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**CONSUMING BURMESE TEAK: ANATOMY OF A  
VIOLENT LUXURY RESOURCE**

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The history of the development of the teak industry is a record of the creation of a luxury resource steeped in chronic and unspeakable violence. Notably centred on Burma (re-labelled Myanmar by the country's military rulers) where most of the world's teak supplies are located, teak production has long been a Jekyll and Hyde tale of murder and marketing, of distinction and extinction, all masked behind a carefully crafted image of the mystery and romance of 'green gold'. It is a tale where the production of consumption has been inextricably linked to the consumption of production – or, at least, a mythical version of that production.

This chapter examines selected themes in this process focusing on a Burmese teak trail littered over time with policies and practices involving brutal production, coercive conservation and seductive consumption. It is only through such an intertwined approach to the history of this commodity that the anatomy of a violent luxury good can be properly understood. Indeed, to understand fully the social life of teak (or other commodities for that matter), there is a need to explore spaces of production and consumption as inseparably tied together through often deeply exploitative histories (colonial and post-colonial) that notably include violence, as well as contested perceptions of use and exchange value, luxury status plus aesthetic beauty. In the process, teak is linked to romanticised place – all the better to *simultaneously* create a mystique surrounding the consumption of this increasingly rare 'king of the timbers' even as harsh production conditions are thereby swept from view. The aim in this chapter therefore is to provide a 'rich thick description' of a distinctive and historically situated empirical case – that of Burmese teak – as part of this book's wider effort to probe some of the ambiguities and tensions that characterise spaces of

consumption and production in an era of acute political, economic, cultural and ecological trade-offs.

The intersection of spaces of consumption and production over teak has indeed been a process ripe with ambiguity and tension in Burma – one of Southeast Asia’s less well-known yet historically important countries. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that Burmese history has long been closely associated with the teak tree. Identification of the country as ‘the land of teak’ was reinforced in numerous fiction and non-fiction accounts. The elaboration of a large-scale export-oriented timber industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demonstrated the economic importance of this resource. As such, teak was popularized and romanticized even as its commercial value was realized (Brandis 1888; Kelly Talbot 1912; Stebbing 1922-1926).

Political interest centered on controlling teak forests and their inhabitants. Burma’s rulers – pre-colonial monarchs, British officials, post-colonial civilian and military elites – have all grappled with this problem, even as forest residents – shifting cultivators, villagers, timber traders – have sought to evade central control. In short, teak has been a perennial focus of struggle (Bryant 1997; Global Witness 2003).

Indeed, as often happens where valuable natural resources are involved, teak exploitation in Burma has been associated with the disruption if not devastation of the livelihoods of the rural poor living in or near by the teak forests. True, some forest residents earned an income in the timber industry as they felled, processed and transported teak to market. Others were involved in shipbuilding as well as the ‘sustainable’ management of teak forest – Karen shifting cultivators being a case in point. And yet, it would be wrong to exaggerate the importance of these benefits given the overall impact of teak exploitation on

resident populations. As powerful Burmese and non-Burmese elites came to prize teakwood, a series of political, military and economic measures were taken that served to violently disrupt pre-existing local ‘life-worlds’ – comprising not only material welfare but also cultural and spiritual attachments to place. What for some was ‘green gold’ became for others ‘blood timber’ in a process that exposed the inescapably contested nature of this natural resource.

### **Anatomy of production**

To describe Burmese teak as blood timber – that is, as a resource whose record of exploitation can be viewed as a *bad* thing – is clearly to go against numerous published historical accounts extolling the virtues of its exploitation. These accounts – written by and/or for elites – present one particular version of history that is ‘factual’ in tone, partial in scope, and de-politicized in presentation. In all their diversity, they present a narrative of teak production and the context of production that laid the basis for the transformation of teak into a premiere world luxury wood and its consumption.

Whether in the dry bureaucratic form of government officials or the florid style of travel writers, ‘progress’ in Burma’s forests was often about mapping, extracting, planting or simply experiencing the majestic teak forests (e.g. Kelly Talbot 1912; Nisbet 1901; Stebbing 1922-1926). Thus, the colonial travel writer, R. Kelly Talbot (1912, 101), gushed:

Surrounded by scenes of the supremest beauty, each day’s ride seemed more beautiful than the last, a gradual crescendo of loveliness which only increased as familiarity aided appreciation, and of which no words of mine could ever give an adequate impression. I had never anticipated anything so completely fascinating as these Burmese forests proved to be.

Yet, this discourse of progress served to romanticize forest intervention that, when viewed from a different angle, was all about the bloody production of a timber and its subsequent

ethical cleansing. The production of Burmese teak has thus been inescapably associated with the production of a particular moral geography that has been deeply politicized.

