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0521399203 - True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border

Jonathan Falla

Excerpt

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## A bronze drum 1

White Rock woke us before dawn with martial music from a ghetto-blaster. At 4.30 a.m. he called us in the name of Ba U Gyi, first leader of the Karen rebellion, to honour the flag and the Karen New Year. And so Fragrance got up and crept about the kitchen, blowing up the fire and putting rice on to boil. I watched her from my hammock.

When it grew light, Bartholomew, her father, tied a Karen flag to a long bamboo and lashed it to a post at the front of the house. At six-thirty the drum beats began, rapid and alternating between a dull thud and a hard clack, soft stick and hard stick, accompanied by a battle horn – the Karen type made of a cow horn with a brass reed, capable of two thin, weedy but nonetheless penetrating notes. Bartholomew put on his Karen shirt of thick cotton, with vertical red stripes and long fringes, and we pinned two campaign medals to his chest. The girls put on their long white dresses, and flipflops which the evening before they'd taken to the river and scrubbed clean with old toothbrushes. Then we went to the football field.

At 7 a.m. in December the sun had not yet appeared, and the forest was cold and damp. Mist blurred the kapok trees, palms, bananas and bamboo clumps – ostrich feather fans drawn with a soft pencil. The steep forested hills less than a mile away were hardly visible.

On the far side of the field there was a fenced-off flagpole, and a bamboo frame supporting a large and ancient drum of dull grey-brown bronze. A man in a red striped tunic sat on a piece of sacking, beating the drum with his two sticks, hard and soft. Behind him stood a soldier in camouflage battle-dress, blowing on the black horn, stopping the narrow end with his thumb to change the note. A handful of other soldiers stood about behind him, waiting for the villagers. The ceremony was not compulsory.

Out towards the centre of the field was a white-painted wooden podium; a microphone stood in front of it, a generator in the nearby

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bushes. A soldier fussed about, tapping the microphone and tweaking leads. A guard of honour in fatigues and flipflops stood to one side with grounded carbines and M16s. A double row of villagers began to assemble watching them, fifty yards off. Most were women and had long Karen dresses of heavy weave, horizontally barred in deep reds, indigo and black, topped with a clean blouse and, if they were lucky, a windproof jacket. It really was cold.

Then, as the drum and the trumpet continued to call, the school-children came, two hundred or more, all in uniform white shirts and dark blue skirts or trousers. They marched from the school compound in a thick column headed by William, their headmaster, who drew them up in a body seventy yards long and five deep, facing the drummer and the flagpole.

In front of the honour guard, another group of fifteen formed a line: the governing élite of this backwater District of the Karen revolution, more elderly than most others present. The Governor, Colonel Marvel, was there at the left of the line, his red tunic over a white cotton shirt with stout black army boots and a beret on his balding head. Next to him, Harvest Moon the Justice, big and portly in a Karen sarong and a beret also. Most of the Departmental heads were there – Roger of Transport, then the propaganda chief whose name translates as ‘Devourer of the Country’,<sup>1</sup> Bartholomew of Health and Welfare, Pastor Moses of Bethany Baptist Church, and a selection of Lieutenant-Colonels, Majors and Captains of the Karen National Liberation Army, in scarves and woolly hats. Edward the Education Officer stood to one side with Colonel Oliver the Army CO, a pistol on Edward’s hip but not on the Colonel’s. The mist began to clear, a weak sun lighting the dense green of the hills and the scuffed grass of the football pitch.

When all were assembled, the flag was raised and saluted. Then Colonel Marvel stepped onto the podium and spoke at length while the soldier struggled to keep the public address operating, jiggling the microphone in the Governor’s face. He spoke of the Karen year past: had it been a satisfactory one for Kawthoolei? On balance, no. The military situation in this District at least was static, but their community had stagnated. What had been achieved in health, in education, in social welfare and in trade? Not enough. Where were the new initiatives in commerce, where was the discipline they would need if they were to keep their heads above water; if Karen liberties were not to sink beneath Burmese oppression? There could be no shirking the responsibilities that every one of them

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had to face; the Burmese would close in, would give no chances, would not wait for the Karen to catch up with their tasks before depriving them of the freedom they'd fought nearly forty years to defend. The struggle, the duty was unremitting.

Everyone clapped. The military commander added a few words; William led them in the national anthem. Then everyone turned, shook hands and wished each other a Happy New Year, and we went off for the village breakfast.

