

Deference for the Elders and
Control over the Younger among
the Karen in Thailand

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This paper examines the foundation of the deference paid the Elders in a Karen forest society in Thailand. It is argued that deference and social control are two sides of the same coin, both resting on the fact that the socially most valuable knowledge in Karen society is an attribute of old age. To analyze the foundation of this knowledge, which endows the Elders with social authority and control, it is useful to distinguish between various types of knowledge, such as knowledge of production-technique and ecology, knowledge of social history, and knowledge of ritual and magic. It is further emphasized that the foundation of the Elders' authority, in contrast to many other societies, is neither control of the means of production nor control of such prestige goods, which in unilineal societies may enter the affinal exchange circulation as bridewealth. Their control derives from their knowledge of social history, from their religious knowledge of cosmology, ritual, and ethics, and from their possession of magical know-how.

The term *Karen* is the ethnic designation for a hill and forest people in Burma and Thailand, whose number totals approximately three million. Karen-speaking people are spread over a large area, mainly on the Burma frontier with Thailand. Everywhere the Karen live interspersed among various other ethnic categories, so that we find pockets of exclusive Karen habitations amidst for instance Mon, Shan and Lawa. Only within the Union of Burma do we find Karen with a large-scale organisation, i.e. in the Kawthuley and Kayah states.

The 200.000 Karen in Thailand all live in the hills and forests. The villages in the Western Central Thailand are self contained units, whose inhabitants live mainly by swidden cultivation in the deep forests. We find no specialist villages. The technology of swidden cultivation of rice is very simple, a heavy knife to cut the trees, bamboo and underbrush, a digging stick for weeding, and a sickle for the harvest of rice.

The Karen living in this part of Thailand originally came from Burma

some 200 years ago on the run from their Burmese oppressors. The area they settled in was sparsely populated and was still in 1970 one of quite low population density, a fact that has meant very favourable conditions for an ecologically well-balanced swidden cultivation and forest regeneration. Each village contains from 10-30 houses. As we find no demarcated village appropriation of forest land for swiddens, individual families are free to move to another village if they feel the need. Within the village the stilted houses are occupied by either nuclear or extended families. As post-marital residence is uxorilocal, families become enlarged due to a son-in-law taking up residence. After the birth of the first child, the new family establishes itself in a house next to that of the woman's parents. Only the youngest daughter stays put. She continues to live in her parents' house together with her husband and their children. Though matrilineal with respect to residence, the Karen embrace no unilineal principle of descent. Descent is cognatic and kinship is traced bilaterally through ego-centered kindreds.

As land in Western Central Thailand's mountane hinterland was still sufficient among the Karen in 1972, - in contrast to the situation of the Karen in Northern Thailand, everybody had access to the resources necessary for the maintenance of his or her family. We find no landlords among the Karen, and there is nothing material, which can be monopolized such as to give a basis for hierarchial social stratification. The only statuses set apart are the Thai-appointed Karen headman, the Buddhist monk and the *boungkho*, who is the local head of indigenous Karen religious ceremonies.² Buddhist monkhood is an institution taken over 200 years ago from the Buddhist valley civilizations of Burma and Thailand, specifically from the Mon in Burma. We thus find among these Karen two spheres of religious activities, where the *boungkho*, - in contrast to the Buddhist monk, belongs to the sphere that has to do with the Karen as swidden cultivators in the forest.³ The Karen *boungkho* stands as the intermediary between the ordinary Karen villagers on one hand and the invisible forces of nature on the other.

We have a society with as yet in 1970 no real structural dependency on the outside world, with very little internal differentiation and few achievable statuses at hand, and with sex and age as the most important criteria for social status. Within these parameters we find that being male and of old age respectively have more social value than being female and of young age.

