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Hayami Yoko. *Between Hills and Plains: Power and Practice in Socio-Religious Dynamics Among Karen.* Kyoto: Kyoto University Press and Melbourne: Trans-Pacific Press, 2004. 385 pp. $77.81 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-920901-03-5.

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This book is an outcome of the author's research among the Karen(s) of Thailand and Myanmar since 1987, a part of which was embodied in the author's doctoral thesis submitted to Brown University in 1992. Little did I know, in July 2003, that I was passing through the Karen land while traveling from Chiang Mai to Myanmar, through the northeastern parts of Thailand. Even if I had read this book before I undertook this travel, I could have seen very little of the Karen land at night through the glass panes of our vehicle, but I did see familiar vegetation in the headlights of our vehicle. Now, after reading this book, and having enjoyed thoroughly doing so, I have no difficulty in identifying with the people and the place so richly described and analyzed therein. As I read through this very lucidly written book on the dialectics of the self and the other, I often realized that the Karen world was identical with the worlds of various hill tribes of Northeast India and Nepal.

Excluding the introduction and the conclusion, the book is divided into three parts. In the introduction, the author writes about the fieldwork, religion of the Karens, and construction of the people called "Karen" across national borders.

Part 1 is titled " 'Karen' Across Time and Space"; it discusses the history of the Karens and their relationship with other ethnic groups. In the first chapter of this part, the author discusses the history of missionary activities in Myanmar, the evolution of Thai nation-state and their impact on the Karens. In the second chapter of this part, he deals with changing inter-ethnic relationships and the socio-economic reasons that were responsible for the same.

Part 2, spread over chapters 3, 4 and 5, is titled "Embodied Practice and Power." The third chapter deals with the family and ancestral spirits and how they are controlled with livestock sacrifice and offering of food. The fourth chapter deals with community rituals and authority both within and beyond the community, and how they negotiate this vis-Ã -vis the lowlanders. And the fifth chapter discusses the alternative sources of their power, which is located in the ascetic practices of their cult men.

Part 3, consisting of chapters 6 and 7, is titled, "World Religions in Local Context." Chapter 6 deals with their adoption of Buddhism in the course of the state-sponsored Thammacarik Project, which propagated Buddhism among the hill people since 1960s, and what is called the Khruba movement to the north, which is about worship of "saintly" monks that provides the Karens with an alternate religious practice. Chapter 7 not only describes the process of their conversion to Christianity, but also challenges some of the extant theories of conversion, particularly the much talked about "rice-bowl"

theory. He considers conversion to Christianity as a dialectical process under constant negotiation and rejects the economic motivation theory. In his concluding chapter, the author revisits the major arguments in his book and compares the Karens with a few other ethnic groups in the region ecologically positioned in upland-lowland continuum. The book also has a highly informative appendix titled "A Brief History of Karen Christianity in Thailand" and a very useful 34 page "Notes" section on the various chapters of the book, followed by an exhaustive list of references. Even without reading the other books on the Karen(s), I would rate this book as one of the very best possible publication on this single nation divided by the national border between Thailand and Myanmar. Even the quality of publication is one of the best I have ever come across. I am personally gratified to have read this book and to be reviewing it for H-Asia.

Let me now list out some of the strengths of this book of which there is indeed no dearth. The first strong point that comes to my mind is the author's rejection of the western binary model for looking at the eastern cultures. Following this model, most western anthropologists tend to, for instance, categorize the spirits into binary categories like "malevolent and benevolent," for God and Satan cannot exist in the same being. Instead, the author has chosen to look at the various spirits existing in a continuum, in a flux, and representing a spectrum rather than a polarity.

The Karens are not just seen as geographically located between the hills and the plains, but actually combining the economic and socio-religious characteristics of both. The author shows how both the high and low-landers share common idioms like power and merit-making to define themselves vis-Ã -vis the others. Second, and perhaps equally important, is that the author has faithfully avoided making any value judgments even about some of the most esoteric socio-religious practices of the Karens. Although anthropology as a discipline teaches one to practice cultural relativism very many anthropologists, including some of the most celebrated ones, have failed to hide their ethnocentrism. This is particularly true of the "other culture" studies, which anthropology to a large extent still is. Third, the author makes judicious mix of theoretical literature and local narratives to weave his arguments, which deserves hearty commendation.

