

Conservation Against Conservation:  
Contesting Ways of Understanding Forests in Southern Myanmar

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I seek to provide an understanding of how a specific rural community in Southern Myanmar, the Karen inhabiting the Kamoethway Valley, have come to identify as indigenous protectors of the environment, by paying attention to the strands of history that have produced the current conjuncture. In particular, I aim to show that, when faced with the prospect of exclusion by conservation, engagement with an explicitly environmental indigeneity remains a tactic of considerable nuance for marginalized communities. A central part of my argument will be that the forms of knowledge behind this tactical maneuver are multiple, drawing both upon local tradition and transnational discourses.



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## Introduction

In June 2017, I attended a meeting at a small Buddhist temple in Myaung Po village in Southern Myanmar. The meeting was called by representatives of an environmental consultancy firm based in Yangon, who wanted to share the results of an environmental impact report (EIR), they had been contracted to produce, pertaining to the efforts on the part of the operators of a nearby tin mine to mitigate the negative environmental effects of their enterprise. The Heinda mine opened in 1999, and is jointly owned by the state-run Mining Enterprise 2 and the Thai-based Myanmar Pongpipat Company. It had until recently been a modest operation, but, due to a changing political climate, the mine had expanded rapidly over the course of the past several years. This process of expansion led to conflicts between the mining company and local villagers, most of whom ethnically identify as Karen, who had watched the accelerating transformation of the landscape adjacent to their farmlands with growing alarm. Of particular concern for the villagers were the effects the mine was having on water quality – increased levels of manganese, arsenic, and lead had been detected in village water sources – and the encroachment of the mine upon agricultural lands. Almost directly below the temple, in the valley upstream of the river which supports the village, I could see a monstrous red wedge of churned up mine tailings nestling up against recently abandoned, bright green rice fields. Also visible, further up the valley, was a large settlement pond impounded behind a wall of tamped over-burden. I was told this pond had overflowed several times in the past few years, sending floods of contaminated water down valley towards residences and fields. Due to these events, and their effects on local livelihoods, villagers had been involved in a number of lawsuits with the mine operators in recent years.

The purpose of the meeting was allay the villagers' fears regarding the mine's continued expansion, by sharing the results of the EIR with the villagers and to receive feedback on those findings. It was advertised as a 'consultation', during which all voices and concerns would be heard. In attendance were Muang Po villagers, residents of neighboring communities, members of local civil society organizations (who brought with them a contingent of local youth as part of training program), journalists, mining company representatives (including executives from Thailand), government officials (including the regional Minister for the Environment), and the consultants themselves, who represented a firm called Ever Green Tech Environmental Services and Training Services Company. After a brief talk by the government minister, who also introduced the visitors from Thailand, one of the Ever Green representatives began a power-point presentation highlighting his firm's key findings. This presentation went on for quite some time, and, though patient to begin with, many of the attendees began to grow restless. People whispered amongst themselves as particular bits of information were relayed. At one point, as the speaker was praising the company's efforts to curtail noise associated with the mine, a middle-aged Karen woman interjected. She stated quite bluntly that that the mine was as noisy as ever and attempted to contradict the speaker on several other previously made points. The consultant suggested that the woman must be mistaken regarding levels of noise pollution, and maneuvered to continue with the presentation.

At this juncture there was much murmuring in the audience and soon other members of the audience spoke up with concerns of their own. These interruptions were an attempt on the part of the villagers to turn the meeting into a dialogue, as opposed to the monologue they felt



they were being treated to. They had, after all, been invited to a consultation, and as consultees wanted to ensure that their experience of the mine's mitigation efforts were shared. About 5 minutes after her first attempt, the woman who had previously spoken up tried to do so again. Again the representative from Green Tech moved to side-step around her concerns. This time something rather astonishing happened. The majority of the people in the temple hall began to stand up and move towards the exit, while vocalizing their displeasure at what they felt to be targeted disregard. They were not being listened to and therefore opted to stop listening. They discovered that they had better places to be. Soon the hall was almost empty, leaving the consultant speaking to a much diminished audience consisting of members of the press, government officials, mine representatives, and curious onlookers from villages not directly affected by the mine. He presented as unfazed, steadfastly incurious as to the villagers' lack of receptiveness to the findings in the EIR.

Although I was assured that this walk-out had not been planned in advance, its effect was one of well-orchestrated refusal. I offer it here as an example of how rural people, in Southern Myanmar's Tanintharyi region, are exploring the terms of political engagement as the conditions determining social action change. Over the course of the past decade Myanmar has seen increased levels of outside investment and economic development, after a half century of military rule and economic isolation. In the wake of a partial democratic transition, which began in 2011, the country has experienced the easing of economic sanctions and a more concerted effort to bring to a close a number of long-running armed ethnic rebellions. This tentative opening has made room for the country's rural citizens to experiment with forms of social contestation that would have been met with crippling repercussions under the previous

regime. But these conditions have also allowed for the flourishing of a number of ambitious large scale industrial development projects, financially backed by local elites in cooperation with foreign investment firms. One of these projects is centered just north of the coastal town of Dawei, which is the capitol of the Tanintharyi Region, an area known for its abundance of natural resources. The Dawei Special Economic Zone (SEZ), if implemented according to plan, will be one of the biggest industrial zones in Southeast Asia, with its core covering an area of 200 km<sup>2</sup>. Should it come to pass, the vast industrial estate will have at its centerpiece a deep sea port, and will be linked to Bangkok by a major transportation thoroughfare. Even though the SEZ remains largely confined to the drawing board, it has already begun to affect the area and its communities. In anticipation of the project, the region has experienced a spike in land speculation, by local elites, military cronies, and outside actors, leading to increased levels of land confiscation and reduced access for small holders in the area. It is those with economic resources who are able to take advantage of recent title formalization programs in the area, driving others out in the process (Loewen 2012, Sekine 2016). As one land rights activist quoted by Sekine put it, “money is more powerful than the gun; people are more afraid of the pen than the bullet” (2016:1). Timber extraction is on the increase, lands have been seized for oil palm and rubber plantations, and mining concessions have been granted, all contributing to a growing trend of rural dispossession in Southern Myanmar. Ethnic Karen communities in the mountains to the east of Dawei stand in the projected path of the massive transportation corridor, planned in conjunction with the Dawei SEZ. If constructed, this corridor, intended to connect the SEZ with Bangkok, will include both a highway and a railroad, along with oil and gas pipelines. In addition to the impacts of this corridor and the predatory land speculation it has

inspired, local Karen farmers inhabitants are also challenged by the fact that large swathes of local forest have been placed within the boundaries of the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve Park (TNRP), effectively cutting these lands off from local use.

In the face of these developments the Karen are devising strategies to protect their lands and safeguard the well-being of their communities. The communities at the heart of this thesis, Karen farmers in Kamoethway Valley, some ten miles north of the Heinda mine, have declared their own community-driven conservation zone, which encompasses their homes, orchards, gardens, and surrounding forest, in direct opposition to both developmental encroachment and the TNRP, each of which they see as threatening their livelihoods and ancestral lands. A report published by a local (CSO) civil society organization, entitled *We Will Manage Our Own Natural Resources* (Thaung 2016), describes the steps the Karen are taking to assert their own aspirations in the face of worrying and unpredictable conditions. In it the authors argue that it is not the activities of farmers such as the Karen that pose a threat to local biodiversity, but rather that the forest is threatened by the very forces of well-financed development that the government encourages. This publication, and the project it describes, are examples of Karen farmers and activists organizing opposition to processes of agrarian change orchestrated from without are increasingly employing discourses rooted in claims of indigenous identity and local environmental ethics to fortify their position.

In this thesis I seek to provide an understanding of how a specific rural community in Southern Myanmar, the Karen inhabiting the Kamoethway Valley, have come to identify as indigenous protectors of the environment, by paying attention to the strands of history that have produced the current conjuncture. In particular, I aim to show that, when faced with the

prospect of exclusion by conservation, engagement with an explicitly environmental indigeneity remains a tactic of considerable nuance for marginalized communities. A central part of my argument will be that the forms of knowledge behind this tactical maneuver are multiple, drawing both upon local tradition and transnational discourses. In order to elaborate this understanding I will use the analytic of political ecology. This method of analysis can be used to understand the power relations that underpin how environments are imagined, accessed, used, and governed. Using this framework can help to illuminate how different actors assert themselves historically in relation both to each other and to the environment itself (Delang 2005). Such a perspective allows us to see how natural resources come to be sites of political negotiation. In an important paper, Peluso & Vandergeest (2001) describe how forests came to be politicized over the course of the colonial period in Southeast Asia. The systems of classification, methods of valuation, and sanctioned patterns of use that were elaborated during that time period, however varied from country to country, have been inherited by the present one. Forests are now political spaces as much as they are ecological ones; they can be made to appear or to disappear simply by virtue of mapping choices or the manipulation of conveniently malleable categorical criteria. The ways that forests have been made legible (Scott 1998) and integrated as territory (Vandergeest 1995) have important implications for how rural people use them. Local practices and knowledge come to be legitimized and legislated as officially recognized “customary rights”, to be granted or taken away by the state. But local actors are not simply at the mercy of outside forces, and can work forcefully to resist how others would define their use of forests (Bryant 1993).

Using the lens of political ecology will help me understand the broader context within which the Karen attempt to defend their lands. For example, the threat of deforestation they face is a multi-faceted phenomenon, for which no one party can be blamed. Power is exerted over woodland environments in different ways and cutting them down is just one way to make a territorial claim over them. But rather than focus on timber extraction or the spread of plantation monocultures, both of which stand as serious challenges to Karen autonomy in the region, I will attend here to the ways in which contestations over forest conservation shape political action in the Kamoethway Valley. Fairhead *et al* (2012) make the case that an evolving challenge faced by rural people is the ways in which powerful actors can make claims over forest landscapes based on “green” pretexts. In such cases, “green grabbing” can occur and forests can be cut down to make way for plantations producing “renewable” oil palm or rubber. The environment is redefined and transformed in order to protect it. Or a forest can be defined as space to be kept free of human endeavor. The above-mentioned TNRP can be understood as one such redefinition of a forested environment. In this thesis I will use the establishment of the TNRP as a focal point for illuminating how the Kamoethway Karen are defending their own interests in a time of agrarian transformation.

In the first chapter, I will situate the TNRP within the context of the global movement to protect the environment, highlighting how this movement rests upon the troubling notion that in order for nature to be protected it is best cordoned off from human activity. I will show how this notion originated as part of an evolving worldview during the nineteenth century as colonial powers went about the incorporation of territories around the world, leading to the exclusion of rural, indigenous populations. In this chapter, I will also describe the peculiar

partnership behind the TNRP's establishment, with an eye to showing how exclusionary conservation emerges and undergoes mutation within particular settings. In the second chapter, my intention will be to give an account of the emergence the Karen's bottom-up conservation project in response to the TNRP. Here I provide a history of the political forest of the Myanmar/Thai borderworld in order to show how contesting ideas about forest use have been shaping the region's history since, at least, the arrival of European colonial powers in the region. Against the backdrop of this history I argue that forest conservation, as such, is not conceptual imposition upon the Karen, but rather that it is the particular form of forest protection taken by the TNRP that is objected to by Kamoethway villagers. In the final chapter, I examine how the Karen use the idea of indigeneity to expand their parameters for political action in the face of multiple fronts of territorial loss. I explore the history of Karen ethnic identity in the borderworld in order to argue that such an identity is always historically contingent and open to revision, allowing for positionings commensurate with time and place. Lastly, I argue that the making of indigenous space in Southern Myanmar, though not without possible pitfalls, suitably intersects with the attempt, on the part of Karen farmers, to articulate an alternative version of forest conservation within the context of an ongoing regional reconfiguration of power dynamics.

### **A Note on Fieldwork and Methods**

The primary research for this thesis took place in Myanmar over the course of four weeks during the summer of 2017. Arriving in Yangon in late May, I met with several individuals associated with local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) who were kind enough to provide me with up to date impressions of the situation on the ground in Tanintharyi. My

characterization of the Dawei SEZ is largely indebted to the conversations with those CSO workers. Those individuals also helped facilitate connections with people I would with during my stays in both Dawei and the Kamoethway Valley. The first three weeks of June were spent primarily in Dawei, interspersed with trips to Kamoethway and other localities (such as the Heinda mine meeting, which opens this introduction). During this time, working with a translator, I conducted informal interviews with members of several Karen CSOs, Dawei city activists concerned with the possible effects of the SEZ, and farmers from the Kamoethway Valley. On a visit to Kamoethway acted as an observer during a training program aimed at providing Karen youth with the tools to engage in environmental advocacy. It was during this time that I was introduced to examples of the forest types (see Chap. 2) that are at the heart of the local conservation project described in this thesis. Due to the potentially sensitive political nature of the situation in Tanintharyi, each of the people I spoke with during this time period requested to remain anonymous.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Nature As Artifact**

#### **Introduction**

When I was in Kamoethway in June, 2017, the Dawei SEZ was a significant source of anxiety for the valley's inhabitants. Not only had the first iteration of the transportation corridor associated with the SEZ - in the form of the Italian-Thai Development (ITD) Company's access road - already cut directly through their territory, causing not inconsequential loss of both forest and farm land, but the land speculation birthed by the announcement of the SEZ had already contributed to a regional uptick in land-grabbing and struggles around land tenure (Sekine 2016). Lands that, due to the uncertainties produced by armed conflict in the region, had formerly been inaccessible to logging companies, mining prospectors, and oil palm consortiums, were made visible and desirable by the cease-fire process (Woods 2011). While that same process had granted the conflict-wary Karen of Kamoethway some sense of both peacetime relief and political assertiveness, they felt it had also made them more vulnerable to intrusions by forces they could neither hold in abeyance nor control. They were acutely aware that Karen communities further south in Tanintharyi had been removed from their lands in order to make way for oil palm concessions; while closer to home several attempts were underway, by mining companies, to open up new mineral seams on lands claimed by Kamoethway villagers. Despite a ban on logging by the Karen National Union (KNU), the ethno-nationalist organization claiming to represent Karen interests in the region, which dually administers large swathes of interior Tanintharyi in conjunction with the central government, it



was suspected that companies with elite connections were engaged in clandestine logging operations in nearby areas. Thus, while it remained unclear whether the Dawei SEZ would receive the go ahead to move forward from state planners in Myanmar's capital of Naypyidaw, it was clear to villagers I met that cease-fire conditions had presented them with just as many potential new threats, as new opportunities.

One threat that was no longer a latent one, but rather one that they had already begun to confront was the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve Project (TNRP), a large-scale forest conservation project, implemented by the central government in partnership with several transnational oil and gas companies. This protected area, the outlines of which had been drawn without consulting any of the communities it now neighbored, bordered, and in some areas was alleged to encompass, lands claimed by several villages in the Kamoethway Valley. Although the reserve had officially been established in 2005, it had remained largely a figurative entity for the first few years after being gazetted. It was not until 2010 that Karen villagers adjacent to the TNRP learned of its existence, when they were informed by government foresters that they had been prohibited access to lands within the project. Additionally, a number of activities had been proscribed within a buffer zone surrounding the project. The villagers faced a form of exclusion they had not previously encountered.

At that moment, confronted by a novel territorial entity, a number of the villagers found themselves asking: what is a protected area? In this chapter my intention is to sketch out an answer to that question. I will be arguing that the Tanintharyi Nature Preserve Project (TNRP) is an example of a form of nature conservation that owes itself to a limited conception of how humans relate to their environment. I will explore the ideological foundations of this model by,

first, providing a brief history of the idea of protected areas as particular form of nature conservation, paying attention to how the idea has played out over time and space, and, second, by reviewing some of the critical ways that social scientists have engaged with the social implications of conservation as exclusion. Here I will be in conversation with scholars who have been concerned with the “representation of nature” (Hughes 2005) and how certain, very powerful, models of representation come to be transposed around the world, to the detriment of others ways of conceptualizing human engagement with the natural world (Fletcher 2013, West *et al* 2006). At the conclusion of the chapter I will highlight some of the ways that the TNRP fits in with the trends I have outlined and suggest some of the ways it can be seen as an example of the novel ways that conservation is currently being expressed and implemented, such as its association with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

In order to provide the broader historical context in which the TNRP arose, I will present a number of cases will be from different locations around the world. I will show that in each case the problems that arise, during the course of the outside imposition of strict territorial conservation regimes, are local, nuanced, and variable.

