

## CHRISTIANITY IN BURMA

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**Abstract:** This article explores the history and development of Christianity in Burma, focusing on its profound impact on ethnic minorities, particularly the Chin, Kachin, and Karen. Christianity was introduced to Burma by Portuguese and Armenian traders in the 16th century, but significant evangelization efforts began during British colonial rule. American Baptist missionaries played a pivotal role in converting the Karen, Kachin, Chin, and other upland ethnic groups, often leveraging local traditions such as folklore of a "lost book" and monotheistic concepts of God. Missionaries introduced Christianity and transformed these communities by creating written scripts, translating the Bible, and establishing schools, hospitals, and printing presses. These efforts elevated literacy, education, and ethnic consciousness among the converted groups. The Karen, Kachin, and Chin embraced Christianity partly to preserve their distinct identities amidst Burmanization and state persecution. Christianity also fostered urbanization, political organization, and national awakening among these groups. Despite challenges, including ethnic conflict and religious persecution, Christianity remains central to the lives of many ethnic minorities in Burma. Today, Christians constitute significant portions of the Chin, Kachin, and Karen populations, with diaspora communities thriving globally. The article underscores the enduring influence of Christianity in shaping ethnic identity, education, and societal progress in Burma.

Christians in Burma represent diverse races, languages, and cultures—the Akha, Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Lahu, Mon, Naga, Shan, and Wa—, however, most of them are from the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, which means Christianity has been synonymous with ethnic minorities and will grow or contract with their fortunes. Portuguese traders settled in Burma in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Wherever they moved, they brought priests to baptize their children, celebrate their marriages, and perform their religious services—the priests who came to Burma never evangelized the local Burman.<sup>1</sup> The Portuguese formed a small Christian community, and in 1613, when their leader, Filipe de Brito e Nicote, was killed, King Anaukpetlun sent them to central Burma.<sup>2</sup> Known for trade, Armenian traders “have managed to permeate almost every corner of the globe in the successful pursuit of trade.”<sup>3</sup> Expert in trade, Armenian merchants also did business in Burma and built their church in Rangoon in 1766—they were prosperous, but small in number—only 265 in 1901.<sup>4</sup> During British rule (1826-1947), Indian Christians came to Burma and founded churches in Mandalay, Rangoon, and Moulmein.<sup>5</sup> Most present Christians, however, come from those native to the land. In terms of statistics, there were 3,172,479 Christians, representing

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<sup>1</sup> Vivian BA, “The Beginnings of Western Education in Burma: The Catholic Effort,” *The Journal of the Burma Research Society* 47, no. 2 (1964): 4.

<sup>2</sup> G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to March 10, 1824, the Beginning of the British Conquest* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1925), 189.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Sarkissian, “Armenians in Southeast Asia,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3, no. 2-3 (1987): 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan Webb, *The Census of India, 1911: Burma Part I Report* (Rangoon: Government Printing, 1912), 104.

<sup>5</sup> Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, “Christianity in Myanmar: With a Particular Emphasis on Its Indian Roots,” *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities*, eds. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Hans-Peter Grosshans, and Madlen Krueger (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 150.

6.2 percent of the entire population in Burma, according to the latest national census in 2014.<sup>6</sup> The real number of Christians could be higher, though, given a long record of successive juntas underplaying the strength of ethnic and religious minorities.

Why did many Karen adopt Christianity? There was a history of troubled relations between the Karen and the Burman, so many Karen backed the British during the first war between Burma and England (1824-1826), with the British finally annexing two provinces of Burma.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the Burman nearly universally resisted missionaries and their religious teachings, many Karen embraced them, accepted Christianity, and collaborated closely with the British, deepening the existing ethnic divide between the two races during and after the colonial era. Less than two years after the end of the third and last war between Burma and England (1885), the British colonial officials actively advanced the cause of the Karen by highlighting the Karen's loyalty to the British Empire and amplifying their overt support for the Karen.<sup>8</sup> The British policy of favoring the Karen acutely infuriated the Burman, and ethnic antipathy between the lowland Burman and upland minorities, including the Karen, intensified before and during WWII, when the Burman sided with the Japanese, on the one hand, and the Karen, Kachin, and Chin actively backed the British and Americans. Andrew Selth details the role of ethnicity during WWII in Burma.<sup>9</sup> It is under this politically stormy context that many Karen became Christians.

