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The sword of the spirit: Christians, Karens, colonialists, and the creation of a nation of Burma

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Rice University, 1993
RICE UNIVERSITY

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT:
CHRISTIANS, KARENS, COLONIALISTS, AND
THE CREATION OF A NATION OF BURMA

by

JEFF PETRY

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

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HOUSTON, TEXAS

JANUARY, 1993
ABSTRACT

The Sword of the Spirit:

Christians, Karens, Colonialists, and
the Creation of a Nation of Burma

by

Jeff Petry

An ethnography of representation combining the following elements: a) The American Baptist Mission to the Karen people of Burma; b) The emergence of Karen nationalism as a consequence of the former, demonstrating the centrality of the phenomenon of "writing," introduced by the missionaries, in this process; c) The colonial milieu in Burma, as evoked by the diverse documentary voices of American Baptists, British colonialists, and Karen Christians; d) Ethnic politics, from the Karen rebellion after Burma’s independence through the current democratic challenge posed by a coalition of Burma’s largest ethnic groups, including Burman; e) The fieldwork process; research and writing; ethnography; exoticism and primitivism; and the construction of this text itself.

An ethnography of the Karen National Union, a predominantly Christian insurgent army in Burma, is constructed. Through an assemblage of texts, some of which have been translated into English for this project, the origins, construction, and articulation of organized Karen nationalism and cultural representation is depicted. The role of writing, print-technology, and the circulation of texts is demonstrated to be central to the foregoing processes in the Karen case. An anthropology of religion and an ethnography of the politics of ethnicity explicates the transitions from conversion to ethnic nationalism to ethnic separatism to democratic opposition.
An evocative pastiche of discourses both reflects and contends with the impossibility of objective representation, with regard to both the subject and the process of research, which are thematically analogous: They both begin and end in religion and politics -- Christianity and revolution. Diverse discursive styles and voices display the contested nature of knowledge while simultaneously participating in the experiment of re-construction. An academic, analytical style, for example, contributes to an understanding of the dynamics of the emergence of ethnic nationalism and notions of identity among Karen Christians in Burma, while the inclusion of Karen stories provides the reader with meaningful complementary ethnographic grounding. These juxtapositions simulate and stimulate the always inherent tension between daily life and retrospection; between action and reconstruction; between experience and representation; between living and writing.
Acknowledgements

Above all, family. Foremost credit must go to my parents, Helen and Lou, for 35 years of support and encouragement. My brother, Jerry, provided important video technology for my research, in addition to numerous other contributions. I am also grateful to my two sisters, Judy and Jeanne, for being super siblings. Thanks also to my many aunts and uncles, for the care always received from them, but especially while I was a long way from home.

At Rice University, I was fortunate to be a member of an exceptional department. I would like to thank my professors and advisors for maintaining an extraordinary environment in which I was able to pursue my interests, which often derived from theirs, but which were never imposed upon me. The former include Professors Steve Tyler, George Marcus, Michael Fischer, Tullio Maranhao, Sharon 'Irawee, Julie Taylor, and Eugenia Georges. Thanks also to Dr. Werner Kelber, Chair of the Religious Studies Department, for his readings of, and recommendations concerning, this study, while serving on my dissertation committee. I am also grateful for the ongoing assistance of Dr. Fred von der Mehden, Chair of the Political Science Department.

My debt to and appreciation of my friends and colleagues is enormous, and I must perforce contain my gratitude here: To Pam Smart, for everything, for so long -- and then some; to Kim Laughlin for being a great colleague and always making time to assist me, and to her wonderful family, who have virtually adopted our entire graduate program; to Melissa Cefkin and Bruce Grant, without whom my years in Houston would have been much diminished; to Jamer Hunt, for intellectual stimulation and poolhall provocations (if ill-matched); and to Ryan Bishop, on many counts, some of which include: his careful readings and comments on most of my work. his and his wife Junya's exceptional hospitality (in Bangkok and Houston), and numerous basketball diversions, welcome (if ill-matched). Thanks also to Ashley Barr, for her friendship, encouragement, and honest reactions to this work, and to her father, Larry, and his wife, Tica Smallman, for taking me into their house when I returned to Houston, and making me feel like one of the family, along with Murphy and Hummer.

I am grateful for the support of several other organizations: the Fulbright Program of the Institute for International Education, represented in Bangkok by the excellent staff of the Thailand-U.S. Educational Foundation; Chiang Mai University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology for sponsoring me, re-sponsoring me, and extending me, by being a much-needed buffer between me and the Thai bureaucratic authorities -- special thanks to my sponsor Aajan Suthèp; the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Kandy (and Colombo), Sri Lanka, for granting me a graduate internship to their organization for six months, in which I was able to make significant inroads into the writing of this thesis, to the wonderful staff in Kandy and its respected leaders, Drs. Sam Samarasinghe and Kingsley de Silva.
In Thailand and Burma, I regret that I cannot here thank the many individuals who showed me great kindness, and who, for now, must remain anonymous, due to the brutal nature of Burma’s ruling military junta. Thank you anyway. This work would have been impossible without your generosity and care. I look forward to the day I can visit you in your homes in Burma.

Fortunately, I can mention some names and organizations here: Junya Bishop and her family, the Pookayaporns, who have opened their home to me for years now in Bangkok; Dr. Ronald Renard of Payap University in Chiang Mai for his patient assistance; Dr. Leo Alting von Geusau; Dr. Charles F. Keyes; Dr. Ananda Rajah; Rev. J. Edwin Hudspith; Rupert R. Nelson; G. Lamar Robert; Pippa Curwin and the Burma Relief Center; Marti Patel and the Women’s Education for Advancement and Empowerment organization; the Karen Baptist Convention and the Thai Baptist Convention; Prasert Trakarnsuphakorn; Wanat Bhruksasri, Director of the Tribal Research Institute in Chiang Mai; Dr. Sumit Pitiphat of Thammasat University; Father Joseph Seguinette; Sunny Danpongpee; Gary Dmytryk, for his friendship, collegiality, and assistance in Thailand and Burma; Dr. Scott F. McNabb, for sharing his experience in northern Thailand with me; John Davies, for his friendship and employment of me as a tour guide; the Karen National Union, for allowing me access into their territory, granting me many interviews, and tolerating my many intrusions into their lives in the pursuit of a Ph.D.; the Democratic Alliance of Burma, and especially U Aye Saung; the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front; the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, and its Prime Minister Dr. Sein Win; Mark and Dana Richie, for being there, and telling me to go to the hospital; Nora Bateson, for her ongoing support and friendship, and for her super research assistance in Thailand, Burma, and Vietnam, where she was always ready to jump in the back of a truck and roll her Hi-8.

Finally, I am thankful for the kindness of strangers (in Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, and the U.S.), totally undeserved and typically unbelievable.

Although I am extremely appreciative to all of the above, it is I alone who am responsible for all the errors and shortcomings this text possesses.
LEGEND

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EPIGRAPHS

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.
--Ephesians 6:17

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.
--Hebrews 4:12

Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things that are written therein: for the time is at hand.
--Revelation 1:3

Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen.
--Revelation 1:7

Rangoon, August 17, 1886

"The key to all this misconception is plain. No one, neither Burmans, Government officials, nor any one, had gauged the quiet work we have been doing among the Karens. You know no one knows Karens. They won't talk to these servility-loving officials. No one visits their villages and sees for himself what education and Christianity have done. The "timid Karen" has become a man, but nobody knew it....Thank God! the "timid Karen" is now a phrase of the past. "Nous avons changé tout cela" with a vengeance."

--Rev. J.B. Vinton to
Mr. Donald MacKenzie
Writing Research: An Introduction

They stood aloof, the scars remaining,
Like cliffs which had been rent asunder;
A dreary sea now flows between.
But neither heat nor frost nor thunder,
Shall wholly do away I ween,
The marks of that which once hath been.
--Coleridge

Chiang Mai, Thailand; September 5, 1991:

"Writing is powerful," she told me, as we sat down on the bamboo mat. Our host brought out some condensed milk sandwiches and offered them to us. We ate, and talked.

"You know, Jeff," she went on, "I hope he has a heart like Saddam Hussein or Adolph Hitler. I don't want to criticize anyone, but I want to be honest with you. I know I can trust you. I've talked to many Karens in Chiang Mai about you. They told me you care about the Karen people, that you have a good heart. But I hope he has a hard heart, so that when he gets older and looks back on what he's written about us, he won't regret it. If he has a good heart, a normal heart, he'll feel very bad about that book. He's written some bad things about us, and many things are

---

1 Epigraph to Chapter I, Burma and the Karens, by Sir San C. Po, C.B.E.
just lies. Some people have suffered because of it. I really hope his heart is hard. If it's not, he'll feel very, very bad. You asked me what I thought in your letter, but I didn't write back. I wanted to see you. It's better this way."

She was obviously upset and spoke about the book for some time, much in the same vein. Someone had published a book about life in a Karen village, her village, and although he had tried to make the village and the people anonymous, he had failed, at least among those whose identities he had apparently wanted to protect. The literate Karen world, especially the Christian Karen world, in Thailand and Burma is a small, close, and well-connected community. (Despite whatever internal differences might exist, their Karen identity rises above these.) I felt badly for her and her acquaintances, the characters in this man's story. After a thoughtful pause, she continued.

"We Karen used to believe that white people didn't lie, that only Asians lied. As you know, we really loved and respected the missionaries that came to us. They taught us many good things and helped us very much. They seemed like saints to us. Now I know different. I no longer believe white people can't lie. You must be careful what you say to anyone. You must always be very careful."

At this time, I had been conducting my research in Thailand and Burma for almost one year, and my notes for that day show the ethnographocentrism, or preoccupation with writing, of a researcher. I had been planning on staying in this
very village myself, when this book appeared. (I eventually did.) I wrote after our meeting:

Consider choosing another village. Everyone there will now be on guard and protective, not to mention mistrustful, assuming they are aware of, and are similarly disposed towards, this book. Word will have spread anyway. It may be difficult to get their cooperation. What do I have now?: texts, by Karen authors which I have had translated; other texts on "the Karen" by missionaries, colonialists, anthropologists, historians, etc.; videotapes -- interviews and trips; cassettes -- oral interviews with Karens, missionaries, locals; data from various ethnic Baptist Conventions from Rangoon, Judson Jubilee; notebooks and previous writings; scores and scores of titles....

Need more voices, stories, lives to complement the textual/archival stuff, to inform it and bring it to life -- to make it breathe. Maybe further south along the Thai-Burmese border, or a Karen village further inside Burma. Check with M. R. Or maybe I should include other ethnic groups as well. Why only "the Karen"? Every group in Burma is presently suffering persecution from the Burmese government, and wants publicity. A more academic, sociological, historical account of the whole white encounter 1813-1963?....

But I needed to maintain my concentration. This seemed to me a unique infield opportunity for native critique of a text not wholly unlike the one I was envisioning. I was anxious to hear more specific comments. I was also a little nervous, uneasy, and almost...guilty.
"He only shows a very small part of the picture. He didn’t travel around much and see what our Karen people are really like. There are so many special places I’d like to show you. Some you cannot go to now, of course, with the Burmese army in the area, but we can show you some beautiful areas in Kaw Thoo Lei (the Free Karen State), like Papun. Maybe we can go there in January."

Our host brought us some tall glasses of hot Nescafé, heavily sweetened, and a plate of fruit -- mangosteen and rambutan. It is early September and the rains are still upon us. A storm is brewing; the wind is stirring up and the sky is darkening. The lights are turned on.

We are waiting for "the First Lady," "Mrs. President," "Mrs. Bo Mya," or, as my Karen friends refer to her, "Auntie." Her husband is General Bo Mya, the President of the Karen National Union (KNU); she is the President of the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO). I am anxious to meet her and to learn about the women’s organization. As a man, I have, until recently, had limited opportunities to establish close working relationships with Karen women. Most of my informants until now have been men, though two Karen women have been extremely helpful. In the end, these women came to help me enormously, giving more of their time, assistance, and support than I could have expected. (They have both requested anonymity.)

It is these women, and thousands of others, who remain behind in the villages, with the children and the wounded, when the men go to fight the Burmese Army.
They must raise the children, teach the students, care for the many sick and wounded, and hold the communities together. (When I refer to the fighting, I am generally speaking of Burma, though fighting sporadically occurs in Thailand as well.) A number of Karen leaders have homes in Thailand -- in Chiang Mai, Mae Sariang, Mae Hong Son, and Mae Sot, to name the main cities -- and their families live in Thailand. Their children go to Thai schools, colleges, and universities; and in many cases, business is conducted with Thais: gems, teakwood and cattle come from Burma, and consumer goods, weapons and other supplies come from Thailand. The stoic perseverance and stability of these people in the most trying circumstances constantly impressed me during my fieldwork.

Shortly after arriving in Thailand, still thinking quite academically, I decided to ask a primary informant of mine, a middle-aged man with a wife and family, about Karen matriarchy. I had read that in Pwo Karen villages, there was one woman who had final say in many of the affairs of the village, but in Sgaw Karen villages, many more decisions were made on the family level, by "the woman of the house." ("Sgaw" and "Pwo" are by far the two largest sub-groups of "Karen.") As my informant was Sgaw, I asked him if this was indeed the case. He laughed somewhat nervously and said, "Oh really! I thought it was just my family!" His wife was not as amused as we were by his answer.

We had been waiting for Mrs. President for over two hours, so my friends suggested that we go visit another Karen woman who lived nearby. As it turns out,
many Karen live in this part of Chiang Mai. We stepped outside and were preparing
to leave when we saw a car coming down the dusty lane towards us, a dark green
Mercedes 300E. "It's them," my friend said.

The driver parked the car under a nearby tree, and three Karen women got
out, one stepping discretely off to the side to discharge her mouthful of betel-juice.
Greetings and introductions accomplished, we moved back inside and sat down, while
our host went to prepare more coffee and sandwiches. I noticed the driver standing
by the car outside the open door, and wondered if he was armed. Being in Thailand,
I thought not. They would not want to press their luck with the Thai authorities, who
let them come and go fairly liberally between countries. Weapons are usually left
on the border.

Nevertheless, the wife of the President of the KNU seemed to me a prime
target for Burmese Intelligence, some of whom are certainly based in Chiang Mai.
The women, however, did not appear worried, and were happily chatting away in
melodious Karen. I assumed my polite fly-on-the-wall position and waited for them
to finish their personal conversation, which, even if I had been fluent in Karen
(which I never became), I'm sure I would not have understood.

I had made repeated efforts to study the Karen language during my fieldwork,
but for varying reasons, not the least of which being that my informants (and
subjects) spoke English fluently, I made little progress. Had I chosen to live for an
extended period in a "traditional" Karen village, that is, one not associated with the
Karen revolution, doing "traditional" anthropological fieldwork, that is, (among other things) single-sited, this would not have been the case. The importance of language-learning cannot be overestimated. And Karen is actually one of the easier languages in the region for Westerners to learn, much easier than, say, Thai, to which I devoted a significant amount more time and energy, living as I was for the most part in a Thai environment. Further, many of the Karen in/from Burma use Burmese as their common language, a language they were not too keen on teaching me, understandably, given the current situation in Burma, and their feelings towards many Burmese people, in general.

Even in Kaw Thoo Lei, the Karen State, and Burma "proper," the Burmese politicians, monks, students, and citizens spoke English quite well. In this multi-lingual context, English proved very satisfactory for the topic I had come to choose. To some extent, probably a very large one, the fact that my research was guided by English-speaking informants, predominantly from Burma, influenced my research direction. These informants later proved a super boon when it came to translating Karen texts into English. My best translator orally translated Karen texts into English on a tape recorder, the transcription of which I could then accomplish.

Most works concerning the Karen people, however, have been written in English -- by Karens (though very few), American missionaries, British colonialists, and (mostly American) social scientists. I want to emphasize the importance of this limited number of texts for the literate Karen. Countless times, I was referred to the
same texts by Karres I was interviewing. (These texts will become known, as I draw on them frequently in this work.) Even copies of old articles and unpublished Ph.D. dissertations were circulated amongst themselves, copied, saved, and protected by many of these people. I found expensive, new publications in the libraries of military headquarters in the middle of the jungle. I was asked my opinion concerning certain Western authors who had written on Burma, some of whom were greatly admired, some of whom were not. I met informants for, and individuals referred to in, some of the more recent of these works. One Epigraph man informed me that his brother had worked with Edmund Leach; another advised me to consult Martin Smith's recent book on "Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity" concerning a certain ethnic group's history. Some informants with whom I worked periodically could even be read about in other works, and information cross-checked. (This was often very amusing, and at other times, disconcerting.)

Writing and representation of "the Karen" is clearly very important and highly-valued by this community. These Christian Karen have a delimited, common corpus of reference related to their inscription as a culture, including explicit cultural characterizations and self-definition (to which I turn below). This is in fact an ideal supra-culture (or, as my primary Karen informant, who has requested anonymity, would have it, "super-culture") on which to write an ethnography of representation. When I (half-jokingly) asked the latter to supply an adjective describing "the Karen,"
e.g., "the 'blank' people", he thought briefly and said, "Yes, 'The Blank People.'" (On several occasions, I appreciated his point.)

The First Lady and her colleagues told me about their organization, and briefed me on the current situation on the border. Things were not good. Many people had malaria, in fact everyone had had it, and there were a large number of recurrences at this time. Proper medication was not available, and the mosquitos had become resistant to quinine.

Many refugees were fleeing from inside Burma to the Thai-Burmese border, where the KWO was based, to escape being forced to serve as porters for the Burmese army. A number of defectors from the Burmese Army were there now also, in hospital. The Karen facilities were constantly strained.

They told me about Kaw Thoo Lei, the Karen State. "Kaw" in Karen means "land" or "place"; "Thoo Lei" is a white orchid-like flower; "Thoo Lei" also means "without black spots": thus, Kaw Thoo Lei meant either "the land of the Thoo Lei flowers" or "the land without black spots." (I personally received the latter interpretation more frequently.)

Either way, Kaw Thoo Lei is a long, rugged, jungled strip of land extending along much of the Thai-Burmese border, forming, as it were, a buffer-region between Thailand and Burma. (Although Kaw Thoo Lei is officially a part of Burma, in practice the only interaction with the Burmese government usually takes place on the battlefields.) The Karen have often been referred to as "a people between," and this
is reflected geographically, socio-culturally, and religiously. Before the collapse of both Thailand and Burma's Communist Parties, the Karens in Kaw Thoo Lei had served as an effective buffer against Communism, between the two countries. They are no longer needed in that capacity, however, and relations between the Thais and Karens reflect this. Lucrative logging concessions have been signed between the Thai and Burmese governments, and the Karen are not in a good position to challenge Thai policies, dependent as they are on Thailand in many important ways: foodstuffs, communications, trade, etc.

The Karens in Kaw Thoo Lei are also, in other ways, "a people between": between Buddhists, between mountains and rivers, and between a disastrously idiosyncratic socialism and an utterly excessive capitalism. I was wondering how they had come to be in this place, and, for that matter, how I had....

* * *
"The Field": A Reflexive Pretext

One does not often see green pigeons so closely when they are alive. They are high-flying birds, living in the treetops, and they do not come to the ground, or only to drink. When one shoots them, if they are not killed outright, they cling to the branch until they die, and drop long after one has given up waiting and gone away.

--George Orwell

_Burmese Days_

To make a start, that is all. Be it writing, speaking, life, love, or similarly trying endeavors, much is at stake in the early stages; and, whether one is aware of it or not at the time, the general nature of what is yet-to-come has already been established in the initial opening. One may perhaps argue that ending -- life, love, etc. -- is the harder part; but I believe this perspective shies away from the real fear: beginning anew, starting over. What mystery lies ahead, and am I up for it?

Let me, then, now on the other side of writing, turn to the end (or to what I thought would be the end): the end of fieldwork, mine and others’. But let me not speak of others, though I must write. I can neither write their stories, nor reduce and re-present mine -- the words, written, lie mutely on the page: a faulty trace, shadows in the sand -- scratches on bark.

Nevertheless, that is part of what lies before you -- stories within and about stories: histories, myths, biographies, ethnographies. Autobiography and reflexivity
have their place and value here also, though it is meaningless to dwell and ponder on this in the abstract -- for, and this is the point -- the critical context is lacking: it would be unillustrative.

At any rate, the reader will be the final judge. As Dostoyevsky wrote, before recounting the trial of Dmitri Karamozov, "I want to emphasize the fact that I am far from capable of reporting all that took place...in full detail, or even in the actual order of events. To mention everything with a full explanation would fill many volumes, very large ones. And so I trust I will not be reproached for confining myself to what struck me. I may have selected of most interest what was of secondary importance, and may have omitted the most prominent and essential details, but I will do better not to apologize. I will do my best and the reader will see for himself that I have done all I can."

The reader should know, at the outset, that this "field," in which I have "worked," is an ethnographic artifice -- useful, perhaps even a disciplinary necessity - - but artificial and ephemeral nonetheless. The groups to be involved; the issues to be investigated, pursued, analyzed, discussed or evoked; the ground to be covered -- all these were foreshadowed at best in the preliminary stages of this endeavor. Proposals are written without crystal balls. And, despite remarkable pretensions, lives are not left behind when one leaves home, and they too come into play, and into work, in all their originality, spontaneity, and splendor.
Where does one go today to study, say, ethnic nationalism and the democratization process? More to the point, where doesn't one go? What about a study on minority religion in its socio-cultural context? Human rights and the violations thereof? The social consequences of the individual lust for power, wealth, and glory? The politics of "the calling"? Inter-racial/religious prejudice.

When the field is everywhere, it is no-where.

Where then should ethnographers go to ethnograph? Why, where they have always gone -- wherever they felt like going, wherever they chose, wherever they happen to find themselves: stranded on a Pacific isle or on assignment in an African jungle; tripping with the shaman or following the Shining Path; in the archives of excess or the museums of ghosts; in the lab, the theme park, and the boardroom -- among physicists, clowns and insurgents...constructing oneself through the detour of the other. (Or, constructing one's self while writing on the construction of the other.)

Then why rationalize desire and justify chance? No reason, but chances are that something called "Science" has something to do with it. Let's get real. For those not blinded by science and the unenlightened dream of objectivity, the cat has long been out of the bag. A cheshire cat itself inventing in a laboratory stocked with furry rodents, caged and classified.

* * *
I left for Thailand in August, 1990, to do an ethnographic study, the aim of which was, as I wrote in my Fulbright proposal, (subsequently funded,) to "investigate and ascertain the implications and consequences of literacy among the Karen (and to a lesser extent the other minority groups) in the Chiang Mai area of northern Thailand, subsequent to the introduction of Thai schooling into the region (within the last decade).... What I propose to conduct, and what the literature is essentially calling for, is an 'ethnography of literacy.'" My underlying theoretical interests, namely, the consequences of literacy; writing and representation; the construction of what we call culture(s) and identity; and the dynamics of social change, remain the same now as I write this as when I wrote that over three years ago. What has radically affected the latent ethnography, however, aside from my experiences, has been geopolitics: borders, and all that they entail. Considering that the geographical movements in this case were in a westerly direction, into Burma, this entailed a great deal indeed.

As approximately 90% of Karen people, of which five million is as good a guess as any for their total numbers, live in Burma, and due to the advice, suggestions, and urgings by Karens, scholars, missionaries, and others, more and more of my research came to involve Karens in Burma, and "the Karen" and Burma.

Given Burma's longstanding and ongoing political crisis, this turn in turn led to more political concerns, a veering all but impossible to avoid, to my mind. However, ethnographic research is not permitted in Burma these days. Researchers
interested in working in the country are limited to the border areas, which means essentially the Thai-Burmese border, as Burma's other borders with Bangladesh, India, China, and Laos are generally inaccessible, and often they are war-zones. Officially, any border areas are considered too "politically sensitive" by the Thai authorities for researchers to be researching, almost an inverse justification for investigation in itself. For the Burmese authorities, the whole country is too politically sensitive to describe. One obtains a moral visa and crosses the river with the people who live there -- in my case, with Karen "insurgents."

Today, Burma deals with its minority groups and its non-Buddhists by forcing them out of the country, typically at gunpoint. The Arakanese Muslims, or Rohingyas, hundreds of thousands of whom have recently fled into Bangladesh (again), is only the most widely-known example, and a not-too-widely known one at that. Added to the "minority" exodus today -- of Karens, Kachins, Nagas, Rohingyas, and other ethnic groups -- are "majority" Burman students, monks, politicians, and ordinary citizens, on which more shall follow, both here and there.

One sentiment constantly expressed to me was the need for publicity and international awareness of the situation in Burma. Theoretically, the military dictatorship in Rangoon, which now calls itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), would be less likely to persecute its citizens if the international community was aware of their actions. In fact, it has taken a great deal of
international pressure to get the SLORC to respond at all, and this has been largely cosmetic.

A letter I just received from the General Secretary of the Karen National Union (KNU), Thra (a male term of high respect in "Karen") Ba Thin Ba Sein, illuminates a number of concerns discussed so far, and will begin to put some flesh on these bones. From his letter:

June 1992

...Thank you for your concerned response to my previous letter. Although the Karen people are used to standing on our own in our struggle, we rely on people like yourself to be our voice in other parts of the world, and we greatly appreciate your actions in support of our cause. The more political and economic pressure which is applied by the international community, the sooner the SLORC will have to give way to the wishes of the people, and a free, equal, and democratic Burma can come about.

Recently you may have heard of some new developments in our situation. Gen. Than Shwe has replaced Gen. Saw Maung as official head of the SLORC, a few political prisoners have been released, a National Convention promised within 6 months, and SLORC Maj. Gen. Maung Hla has "called off" the offensive in our Karen state. Please understand that these are nothing but political ploys by the SLORC. Their tactics may have changed slightly on the surface, but in reality they remain as brutal as ever, in both their methods and their goals.

...Regarding Maj. Gen. Maung Hla's order to halt the current offensive "to expedite amity between national races and strengthen national unity," this is merely the time of year when the Burmese always halt their offensive as the rains approach, so that they can stockpile supplies and ammunition before their supply lines are washed out. "Operation Dragon King" had four and a half months to capture
Manerplaw [Karen Headquarters]. It failed in every respect, but they will almost certainly try again next year. The SLORC has been commanding its front line troops to dig in and fortify their current positions for the rainy season. Fighting is still going on, people are dying every day, the SLORC continues to brutalize and displace many villagers, and new refugees are still arriving.

...As it is, the KNU is faced with a huge burden of care for those affected by this year's offensive, particularly the thousands of displaced people hiding from the SLORC in Karen areas. Material help for these people's survival is needed desperately.

The civil war continues. No false statements or cosmetic changes in the SLORC will change that. Only freedom, equal rights, democracy and self-determination can bring peace to Burma, and these can only come about when the SLORC is deposed....

Included with his letter was a Karen woman's account of what she had recently endured before having fled to the shelter of the Karen State, Kaw Thoo Lei. Tragically, there are thousands and thousands of individuals with similarly horrific experiences (which certainly does not minimize her experience, nor anyone else's), suffered at the hands of the Burmese Army. From her story:

**NAME: NAW (Ms.) Htoo Paw (NOT HER REAL NAME)**
**SEX: F** **AGE: 33**
**NATIONALITY: KAREN** **RELIGION: CHRISTIAN**
**ADDRESS: Wet La Daw Village, Kyauk Kyi Township**
**FAMILY: WIDOW WITH 3 CHILDREN, MOTHER SURVIVING, FATHER DEAD**

...The SLORC troops from 60 Regiment often force us to work for them. Everyone in our village has to go to a meeting every Sunday night when one of their officers tells us what we have to do....They always made us work from dawn to dusk, and we could only cook and
eat very early in the morning and after dark at night. They made us sleep on the ground in the camp, but the mosquitoes usually kept us awake. We could only go to the latrine once in the early morning or once after work in the evening, and we had to urinate where we slept....

One night, I remember it was February 12, [Burmese Sergeant] Ba Kyi came back from a trip to headquarters and called a meeting. He was drunk. He told us he'd got a letter that his mother was dying, but that his superiors wanted him to come back to the camp so he did. He said he wanted to question us one by one, "and you'd better not answer 'I don't know' or you'll meet my knife!" Then he pointed two big knives at us, and said one was for the men and one for the women.

When we left the meeting we were split into small groups and kept under guard on the ground. But none of us could sleep because Ba Kyi went up the hill to the top of the camp and ordered the soldiers to fire their guns and mortars all over the place for no reason. There were all kinds of explosions and we were terrified, which must have been why he did it. Along with the other Christians there, I just prayed and tried to sleep.

Ba Kyi started calling villagers to his quarters one by one and questioning them, but we never got to see them afterwards to find out what happened. Eventually I was woken up and was the first of the five women there taken to see him. After I was left alone with him, he told me to tell him about Wet La Daw village, especially about the smugglers coming to buy cattle and buffaloes and any villagers who were helping the rebels. I didn't want to tell him anything, and he started yelling at me and threatening me with his knife. He demanded to know about Karen soldiers and Saw Lah Oo, their commander. I told him I'm too busy struggling to survive and feed my children to think about such things. He said he wanted to know what the villagers said about him. He told me he'd already tied up two villagers and killed them, and started firing continuous questions at me, especially about Saw Lah Oo. I didn't even have time to try to answer.

Then he pushed me into a small room behind a wall and tied one of my hands with wire so I couldn't move. He ordered me to sit quietly while he interviewed the others. Then he just went and pretended to call the next person in, but immediately came back to me
and started asking more questions. I said, "Don't ask me, ask the men," and he accused me of working for the rebels.

Then he waved his knife at me again, grabbed my free hand and clutched at my breast. I shouted, "Son, let me free!" But he told me since he was 24 and I was only 33, I must call him "brother," and started asking for sex. When I refused, he said, "Then I'll send you up to the top of the camp -- there, many men will rape you and kill you, and we'll say the Karen rebels did it! If that frightens you, you'd better give in to me!" I told him, "Son, don't do this -- you're single, if you need a woman you can marry someone much prettier than me. I'm a Christian widow, I have 3 children to support and I have to work here. I have too much trouble already."

He kept threatening that he'd give me to his men, who'd rape me to death, waving his knife and demanding sex. I kept fighting, but he tied up my other hand, and then he pushed me down and raped me. I warned him I must tell the Church but he ordered me not to.

When he was finished, he asked me, "Are you satisfied?" All I could tell him was that my life was now nothing but darkness. He just said, "If you're so troubled and ashamed, go hang yourself."

He raped me 3 times that night. I was tied so tight my elbows were dislocated while he raped me, and they still hurt even now. Then he told me that when I went the next day, I would have to go and spy on 2 huts near the village that the Karen soldiers use and report back to him by letter, especially anything about Saw Lah Oo. I agreed just so he'd let me go. At 4 a.m. they woke up the other villagers and let me go with them but warned me not to tell them anything except that I'd been tied up under a tree overnight.

But back in the village, I felt I had to tell them, and tell the Church. When I did this I learned that Ba Kyi had treated many women the same way before. But now that I'd told them I couldn't stay there safely any more, and I had to flee my home and bring my children here.

* * *
I based myself in Chiang Mai, Thailand's second city, in the north of the country, where, for eighteen months, I traveled frequently inside Thailand, along the Thai-Burmese border (on both sides) where many Karens, and many other refugees, are living, and made one trip to Burma "proper": Rangoon, Mandalay, and Pagan, in order to attend the 175th Judson Jubilee in Rangoon, an event described below, which was truly an ethnographer's dream. (As often happens, an incidental comment brought this occasion to my attention. I remain grateful to Marshall Peters, the President of the Thailand Baptist Convention, for this intelligence.)

I stayed for varying periods of time in these places, sometimes several days, other times several weeks. Sometimes I travelled alone, but it was more common for me to connect with a local Karen who knew the area, and could get me past whatever checkpoints existed. Visas are issued by the Karen National Union for travel in Kaw Thoo Lei. Travel is sometimes restricted. For example, during a Karen Congress held in February, 1992, (the first in sixteen years,) only visitors who had been to Manerplaw before were allowed entry.


This multi-locale procedure has led to a fairly general, or macro picture, which is interspersed with micro details: historical, textual, and/or experiential points of light. I was interested in the consequences of literacy among the Karen; the vast
majority of literate Karens, especially in the Karen language, are Christians, mostly Baptists. A very vocal, "visible" and predominate group of these "élite" Christian Karen are also in armed resistance against the Burmese government, and have been since 1949, one year after Burmese independence. Subsequently, I began to investigate the connections between Christianity and Karen nationalism, and, this proving itself a rich theoretical field to work, it accordingly became a major theme of my research and writing. Today, the Karen are not alone in their struggle, as we shall see. A number of other ethnic groups of Burma have been in rebellion against the Burmese government for decades, and, in many key ways, the Karen National Union was the model. In their turn, the Karens were inspired by American Baptist missionaries and British colonialists, as I shall demonstrate.

In addition to working with my informants and travelling, the comprehension of this emerging theme required historical, archival research. Fortunately, Chiang Mai has numerous research institutions, non-governmental organizations, and a scholarly community very amenable to such research. (At any one time, scores of researchers can be found working, meeting, and collaborating in the area.) I divided my time between travelling, interviewing and working with Karens in Chiang Mai, many of whom had come from Burma, attending a multitude of Karen church services (with informants or missionaries translating and passing around little numbered pages), collecting relevant texts and having them translated from Karen into English, and working in the libraries, archives, and research institutes in Chiang
Mai. Theoretical investigations and speculation was often quickly and fairly easily pursued among local informants.

I found this situation and working arrangement very rewarding. Historical, sociological, and anthropological theorizing could be informed by a living subject, and a number of these had been involved in Karen affairs since World War II, Burmese independence, and the Karen insurrection. On several occasions, I was pleased to find the personalities I had been reading about in the archives residing in, or near, Chiang Mai (and vice versa). In the end, the group I came to focus on was found to be a relatively small one, and an internally connected one, at times shockingly so. Many individuals knew who I was and what I was doing when I came to see them, both in Chiang Mai and in other places in Thailand and Burma. They also knew which Karens I associated with, which frequently influenced their responses and tempered their accounts.

After completion of my research "proper," I was offered a graduate internship in Kandy, Sri Lanka, at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. I was to prepare a paper on Burma's political crisis for a conference to be held at the end of August, 1992, which I plan on adapting for this study below.

The move to Kandy led me to a re-consideration of the field, fieldwork, and fieldnotes. Some fieldnotes on this would seem an appropriate place to turn. Looking at them, I see I must turn back a page or two in these notes to provide the necessary context. (That's really important.)
Kandy, Sri Lanka; April 17, 1992:

To make a start, that is all... (change opening). Wrong place -- disregard.

Loud noises fill the air. Because it is raining, I assume it is thunder. Yet my very assumption provokes me to consider why I am uncertain. What else could it be? The fact is that I've been hearing a great deal of rumbling, shots, and explosions -- loud noises -- for some time. Even now, as I write, periodic shots ring out. Firecrackers apparently. It is the Tamil and Sinhalese New Year, Aluth Avurudu.

These sounds, in conjunction with the theme on my mind as I write a paper on Burma's democratic opposition, instantly and vividly evoke an event which occurred during my last visit to Manerplaw, the headquarters of the Karen National Union (KNU): The rumbling started as a group of us were sitting down to lunch. It took a few seconds before the more astute journalists present realized that the Burmese Army had sent their recently-acquired Chinese fighter jets to bomb this area. Within seconds, reporters were scrambling for their audio-video equipment and jumping over fences as they ran into the middle of the parade field to try to get some good shots of this unprecedented event. Four jets circled and repeatedly bombed "Sleeping Dog Hill," a strategic peak about three miles from Karen Headquarters, where we were then staying. They delivered their payloads and flew away. Fortunately, the damage was minimal. The press had their scoops. As for me, I was wondering exactly what all this had to do with "the consequences of literacy...."
I write to try to convey, express, or evoke some sense of place to myself, and to potential readers who, at the least, will include my professors, several colleagues, and a few interested others. Naturally, after years of effort, expenditure, diseases, sweat, frustration, disappointment, excitement, love, loss, and general investment, one hopes for more. (Pursue later. Consider sentiment/mush; ego-investment; public/private with respect to ethnography. Perhaps, I venture to submit, the role of emotions may not be wholly irrelevant to the construction of a work concerning people.)

