A PROLEGOMENA ON TRADITIONAL WISDOM IN KAREN FOLKLORE*

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This prolegomena is based on extensive materials compiled between 1975–1982 which were originally collected for the preparation of a Karen-Thai, Thai-Karen Dictionary. As linguistic investigation continued, interesting and unexpected cultural understandings appeared that were associated with Karen words. These cultural materials were recorded as part of the linguistic investigation of the Karen language. They include the Karen's world-view, life-style, traditional beliefs, superstitions, customs, manners, folk-medicine, tales, proverbs and traditional entertainment such as songs and riddles. This paper will present some of the cultural data and provide the readers with an opportunity to learn about the wisdom of these lesser known people of Southeast Asia.

The People

The Karen are an important group of people in the Sino-Tibetan linguistic super-stock. According to Keyes (1977: 49), they are the largest tribal minority in both Burma and Thailand, numbering three million or more in Burma, although in Thailand their number does not probably exceed 200,000. In the map appended in the book of Lebar and others (1964) it was shown that the Karen cluster in dispersed groups in the basins of the Irrawaddy river, the Sittang river and in the hill areas which is eastern Burma and the western part of Thailand. In Thailand the Karen, being the largest minority group, are scattered in various places. One can find Karen villages in every northern and western province, from Mae Hongson down south to Ranong. There are settlements of Karen in the central basin especially in the pocket-areas of Uthaithani, Petchburi and Suphanburi provinces. Only the north-eastern plateau and the southern-most provinces do not have their settlement. Linguistically speaking, at least two eminent linguists: Shafer (1955: 94–111) and Benedict (1972: 6) see the

* Paper presented to the International Symposium on Southeast Asian Folklore, Krogerup College, Humlebaek, Denmark. August 23rd–26th, 1982. Acknowledgement is made to the Yayasan Lee Foundation of Malaysia and the Organizing Committee of the Symposium which made it possible for me to participate in this meeting.

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importance of this linguistic family so that they set up this people as a group separated from the rest of the Tibeto-Burman people, thus, constituting an entity called the Karenic group.

Unlike other new-comer hill people of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups (such as the Lahu, Lisu, Akha etc.). The Karen have been familiar to the Thai for a long time. The latter have a special name for these old friends i.e. the Jaaj\(^1\) whereas other new-comer tribes are called by the tribal names they call themselves. There are two districts in Thailand whose names tell clearly that they must have been the cluster site of the Karen people i.e. Thaan Jaaj district and Thaan Soo Jaaj district. In the lowland in the Central Basin, the Karen, like their Thai neighbours, tend the ricefields and grow crops necessary for their subsistence such as corn, vegetables and tobacco. In the hills, where the Karen live at a lower altitude than other hill-tribes, they employ swidden or "slash and burn" agriculture. In the northern forest, they play an important role in the teak trade and are very keen at elephant training. They do not grow opium-poppy and neither do they take part in the opium trade except some few individual cases. The data for this study are from field work done in 6 provinces namely Chiengmai, Maehongsorn, Lamphoon, Kanchanaburi, Suphanburi and Petchburi.

The Study

As a people, the Karen have interesting cultural traditions. Some of these traditions are not unlike those of other peoples of Southeast Asia. To mention only the most telling ones for example, the Karen teajpre is very close to Thai "Kumaan thoog\(^*\) and thaoaj\(^*\). the Karen tiger-bride story has some inkling resemblance to Thai "sya samii\(^*\) and their concept that "bad luck" can be changed is like the concept of the Thai "sado khr5?".

\(^*\)1 Thai words in this study are written according to the transliteration system used in Haas' Thai-English Student's Dictionary (1964)
Karen data are from the author's field-notes which will be published in the form of Sgaw Karen-Thai Dictionary and Thai-Sgaw Karen Dictionary, (forthcoming).

