

Karen Culture and the Karen Church
A Report on a Consultation on Karen Theology

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Introduction

The Karen Church and Culture Project—a joint project of the Karen Baptist Convention (that is, the 10th and 19th Districts of the Church of Christ in Thailand), the Baptist Union of Sweden, and the Office of History of the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT)—held a three-day consultation in November 2000 at the Mae Ping Noi Church, Pai Association, on the subject of church and culture. The purpose of the consultation was to explore themes and ideas in the development of Karen theologies, particularly with reference to the traditional Karen religious poetry known as "ta". Esther Danpongpi, the project coordinator, organized and moderated the conference. Attendance fluctuated considerably but involved roughly 25 participants, including a stable core of 14 who attended all the sessions. In addition, one Thai and two Western observer-participants were also present. Most of the participants came from the KBC's Pai and Musikee Associations; but there were three from the CCT's District 16, Sangklaburi, as well as two recent Karen graduates of the Bangkok Institute of Theology, one of whom is working with Karen churches in Ratchaburi Province. Two Catholic and two Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand participants added an important ecumenical note to the consultations. The participants included eight pastors and several local church leaders. A few members of the Mae Ping Noi Church "dropped in" from time to time to see what was happening.

The consultation began Thursday afternoon, November 9th, and lasted until Saturday noon, November 11th, numbering six half-day or evening sessions. The two evening sessions were devoted to learning and practicing traditional Karen music, some of which used ta for its lyrics. Two other sessions involved substantial time in smaller groups. The process was largely informal, with participants seated on the floor of a small administrative and Christian education building situated next to the Mae Ping Noi Church's main building.

The language of the consultation was almost entirely Karen and was complicated by the fact that a few participants speak only Pwo Karen while the majority are Sgaw speakers. Several individuals assisted in translating the proceedings for the non-Karen observer-participants. The Thai participant did not speak, one Westerner spoke once for about two minutes, and one spoke in Thai for about ten minutes on the importance of working out identifiably Karen theologies and once, at the very end of the consultation, for about 25 minutes on what he had heard and learned from the consultation. Informally, during breaks and meals, all three of these observer-participants were actively engaged in exchanges with the other participants.

The Consultation

There were no lectures, as such, although one of the Catholic participants is highly knowledgeable about traditional Karen religion and literature. Most of the participants have at least some knowledge of traditional Karen ways, although all of them acknowledged their limitations in this regard. The discussions were wide-ranging and sometimes only vaguely related to the consultation's theme, if at all. One of the theologically trained participants observed during the last session on Saturday that he would come with a misapprehension of what we were doing. He thought the consultation was looking to develop a formal system of Karen theological

doctrines, but what actually happened was that it explored themes in what he called "local Karen theology." The organizers, frankly, entered the consultation with the same goal of working through clear doctrinal themes in Karen theology and had themselves to "re-learn" what they were doing.

No set of Karen theological doctrines, thus, resulted from this consultation. Given the fact that none of the participants had ever taken part in anything even remotely similar to this consultation, the "failure" to develop Karen doctrines can probably only be counted as a success. A number of important themes and issues for Karen theological reflection, however, did emerge, ones that point to an identifiably Karen way of approaching Christian theological reflection.

First, the most immediate and meaningful context of Karen theology is the forest. Traditional Karen religion gives great significance to the elemental spiritual powers found in the streams and woods of the mountains, forces sometimes called the "lords of water and land." God, as creator, is also highly meaningful to the Karen, and it appears that so-called natural theology will play an important role in the process of articulating Karen theologies. One participant summarized what seemed to be a consensus of the consultation that the Karen know God in four ways: through nature, through the Bible, through the ta (traditional poetry), and through personal experience. It is interesting that he ordered the four sources of Karen revelation in this order, whether intentionally or not. Just what it means to "do" Karen forest theology (mountain theology, streams and brooks theology, hill theology) remains unclear, but it seems quite clear that the Theology of Creation plays an important role in Karen theological reflection.

