

KAREN BAPTISTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In 1833 he (Ko Thah Byu) left for Rangoon to share the Gospel with his countrymen there... A great revival started among the Karens. But not long thereafter, the Burmese government forbade the church to meet. Pastors faced torture and imprisonment, or were killed if they refused to stop their activities. The persecution of the Christian Church in Burma was severe back then and the persecution continues today. Despite all this, the Church in Burma survives and is still growing. Forty percent of the Karen people are Christians in spite of fifty years of war with the current military regime.¹

Who are the Karens? What role do they play in Baptists history? The Karens, in foreigner's eyes, often "are not intelligent people. They are nothing like as quick-witted as the Burmese or the Chinese. They are often extremely stupid."² Ever since history begins to mention them they appears to be a god-forsaken race and people under the shadow of the cross as soon as they were taking up the Christian faith. The following definition of the Karen by 'New Oxford American Dictionary' shows a fragile position of the Karen people and it also shows some people have a fragile grip on the reality and nature of the Karen as a nation.

New Oxford American Dictionary

¹ The Rise of Christianity among the Karens, (Online Article) available at, <http://www.partnersworld.org/download/christianityandthekar.en.pdf>, Internet; assessed on 11, March 2011. The 'he' in this footnote refers to Ko Thah Byu, the first convert among the Karen tribe, baptized in 1828 who lost no time in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to his people.

² Ian Morrison, *Grandfather longlegs: Gallant Death of Major H.P. Seagrim*, (London: Faber and Faber LTD, 1946), 19.

Karen |kə'ren|

noun (pl. same or -rens)

1 a member of an indigenous people of eastern Myanmar (Burma) and western Thailand.

2 the language of this people, probably Sino-Tibetan.

adjective

of or relating to this people or their language.

ORIGIN from Burmese ka-reng 'wild unclean man.'³

After raising awareness in many conferences, through effort of different people, we see changes, positive changes in the way the *New Oxford American Dictionary* describe the Karen people.

Karen |kə'ren|

noun (pl.same or Karens)

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2 the language of the Karen, probably Sino-Tibetan.

adjective

relating to the Karen or their language.

ORIGIN from Arakanese (a language of Burma) *karang* .

Who, therefore, are the Karens? The Karens are one of the people on earth of whom the Burmese are another. Many

³ "Karen", *New Oxford American Dictionary*. The dictionary's source word the Karen is equivalent to Ian Morrison's words, "The Karens are not an intelligent people. They are nothing like as quick-witted as the Burmese or the Chinese. They are often extremely stupid." Ian Morrison, *Grandfather longlegs: Gallant Death of Major H.P. Seagrim*, (London: Faber and Faber LTD, 1946), 19. They (*New Oxford American Dictionary*) should have asked the Karens themselves what it means by the 'Karen' in their original language. Asking its meaning from those who are at war with you for more than six decades wouldn't in any probable sense provide unbiased meaning. Some Karens would have answered with the same negative connotation if asked the meaning of the word 'Burmese'. As a matter of fact, the Karens called Burmese "white ribs".

centuries ago the migrated south ward from Tibet and south China, probably around BC 739 in search of a warmer climate. 2011 marks the 2750 years of Karen settlement in the land called Burma or Myanmar. Ian Morrison acknowledged that, "Ever since they first arrived in Burma, the Karens appear to have been a subject race, oppressed by their stronger neighbors and frequently used as slaves.. they were a subject and despised race,"⁴ and for centuries the Burman "bullied the Karen and regarded him as slave"⁵ and bullies and oppression still continue today.

As I see it, the Karens are victims of:

1. Genocidal war
2. Colonialism (not by British but by the Mons and later by Burmese)
3. Divide and rule policy
4. Racial discrimination
5. Religious persecution
6. Ethnic cleansing policy
7. Slavery and etc

To address to issues above will take more space and time than this paper permits. The issue I would like to emphasize, however, is how God, in spite of severe persecutions and zero tolerance, used the so-called "orphans," "stupid," "oppressed.. subject and despised" race to ignite the Gospel movement in Burma. In fact, the Karens were pioneers in "one of the most remarkable Christian movements of modern times,"⁶ to be precise, in Burma. Baptists mission in Burma was groundbreaking; it appears, though the Roman Catholic missionaries had been there as early as 1581. A few missionaries were martyred by 1693: "... it happened that during AD 1581 the Gospel of Christ carried by the Roman Catholic Mission arrived into Burma firstly at Than Hling (syrium)." Two French missionaries were martyred by AD 1693 for the sake of the Gospel. Saw Aung Hla recorded that Father Jean Genoud and Father Jean Joret were "... stripped naked so that mosquitoes would bite