\(^*\)2 thaoaj is the spirit of a male infant whose mother died before it was born. To make this spirit, thaoaj, the baby is taken out of its dead mother's womb while a magical ceremony is performed. After the ceremony the child-spirit becomes powerful and has to act on every wish of its master, the performer of that ceremony. It is believed that the spirit will be most powerful if it is the master's son. The magical ceremony to make thaoaj is described elaborately in a popular Thai work of literature "Khun Chao Khun Phraen". ชูน จักจุฬาภรณ์

\(^*\)3 teajmii is the spirit of an old man-eating tiger. It can change its appearance from man to tiger/from tiger to man at will. In the Thai version of the legend, this tiger runs with its victims' corpses usually on its back. In the Karen version, in the human-maiden form, it kills the man by alluring him to its enchanting female body. Its appearance can be changed from beautiful maiden into an old tiger by walking around a termite hill.
Some of the Karen beliefs are, according to our present knowledge, unique to this people such as the belief that every man predetermines his own life-span by telling the number of years he wants to live on this earth to mâxâkhâb, the record-keeper, before he enters this life. This belief together with other traditional beliefs might seem nonsense to our modern mind. But it is to be noted that despite the change of time the tradition is still a living and dynamic force governing the behaviour, speech and way of thinking of the Karen living in modern time as in the past. With limited space it is impossible to present all these traditional lore in this paper. Besides, there is a problem of categorizing the materials collected. In this case we need help from folklorists who have been working on Southeast Asian folklores to set up a universal (or at least Southeast Asian) categorization for the presentation of all these traditional wisdom. A Working Group is needed for the setting up of the categorization of recurring themes which crop up now and then in the investigation of folklores of different tribes. For folktales, good work was done by Thompson (1955-58). But for other aspects of culture we are still in need of a workable framework. Hence in the study of proverbs, traditional beliefs, superstitions, folk-medicine, manners and body-mannerism, customs and traditional entertainments etc., we have to use a descriptive approach method to describe as accurately as possible what is discovered in the field-data. In the description some comparisons, such as between Thai and Karen proverbs, can be made. This is all we can do at the moment. In the following part of the study we are attempting to present some examples of the Karen traditional wisdom and will wait for further research to suggest ways to use these data to shed more light on the comparative study of Southeast Asian folklore in general.

Proverbs and Sayings: tà kə̄?todo

Being a poetic people who like to use vivid and figurative metaphor, Karen speech is full of proverbs and good old-sayings, both of which have the same name in Karen “tà kə̄?todo”. While some of these proverbs have their counterparts in Thai which will be shown in (1)—(4), some are unique to the Karen at our present knowledge (we have not yet the means to investigate whether the latter occur in other minority languages in Burma such as the Chin, the Palaung etc. or not).

tiger its mother striped its children red

‘Being tiger whose mother is striped, the litters cannot be otherwise but russet’ The contexts where this proverb is mostly used are for example: to criticize the subordinates whose chief is a do-no-good man, or to praise the descendants of an able man. This tà kə̄?todo has similar meaning in Thai saying “chýa mài thíŋ thèw” เชือไม่ทิ้งผ่าน
or “Like father, like son” in English. However, a difference is to be made, while the English and the Thai sayings specifically refer to children in relation to their fathers or ancestors, the Karen saying is more general in its application.


bamboo at its internode man at his heart

Even the same stem of bamboo can have different colours on its different nodes, men can have different opinions'. This tā kāʔtokō is like Thai “phāj jaŋ tāŋ plō, phī nōŋ jaŋ tāŋ caj’ ใฝ่จังผู้จัง พี่น้องจังต่างใจ. The same remark can be made as in (1). The Thai application is more appropriate for the comparison of the difference of opinions among siblings whereas the Karen application is more general.

(3) nācha tē? bo nācha ṭō'
catfish one classifier catfish red

?iʔ nē ?aʔ ṭōmō do mo
bad obtain its friend all container made of bamboo node

‘If one catfish in the container is a red catfish, then all of its friends in the same container are poisonous’. In the Karen belief a red catfish has very potent poison that can contaminate other fish in the same container. Thus if a fish trap catches one red catfish, the traditional wisdom demands that, as we should not take an unnecessary risk of being poisoned, all other caught fish must be thrown away. This way of thinking is seen in other cases as well. For example in mushroom-gathering, the Karen will not gather edible mushrooms if they see a poisonous one in the proximity of these mushrooms. One should notice also that this tā keʔtōdō has rhyming element at the end of each stanza (ṭō and mo), thus making it melodious and easily memorable. This Karen proverb is used to remind us of the necessity for self-preservation and is also used in the same meaning as in the Thai counterpart “plaa tua diaw nāw, nāw thāŋ khāŋ” ปลาที่ผิดพลาดคนที่ซ่า ซ่าที่ทำผิด, comparing that one bad chap in the company makes everyone infamous. The Lawa also have a proverb on this theme.