Second, the question of identity was a burning, frequently mentioned theme throughout the consultation. Karen Christians are almost painfully aware of the long-held tradition that the Karen are the Elder Brother of the human family, an elder brother who in one way or another lost his inheritance so that his younger brothers have now developed themselves far in advance of their eldest sibling. The story of Jacob stealing Esau's blessing (Genesis 27) was one of the most frequently alluded to passages in the Bible during the consultation. A few references were made to the Christian Karen belief, started by Baptist missionaries in Burma, that the Karen are one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Only one reference that I caught was made to the other traditional Karen view of themselves as orphans abandoned by Yua (God). There was a real wrestling with the issue of who we are as Karen. It appears that the question of how Karen Christians understand and relate to Yua necessarily imposes the question of identity on these Christians. Given the immense social and cultural pressures of Thai national and global international forces on the Karen, it is hardly surprising how frequently and intensely the question of personal and tribal identity arose in this theological consultation. Thinking about God requires thinking about ourselves.

This second issue for Karen theological reflection constantly raised the question of Karen relations with non-Karen peoples and with Karens of other religious faiths than Protestantism. One Catholic participant made a strong plea for greater unity among the Karen of all faiths, and that plea became another theme that cropped up from time to time. Interestingly enough, however, among this otherwise Protestant gathering there seemed to be more concern for intra-tribal unity among the Pwo and Sgaw than inter-faith unity, although inter-faith unity did come up again several times. In any event, it appears all but certain that Karen Protestants who seek to reflect on theological issues from an identifiably Karen perspective will necessarily begin to study traditional religious sources and ideas. That process will bring them into dialogue with Catholics, who are considerably in advance of Protestants on the question of drawing on traditional religiosity for church life, and with Buddhist Karen, who have retained closer ties to the old religious ways and traditions. Karen theological reflection is going to be dialogical, not because dialogue is a "good" thing to do in theory, but because in practice Karen Christians, Catholic as well as Protestant, have a great deal to re-learn from Karen of other faiths

Third, when the Karen talk about God and other important things in their lives, they frequently tell stories and often refer to things that their parents and other respected elder relatives taught them as children. Their stories are about things close at hand and make use of local images and experiences to point to larger truths. Even when Karen theology is being more doctrinal, it still retains a close relationship to the simple, basic things around it. The Catholic participant shared with us the Karen Ten Commandments. They go to the effect that: You Are Forbidden to Eat the Neck of Chickens. You are Forbidden to Eat the Liver of Chickens. And so forth through ten parts of a chicken's body, which are all forbidden. Then come the reasons for these negative commandments. I did not get them through the translation process fast enough to record them accurately, but what it came down to was that if a person eats a certain part of the chicken it shows that they have certain negative traits, such as they are selfish or boastful or like to gossip or are people who commit serious crimes against the community. The body parts of a chicken, thus, become an immediate, visible, and highly effective medium for the religious instruction of children.

The participants in this consultation, apparently, have never engaged in intentional Karen theological reflection. Theological process, as they understand it, is largely a matter of studying the Bible and learning an inherited body of doctrines. Theology comes to them through missionaries, missionary and/or Western-trained Asians of various stripes, and books translated from English. When they talk about more complex theological concepts, they often have to use Thai or English words. The concept of "local theology" is as new to them as it is to most of the rest of us; the idea of "Karen theology" takes some getting used to. The shift, however, from a seminary to a local locus for theological reflection and experimentation involves a radically important reordering of who "does" theology and how local churches experience the process of articulating their faith. Even theologically trained Karen tell stories when asked to think about their faith as Karen. They are stories that emerge out of the village-forest experience. The theological experts are their ancestors, parents, and older, respected relatives. Doctrinal correctness recedes into the backside of the hills, and theology becomes a process of packing religious meanings into a medium that is shared, meaningful, simple, and easy to communicate. If a Karen Christian wants to review the Hebrew Ten Commandments she has to open a Bible that not everyone reads or understands very well and enter an alien world thousands of years and kilometers distant; if she wants to review the Karen Ten Commandments all she has to do is glance over at the nearest hen or rooster.

