

# Seeing 'Karen' in the Union of Myanmar<sup>1</sup>

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*Karen identity is problematic, as peoples known as 'Karen' do not share a common language, culture, religion or material characteristics. Most of the research on Karens has been conducted in Thailand, but the dominant 'pan-Karen' identity is a product of social and historical forces in Myanmar, where this study is focused. In the main part of this paper, I reveal the subjective criteria that have come to signify pan-Karen identity. My primary source material consists of internal literary discourses. In particular, I have drawn on the historical texts of two British colonial-era authors: T. Thanbyah and Saw Aung Hla. Three significant concepts appear in their works and subsequent internal discourses on Karen identity: that Karens are oppressed, uneducated and virtuous. In the latter part of the paper, I review contemporary Myanmar government policy on ethnic identity, highlighting the assigned role of 'Union Spirit' among all groups in the country towards overcoming superficial differences. State policies are designed—among other things—to emphasise a myth of common descent of all 'national races'; construct a unifying national culture, and concentrate administrative power at the centre.*

*Both Karen identity and the Union of Myanmar are products of the same historical and social conditions. Both appeal to a supposed unity, but in other characteristics differ. State discourses suggest accommodation, but are directed towards social control. Karen identity is born of primordial statements but is manifest in structural opposition to the state. Ultimately, while the state seeks to assimilate all, Karen nationalists aim towards the assimilation of their own and separation from others.*

Karen New Year 1998 fell on 18 December. At Insein, just north of Myanmar's national capital, a Buddhist monastery accommodated a stage with 'Karen New Year' emblazoned across the backdrop in three Karen alphabets and languages, and larger Burmese text in the middle. Karen and state flags hung overhead; tents housed traditional clothes, instruments and texts. Stalls thronged with crowds in familiar tasselled Karen shirts, scrutinised by police straddling the compound walls. Foreign Christian missionaries were guided carefully through the crush to reserved seats as the dances began. Speeches followed, and speakers from civic and cultural associations announced in precise Burmese the importance of Karen New Year, Karen culture, and the role of all Karens in building a modern, peaceful and developed Union of Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> When the addresses turned to Karen languages, an elderly man took the stage, and striding up and down began exhorting in Eastern Pwo dialect: 'Our

1 My thanks in particular to Patrick Jory of the Department of Asian Studies, University of Western Australia, for his advice and assistance in the preparation of this article.

2 I have used the current administration's name for the country, formerly known as Burma, because the latter part of this paper emphasises government discourses on the state. I use 'Myanmar' without political connotation. For a comprehensive discussion on 'Myanmification', see Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (ILCAA Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa Monograph Series, No. 33, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Tokyo, 1999), available online at [<http://homepages.tesco.net/~ghoutman/index.htm>].

people must wear their clothes, speak their language and study their texts everyday, or all will be lost!' A Sgaw Karen in the crowd to one side of me asked his friend if she could understand; further back someone yelled out 'Speak in Burmese!' Most of the audience broke into conversation, unable to comprehend. Within a few minutes the elder was finished and the show went on regardless.

Who or what is a Karen? Although the subject of scattered studies, both the concept of a specific Karen identity and the problems it entails persist. For practical reasons, most related research has been carried out in Thailand.<sup>3</sup> However the moulding and reifying of a dominant Karen identity has occurred primarily in neighbouring Myanmar, where conflicts of ethnic identity have been perhaps the most enduring threat to the legitimacy of the state.<sup>4</sup> Examinations of Karen ethnicity there have tended to focus on objective social characteristics such as language, culture and religion.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the political aspirations of the long-running Karen insurgency have also become the subject of both popular media attention and detailed studies.<sup>6</sup> Yet Karens are bound neither by a common language, religion, region, nor many of the other characteristics conventionally used to designate an 'ethnic group'.<sup>7</sup> And therein lies the difficulty. How does a researcher infer that a Sgaw Karen highland animist swidden farmer who speaks only her own language and a Western Pwo Karen delta Christian civil servant whose first language is Burmese share a common identity? How might a tourist draw a connection between Southeast Asian guidebooks' portrayals of Karen as quaint 'hill tribes', and newspaper reports of their bloody nationalist war of attrition? In short, what phenomena shape and reinforce a binding Karen identity?

In recent years, innumerable studies have examined concepts of ethnic, national and state identities, their origins and contemporary manifestations. Much of the debate on the origin and formation of ethnic identity has centred around alternative theories of primordial sentiments and situational adaptation. According to the former model, ethnic identity is a relatively static 'given', while in the latter it is a product of circumstance subject to flux. Geertz's work led him to contend that ethnicity is a drive for recognition through primordial

3 For instance, Yoko Hayami, 'Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha: The Implications of Multiple Reinterpretations for a Minority Ethnic Group in Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2 (September 1996). Keyes *et al.*, in Charles F. Keyes (ed.), *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: The Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma* (Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, 1979). Ronald D. Renard, 'Kariang: History of Karen-T'ai Relations from the Beginnings to 1923' (unpublished PhD Thesis, Graduate Division, University of Hawaii, May 1980). Andrew Walker, 'The "Karen Consensus": Ethnic Politics and Resource-Use Legitimacy in Northern Thailand', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 2, no. 2 (September 2001), pp. 145–62. Rajah has discussed the relative lack of influence of greater Karen discourses from Myanmar on Karen in Thailand. Rajah Ananda, 'Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Nation-state: The Karen in Burma and Thailand', in Gehan Wijeyewardene (ed.), *Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1990), pp. 102–33.

4 Prominent among those studying ethnicity in Myanmar have been historians Victor Lieberman, Ronald Renard and Josef Silverstein. Lieberman has challenged conventional understandings of historical Burman and Mon identities. Victor B. Lieberman, 'Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1978). Renard has outlined the general concept and position of minority groups in history. Ronald D. Renard, 'Minorities in Burmese History', in K.M. de Silva, Pensri Duke, Ellen S. Goldberg and Nathan Katz (eds), *Ethnic Conflict in Buddhist Societies: Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma* (Pinter Publishers, London, 1988), pp. 77–91. Silverstein has offered an overview of more recent Burman and non-Burman political relations. Josef Silverstein, 'Minority Problems in Burma since 1962', in F.K. Lehman (ed.), *Military Rule in Burma since 1962: A Kaleidoscope of Views* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Maruzen Asia, Singapore, 1981), pp. 51–8.

5 Such as the classic colonial-era ethnographic treatise on Karens by the missionary Harry Ignatius Marshall. Harry Ignatius Marshall (Rev.), *The Karen People of Burma: A Study of Anthropology and Ethnology* (White Lotus Press, Bangkok, 1997 [1922]).

6 The definitive text on ethnic insurgency in Myanmar is Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (2nd edn rev., White Lotus Press, Bangkok, 1999).

7 This does not preclude Weber's classic definition of an ethnic group as characterised primarily by a subjective belief in common descent. Max Weber, 'The Origins of Ethnic Groups', in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Ethnicity* (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1996), p. 35.

ties competing against the urge to modernise.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Leach problematised the ethnic identity of Kachins in Myanmar as a structural opposition to other ethnic groups.<sup>9</sup> Later researchers in Myanmar have concurred with Leach's analysis, such as Lehman in his prominent study of the Chin.<sup>10</sup> Taylor has argued strongly against the reification of ethnicity through the attribution of primordial characteristics.<sup>11</sup> Others studying Karens have proceeded similarly, including Keyes, Hayami and Stern.<sup>12</sup> Renard has proposed that the defining characteristic of Karen identity is the conviction that one is a Karen.<sup>13</sup> The deliberate simplicity of Renard's statement both conceals the complexity of its point and suggests a direction for further enquiry.

Rather than investigate supposedly objective characteristics of Karen identity, in this paper I examine self-descriptions: subjective criteria by which the collective Karen identity has come to be defined. I do not propose to examine how Karen villagers *actually* perceive themselves, but rather I attempt to locate the formulation of a pan-Karen identity in particular social and historical processes. Studies that have examined Karen self-conceptions are few, and generally have involved oral collection of data among specific communities in Thailand.<sup>14</sup> For this work, however, I have relied heavily upon a range of Sgaw Karen texts, a significant means for the propagation of internal discourses on Karen identity, which appear to have been underutilised by other authors.<sup>15</sup> Notably, I refer to the historical texts of two British colonial-era authors—T. Thanbyah and Saw Aung Hla—whose works offer a foundation for understanding the movement towards a pan-Karen identity from the nineteenth century to the present. Admittedly, these texts reflect elite Karen aspirations to a pan-nationalist identity, rather than the attitudes of the lower social strata. However, as this paper demonstrates, the role of the vertical power structure in formulating a pan-Karen identity cannot be underestimated. That said, while the characteristics of Karen self-ascription that I have highlighted as prevalent in these texts are, I believe, significant to the study of Karen identity, they are certainly not definitive. Many varied (and sometimes contradictory) secondary themes run throughout the diverse and scattered Karen communities, as well as these texts, and all of these contribute to the sum of factors that amount to Karen identity. That in turn speaks to the broader discourse on relationships between ethnic groups and states: the problems pertaining to Karen identity

8 Clifford Geertz, 'The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States', in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London, Fontana Press, 1993), pp. 255–310.

9 E.R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology No. 44, Athlone Press, University of London, London, 1979 [1954]).

10 F.K. Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society: A Tribal People of Burma Adapted to a Non-Western Civilization* (Illinois Studies in Anthropology No. 3, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1963).

11 Robert H. Taylor, 'Perceptions of Ethnicity in the Politics of Burma', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1982).

12 Charles F. Keyes, 'Introduction', in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, pp. 1–23; Hayami, 'Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha'; Theodore Stern, 'A People Between: The Pwo Karen of Western Thailand', in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, pp. 63–80.

13 Renard, 'Kariang'.

14 For instance, Peter Kunstadter, 'Ethnic Group, Category, and Identity: Karen in Northern Thailand', in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, pp. 119–68. David H. Marlowe, 'In the Mosaic: The Cognitive and Structural Aspects of Karen-Other Relationships', in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*.

