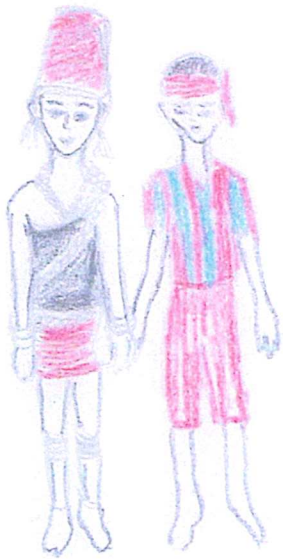


# Karenni



# Traditional



# Storybook



## Foreword

*These stories were all told to me by my Karenni (majoritarily Kayah) students and coworkers. The ideas come from them and have been edited by myself. I would like to acknowledge potential discrepancies or gaps that could occur throughout the book as a result of words lost in translation and knowledge lost over time. As my students and coworkers have lived in Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp 1 for the past 10-30 years, certain traditions and cultures have been lost or changed.*

*Through the history and the stories shared, this book hopes to narrate the story of the Karenni people and show the importance of keeping traditional knowledge and practices alive in their culture. Unfortunately, colonialism, assimilation by majority groups, and conflict has resulted in the loss of traditional knowledge in many parts of the world and the Karenni people are not an exception to this. Traditional knowledge was passed down orally from generation to generation for many years. Colonialism resulted in assimilation of the Karenni people through the introduction of new religions and western practices. Assimilation by the Burmans (the ethnic majority group of Myanmar) as well as conflict and displacement has also affected the transmission of knowledge by breaking up the community and isolating populations from their homes. As the traditions were never written down, much of the knowledge has been lost over time. With this loss of knowledge there have been changes in the culture of the Karenni people as well as their connection with the environment. This book hopes to acknowledge the importance of traditional knowledge and practices for the lives of the Karenni people.*

### *Who are the Karenni People?*

*The Karenni people migrated to Burma a long time ago. Their ancestors began in the Gobi Desert and made their way through Mongolia and China before arriving in Burma. They initially arrived in Mandalay before moving to what is today known as Demoso in Karenni State. The term Karenni is used to encompass many sub ethnic groups. The largest of the subgroups are the Kayah. Other subgroups include the Kayan, Kayaw, Geko, Geba, Pres, Manumanaw, Yintale, Yinbaw, Bwe, and Paku.*

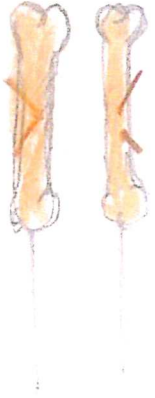
## *History of Conflict*

*The Karenni people have been subject to numerous injustices, human rights abuses, and discrimination over countless decades. The Bamar people make up the majority ethnic group in Karenni state and have used this power in attempts to dominate Myanmar. Throughout this process, numerous ethnic minority groups such as the Karenni people have suffered. In 1875, during the British rule in Burma, the Karenni people were granted independence through a treaty signed by both the Burmese and the British. Unfortunately, once the British rule ended and the power was handed over to the Bamar people in 1948, this promise of independence was not honoured. The Burmese invaded Karenni State, and the Karenni people lost their independence. This is an ongoing source of conflict today. This loss resulted in tensions and armed conflict between the Karenni people and the Bamar people. In 1962, the Burmese military gained control of the country through a military coup and the situation continued to worsen. The military imposed numerous "crackdowns" on the ethnic minority groups. Thousands of villages were burned and countless atrocious human rights abuses were committed against the Karenni people. This long history of conflict has resulted in millions of individuals from Myanmar being internally displaced or fleeing to bordering countries such as Thailand.*

*The authors of this book include teachers who fled the conflict themselves, students who left later on for educational purposes, and students who were born, and have lived their whole lives, in Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp 1. The majority of the authors are Kayah and the traditions and practices shared will therefore reflect this ethnic group.*

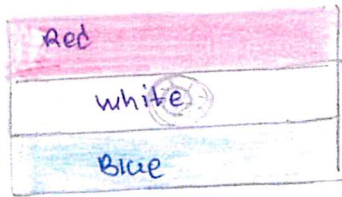
## Chicken bone

Symbols : thing - that cultures attach meaning to.  
solute - 2000: @1225 -



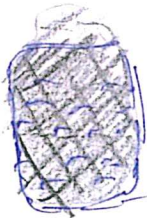
~~we~~ we Karenni national make chicken bone because chicken bone mean we can do and not, chicken bone decide for their.

## Karenni flag



Red is mean courage  
White is mean honesty  
Blue is mean righteousness.

## Karenni traditional wine



Karenni traditional wine people make for celebrated and many people like this, important for make traditional.

## Frog drum



It is mean important to Karenni national culture. Frog is call come rain for ~~people~~ and everything.

## Deeku



Dee ku is mean we are unity. along time we Karenni went to fought enemy and they cooking dee ku and fought enemy. The last we Karenni winner.

