

Territorial Resistance of Powerless: A Case Study of Communities in Taw Oo

Saw Ner Duh Da

Abstract

This paper argues that forced relocation and territorialization imposed by the Myanmar military have not resulted in the permanent dispossession of local villagers. Instead, villagers have actively countered these processes through repeated returns to their ancestral villages, the maintenance of livelihood practices under conditions of violence and environmental degradation. In addition, they reconfigure their land relation through engagement with Indigenous territorial initiatives led by the Karen National Union (KNU), particularly the Thaw Thi Taw Oo Indigenous Park. Rather than looking at this initiative as a singular territorial strategy, I try to examine how communities still have to navigate their way out from political dynamics and rupture. Together, these practices constitute a form of territorial resistance that challenges state-led strategies of control while adapting to climate change and ecological degradation. The paper also argues that villagers' persistence is grounded in their livelihood practices, which function as both survival strategies and territorial claims.

At the collective level, this everyday resistance is reinforced by Indigenous governance structures associated with the KNU, particularly through the Thaw Thi Taw Oo Indigenous Park initiative. The Indigenous park operates as an alternative territorial framework that counters military territorialization by asserting Indigenous stewardship, conservation ethics, and collective land governance. This initiative reframes conservation not as exclusion or control, but as a continuation of Indigenous presence and responsibility. In doing so, it provides political and moral legitimacy to villagers' return and land use, while also addressing environmental protection amid climate instability. By examining the interaction between villagers' repeated returns, adaptive livelihoods, and Indigenous territorial governance, this paper demonstrates that territorialization is not monopolized by the state or military power. Instead, territory emerges as a relational and contested process shaped by everyday practices, survival, ecological knowledge, and political organization.