(4) cho pho ṭaʔ cīʔ nesāʔ pu

hen children v.to be hand center of the palm inside

or sole

‘The chicken in the palm of your hand (you can squeeze it or release it, up to your mercy)’. This tā keʔtōdō resembles the Thai “lūuk kāj naj kam myy” ลูกว่า

ในที่เมื่อ.
Some ต่ำะ todo are unique to the Karen. Most of the wisdom comes from the Karen's close observation of nature around them in the forest. The town people cannot have time to see the beauty of ants' eggs nor to observe the mannerism of big fish seeking for their prey as can be seen in (5) and (6).

(5) แต่เจ แล้ว หา ดี?
ant  good, beautiful when it egg
paเจ อี หา pho
man  good, beautiful when he child

'Ants are good only when they are in the egg, human-beings are beautiful only in their youth.' To understand this saying, a knowledge of the Karen life is needed. As toilers of the land, the Karen detest ants because the latter, bother them while they are working and destroy their crops especially their favourite chilly plants whose young leaves are also ants' favourite. However, the Karen love to eat ants' eggs, so an ant's nest full of eggs is beautiful/good in the Karen's eyes. The Karen value youth because this period of life passes them so fast—being hard workers in the field without the help of modern technology, they age prematurely.

(6) หน้า ใด้ ร้าย หา กา ที่ dĩ
fish big eat its prey water muddy, unclear

'The big fish can prey only when the water is muddy (otherwise the small fish see it coming)' The Karen observe that when a big fish preys, it stirs up its body to make the surrounding water muddy which will prevent it being seen by its prey, the small fish. This ต่ำะ ka todo is very popular and is used in everyday speech. When a clever man tries to fool his neighbour, he likes to talk about big things such as the law, the rules etc., his neighbour can evade the trap by citing this "หน้า ได้ .......". Then he will understand immediately that his neighbour refuses to be fooled.

Traditional Beliefs

The topic is undoubtedly an all-enbracing subject. As to how many sub-categorizations under this topic should be formed for the benefits of the study of Southeast Asian folklore should be determined by the mentioned Working Group. The subject can cover from religiously significant beliefs concerning with the hierarchy of deities and cosmology to ordinary and unimportant beliefs such as the belief that toad is a bad omen. In this paper, only 3 kinds of beliefs will be discussed.

A. Prediction based on physical characteristics (การ, หามนสัตว์). The Karen are keen at making physical observation on physical characteristics of both living beings (e.g. human and animal) and inanimate objects (e.g. house, knife etc.). These observations are used to tell them whether the objects seen are good or bad.
Some of these beliefs seem nonsense to the mind of modern readers. However, some of them reveal the ability of the Karen to make a penetrating observation on nature (e.g. in (7)) and human psychology (e.g. in (8)).

(7) thō? ʔa? mē kā? krs. tā ʔe bā
pig its tail shut door negative good negative

particle particle

‘Pig with drooping tail is not good’. As keen observer of nature, the Karen know that animals with drooping tail (called in Karen idiom “shut-door tail”) are weak animals. They make further notice that in a brood of puppies or piglets, there will be one which they call “lome” meaning “the weakest one of the brood”. Neither in English nor Thai, do we have such a word. These lome animals usually have drooping tail. To test the truth of this Karen traditional wisdom, please observe when your dog has a new brood.

(8) xeʔ lāʔ ʔaʔ ʔe klā matā tā mīʔ bā
knife which its beautiful very work neg.part pleasant, neg.part
to have fun

‘Too beautiful knife cannot work well’ The Karen believes that utility tools such as a knife, a hoe have minds of their own. If they are too beautiful, they might refuse to work hard lest their beauty will disappear. Thus when a Karen blacksmith makes these tools, he will leave a tiny imperfection on each of them so that the tools will not be vain of their beauty. There is wisdom in this so-called nonsense. Man usually loves his beautiful tool so much that he might not use it in its full capacity as seen in the care and concern of a young man given to his first brand-new car. Realizing that if a Karen has a beautiful tool he might work less, the Karen blacksmith therefore will not make an artistically beautiful knife for a worker. This observation on the knife in (8) “xeʔ ʔaʔ ʔe klā matā tā mīʔ bā” can be used as a saying tā kəʔtodo (see supra.). When used as a tā kəʔtodo, it is used in a situation such as to refuse to employ a too good-looking or too well-dressed man as a labourer.

