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Who knows the river? Gender, expertise, and the politics of local ecological knowledge production of the Salween River, Thai-Myanmar border

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how local knowledge about riverine ecologies influenced the production of expert, gendered, and ethnic identities, and interrogates how these identities and knowledges are 'co-produced'. Drawing on work in feminist political ecology and science studies, I highlight the links between the production of knowledge and identity. Research was carried out through fieldwork in two villages along the Salween River, at the border between Thailand and Myanmar (Burma), where residents participated in 'Villager Research'. Here, residents identify as members of ethnic minority groups, mainly the Karen, and undertake a variety of livelihood activities, including fishing, swidden agriculture, rice farming, and entrepreneurial trade. Much of the impetus for residents to undertake the work of local knowledge production was to have a say in the decision-making processes of large-scale developments proposed on the river which would impact these livelihoods. What I examine is how these efforts also obscured women's participation in fishing and in research because their predominant practices associated with fishing involved income-producing activities instead of romanticized subsistence activities. I also consider some of the critiques from the Karen women's group who identified subsistence-focused work as 'not enough' in that it does not generate much needed income and is 'not secure'. These efforts accomplished a particular kind of village expert, to the exclusion of Karen women in its documentation, even in a project led by villagers and situated within an ethnic minority community which is matriarchal.

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Introduction

In Southeast Asia, there is longstanding work in collaborative local research and advocacy related to natural resource management, particularly in Thailand. In this article, I consider the ways that one local knowledge project about riverine ecologies and livelihoods influenced the co-production of several identities including those of experts, gender, and ethnicity. As Escobar (1992) and Agrawal (1995, 2002) argue, local knowledge is an agentic tool for communities to critique and find alternatives to status quo development schemes, which overlook resources users and their knowledge, but that in some ways the focus on the 'local' in local knowledge

elides or limits that same struggle for representation. While local knowledge can be the 'basis for redefining representations' (Escobar 1992, 1), and a way to reassert the agency of marginalized people, there are also the impacts to consider about how local knowledges are made and the differential ways such practices shape or are shaped by the individuals and communities being documented (Tsing 2005). What I contribute in this article then is an illustration of how these practices of making local participatory knowledge about nature, the river, and livelihoods are also shaping (and shaped by) gendered and ethnic identities.

At the heart of this article is one local ecological knowledge project called Villager Research, or colloquially, *Thai Baan*, which aimed to redefine representations of ethnic people in rural Southeast Asia. Or, more pointedly, to transform ethnic people stereotyped as 'uneducated water buffaloes' (Rojanaphruk 2010) into 'experts'. This Villager Research project documented local ecologies and livelihoods in Thailand along the Salween River through collaborative work by local Karen residents acting as 'village researchers' and local NGOs acting as research assistants (RAs). An ethnic minority or 'hilltribe' group in Thailand, defining Karen as an ethnic category in Thailand is complicated (discussed below) the majority of residents at the Salween River-border identify as Pga K'nyau or Sgaw Karen. The ethnic category of Karen encompasses a diversity of peoples and languages, for an extensive history not possible in this article see Keyes (1979). In general, they are more commonly stereotyped as 'forest destroyers' in relation to their tradition of practicing swidden agriculture than as 'experts'. Thus, the Villager Research project was in a good position to assert agency and expertise and provide important alternative representations to the prevailing narratives that in many ways position the Karen negatively within Thailand.

What I examine is how these efforts also obscured women's participation in fishing and in research because their predominant practices associated with fishing involved income-producing activities instead of romanticized subsistence activities. I consider some of the interjections of the Karen women's group who critique such subsistence-focused work as 'not enough' in that it does not generate much needed income and is 'not secure'. In this case, Karen women participated in the collection of data, but were not recognized as 'experts' in the documented outputs, indicating how expertise, when critically examined, is in many cases less based on what you know than 'who you are and where you come from' (Kothari 2006, 15). I consider how these efforts accomplished a particular kind of village expert, to the exclusion of Karen women in its documentation, even in a project led by villagers and situated within an ethnic minority community which is matriarchal. I argue that to get at the *how* of questions around 'who knows the river' I had to consider both the representational aspects of identity in the project *and* the practices of local 'villagers' in making knowledge about the village. This required a broader assessment of what was at stake in the participation of villagers in local knowledge projects, and the enduring focus on subsistence livelihoods.

There is more at stake here than the results of one development project or participatory scheme, which sought to be inclusive of local knowledge and more gender equitable. Defining who counts for purposes of decision-making frequently owes a great deal to classifications of experts. Thus, in the work to create local knowledge and to influence decision-making, it is important to attend to who can speak on behalf of the village, or 'know' the river. Much of the impetus for residents to undertake the work of the project here, done as volunteers, was to have a say in the decision-making processes of large-scale dam developments proposed on the river which would impact these livelihoods. The Salween River, which flows through China, Myanmar (Burma), and Thailand, supports an estimated 10 million people as a source of livelihood and food (FAO 2008). At present, proposals for at least 15 large dams represent an impending threat to livelihood security for those who depend on the river. The particular dam proposal which the Villager Research project responded to emerged after decades during which communities were threatened with displacement due to the establishment of national parks and other protected areas around their settlements.

This is an unfinished project, not just the dams or the novel Villager Research project, but also for the transformations I detail in terms of gender, ethnicity, and expertise. It is a messy storyline that does not fit with a more romantic focus on local knowledge, nor does it fit with the negative focus on ethnic minorities in Thailand. It does show how some Karen women struggle – both for subsistence and the protection of natural resources as well as with poverty and the challenges of working towards income providing livelihoods.

