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**COA Thailand**

# **Burmese Cultural Profile**

**A Tool for Settlement Workers**

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**Typical Scene in a Burmese Refugee Camp in Thailand**

Photo Credit: Odile Minichette / ECHO

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## **Burma**

There are nearly 50 million people living in Burma<sup>1</sup>, a country richly endowed with resources; oil and gas, gemstones and huge areas of fertile land. Once called "the rice bowl of Asia", Burma is now ranked as one of the world's ten poorest countries. Due to government policies, nearly half of the population is living below the poverty line, and some two million Burmese have fled persecution for neighbouring countries; a further 600,000 to one million are displaced within the country.

## **Ethnic Diversity**

There are some 135 different ethnic groups in Burma. These are normally broken down into nine main groups: the majority ethnic Burmans, and eight minority groups. These include: Karen, Mon, Shan, Chin, Rohingya, Arakhan, Kachin, and Karenni. Minority groups will not normally identify themselves as being Burmese, they generally hold a strong identity of their own ethnic group.

## **Recent History**

The country of Burma was formed only in the 19th century, as a colony of the British Empire. Previously independent groups were forced

together into an unnatural union. When the British departed in 1948 civil war broke out as each group sought to stake its claim. In 1962, the military took power and hold it to this day. The defining feature of Burmese military rule has been disastrous economic policies and human rights abuses on a massive scale. Any demonstrations against government rule have been brutally suppressed and brutal campaigns of ethnic oppression, through executions, torture, forced labour, and forced relocation, are ongoing. This picture, however, is too simplistic; it is not one majority group oppressing the minorities; many minority groups are also traditional enemies. Going deeper still, each ethnic group also has, within its own membership, disparate factions. People working with Burmese populations should be aware of the current and historical relations amongst the various groups and not assume that all would be happy to live together just because they come from the same country.

## **Refugee Life in Thailand**

Thailand has not signed the UN Convention on Refugees of 1951; as such, there are, officially, no refugees and no refugee camps. Instead, the terms used have been "Persons of Concern" (POC) and "temporary shelters". These so-called "temporary shelters" have been used for housing POCs from Burma since the 1980s. Currently,

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1989, the military authorities in Burma have promoted the name Myanmar as the name of their state. This name, however, is not universally accepted.

there are 9 along the Burmese border, housing some 150,000 POCs. The camps are located very near the border, where security is often an issue; Burmese troops have, on occasion, crossed the border and attacked the camps. In the camps, the necessities of life - food, shelter, sanitation, health care, and basic education - are provided for by aid agencies. Facilities are very basic; housing is in bamboo shacks and electricity is available only on occasion, through the use of generators. Freedom is not one of the provisions offered by the aid agencies; camps are surrounded by barbed wire fences and refugees are not allowed to leave.

### **Cultural and Social Background**

Physical attributes, language, history, clothing, food, dances and other traditions differentiate the various ethnic groups within Burma. It would not be appropriate to assume similarities amongst the groups; a Karen and a Burman, for example, may not see themselves as having anything in common. At the same time, however, many values and beliefs are the same; there may be greater similarities between a Burman Christian and a Karen Christian than between a Burman Christian and a Burman Buddhist. The below is a brief description of some cultural features that are common to most Burmese ethnic groups.

### Family

The traditional Burmese family includes grandparents, aunts and uncles, and even relatives as distant as 7<sup>th</sup> cousins. Close friends can also be considered as part of the family. It is common for Burmese to introduce someone as their 'younger brother' when there is, in fact, no family connection at all. Children will live with their parents until they marry but will listen to the advice of their parents and obey them all their lives. Beating ones children is widely practiced and socially accepted; it is considered necessary in the training of a child.

### Marriage

Marriage is a strongly respected institution, though the emphasis upon the wedding ceremony is minor. Cohabitation and pre-marital sex is forbidden, though secret liaisons do occur. When illicit sexual activity is discovered, it is usually the girl that is given the blame and suffers the consequences. Arranged marriages are still practiced to some degree but couples unhappily paired can withdraw from the arrangement. Interracial marriages do occur and are generally accepted, though not all to an equal degree.

### Gender roles

"A well-behaved Burmese woman should be modest and discreet, dress neatly, and not talk or laugh loudly. In fact, she shouldn't talk too much at all, especially in the

presence of a man. A woman must walk slowly and elegantly, like an elephant!" So says tradition, at any rate. Tradition also says that the man is the head of the family and earns the money while the woman takes care of household duties. Extreme need in recent years, however, has also made the woman an income earner, but without relieving her of her role as cleaner, cook, and child minder. Buddhist practices reinforce women's subordinate status in the society; only men can be ordained as monks, the highest status in a Buddhist society. Women may become nuns but nuns do not enjoy the revered status bestowed upon monks.

### Religion

Eighty-five percent of the Burmese population is Buddhist, four percent, mostly Karen and Chin, are Christians. Buddhism teaches patience and tolerance; life should be led with internal peace and tranquility. Buddhism believes in a close relationship between cause and effect; good deeds will result in rewards, bad deeds in punishment. It is important to make merit in order to attain happiness in future rebirths. One of the chief ways of making merit is to make offerings to monks. Animistic beliefs, superstitions, and astrology have a strong foothold in Buddhist thought.

