

KAREN AND LAHU: ETHNIC AFFILIATION OR BAPTISTS' IMAGINATION?¹

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Abstract

Three generations of the Young family: William Marcus (pioneer American Baptist missionary among the Lahu people of Kengtung, Burma and across the northern border into Yunnan); son, Harold Mason and grandson, Oliver Gordon have championed the view that there is a close ethnic relationship between Karen and Lahu. This paper contends that the claim cannot be substantiated either ethnologically or linguistically. It concludes that Lahu-Karen ethnic affiliations derive from ideas espoused by Baptist Karen evangelists who were sent from Lower Burma (principally the Bassein area) to assist William Young's missionary efforts in Kengtung.

Karen and Lahu: Supposed Ethnic Affiliations

Those who have read Gordon Young's *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand* (1961, 1962) may possibly recall the first paragraph of his chapter on the Lahu Nyi and Lahu Na, where he writes of the 'similarities and relationships which all the Lahu "tribes" [for which read "sub-ethnic divisions"] have with the Lisu and Akha, suggesting a common (Lo-lo) origin' (O.G. Young 1962:9). Leaving aside the thorny question of ethnogenesis, in linguistic terms Young is absolutely right. All three languages belong within the Yi (or Loloish) branch of the Tibeto-Burman family, although Lahu is more closely affiliated with Lisu (both languages belong to the Central Yi branch of the family) than with Akha (which belongs to the southern branch) (Matisoff 1986). But Young then goes on to aver that 'Lahu traditions would place themselves closer to the Karens, having as they claim, been "brothers of the same clans" at one time' (O. G. Young 1962:9).

¹ This paper is dedicated to the memory of Peter Hinton (1939–2004), Karen specialist, former adviser to the Tribal Research Centre (later Institute) in Chiang Mai, senior member of the Department of Anthropology, Sydney University, mentor and friend.

I do not doubt for one moment that Gordon Young is here accurately articulating a claim made by Lahu themselves, in this case almost certainly Christian Lahu (see below). After all, Young was born and grew up among these people and Lahu was his first language (cf. O. G. Young 1967: Ch. 1; French 1968); only subsequently did he acquire English. But why would Lahu claim their closest ethnic affiliations to be with Karen?

Certainly, their respective languages are far apart, with historical linguists still debating whether the Karenic languages belong within or outside of the Tibeto-Burman family (Matisoff 1983:66–7). Matisoff (*ibid.*), a Tibeto-Burman (and specifically Lahu) specialist, favours their inclusion within Tibeto-Burman; the late Paul Benedict did not. But even if we accept such affiliation, the Karen languages have to be placed on the same level of segmentation within the Tibeto-Burman family as the Lolo-Burmese division, the latter dividing into Burmish and Loloish, and Loloish into northern, central and southern branches, before we reach Lahu (together with Lisu) in the central branch. Put another way, the Karen languages are no closer to the Lahu languages than are the Naga or Tibetan languages — and no anthropologist, I think, would say that Naga and Lahu are ‘brothers of the same clans’.

If linguistic affiliations are hardly very close, neither are geographic ones. It is true that there is some evidence in ‘Karen tradition’ of past residence in what is now China. (Obviously, we have to be wary here—just as was Peter Hinton (1983)—of what the ethnic label ‘Karen’ actually signifies and of whether any single ‘tradition’ associated with it actually exists.) Be this as it may, there are indeed Karen traditions (Renard 1980: 33) that talk of an original homeland far to the north and of this people having crossed over a ‘river of running sand’ or ‘river of water flowing with sand’ on the journey southwards that would eventually lead them into Southeast Asia. Writers on Karen ethnohistory have (*inter alia*) identified this as the Gobi desert (Mason 1882:831), the Salween (Gilmore 1911) and the Yellow River (Marshall 1922:6). Since the Lahu have a rather similar story and Chinese ethnohistorians (cf. Liang et al. 1992: Ch. 1, p. 3) have identified the river concerned as the Jinsha Jiang (literally, the ‘Golden Sands River’) that divides Yunnan and Sichuan, let me throw this in as well. All this notwithstanding, the fact is that Karen-speaking peoples, in historic times (reliable data prior to the late eighteenth century are very scarce), have been concentrated in central and lower Burma and in adjacent parts of Thailand. Here they are typically a Southeast Asian minority people, or better perhaps “peoples” (whether as highlanders or lowlanders), with complex links to Mon, Burman and T’ai lowland polities and cultures.