### **Early Conservation Across Time and Space**

According the definition currently in use by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) a protected area is a “clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated, and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values” (Dudley 2008). The IUCN recognizes and categorizes protected areas according to a hierarchical scale of management

objectives, using criteria based upon the level and intensity of restrictions placed upon human activity in any given bounded area. Thus protected areas run the gamut from Strict Nature Reserve at the top of the scheme, where human visitation is severely delimited and biodiversity conservation values are strictly protected, down through entities such as National Parks and Habitat/Species Management Areas, where increasing levels of human activity are allowed, until the level of Protected Area with Sustainable Use of Natural Resources is reached, where “low-level non-industrial use of natural resources compatible with nature conservation is seen as one of the main aims” (Dudley 2008).

By current estimations there are approximately 200,000 protected areas globally, covering over 32.5 million km<sup>2</sup>, meaning that 3.41% of the earth’s marine area and 14% of its terrestrial areas are currently protected (Deguignet *et al* 2014). According to Deguignet *et al* this means that the amount of recognized protected areas has more than doubled since 2003, while the amount of area coming under protection has nearly done so as well (2014). Such a tremendous expansion of protected areas must on some level be attributed to increasing anxiety regarding global environmental degradation, along with threats to biodiversity that accompany such qualitative declines. In the face of accelerating deforestation, anthropogenic species extinctions, rising CO<sup>2</sup> levels, and marine acidification such anxieties are of course completely warranted and devising strategies for protecting and conserving the ecosystems upon which our social worlds are founded and within which our lives are enmeshed, is one of the most urgent tasks of the current century. However, protected areas do not just work to preserve fragile ecologies or conserve embattled species. Conservation projects do not just

pertain to the non-human constituents of environments, they often have profound consequences for human beings.

Conservation is an exercise in space making (Hughes 2005) during which a particular areas of the world are remapped and made anew. When this occurs, it is often the case that social relations are remade as well, for nearly every area that undergoes this process is inhabited by human communities. That is, when a protected area is brought into being new ways of “seeing and governing the world that have myriad social effects” (West, Igoe & Brockinton 2006:255) are also set into motion. West, Igoe, and Brockinton argue that protected areas increasingly act as a means by which segments of the so called natural world are visualized, comprehended and experienced and that this way of seeing nature is firmly rooted in values of the North Atlantic, where nature and culture are imagined to be dichotomously opposed (2006). This highlights a central problem for modern conservation practice: in order to protect nature it is imagined as a separate asocial realm. This becomes problematic when those who inhabit, or have customarily used, a particular environment where this division has been imposed do not share in its tenets. For many people nature is not something that is “out there” nor is it a space untouched by human agency, rather it is the context within which relationships within and between species are maintained (Howell 1996, Novellino 2003). By and large, this way of seeing and being in the world, is sidelined in the process of enclosing areas in order to protect them. At the moment of enclosure, “nature becomes the province of experts” despite the tenancy claims of those who were already there and, indeed, those very people are then often subjected to recrimination and discrimination

(Berglund & Anderson 2003:5), if not outright eviction (Brockington, Igoe, & Schmidt-Soltau 2006, Brockington 2002).

The lineage of this predicament, whereby in order for nature to be saved it must be partitioned off from culture (and culture therefore extricated from the primordium of nature) may be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the expanding US empire found itself in possession of lands too precious, pristine, sublime or curious to be brought under plough, pick and spade. Up until that time lands that would come be valorized as wilderness by modern conservationists – indeed the designation “Wilderness” stands second from the top of the IUCN’s protection hierarchy (Deguignet 2014) – would have been vilified as “desolate” or “barren” by those westerners who encountered it (Cronon 1996). As outlined by Cronon, in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this all began to change (1996). Influenced by Romantic poetry emanating from Europe, American pioneers – or at least the emerging pioneer elites - began to see the lands they now possessed as endowed with sacred elements. What once had been wasteland was now ripe with Edenic potential. Instead of taming nature, instead of turning it into culture, one could now seek rejuvenation and solace in its beauty. Indeed, it was at this time the first national parks came into existence. Yellowstone was proclaimed such in 1872, with Yosemite following in 1886 (Spence 1996). Those who set out to visit such places left their homes, not in order to seek cultural enrichment, but rather to partake of nature’s redemptive offerings (Cronon 1996, Fletcher 2014).

This was a formative time for the conservation movement, during which important precedents were set which would have far reaching consequences. Those first few national park lands carved out of and mapped onto landscapes of the American west became

archetypes. In years to come, they were seen as models to be emulated, as other places came to be reinvented as parks and preserves. One of the characteristics of these newly founded parks, one of the traits to be carried over from the model, was that they were to have no permanent human inhabitants (Kemf 1993). The problem is that prior to their foundation, both Yellowstone and Yosemite had been inhabited by populations of Native Americans. These populations – Crow, Blackfoot, and Shoshone-Bannock in Yellowstone (Kemf 1993), Ahwahneechee-Miwok in Yosemite (Spence 1999, Solnit 1995) - had been driven out to make way for the parks; nature had been cleansed of culture. Glacier National Park, which was founded in 1910, was idealized as a “sacred remnant of God’s original handiwork”; in its early years native Blackfoot were put on display as dancers in front of the park’s lodge, even as they were forcibly excluded from the rest of the park (Spence 1999). Thus at the same time that the architects of the new American west were refashioning their conception of what nature was, or what wilderness could be, they were simultaneously continuing the process of dispossessing Native Americans of their ancestral lands. One might fairly state that the latter process is what made such a reconception possible; only a landscape unencumbered by recalcitrant indigenous peoples, with their inscrutable ways of being, could be properly reimagined in the image of a sort of universal naturescape (Spence 1999). This image of the naturescape, as a socially empty landscape, as an uncultured Eden, despite the evidence for long term, consciously pursued landscape management (such as, the deliberate use of fire or selective hunting practices) on the part of indigenous occupants, would go more or less unchallenged within the conservation community for the next hundred years. The ideal protected area was one without people.

This idea of an unpeopled nature, in the form of enclaves of preservation, was enthusiastically adopted by European colonial powers during the consolidation of their rule over their possessions in Africa and Asia. Here the colonial administrators actively also sought to exclude local populations from newly enclosed lands, but in so doing they called upon a slightly different rationale than that that drove their North American counterparts. In places held by the British in Southern Africa and others, such as German Tanganyika, local inhabitants were to be removed and their activities curtailed based upon the premise that “Africans, left to their own devices were wiping out the continent’s wildlife” (Honey 1999: 223). While the rhetoric of the sublime – so powerfully mobilized in the context of the American west – was also a component of the drive towards conservationist enclosure in Africa, a much more utilitarian rationale was also at work. The colonialist’s concern for the welfare of wildlife was directly related to their own valorization of ‘the Hunt’ (MacKenzie 1987). The colonial administrators sought to protect the wild animals of Africa so that they could hunt them. According to MacKenzie, it was in ‘the Hunt’ that Europeans asserted their dominance over Africans (while simultaneously demarcating class distinctions within their own ranks) (1987). That it became necessary to inaugurate regimes of protection for wildlife in Africa, in order to maintain this tradition of colonial self-fashioning, was a result of the fact that the wholesale commercial slaughter of African animals, previously encouraged by the colonial powers, had in fact led to a sharp population decline in those animals. In a deft sleight of hand, European officials erroneously attributed the blame for this decline to communities of agrarian and pastoralist Africans (Honey 1999), thus supplying a rationale for the exclusion of those communities from lands newly earmarked for conservation. As MacKenzie would have it, “the

link between conservation and the Hunt lay in the demarcation of the privilege and power of the new rulers of Africa” (1999: 58).

In those early game reserves in Africa, zones of masculine replenishment for colonial officers, can be found the foundations for the continent’s first national parks, bounded landscapes celebrating nature’s diversity in the absence of humans. Tanzania’s Serengeti National Park, arguably the continent’s most famous, is advertised as an unexplored Garden of Eden, suggesting an absence of troublesome human histories; yet it began as a private hunting ground for the German colonial elite where the activities of the pastoral Maasai were viewed with suspicion. This suspicion was inherited by the British who took over Germany’s East African holdings after the first world war. When the Serengeti’s status was upgraded into a national park in the 1940’s the Maasai were told they could continue to live there, but this promise was abrogated within the decade (Honey 1999). Similar situations played out elsewhere in the region, also effecting Maasai pastoralists; in such places as Mkomazi Game Reserve (Brockington 2002), also in Tanzania, and Amboseli National Park (Lindsay 1997), across the border in Kenya, traditional livestock grazing was increasingly seen as detrimental to the local ecology and as posing a direct threat to wildlife found in the same areas. By means of bureaucratic attrition, and police action in some instances, the Maasai saw their access to these areas drastically reduced without seeing any significant compensatory measures emplaced to ensure their livelihoods. In the course of a few generations, in each location the Maasai saw themselves increasingly dispossessed of lands ancestral them, lands that held their movements for centuries, at first to make way for white hunters keen on proving themselves on the hunting grounds, and then to further relinquish their tenure in order to facilitate the establishment of



newly pristine territories. This had been an exercise in creating what Hughes calls third nature: a sort of idealized, virtual territory ripe with wild potential, while simultaneously unmoored from past or future (2005).

In British India a similar process was underway during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the twentieth. After a prolonged period of enthusiastic resource extraction, the colonial administrators began to address the need to rationally manage resources in a more, to put it today's language, sustainable manner. On one level there was some concern regarding loss of revenue due to over-extraction and slow replenishment in the case of the colony's valuable timber industry (Guha 1989, Munster & Munster 2012). On another level, mirroring colonial anxieties in Africa, it was observed that the depletion of India's wild mammals was endangering the prospects for pursuing the gentlemanly hunt (Chhatre & Saberwal 2006). Rangarajan iterates the importance of the Hunt for the colonial elite thusly, for the British "the scale of a shoot became an index of the sportsman's place in the hierarchy", local administrators labored to ensure that their superiors would successfully encounter preferred prey while in the field (1996:125). The genesis of India's protected areas can be found in these concerns and anxieties; economy and virility were at stake. This is not to say that the successful enclosure of India's forested landscapes happened overnight. Guha has demonstrated that local inhabitants, dependent on forests for any number of uses, consistently resisted their exclusion from forest lands, thus working to considerably slow the full bureaucratic annexation of those lands; regulation and enforcement were unevenly applied (1989). Likewise, in the case of game reserves - even where in many cases the British had a head start, so to speak, by virtue of the fact that many of these areas had previously been

viewed as the private hunting grounds of the landed Majorajas – the British found that it was nearly impossible to keep local people and their livestock from intrusively using and moving through those lands. Nonetheless, annexation continued apace, by 1900 a fifth of British India's land area was under control of the government forestry department (Ranjarajan & Shahabuddin 2006). Not all of these lands were destined to be parks or wildlife preserves, indeed they were explicitly being conserved for extractive purposes, but the guiding rationale behind bringing them under direct government control was the same one that would underwrite the policies of later Indian protected areas: traditional peasant land use was wasteful and destructive, and that only by curtailing such practices could Indian forests thrive (Williams 2003).

### **Post-Colonial Conservation**

If it is accepted that exclusionary conservation can be understood as a legacy of the expanding Euro-American empires of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a legacy bound up with deeply held notions regarding the ontological rift between nature and culture, this fact should not distract us from the fact that this ideological endowment carried over into the practices of newly independent states during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Far from reversing colonial efforts to strictly govern what activities and which people were allowed in protected areas, post-colonial regimes often enthusiastically expanded the boundaries of what was to be protected and constricted the parameters of what was permitted within those bounds. Nearly every modern nation is home to a system of national parks, nature reserves and special conservation zones. It would seem that such forms of institutional conservation have become a hallmark of modern nationhood, along with such things as national museums, compulsory,

schooling, and central banks. Additionally, as each nation is imbricated within the workings of the global economy, so too are their respective protected areas; these spaces thus work not just to preserve biodiversity, but also to produce social, cultural, and economic effects. One could go so far as to say that “protected areas are no longer spaces of contestation between rapacious foreign conquistadors and indigenous defenders”, but rather can be understood as sites of the more mundane struggles between different segments of the global capitalist economy (Kroecker-Mauss 2014: 803). What do these struggles look like? Specifically, it needs to be asked: in recent decades, how have protected areas effected the social, economic, and cosmological worlds of those who dwell in and around them?

In order to sketch out an answer to this question, thus tracing the genealogy that undergirds projects such as the TNRP, I will present a number of case studies from different locations around the world. In each case the problems that arise when strict territorial conservation regimes are imposed from the outside, will be shown to be local, nuanced, and variable, and, yet, embedded in a larger global project of protecting nature from certain kinds of human activities so that other types of human activities can be carried out.

India’s Sariska Tiger Reserve, in the western state of Rajasthan, was declared in 1978. It consists of an 866 km<sup>2</sup> parcel of forest, that previous to independence had functioned as a hunting reserve for the local Maharaja. By drawing on work by Torri (2011), Udaya Sekhar (2003) and Rangajan & Shahabuddin (2006) a picture emerges of how this reserve has affected the lives of those who dwell in proximity to it. After the establishment of the reserve boundaries, all previous tenure arrangements were dismissed and access rights were drastically curtailed. Local farmers who lost land due to the enactment of the reserve were compensated

with lands that were viewed by the farmers as less fertile and, therefore, not as productive. Additionally, new restrictions were placed on the surrounding villagers' access to building materials, firewood, and fodder for livestock. From the outset, this led to conflicts between villagers and reserve authorities, who tended to be educated urban elites who harbored both class and caste prejudices towards those living in the vicinity of the protected area. The authorities claimed that the villagers' ongoing gathering of firewood, fodder, and medicinal plants, along with the grazing of their livestock, was causing irreparable damage to the reserve's vegetation, thus starving out the prey species upon which tigers depended. For their part, the villagers claimed the reserve officials turned a blind eye towards, and perhaps directly benefited in the form of bribes from, larger scale extractive logging and mining activities that were known to be taking place within Sariska's boundaries. Also, due to the artificial scarcity imposed by restricted access there were more conflicts between villagers, who now found themselves in competition for what were considered common pool resources. One result of these tensions, was that when villagers did enter reserve lands in order to carry out livelihood activities they tended to be in a hurry so as to avoid confrontations with reserve staff or other villagers, causing them to be less selective and less careful in how they went about harvesting resources. Pushed into heightened precarity by the new regulatory regime, "local people maximized their short-term gains from the forest in whatever way they could" (Rangarajan & Shahabuddin 2006: 363). This, in turn, led to calls for stronger surveillance of villagers' activities and more stringent enforcement of reserve regulations.

The Sariska Tiger Reserve was created in order to safeguard habitat for endangered tigers. The strategy used to achieve this was a top-down one, by means of which biologists,

ecologists, and forestry officials sought to restrict the movements and livelihood pursuits of local farmers and herders, even though it had not been demonstrated that these communities were posing any more of an existential threat to resident tigers than a host of other factors. Even as these restrictions were implemented, the movement of others into the reserve was encouraged. Sariska became a destination for ecotourists – mostly middle-class Indian urbanites – who wanted to see tigers and experience a sense of wild nature. These ecotourists generally arrived in tours organized by commercial tourism operators based outside of and away from the reserve, fostering a situation which made it very difficult for locals to benefit in any way from the visitors. Gains did not trickle down. In addition to those who came to explore nature, there were an increasingly large number of others who came to visit a series of rustic temple complexes found within the reserve’s boundaries. These pilgrims – eco-religious tourists? – were given access to the reserve despite concerns regarding the observed negative ecological consequences of their devotional presence. Ironically when local farmers, who had traditionally attended to these same sites for the purpose of worshipping forest deities, approached these temples they were viewed with suspicion by park authorities. Here was a situation similar to one, observed by David Hughes, in the Great Limpopo of southern Africa where the mobility of some happened at the expense of others and where the boundaries served to separate “empowerment from disempowerment” (Hughes 2005: 161, 167).

If an injustice is perceived here, perhaps it could be glossed over by highlighting the positive conservation outcomes resulting from such boundary enforcement efforts. That would be difficult in this case though, due to the fact that in 2005 it was reported that all of the reserve’s tigers had been poached out of existence. In final irony, even though the original

exclusionary measures had not functioned to secure the tiger's future in the reserve lands, the reserve authorities responded to the local extinction by declaring that more villagers would be expelled from reserve areas and that boundary enforcement would be ramped up in anticipation of tigers being reintroduced from elsewhere. Reserve authorities remained adamant that local subsistence activities endangered tigers even in the face of evidence for more subtle understandings of changes in the reserve's ecology over time (Shahabuddin et al 2005).

