Resources

Orphaned World, Absent God
Notes for Karen Theologies in Northern Thailand

by Herbert Swanson*

In March-April, 1999, the Office of History, Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) in conjunc-
tion with the Musokuei Larger Parish of the CCT's 19th District conducted a seven-week research project on the construction of Karen theologies. The project was funded by the Baptist Union of Sweden (BUS), the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA), with supporting assistance from the CCT. Participating in the project were six Karen theological students as well as three members of the office of History staff including a Karen field researcher. The project was located in the village of Ban Nong Ched Neey, Chiang Mai Province, a community some 4-6 hour's drive from the city of Chiang Mai.

In this article I’d like to share the results of the theological reflection carried on through the Musokei project. It’s not intended to be a report on the project but, rather, a guide to potential issues and directions for future Karen theologies in northern Thailand.

Background

The Karen are the largest of Thailand’s hill tribal groups and have lived in northern and western Thailand for many centuries. Most of the Karen in northern Thailand, however, are descended from Burmese immigrants, and until recent years there was a great deal of coming and going between the Karen in northern Thailand and the much larger Karen populace in Burma. The first Karen churches in northern Thailand were founded in 1881 in what is now Lampang Province by Karen Baptist missionaries from Burma. Karen Christianity in northern Thailand, thus, is nearly as old as northern Thai Chris-
tainty itself, which emerged in meaningful numbers only in the late 1870s. In the later 19th century the Karen churches fell on hard times and dwindled in membership. The earlier 20th century, up through the beginning of World War II witnessed modest growth among them, some of that growth coming from the migration of Lampang Karen Christians further north to Chiang Rai Province. Christianity came to the Musokei region of Chiang Mai Province in the 1930s, primarily through the work of Th'ra (Teacher) Donney Danpongeo. After World War II, the Karen churches began to grow numerically, and today the CCT has three largely or entirely Karen districts numbering some 18,000 communicant members.

So far as the participants in this theological research project know, there have been no attempts to articulate Karen theologies in northern Thailand. The Karen church has generally shown antipathy towards traditional Karen religion (mae-lah), although many older converts retain some respect for their former beliefs. Karen-language theological education has been limited to the Bible school level, and seminary-trained Karen have received their theological education in Thai seminaries where there is little if any consciousness of the Karen religious environment.

During the seven weeks of the project, the students received two weeks of "basic training" in theological reflection in Asian contexts based on a paper this author prepared for a PTCA Thailand national workshop held in March 1999. The model for constructing theology that we worked with was based on the idea of bringing Asian (Karen) resources ("Text A") into dialogue with biblical resources ("Text B"). Considerable time was also

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devoted to improving the students' reading and writing skills in Karen. The students then spent one week in field research, a week reflecting on what they learned, another week in the field, and then two weeks constructing a general outline for Karen theologies. The project culminated with a capstone project that showcased the students' theological thought for church leaders conducted entirely by the students themselves.

What follows is a summary description of the general outline for Karen theologies as worked out by the students. Their staff would emphasize here that I don’t speak Karen, and so what appears here has been filtered through Thai into English. It’s based, however, on the students’ field research, on translations of traditional religious poetry (ta) and stories, and on a complex dialogue between the students themselves and with the Karen staff person, conducted largely in Karen, and with the other two-staff persons, conducted in Thai. Even working in Thai, however, all of the participants habitually used Karen for key theological terms.

LITERACY: THE JUMPING OFF POINT

Theology is an artifact of language. Although this observation might seem somewhat banal at first mention, the Karen situation in northern Thailand forces those who would construct Karen theologies to be painfully conscious of the current state of the Karen language in Thailand. Karen, spoken in two educational settings, the language of learning among the Karen in Thailand is Thai. Fewer and fewer young people can read or write Karen with even modest facility, and there isn’t much motivation for them to learn so because the amount of material available in Karen is quite limited. The Karen church, in fact, has been one of the few institutions to promote Karen literacy, but its efforts to do so are fading before the massive onslaught of central Thai. Central Thai is the language that rides the waves of electronic globalization within the bounds of the Thai nation state, and as a result regional dialects and ethnic languages are hard pressed to maintain their lingual integrity.

