Karen Environmental Stewardship of Natural Resources

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Abstract—In northern Thailand, state-driven discourse has often labeled diverse highland minority groups or "hill tribes" as destroyers of the forest, associated with the drug trade, and as non-indigenous migrants. The reality is far more complex. Indigenous groups such as the Karen practice sophisticated traditional ways of environmental stewardship. Specific sites and portions of community lands are set aside and protected from resource usage, including watershed forests, cemetery forests, and forests of spiritual protection where community members' umbilical cords are ritually deposited. A series of complex and variable taboos regulate hunting activity, including bans on killing certain animals, restrictions and practices that limit waste and overuse. Portions of the landscape that are used for agriculture or resource extraction are carefully stewarded through a cyclical process of asking permission for the temporary use of the land, asking forgiveness for any misuse that may intentionally or unintentionally occur, and offering thanksgiving before ending the stewardship and returning the land to its true non-human owners. These three axes of Karen stewardship – permission, atonement and thanksgiving – comprise a "green circular cycle" that mediates reciprocal relations between human communities and non-human beings, spirits, and the land.

Forestry discourse in Thailand

In northern Thailand, state-driven discourse often labels diverse highland minority groups or "hill tribes" as destroyers of the forest, associated with the drug trade, and as non-indigenous migrants. This discourse, which has its origins in the late 19th century and became more prominent in the early 1980s, justifies an approach to forest and landscape management based on the principle of "Separate people from the forest." Government efforts in forest conservation focus on pushing people who live and work in forest zones out of the area and expanding conservation zones to encompass the rotational farmland used by highland villagers. The argument that highland ethnic groups, who generally practice sustainable rotational farming, are causing the destruction of watersheds, water sources, and forest resources is used by the government to declare national parks and wildlife sanctuaries over forest and farmland falling within the customary lands of minority villagers. Tensions between forestry officials and local villagers have led to both sporadic outbreaks of violence and large-scale protest movements, including several marches in the 1980s and 1990s that brought protesting highland villagers to the Chiang Mai City Hall and even to government offices in Bangkok.

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Conflicts between the state and local communities on the issue of forest resource management can be summarized as comprising three main issues: 1. conflicting interpretations of the definition of a forest; 2. conflicts over the ownership of forest lands; and 3. conflicts in thinking and practice that stem from different ontological and epistemological perspectives. Regarding the definition of forest, the Thai government relies upon Section 4 of the 1941 Forest Act, which defines forests as lands that have not yet been acquired by a person under the land law. Following this definition, land which was once forested but is currently without trees is still considered forest, as long as it has not been legally assigned to someone's ownership. However local communities tend to believe that the forest ownership exercised by the state refers naturally only to forested lands. Unforested areas, such as the agricultural land used by highland peoples, are generally viewed as spaces where everyone has the right to occupy and pioneer. We can summarize this conflict by saying that the state claims ownership through recourse to *legal rights*, while highland villagers claim ownership to the same lands by means of their *traditional rights* (Kanjanaphan and Kaosa-ard 1995). These traditional or customary rights are based on highland communities' roles as stewards, who have maintained, exploited, and lived in the forest for a long time, usually longer than the existence of the 1941 Forest Act.

The Thai state uses a Western model of natural resource management based on the belief that people are a threat to forest security. As is now well-known, this model originated with thinkers like John Muir in the United States, who mistakenly observed what he thought were "pristine lands" but were, in fact, carefully managed ecosystems whose indigenous stewards had been massacred by colonial settlers shortly before Muir's time. This misunderstanding went on to become enshrined as the guiding principle of the US National Parks System, which has in turn inspired national park systems and landscape management approaches worldwide, including in Thailand. The natural outcome of this "pristine forest" model is that it is necessary to separate people from the forest in order to protect it. This "exclusionary" approach to resource management refuses to recognize that minority peoples may have their own cultures and ways of living on the land that differ from those of the majority people.

In Thailand, the prerogative to exclude local communities from the forest is also influenced by their perception as itinerant migrants coming from other lands. The belief that such groups also participate in drug trafficking (which has historical reasons) further labels them as threats to national security that require strict control and management. Ironically then, in Thailand, the state has concluded that it must "defend" the forest against the people, while from the perspective of indigenous defenders, the people and their carefully stewarded natural resources must be "defended" against the state. These two perspectives are at odds and constantly threaten to bring the state and local communities into states of opposition and conflict.

