

# **Karen Stories of Creation**

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## **Introduction**

Before this I never gave much thought to Karen Theology, and I did not understand very clearly what the term might mean. My lack of understanding, in fact, led me to disparage the traditional theology of my own tribe. It caused me to misunderstand the original beliefs of our ancestors.

During the hot season breaks of 1998 and 1999 (March and April) a number of young Karen seminarians, studying in Thai-language seminaries in Bangkok or Chiang Mai, joined with me to study our traditional Karen beliefs, culture, and social organization as well as the history of our Karen churches. During this study they also had to spend time learning to read and write Karen more fluently. From our study, our hearts and minds have been opened as we came to know the actual theological beliefs of the Karen people. We discovered how precious those beliefs are, and we feel a deep urge to preserve the beliefs of our people. In addition to all of this, I personally have come to realize that my Christian beliefs are one with the original beliefs of the Karen. We can agree in almost everything, and our differences are very few.

Among our many beliefs, we Karen also have creation stories and an understanding of creation that is very similar to that of the Christian faith. I feel motivated to write on this topic of creation stories so that Karens, both Christian and non-Christian, will know that we share one understanding about God and about God's creation. The original Karen concept of creation is that everything in this universe does not come about on its own. Everything has come about through God's plan and work, and everything is His handiwork. Knowing the creation stories of the Karen and what our ancestors believed traditionally demonstrates that all of us together worship the one God.

All of the resources I've used and interviews I've conducted with both Christians and non-Christians prove that the Karen people have a concept of God who is the creator of everything in this universe. The greatest difficulty I've faced in discovering the original beliefs of the Karen concerning God and creation is that traditional Karen don't have people who write down their beliefs. We have to rely on Christian writers, but for the most part it is clear that these Christian writers have spent a lot of time with the non-Christian Karen and worked with them. Through their writings we can get new insights into what the traditional Karen people actually believe about God and creation. In fact, there are enough similarities between us that it is easy for Christians to share Christ with traditional Karen, because they already have the basic concepts they need to understand Christ. Sharing becomes difficult only when traditional Karens mix their beliefs with those of other religions. Then it is difficult to bring Christ to them. Even so, however, when we interview those who are influenced by other religions, we can still see that they have a concept of God as creator.

I know that most Karen people at present do not know the original beliefs of our tribe and do not care about them. This is the way that may lead our tribe to perish. So, I want to write on this theme to share my concern with all Karen. I hope that this may encourage the Karen people to awaken and preserve our own beliefs.

## **History of the Karen**

The Karen people have a history that mixes Christian with traditional materials. While modern historians have largely rejected this history, it is still worth telling here. Many of us still believe that it is true. That history states that the Karen is a tribe that has descended from Noah's son, Shem, and were originally

located in modern-day Mesopotamia. According to this history, the Karen people migrated away from Mesopotamia before Abraham left there and before Jacob and Isaac were born.<sup>1</sup> Hser Ti states that the Karen people moved from Babylon in 2234 BC and arrived in Mongolia in 2194 BC. They then departed from Mongolia in 2017 BC and arrived in Turkistan in 2013 BC. Again in 1866 BC, they moved from there and reached Tibet in 1864 BC. After a period of 476 years they left Tibet in 1388 BC and arrived in Yunnan, southern China in 1385 BC. There they divided themselves into two groups for the continuation of their wanderings. The first group contained 99 families and they left Yunnan in 1128 BC and arrived in Burma in 1125 BC. The second group contained 33 families, their departure from Yunnan was in 741 BC, and they arrived in Burma in 739 BC.<sup>2</sup>

Many historians hold that the Mon and the Karen once had a very close relationship. During the reign of the Burmese King Alaungpaya, Burma made war on the Mon and defeated them in battle. So, they fled and as they had good relations with Karen, they came to Karen to escape. When Burmese troops followed the Mon, the Karen became very concerned about the danger that they faced, and some of them left Burma and came to Thailand. The mass exodus of Karen people at that time was recorded as the greatest one in the history of the Karen. After that there were other reasons that caused Karens to move to Thailand. One of the greatest problems they faced was economic hardship. This and other problems weren't found just among the Karen. Other hill-tribes faced them as well.<sup>3</sup>

Some historians claim that the Karen actually entered modern-day Thailand before any of the Tai peoples arrived, although the Karen were few in number at first. The people who were already in Thailand when the Karen arrived were known as Lwa. Today, the Karen are the largest of the hill tribes living in Thailand. At first they settled in northern Thailand, but due to the many problems they had to face they soon became scattered over much of the country.