Tables had been built by the Justice's house, long bamboo structures topped with split bamboo panels and with integral benches, each seating forty. On them were arranged enamel plates of plain rice and, in the centre, bowls of fermented fish paste, boiled plantain and fat pork. This was, very importantly, a pig feast – like those that had always in the past brought animist Karen villages together to mark the rites of passage or the expiation of sins. Good Karen always had fowl and swine ready for communal consumption, and now the Revolution required to be honoured in the same way. The pork had been cooking slowly in its own fat in giant woks over open fires half the night, stirred by soldiers, and now blubber, bristle and flesh swam lukewarm in bowls of that same fat.

A first sitting set to it: senior men at one table, everyone else scattered amongst the mob of children, in the midst of whom a very old lady squatted uncomfortably on her haunches up on the unfamiliar bench. The schoolgirls served to begin with, carrying plates back and forth between the tables and two vast steaming baskets of rice, where the Justice's nephew Golden Love and Glory his friend doled it out generously. Soon, though, restraint and order surrendered to cheerful gluttony, children screaming with laughter, young soldiers milling, dogs scrapping under the tables over dropped pork fat, the villagers swirling amongst the long tables, feasting and rising and belching and some of them sitting and eating again. I photographed the bigwigs, and out on the football pitch the soldier dismantled the public address system. Venerable and irreplaceable, the bronze drum was detached from its frame and carried away to safe keeping. All that by 9 a.m. and a long day of unity and symbolism still to come.

The drum and the battle-horn together form the insignia of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Every soldier wears it on his hat, cast in yellow-coated base metal. Of these symbols,

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the drum is the more potent. A Karen bronze drum is a massive object, about three foot deep and a little less in diameter. 'Like an upturned cooking pot', wrote a French archaeologist, Georges Coedès (1962, pp. 17–18); in fact they are always suspended sideways with a cord through two loops of bronze. The wide, hipped body is decoratively ringed, with a pronounced lengthways seam from the casting. The broad face has so many rings as to resemble the cross-section of a log – except that, in the centre, there is a many-pointed star. I'd seen drums like this before; you can't have a standing interest in South East Asia without meeting them sooner or later. At home in Britain, in a book entitled *The Dawn of Civilisation* (Christie: 1967, p. 284), I have an illustration of a drum almost identical to that which was now hanging from bamboos on the football pitch, but labelled 'Dong Son' – that is, of a culture that flourished in what is now northern Vietnam around 400 BC. These huge bronze drums are regarded by archaeologists as the epitome of Dong Son culture; they are also regarded, in revolutionary Kawthoolei, as the symbol of the Free Karen.

Whether the drums had any nationalistic significance for the Dong Son people – or even whether they were in any sense special to that culture – is another question. Coedès says that the Dyaks of Borneo, Melanesia and Oceania, fourth and third century BC China and even early western European art have all been claimed as design sources. From such disparate origins, the Karen have made the drums their own. In a small stapled booklet called *Karen Bronze Drums*, Pu Taw Oo ('the old man of Toungoo') says that the first drums were made some 3,000 years ago by a 'Chinese Karen' people called the Kemuh, who were skilled in geometric designs. A more resonant shape for the drums was obtained from 'the monkeys' – by which was perhaps meant the Lahu people, who make themselves a black costume with a little tail.

By the time of British rule in Burma (continues Pu Taw Oo), the drums were made only by Karen living up north in the Shan States. A last centre of manufacture was destroyed by the British in a punitive expedition against tax-refusers. The drum-makers heard gunfire, abandoned the village and, each man carrying two drums (no mean feat), they fled south. They never recommenced manufacture.<sup>2</sup>

A drum was worth 'more than seven elephants', and some Karen began to sell them to outsiders. A steady export trade grew up. Even the Kings of Siam bought them; there are several in the palaces

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and museums of Bangkok, painted black, red and gold and suspended from antlers.

But the leaders of the Karen rebellion put a stop to it. With no more drums being made, the patrimony was being squandered – and that potent symbol diluted. Today the Kawthoolei government prohibits the sale of drums to non-Karen. In fact, they have made it a capital offence.

When not out on the football pitch, the drum at Riverside was normally slung from the rafters in the school office. I asked Ruth the Headmistress where it had come from. ‘Oh, I don’t know, our ancestors. Every village is supposed to have one. In fact it was once the ambition of every headmen to have a drum made for him. When he died it would be smashed to bits – in our old burying grounds you can see the pieces everywhere.’

The school was obviously the place for it, since the design of the drums is educational and admonitory. ‘The old man of Toungoo’ describes in his booklet several variants on the theme. In the basic form, the flat, star-patterned face of the drum has four small frogs in cast bronze an inch or so in height, squatting near the outer edge and all facing in an anticlockwise direction. Lt Col MacMahon (1876, p. 279) was baffled by these: ‘Whether the instrument is intended to emulate the voice of the frog or not must be left to conjecture for no one can give any reason for the frog being there.’ But today, everyone knows the reason. These are the little Karen, unified in purpose. On the side of the drum is a bronze elephant, moving down the flank away from the face. That is the lumbering Enemy, in retreat. Near the elephant there are small lumps on the ground; faced with the solid resolve of the people, it has shat itself in fear.