(9) mēʔo kēʔ ʔaʔ khîʔ
red mole v.to be one’s bad characteristics

‘Red moles (on the skin) are bad sign.’ With our knowledge of modern medicine this observation seems nonsense to our modern mind. But one should not forget that modern medicine also warns us that there is a possible link between unusual moles with the sign of newly developed cancer.
B. The Karen concept of “weird wicked” behaviours: kòchù

There is no single English word equivalent to the Karen term kòchù. The idea refers to an unusually weird wicked behaviour or an unnecessarily cruel act (the French “crime gratuit”) such as the sadist’s cruel acts. The Karen believe that kòchù brings bad fortune both to the doer and to his village. It is evident that such belief has pragmatic value: it brings peace and harmony into Karen society. Moreover, this concept of kòchù protects not only human but also animals and nature, as in (11) and (12), from exploitation by the cruel acts of man. kòchù is therefore a really modern concept. Examples of kòchù behaviours which are censured in Karen society are as follows:

(10) kòchù chòtâ tò nè bà
to swear neg.part able neg.part

“One cannot use a swear word, to swear is a kòchù”. Politeness and harmony in human relationship is valued in Karen society so much that even abusive language such as to swear at one another is considered a kòchù and is not permitted.

(11) tëlô sülâ lô? shwè ?a? pu kòchù lophlâ?
to put one kind of rattan at crab its hole thunderbolt

“To put rattan in the crab’s hole (an unnecessarily cruel act to the crab) is kòchù. The sinner will be struck by lightning.”

(12) ma phê?â môlí? pho dê ?a? mò ma phê?â sê
to separate monkey child with its mother to separate tree
dê ?a? pê?apa ?a kòchù
with its forest many

“To separate the little monkey from its mother, to fell too many trees in the forest is kòchù.”

to trap touch, animal at water many fish at water finish obtain
hunt eat animal at forest many forest it deserted, uninhabited
sâ? këkêtô?
heart lonely and
nostalgic

“To trap too many water-animals, the supply of fish will finish; to hunt too much, the forest will be empty, a lonely and nostalgic feeling for (our) heart.”
We may conclude that the Karen are non-acquisitive people without "capitalist spirit". They are not driven by the desire to accumulate wealth and in so far as environment and natural resources are concerned they are less violently exploitative and destructive. For the Karen the natural world and all its resources including animals are not to be exploited to satisfy man's greedy desires. To use any material resources heedlessly or wastefully would be morally wrong or a kəchə. Trees should be felled down only if they are needed, and only with the greatest care and the most meticulous concern for conservation. This non-exploitative attitude is also seen in the case of killing animals.

C. the Karen concept of unhealthy food

Folk-medicine in many tribes around the world prohibit some specific kinds of food during a specific illness. Thai word for this concept is "sālékn" วณี. In modern western medicine, there is no longer such concept. However, the prohibition of taking some kinds of food is still practiced as a means to prevent illness. (i.e. to abstain from sea-food in allergic patients). Examples of such belief among the Karen are as follow:

(14) ʔɔʔ nà thu tà ba? lo de
    eat fish a kind of mackerel neg.part appropriate with with
    ?a? lo sà? bà
    his body itch neg. part.

    'To eat mackerel (Scrombridae) is unhealthy if our body is itching (an allergic case)'.

(15) pho chiʔ su ʔɔʔ cho diʔ tə ba?
    child small new eat hen egg neg. part. appropriate
    loʔ bà
    with neg. part.

    'A new mother should not eat eggs'

(16) tàchì tà ba? loʔ tàpul5 bà
    acid things neg. part. appropriate with wound neg. part.

    'One who has wounds should not eat acid things'.

