Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha: The Implications of Multiple Reinterpretations for a Minority Ethnic Group in Thailand
Author(s): Yoko Hayami
Source: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Sep., 1996), pp. 334-349
Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of Department of History, National University of Singapore
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20062746
Accessed: 24/03/2011 16:34

Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 27, 2 (September 1996): 334–349

Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha: The Implications of Multiple Reinterpretations for a Minority Ethnic Group in Thailand

YOKO HAYAMI
Kyoto University

Those who have studied the Karen in Thailand have acknowledged the openness of the Karen towards different religious practices. Charles Keyes remarks that "Karen follow a number of different religions while still remaining Karen: traditional forms of spirit and ancestor worship a tattooing cult, several varieties of millenarianism, Christianity, and different types of Buddhism".[1] His observation that Karen do not associate their ethnic identity with a distinctive religion is corroborated by Peter Kunstadter, who sees religion as one of many ways in which Karen flexibly adapt to different conditions while maintaining Karen self-identification, and by Peter Hinton, who describes the Karen as "eclectic" in religious matters.[2]

Today, both Christianity and Buddhism find a proportionally larger following among the Karen in terms of percentage than among any of the other so-called hill tribes in Thailand. The two largest Christian denominations among the Karen, Baptist and Catholic, together constitute eight per cent of the Karen population in Thailand.[3] Similarly, the Thammacarik program, a program initiated by the joint effort of the Buddhist Sangha and the Thai government for the propagation of Buddhism among the hill people, claims to be most successful with the Karen.[4]

The concern in this paper is the significance of religion for a minority ethnic group whose position and relationship to the majority population has evolved in the midst of

The fieldwork and research upon which this paper is based were made possible by a grant from the Niwano Peace Foundation and research permission from the National Research Council of Thailand. I am grateful to the staff of the Tribal Research Institute in Chiang Mai, leaders and members of Karen churches, missionaries, and Buddhist monks working among the Karen, as well as the staff of the Payap University Archives for all the help I received during fieldwork. No words can express my gratitude to the Karen villagers with whom I spent a time of learning, much of which may never go on paper. Thanks are also due to Nina Kammerer for reading, editing and commenting on numerous drafts of this paper.

[1]Charles F. Keyes, "Introduction", in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: the Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma*, ed. C.F. Keyes (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1979), p. 12.

[2]Peter Kunstadter, "Ethnic Group, Category, and Identity: Karen in Northern Thailand", in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, ed. Keyes, p. 131; and Peter Hinton, "Do the Karen Really Exist?", *Highlanders of Thailand*, ed. John McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 162.

[3]According to the Karen Baptist Convention's annual meeting files, the total number of baptized Baptist Christians among Karen in Northern Thailand, was 11,500 in 1988 (Karen Baptist Convention, 1988), and *Feuilles Missionaires*, a bulletin published by Catholic missionaries in Thailand gives the number of baptized Karen Catholics as 9,630 in 1986 (accounting for more than half of the 15,281 Catholics in Northern Thailand). The figures do not include younger family members and other non-baptized Karen who also participate in Christian activities.

[4]For example, in 1987 the number of monks and novices at the training centre for the programme in the North, was 226, out of which 95 were Karen. Others are 18 Akha, 17 Lisu, 11 Shan, etc. (*Annual Report of the Thammacarik Program*, 1987).

the latter's gradual movement towards the formation and integration of a state. How can such religious diversity be understood? And is it possible that religious practices have nothing to do with Karen identity as a minority group in a Buddhist state? The problem is particularly pertinent when we consider the history of the Karen in neighbouring Burma since the beginning of the last century, for it is impossible to ignore the role of Christian missionization among Karen, or the influence of Buddhism and particularly millennial cults, in seeking to understand the historical processes and ethnic politics of Burma in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

In spite of the acknowledged religious eclecticism of the Karen and their increasing involvement with Christianity and Buddhism, few detailed studies of religious change affecting the community have been carried out aside from those concerned with millennial cults in nineteenth-century Burma.[5] There is need for ethnographic data on how changes take place, as well as a wider perspective on the cultural dynamics of religious change among the Karen and underlying ethnic relations.

Following a brief account of the Karen, the first part of this paper, which draws upon both historical and fieldwork material, especially oral traditions, will explore Karen self-conceptions and self-images *vis-à-vis* the lowland populations in both Burma and Thailand, examining the ways such self-images have contributed to Karen acceptance of other religious practices. Since these cultural conceptions reflect the position of the Karen as a tribal or stateless minority amidst politically centralized states, religious change and, indeed, social and cultural change in general must be considered in relation to the minority status of the Karen. The second part of the paper, based on fieldwork data from contemporary Thailand, explores how Karen practices and conceptualizations involving the supernatural have been reinterpreted in the newly adopted religions, and how the Karen reformulate and redefine their community, identity and status within the Thai state through such adaptation. The conclusion drawn is that while Karen do not utilize particular religious forms to distinguish Karen from non-Karen, religious variations may bring forth diverse ways of maintaining or redefining Karen identity, or even alter the very nature of that identity.[6]

---

[5]Examples of studies on millennialistic cults include Peter Hinton, "The Karen, Millennialism, and the Politics of Accommodation to Lowland States", *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, ed. Keyes, pp. 81–94; Theodore Stern, "*Ariya* and the Golden Book: A Millenarian Buddhist Sect among the Karen", *Journal of Asian Studies* 27,2 (1968): 297–328; and G. Wijeyewardene, "The Theravada Compact and the Karen", *Sojourn* 2,1 (1987): 31–54. Studies which mention Buddhist activities and Christian conversion among Karen include Michael Madha, "Economic Development and Social Change: The Structure of Two Sgaw Karen Communities in North-west Thailand" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1980); Peter Kunstadter, "Ethnic Group", and "Animism, Buddhism, and Christianity: Religion in the Life of Lua People of Pa Pae, North-Western Thailand", in *Highlanders of Thailand*, ed. McKinnon and Bhruksasri, pp. 135–54. Studies of changes within traditional practices include Shigeru Iijima, *Karen-zoku no Shakai Bunka Henyo* [Social and Cultural Change among the Karen] (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1971); Roland Mischung, "Religion in a Cgau (Sgaw) Karen Village of Western Upland Chiang Mai Province, Northwest Thailand" (Bangkok: Final Research Report presented to the National Research Council of Thailand, 1980).