The perception that local subsistence practices are inherently damaging to environments targeted by conservation efforts is one that is widespread. The policy implications of this perception, that these practices should be curtailed and/or that people should be removed from those environments, can result in uneven, and therefore revealing and interesting, outcomes. The nuances of this sort of unevenness can be observed by looking at the case of Cuc Phuong National Park in Northern Vietnam where the majority of villages found within the park's borders were relocated, on the grounds that the swidden agriculture practiced by the villagers was causing irreparable degradation, while a few select others were allowed to remain. A supporting rationale for resettling villagers "was that the Muong people were prosperous enough to be able to survive relocation, and that they were prosperous precisely because they were 'poaching' off park resources" (McElwee 2006: 398). Following work carried out by Rugendyke and Son (2005) on the effects of these maneuvers on local residents - primarily members of the Mung ethnic minority - within the context detailed by McElwee's (2006) broader regional survey, we get a picture of what asymmetrical resettlement looks like on the ground and how related imbalances effect conservation outcomes. In the

resettled villages it was found, much like the case with Sariska, that new agricultural plots were of poor quality. Additionally, resettled villagers could no longer count upon foraged forest resources to supplement their dietary needs, without incurring the sometimes violent wrath of park authorities. This new found precarity contrasted sharply with the villagers' characterizations of their former homes within the park as marked by relative abundance and no doubt contributed to a sense of ambivalence regarding Cuc Phuong's existence, possibly leading to an increase in locally initiated poaching activities. In contrast, the inhabitants of Ban Khanh, a village that maintained its ancestral location within the park boundaries, were less circumspect about the park's existence. This village hosted tourists and residents were able to derive a small supplementary income from those visits by way of payment for "home stay" accomodation and the sale of handicrafts. More importantly for their own well being, was the fact that these villagers were "living in their inherited environment and (were) clearly better equipped to survive than those living in the resettlement villages" (Rugendyke & Son 2005: 195). Even though the park authorities had restricted some of this community's agricultural activities, the fact that they had been left *in situ* had allowed them to continue to interact with a diverse environment they were intimately familiar with, while simultaneously excusing them from the need to develop anew the skills and knowledge necessary for farming unfamiliar lands, a need the resettled Muong were acutely aware of. Also, living within the park's borders and occupying their traditional lands made these Muong appear more 'authentic' than their dispossessed neighbors, in the eyes of visiting tourists. By allowing these villagers to stay in the park, the park administrators had naturalized them; they became part of the forest that tourists came to see. Unsurprisingly, this state of relatively uncompromised access and uncontested

belonging fostered positive attitudes towards the park's conservation efforts among the residents of Ban Khanh; they had a stake in biodiversity's preservation.

As in the case of Sariska, Cuc Phuong had become a space accessible to some, while placed out of reach of others; "one group of forest users (had) been removed, partially in the interests of another" (Rugendyke & Son 2005: 197). Tourists were encouraged to visit the park, scientists explored its deepest reaches, and model Muong were allowed to go about their lives, albeit in a bureaucratically circumscribed fashion. Meanwhile, the excluded villagers were tasked with learning how to farm marginal plots and how avoid park authorities in order to surreptitiously supplement their diets. In a final irony, in 2000 it was announced that a national highway was to be routed through the park. This road, a deep cause of concern among conservationists, was to run through areas that had been previously 'saved' from the Muong. If the villagers had been removed in the name of biodiversity, biodiversity was now being bisected in the name of mobility.

### **The Work of the Artifact**

Of course not all protected areas are predicated on outright exclusion. Even though nature has been, and continues to be, consistently idealized as outside of and in opposition to culture by conservation organizations, some conservation practitioners have come to recognize that it is not always feasible or desirable to impose exclusionary measures in order to promote biodiversity. Some people may be viewed as too recalcitrant to be persuaded to leave. Some national governments are not in a position to enforce regimes of enclosure. Sometimes it is recognized that local inhabitants may in fact benefit conservation efforts in some way, perhaps



by excluding others who may be perceived to be a greater threat to local flora and fauna. In each of these cases, conservationists might seek to enter into a partnership with local people in order to further preservationist goals. Such scenarios, may not produce the sorts of traumatic effects that outright exclusionary measures do, but they can manifest other sorts of issues, relating to concerns about mobility and access or differing perceptions regarding how human communities should relate to the natural world. In cases such as these, one particular *place* can come to be imagined and defined as if it existed in two separate *spaces*.

It might be asked again at this point: what is a protected area? To which the answer might be: an enclave of the natural world buffered from the predations of human endeavor. But it might just as well be answered that protected areas are simply artifacts of new kinds of human endeavors. They are experiments in spacemaking, where the natural world is produced anew under the guidance of a novel and undeniably modernist vision. Social scientists have worked with a number of different analytical frameworks for understanding how space is remade under regimes of protection; I will outline three of these below.

One way to make sense of the spatial and temporal qualities of these artifacts is by way of Hughes' (2005) tripartite schema for understanding representations of nature, alluded to previously. In this model, which builds off of Cronon's interventions (1991), *first nature* refers to mythical, Edenic environments, that which was before the human, *second nature* indexes peopled, anthropogenic environments, and *third nature* points to imagined, speculative environments, places defined by *should*, *could*, and *would*. According to Hughes, third nature "is not past, present, or future, but conditional; not a tense, but a mode of speech" (2005:158). The evocation of third nature can be seen in the planning of the Greater Limpopo

Transboundary Conservation Area. This expanse of land, straddling the borders of South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, was envisioned, even before its implementation, as part of a vast future conservation zone stretching from Cairo to Capetown. Within this zone it was imagined that wildlife would flourish, regardless of ecological constraints; villagers would stay put and enjoy demographic stasis, whether they wanted to or not; and ecotourists, mostly high-end wildlife watchers, would move across the landscape, unfettered by national boundaries. All of Africa was a potential wilderness. In this spatial reimagining “(t)ourists expand as peasants are enclosed. Large vibrant ... bioregions nestle against small, static ... villages” (Hughes 2005: 174).

A second way to conceive of these spaces is by means of the notion of virtualism as theorized by Carrier and Miller (1998, see also, West & Carrier 2004). Borrowing from Fletcher’s summarization of this framework, the creation of protected area can be understood as an instance of virtualism: “a project that seeks to reshape the world in conformance with its predetermined vision while claiming to merely reflect the reality it seeks to transform” (2013: 801). In the case of a particular landscape the virtual claim might be that the land is pristine and untouched - not degraded, debased, defiled or inscribed by social traces - and in order to make it appear so, the practices of local people must be modified, managed, or prohibited. The artifact is created through erasure. An instance of this would be that described by Sylvester *et al* (2016) where prohibitions on the hunting of animals and gathering of wild plants within the confines of Costa Rica’s La Amistad Biosphere Reserve, were leading to the erosion of local ecological knowledge. In this case the desire of indigenous Bribri elders to teach younger community members how to properly use their ancestral forest was subsumed by the need present that same sylvan landscape as an undisturbed enclave of nature, a vision of nature in

conformance with the ideals advertised in ecotourism brochures. A similar case can be found in Belize where Mayan farmers were removed their lands the during the establishment of the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary. Here “northern conservationists recast the Cockscomb’s forests as a potential new commodity: endangered tropical nature” (Medina 2015:276). In the virtualizing vision of these particular conservationists, the nature they wanted to see was incompatible with one in which local people grew food and built houses and made their lives.

A third way of appreciating what is at work in the production of idealized conservation spaces is through concept of generification as developed by Errington and Gewertz (2001, see also, Scott 1998). While Errington and Gewertz were primarily interested in the ways in which units of culture are abstracted from tangles of embedded relations in order to make them recognizable and comparable, the concept of generification can be usefully applied ways ecologies and landscapes are likewise disaggregated on order that their constituent elements might be read out on a field of comparison. A “tropical forest”, “coral reef”, “endangered species”, or “tribal people” can be read as examples of circumscribed global genres, and each can be weighed within these genres against an ideal type or against other units of the same genre. By way of generic comparison complex ecosystems are rendered legible (Scott 1998) to funding agencies and made alluring to scientists. In this process, those elements of a place that do not qualify as generically significant or that are measured as inferior are made invisible or scripted as irrelevant. One example of this would be how the cosmologies of people effected by conservation regimes, such as the Batak of Palawan Island in the Philippines, are often completely elided in the process of developing protection plans, which are often anchored in universalizing western scientific discourse. For the Batak the forest is alive with benevolent and

malevolent forces that one must engage with in order to maintain the social/cosmic status quo, and thus ensure continued access to forest resources (Novellino 2003). For conservationists this same forest is an inventory of biological species that gains its comparative value when scaled against other examples of the same genre. Neither cosmological entities, nor their ecological significance, are accounted for in these inventories. Another example of generification can be seen in the case of the Wounaan of Panama described by Velasquez Runk (2009). The Wounaan relate to their environment through the idiom of riverine analogy, an idiom drawn from their own positioning within local mythological order, whereas conservationists from elsewhere describe the same environment using an idiom of generic sylvan imagery to further their preservationist agendas. As a consequence of this difference, and the power asymmetry that attends to it, the Wounaan have had to adjust the language they use in negotiations regarding the region's future; they find themselves expressing arboreal concerns at the expense of obligations to ancestral rivers. In both the above cases, a complex landscape is made legible, recognizable, and attractive by the invocation of a globally valent category – “exotic tropical forest”- at the expense locally salient meanings. It might be said that for the tourist or the conservation biologist or the researcher it is the genre that beckons, not the actual place, whereas for local people the actual place is not a unit of comparison, but a lived environment for which there is no comparable replacement.

### **The Responsibility to Protect**

How does the TNRP fit in with the historical trajectory outlined above? How have people been affected by the establishment of the TNRP? Which analytical framework best captures the work being done by the creation of this protected area? In concluding this

chapter, these are the questions I will be attending to; with a fuller discussion of some aspects of the answers taken up in the following chapter. As it turns out the TNRP is a rather peculiar entity, so the first thing I would like to do describe the circumstances of its creation. To begin with the reserve was not the result of a long term effort on the part of either conservation scientists or concerned local citizens to recognize and protect a particular ecosystem, known for its special or remarkable qualities. Whatever the actual endemic uniqueness of the gazetted landscape, its enclosure was not outcome of a grassroots movement grounded in environmental concern. Rather, this 168,978 ha reserve is the artifact of a public-private partnership between the Forest Department (FD) of Myanmar, the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), which operates as part of the National Ministry of Electricity and Energy, and a consortium of transnational oil companies, including Total, Chevron, and Petronas (Pollard 2014). Additionally, the FD receives technical support from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Myanmar Program in administering the Reserve's implementation. The origins of this institutional hybrid can be found in the fact that there are gas and oils deposits under the floor of the Andaman Sea, off the coast of Tanintharyi, and that the Thai financial hub of Bangkok is largely powered by gas fired power plants. The lands encompassed by The TNRP lay directly in the path between the submerged gas fields and the gas powered turbines of Bangkok. Beginning in the 1990s transnational energy companies partnered with the Myanmar state energy started building a pipeline from the Andaman, over the mountainous interior of Tanintharyi, into Thailand (Pollard 2013). There are now three of these pipelines – Yadana, Yetagun, and Zawtika - sharing the same corridor, which traverses the forested landscape out of which flows the Kamoethway River. Locally, the corridor is usually called the Yadana, in

recognition of the fact that this was both the first of the pipelines and the name of the gas field from which most the lucrative material moving through the pipes originates.

The TNRP, bisected by this energy corridor, was born of a need on the part of the energy companies involved in constructing and operating the pipelines to show that they were responsible corporate actors, concerned with proper ecological stewardship practices. A project document drafted during the planning stages of the TNRP states that “the need to manage this corridor in an ecologically sound manner and the commitment ... to contribute to ecologically sound development within the surrounding region, provides a unique opportunity to establish and support the management of a protected area that would contribute to the expansion of the national protected areas system” (TNRP 2013). The owners of the three pipelines provide payments to the FD as compensation for biodiversity loss along the length of the corridor; these payments finance the management of the reserve, and are expected to continue throughout the lifetime of the pipelines. This compensation model falls outside the most up-to-date standards set for corporate ‘best practices’ due to the fact the project predates the codification of those standards, and so is technically different from the biodiversity offset model, advocated by the international conservation community today (Pollard 2014). In many respects though, the underlying rationale remains the same with both models: a certain portion of ecological wealth is sacrificed in exchange for financing the sustainable management of another portion of ecological wealth.

This is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in action. Referring to social and environmental initiatives funded by corporations, CSR is now a mainstay of capitalist expansion worldwide, and Myanmar is no exception. As Strasser notes, the wake of the country’s political

and economic reforms CSR “is regarded as the ‘key’ to market entry in Myanmar” (2017:28). CSR programs along the path of the Yadana corridor, which are early examples of targeted corporate largess in the country predating democratic reforms, are viewed as worthy of emulation (Strasser 2017) and in the conservation sector the TNRP is often viewed as a positive and replicable model (Pollard 2014). Advocates of conservation oriented CSR argue that such a model provides a win-win situation: the environment receives protection, an underfunded government boosts its conservation credentials, and corporate actors earn recognition as responsible partners. Under CSR driven conservation initiatives the varying stakeholders are thought to share the benefits equally. But the conceit of stakeholder equality obfuscates underlying power asymmetries. Though often officially included as stakeholders – perhaps after having been shaped into such through ‘capacity building’ efforts – the rural poor, marginalized communities, and the indigenous are often left out of the equation in any substantive way, except maybe as recipients of care, education, or development benefits. Crucial decisions about how conservation plays out on the ground are frequently made without consulting the communities that will be most affected, despite mechanisms celebrated for identifying and including such communities, i.e. processes of stakeholder identification or partnership evaluations

The TNRP is defined in IUCN terms as a Strict Nature Reserve, which, as previously mentioned, means that within its boundaries human activities are, for the most part, strictly prohibited. Sites listed as such are usually conceived behind the idea that they are relatively untouched by human endeavor. Biological diversity has been left to freely proliferate. In the case of the TNRP, much like both the historical and contemporary cases explored above, the

fact is that that prior to the construction of the pipeline and the mapping of the reserve, the area to be protected was a landscape that had long been marked by human activity. According to a recently published CSO report, communities of small-scale farmers, mostly Karen, had inhabited the hills and valleys, that are now considered part of the reserve, for centuries (CAT 2018), confirming stories I was told during my time in Kamoethway. Due to civil war violence in the 1980s and 1990s, a large number of villages were abandoned. Whole communities fled across the border to Thailand, while other communities underwent forced relocation by the country's military regime. Separately, in a review of the TNRP, evaluating its potential role as a model CSR project, a third party consultancy firm noted that satellite imagery of the reserve indicated the existence of former village sites in the valley bottoms and that this had been acknowledged in preliminary reports produced by the project (Pollard 2014, TNRP 2013). Thus the pipeline project and the protected area were both beneficiaries of process whereby human communities had been cleansed from the landscape. Nature in need of protection was an artifact of violent exclusion.

Large expanses of land, free of human habitation, remain central to the modern conservationist imaginary. International conservation organizations working in Tanintharyi, such as Flora and Fauna International, picture the TNRP as but one piece of a larger 'ridge to reef' system, which would link several proposed national parks along the Thai border with marine reserves off the Andaman coast. This scheme would bring more than 800,000 acres under protective status, even though very few of the customary landholders in the areas targeted for protection have been consulted about these plans (CAT 2018). This is *third nature* in action: a vast tract of land is repurposed by the imagination to be something it never was.



