

THE PRESENCE OF “YWA” IN SHAPING KAREN CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Introduction

In the cherished land where this researcher grew up, Karen state, Burma, (known now as Myanmar), the rich tapestry of Karen identity holds profound significance. For us, preserving this vibrant identity goes beyond a mere obligation, it's a sacred duty, deeply influencing the perception of my people and my faith. Asia stands out as a magnificent variety of cultural diversity with an innumerable array of traditions, rituals, and lifestyles that intricately shape the way individuals perceive the universe and their comprehension of the Divine.¹ Thus, when conveying the gospel message, lacking cultural understanding becomes a formidable challenge. Every tradition, myth, and narrative is woven with threads of belief in a supreme being. In the heart of the Karen people, who are deeply entrenched in animistic beliefs, there exists a plethora of tales about supreme beings and even prophecies that whisper of future events of “Y’wa”²

Delivering the message of Christ to the Karen people demands not a foreign form, but instead a harmonious blend of languages, symbols, and practices that deeply resonate with the indigenous soul. Within the daily lives of the Karen people, the interplay of faith and culture is prominently displayed.³ An example is the wearing of Karen shirts, which serve as powerful symbols of involvement in significant events such as lively wedding ceremonies, joyful new year celebrations, and thanksgiving services. Notably, every Sunday is marked by the sight of the church congregation wearing Karen shirts with pride. These garments are not merely apparel; they are an important part of the rich fabric of meaningful Karen community traditions. Pastors also embrace this tradition by wearing Karen shirts and carrying Karen bags, highlighting their revered positions as they deliver sermons to their congregations on Sundays. This blend of Christianity into the very essence of Karen culture enables a deep understanding of the Karen people's identity in Christ, while still maintaining a firm grasp on their heritage. Defined by the arts, beliefs, customs, institutions, and other human-world manifestations, Karen culture fosters a strong sense of unity within a community as its members collectively adhere to these shared values.⁴

Culture is profoundly embedded at the heart of individuals and groups, binding them closely together. As Edward Burnett Tylor describes, “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits

¹ Donglu Shih, “Spirituality and Religion: The Varied Beliefs Across Asia,” *The Deeping*, August 7, 2024, <https://www.thedeeping.eu/2024/08/07/spirituality-and-religion-the-varied-beliefs-across-asia/>.

² Albert Harmon, “The Karen People and the Spread of Early Christianity in Southeast Asia,” *Galaxy.ai*, April 14, 2020, <https://galaxy.ai/youtube-summarizer/the-karen-people-and-the-spread-of-early-christianity-in-southeast-asia-b1eltvVwu8E>.

³ Roland Platz, “Buddhism and Christianity in Competition? Religious and Ethnic Identity in Karen Communities of Northern Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2003): 478, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20072533>.

⁴ Platz, “Buddhism and Christianity in Competition?,” 478.

acquired by man as a member of society.”⁵ This foundation is what forms distinct groups of people and communities. The Karen people exemplify these values, crafting a robust and distinct identity. Thus, the Karen people's cultural fabric is inseparably woven with Christianity. This principle is similarly applicable when conveying the gospel to Muslims, Buddhists, and other groups. So that, the meaning of the gospel message stays the same when trying to make it understandable to the people. As a result, having ideas of how Asia is redefining the way of doing evangelism, and how people in Asia embrace their own understanding of mission within their context through culture, rituals, mythology, and other local factors can foster a more meaningful and effective approach to evangelism.

The History of Christianity

The spread of Christianity has played a very essential role in the life and experiences of the Karen people. The history of Christianity in Burma started from the arrival of the Portuguese who brought with them Catholic missionaries in 1514.⁶ However, everything changed when Protestant missionaries, like Richard Mardon and James Charter from the Baptist missionary society of London, arrived in 1807. This also included the American Baptist missionary couple Adoniram and Ann Judson who arrived in 1913.⁷ They all spent most of their ministry among the hill tribes.⁸ It was easier for missionaries to convert the hill tribes compared to the Burmese Buddhists.⁹ This marked the commencement and foundation of Christianity in Burma, which would influence the churches among the Karen people.

