

## **Karen: When the Wind Blows**

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Before we start and step into my discourse let us remember.

Forests have trees, animals and people.  
That nothing is fixed and reality is change.

That the factors of change are many and are manifest both directly and indirectly. The dialectic of change brings goodness as well as badness, change is a sharp, two edged sword.

To the point then, who are the Karen? How many are there? The Karen are the largest group of ethnic-minority highlanders in Thailand (270,803 Appendix I).

Karen live in the forest, high on the mountains. Trees are their closest neighbours, along with many kinds of animals. Life for them has been like this for centuries.

Karen are humans, people who live together in their own society in villages. But this does not mean that they live in isolation from the outside world. Just as the winds of change transform societies everywhere in the world so do these winds affect Karen. The most important changes have occurred in agriculture. The most direct impact comes from

development projects supported by both government and private enterprise, Thai and foreign money. Changes of more indirect origin are structured into the nature of modern industrial society, which also alters the relationship between Karen and Thai lowlanders because it completely transforms the perception and use of resources. Modern transport and communication are so convenient and make it easy to reach markets and family and friends. New conflicts and problems are also brought in.

In the early days of this development game the Karen were always accused, like other minorities, of causing problems and of having no talent for the skills and knowledge required by the new age. Unfair accusations which would not survive investigation.

If they are so backward why is it that they have been able to survive in the mountain environment for so many centuries? Why have their numbers slowly increased? Surely this is evidence of success.

We, all who come from the huge capital of Bangkok, are able to perceive, study and see directly into Karen society. They are our equals are they not?

**Cultivation: all for mouths and stomachs**

Born as human beings, no matter where we live, we are captives of our ancient pasts, with memories of deep hunger and the search for food.

For the Karen the word "food" is synonymous with rice. Rice is the staple and forms the largest part of any meal. If they have sufficient land and labour, farmers will grow just enough for their own family needs and that's all. As for plants and crops, cultivated fields resemble the

selected and reassembled conditions of forest, mountain, valley and stream. A modest type of agricultural intervention, engineered in a manner that harmonizes with nature. If nature is in a state of balance, we can talk of a certain type of perfection ; then life is happy. Yet even this balance is transitory, change is as inevitable as suffering.

The faster things change the greater the pressure added every minute, every hour to everyday life.

### **Rice farming is not forest destruction**

Around the estate of each village stand clumps of trees which provide a home for the spirits of the land. These are not touched for they also stand as evidence of the respect one village holds for another. The law of the jungle is more gentle than we might imagine. It is an ancient law of conservation. The agricultural cycle is conducted with economy.

Fields cut before the end of winter–February.

Fields burnt before the end of summer–April.

Rice seeds sown before the coming of the rains at the end of April or May.

Weeding continually through the time of the rains.

Harvesting when the cold of winter once again visits  
– November till December.

This is the annual cycle in the everyday lives of Karen.

Several kinds of plants are established in the rice fields, all passed down from generation to generation. Rice dominates but is mixed with edible kitchen, medicinal and other plants of many kinds (see Chantaboon, this volume). In a good field the plants grow up nice and close together

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in an order set by the farmer but not boldly announcing in misplaced pride that they follow an exacting and complex system.

Some crops mature quickly and may be harvested for eating long before the others. Their early removal exposes the slow developers to more light. With more space available, they gradually take over.

In a rice field not only is rice grown. We may find maize, several types of bean, many types of melon and potato, taro, cucumber, pumpkin and gourd: all that plants which provide delicious food. Then let us not forget the extras that give taste and comfort to life ; chillis, sesame, cotton, tobacco and so the list goes on. All for the family.

One problem is linked to another in a relationship of mutual dependence. One of the biggest problems now is the shortage of hill land available for growing rice, well-watered valleys for constructing terraced paddy fields and so it goes. Rice fields are cultivable land, fields in which many food crops can be grown: agriculture is conducted for survival.

The size of the land is fixed. The forest still covers the land but the canopy stands lower. The biggest change from old times is the higher population. Fertility has always been controlled by late marriage and strict rules governing who may sleep with whom and when, but reproduction is a basic enterprise which must be successful for any society to survive and for their families to continue.

In the past when mortality rates were high, a lot of people died of diseases. Deaths often exceeded births. Natural increase at a steady rate is a contemporary phenomenon but surely it is not frightening.