American Baptist missionaries, George Boardman, Adoniram Judson, Francis Mason, and Jonathan Wade, started proselytizing the Karen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and made inroads among them without much difficulty, partly because of their folklore of 'lost book,' 'white brother,' and 'Ywah' (God).<sup>10</sup> In 1828, Boardman baptized Ko Thabyu, the first Karen Christian, marking the birth of Karen Christianity. In the following decades, Karen missionaries, especially Ko Thabyu and Saw Quala, evangelized their people with considerable success, marking a popular culture of evangelism among Karen Christians.<sup>11</sup> The Burman, who still ruled the province of Pegu, however, persecuted Karen Christians, which forced many Karen to seek refuge in the province of Rakhine, already under British control. The Burman attacked the Karen, since the Karen, as stated earlier, assisted the British during the first war between Burma and England.<sup>12</sup> When the British annexed the province of Pegu after the second war between Burma and England (1852), American Baptist missionaries expanded their mission efforts among the Karen, which saw the slow but steady growth of the Karen Baptist church. By 1901, there were 130,271 Karen Christians, representing 12 percent of the Karen population and 62 percent of all Burmese Christians (210,081).<sup>13</sup> Christians are now estimated to constitute one-third of the Karen population.<sup>14</sup> Whereas they are known to the Christian world as the Baptist Christians, most Karen practice religions other than Christianity—most Sgaw Karen adopt Christianity, while most other sub-tribes of the Karen practice Buddhism and animism.

Although the statistical strength of Karen Christianity is hardly significant, the influence of Christianity has been pervasive and enduring—Karen Christians received literature, education, medicines, schools, books, and more from missionaries, who had lived with and for them from the 1820s until the 1960s. What is striking is that their missionaries invented the written Karen language, translated the Bible into that Karen language, wrote various Karen history books, immensely popularized the name “Karen” nationally and internationally, founded renowned mission schools, seminaries, and Karen newspapers, educated many Karen young men in the U.S. seminaries, colleges, and universities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, deeply awakened national consciousness, and started Karen urbanization. Recognizing this

<sup>6</sup> U Thein Swe, *Census Atlas Myanmar: The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census* (Naypyidaw: Immigration and Population, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014), 26.

<sup>7</sup> John Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Donald M. Smeaton, *The Loyal Karens of Burma* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Company, 1887).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Selth, "Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942-1945," *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (1986).

<sup>10</sup> Gen. Smith Dun, *Memoirs of the Four-Foot Generals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 5-7.

<sup>11</sup> Yoko Hayami, "Karen Culture of Evangelism and Early Baptist Mission in Nineteenth Century Burma," *Social Sciences and Mission* 31 (2018): 251-283.

<sup>12</sup> Harry I. Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology* (Columbus: University of Columbus, 1922), 306.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan Webb, *Census of India: Burma 1911* (Rangoon: 1912): 100-101.

<sup>14</sup> Pum Za Mang, "Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma," *Journal of Church and State* 61, no. 1 (2019): 96.

astonishing transformation in their national history, Karen leaders and scholars have praised their bygone missionaries.<sup>15</sup> The U.S.-educated Karen Baptist theologians founded the Karen National Association (KNA), the first political organization in the history of British Burma, in 1881 to serve the interests of the Karen regardless of religion and language.<sup>16</sup> San C. Po, a U.S.-educated Baptist Karen, also called for the first time in history to form an independent Karen country.<sup>17</sup>