## The Karen People

The Karen people mostly love to stay in mountainous and forested places and want to stay by themselves, living calmly in and with the natural world. Karen homes are mostly made of wood and bamboo and the roofs are made of leaves, wood or bamboo. Karen men and boys traditionally wear the Karen shirt that we call the hse plow, red with stripes of other colors, and hse mo xo, brown with stripes of other colors. Karen girls and unmarried women wear a white long dress and married women wear black or blue seed blouses or embroidered blouses with red skirts. The middle of the skirt displays the python pattern. Ornaments for females include embroidered turbans, seed necklaces (red, yellow, and white), silver necklaces, and silver earrings.

The whole group of Karen tribes can be divided into four divisions, according to their dialectical differences. These are the Sgaw, Pwo, Bwe, and Tounghthu. The Sgaw and Pwo groups are the largest and most widely scattered. Each group of Karen has their own language which is very different from the rest to the extent that they do not understand one another easily. Sgaw Karen is the main language that almost every group can use. There are two Karen written languages, Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen. Each group has different cultures, but the differences are not great. The main elements of the cultures are the same.

Originally, all the Karen people held entirely to their own traditional religious practices, known as *aw xae*. Thra Kwaw Htoo, writing under the theme of "Tha Our Precious Heritage," states that the traditional *aw xae* Karen were a people who believed in the Only True God who is the Lord of heaven, earth and all creation. We know this because of the *tha* (traditional poems) that our ancestor left for their children as commandments. Even today, there is a group of Karen people in Burma who still preserve this kind of belief and continue to live according to the commandments of their ancestors and to worship the only true God.<sup>4</sup> The *aw xae* Karen of Thailand, however, today mostly do not live according to the old commandments. They do not know or understand very clearly the traditional teachings of their patriarchs.

Their worship is largely directed to the *thi ko mu xa*, the lords of spirit-beings and of heaven and earth, as well as other spirit-beings.

Thus, we can see that the Karen are a people with a long history and with traditions that go back many, many generations. They have a distinctive language and culture. The Karen also have a distinctive religious consciousness which includes a clear conception of God as creator.

## **The *Tha* & Karen Religious Consciousness**

The Karen do not have formal histories as such, and the only way we can discover the traditions and ancient culture of the Karen is through the *tha* which is a kind of oral literature. In ancient times there was a large quantity of *tha*. Marshall, in his study of the Karen people in Burma, writes that the *tha* were a "bard literature" comprising tales, legends, and mythical stories that were handed down from generation to generation for the instruction of later generations.<sup>5</sup> He writes,

A large proportion of these are in the nature of beast tales or fables, such as are found in India, Europe, and Africa. Some of the myths and legends are in the forms of verse and were formerly recited at length at funerals and on other festal occasions, or were sung to the accompaniment of the harp. There are also the epics containing the "Y'wa" legends. Finally, a considerable amount of wise instruction is contained in the numerous short sayings, proverbs, and riddles that have survived.<sup>6</sup>

We can see, then, that the *tha* are an important part of the life of the Karen people. They should not be separated from their *tha*. It is not worthy for them to be separated.

Than Bya, a learned Karen Christian clergyman, states that the Karen people are distinguished by the fact that they are a tribe that chants *tha*. He says that when one listens to the sound of Karen words and their voices as they chant the *tha* one hears a fluent, poetic language that takes on the nature of an epic. Than Bya claims that among those peoples who don't have their own written language, there are few that have access to a wealth of knowledge such as is found in the *tha*. Karen elders in the past were illiterate, but they were still learned men, speaking the oral, poetic language of the *tha*. Down to the present traditional Karen use the *tha* every time they celebrate a special occasion. They speak to one another, that is, in the language of *tha*. These *tha* contain wonderful and beautiful words, soft and tender words, good and true words. Those who read these *tha* don't lose wisdom; they get more wisdom. It was said that in the old days those adept in chanting the *tha* could continue their chants for seven days and seven nights and still not recite all the *tha* there were to recite. Whenever the Karen chanted their *tha*, they always began with an especially beautiful *tha* just as their ancestors taught them to do. The *tha* are the narrative sources for the Karen's understanding of God, His creation, the ancestry of the Karen, and their descendants down to the present. Traditional Karen greatly enjoy hearing about these things.<sup>7</sup>

The *tha* are very important to the Karen for several reasons. First, they are the precious, invaluable inheritance of the Karen people. Second, they contain and exemplify the beauty of Karen culture. Third, the *tha* tell us about our ancestors, their descendants, and our history. Fourth, the *tha* contain prophecies about future things. Fifth, they reveal the character, quality, and attitudes of the Karen people.<sup>8</sup> We can see, then, that our Karen ancestors use *tha* on every occasion and everywhere in their lives. The language of the *tha* was used by the wise elders of the people, women and men, as part of their daily language as well as in their teachings, stories, and riddles. They were used in worship and in the traditional ceremonies of *aw xae*. We can't understand how the Karen understand God or creation without using *tha*.