As the number of people increases they will need more rice, more rice must be grown. How can this be done if the forest is also diminishing?

**Forest: "Do Not Enter"**

Almost everybody who doesn't know, accuses highland farmers of destroying the forest by slash-and-burn cultivation. Somehow critics forget to look at the parts of the country where there are no ethnic minorities and where the forest is disappearing even more quickly.

Who is responsible for this attack? Is it not the work of those who will accumulate more power by advocating the establishment of forests?

Afforestation activities extended onto land farmed by the Karen and Lua are not always justified. Sometimes planting is extended in disregard of household fences.

Karen people live peacefully and have never sought power to oppose the authority of the state. When all they have offered is cooperation, the bitterness they feel is understandable. The dignity of climax forest and all that it stood for has become a memory and now what remains is being taken away and placed under the care of a much more commercially minded hoarder.

Because of this, day and night, people worry about land and how to grow enough rice to eat.

While claims over land used for decades are abrogated, the number of people who eat rice increases. While the ability to extend fields is restricted, land normally left fallow for a decade or more must be used again before the nutrient fixing

vegetation has recovered. As the amount of biomass felled gets smaller, fewer nutrients are released by the burn. As fertility declines and weeding becomes a problem, yields drop.

Nobody can complain that the system is not conservation minded. Some trees must be felled in the clearing process but most are just heavily trimmed. These trees survive the fires. When the rains come, they quickly recover and serve to provide a reservoir of seeds for the next generation of trees. Not only is the system of farming cyclical, the forest is also husbanded in a cyclical fashion.

If the forest still stands, if enough rice can be grown for household needs, then life can be good and the people happy.

If the number of people increases but the forest diminishes, then the good life and happiness can be expected to fade away.

### **Enter new materials**

Current poverty among the Karen is frightening. There are many to whom help should be given. But fear not, several projects have come to the rescue. The objectives are clear, for sacred development's sake will the transformation take place. With these compassionate development plans come many new plant materials and industrial products.

The list is impressive. A new rice variety *hom mali* (which smells of sweet jasmine), and also *mei nong*. But not all places are good for all the new varieties. Some locations are too cold or unsuitable because of the prevalence of disease.

If Karen too readily believe what extension workers tell them and enter into what is really an experiment with too much optimism, too much hope in the promise of new

plant materials, they may well find themselves expelled from paradise before harvest day.

It is always the cautious Karen who ask, "Is this an experiment or proper extension?"

And what is offered? New plants to replace rice. Cash crops are promoted with the advice that they replace crops grown for food. So all those plants on the list, cabbages, potatoes, rosemary, strawberries etc march in. They all come in the role of saviours, palliatives against poverty. They create a new dream, new hope for a future of plenty.

At the start there can be hope that the dream will come true.

Those who first accept the innovation will become rich. But this flame is blown out in a single breath, the same breath that carries the news from mouth to mouth, from mountain top to mountain top. The Karen breathe on the flame gently in the hope they share with other highland farmers that this sweet promise will come true. So they watch carefully for the rush of wind which will blow out the fire.

Yes, news of new crops spreads quickly like fire through straw. Farmers want to be better off and are prepared to adopt the use of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, new agriculture tools and machines which seem to jump up and say, "Hello!" to Karen and every passing highland farmer.

Traders with pick-up trucks come with their marketing skills and attractive bundles of goods. There is reason enough to earn more money.

Everything is money and gold, getting by, buying and selling. These are the days of the great hope to buy and

the disappointment of sell-out. Modern urban clothes, whether jeans or jumpers: these are what people want. New rice and desserts, whether rainbow coloured or plain, are what everybody desires. All of these take money: liquid time, labour and land.

**In the name of slaves and servants**

Marketing is upbeat. Such really nice companies. Skilled advertisers can create the illusion of divinity and magic: violet or red banknotes can secure wishes and buy happiness. A new divinity: the money god.

