

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Introduction Effective language planning involves knowledge about the target community. This chapter explores relevant background information about the Karen in general, and the seven Northwest Karenic groups in particular. Relevant information about the Kayah language is also included.

#### 2.1 Historical background and geographical distribution

To indicate the exact location of the Karen people on a map is rather difficult because, like the Burmese, they are scattered all over Myanmar. The areas where most of the Karen are found, however, are the southern part of Shan State, Kayah State, Karen State, Pegu Division, Yangon Division, Taninthayi Division, Mon State and Irrawaddy Division in Myanmar. Karen are also found in Myanmar in the Irrawaddy and Sittang valleys from the coast to about 19° N., and in the entire length of Tenasserim from 10° N. up through the hills along the Thai border and into the Shan plateau as far as 21° N. The majority of Karen lives in the central Irrawaddy Delta and in the end of Tenasserim at the head of the Gulf of Martaban. In Thailand they live chiefly along the border with Myanmar from about 12° N., extending north and east to the Mekong, approximately 20°30' N. (JuNamkung 1996). They can also be found in the south of Thailand as far as the northern border of Malaysia. (See maps in Appendix B.)

The historical origin of the Karen, their culture, religion and linguistic affiliation is not yet thoroughly researched, and therefore no sure evidence of the date of their migration into Myanmar can be given. JuNamkung (1996:59) states that Karen history prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is largely a matter of conjecture. The oral history of the Karen tends to be more legendary than objective history. Nevertheless, Karen oral tradition indicates that they came from the North, possibly from the area around Tibet. Some Burmese historians say that they came from Tibet directly. The Pagan inscriptions of the Ninth to Eleventh Centuries A. D., and the T'ai chronicles, state that the Karen entered what is now called Myanmar and northern Thailand sometime before the Eighth century A.D. References to the Karen in Burmese and Thai literature were vague, however, until the Eighteenth Century (Renard 1980: v). Karen oral tradition suggests that the Karen are naturally sincere, very religious and peaceful type of people. The present beliefs of the Karen are diverse because of long contact with many peoples and their religions, yet their oral tradition points to what their ancestors believed and hoped. The majority of the Karen are animists, even though their oral tradition describes one supernatural God, the creator and father of all mankind. They have a firm conviction that they are *Pwakanyaw*, human beings, and they also have a sure hope that they are people in God's plan and that there is some purpose to their lives. They used to be a unified group under one prestigious leader and linked their history (as found in their oral tradition) with their traditional beliefs.

## **2.2 Karen linguistic typology**

Luce (1959), Jones (1961, 1971), Burling (1969), Haudricourt '5,1975'(1942), and Henderson (1979) made diachronic comparisons of Karenic dialects with Tibeto-

Burman languages. This helped the Karen to recognize their racial identity and value their natural inheritance. Haudricourt's and Luce's early comparative studies were followed by Jones's reconstruction of Proto-Karen based on six languages (Moulmein Sgaw, Bassein Sgaw, Palaychi, Taungthu, Moulmein Pwo and a Bassein Pwo) Burling (1969) later reanalyzed Jones's data.

Based on syntactic differences between Karen and other Tibeto-Burman languages, Benedict (1972) proposed "Tibeto-Karen" as one of the major Sino-Tibetan subgroups, and used the name "Tibeto-Burman" for languages other than Chinese and Karen.

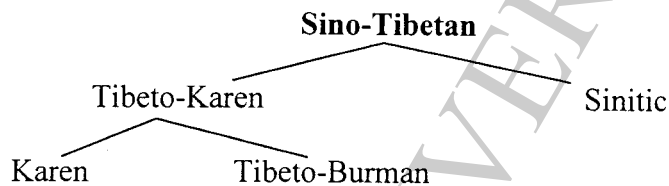


Figure 1. The Sino-Tibetan language stock (Benedict 1972)

After a reanalysis based on lexicostatistic analysis of shared vocabulary, Benedict (1979) rejected the Tibeto-Burman/Karen dichotomy and suggested the following stammbaum diagram:

