

# To be Karen and to be cool

## Community, morality and identity among Sgaw Karen in Northern Thailand\*

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### INTRODUCTION

In a letter written to his superiors in the East India Company in 1759, Captain George Baker says of the Karen, "they are remarkable for their perfect morality, but have no apparent religion" (cited in Theodore Stern's foreword to HAMILTON 1976: vii). Other early reports by British too refer to the "peaceableness, honesty, and goodness" of Karen-not surprisingly, since some Karen helped the British in their war against Burma (SANGERMANO, 1885 and SNODGRASS 1827, cited in MARSHALL, 1922: 26; also ANDERSEN, 1923; BALDWIN, 1948). More recent accounts also stress the characteristic love of peace and harmony among Karen (LEWIS, 1984). Are there cultural bases for such character attribution by western observers, and do the Karen themselves refer to such characteristic as an ethnic marker? Missionaries however, attribute the "moral" characteristic of Karen to the power of Christian teachings, claiming that it is Christian conversion that brought profound changes in Karen moral character, differentiating Christian Karen from other peoples as well as non-Christian Karen (BOARDMAN, 1829). How do Christian Karen in Thailand today identify themselves? Is there continuity from morality in traditional practices or from that expressed by missionaries? Such questions must be posed in historical context. With changing Thai

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administrative policy, the position of hill Karen communities have undergone significant changes. Karen conception of themselves, the surrounding national environment and their position within it may also be part of such dynamics.

In this article, I first introduce the traditional Karen community as the basic unit of ritual and social order demonstrating that the autonomous and bounded community provides basis for identity and morality. Qualitative changes in the relationship between community and the outside world since the 1960s have brought increasing involvement with the Thai polity and economy for Karen villagers. In such context, the Karen community undergoes significant change, and villagers seek a wider basis of activity, negotiating between a Karen ethnic identity and belonging to the Thai nation. I then consider how such a basis is reformulated and how negotiation of identity in the Thai setting is effected through non-traditional practices, namely Christian. In this negotiative process, the moral characteristic of the Karen is high-lighted by the Karen themselves where Karen identity is reformulated.

The material derives from 20 months' fieldwork in Chiangmai Province between 1987 and 1989. The main area of fieldwork was a cluster of hill Sgaw Karen villages, some of which were comprised entirely of traditional ritual practitioners, while others included Baptist Christians. In addition, the entire area was involved with Thammacarik Buddhism and all non-Christian villagers participated in Buddhist temple activities.

## KAREN IN NORTHERN THAILAND

The Karen population in Thailand in 1986 was approximately 270,000 according to the Tribal Research Institute. This is less than one percent of the Thai population although they are the largest among all minority groups referred to as "hill tribes" in Thailand. In traditional Karen society, the village community is the largest social unit and a village can consist of from several to as many as fifty households which are composed of a nuclear family or an extended family consisting of parents and one married daughter's family. For purposes other than ritual, kin relation is traced bilaterally.

Except those in Chiangmai and other towns, the majority of Karen population in Northern Thailand are rice cultivators. Over the past several decades, the center of subsistence has shifted from swidden cultivation of rice on the slopes to wet-rice cultivation in the plains due to population pressure in the hills as well as national policy. In

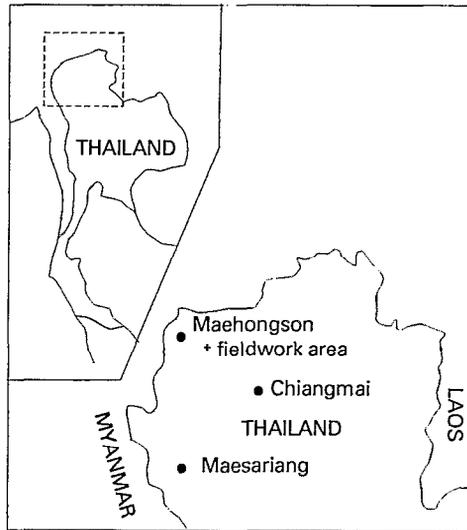


FIG. 1. — Map of Northern Thailand Showing Fieldwork Area

the area of my fieldwork, 70 per cent of the villagers owned wet-rice fields although only a few had surplus rice to sell, while many other families had to supplement the yield by small scale dry-rice cultivation on the slopes. Other crops such as maize, a variety of beans, green vegetables, pumpkin, squash, garlic, chili, and fruit are grown for their own consumption. Cash income derives from gathering and selling forest products, working in Hmong or Northern Thai fields or selling livestock.