I believe this to be very relevant to what follows, however: where one writes -- in a Burmese village, a university office, a jungle headquarters, or a bar in Thailand -- influences what one writes. The context passes into the text, like a virus into the body. We are all receptors -- to greater and lesser extents, but always -- willy-nilly. Heat stifles. Loneliness cripples and distorts. Malaria and Dengue Fever disable. Culture shocks.... But enough for now. Let's compare.

To begin to sketch my current environment, I would like to flip through today's newspaper (Friday, April 17, 1992), The Island, one of the few sources of information in Sri Lanka, and less-censored than the government-controlled The Daily News. I didn't realize I'd miss Thailand's newspapers so much, which are excellent from my current perspective. In fact, I didn't realize I'd miss Thailand so much in general. This island strikes me as a most serious place, but then, relative to Thailand, most places are, I suppose. This is the time for one of Thailand's best festivals, Songkran, or the water festival, during which everyone gets drenched in cold water, marches in parades, bathes
Buddha images, and generally gets some relief from the heat. Here in Kandy it is a beautiful religious holiday, called Vesak, commemorating the Lord Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and escape from the human cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Thousands of small candle-lit lamps sparkle the hills, and friends and family gather together, and go to see the huge, electrically-lit pandols depicting events in the life of Buddha. (Of course this is a very special day for Buddhists in all countries.)

Nevertheless, I've been here but a short time, know very few people, do not speak (or read) Sinhalese or Tamil, and am living alone. Why, after all, should I not experience some culture shock here? After all, when leaving my house is like going onstage, it can be intense, but not nearly as daunting, I'm told, as it is for Western women here. Coping strategies do not come at once. Maintain sense of humor; take advantage of local nature and culture: the stunning natural environment, and the practice of meditation. Give it time. In many ways, the shock is not derived from the culture being entered, but rather results from the readaptation necessary in the wake of the loss of the old. Finding touchstones. Beginning anew. Starting over. ("In order to be born again, first you have to..."

A quick scan:

Front page: "Pres, PM, MPs See Bomb Blast Victims in Hospitals."

"Film Asks Germans to do the Unthinkable -- Laugh at Hitler."

Inside: "UNP will be in Power 4 More Years."

"No Drinking Water Due to Prevailing Drought."
"Raping of the Forest Goes Unabated."

"Four Shops Destroyed."

"Desperate Plight of University Students."

"Executive Presidency has Ruined the Country."

"Terrorism Rampant in the Country."

"Man Attacks Reagan."

"Call to Security-Conscious: Public are requested to be security-conscious during the period and assist the Police and Security Forces by passing on any information they may have of suspicious persons and vehicles in their areas, an appeal by the State Ministry of Defense stated."

"Human Rights -- A Third World View: "The Chinese thesis on human rights...declares that the evolution of the situation in regard to human rights is circumscribed by the historical, social, economic, and cultural conditions of various nations and involves a process of historical development. ...Despite the international aspect, the issue of human rights falls by and large within the sovereignty of each country. ...Hence, critics of Third World Human Rights must realize that at least in the initial phase [?] it might not be possible for development and democracy to travel together...."

Ill-informed as I have been about Sri Lanka's political and ethnic problems, I was shocked to learn that this beautiful island's human rights record is perhaps worse than Burma's; I still find it hard to believe. (Investigate and update.) It is impossible to determine exactly, at any rate, given the insidious nature of acts of this kind. What strikes me, however, and what has compelled me to enter these observations, are the disturbing similarities in the stories Sri Lankans are now telling me, primarily about the events of 1988-90, once they find out what I'm doing here and feel they can trust me, and the stories that I have heard throughout my fieldwork in Thailand and Burma,
relating atrocities committed by the Burmese Army. And now, in May, 1992, by the Thai Army. How much more blood will be shed before the soldiers, of whatever country, are put in their place? How much blood has just been shed? According to a letter just received from Thailand, an awful lot more than officially reported. My friend writes:

July, 1992

...I'm sure you're dying to know what happened here last week and, if the news in Sri Lanka is anything like as censored as it is in the rest of the world, then you know nearly nothing about what really happened.

Thailand's all to hell. As you probably heard we had a revolution here two weeks ago, it was crazy. On May 18th, violence erupted in Bangkok, at Sanam Luang, while something like 400,000 protestors were peacefully demanding the resignation of militarily implemented Prime Minister Suchinda. Martial Law was instated in Bangkok, and the highest military generals gave the ok to the soldiers to use "force" to control the protestors. Apparently what happened was what is known as the "third hand", ie the people (mainly poor villagers) that Suchinda and his right arm Kaset, hired to instigate violence and give the army subsequent reason to open fire on the protestors, which they did. There was open automatic weapon fire on the demonstrators for a full fifteen minutes; that was at about three am. The gunfire and killing continued for three days. Contrary to the international press reports on the incident, over 2,000 people got killed and tons more injured. However, it was impossible for the real death tolls to be reported because Suchinda piled the bodies on trucks and took them into the suburbs where they were then burned, before anyone could count them. There are numerous eye witness reports of this. The military would not allow wounded into the hospitals for obvious reasons that they could then be counted and on legal record. Doctors therefore took to the streets and nearby hotels to help, but the soldiers shot at them too. It was ugly and sad....

The underlying tensions in Burma and Sri Lanka are largely ethnic ones: between the Burman rulers and the many minority groups in Burma, and between
the Tamil Tigers (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the Sri Lankan Army, which is largely, though not entirely, Sinhalese. Political problems certainly exist within the majority groups of both countries as well, though I must limit myself to Burma in this regard. People are still very cautious in Sri Lanka about speaking too freely about the ruling party (UNP) and the "JVP trouble" several years ago. Trust does not come quickly to people who have heard gunshots in the night, and had no doubt that their young people were being murdered. This lack of trust and constant suspicion is one of the awful consequences of ruthless regimes. I cannot remember how many times I've been suspected of working for the CIA in the past several years. (On the contrary, I had once done intelligence-gathering for the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA/"No Such Agency") as a Vietnamese linguist, and was assigned to Clark Air Base in the Republic of the Philippines for 15 months, but this was just a personal coincidence.) Worse, the suspicion is not just directed at foreigners, or strangers.

As for Thailand, the minority groups constitute only about one percent of the population (numbering around 600,000, with over half of these being Karen) and pose little threat to national security. Like its neighbor Burma, the National Army is itself the unsettling and disturbing force. Unlike its neighbor, the minority groups in Thailand cannot be set up as scapegoats.

These three countries are also three of four countries which have predominantly adopted, and adapted, Theraveda (Hinayana) Buddhism (the fourth
being Cambodia). And all these countries are currently in the throes of political crises, as their citizens increasingly demand democratic rights and representative governments. Presently, the U.N. is undertaking a peace-keeping mission in Cambodia as the opposing factions form an uneasy alliance. ("Uneasy" is a mild term when the Khmer Rouge is involved.) This country is an important test case for the increasing role of the U.N. in today's world, a point not lost on the Burmese generals. Much blood has been shed in all these countries, and many people have died for democracy. Tragically, there is not much ground for optimism, though more ground perhaps in Thailand than in Sri Lanka, and more in Sri Lanka than in Burma, though this is, of course, a strictly personal impression of volatile conditions.

What I am primarily referring to here is the pressure tangibly felt in everyday life, pressure generated by the government, with the backing of the military. I felt almost none of this pressure in Thailand, and no one with whom I spoke did either, though I must admit that I avoided Bangkok as much as possible, which is itself virtually a country within a country, or, better, a city without the country. The pressure is noticeably turned up in Sri Lanka, from the moment one arrives at the heavily-guarded airport to the frequent warnings by sympathetic locals to be careful and security-conscious at all times, to the presence of armed soldiers throughout the country and the omnipresent discretion and suspicion. In Burma, the pressure is simply suffocating -- there exist only a few countries in the world with such a
headlock on the people. And the people can only be choked for so long, before they
either die, or strike back....

Just in: The Island, June 19, 1992:

Mothers of persons dead or missing in JVP-related violence and its
suppression on Tuesday wept as they broke coconuts while addressing
appeals of redress and retribution to Goddess Kali at the Kali Amman
Kovil in Modera, Colombo.

They were participating in the pooja ceremony conducted by the
Mother's Front.

...In a brief interview with foreign and local media personnel, outside
the Temple, Mr. Rajapakse said the objective of the prayers to
Goddess Kali was to seek divine punishment to those responsible for
the abductions and killings.

He added that over 60,000 youths had disappeared since 1988.

He said abductions by armed groups still continued.

* * *

With respect to research and writing, (call it "ethnography"), there is
something to be said for beating around the bush (not only as style, but also as
methodology): before long, the bush has been circumscribed, and one has come to
some kind of terms with it, be they what they may. Circumlocution can, at times,
finally render its point with a startling and unexpected clarity and lucidity. But
patience, that scarce commodity, is demanded.
A better analogy for this very worldly labor, to push my point (and, perhaps, my reader), may be ice-fishing: a small area is demarcated and a more or less arbitrary opening obtained -- albeit a relatively safe one. A world exists beneath the ice, but the vantage point is limited. One can, of course, jump through the hole, into the other world, but only at the risk of regaining the hole. (This is called "going native": one dwells amongst eternal difference.)

Should the reader so desire, this project could be construed as a twenty-six hole ethnography, lettered fragments of my fieldwork, not, however, fragments of any "field" or "culture" that I've only managed to get pieces of. The latter would presuppose some holistic, circumscribed object which does not exist, nor ever has. There is no "the Karen," which does not foreclose the utility of the phrase. Let us, however, try to be conscious of what is merely an abstract category which facilitates discussion, and something that might, for example, hurt us if it fell on us.

There are, more over, holes within holes: absences; blanks; letters unwritten; garden paths and paths not taken. Consider the alphabet, and what it has wrought. How different from hieroglyphs and ideograms, this phonetic, linear, anal string of symbols. Consider the imposition: on us, on others, and on this text. (Have we alternatives?) I could make numerous arguments justifying this form, after the fact, but the fact is that this form provides a structure within which to work, within which I can work. It is also a para-linguistic supplement which opens up another dimension of the text. A space to play.
The obscure object of research (it seems to me) materializes in its own shape and time -- it cannot be forced. My point is this: It is, in my opinion, more rewarding to be guided by one's subject than to guide it. There is no denying the fortuitousness of one's encounters; no two (re)searchers' paths will be the same; and, decisions, control, and author-ity are ultimately vested, admittedly to greater and lesser extents, in the researcher/writer/ethnographer. But, maintaining a flexible, open, and even passive agenda has been for me, for sure, enormously more fruitful and interesting than stubbornly maintaining some preconceived and prejudiced proposal and program, come what may. One does not know what, or who, may come. For this "method," or anti-method, to be able to manifest its designs, however, one needs flexibility, patience, and time -- considerable time. (Why am I thinking of "jazz"? With Kurtz as the headman.)

Continuing, I believe that much benefit may be derived from a style in which the structure of the writing echoes to some extent the sound of the experience, as it was lived, and heard. Moreover, the reader (and critic) in this case is given more ground to stand on, for whatever purpose, be it legitimation, evaluation, understanding, insight, or perhaps even pleasure. The reader can follow the writer, insofar as the writer reveals. As for this work, this, the range of revelation, remains to be seen. (Whether one's heart need be laid bare is another more personal, and more ethical matter. After all, anthropology, or more specifically, ethnography, is concerned with people, who are not (just) numbers, reactions, texts, molecules,
systems, (dis)orders, or ideas -- they are (that and) much more.) Others are involved, whose lives must be respected. Confidences must be maintained, secrets kept.

Whatever this effort may amount to, it is not a diary writ for public consumption, nor an exercise in vulgar reflexivity; nor is it a play or a novel or an adventure story (which is certainly not to minimize the value, contributions, and potential of these genres). It is, above all, an ethnography -- a writing about people, individually and collectively -- as subjectively experienced by the ethnographer, the writer, the author. Reflexivity in this context provides the reader with, among other things, insight into the construction of the ethnography at hand. The ghost-writer materializes from time to time, exposing presence.

It is also a story, which follows my personal theoretical thread: writing. I have not escaped the narrative net. To reduce it, what storyline have we? Put crudely, something like this: American ethnographer writes about American missionaries who, under British protection in colonial Burma, convert, educate, and organize persecuted Karen, who construct a "nation," rebel after independence, fight government for four decades, and finally come to host the entire opposition movement of all of Burma's ethnic groups in their jungle headquarters, from where the democratic challenge to the military dictatorship issues, and the blueprints are written for another new nation: this time, "Burma." Sounds like a good story. But it is shot through with arrows.

Keywords: Christianity, Colonialism, Conversion, Literacy, Culture, Ethnicity, Democratization, Primitivism, Exoticism, Change, Writing,
Is it true? Further, "Is all this relevant to my 'thesis?,' you may ask. Must it be? (Muss es sein?) Yes. And no. I come back to this.

Kandy; April 20, 1992:

When I came here to write, I thought I would be leaving my fieldwork behind, having completed yet another stage in my doctoral program. My present feeling, after only several weeks here, is that that break, in my case anyway, may turn out to be all too neat and artificial.

I am no longer in the field. I am not home (in Thailand? America?). Whether it is because I am still away, and further, so close, geographically and culturally, to what it is I am writing about, but no longer there, or whether it is for other reasons ( ), I am coming to believe that "fieldwork" never ends. Only contexts change. A way of seeing and being has already established itself. This, I now feel, will always remain. Is that what it means to be an anthropologist. Or, have I just been away from home alone too long?

* * *
The Sunday Times, April 19, 1992, Easter (Colombo, Sri Lanka), in a feature entitled
"An Easter meditation: 'why look for the living among the dead?' -- Rising above the
tombstones of false values," the writer, Louis Benedict, asks us:

What are the boulders or obstacles that prevent us from experiencing this new life in Sri Lanka today where even on the eve of the national New Year more than thirty five people were killed in vehicle-bomb explosions? In addition to all this violence and vice the nation is saddled today with prolonged water cuts and power cuts arising out of the worst drought in recent history.

Thousands are going through a desert experience physically, psychologically, and spiritually. As we stand in the presence of the Lord, we need to turn the searchlight inward and see some of the boulders we must roll away, if we wish to experience the ultimate reality of the new life above the self which Jesus offers us.

One of these boulders is racial prejudice which has caused up to ten thousand violent deaths over the past ten years in a bloodbath that has turned the once peaceful pearl of the Indian ocean into a cockpit of hatred and violence. When the boulder of prejudice is turned away by the power of the Lord, we will not relate to people in terms of race. We will not consider people as Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, or Burghers, but relate to all equally as human beings.

In *The Island*, Tuesday, April 21, 1992, we hear some of the things which have come to pass this Easter:

...In the Philippines, Asia's only Roman Catholic country, a grenade tore through an Easter Sunday procession in the southern city of Iligan, killing nine worshippers and wounding 70 others. ...The dead included four children aged up to 10, including a girl who played the role of an angel.

...Gunmen burst into a township house south of Johannesburg, herded family members into one room and shot dead eight of them, including children.
...In the former Soviet Union, television reports said more than 50 people had died in recent Azeri shelling of the predominantly Armenian village of Maraga, just north of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh enclave.

...[From the balcony of St. Peter’s basilica in Rome, the Pope, in his traditional Easter message, said]: May this Easter wish reach those still fighting in certain regions of Africa, in the middle of Europe, and in the Caucasus.

On a dusty hillside [in Moria, South Africa] named Zion City, Nelson Mandela appeared to cast himself in the role of Moses, saying: "We extended the hand of peace to the government. Like Pharaohs of old, the government spurned our calls for four long years. The convening of political talks was like the parting of the waters. We hope that the waters will not return until we have crossed to the Promised Land of democracy."

But Mandela said that, even as Christians worshipped at Easter, Police and security forces were attacking township residents in a continuation of battles that have killed 5,000 people in the last two years alone.

[Inkatha Freedom Party leader Mangosuthu] Buthelezi said in a veiled reference to the ANC: "It is as if Satan himself is out there next to all those pulling the triggers of AK-47s, pulling the pins out of hand grenades and striking matches to set people alight.

Yes, Easter is a specially meaningful day. Theologically, it is dear to Christians in many lands that were missionized, for it was on this day, or, according to some accounts, forty days afterwards, nearly 2,000 years ago when Christ, before finally leaving the earth, had a few last words with his eleven remaining disciples. (Judas, of course, had already done his part, and had gone on before.)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us about Jesus’ so-called Great Commission in similar words, concurring more in this matter than, say, in reporting Christ’s last
words; whereas John appears quite overwhelmed by the magnitude and scope of Christ's brief but brilliant career.

The first three Gospel writers have the resurrected Christ commissioning them to go forth into all the world, spreading the Word of God, and baptizing believers. A young man named Adoniram Judson, born in Massachusetts in 1788 and raised during the evangelical revival, truly took this to heart, and, along with several colleagues, pushed for the Congregationalist Church to support them and begin the American missionary enterprise. He and his wife arrived in Burma on July 13, 1813. The Judsons roughly mark the opening of our story. If another personality were to mark the end of this account, it would be the Christian leader of the Karen National Union, General Bo Mya, whose hospitality I will always appreciate, and whose words appear in an interview I have included in this text.

Lest we forget John. At the moment, another beginning, another ending, I feel a particular sympathy for his conclusion, the last verse of the last chapter of his beautiful Gospel:

*And there are also many things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.*

(Yes, you Karens (and you know who you are), have brought me closer to the Word, again, too.)
The Return of the Younger White Brother
With the Lost Books

Introduction

The history of the Karen struggle for a national identity, an independent state, self-determination, freedom from persecution, and democracy in Burma is a long, sad, and fascinating story, with a dramatic variety of colourful characters. Two of the major players, Christian missionaries, primarily American Baptist missionaries, and British colonialists, have already made their entrances and exits from the Burmese stage, though their absence is still strongly felt. The American missionaries came earlier, beginning in 1813, and left later, in 1963. The British conquered Burma in a series of three wars -- 1824, 1852, and 1885 -- and restored Burma's independence in 1947, having transformed the structures of power and popular cosmology irrevocably.

The two other groups central to this account had both lived in Burma for many centuries before the aforementioned white foreigners arrived with their particular missions and campaigns, and still remain today; their relations are none the better for these powerful spiritual, martial, and cultural interventions -- though they were hardly idyllic historically -- quite the contrary. These two groups are
generally classified as Karens and Burmans, though the classifications, as indeed most classifications, simplify and reduce the actual state of affairs, here socio-cultural affairs. Nonetheless, for many people on the ground in Burma, and for the theoretical purposes of this paper, these problematic labels hold up all too well, as we shall see.

The primary question I want to begin to address in this article (or letter/fragment), anthropologically and historically, is this: How is it that a previously un-unified and widely repressed minority group have come to their present state, so to speak, in which they find themselves the hosts for, and one of the most powerful and best-organized groups of, virtually the entire opposition to Burma's current government, the so-called State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC)? More specifically, what forces and events, what agents and institutions, catalyzed, contributed to, influenced, and/or sustained the unusually rapid social and political organization of a relatively small group of Karen villagers in Burma?

Further, this section contains an historical anthropological investigation into the emergence of Karen nationalism, focusing on the impact of American missionaries and British colonialists on Karen social and political organization, necessarily entailing a consideration of the power of the written word in achieving the missionaries' goals, as well as the significant unintended consequences of their mission.
The major developments pertaining to Karen nationalism occurred during the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century, especially during the turbulent times following the complete annexation of Burma to British India after 1885 and culminate in the Karen insurrection and rebellion in the year following Burmese independence in 1948.

* * *
The Return of the Younger White Brother

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying,
All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth,
Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing
them in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost;
Teach them to observe all things
whosoever I have commanded you:
And, lo, I am with you alway,
even unto the end of the world.

Amen.
--Matthew 28: 18-20

Never has the Christian missionary had a better opportunity to take tactful advantage of a national belief for the introduction of the Gospel of Christ.
--Zwemer, Samuel, or Brown

Although Great Britain only officially began annexing Burma to its Indian empire during the first Anglo-Burmese War, begun in 1824, an embassy had been opened in Rangoon in the late 18th Century, and British civil servants, soldiers and nabobs had already been probing the country for some time, apparently curious as to what this unknown land might have to offer.

In a book very popular among the Christian Karen with whom I worked in Thailand and Burma, Eternity in Their Hearts, the author attempts to show how
many cultures in the world have long believed in one great God; the section on "the Karen of Burma" begins with this set-piece² (Richardson: 73-75):

Near Rangoon, Burma, in the year 1795, an encounter took place in the following manner:

"If the inhabitants of that village are not Burmese," asked a sun-helmeted English diplomat, "what do they call themselves?"

"Karen," replied the diplomat's Burmese guide.

"Carian," mispronounced the Englishman.[...]"Very well,...let's see what these 'Carianers' look like."

The "Carianers," it turned out, were even more interested to discover what the Englishman looked like! This first encounter with a European's white face electrified people in that village. Drawn like moths to a lamp, they converged upon the diplomat, who recoiled slightly as wiry brown hands reached out to touch his arms and cheeks.

The Burmese guide, meanwhile, spoke disparagingly of the Karen: "Be careful! They're just wild hillpeople given to stealing and fighting," he scoffed.

It was not entirely true. The Karen were in fact the most progressive of Burma's many tribal peoples. Burmese, however, had abused and exploited the Karen for centuries, making such descriptions self-fulfilling.

Nor could Burmese Buddhists forgive the Karen minority for stubbornly adhering to their own folk religion in the face of unremitting attempts by the Burmese to make Buddhists of them!

The Englishman, in any case, was no longer listening to his guide. Cheerful Karen voices now charmed his ears. Every man, woman, and

² I have further chosen this piece because one of the most prolific living Karen writers, Mika Rolley, uses this in his collection of unpublished writings, "The Prophesies of the Karen," from which I will subsequently have further opportunity to draw on. The bracketed comments here are not mine, but Mika Rolley's.
child around him glowed with radiant welcome. How refreshingly different, he thought, from the usual Burmese crowd's aloofness towards foreigners.

A Karen man who could speak Burmese explained something to the guide.

"This is most interesting," the guide said. "These tribesman think you may be a certain 'white brother' whom they as a people have been expecting from time immemorial!"

"How curious," replied the diplomat. "Ask them what this 'white brother' is supposed to do when he arrives."

"He's supposed to bring them a book," the guide said. "A book just like one their forefathers lost long ago. They are asking -- with bated breath -- 'hasn't he brought it?'"

"Ho! Ho!" the Englishman guffawed. "And who, pray tell, is the author whose book has power to charm illiterate folk like these?"

"They say the author is Y'wa -- the Supreme God. They say also..." at this point the Burman's face began to darken with unease, "...that the white brother, having given them the lost book, will thereby set them free from all who oppress them."

The Burman began to fidget. The nerve of these Karen! This English diplomat was part of a team sent to arbitrate a dispute between Britain and Burma -- a dispute which Burma feared might give Britain pretext to add Burma to its empire. And now these wily Karen were practically inviting the British to do just that! Who would have guessed, he fumed, that simple tribesmen could be capable of such subtlety?

[...]"Tell them they're mistaken," he ordered, hoping to set the Burman at ease.[...]

"Could our forefathers have been mistaken?" asked a young Karen.

"Don't worry," responded an elder, managing a hopeful smile. "One day he will come. Other prophesies may fail, but not this one!"
Upon returning to Rangoon, the diplomat reported the incident to his superior, Lieutenant Colonel Michael Symes. Symes duly noted the incident (without the preceding embellishments), and it was later included in his book, *An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava, in the Year 1795*, published in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Symes' account is noteworthy for several reasons: 1) It is among the earliest documents concerning the exploits and adventures of the British in Burma; 2) It contains one of the earliest references to the Karen people of Burma in the English language; and 3), in a recently liberated colony now known as the United States of America, a young man in New England named Adoniram Judson had got hold of the book, and was intrigued by its descriptions of this exotic, *heathen*, land. (Another book called *The Star in the East*, by Claudius Buchanan, was also extremely influential to Judson's subsequent choice of mission location, although the element of chance played its customary role as well.)

This was a new century, the 19th, and Judson and his compatriots had brave new ideas. They had been trying to convince the elders of the Congregationalist Church in New England to support them in their bid to become the first American missionaries to be sent abroad, but had so far been unsuccessful. The church was far keener on converting the native American Indians than on venturing overseas to convert the Asian Indians, and their results in North America had not been promising -- the "Indians," for some reason, were refusing to give up the religion of
their ancestors in order to adopt the religion of their persecutors. But Judson, once having made up his mind, was never a man easily deterred from his goals, as his numerous biographers now tell us, and as these pages shall also briefly describe.

Judson was aware of the fact that (old) England already had foreign missionaries in the field, and had heard about the increasingly famous Dr. William Carey, sponsored by the British Baptists, who had set up in Serampore, India, in 1792. Now he wasted no time in journeying to London, in order to propose a joint venture with the American Baptists, who had just formed the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions. They agreed to support him and his colleagues - but, on their own terms: he was to be their missionary, under their auspices, banner, and control. Back in New England, the churchdeacons would not hear of such a post-colonial appropriation, and now managed to collect the necessary funds from the ambivalent but patriotic Congregationalists. It is safe to say that nationalistic sentiments, in addition to evangelistic ones, influenced the elders. This was, after all, only 34 years after the "Revolutionary War." (What they did not, and could not, know at that time was that nationalism was contagious, like a cultural smallpox.)

They sent the first two American missionary couples off in 1812. The young and newly-married Judsons and Newells sailed from Boston Harbor after a teary farewell. Full of evangelical zeal and proselytizing enthusiasm, they set sail to convert the heathens, whoever and wherever they might be -- their ultimate
destination at this time was unclear; they would first sail to British India to get the lay of the land.

After a series of false starts, including the Judsons having decided to become Baptists after their long, watery journey (necessitating alternate funding); having to adroitly manoeuvre through "the Raj," which was none too keen on missionaries converting their subjects -- the British government had tried to deport them to England; finally, Adoniram and Ann Judson found themselves sailing into Rangoon Harbor on The Georgianna, a ship which happened to be heading to Burma, on July 13, 1813. (The Newells never made it; Harriet Newell and the couple's newborn baby were dead -- a bad omen of the many untimely losses to come.)

Not surprisingly, the Burmese authorities and people did not welcome these foreign missionaries with open arms and hearts and souls; they were, however, permitted to occupy the small plot of land which William Carey's son, Felix, had abandoned earlier and, in traditional Burmese fashion, they were closely monitored. The fact that they were white foreigners was to be a serious problem for them in the years to come, as far as the Burmese authorities were concerned; inevitably, they were associated with the British invaders and suffered the consequences of such association.

Judson's accomplishments in his first decade in Burma were impressive, but converting Burmese Buddhists to Christianity was not one of them. He had mastered the language, made significant inroads into the translation of the Bible (from Greek
and Latin) into Burmese, begun a Burmese dictionary, and befriended a number of influential Burmese officials, but he had but a meagre flock of sheep. After 15 years, he had 15 converts -- a soul a year -- and with a population of 20 million or so (at that time), well....

The Buddhists for the most part were either uninterested, afraid of persecution and ostracization, or, for those who even considered "the earnest man's" teachings, could not relate to the message of Jesus Christ: His crucifixion, especially, was difficult for them to comprehend; how it was that the Son of God should allow himself to be executed on the Cross. This concept of vicarious atonement, along with that of justification by faith, and the even-to-Christians debatable and far-from-crystalline concept of the Trinity -- three pillars of evangelical Christianity -- was far-removed from the Buddhist cosmology, as many a missionary was to discover.

The Burma Baptist Chronicle tells us that "Dr. Judson, after comparing notes on [the] subject [of Buddhist Burman vs. animist Karen conversion] with [the missionary to the Karen and Bible translator (into Sgaw Karen)] Dr. Mason, remarked after baptizing two Burmans, 'When I laboured among the Karens at the commencement of that mission, I baptized about one hundred converts, and the whole of them did not cost me as much labour as it has to bring in these two Burmans'" (Maung Shwe Wa: 57).

Furthermore, the authorities were actively discouraging conversion to Christianity, and even association with the foreign Christians could cause trouble.
Converts and their families, who Judson referred to as "the fellowship of the persecuted," were tormented by the government in a way which was only to worsen over time, save the exceptional period and territories under British control.

The American converters and the British colonizers often came to work together, at times assisting and supporting one another. The missionaries, with their special linguistic skills and cultural contacts were utilized by the British for interpretation and recruitment. The British, above and beyond opening up all of Burma to missionary activity under their protection, contributed financially to the development of the educational system and the construction of hospitals and churches for the various ethnic groups who were becoming Christianized, and, at times, as we shall see, provided the missionaries and their flocks with arms and ammunition to help them put down rebellions and insurrections by the newly-subjugated, resentful and vengeance-seeking Burmese. This latter was a critical contribution towards the armed Karen nationalism that was emerging between the Second and Third Anglo-Burmese Wars. But I anticipate myself.

One day in 1828 Judson’s luck changed, and one of the most successful missions in the world was launched. It was not to be a Burman mission, however, but a Karen one.
The Lost Books Found

Children and grandchildren!
The powerful will continue to demand of the weak.
When they come by land, mourn --
When they come by water, laugh.¹
--Karen prophesy

For fifteen ticals of silver, the first Burman evangelist, Maung Shwe Bay, had bought a debt-slave named Ko Tha Byu in the market for Rev. Judson -- to help around the house, carry water, and whatnot. According to the Burma Baptist Chronicle, "It was [Maung Shwe Bay] who rescued the Karen murderer, Ko Tha Byu, from slavery and turned him over to the Judsons. In this way Maung Shwe Bay was responsible for the beginning of Christian work among the Karens" (p. 36).

Ko Tha Byu was a Karen man from Bassein with an extremely sordid past; among other things, he had murdered roughly thirty people. (All Karen Christians know of Ko Tha Byu. One joked to me that Ko Tha Byu would go around saying, "You! Become a Christian!...or else!" But some may see this as sacrilege.)

Reverend Mason described Ko Tha Byu as follows:

He was very illiterate, but his mental powers, though limited, were well-directed, and he had the rare faculty of concentrating all his powers and bringing them to bear upon a certain point. Thus having once realized the great doctrine of justification by faith, it seemed to be all-sufficient for him. It was the alpha and omega of his preaching,

for, ignorant as he was upon all other subjects, and obtuse in all his conceptions to a proverb, the moment he touched his favourite theme, he exhibited a power and force of illustration that surprised all that knew him (Mason 1843: 70).

When he died in 1840, or twelve years after his conversion, there were officially reported as members of Christian congregations in Pegu, above one thousand two hundred and seventy individuals of his countrymen, most of whom were indebted for their saving grace to his efforts. After his death Christianity rapidly spread, in spite of the drawbacks offered to its progress, and in 1852, or when the English declared war with Burmah, we find by a note from Dr. Mason, that seventy-six churches, with five thousand members, were reported to exist in Lower Pegu (McMahon: 170).

One day, in the course of performing his duties in the Judson compound, Ko Tha Byu paused to see exactly what it was this white man had been labouring over so diligently. He took up one of the religious tracts that Judson had been writing in Burmese, and gradually, for he was not a well-educated man by any means, the connection was made: Judson was the younger white brother prophesized about for so many years in Karen oral tradition, finally come back with the lost books to tell us of the true God, redeem our people, and restore our former greatness. Like Saul of Tarsus' great rebirth on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:5: "the Lord saying, 'it IS hard for thee to kick against the pricks'"), Ko Tha Byu's life was likewise transformed, "and immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized" (Acts 9:18).

The first Karen author and nationalist leader, T. Thanbyah, who figures prominently in this account, compares Ko Tha Byu to the Biblical Joseph, "who was
sold as a slave out of hatred and imprisoned, which led to his rescuing the children of Jacob (the Israelites) from famine and making them a great nation." (Because of the folklore of the Karen and their Biblical parallels, and examples like the resemblance of the Karen word for God, "Y'wa," to the Hebrew "Yahweh," the Karen have been hypothesized by some to be one of the lost tribes of Israel. Others suggest some historical contact with the Nestorian community in China. At this point, the surest statement on the matter may be to say that "only God knows," and continue on with what it is that we mortals like to think we know beyond doubt.)

Judson, taking the torch, sent for reinforcements from America, enthusiastic about the results of Ko Tha Byu's initial in-gatherings. The first missionaries to be sent to the Karen people began arriving, men and women whose names would be long remembered and respected in missionary circles and in the Burma Baptist community: Boardman, Wade, and Mason in the beginning; (the "American Karens") Vinton, Bunker, Kincaid, and Nichols following shortly thereafter; and after them, hundreds of others, until no longer allowed entry by Burma's emerging 20th Century dictator, General Ne Win -- but that was over a century away, plenty of time in which to accomplish their mission goals of creating a self-supporting, self-directing, and self-propagating church on foreign soil. Their mission was successful by these standards.

* * *
I did neither research nor writing during this period.  
One cannot write and live at the same time.  

One writes in order to live, or to reflect on life.  
And reflection is not life, not really.  
It is far too self-conscious.  

It is a transcription of the past -- for the future.  
It is therefore a time of absence, a blank time.  
Like all representations, it is not real.  
It is a moment of death.  

One leaves little behind when one goes.  
But the legacy of letters remains.  
Letters written and unwritten.  
Lives lived...in form.  
A record.  
Cultural Conversions

For He is like a refiner's fire.
--Malachi 3:2

In the mid-Nineteenth Century, Reverend Francis Mason described the missionaries' reception as follows:

"The history of the introduction of Christianity among the Karens is, perhaps, too full of 'truth stranger than fiction,' to be believed by those who have not been actors in the scenes, themselves. Take Mergui for a single instance. Mr. and Mrs. Wade were the first to visit the Karen villages of Mergui with the gospel, and a more interesting reception than was given them, it were difficult to find on record. They were led by an intelligent chief, now a pillar in the church, and were met on their arrival by 'several young women whom he had invited, among others, to meet them,' singing a hymn of which the first verse and chorus was,

The Lord his messengers doth send,
And he himself will quickly come;
The priests of Boodh, whose reign is short,
Must leave the place to make them room" (Mason, 1843: 149).
With respect to "the Karen," Mason\(^2\) attempted to set the record straight:

"The remarkable success of the Karen mission has created the impression that the Karens receive the gospel readily wherever it is preached; but nothing can be farther from the truth. The first Karen settlements south of Tavoy were visited by Mr. Boardman, and by nearly every Tavoy missionary since, without the slightest measure of success. The assistants and myself were never treated more uncivilly than there, by either Burmese, Karens, or Talaings; and they could never be persuaded to send a single pupil to our schools, nor receive a school teacher to their villages. Nor is this a solitary or rare instance. In the Tenasserim provinces, at least, such has been the rule; the ready reception of the truth, the exception. The missionary in his sketches has thrown the former into shade, because none love to contemplate them; and brought the latter into the sunlight, like the traveller's picture of the desert, with the oasis in the foreground."

