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PAMPHLETS

No. 8

The Karens of Burma

by  
Harry I. Marshall

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**BURMA PAMPHLETS**

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OF BURMA

BY  
HARRY I. MARSHALL

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C. H. G. Moorhouse, and 1 Map*

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Karen Woman

## THE KARENS OF BURMA

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### I

#### BACKGROUND

THE Karen people of Burma are now the second most important tribe in the country ; but one hundred years ago they were called by their more powerful Burman neighbours the "Wild Cattle of the Hills".

At that time they were unorganized and lived in the dense forests that covered the country, especially in the ranges of hills that afforded them protection. They had no written language and were held in bondage to the fears that made their lives stagnant and prevented their changing the customs that they had received from their ancestors.

They were not an aggressive people and sought security in withdrawal from the rivers, which in those days were the only lines of communication, and they built their small villages high up in the hills or other places difficult of access. Here they lived in poverty but not without hope that some day their descendants would have better times. But now like hunted birds they admonished their children as they squatted at their rude low tables to eat their rice, "Eat fast, eat fast. The Burmans may come!"

Their origin is obscure. They have no written records and the destructive wet climate has obliterated almost all

traces of their ancestry. Probably they originated in China and came into Burma from the north-east in about the sixth or seventh century of the Christian era. Their language and personal characteristics would seem to indicate this.

The derivation of the term "Karen" is uncertain. It is the name by which this people have been called by the Burmese. The name by which they call themselves is *Pga K' Nyaw* which may be of Chinese origin and means "Men". They are the only real men. All other peoples are designated by their name as "Burman", "English", and so on.

## II

### DISTRIBUTION

The only part of Burma that can be called Karen country is that lying eastward from Toungoo. Here in the mountains the villages have never been dominated by their more powerful Burman neighbours and in several sections they retain their Karen names. In other sections they are known by Burmese names and show the influence of their having been overpowered at some time.

On the eastern slopes of the ranges which are dominated by Mt. Nattaung (called by the Karens *Thaw Thi*) are the three small independent states the chiefs of which are Karens. They belong to the Red Karen tribes and are called in Burmese Karen-ni. These states are Bawlekeh, Kyetpogyi and Kantarrawaddi and do not comprise a part of Burma politically except that they owe their security to the British Government with whom they have treaty relations established by the early Deputy Commissioners of Toungoo.

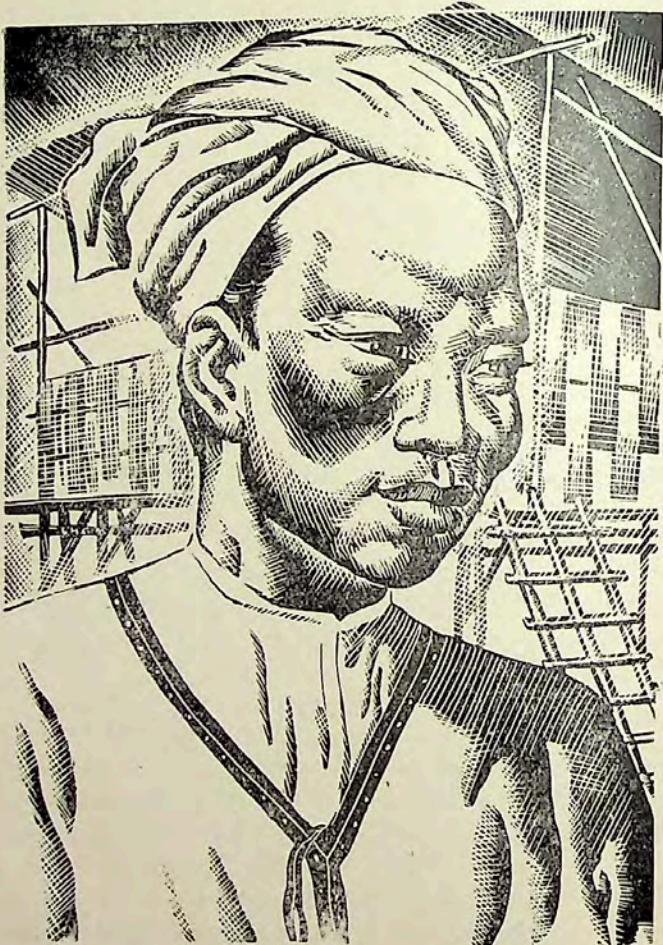
There are a few Karens in the ranges of hills as far

north as a line running through Thayetmyo and Pyinmana. To the east, Loikaw is a Karen district and Karens are found farther eastward in Thailand. For the most part the Karens share their localities with the Burmans and Shans. Their villages are now found scattered over the plains as well as the hills in Lower Burma all the way from Pyinmania to Victoria Point and from Arakan to some indefinite line in Thailand. It has been reported that there are a few scattered Karen communities even as far east as Cambodia, but they have been pretty well absorbed by the more aggressive surrounding races.

During the unsettled Burmese times they clung to the hills and the remote forests for their security and wrested a precarious living there, but with the more peaceful conditions brought about by the settled British Government they spilled over into the plains and, clearing tracts of forest for villages and tracts for paddy fields, they settled down and became prosperous. Therefore they may now be found in every district of Lower Burma. In such sections as around Bassein, Pyapon, Pegu, Thaton, Moulmein, and Tavoy they comprise a very considerable minority of the population.

In the hills the Karen villages are usually at the top of a ridge. The houses are close together and in some places they are surrounded by a stockade of bamboo with sharp pickets pointing outward to reinforce the fence. There are seldom more than twenty to thirty houses in a village.

When they build on the plains they usually select a site away from the roads where they will attract least attention and be free from intrusion. Often in the villages there is little attempt at orderly arrangement of the houses.



Karen Man

One may front against the back of the next. Here the individuality of the Karens is made manifest.

Originally they were, almost without exception, agriculturists and therefore kept to the outlying districts. Their villages were small for they did not have the power to organize a large society. But later, as they began to grow more prosperous and some of them became well-to-do landowners, they moved into the towns. With the spread of education they took up such posts in the cities as teachers, clerks, policemen, and officers and men in the Burma Army, and in a few instances as traders. Therefore in the vicinity of each of the larger towns and cities of Burma there was, at the time of the invasion, a community of Karens usually living in a section by themselves, for they are gregarious. In Rangoon, however, many Karens were to be found renting apartments and living among other peoples in the city, and men and women were to be found in small numbers everywhere.

### III

#### PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

In appearance the Karens are not very different from the other Mongoloid peoples in Burma. Their usual colour is a little lighter than the Burmans', and is that of coffee with a generous mixture of milk. Their faces are a little flatter than the Burmans'. Having lived mostly in the hills they have a more stocky body and thicker thighs and calves than those of their neighbours. In height they are short, the men averaging a little over five feet, and the women a little less.

