

Possessed Earth

Ownership and Power in the Salween Peace Park of Southeast
Myanmar

Tomas Cole



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Abstract

In the wake of seven decades of protracted revolution and armed conflict in Southeast Myanmar, an ensemble of indigenous peoples and transnational activists have begun formulating a radical alternative vision of how peace and conservation might be achieved in practice. Through translating and rescaling indigenous modes of possessing the earth, this ensemble is working to transform 5,000 km² of highly contested terrain in the highlands along the Salween River into a conservation zone they call the Salween Peace Park.

In this study I explore what indigenous practices and cosmologies, and the ways they are being translated and rescaled into the Salween Peace Park, might teach us about ownership, sovereignty, and politics at large.

The first half of this study focuses on the highlands along the Salween River, to explore how people residing here commonly treat their landscapes as already possessed, in the dual and entangled senses of being both occupied or haunted by spectral more-than-human presences, and controlled and owned by them. In these Possessed Landscapes human ownership of land is always ephemeral, ultimately nesting in the encompassing ownership of spectral presences (who I describe as persons). Humans can only borrow land by constantly negotiating with and propitiating its spectral owners. A corollary of these indigenous modes of possessing the earth is that these highlands were not so much anarchic as in sense of “no ruler”, but rather, power and sovereignty is nesting in the hands of the spectral owners of the earth. I describe this as an alternative mode of politics that I name Spectral Sovereignty. In the second half I take a small step back to shuttle between the residents of these highlands and networks of activists based in Chiang Mai in Thailand. Here I focus on both growing new forms of dispossession and counterinsurgency that have accompanied the cooling of armed conflict, and efforts by ensembles of indigenous peoples, activists, armed groups, and conservationists to attempt to push back and re-territorialise and re-possess the earth. I go on to explore how this ensemble is subtly translating and rescaling possessed landscapes and spectral sovereignty into land laws and conservation policy as a way to transform these former war zones into a protected area, the Salween Peace Park. I then show how, in the process of establishing this protected area, these activists are continuing the revolutionary movements to attain greater autonomy for the indigenous people residing here. I then close this thesis by exploring what is happening as the Salween Peace Park is coming into contact and being negotiated on the ground in these highlands. Here we find revolutionary politics and spectral sovereignty are becoming entwined into a form of Alter-Politics that is unsettling established notions of sovereignty and politics. However, beyond unsettling, it also gestures towards alternative ways of understanding the shifting entanglements between people, politics, spectres, and other unseen more-than-humans, and radical alternatives to conservation and armed conflict in Myanmar, and beyond.

Keywords: *Myanmar, conflict, peace, conservation, political ecology, ownership, sovereignty, indigeneity, ontology.*

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Glossary

Abbreviations:

KESAN	Karen Environmental and Social Action Network
KNU	Karen National Union
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
NCA	National Ceasefire Agreement

Terms:

<i>-Kaw</i>	The area surrounding and belonging to a particular village cluster or cluster of villages (lit. country/realm)
<i>Aw loh</i>	To eat, consume, or snatch a person's <i>k'la</i> or "soul"
Bah Hpaw	A syncretic mix of Buddhist and Animist (lit. "flower worshippers")
<i>Daw k'lu</i>	"All the tribes", i.e. all the different karenic speaking groups taken as a whole
<i>Goh lah wah</i>	White foreigner(s)
<i>Hku</i> (short tone)	Swidden patch(s)
<i>Hku</i> (falling tone)	A coolness, pertaining to peaceful relations
<i>Hpu</i>	Grandfather
<i>Hpee</i>	Grandmother
<i>Hsoo</i>	To be strong
<i>(Pgħa) htoo lee hpoe</i>	"Indigenous" in the very restrictive sense of belonging to a particular village- <i>kaw</i>
<i>K'la</i>	Soul or spirit, of which humans have seven
<i>K'mah</i> (low-short tone)	A mistake
<i>K'mah</i> (low tone)	A debt
<i>K'sah</i>	Owner
<i>Kaw k'sah</i>	The spectral owner of each villager- <i>kaw</i>

<i>Koh</i>	A hotness, pertaining to moral and social discord.
<i>Loh</i>	The dominion or resting place of the k'la of the dead
<i>Lu ta</i>	To feed or propitiate the spectres in an offering
<i>nay suh</i>	“Nature” or “all the contents of the earth that were not made by man”, immanent in all things
<i>P'doh</i>	Government official
<i>Pgha daw kho</i>	A “cut-throat person”, a monstrous outsider
<i>Pgha k'nyaw</i>	The autonym used by Sgaw Karen speakers, “humankind” in general
<i>Pgha meh ay play thweh</i>	Elders (lit. “people with sharp teeth and rough tongues”)
<i>Pgha tah</i>	Protected or prohibited forests
<i>Pya ley pya</i>	The “the four cuts” i.e. Tatmadaw’s counterinsurgency programme
<i>Ray daw</i>	To befriend, to make friends, and to create conviviality
<i>Ta taw ta loh kaw</i>	The spectral realm (lit. “the realm of that which is true”)
<i>Ta du ta htu</i>	Taboo(s)
<i>Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah</i>	The highest spectral authority, the spectral sovereign immanent in all things (see also <i>nay suh</i>)
<i>Ta mu khah</i>	A genus of spectral persons
<i>Ta Mu Ta Hku K'Ruh</i>	The Sgaw Karen term for the Salween Peace Park (Lit. “pleasant-and-cool/peace garden”)
<i>Ta nah</i>	Faith, trust, or confidence in something or someone
<i>Ta thoo ta pgho</i>	Potency, the power of creation
<i>Tatmadaw</i>	The Myanmar armed forces
<i>tha waw tha pgha</i>	Headman (lit. “old heart of the village”)
<i>Thoo hkoh</i>	Karen animism, or “Worldly People”
<i>Y'wa</i>	The great creator demiurge

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This thesis is by no means the fruit of my own labours alone, nor does it belong solely to me, even though my name is written on the front cover. Rather, it is the result of a dense web of relations.

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Hägersten, November 2020,
Tomas Cole

Opening | From Battlefields to Refuges



Thursday, 26 May 2016

Battlefields to Refuge. The Salween Peace Park in Burma's Karen State

MUTRAW DISTRICT, KAREN STATE, BURMA - *Can a battlefield be turned into an indigenous-run protected area with scores of endangered species like tiger, gibbons and wild cattle? Yes it can, according to almost 300 local leaders, ethnic soldiers and activists gathered May 23-26 for a consultation in this remote mountainous corner of Burma. They call it the Salween Peace Park, a first of its kind in the world.*

The above quote comes from the opening lines of the first press release announcing the Salween Peace Park's entrance onto the world stage. In the pages that follow I investigate how, in this "remote" (Ardenner [1984] 2012; Saxer and Andersson 2019) corner of Myanmar long riven by protracted armed conflict, indigenous practices of possessing the earth and activists' attempts to translate and rescale these practices into a protected area are becoming entangled – in ways that that are upending settled notions of sovereignty and politics. However, to get here I had to take several detours and encountered numerous dead ends along the way.

My attention was first drawn to this press release just as I was about to embark on the first phase of my PhD fieldwork, headed to upstate New York. I was to spend three months among former refugees who had been resettled to the United States by the United Nations High Council for Refugees (UNHCR) from the sprawling refugee camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border. In this way, I hoped to build on my previous research in and around one of these camps. Hundreds of thousands of people had streamed across the border in the wake of nearly seven decades of chronic armed conflict in Southeast Myanmar between the Myanmar military, or Tatmadaw, and the revolutionary armed group, the Karen National Union (KNU), who seek greater

autonomy for the indigenous peoples of this area, the Karen.¹ By some counts, this armed conflict is one of the world's longest ongoing civil wars (e.g. South 2011). While a bilateral ceasefire was brokered between the Tatmadaw and the KNU in 2012, by the time I began my fieldwork in 2016, I found both the resulting peace process and the scholarly debate surrounding it to have become somewhat stagnated, doggedly focusing on inter-ethnic grievances and cross-border ties. As such, I hoped to look awry at this revolution, and the resulting conflict, by conducting a multi-sited study on how translocal entanglements and remittance flows between burgeoning diaspora groups and communities back in Southeast Myanmar play into political landscapes in these (former) warzones. However, the questions posed by this press release, and the promises of radically different perspectives on peace, conservation, and politics the Salween Peace Park presaged, continued to haunt me as I stepped out into the field.

Five months later, I set out on the second phase of my fieldwork, in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands. Here I quickly learnt that people were far less preoccupied with their translocal entanglements with kin and kith abroad than they were with the ever more present threats of dispossession by transnational organisations and the Tatmadaw. Differing, overlapping and conflicting perspectives on and claims over how the earth was and could be owned and controlled lay at the very heart of this continuing conflict.

I continually found that the most pertinent questions on people's lips pertained to how they might resolve growing conflicts over the land they lived on and sustained themselves with. As a report from Forest Trends attests, "land and resource ownership and governance decentralisation within federal structures anchor the central demands of ethnic civil society stakeholders and ethnic armed organizations" (Woods 2018). Thus, I tentatively made contact and struck up conversation with the indigenous and ecological activists behind the press release for this Salween Peace Park to learn more about how they approached issues of these overlapping and conflicting claims on and rights to land in Southeast Myanmar.

¹ This is the exonym for these peoples. The autonym in the local dialect of Sgaw Karen is *pga k'nyaw*, which translates to "humans/humankind".

From these ongoing conversations I began to grasp how, in partnership with both local communities and the KNU, the activists behind the Salween Peace Park intended to demonstrate one way in which both peace and federalism might be achieved in practice by transforming 5,000 km² (around the size of the nation of Brunei, or twice as large as Luxembourg, see the map below) of highly contested terrain in Southeast Myanmar into an indigenous-run conservation zone: a place for “all living things sharing peace”, as the first flyer of the Salween Peace Park proclaimed. They aimed to achieve these goals by translating and rescaling indigenous practices and modes of dwelling into both government and conservation policy. In indigenous practices along the Salween River the earth is often treated as possessed in both entangled senses, as occupied or haunted by unseen more-than-human presences and owned by them. As such, all land is, ultimately, borrowed by humans from its spectral owners, to be returned at a later date. Thus, these indigenous practices of living together peacefully, with human and more-than-humans alike, can be seen as situated and radically alternate regimes of ownership and sovereignty. And, in rescaling and translating these practices into policy, the Salween Peace Park is directed towards the re-territorialisation and re-possession of this contested terrain.

It is from these two entangled and contested senses of *possessed* that this thesis draws its title. Much like these activists, throughout I attempt to hold in focus both the cosmological sense of the earth beneath people’s feet being already possessed, as in occupied or haunted by more-than-human beings, and the political-ecology sense of possessed as in multi-scalar conflicts over control and ownership of this earth.

Thus, the Peace Park, in combining these senses of possessed, can be seen as a highly sophisticated way of looking awry at the current political impasse in Southeast Myanmar by an ensemble of indigenous peoples and transnational activist. It gestures towards not only a radically new approach, in Myanmar at least, to securing peace and of going about conservation, but also, of continuing seven decades of struggle for indigenous autonomy. Therefore, the pages that follow are, in part, an attempt to take seriously and begin addressing the question posed in the first press release announcing the Salween Peace Park on the world stage:

Can a battlefield be turned into an indigenous-run sanctuary for both endangered species and human communities living here?

Moreover, in grappling with this question, throughout this thesis I explore:
What might indigenous modes of possessing the earth, and activists' attempts to translate and rescale these into a Peace Park, teach us about sovereignty and politics more generally?



To begin addressing these questions, I start by exploring how the ongoing armed conflict and ideas and practices underpinning the Salween Peace Park were unfolding in one particular community slated to become part of this indigenous-run sanctuary. Given my initial frustrated attempts at multi-sited fieldwork – which as Ghassan Hage (2005) has shown, are often both exhausting and militate against the generation of thick ethnography – and given the physical restraints imposed on my movement by the monsoon season and continued armed conflict, it ended up making most sense to stick to one area in the highlands along the Salween river.

Thus, together with the activists we settled on one village to act as a base for my fieldwork, where many of the practices this indigenous-run protected area draws on were “still strong”, as Doh K’Oh, one of the activists, put it. As such, I spent nearly eight months (from January to September 2017) in and around the village I call Ta K’Thwee Duh, or Misty Village. At 1200 meters above sea level, sits high atop the Bu Thoe ridge (marked by the dotted line in Figure 0.1 below), which towers over the Salween River in the east (200 meters over sea-level), close to a KNU built road (that I will discuss in more detail in chapter three).

While nestled in a (former) war zone, which until relatively recently the Tatmadaw referred to as an insurgent “black zone” and “free fire zone” (M. Smith 1999; KHRG 2009), much of the heavy fighting had passed around this ridge. Moreover, all the residents of Ta K’Thwee Duh and other villages across this ridge top were subsistence farmers, the vast majority sustaining themselves and their families through swidden cultivation. As such, the highlands along the Salween River were far from uniformly high, themselves divided into valleys and hills. As we shall see,

particularly in chapter three, these topographic differences had significant effects on the political landscape of the Salween Peace Park. Capital from development and infrastructural projects, be they KNU or NGO led, tended to “hop over” the Bu Thoe ridge and remain in the regional centres that are often found at lower elevations.

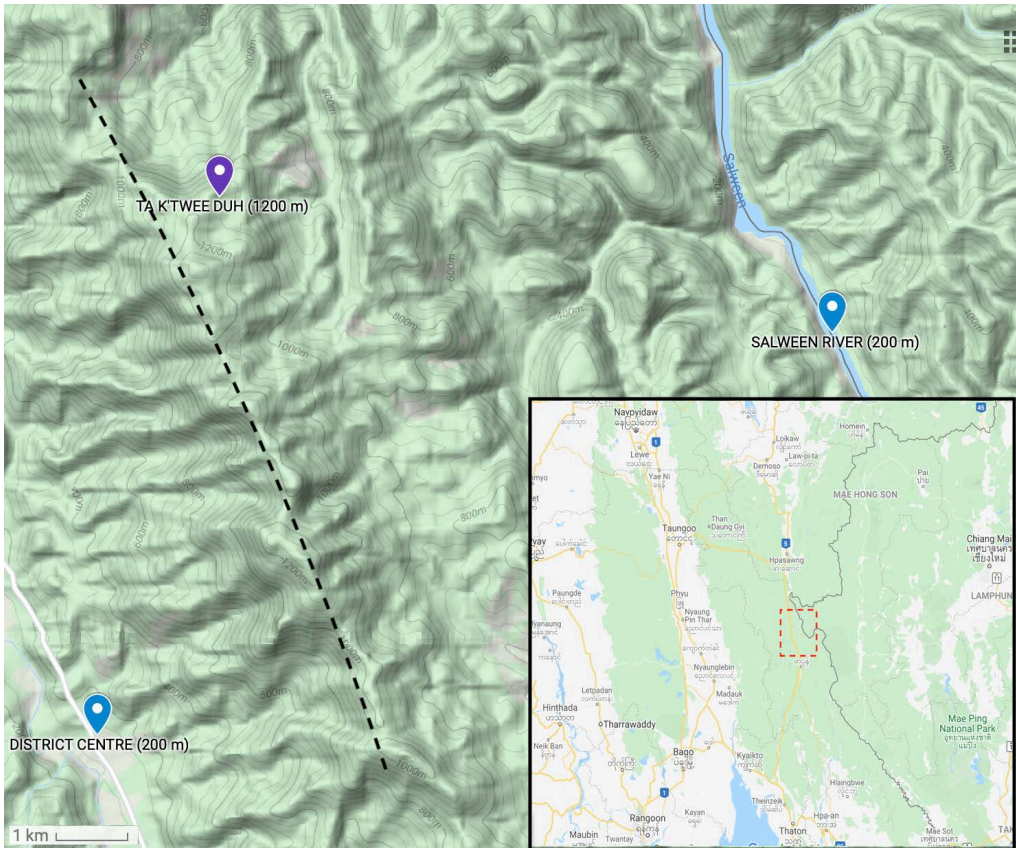


Figure 01: Topographical map of the Salween highlands (adapted from Google Maps)

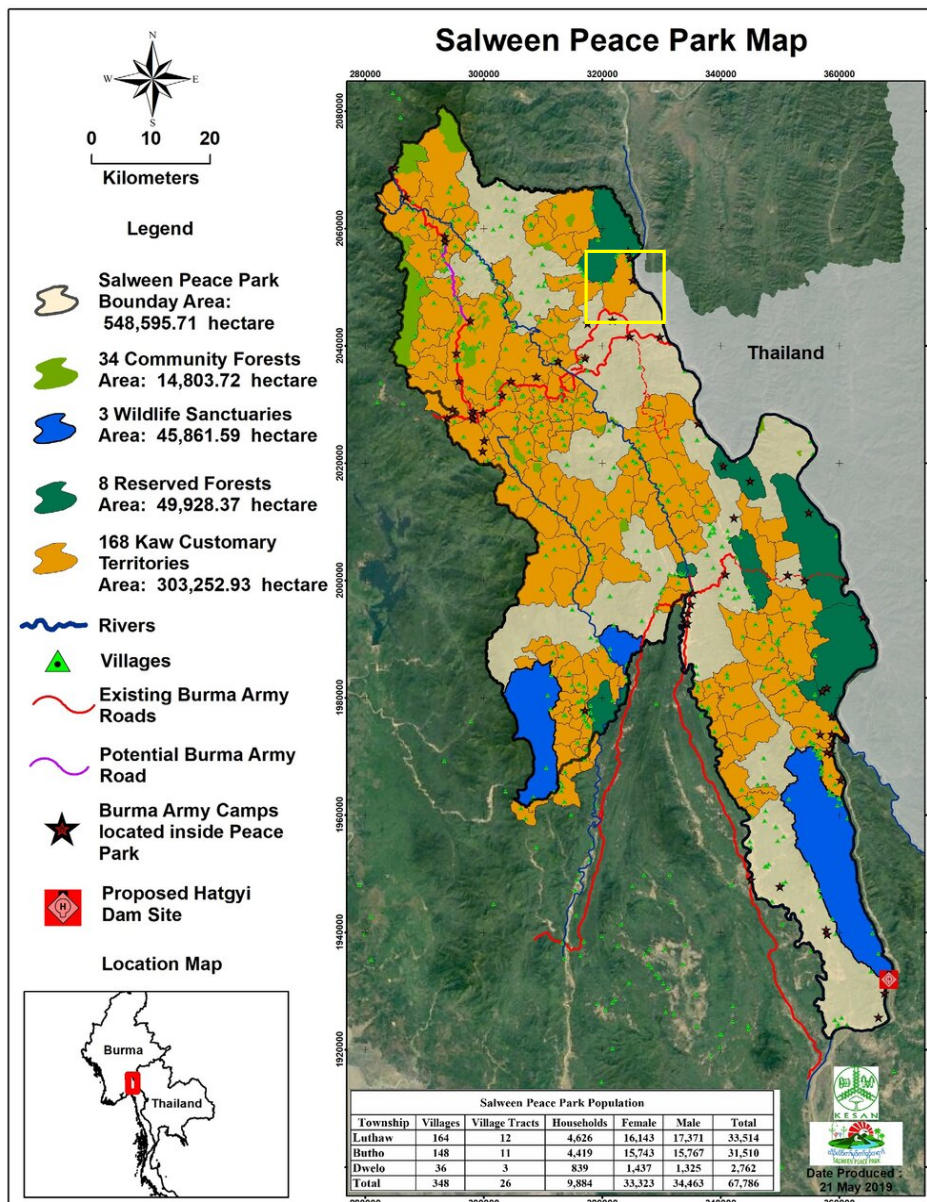


Figure 02: Map of the Salween Peace Park, with field research area marked by the yellow square, with Ta K'Thwee Duh in the centre (map courtesy of KESAN)

The vantage point of this village allowed me to begin exploring vexed, overlapping, and highly indeterminate perspectives on owning earth in a region that was slowly

becoming incorporated into the Salween Peace Park. In going about this exploration, I found that histories were lively. That is to say, they were highly labile, constantly being reworked to meet pressing exigencies. Moreover, in their daily lives people regularly treated the earth as possessed in the dual and entangled sense of being occupied or haunted, and being owned by unseen presences or persons, who acted as the spectral sovereigns over the earth. In this manner, as detailed below, I attempted to keep in focus both of these senses of possessed, as cosmological and political. This fieldwork forms the basis for the first part of this thesis, namely chapters one to three, entitled *Possession*.

I then combined this more classic anthropological fieldwork with my ongoing conversations with central figures from within indigenous ecological activist groups, mostly based in Chiang Mai in Thailand, along with conversations with local academics and military figures. In this way, I attempted to trace out how these activists were drawing on indigenous practices and translating and rescaling them in order to bring them to bear not only on KNU policies and those of their international donors such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF),² but also their own political cosmologies. In this manner, I found that they laboured to both compose the Peace Park and simultaneously re-possess and re-territorialise these highly contested lands in the process. Due to visa constraints I periodically shifted back and forth within the nexus between the highlands along the Salween River and Chiang Mai, where these activists were based. This allowed me to explore how both the ideas and practices of the Peace Park were negotiated with the KNU and Myanmar state and their legal systems, as well as how they were in turn rescaled and re-negotiated on the ground where this park was to be implemented. This shifting back and forth within this nexus forms the basis of the second part of this thesis, namely chapters four to six, entitled *Dispossession/Re-Possession*.

Thus, in this thesis I follow how the process of establishing the Salween Peace Park as a space for “all living things sharing peace” sheds light on alternative modes of ownership and sovereignty, and how, in the face of protracted conflict and a stymied

² Note that, as I show in chapter five, activists working along the Salween River often talked of “jumping over” the Myanmar state and Tatmadaw, to work directly with international actors, at least while conflict continues.

peace process in the specific case of Southeast Myanmar, these are being translated and rescaled into radically new ways of carrying out both conservation and revolution. Moreover, in focusing on the politics of possession, I follow the ways that both struggles for autonomy and efforts to protect biodiversity are becoming entangled, and how these are constantly being negotiated on the ground. To this end I explore what indigenous practices and their translation and rescaling into a Peace Park might teach us about politics and sovereignty.

In this opening chapter I begin by briefly laying out the three overarching themes that run throughout this thesis: Lively Histories in Contact Zones; Spectral Presences/Persons in Possessed Landscapes; and Translating and Rescaling Indigenous Practices as Alter-Politics. After laying out these themes I situate this thesis in an abbreviated history of chronic conflict in highland Southeast Myanmar. From here I discuss the ways I negotiated conducting fieldwork in these former war zones with indigenous peoples, armed groups, activists, and conservationists. I discuss these negotiations in terms of being “caught” or “affected” (Favret-Saada 1980; 1990; 2015) to highlight the impossibility of remaining outside the nexus of revolution and counterinsurgency when researching it, but also how being affected allows one to closer study relations of intimacy (Aretxaga 2012; Herzfeld 2004; Shah 2013). Moreover, I show how, following a growing trend of “ethnographic theory” rather than simply interpreting ethnography into abstract philosophical theory, I elevate ethnography to the position of theory in its own right (Da Col and Graeber 2011; Nader 2011; see also, Viveiros de Castro 2003). I then move on to address how I approached working with people who often treat their landscapes as populated and possessed by unseen more-than-humans such as the *kaw k’sah* or spectral owners/masters of the earth. Yet, in going about this, I attempt to avoid flattening or silencing their own indeterminacy and doubts about the veracity of these practices. In paying attention to everyday life, I show how people often seemed less enamoured (at least far less than most anthropologists) with questions pertaining to whether such more-than-humans really existed, instead being attentive to the effect they had on their day-to-day lives and how they could respond and negotiate with these effects. This chapter concludes with a brief overview of the coming chapters.

Perspectives and Positions

A series of overarching perspectives and positions run through the course of thesis, guiding both the ethnography and the analysis. While I divide these into three separate streams in this section for the sake of clarity, they are intricately intertwined.

Lively Histories in Contact Zones

A great deal of exemplary and path-breaking work has been carried out over the years in highland areas of Southeast Asia such as those along the Salween River. In this growing body of work, these upland spaces have been grasped variously as borderlands, border-worlds, non-state-spaces, and (capitalist) frontiers (e.g. South 2008; Winichakul 1994; Li 2014a; Sadan 2013; Scott 2009). In this thesis I build on and attempt to nuance this work by bringing it into more sustained dialogue with the notion of “Contact Zones”. Thus, beginning in chapter one, I ethnographically examine both historical and day-to-day encounters along the Salween, and how these encounters have shaped and continue to shape these upland landscapes. In drawing on the work of Mary Louise Pratt (1991; 2008) and James Clifford (1997) I explore how these highlands are sites not only of domination but also of continuing relations, shot through with improvisation, negotiation and co-option. These are ongoing “contact histories” and “stories of struggle” that are disruptive, where power imbalances are not resolved but endure into the future (Clifford 1997, 193). In this way histories and other tales are never quite settled nor monolithic, but rather, ongoing, indeterminate, and flexible.

This focus on contact, improvisation, and negotiations picks a path between common binaries, between grasping such spaces at the interstices of states as either “zones of exemption” and abandonment (Tangseefa 2006; 2007), or as a “zone of no sovereignty” (Scott 2009, 60–61). As Pratt argues, Contact Zones are spaces of imperial encounters that involve conditions of “highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 1991, 34). Yet, the term “contact” simultaneously foregrounds the “interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by accounts of conquest and domination told from the

invader's perspective" (2008, 8). As such agency here is always "burdened", enacted within enormous restraints (Dunn and Cons 2014, 99). I pick up this theme again in chapters two and three. Moreover, as I stress in the final chapter, contact zones are sites of intimacy and dependency (e.g. Faier 2009, 12; Wilson 2019, 715).

In grasping both histories and practices as situated in contact zones, I demonstrate how they are constantly unsettled and open to renegotiation, not closed-in entities but open processes that are never finished and in the grips of "continual rebirth" (cf. Ingold 2000; 2006; 2011). Yet, in the midst of these processes of "continual rebirth" and renegotiation, I found that these tales endure, passed on down through the generations (*ibid*). Thus, in this thesis I attempt to grasp these histories and practices less as hybrid (e.g. Latour 1993) or plural (e.g. McConnachie 2014) – which would suggest the finished products of these processes – but more as "lively" histories that are on-going, unsettled and highly flexible. Drawing on Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose's work, I treat histories as neither doctrine nor orthodoxy but as "lively", responsive and generative, "an opening into a mode of encounter" (2016, 82–83). As such they are less ancient, as adaptive to the pressing exigencies of the current conjecture. This becomes central in the final chapter.

Spectral Presences/Persons in Possessed Landscapes

As we have seen, in these highlands along the Salween River I found that the residents regularly treated their landscapes as thick and crowded with more-than-human life, both biotic – from microbes to elephants – and spectral. I use the term spectral to denote something whose presence is sensed but never quite seen, understood to be just off the visual spectrum.³ I also lean in to the other connotations of spectral, to attempt to draw out a sense of these unseen more-than-humans as remaining constantly indeterminate. I explore how people could never quite be certain of their identity, only being able to intuit them by sensing their presence on their bodies, in dreams, and in the effects they have on everyday life, and by experimenting with this

³ This said, the border between the biotic and the spectral was often far from clear-cut. The suffix *-khah* denotes both hungry spectres, such as *ta mu khah*, as well as other hard-to-see things, such as insects like *htee khah*, a kind of water insect. Something similar existed in the English language in Elizabethan times where, for Shakespeare at least, "bug" was once a synonym for ghosts (MacNeal 2017, 9 ff.)

sensing. In taking this perspective I draw on the work of A. Irving Hallowell (1960) and Tim Ingold's (2000; 2011; 2016) continuation and development of his ideas. Moreover, I follow the work of both Hallowell and Ingold as well as that of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015) and Philippe Descola (2013) in arguing that these presences often come closer to being treated as persons that humans are continually engaged in social relations with.

Following this, a corollary of landscapes busy with spectral presences, or indeed persons, is that human residents of these highlands regularly talk of the land they live and farm on as ultimately "borrowed" from its "real" spectral owners. This becomes particularly evident in the case of certain spectres that are referred to as *k'sah* or "owners" said to own certain trees, lakes, the lands around a village, or even all land and waterways. I grasp this conviviality of humans, animals, plants, and spectres by describing these highlands as **Possessed Landscapes**, in the dual and entangled sense of these unseen persons both occupying and haunting the earth, as well as also controlling and owning it. As such, I show that these uplands are also a contact zone between the human and the spectral realms, where people are perpetually negotiating with hungry spectres by avoiding certain areas where they are said to reside, strictly observing *ta du ta htu* or "taboos" so as not to vex them, and by *lu ta*, or "feeding", propitiating, and entreating them. These themes become central in particular in chapter two, but continue on in chapters three and onwards.

As such, while I have demonstrated how the Myanmar government is distant and the KNU government's sovereignty along the Bu Thoe ridge is threadbare, I found it difficult to square the ethnography I had collected with common portrayals of such highland areas as pockets of "anarchy" (e.g. Scott 2009; Gibson and Sillander 2011). Insofar as the term anarchy comes from the Greek for "no ruler" (Morris 2015, 62) or "without government" (Barclay 1998, 8–10), I found that it was not so much the case that sovereignty was lacking, but rather, that sovereignty was held in spectral hands. Therefore, I grasp this as an alternative mode of politics that I describe as **Spectral Sovereignty**. I show how human ownership is always fleeting and ephemeral on account of it constantly nesting in encompassing layers of spectral sovereignty.

Translating and Rescaling indigenous practices as Alter-Politics

Finally, in Part II of this thesis I first delve into how peace has become “predatory” (Lund 2018; Tsing 2005) as armed counterinsurgency has been replaced by creeping Myanmar state encroachment and mass dispossession. I then demonstrate how growing ensembles of indigenous people, activists, and armed groups behind the Salween Peace Park and similar movements are working to translate and rescale these indigenous politics of possession into government and conservation policy.

I show how following the ceasefire in 2012, the subsequent peace negotiations have increasingly stagnated as the Myanmar government and military have largely used this lull in armed conflict to expand territorial control by granting land to private actors and conservation groups (Woods 2011; 2019), what I describe as **Ceasefire Territorialisation**. Through the example of Tanintharyi in southern Myanmar I then demonstrate how a growing ensemble of indigenous people, activists, and armed groups are beginning to push back against these new threats of dispossession, coming close to what Karl Polanyi ([1944] 2001) calls **Countermovements** – multi-class protective reactions against the dis-embedding of the economy from society and the commodification of land. Looking closer we find that these groups are drawing on indigenous politics of possession and **translating** them in order to create counter-maps (Peluso 1995) to push back against encroachments from both the Myanmar state, and actors from within the KNU state. These themes play a central role in chapter four.

However, as I return to look at the Salween Peace Park in chapter five, we find that the activists behind this indigenous-run protected area worked very much from within the KNU. I show how they have laboured tirelessly to pragmatically **rescale** indigenous practices of possessed landscapes and spectral sovereignty in such a way that they have become enfolded into, and intrinsic to, KNU laws and both government and conservation policy. In this way, these activists are creating a legal space within the KNU in which these alternative modes of ownership and sovereignty can flourish. Thus, these pragmatic politics went beyond simply pushing back against growing ceasefire territorialisation in a countermovement as they worked to build a sustainable peace by prefiguring alternative visions and practices of federalism by

building on indigenous practices. As I show, this work to prefigure peace and federalism was deeply entangled with revolutionary commitments to self-determination, as these activists consider themselves as the third generation of the continuing struggle for greater autonomy. To grasp this, I term the Salween Peace Park as a form of **Liberation Conservation**, where the demand to create an indigenous-run protected area has become deeply wedded to the demand to self-determination.

In the final chapter I then return the Papun hills. Here I explore how this work of translating and rescaling indigenous modes of ownership and sovereignty is creating an “interstitial distance within the state” (Critchley 2008, 92), both within the Myanmar and KNU state, in which alternative modes of politics can flourish. Consequently, the villagers are increasingly being emboldened to take matters into their own hands. I demonstrate this through by showing how, in lieu of state administrative assistance, they created their own community forest by placing the land under the protection of the highest spectral authority, the *ta htee ta daw k'sah*, “in its hands” as they put it. These actions delineate a mode of what Ghassan Hage describes as **alter-politics** (2015), which gesture towards both radically different ways of being enmeshed in the world and towards prefigurative politics that envision these highlands as a space for “all living things sharing peace”.

States of War and Revolution

This thesis builds upon nearly eleven months of anthropological fieldwork, from November 2016 to September 2017, both in and on the nexus between a small upland community in Southeast Myanmar that I call Ta K'Thwee Duh, and a network of indigenous and ecological activists based in Thailand's second city, Chiang Mai. Albeit to a much lesser degree, it is also informed by an additional three months of fieldwork in upstate New York among diaspora groups who were resettled there in 2006, offering a different perspective.

As we have seen, Ta K'Thwee Duh sits at around 1200 metres above sea level, atop the Bu Thoe ridge that divides the watersheds of the Salween River and the Yunzalin River (one of its tributaries) in Southeast Myanmar's Northern Karen State. Locally,

these uplands are ecologically defined as *k'nuh htee*, that can be translated as (tropical montane) evergreen forest (c.f. Trakansuphakon 2006, 36). In these forests, (mostly) above the teak line,⁴ the temperature drops sharply at night in the cool season, summers are temperate and in the monsoon season, the area is constantly damp and covered in a shroud of mist. Moreover, due to the humidity of these uplands, a thick layer of moss grows on the bark of most trees and many houses. The village itself has twenty-eight households,⁵ fourth-eight in total including the two sub-villages/hamlets that surround the main village. Administratively the village is part of the Pa Heh village tract which, in turn, is a part of the Bu Thoe township of the Mutraw district of the Karen National Union's (KNU's) nation of Kawthoolei, under the 5th Brigade of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). On official maps this village resides in the Papun township of the Karen State of the Union of Myanmar but, as will become apparent, the Myanmar government had very little de facto influence up here. Through the Salween Peace Park this village is slowly becoming entangled with a network of indigenous and ecological activists, based in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, known in Sgaw Karen as Gee May.

As I discuss in more detail in chapter one, these borderlands have deep histories of contact and violent conflict. Upland areas have long oscillated between becoming sites of violent territorial tussles and acting as largely autonomous buffer-zones between successive city states and empires (Gravers 1999; South 2008). However, the historical events perhaps most pertinent to the current political predicaments came about after the British Empire colonised these uplands along the Salween River. These highlands were forcibly annexed to British India, and officially designated as a "frontier area". Following this designation, the newly minted Salween District was placed under indirect rule, with day-to-day governance left to "tribal chieftains" (Furnivall 1960, 12). Indeed, by some accounts, this area has never been brought fully under centralised state rule, and continues to this day to be largely autonomous (Jolliffe 2016, 9). In this section I paint the picture of this conflict with rather broad

⁴ There is a small grove of teak trees to the west of Ta K'Thwee Duh that it is said to be where Y'wa, the great creator demiurge, hid them.

⁵ Eighteen households practiced Thoo Hkoh or Karen Animism, two *Bah Hpaw* that combines Buddhist with animism, and ten were Christian (eight Roman Catholic, and two Baptist) with some animist twists.

brushstrokes in order to set the scene. I shall come back to this rather complex history in the chapter that follows.

Sgaw Karen (a Karenic language and member of the Sino-Tibetan language family) speaking people such as those living in the highlands that run along the Salween River refer to themselves and their language as *pgha k'nyaw*, literally meaning “humankind”. However, following the intensification of contact between Pgha K'Nyaw and other Karenic language speakers across Burma with colonial and, centrally, missionary practices and discourses under the British rule, there was a growing notion that these dispersed and heterogeneous peoples belonged to a wider group, denoted by the exonym “Karen”. Consequently, missionaries and churches have been, and continue to be pivotal in this movement (e.g. Christie 2000; Gravers 2007; Horstmann 2011a; Horstmann and Jung 2015). This notion of shared “Karen-ness” was initially articulated as *daw k'lu* or “all the tribes” by missionary educated Sgaw speaking intellectuals such as Dr T. Thanbyah (cf. Christie 2000). As this notion of a separate “Karen People” began to set down roots across colonial Burma, reinforced by the growing power of Karen church groups, it was accompanied by a growing crescendo of calls for a corresponding homeland in which these people could reside. This new homeland, originally located in what is now known as the Tanintharyi district of southern Myanmar (San C. Po 1928), was then christened Kawthoolei. This name may be translated as “the land of the *thoo lei* flower” (a kind of crêpe ginger that is said to indicate soil fertility), or “the earth burnt black”, intimating that the land was ripe for swidden cultivation (which involves clearing areas of forest by burning them). Thus by 1888, the Karen National Organisation (KNO), later renamed the Karen Nation Union (KNU) was established. The KNO then began to flesh out and amplify these calls for Karen nationhood. However, while vague assurances of Karen nationhood were made by colonial authorities throughout their reign, when Burma gained its independence in 1948, following several years under Japanese occupation during the Second World War, no provisions were made for an autonomous Karen homeland. During the occupation, communities along the Salween River had overwhelmingly sided with the British Colonists, becoming embroiled in a bloody guerrilla war against both the Japanese Empire and their allies, the Burmese

Independence Army (BIA). This guerrilla war and the resulting violent reprisals visited on the civilian population cost countless lives and displaced whole villages. Thus, when many of the central figures (the “thirty comrades”) behind the BIA such as Aung San (Aung San Suu Kyi’s father) and Ne Win (who later became the country’s dictator) quickly took leadership positions (as prime minister and Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, respectively) in the newly independent Union of Burma, many Karen were deeply wary. As reprisal attacks turned into intercommunal violence between Karen and Burman settlements, the KNU went underground on February 1949. An armed wing of the KNU, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), was formed and revolution was declared.

This revolutionary war was, at first, slow to reach up into the highlands along the Salween, also known as the Papun hills after the nearest larger settlement Papun town. As many of the villagers I met who were alive at this time attested, the 1950s were a period of relative calm, punctuated by sporadic armed clashes between the KNU and the Burmese Army also known as the Tatmadaw. After the original heart of the revolution, the Irrawaddy delta in Southwest Burma, fell to the resurgent Tatmadaw, by the mid-50s these still largely autonomous “frontier areas” in the Papun hills became the new nucleus of the Karen struggle (Furnivall 1960; Lintner 2015). However, this situation changed dramatically in the mid-1960s when the country’s ascendant dictator General Ne Win (who, as we saw above, was one of the “thirty comrades”) began to enact a counterinsurgency programme to “liquidate the insurgents”, known as *pya ley pya* or “the four cuts” (M. Smith 1999, 258–59). The aim of this programme was to “cut” the four main links between the revolution and their civilian bases: of food, funds, intelligence, and recruits (ibid). This was to be done by dispossessing villages and resettling them out of reach of these revolutionary movements. Thus, in one fell swoop, upland communities such as Ta K’Twee Duh became “black zones” of “hard-core” insurgency, as the Tatmadaw was given carte blanche to use any means necessary to remove the civilian population and transform into a “white zone” or “peace area”. While sustained fighting never quite reached the top of the Bu Thoe ridge, many of their kin and kith living closer to the Salween River witness this counterinsurgency first-hand. One specific example of this came in the

area around the neighbouring village of Dweh Kee Duh, where many kin of the inhabitants of Ta K'Thwee Duh resided.

When, after a drawn-out battle, the Tatmadaw wrested control of Thee Mu Hta, this small hamlet and former KNLA base was declared a “white area” (I come back to this case in chapter four). Following this, the Tatmadaw began to make regular visits to the nearest village of Dweh Kee Duh, demanding taxes, and that they relocate to this newly established “peace area”. As my neighbour’s oldest brother Hpu Htoo, who still lives in Dweh Kee Duh explained, when they refused the Tatmadaw burnt their rice fields and their granaries to the ground in attempts to intimidate them into moving out of these “black zones”. Much as Martin Smith has shown was the case throughout Burma, in the “four cuts” campaign “there is no such thing as an innocent or neutral villager. Each community must flee, or join the Tatmadaw” (1999, 260). In this way, all villagers living in “black zones” were classified as potential KNU combatants and/or collaborators, and thus, legitimate targets. In the wake of this, villagers all along the Salween faced shoot-on-sight orders day-to-day, and their villages and fields were regularly plundered, razed to the ground, and the remains littered with landmines, in scorched earth tactics (giving a new meaning to the term *Kawthoolei*, as in “earth burnt black”). These tactics were directed towards forcing civilians to flee from such “black zones” under KNU control, either across the border or to this newly established “white/peace zone” that acted much like the “strategic hamlets” the US employed in Laos and Vietnam, insulated from the revolutions (*ibid*; see also KHRG 2009). I learnt that while many of the original residents of the area around Dweh Kee Duh had fled to the refugee camps across the river in Thailand, the KNLA, which still had a strong presence in this area, was eventually able to push the Tatmadaw back to their barracks, and surround them with landmines to hem them in.

In the wake of these brutal counterinsurgency tactics, much like the residents of Dweh Kee Duh, hundreds of thousands of civilians were forced to flee to the refugee camps in Thailand. Unable to return home, a whole new generation came into contact, not only with more missionaries, but also with a wide array of International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs) that provided education and training steeped in notions of human and indigenous rights, and ecological sustainability. Moreover,

while a ceasefire was signed between the KNU and the Tatmadaw in 2012, as I show in chapter four, armed conflict and dispossession rather than abating have simply become more insidious. Increasingly, under the pretext of “development” and “conservation”, the Tatmadaw has begun to remobilise in ceasefire areas to “secure” these projects, effectively dispossessing civilians and turning former “black zones” into “white” ones under their sovereignty (Woods 2011; 2019).

Thus, as I show in chapter five, in the wake of this mass dispossession and in the face of continued displacements through development and conservation projects, a new generation of revolutionaries is emerging that is continuing to struggle for self-determination, but by other means. This new generation is edging ever closer to indigenous and ecological activists than armed militants as evidenced in Salween Peace Park.

Contexts such as these that are gripped by chronic armed conflict often lead to a moral morass. Here lines between war and peace, soldier and civilian, activist and militant constantly blur, and practices of “social navigation” become fraught with difficulty (c.f. Vigh 2008; 2006) – not only for the people living in these contexts but also for academics researching them. As I discuss in the next section, I attempted to negotiate these fraught issues by, instead of never becoming involved in insurgency, trying to find more desirable ways of being caught up in it. Consequently, rather than trying to force concepts generated by ethnography into pre-existing anthropological and other scientific theories, in this thesis I attempt to situate various ethnographic concepts as theories in their own right, in ways that may unsettle and give us pause to re-think our pre-established theories (Da Col and Graeber 2011; Nader 2011).

Insurgency, sorcery, and getting caught: Ethnographic Theory

Over the course of my research in a setting beset by chronic armed conflict I began to notice a peculiar resonance between insurgency and sorcery. As Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980) and Begoña Aretxaga (2012) show, in both witchcraft and armed revolution, one must first be “caught” (Favret-Saada 1990) or “affected” (Favret-Saada 1990; 2015) — that is, allow oneself to be “compromised” (Aretxaga 2012) — before it is possible to properly grasp the phenomenon. Through conducting fieldwork in the (former)

warzones of Southeast Myanmar I discovered that it was only as I allowed myself to become “affected” by the KNU’s seven-decade long movement toward greater autonomy that I began to get a better handle on it. Indeed, as Aretxaga argues, it was precisely the process of being “implicated”, being “caught” up in armed conflict that “open[ed] up the possibility of dialogue and of resolution of violence” (2012, 165), and the possibility of better understanding the intimate and affective relations implicated in armed struggles. This was, as we shall see in the next section, similar to how I came to grasp people’s day-to-day relations with more-than-human realms.

Being caught

Upon embarking on my first period of fieldwork along the Thai-Myanmar borderlands in 2013 among people disabled by landmines living in a refugee camp on the Thai side, I was struck by a tendency among researchers and NGO workers alike to cleave to the role of either official chronicler of the KNU, or fierce critic of the Karen revolution and, especially, its leadership. In these sticky webs of insurgency and counterinsurgency it often appeared to me that the space for critical academic discourse on the KNU shrunk in direct relation to how closely one worked together with them. As a result, out of fear of becoming too “subjective” or “compromised” to conduct a rigorous academic study I endeavoured to maintain as much distance as possible from both the KNU itself and the dense networks of insurgence surrounding them, such as church and community-based organisations (CBOs) affiliated with them. As we have seen, since the dawn of the KNU movement churches have played a pivotal role. Yet, as much as I tried, I repeatedly found myself drawn into the KNU and church networks’ spheres of influence. As such, in a manner akin to the experience of the people disabled by mines that I worked with, I found it increasingly difficult to refuse offers by representatives of a powerful and highly influential local seminary school to attend their “thanks-giving” ceremonies for their teachers and their promotional activities. As one young woman put it, in accepting the charity and kindness of these powerful Christian organisations, “You can’t avoid it and can’t escape it, so you have no choice, even if you are not interested” (Cole 2020, 231).

Upon my return to these borderlands in 2016, following three months of fieldwork in upstate New York, the impossibility, and indeed undesirability, of escaping these sticky webs of insurgency and counterinsurgency became ever more apparent. In the US I had learnt that my neighbour, whom I had grown close to, Saw Dee, had – together with his extended kin in the diaspora – pooled their resources to fund the construction of a new Buddhist monastery in his natal village of Noh Baw, in Mon state in Southeast Myanmar. However, my first flailing attempts to reach this village ended in unmitigated failure.

Despite the ceasefire, the area around Noh Baw remains a “brown zone”, hotly contested between both the KNU and the Tatmadaw. As such, the car that I chartered from Hpa-An in central Karen State with Saw Moo, Saw Dee’s nephew, to take me most of the way there, was stopped in the first town we passed by two rather irate men. Upon seeing me slunk down in the back seat they proceeded to threaten to call the police⁶ if we did not turn back immediately, claiming the last foreigners who came this way are still languishing in jail to this day. I was only able to reach the villager through the intervention of Saw Moo’s brother, a captain in the Karen Nation Liberation Army. The captain pulled some strings to have a KNU marked vehicle ferry us safely most of the way there. Upon finally arriving at Noh Baw village, while I was given a brisk tour of the new monastery, my lines of inquiry as to their translocal entanglements with distant kin did not lead me very far. As discussed above, people appeared far more preoccupied with ongoing militarisation and threats of dispossession from two fronts: a tarmac road currently being built through their lands by the Tatmadaw, and the ever-expanding commercial rubber plantations, slowly boxing them in. Almost as if to emphasise this point, after only one night in the village, the same captain arrived abruptly in the village in the morning with his entourage of heavily armed soldiers informing me I was not safe here as the Tatmadaw were scheduled to pass through here at any time to survey the road. Thus, after less than 12 hours in one of the villages I hoped to spend the next year, I was escorted back to Hpa-An, following an additional night spent at this captain’s base.

⁶ I never managed to ascertain just who these men were, nor why they were quite so ticked off.

These combined experiences convinced me to take a different tack, both thematically and methodologically. I began to draw closer to the KNU and their proxies and, rather than refusing overtures from them, allow myself to more readily be caught up and affected by them.

In a manner akin to Favret-Saada's (1980, 4). attempts to understand marginalised witchcraft practices in northern France, I had found that each time I asked civilians in the camps, the diaspora, and in villages in Myanmar about their relations with the KNU revolution, I was met with either silence or statements to the effect of "many people still provide financial support and young men to serve the KNU, but not here". What is more, when I did meet those, like Saw Moo, who talked openly of their deep commitments to the continued struggle for greater autonomy it soon became clear that, not unlike witchcraft, "those who have caught can't even talk about it" (ibid, 15). Saw Moo and I constantly talked at crossed purposes, mutual understanding constantly eluding us at each turn as I tried to better understand his deep relations to the KNU, and why he so desired so fervently to be a soldier like his brother. To this end, I found that "as long as she adopts an external position, the ethnographer hears nothing" and as such "condemn[s] oneself to only hearing objectivist statements" (ibid, 16). Again, as I shall show presently, this closely aligned with my experiences of attempting to understand indigenous practices and politics of possession. Thus, in much the same way as sorcery, in studying armed conflict and insurgency I found that much as Begoña Aretxaga (building on Favret-Saada's work) states, "there is no position that remains 'uncontaminated', in other words, that does not take part... all positions are already implicated in the relations between forces in armed conflict" (2012, 165).

In the wake of these insights, I began to grasp how, much as "one cannot study witchcraft without agreeing to take part in the situation in which it manifests itself" (Favret-Saada 1980, 20), one cannot study armed insurgency without becoming caught up in it. As such, I began to slowly initiate closer contact with the KNU and their affiliated organisations to "enter the network as a partner and to commit my existence as it stood at the time" (Favret-Saada 1990, 192). In this way, I slowly shifted

from simply “observing” to something closer to “participation” (c.f. *ibid*), in ways that I was not always comfortable with.

However, this change of tack did not imply simply throwing caution to the wind and uncritically letting myself be caught up in these dense networks of (counter)insurgency. Much as James Ferguson talks of dependence, rather than striving to never be caught I constantly negotiated and endeavoured to build “more desirable forms of it” (2013, 237). Through this negotiation I slowly began to discern between less desirable forms of being caught up in the over seven-decade struggle for autonomy, such as through the jingoistic general we meet in chapter four, and other more desirable forms, such as with the environmental and indigenous activism group the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), who penned the press release this chapter opens with.

As I spent time with this activist group I learnt that they work very much from inside of the KNU itself, often acting as a “technical body” of the revolutionary government (as I show in chapter five). Although they were not exactly pacifist, these activists were deeply committed to achieving greater autonomy through other means than endless war. As I attempted to pitch the notion of a collaborative research project with them, I quickly found that my abstract promises of bringing the ideas of the Salween Peace Park to the attention of a wider academic audience was not a satisfactory answer to their repeated questions of “but what do we get out of it” and “how will this be useful to us”. It was only when I suggested getting more hands-on by training one of their junior staff members in ethnographic methods and sharing our “findings” from this research with them that they began to warm up to the idea. The junior staff member who became my main collaborator and field assistant turned out to be a young woman, who I call Naw Paw. Coincidentally, she is a childhood friend of Saw Moo, from a neighbouring village to Noh Baw. Together we selected a village to research where not only indigenous practices were still “strong” but where both the KESAN’s and the KNU’s influence was weaker. As I show in chapter three, not only armed conflict but also both aid and much of the KESAN’s activism and advocacy work had the tendency to “jump over” these highland areas. Thus, not only did I end up helping to edit some of their technical and promotional reports and sharing my

notes and photos with these activists, but also building trust and paving the way for the KESAN to demarcate the village area. This demarcation was facilitated by Naw Paw.

In this way, I found my research project became considerably “contaminated” (Aretxaga 2012) by both KESAN and KNU projects.

Participating

The resulting collaboration that emerged out of these conversations with the activists from KESAN allowed me to spend extended periods of time in an area that was slated to become part of the Salween Peace Park. In this manner, this thesis, especially Part I, follows the grain of more classic anthropological studies that seek to describe “the social life of some particular region of the earth during a certain period of time” (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, 4), that builds on a method of “participant observation”.

As a result, I spent a great deal of time in the highlands along the Salween River accompanying and joining with the people as they went about their day-to-day activities such as walking to their fields, planting rice, replacing their roofs before the monsoon season, and making offerings of rice wine, betel nut, and tobacco to the spectral owners of a place. In this way, I attempted to get a better grasp on everyday experiences and practices of living together with spectral people and negotiating possessed landscapes. Through this participant observation and sustained interviews with the residents here, I also garnered a better understanding of day-to-day practices of negotiating with both the KNU and the KESAN. However, this method also quickly revealed the limits of idealised notions of “participation” (c.f. Favret-Saada 1990).

While I had initially expected to spend the lion’s share of my time together with the male members of the village partaking in hunting and other similar forms of homosociality, it quickly became apparent that I was perceived as not being masculine enough for these activities. Both the men and the women fretted endlessly that I was so thin and (compared to them) so unstable on my feet, especially as the rains came and the earth around the village became a river of flowing mud. They often exclaimed that they feared I might fall and “snap in half like a dry twig”. As such,

while I joined the men from time to time on their peregrinations along these highlands and grew close to a group of young fathers that we meet properly in the final chapter, I spent the majority of my time in these highlands in Ta K'Thwee Duh in people's homes. I also regularly joined young mothers and their children walking close to the village, collecting vegetables and firewood while exchanging tales and gossip. Moreover, since I was never able to learn Sgaw Karen fluently I was largely dependent on Naw Paw, a young woman, to help me translate. Following this, despite me being a (relatively) young foreign man I found that the women and elderly men in the village often quickly endearing themselves to us, leading us to learn a great deal about local gossip and lore from the perspective of women and the elders of the village while huddled around the "heat of their hearths" (c.f. Carsten 1997).

Thus, in exploring this resonance between insurgency and sorcery I have argued that, in both cases, one must first be caught up in them before one can begin to grasp them in any significant manner. In the following section, I push this point further to argue that, to be "caught up" and be affected implies taking seriously accounts and experiences of the inextricable entanglement of human and more-than-human lives, both biotic and spectral, that are implied in notions of possessed landscapes. To address this issue, I follow recent calls to take human and more-than-human relations seriously (e.g. Wastell et al. 2007; Willerslev 2007; de la Cadena 2015; 2010), allowing ethnography to become a prime motor for theoretical insight (e.g. Da Col and Graeber 2011; Nader 2011). However, as I discuss in the next section, this taking human and more-than-human relations seriously often pulls and contorts analysis in several directions at once.

Towards a More-Than-Human Political Ecology

Regularly, when approaching armed conflict and ecology we find that, on one end of a sliding scale, taking indigenous histories and practices too seriously can loosen the analytical grip on the constant multi-scalar struggles over power and ownership underpinning them (e.g. Vigh and Sausdal 2014; Hornborg 2017b; 2017a): political struggles over possession that lay at the very heart of this thesis. Yet, on the other end, approaches that take these political struggles for power over and possession of the

earth deadly serious themselves often loosen their analytic grip on the centrality of interdependencies between human and more-than-human lives, treating the land as a set of extractable resources (Escobar 1999; Descola 2013; Karlsson 2018): losing sight of the cosmological connotations of possession also at the heart of both the Salween Peace Park and my research. As such, we find that in trying to get a better handle on places like the Salween Peace Park and practices such as those of possessed landscapes, we are constantly dragged back and forth along this continuum of what should be taken most seriously, politics or cosmologies, often forced to compromise one for the other (albeit with several notable exceptions such as, de la Cadena 2015; B. R. Middleton 2015; Tsing 1993; Pedersen 2011).

However, as I begun conducting fieldwork up along the Salween Hills I started to notice the ways in which the residents here were themselves', at times, less than deadly serious. I found that people often engaged in highly indeterminate, pragmatic, and playful relations with the world. In focusing on the ways people actually engaged their worlds I show how, beyond easy binaries, the politics of possession constantly came into being and was (re)negotiated in the grip of "worldly" encounters (Tsing 2005, 1). What was at stake was less "belief" in these more-than-human actors than, to borrow William James' phrase, their "power to work" (1907, 58), their *effect* on the world. In this manner I suggest a more-than-human political ecology that is engaged and critical yet remains agnostic.

Taking both cosmologies and politics seriously

The day-to-day practices of the people along these highlands and their relations to their environments as possessed by biotic and spectral more-than-human actors, such as tigers and spectral owners, are usually gathered under the rubric "animism", or as one specific iteration of the mode of "hierarchical" animism prevalent in Southeast Asia (K. Århem 2016b; c.f. Sahlins 2014).

In previous studies from Myanmar, practices and histories similar to those discussed in this thesis have commonly been categorised under the rubric of "nats", and their inferences in human lives and politics regularly grasped as part of "supernatural belief systems" (Spiro 1967; Leach 1954). As such, in Burma and beyond,

“supernatural beliefs” have commonly been grasped, in Edmund Leach’s words as “in the last analysis, nothing more than ways of describing the formal relationships that exist between real persons and real groups” (1954, 182). That is to say, metaphorical representations of real events that should properly be understood as symbolic (see also, Willerslev 2007, 182). Moving into the present, albeit with far greater nuance, a tendency remains in contemporary political anthropological accounts that it is important to “respect” these “beliefs” insofar as this respect does not undermine the “realist ontology” that scientific writing and politics are based upon (e.g. Hornborg 2017a; 2017b; Graeber 2015). A similar “critical realism” undergirding most forms of political ecology “starts from the premise that the world exists independently of our knowledge of it and that its very independence means that human knowledge is not itself reality, but a representation of it” (Neumann 2005, 8–10). A corollary of this “critical realism” in both political ecological and many political anthropological accounts alike is that, in the last analysis, tigers, mountains, and most of what we name “nature” more generally, should be treated as inert resources to be managed by human political action (e.g. Peluso and Watts 2001; Sikor and Lund 2010). Moreover, spectral presences become “beliefs” that, as Byron Good has shown, have come to stand in juxtaposition to “how the world is, as a matter of empirical fact, constituted” (Good 1993, 9). Implicit in the notion of “belief”, as I touched upon above, is the tacit premise that, in opposition to “fact”, belief is essentially a “logical error” (Favret-Saada 1980, 5, ff. 2; for a classic example of this, see Evans-Pritchard 1976).

However, as I have pressed, in this thesis I join up with a growing chorus of critical voices who have begun questioning the grounding of both political anthropology, and political ecology more generally, in a “critical realism” that translates indigenous peoples’ own histories and practices hedged in the inextricable entanglement of human and more-than-human into “beliefs” or “representations” of the “actual” struggles over control of “natural resources” (Karlsson 2018, 22; Escobar 1999; see also, B. R. Middleton 2015, 563), with some even pushing for a “multi-realist” perspective (Latour 2005).

Perhaps one of the most prominent voices in this chorus is Marisol de la Cadena who attempts to bring cosmological and political accounts together in her work

among Quechua people in the Peruvian Andes. She argues convincingly that that belief does not necessarily mediate the relations between humans and various unseen more-than-humans (2015, 26). It was not so much, as she shows, that people “believe” in what they termed *tirakuna* or “Earth Beings” – that in many senses bear a strong resemblance to the *kaw k’sah* – as it was that an Earth Being such as Asangate, who features prominently in her text “is, period”, enacted in everyday practices of being/becoming together (2015, *ibid*). This argument bears a striking resemblance to Benedict Anderson’s ideas on power in Java as “something concrete, homogenous, constant in total quality, and without inherent moral implications [...] power is.” (1990, 23). The Earth Being Asangate, like power in Java and “potency” in Southeast Asia more generally (Chua et al. 2012a; Errington 2012), is not something mediated, nor can it be questioned directly, but rather, is hypostatized as part and parcel of people’s everyday reality. Following this, de la Cadena strives to “take seriously (perhaps literally) the presence in politics of those actors, which, being other than human, the dominant disciplines assigned either to nature (where they were to be known by science) or to the metaphysical and symbolic fields of knowledge” (2010, 336). In hypostatizing more-than-humans and taking their presence in politics seriously (perhaps literally), de la Cadena attempts to marry research into indigenous cosmologies with political anthropology by evoking Isabelle Stengers’ (2010) notion of cosmopolitics.

This work follows a growing tradition in anthropology that attempts to go beyond merely respecting and representing others’ realities, and instead taking them “seriously”. This move opens up the possibility of indigenous concepts and realities being able to unsettle and challenge our own suppositions, in a practice of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls the “theory/practice of the permanent decolonisation of thought” (2014, 40). In exploring and making visible the potential of “how things could be” and of “the otherwise” as real alternatives, our own assumptions about the world are troubled and unsettled (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014; Viveiros de Castro 2015). In this move the political aspect of anthropology shifts from the critical investigation into multi-scalar struggles over

power and ownership to embrace this form of “decolonising of thought”, in allowing indigenous practice to critique our own (theoretical) presuppositions (c.f. Hage 2015).

Thus, in this thesis I draw inspiration from, and elaborate on, these powerful critiques of approaches that attempt to reduce indigenous practice and cosmologies to “beliefs”, and subordinate them as representation of paramount (“more real”) reality. Along these lines, I follow the parallel move of instead taking the ways people relate to their environments and their practices and politics of possession “seriously” such that these might begin to unsettle established ways of thinking about ownership, power, and sovereignty.

However, as we have seen, this move to take these indigenous practices seriously also bears with it the corresponding threat of flattening social worlds and the politics at play in the shaping of what “is” (e.g. Vigh and Sausdal 2014, 63). This flattening threatens to obfuscate people’s perpetual indeterminacy as to how to respond to constantly shifting political, economic, and ecological terrains (Pedersen 2011a; Bubandt 2014). Throughout this thesis I argue that, in the context of chronic armed conflict along the Salween River, there is a constant interweaving of these so called “animist” practices and interminable cycles of armed violence and upheaval. Between spectral and indeterminate phenomena that may or may not be present and equally unpredictable patterns of insurgency, counterinsurgency and dispossession, people were forced to constantly fumble about for ways to respond to and negotiate these ever-shifting and unsettled terrains of war (c.f. Pedersen 2011, 4–9). Thus, taking these indigenous practices seriously, or even literally, threatens to miss the mark somewhat. To address these issues, in this thesis I constantly bring to the fore the ways people’s relations with the world were riddled with indeterminacy and doubt, and shot through with experimentation and a distinct playfulness.

