

Two Indigenous Karen Religious Denominations

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# Two Indigenous Karen Religious Denominations<sup>1</sup>

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This paper is a short presentation of two Pwo Karen sects as they may be found in contemporary Western Central Thailand. It will discuss the organization, origin, and cultural content of the two denominations in order to show how their politico-religious concepts and ritual architecture are related to their historical position in a larger system comprising the Buddhist monarchial civilizations of Burma and Thailand. It is my supposition that the religious paraphernalia of present day sects materialized in a certain historical context as symbols of royalty and autonomy, and in the larger social context functioned to identify these Pwo Karen collectively as a sovereign part of a larger civilized world. These symbols of self-defined participation in the world, and at times even claims to superiority, had been moulded according to a model set by the monarchism of the 18th century Mon Buddhist kingdom in Lower Burma. It included a messianic Buddhist framework, which precipitated millenarian expectations of the rise of a world conqueror and subsequent future Buddha, the Buddha Ariya Mettaya, who would install a new and ideal society for the elect. Viewing the history of the Buddhist valley civilizations, be they Burmese, Mon or Thai, we may see that this messianic aspect of Theravada Buddhism has been the catalyst for both social discontent and personal political ambitions within the Buddhist societies of Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup>

The term 'Karen' covers a category of people in Burma and Thailand who speak related languages. Karen-speaking people are spread over a large area, and their habitations are found in the hills and forests as well as the lowland. Everywhere Karen groups live interspersed among various other ethnic groups, hill as well as valley peoples. The Karen with whom this presentation is concerned live in the Burma-Thailand borderland on the Thai side between 12°-17° northern latitude.

Karen villages in this area contain from two to forty houses. The inhabi-

tants live by swidden cultivation and hunting in the deep forest. Most are descendants of Pwo Karen, who came over from Tavoy some 200 years ago fleeing their Burmese oppressors. The Thai area they settled was very sparsely populated and is still in 1972 one of quite low population density, a fact that has meant very favourable conditions for an ecologically well-balanced swidden cultivation and forest regeneration.<sup>3</sup> We find in this area no village boundaries, and individual families may move between villages and cut swiddens without seeking anybody's permission. Post-marital residence is uxorilocal, so local families expand as sons-in-law take up residence. Thus within the village we may find clusters of houses centering around an old mother, her husband and her daughters living with their husbands in houses adjacent to the stem household. Though there is some co-operation in swidden work, each household constitutes a single economic unit. Once the old couple dies, the sister-households may part.

Among these Pwo Karen we find two types of religious adherence, the *lu baung* (»yellow thread«), and the *wi maung*. On the local village-level, each one has its religious head, the *boungkho*. Thus we have *lu baung boungkho* and *wi maung boungkho*. Together with his wife, the *boungkho* officiates as the head of the periodic ceremonies in which all *lu baung* and/or *wi maung* villagers take part. Generally we may say that these ceremonies focus on the existential conditions of these Pwo Karen both as a people who live in and by the forest, and as a forest people in a larger civilized world. We may see the *boungkho* as the mediator between the invisible forces of nature on the one hand and those who use and live by this nature on the other. At the same time, the term *boungkho* signifies a man of outstanding merit on a par with the Buddhist monk. I see the institution of *boungkho* as it developed in Burma among the Karen in the second half of the 18th century, as a synthesis of two notions of leadership. One is based on a conception of the leader as the mediating and necessary condition of nature's benevolence. The other notion is nourished by the Buddhist concept of merit, its accumulation and its transfer to ordinary villagers by the religious head.<sup>4</sup>

Ideally each contemporary Pwo Karen village in our area should have *boungkho* in accordance with the persuasion of its inhabitants, and formerly it was so. Nowadays we may find villages without *boungkho*, where the villagers must attend the necessary ceremonies in a neighbouring village. The *boungkho* have become fewer as those who are eligible, for various reasons, no longer want to become *boungkho*. The position of *boungkho* demands an old man, a married man too, and a man of particular merit. In addition, specific social circumstances and another *boungkho* to install you in office are required. In practice, the office has often been passed on in families normally to the man who is married to the eldest daughter of the previous *boungkho*.