Social Organisation of Work Based on Sex and Age

Karen women give birth to from five to ten children. Infant mortality is high especially in the period after weaning. There is no differentiated treatment of either sex until the age of two years. At that age the Karen notions of shame result in a differentiation. While boys are left naked until the age of six or seven, the girls are given a gown that reaches the ankles, and they are

told to take care not to expose their genitals. A very frequent jocular expression among the children is an exclamation signalling the discovery of some little girl's bottom due to her carelessly seating herself.

Through socialization children grow up with the conception that female genitals - and later through the association with menstrual blood, also female skirts, are unclean and taboo to men. A woman's unused skirt is kept underneath the floor of the house, and as men never pass under a house, there is no danger of contamination. Although these notions are the legacy of every Karen, they do not disturb the communality of household life. Men and women can do each other's job to a very large extent. A woman, a widow for instance, may cut and grow a swidden herself, which is the normal preoccupation of the men. And men do cook and take care of children at home and in the swidden. To cut, clear, burn, and weed a swidden field is the work of men, - only at peak seasons do women join field work. All married men cut a swidden until they grow so old, that they cannot walk far. There is no retirement for the old. Old women stay in the village with their daughters and grandchildren, they pound rice, weave, and look after children, while the younger women go fishing, fetch firewood or pound rice. We find in the village a large extent of cooperation among the women, specifically among an old mother and her married daughters living next to her house.

In this way the socialization of small children is left to those, who stay at home, and it follows a clear pattern. While boys play around till the age of ten, girls at the age of five start to participate increasingly in domestic chores, fetching firewood and water and taking care of smaller brothers and sisters. Courted by the young men until late at night, a girl in her early teens resumes her domestic chores in the morning, while the young man sleeps all morning in the house of someone else. Not until after marriage does a young man seriously work in the swidden, and he is not really exhorted by his parents to do so before that time.

Deference for the Elders and their Control

In traditional societies we may often notice a prestige and social value of elder persons that is at a remarkable variance with that ascribed to the Elders in western industrialized societies. In the west, the demands of the labour market determine what is valuable knowledge and skills. The social value of a person is defined by her or his position in the labour market. And as the labour market of the western world always demands the most up to date training, the technological knowledge and skills of the Elders become outdated very fast. If not reeducated, there is no need for them and they have no socio-economic value whatsoever in the industrialized societies. Their fate becomes one of the main problems of the Welfare State.⁴

In traditional societies we may often find the prevalence of social valuable knowledge in accordance with the status of old age. Karen deference for the Elders, *sa shaa*, or »old hearts« is evident in daily village life: who among the visitors is seated where, who is handed the offered tobacco purse first, and how one asks permission to pass behind a seated Elder. When addressing each other people use kin terms, and the prefix you use indicates not only the sex and the status of the person addressed, but also the relative status and age of the person who speaks. - To pay respect to the Elders is called *d'khe sa shaa*, and it is very often placed within an institutional framework being part of periodic and occasional ceremonies.

A symbolic expression of the prevalent status differentiation according to sex and age is manifest within the household in its spatial outlay with respect to the four points of the compass. The west is the extreme inauspicious direction associated with death and bad luck, while the east and north are the auspicious corners of the world. This directional orientation of complementary opposition is found throughout Southeast Asian societies, among hill as well as among valley people. Thus members of the household sleep with their heads pointing east or north, feet west or south. With heads pointing towards the east, the eldest couple in a three generational Karen household occupies the northern end of the sleeping compartment, the old man the northernmost. Next to the old couple and sometimes separated from them by a bamboo frame, their son-in-law sleeps with wife and children, - the girls until marriage, the boys until the age of 13-14, when they start partaking in the night courtship.

Besides these permanent and everyday expressions of status differentiation, we find periodic and more explicit occasions for *d'khe sa shaa*. These occasions are shifts of moon, weddings, civil cases and religious ceremonies, where the acts of deference constitute a necessary part of the proceedings, while at the same time serve to confirm the authority of the Elders and their control over the Younger.