Christ's messengers to foreign lands had an unexpected confrontation with the concept of culture. Before too long, many were discussing applied and "practical anthropology," the latter becoming the name of a missionary journal. Strategies were developed over the years, and doctorates of missiology were written on how best to penetrate a particular cultural group and tweak it appropriately towards the desired Christian end.\(^3\) Prime targets were emerging: MINORITY GROUPS: OPPRESSED: ANIMIST: UNDEVELOPED.

Unfortunately for many of our missionaries, large numbers of Karens had already become Buddhists in Burma, especially in the delta area, and were well on the way to a practical assimilation into mainstream Burmese society and culture. They were filling their jars with local water, as Adoniram Judson would have it: He spoke of a man offering to fill two earthenware jars, one of which stood empty and the other filled with earth oil, called in Burmese *stinking water*:

"The man goes to the owner of the empty jar and asks him if he may fill it with pure and sweet water. 'Oh, yes, I shall consider it a favour.' So the Karen receives the truth, the benefits of a written language, the instruction in books and the elevation that follows, as favours conferred; and as there are few stains from ancient superstitions, he becomes a good Christian.

\(^3\) See Conklin, James, *Worldview Evangelism*, for a remarkable example.
"But let the Christian teacher next go to the owner of the jar filled with earth oil. He must first empty it, which the owner considers great waste. He would say, ‘You are taking away my property; this is my merit which I have been many years gathering. You wish to deprive me of my offerings.’ But the teacher says, ‘If you drink that oil it will poison you; let me give you water which will ensure life eternal.’

‘Oh, my ancestors have all drunk this and I wish to do the same; this is good for me and yours for you.’ But after long argument and persuasion, he gains the man’s consent to give up the earth oil, and he labours through the process of dipping it out and cleansing the jar. He rubs and he washes, and by-standers may say, ‘We do not perceive that the water is any sweeter than the oil.’ Sometimes the man himself agrees that the smell is as bad as before and the change has been of no use, so he upsets the jar and starts to fill it with oil again. But fortunately the process often results in a thorough cleansing and an appreciation of the new which is the greater for the long struggle involved. When this happens, the change is a happy one and forever" (Maung Shwe Wa: 132-33).

One hundred fifty years later, in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the American Baptist missionary Reverend Edwin Hudspith explained it to me like this:

"Buddhism is a façade. You look down the street. How many Buddhist Thai houses do you see that don’t have a spirit house? And you watch a murder take place in a house like that and boy I’m telling you they bring in the priests to exorcise the spirits....
"One of the reasons there's such a big church amongst the animist people here is just this very fact, that here you have an animist who for his salvation is seeking help from the outside by sacrifices and obeisances to this myriad pantheon of spirits that he holds to ok?

"Now a Buddhist comes along and says, 'You gotta do good to get good. That's the way to save yourself.' So he's building up his merit ok? They deny the spirits, but they all practice it ok? but religion is doing merit. The bigger the stack of merit you got the better you're gonna be in the next life ok?

Christianity comes along and says, 'Hey! You're saved by grace! God gave His Son -- He has effected your atonement all you got to do is receive Him. Accept His gift. "By grace ye is saved through faith." Not of works ok?

"The guy whose got a stack of works here. He's not gonna give that up. 'I spent a lifetime doing this!' So for him to accept something with pure grace, gratuitous gift, very difficult because he's gotta give up his. Salvation is a, is a, is a...is not...if you see it as a change of allegiance, I think you can understand it better.

"He's aligned to building himself up in his works.... Animism is allegiance to Satan. ok? Now I'll tell you how that starts in a family...that's where his allegiance is, that's who he's worshipping, that's where he gets his guidance from and prosperity and everything ok? When he gets sick when he dies he's the one who does the pleading and guiding and providing for ok?
"Whereas the Christian then comes in and says, 'Hey! The Lord your God He is one!' Myriad gods here...one God here. These guys here are a hierarchy of gods, so you've got weak ones good ones, you got bad ones and you got strong ones.

"Over here you have one, who's almighty. Spirits? One great Holy Spirit Almighty.

"Now. Just plain sheer arithmetic sheer business sense who ya gonna follow? Very acceptable you see, so this is why you have much more conversion rate amongst the animist than you do amongst the Buddhists because of this basic worldview philosophies of life."

Reverend Mason elaborated on converting Buddhists thusly:

Idolatry seems to have a singular power to stultify the mind in the reception of the truth. In proportion as the Karens have received Buddhism, in the same proportion is the difficulty of bringing them to Christ increased. Hence the reason so few Pwos have been converted. Some have attributed it to the less labour bestowed upon them; but this is the effect, not the cause. When the missionaries first went among the Karens, they preached in Burman, and knew no distinction between Pwos and Sgaus. Of the first seven baptized by Mr. Boardman, one was a Pwo, and the other six Sgaus. The Sgaus being the readiest to receive the gospel, naturally received the most attention. When missionaries were appointed to the Pwos exclusively, the results proved that the most indefatigable labors among them brought scarcely "thirty fold," to the full hundred when directed to the Sgaus (Mason, 1843: 100).

This sub-cultural phenomenon, the fact that Sgaw Karen were much more easily converted than Pwo Karen, became an issue among missionaries, whose bread and butter was the converted soul. In retrospect, these findings are rich material for
early notes towards an anthropology of religion. A few more observations from the pioneering "Karen" missionary Francis Mason:

It is a singular fact that while it is rare to find a Sgau who is a Buddhist, the Pwos have gone over as a nation to that faith, and appear contented with it; though, looking at Buddhism on paper, it has many vulnerable points for Christianity to breach, which promise the preacher a speedy victory. It is the most remarkable monument of man's spiritual wants, of his yearning for deliverance from sin, that man has ever erected. It fully recognizes his lost and ruined state, and the necessity for some extraordinary way of deliverance. The evil is regarded as so deep that it is inseparable from his being, and can only be eradicated by the cessation of existence.4

The scholar-missionary at times pushes his observations into very interesting "social scientific" territory, essentially musing on the concept of "culture." The theological/anthropological continuum, however, is somewhat dodgy turf for the missionary to tread. An acceptance of the fact that it is not to the heart of the potential convert that one is speaking, but rather through a culturally-conditioned mind, gradually became clear to the missionaries. Instead of articulating this insight in ethnic terms, however, the political term, "nation," was invoked, a decisive and divisive categorization.

One can also imagine the consternation of the elders back in New England, who were not always pleased by the missionaries activities, and at what seemed to them to be all too much responsibility and authority being exercised by their distant apostles. The missionaries were becoming "national" leaders among non-existant nations.

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4 In the Baptist Missionary Magazine, September, 1856, p. 363.
Reverend Mason wisely and diplomatically notes the results of the early missionaries' forays into diverse cultural milieux:

Those who condemn the Burmese missionaries for lack of success, should study cases like these. Some of the brethren in the Burmese department have suffered no little injustice in the estimation of many, from a misunderstanding of this matter. The history of the missions shows that every Sgau missionary has been a successful preacher, while every missionary to the Burmese has had but a very moderate measure of success. The difference is not in the cultivators, but in the soils they cultivate. It requires far more labor to obtain thirty fold from the rocks of New England, than one hundred from the rich bottoms of Illinois and Missouri. This is proved, if proof is required, when the missionary turns from one people to the other. Judson, Wade, and Boardman had "apostolic success," when they labored for the Sgau Karens; but when they preached to the Burmese, they were no more successful than their associates in the Burman mission. The difference is not in the men, nor in the measures; but in the minds of the Sgaus and the Burmese (Mason, 1843: 101-102).

The critical theo-missiological point was curiously neglected here: the message: the Word. In effect, Reverend Mason was admitting that both the missionaries themselves and their individual evangelical methodologies made little difference in the face of their particular audience. Additionally, according to Mason, the problem was psychological, in their minds; it was not yet articulated in anthropological, terms, despite the fact that the distinguishing criterion was cultural, or, in this case, sub-cultural, between Sgaw and Pwo Karen, even though it appears to have been implicitly understood.

At this point in time, the individual took precedence over the group for the missionary, though this belief was beginning to change, in light of their experiences among different groups, as well as their results among those practicing different
religions. Mr. McMahon, who was assisted in his book on the Karen, The Karens of the Golden Chersonese, by Reverend Mason, offers the following observation concerning animist/Buddhist differences:

With few prejudices, and no deeply-rooted convictions to get rid of, his [the animist’s] whole system of religion consists in propitiating the tutelary deities presiding over the various objects of nature; the Karen therefore is naturally more susceptible to the teachings of Christianity than the Burman, who is trammeled with the dogma of metempsychosis and the metaphysical conceptions of the faith of Buddha. As Dr. Mason happily puts it: "The faith of a Burman is the faith of a man welling up from the deeps of his mental faculties; but the faith of a Karen is the faith of a child with no deep roots in the understanding. The Karens are like the Samaritans, who at the first hearing, 'with one accord, gave heed unto the things that Phillip spake,' but the Burmans are like the Bereans, who searched the Scriptures daily whether those things were so" (McMahon: 53-54).

In other words, the Burmese had a great literary-religious tradition, Buddhism, in which they believed body and soul. For many, their actions were dedicated to the making of merit in order to improve their station in life the next time around. Why give all this up and be subjected to persecution, social ostracism, and personal danger? Further, why join the ranks of their white oppressors, and their sycophantic lackeys, as the new Christians were perceived. The lines were being drawn.

And for the Karen converts, the lines were in Karen, their long-lost writing. As animists, their responsibility was to propitiate the many spirits, mostly evil ones at that. Great sacrifices, literally, had to be made to ensure one's safety. Life was precarious, and danger was always imminent.
Now, their long-prophesied redeemers had returned from across the water. And, as ultimate confirmation of the prophecy, they had indeed brought "the writing" with them. The potency of their internalized oral tradition reinforced the acceptance of their new-found literate World Religion. They were implicitly certain that what differentiated them from their powerful neighbors was their lack of writing, the absence of books. They demanded to be given the Bible in Karen. And the missionaries complied, becoming fluent in the language of their new disciples.

Thus, because the language of the Church was Karen, the hymnals and studybooks were in Karen, the preachers spoke Karen, and everyone, including the foreigners, wore traditional Karen costumes to Christian gatherings, the Church accomplished an unintended phenomenon. Although converting Karens by the thousands from animism to Christianity, the Church has served as a primary vehicle in key aspects of Karen "cultural" maintenance. The Karen language, oral and written, but especially written, has been maintained and safeguarded by the Church. It is predominantly Karen Christians who are literate in Karen, and who pass these skills on to the next generation.

Karen costumes are worn to church services and other weekly religious meetings, such as Christian Endeavor, and the Karen Women's Organization meetings, which have served an important function for the solidarity and advancement of Karen women. Traditional Karen celebrations are frequently maintained in Christian villages as well, particularly in the areas of singing and
dancing. The main demand of the Baptists is to say goodbye to the spirits forever. Some missionaries even allow farewell ceremonies to be held for this purpose, although many object to such a practice.

Once converted, the mobility begins, physically, psychologically, and socially. One's cosmology is redefined. No longer a member of just a village, the Karen Christian finds a larger community within his or her ken. Many individuals from small and isolated villages move into the cities, to the centers of the local Christian community, be it in Toungoo, Bassein, Moulmein, or any number of other centers. Children attend excellent schools. Hospitals are available with the latest technology. New occupations and avenues of social mobility are opened. One has access to a new power, and it is white -- as in American and British, who are perceived to be the new pre-eminent rulers of Burma, especially after 1886 and King Theebaw's deposition.

Christianity was in deed miraculous for many Karens. With literacy and an expanded social organization, and an unprecedented security and confidence in their social status vis-à-vis Burmans, the Karen Christian community began to surpass the Burmans in many arenas, as previously indicated. All these developments were viewed with suspicion, envy, and animosity by the formerly "superior" Burman élite. Longstanding racial prejudices were exacerbated, and the desire for vengeance upon their "traitor" compatriots increased in direct proportion to minority advancement. When opportunities arose for "retaliation" by the Burmans, they were seized, and
gruesome atrocities were perpetrated, as we shall have occasion to narrate in part below.

For the time being, however, in the mid- to late-Nineteenth Century, the Word was still spreading, and the harvest continued. For the missionaries and their enthusiastic believers, it was an exciting time, millenarian in scale, and irrevocable by design. Witness the thrill in the following tale of books, as narrated by the leading Christian nationalist leader of the time.

* * *
T. Thanbyah, in the first book written by a Karen in the new Karen script (devised by Reverend Jonathan Wade), *The Karens and Their Persecution, A.D. 1824-1854*, wonderfully describes the Karens' excitement at having their lost books returned, and the reasons for this excitement. I draw heavily on this book, and his second one, *The Karens and Their Progress, A.D. 1855-1890*, for several reasons. Firstly, Thanbyah's is a Karen voice, obviously important to draw on in an ethnographic work, in my opinion, whenever possible. Not only is his simply a Karen voice, however, but as the founder of the Karen National Association in 1881, he is also a central figure in this account. Secondly, his books have thus far not been published in English, and these extracts will be of interest to many readers, and may lead to their publication. (I remain grateful to my super-anonymous Karen informant for his excellent translations.) Thirdly, aside from being interesting sui generis, these texts are noteworthy as an early example of writing by a member of the Sgaw Karen sub-group which, at the time, has only recently had their language reduced to writing.

The similarities with the oral story-telling tradition are apparent in its reliance on personal experience and concrete details. It is extremely telling that Thanbyah, with the aim of writing Karen history, has written what amounts to historical accounts
of the missionary enterprise among the Karen in Burma. Like subsequent Karen authors, he draws on American missionary works and neglects telling his accounts, for the most part, of what has already been written. This evidences not only a high respect for the missionary authors, but for the written word as well. Criticism or revisionism is not yet considered. The stylistic affinity with the Bible is outstanding; the Bible is far and away the most widely read literature for these Karen, and for later literate Karen (in Karen) as well -- there are few other options for reading in the Karen language, as there have been very few Karen authors. We will meet several of them in due course, and continue this discussion, but for now, I give you Reverend T. Thanbyah, D.D.M.A., who has been waiting patiently (through this (overly) long paragraph) to relate the story of the return of the Karens' long-lost books and the fulfillment of their prophesy. (I have italicized his account to distinguish it from mine.)
The Karen people have a folklore which says that they had their own literature. Because of their negligence, they lost their literature and had to live in poverty and persecution among the other races with whom they cohabitated. But the folklore went on to say that the younger brother, white man, will bring back their book, and when they receive it and learn it, they will learn the blessings of God and will live without worries and woes. So, now, the news is that their book has returned to Headman Shwe Waing, and it is the book that he received in the Karen language which came from a white man. Therefore, the Karen multitude, when they heard this, raised their heads and listened with great joy and they yearned to see and touch the book. (This could be the book of Heaven and Earth.) I thought so because we children, about fifty or sixty of us, learned this book in 1848, but we never had a copy of our own. Only our teacher had one copy of a book and that book was the Book of Heaven and Earth. The teacher never let any of us touch it.

Every boy and girl had a wooden plank which was painted black with a mixture of charcoal powder and rice glue. [...] We copied his writing one step at a time till the end we learnt it by rote. When we completed the alphabets, he wrote down two or three lines from the Book of Heaven and Earth. For example, "Who created the Heaven and Earth?" "God created."

We copied this and we learnt them by heart. But none of the students had the book. We could not touch it because the teacher was afraid that his book might get torn. Therefore he forbid us to touch it.
When the Karens heard about the book in Headman Shwe Waing’s hands, the Karens from far and near went to his house mostly at night when the Burmese could not see, or failed to see, at a time when the Burmese would not know, and by the most secret routes. Some had to travel for several days, but the Karens did go. So Headman Shwe Waing’s house was over-crowded as everybody wanted to get a close look at the earliest possible opportunity, but nobody dared make any noise for fear of accidentally notifying the Burmese.

When they got close to the book, one would give it a quick hold, another just touched it with the tip of his thumb only once, some stretched out their hands, some struggled closer to see the letters, some would like to smell the pages. You could see that ultimately hands intertwined and eyes were strenuously strained on the book. Ah! It might get torn! Therefore, two people tenderly held up the book for all to see. Only then, the whole multitude -- young girls and boys, old folks, children -- all stared with awe without blinking to admire the book. They all heaved a big sigh deep down from their chests. They even dared not breathe heavily. They all held their breath!

Everybody had something to say! Some praised the book! Some could barely whisper. But they just had endless praise for the book, because this is what God with love gave them back as their forefathers had told them. That is not all. When they got back to their homes, they were busy describing what they had seen and answering endless questions by the less fortunate. And they never tired in singing praise to the book. It was more than a marvel for all who heard and they just couldn't resist the urge to see
it with their own eyes. So the number of people that went to see the book, leaving behind all other things and making risky, secret journeys grew day in and day out.

It was said that when Thra Boardman went to preach the gospel in the mountains among the Karens soon after he reached Tavoy and baptized Ko Tha Byu, he happened to mention that the Karens' teacher the white man had come to return the golden book of God. And at that time in that region lived an old Karen man who was respected as a prophet. When the old prophet heard of this white man (Thra Boardman), and the book, he went to visit Thra Boardman in Tavoy. He took along with him a bundle which he sincerely appeared to revere and worship. After talking with Thra Boardman, he carefully unwrapped the layers of muslin protecting his sacred object, and took out a book, then handed it to Thra Boardman saying, "This is the book that God left us. And I got it from a white man." But when Thra Boardman took a close look, he found that it was a prayer book used by the English at prayer service. And the language was English.

Later, Thra Boardman told the Karens that although the book was a good one, it was not the Book of the Words of God, the Bible, which the missionaries had brought. And he taught them to revere God as the Bible says and worship God. Therefore many Karens in the Tavoy mountains at one place became converts. At first they only saw that book and remembering their fore-fathers' folklore, wrongly worshipped the book. The same thing happened with the people who had gone and seen the book with Headman Shwe Waing. The book that Thra Boardman saw was only in English, but
the book that Headman Shwe Waing had was in Karen, and when it was read, it sounded in Karen. So the Karens who heard about it were overjoyed and wanted to know most about that one. Their thirst for it can never be fully satiated. They never tired of talking about it either. Just by listening to them, it appeared to be a great miracle. There might have been some people who did not remember the prophesies of their fore-fathers, and so the distance to the book seemed far for them and they were unable to proclaim in a loud voice saying, "Now we the Karens will be with their own God who will crush their arch-enemy that has persecuted them for ages." Who can tell, but, as we know, it was a great joy and comfort for the Karens in the days of persecution. Those who had seen and heard the words from this book, wherever they went or stopped, they couldn't stop talking about it and praising it. Even children, young ladies and women, talked about this book. If possible, they would steal a glance at the book at night when the owner was fast asleep, just to pacify and satisfy their immense excitement.

* * *


Another Story of Books

by Reverend Francis Mason

On reaching Tamenmatsa, a Pwo settlement a few hours walk south of Pyeekhya, we found one or two men who had visited Mr. Boardman in Tavoy and returned with the report that all the people were directed by him to build zayats, and worship according to the Christian books. They had therefore built a very fine chapel, with a graduated pyramidal roof, after the model of the finest Buddhistic religious buildings. The interior had a double court, one elevated a few steps above the other, and a central room; each separated from the other by a partition of mats, three or four feet high. A model of a smaller temple stood in the central sanctum sanctorum, in which was placed a bundle of Burmese tracts with a copy of Matthew’s Gospel. One of their number had taken the office of teacher upon himself, cut his hair short, wore a close cap decorated with rows of the golden-green wing-cases of buprestis beetles, and dressed himself in a long white robe like a Mohammedan imam. On their worship days, the teacher, or some other of their number, who could read Burmese, read a portion of Matthew or one of the tracts, and they were then laid in the little temple; when all prostrated themselves and worshipped the books. The teacher prayed before us most eloquently for the spread of Christianity, and readily agreed, as did his people, to purge the chapel of everything objectionable, and render his worship more like the teaching of the Scriptures. Next rainy season,
this teacher called on me in Tavoy, professing himself a sincere believer; but he said, when he began to require the people to act in accordance with the Scriptures, they drove him out of the settlement. They were all ready to worship the Bible, prostrating themselves and knocking their heads on the ground, but not one was willing to obey the precepts it enjoined. Every year, for more than a dozen afterwards, the gospel was preached to that people by myself, or my assistants, or both, in Pwo, Sgau, and Burmese, without ever gathering a single convert into the fold; while about twice the same amount of labor bestowed on Pyeekhya, close by, brought in the first hundred members of that church....

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*The Book of Heaven and Earth*

(Judson's first tract in Burmese)

(Translated by W.P., Research Assistant)

1. Who created the heaven and the earth and everything existing? (God created.)

2. Who is God? (God has neither beginning nor end but he has been since long, long ago.)

3. How many gods are there? (There is but only one God.)

4. Will we suffer for sin if we worship what is not God? (We will suffer greatly for this sin.)

5. Where is God? (God is everywhere and resides in His City in Heaven.)

6. If God is everywhere, why don't people see Him? (God is not like human beings but He is the Spirit. Therefore, people cannot see him.)

7. If people cannot see God, how can people know Him? (If we trust in the Bible, and books that the Son of God Jesus Christ gives us, we can know God.)

8. Why do people call Jesus Christ the Son of God? (Because virgin Mary was pregnant with Jesus Christ with God's Holy Spirit we call Him the Son of God.)

9. Why do people call Jesus Christ the Son of man? (Jesus Christ incarnated in the belly of a human being, the virgin Mary, so we call Him the Son of man.)

10. Where did Jesus live before he came down to this human world? (Before Jesus Christ came down to this human world, he was the real God and resided with His Father God in Heaven.)

11. Why did God ask his Son to come down to this human world? (So that God could save humans from sin and redeem man from Hell, He sent His Son to come down to this human world.)
12. If God's Son did not come down, would there be nothing to save us from our sin? (If God's Son did not come down for our salvation, there would be nothing to save us from sin.)

13. These human beings, what did they do that caused them to suffer for their sins? (These human beings trespassed the words of God, so they suffer for their sins.)

14. How many main points are there in God's words? (There are two main points in God's words.)

15. What does His first point say? (His main point, the root, says to turn back to God and love Him with all your heart.)

16. What does His second point say? (The second point says: love your neighbors as yourself.)

17. When God first created man, did they have sin? (In the beginning, when God created man, they were pure at heart, so they had no sin.)

18. Nowadays does every man who lives in this world have sin? (Every man in this world has already transgressed the words of God, therefore all have sin.)

19. How should those who have transgressed the words of God suffer for their sins? (Those who have transgressed the words of God should best suffer the persecution of Hell for ever and ever.)

20. Jesus Christ, in order to save human beings from the sin of Hell, what was the one thing that he did? (In order to save human beings from the sin of Hell, Jesus Christ let Himself be crucified on the cross and donated Himself.)

21. After giving away his life, has Jesus Christ disappeared up until now? (After giving away his life, He resurrected in three days.)

22. Since then, is it so that Jesus Christ never died again? (Since then, Jesus Christ never died again. He stayed in this world for forty days, and after that He went back up to Heaven in glory, and has lived together with His Father God even up till now.)

23. Because Jesus gave his life, will all human beings be saved from Hell? (All the human beings are not saved from Hell.)

24. Who are those who will be saved from Hell? (The followers of Jesus Christ will be saved from Hell.)
25. What type of people are those who we call "the followers of Jesus Christ"? (Those who we call "the followers of Jesus Christ" are they who believe in Jesus Christ and get baptized.)

26. Do the followers of Jesus Christ behave like non-believers? (The followers of Jesus Christ do not behave like non-believers. They obey all that is taught to them by Jesus Christ.)

27. The followers of Jesus Christ, when they die, where will they end up? (The followers of Jesus Christ, when they die, will go up to the City of God and will never be sick, will never age, die, or disappear, but live on for ever and ever, peacefully and joyfully like the heavenly bodies.)

28. Those who are not the followers of Jesus Christ, when they die, where will they be? (Those who are not the followers of Jesus Christ, when they die, they will go to Hell and will not be able to live peacefully and joyfully, but will suffer for their sins in Hell for ever and ever without end.)

29. Is it because we believe in ourselves (or because of our self-confidence) that we are able to become the followers of Christ? (Any single human being can easily waver and be destroyed, and unless we receive new life, we cannot become true followers of Jesus Christ.)

30. How can we receive new life? (Our new life is what the Holy Spirit creates in us, and in that way we receive it. What we wanted a while ago, if that we hate; and if we want again what we hated a while ago, we will know that we have already received our new life.)

31. So that the Holy Spirit will give us new life, to enable Jesus Christ's salvation, what shall we do? (Repent and confess your sins and worship God with fervent admission and beseeching.)

32. How shall we worship with fervent admission and beseeching? (Worship with fervent admission and beseeching like this: Father God, I have greatly wronged Thee. Lord, Ye could and should reject me and send me to the great Hell. Yet, the Son of God has already died for me, and I desire to depend on Him. Therefore, have pity on me and grant me the good and holy new spirit. Save me and free me from any of my sin that I have so that I will be able to become the follower of Jesus Christ, so that I will remember and obey the words of the Lord, mend and turn my soul back to "the right." Pour the Holy Spirit down on me. And when I die, let me not go to Hell. And so that I may get to the heavenly city of joy and peace, look after me, and have pity on me, O Father God, Amen.)
Learn

1. Return to God and love Him with all your heart.
2. Love your neighbor as yourself.
3. Remember your sin and think of your repentance.
4. Believe in Jesus Christ and be baptized.
5. Don’t envy the happiness and goodness of non-believers, but desire more of the goodness and joy of Heaven.
6. Don’t let laziness dwell in you but crave for work.

* * *
The Word Made Flesh

I am more and more convinced that Burmah is to be evangelized by tracts and portions of Scripture. The press is the grand engine for Burmah. Every pull of the press throws another ray of light through the empire.

—Adoniram Judson

The birth of the Christian Karen "nation" took place with the young, sickly Reverend Boardman and the aging murderer-turned-evangelist Ko Tha Byu travelling throughout British-controlled lower Burma, mostly in the Tavoy-Mergui areas; and for Ko Tha Byu, in the Moulmein, Rangoon, and western Arakan fields as well. Boardman wrote of him, "If Karens were accessible, no fatigue, no obstacles would prevent his seeking them out" (Maung Shwe Wa: 309). Village after village converted, hearing the good news of the Christians: that their time had finally come - - their prophesies had been fulfilled; the white brother had returned, bringing with him the lost books and the ensuing benefits of education, health care, and material and social advancement; and they also now had a great world religion of their own, in contradistinction to the Burmans' Buddhism. Their strongest desire now was to put it in writing, in their own language. They wanted it in Karen, not Burmese. Karen was their "truth-language."

Mrs. Calista V. Luther described this desire in her book on the Vintons:

This desire to read "God's word,"...was a remarkable characteristic of the Karens; and it was this which was the secret of those educational
movements which were so misunderstood, not to say misrepresented, in America. It took American Christians thirty years to learn that a Karen would not take his knowledge of the gospel at second hand, but insisted upon his right to be taught by missionary schools to read in his own tongue "the long-lost law of his God" (Luther: 83).

Ko San Lone cites Karen folklore to this effect also,

writing:

"The Burmese language is not our language, and their ways are not our ways:

These letters we must not receive,
The Golden Book alone believe." (Sowards: 9-10).

Before he undertook the task of reducing Karen to writing, Reverend Jonathan Wade described one of the events that changed his ministry from the ethnic Burmans to the Karens, a trip to one Karen village:

I set out ...to visit a Karen village at Dongyan, about twenty miles north of Moulmain.

"On our arrival, every man, woman, and child had deserted their dwelling, and hid themselves in the jungles.

"...after some time one or two of the men summoned sufficient courage to show themselves, and ask our object in coming to their village.

"Ko-Myat-Kyan told them our only object was to tell them about the true God, and the way of salvation.

"'Oh, is that your object?' they replied, 'we thought you were Government officials, and we were afraid; but if you are religious teachers, come to tell us of God, we are happy; we will listen, Have you brought God's Book?' ...I replied, yes, we have brought the Book of God (showing them a Bible), but it is in the language of the foreigners, though parts of it have been translated into the language of
the Burmans. Can you read Burman? 'No, we cannot; you must translate it for us, as you have for the Burmans.'

"By this time the villagers generally had learned our object in coming, and ventured out of their hiding places....

"I [told them]: 'I came from the land of the foreigners, to teach the Burmans the true religion. I have learned their language, but do not understand Karen. I am obliged to speak to you through an interpreter; but I will write to those who sent me out, to send a teacher for the Karens, who will study your language, reduce it to writing, and translate God's Word for you, if on your part you will learn to read, and let your children learn; else the labour and expense will be lost. Will the Karens do it?'

'Yes, we will, and we will worship God, when we are taught his requirements. Our fathers have told that when the white foreigners bring us the lost Book, and teach us the true religion, we must listen and obey, then prosperity will return to us: but if we do not listen and obey, we shall perish without remedy....Yes, we will listen and obey; but how long will it take for a teacher to come, learn our language, reduce it to writing, and translate for us the Book of God?'

"I said I thought it could be accomplished in ten years. 'Alas! it will not then be done in my day,' exclaimed a man who had nearly completed his three-score years and ten. 'But you must not wait for a new teacher, you must begin at once.' (Wylie: 171-73 passim).

And so it came to pass that in 1832, Reverend Jonathan Wade, although in poor health and about to leave Burma on furlough, adapted the Burmese script to the Karen language. He chose to use the Burmese script for two primary reasons: 1) He realized that there were already some literate Karen familiar with the Burmese script; but more importantly, 2) the same type could be used with the printing presses already in operation for the Burmese literature, with only three additional characters being needed to complete the transformation, three Karen consonants not found in
the Burmese language. (Although the decision to use the Burmese script is not
entirely appreciated by some Karens, they remain extremely grateful for his services).

According to the Burma Baptist Chronicle,

Since Sgaw Karen has no final consonants and every syllable ends in
an open vowel sound, it proved easier to reduce to writing than Pwo
with its nasals. By February 1832 Wade had hastily made an alphabet
for the Sgaw, using chiefly Burmese letters for which type was already
available, hoping to revise and improve the system after furlough.
However, he did so well that little change was made later. The first
printing in Sgaw Karen was a tract of six pages and a spelling-book of
thirty-three pages in 1832. Karens began to use the new script for
writing, and teachers were trained (Maung Shwe Wa: 312).

Mr. McMahon describes the enthusiastic reception of written Karen:

It had never struck the Karens that this language, like that of
others, could be represented by signs, and when this was an
accomplished fact, the effect on them was quite electrical.

Tottering old men and aged matrons, as well as youths and
maidens, whose pleasures were hitherto aimless and profitless, if not
absolutely vicious, vied with each other in endeavouring to acquire
even a smattering of learning, so as to be able to spell over the little
Christian tracts which were first printed in their mother tongue.
Actuated by such a spirit, their progress in the art of reading was
marvelous, and the first literary ventures of the missionaries in the
Karen language -- devoured with enthusiasm by thousands -- were
eminently successful (McMahon: 74).

By 1843, only 11 years after the introduction of writing, the list of books in
Sgaw Karen included the complete New Testament, an Epitome of the Old Testament
of 840 pages, another Supplement to the Hymn Book of 128 pages, and even a Child's
Book of 154 pages (Maung Shwe Wa: 313).

And in 1853, only twenty-five years after the baptism of Ko Tha Byu,
the entire Bible in Sgaw Karen, a volume of 1,040 pages, was
published. By that time the list of books available to Christian Karens
included such items as a Church History of 468 pages, a Catalogue of Plants, a Key to Astronomy, and school texts from Infant’s Readers to Trigonometry. The monumental Karen Thesaurus in four volumes had 3,243 pages. Truly the Mission had measured up to the great challenge, and the growth in numbers and development of the Karen Christian community is due in no small measure to this (Ibid).

As opposed to Rev. Judson, who had always resisted dabbling in foreign, non-Biblical literature, Rev. Mason realized the importance of collecting and examining Karen oral tradition, which he subsequently reduced to writing. These documents became an important contribution to the Karen Thesaurus, which Rev. Wade was compiling. Mason wrote that:

It is manifest that the common vocabulary of any uncultivated people will pertain mainly to external things, and be confined to the matters with which they are conversant in the little circle around them. It was clear to me then, at the outset, that to be master of the Karen language, so as to be perfectly familiar with all the words and constructions I heard, would only be a small advance towards the knowledge of the language necessary to make an adequate translation of the Bible. To supply the deficiency, I employed Quala to write down all the traditions in prose and verse with which he was acquainted; and, when he had exhausted his own memory, I sent him to different individuals reputed to be particularly versed in these traditions, to collect whatever they remembered with which he was unacquainted.

The multifarious consequences of literacy for Karens, and not only Christian Karens, have been enormous and far-reaching, as indeed they are for any people whose language is reduced to writing. The effects have been profound, literally across the board. Here, we need to continue to sketch the mechanics of the

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missionary enterprise in their impressive dissemination and propagation of the written word, and then examine some of the consequences of these acts, that is, what followed after it.

According to the Burma Baptist Chronicle, "During the first fifty years of the history of the [Baptist] church in Burma, eight different missionaries were connected with the various Baptist printing presses. In 1837 alone, over 21 million pages of printed matter were produced in three different languages of Burma" (Maung Shwe Wa: 125-26). These languages were Burmese, Mon, and Sgaw Karen. (The first books to appear in Pwo Karen appeared in 1838, having been translated by Reverend D. L. Brayton, the architect of the new Pwo Karen script.)

Between 1830 and 1864, 164,208,137 pages were printed, these being tracts and books of a religious or educational nature. The New Testament (NT) was usually printed before the Old Testament (OT); in Burmese, the NT appeared in 1832, the OT in 1838; in Sgaw Karen, the years of publication were 1843 and 1853; in Pwo Karen the NT appeared in 1852 and the OT in 1883.

Burma was beginning to be inundated by millions and millions of pages of "foreign matter" in languages never before reduced to print. Naturally, the Burmese authorities were suspicious of all this mysterious new literature, spread throughout the realm in overt codes. All this only a decade after Great Britain had annexed a few pieces of their country to India. Obviously, the Christians and the colonialists, usually Christian, had to be plotting in cahoots. Why had these white men sailed
halfway around the world to Burma after all? And what was the nature of all the propaganda that was now covering the land, and at such a cost? What was all the writing about?

In addition to the Bibles and tracts were dictionaries and grammars for the use of the missionaries, theological and practical works for pastors and other Christian workers, hymn books for all language groups, a variety of school textbooks, a Sgaw Karen monthly magazine called *The Morning Star*, begun in Tavoy in 1842, and the oldest and longest-running vernacular newspaper in Southeast Asia -- shut down by General Ne Win after his 1962 seizure of power), and *The Religious Herald* in the Burmese language, begun in Moulmein in 1843, and known after 1862 as *The Burman Messenger*.

The schools and theological training centres set up by the Baptist missionaries was producing an educated Karen Christian elite. Christianity seemed on the way to becoming a "national" religion, as native evangelists and pastors moved into the hills to convert and educate their illiterate animist brethren, both Karen and non-Karen, but minorities: Kachin, Chin, Shan, Lisu, and others.

