

## The twofold challenge for Karen Baptist intellectuals in colonial Burma: A national claim and its failure

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*Two years after the Anglo-Burmese War, with the British colonial takeover of Burma complete and yet still subject to outbreaks of rebellions, a small group of Karen Baptist intellectuals in Rangoon who formed the Karen National Association (KNA), attempted to assert a political claim to Karen nationhood. This article focuses on two letters, in English and Sgaw Karen, presented by Karen delegates on the occasion of the ceremony to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887 in Rangoon, to investigate the colonial politics of loyalty and national claim. It argues that the letters were written for two different audiences, and by doing so the Karen Baptists were asserting dual claims; one directed at the British colonial authorities and the other, the wider population of Karen in Burma, with their multiple Karennic languages and religious and other affiliations. Both appeals failed to get the desired responses, however. This article then discusses the contradiction that this assertion of Karen nationhood alienated the Baptist leaders from their own diverse community.*

This article examines Karen Baptist intellectuals' participation in a landmark colonial event in British Burma, Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887. By assessing the Karen minority's bidirectional political claim of nationhood, and its failure, this article examines the politics of colonial loyalty and reveals the contradiction that the very claim of nationhood alienated these Karen leaders from their own diverse population, a phenomenon which lingers in present day Myanmar.

Queen Victoria's reign had reached its fiftieth year in 1887, and Rangoon, the capital of British Burma, witnessed a lavish Golden Jubilee ceremony that February. At the ceremony, members of the recently formed Karen National Association (KNA) read aloud a commemorative letter in English in front of all the attendees. Calling themselves 'a nation of British Burma', they expressed their loyalty to the Queen. After delivering the address in English, the Karen delegates submitted another letter written in Sgaw Karen.<sup>1</sup> The Sgaw Karen letter was later published in Karen newspapers.

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1 Sgaw Karen is a Karennic language used in Burma and Thailand. Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen are the two most widely-spoken Karennic languages, but there are dozens of others.

The first section below reviews the existing literature to clarify the analytical scope of this article before introducing relevant historical sources. The second section summarises the historical background of the Karen Baptist community in Burma, elucidating how Karen Baptist intellectuals started engaging in political activities in the 1880s. The third section describes the preparations and programme for the Golden Jubilee ceremony, including a summary of the Karen address for the Queen. The fourth and fifth sections analyse the actual texts of both the English and Sgaw Karen letters addressed to the Queen. The textual investigations point out that the Karen intellectuals sought to represent 'the Karen nation of Burma' in two directions. While proclaiming their allegiance to the Crown, the Karen delegates urged their fellow Karen to foster a collective sense of national unity. An examination of the factors for the unsuccessful outcome of the Karen Baptists' actions will lead us to the final discussion. I will argue that the sociopolitical situation surrounding these Karen Baptist intellectuals at the time illustrates the difficulties that minorities in Burma faced, and continue to face, in relation to national-level politics.

### Literature review and historical sources

#### *Loyal actions as a mode of political performance*

The Golden Jubilee was a turning point in the public image of the British monarchy. Before the 1870s, royal ceremonies had no function as a part of the imperial system in British history.<sup>2</sup> The British government staged the Golden Jubilee of 1887 as an auspicious occasion, celebrating the Queen as the Empress of India for the first time since her coronation in 1858. A splendid, public, and imperial image of the royal house was created for global consumption to prove the righteousness and prosperity of the British Empire.<sup>3</sup> Jubilee ceremonies became an arena of political contestation between the colonising and colonised.

Such events related to the monarchy were also moments for staging British colonial views on class and race. With the colonial mindset based on ideas of class and social prestige in Britain, the British were enthusiastic about creating societies that resembled their own elsewhere in the world. David Cannadine emphasises in *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their empire*, that this hierarchical principle led the British to see social structures in their colonies as similarly layered, individualistic and traditional.<sup>4</sup> Thus they favoured native princes, lords and indigenous court officials because they were well-born and elite members of society.<sup>5</sup>

Colonial attitudes were shaped by more than class; another integral facet was racial hierarchy. British Orientalism developed as multiple ideas and identities transmitted through a complex, overlapping web across the empire.<sup>6</sup> Centring India as the core region, language learning and linguistic classification gradually cemented the

2 David Cannadine, 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: The British monarchy and the invention of tradition, c.1820–1977', in *The invention of tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 120.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 122–4.

4 David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 121.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 125–7.

6 Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 15; Christine Bolt, *Victorian attitudes to race* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).

colonial interpretation with racial hierarchy. As a result, race and language had an essential administrative function in the British colonies, including Burma.<sup>7</sup>

While demonstrating the colonial hierarchies of class and race, royal events presented a chance for the colonised to manipulate their political status and fortunes. Locals in British Malaya, such as Muslims, Chinese, Hindus as well as Eurasians, attended imperial ceremonies to impress the authority as good imperial subjects, hoping to bargain for some concessions with the British through such an image.<sup>8</sup> Collaboration and allegiance were intentionally performed in accord with the Western vision of ‘civilised citizens’, demonstrating that attendees were qualified partners for bargaining.<sup>9</sup> This understanding that the performance of loyal collaboration can function as a political means provides us with a new avenue to re-examine the actions of so-called loyal colonial subjects.

The Karen, in particular those who were Christian, have been a well-known example of Britain’s collaborators in Burma. Their colonial loyalty is often narrated through a lens of ethnic hostility. A typical explanation is that the Karen, under nationalist pressure from the dominant Buddhist Burmese, turned to the colonial power for protection.<sup>10</sup> This image of the Karen was largely constructed by colonial and missionary narratives. In his *Loyal Karen of Burma* (1887), British officer Donald Smeaton commented that the Karen, many of whom were Christian, became civilised thanks to British rule.<sup>11</sup> He also mentioned the KNA in his book as a pro-British organisation of loyal Karens.<sup>12</sup> Smeaton’s narrative was the foundation for later discourse on the Karen, as many other colonial officers and missionaries referred to his work. American missionary Harry Marshall, for instance, felt assured of the Karen’s loyal cooperation.<sup>13</sup> He emphasised the historical antagonism between the Karen and the Burmese, implying that Karen were willingly cooperative with the British, unlike the Burmese.<sup>14</sup> However, the Karen narrative by Westerners was one-sided because their writings were largely about Christian Karen who only consisted less than one-fifth of the total Karen population.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the image of the Karen, being Christian, loyal to the British and therefore against the Buddhist Burmese became widely accepted.

7 Jane Ferguson, ‘Who’s counting? Ethnicity, belonging, and the national census in Burma/Myanmar’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde* 171, 1 (2015): 1–28; Charles Hirschman, ‘The meaning and measurement of ethnicity in Malaysia: An analysis of census classifications’, *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, 3 (1987): 555–82.

8 Lynn H. Lees, *Planting empire, cultivating subjects: British Malaya, 1786–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 155–7, 284–9; Kaori Shinozaki, *Political participation in multiple homelands: Peranakanness of the Chinese in the Straits Settlements of Penang* (Fukuoka: Kyushu University Press, 2017), p. 185–6 (in Japanese).

9 Lees, *Planting empire*, p. 157.

10 Paul Kratoska and Ben Batson, ‘Nationalism and modernist reform’, in *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia, volume two, part one: From c.1800 to the 1930s*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 313.

11 Donald Smeaton, *The loyal Karen of Burma* (London: K. Paul, Trench & Co., 1887).

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 225, 237.

13 Harry Ignatius Marshall, *The Karen people of Burma: A study in anthropology and ethnology* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1922), pp. 25–6.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 304–9.

15 Government of India, *Census of 1891: Imperial series. vol. 9, Burma report vol. 1* (Rangoon: Government Printing, Burma, 1892), pp. 56, 149.

