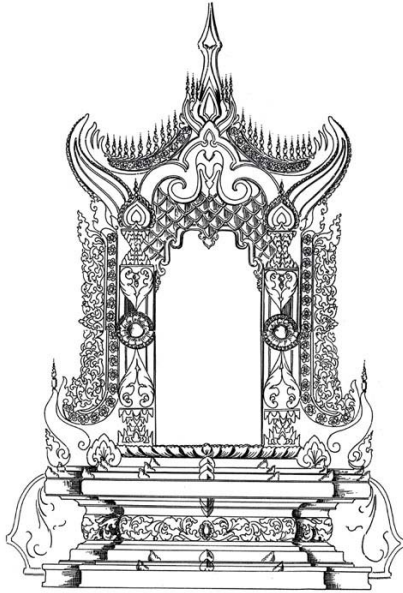


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**“Making a Name for Themselves:” Karen Identity and the
Politicization of Ethnicity in Burma***

Jessica Harriden**

The history of Karen nationalism has been interpreted in terms of inter-ethnic conflict and conceptualizations of ethnicity have influenced understanding of Karen political identity. While ‘Karen’ incorporated various linguistic, sociocultural, religious and political sub-groups, the Karen National Union (KNU) elite promoted a singular pan-Karen identity in order to minimize such diversity. As a result, factionalism emerged between different Karen groups, obstructing the KNU’s political vision and leaving many Karens dissatisfied with KNU attempts to represent their various interests. The fall of Manerplaw in 1995 was thus the result of intra-ethnic conflict as much as conflict between Karens and non-Karens.

This paper examines the origins, construction, and articulation of organized Karen nationalism in Burma.¹ In particular, it discusses how conceptualizations of ethnicity have influenced our understanding of Karen political identity. At the height of its power, the Karen National Union (KNU) was arguably the most powerful and influential political-military organization opposing the government in Burma. The Karen rebel state of “Kawthoolei” became the focus of international attention following the Burmese

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¹ In 1989, the government officially renamed the country “Myanmar” and the Karen were renamed the “Kayin.” Karen nationalists have strongly rejected both new names. For the sake of consistency, I will use the terms Burma and Karen throughout.

military regime's brutal suppression of the emerging democracy movement in the late 1980s. Then, the KNU headquarters at Manerplaw on the Burmese-Thai border hosted virtually the entire Burmese opposition to the military junta. Against this, the rapid decline in Karen fortunes since 1992, culminating in the fall of Manerplaw in January 1995, cuts a striking contrast.

Traditionally, the history of the Karen national movement has been written in terms of an ethnic conflict,² in which Karen nationalists cannot envisage a "union" between themselves and the politically dominant Burmans — such is the perceived gulf between the two ethnic groups in terms of culture, language and religion. KNU demands for self-determination are based largely on Western notions of ethnic primordialism and modern political systems, yet ironically by these standards, the state that the Karens are fighting for is a geographic and political impossibility: Karens do not, in fact, constitute a homogenous ethnic category. The name "Karen" is a collective term for twenty-odd ethnic sub-groups that live in Burma and Thailand.³ Although most Karen-speaking peoples recognize a

² See Thomas A. Marks, "The Karen Revolt in Burma," *Issues and Studies* 14:12 (December 1978), 49.

³ The largest of these sub-groups are the Sgaw and the Pwo. The Karenni ("Red Karen") of the Kayah State and the Pao and Kayan of the Shan State are also ethnically related to the other Karen groups. These groups do recognize an ethnic relationship between themselves and other Karen groups, and many sympathize and even collaborate with the Karen nationalists. Scholars, however, distinguish between the Karen, Karenni, and Pao nationalist movements. See Anders Baltzer Jørgensen, "Karen Natural Resources Management and Relations to State Polity," in Ing-Britt Trankell and Laura Summers (eds.), *Facets of Power and Its Limitations: Political Culture in Southeast Asia*, Studies in Cultural Anthropology 24 (Uppsala, Sweden: Department of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University, 1998), 222; Donald Duane Renard, "Minorities in Burmese History," in K. M. de Silva et al. (eds.), *Ethnic Conflict in Buddhist Societies: Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma* (London: Pinter, 1988), 87; Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1999). For more on the Pao and Karenni nationalist movements see Smith, as well as Saw Mika Rolly, "The Karenni and Pa-Oh: Revolution in Burma," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 13:4 (1989), 15-17; Laurie A. Crozier, *Mawchi: Mining, War and Insurgency in Burma*,

special kinship with one another, there are linguistic, sociocultural, religious, and political differences between these various sub-groups. In the present climate of factionalism and divisiveness, the validity of the KNU's claim to being most representative of the range of Karen societies and cultures is brought into question.

A focus on ethnic *identity*, rather than ethnicity *per se*, is more useful when discussing the development of Karen nationalism. Karen identity as espoused by KNU leaders is singular and exclusive, with an emphasis on pan-Karen solidarity in opposition to other ethnocultural, politico-ideological, and religious movements. This generates a feeling of distinctiveness among Karens which has fuelled their desire for self-determination. Largely because it is so rigid and uncompromising, however, the KNU representation of Karen identity fails to recognize Karen diversity. Weaknesses that have revealed themselves periodically throughout the Karen nationalist movement's history are as much the result of intra-ethnic conflict as conflict between Karens and non-Karens.

Perceptions of Ethnicity: Theory vs. Reality in Burmese Politics

An examination of theoretical contributions to the study of ethnicity provides a basis for further discussion of Karen identity, nationalism, and cultural representation. Karen identity is often explained in ethnic terms, masking an ongoing controversy between "primordialist" and "instrumentalist" views of ethnicity. Paul Brass explains that:

The primordialist would hold that political identities are given, that is, they proceed inexorably from the principle of cultural identity of the past. The instrumentalist, on the other hand, would hold that political identities are chosen; that is, out of an infinite range of possible cultural identities that one is selected as the political

identity which it is believed offers the greatest hope of political success.⁴

Ethnicity in Western political thought has generally been conceptualized as an ascribed attribute, with the implicit assumption of instinctive and primordial antagonisms between different groups.⁵ This has wide implications for the identification of peoples and nations in Southeast Asia, past and present. By contrast, S.J. Tambiah and Victor Lieberman have emphasized the absence of hard and permanent ethnic categories in Burma's cultural traditions. They argue that ethnicity was of limited importance in determining political behavior in pre-colonial Burma and that evidence of inter-ethnic awareness and antagonism does not prove that ethnic identity was paramount.⁶

The encouragement of cultural and ethnic particularism in the colonial period "introduced a basic discontinuity into the structure of Burmese ethnic relations."⁷ British "divide-and-rule" policy is a classic example of how ascriptive ethnicity functioned in practice, by inculcating a sense of ethnic opposition which has had an enormous impact on political processes in Burma ever since. John S. Furnivall described Burma during this period as a "plural society," in which the different ethnic groups could "mix but never combine."⁸ The

⁴ Cited in Rajeshwari Ghose (ed.), *Protest Movements in South and South-East Asia: Traditional and Modern Idioms of Expression* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1987), xv.

⁵ See, for example, Josef Silverstein, *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960).

⁶ Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 102-131; Victor Lieberman, "Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-century Burma," *Modern Asian Studies* 12:3 (1978), 455-482.

⁷ See, for example, Lieberman, "Ethnic Politics in Eighteenth-century Burma," 480; Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 39-44; Frank N. Trager, *Burma — From Kingdom to Republic: A Historical and Political Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 79-81.

⁸ John S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1956).

history of the Karens is often recorded as an ongoing power struggle between Karens and Burmans where ethnic conflict is interpreted as a clash between absolutist ideologies.⁹

Karen nationalist leaders have been influenced by ascriptive conceptual modes apparent in early twentieth-century studies of the Karen "nation". The majority of these studies were written by Christian missionaries and British officials. They simultaneously encouraged notions of Karen distinctiveness vis-à-vis other ethnic groups and emphasized the unity of all Karen cultures by adopting a pan-Karen perspective.¹⁰ Previously, different groups of Karen speakers recognized no common political identity. Under the colonial administration, emerging Karen elites endorsed the two most recognizable "badges" of Karen identity: Christianity and loyalty to Britain. The Christian Karen leader, San C. Po, wrote in 1928 that Karens "owc what progress and advancement they have made, to the missionaries whom they affectionately call their 'Mother' under the protection of the British Government whom they rightly call their 'Father'."¹¹ These expressions of Karen nationalism did not reflect the variety and complexity of Karen religious and political identification. The majority of Karens were Buddhists or animists and not all Karens were loyal to the British.¹²

⁹ David Brown, "From Peripheral Communities to Ethnic Nations: Separatism in Southeast Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 61 (Spring 1998), 51.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Rev. Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology*, reprinted with foreword by Anders Baltzer Jørgensen (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997). In his foreword, Anders Baltzer Jørgensen notes that the book was written at a time when it was expected that there should be at least one book on each "tribe." Donald MacKenzie Smeaton was a Bengal civil servant who wrote approvingly of the "plucky little Karen nation" in his book, *The Loyal Karens of Burma* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1887).

¹¹ Dr. San Crombie Po, *Burma and the Karens* (Elliot Stock: London, 1928), 58.

¹² There were instances of Karen revolts against the colonial administration: see, for instance, Mikael Gravers, "The Karen Making of a Nation," in Stein Tønneson and Hans Atlöv (eds.), *Asian Forms of the Nation*, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Studies in Asian Topics No. 23 (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), 252. For a more complete discussion on Karen religious identity, see Ananda Rajah, "Remaining Karen: A Study of Cultural Reproduction and the Maintenance of Identity" (Ph. D. Thesis,

Western commentators based their assumptions of Burman-Karen opposition upon historical antagonisms between the two peoples.¹³ Karens claimed that centuries of Burman “violence” had forced them eastward into the remote hill areas. Ethnic Burmans were dominant in the lowland areas, and referred to the “uncivilized” Karens as “wild cattle of the hills.”¹⁴ Many authors have drawn upon E. R. Leach’s study of “traditional frontiers” in pre-colonial Burma to distinguish between lowland Burmans and highland minorities.¹⁵ Yet Karens defy such categorization; many live in the delta alongside ethnic Burmans and other minorities. Martin Smith has also shown that racial tensions in Burma are not simply a Burman-minority issue.¹⁶ Conflicts have erupted both within the Karen nationalist movement and between the Karens and the various other ethnic insurgents and communist fronts.

Some historians, political scientists and anthropologists have adopted relational or situational definitions of ethnicity in order to understand ethnicity in contemporary Burma. Anthropological studies of Karen cultural identity have shown that ethnic groups cannot be defined in terms of narrow cultural patterns but rather should be understood as social units “whose definition is a function of structural opposition to other such entities.”¹⁷ Central to this thesis

Australian National University, 1986); Theodore Stern, “Ariya and the Golden Book: A Millenarian Buddhist Sect among the Karen,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 27:2 (1968), 297-328.

¹³ Ian Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs: The Life and Gallant Death of Major H. P. Seagrim* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 20-21; General Smith Dun provides two accounts of Burmese history: one from “the Burman’s view” and the other from “the Karen’s view”: Gen. Smith Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, Data Paper No. 113 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1980), 60-70.

¹⁴ Rev. Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karens of Burma*, Burma Pamphlets No. 8 (London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1945), 1.

¹⁵ Edward R. Leach, “The Frontiers of ‘Burma’,” in John T. McAlister, Jr. (ed.), *Southeast Asia, the Politics of National Integration* (New York: Random House, 1973), 315-335. See also Marks, “The Karen Revolt in Burma,” 52-54; Jørgensen, “Karen Natural Resources Management,” 217.

¹⁶ Smith, *Burma*, 388.

¹⁷ One of the most significant contributions is Charles F. Keyes (ed.), *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity: The Karen on the Thai Frontier with Burma* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1979), esp. 3.

is the idea that ethnic identity depends upon “self-identification” as well as “assigned identity.”¹⁸ Karen self-identity finds cultural expression in the *belief* that certain traits distinguish them from other ethnic groups.¹⁹ This becomes crucial to counteract claims that ascriptive ethnicity is “falsely conceived.”²⁰

Robert H. Taylor writes that successive British and Burmese leaders raised ethnic politics “from the condition of inchoate aspiration to the pivot of political action.”²¹ In other words, ethnicity in ascriptive terms has become a reality in modern Burma. Burma’s political elites and ethnic groups themselves have tended to accept broad ethnic categories (Burmans, Mons, Karens, and so on) as embodying living social formations with political prerogatives. Mikael Gravers calls this political process “ethnicism,” where a continuous accentuation of ethnic identity makes ethnicity appear as the “natural fulcrum for political autonomy.”²² Since the late 1940s, Karen identity has been synonymous with the Karen separatist movement led by the KNU. The KNU’s demand for a separate state reflects a desire to preserve Karen ethnic identity through its own social, political, educational, and economic institutions.