It is important to give some background as to why the gospel took a firm hold on the Karen people. Karen tradition tells the story of the “lost golden book” know in Karen as Li Tu Li Say. The creator, “Y'wa,” a supreme being, made three brothers. The oldest brother was Karen, the second brother was Black, and the youngest brother was White. To each, Y'wa gave a golden book that held the teachings of God. Then the three brothers parted and went to different parts of the world. One day, the Karen brother was clearing a forest for fields. He placed the book on a tree stump and went deeper into the forest to clear more land. Busy with his work, he neglected to study the teachings of Y'wa. Afterward, he burned the fields and suddenly remembered the book he had left on the tree stump. By then, it was too late, the fire had destroyed it. His brothers were far away now, and they could not share the teachings with him or his family. Thus, the prophecy began: the book that had disappeared would one day reappear through the white brother. This story was passed down from generation to generation, and the prophecy warned

⁵ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1871), 1. <https://archive.org/details/primitivculture0001edwa/page/n15/mode/2up>.

⁶ “A History of the Catholic Church in Myanmar,” *Dominican Friars*, December 8, 2022, accessed September 27, 2025, <https://www.opcentral.org/node/5999>

⁷ Stanley, “*Christian Hospitality for Interfaith Relations in Myanmar: A Historical and Theological Consideratio*” (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, May 2024), 60.

⁸ Hrang Hlei, “Myanmar,” in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Edited by Kenneth R. Ross, Francis Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Hendrickson Academic, 2022). 144-146.

⁹ Za Go, “A Brief History of Christianity in Burma (Myanamr),” *Chin People in the World* (blog), accessed September 25, 2025, <https://sialki.wordpress.com/the-stories-of-zomi/a-brief-history-of-christianity-in-burma/>.

that the Karen people must only trust the white brother, who would come by water on white wings.¹⁰

To the Karen people, it was good news when they heard that the white youngest brother was coming back to them. Because, when the news came that the foreigners had entered the mouth of the Tavoy river, the Karens rejoiced and said, “Now happiness has arrived. The thing has come by water. Now we may take a breath.”¹¹ They suffered from oppression under the Burmese kings.¹² This kind of oppression was one the factors to convert so that they would be able start a new life.

The story of the Karen people and the message of Christianity is not something foreign, but it was the fulfillment of the long awaited prophecy which passed down orally told generation to generation. There was a prophecy that said the younger brother will one day return and bring them “Li Tu Li Say,”. That will be a time for them to be liberated by gaining a way out through the wisdom and knowledge from the golden book.¹³

An important key in understanding the origin of Karen Christianity is to look at the life of Ko Tha Byu, known as the Karen Apostle,¹⁴ who once was enslaved and was known for being illiterate and rough, as well as feared by both his own people and their Burmese adversaries. When he was brought to the missionary Judson's home, he often observed Judson with a particular book, sparking his curiosity about its contents. This curiosity led him to inquire about it, and Ann Judson explained that the book contained the key to all wisdom and knowledge. Adoniram Judson and his wife, Ann, shared with Ko Tha Byu the teachings of Christianity, encompassing God's love, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of eternal life. The message resonated profoundly with Ko Tha Byu, as he had been raised with his people's ancient prophecies concerning a “lost book” and a supreme God. Adoniram Judson gained the first Karen convert to Christianity in Ko Tha Byu (1828) who lost no time in spreading the gospel among his people, declaring that the long lost book, which is the Bible, had been brought back by the white brother, and that the prophecy was fulfilled.¹⁵ When the Karen people heard the message, they instantly understood what it meant. They were happy to receive their book back

¹⁰ Doh Soe, “The Story Of Karen People Golden Book By Youth Canada,” December 16, 2013, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cA4upmJyyk4>.

¹¹ Saw Pwe Say, “Christian Missionary Activities in Irrawaddy Delta During Colonial Period c.1850-1947,” PhD., Okayama University, 2019. “Christian Missionary Activites in Irrawaddy Delta During Colonial Period.” 5-6.

¹² Amy Neiman, Eunice Soh, and Parisa Sutan, “Karen,” *EthnoMed*, July 1, 2008, accessed September 25, 2025, <https://ethnomed.org/culture/karen/#content>.

