

Culture Profile No. 21  
June 2007

# Refugees From Burma

## **Their Backgrounds and Refugee Experiences**

Writers: Sandy Barron, John Okell, Saw Myat Yin, Kenneth VanBik,  
Arthur Swain, Emma Larkin, Anna J. Allott, and Kirsten Ewers

Editors: Donald A. Ranard and Sandy Barron

**CAL**

Published by the Center for Applied Linguistics

**OR**

Cultural Orientation Resource Center  
Center for Applied Linguistics  
4646 40th Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20016-1859

Tel. (202) 362-0700

Fax (202) 363-7204

<http://www.culturalorientation.net>

<http://www.cal.org>

The contents of this profile were developed with funding from the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, United States Department of State, but do not necessarily represent the policy of that agency and the reader should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

This profile was published by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), but the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of CAL.

Production supervision: Sanja Bebic

Editing: Donald A. Ranard

Copyediting: Jeannie Rennie

Cover: *Burmese Pagoda*. Oil painting. Private collection, Bangkok.

Design, illustration, production: SAGARTdesign, 2007

©2007 by the Center for Applied Linguistics

The U.S. Department of State reserves a royalty-free, nonexclusive, and irrevocable right to reproduce, publish, or otherwise use, and to authorize others to use, the work for Government purposes.

All other rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, in any form or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher. All inquiries should be addressed to the Cultural Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics, 4646 40th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016.

## Acknowledgments

This profile is the result of the collective effort of a team of Burma area specialists and refugee resettlement professionals. Sandy Barron, a Bangkok-based writer and editor who has written extensively about Karen refugees in Thailand, oversaw the development of the first draft of the profile, and was the principal writer for the sections on the Karen and Karenni. John Okell, formerly a lecturer in Burmese at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), wrote the section on Burmese language and also contributed his knowledge of Burmese language and culture to other parts of the profile. Saw Myat Yin, a Burmese writer, wrote the section on Burman culture, and the principal writer for the Chin section is Kenneth VanBik, instructor of linguistics, Patten University, Oakland, California, and postdoctoral researcher at the STEDT Project, Department of Linguistics, University of California, Berkeley. He is a native Hakha-Chin speaker. Zo T. Hmung, program officer, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, also contributed to the Chin section.

Arthur Swain, a Burmese art specialist and author, commented on early drafts of the profile, wrote the section on Burmese art and architecture, and contributed to the Burman culture and Chin literature sections. Anna J. Allott, senior research associate in Burmese Studies at SOAS, contributed the section on Burmese literature, and Emma Larkin, author of the highly praised book *Finding George Orwell in Burma*, wrote the section on Burmese history.

Kirsten Ewers, an anthropologist who has conducted research on the Pwo Karen of Thailand, was the principal writer for the Karen language section. Also contributing to this section was Prasert Trakansuphakon, a native Sgaw Karen speaker whose Karen name is Cau Pav Di. He is a Ph.D. student at the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

Special thanks go to Martin Smith, a Burma historian and author, who reviewed the first and final drafts of the profile. His thoughtful comments added detail, depth, and balance. We would also like to thank F. K. Lehman, professor of anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for his thorough and careful review of the Chin and Karen sections.

In addition, many refugee resettlement professionals commented on the manuscript. In particular, we would like to thank the Cultural Orientation Work Group and staff members of U.S. resettlement agencies for their contributions to the section "Resettlement in the United States."

We would also like to thank Margaret Burkhardt, program officer in the Admissions Office at the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, for her invaluable guidance and assistance throughout the development of the profile.

Finally, we would like to thank the Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration, U.S. Department of State, whose support made this profile possible.

Sanja Bebic, Director, Cultural Orientation Resource Center  
Donald A. Ranard, Editor



# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Burma: An Overview</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>The Burmans</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>The Karen and Karenni</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>The Chin</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>Other Ethnic Groups of Burma</b> .....	<b>62</b>
<b>Resettlement in the United States</b> .....	<b>64</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>73</b>



## Introduction

Resource-rich and fertile, Burma was once regarded as “the rice bowl of Asia.” Under military rule since 1962, its fortunes have steadily declined, and today it is one of the world’s least developed and least free countries. It is also the source of one of the world’s most protracted refugee crises.

More than half a million refugees from Burma, also called Myanmar, are in mainly neighboring and nearby countries such as Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, and Thailand. Around 150,000 people, mostly ethnic Karen and Karenni, are living in designated camps in Thailand; some have been in these camps for more than 2 decades. Another 22,000 are in camps in Bangladesh that date back to 1992. Most of the remaining refugees have little choice but to eke out precarious lives as illegal migrants.

To date, the United States has resettled nearly 5,000 refugees from Burma, according to the Department of State’s Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS). Of these, about 3,500 have been Karen. More than 1,000 Burmans and about 400 Chin have also been resettled. Most of the Karen and Burmans have been resettled from refugee camps in Thailand. Most of the Chin have been resettled from Malaysia.

This profile provides information about the richly diverse histories, cultures, and backgrounds of the refugees from Burma, with a focus on the Burmans (the country’s majority ethnic group), the Karen and their various subgroups, and the Chin. It also looks at their experiences as refugees in camps in Thailand and Malaysia and the early experiences of their fellow countrymen and women who have already been resettled in the United States.

The profile is intended primarily for refugee service providers who will be assisting the refugees in their new communities in the United States. But others may find it useful, too. Teachers may use it to educate students about once faraway peoples, now struggling to find their way in a new land. Local government agencies—the courts, the police, the housing and health departments—may use it to help their staff better understand, and so better serve, the new arrivals.

For readers who wish to learn more about the peoples of Burma, we provide a list of books, films, and Web sites at the end of this profile. But ultimately the best source of information about the peoples of Burma is the people themselves, and readers who find this profile interesting should consider taking the next step—getting to know those whose cultures and experiences are described on these pages. Readers who do so will discover people who are eager to share their lives and stories.

*Burma is the source of one of the world’s most protracted refugee crises.*

# Burma: An Overview

## The Peoples

### An Ethnic Mosaic

Burma is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Within the eight main ethnic groups inhabiting the country, anthropologists have counted more than 130 distinctive subgroups. Burma's extraordinarily rich range of ethnicities and cultures—exemplified in the gala of color and design manifested in its various forms of ethnic dress—presents new students of the country with a picture that can seem dizzyingly complex.

Of the estimated population of 55 million, the largest ethnic group, the Burmans, or Bamar, form about 68%. Occupying mainly territories in the various border regions are other ethnic groups, such as the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, and Wa.

Burma's location helps to explain its rich cultural diversity, as Martin Smith, a leading Burma expert, explains in *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity*:

**In many respects, [Burma's] cultural diversity reflects [its] location on a strategic crossroads in Asia. Here it has acted as a historic buffer between the neighboring powers of China, India, and Siam (Thailand). A fertile land . . . the country is protected by a rugged horseshoe of mountains that surround the Irrawaddy plains. Over the past 2,000 years, many ethnic groups have migrated across these frontiers, interacting with other people along the way. The result is a pattern of cultural interchange and human habitation which, in many areas, resembles more a mosaic than a map of homogeneous or easily separable territories.**

Smith divides the peoples of pre-colonial Burma into two main groups:

- the valley-dwelling peoples—Burmans, Mon, Rakhine (Arakanese), and Shan—who were wet-rice farmers, Theravada Buddhists, and in many cases literate; and
- the diverse hill peoples, such as the Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Wa, who were dry-rice farmers, mostly spirit worshippers, and largely nonliterate.

American refugee agencies may meet people from both these categories—the Buddhist Burmans and the mainly animist (or, in the post-colonial period, Christian) hill peoples.

*Burma's location helps to explain its rich cultural diversity.*



## Shared Characteristics

Though there are great cultural, historical, and political differences among the various groups of Burma, there are of course some shared cultural characteristics. First and foremost, in common with all the cultures of Southeast Asia, is rice. Whether it is in the form of wet rice grown in the flooded paddy fields of the lowlands, dry rice grown as part of shifting cultivation at higher altitudes, glutinous rice known as *sticky rice*, or rice wine used for relaxation and festivities, rice is central to daily existence throughout Burma—so essential that it is regarded as virtually synonymous with life itself.

The patterns of life resulting from the tropical monsoon climate form another basic shared reality and common cultural reference point. Seasonal alternations between heavy monsoons and long, dry periods have historically determined the central patterns of life—everything from the appropriate time for doing various kinds of work and going on a journey to getting married and going to battle.

Certain very broad cultural values that have been cautiously ascribed to Asians by both Asian and Western scholars may also be applied to the peoples of Burma. Among them are an emphasis on family and community and a respect for elders and ancestors.

American resettlement agencies could encounter members of virtually any of the country's ethnic groups, because most are included in the ranks of refugees currently living in neighboring or nearby countries. However, it is most likely that Americans will encounter people from three main groups: the Burmans, the Karen and their various subgroups, and the Chin.

*Americans will encounter people from three main groups: the Burmans, the Karen and their various subgroups, and the Chin.*

## Terms

The Burmese language has two forms of its name for itself and for its speakers and their country. It uses *Myanmar* in formal contexts (e.g., in book titles or the names of government agencies) and *Bamar* in informal conversation. The name of the country in other languages—English, French, German, Japanese, Thai—is based on the informal version. The difference between the two forms is rather like the way English speakers talk informally about going to Holland but address letters to The Netherlands.

In 1989, the military government of Burma announced that they wanted foreigners to stop using the words *Burma* and *Burmese*. Instead they wanted the world to use *Myanmar* for the country and its national people, and *Bamar* for the majority ethnic and linguistic group. Thus, members of the ethnic minorities—the Karen, for example—would be *Myanmar* by nationality and *Karen* by ethnicity, while the majority group would be *Myanmar* by nationality and *Bamar* by ethnicity. Previously, the same distinction was made by using *Burmese* for the nationality and the language and *Burman* for the ethnicity.

Other place names have been changed as well. *Yangon*, for example, is now the official designation for Rangoon, and the new name for the city of Moulmein is *Mawlamyine*.

Although the international business community and international organizations like the United Nations have adopted *Myanmar* as the new name without reservation, not everyone has accepted these name changes. Foreigners and Burmese expatriates who oppose the military government, and contest its right to rule, deliberately persist in using the old names, *Burmese* and *Burma*, as a symbol of their opposition and defiance. A third group, which includes the authors of this profile, continues to use the old names on the grounds that those are the names with which their readership is familiar, and that there are still many people who do not recognize the name *Myanmar*.

In summary, in most contemporary usage and in this profile, *Burman* refers to the majority ethnic group, and *Burmese* describes the language, citizenship, or country.

*Burma is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia.*

## **Land**

Burma is bordered by Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, and Thailand. It covers an area of 261,000 square miles—a land mass just slightly smaller than that of Texas.

The largest country in mainland Southeast Asia, Burma has fertile rice-growing areas in the center and teak-filled forests covering high mountains in the west, north, and east. To the southwest and south, a long coastline fringes the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal.

Burma is divided into seven states and seven divisions. The states are ethnically based; the divisions are predominantly made up of Burmans. The seven states are Arakhan (Rakhine), Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Karenni (Kayah), Mon, and Shan.

There are three large cities: Rangoon (estimated population 5 million), now known as Yangon; Mandalay (population 927,000 in 2005); and Moulmein (population 300,000), now known as Mawlamyine. In late 2005, the regime astonished Burmese and foreigners alike by announcing that it was moving the capital of the country from Rangoon in the south to the town of Pyinmana (population 100,000), about 320 kilometers north of Rangoon on the Rangoon-Mandalay railway line, roughly halfway between the two cities. The new capital is now called Naypyidaw, meaning “royal city.” Construction began secretly under the guise of building an army camp in 2004 and is expected to continue until at least 2012. Many civil servants were relocated to their new offices on November 6, 2006. Foreign embassies and consulates are still in Rangoon, however.

## **Climate**

Burma has three distinct seasons: the dry season from March to June; the rainy, or monsoon, season from July to October (roughly coinciding with the Buddhist Lent); and the cool season from November to February. It is very hot during

the dry season, especially in towns such as Mandalay, Monywa, and Myingyan in the Dry Zone, an arid area in the center of the country where temperatures can reach 110° F. The rainy season brings heavy rain to the southeastern and southern parts of the country. Moulmein, for example, has an annual rainfall of about 200 inches or more; Rangoon, the former capital of the country, has an average of about 100 inches of rain per year. During the cool season, the northernmost areas of the mountainous regions in the north, west, and east experience freezing temperatures and snowfall. In the Shan State, temperatures reach the freezing point.

## **Economy**

Resource-rich Burma suffers from inefficient economic policies and government controls. Large portions of the economy were nationalized after the military takeover in 1962, followed soon after by a ruinous program known as the “Burmese Way to Socialism.” A limited return to a market economy in the mid-1990s has failed to lift the country out of least developed country status.

The economy is predominantly agriculture based, with rice the main crop and farming the main occupation of 60% to 80% of the population. Other important crops are corn, peanuts, beans, oilseeds, and sugar cane. Burma’s natural resources include natural gas, oil, tin, and tungsten, and gems such as ruby, jade, and sapphire. Manufacturing industries include textiles, footwear, wood, and wood products. Teak and other hardwoods are a major export. Burma is also known as a major producer of illegal opium in the northern region bordering on Laos and Thailand known as the “Golden Triangle.”

Chief trading partners are China, India, Japan, Singapore, and Thailand. The United States and the European Union have placed various economic sanctions on Burma.

## **History**

The history of Burma, from ancient times to today, is marked by its ethnic diversity and characterized by ongoing geopolitical struggles between the country’s smaller ethnic groups and its largest, the Burmans.

The history of ethnic relationships in Burma is complex, and across the centuries there has been much cultural interchange. But in general, during the 8th and 9th centuries, the Burmans migrated south from the eastern Himalayas and occupied the central plains of Burma, where they established the great kingdom at Pagan, the ruins of which are still standing today. Neighboring ethnic groups were treated as vassal states or were required to pay tribute to the Buddhist monarchs, and over the following centuries, battles and power struggles saw the rise and fall of numerous rival kingdoms. When Pagan’s prominence began to wane in the 13th century, for instance, Mon rulers rebuilt their kingdom in the south and the Shan established another court in the east.

*The economy is agriculture based, with rice the main crop.*

In the 16th century, another Burman monarch, Bayinnaung, built up a great kingdom within the territories similar to the boundaries of modern-day Burma. The battles with various Mon, Rakhine, and other ethnic rulers continued, however. These ended with the dominance of Alaungpaya, who founded the Konbaung Dynasty in the 18th century, sending his troops westward to claim land from British-ruled India. The move instigated a series of three Anglo-Burmese wars which eventually led to England's colonization of all Burmese territory by 1885.

In many respects, colonial rule exacerbated ethnic differences within the country. The British government practiced a policy of "divide and rule" in Burma by drawing clear lines between the Burmans, living in the central plains, and the ethnic minorities in the hills. While central Burma was administered through a British-style civil service and legal code, the frontier areas, such as the Shan and Karenni States, remained semi-autonomous under their traditional rulers and chieftains. Along with British rule came Christian missionaries, who built schools and hospitals in the hills areas and encouraged many among the Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Karenni to convert to Christianity. Overall, British rule left Burma with the physical legacy of an extensive transport infrastructure and the political legacy of the framework for a representative government. As in other British colonies, English and Western-style education left a legacy with lasting and ambiguous social implications. In particular, in Burman-majority areas, where there was an existing tradition of Buddhist monastery schools, high levels of literacy developed, while in the ethnic minority hills many non-Burmese languages developed writing systems, inspiring interest in education, social progress, and the promotion of different ethnic cultures.

Whatever contributions British rule made to Burma's modern development, however, it also set the Burmans and many of the non-Burman peoples on largely different paths of political and economic development. National unity was not fostered, and until 1937 Burma was administered as a province of India.

By the time of World War II, a pro-independence movement had been set in motion, led by a charismatic Burman called Aung San. He is generally considered to be one of the few leaders who had the vision and ability to unify the country and its various ethnic groups, but he was assassinated, allegedly by a rival politician, just months before independence in January 1948. Furthermore, interethnic tensions had been dangerously inflamed during World War II when such minority peoples as the Karen and Kachin stayed loyal to the British while Aung Sang's Burma Independence army initially joined with imperial Japan. Communal violence erupted in several areas.

At independence, civil war broke out almost immediately around the country. The Communist Party of Burma withdrew from the government and launched an insurrection against the central government in 1948. The Karen insurgency, which is still ongoing today, began in 1949, with armed struggles rapidly spreading to other ethnic groups, including the Karenni, Mon, Pa-o, and Rakhine.

*The British government practiced a policy of "divide and rule."*

In 1962, one of Aung San's former colleagues, Ne Win, seized control of the government and imposed iron-fisted military rule. Gradually, the Burmese army regained control of opposition-controlled areas in central Burma with the notorious *hpyat ley byat*, or the "four cuts" policy, which was designed to cut insurgent armies off from their key sources of survival: food, funds, recruits, and information. Villages were razed to the ground, and villagers were used as living shields between the Burmese army and nationalist ethnic forces.

While Ne Win suppressed the ethnic minority peoples, his economic policies proved disastrous for the country as a whole. On coming to power, Ne Win launched the Burmese Way to Socialism, nationalizing private industry, expelling all foreigners, and closing the country off to the outside world.

After decades of economic degradation and authoritarian rule, widespread unrest culminated in a nationwide people's uprising calling for democracy in August 1988 (the auspicious date, 8/8/88, is known in Burmese as *shiq ley lone*, or the "four eights"). The military regime's response was brutal; over the following weeks of demonstrations, an estimated 3,000 people were killed by the security services.

In 1988, Ne Win stepped aside and a new lineup of ruling generals, known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), reassumed military control of the government. When the regime promised the people a general election, Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, formed a political party called the National League for Democracy (NLD). The generals tried to prevent the immensely popular NLD from winning the elections by arresting thousands of its supporters and placing Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest. Regardless, the NLD won a landslide victory, securing over 80% of the parliamentary vote. The SLORC, however, ignored the results and continued to rule. Today, nearly 20 years since Ne Win stepped aside, the military regime, now renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), is still in power, and Aung San Suu Kyi has spent most of the intervening years locked up in her rundown family home in Rangoon.

Since 1988, the army has more than doubled in size and now has a staggering troop-force of almost half a million soldiers, around the same number as the U.S. army. It is estimated that 40% of the national budget is spent on building the army's strength, while education reportedly receives as little as 1% to 2%. The regime's finances are said to be buoyed up by trade in illegal drugs; according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, Burma is the world's second biggest exporter of illicit opiates.

By the end of the 1990s, most groups, wearied after decades of fighting, had brokered ceasefire deals with the regime. Though the various wars against ethnic nationalist armies appear almost over, human rights abuses continue in many areas of the country and hundreds of thousands of people of all ethnicities have been forced to flee.

*Ne Win's economic policies proved disastrous for the country.*

## The Burmans

Making up around 68% of the population of Burma, the Burmans live in Burma's lowlands, where they populate the main cities, cultivate rice in the rural areas, and practice Theravada Buddhism.

### Daily Life

In Burma, the day can start as early as 4:00 a.m., as food must be prepared for monks who come by foot on daily alms rounds. A token amount of food is also offered on the family shrine for Buddha. Breakfast takes place from 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m., then those who live and work in the main cities go to work. Lunch is between 11:00 a.m. and 12:00 noon and dinner or supper between 5:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m., after the working family members return home. Bedtimes are at about 10:00 p.m., after a few hours of relaxing, watching TV or videos, or talking about the day's events.

In farming areas, sowing and transplanting of rice and seedlings take place in the rainy season (July to October) and harvesting in the cool season (November to February). All members of the family may be required to help with farm chores, so children's education may stop at around age 10.

### Family and Gender Roles

The family, both immediate and extended, is the most important social unit in Burman life. Uncles, aunts, and cousins may live together under extended family arrangements. The mother usually takes care of the daily chores, helped by daughters or unmarried sisters. Those who can afford it may have one or two domestic helpers; in many cases, these may be poor relations brought in from the villages to the towns. Children from minority ethnic groups may be taken into urban homes where they help with light chores in return for an education and room and board.

After marriage it is usual for children to continue to live with parents. Economic pressures and housing costs make this even more common now, especially in the former capital Rangoon.

In Burman families, males have priority, with father and sons assuming first place. They wield greater authority, and are shown deference. Grandparents living with the family are also shown deference.

Females have many rights, however, including inheritance rights and the right to an equal share of property upon divorce. Enrollment in higher education shows almost equal numbers of females and males. Women work in all parts of

*The family is the most important social unit in Burman life.*

the economy, from small businesses to the professions, such as medicine, law, engineering, and teaching.