Reflections on Life, Human Frailty and Death

Traditional Karen religion was already discussed in Keyes (1977 : 52-54). Our findings agree with his study and supplement it with more details. One can see the Karen's attitudes towards life and death through the study of their myth and folklores.

*4 When one of my Karen informants saw my cook-book with many pictures of preserved meat he remarked that the preservation of meat was a kəchə and for explanation cited (13) to mean "You should not hunt for too much meat, the forest will be empty." Usually the Karen eat game meat only once in a while and they eat it with thrift.
For example in a cosmogonic myth, we are told, *Swa* is the Divine Power, the Great Lord who created nature, the earth, the sky, water and wind. He also created the first man and the first woman whose seven offspring were ancestors of the world's major ethnic tribes of which the Karen were the eldest son. Then one day *Swa*, their Father, distributed books of wisdom to all these seven sons. The six elder sons were preoccupied with work in the field so much that they were not interested in their Father's gift. Only the youngest son paid much attention to it and thus became literate and wise.*5 From this myth the Karen like to cite a popular saying praising the wisdom of the youngest child of a family as in (17)

(17)  
\[ \text{thō tha wēkō? thō tā shī'ā} \]  
bird it eldest bird not clever  
\[ \text{phо tha shī'ā phо sa?da.} \]  
child it clever child youngest in the family  

'The eldest bird is not clever, the youngest child is the cleverest'.

Since all men are children of the same parents they cannot fundamentally differ from each other except in normative ways. For the Karen man is born as a part of the natural world and is therefore subject to the same law governing trees and animals. We are the same as trees, we are born, we grow old and we die as a tree or animal does. For the unpleasant fact of life the Karen explain in the myth of *Mōkōlī*, the Mistress of the Great Lord *Swa*.*6

The Karen regards misfortune, hardship and illness as common aspects of life shared by all men. Even if the Great Lord *Swa* was their creator, the Karen do not

*5 The fact that this myth was used by the American Baptist missionaries for the benefits of spreading Christianity among the Karen was mentioned both in Keyes (1977: 52) and in Ratanakul (1978). These missionaries identified themselves with the youngest brother in the cosmogonic myth coming to help their elder brother, the Karen, by bringing them the book (the New Testament) so that the latter could be literate and wise.

*6 In the myth *Mōkōlī* is the Divinity Evil who enjoyed making man suffer. The relationship between *Swa* and *Mōkōlī* is described as *sima* (mistress). However, the Karen *sima* has a stronger connotation of sexual misbehaviour than the English word. It is to be noted that the myth does not give any account of Swa's lawful wife. Even her name is omitted. One can speculate that the relationship between *Swa* and *Mōkōlī* is used in the myth to suggest human weakness which mythically stemmed from his Creator. The American missionaries equated *Mōkōlī* to Satan. This comparison is easily acceptable to the Karen because in their legends there are so many stories concerning the evil acts of *Mōkōlī*, for example, she made life unnecessarily difficult for man by creating plants with thorns as his obstacles and poisonous fruits as his food.
turn to Him for protection. On the contrary they will seek help from spirits instead. The misfortune and suffering which the Karen often encounter in their life in the forests or on the hills does not make the Karen adopt a pessimistic attitude toward life. For them life is to be lived as fully as one can. One must accept the inevitable happenings in life with stiff-upper-lip and not fight against them, as advised in (19) by the Wise Rabbit in a Karen popular folktale:

(18) Chi?ï'i do Swa takâ?no chë?
with engage in a wrestling match push against
one another at the Salawin river at the Maekhong river

Chi?ï'i and Swa, wrestling with one another in a drawn match, got stuck one against another at the area between the Salawin river and the Maekhong river.

(19) më më*8 pâzo*9 lôshwi
when if dragon following the course of a stream
lô thi më më sêphu thô si?
at water when if a big trunk of tree to go up in the direction of
thi khi
water tail

‘If (and only if) you can make a dragon follow the course of a stream, then you can make a big trunk of tree go up against the direction of the current’ meaning ‘you cannot go against destiny’.