¹³ “Lost Book Found,” *Baptist Bible Translators Institute*, accessed October 11, 2025, <https://baptisttranslators.com/lost-book-found/>.

¹⁴ Francis Mason, *The Karen apostle : or, Memoir of Ko Thah-byu, the first Karen convert, with an historical and geographical account of the nation, its traditions, precepts, rites, &c.* (Boston: Princeton Theological Seminary Library, 1847), 14. Manson, a Baptist missionary to the Karens, records the conversion and ministry of Ko Thah-byu, often regarded as “the Karen Apostle,” highlighting early Karen Christian tradition and customs.

¹⁵ SAN C. PO, *Burma and the Karen* (London Elliot Stock, 1928), 1.

and diligently studied it. Then, the advent of Western education liberated the Karen community, as it symbolically represented the rediscovery of their lost book.¹⁶

Current Conflicts of Christianity the Karen Culture

Christianity introduced a profound duality to the Karen people, sparking both remarkable positive changes and significant challenges that cannot be ignored, and even stirring tensions among communities. The decision to convert to Christianity or to uphold cherished animistic traditions is a complex argument. These paths have unfolded as parallel roads where each individual stands at a crossroads, compelled to make a profound choice. Opting for either path entails the risk of losing something deeply valuable, even as one may gain considerable insight or spiritual fulfillment in return. The stakes are high, and the journey toward making such a choice is laden with moments of difficult contemplation.

The Impact of Western Missionaries

The Baptist Church in Burma was founded by Adoniram and Ann Judson, the pioneer missionaries who arrived in Rangoon in 1813. Christianity, both Protestant and Roman Catholic flourished in the Irrawaddy Delta districts and surrounding areas (a place where Karen people lived).¹⁷ The Delta area was the pivotal place where the Karen people gaining momentum in converting to Christianity with the help of the traditions and beliefs that seem to foreshadow Christian teaching. For instance, stories of the lost book, as mentioned above, and a supreme God. Because of this, when missionaries shared the gospel, many Karen people understood their message. After Ko Tha Byu converted in 1828, he then visited many Karen villages announcing the return of the white brother and of the golden book. This new teaching of the supreme God caused hundreds of Karen people to be converted to Christianity. John Wades was an American Baptist missionary in the early 19th century who had a significant impact on the Karen people. He created the first written form of the Karen language, especially the S'gaw Karen dialect, around 1931-1932 using chiefly Burmese letters for which type was already available.¹⁸ This was how the tradition of the Karen language went from oral to the written form. Karen people grew in their Christian faith through the America missionaries and Western style of education.¹⁹ In comparison with other regions in Buma, the Delta was the most successful in the development of missionary educational work. According to a survey of the American Baptist Mission, Protestant schools amounted to 365, and Roman Catholic schools to ninety-six in the Delta in 1927. After Christian missionaries left the country, the native Karen people took responsibility and continued to self-support the mission school. Therefore, under the guidance of Christian missionaries, the Christian Karens made great progress and became educated and knowledgeable, ready to serve their people and their country.²⁰ The spread of literacy and learning revolutionized these communities that had traditionally been steeped in oral traditions. The development of a written language opened up new avenues for the Karen. Mission schools were established, granting entire generations access to written knowledge. This development not only made religious texts more accessible but also equipped Karen individuals with educational skills, allowing them to

¹⁶ Pia Jolliffe, *Learning Migration and Intergenerational Relations: The Karen and the Gift of Education*, Introduction by Michael Bourdillon (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 17.

¹⁷ Pwe, "Christian Missionary Activities in Irrawaddy Delta During Colonial Period," 8.

¹⁸ Pwe, "Christian Missionary Activites in Irrawaddy Delta During Colonial Period," 19.

¹⁹ Thawngmung, *The Karen Revolution in Burma*, 4.