15 Where not otherwise referred to in the footnotes, non-English language texts cited in this paper are Sgaw Karen. While a strong reliance on Sgaw Karen texts necessarily brings with it a Sgaw Karen perspective, I have utilised primary and secondary Pwo Karen sources where possible, including Burmese language material written by Pwo Karens. As there are no standard alphabets for Romanisation of either Burmese or Sgaw Karen, in this paper Romanisation of Burmese titles follows the style of the Myanmar Language Commission found in the *Myanmar-English Dictionary* (5th edn, Union of Myanmar, Department of the Myanmar Language Commission, Ministry of Education, 1998). Romanisation of Karen titles is based very loosely on the phonetic alphabet in Robert B. Jones, Jr, *Karen Linguistic Studies: Description, Comparison, and Texts* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1961). Romanisation of personal names follows popular conventional usage.

and the Union to which it has been subordinated have equivalents in most of the Asian region. To approach these themes, I first briefly underscore the problem of pan-Karen identity; secondly, I reveal three of its recurrent discourses, their origins, prevalence and implications; and thirdly, I contextualise the above by examining the position of the state in Myanmar on ethnicity.

## *Dawkalu* and the Pan-Karen Identity

As Karens are not homogeneous, 'pan-Karen' identity is an umbrella term denoting a said unity of the varied regional, social, cultural, linguistic, religious and occupational differences among people referred to as 'Karen'. There is no single word across Karen languages to encapsulate the concept of Karen oneness.<sup>16</sup> 'Karen' is itself an Anglicisation of the Burmese 'Kayin', the etymology of which is subject to dispute. By one account 'Kayin' was a derogatory Burmese term used to designate subordinate non-Buddhist groups.<sup>17</sup> By another, it means 'aboriginal'.<sup>18</sup> Officially it is a derivation of 'Kanyan', the name of a vanished civilisation.<sup>19</sup> As the concept of a pan-Karen identity is relatively new, so too is the term that perhaps captures it best in Sgaw Karen: *dawkalu*, meaning 'entire race'.<sup>20</sup> But this term to encompass the conceptual whole is a mere label, not a tool for understanding the entity it purports to describe. Attempts to clarify the parameters of the *dawkalu* have in themselves demonstrated the inherent complexities and contradictions it entails.

Geographically, Karens are spread from the western delta of Myanmar to the mountain ranges of western Thailand.<sup>21</sup> While the vast majority of Karens reside in Myanmar, to

16 However each Karen language does have some term meaning 'people' that typically designated group identity. Keyes, 'Introduction', p. 10. Nonetheless, these terms do not *specifically* indicate a concept of *pan*-Karen identity.

17 Lieberman, 'Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma', p. 469. See also 'The Karen', in *Minority Groups in Thailand* (Headquarters, Department of the [United States] Army, Department of the Army Pamphlet No. 550-107, Ethnographic Study Series, February 1970), pp. 793-4. But subordination was not necessarily perceived in an 'ethnic' sense. Gravers argues that the main criterion used by Burmans to ascribe 'barbarian' status to others was religious. Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (NIAS Report No. 11, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen, 1993), p. 26.

18 Smith Dun (Gen.), *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel* (Southeast Asia Program, Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University, Data Paper No. 113, Ithaca, New York, May 1980), p. 3.

19 *Tain:jin:dha: jinkjei:hmu. jou:ja dalei. htoun:zanmja:—kajin* (National Races' Cultures and Customs: Kayin) (Union of Burma, Burma Socialist Programme Party, Headquarters of the Party Central Organising Committee, 1967) (in Burmese), pp. 10 and 20. Stern suggests that this word may have originated from Mon language. Stern, 'A People Between', p. 80.

20 Where *daw* (*dau*) is a prefix denoting 'entire', 'whole' or 'complete' and *kalu* (*k'lu*.) literally means 'kind', 'variety', 'species' or 'genus' but in this context means 'race', 'ethnicity', 'ethnic nation' or 'ethnic group'. *Daw* is a substitute for the prefix *pga* (*pga*), meaning 'person', in the term *pgakalu*, literally, 'variety of person'. *Pgakalu* appears to be a Sgaw Karen neologism from the Burmese word *lumyo* (*lumjou*:). The contemporary term for 'ethnic group' in Burmese is *lumyosu* (*lumjou:zu.*), where *su* (*zu.*) indicates a group or assemblage. Likewise, *lumyosu* has its Sgaw Karen equivalent in *kaludoo* (*k'lu.duít.*), however this term is sometimes used interchangeably with *pgakalu*. Although no longer a conventional term in social sciences, I have translated *kalu* here as 'race'. This choice is justified as it invokes the pan-Karen aspirations inherent in both *pgakalu* and *dawkalu* and best reflects the collective perception of Karen authors, particularly those during the British colonial era, of their own identity. See also *Hti'ruikauñthei. wauñthrei'-a'bé. (1)* (*Political Terms, Book 1*) (Ye-Tavoy Publications Committee, Karen Era 2736 [c. 1997]), p. 6. J. Wade (Dr.), *Thesaurus of Karen Knowledge* (vol. 1, Judson Sesquicentennial Edition, BBC Board of Publications, Rangoon, 1963), p. 515.

21 Koenig argues that this wide distribution of Karens has contributed both to their importance to the region and also to the differences in Karen identities, particularly between the west—where over time they were absorbed into lowland polities and in the east, where they fiercely resisted assimilation. William J. Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752-1819: Politics, Administration, and Social Organization in the Early Kon-baung Period* (Michigan Papers on South & Southeast Asia, no. 34, Center for South & Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1990), pp. 63-4. Marlowe also considers the Karens' dispersion to have been of critical importance to regional polities, but suggests that rather than drawing a division between Karens on the plains and Karens in the hills, their significance lay in the medial positions that they occupied between domains. Marlowe, 'In the Mosaic', p. 166.

attach a numerical figure to the population is to court controversy. The 1931 census, perhaps the last truly comprehensive attempt at mapping the national demography, put Karens at less than 1.5 million out of a total 14.5 million, but under the Japanese administration a decade later, they were estimated at 4.5 million.<sup>22</sup> In more recent years, government censuses have variously estimated a Karen population of between 2 and 5 million, whereas Karen nationalists claim between 7 and 12 million.<sup>23</sup>

One reason for the quantification difficulties lies in the problem of classification. British colonial surveys used language as the main criterion for ethnic distinction. Under the colonial regime, Karenni speakers were classified as Karen—Karenni (Kayah) being one of the three principal sub-groups that make up Karen languages.<sup>24</sup> However, the independent state later deemed Karenni and its sub-groups distinct from Karen.<sup>25</sup> Out of the 17 Karen groups identified in the 1931 census, 11 remained, falling broadly under the categories of 'Sgaw' and 'Pwo' in the government schema. There are an estimated 20–25 distinct Karen dialects.<sup>26</sup> However many Karen nationalists point to fine linguistic and cultural distinctions to claim that up to 28 Karen groups exist, and fanciful claims run to over a hundred.<sup>27</sup>

Karens adhere to Buddhist, Christian and local faiths. The Christian minority has often assumed positions of leadership and has thus been the most visible, although perhaps around three-quarters of Karen are Buddhist.<sup>28</sup> Religion has had a significant impact on Karen society, although Karens have not generally drawn a relationship between religious practice and ethnic identity.<sup>29</sup> Monks and missionaries alike have devised different alphabets for various Karen languages, and so the script used in a given situation often depends not only on the specific language employed but also the religious persuasion of the user. There are at least nine distinct scripts, both modern and 'ancient' (see Figure 1).<sup>30</sup>

If a Karen commonality is not readily found among linguistic, regional, religious or cultural characteristics, from where did it come? The creation of a modern pan-Karen identity can be attributed primarily to a specific historical process: the combined colonial-missionary enterprise. Under its influence, *dawkalu* was born, not merely as a term but as an organisation. Founded in 1881 by elite American-educated Karen Christians, Dawkalu

22 Smith, *Burma*, p. 30. See also Teruko Saito and Lee Kin Kiong, *Statistics on the Burmese Economy: The 19th and 20th Centuries* (Data Paper Series, Sources for the Economic History of Southeast Asia, no. 7, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1999), p. 7. Dun identifies problems and inaccuracies with the 1931 census and proposes a population of Karen around that time of no less than 3.5 million. Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, pp. 87–8.

23 Chris Cusano, 'Water on the *Khu* Leaf: Displaced Karens in Eastern Burma' (2nd draft, February 2001, final draft in press), p. 2. In its history text on the Karen revolution, the Karen National Union has claimed that in the 1970s there were around 5.5 million Karen, not including Karenni and Pa'o as sub-groups. Importantly, out of a total population at that time of 30 million, the text maintains that Burmans in fact made up only 13 million. Hence, it deems non-Burmans to be the majority. Pu S'kaw Ler Taw, *K'ñau' tàpèuhseu tàsǎ.sotei'so* (*History of the Karen Revolution*) (History Committee, Karen National Union, c. 1977), pp. 22–3.

24 Jones, *Karen Linguistic Studies*, p. v.

25 In personal correspondence of 24 December 1999, a Karen scholar held that this was an example of government manipulation of ethnicity: 'Formerly the Karennis and even the Pa'os identified themselves as Karen tribes ... [but] just before Burma's independence, the clever Burmans (extreme nationalist politicians) cleverly manipulated [them] and the Karennis and Pa'os left the [Karen].' Lehman, however, argues that this was a matter of choice by Karenni leaders. F.K. Lehman, 'Ethnic Categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems', in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*, p. 101.

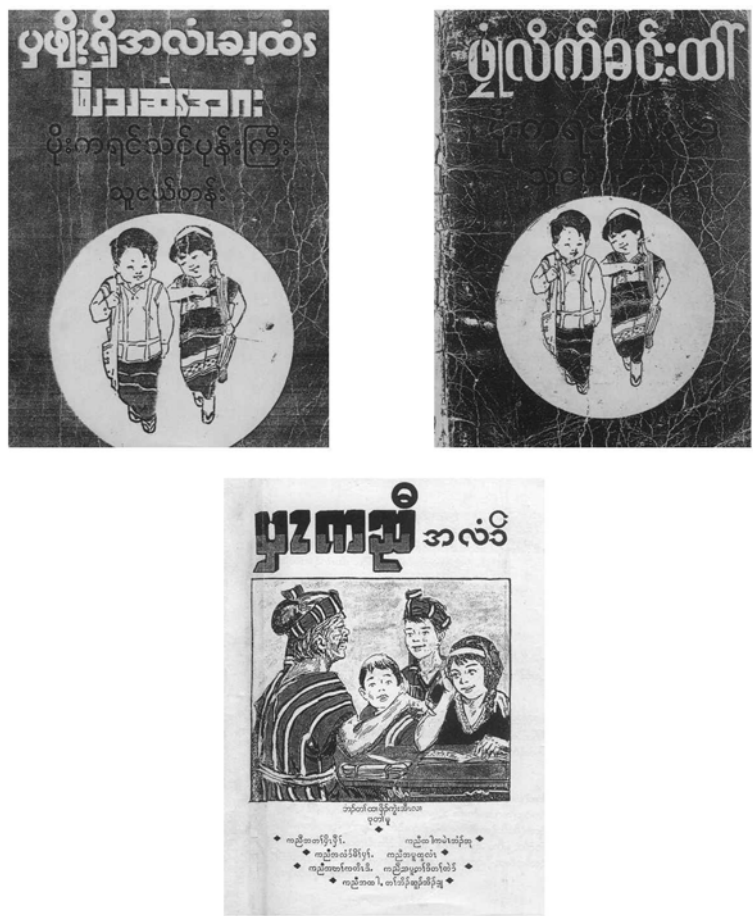
26 Jones, *Karen Linguistic Studies*, p. v.

