

A View of the Karen Baptists in Burma of the Mid-Nineteenth Century, from the Standpoint of the American Baptist Mission⁽¹⁾

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Introduction

This article aims to shed light on the significance of the mission policy and interaction between the mission society in America and missionaries in Burma, in order to comprehend the manner in which the Karens of the 19th century were described. The Karens have been known as “a Christianized people,” and they have been described thus both by themselves and others for quite a period of time.⁽²⁾ While this is still generally the case, yet many point to the fact that such an understanding does not precisely reflect the reality of the situation. As a matter of fact, the Christians, two-thirds of which are Baptists constitute merely a minority of the entire Karen population, slightly over 10 percent of their total number,⁽³⁾ and the majority of those people have been and still are Buddhists. This situation indicates that the general view of the Karens being Christian is distorted. And if so, one cannot avoid asking why such a distorted view came to grow so dominant with reference to our understanding of those people. A closer look into the historical situation is the key to prove this issue.

In the historical process of accumulating knowledge concerning the Karens, the significance of the American Baptist missionary records cannot be ignored. Most of the earlier research refers to the American Baptist missionary journals, reports, and letters as

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primary source material, in order to trace the history of the Karens during the 19th century. Concerning the role the Baptist records played in compiling knowledge regarding the Karens, Ikeda Kazuto, a Japanese researcher specializing in the Burmese and Karen history points out that what was significant was not merely the quantity of the missionary records, but also the fact that those missionary records that focused mainly on the converted Baptist Karens, constituted the chief and most reliable source on the Karens at that time. This historically means that the rest of the Karens who were Buddhists, were relatively ignored in “Karen history”.⁽⁴⁾ While pointing out the limitations of this history that is centered on the Baptist Karens, Ikeda calls for more attention to be paid to Buddhist Karens as well. Thawngmung also points out that the general understanding about the Karens covers the diversity within the people. She says that the Karens have been understood as “anti-Burmese” or “violent secessionists,” and that the image people have of the Karens was mere artificial. In order to mend this disparity, she conducted interviews and research with reference to the “other” Karens in Burma, who are more likely hesitant to be identified as Karen nationalists and who live along with Buddhist Burmese in comfort.⁽⁵⁾ Both these arguments suggest the need for us to shift the focus of research to the Buddhist Karens, in order that we may fix the distorted general view and achieve a more holistic image of the Karen people.

While greater research on the Buddhist Karens is undoubtedly a necessity, a question that remains unsolved is this: How should we interpret then, the appearance of the Karen Baptists in the missionary records of the 19th century? Although the Karen Baptists did not constitute the majority of the Karen people in Burma at that time, this does not necessarily mean that their appearance in the missionary records and its historical significance should be belittled or minimized. This article aims to tackle this issue, and it intends to argue that the Karen Baptists in the 19th century should be viewed within the context of the American Baptist mission. More specifically, this article will examine the mission policy of the American Baptist mission, and see how it affected the manner of description of the Karens.

Since there are large quantities of Baptist mission records and it is beyond author’s capability to examine them all in one article, this paper will deal with just one Baptist document written by a missionary named Francis Mason (1799-1874) in the mid-19th century, and entitled: “*The Karen Apostle; or, Memoir of Ko Thah-Byu*”, the First Karen Convert, with Notices Concerning His Nation” (hereafter *The Karen Apostle*).⁽⁷⁾ *The Karen Apostle* was written in 1843 as a biography of the first Karen Baptist, on his death in 1840. This book has been one of the most well-known documents concerning the early history of the Karen mission, and it is often referred to because of its subject, namely the first Karen Baptist, Thah Byu.⁽⁸⁾ The author, Francis Mason is also noteworthy, since he was the most prominent missionary of the Karen mission and a professional in those days, with regard to writing on the Karens. Even more details will be presented later, but Mason’s writings at that time played a major role as a reliable source to acquire an image of the Karens. Thus, it can be safely said that *the Karen Apostle* was the best example to show the typical manner of documenting Karens that was employed at that time by one of the most influential Karen experts. In addition to *The Karen Apostle*, Baptist missionary periodicals, magazines, and records were also used to understand the situation of the Baptist mission society, during the period spanning 1830s and 1840s.

I . American Baptist Missions in Burma: the Historical Background

First of all, the early history of the American Baptist Mission needs to be summarized. As shown below, tracing the early history of the Baptist mission society clarifies the fact that the missions in Burma, especially the Karen mission, had been the central and leading mission for the society since its foundation.

1.1. Establishment of the General Baptist Convention

The Baptist missionary convention was founded by the efforts of two missionaries, namely Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) and Luther Rice (1783-1836). They started their careers as foreign missionaries when their petition to launch the foreign missions in Asia was approved at the Congregationalist meeting in 1810. Although originally being a Congregationalist, on his sea route to India, Judson concluded that the Baptist understanding of the Christian doctrine was more precise, and so he decided to convert. He was baptized soon after he landed in Calcutta in 1812, as did Rice. After their conversion, they decided to found a missionary association in America consisting of Baptist churches. Rice decided to go back to America to establish the organization, while Judson remained in Asia to find a place to begin the mission.⁽⁹⁾