²⁰ Pwe, "Christian Missionary Activites in Irrawaddy Delta During Colonial Period," 54.

integrate more effectively into broader society, improve their social mobility, and cultivate a sense of dignity rooted in the belief of inherent worth in the eyes of God. The ability to write empowered the Karen people to communicate through magazines, sharing knowledge and information in published form. Furthermore, educational institutions nurtured professionals, academics, and other experts.²¹

Negative Impact

On the other hand, it also brought chaos to Karen society. The spread of Christianity ushered in deep cultural tensions. After the Karen people converted to Christianity, there were certain activities that were not compatible with the teachings of the Bible. As a result, some parents and grandparents cut ties with individuals who converted to Christianity because they saw them as rebelling against their ancestors. In some cases, converts could not return to their homes due to these differences. They lost connection with family gatherings, where the family would observe rituals and spirit worship ceremonies during reunions. This created a tragic rift within the family.²²

This is how this researcher learned that a friend came to know Christianity and wanted to convert. However, the family refused to grant this request because she was their only daughter. Her grandmother was especially heartbroken over the decision, as both the grandmother and the mother felt that their daughter was abandoning their beliefs. The grandmother even told her that she was no longer welcome to visit them and that she could no longer be considered a granddaughter. For them, ancestor worship, tradition, and their connection to the land are deeply rooted in their beliefs, passed down since childhood. They believe that these customs need to be preserved, and the only way they can do this is by passing them on to their descendants. However, when their descendants choose to convert to Christianity, it becomes a heavy burden on their hearts. They feel as though they have failed in their duty as elders to their family.²³ Becoming a Christian is often seen as abandoning one family and everything that one's ancestors practiced in their animistic faith. However, this is not entirely accurate. Christians still preserve many of the good aspects of their culture, things that can bring the Karen people together. For example, the ritual of wrist tying, New Year celebration, harvest festival and thanksgiving, and preserving the natural resources which will be mentioned in the following few paragraphs.

At the same time, becoming Christian results in significant changes to culture and traditions. Some aspects of Karen identity are no longer retained by those who convert. This is because converting to Christianity is viewed as becoming a new person in Christ, no longer bound by the old traditions and practices. Just as Paul said, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away; behold, the new has come," (2 Cor 5:15).

Yet, Christianity requires Karen converts to abandon certain traditional practices, which creates tension between cultural preservation and religious conviction. There was a time when one of the pastors was asked to visit the home of an animist, where the homeowner requested that the pastor dismantle all the idols and altars in the house. On the positive side, the

²¹ Henry C. Vedder, "Other Missions in Burma," *Baptist History Homepage*, 1927, accessed October 11, 2025, <https://baptisthistoryhomepage.com/vedder5.other.burma.html>.

²² Personal conversation with a friend, Phop Phra, December 25, 2017.

²³ Naw Paw Ta Yaw, testimony, Bethel Karen Baptist Church, Phop Phra, Tak, July 9, 2015.

homeowner had converted to Christianity and became a new person in Christ. However, this situation also meant that the animist family's beliefs would disappear along with their traditional practices. This created tension in the community, where non-believers were afraid to open themselves to the gospel due to the fear of losing their identity. As a result, some people under the influence of animism did not want to send their families and friends to convert to Christianity. At one point, this researcher thought that Christianity was destroying the native culture, traditions, and customs which are the very things that had bound us together and preserved for thousands of years. But he said he was able to rebuild his relationship with them by investing time and effort and inviting them for a trip and meal fellowship.²⁴ This raised a question: Does Karen culture always need to remain the same, or can it evolve? As most would agree, every culture in the world evolves over time.

Buddhist and Christian

The Karen people are one of the longest-surviving ethnic groups in Burma, with their struggle for self-determination beginning in 1949 and continuing to this day. The Karen have fought for their rights in Burma since the mid-twentieth century, with the Karen National Union (KNU) serving as the primary political and military organization representing their cause.²⁵

This cause has now splintered into two groups. The Christianity (KNU) and the Buddhist Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). This division deeply impacted Karen people causing disruption within their group between the Christians (KNU) and Buddhists (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, DKBA). The primary reason for this separation was religion²⁶ inequality and the inability to find common ground for unity.

