

Song lyrics by BLAST:

Music from the Kachin rock band in the
film *Above & Below the Ground*

Translated by

Dr. Hka Lum



Center for Southeast
Asian Studies

**University of Wisconsin-
Madison**

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Justice in Translation is an open-access web publication series that publishes translations from Southeast Asian languages to English that is a project of the Justice in Southeast Asia Lab (JSEALab). The JSEALab is part of a five-year initiative on Social Justice in Southeast Asia at the University of Wisconsin-Madison generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and located in the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and the Human Rights Program. A combination of intensive exchange between faculty and graduate students and public-facing events aim to foster significant collaboration between academics and practitioners, reflecting both the recognition that a growing number of MAs and PhDs in Southeast Asian Studies are choosing to pursue professional careers outside the university and that there is a need for academic work to be directly responsive to ongoing social justice crises in the region.

For more information:

Web: <https://seasia.wisc.edu/sjsea-project/jsealab/>

Email: jsealab@wisc.edu

 @jsealab

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Introduction

Kachin State, Myanmar is home to the world's most valuable jade reserves and global hotspots of biodiversity, including the Irrawaddy River, and both the highest mountain and the largest lake in Southeast Asia. For years, the ruling military junta has exploited this pristine landscape and the Indigenous Kachin community's rich natural resources to enrich themselves. Under the cover of civil war, the military entered Indigenous areas to obliterate forests for logging, turned mountains into jade mining trash piles, and destroyed river ecosystems for hydropower. Despite the deep damage done, these northern subtropical forests are one of the few places in Asia where conservation can still occur proactively.

The latest military-led mega 'development' project in Kachin State, the Myitsone Dam, would be the fifteenth largest dam in the world. Lobbied for heavily by China, it would export power to Yunnan, China, with little to no benefits reaching Kachin people. Knowing the consequences related to forced removal, harmed livelihoods and a denigrated environment on their sacred river, ordinary Kachin people have led efforts to protest its construction, eventually leading to the dam's suspension in 2011 during the decade of democratic "opening" under President Thein Sein. This glimmer of hope, however, was shattered by the recent military coup, in which thousands of nonviolent activists were killed or disappeared, and in which the military stated it would restart contested dam projects.

Above and Below the Ground depicts the Indigenous women activists and punk rock pastors leading Myanmar's first country-wide environmental movement. When the Myanmar army and a Chinese corporate giant force Indigenous Kachin people off their ancestral land to build the massive Myitsone Dam, grandmother Lu Ra stands her ground. We see her and fellow activist Ja Hkawn struggle to save the sacred conflu-

ence and build a movement, mentoring young female law student Hkawn Mai. BLAST, a punk rock band formed by Indigenous Kachin pastors, secretly records a music video album, disseminated through underground networks. It goes viral over-night, sparking local resistance which grows into Myanmar's first country-wide environmental movement. As democratic reforms start unfolding, the band begins to record their most politically daring Karaoke music video album yet.

Our film follows these individuals through their journey of activism, from their underground beginnings during Myanmar's military junta rule, to supposed "democratic" reforms and a sudden military coup. During such periods of fledgling democracy and dictatorship – in Myanmar and globally – our film asks how ordinary people can use the power of music, community organizing and women's leadership to challenge authoritarianism.

This is an environmental story that is not an intellectual exercise of "what the right or smart thing to do is" but rather a demonstration of relating, being and belonging to the environment. With Indigenous activists at the forefront of our film, we show critical tactics as well as holistic ways of coexisting in a world where we do not 'own' and abuse natural resources. Indigenous rock band BLAST's musical message ("if we destroy the environment, we destroy ourselves") reminded people of the significance of long-held Kachin spiritual values, sparking an unprecedented movement across the country.

The Songs

Sut Ngai Mung A Kam Maka

*Despite richness of Natural resources in our homeland
We Kachins are dying of thirst surrounded by water
We are terrorized, we are frightened
We cannot exploit our natural resources
The stray dogs are threatening the host
They decide, they manage, alone
They exploited our natural resources
Indigenous peoples are living hopelessly
In Kachin State, the Kachins are languishing
Kachins are upside down in their homeland
Our natural resources belong to us
Our resources are for us to improve our lives
We are the natives and owners of this land
We shall use it for our development
We must have the ownership to manage our natural
resources
Kachin state, Kachin land
We must use our resources in making our nation
Despite the richness of natural resources in our homeland
We Kachins are dying of thirst surrounded by water
We are terrorized, we are frightened
We have no access to our resources
The stray dogs are threatening the host
They decide, they manage, alone
They exploited our natural resources
Indigenous peoples/natives are living hopelessly
In Kachin State, the Kachins are languishing...
Kachins are upside down in their homeland
Our natural resources belong to us
We must enjoy our property
We are the natives and owners of this land.
We shall use it for our development
Kachin state, Kachin land
For development of the native population
Our natural resources must be in our hands.*

Kaw Kaw

(*a song that can also be interpreted as about Aung Sang
Suu Kyi)

*Kaw Kaw, because of you
My heart is broken
I listened to your words
My life is spoiled
Love with great trust, has become meaningless
Kaw Kaw, because of you
My future is ruined
I have been faithful to you
My dream has been destroyed
Love with great trust, has come to nothing
You forsook me when you have a good time
You forgot me when you are happy
You forsook me when you have a good time
You forgot me when you are happy
Kaw from the highest throne
You ignored my tears
So sad....
Kaw Kaw, because of you
My future is ruined
I have been faithful to you
My dream has been destroyed
Love with great trust, has come to nothing
You forsook me when you have a good time
You forgot me when you are happy
You forsook me when you have a good time
You forgot me when you are happy
Kaw from the highest throne
You ignored my tears
Kaw Kaw, because of you
My heart is broken
I listened to your words
My life is spoiled*

About BLAST

BLAST is a punk rock band formed by Indigenous Kachin pastors in Kachin State Myanmar. Their albums of karaoke music videos helped launch and grow Myanmar's first country-wide environmental movement, against the Myitsone Dam.