Fourth, the great diversity found among the Karen and reflected in this consultation poses a major challenge to and opportunity for their theological reflection. Having had no national capital or state religion, traditional Karen religious thinking has never been systematized, nor has there been any person or body with the authority to determine how all Karen should think and believe. The number and nature of Karen ta is almost dizzying. Which ta are "right" and which ones "wrong" is not an issue that has ever come up, apparently. One of the Catholic participants had thus a strikingly different understanding about how the ta describe Yua (God) from that generally expressed by most of the other participants. Given the further intra-tribal divisions into Pwo and Sgaw, into northern and southern Karen in Thailand, into Burmese and Thailand Karen, and into a variety of Karen in Burma--given all of this, it is difficult to believe that "a" Karen theology is possible--or desirable. Where, in all of this, do Karen individuals and groups begin? While Karen theology will remain (one hopes) local in many ways, it will have to develop its own scholarly traditions, its collections of ta, and its experts. Dialogue and the exchange of ideas and information between denominations and faiths will, if carried out, greatly facilitate this process of sifting through the mass of oral and printed Karen literature to identify those particular ta that carry especial theological meaning for each group.

Fifth, the question of Karen literacy remains a central obstacle and challenge to the future of

Karen theological reflection. Theology resides in language. Karen theological thought, necessarily, resides in the Karen language. During this consultation, however, Thai Bibles were as much in evidence as Karen ones. Several participants can hardly read, let alone write Karen. Thai kept "popping up," and it required a conscious effort and repeated reminders on the part of the moderator to keep the consultation from falling back into Thai entirely. It was clearly difficult for a few of the participants to engage in meaningful theological intercourse in the Karen language and to express their thoughts in Karen without Thai. Added to this difficulty is the fact that the two Catholic participants aren't all that familiar with the Karen script used by the Protestants, the Catholics having their own Romanized script. The Karens also have a traditional script, which is still known but not used. Younger Karen, meanwhile, are frequently illiterate in Karen and sometimes resist having to learn to read and write it--for them Thai is more than sufficient. There are thus a range of Karen literacy issues that go along with the development of Karen theologies.

Sixth and finally, the whole point of working out Karen ways of reflecting theologically presupposes an ongoing body of Karen people who think about their faith in Karen. The vehicle of Karen theology is, as said above, the Karen language; it is also Karen culture. It is an obvious fact of Karen life in Thailand that Thai mass communications, the Thai educational system, and international globalization pose an incredibly immediate and powerful threat to the continued existence of Karen culture in Thailand. The dangers facing Karen culture were alluded to but did not emerge as clearly from the consultation as did the other themes already mentioned; yet those dangers are something that older Karen are painfully aware of and discuss often in other contexts. Their children or grandchildren seem to be more Thai than Karen. Karen theology, therefore, cannot escape the question of how to communicate the faith to Karen children and youth. Christian education methods and values will have an important role to play in maintaining the communal and local integrity of Karen theological reflection.

If, furthermore, Karen theology is going to reach into the lives of young Karen it will have to become a computer theology, an internet theology, a "modern" theology that assists younger Karen in maintaining their religious faith and cultural identity as Karen in the 21st century. How does forest theology function in the streets of Chiang Mai and Bangkok? in the world of television and the Web? These are pressing issues inevitably raised by the very idea that Karen theologies are possible and worth reflecting on.

