Chapter VII

Conclusion: Cultural Reproduction and the Maintenance of Identity

In the late eighteenth century, Father Vincentius Sangermano made the following remarks about the Karen in Burma:

It is worthy of observation that, although residing in the midst of the Burmese and Peguans, they not only retain their own language, but even their dress, houses, and everything else are distinguished from them; and what is more remarkable, they have a different religion. (Sangermano, quoted in Keyes [1979a:1]).

These observations are as true today of the Palokhi Karen in the Pa Pae hills as they were of the Karen amongst the Burmese and Mon of Burma in Sangermano’s time. As I hope to have shown, following the argument set out in the introductory chapter to this study, much if not all of what is distinctively “Karen” about the Palokhi Karen—despite the fact that they are to be found in a predominantly Northern Thai socio-economic milieu and, indeed, are dependent to a greater or lesser extent on a regional economy to meet their subsistence needs—may be found in their “different” religion. I also hope to have shown that, “even in their dress, houses, and everything else” there are features, the significance of which can only be understood by reference to their indigenous, non-Buddhist, non-Christian religion.

By way of comparison and contrast, however, let me turn briefly to a consideration of two rather different examples of what “being Karen” might mean. In terms of my argument and analysis, both examples may be regarded as “ideal types” representing possibly extreme developments, conditioned by historical circumstances, in the directions which the sociological relationship between religion and identity (at its most general) may take in the context of intergroup relations involving the Karen. Nevertheless, they stand as very real experiences—at least for some Karen communities. The two examples which I refer to are the Telakhon, a Karen syncretic Buddhist millenarian movement, and the Karen separatist movement in Burma which is predominantly composed of Christian Karen in its leadership, body of armed men and, to some extent, civilian supporters. The relevance and interest of these two movements, for the present discussion, lie in what may be gleaned about the relationship between social organisation, religion, and some form of Karen identity, and in the possible elements of an answer to the question which I posed at the beginning—in what way or ways are Buddhist, Christian, and “animist” Karen “Karen”?
The Telakhon: Identifying Religious Change

The Telakhon movement has not been thoroughly documented, at least in its ethnographic details, but what is available in existing accounts is highly suggestive of the kinds of evidence which are relevant to the issues dealt with in this study in the case of the Palokhi Karen. There are only two accounts (Stern [1968] and Dodd [1962]) of the Telakhon which offer some details of this Karen Buddhist millenarian movement based on first-hand information.1

Stern’s account of the Telakhon in one Karen community is principally concerned with an explication of the phenomenon of millenarianism based on Buddhist derived beliefs about a Future Buddha, Arimetteya, in terms of the significance of a certain Karen myth, as well as a sociological explanation of the phenomenon in terms of a version of Aberle’s “relative deprivation” thesis.2 The account of the Telakhon provided by Dodge is based on the same group of people. It is not altogether informative from an anthropological point of view but, as with Stern’s description (which was based on a visit to the Telakhon a few years after Dodge’s first visit), there are a few intriguing observations about social organisation and identification in the context of religious change.

In the earlier description of the Telakhon, Dodge (an American Baptist missionary based in Thailand) says that there were approximately 50 followers of Telasi, the self-proclaimed Ariya (that is, Arimetteya), at the village of Tee Maw near the Thai-Burmese border. Dodge also says, however, that there were reputedly 6,000 followers spread out in separate villages in Burma as well as Thailand. His overall impression of Tee Maw was that “it is essentially a Karen society, including Sgaw and Pwo” where the followers of Telasi “can wear Karen dress or else solid coloured shirts and longee” which most of the men wear, while “The women seem to wear typical Karen costumes all the time” (1962:i, 4).