Fig. 1. A *lu baung boungkho* and his wife. The *boungkho* wears his traditional white handwoven clothes.

Now, within this Pwo Karen population of approximately 5,000 people distributed in 40 villages, there are far more *lu baung* than *wi maung* Karen. In 1972 there were four *wi maung boungkho*; three have died now, so that as of January 1980 only one *wi maung boungkho* is left. He lived some days walk away from another nucleus of *wi maung*, who have been without *boungkho* for two years. An eligible man among them, married to the late *boungkho's* eldest daughter, is hesitant to become *boungkho*. His brother-in-law, married to a younger daughter of the late *boungkho*, although willing, cannot take office before the man he designates as his »elder brother«.

Within a single village we may find *lu baung* as well as *wi maung* family

clusters. Each matrilineal cluster is either *lu baung* or *wi maung*. Sect affiliation or recruitment takes place already at birth. A girl becomes *lu baung* at birth, if her mother is *lu baung*. Her father became *lu baung* by marrying her mother, if not *lu baung* already. If born to a *wi maung* mother, he would have had to change his affiliation at marriage. A man who marries more than once may experience shifting affiliations. It does not bother him though. What is important is to avoid being »roasted«. Rules of residence within the village specify that a household adhering to one sect may not obstruct a straight line correspondence between two houses of the opposite sect, otherwise it will become »roasted«, i.e. its members will fall sick, go crazy or die. Those who live close together must be of the same kind, therefore a son-in-law must fit in with the affiliation of his wife and her parents. Affiliation is a function of residence and residence is matrilineal.

In villages where we find *boungkho*, two principal annual ceremonies take place, one in January for the rice goddess, Phibeyu, and one in March, called *khoun s'raung*. The rice goddess ceremony is to a large extent similar for the two sects, and its main parts may be conducted for both categories by a single *boungkho*. The second ceremony, the *khoun s'raung*, is meant to renew or reestablish the correct way, to provide the link between the past and the future, to fasten the soul in the body, and to ask for leniency that the retribution stemming from the killing of trees, bamboo, insects and animals during the year's agricultural work may not hit them too hard.

As there is an overall similarity between the two sects, I may at times deal with them as a single category.

Ceremonies headed by *boungkho* take place inside the ceremonial assembly house, the *s'ro'*, where the *boungkho* and his wife conduct the proceedings. It may be noticed that during these ceremonies, the essential outward distinguishing features of the *wi maung* and the *lu baung* appear: that is, the *lu baung* have yellow thread tied around their wrists by the *boungkho*, while the *wi maung* drink »ripe water«, that is boiled water, but have no threads tied. The *lu baung* prepare and erect various umbrellas or staffs, the so-called *th'dong* with either one or three crowns or tiers, they decorate the four-armed pole, the *la'* and sprinkle sand on a small pagoda. Pagoda, *th'dong* and *la'* constitute a sacred architectural complex which together with the ceremonial assembly house is set aside at the eastern outskirts of the village.

I shall return to the spatial set up of the *lu baung* religious structures in a moment as I review the origin and cultural content of the two denominations.

Historically speaking the Karen were noted by American missionaries in 19th century Burma for their variety of religious inclinations and a prone-

ness to follow charismatic leaders. Recent anthropological literature depicts one Karen group as millennial followers of the Telakhon sect leader, another group as followers of the so-called 'white monk' in Northern Thailand, a third group as adhering to a Leke sect in Burma, and still others as inventing a supposedly new mode of religious practice, the tattooing, which supplants former spirit worship. And the existence of the *lu baung* and *wi maung* denominations may just add new modalities to the general picture.

### *Origin of Sects*

According to local tradition the *lu baung* and *wi maung* denominations took shape in the first half of the 19th century centering on a Karen holy man, a seclusionist, designated by the term '*eing sai*'. To say that they took form around an '*eing sai*' has some inherent implications. An '*eing sai*' is in Karen what the Burmese term a *weikza*, a holy man, one who by imposing abstinence upon himself, gains so much spiritual power that he becomes invisible at will, can fly through the air, travel underground, and live for so long, possibly in various shapes, that he may witness the advent of the future Buddha, the Ariya Mettaya. In the meantime he is concerned with the promotion of religion among the ignorant, occasionally in accordance with a command from the god Indra.

