

Kawthoolei and Teak: Karen Forest Management on the Thai-Burmese Border

By Raymond Bryant

The Karen State of Kawthoolei has been heavily dependent on teak extraction to fund the Karen National Union struggle against the Burmese military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Raymond Bryant explores the social and economic structure of Kawthoolei, and the way in which resource extraction was more than simply a source of revenue — it was also an integral part of the assertion of Karen sovereignty.

In late January 1995 the Karen National Union (KNU) suffered a major military defeat when Mannerplaw — its headquarters near the Thai-Burmese border since 1974 — was captured by the Burmese army. In subsequent days, KNU leaders fled to Thailand in a move that appeared to mark the end of the KNU's 47 year struggle against the Burmese State. As Mannerplaw (which means "Field of Victory") was reduced to ashes, so too were the hopes of those who believed in Kawthoolei — the Karen Free State proclaimed by KNU President Saw Baw U Gyi in June 1949. The world's longest-running insurgency had seemingly run its course.

Notwithstanding media coverage of Mannerplaw's capture, the KNU's struggle to establish Kawthoolei has gone largely unreported in the west. Writers have documented the political conflict and recent work highlights the human rights abuses perpetrated by an advancing Burmese army. In contrast, little is known about the socioeconomic characteristics of Kawthoolei — the ways in which a Karen state independent of the Burmese political economy for nearly 50 years was structured socially and economically.

Historical background

In order to understand the link between Karen forestry and sovereignty, the history of Karen forest use and management prior to 1949 needs to be reviewed. To appreciate this history in turn necessitates that the Karen's relationship with the region's ethnically predominant Burmese and Thai peoples also be understood.

Karen history is often portrayed as an ancient struggle between the Karen and the more powerful Burmese and Thai peoples. Yet the political and cultural significance attached to ethnicity is of comparatively recent origin. The construction of a Karen identity in Burma, for example, has been linked to the policies and practices of colonial officials and missionaries. Under British rule, a distinctive Karen identity developed as expressed through a separate language, education system and culture. Such was this "national awakening" that as colonial rule neared its end Karen leaders spoke of a Karen "nation" in search of its own state — as early as 1928 the Karen leader San C. Po had formulated such a demand. The British encouraged the development of a Karen identity, notably through preferential employment in the colonial state, but pointedly refused to entertain the idea of a separate Karen state.

On the contrary, colonial rule clarified the territorial limits of a Burma-dominated Burmese state. Hitherto fuzzy frontiers were replaced with precise borders that spatially defined "Burma" — a political entity sanctioned by international law. This mapping of Burma was repeated elsewhere in the region. Thus, in neighbouring Thailand, the Bangkok-based monarchy was able to similarly delineate its borders in the 19th and early 20th centuries. As the new political contours of the region were mapped, the Karen found themselves under the jurisdiction of states over which they had no control.

The result has almost inevitably been conflict. Following the Second World War and the departure of the colonial powers, the Burmese and Thai states have sought to create national identities within their respective territories, but these "imagined communities" have been based on the preeminence of the cultures of the Burmese and Thai peoples. Confronted with this process, the Karen sought refuge in their own state of Kawthoolei, a remote territory on the Thai-Burmese border traditionally not subject to either Thai or Burmese control.

Since 1949 the Thai and Burmese states have exerted greater control over their respective territories, progressively eliminating Karen territory. The Thais have accomplished this process more rapidly than the

Burmese. There are various reasons for this difference. First the Thai State enjoys relatively easy access to the border from central areas, and this has facilitated the imposition of central authority. In contrast, the Burmese have had to impose control over a larger and more inaccessible territory. Second, whereas colonial rule in Burma encouraged the development of a Karen identity, a comparable process was lacking in Thailand. As the Thais asserted control over Karen areas, they encountered fragmented rather than coordinated resistance from local Karen villagers. Such resistance was relatively easy to overcome. In contrast, the more organized resistance of the Burmese Karen to the Burmese State formed the basis of the world's longest running insurgency. Finally, the vast majority of the Karen originates in Burma — there are only about 300,000 Karen in Thailand compared with up to four million Karen in Burma. Once again, this makes the task of assimilating Karen in Burma more difficult than in Thailand.

