Appendix I. The Origin of the Karen: An “Official” History

The origin of the Karens

According to tradition the home-country of the Karens was the land called by them—‘Htee-Hseh-Meh-Ywa’ ‘Water pushes sand flows’. It means that it was a land that Sand Moves or Flows as a river—‘The River of Sand’. Perhaps it might be the Gobi desert, which is directly towards the north. That region is in Mongolia. Thus is seems that the Karens came from Mongolia, and they were a tribe of the Mongolian race. It was as such that the Karens were described by a great many historians as an off-shoot of the main race the Mongolian race.

The First migration of the Karens into Burma.

All western historians and the missionaries, working among the Karens had mentioned that the home of the Karens was in what (to the Karens) was known as Kaw-Si’ or the ‘Country-Si’ probably Sinkiang, a region in western China. That was before they came into Burma. The Chinese and the Shans have stated that the river Yangtse (which means the Yang river) came from the country of the Yang (the Yang or the Karen). This plainly shows that the Karens or the Yangs or the Carians had lived some where in the west of China, in the region where the Yangtse takes its source.

The Karens entered Burma along three routes-

1. The Mekong valley route.
2. The Irrawaddy valley route.
3. The Salween valley route.

1. The Mekong river rises in Tibet and flows through China down south through Laos. Cambodia and enters the Gulf of Thailand. Some history books mentioned that the Karens established cities and government in Chiang Mai, but they were overthrown by the Thais, and Karens moved into the mountains, to Mae Sariang and across the other side of the Salween.

2. The second migratory group followed along the valleys of the Shwe-li and the Irrawaddy. The Pwo Karens built the town of Prome (Pwo-Wai’—meaning the’ Pwo-town). Some went down south to the Irrawaddy Delta-to such places as Ma-u-bin, Bassein, Myaung-Mya, etc.

3. The third group entered what now is known as the Shan States, moving down to southern Shan State. They are here known as the Pa-o Karens, some stayed on in Karenni State (the Red Karens). Some of this group went westward
Karen tradition has it that the first migration of the Karens was in the year B.C. 1125 and the second one was in B.C.739. They were the first migratory group to arrive in this region now called Burma. In those days according to Karen tradition the sea shore was at Prome (then called Pwo-way). The Karen calendar year is (739/ the year of our Lord A.D. 1939)-1939 was the year the Government of Burma recognised and confirmed it. Thus the Karen year this time will be (739/ 1977) 2716 year-the 739 was the year 739 B.C. when the Karens came into Burma in their second migration into Burma. Professor Luce of the Rangoon University and Professor Peam of the Eastern Historical Research Society endorsed the statement of the Karen calendar year.

The Karens came in earlier than the Shans, and due to the dominance of the Shans, the Karens moved down south towards the delta regions of the great river valleys along which they came. The Karens moved down south at the time over two hundred years before the Mon and the Burmese came over from India.

When the Karens first settled down they called this land ‘Kaw Lah’ -the Green Country’ and they were then a free people but gradually the Mons (a new group evolved from the mixed marriage of the Indians and the people of the land in Tavoy and Moulmein regions) and the Burmans (the people emerging from the inter-marriage of the Indian ‘Bramin’ and the people in the country) pushed into the Karen settlements. These Karens being peaceful and self-effacing had again to move away into the mountain fastness or away from established settlements which became the possessions of these later settlers who had all the traits or (mostly all) of the Indian culture, statescraft and other attributes of the so-called civilization.

The present day Karens are found in-

(1) The Delta of the Irrawaddy-
Bassein, Myaung-nya, Ma-u-bin, Pya-pon, Henzada, Tharawaddy and some in the Prome district.

(2) The Eastern Hills-
Toongoo, Papun, Thaton, Moulmein, Pa-an, Tavoy, Mergui and Pegu districts and also in Karenni, southern Shan States and in Pyin-ma-na hills.

(3) The western regions-
The Pwo and Sgaw Karens here live amongst the Burmese and thus having come in contact in most of their dealings with the Burmese, these Karens can speak the Burmese language well, but in the eastern hills they live apart and have very little contact with the Burmese, resulting in having very little command
of the Burmese language. The Karens both living in the deltas and the eastern hills are behind the Burmese in their standard of living.