Now, according to existing Pwo Karen tradition the *lu baung* and *wi maung* were the creation of such an '*eing sai*', whose corporeal form, the man Th'Soung Ne Dje, found followers among the Karen in the Burma-Thailand borderland. His teachings are contained in a narrative composed by a *lu baung bounghko* a couple of generations ago. It goes as follows:

»To tell it from the beginning to the end, we are real Pwo Karen. But there are some with closed hearts, who do not think about the fact that the Pwo Karen in the beginning were Duwe Vaphyaung, who had to give sacrifices and offerings ('*aung hrae*'). We had to feed everything, all spirits, with pigs, with chickens, and with small fishes. We had to raise them, we had to kill them, we had to give K'lau' something good to eat. We had to feed K'lau' because we were Duwe Vaphyaung. Small fishes, little fishes, ducks, pigs and chickens, we had to offer together with bamboo rat and mole, until some could not bear it any longer. There were some who heard that '*eing sai*', the hermit, was born anew. Th'Soung Ne Dje was his name, he was the master of Pwo *lu baung*, and besides he gave an order to build the *wi maung* assembly house. He tore apart Duwe Vaphyaung behavior. He sent K'lau' away and instructed us to build *s'ro*', *th'dong* and pagoda and showed us how to use thirty flowers and yellow-white tapers when paying respect at the *th'dong* and *la*'. Furthermore he said to avoid feeding and raising chickens, pigs and ducks and to avoid turning rice into liquor.

But that was not all, we must also keep the five precepts, stick to them, pay respect to sand pagoda at every change of moon. This is our work, we must remember it, hold it clean and smooth and not let it become dirty. It is like our Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. When we do religious work, we must tie our wrists, our feet, our soul. We shall call that feast *Khounng s'raung*. The wrists must be tied with yellow thread. We must try to achieve knowledge and he taught everybody about it. Then he left the religious work in the hands of the *boungkho* and the *dewata* (gods) were happy.«

(Abridged version of own translation from Pwo Karen).

I would like to stress that the establishment of the *lu baung* and *wi maung* meant a denial of the previous religious belief, that of the Duwe Vaphyaung. The essential characteristic of Duwe is that they make sacrifices to the spirits (*'aung hrae*), whether these spirits be matrilineal ancestor-spirits, as found among the Karen in Northern Thailand, or some category of forest spirits, i.e. local lords of trees and mountains. The Duwe are classified by the *lu baung* and *wi maung* in the category designated *lu wa* ('white threads'). The 'white thread' Karen have no *boungkho*. All Karen on the Kwaie Noi and Kwaie Yai Rivers and those in northern Thailand are classified as 'white thread' Karen. (The *lu baung* and *wi maung* differentiate among the 'white thread' Karen according to whether they sacrifice chickens, pigs, bamboo rats, moles, flowers or sesame). It was this spirit worship of the 'white thread' or Duwe Karen that was suppressed by our Karen sage. He forbade the Pwo Karen to feed the spirits anymore and he issued an injunction against raising domestic animals such as fowls and pigs, which might be used in these sacrifices. Instead they were to build a village assembly house, and a pagoda, erect *th'dong* staffs and the four-armed pole, the *la'*. They were to use only flowers and wax tapers during the ceremonies in the *s'ro'*, as well as outside at the *th'dong* and *la'*. In addition the *lu baung* and *wi maung* were to keep the five Buddhist precepts and the *lu baung* to tie their wrists with yellow thread. And to this day *lu baung* and *wi maung* Karen villages are conspicuous for the total absence of fowls and pigs. Those close to the Thai show exceptions, though.

As we take a closer look at the ceremonies, at the contents of the *boungkho's* prayers, and at the ritual paraphernalia, we may explain the ideological transformation from Duwe, i.e. from a *boungkho-less* white thread category to a *boungkho-headed wi maung and lu baung* category as resting upon the incorporation of Buddhist elements into a Karen basis which was essentially non-Buddhist.