Karen identity has been forged in the context of the development of the Burmese and Thai political economies, but it has also been based on a close affiliation with the forests that once covered most of Kawthoolei. Forest use and management has long been an important part of Karen livelihoods. As most Karen were traditionally rural dwellers, forest use and management was inevitably an important part of their life and identity. Since the Karen are an ethnic group of great internal heterogeneity, their use of the forests varied from place to place depending on local social and ecological conditions. In areas where shifting cultivation was practised, forest was burned to provide fertilizer for agricultural crops, and then allowed to grow back for 10 or more years until conditions were again right for agricultural production. The forests were also managed so as to provide timber, fuelwood, fruit, nuts, medicinal products and game.

Such forest management was oriented largely, but not exclusively, towards subsistence. Yet as the British discovered upon the conquest of Tenassarim in 1826, Karen were important in the teak trade, especially in the teak forests of the Salween watershed. [See Map: The Karen homeland of Kawthoolei.] During much of the 19th century, these forests were a major source of teak (used primarily in the construction of naval ships), and the timber was sent to India and Europe from the lumber town of Moulmein. Although various ethnic groups participated in this trade, the Karen were especially prominent. In some cases, Karen were in charge of teak extraction and marketing. The success in Tenassarim of the Karen merchants Saw Po Nyein and Saw Tba Dwe around the turn of the century is but one example of the Karen presence in this sector of the economy. However, Karen were primarily involved in teak extraction as elephant riders (*mahouts*). Teak extraction in the Salween River watershed forests required the use of trained elephants which dragged prodded the logs (a process known as *aunging*) until they were swept downstream. It was local Karen who captured, trained and owned many of these elephants. Such was their reputation in the business that when the British acquired the Pegu teak forests in 1852, their first task was to persuade Karen *mahouts* to move with their elephants from Tenassarim to Pegu.

In colonial times, the link between the Karen and commercial forestry management was further strengthened. Thus, Karen were prominent in the colonial forest service created in 1856. This was especially so in areas such as Tenassarim where the Karen population was large. Barred, as were Burmese, from the senior forest service, Karen youth nevertheless served in the subordinate service as guards and rangers.

The Karen were also central to plantation forestry in Burma from the mid 19th century. Under the *taungya* forestry system, colonial foresters employed Karen shifting cultivators to plant teak in their hill clearings, or *taungya*. As the cultivators moved to a new area after a couple of years, the process was repeated. In this manner, timber plantations were left in their wake.

The historical links between the Karen and forest use and management were thus well developed at the time of Burmese independence in 1948. It was not surprising, therefore, that those links would be an integral part of Karen attempts to establish an independent Karen state along the Thai-Burmese border. In the process, forest use and management was associated with security, livelihood and identity issues.

Forests as a source of refuge

From the start, the forests have been crucial to Karen political and military efforts insofar as they have served as a source of refuge from the Burmese army. Except during the first years of the insurgency, the Karen have been involved in an unequal struggle with a much larger and better equipped military adversary. The trend in the fighting between the Burmese army (*tatmadaw*) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA, previously the Karen National Defence Organization) has been a gradual retreat of the KNLA from central Burma to the remote border area. Confronted by the superior fire-power of the *tatmadaw*, the KNLA have used the forests strategically as a source of refuge in which to regroup and replenish supplies. In doing so, the KNLA have relied on local Karen for food, directions, recruits and intelligence about the *tatmadaw*. In the early 1950s, Karen forces took refuge in the Pegu Yoma forests, but subsequently shifted east into the more

inaccessible hills along the Burmese-Thai border.

The Burmese army has long sought to undermine the role of the forests as a source of refuge for the KNLA. A primary goal has been to cut the KNLA off from villagers through the Four Cuts (*pya ley pya*) campaign. Under this counter-insurgency campaign (which aims to cut links to local food, funds, intelligence and recruits), local Karen were forcibly removed from their villages and resettled in army-controlled settlements. Initially focused on the Pegu Yoma forests, the campaign was continued by the *tatmadaw* in the border region. In addition to forced resettlement, the Burmese army has press-ganged Karen into service on the front line as porters. Between 1989 and 1993, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) — the military junta ruling Burma since 1988 — also supported clear-cut logging along the border. Other than providing the junta with revenue (and denying revenue to the KNU, as discussed below), such logging also removed forest in contested areas, thereby eliminating strategic military cover for the KNLA.

