

Introduction to the Karen

Where is the population country of origin?

The Karen come from the country of Myanmar formerly known as Burma. The Karen are an ethnic group who have resided in Burma for over two thousand years and were one of the first inhabitants of the region. Many of the Karen have fled Burma due to religious and ethnic persecution by the government.

When and why did this population come to USA?

The Karen have come to this country due to the political situation in Myanmar and former military dictatorship. Many Karen were forced to live in refugee camps due to the destruction of their homes. There are nine main refugee camps where the Karen are living on the Thailand – Burma border. There are 9 refugee camps – Ban Mai Nai Soi, Ban Mae Surin, Mae Ra Ma Luang, Mae La Oon, Mae La, Umpiem, Nu Po, Ban Doin Yan, Tham Hin; with a total population (in 2015) of 93,269 and of these 84% were Karen.

The Karen have started the process of relocation and since 2005 have settled across America and other countries. The Karen have come to the USA as refugees. The Karen have been engaged in a civil war with the ethnic Burmese since the late 1940's. This civil war started after the British who had colonized Burma gave the country its independence in 1948. The Karen who had fought with the British during World War II had hoped to be granted their own independent state, however when Burma was granted its independence this was not given to them. In 2004, a ceasefire between the Karen and the Burmese government was brokered, but there continued to be human rights abuses such as village burnings, genocide, ethnic cleansing, forced labor, rape, arbitrary taxation, and killings that occur without trials or convictions of crimes.

<https://reiffcenterblog.cnu.edu/2016/01/myanmar-and-the-karen-conflict-the-longest-civil-war-you-have-never-heard-of/>

<https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/markings-70-years-of-war-in-myanmar/>

When and why did this population come to Minnesota?

The Karen came to MN due to ethnic cleansing and genocide from the Burmese Military Dictatorship. The Karen settled in Minnesota due the open policy on receiving refugees. Currently there are estimated to be over 17,000 Karen people living in the Minnesota.

The VOLAG (Voluntary Agency) Resettlement agency promoted Minnesota as a destination for the refugees. Once the Karen started to settle in Minnesota other Karen refugees followed suit and began to settle in MN due to the longing for sense of community and relations.

What is there history in Minnesota?

The Karen are one of the newest refugees to the state of Minnesota. The Karen have taken steps to establish themselves in this community by organizing the Karen Origination of Minnesota (KOM). The Karen have also started businesses such as Grocery stores, Restaurants, Art Galleries, home health care and other businesses.

In 2014, Ler Htoo was sworn in after graduating from the St. Paul Police Academy in Minnesota as the first Karen police officer in the United States. <http://www.startribune.com/st-paul-swears-in-nation-s-first-karen-police-officer/286310851/>

Where does this population currently live in Minnesota?

According to the Karen Organization of Minnesota the majority of the Karen population lives in Ramsey County. There are also smaller communities of Karen in the cities of Albert Lea, Austin, Marshall and Willmar MN where individuals have found work and affordable housing.

<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/minnesota/articles/2019-08-31/jobs-housing-lure-karen-refugees-to-spread-across-minnesota>

How communication is ran in this culture? Considering tone of voice, gestures, eye-contact, overall body language.

Indirect eye contact is considered polite when conversing with someone, and it will take some time for the Karen to adjust to the American style of looking someone in the eye while speaking. Modesty, or not emphasizing one's own feelings or opinions, is also an important value in Karen culture. Kissing and hugging by opposite genders in public is considered impolite or disrespectful.

Other behaviors that can be seen as culturally impolite include direct eye contact, folding one's arms in front of oneself when talking, sitting so that one's feet are pointing in the direction of another person (especially someone older), and touching someone's head where it is believed a person's spirit resides.

What language does this population speak?

