

A PROLEGOMENA ON TRADITIONAL WISDOM IN KAREN FOLKLORE*

SURIYA RATANAKUL**

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 Uthaitхани, 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

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** Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University, Bangkok.

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 Jaan*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. Thâa Jaan district and Thâa Sǒɔŋ Jaan 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 Chiangmai, 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 tɛ'prɛ is very close to Thai "Kumaan thɔɔŋ" กุมารทอง*²; the Karen tiger-bride story has some inkling resemblance to Thai "sǎa samɨŋ" เสือสมิง*³; and their concept that "bad luck" can be changed is like the concept of the Thai "sadɔ' khrɔ'" สะเดาะเคราะห์.

*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 กุมารทอง is the spirit of a male infant whose mother died before it was born. To make this spirit, กุมารทอง, 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 กุมารทอง is described elaborately in a popular Thai work of literature "Khǔn Chǎaŋ Khǔn Phǎɛn" ขุนช้างขุนแผน

*3 เสือสมิง 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.

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.

- (2) wà ləʔ ʔaʔ kəphəʔ, pa ləʔ ʔaʔ sáʔ
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 *tà kəʔtoko* is like Thai "phāj jaŋ tən pləŋ, phī nōŋ jaŋ tən caŋ" ไผ่ยังต่างปล้อง ฟันยังต่างใจ. 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) n̄acha təʔ bo n̄acha ʔəʔ
catfish one classifier catfish red
ʔiʔ nə ʔaʔ ʔomdə də mə
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 *tà kəʔtodo* has rhyming element at the end of each stanza (ʔəʔ and mə), 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 n̄aw, n̄aw th̄aŋ kh̄ŋ" ปลาตัวเดียวเน่าเน่าทั้งข้อง", comparing that one bad chap in the company makes everyone infamous. The Lawa also have a proverb on this theme.

- (4) cho pho ʔəʔ cíʔ nesáʔ 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 *tà kəʔtodo* resembles the Thai "l̄uuk k̄aŋ naj kam myy" ลูกไก่ในกำมือ.

Some *tàkə? 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)	tə	ʔe	lɔʔ	ʔaʔ	diʔ
	ant	good,beautiful	when	it	egg
	pa	ʔe	lɔʔ	ʔaʔ	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)	nā	doʔ	ʔoʔ	ʔaʔ	chā	thi	dī
	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 *tà kə?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 "nā do?". 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 (การดู, ทำนายลักษณะ). 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)	thɔʔ	ʔaʔ	mê	káʔ	krɛ	tə	ʔe	bà
	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 "lɔmɛ" meaning "the weakest one of the brood". Neither in English nor Thai, do we have such a word. These lɔmɛ animals usually have drooping tail. To test the truth of this Karen traditional wisdom, please observe when your dog has a new brood.

(8)	xɛʔ	lɔʔ	ʔaʔ	ʔe	klà	matà	tə	mɪʔ	bà
	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) "xɛʔ ʔaʔ ʔe klà matà tə mɪʔ bà" can be used as a saying *tà kəʔtodo* (see supra.). When used as a *tà 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)	mɛʔɔ	kɛʔ	ʔaʔ	khɪʔ
	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.

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 *kəchù*. 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*4

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 "salǎŋ" แผลง. 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) ?ə? ñà thu tə ba? lə də
eat fish a kind of mackerel neg.part appropriate with with
?a? lo sá? bà
his body itch neg. part.

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

- (15) pho chí? sə ?ə? chə di? tə ba?
child small new eat hen egg neg. part. appropriate
lə? bà
with neg. part.

'A new mother should not eat eggs'

- (16) tàchì , tə ba? lə? tàpuló 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 *kəchù* 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) thò ʔaʔ wəkóʔ thò t̃ shʔa
 bird it eldest bird not clever
 pho ʔaʔ shʔa pho saʔda
 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 *Mə̀kəlì*, 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 *Mə̀kəlì* is the Divinity Evil who enjoyed making man suffer. The relationship between *Swa* and *Mə̀kəlì* is described as *sìma* (mistress). However, the Karen *sìma* 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 *Mə̀kəlì* is used in the myth to suggest human weakness which mythically stemmed from his Creator. The American missionaries equated *Mə̀kəlì* to Satan. This comparison is easily acceptable to the Karen because in their legends there are so many stories concerning the evil acts of *Mə̀kəlì*, for example, she made life unnecessarily difficult for man by creating plants with thorns as his obstacles and poisonous fruits as his food.

be accepted without grief or lamentation, for, as the Karen consoles the relatives of an untimely death of a man in (20)

(20)	pa	təʔ	ʔa	dʂʔ	təʔ
	man	one	classifier for man	try and see	one
	ʔa	hɛ	pháʔ	míxakhlè	tè
classifier	come	make a rendez-vous		neg. part.	
	díʔsʂʔ	lɔʔsáʔ	bà		
resemble, to be like		one another	neg. part.		

'Each one made (a separate choice of) rendez-vous with *míxakhlè*, (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, *mochóʔ*, 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*¹² 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, *phĩʔpĩʔotà*, are usually used to test the wit of one another. The study of the *phĩʔpĩʔotà* will reveal both the interest of the Karen and their mode of living. The following *phĩʔpĩʔotà* from (21) to (25) are some of the commonly known riddles :

(21)	tà	chĩʔke	ma	hò	ʔaʔ	pho
	thing	small	make	cry	one's	child

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

(22)	tà	thò	sè	tà	wi	kloʔ
	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) sè sɛʔ thù cɔwaʔ cɔ̃ tɛʔ
 tree three classifier for tree black-bird to perch one

beʔ

classifier for birds

'Three trees that one black-bird perches on'. The answer is a traditional fireplace made of three rocks.

- (24) pa dɔpiwɛ̃ khi ʔa
 man relatives two classifier for man
 blo lɔʔ ʔaʔ mɛʔ thɔbo
 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.

- (25) thò tɛʔ beʔ zu lɛʔ díʔ cɔ̃
 bird one classifier for bird to fly at wings to perch
 lɛʔ ʔaʔ nɔʔ
 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.

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