The majority of the leaders who led the revolution in 1949 were Christians, and they tended to align their religious practices with their governance system. Over time, Buddhist members of the movement felt that their beliefs and traditions were not being equally recognized. Certain Buddhist rituals were discouraged in KNU-controlled areas, leading to resentment among Buddhist soldiers and villagers. This sense of exclusion created fertile ground for dissatisfaction, especially as the war dragged on and the Karen people suffered heavy casualties and displacement. Christian leaders, believing their religious practices were superior because they served the living God, failed to recognize the importance of adapting their beliefs to the community they were part of. At that time, those who converted to Christianity seem to believe that their beliefs were more superior to the other and that made the other side dissatisfied. As a result, in 1994, the DKBA was officially formed to serve Buddhist religious values. The creation of the DKBA weakened the Karen struggle for autonomy by dividing the community along religious lines. This split not only undermined the Karen military strength but also deepened distrust between Christian and Buddhist Karens. Currently, though tensions have

²⁴ Toh Pah Doh, "The wonderful testimony of Reverend Pastor Tha Do: Kaw Thoo Lei Republic Podcast," podcast, YouTube video, 24:34, posted by Kawthoolei Republic Podcast, December 11, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VC9xdAIB1Us>.

²⁵ Ida Fagervold, "A Land Regime for the Future Kawthoolei" (MA diss., University of OSLO, 2021), 3.

²⁶ Quinn Davis, *Karen Unity Building Initiatives: Towards Sustainable Peace in Myanmar*, CPCS Learning Paper (Bangkok: The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies [CPCS], 2016), 10.

lightened between the KNU and the DKBA, there is still a significant divide in efforts to share the gospel, and the tension still persists in the community.²⁷

This researcher will never forget one incident that happened during a summer camp, which was part of a school activity to teach English and engage with a village in the Karen State. The village visited was a Buddhist-dominated area with a very strong Buddhist monk presence. After completing the summer English course, there was a closing ceremony. As usual, there was a Christian worship service with praise songs before proceeding with the rest of the program. Some sang and some danced in the newly built school in the village, which was constructed by one of the organizations. However, that night, when the visitors returned to sleep, someone came to the newly built school and burned it down in the middle of the night. The next morning, the visiting group was shocked by what had happened. As the group was leaving, they realized that the Christian songs and praise provoked the most influential monk and the local community.²⁸ They didn't want their children to fall under the influence of Christianity.

Wrist tying (Lah Ku Kee Su)

As mentioned above, the traditions and rituals of the Karen people do not completely need to be purged when one converts to Christianity. For example, the wrist-tying ceremony is an ancient tradition practiced by the Karen people before they converted to Christianity or Buddhism. Their ancestors lived in fear of different spirits. To protect themselves, they used white thread, which they tied around the wrists of children after calling back their spirits. The most famous phrase spoken during the ceremony is “Prii gle kae thai” in the Pwo dialect, and in the S'gaw dialect, it's “Pru ka la hae kai hae kai,” both meaning “soul, come back.” The literal translation is “Oh spirit, come back, come back.”²⁹ There are seven elements used in the wrist-tying ceremony, including:

1. A glass of cold water
2. Three white threads
3. Seven rice balls
4. Seven triangular-shaped lumps of sticky rice in packages
5. Seven boiled bananas
6. Seven branches of *Paw Woung* flowers
7. Seven pieces of sugarcane

²⁷ Karen Human Rights Group, *Inside the DKBA*, KHRG Field Report, March 31, 1996, <https://khr.org/1996/03/khr96b23/inside-dkba>.

²⁸ The incident occurred in a village in Kawkareik Township, Karen State, Burma, in 2017. The village is predominantly Buddhist and is strongly influenced by a local monk. Although the school was built by a non-profit organization, visiting groups of students conducted worship there, which led the villagers to mistakenly assume that the school had been established to promote Christianity in their community.

²⁹ Yoko Hayami, “Karen Tradition According to Christ or Buddha: The Implications of Multiple Reinterpretations for a Minority Ethnic Group in Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27, no. 2 (1996): 338-49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20062746>.

