

CHAPTER I

KARENS IN THE CITY

Why have so many Karens recently started coming to study in Thai schools? A couple of decades ago, only rarely did Karens attend institutions of higher learning in Thailand. Now, even though no precise figures are available, there are surely hundreds of young Karen men and women in Thailand now receiving an education in Thai universities, colleges, and technical institutes. Although this fact is known to government planners, developers, and academicians, little more is known about these individuals.

In carrying out this study, we have shed light on this segment of Karen society in Thailand that has never been formally studied before: the young, and well-educated. Although there have been highly-educated Karens--doctors, lawyers, generals, and educators--in Burma for decades, in Thailand this is a new phenomenon. Most Karens in both countries who became educated did so through the support of Christian missionaries who first preached among Karens in Burma in the 1820s. Since then perhaps a million of the estimated 3-4 million total Karens have become Christian, these mostly living in Burma. Most of the Karens who became well-educated did so through the auspices of Christian missionaries--most often Baptist and Catholics. The activities of missionaries in Burma have been well reported but since there has been less mission work in Thailand and it has been less studied. Since in Thailand there is a much smaller number of Karens altogether--200,000-300,000, the number of Christians is much less than in Burma too. Furthermore, since the process of modern

education got off to a later start here than in Burma, there has been a very small base indeed of Karen Christians with a modern education. In 1976, as far as can be told, there was only one Karen (a Christian) with a Thai university degree. In the last decade, though, through the Thailand Karen Baptist Convention and other agencies many Karens have received scholarships to attend technical colleges where they study agriculture or commerce, and teachers' training colleges. There have also been a number who received university educations. Also, with the increasing availability of secondary education in rural areas, a number of Karens have been given the opportunity to work their way through college even if they could not qualify for a scholarship. Some of these people were given initial assistance through the Thammacharik Program for monks and novices at Wat Si Soda in Chiang Mai. Thus, this is a new phenomena, one that has scarcely been noticed in the academic and development literature that often focuses on rural (the more rural, to many investigators, the better) villages. Occasionally there are references in these writings to young people going off to school, but these individuals are then considered absent from the village and problems related to them as apart from the village are not considered in those studies.

Problems faced by these individuals involve both factors arising from traditional Karen-Thai relations and those arising from the impact of modern civilization on life in Thailand. Karens surely were present in what is now Thailand for at least the last 250 years but very probably were here for much longer than that. Karens have traditions that they were the first peoples in the Ping River Valley, preceding even the Lua who were here before the Thais appeared in large numbers during the 13th century. Thus, there have been Karen-

Thai relations for a long time. During this time, before the 20th century, the two groups worked out a means for dealing with the other amicably. Although individual disputes surely occurred, relations were usually harmonious.

During this time, the Thais lived in the valley centers, such as Chiang Mai and Lamphun, and Karens lived on the outskirts of these centers. In those days the outskirts were the far reaches of the valleys and in the foothills surrounding them. The Thais practiced Buddhism and the states in which they lived were characterized by an Indic-influenced civilization with Hindu-style law codes, writing scripts, architecture, and practices of kingship. The Karens, both Sgaw and Pwo, surrounding the Thais practiced an animist religion based on an ancestor worship ceremony. They lacked almost all the Indic influences of the Thais, except a few that might have trickled down to them. Karens were not ruled by Karens kings, they had no Indic-influenced architecture, law codes, or other such phenomena. Karens lived in villages that were loosely grouped into multi-village units known as kau (Mischung 1980, p. 13), but there was no higher level of Karen political organization.

By all of the standards of Thai society, the Karens were considered as a different type of human being by the Thai. Thais saw themselves as civilized Buddhists, capable of living in as well as ruling large states. According to the Thais, Karens were uncivilized non-Buddhists, incapable of living in large states. The Thais saw Karens as peoples of the forest, who had better senses of smell, were more successful hunters, were better trained in martial arts, and were less susceptible to forest diseases. Similarly, Karens were imagined

by the Tai to better understand the dangerous forest spirits and Karen death magic (tu) was widely feared by Tai city-dwellers.