Various commentators have noted the effects of the imposition of a modern state system on Karen nationalism and conceptions of ethnic identity. According to Taylor, the modern international system is only concerned with political nations possessing

¹⁸ Keyes, “Introduction,” in Keyes (ed.), *Ethnic Adaptation and Identity*, 10-13.

¹⁹ Rajah, “Remaining Karen,” 7.

²⁰ Robert H. Taylor, “Perceptions of Ethnicity in the Politics of Burma,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 10:1 (1982), 8. At one extreme this has led some scholars to question the validity of studying Karen ethnicity at all. The outstanding example is Peter Hinton, “Do the Karen Really Exist?” in J. McKinnon and W. Bhruksasri (eds.), *Highlanders of Thailand* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), 155-168. The Burmese military regime has used similar arguments to dilute the meaning or terms such as “ethnic minority”: see, for example, Peter Carey (ed.), *Burma: The Challenge of Change in a Divided Society*, foreword by Aung San Suu Kyi (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 10.

²¹ Taylor, “Perceptions of Ethnicity,” 9.

²² Gravers, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 241.

recognized states.²³ Thus, in its continuing struggle for self-determination and political autonomy, the KNU leadership has urgently needed to promote a common Karen national identity. David Brown points to the role of Karen elites in articulating and ideologising the “minority consciousness” that developed among the Karen masses as a result of the Burmese state’s “ethnocratic tendency.”²⁴ In his analysis of the “nation-state” of Kawthoolei, Ananda Rajah considers how the KNU communicates its vision of a nation.²⁵ Likening Kawthoolei to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined political community,”²⁶ Rajah shows that its boundaries are “imagined” in a way that plays down intra-ethnic and inter-religious differences.²⁷

One of the KNU’s greatest achievements has been to generate a coherent sense of Karen identity out of such demographic, linguistic and religious diversity. Yet, by consistently promoting a singular, particularist identity to bolster its claims for political autonomy, the KNU leadership cannot adequately represent the variety of Karen groups. As a result, structural opposition has occurred on various levels within the Karen nationalist movement, and is manifested in religious, ideological, political and/or generational division.

No single study has sufficiently explained the changing nature of Karen identity in Burma. Older works based on ascriptive notions of ethnicity are inadequate in this regard, because the identities they describe tend to be static and emphasize synchronic rather than diachronic histories. Relational models provide a useful framework for describing ethnic adaptation and identity, although notions of structural opposition have generally been used to distinguish one ethnic group from another. This paper will analyze the structural

²³ Taylor, “Perceptions of Ethnicity,” 11.

²⁴ David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), 38.

²⁵ Ananda Rajah, “Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Nation-state: The Karen in Burma and Thailand,” in Gehan Wijeyewardene (ed.), *Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), 102-133.

²⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

²⁷ Rajah, “Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Nation-state,” 121.

relationships that exist *within* the “Karen community” itself, using these to highlight the ways that various elites have sought to politicize ethnicity in Burma. This is an ongoing process that began during the colonial period under British and missionary leaders and has continued, since Burmese independence, under indigenous elites. The success of the Karen nationalist movement has been contingent on the ability of Karen elites to direct the politicization process, taking account of how their political ambitions were perceived by various domestic and foreign governments, institutions, and individuals. Since the KNU still claims to represent all Karens, it is crucial to consider how the Karen people themselves have responded to this politicization process.

Firstly, I will focus on the emergence of a Karen elite in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of missionary and colonial influences. I will then cover the brief but crucial period between the end of World War II and the declaration of Burma’s independence, during which the KNU was formed. Around this time, there emerged various competing elite groups within the Karen nationalist movement, but Karens remained more or less united in their opposition to the politically dominant Burmans. I will then consider several ideological splits that occurred within the KNU leadership from the 1950s to the 1970s. The credibility of the KNU was seriously damaged at a time when many Karens were becoming disillusioned with the continuing civil war. Finally, I will discuss the events that led to the fall of Manerplaw in 1995. In many respects, the KNU was strongest during the 1980s, but its power proved to be more illusory than real.

From “Wild Cattle” to “White Brothers”: The Emergence of Organized Karen Nationalism

Different Karen groups did not share the same history of inter-ethnic relations with civilized kingdoms in pre-colonial Burma. The Pwo Karens living in the plains of central and lower Burma were assimilated into the dominant Mon social system and were traditionally known as *Talaing Kayin* or “Mon-Karen.” They had special ritual status as “original settlers” and were an essential part of Mon court life. The Sgaw Karens, although referred to as *Bama Kayin* “Burman-Karen”, were never granted the same status in Burman kingdoms. The Burmans treated them as a client and

subordinate population, and many Sgaw Karens were either absorbed into Burmese society or pushed into the remote mountains and forests.²⁸ These geographical and sociocultural factors inhibited the growth of a pan-Karen identity. As a “national consciousness” developed in the mid-eighteenth century under Burman rule, Buddhism was a unifying factor among different racial groups.²⁹ Some 75 percent of Karens identified themselves as Buddhists in a 1931 census. Pwo Buddhists were better integrated into Mon kingdoms, however, and Karen Buddhism has always existed in combination with hostility towards Burmans.³⁰

In the nineteenth century, the introduction of Christianity and Western anthropological theory provided a way for Karens to distinguish themselves from Burmans. Christianity provided an alternative to Buddhism and European notions of ethnicity emphasized cultural particularism. Karens who accepted this new identity were able to improve their economic, educational, and social situation and, for a time, were better organized politically than the Burmans. As the Burman nationalist movement gathered momentum in the 1920s and 1930s, Karen Christian elites began to demand self-determination and other “safeguards” for minority rights.

Christian missionaries, mainly American Baptists, arrived in Burma in the early nineteenth century. Their activity among the Karens was one of the most important factors in the development of the Karen nationalist movement.³¹ At the same time, however, they introduced decisive and divisive ethnic categorizations into Karen and Burmese society. The missionaries found that, among the ethnic Karen groups, the Sgaw were more easily converted to Christianity than the Pwo, the latter having previously converted to Buddhism in large numbers.³² Such religious differences later inhibited the growth

²⁸ Stern, “*Ariya* and the Golden Book,” 298-301.

²⁹ See, for example, Union of Burma, *KNDO Insurrection* (Rangoon: Government Printing and Stationery, 1949), 30.

³⁰ Trevor O. Ling, “Religious Minorities in Burma in the Contemporary Period,” in K. M. de Silva et al. (eds.), *Ethnic Conflict*, 117-118.

³¹ Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 56.

³² Ling, “Religious Minorities in Burma,” 185; Stern, “*Ariya* and the Golden Book,” 97; F. K. Lehman, “Ethnic Categories in Burma and the

of a pan-ethnic identity among the Karens. Sgaw Christians always dominated in the leadership of Karen nationalist organizations. Their efforts to include non-Christian Karens were resisted by Pwo Buddhists, who tended to shun even secular institutions. Furthermore, the distinction between Christian Karens and Buddhist Burmans tended to exacerbate deteriorating relations between the two ethnic groups, leading ultimately to the Karen rebellion in 1949.

A missionary focus on the origins of the Karens served to foster Karen national consciousness. Christian Karens were encouraged to accept, uncritically, certain oral traditions about early Karen history. One myth established the identity of all Karen as descendants of Hto Meh Pah. In confirming the status of the Karen as an indigenous people of Burma, this myth fulfilled an important function in the creation of a national identity with a primordial essence.³³ Another body of Karen tradition based around the mythical figure of Y'wa featured three major elements: (1) the story of creation; (2) stories of the fall from grace, relating the deception of the Karen by a serpent and also how a "golden book" entrusted to the Karen was lost; and (3) prophecies concerning the future, including how the Karen would repossess the book with the aid of a younger, white brother, after which a messianic Karen king would appear.³⁴ This myth — one of several versions found among peoples of mainland Southeast Asia — served the purpose of asserting symbolically the Karens' right to the benefits of civilized life.

The missionaries emphasized similarities between the Christian and Y'wa traditions, presenting themselves as the "white brothers" bringing the Karens their lost "golden book", the Bible.³⁵ Christian Karen elites also used these traditions for their own

Theory of Social Systems," in P. Kunstadter (ed.), *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 97.

³³ This myth is used in official KNU publications. See Saw Moo Troo, "Karens and Communism," in Jeffrey Lewis Petry, *The Sword of the Spirit: Christians, Karens, Colonialists, and the Creation of a Nation in Burma* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1995), 229; Gravers, "The Karen Making of a Nation," 253.

³⁴ Anders P. Hovemyr, *In Search of the Karen King: A Study of Karen Identity with Special Reference to 19th Century Karen Evangelism in Northern Thailand* (Uppsala: S. Academiae Ubsaliensis, 1989), 66-67.

³⁵ Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula*, 52.

purposes. The relationship between Karens and “white” missionaries and colonialists became a central feature of Christian Karen identification. Karen identity came to be defined as an ethno-religious essence that distinguished Christian Karens from Buddhist Burmans.³⁶ Through constant reiteration and *re*-presentation of these myths, Christian Karens were able to establish a public image of “the Karen,” which was congruent with the category used by the colonial power, but which at the same time marginalized Buddhist Karens.

The missionaries’ controversial interpretations have been criticized from various angles.³⁷ A.P. Hovemyr suggests that certain millenarian aspects of the Y’wa tradition might reflect Buddhist influences on traditional Karen religion.³⁸ Karen protest was traditionally expressed in millenarian terms, and often took a form common in political Buddhism. In 1856, a Karen man assumed the title of *Minlaung* “embryo king”, and led over a thousand Karens in a rebellion against missionaries and colonialists in Lower Burma.³⁹ The *Telakhon* was a millenarian “animist” sect that originated around the same time as the *Minlaung* uprising.⁴⁰ The movement borrowed widely from Buddhist imagery and belief and its leaders regarded the Christian missionaries with suspicion. In 1967, the *Phu Chaik* (“Grandfather Buddha”) asserted that the *Telakhon* and not the Christian-led KNU was the true representative of Karen nationalism. The KNU leaders did not tolerate this challenge to their authority and the movement was quickly suppressed.⁴¹

Anthropologists have observed that Karens follow a number of different religions while still remaining “Karen.” Yoko Hayami notes that, “While Karen do not utilize particular religious forms to

³⁶ Gravers, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 251-253.

³⁷ See Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula*, 52; Jonathan Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 226-227; Rajah, “Remaining Karen,” 433; Gravers, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 252; *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power*, NIAS Report No. 11 (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1993), 22.

³⁸ Hovemyr, *In Search of the Karen King*, 77-81.

³⁹ Gravers, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 246; *Nationalism as Political Paranoia*, 28.

⁴⁰ Stern, “*Ariya* and the Golden Book,” 318, 321, 326.

⁴¹ Smith, *Burma*, 454, 95.

distinguish Karen from non-Karen, religious variations may bring forth diverse ways of maintaining or redefining Karen identity, or even alter the very nature of that identity.”⁴² Political influence of Christian Karens has always been far greater than is warranted by their numbers. In 1931, Christians constituted 17 percent of the total Karen population of 1,367,000.⁴³ Under missionary and British guidance, this minority within a minority was able to advance – educationally, socially, and politically. As a result, Christian Karens emerged as the dominant force behind the Karen nationalist movement. For the majority population in Burma, Buddhism provided the foundation of ethnic and national identity and it was common to hear that “to be a Burman is to be Buddhist.” Increasingly, in the cities and towns, it was also implied that “to be Karen is to be Christian.”

Under the Baptist Church, some aspects of Karen “cultural” identity were safeguarded and celebrated. Missionaries developed a Karen script based on a modified Burmese alphabet, which they then used to translate the Bible into Sgaw and Pwo Karen. The production of printed books served both religious and educational needs, and also stimulated the emergence of a tradition of secular Karen literature.⁴⁴ The impact of both literacy and literature on the emerging Karen identity cannot be underestimated. Vernacular publications such as *The Karen Morning Star (Sah Muh Tau)* “encouraged ethnic sensibilities and broadcast the emergence of a new Christian nation.”⁴⁵ Access to this new source of power was somewhat limited, however: material was mainly published in Sgaw Karen, and the *Morning Star* was essentially a mouthpiece for

⁴² Yoko Hayami, “Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha: The Implications of Multiple Reinterpretations for a Minority Ethnic Group in Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27:2 (1996), 335.