⁴ Ian Morrison, *Grandfather longlegs: Gallant Death of Major H.P. Seagrim*, (London: Faber and Faber LTD, 1946), 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

them. Finally 12.2.1693 the kings men put the priests into cotton bags, stitched closed and threw those martyrs into the Pegu River."⁷ Christianity was not welcome by the Burmese people partly because of Buddhism and partly because, the Burmese believe, Christianity being the religion of the western colonizers would be propaganda in promoting colonialism or that the missionaries share the same agenda as British officials. Saw Aung Hla writes,

The American missionary couple Dr. and Mrs. Judson left America and arrived in Rangoon in the 13th July 1813 to form a Baptist mission church among the Burmese people. This was not welcome by the Burmese government due to the fact that Christianity, according to their thoughts are at loggerheads with Buddhism. So the effort given by Dr. Judson was not welcome by the Burmese people. Before the arrival of Dr. Judson into Burma there also come two Anglican missionaries in the years AD 1807. They were Rev. Carter and Rev. Madoh who also came to work primarily for the Burmese people. After the few months, another missionary by the name of Rev. Felix Cary came to fill up the place of Rev. Madoh who left his ministry. These three Anglican missionaries came six years before Dr. Judson. The Burmese people did not accept their work to spread the holy Gospel. Rev. Carter left Burma to continue his ministry in Ceylon. When Dr. Judson arrived, he took up the work of Rev. Feix Cary abandoned. At that time the fact that Karens live and exist in Burma was not known to those of the foreign land.⁸

But the conversion of Ko Thah Pyu, an ex-bandit turned "the Apostle to the Karens," "the freed slave, Ko Tha Byu, was an illiterate, surly man who spoke almost no Burmese and was reputed to be not only a thief but also a murderer who admitted killing at least thirty men, but could not remember exactly how many more,"⁹ in 1828 marked the beginning of successful Baptist mission in Burma.

⁷ Saw Aung Hla, The Karen History, translated by Saw Tar Mla Lar Htoo, Kwe Ka Baung National Books Store: Maesot, Thailand, no date), 297.

⁸ Ibid., 300.

Now, it is interesting how the Karens came to readily embrace Christianity. The Karen 'lost golden book' legend¹⁰ played substantial role in what made Christianity fit into Karen worldview, ethical code and cultural values of the Karens. According to this legend, once upon a time God had three sons, the first and beloved son was Karen, the second was Burman and the third was 'white'. When they became adults God was going back to his country far away. The youngest brother happened to accompany his father when the first and second sons excused themselves for being busy. Upon returning God gave three books-- the golden book assigned to the so-called beloved Karen, to his second son, the Burman, a palm-leaf book; to the youngest son, a book of leather.

The white brother read the three books on his journey home and found out that the golden book was filled with the word of God, various theories of commerce, and a wide range of knowledge written in it. The youngest son decided the golden book was the most valuable among the three books. As it was told the youngest son swapped the book and presented the leather book to the Karen. The Karen was busy toiling his farm and asked his youngest brother to leave it on the tree trunk. He forgot the book days after days. A bush fire came and destroyed the book. The Karen later went to the location and found out the book was burned along with the tree trunk. He found only the footprints of wild chicken. For this reason the original Karen alphabets resembled the chicken footprints.¹¹

⁹ Karen Baptist Convention, (online article) available at, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Baptist_Convention#History, Internet assessed on 20, March 2011.

¹⁰ Ian Morrison, 26. Ian Morrison has a rather different account of the "golden book" legend than the original Karen golden book tradition, "According to this legend, the original father of the peoples of Burma had three sons. To his eldest son, the Karen, he gave a golden book; to his second son, the Burman, a palm-leaf book; to his youngest son, who was white, a book of leather. The father of the peoples, from his home in the far north, sent his sons down into Burma. The Burman's palm-leaf book was eaten by the white ants, the white brother's leather book by pig. Then the Burman began to quarrel with the Karen for possession of the golden book. To preserve it the Karen entrusted it to his young white brother. The latter was skilled in sailing boats and he sailed away with it across the seas." (See Ian Morrison's Grandfather Longlegs, page, 26)

¹¹ Quoted and translated from Thra Htoo Hla E., The Golden Book, (Rangoon: Go Forward Press, 1955), 80-83, Passim.