## **The Karen Understanding of God**

The *tha* show that from their beginnings the Karen have had a concept of God. Htoo Hla E, author of a collection of *tha* entitled *The Golden Book*, states that the *tha* contained in that collection were collected entirely from traditional Karens in the Karen Year 2673 (ca. 1934).<sup>9</sup> The *tha* that the Karen seminarians collected during the past hot season break (March-April 1999) were also taken mostly from interviews with traditional Karen. All of these *tha* describe the person of God, how God came to be, God's creative work, why God left creation and returned to heaven, and what God prophesied about His return.

The One True God of the Karen is known as Y'wa (pronounced u-wa with a short a sound). According to one *tha*, there is only one Y'wa, who is the real and true God. Even though people may claim that there are many gods, still the real and true God, Y'wa, is the one true God. Fate lies in his hands. He can never die. More than this, what other people know and worship as god are nothing more than the handiwork of Y'wa, the one real and true God. There is another *tha* which describes the becoming of Y'wa. It teaches that Y'wa has His becoming in and of Himself, just as the dew falls in and of itself. Y'wa was present at the very beginnings of the world. No one else created Him. He is above the world as the air and wind are above us. He will never sicken, never die. He is the everlasting One, and as such Y'wa is full of good things. Although this world may pass from age to age, Y'wa will never die.

In his book, *Karen History*, Saw Aung Hla summarizes the teachings of the *tha* as follows:

The elders say, dearest children, that Y'wa is not so far from us. But, because of the unfaithful and disobedience of human beings, we cannot see Y'wa anymore. The earth is His footstool and heaven is His throne. When we stay on this earth, Y'wa is looking down upon us quietly. Y'wa will never sicken, die, spoil, or be lost. He is everlasting, never wavers, and is unchangeable. He becomes by Himself. He does not depend on anything. He judges according to His will. He created everything. He has authority and power over everything. He is full of power, might, grace, love and mighty attributes. He can do everything. He is omnipotent, omniscience and omnipresent. He is Holy and He is the best of all. He is the only God."<sup>10</sup>

From all of this, we can see that the Karen is a tribe that has had a concept of God since its very beginning. We can also see that Y'wa, the Karen God, has attributes similar to those of the Christian God. The *tha* emphasize that He is above everything and the source of everything that exists. We see that the *tha* sometimes use images from the forest and mountains, such as the dew or the wind, to explain the attributes of Y'wa. One hears also a feeling of pride in Saw Aung Hla's words that it is the Karen who know who Y'wa is.

A term for Y'wa favored by Karen Christians is *ker sa y'wa*. Htoo Hla E mentions this title in *The Golden Book*.<sup>11</sup> The words *ker sa* are a term of respect and reverence which can be translated as "lord" or "Lord." Y'wa, we have already seen, means God. Thus, *ker sa y'wa* means the greatest, highest Lord, who is Lord of the earth and the heavens. He is the almighty God, the only true One God, who cannot be compared with other gods. It is unworthy to make such comparisons. If we go a step further, however, to examine the root meaning of the word *y'wa*, we find that it means something that is flowing, such as wind or water in a stream. In that sense *ker sa y'wa* can mean the "Flowing Lord." Y'wa is the Lord whose kindness, grace, and love flows for us always.

Y'wa is the Mighty, Undying God. Y'wa is the Flowing Lord. And Y'wa is the Lord of Creation.

