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LIBERATION CONSERVATION:
THE SALWEEN PEACE PARK
AND THE POLITICS OF
POSSESSING THE EARTH
IN SOUTHEAST MYANMAR



Liberation Conservation

The Salween Peace Park and the Politics of Possessing the Earth
in Southeast Myanmar

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to

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<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1492910/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

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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 5,500 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. Moreover, this study contributes with deep, ethnographically founded insights into the importance of increased economic and political support to grassroots, indigenously led, initiatives to build sustainable peace and ecologies.

Introduction

Early in the morning on 1st February 2021 columns of troops and armoured vehicles trundled into the state capital of Myanmar, Naypyidaw, heralding the start of a military coup – the third since the country became independent from the British empire in 1948. At the crack of dawn on the morning of the coup, the de facto state head Aung San Suu Kyi was once more placed under indefinite house arrest. In response, political leaders around the world (China and Russia withstanding) lined up to condemn the Myanmar Military (known as the Tatmadaw). Moreover, traditional and social media were awash with stories of the coup, largely gravitating around notions of Myanmar’s burgeoning and fragile liberal democracy being imperilled by this intervention by the military (Campbell 2021).

A day earlier, in the densely forested highlands along Myanmar’s long border with Thailand, a rather different story was unfolding. On this day, the Karen National Union, or KNU (usual classified as a Non-State Armed Group), held a small ceremony solemnly marking the 72nd anniversary of its revolution against the central Myanmar government, in the shadow of the growing possibility of a return to outright war.

Two months prior, the Tatmadaw began indiscriminately shelling villages in territories held by the KNU in the Karen State of Southeast Myanmar. During these assaults, that are still ongoing at the time of writing, at least one civilian has been killed and several injured, while over 5,000 people have been forced to flee their homes once more (KPSN 2021a). This drastic escalation of armed conflict has been building for over three years, throwing the already highly precarious ceasefire agreement, brokered in 2012, into disarray. Recently, 85 influential community based and diasporic organisations issued a statement calling upon the KNU and its affiliates to immediately cease “any and all relationships” with the new military junta, such as “peace talks, political, military and economic affair”, and to take “decisive action” against them

(KPSN 2021b). However, these events, that have long imperilled the very peace Myanmar’s fragile liberal democracy is built upon, have largely gone unremarked by these same world leaders – including representatives of the EU that has been funding the faltering peace process since its outset. What is more, these events have attracted limited media attention outside of Myanmar: all eyes remain fixed on the centre, on the capital and the largest city Yangon.

In shifting focus from Myanmar’s centre to the long-troubled borderland areas we find that the February coup, far from being surprising, brought to the fore the underlying and largely unresolved tensions and fissures underlying the country’s much lauded “transition to democracy” (e.g. Cheesman, Skidmore, and Wilson 2013; Rhoads and Wittekind 2018). Moreover, in beginning to attend more closely to the unruly edges of Myanmar, we encounter several novel and highly sophisticated initiatives that look awry at the current political impasse and often radical alternative avenues for pursuing sustainable peace and ecosystems.

One such initiative, and the focus of this thesis and Development Dissertation Brief is the Salween Peace Park initiative in the highlands along Myanmar’s border with Thailand. This initiative is attempting to confront and overcome these tensions and fissures by transforming one war-torn corner of Southeast Myanmar into an indigenously run protected area. The very first press release, heralding this Peace Park onto the world stage asked:

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

In partnership with both local communities and the KNU, the activists behind this initiative answer this question by demonstrating, as they put it, “one local solution” to how both peace and federalism might be achieved in practice by refiguring nearly 5,500 km² (around the size of the nation of Brunei, or twice as large as Luxembourg, see the map below) of highly contested terrain in

northern Karen state into an indigenously-run conservation zone. As the slogan for the Salween Peace Park proclaims, this area is envisioned as a place for “all living things sharing peace”. This ensemble of actors aims to achieve these goals by translating and rescaling indigenous practices and modes of dwelling into both government and conservation policy. In this manner, this grassroots initiative stands in stark contrast to the state-centric and well-funded peace-building process being led from the capital of Nay Pyi Daw.

