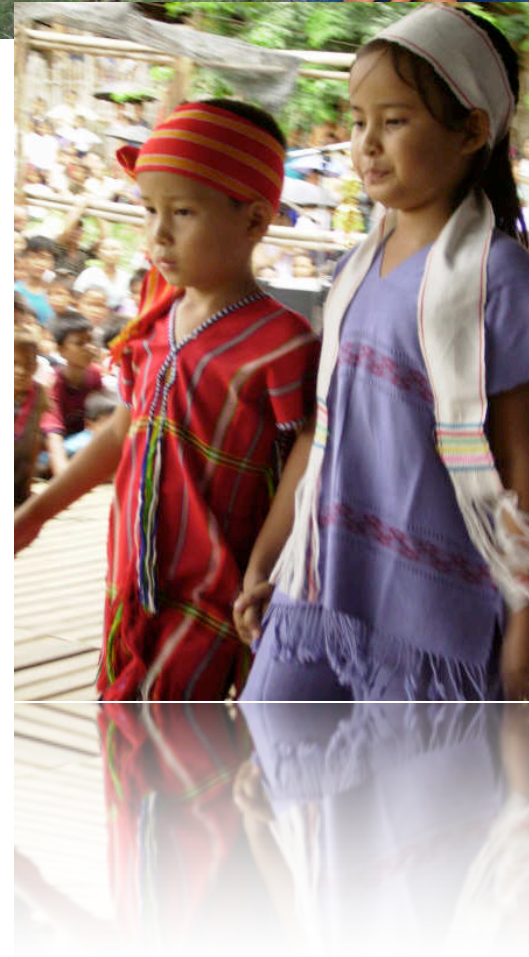




Karen Culture

Courtney Imran



Des Moines Public Schools

Map



The Karen people live primarily in the hilly region between Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand.

Demographics



The last reliable census of Burma (Myanmar) was conducted in the 1930s. In 2006, Voice of America estimated that seven million Karen live in Burma. There are another 400,000 Karen in Thailand. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_\(ethnic_group\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_(ethnic_group))

Why are the Karen immigrating?



★ In May 2006, President Bush signed a waiver to allow 9,300 Burmese Karen refugees to enter the United States. These people had been living in camps in Thailand. Since 2006, more Karen have been allowed entry to the United States.

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/05/us/05refugee.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

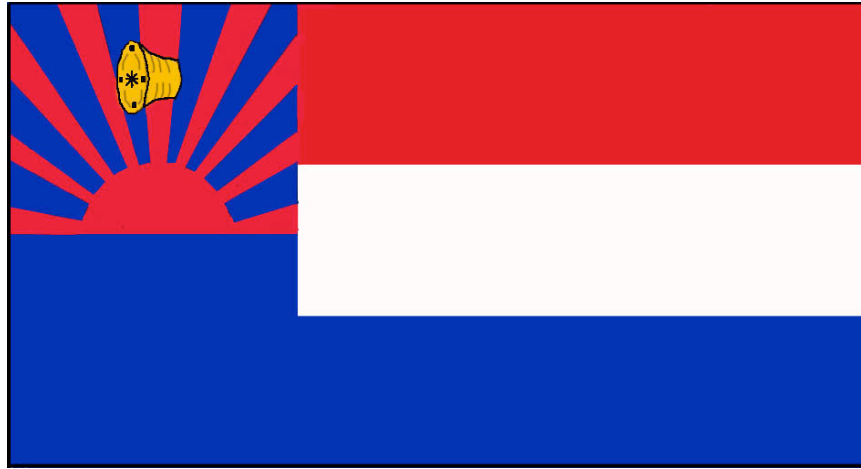
★ Myanmar (Burma) is ruled by a military government, which many Karen oppose. In Myanmar, 200,000 Karen people have been driven from their homes, and 120,000 live in refugee camps in Thailand.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_\(ethnic_group\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_(ethnic_group))

★ Before 1995, there were about forty Karen refugee camps along the border between Thailand and Myanmar. Since that time, the Thai government has consolidated the camps, creating crowded conditions. Families can't build houses in the camps.

http://www.burmafund.org/Pathfinders/Research_Library/EdithBowlespaper.htm

Modern Karen History



In Myanmar, political power has been controlled by the Burmese ethnic group since the country achieved independence from Great Britain in 1948. Between 1948 and 1962, armed conflicts broke out between minority groups, including the Karen, and the Burmese government. The Karen continue to be marginalized politically, socially, and economically in Myanmar.

Religion in Karen Life

Most of the Karen people follow either animist, Buddhist or Christian religious beliefs. The majority of Karen are animists, and they believe that every living thing contains a spirit.

Although the Christian community represents a small proportion of the Karen people (30%), they have been persecuted for their religious practices by the Burmese government.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_people#Film



Clothing



Many Karen people are very proud of their traditional costumes because they represent their culture's long artistic tradition.