Taking doubt seriously

For the women and men living along the Salween River more-than-humans such as the *kaw k’sah*, the spectral owners of the area around a village (the village-*kaw*, that I shall address in more detail together with the *kaw k’sah* in chapter three), “were, full

stop”, to paraphrase de la Cadena’s statement on Earth Beings: unless of course they are not.

As I spent time in these highlands I learnt that sometimes a mountain was the seat of a *kaw k’sah*, “the spectral owner”, and the appearance of a tiger was a harbinger that this “owner” had become vexed by human moral transgression. In these instances, the mountain and the tiger are deeply entangled in day-to-day politics. At other times, however, a tiger was just a tiger, and a mountain was just a mountain. Each time a tiger was spotted it was not immediately taken to be the *kaw k’sah* or its emissary. Rather, only after careful observation and discussion of the effects it had on their lives was its presence discerned, or denied. In chapter two I follow A. Irving Hallowell in showing how, while landscapes always have the potentiality to be animate and to be possessed by unseen more-than-humans, “the crucial test is experience” (1960, 25), in people’s playful engagements with them. Michael Lambek describes this as a “pragmatic dimension” in which, when traversing this possessed landscape, people are less preoccupied with ontological questions as to “which of these spirits exist” than with “which of them has the power to influence my life now?” (1996, 247).

Moreover, as I show in chapter one, histories of these highlands are not so much ancient as adaptive, often grasped “ex post facto” (Hayami 2004, 29), after the fact. Like spectres they are indeterminate and constantly negotiated, being selectively co-opted – what I describe as Lively Histories. It is only through such “worldly encounters” that, for example, a tiger can be known to be the emissary of a *kaw k’sah*, or just a tiger.

Related to this, when people living in these highlands talked of spectral persons, they tended to couch their relations to them in terms of *ta nah*. While *ta nah* can be rendered as “belief”, it has closer connotations with “faith, trust, and confidence” in something or someone.⁷ I found that people utter this term when talking not only of their faith or confidence in the potency of unseen more-than-humans to have effects on their lives, but also of the political efficacy of their political leaders in the KNLA/KNU. In everyday conversations it was often opined that people felt a lack of *ta*

⁷ <http://drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=w%3Eem&submit=Lookup>

nah, as in faith or confidence in certain political leaders, on account of experiencing them as corrupt or ineffective. In this way, *ta nah* bears little resemblance to the way belief has come to be known through enlightenment thinking (Good 1993). Lacking *ta nah* in their leaders implied less that they doubted their existence, than that they did not hold trust or confidence in their efficacy to have an effect on their lives.

This notion of *ta nah* resonates strongly with Jeanne Favret-Saada's work on witchcraft in Bocage in rural France; with their lives often at stake, people had less interest in beliefs in witchcraft than in how to protect themselves and ward off attacks producing illness and misfortune in their day-to-day lives (1980). Thus, to grasp these practices, in this thesis I cleave closer to a pragmatic approach (c.f. Lambek 1996). This implies, as William James phrases it "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles [...] and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (1907, 54–55). In this manner, I also take doubt seriously throughout this thesis. Consequently, in my analysis I am less concerned with uncovering if a particular phenomenon actually exists, than with its "power to work" (ibid, 148), that is to say what its practical effects are on people's lives. As I found, what is true to them is often what works in any given situation, what emerges in their practical engagements and encounters with the world. As such, reality is constantly in the making, born through lived experiences with the world (James 1907). This pragmatic and worldly approach is akin to the work of both Tim Ingold (2000; 2006; 2011) and Michael Jackson. As Jackson states, "the world is never something finished ... the world is always in the making" (1996) and never quite settled. This attentiveness to incompleteness, precariousness, and indeterminacy entails for Jackson the cultivation of what Keats calls a "negative capability" which is the practice of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" (1989, 16).

Taking a cue from the work coming out of multispecies studies, this thesis aims to "hold open a question of who — and what — is taken to exist and of how certain modes of existence are (and are not) made to count" (van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster 2016, 16). In this manner, a space is left for the possibility of unseen more-than-humans to have political effects on human lives. As I argue throughout, questions as to who and what is taken to exist are always shot through with politics, and

constantly shifting. To this end, it is not so much, as Jackson argues, that magic, and by extension spectres, protect people from and help deny the vicissitudes of chance and indeterminacy (1996, 5–6). Much as Nils Bubandt (2014) points out, arguments such as these mirror those made by E.E. Evans-Pritchard at the turn of the last century. From this perspective, practices tied to magic and spectres are, as Evans-Pritchard puts it, a “natural philosophy by which relations between men and unfortunate events are explained” (1976, 63). A natural philosophy which is “not incommoded” by internal contradictions (ibid, 28). However, in his own study of witchcraft, Bubandt repeatedly found that the intervention of unseen more-than-humans, far from protecting the Buli people in Indonesia he worked with, greatly “incommoded” their lives. These spectral interventions led to a great deal of speculation “*precisely because*” they themselves generated indeterminacy in previously settled explanations and meanings (Bubandt 2014, 42). Thus, while these practices played out in constantly shifting political landscapes, they themselves introduced more, not less, indeterminacy into the picture.

Thus, in attempting to take spectral persons such as the *kaw k’sah* and their effects on politics seriously, I also attempt to bring forward and take equally seriously cases of doubt and indeterminacy.

Following these lines, throughout this thesis I attempt to build a **More-Than-Human Political Ecology**. That is to say a method that is deeply inspired by the indeterminate, pragmatic, and playful manner in which the residents of these highlands constantly juggle and negotiate both the cosmological and political (ecological) entailments of living in possessed landscapes. This method gestures towards a way of conducting fieldwork that takes both politics and cosmologies seriously, while maintaining a playful relation to both in simultaneously also taking doubt seriously. Thus, I attempt to turn method into play – but always played seriously.

Chapters in brief:

In **Part I: *Possession***, covering chapters one to three, I draw largely on the eight months of fieldwork I conducted in and around Ta K'Thwee Duh village in the heart of the Salween Peace Park. Here I focus mostly on the implications of local histories and indigenous practices of dwelling together with more-than-humans, of the politics of possessing the earth, to explore alternative modes of ownership and sovereignty.

I begin in **Chapter One** by showing how we might understand these highlands as a contact zone at the interstices between city and nation states, and between human and more-than-human realms. In these highlands we find that multiple and jostling regimes of ownership and political cosmologies come into contact and are continually negotiated, selectively co-opted and co-present. I then follow this up in **Chapter Two** by demonstrating how while things, animals, and (historically) people can and often are owned — the earth in these uplands itself can never be fully held to be possessed by humans. Landscapes are always already possessed, in the dual and entangled sense of the term: both as haunted by and under the power of a whole host of spectral persons, but also belonging to and owned by these unseen more-than-humans, that often bear the name *k'sah*, meaning “owner”. Thus, I describe these highlands along the Salween River as Possessed Landscapes. People’s relations with the earth were tempered by constant negotiation with and the feeding of these hungry spectral persons in order to placate them, pay them, and entreat them to borrow the earth, and to protect them from harm. I describe these regimes of ownership as ephemeral and nesting. To this end, in **Chapter Three** I explore how this notion of possessed landscapes delineated not only specific regimes of ownership, but also alternative modes of politics, where people’s relations to their environments are orientated less toward control and management of “resources” than to contact, encounter and negotiation. As a corollary, we find that the political landscapes of these highlands were remarkably flat on account of authority and sovereignty being understood to be held in more-than-human hands, by the *kaw k'sah* and other spectral owners of the earth. Indeed, we find that these spectres were sometimes understood as otherworldly monarchs that were the real owners. I refer to this as Spectral Sovereignty.

In Part II: *Dispossession/Re-Possession*, covering chapters four to six, I take a small step back to shuttle between subsistence farmers in the highlands along the Salween and other upland areas of Southeast Myanmar, and activists based in Chiang Mai in Thailand. Here I focus on both new forms of dispossession and counterinsurgency since the armed conflict had cooled, and how a growing ensemble of indigenous people, activists, armed groups, and conservationists are attempting to push back, to re-territorialise and re-possess the earth.

I begin in **Chapter Four** by showing how the abating of armed conflict had been accompanied by a rising tide of what I label Ceasefire Territorialisation. Especially in the Tanintharyi district of Southeast Myanmar, we find that land is increasingly being captured by state actors, not by force of arms, but in the name of religion, economy, development, and conservation. I then show how, in the Tanintharyi district, in the face of these intensifying new threats of dispossession, burgeoning protective countermovements are rising up to push back against this creeping territorialisation. These movements are organising this push back by drawing on and translating indigenous politics of possession, such as those we see in Part I, in order to re-territorialise and re-possess these landscapes. However, as I return to the Salween Peace Park in **Chapter Five** I show how, beyond simply pushing back against Ceasefire Territorialisation, this indigenous-run protected area is subtly translating these indigenous modes of ownership and sovereignty in ways that are rescaling them to land laws and conservation politics. In this manner we find that the activists behind the Salween Peace Park have been labouring for several decades to lobby the KNU governments in order to gradually create a legal niche in which these indigenous modes of ownership and sovereignty can flourish, prefiguring an alternative politics. However, as I delved deeper I found that this work to enshrine indigenous sovereignty into law is deeply wedded with the activists' continuing commitments to the KNU's seventy year-long struggle for greater autonomy. As such, I describe the Salween Peace Park as a form of Liberation Conservation. Finally, in **Chapter Six** I return to Ta K'Thwee Duh to explore how Ceasefire Territorialisation and Liberation Conservation are coming into contact and being negotiated on the ground in the Salween Peace Park. Here we find that the inhabitants of these highlands were

increasingly appealing to the KNU state to assist them, both in pushing back against perceived threats of creeping territorialisation, and in protecting their environments. However, the KNU state still struggled to “climb hills”. Thus, these highlanders again turned to the encompassing sovereignty of the spectral realm, which I describe as a mode of Alter-Politics. Through these practices, alter-politics are steadily becoming aligned with and augmenting the KNU’s long struggled for greater autonomy, which I describe as a kind of counter- or Anti-Politics. I then argue that the continual weaving together of these different modes of politics pushes us to rethink many established ways of grasping ownership, sovereignty and revolution, and indeed, politics at large. I close this thesis by revisiting the tagline of the Salween Peace Park, “all living things sharing peace”, to explore how in studying indigenous practices and cosmologies as well as how they are being translated and rescaled, we might better grasp how people relate both to the more-than-human world and to radical alternatives to coercive conservation and armed conflict.

Part I. Possession



One | Lively Histories

Power and Possession in Contact Zones



On the first day of my first stay at Ta K'Thwee Duh, late afternoon at the end of January 2017, I find the village eerily quiet. Not a soul stirs as I trot up and down the steep incline the village is built upon, trying to find someone to inform that I had arrived. In the headman's house his wife and some of his children rather briskly inform me that the headman is away until late, but that that I would be staying in the old dormitory at the foot of the village. Eventually, as dusk falls upon the village, a clamour of older men come to visit, including the headman and the headmaster of the village primary school.

This group of men sit in a row along the wall furthest away from me, nearest the door, and after exchanging a few pleasantries, request to see my permission papers from the Karen Nation Union, that they call my "passport". The headmaster receives it with his right hand, his left hand tucked under the elbow of his extended arm, and proceeds to read it aloud to the others. When the headmaster has finished reading the document and has handed it back to me in the same manner, they seem to relax a little and start asking for me to elaborate a little more on why I am here. My field assistant Naw Paw and I then attempt to gently smooth out this initial snag in relations and carefully build a rapport. These attempts begin well, the men quickly turning to tease me that I am far younger than I look when I give my age, but after a short silence, one of the elders, greying at the temples, asks flatly and directly: "Are you a spy?" After hearing Naw Paw's translation of my flailing explanation that I am merely here to do research, without missing a beat, this elder looks me directly in the eye and asks, "then have you come to steal our children?" We all laugh, I a little more nervously, and

eventually Naw Paw explains that they are concerned that I might be *pgha daw koh*, a “cut-throat person”.

As Naw Paw later elaborates, she first heard tales of *pgha daw koh*, (literally: people who slit throats) from her own parents in her natal village further west along the Bilin River. She was warned against approaching strangers, especially those whom, like myself, arrive in the village in dry season, as they may be *pgha daw koh* who kidnap children. Initially she stresses that these are “just stories, to warn children not to wander too far from the village” where they may get lost or hurt. However, immediately following this assertion she recounts her own, very real, encounters with “cut-throat people”. In her home village, at this time of the year when it is easiest to travel (especially by road), these strangers would appear under the cover of night at the edges of the village, only to suddenly disappear again. When she was young she would sometimes catch a glimpse of them in the distance. “You can tell [it is] them by their strange eyes”, she adds. Many of the rumours of these “cut-throat people” are now spread over Facebook, she adds, and there are videos of children kidnapped by them being held in cages. Following this initial accusation, the elder with hair greying at the temples, whom I later learnt is called Hpu Waw, then adds, deadly serious, that “we have come here just to make sure that you will not try to abduct their children”.

As I came to grasp, while Naw Paw and many of the villagers continually cast doubt upon the reality of these *pgha daw koh*, this in no way prohibited them from readily and pragmatically accepting that their existence could not conclusively be ruled out, and governed themselves accordingly: “just to make sure”, as Hpu Waw put it some weeks later. In this way, people held that the “cut-throat people” were at once tales to scare children into behaving but, at the same time, were open to them also being potentially very real and monstrous beings that prowled the edges of both the imagination and the village.

As the weeks passed, and as the villagers of Ta K’Thwee Duh began to grow accustomed to my presence, I learnt that in the beginning they had told their children to remain inside and had forbidden them from visiting me. Eventually, one lazy afternoon when I stopped by one of my neighbours, Naw Ghaw, whose sister was fast becoming Naw Paw’s close friend, I asked her who these *pgha daw koh* are. Not once

taking her eyes off me, she described how “when they come to the village they hide their faces”, but if you catch a glimpse of them “you see in their eyes that there is something wrong with them and then people become afraid”. She then adds that she too feared that I was here to snatch children. *Pgha daw koh* take children in order to sever their heads from their bodies to *ta lu*, that is to propitiate, literally to “feed or nourish”,⁸ the powerful spectral owners of an area such as a river so that they can attain permission to excavate or conduct large-scale infrastructure projects. In this arcane manner, the *pgha daw koh* hopes to accrue great riches. She goes on that my presence was particularly alarming to them since they had heard that at almost exactly this time a year prior a group of *goh lah wah* (white foreigners) had snatched a 15-year-old and *lu ta* or “fed” his head and his blood to the *k’sah*, the spectral owner, of Pgho Pgho Lee, the most spiritually potent landmark in these highlands also known to be a place of great riches. Her mother and sisters sat around listening, nodding vigorously along with this tale, clucking in agreement.

We find underlying this tale a deep-seated fear that monstrous (white) strangers will steal into their village, take their youth and sacrifice them to take possession of their most potent and valuable areas in the quest for “development” and, I assume here, to enrich themselves.

Upon explaining her concerns, while furiously tugging on the small pipe Naw Ghaw perpetually holds between her teeth and without letting go of my gaze, she asks: “So are you here to take our children?” Before I can properly answer her question, she insists that she just wants to make sure and, raising the machete she holds in her right hand she assures me that she will cut me long before I have a chance. After an awkward few seconds her mother bursts out laughing, saying “you two are like a monkey and a dog, squaring up to each other – neither can understand the other”. Then she tells me, don’t feel *may sgha*, “embarrassed/ashamed”, my daughter is just playing with you. But Naw Ghaw continues to stare at me unblinkingly, her countenance unchanging, as she still clutches the machete.



⁸ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=vk%3E&submit=Lookup#>

As this vignette shows, tales of monstrous and indeterminate outsiders who prey on these indigenous people's bodies and landscapes – sacrificing them for their own occult and unfathomable territorial and financial gains – are taken simultaneously both as “just stories” and as accounts of very real beings, prowling the edges of the imagination and of the village. Naw Lee was at once “just playing with me”, while this play was deadly serious.

All that was clear for the inhabitants of these highlands was that they continued to be slowly dispossessed of their land by indeterminate and often unseen forces. As such, analogous with the post-socialist Northern Mongolia that Morten Axel Pedersen writes about, people in the highlands along the Salween River rarely distinguished between frames of explanation that would grasp these tales of monstrous outsiders as metaphorical devices, and those that grasp these tales as descriptions of possibly very real and dangerous presences (Pedersen 2011, 4). Thus, these oral histories, which embody elements of myths as well as histories, would appear to direct our attention towards indigenous political cosmologies and ownership regimes. However, they also direct us to how these cosmologies and regimes have been, and continue to be, shaped by deep histories of very real (and often violent) contact with other places, temporalities, and more-than-human lives, both biotic and spectral – in ways that are unsettled and constantly unsettle both colonial and contemporary accounts of Southeast Myanmar and beyond.

In this chapter I explore how we might understand these shifting frames of explanation by grasping the highlands along the Salween River as Contact Zones where “cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” that involve “improvisation” and stress “co-presence” and interaction (Pratt 2008, 7–8). These uplands are the interstices of nation-states, and of human and more-than-human realms where multiple and jostling regimes of ownership and political cosmologies are continually in contact. Through these constant encounters, regimes of ownership and political cosmologies are co-present, constantly being (re)negotiated and selectively appropriated. I show how these tales, akin to the spectral persons that people and possess the landscape

that I address in more detail in the coming chapters, are inherently indeterminate and interminably unsettled and flexible.

However, in the midst of constantly undergoing movement, growth and change, these histories continue on. Much akin to the way that Tim Ingold describes life, these tales are not closed-in entities but open-ended processes, never finished, in the grips of “continual rebirth” as they carry on and perdure throughout time and space (Ingold 2000; 2006; Ingold and Palsson 2013). Thus, these oral histories are not so much ancient as they are adaptive, like the protean path of a river that rises and falls, shifts directions, and carves lakes out of the landscape, through the vicissitudes of climate and the actions of humans and more-than-humans alike (c.f. Cederlöf 2014, 21–22).⁹ To emphasise this unsettledness and mutability, I refer to these tales as Lively Histories. In describing these histories as ‘lively’ I hope to side-step notions of hybridity or plurality that imply products, to foreground this lively ongoing process as an “openness to the world”(Ingold 2006).

In the following pages I begin by describing how local cosmogonies and cosmologies of power and potency work by way of making and maintaining continuity and conviviality with the origin, from whence all power emanated, in the more-than-human world. Yet, upon closer investigation we find that this sense of continuity is constantly shadowed by deep histories of contact, that continue to shift and to unsettle these histories. I grasp the continual unsettling of lively histories by treating these highlands as contact zones where multiple and jostling regimes of ownership and political cosmologies have been and continue to come into contact. These encounters lead to a great deal of improvisation, negotiation, and indeterminacy. In this manner we find that these stories are constantly retold and selectively co-opted to fit into current pressing exigencies. This then leads into a description of cases where these lively histories have been captured, co-opted and reified to official histories. Moreover, the proliferation of these co-opted and reified stories is regularly accompanied by the rise of dispossession and extractivism, as landscapes are reimagined as a set of detachable and extractable resources. In this

⁹ For example, George Monbiot shows how the reintroduction of wolves to the Yellowstone National Park in the US set off a trophic cascade creating a dramatic shift in the path of whole river.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q>

way, these histories of entanglement and interdependence with more-than-human life effaced. Yet, as we shall see, these lively histories constantly slip away, continually unsettling established historical facts and reaffirming continuities and conviviality with more-than-human worlds.

I begin by following the lively histories of these highlands in a roughly chronological fashion, starting with those of how the world came into being. Yet, as we shall see, numerous eddies and undercurrents make the path of these histories into the present far from straight.

“Wind, Sky, Water”: Continuity with ancestral power and potency

When I asked elders in Ta K’Thwee Duh to help me get a better idea of the histories of these highlands they were prone to telling me one of two types of tales: either those of events within living memory, that some of the eldest villagers themselves had lived through, such as the Second World War and the end of colonialism; or those of cosmogony, on how the universe came into being. In the latter type of tales there was often a slippage between tales of these particular people, and those of all humankind. This slippage was afforded by a linguistic peculiarity of the Sgaw Karen spoken in this area, common among indigenous peoples around the world (for an overview see Praet 2013, 192–99), in which their autonym is the same as the word used to denote humankind in general. In this way the story of the origin of this particular group of Sgaw Karen speaking people, or *pg̃ha k’nyaw*, easily slips into stories of the origin of humankind as a whole that is also spoken of as *pg̃ha k’nyaw*.¹⁰

Thus, I begin this chapter from the very beginning of history, with oral accounts I collected in these highlands that tell not only of the origin of the particular people who now reside here, but also of the advent of all land, all beings (both biotic and spectral), all potency in the universe, and the gendered dimensions of power and possession. These stories sketch out a cosmology of power and potency that is distant, both in time and space, only accessible indirectly by making and maintaining

¹⁰ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=ySRunD&submit=Lookup>

continuity and conviviality with its more-than-human sources (these points become particularly relevant in chapters three and six).

As such, these stories depict an original and ontological state of co-presence and interdependence between human and more-than-human life. After hearing countless versions of these tales, I found the details were highly labile, regularly being subtly altered with each iteration, even by the same speaker. Each time a version of this cosmogony was told, a certain twist was added to illustrate a particular point to the intended audience. This said, I found a common thread that ran through and tied together all these narratives together. In truncated form, these tales usually began thusly:

In the beginning there was only wind, sky, and water. In the water there lived one fish, and in the sky one bird, a htoe hklu (of the Adolius/Drongo bird genus). On the water there was a tiny clod of earth the size of a large seed. Out of this clod of earth grew a banyan tree, forming a tiny island.

During a break in the narration of these tales I sometimes inquired whether, since banyan trees are epiphytic, there was a host tree already growing on this island to support and foster it. The reply offered usually involved varying guesses as to what the host tree may have been. But the elders who told these tales agreed that there must have been some sort of tree there before to support it. Going on, the tale then explains:

On this island lived Mu Khah. Mu Khah with her daughter (who is never named)¹¹. However, because neither of them had the ability to create anything new, the world remained in this state for a long period of time, just wind, sky, water. This and the inhabitants of this tiny island and one fish and one bird.

But, one day, while her daughter was playing by this vast and endless ocean stirring up the water with her hand, she created eddies that fermented the surface so that it began to foam and bubble. All of a sudden, one of the bubbles burst and a little boy appeared out of it. She took the boy to her mother who named him Y'wa, meaning to flow like water.¹²

¹¹ As a consequence, this tree is often referred to as *Mu Khah hklur*, the Mu Khah banyan.

¹² <http://drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=%2CGR&submit=Lookup#>

As this boy grew older he began to realise that, unlike Mu Khah and her daughter, he was possessed with *ta thoo ta pgho*: the potency or power of creation. This potency allowed him to create new matter, to build on this desolate world. So, one day, while Mu Khah and her daughter were distracted¹³ he drafted in the help of an *Adolius* or *Drongo* bird and a fish to smuggle tiny clods of earth from under the banyan tree and transplant them to another area. From these tiny clods they slowly created the first landmass. In some iterations there was a termite nest in the Banyan tree and these insects also helped Y'wa with this task. Eventually, Y'wa, together with these animals, created all the earth that humans, animals and spectres alike reside upon. Later Y'wa then folded the earth to create the hills and valleys that for the landscapes of the earth as now know it. Upon forming the landscape, Y'wa set to work populating it by creating all the other animals and the humans that now exist. The two first humans he fashioned were a woman and a man, *Naw Eh Oo* and *Saw Ah Dah*.

After spending some time with his creations he eventually decided to leave the earth to go and reside in *Mu HKoh* (the sky, heaven, or firmament¹⁴) never to be seen or heard from again. Upon leaving he took most of the *ta thoo ta pgho*, the potency to create new matter, with him. However, he left a few deposits, littered in the landscape, in places he had touched, in a few exceptional beings such as *k'sah* (his "emissaries"), and a tiny fraction in the bodies of all male and female flora and fauna so they might also create new life. He no longer intervenes in earthly affairs and the *ta thoo ta pgho* he left behind is finite, slowly waning for each generation that passes.

In these tales we find that the history of creation "sits in place" (Basso 1996) and can be delineated through the contours of the landscape. What is more, this history is not inert. They continue on in the deposits of *ta thoo ta pgho*, of "potency" that Y'wa left behind in places he had touched (I address these points more thoroughly in the next chapter). Yet, this potency, this power of creation, could never be accessed directly.

As these tales asserted, Y'wa removed himself from worldly affairs, and thus, as most elders I spoke to agreed, it is fruitless to address him directly. Neither earnest prayer nor attempts to propitiate him (known as *lu ta*, literally "feeding or nourishing") can move him to action anymore. One elder, *Hpu Hka Hsoo*, explained

¹³ While I later heard tales of Y'wa's mother, people would insist that this was neither Mu Khah nor her daughter.

¹⁴ <http://drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=rlcd.&submit=Lookup#>

this to me as being much the same as how one should not address one's seniors and leaders directly, but rather, go through an intermediary (e.g. Andersen 1980; Bekker 1981; Cole 2020). It is highly improper to beseech Y'wa directly. Following this, I found that Y'wa's name was only mentioned when recounting or singing a particular set of *hta*, a style of dramatic poetry preformed in rhyming couplets,¹⁵ as a way to document and to carry on the record of his feats in creating the world we now know (often know as Y'wa cycle of *hta*). These *hta* and other modes of telling histories act as archives for these predominantly illiterate people to store their histories (Mischung 2003; Fink 2003).

Thus, for those who defined themselves as *thoo hkoh* – that is to say animists or “worldly people” – while Y'wa was revered as a kind of demiurge, in day-to-day matters one had to pray to, propitiate, and beseech his *k'loo*¹⁶ or *ta kay ta pgah*¹⁷ “emissaries” or “servants”, the *k'sah*. I delve deeper into who these emissaries were and their effects on everyday life and politics in chapter three, but it can be noted here that the *k'sah* are a certain category of spectral persons that are the “owners” of certain trees, lakes, patches of land, and even of all lands and waters. As Hpu Hka Choo insisted, these *k'sah* or “owners” may then forward humans' prayers, propitiations and beseeching on to Y'wa himself as they see fit, if they do not have the power to address the issue at hand themselves. Yet, their potency is also waning.

A legacy of this cosmogony, as most elders explained, was that humans were locked in constant negotiations to maintain continuity and conviviality with these original sources of potency and power that are distant, both temporally and specially. These interminable negotiations were conducted through prayers and propitiations, that is to say the *lu ta* or “feeding”, of the spectral realm – where all power and potency resided. However, since Y'wa had removed himself from human affairs, connections to the divine are always mediated through his “emissaries”, and thus remain indeterminate, imperfect, patchy, and worldly. I found that it was essential for these highlanders to make and maintain good relations with the spectral persons or *k'sah*,

¹⁵ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=xg&submit=Lookup#>

¹⁶ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=uvl%3B&submit=Lookup#>

¹⁷ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=w%3Echw%3EYsR&submit=Lookup#>

“owners”. Any upset to these relations could potentially lead to great sickness and misfortune befalling both humans and their livestock and crops. These points become pivotal in the following two chapters, when I go on to describe landscapes as possessed and ownership and sovereignty, ultimately, being held in spectral hands.

As these stories continue, they go on to describe the period following the creation of the first humans, Naw Eh Oo and Saw Ah Dah, and their progeny as a state of original ontological co-presence and interdependence between humans and more-than-humans. Here we find that humans were not only indebted to and dependent upon the first termites, fish and bird for the creation of all the earth they walk upon and receive their sustenance from, but also to the animals that came after them. As Hpu Hka Choo’s only son Hpa Thoo Pa¹⁸ narrated the tale to me one rainy afternoon in August:

When humans were first created by Y`wa they were few, greatly outnumbered by all the other animals in existence. For their part, the other animals steadily grew weary of the slowly multiplying humans and plotted to wipe them all out before there were too many and before they threatened to eat and kill them all. Yet, not all the animals agreed to this complot. Behind the backs of the others, several animals felt sorry for the humans and decided to protect them.

The first animals that banded together and set out to be rid of the humans once and for all were the insects. However, the pangolin and the porcupine got wind of this plan and came up with an idea to foil it. As the insects assembled, the pangolin and the porcupine said to them, “it is very far to go, so why not ride there on our backs”. The insects agreed and, when they had almost arrived, the pangolin and the porcupine rolled into a ball and stuck out their spikes and killed the insects before they could hurt the humans. Later, when the other animals decided to attack the humans together, the tiger, the hornbill, the gibbon, and the bear stood nearby and let out a collective earth-shattering roar scaring the other animals away from the humans. So, without these animals, there would be no more humans left on earth.

¹⁸ As discussed earlier all names ending in Pa or Moh are teknomyms denoting father of, and mother of respectively. So this man is the father of Hpa Thoo.

Hpa Thoo Pa then concluded this story by listing all the animals that are *ta du ta htu*, “taboo”,¹⁹ to hunt and to kill. As I furiously jotted down this list I noticed that a great number of these taboos pertained to the very same animals that, as this tale described, had protected the first humans from harm. It is, for example, strictly prohibited to kill and eat tigers and hornbills. As he leant back and relit the hand-rolled cigar he was smoking with a glowing ember from the hearth that we were huddled around, he asserted, much as is the case should one neglect to feed hungry spectres, that terrible consequences such as misfortune, illness and even death await those who would flout these prohibitions. As such it is important to care for and to maintain good relations not only with spectres but also with the different beasts of the realm. He speaks of this as *ray daw*, to “befriend” these animals. I shall return to this notion of “befriending” in the final chapter.

Therefore, these oral histories trace an original ontological state of co-presence and interdependence with other living beings that underline the importance of respecting and maintaining good relations with them. Moreover, both taboos on eating the flesh of certain animals that humans have deep relations with and a sense of debt to, and continued practices of feeding Y’wa’s “emissaries”, suggest that the people of these highlands engaged in sustained attempts to maintain a continuity with their ancestors, and to carry on their practices. Indeed, another term for animism in Sgaw Karen is *pgha moh lu pa lah*, that can be translated as “people who feed and follow the practices of their ancestors” (c.f. Buadaeng 2003). However, while these histories and practices handed down over the generations were in a sense ancient, they were far from unsullied or pure. On the contrary, as I show in the next section, upon closer inspection we find “purity is not an option” (Tsing 2015, 27; c.f. Raffles 2017), many of these tales being deeply interwoven with biblical stories. Much as has been shown in other corners of the earth, these histories and practices were less ancient than they were adaptive, continually shaped and reworked by and in relation to on-going histories of contact with other places.

¹⁹ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=taboo&look4k=&submit=Lookup#> I return to the topic of taboo in the following chapters

Contact Histories of Power and Possession

As I heard various and varying iterations of these cosmogonies and witnessed their continuation in day-to-day practices I was struck by how these “ancient” and “ancestral” tales as they are often referred to by missionaries and activist alike, were peppered with figures and elements that I recognised from biblical stories. While a handful of the first missionaries to this area (and even a few fervently Christian Karen I met in upstate New York and the refugee camps in Thailand) have floated the idea that this could be a sign that residents of these highlands are “fallen” Christians, in this thesis I explore the co-presence of biblical tales as a form of syncretism (c.f. Womack 2005; Horstmann 2011b; South 2008, 182–90). These oral histories also act as a kind of documentation, an archive, of deep, vexed, and complex histories of contact with far-flung places.

Following Eric Wolf, it is far from the case that societies or “cultures” in the highlands along the Salween River are bounded objects that, like billiard balls, simply spin off in each other upon coming into contact (1982, 6–7; c.f. Geertz 1974, 38). The impossibility of considering societies in isolation, and the deep effects of contact and encounter with other societies, have long been asserted by anthropologist from Wolf through Edwin Ardener ([1984] 2012) and James Clifford (1997) to Richard White (1991). As Clifford argues, stories of contact between different places and cultures cannot be confined to the diametrically opposed poles of either absorption or resistance (like Wolf’s billiard balls perpetually spinning off one another). Thus, Clifford implores that, rather than viewing this kind of syncretism as sullyng of or loss of identity, we might better understand identity as “not a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject”, and that stories of interaction be “more complex, less linear and teleological” (Clifford 1997, 344). More recently, Anna Tsing has talked of this in terms of “histories of contamination”, in the ways in which categories emerge through contact across difference, reminding us that “changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival” (Tsing 2015, 27–29).

Thus, to more thoroughly address these eclectic tales of cosmogony, as I touched upon in the opening chapter, I treat these highlands as a “contact zone”, and these

tales as “contact histories”. As we have seen, in focusing on contact zones and histories we become more acutely attuned to not only the conquest and domination often implicit in such imperial encounters, but also to playful negotiations, improvisation, and co-option (Pratt 2008; Clifford 1997). Following this, I draw on Clifford’s understanding of contact zones as “relational ensembles sustained through processes of cultural borrowing, appropriation and translation – multidirectional processes” (2003, 34). Richard White describes this as a “middle ground” that, as opposed to acculturation which proceeds under the conditions that the dominant group dictates the terms, might be better grasped as mutual accommodation by creative co-translation (1991, xxvi).

In exploring these tales as contact histories, we find that they also bear with them imbricated and co-present cosmologies of power and regimes and claims to ownership that themselves are open to constant negotiation and at times selectively appropriated. As such, these tales are unsettled, labile and constantly shifting in unpredictable and “lively” ways (van Dooren and Rose 2016). These dynamics first began to become apparent to me as I attempted to triangulate indigenous cosmogonies, the point of origin of all other histories, with written accounts from this highland region.

Tales of missionary contact

As I delved into written accounts of the histories of these hills, looking for similar tales of cosmogonies, I was surprised to find that, time and time again, adventurers, travellers, ethnographers, missionaries, and colonial officers alike were far more inclined to focus their attentions on tales of the origins of this specific collection of people labelled “the Karen” (*pgah k’nyaw* in the restricted sense). Tales, of the creation of the universe, such as those above that I was commonly regaled with, were largely absent from their accounts. One of the few exceptions to this relative lacuna can be found in Reverent Harry Ignatius Marshall’s classic book, *The Karen People of Burma* (1922), from the turn of last century. This book often stands as the key or even sole text in the discussion on the history of Thoo Hkoh or *moh lah pa lah* practices, cosmologies, and tales among Karenic speaking groups in Southeast Myanmar (e.g.

Hayami 2004; McConnachie 2014). However, from the very outset of this book, Marshall asserts that he is part of the “great missionary enterprise” to lead the Karen on an “upward path” by “bring them the best of our Christian civilisation” (Marshall 1922, vii–ix). As a consequence, we find that his accounts of indigenous cosmogonies in Southeast Myanmar – while bearing similarities to those I heard detailing the feats of the Drongo bird and the termites as the laboured together with Y’wa to create the earth (ibid, 211–212) – continually conflate the creative demiurge Y’wa with the Christian God, and the trickster *Mu Kaw Lee* with the Christian Satan.²⁰ Moreover, drawing on accounts from other missionaries, he then weaves in elements from the Book of Genesis (a forbidden fruit and a serpent) into his re-telling of this cosmogony (ibid, 213–216). As such, the weaving in of biblical tales appears to be part and parcel of concerted efforts to reframe these highland peoples as “fallen” Christians, such that these missionaries were simply redeeming them (ibid, 211–217). One missionary, Adoniram Judson, has even claimed that Karen, along with the Chin and Kachin are one of the lost tribes of Israel (as cited in Thangtungnung 2015, 46; c.f. Renard 2003, 6; Keyes [1977] 1994, 52). Through these missionary renderings of *thoo hkoh* cosmogonies into written documents, we find that these lively histories are reworked and rewoven together with the Baptist Christian creation stories of the author, based on biblical tales of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man.

At first glance, these documented retellings of oral histories pertaining to Y’wa and the creation of the universe would appear to be rather clear-cut cases of the common tendency among missionaries to translate and co-opt indigenous histories for their own ideological means. Yet, delving back into the oral histories from the highlands along the Salween that I present above we find that cases of missionary appropriation and co-option are rarely so simple, nor are those being proselytised so passive – missionising often being a multidirectional process (c.f. Clifford 2003, 34). The people residing in these highlands whom I met constantly engaged in reciprocal processes of their own translating, appropriating and co-opting of these bible stories

²⁰ Marshall even goes as far as to consistently gender *Mu Gaw Lee* male, presumably to better align with the Christian accounts of Lucifer, in the face of all the evidence he produces to make this case where she is always referred to with a female prefix (*mu* or *naw*) and, as I found, referred to exclusively by the pronoun “she” (Marshall 1922, 213).

into their oral histories, towards their own means. As such, these differing and often conflicting stories existed side by side.

Returning to the accounts of the origin of the universe I collected from these highlands along the Salween River, we saw that the first woman was referred to as Naw Eh Oo while the first man was called Saw Aw Dah (again, the female part comes first). These names bear more than a passing resemblance to Eve and Adam from the Book of Genesis in the Bible. Moreover, while in the tales I heard there was no mention of scheming serpents and forbidden fruits that Marshall emphasised, these themes sometimes seeped into everyday discourse. For example, I often heard men who were actively practicing and were self-defined Thoo Hkoh or Buddhist refer to finding their wife as “getting back my rib”. On one occasion in which Hpa Thoo Pa used this phrase, I asked him, and the others who sat around chatting in my home, what this pertains to. He then explained rather matter-of-factly that this phrase comes from how the first woman came from the first man’s rib. I later heard many a villager explain this phrase in the same matter-of-fact manner. Yet, this biblically inflected expression was regularly interspaced with tales and of *hta* where, like the cosmogony given above and also offered by Hpa Thoo Pa himself, it was made abundantly clear that Y’wa created woman and man together at the same time. In this way it becomes apparent that this striking syncretism and the co-presence of seemingly conflicting accounts can be found not only in missionary texts, but also in both indigenous histories and everyday discourses and practices in these highlands. In this manner, we find that these indigenous tales and practices might be better grasped as ongoing “contact histories” (Clifford 1997) that also document deep histories of encounters with missionaries. As many others have pointed out, conversion is always an active process (e.g. Salemink 2015).

These findings stand somewhat in contrasts to the work coming out of the burgeoning Anthropology of Christianity. In this body of work conversion is often grasped as a “rupture” or “radical break” with the continuity of the past, introducing new models of time and belief (Coleman 2003; J. Robbins 2007). Yet, as we see was the case in the highlands along the Salween River patently “indigenous” or Thoo Hkoh histories were co-present with biblical tales, often interweaved with Judeo-Christian

elements and themes. As I pried deeper, I found that tales from these highlands were crowded with often seemingly contradictory and jumbled histories, folded in on each other and deployed differently in different contexts. As Christian Lund notes, while a point of rupture “makes certain contractions visible”, the old practices, tales and ownership regimes are not simply swept away in the torrent but rather continued alongside the new (2017, 4–5). In this light, I find it most felicitous to approach these hills as less of a frontier with a history set out as a span of ruptures per se, and more as ongoing “contact histories” and “stories of struggle” that are disruptive, where power imbalances are not resolved but endure into the future (Clifford 1997, 193). Yet, following Lund, I argue that these contact histories are not only the constant interweaving of tales and practices, but also of ownership regimes and cosmologies of power. Indigenous histories, cosmologies of power and regimes of ownership are never monolithic, but rather, ongoing, indeterminate, flexible, and often playful.

The way these tales document deep histories of contact begins to become clearer as they move on to describe how the first humans came to reside in these highlands after surviving the onslaught of the other animals. These tales describe the exploits of three brothers, who were to become the ancestors of the three main groups of humans. Tales of these three brothers have been exhaustively studied by several generations of researcher so I will only touch upon them briefly here. However, beyond many of the common academic depictions of these tales, I bring forward the rather “lively” ways these stories, like life processes themselves, are constantly shifting to meet the current situation.

Indigenous negotiations

Before I could begin fieldwork in Ta K’Thwee duh, as mentioned in the opening chapter, I had to make a stop-off in the regional centre in the valley to report myself and present my official documents, my “KNU passport”, to the local authorities. On the way, another researcher who was headed further north and I rested at the top of the Bu Thoe ridge, at a wind-buffered KNLA checkpoint with a small teashop beside it. Here we met an old-timer, whom I later learnt was called Hpu Kee. He was sat chuntering to himself as he attempted to wrestle off a pair of army boots far too large

for his feet as we approached. Upon seeing us he exclaimed at the top of his lungs “*pu dee wahl!*” or “white younger brother!” Even some eight months later, after he had tried to marry me off to one of his daughters and taken me into his confidence about his financial woes, he and some of the other older men continued to refer to me as *pu dee wah*. While this name was, in a sense, a term of endearment, it references perhaps one of the most well-documented histories among Karenic speaking groups (e.g. Marshall 1922; Cheesman 2002; Renard 2003; Hayami 2004; South 2008), that was told and re-told to me on numerous occasions throughout my stay in these highlands.

In broad brushstrokes, these tales tell of how, at some undisclosed point after creation, there were three human brothers. These three brothers were to become the main groups of humanity: the oldest brother is the ancestor of all Karen; the middle brother is the ancestor of all dark-skinned peoples; and the youngest brother, Pu Dee Wah, is the ancestor of all light-skinned peoples. When Y’wa came to collect these first humans the oldest brother, the ancestor of the Karen, was away working on his rice field and they left without him. Later he lost his “golden book” of knowledge given to him by Y’wa, or it was stolen by Pu Dee Wah. Thus, the oldest brother found himself orphaned, alone, and with no written language. Eventually, he migrated to the highlands along the Salween, being the first human to step foot here, and his progeny are the current Sgaw Karen speaking residents of this area. Moreover, it is prophesised that *pu dee wah*, the younger white brother would one day come back and return his older brother’s golden book. In this framework, *goh la wah* or white foreigners such as myself are often seen as this returning sibling, and obligated to help their long-suffering older brother. As one visiting elder insisted to me, the eyes of those *goh la wah* that do not help their older brother will turn *khah*, “pale”, implying they will become light blue or blind.

This particular tale of three brothers told among Sgaw Karen speakers has been subject to a great deal of heated academic debate since the 1970s (e.g. Keyes [1977] 1994; 2003; Hayami 2004; Renard 2003; Rajah 1990). Eschewing early missionary notions that these tales add credence to the proposition that Karen are “fallen” Christians, many researchers tended to highlight what Stephen Campbell has labelled the “instrumentalist” aspects of these tales, as elite articulations to further ethnic

claims (2014, 241; c.f. Rajah 1990; 2002). As such, these tales are usually taken to be the result of elite captures and co-options of history and practices. More recently, however, researchers have begun foregrounding the syncretic aspects of these oral histories to argue that they evidence an indigenous mode of dealing with alterity (Hayami 2004). I follow and build on these arguments to forward that these oral histories might also be grasped as an indigenous record of the past as “contact histories” or as a “middle ground” (White 1991). Anthropologist Yoko Hayami (2004), for example, neatly demonstrates the ways in which these tales of Pu Dee Wah resonated with day-to-day practices among Sgaw Karen speakers in northern Thailand and their ways of dealing with novelty and alterity.

Hayami regularly found that when she arrived in a certain village, a person there would inform her they had dreamt of, or otherwise had a premonition of, her arrival – not unlike the premonitions of the returning “younger white brother” (ibid 2004, 29). Indeed, I myself experienced something quite similar during my time on the other side of the border. Once, when Naw Paw and I spontaneously decided to take a trip to the small teashop at the checkpoint where I first met Hpu Kee, we were surprised to find that the proprietor had cooked a yam curry especially for us. When, rather taken aback, we asked how this could be she replied, somewhat matter-of-factly, that the night before she had dreamt we would visit. Investigating such incidents of premonition and connecting them to histories of the returning *pu dee wah*, Hayami argues that they illustrate an indigenous regime of causality and temporality, where events are apprehended “ex post facto”, after the fact, as a premonition or a prophesy (Hayami 2004, 29). In this manner, both inexplicable events and alterity – be this the unannounced arrival of pale-faced missionaries preaching the gospel, or strange anthropologists visiting with so many questions on their lips – are drawn into existing narrative schemes and histories to contextualise them and give them meaning. As such, events, and indeed history itself, are understood neither uni-lineally nor sequentially, but rather, in a far more circular and ad hoc manner, ex post facto. Histories are constantly reworked in relation to pressing current events.

To grasp this tendency Kirsten McConnachie quite helpfully describes these practices and oral histories among Sgaw Karen speaking groups as akin to a

palimpsest (2014, 58–79). A palimpsest is a stone tablet or parchment where, while the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing, traces of the original remain. In much the same way, oral histories such as those of cosmogony and of the brotherhood of humanity demonstrate an imbrication and entwining of different historical durations and regimes that all leave their traces (ibid, 58). Moreover, as Hayami emphasises, beyond simple traces these histories are embroiled in an active and ongoing process. In this manner, these oral histories emerge in encounters in which “[p]eople try to persuade others who are different from them by appealing to what they perceive to be values and practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both values and practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings” (White 1991, xxvi). Following this, I prefer to grasp these histories less as elite captures and co-options by powerful colonial and missionary actors, but rather, as lively histories of contact.

Lively Histories of Contact

Returning to the notion of contact zones, we find that Pratt’s initial impetus coining this term was a 400-year old indigenous rewriting of the Christian history (Pratt 1991, 33–37), that bears an uncanny resemblance to these oral histories of creation and of the brotherhood of humanity. Here she shows how, in a letter addressed to the Spanish king and dated in the city of Cuzco in Peru in the year 1613, Filipe Guaman Poma de Ayala wrote *The First New Chronical and Good Government*. In this “new chronical”, he takes over the official Spanish genre and turns it to his own ends of “constructing a new picture of the Christian world with Andean rather than European people at the centre of it” (ibid, 34). Strikingly similar to the accounts from the highlands along the Salween River recounted to me, Filipe Guaman Poma de Ayala retold the biblical story of Adam and Eve, subtly incorporating Amerindians into it as descendants of one of the sons of Noah. In this manner it “invokes a selective collaboration with and appropriation of” missionary idioms that are merged with indigenous idioms in the creation of a new contact zone (ibid, 35). It is in these “spaces of imperial contact” that indigenous people “appropriate” and “talk back” to powerful forms of domination as they “come into contact with one another and

establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt 2008, 7–8). Much the same can be seen in these histories from the Papun hills, where different geographies and histories are “co-present”, bible stories of Adam’s rib sit side by side with those of man and woman being created together, and, as we have seen, these encounters are inherently interactive and improvisational (cf. *ibid*, 8). Thus, looping back to the beginning of this chapter, it becomes clearer how these tales not only carry on, making and maintaining continuity and conviviality with the origin or all *ta thoo ta pgho* in Y’wa, but are also continually shifting.

Consequently, as we saw in the opening chapter, I draw on the work of Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose (2016) to describe these contact histories as “lively”. Rather than monolithic, we find that these histories are responsive and generative. In line with the work of Tim Ingold (2006), as I have stressed in the introduction to this chapter, these tales remain “open to the world”, constantly being retold and weaved together with other tales, while at the same time carrying on, maintaining continuity with the sources of all potency and power. As such these are lively histories of contact.

Shortly after these lands were colonised by the British, beginning in 1824 (Gravers 1999, 9), several generations of Karenic speaking intellectuals began their own retellings of these oral histories. While, ostensibly, reworkings of these tales were aimed towards facing down the colonial government, as we have seen, they were also, in part, aimed towards furthering their political ends. In documenting and canonising the “The Karen History” as a bounded group with a definite and defined history, these first Karen intellectuals attempted to fix lively histories, hypostatizing and reifying them, in response to and as a way to negotiate similar missionary and colonial efforts.

“Karen: Their Nature and History”: Reified Official stories

From the 19th century onwards these lively migration and “oldest brother” (Hinton and Hinton 2000) stories were progressively documented, standardised and reified to become the monolithic official History of the Karen (with a capital H). This is the History held forth and promoted by the Karen National Union (KNU). The first official Karen chronicler, Dr T Thanbyah began his work writing this History upon

completing his own migration journey to study theology in Rochester, New York.²¹ Upon his return to what was then British Burma, he began collecting *hta* (dramatic poems that act as storehouses of history), much like those I have addressed above, along with eyewitness accounts to draw up the first indigenous historical account of the “Karen people” as a delineated group, beginning with *The Karens and Their Persecution: AD 1824-1854*. His particular narration of these lively histories in part cleaves closely to these *hta*, while weaving in some rather subtle difference to emphasise the role of Christian missionaries (Cheesman 2002, 206). In 1881 he then drew on this new, more static, official History to create the first Karen political body, the Karen National Association (KNA) or *daw k’lu*, “all the tribes/species/groups”. This work was then continued on by missionary-educated Saw Aung Hla (who, coincidentally also studied in New York state). As Nick Cheesman notes, this work was of a larger field and broader objective than Dr. T. Thanbyah’s writings, relying more heavily on these lively oral histories, mostly as narrated in the form of *hta* (2002, 205–6). The resulting work *The Karen History* (c.1932) was then taken up by the renamed Karen National Union as the monolithic History of all Karenic speaking peoples. Take the opening paragraphs from the KNU’s official website KNUHQ.org in a section entitled, *A Nation, Their Nature and History*:

Historically, the Karen descend from the same ancestors as the Mongolian people. The earliest Karen settled in Htee-Hset Met Ywa (Land of Flowing Sands), a land bordering the sources of the Yang-tse-Kiang River in the Gobi Desert. From there, we migrated southwards and gradually entered the land now known as Burma about 739 B.C. We were, according to most historians, the first settlers in this new land. The Karen named this land Kaw-Lah, meaning the Green Land. We began to peacefully clear and till our land free from all hindrances. Our labours were fruitful and we were very happy with our lot. So we changed the name of the land to Kawthoolei, a land free of all evils, famine, misery and strife: Kawthoolei, a pleasant, plentiful and peaceful

²¹ In 2016 I joined a group of Karen that had been resettled to upstate New York by the UNHCR on a “pilgrimage” to his former school very close to the city they now reside in.

country. Here we lived characteristically simple, uneventful and peaceful lives.²²

In many ways this account cleaves closely to the oral histories we have seen. It locates the origin of these karenic speakers in to a place beyond the Htee Hseh Meh Y'wa, "river of flowing sands" (skirting around Aung Hla's more wild assertions that these people in fact have their origin in Babylon). However, in this particular reworking, steeped in the colonial racial biology of these times, this river of flowing sand is identified as the Gobi Desert. In this manner the origin of these peoples is said to be Mongolian. This assertion appears to have emerged from, and to be an articulation of, prevalent colonial discourses on the Karen as a sub-set of the Mongoloid "race" (e.g. Marshall 1922, 18; Falla 1991, 13). In this manner, while the missionary retelling of the creation of the world subtly altered oral histories to appeal to the authority of biblical passages, the Karen intellectuals' own retellings were articulated to also appeal to the authority of what were then established scientific facts at the time, such as to the racial origin of these Karenic speakers, that viewed from the present bear rather problematic connotations. In drawing on both Saw Aung Hla and Dr. T. Thanbyah's written and reified records, in the official KNU History, with these origins established, a temporal jump is made to the near present moment, when Pu Dee Wah, the younger white brother, in the figure of the missionary or colonist, returns. This next chapter of history on their website is entitled Karen Nationalism:

Through the creation of a new written Sqaw [sic] Karen script in 1830, and the Pwo Karen script 10 years later, the Karen oral tradition was transformed into written form. Our history was being taught in the newly formed schools. An ethnic consciousness was born.

Omitted in this account is the fact that this new written script was created by Baptist missionaries by adapting the Burmese one as they translated the Bible into local languages in this area.²³ Moreover, akin to many other written accounts of the

²² <https://www.knuhq.org/public/en/about/background>

²³ And, in another case of striking happenstance, that some see as divinity, one of the key missionaries who assisted the translation, Cephus Bennet, came from a city in upstate New York that is now home to the second

histories of these people, official or otherwise, a time-space compression is smuggled into the narrative. In these retellings the history of all Karen speaking people is bookended between two key events. These tales of cosmogony, and the entangled and interdependent state of power and potency of more-than-humans is silenced to bring forward a history that begins in a flight (Falla 1991, 14; c.f. Tsing 2015, 31). These tales begin with a migration, after the Karen had been persecuted and dispossessed, they finally come to rest in this green, lush land, *Kaw Lah* (literally “the green land or nation”). These events are then reified and canonised into “The History of the Karen”.

The period following this event is then described as a kind of lost arcadia, “free from all hindrances” with the residents of this Green Land “happy with our lot”. A state of stasis and isolation is implied in these assertions of an Edenic ideal, of uneventfulness and stagnation, drawing close to notions of noble savagery. As such, historical narration ceases: these times are characterised by a prolonged state of stagnant waiting for Pu Dee Wah, in the figure of the white missionaries and colonists, to return. This is then juxtaposed to the second key event that restarts historical narration, the arrival of the youngest brother. The retuning of Pu Dee Wah with their book of knowledge then births this “ethnic consciousness”, transfiguring them from a fractured and scattered group of peoples, isolated temporarily and physically, to a nation in waiting. This official history was then furnished with a national anthem, a flag, a national day (Karen New Year, based on the date that T. Thanbyah calculated “the Karen” arrived in Burma from “Mongolia”), and all the other trappings of a nation state.

Therefore, when the British colonial government officially recognised the KNA-sanctioned national day as public holiday, as the KNU History states, “they effectively endorsed the Karen view of their history as recorded by Dr T. Thanbyah and Aung Hla, identifying them as the first inhabitants of Burma”. This iteration again subtly reworks these (formerly) lively histories but, in the process, fixes them as it attempts to settle claims of indigeneity and their status as a nation in waiting.

largest concentration of Karen in the US after Minnesota, from a church that now services mostly Karen parishioners.

As such, in this reading of the History, the Karen as *daw k'lu*, the collection of all the different Karenic speaking groups are positioned not only as the indigenous peoples of these highlands but also as a nation. In this way, we see how the KNU is attempting, in James C. Scott's (1998) terms, to simplify histories and make them "legible" to the colonial movement. I come back to this argument in chapters four and five, where I show how ensembles of activists, farmers, students and armed groups are attempting to make indigenous land possession practices and political cosmologies "legible" to conservation organisations, the Myanmar government, and the KNU.

Through this series of moves, the KNU has positioned itself as the sole legitimate government of these people, empowered with the ability to own and control the earth, much like any other nation-state. As the KNU's account of their history concludes, their government "fully recognises and encourages private ownership and welcomes foreign investment". As the first KNU Land Law Policy written in 1974 goes on to emphasise, "the land must be in our hands" (I return to this point in chapter five).

Upon closer inspection of this official KNU History of the highlands along the Salween River, however, we find that, like most other historical documentations of Myanmar/Burma, it is premised on notions of long durations of isolation and decline. As Rhodes and Wittekind (2018a) have shown – both in urban centres such as Yangon and the rural margins such as Shan state – in historical depictions of Myanmar, there is a tendency to emphasise long period of isolation and decline in Myanmar. Thus, the periods that came prior to key moments, such as the period before Myanmar's "transition" from authoritarianism,²⁴ is often characterised in the negative, by a presumed lack (ibid, 172). These types of a-temporal historical analyses have equally been applied to studies of land and immovable property, and of customary and traditional tenure practices (ibid 2018a, 174; c.f. Li 2010; 2014b). In these a-temporal modes of historical narration practices, people, and places are often grasped as vulnerable to and slowly coming under greater threat from "the outside", that will bring them violently into the present.

²⁴ In 2005 the then United States Secretary of State labelled Myanmar, along with North Korea and Iran as an "Outpost of tyranny", and placed considerable sanctions on the country. Relations only began to thaw again in direct correlation to this "transition" out of tyranny (Steinberg 2012)

Consequently, these types of time-space compressions might be grasped as a “historical leap” (Rhoads and Wittekind 2018, 178) that not only simplifies and flattens complex and vexed histories, but can also efface messy, unsettled, co-present and conflicting claims to ownership and authority (ibid, 187, 193). Lively unsettled and unsettling histories are fixed and placed outside of time to smooth them out. This bears a striking resemblance to the way the Bolsheviks attempted to create new national republics by “hypostatizing registers of identity that had previously been far more fluid and situational” (Reeves 2014, 80).

However, these early attempts by the KNU to hypostatise and reify lively oral histories and practices cannot be understood separately from attempts by their colonial counterparts to efface all deep histories of contact along these highlands – refiguring this space as a frontier, and reimagining more-than-human life as a set of extractable natural resources.

Violent Frontiers and “Cut-Throat People”

In the process of forging frontiers, as Anna Tsing so evocatively phrases it, “entrepreneurs and armies [...] disengage nature from local ecologies and livelihoods, ‘freeing up’ natural resources”, as raw materials that can then be extracted and sold for vast profits (2005, 28). In this way, local systems of human access and lifeways are effaced and replaced by the capitalist and extractivist logics (ibid). Particularly since the beginning of the colonial period, very similar processes of “freeing up natural resources” have been afoot in the highlands along the Salween River. Here land and forests were reimagined by the British in a way that it was, as official and scholar J.S. Furnivall put it, a “free gift from nature” (1909; c.f. Bryant 2007, 149). Through this reimagining, a violent resource frontier was forged along the Papun hills, having profound effects that continue to reverberate into the present. Returning to tales of people who cut throats that I opened this chapter with we find that, these oral histories document the past, like a palimpsest (McConnachie 2014), continuing to bear these “traces” of deep histories of encounter into the present (c.f. Stoler 2008; 2013), acting as warnings, not only to children.

In this light, these early Karenic speaking intellectuals' attempts to formulate an official History of "the Karen" can be seen as the dawning of nascent struggles to push back against powerful colonial discourses. These Colonial logics sought, on the one hand, to reify and flatten lively histories and, on the other, to erase all traces of deep contact to transform such spaces into resource frontiers. As we shall see in chapters four and five, struggles to push back against these logics in Southeast Myanmar continue into the present.

Forging a Teak Frontier

As touched upon in the opening chapter, when the British Empire first forcefully annexed the highlands along the Salween River to the British-Indian Empire during the Anglo-Burmese wars beginning in 1824, they were set apart from "Burma Proper". Indeed, in the preceding pre-colonial period, the residents of these highlands first entered into written accounts as "the wild cattle of the hills" in what is now Myanmar, and as "holders of the 'wild' for the 'sown'... the 'marchmen' of the civilised" across the border in what is now Thailand (Falla 1991, 17–18; Keyes 2003, 211). Consequently, these highland areas regularly acted as buffer-zones between city states that were, on the whole, left to their own devices. The people residing here regularly oscillated between engaging in patron-client relations with the lowland polities and escaping into the hills away from their reach (Scott 2009; Gravers 1999, 21). Thus, at the beginning of the colonial period, the British inherited and largely continued the practices of the Burmese kings that preceded them (e.g. Boutry et al. 2017, 52). This was perhaps best evidenced in the way the colonial government designated these highlands, renamed the "Salween district", as a frontier area to be governed "by their own tribal chieftains" (Furnivall 1960, 6–7, 12; Jolliffe 2016, 9). As we found in the previous chapter, these highlands along the Salween appear to have never fully been brought under centralised state rule and, to this day, remain a largely autonomous zone under de jure KNU control (Jolliffe 2016, 9). The creation of these frontier zones and the resulting "indirect" governance, would appear to have been part of what Mikael Gravers describes as a colonial "political and economic policy of divide

and rule” to segregate certain groups and make them more governable (1999, 30–31).²⁵ However, this “indirect” rule was by no means tantamount to people being left to their own devices, isolated from the rest of Myanmar. On the contrary, the classification of these highlands as a frontier initiated a massive intensification of increasingly violent contact – first with venture capitalists, and steadily with the colonial state in the guise of the forestry department.