In drum variants two and three the frogs and elephants are doubled and trebled, the frogs sitting pick-a-back. In variant four, however, there’s a disturbing new note. Two of the Karen frogs have turned around, are heading the wrong way round the drum face. Disunity is quickly penalised; the elephant on the side has turned also, and now approaches menacingly. In variant five, two elephants are actually among the frogs on the drum face, while two more close in up the flank. Variant six features elephants only.

The Riverside drum was a type three. It would be a lugubrious soul who commissioned a drum in the later variants to hang in his village. Having a drum was a responsibility; its spirit required annual food and liquor, or disaster would befall the village. Pu Taw Oo insists that the drums could be used on any festive occasion

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– a wedding, or a new house – but the drums were also beaten, all night, for funerals; presumably (if Ruth was right) prior to being broken up and scattered. They were also a means of defence, as drums have been the world over, against the dire consequences of lunar and solar eclipses.

In disputes, drums were the best possible indemnity, better than pigs or buffaloes. The deep monotone of the drums propitiated the spirits of the forest whose intoxicated song the echo was. MacMahon wrote that, ‘A scene of the wildest revelry ensues’, but always with a melancholic undertow: ‘the music softens the heart, and women weep for the friends that they have lost’. How sad the drums were! But also, how essential. In Karen thinking, Pride does not ride before a fall: here, ‘the proud shall lose their drums’.

The flag of Kawthoolei has a drum on it. The overall design of the flag is not unlike that of the United States – horizontal bars of blue and red with a box in the top left corner. Here, though, instead of stars there is a brilliant rising sun, with the Karen drum silhouetted against it.

In the early days of the insurrection, Karen raiders sometimes left a Union Jack at the scene of an attack; a statement of allegiance that must have been regarded with rather mixed feelings by the departing British. The symbolism of the present flag is conventional. There is, of course, a song about it. A young woman teacher called Ku Wah recorded it for me:

There’s nothing quite so lovely as our flag.  
The white signifies purity,  
the red, boldness.  
The blue is for loyalty,  
and there are nine rays of sunlight  
and a golden Karen drum.

The nine rays, she told me, are the nine traditional ‘nations’ of the Karen.

Ku Wah was, for her age, an important person. She could activate symbols. She not only knew more of the old songs than anyone else, she knew the traditional dances as well. Which was perhaps not saying very much: a Karen in northern Thailand once told a visiting anthropologist, ‘We are the only people in the world who do not dance’ – it was said with pride, as an identifying mark. For many Karen, dancing is a rather suspect activity, verging on the immoral. Under the heading, ‘High Moral and Ethical Standards’, the Karen writer Saw Moo Troo (1981, p. 2) says:

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There is no dancing among the Karens. In fact during funeral ceremonies there is a form of dancing with bamboo flute blowing and obstacle jumping displayed between bachelors and spinsters but there is no body-touching even.

In a whole year I was to see Karen people dancing, in any manner, just three times. Yet the glossy calendars put out by the Karen National Union each year always feature the 'national dances'. The changed emphasis is not so difficult to understand. Karen in Thailand now preserve their separateness by negative accommodation to the Thai state they wish to be accepted by, and so they avoid 'national' display. For the rebels in Burma, the opposite need applies – you don't create nationhood out of a negation. And so dance they must, to show themselves and the outside world what they understand by 'Karen'.

On the football field, the flag remained – in the hot, still air curled against the flagpole, guarded by a relay of soldiers sweating it out in the sun for an hour apiece. By ten o'clock the drum was long since back in the school office, and the morning was given over to sports – volleyball, football, wheelbarrow races and tug o'war – 'Very old Karen game, Mr Jo, you'll not have seen this before' – all organised by a jocular young teacher in military uniform called Nixon ('I was born the day that man was elected; my father thought it must be auspicious.')

There was to be a celebratory concert. All afternoon – indeed, for several afternoons beforehand – there were dance rehearsals, a mixed group of young teachers and students stamping it out by the school kitchen. They needed all the practice they could get: none of them knew the steps too well, and there was just Ku Wah to lead and instruct. The moves were complex and tricky. There was the Bamboo Dance, in which they had to skip through a moving grid of twelve long poles upon the ground, picking up their ankles smartly as the bamboos were rhythmically, energetically smacked together by twelve young men. Then there was the Rice Planting Dance, in which files of boys and girls wind in and out while some mime the stabbing of seed holes with bamboo staves and the others dab their feet into the centre daintily, to press the seedlings in. And there was another, elaborate dance in which the lines swung about and permutated to form letters, spelling out whatever you wished. The practices went on hour after hour in the hot afternoon and on into the evening by the light of a neon strip over the door



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Plate 1. The bamboo dance: 'They had to skip through a moving grid of poles.'

of the kitchen, the words and the rhythm marred by the noise of the generator, the dust cloud from the stamping feet and clapping bamboos sapping the thin light of the neon.