How come we find this deference for the Elders in traditional society, how come the Elders have this authority and control over the Younger? An answer may be found in the fact that incidences of deference and authority are two sides of the same coin. The deference paid is the counterpart of the authority and social control of the Elders. In order to analyze the social valuable knowledge attributed to the Elders, we may separate this knowledge into its various foundations, such as the Elders' knowledge of production-technique and ecology, their knowledge of social history, comprising ethnohistory and ability to refer to previous instances of civil cases, knowledge of marriage rules and proper conduct, and finally their ritual knowledge.

Ritual knowledge and capacity for magical techniques is the faculty,



Fig. 1. An old Pwo Karen couple

which very often efficiently can be barred to the Younger. In Karen forest society survival not only depends on the pertinent ecological knowledge, but also on a proper relationship to the supernatural forces, the spirits of water and land, who control the vicissitudes of agricultural life. This relationship is mediated through the *boungkho*, who is the village priest and the intermediary between men and the invisible forces of nature. The cultural form of his authority is expressed by his relative closeness to the spirits or gods. The specific recruitment criteria for the office of *boungkho* require that he is an old man, and a married man too. Through his installation in office his wife must become *boungmyy* and in this role she fulfills important ritual functions as a counterpart to her husband.

Faculty in magical techniques depends on a reputation as a successful healer and on the exclusive possession of such ritual knowledge as written or drawn formulas, some of which have an effect for instance on fever attacks, diarrhoea, head aches, pneumonia or pain in general, while others precipitate good luck for any contemplated enterprise. The magician or *ht'raa*, who is asked to recite such *mantras* usually receives as a payment a few coins and some wax candles. This magical knowledge is well guarded property and it is the privilege of the *ht'raa* Elder alone to decide when and to whom he shall pass his knowledge.

When we look at the level of production-technique the ecological knowl-



Fig. 2. Old man weeding. The Elders continue to work as long as they can.

edge of the Elders is passed down to the uninitiated within each family during the periods, when the young boys, those who have not reached courting age, actually help their fathers in the swidden and in hunting expeditions. To live in and by the forest you must know the resources available, a knowledge stored in the experience of the Elders and expressed for instance in the complex differentiation among more than 1000 plant resources in the jungle. This ecological experience of the Elders may be summed up in a large body of admonitions, such as those found by the American Baptist missionary Francis Mason among the Karen in Burma in the 1850s:

Children and grandchildren, you are children. You do not know, and have never yet seen difficulties and trouble. But I am old, difficulties I have seen, troubles I have found. I have been in scarcity and famine ... I have seen irruptions of rats destroy the crops; I have seen the Talaiings and Burmans overrun the country. I have known famines, when people had to dig deep to obtain poisonous wild yams, and I have seen them die with exhaustion at the diggings.

Therefore

Children and grandchildren, do not be lazy, work hard. If you work hard you will obtain paddy, you will obtain rice ... I tell you truly, everything is in the earth. Therefore I say to you, bend down your backs, grasp the hoe, hoe deep, weed clean; and you will obtain eatables.⁵

Though heirs to the Elders' ecological knowledge, these orally transmitted teachings alone do not seem to constitute a sufficient condition for raising up the deference paid. Individual young men may no doubt come to compete or equal the ecological knowledge of the Elders quite fast. And in contrast to other societies, where the Elders' authority may be founded upon their control of the means of production, such as land and cattle, the Elders in Karen society have no occasion to control the Younger through a control of the means of production, as forest land for swiddens is plenty. Also a circulation of prestige goods, which through the Elders' control may enter an affinal marriage exchange as brideprice, is non-existent in this non-unilineal Karen society.

It is when we turn to types of knowledge, which are exclusively identified with old age, - and sometimes by the Elders actively barred to the Younger such as ritual knowledge, that we find the foundation for the deference and authority expressed. Taking social-historical knowledge we notice that all civil cases including marriage negotiations are decided upon by the men among the village Elders, who at these occasions constitute an informal village council.