In the early 19th century, prior to colonisation, British interest in Burma was first piqued by the promises it held of vast reserves of teak forest, often known as “the land of teak” (Bryant 1997b, 1; 2007, 146). Thus, in part, the drive to colonise these lands was spurred on by the hunt for new zones of valorisation, in the quest for teak, along with valuable gems and fertile rice growing land (Bryant 2007, 149; 1997b, 23; I. Brown 2005; c.f. Makki 2014). As a result, when the lands along the Salween River were folded into British India following the second Anglo-Burmese war (1852), while day-to-day governance was left to “tribal chieftains”, the rich forests here were left to private logging firms (Bryant 1997b, 23–32). In the early colonial period the British, inspired by a doctrine of economic liberalism, engaged in a form of *laissez-faire* forestry that led traders to flock to these forests (ibid, 25–27). The rush for teak precipitated the opening up of a “resource frontier” in which fantasies of old forms of savagery were revived (Tsing 2005, 28–29). Old narratives that people living here were “wild” and animal-like (Falla 1991; Keyes 2003), and that the lands they lived on were a kind of *terra nullius* (c.f. Makki 2014), “a free gift of nature” (Furnivall 1909), proliferated in this period. In this manner, previous deep histories of contact and of contested possession were effectively effaced, to reimagine these highlands as an unpeopled expanse of readily extractable resources. As such these highlands steadily became “violent environments” (Peluso and Watts 2001).

However, as the destruction wrought by this unfettered form of timber extraction slowly became evident, the colonial government began to change tack and engage in a form of “scientific forestry” that had the effect of bringing these highlands steadily under closer state control.

²⁵ These policies were themselves built on colonial models of a “plural society” where different groups lived side by side but separate, only meeting in the market-place (Furnivall 1948, 304), mirroring later models of liberal peace (Paris 2004)

In the wake of the widespread destruction of teak forests, the colonial state began moving away from the doctrine of economic liberalism to increasingly intervening in the teak trade. This move was inaugurated by the creation of the Forest Department in 1856 that asserted control over both forests and forest users along the Salween River in attempts to manage them scientifically (Bryant 1997b, 53). The introduction of “scientific forestry” was headed up by the introduction of a new framework of rules and regulations regarding forest use and prohibiting unauthorised felling, which “transform[ed] the state’s nominal ownership of teak forests into an actively exercised proprietorial right” (ibid, 45). As has been well documented across the colonised expanses of Asia, the mapping, resource inventories, censuses, and draconian restrictions on access to forested land implicated in scientific forestry were deeply coercive and often violent (Scott 1998; Peluso 1991; P. Boomgaard 1992; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Bryant 1997b). In both these moves, from *laissez-faire* to scientific forestry, the processes involved were as bloody as they were disruptive on pre-existing practices among the residents of these highland areas (Bryant 2007, 149). Moreover, in being reimagined as open “resource frontiers” these highlands became indelibly linked with the extraction of natural resources from the land and forests (ibid).

These colonial policies left an indelible mark on the Papun hills. Following independence and the resulting protracted armed conflict, the country continued to be wedded to battles over the control over “natural resources”. The effects of British attempts to erase deep histories of contact and of contested possession along these highlands, and to “free up natural resources” by wresting them from local ecologies and lifeways, reverberate into the present. These were the first blushes with what Tania Li (2014a) describes as “capitalist relations” where people can, at times, become active participants in capitalist and extractivist ventures. Moreover, the gamut of organisational and technical innovations brought in during the colonial period, such as forest maps and censuses, allowed a degree of control over these forested highlands that would have been unimaginable during the rule of the successive Burmese and northern Thai city state that had preceded them (Bryant 2007, 153). Thus, as the armed conflicts dragged on, and as the reigning military Junta drew a “teak curtain”

around the country (Thawngmung 2006) to engage in a form of “hermit-authoritarianism” (Scott 2007), both the Tatmadaw and the KNU became increasingly dependent of the rich forests along the Salween to fund their militaries and as a link to the surrounding countries (Bryant 1997a; 2007). As Bryant notes, the extraction of teak became increasingly violent, resembling a military campaign (2007, 153). Yet, as I learnt from some of the older villagers who had themselves participated in the extraction of teak during its height in the 90s, both the KNU and the Tatmadaw regularly partnered with foreign, mostly Thai, logging firms who did the actual logging. This appears to have led to a laissez-faire policy of resource extraction that, not unlike the early colonial period, created a new “resource frontier”, once again precipitating a violent rush of outsiders to this area, decimating the forests.

While the KNU eventually enforced a moratorium on logging all along the Salween River, as the ceasefire continues to stagnate, new violent resource frontiers are constantly opening up, in ways that rehearse these older patterns. I delve deeper into the opening of new frontiers in Southeast Myanmar in chapter four. Returning to the current chapter, I end by revisiting these tales of cut-throat people that this chapter opened with to explore how they might help us better grasp these ongoing histories of violent resource frontiers and how these histories carry on.

Cut-throat people in more-than-human contact zones

As we found, upon arriving in Ta K’Thwee Duh many of the villagers feared that I might be a “cut-throat person”. These shadowy figures arrive unannounced in villages just as the dry season sets in and kidnap children. The heads of these children are then offered or “fed” to the spectres of an area of great importance and riches, such as Pgho Pgho Lee, to negotiate unknown, but potentially fabulous gains. Indeed, the spectre of human sacrifice loomed large over the villagers. Dee Nay, for instance, told of how his father conducted a *su ta gah ta*, a “divining”, beside a small hillock that was said to be the burial mound of a queen who was interred together with her fabulous riches. This divination involved scattering sand beside the mound and leaving it overnight. The footprint he found in the sand the next day would then indicate the offering demanded by the *k’sah*, the “owner”, of the mound in order for him to excavate here.

Yet, as Dee Nay laments, the next day his father returned to find a small child's footprint in the sand. Following these events, nobody dared excavate here, and plans of recovering the queen's riches were abandoned.

In both these tales we find that the riches of the earth can only be disentangled from local ecologies and practices at the terrible cost of their own children's lives, and only monstrous outsiders are willing to do this. These riches were by no means "free gifts from nature". As such, these tales appear to act as indigenous perspectives and comments on the violent nature of extractive endeavours.

Much as we have seen in stories of cosmogony and of the returning younger white brother, oral tales document deep histories of contact with other places. Yet, as becomes clearer in these particular tales of monstrous outsiders and human sacrifices, they also direct our attention towards what Pratt describes as the "coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (2008, 7–8) inherent in contact histories. Much as Michael Taussig (1980) has shown in his study of tales pertaining to dealings with the devil among plantation workers and miners in South America, people on the periphery of the capitalist world-system can offer us with critical vantage points on ongoing colonial and other capitalist extractivist activities (cf. Burman 2018, 50). Thus, in delving into these oral histories we not only learn about these indigenous people themselves, their cosmologies and their practices of dealing with novelty and alterity (Hayami 2004, 29; McConnachie 2014, 58–79; c.f. Canessa 2012). These oral histories also hold up a mirror that show us something about ourselves, as outsider observers, how these deep historical practices of violent extraction in these highlands always incur a terrible cost for the people residing here. Indeed, as Anders Burman (2018) points out, such tales also offer us with a critical vantage point on the inherently extractivist endeavour of ethnography, where anthropologist are often equated with monsters. As such, these are not "just stories to warn children not to wander too far from the village", as Naw Paw put it, but also warning of the dangers, inherent violence, and hidden costs of extractivist activities, be they mining, construction of infrastructure, or even ethnography.

However, as I begun this chapter by arguing, in the highlands along the Salween River people rarely distinguished between frames of explanation that would cast

these tales of cut-throat people as metaphors for the hidden cost of capitalist expansion, and those that cast these monstrous figures as possibly very real and dangerous presences that stalk these hills. Consequently, as I argue throughout this thesis, we must take seriously Naw Paw and Naw Ghaw's doubts that these were "just stories", and their assertions that these shadowy figures might well be among them. Both toyed with and fretted over the prospect that cut-throat people could be very real and dangerous figures, playing with this notion quite seriously. As such, we find that these highlands are located at the interstices of nation-states, but also, of human and more-than-human realms. Thus, in these contact zones, what "meet and grapple with each other" in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, are both human and more-than-humans. In this sense, I grasp these highlands as More-Than-Human Contact Zones where "humans are inescapably entangled with nonhuman agents" (Isaacs and Otruba 2019, 699).

In the following chapters, two and three, I explore these highlands as more-than-human contact zones where humans and other forms of life, both biotic and spectral, are in constant contact and negotiation. Here I show how these violent histories remain in these landscapes and continue to haunt them as ghosts that, as we shall see, "although belonging to a past era, [are] believed to continue into the present time in an empirical, rather than allegorical way" (Kwon 2014, 2).

Two | Possessed Landscapes



In this chapter I delve deeper into the differing ways in which the earth can be possessed up in the highlands along the Salween River. As we shall see, while things, animals, and (historically) people can and often are owned, the landscape itself can never be fully held in human possession. Following on from the previous chapter, we find that the current residents of these highlands understand themselves as neither the producers nor the first settlers of these lands. As a consequence, they often talk of the earth they live and farm on as, ultimately, borrowed from the spectral presences they cohabit these landscapes with. Thus, I describe these highlands as possessed landscapes. I deploy the word possessed here in its dual and entangled senses, to tease out the ways the Papun hills are at once: already occupied or haunted by, and under the power of, spectral presences or persons such as hungry ghosts, ancestors and territorial spirits; and also, ultimately, belong to/are owned by these spectres. As touched upon in the opening chapter, in this way I attempt to hold in focus both the cosmological sense of possessed as in occupied or haunted and the political-ecology sense as of multi-scalar conflicts over control and ownership. To this end, this notion of Possessed Landscapes delineates not only an alternative mode of ownership, but also of politics. I show how people's relations to their landscapes were orientated less toward control and management of "resources", instead demonstrating deep "contact histories" of co-presence and highly asymmetrical relations of power, as well as improvisation and negotiation (Pratt 2008, 7–8; 1991; Clifford 1997) between the human and the spectral realm.

To make this argument I begin by tying this chapter to the last, in how oral histories are neither abstract nor inert but carry on as remnants from the past, that continue to enact their ruination on the present, like revenants (Stoler 2008; 2013).

These objects are possessed by and carried on violent histories that they spread throughout the landscape. I then show how histories are also wedded to the landscapes they unfolded in, landscapes that people traverse on a daily basis, as traces or “footsteps” left behind, that continue to occupy the earth. These traces and histories are also accompanied by a whole host of hungry ghosts, ancestors and other spectral presences that, while usually unseen by humans, are constantly felt in sickening bodies and minds. As such, these landscapes are thick and crowded with spectral presences, that I argue may be better grasped as persons that humans share their lives with. Thus, these landscapes were not only “spiritual” or “potent” (Allerton 2009; 2013; Guillou 2017), that spectral presences possessed in the sense of haunting and controlling the terrain, but also possessed in the sense that were treated as, by extension, owned by these unseen more-than-humans. We see this in practices of constantly negotiating and feeding these hungry spectral presences to placate them, pay them, entreat them to borrow the earth, and to protect humans, their crops, and cattle from harm, as well as speaking of these spectres as *k’sah* or “owners”. I end this chapter by gesturing towards the ways this notion of possessed landscapes also points towards a mode of politics that I explore the deeper implications of in the next chapter.

Remnants/Revenants

While I was initially wary that the villagers may feel uncomfortable with being photographed and filmed by me, it soon became apparent that many relished the opportunity for a photoshoot, endlessly posing for the camera. Each time I returned to the village my small house would quickly become cramped with people wanting to see, comment and take home the latest photographs I had printed out for them. Some also insisted that I take photos with me in them so as they could have them at home, “to remember”, as my elderly neighbour Hpu Gay put it. On one occasion, when my intrepid partner at that time was visiting the village, Hpu Gay came by and asked that we visit his home for a photoshoot so he had something to remember us by. When we came in through the doors a few minutes later, we found that he had laid out some of their finest *g’nyaw*, Sgaw Karen clothes, that he wanted us to pose in for the photo. As I

rifled through the intricately hand-woven tunics and sarongs, my fingers fell upon a pair of black trousers with a texture quite different from the coarse cotton of the others. They had the undeniable feel of silk. When I asked Hpu Gay what they were made of it soon became clear that neither he nor my field assistant Naw Paw knew what silk was, even after my rather crude explanation of it being a thread that comes out of a certain worm's bottom. After a little back and forth, I ascertained that the trousers were hewn from the discarded parachutes from one of the many airdrops the British Air Force made over these hills during WW2, of soldiers, guns and (according to all the elders I met who still remember the taste) rather rancid rice and meat. Indeed, those old enough to remember these times talked incessantly about these airdrops, with all the drama and intrigue they entailed – of lighting signal fires and dodging Japanese soldiers. I found that these trousers and talk of provisions falling from the sky, like the photographs I took, help people “to remember”. To remember violent colonial pasts and bold acts of resistance, and for them to ponder aloud how it could be that all the grand promises made to them by the representatives of the British Empire, that after the war they would be granted autonomy and prosperity, had come to naught. I was also left to ponder what those who came after them would make of the photographs I gifted the villagers. As I dug deeper into how certain objects were tied to deep histories of contact, violence, colonialism and broken promises, I found the village and surrounding areas awash with remains from the past.

Some days later in Hpu Gay's oldest son's hut beside his family's paddy field, he brought out a British rifle, which he had stashed away in the rafters, to show me. Perhaps coming from one of the airdrops, or given by a colonial soldier, it had been given to him by his maternal aunt. He explained that the bullets were very hard to come by, and prohibitively expensive, so it was quite useless to them. But he hoped they might be able to sell it on. While this British rifle just so happened to be the only intact one left, countless others that had been reworked and recycled circulated in these highlands. As Hpu Waw demonstrated with his own hunting rifle I found him repairing in front of his home one sunny afternoon, commonly the barrel is the only part of the original weapon that remains intact. He, like most others in the village, had carved a new stock out of fresh wood, and added a firing mechanism fashioned out of

bits of metal and elastic bands to make a kind of matchlock rifle. To shoot it, the barrel has to first be filled with homemade black powder and lead shot bought in the local market, then tamped down. They use these weapons as a kind of musket for hunting all types of game, from small birds to muntjac and wild boar. These were also the only weapons they had at hand to defend themselves should the Myanmar army return again. Much like these rifles, helmets left by Japanese soldiers as they beat a hasty retreat in 1945 also continued to litter these highlands.

Much like the British and Japanese rifles, while some people kept these remains intact in hopes of future profit, most had reworked them, adapting them to very practical means. This became most apparent one rainy morning when I visited one of the oldest women in the area, Hpee Thoo, who could still remember how bad the British rice tasted. When I arrived at her house in a satellite hamlet of Ta K'Thwee Duh I found her outside feeding her chickens with a rather peculiar receptacle. Upon inquiring as to what the object she was using to scatter the feed with was she chirpily replied, with a surprised chuckle, that it had once belonged to a Japanese soldier (see the photo below). Her father Gwa Nee, from the founding lineage of the village and the first Christian convert, had joined the British to fight back the Japanese. During this time, he had taken the helmet from an emaciated Japanese soldier as they beat a hasty retreat in 1945. As the tide of the war had turned, the Japanese forces were scattered. Soldiers were left to flee through inhospitable forests in these highlands for many weeks, discarding their arms and uniforms, eating pig swill to survive and being chased off by grandmothers brandishing brooms at them as many of the elders gleefully recalled.

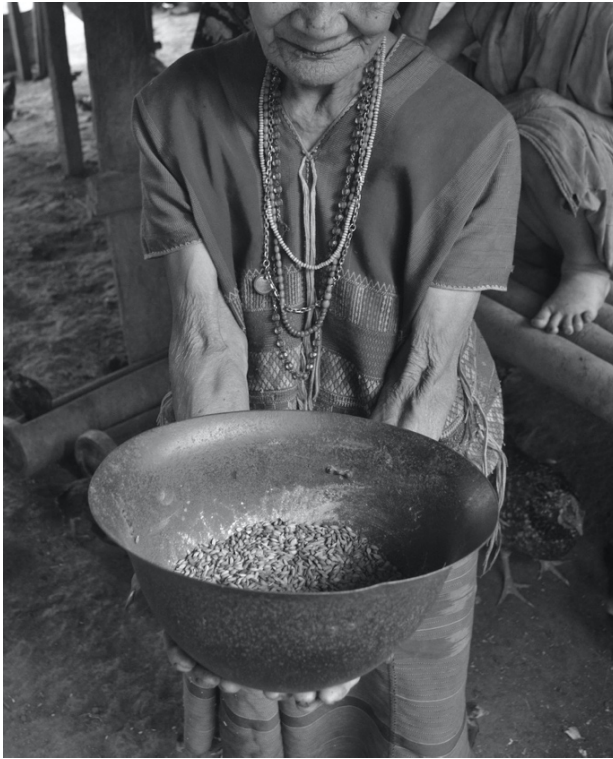


Figure 2.1 Japanese helmet/bird feeder (photo by author)

Much as we saw in the previous chapter, histories in these highlands are neither inert nor abstract but very much alive. Thus, we find that people were constantly in the process of negotiating with and reworking them. As the vignette above suggests, much the same can be said of people's relations to these remains from the past. Deep histories of contact and violence were not abstract stories but tangible and alive, often deeply tied to everyday objects such as trousers, guns, and helmets. It was through these remnants that, like revenants, the past continued to return and to haunt the present, and threatened to break into the future. Moreover, histories possessed not only the remnants but, as we shall see, also parts of the landscape.

Following this, I found that these remnants were not treated as artefacts, preserved for posterity like museum pieces. Rather, like the history/myths addressed earlier, they were constantly negotiated and reworked, to be turned into something useful to the present predicament. Hpee Thoo's father's Japanese army helmet, for

example, continues on as a remnant of the past, part of long histories of armed conflict, oppression and resistance, marked as the epitome of masculinity (Kilshaw 2009, 181). However, she has removed the foam and padding in the helmet and turned it, literally and symbolically, upside-down so that it could also be used in the deeply feminised routine activity of rearing and nurturing chickens.

In this manner, these remnants of the past are akin to what Ann Stoler (2008; 2013) calls “Imperial debris”. Rather than artefacts or evidence of colonial pasts, they are part and parcel of ongoing processes of the ruination in the present, and stretching into distant futures. History is active, continuing to have an effect on people’s everyday lives where imperial formations persist in material form, demonstrating “unfinished histories, not of a victimised past but of consequential histories of differential futures” (Stoler 2013, 11). As such they “occupy multiple historical tenses” and “selectively permeate the present as they shape both the conditional subjunctive and uncertain futures” (Stoler 2008, 194–95). The remains of a British parachute, repurposed into a pair of trousers, were not only part of latent violent pasts but also of potential futures, laden with peace and prosperity, where the colonial government held their promises to grant some level of self-determination. These were the remnants and afterlives of ongoing “contact histories” (Clifford 1997). Indeed, as we talked about these repurposed guns, helmets and parachutes I was struck by how many of the villagers would add that they sometimes wished the British would return and recolonise the area again.²⁶ Thus, through following these remnants of imperialism’s past we find that histories up along the Papun hills were always ongoing, entangled and interdependent with multiple (potential) pasts and futures.

Here I find Jacques Derrida’s (1994) analogues of haunting and ghosts felicitous in grasping the ways in which remnants from the past simultaneously figure in pasts, presents and futures, “occupy[ing] multiple historical tenses”. Derrida invokes the first line of the Communist Manifesto, “[a] spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism” (Marx and Engels [1848] 2008, 31) to exemplify how histories constantly haunt and shape the present, bearing with them the latent potentiality to

²⁶ This kind of colonial nostalgia is common across highland areas of what was once British India (e.g. Karlsson 2017).

(violently) refigure the future. Following this provocation, many scholars have begun drawing a relation between haunting and ghosts, and history as a way to grasp the “uncanny” fashion in which everything from “ruins of empire”, bombed out pagodas in Vietnam, to unexploded ordinance in Laos, continue to trouble the present and point to possible futures (Stoler 2008; Schwenkel 2017; Zani 2019). In this light, these remnants of guns, helmets and parachutes begin to resemble wraiths or revenants of the long histories of bloody conflict and colonialism that still stalk these hills, continuing to affect people’s lives. It is fitting that the literal meaning of a revenant is “one who returns” (Derrida 1994, 2) as these (often violent) pasts, through these remnants, have a reiterative tendency.

However, as Heonik Kwon has pointed out, it is important to remember that Derrida’s ghosts of the past are grasped, like communism, as “collective phantoms” that are general and allegorical (2014, 15). In this way, they remain deeply steeped in metaphysical traditions inherited from enlightenment thinkers. For Derrida ghosts are always disembodied, disjointed and untimely. However, as Kwon stresses, in Vietnam (much as we shall see is the case in the Papun highlands) ghosts “although belonging to a past era, [are] believed to continue into the present time in an empirical, rather than allegorical way” (2014, 2). For the Vietnamese people he worked with, ghosts are part of their being and becoming in the world (ibid, 15-16) – part of the patchwork of everyday life. As empirical entities, not unlike these imperial debris, these ghosts are wrapped up in humans’ quotidian existence, and thus, are constantly negotiated and worked upon, what Kwon describes as “transforming” them (ibid, 103-132). Here, ghosts are the manifestation of violent histories that need to be wrestled with and transformed.

Resonating with these authors, through following these remnants of the past we find that deep histories of colonialism and violent conflict were far from abstract and free-floating “collective phantoms” in these highlands. Histories were usually tied to, and indeed possessed, specific objects such as these guns, helmets, and clothes. It was through these objects that the past continually returned to haunt the present and presage the future. Moreover, in these highlands these histories not only occupied multiple historical tenses and these imperial debris (Stoler 2008; 2013) and particular

objects but also possessed parcels of the landscape itself. This becomes perhaps most apparent in the figure of landmine littered landscapes.

Landmined Landscapes

Both the Tatmadaw and the KNU have extensively used landmines throughout the counterinsurgency, leaving these borderlands between Myanmar and Thailand as potentially one of the most landmine-littered places in the world (Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor 2013; KHRG 2012). Throughout the counterinsurgency, sustained armed conflict and military occupation seemed to constantly skirt around Ta K'Thwee Duh Kaw itself.²⁷ I learnt from people who had lived through the armed conflict, which has slowly abated since the ceasefire in 2012, that despite many false alarms, Tatmadaw soldiers only ever passed through this area on a handful of occasions. Each time these soldiers were en route to more strategically important areas. Despite this, there were still areas around the village in which people dare not tread due to a fear of these explosive devices. One such area is a swidden field, just on the border to Htee Khu Duh Kaw, beside the road shortly before it branches off to the Salween river in east and the administrative capital in the west. As many of the villagers, including the surprisingly unfazed current cultivator Wee Daw, explained, after sustained fighting close to the Salween River the KNU had given chase to a small group of Tatmadaw soldiers through this area. As these soldiers fled, they laid around three landmines on and beside the path in this area to perturb their pursuers. One had seriously injured one of the KNU soldiers pursuing them – a local boy who moved to the camps and is now in the US – while the other scared the living daylights out of a villager some years later when it detonated as he was burning this swidden field. This leaves one landmine still unaccounted for to this day, lurking under the earth here.

Landscapes littered with landmines, much like helmets and guns left over from colonial times, are also remnants of ongoing histories of counterinsurgency and imperialism (c.f. Zani 2019). Landmines are very much an empirical entity, yet also hold a particularly haunting quality. Each time the rains come the earth becomes mud,

²⁷ The suffix *-kaw* following the name of a village denotes the lands surrounding and belonging to this settlement. I return to this term I term *village-kaw* and deal with it in much greater detail shortly.

unpredictably relocating these explosive devices (c.f. Arensen 2012). This remaining landmine could be anywhere, or nowhere at all. These mines originate in violent pasts and persist unseen into the present, constantly threatening to, quite literally, cut the ground from under people's feet in the present, portending terrible potential futures in indeterminate ways. As imperial debris, landmined landscapes are more than mere reminders, cues that jog memories of the past, but a part of people's quotidian life, that they must navigate on a daily basis (c.f. Zani 2019, 12–14).

As such, this landmine's potential presence haunted, and indeed possessed a large swathe of land beside the road here along the Bu Thoe ridge. However, it is not only objects of violent pasts, of colonialism and counterinsurgency, that are materialised in and haunt the present landscapes. Nearly all histories and the spectral presences tied to them are embedded in local landscapes such that they are always layered and multiple, thick and sometimes viscous with history. As Keith Basso has shown was the case among the western Apache, history is not removed from the context of daily life, silent and inert on the pages of history books: "the past lies embedded in features of the earth" (Basso 1996, 34–35). Oral histories are inextricably entangled to the landscape they unfold in. This was especially the case in stories surrounding the demiurge figure of Y'wa.

"Y'wa's Deadfall Trap Rocks"

Very early on in my fieldwork I found that some the most vivid and captivating oral histories retold to me were those elicited as we traversed the landscapes they unfolded in together. One of the first, and perhaps most recurrent and elaborated oral history I was told related to a chain of five prominent mountain peaks that abruptly jut skywards out of the forest floor. These five rock faces demarcate Ta K'Thwee Duh Kaw not only from two of its neighbouring village-*kaw* but also from the locally defined climatic zones. On the west side was Ta T'Thwee Duh Kaw and *k'nuh htce*, or temperate montane evergreen forest, and on the eastern front that faces the Salween was *kaw bway hkoh*, or warm mixed deciduous teak forest. The first time my attention was called to this distinct mountain chain was by the headmaster, grandson of Gwa Nee (and thus, Hpee Thoo's nephew).

While walking north from the village, we stop to catch our breath, drink some water, and smoke a cheroot. The headmaster then points eastwards to a set of jagged peaks, crowned with forests of deep emerald that is characteristic of primary forest. As he points, he tells us that the formation is called Y'wa Ma Htu Lay. Naw Paw translates this for me as Y'wa's trap – the full translation of this place name coming closer to “Y'wa's Deadfall Trap Rocks”. In his characteristically engaged manner of storytelling the headmaster then goes on to explain that the name comes from how, in an undated, presumably mythical time, Y'wa created these five *lay*, steep rock faces.²⁸ He did so as he hoped to build a trap big enough to capture a giant white elephant, so that it may stop following him and stay among the humans in this area. This trap was to be a hugely scaled-up versions of the type of (*ma*) *htu*, or deadfall trap²⁹ that people place at regular intervals along fences they build around their rice fields to protect them from marauding rats and even wild boar. Tracing the contours of this mountain chain with his fingers the headmaster shows how, like the deadfall traps they use in their fields, each peak was to act like the bamboo pillars. These pillars hold between them a third weighted length of bamboo that, when triggered, falls on the animal and traps them. However, before Y'wa could complete his work he was tempted away by *Loo Sch Buh*, (i.e. Lucifer), who is also known as Mu Kaw Lee, the great trickster. Mu Kaw Lee fooled Y'wa into believing that his mother was deadly sick and that he must attend to her immediately, before he could finish the fifth and final peak that would make the trap impassable. Thus, when the white elephant came here it soon found it could simply walk around the uncompleted deadfall. Upon seeing that Y'wa had attempted to trap it, the elephant flew into a rage, and traces of this anger can be seen today. At one bend of the Bleh Mah Loh river that flows unhurriedly along the foot of this mountain, the headmaster explains that there are still two deep indents in the otherwise shallow riverbed. These deep pools are the elephant's footprints, from when it stomped in fury. He then looks up and beamingly pronounces that because of this footprint, we know how big the elephant was. “Its foot was this big” he pronounces, then stretches his arms out as far as they will go, before joining them

²⁸ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=vh&submit=Lookup#>

²⁹ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=xk&submit=Lookup#>

together to form a large circle. Near the top of one of the peaks there are also two large holes in the rock, made by the white elephant's tusks as it continued its rampage.



These five peaks were one of the various spots in the landscape that continued to be possessed with *ta thoo ta pgho*, with potency or power left over from creation. This term is used interchangeably with *hsoo* (locally pronounced as *choo*), “strong”,³⁰ and indicates an area that cannot be cleared for cultivation and/or, in particularly “strong” areas, that people ought not pass through unless unavoidable. These “footprints”, the continual traces of the divine forces of Y’wa maintain a historical link with creation that imbues these places with their strength/potency. In this way, histories carry on into the present and possess the surrounding landscapes.

As I took additional walks with people out and about around the village, I found that vast swathes of the landscape were possessed with this strength/potency. However, Y’wa Ma Htu Lay was one of the few places that bears Y’wa’s name and has clear ties to stories of creation. The others, “the forest where Y’wa hid the teak trees”, an incongruous coppice of teak trees surrounded by evergreen forest towards the Yunzalin River in the west and “where Y’wa wrestled”, a flat open pasture on the northern border of the kaw, evoked rather unelaborated and less known stories. While areas such as this mountain chain were considered strong/potent on account of the past lying “embedded in features of the earth” (Basso 1996, 34) or by being “imbued with earlier tracks and traces” (Tsing 2017, gl,6), countless others were *hsoo* due to being possessed not only by these traces, these ghosts of the past, but by various other unseen but felt spectral persons. As such, these highlanders live in landscapes possessed not only by the ghosts of histories, continuing into the present, but also by unseen spectral persons, that do not always have deep histories. Here the line between haunting stories and these empirical entities becomes very messy and blurred indeed. While some of these spectres closely resemble the way living histories continue on into the present, others come closer what might be defined as people. As such I refer to these as neither ghosts nor spirits, but rather as spectral presences or

³⁰ <http://drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=ql.&submit=Lookup>

persons (a point I come back to later). One such *hsoo* or “strong” place is Hpu Noh Noh Deh: both the name of a small path, the surrounding forest, and the spectral presence or person that possesses this area.

Possessed Landscapes

The first time I heard Hpu Noh Noh Deh uttered was by my neighbour Naw Htoo when she visited Naw Paw (my field assistant) and me one dark night and we exchanged ghost stories.

Naw Paw and I joke that she already looks the part, dressed as she is in the long formless white tunic of unmarried women, her raven black hair loose, and the burning embers of the small pipe she constantly tugs on intermittently illuminating her face. She begins with a warning, that we should avoid travelling down this small path, to the west of the village if possible. This place is *hsoo* and it can be dangerous to walk here, especially at night. “This is Hpu Noh Noh Deh’s path”, she tells us. This is “the place” of a powerful *ta mu khah* (a genus of spectral persons) and he will “drink your blood”, Naw Paw translated hesitatingly. Later I learn that this blood drinking is commonly spoken of as *aw loh*, meaning to snatch and to consume a person’s *k’la*, her “soul or spirit” (each person possessing seven *k’la*, of which all but one are detachable and can periodically leave the body).³¹ When a person loses their *k’la* they become weak and are susceptible to illness and, if it is not returned, they may even die from this (cf. Desjarlais 1992). This is especially dangerous for people who are already weak, such as those who are sick or pregnant. When I ask Naw Htoo if she has experienced anything spooky along this path she emphasises that while others do walk here, she always tries to avoid it whenever possible. My interest piqued, I inquire as to where this path is, to which she replies that it is close to several of Hpu Kee’s fallow fields. She goes on to tell of how, once, when this outspoken elder had been walking along this path carrying a bag of paddy home from his field, just as the dusk was gathering, he stopped to rest a while. Just then he heard a sound, of chains jangling and the heavy footfall of an elephant. But when no matter how much he searched with his eyes there

³¹ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=uvR&submit=Lookup#>

was no elephant in sight. As the sounds edged closer, he slipped his heavy burden and ran all the way home. Indeed, as Naw Htoo elaborates, many people hear sounds in the treetops, or footsteps on the ground, but no matter how hard they look they see nothing.

After hearing this tale, I wanted to experience for myself how it might feel to be in a *hsoo*, or “strong”, area such as this. But alas, neither the villagers nor Naw Paw were willing to accompany me to this area when I was eventually able to pinpoint its exact location, close to the village. However, as the agricultural season picked up again following the short winter hiatus, I learnt that the quickest route to Hpu Kee’s paddy field is also along this very path. And as we grew closer, he invited us to join him to visit his field, taking the fastest route through Hpu Noh Noh Deh Gleh (*gleh* meaning “path”).

Hiking this path for the first time with Hpu Kee I am struck by deepness of the greens in the forest we passed thorough, many of the trees towering over the canopy. Hpu Kee explains as we walk at a brisk pace that the forest is so rich here since nobody dares to clear this area. Long ago a young and vibrant man, not yet married, decided to clear a patch here, certain that with his youth, strength, and lack of family he would not be affected. Soon after he had cleared the land, however, he fell ill and died soon after. Hpu then explains that many attempts had been made to placate this *ta mu khah* and urge it to move on, but all ultimately failed. However, one enterprising villager began planting cardamom here some sixty years prior. When he did not fall ill, many households followed suit, carefully planting this spice in the understory of the forest and then harvesting it as a cash crop, while leaving the trees for Hpu Noh Noh Deh. In this way, they created their own vibrant agro-forestry area.



Figure 2.2 "The Path that drinks your blood" (Photo by author)

From the tale of this particular *ta mu khah*, this spectral presence or person, we see how, while never quite perceived by human eyes, its presence was strongly felt. Indeed, so strongly was its presence sensed that it appears to have possessed the path and the forest surrounding it, in the twin and entangled senses of the way the word is used in English. As I shall elaborate in what follows, this presence possessed this area, both in the ways it continued to haunt and control the earth here, but also in the ways the path was spoken of as belonging to this spectre, as the *k'sah* or "owner" of the path and the surrounding forest that was "his place".

Following these descriptions, I grasp these highlands as Possessed Landscapes. Let us begin by exploring how I used the notion of possession in this thesis. In the first sense of possession, that I have alluded to previously in relation to oral histories, the path continued to be haunted by this unseen presence. This is similar to the way another genus of spectral presence or persons known variously as *ta yoh* or *ta wee ta nah*, can take up temporary residence in and afflict a human body, continually returning. Classically these types of phenomena have been grasped as examples of "spirit

possession” where a spectral person takes temporary hold of, occupying and controlling a human’s body (Bourguignon 1976, 5–7; c.f. Lambek 1981; 1996), the body becoming a site of interaction between the human and spectral realm (Lambek 1981, 9). Yet, as more recent studies have pointed out, the etymological origin of the word possess describes the occupation of a particular place, from the Latin *potis*, “power” and *sedere*, “to sit in” (Crosson 2019, 546). This is also the main sense in which I have been using the word possessed thus far, that a particular history or spectre can have power over and “sit in” a particular place in a kind of haunting.

However, as Naw Htoo explained, “this is Hpu Noh Noh Deh’s path”, the whole area belongs to this spectre. The *ta mu hkah* residing here does not simply tabernacle the terrain, as a *ta yoh/ta wee ta nah* takes temporary residence in a body, but holds territorial dominion over this earth (c.f. Shapero 2019; Strange 2019). Landscapes are, thus, another site of interaction between the human and spectral realm, and their contesting claims to the ownership of the earth. Therefore, this second sense speaks to political-ecology notions of possession as the multi-scalar conflicts over access to and control over the land (Sikor and Lund 2010; Barbesgaard 2019). Moreover, while histories leave traces that continue on into the present and haunt the landscape, spectral presences or persons such as Hpu Noh Noh Deh often have less clear historical origins and more definite identities, with names and (as I shall show in the next chapter) biographies. Yet, their stories and their continual effects on human lives also possess the landscape in these two entangled senses.

Delving deeper into the literature regarding relations between humans and spectres in Southeast Asia, we find that this sense of landscapes being haunted or possessed by unseen presences that “affect or control the material world” and can be communicated with has historically been grasped as a form of animism (Tylor 1920, 426–29). In Burma/Myanmar, where the vast majority of people are Buddhist, this phenomenon has classically glossed as part of a so-called “supernaturalism” belief system that accompanies Buddhism (Spiro 1967, 3). Yet, as I have argued in the opening chapter to this thesis, tales such as that of Hpu Noh Noh Deh often trouble and unsettle notions of “belief”. In grasping these practices as part of a belief system it is tacitly implied that, in the final instance, they are unfounded (G. Harvey 2016; c.f.

Evans-Pritchard 1976). To this end, place-based presences such as *ta mu khah*, described variously as tutelary spirits (e.g. Aragon 2003, 127) and in Central Burma as *nats* (Spiro 1967), are commonly addressed as “supernatural” representations of the “real” natural landscapes (Allerton 2009, 236; Spiro 1967). Yet, as I began this thesis by arguing, rather than reducing people’s practices and cosmologies of cohabitation and interactions with spectral persons to a “belief system”, I attempt to “take seriously” the significant effects these practices and cosmologies have on people’s day-to-day lives and politics, while also being mindful of their own doubts and scepticism.

Thus, to begin grappling with the ways these possessive spectres played into the everyday lives of these highlanders I draw on more recent studies that, taking their cue from Tim Ingold (2000), trouble any sharp distinction between “cultural” and “natural” landscapes. This newer crop of studies approaches the ways in which the land and waterways are commonly treated as possessed by a clamour of unseen more-than-human life in Southeast Asia as what they term Spiritual or Potent Landscapes (Allerton 2009; 2013; Guillou 2017). As Catherine Allerton points out in her introduction to a special issue on Spiritual Landscapes, people traverse and negotiate potent and strong areas on a daily basis such that, rather than seeing them as “sacred” places set apart from the “profane”, they are treated as part and parcel of everyday life (2009, 238). However, in these and many similar accounts, while it is noted that place-based spectres in Southeast Asia are commonly referred to as “owners”³² (Allerton 2009, 240; c.f. Forth 1998; Pannell 2007; Lehman 2003), the implications of this ownership are rarely taken seriously as a way in which we might unsettle and rethink notions of ownership and the politics of possession.³³

The sense of possessed as belonging to and owned by spectral presences became particularly pertinent when I began to ask people as to who certain patches of agricultural land belonged to. I delve deeper into this issue of land ownership in the following chapter, so I shall only touch upon it here. But, after a great deal confusion on my part, I slowly came to appreciate how people did not inherit a certain parcel of land used for swidden cultivation itself as much as the usufruct rights over it. While

³² And as we shall see in the next chapter, this phenomenon spreads far beyond Southeast Asia.

³³ A notable exception to this trend is a recent special issue in *Ethnos* entitled “What Possessed you?” that brings these two senses of possession together (Crosson 2019; see also, Shapero 2019; Strange 2019).

one particular patch of land might be referred to as “so-and-so’s field”, as I began to gather, all the land and waters humans lived on and lived off were understood to be simply *hee loh* or “borrowed” from its spectral owners, the *ta mu khah* and *k’sah* or owners, with the ardent promise to return them at a later date.³⁴ Moreover, as touched upon in the previous chapter, the current inhabitants do not understand themselves as the first people to have settled here. Fragments of pottery and jewellery people dig up from time to time act as constant reminders that, when they came to this area, it was already possessed. As these oral histories tell, they inherited the land they now dwell on from a semi-mythical group the K’wa that were forced to flee across the Salween many centuries prior, now occupying the area around Mae Sariang (in present day Thailand). Moreover, these oral histories tell how the K’wa did arrive to terra nullius. They themselves arrived in a landscape that had been folded by Y’wa, and was already possessed by a bustling crowd of spectral presences.

Thus, it is this double sense of possession that I allude to in describing these landscapes as busy with seen and unseen more-than-human life. They are not only “spiritual” or “potent” but also possessed. In these Possessed Landscapes people not only shared the land and water with a whole host of ghosts, territorial spirits, ancestors and other unseen beings but also constantly negotiated with them to borrow it for cultivation. Moreover, as I touched on in the opening chapter, terms such as ghost and spirit map awkwardly onto how people related to these presences that come closer to that of spectral persons. As such, the human inhabitants of these highlands were constantly engaged in efforts to make and maintain good relations with their spectral counterparts, to be good neighbours. Let us take a closer look at one particular class of spectral person, the *ta mu khah*, like the one we met along the path in the vignette above.

³⁴ This is a common feature among swidden cultivating peoples from the Amazonas (e.g. Viegas 2016; Butt Colson 1973) to South & Southeast Asia (Li 2014a, e.g.; Karlsson 2011). I return to this point in the next chapter.

“The Realm of That Which is True”: Spectral Societies

While Karen-English dictionaries tend to define *ta mu khah* as a “monster, a spirit, a kind of ghost”,³⁵ other classes of spectral presences that possess the Papun hills fit this description far better. For example, as we have seen, Heonik Kwon speaks of the ghosts of violent pasts in Vietnam as “concrete historical identities” that continue on to the present time in an empirical way (Kwon 2014, 2). Ghosts that arise from bad deaths are commonly referred to in Southeast Asia as “green ghosts” (Tsing 2017, 7; Thwe 2003), and are opposed to ancestors who died more “normal deaths”. Such a description, however, poorly captures these rather timeless *ta mu khah*. In the Papun hills such “green ghosts” come closer to what are commonly known as *ta reh t’kah* or *teh preh*. It is these vengeful revenants of humans that continue to haunt the areas near to where they suffered gruesome demises, such as a river they drowned in or the house where they were murdered. Stories abound tell of how *ta reh t’kah* and *teh preh* cling to these places, and *aw loh*, or “eat” the *k’la* or “souls” of the living that pass through here carelessly. It is also these presences that are paralleled in living histories and living landscapes that continue (often violent) pasts into the present. How then can we understand these *ta mu khah*?

Some *ta mu khah*, such as Hpu Noh Noh Deh whom we met above, resonate strongly what have been termed as territorial/tutelary spirits or nats (e.g. Aragon 2003; Spiro 1967) tied to a specific spot on the landscape. Yet, other *ta mu khah* are known, like their human counterparts, to roam far and wide from “their places”, throughout these hills. The corridors of thick primary forest that were maintained between each *hku*, or “swidden patch”, for example, while acting partly as a firebreak during the burning season, are often referred to as *ta mu khah kleh*, or “the *ta mu khah*’s pathways”. As villagers in Ta K’Thwee Duh explained to me, as this name suggests, these “paths” or “bridges” are maintained to allow these spectral people to move easily from forest to forest. These “pathways” then form a vast network connecting all the forests together, and thus, allowing *ta mu khah* to roam freely all along these highlands. Consequently, humans risk provoking the ire of itinerant *ta mu khah* should they

³⁵ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=w%3Erk%3EC%3E&submit=Lookup#>

attempt to clear out the trees in these *kleh* or “paths”. Doing so may cause them to lose their bearing or become trapped in a certain section of the forest, unable to get home. As such, it is *ta du ta htu*, or “taboo/prohibited” to remove the trees and attempt to cultivate in these pathways in any shape or form. Such *ta du ta htu* are not to be taken lightly. Hpu Hkee whom we first met chuntering to himself as he struggled to remove his boots at the checkpoint in chapter one had experienced this first-hand.

A few times each year, a person from a neighbouring village arrives one morning to Ta K’Thwee Duh and announces that they bring with them *ta du ta pluh*, a special taboo day. The day following this announcement the villagers are prohibited from going to their fields, weaving with cotton, and indeed, from engaging in any form of work, the whole village being forced to rest. Albeit, as on one of these taboo days Hpa Thoo Moh pointed out to me, with one infant balanced on each hip, “for us women there are no rest days”. When this taboo day is over, one of the villagers then travels to a neighbouring village and “brings the *ta du ta pluh* to them”. However, many years prior when one of these travelling taboo days was announced in Ta K’Thwee Duh, Hpu Hkee decided that, since he was strong and healthy, he could simply ignore these *ta du ta htu* and, the next morning, arose early and worked on his field as usual. Tragically, while Hpu Hkee himself was fit and strong at this time, his wife was heavily pregnant, and thus, when she gave birth a few weeks later the child was born with his anus fully fused together (known in medical terms as imperforate anus). The infant died a few days later. As I later learnt, when people ignore the particular set of *ta du ta htu* related to *ta du ta pluh*, it is common for their children to have birth defects in which one of their bodily orifices is fused together: an ear, a nostril or, as in this heart-rending case, their anus. Here we see how, while for the man who attempted to cultivate the area around Hpu Noh Noh Deh Kleh the consequence of his actions directly affected him, more commonly the person who breached a *ta du ta htu* is spared and their close family is affected instead. In this way the person who breached the *ta du ta htu* may, in many cases, rectify their *k’ma*, “mistake”, or at least not do this again. This was certainly the case with Hpu Hkee, who now studiously observed each and every *ta du ta htu* and *ta du*

ta htu day, even those that seem to contradict each other. As he saw it, it was better to be safe and give all *ta du ta htu* the same attention than to be sorry again.

Thus, *ta mu khah kleh*, their pathways, allow the humans of these highlands to clear parcels of the forest to cultivate their crops while still respecting the *ta mu khah* (and animals, as Hpa Thoo Pa pointed out to me) and the related *ta du ta htu*, by leaving them corridors in which they can continue to move freely, and to safely leave areas being cleared and burnt. As I shall address more thoroughly in the next chapter, other genus of spectres such as *nah htee*, that possess certain bodies of water, and *k'sah* or owners/lords, come closer to the definition of territorial/tutelary spirits or nats. Such spectres are said to be the *k'sah*, or the “owners” of certain rocks, rivers, ponds, fields, a whole mountain, or even of all the earth and water in the area.

As I spent more time in these highlands I heard oral histories of the *ta mu khah*'s origin that tell of how they once lived together with the humans, and were even enmeshed in mutual aid networks, taking turns caring for each other's children while the other went to work in their fields. However, these stories then go on to tell how often, when it was the humans' turn to care for the *ta mu khah* offspring, the human parents would often neglect and mistreat them. Upon learning of how the humans were treating their children the *ta mu khah* parents responded by making their offspring imperceptible to humans by, depending on who is telling the tale, either placing a magic leaf upon their faces, or slapping them so hard that they became invisible. Ever since, the *ta mu khah* have continued to live side by side with humans, with their own villages and their own livestock, only now humans can no longer see them. As Andrew Paul found during his research a day's hike north, *ta mu khah* are “humans' friends and blood brothers” (2018, 76). Indeed, by some accounts, due to this kinship bond the *ta mu khah* themselves do not that afflict humans, but rather “it is their animals, such as pig and dogs that bite humans” when they violate taboos (ibid). In and around Ta K'Twee Duh, however, while most agreed that there was a kinship between humans and *ta mu khah*, they replied rather incredulously that, just like other spectres, it was them and not their dogs that *aw loh* or feed on humans.

Fascinatingly, in many ways the *ta mu khah* bore a strong family resemblance to another genus of spectre, *pgha k'nyaw mee* or “wild humans”. Tales of *pgha k'nyaw mee* usually cast them as trickster figures who lived in the forests and delighted in “messing” with humans, scaring them and making them think they are going crazy. Yet, unlike other spectral persons, while usually invisible to humans, they occasionally made themselves visible. Tales told of *pgha k'nyaw mee* shapeshifting, for example, into a beautiful woman and luring a man away from his work. Their natural form, however, was said to be humanoid, albeit extremely hirsute, with long thin limbs and bodies. What is more, as the headmaster explained one rainy afternoon in June, there is a set of photos circulating in these highlands that several villagers including himself have glimpsed purporting to depict a *pgha k'nyaw mee* that had died. These photos confirmed not only this physical description of them as flesh and blood, only usually unseen to the human eye, but also showed how they had testicles the size of cooking pots.

Thus, in these differing tales we find that, much like in many other areas of Southeast Asia, “human life is mirrored in the immanent realm of spirits” (Allerton 2013, 8). As we have seen, like humans, *ta mu khah* have their own places, their own villages, children and livestock. The spectre that possessed the path beside the village was referred to as Hpu, or grandfather, implying that he had, and also is kin.

Delving deeper into these tales and experiences from the Papun hills we find some startling resonances with findings from starkly different contexts, among others people classified as animist. Among Amerindians in the Amazonia basin, for example, we find that, much like in these highlands, rather than seeing humans as evolved from animals, both animals and spectral persons are understood as “ex-humans” (pace Viveiros de Castro 2004b, 465). Parallel with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (2004b) studies of Amerindian peoples, there is a strong notion in the Papun hills that many of the spectral beings that now possess their landscapes were once humans. It was only after a process of differentiation that they “disguised” themselves, becoming invisible to humans, by way of magical leaves or shapeshifting. Yet, their invisibility in no way makes them less persons, maintaining their own houses, villages and livestock, and with their own particular proclivities, just like other people. This parallel becomes

even more apparent in light of fragments of stories I heard of how snakes, and perhaps also bears, once lived among humans. In each case, after a critical event these snakes and bears “left the humans” as people put. Viveiros de Castro points to something similar in how animal become “disguised by their ostensibly bestial forms” (ibid, 465). Interestingly, these findings stand in contrast to Århem’s assertion that in “prototypical” Southeast Asian animism “wild animals are just that, animals, categorically different from humans” (K. Århem 2016a, 282). This form of anthropomorphism established a state of affairs in which these unseen persons, and to an extent also some non-human animals, were treated as conscious subjects, able to communicate with humans. Thus, much as Viveiros de Castro found was the case in the Amazonas, spectres and some animals were addressed as people that were to be engaged in reciprocal relations of respect (2004, 469). In both these contexts we find that relations with what we might call “nature” that “take on the quality of what we would term ‘social relations’” (ibid, 465). As Philippe Descola evocatively phrases it, this is a “cosmology in which most plants and animals share all or some faculties, behaviours, and moral codes ordinarily attributed to human beings” in ways that trouble any attempt to oppose “nature” to “culture” (Descola 2013, 8). Thus, Papun hills are busy and viscous with not only histories but also these unseen presences that humans must negotiate with on a day-to-day basis.

Consequently, as I touched on earlier, I am reticent to describe these spectres as spirits. As we have seen, in most circumstances these spectres are understood and treated as people, albeit those that can see but cannot be seen directly, and thus, one can only have mediated relations to (I return to this point in a moment). Derrida describes this spectral asymmetry as the “visor effect”, where “we do not see who looks at us” (1994, 6). However, as I began delving deeper into this asymmetry I found that it emerges largely as a corollary of these spectres residing in an intersecting and imbricated realm to that of humans. The spectral realm is known as *ta taw ta loh kaw*, which directly translated means the “land/realm of that which is true”. Following this, although rarely used, one collective name for all these different spectres, including the shades of the dead such as ancestors is simply *ta taw ta loh*, or “that which is true”.³⁶

³⁶ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=w%3EwDw%3EvdR&submit=Lookup#>

While living human beings cannot perceive these *ta taw ta loh*, nor their homes and their livestock, they themselves have no issues with seeing each other, nor with seeing humans. In this manner, this spectral asymmetry comes close to what John Holt calls a “this-worldly and otherworldly parallelism” that entails a “doubling” of territoriality and hierarchy (Holt 2011, 44).

Humans are only afforded brief glimpses of this realm, through the jangle of spectral chains in the dark or the feeling of their *k’la* being snatched and consumed, and through metaphor-laden visions, in dreams and during spells of fever/mental illness. In dreams and hallucinations, for example, everything is *hkoh hkee*, or “inversed”, implying the exact opposite of the visions they experience is often what is true. Moreover, as I explore in the final section of this chapter, technologies of divination, such as consulting chicken bones and strips of bamboo, also allow one to peer dimly, and often imperfectly, into this spectral realm. Otherwise, humans can only gain this point of view upon shedding their bodies when they die. This spectral asymmetry suggests a hierarchy of sorts, at least in perception, where humans are only able to engage in lateral perception with the human realm, whereas “those that are true” see more, being also able to perceive both realms simultaneously (c.f. Kohn 2007, 17).

Therefore, we find that a whole host of spectral presences, or in many cases spectral people, not only share these highlands with humans but possess them in the double and entangled sense of the word. In the final section of this chapter, I explore how, in their day-to-day lives, people negotiate through and with these already possessed landscapes, peopled by unseen presences that they must first discern and then communicate and appease.

Negotiating (with) Possessed Landscapes

I once asked an old man: are all stones we see about us here alive? He reflected a long while then replied, 'No! But some are.' This qualified answer made a lasting impression on me.
(Hallowell 1960, 24)

The quote above comes from A. Irving Hallowell path-breaking work among the northern Ojibwa, an indigenous group living in central Canada, where stones are grammatically classed as animate. However, as he shows us, this did not lead to a state akin to that imagined by vitalists (e.g. Bennett 2010) of the whole landscape being infused with life. Rather, Ojibwa “do not perceive stones in general, as animate, any more than we do. The crucial test is experience. Is there any personal testament available” (Hallowell 1960, 25). In what follows I explore how, much like among the Ojibwa, in these Papun hills, while all stones have the potentiality to be animate, this can only be qualified by people’s experiences of their animacy. As I argued in the opening chapter, people in these highlands engaged in highly indeterminate, pragmatic, and playful relations with the world, appearing to be less concerned with uncovering whether spectral persons actually existed than with the effects they had on day-to-day life.

When I asked similar questions to the one posed by Hallowell, especially to the elders in the village, I received similarly qualified answers. These were often to the effect of “it depends”. The animacy or personhood of a rock, tree, stream or any other feature on the terrain cannot be given in advance. As among the Ojibwa, while each bears the latent potentiality to be alive, or even to be treated as a person, one must look intently for signs that would suggest this to be so. This deeply pragmatic and experience-based notions stand in contrast to more generic notions of potency in Southeast Asia as “manifested in every aspect of the natural world, in stones, trees, clouds and fire” (Errington 1990, 22).

Sometimes this process of discerning as to whether an area is possessed is a quite straightforward affair. If a banyan trees has six or more *khaw*, “ladders”, that is to say aerial prop roots, then there is a good chance that they are also possessed by a *k’sah*, an owner. For rice, on the other hand, when it is harvested occasionally a rite is

conducted, that mirrors those conducted during funerals, which also quite concretely test whether the rice, or the cadaver, is still possessed by a *k'la* or a soul. First the *k'la* is led away to the afterlife, then afterwards they check to make sure it was successful. Threshed paddy is weighed before and after the rite. If it weighs less, then it is concluded that the rite succeeded and the *k'la* of the rice has now left. If not, then the rite is repeated and the result weighed again until they can be certain the rice *k'la* has left.

As these rites suggest, animacy and indeed personhood is asserted by dint of possessing (and being possessed by) a *k'la* or some form of spectral presence such as these *k'sah* or “owners”. However, in most cases discerning whether rocks, trees, ponds and other swathes of landscape are possessed by/possess life is far less straightforward than enumerating roots or weighing rice.

In cases where there are no pre-existing oral histories of the activities of powerful spectral beings, the process of discerning which specific parts of the landscape are possessed is not given prior, but is a fraught and indeterminate affair. These often begin with a person sensing, through their body, the presence of a spectre in certain areas of the landscape. While particularly strong or potent *ta mu khah*, such as the one possessing the path west of the village, may make their presence known by sound, most are perceived by humans only through the effects they have on villagers' bodies as they feed on their *k'la*, causing them to become weak and/or sick, physically or mentally, after having stumbled upon “the areas” of one particular spectral person. The *ta mu khah* of Hpu Noh Noh Deh did just this to the young man who attempted to cultivate here, making him become deadly sick. In stumbling into their “area” it is reasoned that these spectral persons can become highly vexed and retaliate by afflicting the body of the interloping person, *aw loh*, snatching and eating their *k'la*, and making them weak and sick (or their pigs and dog do this in another interpretation). The focus of this thesis, however, is less on the phenomenology of how it might feel to lose and regain one's soul as anthropologists such as Robert Desjarlais' (1992, 14) work has done, than on the effects these encounter have on people's lives, and how they negotiate this. Exploring the sensation of having one's soul snatched away or fed upon, I found that people usually attempted to make amends with the offended

spectre. As I showed in the previous section, in understanding the spectres as the owners of discrete areas of the landscape, they are treated as persons to be engaged in social relations with. In this way, rather than relations of managing and mastery, with them and the world around them, these are relations of negotiation with fellow, but often hungry, persons. As I shall return to in the final chapter, the residents of these highlands were constantly engaged in efforts to make and maintain good relations with the spectral realm, “to make friends” as they commonly phrased it. One clear example of this can be seen in the case of Lee Kyaw Hta’s daughter:

When Lee Kyaw Hta’s daughter first fell ill, feeling weak and tired, the initial action her family took was to march her down to the small clinic nestled in the valley between the Bu Thoe ridge the villages sits atop and Y’wa Ma Htu Lay. Here they received a rather general diagnosis, a fistfull of paracetamol tablets and doctors’ orders that she should rest. Indeed, the tendency for this clinic to simply hand out paracetamols and then send people on their way has earned it the nickname by some as a “para-clinic”. However, after some weeks, when she did not recover after resting and taking these tablets, her father decided that her ailment may have a cause that biomedicine cannot address. Thus, he went to consult Dee Klee. Although Dee Klee, slightly built and his face dominated by a large and bushy moustache, converted to Catholicism many years prior when he married, he was very well versed in most Thoo Hkoh rites and even trained under several Thoo Hkoh ritual experts in Thailand to hone his skills further. After asking Lee Kyaw Hta a series of questions, it transpires that that his daughter had been playing beside a small stream adjacent to the villages that may be possessed by a *nah htee*, a tutelary spirit of this waterway. To make sure Dee Klee conducted a *su ta gah daw*, a form of divination, in this case with chicken bones (it can also be done with strips of bamboo or the stem of a certain plant). In this form of ostemancy, a question is asked and then the thighbones are consulted to discern whether the omen is good, i.e. a positive answer, or bad. In this way they were able to quickly confirm that this stream was possessed by a *nah htee*, that the girl had vexed by carelessly passing by, leading it to to *aw loh* her and make her weak and tired. They then ascertain that to relinquish its hold over her the *nah htee* required a chicken,

a bottle of rice wine, cigars, betel nut and a simple chicken curry dish. When I caught up with them later I found them beside the stream hard at work constructing a *ta lu*, literally, a place of nourishing or feeding, that takes the form of a spirit house made of bamboo. The chicken Lee Kyaw Hta has with him in a small bamboo basket is summarily slaughtered, the blood spread over the *ta lu* and a curry cooked. When these preparations are complete all the other items are placed inside the house, a small plate for the best morsels of chicken curry and a cup with a straw for the alcohol laid out, and a short prayer incanted, with hands pressed together and fingers splayed out, entreating the *nah htee* to relinquish the girl's *k'la*. People and animals pass uninterestedly by as these two men rather unceremoniously carry this out, then eat the rest of the curry in silence. The men and the *nah htee* then eat together beside this small stream. Afterwards, the *ta lu* is to be untouched until it finally rots or is knocked down by animals. Only time will tell if this cures the girl they explain. When I ask Lee Kyaw Hta how his daughter was doing some days later he explains that it had not worked, so they would try again, in another place until she recovered.



This episode of making contact with and negotiation between the human and spectral realms, in many ways, is typical in these highlands. Negotiating these possessed landscapes is a fraught business. What becomes apparent here is the “pragmatic dimension” (Lambek 1996, 247), that infuses the process of trying to constantly figure out how to fit into each other's lives and maintain good relations. When traversing this possessed landscape, people were less preoccupied with ontological questions as to “which of these spirits exist” than with “which of them has the power to influence my life now?” (ibid). It is these spectral persons' capacity to have an effect on human lives that, “power to work” (James 1907, 58), as felt in the body becoming weak and sick, that is the primary concern of the women and men I came to know in the Papuan hills. Upon stumbling upon such a hungry spectre, a process of highly mediated negotiation is enacted. These spectres are often treated as conscious subjects able to communicate with humans and, as such, addressed as people that can be engaged in

reciprocal relations of respect (c.f. Viveiros de Castro 2004b). This is very much in evidence in the case of Lee Kyaw Hta's daughter.

Thus, this encounter between the *nah htee* and Lee Kyaw Hta's daughter is located in a more-than-human contact zone that, as we saw in the previous chapter, involves both asymmetrical power relations and a great deal of improvisation and constant negotiation (Isaacs and Otruba 2019; c.f. Pratt 1991; 2008). As such, this encounter with the landscape is less a relation of control or management of scarce "resources" than an open-ended asymmetrical grappling and negotiation between the human and the spectral realms.

The first moment of contact came when the girl first stumbled upon an area possessed by a certain spectral person. This careless intrusion into its area raises its ire, proving it to *aw loh*, to eat/snatch her *k'la*, beginning this process of asymmetrical "clash[ing] and grappl[ing] with each other". Following on from this, there is a further flurry of contact as these two men then try to communicate and negotiate with this hungry spectre. However, in this contact these men do not attempt to turn the spectre to their own needs, to co-op it as we saw was the case of histories, nor to transform it as Kwon (2014) has shown was the case with ghosts of violent conflict in Vietnam. Instead, what follows comes closer to a negotiation, by way of propitiation, to attempt to straighten-out relations between the human and spectral realms that have become strained.

Hpu Waw, whom we met earlier, for example, once described the way a certain spectre that possesses a path or road *aw loh*, or "eats", a person's *k'la* as being "like the person's *k'la* is put in prison". When this happens, the spectre demands not only alcohol and the food but also some coins, that are a "fee" or even a "bribe" to release the *k'la* again. This resonates with the ways in which, as Marisol de la Cadena shows, among the Runakuna in Peru "offerings" are locally referred to as a "payment", and echo acts of bribing judges (2015, 95). As such, following de la Cadena, I prefer to see these as relations not of co-option or transformation but of obligation and alliance. In each instance, *lu ta*, involved feeding the spectral person in question to win their favour. The hungry spectral person is entreated to come and eat together with the humans. The two men in the vignette above ate together, after first giving the best

morsels of food to the *nah htee* as a way to “pay back” and to realign relations between the human and spectral realms.