These early narratives did not undergo serious reconsideration, mainly due to the historical trajectory that nationalist discourses took from the 1920s onward. For example, when a Karen Baptist nationalist, San C. Po, demanded an independent Karen state in 1928, he accentuated the antagonism between the Karen and the Burmese.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Burmese nationalists positioned themselves opposite to the pro-British collaborators in the 1930s, when *Dobama-asiayoun* (the Thakin Party) called themselves ‘Our Bamans (*dobama*)’ and the collaborators ‘Their Bamans (*thudo-bama*)’.<sup>17</sup> The term *thudo-bamas*, denoting those who do not cherish Buddhism but instead work for the British, nourished the public image that Karen Christians, known as pro-British, were an enemy of Burmese nationalism.<sup>18</sup> In 1947, the KNA merged with other Karen groups to form a Karen ethno-nationalist organisation: the Karen National Union (KNU). In the post-independence period, the KNU’s anti-state military campaigns and secessionist movement have been seen as justifying this hostile ethnicist understanding.<sup>19</sup> Kazuto Ikeda criticises what he calls the Thakin historiography which has preserved the image of ‘anti-Burmese Karen’ and impeded serious historical reconsideration until today.<sup>20</sup>

An investigation of how some local elites offered to collaborate and changed their mode of negotiation throughout the colonial period liberates us from the above interpretation.<sup>21</sup> Given the function of allegiance as political performance, the loyalists’ actions need to be seen in particular colonial contexts and periods and be evaluated from a different angle. Resonating with recent critique on the dominance of the Buddhist Burmese-centred narrative of Myanmar’s history and politics,<sup>22</sup> this article seeks to contribute to more multifaceted discussions of colonial Burma, particularly from the point of view of minorities.

One characteristic of the Karen national claim is that despite its strength as displayed in secessionist wars against the state after independence, there has been serious internal fragmentation. Scholars have discussed the lack of cohesion among the KNU leaders, religious divides and class inequality to explain the fragility of Karen unity in the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> This article argues that colonial governance, and conceptual semantic barriers among the different Karennic language speakers, also hampered the assertion of Karen nationhood from the beginning.

16 San C. Po, *Burma and the Karens* (London: Elliot Stock, 1928).

17 Kei Nemoto, ‘The concepts of *Dobama* (“Our Burma”) and *Thudo-Bama* (“Their Burma”) in Burmese nationalism, 1930–1948’, *Journal of Burma Studies* 5 (2000): 1–2.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

19 See Ashley South, *Burma’s longest war: Anatomy of the Karen conflict* (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, Burma Center Netherlands, 2011).

20 Kazuto Ikeda, ‘A note on the origin of the Karen ethnic problem and Thakin historiography in Myanmar’, *Ex Oriente* 24 (2017): 27–61 (in Japanese).

21 Ronald Robinson, ‘Non-European foundations of European imperialism: Sketch for a theory of collaboration’, in *Studies in the theory of imperialism*, ed. Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 118, 121–3.

22 Matthew Walton, ‘The “wages of Burman-ness”: Ethnicity and Burman privilege in contemporary Myanmar’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, 1 (2013): 1–27.

23 Mikael Gravers, ‘Religion and the formation of Karen ethnic identity in Burma’, in *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma*, ed. Mikael Gravers (Copenhagen: NIAS Press), 2007; Ashley South, ‘Karen nationalist communities: The “problem” of diversity’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 29, 1 (2007): 55–76.

The Karen Baptists' action in 1887 was indeed political, as they clearly referred to themselves as representing a 'nation'. Works by Yoshinari Watanabe and Aurore Candier illustrate that a significant conceptual shift took place in the nineteenth century and the new meaning of 'nation' in a modern sense emerged with the Burmese term *lumyo*. The peoples of Burma were historically aware of their cultural, physical or linguistic differences, but ethnic identification or classification was neither common nor absolute before the age of imperialism.<sup>24</sup> The conceptual shift slowly began as Burmese kings and court officials engaged in diplomatic negotiations with the British.<sup>25</sup> Correspondence with the British during the 1830s and 1870s shows that the new meaning of *lumyo* as a translation of 'nation' gradually penetrated among the Burmese officials.<sup>26</sup> While the modern national concept was emerging in the Burmese-speaking world, a cadre of Karen Baptist intellectuals also started adopting the concept in their public statements. In an earlier work, I discussed the formation of the KNA in 1881 as the first instance of a national claim made by local people in a collective form in Burma.<sup>27</sup> The present article further examines the activities of the Karen Baptist literati of the nineteenth century and their political reference to a Karen nation.

A close textual investigation of the Karen intellectuals' claim sheds light on the need for minorities in colonial society to engage in bidirectional politics, with the colonial authority and amongst their own people. By examining the reason for the KNA's failure in the late 1880s to win over both sides, this article highlights the historicity of the innate challenge of the national imagination for minority leaders of Burma.

#### *Historical sources*

The principal sources are the two commemorative letters made public on different occasions: one in English and the other in Sgaw Karen. One of the Karen delegates read out the English letter at the Golden Jubilee, while the letter in Sgaw Karen was published in Karen periodicals after the event. Although the original copies are not known to exist, the full texts of both letters are accessible (see appendices A and B). Appendix A is from an English newspaper, the *Rangoon Gazette Weekly Budget*, which published the entire English text of the KNA's letter on the day following the ceremony, 17 February 1887.<sup>28</sup> This article also details the programme for the Jubilee ceremony. Since its publication was almost simultaneous with the actual event, we may treat the report as equivalent to a primary source.

24 Victor B. Lieberman, 'Ethnic politics in eighteenth-century Burma', *Modern Asian Studies* 12, 3 (1978): 457; Yoshinari Watanabe, 'Ethnic policy towards various "peoples" in the early Konbaung dynasty: Ethnic awareness in eighteenth to nineteenth century Burma', in *The changing self image of Southeast Asian society during the 19th and 20th centuries*, ed. Yoneo Ishii (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 2009), pp. 32–3.

25 Aurore Candier, 'Mapping ethnicity in nineteenth-century Burma: When "categories of people" (*lumyo*) became "nations"', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50, 3 (2019): 353–6.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 356.

27 Hitomi Fujimura, 'Disentangling the colonial narrative of the Karen National Association of 1881: The motive behind Karen Baptist intellectuals' claim for a nation' *Journal of Burma Studies* 24, 2 (2020): 275–314.

28 'Her Majesty's Jubilee', *Rangoon Gazette Weekly Budget* (RGWB), 18 Feb. 1887, pp. 16–17.

The original Sgaw Karen version is also unknown to exist; however, a copy of the letter was published in a Karen Baptist newspaper, *Hsa Too Gaw* (Morning Star) in Sgaw Karen in March 1887. The letter first appeared in the KNA's organisational newspaper and the copy in *Hsa Too Gaw* was a reproduction in full. Appendix B is the author's translation of the full text of the Sgaw Karen letter. We can reasonably assume that the intended and probable readers of the article were not colonial officers but Karen Baptists who could read the Sgaw Karen script. This article studies the language and rhetoric of both texts to illuminate the kernel of their message, as well as their significantly different nuances. The large volumes of the *Thesaurus of Karen knowledge*<sup>29</sup> and other dictionaries published in the mid-nineteenth century provide ample examples and information for etymological and semantic analysis of the Sgaw Karen version of the letter. Other contemporary colonial correspondence and reports are also examined to trace the government's preparations for the Jubilee ceremony.

### The Baptist Mission and Karen Baptist intellectuals

#### *Adopting modern concepts*

About a decade after the arrival of the first American missionaries in Burma, Baptist missionaries embarked on a mission to Karen-speaking people in the 1820s. Hundreds of Karen in the Tenasserim and the Irrawaddy delta regions became Baptists in the following two decades. Local missions were set up in Tavoy, Moulmein, Bassein and Rangoon. After the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852), the mission work expanded to the newly annexed areas and numerous mission schools were set up. Along with the mission development, the linguistical diversity among the Karen converts increased. While Sgaw speakers were always the majority of Karen converts, the Karen mission embraced other Karennic language speakers, such as the Pwo, Bwe, Monei and Mopwa. By 1882, the Karen mission had grown to be the most successful Baptist mission in Burma, with 22,570 baptised church members.<sup>30</sup>

The Karen Baptist mission developed its own education system and schools, where they taught Karen orthographies. With the great help of his Mon assistant Myat Kyaw, Rev. Jonathan Wade combined the Burmese and Mon scripts to transcribe Sgaw Karen properly around 1830.<sup>31</sup> The American missionaries soon published schoolbooks and taught the newly devised Sgaw Karen script to students at schools.<sup>32</sup> While other Karennic languages such as Pwo (1852) and Bgai (1856) were transcribed later, the Sgaw Karen script became the major medium of instruction in the Karen Baptist community. Even non-Sgaw students, albeit only a few, learnt it at school. The Karen Theological Seminary, Pegu High School and Rangoon Baptist

29 American missionaries edited the four volumes of a Karen language thesaurus in the 1840s. See Sau Kau Too and Jonathan Wade, eds, *Thesaurus of Karen knowledge, comprising traditions, legends or fables, poetry, customs, superstitions, demonology, therapeutics, etc.*, vols. 1–4 (Tavoy: Karen Publication Committee, 2001 [1847–50]). While Sau Kau Too and Wade were credited as co-editors, a vast vocabulary was also collected by other Karen converts.

