



# Riverine Relations: A Sacred Geography of the Salween River

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# Riverine Relations: A Sacred Geography of the Salween River

By Emily Ostler

This thesis is submitted for the degree of  
**Master of Theological Studies**  
at  
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Advised by Professor James Robson  
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations  
Harvard University

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would be absent of its most pivotal aspects, including its embrace of affect and the entirety of its riverine framework.

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# Introduction: Corridor Geographies, Affect, and Relational Ontologies Along the Salween River

## A Brief Mapping of the Salween River

As it melts the Jiangmei'ergang Galou glacier (将美尔岗朶楼冰川), located 5,432 meter-high in the Tanggula Mountains, the Salween River is known by its Tibetan name, the Gyalmo Ngulchu (རྒྱལ་མོ་ངུལ་ཅུ).<sup>1</sup> From here it trails, mostly slow and clear, through Tibetan and Himalayan shrublands and meadows. The river then carves deep ravines through the Nujiang Gorge (怒江大峡谷), nourishing alpine coniferous and mixed forests and supporting Dulong (獨龍族), Nu (怒族), Lisu (栗僂族), and other communities who live alongside it. At this point, the Gyalmo Ngluchu becomes known primarily by its Mandarin name, the Nujiang (怒江) – a name derived from the name of the Nu people who live in the Nu River Valley. Here, in Yunnan, the Nujiang is protected as a part of China's Three Parallel Rivers UNESCO World Heritage Site (云南三江并流保护区), which encompasses certain Yunnan portions of the Salween-Nujiang (怒江), Mekong-Lancang (澜沧江), and Yangtze-Jinsha (金沙江) rivers. This World Heritage Site is home to over 80 species of endangered animals and is purported to support “over 25% of the

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<sup>1</sup> Yu Fei 喻菲, “Zhongguo kexuejia queding Yalu Zangbu Jiang deng sitiao guoji heliu yuantou 中國科學家確定雅魯藏布江等四條國際河流源頭”, *Kexue Wang* 科學網, August 22, 2011, <https://news.sciencenet.cn/htmlnews/2011/8/251272.shtml>

world's and 80% of China's animal species," and its demarcation has advanced conservation of the Salween Basin in Yunnan.<sup>2</sup>

From these towering mountains and gorges, the Nujiang then flows into northern Indochina subtropical forests near the China-Myanmar border. The most populous Indigenous groups of the area – known together as the Tai-Shan – refer to the river as Nae Som (ၤမၤဃၤ ခၤလၤက / ခၤမၤခၤခၤ).

The Nae Som soon crosses over the border into Myanmar, where it becomes known primarily by its Burmese name, the Thanlwin River (သံလွင်), or by the anglicization of this name, the Salween. These subtropical moist broadleaf forests are home to many Kachin, Lisu, Han, Shan, Palaung, and Wa communities. Leaving these subtropical forests, the Thanlwin then reaches tropical montane rainforests and the homelands of Lahu, Karen, Kayah, and Shan peoples. For a brief moment, as it touches Thailand, the Thanlwin forms a border between two countries. In Thailand, it is known as Mae Nam Salawin (แม่น้ำสาละวิน), where it home to primarily Karen communities – many of whom fled across the river to Thailand during periods of conflict in Myanmar's Karen State. The river then snakes back into Myanmar, where – in a mere 200-kilometers-stretch – it passes through tropical montane rainforests, moist deciduous forests, tropical dry forests, and coastal rainforests, as well as through Burman, Karen, and Mon communities. As it finally tumbles into the Andaman Sea, the Thanlwin River sustains coastal Mon communities and nourishes mangrove forests. Mangroves are some of the world's rarest

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<sup>2</sup> International Rivers, "The Salween River Basin: Dam Cascades Threaten Biological and Cultural Diversity," *International Rivers*, May 2012, [https://www.internationalrivers.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/86/2020/05/ir\\_salween\\_factsheet2012\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://www.internationalrivers.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/86/2020/05/ir_salween_factsheet2012_web_0.pdf).

but most productive ecosystems, and scholars have warned of the harmful consequences brought about by the current rapid decline of mangrove forests in Myanmar and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

From source to mouth, the Salween River supports human and non-human communities throughout the basin. The beneficial functions of the basin's ecosystems – such as carbon sequestration, water purification, food provision, and waste decomposition – not only sustain these communities but pour far beyond the basin itself.

However, these diverse ecosystems and human communities are increasingly burdened, fragmented, and afflicted by extractive industry, climate change, conflict, and other societal and environmental pressures.<sup>4</sup> In Myanmar and Yunnan, a large proportion of national income is derived from natural resources, with much of the population engaged in subsistence agriculture, commercial agriculture, and extractive industries. In China, recent infrastructure projects, extractive industries, and other developments have placed new burdens on Indigenous communities and the environments in which they live. In Myanmar, rich natural resources – a potential source of sustainable livelihood and development for the country – are instead enmeshed in conflict: driving conflict, funding conflict, and depleted by conflict. As explained by Burmese environmental scientist Thiri Shwesiin Aung, “pressures on natural resources and biodiversity and conflicts over the use of resources are mounting,” harming the earth and people whose lives and livelihoods are tied up with it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bijeesh Kozhikkodan Veetil, Sebastian Felipe Ruiz Pereira, and Ngo Xuan Quang, “Rapidly Diminishing Mangrove Forests in Myanmar (Burma): A Review,” *Hydrobiologica* 822, no. 1 (2018): 19-35; NUS News, “Over 60 Per Cent of Myanmar’s Mangroves Deforested in the Last 20 Years,” *NUS News*, March 3, 2020, <https://news.nus.edu.sg/over-60-per-cent-of-myanmars-mangroves-deforested-in-the-last-20-years/>.

<sup>4</sup> Thiri Shwesiin Aung, “The Current Situation of Myanmar’s Environmental and Natural Resource Governance,” *Current Politics of South, Southeastern, and Central Asia* 28, no. 1 (2019): 33-58.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.



Along the Salween, these myriad developments are rarely analyzed in conversation with each other and are instead subjected to disciplinary and regional divisions. These divisions do not represent the river's realities; communities throughout the basin are affected by developments happening both up and downstream. Furthermore, these diverse communities may have notions of development and prerequisites for peacebuilding that differ from those in positions of political power, and they may have consequential similarities and differences with communities up and downstream that impact how the river as a whole should be managed. As such, to better understand how to simultaneously promote peace, environmental protection, and development for communities anywhere along the basin, the Salween needs to be understood holistically: environmental science brought in conversation with peacebuilding efforts, northern portions of the basin considered in connection with portions in the south. By opening this conversation, this thesis aims to advance the well-being of human and more-than-human within the basin and beyond.

## **Introduction**

This thesis tracks a sacred geography of the Salween River.<sup>6</sup> On its 3,289 kilometer journey from its source in the Tibetan Plateau to the Andaman Sea, the Salween River passes through and sustains some of the world's most biodiverse regions. Members of many Indigenous groups, including the Akha, Blang, Dulong, Hmong, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Kokang, Lahu, Lisu, Mon,

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<sup>6</sup> The Salween River is also known as the Gyalmo Ngulchu (རྒྱལ་མོ་ངུལ་ཅུ), Nujiang (怒江), Thanlwin (သံလွင်), and Mae Nam Salawin (แม่น้ำสาละวิน), in Tibetan, Chinese, Burmese, and Thai, respectively. To emphasize the continuity of the river through multiple countries and communities with diverse linguistic backgrounds, this essay will utilize only one term, the term by which the river is most commonly known at its mouth: the Salween River. Quotes and other references will maintain the names for the river used by original authors.

Nu, Palaung, Pa'O, Shan, Tibetan, Yao, and Wa, have lived alongside the river for centuries, and all of them have developed ontologies, land management practices, and spiritualities, in direct conversation with the landscapes which they inhabit.<sup>7</sup> This lived relationality with the natural world – including plant, animal, and supernatural entities – informs notions of well-being for many of these groups. As such, understanding the nature of these relationalities is necessary to understand what is at stake with the rapid environmental change, increasing infrastructure development, and widespread conflict in the region, and it is a key component of any effective peacebuilding or development initiative, if such initiatives are to genuinely advance well-being as understood by Indigenous groups themselves.

This analysis will focus on three groups, spread out across the basin: the Lisu, the Shan, and the Karen. I will provide a brief overview of each community's history, culture, and religious background, as well as a brief description of the ecology of the region. I will then explore the ways these traditional ecological knowledges have informed and been informed by recent infrastructure developments along the Salween. It is important to emphasize that, given the breadth of this topic, these overviews are necessarily short; as such, they make generalizations that will not be representative of all people, communities, and locations. Furthermore, an ideal exploration of the topic would include communities further upstream, such as the Nu and Tibetans. However, given the scarcity of information from those regions and the brief nature of this thesis, they are not discussed here.

Although these three Indigenous communities are internally and mutually heterogenous, each community has strong animist traditions which have undergirded their traditional

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<sup>7</sup> Saw John Bright, "Opinion: Indigenous Understanding of Salween River Key for Biodiversity," *The Third Pole*, October 11, 2021, <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/culture/indigenous-understanding-salween-river-key-biodiversity/>.

ecological knowledges, their approaches to development and conservation, and their relationships with the environment. As I explore their ontologies, I will thus grant particular attention to animism and the way it has informed current attitudes and actions towards environmental conservation. In each section, I will include a case study, allowing me to grant these topics a greater degree of the specificity they demand.

## **Animism**

It is important to note the convoluted history of the term “animism.” The term was initially derived as a pejorative, implying that it is the false attribution of consciousness to things presumed to be inert.<sup>8</sup> Throughout its history, the term has primarily been used to pit “indigenous religions” against “world religions” such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, and as such, many scholars hoping to illuminate the complexity and honor the uniqueness of particular Indigenous religious traditions began to eschew the term.<sup>9</sup> In recent decades, however, the term has been resuscitated in scholarly works, even if with a range of interpretations and implications. The term is used by some in reference to the recognition of the animacy of the more-than-human world, often in a metaphysical sense, while others use it to “direct attention towards the continuous interrelation of all beings or of matter itself,” whether these more-than-human beings house spirits, consciousness, or other forms of intelligence.<sup>10</sup> Most recent employments of the term animism blend multiple definitions, emphasizing those aspects most representative of a particular context.

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<sup>8</sup> Darryl Wilkinson, “Is There Such a Thing as Animism?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 2 (June 2017): 289-311.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Harvey, “Introduction,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (London, UK: Routledge, 2013), 6.

Animism, that inherently difficult to delimit system of belief and action, likewise manifests differently in each case study presented here. As such, I likewise employ a blended notion of the term, which notion points simultaneously to a recognition of the natural world as animate and to the ways these communities relate with that animate world. These various manifestations of animism will be discussed in their respective sections, but I will note a few commonalities.

First, to varying degrees – or at least to varying degrees as can be concluded from the sources available to me – Lisu, Shan, and Karen communities along the Salween ascribe animacy to the natural world, viewing themselves as agential selves in an ecology of many more-than-human agential selves. Karen communities continue to outspokenly acknowledge nature spirits – including those enlivening aspects of nature often considered “inert,” like water. Lisu and Shan communities likewise voice similar convictions, yet information is sparser, particularly in terms of the ways animism has shifted with large-scale conversion to Buddhism and Christianity. Second, the animisms of these communities are relational, calling for particular ways of acting to maintain the simultaneous, sustained flourishing of humans and the many other selves peopling the landscape.

Therefore, I use the term “animism” in a manner similar to anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, who explored the animism of the Runa people of Ecuador in his book, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. He explains:

Animism, as it is currently being theorized...is quite different from its earlier social evolutionist and sometimes even racist incarnations, and it has provided an important foil for critiquing Western mechanistic representations of nature. And yet such critiques of the way we in the ‘West’ represent nature only asks how other humans come to treat nonhumans as animate... Animism, to my mind, gets at something more far reaching about the properties of the world, and this is why thinking with it is central to an anthropology beyond the human. It captures an animation that is emergent with life... Runa animism grows out of a need to interact with semiotic selves qua selves in all their

diversity. It is grounded in an ontological fact: there exist other kinds of thinking selves beyond the human.<sup>11</sup>

Runa animism, he explains, is “pragmatically oriented,” a way of relating and living that will allow Runa people to “penetrate the relational logics that create, connect, and sustain beings of the forest,” which beings include themselves.<sup>12</sup> Lisu, Shan, and Karen animisms likewise move beyond the recognition of animacy to particular mode of being that emerges in collaboration with the many more-than-human selves. Exactly what each community believes about the consciousness of more-than-human beings was difficult to find – a topic that may merit more research. However, what was evident was that each group recognized the human self as only one self in an ecology of selves peopling the landscape. More importantly, from this recognition of the human selves as embedded in an ecology of agential selves emerges notions of well-being that encompass well-being beyond the human. From this entangled sense of well-being emerges action – be that religious ritual or agricultural practices, legends or political activism – aimed at maintaining right relationships with these more-than-human beings inhabiting the landscape.

## **Theoretical Approaches**

### *Corridor Geographies, Story, and Affect*

When I decided to research Indigenous environmental ethics in China and Myanmar, I was initially uncertain of where to focus: which groups, which places, which practices? However, I realized that I was limiting my thinking to the same bounds which my former and current engagements with traditional ecological knowledges were urging me to break. This siloed

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<sup>11</sup> Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 94.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 95.

thinking placed firm divides between countries, disciplines, generations, and peoples, dismissing the cross-cutting and interpenetrating nature of these realities. It was not until I further considered the strangeness of Tibetan and Karen people sharing the same river that I realized the potentially emancipatory effects of taking a river-based approach with this thesis: an emancipatory effect that reflects the reframing evident in many traditional Indigenous ontologies. As such, this thesis follows the river.

By following the river, this thesis builds upon the “corridor” approach to geography developed by Dan Smyer Yü and Karin Dean, originally crafted as a means of reconsidering disciplinary, regional, political, and species boundaries at the Yunnan-Burma-Bengal nexus.<sup>13</sup> Corridor geographies are influenced by process geographies, which center human interactions and motions, but they go beyond these by “encompassing environmental flows and nonhuman aspects of transregionality.”<sup>14</sup> Yü explains that “nonhuman-defined corridors like rivers...are under-researched in contemporary corridor studies. Their relationships with local human societies, continental empires, and states deserve full attention.”<sup>15</sup> This thesis aims to respond to that call. Driven by the potential for corridor geographies to reimagine divides between disciplines, regions, species, and ecosystems, this thesis centers the Salween – a river that transverses multiple countries, conflict zones, ecoregions, ethnolinguistic groups, and which finds home in the borderlands of two large countries, but which has long played a central role in the migration histories, religions, cultures, and livelihoods of human and nonhuman actors living alongside it.

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<sup>13</sup> Dan Smyer Yü, “Perpendicular Geospatiality of Corridors and Borderlands,” in *Yunnan-Burma-Bengal Corridor Geographies: Protean Edging of Habitats and Empires*, ed. Dan Smyer Yü and Karin Dean, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 1-26.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

*Yunnan-Burma-Bengal Corridor Geographies: Protean Edging of Habitats and Empires*, edited by Yü and Dean, lays forth multiple corridor geographies that urge a rethinking of disciplinary, regional, and species divides in China, India, and Myanmar. It explains that a consideration of the more-than-human world is central to understanding human societies as they exist, shift, and interact, both among each other and with the environment. Yü states:

The nonhuman-corridor geography, which this book promotes as a more-than-human geography, pertains to an antithetical but symbiotic world of humans and nonhumans grounded in land and environmental flows and intertwined with nonhuman species. A continent can drift from its current location, a mountain or a plateau can grow taller, a river can shift its course or erode its banks, and a grassland can evolve into a desert due to geological, ecological, and climatic forces of change. As a 'body' fused with biotic and abiotic entities, a physical environment also co-evolves with organic beings who are themselves capable of altering the earth's geo-ecological formations for specific purposes.<sup>16</sup>

Such corridor geographies make innovative steps in highlighting the agentiality of more-than-human actors and the flows of interaction between themselves and human societies. In an effort to honor the ontologies of communities along the Salween River, particularly the Lisu, Shan, and Karen, this thesis aims to take these corridor geographies a step further, taking into account spirit and other supernatural actors in the landscape. Such ontologies necessarily shapes Lisu, Shan, and Karen notions of well-being and their interactions with the world around them, and as such, more-than-human agents must be understood to determine appropriate aims and means of any development, conservation, or peacemaking initiatives in the basin. Furthermore, considering spiritual agents enables a more thorough exploration into the ways spirituality and religion, however understood by the communities themselves, shape human interactions with the environment.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 16.

This thesis is further informed by Dan Smyer Yü in its emphasis on story and affect. Wherever possible, this thesis aims to include the folk literature, religious narratives, and personal accounts of Lisu, Shan, and Karen individuals and communities. In an article on the Myanmar-China jade trade, Yü explains that storytelling is important due to its “capacity to engender deeper empathy with otherwise apparently culturally ‘othered’ subjects,” which can “motivate action as well as compassion.”<sup>17</sup> Following the Salween River unearths many issues, such as conflict, extractive industry, climate change, and environmental conservation, wherein action is necessary. Many readers may be unconsciously or consciously tied up with these issues to various degrees, be that through their professional work, consumption patterns, or life situations, and stories may aid more empathetic engagement with these issues.

Affect is likewise crucial to address because it is, for many individuals along the Salween River, a key motivator in religious ritual, water rights activism, and land management practices. In his research in the Himalayas, the source of the Salween, Yü explores “human-earth affective bonds through religious and spiritual practices” – a topic which this thesis continues to explore among communities living downstream.<sup>18</sup> Through his research, Yü explains that not only are such affective bonds necessary to understand to promote “development” in ways that are meaningful to impacted communities, but that such affective bonds between humans and earth are “critical foundation of a sustainable future.” He further explains:

The challenge is that these relationships are intangible but felt and expressed in spiritual practices, indigenous earth-mythologies, world religions’ cosmovisions, local poetry and literature, and everyday modes of being. This is where I’m making an effort to bridge religion and ecology, environmental humanities, and earth science for diversifying

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<sup>17</sup> Mandy Sadan, Dan Smyer Yü, and Seng Lawn Dan, “Researching Life Stories of the Myanmar-China Jadeite Trade,” *New Area Studies* 2, no. 1 (2021): 63.