27 Pu Htawmepa, 'Hpu' k' tei' thu' (3)–K'ñau' k' peu' di. tà tu htau.k'leì. aú. háu.hk6.lei.' ('Grandpa Will Tell You [3]: Karen Will Rule Upon Worms Eating the Earth'), *Kwe Kalu* (31 July 1999), p. 15. S'kaw Ler Taw, *K'ñau' tàpèuhseu tàsǎ.sotei'so*, p. 84.

28 S'kaw Ler Taw, *K'ñau' tàpèuhseu tàsǎ.sotei'so*, p. 79. The 1931 census calculated Sgaw as 67 per cent Buddhist and Pwo 93 per cent. 'The Karen', in *Minority Groups in Thailand*, p. 831.

29 Keyes, 'Introduction', p. 12. By contrast, Burmans conventionally associate being Burman with being Buddhist.

30 *Tain:jín:dha: jinkjei:hmui.*, pp. 371–2. Jones, *Karen Linguistic Studies*, p. v. S'kaw Ler Taw, *K'ñau' tàpèuhseu tàsǎ.sotei'so*, pp. 100–01, 106–7. To date, efforts to create a pan-Karen script have been unsuccessful.



**Figure 1.** Pan-Karen identity and its primers: top left, Western Pwo Karen ‘Christian’ script; top right, Eastern Pwo Karen ‘Buddhist’ script; bottom, Sgaw Karen ‘Christian’ script. *Note:* The two Pwo Karen texts are in accordance with government textbook format, and bear Burmese subtitles; the Sgaw Karen text is from Thailand.

was the first modern proto-nationalist organisation in what is now Myanmar, established even prior to the completion of British military occupation. What motivated the organisation and promotion of a pan-Karen cause? Three powerful subjective concepts that figured in the early literature shaping Karen identity have remained, in one form or another, a part of pan-Karen discourse ever since. They are that Karens are oppressed, uneducated and virtuous.<sup>31</sup>

31 According to Keyes, the most significant Karen self-ascriptions are the use of a Karen language, the sharing of myths that suggest a common identity and structural inferiority to other groups, and a coinciding moral superiority. Keyes, ‘Introduction’, pp. 10–12. Kunstadter and Stern have also both emphasised the role of language in determining identity. Kunstadter, ‘Ethnic Group, Category, and Identity’, p. 155, and Stern, ‘A People Between’, p. 63. I have some brief comments on each of these points that are salient to this paper. First, (dated) studies in Thailand may have led researchers to conclude that language is paramount to Karen identity, but this cannot be said of Karens in Myanmar, although undoubtedly it remains an important element. The combined effects of pro-Burmese language government education policies and a political culture couched in Burmese idiom there mean that many Karens who are unable to speak a Karen language with competency, if at all, are invariably among the strongest proponents of ‘Karen rights’. Furthermore, while language may serve to reinforce sub-group identity, it does much less to facilitate *pan*-Karen identity when, for example, mountain Sgaw Karens have been

## The Oppressed

Our Karen race has suffered oppression under the Burman chauvinist system ... and has been forced into slavery for generations—so our race has been impoverished and unable to progress.<sup>32</sup>

Conventional Karen accounts propose that they were first to arrive in the area now demarcated as Myanmar, followed by the Mon and Burman, both of whom were feudal oppressors.<sup>33</sup> The most comprehensive Karen study of their migration and persecution is Saw Aung Hla's Sgaw Karen work, *The Karen History* (c. 1932), which stands as a testament to the construction of a pan-Karen identity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.<sup>34</sup> Aung Hla was a missionary-educated inspector of schools under the colonial state. He felt acutely the need to produce a definitive historical text about Karen for Karen. Sourcing Karen, Burmese and English texts, and Karen epic poems and oral histories, Aung Hla's work traces the said historical oppression of the Karens through a series of migrations from Babylon, across Central Asia towards their current home.<sup>35</sup> Aung Hla carries the reader forward to the Karens' arrival in Mongolia (in 2167 BCE), from where most Karen histories begin tracking their migration. There they paid respects and taxes to the local rulers and were able to live peacefully for some hundreds of years. However the rulers became concerned about potential rivalry after the numbers of Karens grew, so they 'scattered and subjugated the Karen and made some slaves'.<sup>36</sup> Being a peace-loving people, Aung Hla continues, rather than fight, the Karen again moved. The story was repeated in lower China, before their eventual arrival in present-day Myanmar. The wide dispersion of Karens throughout Myanmar and Thailand is accounted for by the theory that they migrated in different groups, over different periods, along the Irrawaddy, Salween and Mekong Rivers.

Over the first millennium of the Christian Era, the Irrawaddy, Salween and Mekong River basins came to accommodate numerous diverse groups of people, coexisting in varying degrees of cooperation and hostility. Most Karen texts emphasise their endogamy and animosity toward other groups, while at the same time other indications are that

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Footnote continued

unable to recognise, let alone understand, the language of delta Western Pwo Karens. Secondly, I suggest that Keyes' remarks on structural inferiority coincide with the themes of 'oppression' and 'lack of education' contained in Karen literature. Thirdly, Keyes' comments on Karen's sense of moral superiority broadly correspond to the discussion on virtue in this paper.

32 'Kaùhkó. Thu.hkó.kleùso'ro Sau Bó. Mya. a' ták'to hpei' K'ñau' Nj.htaú.thau'-K'ñau' nj. 2738 Th'le láhtaú. (1) thau' lá Dí.se'beú. (18) thau' 1998 nj.' ('President Commanding General Saw Bo Mya's Speech on Karen New Year: Karen New Year 2738, 1st Day of waxing Th'le, 18 December, 1998'), *KIC News*, vol. 2, no. 3, Karen Information Centre (December 1998), p. 5.

33 Horowitz proposes that the most common ethnic group claim to legitimacy is that they are 'indigenous'. Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), pp. 202–4. As most groups in present-day Myanmar are deemed 'indigenous', the challenge for each is to assert that they are *more* indigenous by default of prior arrival.

34 Saw Aung Hla, *Pgak'ñau' a'li. tàsì.sotei'so* (*The Karen History*) (Images Asia, c. 2000 [c. 1932]).

35 However Aung Hla asserts that they were 'not one of the lost tribes of Israel' as they left Babylon before the house of Israel was established. Aung Hla, *Pgak'ñau' a'li. tàsì.sotei'so*, p. 66. Only a few later texts support Aung Hla's 'Babylonian origin' theory, such as Pi Emma's *My Race, The Karen People*. In her text, Pi Emma goes to some length to compare 'ancient' Karen scripts with the Hebrew alphabet. Pi Emma, *Y' pgak'li. Pgak'ñau' hpo' abé. deu'* (*My Race, the Karen People: Book One*) (undated), pp. 17–33. The supposed similarity of these alphabets was originally picked up on by the nineteenth-century missionary Francis Mason. Renard, 'Kariang', p. 33. Recent Karen authors have either downplayed the theory or explicitly rejected it. S'kaw Ler Taw, for instance, in writing an official history of the Karen revolution, avoided offending the Buddhist majority in the revolution's rank and file by dismissing the idea outright. For instance, S'kaw Ler Taw, *K'ñau' tàpeùhseu tàsì.sotei'so*, p. 79.

36 Aung Hla, *Pgak'ñau' a'li. tàsì.sotei'so*, pp. 66–7.

'Karens' had extensive interactions with lowland polities.<sup>37</sup> Historical documents suggest that the kingdom of Pegu struck alliances with 'Karens' prior to the defeat of their city by Ava in 1775.<sup>38</sup> Karens' support for Pegu may have instigated vengeful punitive sanctions by the victors, precipitating contemporary themes of persecution.<sup>39</sup> Thai-language sources also record the flight of many Karens into Siam in this period, where they were incorporated into the administrative framework.<sup>40</sup>

At this point the texts of Thera T. Thanbyah, the most prominent Sgaw Karen historian to precede Aung Hla, become relevant. Thanbyah was a founding member of the nationalist Dawkalu association, and like Aung Hla, a product of the missionary education system. While he felt a need to record a definitive 'Karen history', his was a smaller field of study and narrower objective than that of the later Aung Hla. Thanbyah relied on nineteenth-century eyewitness accounts and documents to emphasise the role of the Christian missions in liberating the Karen people from their historical bondage. *The Karens and their Persecution* begins with a portrayal of atrocities committed against Karens during the latter part of the eighteenth century not as the result of a war between two states, but rather as a war of genocidal intent by Burmans (who at that time dominated Ava) versus Karens.<sup>41</sup>

With the advent of British control from the nineteenth century, conditions for Karens ameliorated, and they ostensibly became loyal subjects of the British Crown. The first Anglo-Burmese war (1824–26) began a new era, and around the time of the British invasion, some Karens led a failed uprising against Ava.<sup>42</sup> As early as 1826, a 'Karen spokesman' addressed the Viceroy of India to list a litany of oppressive measures enacted against his people by both Burmans and Siamese.<sup>43</sup> Major Snodgrass, an officer in the British army who published a record of the first war, also singled-out the Karen, who, he remarked,

may be considered as the slaves of the soil, living in wretched hamlets by themselves, heavily

37 Stern, 'A People Between', pp. 64–5. Leach discusses the interactive relationship between hill and valley peoples throughout the northern regions of contemporary Burma in E.R. Leach, 'The Frontiers of "Burma"', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 3 (1961), pp. 49–68.

38 Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles*, p. 219. Lieberman argues that the resistance of Pegu may in fact have been led by a Karen, and not by a Mon, as ordinarily presumed. Lieberman, 'Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma', p. 468.

39 Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752–1819*, pp. 63–4. Stern, 'Ariya and the Golden Book: A Millenarian Buddhist Sect Among the Karens', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1968), p. 299.