The description of Karen progress must include the historical importance of the printing press. In this case, the Karen and all races in Burma never saw the press before 1816, when G.H. Hough brought the first press from India to Rangoon for Baptist missionaries, who afterward used it to print portions of the Bible and other Christian literature. Due to the first war between Burma and England, the printing service ended, and the press was taken back to India. In January of 1830, Cephas Bennet brought the wooden printing press from the United States and served as a missionary printer in Moulmein, Tavoy, and Rangoon until September 1882. A few years after 1830, the first iron press, donated by the Oliver Street Baptist Church of New York, was brought to Burma. Missionaries brought more presses in the subsequent decades to meet the demands of churches among the Karen and other races.<sup>18</sup> This mission press printed Christian literature, including the Bible and Hymn Books in vernaculars, the *Burman Messenger*, the *Karen Morning Star*, the *Sabbath Awakener*, the *Sgaw Karen Sunday School Paper*, *Pwo Karen Sunday School Paper*, *The News*, *Sunshine Hymn Book*, *Songs and Solos*.<sup>19</sup>

Urbanization was included in the annals of evolution among the Karen. It started with the internal immigration of primarily Karen Christians from their upland villages to major towns and cities in the lowland. Missionaries noticed that there was no chance of long-term progress for the Karen in the highlands, so they urged Christians to leave their villages and settle in urban centers, where they would seek holistic growth. In altering the trajectory of Karen history, many Karen moved to lowland cities.<sup>20</sup> This urbanization perhaps played an important role in the Karen national awakening. The education programs that missionaries initiated and advanced have uplifted them the most, given that they, particularly Christians, perfectly amplified the power of education to flourish. The end of British rule negatively reversed the fate of the Karen, but the achievement of Karen Christians in education has served them well to thrive despite everything. To highlight the level of feat they made in acquiring education, Thomas A. Marks writes, "Christian Karen students comprised 22% of the student body at Rangoon University, despite their being only 2% of the population."<sup>21</sup> Overall, most Karen of national repute attended mission schools.

Religious diversity among the Karen is sometimes a curse for them when their opponents manipulate the religious divide between the Christian and non-Christian Karen. In the 1990s, the Karen National Union (KNU), led mainly by Christians, suffered politically and militarily when Karen Buddhist soldiers left the KNU and formed their Buddhist armed group and subsequently sided with the then junta.<sup>22</sup> The military regime was partly responsible for this split. All governments of post-colonial Burma, both civilian and military, likewise, consistently advance Burman Buddhist interests against ethnic and religious minorities. Due to persecution after persecution perpetrated by the successive regimes against them, hundreds of thousands of the Karen fled and sought refuge in camps in Thailand. Tens of thousands were resettled in democratic countries in the West, with most of them in the United States. Angelene Naw, a Karen historian, recently wrote that the Karen Americans are more than 70,000.<sup>23</sup> It is sure that

<sup>15</sup> San C. Po, *Burma and the Karens* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), 58–65, Ardeth M. Thawngmung, *The Other Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 26–31, Angelene Naw, *The History of the Karen People of Burma* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2023),

<sup>16</sup> Naw, *The History of the Karen People of Burma*, 85–88.

<sup>17</sup> Po, *Burma and the Karens*, xiv.

<sup>18</sup> Frank D. Phinney, *The American Baptist Mission Press, Burma, 1816–1908* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1908), 11–14,

<sup>19</sup> Phinney, 31–33.

<sup>20</sup> Po, *Burma and the Karens*, 64.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas A. Marks, "The Karen Revolt in Burma," *Issues and Studies* 14, no.12 (1978): 58.

<sup>22</sup> Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 91–93.

<sup>23</sup> Angelene Naw, *The History of the Karen People of Burma* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2023), 317.