While Aung San Suu Kyi’s party the National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide victory in the 2015 elections, the constitution, drafted and passed into law by the former military junta in 2008, along with a raft of land and investment laws favouring Tatmadaw and commercial interests (e.g. J. M. Ferguson 2014; Hong 2017), has constantly hampered chances of meaningful change. The constitution reserves a quarter of all seats in parliament, along with several key ministries, to the Myanmar Military allowing them to maintain a firm grip on power and remain largely autonomous from the democratically elected government. This became particularly evident following the Rohingya crisis in 2017.

Concurrently, the peace process, kick-started in 2012 by the former (quasi-civilian) government led by ex-general Thein Sein and broadly funded by the EU, to resolve Myanmar’s multiple and protracted armed revolutions on several fronts has repeatedly faltered and devolved back into armed conflict. In these peace negotiations, that continue to be largely dominated by the Myanmar Military, some of the most powerful and influential armed groups were not invited to the table, and those that were continuously butted heads with the Tatmadaw over issues related to national land and investment laws, autonomy, federalism, and Demobilisation Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) (e.g. South 2018; Anderson 2017). This disagreement on basic tenets, and an uptick in armed skirmishes between the Tatmadaw and KNU forces in

the area close to the Salween Peace park, had led these talks to slowly ground to a halt in recent years.

In lieu of tangible progress in regards to the peace process, the NLD, the Tatmadaw, and many international donors have largely acted in lockstep in pursuing a policy of liberal peace, such as the “Business for Peace” model that aims to bring peace to Myanmar through investment and development (Nyein 2018). Aung San Suu Kyi laid bare the logic of this policy when talking at an event in the Rakhine state of western Myanmar, the site of the Rohingya crisis, in 2019. At this event proclaiming the state “open for business to the world”, she told the assembled crowd that “we have to address economic issues in Rakhine, that we may achieve the progress and development needed to sustain stability and prosperity” (Lwin 2019).

These policies of pouring capital into areas under rather unstable ceasefires, we find, have largely served to entrench the very struggles over land, and the economic and political disparities that underlie the country’s various armed struggles. As such, in this political landscape peace often becomes predatory (c.f. Lund 2018). In the Kachin state in northern Myanmar, for example, following a round of ceasefires in the 1990s, the central state allocated land concessions to local elites and international investors (Woods 2011), ostensibly to foster “progress and development” in order to build peace. However, in effect these land allocations have helped generate and expand national state authority, sovereignty and territory in formally non-state areas (ibid, 749), simultaneously weakening both armed group and smallholders’ customary claims to these lands (ibid, 754), eventually leading to return to armed conflict. Woods describes this policy as a form of Ceasefire Capitalism. These processes, that I expand on to describe as Ceasefire Territorialisation, are ongoing during the current ceasefire and continue long histories of state-backed counterinsurgency, only by other means. I found that people living in areas

under this uneasy peace often called the ceasefires a kind of “peace trap” or a “cool” continuation of the conflict now waged with bulldozers and land laws.

Thus, in this context of seeming interminable cycles of armed violence and a dearth of viable alternatives, this thesis explores the potential of the radically bottom-up project of the Salween Peace Park.

Going beyond the largely top-down approach of the Tatmadaw-led current stymied peace process – that remains doggedly fixated on nation-states, national sovereignty, liberal peace and DDR – the Salween Peace Park works to build both sustainable peace and ecosystems by prefiguring alternative visions of federalism that build on indigenous practices of possessing the earth. In this manner, this indigenously run protected area is less a form of counter-politics, simply pushing against the status quo, than a form of alter-politics that gestures towards radically alternative approaches and futures.

The Salween Peace Park has already begun to attract considerable global attention. The UN awarded it with the Equator Prize in September 2020, and later that same year one of its founders was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize (the “Nobel Prize for nature”). However, this grassroots initiative, and many like it, still remain outside and parallel to the official peace negotiations, lacking both national and international recognition and backing. As director of one of the activist networks described in this thesis, “Now it is time for governments, international organisations, businesses and the UN to learn from indigenous people”. Thus, it is the contention of this Development Dissertation Brief that the Salween Peace Park is a form of Liberation Conservation, combining indigenous self-determination, protection of biodiversity, and federalism from below: international actors should take note.

