

State-Building through Indigenous Conservation Parks in Karen State, Myanmar

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Abstract

Indigenous conservation initiatives are widely recognised for protecting biodiversity and strengthening traditional governance. In conflict-affected regions such as Karen State in Myanmar, these efforts also operate within complex political contexts where autonomous actors exercise authority. While recent research tends to portray these initiatives as culturally inspired conservation efforts grounded in traditional approaches to resource management, scant research has examined how they contribute to autonomous state-building processes.

This study analyzes how the Salween Peace Park and Thawthi Taw Oo Indigenous Park have advanced the Karen National Union's (KNU) state-building projects. The qualitative analysis is informed by 40 semi-structured interviews conducted both in person and online with three levels of informants: KNU leaders, KNU departmental representatives, and local actors at the community level. This approach enables triangulation to cross-check information from key actors.

I argue the parks function as tools of territorialization and eco-governmentality through which the KNU achieves its state-building efforts. This study observes that state-building processes are largely a function of legibility that enables governing entities to extend the reach of their domain of authority. In the case of these two parks, legibility can be understood as functions of territorialization and eco-governmentality, including tools such as population census as well as land classification and registration. I conclude that the parks are not only significant in terms of indigenous conservation, but they also serve as institutional platforms for state-building in KNU-controlled areas.

The paper suggests opportunities for further studies about the role indigenous conservation initiatives play in relation to governing authority in contested areas. For example, a deeper study of the dynamics of ethnic attitudes toward authority and natural resource management could offer new insights into tensions in governance and the production of legibility. Such work could improve our understanding of the link between Indigenous conservation and autonomous state formation.