

SOME NOTES ABOUT THE KARENS IN SIAM

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The Karens in North and North-Western Siam are of two kinds, called here in Siam the "White" Karens and the "Red" Karens. The Siamese call them "Karieng," but they call themselves "Yang," and the Shans also call them so.

The Red Karens are very few; I have only seen them in Maa Hawng Sawm in the Western part of Monthon Chiengmai, but there are also a few in Monthon Nakon Sawan and in other Mouthons. They have darker coloured skin than the White Karens.

The men dress in short Shan-trousers and a loose jacket something like the Shans do. The garments are generally made of dark material, but even if light coloured material is sometimes used, it soon becomes dark with dirt; a Red Karen would be horrified at the idea of washing either himself or his clothes.

The women, of all ages, both married and unmarried, wear a piece of blue and red striped cloth round the waist, barely reaching to the knee. On the body they wear a piece of black cloth; in front it is tucked under a girdle, draped over the bosom, brought over one shoulder and tucked under the girdle at the back. Round the legs, just below the knee, they wear a number of rings made of thin strips of cane.

Both sexes wear a piece of cloth tied round their hair, but not a real turban.

The White Karens are much more numerous, and when hereafter in these notes I use the word Karens, it is White Karens I mean.

I have found them the whole way from Muang Bai to the North-west of Chiengmai, and down through Maa Hawng Sawm, Khun Yooam, Muang Yooam and Medan in the Western Chiengmai district, and continuing down through Melamat, Mesot and Umpang, near the head-waters of the Me Klong, in Nakon Sawan Monthon.

They are a well-built, sturdy race, much better looking than the Red Karens. The men, while young, are lithe and well set up, and the young girls are plump, buxom wenches, often with pleasing features.

Their height averages about the same as the height of the Siamese peasants and the Laos. If their skin were not exposed to sun and wind, it would in many cases be quite white. I have on one or two occasions seen some young girls and children bathing in a stream, and their bodies, where the sun had not touched them, were white. Young people often have rosy cheeks. They have more strongly marked features than most other Eastern Asiatics, many of the men having aquiline noses. In the Me Chem district, between Chiengmai and Maa Hawng Sawm, a district which is almost exclusively inhabited by Karens, I have seen many young people both men and women with perfectly Jewish features; if they were dressed in European clothes they would easily be taken for Jews of Eastern parentage. So perhaps it is not absolutely a myth that the White Karens are descendants of one of the ten lost tribes.

The fashion of the men's dress has gradually changed; originally the dress consisted of a kind of smock, reaching to below the knee, and nothing else. Then short Shan-trousers were adopted, the smock was made shorter, and gradually by many, replaced by a Shan jacket, and this is now the most common dress. There is also another piece of clothing the Karens sometimes use instead of the Shan trousers, that is a short home-made sarong with broad blue and red stripes. Sometimes, but not often, one meets an old Karen who still keeps to the old fashion and wears a smock only.

The smock is first a bag with the cross-slit to put the head through and two slits in the corners for the arms. It is mostly white with red stripes, sometimes vice-versa; the stripes are sometimes very narrow and close together, forming a border round the lower part of the smock, sometimes there are two broad stripes coming, one over each shoulder and running parallel and close together down the front and the back. There are also other patterns, but always made with stripes, and the colours red and white are used.

The women have been absolutely conservative about their dress. An unmarried woman, whether she is a girl of tender age or a toothless old hag, wears, as her only garment, a long white smock reaching to her heels. Sometimes a red thread is woven into the material, round the waist, but otherwise the smock is not ornamented in any way.

A Karen 'belle' does not cost her father much in the way of clothes, as the only dress she owns is the smock she has on. When that begins to be too much worn, she begins the weaving of a new one, and when it is finished she takes off the old smock and puts the new one on. A married woman wears a red skirt, reaching nearly to the ankles, with some blue, white and yellow patterns woven into the material in the shape of broken stripes. Over this she wears a dark blue smock, reaching nearly to the knee, the smock being often richly embroidered with white beads.

Both sexes generally wear a piece of cloth round the hair.

The women and girls always wear some silver ornaments such as necklaces of silver coins, bell-shaped silver tubes in the ears, bangles, etc., and they are also very fond of coloured glass-beads. The young boys also wear necklaces and bracelets made of coloured glass-beads, sometimes they have a string of glass-beads hanging from ear to ear, down under the chin.

The Karens are animists and worship the spirits they believe exist in the forests, the mountains and in running water. In Burma, a great many of them have been converted to Christianity, but here in Siam I have only met one Christian Karen family.

At certain times of the year and on certain occasions they sacrifice a pig to the spirits, and the head and feet of the pig are then carried in procession through the forest and mountains. Well-to-do Karens also sacrifice money, in the shape of silver rupees, which are thrown down a narrow crack in the rocks or some other inaccessible place. It is not unusual for a Karen, who has sold an elephant, to dispose of a part of the price in this way, and sometimes the part so disposed of amounts to several hundred rupees.

