

Cultural Resilience

A Revolutionary Perspective



The Indigenous Karen people of Kawthoolei have faced seven decades of relentless oppression, despotism, and supremacy under the rule of the Burmese military. Our ancestral lands were taken from us, our cultural identities and values eroded, and the natural resources we relied on for our survival were plundered or exploited through militarization and imperialism imposed by successive military regimes. To unite against the injustices forced upon us and to reclaim our right to self-determination, we recognize that cultural resilience is just as crucial as armed and political revolutionary efforts.

Since its official launch in late 2018, the Salween Peace Park has made significant strides in cultural revitalization, even amidst the heightened conflict following the military coup in 2021. Notable initiatives include the Culture-based Vocational Training Program in The Nue Chet La Cultural School, the preservation of traditional Kaw (customary land) governance systems, women-led biodiversity research, youth exchange camps fostering intergenerational dialogue on culture and the environment, and the development of a Karen cultural curriculum. These efforts represent crucial forms of cultural resistance and resilience, and they have achieved remarkable milestones within the framework of the Salween Peace Park.



Indigenous Karen families in the Salween Peace Park also use rice leaf along with white cotton thread during the wrist-tying ceremony. Photo credit: Saw Mort.

Like many Indigenous Peoples around the world, Karen people share a profound connection with specific lands that have been inhabited by their ancestors for generations. This deep connection is firmly rooted in our traditional cultures, belief systems, and ways of life, and it is marked by a reverence for the natural world and a recognition of our interconnectedness with it. These lands are not mere physical spaces but also serve as invaluable repositories of cultural heritage and knowledge. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and our ancestral territories is intricately woven into our identity and is critical to our survival. Social relations and ceremonial obligations with more-than-human beings (spiritual entities) are an essential part of our territorial governance and for the protection and conservation of biodiversity. Maintaining proper relations with more-than-human beings is paramount to ensure human well-being and to maintain healthy water, land, and natural resources.



A local woman is collecting Khay leaves (broom grass) in P' Deh Der village to make May Taw for a Lar Ku Ki Sue ceremony. Photo credit: Saw Hay Blut Say

Indigenous Karen Wrist-Tying Ceremony

Lar Ku means the lunar month of August. During this month there is a traditional wrist-tying ritual ceremony called *Ki Sue*. *Lar Ku Ki Sue* refers to annual wrist tying ceremony carried out by Karen communities. Indigenous communities in the Salween Peace Park of Mutraw District also refer to it as *Tar Or Lar Ku* or *Tar Kwei*, which connote the same meanings. The Karen National Union (KNU) officially designates a national day for *Lar Ku Ki Sue* based on the lunar calendar, however for Indigenous Karen communities in the Salween Peace Park, there is no fixed date for the *Lar Ku Ki Sue* ceremony. Instead, it is the decision of individual households and communities.



An Indigenous elder wrapping May Taw with Khay leaves. Photo credit: Saw Hay Blut Say

Indigenous Karen elders in the Salween Peace Park know that *Lar Ku*/August is the most dangerous month for natural disasters such as thunderstorms and heavy rain, flooding, and landslides. This hazardous period could cause spiritual and physical harm to people. It's also believed that because of these natural disasters, the custodian spirits (in Karen ontology seven spirits are embodied within a person), residing in individuals' physical body could abandon the body and roam around. These custodian spirits can be led astray by the spiritual entities of the water called *Tar Htaw Tar Law* that travel in rivers and streams this time of year. Therefore, Karen communities gather together and perform *Lar Ku Ki Sue* to call back spirits of family and community members to be reunited with their souls. For the Karen, this cultural tradition is also a part of mitigating the impacts of Climate Change because *Lar Ku Ki Sue* is a time when elders caution us to beware of natural disasters, in other words, this tradition acts as an early warning system.

Embedded in the ritual ceremony of *Lar Ku Ki Sue* is the spiritual belief of protecting custodian spirits residing in a person and warding off evil spirits. However, *Lar Ku Ki Sue* isn't simply part of a spiritual tradition, it's a unique and important symbol of social cohesion which serves to sustain intergenerational community values of collectivism and reciprocity. For Indigenous Karen peoples practicing *Ku* (upland rotational farming), *Lar Ku Ki Sue* is undertaken after the *Thet Ku* offering ceremony in which they pray to *Htee K'Sar Kaw K'Sar* (the spirits of the water and the land), to care for their crops and their productivity.