30 'Asiatic Mission: Burma', *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, July 1882, pp. 214–39.

31 Jonathan Wade, 'The first twenty years of the Mission to the Karens of Burma: 1828–48', n.d., Wade, Jonathan, 1328. International Ministries: Biographical Files, Group 1: Series 2. American Baptist Historical Society, Atlanta.

32 Jonathan Wade, 'Letter from Mr. Wade', *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, May 1833, p. 201.

College were established as institutes for Baptist higher education, and the number of literate Karen Baptists gradually increased.

These schools were also where Karen students encountered Western worldviews and learnt about concepts such as race. For example, in Baptist textbooks, American missionaries generated a new usage of *pwakalu* (category of people) or *kaludu* (kind of family) by translating them as 'race'.<sup>33</sup> Although the term *pwakalu* can be found in writings by Karen converts in the 1840s when they described people in a collective form,<sup>34</sup> it did not explicitly indicate physical traits or linguistic differences before the missionaries' translation. *Pwakalu* or *pwa takalu* (a category of people) originally stood for any group of people along with either their place of residence, birthplace, or language. American missionaries transformed the concepts behind the terms by translating them as 'race' and through school-teaching.

Travelling and living abroad also laid the essential foundation of Karen intellectuals' understanding of race and nation. From the beginning of the 1860s, some young Karen boys sailed to the United States or British India to enrol in universities. During their lengthy stays,<sup>35</sup> they experienced racism and understood that the ideas of race and nation were deeply embedded in Western minds and modernity.

One of these Karen Baptists, Theodore Thanbyah, is a good example. Thanbyah sailed to America in 1865 and studied in Chicago and New York for nine years. He recalled in his autobiography in 1920 that Americans yelled at him on a train, calling him 'negro' and ordering him to move away from the seat he was sitting in so they could occupy it.<sup>36</sup> Thanbyah noted in retrospect that his experiences in the United States made him realise 'that American people did not wish to be with non-White people'.<sup>37</sup> The idea of a nation was familiar to him at least by 1871, when he made a commencement speech in English, referring to 'nation' repeatedly.<sup>38</sup> Other young Karen Baptists who studied abroad also learnt about racial consciousness and its sociopolitical significance.

However, the concept of the nation was not articulated with a Sgaw Karen expression until the 1880s. A specific term suddenly appeared and became a favourite among Karen Baptist intellectuals when they established the KNA.

#### *The early period of the Karen National Association*

In early 1881, a small group of Karen Baptist intellectuals founded a sociopolitical organisation, the KNA, to negotiate directly with the British government.<sup>39</sup> They also named it in Sgaw Karen: *Pwākanyaw* (Karen) *Dawkalu* (National) *Taòhhpwòh* (Meeting). 'National' was expressed by a Sgaw Karen term *dawkalu*, literally meaning

33 Ellen M. Mason, *Geography: Ancient and modern* (Moulmein: American Baptist Press, 1861), p. 7.

34 For example, they called inhabitants in Dawei *dawe pwa kalu* (people of Dawei). See Sau and Wade, *Thesaurus*, p. 315. When *ta* (one) was inserted between *pwa* and *kalu*, *pwa ta kalu* denotes 'one kind of people'. *Pwa ta kalu* was frequently used interchangeably with *pwa kalu*.

35 They stayed at least for two or three years, and some stayed much longer, up to nine years.

36 Theodore Thanbyah, *A pilgrim's life* (Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1920), pp. 70–71.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

38 'Thanbyah, T., The contest for economic supremacy in Asia', in the *Senior orations 1868–1877, 1913–14*. Box 1, Rare Books, Special Collection and Preservation, University of Rochester Library.

39 Theodore Thanbyah, *The Karens and their progress (1854–1914)* (Yangon: Missionary Press, 1913), p. 88.

'whole kind'. A thorough survey of Sgaw Karen documents suggests that the term *dawkalu* had never been used or documented before the 1880s. Though it may be too bold to say that the KNA's founders invented it, the fact that they selected this uncommon, novel term *dawkalu*, which etymologically indicates a mutual connectedness among members of one group, for their new association testifies their interest in self-representation as a 'nation'.<sup>40</sup>

These Karen Baptists intended to take responsibility for dealing with social and political issues through this organisation. One of the KNA's nine founders, Shwe Maung Oung, stated that they 'should take action as others in Rangoon do. Otherwise, others' power will be too great for us to do anything. We should make a demand for ourselves.'<sup>41</sup> Though it remains unclear who Shwe Maung Oung specifically meant by 'others', he must have learnt that the British paid more attention to Burmese, Chinese and other residents of Rangoon when the KNA conversed with the Viceroy of India at the end of 1880.<sup>42</sup>

The KNA appointed a president (Thanbyah), vice president (Tay), treasurer (Shwe Maung Oung), secretary (Loo Nee) and five executive committee members (Ei Kay, Tha Toh, Myat Mei, Shwe Nu and Sah Loo), a close-knit circle.<sup>43</sup> Thanbyah and Tay, the president and vice president, were cousins, growing up together in a small village near Bassein.<sup>44</sup> The secretary, Loo Nee was a younger brother of Shwe Maung Oung. Two of the committee members, Myat Mei and Shwe Nu, were Tay's colleagues at the Karen Theological Seminary.<sup>45</sup> The nascent KNA was a small circle of Karen Baptist friends and kin, although its structure appeared very modern and secular.

Relying on each member's network, the KNA gained little notice or popularity among the general population of Karen Baptists. A general meeting was held once every three years, but attendance was low.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, whatever these intellectuals attempted was beyond the scope of the non-Christian majority of Karen.

The KNA remained unnoticed even after the launch of its weekly newspaper, *Pwa Kanyaw Dawkalu Atapayuh* (Karen National News), founded by four Karen intellectuals in 1885.<sup>47</sup> Although the initial print run was 700 copies per week,<sup>48</sup> it seems that it was not popular in the 1880s. Thanbyah recalled, 'the newspaper became known among the Karen converts gradually, but the number of subscribers was not many'.<sup>49</sup> Despite little interest from the mass of Karen Baptists, the establishment

40 See Fujimura, 'Disentangling the colonial narrative'.

41 'In memoriam', *HTG*, Dec. 1906, pp. 190–91.

42 See Fujimura, 'Disentangling the colonial narrative'.

43 Thanbyah, *Karens and their progress*, p. 89.

44 Thanbyah, *Pilgrim's life*, p. 20.

45 Shwe Nu, ed., *Seminary's first jubilee (1845–1895)* (Insein: Seminary Press, 1895), pp. 79–85.

46 Thanbyah, *Karen and their progress*, p. 88. The idea of holding a general meeting once every three years must have been derived from the American Baptist Mission's tradition.

47 Three of the founders, Thanbyah, Myat San and Yah Bah, had studied in New York together; little is known about the fourth, Pinnya Oo. Thanbyah, *Karen and their progress*, p. 93.

48 'Report on municipal administration in Lower Burma', India Office Records and Private Papers, Departmental Annual Reports, IOR/V/24/2951 (1885–1889), British Library. We have little other information about this periodical because the early volumes are lost.

49 Thanbyah, *Karen and their progress*, p. 94.



of the newspaper marks a significant shift, as it ushered the KNA's determination to reach out to their community.

*Karen Baptist intellectuals in the colonial administration*

In the same period, KNA members participated in the municipal administration, representing the Karen population of Rangoon.<sup>50</sup> The British Burma government decided in 1881 that the civilian representatives to the municipal committees, who occupied two-fifths of all seats, would be selected by and among the town's taxpayers.<sup>51</sup> Eligible taxpayers had to register their ethnic community in advance, according to language or religion, in order to vote.