One area of gender distinction is in religious practice. Females are not allowed to enter some parts of monasteries nor to climb to the higher levels of pagodas.

## **Belief Systems and Values**

### **Religious Beliefs**

Around 90% of Burmans are Theravada Buddhist. Monks are given the highest respect and priority.

Buddhist beliefs include the belief in *karma*—the idea that good and bad events can be attributed to actions committed in the past— and in reincarnation, the rebirth of the soul in another body. A child with a birth mark, for example, might be thought to be a person who was similarly marked in his or her previous life.

The Burmans also retain many animistic beliefs. Many worship spirits called *nats*, who are believed to dwell in trees, mountains, lakes, streams, forests, and other natural objects or phenomena.

### **Traditional Medicine**

Among the Burmans, traditional notions exist side by side with modern medical practices. Traditionally, it is believed that the health of a person is controlled by the four elements of fire, water, air, and earth, and any imbalance in these elements causes illness and disease. There are many kinds of traditional medicine practices. They include Ayurvedic medicine from India, a dietary system based on the planets, an indigenous massage system, and herbal medicine.

Belief in spells and black magic is also widespread. When a person has a mysterious ailment that cannot be cured by any kind of medicine, black magic is suspected, and a cure is sought by going to a healer who deals with such illnesses. More than a few of these healers are quacks eager to charge a lot of money for their “cures.”

### **Traditional Values**

Respect for elders is important in Burman culture. Younger persons do not sit at a level higher than that of an elder in the same room, nor do they sit with their feet pointing at elders.

Children of both sexes are loved equally. The chief reason families would want a son is to have a novitiation ceremony (see the following subsection, “Rites of Passage”), which is believed to bring great merit to the parents.

*Around 90%  
of Burmans  
are Theravada  
Buddhists.*

## Rites of Passage

### Birth

When a new baby is 100 days old, families may hold a feast for monks and friends, after which a name-giving ceremony may also be held.

### Novitiation

For the Burmans, the most important rite of passage is the novitiation ceremony, in which a boy of around 10 years of age becomes a novice in the monastic order for a few days. This is an occasion for offering food and other requisites such as medicines, dry provisions, books, and robes to the monks, and also for inviting guests for a meal. The boy's head is shaved and he wears orange-yellow robes. He is taught the scriptures and meditation. Boys may also become monks for a short time after they reach adulthood.

Girls used to undergo an ear-piercing ceremony, but this is not carried out as much today. Girls may also become nuns for a short period, but this does not have nearly the same significance as the novitiation ceremony for boys.

### Marriage

Western-influenced young urban couples intending to be married may hold an engagement ceremony. A wedding is not a religious ceremony; the bride and groom are married by a distinguished couple who are close friends of the parents or who are socially important. Wealthy urban families may invite hundreds of guests to a wedding ceremony held in a large hotel. In a civil ceremony, the bride and groom may sign a marriage contract before a judge.

In rural areas, wedding ceremonies are simple affairs in which a feast is offered for monks, either at the home or in the monastery.

### Death

When a person dies, Buddhist families will offer food to monks on the day of death, on the day of the funeral, and on the seventh day after death. If a person dies outside the home, the body will not be brought back into the home or village but will be kept at the mortuary or crematorium in urban areas, or on a bed or a raised platform outside the village in rural areas. Burial or cremation is usual. Death is seen as just another stage in the cycle of life, and after death the family makes donations to various charitable causes in an effort to gain merit (and hence a better existence in the next life) for the dead. There is no taking care of graves in cemeteries, except in the case of families of Chinese descent, who have their annual offering ceremony at the tombs of their family members in April.

*The most important rite of passage is the novitiation ceremony.*



## Food

The Burmans typically eat boiled rice accompanied by curry and condiments. The early morning meal may consist of fried leftover rice or steamed sticky rice, eaten with sesame and finely ground salt, boiled beans, and sometimes grilled dried fish. In the urban areas, breakfast might be bread and jam or Indian *naan* (flatbread) with boiled beans. The midday meal is usually rice and some kind of curry, which for the more well-to-do may be a meat dish accompanied by stir-fried vegetables and a soup. More side dishes, such as various fermented fish paste dips (eaten with boiled vegetables) and other meat or vegetable dishes, may be served, depending on the family's income. Evening dinner will be roughly the same fare, with some additional dishes if the family is wealthy.

On special occasions such as weddings and feasts, many more dishes may be served. Sometimes just one special dish, like the popular *mohinga* (rice noodles served with a fish-based soup) may be served to guests. *Biryani* (an Indian dish containing meat, fish, or vegetables and rice flavored with saffron or turmeric) is also a favorite single-dish meal served on special occasions.

*Burmans typically eat boiled rice accompanied by curry and condiments.*

## Clothing

Burman men and women wear a *longyi* (pronounced /lon-jee/), an ankle-length skirt suitable for the hot climate. It consists of a sarong that is tied around the waist and teamed on top with a blouse (for women) or a shirt (for men). Men sometimes wear trousers to work, but the *longyi* is still very common among men, even in the large cities. Women in particular are inclined to wear *longyi*, even when living abroad. A rising trend among young women is to wear the *longyis* shorter and sometimes sewn like a skirt. Since the 1990s, younger Burmese women have started to wear Western-style skirts and jackets at work, and jeans and pants for leisure and sports.

One aspect of Burman grooming may strike Americans as particularly unusual. Women often wear a thick make-up on their face, called *thanakha*, which appears as a patch on either cheek, without being blended into the natural color of the skin. Thanakha is worn for two reasons: It is considered cosmetically attractive and it protects the cheeks from sunburn. Thanakha is not as common in urban areas as it once was, although it is still seen a great deal, and more so as one moves into the remote areas of the country.

## Festivities

The most significant festivals for the Burmans are the Water Festival (*Thingyan*) that celebrates the New Year in mid-April, the Festival of Lights in October, and another Festival of Lights in November.

During the Water Festival, people throw water on each other or, in a more refined ceremony, sprinkle scented water on each other using leafy twigs. The water symbolically cleanses the old sins of the past year.

During the Festival of Lights, families light up their houses with colored electric lights, lanterns, or candles. They do this for 3 consecutive nights—before, on, and after the full moon—during the months of *Thadingyut* and *Tazaungmone* (the 7th and 8th months of the Burmese calendar). *Thadingyut* celebrates the end of the Buddhist Lent (the 3 months of the rainy season), and people offer robes to monks and pay respects to the elders such as parents, grandparents, and teachers with gifts of clothing, fruits, food, and beverages. In the month of *Tazaungmone*, it is the custom to offer robes to monks in a ceremony known as *ka-htein*.

## Music and Dance

Burman classical music does not sound harmonious to the Western ear. The instruments in the Burman orchestra include the gong circle, drum circle, wind instruments, bamboo clappers, and cymbals. Classical music is mostly slow and heavy compared with modern Western music. Popular classical music includes *Yodaya thachingyi* (Thai classical songs).

Pop music in Burma follows popular Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Indian, and Western styles—including, recently, rap music—with Burmese lyrics.

Burman dances are staged performances rather than occasions for social dancing, although ethnic groups hold social dances, such as the Karen *Don* dance at Karen New Year. After Burma's conquest of Siam (present-day Thailand), Siamese dance became popular in Burma; one such dance, *Yodaya a-ka*, is a famous dance often performed at shows. There is also the Dance with Oil Lamps, a difficult dance in which the dancers hold oil lamps in the palms of their hands. Solo dances, duets, and the Marionette Dance (in which the dancers mimic the movements of puppets dancing) are also well-known and well-loved dances.

## Arts and Crafts

Burma is known for its rich traditions of arts and crafts. These include lacquerware, tapestry, gold and silver work, stone carving, wood carving, ivory carving, umbrella making, hand-woven silk and cotton textiles, and glazed pottery. Pagan (now called *Bagan*) is famous for its red lacquerware with its intricate, hand-decorated designs. Tapestries (called *kalaga*) are much sought-after wall hangings. They are embroidered cloths with appliqués on wool, velvet, or cotton, depicting zodiac animals, traditional Burmese dancers, and scenes from Buddhist legends. These *kalaga* are also stitched with glass beads and sequins.

Various types of carving work are found mainly in Mandalay. Bassein (now Patheingyi) is famous for its umbrella industry. The umbrellas are brightly painted with flowers and other colorful designs. Textiles of silk and cotton woven on hand looms are found all over the country, but the best come from Mandalay

*Burma is known for its rich traditions of arts and crafts.*

and Amarapura. The most famous of the silk-weaving designs is the 100-shuttle *acheik* design of multicoloured twisted chains and spirals. Twante in the Irrawaddy (now Ayeyarwady) delta area is famous for its glazed pottery, particularly the Martaban jars and vases.

## Art

### Ancient Art and Architecture

The early accomplishments of civilization in Burma can be seen today in Upper Burma, where more than 2,800 monuments—mostly temples and stupas—sit on the plains of Pagan. These monuments date from the 11th to the early 14th century, and the original influence is clearly Indic (Indian) in origin, with prominent local adaptation.

Many Pagan temples bear large tableaux of ancient Buddhist paintings. Though largely unknown to the rest of the world, they are a crucial link between the history of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Paintings of such extensive enterprise, so early in time, do not survive elsewhere in Southeast Asia, nor for that matter in India.

The Buddhism at Pagan was Theravadin, but there is a surprising religious diversity of imagery in the Pagan murals. They show not only Theravada interpretations of text, but also Buddhist Mahayanist, Hindu, and Tantric elements as well. After Pagan declined, the great temple building ended, and little painting appeared over the next 300 to 400 years. In the 17th century, however, painting recommenced on the walls of caves, and in the 18th century in small monasteries and libraries. Evidence of Chinese influence (in bird's-eye perspective, for example) is notable in the 18th century murals. In the 19th century, European effects appear in the winged Renaissance-like angels in the last great Buddhist mural of Burma, at Kyauktawgyi Temple in Amarapura, constructed in 1849.

In the 19th century, *parabaik* painting was also common, though its roots as a medium for colored painting may have reached back much further in time. *Parabaik* are folding books, similar in concept to the Chinese scroll. Some of the best of these *parabaik* are currently in the British Library in London and the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin.

### Modern Painting

Modern painting in Burma dates back to the first decade of the 1900s, when artists were exposed to the work of British painters who toured the country, painting its scenes and people. Later, in 1913, amateur British colonial painters founded the Burma Art Club as a means to develop their own talents and to pass on instruction in Western painting to Burmese artists. In the 1920s, club members induced the colonial regime in Burma to send two painters, U Ba Nyan and U Ba Zaw, to study at the Royal College of Art in London. Ba Nyan returned

*Many Pagan temples bear large tableaux of ancient Buddhist paintings.*

to Burma with a bold style of oil painting, while Ba Zaw brought back a style of transparent watercolor painting characteristic of the British school.

In the period up to World War II, instruction at the Burma Art Club continued, but painters such as Ba Nyan began master-apprentice training at their homes. In the post-War period, government art institutions took greater control with the establishment of the Rangoon School of Fine Arts and the Mandalay School of Fine Arts. Individual artists continued training in the master-apprentice style, and over the ensuing decades, different schools of art emerged. Painters such as U Ba Kyi worked toward a modern revival of traditional Burmese painting while other painters explored modernistic painting.

Today, despite Burma's isolation from the rest of the world, Burmese painting is a thriving art form that mixes a rich variety of styles—Renaissance-style realism, 19th-century impressionism, and 20th-century cubism and abstract expressionism. At the same time, traditional Burmese painting survives.

In the 1990s, the work of Burmese painters was introduced abroad. Today, painters such as U Lun Gywe and Min Wae Aung sell their works for high prices in the art markets of Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore, and London.

*Most writers start their careers by penning verses.*

## Literature

The oldest surviving traces of Burmese literature are inscriptions on stone, dating from around 1050, that record religious donations to the Buddha and the *sangha* (the Buddhist order of monks). Among the historical details and passages of Buddhist piety, there are occasional lines of verse. By around 1500, religious verse in praise of royalty and the Buddha, scratched on strips of palm leaf (called *pe-sa*) with a metal stylus, was flourishing.

Up to the 19th century, imaginative literature was written mostly in verse; prose was not considered an artistic medium and was reserved for works of a practical nature, especially for the interpretation of the Pali Buddhist scriptures. This love of poetry continues, as most writers start their careers by penning verses.

Modern prose literature in Burma is considered to have begun at the beginning of the 20th century with the first Burmese novel, a love story inspired by an episode from Alexander Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. More novels followed, together with short stories, helped by the establishment of Burmese newspapers around 1915. Detective stories modeled on Sherlock Holmes and patriotic anti-colonialist novels were especially popular before 1940.

Since the 1950s, the variety of topics and genres has increased immensely, encouraged by government literary awards, privately sponsored short story competitions, and the Burmese love of reading and respect for the written word. The late start of television (in the early 1980s) and the monotonous nature of

government-controlled media help to explain the extraordinary popularity of the short story. Only in these stories can Burmese find reflected the successes and failures of ordinary life that members of open societies can see daily in their press and TV soap operas.

About 100 magazines are published every month, almost all containing four to five short stories. The fact that every publication—as well as every video, cinema film, and song—is subject to strict government censorship has not stemmed the flow of stories. It only inhibits writers from tackling certain taboo topics, such as government corruption, prostitution, poverty, democracy and lack of freedom, and any reference to Aung San Suu Kyi.

Two novels by Ma Ma Lay (1917-1982), a leading woman writer, have been translated into English. *Not Out of Hate*, published in 1955, tells of the conflict between Western and Burmese cultures. *Blood Bond* is the story, in both urban and rural settings, of a Japanese woman's tireless search for her Burmese half-brother, born during World War II when her father, a Japanese officer fighting in Burma, fell in love with and married a Burmese woman.

An important left-wing politician and writer, Thein Pe Myint (1914-1978), wrote novels, biographies, and travelogues and has had a considerable number of his short stories translated into English. *Sweet and Sour, Burmese Short Stories* includes stories written between 1935 and 1965. Another leading left-wing writer, novelist and translator Mya Than Tint (1929-1998), who spent 11 years in prison, became an important interpreter of Western literature and philosophy through his numerous translations. Inspired by books of oral interviews by the American writer Studs Terkel, he published a series of interviews with ordinary people in a Burmese monthly magazine, excellently translated into English as *On the Road to Mandalay, Tales of Ordinary People*. They are better than any guide book as an introduction to real life in Burma.

Some émigré Burmese writers have attracted critical acclaim abroad. Tin Moe, who died in the United States in January 2007, was Burma's most famous émigré poet. A prominent émigré novelist is Wendy Law Yone, whose father, Edward Law Yone, was a famous Anglo-Burmese newspaper publisher and dissident who was jailed in Burma during the mid-1960s. After the father was released from jail, the family left Burma. Wendy Law Yone's 1983 novel, *The Coffin Tree*, tells the moving and turbulent story of a brother and sister living in limbo in the United States as émigrés. In 1993, she published another novel about Burma, *Irrawaddy Tango*, and has continued with other publications.

Two partly autobiographical accounts of Burma by the post-1988 generation of Burmese writers living abroad have also received many plaudits. From the *Land of Green Ghosts* by Pascal Khoo Thwe is the graphic story of an ethnic Kayan (Padaung) student who flees the turmoil of Burma into refugee exile and eventually enrolls at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. *The River of*

*Almost 100  
magazines are  
published every  
month.*

*Lost Footsteps* by Thant Myint-U, the grandson of former UN Secretary-General U Thant, is an informative reappraisal of Burma's tortuous history, seen from a contemporary viewpoint.

## **Printing**

Until the introduction of Western-style paper and book binding, texts were written on locally produced paper that was folded fanwise to make books or on more durable sheets of prepared palm leaf, which were stacked and held together by thin stakes. Printing in Burmese script was introduced by Christian missionaries around 1800. Burmese typewriters became available in the early 1900s, and fonts for computer input and output in Burmese script were first made in the mid-1980s.

## **Education and Literacy**

The government education system consists of 4 years of primary school, 4 years of middle school, and 3 years of high school. Arts and science subjects, as well as economics, accountancy, and social studies, are taught.

Government expenditure on education is very low. Although figures are unreliable, an estimated 1% to 2% of gross domestic product is spent on education. Teaching salaries are correspondingly meager, and most teachers take second jobs. In rural areas, villagers often have to organize their own schools by collecting funds, building the schools, and finding the teachers, texts, and equipment. In Rangoon and other urban centers, private schools at all levels of education have begun to cater to wealthy families.

After student pro-democracy demonstrations in the late 1980s, the university system was thrown into disarray. Universities were closed or moved out of Rangoon, and new ones opened in towns around the country. Teachers failed to receive adequate incentives to relocate. Poorer standards, shorter semesters, high costs, and the remote locations of the new institutions have resulted in increasing numbers of students turning to correspondence courses, private English lessons, and vocational training courses to acquire more marketable skills.

Thanks to the tradition of education in Buddhist monastery schools, the Burmese have long had a relatively high literacy rate. In 1964, the government launched a campaign to increase literacy throughout the population. The movement depended on volunteer teachers, mostly students, who established warm relationships with the villagers they taught. The campaign raised overall literacy to 67% (compared with 37% in 1940), with rates varying widely among districts, and earned Burma a UNESCO prize in 1971.

*Government expenditure on education is very low.*

## Language

Burmese is the mother tongue of the Burmans, the majority ethnic group of Burma. As the national language and the medium of administration and trade throughout the country, Burmese is also spoken as an acquired language by many members of the other ethnic groups. Karen and Chin refugees who have lived in close proximity with ethnic Burman are likely to understand and speak Burmese. Those who are from more remote areas of Burma and have not interacted with ethnic Burmans are much less likely to know the language.

The closest relatives of Burmese are the languages spoken by smaller linguistic groups in the Southeast Asia region, such as Atsi, Lahu, Lisu, Maru, and many others. More distant relatives in the Tibeto-Burmese subgroup are the different Chin and Kachin languages and dialects. More distant still are the languages of Tibet and China.

### Dialects

Spoken Burmese is remarkably uniform over its large language area. There is sometimes talk of a Rangoon dialect and a Mandalay dialect, but the differences between the two are very small—a different sentence intonation in some speakers and a few different vocabulary items.

Variants that are appropriately called dialects are Rakhine (Arakanese) and Tavoyan, spoken on the coastal strips, and Danu, Intha, and Yaw, spoken in the hills. The differences between these dialects and the standard language are mostly found in the vowels (e.g., Intha /-en/ for the standard /-in/), though there are some differences in consonants too (e.g., Arakanese /r-/ and /y-/ for the standard /y-/), and there are of course vocabulary items peculiar to each dialect.

### Colloquial and Literary Styles

When Burmese speakers write a letter to a friend, they write just as they speak. However, when they are writing something that needs more gravity, such as an academic article or an application to a government department, they use a markedly different style.

Literacy specialists usually call the normal conversational style the *colloquial* style, and the formal one the *literary* style. The difference between the two lies almost entirely in the function words—that is, words such as *if*, *from*, *because*, *but*, *when*, and *from*, which indicate grammatical relationships between parts of the sentence. In Burmese, one set of function words is used in the colloquial style and a different set is used in the literary style. For example:

English	<i>from</i>	<i>because</i>	<i>but</i>	<i>noun plural marker</i>
Burmese Colloquial	<i>gá</i>	<i>ló</i>	<i>dáw</i>	<i>dwe</i>
Burmese Literary	<i>hmá</i>	<i>ywé</i>	<i>mu</i>	<i>myà</i>

*Burmese is the mother tongue of the Burmans.*

Apart from a few exceptions, all the other words—nouns and verbs and so on—remain the same in both styles.

The contrast between the two styles can be seen most clearly in fiction. The narrative sections of a novel are written in literary style, but the dialogue between characters is written in the colloquial style.

### **Pronunciation and Grammar**

The sound system and structure of Burmese differ from English and the more familiar European languages in several striking ways.

In its sound system, Burmese makes use of distinctions between several pairs of sounds that seem almost identical to the ears of English speakers. For example, in Burmese the sound transcribed as *t'* is different from the sound transcribed as *t*. The first sound is similar to the English /t/; the second sound does not exist in English. In Burmese, the difference between the two is critical to meaning, as can be seen in the words *t'aun* ("prison") and *taun* ("mountain"). English speakers find such pairs hard to differentiate.