Karen history in Thailand

"Karen" refers to groups of people who call themselves Pgaz k'Nyau, Sgaw, Pwo, Kayah, Kayan and Pa-O. They live mainly in areas which are defined as "forest lands"

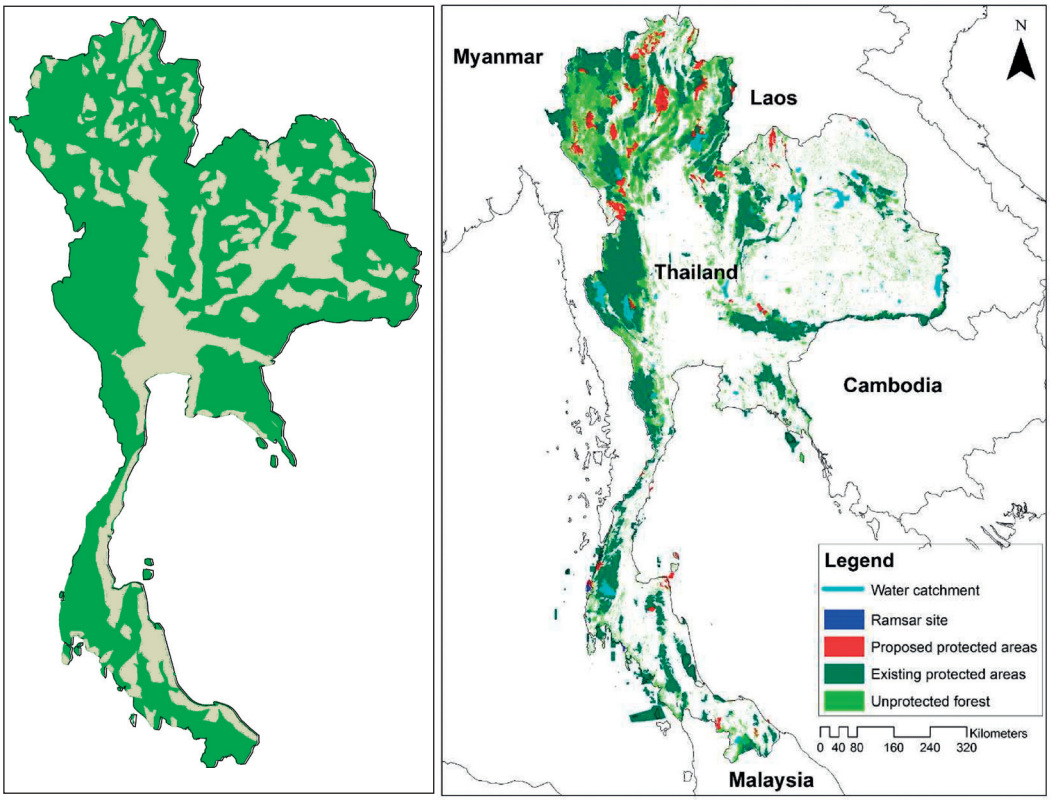

Figure 1. (left) Forest cover from Forestry Department map in the 1950s; (right) current situation from Pomoin et al (2022)

by the state in fifteen provinces: Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Lamphun, Lampang, Phrae, Sukhothai, Tak, Kamphaeng Phet, Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, Phetchaburi and Prachuap Khiri Khan. The Chiang Mai Hill Tribe Research Institute in April 2002 reported that the Karen population in Thailand totaled 438,450 people (Hill Tribe Research Institute 2002), while a report of the Karen Community Data Survey project states that the total Karen population in 2017 was 549,395 people in 125,673 households across 1,993 villages (Northern Farmers Group Network 2017).

Karen people have a long history of ties with the kingdoms of Lan Na and Siam. Most Karen people in Thailand had ancestors in the north and central west. Some of these communities have histories that can be traced as far back as 1,200 years, although most can identify no more than 400 years of history. Even though these histories of settlement extend far beyond the periods when "forest lands" were defined for different kingdoms and states, governments have not generally recognized Karen territorial claims. The Forest Management Bureau, Department of Forestry, Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment, reports that forest cover has decreased from 28.3 million hectares or 53.3 percent of the total area in 1963 to 16.3 million hectares or 31.5 percent in 2014 (Figure 1). Currently, most of the remaining forested lands are in the northern and western regions of Thailand, the areas where most Karen communities live. The Thai state has declared forest reserves and other categories of protected areas which overlap with Karen territories and agricultural lands, relegating all such communities to illegal status.

Panichkul et al. (2017) studied the rights of Pgaz k'Nyau Karen communities and

the implementation of special cultural zones for swidden cultivation in strategic areas as a method to resolve agricultural land disputes and Karen housing problems in the northern forest lands. They report that 1,661 communities (out of a total of 1,930) are located in National Forest and 492 of these communities are located in conservation forests such as national parks and wildlife protection zones. There are 583 communities in both national forest and conservation forest. Almost all the Karen communities in western Thailand are in protected forests.