For the Rangoon municipal election, the government initially established five electoral communities: European, Burmese, Muslim, Chinese and Hindu.<sup>52</sup> In 1884, a representative seat was added for the Karen population.<sup>53</sup> The Karen electoral community was set up for preliminary registration so that eligible Karen taxpayers could choose it as their community. Thanbyah and Shwe Maung Oung, the KNA's president and accountant, served as the Karen representative for 1884–85 and 1885–86, respectively.<sup>54</sup>

It is difficult to pinpoint why the Karen representative seat was added, but the initiative did not come from the Karen residents of Rangoon. The preregistration and voting returns signify that Karen in the capital had little interest in participating in the colonial administration. For the municipal election in 1884, the number of pre-registered voters reached 7,275 in total.<sup>55</sup> Compared to the other communities, the Karen marked the lowest number of pre-registrations, only 26 individuals.<sup>56</sup> Amongst these 26 registrants, none cast a vote. The Karen representative for 1884 was appointed in the absence of votes.<sup>57</sup>

Karen residents' indifference to elections was noted by the authorities. In the municipal election of 24 November 1886, none of the Karen voted again. This led the chief commissioner of British Burma to announce that he would terminate the Karen representative seat.<sup>58</sup> The administrative report for 1886–87 recorded that

50 The British Burma government introduced the municipal system in 1874. Seven municipal committees were set up, for Rangoon, Moulmein, Toungoo, Bassein, Akyab, Henzada and Prome. *The British Burma Gazetteer*, vol. 1 (Rangoon: Government Press, 1880), p. 494.

51 'Report on the administration of British Burma', India Office Records and Private Papers, Departmental Annual Reports, IOR/V/10/496 (1880–81), British Library, London.

52 'Report on the working of municipalities of British Burma', India Office Records and Private Papers, Departmental Annual Reports, IOR/V/24/2950 (1883–85), British Library, London.

53 Ibid.

54 'Burma Proceedings (July 1886–Dec. 1886)', India Office Records and Private Papers, Proceedings, IOR/P/2660, British Library.

55 Public interest in municipal elections remained low throughout the 1880s in general. Only about 5% of Rangoon's population (134,176) registered to vote in 1884. And among 7,205 who pre-registered, only 2,705 voted on election day. Even with the general low voting returns, the Karen scored the lowest. 'Burma Proceeding (1884)', India Office Records and Private Papers, Proceedings, IOR/P/2185, British Library.

56 'Burma Proceedings (1885)', India Office Records and Private Papers, Proceedings, IOR/P/2431, British Library. According to the 1881 Census, there were only 171 Karen in Rangoon, though a mission source reported 3,945 Karen converts in the town (*Baptist Missionary Magazine*, 1880, p. 208). This discrepancy suggests Karen Baptists' indifference in identifying themselves solely by their ethnic entity.

57 Ibid.

58 'Burma Proceedings (July 1886–Dec 1886)'.

‘about the Karen community, the representative seat in the municipality would not be secured in future’.<sup>59</sup> These electoral records indicate that few Karen speakers considered their ethnic affinity as integral to their sense of belonging at that time. From the viewpoint of the Karen Baptist intellectuals who had set up a national organisation and had participated in the municipal administration as Karen representatives, it appeared the Karen of Rangoon were losing their political opportunity because of their indifference.

### The Golden Jubilee Ceremony

#### *Colonial politics*

While the KNA leaders gradually realised that they needed to cultivate a political sense among the Karen population, preparations for the Jubilee began in the midst of political unease in British Burma. It was not long after the Third Anglo–Burmese War (1885) and the British deportation of the last Burmese king to India, and violence and uprisings continued taking place in Upper Burma.<sup>60</sup> Some of the Shan chiefs, *sawbwa*, who still maintained their sovereignty in the Shan highlands, began mobilising their troops. In 1887, British rule in Burma was indeed feeble and ineffectual. The British colonial government felt an urgent need to publicly demonstrate the righteousness and stability of their rule.

To this end, invitations were issued to local dignitaries to attend the Jubilee ceremony, and some were to receive chivalric honours. Besides the four British individuals, the chief commissioner nominated nine Burmese, one Chinese and one sawbwa, all of whom were pre-approved by the authorities in Calcutta.<sup>61</sup> As shown in table 1, the Companion of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India, the highest order class among all of the nominees, was given to Kin Wun Myin Gyi, the former prime minister of the defeated Konbaung dynasty.<sup>62</sup> Kin Wun Myin Gyi, now serving the British government, was a most desirable individual for colonial purposes. A governmental record appraises his allegiance, explaining that he loyally supported the government and was always ready to assist the chief commissioner.<sup>63</sup>

Besides the Star of India and the Indian Empire, two additional orders were prepared on this occasion for local officers of British Burma. The nomination of Burmese officers from Mandalay, site of the former royal palace, and neighbouring towns such as Kyaukse and Myingyan, reflects the government’s eagerness to reward local officers for calming the ‘disturbances’ in areas where the British were still struggling to establish firm control. The sawbwa of Thang Thut<sup>64</sup> was nominated for the Order of the

59 ‘Report on Municipal Administration in Lower Burma’.

60 Intelligence Branch of the Quarter-Master-General’s Department in India, *History of the Third Burmese War 1885, 1886, and 1887 period I: History of the War prior to the annexation of the country* (Calcutta: Government Printing, 1887), pp. 54–5.

61 Hodgkinson, the Commissioner on Special Duty in Rangoon, was nominated for the Star of India. Three other Britons were named for Order of the Indian Empire.

62 ‘Her Majesty’s Jubilee’, 1887, 1/1/2481, National Archives Department of Myanmar (Yangon).

63 Ibid.

64 Although this local chief was nominated as a sawbwa, designating him as Shan, he was probably a Chin chief of Thang Thut. The exact name of the area was found in another colonial report regarding the Chin chiefdom issue (‘Kale and Thang Thut Sawbwas [1886–87]’, 1/1(A)/2562, National Archive

**Table 1: Local recipients of British orders at the Golden Jubilee Ceremony**

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| The Star of India (CSI)          | Khin Wun Min Gyi                                      |
| The Indian Empire (CSI)          | Pe Si, Myowun of Mandalay                             |
| The Exalted Gold Necklace        | Saw Kan Mu, Sawbwa of Thaung Thut                     |
| ကျက်သရေဆောင်ရွှေစလွယ်ရမင်း       | Maung Ponnaka, Kayaing Ok of Kyaukse                  |
|                                  | Maung Lu Tha, Myo Ok of Letpangaing, Myingyan         |
|                                  | Maung Ba Tu, Assistant Commissioner, Ohpo, Henzadha   |
|                                  | Maung Hme, Extra Assistant Commissioner, Tharrawaddy  |
|                                  | Maung Law Yan, a Chinese merchant of Mandalay         |
| The Silver Sword for the Valiant | Kyaw Zaw, Myo Ok of Sale                              |
| သူရဲကောင်းငွေခါးရမင်း            | Maung Ba U, Assistant Superintendent of Police, Papun |

Source: 'Her Majesty's Jubilee', 1887, 1/1/2481, National Archives Department of Myanmar (Yangon).

Exalted Gold Necklace because he had acknowledged the supremacy of the Queen and received British officers in a friendly manner.<sup>65</sup>

The government expected that the Burmese officials' appearance at the ceremony would help manipulate a celebratory atmosphere among the local elites. Honouring the most renowned former Burmese court official Kin Wun Myin Gyi and others was necessary to secure their attendance so that the government could display the image of an obedient and pacified Burmese population. The presentation of orders also demonstrates the British mindset that Cannadine describes in *Ornamentalism*, favouring local chiefs and high-ranking personnel and decorating them with imperial ranks and orders.<sup>66</sup>

Another method to conciliate local authorities was granting amnesty to those arrested in the recent anti-British riots, including some monks. The British were cautious in their treatment of Buddhist monks and the Sangha because of their strong connections with the exiled Burmese ruler. The chief commissioner sent a telegram to the governor of India in Calcutta in January 1887, suggesting that granting such an amnesty would demonstrate the government's generosity and placate anti-British insurgents.<sup>67</sup> After some correspondence, the British on both sides of the Bay of Bengal agreed that pardons would be granted to those whose fines were less than 100 rupees.

#### *Drafting the letters*

Meanwhile, the Karen Baptist intellectuals in Rangoon launched preparations of their own. KNA members started preparing a draft document in January. The readers' column in *Hsa Too Gaw* of February 1887, written in January, reports a British

Department of Myanmar (Yangon)). British officers in the 1880s called all non-Burmese chiefs in the highlands sawbwes, though the term *sawbwa* explicitly meant 'Shan prince'.

65 'Her Majesty's Jubilee'.

66 Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, pp. 88–90.

67 'Her Majesty's Jubilee', p. 15.

officer's proposal that the Karen write a letter to the Queen on the occasion of her Jubilee.<sup>68</sup> It did not mention the name of this officer; it could have been a British officer from the Rangoon municipal committee, with whom Thanbyah and Shwe Maung Oung had worked regularly during their terms in office.