Another feature of the Burmese sound system that makes the language different from English is the distinction it makes between syllables by means of pitch (high vs. low), voice quality (creaky vs. plain), and final sound (final glottal stop vs. open syllable or nasalized vowel). For example, although the following words all have the same consonant and vowel, they are differentiated by their tone:

- te* "to establish" (low pitch, normal voice)
- té* "to be aligned" (high pitch, creaky voice)
- tè* "to live temporarily" (high pitch, normal voice)
- teq* "to ascend" (high pitch, final glottal stop)

Notable features of Burmese syntax include the following:

- Markers corresponding to English prepositions follow the noun. (The English phrase "from Mandalay" becomes "Mandalay from" in Burmese.)
- The verb always comes at the end of the sentence. (Instead of "The patient drank the medicine," the Burmese would say, "The patient the medicine drank.")
- All subordinate clauses precede the main clause. (The English sentence "She couldn't come with us because she had to go to a meeting" would appear in Burmese as "She meeting go have to because, us with not come could.")

*Burmese makes use of distinctions between several pairs of sounds that seem almost identical to the ears of English speakers.*



- Relative clauses precede the nouns that they modify. (The English clause “the clock I bought yesterday” is rendered in Burmese as “the I yesterday bought clock.”)
- The language makes use of *classifiers*, special words used when items are counted that indicate the semantic class to which the item being counted belongs. (The English phrase “two pens” becomes “pen-two-rods” in Burmese.)

### Script

The first dated example of written Burmese is an inscription from the year 1112. The writing system used then—and now—is an adaptation of the Indic syllabary that forms the basis of writing systems for many languages of the Indian subcontinent and South East Asia, such as Bengali, Javanese, Khmer, Lao, Mon, Sinhala, and Thai.

The following—the text of an inscription on a pagoda wall, recording the names of the family who paid for tiling the wall—is an example of Burmese script:

မန္တလေးမြို့ (၁၇)လမ်း နှင်းဆီခြံရပ်  
 ဘိုးဘွားများနှင့် အဘဦးတင်အောင် အမိဒေါ်ခင်ချိုတို့အား ရည်စူး၍  
 သမီးဒေါ်စန်းစန်း မိသားစု ကောင်းမှု

### Romanization Systems

Early travelers to Burma Romanized names of places and people in an ad hoc way, attempting to reproduce in Roman letters the sounds they heard by ear (e.g., *Mandalay* and *Mindon*), and the convention continues to this day.

This conventional approach to Romanization has the advantage of being familiar to many readers, but when precise equivalents are needed, the system is totally inadequate. It fails to make vital distinctions in Burmese that do not exist in English (such as between high and low pitch, between plain and aspirate consonants, and between the vowels /e/ and /eh/). It is also inconsistent: The same sound may be Romanized one way in one word and a different way in another (e.g., *shwe* and *zay*, two words that rhyme with each other).

Some Burmese who need to write their names in Roman letters deliberately adopt an uncommon spelling so as to differentiate their names from others. Thus, names Romanized by the conventional system as *Win*, *Winn*, *Wyn*, *Wynn*, *Wynne*, and so on, are all different ways of writing the same name. Many linguists have attempted to establish a systematic Romanization for Burmese, but to this day there is still no universally accepted system.

*Many linguists have attempted to establish a systematic romanization for Burmese, but to this day there is no universally accepted system.*

One striking feature of the conventional approach to Romanization is the use of *ar* for a sound like the *a* in British English *tomato*, *dance*, and *bath*. It is based on the *ar* spelling in the southern British English pronunciation of *Martha*, *darn*, and *barter*, in which the *r* is silent and not sounded as in Scottish and American English. Thus, a girl's name like *Marlar* and the name *Myanmar* itself have no *r* sound in them.

### **Personal Names**

While most Burmese names are made up of two syllables (e.g., *Aye Ngwe* and *Nay Win*), some names have three syllables (*Khin Zaw Win* and *Kyaw Moe Tun*) or two elements with one of them doubled (*Nyein Nyein Lwin* and *Than Than Nu*). Names that have just one syllable, or four or more syllables, are less common. Most words used as names have a pleasant or auspicious meaning, such as *Hla* ("pretty"), *Mya* ("emerald"), *Naing* ("victorious"), *Aung* ("successful"), and *Nyein* ("calm").

Many individual names are chosen following a naming system in which certain letters of the alphabet are assigned to each of the 7 days of the week. Thus a person born on a Tuesday might have a name formed by using the letters *sa*, *hsa*, *za*, or *nya*.

Traditionally, Burmese do not have family names. A man named *Htay Maung* might have a wife named *Win Swe Myint* and two children named *Cho Zin Nwe* and *Than Tut*. None of the names has any relationship to the others; each is individual. The absence of surnames creates problems when Burmese are asked to fill in forms in Western countries. People with names of more than one syllable usually put the last syllable in the surname box and the remainder in the given name box.

Now and then one encounters a woman who has added her husband's name to her own to avoid confusion when living or traveling abroad: Ambassadors' wives often find it convenient to do this (e.g., *Madame Hla Maung*). And some parents add elements of their own names to their children's names. But families that do this are the exception. There are also some Burmese who use Western names, like *Kenneth* and *Gladys*, either as nicknames (often originating in schooldays) or to make life easier for Western friends.

### **Prefixes to Name**

In addressing people other than small children and close friends, it is customary to precede the name with a prefix corresponding to titles like *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Colonel*, and *Dr.* in English. Using a name without a prefix sounds quite offensive to Burmese.

*Traditionally,  
Burmese do  
not have family  
names.*

The two most common prefixes are *U* (pronounced /oo/), which corresponds to Mr., and *Daw*, which corresponds to Mrs., Miss, or Ms. Thus, a man and woman named Htay Aung and Win Swe Myint would be addressed and referred to as U Htay Aung and Daw Win Swe Myint.

Other prefixes used include the following:

- *Ko* (from the word for brother) to address younger men
- *Ma* (from the word for sister) to address younger women
- *Maung* (from the word for younger brother) to address boys
- *Saya*: Teacher (male)
- *Sayama*: Teacher (female)
- *Bohmu*: Major
- *Bogyoke*: General

### Common Words and Phrases

The words and phrases below use one system of romanization; other systems use other conventions. In the system used here, letters are pronounced as they are in English, with the following exceptions:

-ă	like <i>a</i> in English <i>among</i>
-e	like <i>ay</i> in English <i>hay</i>
-eh	like <i>e</i> in English <i>bell</i>
-q	glottal stop, like <i>q</i> in Cockney <i>Woq is iq?</i> ("What is it?")
-auq, -aun	like <i>out, own</i> in English <i>tout, town</i>
-aiq, -ain	like <i>ike, ine</i> in English <i>mike, mine</i>
-ouq, -oun	like <i>oat, oan</i> in English <i>moat, moan</i>
-eiq, -ein	like <i>ake, eign</i> in English <i>rake, reign</i>
c-	like <i>c</i> in Italian <i>ciao, cello</i>
th-	like <i>th</i> in English <i>thing</i>
j-	like <i>j</i> in English <i>jam</i>
k'-, t'-, p'-	like <i>k, t, p</i> in English, but with a brief <i>h</i> between the consonant and the vowel (they are aspirated consonants)

### Numbers

1	tiq	11	s'éh-tiq	21	hnăs'éh-tiq
2	hniq	12	s'éh-hniq	22	hnăs'éh-hniq
3	thoùn	13	s'éh-thoùn	23	hnăs'éh-thoùn
4	lè	14	s'éh-lè	24	hnăs'éh-lè
5	ngà	15	s'éh-ngà	25	hnăs'éh-ngà
6	c'auq	16	s'éh-c'auq	26	hnăs'éh-c'auq
7	k'un(-hniq)	17	s'éh-k'un(-hniq)	27	hnăs'éh-k'un(-hniq)
8	shiq	18	s'éh-shiq	28	hnăs'éh-shiq
9	kò	19	s'éh-kò	29	hnăs'éh-kò
10	tăs'eh	20	hnăs'eh	30	thoùn-zeh

*The two most common prefixes are U for men and Daw for women.*

10	tăs'eh	100	tăya	1000	tăt'aun
20	hnăs'eh	200	hnăya	2000	hnăt'aun
30	thoùn-zeh	300	thoùn-ya	3000	thoùn-daun
40	lè-zeh	400	lè-ya	4000	lè-daun
50	ngà-zeh	500	ngà-ya	5000	ngà-daun
60	c'auq-s'eh	600	c'auq-ya	6000	c'auq-t'aun
70	k'un-năs'eh	700	k'un-năya	7000	k'un-năt'aun
80	shiq-s'eh	800	shiq-ya	8000	shiq-t'aun
90	kò-zeh	900	kò-ya	9000	kò-daun

zero	thoun-nyá	1,000	tăt'aun
1	tăk'ú/tiq	10,000	tăthaùn
10	tăs'eh	100,000	tătheìn
100	tăya	1,000,000	tăthàn

### ***Greetings and Farewells***

How are you?	Ne-kaùn-là?
— I'm fine.	Ne-kaùn-ba-deh.
— I am not very well.	Theiq ne mǎkaùn-ba-bù.
— How about you*? Are you well?	[You*]-gàw? Ne-kaùn-là?
How are things?	Beh-lo-lèh?
— It's good, fine.	Kaùn-ba-deh.
Goodbye (person leaving)	Thwà-meh-naw? (lit: "I am going, OK?")
— Goodbye (person remaining)	Kaùn-ba-bi.
See you later, OK?	Twé-oùn-meh-naw?

### ***Everyday Words and Phrase***

Thank you.	Cè-zù tin-ba-deh.
— That's OK.	Yá-ba-deh.
Sorry.	S'àw-ri-bèh.
Fine, OK.	Kaùn-ba-bi.
Do you understand?	Nà-leh-thǎlà?
— Yes, I do.	Nà-leh-ba-deh.
— No, I don't.	Nà-mǎleh-ba-bù.
— I don't understand very well.	Theiq nà-mǎleh-ba-bù.
This is OK, isn't it?	Yá-deh-naw?
— Yes, it's OK.	Houq-kéh. Yá-ba-deh.
Please write it down here.	Di-hma yè-pè-ba.
Have you finished?	Pì-bi-là?
— Yes, I have.	Pì-bi.
— No, I haven't.	Mǎpì-thè-ba-bù.
Just a moment.	K'ăná-lè.
Is that everything?	Da-bèh-là?
— Yes, that's everything.	Da-ba-bèh.
— No, there is something else.	Shí-ba-thè-deh.

\*In Burmese, the most common way of saying *you* is to use either the person's name or a kin term. Thus, when speaking to a man named Û Tin Hlá, a Burmese speaker is likely to say, "Does Û Tin Hlá want to go?" rather than "Do you want to go?"

What is your name?	Na-meh beh-lo k'aw-thǎlèh.
— It's Tin Hla.	Tin-Hlá-ba.
Please say that again.	Pyan-pyàw-ba-oùn.
My name is X (male speaker*)	Cǎnáv na-meh-gá X-ba.
My name is X (female speaker*)	Cǎmá na-meh-gá X-ba.
I am happy to meet you.	Twé-yá-da wùn-tha-ba-deh.
— And I am happy to meet you too (male speaker*).	Cǎnaw-lèh wùn-tha-ba-deh.
— And I am happy to meet you too (female speaker*).	Cǎmá-lèh wùn-tha-ba-deh.
Please come in.	Win-ba.
Please sit down.	T'ain-ba.
Please drink some tea/ coffee/ water.	Lǎp'eq-ye/ kaw-p'i/ ye thauq-pa.
I will come.	La-géh-meh.
Please come again.	La-géh-ba-oùn.
I will come again.	La-géh-ba-oùn-meh.
I will come again on Sunday.	Sunday la-géh-ba-oùn-meh.

### ***Time Expressions***

One o'clock	Tǎna-yi
Two o'clock	Hnǎna-yi
Three o'clock	Thoùn-na-yi
4:15	Lè-na-yi s'éh-ngà mí-niq
Half past five	Ngà-na-yi-gwèh
Today	Di-né
This morning	Di-né mǎneq
This afternoon	Di-né nyá-ne
This evening, tonight	Di-né nyá
Tomorrow	Mǎneq-p'an
Tomorrow morning	Mǎneq-p'an mǎneq

### ***Kin Terms***

(often used in place of *you* and sometimes *I*)

Uncle	Ù-lè
Auntie	Daw-daw
Older brother	ǎko
Older sister	ǎmá
Younger brother (male speaker*)	Nyi-lè
Younger brother (female speaker*)	Maun-lè
Younger sister	Nyi-má-lè
Son	Thà
Daughter	Thǎmì
Friend	Meiq-s'we
Teacher (male), Teacher (female)	Sǎya, Sǎya-má

\*Male and female speakers use different forms for certain pronouns and kin terms:

<b>English</b>	<b>Male Speaker</b>	<b>Female Speaker</b>
I	cǎnaw	cǎmá
my	cǎnáv	cǎmá
younger brother	nyi OR nyi-lè	maun OR maun-lè

## **Communication and Body Language: Cultural Considerations**

Every culture has its conventions of communication to show respect and deference. The following are some things to remember about the Burmese:

- Treat older people, Buddhist monks, and Buddhist images and objects with respect. For example, one would not normally place household objects above a Buddha image in a home.
- Don't tower over people senior to yourself: Lower your head a little if you have to pass close in front of them.
- Don't point your feet toward a senior person. The feet are regarded as the least noble part of the body, and it is disrespectful to point them toward someone deserving your respect.
- Don't touch people on the head, which is considered the spiritually highest part of the body.
- Use both hands to give something to, and receive something from, an older person.
- Try not to show anger with Burmese even in the most frustrating situations. Losing one's temper is a sign of bad manners and poor upbringing, and such behavior is not easily forgiven.
- Understand that the up-front behavior that Americans take as honest communication is not regarded similarly by the Burmese. Burmese tend toward discretion with others, at least until friendships are formed.

*Treat older people, Buddhist monks, and Buddhist images and object with respect.*

## **English Language Proficiency and Challenges**

### **A Long and Uneven History**

Many Burmese speak English proficiently. This is particularly true of the older generation and those who attended school after 1990.

Burmese proficiency in English reflects the country's long historical relationship with the language. The British annexed Burma in three stages, in 1826, 1854, and 1886, and retained power until Burma won independence in 1948. English was widely studied during this period: It was the medium of instruction in the universities and some schools, and was seen as the key to career advancement.

Patriotic sentiment from the 1920s and 1930s led to increasing use of Burmese in place of English. In 1964, Burmese became the medium of instruction at all levels of education, and English was relegated to tool language status.

The pendulum swung back during the 1980s, and by 1991 English was back in use at all levels of university teaching: Textbooks in Burmese were replaced by books in English, and teachers' handouts and student exams and essays were (and still are) written in English. Today, the same is true of the last 2 years of high school, and children now start learning English in kindergarten. The state-run newspapers are published in both Burmese and English editions, and the state-produced comic strips for children carry an English translation of the text.

Today, the desire to acquire English is widespread and intense, and many Burmese have at least some competence in the language. English is seen both as a gateway to wider reading and information, especially on the Internet, and as a requirement for employment in the lucrative tourist and import-export trades, or for traveling and working abroad. It is not surprising that English language classes are so numerous in Burma, though increasingly they are being matched by classes in Chinese, Japanese, and Thai.

### **Problems with English**

Burmese speakers encounter difficulties in the areas described below.

#### ***Pronunciation***

The right column shows the way Burmese typically pronounce the standard English sounds from the left column.

#### **Standard English**

*ur* (as in *further* and *Burma*)

*ow* (as in *now* and *brow*)

*ie* (as in *pie* and *lie*)

*tu* (as in *tuba* and *tutor*)

#### **Burmese English**

sounds like *fahthah* and *Bahmah*

sounds like *noun* and *brown*

sounds like *pine* and *line*

sounds like *chuba* and *chutah*

Less proficient English speakers typically have problems with consonant clusters, inserting vowels into them, so that *ski* sounds like *saki* and *plug* sounds like *paluk*.

#### **Stress**

Stress is often wrongly placed by Burmese speakers of English (e.g., *vegeTABLE* instead of *VEGeTABLE*, *deveLOPment* instead of *deVELOpment*), especially in syllables ending with the sounds /t/, /k/, and /p/ (e.g., *homeSICK* instead of *HOMEsick*, *PAtricia* instead of *PaTRicia*).

*Today, the desire to acquire English is widespread and intense.*

### **Grammar**

Burmese speakers of English typically have problems with verb tenses, inasmuch as Burmese verbs are not conjugated the way English verbs are. Thus, a Burmese speaker might say “He had lost his job” when “He lost his job” would be the called-for form. Past participles used as adjectives are also problematic: A Burmese speaker might say “You are boring” when “You are bored” is meant.

Comparative forms of adjectives can present difficulties. “I work more harder” is a common mistake made by Burmese speakers. Prepositions, the bane of all English language learners, present particular problems to Burmese speakers of English. A Burmese speaker might say, for example, “Please help for this” instead of “Please help me with this.” In Burmese, personal pronouns are not distinguished by masculine and feminine forms. As a result, Burmese speakers often confuse the two forms, saying, for example, “I know him” when “I know her” is meant.

*The Burmese people held massive demonstrations in 1987 and 1988 that were quickly and brutally quashed by the regime.*

### **The Refugee Experience**

After a quarter century of economic hardship and repression under military rule, the Burmese people held massive demonstrations in 1987 and 1988 that were quickly and brutally quashed by the regime. The military government held elections in May 1990, but refused to recognize the results after a landslide victory by the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi.

Democracy activists were targeted for repression, and thousands of students, intellectuals, and elected politicians were forced to flee the country. Many headed for the rugged jungles on the Thai-Burmese border, where the educated urbanites experienced malaria, wild animals, hunger, and fevers, and encountered for the first time the ethnic armies whose struggles against the military regime were of a much older vintage than their own.

Some of the young activists tried to continue anti-regime activities from the border, setting up groups such as the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF). But by the mid- to late-1990s, the majority of students had taken refuge inside Thailand in cities such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai in the north. A few found asylum further afield.

Thailand, which is not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, responded to the influx in different ways at different times. Ethnic minority refugees on the Thai-Burmese border were permitted to set up designated camps supported by private relief agencies, while ethnic Burman refugees were allowed to make asylum claims with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This afforded those who succeeded in doing so a small monthly stipend but limited protection. Most Burman dissidents continued to live in virtually the same precarious situation as illegal migrants, unable to find adequate work or other life opportunities and vulnerable to police harassment or even deportation if they were arrested without documents.



A number of Burmese—both Burman and non-Burman—continued working on Burma-related causes through grassroots and nongovernmental organizations that were sometimes tolerated by the Thai authorities and on other occasions suppressed. Some Burmese received training, backed by international donors, in skills such as English, management, accounting, organizational capacity building, and journalism. A few found opportunities to study in correspondence courses or in Thai open universities.

Thai policy toward the Burmese refugees and activists hardened over time, as political and economic relations improved between Bangkok and Rangoon and after an incident in which a splinter Burmese rebel group attacked a Thai hospital. The offices of nongovernmental and activist groups were raided and closed down, and in 2003 the Thai government announced that all urban refugees registered with UNHCR would have to move to designated border camps. The change was deeply unpopular among the approximately 4,000 registered refugees, who feared isolation, lack of opportunities, and lack of protection in the spartan and remote camps. Some were ethnic Karen who had separated from their leadership and feared the uncertain welcome they faced from their leaders and fellow Karen. Soon after the policy was announced, expanded resettlement opportunities were opened up for the urban refugees, and many began to be resettled to third countries such as the United States.

On top of the general hardships attached to exile and uncertain legal status, refugees from Burma have suffered various traumatic and distressing experiences. These include prolonged separation from their families in Burma. Many middle-aged refugees have experienced the death of parents and other family members they have not seen since they left home around 15 years ago. In some cases, family members in Burma suffered repression as a result of the refugees' political actions or exile status. Refugees lost friends and colleagues in the military crackdown in Rangoon and to sickness and other causes on the Thai-Burmese border. Refugees who are former political prisoners may have been subject to torture, forced labor, and poor diet over a number of years.

A 1992-1993 study of 104 Burmese dissidents in Thailand, by the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, reported that 89% had suffered interrogation, 78% had suffered imprisonment, 70% had suffered threats of deportation, and 38% had suffered torture. Many reported poor health and symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Few, however, reported substantial social disability. The report, published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 1996, suggested that survival strategies, such as camaraderie and a Buddhist concept of self-confidence (*weria*), may have accounted for the refugees' surprising resilience.