The purpose of this analysis, then, is not to simply critique the format or the outcomes of the collaborative work of Villager Research, but drawing on feminist political ecology and science studies, I detail how knowledge, nature, and identity are coproduced. I acknowledge the powerful work of Villager Research and its impacts, because to ignore these would also ignore the work and struggle by local Karen villagers, both men and women, to produce new representations and knowledge. Ignoring that work to represent themselves would also overlook the ways that identity here is a constant, dynamic struggle. To present and analyze this research I look to scholarship in feminist political ecology and work by Jasanoff in science studies to highlight the links between the production of knowledge, nature, and identity, considered in the next section.

Conceptual approach

Much of the work at the intersection of gender and socio-environment identity is in the field of feminist political ecology (fpe) originally introduced in the 1990s by Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayer, and Wangari (1996). Following work in fpe (Elmhirst 2011; Gururani 2002a; Sultana 2009; Sundberg 2004), I understand identity as performative (Butler 1994). That ‘social difference is understood as emergent and produced out of everyday practices’ (Nightingale 2011, 155), and not simply imposed, is core to understanding the co-production of identity discussed later.

While gender is a primary focus of fpe, more recent work in this field also engages intersectionality (Nightingale 2011, 155, Rocheleau 2008, 55). In this case, it is central to how differently placed people can or get to enact, claim, or be recognized as experts. Key for this study, this work understands that ‘a narrow focus on gender is inappropriate and rather how people are subjected by race, ethnicity/caste, class, gender and other forms of social difference must be seen as simultaneous’ (Nightingale 2011, 153). This engagement is seen in the ways ‘several FPE scholars expanded from gender to address indigenous and peasant identities or race, or both and feminist analyses of nature/culture’ (Rocheleau 2008, 55) although, not all scholars in the field agree that intersectionality is taken up in a way that, for instance, seriously considers intersectional identities and subjectivities, particularly regarding race and racialization (Mollett and Faria 2013, 117). This work engages with the simultaneous production of gender, indigenous and rural identities, like the ‘Karen villager experts’ in this article, by drawing out the implications for agency in identity-making for marginalized resource users. Radel, for instance, not unlike Escobar and Agrawal noted at the start of this article, argues that a focus on identity making reveals agency for individual farmers, in a way that a more materialist approach or an approach, which sees gender as fixed ignores (Gururani 2002b). In Radel’s (2012, 77) analysis, ‘Active identity construction, or how the women represented themselves within the spaces of the CBOs [community-based organizations] and the conservation projects, is central to this agency’.

Within this rich work, however, are a limited number of studies that specifically consider how the incursion of knowledge practices produce identities in areas that are ostensibly marginalized communities and are also matriarchal. There is also room for conceptual insights into how such practices might be agentic in one sense, as Radel’s analysis shows, but also, simultaneously, be limiting in other ways.

To consider these contradictions, and to bring together these different threads—knowledge, nature, agency, and intersectional identity—I also turn to Jasanoff’s work in science studies on the co-production of nature, knowledge, and identity and the possibilities it offers in approaching

these themes. Co-production, in Jasanoff's terms (2004, 2), is 'the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it' and that 'we gain explanatory power by thinking of natural and social orders as being produced together.' I draw on Jasanoff's formulation in this article for two key reasons, which may also be useful for fpe scholars working to understand the relationship between nature, knowledge and identity.

First, Jasanoff's work links knowledge production, nature, institutions, and identity. Unlike much work in science and technology studies that is more exclusively focused on the 'scientist' or the laboratory, she extends analysis to the community, the nation, the state (2004, 5). This shift is imperative in understanding Villager Research, which involves a range of different actors and connections not limited to the village but is linked to the 'village' as a site of knowledge, which might otherwise easily be dismissed or discounted in the broader co-production of identity.

Second, moving the frame of analysis beyond the lab to more directly link knowledge/action involves a critique of power analysis in science studies and the social sciences. In presenting an argument for a more fluid, continually negotiated notion of power, Jasanoff (2004) proposes we look differently at power. For instance, in her approach to power as 'continually reinscribing itself in the institutions, communities, practices, discourses, claims, and products of science and technology' (2004, 68); the issue of how not only outside knowledge or interventionist science shapes identity, but how the practices of making local knowledge and experts might also shape (and be shaped by) gender is brought into frame.

That I approach identity and knowledge as 'co-produced' in this article also matters because such an approach reveals how local knowledge projects, like Villager Research, are practices which invoke and shape performances of gender, race, and expertise in articulation with 'nature', while also questioning the foundational assumptions of these categories as 'fixed', even as they are represented in enduring images and texts. At times these practices are done in ways which would be seen to be in the service of reinforcing conventional gender categories, or even in terms of promoting gender equity (and at other times, not).

Sundberg (2004) also links co-productionist approaches and fpe, producing insights into conservation projects as co-constituting identities and subjectivities. Drawing on Haraway (1997), she shows how gender and race are also at stake in conservation projects, as 'gender-in-the-making' projects. Sundberg (2004, 43) studies 'how the daily discourses, practices, and performances of conservation projects are instrumental in mapping ways of life that are gendered and racialized' emphasising particular moments. Tsing's work considering the 'making' of tribal elders echoes this approach; she takes the work of local communities seriously to analyse 'the dynamics of representation itself' (1999, 159). Like Sundberg, Tsing guides us through the 'situations' where categories take on meanings, such as in a village-NGO meeting or in the media articles focusing on the village. In this way, Tsing shows the 'double-sided agency' involved in the making of 'tribal elders', a locally and globally inspired category (Tsing 1999; see also, Tsing 2005, 160–163).