<sup>18</sup> ISSRNC, “Meet ISSRNC Board Member Dan Smyer Yü,” *ISSRNC*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.issrnc.org/2020/06/04/meet-issrnc-board-member-dan-smyer-yu/>.



existing affective approaches and yielding outcomes that can be shared widely beyond the Himalayas.<sup>19</sup>

I aim to follow Yü's bold turning towards to spirituality and affect, incorporating Indigenous cosmovisions, mythologies, rituals, and other aspects of spiritual life into my analyses. As I do so, I aim to build upon his work in two ways. First, although Yü asserted the consequentiality of spirituality and affect, he did not grant them much attention in *Yunnan-Burma-Bengal Corridor Geographies*. Furthermore, though the Salween River cuts through Yunnan and Myanmar, it was only cursorily considered in this book. Thus, this thesis brings together Yü's attention to spirituality and affect with his corridor geographical approach, introducing these to a corridor – the Salween River – yet only minimally examined through these lenses. As such, it will explore the ways affective relationships with the Salween River – particularly as manifest in folktales, spiritualities, and interactions with the river – inform notions of well-being by communities throughout the basin.

It is important to note that, rather than providing a thorough analyses of each community along the Salween, this thesis aims to commence a project and encourage further research. It aims to encourage more ethnographic work exploring spiritual and material lives of these communities, to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration in scholarship surrounding the Salween, and to encourage reconsideration of the importance of human-nature relationships in determining the aims and means of development within various contexts.

### *Salween Studies*

In the foreword of *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics on a Transboundary River* – a book unique in its interdisciplinary, interregional, and rigorous approach to the Salween – scholars

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Vanessa Lamb, Carl Middleton, and Saw Win explain that many of the various infrastructure developments currently being pursued along the Salween Basin are being pursued with “limited understanding of what precisely these new connections and developments would mean for the people, ecologies, and localities that they ‘intersect’ with in the Salween basin.”<sup>20</sup> Salween Studies, they explain, necessitates collaborations between groups, such as civil society groups, researchers, academic experts, interdisciplinary experts, language interpreters, knowledge interlocutors, governments and their representatives, and others who “see enough value in understanding an ‘area’ (as a set of processes, not necessarily geographically fixed) that they can come together and emerge with new understandings of the world and our place in it.”<sup>21</sup>

In *Knowing the Salween River*, contributors carved out a deliberate, interdisciplinary, collaborative space for Salween Studies. With my attention to corridor geographies and religiosity, I aim to build upon this work, drawing attention to the significance with which spiritual beliefs and practices inform relationships with the natural world for many communities throughout the Salween Basin, as well as the ways these relationships undergird traditional ecological knowledge, identity, and notions of development. These understandings, considered across the entire length of the river, are necessary to illuminate what is at stake with developments and conflicts along the river, and to determine what developments and projects would genuinely advance well-being for communities living alongside it.

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<sup>20</sup> Vanessa Lamb et al., “A State of Knowledge of the Salween River: An Overview of Civil Society Research,” in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 108.

<sup>21</sup> Vanessa Lamb, Carl Middleton, and Saw Win, “Introduction: Resources Politics and Knowing the Salween River,” in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 4.

### *A Salweenian Corridor Geography*

I propose the Salween River as a particularly layered, reconfiguring, and consequential corridor geography to consider for multiple reasons.

First, because the Salween River crosscuts multiple political borders, ethnolinguistic groups, and ecosystems, it provides fresh visions for understanding geographical boundaries. This is particularly evident as the Salween stretches through the border regions of three countries, and as such, human and more-than-human communities along the river may be more ecologically and culturally tied to others sharing the river, but whom live in separate countries and political contexts. Furthermore, along the Salween, three geographical regions often siloed in traditional academic Area Studies – South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia – overlap and evolve together. Riverine communities along the Salween are located far from national capitals in both China and Myanmar, and they are often considered in separate realms of Area Studies. Such disciplinary, political, and regional siloes fragment the centuries-long connectivity of these riverine communities, and considering them as an interacting, living whole offers to illuminate paths for collaborative engagement that enhances the well-being of communities throughout the basin.

As the Salween transgresses political boundaries to bind neighboring communities, it likewise binds communities that are geographically, linguistically, and culturally isolated – such as the Karen and the Tibetan people – and it binds human and more-than-human actors across vast stretches of land into ties of reciprocal responsibility. Actions taken upstream quickly affect the well-being of those downstream, and as such, these human and more-than-human communities cannot be considered fully isolated or separate from one another.

Second, the Salween River acts as an “[agent] of the environmental edging process,” nurturing biodiversity as it threads through multiple ecosystems and draws species into encounter with one another. Its health has important implications for the health of diverse ecosystems along the river and surrounding its tributaries and distributaries. This edging process effected by the river likewise facilitates human co-emergence through the exchange of ideas, river-based livelihoods, and the sharing of resources – including, but not limited to, water.

Ecologically, the Salween River and its basin traverse ten ecoregions. Ecoregions are “complex patterns determined by climate, geology and the evolutionary history of the planet,”<sup>22</sup> As the boundaries of ecoregions are “not fixed and sharp, but rather encompass area[s] within which important ecological and evolutionary process most strongly interact,” and because the markings of ecoregions throughout the Salween Basin often follow the shape of its course, the weaving of ecoregions into this analysis harmonizes well with the interspecies, movement-centered approaches encouraged by corridor geographies.

Of the ten ecoregions traversed by the Salween, four are listed as “priorities for conservation:” the Tibetan Plateau Alpine Shrublands and Meadows, the Eastern Himalayan Alpine Shrub and Meadows, the Northern Indochina Subtropical Forests, and the Karen-Kayah Montane Forests.<sup>23</sup> Due to geographic and political isolation, the ecoregions comprising the Salween Basin are among Asia’s least modified, and are thus home to large numbers of endemic species and rich biodiversity.<sup>24</sup> However, also due to these isolations and conflict, these

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<sup>22</sup> World Wildlife Fund, “Ecoregions,” *World Wildlife Fund*, n.d., <https://www.worldwildlife.org/biomes>.

<sup>23</sup> The ten ecoregions comprising the Salween River basin are: Tibetan Plateau Alpine Shrublands and Meadows, Southwest Tibet Shrublands and Meadows, Eastern Himalayan Alpine Shrublands and Meadows, Nujiang Lancang Gorge Alpine Conifer and Mixed Forests, Northern Indochina Subtropical Forests, Irrawaddy Moist Deciduous Rainforests, Kayah-Karen Montane Rainforests, Irrawaddy Dry Forests, Myanmar Coastal Rainforests, and Myanmar Coast Mangroves.

<sup>24</sup> The Third Pole, “River Basins: Salween,” *The Third Pole*, n.d., <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/river-basins/salween/>.

ecoregions are vastly understudied, and conservation scientists and local communities worry that the environmental impacts of rapidly increasing infrastructure development, exploitative industry, and conflict in the region are not thoroughly understood and are thus more readily dismissed.<sup>25</sup>

Third, although the Salween River binds ecosystems and communities, it also, in many places, forms natural boundaries. Many divides between ethnolinguistic groups, states, and habitats have been shaped by the river, such as in places where rivers rage dangerously, are unnavigable, or have formed deep canyons and ravines. Most of the Salween is unnavigable, and much of its Yunnan and Tibetan portions stretch through deep gorges, contributing to the longstanding isolation of many ethnic groups, such as the Dulong and Lisu, from China's heartland. In China and Myanmar, the isolation of ethnic minority groups from their states' respective capitals has encouraged the preservation of cultural traditions, their languages, and the environments within which they live. In other places, such as on the border of Myanmar and Thailand, the natural division of the river has served as a source of immediate refuge for individuals escaping conflict.

The divisions carved by the Salween have also encouraged plant and animal speciation in the region. In addition to facilitating cultural and linguistic preservation, this isolation likewise allowed much of the Salween River Basin's biodiversity, natural resources, and water quality to remain intact while other, more accessible, parts of Myanmar and China were increasingly burdened by extractive industry, globalization, and infrastructure developments.

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<sup>25</sup> Tyler Roney et al., "China's Salween Plans in Limbo in Post-Coup Myanmar," *The Third Pole*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/energy/chinas-salween-plans-in-limbo-in-post-coup-myanmar/>.

Fourth, the movement of the Salween offers a powerful counternarrative to predominate “trait” geographies, which largely treat the globe as a parcelable, static entity. As means of transportation, migration, and communication for human and more-than-human subjects, and because of the longstanding isolation but imminent – and already occurring – shifting of Salween Basin, a Salween River corridor geographical lens not only encourage imaginations of place that transcend modern geographical demarcations, but it encourages reimaginings of time. In such reimaginings, not only are generations past and future brought into conversation with the present, but attention is drawn to the everyday, quick tumbling of actions into others. In the case of the Salween, this demands attention to the urgent questions of climate change, pollution, damming, and war, as well as the presence or absence of affective ties between humans and the landscape, as all of these have immediate and long-term implications for human and non-human communities along the river. It also encourages innovative collaborations among Salweenian communities to shape their collective well-being.

Lastly, due to its course through ethnically and ecologically diverse regions, through borderlands long considered home by many Indigenous groups, through conflict zones, through multiple political constituencies, and through communities with longstanding, layered material and spiritual ties with the river, as well as its current “wholeness” or freedom from large dams, the Salween River is particularly transgressive to conventional, siloed ways of thinking. Despite increasing environmental pressures, the Salween Basin maintains abundant biodiversity, forest cover, and wildlife populations, and the river still flows largely undammed. The Salween Basin is thus a principally intact international, interhabitat linkage of wildlife – an anomaly in a region wherein where so many rivers, habitats, and wildlife populations are greatly fragmented.

Throughout the Salween Basin, environmental, political, economic, and other issues of immense consequence for millions of human and more-than-human beings are woven together – discipline with discipline, species with species, constituency with constituency, moment with moment, spiritual with material. By following a corridor geography of the Salween River, I aim to bring these topics together in fresh and consequential ways, drawing attention to the interspecific, interregional, interdisciplinary relationships characterizing life along the Salween.

### **Conflict, Development, and Natural Resources in China and Myanmar**

The Salween River and its basin are home to rich biodiversity, protected by the longstanding stewardship of Indigenous peoples, environmental protection efforts, and geographic and political isolation – which reduced the pressures of globalization, extraction, and infrastructure development.<sup>26</sup> However, the transition to Myanmar’s transition to a civilian government in 2011 and the commencement of China’s “reform and opening-Up” in 1978 placed long intact ecosystems under increasing pressures from infrastructure construction, extractive industry, hydropower projects, wildlife trafficking, monocropping and chemical fertilizers, and other developments. Since these political changes, environmental pressures have taken new forms as conservation science has illuminated new possibilities, activists have pursued policy changes, and as conflict seized Myanmar following the military coup in 2021. As such, Indigenous groups throughout the Salween Basin have experienced vast economic, political, and environmental changes in recent decades, despite their varying political contexts.

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<sup>26</sup> This can be seen, for instance, in the Hani Rice Terraces, which are self-sustaining agrosystems developed and utilized by Hani communities for hundreds of years. Though long isolated from mainland China, the terraces have recently been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and have received environmental protections, and cultural protections, and funding from the government of the People’s Republic of China. More information can be found on the UNESCO website: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1111/>.

In Myanmar, this can be seen, for instance, in proliferating deforestation following the military coup in Myanmar, as the Tatmadaw – the official name of the armed forces of Myanmar – uses timber and other extractive industries as means of rapid revenue flow and because their takeover enabled them to surmount accountability requirements for various environmental laws.<sup>27</sup> It can also be seen in the pollution of Daw Lar Lake by upstream cement plants, which harmed the health and incomes of local Karen communities. This is also evident in the many planned, though yet unconstructed, largescale hydropower projects on the river. As of 2019, there were twenty proposed hydropower projects along the Salween River, most on its Myanmar portions.<sup>28</sup> Most of these dams will export the majority of their energy to China and Thailand, and what is left will be used primarily by Myanmar’s military government, leaving ethnic minority groups to bear the double burden of harm to the river and a strengthened military aggressor, with no economic benefit for themselves.

Many of Myanmar’s natural resources are tied up in violent conflict, authoritarianism, and genocide. For instance, jade mining has not only engendered corruption, dangerous working conditions, increased rates of child labor, and environmental degradation, but it has provided a source of funding for the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), who directly or indirectly control various aspects of the industry.<sup>29</sup> Thus, jade mining – as with extraction of other natural resources, such as rubies and timber – has undermined peacemaking efforts in Myanmar, both by funding armed groups and encouraging conflict over ownership of extraction

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<sup>27</sup> Conflict and Environment Observatory, “Deforestation in Conflict Areas in 2020,” *Conflict and Environment Observatory*, April 2021, <https://ceobs.org/assessment-of-recent-forest-loss-in-conflict-areas/>.

<sup>28</sup> Maung Maung Aye, “A Reflection on the Role of Researchers and Research on the Salween River: Past, Present, and Future,” in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), v.

<sup>29</sup> Hannah Beech, “Battling for Blood Jade,” *TIME*, March 9, 2017, <https://time.com/4696417/myanmar-blood-jade-hpakant/>.



industries and sites. One report went so far as to claim that the jade industry “enabled” the military coup in 2021, and that “natural resource governance and management needed to be considered as a fundamental part of the peace process [in Myanmar],” and that their relegation to a secondary status has continuously undermined peacebuilding efforts.<sup>30</sup>

In China, many environmental conservation policies nuanced effects on human and nonhuman communities. Grós, for instance, explains that the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) – a program enacted by the PRC, which required all farmland located on slopes with a gradient higher than twenty-five degrees be converted to forests, with rice subsidies provided to compensate for decreased agricultural yield – on Dulong livelihoods, access to traditional foods, and economic sovereignty, as well as on environmental health in the region.<sup>31</sup> This policy, enacted in 2003, had particularly impactful effects on Dulong communities, who almost solely reside in steep gorges. Biodiversity, in some regards, increased, but it reduced access to traditional foods and ability to carry out traditional practices. Another PRC policy required farmers in many Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) villages to purchase chemical fertilizers, regardless of whether they wanted to use them – often they did not, because of effects on soil health, food taste, and food nutrition, and because of religious prohibitions against killing.<sup>32</sup> These policies framed Tibetans as backwards and in need of scientific technology to properly develop, and while this policy did allow for greater agricultural production, it was not without negative environmental effects, wasted money for those who did

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<sup>30</sup> Global Witness, “Jade and Conflict: Myanmar’s Vicious Cycle,” *Global Witness* (June 2021): 64; RFA, “Report: Corrupt Myanmar Jade Industry Causes Armed Conflict and Enabled Coup,” *Radio Free Asia*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/jade-07012021152039.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Stephane Grós, “The Bittersweet Taste of Rice. Sloping Land Conversion and the Shifting Livelihoods of the Drung in Northwest China,” *Himalaya: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 34, no. 2 (2014): 81-96.

<sup>32</sup> Emily Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 183-187.

not use the fertilizers, impacts on local health, and making TAR villages more dependent on interventions from the central government.

Despite these shifts, many policymakers, environmental activists, and Indigenous leaders have been working to promote cultural and environmental preservation in these countries. For instance, in addition to the many dams planned for Myanmar portions of the Salween River, additional dams were previously planned for construction in China. However, most of these have all been cancelled due to civil society opposition, seismic risks, and environmental concerns.<sup>33</sup> Following challenges by the State Environmental Protection Administration, NGOs, and other actors, hydropower projects proposed to be built in the Yunnan portion were shelved in 2004. Taking their place are endeavors to transform portions of the river into a national park, which would simultaneously advance economic opportunity and environmental protection in the region.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, I argue that to fully understand the implications of such developments on the well-being of Indigenous groups along the Salween, analyses need to grant greater attention their value systems and, in particular, their spiritual lives. Through personal engagements with and research into various communities along the Salween, I have found that, in many cases and in many regards, spirituality heavily informs the preferred aims and means of “development.” For the groups with whom I have engaged, these spiritualities are premised primarily upon relationality with a more-than-human world, encompassing a range of plant, animal, and spirit

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<sup>33</sup> Salween Watch, “Hydropower Projects on the Salween River: An Update,” *International Rivers*, March 14, 2014, <https://archive.internationalrivers.org/resources/hydropower-projects-on-the-salween-river-an-update-8258>.

<sup>34</sup> Yu Xiaogang, Chen Xiangxue, and Carl Middleton, “From Hydropower Construction to National Park Creation: Changing Pathways of the Nu River,” in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 49-69.

actors. These relationships are central to notions of identity and well-being, and as such, they shape perspectives towards development in their respective region.

The ontologies of these respective groups, especially in their relationality with the environment, have shaped perspectives and approaches towards these developments. As such, these ontologies are not only beneficial in providing ethical alternatives amidst a global environmental crisis, but they are important locating pathways through the tension of conservation and development that encompass “well-being” as understood by the Indigenous groups themselves.

### **Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Relationship, and Well-Being**

Driven by the importance of understanding these relationships and their appended ontologies, notions of well-being, and practices, I work my way along the Salween, granting attention to the relationships between humans, plants, animals, and supernatural entities, and the beliefs, practices, and ethics stemming from these.

These relationship-based, intergenerational, and dynamic knowledge systems developed and employed by Indigenous peoples throughout the world are frequently referred to as “traditional ecological knowledges.” Because of their ability to promote simultaneous, sustainable ways of life for both humans and the environment, traditional ecological knowledges have been increasingly incorporated into academic and professional work on Indigenous rights, sustainable development, and environmental conservation.