The intriguing part of Dodge’s observations, however, concerns what appears to be an element of hierarchical differentiation at Tee Maw. He reports that Telasi had two subordinates, the “bukho” or spiritual head, and the “kokho” or secular head, as well as a “scribe” who was also prominent at his meetings with the head of the Telakhon. Equally intriguing is Dodge’s report that the head of the Telakhon made the suggestion that the mission of American Baptists establish a clinic and school in a valley about three days’ walk from Sangklaburi. The leader of the Telakhon claimed that if the mission did so, “a thousand or more Karen would move there”. Telasi, furthermore, offered to have the land cleared for them (1962:10). Judging from Dodge’s account, it would seem that this valley lay well away from Tee Maw itself. What is intriguing about this brief account of the conversation with Telasi is that the leader of the Telakhon seems either to have had some power of disposition over land situated well away from his headquarters at Tee Maw, or that he at least believed he did.
The significance of these snippets of information provided by Dodge is that generally the society was “essentially Karen” and that where the social organisation of the Telakhon is concerned there was some form of hierarchy as well as some notion of territorial control attaching to leadership of the Telakhon. Though Dodge’s descriptions are by no means conclusive, they contain elements which indicate some important differences in social organisation compared to that in Palokhi, notwithstanding the fact that Tee Maw is “essentially Karen” and the fact of Karen dress.

Stern’s account of the Telakhon some years later is more detailed and it points to a far greater elaboration of life in the Telakhon. It is not possible to say whether the elaboration lies in the development of the Telakhon over a few years, or whether it lies in Stern’s greater attention to detail; but the elaboration is significant.

The account of Telakhon organisation under the Ariya, provided by Stern, goes as follows:

Beneath him there is now a complex administration comprising a religious head (bu kho) and a secular head (kaw kho — both terms are given in Sgaw), each assisted by a board, a central executive committee and subordinate counterparts under the inferior yathe, as well as a panel of elders, drawn from all the faithful, to serve as advisors to the central executive committee. Together, they manage the affairs of the sect, supervising the three major festivals of the year, maintaining communication with the membership and correspondence with outsiders, and overseeing corporate business concerns, which derive income principally through a house tax on members and from free-will gifts. Two secular departments, those of education and defense, seem as yet largely inoperative. The executive committee also sits as a court in maintaining observance of a code of controlling sexual conduct with traditional Karen stringency, but also forbidding gambling, the use of intoxicants and narcotics, and acts which might foment internal discord; and further enjoining the raising of such animals as might be sacrificed to the spirits. To the conduct so regulated is added the encouragement of wearing Karen garb. (1968:315–6).

Stern comments later that,

The issues of change and conservation in customary behaviour are neatly exemplified in the Telakhon observance of the wearing of Karen garb, an act which may be taken as expressive at once of an ethnic continuity with the mythic past, when the conditions of the millenium were laid down, and of that reunited nation of the Karen to which they look forward. (1968:321).
The doctrinal considerations and macro-political aspects (that is, the relations between the Karen and the polities of Burma and Thailand in historical times) of the Telakhon have been much explored and discussed not only by Stern but others as well (Keyes [1977a]; Hinton [1979]; Lehman [1979]; Tambiah [1984:300–2]; but see also Wijeyewardene [in press]) and I shall not, therefore, consider them here. The micro-political features and the identification of religious change are, however, worth noting.

Despite what may be regarded as its “charismatic” basis, it is unequivocally clear that the social organisation of the Telakhon is not only “bureaucratic” in nature (also in Weber’s sense), but it displays political features. The bureaucratic aspect of the Telakhon is evident from Stern’s description as is the political which is contained in some notion of territorial control and defence. This is consistent with the politico-religious complex associated with beliefs about cakkavatti and Arimetteya. As Stern describes it, the Arimetteya is preceded by “the messianic figure of the cakkavatti, a universal monarch, who solely through the exercise of his justice and love for all living beings will conquer mankind and thus lay the foundation for the new order (dhamma) of the Future Buddha, Arimetteya” (1968:300). The two may sometimes be conflated as seems to be the case with the leader of the Telakhon.