⁴³ Stern, “*Ariya and the Golden Book*,” 313. Census figures varied quite considerably: Karen nationalists later claimed that Christians constituted 33 percent of the total Karen population, whereas Western missionary sources placed them between 15 and 20 percent. See Gravers, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 249.

⁴⁴ Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula*, 56.

⁴⁵ Petry, *The Sword of the Spirit*, 83-84.

Christian ideas. This disadvantaged other Karen linguistic groups and alienated many Buddhist Karens.⁴⁶

A Christian education enabled some Karens to advance within the Burmese administration and was a crucial factor in developing the infrastructure of a pan-Karen community. Primary schools were established across lower Burma where Sgaw, Pwo, or English was the main medium of instruction. The Baptist College in Rangoon was founded in 1875, and rapidly became an important center for the spread of Karen nationalist ideas.⁴⁷ Commonly referred to as "Karen College," this institution remained distinct from the University of Rangoon, and Christian Karens took no part in the anti-colonial protests of Burman students during the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁸ A Burmese government publication on the 1949 insurrections claimed that the Karen leaders had been taught at Judson College,⁴⁹ where they were segregated from Burmans, and so had difficulty fitting into general society.⁵⁰ Educational institutions thus served to inculcate a sense of cultural particularism, which was evident in the emerging Karen nationalist movement.

Through Christianity, hill Karens were brought into a network that widely exceeded the sociopolitical frameworks of their traditional village communities. Many of these Karens moved to larger Karen townships in the delta in order to gain access to the new schools, hospitals, and occupations that the missionaries provided. These developments were critical for the leap to organized Karen nationalism. The Karen National Association (KNA), formed in 1881 by Rev. Thra Than Bya, was the first organization of its kind in what was then British India. The KNA aimed to promote the interests of all Karen groups regardless of religion, language, or

⁴⁶ Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 31; Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 223-224.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Burma*, 44-45; Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 300.

⁴⁸ Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 220; Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency since 1948* (Boulder: Westview Press; Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994), 44.

⁴⁹ The Baptist College was renamed Judson College after Dr. Adoniram Judson, the first American Baptist missionary to work in Burma.

⁵⁰ Union of Burma, *Burma and the Insurrections* (Rangoon: Government of the Union of Burma Publications, 1949), 35-36.

location.⁵¹ However, the organization was dominated by Christian Karens from towns in the plains and had difficulty being accepted as the sole representatives of Karen interests. In the Frontier Areas, the poorer, forest-dwelling animists kept to themselves,⁵² and the KNA made little effort to extend its organization to include the majority of Buddhist Karens.

The Buddhist wing of the KNA (BKNA) was not formed until 1939. A government publication in the U Nu period later claimed that the BKNA formed close links with the Burmans.⁵³ The Baptist leaders of the KNA, by contrast, cooperated with the British rulers and attempted to guard against further Burman domination.⁵⁴ As noted above, many Pwo Buddhists resisted the Christian Karens' efforts to include them in any nationalist organization, though others have suggested that Buddhist Karens were adequately represented by the KNA and consequently did not feel the need to organize separately.⁵⁵ A mere five years after it was formed, one observer sympathetic to the Karen noted the unifying power of the Christian-led KNA: "This is just welding the Karens into a nation, not an aggregation of clans. The heathen Karens to a man are brigading themselves under the Christians. This whole thing is doing good for the Karen."⁵⁶ The KNA, whatever its composition or support base, was the only organization strong enough to represent Karens at the government level and its leaders developed a close relationship with the colonial regime. The colonial experience defined Karen identity in the modern national sense and gave it coherence.

The period of British rule introduced a novel discontinuity into Burmese society. From the nineteenth-century onwards, fluidity in political alignments and communal affiliations gave way to politics based increasingly on stable ethnic alignments and ethno-national consciousness.⁵⁷ The British were able to take advantage of the deep antagonism between Karens and Burmans in their takeover of Burma

⁵¹ Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, 221-226.

⁵² Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 288.

⁵³ Union of Burma, *KNDO Insurrection*, 8.

⁵⁴ Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 138.

⁵⁵ Michael Fredholm, *Burma: Ethnicity and Insurgency* (Westport: Praeger, 1993), 27.

⁵⁶ Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, 12.

⁵⁷ Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, 35.

between 1826 and 1885. Karens provided vital military support for the British in the Anglo-Burmese Wars and the pacification of eastern Burma.⁵⁸ A “loyalist” relationship subsequently developed between the colonial rulers and the Karens, which was the cause of much resentment among Burmans.⁵⁹

The Karens’ view of themselves as a constituent in a multiethnic system may have facilitated their identity change, from subordinates in the Burmese kingdom to faithful subjects in the British Empire.⁶⁰ Karen leaders soon became aware, however, of a persistent ambiguity in their relationship with Britain. San C. Po highlighted this when he described the British government as a “father” to the Karen, who “as is usually the case with a father, never really knows, or if he knows often forgets, the special or peculiar needs of his individual child at home.”⁶¹ Martin Smith describes the pattern emerging from British administration of the Frontier Areas as “not so much one of benign paternalism as of chronic neglect.”⁶² There were few attempts to investigate, recognize, or reconcile the rising tide of Karen nationalism.

As the Burman nationalist movement gathered momentum in the 1920s, old Karen fears about Burman dominance inevitably resurfaced. These apprehensions were strengthened by Britain’s progressive implementation of political and administrative reforms designed to give greater self-government to Burma.⁶³ Burma was divided into five different administrative districts and arbitrary lines were drawn through Karen-majority areas against the express wishes of Karen nationalist leaders.⁶⁴ This further complicated the spread and ethnic diversity of the Karen population, and weakened KNA

⁵⁸ Marshall, *The Karens of Burma*, 32; Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma*, 6-12, 32-35; Marks, “The Karen Revolt in Burma,” 54-56; Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 139-140.

⁵⁹ Christie, “Anatomy of a Betrayal,” 54.

⁶⁰ Dorothy Hess Guyot, “Communal Conflict in the Burma Delta,” in Ruth T. McVey (ed.), with the assistance of Adrienne Suddard, *Southeast Asian Transitions: Approaches through Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 198.

⁶¹ Po, *Burma and the Karens*, 58.

⁶² Smith, *Burma*, 48.

⁶³ Christie, “Anatomy of a Betrayal,” 58-59.

⁶⁴ Smith, *Burma*, 46.

claims of a unified pan-Karen identity subsuming the various Karen sub-groups. Diversified Karen elites emerged, but only in the most backward areas was Karen territory ever explicitly recognized. The majority of Karens — including most of the political elites — lived in ethnically mixed areas that stretched into the very heart of Lower Burma. In order to protect the rights of these latter Karen communities, the KNA demanded minority safeguards and separate representation in the Legislative Council.⁶⁵ Many Karens felt again that their language and culture were under threat and that their interests were taking a secondary position to those of the numerically and politically dominant Burmans.⁶⁶ Karen elites therefore sought new ways to protect their interests and identity. In doing so, they were profoundly influenced by modern political discourse and Western notions of the nation-state.

Karen elites took the “minority consciousness” that developed as a result of political centralization and cultural “Burmanization” and translated this inchoate sentiment into a call for ethnic autonomy.⁶⁷ San C. Po’s book, *Burma and the Karens*, published in 1928, is most revealing of the political thinking of Karen elites in the inter-war years. Relying on arguments put forward by Smeaton forty years earlier, Po asserted that the Karens should be given a separate administrative region they could call their own. “Karen Country,” he proclaimed, “how inspiring it sounds!” An emphasis on distinctiveness and particularism characterized Karen claims of statehood. According to Po, the Karens “pleaded that the distinction between Burmese and Karens be fully recognized, and acted on — to the benefit of the Government and the contentment of the people.”⁶⁸

Po proposed the creation of a Karen state in the Tenasserim Division that would be allowed significant autonomy within a federated Burma.⁶⁹ This was the first authoritative statement of Karen nationalist aspirations and Po’s ideal of self-determination remains a basic KNU demand. Since the Karens were never more

⁶⁵ Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 370.

⁶⁶ Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 46; Smith, *Burma*, 51; Po, *Burma and the Karens*, 8-10.

⁶⁷ Brown, “From Peripheral Communities to Ethnic Nations,” 51-77.

⁶⁸ Po, *Burma and the Karens*, 81, 80.

⁶⁹ Po, *Burma and the Karens*, 73, 77-79.

than a minority element in most districts, however, British officials felt that the interests of *all* Karens were best served by increasing Karen parliamentary representation. Though Karen leaders continued to put forward claims for political autonomy, the entire Karen question was increasingly overshadowed by the Burmese national liberation movement.⁷⁰

The growing tide of Burmese nationalism in the early 1930s enhanced the sense of ethnic opposition between Burmans and Karens. The Saya San rebellion (1930-32) saw peasants across the country take up arms in a show of anti-British resentment. Saya San was a charismatic former *pongyi* (monk) and most of the rebel leaders were Buddhists. Karens were allegedly targeted on occasion, in part because the rebels associated Christianity with imperialist rule. Following Karen involvement in the suppression of the rebellion, observers warned of possible clashes between Burmans and Karens in the future. The Field Secretary of the American Baptist Mission wrote: "I fear the help they [the Karens] have given the government during this rebellion is going to make it harder for them if separation comes, and some of them know it."⁷¹

The mounting tensions between Burman and Karen nationalists were also evident at the Burma Round Table Conference (1931-32), which considered Burma's separation from India. The KNA memorandum was primarily concerned with preserving Karen "nationality." Karen representatives wanted increased representation for Karens in a separated Burma under direct British control.⁷² The Burman separationists found this unacceptable, arguing that the Karens were not a distinct racial group and that the majority of Buddhist Karens identified with Burmans.⁷³

Throughout the 1930s, the KNA continued to push for special parliamentary representation in order to counteract Burman

⁷⁰ Smith, *Burma*, 51-52.

⁷¹ Cited in Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 371-372.

⁷² Great Britain, Burma Round Table Conference, 27th November 1931-12th January 1932: *Proceedings* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1932), 67-68. Hereafter referred to as BRTCP.

⁷³ BRTCP, 44; Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 333. See also Statement of People's Party, published in "Memorandum by Govt. of Burma on the representations received from the representatives of political parties and minorities," 1933, in Smith, *Burma*, 52.

domination. Yet San C. Po and the other Christian Karen leaders were overstepping their bounds in claiming to represent all Karens. It was apparent that not all Karens supported the KNA unconditionally. Most hill-dwelling Karen populations were politically and economically less developed than Karen communities in the delta. The former probably had only a limited interest in the party politics of Rangoon. These Karens did, though, harbor traditional fears about Burman domination, which may have led them to support the KNA. Some Buddhist Karens seem to have developed closer relations with the ethnic Burman majority. Others, including many Pwo Buddhists, showed no interest in any nationalist organization. Nonetheless, the fact that Karen Buddhists were represented in the KNA structure indeed suggests that many were not content to be subordinate subjects in a Burman-dominated society.

At the beginning of World War II, the Karen and Burman nationalist movements were moving in opposite directions. Although incompatible, both models contained the fiction of a common ethnic core of a nation: the image of the Karen as a Christian and loyal supporter of Britain was set against the anti-imperialist, Buddhist Burman. The deterioration of Burman-Karen relations during the war and in the immediate post-war period was largely a result of massacres of people, spawned by this “logic of ethnicism.”

War to Independence: 1942-1948

The war in Burma was fought largely along ethnic lines, which increased resentment and opposition between Karen and Burman nationalists. Immediately after the Japanese defeat, senior Karen leaders renewed their demands for self-determination in the belief that this would protect Karens from further Burman domination and aggression. Although negotiations for independence were soon underway, they were not of the sort envisaged by the Karen leadership. Rather, the British government looked to Bogyoke Aung San, a Burman (and Burmese) nationalist and former leader of the Burma Independence Army (BIA). Aung San had left the military to lead a broad coalition of political parties known as the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL). Although Burman dominated, the AFPFL included many ethnic minority members. Many observers felt that Aung San was the only person able to unite the

various peoples of Burma. His assassination in July 1947 meant that this belief was never put to the test.

Among the Karens, Aung San's policies were to cause much division. Many Karens, including Buddhists and others living in mixed populations in the delta, were encouraged by his attitude towards minorities and the offer of a Karen State within a federated Union of Burma. The newly formed Karen National Union (KNU), however, was not satisfied with the boundaries of the proposed Karen state. KNU leaders demanded a much bigger state and communal representation for the Karens in the delta, but only succeeded in isolating themselves from the political mainstream. A group of more militant Karen nationalists consequently sought to gain their political objectives through alternative means.