A premarital relationship in which a boy is known to have courted a girl for some time, and eventually to have slept with her, must be brought into the open in the form of a *daing gjong*, a public hearing in the headman's house. The purpose of the meeting is to decide upon whether the couple must marry each other or drop the relationship.

We may, as stated, nowadays in almost every village find a Karen headman, appointed by the Thai. Though formal authority in intravillage affairs is vested in him by the Thai, his authority is always exercised in conjunction with that of the village Elders, he himself a village Elder too. Present at the meeting then are the village Elders, mainly men, the headman and the parents of the concerned couple. Attending such a *daing gjong* one may easily become bewildered by the subjects touched upon, as nobody in the beginning seems to mention the actual case. The men discuss the weather, the swiddens, the hunt and who have passed by the village. The discussion gradually comes to deal with such matters as previous instances of affinal relations and how they turned out, dating back as far as the men may remember. And suddenly we find them dealing by an implicit comparison with the actual case, which then is decided upon by consensus in a very short



Fig. 3. Karen nuns. Old women without daughters may choose to become nuns. In this way they gain religious merit and the village as a collectivity sustains them with food.

time, The language of the proceedings has step by step evolved into a flourishing style filled with rhyme and couplets. This is a very significant part of such settings, and it may often render the proceedings incomprehensible to the Younger as well as to the outsider.

We see thus, that the final decision upon the case is reached not by the couple or their parents by themselves, but is the consensus-outcome of a debate among the Elders, a debate which is governed partly by the existing rules, that are known to most villagers, and in particular by the social-historical knowledge of the Elders. The outcome of such a meeting may be a decision upon marriage. We may take, then, a wedding as an instance of the manifest deference shown the Elders as individuals and as a collectivity on one hand and as an articulation of the Elders' control over the Younger on the other.

On the day of the wedding the groom must leave his own household to enter that of the bride before noon. The act of consummation is the sharing of a meal from the same plate of rice and curry, which had been prepared by the bride's household. Before the meal takes place, though, the couple addresses the parents of the bride by seating themselves opposite to them. One of the attendants hands the couple a bowl of turmeric water and they slowly pour the contents over the feet of the bride's parents. By a simultaneous blessing, the parents sanction the new relationship. It may be added



Fig. 4. Grandparents, men, and women often take care of their grandchildren.

here, that prior to the groom's departure from his own household, everybody there, except the oldest man, had poured turmeric water over the feet of someone else, i.e. the women had poured water over their husbands' feet, and the children had poured water over their parents' feet. To pour turmeric water and carefully wash the outstretched feet of someone is a main token of deference. It is used extensively at ritual occasions and always follows an order founded upon age and sex. It is normal practice at moon-shifts, especially at full moon, where the members of a household sprinkle water at the *mihtakhoo*, the wall in the direction of the head when at sleep, and then afterwards pour water over the feet of the Elders in the household.

The actual wedding, though, also is not an event that concerns the households of the bride and groom only, - it concerns the whole village. On the actual day almost everyone watches outside the house of the bride as the groom enters, and inside the house we always find the Elders seated, again mainly men. With the actual wedding meal over, the groom leaves the house in a hurry only to return for good the same night. Rice and curries are then served the guests inside the house, and by the very act of being present and partaking in the food thus served, the Elders sanction the event. A very significant example of the sanctions thus given was a case, where the parents of the couple, the Elders and other villagers in general did not approve of the relationship. Among other things they were too close. This resulted in



Fig. 5. The young couple pours turmeric water over the feet of the bride's parents at a wedding ceremony.

an elopement. The young couple went to a single sympathetic Elder, washed his feet and eloped. Later they settled outside the village in a swidden field of their own. The marriage was considered a bad one as »the Elders had not been present«, and every piece of bad luck that hit close kin of the young couple was considered a result of this marriage. Religious ceremonies, weddings such as the above described, where many people congregate, serve as occasions for disseminating moral instructions in the forms of songs, *phalegae*, about the moral obligations of children towards their parents, and about the proper moral conduct of everyone. Often it is the *boungkho*, who may intone these lessons for hours.