Christianity has been central to most diaspora Karen in the United States, and Karen American Baptists founded the Karen Baptist Churches-USA (KBCUSA) in April 2009 2023, with 105 churches and 35,000 members.<sup>24</sup>

Let us now explore the story of the ethnic Kachin native to the northernmost frontier of Burma. Estimated to number a million to a million and a half, they practiced animism before American Baptist missionaries started an evangelization effort among them in 1877, with Robert J. Lyon as the first Baptist missionary. When Lyon arrived in Rangoon, he and Josiah N. Cushing, another American Baptist missionary to the ethnic Shan, sought assistance from Karen Christians in Bassein, lower Burma. In his letter dated January 29, 1978, Lyon wrote, "The native preachers came into an afternoon meeting in the interest of the mission at Bhamo. They paid close attention to Mr. Cushing as he detailed the opening there. As a partial result, two native preachers are with us for this work: To Leh and Naytha."<sup>25</sup> Lyon died of malaria in the town of Bhamo less than two months after he arrived in the Kachin country, and more missionaries came afterward, lived with the Kachin, and evangelized them with noteworthy success. The most beloved, revered, and remembered missionary to the Kachin is a Swedish-American missionary, Ola Hanson, who invented a written Kachin language, created an English-Kachin dictionary and a Kachin grammar book, translated the Bible into the Kachin, and authored multiple books on the Kachin.<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to overstate that, dedicated his entire life to the Kachin, his works have been an important source of enduring scholarly values for scholars and students interested in Kachin and Burma studies.

Missionaries initially faced opposition from the animistic Kachin; however, they slowly made inroads among them, which forever changed the Kachin country's religious landscape, especially after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What prepared these upland people to be receptive to Christianity? Like other hill people in Burma and elsewhere, they had the old traditions of 'lost book,' 'life-after-death,' 'blood sacrifice,' and 'God' (*Karai Kasang* in Kachin) embedded deeply in their traditional religion and subsequently proved helpful when missionaries evangelized them. The fact that they had the idea of *Karai Kasang* made them well acquainted with the Christian concept of God, according to missionaries. To be more specific, Ola Hanson, one of the first missionaries to the Kachin, observed that for the Kachin, *Karai Kasang* "is immortal, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, and this is never affirmed of the nats."<sup>27</sup> Other factors for their religious conversion included economic freedom, mission education, social changes, and political situation.<sup>28</sup> The practice of Christianity, for instance, not only liberated Christians from the economic burden of costly animal sacrifices to *nats*, but also effectively allowed them to maintain their distance from their far more powerful Buddhist neighbors. This new reality must be assessed against Burman nationalists, conveniently blaming British colonialists for all problems, particularly the ethnic divide between the Burman and the Kachin. Kachin scholars insist that ethnic conflict preceded colonialism.<sup>29</sup>

What is more, Karen Baptist missionaries from lower Burma, especially the Bassein area, enormously contributed to the success of American missionaries proselytizing the Kachin. Living and working with and for the Kachin for more than 85 years, Karen missionaries played a crucial role in the making of Kachin Christianity.<sup>30</sup> In 1927, when Kachin Christians had celebrated the golden jubilee, Karen Christians from lower Burma joined them, accordingly underlining growing religious ties between the two races and churches. In his widely cited mission history book, Herman G. Tegenfeldt, one of the

<sup>24</sup> Naw, 319.

<sup>25</sup> Robert J. Lyon, "Mission to the Ka-Khyens." *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 58, no. 5 (1878): 143.

<sup>26</sup> Ola Hanson, *The Kachins: Their Customs and Traditions* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1913); Ola Hanson, *A Grammar of the Kachin Language* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1896); Ola Hanson, *A Dictionary of the Kachin Language* (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1906).

<sup>27</sup> Hanson, *The Kachins*, 168.

<sup>28</sup> La Seng Dingrin, "Conversion to Mission Christianity among the Kachin of Upper Burma 1877–1972," *Asia in the Making of Christianity*, edited by Richard F. Young and Jonathan A. Seitz (Leiden: Brill, 1913), 132-134.

<sup>29</sup> Maran La Raw, "Toward a Basis for Understanding the Minorities in Burma: The Kachin Example," in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations*, Peter Kunstadter, Ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 129-131.