Moving forward, then, as a way to conceptualize the impacts and identity work in Villager Research, I approach identity and knowledge as 'co-produced' and analyze various discussions and situations where identity and knowledge come together in particular moments of Villager Research. These matters because such approaches reveal how local knowledge projects, like Villager Research, comprise a set of practices which invoke and shape performances of gender, rather than simply document them. As Tsing notes, 'it is not enough to say that [a project] engages in simplifications, as all social categories simplify even as they bring us to appreciate new complexities' (2005, 162). The benefit of this entry point is that it also allows for viewing the work of Villager Research as not necessarily 'uncovering' some original knowledge (invoking romantic visions of rural people, a pure nature, and idyllic history which, for instance, erases different as well as the violence experienced by ethnic minorities in Thailand), but instead: *highlights the co-production work of Villager Research at the Salween.*

Methods

I am familiar with Villager Research through work in Southeast Asia with environmental NGOs (2003–2004, and 2006–2008). This influenced the research conducted in 2009–2011 where I focused on long-term doctoral and post-doctoral research in two villages along the Salween where it comprises the political border between Thailand and Myanmar. I conducted participant observation and carried out interviews at villages along the Salween River, and at a series of NGO network meetings in Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai, and Bangkok. I can speak and read Thai, and with the help of a multi-lingual research assistant, research was conducted in Thai, Karen, and English languages. My research assistant, a young Thai-Karen woman residing in a nearby district town, helped me navigate and assess the impacts of the project from her insider-outsider position.

As linked to the conceptual focus of co-production and identity, participant observation was also useful for a number of reasons, but it was particularly useful to understand and experience the practices and activities of village life. Linked to this, I took notes on the ways I negotiated the expectations that came from being a foreign outsider, a woman, and a former NGO worker.

My research assistant and I also conducted over 100 informal and semi-structured interviews with local residents, government officials, activists, scientists, and others. Over two follow-up trips to the region in 2012 and 2013, I spent an additional 5 months' time in the field doing looking at the 'success' of the project and specifically focusing on gender.

This article then represents the culmination of several years of fieldwork, reading, and writing about these villages and their research, the multifaceted ways that individuals and communities represent themselves, and the ways that they, as communities and individuals, are networked into broader narratives of conservation and development. As part of analysis and writing, the continual process of critical reflexivity helped me to consider the real work of villager research: the ability to shape identities, and that is what I further explore in the following sections, starting with a background on the site of research and the local knowledge project, *Salween Villager Research*.

Background: Karen communities in Thailand

In Thailand, the Karen are generally portrayed in either romantic or negative terms (Laungaramsri 2001), particularly as seen as in the links made with the Karen as an ethnic group and their forest and livelihood practices. These two stereotypes leave little room for nuanced stories about nature and livelihoods. These positions the Karen in an impossible situation: as guardians responsible for taking care of 'nature' and the forest, but, counterintuitively, then they are also blamed for any deforestation and other environmental degradation that occurs (Forsyth and Walker 2008).

These portrayals include, in particular, the practice of swidden agriculture. In negative, rather outdated terms, 'slash-and-burn' agriculture and those who practice it, including the Karen, are seen as destructive to nature and nation. An important backdrop to these portrayals is the Thai education system. An example from grade five pupils prepared by a private school illustrates this portrayal of ethnic minorities like the Karen, also referred to 'hill tribes' (discussed in Hongladarom 2000):

Which of the following cannot be considered a cause of deforestation?

1. Capitalists illegally fell trees.
2. Hill tribes (chaokhao) do slash-and-burn farming.
3. Villagers (chaobaan) clear forests and make a living on the land.
4. No law punishes wrongdoers.

Hongladarom (2000) explains that 'The expected answer is choice (d). So, hill tribe people, along with capitalists and villagers, are remembered as agents of deforestation. Note that there is no race or ethnicity attached to the words capitalists or villagers, whereas the term chaokhao [hill tribe] denotes non-Thai Northern minorities' (2000, 1). While the Karen are referred to as 'hill tribes', the term 'Thai-Karen', which represents the relationship of the Karen as a hyphenated group in Thailand is also used commonly in Thailand, even as Karen settlement in northern Thailand precedes the establishment of the modern Thai nation-state (Winichakul 1994, 69). The citizenship status of many 'Thai-Karen' is complicated, and linked to both technical-bureaucratic rules, which shifted lately (Rakkanam 2017) but tends to rely on a range of barriers for ethnic rural people to register birth of their children, and without that, maintains that the Karen born in Thailand are ineligible for citizenship. This challenge for citizenship relates not only to the bureaucratic rules, but the Karen's perceived position as a Burmese, rather than Thai, national; as one of the ethnic minority groups residing within Thailand's borders, which are seen as the 'other within' (Winichakul 2000). This positioning as an immigrant 'other' within Thailand impacts an individual's ability to participate in waged work, which requires citizenship or some form of state identity card. Mae Hong Son Province, where this research took place, was ranked last in the country for income per capita in 2011 (UNESCO 2012).

In more 'romantic' terms, the Karen are characterized as 'local people [who] always uniquely adapt in ways which ensure the balance of resources and local uses' (Laungaramsri 2001, 9). This is seen in NGO portrayals of Karen in the community forest movement or in advocating for swidden rights in forested areas (Walker 2001). Here a link is made between subsistence swidden and local knowledge, where it emerged that 'subsistence is the key element that characterizes local knowledge' (Laungaramsri 2001, 7).