It is not difficult to see why both Burmese and British elites were enamored with the teak tree. As a durable, attractive and long-lasting hardwood resistant to the predation of many wood-boring insects, teak (*Tectona grandis*) was used in the construction industry, notably as the preferred source for the homes of pre-colonial Burmese royalty and nobility. Significantly, teak was also the preferred timber of a pre-colonial shipbuilding industry based in southern Burma from at least the seventeenth century. This was so because it held up well under prolonged exposure to the corrosive effects of seawater as well as containing an essential oil which prevented metal corrosion (Brandis 1888; Nisbet 1901).

As the reputation of teak grew, pre-colonial Burma became the focus of a thriving export trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Burmese shipbuilders constructed a variety of ships from small coastal boats to larger square-rigged vessels based on the European model. Between 1786 and 1824 alone, 111 European-style vessels were built in Rangoon with an aggregate tonnage of 35,000 (Pearn 1939, 71; Lieberman 1984, 119-20). Labourers flocked south from elsewhere in the country to become part of this economic boom attracted by the prospect of relatively well-paid semi-skilled work (Htin Aung 1968, 10-11). A complex if fluid regulatory system was in place that was designed to tax teak production and control labour in the teak forests, along the major transport routes and at the site of shipbuilding itself (Koenig 1990; Taylor 1987). As a valued timber, there was a royal monopoly on teak from at least the eighteenth century that was enforced in the forests by specially appointed guards empowered to fine or arrest anyone involved in its illegal extraction. Such extraction persisted given both the high value of teak and the relatively

weak administrative capacity of the pre-colonial Burmese State (Bryant 1997, 39-41). And yet, however small scale, it was in late pre-colonial Burma that a political economy of teak was crafted that proved remarkably durable and which was based on great commercial value of the product, export-oriented production and political coercion.

Teak was thus influencing Burmese history even before the nineteenth century intervention of the British in that country. Indeed, that intervention was itself shaped by a growing international awareness of 'the land of teak'. By the early nineteenth century, the international identification of Burma with teak was ever more pronounced thereby setting the stage for a fierce geopolitics of teak. There were diverse aspects to this process. Thus, teak was becoming a sought after resource by the European powers on military grounds. Imperial shipbuilders had discovered what their Burmese counterparts already knew – namely, that teak was an ideal timber for the construction of warships. Further, at a time of heightened Anglo-French conflict, the British were desperately searching for new timber supplies for their navy as oak forests were depleted in Europe and limited teak forests were felled in southern India (Ribbentrop 1900, 64-66). Finally, eyewitness accounts by foreigners reported that Burma was home to the largest teak forests in the world. The actual extent and quality of those forests would only be known following the British conquest of Burma (between 1824 and 1886) once the Burma forest department was able to complete a systematic survey (Bryant 1997). Yet, if anything, feverish expectations of 'limitless' Burmese teak forests in the early to mid-nineteenth century only hastened the process whereby Burma became identified as the home of teak

From the mid-nineteenth century to the Japanese invasion of Burma in early 1942, the consolidation of British control went hand in hand with the elaboration of the world's

leading export-oriented teak industry. As such, teak became a prime *imperial* resource with a political- economic context defined by four elements. First, a specially created forest department facilitated a rise in teak production as forests across British-ruled Burma were systematically mapped and exploited. Whereas 20,462 tons were produced in 1859 (albeit, from British-ruled Lower Burma only) by 1900 the figure was 205,000 tons while in the early 1920s it exceeded 513,000 tons. While production levels fluctuated (notably due to shifting market conditions), the basic situation was nonetheless a considerable increase in teak production as more and more of the national teak forest was incorporated into the realm of market activity. From a British viewpoint, teak was the main forest crop with the corollary of that being that other timber and non-timber species were ‘minor forest products’.

Second, virtually all teak extracted was destined for export. A classic case of export-oriented resource production, teak was shipped to markets in British-ruled India as well as in Europe where it was converted into everything from railway sleepers to park benches, warships to office paneling (Brandis 1888: 104; see below). Burmese teak dominated the world market. Just prior to the Second World War, for example, Burma provided 85 per cent of world teak exports (Gallant 1957, 2).

Third, foreign firms dominated the Burma teak industry especially after 1900 as forests were ‘privatized’. Led by the mighty Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation Limited (BBTCL), five European firms controlled the key teak forests while much smaller Burmese firms were left to fight over the residual tracts. Indeed, between 1904 and 1924, outturn by Burmese firms fell from 23 per cent of total production to under 5 per cent whereas outturn by European firms climbed from just under 44 per cent of total production to more than 74

per cent (Bryant 1997, 103). In a pattern familiar in many parts of the South today, foreign firms dominated this key natural resource sector at the expense of smaller local rivals – thereby generating local resentment. The substantial profits generated by these firms were repatriated to Europe and when global market conditions turned sour, as they did in the early 1930s, the colonial state cut their royalty rates by 30 per cent – a move not extended to Burmese firms in the industry at that time.