Dorothy H. Guyot argues that the inter-ethnic conflict during World War II can be understood in terms of the Burman and Karen's discrepant role relations to the British and to each other.⁷⁴ Karen troops in the British Burma Army remained loyal to Britain. The Burmese nationalists led by Aung San, by contrast, formed the BIA under Japanese guidance. In March 1942, open conflict between Burmans and Karens erupted when BIA troops attacked Karen populations in Myaungmya and Papun. The Burmans accused the Christian Karens of being pro-British, but they also questioned the loyalty of the Burmese-speaking Buddhist Karens. Religious affiliation was not able to diffuse what had become essentially a racial conflict. The fighting continued in the delta until mid-June when Japanese intervention brought an end to the civil war.

The events of 1942 increased mutual distrust between Burmans and Karens, and had a profound effect on the emerging Karen political movement: "If this war has awakened and aroused nationalism," warned the KNU in 1947, "it has not left the Karens untouched or asleep."⁷⁵ The Christian-dominated Karen Central Organization (KCO) formed by the wartime government rapidly became the most influential Karen political organization and was the

⁷⁴ Guyot, "Communal Conflict in the Burma Delta," 195.

⁷⁵ "Press Release: Karen National Union for Reuter," June 25, 1947, in Hugh Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948: Documents from Official and Private Sources*, 2 Vols. (London: H.M.S.O., 1983), Vol. 2, Doc. 413.

forerunner of the present-day KNU.⁷⁶ Although Karens and Burmans later fought as allies against the Japanese, the way the war was fought still largely reflected racial divisions. Many Karens in the hills preferred to join British underground forces, whereas the Japanese-trained BNA remained predominantly Burman.⁷⁷ Some Karens started to plan for independence immediately after the war, and from there entered straight into rebellion in 1949. Four decades later, much of the KNU leadership still consisted of veterans of Allied units from World War II.⁷⁸

The KNU's official line does not reflect the fact that Karens responded in different ways to the wartime situation. Burmese leaders made extensive efforts to repair damage to Karen-Burman relations. Ba Maw's government initially worked with the BKNA that, according to Burmese authors, was equally as strong as the Christian-dominated KNA. The *Dobama-Sinyetha Asiayone* was formed in order to "banish party feelings and to create unity among the peoples."⁷⁹ Several Karen leaders, including San C. Po, were appointed to government office. After the war, Aung San appointed Karens as heads of the army and air force.⁸⁰ There was even evidence of Karen-Japanese rapprochement, although this can be seen as political expediency in extremely difficult circumstances and not necessarily indicative of deeper feelings.⁸¹

The Karen political agenda certainly became more focused by the war experience. Karens who had remained loyal to their colonial ruler during the war expected the British to support their political objectives as Burma moved towards independence. These Karens were increasingly prepared to defend their "national rights" — with

⁷⁶ Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 58.

⁷⁷ Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs*, 164.

⁷⁸ Smith, *Burma*, 93.

⁷⁹ Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 58.

⁸⁰ Dr. Maung Maung, *Burma's Constitution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959), 63; U Nu, *U Nu, Saturday's Son*. Trans. by U Law Yone; ed. by U Kyaw Win (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1975), 165-167; U Nu, *Burma under the Japanese: Pictures and Portraits*, ed. and trans. by J. S. Furnivall (London: Macmillan, 1954), 98-102.

⁸¹ For instance, a Japanese census more than doubled the previously calculated size of the Karen population, which strengthened Karen claims for political autonomy. See Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs*, 14.

or without British assistance.⁸² In September 1945, a Karen memorial requesting the creation of the “United Frontier Karen States” was sent to London.⁸³ This “Karenistan” would include Karen and Karenni populations in Burma as well as the Karen regions of Thailand.

A four-man Karen “goodwill delegation” traveled to London in August 1946 and published a pamphlet known as “The Case for the Karens.”⁸⁴ This document presented Karen political claims in terms of a particularist ethnic identity vis-à-vis the Burmans. Karens were portrayed as anti-Burman, mainly Christian and loyal to Britain. The authors argued that the Karens’ national consciousness, religion, and way of life “would not at present permit a happy collaboration with the Burmese people.”⁸⁵ They failed to acknowledge that the majority of Karens were Buddhists or animists. Moreover, in the delta areas, most Christian Karens lived side by side with their Burman neighbors.

The Karen delegation was under the misapprehension that its proposal was under active and serious consideration by the British government. Most British officials felt that Karen interests were sufficiently protected by Karen representatives on the Governor’s Executive Council.⁸⁶ By this time, however, the more militant Karen nationalists had already given up hope of a negotiated settlement.⁸⁷ Others, including many Buddhist Karens, did not wish to continue fighting. Although the 1946 goodwill delegation claimed to represent all Karens, many Buddhist Karens in the BKNA opposed the mission and did not favor separation from Burma. The idea of a separate Karen State had been discussed earlier at an All Burma Karen Congress held in February. Representatives of the BKNA had

⁸² Christie, “Anatomy of a Betrayal,” 68.

⁸³ “The Humble Memorial of the Karens,” in Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle*, I, Doc. 286.

⁸⁴ Gravers cites several passages of this document in “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 237-269.

⁸⁵ Gravers, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 247.

⁸⁶ But see, for example, “Record of Meeting on Frontier Areas,” February 7, 1947, in Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle*, II, Doc. 274.

⁸⁷ See, for instance, “Observations by H. N. C. Stevenson on Karen resolution, adopted 25 April 1946,” in Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle*, I, Doc. 566.

dismissed the idea as premature, but the resolution was carried by a majority of KCO members.⁸⁸

Many Buddhist Karens preferred a policy of cooperation with Aung San and the AFPFL. Aung San's vision of a united Burma transcending ethnic divisions won the support of most minority leaders, including a significant number of Karens.⁸⁹ The AFPFL's policy in regard to the Frontier Areas was "to seek cordial relations with the peoples of these areas with the view to the formation of a union or federation...formed by the willing consent of all races inhabiting the whole of Burma."⁹⁰ The Karens who advocated separatism, however, saw themselves primarily as "members of an ethno-linguistic-religious group rather than as members of a political nation-state in which they shared a common identity and destiny with other citizens, regardless of their backgrounds."⁹¹ Ruth McVey claims that these Karens felt impelled to rebellion because they did not consider themselves "real" nationals of the proposed Burmese state.⁹²

In January 1947, Aung San took his own delegation to London to negotiate with the British Government on the constitutional advancement of Burma. Karen representatives were not invited to take part in the discussions that resulted in the Attlee-Aung San agreement. All negotiations between Burma Proper and the Frontier Areas thereafter would take place within the framework of the concept of a united Burma.⁹³ A conference was held at Panglong in

⁸⁸ Union of Burma, *KNDO Insurrection*, 11.

⁸⁹ Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia*, 44.

⁹⁰ *New Times of Burma*, November 8, 1946.

⁹¹ Josef Silverstein, "Ethnic Protest in Burma: Its Causes and Solutions," in Ghose (ed.), *Protest Movements in South and South-East Asia*, 82.

⁹² Ruth McVey, "Separatism and the Paradoxes of the Nation-State in Perspective," in Lim Joo-Jock and S. Vani (eds.), *Armed Separatism in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Regional Strategic Studies Programme, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984), 13.

⁹³ Union of Burma, *Burma's Fight for Freedom* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, Government of the Union of Burma, 1948), 44-45.

February to ascertain Frontier views, but the Karens chose not to attend.⁹⁴

The Karens now faced the prospective amalgamation of Karen-inhabited areas into Burma proper. In early February 1947, 700 delegates from existing Karen organizations, including Baptist and Buddhist chapters of the KNA, the KCO, and its youth wing, the Karen Youth Organization (KYO), agreed to form the Karen National Union (KNU). This was a more militant organization than the KCO, and its members put forward a new series of demands: the acceptance in principle of a Karen state with a seaboard; adequate representation in the Executive Council, government service and army; and a new ethnic census.⁹⁵ When these demands were ignored, the KNU's president Saw Ba U Gyi withdrew from the Executive Council.⁹⁶ His decision to boycott the forthcoming Constituent Assembly was intended to show the extent of KNU support, but it effectively removed the Karens' main nationalist voice from the critical debates to come.

The Karen Youth Organization (KYO) became affiliated with the AFPFL, and Saw San Po Thin replaced Ba U Gyi on the Executive Council.⁹⁷ The KNU boycott meant that, of 24 seats reserved for Karens in the 255-seat Constituent Assembly, 19 went to the KYO and the remainder to independent candidates backed by the AFPFL.⁹⁸ The KYO leaders believed that the rights of Delta Karens could only be protected by finding accommodation with the Burman majority. They wished to negotiate a solution that included special constitutional rights for Karens within a federated union. Saw

⁹⁴ Government of Burma, *Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry 1947: Part I: Report* (Rangoon: Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, 1947), 16-17. Hereafter referred to as *FACE, I, Report*.

⁹⁵ "The KNU to the PM (via Gov. of Burma)," February 17, 1947, in Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle*, II, Doc. 291 and "Resolutions passed by the Karen Council of Action," February 22, 1947, in Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle*, Vol. 2, Doc. 300. For a more moderate view of a Karen state, see *New Times of Burma*, March 1, 1947.

⁹⁶ *The Times*, March 8 and March 18, 1947.

⁹⁷ Smith Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, 85.

⁹⁸ *The Times*, April 14, 1947; Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, 551; Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 118-119.

Ba U Gyi and the KNU leadership, by contrast, demanded control of mixed Burman-Karen territory in the delta.

According to Burman politicians, the Buddhist Karens had no desire to separate from Burma, and the separatist tendency was for all practical purposes confined to the relatively small element of educated Christian Karens.⁹⁹ It is clear, however, that many Karens supported the KNU leaders who campaigned for a separate Karen state. Influential Buddhist leaders such as Saw Mya Thein of the BKNA even expressed the view that “if the Karen community could prove that their population in Lower Burma was more than that of Burmans, [there was] no reason why Lower Burma should not be made ‘Karenistan’.”¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, the KNU leadership found it increasingly difficult to further its cause, especially when a number of Karen groups began to put forward contradictory claims.

The Karen community was divided at the 1947 Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry, which considered the question of minority representation in the Constituent Assembly. Geographic divisions hindered Karen nationalist claims: only 20 percent of Karens actually lived in the Frontier Areas, whereas most leaders were from the Delta. KNU leaders felt misrepresented by the Karen testimony that was accepted by the committee in its report, where it was noted: “representatives of [the Salween] district indicated the desire for incorporation in Ministerial Burma as an ordinary district.”¹⁰¹ The KNU became frustrated when the leader of this delegation signed a copy of the draft constitution, even though there was no firm guarantee of an autonomous Karen state.

Observers saw such contradictory arguments as evidence of the lack of unity among Karens. This confused British patrons, who had anticipated that Karens would behave as a united group with common interests.¹⁰² Increasingly, they expressed doubts about the KNU’s case. Lt. Col. David Rees Williams, chairman of the

⁹⁹ “Karen Claims: Note by L. B. Walsh Atkins,” Burma Office, February 13, 1947, in Tinker (ed.), *Burma: the Struggle*, Vol. 2, Doc. 282.

¹⁰⁰ “Sir Hubert Rance to the Earl of Listowel,” Rangoon, June 2, 1947, in Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle*, Vol. 2, Doc. 385.

¹⁰¹ *FACE, I, Report*, 30. See also J. L. Leyden, “The Karen Problem in Relation to Frontier Areas Administration,” June 28, 1947, in Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle*, II, Doc. 421.

¹⁰² Gravens, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 257.

committee, described what he saw as Karen disunity in the *Sunday Times*.

The Animist Karens have no interest in the constitutional issue, the Buddhist Karens are inclined to side with the Burmans, while the Christian Karens, who are about 25 per cent of the whole, and the educated ones at that are divided among themselves into two groups, one of which supports Aung San and the other is against him.¹⁰³

The KNU responded with a bold statement entitled “Karen Unity”: “A KAREN IS A KAREN; one in blood brotherhood; one in sentiment; one in diversity and one mass of a Karen nationhood [*sic*].”¹⁰⁴

At the Constituent Assembly, Aung San claimed that the basic law “shall provide adequate safeguards for minorities.”¹⁰⁵ But KNU leaders remained concerned about his suggestion that the constitution establish areas with varying degrees of political autonomy, depending on how close they came to meeting Stalin’s criteria of nationhood: “A nation is a historically constituted stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”¹⁰⁶ Aung San concluded that of Burma’s ethnic minorities, only the Shans constituted a “nation”; the Karens were considered a “national minority.”¹⁰⁷ KNU leaders, using similar criteria, have emphatically tried to assure their Burman adversaries of their “national” status. As they state on their web page: “The

¹⁰³ *Sunday Times*, July 22, 1947.

¹⁰⁴ “Press Release,” in Tinker (ed.), *Burma: The Struggle*, I, Doc. 413.