Aim and Research Questions

In this thesis I explore the question posed by the activist themselves as to whether these (former) battlefields can 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?

Ethnographic Methods and Ethnographic Theory

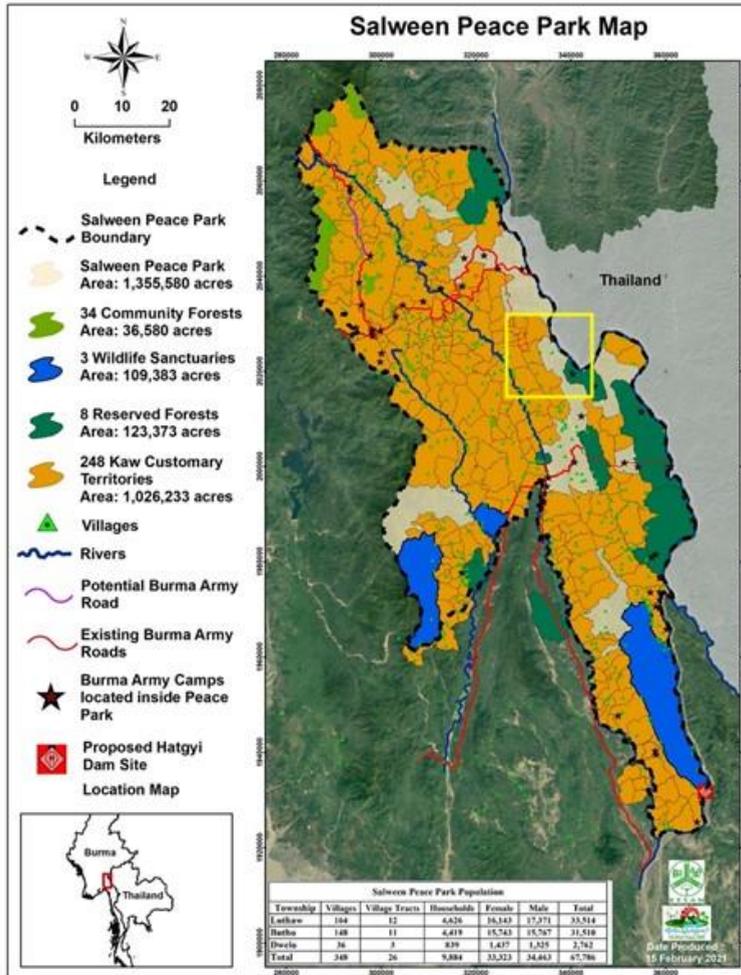
This thesis is empirically grounded in thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork. The lion’s share, eight months, of this fieldwork was conducted in and around a small village I call Ta K’Thwee Duh atop the Bu Thoe ridge over 1200 m above sea-level in the Salween Peace Park area (see figure 1) in 2017. This was supplemented by additional fieldwork from December 2016 to September 2017, conducted in other former warzones in Karen state in Myanmar and among a network of activist based in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand, to trace the wider ramifications of the Salween Peace Park. 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.

This ethnographic fieldwork consisted largely of extensive interviews – with farmers, soldiers, generals, policy makers, activist, academics and people in the diaspora – and prolonged participant-observation, along with archival research. This type of ethnographic fieldwork, which entails living with and taking part in the daily life of the people one studies leads the researcher to get “caught up” (Favret-Saada 1980; 2015). As such, especially in the (former) warzones of southeast Myanmar, it is often difficult (if not impossible) to extricate oneself from the sticky webs woven by decades of insurgency and counterinsurgency.

In the words of Jeanne Favret-Saada “as long as she adopts an external position, the ethnographer hears nothing” and as such one “condemn[s] oneself to only hearing objectivist statements” (1980, 16). Thus, in studying armed conflict and insurgency I found, 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).

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).

Figure 1: A Map of the Salween Peace Park



Note: Field research area marked by the yellow square. Map courtesy of KESAN.

Findings

The study is sub-divided into two halves. In Part I: *Possession* I draw largely on the eight months of fieldwork I conducted in the Salween Peace Park area. Here I focus mostly on the implications of local histories and indigenous modes of dwelling – of the practices and politics of possessing the earth and of living together – to explore alternative forms of ownership and sovereignty.