## **The Karen Understanding of Creation**

As we stated above, aside from the *tha* it is impossible to discover Karen religious concepts. Those concepts are found only in the *tha* that our ancestors have chanted in the past. We face the same situation when we want to understand how the Karen viewed creation. It is through our study of the *tha* that our ancestors chanted that we also discover their faith and understanding about creation. The following is several sections of a *tha* that speaks about creation:

ywa keh ywa ter oh ker law ywa keh ywa ku taw pa law ywa keh ywa ter oh ter gar ywa keh ywa ku taw pa ma	God is God who does not remain unoccupied God is God who arranged and planned God is God who does not stay alone God is God who always planned
Tee ther bwaè ywa haw nay aw Keh taw weh ler kler ah paw Tee ther bwaè paw ywa haw nee Keh taw weh ler kler ah klee	God took the foam of water It becomes banyan's flower Foam of water God's taking It becomes a banyan's seed
Keh taw weh ler kler ah paw Thu law aw tee ther bwaè paw Keh taw weh ler kler ah klee Thu law aw ler tee waw wi Thu law aw tee ther bwaè paw Meh taw weh ler kler ah taw Thu law aw ler tee waw wi Meh taw weh ler kler ah ti	When it is become banyan's flower He planted it in the foam of water When it's become banyan's seed He planted it in a whirlpool Planted in the foam of water It became a kind of banyan Planted it in whirlpool It became a tree of banyan
Ywa tay per oo gar kler day Haw koe per oo aye saw nay ywa tay per oo gar kler sot Haw koe per oo aye soe aw	God made termite, crawled on banyan's branch Termite bite and brought the dust God made termite, crawled to tips of banyan Dust was brought by the termite
Haw koe ywa tho pgaw mat mat Ywa tho pgaw doh taw ter set Haw Koe wya tho pgaw mot mot Ywa tho pgaw doe taw ter sot	Earth was molded and slapped <sup>***</sup> by God Till it become still greater God molded and slapped <sup>***</sup> the earth quickly Till it become still greater
Haw Koe keh thaw ther bwaè paw May mer tha tay mer tha bgaw Haw Koe keh thaw ther bwaè pa May mer tha tay mer tha mar	The earth at first was only foam Who created it? who built it? The earth at first was only foam Who created it? who made it
Haw koe keh thaw ther bwaè paw May ler Ywa tay ler Ywa bgaw Haw koe keh thaw ther bwaè pa May ler ywa tay ler ywa mar	The earth at first was only foam Ywa created it. He built it The earth at first was only foam Ywa created it. He made it.

This *tha* shows us that after God became by Himself He did not live a free and easy life without doing anything. He planned how to create each thing. Our ancestors, thus, stated that before God created each thing, He thought, planned and fixed it permanently and exactly (precisely). The elders said that for His creative work, Y'wa sat to think till seven chairs were broken. He stood to think till seven pairs of shoes were worn out. He laid down to plan till seven beds were destroyed. After thinking and planning precisely, Y'wa took foam of water into the palm of His hand and shaped it with His fingers till it became a banyan seed, and He planted it in the middle of a whirlpool. Its seed sprouted and grew until it became a large tree, the banyan. After that, God created a termite and put it on a banyan tree. That termite went around over the tree and ate the bark and the tip. Then it came back and excreted in the crook of the banyan tree. Y'wa took

that excreta and molded it into a round shape , like a ball, and shaped it and it grew bigger and bigger till it became a great earth.

Yet another *tha* insists that once Y'wa created the earth as a round ball, He then put this earth in the universe and rotated it! The *tha* states,

Haw koe pler ree di maw keh	The earth is round spinning like a top
Hpo tha o hpo tha loh kwe	Like children playing with it all day long
Haw koe pler ree di sohkwaw	The earth is round and spins like a wheel
Hpo tha o hpo tha kwah kaw	Like children looking on all day long

The *maw keh* is a kind of nut that is thick, flat and round. It is the nut used in a game played by children as well as adults throughout Burma and in other parts of Asia. When the game is played, the *maw keh* nut turns like a top. A *sohkwaw* is a spinning wheel, and *haw koe pler* means the round earth, The word *ree* means turning round and round or spinning.<sup>12</sup> Thra Loo Shwe observes that,

Of all the Karen poetry, the one that tells the earth is round and rotates on its axis is the strangest one of all. The great scientists and astronomers came to know that the world is round and rotates on its axis only not more than 400 years ago. Yet, the Karen *tha* has told us that the earth is round and rotates, and this knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation among a wholly uneducated and illiterate people who lived in a very dark corner of the earth far away from civilization.<sup>13</sup>

If they knew about this Karen *tha* Galileo and Copernicus would probably turn over in their graves! We see here again how the Karen take everyday objects from the world around them—such as trees, termites, and nuts used in games—to express their understanding of Y'wa. God fits very easily and naturally into the way the Karen understand their world.

