

CHAPTER 1

Background

In 1799, the British traveller, Symes, wrote of a backwoods group he had encountered in the Tenasserim region of what is now Burma, which lies to the east of Rangoon and bordering Thailand.

From the reverend father [Fr. V. Sangermano] I received much useful information. He told me...of people called Carayners or Carianers that inhabit different parts of the country....He represented them as a simple, innocent race, speaking a language distinct from that of the Burmans, and entertaining rude notions of religion....They are timorous, honest, mild in their manners, and exceedingly hospitable to strangers. [Symes 1800, p. 207]

Among these so-called rude notions of religion was the belief that at an undatable time in the distant past, the god, Ywa had given a Karen forefather a paper book, his younger Caucasian brother a golden book and his Burman (or in some accounts, Thai) brother a silver book. Whereas the younger brothers had gone off and prospered, the Karens remained stuck in the woods. Through what Karens recall as their own stupidity, the Karen's copy of the book had been eaten by some chicken making it necessary for Karens to resort to the inconvenience of chicken bone divination to learn the word of God.

Into the Karen world then came the American Baptist missionaries led by Adoniram Judson who travelled to Rangoon with the Bible of Yaweh in 1819. Some years later a man he had bought out of slavery became a Christian, and proceeded to preach to Karens around Rangoon and Tenasserim. With the Karens viewing him as the white younger brother returning with the book of Ywa, entire villages began turning to Christianity. Motivated not only by this linguistic coincidence, many Karens became convinced that Christianity, and the way of life that came with it, was a means to elevate their status and become more equal to the Burmans. Recalling their long domination by them and their denigration by officials and early British travellers, Christianity was seen as a way to a better life.

Most of the Karens to become Christian were Sgaw, akin to the first Christian convert. Many of the Pwo Karens, the second largest Karen sub-group, remained attached to a strong tradition of paying homage to matrilineal spirits, which amounted to an impediment to conversion. Although the Bible was translated into Pwo and dictionaries in that language were prepared, most Karen Christians were Sgaw and most conversions were among the Sgaw.

As more Karens became Christian, they began preaching the gospel to Karens in increasingly distant parts, eventually coming to Thailand where, in 1882 several Karen preachers managed to convert three Pwo villages in Lampang province, two of which later reverted to their previous non-Christian beliefs. By 1887 a Chiang Mai Karen Association had been established, the members of which, mainly Sgaw, established a Bible school in 1913 in Chiang Mai. These efforts are detailed in letters to the Karen vernacular Morning Star well into the 20th century and show how Karens worked to start a Christian church in this country. [Morning Star, 1887-1919] Not until after World War II and the Chinese Revolution of 1949 when many missionaries were forced out of China, did American Baptist missionaries come to Thailand to join in the work begun by the Karen missionaries.

When the American Baptists reached Thailand, perhaps because of the preponderance of Karen Christians being Sgaw, they devoted more attention to starting work among the Pwo. They conducted surveys of Pwo Karens in the areas of Mae Sariang and Pai, Mae Hong Son Province, and in Wang Lung, Hot Province of Chiang Mai Province, as well as Musikee. Some areas, such as in Omkoi District of Chiang Mai where there are many Pwo, were left unstudied at that time because of their remoteness.

The American Baptist missionaries and the Karen workers focused on both evangelization as well as answering the material needs of the Karens. In 1956, a Baptist missionary, Addison Truxton, drafted a report on development work the mission ought to carry out. Besides calling for increased Karen literacy, health education and youth leadership, Truxton stated that agricultural development was imperative. He suggested that cropping regimes be diversified, improved breeds of livestock be introduced, and soil enrichment be promoted. [Truxton 1956] As part of the answer to the issues he raised, a school in which agricultural and religious topics were taught was opened in Bo Kaeo. This location in Samoeng District of Chiang Mai Province eventually became the Center for the Uplift of the Hilltribes which is now located just outside of Chiang Mai city.

The Karen Baptist Convention (KBC) also became involved in other activities. In education, two schools and fourteen hostels (including two in Mae Sariang) were built providing hilltribe children an opportunity for an education that would not be available otherwise. In the area of health, the KBC operates a hospital in Mae Sariang. In addition to both in-patient and out-patient care, the hospital has training programs for villages to learn basic medical skills and a mobile clinic which makes periodic visits to many outlying villages. An educational program for teenage and older Karen young people who have not had much previous formal education provides them with knowledge they carry back to their village where it can help improve village life.

Other types of development undertaken by the Karen Baptist Convention include cattle projects, fishpond projects, rice and fertilizer banks, cooperatives, help with marketing, and a milk goat project. For the past six years, there was also a small irrigation ditch and waterline project that reached some two hundred villages.