It is, however, the creation of two offices or positions in the bureaucratic organisation of the Telakhon out of a Karen context that is striking, namely, the bu kho and the kau kho (Dodge’s “kokho” and Stern’s “kaw kho”) functioning under the Ariya Telasi who is not only a religious figure but presents some semblance of being a ruler of sorts. Kho of course means “head” in Sgaw Karen and kau “stream valley” or more broadly “domain”, as I have noted before. The etymon of bu is either Mon (pon, as Stern suggests) or Thai (bun), both ultimately deriving from the Pali punna, “merit”. In Palokhi, as we have seen, the only “head” is the village headman, the zi kho, who functions essentially as an intermediary between the community and the Lord of the Water, Lord of the Land.

The administrative complex of the Telakhon (to which we might add its “corporate business concerns”) and these two “heads” are so radically different from the system of head-manship and village organisation which, as I have shown, are intimately linked to religion in Palokhi, that we may well be justified in saying that they represent very different social systems.

Wijeyewardene has argued, in his paper on “The Theravada Compact and the Karen” where he examines not only the Telakhon but other movements in Northern and North-eastern Thailand and similar contemporary developments in Thailand, that

... we need to look at the operation of Buddhism in society not so much as the operation of a single tendency or dichotomy, but as a number of
sometimes opposed principles. The millenarian tendency ... applied not only to individuals and communities who were “deprived”, but was also a factor in the activities of monarchs themselves. Charismatic figures may sometimes not be so much millenarian, but represent the manifestation of a point of view put forward by [Trevor] Ling — a Buddhist view of society which was concerned with creating a society in which salvation was possible. In its modern manifestation, I suggested that we have a sociological view of the role of Buddhism; and traditionally, what appear to be millenarian movements were attempts to define the socio-religious nature of the society. (Wijeyewardene, in press).

The Telakhon is quite evidently one such attempt to define, or redefine, the socio-religious nature of society, Dodge’s general impression notwithstanding.

Indeed, this redefinition was probably so successful at Tee Maw that it was necessary to “mark” it somehow as a “Karen” phenomenon. I would suggest that this is the import of the encouragement to wear Karen dress noted by Stern, and it is probably the use of Karen dress (and the use of Sgaw Karen) at Tee Maw which led Dodge into describing Tee Maw as an essentially “Karen” society. Even if Dodge was correct, when he first visited Tee Maw, it is clear from Stern’s account that Karen dress was not merely a matter of what could be worn, but what ought to be worn. It is almost as if the Telakhon was in danger of becoming (or being seen as) something else that necessitated the encouragement of the wearing of Karen dress. Dodge is quite explicit that the language spoken in the Telakhon was Sgaw Karen (1962:7), so the language was probably not entirely sufficient in itself to distinguish the identity of the movement if, as I argue, an additional possibly more conspicuous “marker” was required. Although Stern is essentially correct in seeing the “issues of change and conservation” in the wearing of Karen dress, these issues are not perhaps as neatly exemplified as he suggests.

The encouragement of Karen dress in the Telakhon, I suggest, was an attempt to assert an identity, a means of identifying socio-religious change in the form of the Telakhon as a “Karen” development because the cultural substance, as it were, of the community at Tee Maw had changed. It is possible also that the conscious references to the Karen myth, and its apparently indigenous millenarian content, which Stern discusses, were of the same order. This is not to say, however, that socio-religious change in the form of the Telakhon necessarily meant an absolute hiatus in cultural continuity at Tee Maw, but rather that the socio-religious change was sufficient and significant enough to require a conscious attempt to identify the change. In terms of the argument presented at the beginning of this study, I would suggest that the cultural ideology of the
Tee Maw Karen had undergone a transformation and that they cannot be regarded as being “Karen” in the same sense that the Palokhi Karen are “Karen”.