As a consequence of the foregoing, particularly through writing, a collective Karen identity was being established, albeit on a limited scale. In the mid-Nineteenth Century, this amounted to a Karen Christian elite comprising approximately ten percent of all Karens. *The Morning Star* and other Karen publications were stimulating and encouraging ethnic sensibilities, proudly
broadcasting the emergence of a new Christian nation. In turn, step by step (to use a popular Christian phrase), the "national" religion was begetting sentiments of religious nationalism, specifically, Christian Karen nationalism; and in large measure, Baptist Sgaw Karen nationalism, since many more Sgaw Karen have always converted to Christianity than the other, smaller Karen subgroups (of which the Pwo is the second largest by far). For example, in 1990, the Pwo Karen had six Associations, 195 churches, and approximately 15,000 members, compared to the Sgaw’s 17 Associations, 1270 churches, and approximately 170,000 members.²

A strong Karen voice was emerging, announcing the prophesied rebirth of "the Karen nation," inviting and proselytizing their Karen brothers and sisters to come together under Christ’s banner. Many heeded the rallying cry, but, and it is important to emphasize this, many did not and many have not -- even today only about 20% of Karens (in Burma and Thailand) are Christians, that is, Baptists. (Much smaller numbers of other denominations, such as Roman Catholic, Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, etc. also exist in Southeast Asia). The size of the Baptist community is actually substantially larger than the numbers indicate, since only

² Statistics obtained by the author at the 175th Judson Jubilee, Rangoon, Burma, December 13-16, 1990. Please note that these figures are for Burma only; Thailand has 5 Associations, 63 churches, and about 12,000 members according to the Thailand Karen Baptist Convention in Chiang Mai. Also, it is important to realize that Baptist count only baptized members of the church and not their families; further, there is no infant baptism in these communities.
baptized members are counted and infant baptism is not practiced here -- only believer baptism.

Along with the aforementioned benefits of conversion, and colonization, the Karen and other minorities were being selectively recruited into the colonial administration and armed forces, much to the chagrin of the Burman majority, which had previously received biased preference. This social mobility of the formerly-despised minorities exacerbated the already precarious relations between the Burmans and Burma's other ethnic groups, particularly the Karen, Kachin, and Chin, and, to a lesser extent, the Shan, Mon, and others. These resentments by the Burmans were to be made horrifically manifest during World War II, when the Burmans and the Japanese were fighting against the British and a large contingent of non-Burman soldiers. The Karens had much to be grateful for, but at what price?

Sau Quala wrote in *The Morning Star* about his concern for the Karen people should the missionaries ever leave them:

Consider the generation of the fathers. They had no books; they had none to teach them anything; they had no teachers. Of the things in heaven and the things on earth, they knew nothing; but now, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the American teachers from the west have come and taught us, and we have obtained books in our own language. Then, when they instruct us, and explain to us the Holy Scriptures, we ought, every one of us, to seize on their instructions and retain them; for, had it not been for the teachers, we should have remained without books, in ignorance and darkness, to this day. Let us then, in the strength of God, put forth strenuous efforts to acquire a knowledge of books; for should the teachers leave, we should be left as orphans. While they are with us, let us make every possible effort to study, so that we may understand for ourselves independently; and,
should the teachers be no longer with us, that we may be able to instruct each other\(^3\).

Notwithstanding the above, this very vocal and visible minority within a minority has in many respects come to represent their entire ethnic group to the outside world. (When discussing Burma, the phrase "outside world" is almost non-metaphorical). This elite twenty percent has been a virtual synecdoche for "the Karen" internationally in three highly-publicized arenas: 1) as Christians, being one of the world's earliest and most successful missions; 2) as loyal allies to the British forces in the Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824, 1852, 1885) and World War II; and 3) as revolutionaries of the Karen National Union (KNU), waging one of the world's longest-standing internal rebellions. Now four and one half decades old, it has become a way of life for these insurgents, who now call it the father-to-son war.

* * *

\(^3\) In the Baptist Missionary Magazine, Vol. XXXVI, May, 1856, No. 5. p. 134.
This is just welding the Karens into a nation, not an aggregation of clans. The heathen Karens to a man are brigading themselves under the Christians. This whole thing is doing good for the Karen. This will put virility into our Christianity.
--Reverend Dr. J. B. Vinton to Mr. Donald MacKenzie

Texts have been an important element involved in the establishment of a Karen identity, texts written by Karens and texts written by others. We need to look at several of these works in this section to illustrate their import. I will (selectively) sample three primary discourses and authorships to further develop my thesis: 1) British colonialists; 2) Baptist missionaries; 3) Christian Karens. I am interested in the observations, reflections, and attitudes of these parties concerning the organization and progressive unification of a Karen elite, and the formation of a national Karen association.

Although I feel that these are very important works for our given field, we should not read too much into them. There is such a limited corpus that broad generalizations are difficult to derive from them. Nevertheless, they are salient and
indicative historical flashpoints which can at least illuminate our way through the
caverns of history otherwise shrouded in the dark recesses of time past.

First I would like to draw on a book beloved of many Karens, especially those
that are Christian soldiers, a text written by the Bengal civil servant Donald
MacKenzie Smeaton, M.A., published in 1887, shortly after Britain completed its
annexation of the whole of Burma. In The Loyal Karens of Burma, Mr. Smeaton,
an admirer and ardent supporter of the Karen ("the plucky little nation"),
enthusiastically addresses some of our concerns about conversion, social and political
organization among the Karen people:

It may perhaps be asked whether the success of the Karen mission is
not due mainly to its material progress. The suspicion naturally arises
that in a downtrodden race which feels conscious of powers and aspires
to elevate itself, the success won may be spurious, and may be due to
other causes than a sincere adoption of the great doctrines of
Christianity. I am convinced, from what I know and have seen, that it
is not so. I believe that devotion to the Christian faith has supplied the
one link that was wanting to complete what may be called the federative
capacity of the Karens, and make their national unity strong enough to
resist all disintegrating forces (Smeaton: 191) (emphasis mine).

Two pages later, he adds:

[...] [W]ith material prosperity the craving for a united Karen nation
increases (Smeaton: 193).

Sociologically, dramatic changes began occurring at the village level under
Christian guidance, both foreign and, increasingly, native. Karens were moving in
from the hills to join the growing Christian communities. Traditionally content to
live in very small isolated groupings of several huts, they were being drawn together
into larger and larger communities, like moths to a bright light. Mr. Smeaton
continues:

The local church takes the place of the clan-unit, or village. These
churches are federally united into associations or missions, which look
up to the missionary as their leader. These associations take the place
of the confederacy of clans. Affairs are managed under the Christian
regime just as they were in the olden time by the council of leaders
(Smeaton: 196).

A pastor is chose and sent, but with no promise or certainty of any
salary. [...] He takes with him a stock of quinine, some carbolic acid for
wounds, plenty of aperient pills, vaccine tubes for a crusade against
small-pox -- the arch-destroyer in these jungle villages -- a few other
simple medicines, and off he goes. During the day he keeps up a
school. [...] He attends to the sick, praying over them before
administering medicine, urging them no longer to fear the demons as
the causes of sickness, but to place themselves directly under the
protection of God, who has now returned to them, often alluding to
the casting out of demons by Christ while on earth (Smeaton: 202).

Not many months pass before the preacher has become the leader of
all the business and real life of the place. [...] His influence and
authority are enormous. He is the living embodiment to the villagers
of all that Christianity, education, and civilization have done for them
(Smeaton: 204-5).

The church has provided the means and the model critical, in this case, for the
leap to organized nationalism. Christianity was the vessel carrying the long-awaited
cargo, namely: 1) literacy -- the means; and 2) the national Baptist church
organization -- the model. The missionaries were unaware of the felicitous elective
affinities existing between their own culture and ideology, and the Karens'
prophesies, predispositions, and inter-ethnic social predicament. It was, one might
say, a match made in heaven, and a huge investment was made by America: 150 years; 794 missionaries; approximately 10,000 missionary-years total.

At the end of the foreign missionary period, 1963, the results added up to this: 2,320 churches in 45 associations with 216,321 baptized members. Additionally, the Mission was responsible for establishing: 482 primary schools; 52 middle schools; 34 high schools; 16 Bible schools; 1,281 Sunday Schools; 1,000 women's organizations; and 1,248 youth societies.

The individual agent who spearheaded the formal socio-cultural leap to a pan-Karen, supra-local, secular, nationalist structure was the Reverend T. Thanbyah, D.D.M.A. Interestingly, he had been sent abroad by the American Baptist Mission board and had returned with an advanced degree from the University of Rochester, New York, the first individual in all of Burma to have accomplished this. He personified the cultural combination of the Western Christian and the Eastern Karen worldview: he was the father of organized Karen nationalism.

In 1881 he founded the Karen National Association (KNA), the first organization of its kind in Burma, predating the influential Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) by over two decades. (One cannot help but wonder how he, like de Tocqueville, must have been struck by America's voluntary associations; and subsequently, the influence his organization must have had on the hundreds of similar institutions that followed in Burma.)
He eloquently and very diplomatically details the development, motivation, and program of this move as follows:

The Karens, as highlanders, for self-preservation and defence, have for ages been indoctrinated with the policy of association. Living as they do in their long houses on the hills, forming a family group, having a common hall, to meet and to discuss tribal matters of peace and of war, they have a facility for combination.

On their emigrating to the lowlands, and living in separate houses in villages, the current of association and combination seems to be interrupted -- dormant, but not extinguished, till, among those Christianized, it is again brought into play in the formation of associations for the promotion of Christianity, where delegates from churches are appointed to meet and act in union for a common object.

This return current combined only the Christian Karens, and though it indirectly benefitted the heathens in a measure, yet directly it left the heathen Karens untouched.

This segregation of the Christian Karens split the Karen race into two sections, the heathen and the Christian. The former, with no means of educating themselves -- the written language being not theirs, the white Book sealed to them -- uncared for by the State, as their voice could not be heard, are no better off than in the days of Burmese rule, because of their ignorance. On the other hand, the latter, with his village school, his newspaper *The Morning Star*, the Association of the Churches, the Home Mission Societies, the Missionary Conventions, the High Schools, is prepared to start in life with every advantage.

To many of us who have been benefitted by Christianity, it appears that this facility of combination can be utilized for the heathen Karen in common with the Christian -- that there is ground wide enough for us all, without distinction of belief to meet on a common platform, united by ties broader even than the ties of religion; to pursue purely secular objects and thus benefit our younger brothers, and in lifting them up lift ourselves too. The most of us know that for the civilization of a race, the mass must be raised as a solid body.

[...] Hence we deemed that a representative body representing the Karens from all parts of British Burma has become a necessity.
Such an Association is needed -- N. Karen Association, 1881 --

1. To utilize the clannishness of the race by having a common platform for heathen and Christian Karens, and thereby keep the nation together.

2. To enable the Karens to help themselves and one another in case of oppression and wrong in purely secular affairs, and thus free our missionaries in a large measure from the charge of "interference" with officers of Government -- deferring to the guidance and counsel of our missionaries in all points compatible with their labours for us. [...] 

To the [colonial] Government the move would be useful --

1. To lead the Karens from their Utopian ideas, dangerous from the gullibility of ignorant Karens, and the liability to be led astray by pretended prophets.

2. To help the Government in all the schemes for the amelioration of the condition of the race.

3. To form a telephonic line of communication by which the Government can make itself thoroughly understood by even the most ignorant, and to transmit to Government all grievances or causes of complaint (Smeaton: 213-17 passim).

To which Mr. Smeaton sympathetically responds:

The little manifesto is evidence at once of the truest patriotism, and of a high capacity for self-government and self-development. *It does not often fall to the lot of an alien government to be favoured with such an opportunity as this affords. Let the British Government for once try the experiment of civilizing and elevating a people without de-nationalizing them.* (Smeaton: 219) (all emphases mine).
Conquer them, colonize them, convert them, conscript them -- BUT -- leave their "plucky little nation" intact -- for God's sake.

Some years later, General Smith Dun, a pivotal Karen leader of Burma (who we will be hearing from again before long), commented specifically on Smeaton and his popular book, writing, as he said, from "the Burman point of view":

Similar comments can also be found in other books by Western authors. As it was the period of the growth of imperialism, the main concern of the rulers was the perpetuation of their control over the ruled and they accordingly promoted dissensions and splits among the indigenous races. Of Burma it will not be far from the truth to suggest that these machinations lie at the root of the present K.N.D.O. (Karen National Defense Organization) rising with a view to creating a strong impetus for the establishment of a separate Karen State....In fact the cause for the Karenistan insurrection could be traced back to the time when rabid imperialists like D. M. Smeaton started to sow the seeds of political disruptive tendencies (Dun: 123).

The man typically referred to as "the father of the Karens," Sir San C. Po, saw things in a different light, illustrating two of the differing Karen positions with respect to "the West" and "the State" -- a difference within themselves that was to have tragic and long-lasting consequences for Burma after independence. Po wanted a separate Karen State while Dun had other loyalties, namely to the newly independent "State": the Union of Burma.

In his book, Burma and the Karens, Po writes:

The educational, social and spiritual progress of the Karens has been due, to a very great extent, to the Missionaries who have so faithfully and sympathetically worked among and with them. The Karens are not ashamed or afraid to proclaim to the world publicly or in private that they owe what progress and advancement they have made, to the missionaries whom they affectionately call their "Mother" under the
protection of the British Government whom they rightly call their "Father." *The latter, as is usually the case with a father, never really knows, or if he does know often forgets, the special or peculiar needs of his individual child at home* (Po: 58) (emphasis mine).

Their father forgot. Burma was turned over to the Burmans, as were the Karens. The country was divided amongst itself, between Burmans themselves (as with the Communist Party of Burma and the People's Volunteer Organization, to name two), and increasingly, or perhaps now more formally, between the majority and the minorities. A state of civil war continues to this day.
The Sword of the Spirit:  
Notes on Quotes From Letters

"Oh, hell! I'd snivel psalms to oblige the padre, but I can't stick the way these damned native Christians come shoving into our church. A pack of Madrassi servants and Karen school-teachers. And then those two yellow-bellies, Francis and Samuel -- they call themselves Christians too. Last time the padre was here they had the nerve to come up and sit on the front pews with the white men. Someone ought to speak to the padre about that. What bloody fools we were to let those missionaries loose in this country! Teaching bazaar sweepers they're as good as we are. 'Please, sir, me Christian same like master.' Damned cheek."

--George Orwell, Burmese Days

Although it is I who have chosen the passages which comprise this letter, passages from letters for the most part, I have chosen not to embroider them, as is customary, into a standard academic expostulation. These are strong words, often written during trying times, and my notes provide the reader with the necessary contextualization. This letter, transcribed as it was from the author's notebooks, further provides an insight into the construction of this text.

In several aspects, this letter is central to this study. Many of the passages come from Rev. Vinton's correspondence with Mr. Smeaton in 1886, the year Great Britain annexed Burma to India. After King Theebaw was taken to India, there were many uprisings throughout the country. The missionaries seized the opportunity to mobilize their flocks against the rebels. The British supplied them with arms, and the dye was cast.
The Karen Christians had the training, the organization, and the support of the rulers of the country. They learned what they could do with such resources, and were successful in quelling many of the rebellions. Subsequently, many Karens and other minority group members became the backbone of the colonial armed forces in Burma. Now it was they who were given preferential treatment, not the Burmans, and inter-group relations were certainly none the better for this. For half a century, up to World War II, this state of affairs ensued. After Independence, there was no going back.

* * *

Mrs. Calista Luther (missionary) wrote:

One day Mrs. Vinton, in Maulmain, was startled by the inquiry, "**Mama, is it wrong to pray for war?**" Such a question from the peace-loving, submissive Karens, was astounding.

"**Why?**" was the cautious reply.

"Because we are tired of being hunted like wild beasts; of being obliged to worship God by night and in the forest, not daring to speak of Jesus, save in a whisper. O
mamma! may we not pray that the English may come and take our country, so that we may worship God in freedom and without fear?"

"Yes, you may!" she answered; and from that day that one petition made a part of every prayer which went up from the hundreds of persecuted Christians; and they looked for the coming of the English guns, and for the protection which the English flag had ever brought with it, as earnestly as they had looked for the coming of their "younger brother, the white man" (Luther: 85).

* * *

From the Memoir of Mrs. Eliza G. Jones, Missionary to Burmah and Siam.
Phila.:American Baptist Publication Society (1853)

Extracts of her letters:

Maulmain, July 7, 1831.

Here we are, on Burmah's heathen shore, surrounded by thousands, and tens of thousands, who have never heard the word of life. We see all the populous country which still belongs to the king of Ava, involved in the gloom of a religion whose highest reward, and the most cherished hopes of whose votaries, centre in annihilation; enlightened only by the few rays which brother Judson is enabled to scatter by means of tracts and portions of scripture given to visitors from various parts of the country at Rangoon, who receive them with great avidity. Still nearer
to us, are thousands of Talaings, enslaved to the same cold and cheerless faith, who are waiting for the glorious doctrine of the cross. The Karens, a people scattered all over this vast peninsula, having no religion of any kind, are flocking in much eagerness to our missionary stations to receive one, which according to a tradition prevalent among some of them, is to be given to them by a people coming from the west (Jones: 52, 53).

August 31, 1831.

Full moon; the most distinguished worship day in the month. After sunset I walked with Mr. Jones to the pagoda. After ascending the terrace steps, between two huge lions, found myself surprised by as complete a scene of enchantment as I ever witnessed. Around the large, splendidly gilt idols, hundreds of small wax candles, (some of which were run into forms, resembling flowers and other fanciful figures,) were burning....The area was occupied by men, women, and children, some moving about the fairy scenery, some standing to chat, and others reverently kneeling, with bouquets of flowers raised above their heads between the palms of their hands, before the pagodas and images, muttering their prayers....Ah! what attractions has the humble, simple religion of Jesus to draw the idolater away from such imposing
scenes? The heart must be radically changed by divine grace before he can expect it to give up a religion so congenial to its carnal nature (Jones: 56, 57).

December 16, 1831

The twenty-fourth chapter of Job was read at our morning worship, and I was very forcibly struck with its applicability to the people of this land. It is a graphic description of the present state and character of the Burmese (Jones: 62).

Maulmain, March 4, 1832. (63)

Alas! for poor Burmah! Her sons are enthralled by a triple despotism. Their rulers, their priests, and their own native pride of heart, all forbid them to listen to the humiliating doctrines of the cross, and cause them to shut their eyes on the few rays of light which are already dawning upon them.

* * *


The fault is that the European officers place too much confidence in their Burmese underlings, who form a wall of brass around the bench of justice, which a poor
ignorant Karen cannot get through without the help of a white man; and what white man is there, to help a dirty, artless Karen, except a missionary? (Mason, 1870: 412).

From *The Karens of the Golden Chersonese*, by A. R. McMahon:

**On British governance and Karens** (pp. 37, 38)

Dr. Mason, in his work on "Burmah," passes somewhat severe strictures on the governing class of that country in reference to its alleged partiality for the Burmese as compared with the Karens, and this he attributes partly to the fact that the English ruler usually belongs to the "aristocratic classes," and having no sympathy with his own countrymen, cannot be expected to have any "with the downtrodden serfs of the dominant race;" partly from his ignorance of the Karen language, he is obliged to look at everything that concerns the Karens through Burmese spectacles, and partly because he is swayed by the lavish flattery of the Burmese, who thus distance a people who have no word for flattery in their language.
Response to Mason from McMahon: (pp. 38-9)

Now while we admit that the charge of partiality may have been deserved in days gone by, and that even now this reproach may not be groundless in some instances; -
- for, owing to the imperfection of human nature, the wisest among us may succumb to the cajolery of a race who are described as knowing all the weak points of the man with whom they deal, as being "as cunning as the old serpent in Eden, and as well able to beguile men as he was to deceive women;" still, whatever sins of omission may be brought to the account of those concerned in the administration of the country -- who, by the way, can hardly be said to belong to the aristocratic class -
- the comparative want of sympathy with the Karens must be attributed to other causes than caste prejudice. As well might we say that the partiality which the American missionaries who labour among the Karens evince in favour of their converts is attributable to a democratic spirit which has no sympathy with the aristocracy.

...There is also a strong tendency on the part of the latter to make a "stalking horse" of their pastor and master, in case they have dealings with a Government official, and by so doing put both in a false position. They even persist in doing so in cases where, to obviate such necessity, one of their own people, chosen by themselves, and able and willing to help them, has been appointed for the express purpose of assisting them in all matters which they should have occasion to negotiate.
On English as lost bros, etc. (McMahon: pp. 41-2)

The advent of the English was accordingly hailed by the Karens with a delight that was intensified by the fact that the American missionaries brought with them the Book for which they had so long yearned (p.42).

An opening was accordingly made and eagerly taken advantage of by the Karens, their new rulers, and their new teachers, laying the foundation of a feeling of mutual confidence, which has year by year become more intelligent.

British on "mission": (p. 42)

It also deserves the cordial recognition of all thinking men, for the fearlessness and tact with which it has attacked and broken down the strongholds of ignorance, superstition, and savagery, fighting a good fight in the cause of civilization, not indeed with carnal weapons, but having as it were for its motto, the grand watchword that has been handed down to us from the very dawn of Christianity--

"Peace on earth, and good will towards men."
On cultivation of Karens: character, citizens, women, etc. (McMahon: p. 54)

The success of missionary enterprise among the Karens has had a marvelous influence on their character, for they have not only been weaned from the debasing habits that hitherto characterised the race, but a healthy sense of their obligations as good and loyal citizens has been implanted in their minds, fostering an honest pride that stimulates them to more independent action, and to a sense of the responsibilities they incur in their endeavors to raise themselves, practical proof of which they afford in the commendable liberality with which they support their pastors and village schools, and the alacrity with which they undertake their fair share of the burden of education, recognizing the rights of women to intellectual teaching, and in this respect, at least, creditably contrasting with the Burmese and many more civilised nations.

On Civilising Process, Christian vs. Civil  (Chief Commissioner of British Burmah, May 1, 1863) (McMahon: p. 175,6):

"[T]he district of Toungoo was occupied by British troops early in 1853. In the autumn of that year, the Rev. Dr. Mason and Mrs. Mason came to the district, as
also did the Karen minister the Rev. San-Qua-La, and immediately commenced mission work among the Karens....

"...The Burmese Government never had authority over any of the tribes living more than a day's journey from the city and river.

"In process of time, from the constant labour of the above-mentioned missionaries, many thousand of the mountain Karens were instructed in Christianity, had abandoned their savage mode of life, and their cruel wars, and lived as Christian men and women.

..."There are now twenty-five thousand of them either Christians, or under Christian influence and teaching. They found them split up into tribes and clans, warring against each other, and taking captives to sell as slaves. Wherever the Gospel has been spread such acts no longer prevail. They have ceased not only amongst Christian tribes, but also among the heathen tribes, except those on the extreme border.

..."I assert from long experience among similar tribes, that such results could not be obtained by the Civil Administration, unaided by missionary teaching."
Rev. J.B. Vinton to Mr. Smeaton

1886

(From Smeaton's *Loyal Karens...*)

Rangoon, May 15

For all that the Karens have done, I unhesitatingly say that when the danger is over, the Karen will be as soundly hated as ever by the officials. (21)

Rangoon, July 13:

Your officials show an insane jealousy of the missionaries, and seem to be ashamed that they have no influence among the Karens. (24)

...The Burmese officials and non-officials alike are all gnashing their teeth at the Karens, attributing (rightly) the defeat of the rebellion solely to those "Meddlesome Karens." (25)

The high official has been warned, and he turns comfortably in his chair, and says, "Bother those meddlesome missionaries!" and reads over the rose-coloured reports of other officials based on the reports of his disloyal Burmese understrappers, and calmly says, "How can those impudent fellows know anything about the country?" Suddenly he is waked from as great a stupor as that of [King] Theebaw when, hourly expecting the arrival of the captive British army, he is told that Prendergast has past
the last defenses of the capital, and there is not time even for flight. News comes that the peacock flag is raised and the rebels are marching on him, leaving blood in their wake, and this dignified British official calmly writes a memorandum! He can ask and get a dozen regiments from India at the cost of many lakhs of rupees, but when that bothersome missionary raves at him for guns to arm men who have proved themselves universally loyal, he can't spend a pice! A dignified non possumus is all you can get out of him. The Karens could have put five thousand men in the field for three months without a pice of pay, and ended the rebellion in a way that would have knocked the nonsense out of the Burmans for thirty years to come. (25, 26)

...We are sick at heart at the officialism that paralyzes us all in Burma. (27)

Rangoon, August 17:

It is just such polite, gentlemanly, estimable men by whom empires are lost. (46)

[N.B. (heart) (missionary leadership of Karen levies):
Transition period to organized military action;
Vinton and Mobilization of the Flock (Karen Christians):]
(Letters to Smeaton, (from Loyal Karens) continued):

Vinton: Rangoon, Feb. 28th, 1886

I don't believe myself a coward or an alarmist, but I am warning Karens everywhere that the fight has not yet begun. Mr. Bernard told me he would arm the Karens in any threatened district if they would volunteer. I can put any number of Karens in the field. (13, 14)

Every mission has promised me a levy en masse of all the able-bodied men. They all agree to refuse all pay and to fight from pure loyalty to the Queen. (14)

The strangest of all is the presence of poongyees [Buddhist priests] on the battlefield. This is unheard of in history. (14)

My Karens universally interpret this as God's sign that Buddhism is to be destroyed for ever. They say the challenge of [King] Theebaw could be answered by the English Government, but the challenge of the fighting poongyees can only be taken up fitly by Karens under their own missionaries. Every village now is full of bows and arrows to keep off the dacoits between volleys of the fire-arms. (14, 15)

So far from being daunted, I never saw the Karen so anxious for a fight. (15)
This is just welding the Karens into a nation, not an aggregation of clans. The heathen Karens to a man are brigading themselves under the Christians. This whole thing is doing good for the Karen. This will put virility into our Christianity. (emphasis mine)

Rangoon, May 15, 1886.

The Karens had few guns in their hands, but mostly used spears, shields, and bows. The next day was Sunday. After a lot of trouble I got fifty smooth-bores from Mr. Bernard. (19)

The fight was specially noticeable, because every Karen clan, except the Pghos, were in arms that day. The Pghos are not found on the Toungoo hills. Even the Brees, our most physically insignificant tribe, sent a detachment from three days’ march away, though they lived out of British territory. (19)

The tribes that once were constantly fighting each other, now stood side by side. From a loose aggregation of clans we shall weld them into a nation yet. (19, 20)

Rangoon, July 13:

God has -- to use a Karen expression -- hung thousands of lives around my neck, and I have had hard work trying to keep my people alive. (22, 23)
Whatever service the Karens have done is not one hundredth of what I can get out of them. Red tape is choking the life out of us. (23)

Many a leader -- especially the poongyes -- have tried to keep their men from robbery and plunder, but they have found that the natural cowardly ferocity of the Burman at the first taste of blood could not be restrained. (27)

Rangoon, July 26:

Even the wealthy well-to-do Burmese help the rebels, and openly talk disloyalty. Why? They say it is a war for religion, and patriots must put up with license in the soldiers fighting for them.

The dacoit atrocities are horrible. The unutterable Turk, with his "Bulgarian atrocities," would have no chance in a competition with the Burman dacoit. Dacoity is reported, you dash off at the double quick for a dozen miles, Karen levy trotting along abreast, or even ahead of the police officer and missionary on their ponies; you come in and find that thousands of rupees have been taken, the women lashed to platforms and then violated by the dacoits in turn, and kerosene oil poured over their clothes and set on fire. The men, bruised and slashed, have seen all this, and are wailing like women around the horrible, blackened lumps of charred flesh that were
once their wives. You are shown where babies have been beaten to a literal jelly in those rice mortars, before their mother’s eyes. (28, 29)

You have but one winning card that you can play, and it is the Karen. (30)

Rangoon, August 17:

The key to all this misconception is plain. No one, neither Burmans, Government officials, nor any one, had gauged the quiet work we have been doing among the Karens. You know no one knows Karens. They won’t talk to these servility-loving officials. No one visits their villages and sees for himself what education and Christianity have done. The "timid Karen" has become a man, but nobody knew it. (40, 41)

Thank God! the "timid Karen" is now a phrase of the past. "Nous avons changé tout cela" with a vengeance. (41)

...I would like nothing better than to raise and command a Karen corps. (41)

No one had gauged the unifying power of Christianity, or guessed that these loose grains of sand (the clans) had been welded into a terrible weapon. (41)
Long before Karen levies were sanctioned, Captain Parrott and I had every able-bodied Karen enrolled, and seventy of them regularly drilled. (42)

...the Karen fought his way into notice, and dispelled all these illusions. Then the jealousy of the Government officials of the mission wanted to get matters into their own hands, and get rid of the missionaries. The only good service the Karens have done has been when they have been let alone. They have served under their pastors and schoolmasters and hereditary chiefs; but the moment the first coil of red tape touches a Karen levy, it paralyzes it. (43)

The Karen is so clannish you cannot scratch one of them but the whole clan knows it and resents it. (45)

Concerning "virility"

You would be pleased to see the change the war has made in the bearing of the Karen. I've seen him flaunt his national Karen dress, and say proudly, "Yes, I'm a loyal Karen, and what have you to say to that?" to the proud Burman. (48)
Near a court-house I saw a Karen chief in full dress. He had brought down some
dead dacoits. A dandy Burman, all in silk, with gold watch-chain, tried to crowd him
off the road as usual. The Karen pushed him contemptuously out of the way, and
sternly said, "Let that teach you to make way for the Karen "thin daing" hereafter."
(48)

Warnings of the other insurrections were as contemptuously treated, but our
missionaries backed me like men, and we saved our Christian Karens. We point with
pride to the fact that every insurrection has been smothered in blood whenever it
came into a Christian tract, while the government has not quelled one. (51)

Now there is no retreat, and there will be no peace till the last head is sent in. This
sounds queer from a Christian missionary, but it is the truth. You can’t attack
dacoity organized into a system for centuries by ordinary process of law. You must
regard it as a system akin to an exaggerated Thuggee, and act accordingly. (50)

Smeaton (from Loyal Karens):
It is not often given to witness such a remarkable development of national character
as has taken place among the Karens under the influence of Christianity and good
government. Forty -- ay, thirty -- years ago they were a despised, grovelling, timid
people, held in open contempt by the Burmese. At the first sound of the gospel message they sprang to their feet as a sleeping army springs to the bugle call. The dream of hundreds of years was fulfilled; the God who had cast them off for their faithlessness had come back to them; they felt themselves a nation once more. (65)

[Persecution; Sau Le, Morning Star, Dec. 29, 1850]

(164)

...[S]ome evil-minded persons informed the governor that I was going about preaching; so he sent his officers to seize me, who took me to Rangoon, and threw me into the stable of the prison, where my feet were put in the stocks, and then drawn up so that I could neither sit nor lie; and in this painful position I had to remain all night. Then it was the cold season, and they stripped me of all my clothes, giving me nothing but a little dirty rag, so that I suffered much from the cold; and they gave me nothing to eat, though I was very hungry, and no water to drink, though I was exceedingly thirsty. The next day, they brought me before the governor, hung me up by the heels in the Court House in the presence of the people, while a spotted-faced executioner stood over me with a cane, to beat me till I gave up the names of all the Karen Christians. I committed myself to God, prayed to him in my heart without intermission, and he so sustained me that I did not feel afraid; but resolved to suffer and die, if necessary, rather than betray a single individual.

[Massacre; mercy; reading threat]

[Mrs. Vinton to Mrs. Baron Stow:]

One village of nearly a thousand inhabitants worshipped God...for some time, unknown to the Burmans; but, when the latter learned the fact, they sent an armed force to destroy the village. Some of the Karens inquired of their leader if they should fight. "No," replied the chief: "it is inconsistent with the worship of our God to fight. We will cast ourselves upon his protection." They then opened their gates, brought forth their weapons of defense, and laid them at the feet of their enemies. Thus defenseless, they were immediately slain by their cruel oppressors, the Burmans.

[The author continues:] This record seems incredible; and yet in the year 1851, -- even so late a date as that, -- the Burmese viceroy of Rangoon told Mr. Kincaid ["the hero missionary"] that he would instantly shoot the first Karen whom he found that could read. (29, 30)
Cross-death

How sweetly did the message of salvation fall upon the still night air! and how consoling to those poor despised "Karen dogs," -- as the Burmans were wont to call them, -- to learn that God had remembered the Karens, and sent them back the long-lost law of their God! How gladly did they hear of a redemption purchased not with silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ! and what wonder that these same Rangoon Karens went cheerfully to prison, to slavery, to torture, to death, even the death of the cross? (84, 85)

Before hostilities began, the Burmans made light of the coming of the English. They would whet their knives before the Karens, and perform their war-dances, and say, "We will soon drive these pale-faces back into the sea whence they came. They have no strength, and one Burman can drive a hundred of the coward redcoats. They took Rangoon once before, but they gave it up again. You will soon see their ships returning, or else sunk deep in the river; and then we will make these Karen dogs feel our vengeance. They want the English to come; and, when we have driven their white friends forever from the country, we will attend to them. We will flay them alive, roast them over slow fires, and none shall deliver them out of our hands." (89)
Rangoon, August 17, 1886: Rev. Vinton:

It is just such polite, gentlemanly, estimable men by whom empires are lost (46).


"Look at the history of Burma. We go and invade the country: the local tribes support us: we are victorious: but unlike you Americans we weren’t colonialists in those days. Oh no, we made peace with the king and we handed him back his province and left our allies to be crucified and sawn in two. They were innocent. They thought we’d stay. But we were liberals and we didn’t want a bad conscience."

"That was a long time ago."

"We shall do the same thing here. Encourage them and leave them with a little equipment and a toy industry."
I did no research or writing during this period. I was hospitalized with Dengue Fever. Two days later, my doctor informed me that I also had Malaria. I received many more visitors than I had expected: Thai friends; American and English friends; the pastor of the Community Church of Chiang Mai; and, much to my surprise, delight, and interest, many Karen visitors, the majority of whom I had not previously met. They, however, knew who I was, and what I was doing in Thailand and Burma. They brought me gifts, and invited me to visit them after I was discharged. I found the whole experience quite overwhelming. My physical condition further heightened my sense of not being in control, of being generally unaware of my surroundings, my environment, and, most of all, of the field in which I was working.

My much-discussed and celebrated double-malady moved my research into another phase. I was perceived as willing to subject myself to great physical danger in order to write about "the Karen." The bloody mosquitoes had activated one acceptance trope, one rite of passage, as it were. Although I had been incapacitated for a few weeks, my research had not come to a halt. W. P., my primary research assistant at this time, had been busy translating. We both found "k" to be a super link in our research chain.
The Visit of the Queen's Representative
and the Birth of the Karen National Association

by

Rev. T. Thanbyah

In 1880, in December, there was a great clamor concerning the visit of the Queen's representative to Rangoon. British administrators with their Burmese sub-administrators discussed and planned the welcoming party. But to us Karen, nobody said anything.

Thra Saw Thay and some of his friends discussed this with some missionaries, seeking assistance. But nothing seemed to happen. Then, one evening Thra Thay Oo went to visit U Shwe Maung to talk about this, and later the two went to see Thra Thanbyah in the Baptist College compound. The time was about 10 p.m.

Thra Thay told Thra Thanbyah that when he went to U Shwe Maung and talked about the welcoming party for the Queen's representative, U Shwe Maung didn't pay attention to him, but even cursed him. U Shwe Maung had said, "You and your missionaries, you will just go and stand beside the road without any roofing, and when the great man has gone, you will come back for nothing. I can't do that. I'll go and greet him among the Burmese crowd with roofing and grand facilities."
Thra Thanbyah looked at Thra Saw Thay for a while, and then he asked, "Hey! Are you really very keen on welcoming the great man?"

"Yes!"

"Well, with me, I have the same feeling too, because we are one of a race in this country, and we should show our welcoming spirit."

And later on Thra Thanbyah said, "Hey! If you're that keen, and if you believe in your people, your race, come to me early tomorrow morning at 6 a.m., and after tea we'll go and find a place for ourselves."

I'm mentioning this because this is the first step that led to the Karen National Association.