What were incorporated were those elements of Buddhism, conceptual as well as physical, that had to do with the establishment of a royal cult and

also with the messianic expectations of the rise of a world conqueror and future Buddha among the elect who had kept the correct path. As mentioned, such millennial expectations had occasionally materialized as rebellions in 19th century Burma among Karen as well as among Mon and Burmese, and they were not confined to any particular sect. Historical evidence on some Karen *boungkho* (whose sect-affiliation is unknown) shows that some of them staged rebellions against their Burmese or English masters, claiming to be *min laung*, i.e. embryo kings, which is the first step on the ladder towards being an embryo world conqueror and future Buddha. As late as the 1960s we find these expectations articulated among the adherents of the Karen Telakhon sect, and to some extent among the members of the Karen Leke sect in Burma.<sup>5</sup>

The *lu baung* and *wi maung* share this legacy, but have turned it into a different mould. Due to specific political and demographic conditions of the historical setting in which the Karen sage made his appearance, the symbols of royalty and messianic Buddhism were not used as a vehicle for rebellion against the Thai state, but to delineate a Karen collective sovereignty within the Thai state. It was a sovereignty to which the Thai king consented as he needed the Karen in his foreign policy towards the Burmese and later the English.

#### *Interpretation of the lu baung paraphernalia*

The *la'* is a symbol of Karen sovereignty. It constitutes part of the *lu baung* religious architecture. It is a 2 1/2m pole with a four-arm horizontal structure near its top. It is my contention that the *la'* of these Karen is etymologically the same as the Thai *lak myang*, the pole formerly erected for the territorial spirit of the domain of a state or principality.<sup>6</sup> Among Thai groups the *lak myang* pillar was the center of the royal cult for the princely ancestor-founder of the political domain. By the symbolic installation of the axis mundi, the Thai prince claimed his sovereignty by assimilating his territory to the layout of the Buddhist cosmos. Besides, the pillar was the means of royal communication with the god Indra, who is the attendant of monarchs, and, in the millennial teaching of Theravada Buddhism, the one who takes care of the installment of the fifth Buddha, Ariya Mettaya.

As an explicit incorporation of Buddhist elements into the *lu baung*, the Karen sage introduced the *th'dong* umbrella staffs, and the pagoda. I shall only discuss the *th'dong* here. In function, though not in height, it resembles the *iyuw* pole among the Kayah or Red Karen in Burma, and it may be the etymological equivalent of the Burmese sacred flagstaff, the *tagundaing*. Comparing the *iyuw* pole to the *tagundaing*, F.K. Lehman tells us that the *tagundaing* is a »flagstaff erected to celebrate the triumph of Buddhist doctrine and law over the demon placegods of the land and the submission of





Fig. 2 *Lu baung* ritual architecture. In the middle a three-story sand pagoda, in each corner a small pagoda, all surrounded by a symbolic fence. Outside the fence at the southwest corner one finds the *la'* and the tall *th'dong*.

these latter to the rule of the Buddhist law«. <sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, the Karen sage actually had the tall *th'dong* erected as he chased away the K'lau' spirit to whom the Duwe Vaphyaung made their offerings. Now the word K'lau' is a Mon derivative. The word may carry two meanings, namely a generalized evil forest spirit who punishes moral offences and, at the same time, in Mon at least, it also signifies a clan or lineage spirit.

We may as a conclusion note the correlation between the presence of *boungkho* and what they stand for on the one hand and the subsequent absence of spirit worship on the other. The *lu baung* and *wi maung* seem to have rid themselves of that matrilineal principle which specifically operates in the organization of ancestor-worship among for instance the Karen in Northern Thailand.