While many Karen villagers continue to perform a body of traditional rituals which they have inherited from parental generations, Christianity finds a large following among the Karen. The two largest Christian denominations among Karen in Thailand, the Baptist and Catholic have grown especially since the late 1950s, together constituting almost ten per cent of the Karen population<sup>1</sup>. Even as the Thai nation

<sup>1</sup> Baptist missionary work among Karen in Thailand was initiated by Baptist Karen in Burma in the 1880s, while Catholic mission among Karen in Thailand began in the 1950s. Both denominations have seen rapid growth since the 1950s. According to the files of the Karen Baptist Convention's annual meetings, the number of baptized Baptist Christians among Karen in Northern Thailand is 11,500 in 1988. According to *Feuilles Missionnaires*, a bulletin for Catholic missionaries working in Northern Thailand, the number of Karen Catholics was 9,630 in 1986 (this number represents 63% out of 15,281 across all ethnic groups in Northern Thailand). Neither of these figures include the younger family members and other non-baptized population who equally participate in Christian activities.

declares religious freedom, it embraces Theravada Buddhism in its nationalizing policies, and affiliation with or adoption of other religions may have significant implications on Karen identity<sup>2</sup>.

## COMMUNITY, MORALITY AND IDENTITY

Among traditionalist Karen, the village community constitutes the largest socio-political and ritual unit, and is conceptualized in opposition to the forest which is the realm of spirits of the wild. In order to appropriate a piece of land for human purposes such as habitation or agriculture, an area of land in the forest is chosen and cleared. The territorial spirit, Lord of Water and Land must be informed and offered sacrifice, and spirits of the forest must be chased away in order for human beings to inhabit or use the area. All of the surrounding area not adapted for human use is the forest, and human beings, especially women and children, are believed to be vulnerable to evil spirits of the forest. This village/forest dichotomy is central in Karen conceptualization of their universe and in various rituals.

The forest is the realm of wilderness and chaos where evil spirits and wild animals roam, from which the human village realm of order is cut out and protected through good relationship with the territorial spirit. Things causing harm or disgust in the village can be thrown away in the forest. The village is where such power is controlled and order maintained. The most desirable condition for a community is that of "happiness and coolness", where good relationship is maintained with the spirit and health, harvest and order prevail. Words and deeds that can cause disorder are tabu within the community, yet they are not so harmful if performed in the forest out of community bounds. For example, gambling is said to cause disorder in the community but is harmless in the forest. Similarly, funeral songs can be uttered in the forest but never in the village at any time other than funerals. Strong spells can cause disorder among villagers if uttered in the community and affect villagers if used inappropriately but can be spoken in the forest without causing harm. The village/forest boundary is thus maintained. It is within village bounds that power must be controlled and contained and an orderly and harmonious state sustained through negotiation with the territorial spirit.

<sup>2</sup> Although this paper focuses on Christian Karen (which, in this area was entirely Baptist), in terms of adopted religion, Buddhism also has had significant influence among the Karen for over a century and today, it is an important element in many Karen communities. Buddhism among Karen has been discussed, for example, in ANDERSON (1978) and MADHA (1980). In HAYAMI (1992), I discuss Thammacarik Buddhism among Karen.

The opposite of a cool state is “hot and red village”, “strong land” or “broken village, broken rice crop” which is caused by extra-marital sexual liaison, theft, speaking bad words, conflict, and gambling within community bounds. Such acts disturb the coolness or order in the community resulting in illness, death and famine. It is the responsibility of the village ritual leader together with male elders to ensure order and “coolness” in a community.