Be it as it may, the Karen believed their 'golden book' was lost and that his youngest brother will return it to him one day. So when the American Baptist missionaries Adoniram Judson, Francis Mason and Jonathan Wade came with the Bible, it brought a large stir among the Karens. The story is told that in 1831 on his first trip into Karen territory, an old man confronted Jonathan Wade with this question: "Where is our book?" he asked, referring to the Karen legend mentioned before. "If you bring us our lost book, we will welcome you." Wade was quick to respond. It is said that he reduced the Karen language to writing even before he could speak it, and Dr. Mason took Wade's adaptation of the Burmese alphabet to Karen sounds and threw himself into the arduous task of translating the Bible into Sgaw Karen. Thus did the Karens receive "their Lost Book"—their written language and Bible in their own language. The first printed portion was the Sermon on the Mount in 1837; the New Testament appeared in successive printing stages from 1843 to 1861, and the Old Testament in 1863.¹² San C. Poe, a Karen intellectual who lived and served during the British occupation of Burma narrated the turbulent incident as thus:

The Karen God-tradition, so firmly believed in and strongly adhered to, was: "Our younger white brother to whom God temporarily entrusted the Book of Silver and the Book of Gold is coming back to return them to the elder Karen brother." So when news was received that the white brother had arrived in Burma, there was no little stir in Karendom. Adoniram Judson gained the first convert to Christianity in Ko Tha Byu (1828) who lost no time in spreading the gospel among his people, declaring that the long-lost "Book of God" had been brought back by the white brother and that the Karen God-tradition was fulfilled. Consequently, a number of young men from different parts of the country went over to Arakan, and later to Moulmein, to find the Missionaries who had brought the gospel of Christ and to learn more about the truth, which it was their intention to preach among their own people.¹³

¹² Karen Baptist Convention, (online article) available at, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Baptist_Convention#History, Internet assessed on 20, March 2011.

Rev. T. Thanbyah, a Karen historian recorded that after the British annexation of lower Burma, namely Tanasarin Division and Arakan in 1824 and 1826 written history of Karens began to appear significantly when Ko Tha Byu became the disciple of Jesus Christ. There was almost nothing prior to this. The fact that the Karens had been living in Burma were known to the Burmese and the Talaing or Mons but they were not known to foreigners until the conversion of Ko Tha Byu, by 1828. The Gospel was not in the first place intended for the Karen but it came to them as coincidence and as the gift of heaven. From here on, the name 'Karen' and the story about the Karens began to make the written history books.¹⁴

The conversion of a slave people inaugurated a new order of life for Karen and, concretely, the dawn of a new era to them. The resurrection of this nation rested on no human merit but solely rested up divine grace. It was neither human plan nor cosmic chance that these most humbled slaves became heirs to the Gospel but by the gift of heaven. In a nutshell, because of Christianity the Karen regain their identity as a nation. What were the implications of the encounter with Gospel of Jesus Christ for the socio-political development of the Karens? Htoo Hla E. said that multitudes of Karens came together and formed themselves into Churches Associations and later eventually formed their churches Convention,¹⁵ what is now called Karen Baptist Convention in Burma, established in 1913 as a result of the encounter. (Subsequently, "Karen Baptists from Burma first sent missionaries to the Karens in Thailand in 1880, and soon two churches were established. The Karen work grew to twenty churches with 800 members by 1954,"¹⁶ and Thailand Karen Baptist Convention was formed in 1955.) This came naturally, I think, as a response to the saving act of the Great God in their history. Because Christianity came firstly as "civilizing process" and

¹³ San C. Poe, *Burma and the Karens*, (7 Paternoster Row, London: Elliot Stock, Publisher, 1928), 2.

¹⁴ T. Thanbyah, *The Karens and Their Persecution*, Rangoon: 1904), 6.

¹⁵ Quoted and translated from, Htoo Hla E., *The Golden Book*, 129.