On his return to America, without any delay Rice established in 1814 the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist denomination in the United States of America (the Baptist Convention).⁽¹⁰⁾ The Baptist Convention, which consisted of local Baptist associations mainly in the eastern coastal area, was to hold a general meeting once every three years. Although in principle the Baptist Convention was the ultimate body to take all decisions, practical management was conducted by its board, namely the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions (hereafter the Baptist Board). The Baptist Board took charge of appointing missionaries, setting up the mission goals and policies, and even managing the convention's accounting.⁽¹¹⁾

1.2. The Beginning of the American Baptist Missionary Work: 1810s-1820s.

As the Baptists in America were ready to support foreign missions, some initial missions were launched in the late 1810s and 1820s. The very first foreign mission was of course, by Judson. Judson at first struggled to find a settlement for a mission in India, because the British East India Company ordered him to leave immediately. He finally got on board a vessel bound for Rangoon, namely the Georgiana, and landed there on July 1813. He and his wife Ann began actual missionary work around 1817 and acquired the first Burmese Baptist convert, Maung Sau in 1819. It was said that by 1820, approximately 10 persons had become Baptists.⁽¹²⁾ With the arrival of another missionary, Jonathan Wade (1798-1872), it seemed as though the mission in Burma in the 1820s was ready to develop.

Although it was first founded to support Judson and his mission in Asia, the Baptist Board also set its focus upon the domestic non-Christians, namely Native Americans. It was in 1817 that the mission for Native Americans was resolved at the first General Baptist convention meeting. It began with the tribes residing in the east of the Mississippi River

and around the great Lakes, such as the Cherokee, Ottawa, Miami, and Shanowah.⁽¹³⁾ The mission for the Native Americans was called ‘the Home Mission’ or ‘Indian Mission’ and the Home Mission was considered one of the most important missions of the Baptist Board, aside from the Burma mission.⁽¹⁴⁾

In the same period, the Baptist Board set up another mission in Africa as well. The American Colonization Society was established in 1819 and the first mission station was set up in Iberia in 1822, and new missionaries were continuously sent to the missions in Africa.⁽¹⁵⁾

1.3. The Rise of the Karen Mission in Contrast to Other Missions during the 1830s and 1840s.

In the next two decades, the missions in Burma saw a significant development. In particular, the beginning of the Karen mission and its rapid development are worthy of explanation in detail. After the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26),⁽¹⁶⁾ the Baptist missionaries decided to resettle in the Tenasserim region, with the hope of working without opposition from the local society, and so they launched their mission work again.⁽¹⁷⁾ A newly arrived missionary, namely George D. Boardman (1801-1831) who reached Maulmein in 1827 took charge of a new mission station in Tavoy. Wade was in charge of a station in Maulmein, and both missionaries were engaged in evangelizing the Karens. Those two stations later became the center of the early Karen mission, because the relatively high density of the Karen population in these regions allowed the missionaries to have contact with the Karens more often.

Boardman was the one who baptized the first Karen Baptist, Tha Byu on May 16th of 1828, soon after arriving in Tavoy. And with the help of Baptized Karens, he worked to spread the Gospel among them. He reported in his journals that there was a high possibility that the Gospels would be widely accepted by the Karens, but he passed away in 1831, before witnessing the actual growth of the mission. In the same year, Francis Mason was sent to Burma, to take over Boardman’s work after his death.

The increase in the number of converts was visible as early as the years 1830-31. Table 1 shows the number of converts among the Burmese and Karens during the 1830s,⁽¹⁸⁾ and throughout the decade the Karen converts never ceased to increase. The number grew to over 1200 converts in 1840, whereas the number of the Burmese converts remained relatively unchanged.

Table 1: Numbers of Converted Baptists and Schools.⁽¹⁹⁾

	Burmese	Karen	School in Burmese	School in Karen
1828-29	30	5	1	2
1829-30	56	10	1	2
1830-31	144	150	1	3
1833-34	92	252	2	3
1835-36	110	340	3	4
1837-38	188	695	4	N/A
1838-39	173	1190	6	17
1839-40	186	1244	6	17

The development of the Karen mission during this period was characterized by two features. The first is the reduction of Karen languages into script. Among dozens of sub-groups in the Karen languages, the Sgaw Karen was the first to be reduced by the missionary Wade. He started learning the language as early as 1831, and realized that it could be reduced with a combination of Burmese and Mon scripts.⁽²⁰⁾ A small tract and a grammar book in the Sgaw Karen were already distributed in the following year, for each of which 3000 copies were printed.⁽²¹⁾ Translation of religious scriptures was continued, and the New Testament in the Sgaw Karen was published in 1847. Another effort to reduce another Karen language, namely Pwo Karen into script was made around the years 1838-39. However, too many dialects of the Pwo Karen prevented the establishment of one holistic writing system, which was not completed until the 1850s.

The second feature was the development of educational environments for the Karen mission. The Baptist missionaries started theological training for the local Karens in their own houses to work for the ministry. The missionary education became more organized when a boarding school for boys at Tavoy was established in 1830, where most students were actually Karens. Table 1 also shows that the number of schools for Karens was on an increase in the 1830s. A large number of religious documents published in the Karen languages were used in the school education. And in this way, publications in the Karen languages and school education for Karen Baptists certainly helped the mission to grow rapidly.