It’s impossible to see, however, how Karen theologies are going to be constructed apart from the Karen language, written as well as the spoken. Articulate modern theologies house themselves in books and articles, and one of the things the Asian theological movement has striven to do is create an identifiable Asian theological literature. The starting point, thus, for Karen theology is in recovering Karen literacy. Looking into the future, Karen are going to be able to create a living indigenous theology only to the extent that they’re able to preserve and promote Karen literacy in the churches themselves. Future Karen theologies will have to learn their native tongue, furthermore, in a new way, not just as a family, church, and market language but as a tool for theological reflection and Yua is the thread of the created order of things. Before Yua there existed a fundamental element, variously described as a fine dust, wind, or water, and Yua was himself generated from that fundamental element. Yua, the creator of the world, so to speak, is described as being carried out in partnership with a forest bird and termites. Traditional Karen believe that Yua is eternal and all-powerful, but they still see his power as being within the created order.

The 1st invariably portrays Yua as a loving God who cares for his creation and who is very close to it. The word “yua” itself has a meaning, namely “to flow.” It carries the inherent image of water flowing down through the Karen hills, a potent, meaningful image in the context of a hill culture. It seems likely, then, that future Karen Christian theologies will be essentially inerrant to an even greater extent than those of other Christians because Yua doesn’t come to humanity and the world and Time and Space. Yua lives, rather, within the created order.

Yua, Absent God

In spite of the existence of many to some the Karen tradition in living northern Thailand today unani-
mously insist that they know nothing about him. Their religion is without a god, divine, or sacred entities are generally linked to their ancestors, most immediately their deceased parents or grand-
parents. In this context, it is striking that some to describe Yua as a God who has left the world because he couldn’t stand the disorder and discord caused by the forces of evil, extraordinarily portrayed as the devil (moe gaw lee) or a fierce giant (sune saka). While moe gow lee was originally created by and a companion of Yua, it is sup-
posed in some to have at some point to seize Yua’s power. Before he left the world, however, Yua negotiated with the various kingdoms to take care of humanity. He is said, in some to, to have first gone to the fierce giant, but the giant demanded a human sacrifice, and Yua rejected that demand out of hand. Then he went to the ancestor spirits,” 1st (moe ku) and demanded only that sacrifice of a chicken and a pig every three years. Yua agreed to this demand and gave humanity over to the care of the moe ku, that is their own ancestors. 2nd
Traditio

Karen religion, thus, is centered on the home and has an elaborately detailed family ritual (saw kwa) that involves the sacrifice of chickens and pigs.

The moe ku are viewed with mixed feelings by tradi-
tional Karen. The moe ku look after them, but if a member of the family does something to offend the moe ku there can be considerable trouble. The moe ku seem to generally make two demand son the Karen, first that they perform the family rituals properly and, second, that they live moral lives, especially in terms of proper sexual re-
lations. It should be noted here that each family has its own moe ku, which is generally understood to be the parents or grandparents of the family. Tradi-

tional Karen can be rather obscure about just who the moe ku are, but they evidently also don’t like to talk about the moe ku too openly for fear they will say something that offends them.

Most Christians will find the idea that God has left the world in the hands of other spiritual agencies and gone off to heaven (as some tales claim) more than a little difficult to accept. Yua sounds like a singularly irresponsible God. Within the context of Karen culture, however, Yua’s departure from the world is entirely understandable. The Karen themselves have a distinct disdain for open confession of personal situations, and one of the primary ways they deal with potential, potentially confrontational situations is by withdrawing from them. In especially tense situations Karen are known to go off to live in distant gharis for months or even years at a time. In not a few cases, the very act of leaving a tense situation forces those causing the tension to change their behavior. Future Karen theologies might well argue that Yua tolerated the situation of tension and turmoil created by the devil (moe kaw lee) for as long as possible and then performed the divine equivalent of heading off into the deeper forest after having made plain vision for the care of humanity. Yua, thus, has left the world in order to create the conditions that will lead to change in his eventual return.

