).

Saw Nya Ki Htoo also shared with me a ritual that Karen animists do in their irrigated rice fields at the beginning of the ploughing season, called *Hteh See*. The field's owner ploughs three times around the perimeter of the field; if a barking deer calls, or if anything goes wrong with the ploughing, it is a bad omen, and the ritual must be repeated. After the farmer has ploughed three rounds, he returns to his field hut and offers rice to the spirits of the water and land, placing it on the post at the entrance to his hut and inviting the spirits to come and eat. After the morning meal, the farmer dribbles alcohol and prays to the *K'Sah* spirits for help and blessing in the upcoming growing season (fieldnotes 2018/01/14).

Some people also practice small *Kyoh Tah* or *Lu Tah* ceremonies in their fields or at the head of irrigation canals. Only a field's owner can practice such ceremonies; if the owner is a woman, a male relative performs the ceremony on her behalf (unpublished KESAN research). The same is true for *Lu Hku Thet Hku*, a ceremony that Karen animists perform in both lowland irrigated paddy and upland swidden fields as the grain heads are forming. This ceremony invokes the *K'Sah* spirits to protect the rice from pests, 'call back' the spirits of the rice to the field, and ensure an abundant harvest (fieldnotes 2017/02/16).

### *Ceremonies: Summary and Key Principles*

Each of the ceremonies that research colleagues described to me cultivates and maintains healthy relations between people and the spiritual owners of the water and land. An ethic of reciprocity governs these relationships: people make offerings to these guardian spirits, and in return they pray for the spirits'

blessing and protection on their waters, lands, and communities. These ceremonies manage the relationship between Karen villagers and their natural environment, mediated through the spirits. Without the ceremonies, the spiritual relationship is broken, and the *Kaw* risks facing calamity such as floods, droughts, landslides, poor harvests, and other natural disasters.

Displaced villagers from Tee Moo Kee village explained to me the consequences of not being able to practice the ceremonies to propitiate the *K'Sah* spirits. They told me that, even when they obtained the same quantity of rice as in the past, it was no longer sufficient to feed the people for the whole year. They suggested that this was because they were no longer able to practice the ceremonies as in the past, and their village did not currently have a *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah*, due to their displacement situation (fieldnotes 2016/12/18). Thus, maintaining proper spiritual relationships with the *K'Sah* is essential not only to prevent disaster, but also to ensure food security and general human well-being.

The spirit world is the way that local Karen animists relate to the water and land itself. After all, in the animist Karen worldview, the *K'Sah* are the owners of the water and land. These are exclusive relationships, and therefore only the human 'owner' of a rice field can perform ceremonies in that field. The same principle holds true for *Lu Htee Hta* and *Kyoh Tah*. Only the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* of Bler Ghaw village can *Lu Htee Hta*, and only the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* of Hee Gho Lo Der can *Kyoh Tah*. These *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* inherit their roles from the original founder of Kaw Thay Ghu. The story of Kaw Thay Ghu's founding illustrates the consequences of angering the *K'Sah* by disrespecting the unique spiritual protocols of the *Kaw*. Humans' rights to use the land are contingent on maintaining ritual obligations to the spiritual owners of the land. As research participants and collaborators emphasized, satisfying these obligations is the most important action to manage and care for the waters and lands of Kaw Thay Ghu. That is because, in the local Karen ontology, water and land constitute "a field of [spiritual] relationships" (Coulthard 2014, 61), and these relations must be maintained in order to have healthy water, healthy land, and healthy people.

### *Showing Respect, Protecting the Forest: Tah Mu Kha and Nah Htee Spirits*

Although Karen villagers in Kaw Thay Ghu are in theory free to clear forest for swidden cultivation anywhere in the *Kaw*, in practice many forest areas are traditionally protected from being cleared. In the local Karen worldview, many of these places are inhabited by *Tah Mu Kha* spirits, or in water places by *Nah Htee*. For ease of discussion, I will treat these two categories of spiritual beings interchangeably. Karen villagers respect the dwelling places of these spirits, which in effect creates a network of protected forest in the inhabited landscape, demonstrating the spirits' agency and participation in the management and conservation of the water and land in a Karen *Kaw*.

The place of *Tah Mu Kha* in the local Karen worldview did not become clear until toward the end of the fieldwork. Some people spoke of *Tah Mu Kha* as 'evil spirits,' and the places they inhabit as 'evil places.' People also often referred to these places in the Karen language as 'strong forest' or 'strong forest fallow,' alluding to the spiritual power present there. However, one day my young friend Moe Dah Doh told me the history of *Tah Mu Kha* spirits and how they formerly lived with people (fieldnotes 2017/02/13). At that time, humans and *Tah Mu Kha* had a reciprocal childcare relationship, watching one another's children while the adults, both human and *Tah Mu Kha*, worked their fields. However, humans mistreated the children of the *Tah Mu Kha*. Because humans failed to practice respectful relations, they can no longer see the *Tah Mu Kha*, although *Tah Mu Kha* can see humans. Three elders, Saw Doh Ghay and Saw Shwe Eh Lay, and Saw Taray Ker, later confirmed this story, and they also explained that *Tah Mu Kha* are humans' friends and blood brothers. Although people may suffer sickness or injury when they transgress areas inhabited by *Tah Mu Kha*, the *Tah Mu Kha* themselves do not harm humans. Rather, it is their animals, such as dogs and pigs, that bite humans when the latter violate *Tah Mu Kha* or *Nah Htee* areas (fieldnotes 2017/02/19; 2017/02/20).

Some Christian research participants suggested that it would be better if there were fewer places inhabited by *Tah Mu Kha*, so that the animists would not get sick or injured by the spiritual power in these

places (fieldnotes 2017/01/31). When I asked Doh Ghay, Shwe Eh Lay, and Taray Ker about this, they laughed and replied that no, that is not the way it is at all. They explained that if humans destroy places inhabited by *Tah Mu Kha*, those spirits will have nowhere else to go, and so they will come among people and cause harm and sickness. However, if humans respect the *Tah Mu Kha* in their places, they will not bother humans in their places (fieldnotes 2017/02/19; 2017/02/20).

Karen elders recognize places inhabited by *Tah Mu Kha* in various ways. Some places are known by their history, because in the past people died after clearing these areas. Naw Ma Mya, a respected elder from Bler Ghaw village, told me that if such a thing happens twice, then people know they should not clear that land (fieldnotes 2016/11/21). There are numerous categories of 'strong forest fallow,' depending on the history of the land. Some land is known as orphans' fallow because parents of those who cleared the land in the past died; now, only those whose parents have already died will dare to clear this land. Other land is reserved for single unmarried people, because people who cleared the land in the past lost their spouse or children. There is also widows' fallow, and so on. Ma Mya said she sometimes hears strange noises or voices, and that is how she knows that land is spiritually 'strong' (fieldnotes 2016/11/21). In each case, people recognize the power of such land and usually avoid clearing it for fear of spiritual consequences.

Many ecologically unique places are inhabited by *Tah Mu Kha* and are protected as such, as participants in a focus group activity told me. For example, *Htee Meh K'Lah* ('mirror water') is a spring-fed pool with no outflow and is traditionally protected as a place of the *Nah Htee* water spirits. Many other unique landforms and water bodies are also inhabited by *Tah Mu Kha* or *Nah Htee* and are subject to various rules and taboos. Some of these places are unsuitable for permanent dwellings or villages, others cannot be cleared for farming, and some places people do not dare to go at all (fieldnotes 2016/12/15).

Karen villagers know that *Tah Mu Kha* must be able to travel across the landscape, and that they therefore require forest corridors. Traditional taboos prohibit the clearing of ridgetops and stream

corridors, and people leave small strips of forest between adjacent swidden fields. These corridors allow *Tah Mu Kha* to travel through the inhabited landscape without disrupting people's homes, villages, and farms (fieldnotes 2017/02/01). Research participants also noted the ecological benefits of maintaining these forest corridors, including watershed protection, corridors for forest animals and birds, and seed trees, particularly for pine, which does not regenerate from the stump after being cut, like most other local trees do.

Some types of *Tah Mu Kha* land can be cleared, provided people follow proper protocols. As noted above, certain kinds of 'strong fallow' only affect certain groups of people, such as people with children, or those whose parents are still living. Other people can clear this land without consequence. Sometimes, people perform ceremonies to cause the *Tah Mu Kha* spirits to leave the land for the growing season and return after the rice has been harvested. Elders Doh Ghay and Shwe Eh Lay suggested that these ceremonies compel the *Tah Mu Kha* to lock up their pigs and dogs so that they do not harm people or their crops (fieldnotes 2017/02/20). Sometimes, people build bamboo ladders or other structures to allow the spirits to leave the land and enter the surrounding forest (fieldnotes 2016/12/15). In any case, clearing spiritually powerful land requires thorough knowledge of the ceremonies and protocols to propitiate the *Tah Mu Kha* and other spiritual forces that inhabit this land.

### *Ceremonies to Atone for Violations against Tah Mu Kha and Nah Htee Spirits*

When people become sick or injured, they may consult a diviner to determine both the cause and cure of the ailment. Often, the cause can be traced to a violation of the *Tah Mu Kha* forest spirits or the *Nah Htee* water spirits. On one occasion, I witnessed my research assistant Saw Maw Grow perform a ceremony for his older brother, who had suffered a hurt leg for about three months. Divination (*Su Tah Kah Tah*) indicated that the man had violated the *Nah Htee*, and that an offering to these spirits was required to make things right and heal his leg (fieldnotes 2016/12/10).



First, the elderly grandmother of the house took a live chick, wrapped it in a leaf, and rubbed it up and down the man's leg while saying a prayer that went something like this: "if he hurt you [the *Nah Htee*], we are going to do an offering, so that you can forgive each other and you can both be cured" (fieldnotes 2016/12/10). Maw Grow then took the chick down to the stream and sacrificed it to the *Nah Htee* water spirits, as directed by the *Su Tah Kah Tah* divination ritual.

After the ceremony, we returned to the house, and I asked Maw Grow and his relatives whether they know people who have recovered through these methods. They then shared with me several examples of people who had unwittingly violated the spirits, suffered various ailments, and been healed following the proper ceremony. They said that the success of the healing rituals depends on the *Su Tah Kah Tah* divination rituals and their ability to determine the necessary ceremonies to placate the spirits. Interestingly, Doh Ghay and Shwe Eh Lay told me that although it is the spirits' pigs and dogs that bite and cause the sickness, it is the *Tah Mu Kha* or *Nah Htee* spirits themselves who heal the people once they have performed the proper rituals (fieldnotes 2017/02/20).

Once again, Karen villagers' interactions with *Tah Mu Kha* and *Nah Htee* spirits illustrates a relational worldview based on an ethic of reciprocity. In the past, humans enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with these spirits, but this relationship was violated by humans who failed to respect the *Tah Mu Kha*. Although some villagers speak of 'evil spirits' and 'evil places,' these relations are governed more by an ethic of respect, of humans in their place and the spirits in theirs. Elders and diviners recognize spiritual forces in the landscape, acknowledging the agency of these forces that govern how people interact with the waters and forests of their homeland, and that designate some lands as spiritually 'strong' protected forests. Ceremonies to atone for violations also illustrate an ethic of reciprocity: people bring offerings to feed the spirits, make restitution, and request healing.

A network of protected *Tah Mu Kha* forest corridors and ecologically significant landscape features traditionally maintain biodiversity, watershed function, and forest resources within the inhabited Karen

landscape. Rather than being directly managed and policed by humans, these places are protected due to the spiritual forces that inhabit them and that demand humans' deference and respect.

### *Day Paw Law to the Lo: A Spiritual Bond between Karen Villagers and their Homelands*

Another category of protected forest groves also exists in any Karen *Kaw*. These lands, which for the purposes of this paper I will call 'spirit groves,' are linked to human cycles of birth and death. These places are important to manage the *K'Lah*, or spiritual essences, which in a Karen ontology inhabit every living human being and which must be safely returned to the land after death so that they do not disturb the living. There are five types of spirit groves in a Karen *Kaw*: *Day Paw Law*, cemetery, *Lo*, *Bu Ma Law*, and *Hto Mo Lo*. One day when I was visiting Htee Baw Kee village, an elder named Saw Thet Mi showed me the spirit groves surrounding the village. Since most villages are displaced, they no longer have formally protected groves for *Day Paw Law*, *Bu Ma Law*, and *Hto Mo Lo*, but Htee Baw Kee is in its original location, so villagers still access and maintain these places. Research participants had described these places to me many times, but it was only after seeing them in person in a stable village setting that I could understand how these places function as protected forests on the landscape.

When a baby is born, the baby's father takes the umbilicus and places it in a bamboo container, which he then straps to the village's *Day Paw Law* tree. The life of the newborn baby thus becomes attached to the life of the tree. Typically, the entire village uses one or two *Day Paw Law* trees, and these trees must be tall, straight, and fast-growing. The *Day Paw Law* trees are traditionally located in a protected grove at the edge of the village. It is prohibited to cut these trees, and Saw Thet Mi told me that if someone cuts the *Day Paw Law* tree, people whose umbilicus was tied there may suffer depression or other kinds of sickness (fieldnotes 2016/12/13).

Graveyards are spiritually powerful and dangerous places, and these are some of the most strictly protected forests in Kaw Thay Ghu. However, even more important than the graveyard for Karen animists

is the *Lo*, one of the most sacred places in any Karen *Kaw*. One day, my research assistant Maw Grow and I hiked to the mountaintop where the *Lo* is located in a grove of mature pine trees. The *Lo* is the final dwelling place of the spirits of the deceased, or as my research collaborator Saw O Moo called it, the "city of the dead" (pers. comm. 2015/05/18). When a person dies, family members prepare a basket to take to the *Lo*. If the deceased was cremated, a piece of the skull is placed in the basket; otherwise, some of the person's hair is included (KESAN 2015c). People then add other items to the basket, including Karen rice alcohol, betelnut, chili, salt, thread, rice, and more – in short, everything the spirit needs for its continued existence in the *Lo*. Sometimes people also place money in the *Lo* as *Tah Hku* (fieldnotes 2016/11/15). No matter where a Karen animist villager travels, when that person dies, his or her remains must be carried back to the ancestral *Lo*. My KESAN colleague Saw Sha Bwe Moo, who grew up in Kaw Thay Ghu, shared that his great-grandfather died far from his ancestral land, and so the trip to carry his remains back to the *Lo* involved two men and an elephant, taking months over mountain trails (pers. comm. 2014/11/11). The *Lo* thus epitomizes the bond between Karen animists and their ancestral territory.

Spiritual proscriptions prohibit clearing the *Lo*. If people clear the *Lo*, the spirits of the dead will be affected, and they may disturb the living, who will then experience sickness or depression (fieldnotes 2016/12/18). Elders from Poe Khaw Kee village told me that if people disrespect the *Lo* by stealing money or other possessions left there for the spirits of the deceased, they will suffer spiritual consequences. Not only the one who stole the item, but his relatives might also get sick. Furthermore, the elders suggested that because their village is close to the *Lo*, they might also be affected by these violations (fieldnotes 2016/12/22). Thus, Poe Khaw Kee villagers take special care to protect the *Lo* as a sacred spirit grove, and they have now designated it as a community forest under KNU forest policy.

*Bu Ma Law* and *Hto Mo Lo* are traditionally located in protected forest groves along the path between the village and the *Lo*. Local animists told me that the *Bu Ma Law* is the granary for the spirit of the deceased as it becomes established in the *Lo* (fieldnotes 2017/02/24). Here, people place various

possessions for the spirit of the deceased, in much the same way as they do in the *Lo*. In essence, constructing a *Bu Ma Law* is the last act of love family members perform for the deceased. Finally, the *Hto Mo Lo* relates to *Au Kheh*, a ritual feast of roast pork conducted to propitiate the spirits of the ancestors who have passed on and who are in the *Lo* (fieldnotes 2016/11/20; see also Buadaeng 2003). The pork bones from the feast are placed in a basket and deposited in the *Hto Mo Lo*, along the path toward the *Lo* (fieldnotes 2016/12/09). Traditionally, people did not clear the *Bu Ma Law* or *Hto Mo Lo* areas, since to do so would be to risk disturbance by the spirits of the deceased and, in the case of *Au Kheh*, render the ceremony ineffective so it would have to be repeated (fieldnotes 2016/12/13).

The organization of spirit groves around the old village of K'Neh Mu Der illustrates how these places, combined with other protected forests such as ridgetop corridors and *Tah Mu Kha* forests, create a protected forest network in the inhabited Karen landscape. Saw Taray Ker, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* of K'Neh Mu Der, took my research assistant and me one day to explore the ridge where K'Neh Mu Der village was situated. At the south end of the ridge was the village site itself, which has lain uninhabited since the villagers fled Burmese military attacks in 1997. The *Day Paw Law* was nearby, as was the *Hto Mo Lo*, near an enormous banyan tree. A little further up the ridge was the *Bu Ma Law*, followed by the graveyard. The entire ridgetop is also a *Tah Mu Kha* spirit corridor that extends to the *Lo*. Like *Tah Mu Kha* forests, spirit groves are protected for spiritual reasons, to protect the living from being disturbed by the spirits of the dead. The imperative is to maintain healthy relations in a world imbued with spiritual power.