As for Baptist missions in Asia, the Baptist Board opened up a new mission in Siam (Thailand) in 1832. Yet, the mission works were also for the Chinese, since the missionary journals reveal that prayer services were always conducted in both the Siamese and Chinese languages.⁽²²⁾ In 1837, a Siamese printing press was prepared, and 500,000 copies of a religious tract were printed and distributed. Overall the Baptist missions in Asia were relatively prosperous, mainly led by the huge success of the Karen mission.

While the missions in Asia seemed to be in a favorable situation, the Home mission in America was on shaky ground. The Baptist missions were not warmly welcomed by the Native Americans, obviously not as much as the Karen mission. For example, the mission to the Creek was suspended in 1829 because of its little success, and furthermore, the Indian Removal policy was in effect in the 1830s, and so the missionaries could no longer use their facilities including churches and educational assets, which they established in Native American old (and original) lands.⁽²³⁾ According to the statistics for 1838-39, there were only 170 converts from the Cherokee, 29 from Shanowah and Ojibwa respectively.⁽²⁴⁾ On comparing this with the number of Karen converts it is obvious that the mission for Native Americans was declining, and this made the Karen mission the only promising mission of the Baptist Board.

This brief early history of the American Baptist mission shows that the mission in Burma had been the first and leading mission for the Baptist Board since the beginning. And in the 1830s, the mission for Karens started and soon became a prominent work among the other Baptist missions. In particular, whereas the Home mission for Native Americans declined due to its unpopularity and the government's domestic policy, the Karen mission appeared as the most successful mission among the Baptist missionary works. By the end of

the 1830s the Karen mission had almost become the sole promising and firm mission of the Baptist Convention, and hence it must have occupied a very prominent place among all the mission activities of the American Baptists.

II. The Mission Policy of the American Baptists and Its Change in the 1840s.

Having examined the early history of the American Baptist missions and the significance of the Karen mission, this section aims to understand how Baptist missionaries tried to reach the non-Christian indigenous people. The mission policy will be examined in detail, and in particular, the change in the mission policies and their details will be discussed. The following discussion argues that the economic situation of the Convention in the late 1830s through 1840s was a crucial factor that made it necessary to change the mission policy accordingly.

2.1. Baptist Understanding of Christian Doctrines

First of all, some fundamental doctrines of the Baptists need to be articulated. One of them is their strong belief in scripture. The Bible is considered most important, as it reveals the holy words of God. Bible study is in need of the believers' own learning, and a deep understanding of the Bible, and the Baptists carried out their mission work based on their own evangelical faith. The enlightenment of the non-Christian indigenous people and their pious devotion to God was aimed at, by spreading the gospel and public preaching. Each individual's awakening to the truth of God was important, and they believed that realization of the truth would be gained through the individual's dedication to God by prayer. Thus, prayer is another important doctrine for the Baptists. Certain missionary journals of 1837 explained that God would eventually hear prayers of devotion, and that his mercy would be granted to missionary works.⁽²⁵⁾ For the Baptists, evangelical work could never be accomplished without sincere prayer.

As the foremost individual service to God, working as a missionary was considered a task of high esteem. Foreign missions were encouraged as the ultimate goal for Baptists by William Carey, who was the very first England Mission Society's (hereafter EMS) foreign missionary. According to his mission policy, the Baptist's duty was to carry God's words and to spread the gospel to all non-Christian people on the earth.⁽²⁶⁾ It should be noted that both founders of the Baptist Convention, namely Judson and Rice, were encouraged by the mission works of the EMS. Furthermore, it was decided that the proceedings of the Board would "be communicated to the Baptist Mission Society of England and to their missionaries at Serampore, assuring them that it was the desire of the board to hold an affectionate intercourse with them" at the meeting of the Board on May 24th 1814.⁽²⁷⁾ Those facts suggest that the core policy of the Baptist Convention coincided greatly with Carey's policy on foreign missions.

2.2. The Mission Policy of the American Baptists at their Foundation

The aforementioned doctrine was reflected in the principal mission policy of the Baptist Convention. A letter written by Rice to the Baptist Board on May 25th 1814 explains well how Biblical study and evangelization through vernacular languages were central to the Baptist foreign missions. He articulated as follows:

“The grand object of that establishment has been and still is, the translation of the scriptures...A mission now to be established, should fix itself in some important place, make itself master of the language and literature of the people, ultimately carry to very considerable correctness a translation of the scriptures into that language, and diffuse the effectual knowledge of the gospel throughout the region in which such language is spoken”.⁽²⁸⁾

This statement shows that Rice thought it important to work along with the concepts of Biblical Study, and in order to spread the Bible’s teachings among the indigenous people, the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages was necessary. The same view of mission work was preached and underlined in the Sermon at the meeting in which the Baptist Convention was formed.⁽²⁹⁾

Rice’s opinion on the mission policy should also be understood in relation with the mission principle of the aforementioned William Carey. As the Baptist Board decided to work in cooperation with the EMS, its mission policy became similar to the EMS’s policy as well. There were five major principles that were emphasized by the missionary Carey for foreign missions, which the Baptist board followed as well. Those principles are translating the Bible as well as mission documents into the vernacular, understanding native customs, conducting mission work through vernacular languages, and localization of missions.⁽³⁰⁾ Here it can easily be stated that evangelization and working through vernacular languages were the central idea for the Baptist foreign missions. While foreign missions ought to be conducted according to those major principles, there were a few detailed restrictions for them. A relatively free hand was given to foreign missionaries in the field, “in the name of God”.