These efforts have played a significant part in the growth of the Karen Baptist Convention in Thailand to its present level of about 12,000 members in 56 churches spread mainly throughout the north of Thailand. This growth has been so rapid that the Secretary-General of the KBC has observed that it has not been possible to provide enough trained leadership to the new churches.

After providing much assistance to the Karen churches, it was perceived by church leaders that more than a justifiable share was going to Sgaw churches. Many Pwo Karens live in remote areas, are unfamiliar with outside agencies and are poorly represented in government-sponsored and church organizations. This puts them at a disadvantage in requesting assistance or receiving aid.

When the Baptist Union of Sweden became active in Thailand starting in about 1973, it was decided to work with the Pwo in a variety of ways, including development and evangelism. Recently the Baptist Union of Sweden sponsored an irrigation project that was aimed at working with the Pwo, a group that the Union has shown particular concern with over the last decade. SIDA (Swedish International Development Agency) funding was obtained for this project. However, even with the focus on the Pwo, it was observed by KBC and Union leaders that a disproportionate amount of the help was actually reaching Sgaw instead of the Pwo. To rectify this, the Pwo Karen Agricultural Development Project was established with the specific purpose of dealing directly with the Pwo, who in many cases had a lower standard of living than the Sgaw. The Baptist Union of Sweden agreed to sponsor the Project which is available to any Pwo Karen of any religion or belief.

The area selected was south of Mae Sariang and north of Tak and Mae Sot, in a remote area off trade routes, highways, and out of the reach of most government services. This includes Omkoi and Hot Districts of Chiang Mai Province and Mae Sariang District and Sop Moei Sub-District in Mae Hong Son Province. In much of the region, the villagers cannot speak Thai or even northern Thai. Schools and health clinics are scattered widely in the area while the villagers only carry out trade with Thais for necessities such as salt. Many of the villages here had never had any project, government or NGO assistance before this. Perhaps 1,000 of the Pwo in the area are Christian, with the Catholics, Baptists, the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) and some smaller Church groups working among the people.

Formerly all residents in the Project area relied principally on swidden agriculture. Although some terraced fields have been cut over the last few decades, this mainly supplements the traditional agricultural methods. During the last decade, however, the Royal Forest Department has begun warning residents of the Project area that it would enforce laws prohibiting swiddening. In 1991, at Thi Hue Lue village, forestry officials came to arrest one or two men caught in the act of swiddening. All the residents of the village then told the officials that since everybody in the village engaged in shifting cultivation so the

entire village ought to be arrested. Because the officials could not arrest so many people, they decided to let the two offenders go while seizing the villagers' machetes and other swiddening equipment.

The Project followed a six-fold methodology. First, Project workers entered the village and met with the villagers. Second, the workers introduced the Project and its policies. Third, the workers surveyed the village to determine how the Project might help by finding out what needs the villagers had. Fourth, the Project staff explained how the Project would operate. Fifth, the Project worked with the villagers to carry out the tasks chosen. Sixth, the staff monitored progress. Five extension workers (supported by a small central staff) supported the Project's work.

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Stated Project Goals

The main goal of the Project is to help the Pwo Karen villages in the Project area to become more self-sufficient in rice production and to increase fruit, vegetable, and cash crop production, to improve nutrition within the household as well as to upgrade economic conditions in the village. The Project also encourages the people within a village to plan and work together cooperatively, rather than as individuals. Finally, the Project seeks ways to protect the environment and to improve the life of people in the village both for their benefit and that of the country.

Stated Purposes of the Project

- 1) Help install waterlines in villages for domestic and agricultural purposes.
- 2) Help supply seeds and seedlings appropriate for the village and encourage these to be planted and cared for properly.
- 3) Help villagers dig irrigation ditches to increase the land area available for rice paddies.
- 4) Experiment with methods of making permanent hill fields to help prevent future forest destruction from shifting cultivation.
- 5) Conduct seminars and training in villages to introduce new concepts and techniques.

The Pwo Karen Agriculture Development Project began in stages. In January 1988, the project was officially to begin although budgetary funds were only available as of June. The Project was to last three years, until 30 June 1991. In July, the Project began taking shape with the arrival of the American Baptist Missionary, Mr. Duane Binkley, who served as the project director. The Project took definite shape only on 3 September 1988 with a meal at the Bamboo Garden Restaurant in Mae Sariang which a participant recalls was held in "a pleasingly informal manner". Soon thereafter, the training of extension workers commenced prior to their moving into the field for village work. Towards the end of the Project, it was decided that the Project would be extended for 10 more months, until 30 April 1992 at which time the Project reached its conclusion.