A Karen will not undertake a task of the slightest importance before he has asked the spirits' advice; this is done with the help of a chicken which is killed.

The Karens are of a higher morality than their neighbours with whom they rarely intermarry. They also marry later in life than most other Asiatic people, and it is very rare to meet a married woman under twenty or a married man under 24-25. Polygamy is not forbidden but is very seldom practised.

They burn the dead, generally close to a mountain path, and when a headman dies, a kind of altar, made of bamboo, is erected at the road-side. On this is placed the dead man's personal belongings, such as his gun, 'dah,' powder-horn, shoulderbag, pipe and numerous other small articles, and everybody coming along the road is then supposed to take one of these articles as a memento, but it is an understood thing that the gun, 'dah' and powderhorn are left for the relatives.

Also, when a headman dies, the village is deserted and rebuilt on another site in the neighbourhood.

The Karens are very afraid of infectious diseases, particularly small pox, which used to play havoc amongst them. They will not go within miles of a village in which there is known to be an outbreak of small-pox, nor will they allow any stranger to come into their village if there is small-pox anywhere in the neighbourhood, and they barricade the approaches to the village. It is not a formidable barricade, a child could kick it down, but people passing along the road know the meaning and respect it. It consists of light chains made of bamboo, and bamboo-spears pointing outwards are placed leaning on the chains, with some roughly made wooden guns and the figure of a man made of wood in a super-realistic way, and also as a rule crude imitations of an elephant and a buffalo.

The villages are mostly built high up on mountain sides, and the houses are built entirely of bamboo, with roofs of leaves. As a rule each family has its own house, generally containing only one room, in the middle of which is a big square fire-place made of clay, the smoke escaping as best it can. I have, however, seen two villages

where the houses were long buildings, each divided into several rooms, and inhabited by several families, all related to each other. The floor is raised about 4-5 feet from the ground, and the space under it is the residence of pigs and fowls. There are no gardens, and seldom any fences in a Karen village, the houses being just scattered about in a clearing on a fairly open hill side.

The Karen is a cultivator, but his way of cultivating is very crude indeed. Some Karens have paddy fields in the small valleys amongst the hills, and these fields they cultivate in the same way as their neighbours, the Shans and Laos. But far the most common way of cultivation is the hill cultivation. A suitable place on a hill-side is completely cleared of vegetation, all trees are felled and later burned on the spot, to prepare the soil for the seed. Only an iron-tipped stick is used, with which innumerable small holes are scratched in the soil, and in these holes the paddy seeds are dropped. Rain and sun must then do the rest. But sometimes the rain is so violent that the seeds and young plants are washed down the hill side, and sometimes it rains too little or not at all, and the young plants get shrivelled up by the sun, or myriads of rats overrun the hill side and eat every sprout. When any of these things happen, the Karens are badly hit and they have then to exist as best they can on "kloi." This is a tuberous root which grows round about in the forest, and is poisonous if it is not steeped in water for a considerable time; in any case it is a poor, unpalatable food, containing very little nourishment. So it happens sometimes that there is famine amongst the Karens, when they come down to the Shan and Lao villages to buy rice if they have anything to buy it with, the poor even selling their children for rice, or to beg for it.

In some places the same clearing is cultivated three years in succession, but in others a new clearing is made every year. In the past, large tracts of forest have been destroyed in this way, and even now, when the Forest Department has taken the matter up, a good deal of destruction takes place in valuable forests.

The Karens who own paddy-fields, of course own buffaloes for the purpose of ploughing, and many Karens in that part of Me Chen district which is nearest to Chiengmai, own herds of cattle,

but the most common domestic animal in the Karen villages is the pig, though a number of fowls are kept, and dogs of course. And then, there is the elephant. The Karens are very fond of elephants, and have a great deal of knowledge about them and their habits, but I am not so sure that they are really good elephant masters. I have seen a great many Karen elephants, but I have seen few really well-trained ones, as they are nearly always shy and will bolt on the slightest occasion.

Many Karens who own elephants use them to work teak for the timber-firms, but there are also a good many who keep them simply because they like to have them, and only use them to carry paddy in from the fields. I once saw an elephant which was considered by the Karens a perfect specimen of a full grown male elephant, and it was certainly a fine animal. It belonged to two brothers and had formerly worked timber for the Bombay-Burma Trading Co., but it had been stolen twice and again recovered, and now it did no more work, but was kept as an ornament. One or other of its owners was always with it, and the young men in the village took turns to act as body-guard for it, so that it should not be stolen again.

There is comparatively little crime amongst the Karens, but there is one kind of crime which has an almost irresistible fascination for many Karens, and that is elephant-stealing. I should not at all be surprised if it was proved that a large number of Karens looked upon elephant-stealing as a perfectly legitimate sport.