2.3. Change of Policy in the 1840s and the Financial Situation of the Baptist Convention

In the period spanning the 1830s and 40s, several very important regulations for mission work were made. In 1841, the Board announced its decision to modify the mission policy at its tenth annual meeting, and there were two important modifications can be found at that time. The first was a strong recommendation for the appointment of indigenous assistants. The addressing report of the Baptist Board to the president of the Convention explained the importance of the work of the indigenous Baptists, and strongly recommended more appointments, as “[g]reat importance is attached to indigenous instrumentality in the prosecution of the missionary work....[T]he history of the church, from the earliest times to the present, abundantly shows, that the divinely appointed agency for its perpetuation of enlargement is the sanctified talent of the native population.”⁽³¹⁾ The second issue was about missionary publications. The Board clearly articulated its concern about the publication

procedure and its expenditure, as it says, “[i]n regard to the number of copies of Scriptures and tracts printed, the general limitation is the current demand for judicious distribution. And one of the principal requisites in judicious distribution is, that “every copy of the Scriptures and every tract should, if possible, be sustained by personal remark, and where there is not a reasonable prospect of their doing good, they should be withheld.”⁽³²⁾

These two particular concerns were articulated in this specific period because of the financial status. The president of the Baptist Convention explained the reason why these modifications were needed in front of the participants of the general meeting. He said:

“No restrictions were laid in regard to the employment of native assistants, or the establishment of schools or any other suitable expenditure involved in the right conduct of the missions....To relinquish this system of operation and thus to forbid our missionaries, who were toiling in the field, from gathering up the sheaves which seemed ready to fall into their bosoms, was exceedingly painful. But the necessity had come; the funds committed to the Board were liable to be overdrawn; and in pursuance of its settled policy to incur no burdensome debt if by any means it could be averted, the requisite limitations were made.”⁽³³⁾

According to this statement, these changes in policy were introduced due to the deteriorating financial status of the Convention. Annual treasury reports show that the Baptist Board indeed faced a serious financial crisis around that time. The direct cause for the decline was the economic depression in America in the late 1830s. After President Jackson announced in 1836 that only standard money such as gold and silver would be accepted for money transactions ever after, the American economy experienced a serious depression in the following years owing to the escalation of inflation. Many major banks in the East coast went bankrupt after 1837,⁽³⁴⁾ and the economy would not recover from the inflation until about 1842.⁽³⁵⁾ As for the financial situation for the Baptist Convention, Table 2 clearly shows the decline of its annual revenues and balance of the Convention. When economic depression occurred in 1837, the effect first manifested itself as a decline in the balance of the accounts. The balance started to decline immediately and culminated in a deficit in 1840, and the amount of the deficit during the early 1840s skyrocketed exorbitantly, and the Convention did not see it recover until in the late 1840s.

Table 2: Revenue and Balance of the Baptist Convention during the 1830s-40s⁽³⁶⁾

	Annual Revenue	Balance
1834-35	56,764.67	3,494.70
1835-36	54,988.53	149.13
1836-37	64,954.86	2,808.54
1837-38	76,857.53	1,499.50
1838-39	101,903.90	528.42
1839-40	65,672.56	893.97
1840-41	82,164.78	-1,190.62
1841-42	54,743.95	-7,215.34
1842-43	69,311.22	-17,236.62
1843-44	87,721	-31,585.02
1844-45	93,002.33	-45,412.99
1845-46	112,246.33	-39,015.30
1846-47	88,906.72	-35,035.06

The financial situation was a serious matter for the Baptist Board, since it always had to consider it to maintain its mission activity. The expense of the missions, such as the salary of missionaries and local preachers, printing costs, and costs for transferring resources was always a major concern for the Board. Therefore, the financial crisis in the 1830s and 1840s had a large influence on urging the Baptist Board to make its mission policy more strict and rigid. To rephrase this in more general terms, the mission policy of the Baptist Board was very vulnerable to the state of the American society and economy at that period. And hence, when the mission policy was subject to secular matters, how did this influence the contents and statements in mission documents? Most mission records were written and sent to the Baptist Board to appeal each success, hardship, or current situation. Did the manner of appealing to the Board and church members follow the change of the mission policy? If so, how?

III. Tha Byu as “The Karen Apostle” in the American Baptist Mission Context

As stated earlier, *The Karen Apostle* was written as a memoir concerning Tha Byu’s death in 1840. Mason explained in his own memoir that the reason for writing such a biography was the following: “After his death one of my associates suggested that I should write a memoir of his life, which I did, as a means of creating a deeper interest in the Karen Mission.”⁽³⁷⁾ Hence, this depiction of Tha Byu was meant to evoke a greater interest in the Karen mission, but the interest of whom? In general, the chief readers of missionary records were people living in the world outside of Burma, that is, the church members in America as well as the Baptist Board members.⁽³⁸⁾ So, it can be said that Mason wrote *The Karen Apostle* to evoke the interest of *Baptists in America*. In the following paragraphs, the actual content of *The Karen Apostle* will be gauged, with a brief explanation concerning the author’s background and his missionary work, and finally the parallel between the particular description of Tha Byu and the mission policy will be discussed.

