Belief has played an extremely important part in the character and progression of the ethnic Karen people of Burma. Whether encompassing their own traditional animism or their adoption of Buddhism and Christianity – belief has moulded, and also divided, a people into what at the moment is a race at a crossroads of identity. While Christianity has superseded the more benign and tolerant religions of their forefathers, Karen religion continues to be at the forefront of the nationalist agenda and decides the way forward.

Popular opinion describes the Karen as being a predominantly Christian race – a stereotype that does not hold up to scrutiny. While most commentaries in the media are related to the ongoing war which describes, quite correctly, a Karen resistance led by a primarily Christian composed leadership - such an analogy does not reveal the true nature of the Karen race or that matter their faith. While it is true a large number of Karen have converted and due to this have been given greater opportunities, chiefly through education and social support, to advance, it should not be overlooked that the majority of Karens are Buddhist, Animist or many are a mixture of both.

The purpose of this article to look at the many aspects of Karen belief so that a clearer picture of how multi-faceted Karen identity actually is and therefore dispel the popular ‘Christian’ Karen myth.

Animism was most likely the first belief practiced by the Karens who believed that everything in the world contained an omnipresent ethereal energy called ‘Pgho’ which to quote the Karen Thesaurus is described as:

…a more or less unknown force believed to be all about [us] and which cannot be overcome.

This mysterious power could be found not only in certain individuals - Karen shamen known as ‘pgha a pgho’ who are able to complete magical tasks – but it can also be passed on to inanimate objects which become charms that can be used either to create good or evil. The belief in this power began to materialise in the form of gods when different types of ‘pgho’ became associated with individual objects. Thus the power present in rice or crops became associated with the personality of a Goddess ‘Hpi Bi Yaw’ and from this elaborate ceremonies developed around the seasonal crop rotation to pay homage to the goddess. Like wise the two seasons, dry and rainy, were seen as two separate incarnations, or demons, that would lose a yearly conflict of who would control the time of year.

Through this collective belief individual rivers and mountains became the provinces of lords (K’sa) and individual objects including basic cooking utensils were the domains of spirits (K’la). A number of these lords and spirits were seen as being able...
to represent good - yet a larger part were seen as being malevolent and thus required offerings and sacrifices.

Karen Animist beliefs also included the distinct recognition of a soul (tha) and a life force (also K’la). The ‘tha’ was perceived as the root of conscience and spiritual guidance while the K’la was the essence of physical being and it is the latter that was seen as being most in danger of falling prey to the evil spirits of the world and thus required protect through the use of amulets and magical charms.

It was believed that the K’la entered the body at birth and departed not only at death but also during sleep and it was believed that the absence of the K’la would result in illness or even death. Many Karens believed that the K’la whilst wandering during its sleeping hours would take on the appearance of a ghost and a number of stories and legends have arisen that narrate the meetings of these spiritual apparitions and their unfortunate relatives.

Animism continues to be adhered to by many Karens especially in the hills and away from urban centres. And it must be noted that even the most modern thinking Karen, even some of those who have given up their traditional religion for Christianity and Buddhism, still continue to harbour at least some belief in the spirits.

The Creation Legend

While there is little doubt that Animism was the first religion embraced by the newly entered migrants into Burma another myth is believed to have developed alongside their traditional beliefs. At which point the Karens embraced a creation myth is unclear. It is likely that if the Karens had completed their final migration into Burma in 1128 B.C. has they believe, then Animism would have followed with them and the creation legend most probably appeared much later.

Buddhism was first introduced to the Mon during the Ramyana period and was known to have been flourishing by 2 B.C. when the Mon emperor sent a delegation to the second Buddhist synod in Ceylon. It is likely that the Karens who had migrated into the Irrawaddy delta and in to Tennesserim, the majority of which at the time was most likely Pwo, probably adhered more to Buddhism rather that immediately adopting the creation myth.