Pivotal in maintaining this boundary and order within the community is the relationship between villagers and the Lord of Water and Land, the territorial spirit which is central in various rituals performed by the village ritual leader and male elders. Every village community differs in the way it communicates with this spirit and must negotiate its own unique way of relating to or dealing with it to maintain ritual order. Good relationship with the spirit ensures that the latter will look after all inhabitants in the territory giving protection and harvest as long as its demands are satisfied, but it is easily offended by human carelessness both in word and deed. Upon initial settlement, the first settler who becomes village ritual leader must perform divination and seek appropriate ways of satisfying the Lord of Water and Land, and if there is epidemic or famine, it is understood that the spirit is dissatisfied and the leader may again by means of chicken bone divination decide to move out to a new site and/or change the ritual order. This is an on-going process, responsibility for which is borne by the village ritual leader (*hi kho* in Karen, meaning “village first” or “village head”), as first among equals in a group of male elders. This position is inherited through the paternal line from the first settler in the community. His role is basically concerned with ritual, yet as I clarify in the course of this discussion, since the ritual and social order in the community are inseparable, he is in effect leader in the religio-political traditional community, although the nature and extent of his leadership seems to vary from person to person.

The invariable role of the ritual leader is the performance of rites, both regular calendrical rites as well as irregular rites of propitiation at times of crisis, in which he assumes a priestly role in assuring renewed relationship between the spirit, the community and villagers. One of the most important rites of the latter type is that of “making cool” or “making good” when extra-marital sexual relationship jeopardizes community order. The community is said to be “hot” or “strong” and there will be illness and bad harvest in the entire community. Such relationships include pre-marital intercourse and adultery. Heat and disorder in the land caused by the spirit’s anger towards the culprits must be dissolved and order restored by cooling. Moral transgression must thus be corrected by the village ritual leader.

In another rite, when a villager loses a buffalo, money, or other important belonging, the ritual leader will perform a sacrifice in which liquor and a pig or chicken are offered at the village boundary. If it is a case of theft, the culprit will be driven to confess for fear of spirit retaliation, and if it is simply a lost item, it will come back. The spirits are believed to keep jealous watch over not only villagers in the territory but their belongings so that if livestock or treasure is misplaced without notice, the spirit will respond. Other types of offense that affect the community are conflict between villagers, especially those involving verbal abuse.

Thus within the community, certain acts and events that disturb order and release power must be counteracted and contained, especially through the ritual leader. Otherwise, the well-being of the entire community is affected. While blasphemous words referring directly to the spirits are certain to cause disorder, strong words and disagreement in face-to-face situations between villagers too are strictly avoided for fear of causing conflict leading to sorcery, and disorder in the community as a whole. Speaking strong words especially in front of elders is said to affect the speaker as well as the community. Thus, a cool and orderly community as precondition for harvest and well-being of villagers depends to a degree on ritual and moral conduct of villagers.

While the conduct of its members thus affects the community requiring subsequent ritual propitiation, condition of the community is in turn essential for the well-being of its members. Health of a person depends on the existence of the vital essence called *k'la*. As according to Karen, a person has 37 *k'la*, one of which is the head *k'la*. The loss of *k'la* causes illness and the permanent loss of the head *k'la* brings death. *K'la* are easily lured away by evil spirits or become lost in the forest. Most rites of individual curing and protection involve the calling and securing of *k'la* by tying a person's wrists with cotton strings thereby preventing the *k'la* from getting lost. The following is an example of prayer for calling and tying *k'la*:

prrr...  
 We tie so that you return.  
 Call so that you return  
 Come back home to your sleeping place  
 Come back to the village to your land  
 Make much goodness  
 You are in our village you are in our land  
 Your goodness is great  
 Let us live long that we do not get sick  
 That we are not hurt and have no trouble  
 Please do  
 Let us be healthy without sickness  
 Strong and healthy

Let us be rich and abundant  
 For many years and many months  
 .....  
 You go [to work] and you come back  
 You go to far and high places  
 We call you back your energy  
 Make much goodness  
 For long years and months  
 .....