#### *Taboos: Internalized Law in a Karen Kaw*

As Indigenous scholars in North America have pointed out, spiritual and social relations constitute a source of Indigenous law (Borrows 2010; Napoleon 2013; Lindberg 2007). The discussion of Karen environmental governance so far illustrates this. Sacred relations with *K'Sah* spirits compel Karen villagers to uphold ceremonial obligations in *Lu Htee Hta* and *Kyoh Tah* in order to care for the waters and lands of

the *Kaw*. An ethic of respect toward *Tah Mu Kha* and *Nah Htee* spirits compel local people to avoid disturbing the dwelling places of these spirits, and to perform ceremonies when they have violated these places. Similarly, respect for the continuing existence of the spirits of the dead in the *Lo* and related spirit groves maintain these places as protected forest in the inhabited landscape. All of this has traditionally existed in *Kaw Thay Ghu* in the absence of formalized regulations or coercive authority. This is an internalized Indigenous law based on respecting relationships with the spirit world, and the consequences of disrespecting these relations motivates compliance.

A similar internalized law of spiritual proscriptions traditionally governs fishing, hunting, and gathering activities in a Karen *Kaw*. For example, there are several species of animals that Karen animists say should never be killed, such as the Hoolock Gibbon, tiger, or rhinoceros. Buadaeng (2003) reports that some Karen people believe that these animals might be inhabited by human *K'Lah*. My research colleagues never mentioned this, although they did say about gibbons that their lives are like humans: the young stay with the mother for a long time, and they reproduce very slowly. Therefore, if humans kill gibbons, their own children might die; on a KESAN-organized field trip to the Kheshorter Community Forest, local people shared stories of this happening (fieldnotes 2016/11/28).

Another type of taboo is *Tah U Tah Khaw*. These species are not strictly forbidden per se, but they possess spiritual power that can cause disaster if certain rules and taboos are not followed. A common theme is that these species either should not be eaten in the house (such as Slow Loris), or should not be eaten in the forest (several species of frogs, *Nya Lee* fish, crabs, and shrimp). In the first instance, eating the animal in the house will bring disaster upon that household, and in the latter case, eating it in the forest will cause one to become lost.

Numerous additional taboos govern hunting, fishing, and gathering, and it is beyond the scope of this research to describe them all. My research collaborator Saw Nya Ki Htoo emphasized the role of taboos in promoting conservation, summing it up this way: "the elders knew how to make it difficult for us to

hunt too many, so they made these rules and taboos that we need to follow" (fieldnotes 2016/12/14). Nya Ki Htoo and his wife Naw Lay Lah Wah, who are passionate about their culture and restoring *Kaw* environmental governance, often stressed to me the importance of the taboos that govern their everyday lives and interactions with their world.

This is the way that environmental governance and conservation work in a Karen *Kaw*. In the absence of centralized authority structures and statutory regulations, a system of protocols and taboos governs relationships between people, the natural environment, plants and animals, all mediated through relationships with spiritual beings such as *K'Sah*, *Tah Mu Kha*, *Nah Htee*, and *K'Lah*. There are other important spiritual forces in the Karen animist cosmology, but these four groups of beings figure prominently in the ways that they influence *Kaw* environmental governance in northern Mutraw District.

#### *Actualizing Indigenous Law, Managing Relations: The Kaw Governance Structure*

The foregoing discussion is not to suggest the absence of communal governance structures in a Karen *Kaw*. To the contrary, the *Kaw* includes numerous positions responsible for governing the community's social and spiritual relations. The diagram pictured in Figure 4 was produced as part of KESAN's ongoing community-based research project on *Kaw* governance. This diagram is not exhaustive, but it illustrates the complex governance structure that exists in a *Kaw* such as Kaw Thay Ghu. None of these people directly controls villagers' use of the land, forest, and natural resources of the *Kaw*; rather, their primary function is to maintain proper spiritual relations through the ceremonies, to pass on knowledge of the rituals and taboos, and to manage relations with other *Kaw*, a process which also involves spiritual considerations. *Kaw* leaders manage the spiritual and social relations of the *Kaw*, which in turn enacts governance by coordinating villagers' social and ritual activities, as well as the agricultural activities that

relate to these rituals. From discussions with research participants and collaborators in Kaw Thay Ghu, this is how I understand environmental governance to work in a Karen *Kaw*.

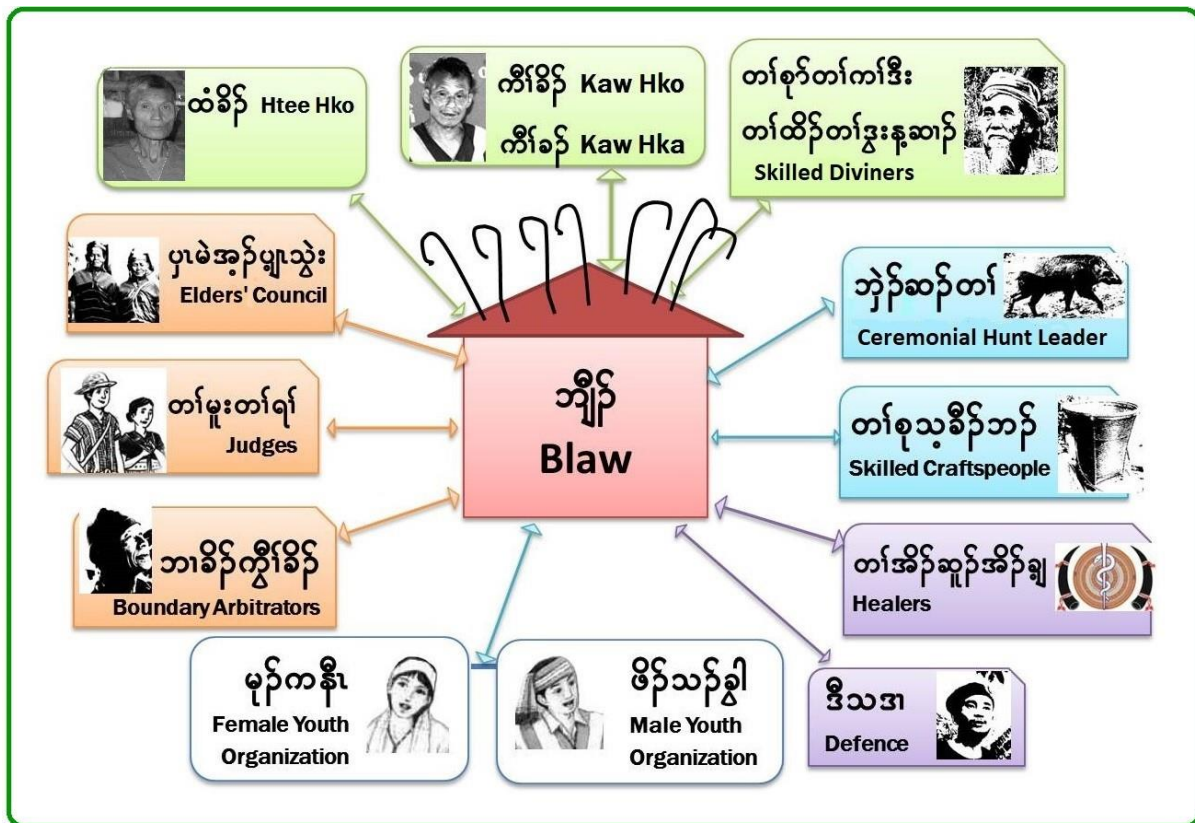


Figure 4. *Kaw Governance Structure*. Adapted from unpublished KESAN document.

It should be noted that this diagram is an idealized picture of *Kaw* governance roles that developed over more than two years of community research and consultation. It illustrates how people in Kaw Thay Ghu currently conceive of how *Kaw* governance worked in the past, as well as describing the kinds of roles and positions that they wish to restore and revitalize. In the following discussion, I describe ways that these governance structures manage social and spiritual relationships in a *Kaw* community. My discussion here focuses on the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* (*Htee Hko*, *Kaw Hko*, and *Kaw Hka* in the diagram), elders, and youth organizations. These positions traditionally constitute the heart of *Kaw* governance; in fact, two elders with whom I spoke, Saw Tah Htoo and Saw Doh Ghay, suggested that the entire *Kaw* governance structure could be distilled into these three groups (fieldnotes 2017/02/04). Other roles, such as judges (more of an investigative role rather than prosecutor), *Su Tah Kah Tah* diviners, medicinal healers, or

boundary arbitrators, are often filled by trusted elders, and youth can also be judges. These roles are more fluid and informal, and they are based on individuals' personal merit and standing in the community. One person may hold several different positions simultaneously. As the diagram indicates, *Kaw* governance centres on the *Blaw*, a ceremonial structure that traditionally is present in every animist Karen village.

The *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* structure includes several related positions, each with its own roles and responsibilities. In Kaw Thay Ghu, there is both a *Htee Hko* ('head of the water') who performs the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony to care for the waters of the *Kaw*, and a *Kaw Hko* ('head of the *Kaw*') who performs the *Kyoh Tah* ceremony to care for the land. Both structures include three people, and these men trace their lineage through the male line to the founders of Kaw Thay Ghu, affirming the original contract between the people and the spiritual owners of the *Kaw*. The *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* at the village level, or *Hee Hko* (village heads), also trace their lineage through the male line to their village's original founder.

*Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* have other ritual and ceremonial roles in addition to *Lu Htee Hta* and *Kyoh Tah*. For example, in the *Lu Hku Thet Hku* ceremony, all villagers in Kaw Thay Ghu must wait for the *Hee Hko* in Bler Ghaw to perform this ceremony, followed by the *Hee Hko* in their own village, before they can do so (fieldnotes 2017/12/16). There are also ritual taboo days, during which villagers in the *Kaw* cannot do any work. The *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* coordinates these taboo day observances, which are often associated with moon cycles and/or agricultural activities such as selecting land for shifting cultivation (fieldnotes 2017/12/16).

The Karen language term for the elders' council is *Meh Ay Blay Thweh*, 'those with sharp teeth and rough tongues,' a reference to these people's wisdom and ability to resolve disputes. *Meh Ay Blay Thweh* know the *Kaw*'s history and ritual protocols. Some elders are also *Pwa Su Tah Kah Tah* diviners, who know the spiritual history of the land and perform divining rituals to assist villagers in selecting spiritually propitious places to farm. *Meh Ay Blay Thweh* may be more knowledgeable than the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah*, particularly if the latter are young and recently inherited their positions. These elders are therefore



trusted advisors on spiritual and social matters (fieldnotes 2017/02/11). Unlike the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah*, who must be animist, *Meh Ay Blay Thweh* in Kaw Thay Ghu and neighbouring *Kaw* include Christians as well as animists.

*Meh Ay Blay Thweh* pass on knowledge of the spiritual taboos, rituals, and handicraft skills to the youth. This is one of the purposes of the male and female youth organizations, which are comprised of unmarried youth. Saw Nya Ki Htoo and Naw Lay Lah Wah told me stories one evening about being part of these youth organizations when they were young (fieldnotes 2017/01/28). Young men and women would travel from village to village doing communal work such as planting swidden fields, even going across *Kaw* boundaries. These organizations initiated youth into the social life of the community, while passing on knowledge of the spiritual relationships in which the community was enmeshed. By the time of my fieldwork, this institution had disappeared due to the war and displacement, although research participants stated that they wish to restore it in the future.

Due to the war and displacement, there are currently no permanent *Blaw* structures in Kaw Thay Ghu, but in the past, this building was the ceremonial heart of a Karen village. Male visitors to the village would sleep in the *Blaw*. Certain ceremonies would be held there, as would weddings, funerals, and community gatherings to discuss ceremonial matters. In the *Blaw*, elders would teach youth the community's knowledge and traditions. The *Blaw* was the site of social reproduction of *Kaw* governance, where knowledge of the ceremonies, taboos, and spiritual relations was transmitted from one generation to the next. It is little wonder that villagers and ceremonial leaders with whom I spoke stressed the importance of restoring this institution once they are able to re-establish stable villages.

In sum, *Kaw* is a diffuse and informal system of governance, and the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* are the only people who formally inherit their positions. Rather than exercising direct authority, leaders within the *Kaw* administration govern by managing relations with the spirit world and by passing on knowledge of the *Kaw*'s internalized law. I will now discuss how the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* and other *Kaw* governance

structures traditionally actualize this spiritual-ceremonial regime in the governance of swidden cultivation.

*Administration in Practice: Ceremonies and Swidden Cultivation Governance*

*Kaw* governance bodies do not directly control people's access and use of the community's lands and natural resources. Rather, leaders exercise authority indirectly by managing spiritual relations and coordinating ceremonies in the agricultural cycle. In more stable village situations in the past, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* would be the first to perform each of these ceremonies, and this continues to varying degrees in the villages of Kaw Thay Ghu today, mostly depending on the severity of the displacement situation. As my KESAN colleague Mabu Htoo suggested, this is how the spiritual-ceremonial system becomes a system of *Kaw* administration (fieldnotes 2017/01/11).

Due to the displacement, contemporary patterns of swidden cultivation in Kaw Thay Ghu are scattered, as displaced villagers access land wherever they can to grow enough rice to survive. This presented a challenge for my research, as I searched for evidence of systematic swidden cultivation governance. My colleagues at KESAN insisted that such coordinated management existed in the more stable villages of the past. Even in the current displacement situation, it is almost unheard of for villagers to cut swidden land alone, and usually at least a few families clear an area of land together. Finally, toward the end of my fieldwork, a picture began to emerge of how the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* coordinated swidden cultivation through the ceremonial system in the past. After villagers agreed together which general area they would clear, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* led the entire *Kaw* in the practice of the 'barking deer taboo day' (fieldnotes 2017/02/04). During this day, all the people of the *Kaw* refrained from doing any work. After this taboo day, each family or group of families selected and marked the plot of land they intend to clear, *Su Tah Kah Tah* to determine whether they had made a propitious choice, *Peh Law Doo Kee*, and *Peh Kyoo Law*, as described earlier.

Although these ceremonies were and are individually performed by each family or group of families in their own swidden fields, in a stable village situation the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* would be the first to perform each of these ceremonies, and they would also coordinate the taboo no-work days. As Saw Nya Ki Htoo and Naw Lay Lah Wah explained to me, in the past villagers would work together to clear each swidden field, one after another, beginning with the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah's* field (fieldnotes 2017/02/21). Thus, although there was no coercion to enforce rules for swidden cultivation, coordination of the ceremonies and ritual observances under the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah*, as well as the communal organization of labour, produced a systematic, if still flexible, regime of rotational swidden cultivation. To varying degrees, coordination through the ceremonial regime continues in Kaw Thay Ghu today, despite the unstable displacement situation.

#### *Kaw Territoriality: The Spatial Expression of Spiritual Relations*

Ceremonies and spiritual protocols also constitute the *Kaw* boundary, because each *Kaw* represents a unique contract between its human inhabitants and the spiritual owners of the water and land. Research participants explained that one of the most significant distinctions between different *Kaw* is the sacrifice to 'cool the *Kaw*' in case of a premarital sexual relationship: in some *Kaw*, the couple needs to sacrifice a buffalo, in others a pig. In Kaw Thay Ghu, they sacrifice a chicken. In addition, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* of each *Kaw* coordinate taboo days and ceremonies such as *Lu Hku Thet Hku*, and anyone living or farming within the *Kaw* boundaries must follow the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* and perform these ceremonies according to the protocols of that particular *Kaw*. These protocols represent the original contract between the *K'Sah* spirits and human founders of the *Kaw* (cf. Hayami 2004; Kammerer and Tannenbaum 2003).

Since each *Kaw* has a unique relationship with the spiritual owners of the land, it is impossible to practice the ceremonies if one's field straddles the *Kaw* boundary. Villagers from Htee Bway Kee, which borders Kaw Thay Ghu, explained to me the problems they faced because the *Kaw* boundary had shifted

over time and now goes through the middle of their fields, preventing them from being able to practice ceremonies such as *Lu Hku Thet Hku* (fieldnotes 2017/02/09). In another case, some people from Kaw Roe Mu, a *Kaw* neighbouring Kaw Thay Ghu, cleared swidden land extending across the *Kaw* boundary, performing a small *Kyoh Tah* ceremony on the Kaw Thay Ghu side. Subsequently, one man was accidentally shot, another broke his leg, and a third man also suffered injury (fieldnotes 2016/12/10). For local people, this case and others like it illustrate the consequences of violating the territorially-defined terms of the relationship between humans and the *K'Sah* spirits.

In many *Kaw*, including Kaw Thay Ghu, people regularly walk the *Kaw* boundary, meeting together with people from neighbouring communities and adding stones to boundary markers along the way. When there is a dispute over *Kaw* boundaries, elders attempt to negotiate, using their knowledge of the history and ancient poems. If they are unable to resolve the dispute, the people may perform a ceremony and swear an oath, deferring to the *K'Sah* spiritual owners of the land to resolve the dispute.

Several times, research participants related to me the following story about a boundary dispute between Kaw Thay Ghu and Kaw Roe Mu. This story is widely told in Kaw Thay Ghu, although people from Kaw Roe Mu tell a different version of the story, claiming that in the past Kaw Thay Ghu expanded and took the land in question away from them (fieldnotes 2017/02/09). Nevertheless, for the purposes of illustration, I recount the story here as research participants from Kaw Thay Ghu shared it with me:

A man named Bweh Hpa, who had connections in the KNU, married a woman from Kaw Roe Mu and subsequently tried to help Kaw Roe Mu take land from Kaw Thay Ghu during the *Kaw* boundary demarcation in 1969. The people debated for three days but were unable to solve the problem. Finally, Bweh Hpa girdled a tree on the disputed boundary, a tree which was already leaning into Kaw Thay Ghu. Then he said a prayer and an oath that if the tree fell into Kaw Thay Ghu, Kaw Thay Ghu was at fault, and if it fell into Kaw Roe Mu, Kaw Roe Mu was in the wrong. The tree later fell into Kaw Roe Mu, and many people from Kaw Roe Mu died, including Bweh Pah's wife (compiled from unpublished research on file with KESAN).