Similar considerations are contained in the Karen separatist movement, but the separatist movement is also extremely interesting for what it shows of how transformations in cultural ideologies, of the kind that I am interested in here, may be disguised by the manipulation of traditional Karen symbols and adductions of a mythical past rationalised in the form of a theory of racial origins. In principle, the issues are not dissimilar to those in the Telakhon.

**From “Tribe” to “State”: An Official View of Karen Identity**

The Karen separatist movement has been in existence in Burma since 1949, one year after Burma gained independence from the British. The movement has received some scholarly attention by historians and political scientists and has merited brief comments in the anthropological literature on the Karen.

Keyes’ short account of Karen nationalism (1977b:56–8) provides the essential background to the emergence of the separatist movement in Burma which is now based in several strongholds on the Thai-Burmese border. As Keyes notes,

The activities of the Christian missionaries among the Karen must be recognized as perhaps the most important factor in the development of a Karen national movement, a movement that has attracted many non-Christian Karens. (1977b:56).

The reason for this, as Keyes points out, was that Christian missionaries initiated the development of a Karen literate tradition through the introduction of schools, the construction of printing presses which served both religious and secular needs. Equally important was the fact that Karen Christian churches provided a supralocal network of connections and organisation.

Out of this background has emerged the Karen National Union (KNU), a political organisation, and its military arm, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), as they are now known. The aim of the KNU is the establishment of an independent Karen state which they call Kawthoolei or “The Land of Lilies”. The Karen separatists, under the leadership of General Saw Bo Mya who is both President of the KNU and Commander-in-Chief of the KNLA, occupy a certain amount of territory in Burma and this is, for all practical purposes, their de facto state.

There is a semblance of a government complete with cabinet ministers holding various portfolios, but in the final analysis these are somewhat artificial creations which do not mean very much, at least in terms of ministerial powers as they are conventionally understood. The real administrative structures of Kawthoolei are army command structures modelled on the British Army, that is its organisation and order of battle. This consists of five brigades and an elite
battalion. Each of these brigades and the battalion are responsible for an operational sector which together form the administrative and constituent territories of Kawthoolei. The principal tasks of these units are, of course, the defence of their sectors and the conduct of operations against Burmese government troops when they move into these sectors. The elite battalion has additional, rather more offensive tasks.

The commanders of these units are responsible for the collection of taxes or levies on goods in the black market trade between Thailand and Burma. The income from these levies is turned over to the government, as it is called, though it is nothing but the headquarters of the KNLA. The income thus received is used to finance the movement’s never-ending military confrontation with the Burmese government. Income is also obtained from the sale of timber and some minerals in Thai markets. A certain amount of income in kind, namely rice, is also collected from Karen villages in Kawthoolei. Unit commanders are said to receive nominal salaries, but all amenities such as housing, road and water transport and so forth are provided. Part of the income from the levies are redistributed to unit commanders for the purpose of equipping and paying their regular troops and conscripts who are said to serve for two years. Generally, however, units are required to be self-sufficient in food, and some commanders in fact have their own sources of income deriving from the sale of livestock in Thailand or from their own farming businesses.

The important point to note about the separatist movement is that it represents an active or activist manifestation of Karen nationalism and, like Karen nationalism, grew out of a history and system of Christian missionary patronage in Burma. Its leadership is predominantly composed of Christian (Baptist and Seventh-Day Adventist) Karen, many of whom are Sgaw, though for all practical purposes little weight is attached to Sgaw-Pwo differences. The two major languages used by members of the KNU and KNLA are Sgaw Karen and English, although Burmese is also sometimes used, especially by Karen from Rangoon and Moulmein who have joined the movement.

The separatist movement is undoubtedly political in its motivation, but it is the cultural logic of the movement that is relevant here. This is best exemplified in official and quasi-official accounts of what is best regarded as the “mythical charter” (in Malinowski’s sense) of the movement. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this “charter” is that much of it rests on the ethnological speculations and conjectures of the early missionaries and British colonial administrators in Burma, based on a number of Karen myths.