Yet, the Karen always returned to the power of Y'wa over His creation. There is a *tha* that states,

Haw koe ler pler may ywa tay	The earth of yore was made by God
Ywa thu ei thay thu leh thay	God could easily make it narrower or wider
Haw koe ler pler may ywa bgaw	The earth of yore was established by God
Ywa thu ei nyaw thu leh nyaw	God could easily make it narrower or wider

The *tha* affirms that in the very beginning God created the earth. He, thus, can make narrower or broader according to His own will. Y'wa, that is, rules and judges the earth.

Other *tha* shed still further light on God's relationship to creation. One of them explains,

Haw koe per oo aye rat law	Termite ate and arranged the earth
Toe klu ko tay ywa ko bgaw	Edolius tried to make it, God tried to form it
Toe klu tay tay ywa tay tay	Edolius made and God created
Teh toe klu keh taw ter thay	The work cannot be done just only by Edolius
Haw koe o di naw maw keh	When the earth was the size of a nut
Toe klu tay ywa pgaw mat mat	Edolius tried to built it, Y'wa gave it a slap
Haw koe naw ther be ah kee	When the earth was the size of round table
ywa ko tay toe klu ko ri	God tried to create and Edolius tried to cut.

This *tha* tells us know that when God created the world, He did not do it alone. He created Termite and Edolius first and used them as His helpers to create<sup>14</sup> the world. God used Termite to eat the branches and tips of the banyan and void feces used by Edolius to fashion the world. We can conclude from this *tha* that Y'wa is a God who is close to His creation and gave other beings an opportunity to take part in creation. The distinction between Creator and created is less clear for the Karen than it is in traditional Christian theology.

After God created the earth, He then turned to the creation of other things. The Karen have *tha* that describes how He set about creating those other things. The following *tha* is one illustration, telling about the creation of humanity:

When the earth was newly formed,  
It was without form and without void.  
When the earth was newly made,  
It was formless and empty.

When the earth was newly formed,  
Man was created by God first.  
When the earth that made at first,  
Two persons were the first things created.

God created humans before anything else.  
Gave them the names Naw and Saw.

God first created two human being,  
naming them Naw and Saw.

Everything that God created  
On this world is entirely perfect.  
God created everything  
Since the very beginning.

From this *tha* we learn several important things about the Karen understanding of creation. After God created the earth, there was no life of any kind, including plant life. So, it was very quiet, empty, and formless. God saw that this was not good, so He planned to create the living creatures and plants to beautify this world. For this cause, God needed someone to look after and take care of the earth and everything in it. So, God created two humans and gave them the names, Naw and Saw. Naw stands for female and Saw for male.

It is interesting to note that in this last *tha* there is no distinction between the creation of Man and of Woman. They were created at the same time with, apparently, the same status. Aung Hla in his book, *The Karen History*, provides another version, based on another *tha* and that has a suspiciously Christian ring to it. According to him, Y'wa created heaven and earth, and when the creation of heaven and earth was finished Y'wa created the sun, the moon, and the stars. When that was finished, He created humanity. He created man first and from the earth. Y'wa then created a woman by taking a rib out of the man and creating the woman. Then *pah sa ywa* (God, the Father) said, "In respect to my son and daughter, I love them so much, I will give them my great life." He took a little piece of His life, breathed into the nostril of the two persons and they came to life and were real human beings. The creation of life was finished.

Aung Hla goes on to describe how God then created food and drink. He created rice, horses, elephants, birds and every kind of animal. After that Y'wa said, "My son and daughter, your father will make and give you a garden. In the garden there will be seven kinds of trees bearing seven different kinds of fruits. Among the seven, one kind of fruit is not good to eat. Eat not of that fruit. If you eat of it, you will fall ill, grow old, and die. Do not eat it. All else that I have created, I give to you. Once in seven days I will visit you. All I have commanded, observe and do. Forget me not. Pray to me every morning and night."<sup>15</sup> Although this

version may or may not show Christian influence, there are still differences between it and the Christian understanding of creation, which will be described later in this paper.

The following *tha* continues the themes described by Aung Hla:

The earth of yore was set by God  
with food and drink He created it all  
The earth of yore God created  
Everything He gives is perfect  
All these things that God created  
Show us the greatness of His grace

Father will make a place for you  
Filled with perfect drink and food  
Seven kinds and sorts of trees  
seven different fruits there will be  
One kind of fruit is not for eating  
You will die when eating this

Everything that I create  
Everything that I have made  
All I have mentioned to you  
All I have given to you  
By yourself carefully eat  
Once a week I'll come to meet you.