Young people of both sexes are attractive and robust,

but hard work, undernourishment and, in the case of the women, constant child-bearing often make them appear old when they have only reached what should be the prime of life.

Family life among the Karens is not unlike that of the ordinary European family. They do not have the patriarchial family system of the Chinese, and each married couple usually has its own house in which to live. Often the woman brings her young husband to live with her parents and he inherits their lands on their decease. Marriage in the early days was strictly within the tribe. Even marriage with those of other Karen tribes was looked down upon. Karen women usually bear as many as ten or more children, but often raise less than half of them, due to their lack of knowledge of sanitation. Karen fathers are usually fond of their children and take as good care of them as they know how. Their love is generally sentimental and children are allowed to rule the household. Old people usually receive good care for the Karens always reverence age.

#### IV

#### OCCUPATIONS

In the early days the Karens were concerned with wresting a living for themselves from the ground where they lived. Almost without exception they were cultivators of the soil and raised rice, their principal food. They followed the two methods usually found in Burma, the mountain method in the hills and the paddy-field method on the plains.

In the hills the wasteful way of cultivating rice was that of clearing a section, called in Burmese a *taung-ya*,

on the mountain side. Everything but the largest trees would be cut in the cool season of January or February and left to dry until just before the rains began in May. Then it would be set on fire. Precautions were taken to keep the fires from spreading to the neighbouring dry forest, but these were often futile and vast areas were frequently ablaze for days until the rains would put out the fires. In this way large quantities of forest containing valuable timber would be sacrificed for a small quantity of rice. The burning would leave a deposit of ash that would act as a fertilizer for the rice to be planted. It would also kill the seeds of weeds and trees and give the rice a chance to get a start over the more vigorous growth of native plants.

On the plains they used buffaloes and oxen to plough when the rains had covered the ground with a few inches of water. The flowers of the pyinma tree that comes out just before the work begins with the coming of the rains is called *P'Nah Haw* meaning "the buffalo weeps", for they say that when the buffalo sees this tree in bloom he weeps because he knows that he must soon begin



Karen girl carrying  
bamboo water pots

ploughing. Almost always they used the small wooden plough, sometimes tipped with iron. I have seen a herd of six or eight buffaloes driven around and around over the muddy ground as a method of preparing it for receiving the seed.

As soon as the rain had softened the ground the rice or, more properly, the paddy would be planted by hand, being poked into the ground with a sharp stick. The Karens invented few tools for their work and did not readily adopt those used by other peoples. They weeded with rude hoes, or with sticks and fingers. As the crop matured, they had to fight many varieties of animals and birds. They would construct rude fences of bamboo to keep out wild pig and deer. To protect themselves from the birds they strung small ropes made of various fibres around the field and attached bamboo clappers and later tin cans or anything that would make a noise. It was the duty of the women or small boys to sit in the central hut where they lived during the time of cultivation and pull these strings to drive away the marauding birds which came in large flocks to get their fill of the succulent, newly-formed rice.

The rice was reaped by hand using a sickle with a long curved handle, and then the grain was beaten out against a bamboo bar fixed to standards set up in the ground. The wind was the winnowing machine. The grain was stored in paddy bins prepared for it until it was needed for supplying the daily table. Often these bins would be located part way between the cultivation and the village site and they were not molested for there is an innate honesty among the Karens that respects that to which they have become accustomed.

In the early 1900's many Karens who had cleared immense tracts of land raised large crops of paddy and became well-to-do. It was then that they employed many Burman and Indian coolies to work for them. They built substantial houses, often of teak, or in a few instances of brick. Some of them were able to add field to field and became really wealthy. It was at this time that money-lenders became very active and going about the villages imposed loans of easy money on the unsuspecting cultivators. These loans were then allowed to lie idle for a year or two until the interest, set at exorbitant rates, mounted to nearly double the original loans, when a sudden demand for full payment could not be met; and the results were that the lending sharks foreclosed on the rich paddy-fields. In this way many a Karen who was once a prosperous cultivator became a tenant on land that he had previously owned. This process continued until near the time of the invasion and the property, land, houses and cattle of the Karens as well as of Burman cultivators, were largely in the hands of absentee landlords. The Indian Tamil Chettiar were the most numerous class of money-lenders and most exacting in demanding their pounds of flesh.

In only a few cases have the Karens proved to be good traders. They are too soft-hearted and often sell on credit which they feel embarrassed to collect, and therefore they soon fail. The shops in the Karen villages in the hills are most often kept by the Shans who are born traders. On the plains the Chinese have found the Karen villages good places to make money. They begin in a small way and soon, by lending money, collecting their debts by foreclosing on the land, and sometimes by selling

opium on the quiet, grow rich at the expense of their neighbours. They usually come to Burma single but they can easily marry, for their prosperity attracts the young women, and then they settle down to raise a family of mixed blood, and make a real contribution to the life of the country.

The Karens are at home in the forests. In many cases they became expert foresters for the Government and for the timber firms. Where the use of elephants was needed they were largely employed. There were at the time of the invasion a number of Karen timber contractors owning elephants which they understood and knew how to catch and train and use in hauling logs from the jungles to the river banks where in the rains the swelling streams carried them down to the markets at Moulmein and Rangoon.

The Karens have established a safe way of training newly-caught elephants for timber use. Instead of the more cruel methods of jabbing and brow-beating often used by Indian elephant drivers, they tie the animals up to the large trees left near the point of the V-shaped corral that they build along the elephant runs in the jungle, and then they keep the animals from sleeping by continually feeding and working with them for five or more days, until they subdue their wild spirit and win them to obedience to their keepers. Thus in six months they can train a full-grown animal to follow the directions of its keeper and drag out logs.

From the first contacts with the "Younger White Brother" their desire to read the Book which he brought them was very keen. In the beginning men and some women of all ages went to school to be able to read the

precious Book. As soon as one made a little progress he was required to go out and teach others. In this way schools sprang up all over the country wherever the people turned to the Christian teaching. Teachers were much respected. They were addressed as *Thra*. With the increase of education went an increase in the standards of training. Many of them were called to go to Upper Burma and teach in schools run by private agencies, by missions and by the Education Department of Government. In the spreading of the Christian teaching among many of the outlying tribes of Upper Burma and the Chin Hills the Karen teachers played a very important part, often undergoing the same hardships that foreign teachers had to bear among more primitive tribes.

During recent years the Karens have taken up all occupations. Their more general education and newly-developed adaptability to take on new ways have given them openings in offices as clerks, in the police, in the army where they have played an important part even as they have in the professions. A number of Karens have taken up medicine, among the most distinguished of whom was Sir San C Po, of Bassein.