3.1. The Author of The Karen Apostle, a Prominent Karen Missionary, Francis Mason

Francis Mason, originally born in York, England in 1799, arrived in America in 1818. He received Baptism in Missouri in 1825 and was appointed a foreign missionary in 1829, to support the Karen mission.⁽³⁹⁾

Arriving in Burma in 1831, Mason settled in Tavoy to work for the Karen mission, and within a few years, one of his accomplishments for the Karen mission was launched. Mason started to translate the Bible into Sgaw Karen in cooperation with Wade, who had already started working on reducing the language into scripts. The book of Matthew was translated in 1837 first, and the New Testament in Sgaw Karen was completed in 1843. Mason continued his work to translate the Old Testament, which was concluded in 1853.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In accordance with the development of the missionary educational environment, Mason’s translations contributed to spreading the Gospel among the Karens, as the Sgaw Karen

Bible was widely used in schools and churches.

Another his accomplishment consisted in a number of publications concerning the Karens. As early as 1834, Mason expressed his highly unique view on the Karens in his letter to the British Chief Commissioner Maingy, entitled ‘Traditions of Karens.’ In this letter he described the Karens as a lost tribe whose oral traditions and customs had originated from Hebrew, and this became a masterpiece of his writings concerning the Karens.⁽⁴¹⁾ Mason then continued to write on the Karens based on his own experiences in field. He published *The Natural Production of Burmah* in 1852, and later published other articles.⁽⁴²⁾ He continued to work in the field and moved from Tavoy to Toungoo in 1853, and remained engaged in the mission work mainly in Toungoo, until he passed away in Rangoon in 1874.

As his entire carrier suggests, Mason contributed in many ways towards the development of the Karen mission. Ikeda explains that his works had a considerable influence at that time, in terms of accumulating knowledge on the Karens. A set of his writings was the first attempt to consolidate knowledge and information on the Karens, using linguistic, theological, and ethnographical perspectives.⁽⁴³⁾ Hence Mason was the most well-known Karen missionary and a reliable expert on those people in the mid-nineteenth century. *The Karen Apostle* may therefore be said to form a part of the body of knowledge on the Karens, which Mason compiled through his own writings. The next section will take a look at *the Karen Apostle*’s contents, and Mason’s opinion on them.

3.2. Description of Tha Byu in The Karen Apostle

Tha Byu was born around 1778 in Oo-twau, a small village lying about four day’s away from Bassein. According to Thah Byu’s own description of himself to Mason, “he was then a wicked and ungovernable boy, and, when he left his parents, he became a robber and a murderer.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ Unable to pay his debts he was taken into Judson’s house. And later, interactions with missionaries led him to believe in Christianity, and he eventually accepted baptism. However his baptism was postponed for the time being, due to his moving to Tavoy with Boardman, Thah Byu was finally baptized by Boardman in Tavoy on May 16th 1828.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Immediately after his baptism, Thah Byu began his work among the Karens, especially for those living in remote areas. He worked around Tavoy and later moved to Maulmein. Around 1837 he moved farther north up to Rangoon or Bassein, where he remained working until his death in 1840. Although he was never an ordained minister, yet Thah Byu involved himself deeply in spreading the Gospel. He often visited villages in mountains and stayed there for as long as a month, searching for individuals who showed an interest in Christianity, and later he either went to a mission station with those people, or came back alone and returned to those villages with a missionary, so that they could be converted. Thah Byu passed away on September 9th 1840, due to the sufferings he experienced from rheumatism.⁽⁴⁶⁾

In the last two chapters of *The Karen Apostle*, Mason examined the significance of Thah Byu’s success. First, he illustrated the life of Tha Byu as follows. “The doctrines of the cross [s]till live to humanize inhuman man; to change a villain, from whose presence the virtuous instinctively shrink, into a “good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith,”

who scatters blessings wherever he goes, whose path through the world is traced by a track of glory.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ Although Mason never mentioned Tha Byu’s personal name in this sentence, it is quite obvious that it refers to his actual life course. Tha Byu, as he explained, committed thefts and murders before receiving baptism. From being “a villain,” he was reborn as “a good man who scatters blessings wherever he goes.” So here Mason related Thah Byu’s accomplishments, undertaken due to the blessing and power of God.

Mason provides two specific examples as to how the power of God worked through Thah Byu. The first concerned his devotion to mission work. Here it is worthwhile taking a look at Mason’s description in length.

“[I]f ever a man loved the gospel, Ko Thah-byu was that man. It was his love for the Gospel that kindled that unconquerable desire to proclaim its precious truths to his fellow men...And yet in accounting for the wonderful success that attended his preaching, we must look to other causes. One of our eldest and ablest assistants said, “Ko Thah-byu was an ignorant and stupid man; and yet he did more good than all of us, for God was with him.” ...[H]e who gives himself exclusively to the work of the Lord, will find that God will be with him, to assist him in his work and grant him every needed blessings. This was emphatically true of Ko Thah-byu; God was with him.”⁽⁴⁸⁾

The description above shows that Mason attributed the ultimate cause of Thah Byu’s success to the grace of God. It was also explained that Thah Byu often read the Bible or prayed to God when he was not out on mission works. And when he prayed, he did so until it was as late as ten or eleven o’clock at night, which must have been a very late hour back in the mid-19th century. Mason also boldly declared the cause of this praying behavior of Thah Byu as being due to the power of God.