<sup>30</sup> Pum Za Mang, "Native Christian Mission in Burma," *Theology and Ethics for the Public Church: Mission in the 21st Century World*, edited by Samuel Yonas Deressa and Mary Sue Dreier (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2023), 63-66, Dingrin, "Conversion to Mission Christianity among the Kachin of Upper Burma 1877–1972," 126.

last American Baptist missionaries to Burma, writes, "A choir and a band from the Karens of Bassein presented numerous numbers."<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, Kachin Christians proselytized and Christianized their people, which resulted in the rise of Christianity among them. In the 1960s, when missionaries left Burma, Christians represented about 40 percent of the Kachin, but they are today estimated to number more than 95 percent of the entire Kachin population.<sup>32</sup> Also, Kachin Christians actively evangelized other races, such as the Shan, Palaung, and Naga.<sup>33</sup> In this significant way, they display that Christianity is their religion.

It is sure that conversion among the Kachin to Christianity has an enduring implication for them and Burma alike. The Kachin traditionally lived in upland villages, but many left their mountainous villages and founded new villages in the lowland after becoming Christians. This internal immigration, encouraged by missionaries, allowed them to be free from the control of chiefs (*Duwa* in Kachin). This migration must be observed and understood against the historical backdrop that the first Christians came from the ordinary Kachin without social status or political influence. They formed Christian villages in the fertile lowland.<sup>34</sup> Mission education, then, slowly but certainly uplifted them with each passing year, given that in 1948, when Burma became independent, Christians were still a minority among the Kachin, but started shaping the future fate and destiny of the Kachin, because most educated Kachin elites were already Christians. Kachin Christians, like Karen Christians, cherished education.<sup>35</sup>

Ethnic conflict and war defined the collective life of Kachin Christians after the educated Kachin Christians started their armed uprising against the government, dominated by the Burman, when it declared Buddhism the state religion despite strong opposition from the Kachin and other minorities. U Nu, the first Prime Minister of Burma, made this politically divisive and unhelpful move. Aung San, the founding father of independent Burma, vehemently rejected making Buddhism the official religion for national unity among different religious and ethnic groups.<sup>36</sup> He was assassinated before independence, however, and his friend, U Nu, became the leader of the young nation. The Kachin, meanwhile, increasingly adopted Christianity to protect their distinct ethnic identity against the Burman hegemony, illustrating the rising role and influence of Christianity among them after the 1960s. What this means is that most Kachin became Christians amid violence, suffering, and war, which resulted in boosting Kachin nationalism. Mandy Sadan rightly contends that the independent state of Burma was "Deeply implicated in the dramatic growth of the indigenized Kachin Christian missionary movement after 1948."<sup>37</sup> The most Christianized people in Burma, the Kachin, have almost always been subject to restriction, persecution, and militarization.<sup>38</sup>

Inhabiting the mountainous borderland between western Burma and northeast India, the ethnic Chin practiced animism, spoke various distinct vernaculars, and preserved their independence before the British annexed their homeland in 1896 and American Baptist missionaries evangelized them in 1899. The earliest Chin converts were, however, not from the hill Chin. In his journal, Willis F. Thomas noted that Francis Mason baptized the first unnamed Chin Christian, a woman, on February 1, 1837, in Tavoy. Eugenio Kincaid baptized the second unnamed Chin Christian, a man, in Prome in 1854, adding that there were 268 Baptized Chin Christians before American Baptists started mission efforts among the Asho, one of the sub-tribes of the Chin, at Thayetmyo, lowland Burma, in 1888.<sup>39</sup> Invited by Captain Dury, a British Superintendent of the Chin Hills, Arthur and Laura Carson left Thayetmyo and arrived at Hakha, the Chin

<sup>31</sup> Herman G. Tegenfeldt, *A Century of Growth: The Kachin Baptist Church of Burma* (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974), 171.

<sup>32</sup> Pum Za Mang, "Buddhist Nationalism and Burmese Christianity," *Studies in World Christianity* 22, no. 2 (2016): 163.

<sup>33</sup> Tegenfeldt, *A Century of Growth*, 226.

<sup>34</sup> Tegenfeldt, *A Century of Growth*, 322–323.

<sup>35</sup> Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*, 373.

<sup>36</sup> Donald E. Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 230.

<sup>37</sup> Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 373.