40 Charles F. Keyes, 'The Karen in Thai History and the History of the Karen in Thailand', in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, p. 44. Stern, 'A People Between', pp. 65–6. Renard, 'Kariang', p. 71. Ronald D. Renard, 'The Differential Integration of Hill People into the Thai State', in Andrew Turton (ed.), *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States* (Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 2000), pp. 71–5.

41 T. Thanbyah, *Pgak'ñau' dau. a' tàbá.kòbá.gau-xa' na' 1824–1854 (The Karens and their Persecution: AD 1824–1854)* (American Baptist Missionary Press, Rangoon, 1904), pp. 49–50, 66–7. This book, and the later *Pgak'ñau' dau. a' tàdó.htaú.á htaú.-xa' na' 1854–1914 (The Karens and Their Progress: AD 1854–1914)* (American Baptist Missionary Press, Rangoon, 1913) were up until recently standard high school texts in Karen National Union schools, and refugee camps in Thailand.

42 Stern, 'Ariya and the Golden Book', p. 305. However, the British did not complete their conquest for over another fifty years, in which time there was reputed to be at least one Karen-led uprising against the British. Stern writes that around 1856, just after the occupation of lower Burma, a Karen revolt against the new regime swept across a number of regions but was finally put down with the assistance of Karen Christian converts. Stern, 'Ariya and the Golden Book', p. 307. See also Gravers, *Political Paranoia in Burma*, p. 28. Interestingly, Hinton argues that millenarian Karen leaders were perhaps the first to invoke pan-Karen aspirations, through their recognition that unified under a powerful leader they had a greater chance of resisting intrusion into their territories by lowland polities. Peter Hinton, 'The Karen, Millennialism, and the Politics of Accommodation to Lowland States', in *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, p. 92.

43 Donald MacKenzie Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma* (Kegan Paul, Trench, London, 1887), pp. 157–61.



taxed and oppressed by the Burmese authorities, by whom they are treated as altogether an inferior race of beings ...<sup>44</sup>

With the third Anglo-Burmese war (1885–86), the embryo Karen nationalist movement militarised rapidly. The surrender of the royal family to the British and exile of King Thibaw led to sporadic outbreaks of bitter hostilities between Burman-allied and British-allied communities for many years. In sympathy to the Karen cause, Donald MacKenzie Smeaton—a British observer—wrote *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, the first English text pleading their case to an outside audience. The book also contains a series of letters from a prominent missionary, Dr Vinton, which admit to missionaries' role in militarising and promoting a pan-Karen identity. Reporting on one 1886 battle, for instance, Vinton observes:

The Karens had few guns in their hands, but mostly used spears, shields and bows ... The fighting was heavy and bloody on the side of the [Burman] dacoits. Hunger had made them desperate, and so they fought for their lives ... The fight was especially noticeable, because every Karen clan, except the Pghos, were in arms that day ... The tribes that once were constantly fighting each other, now stood side by side. From a loose aggregation of clans we shall weld them into a nation yet.<sup>45</sup>

As the British consolidated power, they slowly responded to demands for special recognition by Karen leaders and their proponents. In 1917, when Westminster decided to extend partial home-rule to the Indian Empire through the establishment of local legislatures, Dawkalu commenced lobbying to reserve seats for Karen representatives. These they obtained when the Legislative Council commenced in 1923, the only 'native' group in the territory to do so. The Karen elite was now able to use its exceptional position to push through bills reinforcing pan-Karen identity and demanding restitution for perceived age-old oppression. Aung Hla claims that the Karen New Year, for instance, was a traditional event that had been lost, 'Because the Mon and Burman oppressed we Karens, [so] we were scattered throughout the mountain ranges and wilderness, and for many years we didn't know of our New Year.'<sup>46</sup> The theme had also arisen in submissions to the Whyte Committee on communal representation, such as in one address by an anonymous speaker:

The Karens are to-day ten times more oppressed and down-trodden than in former days. The Burmese have learned to be wiser and more cunning in their methods of oppression, and Government are [*sic*] none the wiser.<sup>47</sup>

The Second World War began with Karen–Burman animosity manifesting itself in violence and left in its wake a failed attempt for an independent Karen state. The hasty withdrawal of the British and arrival of the Burman-dominated Burma Independence Army with Japanese troops all but guaranteed conflict. Dawkalu recoiled onto its children, as rightly or wrongly, to be identified as 'Karen' was to be associated with colonial rule and loyalist sentiment. Inter-communal bloodshed again ensued; atrocities were widespread and mutual. The clashes strengthened the Karen nationalist leaders' resolve for the establishment of an independent Karen state. After the war, four prominent Karen groups

44 Snodgrass (Maj.), *Narrative of the Burmese War, Detailing the Operations of Major-General Sir Archibald Campbell's Army, from Its Landing at Rangoon in May 1824, to the Conclusion of a Treaty of Peace at Yandaboo, in February 1826* (Ava Publishing House, Bangkok, 1997 [1827]), p. 21. However, Snodgrass does not offer details as to what specifically distinguished Karens from their neighbours (apart from their poverty) nor provides details on his sources of information regarding Karens.

45 Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, pp. 15–16, my italics.

46 Aung Hla, *Pgak'ñau' a'li. tāsī.sotei'so*, p. 113. The Karen New Year was passed by the Legislative Council in 1937, and is still an official calendar event in Myanmar. '62nd Anniversary of Karen National New Year: History of the Karen National New Year', Eastern Pwo Karen Culture and Literature Preservation Committee (25 November 2000).

47 San C. Po (Dr), *Burma and the Karens* (Elliot Stock, London, 1928), p. 8, quoting witness.

reunited and formed an armed wing, in preparation for a declaration of Karen independence, but the movement had its detractors.<sup>48</sup> As some sought compromise with the newly independent government and others pursued demands for a wholly autonomous Karen state, the pan-Karen front factionalised and failed to achieve its ultimate objective.

Oppression has since shaped much Karen internal discourse. As the pan-Karen movement failed to obtain an independent homeland (other than a small state of little significance within the union), civil war spiralled out of control. Successive post-independence governments have responded to demands for autonomy with hard-line policies that have lent credence to Karen grievances. Uncompromising anti-insurgent strategies in Karen-populated areas began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since the 1990s, Karens are believed to have made up one of the largest communities of internally displaced people in Asia, giving a contemporary face to the narratives of dispossession.<sup>49</sup> Populations in remote mountainous regions have ample reason to believe that they are being targeted for extermination, through the destruction of ancestral villages and land, forced relocation, the severing of inter-community communication and military provocation of inter-communal conflict.<sup>50</sup> Thousands are forced into Thailand as refugees and migrant workers where Karen cultural groups lament that the 'young people are being swallowed into Thai society and are losing a sense of pride in their culture and identity'.<sup>51</sup> Those remaining behind express fear of economic take-over:

Neither the Burmese government nor the multi-national companies have any respect for our traditional practices ... Before they came to our land, they should have asked permission from our village leaders ... but they just came to our land without permission.<sup>52</sup>

Suffering villagers relate their personal experiences to the long-term narrative of oppression.<sup>53</sup> Urban Karens offer anecdotes of teachers and supervisors who have discriminated against them at school and in the workplace, and critique administrative policies that deliberately marginalise the Karen community.<sup>54</sup> Karens continue to see oppression as the norm, in word and in deed.

Understandably, this tragic situation attracts attention and support from outside agencies, but frequently these succeed in doing little more than reinforcing the same ethnocentric models that have contributed to the prolongation of the conflict.<sup>55</sup> With informants who often have vested political and economic interests, the reporting of gross human rights abuses and delivery of assistance has been co-opted into the ethnic-nationalist framework. Sympathetic third parties (journalists, aid workers, researchers) based outside the country adopt a position as latter-day colonial ethnographers perpetuating ethnocentric readings

48 For instance, the new Union of Burma army was led by Smith Dun, a former Karen officer in the British imperial forces. In 1948, Dun led Karen troops among those rescuing the government from an attempted communist take-over. He blamed both Karens and outside parties for the inflation of unreasonable nationalist sentiment. Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, pp. 62, 68. See also Josef Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1980), p. 46. Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (C. Hurst, London, 1987), pp. 286–7.

49 Cusano, 'Water on the *Khu* Leaf', pp. 5–7.

50 Kwe Klo, Saw, 'Mone Township–Khlerlwihtooh District: Report on Village Conditions', unpublished report (July 1999), p. 7. People's Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarization in Burma, *Voice of the Hungry Nation* (Asian Human Rights Commission, Hong Kong SAR, 1999), p. 88.

51 Eastern Pwo Karen Culture and Literature Preservation Committee, 'Proposed Activities: 1998' (1997), p. 1.

52 Saw Moe K. Tun, *The 1997 Offensives: Suffering and Struggle for Identity and Justice of the Ethnic Karen in Burma* (Burma Issues, Bangkok, 1997), p. 10, quoting an anonymous villager.

53 For instance, 'K'lu Ser, 'Y' li k' htǎ. bá. a' hpo' xè sò. a' li di'. á' ('Will My Grandchildren See their Children Fleeing Carrying their Own Grandchildren?') *Kwe Kalu* (31 May 1999), p. 20.

54 Independent Karen Historical Research Association, 'Badhapyan *Kajin* thamain:' ('Karen History Translated'), *Neo Historical Journal*, vol. 3 (April 1999), p. 48.

55 For a recent critique of training programmes offered to political exiles in Thailand see, 'The Irrawaddy: Training for Whose Sake?', *The Burmanet News*, no. 1875 (2 September 2001) [strider@burmanet.org], 3 September 2001.

of oppression.<sup>56</sup> Many offer tacit—some, explicit—support for those forces opposing the government through armed struggle, with little critical reflection of the role that these groups may have played in the drawn-out civil war. Non-government organisations facilitate new structures to reinforce artificial categories of ethnic and regional identity, design programmes romanticising antiquated models of indigenous life, and fund and distribute ethnic-nationalist texts.<sup>57</sup>

If Karen heritage indicates dispossession, concomitantly Karen destiny is one of liberation. Karens often signify their marginalisation by likening themselves to orphans. But this metaphor must be contextualised. In Karen stories, the orphan is hero, invariably managing (through a combination of luck and skill) to gain a powerful position in society, even to the point of taking over a kingdom.<sup>58</sup> Another legend identifies a common homeland and forefather who abandoned his children, but who will eventually return to lead them to their freedom.<sup>59</sup> Myth feeds into religious practice, where many Karens have found consolation in millenarian traditions heralding the imminent return of a saviour both spiritual and political.<sup>60</sup> Recent manifestations of this religio-nationalist urge have demonstrated its resilience.<sup>61</sup> Modern-day millenarian revolts lend credence to the scant references in historical documents indicating that Karen history has consisted not only of oppression but also of a willingness to fight back when conditions have been interpreted as favourable.

