

Land and Labour in the Karen Hills of Burma: Cosmology and value in the study of agrarian change

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What is Land?

- Physical environment
- Social Relation
 - Historical: Land as memory
 - Blood and Soil: Nationalism?
 - Spiritual
- *Livelihoods*
- Rights of access/use
 - Ownership? Customary? False Dichotomy?
- Economic
 - Land as possession, location of extraction, source of capital
 - Also *livelihoods*

Value

What are Value/Values? Why is this important for the Study of Land?

- Meaning Making? **Values** —> moral/ethical orientation?
- Economic **Value**?
- Intrinsic? —> Does Value exist prior to human conception?
 - The idea of '*value in potentia*' or nature as something which '*affords*'

Towards a new Theory of Value

- Value + Value(s) —> two sides of the same coin
- *“If value systems create a potentially endless series of little worlds”.. and “the ultimate stakes of politics are negotiating how these come into relation with one another, then the obvious question is how” Graeber*

What is Labour?

The Neoclassical Model



- Typically:
 - 'Doing Things' — > Creating and transforming something: e.g cultivation of plants, animal husbandry, foraging, creation of 'things'
 - We think farming, factory work, etc
 - *Marx describes; Surplus Value extracted from labour + capital + sources of extraction = accumulation*

- Acknowledging Marx's shortcomings: Labour are not just processes of the creation & transformation of things
 - Much of labour is care (looking after things) —> include so called 'wageless labour'
 - We need an expanded notion of production: Production as ultimately aimed at the creation of new people rather than goods as normally assumed
 - Things are meant for human use —> transformations in

material conditions lead to transformation in people. This process is recursive.

- In this way the labouring of humans and non-humans can be included

Ethnographic Field-Site



The Mutraw Hills

Mutraw District KNU - Kawthoolei

Mutraw district is the area with the most territory under direct governance of the KNU

Burmese administration

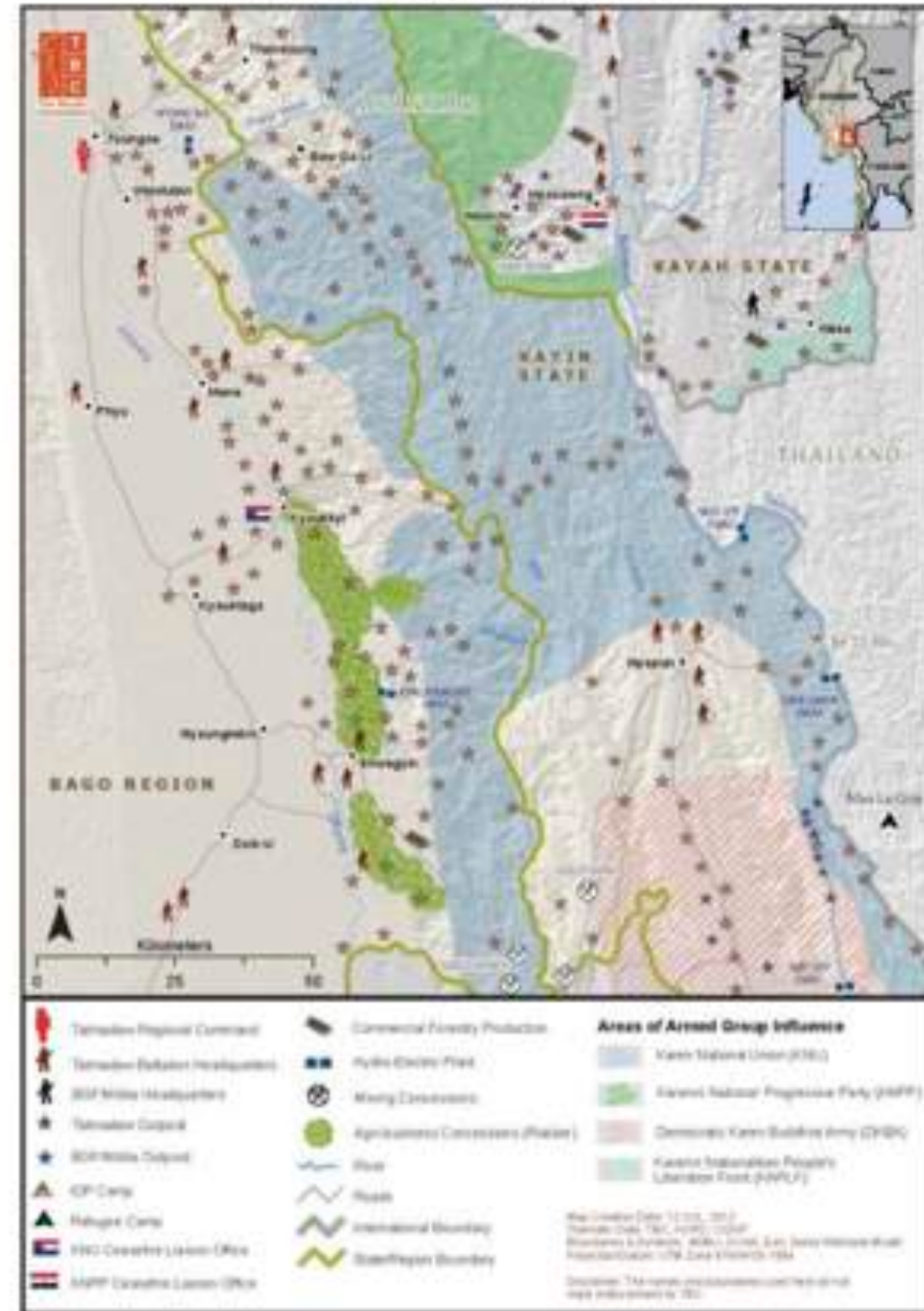
**Hpapun Township - Kayin State
Papun Town under Myanmar Military Control**