Listen to my commandments  
Observe to my words well  
Be sure, don't forget me  
Don't fail to remember me  
Think of me every morning and night  
Pray to me every morning and night

Here, again, we see that Y'wa is a loving God but also a God who expects humanity to respond to His love in obedience. He creates all that humanity needs, but at the same time He sets limits and warnings. This last *tha* also explains the two ways that the Karen understand Y'wa and His creative powers. On the one hand, God is a perfect and a powerful God. As we've seen above, Y'wa is the one true God and has His Being from before the rest of creation. Y'wa is also, on the other hand, a kindly God, close to His creation. He cares for humanity.

## Genesis & Creation<sup>16</sup>

It will help us to understand the Karen stories of creation if we compare and contrast them to the stories found in Genesis. In Genesis 1:1, we can see that there was nothing before God has created the earth. In the very beginning, there was nothing in this universe, and God created the earth from nothing. After creating this earth, it was still formless and empty. Genesis 1:2 says that there was darkness over the earth that God created. There was no light. After that God created light, and God separated the light from darkness. God called the light, "day" and the darkness, "night". These acts comprised the first day of creation. It is not clear just how God created the earth itself, whether it was by His hand or word. But, it is clear that God created the light and darkness (day and night), by His word. The Bible says, "...God *said*...and there was..."(Gen. 1:3).

Genesis tells us that God did His work of creation in six days and describes for us exactly what God created on each day. Genesis 1:1 informs us that on the first day, God created earth and after that He created day and night (Gen. 1:1-5). The second day, God created the firmament, and He divided the waters which were

under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament (Gen. 1:6-8). The third day, God created land and seas, vegetation, rice, plants and trees that yield seed (Gen. 1:9-13). The fourth day, He created the sun, moon, and stars (Gen. 1:14-19). On the fifth day, living creatures in waters and birds flying above the earth were created (Gen. 1:20-23). On the sixth day, God created wild animals, livestock, all creatures that move along the ground, and all creeping things. Finally, God created man (Gen. 1:24-25). As soon as God finished His creation, He saw all that He had made was good. In Genesis the words "God saw that it was good" are repeated seven times, and the last time in Genesis 1:31 is special or different from the others. It says, "it was very good". It seems that as soon as God finished His work of creation, everything that he had created was holy, beautiful and lovely. Creation satisfied God, and He enjoyed it.

As Genesis describes God's work of creation, the things that we need to notice are as follows. First, when God began to create the earth, it seems it was dark and the earth was in deep water (at the bottom of water) (Gen. 1:1-2). It looks like water was there as soon as the earth was formed and it covered the earth. The earth that we called "land" where we are living now was exactly formed on the third day of creation. Another thing that we should notice is how God went about the work of creation. At some points it is not clear just how God went about creating the things He created, but in general we're told that God created everything by His word. But, He created humanity from earth (dust) and breathed life to their nostrils (Gen. 2:7). More than this, Genesis tells us that God created man in His own image, male and female He created them (Gen. 1:27-28). Moreover, it also tells us that man was created before woman and that God created woman in a slightly different manner from man, because He created her from a rib (not from many ribs) taken from man (Gen. 2:21-22).

From all of this, we know that God created everything with an exact and clear aim and purpose. He did not create things carelessly or haphazardly. God had exact goals or purposes for every aspect of creation. God created light to divide day and night (Gen. 1:1-5). He created the sun and moon to divide time, years, months, days and for separating the seasons (rainy, summer, and winter) (Gen. 1:14). He created grass for the food of animals, He created animals, fruit, rice, trees as food for human beings and for using in their work. He created man to rule and take care of everything on this earth. God loves humans, blesses them, trusts them, and gives them power and authority to rule over the rest of creation.

Another thing that we need to notice is that God created each thing in an orderly way, step by step. As the first step, He created that which does not have life such as the earth, heaven, firmament, seas, sun, moon, stars, light and darkness. In the second step, God created those things that have life but cannot move, including grass, rice and trees. With the third step, He created the creatures that have life and can move, such as birds, fish, wild animals, livestock, and creeping things. Finally, God created man who He kept in the highest position. He created humans in His own image and gave them life and souls, so they can move, work, provide themselves an education, and gain wisdom. God also gave them power and authority to rule and take care everything on this earth.

## **A Comparison of the Karen & the Biblical Stories of Creation**

Although we saw that some Karen *tha* sound very much like the Genesis story of creation, it is clear that there are some important differences between the Karen and biblical stories. This is shown through a comparison of the similarities and differences between Genesis and the *tha*. We'll look at the similarities first.