¹⁶ Albert W. Wardin, *Baptist Around the World*, 164.

secondly, Christianity was identified with "education" in the mind of the people:

Christianity made such rapid strides because it was accompanied by, was indeed mainly responsible for, two other processes—the gradual civilizing of a hitherto rude and unlettered people, and the growth of Karen unity and prestige. Christianity was identified in the mind of the people with education. Education raised their standard of living, gave them confidence and pride, and aroused what has been called heir 'federative capacity'.¹⁷

Moreover, sadly so, from here on began yet another form of suppression along with long existing political and racial ill-treatments, namely, religious persecution. San C. Poe documented some of the fracasas as below:

The lot of the Karens under Burmese rule had been hard enough, but when declared between Burma and Great Britain, heard that the Karens were taking up the Christian religion they proceeded to make life unbearable for the new converts to Christianity. Persecution, religious and political, began in earnest. Karens were caught and thrown into prison, suffering untold agonies, and a few were crucified. One man, by the name of Klaw Meh was nailed to a cross, the abdomen ripped open with intestines hanging down, which the crows were picking while the poor man writhed in agony in an impossible attempt to drive away the crows. His voice gradually grew weaker until at last he died a martyr on the cross like his Master, Jesus Christ, whom he had lately embraced.¹⁸

'*International Ministries Resolution Against Slavery*' documented that In Burma in the 1830s American Baptist missionaries worked with the Karen minority who were virtually serfs, forbidden to own books and learn to read. The missionaries persisted in petitioning the Burmese King on religious and civil liberty,

In Burma in the 1830s, American Baptist missionaries reached out to the ethnic Karen minority,

¹⁷ Ian Morrison, 28.

¹⁸ San C. Poe, *Burma and the Karens*, 2.

dominated as virtual serfs by the majority Burmese who forbid them to possess books or learn to read. Enslavement, beheading and crucifixion were punishments for those who violated the restrictions. Because they were found with books, several early Karen Baptist converts were shackled in heavy irons and forced to work as slaves on the grounds of Shway Dagon pagoda in Rangoon. The American Baptist missionaries persistently petitioned the Burmese king regarding religious and civil liberty.¹⁹

Burma shows no sign of improvement in this regard. Human rights violation tied along with religious persecution prevails. In its article 'Burma's Almost Forgotten,' Christianity Today Magazine writes, "*Christians find themselves battered by the world's longest civil war and a brutally repressive regime.*" And that, "The U.S. State Department has ranked Burma as one of the six worst violators of religious freedom," as in 2011.

In an effort to terrorize the ethnic groups into submission, the Burma Army uses religion as a weapon of war. When it is convenient to do so, the army cloaks itself in Buddhism and stirs up anti-Christian sentiment. Churches are often the first targets in attacks on ethnic villages, while more often than not Buddhist temples are left untouched.²⁰

In spite of intense challenges and formidable repression, and in other words, widespread religious persecution, churches burned to the ground, Christians forced to convert to the state religion, Buddhism and their children discriminated in schools, the foundation of Christianity in Burma never wavers. The Karen Baptists Convention in Burma has made remarkable growth.

¹⁹ International Ministries Resolution Against Slavery, (online article) available at, <http://www.abwmbreakthechains.org/media/IM%20Resolution%20Against%20Slavery.pdf>, Internet; accessed on 11, February 2011.

²⁰ Burma's Almost Forgotten, (online article) available at, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/march/7.52.html>, Internet assessed on 25 March 2011.

The Formation of the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Churches

The Karen people were hard hit by the so-called "four cut operation" of the regime in the 70s. The 'four cut operation' is the regime's policy intended to deprive the ethnic resistance movement of their food, money, intelligence and recruits. Along with the 'four cut operation' came widespread displacement and the crisis of refugees. Thousands of refugees fluxed into Thailand and thousands more became displaced and re-displaced. Thus the Karen churches in the Eastern Burma were cut off from mainstream Karen Baptist Convention headquartered in Insein, Rangoon. Ministers, pastors and members of churches in the Kawthoolei area were unable to attend meetings/conference conveyed. Relationship was cut off, Karen churches was divide-and-ruled. Now, the need for strengthening, nurturing of churches along Thai-Burma border has become both a matter of urgency and convenient apriority.