The creation myth was probably brought by the further migration of the Sgaw into those Karen areas when they continued to move westwards along the Salween and Southwards following the Irrawaddy. Although there is no evidence it is possible that some Karens may have heard of the Christian religion at least by the 8th Century. Nestorianism is known to have arrived in China as early as the 7th Century and it is possible that the Karens who had migrated into the Irrawaddy delta and in to Tennesserim, the majority of which at the time was most likely Pwo, probably adhered more to Buddhism rather that immediately adopting the creation myth.

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The Karen legend tells of a god figure and creator of the world called Ywa. Ywa had a servant named ‘Naw K’plaw’ a female name that was changed later to ‘Mu Kaw Li’ the fact that both names were feminine was, according to missionary accounts, due to the fact that the use of a female nomenclature was a term of reproach – although this perhaps deliberately avoids the fact that Karens have often emphasised the opposites of male and female – for example Pwo (female) and Sgaw (male) and such an hypothesis may lend itself to refute the similarities the Missionaries were looking for with their own beliefs and it was therefore obscured in translations.

Ywa was said to have created the first human beings, a male ‘Saw Tha Neh’ and a female ‘Naw Ee Oo’, and made for them an orchard which he filled with several kinds of fruit. Before he allowed them to enter the orchard he warned that one of the kinds of fruit was not good to eat and that under no circumstances were they to partake of this fruit otherwise they would fall ill and die. He promised to return in seven days. During that period Mu Kaw Li appeared in the form of a serpent and
asked them what they had to eat. The pair told them that had an abundance of fruit and described the flavours of the six varieties of fruit they were allowed to eat but admitted they had no knowledge of the seventh as their father had forbidden them from eating it.

Mu Kaw Li on hearing this told them that their father was deceiving them and that the fruit on that particular tree was the most delicious and on consumption they would be turned into gods. The man refused to believe the words of Mu Kaw Li and insisted on not eating the fruit, the wife was more easily persuaded and after listening to Mu Kaw Li gave some of the fruit to her husband. The next day Ywa returned and on realising that the pair had disobeyed them he cursed them and their lineage saying that the human race was destined to fall ill, grow old and die.

The Ywa myth is often closely connected to that of the lost books but how they connect is unclear. This legend tells how the father of the three tribes of Burma are said to have held three books; the first - the Golden book, he gave to his elder son - the Karen, to the second son – the Burman, he gave a palm leaf book, and to the third and youngest son who was Caucasian, he gave a leather book. The father told his sons to go into the land that is now known as Burma but on their arrival the Burman’s book was eaten by white ants while the Caucasian’s book was eaten by pigs. The Burman began to quarrel with the Karens over possession of the Golden book and the Karen entrusted the book to the white brother for safe keeping, who then sailed away with it. The legend ends saying that once the white brother and the Golden book return then the Karen’s suffering will stop and they shall have peace and prosperity in their own country.

Again how old this tradition is is uncertain. One assumes that for the Karens to be aware of caucasian races it would likely date to around the 13th century when Marco Polo is known to have been travelling through Asia although their may have been a possibility that some Christian teachings may have been absorbed by the Karen during the eastwards movement of the nestorians. Either way the Lost books traditions is most likely to have been an alien concept to the Karens who first made their homes in Burma, and regardless of missionary presumptions it is likely that it, and the story of Ywa, became influence by external Christian teachings.

The story of the return of the white brother has had a significant impact on Karen identity and history opening a reliance on external western support ever since the early 1800’s. A support which especially during the mid-late 1800s was utilised to create a unique Karen Christian identity. Sadly such support was proven ill-founded when the white brother, in the guise of the British government, turned his back on his erstwhile comrades during their call for independence, and while further aid pre-dominantly through Christian organisations like Christian Solidarity Worldwide is maintained in general assistance is on the wane.

Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism was probably introduced to Karens living in the Mon kingdom of Ramyana by the Mauryian Emperor Asoka (273 B.C. – 232 B.C.). Asoka had sent a number of Buddhist missions throughout Asia including the Mon capital. Two Buddhist monks, Sona and Uttara, arrived in what Buddhist chronicles describe as Suvanna Bhumi (Ramyana or the Golden Land) and soon introduced the inhabitants, the Talaings (Mons) to the new religion. By 2 B.C. Buddhism was flourishing in Ramayana and the Mons sent representatives from the ancient monastic settlement at Kalasa to attend the second great Buddhist synod in Ceylon.

The Karens living in the kingdom, who were subjects of the Mon, most likely maintained their own animist beliefs however with the arrival of the new religion they began to convert however not totally relinquishing their own traditional beliefs which sat comfortably within Buddhist doctrine which did not require total sacrifice in its conversion.

Buddhism and the Mon were responsible for
educating the Karens especially after the rise of the Burman empire in the north which forced a lot of Mon and Karen tribes eastwards. The Mon established large communities on what are now regarded as the borders with Siam and many Karens found themselves educated in Buddhist monasteries there. As Reverend Vinton noted on a visit to the border areas in 1832 the Karens are:

‘...in a higher state of civilization in that country [Siam] than in this [Burma] there they live in large villages as Boodhists [sic], and have monasteries… with Karen priests, where the Taliang language is taught.’

Buddhism and it hybrid mix of Buddhism-Animism has most closely been identified with the Pwo Karen who during the early period were most likely able to live peacefully within strong Buddhist Burman dominated society. During both the Mon and Burman Kingdoms Buddhist Karens were able to rise to at least nominal positions of power.

Christianity

The first missionaries to attempt to open up Burma to Christian teachings came from the Roman Catholic missions in Siam and Melipur. As early as 1699 a dispute had erupted as to the jurisdiction of whom the then kingdom of Pegu fell under - with both the Vicar Apostolic of Siam and the Bishop of Meliapur contesting the right to propagate the Gospels of Christ there. While the former was eventually granted permission no real attempt was made until 1722, when two Barnabites Father Sigismond de Calchi and Father Vittoni were sent to the Kingdom. Although there were some minor successes in converting the Burmans the first Anglo-Burmese war saw the mission almost abandoned with two of its priests killed. Despite the early arrival of the Catholic mission it wasn’t until the early 1800’s and the arrival of Adoniram Judson that the Karens would find themselves converted to the new faith.

Adoniram Judson, was the founder of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and had been one of the first missionaries to work in Burma with some success. He had arrived in the country on July 13th, 1813 and immediately, although unsuccessfully, began administering to the Burmese Buddhists. Although primarily concerned with the Burmese
themselves, translating and printing the Bible in Burmese and compiling a Burmese grammar, after realising he was unable to find many converts amongst the Burman Buddhists, he changed his focus to the Karens in the delta and it was here that he was also responsible for converting what is believed to be the first Karen Christian - Ko Than Bya.

Ko Than Bya was set to become a debt slave to a Burmese but was purchased by Judson with the goal of gaining access to the Karen. He was chosen by one of Judson associates, the Reverend George D Boardman, to travel with him to Tavoy where it was the intention of opening a Baptist mission. He was baptised by Rev. Boardman on May 16, 1828 in Tavoy, and it was with this that Judson was to achieve his aim. Based in Tavoy and with the help of Ko Than Bya the Christianisation of the Karen began.

Christianity had, to a minor degree, already found its way to the Karens when, according to Marshall, after a number of Karens returned to Tavoy to hear Rev. Boardman speak there was among them a prophet who had had with him a 'book of common prayer' which he had bought from a sailor in Tavoy and had since regarded as a fetish. The prophet had come from a village to the east of Tavoy where, twelve years earlier a man clad as an ascetic had started preaching that there was a ‘living and true God’ while also echoing what is more commonly considered to be Buddhist doctrine. He had taught that pork and chicken should not be eaten, in addition he left the villagers a book that he told them they should worship. Half the village converted to the new cult and the prophet who Boardman met later became a priest.