The declaration of protected forest areas which are superimposed on Karen and other highland groups' community territories significantly affects their ways of life. Those communities located in protected areas are often prevented by forestry officials from practicing shifting cultivation, or are forced to limit their areas of cultivation. Limiting the amount of land in cultivation shortens the length of cycles of rotation, causing degradation of the soil, an increase in grass and decrease of rice yields per acre. In such situations, Karen people, besieged by the state, are both faced with food vulnerability and prevented from practicing their tradition of shifting cultivation. Beyond forestry policies, another key factor in the vulnerability of Karen communities is the mounting influence of capitalism. External networks of capital and merchants, commercial markets, and state economic promotion programs together pressure self-reliant local economies to transform into commercial economies, forcing villagers to shift from rotational fields to commercial crops, particularly maize. This situation has been created through national forestry policy coupled with the growing influence of commercial agriculture, as found in the work of Boonchai et al. (2014).

Although besieged by the dual powers of state policy and capitalist markets, Karen communities continue to uphold the values and ideals of natural resource stewardship. The widespread perspective that "Because we use it, we have to take care of it" reinforces a cycle of sustainable consumption that maintains a balance between people, natural resources, and the spiritual world.

Customary protected areas in Karen communities

Specific sites and portions of Karen community lands are set aside and protected from resource usage (Junsongduang et al. 2013; Phatthanaphraiwan, Zeitler and Fairfield 2022; Platz 2003). These conserved areas, such as the upper portion of *tee kwa kee* (watersheds), are considered fragile, and cannot be farmed or even entered under normal circumstances. If people enter the upper watershed, they may become sick. If these areas are exposed to too much heat or cold, they will also become "sick", so they must be maintained at a stable, balanced temperature. Cutting trees, collecting firewood, hunting, and other forms of natural resource extraction are forbidden in these areas. Most designated upper watershed areas account for 30–40 percent of the total community territory (Maniratanavongsiri 1999).

Another category of preserved lands are cemetery forests, which are called *ta sua kho* in the Pakinyaw language, meaning zero space or empty space. This signifies that these areas have been returned to nature; they are empty. Everything in the cemetery forests are forbidden to the living, and living beings cannot use any resource in these areas

(Flanagan 2019). They are only used when someone dies, for instance to gather wood to construct the coffin. Otherwise, all plants and animals that live in cemetery forests cannot be hunted or killed, as they are believed to be the property of the deceased souls. If living people break the rules, such as crossing the line that delineates the cemetery forest, the spirits of the dead may become dissatisfied and claim damages (Paul, Roth, and Moo 2021). Therefore, cemetery forests are strictly controlled conservation areas, as well as refuges for animal and plant species.

Figure 2. (left) A sign marking the protected umbilical cord forest in a northern Thai Karen village; and (right) a Karen elder pointing out a recently hung bamboo tube containing a newborn's umbilical cord attached to a navel tree in a *pga dei pau* (photos by Suwichan Phatthanaphraiwan)

When someone dies and is buried in the cemetery forest, plants, fruit trees and flowers that were favored by the deceased are brought by their relatives and planted in the burial area, thus increasing the site's biodiversity. The body is sent back to the earth and back to the forest. While a person is alive, they use many natural resources to survive. In death, they are able to pay back this debt by returning their body as an offering for the food, animals, firewood, and other resources which they used during their lifetime. The average area of these forests is about 5–6 hectares, so across the 5,790 Pgaz k'Nyau Karen villages in Thailand, there are roughly 37,500 hectares of land under conservation as cemetery forests.

The third category of protected forests are called *pga dei pau* (Figure 2). They are forests of spiritual protection where the umbilical cords of newborn community members are ritually deposited in trees. According to the Karen tradition, after birth, the umbilical cord is cut with a special bamboo knife made for this purpose, and it and the placenta are placed in a bamboo tube. The father or grandfather of the newborn child then goes to the *pga dei pau* and ties the tube to a large, strong tree, ideally a fruiting one (Greene 2021). This act establishes a spiritual link between the child and the tree. While the child grows, this "navel" tree must be protected by their parents, and once they have reached an adult age, this responsibility becomes their own (Georgiadis 2022). If the tree is cut down, it is believed that the human "owner" of the tree may get sick or even

die (Santasombat 2004). If the navel tree is cut down or harmed, the person responsible must hurry to apologize by offering a chicken egg before they get sick. Afterwards, the tree's owner must find a new navel tree within three days or pay a fine of a pig. Similarly, if the child falls sick, one of their family members often visits the child's navel tree to make offerings in order to return the child to health (Omori et al. 1999)

The number of navel trees depends on the number of people in the community. Normally, each community will set aside one area to be the *pga dei pau*, which makes it easier to protect the trees. It is a restricted area, because the souls of all the community members are believed to reside there. The *pga dei pau* is where the notification of someone's birth is delivered to the land, the forest, and the natural elements, opening a kind of contract between them and the other beings with whom they will coexist. Each community's *pga dei pau* is roughly 5–6 hectares, the same size as the funeral forests, so across the 5,790 Karen communities in Thailand, these forests protect around 37,500 hectares of land.