[6]For a more detailed exposition of the process of religious change among the Karen, see Yoko Hayami, "Ritual and Religious Transformation Among Sgaw Karen of Northern Thailand: Implications on Gender and Ethnic Identity" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1992). The Thammacarik programme is discussed in detail in Yoko Hayami, "Buddhist Missionary Project in the Hills of Northern Thailand: A Case Study from a Cluster of Karen Villages" (in Japanese), *Southeast Asian Studies* 32,2 (1994): 231–50.

The fieldwork data for this paper were collected during fourteen months between 1987 and 1989 in Sgaw Karen villages in Mae Chaem District, Chiang Mai Province, near the border with Mae Hong Son Province (see map on p. 333). In this cluster of hill Sgaw Karen villages, Christianity, which in this area is exclusively Baptist, coexists with Buddhism and traditional practices. This article is consequently concerned with Baptist and traditionalist and/or Buddhist Sgaw Karen unless otherwise noted.

The Karen

The Karen, who speak a Tibeto-Burman language, number over 2.5 million people in Burma and 320,000 in Thailand (as of 1996). The earliest habitat of the Karen in the area seems to have been in the hills of southern Shan state. Karen have long had localized relationships with lowland Buddhist populations such as the Shan, Mon, Burman, Northern Thai and Thai, with increasing contact during the past two centuries.[7] In Thailand there are numerous Karen subgroups distinguished by language, such as the Pgho, Sgaw, Kayah, and a small number of Taungthu. State formation and integration have involved the Karen in different processes in the two countries, some of which are discussed in this paper.

The majority of Karen communities in northern Thailand are located on the lower hills surrounding the valleys, where villagers cultivate rice either in swidden fields on the slopes or in wet-rice fields. The latter produce regular and higher yields, and receive more emphasis owing to population pressure on land in the hills.

Karen villagers have a notion of a body of custom and practice called *a lw a la* which encompasses ritual, kinship, marriage, methods of cultivation, costume and language. What these villagers refer to as *a lw a la* is here referred to as "traditional".[8] At the core of *a lw a la* are two realms of ritual practices, each involving different spirits: family rituals for the spirit of the family called *Mw Xa*, and communal rites for territorial spirits represented by the "Lord of Water and Land". These rites define a person's membership in the family and in the community, and ensure or restore order. In addition, innumerable rituals of propitiation or exorcism are directed at minor spirits that may cause illness or affliction. Christian Karen villagers eschew these rites, but villagers who participate in Buddhist activities may still continue to perform them. In fact, in the village where I lived, all non-Christian villagers were active participants in the local temple and also performed these familial and communal rites. They will therefore be referred to below as "traditionalist/Buddhist".

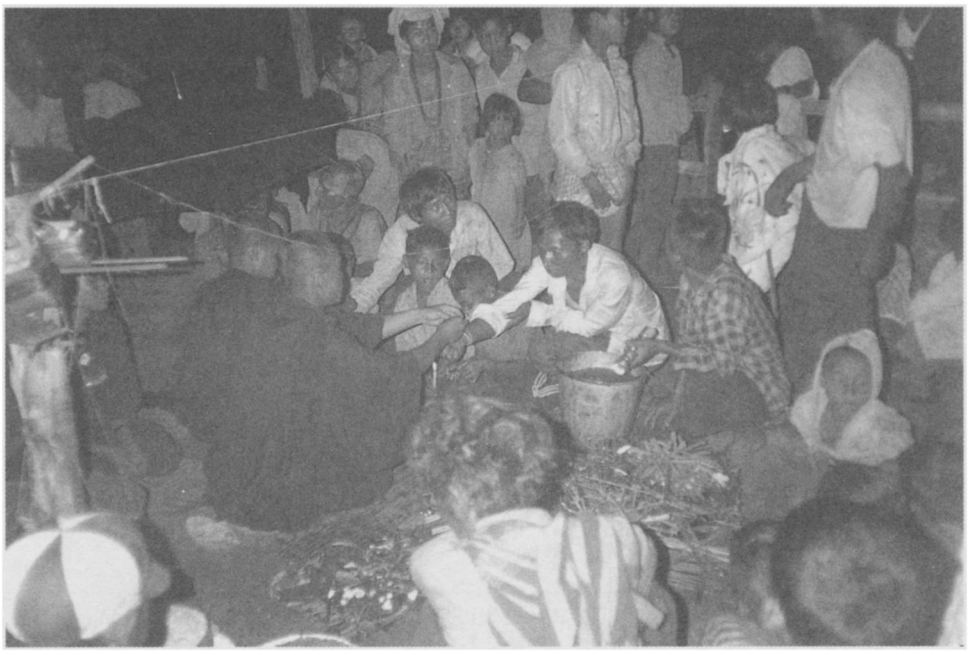
The effects and influences of Buddhism among Karen in Thailand derived from sporadic and non-organized contacts with surrounding Buddhist peoples until 1964, when the Thammacarik Program was initiated, as discussed below. Karen conversion to Christianity began in Burma, where American Baptist missionaries achieved remarkable success during the nineteenth century. By the 1870s, Karen evangelists from Burma were making trips into Northern Thailand to spread the gospel among Karen living there, but growth was slow in Thailand until after the Second World War, when a concerted effort by Karen and American missionary leaders resulted in the founding of the Karen Baptist Convention.

---

[7]Charles F. Keyes, "The Karen in Thai History and the History of the Karen in Thailand", in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, ed. Keyes, pp. 25–61. Throughout this paper, I use "Burman" to designate the ethnic majority in what is today Myanmar.

[8]There is no standardized system for transcribing the Karen language. In this paper, an approximation of the International Phonetic Alphabet is used without tone markers.

At the annual Karen Baptist Convention meeting. Christian Karen women hold the flag of Thailand in center flanked by those of the Karen Baptist Convention.