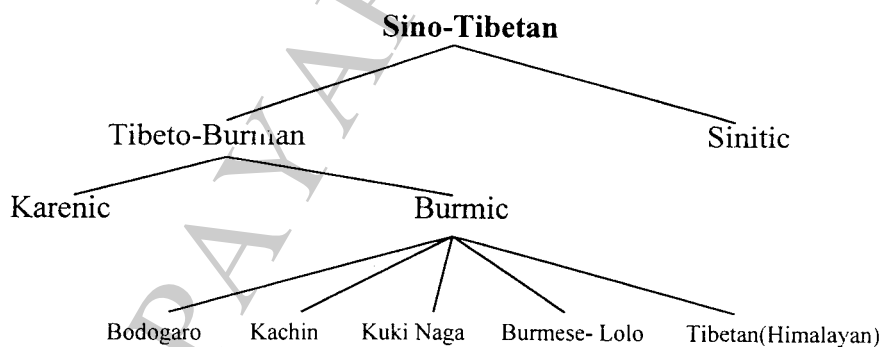


Figure 2 The Sino-Tibetan language stock (Benedict 1979)

The Karenic group shows broad phonological, syntactic, and semantic variation. There are, for example, possibly more than fifty varieties of Sgaw Karen, and up to eleven different varieties among the Paku, which may itself be a subgroup of Sgaw. On comparative grounds, the Karenic family may be divided into two main branches: Pwo and Pa-O (Taungthu) on one hand, and Sgaw and its relatives on the other (cf. Jones 1961). Various dialects of Pwo are spoken in the Irrawadi Delta the southeastern part of Karen State, and in Thailand, while Pa-O is spoken chiefly in Shan State.

The relationship between Sgaw and its close relatives has not yet been established. Most of these language varieties are found in northwestern Karen State, western Kayah State, and adjoining areas of Shan State. This linguistically diverse area includes Kayah (Red Karen or Karenni), Kayan (Padaung), Kayaw, Manu manaw, Bwe, Paku, Palaychi, Gebah and Geker. The following is the Karenic stammbaum diagram extracted from above, indicating the place of some of the related groups as much as current knowledge allows.

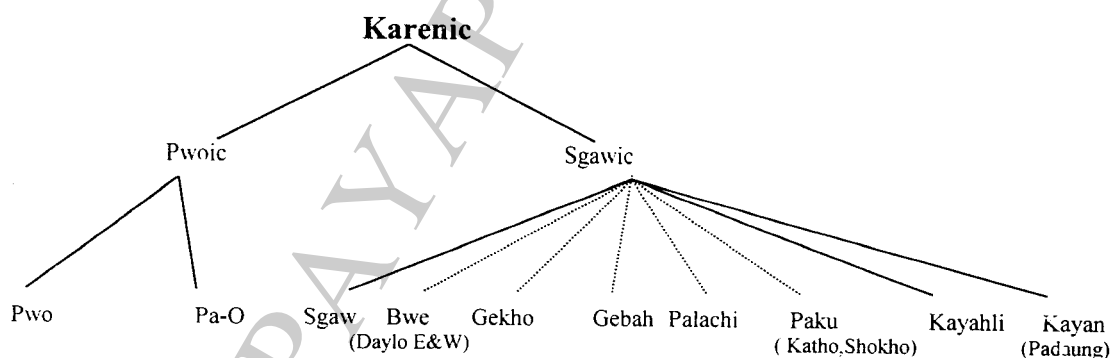


Figure 3 Suggested Karenic Stammbaum

There is a dialect network with a web of multidirectional changes in speech varieties among the Northwest Karenic groups. The Northwest Karenic languages are commonly seen as being closely related to Kayah by some native speakers but is uncertain whether they are linguistically closer to Sgaw or Kayah. While I offer some initial phonological comparisons in Chapter 7, until detailed historical work can be done the evidence is not yet conclusive either way. Because Karenic languages are quite different from the rest of the Tibeto-Burman family, this paper will not take general TB phonology into consideration.

### **2.3 Distribution and sociolinguistic overview of the target groups**

Burmese or Myanmar is the national language and recognized as the lingua franca in Myanmar. It is widely used as a language unifying all the racial groups, and is the only language for the educational system in national development schemes. Mass media are also primarily in the Burmese language. Because of national policy and the development projects envisaged for all the language groups, Burmese is taught and learned on a wide scale. Although primary education does not extend to every village, it is estimated there are as many as 10,000 primary schools in the whole country. Those who have the privilege to learn Burmese start learning it at 5 years of age. Those who continue their education to high school and college become fluent in Burmese. People from different language groups who settle in cities feel the need for education more than people in the villages do. People in remote areas generally do not even care for education. Therefore, it is not unusual that many people in rural areas cannot speak or understand Burmese. This is one reason why the rural Northwest Karen have maintained their language well, even though they have a long history of contact with monolingual Burmese speakers. Out of a 436- item word list,

most Northwest Karen dialects include only two or three words borrowed from Burmese.