In the Salween Peace Park, *Lar Ku Ki Sue* is categorized into two types: a village ceremony, and a household ceremony. *Lar Ku Ki Sue* organized and carried out by the entire village under the guidance and leadership of *Kaw Kho Kaw Kha* – the Master of the *Kaw* who is responsible for conducting ceremonies in village - and occurs especially in a village or *Kaw* where a *Blaw* (community meeting place/ceremonial hall) exists. If a community does not have a *Blaw*, *Lar Ku Ki Sue* will be carried out at the household level, and the *Kaw Kho Kaw Kha's* household must be first. At the family level, the father is typically the leader of the ceremony and begins the ritual by tying a white cotton thread on his children and spouse's right-hand wrists whilst chanting a prayer. Young people in the community or visitors are also allowed to carry out the wrist-tying ritual to each other in some communities. Each community in the Salween Peace Park may have a slightly different ritual.

After a pig is slaughtered for the feast, the quality of its gallbladder is tested. This is an indicator of if the ceremony will be successful or not. Photo credit: Saw Hay Blut Say





*Thet Ku cultural icons and materials in a Ku rotational farm. Indigenous Karen people in the Salween Peace Park perform Thet Ku ceremony to pray to Htee K'Sar Kaw K'Sar before Lar Ku Ki Sue.
Photo credit: Saw Mort*

Spiritual Taboos

There is a set of traditional taboos which ensure that the ceremony is effective. If any of the following events occur during *Lar Kue Ki Sue*, they are considered unfortunate, necessitating the repetition of the ritual preparation and performance. These events include: an earthquake, the death of an animal, the accidental breakage of a glass bottle, bamboo water container, bowl, plate, or whisky jar, as well as the birth or death of a person within the village.

Pigs are a significant part of the *Lar Kue Ki Sue* ceremony in the Salween Peace Park. A healthy and good quality pig's gallbladder is vital for the ritual. It's believed that when a pig's gallbladder is covered with its liver, it is a bad omen and the outcome of the ceremony will not be good and therefore a new one is required. After a family's ceremony, the guests are invited to share food, especially *Tar Ka Por* the Karen traditional pork porridge. A traditional wrist-tying drink known as *Thi Ki Sue* (rice whisky) is also offered to show gratitude to *Htee K'Sar Kaw K'Sar* for the successful completion of the *Lar Ku Ki Sue* ceremony. The following day *Tar Du* is observed which is a spiritual taboo requiring resting. Community members are not allowed to do any livelihood activities including farming and weaving. The elders teach us that a violation of this taboo could result in illness, food shortages, and animal death.

Cultural Symbols

The uses of cultural materials and tools for the performance of *Lar Ku Ki Sue* vary amongst Karen people, however for Karen communities in the Salween Peace Park, some important materials include:

May Taw: Sticky rice is wrapped with broom grass in the shape of a right-angled triangle and an isosceles triangle. *May Taw* is supposed to be wrapped with *Khay* leaf, broom grass (*Thysanolaena latifolia*) as it signifies a sharpened object which can defeat any malevolent energies that could threaten or harm an individuals' spiritual and physical well-being. In order to honor the value of both men and women in Karen family life and society, *May Taw Mo* (isosceles triangle shape) representing the feminine, and *May Taw Par* (right-angle triangle shape) representing the masculine, are prepared and served during the ritual ceremony. For Indigenous Karen people, sticky rice signifies togetherness, cohesion, and solidarity.

Two pairs of May Taw Par symbolizing the male (above) and May Taw Mo symbolizing the female (below) signify the vital and equal roles of men and women in a family and community.
Photo credit: Saw Mort





An Indigenous Karen elder from Hee Poe Der Village preparing a white cottonthread for a Lar Ku Ki Sue. Photo credit: Saw Mort

White Cotton Thread: Locally crafted white cotton thread embodies our cherished cultural values of honesty, purity, and integrity. Our ancestors passed down these principles, urging us to uphold and embody them in our daily lives. During the ritual, tying the white cotton commences with the youngest family members and culminates with the eldest, all under the guidance of the father. Eventually, the mother takes charge of the father's wrist-tying. In the event that a family member is unable to attend the ceremony, their belongings, particularly their clothing, serve as proxies during the *Lar Ku Ki Sue* wrist-tying prayer. The cotton is always tied on the right-hand wrist according to ancestral teachings. In addition to the white cotton thread wrist-tying, certain families incorporate the use of rice leaves in their prayers, seeking the benevolence of the rice crop's spirit to ensure their food security. Finally, the father, will take a piece of thread and touch it with rice, *Ta Ka Por*, and other foods in the bowl, and put it on the head of his youngest child along with a blessing prayer.