The first myth, which bears certain resemblances to the story of the Garden of Eden in the Old Testament, tells the story of the creation of the first ancestral couple by a cosmogonic deity, Y’wa. According to the myth, Y’wa forbade them to eat a certain fruit but a serpent, Mu kaw li, feminine in its conception,
persuades them to do so and the couple then become subject to the processes of
aging, disease, and death. The second myth relates that Y’wa gave his children,
amongst whom numbered the Karen, books of knowledge. The Karen, however,
lose the book through their negligence and it is destroyed. Y’wa nevertheless
promises them that some day “foreign brothers” would bring a “golden book”
for them. Both myths are discussed by Keyes who says:

These two myths greatly impressed the American Baptist missionaries
who began work among the Karens in the early part of the nineteenth
century. The first story so paralleled the Biblical story of the Garden of
Eden, including the fact that the name Y’wa was very similar to the
Hebrew Yahweh, that the missionaries concluded that the Karens must
be the descendants of one of the ten lost tribes of Israel. Moreover they
quickly presented themselves as the foreign brothers bringing the Karens
the golden book. The fact that missionaries were the first to record these
myths has led to their interpretations colouring the understanding of
them ever since. Contrary to such interpretations, Y’wa cannot in fact
be seen (at least prior to Christian missionization) as a high god that
approximates the biblical conception of God. For the Karen, Y’wa
represents a natural state, including the distinctions between men, some
of whom are literate and others of whom, like the Karens, are not.

The cosmogonic deities, Y’wa and Mu kaw li, are but one type of
supernatural power recognized by the Karen. In addition are the rather
large number of animistic divinities, that is, minor gods and spirits, that
belong to the Karen pantheon. Of these animistic beings, the most
important are the “Lord of Land and Water,” that is, a territorial god,
and the ancestral spirit, called bgha. (1977b:52).

Keyes’ discussion is generally persuasive, but at least one missionary, Francis
Mason, attempted to fit if not the ten lost tribes theory then most certainly its
assumption of migrations to a theory of the origins of the Karen based on another
myth to explain the presence of the Karen in Burma. It is, it might be added,
perhaps the only indigenous Karen myth with a millenarian colour and it is the
one discussed by Stern.

There are a number of versions of the myth, described by early missionaries.
The following account draws on a somewhat later version provided by the
Reverend David Gilmore (1911). Very briefly, the myth recounts the travels of
another mythical ancestor or patriarch who kills a wild boar. He uses one of the
boar’s tusks to make a comb and as he combs his hair with it, he becomes young
again. His family does the same, becoming young again. His children bear a great
many offspring, and they in their turn have many children. As they all use the
comb, their numbers are not reduced by death and the land they occupy becomes
overpopulated. The old-young patriarch therefore decides that he should set
out in search of new land to settle. As he travels further afield, he loses his children or descendants after he crosses a “sandy river” or “river of sand”. The descendants are left behind because of some misadventure. The myth ends with a declaration that when the descendants are freed from sin, the patriarch will return and lead his descendants across the river to the pleasant land which he has found beyond.

The point to note about this myth is the reference to the “river of sand” or “sandy river”. As Gilmore says:

Dr. Mason interpreted it to mean a “river of running sand”, i.e., a river consisting of sand. He came to the conclusion that the desert of Gobi was meant by this, and interpreted the legend to mean that the Karens had crossed this desert during the migration into Burma. Subsequent writers have followed Dr. Mason here. (1911:81).

Although Gilmore and some other missionaries were unconvinced by Mason’s ethnological conjectures, it is evident that some version of them has found its way into the political ideology of the Karen separatist movement.