## *Religions in Karenni State*

*Within the Karenni people, there are many sub-ethnic groups. Karenni people's religious beliefs are often aligned with those of their ethnic group. Historically, Karenni people only followed Animist beliefs, but over time other religions began to be introduced to the region. Today there are four main religions in Karenni culture: Christianity, Baptist, Buddhism, and Animism. Although there are more religions today, the majority of Karenni people still practice Animist beliefs along with Christian, Baptist, or Buddhist beliefs. As explained by a student "they believe other religions, but they can't forget their culture and traditional religion."*

*The animist practices of the Karenni people are focused on the protection of their community and the environment. They are centered around honesty and collectivism. The Karenni people believe that if they follow their beliefs they will live a good life and have a good afterlife. Their practices include leading rituals, worshipping, and feeding the spirits that guard the people and the environment as well as the creator of the earth and heaven. It is believed that if these practices are followed and the environment and the spirits are respected that the community and the environment will be looked after. If they are not respected then there will be many problems such as natural disasters. Animist practices focus on the connectedness of nature and the people. Some of these connections are explained below in the words of some of the authors:*

*"They believe trees for get water. Each year, one time, they go to (perform) sacrifices to trees in the forest, because they believe it make water for our use. "*

*"If we go to forest or farm and when we eat rice, first we feed the spirit and then we can eat"*

*"If we make rice field, the first we sacrifice the spirit because if we don't sacrifice the spirit, we can lose our rice field."*

*These practices are performed to the bad and good spirits alike. Karenni people do not discriminate, they provide to everyone and everything. The following passages were explained in detail by the principle of the school:*

*"A vital part of the culture is that your heart is kind to every creature. We don't have bias. This should be the same as human rights. Everyone should have human rights and kindness.*

*If you die in a bad situation, your spirit will be stuck. It will stay where it died and it will be thirsty and hungry. They are starving like humans but we cant see it. A bad spirit is like a child. A child will come up to you if you are having a feast with elders and they will be annoying. If you want them to not cause problems you need to offer them something to go away.*

*You know a bad spirit is surrounding you because they will tell you. For example they will throw rocks at you or shake the trees. If you don't respect them, they will make you sick and cause you many problems. If you respect them they will go far away and they will not cause you any problems. "*

*Traditionally, these practices were divided between the two distinct groups within the Kayah people: the Ee lu phu and Khai phu. Unfortunately, due to the loss of knowledge and traditions over time the traditional partition of roles of these groups are not practiced or fully known by the majority of Karenni people today.*

## Our Soul

An important Karenni belief is that one's soul protects them. If one loses their soul, it is essential to retrieve it or one will get very sick. This belief will be explained through the story of one losing their soul in the forest. As was explained by my student:

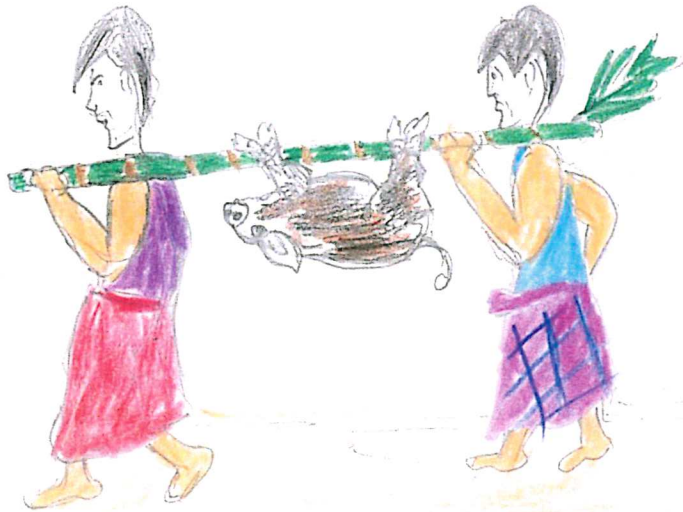
"If I go in the forest, I see something and really afraid. When I come home, I lose my soul in the forest. Soul protects sick, so I am sick."

This passage is explaining an example of a bad spirit taking the person's soul. When the soul is lost, it is important to call it back. To do this, a healer needs to be consulted. This healer will have a holy stone (jade) or holy beads which have a spirit inside. The healer will ask many questions to the stone and the spirit will answer them. If the answer to the question is true, the stone will move. If the answer is false, the stone will not move.

Once the healer knows the location of the lost soul and the reason why the soul was lost, the mother and father (or other male loved one) will be told where to go. In this case, the stone told the healer that the soul was located in the forest.

The mother and father go to the forest together and bring a chicken. Once in the forest they will pick up a stick and call back the soul to follow them home. The soul will follow the stick as they go home. Once home, they will put the stick in the room of the sick one and they will pluck the feathers of the chicken to put under the pillow and around the home. The chicken will then be killed so that the father (or other male relative) can read the chicken bones. The chicken bones will say "good" or "bad". If it is read as good, then the person's soul has returned. If it reads bad, the process will need to be repeated. The chicken will then be sacrificed to the bad spirit. By feeding the bad spirit it is believed that the spirit will go far away and the sick one will be able to retrieve their soul and be healed.