¹⁰⁵ Union of Burma, *Burma’s Fight for Freedom*, 93.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Stalin, “The Nation,” in *Marxism and the National Question*, from *The Essential Stalin: Major Theoretical Writings 1905-52*, ed. Bruce Franklin (Croom Helm: London, 1973), 57-61, cited in John Hutchinson and Anthony David Smith (eds.), *Nationalism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 20.

¹⁰⁷ Aung San, “Characteristics of a Nation or Nationality,” in Josef Silverstein (ed.), *The Political Legacy of Aung San* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993), 156.

Karens are much more than a national minority. We are a nation with a population of 7 million, having all the essential qualities of a nation. We have our own history, our own language, our own culture, our own land of settlement and our own economic system of life."¹⁰⁸ The most obvious omission from the 1947 Constitution was the failure to demarcate any Karen territory, which was the main cause of Karen political grievances.

The Burmese leaders were willing to create a Karen State from the Salween district, the Karenni States and adjacent Karen-majority areas. Karen delegates objected that such a state was not economically viable, and would not include the large Karen population in the delta. The Karenni also rejected this offer, thereby crushing KNU hopes of a united "Karen" autonomous state. Another provision allowed for the creation of a Special Region, to be known as "Kaw-thu-lay" ("Kawthoolei"), to be jointly administered by a Karen Affairs Council and Minister for Karen Affairs. A Karen State could then be created, "as soon as agreement can be reached between the Karen territories and the Karens of Burma generally."¹⁰⁹ This never happened because the Karens were unable to reach an agreement over the territorial demarcation of the Karen State. The majority appeared satisfied with the proposal offered by Aung San, but the KNU rejected the constitution outright. In the event, its institutions could not take root because of the outbreak of civil war soon after independence was declared on January 4, 1948.

On the eve of Burma's independence, the Karen nationalist movement was divided along religious, demographic, and political lines. This "splintered" Karen identity reflected different views of Karen-Burman interaction in the light of evolving political institutions in an independent Burmese nation-state. In many ways, the Christian KNU leaders represented an older generation, whose experience of earlier Burman domination and oppression were reinforced by the recent events of World War II. These Karens refused to adopt a superordinate Burmese identity, even when this excluded them from the political mainstream. Other Karens, including Buddhists, some youth and those living in areas with a

¹⁰⁸ "History of the Karens and KNU." See http://www.karen.org/knu/KNU_His.htm.

¹⁰⁹ *The Times*, August 16, 1947.

mixed ethnic population, were generally more amenable to reaching a compromise with the AFPFL leaders. Although they still wished to maintain their cultural identity, these Karens were willing to identify themselves as Burmese citizens. Burma's first year as an independent nation-state was characterized by confusion and uncertainty. Many Burmans found it difficult to forget the old ethnic distinctions, and Karen-Burman antipathy soon led to violent conflict.

Rebellion to Reformation: 1948-1976

The Karen rebellion broke out almost immediately after independence, and fighting between Karen insurgents and the *Tatmadaw*, the Burmese military, continues to this day. The KNU leaders quickly moved to consolidate their military and political power in order to provide a viable alternative to the Burmese government. In the late 1950s, a crisis among the KNU leadership saw the Karen nationalist movement split along ideological lines, which reflected wider geographical, religious, and ethnocultural differences between Karen populations. The unity and direction the Karens were unable to gain through various congresses and alliances, they found in the charismatic leader Bo Mya. With military experience and a religious and ideological agenda, Bo Mya single-handedly purged the KNU movement, which by the late 1970s, was strong enough to resist the *Tatmadaw's* renewed assaults.

Evidence of Burmans' attacks against Karens in the latter part of 1948 and early 1949 suggests that ethnic divisions were of more concern to the government than political conflicts between different Burman groups. U Nu's government negotiated with Burmese army mutineers, communists, and rebel People's Voluntary Organization (PVO) forces to obtain their cooperation against the KNU's local defense militia, the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO).¹¹⁰ The Karen commander-in-chief of the armed forces, General Smith Dun, was accused of being an "imperialist collaborator." His controversial resignation, combined with the dismissal, defection, and internment of other Karen leaders, resulted in the KNU losing all remaining loyalty to the AFPFL

¹¹⁰ Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 11.

government.¹¹¹ General Smith Dun did not join the rebellion, however, and other prominent Karens tried to persuade the KNU to negotiate with the government.¹¹²

The attempted seizure of Rangoon explains the particular antipathy many Burmese leaders felt for the KNU cause.¹¹³ The Karen rebellion began on January 30, 1949 following Union Military Police attacks in which many Karens were killed. The KNDO militia took over the town of Insein, only a few miles from the capital and a combined Karen-Kachin force captured Mandalay, Burma's second largest city, on March 13.¹¹⁴ The insurgents claimed that government forces played on nationalist feelings, using Buddhist monks to contact the PVOs in Mandalay: "You have to liberate the city from the savage Christian Kachins and Karens."¹¹⁵ U Nu's appeal for peace failed and a ceasefire only served to strengthen the position of the Burma Army. In late May, the Karens evacuated Insein after a 112-day, bloody siege that cost nearly 1,000 lives.

Karen rebels posed the most immediate military threat to the government, but organizationally they remained weak.¹¹⁶ Although the KNU held large areas and benefited from considerable support across Lower Burma, it was not effectively organized in rural areas. The KNU launched its first political campaign on May 20, 1949, declaring the formation of a Karen State in KNU-controlled territory

¹¹¹ Smith, *Burma*, 116, 118; Smith Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel*, 53-54; U Nu, *U Nu, Saturday's Son*, 173.

¹¹² San C. Po's daughter also disagreed with the KNU rebellion and continued to serve in U Nu's government as Minister for Karen Affairs. See Smith, *Burma*, 118; Ronald D. Renard, "The Karen Rebellion in Burma," in Ralph Premadas, S. W. R. De A. Samarasinghe and Alan Anderson (eds.), *Secessionist Movements in Comparative Perspective* (London: Pinter, 1990), 102-103.

¹¹³ Smith, *Burma*, 137-138; Fredholm, *Burma: Ethnicity and Insurgency*, 103.

¹¹⁴ Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 13. Like the Karens, many Kachins are Christians. Commander Naw Seng's 1st Kachin Rifles defected from the Burma Army and went over to the Karens.

¹¹⁵ Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 14.

¹¹⁶ Thakin Nu, *Towards Peace and Democracy: Translation of Selected Speeches* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, 1949), 201; Smith, *Burma*, 137, 142.

between Toungoo and Daik-u.¹¹⁷ A radio broadcast announced the establishment of a provisional Kawthoolei government, with Saw Ba U Gyi as Prime Minister. Communications were improved and an administrative body was established to unify the large KNU-controlled areas. The Karens' military forces were reorganized and renamed the Kawthoolei Armed Forces (KAF).¹¹⁸ The importance of this consolidation of power cannot be underestimated: by maintaining a semi-permanent nation-in-exile identity, the KNU made the Karen nation a reality in space and time for the majority of Karens in Burma. Cultural divisions between various Karen sub-groups therefore became subordinate to geo-political divisions that distinguished between the Karen "nation" and the Burmese State. The importance of Kawthoolei continues to lie in its symbolic function, which provides Karens with a sense of common place, culture, and identity.¹¹⁹

The KNU faced accusations that their demands for a separate state did not represent the desire of the entire Karen people, but only that of "a handful of British lackeys who wanted to ruin the Union of Burma."¹²⁰ In response, the KNU points to peaceful demonstrations staged by Karens all over the country in early 1948 in support of such a state.¹²¹ These demonstrators, however, clearly did not want communal strife or civil war. It is difficult to determine how many Karens lived in "liberated" areas during this period because the KNU constantly shifted its headquarters, although it later established relatively secure bases at Papun and then Manerplaw. The KNU has claimed that up to three million Karens lived in Kawthoolei, but the reality was probably considerably less than that.¹²²

A full KNU Congress was held in July 1950, where Saw Ba U Gyi announced the "Four Principles of the Karen Revolution."

¹¹⁷ *The Times*, May 21, 1949.

¹¹⁸ Smith, *Burma*, 141-142.

¹¹⁹ Rajah, "Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Nation-state," 109; Gravers, "The Karen Making of a Nation," 262-263.

¹²⁰ "Karen History in the Karen National Union (KNU) Narrative." See <http://www.karen.org/history/knunarr.htm>.

¹²¹ "Karen History in the Karen National Union (KNU) Narrative."

¹²² See, for instance, Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 29; Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1987), 334.

There shall be no surrender.
The recognition of the Karen state must be completed.
We shall retain our own arms.
We shall decide our own political destiny.

These remain the cornerstone of KNU political demands. Karen leaders have repeatedly refused to compromise on these principles, revealing an unwillingness to submit to successive Burmese governments and, by implication, accept a super-ordinate “Burmese” identity. Disagreement over the main question of political reorganization was symptomatic of the ethnic chaos that the KNU faced in the early years. The delegates came from diverse ethnic and political backgrounds, and several represented townships that had already formed their own military organizations. These Karens opposed KNU plans to set up a single Kawthoolei governing body and resolutions had to be modified to accommodate their wishes.¹²³ Nonetheless, Saw Ba U Gyi privately set about consolidating KNU power in the east, with the aim of making the KNU the dominant, if not the sole, force in the Karen nationalist movement. The KNU probably gained majority Karen support during this period, if only because most Karens believed they would win the war within two or three years. As U Aung San, who had been a KNDO organizer in the late 1940s, told Martin Smith in 1988: “We never thought we would be in the jungle 40 years later.”¹²⁴

Shortly after the Congress ended, the KNU movement suffered a major setback when Saw Ba U Gyi and one other senior KNU leader¹²⁵ were ambushed by the *Tatmadaw* and killed. Many Western observers believed Ba U Gyi was the one KNU leader capable of uniting the Karen movement and restoring relations with the AFPFL government in Rangoon.¹²⁶ Charismatic leadership was the most

¹²³ “Minutes of the Kawthoolei Congress,” July 17-19, 1950 (KNU Archives Dept.), in Smith, *Burma*, 143.

¹²⁴ Cited in Smith, *Burma*, 141.

¹²⁵ Saw Sankey represented the KNU on the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry. He has been described as “a Baptist dominated zealous Karen nationalist”: U Maung Maung, *Burmese Nationalist Movements, 1940-1948* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 293.

¹²⁶ See, for example, former British governor, Sir R. Dorman-Smith, in *The Times*, August 23, 1950. For a contrasting view see the reply of Lord

intense form of personal authority in a society where personal status relationships formed the basis of the social structure.¹²⁷ Although Ba U Gyi was a Western-educated Christian from the Delta, Buddhist Karens living in the eastern hills nonetheless recognized in him the personal and spiritual qualities required of a leader (merit, karma, and so on). Saw Hunter Tha Hmwe was eventually named as Ba U Gyi's successor, but he had the difficult task of trying to integrate the ethnically and politically diverse Karen sub-groups in the face of the Burmese government's hardening stance on the Karen question.¹²⁸

In the early 1950s, the AFPFL used the legal ambiguities inherent in the 1947 Constitution to drive deep wedges in the Karen nationalist movement. In 1951, the Karenni State was renamed the Kayah State. This simultaneously removed the name synonymous with Karenni independence and created a clear, though questionable, racial distinction between the Kayah and other Karen sub-groups.¹²⁹ The Karen State that was created in 1951 incorporated less than a quarter of the total Karen population — a census taken in 1956 estimated that fewer than 600,000 Karens lived within its boundaries.¹³⁰ This geographical separation effectively prevented the Karens from achieving political unity. U Nu urged the Karens to choose between “the Karen State or the Minority Rights. It is absolutely impossible to have both.”¹³¹ For many Karens, this merely confirmed their belief that the Burmans would not allow them to develop economically, culturally, and geographically as a people.¹³²

The Burmese government followed what Josef Silverstein has called the “politics of contradiction.” On the one hand, the nation's

Listowel, the last British Secretary of State for Burma, in *The Times*, August 1950.

¹²⁷ See Ralph R. Premdas, “Secessionist Movements in Comparative Perspective,” in Premdas *et al.* (eds.), *Secessionist Movements in Comparative Perspective*, 23.

¹²⁸ Smith, *Burma*, 144.

¹²⁹ Smith, *Burma*, 145.

¹³⁰ Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 197-198.

¹³¹ U Nu, “The Karen State (Speech delivered in Parliament, in support of the Constitution Amendment Act, 1951, on 5th October 1951),” in *Burma Looks Ahead: Translation of Selected Speeches* (Rangoon: Ministry of Information, Government of the Union of Burma, 1953), 14.