The activities of local people are to be shaped in conformity with a figurative biological utopia. These inhabitants are encouraged to tame their ambitions and curtail their movements. The TNRP is to be traversed by liquified natural gas, or perhaps by scientists, but not by swidden farmers or betel nut growers. Virtualism and generification can also be seen working in concert here in the way that expectations, on the part of part of conservationists, about what a forested landscape in Southern Myanmar is supposed to consist of and look like become reality. It is expected that a rainforest does not include does not include human communities, that manifestations of human presence are aberrations, and so those communities are viewed with suspicion, their right both to occupancy and mobility called into question. Instead of recognizing the ways in which the forests of Tanintharyi have been relentlessly and uniquely shaped by distinct local forms of human endeavor, such as the regenerative forestry practices carried out upon the land by Karen inhabitants for generations, the social history of the forest is erased and the forms of knowledge that have emerged from long term engagement with specific landscapes are ignored. The generic is asked to stand for the particular. The irony is, of course, that the very landscapes that appear ecologically virtuous from the perspective of the conservationist are in fact deeply inscribed with qualities emplaced by people. When the generifying conservationist sees a degraded forest human activity is assumed, when they see a virtuous forest the absence of human activity is conjured.

I opened this chapter by briefly identifying a number of a number of processes underway in the Tanintharyi region that were generating fear and anxiety among the Karen inhabiting the Kamoethway Valley. What these processes – the development of the Dawei SEZ, the expansion of oil palm plantations, increasing large-scale mining activity, etc. – have in

common is their potential to transform the environment in dramatically negative ways. Local Karen farmers recognize that potential. Indeed, as I showed in the introduction to this thesis, many of them have directly experienced the negative consequences of extractive landscape commodification, which not only diminishes the region's justly celebrated biodiversity, but also shrinks the space available for pursuing their own livelihood activities. In light of this particular community's own concern for the environment, it may then seem perverse to have spent the majority of this chapter engaging critically with the notion of environmental conservation. In closing, I would like to suggest two reasons why I have taken this approach. First, it was the TNRP, not a destructive extractive project – like a coal mine – nor a large scale agricultural project – like a eucalyptus plantation – that first encroached upon the Kamoethway Valley, and its exclusionary ambitions came as a shock to the villagers. This was a novel lesson, which taught them that their own environmental practices, their own concerns regarding how to properly care for a forest, went unrecognized by those with power. Second, and more importantly, their confrontation with the conservation project was also a moment of decisive political inspiration. Running up against the expanding boundary of the TNRP inspired the Karen of Kamoethway to begin a project in which they would elaborate their own vision of environmental conservation as part of an effort to defend their own interests. This elaboration will be explored in the following chapter.

## Chapter 2

### Conservation in Translation

#### Introduction

Hanging on the exterior wall of small community center in the Kamoethway Valley is a poster depicting fish and other aquatic species native to the valley's eponymous river. Of the 74 different species on display the majority are fish, but there are also several species of eel, freshwater shrimp, and snail, along with a crab and a soft-shell turtle. These various species are represented in full color photographs and identified by name (if known) in Karen, Burmese, Tavoyan (a regional dialect of Burmese), English and/or binomial Latin. Several of the species shown are suspected to be endemic to the Kamoethway River, having never been observed elsewhere in the greater Tanintharyi watershed or beyond. Among these are a number which are apparently unknown to 'Western' science, thus far escaping *Linnaean* classification. One of the interesting things to notice about this poster is whether or not a particular species is named in one, some, or all of the included languages. For instance, all of the creatures shown are named in the local dialect of Karen; each one of them is recognizable and identifiable to inhabitants of Kamoethway. In contrast, fewer, but still a majority, of the lifeforms have an equivalent name in Tavoyan and yet a still smaller number can be named in Burmese. The number which have an English or Latin name is roughly the same as for Burmese, though there are some exceptions, as some have one but not the other. In a few cases, a specimen is listed in Karen and Latin only, with a significant few listing simply the *genus* in the later - the exact species remaining as yet undetermined by western fish biologists.

The significance of these differences in correlation between lifeform and name in the poster's different languages can largely be put down to geography and historical occupancy of the region. Those who live along the Kamoethway today are, for the most part Karen; the same was the case historically. Downstream, where the Kamoethway joins the Tanintharyi River on its journey to the Andaman Sea, is the town of Myitta, which was formerly a modest Karen village. In recent years Myitta has seen influx of Tavoyan speakers moving inland from the coast and the lower reaches of the Tanintharyi drainage, in addition to a smaller number of ethnic Bamar, most of whom are low-level government bureaucrats or owners of small businesses. Thus, unsurprisingly, it is the Karen speakers who are most familiar with the aquatic species of the Kamoethway, as until recent decades they had its banks and reaches to themselves. The fact that the most of the creatures shown on the poster can also be named by Tavoyan speakers can be put down to their long residence along the nearby Andaman shore, in addition to the fact that they have been enmeshed in trade relationships with the inland Karen for centuries. Likewise the inability of Burmese to account for some of the creatures, can be accounted for by the fact that ethnic Bamar are relatively recent newcomers to the region. As far as the English and Latin names go, they can be attributed to the long British colonial presence in Tanintharyi. Settling in after the conclusion of the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1826, the British brought with them the a characteristically 19<sup>th</sup> Century European desire to name and classify all that they encountered. The fact that some of the aquatic lifeforms of Tanintharyi's riverine interior escaped their specifying zeal is probably a testament to the ruggedness of the region's terrain, as well as the fact that British presence in the Tenasserim, as Tanintharyi was formerly known, was primarily focused around the extraction of the area's extensive reserves

of teak (Bryant 1996). Rivers were mainly of interest due to their capacity for transporting felled timber to the coast, exhaustive knowledge of aquatic life being of lesser concern.

The poster's linguistic inclusions and elisions, then, are clues to the region's history. They demonstrate that the area's Karen inhabitants have been paying attention to life on the Kamoethway for multiple generations; it is communicative of the knowledge they hold of a lifeworld to which they are intimately linked. This chapter will be an exploration of the context within which the poster was conceived and produced. I will show how concerns and anxieties arising from the implementation of the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve Project (TNRP), discussed in the previous chapter, spurred local actors to embark on a conservation project of their own. My argument will be that, rather than being merely the passive victims of an unwanted form of environmental protection unleashed upon ancestral lands, the Kamoethway Karen have instead been actively engaged in the articulation of their own iteration of environmental thought. Here I will be writing with and alongside those who have taken up Arun Agrawal's conception of "environmentality" (2005), as a way of understanding how rural communities interact with regimes of environmental protection. I will argue, as others have (Cepek 2011, Theriault 2017), for scholars to pay more attention to the considerable conceptual contributions made by subaltern communities during the unfolding of these encounters. As shall be seen, the prohibitions on forest use and mobility associated with the TNRP, along with the expansionary ambitions and more consistent regulatory reach of a central government emboldened by ceasefire conditions (Woods 2011, for similar example from elsewhere in the region see, Lund 2018) caused these villagers to politically assert themselves in previously unexplored ways. At first glance, the appearance of this poster, with its underlying conservationist message, in the

aftermath of the TNRP's territorial announcement, might be understood as an accommodation to an alien environmental logic. In this view the Karen are simply assimilating an introduced discourse in order to appear as legitimate to outside actors. However, it is my contention that the Karen are doing more than simply appropriating technologies and discourses from elsewhere. While colorful posters celebrating biodiversity or talk of sustainable forest stewardship may have important roles to play during the process of environmental claim-making, they can only with difficulty be thought to be fully constitutive of the Karen's relationship to the environment. I will argue that the origins of their concern for the environment are better understood as located within the sets of inherited knowledge and practice that inhere in the ways they have historically, over a broad region, related to forested landscapes. This is not to say that the Karen are natural conservationists or that they have not imported foreign logics and conceptual schemes into their articulation of local conservation, but rather to suggest that their project can be understood as the result of the generative tensions arising from the meeting of long held understandings of the forest-world *and* introduced sets of knowledge. There is friction (Tsing 2004) here; as conservation runs up against conservation new forms of being and acting are formed.

This friction occurs within the context of a complex and reticulate regional history characterized by how forests are defined and used. Therefore, before providing a fuller explanation of the milieu surrounding the production of the poster, I will first situate the Kamoethway valley and its inhabitants within a fuller history unfolding across a mosaic of connected landscapes. In the following section I will work to locate the Kamoethway's conservation project within the context of the historical production of the wider region's

forests and the forest politics that continue to determine the constraints and possibilities of living in, imagining, and continuing to construct that environment.

### **Making Forests in the Myanmar/Thai Borderworld**

The headwaters of the Kamoethway River lie to the north of the 12 villages that have come together to make the forest conservation project. Flowing south, out of mountains now encompassed by the TNRP, the river roughly parallels the coastline of the Andaman Sea to the west and the Thai border to the east, both of which lie less than fifty miles away. The proximity of these two geographical features - one geophysical, the other political - to the Kamoethway Valley has had important consequences for the people who have historically occupied this river valley. Over the course of the last several centuries the coastline, as a whole or in part, has been variously controlled by Mon Kingdoms, a series of Burmese dynasties, regents of Malay sultanates, the Kingdom of Siam, the British empire, and post-independence Burma/Myanmar. Those seeking to dominate the coastline, have been variously interested in control of human labor, access to the Andaman as a trade corridor (as well as for its rich fisheries), seams of tin ore in the mountains, and the presence of extensive stands of teak throughout the region. As the political fortunes of these different centers of power have waxed and waned, the region's inhabitants have endured shifting levels of administrative and extractive intrusion, with many interior communities enjoying significant levels of autonomy due to the topographical challenges faced by would-be authorities (Scott 2009). The Myanmar/Thai border, as it is presently drawn, is less than two centuries old. It is an largely an artifact of the British need to mark clearly the extent of their new territories in the aftermath of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) and a corresponding desire on the part of the Siamese

kingdom to contain the ambitions of European colonial powers (Thongchai 1994). Before the formalization of this border, the inhabitants of the, mostly mountainous, lands it now divides were not directly ruled by any one power, but were rather obliged to negotiate a fluctuating number of tributary relations with powers distant and near, while also enjoying remarkable levels of political autonomy. The region's population was shaped by a history of advantageous migration, coercive conscription, pursuit of swiddens, trade in forest products, and military campaigns, with different polities and ethnic groups appearing, expanding, contracting, overlapping, and merging.

This polycentric order was significantly disrupted, but by no means entirely uprooted, by the arrival of the British, who brought with them more rigid ideas about what political entities should look like, thus adding a new layer to the already complex political geography of the region. One of the primary reasons for the increasingly demonstrative presence of the British in the region was their desire to extract teak from the region's lush and abundant forests. In the early decades of the nineteenth century obtaining access to the region's teak reserves became a pressing imperial priority (Bryant 1996). The maintenance and expansion of the largest navy in the world required vast amounts of rot resistant wood, and the accessible forests of the empire's holdings in India were rapidly being depleted (Gadgil & Guha 1992). This urgent need was one of the pretexts which led to the annexation of the Tenasserim, or what is now Tanintharyi, after the defeat of Burmese forces in 1826. The British, as with other colonial powers in Asia and beyond, brought with them not only novel ideas about the delineation of territory, but also, rather different ideas about forests. Forests were to be evaluated, tamed, managed, and rationalized in ways previously unimagined by local political powers (Guha 1989,



Peluso & Vandergeest 2001). This led to the emergence of, what Peluso and Vandergeest call, the 'political forest', a form of state territorialization wherein particular landscapes are identified as 'forests' for the purpose of inclusion in an expansive sovereignty; in Southeast Asia this "not only revolutionized people's lives and livelihoods, but created new, almost inescapable means of imagining land, resources, and people" (2001:762).

In the case of colonial Burma, it was no mere coincidence that the formal demarcation of a border with neighboring Siam paralleled the consolidation of forestlands under state control. They were simultaneous and mutually reinforcing instances of reconfiguring the landscape. Karen living in the area at this time found that members of extended kinship networks now dwelled in separate nations; instead of a fluctuating and highly permeable mosaic of frontiers, they were now confronted with a curiously permanent border, that was selectively pregnable. The fact of this border, though, should not compel one to imagine that after its creation social life on either side of it congealed into mutually unrecognizable forms, but rather to attend to the ways in which it functioned (as it still does) as an keystone feature shaping what continued (and continues) to be a broad shared social, political, and ecological realm. Instead of thinking about such a realm in terms of borderlands, it might be more appropriate to conceptualize it as a 'borderworld'. In her wide-ranging history of the Kachin ethnic group, living in what is now Northern Myanmar, nestling up against Northeastern India and Southwestern Yunnan, Mandy Sadan suggests that this more expansive term might "be preferable at times because the proximity to a borderline does not always determine the real or imagined interactions of people inhabiting these more widely drawn but interconnected spaces" (2013:4). A too keen of a focus on the apartness instantiated by border can draw our

attention away from the wide distribution of shared features that continue to bind a geographical unit together and disrupt narratives of cleanly bounded nation states.

My point in highlighting the political importance of the newly established border, which functioned for both British colonialists and the Kingdom of Siam to clearly define separate domains of rule, while simultaneously calling into question the ontological reach of the borderland as an analytic device appropriate to this case, is to suggest that even as this was a case of nation-making at work, it was also a process in which a continuous borderworld was being recomposed with the addition of new elements. For the purposes of thinking about the political forest this distinction is important, especially for when our discussion returns to recent decades and the struggles that have shaped the region's forests on both sides of the Myanmar/Thai border.

Before doing so, it is important to further describe the genealogy of the political forest of the Myanmar/Thai borderworld. The first decades of the British administration of the Tenasserim were characterized by a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the commercial exploitation of the forest. This liberal economic doctrine, championed by some of the colonizers, held that such a process, unfolding within a framework characterized by "free trade, comparative advantage, and a limited state," would be entirely self-regulating, competitive harvesting would mitigate against over-exploitation (Bryant 1993, Bryant 1996:17). Under nominal government control the teak industry ballooned. Timber traders soon turned the small coastal settlement of Moulmein into a sizable port, exporting vast amounts of teak. But, as Bryant notes, economic liberalism proved disastrous for the Tenasserim's forests; due to overharvesting and lack of adherence to even the meagerest of stipulations requiring replanting, it eventually

became apparent to some within the colonial administration that this model of exploitation was of little benefit to long-term economic stability of the colonial state (1996). Its colonial detractors eventually managed to replace *laissez-faire* exploitation with a model of scientific forestry, based on the selective harvesting and planting of tree species, leading to the establishment of an assertive colonial Forestry Department in 1856. Thus, instead of the invisible hand of the market guiding forest policy, the “highly ‘visible’ hand of the forest official” was introduced (Bryant 1996:18).

As the colonial Forest Department in British Burma worked to consolidate its control over the timber industry many traders opted to move eastward into forests claimed either by the Kingdom of Siam or one of its vassal states to the north, such as Lanna. The motivation for this move was to reproduce the *laissez-faire* conditions they had previously enjoyed in the Tenasserim and to generate profits unhindered by restrictive forest policy. This migration of the timber trade alarmed authorities in both Burma and Siam. At issue was, who was to benefit from the revenues generated by concessions in areas of overlapping sovereignty and, as both of these powers were eager to avoid conflict over contested resources, the shared desire to clearly define a recognizable border became more urgent. A number of consequences followed from this. First, not only did the actual survey and delineation of the border become more urgent, but both the British and the royal court in Bangkok moved to assert more direct control over areas that had until then remained peripheral in anticipation of that formalization process (Thongchai 1994). The British moved to absorb Kayah state and the Shan principalities, while Bangkok moved to assume direct control over Lanna and other vassal polities (Bryant 1996, Pinkaew 2001). In Siam, this colonization of the periphery (Delang 2002) meant that forests

(*pa*), which had previously been regarded as wild and unknown quantities, external to the realm of the city (*muang*) and direct human concern, became an important asset of the state (Pinkaw 2001, Tomforde 2003). A crucial outcome of this was the establishment of the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) in 1896. This new government entity was founded on the same principles of scientific forestry that had been foundational to the rationalization of forests in Burma; in fact, its first director, H.A. Slade, was a former official of the Forest Department in Burma. The contiguous forests of Burma and Siam would now remain sutured together, forming a sprawling borderworld, by a shared ideology which imagined the forest to be the commercial patrimony of the state.