The assumptions made to primarily link rural, ethnic livelihoods, and subsistence are the topic of much critique. Romantic ideas of nature privilege subsistence over use of nature for the market, or 'subsistence over sale' with detriment to local ethnic groups ability to make a living (Forsyth and Walker 2008). A focus on subsistence obscures resource use for economic gain. For instance, in the 'Karen Consensus', Walker (2001, 155) identifies how these storylines crystalized around the Karen in particular and contends that the key accomplishment of this consensus is that 'it mobilises a selective nostalgia for 'traditional' values and agricultural practices to define and defend a legitimate position within contested northern Thai landscapes'. In this 'consensus' the 'emphasis is on subsistence rather than commercial use' (159).

What I mean to add to this rich discussion is that what is also clear within these critiques is the tendency to homogenize 'communities' in the service of legible identity construction. For instance, looking at the critiques of Karen communities, Walker (2001, 159) notes that local knowledge does play a role in ethnic identity. Yet, other identities and how they might matter or be differently impacted by the enduring traditionalist discourse, such as gender, are not mentioned. Walker concedes in a rejoinder (2004, 265, reply to Santasombat, citing Walker 2001), that his original analysis was more 'formulaic', in that his 'reference to "non-government organizations ... and academics in northern Thailand" as producers of the "Karen consensus" is clearly inadequate' and he points to his critic, Yos' (2004) 'analysis of the role of Karen leaders in strategic symbolic deployment certainly heads in the right direction'. As a result, in that work on problematizing the 'community', notably absent are the impacts on women and interrogation into how these storylines and stereotypes might differently impact Karen men and women. Also, absent in the critique and replies are the voices of Karen men and women who are impacted by these discussions (Santasombat 2004; Walker 2001, 2004).

Thus, while this work interrogated, for instance, the construction of ethnicity and the 'burden' of subsistence on ethnic communities to reveal how certain narratives privilege some livelihoods over others (Vandergest 2003; Walker 2001), neither the narratives (negative or romantic) nor the critiques, engaged a study of how gender or intersectional identities also matter to these constructions, and they are not considered with locally-led knowledge projects. In other words,

in rethinking the ‘Karen consensus,’ I consider a further gendered dimension that Walker did not discuss.

This brings me back to Salween Villager Research project, and the relationship to producing experts, knowledge, and gender. The Karen are a matriarchal society, with the practice of married couples moving into the women’s household upon marriage and with women taking lead responsibility for that household. These gender roles are important in livelihoods and natural resource management, as well as community and finance management. Laungaramsri’s (2001) doctoral work with the Karen in Northwestern Thailand showed that gender roles were significant in local livelihoods resource management, which were linked to practices of swidden agriculture starting at a young age. She explains that ‘Karen girls learn from their mothers to take care of swiddens and to distinguish diverse edible plants in the swidden and fallow fields. The boys, on the other hand, help their fathers clear fields and explore the vast forests hunting small animals’ (2001, 200). My research similarly showed that there were gendered roles linked to swidden and resource management practices, which were shared between men and women seasonally. It is also worth noting that these roles were not necessarily strict, and shifted with age, education, and class. Other livelihoods included, fishing, riverbank gardening, rice farming, and collection of forest products, with the products sold, traded, and consumed within the household. There is also entrepreneurial trade linked to the villages’ position near the border.

In thinking about how tradition and subsistence shape gender and resource management in South Asia, Gururani’s work (2002a, 2002b) critiques how a traditionalist discourse impacted women and gender – particularly, how it increased the burden for women to ‘care’ for nature. In this case, while I argue that subsistence focus impacts women, the particulars are not the same: I investigate a locally-led, collaborative project (or, at least one not easily characterized as an ‘outside intervention’), where women participated, but were not necessarily ‘burdened’ and instead are left out of documentation. How did this happen?

To start to understand and address this, I introduce the project and weave together several ‘small’ examples from the Villager Research, which taken together, I argue provide insight into the production of gender and the impacts of subsistence storyline on Karen women. Indeed, a focus on the struggle with presenting this work is the project’s focus on the banal, everyday practices as linked to knowledge. In what follows, I highlight key instances that emerge as part of this longer-term fieldwork and engagement with the work of local residents and NGOs to produce local knowledge.

Salween villager research

As a methodology, Villager Research aims to record and systematize knowledge about local ecologies—in most cases ecologies threatened by large development projects, particularly dams—both for local use (e.g. within schools) and to make it visible to development proponents and decision-makers (e.g. within hydropower development consultations). As a villager-centred approach to local knowledge, the main focus is that the villagers themselves are the researchers. The methodology, initially developed by villagers in Thailand’s Northeastern region around the Pak Mun dam, was done in collaboration with the organization Living Rivers Siam (SEARIN), an organization based in Thailand, and Thai academics.

Since the first Villager Research project was developed around the Pak Mun dam project in the early 2000s, the methodology is circulating across Southeast Asia, including to Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, as well as across Thailand, to the Salween River, the site of research for this article at the Thailand-Myanmar border. The Villager Research process at the Salween River, along the Thai-Myanmar border, is what I focus on in this article; the project was undertaken collaboratively, like the original Pak Mun project, by non-government organizations and ‘villagers’ since at least 2003. Some of the documented outputs so far include a book (Committee of Researchers

of the Salween Sgaw Karen 2005), posters, videos, as well as numerous presentations by village researchers and NGO staff.