The rite (song khrau baan) performed by the resident monk at the end of the Thai New Year celebrations.

Today, leadership in the Convention is indigenous, and foreign missionaries serve as advisors. Catholic missionaries began work among Karen in Thailand in the 1950s and have also gained many converts.

Ywa and the Orphan Theme

During fieldwork, villagers often recounted a legend to explain their relationship to and difference from other peoples, and particularly why they were illiterate and lacked scientific knowledge and technology. *Ywa* is the subject of this legend which was told with variations in detail depending on the narrator and the context of narration. Here is one version of the legend of *Ywa*'s departure:

> Long ago, when *Ywa* was still with us, *Ywa* called all the children. Among them were the Karen, Burman, Thai, Chinese and the white brothers. The Karen was the eldest and the white brother the youngest. *Ywa* gave the Karen brother a Golden Book of wisdom. The Karen took it to his field, and left it on a tree stump. When he burned the field, the book was burned to ashes. Chickens came and walked over and pecked at the ashes. Another book of knowledge was given to the youngest white brother and that is why the white foreigners are so developed today. The other brothers picked the remains of the ashes and therefore today they have chicken-scratch letters of their own. *Ywa* departed and the Karen have nothing for themselves except the bones of those chickens to consult.

Another often told story, which is about a legendary ancestor figure called *Tho Mae Pa* (Father Boar Tusk), shares common themes with the *Ywa* legend:

> Long ago there were two brothers. The older was Karen and the younger, a white man. They lived near a river in Burma with their *Tho Mae Pa* (Father Boar Tusk). *Tho Mae Pa* had a comb made from a boar's tusk which brought eternal life to its user. *Tho Mae Pa* and his children therefore enjoyed eternal life and increased in numbers. Their land was getting too crowded, and one day, *Tho Mae Pa* brought his children to this river to seek new land. The two brothers were hungry. The elder Karen brother cooked mud snails, and the younger white brother, crabs. The hard shells of the mud snails wouldn't soften, and while the elder Karen waited endlessly, the younger finished cooking the crab and ate, and went on ahead with *Tho Mae Pa*. He and the comb had gone forever, while the Karen was left to himself on this side of the river.

Identical stories have been documented in other areas of both Burma and Thailand by many scholars over almost a century,[9] and variants of both were told voluntarily to me by several villagers. My presence as a non-Karen outsider must certainly have triggered the frequent telling of these tales, and some villagers included a Japanese brother in their versions.

The two legends present a common image the Karen hold of themselves in relation to other peoples. The Karen brother was the eldest and would have received knowledge or eternal life had it not been for his own carelessness. A parental figure, *Ywa* or *Tho Mae Pa*, has left the Karen by himself to live by his own means. The best is out of his reach, and he must make do with what he has. In this connection, Peter Hinton notes that many

[9]See for example, Peter Hinton, "The Karen, Millennialism and the Politics of Accommodation", p. 86; Peter Kunstadter, "Ethnic Group", p. 163; Harry I. Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1922), pp. 279–80; and Stern, "*Ariya* and the Golden Book", p. 303.

Karen stories feature orphan heroes who triumph against the deceit and hostility of ruling non-Karen princes or officials, and points out that the Karen explicitly identify themselves with orphans who are deprived and insecure: "As the orphans were forced back onto their resources of ingenuity and guile in a hostile world, so were the Karen as a people".[10] Loo Shwe, a Christian Karen leader from Burma similarly notes: "Orphans always means the Karens".[11] While Karen thus identify themselves with orphans and even accord orphans heroic power in some legends, in Karen society, the parent-child relationship is emphasized socially and ritually, and orphans are considered inauspicious social anomalies ridden with contradictory values. Without the ritual of sacrifice to family spirits performed by parents, orphans lack the protection provided by these spirits and are left insecure and destitute. The orphan is in a double sense an apt metaphor: insecure and socially downgraded on the one hand, and potentially powerful on the other. The metaphor becomes particularly appropriate when the surrounding world is hostile, such as during the era of millenarian cults and uprisings in Burma discussed below.

It has been noted that the hill-dwelling peoples of this area, including the Karen, have defined themselves *vis-à-vis* the valley dwellers with a mixture of admiration and distrust, pride and inferiority.[12] The above legends exemplify this general disposition among the Karen. They claim a past relationship with a patron and explain the loss of a Karen patron figure and the resulting orphan status. Moreover, the absence of a patron and the orphan image may have been a reflection of their perceptions of the difference in socio-political organization between Karen and surrounding lowland peoples such as the Burman, Shan or Thai, who had more centralized political organizations with rulers. For the Karen, the village was normally the largest political unit and the village ritual leader was a leader among equals. The legends, which seem to have maintained the general theme over time, reflect their relationship with and status among their neighbours, while at the same time, these legends shape their conception of their status and their responses to that conception. The willingness to receive knowledge, wisdom and practices from non-Karen leaders, a theme often repeated in Karen history of the past century, may be associated with their perception of themselves as lacking political mechanisms and knowledge in comparison to their neighbours.[13]

At the same time that the legends acknowledge that surrounding peoples have higher knowledge, they also suggest that Karen are potentially equal to these peoples, and

---

[10]Hinton, "The Karen", p. 86.

[11]Loo Shwe, "The Karen People of Thailand and Christianity", Manuscript in the Payap University Archives, Chiang Mai, 1962.

[12]Hinton, "The Karen", pp. 85–86; F.K. Lehman, "Who Are the Karen, and If So, Why? Karen Ethnohistory and a Formal Theory of Ethnicity", in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, ed. Keyes, pp. 215–53; David H. Marlowe, "In the Mosaic: The Cognitive and Structural Aspects of Karen-Other Relationships", in ibid., pp. 165–214. See also Cornelia A. Kammerer, "Territorial Imperatives: Akha Ethnic Identity and Thailand's National Integration", in *Ethnicities and Nations: Processes of Interethnic Relations in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific*, ed. R. Guidieri, F. Pellizzi and S.J. Tambiah (Houston: Rothko Chapel, 1986), pp. 277–91.