¹³² Smith, *Burma*, 146.

leaders appeared to support the ideal of “unity in diversity.” They attempted to placate the Karens by providing them with titular protection: the second President of the Union was a Karen, and General Smith Dun was the commander of the Burma Army until his resignation in 1949. On the other hand, the government seemed, to the Karens at least, to be working toward political centralization and cultural “Burmanization.”¹³³ U Nu’s concept of national unity implied the submersion of local identities beneath an overarching “Burmese” identity.¹³⁴ The aboveground Karen political parties, such as the Union Karen League (UKL) and the Union Karen Organization (UKO), became subservient to the AFPFL. By 1956, the Karen reserved seats had been abolished and both the UKL and UKO virtually ceased to exist.¹³⁵ Thus, the Karens who adopted a political identity other than that promoted by the KNU found that they could not remain “Karen.”

The years 1953 to 1958 remain the only period when the Karen nationalist movement was politically unified. In the mid-1950s, some Karen leaders were influenced by communist ideology that ultimately brought about a disastrous split in the KNU leadership. The KNU’s First National Congress in 1953 approved the establishment of a Karen vanguard party, the Karen National United Party (KNUP). Saw Hunter Tha Hmwe arrived from the delta a year later and formed a new administrative body, the Karen Revolutionary Council (KRC). The controversial “Second Phase Programme” was unveiled and ratified at the Second National Congress in 1956.¹³⁶ The adoption of the village cooperation system coincided with the most successful era of the Karen revolution, which was marked by significant military successes and political consolidation.¹³⁷

¹³³ Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 207-219; Clifford Geertz, “The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States,” in Clifford Geertz (ed.), *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 136.

¹³⁴ Silverstein, *Burmese Politics*, 151-152; U Nu, *U Nu, Saturday’s Son*, 171-172.

¹³⁵ Smith, *Burma*, 147.

¹³⁶ Fredholm, *Burma: Ethnicity and Insurgency*, 106-107.

¹³⁷ Smith, *Burma*, 170-174.

Objections to the Second Phase Programme, however, were not slow to emerge. KNUP leaders adopted the Maoist concept of a united front and, in 1959, formed the National Democratic United Front (NDUF) with the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP).¹³⁸ Significantly, the KNU was not among the initial signatories. Saw Hunter Tha Hmwe's attempts to win Western aid for the Karen cause were impeded by the KNUP's improving relationship with the CPB. Most observers consequently saw the rift between KRC and KNUP factions primarily in terms of pro- and anti-communist factions.¹³⁹

Martin Smith argues that there was, however, a more fundamental difference in ethno-political outlook. KNUP leaders primarily came from the ethnically mixed delta region, where they had to get along with other insurgent groups as well as their Burman neighbors. The situation was different in the eastern hills where Saw Hunter Tha Hmwe found support. This area was economically and politically less developed, and there were very few ethnic Burmans. At the Third Kawthoolei National Congress, an argument broke out over the definition of the Karens' "enemy." To Hunter Tha Hmwe and his supporters, "the Burmans" were "the enemy," whereas KNUP leaders claimed that they were fighting "Burman chauvinism." Hunter Tha Hmwe withdrew from the Congress and the Karens subsequently failed to present a unified front at the 1963 peace talks. The "surrender" of the KRC faction in 1964 sent shock waves through the Karen nationalist movement, although few Karen rebels actually came in.¹⁴⁰ By this time, the Karen leadership was in disarray and government propaganda further weakened the KNU's authority. Most Karens, however, did not believe they would receive fair treatment under General Ne Win's military regime, which had seized power from the U Nu government on March 3, 1962.

The objective of Ne Win's Revolutionary Council was to eliminate ethnicity as a political issue.¹⁴¹ In his Union Day speech on

¹³⁸ Fredholm, *Burma: Ethnicity and Insurgency*, 108; Smith, *Burma*, 171-172.

¹³⁹ See, for instance, *The Times*, April 25, 1961; *Guardian* (Rangoon), April 6, 1961.

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *Burma*, 213-218.

¹⁴¹ Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Burma* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1987), 302.

February 12, 1964, Ne Win called for the elimination of “false notions such as ‘majority people’ and ‘minority people’ that the mutual, suspicious and strained relationships between nationalities in the past had created.”¹⁴² Most Karens saw in Ne Win’s “Burmese Way to Socialism” a continuation of the “Burmanization” that had begun under U Nu.¹⁴³ With the introduction of a one-party system, there was an obvious decline in the role of ethnic minorities at every level of national life. The Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) nationalized or abolished Karen schools and newspapers, and the usage of Karen languages declined drastically.¹⁴⁴ Karens were later offered increased political representation, although they claimed that only a few ethnic leaders were “hand-picked” by the Burman leadership to symbolize ethnic representation in the BSPP government.¹⁴⁵

The military leaders introduced strong repressive measures to destroy the insurgents’ support base in the cities, but people living in the war zones suffered the heaviest casualties. In the 1960s, the *Tatmadaw* developed a new counterinsurgency strategy to cut the four major links between insurgents and local villages: food, funds, intelligence, and recruits. The Four Cuts campaign effectively prevented Karens from organizing and divided many communities in rebel-controlled areas. The campaign proved particularly damaging for the KNUP. Military movement was difficult, leaders were

¹⁴² Silverstein, “Ethnic Protest in Burma,” 88.

¹⁴³ Ethnic minority leaders have often described the program as the “Burman Way to Socialism.”

¹⁴⁴ The *Karen Morning Star* was closed down by Ne Win shortly after he seized power: see Martin Smith, *State of Fear: Censorship in Burma (Myanmar): An Article 19 Country Report*, edited by Article 19 staff (London: Article 19), 17.

¹⁴⁵ Taylor, *The State in Burma*, 319, 326-327; “Burma’s National Unity Problem and the 1974 Constitution,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 1:3 (1979), 243-244; Naw May Oo, “Ethnic Issues in the Politics of Burma: A Karen perspective,” paper presented at the Free Burma Conference ’97, University of California, Los Angeles, October 4-6, 1997. See <http://www.karen.org/history/docs/may.htm>.

isolated from their supporters, and the village network system was destroyed. Ultimately, this broke the KNUP as a political force.¹⁴⁶

According to the KNU, the determination of Karen soldiers and masses to win the war increased as conditions worsened in government-controlled areas.¹⁴⁷ A steady trickle of Karens fled to the hills and joined the revolution, although most soldiers were recruited in the eastern hills. Each university generation sent recruits to the front-line, although some of these young Karens later became disillusioned with KNU veterans who “seemed to have no policy at all other than dogged resistance in the hills, waiting for a hitherto inexplicably silent world to take issue with Burma over their fate, or for the Rangoon dictators to drop dead.”¹⁴⁸ Many educated Karens realized that Kawthoolei was not viable as a separate political or economic entity, and either returned to government-controlled Burma or settled in Thailand.

Ironically, Karen insurgents in the hitherto neglected eastern hill tracts directly benefited from the otherwise disastrous “Burmese Way to Socialism.” They were able to exploit the flourishing black market along the Thai border, thereby assuming geographical, economic, and political importance.¹⁴⁹ A staunchly nationalist, pro-Western faction grew up under the Eastern Division’s military commander, Bo Mya, who broke ties with the CPB-allied KNUP in Lower Burma.

Bo Mya’s influence on the KNU movement cannot be underestimated. His reputation among hill and Christian Karens bordered on the mythological and scathing attacks made against him in the Rangoon press only served to accentuate his enormous power.¹⁵⁰ Yet many Karens were concerned by his inflexible stance on religion and communism. Originally an animist, Bo Mya converted to Christianity when he married a Seventh Day Adventist. When the *Telakhon* Karen Buddhist millenarian movement took up arms against the *Tatmadaw* in 1967, it was quickly suppressed by the

¹⁴⁶ Smith, *Burma*, 263-264; Fredholm, *Burma: Ethnicity and Insurgency*, 109.

¹⁴⁷ “Karen History in the Karen National Union (KNU) Narrative.”

¹⁴⁸ Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 298-299.

¹⁴⁹ Lintner, *Burma in Revolt*, 180-181.

¹⁵⁰ See, for instance, *The Guardian* (Rangoon), September 18, 1987.

KNU, and its leaders executed on Bo Mya's orders.¹⁵¹ He further proclaimed that the Karens, "as a nation that believe in God, consider communism as Satan's tool." On January 4, 1966, Bo Mya effectively staged a coup d'état when KNUP officials and troops obeyed his order to leave the Eastern Division. Important KNUP leaders, including Mahn Ba Zan, later joined him and, in 1968, they formed the Karen National United Front (KNUF). Martin Smith has called this front "the halfway house on the road to the reformation of the KNU."¹⁵² The KNUF adopted the goal of "national democracy," which marked the beginning of an ideological polarization between the CPB and the ethnic insurgent parties.

At the Ninth KNU Congress in 1974, the need for a "vanguard party" was dropped altogether and the surviving KNUP remnants returned to the KNU fold: "The KNU is the sole organ for the development of the Karen national cause, the elite of the Karen national revolution. The KNU is the highest organ for all Karen people and represents all Karen people."¹⁵³ Did the KNU in fact represent all Karens? Many people, including Western observers and Karens themselves, would answer in the negative. Much of the history of the KNU was rewritten and senior KNU members have admitted that existing records of the period are "deeply flawed."¹⁵⁴ According to Falla, attempts to portray Karen society as fundamentally antipathetic to communism were "nonsense." The Karen historian Saw Moo Troo wrote that "Karens do not believe in common ownership." Yet swidden land farmed by Karen villagers was regarded as common property, as were schools, churches, and shrines. Many Karens felt that, in view of the *Tatmadaw's* renewed offensives, by adopting the KNU's anti-communist stance, they were unnecessarily isolating themselves. As one noted: "We should not hate the communists like this... right now we need friends... [The KNU leaders] want us to have the strong-man image, and it's awful."

¹⁵¹ Smith, *Burma*, 95. For a detailed study of the *Telakhon* as a politico-religious movement, see Stern, "Ariya and the Golden Book," 297-328.

¹⁵² Smith, *Burma*, 280, 286.

¹⁵³ KNU, *Policy and Rules and Regulations of the Karen National Union* (KNU Publishing, 1974), cited in Smith, *Burma*, 295.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *Burma*, 295. See, for instance, "Aims, Policy and Programme of the KNU," which glosses over the whole KNUP period. See <http://www.karen.org/knu/knuaim.htm>.

The KNU leadership, for its part, was more concerned with promoting a unified image. Colonel Marvel, a senior KNU member and anti-communist, later lamented: "It is a terrible thing to be disunited... we had all these new names and we have wasted so much time on these things."¹⁵⁵

The demise of Burman-ethnic minority fronts such as the NDUF and the National United Liberation Front (NULF) left the Karen leaders disillusioned over the prospects of ever working with an ethnic Burman party. The NULF, headed by U Nu, was formed as an alliance of his anti-Ne Win Parliamentary Democracy Party, the KNU and the NMSP. Although the NULF provided an effective counterbalance to CPB-dominated fronts like the NDUF for several years, Bo Mya later dismissed the whole experience as "hopeless."¹⁵⁶ The 1974 constitution "failed to satisfy the desires and hopes of the ethnic minorities who had been in revolt against Burmanization and the total integration of their historic territory into a single political unit."¹⁵⁷ In response, a new ethnic insurgent front was formed on May 10, 1976, at the new KNU headquarters in Manerplaw. The National Democratic Front (NDF) resolved to unite members in the common goal of overthrowing Ne Win's military dictatorship.

By this time, the KNU had firmly abandoned the leftist route. Perceiving a way to gain Western support for the KNU cause, Bo Mya presented himself as thoroughly capitalist. He had himself elected president of the KNU, replacing Mahn Ba Zan, and was also named chief-of-staff of the KNU's military wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).¹⁵⁸ The KNU thus entered the 1980s as a powerful force, under a strong leader. It remained to be seen, however, whether the majority of Karens and other members of the

¹⁵⁵ Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 105, 106, 308.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Bo Mya, January 12, 1987, cited in Smith, *Burma*, 273.

¹⁵⁷ Josef Silverstein, *Burma, Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 133; see also Martin Smith, "A State of Strife: The Indigenous Peoples of Burma," in R. H. Barnes, Andrew Gray, and Benedict Kingsbury (eds.), *Indigenous Peoples of Asia* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1995), 229.

¹⁵⁸ Western authorities pinpointed Mahn Ba Zahn as the KNU's most important left-wing sympathizer. See *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 25, 1976; *Observer* (London), May 16, 1976.

NDF would accept Bo Mya's strict Christian morals and uncompromising stance on communism.

Kawthoolei in the 1980s and Beyond: Can "Karen" Identity Survive the Fall of Manerplaw?