My KESAN colleague Saw Sha Bwe Moo, who is from Hee Gho Lo Der village, has told me similar stories from other *Kaw*, where attempts to violate the *Kaw* boundary, and therefore the realm of spiritual-ceremonial relations, has resulted in death and disaster.

There is thus a sharp boundary separating the spiritual relations and ceremonial protocols of neighbouring *Kaw*. There cannot be two ceremonial administrations operating on the same land at the same time. In terms of social relations and access to resources, boundaries are much fuzzier and more porous, especially with the current displacement situation. This is consistent with what Roth (2009) found among Karen communities in Thailand, with their complex overlapping patterns of resource access and use. It is only in the realm of spiritual relations that rigid boundary lines exist. In terms of a Karen ontology of territory, this makes sense: the relationship between the *K'Sah* spiritual owners of the water and land and its human inhabitants is mediated through the original contract between these spirits and the founders of the *Kaw*, a contract which is unique to each *Kaw*.

#### *Karen Environmental Relations Under Threat: War, Displacement, and Religious Change*

As this chapter has demonstrated so far, Indigenous environmental governance in Kaw Thay Ghu involves mutual obligations between humans and the spirits of the land. This relationship is specific to the bounded territory of the *Kaw* and spiritual sites within the *Kaw*. The *Kaw* is a relational landscape, and *Kaw* environmental governance functions through these relations. Spiritual relations constitute both an internalized law to govern people's everyday interactions with their water, land, and forest, as well as an administrative structure with spiritual leaders who govern agricultural practices by coordinating and managing ceremonial observances.

Burma's state territorialization project constitutes a vicious attack on the social relationship between Karen villagers and the spirits of the land. Some sacred places have been destroyed and occupied by Burmese military camps, and villagers have been forced to flee from their home villages, compromising the social and ceremonial institutions of *Kaw* communities. Some people in Kaw Thay Ghu have been continuously displaced from their ancestral villages for over 40 years, undermining villagers' ability to uphold obligations to the spirits and to practice environmental relations as in the past.

As research participants emphasized to me, Karen ceremonial practices and spiritual relations are intimately tied to specific places. Thus, when people are displaced from their home villages, it is impossible to practice many of the ceremonies. For example, the village of Hee Gho Lo Der has been abandoned ever since it was attacked by the Burmese military in 1997; since then, it has not been possible to hold a large *Kyoh Tah* ceremony at the base of Ler Mu K'Ser, because the *Kaw Hko* and other Hee Gho Lo Der villagers currently live in an IDP settlement in another part of the *Kaw*. The special groves for *Day Paw Law*, *Bu Ma Law*, and *Hto Mo Lo* in most villages lie unused, and some have been destroyed, as displaced villagers continue the associated practices in random places.

Displacement also affects Karen natural resource governance by disrupting social and ceremonial institutions of the *Kaw*. For example, villagers from Tee Moo Kee told me that they are unable to fully practice their traditions because the villagers are scattered in different places, and they no longer have a village *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah (Hee Hko)* (fieldnotes 2016/12/18). Even in villages with a *Hee Hko*, administration and coordination of ceremonies and agricultural activities is often compromised due to displacement and, as one person put it, 'reduced communication' between villagers (fieldnotes 2017/02/01). Other institutions, such as the youth organizations, have all but disappeared, as have village *Blaw* structures.

Inability to maintain ritual obligations to the spirits has also had a detrimental impact on social and psychological well-being, demonstrating the spiritual side of dispossession. Saw Sha Bwe Moo has told me of ceremonial leaders in Mutraw District who committed suicide rather than be forced to live separated from their homeland and the spirits to whom they hold ritual obligations (pers. comm. 2014/11/11). Despite the hardships posed by the war and prolonged displacement, many villagers have steadfastly remained within the boundaries of *Kaw Thay Ghu*, where they are familiar with the ceremonial regime. As the Tee Moo Kee villagers told me, all they want is for the *K'Sah* spirits to watch over them and care for them again.

Religious conversion to Christianity has also impacted *Kaw* environmental governance. In fact, there is a correlation between forced displacement and religious conversion, as war and displacement have made it difficult or impossible to practice animist ceremonies and obligations toward the spirits. Since *Kaw* environmental governance has traditionally depended both on an internalized understanding of ritual taboos and on communal ceremonial observances, Christian conversion inevitably impacts traditional governance practices in a Karen *Kaw*. Saw O Moo and Saw Nya Ki Htoo noted that, now that villagers practice multiple religions, they are not as united in their practice of the ceremonies and, by extension, agricultural activities which are associated with those ceremonies, as they were in the past (fieldnotes 2017/02/10). Research collaborators also frequently noted the declining observance of taboos and internalized law that had conserved the water, land, and natural resources of the *Kaw* in the past.

Thus, some traditionally protected forests have been cleared, and there is more hunting and fishing than formerly. Research participants and collaborators stressed that there is much less forest cover in Kaw Thay Ghu than in the past, and many animal and fish populations have been depleted. When I asked about the causes of forest decline, people blamed it on population growth and displacement, particularly in the eastern half of Kaw Thay Ghu, which for years has hosted a large IDP population. It is true that displacement and the abandonment of irrigated rice paddies near Burmese military camps and roads have increased pressure on the forest by forcing people to rely more heavily on swidden agriculture.

However, at least as important, it seems, is the impact of war and displacement in undermining the ceremonial administration and observance of traditional taboos. When I explicitly asked during a focus-group workshop whether the declines that people blame on population growth would have been so severe had the traditional ceremonial system remained in place, several people responded that no, these declines would not be so bad if they still had their administration as before (fieldnotes 2017/02/25). In other words, research participants affirmed the role of ceremonial practices and spiritual relations in guiding people's interactions with their lands and forests.

Although animists identified Christian conversion as a problem, my conversations with Christian research collaborators indicated that at least many, and perhaps most, Christians still respect the *Kaw* system, the animist ceremonies, and traditionally protected taboo forests. The ontological shift from Karen animism to Christianity is far from complete for many Christians, and these ontological positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some Christians with whom I spoke talked about the 'scary' places that animists say are inhabited by *Tah Mu Kha* spirits; one Christian elder I spoke with reiterated the animist assertion that trees between swidden fields provide corridors for *Tah Mu Kha* spirits to travel across the landscape (fieldnotes 2017/02/01).

Despite ongoing Burmese military occupation of their homeland during the ceasefire, people in Kaw Thay Ghu hope to begin rebuilding their communities and ceremonial-administrative systems. For example, although there are still no ceremonial *Blaw* structures in Kaw Thay Ghu, *Kaw* leaders hope to re-establish the *Blaw* in Bler Ghaw and Hee Gho Lo Der, the two most important villages in Kaw Thay Ghu for ceremonial purposes (field notebook 2016/12/06; 2017/01/30). Saw Taray Ker, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* of K'Neh Mu Der village, moved his family in 2016 from the IDP settlement and rebuilt their house near the old K'Neh Mu Der village site. Although his is so far the only family to return, Taray Ker hopes that other families will soon follow. When I asked why he chose to return to this site, Taray Ker stated that they could not practice their ceremonies while absent from their own land. Even now, there are ceremonies he cannot perform because the village is not yet re-established and the other K'Neh Mu Der villagers have not yet returned (field notebook 2017/02/12).

During fieldwork, I often asked villagers about their hopes for the future. Invariably, people would respond that they need peace more than anything, and they need the Burmese soldiers to leave their land so that they can re-establish their villages. One young couple I talked with told me,

We don't want our children to face this nightmare, and the situation that we have faced. Whichever life our children choose, we want them to have a better life than we have had. Whether they get an education and move away or stay here and continue farming, we want them to be able to live in peace and not have to flee like we have (fieldnotes 2016/11/26).



People long for peace and demilitarization so that they can return to their villages, rehabilitate their farms, rebuild their ceremonial administrations, and restore their protected spirit groves. As displaced Tee Moo Kee villagers told me, they cannot properly perform ceremonies to obtain the blessings and protection of the *K'Sah* while they are displaced. Similarly, the *Htee Hko* from Bler Ghaw village told me that he wished they could practice the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony in peace, instead of having to cut the ceremony short and flee Burmese military attacks as they have often been forced to do (fieldnotes 2016/12/16).

The resolve of Karen villagers to remain on their lands despite decades of war, and their determination to rebuild their villages and ceremonial administrations, attests to the strength of the spiritual relations that bind animist Karen people to their lands.

### *Taking an Indigenous Ontology of Environmental Relations Seriously*

The case of Kaw Thay Ghu suggests that if one wishes to understand what natural resource governance and environmental conservation means in rural Indigenous communities, it is essential to engage with relational ontologies and ways of being in the world. Karen villagers live in a multi-dimensional world that includes not only visible objects and life forms, but also invisible spiritual entities with whom humans have reciprocal obligations. The Kaw Thay Ghu case demonstrates the importance of taking Indigenous ontologies and environmental relations seriously (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017): seriously enough that scholar-activists, conservationists, and resource managers who work with Indigenous communities allow these ways of being in the world to revolutionize their own concepts of resource management and conservation (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006).

As discussed in chapter 2, post-Enlightenment western scientific approaches tend to overlook ontological differences in their search for universal institutional principles to promote sustainable management and conservation of natural resources. While Lertzman (2009) suggests that all human societies consciously manipulate ecosystems toward human-defined outcomes, social-ecological systems

(SES) approaches (e.g., Ostrom 2009; Cox, Arnold, and Villamayor Tomás 2010) analyse institutional factors such as inclusion/exclusion criteria, regulations, enforcement, and penalties. Such approaches tend to overlook the roles of spiritual actors within Indigenous ontologies, where spirits may be agents not only in establishing rules for environmental governance and conservation, but also in enforcing these rules and imposing penalties for violations. In my methodology discussion in Chapter 3, I described my initial failure to fully appreciate Karen villagers' spiritual and social relations with the land, and how at first this hindered my understanding of Karen conservation practices. Thanks to the patience of research colleagues both at KESAN and in the villages, I finally began to gain a greater appreciation for how an Indigenous relational ontology informs environmental governance and conservation practices in a Karen *Kaw*.

In the end, my time with the people of Kaw Thay Ghu led me to conclude that spiritual relations are the single most important driver of conservation in a Karen *Kaw*. These relations constitute Karen land and natural resource governance in at least two ways: first, spiritual proscriptions function as internalized Indigenous law (Lindberg 2007), the imperative to practice accountability to all one's relations (Simpson 2011; Wilson 2008). Research participants and collaborators frequently emphasized the role of spiritual taboos, such as those governing hunting or protecting dwelling places of the *Tah Mu Kha* and *Nah Htee* spirits. Human authorities do not directly enforce penalties for taboo violations; instead, the spirits themselves (or rather, their pigs and dogs) mete out the consequences for these violations. Spiritual relations thus govern human behaviour and traditionally constitute the protected forest network in a Karen *Kaw*.

Second, the *Kaw* ceremonial administration exercises authority by managing social and spiritual relations and by upholding humans' ritual obligations in their social contract with the *K'Sah*, the spiritual owners of the water and land. In a Karen *Kaw*, land is not merely an object of property relations, and the ultimate owners of the land are not humans but the *K'Sah* spirits; humans gain access to these lands by

practicing respectful relations with the spiritual owners, coordinated by the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah*. Maintaining these relations is of utmost importance, and that is why Karen animists consider offerings and prayers to the *K'Sah* spirits to be the most significant actions to manage the *Kaw*. Ritual obligations and spiritual protocols in turn structure *Kaw* territoriality and social relations, both within and across *Kaw* boundaries.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that Karen villagers do not engage in physical management and conservation practices recognizable to a western-trained scientist. They do. Although people may give spiritual explanations for practices such as maintaining forest corridors along streams, ridgetops, watersheds, and ecologically unique places, they are also well aware of the physical consequences of clearing these places, and Christian villagers with whom I spoke acknowledged the ecological benefits of animists' spirit forests (fieldnotes 2016/01/31). Preserving water sources for irrigated rice fields is a priority; for example, my research assistant Hsa Lah Lah showed me the watershed forest that feeds his sister's rice paddies, and that he works with other villagers to protect. Another oft-cited benefit of forest corridors is that they allow forest animals such as gibbons to travel through the inhabited landscape. Finally, Karen villagers talk of 'seed places' as source populations for various species (cf. Dias 1996; Leibold et al. 2004). For example, research participants identified ridgetop forest corridors as sources of tree seeds for forest regeneration, especially pine, while community wildlife sanctuaries and fish conservation areas replenish areas where people hunt and fish, respectively.

The critical point to remember is that, within an Indigenous ontology and ethical framework, all relations are equally important (Wilson 2008), including spiritual relations. There is therefore a need to expand the conceptual repertoire of management and conservation discourse (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006): rather than simply managing land and natural resources as material objects, the goal of 'management' within an Indigenous ontology is to manage humans' relations with non-human social others, including the land and the spirits of the land. Within the relational Karen world, ecological

considerations are never separate from the imperative to maintain healthy spiritual relations. None of these elements can be separated out as more or less 'real' than the others.

Fish conservation in Kaw Thay Ghu and neighbouring communities illustrates this multidimensional nature of Indigenous environmental relations. Faced with declines in fish populations in recent years, Karen villagers have established fish sanctuaries, with formalized rules and penalties for violations. To strengthen protection of these sanctuaries, Karen animists often conduct annual prayer ceremonies to invoke the *K'Sah* spirits to protect the fish (fieldnotes 2017/02/12). I witnessed one of these ceremonies to establish a new fish conservation area in Htee Kheh Kee village, just beyond the Kaw Thay Ghu boundary. "This is how we care for [the fish]," declared Saw Loh Thay, one of the village leaders (fieldnotes 2017/02/11). Karen Christians also pray to God to protect their fish conservation areas. In The Tah Der, a village in a different area of Mutraw District, local Christians dedicated their fish conservation area with a prayer service. A local animist subsequently fished there anyway, and shortly thereafter his cow died (fieldnotes 2017/02/10). Even with formalized rules in place, Karen villagers continue to invoke supernatural beings, whether the Christian God or the *K'Sah* owners of the water and land, to protect their natural resources.

Fish conservation in Kho Kyaw Der, just beyond the boundaries of Kaw Thay Ghu, also illustrates this combination of spiritual protocols and physical management practices. Local leaders shared with me how they care for *Nya Nah*, a locally endemic species which spawns in shallow water along the shores of the Bwe Lo Klo river each year in January and February. Saw Ray Kay Moo, a villager from the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* line in Kho Kyaw Der, leads the *Nya Nah* conservation efforts, and one day he took me and my research assistant to visit the spawning channels, where fish eggs and fry were still present. A month before, the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sah* had led the village in a ceremony to invoke the *K'Sah* spirits to care for the returning fish. Ray Kay Moo also showed me where he and his assistants had prepared spawning channels, maintaining optimal water levels for the eggs and fry; they had also placed tree branches over the channel

to protect the eggs from predators. Ray Kay Moo explained that *Nya Nah* depend upon their human caretakers like a human infant depends on its mother, and that without this care they could not multiply, because in the shallow water they would be vulnerable to predators and changes in water levels (fieldnotes 2017/02/04).

Besides the ceremony to invoke the *K'Sah* spirits' protection on the *Nya Nah*, Kho Kyaw Der villagers observe numerous taboos related to *Nya Nah*. Villagers maintained that if they violate these taboos, the *Nya Nah* fish will abandon them and spawn elsewhere (fieldnotes 2017/02/04). For many fisheries biologists and conservation professionals, it would be tempting to overlook these spiritual and ceremonial aspects and focus on the physical practices of maintaining spawning channels. However, although maintaining spawning channels might be the most important management action from the ontological perspective of a post-Enlightenment, scientifically-trained fisheries biologist, in the local Karen ontology the spiritual relationship between humans, *Nya Nah*, and the *K'Sah* spirits is no less real. In the Karen world, each of these beings has agency and mutual responsibilities to maintain a relationship that operates on a spiritual as well as physical plane. Failing to respect *Nya Nah* by violating the taboos is just as serious as failing to physically maintain the spawning channels.

In sum, I have argued that the spiritual-ceremonial regime is the most important organizer and driver of environmental governance and conservation in a Karen *Kaw*. An internalized law governs people's environmental relations, which are mediated through the spirit world, and the ceremonial regime produces an administration that structures *Kaw* territoriality and social relations. However, although reciprocal obligations toward the spirit world govern Indigenous environmental relations, this does not by any means preclude physical management actions. To the contrary, these management actions are embedded within social-spiritual relations and sacred responsibilities between humans, the land, and the spirits. Thus, it is impossible to truly understand Indigenous peoples' conservation and management

practices unless one is willing to expand one's ontological horizons and strive to understand the world as local people do.

### *Affirming Karen Environmental Relations in the Salween Peace Park*

In this chapter, I have described the basis of Indigenous Karen environmental governance as the imperative to maintain proper spiritual relations. By no means does this imply an absence of rules, penalties, and administrative bodies to manage the social relations of the *Kaw*. To the contrary, the administrative structure operates through these protocols and ceremonial obligations to the spirits; management practices such as the protection of spirit groves, selection of land for swidden cultivation, or designation and protection of fish conservation areas are all deeply intertwined with the spiritual relations of the *Kaw* and cannot properly be understood apart from those relations.