Finally, official revenue earned from the lucrative teak industry was used to sustain the British Indian colonial administration (of which Burma was a part) with a substantial proportion of that revenue being siphoned off to support the overall running of that administration. Indeed, in the early 1890s, the annual net revenue from Burma's forests (virtually all teak-related) amounted to 45 per cent of the total for all of British India, up from 39 per cent in 1870 (Bryant 1997, 57). Burma's teak forests thus helped to sustain not only the colonial administration in Burma itself but also imperial endeavors in British India as a whole. If colonial rule needed to be a 'paying proposition' then teak played a notable role in the propagation of the British Empire. Relatively little of this revenue was devoted to the improvement of the lives of the conquered Burmese. Indeed, even where benefits occurred – for example, as a result of the construction of a railway network that facilitated the movement of people and goods – there is nonetheless a need to relate benefits to costs. To take the railway example, it is important to recognize its role in enabling a far more effective and systematic suppression of internal dissent than was hitherto possible.

Independence did not end Burma's close association with teak. To the contrary, it marked the start of an increasingly bitter chapter in that history. Teak has remained a sought after commodity destined for export that political and economic elites struggle to



control at the expense of many Burmese. As in pre-colonial and colonial times, post-colonial teak production generates enormous profits that are not reinvested in the economic improvement of the country but are rather used to improve the lives of those who control the Burmese State as well as their political and economic allies.

### **From *raison d'état* to reason to shop**

So much for how teak was linked to shifting political economies of timber production in Burma – but what of the consumption patterns that spurred on this process? Far from being simply a matter of ‘natural’ market activity, the consumption of teak was profoundly shaped by military and political concerns that notably reflected the vicissitudes of empire. Burmese teak played a role indeed in the pomp and (bloody) circumstance of British imperialism.

As noted, strong British interest in Burma in the nineteenth century – and certainly a key factor in the decision to conquer that country – related to the need to source new supplies of durable wood for the British navy. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, that old mainstay of naval construction, oak, was in clear decline – especially quality oak timber that met the demanding and highly specific standards of the British Admiralty. At the same time, the superiority of teak over oak in naval construction was becoming ever more apparent: teak was more resistant to marine borers such as the dread mollusc (*teredo navalis*) even as its natural oils (unlike tannic acid in oak sap) preserved metals in sea water meaning that ships could be built using iron spikes (on naval shipbuilding in British India, see Lambert 1996).

Throughout the nineteenth century and even into the early twentieth century, Burmese teak played a leading role in the production of quality warships for the British

Admiralty even as it also found much use in the commercial arena. Given the demanding requirements of naval shipbuilding, only best quality teak referred to as Europe or English first class quality grade was used – with exports to UK shipyards led by the Clyde and the Tyne and distribution centres led by London varying sharply from year to year, but broadly increasing over time. Thus, for example, teak imports to the UK (mostly from Burma) in 1846 amounted to 8,712 tons, rising to 25,112 tons in 1860, before climbing in 1883 to 45,539 tons (Simmonds 1885, 353-54). In 1900 that figure was 63,598 tons before falling back slightly in the years thereafter (Andrews 1931, 31).

The general upward trend in teak imports to the UK reflected shifts in how this expensive timber was used in naval construction. Thus, on the one hand, a steady deterioration in the quality of teak supplies (as prime trees were soon felled) as well as the substitution of iron for teak sidings meant that the quantity of teak used in any one ship fell greatly during the century (Albion 1926). By the late nineteenth century, gone were the days when a military or merchant vessel was made largely of teak – as was the case with the famous tea clipper the ‘Cutty Sark’ which was built on the Clyde in 1869 (and which was a popular tourist attraction in London until its devastation by fire in 2007). On the other hand, many more ships were being built for the British navy (and the other major world powers) as an imperial arms race got under way in the decades leading up to the First World War even as more and more teak was being used in the construction of merchant and passenger ships. By the 1920s, modern shipbuilding technologies as well as a smaller peacetime fleet meant that the British Admiralty’s teak requirements ‘henceforth ceased to be the direct and active factor in the markets in the UK’ that it had previously been (Andrews 1931, 24).

During the nineteenth century, Burmese teak of inferior quality was sent to India where it replaced local teak that had been all but exhausted by that time. Here, teak was popular for a wide variety of purposes including use in the general building trade (houses, temples, etc), public works (official buildings), the railways (carriages, sleepers or railway ties, bridges) and local shipbuilding in Bombay and Calcutta. As time went by and the price of teak climbed, teak was used in India mainly for higher value shipbuilding and public works with substitutes found for other prior uses such as the substitution of non-teak hardwoods for teak in railway sleepers as well as steel for window frames (Hopwood 1935). Still, the size of the expanding Indian market meant that throughout this period, most of the teak produced in Burma was consumed in India.