In the past, no matter what was grown, it was principally grown for eating to sustain the lives of mothers, fathers and children. The surplus if any, specially of sesame or dry chilli, could be sold. At this time what was grown was an extension of what the household needed not what the dream merchants of the market required and told people would bring them a better life. When work in the fields is done for the siren of the market, ambitions seek new goals in a land full of opportunities in which it is difficult to reach your destination without running aground on the rocks of bankruptcy. Friends, can you not picture how Karen cabbage farmers feel uneasy, worried that their crop will not fetch a price good enough for them to buy what they want? Last week the price was 4 baht per kilo. This week it dived down to 4 kilos per baht where it sits in cold silence. The new divinity, the money god, like many gods before resides over the horizon in a land to which the Karen are strangers.

Still it lives. Some have said they have seen it. Some have visited the magic land to get a taste of plenty.



### **Irrigated rice terraces**

For Karen rice is security. Security of rice is the possession and good management of irrigated rice fields. To control water is to free oneself from the unpredictable and capricious rain god, who too often passes in cloud and shadows. Still these sky shadows call to every farmer when it is time to cut, rake, plow and transplant. It is always like a competition between man and the elements to grow enough food. Never mind the number of mouths, this depends on fate. But to be able to grow more rice than required is an outcome that enables people to escape a cruel fate.

So best wishes to the Karen for a secure future. If it means they need only irrigated rice terraces either on the valley floor or slope, as long as water is available, which can be redirected through channels and pipes, then their lives will be rich and fulfilled. Unfortunately, sites with such development potential are not so easy to find. Those who first came to the mountains have already claimed the best spots and not left much for those who followed.

Sites which lack a source of reliable water are avoided because they have no potential. Terraces that cannot be flooded give low returns and present the farmer with considerable weeding problems.

So it is true that the development strategy which would have the Karen dig giant steps into the side of hills has not met with an enthusiastic response. This is so not because the Karen are unable to undertake such construction work but because they know what small returns they will get for their effort. What they know must often be kept to themselves because those who come to tell them what to do assume that they know better and the Karen stand back to allow development and extension workers freedom of expression; words to the winds.

### **Heritage and participation**

Irrigated rice fields are only this, a heritage from grandparents. A small gift obtained by hard work largely in the absence of financial assistance, built when time was precious, in the service of a family's mouths and stomachs. Slow hard work with a hoe. And if there is enough for the generation of builders what of those who follow? Not good news. Those who follow must share the use of the land. A good tradition of sharing between all off-spring without favouritism or prejudice save for a little extra for the youngest daughter, who inherits more land because she looks after her parents until they die. But not without problems.

This nice tradition makes the Karen a little like the silk caterpillar that produces thread for a cocoon but must itself die because of this work. It is the same when land is shared out equally between all the children in a family. Viable holdings are fragmented into increasingly small pieces. Farms become smaller, the yield of rice also declines: the mundane reality of poverty.

But who is able to see these kinds of facts? Who is able to see through the idyllic rural scene beside the road? Beautiful green irrigated rice terraces so symmetrically arranged from the top to the bottom of the slope. Indeed a worthy subject for an expensive camera in the hands of one who has never touched poverty.

### **Signs of suffering**

Where has all the water gone? But from where come these diseases and insects?

Water is needed for growing rice. Not just a little now and then, a lot of water from a generous creek, much more water than can be caught on fields from the rain. A flow that continues day and night is the stuff of dreams. As the cold

season advances into the hot, stream flow diminishes and dwindles to nothing. Farmers and the heavenly rains. They tie their hopes to the onset of the rains. If the water does not start to flow again, the forest will die but if the forest is gone and the rain continues can we then say that the forest and watershed has been destroyed by tribesmen? Trees still grow: the rain still falls.

What a reasonable observation you might say. How simple and easy to understand. We all want to have clear information.

But where does misinformation about destruction come from? Hill tribes use axes for felling trees not the powerful tools which others bring, such as electric saws, tractors, elephants and money to employ labour. Is it really true that there is less water in the highlands because there are fewer trees? If it is so, then responsibility cannot be pinned solely on the hill tribes, certainly not on the Karen. It is certainly not an outcome they want. If it is true, they are the first to suffer.

Farmers must wait for rain. Late rain is late rice. If there is not enough, rain there will not be enough food. Poverty comes hand in hand with drought.

With the vegetation degraded and its complex ecology impoverished and communications vastly improved, another route to suffering is opened which brings increasing difficulties. With development comes new rice with improved rice diseases and raiding insects flying in greater numbers. Perhaps these pests come with Land Rovers or on the soles of the comfort of shiny shoes. More hunger now than ever before.