Concerned by the growing number of Christian converts and believing that Christianity, not incorrectly, was being used as a tool of western imperialists to undermine the Burmese system - which inextricably tied Buddhism to state - the Burmese authorities forbade the converts from entering Rangoon on pain of imprisonment. Even Ko Shwe Waing, a Karen chief from bassein, was not spared and was only released with the help of the British resident, a Mr Edwards. Persecution by the Burmese authorities of Christian Karens was to continue with converts often imprisoned and, only after a ransom was paid, were they released.

After the third Anglo-Burmese War which saw the total annexation of Burma into British India mass Buddhist led demonstration erupted throughout the country. The Christian missionaries quickly grasped the opportunity to raise and arm a Christian Karen force which, working with the British, was used not necessarily successfully, to quash the demonstrations. This use of the Karen by the missionaries was not to be totally favoured by those in the British Government who also saw it as an attempt by the Baptists to divide the country not only on ethnic but also religious ground - a fear that has proved today to be well founded.

**Christian Sects**

With arrival of Christianity a number of sects, of a nationalist nature, began to appear which mixed traditional practices with the new religion. The fact that such movements existed caused some anxiety not only among the Burmese and British, but especially the missionaries who feared their own power taken away from them due to an adulteration of the true Baptist faith. If the Karens could be united under a leader whose spiritual practices had changed the true faith, then their cause would be seriously impeded. The fear that Karen spiritualism might integrate itself with Christianity in the same way that animism had mixed with Buddhism seriously concerned one missionary, Francis Mason, who stated

‘It will readily be seen, that if we give place in the slightest degree to this spiritualism we shall soon have to neglect the teaching of the bible altogether. It will be superseded by new revelations; the result to which spiritualists in America have already arrived.’

Unexpectedly, echoing his own fears, Mason found himself ostracized by other missionaries and finally suspended from administering after his wife
claimed to see - in the dresses of Karen women and in certain Buddhist objects - the language in which God spoke to Adam. She founded a cult around her beliefs and tried to introduce Anglican liturgy - actions which inevitably split the Taungoo mission. Mason requested Commissioner Phayre to assist in the dispute with the other missionaries – however to no avail, the disagreement resulted in Mason being suspended from 1865 until he finally renounced his wife’s teachings six years later.

Another Christian based cult was also founded by a former Baptist missionary - a Karen called Ko Pisan, or Ko San Ye, from either Papun or Shwegyin, his teachings became extremely popular and he formed his own brand of Christian wisdom. At one point he was able to boast of six to seven thousand followers, and unlike the animist or Buddhist based cults, Ko San Ye’s teachings seems to have been generally accepted by other Christian missionaries; Marshall himself believed that the existence of the cult demonstrated how the Karens had been able to show religious progress and it provided an excellent opportunity for the Karens to show what they could accomplish on their own.

It was not just Baptist based Christianity that flourished amongst the cults of the Delta a former Church of England priest, Hkli Bo Pa, also formed his own peculiar brand of Christian worship in Taungoo, which was based on his own interpretation of the scriptures; although excommunicated by his former church, Hkli Bo Pa was able to continue administering in the area although with somewhat less success then Ko San Ye.

**Buddhist-Animist Sects**

Even though a number of Christian sects were able to thrive, by far the most important in terms of longevity were the Buddhist-animist sects that combined a number of religious teachings together. In the mid-1800s one leader became extremely popular, known as Maw Lay and born in Pli Hta, fifty miles north of Shwegyin, the cult practiced a form of worship that not only embraced Ywa but also Buddhism with a spattering of Christianity. The leader was said to be an incarnation of Jesus Christ and the cult soon developed a following of thousands throughout numerous Karen villages, although the sect seems to have fizzled out it was soon replaced by two which have continued to this day; the Lekhai and the Telekhon.