So, after tea, at 6 the next morning, they first went to Ku Loo Nee and asked if he knew anything about the welcoming party, but Ku Loo Nee said he knew nothing about it, but he thought it must be in the hands of Major Poole. So, Thra Thanbyah decided to go and ask the Chief Governor.

On the way back, Thra Saw Thay said, "Hey! Nu Ung, our township officer, has power over the police, so let's go and ask the police watchman over there. And one young police officer guided us to Major Poole's place, and when we got there, everywhere we found only Burmese officers. They were waiting for the Township Officer so that they could request a chance to be at the welcoming party which would be held for one evening only.
After we signed our name on the visitors' list, we gave it to the Indian watchman to send in to the Township Officer. The Indian left in a hurry, and soon returned, and said, "Well, the Township Officer will see you immediately."

We went up the ladders and entered the Township Officer's room. He greeted us warmly, and bid us take our seats.

Then, he said that he was very glad that we Karen people came to visit him, and he wanted to know what was the main reason for our visit. Then we told him that we wanted to know something more about the welcoming party for the Queen's representative, and that we read about it in The Rangoon Gazette. And we told him that the Karen people had been allotted a place in a field in front of a monastery, and we don't like it at all.

And the Township Officer said he did know one Karen missionary in Rangoon, Thra Smith, but from a distance only. Therefore, he had arranged things as he had. And he then asked us to tell us which place we'd prefer. So we told him that we preferred a place opposite the British troops' practice cannons, at the corner of Garden Road and Halpin Road.

And the Township Officer said, "Oh yes, it's quite a good place!" And he requested us to go and take a look at the place with him. Just before we left, the Township officer showed us the list of Burmese, Indian, and Chinese who would be at the party on Wednesday evening.
And we told him that in this country there are only two major races: Burmese and Karen. If you place the Burmese as the first one, you should place the Karen as the second one. And, if you place the Burmese in the second place, then you should place the Karen in the first place.

So the Township Officer replied, and said, "Oh! Dear Thras, I never before knew any Karen elders, therefore, I didn't include the Karen people before. Please forgive me. Now, please tell me of your Karen elders, and give me a list of names so that I can send letters of invitation to them.

There and then, we gave him the names: Ko Ee Kay, Shwe Maung Oo, Ko Hsa Lo, Thra Saw Thay, Thra Thanbyah. And we then went to have a look at the place.

And when we showed him the place, he was quite pleased, and he said, "You can build any kind of pandol you like."

The next day, The Rangoon Gazette newspaper announced that on Wednesday, when the representative of the Queen was here, the Karen people and other races will be present too. When Ku Shwe Maung read about this, he was immensely overjoyed, and repeatedly declared, "Now, now, now! The name of our Karen people is known among the multitudes, the crowds, the nations!"

That same evening, we gathered the Karen elders at Cho O Ko Ee Khe's place, and we discussed the welcoming reception. It was decided that Ko Hsa Lo and Ko Shwe Nu would take care of the pandols, so that the Karen men, women,
young men, young women, could go and welcome the representative. And we also
decided that Ku Loo Nee was to write a welcome/reception speech, and to read it
out when the great man reached our pandol, but only if he was permitted; if not, he
was to hand him the written note.

When the letter was completed, we took it to the Township Officer, but at
that time the Governor was there also, and, after taking a look at it, he said he was
very pleased, because it was so well done.

The Governor straightaway asked us to calculate the number of Karen people,
because he knew that the records of the Karen population were wrong. In the
Rangoon area, the population of the Karen people was 400,000, and a large pandol
was built by the young Karen men and women. A fence was built around the pandol,
and without the permission of the missionaries or the Karen elders, nobody was
allowed to enter that area.

Also, the great meeting decided that all the Karen ladies must wear only
Karen costumes, and all the Karen elders must wear the Karen coat and stand
straight and tall when receiving the representative. And the students must sing a
welcome song when the great representative comes to their spot.

When the great day came, all we Karen people, young and old, dressed in our
Karen costumes and walked to that place. And O! it was a great, great, great
moment, because all those living on both sides of the street came out -- the Burmese,
Shan, British, Indian -- they rushed down from their houses and admired the Karen people.

And when the great man arrived at the pandol, the British soldier in front of the Karen pandol blew his trumpet and a Karen man began to play his harp, and the Karen multitude began to sing. The great man asked the British troops to stop their bands, because he wanted to listen to the Karen choir. When the song ended, and the great man's car was still at rest, Ku Loo Nee went and handed him the welcoming letter. The great man said, "Yes. I accept it." And he bowed to the Karen multitude, and the Karen multitude bowed back to him, with smiles. And the great man continued on his way.

The following day in the newspaper the names of the Karen and Burmese who were given permission to be at the party were reported...[and thus,] by the end of 1880, the Karen people were recognized in newspapers and by the representative of the Queen. And it was really something for the Karen elders to think about profoundly.

The Christian Karen elders found that the foreign missionaries had too much in their hands to do, and at the same time, they found that the Karen people were still not chosen to work in the administrative departments, nor involved in political activities. And so, to assist the missionaries, and at the same time to uplift the standard of living of the Karen people with higher moral standards and aims, in the early part of 1881, these Christian Karen elders had meetings, first at Ku Shwe
Maung Oo's house; second at Chau O U Ee Khe's house, and decided that they would found an organization under the name of Karen National Association (KNA).

And according to the constitution of this organization, or association, their aim was to work between the administrative bodies of Burma and the Karen people, and to uplift the Karen people -- in every sense of the word.

After the first meeting, it was decided that the head of the organization would be T. Thanbyah; Secretary: Thra Saw Thay; Treasurer: Ku Shwe Maung Oo; Recorder: Ku Loo Nee...and it was decided that they would have a meeting every three years to coordinate future works.

And we can proudly say that it has been a great help to the Karen people through today. T. Thanbyah was with the organization for 21 years when he left in 1903....This organization helped the Karen people a lot, especially every time the representative of the Queen came to Burma, when this organization would put up all their troubles to him.
The Karen National Anthem

(1900)

Oh, Daw Ka Lu’ of mine
The best people abide
I love you best
You value honesty
And hospitality
All noble qualities
I love you most.

The Lord’s chosen children
The folks expecting God
Blessed you are
You’d been persecuted
Though been enslaved as well
White brother liberators
God sent them back

The God of our fathers
Our hope from olden days
We worship thee
To be thy disciples
Carry gospel message
To every sea and land
Bless us oh Lord.

"the whole race"
m

The Humble Memorial of the Karens of Burma to
His Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State for Burma

Rangoon, 26 September 1945

May it please Your Honour that your Memorialists, the Karens of Burma, at this momentous time, have great cause to be very much concerned about the future of the Karens in this transitional stage of the much promised Constitutional Progress to the Burmese people to full Self-Government as soon as may prove possible. Our National Identity, jealously preserved as the Karens of Burma, and our National Virtue and National Morals, anxiously nurtured during the long trying centuries, appear at last to be recognised, though formerly we felt that only the baby who cried got the most attention. The Karens have faithfully and loyally followed the flag they vowed to fight for, to distant lands, and not merely as evacuees. We realise that many of our interests in the past have been overlooked, because we failed to make adequate representation of our needs; but now, if the Majority could possibly merit Constitutional Progress to full Self-Government, we the Karens of Burma do deserve "a double claim to British consideration".

The Karens are known to have lived in Burma long before the advent of the Tibeto-Burmans into Burma. The Tibeto-Burmans in their advent pressed out the Karens southward to the Delta Areas, and eastward to the mountainous fringes
bordering on Thailand, yes, even into Thailand and Indo-China. However much they were pressed during these long centuries, they, unlike the Pyus, the Thet, the Kanyans, and the Mons, did never succumb as a race to the evil influence of their neighbours. They kept aloof as a race, jealously preserved their National Identity, and anxiously nurtured their National Virtue and National Morals, untarnished and unsoiled by contamination with their neighbours. There is a story current among the Burmese themselves that when a Buddhist monk was preaching to a crowd of Shans about the abode of Spiritual Beings called in Burmese "Nat-Pye", an old Shan among the crowd asked the monk whether there was any Burmese in "Nat-Pye". The Spiritual Divine replied, "Certainly, the Burmese would be there also." Then the old Shan murmured, "Alack! Nat-Pye also will eventually be ruined by the Burmese." Likewise, the Karen attitude towards Burmese, for similar reason, is such that a whole village community would rather move away than live side by side with Burmese who have immigrated into their area. In this way they keep up their National Identity, which may be taken for Clannishness. Even in the field of education, they successfully establish and smoothly maintain their own system of co-education.

Geographically and socially, there should be no reason why the Karens and the Burmese living on the same soil for so many centuries could not live harmoniously, and be united and treated as one race. Naturally, the by-stander cannot realise or appreciate the situation as those who have to suffer, and live under
circumstances of great strain both mental and physical. Over a hundred years ago, before the British ever set foot in Burma, the Burmese Kings and the Burmese people literally made slaves of the Karen, and persecuted them generally. Ko Tha Byu, who later earned the epithet of "The Apostle of Burma", was a Karen slave redeemed both body and soul by Dr. Judson just a century ago. The Karens, the Hill Tribes, therefore, had to flee or evade the Burmese whenever possible. Under such circumstances, the Karens underwent both mental and physical torture. Then came the British, not only as a Liberator, but also as a Guardian angel, maintaining Law and Order, and preserving Peace and giving Protection. Under such a benign Government, the Karens began to thrive, but still with great difficulty. There was no more physical torture; but the mental tortures still had to be endured. The Burmese still treated the Karens with contempt socially. They still imposed on the Karens in business. They crowded out the minority races in official posts. In every sphere of life, the Burmese took the best. Such was the situation. But is 1942, no sooner was the back of the British turned, no sooner was the Liberator and Guardian Angel taken away, than reoccurred both the mental and the physical torture in a manner unequalled in the whole history of Burma. This unfortunate, uncalled-for and unprovoked series of bloodshed and persecution has turned the clock back a century in our relationships. The Karens, therefore, have come to feel very strongly that they must strike out on a course of their own to preserve their National Ideals and
develop into a progressive and useful State of Burma in the British Commonwealth of Nations.

The Karens have unreservedly rendered military aid to the British crown and the Empire in all the crises ever since the British annexation of Lower Burma. In the early stage of the British occupation, crime, plunder and risings were very rampant in the country; and the Karens under the leadership of pioneer Missionaries helped considerably in suppressing crime and petty revolutions....

Every crisis in our history of the past century convinces us more and more strongly that the time has now come for definite and determined effort to secure due recognition of our merit and an adequate consideration of our just cause by the British, whom we have faithfully and conscientiously served and suffered for especially in this present war....

The National Policies of the Karens are all broadly based on holding high British Honour and Prestige, and to imbibe all that is finest in British Ideals. The events of this war, both at home and abroad, have made us stronger in these beliefs, and the Karens are, therefore, more determined to achieve their National Ideals; for these again affect our future security as a Nation....

In 1926, that is seventeen years ago, our accredited Leader Sir San Crombie Po, Kt, CBE, MD, in his book Burma and the Karens advocated the...Tenasserim Division for the Karen Country to be administered by the Karens directly under British Supervision. Mr. Donald Mackenzie Smeaton of the Bengal Civil Service, of
middle 19th Century, in his book *The Loyal Karens of Burma* pleaded the same thing for the Karens even in those trying days; and in support of our humble claim, your Memorialists beg to quote Mr. Smeaton's words in giving his reason for such a Karen State:

Why should we not try -- if only as a political experiment -- to give to the Karens a chance of growing as a nation in their own way? Why should we not try and bring their wild growth under cultivation, grafting on the ancient roots as time and experience improve our perception and increase our skill? We have here a people -- probably under a million in all -- who aspire to keep their own nationality intact. Why should we not allow them and encourage them to do so? The result may be of the highest interest in the future, and cannot fail to be fraught with great benefit to the people themselves; and it will strengthen British Rule and safeguard it in the times of trouble which may yet be in store for us in Burma.

Surely, those British Officials who have given the subject a thought, and have carefully looked into the matter, could not but be convinced of the reasonableness and potential significance of Mr. Smeaton's comment....

Our blood-brothers, the Karens in Thailand, are more backward than we are in many ways. They are either severely left alone, or made to adopt the Thai culture, which is foreign to them. They are not encouraged to study, and do not receive the education that we have received in Burma. We therefore submit that they and the Areas they inhabit be put under the Special Régime so that we may together live secure and grow up as one united people.

The Mass Meeting referred to above unanimously resolved to send a deputation to England headed by Saw Ba U Gyi, Bar-at-Law and two others (under
the Supervision of their Guardian Angel Sir San Crombie Po, Kt, CBE, MD) to support this humble Memorial in all fair and possible means, with implicit trust in "British consideration" to which we are given to understand we have "a double claim."

Wherefore your Memorialists pray with all confidence, faith and hope that we cherish within us, that His Majesty's Government may be pleased to grant the above mentioned Resolution, after due deliberation, patient and sympathetic consideration, and facilitate the meeting of our elected delegates with His Majesty's Secretary of State for Burma.

(Signed)  Saw Tha Din, President of the Karen National Association¹ (KNA)
          Mahn Ba Kin, Secretary of the KNA
          Saw Mya Thein, Ex-Member of the House of Representatives
          Saw Johnson Kan Gyi, Lecturer, Judson College
          Saw Ba U Gyi, Vice President, Karen Social and Service Club²
          (The Executive Members of the Karen Central Organisation)

Copy to:   HE the Governor
          Major General H.E. Rance, Chief Civil Affairs Officer

¹ Saw Tha Din, the only surviving member of this delegation to England (The Goodwill Mission), is still living in Chiang Mai at the time of this writing. The mission was received in England and found some sympathetic ears, but ultimately returned to Rangoon empty-handed, bitter, and heart-broken. In the course of two and one half years of fieldwork, Saw Tha Din is the only man who would not grant me an audience or interview, despite my association with his son.

² Subsequently, first President of the Karen National Union. Assassinated in 1950.
In this letter, I would like to chart the recent history and progress of Burma's democratic struggle with a special focus on the Karen National Union (KNU). I have chosen this perspective not only because I have recently completed eighteen months of anthropological fieldwork in Burma and Thailand concerning "The Construction of Karen Nationalism," and subsequently have a particular sympathy and attachment to this group, but also for the following reasons: 1) The KNU has been in open rebellion against the Government of Burma longer than any other ethnic group in Burma -- in fact, now going on forty-five years, it is one of the longest such rebellions in the world; 2) The KNU, led by General Bo Mya, is the largest, most powerful and influential, most visible and best-organized ethnic political/military organization in Burma today -- only their ally, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), under Brang Seng's capable leadership, is comparable in scope and sophistication; 3) Presently, the KNU is playing host to virtually Burma's entire opposition movement at its headquarters in Manerplaw (Karen for "Victory Field") on the Burmese-Thai border; (organizations based in
Manerplaw include the National Coalition Government of Burma (NCGUB), the Anti-Military Dictatorship National Solidarity Committee (ADNSC), the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), the National Democratic Front (NDF), the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), and the All Burma Young Monks Union (ABYMU), to mention but six of the leading organizations (to be discussed below); 4) With non-Burman ethnic groups constituting approximately forty percent of Burma’s population, the solution to Burma’s ethnic problems, the end of the armed insurgencies, and a national conciliation of peoples is central to the resolution and transcendence of Burma’s current political and economic crisis. The Government of Burma has for many years been pre-occupied with these rebellions, at great cost to Burma’s material and social welfare.

Very positive and historically unprecedented alliances and coalitions are currently uniting and working together in Manerplaw which provide new ground for optimism regarding national unity, national politics, and the democratic challenge to the ruling military junta, which calls itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The KNU is a key and illustrative actor in these developments. A brief look at the history of their rebellion will provide a useful background to the situation today, exemplifying as it does the crucial ideological shift away from separatism and towards the more practical and fruitful path of federalism. Today, all the peoples of Burma are trying to work together in order to form a more perfect union.
Ironically, the man in large part responsible for Burma’s tragic and deteriorating state of affairs for the past thirty years, General Ne Win, was deputy to the Karen Commander-in-Chief of newly Independent Burma’s Armed Forces, General Smith Dun, over four decades ago, when the Karen-Burmese fighting began which in effect precipitated the formal rebellion. Smith Dun discusses this chaotic time in his *Memoirs* (1980), and to this I now turn.
The Four-Foot Colonel and His Deputy: 
Provoking the Karen Rebellion

Shortly after Burma regained her independence from Great Britain, "the country was in a state of turmoil," according to the Supreme Commander of All Burma's Armed Forces, General Smith Dun, "caused by those who thought they deserved the lion's share but did not get it" (Dun, p. 51). VIPs were being assassinated, and, among the Burmese troops under his command, Communist sympathizers were deserting.

Due to the unavailability of regular Burmese forces, which were spread thin fighting the Communist rebellion and takeovers of towns, Dun, with the approval of Prime Minister U Nu, called in the KNDOs (Karen National Defense Organizations) to help take back lost territories and to form an outer ring of defense around Rangoon.

Several vernacular newspapers at this time began spreading rumors, later proven false, about Karen atrocities against the Burmese public. For example, "stories like foreign planes flying over Karen areas and dropping mysterious cargoes appeared in the papers" (Dun, p. 71). The Karens were often cast as a kind of cargo cult of the West by xenophobic and paranoid Burmese leaders. (It is not unlikely that Deputy Ne Win was overseeing various smear campaigns at this time; later events seem to support this.)
Communal tensions between Karens and Burmans was high, and clashes frequently occurred. Dun, aware of the volatility of the situation, arranged for a conference of his senior officers, battalion commanders and above. He charged all present to be impartial in their dealings with Karens and other minority groups. Some of the officers present argued that the problems were political, and not communal. Dun pointed out several blatant cases to his men, including the ruthless massacre of Palaw in Tavoy district (southern Burma) on Christmas eve of last year, 1948. His officers were silent.

In fact Karens throughout the country were being disarmed, despite the state of civil war between Burman and Burman, with not only the Communists taking up arms, but other groups as well, including the paramilitary People's Volunteer Organization (PVO), under the command of Aung San until his assassination. But the Government Armed Burmese Police, supposedly under General Dun's command, and the newly formed Burma Territorial Force, were operating under orders from mysterious quarters, unknown to General Dun, but later determined to be none other than his deputy's quarters. Ne Win had already begun building his secret shadow world.

According to General Dun, "the tragic events of a horrid massacre were to cast the mould and strike the spark which set ablaze the Karens into action for an all-out armed struggle. The spark was struck in the beautiful large Karen village of
Palaw...with its fine church and own middle school, a model village." Dun continues, detailing only two of the most blatant, premeditated provocations:

Government Armed Burmese Police accompanied by a Karen officer of long-standing entered the village and presented the Government's request for elders to hand over all arms.

Assurances were given supported by the Karen officer. This was 24th December 1948, X'mas eve. The Karen elders concede. Arms were handed over in the interest of peace and understanding. The Burmese Police party was invited to attend the carol celebration of the night and partake of the usual X'mas eve refreshments. They did attend. The village assembled in the church before midnight to bring in the Christmas with bells and worship. The carol parties had met in the church after their rounds. Worship was begun. Suddenly the explosion of grenades thrown into the church by the Burmese Police who had surrounded the church disturbed the worship. Those who did not die in the church were mown down by automatic fire as they fled the church. Already other parties of the police set ablaze the village homes and schools. Most conservative estimates give the death toll in the church as over 300 (a Singapore despatch).

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[...] The last day of the first month of the New Year 1949 brought the last senseless act of brutality which set the Karens in open warfare with the Burmese Government. [In Rangoon...again orders reached the elders of the Karen section of the city (Ahlone Karen Quarters) to give up illegal arms. [...] The day passed off peacefully but not the night. Soon after midnight on the 31st, Burmese troops surrounded the Karen quarters and awoke the sleepers with mortar and machine-gun fire. At the same time scores of houses were set ablaze. This slaughter of unarmed women and children continued for over two hours. By daylight a large section of the Karen Quarter was reduced to ashes. [...] Meanwhile, at about 0700 hours on 31st January 1949 a long series of incidents taking place at the Karen Quarters at Thamaing were reaching their climax. [...] An all-out attack...was on, and thus began the full-scale war that has been going on ever since between the Karens and the Burmese Government (Dun: 69-70).
The rebellion was on. Reportedly, in their drive north the Karen troops captured the Burmese operational document named "Operation Aung San" "which clearly indicated the intention of the Burmese Government to eliminate the Karens first, then other hill people. [...] They were not to lay their necks down for the slaughter, nor their women to dishonor" (Dun: p. 70).

Indeed, at this time the Karens felt betrayed by both the British, who had abandoned them without a State of their own after having fought alongside them for so many years, and the Burmese Government and Military, who were now attacking them and persecuting them, just like the days before their "younger white brother" had returned to Burma, bringing with them the long-prophesied redemption and protection, education and development.

Many towns throughout Burma were occupied by anti-government forces, including Karens, Communists, PVOs, and Mujahids (Muslims in Arakan State), but they could not hold them, and a two-pronged drive on Rangoon failed. U Nu's then-called "Six-Mile Government" (for the area allegedly under its control at the time) held on, and gradually recouped their losses.

As has so often been the problem with Burma's various opposition movements, they were not united -- frequently not even among themselves, and typically not between others. Had their been more unity within and between groups at this time, most analysts agree that Rangoon would most likely have fallen, and history accordingly "re-written" -- for better or worse -- though from today's vantage
point it is difficult to imagine a more depressing scenario than the one that has transpired in Burma in the past three decades, with Ne Win, "Number One," calling all the shots, literally.

Shortly before the Karen Quarters in Rangoon were razed, as General Smith Dun was conferring with his two Brigadiers Let-ya and Kyadoe, the Deputy came in. "Dun, doubting his capacity to read orders, briefed him about the conference that was to take place [concerning the heightening communal tensions]. He listened quite attentively, but at the end he got up and said, 'If only the Karens had started two months ago it would be alright for them, not now,' and left" (Dun: p. 53).
The Karen resistance movement, prior to the formation of the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) in 1988, had been a member of numerous united fronts with other ethnic groups, and on two notable occasions they had joined with Burman groups. Between 1959 and 1975, they had belonged to the National Democratic United Front, which included the Communist Party of Burma along with, for varying periods of time, the Chin National Vanguard Party, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), the New Mon State Party (NMSP), and for a short period, the Shan State Nationalities Liberation Organization.

Between 1970 and 1974, the Karen National Union (KNU) was allied with U Nu's Parliamentary Democracy Party (later the People's Patriotic Party), the Chin Democracy Party, and the NMSP in the National United Liberation Front.

But it was not until 1976 that the most effective and durable (exclusively) minority coalition in Burma was formed: the National Democratic Front (NDF), which remains active and powerful today. The NDF presently consists of the following eight organizations (see following chart): the KNU, KIO, NMSP, KNPP, KNLP, CNF, SSPP and LNO.

Although it had been decided to exclude Burman organizations from this alliance, the formation of the NDF was an important step forward because of the resolve to unite its members in their common goal of overthrowing Ne Win's military
dictatorship. But it was not until 1984, after the KIO had returned to the fold following its abortive peacemaking attempts with Ne Win's ruling party, the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), that the major ideological shift took place in the NDF's platform. According to Martin Smith,

Over the years most NDF members had redefined their political goals, generally watering down any 'separatist' language, but here [in Manerplaw] for the first time the demand for the right of secession by all NDF members, including the KNU, was explicitly dropped and the political goals of the NDF were written in terms designed to win support from the Burman majority: 'The NDF does not want racial hatred. It is struggling for liberty, equality and social progress of all indigenous races of Burma, because Burma is a multi-national state inhabited and owned by all. In the so called Burma of today, the National Democratic Front intends to establish a unified Federal Union with all the ethnic races including the Burmese.'

This was a vital precedent in the establishment of an organized opposition movement, albeit one lacking the key element of a majority Burman component. Once again, this would require Ne Win's unwitting instigation four years later, in 1988, as students, monks, and politicians fled to the insurgent areas in order to avoid the brutal crackdown on, and roundup of, pro-democracy activists. Fortunately, the KNU and other members of the NDF (and other insurgent organizations) decided to provide shelter and training to this new generation of activists, "rebels," and

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"insurgents," though the going was not always easy. This was hardly surprising given the long and often hostile history of Burman-minority relations.

In the decade preceding the events of 1988 (discussed below), however, a new sophistication and political maturity had been developing among the ethnic opposition groups, which in turn began providing the formerly diverse and little-understood groupings with an increasing degree of legitimation and support, domestically to a limited extent, but also externally, where these groups were forced to turn for support. Internally, the BSPP propaganda machine was apparently fairly successful in portraying the non-Burman dissidents as uncivilized barbarians, "wild men," "savages," "dogs" and "monsters who eat their babies," while at the same time they were constantly referred to as imperialist stooges and lackeys who threatened Burma's integrity as a nation.

Given this, the Burmese students with whom I spoke in Kaw Thoo Lei (the Karen State) were surprised and impressed by the revolutionaries' political and military organization, their educational and medical systems, their high moral and ethical standards, and their interminable determination. They were also extremely grateful for their hospitality and generosity, as well as for the military training they were receiving. They acknowledged the leadership of the KNU's General Bo Mya, who also chaired the DAB and the ADNSC (see chart), and were surprisingly serious in heeding his strong Christian prohibitions, particularly concerning drinking.
Above all, there was a great deal of discussions taking place, and a new way of thinking which the students' group, the ABSDF, called "national politics" was being formulated. Policy statements were being issued, newsletters printed, press conferences held, and conventions convened. This was in fact Burma's new political vortex, located between the Dawna mountain range and the Moei River, on the other side of which lay Thailand, a dramatic contrast.

But this scene unfolded only after the watershed and bloodshed of the real barbarian and savage acts of the internationally recognized "government" of Burma against its peacefully demonstrating citizens in 1988, which must be mentioned at this time.
Ne Win has been busier than usual since 1987, as he prepares to die. He is reportedly anxious about his place in history and his place in his next life. He is further under the delusion that he can sanitize that place at this late date and gain some much-needed merit in the process. With his usual flair, he has turned the country upside-down and inside-out with a dizzying display of shocks, surprises, and slaughters seldom seen in modern times, at least in countries whose leaders are rational, moral, and civilized. These however, are not characteristics usually attributed to the man born Shu Maung in 1911, and who assumed the pseudonym Ne Win, "Sun of Glory," as one of the so-called "Thirty Comrades" who trained in Japan and then re-entered Burma with the Japanese Army in World War II, apparently assuming Japan the lesser evil of Britain.

Burma had been subjected to Ne Win for twenty-five years, since his 1962 coup, when he had inaugurated the disastrous policies of the so-called "Burmese Way to Socialism." In this quarter-century, Burma had gone from being one of the most prosperous and promising countries of Southeast Asia to being one of the world's ten poorest countries. It was soon to receive the humiliating distinction of "Least Developed Country" status by the U.N.
In a rare radio and television speech on 10 August 1987, Ne Win finally admitted that "mistakes have been made during his twenty-five years in power, adding that even constitutional changes must be made 'in order to keep abreast with the times'."  

On 1 September, the government de-controlled "domestic trade in rice, maize, pulses, and beans ending restrictions that had been in place since 1966" (Lintner: 192). This was followed, however, on 5 September, by the "demonetization" of the Burmese currency, the second time in three years the government had resorted to this drastic measure which, in effect, made immediately worthless all the larger currency bills in circulation: Kyats 25, 35, and 75 banknotes.  

Eighty percent of the country's money in circulation was wiped out on the spot, without compensation. Ordinary citizens' savings, large and small, became worthless overnight. Approximately 1,000 students went on a rampage in Rangoon, the first serious outbreak of anti-government demonstrations in over a decade. This, coupled with

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2 Bertil Lintner, Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy, (White Lotus, London, 1990) p.192. The most in-depth account of political developments in Burma through March, 1990. Lintner and Smith (see footnote 4) are among the extremely small number of Burmese experts writing today and illuminating events in Burma. I am indebted to their accounts, particularly in this section.

3 Smith points out that "many believed that Ne Win, whose temper was notorious, was going senile or following wild astrological predictions. (The 75 Kyat note was introduced in Ne Win's 75th year; the number 9 (4 + 5) is Ne Win's lucky number and frequently recurs in government announcements. The 1990 elections, for example, were scheduled for the 27th (2 + 7) May, on the 4th Sunday in the 5th month, 1990.)" (Smith: 26).
the government's actions and reactions in the coming months, was to build up to the eventual explosion of anger in the massive riots and demonstrations of 1988. Ne Win broke the back of the people, taking until they had nothing to lose, and worlds to gain.

The situation continued to deteriorate throughout 1987. Universities were closed for several months and anti-government demonstrations were held sporadically.

The major riots that ushered in the large-scale national uprisings which were to follow in the "Democracy Summer" began after one student, Maung Phone Maw, was shot dead by the Lon Htein (riot police) on March 13, 1988; six or seven more students subsequently died of gunshot wounds from the same incident several days later. The students were protesting the release of a man who had assaulted a student in a teashop on March 12. The man released was the son of the chairman of the local People's Council.

The government's response was horrendous. Security forces led by the Lon Htein, heavily armed and backed up by tanks, came down upon the defenseless students mercilessly. An estimated 100 civilians were killed. 41 of these, in an infamous incident, suffocated to death in the back of a crowded prison van as it drove around Rangoon for several hours, instead of driving the short distance to its destination: the notorious Insein prison. Some students were drowned in Inya Lake,
others tortured, and, in what has become the shockingly permitted custom of Burma's Armed Forces, women were raped.

Protests resumed again in early June when the universities were briefly reopened. The day after their closure, June 21, 1988, an estimated 20,000 students, monks, workers, and citizens marched towards the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. The crowd is stopped by the Lon Htein who fire teargas at them and open fire with rifles, killing an estimated 80 civilians. This time, 20 riot policemen are killed, many with jinglees, sharpened bicycle spokes fired with catapults, or deadly slingshots. Riots and massacres are now occurring in Mandalay, Moulmein, and Taungyi, as well as other towns outside the capital. In Pegu alone, 70 people were feared dead after more serious rioting broke out.⁴ According to Smith,

Into July the country lived on knife's edge. Rumours were rife. But the government's crack-down and the restrictions on movement only exacerbated the worsening shortages of supplies in the shops, and the prices of essential goods, such as cooking oil and medicine, continued to rocket dramatically. The price of rice, for example, always the touchstone for political protest in Burma, was estimated to have risen by 400 per cent since the start of the year alone (Smith: 3).

On 23 July 1988, Ne Win made his long-anticipated and long-hoped-for move: before an emergency congress of the BSPP, Ne Win announced his retirement, or rather, his retirement was announced. First, however, Ne Win made an incredible

⁴ See Smith, Chapter 1: "The Burmese Way to Stagnation and the Crisis of 1988; and Lintner, Chapter 1: "Seven Days that Shook Rangoon," from which I draw here.
proposal, and a huge personal mistake. Beginning his address to the 1,000 delegates present, Ne Win said (in a major understatement):

I believe that the bloody events of March and June show a lack of trust in the government and the party that guides it by the people who were either directly involved or were lending their support to the events. But it is necessary to find out whether it is the majority or the minority that supports the people showing the lack of trust. Since it is our belief that the answer to the question -- a multiparty or a single party system -- can be provided by a referendum...if the choice is for a multiparty system, we must hold elections for a new parliament.

At this point, the BSPP Central Committee headquarters secretary, Htwe Han, took over the microphone and read out the following, still in the first person (for reasons best understood by Ne Win):

As I consider that I am not totally free from responsibility, even if indirectly, for the sad events that took place in March and June, and because I am advancing in age, I would like to request party members to allow me to relinquish the duty of party chairman and as a party member.

Ne Win took back the microphone and continued his speech. After laying the blame for blowing up the historic students' union building after his 1962 coup on now-critic and dissident Aung Gyi, Ne Win addressed the Burmese people directly, and unequivocally:

In continuing to maintain control, I want the entire nation, the people, to know that if in the future there are mob disturbances, if the army shoots, it hits -- there is no firing into the air to scare.

Ne Win's chosen successor backed up his words. Brig. Gen. Sein Lwin had already been dubbed "the butcher" for his role in the March massacres. He was also
known for his campaign of terror against students protesting the handling of former U.N. Secretary General U Thant’s funeral in 1974; he was also known as the young officer who ordered his troops to open fire on student demonstrators shortly after Ne Win took power in 1962. In 1950, he had already attracted Ne Win’s attention: he was also known as the 26-year old major whose unit was responsible for locating two of the Karen rebels’ most prominent leaders in the jungle, the KNU’s first President, Saw Ba U Gyi, and Saw Sankey, and killing them. He was the kind of man, in short, a kind-of man like Ne Win could appreciate. (Earlier this year he was reported to have died, although these reports have recently been discredited.)

He lasted 18 long days as President, during which thousands of Burmese citizens lost their lives and their freedom as they demonstrated for what Ne Win himself had suggested -- a multiparty system; further, they wanted free and fair elections and an interim government they could trust. This was not to be. The next president, Dr. Maung Maung was unacceptable to the people. He was ousted after less than one month in office, on September 18, 1988, when Gen. Saw Maung’s SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) assumed power.

One important victory had been achieved by the activists during Maung Maung’s tenure, however: during the BSPP’s second emergency congress on 10 September, it was decided that general elections were to be held. At least partly responsible for this decision was the enormous attention Daw Aung San Suu Kyi had been receiving. The daughter of assassinated independence leader, Aung San, she
had returned to Burma to care for her ailing mother, only to find herself swept up in the chaotic times. Hundreds of thousands of Burmese citizens turned out to listen, see, and eventually support her, beginning with her first speech on 26 August outside Shwe Dagon pagoda. She has since become the military junta’s worse nightmare: founder of the overwhelmingly victorious National League for Democracy (NLD), which won over 80 percent of the votes in the May 1990 elections; winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize (as well as several other international prizes); and national and international symbol of Burma’s long struggle for democracy, what Aung San Suu Kyi calls "Burma’s second struggle for independence." She was put under house arrest July 20, 1989, and remains a prisoner at this writing, 3 years later.

The same day the SLORC took over, 18 September, they began shooting, killing, raping and torturing. The army shot, and following Ne Win’s words, it hit. Today, the death toll in the year’s violence is estimated at more than 10,000.

More than 10,000 others from all walks of life fled Burma’s cities into liberated zones controlled by the rebel armies, the majority to NDF-held territory. According to Smith,

an estimated 2,000...took sanctuary with the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) in the mountains of the far north, but most headed for the nearby jungles in the southeast. Here in the Dawna Range some 6,000 took refuge with the Karen National Union (KNU) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP). Many immediately began armed training (Smith: 16-17).
The following diagram gives one an idea of the breadth of opposition to the small group of despots that calls itself "SLORC."\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{5} Compiled and designed by the author. The changing configurations of these organizations make this a document of the moment, one that was unusually difficult to create.
The Structure of Burma's Democratic Opposition: October, 1992

Headquarters: Manerplaw, Kaw Thoo Lei, Burma

* NCGUB *
National Coalition Government
of the Union of Burma
(Dr. Sein Win, PM)
(MPs, elected 5/90)

NCUB
National Council of
the Union of Burma
(16 DAB, 15 NCGUB)
(de facto parliament)

NLD
National League
for Democracy
(Dr. Sein Win)

DAB
Democratic Alliance of Burma
(Gen. By Mya, KNU)

NDP
National Democratic Front
(Naing Shwe Kyin, NMSP)

CNF
Chin National Front

KIO
Kachin Independence Organisation

KNU
Karen National Union

LNO
Lahu National Organization

NMSP
New Mon State Party

*KNPP
Karen National Progressive Party

*KNLP
Kayan New Land Party

*SSPP
Shan State Progress Party

ABSDF
All Burma Students' Democratic Front

ABMU
All Burma Muslim Union

ABYMU
All Burma Young Monks Union

PLF
People's Liberation Front

GBA
German-Burmese Association

NUFA
National United Front of Arakan

OBLF
Overseas Burma Liberation Front

ALP
Arakan Liberation Party

WNO
Wa National Organisation

OKO
Overseas Karen Organisation

DPNS
Democratic Party for a New Society

PPP
People's Patriotic Party

CRDB
Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma

* Not in DAB
I did no "research" or "writing" during this period.