Forests as a source of livelihood

The forests have also provided an important source of revenue to the KNU, making an essential contribution to Kawthoolei state finances.

The role of the forests as a central part of the livelihood strategies of individual Karen farmers has persisted in the feature post-colonial era. Just as in pre-colonial and colonial times, Karen farmers since 1948 have pursued forest-based agrarian practices, at least in the more remote regions of Kawthoolei. Nevertheless, the ability of individual farmers to earn a livelihood from the forests has been progressively eroded in recent decades. To some extent, this may be linked to population growth among the Karen.

However, it is the growing intrusion on the lives of Karen farmers of the Burmese civil war that is the main cause of declining forest livelihoods. To begin with, the war has resulted in the displacement of thousands of Karen formerly living in the Irrawaddy and Sittang River deltas or adjacent hills. There are over 70,000 Karen refugees from Burma living in Thai refugee camps along the border alone, with many more displaced within Burma. Some internally displaced Karen have cleared forest for agriculture, thereby putting added pressure on residual forests. Further the war itself has shifted over the years, such that by the 1980s it was largely centred on the border area, disrupting local farming practices and forcing many Karen farmers to flee or face an advancing Burmese army infamous for perpetrating human rights abuses on the Karen. Karen farmers have thus been unable to avoid being caught up in the fighting between the *tatmadaw* and the KNU.

The significance of the forests as a source of livelihood has often been as great to the KNU as it has traditionally been to individual Karen farmers. Significantly, a Kawthoolei Forestry Ministry was created in 1950 — only one year after the start of the insurgency. Using Karen foresters trained under the British, the ministry was established on colonial lines with a hierarchy of posts ranging from guards and rangers in the field, through district and headquarters conservators, and on up to the minister. The forests of Kawthoolei were divided into districts, within which reserved forests were created — notably where teak was abundant.

The forests were a significant but not a crucial source of revenue to the KNU in the 1950s. The reasons for this reside in the political and economic context of the early years of the insurgency. The need for revenue to buy arms was then limited, as arms were still plentiful after the Second World War. During the early 1950s, the KNLA was one of the most powerful insurgent armies in Burma — in 1949 it controlled much of the Irrawaddy and Sittang River delta areas, including the outskirts of Rangoon. The revenue base of Kawthoolei was also wider at this stage than in later years.

Considerable revenue was obtained from agriculture and mining as well as from forestry throughout the extensive territory then controlled by the KNU. Finally, in terms of forestry itself, there was little work that was initially required as the KNU was able to seize logs left in the forest or at timber depots by the departing British in 1948

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This relatively favourable situation had ended by the mid 1950s. As the Burmese army advanced, the Karen were cut off from revenue, first in the Irrawaddy and Sittang deltas and subsequently in the adjoining hills. In November 1953, for example, the Burmese army captured the mines at Mawchi — a significant source of revenue to the Karen at that time. Following the *coup d'état* of March 1962 which brought General Ne Win to power, the advance of the *tatmadaw* into hitherto KNU-controlled areas continued, and by the 1970s Karen forces were largely confined to the Thai-Burmese border. As the territory controlled by the KNU contracted so to do

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the range of opportunities available to Karen leaders for earning a livelihood.

An illicit border trade in natural resources and consumer goods partly concealed the growing financial plight of the Kawthoolei State. This trade linking Burma and Thailand via KNU-controlled areas developed during the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the catastrophic economic policies of Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism, which drove much of the Burmese economy underground. Teak, cattle, rice, rubber, gems and even archaeological artifacts were transported from Burma to Thailand while televisions, videos, cosmetics and other consumer goods were dispatched in the other direction. The KNU served as an intermediary in this trade, imposing a five per cent tax on all goods passing through Kawthoolei.