Kaw Thay Ghu and other *Kaw* communities in Mutraw are currently working to formalize their governance and administration after decades of war, displacement, and religious change. Many villages have established community forests under KNU forest policy. Formalized *Kaw* and community forest regulations do not replace traditional spiritual relations and protocols. To the contrary, the new rules enshrine the spiritual protocols so that all members of the *Kaw* community, both animist and Christian, are required to respect the spiritual relationships that are the foundation of Karen environmental governance. For example, taboos regarding Ler Mu K'Ser, vital to the well-being not only of Kaw Thay Ghu but the entire Karen world, are now being enshrined in community forest policy. Many *Kaw* and community forest leaders, both animist and Christian, spoke of the importance of continuing to respect the old rules even as they establish new ones (fieldnotes 2017/02/10). Both Christians and animists emphasized the continuing relevance of taboos and spirit forests to protect the watersheds, maintain the forest, and conserve biodiversity (fieldnotes 2016/11/28; 2017/01/31). In other words, many *Kaw* residents continue to consider animist spiritual relations as a basis for *Kaw* environmental governance,

even though not all people in the *Kaw* actively engage these relations in the same ways their ancestors did.

Formalization of Karen community conservation and natural resource management is also being done with an eye to the future, to prepare for the time when the isolation imposed by the war will finally be lifted, creating challenges as well as opportunities. For example, one of the most common reasons research participants gave for establishing community forests is that they hope this designation will prevent the Burmese government and private resource companies from seizing their lands and forests for extractive purposes. People in Karen State desire a future where they as Indigenous peoples have the freedom to continue practicing their ancient traditions and spiritual relations with their lands and waters. They wish to articulate community development visions that are consistent with these relationships, and that allow them to continue to practice, maintain, and develop their culture and ways of life. This vision finds its most ambitious expression in the Salween Peace Park initiative, the subject of Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5

### Upholding Karen Indigenous Environmental Relations: Politics of Recognition and Indigenous Resurgence in the Salween Peace Park

*We, the Indigenous Karen people of Mutraw, recognizing our roots that transcend national boundaries; respecting the natural world, which has sustained our people for generations; honoring the memory of those who have struggled against all forms of injustice against the people and the Earth; with a commitment to the present and to the future; in order to create and sustain a lasting peace in our lands, protect and maintain the environmental integrity of the Salween River basin, preserve our unique cultural heritage, and further the self-determination of our people; do enact and establish:  
The Charter of the Salween Peace Park.*

*(Preamble to the Charter of the Salween Peace Park)*

Mutraw District KNU leaders, community-based organizations, and local people are mobilizing the political traditions of the *Kaw* in a bold new project for peace, self-determination, biodiversity conservation, and cultural survival: the Salween Peace Park. This initiative upholds the right of Karen villagers to continue practicing and developing their political systems, culture, and way of life on their ancestral territories. The Salween Peace Park asserts self-determination as the practice of Karen relations: relations to place, relations within and between human communities, and relations with the non-human world, including the spirits. It is a project to strengthen these relations in resistance to ongoing violent efforts by the central Burmese government and military to seize control of the area, impose central government administration, and implement top-down development and conservation schemes as elsewhere in the country.



Ontological problems permeate interactions between Indigenous peoples and state societies that claim their traditional territories. At root is the question of whether the state is prepared to respect and accommodate Indigenous peoples' unique social, spiritual, ecological, and political worlds. In this chapter, I explore these issues in the Salween Peace Park by engaging debates around politics of recognition and Indigenous resurgence/sovereign refusal that Indigenous scholars in North America have evaluated as pathways to liberation. Although Burma's political context differs in significant ways from white settler states, critical scholarship on the politics of recognition provides a useful theoretical framework in which to explore the Karen people's mobilization of Indigenous conservation discourses to protect their lands, culture, and political autonomy.

This chapter is organized as follows: I begin by introducing the Salween Peace Park and ways that Mutraw District leaders have conceived the initiative as a political tool for peace, self-determination, and biocultural conservation during the current ceasefire between the KNU and Burmese military. I then proceed to a more in-depth discussion of the ongoing process to create the Peace Park, analyzing it as a community-driven project to assert Karen environmental relations on contested political terrain. I discuss how the initiative functions as a discursive tool in Mutraw Karen communities, stimulating conversations about cultural revitalization, future community development visions, and opposition to destructive resource extraction such as gold mining. The last half of the chapter analyzes the Salween Peace Park as an Indigenous political project by engaging debates around politics of recognition, sovereign refusal, and Indigenous resurgence. I argue that, although Indigenous conservation projects such as the Salween Peace Park seek recognition in international conservation and Indigenous rights discourses, they do not depend on such recognition since they also focus on strengthening and asserting Indigenous peoples' political traditions that grow from their unique relationship with their land and the spirits of that land.

### *General Baw Kyaw Heh and the Birth of the Salween Peace Park Vision*

General Baw Kyaw Heh, now Vice Chief of Staff of the KNLA, was formerly commander of the KNLA's 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Mutraw District. When the general assumed command of Brigade 5 shortly after the fall of the KNU's central headquarters in Manerplaw in 1995, Karen defense forces were in disarray, with roving Burmese troops attacking and burning Karen villages from the Karenni State border in the north to the confluence of the Moei and Salween Rivers in the south (fieldnotes 2017/03/03; see also Karen Rivers Watch 2004). The Karen Human Rights Group documented at least 180 villages destroyed in Mutraw and neighbouring Kler Lwee Htoo District in 1997 alone (KHRG 1998). When General Baw Kyaw Heh took command, he organized defense forces to protect the villagers, and the security situation began to improve. The general is widely regarded as a hero among the people of Mutraw, and among the Karen resistance more generally (Jolliffe 2016).

General Baw Kyaw Heh's idea for a Karen-run protected area in Mutraw first took root shortly after he took command of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade:

I saw that we needed to care for our birthplace and ancestral lands in perpetuity for our future survival as a people, so that we could live together in harmony with the forests, waters, and wildlife of our homeland ... At that time, the invading Burmese soldiers burned and destroyed our villages in so many places, and our people were scattered ... it caused great hardship for us, preventing us from establishing our lives with any stability ... But I decided that, if the opportunity came one day, we would work together to conserve the ... natural environment of our homeland ... (fieldnotes 2016/12/28).

That opportunity came when the preliminary ceasefire in 2012 brought at least a temporary respite from the fighting. Baw Kyaw Heh initially envisioned a national park, albeit one managed by the Karen people rather than the central Burmese government. However, further discussions with friends and advisors persuaded him to call the project a Peace Park. As the general explained, they discussed how a Peace Park could contribute to building peace at a time when many, including certain factions in the KNU, were criticizing Mutraw for being reluctant to embrace the central government-dominated peace process (fieldnotes 2016/12/28).

The Salween Peace Park moves beyond a negative concept of peace (see Galtung 2008) as the absence of armed conflict to advance a positive vision that includes the conditions necessary for local communities to thrive in harmony with each other and with the waters, lands, forests, and wildlife of Mutraw District. Such a holistic approach to peace has been articulated in the field of peace ecology as the effort to eliminate all forms of violence, including cultural violence, ecological violence, structural violence, and psychological violence (Kyrou 2007). For conflict-affected communities in Mutraw, any approach to peace must include provisions for self-determination, withdrawal of occupying Burmese military forces, protection of Karen lands and culture, and provisions for refugees and IDPs to return and reintegrate into their communities. The Salween Peace Park includes all this and more. It is a comprehensive vision for the future of Mutraw and the people who live there. General Baw Kyaw Heh expressed this sentiment when he declared, "With the Salween Peace Park, we can survive as a nation" (*Mizzima* 2016, para. 8).

The map in *Figure 5* shows the boundaries of the Salween Peace Park as currently proposed, although park planners emphasize that these boundaries may continue to change following public consultation, as local community representatives and administrators debate the merits of including different areas within the park. Currently, the proposed area covers 5,485 square kilometres, more than 80% of Mutraw District. The park includes more than 340 villages and is home to an estimated 70,000 people. From its origin as a Karen military officer's dream, the Salween Peace Park is now being developed in collaboration between local communities, KESAN, other Karen civil society organizations, and KNU Mutraw District leaders. The park consolidates ecological governance initiatives of the KNU and local communities in Mutraw District before the seemingly inevitable arrival of Burmese government administration. As such, the initiative builds on over a decade of conservation and land protection collaborations between local villagers, Karen civil society, and the KNU.

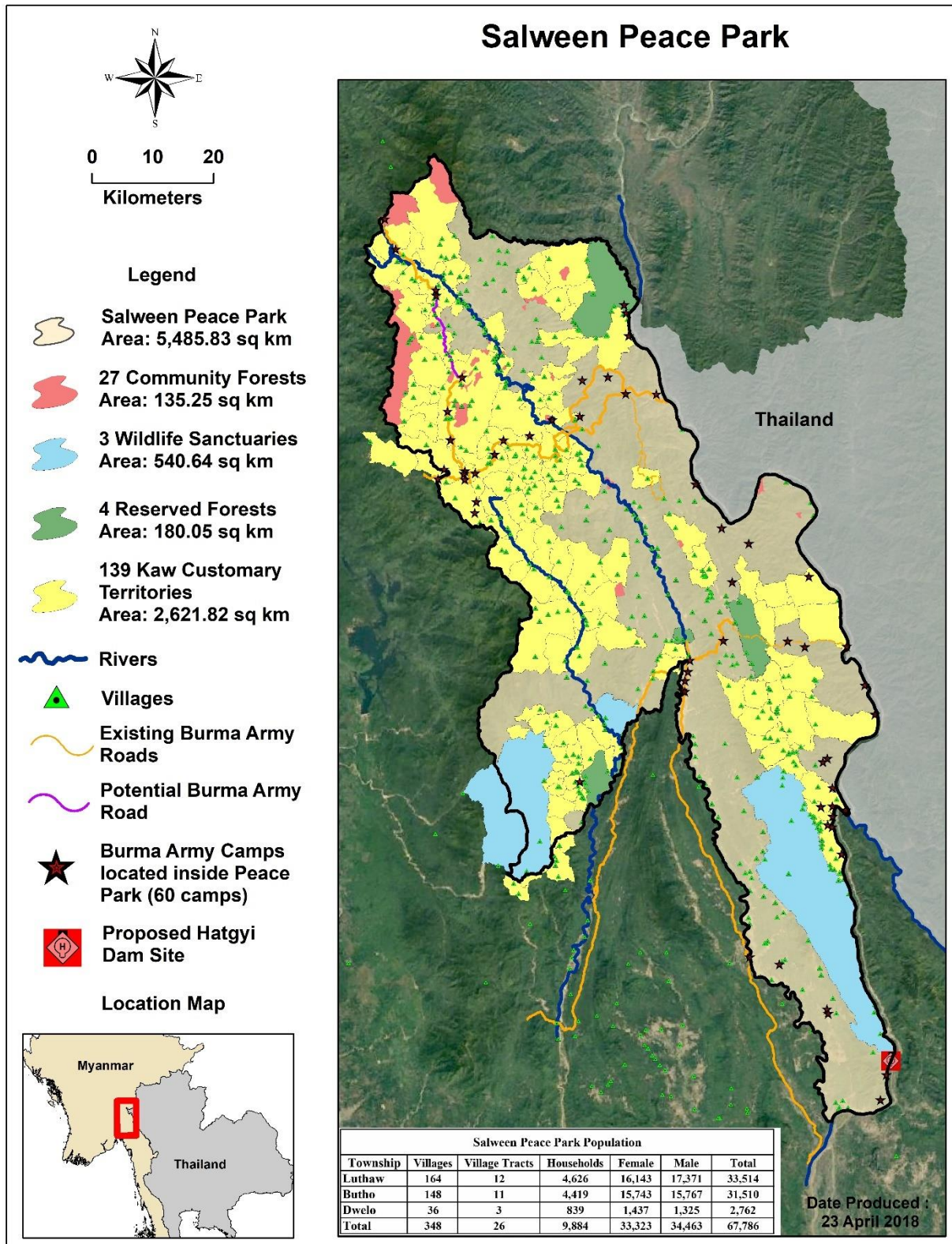


Figure 5. Map of Salween Peace Park. Courtesy of KESAN.

### *Community Conservation Collaborations: Foundation of the Salween Peace Park*

Although the Salween Peace Park is a new idea, foundations for the initiative have been laid over many years of community conservation work. Saw Mabu Htoo, coordinator of KESAN's land and forest protection program, spoke of the "movement" that they are building through their community conservation and land protection work (fieldnotes 2017/03/04). The Salween Peace Park builds on this movement, encompassing customary *Kaw* territories, community forests, reserved forests, and wildlife sanctuaries, all of which are recognized under KNU policy. The Peace Park then integrates these lands under a comprehensive governance framework.

### *Kaw Territories*

With KESAN's assistance, Karen communities in Mutraw are documenting their customary *Kaw* territories and governance systems. As discussed in chapter 4, spiritual relationships form the foundation of *Kaw* governance, and community leaders in places such as Kaw Thay Ghu are working to restore *Kaw* ceremonies, traditions, and spiritual protocols, many of which have been weakened or lost due to conflict, displacement, and religious change. The demarcation and registration of *Kaw* territories under KNU policies is another way to defend community land rights in Mutraw before Burmese government administration takes over. As noted in chapter 3, KESAN staff have selected Kaw Thay Ghu as a pilot project for *Kaw* revitalization, supporting local people's efforts to map land use categories, organize a formal *Kaw* management committee, formalize *Kaw* rules, and negotiate boundary disputes with neighbouring *Kaw*. With the development of the Salween Peace Park, mapping of *Kaw* boundaries has accelerated dramatically: in 2016, the Salween Peace Park reported 29 *Kaw* territories totaling 813 square kilometres (KESAN & KNU Mutraw District 2016), a number that by early 2018 had grown to 139 *Kaw* covering 2,622 square kilometres. This process is ongoing.

### Community Forests

Since 2008, KNU forest policy has provided for the registration of community forests (Jolliffe 2016), which enshrine local villagers' rights to manage their own forests and control access and use of the forest's resources. Although community forests are established partly to protect the forest from over-exploitation by villagers, an even more important role, according to many community forest leaders, is to guard against impending encroachment by the Burmese government and commercial resource extraction activities. When asked about the purpose for community forests, Saw Dah Htoo, a leader from Kheshorter Community Forest, replied that they "protect Indigenous peoples' lands, forests, and animals, so that they are not controlled by other people. We Karen people depend on the forest" (fieldnotes 2016/12/01). Some community forests are established to protect spiritually important places, such as Ler Mu K'Ser Community Forest in Kaw Thay Ghu, or the Kheshorter Community Forest in the northwestern reaches of the Salween Peace Park. Spiritual proscriptions, including taboos protecting rare species such as gibbons, tigers, and hornbills, are enshrined in the rules and regulations of community forests such as Kheshorter (fieldnotes 2016/12/01). During a field trip to the Kheshorter Forest, attendees shared stories about the taboos with community forest leaders from across Kawthoolei, reinforcing these proscriptions as a basis for community forest governance (fieldnotes 2016/11/28).

The process for establishing community forests thus illustrates principles that lie at the heart of the movement to create the Salween Peace Park. These processes strengthen Indigenous Karen people's political traditions and spiritual relationship with their ancestral territories, while simultaneously advocating for recognition in international rights frameworks. KESAN staff regularly organize trainings for local communities on KNU forest policies, Indigenous peoples' forest management, and Karen villagers' rights as Indigenous peoples. Saw Doe Doh Moo, KESAN's environmental education program manager, explained:

by using and applying ... Indigenous rights, the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples], especially [Free Prior and Informed Consent], they will feel

empowered. They feel empowered and working collectively they will try to stop the destructive development (fieldnotes 2017/03/03).

Community-based research has also played an integral role in the development of community forests such as Kheshorter. Saw Sha Bwe Moo from KESAN has been conducting biodiversity research in the Kheshorter area since 1999, documenting tigers, leopards, gibbons, guar, pangolins, birds, and amphibians, among others. Many of these research activities involved students from nearby IDP communities who had been forced to clear virgin forest in order to survive in the high mountain refuge to which they had fled following widespread Burmese military attacks in 1997. Partly as an outcome of community-based research activities, 15 local villages began organizing to protect the community forest in 2010 (fieldnotes 2016/12/01). Community-based research projects play an important role in strengthening the relationship between local communities and their lands (cf. Wilson 2008), laying the foundation for community-based governance of the Salween Peace Park.

#### Forest Reserves and Wildlife Sanctuaries

In addition to 139 demarcated *Kaw* and 27 community forests, the Salween Peace Park includes four forest reserves and three wildlife sanctuaries, which are managed by the KNU's Kawthoolei Forest Department. One of these, the new Kaydoh Mae Nyaw Wildlife Sanctuary, covers 370 square kilometres in the southeastern part of the Salween Peace Park. Due to its size and the ecological richness of its mountain forests, which harbour such species as leopard, tiger, pangolin, gibbon, and wild dog, Kaydoh Mae Nyaw helps promote the Salween Peace Park as a biodiversity conservation initiative (KESAN 2017a). Following consultations with villagers living in and around Kaydoh Mae Nyaw, the sanctuary was officially announced at the Salween Peace Park consultation in December 2017. The process to establish Kaydoh Mae Nyaw Wildlife Sanctuary, which included workshops to develop community land and resource use regulations, makes it a useful pilot project to lay the framework for governance of the Salween Peace Park (KESAN 2016b).

With so many conservation and land protection initiatives underway in Mutraw District, it begs the question: why Salween Peace Park? Two themes emerged from the research. First, the Salween Peace Park is an Indigenous sovereignty project, consolidating efforts to protect *Kaw*, community forests, forest reserves, and wildlife sanctuaries. The initiative reinforces the entire autonomous governance system established by the KNU, Karen civil society, and local villagers to serve their people through decades of violent conflict. It outlines a comprehensive vision for the future of Mutraw, expanding beyond conservation to include discussions around peacebuilding, refugee return, demilitarization, and community development. Rather than waiting on the Burmese government's flawed peace process, the people of Mutraw are busy building their own future and asserting "sovereignty over contested terrain" (Murray and King 2012, 389).