I was a tour guide for an American company called "Bolder Adventure." I, and my Thai partner Kai (the real guide), were to lead a group of Americans around northern Thailand. The tours included: "Hilltribe" villages: Akha, Lisu, Mien, and Karen; a boat trip up the Mae Kok River to an elephant camp; an elephant ride with Karen mahouts over a mountain and through their village (a trip we guides never took, but were told was "thrilling and dangerous"); a waterfall after a "nature walk"; a cave; an orchid farm; a Kuomintang village; a five-star hotel, several resorts, and many gift shops. This was not my natural calling.

But I needed the money. And I thought it would be interesting approaching these diverse villages in another role -- as guide versus anthropologist -- although I had grave misgivings about the whole enterprise. My one-year Fulbright grant had run dry, and I did not yet feel prepared to return home and write. I felt I needed more time (a feeling that never goes away). I thought that I was just beginning to break the ice in my research, that I was beginning to see through the glistening surface to the world underneath.
I reflected on the funds required to pursue this kind of work, how élite a profession it seemed in many ways. Without substantial financial support of some kind -- a grant, student loans, independent wealth, or, as it came to pass in my case (and with many of my colleagues), a supportive family -- it seemed extremely difficult for one to complete an advanced degree in Anthropology. Only those with money, by and large, have the freedom to study others, and to write about them. For their part, families had to be fed, shelter provided, battles fought.

In retrospect the tours were surprisingly good, sometimes bad, and at times ugly. It was illuminating seeing the villages through the eyes of two-week tourists. Even more interesting was the reverse, seeing the tourists through the eyes of a villager, insofar as this was possible. For the longer one resides in a foreign culture, the odder, and inevitably, the uglier, the tourist-culture appears. Armed insurgents in jungle villages become the norm, while hotel lobbies become bizarre, absurd, pockets of exotic, overstuffed, blind resistance to the surrounding world.

Access was easy to these strange worlds: Put on a clean pair of clothes, grab a map, and the Western zones can be infiltrated without an "Excuse me, sir." White skin and blue eyes are the ticket. Sitting in the air-conditioned lobby in the big, soft chair, I began to feel the need to take notes, to outline an ethnography of this strange culture, one that simultaneously reminded me of where I had come from, and also repulsed and embarrassed me. The smell of money. Decadence. Leisure. Boredom. Condescension. Chanel and Old Spice. I ordered a gin and tonic -- a
double. And waited for my guests. I was to be their cultural guide, mediator, and interpreter. But not for long.

The "minority," that is, non-Thai, villagers on our tours were hospitable, as is customary in this part of the world. But instead of sitting down to hours of tea, cheroots (hand-rolled cigars), and conversation, we immediately became the center of an impromptu market, Karen villages excepted. Since the expansion of the Thais into the hills during the past decade, many of these villagers have lost the land they have worked for many years, on which they had grown their rice and other crops, selling whatever excess they might have had to earn some cash.

As second-class citizens in Thailand, they are denied many of the rights of Thais, which usually includes land rights. To generate an income, many have chosen the path of least resistance: selling cultural objects to the tourists who increasingly come to their doorsteps. They have become increasingly commodified, a part of the travelling roadshow that is tourism in northern Thailand. There options are extremely limited in this context, and so the tourist industry provides much-needed income to the villagers. Accordingly, the industry meets a need, and cannot be condemned across the board.

The tourists get a bold adventure into the lives of the "dirty yet colorful" natives. They leave some money behind in the villages in return for their observation and experience. It is a symbiotic relationship, one that could be much worse. Which doesn't make it all any less sad.
The Constitution of the Burma's Democratic Opposition: Manerplaw and Beyond

It is no exaggeration to say that Burma's political heart is no longer located in Rangoon. It is located in the capital of the Free Karen State of Kaw Thoo Lei: Manerplaw. The National Coalition Government of Burma (NCGUB) is based here, which is formed with legal Parliamentary representatives officially elected by the people in the May 1990 elections. The Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) is based here also, consisting of organisations representing the spectrum of Burma's diversity (see the letter "p"), as well as overseas organisations of political exiles concerned with Burma's democratic struggle and the overthrow of the SLORC. The NDF allied itself with all these groups in November 1988, after the flight to the border of thousands of students, monks, and other pro-democracy activists.

The pièce de la résistance was a group of Burma's newly elected members of parliament (MPs) who had managed to escape to Manerplaw in December 1990; other MPs did not make it, having already been arrested, tortured, and in several cases, killed in prison. The group that did complete the dangerous journey was led by Dr. Sein Win, MP for Paukkaung. A ceasefire was declared with the DAB and Dr. Sein Win became Prime Minister of the parallel government, the NCGUB. The Western-educated cousin of Aung San Suu Kyi and nephew of Aung San, Sein Win's
father had been assassinated along with Aung San. He brought a new face to the opposition and also a new legitimation and prestige. He and his cabinet, as well as ethnic opposition leaders such as the KIO's Brang Seng, have been traveling widely abroad, and are receiving increasing support, from many foreign governments and international agencies. (Norway and Switzerland, in fact, began giving aid in April 1992.) Once again, the capital in the jungle provided a safe haven for Burma's future leaders. (One can only hope that these kindnesses will be remembered by the Burman politicians in fairer weather.)

The NCGUB, in its "Principles and Policy Statement" of April, 1991, opens with the following statement:

It is our firm belief that since Burma is home to various ethnic groups of indigenous origin, the task of establishing a great new nation where unity, peace, and prosperity prevail, rests with all these national groups, including ourselves, and not just a single race or a single class of people. (p. 2)

The special salience of this document derives from its Burman voice advocating equality, self-determination, and federalism. It is a post-SLORC document in effect, presaging a democratic Burma. It is explicit in its declaration that "all indigenous groups are equals, and no single group shall be allowed to enjoy special privileges, and equal rights and privileges shall not be denied to any other group."
The DAB has further formalized this emerging unity and cooperation in its
"(Future) Federal Union of States of Burma Constitution (draft)," its third draft, in
November, 1991. The "Preamble" is a telling statement of the moment:

Since time immemorial, various nationalities have inhabited in
the country known as Burma today, as separate and autonomous
national groups.

When the feudal system came into existence, the separate
national groups such as Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Chin, Palung, Pa-O,
Mon, Burman, Arakanese, Lahu, Shan etc., who had their own
territories, traditions, language, customs and cultures, started to lose
their rights as a people.

Due to wars between the feudal lords, the various nationalities
were plunged into great distress and misery. When colonialism came,
all the independence and human rights were lost.

As the 1947 constitution, which was drafted speedily for the
early attainment of independence, was fraught with defects and not in
accordance with the wishes of the indigenous nationalities, it created
causes for the out-break of the civil war.

When the people, consisting of the indigenous nationalities,
made the effort to amend, within the pale of law, the 1947 Constitution
which was federal in form but which in essence was a unitary system,
the Burma military seized state power, and after suppressing the
people by force, it established military dictatorship, in 1962.

In order to continue its totalitarian rule in a civilian guise, the
military clique drafted and enacted the 1974 constitution. Under the
totalitarian system, the indigenous nationalities and the people as a
whole lost all their basic human and democratic rights and the country
was reduced, economically, to the status of the poorest in the world.

At the same time, the totalitarian regime stepped up the civil
war to unprecedented level, and increased its oppression and tyranny
against the people. When the people, including students, youths and
Buddhist monks eventually reached the end of its endurance, the
historic and world-famous movement for democracy broke out in all parts of the country in 1988.

The 1974 Constitution terminated at the time of the great blood-shed that resulted, as the neo-militarists brutally suppressed the country-wide movement for democracy.

The 1974 as well as the 1974 Constitutions became inoperative, because both were not in accordance with the wishes of the people, both failed to guarantee the rights of the citizens and both failed to create a federation based on equality and full democratic rights for all the indigenous nationalities.

In consequence, an exigency arises for drafting a new Constitution, which will be in consonant with the objective conditions of Burma, but which will be substantially different from the old Constitutions.

To meet the exigency, this Draft Constitution was prepared, in good faith, with full sense of justice, fairness, and with the intention of making contributions toward the emergence of a perfect constitution of Burma embodying the basic principles of democracy, protecting basic human rights and the rights of each and every citizen, guaranteeing the right to equality and self-determination of all the indigenous nationalities, forestalling entirely the emergence of any form of dictatorship, repudiating the unitary system and sanctioning a system of the federal union of states. (pp. 1-2)

Diplomatic revisionism notwithstanding, the document clearly reflects the degree of cooperation and negotiation among all the diverse groups living, working, and fighting together on the Burmese-Thai border. The net of culpability is cast abstractly onto first, the feudal system, then colonialism and fascism, and finally onto the totalitarian regime. Previous constitutions are declared inoperative being contrary to all the people's wishes, and a new one drafted. The drafting committee consists of six individuals, from six different organisations: KIO, NMSP, OKO,
NUFA, ABSDF, and PNO; six different "national races": Kachin, Mon, Karen, Arakanese, Burman, and Pao are represented.

As a "working draft," the constitution serves to demonstrate the good faith of the members, and acts as an official charter for inter-ethnic negotiation and relations. Neither its viability nor its potential implementation is the key issue at this time -- the NCGUB is indeed maintaining its distance from the document at the moment, perhaps perforce\(^1\) -- rather, the landmark document is a self-evident display of unprecedented unity across Burma's ethnic spectrum. In demonstrating the efficacy, efficiency and resolve of the resistance, it is indeed an historical document as well as a blueprint for change.

The (draft) constitution mirrors the citizens' longstanding deprivations: 56 of its 197 articles relate to human rights: for children, for the aged and handicapped, to travel, to worship, to work, to get the protection of the Human Rights Commission (to be established), to constitutional remedies; and for legal, cultural, educational, and basic democratic rights. The composition of the (future) union into "national states," "special union territories," "autonomous regions," and "special national

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\(^1\) In an interview with Dr. Sein Win (on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Road) in Manerplaw, in February, 1992, he held a "wait and see" attitude, saying that things would be decided after the SLORC is overthrown, and a national convention held. For the time being, political (as well as physical) survival was foremost; the NLD remains committed to its policy of non-violence, but they were forced to defend themselves against attacks by the army, and were helping transport supplies to the Front Line at this time.
territories" further displays the authors' attempts to come to terms with Burma's complex demography. (See Appendix 2) [not included yet]

The (26 October 1991) "Policy Statement of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front" (ABSDF) reflects similar sentiments and an optimism in the power of the people:

The fight against the military dictatorship, and for the attainment of democracy is not the monopoly of an individual, a stratum, a class of people or an ethnic group. It is the duty of all those who love their country, cherish human rights, and wish to see progress. Being a national cause, a united effort of all is needed to overthrow the military dictatorship to the point of no return.

The history of the world clearly revealed that, in countries with dictatorial regimes, the united efforts of their citizens, based upon patriotism were able to rid themselves of such regimes. There are many such examples. [...] The fight against military dictatorship, and the restoration of democracy are national causes that are the concerns of all the citizens and the nation. *Therefore the political strategy the ABSDF must embrace is National Politics itself* (original emphasis) (p. 1).

Many other groups have issued similar statements, expressing the solidarity of the opposition, much to the SLORC's chagrin. Since 1988, the scale of attacks against the "liberated zones" has increased every year, and the army has been pumped up from 180,000 to 300,000 in this same period. Thousands of porters have been gang-pressed into hauling supplies for the army, having been abducted from their homes, restaurants, cinema halls, ricefields, and wherever the army can find them. They are further forced to act as human shields and human mine-detectors as they are force-marched before the army.
Injected with drugs and often intoxicated, the soldiers fight against an unknown enemy in a war they do not even understand. Many desert to the opposition. Morale is low, loyalty suspect, as the elections results have clearly demonstrated. Most have joined for the benefits; thus, they fight to survive.

The SLORC for its part keeps them busy, and diverted, on many fronts. Borders on all sides are violated as citizens flee: Karens, Mon, Burman, and others into Thailand; Kachin, Shan, and Burman into China; Nagas into India; and, in its pogrom against Arakanese Muslims, it has forced over 200,000 refugees into Bangladesh, a country struggling to survive as it is.

Bangladesh, however, has done what Thailand has never done with its refugees (or illegal immigrants) from Burma; that is, internationalize the issue by seeking U.N. assistance and mediation. By doing so, the SLORC has been increasingly drawn into the international arena, much against its will. Condemnations have come from many quarters, and the rhetoric has recently escalated to the point where the SLORC has had to make a few conciliatory gestures to appease its critics: the U.S., Britain, Australia, the European Community, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation, the U.N., and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, to name a few. Thus, a handful (out of thousands) of political prisoners have been released; the husband and children of Aung San Suu Kyi have been allowed to (conditionally) visit their detained wife and mother; and the usual seasonal end to the fighting against the Karens has been
broadcast this year. As General Saw Maung has taken a "complete rest," following
a nervous breakdown and general incoherency owing to heavy responsibilities
undertaken continuously," these announcements were made by the new General
nominally in charge of the SLORC, Than Shwe. (Real power is still believed wielded
by Ne Win and his Intelligence Chief Khin Nyunt.)

In words the Generals could understand, Saudi Prince Khaled Bin Sultan Bin
Abdul Aziz, commander of the Saudi army contingent of U.N. forces in the Gulf
War, in reference to the Burmese refugees, put it plainly: "I think the U.N. should
do for them just what it did to liberate Kuwait."\(^2\)

Burma's 1992-93 budget belies its spin control -- over 35 percent of overall
spending, US$1.2/$3.4 billion, is earmarked for defense, "reflecting the high priority
SLORC continues to give the ongoing insurgency by ethnic separatists [sic] and
Burmese dissidents\(^3\)." Economically, one can imagine what the end to the internal
wars would do for the country. But this is an unlikely scenario, given the fact that,
for example, Burma bought over US$1.2 billion worth of military hardware from
China last year, including a number of fighter-bombers, recently used against the
insurgents.

A few hours after this first jet bombing I spoke to Padoh Than Aung, the
Vice-President of the KNU, at his home in Manerplaw. After a lifetime serving the

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\(^2\) The Nation, April 16, 1992, (Bangkok, Thailand).

\(^3\) Ibid., April 24, 1992.
Karen Revolution, after the fiercest fighting in over 40 years which brought the Burmese Army to their doorstep, after one of his eloquent and spirited responses to one of my questions, he paused briefly, then confidently told me: "They will never take Manerplaw."

Many observers were sure that Manerplaw would fall in 1992, and the newspapers were anticipating its demise any day. Khin Nyunt apparently wanted this feather in his cap to announce to the country on March 27, Burma's Armed Forces Day, and had devoted many forces towards this end. They got close, but the symbolic prize of the KNU and opposition headquarters was not to be theirs this year. The saving monsoon rains were coming, and the troops were forced to withdraw. "Operation Dragon King" had failed.

Even though I had hoped Padoh Than Aung was right, I was nevertheless taken aback by his bold proclamation. After so many lives lost, so much land lost, and so much time spent, how could he be so sure? Now that Manerplaw has survived its bloodiest year yet, I realize that it is just this strength of spirit and force of will that has kept the resistance alive; and, as the opposition broadens and consolidates its substantial human resources, it is just this power that will lead to the liberation of all the Burmese people. Those struggling against tyranny derive their strength from diverse sources, some from the examples of others such as the "people's power" movement in the Philippines; some from ideology; but many, of course, from their religion. Padoh Than Aung's struggle ended in April, 1992, due
to natural causes, not in Burma nor in Kaw Thoo Lei, but in hospital in Chiang Mai, Thailand. He, like many members of the KNU, was a devout Baptist Christian, and turned to the Scriptures for support. During my fieldwork, every Karen I asked had a favorite Bible verse, and I left "the field" with a collection of these. A number of verses frequently recurred, and I therefore find it fitting to close this account with several of them:

*Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war rise against me, in this will I be confident.* (Psalms 27: 3)

*Let all mine enemies be ashamed and sore vexed:
Let them return and be ashamed suddenly.* (Psalms 6: 10)

*Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.* (Matthew 5: 5)

A m e n.
The Voice of the SLORC:
From The Working People' Daily

One voice we have not heard much from is that of the SLORC. They, too, have their stories, stories they constantly feed to the citizens of Burma. Although many Burmese see through the SLORC's propaganda, the sheer repetition and customariness of the claims of the only newspaper in Burma, the Working People's Daily, penetrate peoples' consciousness. Many of the Burmese who make it to the rebel-controlled areas are shocked by the contrast between the SLORC's characterizations of these people, and the reality confronting them.

It should also be observed in the following selections that the small textual community, or community of texts, to which I have referred previously, encompasses the Burmese leaders as well. These books -- by Smeaton, Po, Marshall, and others -- have amassed extraordinary value -- and circulation. Since relatively few books have been written in English on Burma, the Karens, etc., the literate members of this isolated country pounce on them, to see how they are represented, to try to see how they are seen by a world they know little of, or, at least, have had relatively little contact with. The textual characterizations assume a supernatural import, which inevitably circulates through the local culture, imposing its grand designs upon an often unwitting audience.
10 January 1989

British machinations as regards Karen nationals

Senior officers of the colonialist British Government conspired to create suspicion and division between the Government of the State and Karen nationals in the matter of establishing the Karen State. They pointed at the Karen-Burmese issue that occurred at Myaungmya and Papun during World war II and urged Karen leaders to form a separate Karen State and remain under British protection, and in devious ways tried to sow discord, turning the Karen against the Burmese by saying the Karen race would become extinct as the Burmese would overwhelm them after Burma regained Independence. Thus they cleverly manipulated the Karen nationals' patriotic spirit and pride to suit their own ends.

The KNU leaders at that time did not see the duplicity of the colonialist British and fell into their trap. That was why the KNU armed insurgency came about and remained for over 40 years up to this day. Some KNU leaders who came back into the legal fold later voiced political regret about the wrong moves of the KNU leaders of those days, thus:

"The ideology we had at the time we started our movement was no political ideology but only a narrow racial ideology..."
"The interests of Karen nationals were left forsaken in the hands of the spy ring of Baldwin, Lt-Col Tulloch and Alexander Campbell, and the counter-revolution was launched to serve the interests of the British colonialists...."

Neo-colonialism is domination of a country by another and exploitation through interferences in various fields including politics, economics, and military affairs. The first part of the action is to make it a protege and give support. The introduction of the action of this kind towards Burma has vividly emerged. The citizens of Burma, who are to shape their own destiny, should be aware of that and take every caution against this by thinking carefully and wisely.

Yangon (Rangoon), 26 May, 1989

Measures are being taken to change the use of expressions. Some expressions have already been changed in the newspaper as part of the measures being taken. The Tatmadaw, People's Tatmadaw and Myanmar Tatmadaw will be used for the Burma Army. 'Myanma' will be used in place of 'Burma' and 'Myanma people' for 'Burman'. The matter of negotiations with the insurgents has not yet been taken into consideration. We had held talks with the insurgents and gained experiences.

Nobody talked about ceasefire and mediating a settlement when the Yangon government was put into a tight corner due to the attacks of the Karen insurgents. We would like to ask whether calling for a ceasefire and mediation now is only just. We have fought against the insurgents with the sacrifice of our life, blood and sweat.
Giving replies to the correspondent of the *Newsweek* Magazine, the Information Committee said "We did not say that we would not discuss with insurgents, the insurgents; while they were in wretchedness, used to ask for talks in order to get a relief and breathing spell; moreover they used to ask for ceasefire and talks with an aim to gain political advantage; if there are such intentions we, on our part, may or may not hold talks with them; if there are no such intentions we will possibly consider the matters for holding talks on ceasefire and peace; for instance if we accept their offer they may ask our government forces to withdraw ten miles back from their region: we cannot accept for meeting such demands....

...[O]ur attack against KNU insurgents did not mean an attack against a racial group; our objective is to attack the insurgents only; we are fighting the KNU insurgents, KIA insurgents, SSA insurgents and BCP insurgents only, and we are not fighting the racial groups such as Karen, Kachin, Shan, Myanmar, and Palaung. Our aim in fighting the insurgents come from a national objective; and we are launching these attacks with a view to preventing the national unity from disintegration and for perpetuation of the sovereignty. We are not fighting the national who are living peacefully....
27 May 1989

...The British imperialists used the "three-M" tactics... Merchant, Missionary, and Military -- in expanding their empire by colonizing new areas.

They were also able to incite the national racial groups to emotions causing dissension among themselves.

Pro-imperialist writers also wrote books with aims at causing such dissension among the indigenous people. Smeaton, a pro-British imperialist writer, wrote on page 76 of his book entitled "The Loyal Karens of Burma", "The skin of the Karens is naturally fair, like that of the Chinese; and the features of those of pure blood are the same as those of the White people of Europe, South-West Asia, and North Africa of the Caucasian type -- a characteristic which has been deemed by some to support their claim to have been one of the lost tribes of Israel."

In fact what he wrote was just pure fabrication. How deceitful these people were!

The October 1834 issue of the Missionary Magazine carried an article by American Baptist missionary Dr. Francis Mason dated 6 December 1833. In it he wrote that the Kayins [the SLORC's new word for the Karens] "are a lost Hebrew tribe". Notwithstanding these fabrications, it has been unanimously accepted and approved by the present-day scholars that the Kayins are the descendants of the Mongolians and belong to the Tibet-Myanmar language group of the Tibet-Chinese language stock.
...Now one and all can see the 'handiwork' of the imperialists.

Rev. H D [initial should be "I"] Marshall, who had carried out missionary work among the Kayin nationals and who became famous as a great friend of the Kayin nationals whose interests he promoted, wrote a book entitled "The Karen People of Burma." He concluded the book thus, "The answer I would like to give for the future of the Karen nationals will not make real progress and achieve real development as a separate race by living separately and by getting special rights and privileges.

"The Kayin nationals will be able not only to raise their own standard but also to serve their own interests as well as those of the brothers who are in the same boat on the same journey with them by eliminating from their minds the racial mentality and obsession as far as possible and by having the same concept and attitude as those of the people in the areas concerned and sharing the work with them. Only then will the Kayin nationals become prosperous and only then will they be contributing towards the welfare of Myanmar Naing-Ngan [Burma], which has all the characteristics and ingredients for achieving unlimited development."

It should be noted by the Kayin insurgents of today that what Rev. H D Marshall wrote contains many ideas which greatly benefit the Kayin nationals.
Alien Attractions and Shared Sites:
Elephant-Women, Giraffe-Women, Real Men and the Exotic

Through Kurtz’s teeth, white skull in elephant grass, the imperial fiction sings. Sunday wrinkles downriver from the Heart of Darkness. The heart of darkness is not Africa. The heart of darkness is the core of fire in the white center of the holocaust. The heart of darkness is the rubber claw selecting a scalpel in antiseptic light, the hills of children’s shoes outside the chimneys, the tinkling nickel instruments on the white altar; Jacob, in his last card, sent me these verses: “Think of a God who doesn’t lose His sleep if trees burst into tears or glaciers weep. So, aping his indifference, I write now, not Anno Domini: After Dachau.”

--Derek Walcott, "The Fortunate Traveller"

One meets the strangest people in the jungle. They come from the world over, but largely from the great white north. They come in search of the exotic, the wild, the primitive, the naturally supra-mundane and other-worldly. Craving adventure, excitement, novelty, experience, and divers altered states, they long to be set apart, to be re-created; they want something to take home, too -- videos, photographs, documents, and stories -- yes, above all, stories. Stories to tell around the homefires, the hero returned.

They are mostly men, these intrepid travellers one happens upon in the remotest of places, but not only by any means, and of course they are not all the
same -- they are coming from different places. Some have lived for years in the raw, and those who haven’t pretend as best they can that they have, anyway that this is at least nothing new or particularly strange for them, being in a war zone in southern Burma, for example, or dancing the night away with the Lisu.

"Have you been here before?" I asked one young man at Karen Headquarters, on the wrong side of the Thai-Burmese border.

He chuckled through his nose a little, nodded his head a bit, and slightly grinned, the grin of experience and wisdom. "Oh yeah...many times," as he mixed the fish paste into the rice with his fingers.

"And what brings you here?"

"Oh, you know...." Silence. And mystery. In the humid heart of darkness where only the natives are normal.

Yeah, I know.

I know why that missionary was in that village, and not another, and though I would have liked to have lent a hand to all the young boys industriously building his house, I had my own affairs to attend to, my own personal pre-occupations, interests, and obsessions -- but, more on that later; let’s not talk about me, not yet anyway, shall we? I may answer a few questions later, if there’s time.

Fortunately, and frankly, there are truly sincere ones. Like the Australian boy with the "Karen National Liberation Army" tattoo on his arm, whose village had just been bombed out by the Burmese, his school destroyed. And the writer who
informed me that "we who have been coming here [to Manerplaw, Karen and
opposition headquarters in Kaw Thoo Lei, Karen State, Burma] for years are a
special group -- with a cause we believe in, much more than just work." (But I
thought I was an insider.) And the real ones who really knew what was going on, not
just the reporters who came for the weekend, got the party line, went to the front for
a couple days, got bombed, malaria, shot at, and so on, and so on. Nor the
anthropologists (were there others) doing their fieldwork for their degrees, to return
home in a few months thinking they had really gotten into the culture. If only they
knew.

One man seated nearby at dinner at the Manerplaw guest house, however,
really took the cake. He was describing his plans to lead a tour here, to what was
now a war zone, with fighting only a few miles away. "Not like those sex tours the
Japanese and middle-aged Europeans take. People are too afraid of AIDS
nowadays. This tour would be for insecure older men who want to do something
bold and exciting, to change their lives. I'm talking about A Real Man's Trek!"

I couldn't believe he was serious, that is, not joking, but his friends were
nodding in agreement. They got a pen and paper and began talking figures. I'm not
making this up. You can choose your friends, it would seem, but "in the field," you
can't choose your site-sharers. It's enough to give the most sensitive and reflexive of
ethnographers serious pause. (It even did me, frequently.)
The tourists are in a class by themselves, though, as they usually are. Where do they come from? Well, most recently, from Chiang Mai, Thailand's second city, gateway to the exotic, and one of Asia's more popular tourist destinations. (Before that, mostly Germany (the world's great travellers; one of them told me that after what Germany "had done," they were now sending cultural ambassadors throughout the world); Australia, New Zealand, Austria, Israel (not the tourist industry's favorite), Canada, "America," and, of course, Japan -- but they have set up their own "T-J Tourist Centers and Cultural Clubs.") Here in Chiang Mai, hundreds of companies are waiting to satisfy the primitivistic yearnings of the modern world's temporary escapees, catering to each and every need and desire. The advertisements on the plate-glass windows and sandwich boards proclaim each agency's singularity and professionalism:

Guaranteed Non-Tourist Area: Money Back If You See Any!

Genuine Primitive Hilltribe Trek -- Never Visit Before

Elephant Rafting Jungle Hike, Overnite or Two Weeks

National Geographic's Longneck People Padaung Village

See 6 Tribes in Two Days: Karen, Lahu (Black & Red), Lisu,

Akha, Hmong With Famous Guide Bird

"Spirit of Yellow Leaves" -- Almost Extinct, Moving Quickly!

First Burma Border Zone...Hilltribes Fighting Burmese Army.
Some Poppy Area With Headman Pipes and Extras

One-day to Opium and No-AIDS Area -- Money Back Naturally

We Are Not Like Other Companies...

Government References Available!!!

Fulfill All Your Fantasies!!! * * * HAPPY TOUR (with Deng)

And so, having come this far, they decide to go all the way. Bearded and braless, they pile into the back of overloaded jeeps with enough supplies for a small aid project: assorted gear and paraphernalia; miscellaneous equipment; emergency supplies; bottled water; muesli; nuts; alcohol; and mysterious whatnots whose purpose may or may not become clear. The cool guide lovers smile at their friends as they pull out of the guest-house, anticipating another notch on the local leather. Then they leave civilization far behind -- for hours, and sometimes even days at a time.

Everyone is drawn to the other. Individuals love the mystery, the fascination, and the difference among lovers from different cultures. Time and again the "Westerners" describe "the gentleness, the non-machismo, the ‘effeminism’" of the Thai man; "the mystery, the beauty, the femininity, and the non-feminism" of the Thai woman. The generalizations betray themselves, however, in their de-humanizing impersonality. Not one to belie the beauty or reality of love, the long-term statistics are not encouraging. Communication is a wonderful aid to understanding.
The exploitation is sometimes Janus-faced: the men exploit the women who exploit the men. I am not referring to the miserable and pathetic brothels where girls and boys are bound and bonded, beat and abused. I am referring to voluntary couplings and symbiotic relations. The locals want money. The foreigners want sex mostly, but also companionship and affection, bad faith notwithstanding. Many do not get it at home. Others do what they dare not at home. Abroad, they make themselves at home. Shame is left behind.

People are also drawn to the other on the cultural level, seeking out the strange and unusual. The myth of primitivism coupled with sexual desire and exploitation is particularly disastrous. Attempting to bypass sexually-transmitted diseases common among prostitutes, tourists -- often in groups -- turn to what they imagine is primeval purity in the form of "hilltribe" sex. Typically poor and uneducated, with little knowledge of disease and epidemics, these "tribals" have been found to possess extremely high incidence rates of HIV-infection and other VDs. The prognosis for the flesh industry and its many customers, from all walks of life, is very grim. (Hasn't AIDS come to replace "the Bomb" as the fin-de-siècle sword of Damocles hovering above our collective unconsciousnesses?)

Nevertheless, the companies are not usually short of takers, especially in the "high" season, roughly half the year, October-March. Only recently, and slowly, has the reality of the situation set in. Tourists turn from Thailand and the Philippines
to "newly-opened" countries: Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos. (Don’t even think about Burma.)

* * *

Exploring nature is one thing, all fine and dandy if done sensibly. Exploring culture(s), however, is a whole 'nother story, not to be undertaken unthinkingly. People are different from other animals, after all: they can laugh. And reason. Sometimes. And sometimes, empathize. Turn the tables and see.

You are in your hometown. Many of your closest friends and family have come together for a sad event -- the funeral of a friend -- someone you have grown up with and loved by everyone here. As you are driving to the cemetery, the procession is followed by a large tour bus, one of those double-deckers. Several of the passengers are leaning out of the windows, fiddling with camcorders and cameras with huge lenses moving in and out.

Once the cemetery is reached, an unusual crowd disembarks and mills around the bus; some are laughing and chatting; they all have identical shoulder-bags, which are secured tightly to their bodies. Obviously, they are not from around here, although someone who appears to be their leader looks normal enough. As for the rest, it is far from clear where they have come from, how, and why?
Their language is unintelligible. Most are wearing sunglasses; those eyes which are visible are almost all light green; they all have very long, dark hair, tied in the back; they are for the most part extremely large, and very white -- pale white. It is clear some have been drinking.

The leader and several of the bolder ones approach your group, smiling, and asking questions, which seem to have started before they were quite within hearing distance: "...was the significance of having the headlights on in the daytime? Why the color "black" exactly? And the coffin, of what wood is it made? Will it be retrieved later, once the guests have departed, or actually left in the ground? Why give flowers to a dead person? Can we please see the body please?"

* * *
For some, the novelty and strangeness are overwhelming. One American neo-hippie, a nice piece of work, told me how his experience was "better than drugs. I mean, they were having this major pig-out, if you know what I mean (ha, ha). All these animals were going to be sacrificed for some kind of circumcision ceremony or something. I thought it'd be wild to call my Mom on the mobile phone, so she could hear the slaughter. She was really blown away, you know, like 'Brandon! Dooo be careful!' But what was really weird was hearing my niece and nephew banging on our piano in the sunroom at home in Modesto, California. The screaming pig and the piano in the other ear was totally unreal. Who needs acid? Who needs any drugs?"

* * *

Indeed. There are millions of stories in the jungle. If the bamboo could talk, my, my, what tales to tell. (The locals know them anyway.) And such tales! Everyone loves them, too. Take an old informant of mine, who asked me to translate an article from French for him from a book called *Quel Monde Etrange!* As it was the only request he ever made of me, while I had been after him for some time, seeking and getting whatever information he chose to tell and give, I was happy to comply.

Although it had been several years since I had done any translating from the French, the article, written as it was in a straightforward, storytelling style, was not
too difficult to convert to English, save for some exotic words. As I began to translate, it soon became clear that this was a classic case of all these things we have been discussing, call them alien attractions.

At the time it struck me as curious, if not ironic, that I was translating this article from a book on the bizarre and exotic, specifically, an article on two exoticized Karen sub-groups, for this Sgaw Karen man. Actually, it was not so odd - he collected everything he could get his hands on about the Karen. This article described the author's adventures in Burma, and his quest for, and encounter with "the Padaung" and "the Kayah," particularly their women, hence his title: "Femmes-girafes et femmes-éléphants." (I wondered what a Karen explorer might call the women of the author's tribe....?)

This text provides an interesting illustration and springboard for the remainder of our "t". I have found it necessary to abridge the story in the interests of time and tolerance. But I have included enough of it to satisfy those readers I know who enjoy this stuff. Bracketed interjections and commentary are, of course, mine. Without further ado, then, M. Vitold de Golish. (I hope he's not a famous anthropologist who I've never heard of.)
Femmes-girafes et femmes-éléphants

Upon awakening this morning, a most surprising spectacle appeared before me. The bamboo platform on which I was stretched out was about a meter and thirty centimeters above the ground, and I could thus only see the heads of the strange beings encircling me. These heads were sweetly balanced at the end of necks measuring thirty to fifty centimeters in height, sheathed in rings of layered brass like the end of a tube. The lengths of the necks appeared to me so phenomenal that I experienced a sentiment of shock, comparable to that which I might have standing before a being which had come from a world as yet unknown. I only felt reassured when one of these beings let out a laugh, placing a hand over her mouth, a distinctly feminine gesture that quickly reminded me of where I was, and of the strangeness of my situation. The roles were reversed; I was now the object of curiosity of these women who I would later dub "giraffe-women," though the animal of that name has no reality in these parts of Asia. They wore large black pants and a sort of light-coloured shirt from the shoulders to the loins. Otherwise, they were encircled by yellow brass rings from head to foot; the neck, arms, legs, feet, and sometimes even the abdomen were surrounded with brilliant spirals whose metallic clinking recalled the sound of a rain of gravel in water.

One of them, approaching me, folded in two like a robot as a result of the brass binding which arched her body. Only her unbound haunches served as hinges.
She was bent over me like a half-opened penknife. Very close to mine, her head, in comparison to her neck, appeared minuscule. She advanced her metallic arm and commenced to playing with the zipper of my backpack. All broke out in laughter, displaying their red beetle-stained teeth... *The author appears to be a terrestrial astronaut, a terrestrinaut, exploring another world. The "beings" he describes are more like robots, or cyborgs, than human beings. He takes it upon himself to dub them, to name them, although as we see later, this is not the case. He plays the discoverer, if not the creator of these "beings." Like Adam in the garden, naming is apparently incumbent upon him.]*

Sweating under my duvet, I began to gather my thoughts. Yesterday evening, my guide Maung Gyi, who walked with me at the head of the caravan, had suddenly stopped, his arm stretched out towards a bamboo pole across the path. Atop the pole, suspended by a creeper, a hexagon of woven willow floated in the humid air.