The prayer demonstrates that *k'la* is not only identified with a person, but with a village or territory to which that person belongs. While the rite of *k'la*-calling for an individual is performed any time of the year in varying scale whenever the need arises, twice a year, a community-wide *k'la*-calling takes place before planting and harvest, led by the village ritual leader. The two most important components of this rite is the calling of *k'la* of members in every household, and the offerings of song and feast to the territorial spirit, Lord of Water and Land. Through performance of this twice-annual communal wrist-tying rite, the village renews its relationship with the spirit, and *k'la* of village members are called and secured before crucial agricultural activities. The ritual leader and elders bring on a state of coolness in the community, and villagers bring health and happiness to themselves by calling back their *k'la*. The land must be cool for *k'la* to come back and stay. Such a harmonious state must be secured and villagers strengthened before planting and harvest which are important events that are affected by disorder in the community and that may in turn affect the condition of individual *k'la*.

Individual health and well-being is dependent on such order or "coolness", and individual sense of belonging and identity rests on the community. When two Karen strangers meet, they first ask each others' village, locating the other Karen person in one's own mental map of Karen communities. Every member of the community is thus identified with the community, and personal well-being is inseparable from communal well-being. Immigration of villagers from one community to another must follow strict procedure, and the spirit is notified of any change in membership. Social basis for moral conduct is to a certain extent restricted to each community which in this sense is a morally closed universe. What takes place outside of community bounds does not affect order within, even if a member of the community is involved.

The "moral" quality of Karen people that has impressed western observers may be related to the above traditional Karen conceptualization of community order and personal well-being. The territorial spirit, evil spirits of the forest, or human action can cause disturbance in the community. What translates as morality from the outsider's

point of view is this intention to contain and control power and order which ultimately affect the well-being and health of all village members. What outsiders characterized as moral or peace-loving characteristics of Karen are related to concern for the religio-political order in the community.

On some issues, Karen villagers do frequently reflect on their moral character in comparison to other peoples, especially regarding marriage and sexual mores. One of the gravest offenses is that of extra-marital sexual liaison as can be gathered from the rite of cooling performed by the ritual leader when such tabu is broken. This by no means implies that such relationship never takes place. However, if any such liaison between a young couple is exposed, which invariably happens when the young woman becomes pregnant, they must undergo the cooling rite, and subsequently be married. The stress on confining sexual relationship to a monogamous couple is sanctioned both in family and community rituals<sup>3</sup>.

In ideology Karen emphasize a life-long monogamous relationship, harmony and union between wife and husband. In fact talk about such relationship always evokes reference and comparison to neighboring peoples such as Hmong or Northern Thai, of whom villagers hold disdainful stereotypes. "Hmong men have many wives only to make slaves of them. They buy their wives with money. Hmong women work while their husbands sleep, and if they don't their husbands beat them. Karen couples marry out of love and always work together." "The Northern Thai never stay married, changing partner after partner. It doesn't matter if they have children. A Karen man only has one wife whom he does not buy but marries for mutual love." Village men are extremely protective of their women towards non-Karen outsiders, especially Northern Thai men whose alleged lack of sexual mores is despised and who are often associated with evil spirits in the forest. Caring and life-long togetherness in a married couple is stressed as being characteristically Karen, and is well-supported in family ritual practices. This monogamous ideology is another factor that impressed western observers who also held such marital relationship as ideal. Remarriage after death of a spouse is common, but in rare cases of divorce, the divorcees' chance of remarriage within the community is low. They will marry elsewhere and/or find a non-Karen spouse.

Besides such emphasis on Karen marital and sexual mores, villagers often advised me to stay in Karen villages during my travels, saying

<sup>3</sup> I do not discuss the family rite here, but it constitutes an important part of traditional Karen ritual practice (See for example, HAYAMI, 1992; HINTON, 1984; RAJAH, 1984).

Karen villages are “happy and cool”, and that I need not worry about theft and would be fed and treated with hospitality. Indeed, while Karen villagers do not share meals with other co-villagers, they make sure that all visitors are fed and well-treated. Visitors from outside the village are potential cause for disturbance, and are therefore generally fed and well-received.

So far we have seen that the traditional community is the basis for Karen identity and ritual order within the community. In traditional conceptualization, each community was envisioned as an ordered center while the forest was the realm of uncontrolled power and disorder. However, the community as an autonomous unit and basis of identity and moral conduct is increasingly involved in the national administrative and economic structure. In the process, traditional ritual order is encompassed by a different order.