The Thai conception of the Karen does not mean that Thais saw Karens as not having any importance for the Tai. Indeed, since Karens were forest dwellers they had access to many forest products that the Thais did not or were dissuaded by fear of forest spirits and diseases from getting themselves. Products such as these included lac, animal hides and skins, various products used in making pharmaceutical preparations, minerals and ores such as gold and tin, and also rattan. Income from the trade of these products put the Karens in a secure position. Furthermore, the Karens were renowned as elephant mahouts and there were not a few Karens who owned a dozen or more elephants. To symbolize this wealth, Karen big men owned bronze "frog" drums and large collections were not uncommon. In addition to this, the Thais recognized Karen scouting skill by having them serve as guides and undercover agents for security reasons and Karens were a part of almost every northern Thai expeditionary force.

Another sort of relationship between Karens and Thais was that Karen areas served as havens for runaways from Tai society. In the poem, Khlong Nirat Suphan, the Thai poet, Sunthon Phu, referred to Karens in Suphanburi welcoming Thais fleeing their masters in the 1830s and these Karens helping the fugitives fight against those pursuing them (Sunthon Phu 1841). Similarly, Karens today still recall that Thais accused by their neighbors of being phi ka, a malevolent spirit, were forced to leave their homes and many settled in Karen villages where they could take refuge (Interview with Khru Sant Khankaew, 28 December 1986). Once these runaways came to live in Karen society, oftentimes they assimilated into Karen life, their

descendants becoming indistinguishable from the others there. After a couple of generations, even the memory of this change in identity was lost.

Conversely, there were Karens who entered Thai society. Karen women, whom Thais admired for their fair skin and good looks, were often invited (or abducted) to serve as minor queens in royal households. In the late nineteenth century, Anna Leonowens mentioned that there were Karens in the harem of King Chulalongkorn (Leonowens 1873).. Similarly, a recently-deceased Chiang Mai chao (royal figure) remembered that "a lot" of Karen were mom (royal wives below the level of first queen). These people often brought along friends to help wait on them or to serve in other capacities and they sometimes assimilated into Thai life. Furthermore, on the edges of Thai society, where the distinction between Thai and Karen lifestyles was not so distinct, some intermarriage occurred as well.

Thus, it can be definitely stated that there was traditionally no such thing as a Karen race or a Thai race. In pre-modern Mainland Southeast Asia, the residents had a different notion of patriotism than do people at present which allowed for considerable assimilation between the different native groups that worked in both directions. As a result, Karens and Thais (and the others in the area) differed culturally and in terms of religion. In terms of race, however, they shared many of the same genes, a fact that was implicitly understood by the local residents.

Certainly, the Karens at this time were proud of their ethnicity. They believed they were a more moral and trustworthy people than the Thai. Although they had been forsaken by their god, Ywa, and the Thai

had the advantages of civilization over them, the Karens would some day be redeemed by the return of the white younger brother. This belief is common among all Karen, a considerable number believing that he has already returned with Ywa being the Yaweh (Jehovah) of the Bible and the white younger brother being personified by the Caucasian missionaries who first brought his Message.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the traditional relationship between Thai and Karen had begun to change. Western influences had reached Chiang Mai and the Karens surrounding it. Teak wood had become a very valuable substance and the land on which it stood became a subject of dispute. These disputes brought the central government into the Chiang Mai area with the result that the traditional relationship between Karens and Thais began to break down. After 1901, when the Bangkok government took authority from the hands of the Chiang Mai rulers, the latter lost much of their former auspiciousness. The Karens, who had been their loyal followers, then were one more step removed from power and subject to distant monarchs with whom they had no personal contact. Additionally, the forest products that they had once prospered on, themselves began to lose value. Western and Chinese pharmaceuticals became more popular than the Karen ones and metals from outside the area began to compete with what the Karen could offer. As a result, Karen prosperity and prestige declined, and apparently so sometimes did pride in being Karen.

Not long after this process had begun, there were Karens who had begun to wish they were not Karens. In 1912, the Karen-language newspaper from Tavoy, Burma, The Morning Star, reported that over 100 Karen families in Chiang Mai city alone were hiding from the fact that

they were Karen. Other Karens knew who they were but these people did not wish that Thais recognized them as such. This no doubt represents a loss of pride in Karen culture and this process seems to have continued until the present. In and of itself, Karens wanting to become Thais is nothing new. What is new is the reason: loss of pride, and the fact that there is no record, either written or oral, of Thais at this time wanting to become Karen.