By contrast, the Lahu in historic times (for them, this means since the late seventeenth century) have been a people of Southwest China, where their closest neighbours were (and still are) Hani (Akha), Lisu, Wa and various Yi

groups in the mountains, and, in the valleys, T'ai and Han. (In other words the Mon and Burman cultural complexes, so important for the Karen, are unknown to Lahu, except as mediated through one or another of the T'ai peoples with whom they have historically been associated.) To this day, some 60 percent of the Lahu-speaking peoples live under the flag of the People's Republic of China; there are no Karen communities in China.²

How come, then, that at least some Lahu (as Gordon Young reports) believe themselves 'clan brothers' (whatever this is supposed to mean in two essentially bilateral societies) of the Karen? The likely answer, I suggest, lies in the history of the two peoples' Christianization and, especially, in the part played by Karen pastors, working under Gordon Young's grandfather, William Marcus Young, in the conversion to Baptist Christianity of a sizeable proportion of the Lahu population, first in Burma and, subsequently, in China.

Baptist Christianity among the Karen

It is certainly not my intention here to add to the already voluminous literature on the Baptist enterprise among the Karen.³ The briefest adumbration, together with a few highlights that are especially pertinent to the Karen-Lahu association, must suffice.

The first Karen to convert to Christianity (cf. Brain 1910; F. Mason 1846), a former brigand and murderer named Ko Tha Byu (*circa* 1778–1850), was instructed in the new religion by pioneer American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson (1788–1850). Judson (cf. E. Judson 1883) had arrived in Burma in 1813, but evinced little interest in the Karen until, when stationed in Moulmein, he encountered Ko Tha Byu in 1827, hired him as a household servant and began to instruct him in the Christian faith. The following year (1828), the American Baptists decided to open a new mission station in Tavoy, under the direction of Pastor George Dana Boardman. Still unbaptized, Ko Tha Byu was sent by the missionaries to assist Boardman at Tavoy, where the latter baptized him on 16 May 1828.

² Mosely's (1973:42, 70) datum that some Karen are living in Yunnan's Baoshan Prefecture, where they are known as Shantou, is incorrect. *Shantou ren*, meaning "mountain-top people", was an exonym given to Jingpo or Kachin during the late Qing and Republican eras (Wang 1997:6).

³ Eg., Beaver 1963; Brockett and Brooklyn 1891; Heald 1900; Hovemyr 1989, pp. 97–100; Hughes 1926, pp. 59–86; Lewis 1924, pp. 97–107; McMahon 1876, pp. 161–204; Marshall 1922, pp. 296–314; E. Mason 1862; Maung Shwe Wa 1963, pp. 67–74, 89–101, 156–190; Pifer 1951, pp. 65–74; Scoglund 1951, pp. 3–26; Smeaton 1920, pp. 84–209; Sowards 1954, pp. 4–8); Vedder 1927, 111–18; and Zan & Sowards 1963.

Ko Tha Byu quickly became an ardent field evangelist and, in no small part due to his efforts, a Christian movement rapidly gathered momentum among the Karen-speaking peoples of the Tavoy region; later Judson himself proselytized among Karen living to the north of Moulmein, while stations for work among the Karen were established from the 1850s onwards at Rangoon, Bassein, Toungoo, Shwegen, Henzada, Maubin and Loikaw (Sowards 1954:4). Of these, Bassein, with its concentration of Baptist educational and theological institutions and its 'Karen Home Mission Society' (established in 1876 to support Karen evangelists among their own people and, subsequently, among other mountain peoples) was especially important for the later Lahu Christian movement. By 1925, less than a century after Ko Tha Byu's baptism, the American Baptist Mission claimed a largely self-supporting Karen membership (of baptized adults) numbering 60,000 people, with 886 churches and 807 pastors (Hughes 1926:59). The figure for the Baptist Karen community as a whole, at this time, was around 200,000 (cf. Marshall 1922: 300).