"The village is close now," the guide had said. "This designates the way of the ancestors which no man can travel." And for his demonstration, Maung Gyi had crouched at the foot of the totem, scooping up with his hands the dead leaves which covered the path. A row of bamboo sticks darted out, their tips hardened in flame. Their tips were covered with a kind of varnish.

"Poison," the guide had simply said. I had raised my arms and the forty porters of the caravan had frozen. This totem balancing on the wind marked the end of a three-year adventure for which I had dared everything, risked everything. *Why?
What are the motivations of our intrepid adventurer? Research? Adventure? Journalism? Hobby?]

The adventure began in 1955. Then I had found myself in a small village in northern India, in order to recruit guides and porters for my expedition in the Himalayas; a small squat man, a Burman, hailed me and, in impeccable English, offered me his services. Thus I made the acquaintance of Burmese Captain Maung Gyi, one of three survivors of the celebrated "Forgotten Army" of the English General Wingate. It is he who told me this story. [An historical aside.]

In 1943, the Japanese army occupied all of Southeast Asia and, holding Burma, was threatening India where the English were entrenched. In order to stave off this threat, the English decided to counter-attack the Japanese, where they least expected it -- which is to say, in the forests and mountains of the extreme north of Burma, where they were hidden. The operation was entrusted to the famous and young General Wingate. He recruited 3,000 volunteers and, for the first time in military history, these soldiers were forewarned that, not only a certain death awaited them, but, in the event of sickness or injury, they would be abandoned on the spot with only 3 days worth of rations, a compass, and a map. [The element of danger is never far away, while we have the traveller/adventurer/writer-hero as our guide.]

This army would come to be called the "Forgotten Army," for, 4 months after the soldiers left, only 3 men returned to their base in India -- completely worn out: 2 English soldiers and Captain Maung Gyi, my guide. The entire army had been, in
effect, annihilated by the combined attacks of wild beasts, fevers, mosquitos, and the Japanese.  *[The final inclusion of the Japanese in this series of hazards is telling.]*

But this so tragic an operation was in fact a victory, because it completely disoriented the Japanese, and allowed the English to launch a great offensive which ended in the reconquest of Burma in 1944.  Maung Gyi told me in detail how he managed to return to India, and survived alone in the Burmese jungles, at first thanks to the map impressed in silk that had been given him by General Wingate before his death, but especially thanks to the help he had received from the montagnard tribes of these regions.

Realizing my ethnographic interests [an anthropologist?], he enthusiastically described several of the peoples living completely isolated from the rest of the world.  He told me of their gentleness, but especially of the strange appearances of the women.  Therefore I decided to organize an expedition in these regions.  *[Fair enough.  The women look strange.  Allons-y!  Let’s go!]*

*I had always been amazed at the daring and intrepidity of ethnographers, seemingly entering unexplored regions and fearless of the possible native reactions.  I often thought of Paul Bowles’ *A Distant Episode*, in which a linguistics professor ends up having his tongue cut out and tin cans tied to his body, after which he is forced to dance (or something like that).  Why doesn’t (can’t) this kind of thing happen more often?]*
I left Rangoon, the capital of Burma, at the head of a small team. We were 4 and had 2 vehicles; Maung Gyi was our guide. From the start, our expedition was struck by a succession of misfortunes. Several days after our arrival, the archeologist who accompanied me, Pierre Dupont, a Sorbonne professor, died; then, another of my team-members broke his legs in a car accident. While crossing a river, a jeep was sunk in the swift currents; and, to crown my misfortunes, I was attacked by bandits, who stripped me entirely, and left me stark naked by the side of the road.

***

In effect, Burma, since 1947, that is, since its independence, has had civil war; a large part of its territory was occupied by rebel bands who opposed the regime. Like the Christian Karens, the first ethnic group to go into open rebellion after independence? This would detract from our story, I think. Christians are not very exotic, generally speaking. Nonetheless, he would probably dub them "the Cross People." (But I don't want to be unfair or unkind.)

After all my trials, I decided to return to Rangoon, and from there, to France, in order to organize a new expedition. Several months later, I was at the head of a new team, much more numerous this time... We were now 12 permanent members. With more specialized supplies, and enriched by all my previous experience, I was able to avoid the zones occupied by bandits and enter the mountainous regions of northern Burma, where it meets India, Tibet, and China. This would place him in
the northernmost part of Burma, in Kachinland, whereas he is apparently in the Kayah State, which borders Thailand."

***

...Some days later: the jungle. A swarm of insects, a heavy humming pierced by silences, thick, moist air enveloping men and the beasts of the jungle. Somewhere in the maze of paths, lost amidst the tangles of creepers and enormous trunks, ran the frontier which separates China and Burma. Bamboos barely balanced their white tops in the sky shattered by the heat, and at their base, the grand vegetable fibers wove a net which seemed to remake itself indefinably as we passed through. A lapse of attention and the forest would reform itself into a trap. There came to be on this exhausting march an abandon, an absolute confidence in ourselves and in our guides; they alone knew the vast tracks which, stretching our necks through the thickets, we would perhaps be led to these tribes which, it seemed to me, I discovered their faces, hallucinated through the foliage.

Sometimes, in the evening camp, along a dried-up stream or in a noisy clearing, stretched out on the moss, I wondered at the happy destiny that had thrown me into these ignored paths of Asia. Fascinating Asia, which offers almost simultaneously the spectacle of the most modern civilization [?] as much in its wealth as in its misery, as well as that of the most ancient face of man. [Fascinating Europe,
which offers almost simultaneously the spectacle of the most modern civilization as much in its wealth as in its misery, as well as that of the most ancient face of man.

[...] In effect, we had to reach the plateaus before the monsoon which, after May, would transform streams into torrents and the jungle into a swamp, and we were already on Mars. Several days later, we found ourselves in a sort of noisy savannah with scraggy vegetation, where one could discern some traces of man. [Major Tom to Ground Control. We are not alone. Repeat. We are not alone. Traces visible. Phasers on stun.]

[...] A bridge of intertwined vines, longer than a score of meters, jumped across the river, stretched between two enormous stumps. Maung Gyi turned towards me and smiled. The first village could not be far. In the evening, climbing slowly towards a bare pass, we heard in several refrains the roaring of tigers. Beyond the pass, the first "Padaung" villages, which were called in the language of the region: "Long Necks"...

* * *

I woke up. Not only was this not a dream. My expedition had attained its objective. [To seek out strange women?] [...] Removing my arm from my sleeping bag, I groped about for my shorts. The garment was no longer there. It fluttered between the hands of the "giraffe-women" who passed it around, chuckling. There would be hours that they could watch me, for the sun was high. Shedding all
timidity, I pulled at the zipper of the sleeping bag and burst into the unknown... [To boldly go where no man has gone before!]

The man was called Ra-Nou. He was bare-chested, wearing ample black pants. On his wrinkled head, filthy rags composed a sort of turban. He was the headman. Sitting in the centre of the hut of honour, I was face to face with him. Through the aid of two interpreters, I had posed several questions. Ra-Nou had responded in monosyllables, followed by dignified silence.

Ra-Nou's woman appeared. She was the longest longneck of the village. [!] She placed a wooden plate on the mat without a word and Ra-Nou signalled me to the effect "in your honour." I glanced at the plate with a friendly smile, but -- O horror -- the plate contained filthy creatures which turned out to be fried wasps. Horrified, I listened as the old headman cracked the wasps in his teeth and then meticulously sucked the abdomens, before lining their yellow and black carcasses on the edge of the plate. Maung Gyi, sensing danger, wandered my way.

"They are very rare insects that come from hard-to-reach places in the forest."

It was the moment of truth. I thought of all my difficulties, of my sunken jeep, of two porters who were in my caravan that we found two days earlier with an arrow in each of their backs -- [What!? What was that all about? Never mind...] -- I moved my hand towards the plate. Standing motionless, the lady of the house then smiled with all her red teeth at the summit of that vertiginous neck. The headman
also smiled... We were accepted. *The inevitable "acceptance trope." We've all got them. Myth upon myth...*

Then Ra-Nou spoke: "Once upon a time, the tribe was rich and powerful. This came to excite in the women an excessive taste for pleasures, and the oversight of paying respect to the gods. Angered, the gods then punished the women, setting the tigers upon them, which pounced at their throats. The tribe was wiped out. The men sought out a sage who showed them a place where they could find gold and the means of making a spiral to protect the necks of their spouses. The tigers then broke their teeth, and were in turn wiped out. But the custom continued, the spirals losing their utility and becoming no more than an ornament. Gold, becoming rare, was replaced by brass, and the women began encircling their arms, legs, and sometimes even their abdomens with the spirals. Finally, they elongated their necks in order to carry more of them. The spirals became synonymous with wealth and beauty. It is thus our tribe took the name "Padaung," the "long-necks." *The elders take turns spinning these myths, amusing one another with the earnest anthropologist's credulity. "Yeah, that's it...and then,... and then the tigers' bodies became thusly enspiraled in rings of their own, an eternal brand of humiliation.*

* * *

The full moon came. It is the ritual period during which one can witness the neck-elongating ceremonies. The sorcerer must first consult the omens. He
slaughters a chicken and examines the entrails and bones to determine the right moment. An air of celebration engulfs the village. The adult women have loaded their necks with precious stones and the men have donned a new loincloth. The "fei" (moonshine) gushes forth, all inviting all. The libations finished, one sits the girl down -- generally about 5 years old -- in front of the family hut and the mother brings in a roll of brass wire. In the wink of an eye, the sorcerer has judged the length of wire necessary for the first spiral. The mother, then, stands behind the girl. Fingers inter-crossed, she seizes the head under the chin and pulls up with all her might. The child never cries, and this first adornment always adds 10 cm in height or more; the little girl will pass long days without being able to eat and sleep. But these sufferings vanish in the joy of presents that her family brings. And, if the family is rich, she will even receive the first spirals for her calves.

After 24 full moons -- just under 2 years -- a new round of spirals is laid on - - and so on until adulthood. The longest necks make the best mates. [*Reminds one of certain male myths.*]

They also possess the greatest fidelity. [*Note bene:*] For, among the "giraffe-women," the punishment of the adulterous spouse [*wife*] is crueler than anywhere: she is taken by her husband to the sorcerer who proceeds to remove the rings. The atrophied muscles of the neck are unable to hold up the head which falls onto the chest. Asphyxiation or starvation results, and the woman, if she is not very young, cannot delay death. Sometimes, however, the husband will forgive her, and, after
several hours, he may call the sorcerer back to re-do the spirals. As the women have never been separated from the rings before, outside of this particular case, they clean the neck by passing a damp rag between the spirals and the skin. In order to prevent the verdigris and sweat from irritating the sores, the women apply a surprising medicine of which I am unable to ascertain the efficacy of: a poultice of ground rice mixed with spider web.

* * *

[...]

In the last months of 1944, Mikado's army occupied no more than a small section of Burmese territory, but it was nevertheless a decisive one, for it allowed control of the Mandalay-Rangoon road. A Japanese division was entrenched there, so strongly that it checked the entire Anglo-American expeditionary force. This was in the mountainous region of the Padaung.

Alarmed by the import of the losses suffered with each attack, the commander got the idea of asking aid from some Padaung, of whose reputation he had been aware. A rendez-vous was accordingly set up with the chief of the tribe in a village of the plain. Instead of the sumptuous retinue for which they waited, the allied officers were taken aback at the approach of 4 men, bare-chested, armed with machetes and crossbows, who proceeded to speak with them as equals. Fortunately, they intended only to propose a simple collaboration with the Padaung: reconnoitre the Japanese position and guide our allied troops to them.
"Not interested," the 4 Padaungs responded together. "We are 2,000 warriors, more than enough to wipe out 10,000 Japanese. Let us be." The conference threatened to break down.

"At least accept some arms," an American officer pleaded.

"Useless. We already have arms," came the reply. One of the Padaungs then drew an arrow with a blackish tip from his quiver.

"That?" returned the officer. "What do we have here?"

Without responding, the Padaung grabbed a small dog that trotted about the legs of the parliamentarians and slowly pricked its back with the arrow. Before the arrow had been returned to the quiver, the dog was dead.

"And on what conditions will you fight the Japanese?" an officer asked.

"Two conditions: leave us to ourselves; and...after the last Japanese is gone, give our people absolute autonomy." [The boys were prepared.]

That very evening, the drums were throbbing in the mountains. The Padaung drums, or "klos," are made of bronze alloy, of gold and silver. Each village had its distinctive tenor, dependent upon the proportions of the alloy. The Japanese paid no attention to this nocturnal nuisance which sounded like a concert of toads. [In fact, the Karen call them "frog drums," and many have little frogs, and other symbols on them. Few remain among the Karen today, however, as many have been stolen, or sold.]

When the drums stopped, the first Japanese fell. Three weeks later, of the elite Japanese division, there remained but several soldiers in tatters, wandering the
forests. The giraffe-women smiled as they watched them from the height of their long necks: they were fools. They were spared their lives, for the Padaung grant much respect to those possessed by spirits. The English kept their word. The war over, they gave the Padaung total autonomy, and in restoring independence to Burma in 1947, they also bequeathed to them the territory occupied by the free Padaung and their no less glorious cousins, the Kayah. The Kayah State became the fifth state of Burma.

[As for the rest of the Karens, they were left to fend for themselves, as the British turned over power to the Burmese. This was a particularly bitter pill for the Karens who had fought and worked and lived and worshipped alongside the British for over a century. They had expected better treatment for their loyalty. Unfortunately, the fact that the Karens did not present a united front at the time did not help matters.]

[This would have been the perfect place to describe the adventures of Major Hugh Seagrim, known to Karens as "Grandfather Longlegs." When the British retreated to India, Longlegs chose to stay behind with his beloved Karen people in the hills, and to conduct guerrilla operations to disrupt the Japanese forces. Although he was successful for some time, and was even joined by (possibly) the only escapee from the notorious "Railway of Death" then being built between Burma and Thailand, one Corporal R.A.S. (Ras) Pagani, eventually both of them fell into Japanese hands. Seagrim surrendered because of the atrocities committed against the Karens who were trying to hide him. He was executed in Rangoon by the Japanese Kempetei (Gestapo)
shortly before the war ended, with Britain retaking Rangoon. He is still remembered and revered as a saint by many Karens. (Cultural counterparts to Lawrence of Arabia can be found throughout the world -- someone should assemble an anthology of them. Several American Baptist missionaries can also be said to have "awrenced" the Karen.)

* * *

The Kayah tribe lives several kilometers, as the crow flies, from the hills inhabited by the Padaung. They are today 100,000, distributed in 50 or so large villages, separated by marvelous blue lakes. It is on the edge of these lakes that, according to legend, their ancestors built their first village. The reeds lining the shores were then inhabited by nymths -- half-woman, half-bird -- of irresistible charm. They could thus bathe themselves, invisible in the depths of the lake hidden by thick layers of blue algae. A king came to be hunting in the area. One night, he heard a song so melodious come from the lake that he approached, and saw a nymph, Kenda-ji, in the process of bathing. Charmed by her beauty, he threw out his magic net and allured her to the bank. He then took her away to his palace to make her his wife. But the nymph, already engaged, refused. After several days, the king, touched by his captive's fidelity and by her sorrow, set her free. Kenda-ji returned to the lake where she waited for her fiance. They were married and their children became the ancestors of the Kayah clan. [The Faithful Woman.]
Even today, on full-moon days, the nymphs leave the depths to bathe. Woe to him or her who comes to surprise them. Their radiant beauty is such that the imprudent is drawn through the hidden place of algae, where they drown.

The mountains surrounding the blue lakes are covered with teak forests, the primary wealth of the country, and the realm of the elephants which live and work there. One day, I spotted a group of strange beings [We know to expect women by now.] on the edge of a blue lake, large and heavy, strolling along in a curious way. I stopped to observe them more closely. It was then I realized that the bizarre things were women whose knees disappeared under a thick envelope of black iron wire. The moment they saw me, they let out piercing screams and fled, rather difficultly, I must say, because of their feet, and especially due to the volume of iron wire which kept their knees apart. The longer I watched them, the more I had the impression of beholding a procession of young elephants.

"Maung Gyi, who are these people?"

"They are Kayah women."

Thus passed my first contact with these women, the "elephant-women," as I would come to baptize them in the end. [An interesting choice of words. Many Kayah, Padaung, Karen, Karen, Sgaw Karen, Kachin, Shan, Chin, and other minority groups of Burma are in fact Baptist Christians. But that's another story.]

They believe, in effect, that the seat of their soul is found in their knees. And so they protect them with tens of kilos of very hard vegetable fibers, or, if they are
rich, with iron wire layered with lacquer. They are never removed. On the contrary, whenever possible, they increase the volume; their gait much resembles that of the elephant, sacred animal of the tribe, perfect model in their eyes.

It is after the volume of their knees, and that of their silver necklaces, that the men judge their beauty, and the value of their dowry. [...] 

Unfortunately, everything has an end, and my visit with the Padaung and Kayah was over. I returned to Ra-Nou’s village and, the morning of my departure, during my good-byes, Miang, the eldest son of the chief, approached me mysteriously and gave me a cylindrical bamboo box from which a cock’s head vigorously emerged.

"It’s Jo," he told me. "Thanks to him, you will never die of hunger."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Maung Gyi will understand. He thanked Miang and, hanging Jo’s little basket on his belt, swore never to be separated from him.

Indeed, Jo was to prove a precious companion. That evening, my cook tied his leg to a stake. Around him, he set several traps... All night long, Jo, who knew his lesson well, called out to the wild hens and they scurried into the traps. The next day, we had but to gather this providential manna!

And believe me, chicken is far more agreeable than wasp larvae!

* * *
Today, many Padaung, Kayah, Karen, and other minority groups and Burmese students no longer live in the Kayah State, having fled from the Burmese Army, who have been driving minority groups out of Burma for years. The "Long Neck People" live in two villages close to the Thai-Burmese border, where tourists come and pay to look at them and take their pictures. Video cameras are not allowed.

In 1989, a Shan man was arrested as he attempted to sell seven "Long Neck" women to a resort near Chiang Mai. The women were subsequently sent to Nupa-ah, one of the Padaung villages in Thailand.

The Padaung villages are guarded by soldiers from the Karen National Progressive Party, who charge foreign tourists 300 baht ($12 US) and Thais 50 baht ($2 US) (1992 prices). The money is used to develop the villages, which have little other income, not being allowed to work, as they are not Thai citizens. Some of the profits go to support the Burmese resistance.

While other Burmese refugees who have fled to Thailand -- e.g., to Bangkok, Mae Sot, Tak, Chiang Rai, etc. -- have been "repatriated" by Thai authorities, usually to face tragic consequences "at home," the officials generally leave these refugees be. The Tourist Authority of Thailand, however, has not. Long Necks are a good draw. The profits from the sale of postcards of these women alone could probably support the village, but you can guess how much of this money they see. The cards and photographs are even sold by long-term residents supposedly sensitive to minority issues.

* * *
During a stay in a Karenni refugee camp, a short distance down the Pai River from these Padaung villages, but off the tourist circuit for now, I would see these women passing by in a longtail boat as we had our evening bath, or casually strolling through the camp. I cannot pretend that their appearances are not striking. Nor can I deny the temptation I felt to raise my camcorder and capture their images. I’m sure my family, friends, and students would have enjoyed the video. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. (Do I lose my membership in the American Anthropological Association for this? Oh, I forgot, I’m not even a member.)

One more foreigner aiming a camera at them would make little difference in their lives, I’m sure. It just seemed to me that too many people were already shooting them; they didn’t need one more. And I knew how it felt myself, admittedly on a lesser scale. Hundreds of Burmese Christians in Rangoon at the 175th Jubilee commemorating the arrival of the first American missionaries to Burma, mostly minority group members, had posed and shot me, countless times. It is taxing. I had to stop the photo-ops every time I ventured out of the central office, where the Baptist leaders had taken me, before what felt like a minor riot would take place.

Back in the Karenni camp, as we ate our evening rice, I asked my host, a Karen elder, what he thought of all this Western influence that was affecting their area, and his fellow Karens. In his customary mock grumble, he replied: "I don’t call it Western influence. I call it bad taste!"
I laughed as I tried to continue eating my rice. (My host had hidden the canned fish I had brought, saying it was no good, and that, as an anthropologist, I had to eat what they did, which I always did anyway.) And believe me, rice is far more agreeable than wasp larvae!
An Interview with General Bo Mya, President of the Karen National Union, Chair of the Democratic Alliance of Burma

[Note: This interview was conducted through a Karen interpreter. The General and I speak no common language fluently.]

Manerplaw, Kaw Thoo Lei, Burma.


Jeff Petry: First, I'd like to ask you how things stand with the military; has the situation changed much in the past few years with respect to the Burmese government?

General Mya: The military situation is good.

JP: I suppose there's not very much fighting during the rainy season.

GM: Although it's the rainy season, there is still fighting.

JP: What about the situation here in Manerplaw? Could you tell me something about the relations between the various groups? Now there's a new organization, the ADNSC [Anti-Military Dictatorship National Solidarity Committee]. Why was that formed? Is there a reorganization taking place, a more unified, consolidated effort to unite the many groups here in Manerplaw? What is the general situation?
GM: First, to answer about general relationships, because we are so many groups here, the relationship between ethnic groups and other organizations is very good. The present situation is very good, and as for the new organization, now maybe we have not yet had the time to see the fruit, [that is,] what they have done too much, but we hope this organization will give a real good result for the future, because now we have started planning some programs for the future.

JP: A number of groups have now signed ceasefire agreements with the Burmese government. What can you tell me about that? Is it a necessary move for their survival...the Karen I know would not do that...but a number of other groups have. What does that mean?

GM: For some groups, some organizations, yes, these are just a few people. Some ceasefires, some negotiations, understandings with the SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Committee], peace with the SLORC...this means nothing. This is just a dream in the air. For the Karen, we will never do this.

JP: Do you think the situation with the new government in Thailand, the NPKC [National Peace-Keeping Council], and the SLORC are closer together now and will that affect the situation in Kaw Thoo Lei?

GM: Yes, they have understanding. We know they have understanding. While we don't believe they will be one-sided, they will adjust it for the future, too.

JP: What about Burma's relations with China? Especially the weapons sales? Now, maybe they're not trained in the use of them. Is there much concern over the
training and use of these weapons, and aircraft, against the various ethnic groups of Burma?

GM: For the SLORC and also the Chinese, they do it. We know, and they will do it, because this is their duty, but we are not worried about it. We also have our duty. They do it according to what is necessary for them, according to their own duty, and we also have our own duty, our program. We don't mind so much about that.

JP: You don't perceive it as a real threat at this time?

GM: For example, the military several times, year by year, during the history of fighting together with us, they have received different weapons, new ones, from other countries, several times, and this is not too much different from those.

JP: What about the Soviet Union, with the fall of Communism now? That seems to put a lot of pressure on China and Burma. The world is seeming to be increasingly democratized. Has that raised expectations in this part of the world? Saw Maung [Chair of the SLORC at this time] has just been to China also. They must be very concerned now that the world will start increasing pressure. Do you feel that that's the case?...that things are looking better, that there's some momentum in that direction?

GM: As for the Russian situation, we believe this is for goodness.

JP: And so maybe it will be good for here also?

GM: Yes.

GM: Now we can say that we have already formed a government, the NCGUB [National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma], and this NCGUB is indirectly, we can say, is together with Aung San Suu Kyi, so this means we have already formed a government. We have a real understanding with them. The only thing is that the outside world has to understand this more and more, and then give a lot of pressure. And then once the SLORC and the military go out, automatically, the situation of Burma will be very peaceful.

JP: So you feel that the more publicity for Kaw Thoo Lei, and the minorities, the better it will be for the situation here?

GM: Yes, it is good. And the majority from outside are good friends. Maybe some of our outside friends we don't understand. Maybe sometimes they come from the SLORC side.

JP: And what about [Burmese independence leader and father of Aung San Suu Kyi] Aung San himself? Do you feel that before his assassination he was working in the interests of the various ethnic groups of Burma?

GM: I believe Aung San is a right person. And even, I believe if he's still alive, this country would not have come up to this situation, because he himself was very flexible, and also he thought very much about the ethnic groups. He gave them a
chance, but those against him, they wanted to have the power, big power, and so maybe the assassination had something to do with this.

* * *

**JP:** I'm interested in the role the missionaries played in Karen history, especially throughout the Nineteenth Century when they worked very closely with the Karen people. How influential would you say the missionaries were, since the Sgaw Karen especially are known as a Christian people?

**GM:** For me, I see the missionary as a good man and a right man. They came here to Burma -- not to the Karen -- to Burma. This is the good news. They want to give the good news to the people: about the Gospel, about the Kingdom of God, and they came here. Their main purpose was not for the Karen people, maybe for the Burmese or other people, but the one thing is that the Karen people, we accept evangelism, the Holy Gospel, more than the Burmese people, so we became the majority of the Christians in Burma. And because the Karen became the majority, we extended the mission work to Kachinland, the Chin, the Shan, the Wa...and so because of the Karen, the news of the Gospel was spread out. So this is the good purpose and the good work, and we cannot say that they came to the Karen. And some people criticize them, but they did not come for us, and it is good...we spread the good news throughout Burma.
JP: Why do you think the Karen were so receptive to Christianity as compared to the Burmese and other groups?

GM: For the Karen, their traditional belief is basically very close to the Bible, because God created the world. This is the Karen traditional belief. Even in the old Karen poetry, they have this belief. If we think about it just from theology, just the religion side, the Buddhist people don’t believe the world was created by anybody. They believe the world is made by four elements.

JP: The missionaries also brought writing to the Karen, and they adapted the Burmese script to the Karen language. Do the Karens have any objections to this choice of script, I mean, using the Burmese script?

GM: This is criticized by the Burmese people.

JP: Karen are being assimilated into both Thai and Burmese societies. It seems the only place that Karen literacy is maintained is within the Christian church. Do you think it [Karen literacy] will be able to survive for many more generations? If so, how? Is there a strong desire to keep Karen literacy alive?

GM: We are using this all over Burma, and so we can use this for a long time. But we have to add something, to do something to make it more perfect.

JP: What about the plans for the future, the hopes and expectations of the next generation? Do you anticipate many changes? For example, what is going on right now at the meetings you are having?

GM: There might be something changing.
JP: Do you anticipate any radical change in Burma in the near future with respect to the SLORC and other political parties?

GM: We cannot tell you black or white, nor is it easy to change. Maybe without thinking, something will be changing very soon. Even in Russia, people didn't think it would be changing so soon. But it very quickly changed. If you asked Russian leaders a year ago, "Will there be a change in your country?" they would have said no.

JP: [Thanks offered. General Mya comments:]

GM: I wish the American people and the American government would give a lot of pressure to the SLORC and to this military regime. And we hope that more and more, even the civilians will do this also. One thing I have to tell you, we see and we know that the U.S. government aids and helps so many countries, that they try to find who their friends are, and sometimes go to war helping them; but yet, according to the result, sometimes when the other countries can stand on their own two feet, then things are different. But especially with Burma, please tell them the only good friend is here: the Karen and the Manerplaw situation. We can see here that the closest situation, with the Thai, that with the U.S. backing them, they became more powerful, and they developed a lot. But now they don't want to listen too much to the U.S.

JP: ...And also, with respect to the environment, is there some effort on the part of the Karen to monitor the logging situation, for example.
GM: Yes. It is our duty also to control our natural resources. And not only the natural resources, but with only a little help from the outside, it will be very easy for us to come up to our goal in the fight against the military.

JP: Given that the government does change, what do you see as the future for Kaw Thoo Lei and the Karen State. Will most people stay here or do you think many will move back to their former homes inside Burma?

GM: There will be very many people coming here to Kaw Thoo Lei, to develop it. They will not go out. Really so many.

JP: Is there anything you would like to add, or to say to people outside of here about Manerplaw and your current situation?

GM: Anything written should say something about opium. The Karen people, since 1949, when we started the revolution, have been very strict about opium and narcotics. And since 1949, we have held this policy. Though we have difficulties, we never dream, we never think about getting involved with opium or narcotics. This is very important...for the Karen morally, and for Kaw Thoo Lei. This must be very clear. Also, even with the Burmese government, they get a lot of income from opium. Throughout history, and even now they get it. And sometimes the U.S. government, they get mixed up and help the Burmese Army, the military, and the SLORC, such as giving them helicopters for narcotics. The Burmese Army use these, bring them to our areas, and fight us with those helicopters given by the U.S. government.
Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.
--Jesus Christ
(Matthew 10 : 34)

V

Village Verses: A Survey

I was studying the Bible during a one-month stay in a Karen village in Kaw Thoo Lei. All around me were Christians, mostly Baptists, but Roman Catholics also. An Australian missionary was living in the village for several months as well. There was no shortage of teachers to assist me in my Scriptural studies.

As I read, I made note of, and highlighted, passages I considered relevant to my research. As often happens when one reads a good book, particularly The Good Book, many passages struck me with their pertinence to the situation in which I now found myself, and to the history and predicament of those with whom I was now living, and who constituted the subject of my research.

One of the outstanding ironies of my fieldwork was this: American Baptist missionaries had travelled to the other side of the earth to make Christians of these people, and, as we now know, they enjoyed considerable success among the Karen people. Today, some 180 years distant, these Karen Christians of many generations
are endeavoring to return us, to return me, to a lost faith. To them, it is I who has lost the way, who is lost. I am the heathen.

As part of my exercises, I was looking at Charles Jennens’ superb libretto for Handel’s Messiah. As I was transcribing it on my typewriter in the school office, I typed the passages I found most beautiful, and relevant, in red. One of the teachers came to me and asked why I was doing it in this way. I told her the reason, and we read a few of them together:

10. Air (bass)

_The people that walked in darkness_  
_have seen a great light;_  
_and they that dwell in the land_  
_of the shadow of death,_  
_upon them hath the light shined._

--Isaiah 9 : 2

11. Chorus

..._and His name shall be called_  
_Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God,_  
_the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace._

--Isaiah 9 : 6

20. Air (mezzo-soprano)

_He was despised and rejected of men,_  
_a man of sorrows_  
_and acquainted with grief._

--Isaiah 53 : 3
27. Arioso (tenor)

    Behold, and see if there be any sorrow
    like unto His sorrow.

    --Lamentations 1 : 12

35a. Chorus

    Their sound is gone out into all lands,
    and their words unto the ends of the world.

    --Romans 10 : 18/Psalm 19 : 4

36. Air (bass)

    Why do the nations rage so furiously together,
    And why do the people imagine a vain thing?

    --Psalm 2 : 1

    Why do the nations rage so furiously together?

    And why do the people imagine a vain thing?

    We were both silent for a while. Then, she said, "My favorite verse is Matthew 5 : 7: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Many Karen prefer the verse about inheriting the earth, but I prefer 'mercy.' And you? What is your favorite verse?" she asked me.

    I told her I liked I Corinthians 13, of course, and also Isaiah 5 : 20: Woe unto those that call evil good, and good evil..., but I supposed my favorite at the moment was Revelation 3 : 15, 16: I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would...
thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

As the day passed, I asked many people in the village what their favorite verses were. Everyone I asked had one, and I duly recorded them, finding them telling and meaningful. And a number of these have thus become this letter, "v" (The usual anonymity obtains):

1) *Let me dye the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!* --Numbers 23:10.

2) *I will go in the strength of the Lord God: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only.* --Psalm 71:16.

3) *The troubles of my heart are enlarged: O bring thou me out of my distresses.* --Psalm 25:17.

4) *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* --Matthew 11:28.

5) *Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.* --Matthew 5:8.
6) *The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell....* --Psalm 27:1,2.

7) *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.* --Psalm 46:1.

8) *Re redeeming the time, because the days are evil.* --Ephesians 5:16.

9) *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.* --Philippians 4:13.

10) *The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him.* --Nahum 1:7.

11) *For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?* --Mark 8:36.

12) *Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.* --Joshua 1:9.
13) ...What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?

In all this did not Job sin with his lips. --Job 2:10.

14) ...I am weary with my groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears/ Mine eye is consumed because of grief; it waxeth old because of all mine enemies. ...Let all mine enemies be ashamed and sore vexed: let them return and be ashamed suddenly. --Psalm 6

15) Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. --Psalm 103:1,2.

16) For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life. --John 3:16.

17) Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise. --Proverbs 20:1.

18) Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident. --Psalm 27:3
19) Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of Hosts: Yet once a little while and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations; and the desire of all nations shall come. --Haggai 2:6,7.

20) "Job...the whole book." --Pipi Daphne
A Karen Christmas Carol

Asia has given us our myths; it is meet that we repay her with our truths. From the table land east of Ararat, floods of fable descended westward and covered Europe; eastward, and overspread India, Thibet, and China. Truth from Palestine came west, and cast the fables into the land of shadows; but eastward the myths still stand unchallenged, as subjects of divine revelation and objects of religious faith, till the missionary takes the Bible into his hand and appears before them.¹


Late, or early, I hear singing, distantly, as in a dream...

Lord Jesus I love you,
You know I love you,
Lord Jesus you saved me
From sin so great.

You give me power
For ev'ry hour,
Lord Jesus I love you,
You know I do...

which somehow then blurs into a canon, to the strains of

I like people

I like people

I like...

beautiful harmonies, drifting through the dense jungle, silent night, holy sleep...from outside some time later, people coming through the night, murmuring, gathering, silent, and then, all together, in English:

Merry Christmas to you all!

followed by:

We wish you a Merry Christmas,
We wish you a Merry Christmas,
We wish you a Merry Christmas,
And a Happy New Year...

and then, several more verses, in Karen...which sound further removed, another hut perhaps another group of carollers, but I have apparently drifted off again, it seems, momentarily, until the voices are loud against me and I sit up quickly involuntarily working on perspective: Christmas, not Pennsylvania, not Chiang Mai, mosquito net sleeping bag hard bed, Karen, research, Jingle Bells in the jungle, awake not dreaming, and now my Karen hosts come across the floor with candles and children no cookies or Frangelico past my bed in the main room to step outside onto the porch to watch and listen to the carolers, boldly singing

Bells on bobtail ring
Making spirits bright,
What fun it is to laugh and sing
A sleighing song tonight, Oooh!

Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells,
Jingle all the way...
This time I get up, out of my sleeping bag, through the net, video-handed, behind the family Daniel and Thoo Lei Paw, Simon, James and Zipporah, the newborn child, tiny, unnamed, and little seen lay sleeping in the other room, their room, secret room of Karen houses seldom seen, bamboo notwithstanding.

It is a dark, cold, night in southern Burma.

Strange to see these Karen bundled up in heavy winter coats, scarves, and ski masks, half-expecting to see flurries falling down over the Tenasserim River, or perhaps a touch of white on the Dawna range to our west. It feels some fifty degrees colder than the afternoon nineties swimming and washing in the river with these longyi-clad Christians, but hard water is scarce in this part of the tropics. I myself love this cold, for once not sweating -- so cool I feel energized and refreshed. What a difference a climate makes -- not a mosquito is stirring, not even a louse! (Sorry.)

The carollers continue. They sing several carols in English, not unusual, but more here for my benefit: O come let us adore Him; Joy to the World, the Lord has come and...His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father...the Prince of Peace -- O that it should be so -- so sad. The Karen Revolution is entering its forty-third year. The people that have walked in darkness have seen a
great light and they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death upon them hath the light shined. A bright, bright shining light. Almost blinding.

The carollers finished singing and with a merry christmas toyouall turned and walked away.

And so I closed my eyes. And slept. And dreamt of the past.