In a publication available in Kawthoolei (Saw Moo Troo and Mika Rolley, n.d.), an article whose purpose is to establish that the Karen separatist movement has nothing in common with communism is prefaced by a definition of what it means to be a Karen, what a Karen heritage consists of, and a statement on the historical origins of the Karen. The definition is expressed thus:

According to the tribal traditions of the Karens their earliest known patriarch is Poo Htot-meh-pah, boar tusk’s father. Hence in answer to the question “Who is a Karen?” one of the answers should be (1) one who can claim his ancestry to Poo Htot-meh-pah and (2) one who possesses, maintains and cultivates the legacies bequeathed to him by the said fore-bear and his predecessors. (Saw Moo Troo and Mika Rolley n.d.:1).

As for the Karen heritage, the author says, “As a nation, we have at least eight”, and proceeds to present them “in order of merit and value”. They are: The knowledge that there is a God, the Divine Being; High moral and ethical standards; Honesty; Simple, quiet and peaceful living; Hospitality; Language; National costumes; and Aptitude for music.

The origin of the Karen, which is clearly an implicit justification for a prior right to land, goes as follows:

From central Mongolia our forefathers moved down south to Tibet and afterwards further down along both sides of the Irrawaady [sic], Sittang and Salween rivers settling down scattersingly everywhere between these rivers and thickly in the Irrawaddy Delta. After them came the Talaings
and the Burmese respectively in bigger waves. Then they lived together or side by side with the subsequent settlers most of them became Buddhists [sic]. (Saw Moo Troo and Mika Rolley n.d.:2).

Although the pamphlet is not, strictly speaking, an official publication issued by the Kawthoolei government — it is described on the first page as “An appraisal by an inside observer who is not a politician and who does not aspire to be one” — it undoubtedly seeks to present views which are endorsed by the separatist movement.

A similar type of pamphlet entitled The Karen Revolution in Burma (Lonsdale n.d.) presents the same ethnological speculations in greater detail, with what can only be described as a touching faith in the power of dates, in an appendix entitled “The Origin of the Karens”. The first three pages of this appendix are reproduced in Appendix I.

The official view of the basis of a Karen identity is hardly different from those expressed in these pamphlets. Indeed, the consistent reiteration or representation of this view at both levels would suggest that Mason’s speculations have taken on the status of a “culturally” based political doctrine, for they provide the ultimate validation for the existence of Kawthoolei. In an interview with General Saw Bo Mya (a Sgaw Karen and Seventh-Day Adventist), Bo Mya asserted:

The Karen migrated down to China from Mongolia and down to Burma. The Karen are peace-loving people and for that reason they suffer. Thieving and robbing is not in the Karen line. The Burmese migrated after the Karen. The Burmese are more aggressive than the Karen and exploit all peoples. The came and encroached on Karen land and the Karen say that there is so much land so the Karen moved away. Because we are peace-loving people we gave way …. Later on the Burmese not only took away what the Karen owned but persecuted them.

After a long diatribe about the iniquities of the Burmese, he went on to say:

From the point of view of the world, people may think we are a very backward group [because] we have not won the war. But, to speak seriously, the Burmese have received help from all over. But we have stood up against the Burmese and the rest of the world. So we are not perhaps such poor fighters …. So this is no mean feat on our part because we are fighting against all odds, and to think of it, it is like the whole world oppressing us. Inspite of all this and the odds, we feel that God is with us.

In many respects, the Karen separatist movement is virtually millenarian. Though it is not predicated on a predicted emergence or arrival of a religious figure, it nonetheless seeks to establish a new order which, if not a dhamma,
is most certainly based on a Christian view of a Karen society in which they, like the Christian meek they see themselves as, will come into their own and inherit their earth.

The political ideology of the separatist movement, however, cannot be a very neat edifice. It consciously draws upon myths and other symbols which are regarded as being quintessentially Karen: bronze frog drums, for example, provide the motif for the KNU’s and KNLA’s coat of arms, while Karen clothes (the “national costumes”) are specially worn during Liberation Day parades and celebrations. There is, in other words, a deliberate utilisation of what are held or thought to be intrinsically Karen. Furthermore, as one Karen Seventh-Day Adventist lay preacher closely associated with the separatist movement views it, although all in Kawthoolei are Karen, yet not all are the same because there are those who are not Christian who eventually must be shown the way from “animism” and “uplifted”.