*Refugees who are former political prisoners may have been subject to torture, forced labor, and poor diet.*

## The Karen and Karenni

Geographically and linguistically, the Karen can be divided into three broad groups: Southern, Central, and Northern. These three groups can be further divided into many subgroups. Of these, the largest and best known are the Sgaw and Pwo (Southern), Karenni (Central), and Pa-o (Northern).

In this section we will be looking at the Sgaw, Pwo, and Karenni. Each of these groups has its own name for itself that is different from the name by which they are known to outsiders. The Sgaw call themselves *B'gen Yor*, the Pwo call themselves *G'ploung*, and the Karenni call themselves *Kayah-llii*.

Though the groups broadly share many cultural traits and traditions, their languages are for the most part mutually unintelligible. Among the Burmese refugees living in Thai border camps, around 70% are Sgaw Karen, 7% are Pwo Karen, and 13% are Karenni.

Outsiders generally refer to the subgroups of the Karen, other than the Karenni, simply as Karen. We have followed that convention here.

*Less than half of  
Burma's Karen live  
in Karen State.*

### The Karen

Less than half of Burma's Karen live in Karen (Kayin) State, located in southeastern Burma next to Thailand. Substantial Karen populations dwell in other parts of lower Burma, especially in the Irrawaddy Delta region around such towns and cities as Bassein, Myaungmya, and Rangoon. Over the decades of conflict, many Karen, especially educated Karen and supporters of the armed nationalist movement, have moved from these districts to the Thai border and refugee exile.

Estimates of Burma's Karen population vary widely, from 3 million to 6 million. Around 70% of Karen live in rural areas, where they engage in farming and hunting, and some 30% reside in towns or cities.

#### Land

Karen State covers an area of approximately 12,000 square miles stretching along part of eastern Burma's 1,125-mile border with Thailand. The capital of Karen State is Pa'an, with a population of around 41,000 in 1981. Other towns include Hlaing-Bwe, Kaw-Kareik, Kya-Inn-Seikkyi, Myawaddy, Shwe-Gun, and Than Daung.

Much of the territory consists of high mountains, forests, and valleys. There are significant plains areas around the Karen State capital Pa-an and lower slopes suitable for various forms of agriculture to the south. One of Asia's great rivers, the Salween (*Thanlyin* in Burmese and *Qo Lau Klo* in the Karen language) runs through part of the state. Karen environmental groups and others are opposing plans by the regime to build dams on the Salween and other important rivers.

The mountain areas are home to a great but dwindling variety of animal life, including elephant, tiger, deer, and bear.

Karen State has a tropical monsoon climate. The weather is hot from February to May, rainy from June to October, and cool and relatively dry from November to January.

### **Economy**

Agriculture and related activities are at the center of the Karen economy. In the mountain and forest regions, Karen farmers practice shifting rice cultivation and crop rotation. In the plains and lower areas, they practice wet rice cultivation, using oxen and buffalo.

Other crops include betel nut, ground nut, sesame, peas, beans, a wide variety of fruits, sugar cane, coffee, and tea. Teak and other forms of hardwood have long made Karen areas a target of outside logging companies.

Karen in the hills also hunt many kinds of animals, birds, insects, and fish for food. They have extensive knowledge of forest animals and plants and have beliefs and taboos regarding their appropriate uses. As seen in the saying *Au ti k'tau ti; aù kàu k'tau kàu* ("Use water, take care of water; use the forest and land, take care of the water and land"), traditional Karen beliefs stress the protection of natural resources. Another saying reflects the Karen awareness of the fragility of the forests: *Tô kau' si t'bêi s'yù kàu nwi kàu; káu yoo pgà si t'du s'yù pgà nwi pgà* ("One hornbill dies, seven Banyan trees become lonely; one gibbon dies, seven forests become sorrowful").

In farming communities, dyeing cloth, weaving, and basket-making are important supplementary activities. Besides farmers, Karen communities typically include small traders, teachers, medics or traditional healers, and religious leaders.

### **History**

The early origins of the Karen are a matter of some speculation. They are thought to have migrated downwards from the Tibetan region and from Yunnan in China many centuries ago, eventually settling in lower Burma and the mountainous region between Burma and Thailand. There are around 400,000 Karen living in Thailand.

The first written records of the Karen are in Burmese and Thai documents of the 1700s, where they are mainly described as "forest people." As such, they were required to pay tribute to their more powerful neighbors by providing them with products such as eaglewood, teak, elephant tusks, animal skins, sapan wood, and spices, and sometimes by providing them with labor.

A British colonial officer who visited the jungles between Burma and Siam (Thailand) wrote in 1835, "The whole of this belt is clothed in dense primeval

*Traditional Karen beliefs stress the protection of natural resources.*

forests. It is filled with wild beasts, and the valleys formed by the interior ranges give shelter to those Karian [Karen] tribes who disdain or avoid, as far as they are able, any dependence on either of the nations.”

Under British colonial rule, the Karen became more involved in wider affairs. Though a majority remained Buddhist or animist, many converted to Christianity. Significant numbers of Karen started to take advantage of the educational opportunities offered by missionaries and their converts. A prominent Christian Karen, Dr. San C. Po, played an important role in Burma’s political life in the early part of the 20th century. Karen soldiers provided support to British forces against the Japanese during World War II.

But after Burma achieved independence in 1948, the Karen felt abandoned and betrayed by their former allies, the British. They soon rose up against Burmese rule in a push for self-determination that continues today.

Over the last two decades, the Karen National Union (KNU) and its military wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) have lost control over most of their former territory, known to the Karen as *Kawthoolei*. Thousands of civilians have fled regions now controlled or patrolled by the Burmese army, which in some areas works in collaboration with a Karen splinter group, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). Some of the refugees, mainly farmer civilians, have found shelter in Thailand; others survive in precarious circumstances as internally displaced people in remote pockets along the border.

In 2004, a temporary “gentlemen’s agreement” ceasefire was reached between the KNU and Burma’s military government. However, reports of human rights abuses, including forced labor, the burning of villages, arbitrary taxation, rape, and extrajudicial killings, continue to emerge from Karen State, and in 2006 the ceasefire agreement appeared to have unraveled.

### **Daily Life**

The day starts early among the Karen—as early as 4:30 a.m. for some farmers and mountain people. In this peaceful time before dawn, a slow, leisurely waking-up period includes the simple jobs of making a fire, brewing tea, and preparing the first rice meal of the day. The day’s chores include activities such as tending rice fields and orchards, fetching water, mending utensils, and weaving. Families generally eat together, without much chatting or fanfare, in meals taken on the floor three times a day. Bedtime comes as early as 7:30 or 8:00 p.m.

### **Family and Gender Roles**

The nuclear family is the central social unit. In Karen State, families live in spacious villages, traditionally headed by a village chief or headman (*hi kô*). Houses are made of bamboo or wood and are raised on stilts, with space below for animals and rice milling. At the front is a covered porch for socializing, often

*After Burma achieved independence in 1948, the Karen felt abandoned and betrayed by their former allies, the British.*

with an uncovered platform extending from this. The interior consists of a single room with a hearth and smaller compartments used as sleeping rooms.

In farming communities, husband and wife often work as close partners, with women perhaps taking the greater share of cleaning the house, taking care of children, feeding animals, gathering and chopping firewood, fetching water, and cooking. Women also do the weaving of clothes and blankets. Men do the heavy work of plowing, growing vegetables, hunting, and building and maintaining the family home. They also weave baskets.

Karen trace their ancestors through the female line, in beliefs and rituals called *bga*. When a man and woman marry, they often stay in the home of the wife's family for a year before setting up their own home. Young men and women are generally free to choose their own marriage partners, and after marriage strict monogamy is expected. Men assist with the raising of children.

### **Belief Systems and Values**

#### ***Buddhism and Christianity***

It is estimated that about 70% of Karen are Buddhist, Buddhist-animist, or animist, and about 20% to 30% are Christian.

Karen Buddhists are Theravada Buddhists, for whom key beliefs include karma, the notion that all actions have consequences, and reincarnation. Pockets of Pwo Karen hold to a messianic belief in the imminent arrival of the fifth Buddha.

During the British colonial period, many Karen converted to a wide variety of Christian denominations, becoming Catholics, Anglicans, Seventh Day Adventists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, among others. Educated Christians went on to take the majority leadership role in the Karen independence struggle, a development that ended with a faction of Karen Buddhists breaking into a splinter group in the mid-1990s.

#### ***Traditional Beliefs***

Aspects of Karen traditional beliefs are said to have helped pave the way for Christian missionaries. Ancient stories related to Karen origins held that they once believed in a god called Ywa, knowledge of whom resided in a book that the Karen had lost and that one day would return to them via a white brother who would come from the sea.

Karen Buddhists and Christians retain elements of the original Karen animist beliefs. Animists believe in the omnipresence of spirits, found in trees, mountains, rocks, and rivers, that must constantly be appeased. The beneficence of important spirits such as the Rice Goddess and the Lord of the Water and Land is sought through rituals. Karen also believe in the existence of *pgho*, an omnipresent unknown force that cannot be overcome.

*In farming communities, husband and wife often work as close partners.*

Traditional Karen beliefs about time and space reflect the nature of the land and surroundings. When a Karen is describing the size of an object, he or she may compare it to a body part. Thus, a bamboo piece may be described as being as large around as one's arm, or the limb of a tree as being around the size of one's thigh. The most common way to describe distances is according to how long it takes to walk there.

In the mountains, the Karen divide the daytime into seven parts: dawn, sunrise, sun high overhead, noon, declining sun, evening, and sunset. The night is also divided: sun deep down, midnight, and cock's crow.

### ***Traditional Medicine***

In traditional belief, each person possesses 37 souls, or *kla*, a handful of which reside in the body and the remainder in the environment. The *kla* is constantly in danger of being lost or taken by the spirits, and the Karen believe that losing *kla* puts a person in danger of illness. One way of keeping one's *kla* is through the tying of string around the wrist, usually by an elder or religious shaman. The *kla* is said to leave the body at death and then reappear in the form of the *kla* of a newly born child.

In traditional belief, the abdomen is held to be the seat of the passions and diseases, and moods and bodily conditions are attributed to the presence of wind, fire, or water. Wind is associated with pride, ambition, avarice, evil desires, and hilarity; fire is associated with envy, malice, hatred, and revenge; and water is associated with peace, love, kindness, patience, quietness, and other allied virtues. Karen men, in general, have elaborate and extensive tattoos that are a mark of character and a protection against harm.

To cure sickness, a traditional healer may make offerings of chicken or larger animals to propitiate or drive away the spirits causing the illness. Such ceremonies and offerings are not generally practiced by Christian or Buddhist Karen. Certain herbs, plants, and concoctions may also be used as cures by traditional healers, but the main emphasis is on banishing the spirits.

### ***Community Values***

Traditional Karen community life operates on relatively egalitarian lines, with little emphasis placed on the acquisition of material goods. Values such as consensus, cooperation, and harmony are rated more highly than individualism, assertiveness, or entrepreneurialism. The importance of harmonious relations among the Karen is encapsulated in a saying: "The future is long, the past is short; love of peace gives a wide space; love of evil gives a narrow space." Other highly rated virtues include respect for elders, duty to parents, cheerfulness, and humility.

Karen have a low regard for laziness, uncouth language, covetousness, spite, hatred, lying, quarrelling, adultery, and stealing. Suicide may be viewed as an act of cowardice and the person denied an honorable burial. Disputes are usually settled by the headman or by a religious leader, often through payment of a fine.

*Traditional Karen  
community  
life operates  
on relatively  
egalitarian lines.*

## **Rites of Passage**

A Karen belief goes, "A human being will celebrate at least three times in life: First, when one is born (*dû tà blei*), when all the people in the community stop working for a day to welcome the new member; second, when one gets married (*dû tàu khô blei*), when all the people in the community stop working in order to celebrate; and third, when one dies (*dû na k'krau*), when all the people stop working and gather to send the spirit to a peaceful world. If anyone works on this day, the spirit of the dead person will bring them trouble."

### ***Birth***

Soon after a child is born offerings are made to the spirits, and a string is tied around the child's wrist to keep its *kla* from being enticed away.

### ***Marriage***

Karen mainly marry within their own local language and cultural group, a custom that has helped each group maintain its noteworthy ethnic unity. Young people generally choose their own partners, but sometimes a mediator is brought in to help in matchmaking. March and April are the favorite months for marriage. Weddings are lively, boisterous affairs, with the groom and his family and friends approaching the bride's home with a great fanfare of music and drums before the ceremonies begin.

### ***Death***

Christian Karen bury their dead, while Buddhists perform cremations. In animist tradition, the body is often cremated as well.

When a person dies, relatives are called together to perform the funeral rites. Funerals of adults are feasting occasions. Much rice and liquor are consumed, and the mourners chant poems. The idea is to encourage the spirit to leave rather than hang around the living.

## **Food**

White rice is the staple of the Karen diet, eaten at every meal and cooked so that it is not too soft. The Karen also eat many kinds of animal meat, fish, and insects, as well as maize, roots, millet, sweet potatoes, eggplant, bamboo sprouts, gourds, and fruits. Chilies, salt, and spices such as turmeric are used in every meal, and fish paste is a favorite for adding flavor.

Meals are served with rice in a common container, and separate dishes are laid out for people to help themselves with a spoon or by hand. There is often not much talking during meal times. After the meal, people may drink tea or sweetened coffee. Many older people like to chew betel nut, a piquant combination of nuts, spices, and lime that has a mild soporific effect and turns the teeth red. Rice wine, a kind of whiskey, is also popular.

*White rice is the staple of the Karen diet.*

## Clothing

Karen ethnic dress is highly distinctive, with the dominant red providing a bolt of brilliant color against the greens and browns of the forest landscapes. In refugee camps, the Karen generally wear a combination of Western and native clothes.

There are differences in traditional dress between the Sgaw and Pwo. Unmarried Sgaw girls wear a long white tunic reaching to the ankles and decorated with tassels and embroidery. Married women wear a short-sleeved dark blue blouse, the lower portion decorated with striking red and white beads. The skirt is red or lilac, cross-banded with fine designs; a red, pink, or white turban adds even more color.

Sgaw men wear short-sleeved red tunics decorated with tassels, loose dark blue or black pants, and turbans of various colors. They also wear earrings similar to those of the women. Pwo men traditionally wear a colorful shoulder bag over a short tunic that is similar in style to that of Pwo women. Men also sometimes wear a turban. Younger men sometimes wear beads around their necks.

Unmarried Pwo girls wear a long white tunic similar to that worn by Sgaw girls, but more highly decorated. Married Pwo women wear either a shin-length red or white tunic with vertical stripes of colored beads, or a short red or white similarly adorned tunic with red sarongs whose upper part is decorated with horizontal bands of embroidery.

Virtually all Karen, both men and women, carry a woven bag slung over the shoulder.

## Festivities

The Karen hold two annual festivals: one before planting, called *Nî sau khô*, and another held midway through the growing cycle, called *La khô pò*. Such festivals are designed to bind Karen families and communities together. This is signified through the tying of white thread around the wrist, which symbolizes good will, reaffirms ties, and retains the *kla*.

During festivities, Karen eat five different foods, each carrying a special meaning. Regular rice signifies Karen unity, while sticky rice symbolizes sincerity and loyalty. Bananas stand for honesty, friendship, mutual help, and, along with the rice, Karen unity. A kind of flower (*paw gyi*) and sugar cane represent the continued vitality of the Karen. Water is drunk for its life-giving properties.

During festivities, elders sing traditional songs that explain the ancient meanings of the ceremonies to follow, starting with requests to the *kla* to return from where they are roaming and stay in the family and community circle.

*During festivities,  
elders sing  
traditional songs  
that explain the  
ancient meanings  
of ceremonies.*



## **Music and Dance**

Karen instruments include drums, cymbals, gongs, the harp, the Jew's harp, a bamboo guitar-fiddle, xylophone, flute, graduated pipes, gourd bagpipe, and wedding horn (a three-note instrument made of either buffalo horn or elephant tusk). At harvest time, blowing the horn signifies hope and happiness.

In the old days, poems were chanted to the accompaniment of harps and other instruments. Since the arrival of Christianity, hymns and other Western songs have become very popular. The traditional *dohn* dance, performed by groups of young people, is also popular at festivals and other events. In the dance, groups of young men and women in colorful traditional dress perform energetic and versatile movements, sometimes with the aid of props such as bamboo sticks and string, that signify aspects of Karen culture.

## **Arts and Crafts**

The Karen are known for their elaborate weaving skills that find expression in their traditional dress, bags, and blankets, created on either small hand looms or large wooden ones. Other weavers create handsome baskets for carrying wood and other items, and some make elaborate hats.

## **Literature**

Karen literature is mostly oral, containing hundreds of poems, legends, and mythical stories handed down over the centuries. Such stories and poems, called *ta*, are a vital, living, and ever-changing aspect of Karen culture. According to one saying, "The number of *ta* is the same as the number of all the leaves in the world." *Ta* poems are highly dynamic, and their meanings shift and alter depending on the context in which they are told.

Today young Karen in the refugee camps produce magazines with local and international news, poetry, and accounts of human rights abuses for a community audience. Thra Baw Poe, a leader of one refugee camp, has become known for the *ta* poems he creates (and publishes) based on his own humorous and sad experiences. Small groups of refugees have also been formed in the camps to try to preserve ancient Karen stories, poems, and proverbs.

## **Education and Literacy**

Many Karen place a high value on education, dating back to the mid-1800s when mainly Christian missionaries and Sgaw Karen began to set up village schools. In 1962, the military takeover and subsequent "Burmese Way to Socialism" program outlawed such private schools. Chronically underfunded national schools in Karen areas have since been unable to provide a high standard of education.

*The Karen place a high value on education.*

Karen nationalists were able to keep their own school system functioning until the mid- 1980s, when the Burmese army took control of large portions of Karen territory. Since then, organizations such as the Karen Teachers Working Group have struggled at great risk to run teacher training and classroom programs among displaced communities hiding from Burmese troops.

In a functioning Karen school, a typical syllabus includes three languages (Karen, English, and Burmese); math and general science; and social studies (geography and world, Burmese, and Karen history). Hygiene and civics, domestic science, gardening, cooking, and needlework are also taught.

The Karen language has different writing systems: *Li wa*, a Burmese-style script; *Li ro mei*, a Romanized Karen script; and *Li hsau wai*, a form of writing developed by 19th-century missionaries and used and understood by very few people today. The Pwo Karen, who have been closely associated with the Mon, use Mon characters to write their language.

*Karen is monosyllabic and tonal.*

### **Language**

Karen is a member of the Sino-Tibetan language group. The two main Karen language groups are Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen, followed by Karenni and Pa-o (or Taungthu). Sgaw Karen is the principal language of 70% of all residents of the Thai refugee camps. Pwo Karen is the principal language of almost 7%.

The Sgaw and Pwo dialects differ little in structure and word root, but they sound quite different due to differences in pronunciation. Some Karen elders who have traveled widely in Karen State are able to speak a variety of dialects, but Sgaw and Pwo speakers who have not lived close to one another cannot easily understand each other's language. In Thailand, the Sgaw and the Pwo tend to speak in Thai when they meet; in Burma, they tend to speak Burmese.

### ***Characteristics of Karen Language***

Karen is monosyllabic and tonal. A tonal language is one in which pitch changes meaning. Tonal languages are difficult to Romanize accurately.

In the following examples illustrating the use of tones in the Eastern Pwo dialect of Karen, the first three diacritical markers placed over the vowels indicate a low tone, a high tone, and a falling tone. A fourth diacritical marker, an apostrophe, indicates a short vowel and glottal stop.

<i>ma`</i>	low tone	"to do"
<i>ma´</i>	high tone	"crocodile, moral failure"
<i>maˆ</i>	falling tone	"wife"
<i>ma´</i>	short vowel and glottal stop	"son in law"

As these examples show, the tone is critical to the meaning of a word.

The typical order of words in a Karen sentence (a subject followed by a verb and an object) is similar to that of English. Sentences that contain a question end with *áh?*, while sentences that are affirmative end with *mei* or *a mei* in Sgaw and with *lór* in Pwo Karen.

Verbs are not conjugated in Karen as they are in English. Instead, sentences include a word or expression to specify the time of the action (e.g., *last month, yesterday, tomorrow*), or words such as *already* or *not yet* are added at the end of the sentence to indicate that the action has or has not been completed.

Like Burmese, Karen uses classifiers. Classifiers are special words, used when items are counted, that indicate the semantic class of the item being counted. For example, in Pwo, round objects take the classifier *l'plóung* and flat objects take the classifier *béing*. Thus, "three leaves" would be *làa sóeng béing* ("leaves three pieces") and "four bags" would be *tóeng lii plóung*.