As we have seen in this chapter, these Papun hills might best be described as a Possessed Landscape, where the lands and waters are not only haunted by spectral persons but also ultimately owned by them. A corollary of this is that people carefully negotiated this landscape, mindful that they might at any time disturb the “area” of a certain unseen, more-than-human person, and constantly attempting to realign relations by way of feeding and eating together with them. As such, these findings gesture towards a specific regime of ownership and a mode of politics and sovereignty that prevails in these highlands. It is towards these alternate modes of politics and sovereignty that I turn in the next chapter.

Three | Spectral Sovereignty

Negotiations of State, Power, and Politics



Walking five minutes up the hill from bottom Ta K'Thwee Duh, past the school hall where the Karen flag flutters in the stiff breeze up here, past women and children laden down by weaved bamboo baskets filled to the brim with firewood and foraged forest products slowly lumbering back home, then taking the path that cuts through a five-year-old fallow, one eventually comes upon the main road. The villagers refer to it as the *kleh doh* “big road” or the *kah kleh* “car road” – despite the fact that vehicles larger than a motorbike are only able to traverse this “car road” in the short dry season, some five months of each year. This road was built along the very top of the Bu Thoe ridge that demarcates the Salween and the Yunzalin river basins as they run side by side along this stretch. A three-meter wide strip of stamped down earth was carved out of this mountaintop by bulldozers and earthmovers some six years prior, and has to be harrowed out anew after each monsoon season due to erosion. To the north, this ever-shifting dirt road draws the village into connection with a slightly larger village and a KNLA base and ties it to a warren of motorbike trails to the rest of the district. Travelling south it soon bifurcates, connecting the village to a tiny market town on the banks of the Salween in the east and to the regional centre to the west. This was the first, and to date only, large infrastructure project in the area and, especially among the elders, it continues to generate a considerable amount of anxiety. As I enquired further, it soon became clear that the main objective for building this road was tactical, to string together the various KNLA bases up here together, and facilitate their resupply.

However, this large infrastructural project began generating more than its fair share of contentions, even before a single meter of earth had been cleared and stamped down. When the villagers were first informed about the construction plan, many held grave concerns upon learning that the road was projected to cut right through their

village-*kaw*. The *kaw* is the village land or realm, that is often translated as their “customary” or “ancestral lands”.

On a practical level, people realised that the construction bore seeds of discord since it threatened to segment their *hku* (swidden patches), to which the usufruct rights are inherited. It was also projected to carve up an area that had been heavily planted with cardamom, a lucrative cash crop. Thus, the villagers grew increasingly anxious that the road might lead to conflicts between people over the control of land. One way they hoped to alleviate this was for the road constructors, contracted and led by the KNU, to buy them a large pig for the whole village to share together. They hoped a collective feast might dissipate some of these growing anxieties. It is not clear who actually forwarded this request to the road foreman, as the ritual leader, the *hee koh htee*, declines all such duties and neither he nor the headman of the village are vested in the de facto political power to take such an action. Either way, the villagers were rather curtly informed that there were no funds for such frivolous things. Work on the road would progress as planned.

As this disquiet was building and as road constructions began in earnest further south, some of the villagers from *Ta K'Thwee Duh* went to labour on the road. Here they learnt that it was projected to cut straight through a mountain in their village-*kaw* named Ta Bu Kyoh. This mountain, 1300 meters above sea level, is known to be the seat of/is Naw Ghoo Hsaw who is the *kaw k'sah*, “the owner of the earth” or “owner of the -kaw”. As such, this mountain is ritually and politically central to day-to-day life. Any disturbance of this area would surely illicit the wrath of the *kaw k'sah* that could potentially be catastrophic, not only to the humans, but also to all animals, crops, lands and waters that are under “her” (she was gendered female) dominion. Upon learning about this, people fretted greatly what would happen, but lacked a clear village leader who could convey their concerns to the relevant authorities.

This incident came to a head when a young woman, Naw Ghaw, dreamt that a spring at the top of Ta Bu Kyoh overflowed, inundating the whole area. When she recalled this dream to her fellow villagers, they interpreted it as a terrible and foreboding omen. Following this, her father Hpu Hkee, possessed with an idiosyncratically quavering yet booming voice, marched over to the road constructors

to explain that the road could not be built here. But, once again, he was curtly told that it was too costly to redirect the road. With neither the authority nor the power to demand that they desist, and with few other recourses to action left open them, Hpu Hkee and several other elders turned to the *kaw k'sah*. They ascended Ta Bu Kyoh, much as their ancestors had before them, and entreated Naw Ghoo Hsaw that, should she agree that a road run through here, then let nothing bad happen. But, if she did not agree, then let terrible misfortune befall all those that conspire to build this road through “her place”. Following on from this, they returned home and left it at that. Nothing more could be done they told the other villagers, now “we have put it in the hands of the *kaw k'sah*”. Many of them then returned to labour on the road as it slowly made its way north to them.

Some unspecified time later the foreman, who had repeatedly ignored the villagers’ requests, suddenly and mysteriously fell ill. And shortly afterwards, he keeled over and died. Following these events, his replacement came to pay a personal visit to Ta K’Thwee Duh to hear their grievances and, consequently, the road was redirected around Ta Bu Kyoh. Moreover, as each teller of this tale was eager to stress, the new foreman even asked the villagers what other demands they had. The elders in the villages told him that they also needed a pig to share with the village, but it need not be so large. As long as every villager can take one bite it will suffice. A week later, they received a huge barrow that was more than ample to feed every single person in the village – a taut triumphant smile slowly creeping over Hpu Kee’s deeply wrinkled face each time he tells this part. While there were numerous variations on this story, upon each iteration the narrator came to the same conclusion: it was through the intervention of the *kaw k'sah* that they had finally succeeded in their demands, the mountain had intervened in the realm of human life.



Figure 3.1 Burning the swidden (photo by author)

The furore elicited by the construction of this road along the Bu Thoe ridge brings several issues into sharper focus that I will attempt to address in this chapter. In these highlands, as we have seen has been the case since longer than anyone can remember, the Myanmar state has remained distant, playing a rather minor part in this infrastructure project. Moreover, while the KNU in many ways acts as a state-like entity, their sovereignty too becomes threadbare up along this ridge. This road was the first large infrastructure project to reach this elevation. However, while we find a dearth of local human actors and institutions vested with the *de facto* power and authority to push back against the KNU state building of this road, these highlands

do not quite fit the descriptor of “non-state-spaces” and pockets of anarchy that other small-scale societies at the edges of states in Southeast Asia often are ascribed (e.g. Scott 2009; Gibson and Sillander 2011). While the term anarchy comes from the Greek for “no ruler” (Morris 2015, 62) or “without government” (Barclay 1998, 8–10), along the Bu Thoe ridge it was less that sovereignty was lacking than that it was spectral.

I describe this as Spectral Sovereignty. As I have argued in the previous chapters, these uplands are located in a contact zone at the interstices between states and between human and spectral realms. As such, political landscapes up along the Salween River are never quite settled, but rather, open to constant negotiation and renegotiation. Therefore, in describing sovereignty as spectral I demonstrate the ways it too was never quite settled, constantly being negotiated as these spectral persons regularly intervened in the realm of human life.

Thus, in this chapter I explore how along the Salween River sovereignty, and by implication ownership, is not so much absent (Scott 2009, 60–61; Morgan [1870] 2000), or simply plural³⁷ (Kyed 2011; McConnachie 2014), mutated and fragmented (Ong 2006; Hansen 2006) or aleatory (Dunn and Cons 2014), but rather, nesting and spectral. Much as we found was the case in the movements of spectral persons in the preceding chapter, both ownership and sovereignty remain interminably indeterminate. Consequently, it can only be grasped by the effects it has on life, through sensing their presence and constant negotiations. Moreover, as we saw in the vignette above, sovereignty is often understood to rest in the unseen more-than-human-hands of the *kaw k'sah*, the true owners of the earth. To this end, we find that both ownership and sovereignty were resting in the hands of the *k'sah* and, as a consequence, nesting, in hierarchal relation to the encompassing dominion of the spectral realm. As we shall see, while it was often said that a certain patch of land has a human *k'sah* or “owner”, upon closer inquiry it became clear that the human “owner” had in fact “borrowed” this land from its true owners, such as *ta mu khah* and *kaw k'sah*,

³⁷ Not to be confused with J.S. Furnivall's notion of “plural society”, where different groups and political regimes are co-present but socially segregated, such that “they mix but do not combine” (1948, 304), discussed in chapter one.

that possesses (in the dual and entangled sense) this patch of ground. To grasp this hierarchical relation, I draw on the work of Louis Dumont ([1966] 1980) on hierarchy and relationships of encompassment, and on notions of nested hierarchies (e.g. Allen and Starr 1982; Volk 1995, 125–51; c.f. Humphrey 2008; Simpson 2014). Moreover, I also appeal to applications of these ideas in the Burmese context (Keeler 2017; Harrisson 2020). However, to capture the manner in which both ownership and sovereignty in the highlands along the Salween River are also indeterminate and subject to ongoing negotiations, I loan Signe Howell's (2007) more active and process-oriented terminology of “nesting”. Along these lines, I speak of the spectral sovereignty not as a full gone conclusion but as a process of constant encompassing. I then end this chapter with a discussion on spectral sovereignty to explore how it unsettles more established notions of ownership and sovereignty and gestures towards an alternate mode of politics.

At the frayed edges of state sovereignty

Upon each telling of the tale of this particular road along the Bu Thoe ridge, much the same as in other histories from these highlands, the Myanmar state remains largely distant. As I showed previously, my fieldwork in these highlands from 2016–2017 was bookended, geographically and temporally, by conflicts arising from the Tatmadaw-led road building projects. To the south-east in September 2016, just months before I began my fieldwork, conflict flared up around an access road to the contested Hatgyi hydroelectric dam (Bright 2019, 79–80; Karen Rivers Watch 2016). And to the north-west, from March 2018 and still ongoing, there have been sporadic armed clashes around the construction of a road that also aims to concatenate military bases (albeit Tatmadaw ones), in Ler Mu Plaw a day's hike away (Moo and O'Connor 2018; Nyein 2020c). However, the construction of this particular “car road” along the Bu Thoe ridge described above, seven years prior to my arrival, described above was a purely KNU/KNLA project. The Tatmadaw and the Myanmar state were only implicated in its construction insofar as the road was a part of the KNLA defence strategy to keep them at bay.

The relative absence of the Myanmar state in the construction of this road follows the pattern we saw in the previous chapter, of conflict and state conquest tending to simply pass through these wind-buffered uplands, on the way to more strategically significant areas. This pattern, in turn, follows deep histories of the wider Salween District. As we found in chapter one, the lands along the Salween River were treated by pre-colonial and colonial government alike as a frontier area, under indirect rule through strategic alliances with local “tribal chieftains”, never having been brought fully under centralised state control (Furnivall 1960, 12; Jolliffe 2016, 9). In the present we find, in much the same way, that greatest presence of the Myanmar state in the areas around Ta K’Thwee Duh was a Tatmadaw military encamp some two- or three-hours’ hike away, down along the banks of the Salween River. In people’s day-to-day lives, especially since the ceasefire in 2012, this military presence was mostly felt in the patchy military-owned Myanma Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) mobile network coverage that emanated from this base and could be caught at a few spots along this ridge (when the wind was not blowing too strongly). Indeed, nearly all trade was conducted in Thai Baht, Myanmar Kyat notes being either refused outright, or accepted begrudgingly at rather unfavourable exchange rates. Moreover, the vast majority of items sold in the small tea shops along this ridge were imported from Thailand by the fleet of long-tail boats that plied the Salween day and night, then freighted up on motorbikes along the span of the “car road” and beyond. Moreover, the cars and motorbikes that negotiated this crumbling and constantly shifting road also drove on the left-hand side. “It’s just like Thailand”, people would exclaim each time I veered onto the right-hand side of the road when I rode a motorbike there. One consequence of this protracted armed conflict was that there were few passable roads to the markets inside Myanmar, constraining the flow not only of goods but also of people coming from central Myanmar. Indeed, Burmese-speaking people who were not Tatmadaw soldiers only made it up there on a handful of occasions that people could remember, and as we saw in the first chapter, when they did they were met with considerable trepidation, suspicion and sometimes violence. Thus, along this ridge, most people felt the sovereignty of the Myanmar state largely through its effects, in rumours of the movements of Tatmadaw troops on the ground, the roar of

fighter planes and helicopters overhead, and the traces left in its wake, of scorched earth and landmines underfoot – this and the occasional cattle trader and patchy mobile coverage. However, as became apparent in the events following the KNU attempts to construct a road along the Bu Thoe ridge, where the sovereignty of the Myanmar state wanes, rather than pockets of non-state space opening up (Scott 2009), in its stead the sovereignty of the KNU has waxed (see also, Rajah 1990, 122; South 2008).

From its very formation as the Karen National Organisation in 1888, this so-called Non-State Armed Group (NSAGs), has struggled not only against the Burmese state but, much like its sister movements, such as the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) in the north and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) in the south, it has also worked unceasingly towards the establishment of an autonomous Karen State, Kawthoolei. Thus, in many of the so-called “liberated areas” under its control along these highlands, the KNU acts as a state-like organisation that extends its own sovereignty here. Albeit, this is notwithstanding a significant degree of overlapping and contestation (South 2018; Harrisson and Kyed 2019; Harrisson 2020). The state-like presence of the KNU was most evident in the larger villages in the foothills and valleys, such as the district capital and the seat of the village tract, close to the Salween, which were clearly marked KNU-state spaces. Here the KNU not only cornered the “markets of protection” (Shah 2013, 489), in the form of the Karen Nation Liberation Army (KNLA) and the police (as many “violent” or “rebel” groups excel at), but were also the sole providers of care, education, justice and transportation. The KNU has its own schools, clinics and courthouses, with state departments dedicated to forestry, mining, education, with all the accompanying bureaucracy (c.f. D. Brenner 2019). As one young judge in the district capital told me, they even have a special “witchcraft law” governing the use of magic, and soon will have their own prisons. The road itself was commissioned by the Transportation and Communication Department of the KNU, and all motorbikes that now ply it are required to pay road tax each year, that must be on clearly displayed at all times and subject to inspection at each checkpoint along the road.

To this end, the common practice of describing bodies such as the KNU as Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG) (e.g. Kyed and Gravers 2014; Krause and Milliken 2009) and their sovereignty as “rebel government” (e.g. D. Brenner 2019; Mampilly 2007) often fails to capture what the KNU had attained in their “liberated areas”. As Ashley South points out, in many areas of Southeast Myanmar the KNU acts as a kind of “para-state” (2008, 38). The KNU governance apparatus, modelled, at least in part, on the former colonial system, has its own flag (the one that flutters in the school grounds at the top Ta K’Thwee Duh), national anthem (that the school children here sing each morning), and complex governance structures. Thus, in these liberated areas, the KNU has accrued most of the accoutrements of what would usually be associated with a modern nation-state (not bookended by scare quotes as Rajah 1990 insists on doing). Albeit in a much truncated form to that which we saw in the opening chapter, was envisioned by figures such as San C. Po (1928) almost a century prior, these liberated areas form part of *Kawthoolei*, the territorialised nation-state that the KNU has struggled for over seventy years to attain.

However, as becomes particularly salient during the process of building a road along the Bu Thoe ridge, the highlands there are themselves divided in hills and valleys and, much like its historical predecessors, the KNU state also struggles to expand into the higher elevations of the Papun hills. As has been described in other upland areas of the Southeast Asian massif this can, in part, be accounted for as a function of the “friction of terrain” (Scott 2009, xi, 40–63), of the steep slopes and dense forests of this area. While the villagers had planted their rising sun flag in the soil at the top of the village, the large infrastructural project building the road was the first time the KNU had managed to establish themselves firmly along this ridge. As one of the KESAN activists once lamented to me, capital from development and infrastructural projects, be they KNU- or NGO-led, had a habit of “hopping over the mountain” (c.f. J. Ferguson 2006, 38) and ending up on either side in the lower elevations. As a result, the majority of the primary schools and clinics along this ridge were predominantly funded by a spattering of cross-border, often catholic, organisations with rather tenuous links to the Karen Education Department (KED) and Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) branches of the KNU government. Their main offices

and activities remained in the settlements at lower altitudes. Accordingly, South draws on Stanley Tambiah's ([1985] 2013) notion of Galactic Polities to describe the KNU "para-state" as having a mandala-like cosmological topography (South 2008, 2, 38–39). Parallel to the precolonial Burmese and Thai states that once ruled this area, the KNU's sovereignty radiates outwards from these centres at lower elevations, slowly losing strength towards the periphery (ibid). This is similar to the way Benedict Anderson talks of power in Java as concrete, homogenous, finite and amoral and that, like the light cast downwards from a reflector lamp, gradually reduces in radiance with distance (1990, 36). However, as opposed to many historical perspectives of Southeast Asian forms of power (B. R. O. Anderson 1990; Errington 2012; Chua et al. 2012b) and sovereignty (Tambiah [1985] 2013), as we found in chapter one, these highlands along the Salween were less "fracture zones", or pockets of "nonstate space" (Scott 2009) as much as Contact Zones. At these interstices between the KNU and the Myanmar state, rather than a vacuum, we find that a space opens for the constant encounter and negotiation of power and sovereignty, that remains interminably unsettled.

Most villagers living along the Bu Thoe ridge that I had a chance to talk to spoke warmly about this *kah kleh* or "car road". Indeed, a large proportion of them, including Hpu Kee himself, had helped with its construction. While many may have protested the particular path this road was projected to take, few disagreed with the road itself in principle. Rather than attempting to constantly evade the state, while holding deep reservation, many desired and welcomed more KNU involvement in their area (c.f. Salemink 2015; High 2014; Jansen 2014), hoping they may be able to make claims on them (cf. J. Ferguson 2013). This resonates with Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox's (2015) work where they show how roads as "public works" come to matter, provoking conflicts and negotiations over ownership as well as being entangled with desires for connectivity and prosperity. Thus, struggle over the path of this road was indicative less of wholesale rejection of the KNU's sovereignty than as part of a process of people's constant negotiation with it. Moreover, in these areas where the KNU's influence becomes threadbare, alternative modes of ownership and sovereignty

emerge that coexist with it and constantly negotiate and subvert this influence. The power of the spectral realms indeterminately makes itself felt on human affairs.

Village-Kaw and Alternative Modes of Ownership

In the events that unfolded following the construction of a car road, we are introduced to the terms *hku*,³⁸ denoting the parcels of land used for swidden cultivation, and *-kaw*, that I have until now followed local activists in translating as “customary land”. These terms took centre stage as tensions were building around the “car road”. The villagers in Ta K’Thwee Duh fretted that as the road ploughed through their *-kaw* it may potentially segment and throw into disarray the intricate system of inherited *hku* or swidden patches and carefully negotiated patches of cash crops held by the different households, provoking conflicts over the use and control of land. What is more, as they learnt that the road was projected to cut straight through the mountain that is (the seat or domain of) the *kaw k’sah*, the spectral owner of the lands around the village, these tensions came to a head. Spurred on by dreams of a deadly deluge, they increasingly feared that if road constructions were allowed to continue on its current path, this may evoke the wrath of the *kaw k’sah* and catastrophe could strike at any time. As we shall see, these notions of *hku* and *-kaw* and the *kaw k’sah* were integral to the manner in which day-to-day social life was organised in these highlands, and were deeply entangled to indigenous regimes of ownership and modes of sovereignty. As the road drew closer, the people residing here were forced to renegotiate both ownership and sovereignty, with both the KNU and the spectral realm constantly encompassing them. I return to this point on encompassing and nesting in the following section.

Alternative Regimes of Ownership

The suffix *-kaw*, added to a place or group name in Sgaw Karen, usually denotes a “delineated space”, such as a country,³⁹ for example, Burma/Myanmar is known as

³⁸ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=ck%3B&submit=Lookup#>

³⁹ <http://drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=uD%3E&submit=Lookup#>

Kaw P'Yaw.⁴⁰ However, in these highlands the suffix *-kaw* also connotes the collectively held lands around each named village cluster (or, in one exceptional case, a cluster of different villages).⁴¹ The area where I conducted the lion's share of my fieldwork, for example, is commonly referred to as Ta K'Thwee Duh Kaw, or the lands of Misty Village. And, in each *-kaw* the *hku* are integral to day-to-day affairs.

When I first arrived, people initially seemed to confirm my pre-conceived ideas that the lands around the villages were a form of commons or “common property” (P. Robbins 2011, 51–54) which could not be individually owned, and which everyone had the right to cultivate. Pa Htwee, who acted as my unofficial guide when I first arrived, for example, would regularly comment how, if I were to settle down here, it would be no problem for me to find a patch of land I could clear and begin to farm to feed myself. As he insisted, “it is no problem to borrow land from the people here”. My pre-conceived notions were encouraged further when I asked Naw Wee Daw, one of the most prolific rice wine brewers in the village⁴², if people or households could hold individual ownership of *hku* in this area she replied rather pointedly that “there are some people who like to think they can at least, but this is not so”. However, as I spent more time in these highlands it slowly became apparent that my attempts to portray the lands around the village as a commons were, in part, deeply entrenched in the “dogma of general primitive communism” among small-scale societies, that we anthropologists have inherited from our great ancestors Lewis H. Morgan (Brightman, Fausto, and Grotti 2016, 8). As has become increasingly clear in recent studies, this dogma bears strikingly little similarity to the actual empirical reality among a great deal of small-scale societies (e.g. *ibid*; Costa 2017). Upon closer inspection we find that the land and water in these highlands was held and controlled in far more intricate and complex ways than would be expected in “common property” theory. Indeed, we find less that there was no individual ownership as much as that there was

⁴⁰ Occasionally it also used as a prefix, Northern Thailand known as Kaw Kyaw Teh.

⁴¹ In the north of the peace park there is a *kaw* called *Kaw They Ghoo* that consists of several village clusters. This “federal kaw” came about due to a man, Saw Thay Ghoo exchanging several golden drums for the right to these lands/*kaw*, that he then named after himself. Yet this, from what I can ascertain, was more the exception that proves the rule (Paul, personal communication 2017. For more details, see Paul 2018).

⁴² Her husband, unfortunately, was also one of the most accomplished rice-wine consumers, so they rarely profited from this enterprise.

a blooming and buzzing of coexisting “alternative regimes of ownership” (Brightman, Fausto, and Grotti 2016, 10). Much as we saw in the previous chapter, this point became clearer to me as I traversed these highlands together with the villagers.

Once, while out walking along the road, Naw Htoo, who was accompanying me on this occasion, pointed out the land that lay adjacent to both Hpu Noh Noh Deh and the “car road”. This rough, slightly overgrown patch of land was, she continued, Hpu Hkee’s *hku*, his swidden patches, that now lay in fallow. She then went on to tell us that in this area were some of the *hku* that people fretted would be carved up and divided by the road. Upon asking her to elaborate what she meant when she spoke of these as Hpu Hkee’s fallow fields, she reiterated that they belonged to him, “he is the *k’sah*”, the owner of several of the swidden patches here. My curiosity piqued, I asked her how this squares with what Naw Wee Daw had told me, of how some “like to think” they own land, implying that it does not really belong to them. Naw Htoo then explained how, while a patch of land may, as such, belong to one person, others are free to borrow it. In order to cultivate a particular *hku* that one does not have rights over, the *hku k’sah* the “swidden patch owner” must be sought out to request their expressed permission to borrow it. If the “owner” is not using the land and does not have any plans to use it in the near future, then they usually allow others to borrow the land for this season. During this time, the original owner over the rights to cultivate this *hku* forfeits all claims over the land, requiring neither rent nor any other form of deference. But, the person borrowing this land is prohibited from holding on to it indefinitely. When they are finished cultivating the land, ownership reverts back to the original owner.

A rather intricate, but far from unique, pattern of ownership and cultivation emerges here in which the person actively cultivating the land becomes known as the *k’sah* or owner and the land is treated as, in every practical sense, to be his (c.f. Karlsson 2011, 127–65 in Northeast India; Viegas 2016 in the Brazilian Amazonas). I talk of this land as “his” here since, as we shall see, only men are permitted to begin clearing a field. “Only they have the *ta du ta htu*”, the associated practices and taboos inherited from their fathers, as it was commonly explained to me. As we saw in the previous chapter, such *ta du ta htu* are not to be taken lightly. Breaching these can have

devastating effects for oneself and one's close kin. Let us look at how this plays out up in these Papun hills.

I found how, when a man first begins to clear a certain *hku* for rice cultivation, this land is thereafter spoken of as belonging to him: he is the *k'sah* of this patch. In the season following the cultivation of rice on this land, when all the paddy has been harvested and safely stored, cultivation switches to less soil and water intensive crops such as chillies and aubergines, for an additional two to three-year period. However, as the shrubs and trees begin to grow back and the vegetation becomes too dense to easily tend to and harvest these secondary crops, the patch is left to return to forest again. In this way I found that, as the traces of cultivation disappear and the patch becomes overgrown so does the person's status of owning the field. This is similar to findings other among other people that practicing swidden cultivation where ownership has a temporal dimension, becoming the subject of forgetting. After a certain amount of time has elapsed, land eventually returns to the forest again, only to be cultivated later by someone else, in a cyclical manner (Viegas 2016; Butt Colson 1973). This kind of ephemeral ownership comes close to copyrights and patents that are "designated to expire" after a certain time (Michael. A. Brown 2004; c.f. Brightman, Fausto, and Grotti 2016, 23). However, in the Papun hills I found that while the *hku* appears to return to the forest, it does not become undifferentiated for it. Rather, as it falls back into fallow, ownership reverts back to the original *k'sah* or owner of the rights over its use. As such, this ephemeral mode of ownership appears to exist within another mode of ownership, "nested and embedded" (Simpson 2014, 10–12).

Along these highlands we find that ownership is often organised into "layers stacked upon stabilising layers" (Volk 1995, 127) in "stacked worlds" (D. Anderson 2019), where the ephemeral ownership of the current cultivator of a particular swidden patch is nesting in and subordinate to the encompassing ownership of the person they borrowed the patch from. As such this relation might be grasped as what systems ecologist Tim Allen (1982) refers to as "nested hierarchies", where each layer of ownership is nested in, that is to say, contained by a higher order – not unlike Russian Matryoshka or nesting dolls. Drawing on Bateson's work on metapatterns,

Tyler Volk preferred to call these “holarchies” that can be represented in the image of concentric circles (1995, 30).

In Myanmar such nesting hierarchies are often grasped by reference to Louis Dumont’s ([1966] 1980) work on hierarchy in which certain sets of relations are encompassed by and subordinate to higher orders of relations. In this manner, both religious society (Keeler 2017) and state-making (Harrisson 2020) are grasped as at once autonomous but simultaneously “encompassed” by and dependent upon higher orders, such as the Myanmar State. However, as Dumont repeatedly points out, this understating of (nesting) hierarchies is predicated on the orientation to the whole, or holism ([1966] 1980, 232–33; c.f. Keeler 2017, 112), to one dominant value (Howell 2007, 159). Yet, as we have seen throughout, in the Papun hills rather than one dominant value, relations are patchy, indeterminate and constantly negotiated – in Ingold’s (2006) terms, “open to the world”. Thus, I follow Signe Howell (2007) in using the active verb of “nesting” to describe this constantly jostling hierarchical arrangement. To this end, I also speak not of encompassed but *encompassing*, in the sense of an ongoing and constantly negotiated process. on. In this way, we see that a person’s ephemeral ownership over a *hku* is nesting in encompassing ownership of the person they borrowed it from. As ephemeral ownership wanes following the harvest, original ownership rights wax, dynamically. Yet, all this raises the question of how a person becomes the primary owner of these rights, that is to say, the person who had first rights of refusal over a particular patch of swidden, said to be hers or his.

While helping my neighbour, and Naw Htoo’s brother-in-law, Hpa Dee Pa (Father of Hpa Dee) to plant his swidden field on the startling steep side of Y’wa Ma Htu Lay, I constantly stumbled over the enormous stumps and fallen trees that remained scattered around this field. When I grumbled about this to Hpa Dee Pa after nearly falling for the umpteenth time, he explained to me that when they cleared this area, around a month ago, some of the trees that grew here were so massive that it had been exceedingly hard work. Being the only household (at this time) that owned a chainsaw, they had been able to fell these lumbering giants, but soon found it impossible to either remove them by hand or burn them away. We would simply have to plant around them this time. When I, rather naïvely, inquired as to why the trees

here had been so much larger than in any other swidden fields I had visited, he explained that his family were the first, at least in living memory, to open this particular parcel of forest land for cultivation.

As he sat sunning his body, almost fully adorned with magical protection tattoos, in a break between planting, Hpa Dee Pa elaborated that, as the first person to clear this parcel of forest for cultivation he has become its *k'sah* or owner. This manner in which the hard work involved in opening up a parcel of forest for cultivation appears to generate ownership, at first glance at least, resonates with Lockean notions where a person “mixes” a part of themselves with the land through labour to turn it into their property (Locke [1689] 2003; Brightman, Fausto, and Grotti 2016, 4). Widening our gaze, we find such processes are a common feature in many indigenous tenure systems across South and Southeast Asia (e.g. Li 2014a, 86; Karlsson 2011). Yet, as Hpa Dee Pa hastened to add, and as became clear in the previous chapter, rather than this patch becoming his individual property as Locke would have it, he became the owner of the primary rights to use this patch. Upon further investigation I found that this mode of ownership as owning the rights of usufruct was generated by dint of him being the first human to make contact and create a covenant with the spectral owners of this place. While Hpa Dee Pa was reticent to divulge too many details as to how he actually went about this (remembering that the rites invoked to do this are inherited *ta du ta htu*, i.e. taboos), he explained how there was no great difference from the rites he invokes to clear any other *hku*. He *lu ta* or “feeds/nourishes”, the spectral owners of this area with offerings of rice, curry, and betel nut, encouraging them to eat together while he beseeched them that he may borrow the land so he can feed his family, swearing to return it as soon as cultivation was over. As such, it is not only through his physical labour but also through his ritual labours that he now owns the primary rights of usufruct, to use and enjoy the fruits of something belonging to another. He owns the rites, passed down from his father, to make these covenants with the spectral realm, and through these, he attains the rights of usufruct.

The ownership of the rights to primary usufruct commonly referred to simply as *k'sah*, attained by the first person to make contact and make a covenant with the spectral owners of this parcel of land, rather than being “designed to expire” (Michael.

A. Brown 2004), continues on even after the death, inherited by the original covenant-maker's progeny (Hayami 2004; Lehman 2003). Thus, when Hpa Dee Pa eventually passes away these rights to primary usufruct will be passed down to his children. Moreover, while the first person to clear the land must be a man who has inherited the rites involved in contacting and creating a covenant with the spectral owners of an area, lineage is traced bilaterally among Sgaw Karen speaking groups (an exception to this arises later in this chapter) such that this swidden patch can be inherited both by his sons and his daughters. As such, it is the descendants of the first covenant-maker that become the primary *k'sah*, who have first rights of refusal, and to whom ownership (in this restricted sense) reverts back when it is not being actively cultivated. However, there were ways to circumvent the limitations of this ephemeral mode of ownership such as by cultivating something more permanent than dry rice and chilli plants, or building more permanent terraces in the field for wet rice cultivation.

Certain cultivated bamboo groves, household gardens, orchards (mostly of areca/betel nut), and even free-standing fruit trees such as the coconut palm that grew between Hpu Gay's and my own home were, in regular speech, referred to as belonging to a specific person. While many people hitched their way up the coconut palm to harvest its fruit, people continued to talk of it as Pa Thoo Pa's property. Moreover, as these more permanent plants and trees remain in the ground over several seasons a person or household's status as the *k'sah* or owner also continues and can even be inherited by their decedants. Many of the cardamom planted by an enterprising villager in Hpu Noh Noh Deh Kleh some sixty years prior, for example, had been inherited by his sons after his death. Indeed, in many indigenous tenure systems the materiality of these crops is formative, but their (relative) permanence can also lead to form of exclusive private ownership and provide the groundings for "capitalist relations" (Li 2014a; see also, Karlsson 2011).

Yet, along these highlands I found this shift to private ownership, what Karl Polanyi ([1944] 2001) described as the Great Transformation, continued to be incomplete, being constantly militated against by the encompassing ownership of spectres. As such, in most cases, if a person asked for permission from the human *k'sah*,

under most circumstances they were permitted to harvest a few coconuts, cut a stand of bamboo, or fill up a rolled-up shirt with areca nuts for their families should they not have any themselves. Underlying these practices was a tacit understanding that there were limits as to how much a person may borrow, and that what they borrow may not be sold on for a profit.

In this way, these groves, gardens, orchards, and trees/palms, although talked of as being owned by one person or one household, fell awkwardly somewhere between the often neatly bifurcated modes of ownership, of exclusive private property on the one hand, and the commons on the other. While the material permanency of these areas, plants, palms and trees, allowed people to stretch and negotiate modes of ephemeral ownership, this never quite led to the alienation of the earth from its spectral owners. They remained constantly nesting in and beholden to the possession of the real spectral owner. Thus, we find that ephemeral ownership is resting in the encompassing ownership of the direct descendant of the man who first made contact and made a covenant with the spectre that possesses this area. As such, this form of human ownership is in turn nesting in and subordinate to encompassing spectral ownership. We find that there these layers of ownership or “stacked worlds” (D. Anderson 2019) sketch out a nesting hierarchy that is in constant motion.

Paddy Transformations

These alternative regimes of both ephemeral and nesting ownership have, however, slowly begun shifting over the last eight years with the growing popularity of terraced wet rice cultivation. The dawning of these gradual changes can be discerned in the advent of exchanges of land that often proceed the establishment of terraced wet rice/paddy fields. Take the case of Hpu Hka hsoo who, from what I could ascertain, was one of the first people in the area to adopt this form of agriculture.

Seven or eight years ago Hpu Hka Hsoo decided he would attempt to establish a paddy field like the ones he had come across on his travels in Thailand. By his own estimate, he had inherited the rights to usufruct of at least fifteen *hku* patches in Ta K’Thwee Duh Kaw from his parents. Yet, when he began searching for a suitable spot to begin establishing a paddy field, he discovered that none of the swidden patches he

had inherited were particularly well situated to this task. They were either too far away from a water source, or angled in a way that made it difficult to inundate the top of the field. As he continued to search for a suitable area, he found one swidden patch, nestled along the Bleh Mah Loh stream that ran along the foot of Y'wa Mah Htu Lay, that he thought would be perfect. The problem was, this patch was neither his nor did any of his kin "own" this patch either. But, not easily disheartened, Hpu Kha Hsoo hit upon the idea that, while there are strong *ta du ta htu*, it is strictly forbidden to sell the rights over a swidden patch. In the past people have swapped land, like for like. Thus, he sought out the human *k'sah* or owner over this particular swidden patch along the Bleh Ma Loh stream and proposed a swap, exchanging the rights over this patch with the rights he held over another patch in another area of Ta K'Thwee Duh Kaw. After a little persuading, the exchange was completed; the back-breaking labour of carving the characteristic steps of a terraced wet rice field and the channels to redirect water from the Bleh Mah Loh stream could begin.

However, much like the material permanency of areca palms, the drastic reshaping of the earth entailed in the establishing of a field in which rice can be cultivated here year after year without a fallow period produces a concurrent permanence to his rights over this land. Yet, while both planting trees and establishing a paddy field have the similar effect of stretching how long a single person or household can hold on to a certain parcel of land, the growing influence of the KNU and of official documents is lending this stretched form of ephemeral ownership a added sense of individuality and permanence.

Upon establishing a paddy field and beginning to actively use it to cultivate wet rice, the Karen Agricultural Department (KAD) of the KNU requires a person to register this land, often via the village tract leader, and apply for a land title to it. This KNU land title requires that one specific person be registered as the official owner of this field, effectively making it private property. As I will explore in more depth in chapter four, this can be grasped as a tactic by the KNU state to make this area "assessable", "legible" and, importantly, taxable (cf. Scott 1998). However, one corollary of this individualised land title is that it also makes it possible, on paper at least, for land to be bought and sold.

Following Hpu Hka Hsoo's initial success in establishing a paddy field along this stream several others set to work establishing their own terraced wet rice fields beside it. By my reckoning, there were four paddy fields along this stream, and another three to the west of the village-*kaw* (and two more that, due to a lack of funds, remained incomplete). In one of the Paddy fields along the Bleh Mah Loh stream, the elderly man who held the land title over this field had recently moved to the regional centre to be closer to his son who lived there. Since he moved, he had then rented out the field to Hpa Htwee, ostensibly to cover the taxes he was obligated to pay to the KNU for the land, whether he used it or not. However, at least as Hpa Htwee tells it, the "owner" of this land only intended to rent out this paddy field in the short term. His long-term goal was to find someone who would be willing to buy the land from him, that is to say buy the KNU land deed, relieving him of the tax burden. Following this, Hpa Htwee visited me several times and not so subtly suggested I should buy this field: so I would have somewhere to grow and support myself when I come back. He then, selflessly of course, promised to take care of it while I was away.

In this manner, while it had not quite yet happened, the growing popularity of permanent paddy fields was gradually making it possible to negotiate and in fact stretch and refigure indigenous modes of ownership in ways that bore a strikingly closer resemblance to what could be described as private property. What then of the other half of common dichotomous models of ownership, of the commons?

Uncommon commons and nesting ownership

The closest one comes to a form of commons in these highlands was a handful of *hku* where the rights of usufruct could not be handed on to the next generation, and patches of land that were either unsuitable or dangerous to cultivate, such as rocky outcrops, ponds, and *ta thoo ta pgaho/hsoo* or "potent/strong" places.

In the rare case in which a person without any direct kin to pass on the primary rights of usufruct to their *hku* to died, their *hku* was turned over to the commons. Thus, all people residing in Ta K'Thwee Duh had the rights to cultivate these lands. Yet, a person could only own such a patch of land in ephemeral mode, the cultivator losing all claims to this land as it fell back into fallow/forest. In addition, there were several

areas in the village-*kaw* that could not be cleared and cultivated due to the terrain, such as Way Pgah, a rocky and wild forest populated by a whole host of animals such as tigers, sun bears, and hornbills (that I will return to in the final chapter). Along with these areas, uncultivable due to the terrain, were the swathes of land that, as we found in the previous chapter, could not be cultivated due to being already possessed, in both the political and cosmological senses, either by *hsoo* or “powerful” spectres, such as Hpu Noh Noh Deh, or by *ta thoo ta pgho* or the “potency of creation”, such as the crest of peaks that make up Y’wa Ma Htu Lay. In a sense, these lands resemble what have been described as “common property” (P. Robbins 2011, 51–54), all people in the village-*kaw* being free to collect firewood, forage, hunt and even, as was the case in Hpu Noh Noh Deh plant certain crops such as cardamom here. However, as we delve deeper, we find that the very status of this land as common to all humans residing in the vicinity is predicated on this land being, ultimately, possessed and owned by spectral persons.

Thus, as we have seen, in these highlands two modes of human ownership emerge, both of which describe a person as the *k’sah* or “the owner” of a certain demarcated area. One mode of human ownership is that of primary usufruct, and the other is that of ephemeral ownership, with the latter nesting in and subsumed under the former. As ephemeral ownership wanes we see the waxing of the encompassing ownership of primary usufruct. Moreover, as we have seen, both these modes of human ownership were, in turn, nesting in a wider hierarchical relationship to the encompassing ownership of various spectral persons who possessed and were the true owners of the landscapes along this stretch of the Salween River, acting almost like sovereigns over their own domains. Their encompassing ownership appears to have constantly interrupted and militated against attempts to fully transform land into private property.

-Kaw as Patchworks

In the light of what we have seen thus far, each village-*kaw* appears to be a kind of patchwork of different lands that are loosely sewn together into one piece. This patchwork is composed of: lands with identifiable human *k’sah* in the sense of right to

usufruct such as *hku*, paddy fields, household plots, garden, orchards, groves and some trees; areas with identifiable spectral owners such as those spoken of as *hsoo*, as in “strongly” possessed or *ta thoo ta pgho* “potent” places; and lands understood more diffusely as possessed by a whole host of (mostly) indeterminate spectral persons, such as the surrounding forests, lakes, and rivers. Thus, each village-*kaw* forms a heterogenous “delineated space”, that implies notions of an inside and an outside. This last point becomes most clear when people speak of who is *htoo lee hpoe* or “indigenous” to a specific village-*kaw*.

As I began to learn about the complex and negotiated nature of land ownership in Ta K’Thwee Duh, I found that certain people were understood to be (*pgha*) *htoo lee hpoe*, that is to say “indigenous” in a very restrictive sense of belonging to a particular village-*kaw*. Only a person who is *htoo lee hpoe* may hold and inherit *hku* or “swidden patches” and be permitted to gather food/fuel and hunt here. In delving into how a person can be considered as (*pgha*) *htoo lee hpoe* in Ta K’Thwee Duh and able to “own” land, in the sense of primary usufruct rights, I learnt that both they and their parents/ancestors must have been born within this village-*kaw*, and they must continue to reside here. Should they move to another village-*kaw* after their birth, usually through marriage, (in most cases) they forfeit both the right to “own” and to inherit land in this sense and must request permission not only to cultivate but also to gather food/fuel and hunt in the forests, rivers and lakes in the village-*kaw* of their birth. A non-*htoo lee hpoe* person, who has married into the -*kaw* (sometimes pejoratively called *hsaw mee* or “wild jungle foul”), much like a person who lives in a neighbouring village-*kaw* must ask for permission to borrow a certain *hku*. Moreover, these non-*htoo lee hpoe* can only hold land in the sense of ephemeral ownership. The temporal constraints on this kind of human ownership allows land to be shared with neighbouring areas while militating against attempts to permanently annex a patch to make it their property or part of their -*kaw*. It was in this sense that Pa Twee could say that I could easily find land to cultivate if I moved here (also implying that I marry a local woman here I later learnt).

I found that this patchwork of lands is clearly demarcated verbally rather than by conventional maps, such that this particular rise in the path, or that prominent stone, are used to mark the borders between *-kaw*. Nearly all members of the community, young and old, can recognise these physical boundary markers and, in doubt can always consult the village elders. There was, however, a small scrap of paper kept at the headman's house that was a transcription of these verbal demarcations and related by several of the village elders, in lieu of a map. I come back to and look closer at this document as a kind of "prose map" or "terrier" (Scott 1998, 45) in chapter five. To this end, each village-*kaw* has continuous borders with its neighbouring *-kaw*, touching on all sides, such that, together, they in turn create a patchwork of customary lands that covered these highlands.

Thus, each village-*kaw* acted as a largely autonomous scale of political organisation that both transcended and bound together the different households, families and even villages and sub-villages, while remaining deeply connected to other scales of political organisation. Moreover, each village-*kaw* had their own sets of *ta du ta htu*, or taboos that people here were required to follow. I return to these points of patchworks and scale when I look closer at the ways the Salween Peace Park was translating and rescaling these practices in chapter five. All those residing in a specific village-*kaw* were bound together by dint of their shared status as *pgha htoo lee hpoe* here, and/or as people sharing a particular swathe of agricultural, foraging, and hunting land.

As such, the land possession practices related to patchworks of village-*kaw* imply not only alternative modes of ownership but also alternative modes of politics and of sovereignty. Returning to the road building incident that I opened this chapter with, we begin to grasp how many of the villagers' concerns arose from understandable fears that, as it cut through the middle of the particular village-*kaw*, it might sub-divide and complicate this very delicate pattern of ownership. Should one part of a *hku* be split off from the rest then this could lead to bitter disputes over its ownership. This, in turn, also threatened the integrity of this particular scale of political organisation, that is to say the village-*kaw*, and its sovereignty.

But this all begs the question: who then acts as the head of each village-*kaw*, organising the division of lands such as *khu* between inhabitants? Who are the sovereigns of each -*kaw*? Commonly, especially in political ecology (that, partly, guides this thesis) one attempts to answer such questions by looking for the key actors involved in political process (Li 2014a; P. Robbins 2011; Karlsson 2011). However, as already suggested in the opening vignette, along the Bu Thoe ridge this was far from a straightforward affair.

-Kaw Politics: Negotiating Power

Throughout these upland areas of Southeast Myanmar, each main village, and thus, with a few exceptions as mentioned above, each village-*kaw* has an elected head. This person is known as the *tha waw tha pgha*, literally the “old heart of the village”, which in English is more commonly referred to as “the headman”. The headman and vice-headman are elected by popular vote once every four years in a meeting that gathers all the inhabitants of this area to cast their vote by a show of hands. In Ta K’Thwee Duh the headman has always been man,⁴³ and the current holder during my research throughout 2017 was a Baptism man called Hpa Lee Thoo. Moreover, while in this village-*kaw* the largest sub-villages/hamlets had its own sub-headmen, the elected headman and vice-headman of the main village remained the key figures in most political matters.

In understanding the headman to be a key political actor, when I first arrived in the Papun hills I was convinced that the headman office played a central role in the delegation of land within each village-*kaw*. During the period between January, and February when people select which *hku* then will cultivate for the coming agricultural season, I found that the villagers would regularly visit the headman to discuss matters surrounding cultivation. Moreover, from talking to Naw Ghaw’s husband one chilly February morning, I learnt that he was just returning from paying a visit to the

⁴³ In my research in the refugee camps in Thailand I learnt this was not always the case in all areas of Southeast Myanmar. One woman from a village downstream of the Salween, near Hpa-An, told me how her mother was the village headman when she was a child. This area was under dual KNU/Tatmadaw control at the time and Tatmadaw soldier would regularly beat the headman when he could not meet their demands. Thus, the villagers reasoned that the soldiers might go easier on a woman.

headman of neighbouring Dweh Hkee Duh kaw. He explained that since he was considering cultivating in Dweh Hkee Duh kaw, his first port of call was to speak to their village headman, to talk to him about borrowing land in this area. As a result, I too became a regular visitor to Hpa Lee Thoo's home, plying him with questions as to how they decide who cultivates where, much to his increasing puzzlement. After several visits, he patiently explained to me that, while people often came to him when they were deciding which land they would farm this season, he had little authority to make decisions, let alone give orders in such matters. As it turned out, he was required by the KNU to keep a ledger of where each person cultivated each year to facilitate the collecting of taxes, that was also conducted in this lull in agricultural activities. Thus, the reason people visited the village headman during this period was in order to look at the ledger (or get someone who could read to look for them). In this way, they could both get a better overview as to where other people were planning on cultivating this season and to whom they must ask for permission to clear a certain fallow that they did not hold primary rights of usufruct to. Thus, while people consulted him for information, he had little if any influence on how land was actually cultivated and shared. In a way, he and his home acted more as a hub from which negotiations over land use could begin. As he so pointedly put it, "people just discuss it between themselves and decide like that". As I came to understand, in most cases, the headman's political power stretched little further than his authority to call the villagers to meetings on certain subjects.

Inevitably, the headman called a meeting, to be held in his house, at the behest of others. At the meetings themselves, the people in attendance discussed the matter brought forward in this forum between themselves, listening to different sides of the subject at hand, before there was a show of hands to attempt to come to a consensus decision. If no consensus could be reached, then in most cases no action was taken. Thus, the headman and his house in many ways acted mostly as a forum to facilitate negotiations. As I spent more time with Hpa Lee Htoo I learnt that his elected role as headman in these highlands revolved largely around administrative duties such as calling meetings, helping people find out where they should go to request permission to cultivate a certain area, or relaying orders from the KNU (c.f. Boutry et al. 2017, 64

in Upper Burma; and Karlsson 2011 in Southeast India). He also acted as the village representative at KNU and also Peace Park meetings, returning home to report what he had been told. Indeed, much of the headman's duties revolved around being the intermediary between the KNU/KNLA and his fellow villagers.

Official orders from the KNU and the KNLA were usually conveyed to the village in the form of a written request addressed to the village headman that was delivered by motorcycle courier. In most cases, this was a signed letter from the commander of the local KNU encampment requesting that the villagers provide *corvée* labour. It was then the headman's job to collect villagers for such labour, which largely consisted of portering supplies between KNLA camps (less often now that the camps were connected by road), and assisting with the rebuilding of KNLA bases after the monsoon season, during peace time. During times of heightened conflict, villagers were sometimes also dragooned into serving as guides and even to bearing arms. As we have seen, the collection of taxes to the KNU also went through the headman's house, collected each February after the harvest by the village-tract leader and his entourage (again this was also always a man). The amount of land each household cultivated for shifting cultivation the previous year was recorded in the ledger in the headman's home and paid per acre, in either rice harvested or a cash equivalent. Those few households with paddy fields paid an additional fixed amount each year that, as we have seen, was levied regardless of whether they had actually cultivated this field or not the previous season. In this visit, the KNU village-tract leader and his entourage, including the captain in charge of the KNLA detachment for this village tract, also came to collect new conscripts. As villagers would (often ruefully) explain to me, each household had to "give one son to the KNU", as a soldier who would serve "for life", and one child who would serve for just one year.

As these examples illustrate, these villagers' relation to the KNU was at once quite distant, KNU officials rarely visiting and communicating largely through letters, but also deeply hierarchical. To this end, we find that the headman's political position was mainly that of an intermediary between the villagers and the KNU. His job consisted largely of hosting these officials each February, show them the ledger, and call a meeting when taxes were collected. As Hpu Gay, who served as headman for

over 10 years, explained, if a household was not able or willing to pay up then the headman would usually act as an arbitrator between them and the KNU/KNLA to try to solve this. Thus, the headman himself was neither vested with the authority to demand that the villagers carry out an order, nor did he have the capacity to coerce them to do so. As such, while relations to the KNU could at times be quite hierarchical, relations between villagers remained remarkably flat. The headman power was relegated to his position as an intermediary, negotiating between the villagers and the (distant) powers of the KNU.

In many ways, this role of headman can be seen as a legacy of colonial rule. As Maxime Bountry et al. (2017, 52–53) show, the figure of the village headman, as we see him today, emerged through the Village Act (1887), shortly after colonisation, to break up former administrative structures by emphasising the village as a political territorial unit and tying the headman to the collection of a “household tax” (Taylor 2009, 82). While Leach, not altogether uncharacteristically, is less clear as to the colonial legacy of the headman, he shows how the British regime insisted on each village having a headman (1954, 261), who assumes the position of “executive leadership” (1954, 188–89). In many ways, it appears that the KNU inherited this administrative system, the village acting as the smallest unit of governance in the KNU system.

However, this yearly visit from the village-tract leader and his entourage to collect taxes and soldiers was one of the very few brushes villagers had with the KNU state. The village-tract leader would rarely be seen again until the time of the next harvest, unless some unforeseen event drew him back, such as the arrival of a nosey anthropologist. Beside this flurry of activity around the end of the harvest and the occasional request for *corvée* labour, I found that the KNU and even the KNLA had surprisingly little presence in the day-to-day lives of the villagers. Soldiers would occasionally visit the village, but more often than not they arrived in civilian clothes for weddings and other ceremonies, to chat, drink and sometimes flirt (largely unsuccessfully) with the local single women. As we shall see in the next section, while the KNU’s lowland-based governance and judiciary branch were often evoked as a threat to people suspected of theft and the like, they were rarely, if ever, actually drawn upon in everyday governance. The headman kept out of most day-to-day affairs

and held little political clout outside of his ability to negotiate with the distant powers of the KNU. This can be seen clearly in the road building project this chapter opened with, where he played little part, other than collecting labour from the villagers to help build the road.

Given these rather unenviable tasks, assisting the collection of taxes, conscripts and labour few of the villagers relished the prospect of being the headman. Hpu Gay told me how the current headman had attempted to quit on three separate occasions, and this elder had been drafted in each time to persuade him to stay on. The other villagers told me how, in a myriad of subtle ways, they attempted to evade being chosen each time there was an election for a new headman. This said, most accepted that, once this decision was made, there was nothing they could do about this, at some point it would be “my turn”, as they reasoned (de la Cadena 2015, 41–42). Yet, as Hpa Thoo Pa confided in me, when his “turn” came about around six years ago his wife was furious and did not speak to him for two days.

The Ceremonial Leader

Along with the headman, the only other political office I was able to identify in my time along this stretch of the Salween was the *htee hpoe kaw k'sah/hee hkoh htee*, the hereditary “owner” of each *-kaw*. However, much like the headman, his political authority was largely rooted in his ability to negotiate, in his case with the surrounding spectral powers. His power was “ceremonial” (Paul 2018, 70), in both senses of the word

The title of *htee hpoe kaw k'sah* is passed down patrilineally from the founding lineage, descended from the first family that settled in this area. Much as we saw was the case in the establishing of *hku* or swidden patches, the *htee hpoe kaw k'sah* ancestors that were the first to make a covenant with the spectral owners of the area around Ta K'Thwee Duh. However, these founders made a covenant directly with the *kaw k'sah*, “the owner of the earth”, that is to say the *k'sah* of this entire village-*kaw*. It is in this sense that this living descendant is known as the hereditary “owner” of this village-*kaw*, in having inherited the usufruct rights over this entire delineated area. This relation is commonly known as a “founder’s cult” and is widespread across Southeast

Asia, where, in this covenant “[i]n return for regular offering, the spirit/s ensure the fertility of the land in the form of bountiful crops” (Tannenbaum and Kammerer 2003, 3). As a result of this relation, the position of *htee hpoe kaw k’sah* implies that he is charged with leading negotiations with the spectral owner of this area.⁴⁴

Much as with the headman, at the beginning of my fieldwork I regularly badgered the *htee hpoe kaw k’sah* of Ta K’Thwee Duh, asking a battery of questions as to how politics was organised in this area. I reasoned that, if the headman occupies the position of “executive leadership” then the *htee hpoe kaw k’sah* might come closer to a “thigh eating chief” (Leach 1954, explained below). Yet, he too patiently explained how he had little *de facto* power or authority in this village-*kaw*. His father, a middle child, had inherited the title only after his older brother, after being instructed by their father in all the correct rites and practices, had suddenly absconded to Thailand. As a result, much of the knowledge of how to execute the duties of a *htee hpoe kaw k’sah* had been lost with him. “I cannot do anything”, he repeatedly replied to my questions. Indeed, as Hpu Waw explained when I asked him about what this ceremonial leader had told me, people tend to refer to him as *hee hkoh htee*, the house or village head. Calling him the *htee hpoe kaw k’sah* might be construed as mocking his lack of abilities as a hereditary leader Hpu Waw emphasised. Most referred to the *hee kho htee* by the teknonym Hpaw Htoo Pa, after his oldest daughter Hpaw Htoo. As Hpu Waw went on to explain, the reasons that the villagers had encouraged Hpaw Htoo Pa to continue as the *hee hkoh htee* were largely pragmatic. The villagers had noticed how, as long as there was a *hee hkoh htee* “holding the generation”, they had received considerably more bountiful harvests. As such, his main duties, like his ancestors before him, revolved around being the first to conduct all the *lu ta*, or the “feeding” of spectral owners of the fields that are connected to each agricultural cycle. For, example, it was prohibited to begin propitiating the spectral owners of one’s swidden

⁴⁴ I was never able to glean a clear answer as to why this title can only be inherited patrilineally, to the oldest or youngest son of the current hold, while all other forms of inheritance are traced bilaterally. In part this may be due to how, as we have seen above, only men could inherit the rites associated with making and maintaining relations with these spectral owners. However, the *htee hpoe kaw k’sah* himself and elders I consulted were adamant that this title could not “skip a generation” and be inherited by the eldest son of the current holder’s daughter. It could only be passed from father to son, often leading to the *htee hpoe kaw k’sah* generation to “be lost”.

patch before the *hee hkoh htee*. It was his position, as the direct descendant of the first settlers, to open and facilitate smooth communication and negotiations with the local spectres of this village-*kaw*. Much as the headman acted as an intermediary between the villagers and the (distant) KNU, the *hee hkoh htee* acted as an intermediary between the villagers and the (largely unseen) spectral realm, charged with making and maintaining good relations.

Conversely, in the neighbouring village-*kaw* around Pa Nuh Duh, the *htee hpoe kaw k'sah* had effectively been driven out as a result of these rather diminished duties. As the brother of the former *htee hpoe kaw k'sah* here explained to me, the other villagers get a more bountiful harvest, in direct relation to how poor the *htee hpoe kaw k'sah's* harvest is. Therefore, the villagers are expected to share a small portion of their rice with the *htee hpoe kaw k'sah's* household to recompense his loss. In this way, he resembled what Leach (1954) described as “thigh eating chief” among the Kachin in northern Myanmar, the *htee poe gaw g'sah* similarly receiving rice with no reciprocal bonds attached, based purely on his position. In Pa Nuh Duh, however, people grew complacent, complaining loudly (often in their presence) that his household really ought to instead work in their fields for once and “not beg for rice” from the other households. The *htee hpoe kaw k'sah* of Pa Nuh Duh tried to explain the situation, but these laments fell on deaf ears. So, eventually, he also left for Thailand, in shame. Soon after his departure the village suffered one of the worst harvests in living memory. The villagers reasoned that it must be that the spectral owners of this village-*kaw* were displeased that their intermediary had been driven out. But alas, by this point was too late it was too late to call him back. When a *htee hpoe kaw k'sah* leaves a village, he may never return again. As I travelled through the area, I found this tale from Pa Nuh Duh was indicative of the status of *htee kpoe kaw k'sah/hee koh htee* all along this stretch of the Salween River. Whether this was the result of the protracted conflict, the creeping proselytising of Christian and Buddhist missionaries, or common tropes that things were always better/more powerful before (c.f. Pedersen 2011, 6) is difficult to ascertain. But there was a clear tendency, even in areas where there is still a full *htee hpoe kaw k'sah*, for this ceremonial leader to lack de facto power, political or otherwise,

and to regularly be disparaged by the people. It seems that, while it was widely accepted that the spectres had broad powers over the human realm, and asymmetrical/hierarchical relations to them were taken as a given, humans who made similar demands of food in return for bountiful harvest were treated with a great deal of disdain.

Upon closer inspection both the headman and *hec koh htee/htec hpoc kaw k'sah*, bear a striking resemblance to what Pierre Clastres, somewhat tongue in cheek, describes as a “powerless chief” (Clastres 1987), with little de facto power and authority themselves and being very unwilling to take on more. Thus, in most situations, it would appear that political responsibility between the residents of these highlands was spread reasonably evenly and relations between villagers remained rather symmetrical and egalitarian, albeit strongly gendered. In lieu of specific leader figures or institutions, we find quotidian life was guided by a strong sense of morality and obligation.

Sharp Teeth, Rough Tongues, and Sharing Hearts

While the KNU judiciary system is highly elaborated and, from what I could ascertain, reasonably effective in the lowlands, as we have seen in this chapter, it continued to struggle to “climb hills” and to have a considerable effect on the day-to-day lives of people in places like Ta K'Thwee Duh. Moreover, as we saw in the previous section, of the few political positions that existed, the headman and the *hec koh htee* were largely ceremonial, in both senses. The holders of these positions possessed little de facto political power, other than that derived from their virtuosity in negotiating with powerful external forces. It was mainly in their deftness to communicate and negotiate that their limited political power arose (c.f. Clastres 1987, 151–55; de la Cadena 2015, 45–46). This often left me to ponder, what happens when a person does something that they considered morally apprehensible or socially unacceptable?

When I posed this question to villagers in Ta K'Thwee Duh, time and time again, they replied that they try to deal with social, political and moral problems in situ. Despite threats abound that a certain person would be reported to the KNU judiciary,

the police, or the KNLA should it not be possible to solve an impasse in the village, I was unable to uncover a single account of this actually happening in practice. Indeed, as I spent more time in these highlands it became increasingly evident that the inhabitants here repeatedly and actively attempted to avoid the interference of the KNU justice division.

Much of the growing research on the political working of everyday justice in pockets of Myanmar where the central state remains distant, tends to foreground the plurality or hybridity of forms of governance and justice, where the rule of the central state, armed groups such as the KNU, and “customary” practices are regularly intertwined (e.g. Kyed 2020; Harrisson 2020; South 2018; McConnachie 2014). However, while certainly the case in the lowland areas along the Salween and Yunzalin rivers, up on the Bu Thoe ridge I found that justice commonly began and ended within the limits of each village-*kaw*. When an accusation was made, for example of petty theft, should it not be possible to resolve this issue through the mediation of residents in the area, more often than not, it was left to fester or peter out by itself. This became particularly evident when I began discussing such matter with one of the older women in the village Hpee Luh, who for many years had been the local representative for the Karen Women’s Organisation (KWO).