**The Karen Tribes**

A nation has its own characteristics, there being four-

1. It’s tradition,
2. It’s language, character and culture,
3. The Land in which it settles down
4. It’s individualistic policies of economy, the Karens have all these characteristics, and though a nation, there are many tribes.

On May 6, 1936, the governor of Burma issued a statement, announcing that there are eleven Karen tribes-

1. Sgaw
2. Pwo
3. Pa-O
4. Paku
5. Mon-Ney-Bwa
6. Bwe
7. White Karen
8. Padaung
9. Eastern Bwe (Ka - renni or Kayah
10. Con-Ker

**Chronology**

1. Migration of the Karen from Mongolia B.C. 2617
2. Arrival of the Karens in East Turkistan B.C. 2013
3. Migration of the Karens from East Turkistan B.C. 1866
4. Arrival of the Karens in Tibet B.C. 1864
5. Migration of the Karens from Tibet B.C. 1388

(The Karens settled down in Tibet for 476 years)

6. Arrival of the Karens in Yunnan in China B.C. 1385
7. Migration of the first group from Yunnan to S.E. Asia B.C. 1128
8. Arrival of the first group Karens who entered S.E. Asia B.C. 1125
9. Migration of the second group of the Karens from Yunnan to S.E. Asia B.C. 741
10. The last arrival of the second group to enter S.E. Asia B.C. 759

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The Karens under the Feudal Masters

The Karens are agriculturists and like peace and quietness. They dislike rowdiness and so the majority would rather stay away from big cities with their activities and noises. For over two hundred years they enjoyed a free life under the leadership of their own patriarch of the village, here in this land they has seen built up from mere islands in the sea, into an alluvial-filled land of mountains, and rivers. But when the Mons and the Burmese came in, there started frictions and disagreements in temperament of different cultures. Thus the Karens moved away leaving their settled lands to these new comers. This went on time after time and the Karens avoided strifes by moving away.

During the time of the Mon and the Burmese monarchial rule, the Karens were ill-used to work in the building of pagodas, and digging channels for irrigational water courses. They had been told when young about how their forefathers were carriers earth and stones in baskets which the Burmese kings had them special-made. The woven strings attached to the baskets had harness of wood or bamboo, which harness could be hooked on to the shoulders to relieve the strain on the head. The special harnesses were sickles, and the baskets must be loaded till the straps became so taut they twanged like the strings of a Violin. Any one incapable of fulfilling the allotted was beaten to death. In certain cases the women met un-sightly deaths and the children were put into wooden and pounded to death or else, were thrown up with a sword or a spear pointed to receive them as they dropped back to earth. These are not fancies but facts handed down through the various generations. The Karens could not expect any mercy or understanding from those in powers (The book ‘The Karens and their travails’ by Thra T. Thanbya, had been banned from publication but might still be in an American Missionary Library).

The Karens had been made to feel so un-worthy being ill-treated, oppressed and massacred all through these centuries, that have developed an inferiority complex. The more enlightened ones have reservation about trusting of the Burmese who-ever are in power. Perhaps the genes of the Karen babies in their mothers wombs had undergone so drastic a change that a Karen born of woman, naturally had an ingrained sense to be wary of a Burma. In spite of such terrible physical frustrations, the Karens are still holding on to some national characteristics a sense of honesty, a desire to entertain visitors, a willingness to take part in the communical activities. In this modern world of permissiveness, the Karen family is a closely-Knitted unit. They still remain loyal to their people and their country.
The Karens under the British Colonial Rule

After the Anglo-Burmese war of 1825, the British took the Arakan and Tenessarim states. In 1852 lower Burma fell into the hands of the British. In the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1886, the whole of Burma came under the control of the British. Christian missionaries followed the British rulers. Christianity preaches love, deliverance from bondage (of sin) and blessings to the poor and the oppressed. These attributes of Christianity closely correspond to the Karen traditional ideals. Naturally the Karens were easily converted to Christianity.

Under the British rule, the Karens were allowed to learn their language and the government recognised the students of the tenth standard sitting for a Karen exam. These pages above are facsimiles of the first three pages of Appendix I to The Karen Revolution in Burma (Lonsdale, n.d.).