Although the idea of an absent Yua sounds alien to Christian ears, the Karen religious analysis of the human condition reflects an idea quite similar to the biblical one. In each case God (Yahweh or Yua) is alienated from hu-
manity. Yahweh “dealt” with this alienation by seeking a people who would initiate the process of universal reconc-

dition between God and humanity. However, Yua, how-

ever, is a God of confrontation, a blunt speaking God whose emotions of pleasure or anger are readily, openly expressed. Yua is a greater god than one who left the world rather than add flesh to the fires of earthly discord. Yua, however, also desires reconciliation with humanity.

Orphaned Humanity

Karen tales and traditional stories habitually portray the Karen people as an orphan (pho kwa), albeit a clever orphan who wins through great adversity by wisdom and audacity. It’s likely that future Karen Christian theolo-
gies are going to interpret the human condition as one of being orphaned, being without Yua. The orphan left with nothing but half-remembered stories about its long-
Peer Assistant

unterPour the orphan has to fend for itself in a world of many spiritual agencies, some more trustworthy than others, but none of which have the loving, entirely trustworthiness characteristics of Yua. The orphan, thus, lives by its wits, by carefully staying on the good side of the spiritual forces around it, and by not calling too much attention to itself.

The biblical analysis places blame for the human condition squarely on rebellious humanity, but the Karen analysis is more ambivalent. On the one hand, if Marshall's version of Karen beliefs, based on 19th century missionary sources, are accurate, then humanity rebelled against Yua in the same way Adam and Eve rebelled against Yahweh. There's even a garden story with a woman, under the influence of the devil, who eats forbidden fruit and entices her husband to do the same. The consequence is punishment and Yua's leaving abandon- ing humanity to the care of the mae ku. The stories told by traditional Karen in northern Thailand today, on the other hand, aren't so clear on the issue of whether or not humanity is responsible for Yua's leaving the world. One could conclude from them that humanity is itself innocent of any wrongdoing. Yua left because of the machinations of mae ku, the devil, and not because of anything humanity did. On the other hand, there is a story that tells how humanity grew weary of mae ku and killed it, only to have mae ku return unharmed. After killing it a second time with the same result, humanity murdered mae ku a third time, cut it up into small pieces, and ate it. Satisfied with its new home, and humanity couldn't do anything more with its mae ku because it now lived in humanity was responsible for Yua's leaving it's now implicated in contributing to the conditions that make it impossible for Yua to return. Humanity keeps itself orphaned.

Jesus, Agent of Return
Karen theologians are going to have to think long and hard about how to meld Karen and biblical perspectives into coherent theologies that are at once biblical and Karen. Nowhere is this more the case than in the interpretation of Jesus' role in freeing humanity from its orphaned condition. It's an open question whether or not humanity requires an outside agency for its liberation. The reason is that the Karen expected the eventual return of Yua, who according to the text has promised to return. The conditions for that return however, aren't clear, and it could well be that Yua will return in its own time what it ever humanity does in the meantime. It's not clear just what role Yua's Son might play in that return, since in traditional Karen thinking their isn't a Son.

On the other hand, a number of millenarian sects have arisen among the Karen from time to time. Summarizing the scholarly literature on such sects, Hayami sees them as another reflection of the stateless, orphaned condition of the Karen people. One of the the sects mushroomed for a brief time in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son Provinces in about 1946, and the demise of that sect appears an important cause of increased Christian evangelical success in the early and middle 1950s. This point is important. It suggests that the Jesus of future Karen theologies most likely will be a millenarian figure linked to the promised return of Yua.

