

Refugees Originating from Burma (Myanmar)

It is very important to understand that 'Burmese' is an ethnicity, not a national identity. There is no cohesive national identity in Burma so it is **not** appropriate to refer to everyone from Burma as 'Burmese'. People should be referred to by their individual ethnic identity.

Ethnic Groups: 130+ groups; the largest being Burmese, Shan, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine/Arkanese, Chin, and Kachin. Burmese Muslims are ethnically Burmese but persecuted due to religion.

Primary Religions: Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Animist

Major Holidays: Vary based on ethnic group

Primary Languages: Burmese may be a shared language amongst some adults, but most youth only speak their ethnic language/s. Note: these languages often have different alphabets from each other.



Credit: A. Schriver

Karen Traditional Dancers

Burma or Myanmar?

The name 'Burma' was adopted following British colonial invasion of the country. In 1989, the ruling military regime changed Burma's name to 'The Republic of the Union of Myanmar' to reclaim an indigenous title. However, pro-democracy activists prefer to use the name 'Burma' because they do not accept the legitimacy of the unelected military regime to change the official name of the country. Furthermore, the name 'Myanmar' implies the political dominance of the Burmese (majority ethnic group). Thus, many minority ethnic groups strongly dislike 'Myanmar' and choose to continue using 'Burma.'

History

- World's longest running civil war.
- The Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824-1826) were fought to regain territory Burma wrested away from British India; the British eventually won and took control of Burma. They made Burma a province of India in 1886, making major changes to the culture and economy of the country. Resentment towards British rule was strong.
- During World War II, Japan courted the majority Burmese with promises of ending British rule; meanwhile the British promised autonomy to the Karen State in exchange for their support during the war. Long-term tensions between the Karen and Burmese turned into open fighting.
- The British eventually won, but reneged on their promise of autonomy to the Karen when Burma was granted independence. Free from colonial rule, the Karen and other ethnic states continue to fight for their independence against the brutal Burmese military regime to this day.



Credit: Wikipedia

Thanaka is a paste made from bark mostly worn for cosmetic purposes, but also cools the skin. There are perceived health benefits: sun protection, acne control, fever relief, etc. It smells nice (similar to sandalwood). All ages and genders may wear.

Rice is typically part of every meal. Food is eaten with the right hand or a spoon. Parents feed children by hand until school age. Expect to be offered food or drink on home visits; politely refuse once before graciously accepting.

Family Engagement

- When shaking hands, support your right elbow in your left hand to show respect.
- When passing or receiving an item, use both hands together to show respect.
- It is a sign of respect to fold one's arms while talking to another person.
- It is customary to walk behind seated people. If you have to walk in front of someone, ask first or apologize.
- Do not touch anyone's head, even children.
- Take your shoes off when entering someone's home and place them neatly with the soles flat on the floor.
- People tend to smile throughout conversation; do not assume smiling means they agree with your point or are taking a serious conversation lightly.
- Indirect communication: people take a roundabout way; upfront honesty can be intimidating; people tend to be subtle and discreet with their opinions.
- People may give you the answer they think you want to hear instead of an honest one. Ask open-ended questions that allow people to answer in their own way.
- Do not beckon someone towards you with a single finger curled upwards; this reflects hostility or accusation. Instead, use an open hand with the palm facing down and motion towards yourself.
- Be sure to thank your host dearly at the end of a visit.



Credit: A.Schrivier

Weaving is an important folk art; Clothing, head bands, and bags.



Credit: Wikipedia

Kachin Women

Naming Standards

There are no first, middle, or last names; people have one complete name that should be said in its entirety *unless that person has stated a different preference*. Names from Burma have personal meaning. Americans may better understand this if compared to traditional Native American names like Crazy Horse. Just like it wouldn't be appropriate to address Crazy Horse as simply Crazy, dropping part of someone's name from Burma can change the meaning entirely. Given names are somewhat private and often not casually shared. People normally address others not by legal name, but rather by terms denoting a relationship or position; Uncle, Teacher, etc.