<sup>38</sup> Layang Seng Ja, "Burmanization and Its Effects on the Kachin Ethnic Group in Myanmar," *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities*, 173–187.

<sup>39</sup> Willis F. Thomas, "Chin Jubilee Notes," *Baptist Missionary Magazine* 67, no. 8 (August 1887): 338–339.

Hills, on March 15, 1899.<sup>40</sup> The Carsons and other missionaries who came after them converted many Chin to Christianity. To be sure, they initially faced rejection from the Chin, as Robert Johnston, the last American Baptist missionary to the Chin, wrote, "The Carsons, the Easts, the Woodins, and even the Copes seemed to beat their heads against a stone wall in the effort to win the tribal people there."<sup>41</sup>

Presenting the success story of missionaries evangelizing the Chin requires underlining the important role of dedicated native Karen and Chin missionaries. Crossing arduous linguistic, cultural, social, and geographical barriers, Karen Baptist missionaries and American missionaries arrived in the Chin country, learned the Chin language, earned their trust, educated them, and proselytized them.<sup>42</sup> Witnessing their contribution to the Chin, Johnson rightly states, "The names of San Win, Po Ku, Shwe Zan, Po E, Maung Gone, Maung Kya, Tgyi Gaing, Aung Dwe, and others should be forever remembered and honored by the Christian Chins for their sacrificial work."<sup>43</sup> Chin scholars and historians similarly extolled their bygone Karen missionaries for the labor of love and service for the Chin.<sup>44</sup> Karen missionaries converted the first hill Chin Christians and served them as pastors; American missionaries even ordained Shwe Zan, Po Ku, and San Win—graduates of Karen Baptist Theological Seminary at Insein—on March 28, 1907.<sup>45</sup>

With the intense mission zeal for their people, Chin missionaries from northern Chin State also went to southern Chin State. They effectively proselytized their brethren during and after the era of foreign missionaries. When foreign missionaries left Burma in the 1960s, Christians represented roughly one-third of the Chin population. However, today Christians form roughly ninety percent of the Chin, meaning most of the Chin became Christians without missionaries.<sup>46</sup> The fact that the Chin evangelized the Chin belies the Burmese nationalists, who have typically accused the Chin of practicing a Western religion. It is helpful to stress that the Mizo, who live in Mizoram, and the Kuki, who reside in Manipur (both in Northeast India), have enduring ethnic, religious, and social ties to the Chin—virtually all the Mizo and Kuki are now Christians.<sup>47</sup> They, with the Chin, adopted Christianity, partly because of parallels between Christianity and their animistic religion.<sup>48</sup> The account of mission success among the Chin would be incomplete without describing the important role of Christianity in the course of ethnic awakening among early Chin Christians. Speaking numerous distinct languages, belonging to different subtribes, and scattered in the vast borderland dotted with high mountains, the Chin were divided before missionaries arrived in their homeland, but the new religion they adopted united them.<sup>49</sup>

Christianity has profoundly transformed Chin society and history beyond recognition. The once-illiterate and impoverished people, who lived in upland villages with no written script, literature, education, medicines, school, and books, now have their written language, their own Bible, their colleges and seminaries, their learned religious leaders and organizations, and their extensive networks with worldwide Christians. That they adopted Christianity as their new religion has subsequently elevated them and awakened their ethnic awareness. While highlighting the magnitude of transformation they have been undertaking, Martin Smith writes: "The growth of a Chin national consciousness is usually dated to the arrival of the British, when many Chins converted from their traditional animist beliefs to Christianity. Many also joined the British army and served with distinction in the Second World War."<sup>50</sup> For this to

<sup>40</sup> Lian H. Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2003), 124.

<sup>41</sup> Robert G. Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*. Vol. 1 (Valley Forge: Author, 1988), 531.

<sup>42</sup> Maung Shwe Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle* (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), 385, 388–89.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*. Vol. 1, 283.

<sup>44</sup> Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 127–128.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, 147.

<sup>46</sup> Mang, "Buddhist Nationalism and Burmese Christianity," 163.

