

Karen Cultural Overview

Who are they?

The Karen people originated in Southeastern Burma (Myanmar), on the border of Thailand. This region has a tropical monsoon climate and the economy is centered on agriculture. The estimates for the number of Karen in Burma range from 3-6 million, whereas the country's population is 55 million. The Karen are traditionally animists or Buddhist, but they were among some of first converts to Christianity in Southeast Asia. It is estimated that 20-30% of Karen in Southeast Asia are Christians, but the majority of Karen refugees coming to America consider themselves to be Christians. They are often indirect in their communication and seek to avoid having secrets among the community. They often place a high value on education, the extended family unit and equality between men and women.

Why have they fled?

Under British colonial rule in Burma, many Karen took advantage of educational opportunities provided by missionaries. Additionally, Karen soldiers supported the British in World War II, but when Burma achieved independence in 1948, the Karen felt abandoned by the British. The Karen rose up against Burmese rule in a push for self-determination. In the process they have faced horrific atrocities against them by the Burmese military. Many have fled to refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border, where there are more than 80,000 Karen people. Many have been resettled in the U.S., Canada, and Australia. Minnesota has one of the biggest Karen communities outside of Asia with approximately 10,000 people.

Main do's and don'ts when it comes to interacting with Karen refugees

Do...

- Respect elders.
- Take shoes off your when entering a house.
- Wear modest clothing.
- Ask for a second helping.
- Be kind and polite.
- Accept gifts and last moment invitations.
- Support your right elbow with your left hand when greeting with a handshake as a sign of respect.
- Receive things with your right hand while supporting your right elbow with your left hand; or, receive with both hands.
- Bow in greeting or farewell.
- You may need to wait for answers when you ask questions, or ask questions in a few different ways before getting your desired type of answer – the Karen are sometimes shy and often indirect when asking and answering questions.

Don't...

- Point your feet at anyone or step over anyone, and move your feet to let people avoid stepping over you.
- *Time is flexible for the Karen so don't focus on the clock, but do be ready to stress the importance of arriving on time for appointments.*
- Maintain eye contact, as a sign of respect.
- Offer meat, coffee, tea, or alcohol to Karen Seventh Day Adventists.
- Touch the head of a Karen person, particularly of a peer or an elder.
- Refer to the Karen as Burmese, as they are completely different people groups.

Some good Karen (Sgaw) words/phrases to know...

English	Karen (pronunciation)
Good morning!	hgaw ler ah hgay
Good-bye!	hgaw ler ah hgay
My name is _____.	ya mee may _____.
What is your name?	na mee di leh?
Are you well?	na oh hsoo ahh?
I am well! And you?	ya oh hsoo. Na maw?
Thank you.	ta-blu
Nice to meet you!	htee bah na tha ku doh ma
Friend	tha göh

Resources

- Refugees from Burma – Background and Experience: <http://www.culturalorientation.net/content/download/1338/7825/version/2/file/refugeesfromburma.pdf>
- Focus on the Karen Refugees from Burma: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/refugee/globalbb0414kar.pdf>
- The Border Consortium: <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/>
- Karen Organization of Minnesota (KOM): <http://www.mnkaren.org/about.htm>
- Karen Language Resources: <http://ktwg.org/karen-language-resources/>