Karen taboos and regulations on hunting

In the Karen way of life, animals are hunted for food and traditional medicine, but a series of cultural beliefs and complex taboos regulate this activity and ensure that it is sustainable. These taboos include bans on killing certain animals, and restrictions and practices that limit waste and overuse (Moo et al. 2018). These practices can be classified into three categories: outright bans on killing certain animals; bans on killing certain animals in certain areas; and bans on killing certain animals at certain times of year.

Some animals, such as gibbons, cannot be killed, hunted, or eaten for any reason (Steenhuisen 2020). Such species can be considered "culturally protected", and the beliefs connected to them are often transmitted and preserved in the form of stories, myths or songs called *hta* (Ribó et al. 2021). Gibbons, like humans, live in social groups, and they are respected because they will never destroy or eat agricultural crops. They are believed to be the gift of the mountain, and when a gibbon dies, people say that "the seven mountain peaks will be lonely". If someone kills or eats gibbons, the community will be divided (just as the gibbon troupe is divided by the loss), and agricultural crops will suffer. Similarly, hornbills are large, showy birds that mate for life, displaying what the Karen consider to be a devotion to family. Their monogamy is equated to that of the Karen, so it is believed that if one kills a hornbill, the family will split up and the hunter will become a nomad without a home. Hornbills are considered to be the gift of the banyan tree, and if a hornbill is killed, its mate will die and "seven banyan trees will be sad." Asian elephants are believed to be the gift of rice. Anyone who kills an elephant will never be able to grow rice and eat it again. Conversely, one who dreams of wild elephants will receive a plentiful harvest.

Other animals can be eaten, but only if they are hunted outside the restricted areas outlined above. Once in the restricted area, these species also become taboo. Examples include frogs, eels, softshell turtles, and dwarf snakehead fish. When these species are found in the upper watershed area, they are believed to be protected by the spirit of the water. Hunting these animals in the watershed will cause the water spirit to get angry

and possibly leave to seek a safer area, causing the water supply it once protected to dry up. Another group of animals can be hunted in the forest but not near the community within the area where one can hear a rooster crowing from the village. Such species, which include deer and turtles, are believed to be messengers of the spirits of the forest, sent to the village as signals that something unusual is going to happen (Steenhuisen 2020). Killing such messenger animals near the village can result in disaster for the community. A final group of animals, including rodents and birds, should not be killed around the house. They are believed to be auspicious, merit-bearing animals, so killing or eating them is like killing one's own merit. If someone wishes to get rid of these animals, they have to let other animals do it, such as using cats to kill rats.

There are also some animals which can only be eaten during certain seasons. Wild boar, for instance, can only be eaten in the early winter, after the rice harvest and before the next planting. Once the rice has started to grow, it is believed that the meat of wild boar stinks, making it unappetizing. Red-crested carp can only be eaten in the rainy season and winter, but not in the dry season. The dry season is when this species spawns, so if they are fished at that time, they will not have a chance to spawn. It is believed that if they are eaten in the dry season, the person will get diarrhea or feel sick. Squirrels cannot be eaten in the winter. It is believed that during that time their smell is very strong, and if someone kills and eats them, the smell will stay with them.

These examples show that while hunting is an important activity for Karen communities, it is embedded in a network of regulatory beliefs and prohibitions. The overall goal of these taboos is to maintain a balance between the needs of people and the needs of animals and their habitats. However, the regulatory beliefs extend beyond animals, embracing plants, creeks, and other beings. The overall principles are the same, whether they are applied to plants, animals, or places: some things are never permitted, some are permitted only in certain places, and others are permitted only at certain times. As the ancestors say in the *hta*, "How to cut a tree without letting it die? How to eat frogs without breaking their legs? How to eat crabs without breaking their claws?"