Second, the Salween Peace Park is a political tool for advocacy beyond Mutraw District. It presents existing and future land protection projects as a coordinated initiative dedicated to peacebuilding, landscape-level habitat conservation, and preservation of the Indigenous Karen culture and way of life. As KESAN Director Saw Paul Sein Twa suggested, "[the Salween Peace Park] is putting it into context so it can get people's attention, as kind of a high strategy . . . so some people understand, and they make notes and they can tell other people about the Salween Peace Park idea" (fieldnotes 2017/03/03). In other words, the Peace Park is a vehicle to engage politics of recognition, build alliances, and draw on potential sources of material, institutional, and discursive power (Murray and Burrows 2017) to resist the Burmese government and military's attempts to impose their will on the waters, lands, forests, and people of Mutraw.

### *Building the Salween Peace Park as a Grassroots Movement*

The Salween Peace Park's origin as a Karen military officer's dream might lead some observers to suggest that the park is a top-down initiative imposed on local people without their free, prior, and



informed consent. However, although the idea was originally articulated by KNU Mutraw District leaders and KESAN staff, the details of the park, including its boundaries and governance structures, have been discussed and debated in multiple rounds of public consultation. The report following the first of these consultations in May 2016 emphasized that

[as] this was an initial consultation, [it] did not seek to create a definitive shape and vision for the Salween Peace Park straight away. Instead, the aim was to provoke discussion, and ensure that all of the attending stakeholders would be able to communicate these ideas to the communities that they represent so that they may collect the communities' opinions in preparation for further consultations (KESAN 2016c, 5).

A committee was formed to draft a Charter policy guiding the development and governance of the Salween Peace Park. These conversations continued at the following consultation, held in conjunction with Karen New Year celebrations on December 26-28, 2016. More than 200 people attended, including KNU, KNLA, and community leaders from across Mutraw District. It was especially interesting to watch the engagement of KNLA officers in the discussions. One officer questioned the need for such a time-consuming consultation process, suggesting that KNU leaders could just develop the policy and then present it to the people (fieldnotes 2016/12/26). However, KESAN and KNU leaders kept reminding attendees that the Salween Peace Park belongs to all the people of Mutraw, and it is both their right and responsibility to become involved. P'doh<sup>7</sup> Lweh Ghay, joint secretary of Mutraw District at the time, told attendees that

This responsibility belongs to all of us who are in this park, we need to collaborate and discuss together to establish it ... so that we can recognize this park, so that others will know that our Peace Park is recognized in the whole world, we strive together to achieve this, the duty belongs to all of us ... we just need to work together in harmony, with one mind, and we will achieve our goal (fieldnotes 2016/12/26).

Attendees discussed the draft Charter policy and the Peace Park boundaries, which were subsequently expanded to include Klermu Thooplei Wildlife Sanctuary and adjacent villages in southwestern Mutraw.

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<sup>7</sup> 'P'doh' is a Karen term used to address government officials such as KNU leaders.

In addition to policy discussions, the consultation included presentations by community groups working on such issues as seed-saving, preservation of Karen agro-biodiversity, a community tea project, and IDP resettlement. Students from the culture school in Kaw Thay Ghu performed traditional Karen music, and the first day of the meeting opened with the Karen horn, bronze drum, and animist ceremonies as well as a Christian prayer. In conjunction with the Karen New Year, the consultation included demonstrations of ancient Karen material culture and agricultural seed and produce competitions, culminating in a grand New Year ceremony. The entire event was a celebration and affirmation of Karen cultural identity as a source of radical Indigenous sovereignty and political autonomy in the Salween Peace Park.

In addition to three consultation meetings and two Charter-drafting sessions in Day Bu Noh, local consultations were also held throughout 2017 in the three townships and 26 village tracts that comprise the Salween Peace Park, as well as at the Ee Tu Hta IDP settlement on the Salween River.

During the third district-level consultation in December 2017, attendees launched a campaign to collect signatures of support from at least 75% of the park's inhabitants who are over 18 years old (fieldnotes 2017/12/21). Although the Burmese military's troop deployments and road-building activities since March 2018 have disrupted some Salween Peace Park activities such as *Kaw* land demarcation and the signature campaign, the people of Mutraw are not giving up. They continue to press on in their struggle for peace, self-determination, protection of their ancestral territories, and survival of their communities, culture, and way of life. The official launch of the Salween Peace Park is scheduled for December 2018.

### *Affirming Karen Environmental Relations, Building Governance for Sovereignty*

The draft Salween Peace Park Charter emphasizes an environmental stewardship ethic and explicitly promotes respect for animist Karen practices and spiritual-environmental relations, which form the

foundation for governance of the Peace Park. To guide the park's development consistent with Indigenous Karen traditions, 18 elders were selected to sit on the Salween Peace Park Advisory Council. The Charter establishes basic principles for environmental protection, dispute resolution, sustainable community development, and so on. However, the Charter does not prescribe local regulations:

Each village, group of villages, *Kaw* or administrative unit, as freely determined by the members of those communities, shall be responsible for establishing and implementing rules and regulations, which include customary and/or community codes of conduct, to govern and manage the use of natural resources in their bounded area of ownership or socially legitimate tenure ("Charter of the Salween Peace Park" 2017, Article 52).

Meanwhile, the Charter defends local people's relations to the land by adopting an explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-militaristic position, effectively declaring the ongoing Burmese military occupation illegal (Article 62). According to the Charter, all economic activity within the Salween Peace Park must have the explicit free, prior, and informed consent of local people. It prohibits destructive capitalist development "that is formed on the basis of accumulating money or power in a way that negatively impacts the collective and public interest of Salween Peace Park, including the environment, and the people's right to self-determination" (Article 95). In a discussion about how to manage economic development in the Salween Peace Park, Paul Sein Twa emphasized "the deep relationship of people with their lands and their resources, which should not be bought by corporations" and that "the Peace Park is a way to protect the land and the culture and then we are looking for other pathways [for economic development]" (fieldnotes 2017/03/03). In other words, economic development must be consistent with protecting the relationship between people and land in the Salween Peace Park.

The Charter of the Salween Peace Park thus establishes a system of counter-governance rooted in what it calls "a modern formulation of the Indigenous Karen environmental ethic" (Introduction, para. 8). This reflects Alfred's call to a "self-conscious traditionalism" that identifies "tradition[s] that are appropriate to the present social, political, and economic realities" in order to "construct a framework for government that represents a viable alternative" to oppressive state structures (Alfred 1999, 81). Karen

cultural and political traditions are being revitalized and 'reinvented' (Dickson-Gilmore 1992) as a basis for land and natural resource governance, in sovereign refusal of Burmese government and military domination. These principles are also illustrated in the roles that Karen cultural identity plays in the Salween Peace Park consultation process.

Salween Peace Park is a dynamic project, and its work will never be finished as it continues to build local capacity for governance. During my fieldwork, colleagues and local community partners often expressed the need for such human resources capacity. To that end, there are plans for a Salween Peace Park research institute. The purpose for this institute will be to facilitate international collaboration and provide policy directions in the areas of peacebuilding, biodiversity conservation, cultural revival, and community development. Paul emphasized that "the first need is to start strengthening governance ... we need to have good leaders [who] understand the Peace Park" (fieldnotes 2017/03/03). Thus, the institute will operate as a think tank, in addition to becoming a potential hub for local and foreign researchers studying the natural and cultural heritage of Mutraw District. Salween Peace Park leaders have also begun organizing international exchanges. In 2017, a group of Peace Park leaders travelled to the Philippines, and more trips will be planned in the future to expose local administrators to other examples of Indigenous peoples' governance of protected areas (fieldnotes 2017/03/03).

In sum, the Salween Peace Park is an Indigenous sovereignty project based on upholding Karen villagers' relationships and mutual obligations to each other, to their lands, and to the spiritual beings that inhabit their lands. At the same time, the Peace Park is being developed under the jurisdiction of the KNU, a Karen resistance organization with its own army and civil administration. The project therefore includes initiatives to build capacity for area-based governance that in many ways resembles state forms of sovereignty, all in order to present a viable alternative to the Burmese state's violent territorialization project in Mutraw. This pattern manifests itself throughout Burma's ethnic border regions, where ethnic

armed organizations maintain varying degrees of territorial control and administrative autonomy (Jolliffe 2015).

Although certain tensions remain, life in these ethnic enclaves presents unique opportunities for Indigenous communities' expression of sovereignty based on their relations to the land and spirits. An ethnic administration such as the KNU tends to be much more sympathetic to the cultural values and ontological position of local villagers. This is evident in the KNU's Kawthoolei land and forest policies, which both accommodate Indigenous Karen villagers' relations with the land as something much more than a mere commodity, recognizing the "social, cultural, spiritual, economic, environmental and political value" of the land (KNU 2015, Article 3.3.1). Unlike the land and forest policies of the central Burmese government, the KNU's policies provide for registration and protection of the Indigenous Karen *Kaw* system, and the revised forest policy includes a "protective landscape" category, defined as a

Higher-level landscape scale multi-use conservation co-management arrangement that incorporates multiple use rights and sustainable management systems at multiple administrative and ecological levels ... such as the proposed Salween Peace Park (KNU n.d., 15).

In other words, the co-management arrangement that the Salween Peace Park establishes between Karen villagers and KNU Mutraw District authorities provides a space for Indigenous Karen communities' sovereign expression of the spiritual-environmental relations of the *Kaw* within the KNU's revolutionary project for autonomy, self-determination, and self-governance. At one of the consultations, a KNLA officer suggested that the Salween Peace Park offered a new path for the Karen revolution, since the ceasefire prevents them from attacking the occupying Burmese soldiers (fieldnotes 2016/12/27).

### *Upholding Indigenous Karen Relations: Salween Peace Park as a Discursive Tool*

As an idea, the Salween Peace Park is already doing discursive work among the villages of Mutraw District. The concept is spreading through informal community networks and in the work of civil society organizations such as KESAN. For example, whenever KESAN staff organize workshops on community

conservation or food security, they share about the Peace Park, as I observed on several occasions during fieldwork. The initiative is taking on a life of its own, beyond the control of KESAN and KNU leaders who originated it. Villagers and local community leaders are discussing the initiative at informal community gatherings and over traditional rice wine. On several occasions during ethnographic fieldwork in and around Kaw Thay Ghu, I observed local people referring to the Salween Peace Park to assert their rights as Indigenous peoples and to promote cultural revival, sustainable agricultural alternatives to destructive resource extraction, and ecotourism to fund local community development. Villagers say that the Salween Peace Park is a way for them to "prepare for development" (fieldnotes 2017/03/01). The initiative is becoming a broad-based community movement in Mutraw, building Indigenous sovereignty from the ground up.

An unexpected incident during my fieldwork demonstrates how the Salween Peace Park is being used both by Mutraw District KNU leaders and local villagers to oppose unwanted and destructive resource extraction. In January 2017, local businessmen, in collaboration with some local-level KNU and KNLA personnel, began dredging for gold in the Bwe Lo Klo river near Kaw Thay Ghu. Although Luthaw Township has a long history of traditional gold panning, this was the first time that mining machinery had ever been brought into the area (fieldnotes 2017/03/02). Local KNU who supported the mining argued that they needed the revenue to finance their administration and defense in case of Burmese military attacks (fieldnotes 2017/02/16). Locally, there was confusion since it was unclear whether Mutraw District authorities had given permission for the mining. I later learned that, although District authorities had initially agreed to allow small-scale test mining at a meeting in October 2016, they had subsequently revoked this permission. However, the mining started on January 1 anyway and continued sporadically until District authorities succeeded in permanently shutting it down in early March.

Opponents of the mining both in the KNU Mutraw District administration and among local villagers referred to the Salween Peace Park to explain why the mining was inappropriate and to promote

alternative sources of income. P'doh Lay Ker, the Luthaw Township KNU secretary, told me that "District leaders instructed us that it is not the right time to do [gold mining] because we are currently working to establish the Peace Park" (fieldnotes 2017/02/16). Gold mining was also a hot topic at the Peace Park consultation meeting in December 2016. P'doh Tender, then Mutraw District KNU secretary, spoke of the damage gold mining had caused in the southern parts of the district beyond the park's boundaries, and he stressed that they needed to learn from these mistakes and maintain the waters, land, and natural resources of the Salween Peace Park. Only after policies were in place to protect the environment could they consider gold mining (fieldnotes 2016/12/26).

Villagers and community leaders also invoked the Salween Peace Park in their arguments against the mining in Luthaw Township. Saw Nya Ki Htoo, my colleague from Kaw Thay Ghu, was prepared to use the Salween Peace Park proposal to challenge Mutraw District leaders' decision to allow gold mining in the first place. He insisted that mining was not consistent with the Peace Park's core goals and principles:

We just started the Salween Peace Park, so we cannot allow [gold mining] at this time ... Gold mining is not sustainable development, and it will cause destruction. It is also related to the land conflicts; these issues have not been solved yet. We need to solve the land issues, demarcate our lands, and return the land to Indigenous peoples' hands. If this is not done and they do gold mining, it will hinder the process (fieldnotes 2016/12/28).

Villagers and community leaders offered alternative development strategies, mostly focused on improving local agriculture and community forest management. The Salween Peace Park functions as a "reference," as consultant Jeff Rutherford suggested, that empowers villagers and local leaders to articulate sustainable community development alternatives to destructive activities such as gold mining (fieldnotes 2016/12/26).

In sum, although the Salween Peace Park has not yet been officially declared, the concept is already playing a discursive role. The initiative is stimulating conversations among the people of Mutraw District about their future, including discussions about community development models that are consistent with the core goals of promoting peace, maintaining Indigenous Karen culture, and upholding spiritual relations

to the land. This is similar to many Indigenous peoples' conservation areas around the world, from the Himalayas in Nepal (Stevens 2014d) to the Pacific Coast of North America (Murray and King 2012). Although many of these areas remain unrecognized by the state societies that claim Indigenous peoples' territory, these conservation designations continue to do important discursive work to uphold Indigenous law and environmental relationships. This is certainly the case in the Salween Peace Park, as the park's governance framework is explicitly rooted in the relations of the *Kaw*.

### *Salween Peace Park and Politics of Recognition*

As discussed in Chapter 2, numerous scholars have critiqued the political strategy of seeking recognition of Indigenous rights from within state power structures (e.g., Coulthard 2014; Eisenberg et al. 2014; Alfred 2009; Simpson 2011). These scholars argue that the act of seeking recognition paradoxically reinforces the state's authority by legitimizing its power to either grant or withhold recognition (Day 2001; Tully 2000). However, Indigenous conservation projects complicate these debates by shifting the terms of recognition. When they engage international discourses of conservation and Indigenous rights, Indigenous peoples draw on material, institutional, and discursive power (Murray and Burrows 2017) that originates far beyond the confines of the state authority that claims their lands. Thus, Indigenous conservation projects confront one of the main dilemmas that critics of politics of recognition identify, namely that the sovereign state claims final authority and does not require reciprocal recognition from colonized Indigenous subjects (Coulthard 2014; cf. Markell 2003). Indigenous conservation initiatives engage a symbolic politics that extends far beyond this dualistic colonizer-colonized relationship. Nevertheless, political risks remain, and Indigenous-led conservation projects still risk being subsumed into a conservation and 'Indigenous rights' agenda controlled by powerful outside interests, rather than remaining under the control of the local Indigenous community (see Laungaramsri 2002; Mollett 2014; Li



2002). In other words, the challenge for an Indigenous conservation project such as the Salween Peace Park is to remain in control of the terms of recognition.

### *Seeking Recognition of the Salween Peace Park*

The Salween Peace Park is still in the process of seeking official recognition, and the first priority is to complete the public consultation and Charter drafting process. Some attendees at the December 2017 consultation meeting worried that the huge task of collecting villagers' signatures could slow down the process to officially declare the Salween Peace Park (fieldnotes 2017/12/21). However, these signatures will provide concrete evidence of the park's legitimacy as a people-centred, grassroots alternative to the top-down development schemes of the Burmese military and government (Jason Lubanski, pers. comm.). The signatures document the 'self-recognition' of the Indigenous Karen people of Mutraw District (cf. Coulthard 2014). Once this process is complete, KNU leaders plan to officially declare the Salween Peace Park in December 2018.

So far, the Salween Peace Park has not sought recognition from the Burmese central government. As KESAN explained in a 2016 communiqué to donors, the park first needs to be officially recognized by the KNU, since the area remains under KNU territorial jurisdiction. Furthermore, the people of Mutraw cannot trust the central government, which has not withdrawn its military, and which is intensifying its attempts to extend administrative control in the district. Salween Peace Park leaders are therefore wary of any actions that could "legitimize the government's control over the park" or "facilitate access for them to the heartlands of ... Mutraw District, without ensuring that the central government will respect the distinct cultural traditions and land rights of indigenous peoples" (KESAN 2016d, 5). The document explains that "once solutions to the political dialogue are reached, this reserve can be transformed to a nationally recognized and established reserve in a democratic, federal Karen State" (KESAN 2016d, 2).

Thus, as of November 2018 there had been no formal communication with the Burmese central government, although the Conservation Alliance of Tanawthari, a coalition of Karen community-based organizations in southern Burma, included the Salween Peace Park in one of their presentations to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation in Naypyitaw (Paul Sein Twa, pers. comm., 2018/11/06). So far, the purpose of any engagement with the Burmese central government has been to share information and demonstrate how the Salween Peace Park will contribute to Burma's biodiversity protection commitments, not to seek any official gazettelement of the Salween Peace Park within the Burmese system.