In 1984, the NDF members agreed to drop their demands for the right of secession.¹⁵⁹ Although this represented a considerable compromise for the KNU, most Karens realized that by adopting a federalist line and a common political platform, the NDF would be a more potent force. Thousands of students and other pro-democracy activists sought refuge in Kawthoolei following the 1988 military crackdowns. The BSPP was removed and the leaders of the new State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) agreed to hold a general election. In May 1990, the Burmese people voted overwhelmingly against the military dictatorship and in favor of democracy. Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won 392 of the 485 Parliamentary seats. In the face of the refusal of the military to relinquish power, by late 1990, NLD members began arriving at the KNU headquarters in Manerplaw, where they formed the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). The NDF had earlier established the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) with several Burman-majority groups. The NCGUB joined the DAB in a new front, the Democratic Front of Burma (DFB), with Bo Mya as president. The DFB's goal to establish a "Federal Union of Burma" was reiterated in the Manerplaw Agreement of July 1992.¹⁶⁰ The resistance symbolism of Manerplaw was clear, representing the Karen fight for autonomy as well as Burma's "second struggle for independence." Josef Silverstein writes that by the end of 1992 there were "two centers of politics in Burma," Rangoon and Manerplaw, and it was to the latter "capital" that the center was shifting.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ NDF, "Statement Issued by the Third Plenary Central Praesidium Meeting," October 30, 1984, in Smith, *Burma*, 386.

¹⁶⁰ "Manerplaw Agreement to establish a Federal Union of Burma", July 31, 1992. See <http://www.karen.org/history/docs/mnladoc.htm>.

¹⁶¹ Josef Silverstein, "The Civil War, the Minorities and Burma's New Politics," in Peter Carey (ed.), *Burma: The Challenge of Change*, 129.

In spite of its newly acquired recognition in both domestic and international political arenas, the KNU failed to accommodate the political aspirations of all Karens. KNU leaders in Kawthoolei did not participate in the 1988 demonstrations, which they viewed as a struggle between Burmans. Bo Mya's initial reaction to the mass protests was cautious: "The recent uprisings were good for the people, but we cannot yet say it will be directly beneficial to the revolutionaries."¹⁶² The KNU leadership was mistrustful of the Burman-majority parties and did not support the policies of the NLD until much later in the late 1990s, when many Karens had already rejected the KNU's form of militant nationalism.

The *Tatmadaw* stepped up its "four cuts" campaigns after 1988 and intensive political pressure was exerted on the Karen population in the lower delta when the *Tatmadaw* failed to defeat the KNU and KNLA in the eastern hills.¹⁶³ Many Karens in government-controlled areas felt that the non-violent campaign of the NLD had the best chance of effecting nationwide change.¹⁶⁴ In 1990, only one Karen in the whole of Burma was elected on a "Karen nationalist" ticket (representing the Karen State National Organization).¹⁶⁵ Hundreds of Karen elders and leaders were arrested or interrogated, including Mahn Myunt Maung, the Secretary of the Union Karen League (UKL).¹⁶⁶ Although there are no figures available to indicate the strength of the UKL, it had the advantage over the KNU of being a legal organization through which Karens could express their political identity. Mahn Myunt Maung nonetheless escaped into KNU territory in 1992 following his release from detention.¹⁶⁷ The

¹⁶² *Asiaweek*, September 2, 1988.

¹⁶³ Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 1988* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1988), 152-153.

¹⁶⁴ Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under the Military Rule* (London: Zed Books, 2001), 65.

¹⁶⁵ Martin Smith in collaboration with Annie Allsebrook, *Ethnic Groups in Burma: Development, Democracy and Human Rights*, Human rights services no. 8 (London: Anti-Slavery International, 1994), 45, 127.

¹⁶⁶ The urban-based UKL, which had been affiliated with the AFPFL in the 1950s, was one of only ten recognized political parties in 1996: Smith, *Burma*, 429, 443.

¹⁶⁷ Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma*, 45-46.

Karens were thus frozen out of the political process and many found the alternative offered by the KNU to be inadequate.

Although the KNU claimed to represent all Karens regardless of political, linguistic, or religious affiliation, it continued to be dominated by a small group of militant Sgaw Christians and, increasingly, by Bo Mya himself. The effects of the KNU's abrupt shift to the right under Bo Mya revealed both the strengths and weaknesses of the Karen nationalist movement. Under his leadership, the KNU successfully generated a coherent sense of identity among diverse Karen groups in the eastern hills. Bo Mya's military successes and virulent anti-communism also relieved Thai fears about their undefended Western border. The Thai government consequently gave tacit support to the KNU, but Bo Mya's tough leadership also meant that less public dissension was permitted.

There was evidence of growing estrangement within the KNU leadership from the mid-1980s onwards. Few Central Committee (CC) members supported Bo Mya when he rejected the NDF's attempts to reach political and military accommodation with the CPB.¹⁶⁸ They felt that the KNU desperately needed the additional support that an agreement with the CPB could provide. Bo Mya's authoritarian style of leadership also contributed to the lack of democratic discussion in KNU-controlled areas. Thus, in 1990, when Burmese citizens were voting in general elections for the first time since the military takeover, the Karens had not held a Congress in over fifteen years.

The lack of consultation on key political and military issues concerned not only KNU veterans, but also a younger generation of university-educated Karens, who arrived from the government-controlled delta only to find a similar regime in control of Kawthoolei. In 1984, in recognition of the aging KNU leadership, seventeen younger officials were appointed as "candidate" CC members to be trained as the next generation's administrators.¹⁶⁹ By this time, however, many young urban Karens had either returned to Rangoon or moved to Thailand. These Karens wanted to fight an offensive, guerilla-style campaign, and were frustrated by Bo Mya's strategy of defending major strongholds. Mostly, they were

¹⁶⁸ Fredholm, *Burma: Ethnicity and Insurgency*, 116.

¹⁶⁹ Smith, *Burma*, 392.

unwilling to spend another fifty years in the jungle, fighting for a state they feared might never be recognized.¹⁷⁰ Despite the lack of younger Karens in leadership positions and inter-generational clashes over military strategy, the KNU nonetheless continued to refer to the struggle as the “Father-to-Son” war.¹⁷¹ Though unable to appease these disillusioned Karen youths, the older KNU leaders tried to extend this notion of “family” ties to reach various Karen groups across geographical, political, and socio-economic lines.

The KNU’s other major weakness was its inability to regain support in the delta where the majority of Karens actually lived.¹⁷² Several attempted rebellions failed, in part because the Delta Karens could not realistically oppose the *Tatmadaw* given their location and mixed population. Freedom of movement was severely restricted under the regime and many anti-government protesters were arrested or killed. The KNU leaders therefore remained caught between two images of Karen identity — hill tribe insurgents and disaffected urbanites. They wanted educated Karens as well as the Burmese and international communities to recognize them as a legitimate government. Yet they could not afford to alienate themselves from the peasant population in the eastern hills, where most of the fighting occurred.¹⁷³

Bo Mya focused on maintaining KNU rule in the eastern hills. Here, the idea of the Karen “nation-state” was kept alive through a network of KNU administrative offices, hospitals, and schools serving seven districts. A clear sense of ethnic identity and purpose was maintained in KNU villages and camps, where life was “punctuated with a full litany of colorful nationalist days and celebrations.”¹⁷⁴ Karen leaders encouraged the growth of grass-roots organizations. The Karen Youth Organization (KYO) was reformed

¹⁷⁰ Gravers, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 263-264.

¹⁷¹ Martin Smith, “Burma and World War II,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 13:4 (1987), 6.

¹⁷² Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 54; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 8, 1982; *Bangkok Post*, March 31, 1983.

¹⁷³ Martin MacDonald, *Kawthoolei Dreams, Malaria Nights: Burma’s Civil War* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1999), 51.

¹⁷⁴ Martin Smith, “A State of Strife: The Indigenous Peoples of Burma,” in R. H. Barnes, Andrew Gray and Benedict Kinsbury (eds.) *Indigenous Peoples of Asia* (Ann Arbor, Association for Asian Studies, 1995), 238.

in 1984 and Bo Mya's wife, Tharamu La Pho, headed the Karen Women's Organization (KWO).¹⁷⁵ The KNU's vision of a Karen society stood in direct contrast with that of the military regime in the delta, where public expressions of Karen language and culture were fast disappearing as a result of the Burmese government's "nationalization" programs.

The fortunes of the KNU largely depended on how its leaders negotiated new challenges in the 1990s. In early 1992, the Burmese military launched a massive offensive against the Karen insurgents.¹⁷⁶ The Karens held their base at Mancrplaw and SLORC abruptly called off the offensive in the Karen State "to expedite the attainment of amnesty among all races for national unity with a view to strengthening national solidarity."¹⁷⁷ SLORC announced that the "eight major races" of Burma could never constitute the basis for relative autonomy within the Union.¹⁷⁸ Instead, they identified 135 ethnic groups living in Burma and vowed to grant local autonomy even to smaller ethnic groups living in areas dominated by larger groups.¹⁷⁹ Observers interpreted this as a deliberate attempt to weaken larger ethnic insurgent parties such as the KNU. The category "Karen" (or *Kayin* in Burmese) was split into several smaller groups: Sgaw, Pwo, Kayah, Bwe, Kayan, Bre, Pao, and some other minor groups and sub-groups.¹⁸⁰ The KNU leaders found it increasingly difficult to promote a sense of pan-Karen solidarity among the proliferating Karen groups. How could they maintain their identity as the regime effectively diluted the meaning of the category "Karen"?

After the collapse of the CPB in 1989, a number of ceasefires were concluded between SLORC and various ethnic insurgent groups, resulting in the slow disintegration of such anti-government

¹⁷⁵ Pippa Curwen, "The Kawthoolei Women's Organisation," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 13:4 (1989), 32-33.

¹⁷⁶ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 16, 1995; Petry, *The Sword of the Spirit*, 164; MacDonald, *Kawthoolei Dreams*, 5.

¹⁷⁷ *Working People's Daily* (Rangoon), April 29, 1992, in Josef Silverstein, "The Civil War, the Minorities and Burma's New Politics", in Carey (ed.), *Burma: The Challenge of Change*, 129.

¹⁷⁸ Gravers, "The Karen Making of a Nation," 240.

¹⁷⁹ Smith, "A State of Strife," 231.

¹⁸⁰ Gravers, "The Karen Making of a Nation," 240-241.

alliances as the NDF and the DAB. SLORC was then able to devote more of its considerable military resources against the Karens in Kawthoolei.¹⁸¹ Military analysts suggested that, since declaring a unilateral ceasefire in April 1992, Burmese soldiers were simply waiting for an opportunity to strike when the Karens were weak.¹⁸² Such an occasion presented itself in late 1994, when internal friction within the KNU came to the fore. Although Bo Mya and the KNU leaders resisted negotiation with the Burmese government, many Buddhist Karens were willing to “return to the legal fold” if that meant an end to the fighting.

Prior to the 1990s, there were few reported incidents of religious tension in Kawthoolei. The KNU leaders nonetheless struggled to counter the impression that theirs was a purely Christian rebellion. Bo Mya was said to have risen above the sectarian divide to unify the Karen people: “Among the Karens and people in general, there are various religious beliefs. According to [KNU] political belief there must be freedom for all religions and it is important for members of different religions to have respect for one another and maintain unity.”¹⁸³ KNU leaders had always considered the right to religious freedom as a key demand in their struggle and in 1961 had opposed the constitutional amendment to make Buddhism the official religion of Burma. Buddhist and Christian Karens alike were concerned by the development of a Marxist-influenced, anti-religious movement within the KNUP in the mid-1950s.¹⁸⁴ Buddhist temples and shrines could be found in many villages throughout Kawthoolei. It seemed, then, that the KNU leadership did indeed promote religious tolerance.

¹⁸¹ Ananda Rajah, “Contemporary Developments in Kawthoolei: The Karen and Conflict Resolution in Burma,” *Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter* 19 (December 1992). See <http://www.nectec.or.th/thai-yunnan/>.

¹⁸² *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 16, 1995.

¹⁸³ “President General Bo Mya’s Speech at 40th Anniversary Day Celebration of Karen revolution,” *Karen National Union (K.N.U.) Bulletin: A News Organ of the Karen National Movement (Burma)* (Kawthoolei: Central Organisation Department, KNU), no. 19 (June 1989), 3.

¹⁸⁴ Smith, *Burma*, 173-174.