Traditional ecological knowledge is defined by the U.S. National Park Service as:

...the on-going accumulation of knowledge, practice and belief about relationships between living beings in a specific ecosystem that is acquired by indigenous people over hundreds or thousands of years through direct contact with the environment, handed down through generations, and used for life-

sustaining ways. This knowledge includes the relationships between people, plants, animals, natural phenomena, landscapes, and timing of events for activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry. It encompasses the world view of a people, which includes ecology, spirituality, human and animal relationships, and more.<sup>35</sup>

Traditional ecological knowledges provide specific, interdisciplinary, and sustainable approaches to environmental management, including practices that range from wildlife protection to sustainable agrosystems, and from ethnobotany to wildfire management – all of which are developed in conversation with the environment.<sup>36</sup> As such, traditional ecological knowledges provide ethical, ontological, and practical alternatives to current trends of environmental exploitation and disconnection from the natural world. Cheryl Charles, an expert of nature-based education and leadership, and Gregory Cajete, a Native American scholar of Indigenous epistemologies and science, explain that “Indigenous epistemologies provide some of the most profound insights for cultivating the kind of sustainable relationship to place and spiritually integrated perception of nature needed to address what has now become a global crisis of environmental relationship.”<sup>37</sup> As explained here, traditional ecological knowledge moves beyond “technology” as understood in a bounded, practical sense; instead, it encourage reworkings of relationship with the environment.

Numerous scholars have explored the traditional ecological knowledges of ethnic minority groups residing within and near the Salween Basin, analyzing the effects of these traditions on local biodiversity, the ways such traditions are carried forward, and the ways these practices have adapted to modern pressures. Zhuo Cheng et al., for instance, record Dulong log

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<sup>35</sup> NPS, “Overview of TEK,” *National Park Service*, n.d., <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tek/description.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Newman, “Human Dimensions: Traditional Ecological Knowledge – Finding a Home in the Ecological Society of America,” *Bulletin: Ecological Society of America* 102, no. 3 (July 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Cheryl Charles and Gregory Cajete, “Wisdom Traditions, Science, and Care for the Earth: Pathways to Responsible Action,” *Ecopsychology* 12, no. 2 (April 2020).

beekeeping and living tree beekeeping practices – as well as the plants used in such practices – explaining their importance to Dulong livelihoods, native pollinator populations, and local plant life.<sup>38</sup> Liu Hongmao et al., similarly explores the environmentally beneficial impacts of Dai “holy hills,” wherein hunting, gathering, and cutting are prohibited.<sup>39</sup> Others scholars explore ethnobotanical usages of plants among Indigenous groups in the region, such as within medicine or veterinary care.<sup>40</sup> Each of these authors explained that these practices have been sustained – albeit in ever-shifting form – despite changes in environmental policy, increased tourism, and environmental degradation.

Through such scholarship, these scholars have illuminated the importance of traditional ecological knowledges maintained by Indigenous communities within China and Myanmar, calling for greater understanding of these practices and greater collaboration with Indigenous communities as a means of simultaneously advancing cultural integrity, environmental health, and economic stability.

Importantly, many of these studies explore the ethical and spiritual dimensions of traditional ecological knowledges, as opposed to solely the aspects most apparently corresponding with conservation science. However, many of them give only a cursory glance to religion, and when they do, they often dismiss the role of spiritual lives, human-nature-spirit relationships, and spirit agentiality in shaping these knowledges and determining their purported ends and means as understood by the Indigenous groups themselves. The traditional ecological

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<sup>38</sup> Zhuo Cheng et al., “Ethnobotanical Study on Plants Used for Traditional Beekeeping by Dulong People in Yunnan China,” *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 16, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>39</sup> Liu Hongmao et al., “Practice of Conserving Plant Diversity Through Traditional Beliefs: A Case Study of Xishuangbanna, Southwest China,” *Biodiversity and Conservation* 11, (2002): 705-713.

<sup>40</sup> Abdolbaset Ghorbani et al., “Ethnobotanical Study of Medicinal Plants Utilized by Hani Ethnicity in Naban River Watershed National Reserve, Yunnan, China,” *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 134, (2011): 651-667; Shicai Shen, Jie Qian, Jian Ren, “Ethnoveterinary Plant Remedies Used by Nu People in NW Yunnan of China,” *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 6, no. 24 (2010).

knowledges of many Indigenous groups throughout the Salween Basin are undergirded by human-nature relationality that engages both the spiritual and the material, and as such, when the spiritual is disregarded in analyses, or when the spiritual is taken into account on its own terms and not in conversation with environmental management, development, and conflict in the region, these analyses are left wanting of conversations necessary to promote sustainable peace and development in ways that are understood by Indigenous communities themselves.

Therefore, I aim to bring together various frequently siloed fields – environmental science, peace, development, and religious studies – to illustrate the ways they interweave together within the lives and knowledges of Lisu, Shan, and Karen people. Further research, particularly ethnographic research, should be undertaken to construct more thorough analyses; however, given pandemic and time restraints, this analysis was limited to existing data. As such, I weave together information from traditionally siloed fields, aiming to commence the work of more interdisciplinary analysis of the “development” as pursued and understood by Indigenous groups along the Salween. Most radically, this thesis grants significant weight to spiritual practices, beliefs, and entities.

In this analysis, I will pay particular attention to the way such relationships are informed by and inform religious belief and practice.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis explores a sacred geography of the Salween, focusing on human spiritual and practical relationships with the river, and the ways these are intertwined. By exploring these ties, I hope to better understand the ways river developments impact the well-being of riverine communities, as well as the ways these communities have responded to such developments.

Furthermore, by exploring the ethical, spiritual, and practical knowledges that have grown through long-lasting, intimate relationships with the river and surrounding ecosystems, I hope to illuminate possible pathways forward amidst conflict, environmental degradation, and economic instability in the region.

The Salween thus becomes a means of interrogating mainstream ontologies, which are premised upon divisions: between humans and nature, between countries, between the spiritual and the material, and between disciplines. To be sure, such divisions allow for specialization and many carry unignorable implications for life on the planet; nonetheless, this essay seeks to build connections among things traditionally siloed: East, South, and Southeast Asia; humans and nature; spiritual and material life; geography, political science, religious studies, and anthropology. The primary purpose of centering the Salween in this exploration is to encourage a reimagining of human place on earth, as a counternarrative to the anthropocentric leanings of the West, and against the widened rift between humans and nature often resulting from Western environmental conservation activities.

To explore these relationships, this thesis takes three stops along the Salween River. It begins in the Nu River Valley of China, where it explores the material and spiritual relationships of local Lisu communities with the Salween River. It then stops at villages in Myanmar's Shan State, exploring the ways Shan relationships with the river have shaped their responses to conflict, hydropower, and environmental harm in the region. Lastly, it stops in Karen State's Mutraw District, where it elucidates a Karen-designed vision for sustainable and representative governance, which is rooted in animist ontologies. Each section is written with different styles and emphases, each catered to the particular story I felt was most important to tell.

## **Limitations of This Thesis**

Time, length, and resource constraints required that much be left out of this thesis. First, many groups with strong connections to the Salween River are almost absent from this thesis, including -- but not limited to -- Akha, Blang, Dulong, Hmong, Kachin, Karenni, Kokang, Lahu, Mon, Nu, Palaung, Pa'O, Tibetan, Yao, and Wa communities, and Karen, Lisu, and Shan communities outside of those discussed. Furthermore, those communities discussed -- the Lisu, Shan, and Karen -- are internally and mutually diverse, and this thesis is too short to speak adequately to such diversity.

A thorough understanding of the Salween River basin requires engagements across mediums and disciplines, including firsthand engagements with and contributions from scholars, activists, and other individuals from the region. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup in Myanmar, I was unable to perform firsthand research, and this thesis is based primarily upon secondary sources, which were likewise limited in interdisciplinary design, depth, and quantity.

Because of these barriers to research, I designed a project that was intentionally broad in scope. Instead of providing a detailed account of one community's relationship with the Salween River, this thesis aims to establish large-scale connections between regions and disciplines, aiming to bring them together in innovative, consequential ways. In the future, I hope that I can continue this research in more detail, writing about the Salween Basin with the thoroughness, nuance, and rigor which it demands.



# Christianity, Animism, and Riverine Relations: The Lisu of the Nu River Valley

The first story from the river is that of the Lisu, or those Lisu living along the Salween (Nu) River in the Nu River Valley of northwestern Yunnan Province. Over the past century, these communities have experienced immense economic, environmental, and religious change. Amidst this change, these Lisu communities have retained strong material and spiritual ties with the Salween River, which relationships have long informed their beliefs, ways of life, and notions of well-being.

## Lisu Background

Throughout their history, Lisu have primarily settled in the mountainous regions of southwestern China, northern Myanmar, and northwestern Thailand, where their populations are approximately 630,000, 700,000 and 60,000, respectively.<sup>41</sup> These lands are composed mostly of tropical and subtropical moist broadleaf forests, temperate broadleaf and mixed forests, and temperate coniferous forests.<sup>42</sup> Lisu communities are usually located near consistent sources of water, most frequently the Salween River and its tributaries and streams. Calling these lands home for centuries, Lisu communities have developed environmentally beneficial ways of life, which have grown through their longstanding relationships with and thoroughgoing knowledge of these ecosystems.

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<sup>41</sup> Kyaw Myo Min, “Thousands of Ethnic Lisu Protest Killings by Myanmar’s Kachin Independence Army,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/thousands-of-ethnic-lisu-protest-killings-by-myanmars-kachin-independence-army-05222017163516.html>; The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Lisu,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2007, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lisu>.

<sup>42</sup> Ersi, “WWF Terrestrial Ecoregions of the World (Biomes),” *ArcGIS*, Accessed April 2022, <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/View/index.html?appid=d60ec415febb4874ac5e0960a6a2e448>.

Lisu have historically practiced swidden agriculture to cultivate rice, corn, and buckwheat. They also gather medicinal herbs, honey, wild fruits and vegetables, eggs, bugs, and nuts and seeds from forests, and they also hunt and fish.<sup>43</sup> However, a mixture of large-scale logging and infrastructure developments, policies separating agricultural lands from forests, land privatization, and the demonization of ethnic minority agricultural practices – including swidden in particular – as uncivilized, unproductive, and even harmful within national discourse have caused these traditional practices to wane.<sup>44</sup> In some accounts, increasing commercialization of agriculture, for instance, has caused traditional collaborative agricultural systems to become more exploitative than cooperative.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, infrastructure and economic developments expanding markets access have resulted in deforestation and in overexploitation of non-timber products, such as medicinal plants, in northwestern Yunnan.<sup>46</sup> Though such developments may bring economic benefit, they also impact the ability of Lisu communities to access traditional foods and participate in practices long intertwined with Lisu identity.<sup>47</sup> Lisu communities have worked to adapt to these developments in sustainable ways. For instance, they have started cultivating certain popular medicinal plants at home – rather than harvesting all of them wild

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<sup>43</sup> Huang Ji, Pei Shengji, and Long Chunlin, “An Ethnobotanical Study of Medicinal Plants Used by the Lisu People in Nujiang, Northwest Yunnan, China,” *Economic Botany* 58, no. 1 (December 2004): S255-S256.; Facts and Details, “Lisu Ethnic Group,” *Facts and Details*, April 2014, <https://factsanddetails.com/asian/cat66/sub417/item2736.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Jefferson Fox et al. “Policies, Political-Economy, and Swidden in Southeast Asia,” *Human Ecology: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 37, no. 3 (June 2009): 305-322.

<sup>45</sup> Guojia Minwei Wangzhan 國家民委網站, “Lisu zu 栗僂族,” *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu* 中華人民共和國中央人民政府, April 14, 2006, [http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-04/14/content\\_254191.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2006-04/14/content_254191.htm).

<sup>46</sup> Huang Ji, Pei Shengji, and Long Chunlin, “An Ethnobotanical Study of Medicinal Plants Used by the Lisu People in Nujiang, Northwest Yunnan, China,” S257.

<sup>47</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Lisu.”

from the forest – as is possible.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, the region is still undergoing vast environmental change, affecting Lisu lifeways and livelihoods.

Traditional Lisu agricultural, hunting, and gathering activities have nurtured a strong relationship with the natural world, which manifests in their intertwining of subsistence, cultural, and religious activities. For instance, Lisu traditionally save the skulls of many hunted animals, regard food as a gift from nature, and they adhere to a natural calendar which demarcates periods in which specific activities – such as hunting or gathering in certain areas – were banned to give nature a period of rest.<sup>49</sup> Though this calendar is no longer adhered to strictly by the majority of Lisu, a study in and around Liju, a Lisu village not far from the Salween River, found that ninety percent of Lisu supported the seasonal closure of mountain areas, with many explaining these views with sentiments such as, “we need rest and so does the mountain.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, though usage of the calendar has changed, a sense of respect for seasonal cycles persists, encouraging behavior that harmonizes with them.

Such practices are traditionally not merely practical, but they are rooted in Lisu animist and totemist belief systems. Totemism, a “system of belief in which humans are said to have a mystical relationship with a spirit-being, such as an animal or plant,” encourages spiritual and material reciprocal relationships between humans and the natural world.<sup>51</sup> The totemism of Lisu people has been described as “somewhat exceptional,” because they “believe that they are derived from animals and plants,” which may result in an even more profound sense of kinship

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<sup>48</sup> Ji, Shengji, and Chunlin, “An Ethnobotanical Study of Medicinal Plants Used by the Lisu People,” S256-S257.

<sup>49</sup> Jie Liu et al., “The Lisu People’s Traditional National Philosophy and its Potential Impact on Conservation Planning in the Laojun Mountain Region, Yunnan Province, China,” *Primates* 62, (July 27, 2020), 153-154.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>51</sup> Josef Haekel, “Totemism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/totemism-religion>.

and responsibility towards totems.<sup>52</sup> Each Lisu clan maintains a special relationship with the particular animal, plant, or element of nature from which their clan derives, and they believe these relationships are crucial for the mutual well-being of the clan and the element or species. These totems are passed down intergenerationally through clan names, including names such as Fish, Buckwheat, Fire, Frost, Tiger, and Bee.<sup>53</sup> In these totems and in their appended animist ontologies and practices, Lisu place themselves in networks of kinship with the natural world, which relationships are founded upon awe, respect, and responsibility.

### **Relationships with the Salween (Nu) River**

In the Nu Valley, these belief systems have nurtured animated, spiritually and materially significant relationships with the Salween River. Within these systems, all natural elements – from mountains to trees, birds to water – have spirits, known as “NI,” (尼). To ensure the welfare of the community, Lisu traditionally worship and offer sacrifices to these NI – among the most significant of these being the NI of water, known in Mandarin as *aidusini* (埃杜斯尼).<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the importance of the *aidusini* in traditional beliefs, the spiritual potency of water – and of the Salween River in particular – is evident in the Spring Bathing Festival (澡塘會) held by Chinese Lisu communities in the first lunar month of each year.<sup>55</sup> In this festival,

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<sup>52</sup> Liu et al., “The Lisu People’s Traditional National Philosophy,” 155.

<sup>53</sup> Liu Yahu, *Studies of the Epics of Southern China*, eds. Anna K. Kelly, Mark Y. Wong, and William A. McGrath, trans. Yang Yanhua, Liu Yingpin, and You Guangjie (Linden, NJ: Beijing Book Co., Inc., 2019).

<sup>54</sup> Guojia Minwei Wangzhan 國家民委網站, “Lisu zu 栗僂族.”

<sup>55</sup> Computer Network Information Center of Chinese Academy of Sciences, “‘Kuoshi’ Festival and Bathing Pool Singing Gathering,” *Science Museums of China*, n.d., <http://www.kepu.net.cn/english/nationalitysw/lisu/200311200025.html>.

Lisu women and men of all ages gather in and around hot springs near the Salween River to bathe, feast, sing, and dance. Historically, the water has been especially revered for its ability to cure diseases, and people bathed to prevent sickness in the coming year. Over time, the nature of this festival has shifted and stretched, and now these communities bathe in the sacred water of the hot springs to cleanse themselves of the pollutions, misfortunes, and other ailments of the previous year and to invite auspiciousness into the coming year.<sup>56</sup> They also gather to socialize, feast, dance, and sing, often travelling from throughout the canyon and remaining in the area for multiple days. Though the exact nature of this festival has changed, that it continues to be varied out with such vigor suggests that the Salween still plays a central role in Lisu cultural life and identity.

### **Conversion to Christianity**

In the twentieth century, Christian missionaries began converting large populations of Lisu to Christianity. The first Christian church established among the Lisu was the Salween Branch, located near the Salween River in China.<sup>57</sup> Today, over half of Lisu in China are Christian, with lower numbers practicing Christianity in Myanmar and Thailand.<sup>58</sup> For most, this Christianity has blended with Lisu totemist and animist beliefs, resulting in a form of Christianity particularly cognizant of spirituality in the landscape and of the sacrality of Lisu lands in particular. Among other manifestations, this has manifested in attitudes towards the Salween River among Lisu Christians in Yunnan Province.

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<sup>56</sup> Zhonghua Wuqian Nian 中華五千年， “Zaotanghui 澡塘會,” *Zhongguo Wenming Wang* 中國文明網， December 3, 2007, [http://fz.wenming.cn/zgwmw/wmdjr/ssmzctjr/ssmz\\_lsz/201108/t20110826\\_96032.html](http://fz.wenming.cn/zgwmw/wmdjr/ssmzctjr/ssmz_lsz/201108/t20110826_96032.html).

<sup>57</sup> Shanghai Jiaotong University, “The Amazing World of the Ethnic Groups of Yunnan Province: Lisu Nationality 3,” *Coursera*, n.d., <https://www.coursera.org/lecture/ethnic-yunnan/lisu-nationality-3-6i68J>.

<sup>58</sup> Amita Arrington, *Songs of the Lisu Hills: Practicing Christianity in Southwest China*, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2021).

Despite their conversion to Christianity, for instance, Lisu communities in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture (怒江傈僳族自治州) continue to carry out many traditional festivals and other practices. Upon interviewing Wang Renyang, the caretaker of a temple in the Nu River Valley, Camille Jetzer, then a student at Oxford University, concluded that “ancient festivals which celebrate nature spirits, notably water deities, which inform man’s relationship with his environment,” appear to “have been considered significant enough to be preserved and incorporated into other religious beliefs including Buddhism and Christianity.”<sup>59</sup> Among the most important of these festivals is the Spring Bathing Festival, which is still carried out by large numbers of Lisu today. Thus, though the exact beliefs undergirding it have shifted over the decades, the Spring Bathing Festival is still considered important to Lisu ways of life, and the waters of the Salween River are still, to some extent, revered for their spiritual potency.