One can go on listing out the merits in the book because it has them in abundance. The author has combined the eastern philosophy with the western modernity to produce a book that is intellectually stimulating. The esteem for the author's sensitivity and sophistication goes up with each subsequent chapter one reads.

As an anthropologist who claims to be an Animist himself, I have however great difficulty in accepting his relegation of Animism to the status of "ritual" and reserving the word "religion" for Buddhism and Christianity. Reducing Animism to livestock sacrifices, divination, spirit possession, and the like, without appreciating its inner logic and the overlap between religious practices among Animists on the one hand and Buddhists and Christians on the other, is perhaps not fair. In fact, allegiance to Buddhism and Christianity among the Karens is at times so weak that it is difficult to draw a neat line between Animists on the one hand and Buddhists and Christians on the other, in terms of their every day lives. There is a substratum of Animism in both Buddhism and Christianity in the way the hill tribes of Northeast India practice them, and the Karens are no exception. Instead of seeking to sever any relationship with Animism, as was the case during early phase of the spread of Christianity, Christians today are rediscovering the relationship between Animism and Christianity, and instilling in their people a new sense of ethnic pride. Yoko has noted a similar trend among the Karens as well.

It is also difficult to accept the subtle difference the author draws between Buddhism and Christianity, which the Karens have adopted for different reasons. This distinction is indeed subtle and is marked by embedding the latter with the concept of "conversion" and not embedding the former with it. The author challenges some of the extant theories of conversion, but by keeping Buddhism free from this controversial concept he makes the distinction between these two religions both subtle and effective.

As far as the Karens themselves are concerned, both are exogenous, but both important in their own contexts.

It is not clear why the author does not take cognizance of the fact that the Karens not only evoke imaginations of a hill tribe but many of them live in the hills and the ethnographers writing on them have always recognized them to be so. Even the lowlanders identify the Karens as such even though geographically they might be found in between the hills and plains. It is further true that while there are hill Karens there are no Karen lowlanders!

Their being stereotyped as Christian hill tribes by the lowlanders has close parallels in India's Northeast, although in the latter case the lowlanders are Hindus or

Muslims and not Buddhists, who are incidentally found in the mountainous regions higher up. Further, the societies in Northeast India are not as neatly divisible into hill/shifting cultivation/animism vs. lowland/wet-rice cultivation/Budhism as the Karen land was till some time ago. Such a dichotomy is no longer strong due to increasing reliance of the Karens on paddy cultivation in the terraced fields in the hills of Thailand.

While shifting cultivation is confined to the hills, cultivation of wet-rice in the lower altitudes of the hills is quite common even in Northeast India.

More interestingly, Animism, Buddhism, and Christianity are all linked with the hills in the latter region of India without any clear relationship of power and authority with the state, as it is seen among the Karens.

The author often talks about the rejection by Karens of the dominant economic and socio-religious practices based either on egalitarian principles of the hills or the hierarchical system of the plains and search for alternate practices. This is theoretically exciting, but the reader also needs to be told why the Karens fail to completely identify themselves with the dominant socio-religious practices of the region and why they feel the need for alternate practices. The answer does not come forth clearly in this book.

Finally, Yoko seems to believe in the dominant notion that a community or nation is so because it is internally homogeneous. This perhaps explains his use of the word "Karen" in the singular and his not exploring the internal conflicts and diversity among the Karens. As a result, one does not get a clear picture of how the Karens are responding to different ecological conditions in Thailand and Myanmar and to different socio-religious forces trying to enter their world from different directions. One would also expect a nation like the Karens to have competing, if not conflicting, religious ideologies and cultural symbols for shaping a common identity across national borders.

Despite these limitations, this is a great book that one must read whether or not one is interested specifically in the Karens of Thailand and Burma.

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