Two organizations were mainly involved in coordinating the project, one based locally in the border area and one based in Thailand's northern city of Chiang Mai. They coordinated with village leaders, the Village Research Network, and the local water basin network, to organize the meetings, research, and when sending NGO staff to work as RAs in the communities. The staff and the people in the organizations were mostly Thai and Thai-Karen; those who acted as RAs were a range of ages and occupied various positions in their organizations from leading the NGO to volunteer staff working with the local NGO.

June (a pseudonym, as are all interviewees introduced) worked as an RA for the Villager Research project. I interviewed June multiple times and also visited Salween villages with her. She is Thai-Karen and worked with the local NGO, for nine years prior to participating in the project, starting out as a volunteer.

She explained that, 'It all started with the workshop [with experienced Village Researchers], held at the local NGO office. We invited village heads from all the Salween villages. After the workshop, each village had meetings. They would go to each house, talk about what they will do, for what purpose, and what they will get from doing the project'. It was at these early meetings that they decided upon the five issues to focus the research on. This included, fishing and fish species; swidden agriculture and riverbank gardens; herbal remedies; 'ecology' (rapids, aquatic animals, forest animals, community forests); and paddy rice farming. Across these categories, 'the livelihoods, beliefs, within each issue' were included.

Each group had one or more RAs who helped systematize and record the research. June assisted the swidden agriculture and riverbank gardens group, and Nay, a young man from northern Thailand working with the Chiang Mai based NGO, assisted the fishing group. Nay emphasized the practice-based nature of the research, 'we went out to fish like villagers'. Nay also explained that the participating researchers were not just men, but also 'women, old people and young people. Women mostly they'll know more about food, local vegetables. Some women are good at fish species'.

In the fish group, fish species were photographed daily by villagers and species names were identified within the group, which sometimes created a bit of discussion, as the decisions on fish names were made by consensus. Discussions would focus on, for instance, the sizes of the fish, or a particular fisherman might focus on a stripe or a fin for identification. Some fish did not have names in Thai language and were not identified in other texts creating more discussion. These discussions, species identifications, and photographs were then the basis for the Salween Villager Research publications and posters, which offer lists of species in addition to local consumption practices and to villager's subsistence livelihoods.

Making villager research

Villager Research was not simply documenting local knowledge but also making experts. Nay elaborated on the ways that 'experts' became part of the five groups and part of the project:

Villagers decide on their own ... Those who are experts (*chamnan*) on fish or herbal remedies, they go. For fishing, we go down to the water and go fishing. For herbal remedies, they go to the forest. 'This plant is this, it does this'. Then we take notes. Villagers know themselves who is who – they know who is the local doctor. This person likes to fish, they know.

Village researchers identified their own 'expertise' on specific topics, such as fishing, and the NGO staff came to the village to act as RAs, to take notes and additional photos, and to help systematize and organize the data collected by villagers through meetings and discussion. Villagers were also asked to present their research on livelihoods to NGO and general audiences.

What I saw was that as a result of participating in Villager Research (or not), individuals differently presented themselves as experts, not only to me as an outsider, but to NGO collaborators and to one another. For instance, in discussion with a RA named Jackie, we discussed this work in Villager Research to produce a counter narrative about Thai-Karen in Thailand as 'experts' and people who conserve the forest, and how this was linked to the Thai-Karen identity within Thai society. Jackie emphasized some of the ways that working longer-term on the Villager Research project shifted her own identity as a 'Karen villager'. Jackie identifies as 'Thai-Karen' in Thai language, and Pga K'nyau in Karen language. In Thai elementary school, she was taught that Karen people were 'bad' people who 'destroyed the forests'; they were backward people who wore old clothes and did not understand modern education and technologies – much less experts. The text books, she explained, included images to accompany these problematic narratives that showed Karen looking unkempt next to neatly dressed Thais (see also, Hongladarom 2000).

In contrast, Jackie argued that Villager Research was/is a part of changing those perceptions. Not only for Thais, but for Karen people, too. Illustrative of this, Jackie said she learned to be proud of her family's Karen traditions and to better articulate to outsiders, like myself, the ways that 'the Karen conserve nature' through assisting in the Villager Research at the Salween. Jackie noted that from helping with research conducted by other Karen people, she now tells the story of herself as Karen in a 'different way'. She is more confident to tell outsiders the stories of 'nature and forest conservation' and to position Karen as experts in these areas. In this conversation, as many others with RAs who like Jackie, had steady employment with an NGO, could speak Karen, Thai (and some English), and had citizenship documents, interviewees invoked the project as impactful, and nobly representing local nature conservation.

That the impacts of Villager Research on the making of expertise and identity was complicated and differed across interviewees with different backgrounds was evidenced in my observations and informal discussions with those who participated as the village researchers. For instance, when interviewed about fishing, if for instance, a local fisherman named Jacob was part of the Villager Research fishing group, Jacob would state his position, and it would mean that he could provide useful information for my research. Also, community members would defer to those 'experts' within group conversations, both informally and in more formal village meetings. Jacob, who also had Thai language skills and an identity card, presented on fishing at the Salween in NGO meetings outside the village.

Another layer to participation and this making of experts was seen when someone did not participate. When I visited the homes of Wandii and Wanankan, a wife and husband in their 50s, I saw the ways that not participating as a village researcher impacted the way they identified as experts. Both were traditional doctors in the village. In practical terms, this meant that they are able to locate and identify local plant and animal species and the ways these items can be used for treating ailments, a focus area for Salween Villager Research. In the interview, I asked both individuals about local plant species and herbal remedies, and I also mentioned Villager Research. Wandii told me she had not participated in Villager Research because she was ill. At this point, the interview changed. Wandii responded to nearly all my earlier questions; she was talkative and eager to discuss life in the village and about her and her husband's life history. After I mentioned the Villager Research project, she suggested that her husband, Wanankan, 'answer my questions'. She noted that his knowledge on this topic was more 'useful' to me because of his participation in Villager Research. Wanankan, although not as articulate as his wife, proceeded to answer my questions for the rest of the interview. In this example, Wandii's inability to participate in Villager Research made her less of an expert, in her own home.