Bo Mya's pronouncements nevertheless increasingly came to express Christian sentiment.¹⁸⁵ The KNU judicial system, which had been in place since 1955, reflected a distinctly Christian view of morality and there were strict prohibitions against alcohol and pre-marital sex in Kawthoolei. Moreover, Christianity had a strong influence amongst the senior KNU leadership. Most Central Committee members were Baptists, although Bo Mya himself was a Seventh Day Adventist. In 1988, the one Buddhist general in the KNU leadership converted to Christianity. The situation was quite different at the village or township level, where many officials were Buddhists or animists. This distinction was most apparent in the military, where Buddhist recruits were the majority.¹⁸⁶

It was in part the continuing failure of the KNU to represent all Karen groups that led to the crisis of 1995 and the fall of Manerplaw. For nearly fifty years, Christian and Buddhist Karens had been fighting side by side against the Burmese army. During the Burmese offensive of 1992, however, hundreds of Buddhist Karen soldiers were killed or wounded. Many Buddhist Karens wanted to send their sons to temples, where they would learn to be monks and not fighters. The KNU, however, also expected Karen children to "serve the revolution." Reports suggest that children as young as thirteen were sent to military training.¹⁸⁷ Although most Karens were educated in village schools, some senior KNU officials sent their children to school in Rangoon so they could get a "proper" (that is, recognized) education, even though this meant speaking Burmese and keeping a low ("Karen") profile to avoid persecution.¹⁸⁸ Buddhist and other Karens resented this misuse of revolutionary funds.

It also became apparent that some KNLA Brigades enjoyed higher levels of prosperity than did others. The stronger units operated along the Thai border and controlled the lucrative trading bases. The smaller Brigades suffered not only economic but also

¹⁸⁵ Bo Mya had said that the Karens should "spread the good news throughout Burma": "An Interview with General Bo Mya, President of the Karen National Union, Chair of the Democratic Alliance of Burma," February 1992, cited in Petry, *The Sword of the Spirit*, 205.

¹⁸⁶ Smith, *Burma*, 393.

¹⁸⁷ Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew*, 368.

¹⁸⁸ MacDonald, *Kawthoolei Dreams*, 67-68.

military losses. Their predominantly Buddhist front line units were deep inside Burma, where Karen and Burmese troops were most likely to clash. Although these Karens suffered great hardships at the hands of the *Tatmadaw*, they also became disillusioned with what they saw as “warlordism” among the KNU leadership.¹⁸⁹ Front-line troops in the Paan area complained of anti-Buddhist discrimination by local Christian officers. They further alleged that the KNU was committing human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions, forced labor and conscription of child soldiers.¹⁹⁰ These Karens had witnessed corrupt leaders taxing the border trade and depleting forests while they remained poor and terrorized by the *Tatmadaw*.¹⁹¹ Ultimately, some of these Karens decided to side with their traditional Burman enemy, rather than with their KNU-KNLA superiors.

Antagonisms within the Karen nationalist movement came to the surface in December 1994, when several hundred Buddhist KNLA soldiers mutinied against the predominantly Christian leadership.¹⁹² SLORC circulated anti-Christian propaganda among Karen villages and refugee camps in Thailand, inviting Buddhists to return to Burma and disarm Christian Karens.¹⁹³ The mutineers reorganized into the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and helped the *Tatmadaw* seize Manerplaw in January 1995. Extensive territory within the KNU’s northern strongholds was subsequently taken. Although SLORC has since been criticized for sending ethnic Karen recruits from the Burmese army to fight against KNU forces, it was clear to many observers that the KNU leaders bore at least some responsibility for the mutiny and ensuing conflict.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Smith, *Burma*, 395-396.

¹⁹⁰ Australia, Parliament, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *A Report on Human Rights and the Lack of Progress towards Democracy in Burma (Myanmar)* (Canberra: A.G.P.S., 1995), 61-63.

¹⁹¹ See, for instance, *Bangkok Post*, May 1, 1995.

¹⁹² Gravers, “The Karen Making of a Nation,” 264.

¹⁹³ “Translated Letter from Burma (DKBA) from Sayadaw U Thu Za Na and Myae Kyi Ngu,” January 2, 1995. See <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/54/149.html>.

¹⁹⁴ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 18, 1995; Australia, *A Report on the Lack of Human Rights*, 61-63.

The events of early 1995 were also partly the result of Thailand's controversial policy of "constructive engagement" with Rangoon.¹⁹⁵ Since 1989, the improvement of bilateral relations between Thailand and Burma had had a debilitating effect on the KNU, economically, militarily, and politically. As the *Tatmadaw* recaptured areas along the border, the military leaders were able to undermine the financial viability of the KNU by reaching trade agreements with the Thai army. In 1989, KNLA units were caught in a pincer when the Thai authorities overlooked a series of border violations by Burmese troops.¹⁹⁶ The French and American governments also had vested economic interests in the region and were not sympathetic when, in March 1995, the KNU attacked the Unocal-Total pipeline, killing five oil company workers. Such "terrorist" attacks only served to reinforce the image of the KNU as a gang of undisciplined, violent, and desperate rebels.¹⁹⁷ In March 1995, observers estimated that there were 80,000 Karen refugees in Thailand, some 8,000 of whom had arrived since the attack on Manerplaw in January.¹⁹⁸ While many Karens were fleeing Burma because of the fighting, there is evidence to suggest that some Karen refugees had become disillusioned with Bo Mya's leadership.

Talks held between KNU and SLORC representatives in late 1995 and early 1996 ended in failure when Bo Mya set a letter of rejection to Rangoon on December 31, 1996. However, a number of Karen breakaway factions opted to sign ceasefires with the government rather than continue fighting. Perhaps the most important of these was led by the KNU Forestry Minister Padoh Aung San, who publicly denounced his former party in the government-sponsored press.¹⁹⁹ His surrender caused other KNU CC members to leave the party and take refuge in Thailand. One senior leader privately admitted to Martin Smith:

¹⁹⁵ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 16, 1995.

¹⁹⁶ *Bangkok Post*, various editions from March 1989; Rajah, "Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Nation-state," 116-117.

¹⁹⁷ Smith, *Burma*, 448.

¹⁹⁸ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 16, 1995.

¹⁹⁹ *The New Light of Myanmar*, April 21, 1998.

It seems like in 1949 we bought a one-way ticket. Either victory or we die. That is Saw Ba U Gyi's Four Principles, and that is the way I have thought all these years. But now I have learned that there is a new way to lose. We can be defeated by our own people.²⁰⁰

Not all who disagreed with the KNU leadership surrendered. In 1997, a Karen sect was formed in an area that had previously been under KNU control. "God's Army" (*Kaser Doh*) showed many millennial characteristics, although unlike the *Telakhon* it was nominally a Christian movement. KNU leaders denounced the followers as "heretics," but they were probably more concerned about the publicity the movement received. The young leaders of God's Army were twin brothers, Johnny Htoo and Luther. The image of these children smoking cheroots and firing off rounds from their assault rifles angered veteran KNU leaders, not least because the twins were the subject of so much media attention.²⁰¹ Early in 2000, God's Army soldiers took five hundred patients and staff hostage in a hospital in the Thai town of Ratchaburi, much to Thai anger. The Thai authorities, alarmed about the fragile situation on the border, pressured the KNU to negotiate with the junta. Johnny Htoo and Luther have since surrendered, but the KNU leaders still refuse to sign a ceasefire agreement.

The recent KNU leadership reshuffle can be seen as a deliberate attempt to solidify internal support and present a more unified view to the international community. On January 27, 2000, Bo Mya stepped down as KNU president and delegates to the Twelfth KNU Congress elected a civilian, Saw Ba Thin, as his successor. The KNU set about "wooing" splinter groups such as the DKBA, by installing a devout Buddhist and former monk, Saw Satila, as head of the Religious Affairs Department. Senior KNU officers have also acknowledged that they have been "weak in exercising collective leadership" in the past, and a new-look

²⁰⁰ Smith, *Burma*, 450.

²⁰¹ See, for instance, Terry McCarthy, "God's Army," *Time*, February 7, 2000, 36-37; "God's Army," *Foreign Correspondent* (Sydney: ABC), February 8, 2000.

executive committee includes several younger members in high-ranking positions.²⁰²

Many observers believe the KNU has entered a new phase under Saw Ba Thin's leadership. His "politics-before-military" policy is considered more flexible than Bo Mya's military strongman image, even though Ba Thin has also "vowed to fight the Burmese regime to the bitter end to save the Karen's national identity and preserve their freedom."²⁰³ Saw Ba Thin apparently recognizes the need for the KNU to seek reconciliation with its own people.

Like in any family, differences of opinion and arguments will arise from time to time. But this does not mean that a family is split. It's a natural thing and it is to be expected...After all, they are Karens like us who are suffering under oppressive Burmese rulers. We must convince them, make them understand, and try to win them back.²⁰⁴

His statements nevertheless reveal an enduring ambiguity in KNU policy that can be traced all the way back to the late 1880s. The "fathers of Karen nationalism" are still struggling to convince the Karen "family" that their construction of Karen identity is the only one to which all Karens should give assent.

Conclusion

Since Karen nationalist sentiment was first articulated in the late 1880s, there has been a marked tendency for Karen elites to promote fixed notions of ethnicity and identity. KNU leaders have successfully highlighted the common Karen experience of oppression under the Burmans. In other respects, however, KNU leaders have been reluctant to alter their conceptualization of

²⁰² Aung Zaw and Moe Gyo, "The New Face of the KNU," *The Irrawaddy* 8:2 (February 2000). See <http://www.irrawaddy.org>.

²⁰³ *Bangkok Post*, March 12, 2000. Many people were surprised when Saw Ba Thin failed to attend the Karen Revolution Day celebrations. Some suggested his absence was intended to emphasize his "politics-before-military policy" because the ceremony usually stresses military goals. See, *Bangkok Post*, February 1, 2000.

²⁰⁴ *Bangkok Post*, March 12, 2000.

“Karen-ness.” They continue to accentuate those aspects of Karen identity — language, culture, and religion — that at once distinguish the Karen from other ethnic groups but also highlight differences within the Karen community. In pursuit of their political goal of self-determination, the KNU leaders have alienated large segments of the Karen population who have diverse religious beliefs, social customs, and language as well as differing political and ideological objectives.

The KNU’s conceptualization of Karen identity has become less representative over time. Under the colonial administration, Karen elites were able to secure political representation and cultural safeguards for the uneducated and geographically dispersed Karen masses. When the KNU assumed control over the Karen nationalist movement in the late 1940s, the construction of a Karen identity based on cultural distinctiveness was reinforced by a militant nationalism marked by separatist tendencies. The KNU rejected the offer of a small Karen state within a federated Burma, opting instead to continue its struggle outside mainstream Burmese politics. As a consequence, the Karen nationalist leaders lost their ability to influence the process of building new political institutions. After independence, successive domestic governments promoted alternative forms of national identification that downplayed ethnic divisions. Ethnic minorities were inevitably underrepresented in Burmese (Burman) political and cultural institutions, but many Karens found the alternative identity offered by the KNU equally restrictive.

Despite its rhetoric, the KNU has refused to recognize diverse expressions of Karen political and cultural identity. In many respects, the fall of Manerplaw was the culmination of years of repression, during which the KNU leaders struggled to retain control over the Karen nationalist movement. Saw Ba U Gyi publicly appeared to accommodate the wishes of his opponents but secretly moved to extend KNU control throughout Karen areas. The KNU’s attempts to improve its relations with other insurgent groups resulted in several failed alliances, while ideological divisions between competing Karen elites threatened to destroy the Karen nationalist movement from within. Under Bo Mya’s leadership, the ideal of a Karen nation-state was kept alive in the eastern hills. Life in Kawthoolci was nonetheless difficult for many Karens. The Burmese military applied greater pressure on the Karens to “return to the legal

fold,” to the point where the KNU and KNLA could no longer provide protection for the Karen people. The poor, predominantly Buddhist Karen soldiers could no longer identify with the corrupt Christian KNU leadership, and a significant number of Karens preferred to take their chances with “the big SLORC” or the NLD, rather than continue fighting.

The future of the Karen resistance and Karen political identity remains in doubt. Today, the KNU is far from unified, and in abandoning Manerplaw it has also lost the political base necessary for an effective revolutionary nationalist movement. In its present form, the KNU might more accurately be described as a small, though effective, mobile guerrilla force. The Karen population is now more widely dispersed than ever; even senior KNU leaders have been forced to relocate to Thailand. It seems increasingly likely that younger generations of Karens will abandon revolutionary aims in favor of finding accommodation with pro-democracy leaders. Burma’s Southeast Asian neighbors and the international community cannot afford to recognize a Karen separatist identity. It is often said of guerilla warfare that if your enemy is not winning the war, you are not losing it. This truism does not apply to the Karen. They are losing, and one must ask: How many times can they lose before they seek an alternative future?

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