[13]Lehman recognizes this same tendency among the Kayah Karen (Red Karen). In explaining how the Kayah in Thailand superficially adopt Buddhism from neighbouring Shan, he points to the "Kayah ideological attitude" of, firstly, accepting wisdom from charismatic leaders from the outside, and, secondly, acknowledging the departure of their own charismatic leader *iyluw*. Lehman, "Who are the Karen", p. 244.

therefore with the necessary knowledge or leader they might rise to higher status. In daily conversation with the Karen in present-day Thailand, I often heard villagers refer to their own felt deficiencies with respect to knowledge, literacy and a writing system. To make up for this lack, they must depend on their own wisdom, such as chicken bone divination, oral and ritual tradition, and the knowledge of their elders. Similar legends about the loss of a book are told among neighbouring hill peoples such as Lahu and Hmong. Nicholas Tapp has suggested that yearning for this lost book or literacy provided a motivation for Hmong conversion to Christianity,[14] and for the Karen, too, literacy has been a notable factor in conversion.

Worship of Ywa

In daily ritual practice among traditionalist Karen, *Ywa*[15] is a distant figure which occasionally appears in prayer but is never the object of ritual activity. However, in the course of Karen history both in Burma and Thailand in the past century and a half, there are frequent cases where *Ywa* became the centre of worship in a newly adopted cult. Furthermore, today among Karen in Thailand, *Ywa* is the centre of worship in Christian and Buddhist practices and discourses, respectively as the Christian God or the Buddha. The adoption of external practices in the name of *Ywa* has especially been notable when conflict with the outside has jeopardized the autonomy of the Karen community. At such times the adoption of a patron or *Ywa* served to uplift the Karen image of themselves from that of an abandoned orphan to that of a protected son.

Within the historical and ethno-political context of nineteenth-century Burma, the orphan self-image and the absent patron figure *Ywa* became acutely relevant for the Karen. At times of community crises, adoption of a *Ywa*-like charismatic leader has religious as well as political potential insofar as it brings unity that surpasses these community bounds, as is the case with some millenarian cults. A common theme in studies of millenarian cults worldwide has been that they are most pronounced in times of social flux, disruption of order, dissatisfaction and stress.[16] Similar arguments have been made concerning the Karen millenarian cult of the nineteenth century,[17] a time when they were disposed to accept a new patron. However, it is necessary to look beyond the cults to see how Karen tradition opened the way for wider religious change in general.

Well-documented examples of such processes can be found from the time of colonial and missionary entry in early to mid-nineteenth-century Burma. As the Burmans gained control over most of the population during the course of the three wars they fought with the British, oppression of the Karen in the form of heavy taxes and corvee labour increased. Legends of *Ywa* told in nineteenth-century Burma, unlike the more recently collected versions of *Ywa* and *Tho Mae Pa* legends presented above, conclude with an expectation

---

[14]Nicholas Tapp, "The Impact of Missionary Christianity upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities: The Case of the Hmong", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 20,1 (Mar. 1989): 70–95.

[15]Marshall refers to *Ywa* as the creator deity of the Karen (*The Karen People of Burma*, p. 211). While the above legend does attribute such characteristics to *Ywa*, the extent to which it has been subject to Christian influences is impossible to determine. The status of *Ywa* among the traditionalist Karen is ambiguous.

[16]See D. Aberle, *The Peyote Religion Among the Navaho* (London: Aldine, 1966) and K. Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969).

[17]See Hinton, "The Karen", and Stern, "*Ariya* and the Golden Book", p. 303.

of the return of the white brother and the Golden Book, *Ywa*, or *Tho Mae Pa*.[18] As various studies of Karen society have noted, during the period of worsening relations with the Burmans the notion of the coming saviour Buddha among the surrounding Buddhist peoples had much influence on the Karen.[19] Such millenarian beliefs may well have inspired Karen to build upon their traditional conception of the once departed *Ywa* and their self-image as destitute orphans. The image of the future Buddha (Boddhisatva) and that of the returning *Ywa* or white brother with the book became fused in the expectant atmosphere that gave rise to various cults and movements which were religious and in many cases explicitly political.[20] Missionary reports refer to a number of cults led by self-proclaimed prophets and saviours. The groups characteristically focused on *Ywa* (or the coming Buddhist saviour), the book of wisdom, and/or a millenarian expectation of a Karen kingdom which would raise them from their degraded status. These concepts contributed to the fruitfulness of missionary activities in the early stages, when the Christian God was received in the name of *Ywa*.[21]

Christian Karen in Thailand today, too, consider *Ywa* their God whom they worship and pray to daily, and are therefore referred to as "*ba-Ywa*" (*Ywa*-worshippers). Becoming a *Ywa*-worshipper involves a total departure from the ritual practices of spirit appeasement and propitiation. While most Christian villagers in Thailand today acknowledge the existence of spirits, they claim that *Ywa* will protect them from their malevolence, so prayer to or worship of *Ywa* takes the place of rituals for spirits.

Traditionalist/Buddhist villagers, on the other hand, claim that they are the true *Ywa*-worshippers and that Christians, although called "*Ywa*-worshippers", are actually "Christ-worshippers". In the Buddhist context, *Ywa* is the Buddha image in the temple or in their own houses, even though Karen Buddhists acknowledge that these were brought to them by Thai monks or Northern Thai peddlers. According to a leading elder involved in the activities of the Buddhist temple, a man who is also a traditionalist:

> It is all right that the Buddha image is not Karen in origin. It is *Ywa* all the same. As Karen we have our customs [*a lw a la*], but we don't have our own worship [*ta bu ta ba*, literally, "merit making and worship", translated by Karen into Thai as *saasanaa*, meaning "religion"]. So we take it from the Thai.

---

[18]H.I. Marshall, "The Karen People", p. 297; Stern, "*Ariya* and the Golden Book", p. 303.

[19]Hinton, "The Karen"; F.K. Lehman,"Who Are the Karen"; and Stern, "*Ariya* and the Golden Book".