The evangelistic efforts of the Baptist missionaries among the various Karen-speaking peoples, whether American foreigners or local Karen (the latter, as Ko Tha Byu's case demonstrates, of vital importance, almost from the start) seem to have been greatly facilitated by a number of indigenous cosmological beliefs (many of them shared with Lahu, as we shall see later) that permitted easy assimilation of the newly-introduced Christian dogmas with the pre-Christian Karen worldview. Indeed, contemporary missionaries were so impressed by what they perceived as Christian-like theological traits among the Karen (most notably, belief in a Creator-Divinity or High God and a 'Golden Book' of wisdom) that they quickly assumed the people's prior Christian affiliations. (An Islamic matrix might have been more credible, given the significant Muslim communities to the west and north of the Karen settlement areas, but that would have been nowhere near so convenient for these foot soldiers of Christianity.)

The varied religious traditions of the Karen people prior to contact with Christianity can, however, just as well be seen as demonstrating an indigenous religious culture that is widespread throughout the Southeast Asian region. This we may label as 'animo-theistic': 'animo' because it encompasses belief in 'spirit essence' or 'soul force' associated with both natural and sociological phenomena, and 'theistic' because it simultaneously posits the existence of various unique divine forces, including, typically, a creator divinity (the Karen Y'we, Lahu G'ui sha), responsible, *inter alia*, for the creation of the first human beings and their primal institutions. It is an indigenous Southeast Asian religious complex that encompasses both the ethnic majority peoples (who subsequently added to it a canonical religion: predominantly Brahmanism and Buddhism in mainland

Southeast Asia, Brahmanism and Islam in much of island Southeast Asia and Christianity in the Philippines) and the ethnic minority peoples, such as Karen and Lahu, whose adoption of canonical religions (if done at all) has been more recent. It is a religious culture wherein sickness is typically interpreted as the consequence of soul loss or soul disturbance, brought about by the activities of offended—or simply malicious—spirit entities that often must be appeased or expelled by a knowledgeable ritual specialist, sometimes a shaman. It is not one that builds elaborate sacred edifices or supports a complex local ecclesiastical organization. On the other hand, it is a religious culture that, during times of socio-cultural (including, of course, political) crisis, has the capacity to generate charismatic leaders—prophets, holy men—who are able to unite disparate, politically and culturally acephalous communities into a wider and tighter politico-religious polity than is the norm, in order to combat external aggression. Among the minority peoples of the region, the indigenous religious complex also frequently includes a mythological explanation for why they, in contrast to the dominant peoples of the region, lack literacy (judged rightfully to be theirs) and how this will one day be returned to them.

Putting these various religious traits together in their Karen form, we have the story (at least as interpreted by many of the Baptist missionaries) of an essentially monotheistic people whose indigenous spirit beliefs are an aberration, just as the so-called 'idol worship' of their Buddhist neighbours is an abomination. We are told how the Karen people were cheated of the divine gift of writing, which was rightfully theirs, and how this would one day be restored to them by a younger 'white brother', who would come to them bearing a 'golden book'. While evangelizing amongst the Karen, the Christian missionaries more than once encountered religious movements led by charismatic holy men or 'prophets', who sought to restore the golden age of Karen religion and society. Sometimes, these Karen holy men were instrumental in preparing the way for the subsequent adoption of the Christian religion by their devotees.

Baptist Karen Evangelism among the Lahu

The American Baptist missionary William Marcus Young (1861-1936) was the first to bring Christianity to the Lahu of Kengtung State, Burma. Young had arrived in Burma in 1892 and evangelized first among the Western Shan (T'ai Yai) people of Mongnai and Hsipaw, in whose language he became fluent (Henderson 1936; Robbins 1936; Telford 1936). He came to Kengtung Town in February, 1901 (W. Young 1901, 1902), expecting to work primarily among the T'ai-speaking peoples of Kengtung State (Khün, Tai Yai, Lü, Yuan and