The seven Northwest Karen groups included in this survey (Daylo East Bwe, Daylo West Bwe, Geker, Gebah, Paku Kathokhi, Paku Shokho and Palaychi), were chosen for sociolinguistic reasons which will be given separately for each language. In general, however, the scope of this study is limited to these groups in part because they are the ones most likely to be strongly influenced by Sgaw Karen. Transportation between Kayah State and Karen State remains difficult, so that Karenic groups in Karen State are more likely to be influenced by Sgaw Karen than by Kayah.

The Northwest Karenic groups have never put their dialects into a written form, except for the Roman Catholics' Roman orthography. Sgaw Karen, using the Burmese-based Sgaw script, is used as lingua franca among them.

The following information concerning Sgaw and the Northwest Karenic groups and their sociolinguistic situation were found during my literature review and field survey trip. Maps locating the Geker, Gebah, and Bwe appear in Appendix B. Palaychi village can be found in the Bwe map. A map showing the location of Paku villages is not available. However, there is a large Paku community in the city of Taungoo.

### 2.3.1 Sgaw

The Sgaw call themselves *Pghaknyaw* or *Kanyaw*, which literally means "human being" or "person". The Sgaw are called "Burmese Karen" by the Burmese (as opposed to the Pwo, who are called "Mon Karen"). Kayah call them "White

Karen” or “Paku”. The Pwo designate them rather confusingly as the “Ploune-Shan” along with other inhabitants of the Shan States. At the time of the Census of 1931, Sgaw speakers numbered 500,000. Grimes (1993) estimates a population of 1,284,700 in Myanmar (1983 estimate). Other estimates are 300,000 in Thailand (Hudspith 1987), with a total of 2,000,000 in all countries (UBS 1990). The major Sgaw Karen communities can be found in Yangon, Taungngu (Toungoo), Thandaungyi, Thayawadi (Tharrawadi), Hinthada (Henzada), Pathi (Bassein) and all the towns in the Irrawaddi Delta area, Pegu, Thaton, Moulmyaing (Moulmein), Paan, the capital city of Karen State, Kawkareik, Myawadi, Htawai (Tavoy), and Bleik (Mergui).

Sgaw and Pwo both inhabit Toungoo District and extend southward throughout the Karen State. Sgaw itself has subgroups such as Tavoy, Moulmein, Papun, Bassein and Yangon named after their different geographical locations. In fact, the Yangon Sgaw are those Sgaw from other parts of the country that came to settle in Yangon. Yangon Sgaw speakers have developed a standard variety caused by language contact of different Karen dialects from all over Myanmar.

Sgaw Karen began to be a lingua franca among the Northwest Karen as early as 1852 when the Rev. Francis Mason, the translator of the Sgaw Karen Bible, started a mission among the Bwe. Moreover, Sgaw Karen evangelists utilized the Sgaw dialect as the communication media in dealing with other Karenic groups. During the British Colonial era (c.1858- 1948), the Sgaw Karen had Sgaw Karen-medium State schools, so that the Sgaw tended to be more advanced than other Karen communities in Burma. Therefore, Sgaw Karen became a lingua franca among the Karenic groups

and people from other racial groups learned to speak Sgaw Karen while the Sgaw Karen were not forced to learn other groups' languages.

Today all the Northwest Karen Christians (except Roman Catholic) use Sgaw in their worship services when they read the Bible, preach, sing in the choir and when they pray. The priests preach in Burmese when they cannot speak the local dialect; most Roman Catholic churches in the area use vernacular prayer books in Geker, Gebah or Bwe using a Roman script.