Thus the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Organization was organized and formed on 1st October 1983 having its office located in Wallei (in the Karen side. In the same year the Bible School was moved to Wallei due to the Burmese troops' invasion and occupation of places (Karens' strongholds) near and around Tea Ka Haw where the Bible School was first located. Then, on the 31st of January 1984 the KKBO annual meeting was held at Wallei. We are so grateful to God for sending us Rev. Edwin I. Lopez, then the General Secretary of ABF and Rev. Hespido to be with us during this meeting. We felt so blessed, encouraged and strengthened. It was during this meeting that the name Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Organization (KKBO) was officially changed to Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Churches (KKBC) as suggested by them.²¹

²¹ About K. K. B. C., (online article) available at, <https://sites.google.com/site/kkbbbc/about-k-k-b-c>, Internet assessed on 26 March 25, 2011. The KKBC (Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Churches) started in 1993 to enhance mission activities along the Thai-Burma border because communication with the main line KBC (Karen Baptist Convention) in Burma became impossible due to the intense operation of the Burmese military regime. Joining the TKBC (Thailand Karen Baptist Convention, formed in 1955) was not an option because of their identity as political refugees. The KKBC has women department to ensure spiritual welfare of women, Youth Department exists to promote spiritual welfare and endeavor on spiritual awakening of young people in

The KKBC as a convention, for want of liberty, shuffled its Churches Association, from North to south, ranging along the Thai-Burma border. The KKBC consists of seven areas of Churches associations:

1. Tavoy Mergui Area (Tamhin and Ban Donyang Karen Refugee Camps)
2. East Daw Na Area (Umpium and Noh Poe Refugee Camps)
3. Thoo Mwei Area (1) (Maela Camp Karen Refugee Camp)
4. Mae Ra Moe Area (Mae Rah Moe Camp Karen Refugee Camp)
5. Cholodraw Area (Mae La Oo Camp Karen Refugee Camp)
6. Has Mu Ber Area (Internally Displaced Persons Area)
7. Shwe Gyin Area (Internally Displaced Persons Area)

The KKBC serves an independent body alongside TKBC of Thailand and the KBC of Burma. The Karen Baptist churches suffered again severely from 1995-2000 when the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, (now BGF, Border Guard Force) split from the mainline Karen National Union, backed by the Burma military regime began to gnaw on their own brothers and sisters and who are Christians. They launched series of attacks upon Christian churches in the Karen State and churches in the refugee camps. One valid reason for this conflict is, "...though the majority of Karens are Buddhist, the Karen political leadership and leadership of the Karen insurgency have always been overwhelming Christian, a legacy of American missionary influence over the 19th and early 20th centuries. The DKBA breakaway was rooted in the perceived discrimination by the Christian leadership against local Buddhist Karen communities and the Buddhist Karen rank-and-

the camps along the border and also among the internally displaced people in the eastern jungle of Burma. The Ordain Ministers Council is to oversee ministries relating to ordinances of the church such as the Lord Supper, Baptism, Matrimony and ordination of pastors etc..; Christian Education Department oversees Bible studies such as in Sunday Schools and other activities to promote biblical knowledge and commitment to good moral Christian living; Mission board oversees the work of mission and evangelism; KKBC's Internal Relief Committee deals with relief works in the KKBC and especially among the Internally Displaced Persons of the eastern jungle of Burma.

file of the Karen insurgency [KNLA](#).”²² Thus the DKBA turned head on against the Christian Karens because they felt marginalized and not properly represented in the leadership affairs. They joined the Burmese military regime and become a pain-in-the-neck for the KNU, and ghosts of nightmare for the refugee camps. The regime knew how to strike the iron when it was hot and as a result of that there were series of massive attacks on several refugee camps in Thailand side.

Karen Baptist churches along in the refugee camps enjoy favorable freedom currently though travel outside of the camps is restricted.

In suffix it to say, today Burma is still controlled by military dictatorship. Perhaps Burma remains one of the most repressed countries on earth. Rosalie Hall Hunt recognizes that, “Among those hardest hit by the nation’s woes is the community of faith. Often Christians are deliberately target, especially the ethnic minorities, where the percentage of Christians is impressively high.” But there is hope: “along with thousands of pagodas, the spires of churches dot the landscape.” And hence, in Judson’s own words, “the future is as bright as the promises of God.”²³ If asked, “Lord, is it how you build your Church?” The answer will be invariably “yes!” It is how he builds his Church-- among the weak and the oppressed; amidst severe persecution and zero tolerance. Yes, he will continue to build his Church among the refugees and the displaced.

²² Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, (Online article) available at, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Karen_Buddhist_Arm, Internet assessed on 29 March 25, 2011. KNLA is Karen National Liberation Army.

²³ Rosalie Hall Hunt, *Bless God and Take Courage: The Judson History and Legacy*, (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2005), 353.