Northern Shan). Young used to preach in the town's main market and, at first, most of those who bothered to listen to him seem indeed to have been T'ai. But at least by early 1903, almost exactly two years after his first arrival in Kengtung, Young (1903:3) began to report 'an awakening among the hill people', associated with a number of indigenous Lahu holy men or prophets. He commented at the time that 'work [among these hillmen] I feel sure will be most fruitful'. By the end of the following year (November 1904) he was able to report (1904: 1-3):

The work among the Muhsos [Lahu] is ... now opening up in a way that far exceeds our expectations. [There are] Muhsos teachers [who] have a wonderful influence over the people. They ... seem to be deeply pious men ... They have a description of heaven that corresponds very clearly with that given in [the biblical Book of] Revelation. ... Two Muhsos teachers came from China. ... They gave us their traditions and in turn I had the [Karen] preachers give them a clear statement of the Karen traditions and how the Karens had accepted Christ. *It made a deep impression on them* [emphasis added].

The Lahu 'traditions' to which Young refers bore an uncanny resemblance to those the early missionaries had encountered among the Karen in lower Burma, including belief in a creator divinity, G'ui sha, and legends concerning their ancestors' loss of literacy and of its return in the form of a *li suh* (white/silver/pure book), which would be brought to them by a 'white' (but it could also be 'pure') foreigner.

Young does not, as a matter of fact, mention that the preachers who informed the visiting Lahu holy men (for that was what they were) of the 'Karen traditions' were themselves Karen. But I strongly suspect this to have been the case, for by then Young already had the services of a number of Karen workers delegated by the aforementioned 'Karen Home Mission Society' of Bassein in lower Burma.

Pastor Ba Te's Espousal of Karen-Lahu Affinity

Among the most notable of the early Karen missionaries to the Lahu was Pastor Ba Te, a gifted linguist and formerly a practising lawyer (cf. Cochrane 1912). He was among those Bassein Karen who were wedded to the idea of converting the peoples of northeastern Burma to the Christian religion.

In a March 1905 letter to the Baptist Mission's magazine *The News*, Young (1905a: 11) reports Ba Te undertaking a preaching tour (doubtless this was towards the end of 1904, or else very early in 1905, thus more or less right at the start of the Mission's Lahu work) to the north of Kengtung Town, 'where there are some Muhsos [Lahu] teachers who claim to have miraculous powers'.

By April 1905, Young (1905b:2) begins to report on how Ba Te 'thinks that ... the Muhsos and Kwes [Lahu Na and Lahu Shi] ... are ... allied to the Squa [Skaw] and Pwo Karens.'

At Young's instigation, Pastor Ba Te himself penned a short piece for the *The News* (published in the June 1905 issue), in which he wrote of 'a connecting link between the Karen and Muhsos traditions', claiming that the Karen tradition of migration southwards out of China could be linked to the much-loved Lahu legend of the separation of the respective followers of a Lahu brother and sister. The story tells how the sister thought she had been short-changed by her brother when he gave her so little of the flesh of a porcupine, which, from the size of one of its quills, she judged to be a huge beast. Angrily, she led her followers southwards, away from her brother's people. The sister's people, Ba Te reported learning from a 'Muso teacher ... who had traveled in some parts of China, Siam, and also in different sections of Kengtung State', were the Karen, who had migrated southwards long before the Lahu.

Whether or not Pastor Ba Te himself accepted the literal truth of the Lahu legend and its variant (far from widely accepted among Lahu themselves) that identifies the sister's people as Karen, is not at all clear. But he certainly writes (*ibid.*) that 'So far as my observations of their [the Lahu's] manners, habits and character is concerned, I can only say how many times I said in my heart, "They are *Karens*", while watching them talk, laugh, work and play. There is a strong family resemblance in character and disposition.' He concludes, 'As regards the common origin of the Karens and Lahu in the distant past, there seems to be very little room for doubt.'