### Health

Due to the severely inadequate medical system in Burma, many

Burmese rely on home remedies. In rural areas, traditional beliefs normally still prevail, with malicious spirits being blamed for an illness, and a shaman sought for treatment. Western medicines are known to refugees who have living in camps.

### Housing

Refugees will be used to living in bamboo houses with no running water or electricity. Cooking is done on open fires in an area adjacent to the house. Toilets are simple holes in the ground, some distance from the dwelling.

### Education

Education is highly valued by all Burmese. The standard of education in Burma, however, is so low that the refugee schools in Thailand are considered of better quality and parents are happy when their children can attend these. Teaching methodology is strongly teacher-centered and memorization and repeating in chorus is the standard approach. Students may have studied English for many years, yet never have had to produce anything orally, so their reading and grammar skills may be more highly developed than their speaking. Students who question or challenge the teacher are considered disrespectful. Children are taught to stand up when speaking in class and to cross their arms over their chest when speaking, as a sign of respect. Teachers are very highly respected and will be called "Teacher" rather than by his /

her name. Anyone wiser and of a higher position may be also be referred to as "Teacher".

### Showing respect

Burmese society is strongly hierarchical and a core value is the respect shown to monks and to elders. Monkhood is a step removed from ordinary life, to the degree that in some SE Asian languages, one uses a different vocabulary when referring to monks or the teachings of the Buddha. Elders are viewed as an essential source of wisdom for the younger generations and young people are expected to listen and obey and not to offer opinions. Children are expected to care for their parents when they grow old; it is considered a great humiliation to neglect this responsibility. Refugees from Burma will likely be shocked by the treatment of old people in Canada and the lack of respect shown by Canadian young people.

### Names

Burmese do not have family names. To identify each other, they must refer to their father's name and place of origin. Burman names will normally indicate the day of birth of the child. A name like "Zaw Min" reflects that he was born on a Tuesday, since for people who were born on Tuesday, it is customary to find sounds like "sa" or "za" in their names. Astrology may also have a decisive influence on the name to be given as may some other feature of

the birth date, for example, someone born on a rainy day may be named "Rain". Among the Karen, it is usual that the parents pick one name each from the father and mother and put them together in some way. For all ethnicities, it is the practice to prefix the name with an honorific, such as "Auntie", or "Grandmother" or "Little sister". It is considered rude to say a name without such prefixes, though foreigners are exempt by reason of being ignorant.

### Body language

- The head holds special honour and must not be touched; likewise, the feet hold the lowest place, and should not point at anyone or otherwise be out in the open; when the person is seated (on the floor), the feet should be politely tucked in under the body.
- Shaking hands is not usual but when it is done, the right hand is supported by the left, as a sign of special respect.
- When handing something to someone, Burmese will do so with both hands as a sign of respect. Nothing will ever be passed with the left hand as this is the hand used to clean oneself after a visit to the toilet (water, not paper, is used).
- Men and women will rarely touch each other in public or show any sign of public affection. It is however common to see men showing friendly affection towards each other; holding

hands or resting their hand on their friend's knee.

- When calling someone with the hand, the palm faces down. An upward facing palm is for calling small children and dogs. Calling with the index finger is insulting and often an invitation to a fight.
- Picking one's nose is perfectly ordinary; blowing one's nose into a tissue or worse, a handkerchief, is considered repulsive.

### Time

Burmese are not the slaves to time that most Westerners are. While many will, in fact, arrive 'on time', most are used to living on 'Burmese Standard Time'.

### Food

Most Burmese people eat rice every meal. Bread is consumed mostly in urban areas and then only at a breakfast or teatime. Cakes and cookies are for very special occasions only.

### **The Burmans**

The Burmans are the major ethnic group of Burma, those after whom the country was named. They are typically characterized as a humble people who dress modestly. The stereotype is that the Burmans like to live a relaxed lifestyle and enjoy fun. Work and play are treated in the same way; both should be fun. Foreigners often comment that Burmese are always happy and smile a lot. While, in fact, smiles are

common, they often hold a different meaning than the Western smile; an Asian smile may mean anything from happiness to embarrassment, despair, or even anger.

### **The Karen**

According to some sources, the Karen people are descendants of the Mongols, and were among the first groups to settle in the area that is now called Burma. They possess a very strong ethnic identity. Within the Karen there are some twenty sub-groups and two mutually unintelligible languages: Sgaw and Pwo. About 40% of Karen are Christians; a Karen legend of old spoke of a lost book and a white brother who would come to restore the book. White missionaries were seen to be the brother and the Bible the book. This brotherhood has made the Karen an ally of the British during colonial days, an act that has served to exacerbate the mutual mistrust between the Burman and the Karen. The Karen number between 4 and 8 million, mostly living near the Thai border, and constitute 7% of the population in Burma. They are now a hunted and persecuted people, forever on guard against marauding Burmese troops who rape, burn, and force old and young into building roads and acting as porters for army troops. The stereotyped Karen is simple, honest, hospitable, kind, and peace loving.