*Verbs are not conjugated in Karen as they are in English.*

**Guide to Pronunciation of Pwo and Sgaw Words**

Most letters have their usual English value, but note the following:

- oe        like *e* in English *alert*
- ae        like *e* in English *red*
- e         like the long *a* sound in English *they*
- i         like the double *ee* in *see*
- ü         like German *ü*
- ou        like *ow* in English *glow*
- oung     like *ow* in *glow* but with an added nasalized sound at end
- aun      like *own* in English *town*
- aung     like *own* in English *town* but with a nasalized sound
- ai        like *i* in English *mike, mine*
- ei        like *a* in English *rake*
- ch-      like *ch* in English *child*
- t-        like *t* in English *table*
- j-        like *j* in English *jam*
- p-        like *p* in English *people*
- kh-      like *k* in English *keep*
- hr-      like *j* in Spanish *Juan*

**Numbers in Pwo**

1	loe	11	chi loe	21	ni chi loe
2	ni	12	chi ni	22	ni chi ni
3	soeng	13	chi soeng	23	ni chi soeng
4	li	14	chi li	24	ni chi li
5	yae	15	chi yae	25	ni chi yae
6	hrò	16	chi hrò	26	ni chi hrò
7	nwae	17	chi nwae	27	ni chi nwae
8	hrú	18	chi hrú	28	ni chi hrú
9	kh'wi	19	chi kh'wi	29	ni chi kh'wi
10	chi	20	ni chi	30	soeng chi

10	loe chi	100	loe yaa	1000	loe môeng
20	ni chi	200	ni yaa	2000	ni môeng
30	soeng chi	300	soeng yaa	3000	soeng môeng
40	li chi	400	li yaa	4000	li môeng
50	yae chi	500	yae yaa	5000	yae môeng
60	hrò chi	600	hrò yaa	6000	hrò môeng
70	nwae chi	700	nwae yaa	7000	nwae môeng
80	hrú chi	800	hrú yaa	8000	hrú môeng
90	kh'wi chi	900	kh'wi yaa	9000	kh'wi môeng

### **Numbers in Sgaw**

1	te	11	t' si te	21	jhi si te
2	khi	12	t' si khi	22	khi si khi
3	se	13	t' si se	23	khi si se
4	lwì	14	t' si lwì	24	khi si lwì
5	yài	15	t' si yài	25	khi si yài
6	hrù	16	t' si hrù	26	khi si hrù
7	nwi	17	t' si nwi	27	khi si nwi
8	hraù	18	t' si hraù	28	khi si qaàu
9	khwi	19	t' si khwi	29	khi si khwi
10	t' si	20	khi si	30	se si

10	t' si	100	t' k' ya	1000	t' k' to
20	khi si	200	khi k' ya	2000	khi k' to
30	se si	300	se k' ya	3000	se k' to
40	lwì si	400	lwì k' ya	4000	lwì k' to
50	yai si	500	yai' ya	5000	yai k' to
60	hrù si	600	hrù k' ya	6000	hrù' to
70	nwi si	700	nwi k' ya	7000	nwi k' to
80	hraù si	800	hraù k' ya	8000	hraù k' to
90	khwi si	900	khwi k' ya	9000	khwi k' to

### **Everyday Words and Phrases**

English	Pwo	Sgaw
Where?	Tóng Khô Lái?	pai laiâ?
Are you hungry?	Noe sa wee mì áh?	Tà mô âu sà le mei ah?
It tastes good.	Aung wi lor!	A wi k' tè
What did you eat?	Noe áung mì dae nór lái?	N'âu m' ta lái?
It is hot.	choe ko	Ta ko
It is salty.	choe raung	A hau
It is sweet.	choe choeng	A se
Drink	O	Au
Water	ti	ti
Drink water	O tî	Au ti
Coffee	Gafae	Ka fai
Do you like coffee?	Noe o gafae wi áh?	N' ai dau âu Ka fai ah?
It is cold (weather).	Choe rong	Ta ge

Do you understand?	Nnoe nasi ah?	N' nà pe ah?
— Yes, I do.	Yoe nasi	Mei, y' nà pe
— No, I don't.	Yoe nasi áe or Y' nà t' pe ba	Yoe nasi ba'
Can you write?	Noe gwe lai si áh?	N' kwa li sei ah?
I can write.	Yoe gwe lai si lór	Y' kwa li sei
Can you read?	Noe go lai si ah?	N' kwa li sei ah?
I can read.	Yoe go lai si lór	Y' kwa li sei
Sit down.	Che nàung	Sêi nàu
Let's go.	Boe li lór	Lai dau
Have you finished?	Noe rong yau áh?	N' ma wi li ah?
I have not finished.	Yoe rong ba dai ae'	Y' ma t' wi di ba
What is your name?	Noe mèing bae si lae?	N' mì di lai?
My name (is) _____	Yoe meing _____	Y' mi le _____
Mother	Mò	Mò
Father	Pà	Pà
Grandmother	Pî	Pi
Grandfather	Pû	Pu
Sister (older)	Wae mü	Wae mü
Sister (younger)	Pü mü	Pü mü
Brother (older)	Wae kwâ	Wae kwâ
Brother (younger)	Pü kwâ	Pü kwâ
Son	Pó hkwâ	Po kwa
Daughter	Pó mü	Pó mü
How many children do you have?	Noe pó or hre rà láe?	N' po or hrai rà lài?
Where are your children?	Noe pó or khôrlae?	N' po or pai lai?
Cousin	Kwa mü (female) Mauang khwâ (male)	Dau t' kwa mü (female) Dau t'kwa (male)

*A Karen villager normally addresses others not by name but by terms denoting a kinship relation.*

### **Names**

Karen use names and nicknames; there are no first and last names. In Thailand, however, the authorities typically give Karen a first and last name (that are very different from the Karen name), so most Karen should be familiar with the concept.

Pwo Karen names for men often end with the word *phôr*, meaning "flower." Thus, two common names are *Dea Phor* and *Wjea Dai Phor*. Women's names are often prefixed with *naung*, similar in meaning to the English "Ms." Thus, a woman named *Dai Wja* would be addressed as *Naung Dai Wja*, and *Mari* would be addressed as *Naung Mari*. Most Karen have nicknames used in everyday speech. The nickname calls attention to a particular characteristic. Two common Pwo nicknames for a boy are *Tôr Mae* ("long teeth") and *Kola Wâa* ("white man").

A Karen villager normally addresses others not by name but by terms denoting a kinship relation. For example, Pwo men and women of the same age address one another as *khwa mü* ("cousin") if the person is a woman and *maung khwa* if the person is a man. The Sgaw address an older man as *pa ti* ("uncle"), and

both the Pwo and Sgaw address an older woman as *mÿ ra* (“aunt”). Elderly women are addressed as *phi* (“grandmother”) and elderly men as *phu* (“grandfather”) by both groups.

### **English Language Proficiency and Challenges**

Although a minority of Karen, particularly older men and women who attended English-medium schools, speak English well, most Karen who are being resettled in the United States will have little or no knowledge of English.

In terms of pronunciation, English words that end in final consonants will be problematic for the Karen because the sounds do not exist in their language. A Karen English language learner would typically have problems pronouncing the final sounds in *house*, *drug*, *hat*, and *hack*, although Pwo Karen speakers of English often nasalize certain final vowels in English (e.g., pronouncing the words *now* and *pie* as *noun* and *pine*).

Less proficient English speakers typically have problems with consonant clusters, inserting vowels into them, so that *sky* sounds like /soe'ky/, *slow* will be /sa'lou(ng)/, *crystal* will be /cri sa ta/, and *table* will be /taboe loe/.\*

In terms of grammar, Karen speakers typically encounter problems with English verb tenses, because verbs do not change form in Karen. Personal pronouns are not distinguished by masculine and feminine forms in Karen, and a Karen English language learner may confuse the words *he* and *she* and *him* and *her*. In Karen, there is no equivalent to the English comparative forms of adjectives (e.g., *harder* and *stronger*). Instead, a word meaning “more” is added to the adjective. A Karen speaker often does the same thing in English, saying, for example, “I work more harder.”

### **Communication and Body Language: Cultural Considerations**

Here are some things to keep in mind when interacting with the Karen:

- Avoid walking in front of others. Go behind those who are seated, or ask first and apologize. Normally Karen walk behind those who are their seniors and elders.
- If you accidentally pick up something belonging to another person, apologize.
- When Karen invite you to eat with them, refuse first. If they ask you repeatedly, accept, but do so gently.
- Do not be upset if someone answers a question with “No” when an affirmative answer might seem more appropriate. Saying “no” is often a way to be modest.

---

\*Throughout this publication, we use slash marks to indicate the pronunciation of certain words or sounds. Although slash marks are typically used for phonemic transcriptions using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), we generally do not use IPA symbols here. Instead, we use our own informal system of transcription based on the way sounds are typically spelled in English.

*Saying “no” is often a way to be modest.*

## The Karenni

Like their more numerous Karen kin also in the eastern border areas of Burma, the Karenni (also known as *Kayah-lee*, or Red Kayah) are traditionally animists, many of whom have converted to Christianity. They are mainly farmers and hunters, as well as skilled weavers and basket makers. Community life takes place in roomy villages of stilt houses, under the leadership of a headman. Communities highly value their traditions and independence. Karenni cultural practices are similar in many essential aspects to that of their Karen kin (see previous section as a general guide to life and customs). Below are some additional pointers on the Karenni.

### Land and History

Karenni, or Kayah, State is the smallest state in Burma, with a total population of around 260,000 and a total land surface area of 4,500 square miles. The state is located just above Karen territory, and includes the southernmost point of the Shan plateau and strips of lowland areas lying along river valleys. The highest peaks rise to between 3,970 and 5,499 feet. The state capital is Loikaw.

Karenni State was incorporated into independent Burma in 1948. Along with the Shan State, it was granted the right to secede after a 10-year period—a right that was later not recognized by Burma.

Since 1962, when Burma became subject to military rule, there has been a significant Burmese military presence in the region, especially in and around Loikaw. While one Karenni group, the Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) has entered into a ceasefire with Rangoon, another, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), continues to fight the regime. Civilians living in areas under Burmese army control have been subjected to many human rights abuses, including forced labor, land confiscation, arbitrary taxation, and forced relocation. It is estimated that one third of the population in Karenni State has been displaced since 1996.

Around 20,000 Karenni refugees live in two camps in Thailand near the northwestern town of Mae Hong Son.

### Economy

Karenni State has both wet rice and dry rice farming. Wet farming is limited mainly to the plains around Loikaw and Ngwe Daung. Other crops include sesame, ground nut and sunflower, maize, millet, and wheat. Forest products, including shellac, beeswax, honey, wild orchids, and *thanaka* (the bark of the sandalwood tree, used as a cosmetic), are still important. Tin and tungsten mining, logging, and cattle trading are important economic activities. A significant proportion of the population does not own land, and some landless people rely on poorly paid and often unavailable daily agricultural work.

*The Karenni are traditionally animists, many of whom have converted to Christianity.*

## **Culture and Customs**

### ***Clothing***

Women traditionally wear a simple black tunic that is draped around one shoulder and tied with a broad white sash, sometimes decorated with red and green tassels. Over this they may wear a red cloak, fastened at the chest and reaching behind to the thigh. A turban consisting of a long piece of cloth may be draped over the head.

Some women still bind their knees with coils of lacquered cane rings. They may also pierce their ears and wear large and heavy silver earrings and silver bracelets. Around their necks, they wear multilayered necklaces of colored beads and separate necklaces made of silver coins and other silver elements.

Men traditionally wear woven jackets and loose pants. Traditional formal attire for men, now worn mostly on ceremonial occasions, includes embroidered red short trousers that were once used in warfare as a sort of identifying uniform. It is from this costume that the name *Red Karen* is derived.

### ***Belief Systems***

Many Karenni retain their original animist belief system based on the appeasement of spirits, which requires a variety of rituals and sacrifices. Chicken bones are sometimes used to divine a situation.

Spirit houses are built in the base of large trees into which the Karenni put rice wine. Like the Karen, the Karenni believe that a person possesses a number of souls, *kla*, and that it is vitally important to retain the *kla*, which might flee for various reasons (in connection with a mental breakdown, for example).

## **Language and Literacy**

Karenni is a Central Karen language. Literacy rates among the Karenni are low, including in the Kayah dialect, which has its own script known as *Kayah Li*. Most literate Karenni use the Burmese language and script. In the schools in the refugee camps, the use of Karenni declines, and the use of Burmese and English increases, as students progress through the system.

## **Other Groups in Karenni State**

Karenni State includes a number of related ethnic Karen subgroups. In addition to the majority Kayah, there are Kayan, Kayaw, and Pa-o. Ethnic Shan also live in valley areas in the state.

The following briefly describes the Kayan, Kayaw, and Pa-o. For a brief description of the Shan, see p 63.

*Literacy rates among the Karenni are low.*



**Kayan**

Around 30,000 Kayan (known in Burmese as *Paduang*) live in an area northwest of Loikaw, the state capital. A few hundred are living in villages camps across the border in Thailand, where they are popular tourist attractions because of their women's distinctive dress and the brass rings they wear around their necks. A larger population of Kayan live in adjoining districts of the Shan State.

**Kayaw**

A smaller subgroup who speak a dialect that is not intelligible to other branches, the Kayaw are known for the highly distinctive red costumes and elaborate silver and brass jewelry of the women.

**Pa-o**

The Pa-o live mainly in Shan State to the north of the Karenni State, with some also found in Karen and Mon States. Pockets are found in Karenni State. The Pa-o are Buddhists and dress mainly in black or dark blue with silver or gold ornaments. They live in houses on stilts, with plots surrounded by bamboo fences. They cultivate mainly dry rice and crops such as sweet potato, maize, yams, cucumber, pumpkin, gourds, beans, chilis, sesame, and fruits. In Burmese, they are known as *Taungthu* ("Hill People"), and in Shan they are called *Tong-su*.

**The Karen and Karenni Refugee Experience**

The first large wave of ethnic Karen refugees fled to Thailand in January 1984, after Burmese government troops overran an important Karen military base. In following years, thousands more Karen were joined by Karenni, Mon, Shan, and others, as the Burmese army gained control over more and more territories inside the 1,100-mile Thai-Burmese border.

Thailand, which has never ratified the 1951 Convention Regarding the Status of Refugees, allowed those who were deemed to be fleeing from fighting to set up what were designated "temporary shelters" along its heavily forested Western border.

Early camps had the character of village settlements in which communities were organized along lines similar to those of the refugee's home places. Simple houses made of bamboo and thatch, built in or near forests and mountains, enabled the exiles to retain some sense of familiarity in their difficult new situations. Many of the refugees were farmers from deeply remote areas whose traditional ways of life had survived virtually untouched for centuries.

In 1995, large numbers of educated and mainly Christian Karen political leaders, educators, and others were forced into Thailand when the capital of the Karen resistance, Manerplaw, fell to the Burmese army. At around the same time, the refugee camps in Thailand came under attack from Burmese government troops and from a Karen splinter group, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which had become unhappy with the mainly Christian leadership of the armed opposition Karen National Union (KNU).

*Early camps had the character of village settlements.*

Citing security concerns, Thailand began to consolidate the refugee settlements into a smaller number of larger camps, of which Mae La near the Thai town of Mae Sot became the biggest, with some 40,000 inhabitants squeezed into a long and narrow strip of land tucked in front of a steep mountain.

Adding to the stress of the newly overcrowded conditions, refugees were restricted in their freedom to leave the camps to work or to collect firewood and other forest products. Entry into the Thai camps from Burma also became more difficult.

By 2007, there were approximately 150,000 refugees in nine camps: Ban Don Yang, Ban Kwai/Nai Soi, Ban Mae Surin, Mae La, Mae La Oon, Mae Ra Ma Luang, Nu Po, Ban Don Yang, and Umpium.

During early 2007, the situation on the border became more volatile when a leading KNU commander in the area opposite Mae La brokered his own cease-fire agreement with the central government and joined in alliance with the DKBA. As local fighting broke out, this new split in the KNU caused increasing pressures for refugees and internally displaced persons in the border area.

Ethnic Karen account for about 90% of residents in the camps. The remaining occupants are highly diverse: Within the camps are found an extraordinary 54 languages or distinct dialects.

### ***Camp Organization***

Karen refugees, many of whom originally came from areas controlled by the KNU, impressed outsiders by the speed with which they organized themselves after arriving in Thailand. They soon set up committees to administer their affairs and interact with outside donors and Thai officials. A young educator, Pastor Robert Htwe, sent out letters to church groups and others pleading for rice aid. More than 20 years later, he is still at the helm of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC).

The refugees' main initial support came from a group of international voluntary agencies that formed itself into the Burmese Border Consortium, later renamed the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC). It has been the main supplier of food, housing materials, and other assistance to the refugee communities.

The refugees themselves took charge of virtually all aspects of the day-to-day running of the camps. They set up committees for education, women's affairs, youth affairs, justice issues, and social welfare. Assistance from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in areas such as education and water and sanitation was provided in cooperation with the refugee committees and in a low-profile manner. This approach has helped the refugees retain a greater sense of control over their own affairs, although that sense of independence has been undermined in recent years as the camps have been subjected to stricter controls.

*The refugees took charge of day-to-day running of the camps.*

### **Education**

Education is a high priority for the refugees. All camps have primary and, to a lesser extent, middle schools. Teachers drawn from the refugee community are paid very modest salaries by nongovernmental organizations. The sight and sound of children singing lustily in class is one of the high points of a visit to the remote camps.

Nevertheless, camp conditions—overcrowding, poor facilities, a chronic shortage of books and equipment—make learning and teaching a challenge and contribute to relatively high dropout rates. Moreover, the lack of work opportunities has reduced enthusiasm for the value of education among older children. The situation has improved somewhat since 2005, when the Thai government began discussions about improving educational and vocational opportunities in the camp. Since then, a few young adult refugees have been able to attend a smattering of continuing education courses.

In surveys carried out by UNHCR in late 2005 and 2006 of more than 6,000 adult residents who applied for resettlement to the United States and other countries, about two thirds reported having received primary, middle, or secondary education, and about one third reported having received no education. Fewer than 100 people had received vocational training or attended university. (For a breakdown of the figures by educational level, see p. 48.)

### **Employment**

The lack of work opportunities for refugees who have lived in camps for up to 2 decades, or who may never have lived anywhere else, has placed great pressure on residents' psychological well-being.

Although employment is forbidden, some camp residents have been able to find sporadic seasonal work on nearby Thai farms. Opportunities for young people are so restricted that when bright youngsters are asked what they would like to be when they grow up, the vast majority say "medic" or "teacher"—the only career opportunities in the camps.

The 2005 and 2006 surveys revealed that about half of the refugees had been farmers, one quarter had had no employment experience, and the rest had had a range of professional and vocational experiences. (For a breakdown of figures by occupational category, see p. 49.)

### **Social Affairs**

Groups such as the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) and women's groups from the Karenni and Muslim communities play an important role in the camps. They push women's concerns at the camp leadership level, promote education and occupational opportunities for women, and provide support for the many vulnerable community members, such as orphans, widows, and the victims of domestic violence. KWO programs for weaving traditional garments and blankets help keep community traditions alive and provide a modest income for female weavers.

*The lack of work opportunities has placed great pressure on residents' psychological well-being.*

Youth groups organize sports and cultural events, including the showing of Asian and Western movies on weekends using small generators. Youth groups also address social issues such as the protection of the environment, with classes on recycling and on gardening in a limited space.

### ***Morale***

Though a strong sense of ethnic identity and social cohesion is a feature of Karen and Karenni cultures, inevitably problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and domestic violence have grown over the years as space, opportunities, and hope have dwindled. Though little research has been carried out on the impact of the refugees' experiences on their mental health, a psychological portrait emerges from a 2001 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study by researchers Cardozo, Talley, Burton, and Crawford.

Later published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, the CDC study found that the most common trauma events experienced by the Karenni refugees in the previous 10 years were the following:

- Hiding in the jungle (79%)
- Forced relocation (67%)
- Lost property (66%)
- Destruction of houses and crops (48%)
- Forced labor (50%)
- Missing or lost family members (29%)
- Death of family or friend while in hiding because of illness or food shortage (19%)
- Murder of family or friend (7%)
- Rape (3% of women and 3% of men)

Prevalence rates were 41% for depression, 42% for anxiety, and 4.6% for post-traumatic stress disorder. (General rates for depression and anxiety in the U.S. population are 7% to 10%.) While 60% of respondents reported that life was neither pleasant nor unpleasant, 27% described their quality of life as miserable or very miserable. Women were more likely than men to have symptoms of anxiety. Older age and lack of sufficient food correlated significantly with worse social functioning.