Nowadays criminals are brought to justice in the Siamese courts, but formerly, when such courts did not exist in those parts of the country where the Karens live, the Karens treated their criminals according to their own customs and their own ideas of justice, unless the victim of the crime was a Shan or a Lao, when those people saw to the punishment, and the innocent often suffered with the guilty.

For illegitimate love-affairs, the Karens used to have a peculiar and rather drastic punishment. When the affair was discovered, the man and the girl were brought before the headman of the village.

Three small pills, exactly alike, were then placed before them, and each had to swallow one. Two of the pills contained deadly poison while the third was harmless. They then had to go out into the jungle together, and after some time the headman and others from the village followed them to see what had happened. Sometimes two corpses were found, but if one of them had been fortunate enough to choose the harmless pill, he or she went back to the village, and the matter was finished. From a reliable source I have heard about such a case in 1912, but whether it is still practised now I do not know, though it is quite possible that it is.

The Karen is generally a good hunter and a good tracker, who knows all there is to be known about the jungles and the denizens of the jungle. But, in contrast with the Shan, who is fond of roaming about as a trader, the Karen is a stay-at-home person and has little aptitude for trading. That the Karens, however, are able, through a couple of generations of education, to develop a high intelligence and to take their place amongst more civilised people, is proved by the Karens in Burma, where they have good schools of their own, and where there are many Karens in prominent positions as doctors, schoolmasters, lawyers, etc.

Though a Karen seldom travels far from his own district, he is however fond of visiting his friends in neighbouring villages, and on these occasions much beer is drunk. The Karen-beer is a very simple brew : into a stone-jar, partly filled with fermented rice, water is poured. The partakers, each armed with a long, thin reed, bent in a slight curve, then squat down round the jar, the reeds are pushed through the fermented rice down to the bottom of the jar, and the liquid is sucked up. The taste is slightly acid but is not unpleasant, and it is quite refreshing. Like lemon-squash, it tastes better sucked up through a reed than when drink out off a glass. It is not very intoxicating. Most Karens are fond of distilled spirits also, but they do not often drink to excess.

Both men and women are inveterate tobacco-smokers, and they begin very early. The tobacco is mostly home-grown and home-cured, and the pipes are made from a piece of naturally bent bamboo.

The Karens are generally quite pleasant people to deal with. Whenever I have had occasion to employ them for transport-work. I have always found them cheerful and willing, and also quite ready to give whatever information it was in their power to give. Their opinions they express in a straight-forward way, and they do not try merely to say what they think will please most. They are cheery and amusing people to travel with, and I have many pleasant memories from my travellings amongst them.



Karen house



Old Karen darge

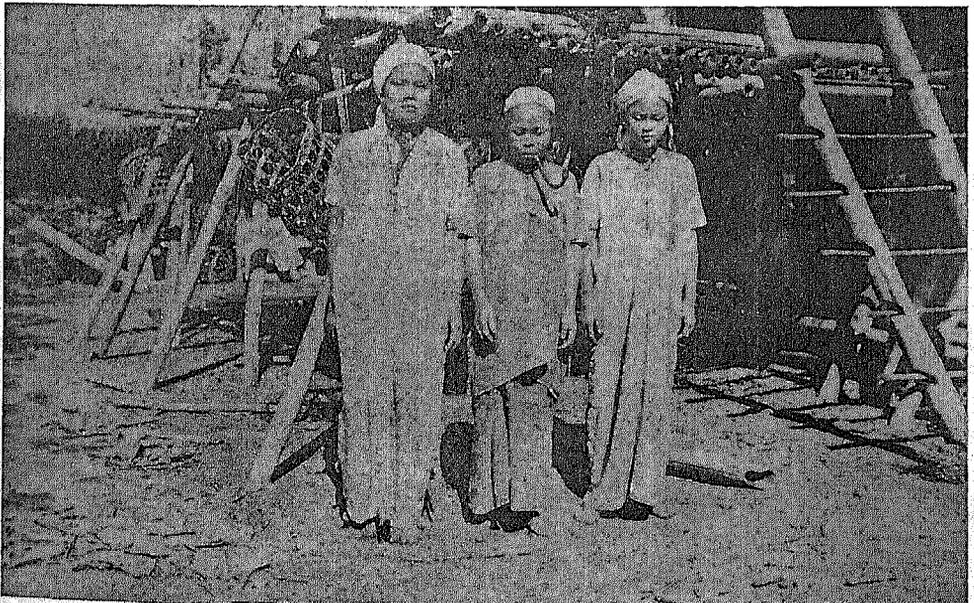


Young married woman





Two old Karen ladies fetching water in bamboo-brackets



Two unmarried girls with a married woman (centre)