### **Technology and rice**

When a family depends on their own efforts to grow enough rice to eat and they can no longer do so, they are usually willing to crawl if necessary to find a solution that will ensure their survival.

Almost anything which may be suggested about ways in which to increase rice production will be received with eager interest by Karen and other highlanders.

So modern materials are taken into rice fields and onto farms reached by development workers. This means new rice varieties, new cash crops, fertilizers and chemicals. Success is the only expectation. Failure is a hazard nobody wants to face. They will accept any innovation that promises to lead to higher production. Alas, this outcome seems to lie beyond the power of this technology.

New rice varieties such as those recommended for Karen fields (*hom mali*, I.R 7, *muei nong*, and other numerous experimental varieties) have marched past the eyes of the Karen long enough for them to come to their own opinion. Some are successful such as the *muei nong* type grown at Mae Chaem, or the *siw mae chan* at Mae Taeng. But sadly this is glutinous rice when the Karen prefer to eat ordinary rice!

Many varieties have failed, such as *hom mali* at Mae La Noi, I.R 7 at Mae Chaem. Some varieties could not bear the cold highland weather, others have been attacked by the gall midge, an insect which greatly reduces yields and is, year by year, gradually pushing the Karen of Mae Chaem to the brink of poverty.

Behind this failure are the most sincere and dedicated agriculture development workers. Honest Karen farmers

easily accept friendliness from outsiders. If they trust too much, in the end they become victims. In the optimistic circle of great hopes and expectations both sides do not always carefully consider whether the new rice varieties will be able to adapt to the local area. Few know whether adaptation trials have been held or not.

Paradise can become a nightmare. Green, green rice fields can be deceptive, all leaf and little or no rice. Pests are a dangerous enemy.

New rice varieties are not quite as resistant to pests and give new life to old diseases. So on comes the technology of better management, fertilizers and insecticides with their shiny new, unblemished qualifications. So impressive. Who would be so presumptuous as to ask for proof and explanations? It is easy for the Karen to accept. If somebody objects or asks questions they might be accused of being stupid or underdeveloped or the like. All opposition is abandoned.

### **The road to hell is paved with chemicals and fertilizer**

Ignorance is a fertile ground on which to establish troubles. Until recently Karen used neither chemical fertilizer nor insecticide, which also means they have just recently come to the dangers of handling them and are still learning how to avoid bad side-effects. Bad results can follow when farmers are ignorant of how new things work. Some fields end up with only green rice leaf *sans* seed because too much fertilizer has been applied or treatments are attempted with the wrong qualities at the wrong time. All these errors may adversely affect the yield.

Insecticide is good when handled properly but it can also be dangerous. The farmer sprays into a breeze and the poison blows back. Those who work with uncovered

abrasions expose themselves to the danger of contamination by osmosis. What happens to these people?

The Karen of Ban Mong, Mae Chaem district used to produce a surplus of rice but the gall midge insect has become established in all their rice fields over the past decade. Production has dropped from plenty to deficiency. Now there is poverty and suffering.

Both development projects and extension workers from government service and private enterprise came a decade ago along the broad and promising road of development to introduce new rice varieties, new cash crops, chemical fertilizer, insecticides, herbicides and so forth. When they came, everybody at Karen Ban Mong experienced hope and looked forward to progress. Nobody anticipated that with this effort would come their present troubles. The gall midge attacked local rice varieties as well as the new I.R. 7. Some sections of rice fields are now no good for rice production.

New agriculture technology in the form of insecticide and chemical fertilizer came too. But Furadan, a powerful chemical insecticide if used in the right way revealed its horrors when a farmer accidentally poured some on to a wound on his foot. He spent a very long time in hospital. Another farmer sprayed Furadan into the wind and he also became sick for a long time. Now everybody is too frightened to touch it.

Then there was another Karen who applied chemical fertilizer to his rice field when the rice was beginning to form (he simply wanted a bigger harvest). When the field otherwise appeared to be ready for harvest, the panicles of rice had still not matured. The harvest was lost through ignorant conscientiousness. Such things should not happen under development guidance.

**Training for success or failure?**

Training is mounted to combat ignorance. But its success depends on many factors, particularly working in with different traditions.