First, both creation stories involve water. Genesis 1:1 tells us that when God first created the earth, and before the earth (land) appeared, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the spirit of God was hovering over the waters. The Karen concept of creation also begins with water. There is a *tha* that says,

God took up foam  
It became a banyan's flower  
Foam was what God took up  
It became a banyan's seed

In other words, according to Karen tradition there was at first nothing besides water. To form the world, Y'wa took foam from the water and rubbed it on every side until it became a banyan seed.

Second, God created the earth. Genesis 1:1 states this clearly. A Karen *tha* says that,

When the earth was firstly formed  
It was void and without form  
When the earth was newly made  
It was formless and empty.

Third, everything on earth and heaven is made by God. Genesis 1:31-2:1 says that "God saw everything that He had made...Thus the heaven and the earth were finished, and all the host of them." The Karen elders' lore says,

"Everything God created  
On this world is all perfect  
God created everything  
Since the very beginning"

Fourth, man was made of dust (earth). In Genesis 2:7, it says, " And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground." Saw Aung Hla writes that the Karen elders' taught that, "He created man at first from the earth."<sup>17</sup>

Fifth, according to both Genesis and Karen poetic traditions, man was created before woman. This can be seen in Genesis 2:18 and 2:21-22. The Karen elders taught that Y'wa, " created man at first from the earth."<sup>18</sup>

Finally, in both cases, the woman was made from a rib taken from the man. We can see that fact in Genesis 2:22. Saw Aung Hla quotes Karen tradition as stating about Y'wa that, "He created a woman by taking a rib out of a man and created again woman."<sup>19</sup>

These six similarities between the Book of Genesis and the traditions of the Karen show that Karen thinking and the Bible reinforce each other in many ways. The traditional creation stories of the Karen are relevant to Karen churches. They form a bridge between Karen thinking and identity and biblical Christianity. These similarities seem so striking, in fact, that some wonder if they don't show that they were really taken from the Bible and then claimed as "traditional" stories of the Karen. But, there are important differences between Karen stories and Genesis that show that these old creation stories are not just taken from the Christian Bible. These differences include the following points:

First, the story of creation in Genesis 1 doesn't tell us anything about how God actually created the world. Karen *tha* do. They tell us clearly that God created the earth by taking the foam of water in the palm of His hands and rubbing it alternately till it became a banyan seed and planted it in the middle of a whirlpool. The seed grew to be a big banyan tree. After that, God created a termite and let it crawl around on the tree and eat the branches and tips. When the termite excreted in the crouch of the banyan, God took the feces and molded it to a round shape and then gave it quick slaps till the earth was completely formed.

Second, in Genesis, God created everything by himself, alone. The Karen elders say that He did not created things alone. He had co-workers that helped Him, such as the termite and the edolius. One *tha* states that, "Termite ate and arranged the earth. Edolius made it, God formed it."

Third, the story of creation in Genesis clearly tells us that after God created the earth, He created everything else before creating human beings. Humanity was His final creation. The Karen elders, on the other hand, say that after God created the heaven, sun, moon and stars, He created man first and the creation of everything else followed. One *tha* says,

When the earth was newly formed  
Man was created by God first  
When the earth was firstly made  
Two persons were first created.

Fourth, Genesis 1 and 2 tells us that God created the world in an exact order. The things that he made each day are clearly mentioned, step by step. There's no indication in the Karen *tha*, however, that God created the world in an orderly way. The *tha* just say generally that God created everything.

Finally, Genesis 2:7 tells us that God created man and breathed "the breath of life" into the man's nostrils. The woman received life only afterwards and indirectly through the man. It's interesting to note that Genesis 1:27 seems to be different from Genesis 2:7. There the man and the woman seem to have been created and given life at the same time. That's the way the Karen elders tell the story. According to them, Y'wa said, "In respect to my son and daughter, I love them. I will give them my greatlife." He took a little piece of His life, breathed into the nostrils of the two persons and they came to life and were real human beings. As we saw before, there are also *tha* that state that the woman was created from a rib of the man. Even so, it seems that they both gained life at the same time and in the same way.

## Theological Reflection

Karen theological reflection begins with the thought that the Karen people have had their own theology from the very beginning. Our theology gives attention to the creation of the world, and through the *tha* about creation we can know something of that theology.