### 2.3.2 Bwe

According to the Secretary of the Bwe Baptist Churches Association, there are two major Bwe groups, Daylo East Bwe and Daylo West Bwe. These differ slightly in phonology, but they are mutually intelligible dialects. Daylo East Bwe as reported here is spoken in six villages: Lerkhodukho, Lerkhodutha, Phawehdokah, Lerkhodokah, Thiyayu, and Thawkasawk. Some ten other villages speak slightly different dialect of Daylo East Bwe. There are dialects identical with Daylo West Bwe in 24 villages: 6 villages in Kashikhi village tract, 6 in Thabahpher village tract, 4 in Khanwe village tract, 3 in Khuthader village tract, and in Khlermucha village.

The Bwe are known to the Geker as "Blimaw". However, "Blimaw" is the name by which the the Bwes call the Sahter, a group located around twenty miles northwest of Taungoo, Chaungnakhwa, and Ohnshikone, the Bwe never call themselves Blimaw. According to the Bwe Churches Association Secretary, Blimaw is a different variety, mutually unintelligible with Bwe.



There are primary schools in all 40 Bwe villages; although the teachers use Burmese as the teaching medium, they have to translate the lessons into Bwe. Bwe maintain their language well. According to the Bwe, their language is richer in vocabulary than Sgaw.

Bwe Baptists<sup>1</sup> use Sgaw Karen in their church worship programs. The Roman Catholic Bwe use the Gebah language in a Roman script; Baptist, Anglican and Seventh Day Adventist Churches use Sgaw and Burmese. Many Bwes are monolingual. They will listen to the Sgaw but do not understand Sgaw well. Therefore, they will respond in Bwe or they will slip away shyly. The older Bwes speak Bwe to their children and they want their children to maintain their language. Bwe children speak Bwe at home, their village and at church. They learn Burmese and Sgaw Karen at school. The Bwe do not understand either Palachi or the Kayah. There are 40 villages and 6000 Bwe Baptist Christians in total. Apart from the Baptist Bwe, there are seven Bwe Roman Catholic Christian Churches located closer to the Geker/Gebah area.

Because of the linguistic and geographic closeness of the Daylo East Bwe and the Daylo West Bwe, one and same orthography is most likely sufficient for both varieties. However, in order to decide on which symbol to chose, both of them need to be analyzed.

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<sup>1</sup>There are 50% Baptist Christian out of the total Bwe population, 40% Anglican, 9% Roman Catholics, and 1% Seventh day Adventist according to the Secretary of the Bwe Churches Association

Bwe are enthusiastic to have literature in their language. The informant reported that Rev. Mason and a local Bwe pastor, Rev. Oo Ta, created a handwritten script for Bwe in 1860, but that it was lost when the pastor died. The informant also expresses his appreciation of having a common script of Bwe.

### **2.3.3 Palaychi (Mo-pgha )**

The early missionaries named the Palaychi *Mopgha*, from the name of a village called Mopgha (Mason 1866: 5). Burmese called them *Tau-bya*, which means "wild bees", probably because of their former trade in honey. According to Mason (1866:113, 282), described the Mopgha as a small Pwo-like group north of the Pwo proper, but within the Toungoo district. Jones (1961), however, established that Palaychi is more closely related to Sgaw than Pwo. Dialects related to Palaychi are Dermucha, Panapu, Palaychiderka, and Sahter. Their present place is called Tawbyagyi village. According to the informant there are 1000 Palaychis. The Palaychi villagers are bilingual in Sgaw and Palaychi. All the Palaychi will talk to each other in Palaychi dialect even when they are able to read and write in Sgaw. It is very consistent and does not depend on any specific situation. This strong use is the reason for including Palaychi in the analysis.

### **2.3.4 Geker (Kekhu, Gekho )**

There are various Roman spellings of the name for this language community, all meaning "on the land". Like the Sgaw, they call themselves *Pgakanyaw* or *Kanyaw* meaning "man". (Burmese simply call them Kayin, a general term for Karen.) The Kayahs call them "Lakhiephy", meaning "mountain people". According

to Grimes (1993), the estimated Geker population was 9,500 in 1980. Geker could be found in Yamethin, Taungoo district, Moby area of the southern Shan State, in particular, Maung Kyaw, Maung Blauk, Bresu, Kyekadot, Tawpone, Bawkahta, Tha Ouk, Pradaung, Hsulaya, Pekin (Pakant), Hunpyu, Hsanight, and Lobakho (Kayah State). The informant said that they were formerly called Geker but now they are known as Kayan. However, there is a different language group called “Kayan” from the Kayah State who say that they are not Geker and speak a different language. The Geker-Gebah Baptist Churches Association secretary says that there are 48 Baptist churches in the Association and 4,890 Christians (Geker-Gebah Church Statistics 1998). Catholic Christians, the largest Geker church community with more than 5000 members, do not understand or speak Sgaw Karen, and use Roman script for Geker. Baptists are the second largest Christian denomination in the Geker/Gebah area; in addition, there are some Anglicans and some Buddhists.

