

Abstract

There are an estimated 242,000 Karen in Thailand making them the largest ethnic minority in the country second only to the Chinese. In Burma, they number approximately 2.2 million. The Karen, of whom the Sgaw and Pwo represent the two largest groups based on dialectal differences, speak a number of related languages which are now recognised as belonging to the Sino-Tibetan group of languages. Since the early part of the last century, the Karen have been the subject of a number of studies by missionaries and British colonial administrators in Burma and, more recently, by anthropologists in Thailand.

Two major areas of interest in the long history of Karen studies have been the nature of Karen religious systems which appear to draw on various traditions, and the nature of Karen identity which appears remarkably resistant to change. While Karen religious traditions and customs were a dominant concern in earlier studies, the question of Karen ethnic identity (or identities) has been the focus of interest in contemporary studies, matched perhaps only by an interest in Karen subsistence or economic systems. Though the more recent anthropological studies of the Karen have retained an interest in Karen religious systems, related in most part to the study of Karen ethnicity, it is remarkable that there has not been a detailed contemporary account of the indigenous, non-Buddhist, non-Christian religion of the Karen.

This study is concerned with both issues — the nature of indigenous Karen religion and the maintenance of identity in a small Karen community which is firmly located, as much by necessity as by choice, in a predominantly Northern Thai socio-economic milieu in the highlands of Northern Thailand. It is also concerned with sociological explanation as well as anthropological description, in the case of the Karen, namely the part played by an indigenous religion (which draws little from Buddhism or Christianity, both of which have had considerable influence on Karen elsewhere) in the maintenance of identity. At one level, therefore, this study may be regarded as an attempt to fill a gap in the contemporary ethnography of the Karen, that is, to provide an account of an indigenous Karen religious system as a system in its own right but taken broadly to show how it encompasses different facets of life in one Karen community. At another level, this study addresses a larger sociological issue in the study of the Karen: how a **cultural** identity may be constituted (and reconstituted as an on-going process) and the implications that this may have for an understanding of Karen ethnicity the principles of which, though perhaps sufficiently established as a matter of conventional sociological wisdom, have not been adequately demonstrated in relation to hard ethnographic fact.

The major argument in this thesis, stated in its most general terms, is that religion and ritual sustain and reproduce what is best regarded as a cultural

ideology which provides a cultural identity, and from which an ethnic identity may be constructed according to the particular circumstances and details of the contexts of intergroup relations. In the case of the Sgaw Karen of Palokhi, in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand, who are the subject of this study, it is argued that this cultural ideology consists of the structured relations between what is best described as 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 and ritual life, which is dominated by men who play a crucial role, and it is this which provides them with their distinctive cultural identity.