## WIDENING HORIZON

Changes that have been taking place in the hill Karen communities have both internal and external origins. Under increasing population pressure and the resulting competition over land as well as government concern over forestry depletion, very few Karen communities today are entirely dependent on dry-rice cultivation in swidden fields. Whereas land was communally owned and appropriated resource under shifting dry-rice cultivation, now under stable wet-rice cultivation it is owned and inherited in a family, and can be sold from person to person. Communal labor for burning and clearing swidden fields is no longer practiced. Ownership is approved and registered by the local district administration.

While Karen communities have always been in contact with other peoples, it is only since the 1950s that the Thai administration seriously began the effort to incorporate the hill communities into its national sphere. Qualitative changes in relationship with the Thai administration have taken place. The local district administration issues usehold titles for wet-rice fields. Roads, schools as well as army, police and development stations have been built in the hills and contact with the outside has increased. The government-supported Buddhist Thammacarik program is one aspect of the increased national concern in the hill population. Thai language education is promoted, and increasingly, villagers are perceiving the need and advantage of literacy and speaking ability in Thai.

Whereas in traditional Karen communities, socio-political and ritual order were inseparable, today, the community is increasingly a

part of the wider national administrative and economic structure. Autonomy and boundary of the community is jeopardized, rendering it administratively subordinate. There is a wider-encompassing center of order outside the Karen community that envelops the latter. The community/forest dichotomy itself no longer holds.

The religio-political order in the community represented by the traditional ritual leader is undermined as the importance of the administrative headman increases. A headman (*puu yai baan*) is elected for the smallest administrative unit, which usually encompasses several communities that may or may not coincide with internally recognized divisions. With increasing contact with outsiders, the headman's job is increasing in responsibility, importance, as well as benefits. Not only is he spokesman for villagers, but is the gateway through which all outsiders seeking involvement with the community must pass. Thus the headman's status and prestige have risen both in the village as well as externally. His position and power derive ultimately from the Thai administration.

In fact, in many of the villages in the area of my study, the patrilineal line of the village ritual leader had terminated. In traditional practice, a new line of ritual leaders can be instituted only if a village can be relocated and reformulated. Under stable wet-rice agriculture, this is no longer feasible as villagers are tied to their land. The flexibility of village formation and fission is no longer possible. Without a ritual leader, the cooling rite cannot be performed, and moral transgression in the community now goes unchecked by ritual propitiation. The ritual leader's role of maintaining community order is left to a group of elders who cannot perform some of the crucial rites of the ritual leader. Problems in the village are taken to the administrative headman. Petty theft in the village is usually taken care of by the meeting of elders, but when jewelry was stolen in one village, the culprits from the village were taken to the Thai police and imprisoned.

The moral sanctioning power of the traditional community is becoming obsolete. Where the line of ritual leadership terminated ritual observance in general has declined, leaving traditionalist villagers in a ritual vacuum and a feeling of loss of control. When there was conflict and violence in the vicinity, elders lamented that Karen have "fallen and become like Northern Thais", not so much because such violence was previously non-existent, but because measures for regaining order within the community has been lost.

Where their community as a basis for identity and morality is undermined, non-traditional religious practices, in this case Baptist Christianity, provides a path for reformulating a sense of belonging. The process is not a simple cause and effect, for religious adoption

not only provides such paths and undermines traditional ritual order thereby necessitating search for such paths<sup>4</sup>.

## CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Whereas community order and personal well-being are deeply related in traditional practices, among Christian villagers, community order is associated with administration and differentiated from religious life and cosmology. Since Baptist conversion demands discontinuation of all traditional rituals, the village ritual leader no longer has any role for Christian villagers. Order or “coolness” in the community is contingent on the administrative skills of the village headman. An able headman will moderate conflict among villagers and maintain order and harmony. Community order thus conceptualized is incompatible with that of the traditional cosmology centered on the Lord of Water and Land and reflected in harvest and villagers’ well-being. In this sense, Christianity has brought “disenchantment” or “rationalization”.