In these instances, the making of experts in Villager Research was multifaceted, and was linked with a range of identities and expectations: gender and women's roles in the home, education or language, citizenship, as well as lingering notions of what acceptable livelihoods fit with forest/nature conservation and the ways in which this positioned certain 'experts' and livelihoods as a key focus of the project. A particular notion of expertise also appeared to emerge.

What I explore next are some of the complicated ways this was continuously and simultaneously linked to gender and ethnicity.

Making and representing 'experts'

Discussions about women's participation in the Salween Villager Research project started early, stemming, at least in part, from the outputs of the original Pak Mun project in northeastern Thailand, where women were excluded in the outputs. There, the Villager Research network subsequently published *Women of the Mun River* (Rivers for Life et al. 2012) as a response to the lack of women's visibility in their original research. This 'problem' of women's participation and visibility was discussed within meetings at the Salween project and there was a move to purposefully include more women in the research at Salween. There are a whole host of reasons why women might not participate in a local knowledge project. Lack of participation is not necessarily divorced from gendered, caring roles in the home. Such an explanation would mirror other research showing that 'the conventional assumption is that women are generally available and that it is within their interests to "participate" in such programs' when other responsibilities may take precedent (Resurreccion and Manorom 2007, 193).

Yet, I also discussed this with Tan, an RA on the project from Northeastern Thailand ('Isan') who also worked on Villager Research projects in the Northeast before working at the Salween. At the time of the interview, he was based in Northern Thailand working with an international NGO. His response to questions I asked about women's participation and expertise related to Villager Research was to explain his views on women's participation at the Salween as compared to his experiences in Isan, where he is from. He explained, 'some ethnic groups, men work very hard, the women stay home and don't say anything'.

Tan wanted to encourage participation of both women and men, and he explained this was a part of Villager Research discussions, but he also believed different 'ethnic' practices mattered to participation. In contrast, he discussed his work in Isan, where he saw gender as less of an issue, further explaining that 'In Isan, men and women are the same. Actually, in Isan the women [have] good knowledge; good local knowledge. They know. They are also fishermen. ... Women and men are same'.

His response highlights both the 'problem' with women's participation at the Salween and the link or reflection on his own role as an RA in the process. He identifies differences in the practices of local ethnic groups compared to those he considers a less ethnically diverse part of Thailand, the Northeast, where he is from. These points are interesting for a number of reasons. Here Tan as an NGO staffer sees ethnic and cultural differences as an issue –quite different from Jackie above – and that he, like Jackie, was responsible for helping the villagers produce research.

Some of these challenges came together in the outputs of the Villager Research project. In spite of the practices of women to collect and create knowledge in Villager Research, as noted at the start of the article, women were left out of the Villager Research outputs. What I mean specifically: the publication, *Salween Villager Research*, the list of 'main village researchers' does not include any women. Each village researcher listed is identified as 'Mister' or in Thai language, *Nay* (Committee of Researchers of the Salween Sgaw Karen 2005, 121). Further, particularly focusing on the case of fishing from the start: the images within the text, which show village researchers engaged in both the process of research and their own livelihoods, shows almost exclusively men. Almost every image of fishing published within the book focuses on men fishing in boats and with nets, including the cover of the book. The book contains just one photo of women, sitting along a small weir in the river.

In public presentations of the Salween project, Village Researchers were also represented outside the village by 'local experts' from the community who are asked to attend meetings to raise awareness about the Salween. Here, as in the book, the work of fishermen is highlighted. For instance, in NGO meetings I attended in 2010, local experts were invited alongside academics

and NGO activists to raise awareness about the Salween. The only person I saw speak from the podium as a 'local expert' was a Karen man, related to Jacob above, who spoke about village fishing activities. The images on display at the meeting only showed fishermen; the images and experts traveled to other sites and villages to share their perspectives. The women I interviewed and introduced above were not asked to attend or present outside of the village.

This mismatch—between the interviews with those who participated in the project *and* Tan's comment and the lack of women in the documentation—also strikes me as important. In essence, we go from a world populated by active women to a world without. How did this happen? Moreover, that women were 'missing' from documentation of fishing is particularly curious. This was in contrast to their actual participation in fishing at the Salween, and it contrasts with research in Thailand and Southeast Asia which show that women are engaged in fishing, and in particular, are the primary participants in the trade in fish (Kusakabe, Korsieporn, and Suntornratana 2003; Kusakabe et al. 2006; Lebel et al. 2012; Resurreccion and Manorom 2007).

In my research, female traders at the Salween bought the fish after it is caught, either directly from the fisher-person or from their network of traders. To arrange sale through their trade networks, the fish are transported in the district or to cities like Chiang Mai. My research at the Salween, shows that the female traders of Salween fish typically make more income from it than do the fishermen. Moreover, at the Salween there was already a discussion of women's participation at the start of the project because of the outcomes at Pak Mun. In the next section, I draw out how this enduring exclusion of women in Villager Research was at least in part, due to the enduring focus on 'subsistence' in local knowledge which interjected prevailing stereotypes as linked to a particular notion of expertise. In other words, I detail how the production of expertise was caught up with both the stereotypes of rural ethnic women, and the practices of making local knowledge.