Young Karen women have made a name for themselves as nursemaids. Their gentle ways and general reliability have made them most popular and many of them have cared for children of European officers. Several of them have been to England and America. They have also done very well as regular registered nurses in the hospitals. and there was hardly a hospital in Burma in which there was not one, or more, Karen nurse. Their work on the whole has been very satisfactory.

With the coming of machinery the Karens have taken

to mechanics. In the machine shops, foundries and workshops of the big companies, and in the oil fields they have played their part. They have also done well as motor-car mechanics and drivers as well as in electrical engineering. In mining they have done their share, although for very difficult underground tunnelling I believe they have not been found as daring as the Gurkhas of Nepal.

## V RELIGION

Primitive Karens are animists, worshipping the spirits with which their imaginations people the phenomena of nature, the hills, the streams, and any unusual happenings which they see around them. The changes of season are due to conflict between the demons (often called by their Burmese name *nats*) of the dry weather and the wet. Those are victorious whose season is prevailing at the time. The banyan is supposed to be the abode of a very vigorous spirit, probably because the seeds of that tree spring up in all kinds of unsuspected places.

In addition to the spirits of the wood and mountain there are the family Penates called the *Bgha* that, when offended, cause illness by eating the *Kala* (psyche) of the person and ultimately cause his death if allowed to go on. They must be appeased by offerings of chicken or pig. Every member of the family must be present on the occasion to save one member from illness. It is hoped that the feast will be so tempting that the demon will leave the sufferer and take the food instead. The customs connected with these feasts differ in various localities and

among different tribes. In many of the more civilized sections they are no longer carefully observed. Christians do not resort to them.

Sex irregularities are believed to be most abhorrent to the *bgha* and are reputed to have been the cause of most trouble. Among the Bwès they are considered to cause the drying up of land and the failure of crops, and are therefore most severely punished by the elders when discovered. In their primitive state the Karens were unusually free from fornication and adultery. The recent transition period, with the breaking down of old customs and before Western ideals have been established, has seen some relaxation of these conditions.

The old epic song about *Ywa*, the Father God and Creator, and this belief in the existence of God are found among all the tribes. It does not, however, play an important part in their daily lives which are taken up with their struggles with the ever-present *nats* and demons.

Those Karens who were in closest contact with the Burmans, as for example the Pwo Karens, took on a thin veneer of Buddhism and went to the pagodas at the full moon and the quarters, but as a rule it was largely a social conforming that did not have a deep spiritual content.

## VI LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

Karen is an agglutinated monosyllabic language belonging to the Sinic family of languages. Like the Chinese it has tones which are important in learning to speak it, for the same sound may have entirely different

meanings if spoken in different tones. For example, the syllable *Meh* may mean 'eye', 'sand', 'tail', 'mole' (on the body), or 'tooth', according to the tone in which it is uttered.

Originally the Karens had a mass of unwritten bard literature, poems and stories handed down orally and recited around the fireplaces, from generation to generation. Some of these were epic poems which related the history of their race, and others folk stories which they told for amusement and which served to keep alive the traditions of their tribes. Many of these stories were much like the Negro folk tales told in America under the title of "Uncle Remus Stories", or like Grimms' Fairy Tales in Europe. In these Karen folk stories the rabbit figures as the wily one as it does in the Negro tales, and as the fox appears in the European stories.

Their epic poems have remarkable accounts of the creation of the world by *Ywa*, who closely resembles the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. They tell of the origin of the human race and the expulsion from a garden, which is similar to the story of Paradise Lost. The poems are in five stress lines and are in couplet form like Hebrew poetry. In their earlier days there used to be rhyming contests or "capping rhymes" as an important part of gatherings such as wedding and funeral feasts. At present they only survive among the most primitive villages away from outside influences.

There are many dialects of the Karen language—probably about twenty of them. They fall into six groups: the Sgaw, Pwo, Bwè, Padaung, Karen and Zayein. The Sgaw and Pwo are the two largest groups. These are the two which have been used in education and in

which books have been printed. Some of the others, especially the Bwè, have been reduced to writing, but the number of those who would use them is so small that it has not been considered advisable to develop them.

The Sgaw dialect has, as designed by Western scholars, twenty-five consonants which are written on the main writing line and seven vowels which are inserted as diacritical marks either above or below the line, except one which follows the consonant with which it is pronounced. There are five tonal characters which indicate the required inflection. The language is perfectly phonetic. Each character has its invariable pronunciation. For certain guttural letters and the tones (which are not found in the Burmese language) arbitrary adaptations of Burmese letters are used. The spelling consists of all the possible variations and combinations of consonant, vowel, and tone, although not every combination forms a word in general usage.

There are several compound consonants in which *g*, *y*, *r*, *l* and *w* are combined with other consonants after the manner of *c* and *l*, *g* and *y*, etc. in English. There are no closed syllables in the Sgaw dialect, every word ending in a vowel as in the Hawaiian language. This makes it very musical. It has sometimes been called the Italian of the Orient.

The Pwo dialect has more nasals and short and sharp syllables than the Sgaw. It also has some final consonants. In general the construction is not different from the Sgaw. An early study of the two dialects showed that thirteen-fourteenths of the words in the Sgaw and Pwo are from the same roots. It is, however, difficult for one who understands only the Sgaw dialect to under-

stand, Pwo because of the nasal effect on the pronunciation.

The Bwè dialects, spoken near Toungoo in the hills about Thandaung, have many nasal sounds and somewhat resemble the Pwo. Other dialects in the mountains differ quite widely from each other but the people in the hills speak several of these dialects for there is now much more intermingling than there was formerly when feuds kept the people apart and made it possible for different dialects to grow up even within a few miles of each other.

The grammar of the various dialects is not difficult. The sentence is formed after the same model as the English, with subject, verb, and object. The written and spoken language are very similar and direct. There are honorifics as in Burmese. There is no sex designation in the names of individuals, and so the Karens use *Saw* for all men and *Naw* for all women or girls.

When Westerners first came into contact with them the Karens had no written language. But so urgent was the demand of those who accepted the missionaries as fulfilling the prophesies uttered by their old poets that some day they would be found by the "Younger White Brother" who would come across the sea in great ships "with white wings" and bring them the Book which their ancestors were supposed to have neglected and lost, that Dr. Wade, in about 1830, reduced the language of the Sgaw dialect to writing. He used the Burmese alphabet, for at that time any Karen who knew anything about reading could read in the Burmese language of the monastery. It was not then foreseen that English and the Roman letter would occupy such an important place in world affairs as they now enjoy.

Mr. Brayton a little later did the same for the Pwo dialect. The desire to read and to have an education arose among the Karens who became Christians, and as the Sgaw tribe has come into the Christian Church in much larger numbers than the Pwo it has consequently developed a larger literature. The greater part of this is of a distinctly Christian nature, designed to promote the spiritual life as well as to give general information. The people have not had time to create a modern literature of their own although a small beginning had been made before the Japanese invasion. No doubt out of the hardships of these war years a new literature will be born.