“At the time I knew him, he used seldom to spend a night without praying as many as three times, or at least as often as he awoke; and I have heard it said of him, that he has occasionally spent whole nights in prayer of God. Is it, then, a matter of wonder that such a man should be honoured of his God?...It is known to all who are at all used in the deep things of God, that there is a peculiar power in prayer to give point to all our conceptions upon Divine subjects; and it is equally known, that a man who has a clear and vivid conception of any great truth, can hardly fail to exhibit that truth with point and with power. Here, then, is one of the secrets of Ko Thah-byu’s success as a preacher.”⁽⁴⁹⁾

This statement informs us that Mason described Thah Byu as a man of prayer and reasoned that Thah Byu succeeded in his mission only because of his devotion to prayer. God blessed him for his piety and prayers. Mason’s purpose here was to proclaim the importance of piety and dedication to God through the description of Thah Byu. His passion for the mission and devotion to prayer are explained as evidence that God’s grace and power actually worked through an indigenous convert.

After having presented the example of Tha Byu as a successful instance of the fruit of God’s blessings and the work of the Karen mission, Mason finally discussed the future

prospects of the mission and his reasoning concerning this issue in the last chapter. He stated that his argument was “to show that the Karen mission is the cheapest of American missions in the world.”⁽⁵⁰⁾ There were three reasons why Mason thought that the Karen mission was the most affordable mission. The first reason was that it was easier for the Karens to accept Baptism, thanks to their traditions. Mason believed that the Karens had their own oral traditions and beliefs, that were similar to the accounts of the Creation, Fall, and Salvation. Hence, the missionaries did not have to explain to the people fundamental notions as to “what is taught in Christianity.” This would reduce both the amount of time and labor needed for the mission work. Second, he pointed out that the efficiency of distributing publications among the Karens. Here, he makes a comparison with a case of the English Baptist Mission in India, where only one tenth of the religious publications if distributed, were likely to be read and utilized by the locals. And he stated that the Karen mission distributed its religious documents only to those who had studied in schools. Hence, the religious documents would be read thoroughly without waste, and so the mission could spread the Gospel teachings efficiently.⁽⁵¹⁾ The third evidence was the fact that the Karen mission was actually conducted by many of the local Karen Baptists, among whom Thah Byu was the best example. Mason argued that a local preacher could be supported with just one tenth of the money needed to support a foreign missionary, and it would be equivalent to approximately 25~50 U.S. dollars. Based on these reasons, Mason concluded that the Karen mission was the cheapest when compared with other American Baptist missions, and hence the most sustainable.⁽⁵²⁾

In his final words, Mason stated that although the native preachers were useful and capable, they needed to be educated by the missionaries. Mentioning the fact that Thah Byu as an example, he explained that the major role for missionaries at that point was to “instruct the native Christians; and yet in this department it is remarkably deficient” and to do so Karen missionaries needed to be “amply provided with means”⁽⁵³⁾

3.3. Mason’s Argument in The Karen Apostle under the Influence of the Mission Policy

As reviewed above, there were two major arguments stressed by Mason in *The Karen Apostle*. The first was to document and prove the success of the Karen mission, and so Thah Byu was depicted as the best example of the fruit of the mission. The description of Thah Byu as being passionate about evangelical work corresponded precisely with the Baptist doctrine of evangelism with regard to the Gospels. For Baptists, evangelization and dedication in works were very essential in their faith. Thah Byu’s character as a dedicated man of prayer is also very distinctive, since prayers were another important activity of the Baptists. Mason described Thah Byu in such a manner as to attest the fact that God’s power is working through such converts. With regard to the American Baptist doctrine, the description of Thah Byu as a good example of those Karen Baptists, who were diligently engaged in mission work, corresponds exactly with the Baptist belief in evangelism.

By depicting Thah Byu as a pious and reliable indigenous Karen Baptist who could be supported with much lesser expense, Mason emphasized the low expenses involved in the Karen mission. This argument corresponds with the mission policy that was recently

modified in 1841. The financial situation of the Baptist Board reached a crisis point in the late 1830s and 1840s, and since it was urgent, missionaries were encouraged to hire native preachers and assistants for evangelical work. Hence this point also seems to prove that Mason's argument was precisely to assure the Mission authorities that the Karen mission was desirable and suitable for a stricter mission policy.

What those two significant points suggest is that Mason's writing about Tha Byu was an act performed under the strong influence of the American Baptist mission policy and its doctrines. The American Baptists accepted with sincerity Biblical study, evangelical works in foreign lands, and prayer as an act of devotion to God. And in the 1840s, the Baptist Board shifted its mission policy to reduce mission expenses by encouraging more appointments of native preachers and regulating publication works in the field. In *The Karen Apostle*, Mason portrayed Tha Byu in exact response to the policy change, as a pious and devoted Karen Baptist, who was always passionate with regard to mission work and prayer. In addition, he stated that the Karen mission was maintainable because of the affordability of hiring native workers and its efficiency regarding distribution of publications and evangelical work. These parallels are so apparent that it is difficult to ignore them.

It is equally important to stress the fact that these parallels are not "strange" at all. As already stated, Mason wrote *The Karen Apostle* "as a means of creating a deeper interest in the Karen Mission."⁽⁵⁴⁾ There were always letters and reports in the missionary records that appealed for more funds, and hence the manner of describing the situation in the missionary fields and the indigenous people, was always embedded in the larger context of the mission society. This interaction between the mission policy and doctrine and the writings of missionaries has been little discussed, perhaps because it was considered something natural. However, close attention needs to be paid to it, since it discloses the dynamics of the interaction between the mission society in America, and the Baptist mission in Burma and the Karen Baptists.