Stoic acceptance of destiny and accommodation of oneself to that destiny are the chief characteristics of the Karen’s philosophy of life. This philosophy seems to be the result of the Karen’s belief in their free choice of life. Similarly death should

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*7 This is because the Karen do not regard Swa as Almighty God and that the Baptist missionaries identification of Swa with the Christian God is not accurate. In the Karen myth even Mëkëlì, His Mistress, could resist His power. In another myth Swa is also powerless against Chi?ï'i, the God of the Land of the Dead, and has to fight an endless battle with this equally powerful god, as accounted in a Karen popular song (18)

*8 më, a Karen copulative verb can be used in place of the conjunction “if” in a conditional proposition because the Karen language lacks the conjunction “if”. This grammatical point is discussed in detail in my other paper (Ratanakul: 1982 b.).

*9 pâzo is a legendary animal much like the Western mythological dragon. The Karen dragon is said to detest water so much that it rarely enters water. When it goes into water, it will swim only against the current.

*10 For the Karen suicide is not a sensible solution to life’s problems. Those who commit suicide will be severely punished after death— to commit suicide in every future life.

*11 In one Karen myth it is said that every man chooses the length of his life span by telling Mîxakhìa, the Record-Keeper, the number of years he wants his life to last. Mîxakhìa is acting only as a recorder of man’s choice and has no power to change man’s decision.
be accepted without grief or lamentation, for, as the Karen consoles the relatives of an untimely death of a man in (20)

(20) pa ta? ya d5? ta? man one classifier for man try and see one
y'a he phá? mišakhle to classifier come make a rendez-vous neg. part.
dǐ?s5? lo?sá? bå resemble, to be like one another neg. part.

‘Each one made (a separate choice of) rendez-vous with mišakhle, (so) the span of life of each one is different’.

Traditional entertainments : songs and riddles

The form and content of Karen songs were already discussed in my other paper (Ratanakul 1978). Here it is to be noted that the Karen are people with poetic and musical ability. In a Karen village one usually finds a poet, mochô?, who is not only well versed in traditional songs but also capable of composing new songs for new situations. Some of these new songs show the novelty and exceptional ability of their composer to write songs with combination of Karen and Thai words*. It is a curious and little known fact that most of the Karen songs are sung at funerals (Ratanakul : 1978). Beside funerals, songs are sung on other occasions as well, e.g. the building of new houses, house-warming ceremony.

Apart from songs, another means of entertainment for the Karen is riddle solving. Riddles, phi?p'i?otâ, are usually used to test the wit of one another. The study of the phi?p'i?otâ will reveal both the interest of the Karen and their mode of living. The following phi?p'i?otâ from (21) to (25) are some of the commonly known riddles:

(21) tà chi?ks ma hò ?a? pho thing small make cry one's child

‘One small thing that makes one's child cry’. The answer is chilly.

(22) tà thô sè tà wi klo? thing climb up tree thing carry big bronze drum

‘One who climbs up tree while carrying a bronze drum? The answer is a snail.

*12 These “new” songs may be regarded as an example of the Karen ability for cultural adaptation to Thai culture without the loss of their cultural identity.
(23) se so? thu cowa? cö te? tree three classifier for tree black-bird to perch one be? classifier for birds
'Three trees that one black-bird perches on'. The answer is a traditional fire-place made of three rocks.

(24) pa dopiwe khi ʔa man relatives two classifier for man blo lo? a? me? thobo
to pass moving in an opposite direction each other its face always
'Two brothers who always pass one another in an opposite direction'. The answer is (man's two) feet.

at its beak
'The bird that flies with its wings (but) perches with its beak'. The answer is an arrow.

Conclusion and Suggestion
The material discussed represents only a small part of the Karen's dynamic culture. Karen folklore is not a mere collection of stories and tales for entertainment. Rather it consists of traditional wisdom and world-views expressed in various forms. One cannot really understand the Karen without knowledge of their lore.

The author contends that there are similarities and differences between Karen folklore and that of other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia which merits further research.

An association of Southeast Asia folklorists is needed to stimulate and consolidate investigations of the lore and culture of ethnic groups in this region. Research findings should be widely disseminated as a means of promoting an understanding and respect for cultural rights of ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, and improving intergroup understanding. The author hopes that an association of folklorists could contribute, through its research and publication, to the easing of conflicts and tensions between minority groups and the dominant societies and makes Southeast Asia a land of peace and tolerance in this troubled world.
REFERENCES