The great American Baptist missionary and his great wife, Adoniram and Ann Hasseltine Judson, set foot on this golden shore one hundred and seventy eight years ago, and lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them -- and they were soar afraid. They trialed and they tribulated for over a decade, alone in this heathen land, suffered harassment and torture as their former masters the British moved in, taking piece after piece of the Golden through the century, "like a centipede," as the Karen described it, finally becoming protectors of the Mission, under whom they could build the Church, after "the Great Roasting," as the Karen described the Anglo-Burmese Wars, over a decade until the young sent-for Boardman baptized the former thief and murderer Ko Tha Byu, first Karen convert, in 1828, a short distance west of here in the sleepy town of Tavoy, then a safe haven under British control, to which thousands of Karen flocked for safety, education, and Jesus -- now occupied by the Burmese Army.
Into the other British-controlled province -- Arakan -- after the first Anglo-Burmese War 1824-26, Karens flocked also, to their younger white brothers with their lost books.

Their time had come, their nation would be reborn, their persecution past.

*Thra* George Boardman, as the Karens respectfully called him, would never know of his place in the Baptist and Karen Christian pantheon, passing away less than three years later, another victim to the consuming environment, following in the passage opened by his two young children to their Heavenly home. His journal entry for May 16, 1828, is a prophetic understatement (and an exercise in qualification):

> May 16. Repaired early in the morning to a neighboring tank, and administered Christian baptism to Ko Thah-byoo, the Karen Christian who accompanied us from Maulamying. May we often have the pleasure of witnessing such scenes.

[... ] The three Karen visitors were present. They appear to be impressed with the truth of our doctrine, and say they are resolved to worship the eternal God. I begin to feel almost persuaded to believe there is a spark of sincerity in them, and that we shall yet see them walking in the ways of truth. [... ] Perhaps God has a great work for him (Ko Thah-byoo) to do among his countrymen. He is very zealous in the cause of declaring what he knows. [... ] I have a little hope that God is about to do a great work among these sons of the wilderness.

And it came to pass in those days, even so, as the Word went forth and the Great Commission made flesh the spirit of these waiting sons and daughters in and of the wilderness. Judson found his sought-after star in the East, his heathens to convert and his talents to apply to the giving of the Word, but not in the kind of miraculous numbers he and his followers at home had been hoping and praying for, and
supporting. Fifteen years in the field, August 29, 1828, Judson wrote home to Reverend Doctor Bolles in Massachusetts that "the church at present consists of eleven members, baptized by the present pastor, beside three or four who remain of the old stock." Fifteen years, fifteen converts. A difficult harvest to be sure. Lessons were being learnt, painfully, through diseases and deaths, persecution and sacrifice.

_He was despised and rejected of men -- a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief._

Ann's friend, Harriet, who had left New England with her new husband and the Judsons, was dead -- at nineteen. So was Harriet's baby. And Ann and Adoniram's son. Ann was dead, too, a victim of her exertions in Ava trying to free her husband and Dr. Price during 21 months in gaol, suspected of collaboration with the invaders. And six months after Ann's death, two weeks after the Boardman's arrival, Judson's surviving daughter, Maria, followed her younger brother, and her mother.

Baptist seeds: Baptist blood and bones.

Judson wept. Alone at his desk, he translated.

And continued translating. Six years later, three years after Boardman's death, in 1834, Judson finished his translation of the Bible into Burmese, writing, "Thanks be to God, I can now say, I have attained." He had taken 21 years to finish this task, and would continue revising his translation for six more years, until 1840, devoting more energy to the revisions than he had to the previous work.
But he was no longer alone. Upon completion of his task, he had left his desk and set off from Moulmein for Tavoy, towards his latest love. Sarah Hall Boardman had been holding down the fort in Tavoy, and then some, since the death of her husband George.

Because it had been her husband's responsibility to make tours among the remote Karen villages, preaching the Gospel, Sarah Boardman continued the practice. After her death [at sea], her biographers described the woman missionary as she threaded her way through "the wild passes of the mountains, the obscure paths of the jungle, fording the smaller streams and carried over the larger in a chair borne on bamboo poles by her followers." In one memoir of her life it was reported that Mrs. Boardman went so far from any civilized habitation that she was mistaken by an Englishman living in the wilds as an "angel visitant from a better sphere" (Brumberg, 1984: 111).

In addition to her jungle tours, her translation work, her personal instruction of Karen women, and the care of her son and home, Sarah Hall Boardman became the primary administrator of a system of Karen schools.... Sarah reported that the day schools were entirely supported by the Honorable British East India Company (Ibid: 112-13).

Sarah Boardman was one of the earliest of the many missionary women who went to Burma. This work provided an opportunity for many women from America to have a career of their own, in a way that was not yet possible at home (Brumberg, 1984: passim).

Judson was impressed. Four days after his arrival in Tavoy, they were married and en route to church headquarters in Moulmein together, along with Sarah's son George. As they left Tavoy, Judson wrote the following sublime journal entry:
Once more, farewell to thee, Boardman, and thy long cherished grave. May thy memory be ever fresh and fragrant, as the memory of the other beloved, whose beautiful, death-marred form reposes at the foot of the hoopia tree....And at last may we all four be re-united before the throne of glory, and form a peculiarly happy family, our mutual loves all purified and consummated in the bright world of love (Wayland, 1853: 114).

According to another writer, Dr. MacGowan, Boardman's death itself had been a sublime event:

This lamented missionary was permitted to commence the work of evangelizing these wild men, but he fell early in the warfare, and closed his brief and useful career like an intrepid soldier of the field of conflict; borne on a cot to the margin of a majestic stream, he there witnessed the baptism of a large body of Karens, the first ingathering from that nation, took part in further ceremonies attending their reception into the Christian Church, and calmly expired, as it were in the arms of victory. A morally sublime scene (JASB, vol. v, no. vi, 1851, p. 174).

The past is full of ghosts -- and spirits. They cover the land and fill the mind. Renunciation of the demons has not brought on their destruction. They thrive at night, tormenting atavistic haunts. Sleep brings little solace, and morning is but a distant dream. Still, time passes, taking its toll. The sun rises. *The evil of the day is sufficient thereof.*

* * *
Presently, I was awakened by the voice of a missionary, not entirely pleasant. The cock had not yet crowed.

"Nobody, no army, no one is to use my boat again, understand? They told me, ‘One day only; up to M and return.’ Now, three days later, no gas, ...."

The three Karen men he was addressing listened silently, letting him vent his spleen. It sounded like the venting would continue for some time, and so I decided to busy myself inside in the meantime. I was a bit surprised that he was going on for so long, despite my presence in the house; they were sitting around the table on the porch. As I had been planning for some time to copy the chronological Karen history chart hanging on Daniel’s wall, I took out my notebook and copied the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017 BC</td>
<td>Depart from Mongolia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864 BC</td>
<td>Arrive in Tibet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1388 BC</td>
<td>Depart from Tibet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1385 BC</td>
<td>Arrive in Yunnan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1128 BC</td>
<td>First migration into Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>939 BC</td>
<td>Second migration into Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1044 AD</td>
<td>Karens into Burmese rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1492 AD</td>
<td>Columbus discovered America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881 AD</td>
<td>Karen National Association formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885 AD</td>
<td>British annex Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914 AD</td>
<td>World War I; Panama Canal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939 AD</td>
<td>World War II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941 AD</td>
<td>Bombing of Pearl Harbor (US) by Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945 AD</td>
<td>United Nations formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948 AD</td>
<td>Burma Independence; Country-wide Karen demonstration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1949 AD  Attack, KNU and KNDO (Karen National Defense Organization) Headquarters
Civil War begins
Burmese/Karen negotiation
Government formed
1950 AD  Saw Ba U Gyi killed
Hunter Tha Mwe elected president KNU
Korean War
1956 AD  Armed Forces (Karen National Liberation Army) formed
1957 AD  Beginning of the Space Age
1960 AD  Second negotiations
Karen split into leftists and rightists
Fighting among the Karen
1963 AD  Karen/Burmese, 3rd negotiation
1967 AD  Israel/Arab War
1975 AD  "Four Cuts" Program started: Communications, Supply, Finance, Heads
Reunification of Karens
Karen refugee first group
1976 AD  NDF (National Democratic Front) formed
Gen. Bo Mya elected president
1980 AD  First Burmese large scale operation
1984 AD  Karen refugee second group
Second Burmese large scale operation
1988 AD  Student uprising (ABSDF: All Burma Students' Democratic Front), DAB (Democratic Alliance of Burma) formed
Third Burmese large scale operation
1989 AD  Democracy Changes; Berlin Wall opens

It would appear that groups of Karen people have been moving -- migrating -- for some time, though that history has been the subject of debate among scholars.

Among Karens, there is a story, an important one for many of them. It is about the "Karen Patri-Arch,"
Phoo Htaw Meh Pah

THE LEGENDARY

In the old days, many eons ago, there was an old grand-mother. She had two orphaned sons. She named the older S'Key Coh, and S'Key Kloh the younger. When the grandmother died the two brothers married and lived separately with their own families. In the years, the two families grew in numbers and the two brothers became heads of two clans, which are the forefathers of the Karen tribes.

The sons and daughters, the sons-in-laws and daughter-in-laws, and grandsons and granddaughters were numerous but very industrious. Some were cultivators, some attended to the herds of goat and sheep, and some were good hunters who supplied meat through the year.

It happened one day, Htah Meh Paw went to a field belonging to his family to inspect whether paddy is riped for harvest or not. Surprised and awe-struck, he found one of the fields laid waste and desolated. He went around the border of the field to pick up footprints of the beast that had devastated the crops. On the knoll at the mountain slope, he found a big boar nest, newly made and presenting a tomb-like heap of grass and branches. He approached to the nest and calculated the lying position of the boar. The spear was stretched out aiming at the fatal spot, he took

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This account taken from Mika Rolley's collection, The Karens and Their Prophesies, n.d. manuscript, given me by the author.
a deep breath and thrust the spear into the nest. He was sure of his kill because he had killed hundreds of boars and never missed one yet.

He returned home and told his children: "I have killed a boar and a very big one. It is on the left side of the field over the knoll on the slope. It is early in the afternoon and plenty of light to cut the beast for our evening meal. Go and get it."

With the prospect of getting wholesome jungle pork, the children did not hesitate. They simply ran to the spot.

The sun was still high in the west. Htaw Meh Pah did not expect the children to return so soon. But they did. One of them handed the grand father a big solid tusk and said: "We did not find the beast. Instead we found this comb-like tusk." He added: "It is strange."

Another one of the sons added: "We could not find any print of any sort."

Amazed, but to himself, he said: "What could it be?" He, however, took the tusk and pinned it to his turban.

It happened one day. Htaw Meh Pah unconsciously combed his hair with the tusk. It, however, was not that he had any intention of finding whether there was any charm the tusk might possess. It was not from any curiosity either. But not for long, what happened to him next was sensational. There was a tingling-ringling in his ear and suddenly he felt a series of ripples waving in his skin. He looked at his arms and found old-age wrinkles all gone. Next he felt that he was younger than half his age.
From then on Phoo S'Key Coh was designated as Phoo Htaw Meh Pah. With the tusk in his possession, he never dies.

One day, Phoo Htaw Meh Pah called his brother S'Key Kloh and said: "Look here brother. We two clans have lived here for quite a long time. Our families are big. We already have exhausted the soil in our surroundings. Would you agree if I suggest we make a move to a new place?"

S'Key Kloh was a soft-spoken man and always let himself be led. He nodded his head, looking up to his brother's face. he said: "Yes, let's start."

Preparation was made. Bags and baggages were packed. Saddles and carriers were repaired. Sheep and goats were rounded up and penned. Ponies were brought in and tied. Pots and pans and food were arranged for use on the journey and when everything was set, the big caravan set forth to a new land. For every three day's march, a long break was made for rest. On the third break, Htaw Meh Pah and his clan rested on the western bank and the S'Key Kloh caravan on the eastern bank of a river. The river was full of fish in the pools, and shellfish was plentiful on the river beds. While Htaw Meh Pah's people caught fish for their meal, S'Key Kloh's people picked shellfish. But when Htaw Meh Pah broke the camp and left for the forward journey, S'Key Kloh's people were still boiling shellfish that could never be boiled tender.

When S'Key Kloh did not catch up at every stop they made, Htah Meh Pah continued the journey. At every stop they made they dug in the ground and looked
for the best soil in the earth. When they reached Htee-Set-Met-Ywah (the flowing sand river) they found the soil the best they wanted. They decided to settle down.

Meanwhile, the S'key Klho group broke camp and started to follow and catch up. They followed the trail of Htaw Meh Pah but did not manage to catch up. They at last gave up.

There is a saying: "That one day, certainly, Phoo Htaw Meh Pah will appear. And this prophesy is based on three conditions which, when they become fulfilled, Phoo Htaw Meh Pah will come." The lyrics are:

1. "High Ways criss-crossed here and there,  
   High Ways traverse east to west."

2. "Dead flowers are blooming,  
   Dead trees start to bloom in red."

3. "Parrot of rock screams and sings,  
   Htaw Meh Pah at last returned."

Saw Moo Troo, in an article entitled "Karens and Communism," attaches great value to this story. In a discussion of Karen identity, he writes,

...[I]n answer to the question "Who is a Karen?" one of the answers should be (1) one who claims his ancestry to Poo Htot-meh-pah and (2) one who possesses, maintains and cultivates the legacies bequeathed to him by the said fore-bear and his predecessors. The writer maintains that any one who treasures and upholds these inheritances is a Karen though he may not have a drop of blood from his tribe. Conversely, anyone who is a descendant of this patriarch and who has forfeited these legacies is no more a typical Karen.
Continuing, he enumerates what he sees as the most important elements, not of a typical Karen, but of the "Karen nation," which is not explicated.\(^3\)

Again what is heritage? It is what a person gets from his parents and forefathers. Some heritages are concrete and materialistic, and some are qualities such as characteristic traits. As a nation, we have at least eight, given below in order of merit and value.

1. The knowledge that there is God, the Divine Being,
2. High moral and ethical standards,
3. Honesty,
4. Simple, quiet and peaceful living,
5. Hospitality,
6. Language,
7. National costumes, and
8. Aptitude for music (Saw Moo Troo 1979: 1).

* * *

\(^3\) In a discussion with General Bo Mya, he told me how he understood the Karen nation: "Anything under my [i.e., KNU] control."
It was the last day of school before the Christmas break. The missionary had left to oversee the construction of his house. I got my coffee kit together and went onto the porch. The Karen men watched my morning ritual with interest, as I put the paper filter into the plastic cone, added the ground coffee, and poured hot water through the filter into my mug. I offered them a cup, and they shared one, after adding plenty of sugar and canned milk. They had started a game of scrabble, and invited me to join them. I politely declined, having had lost every time I had played with them, and wanting to do some typing at the school before it became too hot.

On the way, I met Karen Captain Nixon having tea with several Burmese student leaders. They invited me to join them and I slid down onto the small bench next to them. Capt. Nixon had been named by his prescient father 36 years ago thinking that Richard Nixon was a great man who would do great things. Karen people often name their children in fascinating and curious ways. A short time before I had met Saw (Mr.) Fulbright, named after the respected senator, and also because he was born under a full moon. Upon meeting me, the mother proclaimed a destiny fulfilled, as I too was under the auspices of Fulbright. There were also Saw Kennedy's, but no Johnsons, Carters, Bushes, or Reagans that I knew of. Many had Biblical names, some given to them by missionaries. My two favorites were "True Love", and Eh Kho Sah, "I love you till my head aches."

Nixon and the students told me that the Burmese Army was relocating many villagers, moving them along the Tavoy-Mergui road in order to cut the supply lines
to the Karen Army. Many villagers were fleeing east, towards our area, and the
Thai-Burmese border, to escape the army’s brutalities: forced labor, looting, rape,
and confiscation of foodstuffs. "Karens have always had to move away," he told me,
"but here, we fight back. It is not our choice, but what else can we do? Where else
can we go? More and more Karens are fleeing to Kaw Thoo Lei. They know they
will be safer here, and they know there are good Karen schools for their children,
and hospitals, and land."

We talked a little longer and I then continued on towards the school. The
bell was ringing, calling the children to assemble for the opening exercises.

_For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever
believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life._ And we will build a
hospital and train your children to care for the sick and dying (and wounded). _But
he that believeth not is condemned already because he hath not believed in the name
of the only begotten Son of God._ And schools throughout Karendom to elevate your
race, raise your morals, and open your hearts to the Holy Spirit. _So, come unto me,
all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest._ From persecution and
slavery. And we shall respect your culture and preserve and maintain it. We are not
Burmese, or Thai, or Japanese, or Chinese, or Indian. We are your younger white
brother, as you so dearly call us. We have brought back your lost books. You will
be great again, a model race for your heathen idolatring countrymen. We have the
means and the way. Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, your cultural
Saviour, your national Saviour, and we will move ahead together. We will give you writing, brothers, let us pray.
A Woman's Courage

or

Two Women Talk in the Jungle

by

Thramu Kyo Kho

Forced to flee from Ne Win's soldiers after the 1974 Rangoon University uprisings concerning the handling of former U.N. Secretary General U Thant's funeral, I suddenly found myself labelled a "rebel" in Burma's so-called Black Area - - the liberated not under the control of the Burmese Army. Our Karen leaders posted me (and my husband) in the Education Department. We started with a small, thatched-roof school with thirty primary students and two teachers. After three years of struggle, I became principal of a Karen High School situated on the banks of the Tenasserim River near the Thai-Burmese border in the Free Karen State of Kaw Thoo Lei, (in southern Burma). Today we have 610 students with 24 teachers and 2 office staff.

Most of the students in my school, and their families, have suffered much. They have lost family members in the fight against Burmese tyranny, have contracted
malaria, dysentery, typhoid, cholera, hookworm, and other diseases, and have witnessed atrocities perpetrated by the Burmese military government on close friends and relatives. Now we live between Burma, to our west, and Thailand, to our east, eeking out an existence, and trying to create a community for all the displaced families constantly streaming into this area.

This is the story of one mother and her child, and their flight towards freedom, or at least a temporary respite from active and prolonged fear.

It was June 5, 1987, the second day of a new school year. The school's office had been crowded since early morning with students and parents enrolling their children. I had to carefully check each enrollment form before the students could go to their new classes. It had been too busy for me to eat lunch, and I was hungry, hot, and tired. By late afternoon, the office had quieted down some, and I hoped to get a little rest, maybe get something to eat. I tidied my desk and was just about to leave when a woman with a small child of about six arrived. I'd not seen this woman before in the village.

"Thramu Kyo Kho, please accept my son in your school," the woman said. "We have just arrived in Htee Hta after many days travelling. ("Thramu Kyo Kho" means "school principal" in Karen.)

I told her to go to the next room, fill out the forms, and then return with the completed forms. She returned fifteen minutes later, shyly handed me the forms, and
waited. I looked at what she had written, quickly noting the boy’s name, then looked again at the boy’s name in surprise.

"Your son’s name is Saw (Mr.) Ay Day? That’s a very unusual name to give a child," I said. For "Ay" in Karen means "bite" and "Day" is the word for "umbilical cord."

"Yes," she replied. "When I delivered my son, there was nothing to cut the cord, so I had to bite it," she said.

"Nothing to cut the cord? Surely the person who helped you deliver had a knife."

"I delivered my own son; there was nobody to help me, and nothing to use. It’s a long story, and you’re a very busy woman."

"Please," I said, intrigued. "Sit down. I’d like to hear your story." The woman sat down, holding her son close to her, and began:

My name is Naw Paw Ko. Seven years ago I fell in love with, and married, a Karen soldier fighting for the Karen Revolution against the Burmese Army. My husband came from a revolutionary village in the Black Area. Life in these villages is very hard, Thramu, especially for women. After my marriage, my parents begged me to stay with them, rather than move to my husband’s village. They worried that there would be little food, and that I would get sick. They were old also, and needed someone to look after them. I thought perhaps I could stay for a little while, and arrange for someone to take care of them. I could always see my husband when he had leave from the army. So
I stayed, and soon discovered that I was pregnant. I was overjoyed at the thought of having our first child. I would stay until my baby was born, then we would join my husband in his village.

But these things were not to be. My village, Yer Poe, was in the "Brown Area" - the area in which the Burmese troops are fighting to take over and control. The troops began new attacks on our village, not something unusual or unexpected; anyone captured was beaten, tortured, and killed. The Burmese troops accused us of being spies for the KNLA (Karen National Liberation Army). We learned quickly how to run and hide, and we also had an information system which helped us to know when the Burmese troops were coming. My husband asked me to leave the village, but my parents were too old to travel, and I didn’t want to leave them. The Burmese military frightened me even more than before. I had married a Karen soldier and was therefore a rebel. My marriage made me a special target for the Burmese troops.

After one of the many attacks by the Burmese soldiers, I was approached by our village headman, Saw Pa La. He told me that the Burmese soldiers knew my name, and that they had searched the village and my parents house for me. The headman asked me if I would leave the village as soon as possible, for the sake of the other villagers. He explained that if the soldiers returned and captured me, all the villagers would be killed. I knew I had to leave, but my parents pleaded with me again to stay, at least until the baby was born. I listened to them, and stayed on, taking care to hide when the troops returned again and again. The Burmese soldiers were determined to
catch me, and to make an example of me. Each time hiding became more and more
difficult, and more dangerous.

Time passed. I was nine months pregnant. Soon I could deliver my baby and
travel to safety. Then one day we heard news of another attack -- the Burmese troops
were coming again, and they were already close to the village. The village headman
advised all the villagers to leave, as information led us to believe that the fighting would
be fierce. Soon we could hear the sounds of guns firing and loud explosions filling the
air. Later we heard that three villagers had been killed and sixteen wounded. The
villagers had returned to their homes to collect as many of their belongings as they could
before the Burmese returned to loot the village, as was their custom. On hearing this,
my parents told me to go to my husband; they were old, they said, but I had a new life
inside me to think about, and it was too dangerous to stay.

My sister, Naw (Ms.) Porry, decided to travel with me. We had never left our
village before, and my husband's village, Nat Aing Taung, was far away, near the Thai-
Burmese border. Two villagers who had been to Nat Aing Taung offered to be our
guides. It would take two days and nights of travelling to reach my husband's village,
travelling through thick jungle, having to climb steep hills and cross rivers. We set off
as soon as possible.

For the first few hours, I carried my own bag, but it became more difficult with
each step to keep up with the others. I felt dragging pains in my stomach, so bad that
I feared for my baby. When I could no longer carry the bag, my sister took it for me.
We had been walking along a track, but after hearing gunshots close by, we decided that it would be safer to leave the track, and to find another way through the jungle. The soles of my feet were cut, and my legs were badly scratched. I was bleeding from all the thorns we had to fight our way through. I felt exhausted. The pains in my stomach had worsened, but I had to keep walking. By late evening, we reached the foot of a mountain and decided to camp there for the night. It was December, the cool season, and the nights were very cold, but all I had was a thin blanket for warmth. I tried to sleep. My body was very tired, but I was too frightened to sleep.

I began worrying that my baby would have to be born in the jungle. I kept remembering the gunshots we'd heard, and how close they'd been. Finally, I managed to doze for a while before the sun came up, and we set off again. The pains in my stomach, as we walked, brought back my fears of the night before. I had to get to Nat Aing Taung before the baby came. I tried to walk faster, but my pain made it difficult to keep up with the others -- soon they were far ahead of me. The track became difficult to follow. I looked for my companions, but couldn't see them. Had I wandered off the track? I had nothing with me. The others had been carrying everything. Where were they?

By now my pains were so severe that it was an effort just to stand, much less walk. I forced myself on. I had to find a place to rest, and I needed water badly. As I walked, I prayed. What if my baby was coming? I had seen my aunt's baby being born, but she had many people to help her. I had no one, and no experience of
delivering babies. Then my prayers were answered. I could hear the sound of running water.

I walked towards a clearing where I saw a small stream with large shady trees nearby. As I drank from the stream, I realized how thirsty I had been. Pulling myself up, I saw something at the water's edge -- tracks -- tiger tracks.

Making my way to a tree, I saw more tracks and could smell tiger's urine. A tiger had been here -- and not very long ago, but what could I do? I had no strength to continue walking, so I laid down to rest. Now, I thought, I have found a place to have my baby. I started to think about what I would need. I knew the time was at hand. I thought about last night's cold; a baby couldn't survive that cold. I needed something to wrap it, to keep it warm. The only thing I could use was my sarong. I ripped it in half, tying the shorter half around me. The contractions became stronger with less time between each one. I felt wetness on the back of my sarong, and when I checked it, I found blood. The baby was coming. I began pushing as hard as I could to help it, but there was no sign of the head. I knew that if the baby didn't come soon, I wouldn't survive. I kept on pushing, gasping for breath between each contraction.

At last the baby's head appeared, then shoulders. I grasped the shoulders and pulled gently, hoping to help the baby's passage out. Then, with a gush, the baby came - - a boy. Listening to the baby's cry, I realized I had no way of cutting the umbilical cord. I looked around me for something sharp, a stone, anything, but there was nothing.
I knew what I had to do. Closing my eyes, I grasped the cord and bit, tasting blood, and continued biting until the cord was bitten completely through.

As soon as it was free, I tied what was attached to my baby with a thread from my sarong. I felt a weight lift off me -- the pain had gone -- and my baby and I were alive; we had survived. The baby was crying, so I breast-fed him. I was very hungry, but too weak to look for food. Was I going to survive the delivery, and the Burmese, and the tigers, only to die of starvation?

Despite my hunger I slept, exhausted after my ordeal, my baby clutched closely to me. I awoke to the sound of rustling in the bushes -- my sister! -- she'd come back for me! But my hopes died as a small antelope dashed out into the clearing -- it too had been looking for water.

By now, it was early evening, and soon it would be dark and I had no way to make a fire to keep my baby and me warm, and give us light. Exhaustion again overcame me, and I slept. When I awoke, it was almost dark, and I could hear something moving close by. I remembered the tiger prints and prayed that it wouldn't be the tiger. Then I saw a light, and heard voices; someone was calling my name! I called out, and was answered by my sister's voice. She and our group had found me. We were safe! My prayers had been answered and we could now continue our journey with new life.

The clang of the school bell sounded, signalling the end of the school day. I'd been so involved in the woman's story that I hadn't noticed the time passing.
So that is my story. I must go. I have to make it to the next village before it gets too dark. Please will you take my son into your school? He is a good boy, and a hard worker.

"You are a very strong woman and I respect your courage and determination. I hope all Karen women will have your strength of heart. Of course Saw Ay Day can stay at our school."

I stood with Saw Ay Day as he waved good-bye to his mother. As Naw Paw Ko made her way down the dusty road, many things came into my mind. I thought of our long struggle against Burma's brutal regimes, how we all have had to come here to live our lives in the jungle, being pressed in on both sides. The Burmese Army forces us one way, and if we go to far, Thailand sends us back into our persecutors' hands. The military leaders of both countries are good friends, just like Thailand's generals and Pol Pot. We feel isolated, abandoned, and neglected by the outside world. It seems as if no one is aware of the Karen people and all the other ethnic groups of Burma, and our plight. We wonder why they don't care.

I walked back into my office to finish the day's work, my mind full of thoughts and questions. If Burma cannot change into a democratic country, with good leaders, will there be women like Naw Paw Ko with the strength of will to survive, and persist, and remain strong, and hopeful? I hope so. For the sake of our people, the Karen, or, as we call ourselves, Pwa K'Nyah, as well as for the sake of all the people
in Burma, who simply want to be allowed to live ordinary, decent lives, with dignity and freedom from fear.

* * *

Pipi Daphne had come into the office while I was typing the former account, and, after I had completed it, I was asked to type and edit this:

_The Best-Paying Job for Burma's Graduates_

by

Pipi Daphne

Burma's education policy stipulates that students who fail school examinations three times are to be expelled from school. Failure means the end of a student's education, unless they are accepted by another school. Expulsion is common, particularly at the high school level, since the failure rate for the government's 10th Standard matriculation is very high.

In Burma, the average wage for those with matriculation is 126 kyats; university graduates have difficulty finding work that pays above this rate. Those who do not have an education up to the 10th standard have little chances of gaining employment. The wealthy in Burma are able to afford private tuition classes after school in order for their children to be able to pass the examinations. Such options
are not available, however, to the poor, or the majority of the people of Burma, who are unable to afford tuition fees. Many students of poor families work after school in order to help contribute to the family income. These students are less likely to gain a pass on the 10th Standard matriculation examination.

Another factor is the high cost of living in Burma. Increasing costs and inflation make it very difficult for many families to keep their children in school. The poor get poorer.

Involvement in the drug or black market trade has become the only means of employment for those without educational qualifications, and for many with educational qualifications. Young people with no job opportunities or income are easily persuaded by those who provide money. The young people who become involved in these illegal activities are often intelligent, capable people who could do well if given the right sorts of opportunities. A healthy, intelligent person is able to earn a lot of money in the drug trade.

A common route used by those who carry drugs is from Namkam to Kartha - - a three-day journey through the jungle. The drug mafia in Kartha pay carriers to collect opium from the Shan State area. They are paid 1,000 kyats for each viss of opium. A healthy young man is able to carry up to 15 viss at a time. Food and expenses for the journey are paid by the mafia; so, a carrier can earn up to 15,000 kyats in one trip. Because the return journey to Namkam is usually by bus or car, a drug carrier is able to make at least three trips a month.
Carrying drugs means easy money, but the people involved in this begin to use the drugs themselves. The frequent journeys to obtain these drugs are tiring, and the carriers begin taking the drugs to fight fatigue. Many believe the drugs enable them to work harder. Soon they become addicted to the drugs they are carrying. They usually begin using opium, but as their addiction worsens, they begin using heroin.

The Burmese government have made superficial attempts to stop the drug trafficking by setting up stations of troops throughout Burma. Any chance of success is hampered by corruption within the operation. Many officials take bribes from the mafia-stations set up to stop cultivation of opium by burning crops. It has been found that officials involved in this operation, rather than destroying the crops, have been demanding money from the opium-growers in order for the crops to remain untouched. A family growing opium may have to pay an official 5,000 kyats in order to keep their crop. An official who has ten families paying bribes may earn up to 50,000 kyats.

These officials burn a small portion of the crop, picking an area closest to the grower’s house. Photographs are taken and it is reported in the newspaper that all of the opium crop was destroyed. The government says they are doing all they can to stop drug trafficking; but in reality many government officials encourage opium cultivation for monetary gain.
These are just some of the reasons why nine out of ten students eventually become addicted to drugs. These young people begin smuggling drugs in order to survive, but it ends up killing them.

Who is responsible in this case?!

(This is taken from the experiences of Daphne Tun Baw, who was a school teacher in the Northern Shan State of Burma -- Namkam, from 1964-1985. Mrs. Tun Baw, now 70, continues to work as a teacher in Htee Hta Karen State High School.)
You Can't Touch This

Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.
--Revelation 1:19

I've seen the world, from London to the bank...Can't touch this.
--M.C. Hammer

Rap music was shaking the village, drawing the villagers to its beat, and its image. But for many in the village, church had to be attended to first -- after all, it was Christmas day.

Pastor Gary gave a long sermon in English, while a Karen pastor simultaneously translated. The church was packed. Many new faces were present, and some had been allowed to return to the fold today, after varying periods of excommunication. Several had confessed a few months back to drinking, and had been cast out of the church until now. Baptist penance for confession was rejection.

A special feast was planned for every meal of the day. Many animals had been sacrificed for Christmas curries: pigs, chickens, fish, goats, ducks, and an unexpected possum, found in a trap at the end of the day. Everyone had contributed what they could towards the celebrations. The small Roman Catholic contingent at
the other end of the village had also invited some of us to their festivities, which we attended later.

After the communal breakfast, people began dispersing throughout the village. A large number of them, however, were drifting towards the far west side, to the Thai lumber camp which had been operating there over the past decade. It occurred to me that even in this isolated village in Kaw Thoo Lei, these Karens were still "a people between" -- in this case, between Thais.

The loggers, who had never employed any of the Karen villagers, instead bringing in Thai laborers, had made a fortune from the wood extracted from this area; they were at one end. The largest shop in the village, on the east side of town, was run by Thai merchants as well. Both were operating illegally inside Burma.

Other villagers, Karen and Mon, had opened small shops also, but they were in no position to compete with the Thais. The latter could easily cross the border in their pickup trucks, and were not subjected to the scrutiny and denial non-Thais faced from the Thai border guards. The minorities were effectively locked out.

Implicit in both of these Thai operations was the threat of forced compliance, which virtually amounted to a matter of life or death. The deal was this: "Comply and submit, or stay on your side of the border." Dependent as they are on Thailand for foodstuffs, commodities, communication, arms and ammunition, etc., the closing of the borders would amount to no less than the severing of their lifeline. They are caught between a rock and a hard place: between Burma and Thailand.
Today, however, for the first time, the Thai lumber barons have organized a party for the village. Clearly to placate "the natives" whose land they have been raping, the businessmen have organized the First Annual Thai Lumber Camp Christmas Party and Lotto Extravaganza. And I was invited as one of their special guests! Which meant I got to enter their luxurious log cabin with them, enjoy their conversation, and have access to their surreptitious, though obvious, alcohol, which is prohibited throughout Kaw Thoo Lei.

The villagers slowly trickled into the Thai compound, where many people were already milling about. Refreshments and snacks were being served by several Thai women at a long table. A canopy was being erected over the audio and visual equipment, which was operating full-force.

A quiet but extremely attentive crowd was gathered around the television, watching the images dancing across the screen. I performed my part as well, videotaping the video-watching villagers. To me, the spectacle I observed through my lens was very unusual, extremely intriguing, and poignantly ironic. Part of the Christmas present to the Karen village was a heavy dose of MTV (letters which, like CNN, no longer require explication). The irony was captured in M.C. Hammer's hit video, "You Can't Touch This," whose ("Superfreak") bass line was booming out of the huge speakers on the sides of the technological altar. The images demanded attention, and, as usual, they received it. The people were touched -- inevitably. This was not, of course, the first time.
The resident missionary had a VCR in his home, and many videos had been rented, if that's the word, from Thailand, and shown there. Portable generators were fired up in the middle of the jungle, and huge crowds could be seen watching movies (often Rambo etc.) late into the night. The circulation of images would seem to know no bounds, or boundaries. A star is a star is a star.

And so this was Christmas. My exotic, ethnographic, Christmas with Karen Christians from Burma. What had I expected? A howl and a dance around the fire? A quaint, pastoral service by the river? Ritual sacrifice and vicarious atonement? I could not say, but MTV and a lottery was not my cup of tea. Nowadays, it is our myths who are being shattered. Our others are being redefined. And it is we who are lagging behind. Hence, anthropology is reconfigured by its subject.

I had seen enough, and I was ready to go home. The time had been necessary, and it was, in fact, well-spent. I, too, had been reconfigured, or transfigured. And so had others. It is never uni-directional. Daniel and I headed back to his house. It was one of those insistently beautiful evenings. We walked, and thought, and, after some time, talked.

"It really is incredibly beautiful here," I said. "Is all this land yours?"

Pointing to the fields around his house, he said, "Yes, this area is mine. We have divided the land between us. If you want, you can have that mountain over there."
The moon had just risen behind the mountain. I considered his offer as we turned down the path to his house, in which his wife and three children were now sleeping. I was certainly tempted. But this was not my place. Not now.

"Do you think our way of life is low, compared to people in America and Europe?" he asked me. "We have very little here. Life is simple."

"No, Daniel. I'm sure many people in other countries would love to live here, if they could. Your way of life is not low by any means. In fact, it is in many ways a much higher way of life. If only there was no fighting going on, if people didn't have to be afraid of other people. I hope your war ends soon."

We climbed the ladder into his house, blew out the lights, and went to bed.
$z$

*Terra Incognita*
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