Those who work with Karen must speak Karen or at least some Northern Thai. Good communication is not possible without one of those languages. To speak only central Thai to those who have never been to school is to speak over their heads. The resource people, instructors and the like will convey so little that they had better spend their time elsewhere.

Then again, where the training is held is also an important consideration. When training courses bring trainees to instructors in towns, participants find it difficult to concentrate because there are so many distractions. While they are away from their village, they worry about getting behind with their fieldwork because time and labour allocation must work within a tight schedule from the time swiddens are cleared and burnt. After the rice is sown, it is dangerous to get behind. Standing crops must be weeded and after harvest, stored. Time is precious.

Why not more demonstrations in villages on how to use fertilizer, spray insecticide and so on? These farmers are practical people. They learn things by doing them rather than reading or being told about them.

Development workers familiar with Karen traditions realized long ago that the Karen heart rests on rice. Enough rice to eat is almost all they want. When we hold village meetings about increasing rice production, everybody listens.

The audience or the outsider might think this is pretty simple stuff but it is vital to the Karen. An extension worker

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who understands this and can do something about it will soon win the hearts and minds of the people.

The night after a hard days training is the time when a resource person, if he or she is really interested, should visit homes and sit around the Karen hearth. This is the time to learn, when the teachers will hear Karen opinions, become acquainted with their attitudes and problems. A good teacher must learn from students, learn what issues they feel are important: this will make the teacher more effective in the future.

Only tea and salt will be provided by the hosts, not whiskey and a high time. Karen only drink whiskey on special occasions when performing rituals or ceremonies. They are not like lowlanders or other hill peoples who drink whenever the opportunity presents itself. When a Karen is drunk, he goes to bed. It is not often you see anybody drunk.

Any challenge to tradition threatens understanding. Psychologically this has a very strong impact even though it may only be shown in small ways. All this developers and planners should have learned a long time ago. If they knew, it would provide an excellent basis on which to learn more. When will a better understanding of hill tribe culture be demonstrated in training programmes?

### **Home garden**

Beside distant fields Karen farmers cultivate home gardens. There you can find a wide variety of plants: chilli, eggplant, legumes, taro, potato, pumpkin, papaya, sugar cane and etc are planted together. Sometimes jackfruit or other perennials are also planted close by.

Most important of the condiments is chilli, which is an essential component of every meal. There is even a saying,



“A Karen who doesn’t eat chilli is not a Karen”. Even the chilli has been affected by the development invasion from the outside world. Whether leaf curl entered the mountains on the feet of that rare creature, a walking development official, or a motorcycle borne extension worker, a Land Rover riding, squeaky shod academic doesn’t matter now. Leaf curl has arrived and production from all of the plants that catch it has dropped close to zero. All sorts of pests unknown to the Karen before development are now well established in the village. The white fowl lice and thrips to mention only two. It is not hard to get rid of these if you have access to the right modern technology but this costs money. Would it not be better if Karen could still grow their own chilli rather than have to buy it? Is this a matter which is too insignificant for extension workers to bother themselves with?

### **Orchards old and new**

Traditional Karen orchards have jackfruit and mango. They are like markers. When groves like this are seen in the forest you can guess that a Karen village was once located there. The age of such trees can tell us how long the village has been established. Each family has its own jackfruit or mango. Tamarine, orange and lime are also grown depending on the preference of the householder.

Coffee and lichee are more recent comers and appear to have arrived about 15 years ago out of a growing preoccupation with markets! Coffee is an especially interesting crop and certainly catches the eye. Trees are planted in quite big plantations and promise a lot for future profitable returns. But don’t be too optimistic. If they are to be grown successfully, they require good conditions. Frost and rust can destroy the promise of an otherwise healthy plantation. All the trees might die if heavy frosts occur and yields will be poor if rust gets the upper hand. This is a new crop and requires careful handling. Farmers who lack sufficient training can manage to achieve only low yields.

Lichee commands a better price than coffee. But much of the fruit is eaten by children who love its sweet-sour taste. Then there is the problem of getting the harvest to market.

Land tenure is a problem here. Everybody recognises ownership of irrigated rice terraces but the land on which orchards may be established is seen as public land, common if you like, and it cannot be permanently alienated for private use. To establish an orchard by up-rooting the big stumps left from the natural forest takes more labour than one household can muster.