For many years, the KNU thus had easy access to funds with which to buy military equipment. However, there were evident dangers associated with dependency on the border trade. The adoption of a pro-market economic policy in Rangoon could undermine the trade. A change in policy by the Thai authorities — for example, as a result of a desire for closer links with Burma — would also jeopardize the KNU-controlled trade. Finally, the development of alternative trade routes — notably along the Burma-Chinese border — might result in a drying up of the trade through KNU territories.

To the misfortune of the Karen State, since 1988 all three of these possibilities have become realities. It is in the context of such uncertainty that the importance of the forests as a source of revenue to the KNU becomes apparent. Of the revenue available to the Kawthoolei State, forest revenue (mainly derived from teak extraction) was one of the important sources over which it had some control. Another, tin mining, was significant in the 1970s but collapsed with the price of tin in the early 1980s. Not surprisingly, therefore, the forest sector assumed growing political and economic importance to the KNU from the 1960s.

The importance of the forests was reflected in the growing power of the Forestry Ministry. From only a handful of foresters in the 1950s and early 1960s, the ministry had become a key part of the Karen state by the 1980s. In 1994, there were 463 forest officials at work in Kawthoolei's forest districts, with additional staff at Mannerplaw. Field officials were responsible for reforestation and wildlife protection, but their main task was to monitor teak extraction. Just under two-thirds of the 5,000 teak logs annually extracted in the early 1990s came from Pazpu district.

The importance of the teak industry is reflected in the power of the Forestry Minister Saw Aung San, who was appointed to the post in 1980, and who was second only to General Bo Mya and Prime Minister Saw Ba Thinn in terms of political power within the KNU in the early 1990s. Although the KNU has never published revenue data, forest earnings were understood to constitute most of total state revenue in 1994.

Given the importance of the forests to the KNU, the SLORC's decision to grant logging concessions all along the border to Thai firms in early 1989 was a serious blow to the KNU. As much as 18,800 square kilometres were alienated by the SLORC to Thai loggers who invariably enjoyed close links to senior Thai military officers. Many of the Thai logging concessions were located in KNU-controlled territory. However, as the loggers were supported by the Thai military, there was little that the KNU could do to stop their advance into Karen forests without risking completely alienating the Thai state — something that a KNU weakened by military setbacks was scarcely in a position to do.

The KNU was forced to acquiesce in this deal between the SLORC and the Thai State. The end result was that logging restrictions originally imposed by Kawthoolei's Forestry Ministry to ensure sustainable forestry were waived. Indeed, between 1989 and 1993 (when the SLORC terminated the Thai logging deal) the KNU permitted over-cutting as part of a desperate attempt to maintain forest-based revenues in the face of SLORC's efforts to cut the KNU's income of US\$40-80 per cubic metre (m³) of teak timber. At the same time these companies were also paying the SLORC US\$ 80 per m³ on the same timber. Unable to cut the KNU off from this trade, the SLORC cancelled the Thai logging concessions in 1993.

Yet the KNU were badly weakened by this teak war. Teak over-cutting resulted in widespread deforestation in the logging concessions as Thai loggers extracted more timber than was allowed under the terms of their contracts. Further, logging outside designated areas was ubiquitous as loggers took advantage of the political turmoil along the border to extract extra timber free of charge. Illegal logging has persisted despite the SLORC's termination of border logging in December 1993, aided by the network of logging roads built in 1989-93. As a result, the border forests upon which the KNU relied have been largely depleted, undermining a key element of an already declining Karen resource base. Even before the fall of Mannerplaw in early 1995, therefore, Kawthoolei's finances were in difficulty.

The teak war also weakened the legitimacy of the Kawthoolei state in as much as the KNU had long based part

of its local and international appeal on sustainable forest management. As the next section highlights, forests have always been at the heart of Karen identity. Yet here was a state purporting to represent the Karen people that had sanctioned the destruction of wide areas of Kawthoolei's forest. It is a measure of the sheer desperation of Karen leaders that, in order to maintain forest revenue, they were prepared to destroy the forest resource on which Karen culture itself was based.