In Part II: *Dispossession/Re-Possession* I then 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. Thus, in this second half of the thesis I illustrate how these indigenous practices and modes of politics are being translated and re-scaled into an indigenously-run area that protects both its biodiversity and human inhabitants.

I then close this study by demonstrating how the translated and rescaled practices that underpin the Salween Peace Park might be best grasped as a form of alter politics that may offer us a way out of the current political deadlock in Myanmar and, perhaps, beyond. Let us begin with part one.

Possessed Landscapes

In the opening chapters I describe how, during the course of my fieldwork, I began to learn that while things, animals, and (historically) people can and often are owned, the landscape itself can never be fully held in human possession. I found 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 talked of the earth they lived and farmed on as, ultimately, borrowed

from more-than-human life, both biotic – from microbes to elephants – and spectral, that they cohabited these landscapes with. I use the term spectral to denote something whose presence is sensed but never quite seen, understood to be just off the visual spectrum.¹ I also lean into the other connotations of spectral, to attempt to draw out a sense of these unseen more-than-humans as remaining constantly indeterminate.

Thus, I term these highlands as possessed landscapes. I deploy the word possessed here in its dual and entangled senses, to tease out the ways the lands along the Salween river 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. 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 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. 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.

I then go on to show, by studying remnants of the past such as helmets from the Japanese occupation and rifles from British colonial forces, how histories are neither abstract nor inert but carry on from the past, these remnants

¹ This said, the border between the biotic and the spectral was often far from clear-cut. The suffix *-kha* denotes both hungry spectres, such as *ta mu kha*, as well as other hard-to-see things, such as insects like *htee kha*, 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.)

continuing to enact their ruination on the present, like vengeful ghosts or revenants (Stoler 2008; 2013). These objects are possessed by and carry on violent histories that they spread throughout the landscape. I then show how histories from decades of armed conflict and from ancestral times 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. The past remains embedded in the landscape.

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 *ke’sab* or “owners”.

Thus, in these possessed landscapes 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 place” 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 finding gesture towards a specific regime of ownership and a mode of politics and sovereignty that prevails in these highlands.

Spectral Sovereignty

Following on from this we find that, since longer than anyone can remember, the Myanmar state has remained distant. Through the example of a large KNU project to construct a narrow dirt road along the top of this ridge I illustrate how the Myanmar State played a rather minor part in this infrastructure project – only implicated insofar as the road was part of the KNU’s defence strategy to keep them at bay. 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 implicit in this road building project, 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, 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, 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 plural² (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, sovereignty is often understood to rest in the unseen more-than-human-hands of the *kaw k'sab*, that literary translates to “the (true) owners of the earth”.

To this end, we find that both ownership and sovereignty were resting in the hands of the *k'sab* and, as a consequence, nesting, in hierarchal relation to the encompassing dominion of the spectral realm. While it was often said that a certain patch of land has a human *k'sab* or “owner”, upon closer inquiry it became clear that the human “owner” had in fact “borrowed” this land from its true owners, *kaw k'sab*, 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 Myanmar (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 spectral sovereignty not as a full gone conclusion but as a process of constant encompassing. In this fashion spectral sovereignty unsettles more established

² 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.

notions of ownership and sovereignty and gestures towards an alternate mode of politics.

Liberation Conservation

In part II I oscillate 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.

Reterritorialisation through Translation

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” or as a new “cool/peaceful” form of the on-going counterinsurgency. These highlands are pockmarked by Tatmadaw army bases and criss-crossed with military roads such that, despite the faltering ceasefire agreements and attempts to build a lasting peace, the lands along the Salween river (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.

Rescaling Indigenous Practice to Policy

I then 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 other parts of Myanmar that are pushing back against the rising tide of Ceasefire Territorialisation, 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 chairman of the KNU suggested on the previous revolution day in 2020, at this juncture 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. Moreover, this new iteration of the ongoing revolution is itself unsettling and subverting notions of sovereignty, resistance, and self-determination.