Then there are the maintenance tasks necessary to keep coffee or lynchee orchards in good order. Terraces are formed, large holes must be dug and filled with the correct material, fertilizer must be applied, fences built, weeds cut and branches trimmed. Every activity requires knowledge and understanding.

The choice of land is often difficult. Sometimes farmers plant through areas used in rotation for rice cultivation and this adversely influences the fallow period. When farmers want to grow lynchee, they are forced to make an opportunity cost measurement. If they plant where rice can be grown, how will this change the rice production cycle? Less land available for rice cultivation may mean hardship if the profit from the sale of fruit or coffee does not enable them to purchase enough to make up shortfalls.

### **The jackfruit and mango tango**

Most Karen grow jackfruit and mango. They germinate seeds and plant them everywhere, in the household garden or far away. It is a long time before they bear fruit, six or seven years but it is not hard to wait. Jackfruit is used in cooking or eaten on its own, raw. Mango is something both children and adults enjoy. Why have these trees not received any

attention from extension workers? Are there not better varieties available? Better methods of propagation? Why are these not as attractive to developers as coffee and (lichee?)

Tamarind and lime and other local trees which have adapted well to the cold mountain weather get the same treatment. Many Karen villagers grow those trees quite successfully, obtain good yields even in lowland off-seasons when the market price is high and urban residents are trying to forget about eating sour fruit for a while.

The trees are at fault? They are only ordinary local fruit trees and do not qualify for the dignified attention of extension workers, who much prefer to look to international markets to set their standards and provide them with prestige.

Then again perhaps responsibility for this oversight can be laid at the door of the wealthy nations who provide much of the finance for development. It is their experts who promote and propagate these trees in the highlands even though they are unfamiliar with either the capabilities of these trees or their popularity on local markets.

### **Self-reliance: towards zero**

The environment of forest and mountain has changed a lot particularly in villages which have received attention from development projects. Traditional garden plants have diminished in number, especially chilli, tobacco and cotton. These used to grow quite well in home gardens and in rice fields. They were grown for domestic use and no money was spent on their purchase from markets or traders. Farmers were independent and untouched by price changes that lay beyond their ability to control.

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We must accept that as cash crops are successfully extended farmers are able to make more money even if this also means higher expenses. Sometimes expenses run too far ahead of income.

It's a pity we don't know more about how the relationship between production costs and selling prices fluctuates. We hear more about how the population is increasing than the rate at which production expenses are taking-off. The government's hill tribe problem is not exactly the same as the problems of the hill tribes.

The broad path to development and progress seems to have become rather narrow and rough. Rough not only for the Land Rovers of the development set but also for the trucks carrying project cash crops out, as well as for the small pick-up operators, motorcycle traders and big merchants too.

Those who bring modern necessities and luxury items from lowland markets up the ladder which leads into every Karen household, bring everything: the goods themselves, salted fish, canned fish, ready made noodles, crackers, cake, tomatoes, cotton and plastic mats, picture clocks and quartz watches; and the means with which to buy them on credit, hire purchase and etc. All the prices have to be higher than they are on the lowlands. "Buy on installment if you don't have the money". And the Karen are so honest that they're a low risk customer. They don't play games with their debts. They don't think to run away from those to whom they are indebted.

Rice mills and cooperatives have appeared in the neighbourhoods of many villages. People have abandoned the pounding of rice which preserved vitamin B complex, and now sparrow mouth disease is common. Village shops suck in coins from children wanting colourful, sweet candy. Then there is that insidious, carcinogenic additive, monosodium

glutamate, and sweet fizzy water in bottles. How wonderful the bounty of development!

### **Seeking new roads**

Change doesn't always mean movement towards what is better, particularly if what is being done lacks a deeper sense of virtue than just moving superficially with the times.

In a material sense Karen society is quite easily understood. It has four main interlocking concerns: clothes, house, food and medicine. Each of these can be produced from resources present in their environment using available skills and labour. If they are sometimes short of things for household use, they can borrow from friends even if they are not brothers. No security is asked for.

But direct and indirect development have insinuated their way into the Karen world view. They want more than what is offered by Buddhist missionaries preaching the four basic material conditions of life. Now a fifth factor of endless accumulating has emerged. The tranquility of a society based on a simple set of material needs has gone forever.