<sup>47</sup> Joy L.K. Pachuau, *Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in Northeast India* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1914), 137; Yuimirin Kapai, "William Pettigrew: Mythicizing the Man and His Work," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 43, no. 4 (2019): 358–367.

<sup>48</sup> Mangkhosat Kipgen, *Christianity and Mizo Culture* (Aizawl: The Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 115–123, Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 233–235.

<sup>49</sup> Vumson, *Zo History: With an Introduction to Zo Culture, Economy, Religion, and Their Status as an Ethnic Minority in India, Burma, and Bangladesh* (Aizawl: The Author, 1986), 145–146.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma: Development, Democracy, and Human Rights in Burma* (London: Anti-Slavery International, 1994), 36–37.

happen, missionaries paid a high price while evangelizing the Chin, with Laura H. Carson writing in 1927: "But what sacrifice can counterbalance the joy of giving to a people the Word of Life in their language? Or the touching of darkened lives to uplift and ennoble? There are hardships and sacrifices in every strong, purposeful, worthwhile life, and there are equalizing compensations."<sup>51</sup> At the same time, the Chin, not unlike the Karen and Kachin, have faced systematic marginalization, restriction, and persecution from the state for practicing Christianity. A key reason behind this state oppression against religious and ethnic minorities has been the historically polarizing policy of Burmanization.<sup>52</sup> In other words, what sustains conflict between the majority Buddhist Burman and ethnic minorities, including the Chin, is a tension between, on the one hand, minorities, who think they seek to protect their distinct identity and legitimate rights, and on the other, the Burman, who think they need to unify all races.

When we think of Burmese Christians, we usually think of the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, who form the solid majority of Christians in today's Burma; there are, nevertheless, other sizeable Christians, most of them in the mountainous borderlands between Burma, China, and Thailand. The Akha, Lahu, and Wa practiced animism for centuries. However, many became Christians when missionaries evangelized them, with James C. Scott stating that Christianity has been popular among the upland people with a prophetic tradition in the borderlands between China and Southeast Asia.<sup>53</sup> For instance, the Lahu, like the Karen, had old folklores of 'lost book,' 'white brother,' and 'God,' which led them to embrace missionaries and Christianity. American missionaries wrote, "Rev. Young was a white man, and wore the white cotton clothing common to Westerners in Burma in those days. He brought the Bible, the Scriptures of God. Thus, the Lahus saw the fulfillment of their prophecies and were inclined to accept the new religion."<sup>54</sup> Lazarus, a native Lahu church leader, also states, "When the American Baptist missionary William Marcus Young first preached the gospel to the Lahu in north-eastern Burma in 1901, they told him that they had been waiting for him to come for centuries."<sup>55</sup> Like the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, the Lahu had the monotheistic concept of God (*G'ui Sha* in Lahu).<sup>56</sup> The Wa, not unlike most other hill people, were rich in prophecies and continuously practiced their traditional religion until they came into contact with Western missionaries. Many of them, like the Lahu, became Christians when American Baptist missionaries evangelized them.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike the case with the Lahu and the Wa, few Akha became Christians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, implying that the efforts of American missionaries among the Akha initially did not move the needle. According to missionaries, the religion they practiced for generation after generation appeared to be an obstacle to conversion. However, when many became Christians during and after the 1970s, they also attributed it to their religion, which was undoubtedly expansive and costly. To underscore this conflicting situation, Cornelia A. Kammerer writes, "Ironically, it is precisely those aspects of traditional religion that missionaries considered a barrier to conversion that are currently cited by Akha as the impetus for conversion."<sup>58</sup> In making sense of this contradiction, he adds that many Akha converted to Christianity in recent decades, actually both because they have been under ecological pressure and social changes, which, in turn, prevent them from performing expensive rituals required by their religion, and because the practice of Christianity has practically helped them to protect their distance from their dominant lowland Buddhist neighbors.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Laura H. Carson, *Pioneer Trails, Trials, and Trumps: Personal Memories of Life and Work as a Pioneer Missionary among the Chin Tribes of Burma* (New York: Baptist Board of Education, 1927), 255.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Cockett, *Blood, Dreams, and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 64-108.