When Karenni respondents were asked what constituted "feeling bad," culture-specific symptoms such as numbness, thinking too much, or feeling "hot under the skin" were common responses. Strategies to make oneself feel better

*Problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and domestic violence have grown.*

included talking to family or friends (59%), sleeping (19%), and thinking about the homeland (14%). Also mentioned were visiting the medical clinic (5%), singing or playing music (2%), and drinking rice wine (1%).

The authors pointed out that depression rates among Karenni refugees were similar to those of Bosnian refugees 1 to 2 years after trauma exposure and lower than rates found among Cambodian refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border.

The mean social functioning among the Karenni was calculated at 63%, a relatively high figure under the circumstances. The authors concluded that “despite extensive traumatic experiences and high rates of anxiety and depression symptoms, Karenni refugees appear to function relatively well as a whole.” They also attached a caveat to their study: “Standardized measures to detect mental health problems developed in the West may give a distorted picture in a culture as different as that of the Karenni.”

*Despite extensive traumatic experiences, Karenni refugees appear to function relatively well.*

### **Tham Hin: A Special Case**

Tham Hin is a Karen refugee camp nestled deep in the hills of Ratchaburi Province in western Thailand. In 2005, the United States announced that it would offer resettlement to the entire population of almost 9,500 people in the camp. By September 2006, around half the population had accepted the offer and some 1,200 had already left for the United States.

The people in Tham Hin had fled to Thailand in 1997 after Burmese troops overran Karen bases and rural villages in the lush and fertile Tenasserim region of southern Burma. The majority of the refugees were Christian Sgaw Karen, with a small minority of Pwo Karen and other groups.

Villagers, including the elderly and infants, arrived in Thailand in destitute condition. For a year they were permitted to live only in rudimentary plastic tents. Eventually they were given around 16 acres of land on which to settle.

### **Camp Conditions**

The small and arid space can accommodate the inhabitants only with great difficulty. Houses in Tham Hin are smaller and closer together than those in other camps. They are also hotter, as the only roofing material allowed is plastic sheets because of fear of fire spreading in the overcrowded lanes. There is not enough space for the Christian Karen to bury their dead. Cremations have to be performed instead.

## **Health Conditions**

Sanitation facilities are constantly under pressure, and the incidence of infectious diseases has been higher than in other camps. A 2005 report by Jerrold Huguet and Sureepom Punpuing, published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), indicated that the rate of incidence of diarrhea equalled 22.7 per thousand, compared to 14.8 in all camps. Malaria was 6.2 per thousand, compared to 3.4 for all camps, and many people had suffered dengue fever. The incidence of sexually transmitted disease was 2.6 per 1000, compared to 0.9 in all camps. The NGO *Médicins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders) introduced various programs to counter malnutrition among infants.

## **Psychological Health**

Tham Hin residents have been more strictly confined than refugees in other camps and have had fewer opportunities to do the daily agricultural labor that relieves financial pressures and tedium in other camps. Over the years, some mainly male residents took the risk of slipping away for short periods anyway, but this was a dangerous and seldom satisfactory solution to their predicament.

Though there has been no formal research into the psychological well-being of residents, anecdotal information suggests that the prolonged confined, uncomfortable, and isolated conditions at Tham Hin clearly have taken a toll on residents. It is not Karen cultural style to complain about mental health issues, but one 41-year-old former leader quoted in a 2004 Thailand Burma Border Consortium report, *Between Worlds: Twenty Years on the Border*, admitted that he felt his life was slipping away in a state of limbo, and hinted at unspoken despair beneath the surface of camp life. He pointed out that over the past year the camp medical clinic had received an increasing number of visits from refugees whose problems they were unable to diagnose. "Finally they diagnosed depression," he said.

## **Refugee Backgrounds**

A series of UNHCR surveys in 2005 and 2006 found that Tham Hin residents had the following educational and employment backgrounds:

### **Education**

- Primary school: 55%
  - Middle school: 7%
  - Secondary school: 3.5%
  - No education or informal education: 32.8%
  - Vocational training or university: under 1%
- (Since the survey, the camp has introduced some vocational training in sewing, mechanics, food and baking, Thai language, animal husbandry, and agriculture.)

*The conditions at Tham Hin have taken a clear toll on residents.*

**Employment**

- Farmers: 57%
- Teachers: 4%
- Healthcare workers: 2%
- Other occupations: 14%  
(Other occupations included doctors, food vendors, ship deck crew, sewer workers, construction workers, and religious professionals.)
- No previous employment experience: 21%  
(These would include young people who grew up in the camp and have had no job opportunities.)

**Language Use**

The Tham Hin camp's population of about 9,500 is broken down into the following language groups:

Sgaw Karen	7,913
Pwo Western Karen	1,051
Pwo Eastern Karen	407
Burman	388

Other languages spoken by fewer than 100 people each include English, Hpon (a language related to Burmese that is spoken by a tribal people from North Burma), Karen Paku (also called White Karen), Mon, Sansu, Tavoyan (a southern dialect of Burmese), and Thai.

Although few camp residents claim to speak English, some young people have learned at least a smattering of English words at school. A handful of elderly residents of Tham Hin speak a beautiful British English, a remnant of British rule in Burma before the country received independence in 1948.

*Few camp residents claim to speak English.*

# The Chin

## Introduction

The Chin live mostly in Chin State, Burma, but they are also found in Mizoram State, Chittagong Hills Tract of Bangladesh, and India. The term *Chin* is misleading because it suggests one people with a single language, whereas in reality the Chin are made up of many related peoples whose languages are not mutually intelligible. The Chin speak 20 to 25 languages that can be divided into four groups based on linguistic similarity: Northern Chin (Tedim, Sizang, Kuki); Central Chin (Hakha, Falam, Mizo); Southern and Plains Chin (Matupi, Mindat Cho, Khumi, Asho); and Maraic Chin (Senthang, Zophei, Zotung). Among the Northern Chin group, Tedim is the most widely spoken; Hakha and Falam are the most widely spoken among the Central Chin. Mindat Cho represents the lingua franca of the Southern Chin, although many Khumi do not speak it.

To describe the Chin people, one would ideally describe at least three Chin languages, such as Hakha, Mindat Cho, and Tedim. Since that is not possible in this short profile, the focus here will be on just one group, the Hakha Chin, chosen for two reasons: The author is most familiar with this group, and the majority of Chin refugees being resettled in the United States belong to it.

*The main economic activity is shifting rice cultivation.*

## Land

The mainly mountainous Chin State covers approximately 14,400 square miles, or an area slightly smaller than Switzerland. The maximum north-south length of Chin State is roughly 250 miles and its width is less than 90 miles. Chin State is bordered by Bangladesh and India in the west, Rakhine State in the south, and Magwe and Sagaing Divisions in the east. The average elevation varies between 5,000 and 8,000 feet. The highest mountain, Nat Ma Taung, or Mt. Victoria, in southern Chin State, is 10,017 feet above sea level.

The area is rich in natural resources, most of them forest based. Animal life includes a range of monkey species and birds, barking deer, and wild goats. Teak and other hardwoods are found at elevations below 3,000 feet, while oaks and pines are found at higher elevations.

The climate is mild, hot, and wet at lower elevations and includes three main seasons: the summer, winter, and rainy seasons. Annual rainfall can reach around 100 inches a year, and temperatures range from 30° F at upper elevations in the cold season to 90° F at the lower elevations. April and May are the hottest months of the year. For the most part, the Chin live at the higher levels. Hakha, the capital of Chin State, is 6,000 feet above sea level.

## Economy

The main economic activity is shifting rice cultivation, with some terrace cultivation introduced on lower slopes. Other crops include corn, beans, wheat, maize,



coffee, oranges, apples, and potatoes. Important forest products include teak, pine wood, cane, resin, and turpentine. Hand weaving of blankets and clothing in the traditional style is an important tradition that continues today. Transport and communications are difficult, with poor roads and electricity supply.

Transporting Indian goods and medicines to Burma proper has been a popular trade among the Chin. Many Chin traders also transport electronic goods and cattle to Mizoram State, India.

## History

The origins of the Chin are unclear. Chin folklore traces their original homeland to a place they call *Lung Rawn Khua*, a plains area (unlike the hilly Chin State), possibly located in central Burma or southern China. Traditionally, the Chin can count back 25 generations.

In 1895, the British colonized the northern Chin State, annexing it to Burma. Southern areas of the state were not annexed until 1920. The British allowed the traditional Chin chiefs to govern their own area, and in return, the chiefs agreed to take orders from the British officers or administrators appointed by the colonial power.

After Burma achieved independence from the British in 1948, the Chin people decided to do away with the traditional rule of the chiefs and govern themselves by a democratically elected parliament. In fact, the Chin National Day (February 20) celebrates the day that the Chin chose democratic government.

The democracy in the Chin hills did not last very long. In 1962, General Ne Win seized control of the central government and imposed his Burmese Way to Socialism on the whole country. Most Chin went along with that system until the democracy movement of 1988, when the Burmans divided themselves into two groups: those who wanted to maintain military rule, and those who wanted to govern the country under a system of democratic government. Most of the Chin sided with those who supported democratic change.

With that, the Chin National Front was born. The military government began to persecute the Chin on two fronts: religious and ethnic. Many Christian crosses were pulled down from the Chin areas, and many Chin have been conscripted into forced labor. Apparent support of the Chin National Front is a crime punishable by 10 to 15 years in prison, with the severity of punishment dependent upon the size of the bribe a family can afford. Under these circumstances, many Chin have fled the country.

## Daily Life

In a typical town in the Chin State, daily life for most people consists of part-time farming, even for people with a regular government job such as teaching. Every household has a small garden or farm where the family grows vegetables

*Traditionally,  
the Chin can  
count back 25  
generations.*

to offset their grocery expenses. Only those in high government positions would not need to grow their own vegetables.

In the rural areas, life is typically devoted to full-time farming. Farmers go to the fields at about 8:00 a.m., after breakfast, and come back at about 5:00 p.m. In many towns and villages, people rest on Saturday to prepare for church service.

### **Family and Gender Roles**

In the Chin family, the husband is head of the household. In rural areas, the husband and wife work together, with the wife working harder, because in addition to the farm work that she shares with her husband, she is also responsible for cooking and cleaning the house. Sons and daughters are equally valued, but only sons inherit family property.

*Sons and daughters are equally valued.*

### **Belief Systems and Values**

The first Christian missionaries arrived from the United States in the Chin State on March 15, 1899, and today a large number of Chin in Burma are Christians. Most belong to various Protestant denominations, with Baptists being the most numerous, but some Chin are Roman Catholic. The percentage of Chin Christians varies widely from area to area, from a high of 96% in Hakkha township to a low of 15% in Paletwa, according to one recent survey. It can be expected that most Chin refugees coming to the United States will be Christian, and that most of these will be Protestants.

Some non-Christian Chin practice traditional animism. They believe that large trees and high mountains are the dwelling place of spirits, and that there are good spirits and bad spirits. Believers try to appease the bad ones, who are capable of harming people.

Among the Chin in urban areas, traditional medicine is virtually nonexistent because of the influence of modern Western medicine. In rural areas, honey mixed with oil is used for ointment for wounds, and the consumption of peppers in large amounts is supposed to heal common colds and the flu. When Western medicine fails to cure people of certain ailments, such as mental disorders, some people ascribe the illness to *hnam*, an evil spirit that dwells within humans.

Chin communities are still conscious of the clan they belong to, and will expect support from clan members in addition to support from family members.

### **Rites of Passage**

The Christian Chin celebrate the birth of their child with *nau-chuah-lawmh* (literally, "child-birth-celebration"). Pastors, elders, and relatives are invited to take part in the celebration.

The process that culminates in Chin marriage normally includes a visit to the bride's family from the groom's family; the giving of *man* (which involves the exchange of money, among other things, and formally establishes bonds between the two families); and the marriage celebration itself, which takes place in a Christian church. The process may begin with or without the consent of the couple, although nowadays it is more common to proceed only after consent has been achieved. *Man*, it should be noted, is often misunderstood by outsiders as simply a marriage price, but in fact it is more of a social gesture connecting the groom with the bride's family.

The Chin bury their dead and did so even before they became Christians. They do not have funeral homes. The dead body is normally adorned with a *puan*, a Chin traditional blanket, and put on a bed in the living room of the family until it is taken to the cemetery. Relatives and neighbors bring food for the visitors who stay around the clock. Those who knew the deceased sing funeral dirges, which normally focus on the person's life achievements. The burial is a Christian ceremony conducted by the local pastor.

*The Chin generally do not wear traditional dress except on special occasions.*

## **Food**

Among the Chin, rice is the staple. Corn, potatoes, fried meat, and a variety of vegetables are also eaten. Meat is usually boiled with vegetables such as mustard greens or cabbage, or fried with oil. Soy beans are a source of protein and are usually fermented in a clay pot to preserve them for later consumption.

Every festival and special occasion, such as a wedding, the New Crop Festival, or the new year's celebration, involves killing and consuming domestic animals, including cows, chicken, and mythuns (buffalo-like animals found in the Himalayan foothills).

## **Clothing**

The Chin generally do not wear traditional dress except on special occasions, such as Sundays, marriage ceremonies, Chin National Day, and Christmas. On other days, Chin men dress in Western clothes, wearing trousers, shirts, and jackets, or they wear the *longyi*, the sarong-like garment worn by Burmans. Women wear blouses and the *longyi*.

Traditional Chin dress for women consists of cotton and silk shawls wrapped around the waist as a long skirt and tied with a belt made of several strands of silver. A piece of decorated cloth covering the chest is held in place with a necklace. Men wear cotton and silk shawls over one or both shoulders and another piece of material as a loincloth. Over the loincloth, men usually wear a blanket, *puan*, which is wrapped around the shoulders and chest and hangs down to the knees. The loincloth is worn by itself during wrestling matches.

Traditional clothing is made of hand-woven cloth, whose colors and patterns vary from group to group. For the Hakha, the main color is red. Hakha pat-

terns are especially intricate; it can take up to a month to make one garment. Traditional garments cannot be washed because the colors run; as a result, clothing items are treated with great care and love and worn until they fall apart. While commercially woven cloth is more common today, the Chin community and a growing number of foreign enthusiasts are bringing back the traditional weaving methods and material patterns.

## **Festivities**

In addition to celebrating regular Christian holy days, such as Christmas, Chin hold their own festivals, including Chin National Day and New Crop Festival. New Crop Festival is celebrated around the end of October or the beginning of November and is known by different names, such as *Fang-er* (Falam Chin), *Thlai-thar Tho* (Hakha Chin), and *Khua-do* (Tedim Chin). The *Khua-do* of the Tedim Chin seems to be the most elaborate of the New Crop Festivals, as it involves different members of the family performing different functions.

*The Chin are very proud of their traditional and locally woven clothing.*

## **Arts and Crafts**

The Chin are very proud of their traditional and locally woven clothing. Nowadays, bags, hats, and even slippers are made in the traditional way, in addition to items such as blouses and skirts. Chin also weave bamboo baskets for catching fish and carrying loads. Chin are also adept at weaving bamboo into dolls and animals. The traditional Chin house features many carved posts and gates.

## **Literature**

Most written Chin literature is Christian. The Bible (in some cases only the New Testament) has been translated into Chin languages. There are some bilingual dictionaries, such as David Van Bik's *Chin (Hakha)-English Dictionary*, Father Jordan's *Chin (Mindat Cho)-English Dictionary*, and Kam Khen Thang's *Paite (Tiddim Chin)-English Dictionary*, to name a few.

Other Chin literature is made up of common folktales shared among its people dispersed in diverse locations. There is also a long tradition among the Chin of oral songs and poetry in a heroic, sometimes elegiac, style. These songs record the history of the people and have been passed down for centuries from one generation to the next, and are memorized and recounted at festivals, feasts, and funerals. The songs are often biographical or autobiographical, recounting the lives and achievements of individuals, and may be memorized by family or clan members. Today many of these songs are written down.

The autobiographical songs can go on for pages, divided by stanzas, which are presented in fast and slow cadences, normally finishing with an epilogue. For example, Vum Ko Hau, who rose in politics to become a member of the Burmese national cabinet and served as an ambassador to several Asian and European capitals, included the 69-stanza song of his paternal grandfather,

Chief Thuk Kham Lunman, in his 1963 book, *Profile of a Burma Frontier Man*. Also included in the book is Vum Ko Hau's autobiographical song, an important aspect of the history for his clan, the Siyin.

Another prominent member of the Chin community, Pu Vumson Suantak, wrote and published a book entitled *Zo History* (Zo being another name for the Chin) in 1986. His autobiographical song was recorded by the Chin community, and Vumson undertook a partial translation of it into English before his death in 2005. As the following sample stanzas show, his song celebrates the old traditions of the Chin and mourns their loss, showing how they came in conflict with Christianity. It also speaks of the difficulties of living abroad as an émigré, among foreign peoples.

*My grandfather,  
my source of life,  
you are as strong as  
a sharp weapon*

*You founded our village,  
you successfully bred mythuns  
and you were a rich man*

*Death came in succession to my brother;  
grief overwhelmed my parents  
and their parents*

*My grandparents and  
my parents sought  
the shadow of God.*

*Because we worshipped God  
since childhood,  
I did not learn my traditions.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*I married a white woman  
and shared my life harmoniously  
with white people*

*I have them as friends;  
they are no different from us.*

*I spent sleepless nights  
thinking in distant lands.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Oh! How I miss the warmth  
of sharing meals together  
with my kind and relatives  
in my native land.*

*His song speaks  
of the difficulties  
of living abroad  
as an émigré.*

## Music and Sports

Western-style music is popular with the Chin. At church, songs and hymns are often accompanied by piano, organ, and guitar. Some Chin traditional songs are sung in the style of American country music, thanks to the influence of American Baptist missionaries.

Chin musical instruments include *sa-ki* (hollowed animal horns), *khuang* (drums), and *cheng-cheng* (cymbals). Pure Chin traditional songs, however, are increasingly falling out of fashion, with Christian churches finding it difficult to integrate traditional music into their services. The Web site of the Chin Association for Christian Communication (<http://cacc.info/>) includes some examples of *pipu hla*, Chin ancestors' songs.

In terms of sports, traditional Chin wrestling, soccer, tennis, and volleyball are popular among the Chin. Group fishing, *nga-hring-dawi* (literally, "chasing-alive-fish") is an activity normally enjoyed by young men and women together, with the emphasis more on social enjoyment than the catching of fish.

## Education and Literacy

The education system in the Chin State includes primary, middle, and high school. The only postsecondary educational institutions are theological schools (e.g., Zomi Theological School in Falam and Chin Christian College in Hakha), which are recognized internationally.

Chin adult refugees may not have had formal education if they grew up in rural areas of the Chin State. Some will have been educated to middle school level, and a handful may have graduated from high school and even college. Because of a serious shortage of good teachers in the Chin State, the current high school exit exam given to all students in Burma can be difficult for Chin students. Few opportunities for schooling exist for Chin refugee youth in Malaysia.

A Chin writing system using the Roman alphabet was created by Surgeon-Major A.G.E. Newland in the latter part of the 18th century. Educated Chin have continually improved the writing system with the help of the American Baptist missions.

Today, Burmese government policies discourage the learning of minority languages in Burma, including Chin languages. With Burmese as the official language in minority areas, Chin and other minority languages have been significantly restricted in their use. Chin languages are no longer taught in public schools. In private elementary schools, a local Chin language may be taught only through Grade 2. Otherwise, teachers are required to use Burmese with their students at all times. Chin churches are the sole institutions involved in the preservation of Chin languages.

*Chin adult refugees may not have had formal education if they grew up in rural areas.*

## Language

Hakha Chin (also known as *Hakha Lai*) belongs to the central subgroup of the Kuki-Chin branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. It is spoken mainly in the area of Hakha and Thantlang townships. It is also spoken as a second language by other Chin because Hakha is the capital of Chin State.