By the time of the First World War, teak was well established as one of the most valuable timbers that the world had ever known. If its world renown was still closely linked to its supreme utility in the shipbuilding trade, the properties that made teak a wood that was a 'cut above the rest' meant that it was also well placed to expand into new markets in the non-military and non-maritime sector. In the prospering imperial heartland, teak was to find a new role as a marker of social distinction in the homes and bureaus of the affluent.

It is not really surprising that teak moved from being a piece of essential military hardware to a status where it was a much sought after luxury good. Four factors can be briefly noted here. First, there was the 'demonstration effect' as imperial elites became aware of the beauty and durability of teakwood from having seen it in use in colonial offices, railway carriages, and on board passenger vessels. That teak was literally embedded in key symbols of imperial modernity (the railway, the passenger liner) only added to its allure. Both of the world's two largest liners at the start of the Second World

War, the Queen Mary and the Queen Elizabeth, for example, contained about 1,000 tons of teak used notably for decking, gangways, handrails and window frames (Gardiner 1942, 749). Second, there was the way in which the prospering British middle classes more and more came to value highly quality possessions as markers of moral living, ‘good’ taste and social ‘respectability’. As Deborah Cohen (2006: xv) notes, middle-class consumerism gathered pace as the British became obsessed with shopping for household goods (including luxury furniture and other wood fittings) as part of a wider process of ‘middle-class self-fashioning’ in keeping with modern ‘taste-full’ living. Third, there was the close association of Burmese teak with a sense of the ‘exotic’ as well as adventure – replayed in journalist accounts (e.g. Geary 1886), imperial popular ‘guides’ (e.g. Ferrars and Ferrars 1900; Kelly Talbot 1912), and memoirs written by those who had served in Burma (e.g. Colonel Williams in his popular book *Elephant Bill* first published in 1950). To consume teak was thus to ‘imbibe’ a ‘glorious’ history of imperial adventure. Finally, there was sheer practicality of teak as a hard wearing and long-lasting timber that also displayed little shrinkage in drying and very little subsequent movement in variable climates. These properties meant that it was ideal, for example, as a piece of garden furniture or even as decking and fittings for private yachts – where its virtue for ‘staying put in ship’s decking, windows and doors, furniture and fittings exposed to sun and rain’ (Scott 1945, 82) was unbeatable.

Teak first made its social mark in the tropics where its appeal was simultaneously one of great luxury and no nonsense practicality. Not only were supplies relatively close at hand (at least in South and Southeast Asia) but the wood was one of the few construction timbers that was immune to the attack of white ants (Scott 1945). Just as teak was used in

public buildings and religious temples, so too was it commonly used in the exteriors and interiors of the bungalows that were the home of many a colonial official: window frames, verandas, roof trusses and shingles, doors, panelling, flooring and furniture. Similarly, the social world where colonial and sometimes local elites mingled was often literally framed by this wood: in the case of the Royal Bombay Yacht Club, for instance, the ceiling, flooring, panelling, staircase and tables were all made from teak (Gardiner 1942, 737). Writing about Burma where he had served in the Imperial Police between 1922 and 1928, George Orwell described in his first novel, *Burmese Days* (written in 1934) the European Club as ‘a teak-walled place smelling of earth-oil’ – as a ubiquitous ‘institution’ in British India that was ‘the spiritual citadel, the real seat of the British power’ (1987, 17-18).

Where the Empire led, the imperial heartland soon followed. Teak panelled and floored offices became a hallmark of quality and success in the business world – designed to impress both clients and partners. Even in America, where there were still supplies of local hardwood trees, the Ford Institute Museum in Detroit Michigan completed just prior to the Second World War was decked out entirely in teak – covering an area of 340,000 square feet or about 8 acres, this was the largest single expanse of teak flooring in the world at that time (Gardiner 1942). The affluent middle classes in Europe (and to a lesser extent in North America) also acquired a taste for teak – with flooring, panelling, stairways, window seats, doors, fire places, as well as garden furniture and green-houses but a few examples of the spread of teak into the household (Morehead 1944). At a more modest level, teak ornaments added an exotic touch to the modern imperial living room – at the 1938 Glasgow world exhibition, ‘many thousands of hand-carved teak elephants, carved ash trays, flower bowls, labelled “genuine Burmese teak,” have been eagerly purchased by

the public' (Myat Tun 1938, 808). In the process, more and more people came to possess 'a little bit of empire' in their own homes.

The organised bloodbath that was the Second World War interrupted the steady march of teak into the boardrooms and homes of the imperial heartland. Indeed, Burma ('the land of teak') was the focus of ferocious fighting during the war as the country's teak and other forests became widespread killing fields. As the Second World War gave way to a prolonged and bitter civil war, Burmese teak only re-entered the international market in dribs and drabs – and only then under the barrel of a gun (see below). Postcolonial import restrictions in South Asia (where much of the teak had hitherto gone) limited teak exports from Burma in the 1950s, as did the slow pace of recovery in the UK and in Western Europe. Conversely, as traditional markets began to reopen and expand in the 1960s and 1970s, Burmese supplies were limited by ongoing bloodshed in the country as well as the disastrous autarchic economic policies that embodied the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' (Steinberg 1981; Bryant 1997).