From the outset the institutionalization of scientific forestry in both Burma and Siam meant that rural, upland inhabitants of forested landscapes were subjected to the coercive scrutiny of state agents intent on maintaining a system of forest management aimed at maximizing long-term profits. Control of the forest meant control of people. The annexation of the periphery was a form of territorialization, “a process by which states attempt to control and their actions by drawing boundaries around a geographic space, excluding some categories of individuals from this space, and proscribing or prescribing specific activities within those boundaries” (Vanderveest 1995:159). Early on, in the Tenasserim, colonial officials lamented that Karen shifting cultivators did not know the value of teak; it was simply burned with other woody materials during the creation of new swiddens, which the authorities viewed as inefficient and wasteful (Bryant 1996). The forest as a quantifiable value was lost on the Karen, when they burned the forest they were essentially burning money; worse yet, they were burning money that belonged to the state. And, for this, their practices would need to be

curtailed. This ideological motif has remained a constant of forest politics across the borderworld for more than a century, fostering the heavy handed intervention of forest officials into the lives of upland populations. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the colonial state under the British, was more successful in its interventions than its counterpart in Siam, or Thailand, as it came to be known shortly before WWII. After the war, with the independence of Burma and the inception of multiple long-term armed conflicts within its borders, that situation reversed. In Burma upland forests increasingly fell under the control of ethnic insurgents or the *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese military, tasked with defeating those insurgents. Forests became both refuge and battlefield (Bryant 1997). Prior to WWII, due to fiscal limitations and the resistance on the part of some government bureaucrats to the RFD's desire to strictly segregate forest lands from agricultural lands (Peluso & Vandergeest 2001), the Siamese, or Thai, state had been slower to effect broad territorialization of forestlands, but after the war the RFD became more strident in its efforts and began to effect more direct control over those lands (Pinkaew 2001).

Two noteworthy trends accompanied this process. The first is that not only did the RFD increasingly work to directly administer wider areas of forest for the purposes of insuring sustained revenues for the state, but this institution also began to incorporate and valorize the idea of forest as 'wilderness' into its managerial framework (Pinkaew 2001, Tomforde 2003). This notion of pristine, biologically pure, forest became a powerful discursive tool for the RFD in its efforts to curtail access to broader areas of Thailand's upland forests, within the context of establishing an extensive system of national parks across large swathes of Northern Thailand. The second trend was that debates about who could legitimately inhabit and use forestlands

became racialized (Vandergeest 2003). Upland minority ethnicities, or 'hill tribes', failed to be classified as Thai and were often denied citizenship, based upon imagined essential characteristics that were often linked to patterns of resource use and appropriate location in space. Thus, inefficient and destructive swidden farming was something that could be identified with non-Thai communities, whose loyalty to the state was in question, while intensive wet rice cultivation was associated with loyal Thai citizens, despite the fact that uplanders avidly took up *padi* cultivation when the opportunity arose and ethnic Thais encroached on upland forests through swidden practices when the scarcity of bottom lands incentivized them to do so. Within this framing, ethnic uplanders – such as the Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Lisu, and the Akha – have often been glossed as agents of unchecked environmental destruction and have variously been blamed for floods, droughts, and chronic annual haze resulting from unchecked agricultural burning. The protection of the forest, whether for imagined future profits, facilitating watershed stability for the benefit of lowlanders, or the conservation of endangered biodiversity, has been coupled with the need to make uplanders legible and docile.

These two processes – the creation of wilderness and instrumental racial classification – have had the effect of demonizing non-Thai inhabitants of Northern Thailand's forests, leading to heightened levels of precarity as communities face the legal proscription of their livelihood activities and the state enclosure of their lands. Increasing demands have been made on these communities to demonstrate their loyalty to the state by abandoning both inherited livelihood practices and exclusive tenure claims. Newly established national parks have meant the relocation of whole villages and the abandonment of agricultural lands. Where swidden

practices have been allowed to continue, regulatory interventions have often had the effect of shortened fallow cycles, accompanied by declining soil fertility (Chumpol 1999). If communities can prove themselves to be sufficiently docile they may avoid outright eviction, only to suffer the fate of being fixed in place without legal access to resources (Anderson & Patamawadee 2017, Roth 2008, Vandergeest 2003).

While the negative consequences of the expansion of the political forest have been substantial for Thailand's 'hill tribes' (Chumpol 1999, Delang 2005, Thoms 1995, Pinkaew 2001, Roth 2008), they have also led to emergence of new forms of political mobilization on the part of these communities. Central to these mobilizations has been the attempt to disrupt the notion that upland communities are responsible for environmental degradation. Contrary to this narrative, community organizations have sought to interrupt this narrative by laying claim to alternative environmental identities. Among the different ethnic groups inhabiting lands subject to RFD jurisdiction in the Thai/Myanmar borderworld, the Karen have been, perhaps, the most effective in gaining recognition as 'environmentalists' or 'conservationists'. Despite the Thai state's nonrecognition of the category 'indigenous people' within its boundaries (discussed in the next chapter), the Karen, often in alliance with other communities, have positioned themselves, with some limited success, as an indigenous population with deep ties to the regions forests. Through networking with Thai social movements, international NGOs, and rural CSOs, Karen organizations have managed to carve out a space, however constricted, for their voice to be heard, leading to some tentative victories in tenure disputes with the RFD.

The crucial point to be made here, for the purposes of this thesis, is that as discourses of alternative, indigenous environmentalisms have gained some traction in Thailand, they have

also begun to circulate into Myanmar. As refugees, political exiles, NGO workers, migrant laborers, and armed insurgents have moved back and forth across the border they have brought with them ideas encountered at conferences in Chiang Mai, construction sites in Bangkok, and refugee settlements near Mae Sot. In the space opened up by Myanmar's tenuous democratic experiment this circulation has only increased. What were once, by necessity, clandestine networks of cross border solidarity now operate within the ambit of official visas and organizational charters recognized by the Union of Myanmar. Workshops advocating traditional Karen forestry techniques are attended by individuals from throughout the borderworld and community organizers from both sides of the border share ideas about how to make space in the political forest for the continuation of customary practices.

This cross-pollination is part of what made it possible for Kamoethway villagers to develop a possible course of action when confronted by the establishment of the TNRP and its territorial restrictions. They were able to draw upon not only upon their own historical knowledge of forest behavior and experiences of local conservation practices, but also to connect with a wider effort to enshrine Karen ideas about forests as a viable alternative to restrictive regimes imposed from above. This discussion was enhanced by the fact that Karen communities in Thailand had learned to articulate their ideas to wider audiences over the course of several decades of struggle with the RFD. In fact, a number of the individuals who were key to getting the Kamoethway conservation project off the ground had spent significant amounts of time in Thailand and were in direct communication with important Thai Karen activists. Through the course of these interactions, Kamowthway Karen learned that local forest practices were not necessarily all that 'local', or that 'local' could be less place-bound



than might be thought. Their forest classification system turned out to be part of geographically widespread tradition, shared by Thai Karen several hundred miles distant. They learned that traditions that were falling out of practice in Kamoethway were still actively engaged in elsewhere by other Karen communities. This encouraged them to attempt to revive certain ancestral practices, even as they experimented with novel forms of environmental and political discourse.

In a sense, things had come full circle in the Myanmar/Thai borderworld. If towards the close of the nineteenth century British ideas about how to scientifically manage forests had wandered across a hardening colonial frontier only to be adopted by the modernizing Thai state, this had not been a frictionless process. Rural upland communities in Thailand, like those before them in Burma, had learned ways to both accommodate and resist the encroachment of the political forest, thus helping to shape that peculiar entity as it spread. Now villagers in Myanmar's forests are integrating political discourses and tools developed by their Thai counterparts, in their efforts to defend themselves against restrictive regulation and potential dispossession.

### **Rays of Sunlight and Hidden Knowledge**

The poster described at the beginning of this chapter is one of a series produced by the Kamoethway Karen as a means of demonstrating local knowledge. An examination of them suggests that they are discursive tools being used to insert their voice into a conversation to which they were not necessarily invited. One poster in the series showcases more than 120 forest plants that are used medicinally by the Karen; here all the plants are listed only in Karen,

with many of them having no known name in any other language. Another one documents some 80 herbs and vegetables found in local forest gardens, where, to the untrained eye, cultigens can be difficult to distinguish from the uncultivated. This series of posters attests not only to a broad body of shared knowledge about the local environment, the result of centuries of accumulated curiosity, but also to an attention to the arts of performative knowledge politics, on the part of community members. The posters have a professional look; despite their vernacular specificity, they solicit one's attention and ask for a closer inspection. In each case the viewer is confronted with well packaged place-based knowledge commanding respect. The product of volunteer labor and commitment, these posters are the source of some amount of pride on the part of villagers. In Kamoethway I saw several people wearing T-shirts emblazoned with images lifted from them.

The posters (and the t-shirts) are the work of a small CSO called Rays of Kamoethway Indigenous People and Nature (RKIPN, or *Kamoethway Mu Yay* in Karen). In Karen culture rays of sunlight, alluded to in the organizations name, are an important and widespread icon of freedom. Beams of light are a common trope of Karen ethnic projection. Locally known as a *people's organization*, RKIPN formed in 2014 with the aim of defending the interests of villagers coping with the threats related to exclusionary conservation and land grabbing along the Kamoethway River. Working in partnership with a CSO based in Dawei, Tennaserim River and Indigenous Peoples Networks (TRIP NET), RKIPN began from the outset to define its goals in terms of promoting a vision of conservation based on local practices, knowledge, and history. The posters, along with the survey work that informed them, are an early product of these organization's efforts; they were the beginnings of a conservation project centered on Karen

lands. According to organizers, the purpose of compiling and presenting this knowledge was three-fold: to document local resources before they were destroyed by the incursions of extractive interests, to obtain important data that would strengthen the community's bargaining position *vis a vis* outside actors, and to demonstrate to the villagers themselves that they possessed valuable knowledge. Regarding the last of these, people told me that the process of identifying, collecting, and exhibiting the information presented in the posters made villagers aware of knowledge that they did not know they had. It was an exercise in epistemological discovery, where the banal everyday facts and routines of life came to be seen as exemplifying a profound collective accomplishment. If TNRP officials were inclined to characterize local people as ignorant of the forest's true value and in need of instruction in proper stewardship practices, this previously hidden knowledge was evidence that the Karen too cared about biodiversity and that they also were also capable of systematically evaluating forest health without the intervention of outside experts.

In proving they were paying attention to the abundant lifeforms valorized by global conservation, they were also showing that they were aware of decline. The poster depicting aquatic lifeforms was conceived in preparation for the declaration of the first of several fish conservation zones on the Kamoethway River. Inhabitants of the valley had observed a decrease in the river's fish populations and were concerned that this hugely important resource was in danger of being lost. In response to those concerns, in February, 2014, a ceremony was held near Keh Gwaw village marking the inauguration of the Htar Ta Beh Fish Conservation Zone. More than 1,500 people attended this event, which was marked by speeches by village activists, fisherfolk, and religious leaders, each of whom noted the importance of caring for the

river and allowing fish populations to regenerate. In the protected area all harvesting activities were to be prohibited, with community sanctions to be placed on those who violated the prohibition. It was noted by several of the speakers that rather than being an entirely new concept or one coming from elsewhere, the establishment of special areas along the river, marked by fishing prohibitions was long held local practice, and that in the past each village would have maintained such areas along the river. Thus among the objectives for the protected area communicated during the ceremony, beyond the obvious goal of balancing subsistence use with protecting fish, was the recognition of Karen indigenous identity through the revival and continuation of traditional conservation practices.

The creation of the Htar Ta Beh Fish Conservation Zone is part of a larger project, initiated by community members working with RKIPN, that emerges from a simultaneous invocation of concerns common to international conservation *and* logics associated with ancestral practice. This ambitious project is centered on the conservation of community forestlands throughout the valley. This project can be understood, in part, as a response to the establishment of the TNRP and its regulatory regime. In contrast to the TNRP, where forest zones are classified by categories historically tied to scientific forestry, defined in terms of generic types (e.g. highland evergreen dipterocarp), where humans are imagined as detached observers (Ingold 2000), Kamoethway's conservation forest is divided into zones based on past, present and future human use. A report jointly published by RKIPN and TRIP NET states that unlike the "government led protected area, these zones would reflect the community's current land use and future needs, based on indigenous, local knowledge of the environment and older cultural practices" (Thaung 2016:22). In characterizing the aims of their project as distinct from

those of the TNRP, the Karen are staking a claim to an environmentalist position that lies outside the parameters set out by more powerful actors. They are asserting that their communities need not be subjected to outside intervention in order to be made environmentally compliant, and that such compliance is better achieved through decisions made on the community level, by those communities themselves, based on their own knowledge and preexisting conservation practices. If then, the Karen of Kamoethway are already conservationists, how did they become so? By which route did they arrive at the notion that the forest and its environs was worthy of a particular kind of protective attention?

### **Environmentality or Conservation from Below?**

One way of attempting to understand how the rural inhabitants of an out-of-the-way valley in Southern Myanmar came to identify as environmentalists is through the lens of environmentality. As conceived by Agrawal, environmentality refers to a “framework of understanding in which technologies of self and power are involved in the creation of new subjects concerned about the environment” (2005:166). Both building on and departing from the work of Foucault, Agrawal uses this framework to show how peasants’ ideas about the surrounding forest environment in Northern India changed, over the course of multiple decades, through their practical engagement with state forestry officials, and that this led to the creation of local forest councils, which, in turn, took on the work of regulating people’s relations with the environment. He argues that exposure to these institutional apparatuses led, over time, to local farmers adopting positions relating to the environment that were more commensurate with broader conservationist agendas. Agrawal’s investigation is concerned with to what degree regimes of regulation are contagious, and with the attention he pays to

changing historical context, this leads to some important insights regarding the development of commitment to environmental protection. And yet, if we can accept that to some degree people become environmentalists through these processes of regulatory immersion, it would be incautious to imagine that that is the full story and that there are not other reasons people take on environmental identities.

What is left under investigated in Agrawal's discussion is what people bring with them to the regulatory encounter. People never come to a social interaction conceptually empty-handed. And, as Agrawal himself is aware of, the successful wholesale imposition of identities is a dubious proposition: people may be discursively remade, but they are never reconstituted using exclusively alien discourses. Arguing for the inadequacy of a Foucauldian approach for explaining the participation of members of an indigenous community in Ecuador in conservation projects implemented by foreigners, Cepek argues that, "if ethnography reveals that a population's engagement with a regulatory practice exhibits an origin, a form, a commentary, and a utility that can only be understood in terms of a local background – whether historical, cultural, or political in nature – then researchers have reason to doubt the analytical possibilities of the environmentality approach" (2011:505). Put differently, ideas and practices, more often than not, have diverse lineages and histories, and any attempt at comprehending a given community's relationship to the environment should trace not just genealogies of invasive regulatory regimes, but also the ancestry of logics, ethics and ways of being in the world that locally pre-date the arrival or emergence of those regimes.

An overview of the community conservation forest in Kamoethway brings some of these intertwining genealogical strands to light. In the valley there are nine different zones --

including the fish conservation zone -- each one of which indexes a different field of concern. Some of these zones can be seen as explicit attempts at cultural continuity (or even revival), while others echo contemporary global environmental anxieties, such as the recognition of the need to protect endangered species. Each zone falls under its own particular set of rules, which were devised through a process of consultation and consensus across all 11 of Kamoethway's villages, in contrast to the TNRP, where regulations were unilaterally imposed without any input from Karen communities. A brief examination of these zones (excepting the fish conservation zone, which has already been described) will illustrate how they emerge not from a stable menu of categories, tied exclusively to either indigenous logic or registers of scientific truth (Agrawal 1995, Agrawal 2002), but rather from the messy intersection of conservation trajectories, which despite their distinctiveness, betray traces of a shared phenomenal world.

The first zone is the wildlife sanctuary. In this area of forest all hunting, of all species, is forbidden, as is the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for commercial reasons. The purpose of this part of the forest -- to ensure habitat for endangered species -- marks a concern that the Karen share with global others: vulnerable lifeforms are at risk of disappearing. Awareness of this risk is tied to both local observation -- nobody can remember the last time a Sumatran rhinoceros was seen in the valley -- and to the work of international conservation organizations working in the region, for whom endangered species often function as beachheads for interventionist activities.