Active Conflict Area



Militarisation

Map 9 : Northern Karen / Kayin Areas



The KNU

“The Delta Revolutionaries have taken on an exceedingly difficult task; they must project two images of the Karen neither of which are true, and which are potentially contradictory. They must be seen to run an efficient modern state otherwise, neither the Burmese nor the outside world will take them seriously. And they must uphold a strong sense of common cultural identity, or the Revolution will soon falter.” (Falla 1991: 43)



Areas of Ethnic Militant Activity in Myanmar



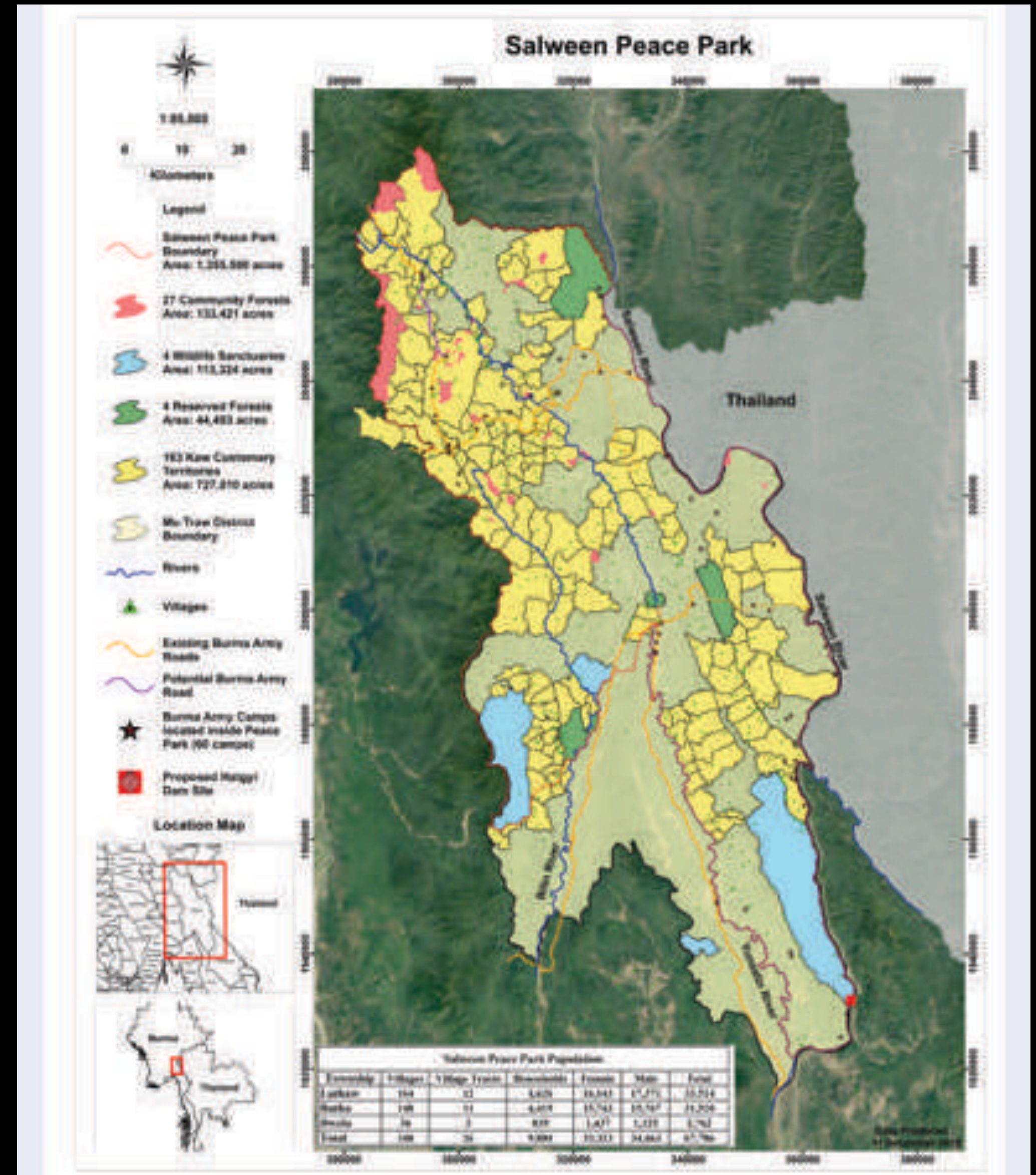
MILITANT GROUPS AND NUMBER OF TROOPS

- UWSA (United Wa State Army):** 30,000 troops, 10,000 reservists
- KIA (Kachin Independence Army):** 10,000 troops, 10,000 reservists
- RCSS (Restoration Council of Shan State):** 8,000+ troops
- SSPP (Shan State Progress Party):** 8,000+ troops
- KNU (Karen National Union):** 1,000+ troops
- TNLA (Ta'ang National Liberation Army):** 4,500+ troops
- NDAA-ESS (National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State):** 4,500+ troops
- MNDAA (Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army):** 2,000 troops
- DKBA (Democratic Karen Beneficent Army):** 1,500+ troops
- NMSP (New Mon State Party):** 800+ troops, 2,000 reservists
- KNPP (Karen National Progressive Party):** 600+ troops
- NSCN-IM (National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muithang):** <500 troops
- PNLO (Pa-O National Liberation Organization):** 400+ troops
- CNF (Chin National Front):** 300+ troops
- KND-B (Kuki National Organization-Burmat):** 200+ troops
- KNU/KNLA-PC (Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army-Peace Council):** <200 troops

Karen National Union 70th Year Revolution Day - Jan 2019



Conservation





Centering Land, Labour and Value

Animist Revivalism - Tensions in History, Land, Nationalism and Activism

Some Preliminary Findings

- Increased mobility due to conflict has further catalysed a shift from Molupala (Karen Animist practice) to Christianity
- ‘Green Nationalism’
 - Codifying socio-ecological social practices as formalised systems of governance —> prefigurative politics
 - Drawn largely from traditions said to have emerged from Molupala