[20]Millenarian cults are also prevalent among the Lahu, and Christian and Buddhist influence are also relatively strong. In the Lahu tradition, there is a creator deity *Guisha* whose imminent return is anticipated by the millenarian cults, which are similar to the Karen *Ywa* cults. See Anthony R. Walker, "The Lahu People: An Introduction", in *Farmers in the Hills: Ethnographic Notes on the Upland Peoples of North Thailand*, ed. A.R. Walker (Singapore: Suvarnabhumi Books, 1986 [1975]), p. 121, and "Messianic Movements Among the Lahu of the Yunnan-Indochina Borderlands", *Southeast Asia: An International Quarterly* 3,2 (1974): 699–711. Among the Hmong people who have also frequently followed messianic cults which worked both for and against Christian missionary efforts, there is a similar legend of a culture hero *Tswb Tchoj*. See Nicholas Tapp, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[21]U Zan and E. Sowards, "Baptist Work Among Karens", *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, Book I, ed. Maung Shwe Wa (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, 1963). See also Stern, "*Ariya* and the Golden Book", and Ananda Rajah, "Transformations of Karen Myths of Origin and Relations of Power", in *Patterns and Illusions: Thai History and Thought*, ed. Gehan Wijeyewardene and E.C. Chapman (Canberra: Australian National University, 1993), pp. 235–74.

For Karen, as mentioned above, *a lw a la* is an inclusive term encompassing not only traditional ritual but also a total way of living. *Ta bu ta ba*, the word translated as merit-making and worship in the above quotation, is occasionally used to refer to traditional practices but more often refers to *Ywa*-related, non-traditional practices.[22] Thus, while *a lw a la* denotes traditional practices concerned with various spirits, *ta bu ta ba* can encompass non-traditional practices pertaining to *Ywa*. *A lw a la* and non-traditional *ta bu ta ba* can coexist in the case of Buddhism, while the exclusiveness of Baptist Christianity compels all converts to abandon the rituals of *a lw a la*.

That the same term *Ywa* is used to designate a traditional spirit/deity, the Christian God, and Buddha does not necessarily mean that the Karen identify them as one. Some missionaries and Christian Karen have suggested that the traditional Karen *Ywa* and the Christian God or Yahweh are one and the same. A few missionaries even claim that the Karen were one of the lost tribes of Israel and had therefore known their God long before the first missionaries arrived.[23] Although this claim may have contributed to legitimizing Christian conversion among Karen, the question of identification is irrelevant for most Karen of whatever religion. What is significant is that *Ywa* appears both in the above legends and in the newly adopted religions as a patron-like figure who provides for and protects the Karen and can become the object of worship (*ta bu ta ba*).

Karen in the study area often recounted another legend that outlines the relationship between *Ywa* and the family spirit *Mw Xa*, and explains the origin of the family ritual which is a central feature in traditional *a lw a la*.

> One day *Ywa* decided to leave the Karen. Before leaving, *Ywa* looked for somebody to take care of the Karen. *Dau S'Kha* [a giant] and *Mw Xa* offered themselves. *Ywa* tested them and chose *Mw Xa*. *Dau S'Kha* was greedy and asked for the sacrifice of one human being annually. *Ywa* said that was impossible. *Mw Xa* asked for a hog and a chicken annually in exchange for taking care of the Karen. *Ywa* consented and asked *Mw Xa* to look after the Karen. Since then Karen hold family rituals for *Mw Xa*.[24]

For traditionalists this legend explains their *a lw a la* as something given to them by *Ywa* upon the latter's departure. It also acknowledges that Karen once had a protector who is now out of their reach and that the present practice of family rituals is a lesser substitute. This legend can therefore also be interpreted as legitimizing the adoption of *Ywa*-centered practices that do not belong to *a lw a la*.

Religious Eclecticism in Contemporary Thailand

Until the last century, Karen in this area were involved in localized social and economic relationships with the lowland peoples and states. After centralization began to take effect

---

[22]This differentiation of worship and custom contrasts with the Akha case discussed in Cornelia A. Kammerer, "Customs and Christian Conversion Among Akha Highlanders of Burma and Thailand", *American Ethnologist* 17,2 (1990): 277–91. For Akha, *Akha zah* is coterminous with Akha religion as well as Akha identity, and encompasses not only "religion" in the western sense, but also kinship, economy and all aspects of traditional life. Conversion to Christianity is a replacement by *ye su zah* (the way of Jesus).

[23]Loo Shwe, "Karen People"; U Zan and Sowards, "Baptist Work"; and H.M.N. Armstrong, "Karen Folklore: An Unwritten Bible", manuscript dated 1913 held by the Payap University Archives in Chiang Mai.

[24]A more detailed version of a similar legend is reported in Kumiko Yoshimatsu, "The Karen World: the Cosmological and Ritual Belief System of the Sgaw Karen in Northwestern Chiang Mai Province". Research Report Presented to the National Research Council of Thailand, 1989.

early in this century, the administration in Bangkok showed little interest in the northern hill population until the late 1950s, when population increase, forestry depletion, opium production, and community insurgency in the border hill areas brought them to the alert. Various policies implemented since the 1960s have affected an increasing proportion of the hill population. Oppression such as that experienced by Karen in Burma never took place among Karen in Thailand, although an epidemic in the 1930s and the war in the 1940s, ecological pressure due to population increase, intervention by the Thai administration and deeper involvement in the local social and economic arena since the 1960s have reduced the autonomy of the villages.

Village Christianity

When Christian Karen are asked why they converted, most of those living in the hills respond that they were tired of feeding the spirits. The issue is not simply a matter of financial cost and burden, for these responses reflect a feeling that traditional practices were not providing the desired state of being and were therefore considered inadequate. Socioeconomic as well as cultural changes in the hills led many Karen to reconsider their traditional practices.

Among Christian Karen, as noted above, *Ywa* does not entirely replace belief in and fear of traditional spirits. *Ywa* is placed in relation to these spirits, and to some extent Christian teachings are understood in terms of traditional Karen conceptions. Among city-based Christian leaders, the more articulate and effective speakers incorporate traditional idioms and beliefs into their exegesis. These concepts provide imagery for Christian teachings and are at the same time modified and incorporated into Christian beliefs. For example, in sermons and in everyday parlance, evil, sin, and temptation are often portrayed as forest-dwelling spirits which can be overcome through prayer to *Ywa*.