As noted in Chapter 1, Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) have emerged as a new category of protected area recognized by the IUCN. ICCAs centre Indigenous peoples' own governance systems as conservation authorities (Kothari et al. 2012). Thus, the ultimate goal of the Salween Peace Park is to attain international recognition of the Salween Peace Park as an ICCA, as well as recognition of the Karen people's civil and political rights under international policy instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (fieldnotes 2016/10/24). Once the local consultation process is complete and the Salween Peace Park has been officially declared by the KNU, the next step will be to get the park listed in the ICCA Registry ("ICCA Registry" 2018).

In sum, recognition of the Salween Peace Park focuses on three levels: first, self-recognition by the Indigenous Karen people who live within the park; second, recognition by the KNU; and third, recognition at the international level as an ICCA. The strategy is to build legitimacy both at the grassroots among local communities and internationally as an Indigenous-managed conservation area, avoiding the need to seek recognition on the terms of the Burmese state by "[multiplying] and [diffusing] the sites around which struggles for recognition are carried out" (Markell 2003, 188). My KESAN colleague Saw Mabu Htoo insisted that even if the Burmese government refuses to recognize the Salween Peace Park, that will not

prevent them from pursuing international recognition as an Indigenous protected area (fieldnotes 2017/03/04).

### *Representations and Promotion of the Salween Peace Park*

In the quest for international recognition as an Indigenous conservation initiative, representations of the Salween Peace Park to external audiences emphasize three themes: peacebuilding, conservation of rare biodiversity, and preservation of Indigenous Karen culture. These have become known as the Three Pillars of the Salween Peace Park (fieldnotes 2016/10/24), with the cultural pillar also emphasizing Karen environmental stewardship traditions as a basis for governance. These three themes combine to create an image of the Salween Peace Park that does discursive work as it engages the symbolic politics of Indigenous conservation at the international level.

As mentioned near the beginning of this chapter, the decision to call the initiative a Peace Park affirms the project's role as a political tool to articulate local people's desires for peace. An online promotional video released shortly after the Salween Peace Park first went public opens with scenes from the war fading to images of the forested mountains, Karen villagers, and iconic wildlife (KESAN 2017b). The narrator poses a rhetorical question: "Can a battlefield be turned into an indigenous-run protected area for scores of endangered species like tigers, gibbons and wild cattle?" After a pause, the narrator assures viewers that "The answer is 'Yes.'" The Salween Peace Park is presented as local people's response to the Burmese military's violent attacks and human rights deprecations.

The Salween Peace Park differs from almost any other Peace Park in the world. Most Peace Parks are established through agreement between the governments of two or more contiguous states, with the protected area straddling international borders (Sandwith et al. 2001; but see Penan Peace Park 2012). In contrast, the Salween Peace Park is a grassroots Indigenous initiative, and while international and interethnic cooperation is one of its goals, the Salween Peace Park as currently defined does not extend

beyond the boundaries of Mutraw District. Nevertheless, the terminology remains useful, since the Salween Peace Park embodies the four key aspirations of the Peace Parks movement, as the promotional video explains: “(1) to end and avoid violent conflict; (2) to protect the environment; (3) to ensure the preservation of ethnic cultural resources; and (4) to help post-conflict communities recover and rebuild” (KESAN 2017b).

Thus, the first 'good' of the Salween Peace Park is peace and reconciliation. The second aspect is biodiversity conservation. Promotional materials emphasize the park as "An Indigenous Karen Landscape of Human-Nature Harmony in Southeast Myanmar" (KESAN & KNU Mutraw District 2018). More than a decade of community-based research has created a bank of data on rare and endangered species that Peace Park planners use to promote the initiative and attract international support. In a KESAN press release announcing the Salween Peace Park for the first time, staff member Saw Blaw Htoo is quoted saying that

Foreign conservationists are amazed that more than 20 kinds of predators like tigers and clouded leopards survive here. They say, 'but it's not protected as a national park'. I tell them, it is the way of life of the Karen people that protects these species and their habitats. If you make it into a national park like in Thailand or Burma, the animals will all be gone (KESAN 2016a, para. 2).

Proponents present the Peace Park as a grassroots, people-centred approach to landscape-level conservation, in contrast to the top-down, government-controlled projects in the Mergui-Tavoy District of southern Kawthoolei (Chandran 2018).

In the quest for recognition of their conservation efforts, Salween Peace Park planners also portray the Salween River basin as a place that is threatened by industrial activities such as mining, logging, and hydropower dams, which until recently have been kept at bay by the long civil war in Mutraw District. Both the promotional brochure and the video show images of other places devastated by mining, warning that these activities also threaten the Salween Peace Park (KESAN 2017b; 2018). Finally, media materials emphasize the fact that the Salween River is one of the last free-flowing rivers in Southeast Asia, while

promoting the Salween Peace Park as an alternative to the government's dam-building schemes (Fawthrop 2016; H. Moo 2017; Corben 2017).

Promoting an image of the Karen as wildlife protectors is paying off. While the Burmese government may be silent on the Karen people's accomplishments, the Salween Peace Park is beginning to attract the attention of international conservationists. Dr. Mitchell of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) expressed support for the initiative, stating that "[i]t would be a big win for conservation if wildlife conservation protection is part of the larger peace agreement between the Government of Myanmar and the Karen" (Fawthrop 2016). This is all part of the strategy of the Salween Peace Park: to draw upon the symbolic 'good' of conservation to build alliances and draw upon sources of discursive power in the struggle to protect Karen lands.

Finally, the third symbolic 'good' of the Salween Peace Park is its Indigenous Karen culture, as emphasized in the Karen New Year celebrations that have accompanied two of the main public consultations. Naw Lay Lah Wah, my colleague from Kaw Thay Ghu, referred to the Salween Peace Park as a table: without food, the table is bare and holds no attraction. Similarly, without the Karen culture, she said, Salween Peace Park cannot succeed (fieldnotes 2017/02/13). Promotional materials speak of the relationship between Karen villagers and their lands, emphasizing the stewardship traditions of the *Kaw* as the basis for Indigenous Karen natural resource governance and conservation (KESAN & KNU Mutraw District 2018).

Since demonstrating conservation is important for attaining international recognition of the Salween Peace Park, public consultations emphasize the importance of formalizing Karen villagers' traditional rules and policies, rooted in their culture as Indigenous peoples, so villagers in the Peace Park can demonstrate that they have a governance system and are capable of managing their own lands and natural resources. As KESAN Director Paul Sein Twa explained to attendees at the October 2016 Charter consultation,

We Karen are Indigenous people. We have our beliefs and our traditions, our way of life that protects our lands and waters ... Indigenous rights may not be officially recognized in Burma,

but these rights are recognized internationally ... That is why we are working to revitalize our Indigenous Karen cultural traditions, demarcate the *Kaw* boundaries, and establish the rules, policies, and elders' governance system (fieldnotes 2016/10/24).

This is the strategy to attain international recognition of the Salween Peace Park as an ICCA, and it is part of the rationale for the Charter as a written document to establish the governance of the Peace Park.

In sum, leaders emphasize three aspects of the Salween Peace Park as they engage international conservation discourses. They present the initiative as a grassroots effort to promote peace; to protect rare, valuable, and endangered biodiversity; and to preserve a unique Indigenous culture and way of life in harmony with the land. In order to achieve recognition and seek support from international conservation interests, leaders emphasize that communities within the Salween Peace Park need to develop and formalize the traditional environmental governance systems of the *Kaw*. Local people need to demonstrate that they are protecting the wildlife and ecosystems of the park.

Large conservation organizations have financial and technical resources that KESAN, KNU, and local communities need to achieve the vision of the Salween Peace Park. In other words, these organizations are potential sources of material, institutional, and discursive power in the struggle to protect the lands, communities, and culture of Mutraw District. So far, the main source of international funding for the Peace Park has come from the Rainforest Trust in Norway, which KESAN describes as a "pro-people conservation organization" (KESAN 2016d, 4). In addition, the Karen Wildlife Conservation Initiative (KWCI) is a consortium including the KNU's Forest Department, KESAN, and Wildlife Asia, an Australian conservation NGO. KWCI has done camera trapping surveys, trained and equipped rangers and anti-poaching teams, and advised the KNU with regards to setting up wildlife sanctuaries in areas under its administration, including wildlife sanctuaries in the Salween Peace Park (fieldnotes 2016/12/27).

As KESAN Director and international spokesperson for the Salween Peace Park, Paul Sein Twa has presented the initiative at such international gatherings as the 2016 IUCN World Conservation Congress in Hawaii (see Frank 2016); the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) COP 13 in Mexico City; a 2018 session at

the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York, where he participated in a side event with the ICCAs Consortium; and again in 2018 at a CBD conference in Montréal on Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs). The Salween Peace Park is thus building international visibility and legitimacy as an Indigenous Karen conservation project even before it becomes officially recognized as an ICCA.

Finally, the Salween Peace Park initiative seeks international recognition by collaborating with foreign journalists, videographers, and academics. In 2016, *Mongabay* published a feature article about the Salween Peace Park (Stokes 2016), and a 2017 podcast by *ABC News* in Australia contrasted the park's living forests with the degraded "silent forests" they had encountered elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Miller and Trevithick 2017). A 2018 *Reuters* article also featured the initiative, comparing it with "fortress conservation" approaches elsewhere in Burma (Chandran 2018). While no academic articles have yet been written focusing on the Salween Peace Park, it was briefly mentioned in one article published in 2017 (Suhardiman, Rutherford, and Bright 2017). Besides my thesis research, two PhD students have completed fieldwork in the Peace Park, and others have expressed interest for future work.

In sum, the Salween Peace Park is a discursive vehicle for pursuing recognition by engaging international conservation discourses. As it seeks and builds alliances, the Salween Peace Park initiative draws on sources of material, and institutional, and discursive power that originate far beyond Kawthoolei and Burma. However, as debates on politics of recognition attest, such a quest is not without risks.

### *Managing the Risks of Recognition*

International conservation provides an arena for Indigenous peoples to influence the terms of recognition and to seek mutual types of recognition beyond state power structures that so often constrain a politics of recognition. Nevertheless, there remains a danger that large conservation organizations may disproportionately control the terms by which they recognize and support Indigenous conservation

initiatives. When considering the risks facing the Salween Peace Park, three themes emerged from the research: risk that external actors and organizations could gain control of the agenda by controlling the terms of recognition; risk that recognition by the Burmese state could facilitate expansion of central government administration into Mutraw District; and risk that the Salween Peace Park will fail to achieve recognition and will subsequently be unable to defend itself against Burmese military attack.

#### *Relationship with Conservation Organizations*

Indigenous conservation initiatives such as the Salween Peace Park seek recognition in international conservation discourses in order to increase their power and legitimacy vis-à-vis an occupying state. However, there is a risk that international conservation actors will attempt to constrain the terms of this recognition and seek to implement their conservation agenda on Indigenous peoples' lands. Often, this comes back to the problem of ontology. It is challenging to communicate a relational Indigenous ontology such as the *Kaw* governance system to external conservation actors (cf. Nadasdy 2005; Ludwig 2016). That is why Karen communities seek to formalize their traditional rules and policies to demonstrate to the outside world that they can manage their own lands and natural resources (fieldnotes 2016/10/24). Nevertheless, formalization carries with it the risk that people's relationship with their lands will be altered in the process (Lindberg 2007; Coulthard 2014). Perhaps my colleagues in Kaw Thay Ghu realized this when they insisted that the spirit forest corridors described in Chapter 4 should not be fixed in space on a map, since the exact area and location of these corridors may shift over time, and the people did not wish to give the impression that they do not use or otherwise interact with these areas (fieldnotes 2017/02/25). Formalization can do violence to the relationship between people and their lands (see Roth 2009; Thom 2009).

Local communities and leaders in Mutraw are determined to remain in control of the terms of recognition. As consultant Jeff Rutherford advised, "It's going to be important to articulate the Peace Park



vision, then decide where the outside donors and their funds can fit – not the other way around" (email, 2016/06/05). Through multiple rounds of consultations, the park's inhabitants are defining that vision, articulating their desires for peace, conservation, cultural revitalization, and community development. They are also establishing policies to govern the park. As Paul Sein Twa told attendees at a Charter consultation event, if local people establish their own rules, it becomes a source of power for them, making it more difficult for external interests to gain control over the initiative (fieldnotes 2016/10/24). Although the Peace Park seeks alliances to gain access to funding, legitimacy, and institutional support, no foreign actors are allowed to control the agenda or manage any conservation projects within the park. Governance and management remain in the hands of the KNU, local Karen organizations, and the park's inhabitants. So far, most international organizations cannot even access Mutraw District due to the ongoing military occupation, and the few who do must comply with the policies of the KNU and local communities. Local people therefore remain largely in control of the terms of their alliances with conservation actors.

### *Preventing Burmese State Capture*

International recognition as an ICCA bypasses the need to seek official recognition from the relevant state government. However, most international organizations want legal certainty for the projects they support, so they want the Salween Peace Park to pursue official registration with the central Burmese government (fieldnotes 2016/10/22). However, as already noted, the people of Mutraw have no reason to trust the central government, and they are wary of anything that might facilitate access for the government to undermine the KNU's autonomous administration. In addition, international organizations that operate under central Burmese government jurisdiction can, either wittingly or not, become agents for expanding that government's territorial control. This is already happening in southern Kawthoolei's Mergui-Tavoy District, where a collaboration between the United Nations Development Programme, the

World Bank's Global Environment Facility, and central Burmese government departments plans to implement a \$21 million "Ridge to Reef" conservation project, much of it in territory at least partially administered by the KNU. In a letter to the UNDP and GEF, the KNU warned that they would oppose the project if it failed to respect Indigenous Karen villagers' rights or if it helped to "directly or indirectly expand government administration in the KNU areas" (Chau 2018, para. 19). This is the kind of situation that local communities and KNU leaders wish to avoid in Mutraw (Chandran 2018).

Thus, the Salween Peace Park has so far refused to seek registration with the Burmese government or to collaborate with any organization that would extend the reach of the Burmese state in Mutraw. Rather, Peace Park leaders are seeking the kinds of international recognition as an ICCA that can bypass the need to seek recognition from the Burmese state, challenging the state's "monopoly on the distribution of recognition" (Markell 2003, 189). The communities of Mutraw District are seeking much more than a co-management arrangement: they want self-determination, the right to govern themselves and decide their own future (fieldnotes 2017/03/03). As long as the Burmese state remains hostile to this aspiration, it is premature for the Salween Peace Park to seek recognition from the central government.

#### *Defending Against Burmese Military Attack*

During the research, villagers and local community leaders often raised concerns about the ongoing Burmese military occupation. How will the Salween Peace Park defend itself if the Burmese soldiers attack? they wonder. Although some people in Mutraw remain confident in their soldiers' guerilla fighting abilities, others fear what might happen should the ceasefire fail as it did in northern Burma's Kachin State in 2011 (*Radio Free Asia* 2011). Indeed, the Burmese military's current attempts to force a road through northern Mutraw appear to put the Peace Park in a vulnerable position. Some township and village tract KNU leaders in Luthaw Township suggested that it is too soon to implement the Salween Peace Park since they have not yet achieved a stable peace (fieldnotes 2017/02/16). However, this stance overlooks the

discursive function of the Peace Park to build peace and assert Karen self-determination. As Paul Sein Twa noted, the "Peace Park is announced by us, and then if they attack us, we also attack them ... We put the fault on their side" (fieldnotes 2017/03/03). Promoting the Peace Park internationally is part of the strategy of making it a reality even as the struggle against Burmese military aggression continues.

Consideration of each of these potential problems – control by international conservation organizations, control by the Burmese government, or attack by the Burmese military – also reinforces the Salween Peace Park's emphasis on strengthening local governance institutions and making the park a radically grassroots project. As my colleague Jason Lubanski noted, if the Peace Park were a centralized, top-down KNU project, the Burmese military would just need to defeat the KNU/KNLA and then take control, making the Peace Park very vulnerable (fieldnotes 2016/10/10). However, as I hope my analysis has demonstrated, that is not the way the park is being developed. It belongs to the people of Mutraw, who are now shaping the project as a grassroots initiative. Although General Baw Kyaw Heh, other KNU leaders, and KESAN staff continue to play key roles, the foundations are being laid for a much broader movement that is poised to outlast any of these individual actors. In other words, engaging local communities is not only a moral imperative; it is also vital for the Peace Park's long-term survival.

However, Salween Peace Park planners also realize that the KNU and local villagers on their own cannot withstand the Burmese military's onslaughts indefinitely. That is why they are engaging international conservation discourses, drawing on sources of legitimacy and power from far beyond Burma in the struggle against military oppression and government expansion. Local people also hope that international recognition as an Indigenous peoples' protected area may enable them to put more pressure on international resource extraction companies that try to operate without local people's free, prior, and informed consent (fieldnotes 2016/10/24).

In sum, the Salween Peace Park initiative is currently focusing on strengthening local institutions and articulating local people's vision for the future of Mutraw District, while simultaneously promoting the

park internationally as a project for peace, biodiversity, and Indigenous Karen culture. The focus on local institutions will help the people of Mutraw resist attempts by either international conservation interests or the Burmese government to impose an external agenda. Although the Salween Peace Park engages conservation discourses in the struggle to protect Karen lands, project proponents are determined to remain in control of the terms of recognition. These twin strategies of local movement-building and international alliance-building are interesting in light of debates around the politics of seeking recognition versus a politics of sovereign refusal and Indigenous resurgence. Challenging the apparent dichotomy between these two approaches, Indigenous conservation projects such as the Salween Peace Park simultaneously engage both types of politics in the struggle to protect ancestral territories.

