



The rise of Christianity among the Karen

Cheerful Karen voices now charmed his ears. Every man, woman and child around him glowed with radiant welcome. How refreshingly different, he thought, from the usual aloofness of Burmese crowds to foreigners. A Karen woman who could speak Burmese explained something to the guide. "This is most interesting," the guide said. "These tribesmen think you may be a certain 'white brother' whom they as a people have been expecting from time immemorial!"

"How curious," replied the foreign diplomat. "Ask them what this 'white brother' is supposed to do when he arrives." The guide replied, "He's supposed to bring them a book just like one their forefathers lost long ago." They are asking with bated breath, "Hasn't he brought it?" "Ho! Ho!" the English man guffawed. "And who, pray tells, is the author of whose book has power to charm illiterate folk like these?" The guide explained, "They say the author is *Y'wa* - the supreme God."

This is how Don Richardson describes the arrival of the British to Burma in 1795 in his book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*. A team of English diplomats came to arbitrate a dispute between England and Burma. They saw this as a great opportunity for adding Burma to the British Empire. The Burmans living in Rangoon didn't really appreciate the new arrivals and looked at them with suspicion. In the remote hill-tribe villages where the Karen people lived, they received better treatment. Here they had a group of humble villagers literally begging them to come and rule. The British saw the excitement and curiosity of the Karens as a perfect opportunity for them to succeed with their plan.

In the hill-tribe villages, animist beliefs are common. The idea of spirits and their impact on people and nature influences all aspects of a villager's life. In the Karen folklore, on the other hand, we find that the concept of one true God is central. The story of "the Lost Book" has passed from generation to generation of Karens and they have waited for centuries for this 'white brother' to arrive. Many Karen villages had a "Bukhos." A "Bukhos" is a teacher who would represent *Y'wa*, and not the evil spirits and the demons. These prophets actually taught their people hymns, which preserved the concept of one true God, and kept the Karens from lapsing into the idolatry of Buddhism. Some hymns tell of *Y'wa's* eternal being, others about the creator, and still others as the omnipotent God. There are many parallels to stories in the Bible in these hymns. With all this spiritual awareness among them, the Karens kept waiting for their 'white brother' to arrive. And in 1817 an American Baptist missionary, Adoniram Judson, came to Burma.

When Adoniram Judson arrived in Rangoon, his goal was to spread the gospel among the Buddhists. He studied Burmese, dressed up like a teacher of monks, and went to the marketplace to preach. Unfortunately he didn't find much success in his mission. The Burmans didn't respond, and with only a few converts there weren't much to do for Mr. Judson. Disappointed and depressed, he decided to start the translation of the Bible into Burmese. If he had only understood the Karen hymns that people sang as they passed his house, he would have been encouraged. Since he didn't, there had to be another way of getting his attention directed toward these hill-tribe people.

One day a man named Ko Thah Byu came to Judson's door looking for a job. Ko Thah Byu

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was about to be sold into slavery in order to pay off a large debt. By giving him a job, Judson saw it as an opportunity to get access to the Karen people. Ko Thah Byu had a history of killing, and it was known that he had taken part in the murders of at least thirty people. The fact that he was middle-aged, seemed to be hopelessly inept, and had an unpredictable temper didn't stop Judson from teaching this unwilling student. And his patience produced results. After a while Ko Thah Byu started to change; he became eager to learn and gained the ability to read the Burmese Bible. His life changed as he opened up to the gospel. He ended up going to Tavoy to help start a mission station together with Rev. George D. Boardman in 1828. Ko Thah Byu was soon busy spreading the Gospel in the hill-tribe villages, confirming the story about the return of their 'white brother' and the 'Lost Book'. Some of the Karens went back to Tavoy with Ko Thah Byu to meet this 'white brother.' Rev. Boardman became the fulfillment of their prophecy, and many received the gospel and were baptized. Ko Thah Byu stayed with the villagers to teach them how to read and write. In 1833 he left for Rangoon to share the Gospel with his countrymen there.

From this time forward, Christianity spread quickly. A great revival started among the Karens. But not long thereafter, the Burmese government forbade the church to meet. Pastors faced torture and imprisonment, or were killed if they refused to stop their activities. The persecution of the Christian Church in Burma was severe back then and the persecution continues today. Despite all this, the Church in Burma survives and is still growing. Forty percent of the Karen people are Christians in spite of fifty years of war with the current military regime.

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