Karen Christian theological analysis, in other words, will likely see Jesus as playing a role in the conditions for Yua's return, and it's possible that it will emphasize the importance of the image of the Kingdom of God found in the New Testament (Mark 1:14-15). The Bible insists that humanity has absented itself from the rule of God, and that it will regain wholeness only as it is reconciled to God and places itself under divine rule. The image we have from the Synoptic Gospels seems to be that in Jesus the Kingdom has sprouted in the midst of humanity but it hasn't yet achieved its full growth. Kingdom of God signifies the return of the divine Parent to take upon his place in the world as a world of peace and order that is appropriate to his divine presence. Perhaps Jesus will be envisioned as the Son of Yua who has become an orphan for the sake of orphaned humanity. In this scenario, he would be the first human to be liberated from the influence of the devil, mae ku. He brings peace, the peace that is necessary to prepare the world for the return of Yua. All of this is still hazy, and other scenarios are possible including one that would have him being the Perfect Sacrifice to the mae ku, thus liberating human- ity from having to make further sacrifices and freeing them to the task of preparing for Yua's return.

The Church's Mission
The question of how the Karen churches respond to humanity's orphaned condition is likely to be more easily resolved than many other theological issues. The role of the church is to prepare the world for the return of Yua, to make it a place suitable to be his divine habitation. In this way, it can help restore humanity to its rightful relationship with Yua and heal the wounds of separation caused by Yua's departure from the chaotic world.

Issues in Karen Theology
Those who would construct Karen theologies face a number of serious issues that have to be worked through if a Karen theological movement is to arise in northern Thailand. One of the most serious obstacles to the future development of Karen theological thinking is the degenerate state of traditional Karen religion, already alluded to above. Christianity and Thai state Buddhism have made inroads into traditional Karen religion to such an extent that it's nearly impossible to find a "pure" tradi- tional village. Economic and social realities related to the rapid globalization of Thailand make it extremely difficult to sustain the traditional Karen world and its elaborate, expensive rituals. Christian evangelists report that most of those who still consider themselves tradition- alist are simply waiting for the right conditions to occur so they can either convert to Christianity or quietly slip into Bud- dhism. The continuing deterioration of traditions of Karen religion means that future Karen Christian theologians will have no living partners to dialog with as they construct their theolo- gies. Even now, the remaining tradi- tional religious leaders (hela), can provide only limited information on traditional religious thinking. They are ritual specialists rather than theologians. Christian theologians, thus, are going to have to devote considerable time to the task of reconstructing the traditional faith and world view from Karen oral traditions. Their task will be made more chal- lenging by the fact that there have never been any reli- gious institutions or structures that could enforce uniform- ity in Karen religious thinking. Karen traditions are, thus, pluralistic in nature and can even be contradictory. A major task facing Karen theologians will be to identify for themselves the major themes and central ideas of Karen traditional religion.

Even more worrisome is another aspect of glo- balization's impact on the Karen people in Thailand. It has launched what amounts to a massive attack on Karen culture. We've already seen some of the consequences of this attack, including the slow demise of Karen liter- ature and the loss of Karen identity among young people. Karen theology is going to have to come to terms with the Global Village and find its place within it, most espe- cially in its Thai version. The Karen of northern Thai- land live in a Thai as well as a Karen cultural context, and it's entirely unrealistic to expect younger Karen to withdraw from the Thai context. Many of them see it as providing a more viable future than does their own cultural context. It seems inevitable that a certain amount of Thai influence will find its way into future Karen the- ologies, which influence will introduce a certain note of tension into Karen theological thinking as the religious universe of the Thai is strikingly different from that of the traditional Karen.

Karen theologians in northern Thailand will, by necessity, be church-based theolo- gies because there are no other readily available institutions in which to conduct Karen theological reflection. The intellectual base for more systematic theological construc- tion remains thin, as the Karen churches are just now educating their first generation of students to a bachelors or masters level. As stated above, these students are all studying theology in Thai seminar- is that simply don't know the world of the Karen churches. Mechanisms will have to be found that will encourage theological reflection among church leaders, the PTCA consultation model offering one viable possi- bility. It's not going to be easy, however, to create the mechanisms and theological literature needed to sustain a long-term theological movement among the Karen churches.