### Characteristics of Hakha Chin

#### **Pronunciation**

Approximate pronunciation of the Hakha orthography is as follows:

#### **Hakha Chin English**

a	the vowel sound in <i>but</i>
aw	the vowel sound in <i>law</i>
b	b
c	begins like a <i>t</i> (as in <i>stop</i> ), but ends as an <i>s</i> (as in <i>some</i> )
ch	the sound of <i>ch</i> in <i>church</i>
d	d
f	f
g	occurs only in loan words from Burmese or English
h	h
i	the vowel sound in <i>bee</i>
j	occurs only in loan words
k	the nonaspirated sound of <i>k</i> in <i>skin</i>
kh	the aspirated sound of <i>k</i> in <i>kin</i>
l	l
hl	no equivalent: start to make the <i>l</i> sound, hold it, release some air through the mouth, and finish the <i>l</i> sound.
m	m
hm	no equivalent: breathe out through the nose, then make the <i>m</i> sound.
n	n
hn	no equivalent: breathe out through the nose, then make the <i>n</i> sound.
ng	the final sound in <i>sing</i> . Unlike in English, in Hakha this sound occurs at the beginning of words too.
hng	no equivalent: breathe out through the nose, then make the <i>ng</i> sound.
o	the vowel sound in <i>go</i> .
p	the nonaspirated sound of <i>p</i> in <i>spin</i>
ph	the aspirated sound of <i>p</i> in <i>pin</i>
q	occurs only in loan words
r	r
hr	no equivalent: make the <i>r</i> sound, hold it, release some air through the mouth, and complete the <i>r</i> sound.
s	s

*Hakha Chin is spoken as a second language by other Chin because Hakha is the capital of the Chin State.*

t	the sound of <i>th</i> in <b>thing</b> (but nonaspirated—that is, without a puff of air)
th	similar to the aspirated initial consonant sound in <b>thing</b>
t̚	the nonaspirated <i>t</i> sound in <b>stop</b>
tʰ	the aspirated <i>t</i> sound in <b>top</b>
tl	no equivalent: start to make <i>t</i> sound, then finish with the <i>l</i> sound
thl	no equivalent: start to make the <i>th</i> sound, then quickly add the <i>l</i> sound
u	the vowel sound in <b>boot</b>
v	v
z	z

### **Tones**

Chin is a tonal language, with three tones. They are not marked in the orthography. The following three words exemplify the three tones in Chin:

ba	“be in debt” (falling tone)
ba	“be tired” (rising tone, used only in certain contexts)
ba	“yam” (level tone)

The tones in Chin are not as prominent as in Karen. A person who speaks Chin without the tonal contrast will still be understood most of the time.

### **Grammar**

Chin word order is quite different from that of English. In Chin, verbs come at the end of sentences, and prepositions follow their nouns. Thus, the English sentence, “The girl eats under the tree” would appear in Chin as “The girl tree-under eats.”

Verb tenses are not conjugated the way they are in English. Instead, particles indicating past or future time are added after the verbs, or temporal markers such as yesterday, last year, or tomorrow are used.

Like Burmese and Karen, Chin makes use of classifiers—words used before objects to describe their shapes. For example, with the word *thei* (“fruit”), the classifier for round objects (*pum*) is used; *thei pum tum* means “three fruits.” In addition to these classifiers, which are almost always required, Chin has another system of classifiers, in which the noun can function as its own classifier—for example, *vok vok khat* (“a pig”), *caw caw hnih* (“two cows”), and *inn inn thum* (“three houses”). The classifier in these cases is not required, however.

*Chin word order is quite different from that of English.*



## Everyday Words and Phrases

### Numbers

1	pa-khat	11	pa-hlei-khat	21	kul le khat (le = and)
2	pa-hnih	12	pa-hlei-hnih	22	kul le hnih
3	pa-thum	13	pa-hlei-thum	23	kul le thum
4	pa-li	14	pa-hlei-li	24	kul le li
5	pa-nga	15	pa-hlei-nga	25	kul le nga
6	pa-ruk	16	pa-hlei-ruk	26	kul le ruk
7	pa-sa-rih	17	pa-hlei-sa-rih	27	kul le sa-rih
8	pa-riat	18	pa-hlei-riat	28	kul le riat
9	pa-kua	19	pa-hlei-kua	29	kul le kua
10	pa-hra	20	pa-kul	30	sawm thum

10	pa-hra	100	za khat	1000	thong khat
20	pa-kul	200	za hnih	2000	thong hnih
30	sawm thum	300	za thum	3000	thong thum
40	sawm li	400	za li	4000	thong li
50	sawm nga	500	za nga	5000	thong nga
60	sawm ruk	600	za ruk	6000	thong ruk
70	sawm sa-rih	700	za sa-rih	7000	thong sa-rih
80	sawm riat	800	za riat	8000	thong riat
90	sawm kua	900	za kua	9000	thong kua

### Time Expressions

Morning	Zing ka
Midday	Chun lai
Afternoon	Chun hnu
Evening	Zanlei (zan =night, lei=towards)
When?	Zeitik ah?
Today	Nihin
Yesterday	Nizan
The day before yesterday	Tihni
I came yesterday	Nizan ah ka ra
Tomorrow	Thaizing
I will come tomorrow	Thaizing ah ka ra than lai.

### Greetings

How are you?	Na dam ma?
Have you eaten?	Na ei cang ma?
I have eaten.	Ka ei cang.
Where are you going?	Khawi na kal lai?
Where are you coming from?	Khawika in dah na rat?

### ***Other Common Expressions***

Where?	Khawika?
Are you hungry?	Na paw a tam ma?
It tastes good	A thaw ngai.
What did you eat?	Zei dah na ei?
It (weather) is hot.	Khua a sa.
It is salty.	A al.
It is sweet.	A thlum.
Water	Ti
Drink water.	Ti ding.
Coffee	Kawfi
Do you like coffee?	Kawfi na duh ma?
It is cold (weather).	Khua a sik.
Do you understand?	Na lung a fiang ma?
Yes, I do.	A fiang ko.
No, I don't.	A fiang lo.
Can you write?	Ca tial na thiam ma?
I can write.	Ca tial ka thiam ko
Can you read?	Ca rel na thiam ma?
I can read.	Ca rel ka thiam ko
Have you finished?	Na dih cang ma?
Sit down.	Thu
Let's go.	Kal hna usih.
I have not finished.	Ka dih rih lo.
What is your name?	Na min aho dah a si?
My name is _____	Ka min cu _____ a si.
Where are your clothes?	Na thil puan khawika dah an um?
Parents	Nu le pa
Are your parents still alive?	Na nu le na pa an nung rih ma?
Mother	Nu
Father	Pa
Grandmother	Pi
Grandfather	Pu
Sister	Far
Brother	Ṭa (when called by a sister) Nau (when called by an older brother) U (when called by a younger brother)
Sisters and brothers	Ṭa le far
Children	Fa
How many children do you have?	Fa pa-zeizat dah na ngeih?
Where are your children?	Na fa-le khawika dah an um?

## **Names**

Among the Chin, there is no last name, first name, and middle name in the Western sense. This becomes a challenge for refugees when they apply for refugee status and are required to fill out forms that ask for first and last names.

When a child is born, the family usually asks someone they admire to name the child. The person tasked with naming will come up with a name that reflects his or her own successes, achievements, and aspirations. For example, the author of this section and his wife asked the author's father to name their daughter. The father, who had translated the entire Bible into Hakha Chin and had compiled the *Hakha Chin-English Dictionary*, named the child *Tial Tin Dim* (literally, "Satisfaction With Writing"). Thus, the girl's name celebrates her grandfather's achievements as a writer and reflects the grandfather's wishes that the child follow in his footsteps.

Before having a child, a couple will be known by their own names or nicknames, but after having a child, the parents will be known as the father and mother of their child.

## **Communication and Body Language**

Some Chin body language is opposite in meaning to that of American body language. For example, among the Chin, looking a speaker in the eye can be considered an act of challenge. Thus, a Chin student will not normally establish direct eye contact with a teacher. Walking with the body bent at the waist in front of the elderly or other individuals deserving respect is common Chin practice, as is crossing both arms across the body and interlocking them. A cursing gesture, the equivalent of the American middle finger, is made by putting the big thumb between the index and middle finger.

*Some Chin body language is opposite in meaning to that of American body language.*

## **English Language Proficiency and Challenges**

English is taught as a subject in schools, and Chin who have been educated in the urban areas will know some English. Those from the rural areas will know little or no English.

Chin familiarity with the Roman alphabet has helped them in their learning of English, but English stress and pitch pose problems for them. For example, the end of an English sentence is marked by a falling pitch, which is not the case in Chin languages; this is something Chin speakers will need to learn and practice. As already noted, most Chin languages have final consonants such as *p*, *t*, and *k* but not *b*, *d*, and *g*. As a result, many Chin will have difficulty pronouncing English words ending with *b*, *d*, or *g*.

English verb agreement (e.g., third-person marking, as in *she speaks*) and tenses may present difficulties for Chin speakers, because Chin verbs do not change

form in this way. The subject-verb-object word order of English may also be somewhat problematic because Chin verbs come at the end of sentences.

## **Chin Refugee Experience**

The Chin Refugee Committee (CRC), a Chin advocacy group, estimates that there are 20,000 to 25,000 Chin refugees in Malaysia. Most are men. Because Malaysia has not signed international agreements that protect refugee rights, the Chin in Malaysia are considered illegal immigrants and receive little or no institutional assistance or legal protection. However, the CRC estimates that the UNHCR in Kuala Lumpur has managed to extend protection and assistance to about 1,500 to 2,000 Chin refugees.

According to Refugees International, the Chin in Malaysia “are on the run, taking shelter where they can, finding employment—and often exploited—as day laborers, attempting to evade the police and immigration authorities, and often being subjected to detention and deportation.” In urban areas, they live together in extremely crowded conditions, with as many as 40 people sharing a two-bedroom apartment. Others live in makeshift huts and tents in the jungle. Most men work as day laborers on construction sites; women generally work as waitresses. As illegal immigrants, they are vulnerable to exploitation by employers who demand long hours and pay low wages, knowing that Chin workers will not report them to the authorities. Chin refugees commonly complain of harassment and extortion by the police.

Chin asylum seekers have no access to government health care and other social services in Malaysia, although a local NGO, A Call to Serve (ACTS), works in conjunction with Doctors Without Borders to provide basic medical care. There are an estimated 300 school-age children among the refugees. In the absence of local educational opportunities for them, a group of young, college-educated Chin have established a mutual assistance association, Chin Students’ Organization, that provides basic schooling for children, with support from Swedish and Canadian NGOs. The focus of the curriculum is Chin culture and survival life skills in Malaysia.

*Chin asylum seekers have no access to government health care and other services in Malaysia.*

## **Other Ethnic Groups of Burma**

### **Kachin**

An estimated 1 million of the total population of more than 2 million Kachin live in Kachin State in the far north of Burma. Others live in China’s Yunnan province and India’s Arunachal Pradesh. Most Kachin are Christians. The largest Kachin armed opposition group, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), entered a ceasefire with the military regime in 1994. However, economic progress has been slow, and the humanitarian situation in the state remains grave. A growing

number of Kachin have left Burma during the past decade, forming expatriate communities in Japan, Thailand, and the United States.

## Mon

The 4 million or so Mon from the Mon-Khmer linguistic group are descendants of a once powerful and influential Southeast Asian civilization. The Mon introduced both Buddhism and writing to Burma. Mon kings once ruled over much of what is now southern Burma, but their influence declined in the mid-18th century as Burmese influence rose.

Today most Mon speakers live in Mon State, located in lower Burma, and in adjoining districts of the Karen State and Tenasserim Division. The New Mon State Party (NMSP), which controls territories along the Thai border, entered into a ceasefire with the military regime in 1995, but the humanitarian and economic situation in the state remains serious. There are around 12,000 former Mon refugees in resettlement sites across the border in Burma that still receive some assistance from the Thailand Burma Border Consortium.

## Shan

With an estimated population of 6 million, the Shan live primarily in the Shan State, Burma's largest ethnic state, located in the northeast of the country. The Shan dwell mostly on the plains of the Shan Plateau, which is drained by the Salween River. Smaller ethnic groups, such as the Kachin, Lahu, Palaung, Pa-o, and Wa, live in the surrounding hills.

The capital of Shan State is Taunggyi, a small city of about 150,000 people. Other main Shan cities include Kengtung and Tachilek. The Shan also inhabit portions of Kachin State, Karenni State, and Mandalay and Sagaing Divisions. The Shan language is part of the family of Tai-Kadai languages, and the Shan (or Tai) are closely related to peoples in southwest China, Laos, and Thailand.

In the precolonial period, the Shan were ruled in small kingdoms by local lords, or *sawbwas*. During the British colonial period, the Shan kingdoms were transferred to British control. The Shan principalities were administered as separate colonies by the British, as protectorates with limited powers given to the *sawbwas*.

Most Shan are Theravada Buddhists. Traditionally they are wet rice cultivators, traders, and artisans. But, against a backdrop of conflict, Shan State has been notorious for illicit opium cultivation since independence, becoming the world's largest producer at one stage in the 1990s.

Since the early 1960s, some Shan and other ethnic inhabitants of the state have been engaged in intermittent civil war against the Burmese government. The main Shan force is the Shan State Army, which is divided largely into two groups: the Shan State Army North (SSA-N), which has a ceasefire with the government, and the Shan State Army South (SSA-S), which has continued

*Some Shan have been engaged in intermittent civil war against the Burmese government.*

armed struggle from bases along the Thai border. Another ethnic opposition force in the state is the United Wa State Army, which has a ceasefire with the government and has begun resettling populations along the Thai border, raising tensions with the SSA-S.

During conflicts with the Burmese government, many Shan villages have been destroyed and their inhabitants internally displaced or forced to flee into Thailand. Unlike the Karen or Karenni, however, they are not recognized as refugees by the Thai authorities and instead many work as illegal or undocumented laborers.

## **Resettlement in the United States**

This section looks at the early resettlement experiences and needs of Burman, Chin, and Karen refugees in the United States. It is based on information provided by refugee resettlement agency staff in California, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Texas.

### **General Adjustment Strengths and Challenges**

Refugees from Burma are generally described as highly motivated. One resettlement agency director described her agency's experience working with refugees from Burma as "a rewarding one," going on to note that "refugees have formed long-lasting friendships with congregational co-sponsors." Refugee communities are also described as well knit and well organized. For both Karen and Chin, religion is very important and a source of community cohesion.

As with other refugee groups, Burman, Chin, and Karen refugees who have had experience living in urban areas in Malaysia and Thailand generally adjust more quickly to life in the United States than those whose background experiences are primarily rural and camp based. For all three groups, adjustment to cold weather has been a challenge. Another area of concern is inadequate understanding of American laws—particularly those regarding hunting and fishing licenses and drinking while driving.

One cultural characteristic of the refugees that service providers praise—their politeness and modesty—is also one that has been the occasional source of misunderstanding. In the words of one volunteer worker, "The refugees give you the answer they think you want to hear." Without a clear idea of what refugees want, service providers find it difficult to assess not only immediate needs and wants, but hopes, dreams, and plans for the future as well.

### **Housing**

Refugees are arriving with varying levels of familiarity with modern housing and amenities. Those with urban experience in Thailand and Malaysia have

*Refugees from Burma are generally described as highly motivated.*

adapted quickly to American housing, while those coming from camps where life in bamboo houses did not include electricity, plumbing, or telephones have required a more thorough orientation to the use of these modern conveniences. Nevertheless, agency staff describe new arrivals as quick learners who are soon expertly using their stoves, microwaves, and washing machines.

The disposal of toilet paper has been especially important for refugees to understand, as they commonly place it in a nearby wastebasket. Refugees have also had to learn how to identify, store, and use cleaning supplies. Some refugees are unfamiliar with the use of keys and locks. New arrivals are generally unfamiliar with landline phones but know how to use cell phones, which they used in the camps.

Because they are not accustomed to cold temperatures, new arrivals need to be shown how to use sheets and blankets. Otherwise, they may sleep on top of them on the bed.

A commonly heard complaint among recent Karen arrivals is that their apartments are too big; they do not like to live with so much space, note agency staff in one resettlement site. Despite being placed in apartments with the appropriate number of bedrooms, refugees often crowd into one or two rooms to sleep at night, with young children sleeping in the same room as their parents and often in the same bed. Parents have been known to remove the bed frames and place the box spring and mattresses on the floor, explaining that the beds are too high for their children.

Refugees' strong sense of community has led agency staff in one site to place the entire refugee community in two adjoining apartment complexes. Feedback from the refugees has been extremely positive, say staff, who highly recommend this practice as a way to foster refugee morale and promote community development.

## **Employment**

Refugees from Burma, whether Burman, Chin, or Karen, bring to resettlement a very strong work ethic. Those who have spent years in camps are eager to find work after many years of feeling useless. As a result, employers hold this population in high regard, often specifically requesting employees from this group. In one Midwestern site, staff report that men often find jobs in manufacturing and assembly, while the women do well in housekeeping and sewing positions.

Refugees arrive with varying work backgrounds, from farming and fishing to professional employment. Agency staff at one site report that for the most part Burman and Karen husbands are very supportive of their wives working outside of the home. In another site, agency staff say that the Chin "do not appear to have an issue" with women working outside the home.

*Those who have spent years in camps are eager to find work after many years of feeling useless.*

Whatever their ethnicity, women with rural backgrounds have had little work experience outside of the home and do not understand the work opportunities that are available to them. Most are not comfortable leaving small children in daycare settings and prefer to work different shifts from their husbands so that someone will be at home at all times to take care of the children.

In general, refugees have little understanding of the job application and interview process. The notion of “selling oneself” seems entirely alien: Agency staff say that the refugees are extremely reluctant to talk about themselves in an interview and will downplay their skills. It often takes several conversations to learn a refugee client’s full employment skills in order to help place him or her in a job. Eye contact in an interview may also be an issue, as refugees often look down as a sign of respect. Once hired, they may not ask many questions about their position or the paperwork required of them and will need guidance through the entire process of orientation to the workplace.

One agency representative, an ethnic Karen, reports that Karen who have been assigned a Sunday work shift face a difficult dilemma, because Sunday is a day for worship and not work for the deeply religious Christian Karen.

*Women with rural backgrounds have had little work experience outside of the home.*

## **Food**

Resettlement staff note a preference among refugees from Burma for their own often-spicy food; most have not added American food to their diets, although in one site agency staff note that the Chin have developed a fondness for ice cream. Because rice is a staple for all refugee groups from Burma, a rice steamer in the home is considered a necessity. Some refugees are used to eating with their fingers; others use a fork and spoon together.

Agency staff in one site note that they had to educate Karen families about food expenses after the refugees spent exorbitant amounts on red meat and sea food, causing them to run out of food money in the early weeks of the month.

## **Clothing**

Appropriate dress may be an issue, depending upon the climate of the resettlement site. Coming from the hot and humid climes of Malaysia and Thailand, refugees resettled in cold-weather sites will need to be taught the importance of wearing socks and winter shoes or boots, as well as coats, hats, and gloves. It is not uncommon in colder climates to enter a refugee family’s apartment and find a woman in a traditional skirt wearing one or more sweaters and a hat, but no socks or slippers. Refugees often wear slippers outside and not in the home, and may wear them without socks. Boys and men enjoy bright colors and may not understand the teasing that results from showing up at school or work dressed in more traditionally female colors. In one resettlement site, after a Karen father took to wearing a lavender coat with fluffy white fur trim, agency staff followed the suggestion of the Karen interpreter and assigned clothing to each family member.



## Finances

Most refugees have never had to pay bills before and will need help with this aspect of resettlement. In cold-weather sites, agency staff have advised refugees to dress warmly inside their homes in order to keep down the high cost of heating their houses and apartments. One area of difficulty for refugees from Burma, as for other refugee groups, is the tendency to send money back to relatives and friends still overseas, sometimes without regard to their own financial situation. Long distance phone bills can also be a concern; new arrivals know people all over the United States and in other countries and want to contact friends and family still in the camps. Refugees familiar with computers may use email as an easy and cheap means of communicating. Library access, with free use of the Internet, will be important for new arrivals.

Agency staff in one site report that the Chin are acutely aware of their finances and are careful never to spend money on anything they do not absolutely need. "If asked to go out to lunch or dinner, they will decline, saying they don't want to spend the money on such wastefulness," agency staff report. Instead, every penny is saved for large purchases, such as cars, homes, and businesses. Chin refugees who have been in the United States 2 years or more usually have computers in their homes and carry cell phones. Their children save up for the latest electronic devices that their friends have.

For the most part, refugees are eager to repay their travel loans and want to establish good credit ratings for their future home ownership.

*Most refugees have never had to pay bills before.*

## Legal Issues

Refugees often arrive with little understanding of legal issues in the United States, agency staff in one site report. In particular, fishing without a license can pose problems. Agency staff in another site say that the refugees need to gain a better understanding of U.S. laws regarding domestic abuse.