### *The Uneducated*

[My teachers] give me education and I know if I try to get education I will have more knowledge and if I want my nation and freedom I must try to get education.<sup>62</sup>

To talk about education and pan-Karen identity is to talk about books. In fact, it is to begin by talking about a 'golden book', mythologised in the generic version of a story about a proto-Karen who lost or maltreated the book, which contained invaluable knowledge. He was subsequently forced to rely upon a younger brother for his education.<sup>63</sup> Again, Thanbyah makes an explicit link between this myth and the Karens' discourses of oppression:

According to Karen history, once upon a time they had literature. Because they did not take care they lost their literature so they were impoverished and became oppressed by the races that they stayed among.<sup>64</sup>

56 For instance, some Karen Human Rights Group reports, online at [http://www.khrg.org].

57 Aung Hla's book has been reprinted with funding from Novib (Oxfam Netherlands), and Thanbyah's texts have been distributed by Christian agencies operating in Thailand. Other publications with ethnic-nationalist rhetoric couched as 'scholarship' are funded by international agencies, although the documents do not bear agency logos or details.

58 For instance, Po Lin Tay, *Pgak'ñau' a' tàxeipuu't'hpá.-leu' tauhkeú.tha. a'gàù* (*Karen Tales: For Middle Standard*) (n.p., undated), pp. 3–22, 64–84.

59 For some variations on this story see, Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, pp. 11–13. David Gilmore (Rev.), 'Karen Folk-lore I: The Legend of Taw-Me-Pa', *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, vol. 1 (1911), pp. 75–82. Hayami, 'Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha', p. 338. Thra Htoo Hla E, *Lì. Pà Ywa* (*The Golden Book* [lit. *Book of the Lord God*]) (Karen Baptist Convention, 1955), pp. 121–33. Jones, *Karen Linguistic Studies*, pp. 230–3. Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, pp. 5–6. Renard, 'Kariang', pp. 1–2.

60 Stern, 'Ariya and the Golden Book', p. 304, and 'A People Between', p. 64. See also Andersen, Kirsten Ewers, 'Two Indigenous Karen Religious Denominations', *Folk*, vol. 23 (1981), pp. 251–61.

61 The two most prominent being the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army, and (the Christian) God's Army.

62 Paw Kwee, 'Thinking About My Heart Feeling Sad', *Thoo Lei Doh Sah Drw: Kaw Moo Rah High School Tenth Standard Magazine* (December 1994), p. 9.

63 For some variations on this story see, Aung Hla, *Pgak'ñau' a'lì. tàsì.sotei'so*, pp. 45–6. Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, pp. 228–31. Hayami, 'Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha', p. 338. Hinton, 'The Karen, Millennialism, and the Politics of Accommodation to Lowland States', pp. 86, 90. Htoo Hla E, *Lì. Pà Ywa*, pp. 80–96. Renard, 'Kariang', p. 2. Stern, 'Ariya and the Golden Book', p. 303.

64 Thanbyah, *Pgak'ñau' dau. a' tàbá.kòbá.gau*, p. 31.

While the circumstances under which the original Karen lost the 'golden book' may vary (depending on the version of the story), the implication is clear: the Karen had important knowledge, lost it, and suffered as a result.<sup>65</sup>

Christian missionaries played an integral role in building the concept of literary education among Karen and neighbouring stateless societies. Missionaries and Karen converts alike were excited by the proximity of many Karen myths to Old Testament stories.<sup>66</sup> Villagers are said to have endured hazardous journeys to view their 'golden book', which many saw as the fulfilment of prophecy and a harbinger of a new age.<sup>67</sup> By 1887, Smeaton was claiming that 'Karens ... look on Christianity and education as inseparable factors in their civilisation'.<sup>68</sup> The spread of literacy among Karen Christian converts was sufficiently rapid that the first indigenous newspaper in the Province of Burma was a Sgaw Karen text produced through the missions.<sup>69</sup> However the role of the missionaries, while important, should not be exaggerated. All Karen religious traditions have had an eagerness for 'the book'.<sup>70</sup>

Karen texts proceeded to extrapolate the mythology of intellectual mishap across time, maintaining that Karens were previously urbane and educated people whose material and intellectual achievements were appropriated, and Karens themselves relegated to the backwaters.<sup>71</sup> For Aung Hla, the purported destruction of Karen civilisation signified the end of both their education and history:

Because the Karen rulers had fallen a long time ago and they had fled to the mountain wildernesses, they thought that they had no literature, no history. In fact, the Mon and Burmans had destroyed their literature ...<sup>72</sup>

Talk about 'ancient' Karen scripts has since become a popular activity among those convinced of the veracity of this speculation. The absence of material evidence has not stopped nationalist Karen writers to the present day from maintaining that Karens had a literary tradition since they entered Myanmar. They assert that, with the advent of the Mon and Burman kingdoms, it was destroyed and, according to one writer, 'if they saw a Karen writing, they cut off his hands, and in some cases killed him'.<sup>73</sup>

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65 This is a frequent theme in the mythology of marginalised people's in the region. Claes, Corlin, 'The Politics of Cosmology: An Introduction to Millenarianism and Ethnicity among Highland Minorities of Northern Thailand', in *Civility and Savagery*, p. 115.

66 Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, pp. 11, 211. In Htoo Hla E's 1955 text, *Lì. Pà Ywa*, the author first establishes the veracity of ancient Karen verse by showing how ancestors predicted, among other things, the creation of automobiles, electricity, aircraft and trains, and also the inter-communal strife that occurred during and after the withdrawal of British authority from the country. He then proceeds to demonstrate the parallels between Karen verse and the Bible. See also, Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, pp. 6–7. Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, pp. 226–31. Gilmore, 'Karen Folk-lore II: The Fall of Man', *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, vol. 2 (1912), pp. 36–42. The similarity of Karen monotheistic beliefs to those of Christianity has led to many theories of how they came about, including that during their migrations from China, Karen predecessors met and were influenced by Jews. 'The Karen', in *Minority Groups in Thailand*, p. 833. Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, p. 68.

67 Thanbyah, *Pgāk'ñau' dau. a' tàbá.kòbá.gau*, p. 33. Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, p. 298. The Burman elite, however, is reported to have seen nothing good in it and responded with further punitive maltreatment of Karen subjects. Renard, 'Kariang', p. 96. Thanbyah, *Pgāk'ñau' dau. a' tàbá.kòbá.gau*, pp. 25–8.

68 Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, p. 226.

69 S'kaw Ler Taw, *K'ñau' tàpèihseu tàs'j.sotei'so*, p. 103.

70 Stern, 'Ariya and the Golden Book', p. 305.

71 Again, a common theme among the larger ethnic groups in the region. Andrew Turton, 'Introduction to *Civility and Savagery*', in *Civility and Savagery*, p. 20.

72 Aung Hla, *Pgāk'ñau' a'li. tàs'j.sotei'so*, pp. 3–4. This argument is prevalent not only among nationalist Sgaw and Pwo Karens, but also related groups, such as Pa'ò. For instance, Paho Historical Research Association, *Thamain: pjau'neitho: lumjou: (Race With a Lost History)* (Paho, Thailand, undated) (in Burmese).

73 Re Moh, Phar, 'K'ñau' k'lù. dau. a'li.a'lej' ('The Karen Race and Its Literature'), *Kwe Kalu* (31 July 1999), p. 19.

The importance of this narrative lies in its not being intrinsically negative: in fact, it serves a number of important positive contemporary functions. First, it is an historical equaliser for Karens in relation to other apparently culturally superior groups. Secondly, it provides the basis for a pan-Karen system of hierarchy. Thirdly, it offers an explanatory device to accommodate apparent pan-Karen disunity. Fourthly, it rallies its children to the cause.

First, the stress on regaining something (written knowledge) has been important, as not only does it equalise Karens with other groups (former oppressors) but it also erases prior conceptions of inferiority. Karens were not intrinsically uncivilised, it could now be established, but rather had been subjected to unreasonable pressures that had imperilled and eventually destroyed their prior equal status.<sup>74</sup> Since the British arrival, they had been busy, not progressing for the first time, but *returning* to their former position. In fact, the Karen elite could infer that their people had not only drawn equal with other groups, but had surpassed them, or at least had the *potential* to do so. As remarked by the prominent American Baptist missionary Dr Mason:

A well read Burman has a mind like a schoolman of the middle ages, a repository of obsolete metaphysics and exploded science. A Karen *knows nothing, but he acquires knowledge as readily as an Anglo-Saxon ...*<sup>75</sup>

Aung Hla posits that those who rule over other peoples are those with the highest level of education at a given time.<sup>76</sup> Hence, when Karens were oppressed, it follows that they lacked education; later, the manifest superiority of the British rulers meant *ipso facto* that they were educationally superior to others. By implication, the cultural attributes that Karens demonstrated in their aptitude for European-style education also placed them in a superior position to their former oppressors, now subordinate to the British.

Secondly, for the Karen elite, scholarship indicated the potential for superiority not only over other groups, but also over the *dawkalu*—the entire Karen race—although conditions since independence have undermined its capacity to continue in this role. The pan-Karen elite both came to be defined by, and define itself by, its superior Western education. From village-based decentralised communities, it mobilised a body of public opinion towards an assertion of mass identity built on the historical and literary traditions it had 'rediscovered'. By the eighteenth century, Karen communities in Thailand were adapting to the state apparatus there.<sup>77</sup> In contrast, the Karens in Myanmar were establishing their own ethnocentric infrastructure in opposition to that of the state. Given the absence of a traditional overarching social order (such as royalty or a unifying religious doctrine), the dominant criterion for positions in the new hierarchy became 'education': scholarship was everything. By the late nineteenth century traditional respect for 'elders' and village-level leaders as transmitters of knowledge and moral codes had been extended to 'the educated'.<sup>78</sup> The

74 Indicated both by historical claims and the mythology of the 'golden book', which placed the Karen at very least on equal footing with the other brother/s (symbolising one non-Karen race or another, depending on local interpretation).

75 Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, p. 4 (my italics). See also, Hayami, 'Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha', p. 339.