The second zone is the watershed forest. The concern here is to ensure the supply of clean, safe water for both household and agricultural use, by protecting the drainage's upper reaches. A number of activities are prohibited here, such as, agricultural burning, gathering

plants, the introduction of non-native trees, and harvesting water for commercial use. At first glance, this concern for the *watershed* could be interpreted simply as importing a concept native to Western geography (Carse 2014) and then mapping it onto a local landscape in defiance of preexisting geographical ontologies. This interpretation, though, would stand in uneasy contradiction to ethnographies on the Karen from elsewhere in the wider Myanmar/Thai borderworlds region, which provide evidence both for an inherited sensitivity to the cultural-ecological significance of watersheds and an acute awareness of watersheds as potential political territories (Chumpol 1999, Pinkaew 2000, Pinkaew 2001). Based on research from two neighboring Karen communities in Thailand, Chumpol notes four discrete types of forest associated with water that were traditionally left undisturbed by villagers – forests surrounding springs, a special type of moist forest (locally likened to “a green frog incubating its eggs”), forests at the ‘heads’ of swiddens or padis, and forests harboring salt-licks; each of these areas are strongly associated with water spirits that are better left alone (1999:11). In each case, there is a recognition that water emerging from these forests sustains the life upon which the Karen depend; the watershed makes their world possible. The watershed is also a world that is contested. In a discussion of how ‘hill tribes’ in Thailand, such as the Karen, came to be viewed as ‘watershed destroyers’ by lowland Thai, Pinkaew observes that a watershed forest is not a “fixed biological component” but a site of constant negotiation where “different concepts and practices intersect, and local reality and scientific myth collide” (2000:54). The watershed forest in Kamoethway, then, might best be thought of as a coproduction of both local and global imaginaries. Its delineation is at once a pragmatic, cosmological, and political act.



The next forest category in Kamoethway is the utilization forest. This is a commons where food, building materials, firewood, and medicine may be gathered. It is meant to demonstrate the community's ability to sustainably manage these resources without bureaucratic intervention from outside. Both the establishment of new swidden plots and new orchards are prohibited in the utilization forest. Here, one can fell trees for local construction use, but commercial harvesting of timber is not allowed. Each family is allowed an annual amount of timber from this forest; beyond that limit permission must be granted by the community. It is also stipulated that for every tree cut, another must be planted. Waste is discouraged, e.g. if one cuts down a tree they are expected to use all of it. An ethic of replenishment is at work here, where to use does not mean simply to take away, but also to put back.

The fourth type of forest comprising the Kamoethway's conservation project is the herbal medicine forest. The purpose here is to celebrate and sustain the Karen's practice of traditional medicine, based on a rather astounding number of native plant species. Like the utilization forest, agriculture is prohibited in this zone, as are clearing or burning, but the careful transplanting of appropriate into the forest is allowed. As in many forest environments, plants with recognized pharmacological properties are carefully managed by local inhabitants, with harvesting times closely correlated with periods of peak medicinal potency, such as those observed during florescence or when fruiting trees are in mast (Etkin and Ross, 1994). By insuring that there will be always be a place for these culturally valuable plants to grow, the Karen are asserting that they wish for local medical practices to continue to thrive as well. It is worth noting that for this rural community, medicinal plants may act as a critical buffer against

disease and infection, in the absence access to other medical options. And, as with many places worldwide, in Kamoethway there is no strict locally recognized dichotomy between resources gathered for caloric value and those collected for medical purposes; foods acquired from the forest are identified as having both nourishing and healing properties (Etkin and Ross 1994; Hanazaki 2006). Some gathered foods that are consumed with regularity are rich in allelochemicals and are characterized by strong or unusual flavors; people may seek these foods out for their flavors, while benefiting from their elevated loads of important vitamins, minerals, or alkaloids (Johns 1994).

The fifth forest category is the cultural forest. This zone is reserved for the practice of traditional rotational, or *swidden*, farming. While most people in Kamoewthay have transitioned to an economy centered on small-holder agroforestry, heavily emphasizing the cultivation of betel nut, *swidden* farming is still practiced by some throughout the valley. Perhaps more importantly, *swidden* continues to be valorized as a vital component of Karen identity. Even though its annual cycles no longer dictate the rhythms of most people's daily lives in Kamoethway, *swidden* still holds a grip on people's imaginations. As with the Karen community studied by Rajah in Northern Thailand, where most people now grow wetland rice (2008), the calendar is still a *swidden* calendar and rituals are still held in accordance with that calendar. Plants that would have traditionally been grown in rotational patches, can now be found generously populating the understory in agroforestry patches in the forest beyond *padi* lands. And, the history of the landscape is still largely remembered as a compendium of past *swiddens*, which ties into Karen ideas about conservation: a healthy forest is a forest marked by attention and use. The purpose of the cultural forest, with its emphasis on maintaining

swidden knowledge and techniques, is to insure the continued *performance* of this aspect of Karen identity in defiance of the notion entertained by many – forestry officials, international conservationists – that rotational agriculture and forests are incompatible.

The agroforestry zone, which is the next category, encompasses a large area of the Kamoethway conservation project. It is in this zone that most people currently make their living. By insisting that this fundamentally economic space is integral to conservation the Karen are arguing that the environment cannot be divorced from human subsistence practices. To highlight this one need only refer to the community guidelines covering agroforestry practices; some of the listed objectives are to, “(m)aintain food security for the community and to protect the forest ecosystem” and to “(r)ehabilitate the forest in away that also generates income for the community” (reproduced in, Thaung 2016). For many in the global environmental community these goals might seem incommensurable, forests are imagined to be healthiest when left alone, but for the Karen these goals are essential; they index the ability of human communities to persist in and with environments, through observation of ritual and habits of care. The seemingly contradictory nature of some of the Karen’s objectives are a reminder that conservation itself is not a stable category, definitively endowed with qualities to be left unquestioned, but rather it is conceptual space where different social worlds intersect, resulting in diverse approaches.

The last two zones included in Kamoethway’s conservation project are the umbilical cord forest and the burial forest. These two areas bracket the Karen’s recognition that their lives are bound up with the forest and that only by sustaining the forest can ritual obligations be safely met. The burying or hanging of a newborn’s umbilical cord in the forest, under or in

specifically dedicated trees, is a widespread cultural practice among Karen on both sides of the Myanmar/Thai border. Customarily, after the birth of a child the umbilical would be placed in a bamboo container, which would then be tied to a strong, healthy tree in area of forest dedicated to this practice; each tree would be for one individual only. The belief is that people's souls reside in the umbilical cord forest and to cut down trees within it would be to invite illness upon the owners of the umbilical cords (Chumpol 1999). Karen in Kamoethway are concerned that this practice is in danger of falling out of the way and wish to conserve it. Here, forest conservation and cultural preservation are intertwined. The last of the conservation zones is the burial forest. This zone is another that is commonly found in regions inhabited by Karen. It is both a place for the burial of the dead and a place where funerary materials – such as timber for coffins – can be gathered. A burial forest is to be “reserved as a serene resting place for the dead. Any disturbance of such a forest is believed to cause trouble for the spirit of the dead, and also for their descendants living close by” (Chumpol 1999:95). In Kamoethway, rules prohibit both burning and farming in the burial forest; while it is also mandated that the community plant more trees in this area. In both the umbilical cord forest and the burial forest certain activities are proscribed in order that other practices might continue, in accordance with pragmatic wants *and* cosmological expectations. In either case, forest, practice, and belief require each other.

### **Heterodox Conservation**

In reviewing the different zones that comprise the Kamoethway conservation project my intention has been to highlight the manifold reasons why the Karen wish to protect their environment. These reasons are variously practical, economic, cosmological, territorial, and

political. And, we might add, *emotional*. As Kay Milton has observed people in cultures around the world often develop deep emotional attachments to the environments they call home. The places where we receive our apprenticeships in perception (Ingold 2000), the places where we learn how to know are frequently held in high regard (Milton 2002). Some of these reasons might be legible to state officials or large-scale conservation actors – inviting recognition collaboration, and common cause – while others might remain unintelligible – subject to scorn and willfully made invisible. Taken together as a whole, this plurality of concerns suggests that the Karen approach conservation from a number of different directions; their conservation project is a place where different paths cross. Following from this, it would be difficult to sustain the notion that the Karen’s environmental project is merely an instantiation of a form of environmentality originating from without. That is to say, the Karen have not simply been made to care for the forest through a process of subject-making, by which their habits and concerns have been shaped to mirror those of the more powerful through a history of routinized association. This is not to suggest that the Karen remain unaffected by these encounters, for they almost certainly have obtained particular habits of discourse, such as discussing ‘resources’ as something to be ‘managed’, and practical technologies of involvement, such as posters displaying colorful biodiversity, through their relations with forestry officials and conservation workers. It is rather to note that this is not the full story, that their project also arises in tension with conceptions of the environment held by various state agencies and their conservationist partners, and rather than emerging solely in mere replication of those conceptions, their project is a thing of heterodox origins. Finally, it is worth insisting that “assumptions about the inexorable march of territorialization and ecogovernmentality overlook

the continued prevalence of Indigenous world-making practices and thereby risk naturalizing ongoing processes of colonization” (Therriault 2017).

My argument in this chapter has been that Kamoethway villagers’ encounter with a powerful environmental regime, encroaching from without, has not been a purely asymmetrical affair. They have brought their own logics to this encounter and have attempted to incorporate useful ideas, associated with outsiders, into a framework of their own devising. In making this point, it is important to point out, echoing Marshall Sahlins, that “to invoke a cultural framework or logic in this way, as orchestrating historical change, is not to speak of the stereotypic reproduction of primordial custom. *Tradition here consists of the distinctive ways the change occurs: change is appropriate to the existing cultural scheme*” (2000:174, italics in the original). Not only are the Karen being shaped by new environmental politics, but those politics are also being shaped by the Karen’s own conceptual inheritance. Their ideas both bend and rebound within processes of change. And, while I have been highlighting how much of what the Karen bring to this arena can be traced to their habitual immersion in a particular phenomenal world, it should be emphasized that “(a)ttention to phenomena is always *someone’s* attention; it must always be situated historically and politically” (Lowe 2006:103, italics mine). The environments where everyday life unfolds, where lifemaking social entanglements happen, both within and across species, are not just made in those ceaseless and intimate local interactions, but are also forged by contestations over power that may, at least in part, owe themselves to distant points of origin.

## Chapter 3

### Making Indigenous Space in Southern Myanmar

#### Introduction

In April, 2017, two months before I arrived in the Kamoethway Valley, village activists, in conjunction with CSO members based in nearby Dawei, hosted a gathering of other rural villagers from around the Tanintharyi region, the purpose of which was to share experiences related to intrusive development projects in the area and to strategize as to how to best confront those unwanted intrusions. This gathering, which was the first of what was hoped to become an annual event, was called the Karen Indigenous People's Assembly (KIPA). Some of those who came had already lost land to oil palm expansion, others were in the midst of complicated negotiations with mining companies intent on opening mineral veins or coal seams on community lands, while still others had yet to confront anything other than rumors of timber concessions granted or impending conservation enclosures. People came with stories to tell and questions to ask. The point was to come together and discuss how to proceed in the face of a proliferating set of challenges, and how to build, extend, and maintain solidarity under circumstances that held both possibilities and trepidation. The organizers of the assembly felt that the gathering had been a success, and were looking for ways to keep up the momentum they felt had been gathered during their time together.

The question I want to answer in this chapter is: why did the word "indigenous" come to be included in the name of this inaugural assembly? Why not simply "Karen People's Assembly"? What does the word "indigenous" do here? My argument in this chapter is that by

identifying as indigenous, by mobilizing indigeneity, agrarian actors in Southern Myanmar are leveraging the opening provided by the country's democratic transition, and local cease-fire conditions, in order to make political space for themselves and to better determine their own futures in the face of numerous existential threats. In elaborating my argument, I will be paying close attention to the ways in which expressions of indigeneity and claims to environmental identity articulate with each other. My interlocutors here are those scholars who have been attempting to build an understanding of what it means for a community to position itself as indigenous in the opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Clifford 2013, Hathaway 2010, Li 2000, Sissons 2005, Tsing 2007).

When I asked one of the organizers of the KIPA why they had chosen to include this term I was given two answers, both of which go a long way towards illuminating the explicitness of the choice. First, I was told that while only Karen had come to this first meeting, they had promoted it as an indigenous gathering in order that, in the future, other ethnic groups inhabiting the region – such as the Mon, Tavoyan, or the Moken - might attend and become involved. The point was not to make this another iteration of a Karen ethno-nationalist project, but rather to invite other marginalized ethnicities into the space they were attempting to create. The second reason I was given for the deliberate indigenous framing was to positively identify with the presumed linkage between indigeneity and sound environmental practice; by identifying the assembly as an indigenous one, they were simultaneously marking it as an assembly of environmentalists. In so doing they were also consciously exclusive of those – even if they happened to be Karen - who were not deemed to be sound environmental practitioners.



This seemed both a provocative framing, in the way that boundaries of belonging and solidarity were being proposed, and a risky one, in the sense that that an often-questioned essential link between being indigenous and ethical environmental conduct was being valorized. My aim here is to explore the conditions under which the choice to follow this particular path was made. In order to do so I will, first, attempt to illuminate the particular historical context within which such a framing emerged. Here, I will be asking what set of circumstances have arisen in Myanmar in recent years that might encourage the use of indigeneity both as a social marker and as a salient political category. Secondly, I will be looking at what sort of effects the use of this marker and category have produced elsewhere in Southeast Asia. I want to keep in on how the concept of indigeneity has travelled throughout the region, and on what kinds of possibilities and problems arise when people are conceptually cloaked as indigenous. Thirdly, I will return my attention to the Karen in southern Myanmar and focus on the linkages between their newly found indigenous identity and their environmentalist claims. The point here will be to consider to what degree the Kamoethway Karen's bottom-up conservation approach, and the sorts of multilocal, extranational linkages it hopes to foster, can be considered an instance of indigenous space making (Hathaway 2010) and what that might mean within the context of Myanmar today.

### **The Karen in History**

Before proceeding, I will first provide a picture of who the Karen are, how they are situated along the Myanmar/Thailand borderworld and what kind of role they have played in shaping the conditions they now find themselves in.

The ethnonym Karen refers to a group of people who have traditionally inhabited a long, narrow stretch of mostly mountainous territory that spans the distance from southern Shan State in Myanmar, at its northern end, to nearly the point where Myanmar ends just above the Kra Isthmus of peninsular Thailand, at its southern end: a distance of almost 800 miles. The term 'Karen' embraces at least 20 subgroups of people speaking a number of mutually unintelligible dialects and practicing different religions (Kunstadter 1979, Thawngmung 2008). There are Theravada Buddhist Karen, Karen following various strands of Christianity, a small number of Muslim Karen, and Karen adhering to ideas about the world that predate the arrival of these other faiths into the region. There are Karen who are swidden farmers in the hills of Northwest Thailand and there are others working as bureaucrats in government ministries in Yangon (Cheesman 2002). While Karen State is one of Myanmar's official administrative districts, its boundaries do not indicate a discrete political entity predating British colonial enterprise, but rather the imaginings of colonial officials attempting to inscribe upon the world a sense of ethnic order (Gravers 2007). At present, only a quarter of the country's 5 million or so Karen are found within its borders (Thawngmung 2012). The rest are found dispersed across neighboring states and districts, in large pockets throughout the Irrawaddy delta region, and across the border in Thailand, where they live both as refugees and as descendants of long resident communities.

In short, the Karen are a geographically, culturally, and linguistically heterogeneous population, with few universally held identifying traits. Cheesman notes that there "is no single word across Karen languages to encapsulate the concept of Karen oneness" (2002: 202). Renard goes as far as stating that the primary defining attribute of Karen identity is simply the

conviction that one is Karen (1980). But how would such a conviction come about? In order to answer this question, numerous authors suggest that we think of Karen ethnic identity as emerging relationally; that is, Karen become Karen in relation to other groups of people who are clearly *not* Karen (Cheesman 2002, Gravers 2007, Lehman 1979). Historically, as the Burmese, Mon, Lanna, or Siamese/Thai states encroached on lands along their long, convoluted, shifting frontiers, the people living on those lands were forced to contend with others who did not so easily fit into local matrices of belonging. Similarly, as would-be Karen ventured outward from their ancestral lands they found themselves amongst people outside their circles of kinship. It was in these interactions - sometimes violent, sometimes convivial – that the idea of *Karenness* began to develop (Gravers 2007, Keyes 1979). Thus it was not on a basis of a decontextualized primordial essence that one became Karen, but rather upon a set of recognized differences that arose when the Karen encountered others moving across the same landscapes. As regional powers expanded and contracted, as they sought out labor, resources, or tribute, those living on the periphery found it necessary to define themselves in ways that would have been previously been unimaginable; it was within a context of contestations over territory, tribute, and autonomy that less fluid ideas about identity began to emerge (Scott 2009).