Championing Lahu-Karen Affiliation: Three Generations of the Young Family

In a letter to *The News* of July 1905, Young (1905c) reiterates that '*Our Karen helpers say* [emphasis added] the Muso main tribe, the Lahuna [Lahu Na] or Black Musos, correspond closely to the Sgaw Karens, the Kwes [Lahu Shi] to the Pwo Karens' and adds: 'The Karen workers now identify the Kaws (Akha) with the Red Karen.' He restates this opinion in his contribution to the *40th Annual Report of the Burma Baptist Convention*, where he writes (Young 1905d: 17): 'It now seems certain that the Lahu tribes here, that is, the Muhsos, Kwes and Akhas, are one stock with the Karens', adding that 'It has been gratifying to see what a strong interest the native Christians in Lower Burma [viz. the Karen] have taken in this work.' Again, in an article for *The Baptist Missionary Review* (Young 1905e: 469), he writes, 'a closer study reveals the fact that the Karens and the Lahu are but different branches of the same people.'

William Young's son, Harold, (father of Oliver Gordon Young) brings championship of Lahu-Karen fraternity into the second generation of Young family writings on the Lahu. Indeed, he elaborates on the connection, tying it more firmly to Lahu legend than did his father, or even Pastor Ba Te. In his, lamentably, unpublished work 'To the Mountain Tops: A Sojourn among the Lahu of Asia' (n.d., 1–2), Harold writes:

By the time they [the Lahu] had wandered into South China, about the year 1830,⁴ their numbers were greatly increased. In addition to their own groups, another tribe known as the Karens, who now live in the delta districts of the Irrawaddy basin and in southern Burma and Thailand, joined them in their southward migration. Accompanied by the Karens they settled in the mountains, avoiding the valleys ... the main settlement was near a valley which was only sparsely inhabited by a race called the Shans. The menfolk were great hunters, and, according to tradition, one day while hunting near the foothills, they shot a large stag which had long grass twined about its antlers. This animal had been feeding in the valley, so when they saw the length of [the] grass, they at once realized that the land must be very fertile. When the hunters reported their discovery, a council was called of all the elders of both the Lahu and Karens [and] ... it was decided that the Lahu would move from the mountains to the valley where there would be greater possibilities for agricultural work.

The Karens, reluctant to give up their mountain stronghold, decided to remain behind because their dreamers said that though they were destined to live in the valleys later on, this was not the right valley. ...

The tale continues with Lahu dominating Shan and then themselves being defeated by Chinese, after which they 'rejoined their Karen brothers in their stronghold, high in the mountain fastnesses ...'.

Through a misunderstanding ... the two brotherly tribes [Lahu and Karen] were finally separated and weakened. Before this, both groups had regarded the chiefs of their respective tribes with the same respect, and paid the same tribute to each. It was the custom to set aside a portion of the meat taken during a hunt for each chief. One day the Lahu hunters shot a large sambar deer and sent a portion of the meat to the Karen chief. The following day the hunt was not so successful. After hunting all day, the only animal shot was a porcupine. As usual they divided up the meat and sent a share to the Karen chief with a large quill sticking in it. When the Karens saw the small portion of meat, with a very large hair on it, they thought that they had been cheated, for surely an animal with hair of that size should be very large! They said to the Lahu, 'Yesterday you sent our chief a large portion of meat ... and the hairs sticking to the wrappers were very small, but today you have sent only a very small portion, yet the hair is that of a great

⁴ This date, incidentally, is far too recent.

animal. Why have you cheated our chief ...?' The Lahu tried ... to explain but the Karens would not believe them. After the dispute, the Karens took their women and children and all their livestock and left for the south. At the time of parting they said, 'Brothers, we will go to the Southland, and when we find that which is of great price [an allusion to the Christian message] we will return and search for you who are left behind.'

Subsequently, according to Harold's version of the legend, the Lahu decided to set out to search for their brothers, the Karen. They did discover a Karen campsite, but misread the signs of recently-roasted crab shells turned red in colour and recently-cut banana stumps sprouting new shoots as indicating the Karen brothers had long ago departed. Consequently, they gave up all hope of meeting up with them again. But the Lahu remembered the Karen's parting words about returning with 'that which is of great price.' Harold concludes his rendition thus:

... when my father first contacted the Lahu, *he was accompanied by Karen assistants* [emphasis added], and they were received by the Lahu as their long lost brothers from whom they had been parted generations before.