The Value of Autonomy and the Importance of Subsistence

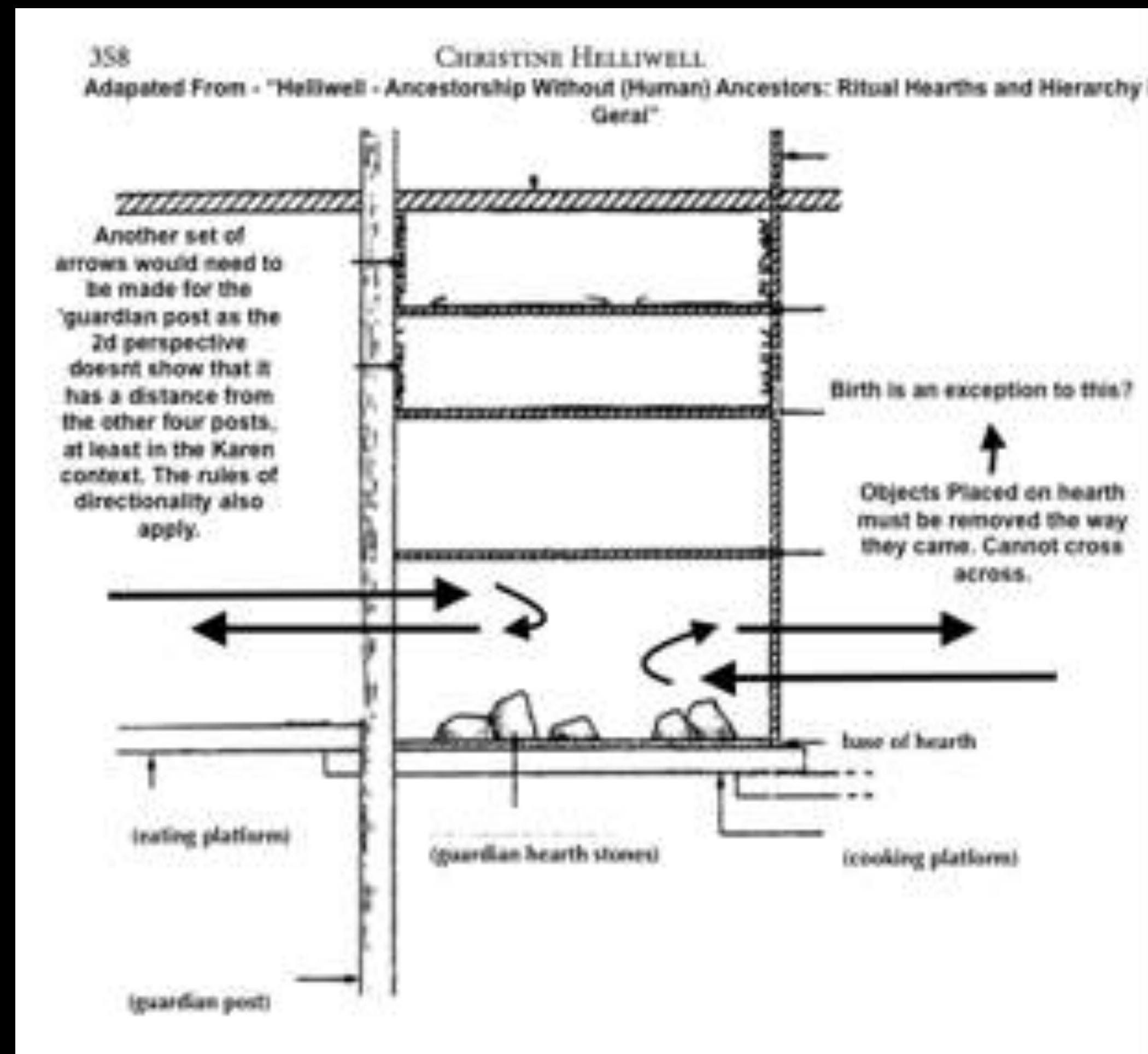
Visions of the future and Struggles over values

Hierarchy/Autonomy in the Mutraw Hills

Transformations in Mutuality through religious ethno-nationalism

The house and the Village unit as a Womb

The hearth as the ritual centre - Documenting Karen Practices of Molu Pala





- For these activists as well as many local peoples, animism appears to be (despite often begrudgingly) associated with ideas of authentic 'Karenness'. These people thus form a diffuse and precarious advocacy coalition, through which different registers of nationalism, environmentalism, ancestry, religion and indigeneity as well the vernacular of international NGO's all coalesce
- However, most leaders of within the KNU are themselves Christians. Cultural revitalisation or 'tactical essentialisms'? Or both?

The potential Contradiction of Cosmology - Value?

Towards a Revised History of Upland People?

- Imaginary Totalities

- “They may propose a total view of the world, but it’s not particularly important if the actors believe that this view is in any ultimate sense true, valid, or correct, as long as they are committed to the achievement of certain forms of value (which, again, can only be realized in others’ eyes)”
Graeber
- Customary land governance as a reified totality and cosmic sovereignty as potentially problematic?





What of Methodology?

And why is it important?

- Long term participant observation
 - Participation is what makes us as social beings!
- Continued attentiveness & engagement in the details of everyday life that often disappear at a quick glance.
- Observation, description, listening, participation, feeling.
- We quickly discover how the seemingly mundane becomes incredible important

- Fieldwork as an ‘ethic of practice’
- Participant observation as: An educational and transformative practice