Although earlier Christian evangelists encouraged converts to form a community of their own, in reality, most Christian villagers live in mixed villages alongside traditionalists. Congregations are formed across village bounds so that members from plural residential communities gather in service. Therefore, the Christian religious community is distinct yet superimposed upon the residential community. For traditionalist villagers, the conversion of fellow villagers rends the ritual unity and order in the community, so that Christian conversion affects the entire community.

Among Christian villagers, the well-being of individual persons and order in the community are no longer interdependent. Among Christian Karen, soul is translated as “heart” (*sa*), and *k’la* is no longer used<sup>5</sup>. Individual coolness derives from personalized relationship with God. Even though conversion takes place usually by the family unit, the ultimate decision of baptism is made on an individual basis. A villager is not associated with the community in the same way as in traditional practices. However, for Christian Karen, the Christian Karen community provides an alternative.

<sup>4</sup> The process and various reasons for conversion are discussed in HAYAMI (1992).

<sup>5</sup> According to MARSHALL, early missionaries made a full study of the Karen *k’la* and *tha* (*sa* in some dialects) to determine which of the two words should be used in translating the word “soul”, and *tha* was chosen (1922:218 fn.).

Through the local church, all Karen Baptist Christians are affiliated with the Karen Baptist Convention (KBC), a Northern Thailand-wide organization with its headquarters in Chiangmai. In addition to activities of the local congregation, there are annual meetings and events that take villagers out of the area so that Christian villagers are part of a larger religious community of Karen. Every year in April, KBC holds a general meeting to which several hundred Karen Baptist Christians from all of the five conventional districts, leaders and missionaries gather. The meeting takes place over five days and the five districts take turn in holding the meeting. According to the Secretary General's speech in the beginning of the 1989 meeting, the purpose of the general meetings is : "for brothers and sisters of various villages and districts to meet together in one place, to strengthen faith and to make plans for the coming year." Reports of the past year's activities and budget are given and plans for the coming year are approved. Each of the sub-units such as the youths or women's groups also meet separately. Every night there is much music, short skits and plays, and during the day youths enjoy soccer or other sports. It is a festive occasion to which several hundred Karen from all over Northern Thailand come together. Today, although KBC receives aid and assistance from foreign missionary organizations in numerous projects, it is an autonomous Karen organization with Karen leaders and funds from all members. Thus, Christian activities that connect villagers with the outside are all within the organization that is solely Karen, which covers educational, medical, and economic functions. Christian villagers are a part of a network of a wider community of Christian Karen.

KBC consciously promotes the ideology of Christian Karen identity. Thai is rarely spoken in services and meetings and whenever it was spoken, it was explained why it had to be so. In order for Christian Karen in the hill villages to be able to read the bible which is written in Karen, literacy program is promoted and literacy in Karen language among non-educated Christian Karen villagers is quite high<sup>6</sup>. In addition to this consistency in language use, there is emphasis on Karen costume. While most women wear their costumes, men are more often clad in western or Thai style clothes. During the 1987 annual convention, a leader announced half-jokingly "I don't see enough red shirts [the traditional Karen man's costume] among you. Next year, if I see a man not wearing one, I shall collect fines".

<sup>6</sup> The written Sgaw Karen language was devised by American Baptist missionaries in Burma in the mid-19th century using the Burmese script. There is another system used today in Thailand, devised by Catholic missionaries based on the Roman alphabet.

In both of the two annual meetings I attended, there was noticeable reference to the Karen and their ongoing conflict in Burma, the land where Karen Christianity originated. Although in most of the hill Karen communities there is little talk of the conflict in Burma, at the convention some attention is paid. There is no organizational support from the Thai KBC to the struggle over the border and this is not by any means a call to the battlefield, but a raising of consciousness. The message is that Karen identity is something to be proud of and to fight for, that leading figures in the conflict in Burma are Christian Karen, and that Christian Karen must be the preservers of such identity and pride.