Concluding Remarks

This paper examined the historical background of the Baptist Convention and its mission policies, and it later analyzed the relationship between the Baptist Convention's mission policies with the manner of depiction of the Karen Baptists by missionaries. In conclusion we might say that the mission policies and the situation of the Baptist Convention in America played a principal role in determining how to describe the Karens in Burma. The social, economic, and possibly political situations in America were equally crucial to comprehending the discourse on the Karen Baptists, for as this paper argues, they were indeed factors that worked towards having the Baptist Board change its mission policy. Mentioning the economic situation in America during the 1830s to 1840s in order to grasp the state in which the Baptist Board was at that time is also something unavoidable.

Finally, let us consider how the whole discussion helps us to interpret the Karen Baptists in the 19th century. The great influence of the American Baptist Convention's

doctrine and policy on writings about the Karens, suggests that the Karen Baptists in Burma should be understood and placed within the history of the American Baptist missions. The historical context of the missions and their doctrines need to be taken into consideration as well. The Baptist mission records might be insufficient when it comes to grasping the history of the entire Karen community, as recently assessed, but they are the most reliable sources in order to get an idea of those Karens who were viewed simply as Baptists. This analytical viewpoint is significant because it helps prevent us from overstating the “Karenness” of the Karen Baptists, and hence it needs to be expanded more.

Emphasizing the significance of the missionary records and its historical context does not necessarily mean to support or justify the missionaries’ Orientalist views which was common and widespread in the Western world at that time. We do not deny that the American Baptist missionaries saw the Karens as one nation, as a myriad of missionary records and journals reveals they certainly did so. Yet, what was more important to the missionaries, with more focus on the missionary context, must have been the issue as to who accepted Christianity and baptism, and whether the newly converted Karens were true and pious Baptists. As this paper tries to point out, the Karens appearing in the missionary records of the 19th century should be simply understood as Baptists, not as the representatives of the whole Karen nation.

An emphasis on the relationship between the Baptist missions and the writings of the missionaries on the Karens in Burma also highlights the historical connection of two different regions, namely Burma and America. An analysis of various historical situations in America is crucial to interpreting the history of Baptist Karens in Burma, because it is plausible to state that factors in America made the Baptist Convention change its mission policy. In historical terms, most scholars reveal an interest in Burma’s relationship to its suzerain in the 19th century, since Burma was under British colonial rule prior to its independence. As this paper shows however, when the Karen Baptists are discussed within the context of the American Baptist missions, it is possible and even necessary to view the 19th century from another analytical viewpoint, focusing on the relationship between Burma and America. The analytical viewpoint of considering the Karen Baptists through the eyes of the American Baptist mission, will not only provide another interpretation of the baptized Karens in Burma, but it also has the possibility of broadening our research horizon, by shedding light on an alternate aspect of Burma in the 19th century.

Notes

- (1) This paper is based on the author’s recently published article in Japanese; “Reconsideration of the Karen Image in Mid-Nineteenth Century Burma within the Context of the American Baptist Mission,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 52(2), 2015, pp. 295-322. Although the argument here is based on the article in Japanese, this paper is a fully revised version.

- (2) Here are some of the major works describing the Karens as Christianized people. In the colonial period, an English officer Smeaton described the Karens as totally pious Christians [Smeaton, Donald M., *The Loyal Karen of Burma*, London: K Paul, Trench & co., 1887]. As one of the earliest descriptions by a Baptist Karen, San C. Po made a comparison between the Karens and Burmese and represented the Karens as “Baptists” [Po, San C., *Burma and the Karens*, London: Elliot Stock, 1928]. Among scholarly research specializing in Karens, the followings could be named in which the Karen people was described mainly focusing on the Baptist Karens; Iijima, Shigeru, “Kokumin Keisei to Shōsu Minzoku Mondai: Biruma niokeru Karenzoku no Higeiki” [国民形成と少数民族問題：ビルマにおけるカレン族の悲劇, Nation-building and Issues of Minority Groups: Tragedy of the Karen People in Burma], *Studies of Linguistics and Culture in Asia and Africa* 8, 1974, pp. 117-135. Gravers, Mikael, “Conversion and Identity-Religion and the Formation of Karen Ethnic Identity in Burma,” in Mikael Graevrs (ed.), *Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Burma*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007, pp. 227-258. Smith, Martin, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, London, Zed Books Ltd., 1991.
- (3) The Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma. *1983 Population Census*.
- (4) Ikeda, Kazuto, “An Outline of Knowledge Formation on the Karen People of Burma and Saw Aung Hla's "A History of the Pgakanyaw" (1939)” [ビルマのキリスト教徒カレンをめぐる民族知識の形成史：カレン知の生成と「プアカニョウの歴史」の位置づけについて], *The Memoirs of the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia* 162, 2012, pp.154-266 (in Japanese), 105-120.
- (5) Thawngmung, Maung Ardeth, *The Other Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms*, New York: Lexington Books, 2011.
- (6) Although usually considered as a part of his name, Ko is just a prefix to refer to a young man. Since it is not his original name, this paper hereafter calls him simply Tha Byu. An exception will be made when it appears in referred paragraphs.
- (7) Mason, Francis, *The Karen Apostle; or, Memoir of Ko Thah-Byu, the First Karen Convert, with Notices Concerning His Nation*, Gould Kendall and Lincoln: Boston, 1843.
- (8) Go Lām Pau, *Ahceipya myanma hkari'yan thamâin 16 yazùale hma 21 yazù pahtama sezùhni' ahthì* [A Brief History of Myanmar Christianity: since the mid-16th century up to the first ten years of the 21st century], Aloun, Yangon: Phileo Mission, 2012.
- (9) Grammell, William, *A History of American Baptist Missions in Asia, Africa, and Europe and North America*, Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1854, p. 7.
- (10) Peck, Solomon, “History of the Missions of the Baptist General Convention,” in Joseph Tracy, Solomon Peck and others (eds), *History of American Missions to the Heathen, from Their Commitment to the Present Times*, Howland: Spooner, 1840, pp. 353-620, 362.
- (11) *ibid.*
- (12) *ibid.*, pp. 358-60.
- (13) *ibid.*, p. 377, 384.
- (14) The mission for Native Americans was important in terms of domestic political interest.