The Spring Bathing Festival, as with many rituals engaging water, carries strong resonances with Christian baptismal practices. As such, further research may consider exploring Lisu attitudes towards the Spring Bathing Festival and Christian baptisms. In my research, I was unable to locate any such comparisons. However, I did find that many Lisu Christian communities carry out immersion baptisms – wherein the full body is immersed in water – in the Salween River.<sup>60</sup> Further research may consider looking at whether the traditional spiritual significance of the Salween River – and any particular sites along it – influences choice of baptismal site, how baptism is perceived, how the Spring Bathing Festival is understood, and

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<sup>59</sup> Camille Jetzer, “River Spirits in the Nu River Valley, Yunnan, China,” *BA Dissertation in Oriental Studies, Oxford University*, March 2014, 32.

<sup>60</sup> China Christian Daily, “Lisu Church Holds Baptism in River,” *YouTube*, June 2, 2018. Video, 2:59, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8arYcKKKo\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8arYcKKKo_0).

how water is viewed and treated by Lisu Christian communities in Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture.

Among the most renown of Lisu traditions are their song and dance, both Christian and otherwise. While performing research Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, Jetzer recorded relationships between Lisu communities and the Salween River, particularly as manifest in such songs. In Bingzhongluo (丙中洛) and Gongshan (貢山), two villages with large Lisu populations, she found that Lisu had blended reverence for the river into Christian frameworks and hymns, presenting the river as spiritually potent medium through which the love of God flowed. Using this theological foundation and the medium of song, many Lisu Christians called for their communities to care for the river.

Hymnals in a Protestant church in Bingzhongluo, for instance, contained songs which utilized nature imagery, highlighted the sacrality of the natural world, and suggested the participation of God in natural processes. These hymns have titles such as “The Great River Roars and Our Hearts Beat in Terror,” “Strong Trees Rely on Our Snow-Capped Mountains,” and “When Beautiful Rhododendrons Open by the Riverside.” One hymn, “Peace Flows Like a River,” states:

像江水一樣和平一直留下來  
從白雪山上你的愛留下來

*Peace, like a river, flows  
From the icy mountain pours your love<sup>61</sup>*

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<sup>61</sup> Camille Jetzer, “River Spirits in the Nu River Valley, Yunnan, China,” 55.

The sacrality of the natural world is emphasized in contemporary Christian songs, as well. Popular sing-a-long DVDs in the area, for instance, seemed to Jetzer to “actively promote the belief that the Nu River is at the source of life in the valley and that their environment is precious and ‘sacred.’”<sup>62</sup> One song, which Jetzer saw performed by Lisu teenagers in Bingzhongluo, clearly highlighted the continued significance of the Salween River to Lisu life:

在怒江旁邊你讓我們生活  
怒江就是我們熱愛的家鄉  
怒江就是我們生活的開始  
主啊我們崇拜你感謝你給我們這篇寶貴的地方  
在怒江旁邊你讓我們生活  
怒江就是我們熱愛的家鄉

*You gave us life next to the Nu River,  
The Nu River is our beloved home,  
The Nu River is where our life begins,  
We praise and thank you Lord, for giving us this precious land.  
You gave us life next to the Nu River,  
The Nu River is our beloved home.*<sup>63</sup>

Embedded in Christian theology, these songs illustrate the perpetual spiritual significance of the natural world – and the Salween River in particular – to Lisu communities amidst religious change. They suggest that Lisu blended their longstanding beliefs in the interpenetration of the spiritual and the material, the importance of human relationships with the natural world, and the sacrality of the Salween River with Christianity upon their conversion.

To many Lisu, these sentiments about nature are more than symbolic; instead, they point to specific landforms, ecological patterns, and human-nature relationships. This can be seen in their connection with environmental conservation programs existing throughout the valley. For

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 56.



instance, Jetzer heard Christian elders exclaim that young people should “take care of the land of heaven,” and a number of local and foreign Christian organizations in the area actively urge the community to care for the environment, teaching them how to better preserve wooded areas and manage water supplies.<sup>64</sup> These are often rooted in sentiments similar to those evident in the songs. For instance, the promotion for a conservation project led by a church in Gongshan, states: “Let our sacred Nu River flow peacefully down the valley, purifying our lands and our spirits.”<sup>65</sup> With strong resonances to the Spring Bathing Festival, Christian baptism imagery, and the songs above, promotions such as these suggest that perceptions of the Salween River as a sanctifying force remain relatively widespread, even among Christian communities.

### **Christianity, Animism, and Environmental Ethics**

Lisu Christian environmental attitudes present a powerful alternative to mainstream conceptions of Christianity as inherently devoid of animist elements and as antagonistic to the environment.<sup>66</sup> The environmental harms stemming from Christianity are explored in works such as Lynn Townsend White’s “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” which asserts Christianity as a leading force in environmental exploitation worldwide.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, throughout the past few centuries, Christian missionaries – including those proselytizing to Lisu communities in China – have often aimed to uproot traditional animist beliefs of communities within which they work, considering the presence of nature spirits and deities in conflict with Christian monotheism and traditional focuses on Earth as distractions from the work of

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 9-10.

<sup>67</sup> Lynn Townsend White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (March 1957): 1203-1207.

Heaven.<sup>68</sup> Currently, in the United States, adherence to Christianity is associated with lower concern for climate change and environmental degradation – a pattern present to varying degrees throughout the globe.<sup>69</sup>

Despite these trends, however, many Christian theologians, environmental activists, and other individuals are working to amplify environmentally friendly interpretations of the Christian theology. Some of such interpretations are premised upon God’s call to care for the poor, recognizing care for the environment as inextricable from this call. Others assert that Christians are responsible to care for God’s creations.<sup>70</sup> Some even aim to thread animism into Christian theological frameworks, maintaining that Christianity originally had potent animist elements.<sup>71</sup>

As can be seen, Christianity has been frequently been blamed for its contributions to current ecological crises. Nonetheless, many Christians throughout the world turning to their tradition with fresh eyes, hoping to find ethical and practical tools for nourishing human, animal, and plant life on Earth. Lisu communities, as with many other Indigenous groups who have become Christian, offer practical, blended alternatives to the stark dichotomies between monotheism and animism, or between humans and the environment. In Bingzhongluo and Gongshan, for instance, Christianity has not stifled reverence for the environment, but it has presented new conduits for environmental care to be understood and enacted. Jetzer explains:

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<sup>68</sup> Kim-Kwong Chan and Tetsunao Yamamori, “China’s Christian Country: The Lisu of Fugong,” *ChinaSource Quarterly* March 17, 2000, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinas-christian-county/#footnote-7>.

<sup>69</sup> David Marchese, “An Evangelical Climate Scientist Wonders What Went Wrong,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/01/03/magazine/katharine-hayhoe-interview.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Introduction: Current Thought on Christianity and Ecology,” in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, eds. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions Publications, 2000), xxxiiv-xlvii.

<sup>71</sup> Wallace, *When God Was a Bird*.

That the characteristics of the Nu river spirit, as depicted in traditional songs and tales, are re-used and re-interpreted in Christian discourse demonstrates the significant role the river plays in the construction of lives and identity in the valley. While traditional songs and myths remain embedded in the consciousness of the people, informing their history and sense of belonging in the valley, the notion of the river spirit has actively been re-introduced into people's lives at the local level in the form of current church activities which often touch upon the theme of ecology. To some extent, Christianity in the valley has become one of the new channels through which the spirituality of the river can continue to flow.

She further asserts:

Indeed, Christian discourse in the valley is perhaps one of the most efficient in re-interpreting traditional relationships between man and nature and employing them to promote ethical and sustainable practices at the local level.

Jetzer's research illuminates the way Lisu attitudes and actions towards the environment have been informed by both animist and Christian beliefs. To many Lisu in the valley, these belief systems need not stand in contradiction towards one another; instead, that the land and the Salween River contain spirits is a further testament to the glory of God's creation and to God's love. With these beliefs come calls to action; with an animated natural world, discipleship demands respect and care for the river.

### **Dam Projects in the Nu River Valley**

In 2003, new proposals for dam construction on Chinese portions of the Salween River threatened to displace tens of thousands of individuals.<sup>72</sup> As such, it threatened to separate Lisu communities from their beloved Salween River. At this time, traditional and Christian practices and communities became important channels for emotional processing and activist mobilization. For instance, in 2013, a group of Lisu Christian gathered in a chapel in Gongshan to support

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<sup>72</sup> Tom Phillips, "Joy as China Shelves Plans to Dam 'Angry River,'" *The Guardian*, December 2, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/02/joy-as-china-shelves-plans-to-dam-angry-river>.

community members who had been affected by these proposed dam projects. In this meeting, individuals who had been relocated from their homes were able to express vocally, one by one, their concerns and sorrows about their displacement. On a blackboard in the church, they wrote a prayer, which stated:

怒江之愛

青翠的高山，碧綠的江水，  
怒江的呼聲，在山谷迴盪，  
蔚藍的天空，白雪的雲朵，  
孩子的笑臉，在陽光下，  
孩子的笑臉，在陽光下燦爛  
主啊你的愛點燃星星之火，  
聚集溫暖，帶來希望，  
主啊你的愛像怒江，  
主啊你的愛像怒江，  
永遠地注入我們的心裡。

*The Nu River's Love*

*Verdant, high mountains, jade colored rivers  
The roaring of the Nu River, echoing deep into the valley.  
Blue skies, white clouds.  
The laughter of children shining under the sun,  
Dear Lord, your love burns bright like the stars,  
Gathering warmth and bringing hope,  
Dear Lord, your love is like the Nu River,  
It flows into our hearts forever and ever.<sup>73</sup>*

Given the context of the prayer session, the significance of this prayer was more than metaphorical. The prayer interwove Christian love with the spiritual potency of the Salween River, honoring the inseparability of harm to land and harm to spirit.

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<sup>73</sup> Jetzer, "River Spirits in the Nu River Valley, Yunnan, China," 58.

Dams in the valley would displace over 60,000 individuals – mostly Lisu – from their homes along the river, would flood some of the pools traditionally used for the Spring Bathing Festival, and would disrupt the flow of the river.<sup>74</sup> Fortunately, less than two decades following their proposal, these dam projects were shelved.<sup>75</sup> This success owes itself to the tireless activism of environmental scientists, scholars, and community members throughout China. Notably, most of these activists were Han urban environmentalists, as dam issues were too politically sensitive for ethnic minority individuals to speak openly towards and because of ethnic minority communities of foreign corporations and NGOs.<sup>76</sup> However, Yu Xiaogang (於曉剛), an environmental activist awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize for his work in developing “groundbreaking watershed management programs to protect China’s Nu River and riverside communities from dams and development,” paid close attention to the relationships of ethnic minorities and the river.<sup>77</sup> He stated that there is still resistance towards public participation in these development projects, but that decision-making about developments on the river should be “inclusive, informed and accountable to ensure that the rights and entitlements of ethnic communities living along the river are recognized.”<sup>78</sup> Here, Yu asserts the need for development programming that takes into account notions of well-being as understood by impacted

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<sup>74</sup> Ben Blanchard, “About 60,000 Could Lose Homes for Controversial Chinese Dams,” *Reuters*, March 7, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-parliament-dam/about-60000-could-lose-homes-for-controversial-china-dams-idUSBRE92608M20130307>.

<sup>75</sup> International Rivers, “Nu River Campaign,” *International Rivers*, n.d., <https://www.internationalrivers.org/where-we-work/asia/salween/nu-river-campaign/>.

<sup>76</sup> Hannah El-Silimy, “‘We Need One Natural River for the Next Generation’: Intersectional Feminism and the Nu Jiang Dams Campaign in China,” in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 129.

<sup>77</sup> Goldman Environmental Prize, “Throwback Thursday: 2006 Prize Winner Yu Xiaogang, Then and Now,” *Goldman Environmental Prize*, January 16, 2014, <https://www.goldmanprize.org/blog/throwback-thursday-2006-prize-winner-yu-xiaogang-then-and-now/>.

<sup>78</sup> Yu Xiaogang, Chen Xiangxue, and Carl Middleton, “From Hydropower Construction to National Park Creation: Changing Pathways of the Nu River,” 67.

communities themselves. For the Lisu, the river is an important artery in economic, spiritual, and cultural life.

Due to the geographic isolation of Lisu communities, political sensitivities, and opaqueness surrounding the details of dam projects, there is little direct information on Lisu perceptions of the dams. In the few interviews I could find, some Lisu individuals expressed worries over lost farmlands and livelihoods, while others expressed satisfaction with the housing provided by the government for relocated communities.<sup>79</sup> None of the interviewees mentioned the sacrality of the river or the importance to the river to cultural life and identity. However, sentiments towards the river present in Lisu legends, traditions such as the Spring Bathing Festival, Christian songs, and this prayer gathering in Gongshan suggest that these dams would cause deep spiritual and cultural harm to Lisu communities. “If you dam the river, their culture, their tradition, disappears,” reported Wang Yongchen, co-founder of the Beijing-based NGO Green Earth Volunteers.<sup>80</sup> For now, the dam projects have been shelved, with national park projects and ecotourism initiatives aimed at simultaneously promoting economic development and environmental conservation promoted increasingly avidly in their stead.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

Through kinship ties nurtured by totemism, belief in the *aidusini*, livelihoods intertwined with the river, the Spring Bathing Festival, and reiterated reverence for the river in Christian worship, Lisu have developed strong ties with the Salween River – including, for many, the *aidusini*

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<sup>79</sup> Wang Yongchen, “Report from the Nu River: ‘Nobody Has Told Us Anything,’” *China Dialogue*, August 2, 2006, <https://chinadialogue.net/en/energy/240-report-from-the-nu-river-nobody-has-told-us-anything/>.

<sup>80</sup> Mitch Moxley, “The Fight to Keep the Nu River Flowing,” *The World*, April 22, 2010, <https://theworld.org/dispatch/china-and-its-neighbors/100414/china-dam-nu-river?page=0,1>.

<sup>81</sup> Xiaogang, Xiangxue, and Middleton, “From Hydropower Construction to National Park Creation,” 49-69.

animating it. Amidst vast environmental, religious, and economic change, Lisu have adapted their practices and belief systems to maintain a powerful and practical environmental ethic of responsibility towards the natural world. In the face of overexploitation of forests, they have adjusted medicinal plant harvesting practices; in the face of environmental degradation, they have used church communities as forms of support and as channels for practical action. Undergirding these attitudes and actions are longstanding spiritual and material relationships with the natural world; ties important enough to have persisted amidst conversion to Christianity and to have taken on new, bold forms within Christian frameworks. Though further research should be carried out to deepen understanding of Lisu relationships with the river, the beliefs and practices explored here illuminate the importance of the river to Lisu spirituality, livelihood, and identity. As such, to adequately promote “development” in ways valued by Lisu communities themselves, any environmental conservation, hydropower, infrastructure, or other projects along the river need to take into account the multifaceted, spiritual and material elements of Lisu relationships with the Salween.

## **“Weaving Across Borders”: Dams, Displacement, and Transboundary Collaborations in Shan State**

*In the beginning of the world, many, many cycles ago, so long ago, in fact, that no man knows how long it was, there were no trees, no hills, no land, nothing but water. The wind blew the waters hither and thither, sometimes in great waves, sometimes in quiet ripples; the wind blew, the waves rolled, and that was all.*

*Now it happened that Gong Gow, the Great Spirit Spider, felt weary with carrying around her heavy burden of eggs wrapped up so carefully in their white covering fastened to her waist, therefore she said to herself:*

*"I would fain place my eggs in a safe place, but know of none where they can hatch themselves without danger," so she searched through the universe to find a suitable place, and at last she spied the water that is now the world, and in it began to spin her web.*

*Backward and forward, forward and backward, round and round, in and out she wove, till at last all was done, and full of content she left her eggs in their web prison nest and journeyed away.*

*The wind blew and drove the water hither and thither as aforesaid, and soon little pieces of solid substance caught in the meshes of the web, and behold! as the time passed the solid substance became more solid till it formed mud and separated itself from the water, and when the mud had dried, lo! it was the earth.*

*So the eggs of the great Spirit Spider were safely locked up within the earth; by and by they hatched, and breaking forth there appeared the first man, Boo Pau, and the first woman, Myeh Pau, from whom all the ancient people who belonged to the first race were descended.*

...