Reflections

The Mae Ping Noi consultation initiated a new way for the participants to think about theology. It is important to understand that what happened in this consultation was unexpected, even by (or, especially by) the organizers. Insights into the ways and means of Karen theological reflection emerged from what this interfaith, mixed group of Karen did when asked the question, "How do we Karen understand God?" They talked about the forest. They told stories. They wrestled with their identity as Karen and as Christians. They sang. They laughed. They pled for intra-tribal unity. They remembered what their grandparents taught them. They struggled with what the traditional Karen spiritual powers, the lords of water and land, meant for them. They wrestled with the relationship of ta to Scripture. They tended to lapse into Thai. And there was something entirely natural and unaffected about raising fundamental questions concerning Karen religious thought while sitting on mats and blankets in a modest church building--in the hills and near the forest. This consultation, in short, provided important insights into how Karen theologies are going to emerge: in dialogue, in community, in small groups, through the use of ta, and by the telling of stories.

Like all pioneering efforts, this consultation also had its limitations, most notably in this case in the absence of women's voices other than that of the moderator, Thra'mu Esther. How best to

open the door to full and equal participation by women in the Karen context is a pressing question that will require further thought. The role of Western and Thai Christians in such a process is also problematic, and it was not easy for the three of us in this category to know quite what to do with ourselves. The participants in the consultation were very patient and encouraging, which simply left us with further questions about what are appropriate ways to be companions. We took up about a half an hour of the some fifteen hours of formal consultation and tried to direct even that time to sharing the results of our listening to their process, rather than trying to bring our "wisdom" to the process. Our sense was that future consultations should involve less or no Thai and Western participation, for a time at least. One hopes that in the future there will opportunities for intentional cross-cultural theological dialogue between the Karen and their non-Karen neighbors and friends. There was no formal evaluation carried out. Thra'mu Esther did ask each person to share in just a couple of minutes their feelings about the consultation. The general reaction was appropriately positive and encouraging, and in amongst the necessary forms of politeness one did sense a desire to continue to do something to preserve the Karen church as a living entity and a genuine "green light" to go on with the process of encouraging the emergence of identifiable, self-aware Karen theologies.

It must be said, however, that some of the pastors sent clear signals of discomfort and caution at various times during the consultation. The one Karen who has a Western theological training used the English term "syncretism" and warned that there is a line over which Karen Baptist churches dare not cross. Where it is, exactly, he himself was not sure. Another Bangkok-trained pastor warned that the process could end up with the formation of yet another Karen sect group, unacceptable to the rest of the Karen church--something, he said, that has happened in Burma. One could sense the ambivalence most of the participants took towards traditional Karen religiosity. They could say, as mentioned above, that the ta are a source of knowledge about God, of revelation that is. Yet, when three different participants were asked privately if the Word of God appears in ta, there was a puzzled reluctance to go quite that far. The standard response was, "Well, it depends on the particular ta." It was not an enthusiastic response. These worries and hesitations have to be honored, especially because of the communal nature of Karen theological reflection. In the end, if a process of continued reflection is sustained, it will probably find various Karen individuals thinking their various thoughts and, it is to be hoped, still able to tell each other important, meaningful stories about God and their Karen heritage.

In spite of a certain wariness about the process, however, The Mae Ping Noi consultations witnessed a remarkable transformation in the way in which the participants thought consciously about their faith. It relocated theology from seminaries and translated textbooks to the churches in the hills. It encouraged the use of the Karen language as a vehicle for theological reflection. It shed preconceptions about who can "do" theology even as it discovered the value of local Karen resources for thinking theologically. It practiced an ecumenical approach to theology that transcended (or, better, ignored) the labels of "Catholic," "Baptist," "Evangelical," and "Pentecostal." On a personal note, finally, it seemed to me that at times the participants expressed their faith most deeply and immediately not in their conversations, but when they were singing.

This paper was written as a report on the consultation and prepared immediately afterwards. The consultation was held at the Mae Ping Noi Church, Pai Association, Karen Baptist Convention, 9-11 November 2000. Funding was provided by the Baptist Union of Sweden, and the Office of History of the CCT. Some local expenses were covered by the Mae Ping Noi Church.