The Karen speak several different dialects of Karen. 70% of Karen refugees speak Sgaw Karen, 7% speak Pwo Karen, and the others speak either Karenni or Pa-o/ Taung Su. Sgaw and Pwo do not differ significantly in word root or structure, but differ in pronunciation so that a refugee who speaks one will not necessarily understand the other. <https://worldrelieffortworth.org/burma-myanmar-karen-cultural-profile>

What is the power structure in their family? How are decisions made at the family and community level? Gender roles?

Karen trace their lineage through the female line (Matrilineal). Mothers and Fathers will make the family decisions together, but the father will typically give the decision to the children. Men and Women will participate in the government and the first elected leader of the country following was Aung San Suu Kyi though the Military Junta refused to relinquish their power and placed her under house arrest.

What is their concept of health? What are health practices and beliefs? Do one use home or folk remedies, a healer, shaman, hospital, or some other traditional or spiritual healer?

Most Karen come from rural areas and had little experience with going to doctors. Western medicine is accepted by most, but many are reluctant to speak openly with doctors. Karen patients may be reluctant to question or contradict what the doctor says, as doctors are often held in high regard.

<http://www.culturecareconnection.org/matters/diversity/karen.html>

What are your family beliefs around child discipline?

Karen parents will use physical discipline for their children. This can include pinching, pulling or hitting with a hand or small object such as a bamboo stick.

What is this groups religion or spirituality?

Buddhism - This teaches that individuals are responsible for their own actions and that every action has a consequence, *karma*.

Animism (spirit worship) - Animists believe that all-natural objects and individuals have multiple souls.

Christianity – This was brought to the Karen through British Colonization as well as through American outreach.

Islam – This teaches that Muhammed was the last prophet of god and has 5 pillars: the Profession of Faith (shahada), Daily Prayer in the direction of Mecca 5 times a day (Salat), Giving Alms/ Donating a portion of their income to the community (Zakat), Fasting during Ramadan – during the daylight hours (sawm), and a Pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during their lifetime (hajj).

What is this groups values and beliefs?

Karen people are very polite and respectful. Karen people can be described as friendly, quiet, and cheerful. Karen culture promotes a sense of pride for being simple, humble, unassuming, and peace-loving. The Karen have a strong work ethic and many have the long-term goal of owning their own home.

<https://worldrelieffortworth.org/burma-myanmar-karen-cultural-profile>

What is this population family traditions, holidays, food, or customs?

Karen families will have both the mother and the father participate in the parenting of the children. The father will typically work to support the family, however based on the educational level of the parent the mother may also work to support the family. The mothers will be in charge of the finances of the family.

Men and women are generally free to choose their own marriage partners; after marriage strict monogamy is expected. When getting married the man will come to live with the woman and her family for a time until they have their own home. The youngest daughter will stay at home to take care of the parents and will inherit the family home.

The Karen have several holidays of their own such as Martyrs day, the Karen New Year and the Karen Writs Tying Ceremony. The wrist tying ceremony is not religiously based and connotes the calling back of one's spirit, (for those who may feel lost or imbalanced).

Traditional food consisted of rice, vegetables, and meat or fish. Karen cuisine features many spices including turmeric, ginger, garlic, lime, and cardamom. A traditional meal might feature a large bowl of rice, and smaller amounts of meat or fish as well as vegetables and flavorings or spices such as fermented fish pastes and chilies, garlic, ginger. <http://www.culturecareconnection.org/matters/diversity/karen.html>

Stereotypes this population faces?

It is a stereo type that all Karen people wear Thanaka on their faces or bodies. This is used as a sun screen or make-up. Thanaka helps to cool down the face / body due to its chemical properties.

Karen people do not speak good English. While the majority do not speak English, this has led to the belief that they are some how not able to speak.

There is a stereo type for all Karen people being hard working. While this is typically true it is certainly not the case that all Karen people desire to work hard their whole lives as they do enjoy non-work-related activities.

There is a stereotype that Karen people are unwilling to engage in an argument. This is based on how polite they are and how their culture values being non-confrontational.