*Our great ancestor Hsin Kyan had seven daughters, whose names to this day are remembered among us as they have been given to the different days of the week, from Nang Ta Nang Nooie, the eldest, after whom we call the first day of the week Wan Ta Nang Nooie, to Nang Hsa Ne, the youngest, and when the mighty lord Sa Kyah found that he could not kill their father, he spoke to these daughters and told them he was searching for one whom he would make his chief queen, and that if one of them would kill his enemy, their father, and bring to him his head, he would choose that one to be his queen and make her joint ruler of the universe; with him she should govern everything created.*

*But the charms tattooed upon Hsin Kyan were very potent. Water would not drown him; fire would not burn him; rope would not strangle him; and he was invulnerable against thrust of spear and stroke of sword, and although all seven of his daughters tried to kill him yet they were not able to do so and six of them gave up the attempt in despair.*

*One day, however, the youngest, she whom we worship on the seventh day of the week and because she was the smallest call it Wan Hsa Nae, was walking in the jungle, and as she was passing under a tree she saw a bird sitting upon its topmost branch. Now this girl knew how clever birds are, and so she said to it:*

*"Brother Bird, oie! can you tell me how I can kill my father?"*

*Now although this daughter was the youngest, yet she was more lovely than all her sisters, and the bird was so pleased with her that he said:*

*"Nang Hsa Nae, you are so beautiful that I will tell you the secret of your father's charm. Water cannot drown him, fire cannot burn him, neither can sword or spear wound him, but there is one way in which he may be killed. Take you, seven strands of a spider's web and twist them into a cord, then with a piece of white bamboo make a bow; with this you will be able to cut off the head of your father and take it to the mighty lord Sa Kyah, and oh!"*

*continued the clever bird, "when you are his queen, do not forget the good turn I have done you, and the debt of gratitude you owe me therefor."*

*Nang Hsa Nae was full of joy when she learned the secret of her father's charm and she promised the little bird that when she became queen of the universe she would grant him any desire that he craved.*

*That night when everybody else was asleep, Nang Hsa Nae crept to her father's side and with the bow made of the seven twisted strands of a spider's web killed him and cut off his head.*

*With great joy she carried it to the universal lord. He was very glad to find that his enemy was at last dead, but although he had given his word to her, yet he would not marry Nang Hsa Nae, for, said he, she has killed her father although I could not conquer him. Were I to marry her, who will go surety for her that she will not do the same to me? So the wicked daughter did not gain her ambitious end after all.*

*Not only that, however, but she and her sisters received a punishment, one they are even now suffering, and will continue till the world ends. It is this:*

*When they found that the lord Sa Kyah would not marry their youngest sister or even accept their father's head, they said among themselves:*

*"What shall we do with the head of our father? Where shall we bury it? Should we place it in the earth the whole world would catch on fire; should we throw it into the sea, all the seven oceans would immediately boil; what shall we do?"*

*In their distress they went to the mighty lord Sa Kyah and in humble tones begged his lordship to give them advice so that they would be freed from the terrible trouble to which their wickedness had brought them. He looked at them and said:*

*"This is what you must do. You," pointing to the youngest, "must carry your father's head in your arms all this year, and when the year is finished you can give it to the sister who is next older than yourself. She will carry it for a year and thus one of you will ever after bear it."*

*And so it is. We know when the year ends because then come the Wan Kyap or washing days, when the princess who has carried her father's head for a year gives it to her elder sister and washes the bloodstains from her clothes.*

*From these spirits all the inhabitants of the world are descended, and so we see the saying of our philosophers is true, "We have all descended from spirits."<sup>82</sup>*

### **The Shan Story of Weaving**

The Shan story begins with weaving. Gang Gow, the Great Spider Spirit, wove land into a water world, and her descendent, Nang Hsa Nae, wove webs together to craft a weapon to kill her father and usurp power over the earth. Though this was a transgression for which she had to recompense, she nonetheless commenced a new era in the lives of human beings: a new calendar, and oversight by the universal lord, Sa Kyah.<sup>83</sup>

As with many ethnic groups throughout the Salween River basin, the Shan have rich traditions of weaving. They make richly colored, patterned textiles on large looms. One textile tradition is particularly well-renown: at Inle Lake, Shan individuals weave textiles from lotuses, resulting in a smooth fabric once reserved for monastics.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> William C. Griggs, *Shan Folk Lore Stories from the Hill and Water Country* (Project Gutenberg, May 15, 2010), <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/32375>.

<sup>83</sup> Griggs, *Shan Folk Lore Stories from the Hill and Water Country*.

<sup>84</sup> Nyein Nyein, "A Lotus Fabric Business Takes Root on Inle Lake," *The Irrawaddy*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/profile/lotus-fabric-business-takes-root-inle-lake.html>.

The Salween River, along with its tributaries and streams, acts like a thread weaving Shan people to the communities up and downstream. It binds ecosystems and landforms, something evident in fish migration and spawning patterns, inland deltas, and rich biodiversity within the basin.<sup>85</sup> Others, it divides, acting as a natural demarcation of territory, a strategic barrier and source of refuge during ethnic conflict, and as source of speciation between ecosystems within and without the basin.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, Shan communities within the basin, along with local plants and animals, have developed intertwined networks of collaborative living, with the river serving as a vital artery in those networks.

Alongside the Salween, Shan communities cultivate rice, vegetables, tea, and other crops, using the water for irrigation.<sup>87</sup> The river is also source of fish, crab, snails, and oysters, and it nourishes nearby forests, where Shan gather mushrooms, vegetables, traditional medicines, and building materials, and where they hunt wild animals. The river also provides electricity to these isolated communities, via small hydropower projects on streams and tributaries.

Though vital to the economic well-being and physical health of Shan communities living in the Salween basin, the Salween River also holds immense cultural and spiritual value. Pagodas, temples, and other significant sacred and cultural sites are located along the river, and many rituals and festivals incorporating water acknowledge and utilize the spiritually renewing potency of water.<sup>88</sup> Many of these fuse shamanist and Buddhist elements, such as a ritual wherein a

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<sup>85</sup> International Rivers, “The Salween River Basin: Dam Cascades Threaten Biological and Cultural Diversity.”

<sup>86</sup> Shan Human Rights Foundation and Shan Sapawa Environmental Organization, “From Scorched Earth to Parched Earth: Conflict and Dams on the Nam Teng in Shan State,” *Progressive Voice Myanmar*, December 3, 2018, 6-8. <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Upper-Kengtawng-English.pdf>.

<sup>87</sup> Demeleza Stokes, “‘My Spirit is There’: Life in the Shadow of the Mong Ton Dam,” *Mongabay*, (December 17, 2016), <https://news.mongabay.com/2016/12/my-spirit-is-there-life-in-the-shadow-of-the-mong-ton-dam/>.

<sup>88</sup> Facts and Details, “Shan Minority and Other Ethnic Groups in Shan State,” *Facts and Details*, May 2014, [https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5\\_5d/entry-3062.html](https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5_5d/entry-3062.html).

healer will recite verses over water that the patient will then drink, or in the Water-Splashing Festival held each spring, which cleanses the spirit and welcomes in the new year.<sup>89</sup>

This interconnectivity of hydrological systems, ecosystems, and people in Shan State is threatened by conflict and natural resource exploitation in the region. Mining, hydropower, and timber industries have sparked violence, displaced thousands, and harmed ecosystems. For instance, as of 2017, at least half of the forty-three dams then being planned in Myanmar were in Shan State, with many in active conflict zones.<sup>90</sup> Not only do such projects exacerbate conflict and displacement, but the presence of conflict makes it near impossible for these hydropower projects to be sustainably and ethically carried out.<sup>91</sup>

Considering the intersections between hydropower and conflict in Shan State, in the next section, I will explore these intersections as manifest in the Mong Ton dam project. As I do so, I will focus on the way this dam has torn apart, and threatens to further tear apart, ecosystems, people, and spirit – things long interwoven Shan communities living near the site of the Mong Ton dam.

## **Shan Background**

The Shan are a subgroup of the Tai Indigenous people of China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Most Shan live in Myanmar, especially in Shan State, and they comprise the country's largest ethnic minority group.<sup>92</sup> Most Shan are Theravada Buddhists, which is influenced heavily by Shan animisms predating the arrival of Buddhism in the region. Many also practice various

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Minority Rights, "Shan," *Minority Rights Group International: World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*, August 2017, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/shan/>.

<sup>91</sup> Dana MacLean, "Myanmar: Shan Villagers and the Salween Dam Fight," *The Diplomat*, September 11, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/myanmar-shan-villagers-and-the-salween-dam-fight/>.

<sup>92</sup> Minority Rights, "Shan."

Tai folk religions, which fuse elements of Buddhism and animism. For most, Buddhism and animism are interfused, with nature spirits, ancestral spirits, and multiple body-spirits all recognized and engaged with to ensure harmony and protect against illness and other sufferings.

Since the 1960s, Shan have been fighting the Burmese military, with this fighting driven by the military's strong centralization and Bamarization efforts.<sup>93</sup> In 1995, a massive counterinsurgency campaign against Shan ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), resulting in forced expulsion of Shan individuals and land confiscations by the Tatmadaw. Within the next decade, a reported 300,000 Shan were displaced, with many taking refuge in Thailand. "Civilians are caught in this fighting," reports Minority Rights Group International, "resulting in multiple displacements, increased militarization near villages, torture, extrajudicial killings, use of villagers as human shields and porters and shelling of civilian targets."<sup>94</sup> In this situation, the Shan face compound sufferings of marginalization, conflict, and poverty, a situation which is exacerbated, driven, and sustained, at least in part, by hydropower projects on the Salween River.

### **Dams and Conflict**

The Mong Ton Dam is slated to be built in central Shan State, from where over 300,000 people have been displaced by the military.<sup>95</sup> If the dam project continues, not only will the resulting 640-square-kilometer reservoir displace additional thousands, but it will leave those currently displaced permanently landless.<sup>96</sup> In addition, the clearing of forests, increased militarization of

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> The Network of People in Salween Basin, "Public Statement on the Mong Ton Dam in the Salween River," *International Rivers*, June 10, 2016, <https://archive.internationalrivers.org/resources/public-statement-on-the-mong-ton-dam-on-the-salween-river-11496>.

<sup>96</sup> Stokes, "'My Spirit is There': Life in the Shadow of the Mong Ton Dam."

the area, and water and air pollution stemming from construction present additional harms to local Shan communities.<sup>97</sup>

As such, this dam will nurture long-term instability for Shan communities, who already face economic and political disadvantages in Myanmar. Through dam-related conflicts, displacements, and environmental harm, the dam will likely weaken Shan ethnic armed organizations and force Shan communities further into positions of economic instability, political marginalization, and physical insecurity.

It is obvious that these dam projects were designed with little regard for resident communities. When discussing the dam design process, Khur Hseng, a Shan member of the Shan Sapawa Environmental Organization, noted that “[the government] did not even inform or try to work with local leaders.”<sup>98</sup> Although Myanmar’s Environmental Conservation Law requires projects to follow Environmental Impact Assessment procedures – which include participation of resident communities – these are rarely enforced, especially in borderland regions.<sup>99</sup> As such, the Mong Ton project has been designed with a high degree of opacity, and it has moved forward despite vehement opposition from impacted communities.

The Mong Ton dam project can also not be reasonably framed as a development project that will benefit residents of the reservoir area. Conflict and dam projects have resulted in their displacement, with many fleeing to Thailand, where they struggle to maintain citizenship and thus lack many rights. They are severed from their livelihoods and lifeways. Furthermore, as of 2016, ninety percent of the energy produced by the dam is slated to be delivered to China and

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<sup>97</sup> Laura Villadiego, “Mong Ton (or Tasang) Dam, Myanmar,” *Environmental Justice Atlas*, August 18, 2019, <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/mong-ton-or-tasang-dam>.

<sup>98</sup> MacLean, “Myanmar: Shan Villagers and the Salween Dam Fight.”

<sup>99</sup> Lamb et al., “A State of Knowledge of the Salween River: An Overview of Civil Society Research,” 114.

Thailand, and the rest would likely be in the hands of industries affiliated with the Myanmar military.<sup>100</sup>

Since the military takeover in 2021, the situation has exacerbated. If investors are willing to engage with the Tatmadaw and industries connected to the Tatmadaw, then, under the current military regime, such industries will have much loosened regulations surrounding EIAs and other procedures aimed to minimize the environmental and human impacts of hydropower projects. Though information emerging from Myanmar, and from this region in particular, is limited, since the military coup, the Tatmadaw has engaged in more rigorous conflicts in Shan State.<sup>101</sup> However, the intensity varies between different regions and Shan EAOS, as some EAOs remain more preoccupied with interethnic conflicts than fighting against the Tatmadaw.<sup>102</sup> Nonetheless, in Shan State, the Tatmadaw has continued its longstanding fighting with EAOs, has increased violence against Shan civilians, and has caused great harm to the environment through military activities – such as burning villages and exploiting natural resources – aimed at destabilizing borderland communities, funding the military, and strengthening their authority over the country.

As stated by an anonymous spokesperson from Save the Salween Network, the Tatmadaw will likely continue dam projects “not just for the sake of generating electricity, but for the militarization of the area. The flooded area will destroy the base area of ethnic armed [militias]”.<sup>103</sup> Given this situation, not only will the dam wipe out mini hydropower projects

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<sup>100</sup> Stokes, “My Spirit is There: Life in the Shadow of the Mong Ton Dam.”

<sup>101</sup> Robert Bociaga, “Myanmar’s Army is Fighting a Multi-Front War,” *The Diplomat*, November 24, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/myanmars-army-is-fighting-a-multi-front-war/>.

<sup>102</sup> International Crisis Group, “Myanmar’s Coup Shakes Up its Ethnic Conflicts,” *International Crisis Group*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/319-myanmars-coup-shakes-its-ethnic-conflicts>.

<sup>103</sup> Roney et al., “China’s Salween Plans in Limbo in Post-Coup Myanmar.”



providing energy to Shan communities, but the existing ten percent of energy produced by the Mong Ton dam currently slated to remain in Myanmar – if this number does not change – will almost certainly fund the Tatmadaw, thereby further harming Shan communities.

As can be seen, the Mong Ton dam drives, sustains, and exacerbates conflict in Shan State. The dam and related violence pit ethnic groups against one another, rip apart families and communities, and tear people from their homes and lands.

### **Dams and Environmental Destruction**

Kunhing is a township in Shan State, located approximately 100 kilometers north of the Mong Ton dam site. The lands of Kunhing host immense ecological richness: the village sits at the edge of two ecoregions, the Karen-Kayah montane rainforests and the Northern Indochina rainforest – both of which are ranked by the World Wildlife Fund’s “Global 200,” meaning that they are exceptionally irreplaceable ecoregions sporting high “species richness, endemic species, unusual higher taxa, unusual ecological or evolutionary phenomena, and...global rarity of habitats,” and for whom conservation efforts should be given priority.<sup>104</sup> In addition to this rich biodiversity, Kunhing boasts another significant ecological wonder: here, the Pang River – a tributary of the Salween – stretches out wide, revealing hundreds of forested islands.<sup>105</sup> At this inland delta, the river splits into many rivers and streams, interlacing forests with water and creating a biodiversity-rich region that local Shan communities have called home for centuries. This is the origin of the township’s name – “Kunhing” means “thousand islands” in Shan.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> World Wildlife Fund, “Global 200,” *World Wildlife Fund*, August 1, 2012, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/publications/global-200>.

<sup>105</sup> Stokes, “My Spirit is There’: Life in the Shadow of the Mong Ton Dam.”

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Although construction of the Mong Ton dam has not yet begun, preparations for the dam, along with longstanding violence in the region, have already substantially harmed the natural environment. As a result of both clearing for construction and extractive industry – particularly in the form of gold and coal mining – the area has experienced significant deforestation, soil destabilization, and water pollution. Interviews of villagers living south of Kunhing, near the Mong Ton dam site, Southern Shan State between 2015 and 2016, showed that seventy-five percent of residents noted reduced water flows in recent years, which they attributed to logging and dam preparations.<sup>107</sup> Many also reported water and air pollution, decreasing fish populations in the river, and decreased wildlife populations in the forests.

Once the dam is constructed, it will likely produce desertification and droughts, large-scale disruption of river hydrology, floods, surface water pollution and depletion, groundwater pollution and depletion, and reduced ecological and hydrological connectivity.<sup>108</sup> The land of the Thousand Islands will be flooded – in connection with the Shan creation narrative, to be water once more. The habitats of many plants and animals will be fragmented and destroyed, including many species of fish, wild orchids, and the clouded leopard.

Furthermore, the Mong Ton dam will be placed on a fault line in a region of Myanmar prone to frequent earthquakes, construction processes and resulting flooding will both place significant strain and pressure on this fragile land, increasing the risk of earthquakes.<sup>109</sup> This dam would be the tallest in Southeast Asia, and if an earthquake caused its collapse, the impacts

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<sup>107</sup> K.B. Roberts, “Powers of Access: Impacts on Resource Users and Researchers in Myanmar’s Shan State,” in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019), 214.

<sup>108</sup> Stokes, “‘My Spirit is There’: Life in the Shadow of the Mong Ton Dam.”

<sup>109</sup> Lun Min Mang, “Expert Highlights Thanlwin Dam Earthquake Risk,” *Myanmar Times*, March 20, 2015, <https://www.mmtimes.com/national-news/13805-expert-highlights-thanlwin-dam-earthquake-risk.html>.

would be catastrophic for downstream communities.<sup>110</sup> Thus, in the gutting of land on fault lines, the flooding of forests, and the erasure of habitats, the Mong Ton dam threatens to rupture irreplaceable, richly biodiverse ecosystems.

## Dams and Spiritual Violence

The significance of the Salween River to Shan communities goes beyond livelihood and physical security; Shan culture has grown in tandem with the river, and environmental harm and displacement are acts of spiritual violence against these communities. “The forest and the river are so important not just for me, but for everyone living along the river basin. All of our livelihoods rely on the water and the forest,” said Par Zoi, a 61-year-old resident of Kunhing township.<sup>111</sup> The township is home to many ancient pagodas, traditional houses, sacred cave temples, and other religious sites, such as the Keng Kham temple and the Ho Leung Pagoda, a 700-year-old pagoda tied to religious legends and practices.<sup>112</sup> These sites would all be submerged by the dam’s reservoir.

In 2015, around 150 villagers, monks, and community leaders in southern Shan State gathered at the Pithakat Hongtam Temple to hold a prayer ceremony for the Salween River.<sup>113</sup> In prior months, residents had seen an abundance of construction vehicles and workers, but they knew almost no details of what was going on, and strict security measures prevented them

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<sup>110</sup> EarthRights, “Flooding the Future: Hydropower and Cultural Survival in the Salween River Basin,” *EarthRights International*, April 28, 2005, [https://earthrights.org/blog/flooding-the-future-hydropower-and-cultural-survival-in-the-salween-river-basin/#\\_edn15](https://earthrights.org/blog/flooding-the-future-hydropower-and-cultural-survival-in-the-salween-river-basin/#_edn15).

<sup>111</sup> Stokes, “My Spirit is There’: Life in the Shadow of the Mong Ton Dam.”

<sup>112</sup> Shan Human Rights Foundation, “Hundreds of Kunhing Villagers Hold Blessing Ceremony for Salween River and Historic Ho Leung Stupa,” *Shan Human Rights Foundation*, March 5, 2020, <https://shanhumanrights.org/hundreds-of-kunhing-villagers-hold-blessing-ceremony-for-salween-river-and-historic-ho-leung-stupa/>.