Subsistence narratives and local knowledge

One of the reasons for an enduring exclusion of women in these outputs and performances of expertise is, I argue, linked to the enduring focus on subsistence livelihoods, as more in line with ethnicized 'forest guardian' ideas of nature. In thinking about the subsistence focus in Villager Research, I could make the counter-argument, as others have, that a focus on subsistence livelihoods could actually increase women's participation because it could include many of the activities which are not legible in economic terms. Research shows that commercialization in fishing in Southeast Asia tends to push women out (Kusakabe, Korsieporn, and Suntornratana 2003; Lebel et al. 2012). Yet, at the Salween, what is seen instead is that by focusing on subsistence livelihoods in Villager Research, which were also more in line with the romantic narratives, women were excluded in documentation of villager research.

In looking at the Salween Villager Research, and the original Pak Mun project, the publications (book, posters) list species names and sometimes villager's local consumption practices, but largely, income earning practices are not included. Yet, in practice, residents and RAs expressed that these issues did come up. Such a link to subsistence was discussed in the actual daily work of the project and in other interviews with RAs. For instance, June and Nay commented in interviews on the sale and trade of fish and agricultural products in the research, but also indicated that it was outside the scope of the project or was not documented. Nay explained that 'connected to this [fishing issue] is the village economy... We didn't say we would study this but as we did research, it came up'. I asked June more directly, 'Did you ask questions or do research about how much they sell or how much they trade it for?' June responded, 'Hm. We never ask how much. They said, eat first, then sell. We didn't talk about the price they sell it for'. In my field notes, I wrote that this was extremely curious: even as issues of income and producing for sale were raised, they were not documented. As noted, sale and trade of fish and other products came up in my research.

It is worth seriously considering why a locally-led knowledge project would focus on documenting subsistence livelihoods, even in a village which also produces for 'sale'. Jackie also explained that in this project they wanted to present themselves in ways which they thought would give them more authority, and in Thailand, authority in these circles meant that the images and livelihood practices that they consciously sought to document would be more in line with the subsistence work they did, even if subsistence livelihoods were part of a more complex livelihood portfolio which also included cash cropping. It is worth considering how different collaborators in this project would be differently impacted by the ability to represent a more cash-focused livelihood portfolio.

Such a focus on subsistence would also counter the enduring storylines of 'forest destruction', which are linked to cash cropping or agriculture in the forest. In earlier work on the Karen in Thailand, Laungaramsri explains that a focus on swidden and subsistence was important 'at the political level' and was 'campaigning for by the Karen members of the [Northern Farmers Network], more than half of whom no longer depend for their livelihoods on a subsistence swidden economy, signifies an effort to resituate the marginal space and identity of the Karen within dominant Thai society' (Laungaramsri 2001, 212). The rationale for a subsistence focus then is that it could do more—more for the Karen marginalized in Thailand.

While a focus on subsistence can mobilize an existing space for Karen in Thai society (Laungaramsri 2001, 212), such a focus does not necessarily aim to transform that space (Walker 2001), nor does it understand the impacts or ways that this also shapes those being narrated or documented, particularly Karen women. That women were 'missing' from documentation of fishing is one of the ways these knowledge practices and representations come together to inform the production of expertise and identity.

That women were 'left out' in the documentation of the local knowledge in a matriarchal society becomes particularly salient here. This appears, at least in the case of fishing, a consequence of their lead roles in earning income for the family in the fish trade, and the 'romantic' focus of Villager Research projects on non-economic, subsistence livelihoods. This results in a rather provocative mismatch of, on the one hand, enduring stereotypes of ethnic peoples' gender roles, and, on the other hand, the contrast with the ways the Karen make a living. To understand this situation, then, the coproduction of knowledge and identity is simultaneously about ethnic marginalization in Thailand, the stereotypes about caring for nature, and the ways these come together in the exclusion of Karen women in Villager Research, which saw subsistence livelihoods as the main point upon which local expertise was based.

This enduring 'problem' of subsistence was also raised in follow up visits in 2012, which were focused on discussion of the success of Villager Research at the Salween. In response to questions from a group of students and NGOs about the project and local livelihoods, local Karen women had a lot to say about the ways that traditional livelihoods being promoted by NGOs were not helpful. I highlight this here because it was one of the clearest distillations of an active critique of subsistence by Karen women. This is likely made possible because this trip was focused on the 'success' of the Villager Research project to outsiders, as compared to much of the individual conversations and group discussions, which focused on and took place more within the existing Villager Research project.

Molly—one NGO staff on the trip—asked directly to the women's group, in attendance, 'What do you need to make life better?' A local NGO staff, seated near the women's group, was the first to reply, 'People here mostly collect leaves from the forest [to make roofing], they can also do hired labor for which they receive around 250 baht per day, but that is only for people with an id card'. Dao, a member of the women's group sitting at the back of the room stood to speak, loudly; this made an impact, as we were all sitting on the ground and her voice was noticeably louder than previous NGO response. She explained, 'Women like to work hard; we [women] can do strong work, can compete like men. Weaving—is not enough (*mai paw*), sewing—is not enough.' A second member of the women's group responded, 'I would like to have

job security. Some organizations provide support for women's work, but it is not permanent. Not secure'.