Understanding of legal responsibilities varies among the Chin, report agency staff in a site where drinking and driving has been a problem—not because the refugees are in the habit of drinking to excess, but because they often do not understand that just two or three drinks can affect their driving.

The freedom to walk around without fear of the police is a new and unfamiliar experience for refugees from Burma and is something that may have to be encouraged.

## Education

Refugees arriving from urban areas generally have had more access to education than those from the camps. While recent Karen arrivals are all able to read and write in Karen to varying degrees, there is little knowledge of Burmese. Occasionally a refugee will speak Thai. Few have English skills.

Despite these obstacles, Karen refugees are all eager to learn English, and some with more advanced levels of proficiency are working toward their GED. They are excited to have their children in school and want to participate in their children's education. They are eager to have tutors work one-on-one with their children to help them succeed in school.

Agency staff who have resettled Chin report that, in general, adults have not pursued further educational options, apparently because they do not see the connection between more education and better employment opportunities. Their children, however, tend to be eager and successful students. They generally graduate from high school with good grades and often go on to college to pursue a career or to learn how to start their own businesses.

### **Family and Parenting Issues**

Families often need to develop a better understanding of appropriate parenting in the United States. In the relative safety of the camps, children were allowed to roam and play freely, and their parents often do not understand the dangers of following similar practices here in the United States. Young children are sometimes seen outside waiting for the school bus alone while parents tend to infants inside the home. They are also seen playing in parking lots or in areas extremely close to busy streets. By U.S. standards, there appears to be little discipline of children.

In the event of domestic abuse among the Karen, other refugees are extremely reluctant to get involved, or even to make the problem known to others or seek help on the family's behalf.

### **Health**

Service providers report no major health issues, although outbreaks of scabies and lice have been reported. Notes an agency representative, "To date, there is no malnutrition, lead levels in children are at normal levels, there have been few cases needing medication for tuberculosis (TB), and no positive tests for parasites. Children are arriving with vaccinations. Refugees are accustomed to visiting a clinic, due to the presence of the UN hospital in the camp, and there appears to be no practice of home remedies among this group. Women gave birth in the UN hospital and do not mention wanting to have home births here in the United States."

Refugees who smoke need to understand where they may and may not do so, agency staff in one site point out. Experience has shown that many of the Karen men drink beer, sometimes to excess. Agency staff point out that many new arrivals do not actually believe that beer is alcohol, and education on this topic has generally not been well received. When possible, refugees chew betel nut, which they obtain from new arrivals or find for purchase in some of the Asian stores.

*Families often need to develop a better understanding of appropriate parenting in the United States.*

Resettlement staff in one site report an interest among Karen women in learning more about different birth control methods. According to agency staff in a Chin resettlement site, however, the subject of birth control is an uncomfortable one, as the Chin feel this is not something that is acceptable to discuss with other people, including doctors. Generally, Chin women want to control their cycles naturally, do not wish to have gynecological exams, and do not feel comfortable discussing these issues with the doctor.

Agency staff in one site report that there has been a high level of false TB cases, which they attribute to a vaccine taken in Burma that can cause a false positive among TB test takers in the United States. Because of this, follow-up visits for further testing and evaluation are required in this site.

*Rice is the key to a decent Karen day.*

## **Helping Karen Refugees: Some Practical Tips**

Here are some everyday aspects of Karen life—and some tips on simple things resettlement staff can do to make the first few weeks in America a little more familiar and a little less difficult for new Karen arrivals. The content is based on interviews by Sandy Barron, one of the principal writers of this profile, with residents of Tham Hin Refugee Camp in the spring of 2006.

### **Food**

Rice is the key to a decent Karen day. Karen like white rice, not the brown unhusked variety. In the United States, Thai brands (Jasmine or Homali) would be most favored. Of the Asian cuisines readily available in the United States, Karen will be happiest with Thai or Chinese dishes.

Karen are familiar with potatoes, which are boiled in soups or fried. Meats such as chicken, pork, or beef are popular, as are eggs. They like any green leaf vegetables and plants, including kale, galangal, and morning glory, as well as tomatoes, eggplant, and onions. Chilis are essential, and Karen like the most fiery (small red) varieties. Mixed spices such as the masala spice mixture are much used. Along with salt and pepper, many Karen also like to add monosodium glutamate, popularly known as MSG, to a dish. Mung beans are popular. Noodles are not, but could be thrown into a curry in a pinch.

Canned fish is familiar and well liked. Fish, shrimp, or prawn paste has been a well-regarded staple of the Karen refugee diet for years. Karen do not drink regular milk but find tinned condensed milk essential, mainly for adding to instant coffee or black tea. Many like green tea as well. Fruits such as bananas, oranges, and mangoes are a treat. Karen do not eat bread.

Many Karen are addicted to the simple pleasure of chewing betel nut, a mildly stimulating mixture of areca nut, lime, and leaf. So fond of this ancient Asian cultural practice are most older Karen that one elderly refugee said he would not go to the United States if he could not find betel there. Another elderly man had already begun to try to wean himself off betel by chewing melon seeds instead. Chewing gum might also work as a (pale) substitute.

### **Cooking Utensils**

A large, round, ordinary metal cooking pot or saucepan of about 28 inches in diameter, with handles, is favored for cooking rice. Every family uses a wok for frying. Gas cookers will work fine, but many Karen will need to be made aware of the need to switch off the safety valve if the cooker is attached to a gas canister.

Karen commonly use metal-enameled or plastic plates, and young children may thus be likely to break ceramic versions. Other essentials for cooking include a chopping board and, if possible, a mortar and pestle.

### **Other Items**

Many Karen like to eat and hang out in comfort on the floor, and would love to have plastic mats on which to do so in a new home. Low stools are also popular. The usual chairs, tables, and cupboards of Western homes will make a pleasant if unfamiliar change for many.

Many families would appreciate having simple plastic plant pots and soil to grow herbs and vegetables. A large plastic basin for washing clothes would add a familiar touch to a new home.

Karen of both sexes generally wear a form of long skirt at home but are also fairly used to Western-style clothing such as shirts, T-shirts, trousers, shorts, and, for women, long skirts.

### **Manners, Habits, and Conventions**

The Karen are a reticent, even shy people, and many will be surprised and perhaps worried by American directness of speech, voice levels, and body language. With the Karen, a quiet, low-key style of communication works best, peppered with lots of reassuring and friendly smiles. It is generally not good to approach issues too directly or straightforwardly, and it is good to re-ask a question to which no answer has yet been received, perhaps in different ways.

When a Karen folds his arms in front of him while talking to you, it is a sign of respect, not aggression or defensiveness. A Karen does not like to walk in front of

*Many Karen will be surprised and perhaps worried by American directness of speech, voice levels, and body language.*

another person and, if it is unavoidable, will pass with head slightly lowered to indicate respect or apology. Westerners should do the same with a Karen. It is disconcerting for a Karen to be touched by a stranger, however friendly or affectionate the intention. When handing something to another person, it is polite to use both hands, not just one.

Karen commonly do not call each other by name, but use instead titles like Grandfather, Auntie, Sister, and so on. It is startling for a Karen to be addressed by name only. Here are a few common titles:

<b>Karen</b>	<b>English</b>
Puu	Grandfather
Pee	Grandmother
Tee	Mr. (or Uncle)
Mü ra	Ms. (or Auntie)
Naw	Miss
Saw	A young Mr.

In general, the Karen like to be very self-reliant and to pursue an independent lifestyle within their own culturally close-knit communities. If a Karen is offered something, he or she may be reluctant to take it, even if the item is needed. Persevere gently. Karen do not like to boast or put themselves forward. They also do not like to complain.

In Karen families, males are generally the heads of household. Elders are given the greatest respect. Karen are very loving yet quite strict with children, and many parents use their hand or a rod to discipline a child.

It is good to be aware of the age and gender conventions when dealing with families, especially if it is easier—but not necessarily more tactful—to communicate with younger family members who may have more English.

The families in refugee camps have had access to only basic medical care for many years. Some people have become used to self-medicating and, in the interest of thrift, of using as little as possible. This may be a problem when it comes to following a course of medication.

*It is disconcerting for a Karen to be touched by a stranger.*



## Bibliography

This bibliography is in two parts. The first part lists the works that writers of this profile used to prepare their sections. The second part, which is annotated, lists books, reports, films, and Web sites for readers who would like to learn more about Burma and its peoples.

### Sources

Allden, K., Poole, C., Chantavanich, S., Ohmar, K., Aung, N. N., & Mollica, R. F. (1996). Burmese political dissidents in Thailand: Trauma and survival among young adults in exile. *American Journal of Public Health, 86*(11), 1561-1569.

Allott, A. J. (1993, September). *Inked over, ripped out: Burmese storytellers and the censors*. New York: PEN American Center.

Aung-Thwin, Michael. (1998). *Myth and history in the historiography of early Burma*. Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies.

Bautze-Picron, C. (2003). *The Buddhist murals of Pagan*. Bangkok, Thailand: Orchid Press.

Cardozo, B. L., Talley, L., Burton, A., & Crawford, C. (2004). Karenni refugees living in Thai-Burmese border camps: Traumatic experiences, mental health outcomes, and social functioning. *Social Science & Medicine, 58*, 2637-2644.

Ceu Hlun, & Lehman, F. K. (2002, May). *Pragmatic influence on pronouns in Lai*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the South East Asian Linguistic Society, De Kalb, IL.

Huguet, J. W., & Punpuing, S. (2005). *International migration in Thailand*. Bangkok, Thailand: International Organization for Migration.

Lehman, F. K. (1963). *The structure of Chin society*. Urbana: University of Illinois.

Luce, G. H. (1959). Chin Hills linguistic tour (Dec.1954)-university project. *Journal of the Burma Research Society, 42*(1), 19-31.

Ma Ma Lay. (1991). *Not out of hate* (Margaret Aung-Thwin, Trans.). Athens: Ohio University. (Original work published in 1953)

Ma Ma Lay. (2006). *Blood bond* (Than Than Win, Trans.). Honolulu: University of Hawaii. (Original work published in 1973)

Marshall, H. I. (1997). *The Karen people of Burma: A study in anthropology and ethnology*. Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press. (Original work published in 1922)

- Mya Than Tint. (1996). *On the road to Mandalay: Tales of ordinary people* (Ohnmar Khin and Sein Kyaw Hlaing, Trans.). Bangkok, Thailand: White Orchid Press. (Original work published in 1993)
- Nyan Shein. (1998). *On Burmese painters, sculptors, and architects* (Vol. 1, Ye Myint Toe, Trans.). Rangoon, Burma: Sarpay Beikman.
- Nyan Shein. (2000). *On Burmese painters, sculptors, and architects* (Vol. 2, Ye Myint Toe, Trans.). Rangoon, Burma: Daw Mya Mya.
- Pascal Khoo Thwe. (2002). *From the land of green ghosts: A Burmese odyssey*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Project Maje. (2004). *Mithuns sacrificed for greed*. Retrieved October 15, 2006, from the Project Maje Web site: <http://www.projectmaje.org/index.htm>
- Pu Vumson Suantak. (n.d.). Autobiographical Zo songs, composed by Pu Vumson Suantak, following ancient Zo tradition. Retrieved October 9, 2006, from the Chin Forum Web site: <http://www.chinforum.org>
- Ranard, A. (in press). *The masques of Burmese painting: A lateral and linear history*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- Schliesinger, J. (2000). *Ethnic groups of Thailand: Non-Tai-speaking peoples*. Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press.
- Smith, M. (1999). *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity*. London: Zed Books.
- Stadtner, D. M. (2005). *Ancient Pagan: Buddhist plain of merit*. Bangkok, Thailand: River Books.
- Strachan, P. (1990). *Imperial Pagan: Art and architecture of Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii.
- Thailand Burma Border Consortium. (2004). *Between worlds: Twenty years on the border*. Bangkok, Thailand: Author.
- Thant Myint-U. (2001). *The making of modern Burma*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University.
- Thant Myint-U. (2006). *The river of lost footsteps*. New York: Farrar, Staus and Giroux.
- Thein Pe Myint. (1999). *Sweet and sour: Burmese short stories* (Usha Narayanan, Trans.). New Delhi, India: Sterling.



VanBik, K. (2006). *Proto-Kuki-Chin*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

Vum Ko Hau. (1963). *Profile of a Burma frontier man*. Bandung, Indonesia: Author.

Vumson. (1986). *Zo History, with an introduction to Zo culture, economy, religion, and their status as an ethnic minority in India, Burma, and Bangladesh*. Mizoram, India: Author.

The sections on refugee experiences in Burma, Malaysia, Thailand, and the United States are based on information provided to the writers by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Bangkok, the Thailand Burma Border Consortium, resettlement agency staff in the United States, and the refugees themselves.

## **Recommended Reading and Viewing**

### **Books and Reports**

Allott, A. J. (1993, September). *Inked over, ripped out: Burmese storytellers and the censors*. New York: PEN American Center.

A PEN American Center Freedom to Write Report on writing under the military dictatorship, featuring stories by seven Burmese writers, selected and translated with an introduction and explanatory notes by Allott.

Retrieved May 9, 2007, from [www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/inked-over-ripped%20-out.htm](http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/inked-over-ripped%20-out.htm)

Collis, M. (1953). *Into hidden Burma*. London: Faber and Faber.

A fascinating reminiscence of the author's many years in Burma, recounting strange tales of his encounters with Burmese spiritualism, the occult, and art.

Connelly, K. (2005). *The lizard cage*. Ontario: Random House Canada.

A novel detailing the tragic story of a Burmese dissident in a Rangoon prison and his complex relationship with his jailers. Finalist for the 2006 Kiriya Prize.

Fink, C. (2001). *Living silence: Burma under military rule*. London: Zed Books.

An in-depth look, based on personal in-country interviews, at how the fear of informers affects the lives of ordinary people.

Fraser-Lu, S. (1994). *Burmese crafts, past and present*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Oxford University Press.

The definitive work on Burmese crafts, filled with hundreds of photos.

Khin Myo Chit. (1976). *Colourful Burma: Her infinite variety*.

Rangoon, Burma: Khin Myo Chit Theidi Sazin.

Entertaining essays on many aspects of Burmese culture.

Larkin, E. (2005). *Secret histories: Finding George Orwell in Burma*. New York: The Penguin Press.

A sensitive and penetrating account of life in modern Burma, with evocative descriptions. Recipient of the 2005 Kiriyaama Notable Book award.

Law Yone, W. (2003). *The coffin tree*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University. (Original work published in 1983)

The moving and turbulent story of a brother and sister living in limbo in the United States as émigrés.

Law Yone, W. (2003). *Irrawaddy tango*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University. (Original work published by in 1993)

A witty, vibrant novel about growing up in a repressive country.

Lewis, N. (1952). *Golden earth: Travels in Burma*. London: Jonathon Cape.

A travelogue through Burma in the early post-World War II era, considered a classic of the genre.

Lintner, B. (1990). *Outrage*. London & Bangkok: White Lotus Press.

Reportage of the 1988 uprising and the arrival of Aung San Suu Kyi on the Burmese political scene.

Ma Ma Lay. (1991). *Not out of hate* (M. Aung-Thwin, Trans.). Athens: Ohio University. (Original work published in 1953)

A novel about the conflict between Western and Burmese culture, offering insight into the social history of the late colonial period.

Ma Ma Lay. (2006). *Blood bond* (Than Than Win, Trans.). Honolulu: University of Hawaii. (Original work published in 1973)

A novel about a Japanese woman's tireless search for her Burmese half-brother born during World War II when her father, a Japanese officer fighting in Burma, fell in love with and married a Burmese woman.

Marshall, A. (2003). *The trouser people: A story of Burma in the shadow of empire*.

New York: Counterpoint.

A travelogue that follows in the footsteps of a Victorian adventurer and civil servant in Burma.

Mya Than Tint. (1996). *On the road to Mandalay: Tales of ordinary people* (Ohnmar Khin and Sein Kyaw Hlaing, Trans.). Bangkok, Thailand: White Orchid Press. (Original work published in 1993)

Interviews with ordinary Burmese, providing an introduction to everyday life in Burma.

Okell, J. (2003). *Burmese by ear, or essential Myanmar*. London: Audio-Forum.

A short course in the spoken language, focusing on the practical; four cassette tapes and a handbook.

Available from <http://www.microworld.uk.com/audioforum.asp>

Orwell, G. (2001). *Burmese days*. Toronto, Ontario: Penguin. (Original work published in 1934)

Based on Orwell's experience as a police officer in colonial Burma, this novel casts a baleful eye on all whom it surveys, whether jaded colonial or Burmese.

Pascal Khoo Thwe. (2002). *From the land of green ghosts: A Burmese odyssey*. New York: Harper Collins.

Memoir of the author's childhood in a remote part of Karenni State and his extraordinary journey from jungle guerrilla fighter to English student at Cambridge University. Awarded the 2002 Kiriama Prize for nonfiction.

Ranard, A. (in press). *The masques of Burmese painting: A lateral and linear history*. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books.

A highly readable history of Burmese painting from the Pagan period to the present, with over 250 photographs.

Saw Myat Yin. (2004). *Culture shock! Myanmar*. Singapore: Times Books International.

A fine account of what is polite and what is offensive in Burmese society.

Smith, M. (1994). *Ethnic groups in Burma: Development, democracy and human rights*. London: Anti-Slavery International.

A report on human rights abuses in Burma that also gives the reader an excellent picture of the ethnic complexity and difficult problems facing the country.

Stadtner, D. M. (2005). *Ancient Pagan: Buddhist plain of merit*. Bangkok, Thailand: River Books.

An academic study that is very accessible to the lay person, with hundreds of photos of the ancient architecture, painting, and sculpture of Pagan.

Thant Myint-U. (2006). *The river of lost footsteps*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

A fresh and provocative look at Burma's history and current dilemmas.

Tucker, S. (2001). *Among insurgents: Walking through Burma*. London: Flamingo.

A travelogue through remote Kachin areas in northern Burma.

## **Films**

Gumnit, R. (Producer & Director). (2004). *Don't fence me in: Major Mary and the Karen refugees from Burma* [Documentary film]. United States: Image and Motion.

A 30-minute film chronicling the fascinating story of 70-year-old freedom fighter Major Mary, who now lives in a refugee camp on the Thailand-Burma border.

Hallacy, J. (Producer & Director). (1997). *Burma diary* [Documentary film]. London: Jane Balfour Films.

A moving 55-minute account of the lives of Burmese refugees on the Thailand-Burma border made over a period of 5 years.

Merrison, L. (Producer & Director). (1995). *Our Burmese days* [Documentary film]. Germany: Lindsey Merrison.

A 90-minute documentary about the filmmaker's trip from England to Burma with her Burma-born mother, who had deliberately "forgotten" her Burmese origins.

Ryerson, S. (Producer), & Boorman, J. (Director). (1995). *Beyond Rangoon* [Motion picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures.

An absorbing movie about a young American doctor caught up in Burma's 1988 uprising.

## **Web Sites**

### **Burma**

[www.burmalibrary.org/](http://www.burmalibrary.org/)

An enormous collection of documents on arts, education, recreation, society, and many other topics relating to contemporary Burma.

[www.burmanet.org](http://www.burmanet.org)

An English language online news service, published outside Burma, compiling recent news articles and opinion pieces about the country.

[www.irrawaddy.org](http://www.irrawaddy.org)

The online version of The Irrawaddy, a monthly magazine on Burma run by exiled Burmese journalists.

[www.myanmar.com/myanmartimes/](http://www.myanmar.com/myanmartimes/)

The Web site for The Myanmar Times, a weekly English-language magazine published in Burma.

[www.myanmar.com/newspaper/nlm/index.html](http://www.myanmar.com/newspaper/nlm/index.html)

The Burmese government newspaper Web site.

[www.myanmar.gov.mm/Perspective/](http://www.myanmar.gov.mm/Perspective/)

The online version of Myanmar Perspectives, a magazine published from Burma presenting official government views on culture and politics.

### ***Chin***

[www.cacc.info/](http://www.cacc.info/)

The Web site of the Chin Association of Christian Communication (CACC), providing general information about the Chin Christians.

[www.chro.org/](http://www.chro.org/)

The official Web site of the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO), providing up-to-date information on the situation in Chin State and the condition of Chin refugees.

### ***Karen***

[www.khrf.org](http://www.khrf.org)

The Web site of the Thailand-based Karen Human Rights Group, reporting on the human rights situation in Karen State.

[www.freeburmarangers.org](http://www.freeburmarangers.org)

The Web site of a Thailand-based Christian relief group, providing information on human rights violations in Karen State.