The ceremony symbolizes the union of a person and their spirit, ensuring they live free from fear. Everyone who attends this ceremony wears the full traditional Karen costume.³⁰ In Karen families and communities worldwide, white threads are tied around the wrists in a ceremony known as “Lah Ku Kee Su.” “Lah Ku” means August, and “Kee Su” refers to the act of binding the wrist.³¹

According to the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD), the Karen wrist-tying ceremony is an ancient tradition passed down through generations. It symbolizes unity, protection, and a call for peaceful spirits.³² This is why the ceremony reminds each generation of the importance of staying united through respect and forgiveness and remembering what binds the community together.³³ Although the Karen people have converted to Christianity or Buddhism, they have continued to carry out this special practice. Dr. Peacefully Thomas, a respected church leader among the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Churches stated that the wrist-tying ceremony is not a religious practice, per se. Instead, it serves as a sign and symbol that, once a year, generations come together in unity and tie the white thread around each other’s wrists, representing their spiritual bond with one another.³⁴ Thus, both Buddhists and Christians, as well as animists, come together to celebrate this unity once a year. Moreover, they pray for one another according to their respective beliefs and greet one another on a special date in August.³⁵ This researcher also experienced this ceremony in a Christian setting, where participants prayed for each other, reminding one another that unity, respect, and forgiveness are what binds communities together in Christ.³⁶ In the same way, Paul also wrote a letter to the churches in Galatia, emphasizes the unity and equality of all believers in Christ. “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:26-28, ESV)

³⁰ Drum Publications, “Karen Wrist Tying Ceremony,” accessed October 11, 2025, <https://drumpublications.org/wrist.php>. The Drum Publication Group is a Karen organization that focuses on preserving and promoting the Karen language, literature, and culture, especially among Karen communities in Myanmar and along the Thai–Myanmar border.

³¹ Shah Paung, “Calling Home the Spirits,” *The Irrawaddy*, August 2004, https://www2.irrawaddy.com/print_article.php?art_id=4026.

³² KECD, “The Karen Wrist Tying Ceremony,” Karen Education and Culture Department, October 1, 2024, <https://kecdktl.org/2024/10/the-karen-wrist-tying-ceremony-2/>.

³³ DVB English News, “Traditional Karen Wrist-Tying Ceremony Held in Thailand,” September 2, 2024, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=We-6ChAfcVY>.

³⁴ Peacefully Thomas, Preaching, Bethel Karen Baptist Church, Phop Phra, Tak, January 1, 2018.

³⁵ Prasert Rangkla, “Karen Ethno-Nationalism and the Wrist-Tying Ceremony along the Thai-Burmese Border,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 45, no. 1 (2014): 75, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43863053>.

³⁶ Peacefully Thomas, Preaching, Bethel Karen Baptist Church, Phop Phra, Tak, January 1, 2018.

Harvest Festival and New Year Celebration

Farming is the primary source of livelihood for the Karen people who live in Karen State in Burma,³⁷ and rice and other crops are their main food sources.³⁸ A good harvest is an important part of their daily life because it directly impacts their livelihood. Therefore, the Karen people have a tradition of celebrating the harvest and giving thanks, reflecting their spiritual relationship with the land and agricultural cycles.³⁹ “These festivals embody the Karen philosophy of reciprocity with nature and gratitude for the bounty provided by their rice-centered agricultural system.”⁴⁰

During the ceremony, local residents pay respect to the “Phibiyaw” (the guardian of crops) by offering gifts. The event also involves a traditional Karen dance called the “Don Dance.” The word “Don” means “togetherness,”⁴¹ which is why this dance was created to promote unity among the people. This kind of dance also was performed at funerals. However, those who are Christians do not perform this at funerals anymore, but they only perform during special occasions. This researcher, who participated in several of these ceremonies, observed that the music played during the Don Dance focuses on gospel messages⁴² rather than traditional music. This reflects how Christianity has integrated into the Karen culture and shaped their beliefs. On the other hand, Karen Christians celebrate the harvest in their own way with a Thanksgiving service on Sunday, where they bring their first fruits to God, as instructed in Exodus “The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God.” (Exodus 23:19, ESV) Instead of calling on spirits, Karen Christians give thanks to God, pray for His guidance, and ask for blessings on their crops. Some families also hold separate, special thanksgiving ceremonies for their harvested crops. Along with the harvest celebration, the Karen people also celebrate the New Year.⁴³

³⁷ Karen News, “Over 200 Locals Join 28th Traditional First Harvest Ceremony in Win-Yaw Area,” *Karen News*, January 4, 2018. <https://karennews.org/2018/01/over-200-locals-join-28th-traditional-first-harvest-ceremony-in-win-yaw-area/>.