However, Christian doctrine and practice rule out traditional rituals as heathen and thereby deprive the villagers of their traditional means of dealing with spirits, illness and misfortune. The two major classes of spirits in traditional practice are the family spirit and the territorial spirits, and the family and the community are the respective ritual units for dealing with them. Discontinuation of traditional ritual practices affects the unity of these social units, but participation in a Christian congregation creates an alternative social network which is even wider. In most areas church membership crosscuts traditional community boundaries, and as a consequence services and prayer meetings are held on a social basis that is substantially different from that of traditional rituals. Farther afield, the numerous Karen Baptist churches in the area constitute a supra-local organization, which in turn belongs to the Northern Thailand-wide Karen Baptist Convention with its headquarters in Chiang Mai. Furthermore, with conversion, not only community-based social relationships but verbal styles, music, and the calendar all take completely different forms.

Christian villagers at times express concern that their practices are inadequate and feel anxious in the face of illness and trouble.[25] There is one kind of Baptist Christian service

[25]The degree to which traditional practices are discontinued differs somewhat between denominations. In general, the Catholic missionaries incorporate or allow more traditional practices than the Baptist. For example, a notable difference between the Baptist and Catholic churches is that the former bans liquor while the latter does not, a major point considering the importance of liquor in traditional ritual practice.

called *ko ta ba*, meaning "call to worship", which provides a substitute positive and communal action in place of traditional ritual performances. Both traditionalists and Christians point out the parallels between *ko ta ba* and the various traditional rituals performed by the family. Even though the forms and procedures are different, there is similarity in purpose and occasion. Both Christian *ko ta ba* and the traditional family rituals are performed to ensure the health and well-being of family members and livestock, and are held at times such as after a family member has recovered from illness, before a family member departs for a long journey, after moving into a new house, or at family reunions. When a villager decides to hold *ko ta ba*, an announcement is made in church, and any Christian villager is welcome to participate. The service is led by the local pastor at the house of the hosting family. The husband and wife explain the reason for holding *ko ta ba* and after a short sermon, chosen friends of the hosts pray for specific blessings, typically for the host family's health, the fertility of its fields and the well-being of its human members as well as their crops and livestock. The service is followed by a feast of chicken or pig according to the preference and wealth of the family. *Ko ta ba* was introduced among Karen Christians in Thailand in the 1930s by a Karen evangelist from Burma, who felt the need to provide a "substitute family festival to replace ancient animistic ones".[26]

Within the Karen Baptist Convention, Karen-ness is associated with a list of traits such as language including its written form, costume, and moral ethos. According to one Christian leader in Chiang Mai, "There are some good things in our Karen custom [*a lw a la*] that we must conserve and be proud of". Literacy in Karen is encouraged and taught locally with support from the Convention, and Karen Baptist churches in Thailand use a Karen Bible first translated and published in Burma by missionaries, who devised a Karen script based on Burmese characters. Karen Christians in Thailand today learn this script, and many Christian villagers, especially women who are not literate in Thai, can read the Karen Bible quite easily. On Sundays and special occasions, Christian Karen wear Karen costumes. The traditional Karen woman's costume is a white tunic for unmarried women and a red skirt and blue or black top for married women. Christian Karen leaders stress and take pride in the purity of Karen girls and in the strict sexual morality symbolized by the whiteness of their costume. The costume and the emphasis on sexual morals and monogamy are a carry-over from traditional spirit rituals, but Christian teachings remove them from such traditional contexts, grounding them instead in Christian Karen morality. Christian Karen doctrine takes the complex of traditional customs apart by abandoning the spirit-related practices and selectively adopting certain elements.

Among Christian Karen, then, the worship of *Ywa* is accompanied by new practices and a supra-local Karen organization, which provide the basis for a reformulated Karen identity in place of the abandoned traditional practices. However, the Karen Baptists in Thailand are cautious not to isolate themselves from the Thai or to antagonize them. Symbolically, this is most clearly manifested in the annual meeting of the Karen Baptist

[26]James E. Conklin, "Worldview Evangelism: A Case Study of the Karen Baptist Church in Thailand" (D. of Missiology diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1984), p. 28. Conklin mentions that Thra Loo Shwe, a Karen evangelist sent from Burma in the 1930s, introduced this form of prayer meeting. It is not clear whether he brought it over from Burma or devised it himself for the Thai Karen.

Convention, where a high ranking local official is invited to give the opening speech. The Baptist church leaders cooperate with Thai government projects and authorities in various events and activities. Karen leaders and missionaries recognize the importance of learning to speak and write Thai and to function within the wider Thai society. Schools founded by the Karen Baptist Convention function within the Thai educational system and use a Thai curriculum.

Village Buddhism

While a person or family can participate in temple activities and still continue to perform traditional rituals, Buddhist and traditionalist practices are kept distinct. For example, Buddhist amulets must be taken off during the traditional family ritual, which cannot be performed on the same evening as a Buddhist ritual. Buddhist altars are always placed in the outer room of a house, never in the inner space where the family ritual is performed. However, as will be illustrated below, Buddhist practices answer needs or concerns that are not met adequately by traditional means.

In every traditionalist Karen village, there is a hereditary village ritual leader called *hi kho* (literally, "village head"), who performs rites for the spirit "Lord of Water and Land" and other spirits of the territory. If he performs all the rituals appropriately, good relations with these spirits bring order and a satisfactory harvest to the village and the surrounding area, indicating that the land is "cool". However, if there is moral, especially sexual, transgression or conflict, the land becomes "hot", and illness, death or famine may result. The ritual leader's function is to cool the land and community through appropriate rituals. Each community maintains its own relationship with the "Lord of Water and Land" through its leader, and is a ritually defined closed unit.