This process is used for most illnesses that do not disappear quickly with medicine.





## *Karenni Traditional Marriage*

*In ancient Karenni traditions, early marriage (around 16-18) was very common as the parents would choose to marry their children off. Today some families still follow early marriage practices and others don't. If two people fall in love, the parents need to approve. Parents will not approve if the two lovers are from different groups. In the case of the Kayah this means that, traditionally, an Ee lu phu could not marry a Khai phu. Some people defy their parents and decide to marry in secret. The Karenni people believe that this is bad luck and will lead to many problems. If the parents allow the marriage, they will read the chicken bones. If the chicken bone reading is a success, the two in love will get engaged. The woman's family will be given chickens, money, and a ring. If the woman accepts they will begin to prepare for their wedding.*

*Traditionally, they are not allowed to live together prior to marriage. Today, in certain cases, they are allowed to live together after their engagement. This is primarily for economic reasons as many couples are not able to afford a marriage ceremony for a few years after their engagement.*

*Their wedding will be a three day and three night long festival and traditional clothing (red clothing) will be worn at the marriage. Chicken bones are read again. If the chicken bones are not a success there might be divorce or conflicts later on in their marriage. One pig is killed for each day and eaten during the celebrations. Friends and family will join them for their celebrations. Together they will eat, dance, and drink lots of Karenni wine.*



Band = The band is important our tradition  
• we play band during festival,  
wedding, Dee Ku and Kay Hoo be  
Festival.



Flag = The flag is important our country  
and ethnic group, we have three  
color in flag, there are red, white,  
and blue. Logo on the flag mean is  
frog make rain, fish live and sun is  
give light in to the world.



animals = Animals are important in our  
traditional. because we use animals  
for festivals.



food = Dee Ku, Dee ta and Karenni wine are  
our traditional and culture food. we  
have Dee Ku festival on september,  
and Dee ta festival on November.



clothes = Especially Karenni traditional  
clothes are weaving. <sup>Also</sup> ~~there~~  
have ~~are~~ many types of traditional  
cloth. Especially we wear  
traditional clothes at festival.



## Deeku Festival

We (the Karenni) started making Deeku a long time ago when we were fighting the Yoe Nationals. We always lost because we didn't have enough rice to eat. Even when we prepared a lot of rice, it would begin to smell bad and become inedible in a few days. During war, we decided we had to do it another way so we started cooking the rice differently. Instead of just cooking rice and letting it sit, we started wrapping uncooked sticky rice in a Deeku leaf before cooking it. We tied three Deeku leaves wrapped in rice together to represent unity between three Karenni sub ethnic groups: Kayah, Kayaw, and Kayan. Once the rice is wrapped inside the leaf it is cooked overnight. This allows the rice to last longer (for around one week instead of two days). After we started making Deeku, we won the war!

Deeku festival is now celebrated every year around the month of September. The date of Deeku festival is different every year as it is decided based on the reading of chicken bones. During Deeku, the community gets together to eat lots of Deeku (often dipped in sugar and coconut), drink lots of rice wine, and dance. Traditional dances happen during Deeku festival that represent the steps of making Deeku. Men and women dance together to show their traditional roles in Deeku making: they both cut the rice, the men beat the rice, the women carry the rice, the men pound the rice, and the women sift the rice. The last step of the dance is the process of putting the rice inside the Deeku leaves and tying the leaves together to make the final product.

Poe Dee Karee is also celebrated during Deeku festival. Poe Dee Karee is very powerful being that protects the Karenni people's lives. Poe Dee Karee is celebrated during Deeku festival by providing wine and Deeku to Poe Dee Karee. A very loose translation of Poe Dee Karee is Poe meaning Grandfather or Grandmother and Dee Karee meaning relative deity.

## *Kayhtoo Boe Festival*

*Another very important festival for the Karenni people is the Kayhtoo Boe Festival. During the Kayhtoo Boe Festival there are poles erected into the ground. These poles are made out of teak trees and represent a passage from the earth to the heavens. The poles are decorated with many different symbols. There are three different parts of the ceremony in one year and the size of the poles vary based on the ceremony.*

*First there is the Too Boe Plyar celebration. This is celebrated during the harvesting period. Crops are very important to the Karenni people and this festival is vital to ensure healthy crops. During this ceremony the people feed the spirits that are guarding the environment and the crops. By doing this the good spirits will provide protection and good weather and the bad spirits will leave the crops alone.*

*The second festival is the Too Boe Phu Thei. This one is a celebration for the youth in the community. The purpose of this festival is to bless the youth with good health and good character.*

*The third part of the festival is Too Boe Du celebration. This is the biggest of the three and, consequently, displays the biggest teak pole. This celebration is for the whole community and offers food, worship, and rituals to the creator of the earth as well as the spirits.*