76 Aung Hla, *Pgak'ñau' a'li. tasi.sotei'so*, p. 3.

77 Renard, 'Kariang', pp. 66–88. Renard, 'The Differential Integration of Hill People into the Thai State', pp. 63–83.

78 Po Lin Tay, for instance, reinforces the mutuality of the concepts by interchanging 'our elders have said that ...' and 'an educated person has said that ...' when emphasising matters of import. Po Lin Tay, *Lei hsuu' ñā-leu' tauhtau't'hpá. a'gàù (Go Forward: for Senior Classes)* (Rangoon Karen Press, Rangoon, 1938). On the role of elders in traditional society see Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, p. 144. Smeaton also offers an anecdote of a chance meeting between a Karen elder brought to India for the Calcutta Exhibition in 1883 and a group of Karen boys sent to university there. The elder encourages the young men that 'times were being turned upside down, and that the educated young men must lead, and their old fathers must follow'. Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, p. 207.

battle was on not only to assert a singular powerful identity to other groups, but also to enforce the internal hierarchy. Yet as Karen leaders proved unable to secure an autonomous territory for their people, their position 'among the best-educated, the most advanced' of groups has suffered.<sup>79</sup> Government policies implemented after independence removed earlier special privileges, including the high status accorded the study of Karen language in schools. Subsequently, all groups in Burma were brought to comply with a compulsory system of study in Burmese, with only some minor allowances made for non-Burmese languages at the primary school level. When military power was entrenched during the 1960s, teaching of non-Burmese indigenous languages went completely off the agenda, and for non-Burman groups even publication of the Bible and mundane periodicals became increasingly difficult. Karen languages and texts continued to be taught only in religious institutions (monasteries and churches), and in schools managed by insurgents.

Thirdly, with its fortunes declining, the pan-Karen movement has also ingeniously utilised the discourse on education as an explanatory foil to protect the contemporary archetype of Karen unity. Historically, bloodshed and rivalry may have been common between one Karen village (or region) and another. Marshall, for instance, writes that:

not until numbers of the Karen removed to the plains and thus came more closely into contact with a common enemy, the Burmese people ... that they seem to have largely given up the killing of one another.<sup>80</sup>

By the time Thanbyah and Aung Hla were writing Karen histories, unity was recorded as the norm, and earlier factionalism was conveniently ignored. But the course of pan-Karen ethnicity has not run smooth, and division has frequently surfaced. Though some political leaders have sought compromise, for those engaged in the long-running insurgency, the conviction that they are fighting a primordial enemy has provided the mainstay of their cause. In recent years, factions have also increasingly surfaced in the highly volatile rural areas subject to civil war.<sup>81</sup> As cracks have rent the conceptual unity, so too has pan-Karen identity become subject to damage. But the strand of discourse on education mitigates this effect and resurrects the conceptual whole. It attributes inter-Karen conflict to ignorance born of inadequate education and the clever manipulations of others. Atrocities committed by Karens are said to be the work of an invisible hand; Karens, being virtuous people, are 'deceived by the [Burmans]' into doing bad things.<sup>82</sup> For its part, the nationalist elite reasserts itself by the familiar but no longer reassuring refrain that it has the answers. By default of superior position, it knows better than its subordinates, who would do better to simply follow, rather than make autonomous decisions.<sup>83</sup>

79 O. Hanson, 'The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology', by Rev. H.I. Marshall, M.A., printed at the Ohio State University Press', *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, vol. 14 (1924), p. 69.

80 Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, pp. 152–8, my italics.

81 The Karen National Union, once the sole representative of the pan-Karen cause operating outside government authority, has now split into a number of disparate groups. In 1995, a large body of troops from its ranks formed the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army and fell into loose alliance with government forces. In 1997, the (Karen) Peace Army similarly aligned itself with the centre. In the same year God's Army formed from troops and villagers in a remote jungle region, led by two small boys prepared to fight all and sundry. Other groups have either 'returned to the legal fold' in Myanmar or established exile political splinter groups in Thailand.

82 Hsaingt Seetsar, 'Facets of a Buddhist Army: Part 2', *Burma Issues*, vol. 8, no. 8 (August 1998), p. 3, citing students at a refugee camp school. Marlowe argues that in general Karens attribute behaviour to social and environmental conditions, rather than genetic characteristics. Marlowe, 'In the Mosaic', p. 173.

83 For instance, letters to defecting soldiers by Karen National Union Commanding General Saw Bo Mya, dated 5 and 7 December 1994, in Independent Karen Historical Research Association, 'Mji'hsoun' ('The River Confluence'), *Nainganthi* (New Country), no. 5 (July 1995), pp. 65–6.

Fourthly and above all else, the discourse on education has reverberated as a call for the Karen people to progress. Influenced by Eurocentric concepts of knowledge, political power and education, Karen leaders understood that, to be seen as a civilised nation in their own right, they needed to have both literature and history.<sup>84</sup> In the past, individual Karens and their communities might have been *assimilated into* a dominant polity. Now they were to create one of their own. Unlike some other marginalised groups in the greater region, they were disadvantaged by the dearth of material or historical evidence to suggest prior civility (Karen places, after all, were said to have been appropriated by others).<sup>85</sup> Thanbyah, Aung Hla and their colleagues were at last engaged in a vigorous and desperate contest to advance. In *The Karen History*, Aung Hla states his charter in certain terms:

This book is for Karen to know that once before they had their country, rulers and literature, so that they will enthusiastically arise and respect themselves, *and have respect for themselves as a race*.<sup>86</sup>

He also makes clear that the book is an attempt to establish a Karen scholarship of European standard and methodology, and encourages others to continue the work where he has left off.<sup>87</sup> Thanbyah's two seminal texts appropriately refer first to the Karens' persecution, then to their progress. The foremost Karen nationalist of the 1930s, Sir San C. Po, waxed lyrical about Karen language study, equating it to Latin, Greek, Persian and Sanskrit.<sup>88</sup> Po Lin Tay, a contemporary of Aung Hla, emphasises the need for Karen youth to gain an education, lest

If at some time our texts are lost, what will become of our race's experiences in past generations? There would be nothing to serve as evidence of Karen history, whether records, newspapers or written news, so we would not be able to exactly re-identify our origins and would become as a generation of people without a country.<sup>89</sup>

Youth are urged to work for their people, educated Karens are called on to go and teach others less fortunate, international agencies are exhorted to provide help. Nothing less than the entire legacy, and destiny, of the pan-Karen identity is at stake.

### *The Virtuous*

Our National Identity, jealously preserved as the Karens of Burma, and our National Virtue and National Morals, anxiously nurtured during the long trying centuries, appear at last to be recognised ... untarnished and unsoiled by contamination with their neighbours.<sup>90</sup>

84 The Karen elite was by no means the only one influenced. In the same period Thai kings emphasised the importance of literary study, observing that barbarian races were those without literature and history. Patrick Jory, 'Books and the Nation: The Making of Thailand's National Library', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2 (September 2000), pp. 356–8. Anderson also discusses the importance of print media in building a national identity. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd edn rev., Verso, London and New York, 1991), pp. 134–5. And Horowitz reflects on the efforts of elite groups to enjoin their 'backward' mass bases to emulate an 'advanced' group. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, pp. 171–5.

85 See for instance Bayly's account of the Cham in Vietnam. Susan Bayly, 'French Anthropology and the Durkheimians in Colonial Indochina', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2000), pp. 581–622.

86 Aung Hla, *Pgak'ñau' a'li. tāsī.sotei'so*, p. 4, my italics.

87 Groups like the Independent Karen Historical Research Association (based in Thailand) have continued to pursue the study of pan-Karen identity through to the latter part of the twentieth century. Unlike Aung Hla, these men have generally written in Burmese, and yet in spite of the linguistic shift, their reassertions of Karen identity have remained substantially unchanged.

88 Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, p. 93.

89 K'lu Ser, 'So i K'ñau' li.lei dau. pgahpa.li.hpo' ('This Generation's Karen Texts and Readership'), *Kwe Kalu* (30 September 1999), p. 16.

90 'The Karen Memorial: The Humble Memorial of the Karens of Burma to His Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State for Burma, Rangoon, 26 September 1945', in *A Modern History of Southeast Asia*, p. 214.

As the nineteenth-century missionary enterprise found progress among Karens, so too was their moral status elevated in relation to the determinedly Buddhist lowland polities. One means to this end was to suggest that Karen culture had defining characteristics that paralleled Christian ethics and doctrine, making them all the more worthy of both salvation and European attention. Karens came to be invested with a moral superiority that has ascribed to them virtues of, among other things, chastity, honesty, loyalty and placidity.<sup>91</sup> Alcoholism was commonly identified as virtually their only vice, which no doubt inspired Christian converts to work even harder to erase the one blot on their race, and demonstrate that they were deserving of the special treatment afforded them by their Western patrons.<sup>92</sup>

Interestingly, anecdote suggests that members of other ethnic, social and cultural groups have come to vest in Karens many of the same virtues.<sup>93</sup> Myanmar's first prime-minister conceded that Karens are 'peace-loving' and 'retiring' people, and that in most cases inter-communal conflict was instigated by Burmans.<sup>94</sup> Later government texts also credit Karens with a high morality, citing the virtual absence of divorce and murder in their traditional societies.<sup>95</sup> Discussions with people on the street likewise suggest that these are widely perceived characteristics of Karen identity. Outsiders have also lent this view credence: American army personnel working in Thailand, for instance, were advised that 'sincerity, honesty and truthfulness are essential in dealing with Karen'.<sup>96</sup>

Again, discourses about Karen virtue have an important relationship to those about Karen oppression, as well as implications for the future of the pan-Karen movement. Aung Hla draws the connection:

[Karen rulers of yore] were people who loved honesty, loved peace and unity; if other peoples abused them this way or that then they didn't say anything, and stayed placidly. On account of this placidness, other races—Shan, Thai, Mon and Burman—forced the [Karen] country under their control.<sup>97</sup>

By this account, contact with other groups is associated with disenfranchisement of place and possessions, invariably through a combination of the other's deceit and Karens' own credulity. At worst, it may result in a breakdown of Karen identity, through moral corruption. Hence, Karens historically have also become associated with a high level of endogamy and 'clannishness'.<sup>98</sup> Where Karens have been seen to intermarry or otherwise

91 For instance, Major J. P. Andersen, 'Some Notes About the Karens in Siam'. *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1923), pp. 54 and 58. Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, p. 4. Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, pp. 257–9. *Hti'ruikauthei. (Politics)* (KNU Department of Education & Culture, Kawthoolei, 1970), p. 2. Htoo Hla E, *Li. Pà Ywa*, pp. 144–57. Marlowe, 'In the Mosaic', pp. 208–9. Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, pp. 26, 30. Moo Troo, Saw, 'Karens and Communism', 21 October 1979, in *Karens and Communism & Karens Fight for Peace* (undated), pp. 2–4. Sir J.G. Scott, *Burma: A Handbook of Practical Information* (3rd edn rev., Daniel O'Connor, London, 1921), pp. 119, 123. S'kaw Ler Taw, *K'ñau' tãpeihseu tãsi.sotei'so*, p. 93. Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*. Snodgrass, *Narrative of the Burmese War*, p. 141. On the importance of colonial views about group moralities, see Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, p. 160.