Every village has a primary school. The teaching medium is Burmese, but the teachers will read in Burmese and explain in Geker. The Geker are looking forward to having literacy classes in Geker. There is no written form except the Roman script used by the Roman Catholic Churches, but only 10% of Geker can read this script. Most of the Geker Baptists read Sgaw and Burmese.

### **2.3.5 Gebah**

There are altogether 36 Gebah villages. The total number of the Gebah is unknown but the total number of Gebah Baptists is around 3500. There are some educated people among the Gebah who serve as government officers and staff. Most of the villagers are farmers or laborers in other people’s farms. There are primary

schools in the villages but people take little interest in them. The villagers are interested mostly in their farms. Children play at home or help their parents on the farm. They talk to each other in Gebah in the house, farm and with their fellow villagers. The house, the farm, the church and the village communities are their primary language domains. Due to this widespread use of Gebah, the language is well maintained. Those who work in government offices are bilingual and speak Burmese quite fluently. Those who become Baptist Christians are also bilingual in Sgaw Karen, due to the fact that the religious leaders are fluent speakers of Sgaw. The church leaders of Gebah ask for orthography for their own dialect. This orthography will hopefully create more interest in primary school attendance where primers in the children's mother tongue could be used, transitioning them into the national school language. (see § 3.2.1)

### **2.3.6 Paku**

The Paku live mostly around Taungoo, although they have spread to other areas. The total population of the Paku is unknown. The Paku Baptist Churches Association statistic in 1998 recorded 20,000 Baptists among the Paku. According to the informants in this study there are not less than eleven mutually unintelligible subgroups among the Paku. Two different Paku dialects, Kathokhi and Shokho, are collected for analysis. Some other dialects mentioned by the informants are Pwikhi, Ghighawper, Humukla, Yemuper, Mituper, Kayekhi, Shodawkho, Thoperti, Khlerla, and Gawthayder. Like the Bwe, Pakus spread as far as Kayah State and yet their dialect is not intelligible for the Kayah.

Because of the many dialect varieties among themselves, the Paku speak Sgaw as a lingua franca with the Bwes and other Karenic groups. According to the informant they also speak Bwe, Sgaw and Burmese. The Paku dialects are not strongly maintained, partly because their great diversity leads to a narrow range of use. The Paku did not ask for orthography. The purpose of choosing Paku for analysis is to find possible proto-Karen elements that may give the Sgaw alphabet a broader expansion, so that other dialects not included in this study may easily use the extended writing system.

### 2.3.7 Kayah and related groups

Kayahs call themselves *Pre-Kayah*, meaning "man". *Kaya-Li*, meaning "Red Karen", is used to distinguish themselves from other Karen; the Burmese designate them as *Karenni*, also meaning "Red Karen". There are six townships in Kayah State: Loikaw, Demawso, Phruso, Bawlakhe, Hpa Hsaun and Shadaw. Kayah-Li are in every township. According to Grimes (1993), the 1987 estimate of their total population was 210,000. Only 5% to 15% are literate in Burmese. Christian Kayah use Sgaw script or Roman script in their respective churches, but most still hold their traditional beliefs.

The Padaung are a related group and are called "Eastern Bwe" by the Northwestern Karen. According to Lehman (1965) Padaung are called *Lakhi*, equivalent to the Kayah name for the 'Greater Padaung', but Emmons (1964) claims that they call themselves 'Kekhongduw' meaning 'Greater Gekho'. It is also said that they insist on being called 'Kayah' (STEDT Series No.2 1995:76). According to Grimes (1993), their population in Myanmar at present is 40,900. They

can be found in Kayah State, Moby area, and in southern Shan State at Hpekhon, in addition to a few in Thailand. Kayaw and Manümanaw are varieties closely related to Kayah. The Kayaw inhabit the deep forests of Phruso and Demawso townships. Manümanaw inhabit mainly Phruso and Bawlakhe townships.

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