The KWO is one of the most important arms of the KNU state and has been working to attain gender equality in Karen communities since its formation, in the same year the KNU was founded in 1949. However, when I asked Hpee Luh what being the local KWO representative entailed, she quickly retorted that it entailed very little indeed. As she stressed, it mostly involved an obligation to regularly attend meetings held in the regional centre and little else. But these days she was getting too old to walk so far, and besides in the village itself being the KWO representative counted for very little. She went on to detail how, while this position did not allow her, like the headman, to call meetings and open discussions, people still regularly called upon her to help mediate certain problems. These problems ranged from incest, to intimate violence, to theft, and everything in between. As such, she often worked in parallel with the headman as a more informal channel.

As Hpee Luh explained to me, when a large problem arose in the village or surrounding area the headman was usually quickly consulted and a meeting called in his house. In the case of theft, for example, the accused would be compelled to confess to the aggrieved parties in front of the assembled villagers at this meeting in the headman's house. Should the person confess, with no stipulation made for an apology, then the case would be considered resolved. Should the accused either refuse to admit their guilt, but have no way to unequivocally prove their innocence, and/or continue to steal after this meeting then the usual practice was to systematically ostracise them, and sometimes even evoke the threat of exile. One example Hpee Luh gave to demonstrate how these processes worked pertained to a young woman I knew well, Naw Maw Htaw.

Some years prior Naw Maw Htaw may or may not have made a *k'ma*, a mistake, i.e. had sex with a man outside of wedlock. As we have seen, in such cases a tiger usually appears or is heard roaring near the village following this impropriety, widely being interpreted as a sign that the *kaw k'sah* had been angered by this "mistake". Steps are then quickly taken to placate and propitiate the *kaw k'sah* before her anger overflows and inflicts disaster on the village. However, in this particular case it appears that a tiger was neither seen nor heard afterwards. Thus, when the man involved refused to accept responsibility and to marry her, this caused an impasse. In the end, this led to them both to become *pgha mee hoo*, literally "people with a name heard/known", that is to say people of ill repute. Following this, while the man had little trouble finding a wife a few years later, Naw Maw Htaw found it incredibly difficult to find a suiter in the village. So difficult in fact that she and her mother beseeched me several times to help find her a *goh lah wa* or "white foreigner" husband. In the end, she found a suiter who hailed from a village far away, in Karenni State, who was unaware of the poor status of her "name", her reputation. As such, we see how these forms of a public shaming acted both as a punishment and a deterrent. Elders such as Hpee Luh were often called upon to help resolve these kinds of issues such that they were sometimes known as *pgha meh ay play thweh* or "people with sharp teeth and rough tongues". It was said that it was the ability of elders to *deh, to* "speak", with sharp teeth and tough tongues, that is to say their accrued experiences and adroit speech, that positioned

them as mediators on many occasions. Much like the headman and the ceremonial leader, the elders' limited political power arose from their "power to speak" (c.f. Clastres 1987, 151–55; de la Cadena 2015, 45–46) with their sharp teeth and rough tongues.

This manner of dealing with breaches of morality through shaming, in part resembles A.R. Radcliff-Brown's assertion that as opposed to the "physical coercion" practiced by states through the use of violence or the threat thereof, small-scale societies tend to practice a form of "moral coercion" (1950, xiv–xvi; c.f. Clastres 1987, 22–23). Morality is commonly raised as an explanation for such so-called "anarchic solidarity" (Gibson and Sillander 2011) commonly found among small-scale societies with subsistence economies across Southeast Asia. For Kirk Endicott (2011), for example, the highly egalitarian practices of the Batek of Malaysia are a consequence of their strong sense of "moral community". While, as I argue in the next section, this is far from the whole picture, morality as a form of "non-coercive power" (Clastres 1987) regularly figured centrally in the day-to-day lives of many of the women and men living along the Bu Thoe ridge. This became particularly evident in the way that social life here was often patterned by what Peter Kropotkin (1976) calls Mutual Aid.

Once every two to three years, each household needed to replace their roofing-tiles of a kind of palm-leaf (*loh lah*) that are commonly used on houses at these elevations along the Salween River. This was far too big a job to be undertaken within the household alone. Thus, rice wine and beer would be brewed, predominantly by women of the household, before kin and neighbours were invited over to drink, eat and help replace the roof. People would then work, drink, chat, and joke until the roof was complete and/or the food and alcohol was exhausted. This labour was deeply divided by gender, with the men perched in the rafters of the house, affixing the tiles with moistened thin strips of bamboo, whilst the women remained on the ground handing the tiles up to them. Each time I joined in I was inevitably placed with the women as they feared I may fall. A similar pattern repeated itself for the building of houses, planting and transplanting rice, and for the harvest. It was initiated by the hosting household inviting people to come to the area the house was to be built, or to their field where the rice was to be (trans)planted, to help them with the task at hand

that was too large for them to complete on their own. All those invited had a strong obligation to attend, sometimes nearly the whole village joining in to help on particularly large fields. The host in turn was then obligated to feed the helpers, once or twice depending on the task, and keep their cups full with alcohol. As such, before a house could be built, or a *hku* or paddy field (trans)planted, the hosting household, that is to say the women of the household, had to first brew a large batch of alcohol and prepare enough food to feed all those who came to help (c.f. Barth 1967). Appropriately, when planting the rice, the labour was divided such that men used a long pole to pierce the earth and make a hole, while women then filled the hole with seeds. Once again, I was lumped with the women in this task.

While this food was often talked of as form of payment for the services rendered, this assistance always incurred a *k'mah*, a debt. As Pa Thoo Pa explained as I helped him clear his swidden field of large trees, should one of the neighbouring households send three members to help plant rice in this swidden field for a day, then they would be obligated to reciprocate by sending three members of their own household to assist when it was the neighbouring household's time to plant. Indeed, another term for a person of ill repute is, *pgha mee k'mah*, or “person whose name has incurred a debt”. Much as David Graeber has noted is the case globally, there is a strongly ingrained moral sense here that “one has to pay one's debts”, and that a deep sense of shame and distrust haunts those that do not (2012, 2–19). Thus, these continual reciprocal acts of mutual aid between households becomes one of the bonds that, as Marcel Mauss shows is so evocatively phrased by New Caledonians, “are the movement of the hook that serves to bind together the various section of the straw roofing as to make one single roof” ([1925] 2002, 27). However, I found that this did not prohibit loops of reciprocity created by mutual aid from being truncated, or cross-cut entirely by a parallel moral principle that comes close to the one, popularised by Marx, of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” (Graeber 2012, 94). The case of Dee Nweh exemplified this.

Dee Nweh lost his wife to illness a few years prior to when I arrived in the village, left to support and raise their four young children all by himself. On top of this, following the plague of rats that befell the area the year prior, his household was one

of the worst affected, leading them borrow extensively from their fellow villagers. As such, his household had fallen into a debt trap whereby, each time he earned enough to buy a bag of rice, he was obliged to give most of it away to those he still owed almost immediately, forcing him to again borrow more rice. In response to this, some household such as that of Hpu Gay who managed to produce a surplus, would share with their chronically rice-poor neighbours. As Hpu Gay explained when he shared some of his rice with Dee Nweh, in response to his instance that he would pay Hpu Gay back one day, Hpu Gay assured him “If the tables are ever turned then we hope you can help us”, knowing for well, in the current situation there was little chance of this happening. Reciprocity is deferred to such an extent that it comes closer to a form of sharing. Thus, while for Gibson and Sillander (2011) “anarchic solidarity” arises not from debt/reciprocity but sharing, as in the dividing of a common good, in these highlands the line between the two regularly blurs.

All along the Bu Thoe ridge, both the Myanmar state and, by and large, also the KNU state struggled to “climb hills” and have substantial effects on people’s everyday lives. In their stead we found that relations between the people who resided in these highlands were remarkably flat. There were few political offices or institutions, and those that existed were vested with very little by way of de facto political power. As such, day-to-day affairs were often mediated through mutual aid, and notions of shame, morality and debt. However, returning back to the vignette that I opened this chapter with we find that the seeming flatness of day-to-day relations between the residents of these highlands, never quite amounted to a form of anarchy in the sense of “no ruler” (Morris 2015, 62). Rather, what we find not so much a mode of sovereignty sans sovereign, as a situation in which the ruler was spectral. While rarely if ever are they seen, these spectral sovereigns were commonly felt in and had a significant effect on people’s body and in their everyday lives.

Spectral Sovereignty

Following on from this, we find that these unseen persons that crowded the landscapes up along the Papun hills, in many senses, might be grasped not only as the *k'sah* or “owners” of particular patches of the landscape, but also their spectral sovereigns. To begin exploring the notion of spectral sovereignty, in the final section of this chapter I take a step back to review what I have discussed in the previous chapters, before going on to address how this notion may unsettle established understandings of ownership and sovereignty.

Unseen “queens”

In the previous chapter we found that those living in the highlands along the Salween River regularly treated their landscapes as possessed in the dual and entangled senses of the term. They treated their landscapes as both peopled, haunted, and controlled by a whole panoply of spectral persons, and by implication, also ultimately belonging to and owned by them. While under usual circumstances they were not perceived by the naked eye, as humans traversed these landscapes they often felt the effects of these spectral persons on their bodies, in their crops, and in their livestock. These deep histories of contact and co-presence led these highlanders to engage in indeterminate and asymmetrical relations with the spectral owners of the lands, constantly negotiating access to cultivate and to live off the earth. Moreover, these asymmetrical relations to the spectral realm became particularly evident in dealings with one particular category of spectral person, known as a *k'sah*, literally meaning “owner”. As we have seen, trees, rocks, tree, ponds and other swathes of landscape were often understood to be possessed by and indeed the domain of certain *k'sah*.

In the current chapter I then delve deeper into the political implications of these possessed landscapes. Here we found that understandings of common land were predicated on human ownership nesting in the encompassing ownership of spectral persons who were the true owners of these areas. As we have seen in the previous chapter, they reside in the imbricated “realm of that which is true”. This spectral asymmetry goes beyond the “visor effect” where “we do not see who looks at us” (Derrida 1994, 6) to suggest a form of hierarchical relationships. Here spectral modes

of ownership and sovereignty are constantly interrupting and encompassing their human counterparts. Moreover, certain spectres supersede others, encompassing them to form “stacked” patterns of constantly jostling nested hierarchies. One of the most revered and potent of spectres was the the *kaw k’sah*, the owner of this particular village-*kaw*.

Looping back one last time to the furore surrounding the initial construction of the “car road”, in much the same manner as when a person first falls ill, the villagers’ initial reaction to the encroachment of the road onto village lands was to appeal to conventional methods. They appealed directly to the relevant KNU representatives to plead their case and attempt to entreat them to adjust the path of the road the *kaw k’sah*. The villagers only relinquished their power upon exhausting and reaching the limits of the authority of their human institutions to affect the path of the road. Yet, rather than giving up or leaving it to fate, as Hpu Kee phrases it, they “put it in the hands of the *kaw k’sah*”, leaving it up to the spectral owner of the village-*kaw*, the ultimate owner of this area, to decide. They put it in her *su poo*, in the “palm of her hand”.⁴⁵ The *kaw k’sah* then intervened, affecting the body of the foreman constructing the road by making him deadly ill. This interruption and intervention then affected political change, leading to the rerouting of the road, and the initiating of efforts to cool tensions between the villages by sharing a large pig.

Thus, for all intents and purposes, the *kaw k’sah* acted as the sovereign of this particular *kaw*. Or more precisely: the sovereignty of the *kaw k’sah* over Ta K’Thwee Duh Kaw was continually interrupting and encompassing human forms of sovereignty. While talking to the elder Hpu Gay about how the *kaw k’sah* has intervened in the road construction he replied that “this is why we sometimes call her our *naw pa mu* [‘queen’]”. Delving deeper still, I found that the *kaw k’sah* of Ta Bu Kyoe, the owner of the entirety of this particular village-*kaw*, is a specific named spectral person. Known as Naw Ghoo Hsaw, oral histories speak of her as an unmarried woman, always wearing the white tunic of young maidens and spinsters, with a patch over one of her eyes. Indeed, each village-*kaw* was the dominion of a different *k’sah*,

⁴⁵ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=pkylR&submit=Lookup#>

each with their own “queen” or “king” with their own biographies. In Thoo Duh, the other side of Y’wa Ma Htu Lay, towards the Salween River, for example, the *kaw k’sah* was a woman who was very miserly. Tales described how she liked to ride on the backs of wild boar, who were her domestic animals, and sweep into the villagers’ rice fields at night to take their grain. As it transpired, certain animals such as the tigers and wild boar in each village-*kaw* were directly owned by the *kaw k’sah*, who kept them as their domestic animals. In this way, the *kaw k’sah* bear a resemblance to the “animal master” found among many Amerindian groups (c.f. Kohn 2007). Indeed, hunters would often comment how wild boar that they shot and wounded would often flee towards the top of Ta Bu Kyoh, never to be found again. This led some to speculate that the *kaw k’sah* has a “hospital” up there to heal her animals.

Following this, I found that in most cases in which a couple make a *k’ma*, a “mistake” by engaging in pre-marital sex it was the *kaw k’sah* that intervened, forcing them to rectify the situation. As we saw in the opening chapter, it is the *kaw k’sah* that first announces a *k’ma* to the other villagers by sending a tiger – or perhaps by herself taking the form of a tiger – and making its presence known by roaring distantly, or by appearing close to the village. Soon after the arrival of the tiger, if nothing is done to address this *k’ma*, it is said that the earth becomes *koh*, “hot, having a high temperature”.⁴⁶ As Hpu Gay explained this to me, this growing warmth is not the *kaw k’sah* becoming angry (c.f. de la Cadena 2015, xxii–xxiii), but rather, the earth becoming feverish as it falls ill, making the humans and their livestock and crops also susceptible to illness (both physical and mental), and even death if not treated. The only way to break this fever and rectify this situation was for the couple to marry, and an offering or *ta hku*, a “cooling” or reparation (Paul 2018, 69; Hayami 1993), to be made directly to the *kaw k’sah*. In Ta K’Thwee Duh the *kaw k’sah* only accepts a *ta hku* of a mature buffalo, killed and butchered at the top of the village so the blood runs down, “cooling” the earth again. The meat is then shared with the *kaw k’sah* and all the villagers not directly related to the couple to also “cool” relations between villagers, not unlike the pig shared by the villagers following the KNU agreeing to build the

⁴⁶ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=ud%3E&submit=Lookup>

road around Ta Bu Kyoe. In most other village-*kaw* the *kaw k'sah* demands the offering of buffalo, but some prefer a large pig or even a brace of chickens. Again, different -*kaw* have different *ta du ta htu*, that is to say “taboos”. In cases where other significant *ta du ta htu* were breached, it was inevitably the local *kaw k'sah* that intervenes and forces people to rectify the mistake, or face terrible consequences. This intervention usually involved the *kaw k'sah* causing people to temporally lose their minds, cause terrible crop failures, or sending its wild boars and tigers to plague people upon a breach of taboo. Moreover, in one tale, of a man in a neighbouring village who had repeatedly fornicated with a goat, the *kaw k'sah* became so enraged that the whole mountain that was its domain began to tilt. The mountain then threatened to collapse, wiping out the entire village. Only after the goat copulater (and presumably also the goat) was exiled far from the village did the mountain cease tilting and disaster was averted. To this day this particular mountain top remains crooked, and the village was eventually relocated to a safer location. In other tales from neighbouring village-*kaw*, the *kaw k'sah* unleashed floods and devastation following the inhabitants’ refusal to respect *ta du ta htu* and to make sufficient reparations, mirroring the dreams of villagers in Ta K’Thwee Duh as the “car road” inched closer. In many real senses, the *Kaw K'sah* act as otherworldly rulers, dictating laws and meting out punishment to those living under their dominion who did not abide these, not dissimilar for unseen queens and kings.

Unsettling Sovereignty

While such tales of spectres acting as sovereigns are by no means new, there is a tenacious tendency among researchers to recast such practices and cosmologies in terms of “culture” and “tradition” in ways that continue to hold them separate from both the present and from politics more generally (c.f. Simpson 2014; Viveiros de Castro 2014). Glancing back at previous anthropologists’ treatment of *kaw k'sah* and other spectral persons we find that among Karen in both Myanmar and Thailand, they are consistently rendered as “lords” in English (e.g. Marshall 1922, 225; Hayami 1993; 2004; Buadaeng 2003; Rajah 2008) and, while assigned great importance in ritual and

religious life, their political implications are consistently ignored. Interestingly, this translation of *k'sah* to “lords” skirts around the commonest usage of this term in everyday life, to connote “ownership”, such as *hku k'sah* (“swidden patch owner”) or *k'hsaw k'sah* (“elephant owner”).⁴⁷ As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, spectral persons referred to as “owners” can be found all over Southeast Asia, from central Myanmar to the Maluku islands of Indonesia in the south (e.g. Pannell 2007; Tannenbaum and Kammerer 2003, 3; K. Århem 2016b, 19). As F.K. Lehman puts it, spectres are “the original and ultimate owners having dominion over the face of the land” (Lehman 2003, 16). However, time and time again, we find that while some of these authors go as far as suggesting that these “beliefs” might have relevance for the understanding of political systems (pace Lehman 2003), notions of “spirit ownership” are rarely taken seriously enough that they might be grasped as de facto alternative modes of politics. In this manner, the potential of these concepts to “decolonise” (Viveiros de Castro 2014) or unsettle (Bonilla 2017) seemingly neutral academic descriptors of governance such as sovereignty is dissipated.

As discussed in the opening chapter and in chapter two, in grasping the ways in which spectral persons possess the landscape in the cosmological sense of the word possessed, as occupied or haunted, regularly take precedence over the more political-ecology oriented sense, of them also owning and controlling the earth. The latter sense of possessed would seem to imply that these spectres may also hold a form of sovereignty over the area they possess. Much as Audra Simpson argues is the case among the indigenous peoples of North America, we find that, time and time again, when studying indigenous practices researchers tend to look “for ‘culture’, instead of sovereignty” as if their own sovereignty had already be eliminated (Simpson 2014, 20). In part, this appears to be predicated on an understanding of sovereignty as the preserve of the nation state that has been hegemonic since the power of human kings and queens began to wane (e.g. Hobbes 1651; Agamben 1998; c.f. Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Bishara 2017). This is evidenced in the ways that, at the interstices between nation-states, the gap that opens up in these spaces is commonly grasped as

⁴⁷ Or even, in some situations, the self or the body as separate from the *k'la*, that is to say the souls: <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=up%3E&submit=Lookup#>

a “zone of no sovereignty” (Scott 2009, 60–61), or in describing the sovereignty that emerges in these spaces as “fractured” or “mutated” forms of state sovereignty (Hansen 2006; Ong 2006).

However, as I opened this thesis by arguing, in taking indigenous modes of ownership and sovereignty seriously, we may many begin to the process of “decolonising thought” (Viveiros de Castro 2014; c.f. Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014; Da Col and Graeber 2011). This said, I agree with Yarimar Bonilla that the notion of decolonising insinuates a certain telos, of a return to some imagined pre-colonial past (Bonilla 2017, 335). Accordingly, I follow Bonilla in arguing that taking indigenous modes of ownership and sovereignty seriously perhaps will not decolonise established concepts, sweeping them away, but rather, “unsettle” them by bringing them fundamentally into question (*ibid*). Along similar lines, I follow Simpson in arguing that these tales of spectral sovereigns suggest that “there is more than one political show in town” and that, as we peer closer, we find “sovereignty may exist within sovereignty” as “nested” (Simpson 2014, 10–11). Yet, what we find along the Salween River is that the KNU-state’s rather patchy sovereignty across the Bu Thoe Ridge does not so much encompass indigenous sovereignty as is the case in Simpson’s North American case. In the Papun hills, state sovereignty is itself nesting “in the hands of the *kaw k’sah*” that regularly interrupts and encompasses it. Indeed, as Marshall Sahlins shrewdly remarks, “there are kingly beings in heaven, even where there are no chiefs on earth” (2017, 91). As can be observed in place all across the world, even the most seemingly egalitarian societies are ultimately ruled over and nesting in the hands of what Sahlins terms “cosmic polities”.

In this manner, we find that largely flat and egalitarian relations between people living in Ta K’Thwee Duh, where few if any persons or institutions are vested with de facto power or authority, are dependent upon encompassing relations to the spectral sovereigns of the realm that are highly asymmetrical, these spectres often treated as queens and kings. For Sahlins (2017) this points to how humans remain dependent upon the life-giving power of the spectral realm. This resonates with the way in which, as we saw in chapter one, when Y’wa departed from the human realm he left the remaining and waning *ta thoo tha pgho*, that is to say the potency of creation, in the

hands of his emissaries the *k'sah*. Thus, humans were left to constantly negotiate the spectral realm to live on and live off the land such that these highlands might be best grasped as more-than-human contact zones. Much as Mauss pointed out, already in the 1920s, “[o]ne of the first groups of beings with which men had to enter into contract, and who, by definition, were there to make a contract with them, were above all the spirits of the dead and of the gods. Indeed, it is they who are the true owners of the things and possessions of this world” (Mauss [1925] 2002, 20). I return to these points in the final chapter where I argue that spectral sovereignty gestures towards to an alternative mode of politics or “Alter-politics” (Hage 2015), and how it unsettles many established notions of sovereignty and politics at large.

In Part II of this thesis I shift my gaze back across the border to Thailand to explore how burgeoning ensembles of farmers and activists, such as the Salween Peace Park, are beginning to translate and rescale these indigenous modes of ownership and sovereignty to push back against dispossession and to continue the struggle for greater autonomy in Southeast Myanmar.

Part II. Dispossession/Re-Possession



Four | Countermovements

Dispossession, Translation, and Re-possession



It is another hot and rainy November day in Chiang Mai as I sit on the steps of one of the city's plethora of upmarket shopping centres just outside the walled old city, waiting to meet a rather outspoken and militant general of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The first time our paths crossed was at a community centre in Upstate New York some four months prior where he was giving a talk for Karen youth in the diaspora. There, on a balmy afternoon much like today, he was urging them to not forget their fellow Karen still languishing back in Burma. Speaking fast and fluent English, with a distinct American lilt, he entreated these youths to not try to come back to fight for them. Rather, they should stay in school and work hard. In this way, he reasons, they could help much more effectively by bringing the knowledge, skills and cash they have accrued in America back to share with their people. What the revolution needs more than anything else is their knowledge and their skills, but also their money. The KNU already have plenty of soldiers, he adds, but not enough guns.

The General eventually turns up at the shopping centre apologising profusely for his tardiness in a surprisingly inconspicuous white pick-up truck, minus the blacked-out windows ubiquitous of the KNU/KNLA top brass, that he drives himself. He waves across at me as he pulls in to the steps where I am sitting and signals that I should wait while he finds a place to park. A few minutes later he is stood behind me, having entered the shopping centre through another entrance. He is dressed much the same as when we last crossed paths, combat casual – in cargo trousers, loose t-shirt and his trademark green-grey tactical vest – and shakes my hand firmly before leading me directly to the food court. Despite my protests, he insists on paying for all the food-tokens in a little booth, speaking broken Thai to the woman working here, then turns to me and says I really ought to try the Pad Thai here as they fry it into an

omelette. When we return to our table and begin to eat, after a few minutes of small talk about his second cousin who is a friend of mine, between sips of Sprite he explains that, since they signed the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015, the KNU leadership are “in the Burmese’s pocket”. The current chairman and his cabinet are not bad people, he then is at pains to stress, they were simply unprepared and naïve in trusting “the Burmese”. Here he consistently conflates “the Burmese” with the Tatmadaw (i.e. the Myanmar Armed Forces) despite having repeatedly chided the youth in the US for doing just this. As he sees it, “they [the KNU leadership] made this deal and now they cannot go back, they are in a trap”. He goes on to talk of how this “peace trap” has hamstrung the revolution in how “[our] leaders have made many concessions and have got nothing back. They have kept giving and waiting for a return. [Meanwhile], they [the Tatmadaw] have used the peace to gain ground and reinforce their outposts, and the ordinary people have not received any benefits. But the leaders may have been paid for this”. I interject here, arguing that while much of this does seem to be the case (albeit, the evidence supporting the allegations that the KNU Central Committee accepted bribes is rather thin on the ground as I see it)⁴⁸ many of the people I have met in Karen State talked of their relief that they could now move more freely and return to their homes and fields again. He looks up from his food and quickly brushes this comment aside with one of his wide repertoire of catchphrases that he pulls out during his many TV interviews and public talks, that “this is all part of their divide and conquer tactic”.



In this chapter I shuttle back and forth between the highland areas along the Salween and Chiang Mai as I attempt to trace both continued patterns of militarisation and dispossession, and inchoate struggles by burgeoning ensembles of activists, armed groups, and indigenous peoples to re-territorialise and re-possess these landscapes.

I begin by charting indigenous analyses of the political situation following the 2012 bilateral ceasefire that, steeped in the discourses of environmental activist groups, often describe the ensuing peace as either a “trap” (as the General) or as a new

⁴⁸ These allegations mostly stem from a contentious KNU election in 2012 and a unsubstantiated claim by writer Roland Watson that the KNU chairman received 2 million USD in bribes from the Euro-Burma Office (Naing 2016).

“cool/peaceful” form of the on-going counterinsurgency. As we see on the map below, these highlands are pockmarked by Tatmadaw army bases and criss-crossed with military roads. Despite the faltering ceasefire agreements and attempts to build a lasting peace, the Papun hills (and indeed many other areas of Karen State) remain deeply militarised. Following this, I demonstrate how these indigenous analyses resonate strongly with recent academic work exploring how the Myanmar state continues its counterinsurgency programme of territorialising these lands by partnering with local elites and multi-national companies to engage in so-called “ceasefire capitalism” and “green territoriality” (Woods 2011; 2019). Building on these analyses, I describe how these processes and technologies of dispossession, including recent land laws, might be grasped more widely as a form of Ceasefire Territorialisation.

I then go on to shine a light on budding social movements by ensembles of indigenous and ecological activist, indigenous peoples, and (in part) armed groups, that are working tirelessly to push back against this Ceasefire Territorialisation. I show how they are translating indigenous land possession practices and political-ethical cosmologies to turn state-making processes of mapping and legibility on their head in order to re-territorialise and re-possess land. I then describe these struggles in relation to Karl Polanyi’s ([1944] 2001) notion of multi-class protective countermovements against the disembedding of the economy from society and the commodification of land. Thus, to begin, let us return to the Papun hills, around a month after my conversation with the General about “peace traps” presented above.

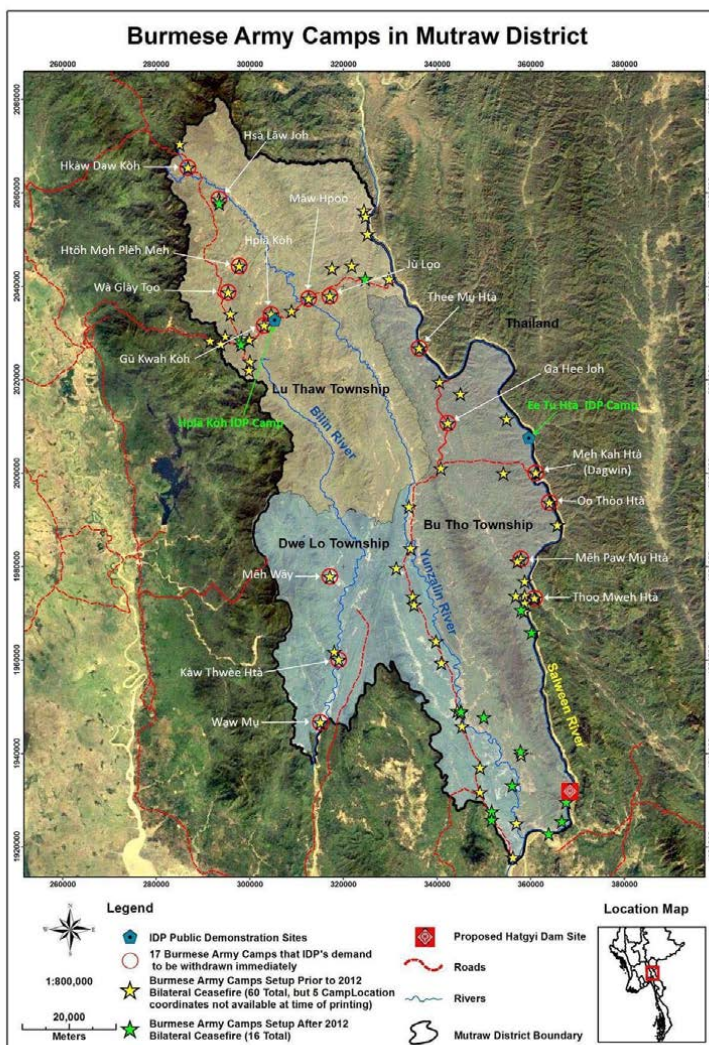


Figure 4.1: A map of the militarised landscape of the Papun hills

The “Cool” Counterinsurgency: Prospecting, Pagodas and Bulldozers

In the ensuing days and weeks, I tried to brush aside the General’s depiction of the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) as a kind of “trap”, reassuring myself that this was simply part of the jingoistic and sabre-rattling discourse often drawn upon by the hawkish wing of the KNU he represents. Such “hardliners”, as they are often

portrayed, have long opposed any rapprochement with the Tatmadaw. As a consequence, they often end up sounding like they are simply parroting the revolutionary slogans of old, such as “give liberty or death” (Gravers 1999, 93). Yet, to my surprise, I slowly came to realise that such deep scepticism to the ceasefire echoed all the way across the border and up into the Papun hills, resonating in villages such as Ta K’Thwee Duh, among people far removed from the KNU “hardliners”, often based in Thailand and the diaspora. This first became evident to me just over a month into my first spell of fieldwork in the Peace Park in the highlands along the Salween.

The headmaster of the local primary school comes through the door of my little house at the bottom of the hill possessed by a sense of great purpose as I sit catching up on gossip with Naw Paw, my field assistant, and Lee Paw (Hpu Hkee’s oldest daughter). He sits silently on the floor beside us in his navy-blue football jersey from the refugee camps that is heavily soiled by betel and lime. His usual knowing smile, stained almost jet black by his interminable chewing of areca nut, and the glint in his eye signalling he has a humorous story to share, are replaced by grave seriousness. Upon noticing this change of countenance our conversation soon grinds to a standstill. We all turn to face him, waiting to hear what he has on his heart/mind. After a short silence he explains, speaking slowly with his voice muffled by all the areca nut he had stuffed in his mouth, that he has just arrived back from a meeting for all residents of Pa Heh village tract that encompasses Ta K’Thwee Duh. At this meeting the KNLA military commanders had first explained to the assembled villagers that they should not continue inviting me to *hpeh hku*, i.e. the laborious clearing of trees in a *pgha* or “mature/old”⁴⁹ fallow field with machetes, nor take me anywhere with steep inclines. Apparently, they feared that I might get injured or even die engaging in these activities, and ominously warned the villagers of dire consequences should this happen (although it soon became evident that this command stemmed from a desire to control my movement and, luckily for me, few if any of the villagers heeded this veiled threat). However, rather than spelling out what the consequences might be, these military leaders quickly changed the topic to talk of politics.

⁴⁹ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=yS%3E&submit=Lookup>

They went on to explain how, although the *ta du ta yah koh*, literally “hot conflict”, of chronic armed conflict may be over “for the time being”, they now face a new growing threat of *ta du ta yah hku*, “cool/peaceful conflict”, currently taking place under the guise of the ceasefire. They went on to explain how the Tatmadaw continue their counterinsurgency against the villagers in these highlands, only now it is being visited upon them by other means. The “hot” means of guns, mortars and attack helicopters are slowly being replaced by “cooler” means of temples and pagodas, that is to say religion, but also, as we shall see, by mines and hydroelectric dams.

This juxtaposition of hot and cold aligns with the common tendency we found in chapter three among Sgaw Karen speaking communities to oppose a sense of *hku* or “coolness”, understood as intercommunal peace and harmony, to a sense of *koh* or “hotness”, of strife, conflict and moral misconduct (cf. Hayami 1993). Human moral misconduct and conflict often lead the *kaw k’sah*, the owner of the earth around the village, to become vexed, leading her/him to punish not only those responsible, but also members of their household, their livestock, and/or their crops, by making them sick and feverish, and thus, “hot”. In this way, even the earth itself can become overheated, fever-like and, if not cooled down again, may lead to death and/or crop failure. To rectify this situation, the persons or parties responsible must, as soon as possible, conduct a *lu ta* to feed/propitiate the *kaw k’sah* in order to make amends and to cool down the situation, usually with the blood of a chicken or a buffalo. Accordingly, the chicken or buffalo offered to the *kaw k’sah* is referred to as *ta hku*, literally “coolness/that which is cool”. This bears out in the literal translation of the Sgaw word for peace, *ta mu ta hku*, as “happiness and coolness” and trouble and conflict as *ta hkoh ta ghaw*, or “hotness and redness” (see also, Paul 2018, 69–70).

As such, in the Papun hills both juxtaposed notions of hot vs. cold and of peace vs. conflict are deeply entangled with possessed landscape and the sovereignty of the spectral owners of the earth. These military leaders appear to be latching onto these practices/cosmologies to express a situation in which conflict and dispossession is perpetuated in the absence of the usual *koh* “hot/heat” of armed conflict and moral

discord. The notion of *ta du ta yah hku* could be rendered as the rather oxymoronic “cool/peaceful conflict”.

According to these KNLA commanders, this newer “cool” counterinsurgency unfolds in a series of steps: first they [it was unclear as to who “they” were here] assist local Karen Buddhist villagers to construct a local pagoda or temple; then, when completed, these Buddhist structures begin drawing in Burman Buddhist monks and laypeople far and wide to make pilgrimages and donations; with time, these areas slowly become inundated with non-Karen people and capital including, increasingly, Tatmadaw soldiers; and finally, the Tatmadaw sweep in to secure these religious spots and the people here, assuming control of the surrounding area and dispossessing the original [Karen] inhabitants in the process.

When the headmaster is finished explaining this, I ask him whether he himself, and the other villagers, also consider this to be a serious concern, or whether this is just their leaders fretting needlessly, like they fret for my safety. Before answering he takes one of my green “golden butterfly” Burmese cheroots, lights it, takes a long drag, and lets the silence swell around him. These worries that the building of Buddhist structures may bring back the feared Tatmadaw, he tells me between puffs, are something most people in this area share, despite them living with many Buddhist neighbours and kin. To exemplify this, as is his penchant, he tells a story.

In the period just before the ceasefire, maybe 10 years ago, there was a small market hamlet-cum-KNLA-base in the neighbouring village-*kaw* called Thee Mu Hta (marked on the map above) that lay along the Salween. The predominantly Buddhist residents of this hamlet decided that, since there was no place nearby to worship, they should raise their own small pagoda in their hamlet. Thus, they sought out the help of a highly revered local Karen monk from Myaing Gyi Ngu.⁵⁰ The monk willingly assisted, declaring that he hoped this would help bring peace to warring factions of the KNU that split in 1997. Thus, a pagoda was quickly erected in Thee Mu Hta, to the great rejoicing of the villagers. But this joy quickly turned to despair, however, as a steady influx of Burman visitors, including more and more soldiers, began to arrive on

⁵⁰ Better known as U Thuzana, this monk is often credited with nurturing the factional that split from the KNU in 1994, destroying their last stronghold and severely crippling the revolution (South 2008).

the pretext of visiting to pay respects at the pagoda, and increasingly not leaving again. As this hamlet-cum-KNLA-base became steadily more densely populated by Burmans from central Myanmar and by Tatmadaw soldiers, a conflict between the Tatmadaw and KNLA flared up over control of this territory, displacing many villagers in the process. The KNLA were eventually defeated and the hamlet transformed into a “white/peace zone”, as a large Tatmadaw base in the area, located strategically along the Salween and a bustling market town.

I would later hear various iterations of this story, the narrators regularly evoking it and similar tales as a way to explain their unease at plans, in both Ta K’Thwee Duh Kaw and in other villages along the Papun hills, to construct pagodas. This story was drawn on to emphasise that their trepidations were not rooted in the ideological opposition to Buddhism itself. Rather, they simply worried that the raising of such Buddhist monuments may set off a similar chain of events as those in Thee Mu Hta, potentially leading to their dispossession and their homes being transformed into a staging post for further Tatmadaw attacks and militarisation.

The story of the hamlet of Thee Mu Hta acted as a kind of cautionary tale, warning people of dangers of this new mode of counterinsurgency that is intensifying as the armed conflict slowly cools – a situation where the General’s description of a “peace trap” becomes quite apt. Such tales of this “cooler” iteration of insurgency usually begin not with an armed provocation but with an offer, a promise, of something that people genuinely desire, such as a place of worship or “development” of some kind. In this way, these kinds of overtures often evoke neither the villagers’ suspicions nor the ire of the spectral owners. Both day-to-day decision-making and spectral sovereignty is bypassed. Yet, soon after the offer is accepted, people realise that these seemingly earnest gestures, such as technical and physical help to build a pagoda, were in fact a kind of bait to lure them in. As soon as they take the bait the trap is sprung, and before long, the local inhabitants find out that their lands and livelihoods have been seized by the Tatmadaw. By this point it is too late for either humans or spectres to intervene to rectify the situation.

Understood in this way, we might view these as cautionary tales on an insidious new iteration of the ongoing counterinsurgency. People’s growing fears of being

dispossessed, however, were by no means isolated to fretting over how the expansion of Burman-dominated Buddhist spheres might perpetuate the intensification of Tatmadaw territorialisation, as these tales from the KNLA leaders and villagers might suggest. As I spent more time in the Papun hills, I often began to hear how people would air their worries pertaining not only to the expansion of state/military religious spheres, but also economic ones – of both the KNU and Myanmar states.

The gravity of these fears of dispossession by economic encroachments became perhaps most apparent when the new vice-head of the village tract Hpu Wah paid a visit to Ta K'Thwee Duh. He arrived in the middle of the day, ostensibly with the remit to discuss issues of conscription with some of the villagers. But, as the day progressed, he appeared far more preoccupied with finding out which household provided the best alcohol than which household should next provide a son to serve in the army. He worked his way, house to house, from the top of the village and downwards such that, by the time he got to my house at the bottom of the hill, he was rather inebriated. He came stumbling through my door a little after twilight; then, while slumped against the wall, promptly produced a crumpled-up letter out of his jacket pocket that he told me is one of his reasons for being here. This was a letter from his office informing villagers in this area of the imminent arrival of Chinese prospectors, visiting to survey the neighbouring village-*kaw* of Yu Wah Duh. It soon transpired that, on account of me being a white outsider, he assumed that I must have something to do with these prospectors, and wanted to assure me personally that they will make sure everything goes smoothly and they will assist “us” as much as they can. In the following days, as word spread of the content of this crumpled piece of paper, I heard how my neighbours began to fret about what would happen should these investors find “valuable things”,⁵¹ such as gold, in the ground and should they expand their survey to this village-*kaw*.

In these cautionary tales, the fall of the hamlet-cum-military-base Thee Mu Hta and the looming arrival of Chinese prospectors retrace the familiar path of the older histories of “cut-throat people” and violent resource frontiers I describe in chapter

⁵¹ Fascinatingly, people not only used the word *ta thoo ta pgho* to describe potent/powerful places, but in situations such as this it was also used to describe areas where potential “valuable things” might be hidden, such as gold, leading to some productive misunderstandings.

one. As the ceasefire sets in up in these highlands, the revenant of resource frontiers where “entrepreneurs and armies” work in concord to “disengage nature from local ecologies and livelihoods, ‘freeing up’ natural resources” (Tsing 2005, 27–28) in the name of territorial gains and capital, returns once more. However, these cautionary tales of “cool” conflict urge us to look closer at how as the revenant of dispossession returns to these highlands it no longer assumes the spectacular form of “primitive accumulation” by force of arms: that, as Marx so eloquently describes it, is how “expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in the letters of blood and fire” (1909, 1:786). In the preceding years scholars such as David Harvey (2004; 2005) have expanded the definition of primitive accumulation into the wider notion of “accumulation by dispossession”. Yet, as Henry Bernstein notes, both “primitive accumulation” and Harvey’s reformation have become exceedingly “busy” in the “elasticity of its definitions, its expanding range of applications and the claims made for it” (2014, 1036). To grasp the specific insidious and often extra-economic manner in which people in the Papun hills are now being steadily dispossessed, in the next section I zero in on the process in which the liberal peace engendered by the ceasefire is turning predatory.

Liberal Peace/Predatory Peace

One way to begin tracing intensifying entanglements between the Papun hills and Myanmar state military and commercial ventures is to follow how transformations in national politics have played, and continue to play, into highlands politics.

As the Cold War drew to a close at the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, like many formerly (nominally at least) socialist states, Myanmar began to pivot back toward Europe and America. In ever more desperate attempts to woo foreign investors and their capital, the increasingly cash-strapped ruling military Junta, the State Law and Order Council or SLORC, began a wave of liberalisation. One example that Monique Skidmore (2004, 109–11) points to of SLORC’s attempts to attract foreign capital is the spectacle, and spectacular failure, of the “Visit Myanmar Year” in 1996. Consequently, in November the year after, SLORC dropped their rather Orwellian-sounding name in favour of the far more catchy State Peace and

Development Council or SPDC, and employed a Washington-based PR-firm to lobby on their behalf (Lintner 2015). Indeed, so catchy was this name that, to this day, some still refer to the Tatmadaw as SPDC.

These overtures to investors, along with gradual liberalising processes such as large-scale de-nationalising and the selling off of vast swathes of land to multinational corporations has had sweeping effects across central Myanmar (e.g. Rhoads and Wittekind 2018). However, chronic armed conflict has largely insulated highland areas such as the uplands along the Salween River from many of these sweeping transformations. As such, the effects of these vast liberalising processes have only recently begun to “climb hills” (pace Scott 2009) into the former warzones, such as the Papun highlands. This is occurring gradually as decades of revolution and counterinsurgency are receding following the brokering of the ceasefire and resulting peace process, and as relations between powerful local actors such as the KNU and the Myanmar government/Tatmadaw are gradually being normalised.

While, as I tried to stress to the General, the cooling of conflict has led to some significant betterments in the lives and livelihoods of many residing in these former warzones, allowing them to return to the agricultural rhythms of their ancestral lands (e.g. South 2018, 57), these betterments are often double-edged. Much as Staffan Lövving (2007) describes was the case in Central America, the de-escalation of armed conflict has not been accompanied by any serious revaluation of the underlying grievances. As such, highlanders continue to fret that the Tatmadaw could come back at any moment now.

In response to these continued fears, most people I met had a chest ensconced somewhere in their homes, filled with their most valuable possessions. For my neighbour Hpu Gay, it was filled with all his finest factory-made clothes and his silk trousers sewed from British parachutes. Naw Lee Paw’s chest was filled with all the clothes she had diligently weaved in preparation for the time that she would marry, even though she was yet to find a suitor. People kept these chests in their homes ready at hand to take with them at a minute’s notice “when”, not if, they are forced to flee again. Moreover, as I learnt from villagers who worked as labour migrants in other parts of Myanmar, both sides of the conflict continue to reinforce their military

positions. As these, mostly young male, migrants found, each time their path led them to pass beside a Tatmadaw camp they would take note of how these bases looked ever more permanent, new concrete reinforcement cropping up each time. Indeed, following protests by Internally Displaced People (IDPs) demanding the closure of seventeen of the more controversial Tatmadaw bases in this area (marked with a red circle on the map above), a young KESAN activist travelling through Ta K'Thwee Duh showed me a photo he had taken while passing one of these bases on the way here. Here we see (figure 4.2) how the soldiers had scrawled the words “we will fight to the death before this base falls”⁵² in Burmese on a sign facing the Salween, for all passing on boats to read, sending a clear message that they had no intention of demobilising any time soon.



Figure 4.2 Sign outside a nearby military base reading "we will fight to the death before this base falls" (photo by Saw Blut).

A consequence of this chronic militarisation along the Salween is that the situation comes closer to that of a ceasefire, where the conflict has simply ceased for the time being (albeit, armed skirmishes between the two sides were not uncommon),

⁵² I would like to extend an extra thanks to Nick Cheesman for assistance translating this sign.

becoming temporarily crystallised: a freeze-frame picture of an ongoing war. The 2012 bilateral ceasefire accords and their ratification into the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015 emerged neither out of any hard-won political demands being granted nor by significant changes in the underlying causes of the conflict. This ceasefire was achieved by neither victory nor defeat, but rather, out of a sense of “fatigue” of fighting, what Löfving describes as the “departure from violence” (2007, 52). Indeed since, as Henrik Vigh phrases it, “wars do not start with the first shot or end with the last” (2008, 5). Peace must, surely, be more than the mere absence of armed violence.

In this light, the situation in these former warzones following the signing of the peace accords in 2012 appears to be one of what is commonly termed “liberal peace”. In the liberal peace thesis, violence is posited to be the disorder ailing a society at war, not a symptom. In accordance with this thesis, the proscription to armed conflict, in all places and at all times, is intensive democratisation and marketisation (Paris 2004, 41). This liberal peace thesis, embraced and aggressively championed by such global giants as the UN and the World Bank (Richmond and Mac Ginty 2015, 178; Mac Ginty 2008, 144; Hetherington 2011), places the processes of political and economic liberalisation at the very heart of all peace-building efforts. The rationale underlying this thesis, in simplified terms, is that market (i.e. capitalist) democracies rarely go to war against each other; thus, more liberalisation must lead directly to less war (Paris 2004, 42). In practice, however, as we find around the world, the push for economic liberalisation and neo-liberal reforms often lead the charge, especially for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (e.g. Klein 2008; Springer 2013; Hetherington 2011). In this respect, the NCA that the KNU signed in 2015, and the subsequent series of “21st Century Panglong”⁵³ peace conferences that have followed in its wake, closely followed a more global blue-print that banks upon economic development being the primary engine of conflict resolution.

One incident that lays the logic of the liberal peace thesis bare was an event held at the beginning of 2019 in the still war-torn west of Myanmar, in the wake of the Rohingya crisis. This event ran with the tagline “Rakhine is open for business to the

⁵³ Named after the first Panglong Conference held in February 1947 where various ethnic minority leaders met and agreed to join the Union of Burma, effectively paving the way for independence the following year.

world”, and State Councillor Aung San Suu Kyi, who presided over the proceedings, stated: “we have to address economic issues in Rakhine, that we may achieve the progress and development needed to sustain stability and prosperity” (Lwin 2019).

This ideology, that liberalising the economy and encouraging foreign investors to pour capital into the (formerly) war-torn fringes of the Myanmar nation-state, was (and, at least at the time of writing, still is) continually pedalled as the panacea for settling the armed conflict. It is in this context that the holding pattern of the current ceasefire up along the Salween River emerges.

As these notions from the Papun hills of a new “cool/peaceful” phase of the counterinsurgency and cases from other “post-conflict” societies around the world (Löfving 2007; Lund 2018; Büscher 2013; Vigh 2006) suggest, the liberal peace thesis struggles to square with lived realities on the ground, of people residing in these (former) warzones. Local military leaders and subsistence-farming villagers alike often talked of the current ceasefire as, in many respects, a continuation of state-sponsored counterinsurgency, the “four cuts” (M. Smith 1999). As the “heat” of armed struggle is dissipating, it is congealing into a new, more insidious form of counterinsurgency. Indeed, following the signing of the bilateral ceasefire in 2012, people are decreasingly being dispossessed by force of arms in the kind of primitive accumulation Marx describes. Now they fear that the land they live on, and live off, will be expropriated by increasingly more insidious means, through the creeping expansion of state-dominated religious and economic spheres, by these “peace traps”, preceded by offers and promises of places of worship and of prosperity. The building of pagodas and large investment projects such as the newly revitalised plans for the construction of the Hatgyi hydroelectric dam further down-stream stand testament to this.

The Hatgyi hydropower project, funded by Sinohydro (China) and EGAT (Thailand) (C. Middleton, Scott, and Lamb 2019, 33), proposes to build a 1,200 MW plant with a 33-meter-high dam (Bright 2019, 79) that, located just down-stream of the Salween Peace Park, threatened to inundate vast swathes of land (the location is marked in red at the bottom of the map this chapter begins with). What is more, at least 90 percent of the electricity produced will be transferred directly to Thailand

and China, providing no discernible benefits for the people living in the area around the dam. While the first design was prepared in 1999 (*ibid*), armed clashes in the immediate vicinity of the dam have intensified following the ceasefire, the Myanmar government steadily attempting to move forward with this project as armed hostilities have, on paper at least, ceased (Bright 2019, 79–80; Karen Rivers Watch 2016).

In this manner, KNLA soldiers and farmers alike articulate a position that resonates strongly with the work of scholars such as Christian Lund (2018). As Lund shows, the ending of protracted armed conflict in Aceh in Indonesia was experienced as a rupture that created “an open moment where both opportunity and risks multiply” (Lund 2018, 434). However, this rupture also ushered in a new frontier (*cf.* Li 2014a, 10–13 on indigenous/land frontiers) that soon led state actors to give concessions to contractors for huge swathes of land, while smallholders’ rights became undermined and silenced as they were slowly dispossessed of their lands (Lund 2018, 433). This said, as Lund emphasises, this is an extreme case of “old stories” continued on (*ibid*). These new patterns of dispossession in the Papun hills in many ways rehearse those from colonial times and the counterinsurgency.

However, while smallholders in Aceh were initially more sanguine about the possibilities opened to them following the peace process – that they may finally be able to assert their customary rights over the land – along the Salween, after so many years of chronic conflict, the indigenous people residing here were considerably more pragmatic, if not out-and-out pessimistic. We find that, while they were able to move around more freely, their hopes that this ceasefire may finally allow them to stabilise their livelihoods and maybe even improve on them were constantly tempered/muted by anxieties that the ceasefire would only serve to compound the risks they were already facing of being dispossessed. They feared the ceasefire could at any moment turn out to be a trap, ready to spring, that peace may in fact be “predatory” (Lund 2018, 431; Tsing 2005, ix).

While the cautionary tale of the fall of Thee Mu Hta, the market hamlet along the Salween, was often evoked by villagers I came to know in the Papun hills to explain their trepidations about the ceasefire, for their KNLA commanders at least, stories

from other parts of Myanmar help further undergird their pessimism towards a ceasefire. For both KNLA commanders and many activists, the hard-won lessons of their former allies the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), based on the Chinese borderlands in northern Myanmar, were not easily forgotten. Up until they exited to sign a bilateral ceasefire with the Tatmadaw a year later, the KNU were one of the founding members of the United Nations Federal Council (UNFC). The UNFC was, for a time, the most powerful alliance of non-state armed organisations (albeit now largely defunct), formed as a platform to collectively bargain with the Tatmadaw. The impetus for forming this alliance arose largely out of the experiences of one of the other prominent members, KIA, who had broken off from the other armed revolutions to sign a separate bilateral ceasefire with Tatmadaw in 1994. As we shall see, the fragile peace this ceasefire engendered steadily became more predatory over the years (Woods 2011).

Along these Myanmar-China borderlands, after the ink had barely had time to dry on the ceasefire accords the KIA signed in 1994, the Tatmadaw quickly began allocating land concessions to local elites and Chinese and international conglomerates, and redirecting timber trade in these former war zones. This served to both weaken the KIA's sovereignty and create legible, militarised, state territory (Woods 2011, 747, I will return to his point on legibility shortly). Indeed, rather than threatening state sovereignty, as Kevin Woods' material from Kachin State suggests, the granting of land concessions actually served to augment Myanmar military state-building efforts. Capturing and controlling flows of capital into these "resource frontiers" has the effect of generating effective national state authority, sovereignty and territory in practice (*ibid*, 749) and, simultaneously, weakening both KIA and smallholders' customary claims to these lands (*ibid*, 754). As Lund and Sikor demonstrate, the processes of recognising claims as property, in a rather circular manner, also works to imbue institutions and states with the recognition of their authority to do so, bolstering state building (2010, 1–3).

To describe these processes Woods (2011) coined the term "Ceasefire Capitalism". Through Ceasefire Capitalism the Tatmadaw were then able to achieve what had eluded them throughout the decades of armed counterinsurgency: taking effective

control of this contested territory. Woods proceeds to name the actual workings of this collaboration between the Tatmadaw and investors to seize control of contested land “military territorialisation” (ibid, 748–49), which, as he persuasively argues, ushered in a new phase of the state-sponsored counterinsurgency (cf. J. M. Ferguson 2014; Peluso and Vandergeest 2011). In light of this, descriptions like those we heard from soldiers and villagers of how, as armed conflict “cools”, the peace that sediments may in fact be a “trap”, emerge as indigenous analyses of this new face of the ongoing state counterinsurgency, and the resulting territorialisation and the dispossession of their lands it has/may bring.

In the next section, I demonstrate how these new forms and threats of dispossession were, in turn, deeply entangled with the current global rush for viable land, and how they are increasingly being conducted via legal technologies such as Myanmar state-level land laws. Moreover, as the tale of Thee Mu Hta demonstrates, the ongoing state counterinsurgency and the resulting territorialisation are not isolated to economic ventures as the term “ceasefire capitalism” may suggest, embracing also religious and moral encroachments. To capture the wider and widening scope of the counterinsurgency, I describe it as a form of ceasefire territorialisation.

Land-Rushes, Land Laws and Ceasefire Territorialisation

In many ways, stories such as these, of creeping dispossession by alliances of state and private actors, can give us a window on the wider process of what has been termed the “global land rush”. Upland swidden cultivators’ livelihood struggles and their current precarious predicaments are deeply entangled with the global food crisis driven by increased demands for staples and reorientation of consumption patterns, and the exploding energy demands of many more affluent nations. All these factors have led to the interminable hunt for new zones of valorisation in ever new land frontiers, enacting colossal processes of enclosures and land grabs, collectively known as the “global land rush” (Makki 2014, 79–80; see also Li 2014b; Hong 2017; Springer 2013). Soldiers and farmers alike are acutely aware that, as the heat of armed conflict slowly dissipates, akin to what happened in the Myanmar-Chinese borderlands, a

growing form of “ceasefire capitalism” threatens to ratchet open the highlands along the Salween River to global capital, generating a new land/indigenous frontier (Li 2014a; Lund 2018), echoing older iterations of such processes (see chapter one). Thus, local people’s apprehensions towards the current political situation could perhaps be best summed up by the slogan of the Tarkapaw Youth Group in response to the building of the Ban Chaung coal mine further south in the Tanintharyi region, “we used to fear bullets, now we fear bulldozers” (Tarkapaw Youth Group 2015).⁵⁴

One of the ways in which the global land rush threatens to have seismic effects on these highlands is through the recent enacting of the *Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law*, often shortened to VFV Land Law, that was first drafted in 2012 (perhaps not coincidentally, the same year the initial bilateral ceasefires, that paved the way for the National Ceasefire Agreement, were signed). In a report released on 12th March 2019, the day after the slightly amended law came into full force, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) christened this moment “Day One” (KHRG 2019). As the VFV Land Law entered the legal fold, becoming part of Myanmar state policy, in effect, from “day one” all land unregistered in state ledgers, estimated to be between 45 and 50 million acres, became “vacant, fallow, or virgin”. The lion’s share, 82 percent, of these 45-50 million acres of unregistered land reside in “ethnic areas” (ibid), such as the former warzones of the Papun hills. That is to say, through this land law, vast swathes of land held in “customary tenure” along Myanmar’s highland areas such as the patchwork of village-*kaw* lands along the Salween River, that are largely under the sway of non-state armed groups, were re-classified. Overnight, vast expanses of land became “vacant”, “fallow” (i.e. underutilised, see below) or “virgin”, and thus, ripe for government reallocation to more “productive”, i.e. commercial, uses such as monocultures for the mass production of food, mineral extraction, and hydroelectric dams for the production of commodities and energy in far-away place.

In many ways, laws such as the VFV Land Law can be seen as the continuation of long histories of targeting patches of land involved in swidden cultivation (e.g. Forsyth and Walker 2008; Springate-Baginsky 2018; J. M. Ferguson 2014). This form of agriculture/agroforestry is regularly cast as “inefficient” due to the long fallowing

⁵⁴ I return to this in the next section.

periods it requires for the soil to regenerate (see chapter three) that leaves a great deal of potential agricultural land seemingly “underutilised” and, somewhat paradoxically, also as a major cause of deforesting due to the periodic clearing and burning of small patches of secondary forest it involves (Springate-Baginsky 2018; Forsyth and Walker 2008).

Thus, the VFV Land Law and associated laws such as the Farmland Law (also first passed in 2012) illustrate a form of “ceasefire capitalism” in how the Myanmar state/military counterinsurgency is wedded to the current global hunt for new zones of valorisation in ever new land frontiers, the military and private sector joining hands to “secure” and territorialise contested lands (Woods 2011). Land laws are one specific technological instrument in which this is being achieved legislatively (J. M. Ferguson 2014). Moreover, and central to my argument here, in the blurring of state and private/capitalist interests, these land laws also illustrate wider practices of how states attempt to bring “unorganised” territory, that is to say land beyond the horizon of their sovereignty, into the legal/legislative fold by making them, as James C. Scott (1998) so productively put it, “legible”.

As legal technologies, the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Land Management Law and associated land laws simplify and “translate” the intricate, indeterminate, playful, and lively indigenous modes of possessing the earth tied to swidden cultivation, such as those I found along the Papun hills, into a uniform/standardised form of landholding that is “legible” (Scott 1998, 2), that can be registered in Myanmar state ledgers. Once land is made legible it can be distributed/sold to state and private actors for investment and development. The case in northern Myanmar, where *de facto* state authority, sovereignty, and territoriality were generated by way of granting land concessions to private actors, such that local claims to land were erased (Woods 2011, 749; cf. Sikor and Lund 2010, 1–3), is one clear instance of this in practice. Land laws attempt to achieve this same goal by similarly flattening, reifying, and/or simply ignoring as illegible, the “vast, complex, and negotiated” (Scott 1998, 13) “customary” modes of spectral, encompassed, and ephemeral ownership – where the ownership of parcels of land constantly cycled between human and spectral hands – we found in chapter three. These land laws then (re)make landscapes (as) legible by drawing on a

property regime where, as Scott shows is often the case, each patch of land becomes a discrete and uniform unit “owned by a legal individual who possesses wide powers of use, inheritance, or sale and whose ownership is represented by uniform deed of title enforced through the judiciary and police institutions of the state” (ibid, 36).⁵⁵

In this manner, possessed landscapes are simplified and transformed into a uniform grid of landholdings that can be readily represented by a cadastral map, making them “readable” and “assessable” by both the Myanmar state and commercial actors. In a somewhat parallel argument, Anna Tsing presses us to grasp how these processes of “banishing”, that is to say flattening and/or ignoring, biological and cultural diversity to create uniform, separate, and autonomous units create not only legibility and assessability but also “scalability” (2012, 506–8). In creating “scalability”, parcels of land become units that can both be plotted onto cadastral maps, and readily be “scaled up”, to allow for seeming infinite expansion of projects without rethinking basic elements (ibid).

As we found in the previously chapter, only a tiny fraction of villagers in the Papun hills held any form of land title deeds. What is more, the few paddy field land titles that people did hold were awarded by the KNU, and thus, unlikely to be recognised by the Myanmar state. In short, the application of the VFV Land Law on the grounds in the Papun hills would essentially imply that most, if not all, land here would be mapped and classified as “vacant”, “fallow” or “virgin”, ripe for redistribution and investment. Following this, as we spied the stirrings of in chapter three in the growing trend towards the establishing of sedentary wet rice fields, the gridding and mapping implied in the VFV Land Law would greatly exacerbate the commodification of land (cf. Polanyi [1944] 2001; see also Scott 1998, 51), both by state/private actors and “from below” by the villagers themselves (cf. Li 2014a). Thus, these land laws portended catastrophic effects for the subsistence farmers residing on the Papun hills and indeed all across Myanmar, of mass displacements and political/economical upheavals in the near future.

⁵⁵ This argument bears a striking resemblance to the one made in James Ferguson’s *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1994), similarly inflected by Foucault’s (2003) “Governmentality lectures”. Here he posits that, much like the “peace trap” described above, such political realities are translated into “technical” issues to be solved by development professionals, all the while strengthening the state’s presence in the area (see also Li 2007).

However, as I have shown, people's continued fears of dispossession were not isolated to their trepidations about intensified state/private partnerships and their growing financial encroachments in the shape of "ceasefire capitalism", that the clutch of new Myanmar state-level land laws appear to herald. The fall of the riverside hamlet of Thee Mu Hta, that for many of the people residing in the adjacent areas exemplified this growing new face of counterinsurgency and dispossession, took the form not of predatory business ventures but of religious encroachments initially welcomed by the inhabitants. What is more, it came before and appeared to presage the coming new threats inherent in a ceasefire.