<sup>113</sup> Burma Rivers Network, “Mong Ton Residents Call on Spirits to Protect Salween River,” *Burma Rivers Network*, April 8, 2015, <https://www.burmariversnetwork.org/news/mong-ton-residents-call-on-spirits-to-protect-salween-river.html>.

from accessing the construction site. Worried about the fate of the river and surrounding lands, residents organized a prayer ceremony, through which they, in the words of participant Sai Nong, “made merit to ward away bad things from the Salween. We don’t want dams to be built on this river. We refuse to let this happen.” This strong opposition stems from economic, spiritual, and cultural ties to the river. Sai Nong further explains: “Many of our highly respected stupas and pagodas, such as Ho Lerng temple, will be destroyed. Villages will be damaged by the flood and the local people will have to struggle.”

In the past decade, Shan communities have carried out multiple prayer ceremonies in response to hydropower, mining, and other environmentally harmful projects in Shan State.<sup>114</sup> Among these are repeated prayer ceremonies for the Salween River, often carried out in March, to coincide with the International Day of Action for Rivers. In 2020, for instance, hundreds of villagers in Kunhing held a blessing ceremony for the Salween River, gathering at Ho Leung stupa to make merit and then floating rafts down the river.<sup>115</sup> One of the organizers, Nang Jeng Kham, explained: “We are gathering to bless our beloved Salween River, so it may flow freely forever and continue to nourish our lands, livelihoods and cultural heritage.” These ceremonies express the deep concern Shan communities feel towards well-being of the Salween, as well as the role of spirituality in nurturing the significance of the Salween and formulating responses to harms enacted against it.

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<sup>114</sup> See, for instance: Action for Shan State Rivers, “Hundreds of Villagers Hold Prayer Ceremony Against Planned Coal Mine and Power Plant in Mong Kok, Eastern Shan State,” *Progressive Voice Myanmar*, October 22, 2019, <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2019/10/22/hundreds-of-villagers-hold-prayer-ceremony-against-planned-coal-mine-and-power-plant-in-mong-kok-eastern-shan-state/>.

<sup>115</sup> Shan Human Rights Foundation, “Hundreds of Kunhing Villagers Hold Blessing Ceremony for Salween River and Historic Ho Leung Stupa.”

Because Shan individuals have such deep spiritual ties to the Salween River, the Mong Ton dam and appended displacement, violence, and environmental damage not only damage the economic and physical well-being of residents, but they constitute acts of spiritual violence. “My spirit is there; I am connected to this land,” explained Paw Tao Ma Ha, a villager from the Keng Kham valley living in exile in Thailand, “If I die, my spirit will be there.”<sup>116</sup> If the dam is built, Paw Tao Ma Ha’s home will be flooded, destroying any remaining hopes of return. He and those who fled with him will be forever separated from their lands, and many more will be removed.

During these periods of displacement, some Shan individuals had such strong ties to the land of the thousand islands that they chose to stay and die, rather than flee. Most of the thousands who fled have held to hope of future return to these culturally, economically, and spiritually beloved lands. By flooding the land of the thousand islands, the Mong Ton dam threatens to tear Shan communities from religious sites rooted deeply in their histories, people from sacred lands, and – for those like Paw Tao Ma Ha – bodies from spirits.

### **A Response to Dams: Weaving the Torn Apart**

The Shan creation narrative mentions a world woven of clay amidst water. The Salween, explained above, has woven together the lands, peoples, and spirits of basin together for centuries. Now, in the face of multifaceted violence to Shan communities and their homes, many Shan activists are standing up to mend the tears. One organization, Weaving Bonds Across Borders, explicitly emphasizes the need to restore these ties ruptured by violence,

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<sup>116</sup> Stokes, “‘My Spirit is There’: Life in the Shadow of the Mong Ton Dam.”

damming, and exploitative industry along the Salween.<sup>117</sup> Weaving Bonds Across Borders aims to foster collaboration between frequently siloed organizations, disciplines, countries, societal sectors, genders, and age groups on behalf of the Salween. They focus on engagement with youth and women, who are currently underrepresented in decision-making circles in the region. Through these collaborations, they produce action-based research, raise awareness, engage with policy makers, and network with people throughout the basin.<sup>118</sup>

Nang Shining, a co-founder of the organization, explains the significance of weaving to their work:

We also deliberately chose the name of our group, Weaving Bonds Across Borders, to illustrate how we were thinking of development networks as hopeful and meaningful, as work that spans across borders. The word ‘thread,’ like in the title of this piece, is meant to link to the work of weaving, an activity known to many groups worldwide, particularly women.<sup>119</sup>

Shining explains that the Salween River belongs to people of many ethnic groups, genders, and ages, as well as from multiple countries and different social classes. This is something she emphasizes in her work: “a transboundary river requires cross-boundary agreements and ... a potentially higher level of cooperation among different stakeholders than we have at present.”<sup>120</sup> Through this organization, she hopes to make collaborative threads visible and accessible to people along the Salween, so that they can grab hold of these threads and weave a network strong enough to withstand the forces tearing them apart. “A weaver brings different threads together to create something new, something strong, from disparate strands,” states Shining.

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<sup>117</sup> Chayan Vaddhanaphuti et al., “Future Trajectories: Five Short Concluding Remarks,” in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019), 289.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

“Weaving, like networking and supporting young people, requires the work of transformation. Even if a small ‘thread’ alone may break, when combined together, in the process of ‘weaving,’ it will be stronger.”

## **Conclusion**

In recent decades, the Mong Ton dam, longstanding conflict in Shan State, and continued violence towards and marginalization of ethnic minority groups in Myanmar have caused Shan communities to suffer large-scale displacement, physical violence, and the destruction of their homelands and sacred sites. The future of the Salween River and people living alongside it – including the Shan – are uncertain, though communities both up and downstream of Kunhing bear multifaceted pressures of increasing intensity. Although some responses to these pressures have remained confined to particular locations and disciplines, others adhere to a more riverine approach. These collaboration-oriented thinkers see that the river runs through and sustains communities of diverse religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds, and they aim to craft responses that honor their intertwined fates. Whether intentionally or inadvertently, approaches like these model the river, which has woven through human and more-than-human communities for eons. Peacebuilder and environmental activist Nang Shining is one such weaver, and she premises her activism upon a rich legacy of weaving that threads through Shan legends, livelihoods, and artistry.

Weaving, be that of textiles, of worlds, or of environmental action, demands attention to distinct threads and persistence amidst the complexity of their coming together. Right now, in Shan State, people and land are being torn apart. In response, Nang Shining and many other activists have chosen to weave.

# **Rooted in Relationship: Representative Governance, Environmental Sustainability, and Animist Ontologies in Karen State**

The final story covered in this thesis that of the Karen, an Indigenous group whose traditional homelands are located primarily in the southern portions of the Salween basin. Enmeshed in decades-long civil wars with only brief moments of reprieve, Karen communities have suffered displacement, physical violence, and political marginalization at the hands of Myanmar's military. Despite this, they maintain a strong, distinct identity and visions for governance, which identity and governance are inseparable from their spiritual and material relationships with the land. This last section explores these relationships – particularly that between Karen communities and the Salween River – arguing that such exploration is necessary in understanding the thoroughness with which violence to people and environment are intertwined in Karen State. It focuses particularly on the Salween Peace Park, a vision for representative, sustainable, and relationship-rooted governance laid out by Karen communities.

## **Karen Background: Agriculture, Livelihoods, and Ontologies**

Karen people comprise the third most populous ethnic group in Myanmar, following the Bamar and Shan.<sup>121</sup> They live primarily in the eastern portion of the country, especially in Karen State, also known as Kayin State. As with other ethnic groups discussed in this thesis, Karen communities are by no means homogenous; instead, they are characterized by high degrees of linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity.<sup>122</sup> This analysis highlights research within and reports

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<sup>121</sup> Minority Rights Group, "Myanmar," *Minority Rights Group International*, November 2020, <https://minorityrights.org/country/myanmarburma/>.

<sup>122</sup> Minority Rights Group, "Karen," *Minority Rights Group International*, August 2017, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/karen/>.



from Sgaw Karen-speaking communities, and as such, may be less representative of communities outside of these.

### *Ecology of Karen State*

Myanmar's Karen State is home to four different ecoregions: Karen-Kayah montane rainforests, Irrawaddy dry forests, Irrawaddy moist deciduous forests, and Myanmar coastal rainforests. The state is characterized by a high degree of biodiversity, which includes a range of endangered species, such as the Indochinese tiger, Phayre's leaf monkeys, and numerous wild orchids.<sup>123</sup>

Karen State's longstanding isolation from the pressures of globalization has resulted in ecosystems that are largely intact and only minimally understood by Western scientists.

### *The Importance of Water in Karen Agriculture and Livelihoods*

The Salween River enters the Karen State from the northeast, where it forms a border between the state and Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province. It then turns westward, cutting across the state before entering Mon State to the south. Karen agricultural practices and livelihoods are deeply intertwined with the Salween and connected streams and lakes. For instance, water resources are important to paddy fields in flat areas, rotational farms in the mountains, and riverbank gardens.<sup>124</sup> Though some of these agriculture practices are carried out by familial units or individuals, many – such as rotational farming – are carried out communally, and natural resources are viewed with a high degree of collective responsibility.

In addition to rotational agriculture, paddy farming, riverbank gardens, and other forms of agriculture, water resources bolster Karen food systems by providing a source of fish. Water

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<sup>123</sup> Saw Sha Bwe Moo, Graden Z. L. Froese, and Thomas N. E. Gray, "First Structured Camera-Trap Surveys in Karen State, Myanmar, Reveal High Diversity of Globally Threatened Mammals," *Oryx* 52, no. 3 (2018): 537-543.

<sup>124</sup> Laofang Bundidterdsakul, "Local Context, National Law: The Rights of Karen People on the Salween River in Thailand," in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 147-149.

resources also nourish forests, where Karen communities harvest non-timber forest products such as medicinal plants, gather fruits and vegetables, and hunt wild animals.<sup>125</sup> Non-timber forest products likewise provide a source of income, and they are also utilized in other aspects of life, like building homes. Lastly, in terms of livelihood, Karen communities facilitate riverine trade routes between various villages in Myanmar and Thailand, which has promoted economic development and cross-border collaboration in both countries.<sup>126</sup>

As can be seen, water in the Salween basin upholds rich ecosystems, plays a central role in Karen food systems and livelihoods, and binds Karen communities with each other and with communities within and without the basin.

### *Karen Animist Ontologies*

The majority of Karen people are Theravada Buddhists, with a smaller, yet significant, practicing Christianity. Most Karen practicing Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions have blended these religions with traditional animisms, and many remain solely animist. Karen ontologies, which are rooted in an animated natural world, have long undergirded Karen cultural practices, political and social values, and identity. In fact, I argue that it is this relationality with the natural world, interwoven throughout Karen ways of life, that paves a path for peace, environmental protection, economic well-being, and cultural integrity to be simultaneously and sustainably pursued in traditional Karen lands.

Among the most important of the relationships informing Karen ontologies are those between Karen and the *Htee K'Sab Kaw K'Sab*, meaning “K'Sab of Water and Land”.<sup>127</sup> *Htee K'Sab*

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<sup>125</sup> KWCI “The Karen People,” *Karen Wildlife Conservation Initiative*, n.d., <https://www.kwci.org/the-karen-people/>.

<sup>126</sup> Bundidterdsakul, “Local Context, National Law: The Rights of Karen People on the Salween River in Thailand,” 141-158.

<sup>127</sup> Andrew Paul, Robin Roth, and Saw Sha Bwe Moo, “Relational Ontology and More-Than-Human Agency in Indigenous Karen Conservation Practice,” *Pacific Conservation Biology* 27, no. 4 (2021): 381.

*Kaw K'Sab* (hereafter referred to collectively as “*K'Sab*”) reside in rivers and forests, and they can act benevolently or malevolently towards humans.

Reciprocal obligations between the *K'Sab* and human beings are central to Karen patterns of land management and social governance, which are known collectively as *kaw*.<sup>128</sup> Karen *kaw* consist of communal forests, rotating agricultural lands, and privately owned paddy fields and gardens that are managed by cultural principles, representative organizational structures, and practices all aimed at maintaining simultaneous social and ecological well-being.<sup>129</sup> While many of these practices may more readily compare to land-management practices elsewhere – such as certain planting and harvesting practices – a number of spiritual practices are also central to *kaw* management. For instance, to nurture healthy relationships between Karen and the *K'Sab*, Karen communities carry out offerings, prayers, and other ceremonies with various human and more-than-human actors. These ceremonies are carried out at specific points in the agricultural cycle, to mark significant life transitions, and to restore moral order when individuals transgress cultural principles and taboos.

At the beginning of each monsoon season, for instance, *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sab*, or “Masters of Water and Land”, carry out two significant ceremonies: *Lu Htee Hta* for the *K'Sab* of the water, and *Kyob Tab* for the *K'Sab* of the land.<sup>130</sup> Scholars and conservationists Andrew Paul, Robin Roth, and Saw Sha Bwe Moo explain the ritual as follows:

The whole community gathers as the *Hteepoe Kaw K'Sab* kill a sacrificial pig and make offerings to the *K'Sab*, praying for proper rainfall, agricultural productivity, general well-being, and protection from natural disasters. Like all prayers to the *K'Sab*, these prayers are said while holding a bowl of Karen rice wine and dribbling it onto the ground.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>129</sup> Andrew Paul, “Kaw: The Indigenous Karen Customary Lands,” *Karen Environmental and Social Action Network*, August 2018, [http://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Final-Briefer\\_KAW-English\\_2.pdf](http://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Final-Briefer_KAW-English_2.pdf).

<sup>130</sup> Paul, Roth, and Moo, “Relational Ontology,” 381.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

As stressed by Karen environmental activists of community members, *Lu Htee Hta* and *Kyoh Tab* are not peripheral to Karen agricultural and conservation practices; instead, these rituals are understood to be the “most important actions to care for the water, land, and natural resources upon which people depend.”<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, because they carry out these rituals, the *Hteepoe Kaw K’Sab* are deemed by many to be the “most important caretakers of the water and land.”<sup>133</sup>

Ceremonies such as the *Lu Htee Hta* and *Kyoh Tab* engage the Karen-*K’Sab* relationships central to Karen ontologies and conservation practices. Through such rituals, people place themselves in relationships of accountability to more-than-human beings occupying the landscape, and they secure rights to use certain elements of the landscape for particular needs. As such, Karen conservation practices such as riverbank gardens, rotational farming, and the protection of old growth forests – all of which sustainable practices lauded by conservation scientists in recent years – cannot, without dishonoring/making ineffective, be separated from the Karen-*K’Sab* relationships undergirding them.<sup>134</sup> Paul, Roth, and Bwe Moo explain:

It is through relations with the *K’Sab* that Karen villagers relate to the water and land itself, and humans’ rights to use the land are contingent on maintaining these ritual obligations. The ceremonies maintain a reciprocal relationship with the *K’Sab*, promoting abundance and protecting the community from harm.<sup>135</sup>

Natural resource management in a Karen framework prioritizes the maintenance of “life-giving relations with social others in a sentient landscape,” which relations are central to Karen notions of well-being.<sup>136</sup> Karen *kaw* are a layering of social, ecological, and spiritual landscapes, designed

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Manasan Wongvorn and Sompong Amnuay-ngertra, “Karen Indigenous Knowledge of Sustainable Resource Management,” *Prajñā Vihāra* 19, no. 2 (2018): 1-21.

<sup>135</sup> Paul, Roth, and Moo, “Relational Ontology,” 381.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 378.

as such to nurture spiritual and material, life-sustaining, relationships between human and more-than-human beings within the *kan*.

Because these ontologies prioritize relationality and conversation with landscape, they are adaptive by nature, allowing them to persist through changing cultural, environmental, religious, and scientific contexts. The cultural protocols and principles stemming from these ontologies are shaped through continual conversation with the land, particularly with the *K'Sab* animating the landscape and humans living among them. Through this attention to context, Karen adapt their practices, social structures, and activism in ways that ensure the long-term well-being of themselves and the environments with which they live.

This adaptation can be seen, for instance, in the persistence of Karen relationality with landscape amidst religious change. Upon their conversion to Christianity, many Karen Christians have adapted various practices to maintain strong relationships with a sentient world—something viewed by most Karen as central to Karen identity, regardless of religious affiliation.<sup>137</sup> For example, many Karen Christian communities have created new rituals, such as prayer ceremonies for fish and other more-than-human actors.<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, although they do create new rituals such as these, the majority of Christian Karen still embrace traditional ceremonies, spirit groves, and other practices, as these are seen as central to both to Karen identity and to “protect[ing] watersheds, maintain[ing] the forest, and conserve[ing] biodiversity,” and they are considered capable of coexistence with monotheistic religions.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 16 (2018), pg. 386. <https://kesan.asia/resource/salween-peace-park-charter/>.

<sup>138</sup> Paul, Roth, and Moo, “Relational Ontology,” 386.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

## Environmental Activism, Conflict, and Dams in Karen State

These spiritual and material ties to land have inspired environmental activism within Karen communities. For instance, the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), a large non-governmental organization works to “improve livelihood security and to gain respect for indigenous people’s knowledge and rights in Karen State of Burma” through various research, activism, and practical projects.<sup>140</sup>

In Karen State, environmental issues are intertwined with decades-long histories of conflict, displacement, and economic instability. KESAN explains that, in Karen State, “the violence and inequities of more than 60 years of civil war have created one of the most impoverished regions in the world.”<sup>141</sup> Not only have Karen communities been engaged in this longstanding war with the Tatmadaw – Myanmar’s armed forces – but they have suffered environmental injustices carried out by Myanmar governments during both periods of military and civilian rule. Military and civilian central governments were involved in dams that reduced river flows in Karen traditional lands, factories which polluted water used by Karen communities, and dam-induced flooding which displaced many Karen individuals. Although these harms against Karen lands and communities have been enacted during both civilian and military rule, they have been exacerbated during military rule because of heightened conflict – including the dissolution of ceasefire agreements – and reduced accountability in military and economic activities.<sup>142</sup> Particularly during civilian rule, many of these projects have been enacted

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<sup>140</sup> KESAN, “Who We Are,” *Karen Environmental and Social Action Network*, n.d., <https://kesan.asia/who-we-are/>.

<sup>141</sup> KESAN, “Karen Environmental and Social Action Network,” *Karen Environmental and Social Action Network*, n.d. <https://kesan.asia>.