Karen relations with the spiritual guardians of the land

In the Karen cosmology, the landscape and the resources that emerge from it are not the possessions of human beings, but in fact belong to "owners" called *K'Jah,* spirits whose dominion extends over certain areas, animals, or resources (Paul 2018; Steenhuisen 2020; Yamamoto 1991). Whenever the community needs to use land for agriculture or other forms of resource extraction, these areas are carefully stewarded through a three-step cyclical process of relations with the land's true owners:

- asking permission for the temporary use of the land;
- asking forgiveness for any misuse that may intentionally or unintentionally occur;
- offering thanksgiving and ending the stewardship in order to return the land to its owners.

Rice cultivation in the traditional swidden system provides a perfect example of this process. Before beginning to cultivate a certain plot of land, there are several steps taken to ritually ask permission for the use of the land (Chiumkanokchai 2008). Failing to obtain this permission and still farming the area is considered a form of theft and disrespect toward the owner of the land, who can claim damages against the perpetrator.

After identifying a potential area, the first step of asking permission is to perform a divinatory ritual by visiting the site and leaving a little pile of rice there overnight. If you have a nightmare that night, or see a snake or a barking deer run in front of you while walking back to check the pile the next morning, permission to use the site has been denied and a new area must be found. However, if the person arrives at the site without incident and sees that the pile of rice has decreased, this shows that the owner has accepted the offering and granted permission to farm the land. Before cutting down the trees, the spirits of the trees must also be supplicated. Then permission is asked of the god of fire, whose help is needed to burn only the site and prevent the fire from spreading beyond it. Birds, rodents, insects, grasshoppers, termites, and ants are asked to evacuate the area before the planting season.

Figure 3. A thank-you ceremony after removing the weeds in the rice fields (photo by Suwichan Phatthanaphraiwan)

Before planting rice, the *K'Jah* of the soil is asked for permission to use the soil. Before mowing the grass, the spirit of the grass is also asked for permission. Once the grass has grown but before it produces seed, another ceremony is held to ask the gods to influence the sky to fertilize the rice stalks, making them pregnant. Each rice plant is believed to be female, so they must be fertilized by the god of thunder, who is male. Before harvesting the rice, there is a harvest festival, and before threshing, the owner of the rice must be asked for their blessing in order to produce a large amount of rice. In all of these rituals, food and drink are offered first to the owners and then the participants also partake of the offerings (Yamamoto 1991).

Since different resources are being taken and consumed at all times, constant vigilance must be paid by the community to ensure that harmonious relations are maintained with all the spirituals owners (Buergin 2002). If a spiritual owner is unhappy, they will cause disturbances in the environment, so constant vigilance is paid to the conditions of rivers, forests, and weather, as well as to the health of people, crops, and animals. Any abnormality, such as a flood, an agricultural disease, a person or animal falling sick, or strange messenger animals appearing in the village, indicates that something is out of balance. This imbalance is perceived to be caused, perhaps unintentionally, by some person or people of the community. In such cases, an elder must be asked to interpret the cause of the phenomenon, and then a ritual is held to confess the wrongdoings and ask for forgiveness. After crops are harvested, a ritual of thanksgiving and gratitude must be performed (Rajah 1989). The purpose of this ritual is to offer thanks to all the spirits who played a part in the agricultural season, including the spirits of the earth, water, wind, fire, forest, and rice (Chiumkanokchai 2008). Thanks are also offered to the other non-human beings who temporarily sacrificed their homes for the rice harvest, such as birds, rodents, insects, grasshoppers, termites, and ants. As in other ceremonies, the various owner spirits are first invited to eat and drink, and later people join them and celebrate together.

Conclusion

These three elements of Karen stewardship – permission, atonement, and thanksgiving – comprise a "green circular cycle" that mediates reciprocal relations between human communities and non-human beings, spirits, and the land. This cycle of reciprocity is also articulated in a series of moral precepts (sometimes mentioned as thirty-seven in number) which traditionally guided human affairs (Walker 2003). They essentially state the equality of all beings, whether human, animal, plant, spiritual or physical. They further point out that given that each being passes the majority of their time in certain parts of the landscape, it is the responsibility of that being to protect its specific environment. Fish, for example, must respect the river, birds must take care of the air, and humans must obey the laws of the land. If any of these parts of the ensemble are damaged, the beings will have to leave their homes and will no longer be able to live easily. When the community's connections to that which sustains it are damaged, the community itself suffers.

In the Karen worldview, humans as consumers must be conscious and respectful

of the fragility of the resources upon which we depend. Human beings are no more the center of creation than any other being or force. Recognizing this and allowing natural rhythms to guide human behavior honors the circle of dependence, which embraces not only the concept of a circular economy, but more broadly, a circular way of life. Unfortunately, this circular way of life is under significant threat.

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