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, teak was ready to resume its re-conquest of the luxury timber market. Political and economic conditions were propitious. On the supply side, the Burmese army (or *tatmadaw*) had largely cleared the country of insurgents – at a bloody cost. Closer links with China meanwhile provided ideal business arrangements for the export and processing of teak (and other hardwoods) for the world market, thereby neatly bypassing Northern NGO-backed attempts to boycott Burma's brutal military regime (Global Witness 2003). On the demand side, newly prosperous middle classes in the North (and increasingly in the South too) 'rediscovered' the aesthetic beauty and practicality of teak – above all in the garden and on water. Thus, imports of Burmese teak have climbed

rapidly – in recent years, to an estimated \$37 million per year to the US alone (and worth \$100 million per year in consumer purchases there) (EarthRights International 2005, 2). In a matter of only a few years it seemed, ‘outdoor living’ was predicated on the teak dining set, garden bench, sun lounge and even teak deck. In the process, teak once more became an essential part of modern elegant living. As one UK-based firm (Gloster n.d., 1) puts it:

Choose a space under the open sky and make it your own. In a hectic world, Gloster lets you create an environment that is not confined by walls, but defined by a sense of personal space, an oasis of peace, relaxation and freedom. View the outside as an extension of your home, an expression of your individual style, every bit as important as any other room in the house, and then furnish it with beautiful things. Choose from teak, metal, sling or woven furniture in a variety of styles, from the traditional to the contemporary. And remember, outside is a far tougher environment than inside, so accept nothing but the best. Gloster.

In Singapore, the middle classes were also being exhorted to accept ‘nothing but the best’ as they were encouraged to buy teak furniture that would enable them to ‘enjoy resort living in [their] own home’ (OriginAsia n.d).

For those with even more money, as well as a maritime disposition, the yachting world is awash with teak – for those who hanker for stylish onboard living. As in colonial times, yachts are today kitted out with teak fittings, doors, decks and trimming – supplied by specialist suppliers such as Jamestown Distributors and East Teak Trading Group (both in the US) and Teak Decking Limited in the UK. And yet, unlike in those times, the yachting industry is a much bigger phenomenon than before as yachts (and power boats) become as much a part of the lives of the affluent as golf memberships and second (third, etc) homes. At the same time, the size of yachts keeps getting bigger and bigger – with the rich and famous at the top end of the market seeking to outdo one another in the race to have the biggest super yachts. In the process, teak remains a favourite because, as the

website of Teak Decking Ltd (UK) points out, it will ‘provide unmistakable lasting beauty, adding value and character to any boat’. In all of this, discussion over the relative merits of using teak for decking, cockpits, trims, and so on is widespread in the yachting industry. And yet this is a wholly ‘technical’ and aesthetic conversation oblivious to the ‘dark side of teak’. Whether based on wilful forgetfulness or blithe obliviousness, this attitude is undoubtedly part-and-parcel of the modern romanticisation of teak – all the better to enhance a consumption experience that revolves around feeling and looking good.

### **A river of blood runs through it**

Yet even as teak wood contributed to imperial grandeur and post-imperial fine living by providing a marker of distinction for both the already well to do and the socially up-and-coming, it was also the focus of vicious strife in the forests from whence it came. Neither a rip-roaring boy’s own adventure nor a romantic ‘crescendo of loveliness’ (Kelly Talbot 1912, 101), Burmese teak extraction has been a brutal and tawdry tale of state repression, local displacement, popular fear and loathing, and out-and-out murder.

How teak geopolitics has led to battles for control of Burma’s teak forests is central to the anatomy of a ‘blood timber’. Resource militarization is long associated with the quest for teak through a process that has produced a ‘violent environment’ in which many lives have been blighted (cf. Peluso and Watts 2001). True, forest violence is not only associated with the quest for teak – other natural resources have been at stake (such as tin and jade). Further, violence has also been motivated by *non*-resource-related objectives, notably the crushing of ethnic opposition to the Burmese State (Smith 1999). Still, the production of violent environments has been part-and-parcel of the extraction of teak in both colonial and post-colonial times.



Teak forests have been notable hotspots in the long-standing production of violent environments. Indeed, they have long been home to individuals and groups opposed to the country's lowland rulers – 'a traditional hiding-place for malcontents' (Foucar 1956: 72). Historical and contemporary accounts abound with descriptions of 'bandits', 'banditry' and pitched battles in the forest as weaker political opponents have retreated to areas into which powerful political groups were at a tactical disadvantage due to the terrain (Mills 1979; Adas 1982). A case in point occurred in the early 1930s – the Hsaya San rebellion was centered on the teak-bearing Pegu Yoma and took the British Indian army several years to quell (Maung Maung 1976, 187-88). In other cases, 'banditry' has been of a more 'home-grown' variety, as residents mobilized against outsiders intent on disrupting local livelihoods – the Burma forest department was often a focal point of such resistance. Clearly, the circumstances and protagonists varied over space and time. However, the capture of teak logs in the forest was a favored practice. As forests were transformed into 'bandit country', though, residents almost inevitably became ensnared in fighting even though many were non-combatants. Violence and uncertainty was the norm as teak logs were seized in an opportunistic fashion.