<sup>142</sup> The Irrawaddy, “Myanmar Ceasefire Agreement is Void: KNU Concerned Group,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 3, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-ceasefire-agreement-is-void-knu-concerned-group.html>.

under the guise of national development, arguing that hydropower, factory construction, and extractive industries will boost Myanmar's economy. However, given the marginalization of Karen communities, the intertwining of these developments with decades-long civil wars between Karen armies and the Tatmadaw, and the lack of accountability in these activities, infrastructure, hydropower, and privatization projects in Karen State have presented multivalent harms to Karen communities. They have placed immense pressures on Karen sovereignty, livelihood security, cultural practices, spirituality, physical health, and safety.

In response to these developments, KESAN carries out a range of projects to protect Karen land and identity, many of which address water and the Salween River in particular. These projects push past the tension frequently arising between development and environmental protection. Central to their ability, and their drive, to do so is their rootedness in relationality between humans and more-than-human beings in the landscape.

To explain the ways these relationship-rooted ontologies allow Karen individuals to craft lifeways beyond the development-conservation divide, Saw John Bright, an ethnic Karen and water governance programme coordinator at KESAN, drafted an article titled, "Opinion: Indigenous Understanding of the Salween River Key for Biodiversity."<sup>143</sup> In this article, he focuses on the Salween River, describes the multifaceted ties between Karen people and the river, as well as the ways damming and other large-scale industrial projects will impact the well-being of the river and of Karen communities.<sup>144</sup> He explains that Karen land management practices combine spirituality, culture, and conservation, which develop and adapt through continued interaction with human and more-than-human actors in the landscape. The Salween

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<sup>143</sup> Bright, "Opinion: Indigenous Understanding of Salween River Key for Biodiversity."

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

River is one such living entity, and, Bright explains, damming her will be catastrophic for the river, for Karen traditional knowledge systems, and for Karen communities. He gives three primary reasons for this.

First, altering the river's flow will affect its ecology and sever people's interdependence with the river by reducing the stability of river-linked livelihoods, encouraging emigration, and reducing the number of Karen carrying out the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony. As mentioned earlier, the *Lu Htee Hta* ceremony is considered by many Karen to be the most important action to care for the water. Furthermore, even for displaced Karen, this ceremony is considered central to their long-term well-being, because they root this well-being in Karen-*K'Sab* relationships. A group of Karen internally displaced persons, who had been displaced for over 40 years, stated: "we want to return to our own village, where the *Htee K'Sab Kaw K'Sab* will watch over and take care of us again."<sup>145</sup> Thus, dams will harm Karen well-being by severing relationships between the Karen, the water, and the land.

Secondly, dams will affect the diversity and population of aquatic species in the Salween – and therefore of wildlife populations living throughout the basin – and will affect the health of other water bodies such as mud beds, waterfalls, spring-fed pools, streams, and islands. These sites are considered sacred by the Karen, and they believe that dams and other destructive actions may anger or repel spirits, thereby "stripping these sites of protection."<sup>146</sup> With this reduction of biodiversity in the basin comes great violence to livelihood and cultural integrity.

Lastly, dams will sever the interspecifically, interspatially, and intergenerationally binding influence of the Salween River. "It is the wholeness of the river," Saw John Bright explains,

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<sup>145</sup> Paul, "Kaw: The Indigenous Karen Customary Lands."

<sup>146</sup> Bright, "Opinion: Indigenous Understanding of Salween River Key for Biodiversity."



“connecting beginning to end; past to present; humans to more-than-humans – that makes her the backbone of our belief systems.”<sup>147</sup> Large dams would chop up this wholeness, diminishing the power of the river to sustain human and more-than-human life throughout the basin.

There are three largescale dams planned to be built on the Salween River in Karen State: the Hatgyi Dam, which has been approved, and the Dagwin and Wei Gyi dams, which have are awaiting approval.<sup>148</sup> The furthest along in the planning process, the Hatgyi Dam, was proposed in 1998, and it immediately became enmeshed in injustices against Karen communities. Ever since construction was slated to begin in 2007, the dam site has been occupied by the Tatmadaw, resulting in tightened security, frequent clashes between Karen ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the Tatmadaw, and violence towards civilians.<sup>149</sup> In early 2018, the military forced around 2,000 people out of the area, and people in the region continue to be killed by the military – a situation which has intensified since the military takeover in 2021.

### **Salween Peace Park**

To address the compound violence to Karen people, culture, and lands stemming from the dam and other injustices, residents of Karen State’s Mutraw District came together to design a peace park in the region. The resulting Salween Peace Park Charter was ratified in 2008, despite continuing conflict and environmental threats in the region. The peace park has four aims:

- 1) To end and avoid conflict
- 2) To protect the environment

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Carl Middleton, Alec Scott, and Vanessa Lamb, “Hydropower Politics and Conflict on the Salween River,” in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 28.

<sup>149</sup> Fred Pearce, “Amid Tensions in Myanmar, An Indigenous Peace Park is Born,” *Yale Environment 360*, November 30, 2020, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/amid-tensions-in-myanmar-an-indigenous-park-of-peace-is-born>.

- 3) To ensure the preservation of ethnic cultural resources
- 4) To help post-conflict communities recover and rebuild<sup>150</sup>

The Salween Peace Park is designed in accordance with the intergenerationally, interspatially, and interspecifically engaged nature of Karen ontologies, particularly as manifest in *kaw* structures.

Salween Peace Park is a 1.4-million-acre park in Mutraw (Hpapun) District of Karen State, designed and led by Karen communities.<sup>151</sup> When the Salween Peace Park Charter was ratified in 2008, the park contained 139 *kaw*, 27 community forests, and three wildlife sanctuaries, and it was home to more than 70,000 people.

A “grassroots, people-centered alternative to the previous Myanmar government and foreign companies’ plans for destructive development in the Salween River basin,” the Salween Peace Park is a radical reweaving of jurisdictional scales, human-nature relationships, ethnic minority groups, religious communities, international boundaries, ontologies, species, and ecosystems in and beyond the Salween basin. Through the Salween Peace Park, Karen communities enact solutions that balance conservation and development by promoting the long-term well-being of human community and of the environment.

These solutions are located and enacted through Karen ontologies, which, as explained above, are rooted in *kaw* structures and which are more holistic than mainstream conservation practices. These ontologies have developed through human collaborations with nature and with

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<sup>150</sup> KESAN, “The Salween Peace Park: A Place for All Living Things to Share Peacefully,” *YouTube*, March 3, 2017. Video, 14:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWyDBz2HaJo>.

<sup>151</sup> Mongabay, “Karen Indigenous Communities in Myanmar Have Officially Launched the Salween Peace Park,” *Mongabay*, January 11, 2019, <https://news.mongabay.com/2019/01/karen-indigenous-communities-in-myanmar-have-officially-launched-the-salween-peace-park/>.

*K'Sab*, and as such, they provide an alternative to mainstream trends in conservation in multiple ways.

First, in contrast to many protected areas designed to promote environmental protection throughout the globe, conservation within the Salween Peace Park does not entail the removal of human communities from “wild” spaces. Instead, it encourages the coexistence of humans and nature – a way of living central to Indigenous Karen ontologies and visions for the future.

Second, in the design and management of the Salween Peace Park, spiritual factors are regarded as important as material factors, which spiritual factors allot nature a higher degree of agency. By reframing nature-as-object to nature-as-subject – including not just plants and animals, but spirits as well – Indigenous Karen ontologies are considered by Karen people more capable of promoting well-being in the basin than would Western science alone, as Western science may disregard the importance of maintaining relationships with the more-than-human world. Thus, through the Salween Peace Park, Indigenous Karen communities have created a vision for land management that radically reweaves the relationships between humanity and nature, between the spiritual and the material, and between conservation and development.

Third, the Salween Peace Park reorganizes jurisdictional scales and political borders within the basin, presenting alternatives to governance that transverses borders and facilitates engagement by individuals of a range of social strata. The introduction of the Salween Peace Park Charter states:

The Salween River is the lifeblood of communities from China to Burma, and the people of Mutraw District are joining together to preserve the river basin’s biocultural diversity and protect their homes from war and destruction through peaceful and sustainable co-management of their lands. The vision for the Salween Peace Park is to demonstrate what truly good governance could be and provide a people-centered alternative to top-down, militarized development.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Introduction, pgs. 4-6.

As delineated in the charter, the Park aims to engage communities of all ethnic groups and religions in Mutraw District, as well as multiple layers of jurisdictional authority within the district – including civil society organizations, the KNU, and local community members, among others – to promote well-being within the Salween basin.

As it makes these connections, the Salween Peace Park Charter draws explicit connections between violence to the land and violence to people – not only to the Karen, but to the millions of people living along the 3,000-kilometer Salween. By emphasizing these interconnections, not only do the creators of the Salween Peace Park dismantle the narrowness of top-down, militarized development within Myanmar, but they also craft internationally, interethnically, interspecifically, and interdisciplinary focused projects that promote the mutual flourishing of humans and the natural world.

In this next section, I will explore each of these reorganizations – between jurisdictional scales, borders, species, and generations – focusing on their manifestations in water management, especially pertaining to the Salween. The Salween is a vital entity in lifeways of Karen and other individuals living alongside it, its health is central to the aims and design of the Salween Peace Park, and – as a transboundary, quickly moving river – the Salween is a particularly potent medium for examining the reorganizations proposed through the park. In these analyses, I will focus specifically on Karen ontologies centering Karen-*K'Sab* relationships, suggesting that the thread enabling these reorganizations is this animism, which animism is taken as an objective reality undergirding governance and practice within the park.

### *Reorganization of Jurisdictional Scales*

When the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party leading Myanmar's transition to democracy in the early 2000s, entered parliament in 2012, it soon promised to federalize the nation, granting increasing amounts of autonomy to ethnic minority groups in border regions.<sup>153</sup> Eager to actualize this promise, Karen communities in Mutraw District established the Salween Peace Park, presenting it as “federal democracy in action.”<sup>154</sup> Thus, Designed as Myanmar trepidatiously emerged from military rule, the Salween Peace Park propelled Mutraw District into a practical and radical reworking of power relations both within and beyond the district.

This began with Park governance. Within the district, the Peace Park established the Salween Peace Park General Assembly, the Salween Peace Park Governance Committee, and working groups and sub-committees.<sup>155</sup>

The General Assembly “coordinates efforts...towards achieving the objectives of the Salween Peace Park,” and it consists of community representatives; village, township, and district KNU representatives; and CSO and CBO representatives, all of whom are to be elected through transparent and democratic processes.<sup>156</sup> The General Assembly must also include a certain number of women.<sup>157</sup> The Governance Committee coordinates between local communities and KNU Mutraw District government authorities, and as such, its role is more

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<sup>153</sup> Ye Myo Hein, “Visions of a Federal Future for Myanmar are Fading Fast – Part II,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/visions-of-a-federal-future-for-myanmar-are-fading-fast-part-ii.html>.

<sup>154</sup> Johanna M. Götz, “Contested Water Governance in Myanmar/Burma: Politics, the Peace Negotiations and the Productions of Scale,” in *Knowing the Salween River: Resource Politics of a Contested Transboundary River*, eds. Carl Middleton and Vanessa Lamb, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 102.

<sup>155</sup> KESAN, “Salween Peace Park Charter: Briefer,” *Karen Social and Environmental Action Network*, <http://kesan.asia/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/SPP-Briefer-1.pdf>.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

concerned with external relations, including overseeing integrity of the park, infrastructure development, and environmental sustainability.<sup>158</sup>

In addition to being composed of democratically-elected representatives from multiple social strata, both the Governance Committee and General Assembly are bolstered by working groups, task forces, and sub-committees are responsible for carrying out specific projects as necessary.<sup>159</sup> These advisory groups are collectively appointed and including, but are not limited to, “customary authorities, elders, natural resource experts, and religious leaders from all faiths.”<sup>160</sup> They provide guidance on specific issues pertaining to traditional ecological knowledge, natural resource management, social development, spirituality and religion, and indigenous culture, among others that are deemed important for sustainable and peaceful park management.

Through these innovative governance structures, Karen governance in the Salween Peace Park reorganizes jurisdictional boundaries and authority in Myanmar. Power is decentralized from the military – including the Tatmadaw and KNU – and from Union-established authorities, such as the central government and the Mutraw District government, and it is shared with leaders whom the Karen deem important, including customary authorities, elders, natural resource experts, and religious leaders. In addition, their enforcement of gender quotas, the democratic processes underlying leadership selection, and the frequent review of leadership positions ensures that the Park is governed by representative, knowledgeable, and accountable committees. In this radical vision, political and military forces do not assert top-down authority

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 38, pg. 17.

on the region; instead, authority stems upwards: from scientific expertise, religious and cultural roles, and the support of the community.

### *Reorganization of Political Boundaries*

When delineating the boundaries of Salween Peace Park, Karen communities did so with a recognition of the layered political, social, ethnic, and environmental landscapes within the region. The Salween basin is seen as a series of interconnected ecosystems to be shared, with respect, by people throughout. As such, rules and regulations within the Salween Peace Park Charter demand residents and anyone acting in the park heed the transboundary impacts of their actions.

For instance, Article 42 of the charter states that the Governance Committee shall review the “social and environmental impacts of projects that are known to have, or potentially have, transboundary impacts on common pool resources, such as air, soil, and water, that may extend beyond land ownership boundaries.”<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, the people of Salween Peace Park are prohibited from accepting “any social, economic, political, or legal developments or changes that have environmental impacts that cannot be isolated or that expose the wider community to risk and harm,” including environmental impacts that “may extend beyond land ownership boundaries.”<sup>162</sup>

Transboundary responsibility is particularly important in actions concerning the Salween River, its tributaries, and connected streams and lakes. Moving quickly through nations, districts, and ecosystems, the river is particularly transversive, and it calls for more urgent attention to

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<sup>161</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 42, pg. 18.

<sup>162</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 71, pg. 26.

transboundary responsibility than elements of the ecosystem that move more slowly, like forests and land formations. Article 92 of the Salween Peace Park Charter states:

Given the transboundary nature of water resources, in particular the Salween River and its tributaries, the Salween Peace Park Governing Committee shall work together with the designated agents of the legitimate KNU Mutraw District government to manage watersheds with the use of Indigenous and scientific knowledge, in order to meet the water use needs of the people while ensuring sustainability of water resources.<sup>163</sup>

By calling upon the Governing Committee – which is concerned primarily with external relations – and district authorities to protect the Salween, this article asserts the need for transboundary collaboration in water management. Even so, this transboundary collaboration does not include only people in diplomatic positions; people within the park are also called upon to “oppose any developments that affect the health of the Salween River and its tributaries” and to minimize their disruptions to the “natural flow of water.”<sup>164</sup> Their actions, be those micro-hydro projects, fishing, and agriculture, should be carried out “with consideration of downstream impacts on other communities.”<sup>165</sup> As such, though the Salween River passes through the peace park, its reach and impact – and thus the duties of residents towards the river – are considered on a much broader scale.

#### *Reorganization of Human-Nature Relations*

The Salween Peace Park challenges conservation methods prevalent in Western countries, which methods pursue protection of wild spaces by enforcing the absence of human presence. In many countries, such conservation has been carried out at the expense of Indigenous communities, who often inhabit remote and biodiversity-rich lands. Thus conserve these lands, many countries have prohibited certain elements of Indigenous livelihoods and lifeways – such as certain

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<sup>163</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 92, pg. 31.

<sup>164</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Articles 89 and 94, pgs. 30-31.

<sup>165</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 94, pg. 31.



agricultural or ceremonial practices – or they have expelled Indigenous communities from the areas completely.<sup>166</sup>

Karen communities in Myanmar and Thailand have likewise been negatively impacted by these trends in conservation. Nonetheless, they recognize themselves as stewards of their traditional lands, and they assert that their presence has not a negative or even neutral impact on the health of the environment, but that their well-being and the well-being of the land are mutually reinforcing.<sup>167</sup>

“The well-being of people is intricately linked to the well-being of the natural environment, and the people of Salween Peace Park shall work together to ensure the ecological sustainability of their way of life,” states Article 71 of the Salween Peace Park Charter.<sup>168</sup> Through reports, studies, and other publications, Karen communities have endeavored to illustrate how their interactions with the natural world have helped sustain forests, water, and wildlife. In one example, Karen villagers support populations of an endemic fish species, *Nya Nab* (*Garra* spp.), by leading communal ceremonies to bless the fish, monitor spawning channels to ensure adequate water levels, and deterring predators with tree branches. They also follow numerous cultural prohibitions and practices geared towards protection of the *Nya Nab* and their habitats. Saw Ray Kay Moo, a leader in *Nya Nab* conservation efforts in Karen State, explained that *Nya Nab* “depend on humans like an infant depends on its mother,” that the well-being of the river, the Karen, and the *Nya Nab* are thoroughly intertwined.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Lara Domínguez and Colin Luoma, “Decolonising Conservation Policy: How Colonial Land and Conservation Ideologies Persist and Perpetuate Indigenous Injustices at the Expense of the Environment,” *Land* 9, no. 3 (2020).

<sup>167</sup> Bundidterdsakul, “Local Context, National Law: The Rights of Karen People on the Salween River in Thailand,” 141-158.

<sup>168</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 71, pg. 26.

<sup>169</sup> Paul, Roth, and Moo, “Relational Ontology,” 385.

In addition to actions such as these, Karen communities advocate on behalf the forests, rivers, and wildlife of the area by promoting environmental protections, protesting against environmentally harmful infrastructure developments such as upstream dams and extractive industries, and ensuring that Karen people are educated in ecological knowledge, political issues, and cultural practices relevant to the well-being of themselves and the land. The Salween Peace Park Charter lays out responsibilities for each Karen individual to educate themselves in these issues and to participate according to their capacities.<sup>170</sup>

#### *Reorganization of Generational Divides*

In addition to reweaving jurisdictional scales and human-nature collaborations, the Salween Peace Park also emphasizes ties between generations. In the charter, people of the park are called upon to heed and learn from elders – seen as “bearers of Indigenous knowledge” – and elders are placed in respected positions within advisory councils and other governance structures.<sup>171</sup>

Furthermore, people agree to learn about and preserve cultural heritage from elders, and they agree to educate younger generations in cultural knowledge and practices. As such, the structure of the Salween Peace Park is rooted in robust intergenerational accountability, with all residents agreeing to learn from their ancestors and their histories, to enact these cultural practices and principles in the present, and to ensure their continuance into the future by teaching younger generations.