Although it is not known who drafted the letter, Thanbyah must have played a central role. Having studied at Rochester University and its seminary in New York for nine years, he had excellent English. Furthermore, he must have become familiar with the official colonial writing style while working in the municipal committee. His involvement in drafting the letter is almost certain, and other KNA members may also have worked on it with him.

In February, the British government publicly announced that anyone who wished to send words to the Queen needed to submit a draft to the Secretariat by 15 February.<sup>69</sup> The KNA was not the only group seizing this opportunity to articulate particular demands to the government. Thanbyah retrospectively noted that the Burmese in Rangoon also submitted a draft,<sup>70</sup> though it was not accepted. The Burmese had asked the authorities to free a Buddhist monk who was arrested for murdering Europeans and proclaiming his sovereignty around Shwegyine. This request was rejected by the British because 'the Burmese's letter was not appropriate either to be presented at the Queen's Golden Jubilee ceremony or to be sent to her'.<sup>71</sup> Unlike the Burmese draft, the KNA's letter passed official scrutiny because it was written in a fashion that the British would favour for presentation at the Jubilee ceremony.

#### *The Jubilee ceremony*

On 16 and 17 February 1887, various Jubilee events took place at every corner of Rangoon.<sup>72</sup> The commemorative ceremony was held in the afternoon of the first day in the main hall of the governor's residence. All the civil and military officers along with many civilians were present; half of the attendees consisted of Burmese and Indians.<sup>73</sup> The consul for Italy and the vice-consul for France were present as well. Noble Buddhist monks from Mandalay and high-ranking local officials were invited as honoured guests. Seven KNA members attended the ceremony as delegates: Shwe Maung Oung, Thanbyah, Loo Nee, Tay, Tah Lu, Ti Too Maung and Shwe Nyaw.<sup>74</sup>

A bundle of official correspondence on the Rangoon Jubilee includes one handwritten manuscript of the opening remarks:

This is the first occasion since Mandalay became a British province that the people of Mandalay have assembled to do honour to the new Queen Empress. I think they may live happily and loyally under the Empress of India and Burma. I am glad to welcome

68 'Miscellaneous', *HTG*, Feb. 1887, p. 19.

69 *RGWB*, 13 Feb. 1887, p. 3.

70 Thanbyah, *Karen and their progress*, p. 110.

71 *Ibid.*

72 This began with a parade at 7.30 am on 16 Feb. The royal artillery fired an imperial salute and the united bands followed, playing the national anthem. The official thanksgiving prayer was held at St Trinity's, the largest Anglican church in Burma. At night, lanterns were hung throughout the city and British ships were decorated with lights. See 'Her Majesty's Jubilee', *RGWB*, p. 16.

73 *Ibid.*

74 'The Queen's Jubilee', *HTG*, p. 41.

here the chief of one of the Shan dependencies of Burma who has come into Mandalay to acknowledge his fealty to the Queen Empress.<sup>75</sup>

As shown in the quote, the opening remarks showcased the local elites' attendance as visible testimony that the indigenous people were rejoicing and pleased with British rule.

The next item on the programme displaying locals' loyalty was the presentation of a commemorative letter. The vice-chairman of the Rangoon Jubilee Committee announced that an address that had been approved in advance would be presented by a local representative. One KNA delegate came forward and read aloud their letter in English.<sup>76</sup> When the presentation of the address finished, the presenter handed both the English and Sgaw Karen letters to Hodgkinson, the commissioner on special duty in Rangoon and also the president of the committee for jubilee preparation.<sup>77</sup> Given that the *Rangoon Gazette Weekly Budget* did not mention any other letter and that Thanbyah recorded that it was the only address by locals,<sup>78</sup> the KNA leaders seem to be the only local representatives who successfully seized the chance to present an official address at the ceremony.

The announcement of an amnesty followed. As planned, the government pardoned all the uprising arrestees who had been handed a fine of 100 rupees or less.<sup>79</sup> The pardon included a statement about the Queen's mercy, thanks to which their penalties were acquitted. The last item was the presentation of the orders. All the recipients were called out in turn and given their orders. The government also prepared special certificates under the name of the chief commissioner of British Burma to more than twenty individuals for their excellent service to the state:<sup>80</sup> among them were many Burmese, Chinese, Indians and a Shan local chief, but not a single Karen.<sup>81</sup> After the presentation of orders, Hodgkinson declared the durbar closed.

#### *Summary of the KNA's address*

Despite being written in two languages, the gist of the two letters is identical. There are four principal statements in the address. The first is praise for Queen Victoria's long reign, expressing gratitude for British rule in Burma. The first three paragraphs of both letters stress that the Karen had received blessings and prosperity under British rule since 1826. In the English version, there is a sentence comparing the Karen people's high level of civilisation with other people of Burma: 'prosperity and progress to the Karens to a greater degree than to the other races in Burma'.<sup>82</sup>

75 'Her Majesty's Jubilee'.

76 There is uncertainty about who presented the address. *RGWB* named Shwe MOUNG OUNG as the presenter ('Her Majesty's Jubilee', *RGWB*, p. 17). On the other hand, a Karen delegate reported that Thanbyah read the address ('The Queen's Jubilee', *HTG*, p. 40). *HTG* seems more credible on local names, because *the RGWB* often had errors in spelling local names. Besides, Thanbyah's fluency in English supports his suitability to read the address.

77 'The Queen's Jubilee', *HTG*, p. 40.

78 'Her Majesty's Jubilee', *RGWB*, p. 17. Thanbyah, *Karen and their progress*, p. 110.

79 'The Queen's Jubilee', *HTG*, p. 41.

80 'Her Majesty's Jubilee', *RGWB*, p. 17.

81 Two Chinese names, Lim Soo Hean and Khoo Jeow, were found on the list. A Shan headman U Nanda and an inspector of police, Babu Khan, also received the certificate; *ibid.*

82 *Ibid.*

Both letters prominently state that these blessed days had benefited Karen as ‘one race’.<sup>83</sup>

The second statement explains the benefits Karen people had acquired under British rule. Both letters indicate two particular kinds of blessings, secular and spiritual. The Sgaw Karen letter highlights ‘earthly things’, such as housing and the living environment, implying that Karen had benefited as equally as the Queen’s other subjects.<sup>84</sup> Both letters claim that the Karen people enjoyed an education thanks to the government, emphasising it as a secular development. The other benefit was inner development. ‘Spiritual development’ signifies the adoption of Christianity in both letters. Although the Baptist mission was not run by the British, the KNA’s letter stresses that the Christian converts enjoyed their religious life thanks to the religious tolerance of the British government.

The third statement emphasises the Karen people’s loyalty to British rule. The fifth paragraph in the Sgaw Karen letter and the sixth paragraph in the English one state that the Karen had fought for the British during the Second Anglo-Burmese War because the Karen were oppressed by bad governance. This may seem as if there was anti-Burmese sentiment traditionally, but documents from the 1850s only testify that some Karen participated in the fighting to protest against the chaos created by battles between the Burmese and British, not explicitly to help the British.<sup>85</sup> Considering this narrative gap, it is possible that the letters suggest that the Karen chose the British side for the sake of better governance. That the letters stress that they helped the British not because they hated the other races of Burma but because they loved the Queen’s good reign, supports the above speculation. The main purpose here was to showcase the Karen’s loyalty to the British.

The fourth statement expresses Karen loyalty to the Queen. The letters claim that the Karen would teach their children to love and respect the Queen. Both letters assure the Queen of the Karen’s willingness to sacrifice themselves to repay their debt to the British.

### **‘A loyal nation’**

#### *Colonial hierarchy*

While their overall content is the same, the phrasing and rhetoric used in each letter implies different intentions. The English message was directed at the English-speaking audience at the Jubilee ceremony: more specifically, the British authorities.

One major characteristic of the English letter is a clear emphasis on the imperial, hierarchical relationship. The letter is consistent in describing the KNA in deferential terms such as ‘memorialists’, ‘humble memorialists’ and ‘loyal subjects’. These terms always appear along with the possessive ‘your’, indicating the presenter’s acceptance

83 In the Sgaw Karen letter, the term *pwa kalu* appeared in the first and second sentences in the second paragraph. The English term ‘race’ appeared in the last sentence of the second paragraph and the second sentence of the third.