- The conversion of the Native Americans was very crucial for the federal government to open up the western frontier and acquire more lands.
- (15) Peck, *op.cit.*, pp. 439-445.
- (16) During the war, Judson himself was put in jail by the Konbaung Court under the suspicion that he must have been an English spy. Wades and other missionaries left Rangoon for India to escape for the time being.
- (17) It was annexed to the British colony after the war, as well as the Arakan region.
- (18) Those numbers included converts in all mission stations.
- (19) Data was retrieved from the annual reports of the Baptist Board. Board of Managers of Baptist General Convention (hereafter BMBGC), *The American Baptist Magazine* 8-15, Boston, 1828-1835. *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 16-20, Boston, 1836-40.
- (20) BMBGC 1833 (13), p. 201. The Mon scripture is as old as the Burmese script, and it was said that the Burmese alphabet were created using the Mon script. The Mon language has mainly been spoken by the Mon people, but as of now, the Mon speaking population is decreasing.
- (21) *ibid.*, p. 356.
- (22) Peck, *op.cit.*, p. 590.
- (23) BMBGC 1839 (19), pp.124-28.
- (24) Ito, Takaaki, “Jyūkyū Seiki Bengal niokeru “Orientalist” [19世紀ベンガルにおける「オリエンタリスト」], *The Orientalist in Bengal of the nineteenth century*], *The Christian Memoirs of Momoyama Gakuin University* 34, 1998, pp.17-33.
- (25) BMBGC 1837 (17), pp.74-75.
- (26) Ito, *op.cit.*, 1998.
- (27) BMBGC 1814. *Proceedings*, pp.13-14.
- (28) *ibid.*, p. 26.
- (29) *ibid.*, pp. 17-24.
- (30) Ito, *op.cit.*, pp. 25-28.
- (31) BMBGC 1841 (21), p.168.
- (32) *ibid.*, p.169.
- (33) *ibid.*, p.170.
- (34) Miyata, Michiya, “America niokeru 1837 nen Kyoukou to Shinyou Seido” [アメリカにおける1837年恐慌と信用制度, *The Depression of 1837 and Credential System in America*], *Memoirs of the Economic Department in Kanazawa University* 9(3), 1989, pp.14-52, 17-18.
- (35) In the early 1830s, the American economy enjoyed a wave of land speculation. Bank notes were heavily used for purchasing public lands. People relied on notes for almost all transactions in land speculation. Thus, President Jackson’s order had a severe impact on newly landowners.
- (36) Data was retrieved from the annual treasurer reports of each year in *American Baptist Magazine* 1835 (16); *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 1836-1845 (16-25); Executive Committee of American Baptist Mission, *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 1846-48 (26-28).
- (37) Mason, Francis, *The Story of Working Man’s life*, Oakley: Maison & co., 1870, p. 278.

- (38) Ikeda, *op.cit.*, p.125.
- (39) Mason, *op.cit.*, p. 37, 185.
- (40) *ibid.*, pp. 296-7.
- (41) Mason, Francis, "Tradition of Karen," *American Baptist Magazine* 1834 (14) 1834, pp. 328-393.
- (42) Mason, Francis, "Notes of the Karen Language," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 27(2), 1858, pp.129-168.; "Religion, Mythology, and Astronomy among the Karens," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 34(3), 1865(a), pp.173-188.; "Religion, Mythology, and Astronomy among the Karens," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 34(4) 1865(b), pp.195-250.; "On Dwelling, Works of Art, Laws, etc. of the Karens; Embracing Query 50 to Query 76," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* 38(3), 1868, pp.125-169.
- (43) Ikeda, *op.cit.*
- (44) Mason, 1843, p.10.
- (45) *ibid.*, pp.12-13.
- (46) *ibid.*, pp. 41-70.
- (47) *ibid.*, p.70.
- (48) *ibid.*, pp.71-76.
- (49) *ibid.*, pp.76-77.
- (50) *ibid.*, p. 90.
- (51) *ibid.*, pp. 92-93.
- (52) *ibid.*, pp. 94-95.
- (53) *ibid.*, p. 95.
- (54) Mason, 1870, p. 278.