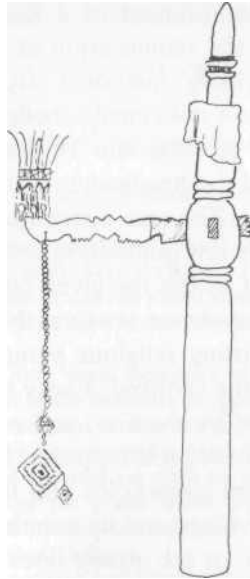


Fig. 3. Drawing of a *la'*.



Fig. 4. There are many kinds of *th'dong*. These are small *th'dong* for *Phu Chi*, the underground god carrying the earth. They are placed in a hole next to the *la'* and the tall *th'dong*. All *th'dong* have pendants representing leaves of the banyan tree.

Factors related to the establishment of a Karen collective sovereignty within the Thai state and to the renunciation of the function of the matrilineage must be found in specific historical circumstances, circumstances that also explain the absence of millennial rebellions among the two sects.

We may assume that after crossing into Thailand our Pwo Karen settled in the vast forest area around the headwaters of the Kaphoen River, which is a tributary to the Kwae Yai. The area was very sparsely populated at that time. In this area of extremely low population density the Pwo Karen established themselves and upheld within the given conditions of production an economic and political independence vis-a-vis the Thai state, an independence which through the existing religious paraphernalia also symbolized participation in the world of the civilized. Every household in this area had control over its own means of production, and whatever the original function of the matrilineage had been, it disappears, and is supplanted by a far greater stress on the individual households and their temporal collectivity. The emphasis now is on the village and its members headed by the *boung-kho* and his wife. Here the *la'* or *lak myang* does not symbolize the superiority of a single line as among the Thai. Rather, it is associated with the unity of that collectivity living at a particular place at a particular moment, a collectivity which until now has reconfirmed itself each year during the ceremony of *khounng s'raung*.

## NOTES

1. The data and findings presented in this paper derive from social anthropological fieldwork carried out among the Karen in Thailand from 1970-72, a short follow-up in 1976 and another in 1980. Three researchers participated in the original research: Anders Baltzer Jørgensen, University of Copenhagen, Michael Gravers, University of Aarhus, and the author.

From the very beginning of our research plans in 1969, through the subsequent project formulation and fieldwork preparations, we had the warmest support in our endeavours from the late Professor Johannes Nicolaisen. 'Nic' became our supervisor and we had the pleasure of actually seeing him in Thailand in October 1971, when he walked with us through the forest for three days in order to visit our Karen villages. From that time 'Nic' took a keen interest in the progress of our work both at the university and during our subsequent follow-up fieldwork in Thailand.

Like many others, we have very warm memories of 'Nic' as a person who always gave ready and enthusiastic support to the fieldwork projects of his students.

The present paper is a slightly adapted version of a paper carrying the same title delivered at the 1980 Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Washington D.C., March 21-23, 1980. All photographs and drawings are made by Anders Baltzer Jørgensen.

We would like to acknowledge the grants which the Danish Research Council for the Humanities kindly awarded us to carry out fieldwork. We also acknowledge support from the National Research Council of Thailand.

2. See S.J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976; S.J. Tambiah, »The Buddhist Conception of Kingship and Its Historical Manifestations: A Reply to Spiro«, *Journal of Asian Studies* XXXVII, 4, 1978; E.M. Mendelson, »The King of the Weaving Mountain«, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Volume XLVII, 1961; and E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution*, The Hague, 1965.
3. See Anders Baltzer Jørgensen, »Swidden Cultivation Among Pwo Karen in Western Thailand«, *In: Lampang Reports*, CINA, Copenhagen 1976.
4. This theme will be elaborated in my forthcoming article "Politico-religious Leadership Among the Karen in 19th Century Burma: the Bounghko«.
5. Th. Stern, »Ariya and the Golden Book: A Millenarian Buddhist Sect Among the Karen«, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume XXVII, 1968.
6. The *Lak myang* or city pillar may still be seen at many places in present day Thailand. Formerly the locus of a royal cult, it now often functions as a centre for fertility rites.
7. F.K. Lehman, »Kayah Society as a Function of the Shan-Burma-Karen Context.« *In: J. Steward* (ed), *Contemporary Change in Traditional Societies*, Urbana, 1967.

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