In ways rarely seen in Western environmental governance, the Salween Peace Park emphasizes environmental protection on behalf of future generations. Community members are

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<sup>170</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 56, pg. 22.

<sup>171</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 57, pg. 22.

called upon to preserve soil health through minimal use of fertilizers and other chemicals in agriculture, to prepare against the effects of climate change, and to protect water and other natural resources for the use of future generations.<sup>172</sup> The rights of future generations are granted significant weight in park governance, with Article 71 of the charter stating that “the people of Salween Peace Park have the right to live in a healthy and ecologically balanced environment that guarantees sustainability of natural resources for future generations.”<sup>173</sup> Within the Salween Peace Park, dams are vehemently opposed, as are extractive industries and factories that pollute the river – all of which are considered to place immense burdens on future inhabitants of the basin.

A crucial component of this intergenerational responsibility in the park is multifaceted cultural preservation. The charter delineates responsibilities to record histories, educate younger generations in various aspects of culture, and even to “revitalize and restore heritage and traditions that have been lost and degraded.”<sup>174</sup> The Governing Committee and the KNU Mutraw District Government, for instance, must “establish an educational institution dedicated to preserving Indigenous Karen cultural traditions,” which institutions must not only preserve culture but facilitate its adaptation to future context, thereby “ensuring that future generations have the knowledge and skills to adapt their way of life to changing circumstances.”<sup>175</sup> One important aspect of this cultural preservation is continued engagement between Karen communities and the spirit world. Lands considered to be “ancestral domain or otherwise sacred to individuals, households, or local communities” are granted specific protections to maintain

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<sup>172</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Articles 76, 80, and 92, pgs. 27-28, 31.

<sup>173</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 71, pg. 26.

<sup>174</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 113, pg. 37.

<sup>175</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Articles 113 and 116, pgs. 37-38.

their ecological and cultural integrity.<sup>176</sup> These include burial grounds, *lob* (spirit dwelling sites), and other sacred grounds, who should be preserved according to Indigenous Karen customs. In the protection of these sites such as these, the charter elucidates how Karen relationships with ancestral and other spirits enables a particularly thoroughgoing intergenerational accountability.

Threading through environmental management and cultural preservation, through spiritual and material worlds, and through multiple layers of governance, intergenerational accountability affects all elements of governance within the Salween Peace Park. This includes, importantly, management of the Salween River. For generations, traditional practices such as riverbank gardening, *Nya Nab* spawning, and *Lu Htee Hta* ceremonies have been transmitted generation to generation for centuries, all aimed at protecting the many species and spirits inhabiting the river. Karen believe that the continual transfer of these practices from generation to generation is central to the maintenance of the health of the Salween River and Salween basin, and the charter aims to ensure that they will be.

### *Relationships as Key*

The design, regulations, and aims of the Salween Peace Park are founded upon Karen ontologies, which center relationships between human and more-than-human beings. In the Salween Peace Park Charter, the agentiality of nature, the presence of the *K'Sab*, and the continuance of *kaw* structures – as well as the subsequent importance of animist ceremonies, practices, and sacred sites – are taken as objective realities inseparable from the well-being of the Karen and of the land. Paul, Roth, and Moo explain:

“To promote ‘practical’ examples of conservation such as sacred groves, fish spawning channels, and hunting protocols, without acknowledging the social and ceremonial relations that give rise to these practices, undermines Indigenous governance and thus

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<sup>176</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 108, pg. 36.

undermines conservation. What our Karen colleagues have taught us has the potential to transform the practice of conservation biology by making it more attentive to Indigenous worlds, ways of being, and ways of knowing.”<sup>177</sup>

The importance of these relationships is written into the Salween Peace Park Charter. The charter’s final article, Article 118 states:

The traditional Indigenous Karen worldview highly values the interdependence of the forests, land, waters, wildlife, and human life. Independent of religious affiliation or belief, the people of Salween Peace Park shall respect and value animist traditions, rituals, and ceremonies that are part of the collective memory of the Indigenous Karen people, and shall recognize and respect the changes that have taken place in Indigenous Karen society that may differ from traditional worldviews.<sup>178</sup>

Here, the “animist traditions, rituals, and ceremonies” of the Karen are considered inseparable from the well-being of forests, land, water, wildlife, and human life. This persists amidst religious change in the region: despite the conversion of large numbers of Karen to Buddhism and Christianity, and despite increasingly levels of education in Western science, the majority of Karen still maintain belief in and relationships with spirits animating the natural world.<sup>179</sup> Paul, Roth, and Moo, for instance, assert that, not only do most Karen harbor some belief in the spirits, but that relegating these ontologies “to the realm of ‘belief’ risks distorting the knowledge and management practices and undermining Indigenous Peoples’ governance systems and relations with their lands.”<sup>180</sup> Thus, in Karen ontologies, the presence of spirits is not only taken as objective, but it is considered inextricable from other elements of life.

As they designed the park, Karen individuals of all religious affiliations, ages, and educational backgrounds throughout Mutraw District agreed to make relationality with spirits of

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 118, pg. 38.

<sup>179</sup> Paul Keenan, “Faith at a Crossroads: Religions and Beliefs of the Karen People of Burma,” *Karen Heritage* 1, no. 1, (n.d.): 2.

<sup>180</sup> Paul, Roth, and Moo, “Relational Ontology,” 385.

the lands, forests, and waters the basis of governance, structure, and regulatory principles within the park. “All the people of Salween Peace Park, regardless of religious belief or ancestral background,” states the charter, “shall endeavor to respect and revitalize the *kam* system of land governance.”<sup>181</sup> It further states that they shall “respect and value the culture of their ancestors, including the animist faith and beliefs, language, literature, and poems.”<sup>182</sup> This includes actively recording history and educating young people in practices such as “herbal and spiritual healing methods, craft traditions of weaving and sewing clothing, and performance arts of music, song, and dance.”<sup>183</sup> The centrality of such themes within the charter illustrates that the majority of Karen view their relationship with the *K'Sab* as irrespective of religious affiliation, age, educational background, or any other identity marker, and it expresses their conviction that the well-being of humans, spirits, and wildlife in the area rests upon the active enactment and transmission of practices that maintain these relations.

### *Learning from the Salween*

Important among these relationships is that between Karen individuals and the Salween River. The Salween, viewed as a living entity, teaches Karen people how to live. “Our knowledge regenerates from our interaction with the environment, especially at the countless natural sacred sites and auspicious confluence points where the Salween meets its tributaries,” explains Bright. “We see her as a living entity.”<sup>184</sup> This sacred relationality makes the Salween for Karen what a house of worship may be for Christians, or temples for Buddhists. Karen learn from and through the river, and the river places them in ties of reciprocal obligation with ethnic groups,

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<sup>181</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 114, pg. 37.

<sup>182</sup> *Charter of the Salween Peace Park* Article 116, pg. 38.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Bright, “Opinion: Indigenous Understanding of Salween River Key for Biodiversity.”

nations, species, and generations throughout the basin. To safeguard her ability to flow freely in thus a crucial task, or conflict, environmental degradation, and economic instability will ensue.

For hundreds of years, Karen have lived near the mouth of the river, watching her nourish the lands they call home. She has a “sacred meaning,” and is, indeed, “an indivisible living entity that supports [Karen] Indigenous cosmos.”<sup>185</sup> To dam her will dam the flow of life-sustaining relationships between humans, animals, plants, and *K'Sab*, resulting in profound harm to human and the more-than-human communities. These impacts extend far beyond Karen State; the Salween is an artery sustaining life for ethnic groups, plants, animals, and spirits throughout the nearly 300,000 square kilometer basin.<sup>186</sup> Because of her importance, Karen people have worked in collaboration with the river to developed social structures, practices, and principles that simultaneously sustain human and environmental well-being. Now, despite conflict, large-scale hydropower projects and exploitative industry, and cultural violence that show no sign of decline, they have chosen to enact the future they envision. The Karen have hope in the ability of their ontologies, especially as manifest in *kaw* relational structures and delineated through rules and regulations in the Salween Peace Park Charter, to promote peace, environmental sustainability, and cultural preservation for human and more-than-human communities within and beyond Mutraw District.

### **The 2021 Military Coup**

Since the military coup in 2021, the residents of the Salween Peace Park have experienced repeated violence by the Tatmadaw. About one month after coup, for instance, the Tatmadaw

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> WLE Greater Mekong, “Salween River Basin,” *CGLAR Research Program on Water, Land, and Ecosystems: Greater Mekong*, <https://wle-mekong.cgiar.org/changes/where-we-work/salween-river-basin/>.

launched air raids on five areas in Mutraw District, causing over 10,000 people to flee their homes.<sup>187</sup> They fled to the jungles, most ultimately vying to cross the Salween River and seek refuge in Thailand. Clashes continued throughout the year, displacing further thousands of people.<sup>188</sup> In news releases about these clashes, Karen communities still defiantly refer to the district as “Salween Peace Park” – a name never recognized by the Tatmadaw. Their “federal democracy in action” remains a reality for which they hope; a reality, they know, is crucial for the peace in the region. Without this bottom-up, representative, accountable form of governance, which governance takes into account the intertwined relationships between natural resources and conflict, between humans and more-than-human species, between generations past and future, and between spiritual and material realities, then oppression, environmental degradation, conflict, will persist. With it, though, a vision for peace is delineated. Though this peace seems a distant possibility, KESAN and other Karen organizations within and without Myanmar still continue to work towards it, promoting the transverse principles and practices embodied in Karen ontologies, traditions, and visions for the future.

## **Conclusion**

Karen ontologies, land management practices, and identity center relationships between humans, plants, animals, and spirits. Karen visions for governance are rooted in these relationships, and as such, they radically reorganize jurisdictional scales, encourage transborder responsibility, weave humans and the natural world, and assert intergenerational accountability. One such

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<sup>187</sup> The Irrawaddy, “10,000 Karen Flee Myanmar Military Airstrikes,” *The Irrawaddy*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/10000-karen-flee-myanmar-military-airstrikes.html>.

<sup>188</sup> Mizzima, “Salween Peace Park Calls on International Community to Intervene After Deadly Myanmar Junta Attacks,” *Mizzima*, February 5, 2022, <https://www.mizzima.com/article/salween-peace-park-calls-international-community-intervene-after-deadly-myanmar-junta>.



vision is encapsulated in the Salween Peace Park, which has been advanced by Karen communities in Mutraw District despite longstanding oppression and violence by the Myanmar central government and the Tatmadaw. In the Salween Peace Park Charter, Karen communities assert the importance of their ontologies and land management practices in maintaining intergenerational, interspecies, and international relationships for the well-being of communities throughout the Salween River basin. This act of radical hope persists despite mounting pressures against it, and the visions it harbors must be understood to effectively advance peace and well-being within Karen State.

## Conclusion

*It is said, the Dulong River and the Nujiang River were created by snake deities, so the two rivers writhe and twist like a snake.*

*In ancient times, on the mountain, Kawa Garbo, there was a pool. The pool was as large as twenty dustpans, and the bottom of it continuously emitted bubbles that looks like strands of pearls. Beside the pool, there was a mysterious cave, where there lived a snake god and snake goddess who could transform into different shapes. The snake god and goddess respected and loved each other. In the daytime, they emerged from the cave to search for food, to run around in the mountain forests, or to play around in the pool, thus leisurely and carefreely passing through their days.*

*Kawa Garbo towered through the clouds. The lower half of the mountain was covered in ancient trees that stretched into the sky, and the peak was blanketed in brilliantly white snow. Nonetheless, after a short time, the snake god and snake goddess had played around the whole mountain and became somewhat bored with it. They felt that the mountain was too small, that it could not accommodate their bodies. The pool was too shallow for them, let alone large enough for them to soar through. Therefore, one night, a night with a bright moon and a gentle breeze, the snake god consulted with the snake goddess. "We have long stayed here, and it is truly desolate" he said. "It would be better to leave and go look around, to find a more spacious place, and to put our abilities to good use. Then can we be free and unfettered!"*

*The snake goddess responded, saying, "How right you are! The skies are spacious and the earth is boundless, so we ought to go out and do something grand, that perhaps we can remain in the world, and maybe even find a new, abundant place to be."*

*"In that case, let us go off separately, and when we finally converge at the furthest place, we can see who is more capable, how do you feel about that?" The snake god was eager to fly off right then.*

*"We have always been together like form and shadow. If now we each travel our own roads, this would be quite sorrowful! We don't know in how many years, in how many months, we will be able to meet again...." As the snake goddess spoke, she wept with grief.*

*The snake god comforted her, saying, "We will ultimately find a large and blessed space. No matter how massive the difficulties on the road may be, if only we bravely press forward, we will at last, one day, meet!"*

*In the early dawn of the second day, the snake god and the snake goddess departed. The sun beamed its smiling face and the snow sparkled dazzlingly in the rays of light, like they were bidding them farewell on their journey.*

*The birds in the forests sang beautiful songs for them, the muntjacs and the red deer danced joyful dances for them. Snake children and grandchildren of all sizes gathered their things, preparing to accompany them on their journey.*

*As they exited the mouth of the cavern, the snake god bid farewell to the snake goddess, and went alone towards the southwest; the snake goddess then confidently and calmly wriggled towards the south. As soon as they left the mountains, they saw a large world, and could not refrain from singing, hua la la, hua la la. Even so, the journey was endless and perilous. Sometimes, they needed to thread through holes in cliffs; sometimes, they had to jump from overhanging cliffs; sometimes, they had to bore through spiky forests; sometimes they had to climb through*

*winding mountains; sometimes their heads crashed into boulders; and sometimes they violently tumbled into sand dunes, but they were unwilling to stop – even more so, they were unwilling to retreat. They used all of their strength to rush east and west, traveling day and night as they basted on with their journey.*

*One day, they finally reached a boundless sea, and the snake god and the snake goddess found each other in the midst of the water. From this point, they lived together happily forever, going through their lives with great love for each other.*

*The path which the snake god travelled turned into a turbulently bubbling, large river, which Dulong people call “A Gu Wang” (Gong Wang), later calling it Nu Jiang; the path which the snake goddess travelled also transformed into a great river with surging waves whose sounds shook the heavens. The Dulong people called it “A Mai Peng” (Mu Wang), later calling it the Dulong River. The paths of the snake children and snake grandchildren who originally followed the snake god and snake goddess became the small rivers which flow into these two large rivers.<sup>189</sup>*

## **Riverine Relations**

This is the Dulong legend illustrating the origin of the Salween River and the nearby Dulong River. The Dulong are an Indigenous group living near the northern end of the Salween River in Yunnan Province., and their villages are primarily tucked away in isolated ravines – far from the sea, far from the Tibetan glaciers feeding the rivers high in the mountains. Nonetheless, as

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<sup>189</sup> Zuo Yu Wang 左玉堂, *Nu zu Dulong zu min jian gushi xuan* 怒族獨龍族民間故事選 (Shanghai, PRC: Shanghai yishu chuban she 上海藝術出版社, 2004), 270-272. Translated by Emily Ostler.

manifest in this story, central to the Dulong understanding of the river is its wholeness, its animacy, and its movement through diverse lands.

Other legends about the Salween River have similar emphases. The Lisu legend about the origin of the Salween River, for instance, traces the journey of two river sisters who climb and tumble through mountains, forests, and fields to connect with their beloved ocean – lover to one sister, friend to other.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, though not about the origin of the river, Karen stories about their own origin likewise illuminate the transboundary journey of the river, as they connect Karen people with the lands and people northward. As explained by them, centuries ago, the ancestors of the Karen departed from Tibet and surrounding regions, crossing “rivers of sand” to ultimately reach the “Green Land,” or the lush forests they now call home.<sup>191</sup> Like many stories of human migration throughout history, this migration depended on and followed rivers – a crucial one, here, being the Salween. The Shan origin story binds them together with more-than-human beings and with a world woven together, as it their ancestry back to spirits and back to spider deities who weave water and land.

Legends such as these show that many communities living alongside the Salween have longstanding and thorough understandings of the river’s transboundary reach. They emphasize the importance of its wholeness in sustaining the lands and peoples it nourishes. Furthermore, they feature interspecies relationships, thereby binding humans, animals, and spirits in webs of relationality from which emerge the ecologies central to life.

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<sup>190</sup> Nujiang zhou ‘Lisu zu minjian gushi’ bianji zu 怒江州《栗僳族民間故事》編輯組, *Lisu zu minjian gushi* 栗僳族民間故事, (Kunming, PRC: Yunnan renmin chubanshe 雲南人民出版社, 1984), 89-91.

<sup>191</sup> Bram Steenhuisen, “Karen Perceptions of the Forest – and its Potential for Future Conservation,” *Thesis Presented at Wageningen University and Research*, May 2020, 12.

The river as an animate whole continues to inform Lisu, Shan, and Karen relationality with the river and other more-than-human beings populating the basin. Through three case studies, I explored how these relationships manifest amidst modern developments. Through this, I discovered relationships that are, fittingly, best described as “riverine.” These relationships snake through the spiritual and the material, through frequently siloed disciplines, through multiple countries, through diverse human communities, and through a range of species and ecosystems. As they do so, they bind the human and more-than-human selves peopling the Salween basin into ties of reciprocity, shaping notions of well-being and the means devised to get there.

Woven together by sustained relations with the river, sacrality interpenetrates the lands and livelihoods, human and more-than-human beings, and spiritual and material worlds present along the Salween. Focusing on three case studies, this thesis followed a Salweenian corridor geography, paying particular attention to affect, story, and traditional ecological knowledge. Although these case studies represent only small snippets of the nuanced and quickly shifting story of the Salween, they nonetheless illuminate the importance of the interspecies, interdisciplinary, and international relationships marking life along the river. Such is the sacred geography of the Salween River: a sacred woven of relations. These relations must be understood to advance peace and development as understood by Salweenian communities themselves, and it is upon these relations that the future of the river depends.

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