## VII

### DRESS

The Karens had a distinctive dress in their primitive state. Not only was there a national style but each individual village in the hills had its distinctive variations which marked a man's origin.

The general dress of the Karens was an uncut garment made by sewing together two breadths of cloth as they came from the rude loom, leaving a hole in the middle of one end for the head and two small holes at the upper corners for the arms. It was made of their own home-grown cotton, which was raised, carded, spun and woven, as well as dyed, by their women-folk. The ground was usually white as it came unbleached from the loom. They interwove decorations of red and sometimes of black.

Among the Sgaw Karens the smock (called a *Hsay*) was white with a wide lower border of red. The garment reached from the shoulders to the calves and was the only bit of clothing worn. It was large and

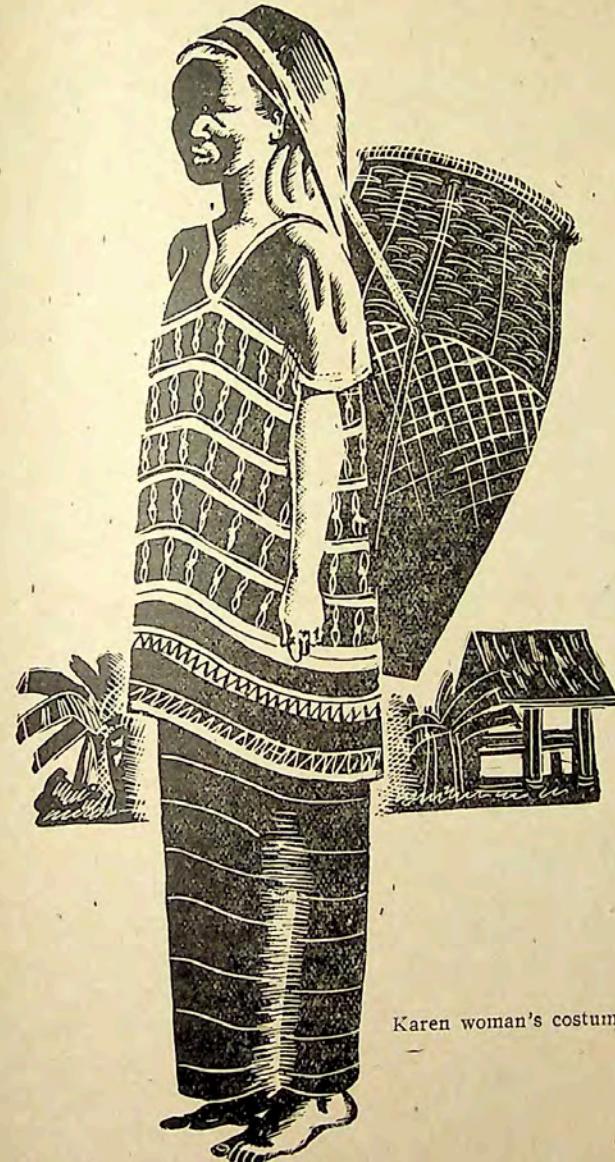
roomy so that a man could squat down and pull his knees up inside the garment. Sometimes it was folded around the loins as its wearer squatted on the ground or mat. On cold mornings extra warmth was obtained by wrapping a blanket round the body, either a thick one of the same hand-woven cotton, or one of wool bought from some bazaar.

In the Toungoo Hills, the Bwè and other tribes usually wore a shorter smock, with all kinds and variations of stripes, which would hardly reach to their knees. They covered their legs with baggy Shan "bombies" or pants, usually black in colour.

For a number of years the Karens on the plains and in the towns have worn the usual Burmese dress consisting of a *longyi* (skirt) with a white jacket in the warm weather and dark thick imported clothing in the cold.

The usual dress for the women has been the *longyi*, worn over the lower part of the body and a shorter *hsay* or smock over the upper part. The former was woven by the women themselves but the latter was often of imported cloth, usually black. Sometimes black velvet was used for the smock. Among the Sgaws the finest smocks were made of homespun black or dark blue cloth and were trimmed with rows of Job's Tears, the white seeds that grow readily in their plantations. Otherwise, bits of blue or red ribbon or strips of cloth were used for ornaments. Often many strings of beads were wrapped about the neck, some of which were supposed to have magical value to ward off evil spirits.

The women of the villages near Thandaung among the Bwès, or Mopghas as they call themselves, wove very elaborate skirts in which a number of colours were beauti-



Karen woman's costume

fully blended together, but the weaving of these skirts was almost a lost art at the time of the invasion.

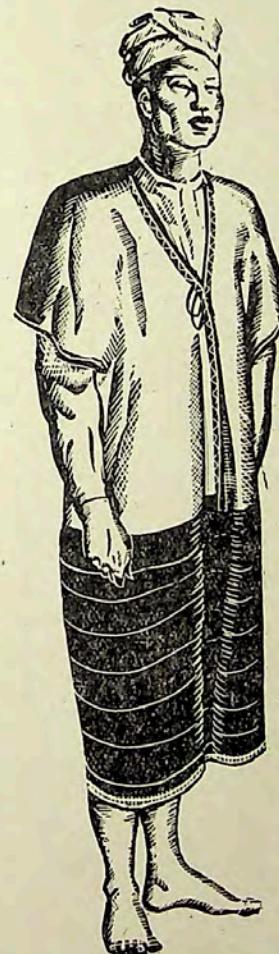
Little children were wrapped in blankets or in garments that were cast off by their elders. When romping boys began to run around they did not bother with clothes until they were five or six, or even older. Little girls usually began to wrap a small *longyi* about their waists at three or four. Elders often went about with scant loin cloths, but very seldom did they appear without any clothing.

With the rise of national self-consciousness, the Karens tried an adaptation of their national dress and, finding the old smock ill-adapted to modern conditions, they invented a jacket cut after the style of the ordinary European lounge jacket made of the native cloth and embroidered with some of the designs of the original smocks. There were many patterns of these and they became very popular among the younger men in the cities and towns and among older boys in schools. They were a sort of blazer such as is worn in schools in Europe or America. A few Karens adopted the European style of men's dress, but few women in the cities wore anything except the usual Burmese costume.

Among the Bwès and Pakus, another tribe near Toungoo, the women all wore skirts of an identical pattern. This had a black ground with two or three narrow horizontal stripes at about the height of the knees. But among the Sgaws there was a large number of patterns. The most common was a conventional design of horizontal stripes of various shades of red and in the middle a "python skin" in clouded pattern. This commemorated the old myth of the woman who was stolen by the

legendary white python and who was released only by the sacrifice of her husband. On her release she wove the pattern of the python's skin into her skirt thus offering him the greatest insult that she knew. (This incident is related in the story of "Ku Law Lay and Naw Mu Eh".)