³⁸ “Uncover the Karen Way of Life in Northern Thailand,” *The Bush Camp Chiang Mai*, April 22, 2023, <https://thebushcampchiangmai.com/karen-hill-tribe-thailand/>.

³⁹ Samdhana Institute, “The Rotate Festival: Reminding Self and Telling Others,” *Samdhana Institute*, September 12, 2024, <https://www.samdhana.org/stories/rotate-festival-reminding-self-and-telling-others>.

⁴⁰ Karen Student Network Group, “Karen indigenous people habit of thanking spirit before harvesting,” December 14, 2016, video, 3:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfOIEb_3tV0. Saw O Moo is a Karen indigenous right defender live in Mutraw District, Karen State, Myanmar who is expert on indigenous knowledge, environmental protection, and community leadership. Though not a scientist by formal training, he was highly respected for his traditional ecological wisdom and ability to organize local communities. He shared his knowledge on how it is necessary to thank the spirit before harvesting.

⁴¹ Karen News, “Karen Villagers Breathe Life Into Their Rice-Tying Ritual To Summon The Rice Spirits,” *Karen News*, March 3, 2015, <https://karennews.org/2015/03/karen-villagers-breathe-life-into-their-rice-tying-ritual-to-summon-the-rice-spirits/>.

⁴² Kehdohhtoo Pwyihtoo, “TMK Modern Dance by Peacefully Thomas,” March 23, 2019, video, 5:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eboenTuIiQc>.

⁴³ “Celebrating the Karen New Year,” *The Plainsman*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.plainsman.com/stories/celebrating-the-karen-new-year,56770>.

The Karen people who practice animism believe that unseen spirits inhabit their world. These include *Nah Htee* (evil water spirits) that guide rivers and streams. Violating these spirits by throwing trash or pollute into the water can cause harm, such as temporary blindness, injury, or illness. To be healed, one must offer something to the river as a form of appeasement.⁴⁴ This belief can also be found in the Bible where “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’” (Genesis 1:26, ESV). This passage highlights the responsibility of humans to care for creation. Rather than fearing evil spirits, Karen Christians follow the same principle by showing respect for God's creation, recognizing that God has entrusted humanity with dominion over the earth.

Conclusion

The belief in “Y’wa” and the integration of the Christian faith into Karen cultural identity reveals a unique interplay between tradition and transformation. Karen culture, expressed through rituals, festivals, clothing, and community practices, remains a vital foundation for the Karen people’s sense of belonging, unity, and spiritual life.

Ko Tha Byu serves as a remarkable example of transformation. His journey from killer to emissary for the Karen people illustrates profound personal change. Had it not been for the love and hope derived from the scriptures, he might have remained unchanged. However, converting to Christianity at age 50 altered his path and touched countless lives. The Bible, often referred to as the Golden Book, offers guidance for following God's will. It’s difficult to imagine the Karen people's resilience without the influence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The scriptures provide them with liberation and enable them to witness to other communities, including the Burmese, who once despised them.

Thus, there is immense value in embracing Christian teachings. While tensions arose between ancestral traditions and the new faith, the Karen people have demonstrated resilience by maintaining meaningful aspects of their cultural heritage alongside their Christian beliefs. Festivals, the wrist-tying ceremony, and other ritual practices continue to unite the community, even as they are reframed through a Christian lens. This shows that faith and culture need not exist in opposition. Ultimately, the Karen experience and journey demonstrate that cultural identity and religious transformation can coexist, enriching both personal spirituality and communal cohesion.

The story of the Karen people highlights the importance of understanding and respecting local culture when sharing the gospel, offering a model of evangelism that honors tradition while fostering renewal, unity, and hope. In John 8:32, it says, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” (NIV) This shows that understanding God’s truth can liberate individuals, heal communities, and help people find the truth in their culture and tradition.

⁴⁴ Andrew Paul, Saw Sha Bwe Moo, and Robin Roth, “Water and Fish Conservation by Karen Communities: An Indigenous Relational Approach,” *The Newsletter* 94 (Spring 2023), <https://www.ias.asia/the-newsletter/article/water-and-fish-conservation-karen-communities-indigenous-relational-approach>.

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