84 Ibid.

85 These acts of violence were not racially oriented even on the part of the Burmese, who attacked Baptist Karen and their villages not because they were Karen, but because they were followers of Christianity, the faith of the colonisers.

of his inferior position in relation to the letter's recipient, the Queen. Similarly, the letter's recipient is designated only by the term 'your Majesty'. The very beginning of the letter, '[t]o her immortal Majesty the Queen Empress of India; the humble memorial, of the undersigned Karen inhabitants of British Burma', textually demonstrates the total subordination of the Karen delegates to the highest authority of the British Empire.

The articulating of the hierarchical relationship was probably a requisite, however. All drafts of commemorative addresses had to be inspected by the governor's office in advance, thus the KNA had to publicly express themselves in the established official style. Letters which did not adhere to this format or permitted contents would have had to be revised or were even rejected, as happened with the draft submitted by the Burmese when they requested release of the arrested monk.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the rhetorical articulation of the colonial hierarchy appears throughout the KNA's English letter, in accordance with official guidelines.

*Self-representation: An indigenous nation of British Burma*

While following the colonial writing code, the KNA delegates still tried to deliver their underlying message, most notably in introducing themselves as 'the Karen nation of British Burma'. Another example can be found in the very first sentence, 'the Karen inhabitants of British Burma on behalf of their nation'. This phrasing typifies how the letter aimed to generate an image of the Karen speakers as one nation. Several other parts also refer to the Karen with a collective term such as race or nation.

The letter depicts the Karen as legitimate subjects of the British Empire by speaking of their allegiance. The last two paragraphs emphasise how the Karen in Burma had been, were, and would continue to be loyal to the Queen and her government. This was emphasised especially in the sixth and seventh paragraphs, but the term 'loyal' appears throughout the letter. Conjoined with their claim of nationhood, the address as a whole suggests that the Karen speakers, one of the nations of Burma, are loyal citizens of the empire.

To assess the purpose behind this claim, a report by one KNA delegate is suggestive. He noted that 'neither British officers nor the Queen understands our race, Karens, very much. When the letter arrives [in the Queen's hands] it will be a great delight for us Karens'.<sup>87</sup> This signifies that, despite their letter having to undergo prior censorship and having to be written in a formulaic style, the KNA had covertly woven their national claim into the colonial rhetoric, and hoped to obtain proper recognition from the British as an indigenous nation.

Pledging allegiance to the Queen showcased one's state of civilisation in the colonial context: adherence to the law and obedience to British rule were seen as marks of civilisation. Europeans tended to think that people in Asia and Africa existed in a lawless state due to a perceived absence of constitutional government and sophisticated legal systems. The KNA sought to communicate that there was a nation of people

86 The government was also not interested in the Burmese request because it was planning to grant pardons for many political prisoners on the occasion of the Jubilee, in order to display British imperial generosity, but not in response to the request of their subjects.

87 'The Queen's Jubilee', *HTG*, p. 41.

called the Karen who were respectful of the rule of law and thus civilised, good subjects.

The KNA's leaders already understood how modern values and the concept of the civilised-self functioned in Westerners' minds. They may have believed that the British would recognise and cherish them as civilised because of their education and fluency in English. The KNA stressed their belief in Christianity, the religion which gave the British confidence in their cultural supremacy over non-White peoples, anticipating that the colonisers would favour the narrative of civilisation.

### **Cultivating a sense of unity through the Sgaw Karen letter**

#### *The absence of a subordinate tone*

The Sgaw Karen letter did not convey any message at the Jubilee ceremony, where it was submitted only as material evidence that the Karen were literate in their own language. The letter was instead published for the Karen community.<sup>88</sup>

Besides the contextual difference, one distinctive quality is the absence of deferential expressions denoting the colonial hierarchical relationship. The pointedly subordinate expressions in the English letter are not apparent in the Sgaw Karen version. The plain subjective case, *pa* (we), most frequently appears designating the letter's sender, even though a more courteous expression did exist in Sgaw Karen. Although it was relatively rare to use the polite form in everyday conversation, *kupoh*, 'I', was used when people conversed with rulers and officers in the nineteenth century.<sup>89</sup> Terms meaning 'followers/servants', such as *akuapwa* or *ahkayapwa*, were also common in Sgaw Karen,<sup>90</sup> but the Sgaw Karen letter lacks these polite equivalents to the English 'your subjects'. This absence suggests that the drafters exercised their own agency in choosing the words and composing the sentences, making the letter's underlying message distinct from the English version.

A slight difference in the Karen vocabulary for 'loyalty' seems to support the above analysis. The Sgaw Karen term used to designate 'loyalty', *tha taw*, indicates a different nuance. Etymologically *tha* means 'heart' or 'soul', and *taw* means 'true', 'honest' or 'sincere'.<sup>91</sup> The *Thesaurus of Karen knowledge* defines *tha taw* as 'given that we [as a married couple] love each other, and if each of the couple does not conduct adultery actions with any other persons, we call such condition *tha taw*'.<sup>92</sup> This definition shows the essential concept of the term: mutual trust, mutual sincerity or faithfulness between individuals. The drafters chose this expression probably because

88 The publishing of the Sgaw Karen version was an example of the KNA's promotion of the concept of a nation, as traceable in the historiography of terms for 'race' and 'nation' in the language. See Hitomi Fujimura, 'The emergence of *dawkalu* in the Karen ethnic claim in the 1880s and the beginning of contestations for "native races"', in *Living with Myanmar*, ed. Justine Chambers, Charlotte Galloway and Jonathan Liljeblad (Singapore: ISEAS, 2020), pp. 315–34. Some of the discussion in 'The emergence of *dawkalu*', which does not provide the full context of the Golden Jubilee, has been incorporated in the present article.

89 Sau and Wade, *Thesaurus*, vol. 1, p. 51; 'Taxes', *HTG*, Aug. 1846, p. 200. *Kupoh* must have been borrowed from the equivalent Burmese term *kywun daw* (royal slave), as *ku* means 'slave' and *poh* 'child' or 'person'.

90 Sau and Wade, *Thesaurus*, vol. 1, pp. 51 and 202. Those terms were commonly used as 'your servant'. Yet, the Sgaw Karen letter frequently referred to the Queen simply as 'you', instead of 'master' or 'lord'.

91 Sau and Wade, *Thesaurus*, vol. 2, p. 316.

92 *Ibid.*, pp. 316–17.



there was no term similar to the English ‘loyal’ in Sgaw Karen. They elected to use *tha taw* instead. As a result, the colonial hierarchical mode of address and narration is no longer salient in the Sgaw Karen letter.

*Appealing to a sense of unity*

Alternatively, if we pay close attention to the rhetorical nuances of ‘race’ and ‘nation’ in the Sgaw Karen letter, the stress on a ‘national’ sense of unity becomes apparent. As already seen, the new semantic usage for these two terms had become conspicuous among the Karen Baptist intellectuals. *Pwa takalu* and *pwa kalu* are used as the translation of ‘race’, and *dawkalu* as ‘nation’ in the letter. *Pwa takalu* or *pwa kalu* frequently appears as a pair with first-person pronouns such as *pa* (we) or *pwakanyaw* (Karen speakers). A phrase in the first sentence exemplifies this well: ‘We, Karens as one race (*pwa takalu*)’.<sup>93</sup> Such collocation is repeated in almost every paragraph. The first pronoun, ‘we’, is juxtaposed alternatively with *pwa-takalu* (one race), *pwakalu* (race), *pwakanyaw* (Karen speakers) or *dawkalu* (nation). The relevant parts are underlined in the text below:

[Second paragraph]: The days in which we have lived under the British people ... have been blessed days for *us as one race* (*pwatakalu*).

[Third paragraph]: *We, as one race* (*pwa kalu*) have received the rightful order just like the other races ...

[Fourth paragraph]: *We, tens of thousands of Karens*, have received the Gospel, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and are freed from every obstacle.

[Sixth paragraph]: *We Karens, as one nation* (*dawkalu*), rejoice in the Jubilee for the fifty years of the rule by the Female Lord altogether.<sup>94</sup>

The juxtaposition of these specific words conveys a narrative that the letter is written by a cohesive group consisting of the Karen. When the expression of ‘nation’, *dawkalu*, is finally added to this equation in the last paragraph, a narrative that ‘we’, the Karen group (*pwakalu* or *pwatakalu*), are one collective entity called a nation (*dawkalu*), is articulated. With the specific wording and phrasing, the intention of publishing the Jubilee letter becomes clearer; the KNA aimed to cultivate a collective sense among the Karen-speaking population.