Bathing is an important item of comfort in a hot country, being not so much for cleanliness as for coolness. In the hills where the water is icy cold as it comes from the mountain springs, and where often the village is located far above the water streams, bathing is not indulged in to any great extent. Nor do Karens mind dirty clothes, for they know that much washing wears them out, as they have to depend upon rubbing and pounding rather than upon soap. In the seclusion of the mountain forests they often play about in the water without clothes. On the plains, where bathing is more common either in the open rivers or at the village well, they



Karen male costume

bathe in the *longyi* then draw a dry one over the wet one which they drop down underneath, thus making the change publicly but modestly without exposing the person. The wet garment is then soaped in water and the laundry work is done.

### VIII

#### INTELLECTUAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Karens, as was said of the people of Borneo, "are not inferior but different". In their primitive state they were subject to the slavery of fear which had retarded their development. To them as to most primitive races all that is unknown is to be feared. They peopled, with all kinds of malevolent demons, the hills, the streams and the big trees, especially the banyan which is held in awe throughout the Orient probably because of its great fertility and tenacious hold on life. They were surrounded by fierce wild animals and more numerous and powerful neighbours. One of their own number aptly described his race as one that "is capable of being afraid".

This timidity has often militated against them. Because of fear they dare not speak their mind. They resort to the common "don't know" and thus hope to escape attention. They are easily thrown into a panic which disorganizes their thinking and makes them ridiculous when under the cross fire of examination or in a crisis. School-boys will not assert themselves and are often adjudged stupid when in reality they have done better daily work while plodding along than their more vocal fellows. Women are especially shy and in primitive villages will run from a stranger.

The generations through which they have been

exploited by their more powerful neighbours have left a stamp upon them and even educated men and women often allow themselves to be outdone in office and shop simply because they dislike to evoke contention. Often the faithful work of an individual does not bring the proper credit to the one earning it, for another steps in and takes advantage of his reticence to claim honour which he does not deserve.

In the old days retaliation for the exploitation they underwent at the hands of the Burmans would be taken by their striking back whenever they saw an opportunity. Small parties of Burmans who were caught in the Karen hills seldom returned alive. It was not because the Karens were worse than others or more given to atrocities, but simply that to them it was a way of getting what they thought was justice.

In their original condition they not only made forays against other races but were continually at feuds among themselves. The theft of a buffalo or a bronze drum, or the kidnapping of a child or a slave, was occasion for a foray. These usually went on and continued from bad to worse until villages were destroyed and many lives were lost. There were no other courts of justice.

The Karens felt the lack of the Book, as they called the Bible,—a need that contributed to what we now would call an inferiority complex. But like all people, either individuals or nations, that have an inferiority complex they were ready and waiting to be led out into greater freedom. They hailed the coming of the American Baptist missionaries as those who could help them to find themselves, to get their rights and to free themselves from the thraldoms into which they were conscious that they had

fallen. They told a story to illustrate this, for they spoke in parables in order to explain many of the situations in which they found themselves.

They said they were like a family which built their little hut for a shelter while cultivating a hillside. There the children and the old sow and her piglets were left while the parents went off over the hillside to cut the jungle and make their clearing. One day a tiger came in and grabbed the sow and carried her off, much to the distress of the children. When the parents returned in the evening they were told what had happened and the father determined to put the children and piglets up on a high bamboo platform out of reach of the tiger before they went to their work the next morning.

The tiger returned and finding no prey within reach set up a howl as he vainly tried to jump to the platform. The children stood it as long as they could and then threw down a pig to appease the beast. This they did at intervals while all the time they were longing to hear the twang of the father's bowstring that would send an arrow quivering through the heart of the tiger. This, the Karens said, represented their condition as they waited for the "white brother" to come and free them from the slavery to evil spirits and give them the Book that would enable them to hold up their heads among the peoples of Burma.

Under the impulse of Christianity the desire for education was strong from the beginning of the contact of the Karens with the Westerners. They wanted to read their own Book and to have a broader education. They demanded to be taught the English language. The early missionaries desired only to train them for a more abundant life in their own country and for a time refused to teach

them a language that might denationalize them. But when they sought outside teachers who would instruct them in English, the missionaries agreed to carry on schools in that language, and there grew up the Anglo-Vernacular system (English combined with the vernaculars, Burmese and Karen) that reached up to the University with its degrees. Karen students usually are slower to grasp new ideas than Burmans, but they often retain them better and have been, in proportion to their numbers, just as good students as any other race in the country. When they get over their reticence and fears they seem to be able to succeed in any endeavour for which they have the aptitude.

The Karens are often accused of being clannish. They are, but it is their natural self-interest which leads them to cling to each other for protection from their more powerful neighbours. For the same reason they condemn marriage outside the tribe.

Although physically the Karen seems to an outsider closely to resemble the Burman, he has many very different racial characteristics which make it difficult for the two peoples to understand each other. The Burman is much like his own national emblem, the peacock, given to show and to a great appreciation of fine feathers. He likes to do things quickly and not too thoroughly. He watches those whom he desires to please and caters to their tastes. He uses many honorifics and is diplomatic in his language and manner. He often wears a silk *longyi* of dainty colours over a body that is rough and unwashed.

The Karen wears his dirty clothes over his unwashed person and feels that the two go together. He cares nothing for personal appearance. He is abrupt in his

language and not much given to servility. Direct in his speech and with his mind easily upset by panic and timidity, he is often what we would call impolite and very undiplomatic. He makes no effort to show himself to his best advantage but has a sort of "take it or leave it" attitude that often gets him into trouble. This makes him all the more desirous of shunning those with whom he feels that he cannot compete. This is another reason why he sought the jungles and the hills.

Many early writers on the Karens have described them as devoid of humour. This can easily be explained when one understands the fears with which they surrounded everything. They were struck with terror by Government officers and other aggressive Europeans, with their strange appearance and ways. They did not dare to laugh for they did not understand what was supposed to be a joke. Therefore they preserved poker faces and seemed dumb and dead. The writer has spent many hours with them when the flow of humour and the joyous laughter were as spontaneous and happy as among any people he was ever with. Stories, practical jokes, wise-cracks came as quickly and merrily as in any language. But a man must have their confidence and know their language if he would enjoy himself among them.

There is a naivety among the Karens that is often very refreshing. They do not seem to be able to plot involved schemes for deceiving their neighbours. When they do attempt such things their simple plots usually fail. There is a simplicity among them that makes one feel a genuine friendliness when with them. One is usually safe in leaving one's luggage in their houses. Pedlars most often sleep at Karen houses when they can; for they

feel safer there than with any other people in the country. When Karens are convinced of one's honesty and truthfulness and genuine friendliness they will prove themselves to be true friends and they will inconvenience themselves no end to make that friendship good.