Right photo: Traditional rice whisky is integral component of Indigenous Karen people's Lar Ku Ki Sue ceremony. This Karen women is passing rice whisky to guests. Photo credit: Saw Mort





Thi Ki Sue: Rice whisky is essential to the ceremony and Indigenous Karen people are spiritually obliged to offer it to *Htee K' Sar Kaw K'Sar* as a way of showing their gratitude. *Thi Ki Sue* is also placed inside of the *Dor Po* during the ritual.

Ta Ka Yar: A *Ta Ka Yar*, or betel quid, is a small package consisting of areca nuts, slake lime, and tobacco wrapped in a betel leaf. Betel chewing is integral part of Indigenous Karen's cultural consumption and it is regarded as a traditional snack. For the *Lar Ku Ki Sue* ceremony, three portions of betel quid are prepared and put in a *Dor Po*. They are also placed in holes dug at the entrance of the house.

Dor Po: This is a medium-sized woven basket/container. The *Dor Po* is where family members' clothes, *May Taw*, betel quid, *Klar* (forged hooked blade), and whisky are all placed together.

Nor Doe Kwar: A bamboo ladle is Indigenous Karen people's kitchen utensil used for cooking as well as for the *Lar Ku Ki Sue* ritual process, while chanting a prayer. It is used to pray for the return of the custodian spirits of the family members to be united with their physical bodies. It is used twice in the ceremony by first tapping it on the ladder of the house when the family calls for the custodian spirits to return three times, and then tapping on a ceremonial wooden tray/rice bowl before the wrist tying whilst reciting a protection prayer.

Klar: A forged hooked blade called a *Klar* is a traditional farming tool which is used to clear the ground underneath the ladder of the house entrance to signify the removal of any evil spirits. It is used to make three holes in which ritual materials such as a pair of *May Taw*, *Ta Ka Yar*, a small piece of pig hair and rice whiskey are placed before the wrist tying. The holes signify safety for the family members.

Left photo: Three portions of *Ta Ka Yar*, or betel quid, are prepared by head of the household for the *Lar Ku Ki Sue* ceremony. Photo credit: Saw Hay Blut Say





Photo above: As the head of the family, Saw Shei Nay Moo Htoo from P'Deh Der village taps a bamboo ladle on the rice bowl and recites a traditional protection prayer before eating the feast with family and guests. Photo credit: Saw Hay Blut Say

Ceremony Process

Before the ceremony, family members gather materials and prepare the food and ritual materials. *Lar Ki Ku Sue* varies depending on the community but typically items will be placed in the *Dor Po* as outlined above. Next, a pig is slaughtered and the gallbladder is tested. The *Dor Po* are taken under the house and the father will use *Klar* to clear the ground under the ladder and make three holes in which ritual materials are placed. After this, the father goes back inside the house and taps the *Nor Doe Kwar* on the ladder three times whilst calling: 'Spirits are you coming back?!' and his family will reply 'Yes, coming back!' each time. Following this, the father will start to pray for protection and use *Nor Doe Kwar* to tap on the rice bowl. Then, the father can commence the wrist tying process for his family, and subsequently invites the guests to participate. Finally, the guests are offered *Thi Ki Sue* before sharing the feast. Typically, the host family will eat last.

Left photo: As part of the household *Lar Ku Ki Sue*, all family members' put their traditional clothes, scarfs, three betel quid, two bottles of rice whisky, a *Klar*, and *May Taw* in *Dor Po* (woven container). Photo credit: Saw Hay Blut Say

Karen Cultural Resistance

Sustaining this cultural tradition is an act of resistance for Indigenous Karen people against generations of cultural and military oppression. Practicing our traditions strengthens our connection to each other, our land, and our natural resources which we depend on. *Lar Ku Ki Sue* is a part of intergenerational knowledge transmission, strengthening our cultural resilience, and sustaining social cohesion. Upholding relations with spiritual entities through ceremonies like *Lar Ku Ki Sue* is an important part of maintaining a reciprocal relationship with the natural environment. This is the bedrock of Indigenous Karen environmental stewardship and Climate Change resilience.

*Indigenous woman preparing Ta Ka Por to be served for the guests and community members.
Photo credit: Saw Mort*



Pawghaw Pawbaw ceremonial flowers (red and golden Celosia flowers), medicinal herbs, and animal bones are hung at the entrance of the house to ward off evil spirits throughout the year.
Photo credit: Saw Hay Blut Say