Why were the Karen Baptist intellectuals trying to foster a sense of national unity? Since its establishment, the KNA’s activities were primarily directed toward the colonial government, not their fellow Karen. The KNA started to speak to the Karen population when establishing their newspaper, but most paid it little attention. The termination of the Karen seat in the Rangoon municipal committee in 1886 due to the Karen residents’ lack of interest surely disappointed the KNA and was cause for concern. By 1887, the KNA realised that the lack of unity among the Karen population could culminate in narrowing their opportunities for social mobility in British Burma and would affect the KNA’s own political clout.

Hence, they saw the Golden Jubilee as an opportunity to broaden their actions to include their fellow Karen, by promoting a sense of national unity. The Sgaw Karen

93 ‘The Queen’s Jubilee’, *HTG*, p. 42.

94 *Ibid.*, pp. 42–3.

commemorative letter was reproduced twice to this end; in the *Karen National News* for the first time and again in *Hsa Too Gaw*.<sup>95</sup> This can be regarded as one of the KNA's earliest activities targeting their fellow Karen, members of the imagined Karen nation. The Baptist intellectuals needed their fellow Karen to believe that nationhood would be a tactically effective form of self-identification within the colonial setting.

### **A sequel: The twofold challenge behind the KNA's failure**

Although the KNA boldly asserted their claim of a unified nation both to the British government and to the broader Karen-speaking population, their actions met with disappointment on both counts.

Considering the British intention to utilise the attendance of locals at the Golden Jubilee ceremony as tangible evidence of their firm control, it is no surprise that they overlooked the KNA's assertion of nationhood. As overtly addressed in the opening remark, the British were preoccupied with manipulating the celebratory narrative.

The KNA attendees were clearly taken aback with the British awarding of royal orders and certificates to people of other ethnicities. Witnessing Burmese, Shan and others but no Karen receiving honours, one KNA delegate reported feeling deeply discouraged:

It was given to the Chinese, Bamar, and Shan. None of the Karens in Rangoon received it. Why could not the Karens in Rangoon get the medal? Did they [the British officers] plan to give it to other races? We are certain that the Karens of Rangoon have been at the officers' beck and call; many became soldiers, and others acquired other jobs. Nevertheless, why did they forget all of those things? We are truly disappointed.<sup>96</sup>

The KNA delegates had participated in the Jubilee celebrations, confident that the Karen would be treated with great respect, but the reality was the reverse. The British government displayed respect to the Burmese officials and other renowned locals because their physical appearance was vital for securing their legitimacy over Burma. Given their 'Ornamentalist' mindset, the British also wished to secure the attendance of traditional, high-ranking individuals in a display of social order and traditional prestige. Within this colonial context, the Karen Baptist delegates and their bold claim was unimportant and trivial, if not irrelevant.

The failure of the Karen to leave much of an impression is well exemplified in a description of the peoples of British Burma by the then chief commissioner, Charles Bernard, when he made a speech in November 1887 in Scotland.<sup>97</sup> He emphasised the importance of the Burmese and the Shans to British rule, describing them as industrious, good farmers and with much higher literacy than people in India.<sup>98</sup> Bernard

95 Speculatively, the KNA delegates' disappointment that not a single Karen was honoured on the occasion of the Jubilee might also have stimulated them to publish the Sgaw Karen letter to seek more support for their cause from their own people.

96 'The Queen's Jubilee', *HTG*, pp. 40–1.

97 Charles Bernard, 'Burma: The new British province, delivered before the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Dundee, November 1887', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 4 (1888), p. 72.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

did not refer to the minority Karen in the same vein in his talk.<sup>99</sup> What mattered was the majority and traditional upper class. The Karen were merely seen as a helpful asset for the colonial project.

The KNA also failed in delivering its message to their fellow Karen-speakers, just as they were unsuccessful in recruiting many members. The very poor attendance at the KNA's meeting in 1887 testifies to this. Eight months after the Jubilee ceremony, the KNA held its three-day general meeting in October 1887 at the Baptist compound in Alone, Rangoon. Only eleven pastors and evangelists attended.<sup>100</sup> The poor attendance is noticeable if compared to the approximately 2,000 Karen Baptists who attended the general meeting of the Rangoon Karen Home Mission Society, which took place at the same location one day before the KNA's meeting.<sup>101</sup> Although six years had passed since its establishment, and even after the KNA publicised the commemorative letter to stir up a sense of collective unity, only a handful showed an interest in the association's activities.

Besides its weak reputation, the KNA's claim of national unity was hard to interpret. Though the wording and tone of the Karen letter articulate a national unity, or rather precisely because of the conceptual novelty of such an assertion, the rhetoric was unfamiliar to their fellow Karen speakers. As the turnouts of municipal elections suggest, the Karen were indifferent to claims of national belonging. The KNA's political project to promote a national sense was far from successful for several reasons.

First, both the concept and the term designating 'nation' were new. The linguistic novelty of *dawkalu* must have made it more difficult to comprehend the letter's message, even among Sgaw Karen Baptists. The linguistic barrier was not only about the terminology but also related to the diversity of Karennic languages and orthographies. The KNA only published the letter in Sgaw Karen; however, the audience it had to reach was much more diverse. As noted, there were many other Karennic languages, such as Pwo, Bwe, Paku and Monei, whose speakers did not necessarily read or understand Sgaw Karen. Sgaw Karen was the lingua franca within the Karen Baptist community, but those who mastered its orthography in schools were still a minority nonetheless, consisting of less than one-fifth of Karen converts. Moreover, non-Baptists could not read the letter at all because it was written in one of the Baptist-oriented scripts.<sup>102</sup> Linguistic diversity multiplied the barriers to conveying the KNA's message to the broader Karen community.

99 Ibid., p. 75.

100 'Miscellaneous', *HTG*, pp. 162–3.

101 J.H. Vinton, 'The Karen Mission', *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Feb. 1888, p. 44. According to the annual report for 1886, 4,349 Karen Baptists were affiliated with the Rangoon Karen home mission, contributing a large sum equivalent to 5,100 dollars to sustain their mission work. 'Seventy-third Annual report', *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, July 1887, pp. 314–15.

102 J.H. Vinton, 'The Karen Mission', *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, Feb. 1888, p. 44. There are other Karen orthographies as well: the Baptist-oriented Pwo Karen, the Buddhist-oriented Pwo, and Ler Ker characters. For the historical development of each of these Karen orthographies and its community, see William Womack, 'Literate networks and the production of Sgaw and Pwo Karen writing in Burma, c.1830–1930' (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2005).

*The twofold challenge of colonial politics*

Given that the KNA's attempt to assert a Karen nationhood was unsuccessful, the focal point for discussion is not about the outcome of their actions. Instead, the bi-directionality of national politics should be the centre of attention because it illuminates the very nature of ethnic minority politics in British Burma. The political challenge for a minority as linguistically diverse as the Karen, then and now, always has two directions: the state and their own fellow compatriots.

A state has to determine who its nationals are and regulate them, as was the case in the then only recently fully conquered British Burma. The British in Burma therefore paid most attention and gave priority to the majority Burmese. Given ongoing anti-British insurgencies in Upper Burma, it is no surprise that the government devoted much energy to appeasing the majority and the traditional aristocracy, such as former Burmese high royal officials and chiefs, whom the British regarded as desirable counterparts and potential allies. From the KNA's viewpoint, their minority status meant that they constantly had to try to draw the government's attention to be treated with equal regard. A linguistic or/and religious minority needed to first get proper recognition from the colonial authority as a legitimate member of British Burma. The pledge of loyalty was performed with this aim in mind. Nevertheless, the bitter truth was that the British favoured the traditional, established elites as their local counterparts.

Simultaneously, minority leaders needed to promote a sense of unity among their own community to achieve support for their national claims. The KNA intellectuals attempted to do so, displaying the Karen nation as one cohesive body, but they met a real challenge. Given the linguistic diversity of the Karen, the KNA's message articulated only in Sgaw Karen had a slim chance of spreading. The historical background of Karen orthography caused additional hindrance. With its organ and the Jubilee commemorative letter written in the Baptist-oriented script, the KNA had no effective medium of communication to appeal to the broader Karen community, which included many non-Baptists. That elite-led national assertions do not necessarily resonate with the self-identification of ordinary people is a well-known historical phenomena, and this article has shown that the KNA in colonial Burma was another such case.