In common with some of the other Hill peoples of south-eastern Asia, they have a great love for music. Their own native music is built on the pantonic scale. It consists of weird tunes in a minor key that are plaintive, sad and tremulous. They use the harp, and make crude instruments resembling the violin out of bamboo, and a kind of xylophone played with two small mallets. The drum is also used in various forms.

The educated Karens, most of whom are Christians, have almost entirely abandoned their old plaintive native airs for the happier Western music. It began with the hymns of the Christian Church of which a fine and large collection has been translated into both the Sgaw and Pwo languages, and which they delight to sing. In addition to these, the young people love picking up the popular airs sung in musicals and in the cinemas. It is not uncommon to hear these songs even in remote villages.

During the past quarter century there has grown up a new music among the people, mostly among the Christians. Every Christian village has its choir. They love to sing together. The leaders of these choirs have taken Western airs and have combined them with touches of their native music and composed new songs for them. Hundreds of these have been published by mimeograph and a few of them have shown real musical ability on the part of their composers. The Karens have, as a rule, soft and velvety voices that lend themselves to good music.

Trained choirs have sung in the cities before exacting audiences and have won praise. Because of their former experiences of being subjected to exploitation, they have taken to the American Negro spirituals and sing them with a great deal of expression. Here again they have adapted some of these to their own life and composed new tunes and songs to fit their own conditions. Probably the suffering of these war years will further develop their folk music.

To the Karen the golden age was in the dim past. It was the old men who were wise. They say: "The generation gone before had wisdom. Now we are but children. Therefore the customs that have come down to us are sacred and cannot be broken without great danger."

They are hedged about with taboos many of which they hold so tenaciously that they are still more or less in the grip of their fears; and while this lasts progress will be slow if not almost impossible. Those who made the big break and became Christians have a different attitude and yet, even with them, the old customs have not entirely lost their hold.

Their fear of change prevents improved methods of living. This is especially true in the hills where for untold generations they have followed the *taung-ya* (mountain cultivation). This involved the sacrifice of a fresh piece of forest each year for their rice fields. When urged to adopt a more economic method, such as terracing or rotation of crops, they would reply that their fathers and grandfathers grew rice by this method, and being poor ignorant Karens they could not do any differently.

## IX

## POLITICS

The Karens never seemed to be able to develop any permanent political organization beyond that of village life. Once in a while a strong man would emerge and gain power over a number of villages and combine them under his own personality. But as a rule the personal independence of the individual would assert itself and with the death of the organizer there would be no one to take his place and the several villages would return to their independence, under each local chief.

In the village the leadership would usually be in the hands of some man who would assert himself over the others and he would pass on his position to his children, to a son not necessarily the eldest, or a nephew, but the one who by his personal ability would be best fitted to take up the task. Often some rival individual would covet the power in the hands of the headman and his family, and set himself up as leader. He would gather a few who were willing to submit to him and would go off and build a new village of his own, and a rival dynasty, if such it could be called, would be set up.

The power that the chief or headman of the village exercised was not carefully defined. There were usually a few old men who were considered as having influence because of their connection with the golden past. The chief governed with the consent of these. As a rule matters were discussed in open gatherings and the headman followed the general desires of the elders. In case of marked differences, there would be a split-off and a new village would be formed: only those remaining loyal to

the chief, often his own relatives, would remain in the village. This refers to those sections where the Karens were left to themselves.

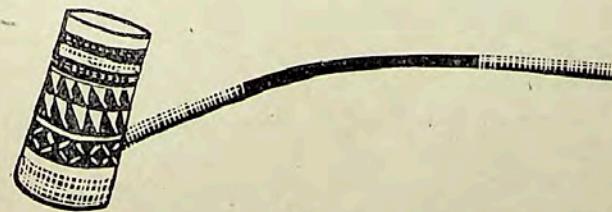
Under the settled conditions brought about by the British Government things remained about the same. The headman was recognized as the seat of authority by the Government, but still the Karens themselves retained their own independent spirit and followed him only by consent. However, since it has required the permission of the Government to set up a new village site there has been less splitting of villages. In some cases there has been a revival of the old Burmese office of *Taikh-thugyi* or Collector of Revenue for a section comprising several villages. In such cases the local headman has been relieved of the collection of the taxes in the area.

The exploitation of the Karens by the Burmans in the days of Burmese rule was chiefly by the forcing of unrequited labour in building walls, digging canals, etc., and the general rough treatment they received when they ventured into the towns. They were shown to be unwelcome by having the dogs set upon them. Such treatment resulted in a great deal of racial antagonism on the part of the Karens towards their more powerful neighbours. This prevented closer relations between the villages which were located in the same section. It made the Karens more exclusive, keeping them within their own tribe, and causing them to refuse to mix with the Burmans.

However, under British rule, and with the greater protection that has come to the Karens from it, the Government has established village tracts which comprise several hamlets under one headman. In such cases the Karens

have come under the Burman official and formed a single unit in his jurisdiction, and on the whole have received just treatment. In some cases, a Karen of standing and influence has been chosen as the headman and has had Burmese villages under his control. In this way Karens have risen to power over those who formerly looked down upon them.

There has usually been a strong national self-consciousness among the Karens. They long for the freedom which they feel would come if they had a Karen king and were out from under the rule of the Burmese and even, in a small degree, of the British. The "prophets" who have led various revival movements among them have had something of a combined political and spiritual freedom in mind although the former has been kept more or less camouflaged. One of those, who seemed to be a sort of Quisling before the Japanese invasion, was talking about the coming of a Karen king to take over the country. But those who heeded him were only a small handful of the more primitive Karens in the Toungoo Hills and those in some of the more remote parts of the Irrawaddy Delta.



Pipe

## X

## ATTITUDE TO THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

Whenever the Karens have had an opportunity they have shown their loyalty to the British Government. They have a deep sense of gratitude for the security that has come with a settled and orderly government. This has allowed them to emerge from their hilly recesses, clear tracts of land on the more fertile plains, and build villages of more permanent construction than the flimsy bamboo structures that they built in the mountains when they had to move every two years. Here they could raise buffaloes and cattle and have reasonable protection against forays and marauders. Open exploitation by the Burmese was curbed if not entirely stopped.

During the first Burmese War in 1826 they served as guides for the English expedition against Ava and were commended for their good faith by Major Snodgrass in his "Narrative of the Burmese War". After the war they turned to the American missionaries for education, but they were forbidden to have any contact with the foreigners because the Burmese king and his Government feared the influence of intruders. They were prohibited from visiting their teachers even as late as 1851, when the Burmese Viceroy in Rangoon threatened to shoot instantly the first Karen he should find capable of reading.

In the Second Burmese War in 1852 they led the attacking forces of the British through jungle paths up to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, which was then the strongest military citadel near Rangoon, to attack it successfully from the rear.