Throughout the early twentieth century, Karen fortunes gradually declined. With their access to power in the old northern Thai chaos now severed and their produce less in demand, Karens became less important politically and economically. Karens near or in the midst of Thais sometimes began assimilating into Thai life. Karens in the hills retreated into a kind of isolation. Although many of King Chulalongkorn's laws to prompt national unity, such as of military and police conscription and of a head tax, applied to all native residents of the kingdom regardless of ethnicity, efforts to introduce these laws to remote areas, where almost all Karens lived, were pursued unenthusiastically or even not at all. Karens living in areas accessible to Thai government projects, such as near Nong Tong in San Pa Tong District, Chiang Mai Province or in the large lowland Karen villages on the Yom River in Long District, Phrae Province, were however actively brought under the new rules. In these places, Karen assimilation into Thai life proceeded rather quickly. In almost every other Karen area, though, assimilation occurred very slowly if at all. The degree of "Karenness" in the vast majority of Karen villages remained high throughout the first half of the 1900s.

This began to change about thirty years ago. During the mid-

1950s, fighting in Laos and Vietnam that involved hill tribes alarmed Thai military planners who feared that members of these groups, like Hmong and Yao, who lived in Thailand might cause war to break out in the north of this country. From this time on, the Royal Thai Government began instituting a number of development plans into the hills of the north. Although these were primarily aimed at the Hmong and Yao, who were involved in the Indochinese fighting, these programs came to be applied to all the hill tribes, including Tibeto-Burman peoples like the Ahka, Lahu, and Lisu who tended to grow opium, and other groups like the Karen and Lua who did not grow much opium at all.

- These programs were designed to instill loyalty to the Thai nation as well as to eliminate the cultivation of opium as a cash crop by these groups. The Public Welfare Department was responsible for many projects but the Army, the Royal Forest Department, drug enforcement agencies, and local governmental units all became involved. In addition to the development of cash crops to replace opium, the promotion of non-swiddened agriculture, road construction, and assistance with irrigation projects, developers also promoted the construction of schools in the hills. As in other rural Thai areas, these schools were at the beginning primary level--four years, but later after the change in the law on compulsory education--six years.

From the late-1960s on, the hills of northern Thailand, all over but particularly in Karen areas which tend to be nearer to Thai settlements, have seen a tremendous growth in schools, so now that almost all villages in the hills have primary schools. This has resulted in many changes. Although this has never been studied and some of these changes may have occurred had there been no schools, it

can safely be stated that Karen children began learning central Thai for the first time; their elders had learned northern Thai if they learned any Thai language. Secondly, and also differing from the experience of their elders, because of the curriculum in these Thai schools, Karen children began developing a positive attitude towards Thai society in these schools. This was due in particular to many of the activities of the Royal Family which became very popular among Karens. The result, thus, of the modern system of Thai education has been to evoke with the younger generation of Karens a desire to join in Thai life as never before.

The Thai educational system has been very successful in integrating the various ethnic groups of this country into the nation state. From the beginning of the twentieth century, when compulsory education in Thailand was first instituted, the educational system of Thailand has served to mold a single people out of the disparate groups that traditionally inhabited this region. By collecting various Thai characteristics, based on the model of Bangkok life, and building the belief that these are markers of the entire Thai people, are subjects of the Thai Royal Family, and citizens of the state of Thailand, this educational system has been a prime mover in unifying the Thai nation. A century ago, there were dozens of distinct minority groups--Chinese, Muslims, hill tribes, and various lowland groups and Tai sub-groups, speaking many different languages and dialects. At present, however, even groups like the overseas Chinese who seemed almost unassimilable are not all but unrecognizable from those whose ancestors were in fact Thais.

As more and more Karens entered Thai schools, these new

participants in this system also began to adopt more and more of the traits encouraged by the educational system. First, and most importantly, young Karens began to speak Thai. Although many Karens spoke northern Thai, this was not the national language and knowledge of only northern Thai did not permit Karens to join in the national life. When Karens began learning Thai, they gained access to the national mass media and could enjoy radio and television broadcasts, read magazines and newspapers, as well as enjoy songs and other expressions of popular culture. Secondly, knowledge of Thai allowed the Karens to travel more widely. With only a knowledge of northern Thai and Karen languages, Karens were fairly effectively restricted to a small geographical area which kept also them out of Thai life. Once they knew Thai, they could, funds allowing, travel all over the kingdom relatively easily.

The Thai educational system also taught young Karens how to act like Thais. In addition to teaching the Thai language, various behavioral traits were also taught in the Thai schools. These included such basics as how to wai, dance the ramwong (this central Thai dance was elevated to the status of "national dance" during the Pibul era), and a variety of Thai social values regarding relationships between seniors and juniors, males and females, and powerful and less powerful. All of this made it possible for young Karens to enter into Thai society more readily. Since they resemble Thais physically, there is no reason why Karens cannot readily move into Thai society given the requisite social knowledge and language skills..