First, Karen theology emphasizes the greatness of Y'wa, God who created everything in this universe, except for the primordial water that He used in creation. Second, we know that Y'wa is a God who plans carefully and fixes everything permanently and exactly before acting. Y'wa is the One who loves to do everything in order. Third, Y'wa is a good example to the people, because He is the One who loves to work hard. Y'wa does not love to live a free and easy life without anything to do. Fourth, Y'wa is a wise, clever God who loves to use small things to make bigger things. Y'wa, thus, is the One who loves to do things practically, not theoretically. Fifth, Y'wa is the One who loves cooperation. We see this when Y'wa had Termite and Eudolius join Him in actually creating the world. We should also remember that the Eudolius is the bird that the Karen consider to have the greatest wisdom.

If we ask how the Karen version of creation adds to our Christian idea of God the Creator, the most important point is that Y'wa was very close to the world He created. He created the world like a craftsman, using his hands instead of "the Word" as is the case in Genesis. He gave careful thought to how he wanted to create everything in the world. He worked closely with others. If we recall that the full name for Y'wa, *ker sa y'wa*, can mean the "flowing Lord," then we will see that God flows into creation, takes part in its life.

In my own life, I have felt that God is very close to me; and I think that other Karen Christians often have this same feeling. One reason we feel God's closeness and love so clearly may be our Karen heritage and our Karen *tha*. God is more a part of creation, not just the distant Creator. We still emphasize the holy greatness of God. That is never lost among the Karen. But the Karen are a hill people with a simple way of governing themselves, and so Karen power is close to us. Our rulers, our elders were traditionally our fathers, uncles, and even brothers. So, we feel that Karen "rulers" are close to us, just as Y'wa is close to us.

## Conclusion

If we look carefully with an unbiased minds into the *tha* and folk tales mentioned above, we will see that *tha* share certain essential ideas of the creation which are found in the biblical story. If we would make more use of our Karen heritage, our religious experience and understanding could be enriched. Our theologians, ministers, and teachers would be enabled to do more contextualized and indigenized

theological reflection. Our reflection would be more understandable and acceptable to Karen audiences, especially since we all share a common religious and culture heritage.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The 2000 AD Culture Committee, *Cultural Handbook* (Karen Baptist Convention, 1996), 21. [in Karen].

<sup>2</sup>Hser Ti, "God Does Great Things for Us (2)," *Rangoon Yearly Magazine* (1998), 92-93. [in Karen]

<sup>3</sup>Kajad Pai, Hill-tribes, chap. 4. [in Karen]

<sup>4</sup>Kwaw Htoo, *Home Magazine* 4 (1997), 67. [in Karen]

<sup>5</sup>Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (1992, reprint. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997), 33.

<sup>6</sup>Marshall, *Karen People*, 34.

<sup>7</sup>T. Than Bya, *The Origin and Culture of Karen*. [in Karen]

<sup>8</sup>Kwaw Htoo, "Tha, Our Invaluable Heritage," *P'hi P'gaw Magazine* 34, 4 (October-December 1997), 67. [in Karen]

<sup>9</sup>Htoo Hla E, ed., *The Golden Book* (1955, Reprint. Chiang Mai: Thailand Karen Baptist Convention, n.d.). [in Karen]

<sup>10</sup>Aung Hla, *The Karen History* (n.p., KE 2678 [1939]), 228.

<sup>11</sup>Htoo Hla E, *Golden Book*, 28-29.

<sup>\*\*</sup>"Shaped" would be an inaccurate translation of the Karen, *pgaw mat mat*, which means to slap with quick or rapid strokes. The Karen image is that after God shaped the world into a round ball, He then slapped the ball lightly and rapidly to make it expand.

<sup>12</sup>Loo Shwe, "The Karen People of Thailand and Christianity" (unpublished typescript, 1962), 6.

<sup>13</sup>Loo Shwe, "Karen People," 6.

<sup>14</sup>According to Marshall, "the *edolius paradiscus* is a black bird, a little smaller than a crow, with two long tail quills having tufts at the ends. Why this bird should have been given a part in the work of creation does not appear." Marshall, *The Karen People*, 212.

<sup>15</sup>Aung Hla, *The Karen History*, 228

<sup>16</sup>Based on *The Annotation of the Annotated Paragraph Bible: The Old Testament*, vol 1 *Genesis to Esther*, trans. D. A. W. Smith, 5th ed. (Rangoon: Baptist Board of Publication, 1956).

<sup>17</sup>Aung Hla, *The Karen History*, 210.

<sup>18</sup>Aung Hla, *The Karen History*, 210.

<sup>19</sup>Aung Hla, *The Karen History*, 210.