Ceasefire Territorialisation

In the months following the first time I heard histories of Thee Mu Hta I learnt how, a short time after the Tatmadaw wrested control of this riverside hamlet from the KNU, this area was re-scheduled to a so-called "peace zone". Shortly thereafter, it became a bustling economic hub for cross-border trade attracting people from all across Myanmar and Thailand, that is, up until the KNU surrounded it with landmines and forbade villagers from visiting. While we cannot rule out that, as was the case in the Kachin State, the Tatmadaw may have planned to later grant land concessions in and around Thee Mu Hta to external investors, to augment and extend their territorial control, it is clear that "ceasefire capitalism" is but one part of the story. Predatory business ventures partnering with Myanmar state/military actors were both subsequent to and dependent upon previous religious and military encroachments. To grasp the wider story of the ongoing counterinsurgency, we need to delve into older attempts at gridding, mapping, and making legible these highlands by the Myanmar state.

As I touched on in the opening chapter, long before the clutch of land laws such as the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law were conceived, one of the Tatmadaw's first attempts at making these highlands legible was through the "four cuts" counterinsurgency programme. In this programme landscapes along the Salween were mapped, chessboard-like, into three zones: "black zones" obscured from the Myanmar state in being fully under the sway of armed "insurgent" groups such as the

KNU; “brown zones” where territorial control was still disputed; and “white zones” that were classified as “free” or “peaceful” on account of being under the full control of, and transparent to, the Tatmadaw (M. Smith 1999, 259). This map was then imposed onto the landscape itself. Areas controlled by “insurgent” groups were cordoned off into a grid of “black zones”, each usually 40-50 square miles across. With these areas mapped and gridded, the “four cuts” aimed to turn all zones designated “black” into “white” ones. This was to be achieved by displacing/resettling the rural population residing in these black zones into *byu hla jaywa*, or “strategic hamlets” that were under Tatmadaw control, cutting them off from the armed revolutionary groups. By severing the links between armed revolutionary groups and their civilian base, the counterinsurgency aimed to stem the flow of food, funds, intelligence and recruits from the rural population to these uprisings, effectively slowly starving them into submission (ibid, 259–260). “To drain the sea, in order to kill the fish,” as one popular Burmese proverb puts it (South and Katsabanis 2007, 57). With the insurgencies effectively neutralised the Tatmadaw could then gradually expand its territorial control over the entire map. All pockets of “insurgency”, such as the highlands along the Salween, were slowly turned into “white/peace” zones that were transparent, that is to say “readable”, and “assessable”, to the Myanmar state.

Moreover, while in practice this counterinsurgency programme was almost exclusively carried out through military might – by the violent displacement of civilians, extensive use of landmines and forced labour, and scorched earth tactics (e.g. M. Smith 1999; KHRG 2001; South and Katsabanis 2007; J. M. Ferguson 2014) – its scope far exceeded this. As Martin Smith notes in passing, the “four cuts” was, in theory, the Tatmadaw’s own version of a people’s war, their attempt to win the war through the hearts and minds of rural villagers (M. Smith 1999, 259, 495 ff. 38). In this light, the tale of Thee Mu Hta allows us a glimpse of how, long prior to the ceasefire, so-called “hot” and “cool” measures regularly went hand-in-hand. What is more, the Tatmadaw’s war to win rural villagers’ hearts and minds has been waged with both promises of economic/capitalist development and of building religious structures. These efforts often preceded and laid the groundwork for later armed military incursions aimed towards territorialising these “black zones”, and making them

legible. Thus, the current threats of a looming “cool” conflict in the wake of the ceasefires in the Papun hills can be seen as a continuation of the long counterinsurgency where, as the armed conflict abates, this form of “people’s war” is in ascendance. The introduction of new land laws the same year as the ceasefire, and the ensuing intensification of commercial/capitalist and religious-led forms of state territorialisation, appear to build on and greatly extend this “cool” shadow side of the ongoing counterinsurgency.

To grasp the wider connotations of these local articulations, indigenous analyses of this new phase of counterinsurgency, where military, capitalist and religious encroachments go hand in hand, I amalgamate Wood’s (2011) terms “ceasefire capitalism” and “military territorialization” to describe the situation in these highlands, more broadly, as one of Ceasefire Territorialisation. In much of Myanmar, but specifically along the Salween River, under the guise of the ceasefires, battles continue to be waged, land territorialised, and people dispossessed. As we have seen, military might is increasing being wedded and subordinated to economic and religious expansions/ventures, that are less spectacular and harder to confront directly (cf. Li 2014a).

This new modality of the counterinsurgency, of Ceasefire Territorialisation waged against the civilian population with economic and religious means has not, however, been met with resignation and acquiescence by all. In the remainder of this chapter I demonstrate how, in several pockets across Southeast Myanmar, growing ensembles of local communities, ecological activists, and in some cases armed groups, have begun to face down, push back, and attempt to re-territorialise and re-possess the earth, in a manner akin to Karl Polanyi’s ([1944] 2001) notion of multi-class protective “countermovements” that arise to resist the disembodiment of the economy and the commodification of land.

To shine a light on these burgeoning “countermovements”, I begin by taking a short excursion to an organic farming foundation just north of Bangkok to meet an ensemble of farmers, students and ecological activists from the Tanintharyi region in southern Myanmar who have begun organising themselves. Here in southern Myanmar, following a massive intensification of counterinsurgency activities from

1997 to the early 2000s, the KNU has been significantly weakened and pushed into a thin sliver of land along the Thai border, paving the way for a massive influx of international investments. As one Chiang Mai based researcher put it, “Tanintharyi district, in many ways, has become the Wild West of Myanmar”, in the (re)opening of a land/resource frontier (cf. Lund 2018; Li 2014a; Tsing 2005).

KNU Activity, Corporate activity, and Green Territoriality in Tanintharyi

The first time I met Saw Jonny was in yet another of Chiang Mai’s glittering shopping centres, this time to the east of the old city. I find him on the top floor at a small coffee stand, younger and lither than I had expected, beaming like the sun as I introduce myself. Saw Jonny is a leading activist in a mushrooming crop of community-based environmental and youth activist groups in the Tanintharyi region of southern Myanmar. The KNU classifies this region as their Mergui-Tavoy administrative district, falling under the command of Brigade Four (Thu Gay Lwee) of the KNLA. Collectively these community-based groups call themselves the Tenasserim River and Indigenous People Network, or TripNet for short. Despite his affable disposition, Saw Jonny is quick to point out when I have misunderstood something and gently put me back on the right track. As I try to pitch a collaborative research project comparing the situation in the Papun hills in Northeast Karen State to that in the Tanintharyi region to him he initially agrees that this is an important angle, but stresses they are also very different situations. While most of the Papun hills are (nominally at least) under KNU jurisdiction, in the south people live under “dual administrations”. Those residing in the Tanintharyi region mostly pay taxes to and are governed by both the Myanmar and KNU states. What is more, it is only “half true” to say that some areas are under KNU “control”. He takes umbrage at the word “control” as the KNU usually do not exactly hold sovereignty here. As he puts it, it would be more correct to assert that certain areas have a greater or lesser degree of “KNU activity”. He exemplifies this in how most people in this area pay tax to both administrations. This “dual administration”, as he labels it, is well documented in the literature on Southeast Myanmar, and is often described as “hybrid” or “plural” governance (South 2018; McConnachie 2014; Kyed and Gravers 2014). Moreover, KNU and Myanmar

state/military “activity” is often shadowed by a great deal of financial “activity” by a growing number of national and transnational investors. The map below (figure 4.3), reproduced from Woods (2019) offers a glimpse of these overlapping financial and military “activities”.

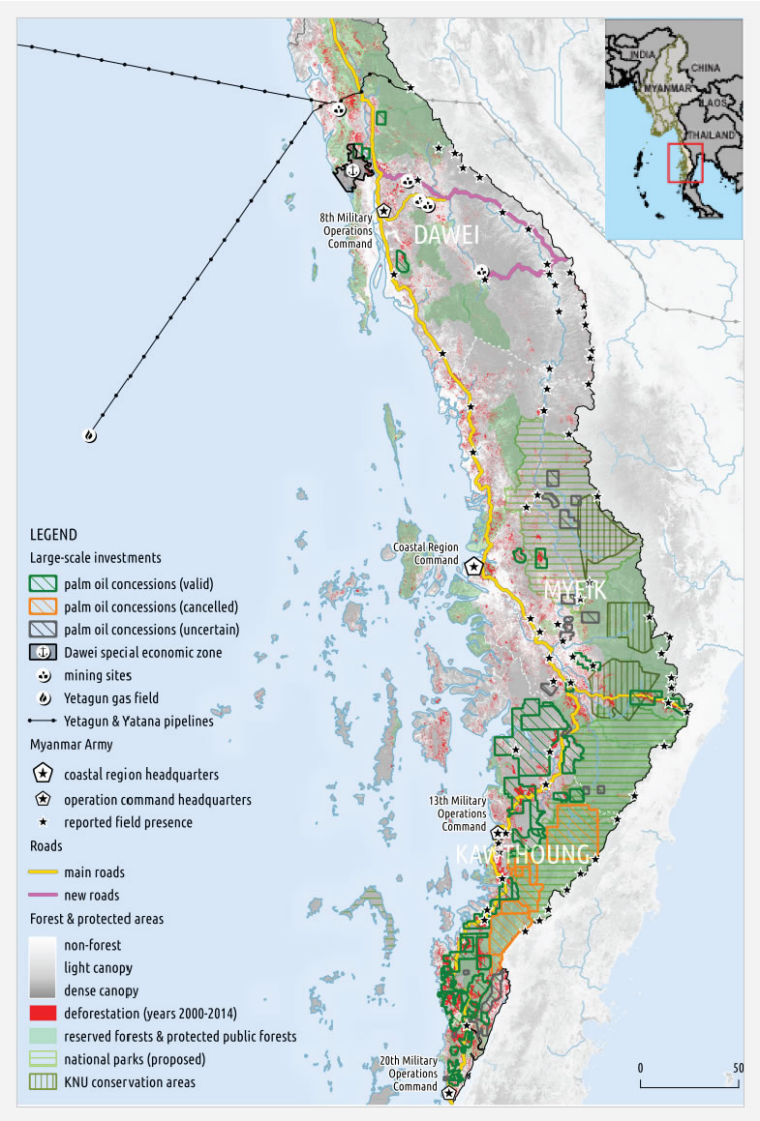


Figure 4.3 An overview of the financial and military “activities” in the Tanintharyi Region

Saw Jonny then explains that we find that since smallholders in Tanintharyi “often do not hold official land titles, the government assumes that these areas are vacant [as per the VFV Land Law we encountered in the previous section]. So, areas can be claimed by simply occupying them. But while as a private person [such as smallholder] you can only claim up to 50 acres, companies can claim up to 50,000. And unlike the villagers they can apply for these rights repeatedly, so there are some real issues here. How can people claim rights to the lands they live on?” Here he is largely paraphrasing the text of the Virgin Fallow and Vacant Land Management Act, Chapter 4, articles 10-12.⁵⁶

A week later I joined Saw Jonny for one of his “exposure trips” he arranges for farmers and youth from Tanintharyi. This trip took them to the *Khao Kwan* (in Thai “the goddess of rice”) Foundation training centre for organic farming in Suphanburi, a few hours’ drive north of Bangkok. Here, they were taught how farmers using modern agricultural practices often become impoverished on account of the market fixing prices, both of the products they sell and of those they buy back. The Foundation’s answer to this, according to the instructors here, is to “not rely only on the market” so as to “liberate farmers and not just to make money”. The organic agricultural practices they teach in this school strive to “increase happiness not richness and to improve the quality of the air and the water” as it is a “question of survivability”, the Thai founder of this foundation told these youth and farmers through a translator on the first day. From the first day, it was already abundantly clear that the aim of this training was not to simply help these farmers become more productive and affluent, but also facilitate their “liberation” from the market and foster their autonomy. The theme of liberation in response to dispossession will come up repeatedly in the next chapter.

On our second day at the Khao Kwan Foundation I got talking to a larger group of farmers and students from Tanintharyi when, out of the blue, Saw Jonny summoned all the participants in the dining hall in order for me to describe my research to them and that I may ask them questions. In this impromptu focus group people described how their rights were also gradually being chipped away as the armed conflict abates.

⁵⁶ See: <http://www.myanmar-law-library.org/law-library/laws-and-regulations/laws/myanmar-laws-1988-until-now/union-solidarity-and-development-party-laws-2012-2016/myanmar-laws-2012/pyidaungsu-hluttaw-law-no-10-2012-vacant-fallow-and-virgin-land-management-act.html> Pages 8-11.

They told how they have not only repeatedly faced threats of dispossession but some had been dispossessed of their lands in the wake of the ceasefires, albeit in a far more dramatic and widespread manner than what we saw was afoot in the Papun hills. After I had presented myself and my research interests, one rather boisterous and unabashed woman quickly broke the ice. She began by explaining how, in the area where she lives, along the Great Tenasserim River (that I saw glistening below me through the window pane of the plane that first took me to Chiang Mai), a large alluvial gold mine facility had been built on the river. This facility had been slowly polluting the local water sources with the mercury and other chemicals used to purify the gold ever since. After a short pause for translation, she adds that that the chemicals pumped into their water sources are highly dangerous for both women and unborn babies. As such, this gold mine had been slowly poisoning the land and water she and her fellow villagers derive their livelihoods from.⁵⁷ A short time afterwards, an older man shares how in his village tract, further downstream, many of his fellow villagers' land is being grabbed by Malaysian palm-oil conglomerates, that are establishing plantations here (as documented in Woods 2019). In response to these comments, a rather serious looking young fellow, Saw Hkwah, comments that, "Actually the situation favours the rich man, because he has money and he is close to those who have more power in the government. So, if we look at the government and business sector, they [the rich] are more powerful. This is the reason why we people need to get together in order to deal with those who have money and power and those with the authority".

Fascinatingly, the picture these farmers and students paint of the situation in Tanintharyi district, though far more entrenched, both bears a striking similarity to and gives credence to shared fears voiced by the women and men I came to know in the Papun hills, that the cooling of armed conflict is shadowed by growing Ceasefire Territorialisation. In the Tanintharyi region, and indeed many other areas of Myanmar, however, these processes of dispossession have been greatly accelerated by constellations of "hybrid/plural" administration (South 2018; Kyed and Gravers 2014;

⁵⁷ This case has been thoroughly documented in a report by three civil society organisations, mentioned earlier, entitled "We used to fear bullets, now we fear bulldozers" (Tarkapaw Youth Group 2015).

McConnachie 2014). As Saw Jonny later explained to me, the context of hybrid, or what he called “dual administrations”, has exacerbated processes of creeping dispossession in the Tanintharyi region, things often “falling between the floorboards”.

When, for example, the gold mine along the Great Tenasserim River was first established, Saw Jonny was approached by a senior figure in the KNU asking for his help. This elected official told him that the mine “received approval from neither the Myanmar Government nor us [the KNU’s highest political body, the Executive Committee]. It is like how a foot sometimes falls through the gaps between the [split bamboo] floorboards of a house”. The Chinese conglomerate that set up this gold mine seemed to have found a “gap” somewhere, most likely with local-level KNLA commanders, to set up shop in this area. Saw Jonny then asked this KNU P’doh/government official why he was asking him, could he not fix it himself, exclaiming “but you are in the executive committee!” To this the P’doh admitted that it was technically within his power to top it, but intimated that due to the delicate nature of this slip, involving high-ranking KNLA officers, his hands were effectively tied. As the report on this incident clarifies, the (in fact Thai) mining company obtained permission from the Myanmar Government and local KNU and KNLA, Mergui-Tavoy District/5th Brigade, but not from the KNU central Executive Committee and the KNU Mining Department (cf. Tarkapaw Youth Group 2015, 14). Following this unofficial request, Saw Jonny began helping those affected by the gold mine as they started to organise and protest this development over the coming weeks and months. Eventually, their joint efforts payed off and the alluvial gold mining facility was forced to close – with little explicit help from the KNU government.

In these combined efforts, by villagers and activists, to force the gold mining operation to close, we see a few glimmers of how these “countermovements” are beginning to gain steam and effectively face down new kinds of extractivism and ceasefire territorialisation. For Polanyi, throughout history there has been a continual “double movement”, where the unchecked market expansion is met by a protective countermovement, “in reaction against a dislocation which attacked the fabric of society” (Polanyi [1944] 2001, 136). Moreover, he goes on to argue that movements

were often “spontaneous, undirected by opinion, and actuated by a purely pragmatic spirit” (ibid, 147). However, these defensive countermovements in Tanintharyi were not only gathering strength to push back against lands being dispossessed by economic enclosures but, increasingly, also conservation enclosures.

Conservation enclosures

As Saw Jonny was eager to emphasise, the lands and waterways of the indigenous peoples of Tanintharyi were not only being made barren (both physically and legally), and people being dispossessed, by predatory investors. Increasingly, the Tatmadaw and the Myanmar government are attempting to territorialise the land under indigenous peoples’ feet through (seemingly) earnest ecological conservation initiatives, in concordance with global environmental organisations (and indeed, in accordance with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals).

North of the Great Tenasserim River, in northern Tanintharyi, lies the Kamoethway valley, where the vast majority of the participants attending this “exposure trip” hail from. This valley is nestled in the hills between Dawei city, on the coast, and the land border crossing over to Thailand. In Kamoethway, a 420,000-acre (1700 km²) conservation zone, the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve Project (TNRP) is slowly being established (cf. Woods 2019, 226; RKIPN 2016). As Saw Jonny points out, this nature reserve came into being already in 1996, through a collaboration between, on the one side French and Malaysian oil and gas companies, Total and Petronas, and on the other the Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Ministry of Forestry of the Myanmar Government. This project was part of these oil companies’ “Corporate Responsibility”, to offset the damages caused by the Yadana Pipeline they built that runs from off-shore rigs in the Andaman Sea through the width of the Tanintharyi region and into Thailand (cf. Barbesgaard 2019, 189). Saw Jonny spits out the words “corporate responsibility”, unable to mask the sneer growing on his face and the sense of contempt entering his voice. After a little pause he adds that it was, however, not until the political situation began to become more settled, following the bilateral ceasefire between the KNU and the Tatmadaw in 2012, as people and goods

began to flow more freely, that the Myanmar government were first able to actually enforce this project in these former warzones.

As Woods puts it, up until this point the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve Project was simply a “paper park” (2019, 226), a park in name only. It was only as the conflict cooled that Myanmar governmental officials were able to visit Kamoethway. And it was at this time that they began informing the residents that the northern section of their customary lands, that few if any of the villagers held Myanmar state-recognised land titles to, were in fact encroaching on the buffer zone of a nature reserve (cf. RKIPN 2016; Woods 2019). As such, overnight the rice fields and vast swathes of areca/betel nut plantations that people had cultivated for generations became illegal occupations of government land. In response to this, Saw Jonny adds, “the community elders tried to talk to these officials, but they have nothing on paper”, i.e. no land titles to back up their claims to ownership and access. Thusly, in one fell swoop, great numbers of subsistence farmers were effectively dispossessed of their lands and livelihoods. For Saw Jonny this was a clear-cut case of what he repeatedly referred to as “green grabbing”. However, he deftly skirted around my attempts to tie this to wider processes of Myanmar state “ceasefire capitalism” across all ceasefire zones. This was perhaps, in part, because he himself was working as a consultant on the very peace process that the terms critique. Nevertheless, I was left to ponder, what does he imply in labelling these processes as “green grabbing”?

Globally, green grabbing has become a common term to describe the manifold ways in which (especially indigenous) people’s land is progressively being appropriated for environmental ends (Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012). However, as Woods points out, taking the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve Project (TNRP) as an example, the notion of “green grabbing” fails to fully capture the ways in which re-zoning landscapes for environmental conservation often involves the violent forces of accumulation that are deeply entangled with state territorialisation. These ecological endeavours are regularly partnered with processes that reorganise such “wild” frontiers into state territory (2019, 219; cf. Peluso and Vandergeest 2011). Indeed, “nature conservation produces state territory and national authority, erasing historical and current claims by villagers under customary and rebel authority” (Woods 2019,

220). Thus, conservation projects bear a striking similarity to the land laws we explore above in the way that, in both cases, in situ land possession practices are effectively ignored and effaced. In order to capture these wider implications, I follow Woods in arguing that (seemingly) earnest ecological conservation initiatives in Tanintharyi are in many ways one particular manifestation of continuing Ceasefire Territorialisation, that he describes as “Green Territoriality” (2019, 219). As Woods so succinctly phrases it, green territoriality acts as a form of “soft counterinsurgency” (ibid, 220).

Yet, as we have seen, especially in Tanintharyi this “soft counterinsurgency” is not going unchallenged. As Saw Hkwah, the rather serious looking younger man I met in Khao Kwan accentuated, the indigenous people of this area were far from sitting idly, waiting for their lands to be expropriated. Following the arrival of representatives of the Myanmar Forestry Department, the villagers in Kamoethway began to gather and discuss how best to “deal with those who have money and power and those with the authority”, and turn the processes of dispossession on their head.

Countermovements, Counter-Mapping, and Translation

Returning to the impromptu focus group at Khao Kwan I described above: after the young man had finished his monologue about “those who have money and power”, a wizened elder wearing a light blue t-shirt emblazoned with the logo representing his community in Kamoethway elaborated on this. He explained how, following their customary lands being designated as illegal occupations on the buffer zone of a Nature Reserve, in the face of looming dispossession by this conservation enclosure, they began to organise themselves:

The way we manage the forest depends on the landscape and the resources that we each have, so we can divide it into wildlife sanctuaries, watershed forests and [zones] utilised for farming [for example]. We do this to protect the landscape and the different characteristics of the area. For example, in Karen traditions there is a lot about conserving forests and animals. This is according to our ancestors' knowledge. But we have also found evidence. We can prove that our efforts are effective. For example, we have started to teach fish conservation and we have seen that in one or two years the fish population is increasing. So we have evidence so people can see the results of our activities.

Saw Jonny then expanded on these two men's descriptions after they were translated to me, on how they went about zoning their lands (cf. RKIPN 2016). He began by elaborating how they began by discussing how to formulate the regulations on the watershed forest. They "first discussed what was the purpose of the watershed forest, why did they need it and how should they regulate it". Saw Johnny then asked them, "ok, so can we cut trees?" in this area, letting them discuss this for some time.

Following some back and forth one person said, "well, for charcoal we would have to chop down the trees," then another chimed in, "Oh, but we can also just take the old, dead and dying wood and use them, for making charcoal and building shelters". Then another villager interjected, "but if we remove too much of this litter on the forest floor then it could destroy the habitat of certain frogs, fish and other animals". "Oh, this is true," the other clucked. In this way, through protracted discussion, they began to formulate their own rules and regulations for these areas. These areas were then transposed onto a map and the rules written down for each area.

As a result, the community collectively defined and mapped nine categories of forest with rules and regulations tied to each of these, that were agreed upon by all members of the community (as also detailed in a report from the community: RKIPN 2016). Saw Jonny then expounded gleefully, how when they presented this plan to the Myanmar Forestry Department, "they were just silent... Then eventually, the first thing they [the Forestry Department] said was, 'who funded this?'" To this, one of the quick-witted villagers interjected, "we started this all by ourselves, and now the donors are starting to come to us". When a Forestry Department official asked, "how can this be? Before the people would never agree and abide by the rules we set out for the forest, why is it that you follow these rules?" Another villager chimed in that "now the rules are written by the people so it is easy for us to follow them".

Fascinatingly, what we find among this ensemble of activists, farmers and students in Tanintharyi is that they are facing down the Myanmar state's continued attempts at Ceasefire Territorialisation by drawing on the very same mapping and zoning practices that threaten to dispossess them. In effect, they are turning state-like attempts to make these lands legible on its head, as a way to counter the state-led

encroachments on their lands (cf. Hetherington 2011; Mathews 2008). By (re)mapping their lands they are making moves to attempt to re-possess them.

From my conversations with the participants and with Saw Jonny I began to learn that, in a parallel fashion to the Myanmar state, these villagers and activists are striving to “translate” the intricate, indeterminate, playful, and lively indigenous modes of possessing the earth, into a uniform/standardised grid of different categories of land to make them legible to the Myanmar state (cf. Scott 1998, 2), plotted onto a map. As Thongchai Winichakul has shown with reference to neighbouring Thailand, the process of mapping had become a technology par excellence in the struggle to assert territoriality, and thus, sovereignty (1994, 14–18). Indeed, the mapping of forested areas such as the Kamoethway valley is “an intrinsically political act” (Peluso 1995, 383). Thus, we might grasp the work of the activists and the farmers to draw and to translate their day-to-day practices and transpose them onto a map as what Nancy Peluso (1995) calls counter-mapping. By appropriating state technologies of territoriality, they hope to bolster the legitimacy of “customary” claims, in the process redefining and reinventing them (ibid, 384, 400). In this manner, “indigenous maps” (Winichakul 1994) are translated into legible and legalising counter-maps to establish property rights that are “readable” and “assessable” to the Myanmar state, to be used in negotiations (cf. Karlsson 2011, 114). As the wizened elder put it to me, in these activities “we have evidence so people can see the results of our activities”. And these activities appear to be having an effect. Myanmar Forestry personnel were left speechless when first presented with this map, finally exclaiming “how can this be?” These counter-mapping efforts then mark a startling turn in the protracted armed conflict in Southeast Myanmar where, in the face of creeping ceasefire territorialisation and the growing threats of dispossession, a growing countermovement is attempting to re-possess the earth beneath them. This work of zoning and mapping forests to make indigenous land possession practices legible is ongoing.

The last time I saw Saw Jonny was at the KESAN Office in Chiang Mai where he came for a flying visit, with a large rolled-up sheet of paper tucked under his arm. When I and some of the activists present ask what he has under his arm, Saw Jonny

excitedly rolls it out on the table in front of us to reveal a rough map of Kamoethway valley, crisscrossed with lines to create different sections, each filled in with bright splashes of colour. He is here to get help from the resident cartography wizard Saw Hpweh to turn this sketch into a fully scaled and digitalised map. They shall draw on this map when they argue their case to the relevant authorities in the pushback against the Reserve Project in this area. He explains how, together with the indigenous people of Kamoethway, following the discussion described above to decide on how to divide up the landscape into discrete zones and having agreed on the rules and regulations for each of these, they had marked these onto a map in different colours.

As he shows us these different zones, Doh K'Oh, whom we met in the opening chapter, leans in and inquires what all the red patches are. "Ahah!" exclaims Saw Jonny, "they are the 'cultural forest' areas". As he turns to us and immediately captures the puzzlement upon our faces he adds, "these are the areas where people practice *hku* or shifting cultivation". However, as we have seen, swidden cultivation, or *taungya* in Burmese, as he puts it rather mildly, "is not very popular with the Myanmar government, so instead we call them cultural forests" (cf. J. M. Ferguson 2014; Springate-Baginsky 2018).⁵⁸ A large smile erupts over his face as he explains this.

However, as he took his leave, he mentioned in passing that by creating this "cultural forest", people in Kamoethway will be able "to try out these Karen traditional practices", that is to say, *hku* or swidden cultivation. Indeed, as he had pointed out to me earlier, very few, if any, households in areas in northern Tanintharyi continue to depend upon swidden cultivation for the majority of their subsistence needs. In Kamoethway, as the community report referred to earlier confirms, the vast majority of households sustain themselves through wet rice cultivation and producing areca/betel nuts in large orchards for the market (RKIPN 2016, 14, 23). Yet, before I was able to inquire how they were able to demarcate this land when the mode of cultivation that sustained it had largely fallen out of practice, and how they intended to "revive" this, he was gone again, with the same abruptness in which he had arrived.

⁵⁸ These echo findings across the border and beyond (Forsyth and Walker 2008; Peluso and Vandergeest 2011; Karlsson 2011)

After this last chance meeting with Saw Jonny I was left with many unanswered questions.

Looking for answers in the community report from Kamoethway (RKIPN 2016), I found that this “cultural forest”, is one of many areas of forest that the community are demarcating to “preserve” and “revive” disappearing indigenous practices. Other areas marked on the map Saw Jonny showed us, and described in the community report, include a forest reserved for the growing of medicinal herbs and an “Umbilical Cord Forest”. The latter is rooted in long lapsed Thoo Hkoh or animist practices in this area, in which people once hung or buried the umbilical cord of newborns on or under a particular (usually especially vibrant) tree (ibid, 23). As I learnt from a Karen elder from the adjacent area on the Thai side of the border, where this practice is still widespread, this tree then keeps the child’s *k’la* from being *aw loh* or fed on by spectral presences.⁵⁹ As such these areas are deeply entangled with practices of possessed landscapes, where, as we saw in chapter two, the earth is treated as already owned, and its uses must be constantly negotiated with its spectral owners. Yet, as Saw Jonny had told me earlier, he is unaware if there are any practicing animist or Thoo Hkoh left in the Tanintharyi district. In this way we glimpse the constant issues that such countermovements run against in translations.

Returning to Peluso’s notion of counter-maps, we see that these technologies often “redefine and reinvent” customary claims as new “traditions” (Peluso 1995, 384) in the process. Moreover, as both Scott (1998) and Tsing (2012) show is the case in state simplifications and rationalisations to make land legible and scalable in order to be rendered into maps, counter-mapping runs the risk of “fixing” or “freezing” such lively histories and practices, taking away their flexibility and indeterminacy, changing their very nature (Peluso 1995, 400; cf. Li 2010). In this sense we see how, as the Italian adage goes, to translate is to betray (Viveiros de Castro 2004a, 5), to redefine and reinvent. Yet, as Walter Benjamin points out, the betrayal inherent in translation is to the destination language, not the source language (Benjamin 2004,

⁵⁹ In Ta K’Thwee Duh village the umbilical cord of neonates was placed inside a bamboo tube and affixed to one particular vibrant tree growing at the top of the village. While there was no notion of an umbilical cord forest, this one tree appeared to serve the same purpose of keeping a child’s *k’la* strong and vibrant (like the tree) to protect it from malevolent spectral presences.

253–69; Hage 2015, 65). Following this, we might see how in translating indigenous notions into forms legible to the Myanmar state, the aim of these countermovements appears to be more towards deforming and subverting these state forms (pace Viveiros de Castro 2004a). However, rather than wading into the broad and vexed debate on practices and politics of translation⁶⁰ in anthropology, here I want to foreground the pragmatism of these activists' relation to translation, as a practical way to bolster legitimacy while deforming and subverting these. This said, from what I was able to gather from Saw Jonny, these processes of counter-mapping in Tanintharyi appear to be particularly inventive. This, as we shall see in the next chapter, stands in stark contrast to the situation further north in the Papun hills.

Another highly significant difference to the Papun hills is the hybrid or plural context of the Tanintharyi region. This ensemble of activists, farmers and students were constantly countering and pushing back on Ceasefire Territorialisation not from the Myanmar government and the Tatmadaw but, in part, from the KNU itself. As we saw was the case with the alluvial gold mining facility along the Great Tenasserim, this ensemble often had to also face down “development” projects that had the approval of the KNU government (at the district level at least). As Saw Jonny tells this story, when this ensemble of farmers, students and activists began to organise and protest against the gold mine, and as it became increasingly hard for the mine to continue business as usual, some KNLA commanders from this area began calling this same P'doh/government official, requesting that he order Saw Jonny and this motley band of farmer-activists to cease and desist immediately. They called these actions “civil disorder”, claiming that Saw Jonny was training villagers to rebel against the KNU. Following this, the P'doh did indeed contact Saw Jonny again, but instead of chastising him he told him that he must be working and urged him to keep up the pressure. This politician then exclaimed that these activist-farmers were “like the mushroom that grows on a termite hill. You know termite hills, right? They are very

⁶⁰ The notion of translations has accumulated a great deal of theoretical baggage since Benjamin, becoming central in Science and Technology Studies and Actor Network Theory (e.g. Callon 1984; Star and Griesemer 1989), and more recently in studies affiliated with the so-called “ontological turn” (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2004a; de la Cadena 2015; Da Col and Graeber 2011).

hard but somehow the mushroom still manages to grow”. Saw Jonny then roars with laughter as he tells this last detail.

Thus, in many ways the activities, the “civil disorder”, of activist-farmers and youth under the TripNet umbrella appear to resonate strongly with Polanyi’s notion of defensive countermovement, engaged in efforts to counter the commodification of their land and dispossession. This defensive movement pushed back against Ceasefire Territorialisation in all its guises, whether it be perpetrated by the Tatmadaw, conservation groups or parts of the KNU/KNLA itself. However, as I was to learn, this is markedly different from the situation in the Papun hills, where the Salween Peace Park was taking shape. Here, while there are some similarities in their methods, the pushback is largely being organised by a collective of Karen activists that call themselves the Karen Environmental Action Network or KESAN for short, who work very much from inside the KNU itself. These activists are working to create a legal ecology to open up a space in these highlands in which both the Salween Peace Park and the indigenous forms of ownership and sovereignty can flourish, not simply to counter state encroachments in the form of Ceasefire Territorialisation, but to open up alternative avenues for attaining peace and autonomy. I describe these struggles as a form of Liberation Conservation.

Five | Liberation Conservation

Rescaling struggles over conservation and Revolution



“Currently, we are still in the mode of revolutionary resistance.”

General Mutu Say Poe, Chairman of the KNU on Karen Revolution day.

31st January 2020 (Nyein 2020a)

In this penultimate chapter I return, via Chiang Mai, to the Papun hills, to take a closer look at the Salween Peace Park itself and how it was being established. Here I show how, while it bears a strong resemblance to the movements in Tanintharyi pushing back against the rising tide of Ceasefire Territorialisation described in the previous chapter, this pushback is being conducted neither in parallel to nor in conflict with the KNU. The Salween Peace Park works very much from within the KNU and in many ways continues their more than seventy-year-long struggles for self-determination. As the quote from the chairman of the KNU this chapter opens with suggests, at this conjuncture, while the “heat” of armed conflict is slowly dissipating (despite a flaring up of fighting at the time of writing, e.g. Nyein 2020b), the “mode of the revolutionary resistance” is still very much at hand. Consequently, I explore how the Salween Peace Park goes beyond a protective countermovement, reacting to and pushing back against growing Ceasefire Territorialisation in this area. We find that the pushback along the Salween River is deeply entangled to the protracted struggle for self-determination, continuing the revolution by other means. To better capture the revolutionary aspects of the Salween Peace Park I coin the term Liberation Conservation. However, as I touch upon at the end of this chapter, this new iteration of the ongoing revolution is itself unsettling and subverting notions of sovereignty, resistance, and self-determination.

Thus, I begin this chapter by demonstrating how this large-scale project to protect biodiversity in these highlands was not conjured out of thin air. Rather, it was

the result of many decades of intensive activism and advocacy by the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) to create a niche within the KNU legal system and beyond in which this indigenous-run protected area could take root. These activists have laboured tirelessly toward creating this niche, this gap, in the law by translating and rescaling indigenous practices and cosmologies. Through these labours, the activists were constantly messing with the scales of the struggle subverting these very scales in pragmatic and productive ways. These pragmatic politics constantly exceeded and overflowed simply pushing back against growing ceasefire territorialisation as the activists simultaneously worked to build a sustainable peace by prefiguring alternative visions and practices of federalism, building on indigenous practices. As I show, this work to prefigure peace and federalism was deeply entangled with the activists' revolutionary commitments to self-determination, many of them considering themselves as the third generation of continuing struggle for greater autonomy. Therefore, I describe the Salween Peace Park as a form of Liberation Conservation, with the demand to create an indigenous-run protected area deeply wedded to the demand to self-determination. I then close by gesturing to how, in the process of opening this space and prefiguring federalism and self-determination, the KNU's decade-long struggle for greater autonomy is also being unsettled and subverted.

However, to begin to spin this particular yarn I need to go back to November 2016, to the first time I met the activists who were working to turn this "wild idea", as one activist called it, of a Peace Park into a pivotal part of KNU policy, and to their long struggle for autonomy.

"Thinking Bigger"

Arranging a sit-down meeting with the incredibly overworked environmental activists in KESAN was no mean feat, taking several weeks of spamming them with emails. And, when I finally arrange to visit their office, ensconced in a small residential area on the outskirts of Chiang Mai, I manage to get hopelessly lost on the way. I arrive over an hour late, dripping in sweat and my brain pickled from cycling around in circles in the midday sun. After cooling off a little in their air-conditioned meeting

room, and after they have finished cracking jokes about my sense of direction, or lack thereof, I attempted to pitch a research collaboration with them by describing their work in the Papun hills as a type of “insurgent conservation”. Before I can finish my spiel, one of the leading activists, Ta Thoo, who is sat behind a MacBook adorned with stickers of KNU logos and Karen flags with his long hair up in a ponytail, interjects. He interrupts me to assert that they (KESAN) are rather hostile to the word “insurgent” due to the rather thorny connotations it has gathered over the decades of armed conflict in Southeast Myanmar. So-called “Non-State Armed Groups” (NSAG) such as the KNU have regularly been referred to by the Tatmadaw as “insurgent” and their revolutions as “insurgencies”. This categorisation has often been treated as synonymous with “terrorist” and long been used to justify the Tatmadaw’s “four cuts” counterinsurgency. Indeed, as Martin Smith notes, already in 1963 following a breakdown in peace negotiations, the Tatmadaw began referring to the armed opposition groups as “bandits” and “extremists”, and thus, no longer accorded with political status (1999, 259).⁶¹

James, a North-American who describes himself as a consultant for KESAN and also sports a long black ponytail, then adds that “it sounds as if you assume that KESAN are working parallel to the KNU. In fact, they work very much from within them”. What is more, he adds, their current efforts to protect the biodiversity of the Mutraw district of Karen State comes from within the KNU’s Forestry Department (as we found in chapter three, the Myanmar state is only faintly felt in these highland areas such that the KNU, for all intents and purposes, operates as the de facto [para-]state). Their conservation work in the Papun hills springs largely from the Karen Forestry Department’s (KFD) definition of a “Protected Landscape” (that they seem to in turn have adopted from the International Union for Conservation of Nature, or IUCN).⁶² Ta Thoo then continues that, in working from within this department, much of their activities consist of constantly lobbying them on land rights issues and how best to govern forest lands. Indeed, as a Thai researcher, Eh, who has been

⁶¹ More recently, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Arakan Army (AA) have variously been labelled as “extremist terrorists” and “insurgents” by the Tatmadaw in order to justify a pattern of targeting civilians that a recent UN factfinding mission described as amounting to “genocidal intent” (OHCHR 2020).

⁶² See: <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories>

working closely with KESAN for some years succinctly put it when telling me about them, “KESAN is a technical body [of the KNU] that deals with conservation issues”.

After putting this to rest, Ta Thoo then goes on to explain a little more about their current big conservation project in the Papun hills, the Salween Peace Park. Looking up from his computer screen again after furiously typing up, he begins by telling me how the first seeds of the Peace Park were sowed in 2015 when they “started establishing wildlife sanctuaries, and began to think bigger”. They were, he tells me, searching for a way to join up all their smaller conservation and development projects in this area with their work protecting and promoting local *kaw* governance systems. At this point I had only heard of this term in passing, so I ask him what exactly they mean when they talk of “*kaw* governance”. He patiently explains that this term is wider than simply different parcels of land used for shifting cultivation (*hku*), and rather is “part of Karen tradition” and of “traditional land practices”. I return his gaze, eyebrows raised, and ask, “doesn’t the word *kaw* simply mean land or earth more generally?” However, Ta Thoo quickly looks down again and appears to be engrossed in typing something on his computer, so James fills in the blanks. He explains that *kaw* can indeed connote “land” or “nation” as in *Kaw Thoo Lei*, or Karen land (literally, the land of the Thoo Lei flower)⁶³ or in *Kaw P’Yaw*, the land of the Burman or Burma/Myanmar. But, he adds, Karen people in Mutraw also use this word when they talk about their “customary land rights and practices”.



As we saw in chapter three, I was later able to fill in many of the blanks in regard to what the notion of *kaw* entails. From my time in and around Ta K’Thwee Duh I learnt that, much as Ta Thoo stressed, village-*kaw* are not simply the usufruct rights to *hku*, or swidden patches that are passed down from the first person that comes into contact and makes a pact with the spectral owners of this place. Each village-*kaw* is a patchwork of these *hku*, and paddy fields, gardens, and orchards held, at least

⁶³ Or in one more fanciful translation, allegedly originating from the General we met in the previous chapter, “the land without evil” (Rogers 2004).

nominally, by one particular household, as well as common forests, rivers, lakes, mountains, and *ta thoo ta pgho/hsoo* or potent/strong places. Moreover, as I have shown, both household and common lands remain under a form of encompassed ownership, ultimately belonging to the spectral owner of this whole territory, the *kaw k'sah*, the “owner/lord of the earth”. Thus, in village-*kaw* practices, land is not so much common as much as that people may only (in most cases) borrow it for a short period of time from its spectral owners, for cultivation for instance, with the obligation that they return it afterwards. This patchwork is a “delineated space”, clearly demarcated verbally in a form of “prose map” or “terrier” (Scott 1998, 45) rather than by conventional modes of cartography. As such, this particular rise in the path or that prominent stone are used to mark the borders between each village-*kaw*. Moreover, village-*kaw* land possession practices are deeply entangled with political affairs, each village-*kaw* having its own discrete set of practices and rules, often encoded and transmitted in the form of *ta du ta htu*, or taboos. In this way, as we saw in chapter three, each *kaw* acted as a largely autonomous scale of political organisation, with its own set of laws/taboo.

Returning to my first conversation with Ta Thoo, it becomes clearer what he meant when he talked of “thinking bigger”. KESAN were working to stitch their smaller conservation projects in the Papun hills together with village-*kaw* land possession practices in order to compose the Salween Peace Park. A glance back at the map of this protected area illustrates how they envision this process taking shape. In this map (figure 5.1), we see how KESAN’s ongoing conservation projects to create wildlife sanctuaries (marked in blue), to reaffirm colonial era reserve forests (marked in dark green) and to establish locally managed community forests (marked in light green), that they have been labouring on for decades, are being sewn together with village-*kaw* or “customary territories” (marked in yellow) to compose the Salween Peace Park.

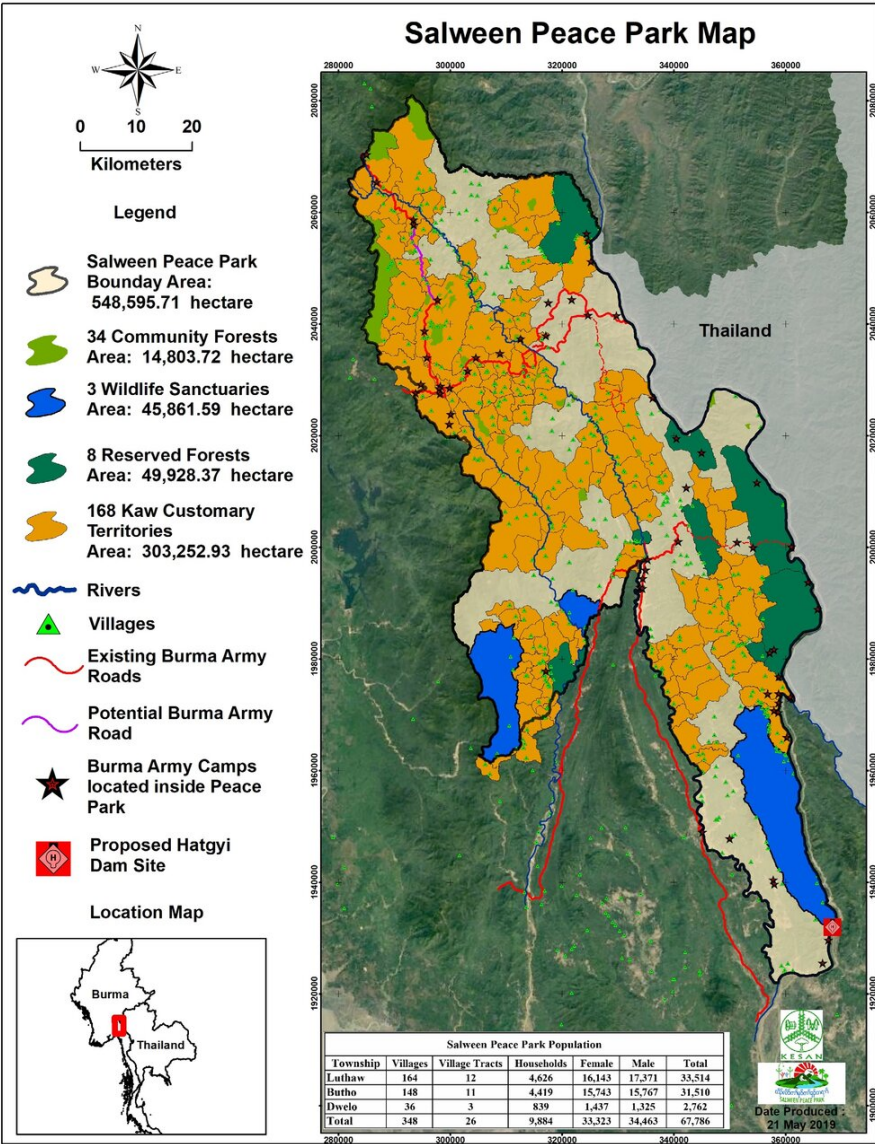


Figure 5.1 A map of the Salween Peace Park, per 21st May 2019

At its heart, the Salween Peace Park, much like each village-*kaw*, is itself a patchwork: “customary territories”, i.e. village and associated practices, are interstitched with KESAN’s ongoing conservation projects such as the establishing of wildlife sanctuaries. Thus, “thinking bigger” for these activists entailed working to pull

together this patchwork of different lands so that it may act as a continuous, indigenous-run protected area, 5,485.95 square kilometres across. For scale, this makes the Salween Peace Park, by land mass, slightly larger than the nation of Brunei and twice the size of Luxembourg. In a similar manner to the countermovements in the south of the country, that I sketched out in the previous chapter, this protected area along the Salween River strives to push back against growing Ceasefire Territorialisation. Yet, in thinking bigger, the Salween Peace Park attempts to effect this pushback by “adapting”, that is to say translating, and also rescaling and mapping, indigenous practices such as these village-*kaw* lands. In the process, these activists are attempting to build peace by prefiguring alternative modes of federalism on the ground that build on these indigenous land possession practices. The centrality of indigenous land possession practices in the establishing of the Salween Peace Park becomes particularly salient in its the official charter.

As the introduction of the Salween Peace Park Charter reads, “[t]he Salween Peace Park is a grassroots, people-centred alternative to the previous Myanmar government and foreign companies’ plans for ecologically destructive and socially inequitable development in the Salween River basin”. To this end, “the charter finds its inspiration in the core of the indigenous Karen way of life, namely a worldview that sees land, forests, waters, and people, as inseparable [...] [T]he charter represents an adaption of the beliefs and values that the indigenous Karen people have held for generations to a more structured system of governance and management” (SPP Charter 2018, 4).⁶⁴

Propagating a legal niche

At the crack of dawn on Christmas Eve 2016, I joined the lion’s share of the KESAN staff from their Chiang Mai office, along with several of their non-Karen consultants and interns, on the long car-, boat- and tractor-ride to the administrative capital of the KNU’s Mutraw district in Northern Karen State, to attend a public consultation meeting for the Salween Peace Park. Following the official opening of the public

⁶⁴ A copy of this charter can be downloaded here: <http://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SPP-Charter-Eng.pdf>

consultation meeting, the draft charter of the Salween Peace Park was read aloud, in full, to the crowd assembled in the grand meeting hall at the centre of the administrative capital. It was read out in its entirety to participants who had travelled far and wide from nearly all the areas that were to fall inside the Salween Peace Park, so that everyone in attendance, including those who could not read, would be able to comment on and suggest amendments to this document before it was finalised. Following this consultation meeting, the charter was revised again (this was the second of three consultation meetings), and the final document was later presented at a series of meetings followed by elections, held at the seat of each village tract, throughout 2018. At each of these elections, representatives from each community that would become part of the Peace Park, 75.1 percent of the voting-age population, voted in favour of endorsing this charter. Thus, on 18th December of the same year the Salween Peace Park was officially established, becoming a legal entity in KNU law (albeit, this status was less clear in Myanmar state law) (KESAN 2019).

Chartering a Course to Peace

Reading this over forty-page-long document aloud, with continual breaks for questions and comments, was a laborious and time-consuming process. As I stood just outside the grand meeting hall listening in, I noticed how many of the participants' patience quickly wore thin, leading them to slope off looking for food, tobacco, betel, a place to snooze, or all of the above. But listening in we hear how the Charter opens with a "preamble/vision" boldly proclaiming:

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

Charter of the Salween Peace Park (2018, 6)

Following this nod to the preamble to the United States Constitution, the Charter goes on to explicitly lay out that “the legitimacy of governance shall be determined collectively by the people of the Salween Peace Park” and “not disproportionately influenced or unilaterally determined by the KNU Mutraw District government or the Salween Park governing committee” (Section 2.2, Article 20). Moreover, as indigenous people, the residents of the Salween Peace Park “have the right to manage and govern their own lands and the natural resources above and below the ground that are inalienably part of Indigenous territory,” such that “customary rights to ancestral domain take precedence over governance systems that have excluded the voices and perspectives of indigenous Karen people” (Section 2.1, Article 14). Along these lines, the general thrust of this Charter is that the Peace Park shall “devolve management responsibilities to decentralised committees that will be responsible for the day-to-day management of the collective and public affairs of the Salween Peace Park at the village level” (Section 2.3, Article 44).

As we read on we find that, in the final chapter on land and land ownership, it becomes clearer that the terms used throughout, such as “decentralised committees”, “Indigenous territory” and “ancestral domain”, (in most cases) are differing ways of referring to the practices and cosmologies related to *-kaw* lands around each village that I explored in chapters two and three. As Article 107 (Section 5.1) states, “[t]he land in the Salween Peace Park that is organized under the Indigenous *kaw* system shall be considered as land owned by the villages or communities that forms the *kaw*”. Consequently, while not stated explicitly, it becomes evident that village-*kaw*, and the particular mode of encompassed ownership and spectral sovereignty that are implicated in them, are not only “an integral part of Indigenous Karen culture” (Section 5.2, Article 114), but also integral to the workings of the Salween Peace Park as a whole. These village-*kaw* lands, the “*kaw* customary lands” marked in orange in the above map, act as the backbone of the Salween Peace Park, “responsible for day-to-day management”, which “take precedence” over other forms of governance. In effect, much like similar movements, the Charter translates indigenous practices and cosmologies to forms that are more “legible” to both states and international

conservation groups. What is more, in the Charter, this translation also involves the rescaling of indigenous practices into policy.

One practical example in the text of how practices and cosmologies are being translated and rescaled to policy comes in the section addressing access and use of, that is to say relationships with, forests (Section 4.3). Here the Charter dictates that “[t]he Integrity of sacred forest sites is inviolable, and people of the Salween Peace Park, regardless of faith or ancestral background, shall respect existing customary rules and regulations against access and use” (Section 4.3, Article 83). In declaring the inviolability of such “sacred forest sites”, the authors of the text appear to intimate patches of the landscape that, as I demonstrate in chapter two, are regularly referred to in the Papun hills as *ta thoo ta pg̃ho* or simply *hsoo*, “potent” or “strong”. Potent places such as the *loh*, the “dominion of the dead” (glossed as “spirit dwelling sites” in the Charter, p. 36), and *Hpu Noh Noh Deh* or “the path that drinks your blood” are, as I have argued, wedded to day-to-day practices of treating the landscape as possessed, as both occupied and owned by a plethora of spectral presences. Consequently, as I have shown in chapter two, people refrain from clearing patches of forest, and sometimes even attempt to avoid walking through such potent places, out of fears they might vex its spectral owner/s. Knowledge of these places is passed not only via oral histories and *hta* (dramatic poems) but also through a robust set of *ta du ta htu*, or orally transmitted taboos. The Charter then translates these *ta du ta htu*, into “customary rules and regulations” that it demands inhabitants of the Peace Park “shall respect”. Either this or local rules and regulations shall be determined “with respect to indigenous Karen customs and practices”, i.e. *ta du ta htu* (Article 108).

In this manner, as we have seen, the Charter explicitly states from the get-go that it “finds its inspiration in” and builds on “an adaption” of these indigenous practices and cosmologies, that it attempts to marshal into “a more structured system of governance and management”. In this sense, the Salween Peace Park bears a strong resemblance to the burgeoning movements in Tanintharyi. Both movements, as we saw in the previous chapter, translate indigenous practices in order to create counter-maps in order to attempt to push back against Ceasefire Territorialisation, and to re-possess the earth. As I have shown, this process of translation is a messy affair, guided

by a deeply pragmatic focus on making indigenous land possession practices legible to national and transnational actors in order to bolster their legitimacy. Moreover, in these “adaptions” we find that indigenous practices are not only translated but also rescaled in the process to transform them into “a more structured system”.

Through the mapping of indigenous practices of village-*kaw* onto the Salween Peace Park, both literally and into the Charter, these patches of land are not only made legible but also scalable. As Emily Hong has argued, in the process of writing village-*kaw* into law, these loosely delineated patches of land are “adapted”, that is to say translated, into a “scalar unit” that can encompass one to multiple villages (2017, 231), becoming a legible and scalable unit of local governance. Moreover, exploring the newest permutation of the KNU’s Land Law (that I address in the next section) she demonstrates how, in rescaling village-*kaw* to a unit of local governance, the authors of these laws simultaneously make citations to legal documents on the global scale such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fishers and Forests (often referred to as FAO tenure guideline), in order to bolster their legitimacy (Hong 2017, 233). The Charter of the Salween Peace Park similarly relies on the citation not only to other foundational documents such as the United States Constitution, but also constantly refers back to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – especially to Article 3 on indigenous peoples’ “right to self-determination” (UN 2007). As the introduction proclaims, “the Charter *enshrines the right* of the indigenous Karen people to self-determination” (SPP Charter 2018, 4; my emphasis). Thus, I follow Hong in understanding the Salween Peace Park not as an either top-down or bottom-up project, but rather as a form of “scalar politics” where “the scale of struggle and the struggle over scale are two sides of the same coin” (N. Smith 1992, 74). In grasping the work of these activists as a form of scalar politics, our attention is drawn to the strategic deployments of scale that are constantly sedimented but also open for transformation, as they are negotiated, being “bent” and “jumped” (Hong 2017, 229; MacKinnon 2011; N. Brenner 2001; N. Smith 1992). However, in the context of this thesis I prefer to talk of this process of continual negotiation by these activists less as what Neil Smith terms as a “struggle over scale” (1992, 74), but rather a pragmatic and

playful “messing with scale” to suit the situation at hand, in ways that tend to unsettle and subvert these scales.

From this short review it follows that, in accordance with the Charter, much of the land that falls within the Salween Peace Park is grasped as owned and controlled first and foremost by the people of the given village-*kaw*, who determine local rules and regulations of land tenure or land possession. However, retuning to chapters two and three, we find that indigenous modes of ownership and sovereignty complicate this picture somewhat. As we have seen, ownership/possession of the earth is always nesting, such that all ownership and sovereignty ultimately rests in the hands of the *k'sah* and other spectral presences in these possessed landscapes. Humans, while referred to as the “owners” of a certain patch of earth, in truth only borrow it from its spectral owners with a solemn promise to return it afterwards. Moreover, local rules and regulations, i.e. *ta du ta htu*, are “determined” by humans in relation to the appetites and gripes of their spectral sovereigns. Thus, much as we saw was the case in the countermovements in the Tanintharyi region, the translation and rescaling of village-*kaw* carried throughout the Charter follows these activists’ pragmatic politics. They can be seen as a practical way to simultaneously bolster legitimacy through appealing to different scales, while also unsettling and subverting these scales in the process. Moreover, through these messy translations and messing with scales, these activists are not only oriented towards countering the Myanmar state and affiliated investors but also prefiguring new scales and new modes of politics that embody a form of self-determination (Hong 2017, 233–35).

Yet, as Ta Thoo and many of the other activists continued to stress to me, the Charter and the Salween Peace Park itself did not materialise out of thin air. Both this legal document and the indigenous-run protected area more generally cannot and should not be considered separately from the several decades of activism KESAN has put into supporting Karen communities in both sustaining themselves and protecting their environments, and in their continued advocacy for these communities, lobbying the KNU to build “good governance”. The Peace Park project emerges out of and builds upon a great deal of work in the background by KESAN propagating a niche within the KNU legal system so that this large-scale conservation project could take

root. This legal niche was engendered through lobbying the KNU hard both to shape land laws and to begin awarding collective land titles to the village-*kaw* lands, so that the Salween Peace Park could eventually blossom.

Lobbying and Land Laws

As I spent more time with these Karen activists in Chiang Mai and began to glean a deeper understanding of the ways they operate, it became apparent that a great deal of their efforts had been invested in lobbying the KNU's Forestry Department.

Predominantly this lobbying was done through the KNU's Central Land Committee, where several KESAN staff members hold significant sway. This advocacy has been foundational in the establishing of the Salween Peace Park. One of the first fruits of these labours came in the current Land Policy that was officially approved by the KNU's highest legal body, the Executive Committee, in December 2015.

The current KNU Land Policy came about through many years of hard graft, petitioning government members and working closely with external activists and academics. One effect of this was that most of the prominent KESAN staff were largely fluent not only in the technical terminology, but also the academic terminology and current debates. Consequently, KESAN staff were then able to bring their combined engagements with activists, academics and Non-Government Organisations such as the Transnational Institute (TNI) to bear on the reworking of Land Policy, these engagements leaving deep impressions on the final document. These impressions can be detected, for example, in how ownership is dealt with in the newest iteration of the Land Policy, which previous versions had largely attempted to skirt around. Take the first Land Policy from 1974. Here the KNU decrees that "the land must be in our hands". The 2005 update on this policy, on the other hand, proclaims "land to the native people". What we find is that, in the 1974 version, it is not clear who the possessive determiner "our" refers to: the policy's authors (i.e. KNU P'Doh) or the indigenous people themselves? And, in the 2005 update, it remains opaque as to what specific rights are implied in stating that the land is "to" the indigenous people: to use, to borrow, to buy? As such, it is striking to find that in the newest iteration from 2015, a document strongly shaped by the influence of KESAN

and their external activist-academic interlocutors, it places ownership firmly at the centre.

The current Land Policy opens by proclaiming “people are [the] owner[s] of the land [sic]” (p.2).⁶⁵ Delving deeper into this document it quickly becomes apparent that this engagement with issues of ownership goes far beyond window-dressing. In the following lines this document goes on to state that since “land policies are never neutral” and as such “necessarily transform the status quo”, it is essential to take a point of departure in “socially-legitimate customary occupation and use right”. This point is then repeated and reinforced throughout the rest of this document. In this way, the 2015 Land Policy represents one of the first concerted efforts to translate and rescale ongoing land possession practices, that is to say practices and cosmologies surrounding village-*kaw*, into official KNU policy and law. Concurrently, it is in the current land policy that KESAN’s twin priorities of environmental conservation and protection of customary rights and practices first become explicitly entwined as their labours to “think bigger” have begun to bear fruit. The deep imprint of KESAN’s advocacy becomes clearer as we read on in this KNU policy document.

In Article 3.6 on “KNU Authorities-Managed Public Purpose Land”, for example, there is a specific article on “Reserve Land” (Article 3.6.2), that effectively enshrines “Wildlife Protected Areas”, “Reserved Forests” and “National Park Areas” into KNU law. This article then dictates that these categories of land can only be established by Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) together with the “customary authorities”. As I later learnt from KESAN staff, it was the wording of this paragraph that helped sway the KNU Executive Committee to accede to accept the Salween Peace Park as official KNU policy. The Peace Park in effect falls into the category of “National Park”, established with clear FPIC, together with the “customary authorities”.

Simultaneously, Article 3.3 refers directly to “*Kaw*’ lands” effectively also bringing indigenous land possession practices into the KNU legal fold. This article states:

⁶⁵ A copy of the 2015 policy can be downloaded here: https://www.tni.org/files/article-downloads/knu_land_policy_eng.pdf

Land, forests, fisheries, water and other related natural resources have social, cultural, spiritual, economic, environmental and political value to indigenous peoples and other communities with Kaw (customary tenure) systems. KNU Authorities must recognize, respect and always take into account these non-monetized values for people and village communities with Kaw.

(KNU Land Policy 2015 Article 3.3.1)

Through the specific wording of this article, the KNU becomes legally obligated not only to recognise village-*kaw* land possession and political-ethical practices in the Papun hills but, in certain situations, to treat them as “socially-legitimate” modes of ownership and governance. As a consequence, the wording of the Charter becomes largely a restatement of existing KNU policy. What I find particularly compelling about this article is that there is a broad consensus among the activists, indigenous people, and academics alike that village-*kaw*, as they are conceived here – as modes of land possession and as political-ethical system – are little known, let alone a part of day-to-day practices, beyond the Papun hills. This would seem to suggest that this particular section of the Land Policy was penned with this particular stretch along the Salween River, or perhaps even with a notion of the Salween Peace Park itself, in mind. Whether this was simply happenstance or a result of careful planning by KESAN is, however, perhaps of lesser importance than the effect the new land policy has had. The launching of this land policy and its accession to KNU law helped pave the way for the Salween Peace Park, as a “national park” composed of village-*kaw* that are treated as “socially-legitimate” modes of ownership and governance.

