

Spiritual beliefs and locally-accepted rules of Traditional Forest Management in Myanmar

Ei Ei Swe Hlaing*, Masayuki Kawai, Kagari S. Yasuoka, Abrar J. Mohammed, Yan Myo Naing, Thaung Naing Oo and Makoto Inoue

Myanmar is a country of proud cultural and historic traditions and it is rich in natural resources. It has a total land area of 676,578 km². The forest covers 42.92% of the total land area, in which reserved forest is about 18 % whereas protected public forest is about 7 % altogether constituting about 25 %. The country is composed of 15 administrative regions: 7 States namely 7 States, namely Chin, Kachin, Kayin Kayin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhin and Shan, and 7 Divisions, namely Ayeyawady, Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Sagaing, Taninthayi, and Yangon and Naypyitaw Council region. According to census (2014), the total population of the country is 51 million. There are 135 different ethnic groups in Myanmar, each with its own history, culture language and traditional forest-related knowledge. The largest minority nationalities are the Chin; Kayin; Kayar; Shan; Mon; Rakhine; Kachin and Bamar. Examples of traditional forest management practices include conservation of sacred forest for watershed value, spiritual beliefs or culture and cemetery; traditional collective land use system of swidden agriculture in Chin state and conservation of private woodlots.

This study focus on some traditional forest management practices in Northern Shan State, Nyaung Cho Township where shifting cultivation field were found to have been converted to permanent field with expansion of cash crop cultivation such as maize and sugar cane and some remnant forests and trees are found in agricultural landscapes. Naung Cho township, covering a total area of 809,992 acres, is located at the west edge of Shan state and share border with Mandalay division. The three major topographic feature of the township are (1) mountainous area (500-1,100 m) in northern part, (2) plain area (600-1,000 m) in middle part and (3) upland/plateau area (1,000-1,200 m) in southeast part. 18.8% (152,523 acres) of the land area is classified as Permanent Forest Estate, i.e. 146,000 acres of Reserved Forest and 6,520 acres of Protected Public Forest. Major crops cultivated in Naung Cho Township are maize (61,382 acres), paddy (25,160 acres), sugar cane (23,996 acres) and wheat (6,230 acres). The population is

141,288 (male: 70,994, female: 70,274). There are 41 village tracts and 282 villages (Statistic data of FD-Naung Cho office 2014-2015).

Field research was conducted in three villages of Nyaung Cho Township namely Khe Mee village, Kone Thar village and Nyuang-htauk village. Structured, semi-structured, open-ended and random interviews were conducted to some villagers including village head, village tract head and elder persons. Participatory field observation was conducted. The people of study villages belong to the Shan and Danu ethnic groups.

Remnant forests are observed as spiritual forest of *Nat* spirit (figure 1) and relatively large watershed forest (figure 2) in three villages while remnant trees (figure 3) are observed inside and at the boundary of farmland. Local name for watershed forest is *Ye Htwet Taw* whereas local name for spiritual forest is *Nat Htien Taw* in Myanmar language and in Shan language, *Lone Saung Mone*. Myanmar name for spirit is *Ywar Taw Shin* and Shan name is *Saung Mone*. Inside the spiritual forest, there is *Nat Sin* (small house) for spirit that protects the whole village and villagers. Villagers believe that (spirit) *Ywar Taw Shin* takes care of their farming, health and economic. That is why, the forest where there is home of *Ywar Taw Shin* have to be safeguarded by the villagers.



Figure (1) Spiritual forest

Figure. (2) Spring surrounded by watershed forest

Figure (3) Remnant trees in farmland

Through this study, it can be concluded that the main reasons for conserving these forests and trees are: for forest (1) watershed value (2) spiritual belief and (3) cemetery; and for trees (1) spiritual belief, (2) providing shade for human and livestock, (3) source of fuelwood and (4) source of fruit (mainly inside monastery). It was also found that spiritual forest and watershed forest maintain a higher biodiversity than original open canopy forest. Core elements of effective resource management are: locally- accepted rules respected by generations to generations; spiritual beliefs; water supply source for washing, irrigation, watering for homegarden and household consumption including for livestock; and graduated sanctions to punish violations of rules.