This is not to say that these identities became in any sense fixed in these encounters, but rather to point out that these encounters encouraged people to more clearly articulate where and with whom they belonged. One's position along a continuum defined how and to what degree one could be ruled. This would begin to change with the arrival of the British, who brought with them completely different ideas about both how to govern territory and how to

classify groups of people. As Gravers puts it, “(e)thnic differences became territorialized in an absolute sense when the British began mapping Burma in 1926” (2007: 13). Not only this, but under the system of colonial classification, ethnic categories that had until then been pliable and relationally contingent became, rigid and immutable. As the British consolidated their control over their new Burmese territories over the course of the next 75 years, they described diverse peoples in terms of their “natural and primordial differences”(Gravers 2007: 14). There were traits that were thought to be held universally by each of these discrete populations that marked them off from others. For instance, as Thawghmung points out, the British imagined the Karen as a “martial race” (2012), categorically different from ethnic Burmans, considered by the British to be soft and effete (Saha 2017). The Karen were thought to be imbued with the qualities of “toughness, muscularity, and loyalty” (Thawghmung 2012: 31).

These ideas were not simply inscribed upon docile populations. They were also increasingly self-ascribed by members of those same populations. In fact, the inception of “a modern Karen identity can be primarily attributed to a specific historical process: the combined colonial missionary enterprise” (Cheesman 2002: 203). Newly missioned Karen Christians did the early work of spreading colonial notions about the inherent and cohering qualities possessed by members of this ethnic category. Thawghmung suggests three ways the activities of these early Karen Christians contributed to the formation of an emerging polity: they spread the gospel, which led to the of quelling longstanding intra-ethnic conflicts; they invented Karen scripts (both *Pwo* and *Sgaw*) that allowed for the sharing and dissemination of unifying messages; and they promoted education through the establishment Karen-language schools (2012). It was also these Christian elites among the Karen who first spread the notion

of a shared common ethnic identity and destiny, opening the door to a nascent nationalism (Rajah 2002, Thawngmung 2012). In the Sgaw Karen dialect, spoken by many of these converts, the term *dawkalu* means 'entire race'. Dawkalu was also the name of the first proto-nationalist Karen organization, which was formed in 1880, even before the British had fully consolidated their rule over the entirety of Burma; these early nationalists built a narrative which described the Karen as oppressed, uneducated, and virtuous (Cheesman 2002). They used this narrative to air grievances against the majority Burmans, who were portrayed as duplicitous and cunning overlords in times past. The current British overlords only encouraged such ethno-historical myth-scripting, as it dovetailed neatly with their own ideas of Burma's racially distinct peoples, subject to different levels of paternalistic intervention (Cady 1958, Sadan 2013).

British ideas about the Karen and the Karen's incorporation of those ideas into their own ethno-biography, allowed the Karen a place of privilege under colonial rule. They were recognized as "loyal and disciplined subjects" (Thawngmung 2012: 33), who could be trusted in ways that other subject 'races' could not. The Karen were represented disproportionately in both the army and the police force under the British. This fact would be of significance during WWII; when pro-independence Burmans temporarily allied themselves with the forces of the Japanese occupation, the Burmese armed forces, who were mostly Karen, remained loyal to the British. In the post WWII lead-up to independence, Karen nationalists attempted to leverage this wartime loyalty into a pledge from the British and ethnic Burman independence leaders that they would be granted, at the very least, self-rule under a federal system, if not a nation of their own, when the colonial power withdrew. For reasons that continue to be debated, neither of these options became reality. Whether due to ethnic chauvinism on the part of the

Burmans, or a reluctance on the part of the British to see their former possession fragmented, the aspirations of the Karen nationalists, were not fulfilled at the moment of independence (Cady 1958). It was under these circumstances that that a civil war began that would continue unabated, in one form or another, for the next half a century. This war would have tragic consequences for many of the people who had become Karen.

### **From Nationalism to Indigeneity**

Particular kinds of politics arise in places under specific circumstances, that are rarely the result of careful planning and seldom could have been predicted in advance. In tracing the emergence and rise of indigenous politics in 1990s Mexico, Jung (2008) describes how long-time activists, who worked around peasant issues, were caught off guard by this new kind of politics, despite the fact that many of these activists were in fact members of indigenous communities. Up until that time, 'indigenous' was simply not a salient political category; subaltern political organizing happened under the banner of 'the peasant'. It was in the interests of peasants that people confronted the state and it was people who considered themselves to be peasants who expressed opposition to capitalist encroachments. Jung shows how this changed in the last decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico. She highlights four crucial changes that occurred during that time which allowed for the eclipse of a politics based on peasant identity and the rise of politics built around notions of indigenous belonging.

First, new discourses of democracy arose during this time period that were closely wed to increasingly strident neo-liberal economic policies. Under these new conditions, space grew for political mobilizations based around ethnic- or gender-centered identities, while

simultaneously space for struggles centered around class identities contracted. Second, the growth of indigenous politics was made possible by a growing global consensus that rights inhered not just in individual political subjects, but also in collective cultural entities. These cultural rights, devised within international frameworks, allowed those claiming indigenous identities the ability to petition bodies of authority beyond national boundaries; in other words, the possessors of these rights now had a broader moral reach (De Costa 2012). Third, Jung notes that as neoliberal states have withdrawn “their commitment to social and economic support, some have attempted to renegotiate the terms of citizenship by extending cultural rights to their marginalized populations” and that this has opened up new spaces for political action (2008: 149). Lastly, the deployment of indigenous identities has allowed activists to make legitimate claims on state resources, in ways denied those identifying as peasants.

It can be seen here, that one arena for political action and social assertion has expanded, just as another has diminished; the neoliberal context “opens possibilities for identity-based social movements while also powerfully channeling diversity and transformation” (Clifford 2013:38). And while Myanmar and Mexico are entirely different places, with very different colonial, as well as post-colonial histories, I do think Jung’s analysis can fruitfully be used to help us understand how indigenous space, in both a discursive and a territorial sense, may be opening up within the former.

Up until recently, the political terrain for minority ethnic groups, such as the Karen, in Myanmar has been dominated by different strains of nationalist politics. The language and praxis of such politics were in wide currency. Everyday political analysis in ethnic regions centered around notions of “national independence” and innate incompatibility with the

Burman majority. So while not all Karen, let alone even a majority, were actively involved in armed nationalist struggle, such a struggle had wide support among Myanmar's diverse Karen constituents, whether they be Buddhist or Christian, urban or rural (Thawghmung 2012). The same could be said for a number of other ethnic groups in the country (Gravers 2007, Sadan 2013). With the military regime's near total ban on opposition politics, the idiom of nationalism was one of the primary means for ethnic minorities in Burma to imagine alternative futures. Much as in Mexico, where it was peasant organizations that disrupted the hegemonic monologue of the state, in Myanmar's ethnic peripheries, where civil society was severely, though not completely (South 2007), suppressed, it was primarily through nationalist activities that a deeply despotic state was challenged. Much of this has changed within the last decade. In the case of the Karen, 2012 Myanmar's central government signed a bilateral peace agreement with the Karen National Union (KNU), the most prominent political Karen organization, bringing to a close a one of the world's longest and stubborn conflicts, one that had caused the deaths of thousands, the displacement of hundreds of thousands, and innumerable instances of trauma. This cease-fire come in the wake of a democratic transition in Myanmar beginning in 2010, under which the country's military regime began handing power over to an elected government.

Thus the second decade of the new millennia has seen a transition in which space has opened up in Myanmar for new kinds of politics, in much the same way that an analogous transition occurring several decades earlier in Mexico allowed for novel political projects to emerge. While I would be reluctant to characterize the current state in Myanmar as neo-liberal one, and am therefore hesitant to suggest that a direct parallel process to that described by



Jung is under way, some interesting parallels nonetheless do exist between the two cases. In the climate produced by both the democratic transition and a related suite of ceasefires, two things have occurred: there has been a huge expansion of capitalist intervention into the economy, which has profoundly altered the landscape defined by the previous status quo, while at the same time there has been a significant increase in the level of street level civil society organizing. Woods (2011) has commented extensively on the former, pointing out the ways in which these new conditions have allowed for particularly aggressive forms of economic expansion into areas that were previously unsuitable for capitalist development due to ethnic insurgencies. Ceasefires have allowed for the expansion of state control of territory, which has been accompanied by large-scale investments on the part of extraction and plantation industries. As for the latter, there has been a simultaneous growth of community organizing and a proliferation of civil society networks, as people experiment with new opportunities for renegotiating the terms of their citizenship (Jung 2008). South suggests that what is at work here is an instance of 'democracy from below' and that what is being challenged is not just the state, but also older oppositional organs, such as armed ethnic organizations and the political parties associated with them, that have traditionally spoken for their ethnic kin (2007). Certain monopolies of discourse and identity are being disrupted as pan-Karen ethnic unity gets questioned from the inside (Boutry 2016).

What is happening here, is not necessarily that people are shedding their ethnic identities, but rather that they are conceiving and mobilizing those identities in ways that were not previously available or imagined. I would argue that when individual Karen from Kamoethway make a claim to an indigenous identity, they are mobilizing their *Karenness* in a

fashion that would have made no sense a decade ago. What has changed is that due to the lifting of restrictions upon associating both within and beyond the nation's borders people are now able to make appeals for recognition of rights beyond the confines of their ethnic enclaves. Additionally, within a climate of increased international recognition of indigenous cultural rights, the framing of ethnic identity as an *indigenous* ethnic identity potentially provides a degree of leverage inaccessible to those who are merely marked as one ethnicity among many, each *belonging* to a particular multi-ethnic nation-state. There is the possibility in becoming indigenous of gaining international recognition. But does indigeneity travel everywhere with equal salience? In the next section, I will be looking at the concept of indigenous peoples as it has been apprehended and implemented throughout Southeast Asia, in order to better understand why it has appeared in Myanmar at this time and what sort of work people there might hope to do with it.

### **Finding Indigeneity in Southeast Asia**

An important edited volume entitled *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*, published in 2007 is prefaced with the statement that “issues of ethnicity and ethnic identity are of global concern” (Gravers 2007a). What is significant about this is that, given the volume's opening concerns and the various contributors' attention to the complexities of Burmese ethnic politics at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, is that there is no prominent mention of indigenous peoples in the book. The word 'indigenous' is not listed in the volume's index. That is, a decade ago it was entirely plausible to produce a scholarly collection examining how ethnic minorities assert identity and contest power in Myanmar, without feeling the need to make room for an engagement with the concept of indigeneity. I believe this was so, not due to any

sort of elision on the part of the scholars involved, but due to the fact that this concept had yet to be visibly mobilized on-the-ground in Myanmar. It is my contention that were such a volume to be produced today, or in a decade henceforth, such an omission would be impossible, or understood as deliberate. For what has changed in the past 10 years, is that indigeneity as a valent, invigorated social category has been imported into Myanmar from the within the surrounding region. What remains to be seen is just how well this importation takes hold. In order to gain some predictive purchase here it is worth taking a look at how *indigenous*, both as a marker and as spring-board for action, has fared elsewhere in the region.

To begin with, within Southeast Asia only the governments of Cambodia and the Philippines recognize indigenous peoples as existing within their counties (Baird 2016). Looking at Cambodia, a case can be seen where organs of the international community, in their capacity as state building agents in the 1990s, encouraged the adoption of policies recognizing indigenous peoples in Cambodia. Thus the Cambodian state has had to reluctantly contend with the category of 'indigenous' and devise a legal framework within which to situate it (Keating 2016, Padwe 2013). In the Philippines, marginalized ethnic communities have been granted some room for maneuver under the terms of the 1997 Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, which Casumbal-Salazar characterizes as providing indigenous peoples – defined in terms of "(t)erritoriality, resistance to colonization, and refusal of non-indigenous political, cultural, religious, social, and economic practices" (2015:79) -- a legal framework from within which to challenge other actors. While such state recognition of the ontological presence of indigenous populations by no means guarantees the negation of asymmetrical outcomes in contestations

over lands, resources, or rights, it does provide at least the possibility of political leverage, that might not be there otherwise.

Other states in the region have been openly hostile to the idea that they have, within their borders, 'indigenous peoples'. The official stance of these governments is that all of the ethnic groups within their borders have equal ancestral claims to citizenship, i.e. they are all 'original peoples' or 'sons of the soil'. In Indonesia, for instance, national ideology calls for a flattening of ethnic identity in the name of national belonging; everyone is entitled to become a normal, model citizen (Li 2000). The notable exception to this regional trend is Thailand, which has a long history of perceiving its upland ethnic minority populations as 'other' and outside the bounds of *Thainess*, making it very difficult for members of these communities to become legal citizens, let alone undertake outward acts of resistance (Baird *et al* 2016). In theory though, this is not a permanent status; assimilation is promoted by the Thai state, meaning that one can become Thai by properly adopting Thai ways and casting off one's previous ethnic skin (Pinkaw 2001). This has led to a situation where members of the 'hill tribes' attempt to gain access to citizenship and legal recognition by proving their fealty to the Thai monarchy (Morton 2017). This is in contrast to Laos, where all 46 of the nation's ethnic groups are recognized as belonging equally to the nation. Officially, in Laos, one does not have to become a member of the majority lowland Lao ethnicity in order to be recognized by the state, as in the Thai case, nor are ethnic differences expected to be completely subsumed by a meta, non-ethnic sense of national sameness, as with the Indonesian case, but rather the nation is imagined as a multiethnic polity, with citizenship inhering to all within the country's borders. In this case,

inclusion by the state sets the terms for political and social contestation, allowing limited room for the alternative of articulating struggles from an indigenous positioning (Baird 2015).

Myanmar is similar to its neighbors in that the state disavows the idea of indigenous peoples existing within its borders. Instead, like Laos, the problem of ethnic diversity and political belonging is addressed by meticulous incorporation. The geo-body of the nation (Thongchai 1994) officially includes a rather astonishing 135 distinct *taing yin thar*, translated as 'sons of the geographical division'. *Taing yin thar* are defined as cultural groups who were present in Burma before the process of annexation by the British began in 1823. In English this term is usually glossed as 'ethnic nationalities' or 'national races' (Thawngmung 2010, Thawngmung 2016), and is often qualified by the possessive 'our' when expressed by government officials. Thus, one might hear or see a statement such as, "the government will work in good faith during the peace and reconciliation process with *our ethnic nationalities*". The national races paternalistically belong, by token of a shared pre-colonial history, to a nation, at the center of which -- both geographically and symbolically -- stand the majority Burmans (Boutry 2016). The thoroughness of the Myanmar state's ethnic classification framework, with its mania for difference and inclusion, has, until recently, worked to suppress claims based on indigeneity.

The point of this brief survey, has been not to discover some common, objective measure for understanding what being indigenous means in Southeast Asia, but rather to show just how precarious a hold this concept has within the imaginations of the region's leaders. It has been granted only limited official salience, if any at all. And yet, despite this, the invocation of indigenous identity has only grown more frequent throughout the region over the past few

decades, regardless of whether or not indigeneity has been granted any space within any particular state's legal parameters. Why is this the case? Why this tenuous persistence?

A tentative answer can be provided by looking at the sorts of things people 'do' with indigeneity. Li (2000) has documented how people on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia successfully articulated an indigenous identity in their fight to stop an unwanted development project. When the inhabitants of the area surrounding Lake Lindu found out that the government was planning on building a dam within their customary territory they began to organize against it. In their organizing efforts they found allies, in regional environmental NGOs and activists associated with various social movements, who were able to help them better vocalize their opposition to the hydro-electric project. Li argues that a key component of this community's eventually successful struggle, was that they framed themselves as indigenous. With help from sympathetic NGOs, environmental activists, and attentive media, the people of Lindu were able to advertise their relationship to the lands slated to be affected by the dam, as a unique relationship, bound-up with a heritage of ancestral belonging. They were able to show that they were not simply peasants in the way of development, but rather were sophisticated practitioners of indigenous knowledge with a unique attachment to the land. Rather than make an appeal to the government as undifferentiated peasants, unfortunately placed in the path of necessary progress, the people of Lindu made the assertion they belonged to a particular place and they were best positioned to define the future of that place. What is remarkable about this, is that, as Li notes, "the efficacy of framing" themselves as "indigenous people was not guaranteed" (2000: 17). As mentioned above, the Indonesian government recognizes no indigenous communities within its domain, so the target of the Lindu's claims

was not the state *per se* but rather a wider national civil society audience, as well as, importantly, an international one. By invoking a form of cultural citizenship based on a category denied local relevance, the organizers of the Lindu struggle were wagering on significant recognition from elsewhere; in a sense they were simultaneously making an appeal to already established global indigenous space, even as they worked to make a contribution to that space. That their struggle was also explicitly an environmental one, only worked to more widely broadcast the Lindu's appeal, for the combination of indigenous politics with environmental politics is a potent one (Tsing 2007), even if is a combination that also come with risks (Dove 2006, Li 2000). I will be examining the potency, and risks, of this combination in the next section, by returning to a discussion of the Kamoethway Karen and their politics of indigenous conservation.