The Burmese knew the desire of the Karens for

freedom which would come from a change in Government, and they inflicted cruel vengeance upon them, burning their villages within a fifty mile radius of Rangoon, and putting men, women and children to death in barbarous ways. This caused large migrations from the territory under the Burmese king to Tenasserim and Arakan which were under British rule. Even here there were frequent miscarriages of justice, for they had to contend against subordinate Burmese officers who still tried to prevent them from gaining more prestige.

After the Third Burmese War in 1885 Karen levies were raised to assist the British. They did excellent work in the pacification of the country where former Burmese soldiers roamed and robbed at will. For assistance in putting down this terror the Karens received scant reward. In fact, many Karens, who with Government permission and their own money had purchased guns for the defence of the country, had them forcibly confiscated because of the unfounded suspicion of their scheming neighbours who resented their rising recognition.

During World War I many Karens were enrolled in the armed services and proved themselves capable and loyal wherever they were called to serve, whether in Mesopotamia, Egypt, or for guard duty in India and the Malay States.

During the Burmese Rebellion under "Saya San" in 1930, in the Tharrawaddy District, the Karens made valuable contributions to the putting down of the insurrection and many of them received honours for their good work at the Durbar in Rangoon. When Karens can serve under officers of their own people they are most happy. They have confidence in British officers but

often find it difficult to serve under Burman or Indian officers.

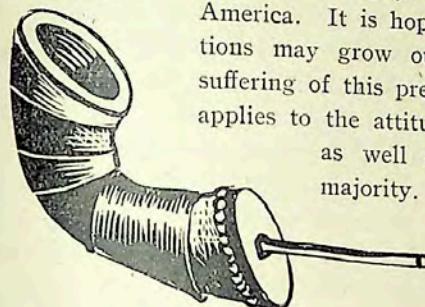
During the rise of the nationalistic movements in Burma, the Karens naturally looked forward to being ruled by their old adversaries without much enthusiasm. They entered into the new government however and played their part as well as could be expected considering their limited opportunity ; by so doing they won the respect of their neighbours to a certain degree and made a contribution to the new regime. In the Cabinets formed under the constitution in force since 1935 there was usually a Karen member who held a portfolio.

As a rule the Karens have exhibited true loyalty to the British Government, but that does not preclude the presence of a few ambitious men who for personal gain have taken the part of Quislings in the present war. Although they happened to be in rather important positions they had only a small following, mostly of ignorant and self-seeking people, and were entirely in opposition to the general attitude of the Karens throughout the country.

In World War II the work of the Karens has been most evident. They occupy important positions in the army and in other services and have done excellent work. If we can believe rumours that have come from Burma, they are undergoing a great deal of suffering not only from the Japanese but from the large number of 'bad hats' who even in peaceful times are always ready to seize an opportunity of easy loot.

The position of minorities has always been difficult. The lot of the Karens has not been harder than that of many other small groups who have had different charac-

teristics and lived under more powerful neighbouring tribes or peoples whether in Europe, Asia, Africa, or even America. It is hoped that better relations may grow out of the common suffering of this present conflict. This applies to the attitude of the minority as well as to that of the majority.



Pipe

## XI

### PROGRESS

Very few races or tribes of people have made greater progress in a century and a quarter than have the Karens in Burma. When we think of their wild state, their unhealthy ways, their lack of knowledge, their fear of strangers and their hesitancy in changing their old accepted ways, their primitive agriculture and crude villages, we can hardly realize that some of the refined, educated, well-dressed and cultured people that we have known come from such unlikely ancestry. The "wild cattle of the hills" have indeed turned out to be what they called themselves, *Pga K' Nyaw*, which actually means "men".

One of the greatest contributing factors in helping them to throw off their fears and rid themselves of the fetters of stagnating customs was their accepting the releasing power of the Christian religion. This opened their

minds and stimulated their smouldering desires for education so that they could read the Book which had been brought to them by their "Younger White Brother", the missionary. Schools were opened and at the beginning were attended by persons of all ages from young children to ambitious gray-haired men and women.

These schools grew in number and in standard of instruction until, within fifty years of the baptism of the first Karen into the Christian Church, a school of collegiate standing was demanded. For many years it was customary to call the school, which at the time of the invasion was a part of Rangoon University known as Judson College, the "Karen College". In fact, the tramway tickets of the Rangoon Electric and Tramway Company were so printed until after the college was transferred to Kokine when the University moved to its present site.

So great was the desire for schools among the Christian Karens, who presented a marked contrast to their non-Christian neighbours of the same race, that they early met the cost of instruction and, in most cases, of the buildings in which their children were taught. This was especially true in Bassein District. Other centres of Karen education and church activity were Rangoon, where they owned their own extensive mission compound in the Sanchaung quarter, and Moulmein at Daingwunkwin, and in Shwegen, Henzada, Tavoy and Toungoo. Later Nyaunglebin, Tharrawaddy, Loikaw, Maubin (for Pwos) and Insein became centres of activity and influence.

The broadening of their mental outlook has brought about many changes in their lives and in their thinking. A number of indigenous cults have arisen as a result of this stimulation. The conflict between their native reli-

gious ideas and Buddhism and Christianity has led some to try to make syntheses of these various teachings. So-called "prophets" have tried to set themselves up as leaders in these developments. But none of them has made a very lasting impression on the people as a whole. Of these the Klibopah and the Ko San Ye movements were probably the most important. The remnants of the latter group have their centre in a large village, Padoplaw, near Nyaunglebin. One of the sons of a former leader, Saw Johnson Po Min, led them into an atheistic movement from which came some of those who were of uncertain loyalty at the time of the Japanese invasion. As compared with the large body of Karens who were unitedly loyal to the government and the religion in which they had found strength, they were a very small group.

Many Karens who qualified as teachers left their own homes and went as pioneers to Upper Burma, and to the outlying tribes such as the Chins, Kachins, Shans, Lahus, and Yawyins and, fired with unselfish zeal, have given their lives for what is really missionary work in preaching and teaching these tribes. During the Third Burmese War, when American missionaries had to leave the Kachin country, these Karen teachers stayed on and did effective work in laying the foundations for a new regime among them.

The development of education among the Karens helped to produce books to take the place of the old oral bard literature. In the beginning many of these books were written by the missionaries; but as time went on there grew up Karens who had a desire to contribute to the growth of their people and these have written a number of very acceptable works. In 1841 a newspaper in Karen,

called "The Morning Star", was established by Dr. Mason in Tavoy. This was the oldest vernacular newspaper in Burma, with a continuous history up to the time its publication was stopped by the Japanese occupation. It was cut off when it was about to celebrate its centenary.

The Karens were carrying on work of research, medical practice, and other scientific branches in which they were showing real ability. There were Karen lecturers in the University.

