

HeRD #154 - Mike I: Karen Beginnings

In order to provide a bit of variety to HeRD, I've asked Dr. Mike Leming to guest HeRD the next three HeRDs. Mike is Professor of Sociology & Anthropology at St. Olaf College and visits Chiang Mai frequently. Thank you, Mike.

The Karen Baptist churches of Thailand have, from their beginning, been relatively independent from direct American spiritual influences. While their Burmese brothers and sisters were initially evangelized by the American Baptist missionaries in the 19th century, the Thai Karen received the gospel from Burmese Karen missionaries. The reason for this was that Thai borders were relatively closed to influence from white "farang" due to fears regarding colonialism. Therefore Karen churches from Burma sent Maw Klo, Shwe Mya, and Saw Kay as lay missionaries to Thailand.

The following statement in 1881 by Justus Vinton (American Baptist missionary leader) clearly indicates the American missionary "respect" accorded to the indigenous Burmese Karen church and its lay preachers. "Native preachers are brave when bravely lead but we must remember that they are to be used as the English government uses sepoys--under white officers. 49 good Karen preachers led by a wide awake aggressive missionary are worth more than 50 missionaries...but 50 native preachers alone would do little without guidance."

Despite this "support" given to the first three Karen missionaries sent to Thailand, more than 500 Thai Karen converted to Christianity in Lampang within a matter of a few days. A few weeks later the missionaries (none of whom were ordained) were forced to return to Burma in order to seek help in building the new Karen Christian community in Thailand. Significant in this story is the continuity that exists within the contemporary Thailand Karen Baptist churches. Even after 100 years, the Karen churches in Thailand remain self-directed, evangelistically-oriented, and strongly influenced by non-ordained leadership.

Source: Anders P. Hovemyr. *In Search of the Karen King*. University of Uppsala Press, 1989.

HeRD #155 - Mike II: Maung Htwe

When the first three Karen missionaries were sent to Thailand from the Burmese Karen Baptist churches they were lead by Maung Htwe, a "quack doctor, indulged in the black arts, charms, magic and in just about everything that caters to the needs of the superstitious" (U Zan, Karen historian, n.d.). Maung Htwe lead the Burmese churchmen because he knew well the area to which the missionaries would be traveling. Justus Vinton (American Baptist missionary leader) described Maung Htwe as "too vile for description but of consummate ability" and ordered that the Karen missionary party "not to allow him to remain an hour in their company." The Karen preachers disobeyed these orders because they viewed Maung Htwe's presence as more of a challenge than a problem and decided to work with and share their faith with Maung Htwe before preaching to the Karen of Thailand. As providence would have it, Maung Htwe became their first convert in Thailand.

Aware of Vinton's disapproval, Maung Htwe promised not to return to Burma until "by hosts of converts he shows God's seal of approval." After more than 500 Thai Karen converted to Christianity in Lampang, the missionaries were forced to return to Burma to seek pastoral help in building the new Karen Christian community in Thailand. Maung Htwe was left to care for the new converts. Justus Vinton lamented: "Worst of all they left the reprobate (Maung Htwe) in charge of Christ's tender lambs. Shame fills me when I think that the devil's man stuck to his post while Christ's men flinched at the moment of victory." But history redeemed Maung Htwe as the Karen of Thailand were experiencing their own Christian redemption. The Karen historian, U Zan (n.d.), describes the work of Maung Htwe in Lampang with these words: "Maung Htwe carried on his work of caring for the new converts as best as his lack of any training would permit. It was said that the services he conducted were just one long session of Bible reading. He just read verse after verse from chapter to chapter which ran into hours of back-breaking and sleepy duration. His flock told him to preach instead of going on the way he did. He said, 'Look here folds, I don't have the training and the qualifications of those teachers. I wouldn't know how to preach even if I

had wanted to. I know how you feel, but let me tell you this, -- I'm just like any one of you here. All I know is read a little, and that's just what I'm trying to do, banking heavily on your simple faith. I want to hold you all together only through your faith and not through any skill of mine."

A year later when six Karen pastors came to Lampang as reinforcements to continue the work among the Thai Karen, they found the Christian community had survived under the enduring care of Maung Htwe. Maung Htwe served and provided continuity for the Christian Karen community in Lampang for another 25 years until, in 1906, he finally returned to Burma and died--never having been fully recognized by the American Baptist Missionary Union in Burma.

Source: Anders P. Hovemyr. *In Search of the Karen King* . University of Uppsala Press, 1989.

HeRD #156 - Mike III: The Burma Rules & Karen Ordination

Burmese Baptist churches and their "daughter" churches in Thailand have long been governed by a set of rule widely known as the "Burma Rules." Among its regulations, are a set of stringent rules governing ordination. By these rules, only ordained pastors can serve communion and baptize believers. For the Karen churches pastors must be proven to be worthy of ordination. For this reason they often serve for many years before they are offered ordination and perhaps even longer before they accept this honor and responsibility. Furthermore, a church must be in need of an ordained pastor before ordination is offered to one serving as the pastor. Therefore if a "retired pastor" lives in the village and is able to serve communion and baptize believers, ordination is not a pressing need for a congregation and therefore will not be offered.

In my research on the Christian Karen of Musikee area (Chiang Mai Province, Amphur Mae Chaem), I discovered that in 1931 three families became converted to Christianity under the preaching of Thra (pastor) Baw Ney. These families became the nucleus for the first church which later spread to become the Musikee Area Association of Churches of the Karen Baptist Convention.

Pastor Baw Ney evangelized the entire area by foot preaching to the Karen of Musikee while the first church in Teemeagala was cared for in his absence by his first converts and his wife. Due to the stringent "Burma Rules" that required a church to be self- sufficient and the pastor to be married, the Teemeagala church did not become an official church until 1940 (a month after Baw Ney was married and officially appointed as pastor). Because Thra Baw Ney was not ordained until 1954, whenever there was a baptism or communion, an ordained minister had to be called from Chiang Rai--more than 200 Kilometers away. The first time a scheduled baptism was held in the Teemeagala church, and an ordained pastor from Chiang Rai was in attendance, 40 people were baptized in the river Musi Klor (or Mae Chaem River).

Pastor Baw Ney only consented to be ordained because he was strongly influenced by the American Baptist missionary A. Q. Van Benschoten, Jr. During a three week visit to the Musikee area, Van Benschoten insisted that Baw Ney receive ordination for the benefit of the Christians in the Musikee area. With the assistance of an ordained Karen Baptist pastor from Chiang Rai, Rev. Van Benschoten ordained Baw New in the Teemeagala church in 1954--23 years after he first came to Musikee as evangelist and pastor.

Today Rev. Baw Ney is 86 years old, the Teemeagala church has more than 300 members, and there are 31 Karen Baptist churches and hundreds of baptized Christians in the villages where Pastor Baw Ney preached during those early years. The present and second pastor of the Teemeagala church is Thra Baw Ney's son, Timothy. He has served since 1980 when his father "retired," but to this date he has yet to be ordained. In April of this year, Thra Timothy will receive ordination at the annual meeting of the Thailand Karen Baptist Convention.