Yet, while the 2015 Land Law may have been one of the first of KESAN’s labours of “thinking bigger” that bore fruit, it was far from the last. Rather than resting on their laurels, these Chiang Mai based activists wasted no time in using the new Land Law as a wedge, to slowly open up a gap in KNU policy and law for the Salween Peace Park to take root. The next step in thinking bigger, that I myself witnessed, came two years later in 2017.

Making collective Land Titles a Reality

As we saw in chapter one, the blurb on the KNU's official website proclaims that their policy "is National Democracy. It fully recognises and encourages private ownership".⁶⁶ Accordingly, the KNU has long issued land titles to individual household plots and paddy fields, facilitating the transfer and, indeed, sale of land. We saw the lineaments of this policy in chapter three where, as people in the Papun hills have begun to establish their own paddy fields and apply for titles to them, local land possession practices such as ephemeral ownership are slowly being stretched close to breaking point. In response to these transformations, from what I was able to glean from my conversations with KESAN staff, they and other activists have been working behind the scenes to induce the KFD into also issuing collective land titles, in the form of Community Forest land deeds (the light green patches on the above map of the Peace Park). Community Forest land titles recognise the collective tenure of a local community to a demarcated area, usually of primary or secondary forest. As the name suggests, Community Forests entail that the communities themselves are given a large degree of latitude to formulate the day-to-day rules and regulations on access and use of these areas, and the enforcement of these. Moreover, as a result of prolonged lobbying to write Community Forests into both KNU Land and Forestry Policy, the rules and regulations laid down by the community that holds a collective title to this land are both semi-autonomous of, and have some legal backing from local KNU and KFD authorities. However, as I was to learn, the latitude and autonomy granted to the title holders over these demarcated areas was far from absolute.

During an interview I conducted with the head of the Karen Forestry Department in the Mutraw district, Saw Duh (who insisted he was quite okay to talk despite still being bed-bound and shivering, but also in his office), he quickly made it clear to me that the Community Forest land title offers the holders little authority beyond day-to-day governance of these areas. As he patiently explained, between rattling coughs, these collective land title give villages the right to be heard in cases where this land is, for example, to be re-allocated by the KNU for "development" projects such as mineral or timber extraction. This follows the Land Policy that stipulates that any such

⁶⁶ See: <https://www.knuhq.org/public/en/about/background>

undertaking must follow Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) from the affected communities. Saw Duh added, however, that the local KFD maintains overall sovereignty of these Community Forests and, as such, may still ultimately claim the land, even if the residents refuse, in certain circumstances. What is more, villagers are prohibited from harvesting teak and other valuable wood without prior permission from the KFD (as also stipulated in Article 3.7.9 in the current KNU Land Policy). It would appear that the slogan “people are owner of the land” is not without a few provisos. These caveats aside, as we see in the above map, as of 21st May 2019, thirty-four community forests had been demarcated, mapped, and registered in KFD’s ledgers inside the borders of the Peace Park. As such, local communities held at least 14,803 hectares, or 148 km² of land under collective tenure, having a great deal of autonomy in governing the day-to-day affairs of these lands. However, when I asked Saw Duh what happens to Community Forests that have already been awarded titles after the village-*kaw* titles are first rolled out, after a moment to think, he replied that the Community Forest land titles would effectively become obsolete. Due to their size and flexibility, village-*kaw* titles not only build on community forests but, in many cases, also supersede and indeed encompass them.

As I had heard from KESAN activists in Chiang Mai, at the beginning of 2017 the KNU had eventually acceded to extend collective land titles to village-*kaw* lands, with the stipulation that this begins tentatively with a “test phase”. This official decision allowed KESAN, together with the Karen Forestry Department (KFD) and Karen Agriculture Department (KAD), to continue and intensify their ongoing efforts to demarcate each village-*kaw* falling within the limits of the Salween Peace Park. The process of demarcations (that I will go into in more detail in the following chapter) requires careful and protracted collaboration with the inhabitants of each village-*kaw*. To achieve this, KESAN build on the deep ties and trust they have forged with many communities across the Papun hills over many years of extensive activist work. Elders, activists, and experts were then brought together with GPS technology to translate and map these indeterminate practices into a discrete demarcated area. Following the demarcation and mapping of each village-*kaw* lands, with the official go-ahead from the KNU, the next step was for the residents of each village-*kaw* be to be awarded

with titles to these lands. This new form of tenure, much like Community Forests, entails collective legal rights over the land, but covers not only forest but also fallow fields, swidden patches, rivers, lakes, mountains – indeed all territory within these borders that is not individually held. At the time of writing this work is still ongoing and, to my knowledge, no *kaw* land titles have yet been issued. Yet, as both the Head of Forestry in Mutraw and Doh K’Oh clarified, this had the added effect of rendering Community Forest titles somewhat obsolete. Under a *kaw* land tenure title the local community themselves can dictate the local rules and regulations, including the allocation of conservation areas such as community forests.

Thus, KESAN’s protracted and intensive activism and advocacy have finally culminated in a situation in which, in one fell swoop, each of these splashes of colour marked on the Salween Peace Park map may soon go from purely illustrative to demonstrative of the *de facto* political organisation of this area. Each of these different categories of land, the deep green and light blue of reserve forests and wildlife sanctuaries, and the light green and yellow of community forests and village-*kaw* or “customary territories”, have been gently shepherded into KNU law, in part, through the diligent efforts of KESAN.

However, as I following Hong (2017) have argued, rather than grasping this activism and advocacy as either top-down policy making, or grass-roots bottom-up pressure, it emerges from the pragmatic politics of messy translations and constant messing with scales. The KESAN simultaneously translate and rescale indigenous practices, KNU law, and global resolutions, bringing them to bear upon one another to garner legitimacy for this project. As such, these different forms of activism and advocacy appear to have been directed towards the same goal of propagating a legal niche in the KNU, and a physical space in the Papun hills, in which the Salween Peace Park could take root and flourish.

What is more, in bringing together these different scales – of indigenous land possession practices, KNU policy, and the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People – KESAN scalar politics (N. Smith 1992; Moore 2008; MacKinnon 2011) mess with scale, and in the process, unsettle and subvert them. As becomes clear in the opening pages of the Charter, these processes aim “in the spirit of self-determination”

to open up a space (or indeed “territory” as the Charter declares) in which the indigenous people themselves may “manage and govern their natural resources and lands” (SPP Charter 2018, 3–4). These struggles to create a niche in KNU law and a space for self-determination to flourish in the Papun hills became most evident on one of my last days in Chiang Mai.

The same day that I met Saw Jonny for the last time at the KESAN main office, I also learnt that one of the final pieces of KESAN’s ongoing struggle to create “good governance” and to propagate a niche that would allow the Salween Peace Park to flourish had fallen into place. Not long after Saw Jonny abruptly disappeared again, Doh K’Oh turned to me and rather casually informed me that, during the last meeting convened by the KNU’s Executive Committee, the Salween Peace Park had officially been accepted into the KNU legal fold as official policy. Much as Ta Thoo had predicted in our first meeting almost a year prior, by appealing to KFD’s policy of Protective Landscapes and the Land Policy (especially Article 3.6.2 on reserve land), this rather “wild idea” (as we shall see Doh K’Oh referred to it) of an indigenously managed decentralised Peace Park had now officially acceded to mainstream KNU policy, and had become part and parcel of their continued struggle for autonomy. But again, as Ta Thoo had continuously stressed, the Peace Park itself was by no means the end goal of KESAN’s combined labours. They continued to “think bigger”. This is intimated in the name of the project itself, of a Peace Park. As I began to explore what these activists meant in calling this protected area a Peace Park, I began to grasp that they were thinking very big indeed. These moves gesture towards a prefigurative politics that goes beyond both conservation and protective countermovements.

That Which We Call Conservation: What is in a name?

In my initial conversations with KESAN staff and their non-Karen consultants/interns about the ideas underpinning the Salween Peace Park I constantly struggled to align their ideas with descriptions of Peace Parks in other places around the world I had read up on. This seeming incongruity left me to ponder, what exactly are KESAN implying in choosing to name this indigenous-run protected area a “Peace Park”? As I wrestled with this question it began to dawn on me that it is the very indeterminacy

and playfulness of how they use this term that was central to the political efficacy of this protected area more generally. It was a conversation with the director of KESAN that first got me thinking along these lines.

I met the director for the first time only after several visits to KESAN's main office in Chiang Mai. He also sports a long ponytail, his nearly reaching all the way down his back, and thin metal framed glasses that keep slipping down his nose as he speaks so that he is constantly pushing them up again with his index finger. After introducing himself he begins by explaining how they had not always envisioned the protected area along the Salween basin as a Peace Park. He tells me how, as Ta Thoo had mentioned earlier, when they first began brainstorming how to stitch all their ongoing conservation work to their work protecting and promoting village-*kaw* to compose a wider protected area, they leaned heavily on the KNU's Forest Policy, and the IUCN's terminology, labelling it a "Protected Landscape". However, they soon felt that such terminology was too constricting for their means. While, as stated on the IUCN's home page, the category of Protected Landscapes expressly aims to "protect and sustain important landscapes/seascapes and the associated nature conservation and other values created by interactions with humans through traditional management practices,"⁶⁷ there is no provision for how these interactions might be protected and sustained in (former) warzones that remain heavily militarised, such as the Papun hills. As a result, the activists began looking more into the notion of a Peace Park. However, I quickly learnt that the story as to how the Salween Peace Park was conceived was constantly being reworked.

A few weeks after meeting the director, I joined the KESAN staff and their non-Karen consultants and interns for the second consultation meeting for the Salween Peace Park at the administrative capital of Mutraw. During the opening speech on the first day of the consultation meeting I found how, much like other oral histories I heard in Ta K'Thwee Duh, the director reworked the tale of the Peace Park's formation to better fit this particular audience and the situation at hand. In this version of the events he explained to the assembled crowd that KESAN had first

⁶⁷ See <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-areas-categories/category-v-protected-landscapes/seascape>

conceptualised this conservation area as kind of Wilderness (category Ib in IUCN's classification of protected areas) but, for obvious reasons, quickly found this characterisation to be a poor fit and, eventually, settled on the notion of a Peace Park. They then translated Peace Park into Sgaw Karen as Ta Mu Ta Hku K'Ruh (literally: "pleasant-and-cool/peace garden"). However, as the director then adds, Karen people often still come up to him and say, "we hear that you are building a flower garden". To this he replies, "I don't know where this rumour is coming from," followed by a hearty belly laugh.

This said, as we saw, in rendering Peace Park to Sgaw Karen, the literal translation becomes "pleasant-and-cool/peace garden". The last particle, *k'ruh*, usually denotes the patch of land around a house where flowers and fruit trees are planted, or to an allotment close by the house where perennial fruits and vegetables for household consumption are grown: not unlike a flower garden. When, some time later, I enquire about this lexical slippage, the director laughingly concedes that indeed it is a slightly unfortunate translation, but laments that they have not been able to find a Karen term that better encapsulates the aspirations and ideals of this project. However, as de la Cadena, paraphrasing Benjamin, states: "translations are misunderstandings that can be productive" (2015, 27). These lexical slippages might be best grasped less as errors, than as part and parcel of KESAN's pragmatic politics that aim to cultivate this indeterminacy as they play with scales in their efforts to evoke the "spirit of self-determination". This became most apparent when the director made public speeches about the Salween Peace Park.

Being the public face of KESAN with several decades of public speaking under his belt, the director had developed a well-rehearsed presentation of the Salween Peace Park, in both Karen and English, that appealed to broad audiences. Each time I have heard him speak about this conservation zone he followed a similar routine that culminates in reeling off the three core aspirations of this Peace Park. While in English he talks of these aspirations as "the three pillars" the Peace Park rests upon, in Sgaw Karen he evokes a more poetic image. Holding up the first two fingers and thumb of his left hand to form triangle, he talks to the crowd of these aspirations as the "hearthstones" that prop up this protected area. The three "hearthstones", that are

also detailed in the flyer for the Peace Park,⁶⁸ are: environmental integrity, cultural survival, and peace and self-determination. While the first two hearthstones, to protect biodiversity and to protect indigenous peoples' culture and livelihoods, are not entirely unexpected aspirations for a project led by a network of ecological and indigenous activist groups to aspire to, the final stone gestures towards aspirations far beyond the two former ones.

The first two aspirations of the Salween Peace Park taken on their own gesture towards a protected area that resonates strongly with the IUCN's category of a "protected landscape", albeit a rather radical, bottom-up indigenous-run vision of this category. The third aspiration, however, by ingeniously bundling self-determination together with peace, translates and rescales the two former aspirations, and the whole protected area itself in the process. As we shall see, it is this third aspiration that, for the activists, make this a Peace Park. From this angle, we begin to get a better handle on what KESAN implied when deploying the term Peace Park to describe this protected area. Yet, as I show below, this is a rather unorthodox angle on the notion of Peace Parks as they have been conceived elsewhere.

"Parks for Peace"

As I began this section by explaining, I struggled at first to ascertain exactly what KESAN meant when they described this protected area as a "Peace Park". From my readings on the subject I had learnt that Werner Myburgh, CEO of the Peace Parks Foundation, defines Peace Parks, or "Transfrontier conservation areas", as a "way to 'link' those protected areas that are divided by an international boundary" (cited in Büscher 2013, 27). Indeed, as the then director-general of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) puts it, these "transboundary protected areas" should "involve a degree of cooperation across one or more boundaries, since plants and animals clearly do not recognise artificial boundaries" (Marton-LaFevre 2007, xiii). Moreover, the South African environmental minister Pallo Jordan reiterated in his opening address to the IUCN meeting on *Parks for Peace* in 1997, "the earth's

⁶⁸ A copy can be downloaded here: <http://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Salween-Peace-Park-Flyer-Updated-Eng.pdf>

environment is the common property of all humanity and creation, and what takes place in one country affects not only its neighbours, but many others well beyond its borders” (ibid, xiv).

In these various statements and in academic literature on these “transfrontier conservation areas” it becomes evident that the guiding principle of the growing global Peace Park initiative is that peace between nations, ethnic groups, armies and people can be forged through the practice of cooperating to conserve a protected area that straddles a boundary they share (Büscher 2013; Ali et al. 2007). However, when we bring this literature to bear on the Salween Peace Park project it quickly becomes clear that it straddled no borders. The entirety of what was to become the Salween Peace Park rests within the borders of what the KNU claims as its Mutraw district and the KNLA’s 5th brigade (*thu kay yeh*), and is, on the whole, solely either under their jurisdiction (albeit in name only in certain areas as we saw in chapter three). In fact, the borders of this protected area, in its current form at least, align far closer with the political-economic boundaries of the KNU’s Mutraw district, than with the ecological boundaries of the Salween River basin. To this end, the extent of cooperation involved in the Salween Peace Park is restricted to that between the different townships, regions, and political departments of the Mutraw division of the KNU, the KNLA, and the inhabitants of these highlands. In hindsight rather hard-headedly, I took up this point already on my first visit to the KESAN office in Chiang Mai:

As Ta Thoo continues to hammer away at the keys of his computer, it is James who begins addressing my question as to how the Salween Peace Park relates to “standard” notions of Peace Parks as “transboundary protected areas”. He starts by making it clear that this seeming incongruence is, of course, by no means new information to them. “But in any case”, he adds a little stiffly, what I am talking about are a form of “International Peace Parks”, while the project they are working on in the Mutraw district is a “National Peace Park”. After quickly picking up that I am not entirely satisfied with this explanation he changes tack, softens his tone and explains that in truth “you have to do what works best”. As I got to know these activists better, I met with this pragmatic outlook time and time again.

The director, for example, who first cooked up the idea of the Salween Peace Park and has been championing it ever since,⁶⁹ has his own way of explaining this seeming incongruity to standard understandings of Peace Parks. He often tells how he and some of the other activists had originally envisioned that the Salween Peace Park would straddle this great river in linking this conservation zone to the current Salawin National Park on the eastern bank, in Thailand.⁷⁰ From here they hoped to continue expanding the Peace Park outwards, eventually to cover the entire Salween basin, from its headwaters on the Tibetan Plateau to its mouth in the Gulf of Martaban. However, given the current political climate, where the Thai government continues to forge ever closer links with their Myanmar counterparts following their “battlefields to marketplaces” strategy that began in the late 80s (cf. Magee and Kelley 2012, 115; D. Brenner 2019, 40–46) and the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) on their shared border (e.g. Campbell 2018; Aung 2018), it soon became evident that a cross-border conservation zone was not (yet) feasible. As a result, they decided to begin small, first ploughing ahead in Mutraw where they had the support of the KNU and, with time, slowly expanding this conservation zone into areas not held by the KNU when, or indeed if, the political climate should shift. Much the same was the case on the west bank of the Salween. As the peace process continues to slowly unravel, and as the ceasefire is constantly punctuated by armed scuffles and land grabs, these activists hold out little hope that the Myanmar state government will cooperate on this conservation project any time soon. In response, they often talked of trying to “jump over”, to leap-frog the Myanmar state “for now”, and seek legitimacy for their project from the wider international community. Almost as if to confirm this, the director ended our first conversation by apologising that he had to dash off home and pack. He had to catch a flight to Cancun in Mexico in a few hours where he was to attend the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 13)⁷¹ in a panel on Biological Diversity and Conservation Monitoring.

⁶⁹ Although in KNLA company he regularly claims that the second in command of the KNLA and de facto leader of the Mutraw district, Baw Kyaw Heh, first came up with the idea after visiting the Salawin National Park on the Thai side of the river.

⁷⁰ Or, in iteration for the KNLA crowd, it was Baw Kyaw Heh who first envisioned this, then tasked KESAN with realising his vision.

⁷¹ More information about this conference can be found here: <https://whc.unesco.org/fr/actualites/1601>



In this conversation it becomes clearer how KESAN cultivate and draw on these productive misunderstandings (de la Cadena 2015, 27) resulting from messy translations as a form of practical politics. The descriptor “Peace Park” translates differently for different actors in productive ways. For many Sgaw Karen speakers, as we saw, Peace Park as *ta mu ta hku k’ru* connotes a “flower/peace garden”. These connotations evoke notions of a shared space. Moreover, as I discuss below, a “peace garden” bears with it positive connotations of a space for growing new ideas. As it so happens, both these connotations dovetail with several of KESAN’s central aims. For conservation organisations and other transnational groups, however, Peace Park implies a “Transfrontier conservation area”, bearing with it positive connotations of meeting global goals and targets on the protection of biodiversity and participation. While these implications do not fit perfectly to the vision of the Salween Peace Park in its entirety, it captures many aspects, and acts as a deferred future goal. As such, is it these misunderstandings of this “park for peace”, including my own, that allow KESAN to pitch the notion of the Salween Peace Park to different actors and evoke different connotations. These messy translations in turn played into KESAN’s ongoing scalar politics where they strategically deployed scale (Hong 2017, 229; MacKinnon 2011, 29).

What is more, we see how these activists were not only deploying scale but constantly “jumping over” the national scale. In the face of both resistance and silence from the Myanmar government, the activists appear to be, as geographers term, “jumping scale” (Neumann 2009; N. Brenner 2001; MacKinnon 2011). Not long after I first learnt of this pragmatic politics constantly trying to “jump over” a reticent Myanmar state the director illustrated it in practice. While I had heard from Ta Thoo how KESAN had also been deeply engaged in a central government-led initiative in 2014 to revise national land laws (i.e. the VFV Land Law and Farmland Law), other than a few concessions such as a partial recognition of customary lands, these laws continue to promote widespread land grabs and dispossession (see also, Hong 2017, 231–33). Following these frustrated engagements with the central government, the director aimed to “jump over” them to negotiate directly with the UN, hedging the

Peace Park in global concerns for biodiversity loss and indigenous effort to prevent this. In this messing with scales KESAN was also effectively unsettling and remaking notions of how these “parks for peace” can be conceived and practiced. As I explore in the next section, the Salween Peace Park outstrips notions of both “Transfrontier conservation areas” and countermovements prefiguring “a grassroots, people-centred alternative” (SPP Charter 2018, 4).

“Real Federal Solutions”: The Peace Park as a Patchwork

A different angle on what these activists were hoping to evoke in naming this conservation project a Peace Park began to become clearer as I attempted to compare it to the situation in Tanintharyi, that I touched upon in the previous chapter. An instance of this happened when, while talking to the director, I attempted to draw a parallel between the Salween Peace Park and TripNet’s work of counter-mapping their landscapes.

The director dutifully pointed out that Saw Jonny is an old and good friend of KESAN, but their two movements are of a fundamentally different kind. As he took pains to point out, what is absolutely pivotal about the Salween Peace Park is that it is part of KESAN’s concerted efforts, in close accordance with the KNU, to generate “real federal solutions” to ongoing peace-building efforts in these Karen areas. As such, in these efforts there must be a grain of self-determination. Upon making this point he appeared to arrive at the key message he wanted to convey to me, stressing “we shall achieve this [federalism] through strong governance, not by sharing power. In this way [by sharing power] we do not have the decision-making power, allowing them [the Myanmar government/Tatmadaw] to build dams and other projects on our land. What we need is action, not debates”.

In labouring this point the director demonstrates that the aspirations of the Salween Peace Park go beyond those of a Peace Park as they are conventionally conceived, gesturing towards a radically different way that Peace Parks and conservation more generally might be conceived and practiced. The vision of this large-scale conservation project along the Salween basin is intimately entangled with and cannot be understood as separate from the KNU’s seven-decade-long struggle for

greater autonomy. It was a month after this conversation with the director, during a long car ride back to Chiang Mai with Doh K'Oh, that the realisation of the ramifications of this entanglement slowly began dawning on me:

Some weeks after my first trip into the Papun hills in conjunction with the consultation meeting for the Salween Peace Park, the director had asked me to meet Doh K'Oh, one of KESAN's leading activists, to discuss my upcoming fieldwork across the border. As it transpired, Doh K'Oh was (nominally at least) on "holiday" in a Thai border town, visiting his wife and children – yet, still very much working. When I learnt that he was here to be with his family I tried to reschedule, only for him to insist, "it's fine, they are getting used to it by now". So, as his, understandably slightly exasperated, family sat at another table at a small café, I bought us all a bite to eat and Doh K'Oh discussed suitable villages. We attempted to find an area where "Karen animist traditions are still strong", as he put it, but where I would still be able to commute to-and-fro from, even during the height of the monsoon season when travel becomes challenging. We continued our conversation on the ride back home to Chiang Mai the next day in his slick black pick-up truck, but soon, the topic turned to politics.

After a brief silence he turns slightly in his seat to face me and says, "I do not know what federalism is". Initially, I am a little taken aback and perplexed by this statement, especially since it is coming from a person who works so explicitly on federal solutions to armed conflict. But, before I have time to comment, he presses on, explaining in an increasingly more animated fashion, how the Tatmadaw and transnational corporations are slowly "moving into areas and the war continues". Echoing a now familiar sentiment, he too explains how people are still steadily being displaced, even now that armed conflict has largely abated. As he exasperatedly exclaims, "refugees are beginning to return, but their customary lands are now palm oil or rubber plantations, and they have no way of securing their livelihoods". In a break in his monologue, I mention how the notion of "liberal peace" might offer us one way to understand this situation. He nods and agrees, before repeating "but what do they mean by a federal union?" The point he is trying to make, he quickly interjects, is

how can federalism work when the land slated to be “handed back”, so to speak, is now occupied and effectively owned by corporations and the military? Here, he takes what, as we saw in the previous chapter, is often labelled the “hard-line” position, saying “they accuse us”, meaning the more militant sections of the KNU, “of being inflexible, yet they [the Tatmadaw] won’t compromise on anything and keep demanding DDR [demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration]”.⁷² Now, thoroughly riled up, he presses on, “and what is more, in their laws our fallow lands become unoccupied or waste land. Then they sell it. But it is not theirs to sell. It belongs to the Karen communities”, referring, I assume, to the Vacant Fallow and Virgin Land Law and Farmland Law. At this point, he is building to the crescendo of his monologue. He continues that “when they talk of federalism, like in the United States, they have no idea how they could actually achieve this, they just say ‘it is coming, it is coming’”. He adds the last part while laughing sardonically. Then, by now rather impassioned, he adds that “the way I see it, after 67, nearly 68 years of war [now over 70] where thousands if not tens of thousands have died it is not okay to just give up”. After a short break to catch his breath he elaborates that, in some respects, he views the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) as a form of surrender. But, unlike the General we met in chapter four, he quickly tempers this sentiment adding, “it is not that I want fighting again. Nobody wants that to happen, but this ‘national’ [spitting out this word] ceasefire agreement lacks any real vision for a federal union”. For him “there should be another way”. He envisions that this can only come about through self-governance, where the people themselves have greater ability to decide their own destiny. Indeed, “this is why the Salween Peace Park came about”, he concludes. The Salween Peace Park, as I slowly began to grasp here, is a novel alternative approach towards what most sides in the conflict agree is the only way forward, to achieve a federal solution. Yet, as Doh K’Oh concludes, “people think we are crazy. Such a crazy idea, that it [the Peace Park] could be maintained by the indigenous people, it has never been done before”.

⁷² Similarly, during a recent flaring up of conflict in the western edges of the Salween Peace Park, the Tatmadaw placed the blame for hostilities squarely on the KNU for not being able to “look at the bigger picture” as they continue to conduct an unauthorised widening of a military road between two of their army camps in KNU country, in clear violation of the NCA (Weng 2020).



Through this long car ride with Doh K'Oh it slowly became clearer to me what this “crazy idea”, as he termed it, is gesturing towards. If we doggedly fixate on the conventional sense of Peace Park we catch a glimpse of but one face of the Salween Peace Park, as a pragmatic attempt at building a “transboundary protected area”, as a peace park in waiting. But if, as Doh K'Oh and the other activists encouraged me to do, we begin to really follow where this “wild idea” leads us, beyond simple definitions we begin to glimpse another face of this indigenous-run protected area. The Salween Peace Park can also be grasped as a diminutive model, a sketch, of a radically alternate approach to building peace and federalism that simultaneously keeps alive the KNU's protracted struggle for autonomy. In following these activists, the notion of a Peace Park becomes unsettled and broadened far beyond a “transboundary protected area”, to become part of wider struggles for federalism and liberation.

Upon reflection, this was exactly what Ta Thoo encouraged me to do on my first visit to KESAN. He talked of the Salween Peace Park on the one hand as “just an idea. A local solution that could not be applied in all places”, and yet, on the other hand, this project was also “one of the ways to work on the federal situation” and one way that (KNU) sovereignty can be retained within these federal structures. As he put it, the Salween Peace Park “is part of our movement to claim land and control this land as we are Karen”, then reemphasising that this project will be led by the people themselves, “as part of their rights as indigenous people”. In this sense the Peace Park is part and parcel of these activists' ongoing attempts to demonstrate, on a practical level, not only that “there should be another way” and that “another world is possible” (Hage 2015, 62), but also that this protected area is an example of this.

In this manner we find, following Hong, that KESAN are deeply invested in a “prefigurative politics that embodies political autonomy” as they attempt to “build federalism from the ‘ground up’” (2017, 233). This prefigurative orientation differentiates the Salween Peace Park from similar movements such as the defensive countermovements arising in Tanintharyi I explored in the previous chapter. As Karl

Polanyi argues, countermovements are in fact part and parcel of a “double movement” aimed at keeping the expansion of the market and growing dispossession in check, in order to prevent it from destroying the very organisation of production it has called into being ([1944] 2001, 136). These double movements are, thus, two sides of the same coin. Much the same pattern could be delineated in Tanintharyi, where growing ceasefire territorialisation was being pushed back by these ensembles of farmers, students, and activists. However, rather than simply turning Myanmar state attempts to make these lands legible and investible on their head, by simply “switching the valences” (Keesing 1994), the Salween Peace Park gestures towards “a grassroots, people-centred alternative” (SPP Charter 2018, 4) to this dialectic. KESAN are attempting to prefigure one alternative way in which federalism might be practically achieved in one specific landscape in one specific conjuncture where “the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal become one in the present” (Maeckelbergh 2009, 67): one “local solution that could not be applied in all places”, as Ta Thoo insisted. All the groundwork propagating a niche within the KNU legal system has allowed these activists to create a space in these highlands in which they can begin cultivating alternative modes of possessing the earth, building a federal union and evoking “the spirit of self-determination”.

Casting our mind back to the director’s quip that he still encountered villagers who referred to the Salween Peace Park as a “flower garden”, as the Sgaw Karen literally means “peace garden”, we find that these people may have not be so far off the mark after all. In a sense the Salween Peace Park, as KESAN appear to conceive it, is not unlike a *k’ruh*, a garden patch, a place for cultivating new ideas of how peace could practically be achieved. In the Salween Peace Park indigenous practices such as those we found in chapters two and three –of patchworks of different categories of lands held together in village-*kaw*, and patchworks of village-*kaw* held together through sharing *ta thoo ta pgho* and associated *ta du ta htu*, and through exchanging rights of usufruct to clear parcels of land – are being cultivated and subtly translated and rescaled, slowly being grown and grafted on wider notions of federalism and autonomy.

Along similar lines, when speaking with an academic who had served many years as an adviser for the nationwide peace process, I was initially taken aback when he confided that, while positive towards the Salween Peace Park, he worried it may simply become “a diminutive Kawthoolei” – a miniature version of the KNU’s protracted and stymied struggle for autonomy. With this statement he appeared to echo the common sentiment that certain (“hard-line”) factions of the KNU remain rather myopic in regard to the peace process. Indeed, General Baw Kyaw Heh appears to intimate as much in declaring that, “with the Salween Peace Park, we can survive as a nation” in the initial press release that I open this thesis with. However, as I spent more time with the KESAN activists I began to learn that describing this protected area in the Papun hills as a “diminutive Kawthoolei”, rather than a cutting critique, quite succinctly sums up the vision behind it.

This depiction of the Salween Peace Park as a miniature version, a diminutive model of the ongoing struggle for federalism and greater autonomy evokes similar imagery to that of a “peace garden”. Both as a diminutive model and as a garden patch, the Peace Park became a place for cultivating new ideas and practices of how both peace and autonomy might be attained, offering an alternative vision. Indeed, as Ta Thoo stressed, this conservation project up in the Papun hills is simply “one of the ways to work on the federal situation [...] a local solution”, not the only way. Thus, far from being a myopic view that simply rehashes hackneyed notions of ethno-nationalism rooted in “Blut und Boden” or blood and soil, that the academic above appears to imply in the term “diminutive Kawthoolei”, the Salween Peace Park may be grasped as “one [specific and local] way”, highly pragmatic, practical, but also playful way to unsettle and rethink stymied and frustrated notions and practices not only of conservation, federalism and peace building, but also of autonomy.

As we have seen, it is the third aspiration of the Salween Peace Park to attain “peace and self-determination” that pushes this protected area beyond simply a “protected landscape” to also embrace a “park for peace”. Following this aspiration, the Peace Park aims to act as a model or garden for cultivating alternative ways of engendering federalism and peace through conservation. However, we find in this third aspiration the call for self-determination is smuggled in with an unequivocally

laudable call for peace. Consequently, the commitment to build peace in the highlands along the Salween River becomes tied to the KNU's revolutionary commitment to achieve greater autonomy for the indigenous peoples of these uplands. The commitment to conservation and peace becomes married to the commitment to the liberation of the inhabitants of the Papun hills. Thus, to better grasp this wider vision of this protected area, I describe the Salween Peace Park as a form of what I term Liberation Conservation. I begin exploring the differing implications of the notion of Liberation Conservation by returning to the car ride with Doh K'Oh.

Liberation Conservation

Back in the pick-up truck with Doh K'Oh, he has begun to wind down again after venting his frustration towards the current peace process. It is already getting dark and the deep forests of one of Thailand's National Parks that this road threads through slips past the windowpanes as we sit quietly in the cab of the truck. Into this silence I eventually ask him how he first came to work with KESAN. He smiles sweetly, but wearily, and begins telling the story, from the beginning, of how KESAN was formed.

KESAN has its origins in the refugee camps in Thailand around 1997 or 98 as a small-scale environmental protection organisation. This organisation was formed by a group of friends, including Doh K'Oh, who wanted to help clean up the vast amount of rubbish that was accumulating in the refugee camp they all lived in. It was in this camp that they first met a *goh la wah*, or white foreigner, whom they still fondly refer to as simply *Hpu*, or grandfather. *Hpu*, who still works with them as a consultant, was also in the refugee camps at the time teaching young refugees about environmental issues and environmental movements from around the world. Around this time *Hpu* was also working to form the first, though short-lived, multi-ethnic environmental alliance for people from Myanmar. It appears that this encounter with *Hpu* and environmentalism more generally, in part, spurred this group of friends to start "thinking bigger", beyond the confines of the camp, or "temporary shelter area" as they are officially designated (Tangseefa 2007). By 2001, these Karen youths had raised sufficient funds to found the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, or

KESAN for short. The first report they produced under this official moniker was on illegal logging. These were wild times, he adds. At one point, to gather information for the report, he was embedded with a troop of KNLA soldiers in order to document illegal logging camps. There were two heavily armed soldiers detailed to protect him, but Doh K'Oh himself had only a camera to point at the loggers and Tatmadaw troops securing the area. The memory of these times causes him to pause for a moment and chuckle a little to himself, before affirming that he would never do this sort of work again. Back then he was young and bold, but now he has a wife and children to think of. Though, he still has the report and the pictures from this time at home somewhere, as a keepsake, he explains. Then, as we continue chatting, he begins to stretch even further back in his history.

As the trees and forests turn to 7-Elevens and cities through the windowpanes of the truck, Doh K'Oh tells me how his family, in fact, originate in Mutraw. His parents are from a village cluster with its own *-kaw*, perhaps one and half day's hike north of Ta K'Thwee Duh. But he himself was not born there. At the time his mother was pregnant with him the Tatmadaw had begun to intensify their counterinsurgency programme, continually making incursions into these highland areas. When armed conflict made its way to their front door, his parents and four older siblings were forced to flee, first hiding in the jungle. During this time, two of his uncles attempted to return to their granaries to fetch some rice and were captured by Tatmadaw soldiers, who then summarily executed these men. This event seems to have left a deep impression on Doh K'Oh, as he restates this tale several times stressing, "they [his uncles] were not soldiers, only farmers, but they were murdered along with many others" (accounts such as Doh K'Oh's, of mass displacements and treating all civilians in 'black zones' as possible combatants, have been meticulously documented over the years by the Karen Human Rights Group, see KHRG 2001; 2009). Following these incidents his parents, like countless others, eventually fled the area entirely, coming to rest in what he terms a "revolutionary area", just behind the former KNU headquarters in Manerplaw (literally: field of victory).

Manerplaw was what a former KNU general named Saw Hpluh, whom I met while he was visiting the Karen diaspora in the US, called the "second capital of

Burma". For a time it acted as the focal point for the revolution against the reigning Junta and even hosted the exiled National League of Democracy (NLD) (cf. M. Smith 1999, 23) who are, at the time of writing, the reigning government in Myanmar. Subsequently, both of Doh K'Oh's parents became what he calls "revolutionaries". As I was to later learn, nearly all the founding members of KESAN had similar trajectories, most having roots in this "revolutionary area" around Manerplaw, and kin well positioned in the KNU/KNLA. One of the other leading activists in KESAN, for example, is the grandchild of a former KNU chairman, whose cousin, until a recent cabinet reshuffle, was a member of the highest body of KNU politics, the Executive Committee.

Doh K'Oh was the only one of his siblings who did not follow directly in his parents' footsteps by joining the KNU/KNLA. Instead he took his own path, attending school in the nearby refugee camp, where his parents later came to join him. While he regularly shuttled between the camp and Manerplaw, as we have seen, it was in the refugee camp, together with other children of "revolutionaries", that the idea of what was to become KESAN first began to take root. He then adds that, like most of the founding members of KESAN, he was officially registered as a refugee by the UNHCR in 2005 and qualified for their resettlement programme to a third country. His parents have, in fact, already taken up this offer and been resettled to the heart of the Karen diaspora in the US, in St. Paul, Minnesota. But when I ask why he did not accompany his parents to the US, he makes it crystal clear that "I have chosen to stay as I want to fight for my people, and it is too hard to do that from so far away".

As the landscape over Doh K'Oh's shoulder fades back into the deep greens of forests he explains how we might understand the current wave of ecological and indigenous movements in Southeast Myanmar in terms of generations. The young women and men who first took up arms against the Myanmar government in 1949, such as the current chairman of the KNU, may be seen as the "first generation" of revolutionaries. Then, as they grew older, the second generation took up the mantle. This new generation of revolutionaries were often the children of the first generation, such as the General we met in chapter four and Baw Kyaw Heh, the *de facto* leader of Mutraw, who became the new vanguard of the revolution. I never did get around to

asking him, but I assume that Doh K'Oh's parents would also be counted among this second generation of revolutionaries. Today, as these leaders too grow old and weary, Doh K'Oh and his KESAN compatriots see themselves as the “coming generation”, the third wave of revolutionaries. As he points out, despite these multiple waves of revolutionaries, the highest echelons of the KNU are still stacked with those from the first generation, such as both the current chairman and vice-chairman. And what is more, as these leaders get older and more stuck in their ways, they are steadily becoming less receptive to new ideas, he laments. As a result, it is up to his “coming generation” to begin pushing for more power, and for new ways to carry on this old and tired struggle for greater autonomy.

Yet, for Doh K'Oh, this coming generation should not be seen as rebels, “we are not rebellious”, he insists, but, “like our parents before us we are revolutionaries”. While the generations before them made revolution by bearing arms and pointing them at the Tatmadaw, to attempt to effect change and gain autonomy, his generation are trying a new tack. Now, rather than M-16s and mortars, they bear digital cameras and GPS devices. These new technologies are not only pointed at Tatmadaw troops, but, increasingly also at themselves, with the same goal of effecting change and attaining autonomy, albeit by a different route.



During this long car ride, it began to become increasingly clear to me that what binds these different generations together is their shared revolutionary zeal to continue the struggle for self-determination. Indeed, as Ta Thoo urged the last time I spoke to him, we must grasp the KESAN's conservation work as “part of the revolution, as part of the struggle, not separate from it”. For these activists the struggle to conserve biodiversity and to build peace is deeply wedded with and inseparable from wider struggles for liberation. It would appear that, recalling Foucault's inversion of Clausewitz's famous adage, “[conservation and environmental] politics [are] the continuation of [revolutionary] war, by other means” (2003, 15–16). The activism and advocacy of those working with KESAN emerges as the third wave of the long KNU struggle for liberation to attain the “Karen land” of Kawthoolei. However, as I shall

follow closer in the final chapter, in the process of propagating a legal niche and the opening of a gap in these highlands, and through prefigurative politics, the Salween Peace Park also continually overflows and unsettles the protracted KNU struggle for a para-state/Kawthoolei. This opens up the possibility of radically alternate modes of self-determination, politics, and being enmeshed with the world.

As became clearer to me through my conversations with Doh K'Oh and the other activists, KESAN's pragmatic politics of messy translations and constantly messing with scale was constantly exceeding notions of protective countermovements. While, like similar movements, the Salween Peace Park arose as a way to push back against the rising tide of Ceasefire Territorialisation and dispossession, it constantly overflowed these activities. As we have seen, upon closer inspection KESAN's protracted labours to establish this indigenous-run protected area cannot be disentangled from their continued revolutionary commitments to attain greater autonomy for the Karen people. Taking seriously Doh K'Oh insistence that "like our parents before us we are revolutionaries", the pragmatic politics underpinning the Salween Peace Park in many ways may be understood as this "coming generation's" renewed attempts to continue the KNU's decade-long struggles to establish and legitimise their own para- or counter state, only "by other means". In a sense, this indigenous-run protected area may indeed be seen as a diminutive Kawthoolei, answering San C. Po (1928) revolutionary call at the turn of the last century for an autonomous territory to act as their "home country" of "Karen land" that has guided the KNU struggle for liberation since its inception. It is in this sense that I term the struggles to establish the Salween Peace Park as a space of self-determination as Liberation Conservation.

However, the KNU's more than seven-decade-long struggle for liberation by establishing a para-state in many ways continues to resemble a countermovement, largely articulated to counter the predations of the Myanmar state. In this manner, the KNU counter-state Kawthoolei comes close to what Ghassan Hage defines as a form of "anti-politics" almost exclusively focused on "overturning the political order they are 'anti' about" (2015, 2). Consequently, alternatives to this political order often appear like the mirror image of the political order they oppose. Yet, as we have seen,

rather than simply “switching the valences”, exchanging the Myanmar Forestry Department with the Karen Forestry Department for example, the Salween Peace Park goes beyond these anti-politics in opening up a space for the propagating of radical alternatives. As the Charter proclaims, this indigenous-run protected area is a “grassroots, people-centred alternative to the previous Myanmar government and foreign companies’ plans for ecologically destructive and socially inequitable development in the Salween River basin”, that instead finds “its inspiration in the core of the indigenous Karen way of life, namely a worldview that sees land, forests, waters, and people, as inseparable”. In this sense we find this “indigenous Karen way of life” forms the basis for this “alternative”, coming closer to what Hage terms a form of “Alter-politics” that gestures towards new modes of existence and alternative ways of practicing sovereignty and politics (ibid). Thus, in the final chapter I begin to explore how, in translating and rescaling indigenous practices and opening a space in the Papun hills for them to flourish, the Salween Peace Park stages an encounter between the KNU’s anti-politics and the alter-politics of spectral sovereignty that have constantly shadowed it.

Six | Alter-Politics

Spectral Sovereignty, Revolution, and Conservation



In this final chapter we return to the highlands along the Salween River, to Ta K'Thwee Duh, perched atop the Bu Thoe ridge. Here I explore the ways in which growing Ceasefire Territorialisation, and fears thereof, and the Liberation Conservation intrinsic to the Salween Peace Park are coming into contact and being negotiated on the ground. I show how, in the face of the growing threats of the return of armed conflict and dispossession, the KNU's political struggles to counter the predations of the Tatmadaw and the Myanmar government are constantly haunted by spectral sovereignty that can be seen as a form of alter-politics. Moreover, as we shall see, the Salween Peace Park is attempting to stage an encounter between these different modes of politics and, in the process is unsettling both the KNU's state-building projects, and established notions of sovereignty and politics in these highlands.

I begin this exploration by describing an instance in which a group of monks from Thailand attempted to help the villagers raise a pagoda, stoking growing fears of Ceasefire Territorialisation – what, as we saw in chapter four, was often grasped by villagers and military leaders alike as a new “cool conflict”. Here, as I touched upon in the previous chapter, I grasp movements to counter these growing threats as a form of what Ghassan Hage (2015) calls “anti-politics”, largely oriented towards countering and overthrowing the Myanmar state's (often) oppressive influence in these highlands. Yet, as we shall see, the KNU itself had little influence along the Bu Thoe ridge and its sovereignty remained patchy. Thus, the residents here then turned to an alternative mode of politics in the form of the encompassing sovereignty of the spectral realm. I grasp this spectral sovereignty as coming close to what Hage

describes as alter-politics. Alter-politics go beyond simply opposing oppression, gesturing towards alternative modes of dwelling and being enmeshed in the world, what Elisabeth Povinelli (2012; 2011) calls “the otherwise”. As I delve into these different modes of politics I find that they have been in constant contact and are continually negotiated, alter-politics haunting revolutionary politics.

I go on to describe another instance in which the villagers of Ta K’Thwee Duh decided to create their own community forests. However, when the KNU was unable to assist them in this, they again turned to alter-politics, this time of the all-encompassing sovereignty of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah, the sovereign of all spectres. Here I show how these different modes of politics occasionally become aligned in “symbiotic events” (Stengers 2011; c.f. Nathan 2004), where alter-politics of spectral sovereignty become temporarily aligned with and augmented the KNU’s anti-politics. I then close this chapter by returning the questions I opened this thesis with to show how the weaving together of anti- and alter-politics guestures towards radically alternative ways of practicing ownership, sovereignty, and politics in practise.



Figure 6.1 Hpu Kha Hsoo's shrine (photo by author)

Pagoda Politics

As I spent more time in Ta K'Thwee Duh I learnt that there were only two Buddhist households in the village. What is more, both households came closer to what is known locally as Bah Hpaw (literally “flower worshipers” due to the flowers usually placed in their household shrines), a syncretic mix of Buddhism and animism. These two households were that of Hpee Luh, the de facto representative for the Karen Woman’s Organisation (KWO), and her Husband Hpu Hka Hsoo, and the household of their eldest daughter. Hpu Hka Hsoo, the elder with a well-waxed handlebar moustache, had come first into contact with monks during his migrations and peregrinations in Thailand and, like many other people in these highlands, adapted several Thoo Hkoh practices to become more in line with the Buddha’s teachings. One such adaption entailed that, at certain phases of the moon, he and the other members of his household abstain from eating meat, drinking alcohol, making offerings of animals to *lu ta* or “feed” the spectral owners and ancestors, and working in their fields.⁷³ Such syncretic practices led these two Bah Hpaw households to adopt some rather inventive variations on day-to-day practices oriented towards traversing possessed landscapes and constantly negotiating with spectral people, that regularly involve the slaying and eating of animals, and the imbuing of copious amounts of alcohol.

When certain feast days fell on the same day as a full moon, for example, Hpu Hka Hsoo forwent the usual offerings, chanting invocation for the spectres to join them in eating a sacrificial meal of store-bought snacks, and replaced libations of rice wine with cans of sprite. These heady mixes of practices led some of his fellow villagers to level accusations at him and his family that they had “given way to” *ta lay p’saw* or “temptations”⁷⁴ from these monks and somehow been corrupted. Some villagers even told me that they feared he had become “crazy with religion”.

Despite the suspicions and rumours surrounding this family’s practices, many of the villagers sympathised with his wife Hpee Luh’s complaints that she had converted

⁷³ In Buddhism this practice is known as *Upadatha*. At certain phases of the moon not only monks but also laypeople observe the five precepts, including abstaining from killing living beings and becoming intoxicated.

⁷⁴ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=w%3EvhypD&submit=Lookup#>

to Buddhism, but had never actually met, let alone worshipped a monk (another term for Buddhists in Sgaw Karen is Bah Thaw Hka, literally “Monk worshippers”). Following this, one of the villagers, who in his younger days had migrated to Thailand and found work building temples and monasteries, arranged for a monk he knew to visit the village. This monk, himself a Karen from Khoe Kay, a day’s hike south of the village along the Salween River, arrived some weeks later and led these two households through several rituals. Hpee Luh, however, still felt frustrated. She continued to complain that there was no place nearby where they could worship. Eventually, she decided to do something about this and contacted this monk again, requesting his assistance to build a small pagoda, closer to a stupa in the village. As she asserted to me rhetorically, “the Christians have their school and their churches, so why can’t we have a small place to worship too?” Yet, before long, these plans ran into a great deal of resistance from her fellow villagers.

Hpee Luh herself later confessed to me that she had not conferred with anyone outside her household beforehand about raising a Buddhist monument in the village, not even with her husband who was away at the time. So, when the Karen monk, along with two Thai monk companions, appeared in the village unannounced one cold January afternoon their arrival caused quite a stir. The furore around these monks only heightened when the other villagers learnt that they, together with Hpee Luh, planned to build a stupa right beside the primary school at the top of the village. This all came to a head when, following a rather heated meeting hastily organised at the headman’s house, it was agreed that they would forbid this religious structure from being erected so close to the village. As I later learnt, at this meeting some of the villagers had argued strongly against the plan to construct a small pagoda in Ta K’Thwee Duh by comparing it to the incident in the riverside hamlet of Thee Mu Hta. In this hamlet (as we saw in chapter four) the building of a Buddhist monument set off a chain of events that led to this whole area being captured by the Tatmadaw and the inhabitants being dispossessed, violence returning once more to these highlands. As such, the arrival of these three monks became implicated in growing fears in these highlands of a new “cool conflict”, as the “hot conflict” of armed counterinsurgency abated. The perceived linkages between the Bah Hpaw households, the visiting monks, and this “cool

conflict” appear to have been intensified by the presence, alongside a vase of flowers, of a photo of U Thuzana in Hpu Hka Hsoo’s household shrine (as we see in the photo above).⁷⁵

Following this decision, the monks and Hpee Luh decided to instead build the stupa on the highest peak in the area, that just so happened to be Ta Bu Kyoe. While the other villagers initially assented, many helping the monks and the two Buddhist households carry building materials to the top of the mountain, a growing torrent of discontent began to envelop this project. Mirroring the events surrounding the construction of the “car road” some six years prior (addressed in chapter three), as it became clear that the relative dearth of political offices and institutions in these highlands meant there was little they could do to prevent the disturbance of the seat of the *kaw k’sah*, several of the villagers began to have nightmares. They dreamt of a giant mudslide engulfing the village that (as we saw) recalled tales of neighbouring villages being inundated as a result of the inhabitants evoking the ire of the *kaw k’sah* by breaking taboos and not making sufficient amends.

The ominous sense of looming disaster that accompanied the arrival of these monks was (as we saw in chapter one) exacerbated by tiger pugmarks being spotted on the road close to the village. These were first noticed the morning after the monks first moved from the village to Ta Bu Kyoe. Taken together, all these incidents appeared to point toward the same conclusion: attempts to construct a Buddhist monument at the top of the mountain that was Naw Ghoo Hsaw’s “place”, her abode, were a grave *k’ma* (“mistake”). Consequently, it was surmised that the *kaw k’sah*, the “owner” or “queen” of Ta K’Thwee Duh village had become terribly vexed by this mistake, and misfortune, disease, and disarray were not far away.

Despite this growing discontent, much as had been the case in the KNU project to construct a “car road”, the inhabitants of this area felt that there was little more they could do to force the monks to desist. They had plainly forbidden them from constructing the small pagoda in the village proper, but this prohibition did not extend to the whole village-*kaw*. And indeed, the villagers I spoke to were wholly

⁷⁵ As we saw in chapter four, the monk embroiled in the incident in Thee Mu Hta and the DKBA’s split from the KNU in 1997.

unsure whether, even if they had held a new headman meeting, the decision made would have the power and authority uphold a village-*kaw* wide ban on such constructions. Moreover, the ceremonial leader, the Hee Hkoh Htee, remained, as usual, tight-lipped and unwilling or unable to intervene. Once again, it appears that they had exhausted the conventional political means at their disposal to effect change.

The situation reached a tipping point a few days after the monks had moved to the top of Ta Bu Kyoe and construction had begun in earnest, when one morning the monks' abruptly decamped, returning home to Thailand. When I went to see the area where the stupa was being erected, around two or three weeks later, only the faintest traces of the monk's presence remained: a small ramshackle shrine with store-bought snacks and cans of fizzy drink still resting in it, and several bags of cement scattered higgledy-piggledy. As I learnt, when these three monks had attempted to sleep at the top of the mountain, they also had terrible dreams and experienced a series of inexplicable events. On their last night on this peak, one of the monks had moved a little closer to the fire to stay warm and his robes had burst into flames, burning his leg. When they discussed their dreams and these events the morning after, the monks agreed that these were bad omens and that if they were to continue it might cause great problems in the area. Thus, they promptly ceased building the pagoda and left. Hpa Hka Hsoo insisted that none of them, at this point, had an inkling of the stirrings of discontent growing in Ta K'Thwee Duh.

Villagers later told me that these events were clearly the work of Naw Ghoo Hsaw. The *kaw k'sah* herself had been deeply displeased by the construction of a pagoda in "her place", her abode, and interrupted and intervened, forcing these monks and the Buddhist families to cease construction work.



The unfolding of events surrounding these thwarted attempts at constructing a pagoda on Ta Bu Kyoe, as we have seen, rehearsed many of the events that followed the KNU road building project some seven years prior, that I addressed in chapter three. The villagers in Ta K'Thwee Duh, again, initially reached for conventional political instruments to prevent the construction of the pagoda. In this case they turned to the headman rather than the KNU directly. However, once more, the limits

of local political institutions were quickly reached and exhausted. It quickly became evident that the limits of the headman's authority coincided largely with the limits of the village. Once it was decided that construction of the pagoda would be moved to take place atop Ta Bu Kyoe, all local political offices and institutions in this village-*kaw* were effectively rendered powerless to intervene. These events also evoked the looming threat of the return of the violent resource frontiers, armed conflict and dispossession of times past.

At this point, the *kaw k'sah* intervened, her spectral sovereignty encompassing these day-day-events by affecting the bodies and lives of the villagers, and of monks, and effecting change.

However, what becomes particularly evident in the *kaw k'sah's* intervention in the construction of a pagoda is that its spectral sovereignty was not simply the inverse of the KNU (para-) state. In chapter three we saw how the sovereignty of the *kaw k'sah* was continually interrupting and encompassing the KNU's patchy sovereignty as they attempted to construct a road along the Bu Thoe ridge, these different modes of politics appearing to constantly bump against and clash with one another. Yet, the *kaw k'sah's* intervention in the construction of a pagoda, in fact, became momentarily aligned with and augmented the KNU's counter- or anti-politics against perceived threats of creeping ceasefire territorialisation.

In next section, I revisit the concept of More-Than-Human Contact Zones to bring forward the ways these different modes of sovereignty were co-present and locked in constant asymmetrical negotiation. Following this, I explore how, along with moments of violence and clashes, we also find fleeting moments of connection, "symbiotic events" (Stengers 2011, 60). Thus, I show how, in these highlands the oppositional or anti-politics of the KNU and their struggle for an autonomous "para-state" were constantly haunted, interrupted but occasionally also accompanied, by this spectral sovereignty that acts as a radically alternate mode of politics. I explore spectral sovereignty as what Ghassan Hage labels Alter-Politics that suggest that "another world is possible", and points to the possibility of a different life outside of a given order of things that "extends beyond opposition and resistance" (2015, 62–63).

The Haunting of Revolutionary Politics

As we have seen, the events I described above involving the monks from Thailand became increasingly tangled up with growing fears across Southeast Myanmar, shared by military leaders and subsistence farmers alike that, as the armed conflict abates, a new “cool” conflict fought with religious and economic means is afoot – raising fears of the opening of new violent frontiers. While the KNU had been actively attempting to combat this new “soft” phase of the counterinsurgency (Woods 2019), much as was the case with the alluvial gold mining facility in Tanintharyi district that I touched upon in chapter four, plans to construct a pagoda in Ta K’Thwee Duh Kaw appear to have slipped between the considerable “gaps in the floorboards”. However, at this moment where the KNU’s reach becomes weak, and it is unable to prevent this construction project, we find that the *kaw k’sah* intervened and the monks left. In this manner, it becomes clearer how the KNU’s revolutionary politics was constantly haunted by spectral politics that, while at times opposing it, at other times patched over the gaps in its sovereignty along the Bu Thoe ridge. Let us take a closer look at these vexed relations.

When Spectres Meet Ceasefire Territorialisation

Other than a general frustration around not being informed beforehand, discontent and trepidation in relation to the pagoda building project intensified in Ta K’Thwee Duh as it became increasingly linked to the cautionary tale of the fall of Thee Mu Hta that I discussed in chapter four. As a consequence, it became implicated in narratives and fears of this new creeping form of counterinsurgency, that I describe as Ceasefire Territorialisation. These narratives and fears of Ceasefire Territorialisation are becoming increasingly common among the political and military leadership of the KNU. Yet, as we saw in chapter four, the KNU often have great difficulty dealing with this new insidious form of counterinsurgency.

Delving deeper into the incident, described above, of these Thai monks’ offer of assistance to build a pagoda in Ta K’Thwee Duh Kaw, we find that it shared many of the same elements as the cautionary tale of Thee Mu Hta, the small hamlet a short hike away. Both instances involved the promise of something people genuinely desired

that was seemingly benign, a small pagoda for the Buddhist villagers to pray at. Moreover, albeit less directly, the highly contentious monk U Thuzana was implicated in both cases. The presence of this monk is significant. U Thuzana was also deeply embroiled in the fall of the once vibrant centre of the revolution, Manerplaw in 1994-95. This event is well-known as a watershed in the armed conflict, regularly debated by villagers and generals alike. In a very similar pattern, prior to the fall of this stronghold this contentious monk built a so-called “peace” pagoda on a hill beside it, and invited Buddhist rank-and-file soldiers, largely disaffected by the Christian-dominated leadership of the KNU, to join him here with promises of betterment in their lives (South 2008, 58–59; M. Smith 1999, 446–47). These soldiers then formed the Democratic Buddhist Karen Army (DKBA), and soon after assisted the Tatmadaw in overrunning Manerplaw. Following these incidents, I often heard tales of how Buddhist monks had “tempted” and corrupted people in these highlands such that they turned against the KNU and their fellow Karen.

It is in this sense that many spoke of Hpu Hka Hsoo as having “given way to temptations” and having become “crazy with religion”. While not uttered explicitly, these pronouncements intimate that he has become tangled up both with U Thuzana and the DKBA and, by implication, with this growing *ta du ta yah hku*, or “cool/peaceful conflict”.

Thus, in this light, we see how the arrival of these three foreign monks, unannounced, and their plans to build a pagoda in one of the most potent areas of Ta K’Thwee Duh, appears to have become tangled up in these cautionary tales, and with growing fears that the Tatmadaw was continuing counterinsurgency by way of expanding religious and economic spheres. Whether it was actually the case that these three monks, and perhaps the Buddhist households too, were all party to an elaborate Tatmadaw complot to capture Ta Bu Kyoe, is of less concern to me here. As I set out to explain from the opening chapter, I am most interested in the effects such events have on day-to-day life and politics in these highlands. Thus, I focus on how the arrival of these monks, not unlike my arrival, evoked growing trepidations towards this creeping Ceasefire Territorialisation, and how this was grappled with in

the Papun hills. In this manner, this attempt to build a pagoda on Ta Bu Kyoe also became tangled up in the KNU's (anti-) politics in these highlands.

As I have shown in chapters four and five, both the KNU and KESAN have made concerted efforts to combat this creeping counterinsurgency. However, these efforts have been constantly frustrated by the friction of the physical and political terrain of these highlands (pace Scott 2009). As became evident in chapter three, while for all intents and purposes the KNU acted as a de facto nation-state or "para-state" in vast swathes of Southeast Myanmar (South 2008, 38), up along the Bu Thoe ridge, its sovereignty grew threadbare. People often spoke warmly of the KNU state as "our government" and "our leaders", many yearning for it to have more influence in these highlands, desiring the state (c.f. High 2014; Salemink 2015). Yet, like successive other states, it struggled to "climb hills" as Scott so evocatively phrases it (2009, 20). Moreover, as the events discussed above appear to further demonstrate, local political institutions such as the headman, tied to the KNU governance system, and the ceremonial leader, the Hee Hko Htee, were largely powerless (pace Clastres 1987) to intervene, vested with little actual authority to effect change. Thus, when the monks arrived to assist Hpee Luh and her household to construct the pagoda, despite the fact that many of the villagers were ill at ease with the prospect, they felt that the KNU was too distant and thinly spread to assist them in this case. What is more, local institutions soon proved to be largely toothless when plans were moved outside of the village proper.

Taken together, the *kaw k'sah*'s intervention that sent these monks packing back to Thailand suggests a far more complicated relation between the KNU and the spectral realm than one of constant opposition and competition over sovereignty of these highlands. In this incident the *kaw k'sah* effectively pushed back against and indeed foiled what for many of the inhabitants were very real threats of ceasefire territorialisation. In this manner, while the *kaw k'sah* appears to have effected this change in response to a *k'ma* or a "mistake" in the area under its dominion, this response ended up complementing and indeed augmenting the KNU's patchy sovereignty in these highland areas. To grasp this, I revisit the notion of contact zone as a space of asymmetrical negotiation.

In chapter one I drew on recent adaptations of Mary Louise Pratt's notion of contact zones (Pratt 1991; 2008) to describe how these highlands are located in a More-Than-Human Contact Zone (Isaacs and Otruba 2019), where not only different human regimes of power, but also the human and more-than human realms are engaged in both asymmetrical clashes and constant negotiations. By viewing the KNU and the *kaw k'sah* as located in a contact zone it becomes clearer that while they are embroiled in highly asymmetrical relations of power, as we have seen, these relations always include co-presence, playful negotiations, improvisation, and co-option (Pratt 2008; Clifford 1997). In this way, we see how they constantly oscillate between relations of opposition and connecting events, where these two heterogeneous modes of sovereignty are positively related, the KNU's sovereignty accompanied and reinforced by its spectral other. Thus, the oppositional politics of the KNU against the predations of the Tatmadaw and the Myanmar state are constantly haunted by the alter-politics of spectral sovereignty.