Teak forests were also the focus of much more systematic and far-reaching military strategizing by well-organized insurgent armies intent on capturing an important source of revenue. The most notable case concerned the long-running insurgency by Karen and other ethnic minorities against the Burman-controlled state which began soon after independence was attained in 1948 (Smith 1999; Global Witness 2003). Indeed, the epic fifty-year struggle by the Karen National Union (KNU) to establish the State of Kawthoolei – a sovereign state of the Karen people along the Thai-Burmese border – was partly reliant on

teak revenue. This dependency was most notable after the 1960s as KNU forces were pushed back into the border region by the powerful *tatmadaw*. By the 1980s the KNU became ever more reliant on teak revenue to underpin the insurgency and a flourishing trade with Thai partners ensued (Falla 1991; Bryant 1997, 167-68).

Still, the greatest impetus to resource militarization was the effort by successive rulers of the Burmese State to assert direct central control over the teak forests. In pre-colonial times, the ability of the monarchical state to achieve such control was relatively limited. However, a series of organizational and technological innovations in colonial and post-colonial times meant that rulers of the Burmese State since the mid-nineteenth century have often achieved a greater degree of forest control than in the past. In particular, the combination of modern armaments and more systematic knowledge about the teak forests and their inhabitants (mainly courtesy of the forest department) were a boon for British and Burmese leaders keen to exploit the forests to the hilt (Adas 1982; Selth 1996; Bryant 1997).

Even then, teak exploitation was not easy for them. The assertion of official control as a basis for such exploitation was highly contingent – and indeed, involved much danger for forest officials caught in the line of fire. The level of violence has certainly fluctuated over time. However, chronic political upheaval and widespread social unrest – especially in the late colonial era/Second World War (e.g. 1920 to 1946) and post-colonial era (since 1947) – have been associated with extreme violence in the forests. Not surprisingly, state-led efforts to extract teak have often resembled a military campaign. Forest officials and/or private lessees would enter the forest only with heavily armed escorts – sometimes to the dismay of foresters afraid that these escorts were ‘merely a succulent bait for the large

bands of well armed rebels roaming the country’ (BOF 1946). In the mid-1950s, the U Nu government mounted a large-scale military operation – code named ‘Operation Teak’ – in insurgent ‘infested’ southern Burma. In this campaign, units of the *tatmadaw* secured the banks of the Sittang River between Toungoo and Rangoon, even as they provided river escorts for the rafts themselves. Teak timber was rafted from the forests to Rangoon thereby earning the government precious foreign exchange (*The Nation* [Rangoon] November 10, 1955).

Such violence left a deep mark on local people. Livelihoods were disrupted while residents were sometimes forced to take up arms themselves, thereby inviting reprisals. The worst reprisals against forest dwellers have occurred since March 1962 as the *tatmadaw* has killed, tortured and raped countless thousands of ethnic minority villagers suspected of helping insurgents. Many thousands of villagers have also been forced to do highly dangerous work on behalf of the Burmese military (Smith 1999; Global Witness 2003).

A counter-insurgency campaign known as *Pya Ley Pya* (‘four cuts’) was at the core of this strategy. It targeted those who lived in or near to the forests and was designed to deprive insurgents of access to local food, funds, intelligence and recruits (Smith 1999). In military terms, this campaign was highly effective and enabled the *tatmadaw* to achieve a series of victories against insurgent armies beginning in the Irrawaddy Delta in the late 1960s. The Four Cuts campaign was subsequently extended to the teak-bearing Pegu Yoma with Operation Aung Soe Moe running from late 1973 to April 1975 when the last insurgent forces were cleared from these hills. During the 1980s and 1990s, the campaign moved to northern and eastern border areas where, again, military success was achieved

(Smith 1999; Global Witness 2003) and where teak was an important part of geopolitical strategizing by Burma's brutal military regime.

Anti-insurgency campaigns of this sort were not new – the British had mounted 'pacification' campaigns to sever insurgents from 'sympathetic' villages in the late nineteenth century (Aung-Thwin 1985). However, the sheer scale and brutality of the post-1962 campaign stands out with entire villages moved to 'secure' sites. In these sites, strict military surveillance was imposed while the displaced villagers faced a brutal forced labour regime (Doherty and Nyein Han 1994; Fink 2001). Extreme violence has been the norm (BCN and TNI 1999; Tucker 2001). In the teak forests, this campaign of terror has been accompanied by a strategy of large-scale and unsustainable extraction. The practice of 'cut and run' forestry over the years now threatens to eliminate the country's prime timber in only a matter of decades (Global Witness 2003). At the same time, of course, this devastation in the spaces of production amounts to a grand 'clearance sale' elsewhere, as spaces of consumption are flooded with timber. Indeed, this inter-linked process underpins the fine 'outdoor' living of Northern (and increasingly Southern) middle-classes.