They make their own costumes and shoulder bags, which are hand woven. Patterns are handed down from generation to generation. Some natural dyes are used, produced from tree and plant extracts, and artificial dyes are also used to create the brighter colors. Weaving is a skill that remains important to the culture.

http://www.karenhilltribes.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=82&Itemid=93

In everyday life in America, Karen men and women will wear longyis at home. Longyis are worn over the legs. They are made from fabric sewn into a cylindrical shape, and the person will tuck or pin it to the body when he or she wears it.

Perspectives about Childhood

Many Karen believe that it is important to instill a respectful nature in children towards adults.



Dress and hairstyles are considered a way for children to demonstrate this respect. Thus, within many Karen families, it is important for boys to keep their hair short, and older girls should cover their legs. Likewise, many parents feel that all children should cover their stomachs.



A Child's Typical Day



Before arriving in the United States, a Karen child's typical day would primarily differ if he or she lived in a village or refugee camp.

In villages without schools, the children would help around the house and babysit after he woke up in the morning. All older children would work on the farm.

In Thai refugee camps, a child would attend school from 8-3, and would help at home once she returned. After helping with chores, she would study and eat dinner.

Education

- ★Teachers move between classes and students remain in the same room.
- ★Students learn a lot through song.
- ★Students receive a lot of homework.
- ★Schools use corporal punishment.
- ★There are usually at least 30 students per class.
- ★Students receive rankings in every grade, and the top student receives a prize at the end of the year.



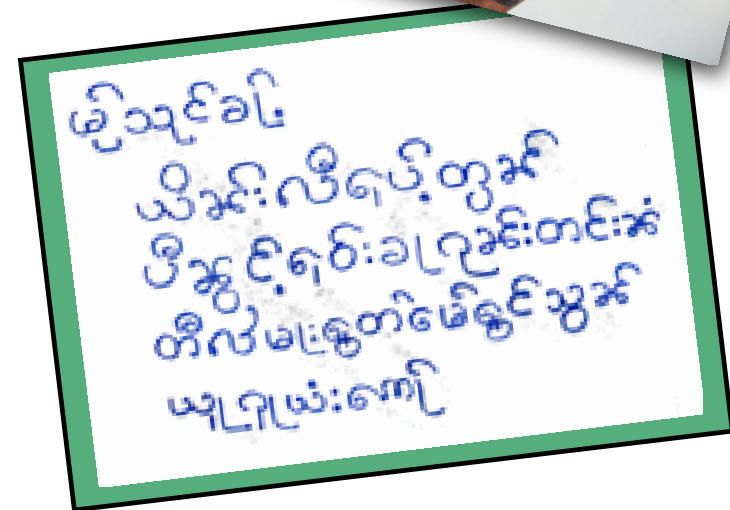
Karen Language

The Karen language is from the Tibeto-Burman group. It is written using the Burmese script.



Useful Phrases

Tablu	Thank you
Naoh hsu	How are you
Ouw Way	Good



Karen Family Structure

Karen society operates through an extended family network.

Older siblings are considered role models for younger family members. Younger children will typically respect the discipline of older siblings and defer to them.



Typical Family Activities



★Extended family gatherings for holidays

★Religious activities, such as services or communal prayer

★Pot lucks

Food

Traditionally, the Karen are farmers who grow rice, corn, vegetables, sesame, and chilies.

A typical Karen meal consists of rice, vegetables, and sometimes meat. Meals are usually flavored with chilies, tumeric, ginger, cardamom, garlic, tamarind, and lime juice.

Typical vegetables are cucumbers, eggplants, mushrooms, squash, and bamboo shoots.

The most common meats are fish, chicken, pork, and beef.

http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/karen/karen_cp.htm#kinship



Health Concerns

*Many members of the Karen refugee community are accustomed to Western medicine since they received care at NGO clinics in the camps.

Despite this familiarity, many Karen, especially women, are embarrassed to discuss health concerns and histories with a doctor.

*Some Karen use the terms vitamins and medications interchangeably.

*Some people suffer from gastric ulcers because of stress.

*Many adults suffer from gum problems and tooth decay because they chew betel, which is similar to chewing tobacco.

*Many children have vitamin and protein deficiencies due to rationing in the refugee camps.

Cultural Beliefs about Nutrition and Health:

*People who are ill should have food that will make the body hot.

*Papaya causes malaria.

*People showing hepatitis symptoms should avoid yellow food.

*Bitter and sour foods prevent health problems.

http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/karen/karen_cp.htm#traditional



General Etiquette



- ★The Karen are more conscientious towards people than time.
- ★The Karen and the Burmese are separate ethnic groups with different histories, cultures, and languages.
- ★Public displays of affection between males and females is discouraged.
- ★People remove their shoes when they enter a home.
- ★School and home are separate spheres, and the teacher is primarily responsible for success at school.
- ★They pass things with the right hand.
- ★Being direct is considered rude.