*At the Intersection of Politics of Recognition and Indigenous Resurgence/Sovereign Refusal*

So far, this discussion has examined the Salween Peace Park primarily in terms of recognition. However, the Peace Park is also very much couched in a politics of Indigenous resurgence and the Karen people's sovereign refusal of Burmese military domination. Recall Alfred's words:

If the goal is to obliterate the oppressor's power altogether, any challenge will fail; if we seek instead to initiate a different kind of challenge, in the form of regenerating our own existences in the face of the oppressor's false claims to authority, legitimacy, and sovereignty, we cannot but succeed and, thus, force the state to transform itself (Alfred 2009, 202).

With its focus on revitalizing *Kaw* traditions as a foundation for environmental governance, the Salween Peace Park asserts Karen communities' inherent rights that flow from their relationship to their land. It is an assertion not only of political self-determination but also ontological self-determination, as it validates the Karen people's unique relationship with their land and the social beings that inhabit that land (Viveiros de Castro 2003; Ludwig 2016; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

Thus, although the Salween Peace Park project strategically engages political discourses of biodiversity conservation and Indigenous peoples' rights, it is not dependent on such recognition. Its

power also derives from strengthening and revitalizing Karen communities' cultural and political traditions as Indigenous people. In other words, the Salween Peace Park is rooted in natural law, the law that derives from Karen people's relationships and responsibilities to the land and the spirits of the land as discussed in Chapter 4. This is grounded normativity in action, as the Salween Peace Park articulates a different world, a different reality, than the one promoted by the central Burmese government (Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2017; Coulthard and Simpson 2016).

The Salween Peace Park also asserts sovereignty as a counter-territorialization project. For the Burmese state, Mutraw is a blank area on the map for which they have little data. At a public consultation event in December 2017, Paul Sein Twa demonstrated how the Salween Peace Park's countermapping project asserts the Karen people's habitation and governance in Mutraw (fieldnotes 2017/12/19). Paul began with an empty Google Earth image of the district and the rhetorical question, "Is this empty land?" He then successively added layers to the map, including the KNU's Mutraw District boundary, villages, community forests, wildlife sanctuaries, and *Kaw* territories. The layers also included Burmese military infrastructure and the government's proposed Hatgyi Dam site on the Salween River. Finally, Paul added the boundaries of the Salween Peace Park and asked the crowd again, "Now who can say this is empty land?" Refusing to accept the Burmese government's portrayal of Mutraw as empty land, local people and KNU leaders are asserting their relations to this territory.

Mutraw District leaders understand that recognition by the Burmese government is not the most important factor for the success of the Salween Peace Park. P'doh Lweh Ghay, KNU joint secretary of Mutraw District at the time, addressed this issue at the December 2016 public consultation:

Some people may ask ... Can our leaders achieve [the Salween Peace Park]? What about the Burmese government, will they recognize it? And I say, don't worry about that. We have our territory, our resources, our land, our waters, our forests, and we can govern, manage, and protect them ourselves. The most important thing is that we work together in harmony, with one mind, and we will certainly achieve [our goal] (fieldnotes 2016/12/26).

My KESAN colleague Saw Mabu Htoo echoed this sentiment, insisting that the most important work of the Salween Peace Park is to empower local communities to revitalize their traditional practices, assert their rights, and manage their own natural resources. Mabu argued that, even if the KNU or Burmese government do not recognize the Salween Peace Park, that does not really matter, because they have started a "movement" in Mutraw for community-based conservation and revitalization of Indigenous Karen governance traditions (fieldnotes 2017/03/04). This movement, which includes establishing community forests, implementing fish conservation zones, revitalizing *Kaw* administrations, and demarcating ancestral *Kaw* territories, has been going strong for many years, laying the foundation for the Salween Peace Park.

The Salween Peace Park now aims to protect these community initiatives, and in fact it consolidates the entire autonomous governance framework that local Karen communities, the KNU, and civil society have developed in Mutraw. In this way, the Peace Park is preparing Mutraw for inclusion in a future federal democratic Burma. As the promotional brochure proclaims,

The new Myanmar government has promised to lead the country toward a devolved, federal democracy. The Karen are not waiting idly for this: the Salween Peace Park is federal democracy in action. It is indigenous self-determination and community protection of natural and cultural heritage in action (KESAN & KNU Mutraw District 2018, 2).

Meanwhile, Central KNU leaders continue their efforts to obtain recognition of the Karen people's self-determination rights within the national peace process. However, as explained in Chapter 1, the Burmese military and government control this process, and they refuse to recognize or respect the self-determination rights and aspirations of non-Burman ethnic peoples. The resulting deadlock in the peace process is a stark reminder of the futility of trying to seek recognition on terms dictated by state power structures.

The Salween Peace Park is charting a different path, asserting local Karen people's vision for peace. Rather than seeking recognition within a framework that is controlled and manipulated by the military and central Burmese government, the Peace Park is a sovereign declaration of self-determination rooted

in Karen people's political systems and relationship with their lands. As they develop the Salween Peace Park Charter and strengthen *Kaw* administrations, the people of Mutraw are exercising self-determination and asserting Karen Indigenous nationhood in the face of the Burmese military government's "false claims to authority, legitimacy, and sovereignty," in a bid to "force the state to transform itself" (Alfred 2009, 202).

*Conclusion: The Politics of an Indigenous Conservation Project*

At more than 5,400 square kilometres, the Salween Peace Park is one of the largest Indigenous conservation areas ever proposed. It is being developed as a collaboration between local Karen villagers, civil society, and the KNU, an armed revolutionary organization that has fought the Burmese state for autonomy and self-determination since 1949. The Salween Peace Park consolidates existing community conservation initiatives, as well as the entire governance system that the KNU, Karen civil society, and local villagers have developed during 70 years of armed conflict. The initiative is a grassroots project, having developed over two and a half years of public consultations as local community leaders and administrators debate the park's boundaries, Charter policy, and governance framework. The Peace Park outlines a comprehensive vision for the future of Mutraw, expanding beyond conservation to include discussions around peacebuilding, demilitarization, refugee return, and community development. As such, although the Salween Peace Park is not yet officially established as a physical park on the ground, the concept is already playing a discursive role among the communities of Mutraw District, empowering local people to resist destructive resource extraction projects and articulate alternative community development models that are consistent with the core goals of promoting peace, maintaining Indigenous Karen culture, and protecting the land.

As an Indigenous conservation project, the Salween Peace Park draws on two distinct strands of Indigenous politics: politics of recognition and politics of sovereign refusal/Indigenous resurgence. By

presenting community land protection efforts as a coordinated initiative, the Salween Peace Park becomes a means to seek international recognition as a project dedicated to peacebuilding, landscape-level conservation, and preservation of Indigenous Karen culture. The focus on autonomous self-recognition by the KNU and international recognition as an ICCA avoids the need to seek recognition on the terms of the Burmese state, which remains hostile to the Karen people's aspirations for autonomy and self-determination. The Salween Peace Park's strategy is to build legitimacy and a strong case for both biodiversity conservation and Indigenous political rights at the international level, drawing on sources of material, institutional, and discursive power that originate far beyond Kawthoolei and Burma (Murray and Burrows 2017). The Peace Park seeks to mitigate potential risks of engaging in a politics of recognition – control by international conservation organizations, control by the Burmese government, or attack by the Burmese military – by simultaneously strengthening local governance institutions. In other words, the people of the Salween Peace Park perform "collective self-recognition [as] a core, place-based practice" (Simpson 2017, 182), providing a grounded place from which to seek alliances with "all who would engage [them] in a constructive manner" (hooks 1990, 22, quoted in Coulthard 2014, 48).

Recognition offers a potential source of external power and legitimacy. However, an Indigenous conservation project such as the Salween Peace Park also reinforces internal power by revitalizing cultural and political traditions as a basis for governance. The Salween Peace Park is a sovereign declaration based on upholding Karen villagers' relationships and mutual obligations to each other, to their lands, and to the spiritual beings that inhabit their lands. With its focus on revitalizing *Kaw* traditions as a foundation for environmental governance, the Peace Park asserts Karen communities' inherent rights that flow from their relationship with their land. This relationship, rooted in natural or Indigenous law, is a source of internal power (Lindberg 2007; McCue 2007). Thus, although Indigenous conservation initiatives such as the Salween Peace Park strategically engage political discourses of biodiversity conservation and Indigenous peoples' rights, they are not dependent on such recognition.



In conclusion, Indigenous conservation projects such as the Salween Peace Park provide fertile ground for analyzing political strategies for Indigenous liberation. As they uphold Indigenous peoples' environmental, social, and spiritual relations, these initiatives can be considered acts of Indigenous resurgence and sovereign refusal. Yet at the same time, these projects engage politics of recognition at multiple scales to promote 'goods' such as biodiversity conservation, cultural survival, and (in the case of a Peace Park) peace and cooperation. Many of the cautions regarding politics of recognition still hold, especially the potential cultural impacts of conforming to hegemonic definitions of conservation and Indigenous rights. However, since in these cases recognition is not restricted to the state form, but rather engages conservation discourses at many scales, up to the international level, there is more potential for Indigenous communities to influence the terms of recognition and to disrupt oppressive power relations (Markell 2003). Most importantly, Indigenous conservation projects are not dependent on external recognition for their success, because they simultaneously practice sovereign self-recognition, strengthening Indigenous peoples' political systems and inherent rights and responsibilities that flow from ancient relationships between people, the land, and the social beings that inhabit their territories. These relations are a source of internal power as Indigenous peoples use conservation as a tool to strengthen their sovereign governance systems, regardless of whether the state or other external actors choose to recognize these efforts.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

#### *Conservation to Advance Indigenous Sovereignty*

Indigenous conservation projects such as the Salween Peace Park offer unique opportunities for diverse Indigenous nations around the world to assert their relationship and responsibilities to ancestral "Territories of Life" (ICCA Consortium n.d.). With increased international recognition and support for Indigenous peoples' conservation areas, or ICCAs, a new global conservation paradigm is emerging. Thanks to this paradigm shift, protected areas have increasing potential to become "an important means of affirming and realizing Indigenous peoples' rights while simultaneously safeguarding biodiversity" (Stevens 2014e, 8). Indigenous peoples are forging alliances with non-Indigenous conservationists, helping to overcome conservation's long and troubled history of facilitating dispossession and undermining Indigenous peoples' relationship with their ancestral territories. ICCAs have the potential to turn global conservation from a tool of environmental dispossession into an agent for environmental *repossession* (Big-Canoe and Richmond 2014; Tobias 2015).

Worldwide, efforts to document, support, and appropriately recognize Indigenous peoples' protected areas have proliferated since the 2003 World Parks Congress, when Indigenous delegates first persuaded the IUCN to establish ICCAs as a protected area category (Stevens 2014a). Indigenous peoples and local communities have cared for their ancestral territories for millennia. However, it is only recently that the global conservation establishment has begun to acknowledge ICCAs' vital contributions to achieving international conservation goals such as the 20 "Aichi Targets," produced during the 2010 COP10 of the Convention on Biodiversity in Japan; among these targets was a commitment to protect at least 17 percent of terrestrial ecosystems and 10 percent of marine ecosystems globally by the year 2020

(Kothari et al. 2012, 38). Given that Indigenous territories cover at least 20 percent of the earth's land area and hold an estimated 80 percent of the world's biodiversity (Stevens 2014e), achieving these targets will be difficult or impossible without supporting ICCAs. Even the Burmese government has included ICCAs in its *National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan* (GOM 2015), and in Canada the Indigenous Circle of Experts is collaborating with the federal government to make ICCAs a central part of the strategy to meet Canada's biodiversity conservation targets (ICE 2018).

Documentation of the world's ICCAs has only begun, and nobody knows how many areas may meet the IUCN's definition: "natural and/or modified ecosystems, containing significant biodiversity values, ecological benefits and cultural values, voluntarily conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities, through customary laws or other effective means" (Kothari et al. 2012, 16). Data deficiencies notwithstanding, Kothari et al. (2012) estimate that Indigenous and local communities' protected areas may well exceed the area of all the world's officially-designated protected areas combined.

With the surge of interest in ICCAs, it is important to remember that recognition of ICCAs is not a panacea, and potential challenges, tensions, and contradictions remain. Stevens writes that "[t]here is great concern that increased international policy and funding emphasis on ICCAs may spark action by states and NGOs that may co-opt, undermine, or destroy ICCAs by inappropriately recognizing them" (Stevens 2014b, 295). For example, new forms of recognition might attempt to constrain and standardize Indigenous environmental governance systems in ways that undermine the dynamism, diversity, and cultural rootedness that make these protected areas successful expressions of Indigenous sovereignty and environmental governance in the first place (Stevens 2014d).

This thesis explored these issues by conducting a case study of Indigenous environmental governance in the Salween Peace Park, a 5485-square kilometre ICCA dedicated to peacebuilding, self-determination, biodiversity conservation, and cultural survival in the autonomous Karen territory of Kawthoolei, an area

that is tentatively emerging from nearly 70 years of violent armed conflict. This research is situated in debates around relational ontologies and Indigenous political literatures on politics of recognition, sovereign refusal, and Indigenous resurgence. Using these lenses, the research examines the Salween Peace Park's mobilization of conservation discourses to both build alliances and assert inherent rights and responsibilities to the land. As such, this thesis brings the works of Indigenous scholars from settler polities such as Canada, the United States, and Australia into conversation with the Karen people's struggle for self-determination in Burma.

Research findings from the community-based ethnographic case study in Kaw Thay Ghu indicate the importance of paying attention to the sentient, spiritually-infused world that many rural and Indigenous peoples inhabit, and the ways in which these spiritual relations inform local people's actions to care for the lands and waters of their ancestral territories. In fact, findings from this research suggest that ceremonies and reciprocal obligations to the spirits are the most important drivers of environmental governance and conservation in a Karen *Kaw*. Physical practices that a post-Enlightenment, scientifically-trained conservation biologist might recognize – managing rotational fallow systems, protecting watersheds, preserving forest corridors in the inhabited landscape, and maintaining protected sanctuaries as source populations for fish and wildlife – each of these practices is embedded within a web of spiritual relationships and cannot be properly understood apart from those relations. Such a relational ontology also has implications for understanding the effects of dispossession on Indigenous peoples such as the Karen. From the standpoint of a relational ontology, the terminology of dispossession itself is misleading since it implies land as property rather than social relation. Recall Leanne Simpson's words: "the opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual *attachment*" (Simpson 2017, emphasis in original).

Thus, ICCAs such as the Salween Peace Park refuse dispossession as they reclaim, strengthen, and assert attachment to the land as a "field of relationships of things to each other" (Coulthard 2014, 61).

ICCAs enact Indigenous resurgence and sovereign refusal of the forces that seek to undermine or destroy the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their ancestral territories. This is what the Salween Peace Park does. Explicitly grounded in the spiritual-environmental relations of the *Kaw*, the Salween Peace Park rejects the Burmese military state's politics of assimilation and refuses to accept the hegemonic authority of that state to dictate the terms of recognition and inclusion. ICCAs are not only acts of resistance to dispossession; rather, they are affirmations of Indigenous reality and relationships, a self-conscious alternative to exploitation and oppression by hierarchical state power structures.

Although the Salween Peace Park, like many ICCAs, refuses to seek recognition on the state's terms, it pursues a different kind of recognition by engaging international discourses of conservation and Indigenous peoples' rights, allowing Karen communities to draw on multi-sited sources of power, legitimacy, and the material resources of the international conservation establishment in the ongoing struggle to protect ancestral territories and assert self-determination (Murray and Burrows 2017). The fundamental question facing Indigenous conservation initiatives such as the Salween Peace Park is how to engage such politics in emancipatory ways, while remaining in control of the terms of recognition. As with any symbolic politics of recognition, there remains the danger that those who bestow recognition will directly or indirectly control the entity that is recognized, in this case an ICCA. In the Salween Peace Park, this risk has so far been avoided by focusing first on a process of building the Peace Park as a collective movement among the communities of Mutraw District. This movement affirms the relationship between local people and their land while building a sovereign, collective vision for peace, self-determination, biodiversity conservation, cultural survival, and community development models that are consistent with these core aspirations. The Salween Peace Park builds internal power by revitalizing cultural and political traditions as a basis for governance. As such, the Peace Park vision is already playing a discursive role in the communities of Mutraw District, as local people refer to the park to resist destructive resource extraction and promote alternatives that are consistent with the park's core vision.

Thus, although the Salween Peace Park engages politics of recognition as an Indigenous conservation project, it is not dependent on such recognition as it simultaneously mounts a sovereign refusal to be dominated and controlled by external actors. As I conducted fieldwork in the mountains of Mutraw, I sometimes reflected on the indomitable optimism of the local people. Despite the tenuous nature of the ceasefire and ongoing Burmese military occupation, Karen villagers are busy establishing community forests, implementing fish conservation zones, revitalizing *Kaw* administrations, and demarcating ancestral *Kaw* territories. These people not only dare to hope for a better future: they dare to begin building that future.

Faced with ongoing violent Burmese military expansion despite a ceasefire, the people of the Salween Peace Park continue their efforts to build a grassroots-based, positive alternative in the form of an ICCA, thereby drawing on the power and legitimacy of international conservation and Indigenous rights discourses in their ongoing struggle for survival. The movement to strengthen Indigenous Karen environmental relations, combined with the material, institutional, and discursive power of global conservation, provides a basis for governance and legitimacy at both micro and macro scales that is so diffuse it will be difficult for the Burmese military and central government to destroy. Whatever the future holds for the Salween Peace Park as a physical entity, it seems likely that the movement the park represents will, in one form or another, continue.