Thump, thump, thump, clack – the crossed poles pounded on the ground three beats, then cracked together on the fourth, snapping at the dancers' ankles, little puffs of talc-fine dust wisping between their toes as they skipped across the grid. They were not getting it right.

'Do these young people really know the traditional dances at all?'

I asked, rather belligerently, of the soldier who was strumming out the accompaniment on a guitar; it was the same man who had been busy with the recalcitrant public address in the morning. He said,

'Here you can see them dancing a traditional dance.'

I pointed out that there was actually only one school teacher who knew how to do it. But he countered,

'That's our Karen way. Our dance troupes always have an



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instructor who knows the traditions.’<sup>3</sup>

But, I persisted, most of these were Delta Karen, not forest villagers. Many were city kids for whom these dances might not be part of the heritage at all.

‘No, that is not right. In all the towns of Burma where the Karen live we know these dances. We do them!’

‘When?’

‘At Karen New Year, all in Karen costume.’

‘The Burmese Government allows that?’

‘We must thank the British colonial administration, which gazetted the Karen New Year as a public holiday. The Burmese would not dare to reverse that now.’

On a bamboo stage behind the church, lit by pale incandescent lights, the evening began as official programmes anywhere do, with speeches. The public address was prone to feed-back, the generator to stalling. The villagers gathered in front of the stage, small children crosslegged in front, their elders on the wooden benches from the church hall. In the background, women sold chicken soup and noodles and rice-flour fritters by the white light of pressure lamps or the smoking flame of naked wicks stuck into tin cans filled with paraffin. Others were selling Burmese cigars:

‘You want to be careful with those. Feel them carefully, weigh them in your hand before you light them.’

‘Why?’

‘Sometimes they pack a .22 bullet inside, facing backwards.’

‘Who does that?’

‘Rival cigar companies.’

In the darkness I bumped into a figure in camouflage green hugging a carbine. Very occasionally I glimpsed a courting couple sidling off into the shadows.

After the speeches, after the sports prize giving, a special item – Homage to the Elders. There were four of them, three old women and an old man, and to a Karen version of *Silver Threads among the Gold* they were led on stage by Karen girls in maiden’s dress – a long white tunic with a pinched waist and delicate scarlet stripes. Each Elder was presented with a rose – red for three of them, white for the oldest lady. Then they were each presented with a cardboard box containing a Thai sponge cake smothered in foaming fake cream. Throughout, the two incandescent lamps at the front of the stage switched on and off by turns, throwing a hard and ghastly light onto one or other side of the old faces.

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And then the dancing. The performers were gathered behind the stage, all in their red and white shifts. To the strumming of an electric guitar, they moved out onto the rickety stage which rattled and trembled with every movement. The Bamboo Dance had had to be scaled down to eight poles to fit the platform. For the Planting Dance, the staves had been twined with green crêpe paper. Once again, Ku Wah sang to keep them moving, with a song of tragic and doomed love, performed with gentle and unmorbid charm. Lastly, the dancers spelled out, in English, KAREN NEW YEAR.

That was all the dancing. There came an announcement: after the singing there'd be a church service and then a special treat. I left, to take a New Year's drink with a friend, just as a choir of schoolgirls were coming onstage to sing a call to arms, and then a slow hymn in waltz time:

The old year has passed away, the new year come.  
Just as light dispels dreams, so your old life  
is now melting away, and a new life dawns.

Walking half a mile through the black forest, flashing my torch only to establish the way and to avoid snakes and centipedes, I could hear the electrified choirs of the Revolution singing in the traditional New Year.

After midnight, returning home, I passed the stage again. The church service was over; it was now the 'treat'. The Education Department video machine was hitched to the generator. An 18-inch television was placed on the front of the bamboo stage. The air had grown cold and the thick, heavy mist was settling down into the valley again, oozing between the ferns and the bamboos and the banana palms. The same crowd was still there but packed tighter now as some 300 Karen rebels, children and Elders pressed towards the little screen. They pulled their jackets tight against the chill, tugged their woollen balaclava helmets over their heads and necks and settled down for a showing of old war epics. As I tied up my hammock, they were watching *The Battle of the Bulge*.