As with the Telakhon, Karen nationalism and the separatist movement which have rather different roots in Christian conversion represent the manifestation of historical processes and a transformation in cultural ideology. And, similar to the Telakhon, the Christian Karen associated with the separatist movement I suggest are really not “Karen” in the sense that the Palokhi Karen are “Karen”.

**Back to Culture**

The Telakhon Karen and the Karen Christian nationalists are somewhat extreme cases of how religious change may be seen to be associated with manifestly different forms of “being Karen”. They are recognisably different from each other, and from the Palokhi Karen. More difficult to identify would be the kinds of differences which may exist in Karen communities which undergo religious conversion (whether to Buddhism or Christianity) but with perhaps less pronounced organisational or political changes. Unfortunately, little has been written on such communities and they must remain as an area to be investigated. The Telakhon and the Karen nationalists nevertheless offer useful insights into the question of religious, cultural, and ethnic change if taken as examples of what is possible in the relationship between religion and identity.

There can be no doubt that however it is internally defined by the people themselves, both the Telakhon Karen and the Karen separatists regard themselves as being unequivocally Karen. In the same way, the Palokhi Karen consider themselves to be quite unambiguously Karen, though they refer to themselves in their dialect as pghako‘njau or “human beings”. As I have already argued, whatever the criteria or “commonsense constructs” they may use to define their “Karen-ness”, the definition itself must be considered tautological. Accordingly, any actor definition of identity (whether we choose to call it cultural or ethnic) has limited, if any, value for a sociological analysis. Sociological definitions
according to some “marker” or sets of “markers”, on the other hand, are I suggest not without their problems. While diacritica, such as language, may enable us to establish whether or not a group of people or a community may be taken as being of one ethnic group rather than another (say, Karen and Northern Thai), they become inadequate for the identification of intragroup differences, especially when these intragroup differences are of an order resembling that between larger groups. These intragroup differences are clearly exemplified by the Telakhon Karen, the Karen nationalists, and the Palokhi Karen.

This is easily seen in, for example, the use of Karen as a language (or, for that matter, dress or any other “symbol”) as a “marker” of identity. It is only a marker in a nominal sense regardless of whether or not it is taken as such by the Karen themselves. As I have tried to show, very particular kinds of cultural meanings are expressed through the use of Sgaw Karen in Palokhi in relation to their ritual and social life. It is extremely unlikely that these meanings are similar to those expressed in the use of Sgaw Karen among the Telakhon or the Karen nationalists. Indeed, I would argue that they are very different. The fact that Sgaw Karen is used by all three therefore says very little about what this might signify in terms of their identification as Karen. The central issue here, in other words, is a clearer sociological understanding of the role of language (rather than language per se) as it is employed by the Karen. The same may be said for Karen dress, as I have tried to show in the case of the Palokhi Karen.

One conclusion which I would therefore draw from this brief examination of the Telakhon and the Karen separatist movement, in relation to the argument in this study, is that in discussing what is similar and different among communities which claim a “Karen” identity, an analytical concept like “cultural ideology”, as I defined it earlier, has a certain utility. It makes it possible to identify what inter- and intragroup similarities and differences are without recourse to actor definitions of identity which would thereby implicitly restate a tautology at an analytical level; it also enables us to do so without recourse to some notion of “markers” of identity, the analytical status and applicability of which can only be relative. The concept of “ethnicity” as applied to the Karen in the contexts of religious change, however, raises precisely this problem, for if it is taken too far, it leaves us with a much too relativistic notion of ethnic identity in which the only irreducible element is the cultural distinctiveness of this identity. I would suggest that while the term “ethnicity” has its uses, the logic of its application must require us to examine more closely what is entailed by the notion of cultural distinctiveness, and to do so brings us back to culture. For analytical purposes, however, “culture” itself may be too general and it is here that something like “cultural ideology” may serve better.