The Karen share with their neighbours in the valley civilizations the Buddhist notions of merit, *karma*, and the transmigration of souls, and as stated, we may even at times find a Buddhist monk settled in a Karen forest monastery. An acknowledged way for a boy to repay the care and hardships of his parents is to become a novice or monk in a Buddhist monastery. It is held, that the merit which the boy acquires through novicehood is transferred to the mother and thus increases her possibilities of a favourable rebirth, while the merit of the monk is transferred to the father. Often young boys enter novicehood or become monks with the stated intent to repay the »milk he got from the mother« and the »rice he got from the father«.



Fig. 6. The wedding ritual consists of a meal from a shared plate. The young girl and the boy are both very shy and hide under towels. The boy is helped to his food by one of the young couple's attendants.

In the impression received, a society with a status ascription based on sex and relative age may be rather static. This no doubt will change as the range of status achievements become enlarged. The Karen economy of production for subsistence is fast becoming exposed to the lures of the market economy. There is an increasing demand for men's wear, kerosene, wrist watches, transistor radios, flashlights and cooking pots, though few Karen in the hinterlands can afford to buy the more luxurious elements among these items. The ordinary way for a Karen to obtain a small amount of cash was to sell the absolute surplus product of some harvested crop from his swidden, such as chilies, sesamum or cotton. Now in the first half of the 1970s few young men have begun to cut specific cash crop fields, sometimes at the expense of the subsistence crops. We may notice a growing tendency towards production of cash crops, at least to the extent that rice for subsistence still may be procured within a net profit. Concomitant with this tendency towards the simultaneous growing of cash crop and rice swiddens, a new class of entrepreneurial young Karen men rises. The Karen entrepreneur is not an Elder, neither does he have the attributes of an Elder. He is a man in his thirties, who knows some Thai language, has money capital to buy the products on the spot and who knows how to get them cheap. The ordinary villager feels he benefits from this, as he avoids the long trek for

three days carrying his whole production down to the Thai town, and as most Karen are shy with the more sophisticated Thai buyers, they prefer to sell their products on the spot to a fellow Karen, though at a low price.

It is possible now to watch a growing internal economic differentiation in local Karen communities with the emergence of the status of labour-boss and with paid labour in cash-crop fields in the way it happened among the Karen in Northern Thailand some fifteen years ago.⁶ In this process of individualization the social authority of the Elders may lessen and partly become substituted by that of the successful labour-boss. The Elders' control based upon social-historical knowledge will become sapped by the Karen society's increasing involvement with the Thai and world market economy through cash-crop production and high labour mobility.

Maintenance of that control, though, which is based upon religious knowledge and skills in magic, is not necessarily endangered by economic transformations. Nevertheless, we may probably notice a shift away from the preoccupation with the indigeneous religious sphere of the *boungkho* and his role as the intermediary between man and nature, towards a greater stress upon authorization from the other religious sphere, that of the Buddhist monk, who in the eyes of the Karen serves as the ideological link between Karen forest society and the larger world of which it is becoming more and more part.

NOTES

1. My familiarity with the Karen in Thailand stems from a period of anthropological field work from 1970-72 and in 1976 in a Karen area in Western Central Thailand. The research was financed through a grant from the Danish Research Council for the Humanities.
2. During the annual post-harvest ceremony for *Phibeyu*, the rice goddess, the *boungkho* conducts the proceedings and he receives on this occasion a small amount of first fruits of labour as a token of the importance of his intermediary position. These almost symbolic first fruits of labour constitute the only indicator of a possible foundation for incipient status differentiation based upon the appropriation of surplus products.
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