<sup>53</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 289.

<sup>54</sup> Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, 409.

<sup>55</sup> Lazarus, *An Integral Mission Model for the Lahu Baptist Churches of the Lahu Baptist Convention: A New Way of Being Lahu Baptist Church* (Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 16.

<sup>56</sup> Elena Samuel, *The Religious and Traditional Beliefs of Lahu People* (Bachelor of Divinity Thesis, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 1998), 9-10.

<sup>57</sup> Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, 419.

<sup>58</sup> Cornelia Ann Kammerer, "Customs and Christian Conversion among Akha Highlanders of Burma and Thailand." *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 2 (1990): 283.

<sup>59</sup> Kammerer, 284-285.

Regarding the native missionary agency, Karen Christians proselytized and converted many Akha, Lahu, and Wa to Christianity.<sup>60</sup> The history of Christian mission among these races would, thus, remain incomplete without Karen missionaries. In 1902, two Karen missionaries, Thra Pho Htoo and Thra Bete, arrived in Kengtung to help American missionaries, learned the Akha and Lahu languages, lived among them, and evangelized them.<sup>61</sup> In April of 1936, Thra Tun Gyaw, another Karen missionary, and his wife established the first Akha Baptist church after years of labor of love among them. Moreover, Karen missionaries contributed to the making of Lahu Christianity.<sup>62</sup> The Akha, Lahu, and Wa Christians evangelized their people, making Christianity their religion. In 1904, Ca Sheh Pu Tao, the first Lahu Christian, was baptized in Kengtung, and he and his wife, Nang Tee, afterward started evangelizing their people.<sup>63</sup> By preaching and Christianizing their people, these dedicated native Christians displayed to everyone around them and the state of Burma that they had played an active role in making Christianity.

What is striking, after all, is that American Baptist missionaries created the written scripts for the illiterate Akha, Lahu, and Wa, and translated the Bible into their respective vernaculars, thus buttressing ethnic identities of these hill people when they enter the wider modern world. "In 1933, Marcus Vincent Young and his Wa colleagues romanized the Wa language and published the first book in this new script, a collection of hymns," according to Bertil Lintner, who adds, "A complete translation of the Bible into Romanized Wa was published in 1939."<sup>64</sup> Paul W. Lewis and other American missionaries, including William Young, the father of Vincent Young, created a written Lahu script. Lewis, then, created a written Akha language and translated the Bible into both languages.<sup>65</sup>

Taken all together, there are lessons from the making of Burmese Christianity. If the passion of Christian mission is to create a written language for illiterate people, to translate the Bible into their language, to establish schools to educate their children and hospitals to relieve their miseries, to found religious institutions and organizations for holistic involvement, and to modernize their society, missionaries to the upland races of Burma undoubtedly fulfilled their goals. Whereas their conversion ostensibly ended their traditional way of life, their new religion allowed them to buttress their distinct ethnic identities by creating the written scripts and the subsequent translation of the Bible into their respective vernaculars. Burman nationalists typically criticize Western missionaries for Christianizing them, but it is also true that they have been active players in the long course of their conversion to Christianity. Finally, education, brought and advanced by missionaries, has helped them join a larger intellectual world.

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<sup>60</sup> Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, 418.

<sup>61</sup> Yar Htu, *A Study on the Holistic Mission of Akha Churches to Non-Christian Akha Communities* (Doctor of Ministry diss., Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 5.

<sup>62</sup> Hayami, "Karen Culture of Evangelism and Early Baptist Mission in Nineteenth Century Burma," 277-278, Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, 318.

<sup>63</sup> Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, 410.

<sup>64</sup> Bertil Linter, *The Wa of Myanmar and China's Quest for Global Dominance* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2021), 31.

<sup>65</sup> Lazarus, *An Integral Mission Model for the Lahu Baptist Churches of the Lahu Baptist Convention 19*, Lintner, *The Wa of Myanmar and China's Quest for Global Dominance*, 31, Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, 419.