I further demonstrate 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 indigenously-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 and subverting these very scales in pragmatic and productive ways. These pragmatic politics constantly exceeded and overflowed simply pushing back against growing ceasefire territorialisation. 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 indigenously-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.

Alter-Politics

Finally, I 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, 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. 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 at best. 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 delved into these different modes of politics, I found 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 K²Thwee 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 thesis by returning the questions I opened this thesis with to show how the weaving together of anti- and alter-politics gestures towards radically alternative ways of practicing ownership, sovereignty, and politics in practise.

Conclusions: “All living things sharing Peace”

As I delved deeper into indigenous practices and cosmologies over the course of this thesis I found that these highlands might be best grasped as actually existing spaces of autonomy, while this autonomy was based on deep interdependencies. I found that human sovereignty and indeed politics at large in these highlands is principally concerned with asymmetrical negotiations with the spectral owners of the earth and with manoeuvring into more “desirable forms” of dependence on them (J. Ferguson 2013, 237). Thus, I demonstrate 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 people often phrased it. 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.

Thus, in translating and rescaling these indigenous practices the Salween Peace Park is not “*just* an idea” and one “local solution”, as KESAN activist often claimed, 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, 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, and the wider ICCA or “territories of life” movement,³ 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” (ICCA 2020).

What is more, many global organisations do indeed appear to be taking notice. On the 29th September the 2020 the Salween Peace Park received the Equator Prize from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in

³ ICCA is not in fact an acronym but an abbreviation for a consortium of territories and areas conserved by indigenous people and local communities across the globe
<https://www.iccaconsortium.org/index.php/discover/>

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). Later that same year the director of KESAN was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize, sometimes referred to as the Nobel Prize for nature, in recognition of his work to help establish the Salween Peace Park.

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) name *The Conservation Revolution*. For these authors, “a revolution in conservation is brewing” that is moving beyond “people versus parks” disputes to embrace radical alternative approaches (*ibid*, 1). The indigenously-run protected area along the Salween River in many senses appears to resonate strongly with the radical alternative that 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.

In the light of these findings, this Development Dissertation Brief ends with a few key take-aways and policy recommendation for development practioners and Swedish development assistance.

- In the current political climate, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners and a return to “normal” will do little to ameliorate the growing potential of a return to all out civil war. Long before the coup, it was this very situation of “business as usual” through policies of liberal peace that imperilled the fragile ceasefire agreements along Myanmar’s Borderlands.
- As such, development practioners and Swedish development assistance should push for a comprehensive overhaul of the 2008 constitution, and the series of illiberal land laws (such as the **Vacant Fallow and Virgin Land Law and Farmland Law**) and investment laws drafted by the former government as fundamental to any future peace process.
- Moreover, while it is encouraging that Sweden has imposed targeted sanctions on the Myanmar Military, it is important that these diplomatic acts do not stop here. New Zealand, for example, has taken the added step of cutting off all high-level diplomatic ties with the Tatmadaw⁴ to freeze out this illegitimate regime.
- As such, in tandem with targeted sanctions, it is essential, as indicated by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, that Sweden continues to increase its support to civil society, especially in the borderland areas, such as through the Burma Relief Centre. What is more, this support, like the sanctions, should be targeted so as to avoid being co-opted by the Tatmadaw. One way this might be achieved is by returning to cross-border aid, routed via Thailand rather than through central Myanmar.

Finally, it is vital that development practioners and Swedish development assistance provide not only financial aid but also political backing to community-based and indigenously driven initiatives instead of state-focused top-down approaches as essential to building sustainable Peace. Especially

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/9/new-zealand-suspends-myanmar-political-military-ties-after-coup>

given the current situation, a peace process controlled by the Myanmar Military is untenable.

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In Southeast Myanmar a protracted armed conflict has dragged on for over 70 years. This DDB depicts the struggles of indigenous people and environmental activists to transform a war-torn area into an indigenously run protected zone, the Salween Peace Park.

I sydöstra Myanmar har en långdragen väpnad konflikt pågått i mer än 70 år. Denna DDB skildrar ursprungsbefolkningens och miljöaktivisters kamp för att omvandla ett krigshärjat område till en inhemskt kontrollerad skyddad zon, Salween Peace Park.

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