The churches established by the missionaries had become self-supporting. No money was being paid from America for regular church work among the Karens, with the exception of grants for a few schools and for pioneering work among outlying tribes. They had their own associational organizations in which the churches of a district were combined and the stronger made contributions to help the weaker, to support their Theological Training School at Insein, to maintain town schools which were conducted with boarding departments for the benefit of the whole district, and to subsidize evangelistic work in distant places.

The Baptist churches among the Karens combined with the churches of other peoples in Burma to form the Burma Baptist Convention. Their annual meetings were often attended by as many as three or four thousand delegates and were sources of inspiration as well as opportunities to plan for further work. The Karens shared the honours of president and officers with Burmans and others. Among other churches such as the Anglican and Roman Catholic which conducted work among the Karens, they had their conferences and carried on their work according to the genius of their own church.

The organization of the Baptist churches has been an important factor in developing a sense of responsibility among the Karens and an understanding of the principles of self-government; even though there may still be much for them to learn.

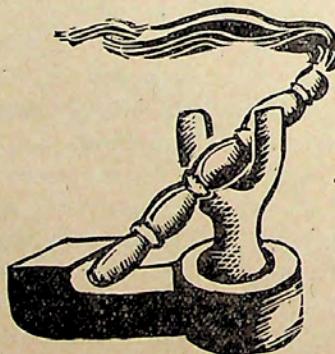
Even a casual observer will notice the great difference between the Karens who have become Christians and those who have either remained in their own animism or even become Buddhists. The difference in the appearance of their villages may not be so striking but officers have often remarked to me that the Christian villagers have a different air, they are a little more cleanly, have their schools and are better clothed. They also have a much lower crime record. Their young people branch out into better positions and become more prosperous.

The villages that remain animistic are still held in the slavery of their taboos and their mentality remains static. The village life remains unchanged. Custom is their master. Progress is considered dangerous. Education is not encouraged. If they do go to school it is to the Buddhist monastery, if there happens to be one. In some cases however ambitious children demand to go to the Christian schools and branch out into progressive ways which they learn there.

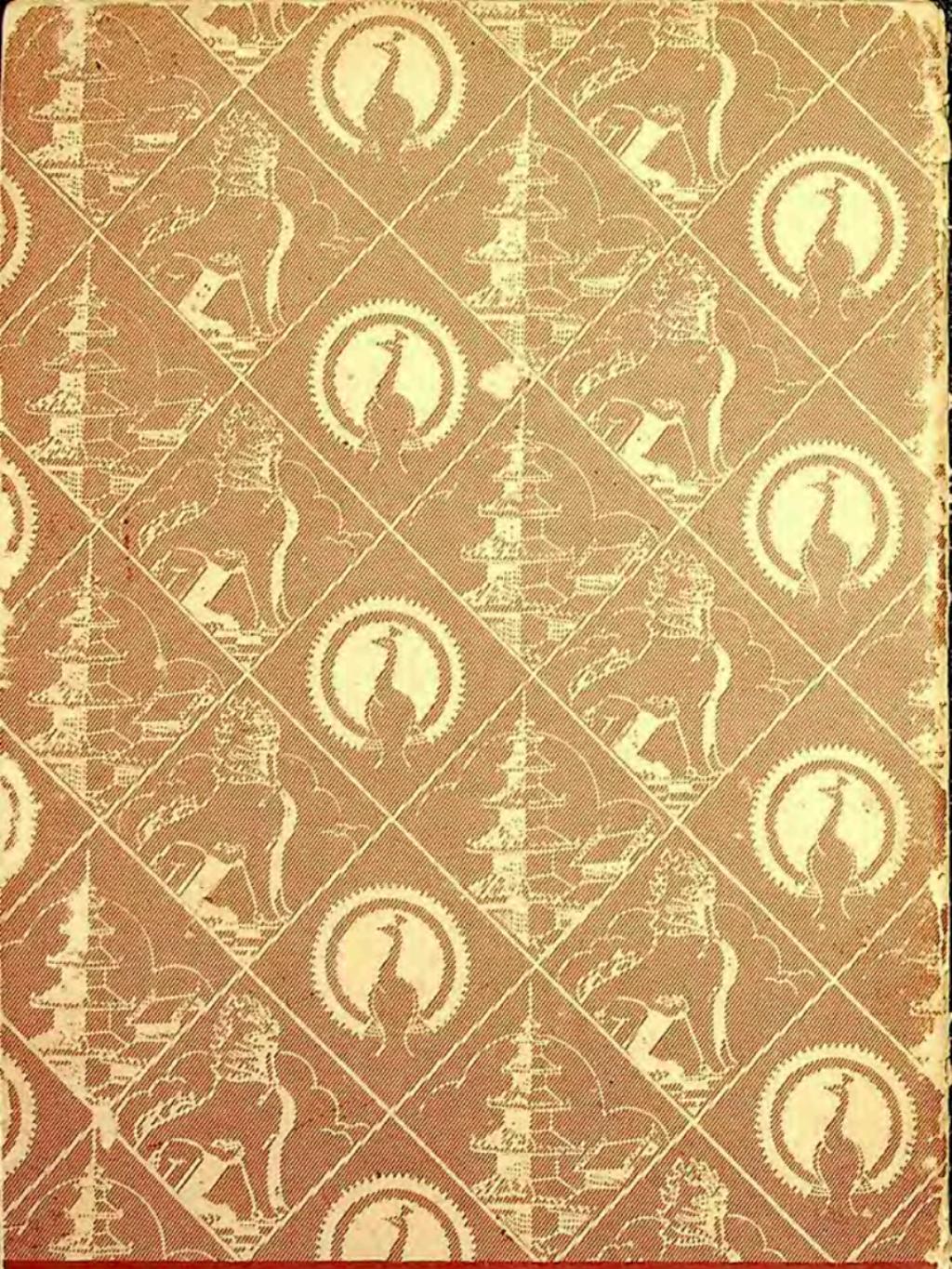
During the last quarter century there has been a movement among the animistic Karens who do not become Christian to turn to the Buddhist culture and religion. This is partly due to the movement to make Buddhism the national religion of the country and to try to win all the inhabitants to its practices, and partly due to the fact that the Buddhist culture is superior to the original Karen way of life. In turning away from their ancient

beliefs and practices they take hold of that which is nearest to them. But in so doing, it must be acknowledged, they find themselves still bound by many fears which Buddhism has not enabled them to throw off. What progress has been made has been very slow.

The release of their minds from the thraldom of superstition and from the fear of breaking with old customs of which we have spoken, together with the security from attack afforded them by the British Government have contributed to help the Karen's to become one of the most hopeful elements in the population of Burma. They can be counted upon to make good use of the opportunities which it is expected will come to them in the rehabilitation of the country when the present war is over.



Torch stand



LONGMANS