In the Karen village where I lived, some traditional practices had been discontinued owing to the death of the hereditary village ritual leader *hi kho*, who had not been replaced. The hereditary line in this village had died out, since the last leader had no male offspring, and his surviving male paternal relatives had all become Christian. This leader's village rituals could be performed, and there was no longer any ritual means of ensuring the "coolness" or order in the community. Buddhism, however, provided a partial substitute for the traditionalists.

The village lies in an area which has been under Buddhist influence since the 1930s, when a visit by the renowned Northern Thai monk Khruba Sri Wichai prompted the founding of a temple in a nearby Karen village. He was a charismatic figure and so popular among both Thai and Karen in the North that Thai officials feared he might lead a millenarian movement against the state.[27] Thus, the initial involvement of Karen in this area with Buddhism was through a Northern Thai monk who was antagonizing the central authorities in Bangkok. By the time the Thammacarik programme, controlled by the central monastic organization and the Department of Public Welfare, entered the area in the 1970s, Buddhism in the Northern Thai mould had become a part of villagers' daily lives. The purpose of the Thammacarik programme is to use missionary monks to propagate Buddhism among the hill populations, and to instill nationalistic allegiance and Thai culture as a means of fending off insurgent activities in the frontier regions.

---

[27]Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand", *Journal of Asian Studies* 30 (1971): 551–67.

The village under study was a "satellite" of the "key" Thammacarik village. Villagers had been participating intermittently in Buddhist practices for over three decades but had no temple until one was constructed by the programme three years before my arrival.[28] They claim that since the construction of the local temple, their village has been "cool" and without trouble even without a hereditary *hi kho*.

Traditionalists/Buddhists follow two different calendars: Karen and Thai Buddhist. Around March the Karen New Year is celebrated, and in April the Thai New Year takes place. Towards the end of the Thai New Year celebrations, villagers invite the resident Thammacarik monk, a Karen youth, to bring the Buddha image to the central crossroads in the village and perform a Northern Thai ritual called *song khrau baan*. This is an exorcistic ritual in which powerful spells and offerings are used to expel the evil and sin that has accumulated during the past year. In Northern Thai villages, the ritual is most often performed by lay ritual specialists, although in Buddhist settings it can be performed by monks.[29] In this Karen village, the Buddha image is set at a crossroads from which all roads lead out into the forest, and the ritual makes the village "cool" by Buddhist rather than traditional means.

The ritual idioms used are of non-Karen origin, yet they are not entirely foreign to the Karen. The use of powerful spells and offerings to send spirits away are a common feature of Karen traditional healing practices. Both the purpose of the Northern Thai ritual of *song khrau baan* and the underlying concept of the community as separated from the surrounding spirit-dwelling forest are meaningful in terms of Karen tradition. Thus, on the one hand Buddhism is used by Thai authorities to link the hill villages culturally, religiously, and socially to the social milieu. Fully aware of such intentions, Karen succumb to some degree through participation in Buddhist activities. Moreover, the traditionalist/Buddhist villagers themselves eagerly adopt certain Buddhist practices to maintain in ritual fashion their community boundaries which are threatened by the disappearance of the village ritual leader and by increasing involvement with the outside. The top-down attempt at national integration through Buddhism also provides villagers with a means to reinforce their community.

While Christian conversion requires abandoning most of traditional *a lw a la* from the beginning, Buddhism slowly permeates, allowing coexistence. However, Buddhism among the Karen took a new turn in 1967 when Thammacarik monks devised and began to perform a rite (called *lu bgha* in Karen, or *phiti lai phii* in Thai, both meaning chasing away the spirit) which allowed households to abandon the core rituals of traditional practice by expelling the spirits they sought to propritiate. According to Thammacarik monks, this rite began in a Karen village in another part of Chiang Mai Province upon the request of villagers who wanted to abandon and replace traditional practices. This ritual enabled Karen to abandon their traditional practices not only by Christian conversion,

---

[28]The structure has not been given formal "temple" status by the Department of Religion. However, the villagers refer to it as a *wat*.

[29]Detailed accounts of a Northern Thai version of this ritual are given by Richard Davis, *Muang Metaphysics: A Study of Northern Thai Myth and Ritual* (Bangkok: Pandora, 1984), pp. 104–118, and by Paul T. Cohen, "'Paeng Baan': the Reification and Regeneration of a Village in Northern Thailand", *Mankind* 9 (1974): 319–23. In many of the Northern Thai temples, the ritual is performed annually by monks. Laurence Judd reports a case where it is presided over by an abbot. See his *Chao Rai Thai: Dry Rice Farmers in Northern Thailand* (Bangkok: Suriyaban Publishers, 1977), p. 273.

but also through Buddhist ritual. If the core of traditional practice is abandoned by the ritual, and one becomes primarily a Buddhist. The implications of this rite are considered below.

Community, Identity and Religion

When two Karen meet, the first thing each asks is which village the other is from, and who are their parents and siblings. Among Karen in the hills, the ritually and socially defined community provides an immediate unit of belonging, and the sense of belonging to a Karen community is fundamental to the identity of Karen living in the hills.[30] With changing ecological and demographic conditions in the hills as well as increasing administrative and commercial involvements with the non-Karen world, villagers are recognizing the need for a reformulated community as a setting for adapting to such changes. As discussed above, adoption of non-traditional religious practices has provided ways to maintain or reformulate a community in one way or another amid such processes, and to this extent it is true that incorporation of indigenous communities into a new and larger macrocosm and conversion to the world religions take place in tandem.[31]

While both Christianity and Buddhism enhance a sense of belonging to a community, the two involve villagers in entirely different networks. Moreover, the nature of the involvement in both cases is qualitatively different from participation in the traditional local community. Christian Karen belong to a region-wide all-Karen organization emphasizing Karen Christian community and identity, while Buddhist Karen are affiliated with a programme that is supported by the Thai government and a central monastic organization.