If forced labour and relocation as well as arbitrary killing provide evidence of the brutal dimensions to this blood timber, there is also an entire set of forest management rules dating from colonial times that marks a systematic attempt to control forest and people. This process involved the imposition of forest access restrictions in aid of 'scientific' teak management that has been a serious blow to the subsistence and livelihood needs of residents (Bryant 1997; see also Guha 1989). The coercive nature of attempted state forest control in colonial and postcolonial times has been widely assessed (e.g. Boomgaard 1992; Peluso 1992; Sivaramakrishnan 2000). As such, only a brief and selective account is

needed here in order to underscore the structural nature of the violence at play in the forests.

Much of what has transpired under the label ‘scientific forest management’ from the mid-nineteenth century was designed to introduce ‘government’ in the Foucauldian sense of the term – the introduction of disciplining and self-disciplining practices, the prevalence of widespread surveillance, and the elimination of antithetical social behavior (Dean 1999; Scott 1998). In Burma, as elsewhere, it entailed inter-linked processes of generating forest maps, resource inventories, and population censuses that provided a basis for draconian restrictions on popular access to timber and non-timber forest products. These restrictions prompted ‘everyday’ forms of popular resistance including arson, theft, illegal grazing and other local resource practices that contravened the law.

This political dynamic of control and resistance was often most intense in the teak forests. To reside in or near to teak-bearing forest was usually to invite systematic state intervention in one’s life precisely because the regulation of teak was seen by many officials inevitably to involve the regulation of people – with the promotion of ‘good conduct’ by local people a key aim. The process of ‘internal territorialization’ that was part-and-parcel of the creation of a system of reserved forests (that were focused on teak-bearing areas) involved the creation of extensive borders that crisscrossed existing villages and land use patterns. These borders were designed to facilitate the disciplining of people – *where* they could go, *when* they could go there and *what* they could do whilst there. In one sense, these draconian measures reflected the fervent wish of forest officials in particular to design a comprehensive system of forest management that would permit long-term timber production within an intact forest estate. In another sense though, and that is a central

concern in this chapter, the systemic disciplining of forest users in the spaces of production was an integral part of the dynamic associated with the ‘safe’ and ‘reliable’ extraction of one of the world’s most valuable woods – and, from there, onwards to its appreciation and use in (often distant) spaces of luxury consumption.

Two examples taken from the colonial era provide some sense of how intensive teak management impacted on the lives of local people – an impact reflective of the structural violence implicated in producing a luxury timber. The first example relates to the fire prevention campaign that was mounted in the reserved forests in the late nineteenth century in the (mistaken) belief that fire inevitably harmed teak trees. In practice, this campaign sought to regulate local practices – such as game hunting, cattle grazing or honey gathering – involving the use of fire. Not surprisingly, it was bitterly resisted by residents. Such resistance joined with growing scientific doubts among foresters over the utility of the campaign leading ultimately to the demise of the policy (Slade 1896; Bryant 1997, 87-91).

The fire prevention campaign proved to be a serious additional burden on already hard-pressed villagers. On the one hand, the restrictions were a source of *individual* nuisance and concern. These restrictions were a nuisance inasmuch as villagers needed either to alter their practices in order to conform to the law or to ensure that those practices were safely hidden from view lest foresters catch and punish them for ‘illegal’ activities. The restrictions were a concern because of the omnipresent threat that they might be captured for violating the law – or indeed, that they might be pursuing practices unaware that their actions were in violation of the law. Ignorance of the law, though, was a weak defense given the publicity surrounding the fire prevention campaign – the more effective tactic was therefore to attribute fires to natural causes. Much depended here on the response

of forest officials and local magistrates. The latter were often keen to moderate the punishment of villagers mindful of the need to avoid unrest. Nonetheless, many villagers were indeed convicted under the law and faced potentially heavy punishments including a 500-rupee fine, six months in prison, or both as well as court damages.

On the other hand, the fire prevention campaign imposed a potentially serious *collective* burden on villagers. Under the forest rules, villagers were required to assist forest officials in fighting local fires whatever the provenance of the fires. Not only did this legal requirement involve entire villages in unpaid dangerous work, it also meant that they needed to drop whatever they were doing at short notice – thereby disrupting a variety of livelihood activities. British complaints of peasant ‘indolence’ and ‘negligence’ in responding to fire-fighting duties were legion, and suggested an additional dynamic of collective imposition and resistance that negatively affected the lives of villagers in and around the teak forests.