In an evangelical tour by a group of Christian youths and leaders from Chiangmai, one of the elders, a retired banker and perhaps one of the most successful and eminent Karen persons, preached: "We may not be smart and intelligent people, but we can pride in our honesty and purity of heart. When I meet Thai administrators and business people, they all agree to this point. We can gain their respect in this way, and we should strive to educate ourselves and serve our own people." In addition to language and costume, Karen ethnic pride and Christian morality are often presented together. Traditional importance of moral conduct is rephrased in Christian context: in the traditional context, moral conduct was precondition for order in the village community; in the Christian context it is to maintain Karen identity and pride at the same time that Karen become good Thai citizens.

One year at the general meetings, the theme was "winning over temptations." Leaders are becoming increasingly apprehensive of Christian Karen youths in the city and hills who fall into bad ways such as drinking, opium, immoral sexual conduct, distancing themselves from church, and from their own Karen identity. Both among leaders as well as local pastors and lay elders, the metaphor of forest spirits was often used in talking about temptations. Temptations and sin are often compared to spirits of the forest. The traditional theme of the community as a moral universe as against the wild forest is repeated here, albeit with a widened sense of the Christian Karen community.

As the above words of the retired banker exemplifies, KBC itself is weighing balance between two purposes that are at times at odds with one another : to provide means and knowledge so that Karen Christians can be self-confident and able to adapt to and succeed in the Thai setting; and to enhance their pride and identity as Karen as a minority ethnic group in Thai society.

In the opening ceremony of the annual meetings, a local Thai official of the district is invited to give a token speech (one of the few Thai

persons present, and only for a few minutes), thus acknowledging the Thai administration as providing the setting for Karen Christian existence. During the women's group meeting at the 1987 convention, flags for the KBC women's group was dedicated. A procession of the newly prepared flags took place, as Karen Christian women clad in traditional costumes proudly marched holding up the flags. The flag at the head of the procession was the Thai national flag, followed by the KBC flag and then flags of each district. Here again is a formal expression of national allegiance.

KBC provides organizational basis of network and new form of community for the Karen who hitherto had no such structure above the village. Such an organization is not only built upon continuity of Karen ethnic identity but also reinforces it. It is a receptacle and distributor of various forms of aid from non-Thai sources geared towards Karen thereby providing benefits in maintaining the boundary. The boundary between Karen and non-Karen, however, is not only one that is voluntarily maintained, but is imposed from the outside. Although Karen have a longer history of residence in the area and have gained citizenship in Thailand, because of the long history of relationship, the conception of Karen as uncivilized hill-dwellers has deep roots. There are many real and psychological obstacles and tribulations for young Karen to go out into an entirely non-Karen setting<sup>7</sup>. KBC's attempt to inspire ethnic pride and moral conduct at the same time as providing means and knowledge necessary to succeed as Thai citizens must be understood in this context. Ultimately, living in Thailand where the national economic and administrative structure has reached far into the hills, Karen must live as Thai citizens. KBC strives to demonstrate national allegiance at the same time that it promotes ethnic pride.

## CONCLUSION

In traditional Karen community, the village community was basis for moral conduct and ultimate locus of belonging and identity. However, with widening horizon, the traditional community is incorporated into the larger Thai order. Against this background, the Baptist Karen organization promotes the ideology of Christian morality and ethnic pride. Missionary stress on Christian Karen morality since the

<sup>7</sup> In a report on Karen student mobility to Northern Thai cities, the authors point out the tendency for young Karen to conceal their Karen identity in non-Karen settings (RENRAD, *et al.*, 1987).

beginning of their work among Karen in Burma reinforces and is mirrored in such ideology.

As opportunities and occasions for village-based Karen youths to gain education and livelihood in non-Karen settings increase, they adopt Thai ways which are often incongruous with traditional community practices as well as with Christian Karen morals. Karen today, both traditionalist and Christian, seem to behold things Thai with a peculiar love/hate mixture. On the one hand, to become like a Thai is to fall from Karen ways, yet on the other hand, Thai culture, material and otherwise is eagerly adopted. At the same time that Christianity discards traditional Karen practices, the community as basis for identity and moral conduct, KBC provides a path for Karen to proudly identify themselves at once as Karen and as Thai citizens. However, such intention on the part of KBC is undermined by the crucial difference between traditional Karen community and the Christian Karen community. That is, that the latter is no longer the all-encompassing religio-political community.

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