Roland Mischung suggests that the reason some Karen villagers where he conducted fieldwork chose Christianity (in this case Catholicism) but none turned to Buddhism may be because the latter was known to them only as a Thai cult.[32] Karen in Mischung's study area asserted their non-Thai identity through religious choice, perhaps owing to a stricter implementation of a government-imposed ban on swidden agriculture, and to the proximity of Thai and Karen communities. Villagers where I conducted fieldwork were well aware of the fact that Buddhism is the religion of the Thai. However, possibly because of historical differences in their relationship to Buddhism, they did not consider that the adoption of Buddhist practices in itself rendered themselves any less Karen as long as traditional practices were continued. In this area, as the quotations in the beginning of this paper suggest, it would seem that there is no apparent correlation between Karen ethnic identity and religious choice.

---

[30]Kunstadter notes that Karen feel very little attachment to a particular village or territory, and their identity is not bound to any place of residence (Kunstadter, "Ethnic Group, Category, and Identity", p. 138). It may be true that swidden cultivating Karen may have been less bound to a particular locality and land. Nevertheless, a sense of belonging to a community is crucial, both for subsistence and ritual reasons.

[31]Robert W. Hefner, p. 28, "World Building and the Rationality of Conversion", in *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 3–44.

[32]Roland Mischung, *Religion und Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen in Einem Karen-Dorf Nordwest-Thailands* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1984), pp. 224–25. Mischung could not elicit any answers from the villagers as to why they were not interested in Buddhism, but draws his own conclusion.

It has been argued by Fredrik Barth, as well as by Edmund Leach, F.K. Lehman and many others who have studied this particular region, that ethnic groups are not collections of people who manifest common and distinctive cultural traits. Rather, they are groups insofar as their members recognize themselves as such,[33] and their continuity depends on structural oppositions and maintenance of social boundaries which may be marked by chosen traits.[34] If the Karen in the study area willingly adopt Buddhism rather than resist it, does it mean that they are choosing NOT to draw a boundary between themselves and the Buddhist population? Perhaps we have come to a point where we must reconsider our approach to ethnic identity among the Karen, and question whether the nature of Karen identity is undergoing qualitative changes.

In Thailand, increasing administrative and economic involvement and improved roads have contributed to the incorporation of the hill population into the national sphere. This is particularly true of the Karen, who have a long history of residence in the area, and whose mode of ecological adaptation is becoming more similar to the Thai lowlanders. Wet-rice land is now registered through the local Thai administration. Villagers in the area of fieldwork all carry identification cards and acknowledge Thai citizenship, and whether Buddhist or Christian they are involved in and affected by Thai culture and society, and strive to gain what they can from it.

Among Christian Karen, both leaders and lay villagers are concerned with keeping up the balancing act of maintaining a strong sense of Karen identity while at the same time becoming respectable citizens of Thailand. Nevertheless, affiliation to Christian Karen churches sets them apart from the majority Buddhists. Traditionalist/Buddhist villagers, too, acknowledge their Thai citizenship and say on the one hand "we live in Thailand, we do as the Thais", but their experiences in Thai settings and their interactions with Thai officials, monks and merchants cause Karen villagers to see themselves as somehow inferior or second-class Thai citizens and Buddhists.

In the area of study, no one had chosen to have the monks perform the *lu bgha* ritual of abandoning traditional rites. Villagers on many occasions heatedly discussed the merits of the ritual, but elders declared it would not happen while they were in charge. Meanwhile, one-third of the households in the nearby "key" Thammacarik village had had the rite performed.[35] Traditionalist villagers were often critical in talking about these people, saying "They are Thai now. They speak, dress, and act like Thais." Such remarks reveal an ambiguity towards Buddhism as the religion of the Thais which is never mentioned so long as villagers are able to maintain both practices. Younger villagers who have been educated in Thai schools see less reason to continue *a lw a la*. These youths may choose to abandon the spirits through the Buddhist monks' *lu bgha* rituals with far less hesitation. Yet for these youths too, especially among those with experience in urban settings, the

[33]Fredrik Barth, "Introduction", in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ed. F. Barth (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1969), pp. 9–38; Edmund R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954); and F.K. Lehman, "Kayah Society as a Function of the Shan-Burman-Karen Context", *Contemporary Changes in Traditional Societies*, ed. Julian H. Steward (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1967), pp. 1–104.

[34]Barth, "Introduction", pp. 14–15.

[35]According to the Thammacarik headquarters annual report, in 1987, 219 households underwent this rite in all of Northern Thailand.

eagerness to embrace Thai culture contains their view of themselves as inferior, and total abandonment of their tradition would mean relinquishing a basis of identity.[36]

There remains the question of what factors are involved in Karen villagers' choice between these religions. Generally, once the decision to abandon traditional practices is made, the question of which path to adopt, Christian conversion or Buddhism, seems to depend firstly on availability: in this area, Christian conversion had been the only consistently available choice until the *lu bgha* rite was introduced in the 1970s. Secondly, since conversion and decisions regarding religious change tend to take place along kinship and socio-political lines, the decision depends on preexisting patterns of social relationship within the community. Contingencies of marriage and personal lifestyle preferences may also play a part. Thus, the concerns that most strongly affect the choice of religion have to do with the immediate village life and social relationships, but the decision involves the villagers in a wider arena with far-reaching implications.

Conclusion

Adoption of world religions allows the Karen to involve themselves in larger social arenas. Karen in Northern Thailand are willingly incorporated into the Thai national and administrative structure, and the religions provide paths to that end, to varying degrees. At the same time Karen are conscious of their disadvantaged position, and the adoption of world religions is also a way to resist wholly succumbing to the larger macrocosm, by allowing Karen to create boundaries for their community. Christian conversion differentiates them from Buddhist Thai, while Buddhist villagers enact rituals that enhance their sense of a ritual community within the larger setting that inevitably incorporates them. Karen identity is in no way one-dimensional, and even within one or the other of the adopted religions, the two orientations of incorporation and differentiation are coexistent. As the various authors point out in the quotations given at the beginning of this paper, no particular religion can be associated with the Karen. However, multiple religious affiliations, while involving villagers in completely different networks, provide ways for Karen identity to manifest itself.

[36]Ronald D. Renard, Prasert Bhandhachat and G. Lamar Robert, "A Study of Karen Student Mobility to Northern Thai Cities: Directions, Problems, Suggested Courses of Action". Submitted to the Thai Norwegian Church Aid Highland Development Project, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 1987.