The second example relates to the case of Karen shifting cultivators, many of who resided in valuable teak-bearing forests. For many British foresters, these forest dwellers were seen as *the* central obstacle to scientific teak management given that they cleared their *taungyas* (or hill clearings) with little or no thought to the protection of teak trees. As one observer remarked, the livelihoods of the Karen were ‘altogether unconnected with an article which is the source of wealth and industry everywhere, but in the place where it is produced’ (McClelland 1855, 13). To the sheer horror of the British, such indifference meant that teak trees were routinely fired, along with other tree species, in the clearance of new fields. An early aim of imperial forestry was thus to stop this practice. Official attention soon centered on the 5,000 or so Karen who lived in the Pegu Yoma (circa 1876).

Over the latter half of the nineteenth century, British foresters sought to resolve the ‘problem’ of the shifting cultivator through use of both ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’ (Bryant 1994). The ‘sticks’ were associated with a series of punitive rules that forbade the destruction of teak trees and placed heavy restrictions on where and when the Karen could clear fields for agriculture (including the draconian fire-prevention rules noted earlier). An additional ‘stick’ was the ever more efficient collection of taxes – amounting to about 6 rupees per individual per year – from a populace among the poorest in the country. In effect, the quest for teak led the British into imposing a system of hill management that had not existed in anything near so comprehensive a form in pre-colonial times. The result was fierce resistance but also flight to less regulated areas, as British rule transformed Karen lifestyles.

The British also proffered ‘carrots’ as a way in which to elicit ‘voluntary’ cooperation from the Karen in teak areas. The system of *taungya* forestry was the classic example here. This system required cultivators to plant and tend teak seedlings alongside their own food crops for a modest payment with the aim being that, when cultivators moved on to clear a new patch of forest, teak plantations would grow up in their wake. Cultivators were aware right from the start that this system would undermine their way of life. As one forest official tellingly reported in 1864, Karen leaders that he had met:

Openly admit that they look upon the sowing of teak in their [*taungyas*] as taking bread from the child’s mouth. All they urge to prove this is true enough. Every one is aware of the fact of their returning to the same localities to cut [*taungyas*] after a lapse of from 10 to 15 years (RFA 1864, 9).

With an estimated growing cycle of between 60 and 100 years until a teak tree was commercially ready for felling, both forest officials and Karen cultivators knew that the resulting plantations represented land irrevocably lost to shifting cultivation. These



cultivators were also promised paid work as forest labourers – porters, fire wardens, etc. – working under the orders of forest officials. Here, too, there was a small supplementary income. Yet, for many, such payment could never adequately compensate for the loss of a locally valued way of life based on shifting cultivation.

In this way, a combination of carrots and sticks was used to transform a way of life that was not compatible with intensive teak management. In forestry accounts, the taungya forestry system has been held up as a classic example of international ‘good practice’ in reconciling forest dwellers to new management systems (e.g. Nisbet 1901; King 1968; Evans 1982). Seen from the perspective of many Karen cultivators, however, the system was all about punishing and disciplining them until they participated in teak planting arrangements that effectively ‘planted out of existence’ a way of life. Here too, living in close proximity to teak forest ended up being a recipe for trouble, as foresters promoted rules and practices that often blighted the lives of those affected by them.

### **Conclusion: Against the grain**

This chapter has examined selected themes in the production and consumption of one of the world’s most valuable timbers. It has argued that the Burmese teak trail has been littered over time with policies and practices that involved patterns of brutal production, coercive conservation and seductive consumption. Such is the intertwined history of a commodity spanning spaces of consumption and production whose anatomy combines extinction and distinction in a way and to an extent that perhaps only violent luxury goods can do (blood diamonds being another example: see LeBillon 2001, 2006).

This account clearly goes against the grain of work that has sought to bring out the ‘romance’ of teak through an entire conservation and production history associated with its

management, exploitation and consumption. Such work has – and still does -- envelop teak in narratives of exotic place and ‘progress’ (Bryant 1996) that have profoundly shaped how the teak forests have been understood and consumed in colonial and post-colonial times. Here, then, is an example of a culture of consumption that is ripe with contradiction – one in which a dark underside of murder and mayhem is discreetly screened from view, all the better to appreciate the aesthetic and practical pleasures of a luxury wood par none.

Yet the unmasking of a violent luxury resource gathers momentum. By the early twenty-first century, the growing use of teak in garden furniture had prompted NGO campaigns against Northern retailers – for example, the Greenpeace campaign against Wyevale Garden Centre in the UK (Frith 2005) and EarthRights International’s boycott campaign against the sale of Burmese teak in the US. The yachting industry is yet to receive the same in-depth treatment but probably will do so in the future. Soon this will mean that teak consumers will no longer be able to plead ignorance about the violent bases of their pleasurable lifestyles. Whether their consciences will be able to live with that fact or indeed whether the final elimination of teak in its natural habitat over the next few decades renders the entire debate ‘historical’ remains to be seen.

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