The Karen status as a minority, its intracommunal linguistic diversity, and the necessity of political actions being directed towards the state as well as inwards within the community continued. The KNA amplified its political eloquence in the early twentieth century but still encountered difficulty mobilising a sizeable Karen-speaking population to their national cause. The KNA did increase its engagement in colonial governance, but their actions only helped strengthen the British colonial narrative. The Karen image as pro-British and therefore anti-Burmese grew and was further cemented. British attention shifted towards the ordinary Buddhist Burmese; Buddhist laypeople became active in public life from the 1900s so that the authorities saw them as *the* local population in Burma whom the government had to treat with the most care. The above discussion suggests reconfiguring the history of the KNA and Karen national activities as a thread of actions and events by a weak political entity without representativeness.

### Conclusion

This article explored the political background in Burma when the Karen Baptist intellectuals started claiming nationhood in public. Focusing on the KNA's letters on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887, an important imperial event for the colonial British government, it revealed the two directions of politics for the minority. By stressing their native-ness and loyalty as one nation to the colonial rulers, the KNA's leaders aimed to secure an administrative position and improve their community's political status in British Burma. Simultaneously, the KNA attempted to cultivate national solidarity among the broader Karen-speaking population. The Baptist intellectuals felt the need to make their fellow Karen realise the significance of claiming nationhood.

This reinterpretation of the KNA's historical standing is integral to understanding the essential political contradiction for minorities in Burma. For a minority as diverse and fragmented as the Karen, it is simply difficult to pursue this two-dimensional politics simultaneously. They have to appeal for equal sociopolitical status at the national level, on the one hand, and to cultivate a sense of unity on the other. As Ashley South characterises the Karen as an entity with inner contradictions and communal diversity,<sup>103</sup> the challenge is multidimensional.

In order to achieve official recognition and equal treatment from the state, there is a need for self-representation in a collective form, namely as a nation. Leaders are required to act as if they were one unified nation when engaging in such politics. Yet, the demonstration of one-ness through *a* national language, *a* national orthography and *a* homogenous culture may have distanced them from their fellow Karen because such a claim presumes a monolithic entity which was far from the reality. Speculatively, this theoretical conflict within a twofold politics seems to leave space for vertical social structures and internal divisions to remain untouched or sometimes intensify, making the solidarity movement more complex.

Whether this discussion based on a case study of the KNA is applicable to any of the other numerous minority groups in Myanmar, and if so how far it is applicable, is beyond the scope of this article and remains to be discussed. Recalling the diversity of languages, religions and living environments among the other ethnic groups of Myanmar, the twofold challenge experienced by each should vary, with different trajectories. Still, what this article tries to demonstrate is that examining these vicissitudes through a diachronic perspective is valuable as it illuminates the continuity, or discontinuity, of the political challenge and enables a more multidimensional comparison and analysis.

103 South, 'Karen nationalist communities', pp. 57–62.

## Appendix A. The English Text of the Commemorative Letter

### TO HER IMMORTAL MAJESTY THE QUEEN EMPRESS OF INDIA THE HUMBLE MEMORIAL, OF THE UNDERSIGNED KAREN INHABITANTS OF BRITISH BURMA ON BEHALF OF THEIR NATION

May it please your majesty,

Your Majesty's loyal subjects the Karens of Burma rejoice with Your Majesty in this the year of Jubilee and praise the Almighty Father for his manifold mercies in vouchsafing to Your Majesty to behold this Fiftieth year of your majesty's beneficent reign.

Your Majesty's reign has been for the full fifty years, one of Prosperity and Progress to the Karens in a greater degree even than to the other races in Burma. They therefore heartily rejoice that the Almighty Father has led Your Majesty even to the Year of Jubilee, and they heartily pray that the same loving Hand may grant to Your Majesty length of days, to bless the human race, as in the years gone by.

Your memorialists remember with thanks-giving the years of the British Rule over them, beginning from the year 1826 when some of them came under British Protection, and from 1853 when nearly their whole race came under the just rule of Your Majesty. These years have been to them years of Blessing and of peace as a race. Before these years their people were ground into the dust by oppression and wrong, and in these years their people have been freed from bad Government and from religious persecution. Under Your Majesty's Reign, their people have been peculiarly benefitted in a two-fold manner both temporally and spiritually.

As regards the Temporal benefits of this transitory life, the Hearths and homes of your Memorialists' race have been safely guarded and protected. Equal rights have been granted to them in common with the other races subject to their Great Queen. For the further Advancement of their race, Your Majesty's Government, which has much at heart their well being, has in common with many European and American Missionaries who were labouring for their advancement founded schools or the common education of their race in Arts and Sciences.

As regards Spiritual benefits, Your Majesty's loyal subjects the Karens have by tens of thousands embraced the Christian faith and they now worship without hindrance the Lord Jesus Christ. Your Memorialists are grateful also for the religious toleration granted now to all, even those of their race still left in the Ancestral faith.

Your Memorialists ancestors foretold to them by tradition that such a Reign of Prosperity and Advancement would once more be accorded to them, the children of the wild, the children of the despised. In such expectation, your Memorialists' fathers awaited its coming and when it came across the sea in 1852 their race stood shoulder to shoulder with Your Majesty's soldiers and freely shed their life-blood to being your Majesty's just and benign rule to be enjoyed by their children. The story of the past year will show that now, as then, Your Memorialist's people do not shrink from sacrifices made to assist Your Majesty's good Government and even from shedding their blood of it. Your Memorialist's people do this not from hatred for other races, but from loyalty to Your Majesty, based on gratitude for the good government established by Your Majesty's Authority in Burma.

Your Memorialist's people endeavour to teach their sons and daughters to list Your Majesty's name with love and deep reverence, in order that when they attain manhood and womanhood they may be loyal to Your Majesty's name and stand as firmly sacrifice all, even to their lives, in return for the deep debt of gratitude for the many benefits they have received under Your Majesty's reign, a debt which a nation's life blood would not fully repay.

Your Memorialists would humbly pray that they may again be permitted to express as a race their joy in this Year of Jubilee of Your Majesty's reign, and to express also their earnest prayer to God the Jehovah, that he would graciously establish Your Majesty on her throne for many years to come, and that He would grant that these coming years may be.

HAPPY YEARS OF PROSPERITY AND PEACE

And your humble Memorialists as in duty bound

WILL EVER PRAY

### **Appendix B. The English translation of the Sgaw Karen version of the Commemorative Letter**

Lord of the Country

Our Female Lord Queen Victoria

Queen of England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other kingdoms, and Empress of India

We, Karens as one race, rejoice with the female Lord at this Jubilee moment when the Female Lord's reign has reached its fiftieth year of prosperity and development.<sup>104</sup> And we praise that God's blessings have guided you, the Female Lord, up to today. We wish that God will endow your life with goodness for many years in the future, just as He has these past years.

The days in which we have lived under the British people, from 1826 to the present, have been blessed days for us as one race. The reason is that when it started, our race began to live under British rule and was liberated from bad governance. Under the female Lord's rule, we gained two types of blessings: the earthly one and the other, the spiritual.

Of the earthly blessing, our houses, generations and our lives have become stable. We, as one race, have received the rightful order just like the other races who are your servants. Education and different kinds of knowledge are implemented for us and our descendants by your officers, Christian missionaries and teachers from Europe and America.

On the spiritual aspect [of the blessings of your rule], we, tens of thousands of Karens, have received the Gospel, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and are freed from every obstacle. Those who still conduct the ancestors' custom among our race will be free from violence because of this belief.

<sup>104</sup> The term *pwa takalu* or *pwa kalu* in the original text were translated as 'one race'. And *dawkalu* was translated as 'nation'.

As our ancestors said that a good rule, like now, would reach us, our fathers, previously, stood up together with the Female Lord's servants in 1852 and shed their blood for good rule. Even today, we are prepared, as we have shown already, we do not go against helping your good rule. We do this, not because we hate the other races. But it is because we love our country and love your good rule. And we will make efforts to teach our descendants, both daughters and sons, to speak the Female Lord's name with compassion and respect. And [we will] teach them, when they become mothers and fathers, to be sincere to the Female Lord and sacrifice themselves for you. Because you have benefited our people greatly, it is impossible to pay back all of what we owe you, even with the race's blood.

Having said the above, may our Female Lord allow us to say one [more] thing. We Karens, as one nation, rejoice in the Jubilee for the fifty years of the rule by the Female Lord altogether, and we pray that God the Jehovah may guide you and your servants to live in health for many years to come and to spend your days in peace and joy.

In Burma, in the joyful year of our Queen,  
a.d. 1887, February 16th.