Karen aspirations to free themselves from Burmese oppression and create their own identity has manifested itself in the foundation of these two cults, while neither were adversely political they showed a strong desire to create a Karen identity an identity that did not necessarily need to align itself with either Christian or Buddhist tenants.

The Lekhai began not far from Pa-an in the Pwo village of Hnitya in 1860. The sect, whose name translated into Burmese means pith or essence, had been formed by Hpu Thi Baw Tho and his wife Pi Mai Ka Li who practiced a kind of worship first introduced to them by Mai Ka Li’s uncle Hpu Poe Coe, the sect venerated a God figure called Ariya and revered a golden book (actually a school exercise book). In addition it had its own form of writing - Leit-San-Wait or Chicken scratch which many believe to be one of the few truly original Karen scripts. They erected a pagoda, the Sulamuni, and followers of the sect practiced the main precepts which included no work, killing, or eating the flesh of any living thing. Holy days, or the Sabbath was
celebrated on the days of the full moon and animist rites also manifested themselves in their practices with offerings given to Hpi Buh Yaw, the female spirit, or nat, who grants the rice harvest. The main ceremony for each practitioner entering the sect consisted of giving offerings of uncooked rice together with bunches of bananas, coconuts, candles, and sprigs of Eugenia, all sprayed with scented water; after these were made the adherent would then enter into a meditative period for nine months.

While the religion seemed somewhat innocuous petty rivalry existed between some of the newly Christianised Karen converts and feuding broke out after rumours were spread that a Lekhai leader, Mahn Thaung Sha, was planning another Min Loung uprising, as a consequence three Lekhai leaders - Mahn Maw Yaing, Thaung Htaw and Hpu Shway were imprisoned for several days.

Similarly the mid 1800’s also led to the emergence of another cult, originating in Gyaing, 35 miles south of Moulmein, the Telekhon (The fruit of wisdom) was created around a leader, Con Yu, who was also said to have been gaoled for his teachings which had been seen to be seditious. Helped by a Karen monk who apparently influenced a lot of his beliefs and introduced Buddhist tenants into his teachings, Con Yu and his followers became hermits and, unlike the Lekhai, celibate. They dressed in orange robes and kept unshorn hair and practice meditation and fasting rituals.

The spiritual head of the Telekhon is the Phu Chaik (Grandfather/Buddha) and the cult practices similar beliefs to those of the Lekhai – offerings to Hpi Buh Yaw, the rice Goddess, the belief in the white brother of Ywa legend all combined with a mixture of Buddhist tenants. Interestingly The Telekhon themselves were said to see the white brother not as a saviour, but more of a deceiver who continues to hold on to the Golden book and not give it to the Karens themselves. There were animosities between them and the Baptist missionaries in the Gyaing area with one Telekhon couplet showing the contempt the missionaries are held in;

‘Christian, whose eye is blurred, deceives us that God returns’

Both the Lekhai and the Telekhon maintain similar beliefs and believe, as in the creation myth that a saviour will return to release them from bondage and in doing so the Karens will be free in their own land. Whether it is the legend of Tawmeipa, the belief in Ariya or in Christ - the sects continue and have remained on the fringes of what would eventually become a revolution.

The Karen people have constantly found themselves questioning their true origins - a question which has still not found any satisfactory answers. To try and find an answer to their predicament the Karens easily adapted to a number of different religions. For the most part, as in Buddhism, these religions were able to merge with their own traditional ideas and it wasn’t until the 1800s when Christian proselytizing was at its height did Karen religion and identity become entwined.

The large scale conversions and the support and education given to those who had adopted the new religion is responsible for creating a totally new Karen identity. It is this identity that has superceded all others. For many westerners, and a large number of Karens, the Karens are a Christian race and it is such a belief, nurtured by Christian missionaries and organisations, today, that ensues and for many must be upheld.

Sadly such a view does not reflect reality. The Karens are and always have been a predominantly Buddhist-animist race and the failure to come to terms with that fact shall, unfortunately continue to foster division.