92 It is possible that stories of Karen 'kings' who lost their power due to drunkenness were developed in this period. For instance, Htawmepa, 'Hpu' k' tei' thu' (3)', p. 16.

93 For a broader discussion on this phenomenon see Benedict Anderson, 'Majorities and Minorities', in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (Verso, London and New York, 1998), pp. 318–30.

94 U Nu, trans. U Law Yone, *U Nu: Saturday's Son* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1975), p. 163.

95 *Tain:jin:dha: jinkjei:hmu.*, pp. 214–15.

96 'The Karen', in *Minority Groups in Thailand*, p. 852.

97 Aung Hla, *Pgak'ñau' a'li. tãsi.sotei'so*, p. 3.

98 'The Karen', in *Minority Groups in Thailand*, pp. 815–16. Although Marlowe and Stern both have data that suggest in certain circumstances this may not in fact be the case. Marlowe, 'In the Mosaic', p. 179. Stern, 'A People Between', p. 74.



associate casually with different groups, 'a moral looseness that was unknown before' has been observed.<sup>99</sup> In the pan-Karen scenario, this perceived moral superiority has taken on a political colouring. When Sir San C. Po argued for political separation, he maintained that both Karens' intellectual immaturity and higher morals meant that they could not 'yet intermingle with other races with any mutual benefit or good result.'<sup>100</sup> Both by implication and assertion, then as now, the only solution has been to remain apart. On this moral claim founds the affirmation of pan-Karen national rights as a distinct race owed an independent territory. This sentiment is epitomised by the attitude of an officer in a Karen anti-government insurgent faction who, when asked recently whom his group would recruit as soldiers, replied succinctly: 'We only accept Karens.'<sup>101</sup>

## Taingyintha in the Union

Since before independence, there have been efforts to find a single Burmese term that would encapsulate the many ethnic groups in the country. While the state continues to struggle with terminology, the word that is used most when emphasising the polyethnic nature of Myanmar's citizens is *taingyintha*. Historically translated into English as 'indigenous races', more often it has been translated as 'national races', or sometimes 'national brethren'.<sup>102</sup> Use of this term perhaps best underscores contemporary government policy on ethnic identity, an approximation of Indonesia's 'unity in diversity', emphasising a paramount 'sense of togetherness' among all groups in the country over superficial differences.<sup>103</sup> Conceptually, this approach is very different from policy in Thailand on Karens and other distinct ethnic groups, where they are designated 'hill tribes' and assigned stereotypical attributes distinct from and implicitly inferior to those of the ethnic Thai majority.<sup>104</sup> In Myanmar, however, the Burman majority is *also* recognised as one of the *taingyintha*, thereby reaffirming the principle of equality among all 'national races': as all are 'indigenous', theoretically all are equally legitimate in the eyes of the state.

The prevailing conceptual status of 'national races' is primarily a product of the colonial order, which afforded ethnicity both a permanent and central role in the political and social structure. The British administration localised and ethnicised aspects of administration and social life not previously subject to such parameters. It created 'thick' descriptions of ethnic minutiae, as against the traditional 'thinner' understandings of difference between one group and the next.<sup>105</sup> While the traditional registers of lowland administrations had made reference to groups perceived as linguistically, culturally or socially different where useful for taxation and military purposes, the British administration identified, divided and merged

99 Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, p. 287.

100 Po, *Burma and the Karens*, p. 18. On Karen separateness see also, Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, p. 5. Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, p. 176. Father Vincenzo Sangermano, *The Burmese Empire a Hundred Years Ago* (3rd edn, reprint, White Orchid Press, Thailand, 1995 [1893]), p. 44.

101 Saw Ler Wa, videotaped interview with Pastor Thah Hpay and Elder Toe Toe, God's Army Camp, Myanmar (c. October 2000).

102 *The Constitution of the Union of Burma* (Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, Burma, Rangoon, 1947), article 11(i). *Taingyintha* (*tain:jîn:dha:*) is a construct of *taing* (*tain:*), meaning 'division' or 'administrative region/unit', *yîn* (*jîn:*) is 'root' or 'prime', and *tha* (*dha:*) denotes a being, a group of persons, or offspring.

103 'Knowing Your Roots', *New Light of Myanmar* (21 February 2001), [http://www.myanmar.com/nlm/perspectives/february/feb21.htm], 22 February 2001, citing Secretary-1 of the State Peace and Development Council, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt.

104 Keyes, 'Introduction', p. 13.

105 For a more detailed discussion on 'thick' and 'thin' descriptions of ethnicity see, K.W. Taylor, 'On Being Muonged', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 2001), pp. 25–34.

politics according to wholly new criteria with less transparent objectives. Likewise, while cultural characteristics had been used by different powers to 'ethnicise' their struggles in preceding centuries, they had been only one component in the exercise of power, which but partially explained social and political motivation. Under the British administration, however, ethnicity came to be assigned an aetiological role in prior conflicts.<sup>106</sup> As a result it has come to be assigned that role in subsequent ones.

The independent state essentially co-opted the complex and often ill-conceived ethnic delineation established by its colonial predecessor. In neighbouring China, the revolutionary state went through a detailed process of classifying 'minority nationalities' according to specific Stalinist criteria.<sup>107</sup> But state recognition of ethnic identity in Myanmar was buffeted by short-term political expediencies to guarantee state stability in the face of mass insurgency and incessant political turmoil. It was not until the 1960s that the new military-managed socialist state set about the creation of definitive ethnographic studies for certain major 'races', which were released late in the decade.<sup>108</sup> Each text examined the demography, language, economics, society, religion, traditional culture and literature of the subject people, and painted a representative, non-threatening portrait of a typical member. With the subsequent reorganisation of administrative boundaries to accommodate two new states in the 1970s, the group of principal 'national races' grew to eight.<sup>109</sup> The total official number is designated as 135, which includes all subcategories of the principal eight and also other entirely distinct groups.<sup>110</sup> To bind the *taingyintha* into a union, the state has relied upon a number of loose policy directives. These include, first, emphasis on a myth of common descent of all national 'brethren'; secondly, a unified national culture of its own design; and thirdly, the drawing of administrative power to the centre.

First, the state asserts that all 'national races' share both a common origin and sense of identity. The current regime encapsulates this principle in an ambiguous concept of 'Union Spirit', usually described through metaphor or historical example as 'the will to live together through thick and thin, weal or woe'.<sup>111</sup> Union Spirit is a product both of

106 Aung-Thwin, Michael A., *Myth and History in the Historiography of Early Burma: Paradigms, Primary Sources and Prejudices* (Monographs in International Studies: Southeast Asia Series No. 102, Ohio University Center for International Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1998), p. 146. Lieberman, 'Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma', p. 480.

107 Dru C. Gladney, 'China's Ethnic Reawakening', *Analysis from the East-West Center*, no. 18 (January 1995), pp. 4–5, and *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic*, Harvard University Press (Cambridge MA, 1991), pp. 66–7. However in China there are many disjunctures between state classifications of ethnicity and popular perceptions. Melissa J. Brown, 'Ethnic Classification and Culture: The Case of the Tujia in Hubei, China', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 2001), p. 56.

108 Published by the Burma Socialist Programme Party, the series *Tain:jin:dha: jinkjei:hmu. jou:ja dalei. htoun:zanmja: (National Races' Cultures and Customs)* focused on groups afforded their own semi-autonomous states: Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni and Shan.

109 Being Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. The Union is divided into seven states and seven divisions. The seven non-Burman groups have been allocated one state each. The seven divisions are by default 'Burman'.

110 This figure was apparently first used after the military take-over of 1962. Private communication with staff of *Burma Issues*, Bangkok, 30 May 2001. It does not include people of South Asian background in particular (many of whom are descendants of British colonial-era migrants).

111 'Message from the Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council Senior General Than Shwe on the 79th Anniversary of National Day', *New Light of Myanmar* (2 December 1999) [<http://www.myanmar.com/nlm/enlm/dec2.htm>], 4 December 1999. For an historical example see, Myat Min Hlaing, 'Making Efforts with Union Spirit for Perpetuity of the Union', *New Light of Myanmar* (12 February 2000) [<http://www.myanmar.com/nlm/arti/feb12.html>], 14 February 2000. Although the Union Spirit terminology is relatively new, the principle of common origin and solidarity has been a part of state rhetoric for some years. For instance, *Tain:jin:dha: jinkjei:hmu.*, p. ii. Houtman argues that terms used to describe culture and customs in Burmese political life have typically not been rendered durable through rigorous defining and clarification. Houtman, *Mental Culture and Burmese Crisis Politics*, p. 180.

the 'national races' supposed common Mongolian origin and shared experiences in the territory of Myanmar, 'drinking the same water, for aeons of time, *having been born of the same ancestry*'.<sup>112</sup> As the 'national races' have been imbued with a sense of common origin, it follows that they had united in self-preservation since time immemorial, showing 'solidarity in repulsing the expansionists and preserving and defending sovereignty and independence in Myanmar'.<sup>113</sup> It was only with the advent of British colonial rule that the national brethren 'became like strangers' due to malicious divide-and-rule policies, that led to the subsequent outbreak of civil war.<sup>114</sup> Happily, the state welcomes all groups back with goodwill and patience.<sup>115</sup> Hence but a few recalcitrant elements who continue to be misguided by neo-colonialists inside and outside the country have not yet 'returned to the legal fold'.<sup>116</sup> In the meantime, the masses are urged to remain vigilant, and with 'Union Spirit and patriotism ... unitedly ward off and crush all dangers of the nation'.<sup>117</sup>

Secondly, the state has constructed a 'traditional' public life that places Burman culture at the core and links other cultures together around the periphery. Like the state in Indonesia, it employs idiom and ritual that speak to the diversity of the state from the position of a dominant group in the centre (see Figure 2).<sup>118</sup> Sanitised images of the eight principal 'national races' are daily woven into state media. Wherever a general is to be found opening a school or weir, representative couples of 'national races' are on hand to pay obeisance. Nightly, mono-ethnic groups of women dance across the television screen, interspersed by other multi-ethnic groups chorusing messages of national solidarity in both Burmese and their respective tongues.<sup>119</sup> Famous actors pose in a myriad ethnic costumes for ubiquitous calendars published by administrative units across the country. Socialist-style billboards erected in the cities depict 'national races' standing shoulder to shoulder with armed forces personnel. But unlike Indonesia, the state in Myanmar has struggled to go beyond rhetoric and media stereotypes to the development of actual programmes aimed at building a sense of community among national races.<sup>120</sup> While literacy campaigns have in the past aimed to build solidarity through mass mobilisation, they have been taught in Burmese—the language of the politically dominant ethnic group—reaffirming the pre-eminence of that language and its attendant cultural matter over those of their

112 'Message from the Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council' (2 December 1999), my italics.