In the case of the Palokhi Karen, the notion of a cultural ideology I believe enables us to grasp a great deal of what makes them distinctive not only in their
own eyes, but in relation to other Christian or Buddhist Karen and, more generally, the Northern Thai as well. This cultural ideology is, as I have argued, best described as the structured relations between a “procreative model” of society and social processes, an integral part of which is a system of social classification based on the difference between male and female, cultural definitions of the relations between the two and the relationship between men and land, and a “model” of agricultural processes. The cultural ideology of the Palokhi Karen is “reproduced” in and through their religious system, a system which is dominated by men who play a crucial role in ritual life. In Palokhi, remaining distinctively Karen is a matter of cultural reproduction and the maintenance of identity.

ENDNOTES

1 There are other Karen millenarian movements (see, for example, Keyes [1979b:20]; Hinton [1979:84–5]), but Stern’s account of the Telakhon in Kanchanaburi province provides the most comprehensive discussion of the subject.

2 Stern’s application of this thesis is essentially political in its import, resting on an assumption that the Ariya (or telakhon) movement was a reaction to oppression by the Burmese. It is an analysis which has been criticised by Hinton on theoretical grounds and untested psychological assumptions (1979:91). While Hinton is, in my view, correct in his criticism, it is difficult to see how his alternative explanation that the phenomenon of “Karen prophets … groping towards pan-Karen solidarity” is similar to the efforts of the Karen separatist movement is any different on theoretical or empirical grounds from that of Stern’s. Sociological explanations of the type proposed by Hinton have, in their turn, been criticised by Wijeyewardene (in press) for their “ring of Wagnerian metaphysics”(1). Though his focus is the “Theravada Compact and the Karen” Wijeyewardene, however, is concerned rather more with Buddhist millenialism as a particular application of “sociological Buddhism”, in Ling’s sense (1975), by those in Theravada Buddhist societies and polities who may be motivated by, amongst other things including historical conditions, the desire for power. He is very likely right in his assessment. While these discussions are extremely useful according to the kinds of sociological understandings that we may arrive at about Buddhism and, to some extent, about its manifestations among marginal groups (such as the Karen) in the context of the Theravada Buddhist states of Burma and Thailand, we still know very little about the details of life in Karen millenarian cults such as the Telakhon.

3 For a discussion of the bu kho in recent times in a Pwo Karen community outside of a millenarian context, see Andersen (1976:269–74).

4 I discuss a version of this later in the case of the Karen separatist movement (p. 452–3). In the case of the separatist movement, it is clear that the myth has become the foundation for nationalist Karen claims for a separate state. While I would agree with Stern’s analysis of the myth, I would nevertheless suggest that the myth, as it is adduced in the Telakhon, is an “article of faith” as it were, consciously wedded to the complex of millenarian ideas, rather than say a matter of belief to which little or no reflection is given.

5 The following descriptions of the Karen separatist movement are based on a visit to Kawthoolei in early 1982. I discuss elsewhere, in an unpublished paper (1985) the history of the Karen separatist movement and its organisational antecedents. Currently, the only reasonably comprehensive account of the Karen separatist movement is to be found in German (Sitte [1979]).

6 Despite the apparently non-Karen names of some of the authors of the publications which I discuss here, it is possible that they are in fact Karen. I have already discussed the naming system in Palokhi; it would seem that a similar system also operates in the case of Christian Karen. The system, however, draws upon Christian and other English names or words with occasionally somewhat strange, if not bizarre, results. In the KNLA, there are a Lieutenant-Colonel Saw Oliver, a Colonel Saw Gladstone, and a Colonel Marvel.