Alter-Politics and Symbiotic Events

Delving deeper into the ways the *kaw k'sah*, at times also pushed back against perceived threats of Ceasefire Territorialisation, we find that, along with normal revolutionary politics of setting up a counter- or para-state as the mirror opposite of the Myanmar state, we detect the perpetual presence of an alternative mode of politics in the encompassing spectral sovereignty of the *kaw k'sah*. For Bruno Latour (2004) this multiplicity of modes of politics might be best grasped by the notion of cosmopolitics. Drawing on the work of Isabelle Stengers, in a Special Issue on *Talking Peace with Gods*, Latour champions the notion of cosmopolitics as a way to widen politics to "embrace, literally, everything – including the vast numbers of nonhuman entities making humans act" to better understand how peace might be brokered (2004, 454). It is not, as he stresses, the case that people can simply "leave their gods on hooks in the cloakroom", rather they always bring with them a "freight of gods, attachments, and unruly cosmos" (ibid, 456-457). This closely aligns with the work of Marisol de la Cadena (2015) on the centrality of Earth Beings in day-to-day politics in the Andes. As such, as I have argued from the opening chapter, we must take the

actions of these more-than-humans seriously as alternative modes of sovereignty, ownership, and thus, politics. These alternative modes of politics are co-present with and often unsettle more established modes.

Yet, for Latour, and many others, cosmopolitics tends to give rise to a kind of “war of the worlds” between clashing cosmologies (Latour 2004, 454; see also 2002; c.f. N. Århem 2015). Consequently, as mentioned above, I prefer to widen politics by grasping these highlands as More-Than-Human Contact Zones. Rather than constant opposition between radically different and indeed incommensurable worlds, we have seen how the Papun hills appear more as a space of contact or encounter between different cosmologies, modes of ownership and sovereignty, and between human and more-than-human realms, that are locked in processes of continual negotiation and mutual accommodation.

Returning to the vignette above of the monks and the pagoda, we find that the counter-politics of the KNU in some cases (such as during the construction of the car road) clashed with and was frustrated by the encompassing sovereignty of *kaw k'sah*, but in other cases these become complimentary. As Pratt points out, in taking a contact perspective out attention is drawn to “how subjects get constituted in and by relation to one another” (2008, 8). I therefore prefer to describe this shadowy spectral other to the KNU’s long struggle against the Myanmar state, as a sometimes unsettling, sometimes complementary mode of alter-politics. As we have seen, I instead grasp these highlands as a contact zone where these different modes of politics are constantly negotiated and indeed constituted.

In following Hage, the KNU’s seven-decade-long struggle for autonomy focused on opposition and resistance to the Tatmadaw and the Myanmar state, might be grasped as what he describes as anti-politics. Anti-politics, such as anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism, tend to be overwhelmingly focused on the most pertinent task at hand, the overturning of (unjust) political orders. However, in this singular focus they are often less successful in transforming these anti-politics of opposition into an alternative to the reality they have overturned (Hage 2015, 2). Much as Roger Keesing has pointed out was often the case in anti-colonialist struggles around the world, there is a tendency for these liberation movements to end up conserving the political

order they attempt to overthrow, while simply “reversing the valences” (1994, 27). While colonial leaders were thrown out and replaced by indigenous ones, the oppressive government apparatus underlying colonial rule often remained largely intact in this overthrowal.

In Southeast Myanmar, as we have seen the opening chapter and chapter one, the KNU has long strived to attain a counter-state, Kawthoolei or Karen land. This state was imagined as a space to shelter the people (San C. Po 1928) and was created by the establishing of parallel forms of governance systems, laws, and bureaucracies (e.g. South 2008, 38; D. Brenner 2019). In this manner, as a para-state Kawthoolei often appears as a mirror image of its Myanmar counterpart. This became particularly evident in chapter four when I explored the stalemate that has followed the ceasefire agreements beginning in 2012 between the constantly duelling visions of a nation-state, of Myanmar and Kawthoolei. In this manner, much as Hage argues, following the ceasefire there had been a kind of “routinisation of notions of crisis where conflict and war situations are increasingly perceived as states in their own right rather than a transition towards something else”, bogged down by “unproductive and endless oppositions” (2015, 62).

Thus, I follow Hage’s call to break out of this impasse anti-politics, not by throwing it out with the bathwater, but rather, (more comprehensively) weaving it together with modes of alter-politics that come from outside these endless oppositions. It is these alter-politics that, as we have seen, point towards the possibility that “another world is possible”, by pointing to an “otherwise” that is continually “at odds with dominant and dominating ways of beings” (Povinelli 2011; 2012). To this end, these alter-politics are social forces and potentialities that continually “haunt” us with their possibility of other ways of dwelling and being enmeshed in the world, that we must become aware of and animate (Hage 2015, 54–55).

In answering this call, I attend closely to and take seriously the haunting of KNU’s revolutionary politics by the constant presence of spectral sovereignty. The effects of these spectral others might be best grasped as an alternative mode of politics. As we have seen in chapters two and three, people living in these possessed

landscapes along the Salween River treated the earth beneath their feet less as a set of resources to be managed and extracted than as a place busy and already owned by more-than-human life. In this manner, land could only ever be borrowed, with the solemn promise to return it to its real spectral owners. To this end, humans were interminably engaging in making and maintaining good relations with the spectral realm. Thus, these alter-politics might offer us with a way out of the stalemate of the current ceasefire by pointing towards radically alternative ways of being enmeshed in and relating to the world.

Yet, it is not the case that, in order to weave anti-politics to alter politics, the KNU and the spectral realm must be reduced by force to become of the same nature. Rather, as Nathan Tobie argues in the same special issue of *Talking Peace with Gods*, like the phasmid and the twig, these two heterogenous modes of politics, through deep histories of encounter, have worked out a relation, a mutual understanding, enabling them to cohabit while still following their own interest (2004, 526–27). This act of working out relations does not require that they recognise and accept each other as such, but simply be moved by each other (ibid, 527). This comes close to what Stengers calls “symbiotic events” whereby two heterogenous terms relate, even as they diverge (2011, 60). These events of connection are less about common interest between the two parties than of opportunity, that their “diverging interests now need each other” (ibid). As such, these fleeting moments of connection between the KNU’s anti-politics and the alter-politics of the *kaw k’sah* must be located in contact zones of deep histories of encounter where these heterogenous ways of life or being have been working out a relation. In this manner, it is doubtful that the KNU and the *kaw k’sah* came together under a common interest, such as to push back against growing fears of Ceasefire Territorialisation, when the *kaw k’sah* affected the bodies of the monks, moving them to leave these highlands. In this instance, it appears to be more a case of opportunity, where their diverging interests happened to coincide and to need each other. What is more, as I have argued throughout, these symbiotic events “demand that we do not accept settled ways of life as being given” (Stengers 2011, 61). They come together only to divide again in indeterminate and lively ways.

One such “symbiotic event” seems to have taken place following the arrival of the monks to Ta K’Thwee Duh, and the subsequent intervention of the *kaw k’sah*. Moreover, in the weeks after the monks absconded back to Thailand, this symbiotic event continued to reverberate. In a meeting held at the seat of the village tract, the KNLA commanders, KNU leaders, and the villagers agreed that following these events, they would prohibit the building of new Buddhist structures, unless over 30 households were Buddhist. Since few villages were larger than 30 households, and none fully Buddhist, this prohibition effectively acted as a blanket ban on all new Buddhist structures. In this manner, the sovereignty of the *kaw k’sah* preceded and haunted that of the KNU’s sovereignty provoking them to close this gap. For a short moment, these two modes of politics came together to effect a lasting change, even as they continued to diverge. In this manner, we see how the Salween Peace Park is attempting to draw on and intensify these symbiotic events as they weave the KNU’s anti-politics to the alter-politics of spectral sovereignty.

Looping back to chapter five, we saw how the KESAN activists were tirelessly striving to create a legal niche within the KNU, and a space in the highlands along the Salween River where the Salween Peace Park could take root. Moreover, in “thinking bigger” by translating and rescaling indigenous practices and cosmologies, this protected area is also a garden for cultivating radical ideas on how sovereignty, ownership and peace might be attained. As we shall see in the following section, to achieve this the activists attempted to stage an encounter between these different modes of politics to intensify these events of connection.

“Making friends” in Violent Frontiers

This opening for alter-politics that the Salween Peace Park engenders became particularly evident when the villagers in Ta K’Thwee duh, partly moved by KESAN’s intensive lobbying of the KNU to create community forests, decided to protect two forested areas from over-hunting. They initially appealed to the KNU’s Forestry Department but again found their attempts “fell between the gaps in the floorboards” and thus, decided to take matter into their own hands.



Figure 6.2 Placing it in the hands of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah (photo by author)

Protect the Porcupines So Our Grandchildren May Eat Them Too!

I found that the villagers often voiced their deep concerns about a rocky stretch of land on the western border of their village-*kaw* known as Way Pgha. In this swath of land, too rough to clear for cultivation, a large and lively primary forest proliferates. This forest hosts numerous old-growth trees, of impressive proportions, and a plethora of animals such as sun bears, IUCN Red Listed as Vulnerable (IUCN Red List 2017), and Great hornbills, also categorised as Vulnerable (IUCN Red List and BirdLife International 2018). There are also a great number of old growth tree such as a giant banyan tree that grows almost exactly in the middle of Way Pgha. When this tree fruits it attracts animals from miles around. As Hpu Hka Hsoo's son Hpa Thoo Pa evocatively phrased it, the fruiting of the banyan tree is much like a *lu ta*, the banyan making an offering and then calling upon animals far and wide to come and feast on its bounty. Moreover, tigers, as in literal *Panthera tigris* listed as endangered (IUCN Red List 2015) "like these kinds of rocky areas" such as this forest, I was commonly

told. At least three different tigers have been spotted passing through Way Pgha on regular occasions. However, more specifically, the villagers were especially concerned about one particular area of Way Pgha where there is a rock face pockmarked with *pah poo*, the burrows of Asiatic brush-tailed porcupines (*Atherurus macrourus*). They fretted that people were over-hunting this porcupine since one could simply sit in front of the entrance of their runs as dusk approaches and pick them off one by one as they emerged. This was indicative of wider concerns, especially amongst the village elders, that as the use of modern firearms for hunting proliferated, it is becoming too easy to kill animals such that, if they do not do something soon there would be none left.⁷⁶

As the ever loquacious Hpu Kee phrased it, “if we do not do anything now then there will be no animals for my children and grandchildren to kill and to eat”. Moreover, many of the villagers who had been to the Salween Peace Park consultation meeting and other events organised by KESAN, such as Dee Nay, began talking of how they need to protect their forests, they needed to keep the land in their hands so it could not be grabbed and/or poisoned by the growing number of outside actors coming to these highlands.

In response to concerns about the status of the forest and wildlife in Way Pgha, the villagers in Ta K’Thwee Duh had attempted to prohibit people from hunting in this area by a decree issued through a meeting held in the headman’s house. This was much the same as they had done to ban the Buddhist pagoda being built next to the school. However, during this meeting the attendees struggled to come to a consensus as to how they would actually go about this ban on hunting practically. As we have seen, they were unsure whether they had the authority to forbid people from hunting in this area so far from the village proper. What is more, even if they succeeded and the residents of Ta K’Thwee Duh completely stopped hunting in this area, they had little faith that this ban would be respected by people from the surrounding village-kaw and further afield. They had no way of enforcing such a prohibition other than one of the villagers giving up farming to constantly patrol the area. Therefore, for several

⁷⁶ Moreover, following decades of armed conflict, people were increasingly gaining access to military-grade firearms such as AR-15 type assault rifles. These weapons made killing animals such as wild boar “almost too easy”, as one young soldier visiting his family in Ta K’Thwee Duh with his service rifle admitted to me.

years they had tried and failed to secure a community forest land title from the Karen Forestry Department (KFD) as a more robust legal instrument for enforcing this prohibition.

However, in spite of numerous trips to the KFD offices in the administrative centre, they felt no closer to their goal. I learnt from KFD officials and KESAN staff that they still lacked the manpower and capability to extend operations to the very top of the Bu Thoe ridge, but they would support local initiatives to protect forest in the area. Yet, despite these assurances, the villagers in Ta K'Thwee Duh continued to push for an official community forest title. They felt that holding a land title might allow them to better enforce the protected status of Way Pgah since official KNU-stamped documents were recognised and respected by most if not all the villagers and by outsiders passing through. What is more, as an official community forest, the KFD may also employ someone to actually enforce the ban on hunting here.

As it became clear that the KNU would not be able to help them, in lieu of an officially sanctioned community forest, some villagers had attempted to take matters into their own hands. One of the first attempts to protect this area was led by Hpu Hka Hsoo, who enlisted the help of the same monks that we met in the previous section. He hoped to protect not only Way Pgah, but also the area around the Loh.



As we see here, there was a growing awareness in these highlands that their environments were being depleted and that an increasing number of outside actors were exacerbating this greatly. Their reactions were similar to other instances we have seen in chapters two and three. They first tried to solve this issue locally through the (highly limited) authority of the headman, much as they did following in moral breaches (as we saw in chapter three). When these attempts failed, they then went to the KNU directly to secure land titles.

Much like the “counter-mapping” (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011; Karlsson 2011) strategies we found in chapter four, the issuing of land titles is deeply entangled with the KNU’s efforts to make these highlands legible, in order to counter Tatmadaw attempts to territorialise these lands. These KNU land titles, which mirror those issued by the Myanmar government, might therefore be seen as a form of counter-

titling. However, despite the KNU's and the KFD's intensifying encouragements, filtered through KESAN's lobbying, for residents in the Papun hills to apply for community forest titles, the titles also struggled to "climb hills". As a result, in the next two sections we see how the villagers began taking matters into their own hands, turning to the alter-politics of the encompassing sovereignty of the Buddha and of spectres. Moreover, I explore how these alter-politics often ended up indirectly complementing and extending the KNU's anti-politics.

When Trees Become Monks

Along with Way Pgah many of the residents of Ta K'Thwee Duh I spoke to were deeply troubled about the status of the riparian buffer strip of forest around the *Loh*, the forest where the *k'la* of the dead reside. On the one hand, in a bend in the river right in the middle of the *Loh*, where the water was still, there is a spawning ground for a great number of fish and other aquatic animals. The villagers feared that, like the porcupine, since the fish are easier to catch here, people had been overfishing and, if they do not do something soon, there would be nothing left to eat in the river. On the other hand, many villagers were concerned that outsiders might be visiting the *Loh* and removing things. When a person dies, along with bone fragments and a lock of their hair, items they were fond of, such as clothes, an old umbrella, or a mirror, are conveyed to this area at the end of the funeral. They feared that these outsiders might not understand that these items have not simply been left here but belong to the dead, and be tempted to take them home as a souvenir. These concerns were exacerbated by tales told by Hpu Hka Hsoo of how, from the hut of his paddy field that lies beside this forest, he regularly heard the sounds of weeping emanating from the *Loh* at night. These tales led some villagers to speculate that this was *k'la* of the dead, or *loh k'sah*, the "owner of the *loh*", upset because people keep taking their things. As such, these concerns were both political ecological and cosmological.

Therefore, when the monk first came to Ta K'Thwee Duh to visit the two Buddhist households, Hpu Hka Choo asked him if he would be able to help protect both Way Pgah and the watershed forest along the *Loh*. He has seen how in Thailand monks wrap their robes around trees to protect them from logging, and hoped that he

might be able to do something similar for the forests here. In this manner the forest would come under the encompassing protection of the Buddha.

As Hpee Luh described these events, the monk agreed to help and began by ripping up several strips of saffron-orange monk's robe. He then proceeded to chant a prayer 40 times, one time for each of his 40 years of life. He then gave these robes to Hpu Hka Choo with strict instructions that he wrap them around trees at the four corners of the loh. However, because Way Pgah was a much larger area than the Loh he instructed Hpu Hka Choo to only wrap robes around the trees surrounding the porcupine runs, to ensure that at least these would be protected. Following this, Hpu Hka Choo hung up warning signs stating variously *pgha tah* "protected/prohibited forest" and *ta poe khah t'mee lah lah, aw ta ghay, thec ta ghay*, roughly translating to "it is prohibited to eat or kill any living creature" (see below).



Figure 6.3 "Protected forest" (photo by author)

This ritual was initially a great success. Tales circulated around the different households in the village of how, in another area that the monk had protected in this manner, a man who had attempted to hunt animals here later fell off the roof of his house breaking his spine. As such, I found that people in this village-*kaw* and the surrounding areas, one and all, dare not kill so much as an insect when walking inside the watershed forest around the Loh.

Despite the initial successes of the monk's encompassing protection, finally achieving the common goal of protecting these two heavily forested areas from over-

hunting and fishing, some villagers began to become increasingly vocal in their criticism of this initiative. These dissenting voices openly vocalised their discomfort that their forests were now effectively nesting in the protective influence of foreign Buddhist monks, and their worries as to what might be the implications of doing this. As I was to later learn, this ceremony conducted by the Karen monk with the strips of robes is known as “tree ordination”. Through draping a blessed robe over a tree, it effectively becomes a Buddhist monk. In this way, the trees and the area around them are protected, since anyone who attempts to cut them down or kill animals near them is now effectively doing this against a Buddhist monk, a serious offence. The trees become monks themselves.

The chorus of discontent to this state of affairs reached a crescendo following the very same monk’s failed attempts to build a pagoda at the top of Ta Bu Kyoe a year later. As the cautionary tale of Thee Mu Hta became increasingly tangled up with these Thai monks’ attempts to construct a pagoda, the status of these forest areas under the encompassing protection of Buddhist monks – the trees that are now monks – also came increasingly under question. Like the attempts to build a pagoda, these protected forests became implicated in this new “cool” conflict.



Through these attempts to take matters into their own hands, we see that the villagers once more turned to an alternative mode of politics. In this case, having little luck in appealing to local forms of sovereignty they appealed to the encompassing sovereignty of Buddhist monks, and perhaps also the Buddha himself, as a way to protect their environments. However, in the face of the growing panic over expansion of religious spheres as a form of ceasefire capitalism, this form of alter-politics became tarred with the same brush. The intervention of this monk became increasingly viewed as a threat that, rather than helping them protect these forests, might conversely lead to them being territorialised and the villagers dispossessed. These events rehearsed patterns from colonial times and the counterinsurgency, and evoked the revenant of so-called “cut-throat people” that, as we saw in chapter one, witness the hidden costs of extractivist activities. Thus, a group of young(ish) men began to

look to indigenous modes of sovereignty in the form of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah, the sovereign of all spectres to provide a more encompassing form of protection.

Making Friends with the Owner of Honesty

Consequently, while most villagers (sometimes begrudgingly) consented that they would not kill or eat any living being in the watershed forest around the Loh, a great deal of disagreement and debate remained surrounding which parts of Way Pgah they could hunt and fish in. Some of the villagers I spoke to insisted that the monks' protection only covered the open rock face pockmarked with porcupine warrens, or only the porcupines themselves. Others told me it was now prohibited to hunt in the forested area immediately around them, yet, the limits of this remained unclear and open to much interpretation, most people choosing an interpretation that best matched their needs. What is more, it was unclear if people could still forage and fell trees in this area.

Eventually, a group of men around my age (that is to say 30ish) whom I had grown close to, and (predictably) the outspoken elder Hpu Kee, decided to take action. One evening over several bottles of rice wine, tired of all the squabbling and backbiting and with no sign that the KNU would step in any time soon, they resolved to protect these forests themselves. They agreed to do this by appealing not to monks, nor even to the *kaw k'sah*, as Hpu Kee had done in relation to the roads, but to "put it in the hands" of the highest spectral authority in the realm. The forest was to be placed under the encompassing protection of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah, literally the owner of all honesty, who was the paramount spectral presence in these lands.

The closest I found to a generic name for the spectres in their entirety and complexity (as we saw in chapter two) was *ta taw ta loh*, and the realm in which they resided as *ta taw ta loh kaw*. Given that *ta taw ta loh* can be translated as either honesty or "that which is true", a literal rendering of the realm in which they reside in is "the realm of that which is true". Thus, the name Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah can be rendered as the "owner of all honesty", intimating that it is the encompassing owner or even master over all other spectres. This translation bears out in the way this sovereign of all spectral persons was treated in everyday life. All along these highlands I found that

before each meal the patriarch of the household places a small morsel of food, *may koh* or “first rice”, on the highest ledge in the house and whispers an invocation to the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’Sah, entreating it to join them to eat together, and to protect them. Much the same is the case when people drink rice wine. When the first bottle of new batch of wine is opened, the first drops, *thee koh*, or “first alcohol” is poured into a fine bone china cup and given to the oldest man in attendance. He then takes the cup between his hands, holds it up to his chest then gently lets the alcohol drip onto the floor in front of him while whispering an invocation to the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah. He invites this spectre to enjoy the first drops of alcohol, together with them, and to look over and protect them. These libations usually also precede *lu ta* and other offerings, the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’Sah being invited to drink and eat first, followed by the other spectres, and then finally the humans. As the elders explained to me, the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’Sah is the most senior and most important, so must always go first. This spectral sovereign, they explained, is much the same as Y’wa. However, while Y’wa left the human realm to take his place in heaven, no longer having any influence on day-to-day life, the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah is imminent in everything and sees everything, “it is in your mind”.⁷⁷ This led some to describe this spectral sovereign as the same as *nay suh*, that is to say nature itself.

As with the other spectral persons that inhabited and crowded these possessed landscapes, elders explained that offering to the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah was a way to *ray daw*, “make friends with” or “work together with” them. As they put it:

*If you want to eat lizard eggs you must make friends with the termite mound.
If you want to eat mushrooms you must make friends with fallen logs
If you want to good fortune/good things (ta ghay ta wa)⁷⁸ you must make
friends with the elders.*

In the same way that one must “make friends” with the environments and elders, one must make and maintain good relations with spectral people in order to have good health and a good harvest. So “we have to help each other” as Hpu Hka Hsoo

⁷⁷ Slightly confusingly, a natural clearing along the top of the Bu Thoe ridge, some fifteen minutes’ walk from Ta K’Thwee Duh, is said to be flat because it was here that the Ta Htee Ta Gaw K’sah wrestled with Y’wa. Accordingly, a mountain in the neighbouring district is said to be Y’wa’s bust, that turned to stone when he was killed.

⁷⁸ https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=&look4k=w%3E*hRw%3E0g&submit=Lookup#

concluded after he repeated the above phrases to me. In sharing in food and alcohol, much as one does with neighbours, a “friendship” is engendered that joins people together to help each other, not so dissimilar to the system of mutual aid we saw in chapter three.



As we see above, the sovereignty of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah is continually encompassing that of the other spectral persons in the uplands along the Salween River. To this end, it comes close to an all-encompassing demiurge-like being, yet, unlike Y’wa it remains on earth, imminent in all things, in the trees, earth and water, even in the human mind. This becomes apparent in its association to *nay suh*, which while meaning literally “nature”, connotes “all the contents of the earth that were not made by man, e.g. the land, the sea, the air, the animals, the fish and the plants”.⁷⁹

Consequently, as we saw in chapter three, these relations between spectral sovereigns suggests a jostling nesting hierarchy where the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah is constantly encompassing all other forms of sovereignty, both spectral and human to take the position as the most senior and highest authority in these highlands. However, as Keeler points out, in hierarchical relations, while the encompassing and superordinate positions imply power over those in subordinate positions, it equally implies having obligations to them, to protect and provide for them (2017, 22; Dumont [1966] 1980). This is something that James Ferguson brings forward in arguing that people are regularly willingly to place themselves in hierarchical relations to powerful others in order that they might “make claims” on them, to protect and provide for them (2013, 231).

Following these ideas, we find that in making offerings to the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah, these highlanders are effectively manoeuvring themselves to be positioned within this nesting hierarchy. In this manner they are then able to make claims on this spectral sovereign to provide for them by helping their crops grow and offering protection from harm. Much in the same way, as we shall see, the villagers in Ta

⁷⁹ <https://www.drumpublications.org/dictionary.php?look4e=nature&look4k=&submit=Lookup#>

K'Thwee Duh made offerings to the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah to place these forests under its encompassing sovereignty, and thus, also its protection.

“Nature in Indigenous Peoples’ Hands” Through Spectral Persons’ Hands

Following the growing discontent in the village, one of these young(ish) men, Hpa Thoo Pa, did not call a meeting at the headman’s house but rather went from house to house. At each household he explained to the residents that they intended to “put the forests in the hands of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah” as he put it, and asked them for their consent. After the other villagers overwhelmingly assented to this plan, these men, including the headman, along with Naw Paw and myself, set out from the village just as the sun began to rise. With two cans of paint and numerous bottles of alcohol, they made their way out of the village to place these forests under the encompassing protection of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah.

We began at the Loh, which is closest to the village, then, a week later, completed the process in Way Pgah. On the trip to the Loh, all the men donned matching red and white Karen shirts (it is said that the ancestors prefer that people wear “Karen clothes”), but at Way Pgah both Hpa Thoo Pa and Hpu Kee bore KESAN shirts with the core ambition of the Salween Peace Park emblazoned on the front, that read: “keeping ancestral territories, nature stewardship, peace and development in indigenous people’s hands”. As it transpired, all but one of this party had, like me, attended the consultation meeting in the regional capital in December the year prior to listen to the charter and learn more about how this peace park would work. At this meeting KESAN activists and Karen Forestry Department workers collectively encouraged the villagers to protect their environments. What is more, they detailed how one way of doing this was by creating community forests in their village-*kaw*.

On each instance, we began by painting new signs in gaudy orange paint, in a hut beside the forested area that was to be placed under the encompassing protection and sovereignty of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah. Like those put up by Hpu Hka Hsoo, each sign declared “protected forest: prohibited to eat or kill any living creature”. With these signs completed, we set out into these forests proper, but stopped just at the border of these designated areas. Here Hpa Thoo Pa made a notch in a tree, then

hammered in the first sign. After observing our handiwork for a few moments, Naw Paw and the men wanted to pose with their signs, staring gravely down the lens of my camera. Then we all crouched down, facing the same way. Hpu Kee explained that we must all face *mu taw*, “where the sun rises” i.e. east when praying to the Htee Ta Daw K’sah. East is where the sun rises and the place of growing and development, so one must always face this way if you want *ta ghay ta wah* or “good things” to happen he added. Then, producing two bottles of rice wine from his shoulder bag, Hpa Thoo Pa filled two cups, passing one to Hpu Kee. These two men then began a long invocation and prayer, calling on the names of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah (it is known by many names) and asking it to extend a special protection encompassing this area. The others in attendance clasped their hands together, fingers splayed, and eyes firmly shut (although I had to peek to follow their actions). After the prayers were finished, each of us took a sip of each cup before they were returned to Hpa Thoo Pa and Hpu Kee. Following this we drank normally, chatting and joking. When we had emptied the bottles, we scrambled down into the forest proper pushing our way through thickets of double-barbed rattan, and trudging through streams and waterfalls to reach the spots where Hpu Hka Choo had affixed a monk’s robes. In each stop a new sign was hung, with great care taken to not disturb the robe itself, and to rewrite the old signs that had been effaced by the elements. As such, they did not so much replace these older forms of protection, but rather, placed an additional layer over it.

Following the hanging of these signs we gathered again and repeated the libations, invocations and prayers to the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah. We repeated these practices four times in total in the Loh and six times in Way Pgah. As such, no doubt facilitated by the copious amounts of alcohol we imbued, each time, these events were rather jubilant affairs. We regularly stopped at certain particularly scenic areas, such as a tiered waterfall, where I was instructed to photograph them, again holding signs and looking deadly serious, only for them to burst into fits of laughter again as Naw Paw and I struggled valiantly to climb the steep embankments and wade up to our knees in the streams – tumbling, scrambling, puffing and panting as we progressed.

With all the signs hung, all the prayers uttered and the alcohol exhausted, we staggered home again through forests and fields. In the following weeks, when I

talked to the other villagers about Way Pgha, I found that much of the disagreement and debate around the extent of this protected area had dissipated. Following both the Loh and Way Pgha being “put into the hands of”, nesting in encompassing sovereignty of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’Sah, a broad consensus in the village emerged that it was prohibited to hunt here, and that terrible consequences would hound anyone who attempted to disturb this forest.



Through these actions the spectres had once more intervened in human affairs. For the time being at least, it would appear that these forests had been successfully protected, the encompassing sovereignty of Ta Htee Ta Daw K’sah in effect transforming these areas into locally-defined community forests. However, this is where the story ended for me. I left a few weeks after Way Pgha was placed under the protection of this spectral sovereign, and only time will tell as to how this will play out in the future.

Spaces of Violence, Spaces of Conviviality

What becomes apparent in both incidents that I present above, and in the case of the KNU-backed road constructed along the Bu Thoe ridge, is that, rather than being the “obverse” of or “against the state” (pace Scott 2009), the villagers in Ta K’Thwee Duh repeatedly turned to the KNU state, entreating them for help and engaging in negotiations with them – much as we have seen they did with spectral persons.

Indeed, as I have stressed throughout, these highlands might be best grasped as contact zones, spaces of continual asymmetrical negotiation. However, as I touched upon in the opening chapter, contact zones are not only spaces of inherent violence, co-option and creativity (e.g. Pratt 1991; 2008; Clifford 1997; Isaacs and Otruba 2019), but also sites of intimacy and dependency (e.g. Faier 2009, 12; Wilson 2019, 715), of “making friends”. I grasp this intimacy and dependency as conviviality, in the sense of “living-with”.

While in his formulation Ivan Illich eschewed the common understanding of conviviality in English which “now seeks the company of tipsy jolliness”, favouring the more austere meaning of “eutrapelia”, taken from Aristotle and Aquinas, as being

skilled in conversation (1975, 12–13; cf. Büscher and Fletcher 2020, 10), I find the sense of “tipsy jolliness” rather befitting here. Bearing in mind that the term conviviality in English derives from the Latin word *convivium* or “a feast”, it would appear that these practices of “making friends” by feasting and drinking together with other humans and spectral persons, “tipsy jolliness” becomes quite apt. Moreover, conviviality connotes a sense of cohabitation and interaction that, in its radical openness, offers a measure of distance from identity (Gilroy 2004, xi), while simultaneously, rejecting divisions between humans and their environments (Büscher and Fletcher 2020, 160–61). In this sense I grasp conviviality as the “building of long-lasting, engaging and open-ended relationships with nonhumans and ecologies” (ibid, 164), and indeed, with powerful human actors and groups. Yet, as we found in chapter six, this does not demand that they must become alike, or even have a common interest in order to come into relation. I return to these points in the final section, but let us first explore how this space of conviviality is opening up in the highlands along the Salween River.

Spaces for Staging Encounters

The villagers’ constant negotiation of relations to the KNU became particularly evident as their worries about the status of the Loh, “the dominion of the dead”, and the flora and fauna⁸⁰ in two heavily forested areas in their village-*kaw* began eating away at them. As we saw, their initial response was to attempt to actively participate in the KNU’s counter-titling practices against the Myanmar state. Following this, they strived for many years to secure a community forest land title, which would place these areas under the sovereignty and protection of the Karen Forestry Department (KFD). Only after it became clear that the KFD’s influence wore too thin along the Bu Thoe ridge, titling and other projects constantly falling through the gaps,⁸¹ did they once more turn to the spectral realm to assist them. Here we saw how, as the Salween Peace Park is slowly being established in these highlands, the KNU’s anti-politics and

⁸⁰ Indeed, as we saw in the opening chapter, in these highlands people rarely made sharp distinction between spectral and biotic life

⁸¹ This or, as we saw in chapter three, often “hopping over the mountain” entirely.

the villagers' alter-politics are increasingly coming into contact and being weaved together, not only by KESAN but also by the villagers themselves.

Rather than sweeping away other forms of sovereignty, this alternative mode of politics, which invoked and appealed to the spectral realm to protect these forested areas, worked by stacking different layers of sovereignty upon one another into nesting hierarchies. We saw this in how the young men from Ta K'Thwee Duh took great care not to disturb the monk's robes and the old signs. Instead they wrote upon them anew (quite literally in the case of the signs) and layered an additional mode of sovereignty on top of and encompassing them. To this end, these practices resemble a palimpsest (McConnachie 2014) or pentimento (Simpson 2014, 25) where new layers are applied, but imprints of earlier versions continue to be discerned underneath.

In this sense, this alternative mode of politics worked by encompassing rather than effacing other modes of politics, creating busy and jostling nesting hierarchies. Consequently, as we saw, while anti- and alter-politics often pulled in different directions, there were also moments of connection or "symbiotic events" (Stengers 2011). In the villagers' efforts to protect their forests, these different modes of politics became momentarily aligned, alter-politics in fact augmenting and extending the anti-politics of the KNU and KESAN, even as they continued to diverge. In this manner, these forested areas around the Loh and Way Pgha became de facto community forests, protecting these landscapes. Yet, this protection was achieved neither by counter-titling nor placing them under KNU jurisdiction. Instead, these landscapes came under the encompassing sovereignty and protection of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah, which led to a similar effect as a community forest, prohibiting people from killing animals, even insects, and from taking items from the spectral resident of the Loh. Thus, we see how alter- and anti-politics could become aligned while not necessarily having a common interest.

Following this, we find that KESAN were working to intensify these symbiotic events, the Salween Peace Park acting as a space to stage encounters between the two. In chapter five we saw how these activists had spent over a decade labouring on creating a legal niche in KNU Law in which these alter-politics can flourish. By translating and rescaling indigenous cosmologies and practices, such as village-*kaw*

and spectral sovereignty, they were also prefiguring alternative visions of federalism and peace in these highlands and beyond. As such, the work of translating and rescaling practices into policy is staging and intensifying encounters between the KNU's anti-politics (such as practices of counter-titling) and alternative modes of politics (such as spectral sovereignty) that have constantly haunted them.

As the villagers' attempts to create a community forest suggest, this staging of encounters has had rippling effects on the ground. These young men wore KESAN T-shirts, almost like uniforms, as they placed these areas "in the hands of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah". In this manner, these villagers were also themselves weaving together these different modes of politics, or more specifically, layered them such that the sovereignty of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'sah was constantly encompassing that of the KNU. Moreover, as these symbiotic events increasingly become a part of the texture of everyday life in these highlands, not only conservation but politics itself, such as the KNU's long struggle for liberation, become fundamentally unsettled.

Spaces for Conviviality

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the Salween Peace Park might well be grasped as a "diminutive Kawthoolei". The Peace Park acts, in many ways, as a model or a garden for growing new ways of attaining greater autonomy for the indigenous peoples of these highlands, and had the effect of continuing the seven-decade long Karen revolution. Delving deeper into the indigenous practices and cosmologies that the Peace Park is translating and rescaling into policy, however, we have found that the pockets of autonomy these practices generate are always nesting in and indeed dependent upon asymmetric relations to spectral persons who are the true owners of the earth. In this manner, we found that the people in these highlands were continually engaged in the labour of "making friends", building relations both of jostling nesting hierarchies and, in the process, relations of conviviality as in "living-with". From these deep relations of conviviality, the villagers could then make claims on powerful others, be they KNU leaders or the Ta Htee Ta Daw K'Sah.

Consequently, we find that through the weaving together of the alter-politics of spectral sovereignty and the KNU's anti-politics, these highlands do not so much

come under KNU sovereignty to form part of an autonomous Kawthoolei, nor do they come into “indigenous people’s hands”. Rather, they are understood to be, ultimately, nesting in the spectral hands of the Ta Htee Ta Daw K’Sah and dependent on its sovereignty and protection. Thus, as we saw in chapter three, largely symmetrical relations between people and the relative autonomy of these highlands is constantly nesting in encompassing asymmetrical relations to the spectral owners of the earth. This weaving together of different threads of politics is having wide-ranging effects on these highland areas and beyond.

On the one hand, through these practices a mode of (revolutionary) politics emerges that, following Simon Critchley, neither creates a counter-state nor causes the state to wither away, but instead, creates an “interstitial distance *within* the state territory” (2008, 92), within both the Myanmar and the KNU state. On the other hand, as we have seen, these practices also fundamentally unsettle many established notions of politics in general. All this brings us full circle, back to the questions that I opened this thesis with:

Can a battlefield be turned into an indigenous-run sanctuary for both endangered species and human communities living here?

And:

What might indigenous modes of possessing the earth, and activists’ attempts to translate and rescale these into a Peace Park teach us about sovereignty and politics more generally?

What we found over the course of this thesis is that the process of turning this former battlefield into an indigenous-run sanctuary pushes us to rethink many established ways of grasping ownership, sovereignty and revolution, and indeed, politics at large.

While, as we saw in the previous chapter, Ta Thoo insisted that the Salween Peace Park is “just an idea. A local solution that could not be applied in all places”, the Peace Park draws our attention to “the otherwise” (Povinelli 2011; 2012), that “we can be radically other than what we are” in ways that may disorient us but also “widen our sphere of what is socially and culturally possible” (Hage 2015, 53–54). This “otherwise” not only “unsettles” (Bonilla 2017) and begins to “decolonise” (Viveiros de

Castro 2014) much of the established thought on how sovereignty and politics can, and should, be practiced, but also gestures towards alternatives. It points to radically alternative ways of practicing politics, ways that are based not only on opposition, violence and autonomy, but are also negotiated, deeply relational, and rooted in dependence and intimacy. We find that the Salween Peace Park was not only articulated in opposition to the encroachments of the Myanmar state but also as a space of conviviality, of “making friends” with human and more-than-human realms and of building more desirable dependencies.

I close this thesis by revisiting to the tag-line of the Salween Peace park of “every living thing sharing peace” to explore how in studying indigenous practices and cosmologies, and how they are being translated and rescaled, we might better grasp both how people related to the more-than-human world and to radical alternatives to conservation and armed conflict.

Closing| “All Living Things Sharing Peace”

Radical alternatives to conservation and armed conflict



It is mid-September 2017 and I am making my way to KESAN's main office, an inconspicuous and unmarked bungalow in a sleepy suburb on the edge of Chiang Mai for the last time. I am here to say my goodbyes and give a small debriefing on “my findings” before heading home. On the basement floor I find Doh K'Oh and the others hunched over their computers. After a little small-talk catching up on each other's lives, I begin detailing my nearly eight months of fieldwork along the Salween highlands by describing one of the experiences that stuck with me the most: how people here often treat their landscapes as alive and possessed by spectral persons such as *kaw k'sah* or “owners of the earth”, constantly negotiating with them, and how tigers then act as moral guardians to these *kaw k'sah*.

As I described to the assembled activists, the first stories I heard about tigers came before I had even stepped foot in the village. When people in the regional centre, where I first visited to clear my paperwork at the local KNU office, heard I would be staying along the Bu Thoe ridge that towers above this tiny town, the first thing they told me was “watch out for tigers!” I expected this to lead into stories of fearsome beasts preying on human flesh, or even of tigers as metaphors for marauding Myanmar Army soldiers whom there are still occasional armed clashes with. Yet, each time I was told that tigers appear whenever somebody makes a *k'ma*, punctuated by squeals of laughter. While (as we have seen) *k'ma* literally means “a mistake”, that is to say breaching a taboo, it quickly became clear that what they were referring to here was *k'ma poe mu poe hkwa*, or “a girl and boy mistake”, which implies breaching the taboo

against premarital sex. It appears that they were less concerned with the endangered species of felidae, or saying something about over seventy years of armed conflict, than with playfully ribbing me about traveling with a young unmarried female field assistant, Naw Paw.

When I arrived in the village, I told the activists, I found that humans still shared this ridge with at least three *baw thoe*, that is, tigers. During my second week here I was shown fresh pugmarks of a female and her cub along the dusty road that cuts along the top of this ridge.⁸² To the west of the road lies the rocky forest of Way Pgha where tigers often rest as they prowl around these uplands. However, I found that tiger sightings along this ridge usually provoke less fear for the safety of children and livestock than they do contemplation and discussion as to why this tiger appeared in this specific place, at this time. Each appearance was shrouded in speculation and doubt. While it was first reasoned that this tiger might have appeared on the road beside the village in relation to my arrival, the leading consensus was that it was related to the three Thai monks who (as we saw in chapter six) were attempting to build a small pagoda on the highest peak in this area, Ta Bu Kyoe. As one elder, Hpu Gay, who lived in the house opposite my own, explained, this was probably the work of the *kaw k'sah*. He told me how the *kaw k'sah* would often send one of her tigers, her “livestock” or “pets”, to prowl the edges of the village when people made “mistakes”, only relenting when they had been addressed.

The tiger was the first warning, heralding that the *kaw k'sah* would soon wreak great misfortune on the people, the earth becoming *koh*, “hot” and feverish, affecting the crops, animals, and humans in this area. Following the arrival of the tiger, there was a flurry of negotiations to attempt to propitiate, placate and plead with the *kaw k'sah* to “cool” relations again to be peaceful and friendly. However, when another of the elders, Hpu Hka Hsoo rather abashedly talked of how he too had married after he had made the “mistake” of premarital sex, he insisted that it was the *kaw k'sah* herself who turned into a tiger to warn the villagers of this transgression.

⁸² As people were fond of explaining, just like humans, tigers prefer to take the dusty road rather than traipse through the often overgrown forest paths.

As such, it became decidedly unclear as to whether these moral tigers that make their presence known after breaches of taboo were the same animals as the ones that conservationists are deeply concerned about (as in *Pantera tigris corbetti* or Indochinese tigers). To clear this up I asked both these elders if the tigers that villagers have in the past accidentally captured in their *htu* or “death-fall traps” they set in their fields, and those caught in conservationist camera traps were then the *kaw k’sah*, her emissaries, or simply run-of-the-mill tigers. Yet, after a small pause to think, both equivocated, not committing to a definite answer one way or another.

What is more, I explained, in the following months I found that, on at least one occasion, tigers were neither heard nor their traces seen following a case of premarital sex (such as that of Naw Maw Htaw we met in chapter three). When a few months after I arrived one of the soldiers at the nearby KNLA checkpoint reported that they had caught a glimpse of a large male tiger, the villagers brushed off any significance to its appearance at this particular place and time. Indeed, as other elders attested, when they were young tigers would regularly enter the village and take livestock.

Thus, I found that sometimes tigers were the *kaw k’sah*’s emissary, sometimes her physical manifestation, but often a tiger was simply a tiger. Following this, while in some cases the appearance of a tiger had deep-reaching political effects, such as re-routing roads and preventing the construction of religious monuments, in other cases they were simply mentioned in passing as one might mention that one saw a villager from the neighbouring village. These differing perspectives were far from settled and constantly shifting.

When I was finished telling this tale to the KESAN activists, Doh K’Oh blurted out incredulously, “but you don’t really believe it, right?” This question gave me pause to ponder, does one have to believe in these practices for them to have deep-reaching effects on the lives and politics of the people residing in the Papun hills?



This conversation with Doh K’Oh at the end of my fieldwork brings us back, full circle, to where this thesis began, to questions of how we might grasp such “worldly” practices. Practices in which the line between inert and animate, the spectral and the

biotic, and between the profound and the banal was indeterminate and constantly negotiated in relation to the situation at hand. In exploring these vexed questions, issues such as ownership and sovereignty, and politics at large, come under considerable scrutiny. Thus, to address these questions and attempt to gather up the different threads that this thesis has been woven together with along the way, I return to the tagline of the Salween Peace Park: “All living things sharing peace”. I do this by breaking this tagline in two. I begin by exploring “All living things”, delving deeper into how I approached working with people who practise animism. Through this exploration I show how such methods might help us better understand the shifting entanglements between people, politics, spectres, and other unseen more-than-humans. I then move on to the second half of “Sharing peace”. Here I tentatively sketch out how the Salween Peace Park might help us build radical alternatives to conservation and armed conflict in Myanmar, and beyond.



“All living things”: More-than-Human Political Ecology Redux

Over the course of my fieldwork in what is now the Salween Peace Park, and particularly when I attempted to sum it up to Doh K’Oh, it became increasingly

evident that the line between spectres, mountains, and tigers was less than clear, constantly being redrawn.

As I began discussing in the opening chapter, a common issue when working among people who practise animism is the question of what is, or should be, considered alive. We saw how the most common ways this issue has been addressed, in broad brushstrokes, has been to either parcel out these practices and cosmologies as “belief systems” or “worldviews” that are metaphorical representations of real events (Spiro 1967; Leach 1954; Evans-Pritchard 1976; Hornborg 2017a; 2017b), or to take practices and cosmologies seriously, hypostatized as part and parcel of people’s everyday reality as radically (read: ontologically) different worlds (e.g. Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; de la Cadena 2015; Latour 2005). My intervention into these rather vexed debates was to take a different tack, taking the way the residents of these highlands themselves deal with such issues, and their own doubts, seriously. Following my interlocutors, my focus has been less on what *is* and what actually exists, to instead pay attention to what *works*, that is, to what has an effect on people’s everyday lives.

I described this methodological move as a “More-Than-Human Political Ecology” that gives equal attention to both people’s deep entanglements with ecologies, and the political underpinnings of these entanglements. In focusing on the interface of these imperatives we found that these entanglements were constantly unsettled and unsettling, leading to a great deal of indeterminacy and doubt. Indeed, as Simon Critchley notes, “if we are doing politics, we cannot and should not pin our hopes on any ontology [...] politics is the disruption of the ontological domain” (2008, 105).

In following this method, we found in chapter one that people repeatedly oscillated between different frames of explanation (cf. Pedersen 2011, 4). For example, at times they grasped tales of people who steal into the village at night and kidnap children for blood sacrifices as “just stories”, at other times they grasped these “cut-throat people” as very real monstrous outsiders, constantly shifting between the two, or holding on to both explanations at the same time. I then went on to argue that these shifting frames of explanation are located in a contact zone, where they are constantly negotiated and co-opted, often in the context of highly asymmetrical

relations of power (e.g. Pratt 2008; Clifford 1997). In this sense we found that these practices and histories were themselves “lively”, responsive, generative and open to the world (van Dooren and Rose 2016; Ingold 2006; 2011). In chapter two I took this further to explore how the animacy of any given thing was not ascribed a priori, but rather, in situ, through sensing its presence and discerning its effects on people’s lives and their bodies: “the crucial test is experience” (Hallowell 1960, 25). I showed how the people residing in these highlands were highly attuned to “footprints” or the traces left behind of the spectral realm, and to the effect they had on their lives, their “power to work” (James 1907, 58), governing themselves accordingly. As such, in treating certain parts of the landscape as possessed with life, in the sense of occupied and owned, they engaged in social relations and were in constant negotiation with their environments. In chapter three I then explored how, in taking these practices seriously, we find that they can be grasped as alternative modes of ownership and sovereignty.

Thus, in tacking towards a More-Than-Human Political Ecology I attempted to get a better grasp on the shifting entanglements between spectral persons and politics by holding open questions as to what exists and what is alive and what is not. In this manner, we found that not only the line between what is alive was constantly redrawn, but also the line between spectral and biotic life. As I touched upon in the opening chapter, I use the term spectral to denote something whose presence is sensed but never quite seen, understood to be just off the visual spectrum. This becomes clearer in how the suffix *-khah* can denote both spectral persons, such as *ta mu khah*, and other hard-to-see things, such as insects (cf. MacNeal 2017, 9ff). The term *bu khah*, for example, usually refers to the tiny green/yellow insects that feed on rice seedlings, but is also used to refer to bacterial infections of rice. As such, insects, bacteria, viruses and other microorganisms were regularly grasped similarly as something spectral, in the sense of being just off the visual spectrum, and thus, could only be discerned through the traces they left and the effects they had on human lives and bodies, and their crops. Returning to the vignette above we find that tigers were often treated in a similar fashion.

While the older villagers often told tales of having tangled with tigers in their youth, many of the younger generation's only glimpses of tigers had been of those caught in traps, and long expired. Thus, for the vast majority of the people residing in these highlands, like spectres, the presence of tigers could never be discerned directly but rather through the traces they left, pugmarks imprinted on the dusty road, scat left along a small jungle path, or the sound of their roar heard distantly. As Amitav Ghosh argues, there remains an "irreducible element of mystery" and "uncanniness" surrounding tigers (Ghosh 2016, 30). Following this, we see how in everyday life people did not always distinguish between tigers and spectres since, in most instances, both could only be discerned in the traces they left and the effects they had on their lives.

Consequently, we find that drawing on this method might help us better grasp the shifting entanglements not only between politics and spectres, but more widely also between people, politics, and other things that are difficult to perceive, such as tigers, insects, bacteria, and viruses. By drawing on a more pragmatic approach (cf. Lambek 1996) that implies cultivating "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles [...] and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts" (James 1907, 54–55), rather than spilling endless amounts of ink on whether such entities actually exist, attention is focused on traces and imprints they leave and the effects that they have on people's everyday lives and politics (cf. Tsing, Gan, and Bubandt 2017). In this sense, a More-Than-Human Political Ecology takes seriously both people's doubts and what is significant to them, "what is at stake" and "really matters", as Arthur Kleinman (1997) puts it.

Moreover, throughout this thesis we have found that exploring the continually shifting line between the inert and the animate, and between spectral and biotic life, throws into light modes of ownership and sovereignty that both unsettle and might offer radical alternatives to the current political impasse of intractable armed conflict in southeast Myanmar and, perhaps, beyond. As I touched upon in chapter six, through translating and rescaling indigenous practices and cosmologies, the Salween Peace Park offers a radical alternative to "unproductive and endless oppositions" (Hage 2015, 62) of armed conflict in the highlands along the Salween River by

attempting to transform these former battle zones into spaces for “all living things sharing peace”.

“Sharing Peace”: Learning from Spectral Politics

As we delved deeper into indigenous practices and cosmologies we found that these highlands might be best grasped as actually existing spaces of autonomy, while this autonomy was based on deep interdependencies. We saw how human sovereignty and indeed politics in these highlands is largely concerned with asymmetrical negotiation with the spectral owners of the earth and manoeuvring into more “desirable forms” of dependence on them (J. Ferguson 2013, 237). Thus, we found a mode of politics predicated on making and maintaining good relations to the spectral realm and other humans, through feasting and drinking together, of “making friends”. As such, these highlands might be grasped as a contact zone not only of violence and asymmetrical relations of power but also of relations of conviviality and care. I end this thesis by offering a tentative sketch as to how these findings relate to wider debates and ongoing efforts to protect biodiversity and build peace worldwide.

In exploring how largely asymmetrical relations between people and the relative autonomy in these highlands is dependent on and nesting in encompassing hierarchical relations to the spectral realm, these findings speak to a growing interest in understanding sovereignty globally as “a process of contingent negotiation” (Martin 2014, 343). However, these findings point not only to “how things could be” (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014), or “what is social and culturally possible” (Hage 2015, 53–54). These practices and cosmologies are also one concrete iteration in which such “interdependent”, “relational” and “entangled” (Rutherford 2012; Kirksey 2012) modes of sovereignty are being drawn on, translated, and rescaled to create actually existing pockets of indigenous autonomy.

The Salween Peace Park is not “just an idea” and one “local solution” in the sense of what “could be” or a “possibility”. It is actively prefiguring a radically alternative way of protecting biodiversity and striving for greater autonomy in former warzones. The practices underpinning this Peace Park that weave together anti- and alter-

politics are already starting to travel and take root in other areas of Myanmar, and are being noticed far beyond the bounds of this nation-state.

In southern Myanmar where, as I described in chapter four, an ensemble of activists and farmers were (counter-) mapping the landscapes around their village to make them more “legible”, in efforts to push back against threats of “green territoriality” (Woods 2019), several different countermovements are being concatenated together into the so-called Tanawthari Landscape of Life. Taking its cue from the Salween Peace Park, this large-scale conservation project is similarly sewing together seven indigenous territories to form an “Indigenous Conserved Landscape, a symbol of the symbiotic relationship between nature and humans, and a proposal for future peace, environmental protection, food sovereignty, and self-determination” (CAT 2020, 10). Indeed, as the director of KESAN, who is part of the alliance of activists behind this project, sums it up: “Conservation of small areas will not work. Indigenous peoples conserve their territories through a landscape approach by seeing the interconnections through the landscape – we have seen this through the example of the Salween Peace Park. Now it is time for governments, international organisations, businesses and the UN to learn from indigenous people” (ICCAs 2020). And this indeed seems to be the case, as global organisations are taking notice. On the 29th September the 2020 the Salween Peace Park received the Equator Prize from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in recognition of their “outstanding community efforts to reduce poverty through the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity [...] laying the foundation for a global movement of local successes that are collectively making a contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” (UNDP 2020).

In this light, the Salween Peace Park might be grasped in the context of growing globe-spanning movements that Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher (2020) describe as *The Conservation Revolution*. For these authors, “a revolution in conservation is brewing” that is moving beyond “people verses park” disputes to embrace radical alternative approaches (*ibid*, 1). The indigenous-run protected area along the Salween River in many senses appears to resonate strongly with the radical alternative Büscher and

Fletcher put forward of “convivial conservation”, that rejects both nature-people dichotomies and capitalist economic systems that demand continual growth. Beyond modes of conservation that attempt to turn the environment into “nature capital” and “environmental services”, convivial conservation points to the need to find better ways “to ‘con vivre’, live with (the rest of) nature” (ibid, 9-10). However, while these authors discuss these “radical alternatives” in order to forward a “scientifically grounded, *political* platform and paradigm” (ibid, 12), the Salween Peace Park is a concrete and situated example of an actually existing radical alternative to both conservation and peace building. As such, by following the establishment of this Peace Park we might better grasp how the conservation revolution might be achieved in practice in other places in Myanmar, and indeed, far beyond.

Sammanfattning på svenska

Possessed Earth: Ägande och makt i Salween Peace Park i sydöstra Burma

I kölvattnet av den sju decennier långa väpnade konflikten i sydöstra Myanmar, har en koalition av ursprungsbefolkningen Karen och transnationella aktivister gemensamt börjat formulera en alternativ vision om hur fred och naturvård kan uppnås i praktiken. Utifrån Karenfolkets traditionella sätt att besitta ("possess") mark, arbetar denna koalition av aktörer med att omvandla en 5000 kvadratkilometer stor yta i höglandet längs med Salween-floden till ett skyddat område under namnet Salween Peace Park. I denna studie undersöker jag de praktiker och kosmologier som ligger till grund för detta radikala, politiska projekt, samt vad det kan lära oss om ägande, suveränitet och politik mer allmänt.

Del I. *Possession*, kapitel ett till tre, bygger på åtta månaders fältarbete i, och runt, byn Ta K'Thwee Duh, i hjärtat av Salween Peace Park. I denna del utforskar jag alternativa former av ägande och suveränitet genom att fokusera på vilka innebörder Karenfolkets berättelser och praktiker av att leva i samklang med mer-än-mänskliga varelser har för politiken av att besitta ("possess") jorden.

Jag inleder **kapitel ett** med att visa hur vi kan förstå dessa högländer som en "Contact Zone" (Pratt 1991; 2008; Clifford 1997), vilken uppstår mellan nationalstater såväl som mellan mänskliga och mer-än-mänskliga domäner. Flera olika politiska kosmologier och regimer av ägandeskap kommer här i kontakt med varandra, vilket gör att en kontinuerlig och selektiv omförhandling av dessa är ständigt pågående.

Sedan följer jag upp detta i **kapitel två** genom att visa hur föremål, djur och (historiskt-sätt) människor kan ägas, medan marken i dessa högländer aldrig kan ägas av människor fullt ut. Landskapet är alltid redan ägt eller "possessed" - i ordets dubbla betydelse på engelska som både hemsökta av och under kraften - av spektrala personer. Marken ägs eller tillhör dessa osynliga mer-än-människor, *k'sah*, vilket betyder just "ägare". Således beskriver jag dessa högländer längs med Salween-floden som "besatta landskap" ("possessed landscapes"). Människors relationer med jorden förmedlas genom pågående förhandlingar med dessa hungriga spektrala personer, vilka ständigt måste blidkas för att de ska upplåta marken och tillåta människor att bruka den. Jag beskriver Karenfolkets regimer av ägandeskap som efemär och "nesting", dvs. att det finns flera lager av ägande (cf. Viegas 2016; Simpson 2014; Howell 2007).

I **kapitel tre** beskriver jag vidare hur uppfattningen om besatta landskap inte bara avgränsar ägandet utan att det också påverkar hur människor relaterar till sin miljö och hur samhället är organiserat. Som jag visar handlar det mindre om kontroll och styrande av "resurser" än om möten och förhandlingar. De politiska landskapen i dessa högländer är påfallande egalitära eftersom auktoritet och suveränitet ytterst finns hos *kaw k'sah* och andra spektralägare. Dessa spektralägare förstås som inte-av-denne-världen monarker, vilka är de verkliga ägarna av marken. Jag beskriver detta fenomen som "spektral suveränitet" (cf. Sahlin 2017).

Del II. *Dispossession / Re-Possession*, kapitel fyra till sex, tar ett steg tillbaka och pendlar mellan de självförsörjande bönder i höglandet längs med Salween-floden och andra bergsområden i sydöstra Myanmar, och de aktivister som är baserade i Chiang Mai i Thailand. I dessa kapitel beskriver jag hur nya former av "dispossession" har uppstått i och med att den väpnade konflikten har avtagit, samt den parallella process där bybor, aktivister, beväpnade grupper och internationella organisationer försöker återta och återbesätta jorden genom upprättande av fredsparken.

I kapitel fyra visar jag hur den avtagande väpnade konflikten åtföljts av en tilltagande "vapenvila-territorialisering" ("ceasefire-territorialisation"). Särskilt i Tanintharyi-distriktet i södra Myanmar finner vi hur olika statliga aktörer exproprierar stora markområden i religionens, ekonomins, utvecklingens och naturvårdens namn (Woods 2011; 2019). Detta bestrids emellertid av den spirande motrörelsen organiserad runt ursprungsbefolkningens besittningspolitik ("politics of possession"), som behandlas i del I, och som i korthet handlar om att "åter-territorialisera" och "åter-besätta" landskapet.

I kapitel fem visar jag hur Salween Fredsparken på ett subtilt sätt översätter och omvandlar de traditionella formerna för ägande och suveränitet till formaliserad policy, lagar, och naturvårdspolitik. Aktivisterna som leder arbetet med fredsparken har under flera decennier propagerat för att KNU, Karenfolkets väpnade gren, stegvis ska gå över till denna alternativa politik. En vidare analys visar dock att detta arbete för att förvandla ursprungsbefolkningens former av ägande och suveränitet till policy, lag och politik är intimt förknippat med aktivisternas pågående engagemang för KNU: s sjuttio år långa revolution för autonomi. Jag beskriver därför Salween Fredsparken som en form av "befrielse-naturvård" ("Liberation Conservation").

Slutligen i kapitel sex vänder jag tillbaka till Ta K'Thwee Duh för att utforska hur vapenvila-territorialisering och befrielse-naturvård förhandlas på plats inom själva fredsparken. Som jag visar appellerar invånarna i dessa högländer i allt högre grad till KNU för att bevara sina marker och för att bevara miljön. Men eftersom KNU har begränsade möjligheter att verka i högländerna, så måste byborna främst förlita sig på det spektrala rikets omfattande suveränitet. Jag beskriver detta som en form av "Alter-Politics" (Hage 2015). Denna gräsrotspraxis av "Alter-Politics" förstärker KNU: s kamp för autonomi, vilket jag beskriver som en mot- eller antipolitik. Jag pekar vidare på hur dessa sammanflätade former av politik utmanar etablerade sätt att förstå ägande, suveränitet och revolution, och, i förlängningen, politik i vidare bemärkelse.

Jag avslutar avhandlingen med att återkoppla till Salween Fredsparkens slogan, “all living things sharing peace”. Genom att utforska ursprungsbefolkningens praktiker och kosmologier, och hur de tolkas och omförhandlas, kan vi bättre förstå hur människor relaterar till den mer-än-mänskliga-världen och till radikala alternativ till påtvingad naturvård och väpnade konflikter.

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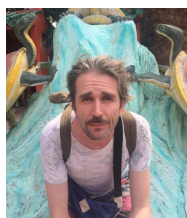
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In the wake of seven decades of protracted revolution and armed conflict in Southeast Myanmar, an ensemble of indigenous peoples and transnational activists have begun formulating a radical alternative vision of how peace and conservation might be achieved in practice. Through translating and rescaling indigenous modes of possessing the earth, this ensemble is working to transform 5,000 km² of highly contested terrain in the highlands along the Salween River into a conservation zone they call the Salween Peace Park.

In this study I explore what indigenous practices and cosmologies, and the ways they are being translated and rescaled into the Salween Peace Park, might teach us about ownership, sovereignty, and politics at large.



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