In terms of specific issues, future Karen theologians will have to devote a great deal of creative energy to solv- ing a number of them. Their theological reflections, fur- thermore, are likely to sound heretical when translated into Thai, English, or other languages. We've already seen that the Karen conception of Yua contains at least two important departures from biblical thinking. Yua, unlike Yahweh, is a Created Creator. Yua was originally more like God and closer to the divine. Yua, however, is cultures, like the Karen, where conflict man- agement seeks to avoid direct confrontation. A third is-

Karen students in training with Rev Herb Jones and Miss Esther Dasongye
sue related to the person of Yua has to do with the tradi-
tional Christian doctrine of the Trinity God. It's evidently
almost impossible to speak meaningfully about the Tri-
inity in Karen. The Holy Spirit, for example, is called the
"Pure Heart of Yua" (yua aai soo shree), the implic-
ação being that the Holy Spirit is an aspect of Yua, not a
distinct "person" of the Trinity. Karen theologies are
likely to be unitarian rather than trinitarian and make most
sense within the Karen cultural context itself.

The types of issues that will face Karen theologians is
further illustrated by the way in which the Karen lan-
guage handles the statement, "God is Spirit" (John 4:23-
24). English and Thai (phrachao song ben winyon) both
deal with the Spirit as an objective entity or characteris-
tic, something that exists in a world outside of humanity.
Whether or not there is a humanity, is God Spirit. In
Karen, however, the statement, "God is Spirit," (yua
maaith maachk) actually means, "God is my heart."
Karen deals with the concept of God as Spirit subject-
ively rather than objectively. The statement "God is Spirit"
is a personal affirmation of faith not a statement of
fact, and as I understand it, there's no clear way in
Karen to state that God is Spirit except subjectively.
Future Karen theologies, thus, are going to have to re-
work the Christian understanding of God in ways that
make sense within the realities of their own language.

Still another area that will require considerable at-
tention is that of the Christian life, viewed theologically.
If Yua is absent, to whom does one pray? Is Yua a prayer-
answering divinity? If so, then how can we say he is ab-
sent from the world? If not, is there a place for personal
devotions in the Christian life? It may well be that future
Karen theologians will be working with the con-
cept of Jesus, Yua has Returned as well as being still Ab-
sent, just as the biblical Kingdom is both Among Us but
Still to Come. The Karen conceptualization of God as
Spirit would suggest that in some, in clear manner, the
Absent Yua is still Present in the heart and conscious-
ness of those who confess him to be Spirit.

These issues give some indication of the potential and
the obstacles involved in the development of future Karen
theologies in northern Thailand. They also provide some
guidance for the direction that development will have to
take. The first priority, already mentioned, is for further
research into what remains of traditional Karen religion,
as well as a vigorous program for the collection of tradi-
tional proverbs, ta, and tales. A second necessary step will
be the development of mechanisms for promoting the
construction and study of indigenous Karen theologies.
As we've seen, it will have to be a church-based mecha-
nism that will raise the consciousness of Karen church
concerning the importance of retaining and developing
Karen culture as well as sponsor programs and projects
in Karen theology. My guess is that future Karen theolo-
gies will be worked out in small-group meetings and con-
ferences rather than by individual theologians housed in
academic institutions. It will depend on home com-
puters and photocopy machines to produce and distribute its
literature. From these two foundations, research and a
mechanism for creating networks of part-time theologi-
gians, the process of study and reflection can begin.
Whether or not all of this happens remains an open ques-
tion.