While not much is written about weaving as a subsistence livelihood in Thailand as compared to fishing or swidden agriculture, weaving is a big part of NGO and development work in Thailand. This is particularly linked to rural, ethnic minorities, like the Hmong and Karen. Weaving is represented as small-scale activity 'grounded in community and location' (Enteen 1997, 314). In other words, it fits easily as a local, subsistence livelihood. As seen above, however, some of the Karen women's group at the Salween would critique such work as 'not enough' in that it does not generate much needed income and is 'not secure'. I consider these interjections on weaving and subsistence by the Karen women's group as I bring these instances together in discussion.

Who knows the river? Co-producing ecology and identity

With the goals of reorienting expertise and giving villagers a say in development projects affecting them, Villager Research is attracting interest as it makes its way across Southeast Asia, as an example of 'politically aware fisheries research' (Friend 2009, 179). Much less attention is given to the narratives generated or perpetuated, and the ways this brings ethnic, rural people who are 'being narrated' into a particular frame of expertise. Even in the case of fishing, a topic of much interest in the Mekong region, a focus on subsistence livelihoods might be expected to increase women's visibility because it could include many of the activities, which are not legible in economic terms. Instead, in this case, what we see is that some women are 'left out' of the documentation of fishing livelihoods, and fishermen present research on behalf of the village. Thus, in a majority Karen, matriarchal community where women do participate in fishing and in research, Karen women's livelihoods—particularly the largely income-producing activities, for instance the trade and sale of fish—are overlooked precisely because they are income producing activities, which do not fit easily into romantic ideas about nature and traditional rural, ethnic livelihoods. Some Karen women are also rejecting a focus on other subsistence activities promoted by NGOs like weaving. It appears that in some ways this Villager Research focused on documenting subsistence livelihoods at the expense of 'women's work'.

Since in the research on fishing livelihoods in the region, 'most studies on gender have not dealt adequately with intersections of class, ethnicity and other sources of social differentiation' (Lebel et al. 2012, 13), and hence there is an enduring gap on understanding the continual work of participation and representation for ethnic, rural minorities. This case adds to our understanding of the complex work of local knowledge: not as simply documenting the local, nor nobly, romantically re-positioning of locals as experts; but in recognizing that the work to make local knowledge and expertise is to simultaneously shape identities in (sometimes) contradictory ways. Indeed, part of the struggle for understanding the work and impacts of local knowledge projects, like Villager Research, is that these projects are in a position to become an agentive tool for marginalized communities. At the same time, they can limit agency or produce differential impacts within and across communities, inserting a particular set of simultaneous openings and constraints in the production of expertise as linked to stereotyped subsistence livelihoods. These processes are not easily characterized as simply 'negative' or 'empowering'; but, they do shape, in their linked outputs and practices, identity and knowledge.

The comments above made by members of the women's group illustrate a number of these tensions which defy easy characterization, and which link Thai-Karen identity and gender with subsistence. Above, the Karen women's group did not consider weaving and sewing activities, which are seen as 'traditional' subsistence activities typically pursued by development NGOs in rural areas in Thailand for women, such as those NGOs who worked had staff work as RAs in Villager Research, as 'enough'. Moreover, the mention of identity cards and travel for work above alludes to issues of citizenship for Thai-Karen raised earlier; not all villagers have citizenship documents and thus have differentiated rights to work or move out of a subsistence-based economy.

This contrasts with Jackie's understanding of the project and its impacts on her identity as a 'conservationist', who is keen to share her Karen heritage as linked to more romantic ideas about nature. As an NGO worker, with Thai language skills and citizenship, Jackie, however, is in quite a different position than the women's group speakers above who are struggling with issues related to work and citizenship, and it makes sense that in these different positions, Villager Research and its subsistence focus would matter differently and impact identity differently, even if in a general sense, women as a broad group are left out of the documentation.

That these identities are simultaneous, intersectional, and contradictory poses additional challenges for presenting a nice, tidy story of local knowledge and identity. However, this messiness is important, for as Valentine (2007, 155) explains, 'By recognising the continual production of social difference, essentialist notions of identity are undermined, and it is possible to illuminate how subjectivity is ultimately a contradictory achievement with subjects exercising and internalising multiple dimensions of power within the same acts'. Moreover, 'This formulation then opens up possibilities to understand how power operates not only in two dimensions, but rather in multiple dimensions that can have lateral and unexpected consequences' (155).

That is why, coming back to Jasanoff's (2004) insights, taking knowledge, particularly local knowledge, seriously necessitates a critique. If 'the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it' then 'we gain explanatory power by thinking of natural and social orders as being produced together' (2004, 2). In my analysis, the mobilized stereotypes of ethnic minorities and nature in Thailand are not the only sites of or sources of re-entrenched power, they are made 'real' and are shaped by the ways in which villagers engage in and perform these local projects.

In focusing on identity, then, this research understands both the tensions and the collaborative efforts necessary to produce identity. I highlight the collaborative, multifaceted work to produce identity here because it links the enduring work of producing identity in terms of gender, expertise, and ethnicity, seen in the production of the markers of difference presented by those who collaborate on these local knowledge projects. Building on this, what I identify as perhaps the more important and yet more modest overall assessment, developed across this article by bringing these different observations, interviews, and critiques together, is that: the work of 'local', female villagers in co-producing their own multifaceted identities is complicated, and tends to be overlooked, but it is this work that is necessary in accomplishing these very identities.

This also highlights what is at stake here, that to make identity and to represent a particular 'ethnic' identity or a 'villager identity' is constant work – to participate, present, and interrupt. To approach these identities as fixed, or as solely entrenchments of external or colonial inventions, ignores the work performed by villagers, and disregard an opportunity to underline 'the contingent, the locally and temporally situated' coproducts which call into question 'univocal grand narratives' (Jasanoff 2004, 70).

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