Many of the major themes—the deer horns entangled with luxuriant grass, war with the Chinese, the dispute over the sharing of porcupine flesh, misinterpretation of signs of recent inhabitation as ancient—are well known by Lahu throughout their settlement area and among communities that have no affiliations with the Christian religion nor any knowledge of the Karen people. Lahu converts and their early Karen pastors must surely have inspired Harold Young's version of the legend.

Given the views of Ba Te (and, for certain, he was not alone in holding them among the Karen pastors who pioneered Christian evangelism among the Lahu in Kengtung) and the acceptance of these Karen opinions, first by William Young and then by his son, Harold—and given also the striking similarity between Karen and Lahu versions of the 'lost wisdom' and its ultimate return in a 'golden' (Karen) or 'silver' (Lahu) book (which impressed both elder and younger Young quite as much as it did the Lahu converts themselves) surely we have the answer as to why Gordon Young wrote (in the same manner as his grandfather and his father) of Lahu and Karen as at one time having been 'brothers of the same clans'. Doubtless Gordon heard his father tell the story many times; and doubtless, also, he heard it for himself among the Christian Lahu and their Karen pastors, in whose midst he spent his youth. The ethnology may be questioned, but the importance of this Lahu Baptist 'mythical charter' can scarcely be doubted.

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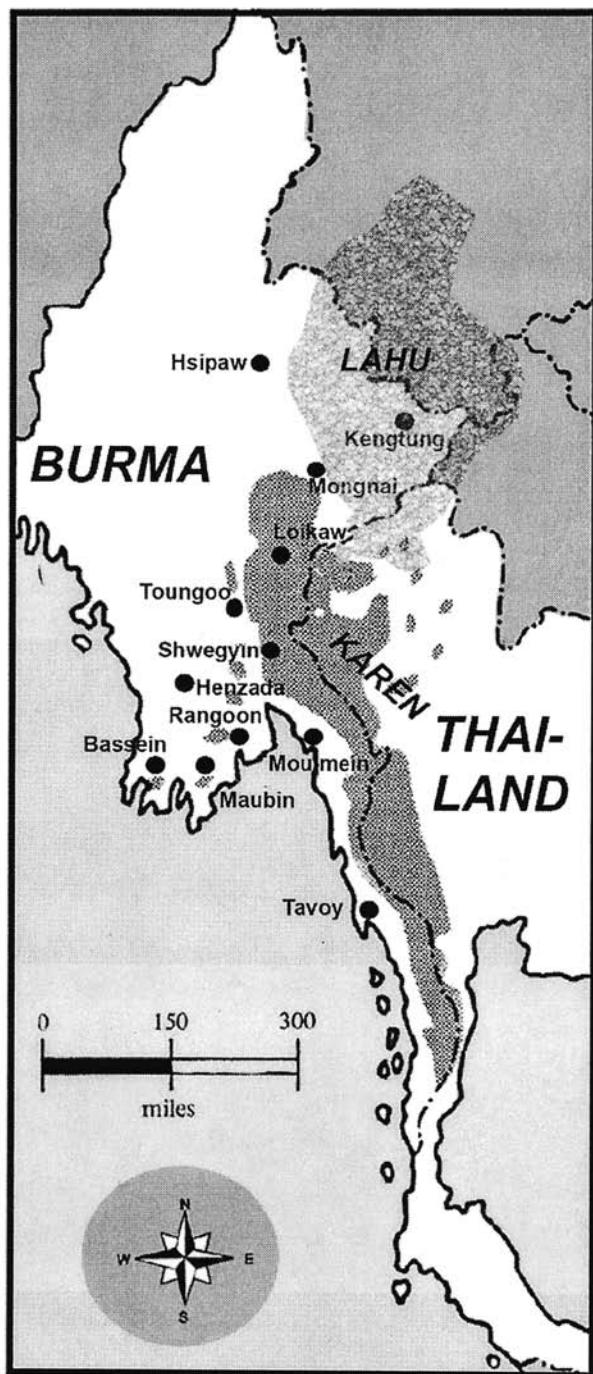
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Map 1. Places mentioned in text and approximate distribution of Karen and Lahu populations