### **The Parameters of Indigenous Space**

In an elegantly argued volume imagining the possible futures for indigenous peoples around the world Sissons (2005) argues that only peoples inhabiting places that have suffered the consequences of protracted 'settler colonialism' should properly be called indigenous. Sissons, of course, has in mind places such as New Zealand, Australia, and the Americas; these are the places where the demographic triumph of European expansion are thought to have uniquely shaped the experiences of subjugated peoples. In clarifying the distinction he is trying to make, Sissons discusses how the struggles of 'tribal' peoples in the 'Third World' emerge from contexts of marginalization, where more powerful ethnic groups oppress less powerful ones, but that both of these groups are in a generic sense 'indigenous'. He goes on to suggest that "(i)ndigeneity in such contexts is of little or no value as a marker of cultural or political

distinctiveness” (2005: 16). It would seem that Sissons is more or less in agreement with the rulers of most of Southeast Asia: there are no indigenous peoples here. The danger here, as I see it, is that in shrinking the parameters of indigenous belonging, one is also placing limits on indigenous futures. An overly strict taxonomy sees only differences where important similarities persist. In a certain sense, what Sissons is attempting to do is to put the genie back in the bottle; it is as if the discursive currency of indigeneity has travelled too widely and it must be saved from itself. If we want to more generously imagine indigenous futures, as Sissons has eloquently done for the *first peoples* of New Zealand and elsewhere, then time is better spent not in deciding who is or who is not indigenous, but rather in rather understanding why and under what circumstances people *decide* to become indigenous (Hodgson 2002, Theriault 2011).

In the past decade circumstances for the Karen of Kamoethway have changed tremendously. The valley in which they live, which for decades had been, at least in part, administered by the armed KNU, and therefore beyond the full control of the central government, is now jointly administered under a ceasefire agreement. Previously, due to conditions of conflict, the Kamoethway Valley was beyond the reach of any sort of systematic, intrusive economic development. There were times when armed conflict violently intruded upon their lives, such as in 1997 when government forces gained control of part of the valley (Thaung 2015), bringing with it traumatic effects. On such occasions people sometimes chose to go into hiding in the forest or to flee across the border into Thailand. But there were also considerable periods of time where these communities were able to pursue their livelihoods in relative calm. Living within the bounds of an ethno-territory provided a level of cultural



security, not found in spaces controlled by the state. It could be that under such conditions, there was no need for the Karen of Kamoethway to assert an indigenous identity: they were Karen in a Karen world. While there are indications that, during past decades, some within the wider Karen movement sought out international recognition as indigenous peoples (Reeves 1992, Merlan 2009, Sissons 2005), it is not clear to what degree, if at all, these calls reflected any sort of broad consensus indigenous identity on the part of the Karen. It is likely that these efforts were attempts to solicit solidarity for the Karen's ethno-nationalist project from representatives of the broader global indigenous movement. This iteration of indigenous positioning was a more generic one, based on the notion of the Karen as the first occupants of what is now Myanmar; they were prior to the Burmans, and therefore *more* indigenous (Rajah 2002).

It is my contention that what can be seen with the Karen of Kamoethway, and Karen elsewhere in Myanmar, is entirely different iteration of indigeneity. This time the Karen are not making a claim to indigeneity based so much on ethnic belonging, and associated ethno-territorial claims, as on environmental belonging. I would like to suggest three reasons that a claim based on this form of indigenous belonging is being made now, and not previously. Firstly, with the implementation of ceasefire agreements, the KNU and other Karen armed groups have been territorially and politically fragmented. There is no contiguous Karen geographical space where one's ethnic rights can be guaranteed, nor is there the same level of enthusiasm for the ethno-nationalist project among Karen communities as previously existed (Thawngmung 2010). Additionally, as the terms of ethnic citizenship shift, groups thought to have traditionally safeguarded Karen interests have been implicated in deals with predatory

extractive interests (Anon. 2015, Thawngmung 2010, Woods 2011). South of the Kamoethway Valley, for instance, Karen villagers fighting the expansion of a Thai owned mining project found that the locally stationed Karen National Liberation Army (KNLU) brigade was profiting from a relationship with the mining company. When villagers blockaded a mine access road, the KNLU arrived to remove the blockade, signaling that intra-ethnic solidarity had its limits. Secondly, the conditions produced by the ceasefire regime have changed the territorial mosaic of the Tanintharyi region, allowing for a steady increase in logging, plantation, and mining activities in the area, each of which encroach upon lands claimed by Karen villagers. A CSO report detailing the mine expansion mentioned above was entitled, *“We Used to Fear Bullets, Now We Fear Bulldozers”*, indicating the way many local Karen experience these changes (Anon. 2015). If the Karen are becoming environmentalists, it is because they have little choice. Their inherited landscape is being converted into a patchwork of extra-locally managed economic resources, amounting to an imposed scarcity. When the Karen assert that they can “manage their own resources” they are proposing a different way of understanding resources. When they call upon an indigenous identity, they are tapping into the popular perception of indigenous people’s as ‘natural’ or untutored conservationists. While this perception has been assailed as false or overly simplifying, from corners both inside outside the academy, it remains a powerful mobilizing tool (Dove 2006). As Tsing puts it “those communities that have placed their hopes in the international indigenous label do so because their land and resources are threatened by corporate and state expansion” (2007: 36).

A final reason the Karen of Kamoethway are making a distinctly indigenous claim at this time is because, simply, the indigenous tool-kit has arrived in southern Myanmar. A decade

ago, due to both political and geographical isolation, these swidden farmers, day-laborers, and sometimes insurgents were unlikely to have recourse to debates surrounding the benefits and merits indigeneity. Under more recent conditions, it is not just new forms of capital that move across the landscape, but also new ideas. With the easing of cross border travel there has been an increasing cross-pollination of ideas as NGO workers, migrant laborers, former insurgents, and members of civil society groups move back and forth across the frontier with Thailand, where discourses of indigeneity have been circulating with increasing frequency over the past several decades (Morton 2017). While visiting Kamoethway, I was told that villagers were inspired to initiate their conservation project after participating in a community meeting, sponsored by a local CSO, where a Karen activist from Thailand spoke about his community's efforts to defend their forests from enclosure by the Thai department of forestry. The idea that circulated at this meeting was that local people could preemptively seek to conserve areas of forest, based on indigenous forest knowledge. The idea was germane not so much because it originated with other Karen, but more so because it was born of experiences the Karen of Kamoethway could relate to. They recognized themselves in the idea of indigenous protectors of the land.

There is a risk here, heavily commented upon (Dove 2006, Li 2000), that in taking up the mantle of indigenous conservationism the Karen are entering a narrative over which they have little or no control. The idea is that they will be backed into a 'primitivist' corner (Kuper 2003), forced to inhabit the tribal slot (Li 2000), glossed as naively anti-development (Kirsch 2007), legally framed in such a way that will accelerate their dispossession (Goodale 2016), or put in the position of managing an unwieldy authenticity (Theriault 2011). These are all warranted

cautions that need to be taken seriously, but they can also distract us from the fact that, due to numerous forms of encroachment upon their inherited landscape, the Kamoethway Karen *already* exist in a heightened state of risk, and that in becoming indigenous they may see expanded parameters for action, which might outweigh in scope the dangers posed by the numerous pitfalls awaiting indigenous actors in the contemporary world. While the door to critique of indigenous identity, should it be generous and in good faith, is best left open, we must, as Clifford warns, be wary of a critique that “leaves little room for contingent articulations or contradictory trends” that “can fall into a complacent tough mindedness that sees everything as an effect of systemic power” (2013:30). Commenting on the phenomenon of rural people taking up environmental identities, and the academic worries it generates, Li reminds us that, “(c)omplexity, collaboration, and creative cultural engagement in both local and global arenas, rather than simple deceit, imposition, or reactive opportunism, best describe these processes and relationships” (Li 2000: 23).

### **Indigeneity and *Communitas***

In this chapter my goal has been to provide an overview of the contemporary socio-political context necessary for understanding why a particular group of rural farmers in Southern Myanmar have chosen to position themselves as indigenous. Furthermore, my intention has not been to identify the Karen of Kamoethway as indigenous by any sort of disembodied objective criteria based on some-or-the-other essential characteristic, nor to define them as a readily identifiable bounded entity, but rather to understand what it is that indigeneity does for them. In attempting to come to terms with what exactly it is that these forest-dwelling villagers are doing as they move to assert their interests, I have found the

conceptual tools provided by the notion of indigenous space to be helpful. Michael Hathaway suggests that such a notion “views indigeneity not as teleological (unfolding towards a predetermined goal) but as a process of emergence shaped by social and historical contingency” and that the question of “indigenous space asks how and why indigeneity becomes relevant or even possible, and how it changes over time in particular places” (2013:118). Viewing social phenomenon from this perspective can also help us “avoid both romantic celebration and knowing critique” (Clifford 2013). We are no longer as inclined to provide a definitive answer about *what* a particular group of people *are*, as we are encouraged to ask an inquisitive *why* a community of actors are pursuing a particular course of *action* and *who* they are acting in concert with.

The space that is opened up here has the potential to be at once territorial, temporal, relational, and discursive. A community can thus be deeply rooted to a particular place, obligated by inheritance to sustain that place overtime, and yet in the same moment be afforded the opportunity of forming new associations with close or distant others who have been shaped by similar, and yet diverse, worldmaking experiences; ideas held in common help to open up possible futures. Paradoxically the Karen’s invocation of indigeneity, initiated in defense of the local, and seemingly parochial in scope, has the effect of internationalizing their identity; they join a global movement already in motion.

Finally, I would like to suggest one more way that this process of becoming indigenous as part of a global articulation might be usefully imagined. Working to understand the ways in which post-colonial actors across Africa and Asia worked to build and sustain an alternative, anti-colonial internationalist sense of solidarity in the years following WWII, historian

Christopher Lee (2010) takes up, extends, and elaborates the notion of *communitas*, as elaborated by Victor Turner (1969), to show how these actors operated outside of established channels and categories in a time of political upheaval. Lee notes several important features characterizing *communitas* that suggest its appropriateness for such an endeavor. First, *communitas* is related to but distinct from community; it is not limited to a particular geographic location, but rather defined by a sense of “social relatedness” from which emanates a “community of feeling”. Second, in its association with liminality, *communitas* is antistructural in character. It is not already complete or in stasis, as one might picture a community, but rather transitory, “an interval moment of creative possibility and innovation” (Lee 2010:31). Not satisfied to operate within current constraints of action, those comprising *communitas* work towards resolution on other terms. Looking towards the future, post-colonial politicians attempted to devise a way forward that would map a path outside the existing framework of the Cold War hardening. “Embracing *communitas* as a political phenomenon at this level asks what it takes to be a viable community international in scope” (Lee 2010:32).

It seems to me that the international movement of indigenous peoples, in the opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can also be understood as a form of *communitas*. In his original formulation Turner gives examples of *communitas* ranging from religious brotherhoods to medieval millenarian movements to “formerly tribal societies ... brought under alien overlordship of complex, industrial societies” (1969:111). Despite the faintly dusty and dated language, I would guess that many contemporary indigenous peoples would recognize themselves in the last example, and that one of the points of global mutual recognition

amongst indigenous populations is to contend with that 'overlordship' in terms devised not at the lord's table. If indigenous peoples can be thought of as enduring a sort of liminality, I would suggest that the hope of indigenous space is that it is that within this space the terms of resolution will be worked out. Instead of a resolution in which full assimilation into the structure of contemporary capitalist society is a forgone conclusion, the *communitas* of indigenous space might be seen as extending and prolonging multiple and diverse, though not necessarily isolated or disconnected, outsides.

## Final Thoughts: Intersecting Lines and Imagined Spaces

In exploring how the Karen inhabitants of Southern Myanmar's Kamoethway Valley have engaged with indigeneity during the process of making a concerted claim to a particular place based upon principles of proper ecological stewardship, I have relied heavily on the notion of the local. In doing so, I have tried to attend to the ways in which local qualities emerge from long term engagement with specific environments and how those engagements end up shaping how people interact with the broader world. In invoking the local it is almost inevitable that the specter of the global should make an appearance, hence my discussion of the global conservation movement. In presenting these two terms an oppositional dyad also, almost effortlessly, comes into view. Tim Ingold suggests that one way of conceptualizing this opposition in terms of the environment is through the heuristic of globes and spheres (2000: 209-218). Simply put, the view of the world as a globe, which developed as part of the European Enlightenment, places humans as external to an environment that "consists of a preformed surface *waiting to be occupied*" (214, italics in the original). This is a colonial view, which imagines humans as spreading outward, intervening in environments that remain alien to them. Here "life appears to be lived upon the outer surface of the world rather than from an experiential centre within it" (215). On the other hand, with a spherical view of the world, the world's inhabitants are located inside the environment; they are enmeshed with their surroundings which radiate outward from a perceiving center. In this view, people participate in the ongoing creation of their environments, rather than intervene in processes from which they are apart. Spheres are inhabited, not occupied.



It is important to note that, as Ingold does, that these two positions are not mutually exclusive. This is not a case of parallel lines, forever twinned and never intersecting. It could be said that “both perspectives are caught up in the dialectical interplay between engagement and detachment, between human beings’ involvement in the world and their separation from it” (Ingold 2000:216). It is in this spirit, of opposed and intersecting lines, that I have attempted to portray the Karen’s articulation of conservation ethics and praxis. Their approach has been at once local and global. In running up against global conservation’s reach, a generative tension has produced new local ways of conceiving the environment. What this suggests is that there is a tension between conservation and rural, subsistence based peoples, but that that tension retains the possibility of being a creative one (Kopnina 2012). It is a reminder that the very definition of conservation itself is not a settled one and one not fully owned by the scientific establishment (Dove 2006).

Lastly, if the point of this study is has been, in part, to understand not only how the political ecology of Southern Myanmar’s forests has affected the lives of the a particular population of villagers, but also how those villagers, endowed with their own ideas about the world, garnered from their experiences within it, continue to shape the political ecology of Southern Myanmar, it has also been my intention to draw attention to the gravity of those villagers’ predicament. And, while there is no guarantee that positioning themselves as either capable conservationists or indigenous place makers, these two positions seem to offer a degree of political leverage that other positions no longer hold. This gambit has not been made lightly, but is a rather a serious move in game with serious consequences. To borrow a poignant observation from Sparke (2007), the Karen of Kamoethway are staring dispossession

in the face. The lands which their ancestors have inhabited for centuries are threatened on several fronts by processes of enclosure and erasure that left unchecked will severely constrain their future courses of action. The ecologically complex world of which they have been a part, stands either to be converted into a terrain impoverished by monoculture's austere aesthetic, dissected in order to obtain the mineral worlds upon which it stands, or cordoned off as an example of pristine nature. Sparke suggests that as we chart geographies of dispossession, "we also have a responsibility to represent geographies of repossession" (2007: 347), those spaces created in defiance of economic and state imperatives that would include us all in zones of sacrifice. It is in with that notion in mind that I have presented the case of the Karen of Kamoethway's modest conservation project. As a preemptive act, these villagers are not so much repossessing their lands, as they are repossessing their future; they are intervening in the narrative that has been created for them. Such a project can also be understood as a physical instance of indigenous space making. It can be pinned on a map: this place here is indigenous. While such territorial proclamation is important and necessary, it is also only part of the story. Perhaps, of greater importance is the *idea* of this particular place. For, it seems to me that the central conceptual value of indigenous space is what it can do for the imagination. It is a place where one can creatively imagine futures, because it has different parameters than other spaces of belonging. It is also a good place to stand while staring down dispossession.

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