Forest as a source of identity

In addition to its political and economic rationale, the SLORC-engineered assault on the border forest also resonates with cultural meaning. An attempt to undermine the military and financial advantages derived by the KNU from the forests, this assault simultaneously attacked the foundations of Karen national identity. As the forests have always been an integral part of Karen identity, their large-scale elimination after 1988 has had cultural as well as political and economic significance.

Traditionally, lowland Burmese and Thais viewed the Karen as an integral part of the forests — the former called them "the wild cattle of the hills," whereas the latter classified the Karen as "wild animals." The British held similar views. Colonial missionaries, for example, considered the Karen to be a primitive people ("noble savages") at home in their forest habitat. Colonial foresters, meanwhile, acknowledged the Karen's detailed forest knowledge (at the same time as they decried their allegedly destructive methods of shifting cultivation). Indeed, the introduction of the *taungya* forestry system noted earlier reflected a British desire to harness that knowledge to the teak-centred forestry management then being introduced in Burma's forests.

Certainly, Karen refugees from the Irrawaddy and Sittang deltas do not fit the popular image of the Karen as a forest people. Karen from the deltas often differ from their hill brethren in terms of religion, education and forest knowledge. Yet, even for the delta Karen, the forests resonate with meaning. Thus, the forests in which they took refuge are a reminder of the historical origins of the Karen people, symbolized most vividly in the many Karen myths and prophecies that are set in the forests. Even among the Christian Karen from the deltas, the notion of the Karen as a lost tribe of Israel wandering in the forests (first suggested by colonial missionaries) serves as a powerful symbolic reinforcement of the link between the forests and Karen identity.

The insurgency reinforced the role of the forests in Karen culture. As noted, they have served as a source both of refuge and of livelihood for the KNU throughout the struggle. Many senior political and military leaders have lived in the forests for more than 30 years, and a new generation has been born in Mannerplaw and other forest strongholds. In as much as these Karen have made the forests their home in exile they have become forest dwellers. Karen refugees have kept alive memories of their previous urban existence (reinforced by satellite TV as well as journeys to Bangkok by the elite). However, as their fate has been linked to the forests now for nearly 50 years, these Karen have been de-urbanized — in other words, they have become a "forest people."

To the extent that the Karen are today a forest people — dependent on the forests for security, livelihood and cultural integrity — the fall of Mannerplaw and other KNU strongholds to the Burmese army is a catastrophe for the Karen. As many Karen have become refugees in Thailand, much of Kawthoolei has been lost to the advancing Burmese.

The territory the Karen called the "Flower Land" has already been changed beyond recognition. A hitherto forested landscape has been converted in many areas into an environmentally degraded and treeless territory as a result of indiscriminate logging. The SLORC's plans to build a series of dams on the Salween River and its tributaries near and along the border (to meet Thai electricity demands) will further alter the landscape. With this loss of the forests, the Karen have been denied refuge, livelihood and even a cultural referent.

In asserting a sovereign Kawthoolei, the KNU posed a challenge that the Burmese state (indeed any state) could scarcely ignore. For Kawthoolei to be born, the old Burma would have to die — something which Burmese politicians (whatever their other differences) have always refused to countenance. As a result, the Karen have been fighting a Burmese state which not only possesses superior military capabilities, but which also enjoys the tacit support of a world of nation states anxious to avoid any alteration of political boundaries. Even western states which condemn the brutality of the Burmese State have refrained from sanctioning the alteration of Burma's boundaries. In this regard, the lack of international recognition for Kawthoolei over the past 50 years is eloquent testimony to the futility of Karen efforts to overcome the consensus over sovereignty issues among the community of nations. That alternative solidarity has been shown outside this community demonstrates the limits to internationalism among nation states.

Indeed, the fact that SLORC has been able to brutally suppress the Karen insurgency without serious opposition from any outside power is a reminder of the overwhelming priority that the international community continues to attach — even in the New World Order — to political sovereignty. In the process, the community sanctions environmental degradation and the persecution of ethnic minorities in the name of the right of nations to do as they please within internationally recognized boundaries. More often than not, ethnic minorities have been placed in a no-win situation. Denied human rights by the rulers of nation states, ethnic minorities face impossible odds when they try to establish a sovereign state of their own. Current international rules established by nation states permit no way out of this vicious circle confronting ethnic minorities.

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