Conclusion
The future of Karen theologies in northern Thailand,
thus, is still unclear. It's unclear, first, whether or not the
Karen churches will actually sustain their own theologi-
cal movement. Second, it's unclear how Karen theolo-
gians will deal with basic theological concepts. Finally,
it's unclear whether or not there will be an audience large
enough to warrant the development of Karen theologies.
At the same time, it may well be that if the Karen churches
in northern Thailand are able to construct and use living
Karen theologies that the very process of theological re-
flection may itself contribute to the survival of a viable
Karen culture in the age of the Global Village.

What also remains unclear is the actual direction fu-
ture Karen theologies will take. This paper is, at best, a
rudimentary and preliminary description of potential
themes and directions for those theologies. It's likely that
much of what's written here will prove naïve at best and
misguided at worst. Yet, the 1999 hot season de-
scribed above uncovered enough information to suggest
that the development of Karen theologies in northern
Thailand offers an exciting possibility for the future. A
dialogue between traditional culture and the Bible could
lead to unique, truly Asian expressions of the Good News
of Jesus Christ that could offer other Asian churches with
insights into how Christians can understand their
faith in yet another Asian cultural context. A "Yua The-
ology" or "Orphans Theology" could become a new voice in
Asian theological reflection, the voice of local church
people and young church workers seeking to understand
how best to bring peace to the hills in anticipation of
Yua's return.

Endnotes
1 The Karen in northern Thailand is divided into two main
groups, the Spaw and the Pwo. This paper is based on research among
the Spaw and reflects their traditional culture and religious beliefs. For
a history of the Karen in Thailand see, Ronald Ream, "Karen:
History of Karen Ta's Relations from the Beginnings to 1932" (Ph.D.
dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1980); and for a recent study of the
Karen in the Maekkha area, see Yoko Hayami, "Ritual and Religious
Transformation Among Spaw Karen of Northern Thailand: Implica-
tions on Gender and Ethnic Identity" (Ph.D. dissertation, Drexel Uni-
versity, 1992).

2 For a history of the Karen in northern Thailand, see Anders
Hovingh, In Search of the Karen King: A Study in Karen Identity
with Special Reference to 19th Century Karen Evangelism in North Thai-

3 See Herbert B. Swanson, Khrubtrath Muang Nua: A Study in Nor-

4 According to a special CUCT census taken in 1997, Districts 10,
and 19 have a total of 279 churches with a total congregational mem-
bership of 14,338 members or 28% of the CUCT's total membership.
Office of the General Secretary, Statistical Report of Local Churches,
and Dioceses of the Church of Christ in Thailand (Bangkok: Office of
the General Secretary, 1997). (In Thai)

5 A collection of traditional religious poems (na) with theological
commentary published in Burma by the Karen Baptist Convention there
suggests that the churches in Burma are aware of traditional sources.
The theological commentary accompanying the collection, however,
puts highly christocentric interpretations on the poems, indicating that
there was little attempt to see them in their original context. See Htoo
Baptist Convention (ed.) (In Karen). The Karen Baptist Conven-
tion has also recently promoted a cultural handbook dedicated to the
purpose of preserving Karen culture that includes a selection of na,
but contains no discussion of theological issues. The handbook's brief
bibliography also contains no items related to theology. See The 2002
AC Culture Committee, Cultural Handbook (Karen Baptist Conven-

6 Herbert Swanson, "What is It? Methods for Seeking Theology in
Thai Contexts" (Chiang Mai: Workshop at the Mcgill Faculty of Theology,
Pray and Work, 29 March - 4 April 1999) (In Thai).

7 Acklie C. C. Lee, "The Plurality of Asian Religious-Cultural Tra-
ditions and its Implications for the Bible Studies," n.d. See also Simon
S. M. Kwan, "Asian Cultural Hermeneutics and the Economic De-

8 See Herry Ignatius Marshall, The Karen People of Burma: A Study in
Anthropology and Ethnology (1932, Reprint, Bangkok: White Lo-

9 Karen to uniformly consider Yua to be a male. This article will
follow the Karen convention and use masculine pronouns with Yua,
leaving to future Karen theologians the question of how to deal with
gender issues in the context of Karen theologies.