113 'Anti-colonialist Struggle', in *Union Spirit* (undated) [<http://www.myanmar.com/e-index/union/colonia.html>], 2 August 2000.

114 'University for Development of National Races', in *Union Spirit* (undated) [<http://www.myanmar.com/e-index/union/university.html>], 3 February 2001, quoting Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council Senior-General Than Shwe.

115 The state policies and initiatives to end internal conflict are thoroughly detailed in *Ta'mado asou:ja.i. amjou:dha: pjanle si:loun: njinju'jei: kjou:ban: hsaunjwe'che'mja: (Endeavours of the Armed Forces Government for National Reconsolidation)* (Government of the Union of Myanmar, Yangon, 1999) (in Burmese, English version available).

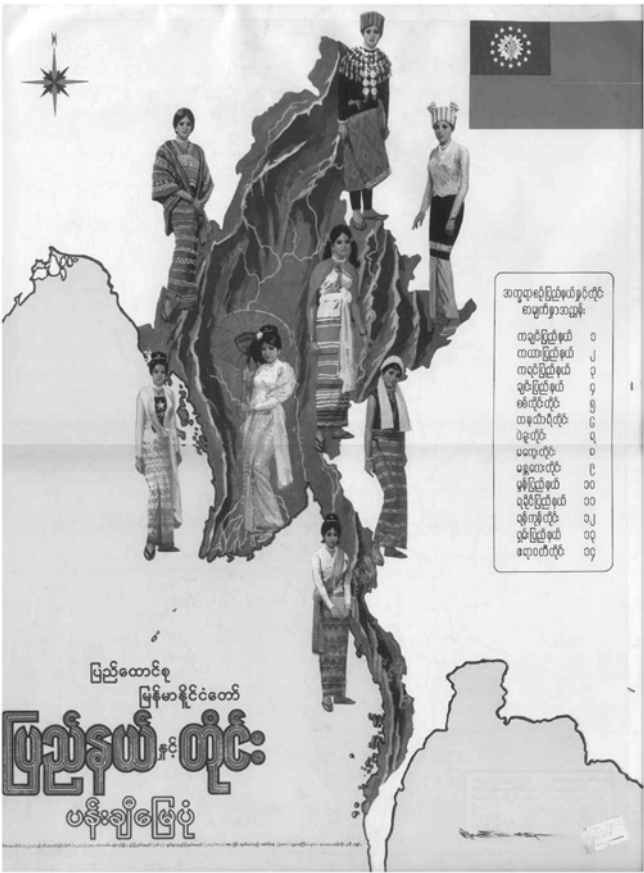
116 Foreign Minister U Win Aung has lamented the failure of the government to conclude a deal with the Karen National Union: 'In the past we have nearly reached agreement with them to come to the legal fold but those forces from the west urged the Kayins not to go ... [These forces] would like to see more and more flames in our country ...' 'Press Conference on South Summit and 13th NAM Ministerial Conference Held', *New Light of Myanmar* (4 May 2000) [<http://www.myanmar.com/nlm/enlm/may4.htm>], 6 May 2000.

117 'Entire People Urged to Unitedly Ward Off and Crush Nation's Enemies: Mongla Emerges as Modern Major Town Due to State's Assistance and Local People's Active Efforts', *New Light of Myanmar* (17 May 2001) [<http://www.myanmar.com/nlm/enlm/May17.htm>], 18 May 2001, citing Secretary-1 of the State Peace and Development Council, Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt.

118 John Pemberton, *On the Subject of 'Java'* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1994), pp. 10–11.

119 Depending on her own background, the Karen in the group could be singing in either Pwo (Eastern or Western) or Sgaw Karen.

120 For a discussion on how 'mutual assistance' programmes in Indonesia were used to create a sense of commonality there see John R. Bowen, 'On the Political Construction of Tradition: *Gotong Royong* in Indonesia', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3 (May 1986).



**Figure 2.** The states of the *taingyintha*. *Note:* Female representatives for each of the eight dominant ethnic groups popularised through government media, on the cover of a widely distributed map set. Each stands in the approximate location of her designated state, with exception of the Burman (at centre, with umbrella) who stands in the seven ostensibly non-ethnic divisions. *Source:* *Pjidaunzu. Myama nainngando pjine hnin. tain: bagyimeyboun (Pictorial Map of Union of Myanmar States and Divisions)* (U Hla Thaug, Yangon, 1988).

‘brethren’.<sup>121</sup> More recently, programmes for the Development of Border Areas and ‘national races’ have emphasised economic and infrastructure development of regions that had until recently ‘lagged behind due to insurgency’. However, these have specific region-building, rather than nation-building, objectives, and are focused on the material elements of development.<sup>122</sup>

Thirdly, under the pretence of ethnic and regional autonomy, the state has striven to consolidate power at the centre of the Union. The 1947 Panglong Agreement and subsequent constitution were both built on federalist principles.<sup>123</sup> Yet Burman-dominated

121 This is in marked contrast to Indonesia, where a ‘neutral’ language was agreed to for national usage, rather than Javanese.

122 *Ta’mado asou:ja.i. amjou:dha: pjanle si:loun: njnju’jei*, pp. 167–9.

123 Lieberman argues that the 1947 constitution failed as it was based on Western concepts of nations and peoples with a secular and intellectual approach that lacked familiarity and popular appeal, allowing pan-ethnic movements to flourish. Lieberman, ‘Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-Century Burma’, pp. 480–2.

government policy has been driven by 'nation building' objectives that have simultaneously expressed and suppressed ethnic distinctions. At times, the rhetoric has been sufficiently confused that both sides have been juxtaposed in a single statement, such as in this press release from the Myanmar Embassy, London:

The people and the Government of the Union of Myanmar bear no ill-will against ... its own 135 ethnic brethren who have lived together as a Kingdom for many centuries and *the assimilation of the peoples over time has become so complete that so called ethnic differences are now barely discernible.*<sup>124</sup>

In 1962, the parliament was replaced by an unapologetic military administration that subordinated all citizens and agencies to its authority. With the 1974 constitution, the practice of absolute authority was written into law:

The State shall be responsible for constantly developing and promoting unity, mutual assistance, amity and mutual respect among the national races. The national races shall enjoy the freedom to profess their religion, use and develop their language, literature and culture, follow their cherished traditions and customs, *provided that the enjoyment of any such freedom does not offend the laws or public interest.*<sup>125</sup>

Simultaneously, the national map was redrawn to accommodate seven 'divisions' (inhabited by the majority of the population) and seven 'ethnic states' (in underpopulated border areas). Geographically, the principal 'national races' were extended recognition, but in reality the states' role has been merely to enforce policy radiating from the capital. Furthermore, the people living in these areas do not correspond significantly to their ethnic designations.<sup>126</sup> Given the dispersion of 'national races' throughout the country, this would under any circumstances be an impossible task. It remains one that, like many others, has confounded the aspirations of both the state and ethnic nationalist leaders alike.

## Conclusion

As Karens are not homogeneous, 'pan-Karen' identity is rendered more accessible through inquiry into its self-descriptions than its material culture. My examination of Sgaw Karen texts and related materials reveals that among the subjective determinants attached to the pan-Karen identity, narratives of oppression, lack of education and virtue are recurrent themes. Among these strands of discourse, many aspects of Karen identity that appear to stress subordination and inferiority in fact have antithetical implications that may be attributed both to traditional mythology and refinements made by the elite. Historical persecution signifies future liberation; a lack of education conceals both former glories and future renaissance; high morality ensures that Karen autonomy remains a political imperative. The dynamics of Karen identity are complex and deserving of far greater research than they entertain at present. Further examination of Pwo Karen and Burmese sources in particular would shed more light on the many dimensions of the problem.

The challenge for the state in Myanmar has been how to make ethnic identity something readily navigable. Faced with a rainbow of division cast by the colonial state and invested

124 Myanmar Embassy London, 'Myanmar News Bulletin Issue No. 3/2000 April 2000: News Release', Myanmar Information Committee (12 April 2000) [http://www.myanmar-information.net/infosheet/2000/000412.htm], 15 April 2000, my italics.

125 *The Constitution of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma* (Ministry of Information, Rangoon, 1974), Article 21, my italics.

126 The majority of Karens, for example, live outside of Karen State, which according to government data had a total population of only 1,318,200 in 1994. *Luhmu.jei: badha-nawama. tan: (Social Studies: Ninth Standard)* (Basic Education Curriculum, Syllabus and Textbooks Committee, Ministry of Education, Government of the Union of Myanmar, February 1996), p. 106 (in Burmese).

with political significance, the independent state has struggled to construct a unified identity for its subjects. Despite espousing the principle of equality for all 'national races', the state has attempted to consolidate its position by emphasising common origin and 'traditional' culture, while simultaneously centralising administrative power. Some analysts have argued that the state in Myanmar has been obliged to submerge ethnicity, lest competing nationalist claims be taken to the extreme.<sup>127</sup> But there is no room in this assertion to justify the militarist strategies adopted by the state to ensure national stability. Furthermore, the *Union* of Myanmar is itself a product of the same historical forces that classified and organised its populace into 'races'. At the other extreme, equally unhelpful is the argument that since the state has failed to structurally incorporate non-Burman groups, it follows that 'Burmese' (or 'Myanmar') do not even exist.<sup>128</sup> Neither of these arguments effectively addresses the very real intricacies of ethnic identity and contemporary state policy. Whether *dawkalu* or *taingyintha*, neither is more nor less arbitrary than the other.

Both pan-Karen identity and the Union of Myanmar are imperfect realisations of normative statements for social organisation. Both were born of the same political dynamic and were cultivated by elite groups. Both make similar appeals to common identity and theoretical unity, although underlying discourses diverge. State rhetoric suggests accommodation, but its actions proceed from the imperative of social control. Pan-Karen identity is forged with powerful statements of primordial sentiment but manifests itself in structural opposition to the state. Although Karen nationalists may sometimes speak of compromise, the conceptual base to their theoretical unity impels them towards assimilation of their own and separation from others.

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127 Taylor, *The State in Burma*, p. 287.

128 Marlowe, 'In the Mosaic', p. 203.