As a result, many Karen youth began wanting to study beyond the schooling available in the northern Thai hills. This meant, of

course, that they had to come down to cities, namely Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Bangkok. This process was facilitated by a number of organizations interested in helping in the development of Karen society. Perhaps the most active agents have been the American Baptist Mission of Thailand and its counterpart organization, the Thailand Karen Baptist Convention.

Although the ABM began work with Karens in Thailand only after World War II, Baptists have evangelized among Karens for well over a century, beginning in Burma during the 1820s. After achieving considerable evangelistic success, primarily among Sgaws but also with some Pwos, in Burma during the mid-nineteenth century, members of the Burma Baptist Convention became interested in sending representatives to preach the gospel in the area around Chiang Mai. The first contact was in the area of Ban Nok in what is now Lampang Province where three villages were converted en masse. Two reverted to ancestor beliefs but one stayed Christian, this becoming the first Karen Christian center in Thailand.

The next effort by the Burma Baptist Convention to expand its work in northern Thailand was in 1911 with the establishment of a bible school in Chiang Mai city. This school stayed open for two decades, finally being sold in 1932. Run by Thra Ennie Di Wah, a Karen from Burma, this school trained dozens of Karen youth who came down from the hills to receive a religious education here (Conklin 1984, pp. 26-27). In addition to religion, music and some village development was also taught. Those receiving training from this school returned to the hills where they generally settled back into village life or preached Christianity. Success was achieved gradually

and the number of Karen Christian villages in Thailand grew slowly, moving into Chiang Rai Province and the area west of Chiang Mai and east of Mae Sariang, this process continuing through the 1930s. There were two grades in this school. In the first grade, in which there were usually about 20 students, subjects were taught in Thai. In the second grade, in which there were perhaps five students, evangelism was taught in Karen. Two guiding forces in this the furthering of this process were two young men who had received training in this bible school, named Khru Sant Khankaew and Thra Bawnee.

Thra Bawnee was joined by another Karen evangelist in 1933, named Loo Shwe who arrived in Chiang Mai from Burma. Although disappointed that the school had been closed, he nonetheless picked up where the school left off by visiting as many Karen Christian congregations as he could. During these treks he evangelized as well as teaching various new skills and means for upgrading village life. Loo Shwe also selected young Karens for educational scholarships. The most notable of these was Khru Sant Khankeaw, a former student of the bible school, who knew Thai well and received a scholarship to study at The Prince Royal's College in Chiang Mai. He showed such promise that he completed his secondary education with the help of a scholarship from William Harris, then principal of PRC. Since then, he became a prominent banker in that town and has remained an active leader in local Karen life (Interview with Khru Sant Khankaew, 28 December 1986).

Following World War II, during which time Protestant Christian work in Thailand went into a decline, Baptists returned to Thailand directly from the United States. The ABM moved quickly into the hills of northern Thailand beginning a variety of evangelistic and

development projects. Because of previous Baptist interest in Karens in Burma and because of the increasing difficulty of missionaries gaining access to that country, Baptist missionaries increasingly became interested in the Karens of northern Thailand.

From the beginning, these Baptist missionaries were convinced that providing the Karens with a modern education was a top priority. By 1955, the Baptists had opened schools at Nam Lat Village and in Musikee, a Karen hill area in the west of Chiang Mai Province. Additionally, hostels were established in Mae Sariang and elsewhere. Plans were also laid for the establishment of a leaders' training center. (ABM Records, RG 034/79 Box 13, File 1).

During the 1950s there were virtually no Karens coming to study in the city because very few Karens knew enough central Thai to keep up with the classes they would have to take. Indeed, when Khru Sant was given the scholarship, one of the main reasons he received it was that he was one of a very few Karens who was fluent in Thai. This situation did not change until well after World War II, when primary schools began opening in the hills. Then, there was a means for Karens to readily learn Thai and, then, the only obstacle remaining in the way of their studying at more advanced schools in the valley was finding funding.

This situation has now changed with many scholarships available. As more Karen students than ever are now moving into the city to receive an education, new movement and cultural patterns are emerging. The purpose of this study has been to examine these emergent patterns, to determine their assets and disadvantages, and to suggest means for maximizing the assets while minimizing the disadvantages.