In the not too distant past all that the outside world had which Karen wanted was salt for cooking, which could be had for a very small amount of money. It was easy to find other things in the forest that could be sold on lowland markets.

But now all has changed, people demand more than fundamentals. Even the original four basic concerns of clothes, house, food and medicine have been transformed into complex sets of options, all of which can be purchased with money. Clothes used to be made from cotton grown in the

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field and spun into thread, dyed with a bark extract and woven by women as time was made available from other tasks: everybody was adequately clothed, carried shoulder bags, slept under blankets etc. But today few grow or spin their own cotton. They go to town to buy it or purchase ready made clothes just like lowlanders.

Clearly money is necessary for most transactions.

Why don't we encourage farmers to grow cotton for their own use? It is not too difficult to grow and extra training could be provided as part of an attempt to promote spinning. Why don't we train people in dress making? Many young Karen women who have completed primary school to Fourth or Sixth grade are ready to work. There are many shops run by various organizations which sell hill tribe products. Why not train Karen how to run such businesses?

This will take money, but is it not worthwhile?

Houses used to be set on piles or poles gathered from the forest with a superstructure built of bamboo and lined with dipterocarpus leaves. None of these products was ever bought. When anybody needed to build a house, all the villagers came willingly to help. To build a house today means expenses for employing labour to fell, saw, finish, erect and construct a building. Concrete tiles for the roof and sometimes even the wood for building must be bought from far away towns.

### **Money**

Why do people stop living in bamboo cottages and borrow money from neighbours to build wooden houses? The hearth is moved to a special room which becomes the kitchen. Now the other rooms are visited by mosquitoes carrying malaria. In its original state the Karen house style is much more appropriate to its environment. Perhaps the old style houses could be a bit cleaner and better arranged to

provide a more comfortable resting place but better to do that than spend so much money copying the life style of lowlanders. To have special rooms set aside for sleeping is only necessary in Bangkok, isn't it?

In former times food could be found everywhere in the forest or on the mountain, now it must be hunted and gathered from shops both in markets in the town and in small shops in the village. If we look only at the surface, this seems to serve nutritional needs. But let us consider how difficult it has become to save money. Every day something is purchased. In the past they felt they must have many hundreds of baht before they dared go into town. Now one or two baht is enough to visit the village shop and those who have no money happily risk indebtedness for the dubious joy of eating colourful food just like their neighbours.

### **More Money**

The day when they might have chosen to improve their diet by gathering forest products or cultivating village gardens is gone. But there are more than ten types of Karen bean that can be cooked and preserved and eaten all year round. Why not encourage young women to make good quality food to maintain good nutrition?

Still, first among all foods is rice. Why is there no project that supports rice production instead of new crops that nobody really wants? Why don't we work seriously on training farmers to maintain soil fertility or increasing the yield of food crops? Why not more revolving funds to assist the people over rough periods, rice banks to make up shortfalls in food supply. For deep in every Karen heart that is all they want: more rice to eat.

And medicine what has happened there? As belief in spirits loses strength, more people go to the hospital. They

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will have to buy more medicine; commercialisation of disease and curing increases very quickly. Can the production of cash crops keep up? Now when people are ill, especially in villages targeted by agriculture development projects, they will go straight to town, to the hospital if necessary and this means they must spend a lot of money for travel, food, accommodation etc.

Why don't we provide training to convey the practical knowledge of when is the proper time to go to the hospital? Why don't we help them to make best use of their own medicinal herbs?

### **Winds hot and cold**

When the winds of change blow, they blow very gently at first but gather strength as they pass over the lowlands. The winds of change have reached every place in the highlands. Karen social structure is being shaken by both material things and new ideas.

Everywhere old ways of living and working have disappeared, in fields and in home gardens. The words and hands of development workers who have a mind to provide only good things to villagers, in fact, bring hardship to all Karen.

If development efforts eventually lead to real happiness, then roll on that day and congratulations to those who toil in the name of development.

But if the changes lead to counterfeit happiness which the new divinity, the money god, has dreamed up to lead us all astray, then having forgotten a more basic reality we are lost.

We, the development workers, are we part of a great merit making exercise or are we lost, and will the winds of change soon blow cold?