As I explained in Chapter 3, my research with the Karen communities of the Salween Peace Park was collaborative and community-based, as I sought to support my friends in their struggle to protect their homelands. Although I initially failed to understand the role of spiritual relations and protocols in mediating local people's relationship with their lands, I eventually began to comprehend thanks to the persistence and patience of my research colleagues. This experience reinforced the importance of foregrounding local ontology in environmental research with Indigenous communities. On that note, I would like to conclude this thesis with a challenge to engaged scholar-activists and non-Indigenous

conservationists to consider the terms of our relationships and collaborations with Indigenous communities. I suggest that the findings presented in this thesis call on us to take Indigenous peoples seriously, both ontologically and politically.

Taking Indigenous peoples' ontologies seriously means allowing local interlocutors' lived experience and knowledge to challenge our own culturally-bound concepts such as resource management and conservation (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). While translation into the terms of international conservation discourse may well be necessary to build alliances and legitimacy in the conservation world, it is important to remember that the result is just that: a translation. The more clearly we come to understand the world as local Indigenous colleagues live, know, and experience it, the more likely we will be able to effectively support our colleagues as they seek to represent that world in their dealings with state bureaucracies and non-Indigenous conservation actors.

It is also important to take Indigenous conservation projects seriously on a political level. Although translation and representation are important steps in Indigenous peoples' efforts to seek recognition of ICCAs, this second call reminds engaged scholars and potential conservation allies that there are alternatives to recognition, and that Indigenous peoples' unique forms of sovereignty and relation to the land should not be forced to conform to the terms of the dominant state society that seeks to control Indigenous peoples' territories. Non-Indigenous allies should support ICCAs on Indigenous peoples' terms, recognizing that although non-Indigenous conservationists' goals often overlap with those of Indigenous communities, they are not identical. These goals arise from distinct ontological and political positions. Non-Indigenous allies must learn to respect Indigenous peoples' unique relationship with their land, and the deeply relational worlds that these communities inhabit. These sorts of understandings would go a long way toward "Advancing the New Paradigm" (Stevens 2014b, 283) in global conservation in a way that finally respects and affirms the rights of Indigenous peoples on their ancestral territories.

As state governments express increased interest in incorporating ICCAs into official protected areas networks, further research is needed to support Indigenous peoples' efforts to avoid state capture and retain ICCAs' radical emancipatory potential. As critiques of politics of recognition make clear, there will always be risks associated with seeking recognition from the state. State governments may seek to use recognition of ICCAs to perversely extend state jurisdiction over Indigenous peoples' territories and more completely incorporate them into capital accumulation circuits. More research and empirical case studies of ICCAs under diverse jurisdictional arrangements and levels of state recognition may provide further insights to ensure that Indigenous protected areas remain under local communities' control.

In conclusion, ICCAs offer a framework for Indigenous communities to reclaim radical resistance, affirm relationships with ancestral territories, and build alliances in the struggle against the ongoing ravages of global imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. Conservation has long been deeply implicated in processes of colonial dispossession and capitalist exploitation, often violently displacing Indigenous peoples and undermining Indigenous communities' relationship with their ancestral territories. Now, Indigenous peoples and their allies are looking to conservation to assert Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination while protecting some of the most biologically rich ecosystems and cultural landscapes on the planet.



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## Appendix A: Research Agreement

### Research Agreement<sup>1</sup>

**PROJECT TITLE:** Salween Peace Park: Promoting Indigenous Self-Determination and Community-Based Environmental Governance in Karen State, Burma

THIS COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH AGREEMENT is made this 4<sup>th</sup> day of October, 2016.

BETWEEN:

**External Researcher**

Name:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Office telephone

Thailand cell phone:

Email:

Institution:

Address:

Telephone:

Email:

Academic supervisor:

Telephone:

Email:

AND

**Community Research Partner**

Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)

Contact person 1:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone:

Email:

Contact person 2:

Telephone:

Email:

Contact person 3:

Telephone:

Email:

The external researcher, as named, and KESAN agree to conduct the named collaborative research project in accordance with the guidelines and conditions described in this document.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: First Nations Centre. (2007). Considerations and Templates for Ethical Research Practices. Ottawa: National Aboriginal Health Organization. [www.naho.ca/documents/fnc/english/FNC\\_ConsiderationsandTemplatesInformationResource.pdf](http://www.naho.ca/documents/fnc/english/FNC_ConsiderationsandTemplatesInformationResource.pdf)

### **1. Purpose of the research project**

The purpose of this research project, as discussed with and understood by the external researcher and community research partners, is to investigate the practice of Karen community-based customary land and natural resource governance (“*Kaw*” in the Karen language) within the area of the proposed Salween Peace Park in Karen State, Burma.

This project will also investigate the emerging institutional development of the Salween Peace Park from the perspective of customary land governance. The analysis portion of the research will include a literature review covering Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs), co-management models, and the opportunities and risks associated with these from the standpoint of Indigenous self-determination and biocultural conservation. It is hoped that this research, in collaboration with community partners, will inform the development of Salween Peace Park institutions going forward, in ways that support dynamic, flexible, and adaptive customary land and natural resource governance by communities within the park area.

### **2. Research questions and scope of the project**

The research questions are divided into one main question and three sub-questions:

- (1) In what ways can the proposed Salween Peace Park strengthen and promote Karen communities’ self-determination and the continued practice and evolution of Indigenous Karen community-based land and natural resource governance? What are the potential risks of such a project for local communities?
  - a. What are the current community practices and protocols governing ownership, management, access, and use of land and natural resources among Karen communities in the Salween Peace Park area? What are the continuities, and how have these practices changed from the past, in particular before the war and massive displacement?
  - b. What are the goals and proposed land and natural resource governance mechanisms in the Salween Peace Park? What management and decision-making bodies are proposed, and what would be the relationship between these bodies and local communities?
  - c. Drawing from the literature on Indigenous peoples’ experiences of co-management and community-based conservation, what principles and lessons can inform the development of the Salween Peace Park in ways that promote local communities’ self-determination and community-based land and natural resource governance?

The proposed research is multi-scalar in scope. First, the research proposes to continue further developing the ethnographic case study begun in 2015 in the community of Kaw Thay Ghu through the use of further observations, interviews, and discussions with community members and leaders. In addition, KESAN is currently conducting community-based surveys in partnership with local communities in the Salween Peace Park area, and the results from these surveys will be analyzed to expand the scope of the research beyond the case study. Finally, the research will include conversations with KESAN staff, relevant KNU officials, and others involved in the development of the park, in order to investigate the proposed management structures.

### 3. Methods and Procedures

Data will be gathered through a variety of methods, including:

- Observation: the external researcher, in collaboration with community researchers, will spend time in the communities, taking part in community life, interacting with local people, and conducting follow-up conversations and interviews in order to gain a greater understanding of community land and natural resource governance practices.
- Interviews: open-ended, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with community leaders and knowledge holders in order to gather more in-depth qualitative data.
- Focus group discussions: researchers will attend community meetings and/or organize focus groups to get a better sense for community decision-making processes.
- Survey-based analysis: results from KESAN's community-based surveys will be analysed and interpreted in order to obtain a representative overview of customary land governance among Karen communities in the Salween Peace Park area.

Number of interviews projected for the research:

- In order to ensure that multiple perspectives are heard and that the research is of sufficient depth to produce valid conclusions, a minimum of 15-20 interviews will be conducted in the Kaw Thay Ghu case study community. As possible and appropriate, some of these interviews might be combined into small focus group discussions.
- Community members with specific knowledge of certain kinds of land and resource governance (e.g., forest, upland rotational cultivation, and lowland rice) will be interviewed, as well as representatives of different social positions in the community, elders, youth, men and women, etc.
- In addition to the interviews in Kaw Thay Ghu, approximately 10-12 interview discussions will be conducted with KESAN staff, IUCN staff, KNU, and others who are involved in developing the peace park idea.
- KESAN's community-based survey aims to cover a representative sampling of the approximately 200 villages located in the Salween Peace Park area. Of these surveys, a representative sample will be selected to accommodate the diversity of geographical situations, village histories, etc. The selection criteria will be identified in consultation with KESAN researchers.

Community involvement in the data gathering process:

- In the case study, interviews and other data gathering activities will be freely open to all community members who wish to participate.
- There will be opportunities for qualified and committed community researchers and research assistants to assist with data gathering and to communicate research results within the community; local villagers are also involved in KESAN's community survey project.

Individual participants in the research will have two options for registering their consent to participate:

- A written consent form to provide information about the study, the participant's role in the research, and the right to freely grant or withhold consent. If appropriate, this document will be translated into the Karen language.
- Oral consent: more likely, consent will be oral. The written consent form will be used as a guide to explain the research project and obtain consent. In this case, consent will be documented in the field notes and/or on voice recording.

All participants will have the right to withdraw from the project at any time for any reason. In this case, that participant's data will be destroyed.

Methods for recording and storing data:

- Field notes and observations will be recorded in field notebooks.
- Interviews will be recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed into digital files.
- Both recordings and digital notes will be stored in a password-protected folder on the external researcher's computer, with a back-up file on a spare hard drive.
- For long-term storage, the data will be deposited in the KESAN main office in Chiang Mai, Thailand.
- Within five years from the inception of the project, the external researcher's copy of the interview data will be destroyed.

Access to data and confidentiality of research participants:

- With the informed consent and permission of research participants, written notes and voice recordings will be shared with community researchers and with KESAN.
- If participants withhold consent to share their data, they may still participate in the research. However, data from these participants will be securely password-protected on the external researcher's computer and will not be shared with anyone without the participant's prior permission.

Community reporting and involvement in data analysis and interpretation:

- Holistic story and context of the research information will be acknowledged during data analysis and, as much as possible, preserved in the presentation of research findings.
- Preliminary coding and identification of themes will be done at KESAN's Chiang Mai office.
- Following preliminary data analysis, a draft report or summary of findings will be produced and translated into Karen.
- In collaboration between the external researcher, KESAN and community partners, this report will be presented in oral discussion format at a community meeting for validation of the information.
- Suggestions and corrections will be incorporated into a revised version of the report document.

Presentation and dissemination of research findings and knowledge mobilization

- Research findings will be presented to the community in a language (Karen) and format that is clear and comprehensible to community members.
- Before any research findings are made public or released in a public report, they will be presented to the community and research participants for validation, approval, and correction if necessary.

- In addition to reports in Karen, Burmese, and English, further advocacy tools such as policy briefs may be prepared in consultation between the external researcher, KESAN, and local community partners.

#### **4. Expected Benefits and Risks of the Research**

The expected outcomes of this research project are:

- Advocacy materials, reports, policy briefs, and other forms of knowledge mobilization to be determined in consultation between the external researcher, KESAN, and local community partners.
- Academic thesis and potential academic publications to engage wider discussions around customary land and Indigenous peoples' relations with their lands.

The project will benefit the external researcher in the following ways:

- Academic professional development and production of Master's thesis.
- Professional development for future engagement in Indigenous land research.
- Potential academic publications and enhanced professional status.

The project will benefit the community in the following ways:

- Contribution to ongoing community knowledge mobilization to restore, revitalize and reassert customary community-based governance of land and natural resources.
- Inform ongoing development of the Salween Peace Park as a community-based biocultural conservation project that promotes ongoing Indigenous and community-based governance of this area.

The project poses the following risks to the community:

- Potential to exacerbate unresolved disagreements or disputes over land and natural resource ownership and access in the community.
- Potential to overlook or exclude marginalized voices in the community.
- Unauthorized use of community information. For example, governments might use information to administer community customary lands in a non-collaborative way, without consultation or consent.

Measures that will be taken to minimize these risks include:

- The external researcher commits to ongoing consultation with KESAN and local community partners in order to conduct research in an inclusive way and avoid potentially sensitive or contentious topics.
- The external researcher, as well as others involved in the research project, will strive to be sensitive to patterns of potential marginalization in the community and seek to include these voices in the research. Researchers also commit to making a conscious effort to accommodate opposing voices in the research, while remaining honest about positionality and the fact that subjective bias cannot be fully eliminated.
- The external researcher commits to consultation with KESAN and local community partners, including a discussion of potential risks, before any research findings are shared or publicly released.
- Confidentiality of community information will be achieved by securely storing research data with KESAN.

## 5. Obligations and Responsibilities

### External Research Partner

- To do no harm to the community.
- To involve the community in active participation of the research process and to promote it as a community-owned activity.
- To collaborate with community-based researchers and where possible contribute to local capacity to enhance community members' ability to conduct their own research.
- To ensure that research design, implementation, analysis, interpretation, reporting, publication and distribution of the results are culturally relevant and in compliance with the standards of competent research.
- To undertake research that will contribute something of value to the community.
- To manage and safeguard the data until the end of the project in collaboration with KESAN and community partners.
- To promote the dissemination of information to the extent that is desired by community partners, through both written publications and oral presentations.
- To be involved in any future analysis of the data after the data is returned to the community, if requested.
- To respect community regulations and protocols, and to become familiar with the culture and traditions of the community.
- To ensure that the community is fully informed in all parts of the research process, including its outcomes through publications and presentations, and to answer questions that may emerge regarding the project and its findings.
- To abide by professional standards, York University's guidelines for ethical research, and general standards of ethical research.

### Community-based researchers

- To place the needs of the community as a first priority in any decision where the community researcher's dual roles of community member and researcher may be in conflict.
- To understand and abide by ethical principles of research, including consent protocols for participants in the research.
- To implement community standards for protecting research participants' confidentiality in all activities involving data storage, sharing, and presentation.

### KESAN staff project partners

- First and foremost, to represent the interests, perspectives and concerns of local Karen communities with whom the research is being conducted.
- To collaborate with the external researcher and community-based researchers to ensure that the research is carried out in accordance with the highest standards, both methodologically and from a Karen cultural perspective.
- To collaborate with the external researcher and community partners to identify community desires regarding data stewardship and confidentiality and to ensure that community researchers understand and are equipped to maintain community-defined standards of confidentiality.

- To provide a link between the research and ongoing advocacy needs in order to ensure that the research remains relevant.
- To communicate the results of the research to other communities, and to share ideas for applying research findings beyond the communities directly involved in the research.
- To provide a communication link between the external researcher and community partners when the researcher is not present in the communities.
- To provide translation of documents for reporting back to the community, as well as translation of the final report, into Karen and Burmese as deemed appropriate. Project funding will be available to support these activities.
- To identify suitable individuals to serve as research assistants and interpreters/translators. Project funding will cover these activities.
- To identify culturally appropriate means of remuneration for research participants (individual or collective, gifts, financial remuneration, etc.), in collaboration with community partners and the external researcher. Again, this will be covered by the project budget.
- To serve as the guardian of the research data after the completion of the project.

#### **6. Timeline**

- October 2016: meeting between KESAN staff and external researcher at KESAN office in Chiang Mai. Discuss research design and research questions, and make required modifications to the research plan.
- November 2016 to February 2017: external researcher and KESAN project partners will make several trips to the communities to conduct semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and collaborative open-ended discussions with community members and leaders.
- November 2016 to February 2017: research activities will also be conducted at KESAN's office: interviews with KESAN staff involved in the Salween Peace Park, as well as consolidation of previous information gathered through KESAN's community-based research.
- December 2016: Salween Peace Park consultation meeting in Day Bu Noh, Karen State. Interviews will be conducted with community representatives, KNU officials involved in the Salween Peace Park, etc.
- February to April 2017: initial data analysis and development of potential themes from the research.
- May to August 2017: drafting of academic thesis; parallel drafting of community report for KESAN and community partners.
- September to December 2017: external researcher to send thesis draft and community report back to KESAN, and potentially travel back to the communities for validation and community approval of research products.

#### **7. Funding**

The external researcher is responsible for procuring funding to support the following costs:

- Gifts and tokens of appreciation for participants in the research.
- Food for community workshops and gatherings connected with the research
- Remuneration for research assistants, interpreters, and translators/transcribers.
- Researcher's own travel and accommodation costs while in Thailand/Burma.
- Equipment and materials required for research

### **8. Dissemination of Results**

The external researcher will share the research report with KESAN. KESAN can then translate the report into the Karen language and distribute it to community partners and others involved in the development of the Salween Peace Park. Research results will also contribute to an academic thesis which will be available through York University.

Any future publications or dissemination of research results beyond what is described in this agreement shall not be undertaken without prior consultation with KESAN and community partners from Kaw Thay Ghu.

### **9. Data Ownership and Intellectual Property Rights**

Individual participants in the research own their own personal information shared through the case study project. Collectively, the case study information belongs to the people of Kaw Thay Ghu, and KESAN as an organization which represents the interests of community partners. Use of the information by the external researcher is subject to the wishes and needs of the local communities who are the knowledge sources, and this access will be mediated through KESAN as an organization with capacity to store and steward the data.

### **10. Communication**

The external researcher will remain in communication with KESAN throughout the duration of the research project. KESAN staff will serve as a communication liaison between the external researcher and local community partners as needed.

The community will be the first to receive research results and the first invited to provide input and feedback on the results. The results shall be presented in a format that is language appropriate and accessible to the community (i.e., in oral discussion format in the Karen language). Results will not be released without the prior approval of the community.

At the end of the research project, research partners agree to participate in community meetings to discuss the results and their implications.

### **11. Dispute Resolution**

In the event that a dispute arises out of or relates to this research project, both parties agree first to try in good faith to settle the dispute. A mediator will assist the parties in finding a resolution that is mutually acceptable.

If a dispute cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of both parties, the research project may be terminated according to the terms described below.

### **12. Term and Termination**

This agreement shall have an effective date of October 4, 2016 and shall terminate on December 31, 2017.

This agreement may be terminated by the written notification of either party.